

#95

The history of Churchbuilding in the Mennonite Colonies in Southern Russia

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From handwritten sources presented by Jacob Epp, Nebraska

The oldest congregation of Anabaptists in Russia is probably the one at Wischinka on the Desna River in the Tschernigow [Chernihiv] Oblast. The Anabaptists there weren't actually Mennonites, they were Hutterites. The difference being that they embraced the principle of communal goods. They had not been influenced by Münzer or the fanatical Münsterites and were considered hardworking, calm and orderly citizens. By 1531 under the leadership of Jakob Hutter and Gabriel Scherding they were already established in Moravia. Persecuted there since 1551, many moved to Kärnten and Tirol. In Clausen, Jakob Hutter was captured and then burned at the stake in Innsbruck. Later they settled in Hungary and Wallachia. Driven from there also, some found haven in the village of Wischinka, owned by Count Romanzow. The community was established by 1782. Later the Hutterites were also driven from Wischinka, wandering for many years. It was through Johann Cornies, who advised them to abandon their principle of communal property, that they settled at Huttertal in the vicinity of the Molotschna Colony where they still are today.

More important to us is the actual settlement of Mennonites in the Ekatarinoslaw administrative centre. A letter from the Russian consul at Thorn to Elder Abraham Nickel in Nischefka [Nieszawka] created the first opportunity.

On 7th of August 1786 a letter sent to the ministerial council, presumably from the Consul at Thorn, was read at an open meeting of the Danzig Old Flemish Congregation. The contents conveyed the decree of her Russian Imperial Majesty to all free landholders, particularly the Danzig-area Mennonites, that a strip of land near the Turkish border was available in Russia. Whoever was interested in going there from Danzig, was to notify the Russian embassy in Langgarten [a suburb of Danzig], costs to be borne by the imperial throne. - But since the Danzig authorities were unhappy with this, the ministerial council was not allowed to continue with this offer of immigration. On the 14. of September Jakob Höppner from Bohnsack and Jakob von Campen declared to the council that they were inclined to travel to Russia and to view the land if they would be sent as deputies, but they were denied. In the Neugarten Friesian Congregation, where the same offer was made, things went similarly. - Nevertheless, Jakob Höppner and Johann Bartsch travelled there on Russian costs to see everything for themselves and returned at the end of 1787 with the Russian commissioner, Herr Trapp. This man had power of attorney to provide for those deciding to go; free transportation to Dubrowna, a city in the administrative centre of Mohilew [Mogilev]. Upon arrival there, they would wait for further orders and receive ¼ Rubel daily. In November of the same year, Mayor Pepelau called in Peter Epp and ordered him to make sure that no one would travel to Russia without permission.

When Herr Trapp approached Epp in December with a writ, containing the invitation to move to Russia to be read in the church, and offered him significant gifts, he declined both. Herr Trapp did not let this discourage him and had his writ printed. On 13th of January 1788, he handed it out at the end of the church service. This procedure raised the ire of the authorities and many respected citizens. The next Sunday the ministerial council was forced to explain that this was done without their knowledge; those so-called deputies of the congregation who had been in Russia as mentioned in the writ, contradicted their orders. Herr Trapp said this statement insulted his Empress; the ministerial council defended their statement in front of the mayor. Herr Trapp's anger couldn't have been that great or at least dissipated quickly. On the 3rd of February when communion was held in the Mennonite church, Herr Trapp was present. At the end of the service, he kissed the elder, praised the holy act and gave him 10 Taler Prussian currency to do with as he pleased.

Now immigration became more serious. In the beginning 4 families from the Danzig congregation came forward and requested certificates from the church. When their request was passed on to the mayors, they stated that the certificates could be granted provided passports were applied for first. With more and more requests to emigrate, the authorities stopped handing out passports and simply gave their permission: whoever wanted to, could go. -

The Danzig emigrants however, were mostly non-landowners, milk deliverers, carpenters and manual laborers. For those deemed as 'average' in economic circumstances, their property was estimated at 4000 Danzig Gulden or 1333 1/3 Taler Prussian currency. Two who had received passports were left behind as they were known to be drunkards. Herr Trapp seems to have actively courted other congregations in West Prussia but the Royal Prussian authorities seem to have been even more difficult to deal with. (Danzig was a free state under Polish sovereignty.) The families here requesting passports did not receive them, just a verbal approval was given to go. They quietly went on their way.

Herr Trapp's efficacy even reached Amsterdam. The Danzig congregation received a letter that Trapp had been there and that it was a request of the Russians that only one congregation form there thereby suggesting a union of the Flemish and Friesian congregations into one congregation. Therefore, on the 10th of July an assembly was held in Rosenort, Marienburg Werder; 20 elders, ministers and deacons of the 4 Flemish congregations met. When they arrived, they found a number of travel-ready brethren gathered, singing songs which were normally used at leadership elections. These brethren believed they were gathered to elect leaders for the congregation that was to be set up in Russia. Elder Cornelius Regier from the Heubuden congregation, spoke to the gathered brethren, reminding them to fear God and maintain neighbourly love even when far away. He explained that a vote could not be held because many from the Prussian side did not have the freedom to leave nor could they depart despite best efforts. An election might vote in such an individual and would then be useless. - The brethren then asked for help that they might achieve this freedom. Many had sold everything and they had no accommodations. Elder Gerhard Wiebe of the Elbing congregation offered to speak to the city councillors on their behalf and would also seek out 2 men that the departing group could turn to for help and also then lead an election. They did not receive their freedom to depart and thus left covertly.

It was decided to reply to the letters from Amsterdam: "Since the members of previous congregations had been accepted by certificate, one could view this as a union of congregations." Soon, letters arrived from emigrants in Riga and Dubrovna complaining that they were leaderless and without ministers. Therefore, the old Flemish congregation from Tiegerfelde, Gross Werder held another elder,

minister and deacon conference which was attended by 14 men. Here it was decided that: - to designate leaders without going there was not good but it was next to impossible to leave. The group was to be notified that a conference and discussion had been held, that they were determined not to rush into the matter of naming leaders. They would consider suitable men, men already out there, that could hold devotional services and they could then be viewed as ministerial candidates. At the time there were 152 emigrated Flemish families in Russia; from the Gross Werder congregation - Ziegenhagen area 41, Rosenort area 41, Ladekopp area 6, Bärwalde area 5; from the Elbing congregation 20, from Heubuden 17 and from Danzig 22. By the end of 1788 the number of families had already risen to 200.

January 27th, 1789 a conference of 17 elders, ministers and deacons was held again. Here 5 letters from Russia were read aloud expressing ardent desires to determine leaders and ministers. Presently their Sunday services consisted of a song and a reading of a preprinted sermon of Isaak Kröker's of Königsberg. At the same time, the emigrants offered to pay the travel costs if someone would only agree to come.

Now they tried to convince Elder Peter Epp (he had always looked favourably upon emigration) to attempt the trip. He stated he was willing but only if his name was drawn by lot from the group of 3 elders. Peter Epp, at the time had neither wife nor children nor property to contend with, was the best candidate. The youngest elder, Cornelius Regier, did not want to draw lots and the Danzig people did not want to give up their elder. The issue remained in limbo. At a meeting of the Danzig churches on February 5th, it was decided that since Peter Epp was dependant upon the congregation, he would be presented to the brethren as candidate especially as Elder Cornelius Regier would be in attendance next Sunday. Cornelius Regier did not arrive, but the issue seemed pressing so Elder Gerhard Wiebe of Elbing was written to and asked to come to Danzig with several others for consultation. Due to an election in Danzig, he declined but soon thereafter arrived with 2 more elders. Discussions were held on what to do. A letter had already been written indicating that Peter Epp would come under certain conditions. This might become impossible because he was sickly and had been very weak at the last communion. Thus, it was decided to notify Russia that Elder Peter Epp would not be able to come due to illness. They were therefore directed to hold an election amongst themselves: - Jakob Höppner from the Gross Werder congregation, Jakob Wiens from the Danzig congregation, Peter Albrecht from the Elbing congregation and Martin Classen from the Heubuden congregation were to preside over an election. Through a majority of votes, these men were to choose 12 to 16 candidates of good repute, send the names to Prussia where lots would be drawn determining 4 as ministers and 2 as deacons. They would consider sending them an elder in the future but currently it was not possible. This was written in haste and all 4 elders signed.

Another conference of 19 elders, ministers and deacons was held 27th of March. Firstly, a letter was read: the 4 men named above had conducted an election with 168 votes which selected 20 candidates through a majority of votes. Further they requested a funeral sermon, a sermon for the segregation and reinstitution of someone who had been punished, 2 concordances, several hymnals and statement of beliefs and again asked to have an elder sent as soon as possible since serving holy communion could not proceed without one. A 2nd letter stated that if an elder would commit to come, they would arrange for 180 ducats as travel costs – 60 to be paid in Danzig, 60 in Riga and 60 in Dubrovna. It was also mentioned that of the elected men, 2 were from the Friesian congregation. Many from these congregations had already come from Prussia, had joined the Flemish group promising unity.

A 3rd letter contained concerns regarding the two Friesians. It was decided to ignore the election of the two Friesians and appointed, without random draw, Jakob Wiens who had garnered 47 votes, Gerhard Neufeld 27 votes, both from Danzig and David Giesbrecht with 18 votes from Petershagen as ministers. Then a draw was held among the five men: - Peter von Dyck from Rehwald garnering 12 votes, Peter von Dyck from Lakenwald 12 votes, Anton Claassen from Heuboden 9 votes, Cornelius von Riesen from Töpferdamm 6 votes, and Bernhard Penner from Danzig 4 votes. This draw, undertaken with prayer, chose Peter von Dyck from Lakenwald, Cornelius von Riesen and Bernhard Penner. Of these Bernhard Penner was chosen as minister and the other two as deacons. This result was communicated to Russia and they were instructed to ask the 3 men the following questions: 1) Were they united in belief with the Flemish congregation of Prussia; 2) Did they view their calling coming from God; 3) Would they carry out their responsibilities with loyalty and honesty?

The 10th of May another letter arrived from Russia in which the newly elected urgently asked for an elder to be sent. Elder Peter Epp declared that this was an urgent situation; he was willing to take the onerous task upon himself if no one else would. It was decided to invite the other 3 elders to Danzig for further discussion among the brotherhood. Thereupon a meeting was held on the 24th of May with the presence of Elders Dirk Tiessen and Cornelius Regier and other foreign ministers along with 200 persons. Elder L. (C.?) Regier gave the opening salutation and asked if the brethren would acquiesce and allow their Elder Peter Epp to travel to Russia to bring order to that situation. Many declared their strong opposition; the foreign ministers strongly urged them to reconsider. Elder Peter Epp's heart became so heavy due to this antagonism that he had to step outside overcome by tears. After some back and forth, it was decided to ask him his opinion. He was called back in, and having composed himself somewhat, he declared that he was determined to help his brethren in Russia, even if it cost him his life. It was an emotional moment and calmed the situation. Everything was soon approved and he was wished well for his journey. It was then decided to advance him 400 Danzig gulden for the trip and a letter was written to Russia requesting they keep their promise, advance the 180 ducats and remember that the elder's return to Prussia was at their costs. This letter was undersigned by the foreign elders, ministers and 4 brethren. The illness of Peter Epp, who hadn't been well for 2 years, advanced. On 7th of June, he still led the baptism but for communion on the 28th he was so ill that it was postponed until the next Sunday with Elder C. Regier. Despite his illness, Peter Epp was preparing for his trip. He ordered 2 new upholstered coaches. His 2 sons wished to accompany him; Heinrich with wife and family were considering emigration and Jacob, the 15-year-old just wanted to accompany his father. An additional 4 families, including David Epp who later became elder of the Russian congregation, had delayed their departure in order to travel in Epp's company.

On the 12th of July a reply came from Russia, signed by ministers Jakob Wiens and Gerhard Neufeld, expressing their joy to the decision of Elder Epp. They also reported the most of the settlers had moved to Kremenchug, a city on the Dnieper in the Poltava governmental area and the rest were on their way. They also sent authorization for 600 rubles that could be redeemed, either through the Russian Resident or through the Eliot trading post in Danzig, to cover the elder's travel costs. P. Epp's health had improved and he was strenuously working toward his departure. It was decided on the 16th of July that Pastor Jakob de Veer would take over Epp's duties in his absence. Simultaneously, Epp declared that he would hold his farewell sermon on the 2nd of Aug. A power of attorney signed by the other 3 elders and several ministers was provided along with foodstuffs for the journey. Despite the fact that he was ill again, having to stay in bed the week prior to departure, and that the Russian resident

had asked him to delay for a few days due to waiting for receipt of some letters concerning him, Epp still held his farewell sermon on the 2nd of Aug. His text was based on John 14, 28: "I go away and come again unto you." After the sermon, Pastor J. de Veer, on behalf of his congregation, spoke some words as did the minister Cornelius Warkentin from Rosenort. After the prayer, a song specifically composed for this occasion by Pastor Hans Momber was sung. - In the mean time, the elder's trip was delayed and the 4 families along with 2 more from the Werder area departed without him.

Peter Epp admitted to his inability to travel immediately and moved to his brother, Minister Cornelius Epp in Neuenhuben, Danzig Werder to convalesce. He became weaker and weaker and admitted that he would not be able to travel that year and asked that Russia be apprised of this. Travel funds totally 156 ½ ducats spent by Peter Epp was receipted by the Elders September 4th and Russia was advised of this September 10th. The elder's weakness increased and on November 12th he was called on a different journey, a peaceful death ended the pious life in Neuenhuben. On the 18th of November he was buried in the cemetery of Nassenhuben. December 3rd a letter was sent to Russia regarding his death.

Here end the handwritten reports chronicling these events. Further issues in the following years 1792-1794 are incompletely documented by a few letters in the copybook of the Danzig Mennonite Congregation.

The desire for an elder to determine community and church affairs went unanswered for the Russian immigrants. Without an elder nothing could happen; an elder was needed for baptism, communion, to appoint a new elder and ordain such; an election could not be held without an elder or be considered valid. No one could or would commit to the journey to Russia but a compromise seems to have been reached. The minister Bernhard Penner was elected as elder. The oldest of the ministers, Jakob Wiens, received a power of attorney letter signed by 4 Prussian elders enabling him to install Penner as elder. So, things seemed to be settled. It only lasted a short time; the newly elected died 29th of July 1791. New problems arose.

Already during Bernhard Penner's illness, a 2nd elder election was held upon his request. The vote went to a younger man, Johann Wiebe. He did not wish to accept the position citing his youth and inability as reasons. Elder Penner died in the mean time and Wiebe was again pressured to accept the position. He would only accept if a 2nd elder was elected and they would then both travel to Prussia to be installed. This was granted and the previously mentioned David Epp was elected. Because of the journey, problems arose and Johann Wiebe stepped down again and David Epp followed his example. Several congregational members fervently begged for at least one of them to accept the position. J. Wiebe remained adamant but D. Epp acquiesced and was installed by Jakob Wiens. Led by 2 ministers and a deacon, many congregation members were unhappy with this. A possible reason for this was that D. Epp had left the Danzig congregation without an attest. This might have been rectified later in Russia by Peter Epp but he had died in the interim. The matter was reported to Prussia, advice and help was requested. D. Epp requested the certificate to be sent from the Danzig congregation. On the 14th of May 1792 a gathering of 4 elders, 13 ministers and 6 deacons was held in Tiegerfeld, Groß Werder. Jakob de Veer (minister since 1774, elder 1790 to 1804, died 1807), after the decision of this gathering, wrote to the minister Jakob Wiens in Russia and included the certificate (attest) for Elder David Epp. De Veer wrote: "the excuses of Johann Wiebe were admirable insofar as that he considered himself unworthy in his own eyes, but that he was called by God through the voice of the congregation. He

pointed to the examples of Moses and Jeremiah. Therefore, the brothers and his coworkers were called upon to admonish him and he was to let go of his excuses and accept the will of God, to take up the appointment and carry it out faithfully according to his insight of the will of God and for the good of his community. God would not demand more of his servants than that they be true to the word. - Elder D. Epp, who had been elected and installed, was to remain as there was no reason for him to step down just because his co-elder had. It was advantageous for the colony to have 2 elders as it was so far away and spread out. At the time the colony consisted of 7 villages, the largest having 44 hearths and the smallest 16 hearths (properties or farms). They lay 9 miles from Ekaterinoslav on the same side of the Dnieper, below the waterfalls, which easily allowed them to transport their goods to Kherson. The Friesian congregation which seemingly had its headquarters in Kronsweide had already built a church and was led by Elder Cornelius Froese (elected as minister 1790, as elder 1792). The Flemish congregation did not have a church and held its services in private residences in Chortitza and Neuendorf, a short mile apart.

On the 21st of February 1793 the money advanced to Peter Epp for his journey to Russia was returned. It probably took this long to recoup the funds that Epp had spent in preparations. Johann Wiebe could still not reconcile himself to his appointment. New problems were added to the old ones. On the 26th of October 1793 a letter, signed by 19 members of the Russian congregation, arrived for the honourable council with harsh allegations against David Epp. One accusation against Epp was regarding another minister and money issues and that Epp had had this minister removed from his position. They again urgently requested that an elder from Prussia come to Russia to help out. Before a meeting could be held regarding this request, 2 men, the elected Elder Johann Wiebe and Jakob von Barga, arrived from Russia with the same plea. A conference was scheduled for the 15th of November in Rosenort. Here the 2 men declared that they would not return to Russia without the requested accompaniment. Since Johann Wiebe would not agree to his installation as elder and to return to Russia as such here, the gathering agreed to the necessity of sending an elder and a minister to Russia. Gerhard Wiebe, elder of the Elbing congregation, Dirk Thiessen, elder of the Grosswerder congregation recused themselves due to old age; Cornelius Regier, elder of Heubuden agreed to a runoff with Jakob de Veer as to who would go. De Veer was not present but explained by letter that he felt incompetent to the task and that his congregation and businesses would not allow him to be gone that long. His opinion was that Cornelius Regier was the right man for the job, that God had given him a rich measure of the spirit. He was held in high regard by his (de Veer's) congregation and by other congregations. The minister Abraham Siemens from Gross Mausdorf, Gross Werder had agreed to the trip but broke his leg and became ill; other obstacles also arose. Therefore, 3 more meetings were held; the first the 14th of January 1794 in Schönseefeld. The result being that Elder C. Regier and Minister Cornelius Warkentin would make the trip. The letter from C. Regier to the honourable elders of Danzig contained this poem which expressed his sentiments very well:

“We venture forth in God’s good grace and with his guidance go.
Oh may he bring us to that place, where his own holy word
Forms Zion’s firm foundation, stands as its cornerstone
And brings forth peace and unity. On earth His will be done.
Oh pray, oh pray in harmony! Our gracious God implore:
That Jesus Christ may reign with pow’r, now and for evermore.”
(Translated by Sarah Klassen; Preservings 15)

The 2 travellers requested to be constantly upheld in prayer by the Prussian congregations during this journey. The travel costs were borne by all 4 congregations; the Danzig City congregation provided 100 Taler and Danzig Country congregation 50 Taler in Prussian currency; the others probably as they were able. They also received a power of attorney from local congregations that follows below:

“We, the elders, ministers and deacons of the Christian congregations in Prussia, called the Flemish Mennonites, wish the elders, ministers and deacons in the congregation in Russia by Chortitza, our dear brothers in Christ, much grace and peace from God our Father through Jesus Christ, his only Son and the working power of the holy spirit that the love among us and to one another continue to grow and become complete. Amen.

After this well-intentioned wish, we acknowledge the letter, signed by 19 brethren from your area, dated 3rd of Sept. 1793 has reached us. From it we sadly see that the spirit of quarrel and discord looks to divide the peace among you and has created disagreement and disgrace. You also urgently request a well-experienced elder for Chortitza. Shortly thereafter, 2 men from Chortitza, the Honourable Johann Wiebe and Johann Barga reached us, also with the urgent plea to settle the disputes and return peace and order to your congregation. After some diligent consideration and discussion, we requested that 2 experienced men, namely the Hon. Elder Cornelius Regier and Hon. Minister Cornelius Warkentin, take up this task to travel to Chortitza. With God’s assistance, they will, to the best of their abilities work to restore peace and order in your congregation. We authorize and empower C. Regier and C. Warkentin, men of experience and good repute, to our fellow believers in Chortitza, Russia to: - investigate the discord and disarray; to listen and to reach decisions; to admonish all to love and peace; to strengthen good intent; to console the downhearted; to correct the path of the erring. Those who continue their dispute, blaspheme and love the discord shall be separated from the congregation of the Lord until they see the error of their ways. - We strongly recommend these authorized men to the Russian congregation; to consider them as their superiors and to follow their orders; to show them respect and support so that they can complete this assignment and return to us with love and joy, telling us of the good that God has worked through them. - As confirmation of this mission, we the undersigned do so in the name of all Prussian congregations on this day of our Lord, 1794, 1st of March.

Gerhard Wiebe, Elder of Elbing and Ellerwald

Franz von Riesen, Minister

Dirk Tiessen, Elder of Tiegenhagen

Martin Hamm, Minister

Jakob de Veer, Elder of the congregation of and around Danzig

Hans Momber, Minister”

On the 23rd of February, C. Regier held his farewell sermon in Heubuden. Many tears were shed indicating the congregation’s devotion to him which endeared them even more to him. Friday, the 14th of March, the 2 men departed from Koscelitzke. They travelled through Poland and arrived in Warsaw March 20th. Here they presented themselves to the Russian representative, were received kindly and were assisted with the necessary travel documents for their continued journey. They arrived in the colony on Good Friday, April 18th. A letter from C. Warkentin to D. Tiessen, Elder in Gross Werder continues:

"Chortitza, 10th of May 1794

The Hon. Elders and other servants of the gospel Jesus Christ, we the undersigned, wish our brethren the grace and peace of God, our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour; that the power of the Holy Spirit may work for both of us toward our goal of praising God and the saving of many souls: to this my soul says Amen." -

After these heartfelt wishes, we report that our journey, with God's aid, ended well. In the evening of Good Friday, April 18th, we arrived in the colony at Neuendorf. It was a touching sight. They were barely aware of our arrival, rushing out of their homes with wistful hearts and tearing eyes. Many surrounded our wagon, including the blind Abraham Wiebe. We stayed the night in Neuendorf. On Saturday we drove through Chortitza and settled into our quarters with Hon. Elder Johann Wiebe, with whom we presently reside.

Easter morning, as unprepared as I was, I had to take over the sermon. We both preached in Chortitza and Neuendorf, alternating. On the third holy day, Elder Regier preached in Chortitza using as text Acts 10: 36-38, with verse 29 as introduction. - After every sermon, particularly after this last one, many tears were shed. The purpose of our journey and authority were declared. After the holidays we started our work. We called the 2 deputies Heppner and Bartsch to us and they agreed to submit to our council; we continued and held several brotherhood meetings until we finally united the contending parties. Firstly, we produced the letter of discontent and pointed out how badly and uncharitably they had acted; the comments and opinions they had expressed regarding David Epp as radical as the Muenster Sect. They acknowledged their wrongdoing and that they couldn't prove their accusations. The other side had also erred. Both sides forgave and peace was made. God grant that it will last a long time! --

Another issue has arisen that is creating much work and effort. The Friesian congregation of Kronsweide has lost their Elder Cornelius Froese. He was buried the 8th of May.

We attended the funeral. After the burial, we were urgently and with tears, begged to have mercy on them and not to leave them. Their situation is sad; the ministers J.C. [Johann Klassen] and H.P. have forced themselves upon the congregation as ministers and have created much quarrel and unrest so that the congregation has forbidden them to preach. They are rightfully a herd without a shepherd and we could not resist their pleas. They have not held communion nor baptism in the last 5 years.

So now we are constantly working, in the spiritual and the worldly realm. Daily we are accosted, seldom having an hour of peace. Ohm Regier has promised to provide baptism and communion as a guest. On Sunday I preached the confession of faith sermon in Kronsweide. May the Lord bless all our ventures!

At this time, union of the 2 congregations is not recommended due to several reasons which I will explain later. Of the young people who have announced their intentions, 31 are from our congregation and 13 from Kronsweide. Handling all these spiritual matters takes more time than we have on a Sunday. Frequently we preach during the week and also hold brotherhood meetings.

With the Lord's blessing, we are keeping our eye on Pentecost as a return date for our trip. Here in the colony, particularly in Kronsweide, health issues are a strong concern as well as the dire poverty among some. May the Lord lead to what is best! The weather here is very dry and if the good Lord doesn't send rain soon for the arid land, the harvest will be bad. The upper villagers are already experiencing a shortage of water for their cattle, but the Lord can replenish everything. He has never erred in his dominion and what he wants and allows to happen always has a good ending; he will make everything well here too. I close and wish you in God's keeping; we remain your obedient servants and brothers in Christ. Pray for us!"

Cornelius Warkentin

Cornelius Regier

From the number of baptismal candidates, we see that the numbers in the Flemish congregation in which Elder David Epp had held baptism in June 1793, were considerably larger than in the Friesian congregation. The plan for the return journey, as declared by the letter, was thwarted before Pentecost when Cornelius Regier was called on another journey by the Lord. C. Warkentin writes about this in a letter to his wife from Ekaterinoslav, dated 12th of July 1794:

"Dear God, how shall I tell you everything? May the Lord strengthen your heart to hear these sad tidings. -

My only, dearest friend is no more; a true philanthropist, Elder Cornelius Regier has died. Full 3 weeks we worked together as a blessing for the local congregation. May 11th, during the night, he became slightly ill and during the day we were to drive to Ekaterinoslav on colony business. I had to complete this business by myself as he became sicker. We returned home but the trip was hard on him. He was calm, his usual demeanor, and at peace with God. His illness grew as did the diarrhea and despite strong medicine he was nearing the portal of death. I was indisposed during his illness but he was more concerned for me than for himself. I was often at his bedside and we frequently discussed God's love through Jesus Christ and the happy state of believers regarding life and death. He was heaven bound and at peace with his God. He died after 20 days of illness, the 30th of May at 8 o'clock in the evening and was buried 3rd of June among 451 grieving followers including the Director and his family and many others.

I held the funeral sermon based on Rom. 14:7, 8 about the bliss of the pious, in life as in death. After the service I held a short speech at the gravesite where many tears were shed. What my soul suffered at this time of parting, only He knew who knows all things. - Now I was alone and had to attend to all matters in both congregations, whether spiritual or earthly. In the name of Jesus Christ, I can't thank my heavenly Father enough for blessing all the work and for reaching a conclusion. - Now my dear I can give you the good news, I have started my return journey. The farewell from those friends was hard and tears turned into loud sobs. A large group of people from the colony accompanied me for 2 miles; 4 wagons accompanied me 10 miles to Ekaterinoslav where I was furnished with my return documents and with God's accompaniment will return to Germany."

That the deceased, from his deathbed, appointed him sole elder to complete the task, Hon. C. Warkentin kept quiet, probably due to modesty. The Director of the colony was a Russian major whose name is unknown to me. Johann Wiebe was probably reinstated and confirmed as from then on, he is

named as elder along with David Epp. The minister that had been deposed during D. Epp's times can also be found listed on later minsters' lists again.

Information regarding Warkentin's activity in the last few weeks and about his return trip was located in his diary, a part of which I have; too bad it only begins with the 15th of June. We can, however, determine how much was required of this man. On the 15th of June he gave communion to 233 worshipers in Chortitza, the 19th to 173 worshipers in Neuendorf, the 20th he helped prepare the Friesian congregation in Kronsweide for communion. At the same time, the ministerial election was strongly urged and a youth who had been ill during the acceptance of candidates was baptised. On the 22nd, communion was given to 107 communicants in Kronsweide, in the afternoon he brought communion to 4 individuals that were ill. The 27th, ministerial election in Chortitza fell to David Giesbrecht and Gerhard Ens, but before that in Neuendorf, after the communion, Peter Dick who had not yet accept the ministerial position was again unanimously elected as minster. After this, 2 young women were accepted into the Friesian congregation.

The 25th, sermon and minister elections in Kronsweide; elected were Heinrich Arendt, Franz Baumann and Cornelius von Riesen as ministers, N. Odse [Edsen] as deacon. Sunday the 29th, he held the farewell sermon in the presence of the director. The next week he preached 2 more times in Neuendorf and in Schönhorst. The 8th of July he held a short speech after the sermon of the minister, after which gripping farewells followed. The 9th he bade farewell to the director and his wife, who apparently grew very fond of him. His leave taking from his host and hostess and other friends as he departed for Ekaterinoslav on the 10th was even more tearful. "There," he continues to write, "we had a few things to regulate with the government which were expedited speedily. Here several friends had already waited for us for several days and I had to concede to their urgent pleas, to come to Stowa-Moskowke to preach once more, I used Col. 3:12-14. Sunday I drove with Councillor Lehr to the Economic Director's to discuss some concerns regarding the colony with the additional presence of Elder Johann Wiebe and David Epp.

After that we continued our travels toward Kremenchuk. I had the privilege of being accompanied from the colony by Hon. Elder David Epp and Gerh. Wibens [Wilms]. We arrived well in Kremenchuk. The 2 men decided to accompany me further on to. So we departed in God's name from Kremenchuk and headed toward Wischontz. After several days we arrived at this German colony which had been established 28 years ago. It consisted of 6 Lutheran villages and 2 Catholic ones. We came to the Lutheran Pastor Schreiber in the morning and after a long conversation, some coffee, a warm farewell and a tour of his church we drove to the Catholic Pastor Innocentius Wolter. He was born in Prague, a fine man who treated me with utmost respect. He showed me his church, his church apparatus and antiquities, and after some time of discussion I bid him farewell. He accompanied me a short distance, wished me luck on my travels and we parted in tears as men who are confident that they will see each other in eternity.

We left in the afternoon guided by the brother of Elias and drove to Baturin; from there to Wischinka where we arrived Saturday the 26th of July around noon. We were received amicably despite that fact that it was harvest time and most people were out in the fields. In the evening we attended a prayer hour which is held daily. Sunday I was requested to preach. I did so with Luke 13: 23-24 as the

text: - the necessity of a true conversion that is required by everyone for true rebirth. Great attention was paid. In the afternoon we were visited by the countess; we conversed and I had to promise her a return visit the next day. Monday we drove there and were graciously welcomed. We were shown the beauties of the palace and after we paid our respects we were guided to the Summer Palace where the monarchy resides on their summer tour. Many precious rarities were housed there. In the evening I was asked to lead the prayer hour. I spoke on Rom. 12:12 on the reasonable, sensible work of Christians which is in the spirit and the truth and is righteous before God. A great silence ruled and at the end of the speech there was great movement among the brothers and sisters. On Tuesday morning, after a 3-day sojourn, we continued our journey.”

Here too the farewell was heartfelt, especially from D. Epp and G. Wilms who were returning to the colony. The Elder of Wischinka, Johannes Waldner, and another Hutterite brother accompanied him for 12 miles. Then due to Polish unrest, he made a detour traveling via Mohilew, Plozt and Dünaburg to Riga where he arrived August 21st. Concerning his stay in Riga he wrote:

“Here I enquired from the Governor about my further travels through Courland to Memel but because of the unrest, was dissuaded to continue overland. I found 4 families here that wished to travel to Russia. They were happy to see me and I held a sermon in the great room of their inn, having listeners of various religious backgrounds. They all showed their appreciation. I was invited for lunch by a well-to-do merchant, in the garden, with his entire family. The day before, the Lord Mayor and Commerzianrat, v. Breitschneider, came to my abode and invited me for a visit to his family and stately home in his coach.

I accepted and we drove, via a long detour, through beautiful vistas and buildings of the city until we finally arrived at his home. Here we received a friendly welcome from his wife and were asked in to coffee. We talked and discussed many things and, in the evening, I returned to my lodgings in his coach. On Monday, the 25th, I returned to His Excellency the Governor: he was very polite and promised to do everything possible to speed along my return trip. He invited me to a meal, I had to promise to come the following day to lunch. On the 26th I attended the luncheon at the governor’s palace among 15 other distinguished guests including the commandant of the fortress, His Excel. Herr v. Meiendorf. Several discussions were held and I too was included and asked the reason for my trip and what I had encountered upon it. Thereafter, I was with the Governor almost daily, sometimes concerning colony affairs and other times concerning the new arrivals.

Finally my business in Riga was completed. Due to the unrest in Courland and upon orders from the Riga governor as well as the Lord Governor, Count von Suzow who was in charge of the outer colonies and who had written to the empress, I had to travel via sea to Memel. His Excellency was so gracious and searched out a comfortable ship for me. After farewells from him and also the Commandant, I boarded the ship surrounded by well-wishers including Lead Pastor Bernhard and Pastor Bergmann.” The 5th of September he sailed from Dünamünde and arrived in Memel on the 9th.

His reception back in the Prussian congregations was just as heartwarming as his departure had been. After several days with stays in churches in Lithuania, Königsberg and Elbing, he reached his home in Rosenort on the 19th. His diary concludes with the following words:

"The Lord be thanked for all the grace and favour he provided during my entire journey. I am unworthy of all the faithfulness and mercy that God provided. Lord, receive grateful thanks from your lowly servant that I offer in Jesus name.

"Thanks to you, Father of life's journey,
My prayers to you were not in vain.
You guarded me, you heard my yearning;
In love you brought me home again.
You are my refuge and my shield,
All joy and praise to you I'll yield.
Now with the loved ones I hold dear:
In gratitude I raise my voice;
To praise your goodness without fear:
For evermore I will rejoice.
My goal was achieved, O God, through thee.
You gave me joy, protected me.
Eternal God on high I praise you:
For bounty given full and free.
And may my feeble words now please you,
My thanks for having guided me.
I trust you, Lord, for future days:
And pray for help in all my ways.

You true holder of my life, may I never forget what good you have done in my life. Praised be the faithful God for all the love and goodness he showed me on my journey, that my prayers were answered, that he was my protection always and has brought my journey to an end. You sheltered me from much danger and misfortune. Now, safely at home, with thankful heart I think of the many unknown dangers that threatened me. But you, faithful Father, have protected me and returned me to my loved ones. I am happy and rejoice.

It is good to be under the protection of God and to be able to fully depend on Him. This loyalty, this love experienced anew in my travels, that I have enjoyed from my youth, may it strengthen my belief and trust in your care.

But my God, I have a more important journey before me – the journey into eternity. May this goal be my main concern to the end. Stay by my side with your mercy, let your spirit lead me and may your loving eye protect me and never leave me in my old age. Be, o God, my staff through the dark valley of death. Protect, o God, through Jesus Christ, my entrance and exist until all eternity. Amen!"

After his return, C. Warkentin lived as congregational co-elder in Rosenort. In 1809, at the age of 69 years, he went on his finally journey to eternity. From 1755 he served his congregation as minister and then from 1794 as elder. Several years after his return, but before his death, he received an extraordinary honour from the Russian government of Tsar Alexander I for his services leading to the blossoming of the colony. A gold medallion was specifically minted featuring the tsar's portrait and signature on one side and agricultural emblems and Cornelius Warkentin's name on the other and sent to him. After his death, the medallion was purchased by Prussian Mennonites to be kept as a reminder

of the events. The fruits of labour of Cornelius Regier and Cornelius Warkentin continue to blossom and grow in the Russian congregations. May our congregations never be short of men who are willing to leave their comfort so they can be sent out to return to and uphold order and peace in our congregations.

