

A Brief History of the Omsk Brotherhood¹

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The roots of the Omsk Brotherhood are in the Mennonite Brethren. Presently it also includes German and Russian Baptists. Its history falls into three periods. During the first period, 1907-37, the evangelical congregations in Omsk oblast were formed. They included Mennonite (German), Baptist and other associations. The period ended with the destruction of all congregations and their unions. The second period, 1947-87, was one of awakening after the Second World War and the reconstruction of Mennonite Brethren and German Baptist congregations who joined the Omsk Association of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB), established in 1957. This was a period of struggle and suffering for God's people, on the one hand, and growth and development of congregations, on the other. This period ended with the cessation of pressure from the authorities and the beginning of freedom of faith. During the third period, 1988-2007, the congregations of the Omsk Association of the ECB worked with open doors. Evangelization possibilities were open and it resulted in the establishment of new congregations and groups.

I. Formation of Congregations (1907-37)

German colonists founded about three hundred settlements in Western Siberia. By 1915 over 80,000 Germans lived in Western Siberia. They were mainly Protestants. According to data of the military economic board of the Siberian Cossack Army, German settlers were 56% Lutheran, 22% Mennonite, 5% Baptists and 17% other confessions. The majority of Mennonites settled along the Trans-Siberian Railway between Petropavlovsk and Tatarskaya station. Here on a stretch of 380 kilometers on both sides of the railway Mennonites lived in thirty six villages and thirty khutors. According to Hildebrandt, about five thousand Mennonites lived in the area around Omsk.

The first evangelical congregations of Omsk oblast were established in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries by settlers from the western part of Russia. They were Russian and German Baptists as well as Mennonite Brethren and Kirchliche Mennonites. From the time of the association's formation and into the early 1990s it consisted primarily of Germans and services were mainly conducted in German.

The first Mennonite Brethren congregation (as a branch of the Rueckenau Mennonite Brethren congregation of Berdiansk uezd, Taurida gubernia) was established in the Omsk oblast in 1901 by a group of settlers, twelve kilometers west of Omsk in the village of Chunayevka. In 1907 the congregation numbered 382 people. In 1900 the settlement of Kremlevka was established thirty kilometers northeast of Omsk. In 1901 the village of Friesenhof was established eight kilometers north of Tokushi station, Petropavlovsk okrug. In 1902 Margenau was established two kilometers southeast of Kukharevo station, Omsk gubernia. In 1907 a large meeting house for three hundred people was built in the village. In 1904 the village of Mikhailovka was established northwest of Tokushi station, Petropavlovsk okrug. Until 1907 all the Siberian congregations, with a total membership of 526, were branches of the Rueckenau Mennonite Brethren congregation located in the Molochna settlement in European Russia.

The first congregation of German Baptists was established in June, 1907 in the village of Hoffnugsthal with Martin Albert Krueger as presbyter. As the number of settlers increased, especially during the Stolypin reform of 1906-1912, many new congregations were established. In 1907 three associations of Siberian evangelical congregations were established.

Mennonite and Baptist Congregations: Historical Facts

On May 18-19, 1907, at the conference of Mennonite Brethren in the village of Nikolayevka, Bakhmut uezd, Ekaterinoslav gubernia, a decision was passed concerning the official transformation of the Chunayevka branch from a branch of the Rueckenau Mennonite Brethren congregation into an independent congregation. (The Omsk Association of the ECB considers this to be the date of its establishment.) At that time, Kremlevka, Mikhailovka, Margenau and Friesenhof became branches of the Chunayevka Mennonite Brethren congregation of Western Siberia. From 1907 to 1913, Chunayevka was the center of the Mennonite Brethren in Siberia. Jacob Gerhard Wiens, residing in Chunayevka, was elected as presbyter of the association. He served till 1913.

In 1907-1913 with the increase of the flow of settlers, new German khutors and settlements were established: Korneyevka, Friedensruh (Solntsevka), Waldheim (Apollonovka), Smolyanovka, Maslyanovka and Krasnopol'ye. In 1909 and later, Mennonite settlements in Pavlodar and Slavgorod oblasts were established and Jacob G. Wiens moved there in order to help his co-religionists. That is why in 1913, Jacob Franz Hiebert was elected and ordained to service by Jacob G. Wiens. At that time the center moved to Margenau where Hiebert lived. The name of the congregation was changed to "Chunayevka-Margenau Mennonite Brethren congregation of Western Siberia." In the years 1913-29 it had ten branches: Kremlevka, Friesenhof, Margenau, Korneyevka, Friedensruh (Solntsevka), Waldheim (Apollonovka), Smolyanovka, Maslyanovka and Krasnopol'ye. Villages such as Apollonovka and Solntsevka had their own branches.

Kirchliche Mennonites also settled in the Omsk uezd and in 1907 a "Siberian congregation of Kirchliche Mennonites" was established. In 1913 a large meeting house was built in the village of Novoalexandrovka, Moskalenskiy raion. At that time Novoalexandrovka became a center of Kirchliche Mennonites. Peter P. Bergen from Ekaterinovka was elected an *Aeltester*. Siberian congregations of Kirchliche Mennonites held services in the following settlements: Mikhailovka, Skvortsovo, Nikolaipol', Novoalexandrovka, Ekaterinovka, Sharapovka, Luzino, Chukreyevka and Neudachino.

The "Western-Siberian Association of German Baptists" was established in 1918. Martin A. Krueger became the chairman of the Association. At his previous place of residence (Don River area) he was active in the construction of a local church and the dissemination of the Gospel. The association initially consisted of seven independent congregations; in 1924 another one joined. The congregations were located in a radius of 500 versts (533 kilometres) and their members numbered 1,976 in 1926. German Baptists had close spiritual ties with

Russian Baptists. In 1927 the German Baptists of Siberia joined the Siberian Baptist Union on the condition that there be a German section.

Life of Congregations in the Pre-War Period

Mennonites paid special attention to the spiritual and secular education of the young generation. To a large extent this task was carried out in their schools with their own curriculum. That is why the school was an integral part of nearly every Mennonite village. Besides, in villages which had no meeting houses, school buildings were utilized for religious services.

In 1917 there were fifty four officially registered German schools in the Western-Siberian school area including thirty five Mennonite ones. In the second half of the 1920s with the increase of Soviet control over school education, teaching of religion had to be removed from schools to out-of-school forms. Soviet legislation during the 1920s prohibited and prosecuted teaching of religion to groups of children in any setting. In spite of the ban, Mennonites continued to hold classes for children and youth groups. In hard years of repression when all religious services were discontinued, group religious education also ended, but teaching religion at home continued. As soon as a child started to prattle, his hands were put together for a prayer and he was taught his first prayer before going to sleep.

As late as 1928 teachers who worked in schools were appointed by the Council of Guardians. The following year, however, the first communist representative was sent to Margenau school as a teacher. Teachers who had worked prior to this were fired and many of them were arrested. The school became state property.

In the early years following settlement around Omsk, week-long courses for Mennonite Brethren preachers took place in the village of Friesenhof near Tokushi station. Jacob Friesen from the village of Rueckenau in Ukraine was the teacher. In 1910 courses for preachers were held in Margenau under the leadership of missionary Johann Wilms. The last such course took place in 1927 in Apollonovka. The living room of the Isaak Toews family was used as a classroom for ten students, mainly younger brothers. Jacob Wiens and Nikolai Siemens were teachers. Each student had to submit a letter in writing from his congregation confirming that he would preach. Each participant of the course prepared a sermon and had to pass a preaching test. Many of them conducted services in their congregations and some were ordained.

Choral Music Ministry

The associations paid special attention to choral music. There were seventeen choirs and two orchestras in eight congregations of the German Baptist association. In 1923 a Choir Council was created in the German Baptist union, which was responsible for the following tasks: holding regular meetings of regents, their assistants and the most knowledgeable and gifted performers; conducting mutual education and joint rehearsals.

Thirty four regents of Mennonite Brethren congregations attended regent courses in the winter of 1925. The courses were conducted by Bernhardt Dyck who was known in Ukraine and in Siberia. Of special joy for singers, regents and all lovers of song were large festivals of Christian singing. One such festival was held in the Margenau Mennonite Brethren building. Choirs from Chunayevka, Kremlevka, Margenau and Friesenhof took part. A second song festival was held in 1914 in a school building of Kolomzino. Choirs from Smolyanovka, Chunayevka, Apollonovka, Kolomzino, Margenau, Friedensruh (Solntsevka) and Friesenhof near Tokushi took part. Especially populous was a festival that took place in the so-called Heinrichs khutor (later called Rodnaya Dolina). Choirs from Baptist congregations also took part in this festival.

The first song festival of the German Baptist union took place in July 1926 in the village of Halbstadt. About five hundred people were present. Individual choirs sang twenty nine hymns and a mass chorus sang twenty one hymns; five hymns were sung by a male choir and three by a ladies chorale. Choir singing alternated with short sermons delivered by brother Wessel and brother Osterman. In 1927 the festival took place at the Hamer khutor. Six choirs consisting of 108 participants sang. Eleven regents conducted a combined choir which sang from 9 o'clock in the morning till 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The singing did not stop even during the lunch hour.

Evangelization in Russian and German Villages

In spite of the fact that Soviet authorities deprived Mennonites of many rights they had enjoyed in pre-revolutionary times, one significant advantage that developed post-revolution was the right to preach to Russians. After the establishment of Soviet rule, many Mennonites started evangelizing among the Russian population. We do not know much about the evangelization efforts of Mennonites in Omsk oblast but it is clear from *Unser Blatt* they were not indifferent toward missionary activity and took part in evangelization by financially supporting missionaries and by visiting them.

One of the difficulties of evangelization was that Mennonites conducted all services in German. Few preachers had mastered enough Russian to speak in a popular form. In spite of this, there were some preachers who devoted themselves to the ministry to the Russian people. One was Jacob Wall from the village of Berezovka, Isil'kul' raion. Jacob Wall, known as a biblical authority, was a gifted public speaker with the nickname of "Shouting Wall." He had a special disposition toward Russian brothers and sisters. Depending on their simple hospitality he stayed for long periods of time in Russian villages as he preached about the grace and love of God. He is remembered for saying "communication is easier there than in German communities."

Robert Osterman was born in Austria. When the First World War began he went to the front as a volunteer. Robert was taken as a prisoner and sent to Siberia. As a result he remained in Russia for a long time. Robert eventually ended up in the German village of Halbstadt, Moskalenskiy raion, Omsk oblast. This village had a large Baptist congregation. In 1918 he became a Christian. From the first day of his new life, his abilities for becoming an ardent Gospel preacher were evident. In 1924 Osterman was elected as a good news preacher of the Western-Siberian Association of German Baptists and continued this ministry till 1928. During these years of ministry, Osterman's repeated visits to German villages were often accompanied by an awakening.

German Baptist congregations of Siberia were repeatedly visited by brothers-preachers from kindred congregations of European Russia. A visit of Daniel Ivanovich Pritskau, a brother and good news preacher, who preached to congregations of German Baptists of Siberia from October 1926 to March 1927, was of special significance. In his last letter home the brother wrote: "March 10 is the day of my departure. Awakenings take place everywhere. There is no village among the Hoffnungsthal congregations where sinners have not repented. I am ashamed of my little faith. Over 300 people have already received peace. Rejoice together with us! I am very tired and cannot work any longer." By June 1927, 104 candidates from these villages had applied for baptism. On June 4 at 8:00 a.m. the meeting house was full and the testing of baptismal candidates began and continued till 8:30 in the evening. On the first Day of the Trinity all candidates were baptized. Participants of this unprecedented event came from many places. Altogether one thousand people were present. They came in 168 wagons. That year 290 people in the Association were baptized.

Fiery Test of Faith

During the 1920s and 30s, Protestant denominations were one of the biggest targets of the state's repressive policies. Mennonites caused special anxiety for Soviet authorities. During the 1920s when the State Political Department (GPU) was "taming" various religious groups, Mennonites appeared to be the "hardest nut" among all of them. They did not accept any communist propaganda and did not permit the Bolsheviks to create hostilities between the well-to-do and poorer segments of the population. In spite of all the Bolshevik ideological and political efforts, life in Mennonite villages until 1929 was defined by congregations (Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren).

In 1928 Lunacharskiy, a People's Commissar of Education, dropped a momentous phrase: "Who will win in this country, Baptists or communists?" This phrase is important because of the recognition by a high level authority of the widespread influence of the Baptists and because it recognizes the two opposing ideological and value systems, evangelical and communist. The state's attack on evangelicals did not start suddenly, but gradually. In 1929 article four of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Constitution was amended. In 1918 it had granted freedom to evangelical believers by allowing both religious and anti-religious propaganda. After 1929 only anti-religious propaganda was recognized. In 1928 the so-called New Economic Policy introduced by Lenin in 1922 that allowed private property and free trade was abolished; the period of Stalin's five-year plan had begun. Unprecedented repressions began and arrests became commonplace.

Beginning in 1931, the inhuman campaign of dekulakization of peasants started. Stalin and his colleagues needed to create an atmosphere of fear in order to weaken peasant resistance to joining collective farms. From this time on, a planned extermination of people took place. A Siberian krai committee set out to dekulakize eight thousand farms in the Omsk okrug. Marshy regions of Vasyugania became the main area of exile. After the establishment of Omsk oblast in December 1934, more than 52,500 special settlers stayed in its northern areas. These people had been deported to northern areas of Omsk and Tyumen' oblasts. Many of them were taken to the taiga and left to fend for themselves in the snow. It was good when someone had an axe or a saw to build some kind of a shelter. Many exiled people died of hunger and cold.

A letter written by exiled Luisa Bekker from Apollonovka on February 19, 1932 from Narym was full of despair:

My dear mother and sisters! Ludwig, I and children wish you good health and prosperity. My heart is breaking from

anguish and hopelessness. From morning on I feel that God has deserted us. Is there no help for us? Are we doomed to stay here forever? You won't find anyone in the world who is unhappier than I, and as the Psalmist asks in Psalm 77, "Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"

Closure of Meeting Houses

The closure of meeting houses began in the early 1930s and continued to 1937. These closures were symbolic actions intended to obliterate the past. One of the methods used to close meeting houses was to have believers themselves allegedly petition to the authorities for closure. The document outlining the closure of the Karpovka (Solntsevka) meeting house of Isil'kul'skiy raion is typical:

Minutes of a general meeting of Mennonite believers at Karpovka khutor, Solntsevskiy village soviet, Isil'kul'skiy raion on August 8, 1937. The general meeting of believers by 99 majority votes, 3 opponents and 9 abstainers resolved to:

- a) close the meeting house and transfer the premise to the maternity hospital;
- b) propose that the church council and auditing commission immediately terminate an agreement for the maintenance of the meeting house;
- c) request the raion executive committee to speed up the transfer of the meeting house to the maternity hospital.

After 1935 the repression of believers increased substantially. The assassination of Sergey Kirov on December 1, 1934 was used to justify unprecedented terror against old Bolsheviks and all strata of the population. In 1936 Nikolai Ezhov was appointed as the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs. In 1937 and 1938 the Stalin terror regime reached its zenith. According to the calculations of British historian Robert Conquest, approximately every twentieth person was arrested. Some groups of the population were entirely exterminated. All the ministers of the Omsk congregations were exterminated.

Extrajudicial "troikas" were created for speeding up this extermination task. In a two year period, 25,443 people were accused by the troikas, 15,984 of them were sentenced to be shot. Among these were hundreds of believers. As a rule, the accusations were not faith or religion based. Instead, all the accusations were political in nature:

being a political agent, having ties with military-spying organizations, counter-revolutionary and anti-Soviet activity, undermining the collective farm system and agitation against socialist transformation in the village. Even absurd charges such as preparing for an attempt on Stalin's life were used.

By 1936 nearly all local congregations had been removed from the registers, their presbyters repressed and meeting houses taken away. How, in such circumstances, would believers survive spiritually and preserve their precious faith? To Stalin was ascribed a phrase, "It is easy to send agents to close the church in the Soviet Union, but the peasant has the church deep in his soul, and the authorities can't combat this hidden church." This church in the depth of its soul withstood the time of trial.

II. Post-War Awakening

Nation-wide difficulties during the Patriotic War resulted in changes in the unfulfilled plans of militant atheism in our country. At the very beginning of the war the Society of Militant Atheism was disbanded and its magazine *Bezbozhnik* ceased publication. At this time as well, Stalin appealed to the nation with momentous words, "Comrades, citizens, brothers and sisters!" Stalin's appeal to believers was published in a central newspaper calling them to unite the power of earth and heaven and to pray for victory.

In July 1944, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was established to deal with Protestants and other religious movements. On November 19, 1944, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR passed a decree entitled "On order of opening meeting houses of various cults." This document was sent only to departmental representatives under the strict control of the Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults but as a result meeting houses were opened in large cities under the control of and with the approval of the Council. Of the three former unions in Omsk oblast only one meeting house was officially opened and registered in 1945 in the city of Omsk. In 1949 it was again taken off the register. In 1948, without written permission, a meeting house was opened in Isil'kul'. A house was rented on Dimitrov Street in which services were held. People streamed in from all around to take part in the services. The first services resulted in an even greater awakening. People came from nearby villages where services had not yet been held.

Catalysts for Awakening

In the late 1940s and early 1950s a large spiritual awakening began in German villages which resulted in the formation of many groups and congregations. Not surprisingly, the question of what caused the awakening arises. Firstly, there was a spiritual reason; spiritual hunger and the numerous prayers of believers caused the awakening. There were also external factors which allowed God's forces to break through scattered feeble vessels. Here the words of Christ were realized, "I opened a door for you and nobody can close it; you don't have much strength." In some places messengers of awakening were people who returned from the Trudarmee camps where they had found God and were now burning with a desire to awaken their compatriots. In other cases they were church members with weakened faith who had been awakened by God's spirit or brothers who had returned from places of imprisonment after being charged in the 1930s with spreading the word of God. In some cases, spiritual work was started by sisters.

In spite of persecution the youth were very active. Even when an older generation had stopped gathering for services, the youth did not stop communicating with each other. They used birthdays, holidays and weddings as pretexts for meetings. In the early period there was an acute shortage of sermons. But the Holy Spirit worked on people's hearts through hymns such as "Come, come the lost sheep" or "Don't pass me, Jesus" which induced people to repent and turn to God.

In the spring of 1950, Johann Friesen, an exile in the East, heard a strange and unfamiliar voice commanding him that "June 15 of the present year shall become a day of lent and prayer for all believers scattered across the country. Pray for the awakening and conversion of sinners so that weakened congregations can be renewed and for authorities to let us preach the Gospel without any hindrance." What was he supposed to do now? At this time he received a visit from Johann Fast who had also been exiled to the east in the 1930s. They discussed the command and after praying ardently these two old men started an unprecedented mail campaign from the forests of the Far East directed at the German villages. Johann Fast's appeal became a powerful spur in German villages to submit to God in lent and prayer so that He would show mercy to His people and grant awakening.

Another awakening took place when God sent a young twenty four year-old Jacob Regier, a former resident of Apollonovka, back to Apollonovka. Jacob had left his parental house and gone to the North to live a free, unrestricted life far from his mother's admonitions. But God had not left him adrift. He heard the word of God, was baptized and soon began witnessing to a new life. He returned to his parents to share his joy with them. Many people had already heard what had happened to

Jacob in a strange land and fellow villagers wanted to meet with him and hear about God. People gathered to listen to the word of God with thirst. Suddenly an awakening began. The service stretched beyond midnight and seventy six persons were given peace with God including ten and twelve year-old children. Among those who came to belief were twins who, looking around for their parents, realized that they were absent. They ran home and woke them up, "Father and mother, wake up. The whole village has already repented and you are sleeping!" The parents got up and went to Regier's house. The mother repented that very night and the father a few days later.

In 1948 the authorities began to show signs of anxiety about this awakening. A new campaign of "tightening the screws" was begun. As all Mennonite and Baptist groups that were re-established in the early 1950s were not registered, they were threatened and shadowed at the places where they held services and were subjected to fierce persecutions. For example, in 1948 the Communist party organization of Isil'kul' invited a lecturer to speak about atheism. In his lecture he said that "In Dimitrov Street believers sing and they can do it because the party committee is not singing, it is sleeping." Soon after his lecture the meeting house was closed and services were prohibited.

With the beginning of the cold war, Stalin started a new campaign against religion. Gates of the camps opened again and swallowed true children of God, many of whom had found God or had been revitalized in the recent awakenings. In the early 1950s, a wave of arrests rolled through the following villages: Ivanovka, Nikolaipol', Novoalexandrovka and Apollonovka. In 1951 the following people were arrested: Johann Neufeld and Helmut Shreider from Nikolaipol'; Jacob Ginter and Peter Thiessen from Ivanovka; Johann Ott and Nikolai Dickman from Novoalexandrovka; Boris Bout from Omsk and Jacob Reger from Kukharevo. In early 1953, four brothers from the village of Apollonovka were arrested and sentenced to twenty five years of imprisonment: Jacob Peter Reger, Ivan Abram Wall, Ivan Vasilyevich Epp and Jacob Franz Dirksen (at that time Epp and Dirksen had not yet been baptized).

Khrushchev Thaw and Formation of Congregations

On March 5, 1953, Stalin died and together with him the regime of personal tyranny. Some people hoped that this would mark the dawn of freedom. They thought an amnesty would be announced in connection with his death. Indeed there was an amnesty in 1954 for prisoners and many prisoners were freed and rehabilitated. This was the beginning of the Khrushchev thaw.

The amnesty also applied to believers who had already served part of their term, and in 1956, to the great joy of families, the imprisoned brothers from Omsk oblast were freed and rehabilitated. Three brothers, Johann Neufeld, Peter Thiessen and Abram Langeman passed away in prison, but others returned home having preserved the faith. Before their return there was not a single ordained person in the communities, not a single congregation had been re-established nor were there any baptisms or communion services held. Once at home these brothers became active participants in the restoration of congregations as exemplified by Ivan Jacob Heide an eighty year-old brother from Isil'kul'. Before the war, Heide had been a member of the Russian congregation and elected as a presbyter. In the mid-1930s the congregation was closed and in 1938 Heide was arrested before he could be ordained. Now having returned he took the initiative to restore the first German congregation.

Although Ivan Heide was still not ordained at that time he considered it his duty to conduct baptisms and accept new church members as it had been the war that had prevented him from being ordained. In 1955 Heide conducted the first baptism of two married couples, Peter and Anna Harder and Abram and Maria Derksen. In the autumn of that year, a congregation under the leadership of Heide was established. It consisted of former believers and newly baptized people and was made up of ethnic Germans, Mennonite Brethren and German Baptists. Because there was no brother with the authority to ordain in the Omsk oblast, brother Johann Fast who resided in Temirtau was invited, the one who had initiated a letter-appeal in 1950. He agreed to come and in the summer of 1956 he came to Isil'kul' to ordain Heide. Having now received the authorization to ordain, Heide ordained people who in turn contributed to the re-establishment of many congregations: twenty three in Solntsevka, twenty seven in Mirolyubovka and over one hundred in Apollonovka. Reconstruction of the congregations began with the renewal of former church members. Many who had been awakened in the early 1950s were now baptized. Some of them were ordained for presbyter ministry: I. [J?] V. [W?] Epp, J. J. Ginter, I. [J?] A. Wall, J. F. Dirksen and N. M. Dickman.

The new spiritual upsurge also required regulation and correct organization of church life. There was also a need for experienced ministers, who were in short supply in the new congregations. Realizing that strength lies in unity, ministers of newly formed congregations agreed to unite in one union and elect an association presbyter and a council of presbyters. In 1957 the Omsk Association of Mennonite Brethren and German Baptist congregations was established. Church regulations were worked out and approved by the brothers (based on former regulations of Mennonite Brethren and Baptists).

New Religious Repressions

Starting in 1958 when Khrushchev finally concentrated all power in his hands a new round of state activity aimed at eliminating religious life began. Already in 1956 Khrushchev vowed to show the last remaining believer in a TV program. In 1960, article 142 was added to the Criminal Code stipulating a three-year prison sentence for violation of religious cult legislation. In 1962 it was supplemented by article 227 stipulating up to a five-year prison sentence or exile for people “urging” other citizens to violate the religious cult legislation. In 1964 an ideological commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union worked out “Measures for strengthening atheist education of the population” which, among other things, included a section entitled “Atheist education of children and teenagers.” Methods of atheist education included stipulating the increase of anti-religious content of school programs, publishing special methodological manuals for the elimination of religion and widespread use of extra-curricular work.

In the Omsk Association there was not a single registered congregation and its leadership made no attempt to register them. Besides, it was not possible in small communities. Any service was considered illegal. Often meetings were attended by militia as well as high-ranking authorities who tried to disperse meetings. Sometimes they brought along members of public order squads who were there to “restore order.” In many places, officially functioning congregations were closed. In the first half of 1961 alone, three hundred Baptist congregations were closed. In 1961-62 persecutions became so intense that in some places general services temporarily ceased, for example, in Isil’kul’ they gathered in small groups in various places instead. During the Khrushchev persecutions, many believers were arrested. In 1964 in Solntsevka, a criminal case was instituted against four brothers of the Omsk Association but the trial was suddenly cancelled after the trial date had initially been set.

In 1964 Khrushchev was removed from his position as the head of the Soviet Union. Once again a change was in the air. A number of provisions relating to religious activity of unions were revised. In 1966 another period of tightening the state’s anti-religious policy began. The main blow was directed at unregistered congregations. On March 18, 1966, a decree was passed “On administrative responsibility for violation of legislation on religious cults.” This document stipulated that refusal to register a religious association was a violation of the legislation on religious cults. Special local commissions were established to monitor religious activity and maintain control. They could

fine violators in the amount of fifty roubles, stop violations with the use of the militia and transfer cases to the court.

The leadership of the Omsk Association rejected registration knowing that this was a costly choice. Registration required voluntary agreement to limit the spiritual life of the congregation to the walls of the meeting house and ban all children from attending services. Ministers of registered congregations had to submit reports about congregational life and finances to government representative. This would result in a permanent dependence on the Representative of the Council for Religious Affairs. Any event and activity would be coordinated with the Representative and nothing could be done without his approval. The leadership of the Omsk Association was not willing to make these concessions. Nor were they willing to do as many ministers of registered congregations did who were of the opinion that congregations could register but not observe the terms of registration. Ministers of the Omsk Association saw this as a double disloyalty, first, to God because they were giving a promise to godless authorities, and secondly, to authorities because they did not observe their signed agreements.

Prisoners of Conscience

A new wave of arrests began in 1967 and through to 1986 someone from the Omsk Association was in prison every year except one. For twenty years, sixteen brothers and seven sisters served terms in prison for a total of seventy six years. This was the price for an independent ministry and especially for spiritually educating children and youth which was a violation of the law on religious cults.

- In 1967 two sisters, Agatha and Lisa Harms of the Omsk congregation were arrested. They were sentenced to three years imprisonment for secretly printing Christian literature by hectograph in their house.
- In 1968 brothers Jacob Franz Wiens and Peter Heinrich Derksen were arrested in the village of Petrovka. The brothers were charged according to article 142 with violation of the law on religious cults. Jacob Wiens was sentenced to three years imprisonment for evading registration of the congregation and Peter Derksen to two years for organized teaching of religion to the under-aged.
- In 1971 in the village of Mirolyubovka, Franz David Penner, presbyter of the congregation, was arrested and sentenced to three years, and sisters Elisabeth and Ella Klassen to two and a half years each.

- In 1971 in the village of Puchkovo, Jacob Peter Rogalsky was arrested and sentenced to three years for being a leader of an illegal congregation and sister Helena A. Kasdorf to two years for teaching religion to a group of children.
- In 1972 three brothers from Apollonovka, Ivan A. Wall, Jacob F. Dirksen and Abram F. Fast, were arrested and sentenced to five years imprisonment.
- In 1974 three brothers from Mirolyubovks were convicted and sentenced. I. F. Toews and J. J. Enns were sentenced to four years and P. Herman Adrian to three years.
- In 1975 J. D. Kreger and A. Ch. Laukert were convicted on probation and sentenced to four and three years respectively.
- In 1976 I. I. Loewen was convicted with taking part in the underground Christianin Publishing House.
- In 1977 Cornelius Gustav Gur was sentenced to one year imprisonment.
- In 1981 I. A. Wall and J. F. Dirksen from Apollonovka were sentenced again to five years in prison, and sisters Elizabeth Panina and Maria Toews to four years for teaching Sunday school.
- In Mar'ianovka N. M. Dickman and Arthur E. Lawrence were sentenced to four and two years respectively and placed on probation.
- In 1984 I. G. [H?] Dyck from Omsk was sentenced to two years imprisonment.

Throughout these indictments and trials, harassment continued at many levels. One excerpt from a raion newspaper after a trial of several brothers is illustrative:

We [war veterans] as nobody else value peaceful skies and the happy laughter of children. ... The trial of sectarian leaders shocked our souls. How could it be? After sixty four years of Soviet power there are still people who call for the non-observance of our laws and teach their children that being members of Octobrist, Pioneer or Komsomol organizations is a crime against freedom of conscience! We should carry out the most vigorous struggle against renegades of our society. The most severe sentence of the court won't be severe enough for them.

The response to these imprisonments is preserved in a letter written by Jacob Franz Dirksen who was sentenced to five years:

It is nine o'clock now and my soul is with you as I travel by train. You are still travelling right now and will probably also

talk about our sad meeting and think about me. ... I am not able to describe my feelings today. For several hours after we parted I had the same pains and feelings as on the day of my arrest. Everything inside me was burning with pain, I suffered soul sickness. It pains me so much. It is impossible to describe it. You probably also felt it keenly, especially you, my dear Katya. How sad it is to look at dear people, who are so close to your heart, through two layers of glass. When I think about all of this my heart is mourning, hurt by such injustice. But we can pray to God about them [our persecutors], as Christ did it: "Forgive them ... for they don't know what terrible things they are doing!"

In spite of all the persecutions, the congregations of the Omsk Association grew. The Association consisted mainly of congregations of Omsk oblast except for a congregation in Neudachino village, Novosibirsk oblast (bordering on Omsk oblast) and a congregation in the town of Dzhetyysai (southern Kazakhstan) which joined the Omsk Association in 1981.

For fifty years the association had three presbyters. In 1969 at the meeting of ministers, Jacob David Kreger was elected the presbyter of the Association, replacing August J. Risto who was seventy five years old at that time. Risto had lived in Temirtau since 1962. Nikolai Martin Dickman, presbyter of the Mar'ianovka congregation, was elected as Kreger's assistant. At the session of ministers in 1976, N. M. Dickman was elected the presbyter brother replacing J. D. Kreger who had moved to Kirovsk. Franz David Penner, a presbyter of Mirolyubovka congregation was elected as the assistant.

Association of Mennonite Brethren

From the very beginning of its ministry, the Association of Mennonite Brethren congregations preserved its independence and did not join any unions. They did, however, maintain brotherly relations with everybody who professed purity of evangelical teaching, communication with the Central Church of the ECB, and communication with brothers. They also cooperated in young people's work, spiritual and material support of prisoners' families and in the work of Christianin Printing House. Unfortunately in the 1990s relations with the Council of Churches of the ECB became strained as a result of a split in the Mirolyubovka congregation aided by the Siberian Council. Relations remain much the same at the present time.

Meeting Houses for Services During the Years of Persecution

During the years of persecution, most services took place in private houses. For the owners of these houses, this was an especially selfless ministry to the Lord. In the early 1960s, when brothers built new houses, many of them designed the rooms in such a way that they would be more convenient for services. Other arrangements were also used. In 1974 members in Solntsevka installed a stove in a temporary tent and met there in the winter time. The work that had been done inside the tent was not visible from the outside and so when authorities visited a service they were surprised. For nine months members gathered in this tent before it was destroyed. In 1976 brothers in Isil'kul' renovated the interiors of houses and this method was subsequently used by other congregations as well. Sisters Catherine Regier and Helena Macht, in whose houses services were often held, permitted such renovation. In 1983 the village of Chortitzza risked building a separate meeting house. Two years later it was destroyed on the instructions of the authorities.

Choral Ministry

Thanks to the fact that many elderly people had preserved hymnals from before the war, choirs were again able to be formed. By the late 1970s, a majority of Association congregations had choirs. As each choir acted independently and developed in its own context, questions about associational leadership emerged. In 1978 a decision was reached to establish a regent council, and A. Ch. Laukert was appointed senior regent. In 1981 the regent council of the Association conducted a two-week regent course that was attended by twenty nine persons.

On August 7, 1977, the first large festival of Christian songs was held in the village of Ivanovka. A large tent was set up on Peter A. Lange-man's plot, which unfortunately, could not accommodate all those present. Twenty choirs with a total number of three hundred singers took part in the festival. When the singing began, a militia unit as well as plainclothes law enforcement arrived. The authorities demanded that it stop and eventually some guests left. Consequences followed for those who stayed; traffic police removed license plates from many vehicles and brothers had to pay a fine before getting them back.

Christian Youth

Starting from the first days of the awakening in the early 1950s, the youth were very active. In spite of the fact that the Christian way in

the Soviet Union did not promise a bright future there were quite a few young people in congregations. When the first opportunity arose, many chose to be baptized. In the mid-1960s, the youth movement became more structured. Recognized youth leaders organized events separate from general meetings. By 1972 the leaders of the youth association met together. In 1977 a large youth festival was organized. More than one hundred young people made decisions to become believers. A similar festival was planned for the following year at the same place. However, early in the morning all roads were blocked by posts of regular and voluntary militia who checked documents and did not permit travel to the site of the festival. A majority managed to find other ways to get there. The service began but soon law enforcement units arrived and ordered it to stop immediately. Seeing that young people did not respond, authorities started using force to dissolve the crowd.

Sunday School

One of the main targets of Satan's arrows during the time of persecution was the education of children and their presence at services. In the mid-1960s, many congregations took the risk of starting classes for children. In most cases this work was undertaken on the initiative of sisters. Sometimes congregational leadership learned about it after classes had already begun. That was done so that the sisters could tell authorities that nobody had urged them to do this work. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some sisters had to pay the high price of imprisonment: Agatha and Lisa Harms of Omsk, Ella and Elizabeth Klassen of Mirolyubovka and Helena Kasdorf of Puchkovo. In 1981 two sisters from Apollonovka, Elizabeth Panina and Maria Toews, were imprisoned for conducting classes for children. In spite of the risks, the work with children continued in nearly every congregation. In the late 1970s, a council of experienced leaders of children groups was elected with Vladimir V. Hamm as its leader. In the 1980s, seminars for leaders of children's groups were conducted.

Christian Literature

Our atheistic state vigilantly protected its borders against penetration of religious literature. Thanks to various missions in the West some books were smuggled into the USSR and reached Omsk oblast. Also, some elderly brothers and sisters miraculously preserved books, for example, German hymnals, New Testaments and even Bibles. These books were as precious as gold. During the service a person would

read a few lines from the available hymnal and then the congregation sang those lines; after this the leader read the following lines and the congregation sang them. This continued to the end of the hymn.

In 1965 sisters Agatha and Lisa Harms of Omsk began book printing by hectograph. Everything had to be done very secretly. The first book printed was *Biblische Geschichten* (Bible stories) and the second was a collection of songs, *Frohe Botschaft* (210 pages). When the third book was printed in 1967 the sisters were arrested and sentenced to three years.

In the mid-1970s when Christianin Publishing House started offset printing, some members of the Omsk Association took part in book binding and thus some books remained in the Association. Everything was done very secretly; even some family members did not know that thousands of pieces of literature were being produced in their homes. No traces of the work could be left for curious neighbours or other visitors.

Missionary Service

In many settlements of our oblast from the 1960s into the 1980s, congregations as such did not exist. Ministers, sometimes from distant villages, visited members and conducted vespers. Noting this situation the leadership of the Omsk Association called on congregations to pray that the Lord would urge young families to resettle to those places where there were no services. In 1979 the first family, Andrei and Katya Klassen from the village of Solntsevka moved to Lyubinskiy raion, village of Maslyanovka. Subsequently thirty one families from the Omsk Association resettled in seventeen different settlements so they could conduct services. The majority of them have remained in their new locations and are still working there. By 1987 there were thirty congregations with 2,306 members, seventeen choirs with 726 choir members and 524 young people participating in youth programs. Between 1987 and 2007 fifty eight brothers were ordained.

III. Period of Freedom

At the end of the 1980s, a new epoch of religious freedom began for Christians in Siberia. Services could be openly conducted without any obstacles. It became possible to secure literature from abroad. It was possible to erect separate meeting houses for religious services. Between 1988 and 2007 the Association built fifteen new and reconstructed thirty six other buildings for meeting houses.

Freedom also meant that it was possible to enlarge the choral work of the congregations, hold special semi-annual one-day seminars with children, conduct children and teenage camps during the summer, publish *Vestnik Mira*, the Association periodical and sponsor periodic special Bible courses for ministers.

Evangelization has been a priority since 1987 when people from the Omsk Association began going to neighbouring villages to witness and conduct services. Tent evangelization across the oblast became a priority in 1997. In the subsequent decade, tent services were held in 106 different villages and sometimes more than once in a village.

Another important part of the evangelistic effort of the Association has been sponsorship of portable libraries and distribution of Christian literature in all Omsk oblast raions. Printing and distribution has included 15,000 hymnals, 800 New Testaments in large format, 5,000 collections of religious poems and various manuals. In early 1991, Christian literature was distributed through the oblast department of public education to twenty three state libraries. Seminars were held with librarians, village schools, orphanages and vocational schools. A program entitled "Gospel to Every House" begun by the Omsk Association in 1993 distributed 150,000 New Testaments.

Current Membership of the Omsk Association

During the period of freedom the Association has added 2,991 members through baptism and established fifty four new village groups. In 2007 the Association consisted of thirty two congregations and forty two groups. Membership in the Association, however, has declined. The congregations of the Omsk Association into the 1980s were predominantly composed of persons of German nationality. Many of them, approximately 3,000, have left for Germany during the past two decades. In 2010 the Association consisted of 1,350 baptized members.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

¹ This essay is drawn from Piotr Epp, *100 let pod krovom Vsevyshnego: Istoriia Omskikh obshchin EKb ikh ob'edineniia, 1907-2007* (Omsk: Steinhagen, 2007).