

# Mennonite Revolutionaries in the Khortitza Settlement Under the Tsarist Regime as Recollected by Johann G. Rempel

*Translated, Annotated and with a Postscript by  
David G. Rempel, Menlo Park, California*

## Introduction

When Dietrich H. Epp founded his *Mennonitische Immigranten-Bote* (soon to become *Der Bote*) in 1924, he solicited some of his former students in Khortitza to contribute articles on subjects of their Russian experience on which they felt competent to write. My brother Johann G. Rempel, one such former student of Epp, responded with a series of six articles appearing between late October and early December, 1924, which dealt with the terrible famine of 1921-22. He followed this in 1926 with a series of twelve articles on his wartime service as a medical orderly on a hospital train of the All-Russian Zemstvo Union. Other articles on various subjects followed, culminating in a series of eight articles running from mid-April to early June, 1931, entitled "Moscow Recollections of the First Days of the Revolution (1917)."

This series elicited favorable responses from Mennonites in Canada who had also served as medical orderlies in World War I. The author was praised for his understanding of the forces at work in Russia at the time and for his broad perspective in evaluating their significance. There was also some negative criticism. Some felt that Saltykov, the head of AZU hospital trains headquarters in Moscow and known for his political liberalism, had been too favorably portrayed in his relationships with Mennonite servicemen. The author was also accused of exaggerating the servicemen's favorable reaction to the collapse of the tsarist regime in 1917. Mennonites, it was argued, had always been the most loyal and monarchistically inclined of Russian subjects, and therefore Mennonite servicemen could hardly have rejoiced over the collapse of the tsarist regime and have approved of an ostensibly socialist Provisional government.

In response to this criticism my brother Johann began working on a manuscript dealing with "Mennonite Revolutionaries" before 1914. The terrible events in the Soviet Union in the early thirties in all likelihood discouraged him from completing his manuscript and trying to get it published. On one of my visits to my brother in Rosthern in the late thirties, he showed me this unfinished manuscript and commented that it was an abandoned endeavor that at the time had seemed of some significance to our history but which in retrospect seemed historically irrelevant and not worth preserving. When his papers were placed at my disposal in the mid-sixties (after his death), the manuscript in question was not among them. Some years before his death, apparently, he had sorted out his materials and given orders for many of his historical writings in German to be burned in the basement furnace.

The materials destroyed included, besides the manuscript mentioned, sketches of interesting Mennonites, of several Russian statesmen and Duma representatives, as well as accounts of Mennonite villagers from Nieder-Chortitza, and other laymen and churchmen. Fortunately, among the remaining papers I discovered not only notes and random jottings, but more importantly two folders headed "Sehr verschieden waren die Nieder Chortitzer" which contained two abbreviated and slightly variant versions of "Mennonitische Revolutionäre." What follows is a translation of these manuscripts, with the inclusion of various random notes found among the papers. Additional notes and explanations are included in my Postscript.

David G. Rempel

## **Mennonite Revolutionaries in the Old Colony Before 1917<sup>1</sup>**

by **Johann G. Rempel**

Shortly after the 1905 revolution rumors began to spread through our villages about certain young Mennonites who were opposed to the political, economic and social order in Imperial Russia, as well as in our Mennonite communities. Not surprisingly, such rumors received more credence in some communities than in others, and were occasionally even accepted as factual. This certainly seemed to be the case in Khortitza, Einlage and perhaps in Osterwick, where owners of Mennonite industrial enterprises had made common cause with industrial entrepreneurs in Alexandrovsk around the time of the 1905 uprisings by resorting to lockouts of workers in order to break strikes. Schönwiese, it must be remembered, had for all intents and purposes been part of the city of Alexandrovsk even before its official incorporation into it in 1911.

Except for management and engineering staffs, the labor force in these Mennonite manufacturing concerns in most of southern Russia was largely composed of Great and Little (Ukrainian) Russians, with some Mennonite workers and an occasional Prussian German thrown in, the latter generally working as a furnace stoker. Hence, the chief agitators for change and the labor union organizers came from Russian ranks, or else were Jewish workers. Still, some Mennonite workers in Khortitza-Rosental, especially those from the Rosental section known as Tomakovka, were from time to time accused by other Mennonites of being sympathetic to radical change if not actually favoring outright revolution.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps P. M. Friesen was right in his assertion that the overwhelming majority of Russian Mennonites before 1914 were arch-conservatives, and that at least 75% of them agreed with those Russian patriots who championed monarchism, love of fatherland and the existing social order.<sup>3</sup>

A considerable number of the admittedly small but steadily growing Mennonite intelligentsia, however, especially among the teaching and other professions, subscribed to the policies of the Party of Constitutional Democrats commonly known as the Cadets, a grouping of liberals which advocated a wide program of political and economic reforms and the transformation of the autocratic form of government into a constitutional monarchy on the British model. Such views were also shared by some Mennonite industrial and business magnates in cities such as Ekaterinoslav, Alexandrovsk-Schönwiese, and possibly even in Khortitza. When I took pedagogical courses in Khortitza from 1907-09, I had reason to think that at least three of my teachers — Heinrich and Dietrich Epp and Heinrich Dyck — were

in agreement with the Cadet policies of liberal reform. In the elections of the first two State Dumas in 1906 and 1907, there was wide interest among our people, particularly among the teachers of Khortitza's various schools and also among us older students. Nevertheless, as Mennonite lay and church leaders maintained at the time, most Russian Mennonites shared the views of the prominent Mennonite evangelist and writer Bernhard Harder (1832-1884) who in many of his numerous verses adopted an extremely worshipful attitude towards Alexander II (especially during his reactionary years after 1865) and Alexander III.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, in spite of this conservative political climate, rumors about real or alleged Mennonite revolutionaries focussed not only on the Mennonite centers of industry already named but also on such villages as Neuendorf and Nieder Chortitza in the Old Colony, neither of which possessed more than one or two flour mills and some cottage industry. In these two villages the alleged revolutionaries, so far as I can recall, came mainly from farming families that had succumbed to what became known as Mennonite "mill fever," which meant that a farmer would sell his farm and establish a flour mill at a railroad junction or in a Russian town or large peasant village. All too often bankruptcy ensued and the disgruntled dreamer-entrepreneur, or his son, or both, having suffered heavy financial loss as well as losing social prestige in their home village, tried to justify themselves by blaming the existing system and joining those who were challenging the status quo and advocating change. Similar scenarios might unfold through other failed commercial and industrial ventures such as attempts to establish depots for the sale of farm machinery and implements of domestic or foreign manufacture in or near newly founded Mennonite colonies in different parts of the empire. Other variants of possible causes leading to radicalization among village Mennonites will be described below with specific reference to Nieder Chortitza.

My first personal experience with alleged Mennonite revolutionaries came after I accepted a teaching position in the Neuendorf elementary school in 1909, where I enjoyed four of the happiest years of my life teaching alongside Johann Wieler, principal of the school and a distant relative of my mother,<sup>5</sup> and the third teacher, Peter Hamm, both of whom became life-long friends. Two other Neuendorf residents relevant to my subject were Johann Hildebrand and Johann Klassen, cherished friends who frequently visited me in the teacherage on the school campus. Hildebrand often told stories about a Cornelius Thiessen, a native Neuendorfer who was a real Mennonite revolutionary. My colleague Hamm and I shared rooms in the teacherage and boarded at the home of the Cornelius Enses,<sup>6</sup> whose comfortable farmstead was situated adjacent to the school. Mrs. Ens, who had until recently been a widow, was the mother of Cornelius Thiessen, and so we got to know more about her atypical son before actually meeting him in 1912-13, my last year in Neuendorf.

Johann Hildebrand and his friends liked to entertain us with stories about the exploits of Cornelius Thiessen in assisting Russian revolutionaries in their work of undermining the tsarist government. One of these exploits related to an event which had taken place in St. Petersburg some years before war began in 1914. A group of revolutionaries, including Thiessen, had met at a prearranged place, but the police,

having received prior intelligence about the rendezvous, surrounded the house and captured all but Thiessen, who escaped through a rear door and found temporary refuge in an outdoor privy. It wasn't long, however, before he was discovered by a policeman searching the backyard of the premises. The agile and very strong Thiessen managed to overpower the lone officer and shut him up in the privy long enough to make his escape. Thiessen was soon recaptured, however, and suffered the fate of most Russian revolutionaries — exile to Siberia.

Another Mennonite revolutionary was Peter Rempel, a native of Nieder Chortitza and a second cousin of mine. His father, the elder Peter Rempel, who was my father's first cousin and who came from a line of prosperous local farmers, was an adventurer who joined many others at the close of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth who were seeking their fortunes in the developing industrial and commercial spheres which were transforming Russia from a largely agricultural country into one of the industrial powers of Europe during the period just before 1914. Instead of adding to the flour mills springing up all over, Peter Rempel Sr. tried his luck by embarking upon large-scale modern farming not in the usual Mennonite village, but rather by leasing an entire estate, or at least portions thereof, from a Russian landowner, a type of gentry still to be found in fair numbers near many Old Colony villages.<sup>7</sup>

The leased Rempel estate or *khutor* was situated a short distance from Neuendorf. Since it was rumored that this land-leasing deal had been easily arranged at a modest price, we surmised that the landowner was one of those bankruptcy-facing noblemen who was conscience-stricken over mistreatment of his former serfs and who might therefore be one of the "repentant nobles" well-known from Russian history and literature. And it was not unusual for members of such a family, especially the younger generation, to become imbued with teachings and far-reaching reforms advocated by growing numbers of dissidents from all walks of life. So it was easy for us in Neuendorf to assume that young Peter Rempel had come under the influence of a "repentant noble" and embraced his radical if not revolutionary ideas. However, it was not until later during my stay in the village that I learned that my second cousin, whom we usually referred to as "Kuta Rampels Peeta," actually belonged to a group of alleged revolutionaries in Nieder Chortitza. That awareness dawned on me gradually as our friend Hildebrand revealed more secrets about Mennonite radicals.<sup>8</sup>

It was common knowledge that the different revolutionary organizations, especially the more radical factions like the Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, made every effort to "spring free" their imprisoned or exiled members. Peter Rempel was entrusted with this task in the case of Cornelius Thiessen. Rempel was successful but unfortunately Thiessen had considerable difficulty finding the prearranged hideout in Saratov, with the result that he was rearrested by the police and again exiled to Siberia. After Rempel had made further fruitless trips to Siberia, Thiessen finally managed to escape to Odessa with the help of a Jewish woman, a fellow revolutionary. He was eventually joined there by her and they were married, but both were once more arrested. According to Hildebrand, Thiessen and his wife

had joined a revolutionary cell, but it was not made clear to us whether this had meant joining a cell of the Bolshevik faction or the Russian Social Democrat Party.

During the course of Hildebrand's account of Cornelius Thiessen's odyssey, he finally revealed that he himself was a member of the Neuendorf Mennonite group of plotters against the tsarist regime, but he did not disclose whether this group belonged to a cell in a specific revolutionary organization. As to Thiessen's ultimate fate in Russia, Hildebrand told us this had finally been decided by a prominent prosecuting attorney in Odessa. Again, he would not reveal the official's name except to observe that he had been involved in a large number of trials of political prisoners and had obtained the death penalty for some of them. According to Hildebrand, this official, now about to retire, had resolved to plead that Thiessen and his wife were not guilty as charged, provided they agreed to his special condition: namely, that after being permitted to spend a few weeks with his mother and stepfather in Neuendorf they would be exiled to South America. Since we were boarding at the Ens home at the time, we got to see the two revolutionaries frequently during their visit, although they tried hard to remain as inconspicuous to outsiders as possible. Naturally, their presence was known to many villagers, but out of fear for the tsarist police the subject was rarely touched upon in public. One thing that struck me about Cornelius Thiessen at the time was his obvious physical strength and agility. I was told that he had been exercising since his early youth according to the so-called Miller System. Often I observed him in the Ens *Grootestow* practising "cat-walking" with the family cat.

I did not learn of the Thiessen couple's departure for overseas until the summer of 1913 when I had already taken a teaching position in Kronsweide, another Old Colony village a relatively short distance from Neuendorf which made for easy contact with my former teaching colleagues Wieler and Hamm. As luck would have it, in Kronsweide I soon made the acquaintance of Peter Thiessen, a local farmer and younger brother of Cornelius whom I was to meet again in very different circumstances during the war and the collapse of the old regime in 1917 and then again during the terrible months of the Makhno domination in 1919.

War came in August, 1914, and by early September I had been mobilized and sent to Moscow to serve as a medical orderly on the hospital trains of the All-Russian Zemstvo Union. After serving on hospital train No. 194 for two years, in the fall of 1916 along with several of my former teaching colleagues I was transferred to Moscow and assigned to the headquarters for hospital trains of the AZU. My assignment in Moscow lasted until early June, 1917, and there I was able to observe and experience the momentous days of revolution leading to the birth of the Provisional government and the virtually insoluble problems it faced in the first three months of its existence.

One evening that spring I happened to attend a meeting of the Mennonite medical orderlies assigned to our headquarters for hospital trains. Such meetings had become an almost daily routine and took place in our dormitory building in Sredne-Tishinskii Pereulok. During the intermission I was strolling among the assembled men when all of a sudden I heard an aroused voice speaking in Russian:

"My brother shed his blood for the Revolution." I at once recognized the voice of Peter Thiessen, brother of Cornelius, the farmer I had gotten to know in Kronsweide during my teaching there in 1913-14. I went over to him and we greeted each other as old acquaintances, but our conversation was casual and brief because he wanted to talk about nothing but the deeds of his brother in the revolutionary cause. I had not been aware of Peter's service as a medical corpsman and of his current presence in Moscow, nor had I heard anything at our headquarters of a serviceman with close kinship to a person who had shed his blood for the Revolution.

Peter himself was at this time a rather insignificant if not downright inconsequential person. However, he proclaimed the valorous deeds of his brother Cornelius so endlessly that he quite impressed some of our men. After all, this was a time when the early revolutionaries were being praised to the skies for having prepared the ground that had made the events of late February, 1917, possible. Our Mennonite men were especially buoyant during those days and weeks because the Provisional government had already abolished most, if not all, of the tsarist laws and decrees which discriminated against Russian subjects on account of race, creed and ethnicity, and had either set aside or actually repealed the notorious land expropriation decrees against subjects of German origin who had at one time belonged to the category of foreign colonists. This meant that these people could not only retain their land holdings but that the dreaded threat of exile to Siberia was eliminated for expropriated landowners. There were also good grounds to believe that the overthrow of the monstrosly corrupt and autocratic tsarist regime would lead to an end of the war.

The third time I heard about Cornelius Thiessen at some length was in the late spring of 1917. As a former teacher I had already been informed of my pending discharge from the service. The Provisional government, at the special behest of Alexander Kerensky, its Minister of Justice, had issued a directive in May ordering the early dismissal of all elementary and, presumably, all secondary school teachers from whatever type of war service they were performing. They were to be sent home forthwith in order to prepare themselves for a return to their teaching posts in the fall. My departure from Moscow had been delayed for several weeks to enable me to assist with the orientation of a new chief secretary and a new business manager in our office. Franz Harder, my friend and former student roommate in Khortitza, was to take over the post of secretary. But of particular interest to me was the business manager designate, a Jew called Tetelbaum who was a former resident of Ekaterinoslav. He became most affable when he found out that I had at one time not only taught in Neuendorf and boarded at the home of Cornelius Thiessen's mother, but that I had also met the man personally. Tetelbaum confided to me that he had often met Thiessen at clandestine meetings in Ekaterinoslav. There had also been many other contacts between them.

The revolution continued to intensify and the possibility of a Bolshevik seizure of power grew from week to week. Tetelbaum was intensifying his own efforts to bring about cooperation between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. I did not know to which group of socialists he had belonged prior to the downfall of the tsarist

government, but my impression was that he had belonged to the radical wing of the Mensheviks, perhaps even to the party of the Socialist Revolutionaries, which for some time had had a strong following in the city of Ekaterinoslav. There was also no hint as to what might have been Cornelius Thiessen's party affiliation. Tetelbaum's strongly reiterated slogan during these prolonged weeks of my stay in Moscow was: "Cooperation is essential. It can be done. It must be done." In May that still seemed possible. I went home to southern Russia, and after a brief vacation joined Heinrich Dyck, one of the teachers in the Khortitza *Zentralschule*, in assisting with voter registration in several Mennonite villages for the election of delegates to the constitutional convention at the time slated to convene in late fall of 1917.

What followed is well-known history: the Bolsheviks seized power in late October, 1917, and at once dashed all hopes of being willing to share power with any of the other socialist parties or factions. On the contrary, they soon proceeded with the "liquidation" of all opponents, including all anarchists and socialists who had not managed to flee the country. Many months later when I happened to scan a newspaper listing the names of "vile and dangerous enemies of Soviet Russia" who had been rendered "harmless" through execution, I found there the name of Tetelbaum.

Many years later I was told in Canada that Cornelius Thiessen had died in South America, apparently in Buenos Aires, where he was reported to have garnered many honors, including having a street and a library named after him. As for Kuta Rampels Peeta, I recall that he visited Nieder Chortitza several times after the Revolution broke out in 1917, but do not know what his eventual fate was. I also lost contact with Johann Hildebrand, who apparently moved to Arkadak in late 1913.<sup>9</sup>

There was one other suspected revolutionary in our village whose mode of life, attitudes and activities were generally viewed as suspect, although he was not really considered to pose a threat either to the community or to the state at large. Cornelius Huebert was an odd fellow who lived with his equally odd father and a younger brother. The three lived in a small brick cottage at the western end of Nieder Chortitza, an area of small cottages occupied by teamsters and (after the Stolypin land reforms in 1906) the recipients of small allotments. The Hueberts owned a small smithy and generally gave the impression that the family had once seen better times. They functioned as jacks-of-all-trades in the village, having the ability to repair almost anything in a typical Mennonite household.

I occasionally met Cornelius Huebert in a casual way but never had the inclination to get to know him better. He was a tall, slender, very erect man who always walked as if he were in a great hurry. I recall that he always wore a hat and a crumpled suit jacket, rather unusual attire in our farm community. He always seemed to be preoccupied with his own thoughts and there was something peculiar about him, a furtiveness which made me think of him in terms of the stereotyped Russian revolutionary, though without the bomb. Like the other Mennonite revolutionaries already mentioned, Huebert had apparently been greatly influenced by the writings of some of the Russian populist and utopian socialist writers of the



1860s and seventies, most particularly by Nicholas Chernyshevski's novel *What is to be Done?*. This work was on the government's list of prohibited works and difficult to obtain.

All kinds of odd stories used to circulate among my friends in Nieder Chortitza about Cornelius Huebert although I cannot vouch for their authenticity. I was intrigued by one in particular for which the evidence was the index finger of his left hand, part of which was missing. The story was that at a meeting of Mennonite radicals in our village — it was not clear whether they had all been native residents — one of the men had told stories about the different forms of torture Russian revolutionaries were subjected to during arrests and hearings at the hands of the tsarist political police, and the stoicism with which these radicals endured the brutal treatment they received. Apparently Huebert claimed that he too could endure such treatment with equal stoicism. The others having questioned his capacity to do so, he is reported to have taken a straight razor, placed his left index finger on the table and calmly proceeded to cut it off at the second joint. I do not know whether this incident happened as reported, but it certainly fits the stereotyped picture one derives from Russian literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century dealing with the beliefs and actions of radical groups during the period.

## Postscript

As noted in the Introduction, the preceding account of Mennonite revolutionaries in the Old Colony is based on my brother Johann's manuscript as well as on scattered notes, reminders and an occasional personal recollection on the background, activities and characters of particular individuals mentioned in his papers. When we discussed his manuscript article in the late thirties, he agreed with my comment that the story lacked a discussion of the specific aims of our "revolutionaries," what motivated them to risk their livelihoods, their freedom and even their lives in joining organizations with the avowed aim of destroying the tsarist regime. He had hoped to expand this theme in a revision of his manuscript, but events in the Soviet Union which had made the continued survival of our people in that country so precarious, combined with the steady growth of National Socialism in Germany and its exceedingly inflammatory effect on many Mennonites in Canada, made him realize that if he had the article published in *Der Bote* he would be inviting angry attacks against himself and Dietrich Epp, the editor. And so he decided to forego further work on it.

I also asked him why he had not included in his discussion other radicals we both knew existed in Nieder Chortitza, including the very evil career during the revolutionary period of Peter Thiessen of Kronsweide, the younger brother of Cornelius Thiessen who had boasted of the latter's revolutionary exploits when Johann met him in Moscow. His answer was that he had always felt more empathy with the pre-revolutionary radicals, since they had advocated radical changes of the

established order in the empire as well as in the Mennonite community at considerable risk to themselves, while the local radicals who had emerged after the collapse of the old regime and the Provisional government in 1917 had selfish personal aims and were motivated by greed and a lust for power and revenge against those who had exploited them.

Among the most widely known local trouble-makers suspected of having connections with Russian revolutionaries during the upheaval of the times, were several who had been absent from Nieder Chortitza for years and belonged to the village only by government census. The most obnoxious of them was a Cornelius Wall, who had changed his name to Wallenko during his absence. In January, 1918, Balkov, the Bolshevik head of the Khortitza soviet, appointed Wallenko and a certain Neufeld to head our village soviet and sent them to Ekaterinoslav to meet with the newly formed *uiezd*, the county government. During their absence the village cancelled their positions, but they returned with their appointments confirmed by a higher soviet. They now received strong support from their fellow "*Nippaenja*," the people who lived in the part of the village closest to the Dnieper, and who were mainly boatmen and *chumaki* (i.e., teamsters or draymen). These people now demanded redress of both real and imagined grievances. Many of them were the not-too-distant relatives of formerly prosperous farmers and onetime power-wielders, a situation which often embittered the conflicts and contests between the parties involved. One of the most notorious of these local radicals was Heinrich Thiessen, who occasionally acted as chairman of the local soviet when the Bolsheviks happened to be in control amidst the never-ending changes of "regime" among the Reds, Whites, Yellows, Greens, Blacks (Anarchists), partisans (mostly bandits), Petlurists, Ukrainian Rada soldiers, Cadets (officers of the imperial army fleeing south to the Caucasus), and many others — altogether more than twenty such changes from late December, 1917, to October, 1920.

The demands of these radicals, Johann believed, had for the most part been valid and timely and could easily have been met in most cases. Their main demands were: 1) extension of voting rights to all male adults; 2) changes in the levying of taxes, particularly poll taxes; 3) changes in the rendering of community services; 4) easier access to wood-, hay-, and pasture lands; 5) exemption from the payment of school taxes; and 6) the granting of building sites to any newly married couple not having obtained such previously, on the large stretch of unused sandy land north of the village. Unfortunately, both sides in the bitter controversy had been to blame, the former "haves" for all too often using delaying tactics based on the excuse of changing regimes, the "have-nots" for being unreasonable in demanding concessions in an impossible time-frame.

Johann clearly remembered the ugliness of the conflict between the two factions, for which in the end both paid a horrible price at the hands of the Soviet government. He also remembered that when emigration finally got underway in 1922-23 one of the farmer leaders most opposed to it taunted him by saying, "Nur die Törrichten emigrieren, die Klügern bleiben in Russland." Later, Abram Schmidt, who had been briefly freed from exile in 1929 (he died in a slave-labor camp during

the 1930s) had said in a letter: "Die Törichsten blieben in Russland, und die Klugen seien ausgewandert." Johann reminded me how one of the loudest advocates for redress of past "sins" by the haves had come one day to us three brothers after our father's death (whom he had owed more than 500 rubles from pre-war years) with a little box of matches selling in 1921 for about the same price and offered it as payment — for which he demanded a receipt!

On the other side of the coin, however, Johann also recalled that when a series of new taxes was imposed on our people, with him as a preacher having to pay double the amount imposed on others and triple for the quarter farm his wife had inherited (in name only) from her father, the already mentioned chairman of the local soviet Heinrich Thiessen persuaded a formerly well-to-do farmer to pay Johann's assessment as well as to effect a paper transfer of the quarter farm as having been made over to someone else some years earlier.

What finally happened, however, was that these radicals, who were really working-class people, suffered the same tragic fate of exile during the purges of 1937-38 as did the so-called kulaks, the same inhuman treatment and death in slave-labor camps in Siberia or north of the Arctic circle in and near Archangelsk. And when I inquired why he had not been more explicit about Peter Thiessen, the terrible brother of Cornelius, who reappeared in the Khortitza settlement in the summer of 1919 with the Red Army under its local commander General Deviatka and that same fall as a member of the Makhnovtsy under Batko Pravda, and who as Petka Thiessen (with a Ukrainian wife), was regarded by our people as one of the most vicious bandits in the area, Johann's answer was that the two had come down with typhus in late December, 1919, and had likely died, or else had later been liquidated by the Red Army, the ultimate fate of so many Makhnovtsy.

So much for Johann's account. By way of conclusion I want to present some further information about Cornelius Thiessen included in A. Klibanov's *Out of the World of Religious Sectarianism: Meetings, Discussions, Observations*, published in the Soviet Union in 1974.<sup>10</sup> A well-known Soviet authority on sectarianism in Russia, Klibanov classifies as sectarian believers all Protestant dissidents among foreign colonists, both pre- and post-revolutionary, including Mennonites, Stundists, and others. His earlier works dating back to the 1930s are exceedingly biased against the people he attacks, and he is very doctrinaire in his anti-religious views. A good example is his *Mennonity*, a book published in 1931 by the Central Council of the Union of Militant Godless of the USSR. It is based on Klibanov's lengthy visit in 1930 to the Old Colony, specifically such villages as Khortitza-Rosental, Neuendorf, Rosengart, Nieder Chortitza, and possibly others. There is no need to comment at length on his treatment of Mennonite beliefs and activities, or on their attitudes towards the tsarist regime or the Bolshevik government, since his treatment on all aspects of these subjects is unadulterated propaganda. Even where he claims that his information comes from Mennonite sources, it is so transparently slanted to support pre-conceived notions and views as to set it utterly at variance with the knowledge of anyone familiar with the events described. Illustrative is the account he gives of the allegedly extremely brutal and callous way in which Mennonite

farmers had treated the poor and starving people of Neuendorf during the famine of 1921, an account he claims to be based upon stories told to him by many Mennonite women about their own experiences during that tragic year.

Similarly wide of the mark is Klibanov's description of the role the Selbstschutz had played in both the Molochnaia and Khortitza. This is particularly the case with reference to Abram Loewen, the notorious member of the Nieder Chortitza Selbstschutz, whose first name he gives as Gerhard and to whom he attributes a wildly exaggerated role as an anti-Soviet leader in 1918-19. Loewen, who before the war had been a boatman earning a barely tolerable living by ferrying passengers and farm produce from his home village to Alexandrovsk-Schönwiese, had found it difficult after returning from alternate war service in late 1917 to adjust to civilian life and had become a more or less shiftless drifter until given a janitorial job at a local school. Bored by that he tried to impress people with boasts of how he would handle the various "reds," "partisans," and just ordinary "bandits" who almost daily plagued the area with demands for the payment of "reparations," "contributions" and "requisitions" of food, clothing, money, bedding, horses, cattle and countless other items of household use, farm equipment, and so forth during the early months of 1918 and the late fall after the German occupation forces had withdrawn from the Ukraine.

When the Selbstschutz was formed Loewen joined it. His braggadocio occasionally succeeded in forcing some of the invaders and marauders to leave with little or no loot, and even led to the slaying of a bandit and the wounding of several others. Unfortunately, Loewen so impressed many sons of once prosperous farmers that three of them — Dietrich Neufeld, Abram Guenter and Jacob Toews — with Loewen as their leader, formed a special unit of self-appointed "guardians" of peace and order in the village. One of their "exploits" ended with the pursuit and killing of three "bandits" who later turned out to have been harmless Petlurists fleeing from the Bolsheviks in Alexandrovsk. It is not entirely clear whether Loewen killed all three or whether the others participated, but it was an act for which the entire village was to pay over and over with every change in "government" which took place during late 1918 and through most of 1919 among the various factions. All used the excuse that the three men had been members of their particular army or police, and demanded either the surrender of Loewen or payment of a "reparation." Invariably these demands involved the beating of innocent men seized at random, followed by the inevitable looting. Loewen was finally captured on November 5, 1919, and executed by the Makhnovtsy, who occupied the entire Khortitza settlement in the fall of that year. Guenter, Neufeld and Toews were executed by the Cheka in early 1922.

The truth is that Loewen never led an "armed detachment" against the Red Army or the Soviet government. Nor did the Mennonite "bourgeoisie" fight the Soviet government as an organized entity of bitter anti-Communists and implacable foes of the Soviets. This is Klibanov's description of the situation:

...The Mennonite bourgeoisie, naturally, did not confine its activity to mere denunciations. In their fight against the October Revolution the Mennonites utilized every means possible — the press and agitation by word of mouth to mobilize public opinion

against the Soviets. Cadres were organized in the colonies to overthrow the Soviets by force, as well as to offer help to the German interventionists and the White Guardists. In the Molochnaia, Khortitza and in other districts armed kulak detachments began to appear for the struggle against the Red Army. A sad notoriety was achieved in Khortitza by that cut-throat Gerhard Loewen, one of the leaders of the Mennonite kulak band. Loewen's company, armed with army rifles, machine guns and bombs, carried on especially in Nizhniaia [Nieder] Khortitza. Its activity began with the killing of three Red Army soldiers. And when one soldier hid in the home of the widow Thiessen and some of Loewen's henchmen got word of it, they went there and killed him on the spot. Subsequently, Loewen and remnants of his band succeeded in reaching Central Russia and at Voronezh in late 1918 staged an uprising against Soviet power. Similar types of organizations also arose in the Molochnaia district....

The number of these armed men in the original Mennonite districts reached several thousand....<sup>11</sup>

This example of Klibanov's biased reporting should also make us regard with some caution his account of the experiences and supposedly heroic deeds of Cornelius Thiessen based on information given him by a Mennonite teacher.

Klibanov begins his story (in his 1974 book) by observing that on his 1930 visit to Khortitza he had collected so much material on the Mennonites as a whole, as well as on specific individuals, that he had found it impossible to incorporate it all in his book. His visits to Neuendorf and Rosengart had been made on the special advice of the local educational propaganda leader. In the Russian manner a person's first name and patronymic are usually given instead of his surname. Hence, Klibanov identifies the educational propaganda leader only as Nikolai Maksimovich, who had given him two good reasons for visiting the village of Rosengart: firstly, because it had the best collective farm in the area and thus constituted a model for others to follow, and secondly the visitor was to meet the teacher of Rosengart's elementary school, who coincidentally was also the secretary of the collective farm. Moreover, meeting the old teacher would in itself be worth making the trip. Klibanov agreed and the two Communists went to Rosengart from Khortitza, a distance of only a few versts.

Klibanov stayed at the teacher's home for several days. Their discussions covered a great variety of subjects but one area received special attention, namely the teacher's collection of documentary materials on his family's ancestry as well as on Mennonites in general, both under tsarism and currently under the Soviet regime. Klibanov, with obvious delight and admiration, refers to the teacher simply as Genrikh Korneievich, but his real name was Cornelius Braun and he happened to be my uncle by marriage.<sup>12</sup> After teaching in Rosental's elementary school for many years, he moved over to the Rosengart school in 1924, where he had been offered a better salary and where he would hopefully be under less pressure to carry on anti-religious propaganda than in Khortitza-Rosental, which was the Communist party headquarters. He taught in Rosengart until 1929, when he made the mistake of attending the baptismal services of his two daughters in Khortitza. This mistake immediately cost him his teaching position, the sole family income. Since he had been a very popular teacher, the leaders and members of the collective farm gave

him the post of farm secretary and somehow managed to permit him to continue living in the teacherage.<sup>13</sup>

Here is what Klibanov reports Braun as having told him about the relations between Mennonite industrial employers and their workers, as well as the attitudes of Mennonite workers towards their employers and about the impact the general economy in earlier years had had on Mennonite workers. Braun also gave the author information on Cornelius Thiessen:

Genrikh Korneievich wished to soften the disagreeable facts which testified to the capitalistic exploitation on Mennonite lands and in Mennonite industrial enterprises and to Mennonite toadying to tsarism. He believed that the Mennonite capitalists had been more concerned about the material needs of their workers than had the Greek Orthodox gentry and factory owners.

Somehow the name of the Mennonite Ivan Ivanovich Thiessen cropped up in our conversation, the former mill owner in Ekaterinoslav with an annual turnover of a million and a half rubles.

"There are many Thiessens," said Genrikh Korneievich, "and among them I knew one Thiessen, a revolutionary from Khortitza. He was an idealist who sacrificed his life for the revolution. He was famous in Khortitza, and he was well-known and highly regarded by revolutionaries in Alexandrovsk. He was persecuted and tried to hide from the police, but not very effectively. He was a man with a beautiful soul but unskilled in practical life. You really should inform yourself about him and in writing about the Mennonites mention him also, not merely Thiessen the mill owner."

I had not only mentioned Thiessen the revolutionary in the original manuscript of my [1931] study, but had also written about the strike of the Khortitza workers in 1905, and about the participation of Mennonite workers in the strike in the railroad yard—in the Lepp-Wallmann factory in Alexandrovsk, the Koop factory in...Schonwiese and in the iron works of the Mennonites Klassen and Neufeld in Sovievka. All this according to the materials and the oral information given to me by Genrikh Korneievich. However, none of this got into the published book because I had been unable to verify in time the information from him against other sources. I am doing that now, some forty years later [in 1974].<sup>14</sup>

So much for Klibanov's report on Cornelius Thiessen. There is no way of knowing at this distance in time whether "Genrikh Korneievich" actually supplied Klibanov with the extraordinary amount of information about Mennonite "revolutionaries" and Mennonite "capitalist exploiters" he claims. There is no denying that the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, possibly also the Trudoviki (Laborites) were scoring some propaganda victories among Mennonite factory workers, and even more so among some of the students who attended higher institutions of learning away from Mennonite centers, and particularly among uprooted Mennonites from our middle and even upper classes. Mennonite teachers and other professional people, if they had an interest in Russian politics and the country's economy, were more likely to be attracted to the more moderate program of the Constitutional Democrats.

Was teacher Cornelius Braun as liberal or even radical as Klibanov seems to imply? I knew him and his family very well, having often stayed in their home for

weeks, even months, especially during the Revolution and Civil War while attending the teacher training seminary in Khortitza. Admittedly, he was liberal in his political views but it was at times difficult to tell what his views really were, for he was a marvelous storyteller and mimic and one might have been misled in assuming that his views on politics, economics and even religion were at variance with those of quite a few of his coreligionists. In fairness I should add that several of his close relatives who managed to come to Canada after World War II claimed that "unser Onkel Braun während den Jahren der Neuen Oekonomischen Politik war ziemlich rot angehaucht." One must bear in mind, however, that this was the opinion of refugees who after undergoing the indescribable horrors of the Stalinist years regarded even a slightly liberal attitude towards the Soviet regime as being "red-tinted."

Braun was strongly opposed to emigration because of his belief that under NEP our people could expect a continued course of moderation of Soviet policies and that therefore they would have a good future in the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> During the terrible years of the so-called dekulakization policies against the rural population (1929-33) and the liquidation of allegedly traitorous urban professional people (1934-38), as well as the wholesale exile of virtually all Mennonite males on the eve of World War II, teacher Braun was one of the very few males (even his oldest son was not spared arrest and temporary exile) who escaped arrest and banishment to the Gulag. What saved Braun from the fate so many others suffered? Could Klibanov possibly have played a role in protecting him? Even before the loss of his teaching position in 1929, for fear of being accused of connection with foreigners he had ceased corresponding with former colleagues in Canada, and did not permit relatives of his wife still living in Rosental and other nearby villages who had received letters from emigrés in Canada to share them with his family in Rosengart. His own wife had to go to Rosental if she wished to read such communications. Braun died somewhere in eastern Germany in a refugee camp in 1946, while his wife, two daughters, a daughter-in-law and four grandchildren were rounded up by the Red Army, repatriated and exiled to Siberia.

The Klibanov account testifies to the fact that much material on real or suspected Mennonite revolutionaries was and possibly still is available in Soviet archives and libraries, both for the years of the late tsarist regime and likely in Bolshevik party and police files, which needs to be studied by students of our Russian experience. [With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the recent discovery of Mennonite archives in Odessa and possibly in other places in the near future, coupled with the freedom and renewed interest in the Russian-Mennonite story in Russia and Ukraine, as well as here, the opportunities for further research on this and other neglected subjects look more promising than ever before. (Editorial note)]

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The very title "Mennonite Revolutionaries...Under the Tsarist Regime" will no doubt provoke strong denials among some Russian Mennonites in Canada: "So etwas gab es nicht unter uns, denn wir waren doch die Stillen im Lande." The Silent People: of the many myths in Russian Mennonite historical literature and folklore none has been more persistent than this one. The two major histories published before World War I—P.M. Friesen's massive *The Mennonite Brotherhood* (1911) and Franz Isaak's more specific study on two major issues of controversy with special concentration on the Molochnaia settlement (1908)—do not even take note of Abraham Thiessen (1838-1899), one of the chief "trouble-makers" during the decades-long dispute between the landowners and the landless. Friesen vehemently denounced Thiessen as a radical agitator, if not actually a socialist, and strongly approved of his administrative exile by the government from 1874-76. But Friesen mentions him only in passing while Isaak does not even do that. Were these authors, both from the ranks of the ministry, afraid to peer behind the veil of historic events at the one real, albeit troublesome, champion of land and administrative reforms?

<sup>2</sup> In addition to workers, a few small farmers and some tradesmen, several residents in Tomakovka secured a livelihood by providing room and board for students of the *Zentralschule* who came from other villages.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P.M. Friesen, *Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* (Halbstadt, Taurien: 1911), 526.

<sup>4</sup> To Harder the very term democrat connoted subversion, as in his verse pronouncement: "Da schleicht mit finsterem Angesicht, der dunkle Democrat."

<sup>5</sup> My father's first wife, nee Maria Rempel, was a granddaughter of Aganetha Wieler, sister of the two well-known Wieler brothers, Johann and Gerhard, both admired and reviled for many years for their part in the religious dissent movements among Mennonites and their Russian neighbors during the 1860s-1880s, and Principal Wieler was a descendant of one of these religious dissenters.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Ens was the father of Mr. Gerhard Ens of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, whom many of our Russian Mennonite emigrants of the 1920s got to know well through his close collaboration with Bishop David Toews in their successful work of opening Canada's door to them, and for his tireless efforts in the settling of many thousands of our refugees in Canada's western provinces.

<sup>7</sup> Since the abolition of serfdom in 1861, which deprived them of free household and field labor, many of the landowners had been on the verge of bankruptcy and many sought relief from huge debts by selling their holdings. Our history shows that Mennonites made ample use of the opportunities to purchase these holdings and made the area from the southern boundary of the Old Colony almost to the city of Ekaterinoslav in the north, and westward from the Dnieper in the east for a distance of some 45 versts, a virtually solid Mennonite, Low-German-speaking miniature state interspersed only by a few peasant villages.

<sup>8</sup> In perusing the histories of a number of such Mennonite estate families, one finds that the radicalizing of Mennonite youths through the influence of "repentant nobles" was far from rare.

<sup>9</sup> There were reports that Hildebrand went insane after moving to Arkadak, and that he had been guilty of some lurid behavior in the final months of his life. People from Arkadak now living in Canada were sure that Hildebrand's insanity was God's punishment for his revolutionary views.

<sup>10</sup> The Russian title is *Iz mira religioznogo sektanstva. Vstrechi, Besedy, Nabliudeniia* (Moscow: 1974), and the specific chapter referred to here is called "A Visit to the Mennonites," 93-113.

<sup>11</sup> Klibanov, *Mennonity*, 94-95.

<sup>12</sup> In 1907 Braun had married my mother's second youngest sister, Helena Pauls of Rosental. In 1930 he would have been forty-seven.

<sup>13</sup> Klibanov's description of the teacher fitted Braun as I knew him: erect and slim with a thin, deeply furrowed, suntanned and very expressive face and a voice one would remember—sharp and not



very modulated. I discovered later, after I had emigrated to Canada, that the Braun family had still been living in the Rosengart teacherage in 1930.

<sup>14</sup> Klibanov's verification of his information reads as follows:

In the collection *On The Barricades: 1905 in Alexandrovsk*, published in 1905 as the remembrances of the old Bolshevik A. Maleiev, we read: "C. Thiessen was a teacher from the German colony of Upper Khortitza. We were in touch with him since the fall of 1901. It was dangerous for him to remain in the village after the first failure [of the strike], and so we came to Alexandrovsk in the capacity of a 'professional.' Later, in 1907, I worked with him in Odessa under the nickname of "Karl." He also participated in the Kartamyshev affair, and was beaten half to death. Then disappeared. Emigrated abroad in 1909. Died in Finland [?] either prior to [World War I] or during the war. He was a wholesome type, a complete and seasoned Marxist-Bolshevik who worked alone a great deal and with extensive knowledge." (6-7)

I also found confirmation of the information concerning the workers movement in the industrial establishments of the Mennonite capitalists. It is hardly necessary to prove the influence of the all-Russian revolutionary movement upon the lower social strata in the Mennonite colonies as an important question deserving the attention of researchers. In the book *Mennonity* by A. Reinmarus and G. Frizen (1930), we find on page 18 an interesting and significant statement: "Working alongside Russian workers, they [the Mennonite workers (A.K)] left the narrow confines of the proverbial Mennonite isolation and even participated in the strikes. When the 1905 Revolution at last reached the southern Ukraine, numerous Mennonite workers participated in revolutionary action. The collapse of the revolution prevented them from regaining their previous work positions, and so the only way out for them was to leave the old colonies and to resettle in new places. The authors know of one Siberian colony, the village Miloradovka in the Pavlograd *uezd* of the Semipalatinsk *gubernia*, which consists almost entirely of former workers from Waldheim."

Waldheim is a large village, not in the Khortitza settlement but in the Molochnaia, a bastion of Mennonite colonization in Russia. The [political] consciousness of Mennonite workers, irrespective of the place of their abode, revealed itself as responsive to the revolutionary struggle, however strong the religious traditions were among them. It is the duty of the researcher to show what was the real significance of this struggle and its influence upon the village population.

Unfortunately, after the aforementioned book by Reinmarus and Frizen, this question has not again been raised in our literature. Meanwhile, one can read assertions in foreign literature to the effect that the Mennonites possess a certain "immunity" in regards to revolutionary influences. (104-105)

DGR: It is surprising that Klibanov, writing in 1974, seems not to have been aware of the fact that Reinmarus (his real name was Penner) and Frizen, two renegade Mennonites, jointly and singly, long after their 1930 book *Mennonity*, continued their exceedingly bitter indictment of every phase of Mennonite life, beliefs and activity prior to the triumph of Communism. In 1931 they published a book entitled *Pod gnetom religii* (Under the Yoke of Religion). I believe it too was published by the Central Council of Militant Godless of the USSR. In 1938 Reinmarus published an article entitled "Mennonity" in the journal *Antireligioznik*, Moscow, No. 1, 47-53. In 1971, when A. N. Ipatov, a candidate for an advanced degree in philosophy, published what I presume was part of his thesis under the title "Vzaimosviaz religioznogo i natsional'nogo v mennonitstve" (The Interrelationship of the Religious with the Ethnic in Mennonitism) in the book *Voprosy nauchogo ateizma* (Questions of Scientific Atheism), Vyp. 12, Mysl' (Moscow, 1971), 64-93, and had something good to say about the Mennonites past and present, Reinmarus immediately attacked with another blast against prerevolutionary and contemporary Mennonitism.

<sup>15</sup> Still, many of his wife's relatives (possibly also on his side) did emigrate to Canada during the 1920s. The same was true of many of his onetime teaching colleagues.