

The Mennonite Community of the Tyumen' Oblast: A Short History from the 1940s to the 1980s

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The Mennonite community in Tyumen' Oblast lasted less than fifty years. It existed only during Soviet times unlike other predominately Mennonite villages in Siberia (Omsk oblast, Altai krai) that date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The arrival of Mennonites in Tyumen' is connected to their deportation from the central regions of the country in the early 1940s. The majority of them were exiled from Arkadak raion, Saratov oblast. In Siberia these Mennonites were concentrated in Isetskiy raion. According to the estimates of E. Eichelberg, Mennonite believers made up approximately twenty to twenty five percent of all Germans in Isetskiy raion (as of October 20, 1941, 1,850 people lived there).¹

For the first few years into the mid-1940s, believers conducted their religious activities in small groups. Religious organization and the revival of Mennonite communities began in 1947 when Dmitriy Dmitriyevich Pauls, V. V. Zacharias, Ivan Jacob Froese and J. J. Froese came to Kommunar state farm to be "reunited with relatives" after

servicing a sentence for anti-Soviet activity.² Pauls was a spiritual leader and organizer; he led religious meetings on the Kommunar state farm and in the village of Verkh-Beshkil'. In April 1952, he was convicted of organizing illegal religious meetings and sentenced to twenty five years in a correctional labor camp pursuant to art. 58, p. 10, part II and art. 58, p. 11 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).³ A letter written by his wife, M. K. Pauls, described the conditions of his arrest: "My husband is charged with being a senior teacher of God's word and simultaneously with subversive work. It is very hard for him to suffer unjustly."⁴ The further fate of Pauls is unknown. His name has not surfaced in any other materials related to the religious life of the area.

Further revival of active congregational life in Tyumen' began with the visit of Dyck, a preacher from the town of Krasnotur'insk, Sverdlovsk oblast to his spiritual brothers in 1955. (It is interesting to note that Sverdlovsk oblast in turn was visited by spiritual leaders from Kazakhstan and Perm' oblast who created church councils and ordained activists there.⁵ Thus ongoing church communication continued to "snow ball" across the country.) As a result of the revival, small groups of believers existed not only on Kommunar state farm but also in the villages of Verkh-Beshkil', Arkhangel'skoye, Sloboda-Beshkil'skoye [Sloboda-Beshkil'] and Isetskoye. I. J. Froese, Dmitriy Dmitriyevich Rempel and J. P. Krahn were leaders of these religious groups.⁶

By 1958 the total number of Mennonites in Tyumen' oblast had grown to 140 members. Kommunar state farm, on which about seventy believers resided, remained the center of religious life. In 1956 I. J. Froese became the leader of the Tyumen' Mennonites. As a "leading brother," I. J. Froese regularly visited the villages of Isetskoye, Berkh-Beshkil' and Sloboda-Beshkil' in order to "render assistance to local preachers in the organization and meeting of sectarian mobs." Together with I. J. Froese, David Ivan Rempel, Dmitriy Dmitriyevich Rempel (probably a namesake) and Ivan Borisovich Hoepfner also itinerated. Due to their efforts, the congregation grew in number and strengthened its organizational structure.⁷

Simultaneously, congregational leaders attempted to legalize their activities by petitioning the raion executive committee to allow them to open a meeting house. After their request was denied, they began "holding regular religious mobs in private homes which were attended by thirty five to forty people."⁸ The participants were multi-generational and included youth. Data of the social-demographic composition of believers has been preserved in official documents. Thus, in 1960-61, 70% of the congregation was female (96 people); 21% was eighteen to thirty years old; 34% was thirty to forty years old; 30% was forty to

sixty and 15% was above sixty. The majority of believers had from four to six years of education. Thirty seven finished the seven-year school and seven completed secondary education. Twenty two people were in the category of "poorly educated."⁹ These facts contradict a common Soviet stereotype that religion was an affair of old people.

By the early 1960s, the Mennonite Brethren had become numerically and ideologically predominant in Tyumen' oblast, which was confirmed by the rebaptism of some Kirchliche Mennonites.¹⁰ I. J. Froese and D. D. Rempel were also rebaptized. Mennonite Brethren were much stricter regarding interaction with the secular world, in particular they did not allow any participation in public and political life. Additionally they did not allow members to visit clubs, see movies, attend lectures or read fiction and newspapers.¹¹ Sermons emphasized the importance of following these rules through teachings such as: "do not give in to temptation," "avoid the Devil's temptations," and "do not engage in activities that distract from preparation for the afterlife." During disputes with secular people, congregational leaders publically stated that participation in public life, attending clubs and movies, and joining pioneer and komsomol organizations "is prohibited by God's word and congregation regulations."¹² I. J. Froese boldly declared that "God is superior to any power" and that "he would submit only to God," which was regarded as brazen resistance to authorities.

One can suppose that already in the mid-1950s Tyumen' Mennonite Brethren would have been able to unite with Evangelical Christian Baptists as they had a certain similarity in religious practice. But it was not until 1965 that they joined the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB). According to the authorities, this was done exclusively to legitimize their activities. It was not only in Tyumen' that officials perceived Mennonites as Baptists. They observed a similar pattern in Sverdlovsk oblast: "Leaders of Mennonite congregations came together for carrying out hostile activities on the grounds of shared religious views with evangelical sectarians."¹³

According to official data, in 1961 not more than twenty five people gathered for religious services on Kommunar state farm, thirty people were preparing to join the congregation while the congregation numbered seventeen people.¹⁴ In this data, religious groups located in neighboring villages were not entered in lists of religious organizations. In contrast, the operative KGB report dated 1961 states that "a sectarian Mennonite congregation is illegally functioning in four settlements of Yalutorovskiy raion¹⁵ (in the villages of Isetckoye, Slobodo-Beshkil'skoye [Sloboda-Beshkil'], Verkh-Beshkil' and Kommunar state farm), numbering 136 members."¹⁶ Evidently there was a lack of coordination between the two supervising bodies, the KGB and the Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, in Tyumen' oblast.

In 1961 I. J. Froese and several other people were charged with “violating the law regarding separation of church and state and school and church,”¹⁷ article 142 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. The court trial was public and its sessions took place on the Kommunar state farm. I. J. Froese, D. I. Rempel and D. D. Rempel were sentenced to one year of correctional work and I. B. Hoepfner was fined fifty rubles.¹⁸ It is doubtful that a report on the measures taken to end sectarian activity reflected the real situation. Among other things the report which discussed the arrest of church leaders stated that “the population of Kommunar state farm and Isetskoye village approved the sentence. The sectarians themselves, many of whom were present at the court trial, also understood the legality of the decision and said that the preachers got what they deserved.”¹⁹

The arrest of separatist preachers did not significantly influence religious life as the leadership was transferred from one person to another. The fact that these congregations were exclusively rural also contributed to their preservation and to the dissemination of their faith. Religious meetings were held on a regular basis. Prior to the beginning of legal prosecutions in July 1961, I. J. Froese and D. D. Rempel held three meetings a week, on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays; D. I. Rempel and I. B. Hoepfner held meetings on Sundays.

A characteristic feature of these congregations, compared to other Christian groups of the region, was the active involvement of children and youth in congregational life which was surely connected to the ongoing religious life of the family. L. Soskovets, in spite of her biased research, described how religious knowledge was transmitted in Mennonite families. Little children started their education by reading Bible texts. When they were older they participated in biblical knowledge competitions. Children also were taught through spiritual hymns that were sung as lullabies.²⁰ The whole environment contributed to children being raised in a devote religious environment. Children were also present at religious celebrations, e.g. they were given Christmas gifts. Sometimes I. J. Froese held meetings specifically for children. According to the state, they were educating their children “in the spirit of religious fanaticism.”²¹ But congregational leaders in their turn thought that the state should have “nothing to do with the way they raised their children. ... Believers should prepare their children from early age for the afterlife.”²²

Congregations were also extensively engaged in charity in particular for low income and elderly people. It took the form of material aid which was rendered from donated money. In 1958 M. A. Wiens, E. J. Janzen from the village of Skorodum and I. P. Letkeman from the village of Sloboda-Beshkil’ received assistance. We don’t know whether this assistance was offered only to believers or to all needy people.²³

Among other distinct features of these congregations, one can mention their efforts to limit contact with secular society and the state. This was largely due to the ritual-dogmatic expectations of the Mennonite Brethren. It might also be due to the influence of other congregations in the same vicinity. The village of Isetskoye was a center of old believers and in the mid-1960s a community of Baptists-*initsiativniki* was present who also avoided contact with its non-religious environment.

One can learn about the content of sermons and believers' conversations only through reports of supervising bodies. We need to be aware of their prejudices however. According to their report, Mennonite "preachers and active sectarians work with believers in a religious-nationalistic spirit, perpetuate and spread unhealthy views about Soviets and about the relation of Germans to other nations in the Soviet Union, promote and spread provoking rumors, defame our reputation and incite national animosity."²⁴ According to the KGB, the most common rumors perpetuated by Mennonites were about the illegal imprisonment of Germans in one of the camps of Perm' krai who lost contact with their relatives after their release and about religious persecution carried out exclusively along national lines, "only because they are Germans. ... Russians are not prosecuted for similar activities." In their spiritual conversations they also claimed that "all opportunities for a better life are closed for Germans and that their only recourse is to pray that they will reach 'eternal bliss.'"²⁵ These conversations were undoubtedly a response to persecution but when the authorities learned about such anti-Soviet conversations they reacted even more intensely. Thus, believers and authorities were locked in a perpetual cycle which could not be disrupted under the existing social system.

Those in power used various means to combat the religious sentiments among the German population. In 1960 a peculiar operation was carried out in Isetskiy raion "exposing sectarian Mennonites." In the villages of Isetskoye, Kommunar state farm and Sloboda-Beshkil' in which there were larger Mennonite populations, workers met and "unanimously accused the sectarian Mennonites of hostile activity." They also showed films such as "Lessons of Life" and "The Truth About Sectarian Pentecostals" which were lectures given by an individual named Katsman.²⁶ Evidently not convinced that one-time lectures would turn believers from their "religious environment," a specially appointed agitator was assigned to supervise each family.²⁷ They also published accusatory articles in the public press and conducted criminal prosecutions. Public trials of German believers were held on May 28, 1962 in the people's court of Tyumen' and on June 22, 1962 in the people's court of Yalutorovskiy raion. A Tyumen' TV studio shot a short film entitled "Behind Closed Shutters," which was shown in theatres prior to the feature film intended to discourage religious activity.²⁸

Believers' convictions did not always remain strong; even preachers were known to repudiate their views. In 1962 the *Tyumenskaya Pravda* oblast newspaper published an open letter by Peter Peter Siemens, a preacher of the Sloboda-Beshkil' congregation in which he announced his withdrawal from the congregation. He gave as reasons his disagreement with pacifist principles and the closed nature of the congregation and a desire to enjoy all the rights granted by Soviet power.²⁹ However, we do not know what really influenced Siemens' decision. He could simply have been scared by the trials of religious leaders in Tyumen' oblast held earlier that year. In spite of the ongoing supervision of security organs and accusatory articles published in the media, Mennonite congregations continued to exist.

Unfortunately the 1970s have not been researched. Information about this period of Mennonite life in Tyumen' oblast has not been preserved. However, it is possible to assert that religious life did continue because there were three Mennonite Brethren congregations in Isetskiy raion in the early 1980s, none of them registered. They were headed by D. Rempel, P. Sawatsky and J. Klassen. It appeared that they were a part of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (CCECB). A 1984 newspaper article stated that "these sectarians actively supported various anti-social actions carried out by CCECB followers in other places too. In December 1983 they organized a CCECB petition which included a number of bold political demands directed to the state."³⁰ The final state campaign against Mennonites dates to 1987 when authorities demanded that a believers' group which gathered in the house of J. Klassen be registered.³¹ In 1989-90 the Mennonite congregation of Isetskiy raion numbered about sixty members; its leaders were D. Rempel, P. Sawatsky, J. Klassen and Hamm.³² Administratively the congregation was under the auspices of the CCECB.

At present there are no Mennonite organizations in Tyumen' oblast. Remaining elderly believers attend Baptist churches.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ Eikhelberg Evgenii, *Germans in Tiumen oblast: istoriia, I sovremennoe polozenie* (Tyumen': 1999), 34, 65.
- ² State Archive of Social-Political History of Tyumen' oblast (GASPITO), F. 124, O. 150, D. 86, p. 149.
- ³ *Ibid.*, Criminal Code of the RSFSR, art. 58, p. 10, part II: Propaganda or agitation that includes an appeal to overturn, undermine or weaken the Soviet power or execute some counter-revolutionary crimes ... using religious or national preju-

dices of masses; art. 58, p. 11: Any organizational activity aimed at preparation or execution of crimes stipulated in this chapter.

- ⁴ Eikhel'berg Evgenii, "Preseledovaniia po religioznym prichinam nemtsev Tiimenskoi oblasti," <http://www.meno.ru/history/nem/Chapter17.htm>.
- ⁵ Motrevich Vladimir, "Mennonity na Srednem Urale v poslevoennye gody: samooorganizatsiia v bor'be za sokhranenie etnokonfessional'noi identichnosti," (based on materials of the Department of the Federal Security Service (UFSB) in Sverdlovsk oblast), http://www.dju.org.ua/index2.php?option=com_view&gid=22&Itemid=65.
- ⁶ GASPITO, F. 124, O. 150, D. 86, p. 150.
- ⁷ GASPITO, F. 124, O. 150, D. 40, p. 112.
- ⁸ GASPITO, F. 3894, O. 2, D. 29, pp. 25-26.
- ⁹ GASPITO, F. 3894, O. 2, D. 40, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ It is a disputable question whether rebaptism was required. One probably observes here a peculiar feature of closed religious groups which claim to have a unique knowledge of "genuine faith." It should be added that at present Protestant denominations do not practice rebaptism.
- ¹¹ GASPITO, F. 124, O. 150, D. 86, p. 150.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 153.
- ¹³ Motrevich Vladimir, "Mennonity na Srednem Urale v poslevoennye gody: samooorganizatsiia v bor'be za sokhranenie etnokonfessional'noi identichnosti," (based on materials of the Department of the Federal Security Service (UFSB) in Sverdlovsk oblast), http://www.dju.org.ua/index2.php?option=com_view&gid=22&Itemid=65.
- ¹⁴ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), F. 6991, O. 4, D. 370, p. 33. A question arises regarding the principles of counting believers, division into parishioners and congregational membership. Seemingly one was considered a congregational member after baptism, everyone else was considered an attendee of religious meetings. Based on this the size of a congregation could vary from forty two to forty seven people.
- ¹⁵ By this time, due to administrative-territorial changes, a part of Isetskiy raion joined Yalutorovskiy raion, Tyumen' oblast'.
- ¹⁶ GASPITO, F. 3894, O. 2, D. 40, p. 29.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 113-14.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Soskovets Liubov', *Religioznye konfessii zapadnoi Sibiri v 40-60-e gody XX veka* (Tomsk: 2003), 208.
- ²¹ GASPITO, F. 3894, O. 2, D. 40, p. 30.
- ²² GASPITO, F. 124, O. 150, D. 86, p. 152.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ²⁶ A selection of films manifested a lack of knowledge by lecturers regarding peculiarities of different Protestant denominations. There was no point in trying to convince Mennonites of the "sectarianism" of Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals because of some ritual-dogmatic peculiarities (for example, glos-solalia); church communications between Pentecostals and evangelical churches (Baptist, Mennonite, etc.) were difficult or impossible.
- ²⁷ GASPITO, F. 124, O. 150, D. 86, pp. 145-147.
- ²⁸ Eikhel'berg Evgenii, "Preseledovaniia po religioznym prichinam nemtsev tiimenskoi oblasti," <http://www.meno.ru/history/nem/Chapter17.htm>.
- ²⁹ Piotr Siemens, "Moe slovo k veruiushchim," *Tiimenskaia Pravda*, December 4, 1962, 3.
- ³⁰ Andreev Aleksei, "Diversanty ot religii," *Tiimenskaia Pravda*, November 21, 1984.

- ³¹ Zamiatin Nikolai, "Net prav bez obiazannostei," *Tiumenskaia Pravda*, September 4, 1987.
- ³² State Archive of Tyumen' oblast, F. 5, O. 1, D. 1961a, p. 35.