

Mennonite Education in Siberia: Heinrich P. Wieler in the Classroom, 1916-1918

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Germans living in communities established in Siberia in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were intent on farming, and to a lesser degree on setting up small businesses. Cultural activities of various kinds also flourished from the very beginning. Educational concerns, in particular, formed a central facet of developing these early frontier settlements. This applied to Mennonite and non-Mennonite newcomers alike. The study of education in these communities, though off to a good start, remains a relatively new field of academic endeavour. Mennonites were a minority within the larger Siberian German population, itself a minority among the total number of inhabitants of this vast region, and the study of their cultural life, including education, could be called a “latecomer” within this area of research.¹

Heinrich P. Wieler was born on February 12, 1891 to Peter and Mary Dyck Wieler in the village of Neuhoffnung in Alt-Samara. Seemingly rejected by his own parents as well as by a stepmother, he was ultimately adopted by a Johan Reimer family that may have moved from Alt-Samara back to the old Molotschna (Molchna) settlement

when Heinrich was still a boy. Here in Molotschna, Wieler received his elementary schooling and at Halbstadt in the years 1907-09, his teacher training as well. He taught at several schools after this, but always for short terms only. In 1911 he obtained a position in the village of his birth, Neuhoffnung in Alt-Samara, not far from Neu-Samara, the home settlement of his future wife. Both settlements were in the Volga region. While working there he received an invitation from a relative to come and teach in Siberia in the elementary school at Alexandrovka in the Omsk settlement area. His life, a microcosmic depiction of cultural progress at the very end of the tsarist period, represents another piece in a complex puzzle of the Mennonite experience in Siberia.

The Context of Heinrich P. Wieler's Work

Germans interested in acquiring Siberian land emigrated from points west of Omsk, notably the Volga region, during the generation following the mid-1880s. The completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the colonization policies of Prime Minister Peter Stolypin, coinciding around 1906, accelerated these moves. By the First World War, the total Siberian German population, including the Mennonites, was just under 100,000. German-language village communities had become common throughout the Siberian settlement area.²

Prevailing land acquisition policies also attracted more well-to-do immigrants, especially Mennonites, who were interested in larger private holdings, that is, khutors (estates), not infrequently of 1,000 dessiatini (1,090 hectares) or more. Many newcomers soon began to take up residence in cities and towns, for instance in Issyl Kul as well as other points on the railway, and especially in Slavgorod after its founding in 1910.

The move of Peter J. and Justina Wiens to the city of Omsk to set up an agricultural machinery business as well as several other ventures, the purchase of several small estates, and the founding of the village of Tchunaevka south of the railway just west of Omsk in 1897-99, constituted the beginnings of the so-called Omsk Mennonite settlement. The settlement consisted of dozens of villages and khutors forty kilometers north and south of the railway between Omsk and Issyl Kul which lay about 165 kilometers west of Omsk.³

The Siberian Mennonite communities were heterogeneous, a mixture of families from various parts of the traditional settlement areas in south Russia (later Ukraine) and other settlements closer to the Siberian steppes. As noted not a few came from the wealthy landowning group. Poorer families tended to settle within village communities. The organization of these groups sometimes demanded

non-traditional patterns of social organization. Still, familiar, older patterns were used to establish general cultural mores and systems of community life. What were tried and true methods for obtaining community unity and morals continued to significantly define the new villages and other parts of the settlements as time went on.⁴

Mennonite communities of western Siberia were no more than a dozen years old when Wieler arrived to teach in 1913. The school system in which he found himself in Siberia had been imported intact from the older Mennonite settlements in south and central Russia. Virtually all villages attempted to establish their own schools as soon as possible. Historian John B. Toews writes that "in most of the villages elementary schools were set up in the first years of settlement."⁵

These local schools functioned under the direction of a local board which often included a minister. This body made regular visits to the schools and regional teachers' meetings were scheduled as often as twice a month. School building construction and maintenance costs fell upon the communities themselves. School and church life overlapped significantly in every community, with religious services often held in school buildings till separate church buildings could be built. The school curriculum included both religious and music instruction, intended to contribute to church life. Maintenance costs, including salaries, were generally divided equally between estate owners and local villagers. Where poor villagers lacked funds for their share, wealthier landowners would better their half.⁶

A fairly standard class schedule set up in the very early years remained in place for all Mennonite schools until 1920 at which time Soviet administration eliminated all forms of religious instruction. Religion was typically taught as a subject first thing in the morning on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Mathematics followed daily in the third hour. Other time slots were filled with subjects related to German language instruction: reading, spelling, essay-writing and penmanship. Russian language was taught in a similar fashion. The subjects of Russian history and geography were added in the fifth and sixth years.⁷

The teacher, typically a male, was hired on an annual basis by mutual agreement. Parents paid for school supplies. Usually six grades were placed in a single classroom, and a teacher needed to use written assignments and other means to keep those classes busy that he was not addressing at that particular time.⁸

Relations with Russian government departments and officials were, of course, a part of the work environment. Russian inspectors would show up only seldom, sometimes not for years on end. In short, Mennonites operated their schools along traditional lines, and exercised significant independence with respect to setting up educational goals as well as finding the means to attain them.⁹

The school system of Neu-Samara with which Wieler would become well acquainted, and Alt-Samara, Wieler's home settlement, could easily become the near-by models for founding the education system in Siberia. The school system of these daughter colonies of the Molotschna settlement located east of the Volga River about four hundred kilometers east of the region's capital, the city of Samara, and established in the latter part of the nineteenth century, could easily be replicated. They reflected old patterns in almost every way. It was a rudimentary education system, but one sufficiently effective to be transplanted to Siberia.

Heinrich P. Wieler in the Classroom

Heinrich P. Wieler began keeping a journal in 1912 just before he arrived in Siberia and settled in Alexandrovka, ten kilometers south of the railway station of Gorkoe and thirty kilometers southeast of Issyl Kul.¹⁰ He continued making journal entries through his entire five year tenure as a teacher in the area and continued after he left. Wieler's journal is a unique historical source offering an insight into the life of one Siberian school teacher during the First World War. Most of the material used in this paper is from Part II, 1916-1919 (about five hundred pages long translated into English), the period that covers the Siberian teaching years of Heinrich Wieler.¹¹

One of Wieler's entries in Part I contains an interesting anecdote. He notes that when he began his first year of teaching at Alexandrovka in Siberia in 1913 his first shock had nothing to do with teaching. On meeting the school administrator, Wieler was asked at once, "Where is your wife?" When Wieler answered that he was not married, the administrator replied, "We have a lady here who comes from Neu-Samara, not far from where you have just come. She can be your wife. Her name is Suse Nickel and she lives quite close to the village here." After some time, and some visits over the course of the next year, Heinrich and Suse were married in 1914.¹² Their first child, Lily, was born on March 22 a year later.

The teaching situation as described in Part I of the journal, that is, the years between 1913 and 1916, reflected a well established school system of the lower grades. Prior to Wieler's arrival, attempts at establishing a school system had been fraught with difficulty; there was no school building, there was a scarcity of good teachers, and other needs were also evident. The situation, however, changed quickly and by 1910, three years before Wieler arrived, a wealthy landowner, Jacob Janzen, provided a loan of 2,000 rubles enabling the construction of a regular schoolhouse. A list of early teachers included a Mr. Huebert,

Gerhard Wiens from Sagradovka in south Russia, Hans Isaak and David Nickel. The construction of a large church in 1912, and the founding of a choir added to the cultural life at Alexandrovka, indeed turning it into a central place among the congregations of the *Kirchliche* Mennonites. Other villages nearby also erected school buildings at about this time, and with the availability of better teachers, Wieler no doubt found an energetic, dynamic group of colleagues to work with in this community.

The following outline, taken from the Neu Samara school system, reflects Wieler's daily schedule as more uniform class schedules had been established from school to school.

Opening exercises – song and prayer

First hour – Bible stories and studies

Half hour with the upper grades (catechism was taught as well)

Half hour with the lower grades

Second hour – German language studies

Reading, poetry, writing and grammar with the upper grades

Primer and reader for levels one and two

Third hour – arithmetic

Instruction for upper grades in Russian

Instruction for lower grades in German

Lunch hour – one hour

Fourth hour – Russian language studies

Beginners and Intermediate Level

Fifth hour – Russian language studies with upper grades

Literature, grammar, history and geography

Sixth hour – Art, penmanship, singing, etc¹³

Part II of Wieler's extant journal, the section explored below, begins in 1916 with entries made during the very last months of what had been a four-year stay in Alexandrovka. The entries made at a difficult time in Wieler's life when he was released from his post, point to a central characteristic of his journal, his willingness to express emotion, disappointment, fear and apprehension, but also moments of ecstasy. For example, he found the circumstances of the time of his dismissal very disturbing. But he was also disturbed by the events in the wider Russian society at war with Germany and often shared somewhat depressed thoughts. In one 1916 entry he records the following analysis:

It is at the same time a serious and wonderful time. For nearly two years a disastrous war has been raging which daily demands its sacrifices. Blood flows in streams and the battlefields ... we [Mennonites are] also, a very tiny part of the population of Russia and have very little good in prospect. As far as the horizon of our people [can be seen], storm clouds are gathering. ... Precisely the law, even if it is newly promulgated, forces us as "Germans" from this country. ... ¹⁴

An undated later entry for 1916 (many entries are not dated clearly) suggests a sense of foreboding that the old social arrangement of Mennonite self sufficiency might be coming to an end. The entry begins with a hopeful sign of spring, then a detailed description of a visit from a school inspector, and ends with an attempt to understand the meaning of such visits. The entry records these thoughts:

The long hard winter has finally had to leave the field. ... For us that means a change in the unvarying monotony of our lives in Siberia. The last quarter of the school year brought some change. One day on a Friday on 18 March I started teaching a little earlier in the afternoon in order to be free ... in the evening. Just as I was in the swing of teaching a carriage arrived on the yard. It was the inspector. I invited him in. He saw our wood in the aisle. That gave us a topic of conversation. Among other things I gave him advice on how to acquire hard ... wood, and then we went into the schoolroom. He asked questions, let the students write, looked at their copy books, and after a good half hour he was gone. The evening before I had talked to my colleague, Friesen, about him. "He will probably not come," opined Friesen. On the next day he was there! I asked the inspector about a ticket of leave ... he promised to give me everything.¹⁵

Another inspection followed five days later when a certain Mr. Bergen and a Mr. Huebert showed up. They were likely from the local school committee. After listening for an hour to a class in religious instruction they were on their way, moving quickly to another village, Kornievka. Wieler concluded that "they will probably now make these visits annually, the beginning of a new custom for us."

Weather changes also brought its ups and downs and Wieler generously added notes of emotion to otherwise banal weather records:

Yesterday, the 1st of April we had a day full of sunshine. The thermometer climbed to 8 degrees plus in the shade. Spring!

Spring! Yesterday a cold northeaster blew. The sun did not manage to break through. ... In the sky white flakes whirled down: snow, again snow! ... it has managed to make foot high drifts. Our school yard was already dry, but today it is covered with knee deep snow. ...

Wieler's journal also recorded moments outside of the teaching routine that added excitement to an otherwise regimented life. On Maundy Thursday, April 7, he recorded that "things began to unfold as they should." That day he dismissed his pupils because the inspector had sent a message to close classes before Easter, April 10. For the first time since coming to Alexandrovka, Wieler received his final pay cheque as scheduled on April 15. That payment made possible a lengthy trip to Neu-Samara, by way of Alt-Samara, to see Suse's parents.

The trip became a drawn-out affair. After the couple and their daughter Lily were driven to the train station at Moskalenko, they took the No. 4 train to Omsk. After visits to an optometrist and some friends, they reached their Neu-Samara destination on April 21, relieved to arrive because Suse and Lily had been ill on the journey. Excitement soon ensued as during this visit Wieler made contact with a Mr. Jacob Janzen who had a camera. After taking some family photos, and meeting someone else who owned a camera, an acquaintance who was serving in the medical corps as alternative service, Wieler felt totally taken in by this new-fangled equipment and potential new hobby. On July 19 he went out to buy his own camera, a piece of technology that would later provide a significant portion of his family income.

The Wielers' vacation ended on August 13 and three days later they were back in Alexandrovka.¹⁶ Now times became more uncertain. Wieler had hoped to begin teaching on September 1 but for some unspecified reason he was compelled to wait till September 10. Not all his students had returned by October 1. Suse returned to work in her profession as mid-wife and chiropractor while Heinrich became busy ordering photographic supplies and getting his new family business established. But despite Suse's work and Heinrich's new business venture, the Wielers were finding it difficult to make ends meet in the context of increased family expenses and rising prices. Adding to their household income became a pressing necessity and Wieler found it difficult to cope. On October 24 he commented again on Suse's heavy work schedule and mentioned numerous parcels of photography supplies that were supposed to arrive from Moscow. He felt the urgent need to pray that he and his wife would not become too attached to earthly goods. Still, prices continued to rise and products like petroleum were becoming scarce. In early November, he lamented the slowness of mail and their high cost as he waited for his photographic supplies.

He complained that “the income just dribbles in bit by bit.” Around November 10, he submitted his invoices for school expenses with a request for half of his salary, wondering if he would in fact be paid all his wages for that school year.

He had mixed feelings as Christmas arrived. True, he had his pupils prepare an elaborate Christmas program, complete with four plays and the recitation of a number of poems. He also received half his annual salary which relieved his financial pressures. In addition it was a time in which he started making wall plaques with verses on them as yet another source of income. In the meantime he recorded receiving another nine parcels by mail, presumably books and photographic supplies. During this time too, his parents who had wondered if “their William,” away on alternative forestry service would return for a visit, were delighted when he in fact did arrive.¹⁷ Wieler even recorded an increase in the sale of wall plaques, along with wonderful weather.

Other events, however, seemed foreboding. Right after Christmas, Suse was called away to her duties, which caused some strain. Then too, the community had an extra “Christmas Eve” on December 30 in order to gather donations to help needy persons in the Slavgorod settlement several hundred miles away. A New Year’s Eve celebration brought the community together in a church service to finish the year of 1916, a day on which Wieler remarked, again with some anxiety, that “another year is behind us again – who knows how many more and what kind?”¹⁸

The Year 1917

Heinrich, of course, could not know that 1917 would bring what he felt to be a forced termination of his classroom work at Alexandrovka, and an unanticipated move to find employment in nearby Hoffnungsthal. He could not know that this year would also herald the end of the tsarist regime in Russia, at first leading to a more democratic provisional government, but then, late in fall, to a Bolshevik dictatorship led by Lenin and his colleagues. Nor could he know that in 1917 he would decide to leave Siberia, and indeed, given the changing circumstances, conclude that he and his family would need to leave Russia itself as soon as possible.

The year began with the routines of previous years, with small, quite tolerable alterations. Early in January, community leaders undertook a project to reduce the size of the school classroom in order to save heat, an act ironically noted by Wieler as “a change in the life of the school.” The Wielers also attended an occasional funeral, some weddings and special church meetings which punctuated the daily routine. The most pressing concern early that year was that the Wielers missed their

parents quite a lot and prices of products continued to rise. Suse's midwifery responsibilities and Heinrich's photography became an ever increasing part of their daily workload because of economic necessity.

Notwithstanding Russia's cataclysmic political upheavals of 1917, Wieler's personal concerns remained essentially local. Cryptic references in his journal refer to relations with village authorities. In one entry he notes that this relationship was "improving," intimating that he had his differences (not explained in the journal) with local school officials. The March abdication of the tsar had brought some new newspapers, leading him to remove the portrait of Nicholas II and put it away in a corner. Soon came a note from the inspector urging communities to obey the new government's laws and regulations.

Wieler's journal made as much about local issues as it did about these national developments. One such issue was an attempt by some teachers to have the school inspector dismissed. On March 22, Heinrich attended a special teachers' meeting at Margenau where the school inspector asked teachers for support to prevent his dismissal. Some teachers of the Omsk area were seeking his termination, but others hoped he could stay. A statement providing a vote of confidence for the inspector resulted from this discussion. Margenau teacher Gerhard Gaede provided the necessary forms so that signatures of eight teachers who supported the inspector could be submitted, while another teacher, Jacob Epp, volunteered to take the document to the designated office. In concluding this meeting, four persons were chosen to represent the Mennonite teachers in a submission to an Omsk conference on April 9.¹⁹

Wieler, however, faced problems at work himself. For some reason after April 12, Wieler taught only in the mornings. A week later he records that he brought a statement of school expenditures to the village mayor, but writes that he "was very happy that the mayor was not at home to personally receive the statement," This may well have indicated a conflicted relationship between village authorities and Heinrich. On April 16, Wieler wrote, "Yesterday I dismissed the students for this school year. Today is the first day of my summer holidays." But then comes the ominous note, perhaps recorded sometime later, "[these were the] last lines written in Alexandrovka."

In May Heinrich learned of a petition from the Alexandrovka village authorities to have him reassigned to another school, suggesting to him that they wanted to terminate his employment. Heinrich handed in his resignation as soon as he heard about the plan. But his note appears to have been misinterpreted to mean that he wanted to cease teaching altogether. Such an interpretation might well close the door to him being hired elsewhere which was not his intention. Wieler felt that he and his family had no recourse except to make plans to return

to Neu-Samara and look for a teaching position there. The ordeal troubled Heinrich deeply, "We teachers are a tormented people" is how he put it in writing.²⁰ The local commissioner, however, called the petition "trash" and agreed to take up his cause. Heinrich saw light at the tunnel's end again.

With Alexandrovka's petition rejected, the commissioner now asked Heinrich what classes he wanted to teach. Since Suse was expecting another child, moving was impractical for the Wieler family. The commissioner's hopeful comments encouraged him, but no teaching position seemed to be available. Heinrich admitted frankly, "we were very impatient." Soon thereafter, on June 30, the Wieler's second child, a son whom they named Harry, was born, and it became imperative that a teaching post for Heinrich be obtained.

On July 18 two visitors arrived to notify Heinrich that a classroom vacancy existed at Hoffnungstal and Heinrich happily accepted it. He wrote, "O God, to you be praise. Away from Alexandrovka! The joy was great on both sides." He noted that only ten days were left before his family could leave for a new home and a new assignment. It had been four years since he had come to Alexandrovka on August 10, 1913.

In his transition to Hoffnungstal, Heinrich spoke somewhat wearily of trying to keep up with new school regulations issued by the Provisional Government, about needing to serve on new committees, and having to establish connections with new associations. Perhaps national and regional events threatened to overwhelm him, but the promise of the post at Hoffnungstal allowed him to move forward with optimism once more.²¹

Hoffnungstal

The move to Hoffnungstal, however, brought its own stresses, and upon arriving Heinrich expressed a deep sense of frustration. "The first days in Hoffnungstal were empty like a desert," he wrote. They were "empty of order, empty of any kind of regularity. Everything had to be unpacked ... the process is seldom pleasant." With these moving strains also came his August 10 visit to Omsk to confirm his teacher's status. What he thought would be routine turned out to be a lengthy interrogation about the circumstances of his departure from his former school. The discussion also implied that in actual fact he would not necessarily have had to leave Alexandrovka. The interview finally ended successfully with Wieler's teaching status upheld for the coming year.²²

Life now seemed quite bearable. By August 19, Wieler began purchasing school supplies in Omsk and also noted his intention to attend a

teachers' convention. He hoped to see several of his former colleagues there, but was disappointed at first when they failed to show up. After the convention, he held discussions with the local village authorities who now offered him a salary of 1,200 rubles, a salary double that of his previous year. Yet, wrote Wieler, "in this time [it is] far too little."

Other events promised better times ahead. He and his family attended a Thanksgiving service in Margenau on October 15. With weddings and other social events, the demand for Wieler's photography services increased. On November 15 he stated that the Christmas program preparations showed real progress, and added with some satisfaction that he had taught a class of boys three hours of mathematics and Russian.

Wieler also devoted much space in his journal to descriptions of church services, sermons and other church events. Contacts with colleagues also brought welcome relief from routine requirements in the classroom, and provided an anchor for him within the larger community that now included Margenau and its environs. His very busy weekly schedule apparently did not weigh as heavily on him now. It might well have, however. An entry on November 24 provides a schedule for Wieler's daily work: classroom work from 8 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.; special tutoring (possibly in the Russian language) for students Katja Baecker and Adolf Krause from 3 to 4 pm; tutoring to three other persons of German nationality from 4 to 6:30 pm; rehearsals with a youth group for a special program from 6.30 to 8 p.m. on three evenings a week, and Russian language instruction for a Mr. Schmidt from the province of Brandenburg on the other two evenings.

Still, Wieler was never really without stress. He complained at one juncture that school books were slow in arriving. Some books had arrived but the primers had not. He also experienced unspecified difficulties with the parents of some of his boys which sometimes tempted him to "hang up the schoolmaster's coat on a nail somewhere." He hoped, he wrote cryptically on November 24, that tomorrow he could settle once and for all "who is my boss," the fathers of the boys, or the boys themselves. He continued to make extensive notes in his journal on sermons of special meetings in the community. A New Year's Eve service and carol singing on the morning of January 1, 1918, finished the old year, but given his new life at Hoffnungstal and news of revolution he once again queried about the upcoming year, "and what can the New Year bring us? That remains hidden in the lap of time which remains hidden from our eyes. ... we are fortunate we can trust in Him!"

The teaching year for 1918 began on January 8 with a note of hope. Near the end of the month, Wieler learned from the school inspector, W. Steinborn, that he would be reappointed as teacher for the coming

year. The future now depended on his response i.e., the conditions which he would set for his employment at Hoffnungstal. Wieler was becoming more and more involved in community music events, for him a welcome addition to his regular routines. "Work makes life sweet," he wrote. When at the end of the month orders came to switch to a new calendar, Wieler explained in his journal that this would mean that the first day of the next month would not be February 1, but February 14. He explained further that until July 1 of 1918, dates of the new calendar would always be written with parentheses leaving the old calendar dates in place to assist orientation to the new dating system.²³ Personally it meant also that Wieler's birthday of February 12 would be celebrated on February 25 from now on! His concerns seemed circumscribed by local events.

But life for Wieler could not continue unruffled. His sense that the terms for employment at the Hoffnungstal school could be set by him would now be tested. In response to the inspector's invitation, Wieler listed the main terms under which he could accept an appointment to a further year of teaching. As salary he would want eight hundred pud (approximately thirteen tonnes) of wheat released to him in four portions on October 15, December 15, March 15 and May 1. He requested exclusive access to the school garden and asked that it be ploughed at the appropriate time. He also would be looking for two cubic "fad" of wood delivered for the household stove, to have manure spread around the school (possibly for weather proofing of the base line), and to have a reed covered structure in front of each door in the house.

He soon learned that the village authorities had some reservations about his request. It seemed to Wieler that his terms might in fact be refused, and then, he noted, if that should happen, he would not return the following year. It would mean looking for another vacancy, some other form of employment, or considering yet other options. Whether he had deliberately set up the terms so that they would be rejected is unclear. In any case, Wieler's journal leaves the matter there. His thoughts move on to describe in minute detail a large church conference that took place in the area.

By all appearances, a further teaching contract did not materialize for Wieler, indeed he likely no longer desired one in Siberia. Journal entries about sermons and other church-related matters took over the written record during the following weeks. The journal entries of 1918 culminate in a section chronicling the last weeks of the Wieliers' Siberian sojourn, with preparations underway for a move to Neu-Samara, the home settlement of Suse's parents.

Heinrich Wieler as a Journal Keeper

With a teaching career of less than a dozen years, bedeviled by adverse circumstances, Wieler's life had led him on a different road than he might have anticipated. His journal depicts a multi-talented, somewhat driven, person with various interests, among which teaching became less and less of a passion. He found it difficult in his early working years to obtain a steady position. His longest tenure was at Alexandrovka with subsequent short term positions in several other locations. In the early 1920s he and his family left for the United States.

In certain portions of the journals, his entries are sporadic, even random and rambling, with significant chronological gaps into which he inserts recollections of long-ago events. It seems that his intention was to date his entries but he did so only sporadically. Then come short stretches where he reverted to a kind of log book, with entries not only carefully dated by day, month and year, but even by the hour in which he did the actual writing. Some confusion remains for readers seeking a clear chronology of his life and work, or a methodical treatment of themes such as family life or church-related activities in which he seemed always to be deeply involved.

The bulk of the writing is strongly theological, devotional and religiously self-reflective in nature. Such entries reveal a definite intellectual bent; he was well read and sometimes provided penetrating thought on spiritual themes, even though he does not actually record the reading of non-school related books during his teaching years. Nor does his journal divide into neat themes; often the topics treated seem to tumble upon each other. Wieler was clearly preoccupied with providing income needed for the upkeep of his family, Suse and the two children, Lily and Harry. This struggle weighed heavily on his mind day and night, and clearly contributed much to feelings of uncertainty, frustration and even depression. Clearly, Wieler struggled emotionally; at times he bordered on despair, but at other times he experienced ecstatic highs that seem to have kept him going.

Significantly, Wieler does not record much about his classroom work. Contacts with his teaching colleagues seemed important to him as he records numerous events where teachers met, and where administrative work was tended to. Social activities involving his family were also important for Wieler; in spite of Suse's schedule which often took her away from home and Heinrich's hectic work pace, the family enjoyed many social engagements and no doubt found good friends wherever they went.

Wieler fails to offer much comment on the political and economic events of the day, though he likely kept up with changes happening beyond the local borders. He did ponder their impact not only on the

local situation, but on the nation as a whole. With respect to economics, both he and Suse were always conscious of shortages and prices of goods, and anything that affected the struggle for daily household existence.

Wieler's journals evidence a challenging and in depth glimpse into the mind and work of a Mennonite teacher, revealing the contours of Mennonite education in Siberian schools and the pioneering decades in Siberia. This sketch comprises just a fraction of the total picture of the complexity of Mennonite life in Siberia. In due time one may be privileged to discern more of the whole.

Epilogue

In 1918 Wieler completed his term in Hoffnungstal but with his mind made up to leave Siberia for Neu-Samara to seek new teaching opportunities, in the short term at least. In Neu-Samara he found a position as teacher of religion in the secondary school at Lugowsk and held that post until 1921.²⁴ A third child, John, was born in Lugowsk in 1920. By 1921 Wieler felt Communist pressures ever more heavily and was advised to leave the country if he could.

Following an interim six-month stay in Poland, after managing a secret escape from Russia, the family entered a refugee camp in Germany, and in 1923 reached the United States where they came into the custody of a sponsoring Dunkard family in Chester County, Pennsylvania. After a year, the Wieler family moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania where they established a new home.

Here Heinrich found work as a security guard, and also began a small business making and selling plaques and small signs. For short intervals he became an instructor in Russian and German in his home and, later, at Franklin College and Marshall College. A fourth child, Mary, joined the family soon after this and Heinrich became a naturalized United States citizen in 1932. Susanna, as Suse came to be called, found various kinds of involvement while keeping up her medical work as well. She died in 1967 at the age of 81 and Heinrich in 1984 at the age of 93.²⁵

The much-treasured journal remained intact through all these years. In the conclusion to their volume, *The Quiet in the Land*, the current holders of the journal, Arthur and Mary Jean Pavlatos say, "It is our intention with Harry Wieler's permission to eventually make these primary source materials available for scholarly use, both religious and secular."²⁶ This essay is thus, among other things, an illustration of what direction such research may take in the future.

Notes

- ¹ For an effort to begin a wider study of Siberian Mennonites see John B. Toews, "The Mennonites on the Siberian Frontier (1907-1930)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 47 (1973): 83-102. The first Mennonite settlements of Siberia in the Omsk region began in 1897.
- ² The emigration of non-Mennonite Germans to Siberia, and their early economic progress has been summarized recently in Detlaf Brandes and Andrei Savin, *Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat 1919-1938*, (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2001), 7-22, and presented more analytically in Viktor Bruhl, *Die Deutschen in Sibirien: Eine hundertjaehrige Geschichte von der Ansiedlung bis zur Auswanderung. Band 1*. (Nuernburg: Historischer Forschungsverein der Deutschen aus Russland, 2003), 57ff. See also migration literature cited in Toews, "Siberian Frontier," 83-87. Donald Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) remains the standard English reference. J. J. Hildebrand, *Mennonitensiedlungen in Sibirien* (Winnipeg MB: by author, 1952), though anecdotal and episodic in nature is still a useful reference for Mennonite movements in Siberia. So is *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 1959 ed., vol. 4. "Siberia," by Cornelius Krahn. Peter Rahn, *Mennoniten in der Umgebung von Omsk* (Vancouver BC: by author, 1975) significantly enhances, albeit in popular format, research on the Omsk area Mennonites. Rahn knew about these communities from personal contact particularly in the Issyl Kul area, and drew, for inclusion in his book, what is considered to be the most reliable map of all the villages and estates of the Omsk region for the tsarist and early Soviet period.
- ³ The Wiens story is found in Hildebrand, *Mennonitensiedlungen*, 17ff. See also Rahn, *Mennoniten*, 9-14, for early settlement data. Hildebrand, *Mennonitensiedlungen*, 17, puts the Omsk area Mennonite population at the beginning of World War I as being about five thousand. The total Siberian population has been estimated to have been about ten million at that time.
- ⁴ Toews, "Siberian Frontier," 90ff.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 92. Toews also states that the majority of villages constructed schools only after World War I which contradicts the note that most villages had buildings quite early in their history. Not infrequently village schooling began in a home. Rahn, *Mennoniten*, 112, states that the Omsk settlement had thirty three Mennonite elementary schools serving forty locations in the pre-war period.
- ⁶ Rahn's brief history of about a dozen local village communities mentions the organization of elementary schools in several instances. See Rahn, *Mennoniten*, 112, 169.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 114. A helpful history of the development of education and educational philosophy in the older settlements which established the basic assumptions for Mennonite education generally (and hence providing the background for teacher training, such as Wieler likely had) is found in Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Education in Russia," in *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*, ed. John Friesen (Winnipeg MB: CMBC Publications, 1989), 75-98. See also the chapter "Pedagogy and Piety" in James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg MB: Hyperion Press, 1989), 153-73.
- ⁸ Wieler had close family connections with Alt-Samara and Neu-Samara, and corresponded frequently with people there. He would likely have compared notes on what was going on in the schools of Neu-Samara, while no doubt duplicating various aspects of those educational arrangements. See Jacob H. Brucks and Henry P. Hooge, comps., and Tena Wiebe, ed. *Neu-Samara: A Mennonite Settlement East of the Volga*, trans., John Isaak (Edmonton AB: the family, 2002), 86ff.

- ⁹ Toews, "Siberian Frontier," 92, reports that a high school inspector from Barnaul (presumably a Russian) was surprised to find fifty schools in the Slavgorod settlement area when he visited the area in 1916, nine years after the settlement was begun. Clearly inspector visits were only occasional in that region at the time.
- ¹⁰ Information about the Siberia teaching vacancy came from a relative of Wieler's living in Alexandrovka.
- ¹¹ *The Journal of Heinrich Wieler* is a 1,500 page, five-volume document written during the years 1912-1924. Some material has been lost. The journal was brought to the U.S. by the Wieler family when they emigrated from the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. The original is currently in the possession of Arthur Pavlatos, a retired high school teacher from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Arthur and his wife Mary Jean are close relatives of the Wieler family. The materials accrued to him through arrangements made by Harry Wieler, son of Heinrich. In 1992 Harry Wieler brought the journal out of a private holding located in an old shed and entrusted it to Mr. Pavlatos and his wife to hold for posterity. Some years ago, Bert Friesen of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, Manitoba prepared an English-language draft of Part II, 1916-19 of the journal. It is lodged in Volume 4235 of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Much of the theological and devotional content of the journal for the years 1916-18 has been gathered, after translation, and edited to become a published paperback volume of 127 pages. It is the first venture in what the current owner views as a series to cover the material in the five volumes of the journal. See Arthur L. Pavlatos and Michael C. Upton, eds. and abrids. *The Quiet in the Land: A Volga-German's Christian Journals. Russian Revolution Years 1916-18* (Victoria BC: Trafford Publishing in cooperation with the family, 2005). The journal materials of Part I, 1912-15, have just been received by the author and are being translated. They were not available as data relevant to this essay. In this article, pagination is taken from the English-language document prepared by Bert Friesen.
- ¹² The story of Alt-Samara has recently received a major new historical treatment by Viktor Fast, comp and ed., *Voruebergehende Heimat: 150 Jahre Beten und Arbeiten in Alt-Samara (Alexandertal and Konstantinovka)* (Steinhagen: Samenkorn, 2009). Neuhoffnung is not mentioned in the volume which does not purport to cover the story of all the villages in that settlement. See however the inside back cover with an insert of maps of the settlement and individual villages which do include Neuhoffnung. For the story of Wieler's early years, first teaching assignments and marriage to Suse Nickel, see his personal unpublished memoir, "Mennonites in Russia," 1-3, in the author's possession.
- ¹³ This is an outline drawn from the Neu-Samara school system of this general period. Brucks and Hooge, *Neu-Samara*, 87.
- ¹⁴ *The Journal of Heinrich Wieler*, 4-5.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-11.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-16. William's location is not mentioned. In 1913 the government opened up another forestry camp for conscientious objectors in the vicinity of Issyl Kul. It is not mentioned in the Wieler entries to the best of our knowledge.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-21. Margenau had become an educational centre of the Omsk Mennonites with the construction of a secondary school in addition to an elementary one. Jacob Epp, a close associate of Heinrich Wieler, spent some years here. Neighbouring villages, too small to construct and maintain their own primary school would often enroll pupils at the Margenau school. Rahn, *Mennoniten*, 153-55.
- ¹⁹ *Journal*, 23-24.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-27.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

²² Ibid., 39-41.

²³ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁴ This school had been established in 1908. Though closed during the war years it was opened in 1917. In a brief history of the institution, Wieler is listed among the teachers of religion sometime during the next few years. When Communist pressures increased, and Wieler was threatened with separation from his family, he and a number of other teachers fled the community in 1921 with the hope of getting to Germany if possible. Brucks and Hooge, *Neu-Samara*, 91-92. See also Wieler's unpublished memoir, "Mennonites in Russia," 3, in the author's possession.

²⁵ Their published obituaries carried in Lancaster newspapers are in the author's possession. Susana was survived by two brothers and two sisters at the time of her death, and Heinrich, by two sons and two daughters, Harry, John, Lily and Mary.

²⁶ Pavlatos and Upton, *Quiet in the Land*, 124. We warmly thank Arthur and Mary Jean for their assistance in procuring photocopies of the *Journal of Heinrich Wieler* to the extent that they have been available for this study. The author also wishes to acknowledge, with equal warmth, the painstaking work of Bert Friesen of Winnipeg, Manitoba, for doing the rough translated English draft which made this project much easier, and which opens the unutilized portions of the photocopies to all interested persons at any time.