

New Mennonite Source Materials From the Former Soviet Union

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The August coup of 1991 brought many unexpected changes to the former Soviet Union. Access to archival holdings in various locations increased significantly, and the acquisition of duplicated records from former Soviet archives quickly developed in many Western centres.

The search for Mennonite materials, in Russian and Ukrainian archives particularly, quickly brought astonishing results. Dr. George K. Epp's discovery of the Peter J. Braun archives in Odessa, and its subsequent microfilming under the direction of Dr. Harvey Dyck of the University of Toronto, paved the way for further acquisitions which would make these materials accessible to western scholars as they never had been before.

Since the story of making that find has been widely publicized, this sketch will focus on what has happened since. The report here will concentrate on the holdings of the Mennonite Heritage Centre since this writer knows that collection best.

Contacts with Zaporozhian archivists by Rudy Friesen of Winnipeg led to a contract which would provide a computer for Zaporozh'e, and 2000 pages of photocopied material to be sent to the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. That project has now been completed and the deposit is now being inventoried for research use. The documents come from four larger files: one on matters

related to forestry service before 1917, one on the activities of the Lepp and Wallmann firm in Chortitza, one containing applications from Mennonite people wanting to emigrate in the 1920s, and a fourth one dealing with landholding in southern Ukraine.

A separate document sent to Winnipeg by the Zaporozhian assistant archivist, Alexander Tedelev, contains a long list of map titles connected with former Mennonite estates. These maps are really remarkable pieces of cartography and all are found in the Zaporozhian collection. The inventory was sent in Russian but has been translated into English. It is a fine supplement to the inventory of Russian Mennonite estates which has been started by Peter Rempel, a young historian from Moscow, whose work in this area has been purchased in duplicate by interested persons in Canada and the USA.

A further very significant project could be initiated as response to information from the St. Petersburg Christian College indicating that it might be possible to microfilm a very large collection of Mennonite materials in the St. Petersburg archives. The offer was accompanied by a detailed inventory of what was available in this collection. Four centres in western Canada and USA agreed to provide the needed funds so each could obtain an identical set of whatever could be procured that way. Dr. George K. Epp of Winnipeg offered communication services to make the transfer of materials possible.

Twenty two rolls have been sent to date, comprising perhaps as much as 30,000 pages of important documentation of the Mennonite story in Ukraine and Russia prior to the 1917 Revolution. Again most of the items are in Russian but quite a few appear in German, generally very legible and clearly filmed. All the material has been listed on a preliminary inventory. It can be consulted at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, and the Centres for MB Studies, Winnipeg and Fresno, as well as the Mennonite Archives in Abbotsford, BC. Filming has been completed, and full payment of costs has been made.

Some copies of interesting sample files on materials (German) like the All Russian Mennonite Agricultural Society in Ukraine (1920s) have been sent our archives by Dr. Walter Bawatsky of Elkhart, Indiana, to illustrate what may be found in the rich collections of some of the Moscow archives. Peter Rempel, mentioned above, has been able to consult some of these for his research. Very extensive searches of Russian and Ukrainian archives carried on currently by Baptist scholars in these countries is providing data on other Mennonite records found in locations researched so far. Sawatsky has been sharing a few notes on these activities also.

Large collections of letters, written by Mennonites from Russia to Canada in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and now being deposited in various archival centres constitute a source of data which is waiting to be sifted through, and used in published research on the Russian Mennonite story. Published sets such as those translated and shared by the Peter Bargins of BC and the Herbert Peters of Saskatoon, suggest what is possible in this regard.

Connections now existing with people in places like Novosibirsk, Orenburg and Omsk may yield more materials in the months ahead. A major microfilming project underway in Zaporozh'e under the direction of Dr. Harvey Dyck will dramatically augment present Mennonite archival holdings. Some very important types of records like the church registers of now-extinct Mennonite congregations in the former Soviet Union, and collections like the P.M. Friesen papers, or the files of the Moscow office which directed Mennonite alternative service work during World War I still need to be located.

Further details on items noted here may be obtained by writing to the Mennonite Heritage Centre at 600 Shaftesbury, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3P 0M4, or making contact by phone (1-204-888-6781) or email lklippen@mbnet.mb.ca.

Bibliographic Note

Glaubenslieder (Frankenthal: Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde, 1994)

This hymn book of the Frankenthal *Umsiedler* congregation stands out by its use of the musical notation system known as *Ziffern*, or numbers, for its 584 songs. The Foreword refers to this system as being practical ("eine musikalisch - praktische Methode") and explains its French origin and its coming to the Mennonites of Russia through the teacher Heinrich Franz (1812-1889). Apparently it was even brought to North America in 1874, but evidently could not be maintained here. The songs are a cross-section of evangelical church hymns from the formerly well-known *Dreiband* and other hymn collections. It will be interesting to see if this bold attempt to maintain difference in a land where most of the cultural boundaries have disappeared can have success.