

“No Songs Were Sung at the Gravesite”

The Blumenort (Russia) Massacre
(November 10-12, 1919)

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The village of Blumenort, among the oldest in the Molotschna settlement, was founded in 1805.¹ The colonization of the region began in 1804-05 when some 350 West Prussian families migrated to the region. Blumenort was under the jurisdiction of the Halbstadt district which, together with Gnadenfeld, comprised the two districts of the Molotschna colony. Blumenort, like many other villages, consisted of twenty indivisible farms of 65 *dessiatines* each.² Its inhabitants participated fully in the economic, social and cultural development of the region, which reached its apex at the dawn of the twentieth century. A century of stability and continuity brought with it a strong sense of identity deeply rooted in religion, language and folk customs. World War I generated some discomfort. All able young men were drafted to serve as medics on Red Cross trains or worked in the traditional forestry service. For a time, a nationalistic fervor directed against all Germans in Russia threatened Blumenort inhabitants with land liquidation, a danger which ended with the overthrow of the tsarist regime.

Blumenort villagers experienced two revolutions in 1917. The first, which involved the abdication of the tsar and the establishment of a provisional government in February, went almost unnoticed in the village. The same was not

true of the Bolshevik Revolution in late October and early November. When Red Army units entered the region during the first months of 1918, a reign of terror ensued in which heavily armed soldiers seized livestock and personal valuables or confiscated such food and farming inventory as they desired.³ The murder of six innocent citizens by Bolshevik sailors occupying Halbstadt was especially shocking for Molotschna Mennonites.⁴

The state of virtual anarchy only ended when German troops entered the Ukraine in April, 1918, under terms dictated by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. German occupation brought with it a development which just a year later brought tragic consequences to Blumenort.

Ignoring a centuries long commitment to pacifism, the Molotschna Mennonites formed an armed militia for self-protection, whose essential purpose was defined by its German name—*Selbstschutz*.⁵ Within the Molotschna its origins were rooted in the dilution of the nonresistant teaching by outside theological influences, a cultural pro-Germanism, a basic reaction against the earlier horrors of the Red Army presence, and the active recruitment of young men by German army officers. When the German troops withdrew in November, 1918, this militia sought to stem the depredations of a partisan army and marauding band headed by the anarchist Nestor Makhno.⁶ In a bid for survival Makhno allied himself with the Red Army. The *Selbstschutz*, though successful at first, collapsed in the wake of the Bolshevik advance in March, 1919. Makhno utilized this uneasy alliance as well as the constantly shifting front of the civil war to terrorize the southern Ukraine, including the Mennonite villages. His atrocities, at least in the Molotschna, culminated in the massacre of twenty Blumenort men in November, 1919.⁷ The orgy of killings extended to Altonau,⁸ where some ten or eleven men were murdered, and to Ohrloff, where six men lost their lives.

Blumenort was only one of thousands of tragedies enveloping the Russian Empire and repeatedly duplicated amid the many diverse peoplehoods of that vast land. In the confusion of anarchy and civil war, race, color or religion offered no special exemption. Yet in the context of the small Molotschna Mennonite world it marked the culmination of many months of intensifying terror. The prevailing violence had steadily undermined the world as they knew it and in a sense the Blumenort massacre reaffirmed that conviction. For years to come the episode remained deeply etched in the folk memory of the Molotschna settlement. Perhaps its large population base served to sustain and disseminate knowledge of the incident. Ironically, the subsequent massacres of 200 people in the colony of Zagradovka during the weekend of November 29 to December 1, 1919 (including 98 people in the village of Muensterberg alone),⁹ and over 80 in Eichenfeld-Dubovka (Yasykovo) on October 26, 1919,¹⁰ never generated the same level of public awareness.¹¹

The documents which follow comprise both eye witness accounts as well as compilations stemming from direct contact with eye witnesses. Jakob Neufeld's account, for example, is personal and experiential. Abram Berg combines his

own childhood memories with the recollections of other eyewitnesses. In contrast, B.B. Janz reconstructs the events entirely from his interaction with Blumenort villagers. J.H. Lepp, like Janz, looks on from next door yet cites personal experiences. Combined, the documents not only provide a sense of the chain of events associated with the massacre, but place it in a more comprehensible context. Individually they offer a variety of perspectives.

Jakob Neufeld essentially reports what he saw and experienced. He describes the raiders as an outside group but is not certain of their identity. He felt they were “volunteers,” a name usually applied to White Army soldiers. Neufeld assigns responsibility for the revenge killings to the *Makhnovzi* militia stationed in Ohrloff, with some assistance from soldiers stationed in Lichtenau. Apparently he did not witness the actual killings and only mentions seeing the mutilated bodies. Neufeld documents Jakob Epp’s heroic attempt to intercede on behalf of the innocent villagers, yet is not aware of any particulars associated with the drama.

Abram Berg’s account is the end product of a lengthy personal quest. Born in Blumenort in 1912, he witnessed the killing and savagery of the Makhno attack as a seven-year-old lad. Educated in the setting of Stalin’s intensifying totalitarianism, he became a specialist in animal husbandry. Finally, as a young man of twenty-four he was arrested on false charges in 1936, sent to a Kazakhstan Gulag near Karaganda, and only released in 1955. Spurred on by childhood memories, Berg sought to reconstruct the massacre from such sources as were available to him. In part, information came from the inhabitants of nearby Bogdanovka, some of whom belonged to Makhno’s band. A 1976 visit to his uncle in Ontario, Canada, supplied additional eye-witness information. Abram’s account is unique insofar as it establishes Makhno’s personal presence in Blumenort, includes the personal reflections of a Ukrainian farm worker and also provides a portrait of the mass flight of the villagers. It is the only account providing detailed descriptions of some of the killings. Berg assumes that the group from Waldheim who attacked the *Makhnovzi* and caused the retaliatory revenge killings consisted of White Army elements or other bandits.

B.B. Janz (of later emigration fame) was a teacher in nearby Tiege at the time of the massacre. The accuracy of his information is attested in a letter which he sent to an Abram Bergmann.¹² Janz notes that much of his information came directly from the widow of the murdered Blumenort mayor Johann Regehr, the village secretary and other survivors. The letter supplies several perspectives as to the origins of the attack on the *Makhnovzi* which invited such a bloody reprisal. One view held that the mayor of Waldheim met a young officer named Gloekler in Stulnevo and suggested he “clean up the *Makhnovzi* nest in Ohrloff.” Others held that someone travelled to Tiegerweide to invite a partisan militia to attack. Some members of the former *Selbstschutz* apparently joined the twenty-two men who left Tiegerweide for the fateful attack upon the Blumenort *Makhnovzi*.

Janz's account provides several interesting perspectives. A steadfast opponent of the *Selbstschutz* since its origins in 1918, he demonstrates how the ongoing *Selbstschutz*-White Army alliance still functioned amid the 1919 anarchy. He holds the raiders directly responsible for the subsequent deaths in Blumenort and the other nearby villages. Janz also documents Johann Regehr's opposition to the uninvited militia and the ensuing repudiation of his mayoral authority by the uninvited guests. Their attack demonstrated a complete lack of strategy and their swift withdrawal an equal lack of heroism. Finally the account of the intense spiritual drama involving mother and son was obviously related to Janz by the widow of Regehr.

J.H. Lepp corroborates much of the information contained in the other accounts yet expands them by providing the reader with a sense of the regional terror generated by the *Machnovzi* depredations. He provides a moving description of the death of his father-in-law in Tiede as well as the mass funeral in Blumenort.

Jakob Neufeld, "The Days of Terror in Blumenort, Halbstadt Volost," *Friedensstimme*. Vol. XVII, no. 38 (November 16, 1919), pp. 3-4.

As possibly the only eye and ear witness who experienced the terror in Blumenort from beginning to end and survived I want to report what I know about the incident.

On Sunday, November 9, the Halbstadt commander Lyachov and five men came to [our village] about six-thirty in the evening. He requested supper for himself and his men and we complied. Lyachov often came here and he was well known, but the men with him were strangers. After they had eaten Lyachov declared that he and two of his men would drive to Ohrlöf, while the other three would spend the night with us. Later it became apparent that one of them did not belong to the group and had casually joined them. Lyachov said goodbye and drove to Ohrlöf, while we and those who remained behind went to bed.

We were suddenly awakened during the night. When I looked out of the window I saw that the yard was filled with riders and wagons. It was the Ohrlöf militia. They immediately inquired about their colleagues who were spending the night and found them sound asleep in their beds. The new arrivals informed us of what had happened in the village. Lyachov and four men were preparing to drive to Ohrlöf when they were stopped by [White Army] volunteers in the middle of the village. During the fighting two men of the militia as well as the driver, a hired man from Blumenort, were shot. Lyachov himself and two of his attendants escaped. (One of the wounded was later found dead behind some buildings).

The [village] inhabitants were terribly agitated and it was apparent that Blumenort faced an imminent crisis. The *Machnovzi* immediately rode into the

village and rounded up suspects. The mayor Johann Regehr and the night watchmen, the brothers Jakob and Daniel Sudermann, as well as Johann Wall, were arrested. From their interrogation of the mayor I learned that the Whites had come to him during the night and demanded stalls for twenty horses. After their horses had been stabled they went into the village, but he did not know what happened after that. Then several other men were brought in, including the teacher Peter Schmidt, the two sons of the mayor and the son of Johann Wall. In all there were eight men. These were driven into the cellar with threats and blows, the door was sealed and locked and the entire *Makhnovzi* company rode back to Ohrloff.

Two anxious hours passed. We all sensed pending danger. During this time the local villager Jakob Epp came to me and asked for advice. He was of the opinion that if he seriously negotiated with the militia, the worst could be averted. I warned him and sought to dissuade him because I had lost all hope. He thought that as a member of the Halbstadt district soviet he might be able to accomplish something. He also implied that he was acquainted with the [*Makhnovzi*] leaders. I stopped arguing with him. Suddenly the *Makhnovzi* returned and brought with them the [so-called] asiatic division,¹³ which they had contacted in Lichtenau by telephone. Some of them stayed in the yard, the others scattered into the village. Jakob Epp, true to his intent, now appeared in order to speak with the *Makhnovzi*. They did not let him speak and immediately struck him with sabres. He ran from the yard through the barn and into the garden pursued by two men with sabres. Later he was found dead in the garden. Gerhard Neufeld was then brought into the yard and shot. Then the cellar door was opened and some of the *Makhnovzi* went into the cellar. Soon after the bodies of Jakob Sudermann and the teacher Peter Schmidt were dragged from the cellar and taken into the yard. We don't know what else happened in the cellar but it must have been terrible, at least judging by the mutilated bodies which were later found in one corner. It was a horrible sight. Six bodies lay in a heap, some of them unrecognizable. While the murdering was taking place in the yard, the inside of the house was being searched, turned inside out and left in disarray.

I too was placed before the firing squads to share the fate of the others. The crying children and the fact that I was not a Blumenort farmer but a renter saved my life. After they had taken my money, watch and clothing, the entire company disappeared into the village. God saved me and my entire family in a wonderful way. Even my grown son who was always with us amid all the chaos remained alive. We now learned that the following people had been shot in their homes: Abraham Dueck of Schönbrunn; Jakob Schmidt, the son-in-law of the Widow David Schroeder; Abraham Wiens; Nikolai Teichroeb and Kornelius Wall. On Monday fifteen persons were murdered.

It was relatively quiet on Tuesday. Only one suspicious person roamed the village during the day. He was here several times, looked at the bodies, asked their names. He declared that the reckoning was still in process and that the *Makhnovzi* would come back.

On Wednesday afternoon we heard shooting in Ohrloff and Tiege and waited in fear. It was almost certain that the company would come to Blumenort. The young men fled to safety. I stayed behind. Then the cry: "They're here!" In an instant the street was filled with riders. There were several on each farmyard. One came to our yard and demanded entry. I went to meet him and asked what he wanted. Weapon in hand he demanded 8,000 rubles. When I objected he said: "Get the money or I'll shoot you!" I went and collected what I had and gave it to him. He seemed satisfied and advised me to go into the house and stay there. I asked him for protection since I had given him all my money and had nothing to spare if others came. He promised no others would come and rode away. Soon two others rode into the yard. I went to meet them and asked what they wanted. These too uttered threats and demanded money. When I explained that I had just given it all away they retorted: "Give us what you still have even if its only 100 rubles!" Since I partially met their demands, they left. Meanwhile the others lit fires everywhere and it seemed as if the entire village was in flames.

Finally a third rider came on to the yard. I walked towards him and asked what he wanted. I had to open the storage barn and bring him straw. Then I ran to the barn and released all the cattle and chased them into the back yard. Then I noticed that the rider had disappeared without setting a fire.

[Men mounted on horseback] rode up and down the street for a time but no one came to us. At the end of the village there were two armed men keeping watch. I stayed inside as long as they were there. When they left I went to the street to look for people and saw no one, only the livestock, crazed by the fire and smoke, running about the street neighing, bellowing and lowing. I felt safe and walked to the inhabitants at the end of the village. Here I learned that there were further killings: Jakob Baerg, Peter Friesen, Abraham Teichroeb and Jakob Baerg. Bernhard Willms had been wounded, but he has died since.

Eight large farmsteads were burned and one small one. The storage barns at four of the large farms were also burned. All the straw for feeding [the livestock] and heating was destroyed. Since the inhabitants almost all fled and left the houses unattended, these were severely burglarized. The damage is enormous, but everything could be endured and replaced if only the twenty men had not been murdered. The loss cannot be replaced. God comfort the widows and orphans.

Today, most of the villagers who fled have returned.

Abram Berg, "Reflections and Recollections on Blumenort" (original manuscript in possession of his widow, Olga Berg, Cologne, Germany).

The list of the fifteen men murdered on November 10, 1919, was entered into his notebook by our father Jakob Berg. The list of the five other men murdered on November 12, 1919, which included my father, was entered into the same

notebook by my eldest brother Peter Berg, born on April 28, 1902. On November 28, 1928, he took this notebook with him to Canada, where he and his wife, Anna Berg, and son Gerhard (born in Blumenort) settled. Later, after visiting Leamington, Canada, my sister Maria Lehn (nee Berg) and her husband Armin Lehn sent me a copy of these two lists.

On November 12, 1919, the bandits ignited and burnt the following twelve farmsteads (houses, barns, storage sheds):

Abram Kroeker (Peter Schroeder)
Johann Wall
Jakob Fast
Peter Friesen
Nikolai Teichraeb
Abraham Wiens
Kornelius Wall
Abram Teichraeb
Daniel Sudermann

Fire was set to Heinrich Dueck's storage barn (*Querscheune*), but he managed to extinguish it. Half of all the full-sized farms were destroyed. Almost all of the straw stacks were burned. Since it was evening all of the barns had been locked with boltlocks and so many of the cows and horses perished. The men had either been shot or had fled before the bandits. There were instances when the hired men simply did not open the doors and as a result many cattle burned. The fire also destroyed a great deal of grain, agricultural implements, hay and other kinds of feed. Few of the possessions left behind [by the bandits] could be saved.

Why did Makhno's band attack our village of Blumenort?

Generally speaking the village was not large—some forty-six farms— but half of them were wealthy, large farms. When I was still a student at the Ohrloff High School I asked many of the old inhabitants of the village about this. Furthermore, being a seven and a half year old at the time, I can clearly recall the events.

The German villages along the Molotschna and its tributary were protected by the *Selbstschutz* for a considerable length of time. It was organized in 1918 by Lieutenant Sonntag of the German army. By the fall of 1919 the *Selbstschutz* had vanished. Some of its adherents had joined the White Army, or had been mobilized, some of them into the Red Army. Local authority in the village and the region constantly shifted. There were "Reds" and "Whites" as well as various bandit leaders. There was always some kind of "committee" which demanded contributions and valuables, etc. At this time (first half of November) a "committee" consisting of five armed men occupied the village. They located themselves in the so-called annex (a paint shop) of Johann Wall, which stood near the street next to the yard entrance. A buggy (*droschki*) with a machine gun on the rear seat stood on the yard in front of the building. Three horses (*atroika*) were hitched to the buggy at all times and two were tied to the back. There was

always an armed sentry. Our village school stood across the street and we students ran down the “middle street” to the cemetery. From here we could see the buggy with its machine gun as well as the guard.

Early in the morning of November 10, 1919, there was great excitement in the village. People were saying that some armed riders came into the village after midnight and fired at the “committee”. Some of the committee members had jumped on the buggy and fled. Who were these riders who attacked the “committee”? There were various ideas. One held that a White Army patrol had come into the village. Someone had relatives or acquaintances here and so learned of the “committee” of bandits and attacked them. It was also rumoured that one of the spies had a fiancée [in the village]. Much later older people told me that this had been a provocation. Bandits attacked the “committee” in order to get their valuables and money and because it belonged to a different group. This was substantiated when I chanced to spend the night in the Russian village of Bogdanovka. Several old men, probably neighbours, visited my host during the evening. They were amazed when they found out that I was the son of the well known doctor Jakob Ivanovich of Blumenort. They assured me that the death of my father had been a mistake. None of “us,” they affirmed, had hurt him. He had cured many of the inhabitants of Bogdanovka and even saved some of their lives. I knew that Bogdanovka had been a veritable bandits lair at the time. During the course of the conversation I heard again and again that a stranger, perhaps from the villages of Tschernigovka or Orechovka, had shot my father.

Back to the events of November 10, 1919. Soon a large band of *Makhnovzi* arrived. The arrests and executions began. Our teacher Peter Schmidt was arrested because a dead member of the “committee” lay on the schoolyard. Another casualty lay at the entrance to the yard of my uncle Johann Regier and so they seized him and his two youngest sons Peter and Jakob (16 and 18 years of age). The oldest sons Abram and Johann were serving in the war somewhere. The prisoners were driven with cudgels to the large granary on Gerhard Klassen’s yard. My aunt Tina, the mother of the youths, begged the bandits to free her sons. She held the youngest tight in her arms, but fell unconscious to the ground after a cudgel blow to her head. She suffered from tremendous headaches for the rest of her life. They locked her in the cellar.

We children were not allowed to leave the house. My brother Peter had taken me into the storage barn with him in order to feed pumpkins to the cattle. If we stood on the cutting machine we could see the yard through a small window. The yard was filled with bandits. They were attacking a man on his knees. His face was covered with blood. Peter pulled me from the pumpkin machine and asked: “Who was the man they were beating?” It was the young teacher Jakob Epp. It was later determined that they had captured him as he left the house of Gerhard Neufeld (at the end of the street in the direction of Rosenort). They brought him to Klassen’s yard and tied him to an elm tree not far from the yard entrance. Somehow he loosened the ropes or tore them (he was a very strong man). He ran

across the yard scattering the bandits, through the open barn door and into the garden. The bandits hardly knew what happened. As they stormed through the narrow barn door they got in each other's way and so Jakob Epp got a head start. Shots rang out as he ran for his life. A few steps in front of the garden house at the end of the garden he was severely wounded and collapsed. The murderers descended upon him like wild animals and cut him to pieces with sabres. This was witnessed by the villager Heinrich Weiss, whose cottage stood behind Jacob Dueck's garden.

Then the bandits gathered around in front of the cellar where the other people were being held. [Here were] the teacher and minister Peter Johann Schmidt; the minister Jakob D. Sudermann; Johann Wall senior and Johann Wall junior; Daniel Sudermann; the village mayor Johann A. Regier and his sons Peter Regier (age 18) and Jakob Regier (age 16). The bandits placed a machine gun in front of the cellar stairs. Then the heavy cellar door was opened. They fired rifles and machine guns and threw handgrenades into the cellar, some through the cellar windows. One heard the screaming and swearing of drunken bandits, then the rattle of wheels and the neighing of horses.

Now came an eerie silence, but we children could not leave the house. People came and went. Our father went somewhere with them—probably to the Klassen farm, to that horrible cellar. There were no survivors, all were dead. At the bottom of the steps lay the bodies of Jakob Sudermann, Johann Regier and others who had stood on the steps in the hope of negotiating with the bandits. It was not to be. The two Regier boys were found in two large barrels. Both were dead. Apparently some of the bandits had gone into the cellar and killed the wounded.

As soon as they had finished in the cellar the riders roamed the village and continued killing. Abraham J. Dueck (a refugee from Schoenbrunn) was shot on Gerhard Neufeld's yard. Gerhard G. Neufeld was shot on the street. Jakob Schmidt from Gulyapolye was shot in Abram Kroecker's (later Schroeder's) house. Kornelius Wall senior was shot on the porch of his house.

On the evening of November 11, 1919, we and our mother walked over to the granary on the Klassens' yard. The bodies lay in rows covered with white linen. Some had simply been tied into a bundle because they were so mutilated. These included Jakob Epp; one of the Regier boys (torn apart by a hand grenade); Abraham Wiens, who lay sick in bed when the bandits entered, was dosed in kerosene and set ablaze; Jakob Schmidt was burnt.

My schoolfriend Ernst Schroeder came to us towards evening on November 12, 1919. We sat down on the sofa and talked about what we had seen and heard. His father, the estate owner Peter Schroeder, had been murdered somewhat earlier on his estate (Ebenfeld) by Makhno bandits. It was also known that uncle Peter Schroeder had been tortured to death by the notorious murderer in Makhno's service, Veliki Nemo. He tore open the mouth of his bound victim, poured lime inside, stamped it into his throat and poured water into his mouth. The Schroeder family fled from their estate and came to Blumenort. They lived near us in Abram Kroecker's house, which they had probably bought. Jakob

Schmidt, the husband of Katharina Schroeder (Schroeder's son-in-law) and Abraham Dueck (a visitor from Schoenbrunn) were murdered [in this house] on November 10. As father stood in front of the window looking over to Klassens' yard and combing his full beard, Ernst related that Makhno's band had threatened to return, shoot all the [village] inhabitants and burn the village.

Ernst and I repeatedly looked out of the window. Suddenly we saw a rider approaching. The other riders separated. One group entered Jakob ((Jasch) Dueck's yard. Mounted guards of *Makhnovzi* stood everywhere on the yard. A wagon accompanied by a troop of riders stormed on to Duecks' yard and stopped. Fearfully we watched as several riders dismounted and, while others held their horses, they opened the door of the wagon and assisted a small man in a large fur cap and wearing a sleeveless cape out of the wagon. Ernst shouted: "Look, that is Makhno who murdered my cousin!" Events moved rapidly. His sister Eva Schroeder came running towards us and shouted: "Ernst, come home the *Makhnovzi* are coming again!" I ran to the street with them and saw many horse-drawn wagons coming from the direction of Tiege. My father came, took me by the hand and brought me to the living room and told me to stay there. I could hear him walking down the steps to the dining room. The silence in the house was depressing and so I joined my brother Jakob and sister Mary in the corner room. After a while we went to the dining room and stood at the window. We saw a rider coming from the backyard. He stopped his horse at the well and shouted: "Farmer!" We saw father leaving the kitchen door and walking towards the rider. He took the bridle and turned his horse around as though he was about to leave. Then it happened. We three—Mary, Jake and I—saw the bandit take his gun which was hanging on the saddlehorn, aim and fire at our father who was already walking towards the door of the house. Father fell on his face. We seemed to be paralyzed. Mother, sister Lena and brother Hans rushed to father. They lifted him, carried him into the dining room and laid him upon the large table.

By then many women and children came to our yard from the rear and shouted: "Come quickly. They are burning everything and murdering everyone." Our straw stack was on fire. At Schroeders the flames were coming through the roof. Large, black clouds of smoke swept along the ground and over the meadows in a northerly direction. Several men appeared out of the smoke and said something to mother. She called Peter and Hans and told them to follow the men under cover of the smoke in the direction of the common corral and the estate Kuruschan. We were all on the meadow already when mother suddenly ran back to the house. We were shocked. She soon returned carrying our overcoats as well as other clothes. The mass of people continued to run. At the corner of Jakob Dueck's yard where the cattle were usually driven to pasture stood a large red stone of granite. Here a group of bandits had gathered, shouting threats at us and periodically firing over our heads.

The family of Johann Braun also lived in our village. He was a contractor who rented machinery in order to prepare the railbed for the new Fyodorovka-Volrovacha rail line. He had three grown daughters who now carried their paralyzed mother on a blanket. The poor old lady groaned steadily. The stretcher bearers changed regularly. There were no men [to help].

Sometime during the night we reached a large estate. The owner was a German whose family name no one later remembered. Later he left his estate forever. The men [of our village] soon followed us. We children helped the farmer sort out the large pile of apples which lay in the storage shed. After about a week it was decided that Anna Braun and our Peter, dressed as a woman, would drive to Blumenort and see if it was safe to return and if food was available. They returned in the evening and reported that they had been advised to wait a few days.

A German day laborer (Kaspar) and his Russian wife and daughter lived in our house, which had not been burned. They prevented the house from being robbed. [While we were absent] they milked our two cows. The sausages and hams etc. still hung in the smoke chimney. Then Peter and Anna Braun made another [inspection] journey and after two weeks we were home. It was during evening. I can still remember it well. The house was full of crying women and children. Somewhere in a corner sat a small group of men and youths. Things only quieted down late at night, but here and there one still heard sobbing and sighing. The dead had been buried with great haste on November 15, 1919, but this was the actual burial service.

Now I want to say a few more things about the arrival of the bandit leader Nestor Makhno in Blumenort. I witnessed his entry with my brother and Ernst Schroeder. I heard the rest of the story from Jakob Neufeld's coachman who lived with the Jacob Duecks in the house across the street from ours. Many years later I heard the story from Mr. Jakob Dueck himself.

Ivan Schevelyov related:

When I saw Makhno step out of the carriage through the small barn window, I immediately locked the strong barn door, then went to the door which led to the front hall and locked it. I put the keys in my pocket. I hung the keys for the steel locks of the horse barn around my neck, but under my shirt. From the front hall a door led into the garden. It was locked but the key was in the latch. It was impossible to leave the house via this door since two armed guards stood close by. I sat down at a table in the front hall and waited. Before long the door opened and Jakob Neufeld, Makhno and several armed bandits came into the front hall. My boss told me to open the door to the barn, since Batko wanted to see the horses. I have to confess that in my little room in the barn I had taken a mighty gulp of vodka. I began to curse and said that I was a poor worker and that the horses were now my property and that I would not give them to a bandit. It all happened quickly. Makhno's armed bandits attacked me, knocked me to the ground and took out their steel gun-cleaning rods and began to beat me. Had my boss not been present they would have probably beaten me to death. He pleaded with Makhno to let me live—after all I was a worker. They searched me and found the barn keys and the keys to

the steel bolts. They threw me on the ground and kicked me with their boots. As I crawled to the outer barn door the bandits were already hitching the horses to the carriage and then sped away. Now everything was silent. My boss called his sons and ordered them to carry Ivan Schevelyov inside and care for his wounds.

Jakob Dueck related:

I stood at the window in the living room and looked out on the street. In my hand I held a gold watch and a ring to give to the bandits when they came. I saw a rider enter your yard. I did not know what to do so I climbed into the attic. Stealthily I glanced at the yard and saw several bandits standing by the carriage. Then Neufeld's white horses were taken from the barn, the other horses unhitched, and Neufeld's horses put in their place. Makhno and two assistants got into the wagon which then raced away. Someone opened the attic door and called me. One of the Neufeld sons told me their father needed me. I helped bind up the wounds of their coach driver, Ivan Schevelyov. When Neufeld wanted to send someone to your house to get your father to give Schevelyov first aid I replied that the bandits were not only standing around our house, but that there were *Makhnovzi* [at your house] as well. We looked over to your house and saw a rider gallop away. Then something terrible happened. A large number of women and children entered your back yard from Schroeders' side and many ran to the fence which stood on your dam. Then they continued over the Kuruschan river in the direction of the Rosenort dam. At Schroeders the storage shed, barn and house were already ablaze. At the large red granite stone which stood near the *Ausjacht* (the road by which the village cattle were taken to pasture every morning) at the corner stood a group of armed robbers who fired their guns over the heads of the fleeing masses. When the riders left our yard our two families fled into the forest and the large hedges, where we spent the night.

Uncle Jacob related this to me when I visited him in Leamington, Canada, in 1976.

B.B. Janz, "We have Sinned" (B.B. Janz Papers, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba), Group I, 15, d.

. . . The twenty-one brothers who sleep in the mass grave in Blumenort as well as six in Ohrloff, one in Tiege and a number in Altonau were certainly innocent. They died as martyrs die. Who killed them? Without question those fiends the *Makhnovzi* from the Russian village of Troitzkoye on Monday, and on Wednesday the "asiatic division of Konovalov" (according to one description) from Melitopol. But where did the violence originate? What were the reasons for it?

We must make a confession: we have sinned—and not only in this particular case. In this instance, however, all the murders of those days, all the conflagrations, all the rapes resulted from Mennonite armed resistance. Former members

of the *Selbstschutz* as well as later members of the German battalion (21-22 persons?) were directly responsible. We've usually kept silent about this bitter fact.

The (*Makhnovzi*) command, a [robber] band, small in size but aggressive in its actions, resided in Mr. Goossen's house in Ohrloff. They carried on throughout the district—eating, drinking, robbing and harassing the people. At that point something seemed to curb their excesses and they stopped short of murder and rape. It was possible to pursue one's daily affairs and travel from village to village. Towards the east all was quiet in the villages of Gnadenfeld district. Rumor had it that units of the White Army were coming from the northeast.

The minister Peter Schmidt, the teacher in Blumenort, preached in the [Mennonite] Brethren church in Tiede on the last peaceful Sunday before bloody Monday. He was the minister of the Lichtenau Mennonite church, a faithful child of God, a prince of a man; he was among the best of our people and later he might well have become an elder. His text was Malachi 3:13-18. It was a gripping, Spirit-inspired sermon, but also his last. The entire congregation was deeply moved. Less than twenty-four hours later he lay mutilated on the yard of Klassen's store.

It happened in the following way. Some fleeing splinter groups from the White Army, including Molotschna warriors (*Selbstschutz*), had entered the village of Waldheim in the Gnadenfeld district. Here they formulated plans to attack the fiends in Ohrloff and destroy the robbers' den. The villages would then be free of their tormentors. Young men from the various villages were recruited until there were several score. On Saturday Mennonite wagons brought them to Blumenort where they arrived at dusk. They did not come down the street but over the meadow and entered the village via the middle road. The school, brother Schmidt's place of work, stood on one side of this road and the farm of [Johann A.] Regehr on the other. He was among the best and most industrious of all the farmers. The entry to his yard was not directly from the street but from the middle road and so the wagons entered without being noticed. "What do you people want here? This will only bring catastrophe. Turn around and leave us alone!" That was the plea of the householder when he realized who had come to visit and what their plans were. They nevertheless insisted that the large doors of the massive storage shed be opened so that men and wagons could quickly disappear.

At that moment they heard the frightened cry of Susie Epp on the [nearby] street: "Come and help us, they are taking our Henry (or Jacob?)." It was almost dark. The band, sitting on a buggy and accompanied by several riders, drove down the street. They were looking for the youngest of the Epp brothers, Heinrich, but he could not be found and so they demanded the older brother Jacob come with them. Both men were unmarried and Susie was their sister. The [would-be] protectors had not counted on this situation. They were going to attack the vagabonds in Ohrloff and now they were here. What now? They quickly loaded their rifles, stood behind the solidly built brick fence and fired. Several riders and several men on the wagon were shot. Two riders escaped and

headed to their group in Troitzkoye. As soon as the battle was over the [young men] retrieved their wagons [from the shed] and hurriedly left without listening to the protestations and complaints of Regehr. Regehr was the mayor of the village. The group stopped in Tiegerweide, some twelve *verst* from Blumenort, and with trembling hearts waited for the things which were to come.

The teacher and minister Peter Schmidt did not sleep that night and in the words of his wife "struggled with God." There were probably others like him. Everyone knew something terrible was pending, a harsh and bloody revenge.

Early in the morning a troop of riders arrived from the Russian village in order to punish the evildoers whom they believed to be the Blumenort residents. First they arrested mayor Regier and his two sons. Then they went to the teacher Schmidt, a staunch pacifist, since it was at this location that the killings had taken place. He was in the barn looking after his livestock consisting of several cows and two horses. "Proprietor!" two riders shouted. He came out wearing stockings and galoshes on his feet and presented himself as the local teacher. Without listening to him they forced him between themselves, ordered him to march forward and beat him with their riding whips. Naturally he lost his galoshes in the deep October mud and ran between them, bareheaded and on stocking feet, moaning and screaming, seeking to protect his head with an upraised arm. They took him and the others into the solidly built cellar at Klassen's store. Four members of the nightwatch were imprisoned as well, among them the minister Jacob Sudermann, his neighbour J. Wall junior and two others. These were not the usual night watchmen, but four additional ones hired to cope with the prevailing unrest. In all eight persons were imprisoned. Mother Regehr, in spite of many warnings, went directly to the prison, leaned down to the cellar window and spoke with her loved ones. She was concerned with the cardinal issue: were they prepared to die? To his mother's question: "Do you believe?" the youngest child, some seventeen years of age, responded: "A little, Mother." The other two were calm and composed.

Around 10 a.m. the gang arrived in large numbers both on horseback and on Mennonite buggies with mounted machine guns. Their black banners waved in the wind. Slowly, step by step, they made their way through the deep October mud of our village on the way to neighbouring Blumenort. Where were our protectors? They moved through Blumenort, since the prison was at the other end of the village. A few stood at the fences staring. All were terrified. As they passed, young Jacob Epp left the fence and followed the troop. "Today I shall die interceding," he said in Low German to several whom he passed. He was a member of the Halbstadt district committee and his voice carried weight. Once on the yard he pushed his way fearlessly to the commander and began to explain that outsiders had suddenly come and they, not the villagers, were responsible for the bloodbath. When the wife of one of the murder victims noticed the commander listening she screamed: "See, if it touches them they make a big fuss but when it comes to our own it doesn't matter, they can be shot!"

That was electrifying. Instantly the commander shouted: "Get out of here or

you're next" and he or his assistant drew his sabre and struck at Epp. He ducked and only received a cut in the face. Epp ran, then turned around and shouted: "These [people] are innocent, they have done nothing, there were others!" He fled through the barn and into the garden seeking to reach the woods at the end of the garden pathway. Almost! But the bullet was faster. Mortally wounded he collapsed. He was the first casualty.

When they opened the cellar door both ministers, Schmidt and Sudermann, stood at the landing. All differences were now forgotten, though the one was from the Mennonite Church and the other from the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. During these last hours, with fervent prayer and supplication they pointed the other prisoners to the crucified Savior. The group had selected them as their representatives and spokesmen and they stood their ground. [The bandits] immediately attacked Schmidt, who stood in front. He collapsed, attempted to get up several times, then succumbed. Jakob Sudermann's turn came next. The two martyred brothers lay next to one another. Then they fired upon the rest through the barred windows and threw hand grenades through the cellar door. The prisoners tried to hide in this corner and that, but finally there was only a bloodied pile of corpses. And where were the rescuers? Sadly, they were only adventurers.

When the killing began in the yard, some of the riders galloped into the village and on to the various farmyards where they murdered the proprietors. For example, in response to a command the lame Mr. Wall came out with a considerable sum of money, but they wanted blood instead of money and shot him on sight. Fifteen died outright and the sixteenth later died from his wounds. When we arrived from Tiede on Monday at twilight the corpses lay in a long row. It was a grisly sight. My friend, how did all this originate?

They began to dig a mass grave, but before they could be buried the situation became even worse. On Wednesday the Konovalov division arrived from the regional capital of Melitopol in order to take further revenge. It began when they passed through Altonau and continued in Ohrloff. Horrible scenes were everywhere.

I personally had to deal with the fiends but thank God it did not come to the worst. My personal anxiety caused me to leave the large school house and walk to the barn. Suddenly the call "proprietor!" Once more I walked back and forth in the barn desperately calling on God, then decided to go out and face the murderers. The Lord was gracious—they took the [pocket] watch and all that we had, then left.

Now the neighbour from across the street came running. "Quickly, lend me one thousand rubles!"

"But I have nothing. I just gave away my last money!"

"Then I am lost!"

I accompanied him to the door. There stood the rider. I could not hide for he had already seen me. I walked out and explained that they had taken all the neighbour's money.

“Yes,” he replied, “when you’re involved you plead for mercy, but us you shoot without mercy.”

“What? Don’t you know that I interceded on your behalf so that blood would not be shed? Don’t you know that I gathered signatures throughout the village that your leader here in Tiege would not be shot, and he is alive [today]. And so I ask you let him live, he can do nothing.”

The words had the desired effect. He placed his drawn sword back in its sheath and warned Harder that he better have money when he returned. Thanks to God, he rode away.

“Brother Janz, what am I to do,” the freed man shouted in his confusion.

“Walk past our cow pen and follow the hedge until you reach the woods.”

In Tiege they killed the farmer at the very end of the village. At first they hesitated to cut him down because of his wife’s heartfelt pleading. They mumbled something to the effect that it had to be him, then shot him in the living room near the oven. The bullet shattered the tiles on the oven. This quiet man had never disturbed the peace, whether in the village or in his treatment of his Russian servants. It was surmised that the Red (Bolshevik) order [to execute] the man at the end of the village was meant for the farmer across the street.

But back to Blumenort. They [*Makhnovzi*] approached the village before twilight. The riders formed a tight line and rushed forward to attack the defenceless village. A. Teichgroeb lived in the second to the last house. Before they arrived his wife and children had already urged him to flee and hide behind the hedges. He believed he had to stay at his post. He was forced to gather straw and set fire to his own farm. Then they shot him. Heinrich Dueck had hidden himself in the cross beams of the large storage shed. When he heard the crackling of the fire and smelled the smoke, he realized he would burn alive. Quickly he broke a hole in the side of the roof, but the rather corpulent man could not squeeze between the narrow roof joists. He tried again and again and finally in the face of death managed to get out with superhuman effort. He slid into the cattle pen, opened the gate and escaped with the cattle. Not long after, amid tears and with deep emotion, he told me of his escape. I had to think of the narrow gate. Never before or after did anyone better illustrate the verse “Enter in at the narrow gate” than H. Dueck of Blumenort and he was not even a minister.

J.H. Lepp, “A Week of Terror in the Village of Blumenort,” in A.A. Toews (ed.), *Mennonitische Maertyrer* (Clearbrook, British Columbia, 1954), Vol. II, pp. 246-250.

On Sunday, November 9, 1919, the minister and teacher Peter Schmidt of Blumenort preached a moving funeral sermon in the Tiege church. It was the last sermon which the dear and respected brother ever preached.

During that night a party of adventurers from the volunteer army attacked the Red watch stationed in the village. Several were killed, possibly a Red commissar among others. The exact sequence of events associated with the raid cannot be ascertained since the participants withdrew the same night and left the innocent inhabitants of Blumenort to their terrible fate! The Red guards who had escaped reported the incident to the Red command in the nearby village of Ohrloff. These vowed to take a bloody revenge on the inhabitants of Blumenort and the surrounding region.

A Red punitive expedition entered the village on Monday morning and began to make arrests . . . A group of eight persons was quickly arraigned and imprisoned in the cellar [located on the yard of Gerhard Klassen's store]. Konovalov's cavalry (a mounted regiment of asiatic soldiers named after their leader Konovalov) arrived on the same day. They threw hand grenades through the cellar window. One of the riders dressed himself in a white garment, pulled out his sabre, then leaped into the cellar swinging his weapon until all were dead. The riders then surged through the village and: (1) shot Abram J. Dyck (a refugee from Schoenbrunn) on Gerhard Neufeld's yard; (2) shot Gerhard G. Neufeld on the street; (3) a student, Jakob J. Epp, tried to speak to the group leader and plead for his innocent fellow citizens, but was struck in the face with a sabre. He ran into a garden but was shot; (4) Jakob Schmidt from Gulyapolye was shot in his home; (5) Kornelius Wall senior was shot in the porch of his home; (6) Nicolai Teichroeb was shot in his home, and because no one could bury the body was cremated when the houses were burned on Wednesday. Many fled during the night; (7) Abram G. Wiens was fatally wounded on the yard by a shot in the back and, in great agony, died after an hour. On Wednesday his body was partially burned, so that it was difficult to place in the coffin.

On Tuesday there was deep sorrow in Blumenort and the surrounding region; many tears were shed. It was November 11th and the Reds gave permission to tend to the bodies. We in Tiege (the residence of the informant J.H. Lepp) heard of this. My father-in-law Mandtler also went to Blumenort to help with the burial. Mother asked: "Do you really want to go?" His only reply: "If we all feel that way no one will go to help." Even the very old Mrs. D. Sudermann was present as the bodies were prepared for burial. After all, two of her sons were among the dead. The bandits had threatened to disrupt the funeral and so the dead could not be buried that day.

On Wednesday November 12, my wife and I and our parents drove to Tiegenhagen to bury father's brother-in-law, Jakob Welk, who was murdered in Tiegenhagen by this terror-inspiring band. There was a sense of foreboding when we returned at 4 p.m. and found no one at home. We soon learned that all the farmers were at the village hall, where massive contributions (war taxes) were being levied and forcibly extracted from the inhabitants. On this Wednesday an entire battalion of soldiers traversed our villages from Altonau to Blumenort. They drove on many buggies, three or four men to a buggy. The leading wagons carried a large flag with skull and crossbones. Other wagons had

machine guns mounted on the rear seats.

The following citizens were shot in Ohrloff.

1. Peter Huebert, the long-time mayor of the village.
2. Aron Enns senior, who also served the village for many years.
3. Abram Schellenberg, the son-in-law of elder Abram Goerz.
4. Kornelius Baerg, senior.
5. Kornelius Baerg, junior.
6. Kornelius Janzen.

The band drove through Tiege on the way to Blumenort. It was not long before smoke and flames arose from Blumenort and painted the sky blood-red. It was evening; the Reds had put Blumenort to the torch.

We lived at the end of the village in the direction of Blumenort and so were the first to see the fire. My father-in-law Mandtler went over to my parents, the Heinrich Lepps, to inform them of what was happening. He was discovered by a [*Makhnovzi*] straggler and forced over the fence. They entered our house with loud shouts, searched everywhere and took what they pleased. They also entered the room where we (the J.H. Lepps) lived. They searched through the chest of drawers and the clothes closet but said nothing. Then they returned to the room where my parents were, locking the door behind them.

“Are they going to kill you, Dad?” asked mother.

“No I don’t think so, I’ve never harmed anyone, but if they do I’m prepared.”

Those were the last words that father spoke. Father sat on the ovenbench and mother next to him. A bandit of seventeen or eighteen years came over to him, knocked him unconscious with his rifle butt, then turned his gun and shot him in the head. Mother was so dazed she could neither cry nor scream.

She came into our room and [simply] said: “Children, father is dead.” We laid him on the bench, bound up his head and ran out into the garden where we hid under the hedges. The flames from Blumenort shot high in the air. It was as bright as day... During the course of the conflagration thirteen farms were partially or completely burned. The bandits had taken sacks and made torches by soaking them in kerosene and with these lit one house after another. Many saved their lives by flight, some going many miles to distant villages in the dead of night. Among them was the widow of the teacher and minister Peter Schmidt who, with her children in hand, struggled through the deep mud and reached Kleefeld....

On Friday, after the bandits had left, the bodies were hastily brought to the cemetery and buried in a common grave. The grave was twenty by twenty feet and later known as the “brotherhood grave.” Not all the bodies had coffins; sometimes two were placed in one coffin, especially those who were badly burned. No songs were sung at the gravesite. The minister Abram Epp of Tiege prayed. The mourners were so afraid they immediately dispersed.

On the following day, Saturday, we buried our dear father Mandtler in Tiege. Only a few neighbours were present for many, fearing another bloodbath, had

fled. We had a coffin made and drove him to the cemetery on a wagon. The minister, B.B. Janz, read God's Word and prayed....

On Good Friday in 1920 all the immediate families, relatives and friends gathered around the "brotherhood grave" in the Blumenort cemetery in order to remember the dead and beautify the grave. A number of ministers read God's Word and prayed. Many wreaths and flowers decorated the grave....

Notes

¹M. Woltner, *Die Gemeindeberichte von 1848 der deutschen Siedlungen am Schwarzen Meer* (Leipzig, S. Hirzel, 1941), pp. 127-129.

²A *dessiatine* was a land measure approximately equalling 2.7 acres.

³For statistical details as to the extent of these losses see "Mitteilungen ueber die Verluste der Bevoelkerung der Halbstaedter Wolost waehrend der Taetigkeit des Wolost Rates im Winter 1918," *Volksfreund*, Vol. II, no. 27 (June 18, 1918).

⁴H. Neufeld, "Den Tod vor Augen," *Volksfreund*, Vol. II, no. 19 (May 11, 1918), pp. 2-4.

⁵An interpretation of the episode can be found in John B. Toews, "The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* in the Ukraine (1918-1919)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. XLVI, no. 1 (January, 1972), pp. 5-40.

⁶See M. Palič, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno 1918-1921. An Aspect of the Ukrainian Revolution* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1976); Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918-1921* (Chicago, 1974).

⁷Halbstadt narrowly averted a fate similar to that of Blumenort. On November 1 Konovalov threatened to execute fifty men unless his demands for contributions were met. When his regiment returned from Blumenort on November 7, "A meeting was called in the *Zentralschule*. Armed guards would round up anyone who did not attend.... In a congenial fashion he announced that he had learned that weapons were hidden [in Halbstadt]. A cannon, two machine guns, twenty-five rifles and fifty pairs of boots as well as overcoats were to be surrendered by 2 p.m., or Halbstadt would be subjected to the same fate as Blumenort. The workers objected, arguing that if this were the case they would have learned about it. The workers demonstrated great loyalty. The soldiers engaged in many house searches and seized whatever they pleased. Many people were threatened with sabres and rifles. The regiment left for Gross-Tokmak before 2 p.m. Before he left, their leader demanded that all the goods be collected by Sunday. They returned Sunday but quickly dispersed since the Cossacks were approaching from Tokmak and Petershagen." "In Halbstadt," *Friedensstimme*, Vol. XVII (1919), no. 39, p. 7.

⁸J.N. Wittenberg, "Etliche Hauptmomente von dem Mordtag in Altonau im Oktober 1919," (B.B. Janz Papers, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Group I, 15, d.) Initially ten men were killed in Altonau, the eleventh died from sabre wounds somewhat later. "Zur Katastrophe in Blumenort," *Friedensstimme*, Vol. XVII (1919), no. 38, p. 8.

⁹D. Neufeld, *Mennonitentum in der Ukraine. Schicksalsgeschichte Sagraadowkas* (Emden, 1922), pp. 17-21; B. Fast, "Die Schreckenstage in der Orloffter Wolost....," *Volksfreund* XVII (1920), no. 5, pp. 3-4. This periodical is simply a continuation of the Russian Mennonite publication *Friedensstimme*. Editor Abraham Kroeker occasionally switched the name to *Volksfreund* in order to accommodate to changing political circumstances.

¹⁰D.A. Quiring, "Die Schreckenzeit in dem Dorfe Eichenfeld, Sued-Russland im Oktober, 1919," *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, Vol. 49 (1926), nos. 34-42. Also H. Toews, *Eichenfeld-*

Dubowka. *Ein Tatsachenbericht aus der Tragoedie des Deutschtums in der Ukraine* (Karlsruhe i.B., n.d.), pp. 24-41.

¹¹For a graphic account of the Old Colony and Zagadovka massacres see Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death: Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*, trans. by Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1977).

¹²B.B. Janz to A. Bergmann, Coaldale, Alberta, September 25, 1960 (B.B. Janz Papers, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Group I, 15, d).

¹³A term applied to a band of *Makhnovzi* led by Konovalov. According to the Janz document it only arrived in Blumenort on the last day of the killings, November 12, 1919.