The Migration Narrative of Heinrich Wölk, a Karaganda Church Elder

Johannes Dyck, *Bibelseminar Bonn*

Heinrich Wölk (1906-2001) was the elder of the Karaganda Mennonite Brethren church in Kazakhstan, a congregation I knew well as a youth. Although I had close friends in this congregation, I came to know Heinrich Wölk, its leader, most intimately through his extensive memoir titled, *Die sollen dem Herrn danken*,[1] a quotation from Psalm 107. The verse was a sign of full satisfaction with a long life journey. His positive retrospective is based on the final part of his story. It is one that describes the peaceful twilight of life in the circle of family and church, within the Frankenthal Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in Germany that was largely influenced by him and led for a long period of time by his son Gerhard Wölk. Finally, he had achieved what he had fought for during decades of striving for his faith in the Soviet Union.

Wölk belonged to the most visible of Mennonites in post-war Soviet Union. In 1967, after the legalization of the MB church in Karaganda with almost 1000 members he was elected its elder, and served the church in this position until 1976. Wölk became known also as author, when, in 1981, he and his son Gerhard, published a

book in North America about the MB Church in Soviet Union,[2] a task encouraged by his friend from old times, J.B. Toews.[3]

Wölk wrote roughly half of his book between 1973 and 1978 while living in the Soviet Union, and he wrote without a definite plan to publish it. His recollections were primarily intended for his family. He continued to work on this text after emigration to Germany in 1978, and finished it in 2001, the year of his death. Wölk's memoirs were published in 2013 in Frankenthal by his great-grandchildren. The book consists of 268 large pages in DIN-A4 format and contains many illustrations, not only from the family archive but also from general Mennonite history in Russia, including an obligatory colored map of his native village of Rudnerweide in Molochna Colony.[4]

Home in Rudnerweide

The first third of Wölk's book deals with his home – the native village, colony, faith, church, vocation, diligence, kinship, and school. This environment formed the person of Wölk and served in his later life as a prototype for everything he strived for, especially when restoring the Mennonites' congregational life after the war. It was not possible to restore everything, but church life was a crucial reference point.

The time of World War I and the subsequent political upheaval is covered by Wölk in relatively short fashion. The author spent 1913 to 1922 studying in different schools or obtaining private lessons. Excellent marks strengthened the intention of this farmer's son to become a teacher. Education remained important for the Mennonite community in early Soviet times, and continued to be important five decades later, when many young members of the Karaganda MB Church strove to obtain the highest training possible.

In 1922, just after the Civil War ended, at the age of 16, Wölk was appointed a teacher's assistant in one of two schools in Rudnerweide that was opened for children of the *Kleinwirte*, the small land owners. In this way, he became a teacher without formal training. Significantly, this position guaranteed him respect within the Mennonite community for decades. In 1925-1926, Wölk obtained training in the *Agroschule* in Gnadenfeld. Here, one of his classmates was Johann Benjamin Töws – better known in North America as J.B. Toews, mentioned above. Teaching became Wölk's main and preferred occupation, though he had to switch to the profession of an accountant during harder periods of life. He

worked as a teacher in different colonies, even though he lost his position several times when, no doubt through his influence, his pupils would not sing the second stanza of the Communist "The Internationale": "No one will grant us deliverance, Not god, nor tsar, nor hero."[5]

Wölk was decisively impacted by church life in his native village Rudnerweide. He describes the preparations for his own baptism by pouring[6] in 1923 with deep feeling, and much detail. The effect of the Mennonite Church on his life endured for decades and made being Mennonite seem normative. This norm included the pietism that accompanied his conversion prior to baptism and informed the Sunday service and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[7] From the beginning, Wölk distanced himself from communities that did conform to this model. In 1926, he accepted a teacher's position in a small school in Barvenkovo, one with a mixed student body consisting of Mennonites, Lutherans, and German Baptists. But Wölk found it difficult to connect with the latter group, as their Christianity seemed shallow to him. After several attempts to serve them, Wölk withdrew his services.[8] It was a pattern of withdrawal that continued over four decades, into the 1960s when it happened on a much larger scale.

In the winter of 1923-1924, after his baptism, Wölk took part in a special Bible study group with retired teacher Isaak Ediger. Here he studied Church history, German and English,[9] but also had the opportunity of teaching faith in a systematic way.

In 1928, Heinrich Wölk married Helene Flaming, daughter of Gerhard Flaming, the Nikolaidorf teacher and an elected preacher in the MB church. Heinrich and Helene's first two children, Heinz (b. 1930) and Helene (b. 1934), were born just as severe persecution began in the Soviet Union, while Gerhard, the last child, was born in August 1941, at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is called in Russia. The Wölks and their children would endure an ocean of suffering over the next decade.

Keine Heimat mehr (No Longer a Home)

The decisive event in Wölk's long life journey was the loss of home. Departing from the geographical location of the colonies went hand in hand with the detachment from the Mennonite community, one that was being dissolved by the Soviets. This loss was merely the beginning of a series of difficulties for the Wölk

family that took them into ever deeper difficulty. This downward path lasted for two decades.

The key phrase of Wölk's narrative is a chapter with the heading, "*Keine Heimat Mehr*" (No Longer a Home).[10] In the spring of 1933 he left Rudnerweide with his father-in-law, Flaming, who had been warned by his friends while delivering the village's requisition of 560 kilograms of wheat. The two men escaped to the Ukrainian village of Mikhailovka, in the distant Donbass, where Wölk, a former teacher, found not only a hiding place, but a position as an accountant. But the small Ukrainian village proved to be unsafe for Wölk. On 18 May 1936, a free day in the Soviet system in which every sixth day was a day of rest, Wölk was arrested, only to be released 69 days later when the authorities could not prove their initial suspicion that he had founded an anti-Soviet group. The terrible years, 1937 and 1938, did not touch him in his Donbass refuge to the degree they touched his loved ones in his native village, a place where three brothers of Heinrich were arrested, never to be heard from again.[11] In 1938, Wölk even found a position as a German language teacher.

Wölk's short imprisonment in 1936 was not the last time he was arrested. On 3 September 1941, shortly after the beginning of the war, he was accused of violating certain blackout rules and imprisoned.[12] Wölk served his term in the feared Ivdel labour camp in Northern Ural, working initially as wood loader. Half a year after imprisonment, he was swollen from hunger. Later, he managed to find work as an accountant in the camp. In August 1947 he was released from the labour camp two years early for good behavior.

Shortly after Heinrich's arrest, his wife Helene with the three children – an eleven-year-old boy, a seven-year-old daughter, and a three-week-old baby – and with her seventy-year-old stepfather, were deported to a small village in Central Kazakhstan. Here she went through very difficult times.[13] Finally, she also earned a teacher's position in the village school.

After release from labour camp, Wölk chose the city of Bijsk in Southern Siberia as place of residence and took his family there from Kazakhstan. With some difficulty, he once again got a job as an accountant. Later, he became a German teacher in an evening school.[14]

Vedenovka Village, Confessing the Faith Openly

Wölk's spiral downwards ended with Stalin's death in March 1953. With the significant changes in Soviet society, Mennonites, as part of the oppressed German population, also felt their situation gradually improve. The decisive point in the life of Germans occurred when they again could take fate into their own hands. The first sign that they had regained their former civil status was the freedom of movement. The definitive proof of that consisted in a permanent change of residence. Through this, the displaced Germans, scattered over the boundless vastness of Siberia and Central Asia, could embrace their German identity and move to areas with a concentration of their own people. Some made this move, some did not.

When in 1956 the deportation era, with its strict settlement restrictions, finally ended, a spontaneous and uncontrolled migration of Germans, from the locations of forced isolation to places with more German families, set in. The Wölk family happened to be on the crest of this migration wave. After visiting with his elder brother Kornelius in the village of Vedenovka in Central Kazakhstan, the first meeting after his release from a 13-year-term in labour camps, the Wölk couple decided to move 1300 kilometers eastwards to settle close to him. Some other Germans also lived there, and soon they met regularly for worship services.[15]

Vedenovka was a typical village where Germans from the European part of the Soviet Union had been deported to in autumn of 1941 and where they had been forced to stay until 1956. Here, as in dozens of other villages in Siberia and Central Asia with German presence, a hidden religiosity found its way to the surface with the political thaw after Stalin's death in 1953. Small churches emerged in new places with new people and new leaders. The Germans began to gather regularly and more openly, and until 1958, the state officials allowed such gatherings. A new geography of German and Mennonite churches came into being.[16]

This spontaneous movement came with a strong ethnic or national identity. Germans looked for new possibilities to settle together with Germans. The Wölks moved to the new location with their two younger children in mind, wishing that at the least they should keep their German identity, even while their elder son married a Russian woman and declined to move to Kazakhstan with the parents. The power of Russian assimilation had already occurred within the Wölk family.

The Germans in Vedenovka, as elsewhere, started their church services without asking the authorities for permission. And even though they were illegal gatherings, for a certain period of time, they were tolerated. They were conducted in German, even though this was the language of the enemy in the lost war. Yet, the Germans lived out their new liberty, expressing a freedom of faith, and even conducting Bible studies – in the same way as they had in the lost, and increasingly forgotten, homes in former Mennonite colonies in Ukraine.

Congregational life in Vedenovka reflected the pattern of nineteenth century pietistic revival in Russia, with a religious fellowship in which all who could preach did. This pattern was common among Mennonite Brethren as well among Russian Baptists and spread widely in the country. The former members of Mennonite churches followed the pattern as well, also incorporating other confessions from the pietist tradition.

Wölk began to attend these services. After two decades of hiding his personal faith, he now sought a more active mode of living it out: "The situation with my *nachfolge* was poor, but I felt that I missed something very costly: I lacked resoluteness."[17] For Wölk, the breakthrough came with his first public audible prayer.[18] He also joined the small choir and even found the courage to preach. Then, together with two other men, including his brother Kornelius, he became a leader of the small congregation.

Wölk again found a job as an accountant. In any village, this position was highly regarded, and the local authorities soon asked him to start an anti-religious work among Germans. This was the hour when Wölk openly declared his faith before the state officials and rejected their offer.

The religious revival in Vedenovka took place against the background of oscillations within the Communist Party on the question of religious freedom. In his memoirs, Wölk states that religion was opposed with a number of invisible methods. Now a state security officer became active and ordered Wölk to a KGB office in the rayon center of Shchuchinsk, seventy kilometers away. Wölk remembers: "Here I experienced one of the heaviest attacks in my life. The tyrant wanted to make me his accomplice, a traitor to my brothers. At that time, I was ready to die in his office rather than say 'yes' to his demands."[19] For a whole year, Wölk was pressured to work for the officer's anti-religion organization, but Wölk rejected. Then the security officer strongly advised Wölk to leave Vedenovka. Thus, Wölk became *persona non grata; not only had he stuck* to his religious tradition, he had begun to confess his faith openly.

A second point of attack concerned the two younger Wölk children. In the short period of fellowship in the Vedenovka church, the children experienced a conversion, became baptized and began to confess their faith openly. Wölk's son Gerhard got into serious difficulties at school because of his faith, and his father dared to lodge a complaint about the matter to the first secretary of the Communist party, Khrushchev. A polite but dismissive reaction of school authorities followed.[20] The Wölk family realized that the only way forward was leaving Vedenovka.

Peak Point: Leading the Church in Karaganda

Heinrich Wölk and his family arrived in Karaganda in September 1958 when a new wave of religious persecutions began to roll over the country. At that time, Karaganda was already a large city with a population of 400,000, having grown significantly since 1931 when it served as a huge deportation site, gathering potential coal miners from across the country. During the war, in 1942, many young Germans were mobilized here as members of the Workers Army. After barbed wire was removed from their barracks at the end of the war in 1945, they could move more freely within the city. They found their way to a small Russian Baptist church that consisted mainly of exiled Russians and one that had been legalization (or officially registered) in 1946 after two attempts. The first attempt failed because of the lack of 20 founding persons with no exile background. The Russian Baptists too, were forced to leave their homes, but they never expressed their feelings for a lost homeland as the Mennonites did. In August 1948, 112 young persons, mostly young exiled Germans, were baptized in the Baptist church.[21] This not only marked the strong German part in the church membership at that time, but also led to the replacement of the church elder who was later excommunicated from the church.[22] The new elder had to adapt to the increased and severe state restrictions, but managed to keep the church legalized, paying the price of reduced numbers of young people being baptized and keeping the number of preachers to a prescribed minimum of seven persons. Considering the large percentage of Germans in the church, the Baptist elder was advised in 1955 by the highest religious state authority in Moscow he would be permitted one German sermon for every three Russian sermons; together with the Senior Presbyter in Kazakhstan, he was made personally responsible for the content of the sermons. The first German service, according to a report to the

local plenipotentiary for matters of religion, was given on 25 December 1955.[23]

The Germans in the church, inspired by the new spirit of freedom, criticized the lack of evangelistic sermons and prohibition of preaching on end times. On 2 December 1956, a group of 21 German-speaking Mennonites split away and founded the German Mennonite Brethren church of Karaganda,[24] initially illegal. The new church foundation coincided with a large migration of Mennonites and other Germans from deportation sites towards places with stronger German presence. The Karaganda German MB church became a big attraction point for hundreds of recently freed German people who were on the look out for German church fellowship. Within the next three years, more than 700 Germans joined the church.[25]

The Karaganda German MB church soon became a melting pot of many Mennonites with different war experiences, each having finally arrived in an allegedly safe harbour and begun church as they had known it before Stalin's ascendancy. The composition of the church in its first years illustrates the consequences of the preceding religious persecutions, deportation and time in the Workers Army. In 1959, only 15 percent of the men and 22 percent of the women had been baptized before Stalin came to power, and had known church life "at home", as they referred to life in pre-war Ukraine.[26]

Soon the Karaganda church attracted members from vastly different backgrounds. Some of the founders had once belonged to the Alliance-minded Mennonites.[27] Others valued fellowship with Russian Baptists with whom they had spent years in labour camps.[28] A considerable percentage consisted of people with Volga-German, Volhynian, and Swabian backgrounds.[29]

Wölk, who in 1925 joined the Alexandertal MB church without being re-baptized by immersion, was accepted in the Karaganda MB church as only a guest member; nevertheless he was permitted to preach in the services. The reason for this was that former teachers were highly respected in the church. But in 1961, he was re-baptized by immersion, accepting the baptism as a kind of a second blessing; in 1962, he was ordained as a preacher.[30]

Despite the relative freedom they enjoyed in the late 1950s, state-driven persecution worsened in the early 1960s. In 1962, the MB church elder David Klassen was imprisoned, and the church was left without leadership. A period of uncertainty and quest for a new orientation set in and new leadership arose. When in 1965 state oppression diminished, Klassen was released from labour

camp and he returned to church, he found a changed inner-church atmosphere and he resigned from his position.

The same year, Heinrich Wölk was elected the new elder of the church.[31] Wilhelm Matthies (1903-1995), who initially came from the colony of Alt-Samara, was elected chair of the congregation that had to report to the government. Like Wölk, he, too, experienced a conversion in his youth and was baptized by sprinkling, served as a teacher by profession, spent several years in prison, and, in 1960, was re-baptized by immersion. Matthies stood out with his clear Mennonite identity and devotion to Mennonite history. His self-authored history of his native Alt-Samara, as well as a hand-written history of Mennonites in Russia, had served as criminal evidence before the courts in 1935.[32] Even a poem in the Mennonite periodical, *Unser Blatt*, can be attributed to him.[33]

Together with Matthies, Wölk played a crucial role in defining a new identity of the Karaganda MB church at a time of external pressure and internal conflict. To keep all the different church backgrounds and ethnic streams under one Mennonite Brethren roof was difficult. Wölk and Matthies did so by stressing a mainstream Mennonite identity. Both were against too much fellowship with Russian Baptists, and both refused to regard Mennonite Brethren who joined the officially recognized All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists as Mennonites. The Karaganda MB Church distanced itself from this organization.[34] In this case, Wölk followed the pattern from the days of his youth when he withdrew from Barvenkovo. Paralleling this confrontation of Baptist influence, Wölk and Matthies fought for the preservation of a German ethnic identity within the congregation, especially among the young generation.[35]

In all, it was not an easy task. The external pressure from the state authorities was supplemented by opposition from within the church. The situation worsened after Matthies emigrated to Germany in 1975. On Wölk's 70th birthday in 1976, something happened that he says, he "did not want to describe, but rather forget."[36] In his own and his son's words, "he could no longer stay in the church because he was unable to work in the church."[37] Wölk had no other choice but to resign as church elder.

In the same year, 1976, he moved to a small village in Ukraine from where he, in 1978, emigrated to Germany. The 72-year-long Russian and Soviet part of his narrative came to a conclusion. Wölk closes this part of his memoirs with a lengthy quote from Psalm 107: 4-9, one that in part informed the title of his memoirs.[38]

In Germany, the larger Wölk family settled in Frankenthal in Rhineland-Palatinate where they fellowshipped with a small MB church consisting of immigrants from the Soviet Union.[39] Over time, it became an attraction point for MBs from Karaganda and elsewhere. Here, Wölk's vision for a sustained Mennonite identity was fulfilled. By 2009, the Frankenthal was the leading church within a wider MB community of 31 congregations.[40] Wölk enjoyed his retirement and watched this development from a rather restful position. He travelled throughout Germany, wider Europe, and North America, where he finally met his friend from the early 1920s, J.B. Toews.[41]

Heinrich Wölk's long migration came to an end when he passed away at age of 95 on 28 September 2001. His life had a lasting effect on the history of the Mennonites in the Soviet Union. His memoir gives an account of this effect.

Notes

1 Heinrich Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken: Eine Autobiografie von Heinrich Wölk (1906-2001),*" Jakob Wiebe and Anna Wiebe, eds. (Frankenthal, 2013).
2 Heinrch Wölk, and Gerhard Wölk, *Die Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde in Russland 1925-1980* (Fresno, CA: Historical Commission of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America, 1981).
3 Wölk, *Die sollen dem Herrn danken*, 237.
4 Ibid., 14.
5 Ibid., 14. Translation from the Russian version of the song according to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Internationale (access 11/26/2017).
6 Wölk, *Die sollen dem Herrn danken*, 16.
7 Ibid., 17.
8 Ibid., 68-69.
9 Ibid., 63.
10 Ibid., 100-104.
11 Ibid., 111.
12 Ibid., 119-146.
13 Ibid., 147-158.
14 Ibid., 159-174.
15 Ibid., 171-178.
16 See: Johannes Dyck, "A Root Out of Dry Ground: Revival Patterns in the German Free Churches in the USSR After World War II", in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30 (2012), 97-112.
17 Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken*," 175.
18 Ibid.
19 Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken*," 175.
20 Ibid., 177-178.
21 Johannes Nickel, and Johannes Dyck, "Aus der Geschichte der Gemeinde der Evangeliumschristen-Baptisten in Karaganda," *Aquila* 1 (31), 8-14, 10.
22 M.S. Kapustinskij. Act. Karaganda, 5.8.1952, State Archive of Karaganda Region, fond 1364, inventory list 1s, delo 19, pp. 41-43.

[23] I.V. Poljanskij, Letter to plenipotentiary Adikov, 30 November 1955. State Archive of Russian Federation, fond 6991, inventory list 3, delo 388, p. 71.
[24] Viktor Fast and Jakob Penner, *Wasserströme in der Einöde: Die Anfangsgeschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdegemeinde Karaganda 1956-1968* (Steinhagen: Samenkorn, 2007), 95.
[25] Based on church list for 1957-1959 in: ibid., 548-582.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 96.
[28] The first elder, David Klassen, spent a part of his 17 years of imprisonment in Dzheskazgan labour camp, together with more than 50 free-church activists. See: S.G. Dubovoj, *Nebesnye iskry ne gasnut: Avtobiografija* [The Heavenly Sparks Do Not Go Out: An Autobiography]. (Harsewinkel: Bild & Medien, 2011), 192.
[29] Ibid., 113.
[30] Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken*," 184.
[31] Ibid., 185.
[32] For a biographical sketch of W. Matthies see: Fast, and Penner, *Wasserströme*, 433-439.
[33] W. Matthies, "Mein Hort," *Unser Blatt*, 5 (Feb 1926), 108.
[34] Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken,*" 187-189.
[35] Ibid., 189-190.
[36] Ibid., 203.
[37] Wölk and Wölk, *Die Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde,* 155-156.
[38] Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken,*" 225-229.
[39] Ibid., 234.
[40] Gerhard Wölk, *Die Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinden in Deutschland: zum 150-jährigen Bestehen der MBG* (Frankenthal: Hirtenstimme, 2009), 22-23.
[41] Wölk, "*Die sollen dem Herrn danken,*" 237-243.