

# The Tent Mission in South Russia: 1918–1923

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In 1924 my mother, as a young woman, left Ukraine for Canada. The most fascinating remembrance of her childhood was the story of her beloved older sister, Elisabeth Hübert-Sukkau. According to my mother, Elisabeth had served as a nurse and was hacked to death by anarchists. As my mother was much younger than Elisabeth, she was never told the circumstances of her death. Nevertheless, her sister's sacrifice influenced my mother to train as a nurse and become a founding member of the Mennonite Community Hospital in Coaldale, Alberta. The power of Elisabeth's life to inspire others and the mystery surrounding her death compelled me to delve into her story.

The true facts regarding my aunt reached me by accident. In 1987, I came across Al Reimer's recently published novel, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*. To my surprise, this semi-fictional book based on Russian Mennonite history included references to Louisa Suckau, who died under brutal circumstances. Despite the name change, I recognized that this was my aunt and wrote to the author to request his sources for the episode. From the information that he sent, I learned that on 26 October 1919 Aunt Elisabeth died in a massacre as a volunteer with an evangelical tent mission. The event took place in the Mennonite village of Eichenfeld (Dubovka), located in the Jasykovo Mennonite settlement, near Zaporozhye in the Ukraine.

In the summer of 1989, I toured regions of the former Soviet Union that are relevant to Mennonite history. Among my fellow travellers was someone whose relatives lived in Eichenfeld at the time of the massacre and whose

father had narrowly escaped my aunt's fate. We shared a deep desire to visit the sites of the events that had so profoundly affected our parents. Accompanied by Jenna, a vivacious Ukrainian university student, we embarked by taxi on a day trip from Zaporozhye to Eichenfeld. Upon arrival, Jenna located an elderly woman who remembered the massacre, although she was very young when it took place. She had been told that the events were triggered by the actions of certain Eichenfeld residents who took up arms against Russian peasants. I knew that Aunt Elisabeth belonged to a group of missionaries who were staunchly pacifist and that their deaths were unrelated to the larger events. It appears, however, that their particular story is not remembered in the village.

Most important to me was the fact that this dear woman could direct us to the site of the schoolhouse from where my aunt had been taken to her death. The schoolhouse has since been rebuilt as a soviet club house. Looking across the street to an open field, I realized that my vantage point was that of the teacher's wife, who had watched the events from a classroom window. I envisioned the leading tent missionary, Jakob Dick, followed by Johann Schellenberg, J. Golitzen, Regina Rosenberg and Aunt Elisabeth as they were forced to cross the street at the point of a sabre. I saw them enter a shed, I heard a shot, I saw Regina come out, pointing heavenward. I saw Oskar Juschkewitsch as he was brought from the village and was also forced to enter the shed. Then, the final assault and silence. I thought of the rampage later that night when almost seventy villagers were shot or hacked to death. While contemplating these events, I became aware of an atmosphere of calm and peace about me and accepted this as a message of reconciliation from my aunt and her co-workers. Recognizing that Aunt Elisabeth's story was intertwined with that of the tent mission, I decided to further explore that historic adventure in faith.

## **Events Leading to the Founding of the Tent Mission**

The leadership of the tent mission included Mennonites and evangelical Baptists from various ethnic backgrounds. Most, if not all, of the Mennonite leaders and volunteers were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Molotschna settlement. There are historical reasons that explain why the Mennonite Brethren Church in general, and the Rückenau congregation in particular, was so involved with this unprecedented ecumenical venture.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the first Mennonite settlers were arriving in South Russia, a number of individuals and groups began a movement to unite American and European evangelical believers. The pan-evangelical movement entered Russia in the early 1800s with the founding of a Russian Bible Society. Soon after, Mennonites in Russia began to receive literature from this organization and visits from foreign missionaries.<sup>1</sup> Later, German pietists settled in the vicinity of the Mennonites and brought notions of spiritual warmth and evangelical zeal to the Mennonite congregations. The Mennonite Brethren Church was founded in 1860 in response to these influenc-

es. The new congregation sought guidance from Baptists and decided on baptism by full immersion, rather than the tradition of pouring, as the correct form.

In the early 1880s, at a time when evangelical churches were expanding throughout Russia, F.W. Bädeker, a German Baptist, founded a world-wide alliance of evangelical churches. The alliance later became known as the *Blankenburger Allianzkonferenz*, after the German city where it met. A number of leading Mennonite Brethren ministers such as the publisher A.J. Kröker from Halbstadt and Jakob W. Reimer from Rückenau, attended its annual meetings and contributed to the programme. These men were strong supporters of the tent mission.

During the same period, the Mennonite Brethren Church came to a larger and more vital understanding of its evangelical mission to Orthodox Russians. Johann Wieler, a Mennonite Brethren evangelist from the Molotschna, became a follower of V.A. Pashkov, a former officer in the Tsar's army who had been influenced by the Plymouth Brethren. Pashkov directed his evangelical activities from St. Petersburg, where his followers were known as "Pashkovites".<sup>2</sup> In 1884, Wieler was encouraged by Pashkov to found a Russian Baptist Union with the aim of converting Russians, even though it was illegal and dangerous to do so. He was soon forced into exile. A number of Mennonite evangelists continued Wieler's mission to the Russians where and how they could. One of them was Jakob Enns, whose son later joined the tent mission.

Another prominent Russian evangelical was Ivan S. Prokhanov. In 1906, he founded a Baptist seminary in St. Petersburg which included on its faculty at least one Mennonite, Adolf Reimer, who later joined the tent mission. In 1908, Prokhanov joined with A. J. Kröker and Heinrich J. Braun, another Mennonite Brethren minister, in founding the Raduga Publishing Company in the Molotschna settlement. Several years later, a branch of this firm began to sell Bibles and religious literature in St. Petersburg.<sup>3</sup> This initiative set the stage for the distribution of books, newsletters and religious tracts as an important feature of tent mission activities.

On the eve of the First World War, a number of leading Mennonite ministers possessed considerable experience and knowledge in the area of evangelism as an ecumenical venture. Many of them belonged to the Rückenau congregation, where they raised important questions regarding attitudes and practice. For some years, the Rückenau congregation had struggled with a number of issues. Should previously baptised Mennonites be accepted as members regardless of the form of baptism they had undergone? Should professed believers share in communion regardless of church affiliation? In an unprecedented action, Jacob J. Dick, the future leader of the tent mission, was accepted as a member of the Rückenau Mennonite Brethren Church on his confession of faith alone, although he had previously been baptised by pouring.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Rückenau church, under Jakob W.

Reimer, was moving rapidly in the direction of open communion with believers from other denominations. The willingness of this congregation to make such accommodations, combined with a long tradition of mission support, prepared it to play a particularly active role in the development of the tent mission.

### **The Alternative Medical Service**

The chain of events leading to the organization of the tent mission began with the involvement of Mennonites in alternative war service. On 1 August, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia and on the following day Tsar Nicholas II responded with a solemn oath before a crowd of people in front of the Winter Palace never to make peace so long as one of the enemy was on Russian soil. The preparations for war included the creation of a number of civilian organizations such as the All-Russian Zemstvo Union (*Verosiiskiin Zemskii Soiuz*), which held the main responsibility for the ambulance train service. Through consultations involving Mennonite leaders and government officials, it was decided in the following weeks that the pacifist Mennonites would continue to be exempt from bearing arms. Instead, they would serve on forestry stations or in a medical capacity with civilian organizations.<sup>5</sup> By 1916, 6,548 Mennonites, almost half of all Mennonite recruits, were serving as medical orderlies on trains or in base and quarantine hospitals.<sup>6</sup> A small number of Mennonite volunteers with higher education worked for the Red Cross and were assigned to administrative duties in various cities.

Since the 1870s, when the Mennonites in Russia lost their exemption from military duty of any kind, they had provided alternative service in self-contained forestry stations under Mennonite direction. Now, for the first time, they were called to participate in an integrated medical service with headquarters in Moscow, Petrograd and other urban centres. This was a time when Russian Mennonites were breaking out of their cultural and religious isolation. Particularly attracted to the medical service were those Mennonites who, in increasing numbers, were pursuing higher education in urban settings in Russia and abroad. Among them were men with training and spiritual depth who witnessed to Russian soldiers and gave advice and guidance to Mennonite recruits. The leading tent missionaries came from this group.

The experience of war-time service sensitized the relatively well-educated and urbanized Mennonite medical recruits to the need for reform in Russian Mennonite life. They were also exposed to mounting political pressure to improve the conditions of Russian workers and peasants.<sup>7</sup> It is in relation to this area of understanding that the activities of the tent mission are most instructive. The attitudes expressed by the tent missionaries towards the Russian peasantry may trouble the modern reader. However, their community development aims in the area of health, domestic science and the local agricultural economy should be acknowledged. It will also be seen that the role of women underwent re-examination.

## The Founding of the Tent Mission:

On 2 March 1917, the Tsar abdicated and a democratic republic was proclaimed. Evangelical-minded individuals rejoiced in the fact that the provisional government offered freedom of religious expression. The prospect of evangelization in Russia excited believers throughout England, Germany and America. One hundred members of the World Alliance of Christian Churches entered St. Petersburg with 16 million rubles and opened a multitude of tea rooms and reading and music centres, where the gospel could be proclaimed. According to a Kiev newspaper, a tent evangelist named Vettler was preparing a small group of Americans for a campaign in Russia. A committee for evangelization in Russia was established by the *Allianzkonferenz* in Germany and began work in St. Petersburg, with plans to expand to Moscow and other cities.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, a Christian Soldiers Society (*Christlichen Soldatenverein*) was organized at the Moscow headquarters of the Mennonite recruits. Building on their previous informal witness to Russian soldiers, members of the Christian Soldiers Society (CSS) rented meeting rooms in various districts of the city in order to hold evangelical services. Christian literature was distributed in hospitals and on street corners. In the long term, the CSS hoped to continue to support demobilized soldiers who had become converted through their ministry so that they could serve as nuclei for the formation of evangelical congregations in their home villages. It was out of this intention that the concept of a mobile tent mission (*Zeltmission*) was born.

The founder of the Christian Soldiers Society and later leader of the tent mission was Jakob Jakob Dick, who was born in 1890 in the Crimea.<sup>9</sup> As a young man, he was converted through the preaching of a German Baptist evangelist. Upon graduation from an engineering institute in Germany, he worked in Berlin and developed administrative skills as a volunteer with the local YMCA. When war broke out, he returned to Russia and volunteered for the medical service. He was assigned as an administrative assistant to the Moscow headquarters, where he also acted as a spiritual advisor to the Mennonite recruits.

Heinrich Peter Sukkau, who was stationed in Moscow as an orderly, has been credited by Jacob Dick with originating the idea of a mobile tent mission as a project for the CSS.<sup>10</sup> While he never became directly involved with the tent mission, he inspired its philosophy and direction. Heinrich Sukkau, a family man in his late thirties, had grown up in the village of Kuterlya, Neu Samara, a daughter colony of the Molotschna settlement.<sup>11</sup> He had only a basic education but what he lacked in formal learning, he more than made up for with spiritual depth and originality. This most unusual man, just a few years before he was recruited into the medical service, gave up his earthly possessions in order to work as an evangelist among Russian peasants. Dressed in simple garb, he travelled from village to village with the gospel. Although he was a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church, he worked independently.

The Christian Soldiers Society also had members in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). Among them was Heinrich Jakob Enns, who began service as an orderly in a Petrograd hospital and later in the war was transferred to a hospital in nearby Tsarskoje Selo. Heinrich Enns was born in 1888 on an estate in the Schönfeld settlement north of the Molotschna, and was a graduate of the Halbstadt Secondary School.<sup>12</sup> His father, Jakob Enns, had trained in the Allianz Bible School in Berlin and was an itinerant minister of the Rosenhof Mennonite church in the Schönfeld settlement.

Through the Christian Soldiers Society, Heinrich Enns came to know Adolf Jakob Reimer who played a later role with the tent mission.<sup>13</sup> Reimer's Lithuanian German grandfather, Martin Kalweit, was the first evangelical minister to baptise an Orthodox Russian. Adolf Reimer was born in 1881 in the village of Wiesenfeld, near the Schönfeld settlement. He trained as a teacher in Halbstadt and began his career in the Molotschna. In 1905, when the Tsar declared Russia a constitutional monarchy with an elected assembly, freedom of religion had been proclaimed for a time. During this period, Adolf Reimer was appointed by the Rückenau Mennonite Brethren Church as an itinerant minister. In 1910, Adolf Reimer took a position with Prokhanov's seminary in St. Petersburg and when war broke out joined the medical service.

The work of the Christian Soldiers Society attracted the attention of evangelical Baptists such as Oskar Juschkewitsch, a Latvian from Riga.<sup>14</sup> He was the son of a poor family with no particular religious leanings. From an early age he demonstrated musical gifts which he developed into a career as a concert organist. In the midst of his success, he became converted through personal reading of the Bible and relinquished his career in favour of the ministry. To this end, he entered the St. Chrischona Seminary near Basel, Switzerland, where a number of Russian Mennonites were also enrolled. The war forced him to return to Moscow, where he joined the CSS.

## **The First Tent Mission Venture: 1918**

Soon after the Bolshevik coup of October 1917, it became evident that the war was winding down in Russia. While peace negotiations began in Brest-Litovsk, vast numbers of demoralized Russian troops deserted the army and drifted home. Over the winter, Heinrich Sukkau, Adolf Reimer and Heinrich Enns also returned to their homes while Jakob Dick remained in Moscow.

In April 1918, Austro-German troops occupied South Russia under the terms of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In Moscow, Jakob Dick recalled Heinrich Sukkau's dream of a tent mission and began to hold daily prayer meetings with a view to its realization. In early May, he was touring the Molotschna villages to speak about the tent mission and to raise funds for the first summer campaign.<sup>15</sup> There were problems: 10,000 rubles promised by believers in West Siberia did not arrive because of civil war. Nevertheless, enough money for one tent was soon raised in the other settlements. Attempts

to locate a field hospital tent were fruitless. In mid-June, Heinrich Enns returned to Moscow and after vigorous enquiries found a manufacturer who was willing to sell, for 4,500 rubles, a tent for 400 people. In the meantime, four members of the CSS had volunteered for a trial venture: Heinrich Enns, Aron Dyck, Abraham Epp and Oskar Juschkewitsch. The latter, who had learned how to organize tent missions in Germany, agreed to lead the endeavour.<sup>16</sup>

The consecration of the first tent took place in Moscow on 22 July, 1918 with an ecumenical service. The tent stood at Pokrovka No. 9, likely the medical service headquarters, and was beautifully decorated with banners and biblical inscriptions. Jakob Dick began the service with a short history of the tent mission. He was followed by the four tent missionaries, who vowed to serve the Lord with absolute devotion and asked the believing participants for their support. Preachers from Russian Baptist congregations extended their words of encouragement and one of them, A.A. Andrejev, dedicated the missionaries. The sermons were so heartfelt and stirring that very few dry eyes remained.<sup>17</sup>

On 24 July the tent and over a ton of Christian literature was sent by train to a destination in Tambov province, about 500 kilometres south-east of Moscow. Tambov province was chosen because food was still available there. The following evening, the four mission workers also set off. The missionaries had hoped to initiate their mission venture in Morschansk, where they perhaps had local contacts, but could get tickets only to station Chobotov, near Kostov in Tambov province. They reported on their activities through *Friedenstimme*, a Mennonite Brethren newspaper published in Halbstadt.

On 28 July 1918, Heinrich Enns sent his first report from Chobotov.<sup>18</sup> He rejoiced that during the train trip the missionaries were able to witness and hand out gospels and the Consciousness-raiser (*Gewissenswecker*), a Russian language publication. They arrived in the village of Chobotskoje, near Chobotov station, the following day. Upon presenting their credentials to the local Kommissar at a small council meeting, they received permission to proceed. Two wagons were put at their disposal, a vacant lot was found and by 5:00 on Saturday, 27 July, the tent was up and decorated with banners and scriptures that offered a silent invitation. At 7:00 the first service began, with around 100 people in attendance. The texts of the sermons were the scriptures displayed on the tent: I Cor. 1:23, (We preach Christ crucified), Mark 1:14-15, (Repent and believe in the gospel) and I John 4:9, (God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him).

The missionaries were asked to pay particular attention to the children. On Sunday morning around 100 children appeared at a special service, followed by general services in the afternoon and evening. The afternoon service was interrupted when the missionaries were asked to explain why there were no icons and why they did not cross themselves during prayer. They also knew that the Lord helped them to answer the questions without inciting argument. The generous villagers brought eggs, milk and fruit to refresh the missionaries.<sup>19</sup>

Two weeks later, Heinrich Enns reported that they had stayed in Chobotskoje for nine days, leaving behind a number of individuals who said they wanted to deliver their souls to the Lord.<sup>20</sup> The missionaries then drove here and there, following invitations. From 5 to 12 August, they were in the village of Tjernovoje, near Radostnoje and then moved to the village of Wostrolutschje, where they planned to stay for ten days. During Sunday and on holidays, which were frequent, there were two to four services. During work days, only evening services were held. These were sparsely attended, as the mowing and harvest season was in full swing. They worked with the children as often as possible, although they were unruly, and some girls from Chobotskoje were already singing quite prettily.

The missionaries offered spiritual comfort where they could. For example, a woman was recommended for surgery and could not come to a decision. The missionaries spoke and prayed with her and she departed, reassured. Another woman had much to bear from her husband and longed for either his or her own death. She found reassurance with the promise of II Cor. 1:4, (Blessed be God who comforts us in all our affliction). The missionaries had some medications with them and helped with advice and deed. Abraham Epp, who apparently had some medical training, left the tent mission in the middle of August. As health care had become an important aspect of mission work, Heinrich Enns issued an appeal for a doctor who would make himself available for the following year. It had also become apparent that female volunteers, including nurses, were needed to work with the women and children.<sup>21</sup>

In all these villages the missionaries found no believers and they had many dark moments. In one village, the local priest threatened to do whatever necessary to drive them out. His son and others disturbed almost every service. In another village, a Kommissar gave the missionaries notice that they should leave immediately the next day. After attending the service, however, he begged them to stay. Moreover, the missionaries found the peasants suspicious and ignorant. It was almost inconceivable to them that people who they believed lived in darkness did not long for the light. The usual local response to questions of belief was, “How otherwise?” or “We are blind and know nothing, only God knows the future and each is given what is his due.” The missionaries did not even dare to ask for donations for fear that they would be accused of exploitation. According to Enns, “Those of you who have a good imagination and allow it free play, can imagine what sort of rumours are circulating about us and our work. Whoever comes to us to personally seek the truth, generally leaves satisfied and supportive of our work.”<sup>22</sup> He concluded with the hope that the mission would find a village where there were some believers.

While in Wostruluschje, Heinrich Enns made a side trip to Alt-Gorritevo, about 25 kilometres away. The purpose was to visit Butschnev, a converted soldier whom he knew from Tsarskoye Selo. On the way, Enns was frequently asked about his armband, which carried, in Russian, the words *Tent Mission*. This gave him an opportunity to explain his purpose and to testify. Enns arrived



in Alt-Gorritvo in the evening and found Butschnev, who welcomed him and explained that he began to testify about the Lord but when the people did not respond he put his Bible away. Heinrich Enns offered encouragement and invited all villagers to a service in Butschnev's home. They begged the tent mission to hold more services, but it was too late in the year to arrange this.<sup>23</sup>

In the middle of September, Heinrich Enns wrote a final report.<sup>24</sup> On 24 August, the tent mission had moved to Nanino, the fourth village in which the tent was erected. This was the most successful venture of the season, for a number of reasons. There was a believing couple in the village who had been converted through the ministry of Mennonites serving in a nearby forestry station. In addition, the local school teacher and his brothers, although not converted, were supportive of the tent mission. Moreover, when the Russian missionary A.A. Andrejev arrived from Moscow at the end of August, his immediate popularity demonstrated the importance of including a native Russian on the team.

The missionaries began with a well attended, marathon ten-hour tent service. Attendance was also good at the evening services on subsequent workdays. Bible studies were held in the home of Smagin, the local believer. Special meetings in private homes and separate meetings with young men and women were well received. The missionaries were frequently asked to sing, which they did willingly with the aid of a pump organ donated by the teacher. The tent mission left behind ten believers and many searching souls.

On 6 September, the missionaries moved their tent to Schidilovka, where the services were blessed and the tent was filled. With the approach of severe weather, the tent mission disbanded. Later that month, Jakob Dick toured the Molotschna again, reporting on the activities of the mission.<sup>25</sup> He was alarmed by the growing involvement of historically pacifist Mennonites in an armed self-defense force (*Selbstschutz*), which was being organized under the supervision of German officers in anticipation of their withdrawal from the settlements. His outspoken opposition created such a furore that a Mennonite official incarcerated him for a time in the firehouse of an unnamed village in the centre of the Molotschna settlement. He was released following the intervention of more level-headed individuals.<sup>26</sup>

In early October 1918, *Friedenstimme* published a proposal for endorsement submitted by the tent mission to an evangelical organization known as *Philadelphia*.<sup>27</sup> The unidentified author is likely Jakob Dick. This remarkable document outlines the principles and goals of the tent mission. It is apparent that much had been learned during the first summer of service and a great deal of thought had been devoted to a larger and more ambitious venture the following spring. As we will see, due to political events we will never know how these lofty ideals would have evolved and eventually been realized.

In view of the massive evangelical effort put forth in the cities by foreign organizations, the document proposed that the Mennonites make up for their long neglect of the souls of their Russian neighbours through the establishment

of an ecumenical tent mission. Not only was this in accordance with Jesus' command, but it would revitalize a complacent Mennonite community. Under the leadership of experienced spiritual care givers, tent mission volunteers would mature into dedicated workers in God's kingdom. The urge to evangelize would be reinforced, along with love and sympathy for the "mere Russian".

There were several issues. First, it was necessary to define, in coordination with Russian believers, a proper geographical area of activity. It should be a rural area, as Mennonites were people of the land who understood the life of the peasant better than that of the city dweller. Moreover, the foreign and Russian evangelical organizations already at work were concentrating on the urban centres at the expense of the countryside. In the end, Poltava province was chosen as the arena for service.

Secondly, accommodation had to be found, as the mission had learned that gatherings in schools and churches were continually opposed by the Russian clergy. Tents provided the ideal solution in that they were easily transported, could accommodate the meetings and house the workers and stocks of literature. It was estimated that with five tents, each staying a week, about 120 villages could be covered in a summer. This presumed a campaign of 24 weeks, likely lasting from May to October. Money would have to be raised for the purchase of tents.

Thirdly, there was the problem of how to hold the interest of the villagers beyond their initial curiosity. The answer lay in the quality of the service. Assigned to each tent would be at least two permanent ministers with good speaking skills and leadership abilities, ideally one Russian and one Mennonite. A well-trained choir and a small, lively orchestra would serve on a rotating basis.

Finally, the most difficult challenge lay in winning the confidence of the Russian peasants so that they could lay aside their suspicions and entrust their children to the mission. This could be accomplished only through "Active Christianity". About five young volunteers would be assigned to each tent, spelling each other off every one or two months. This would reduce the burden on parents, who were giving up their sons and daughters during the busiest period of the agricultural cycle. The male volunteers were to offer instruction in horticulture and animal husbandry. They would also undergo instruction in Russian scriptural vocabulary so that they could read, pray, sing and converse in Russian with unbelievers. The female volunteers, hopefully including some nurses, were to care for the sick and instruct women in cooking, sewing and household duties. A volunteer doctor would serve the tents on a rotating basis and attend to the more serious illnesses.

To promote the ecumenical nature of the venture, tent mission headquarters were to be established away from the Mennonite settlements, in a city such as Moscow or Kiev. Here, ministers would be trained and volunteers gathered for assignment. A large store of literature would be held here to supply the

mission. Street and tract missions, work among the poor and religious services would provide practical experience for the volunteers.

Over the winter, it was expected that leaders and volunteers of the tent mission would gather at the headquarters for a conference, in coordination with the Russian congregations. After a month of rest in the country, the ministers and a small group of volunteers would begin the winter programme. This would involve revisiting the villages contacted during the summer in order to encourage the newly converted, offer them further instruction and assist them in joining local evangelical congregations.

### **Preparations for a Second Mission Venture:**

The winter and spring of 1918-19 was a time of active recruitment in which Jakob Dick, Oscar Juschkewitsch and Heinrich Enns played a leading role. During this period, these men made many trips to Mennonite settlements to promote the mission and to hold evangelical services. Jakob Dick was not outstandingly gifted as a speaker, but was thought to be very practical in his approach. His evangelical style, however, did not please everyone. He was considered by some to be an unduly emotional "English-style" preacher who emphasized conversion and open testimonials.<sup>28</sup>

Twelve men and twelve women responded to the mission call. Towards the spring, headquarters for the tent mission were set up in a humble, two room dwelling in Panjutino, a town near the Losovaia railway junction, 160 kilometres north of the Molotschna on the Sevastopol-Moscow line. The Dick family made the headquarters their home. In the meantime, the Russian Red Cross in Moscow had been persuaded to donate tents and the missionaries now had five at their disposal.

Among the men who volunteered were at least two men with Orthodox Russian backgrounds: J. Golitzen from Mogilev and Nikita Salov-Astakov, a university student who had been converted during the war.<sup>29</sup> The Mennonite team members included Jakob Regehr from Alexanderkrone, Heinrich Epp from Alexanderwohl and a homeopath, perhaps Abraham Epp who had served the previous summer. Katherina Janzen of Alexanderwohl and Katherina Peter Enns from Tiegenhagen, a trained nurse from the Muntau hospital, were among the female volunteers. When Heinrich Enns' sister Sara volunteered, she was severely criticized by Mennonite women from her community for abandoning her old and ill father to join the mission. Her father, in a letter to *Friedenstimme*, staunchly defended her decision. He declared that his daughter had amply demonstrated her love and devotion to him in his fourteen years as a widower. In joining the mission, she was following the higher calling of Jesus: "He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy."<sup>30</sup>

Elisabeth Hübent-Sukkau and Regina Rosenberg were destined to become mission partners. Elisabeth, born in 1893, was the daughter of Abram Hübent and Katherina (Heinrich) Sukkau from the Terek settlement. When her mother died in 1908, Elisabeth went to live with her maternal grandparents in

Rückenau. She was the main care giver of her blind grandmother, a deeply spiritual woman. Elisabeth joined the Rückenau Mennonite Brethren Church and earned a reputation as a mature and dedicated young woman with a strong sense of duty. Elisabeth's uncle Peter had met his cousin, Heinrich Sukkau, through the Christian Soldiers Society in Moscow. He returned to Rückenau with stories about his remarkable relative and inspired Elisabeth to volunteer for the tent mission.

Regina Rosenberg from Konotop, Poltava province, had been recruited in Kharkov by Jakob Dick.<sup>31</sup> She was the gifted daughter of an orthodox Jewish business family and had attended university. A Russian evangelical gave her a New Testament which she read at first as a sceptic, but then as a believer. She became convinced that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. Because of her beliefs, she was driven from her family home and was threatened with death. She prayed that God would give her work and she responded gratefully to Jakob Dick's call for service. She felt that she had a particular gift to speak with spiritual wisdom to the Russian women. Undoubtedly, her fluency in Russian was also an asset.

## **The Second Tent Mission Venture: 1919**

By early March 1919, the Red Army had re-established control of the Mennonite settlements. Despite the nocturnal raids and arrests that followed the take-over, plans for the tent mission continued. On 11 May, for example, H. Enns and O. Juschkewitsch reported optimistically to the Petershagen church.<sup>32</sup> Suddenly, in early June, the Red Army was routed by Deniken's White Army coalition. The White Army moved rapidly north through Ekaterinoslav, towards Kharkov. The proposed mission field, Poltava province, was now under friendly White Army control. Later in June, the tent missionaries were dedicated in the Rückenau Mennonite Brethren Church. The volunteers moved north to Panjutino behind the advancing White Army lines, where Regina Rosenberg was awaiting them. The women on the mission team held special women's meetings here and cleaned the potatoes and beans which had been planted for them by local women. The missionaries resolved that each Saturday, instead of eating a mid-day meal, they would hold a prayer meeting wherever they might find themselves at that time.

By 4 August, the team was in Kursk, where Heinrich Enns had arrived from Moscow with the tents. From here, they travelled from village to village by foot, up to seven kilometres at a time. They found particularly friendly hospitality in Barvenkovo, a German town west of Losovaia, where they were coddled with food and sleep.<sup>33</sup> Around this time, a woman from the tent mission described an emotional encounter with a sick peasant woman, with whom she had spent a night in prayer. She reported the words of the invalid: "How wonderful that women, too, know of the love of Christ and do not idly stay at home with their hands on their laps, but instead go out and tell unfortunate women like me about it." She pleaded with women in particular to join the

ranks of the “Army of Christ” and bring what she promised to be “light and love” into the hearts of the other women.<sup>34</sup>

By 20 October Nestor Makhno, a local anarchist, had taken control of the Molotschna settlement and all territory as far north as Ekaterinoslav. Murder, rape and pillage were common at this time. In the meantime, the tent missionaries began preparations to return to their homes, which were now in Makhno’s hands. They gathered in Panjutino, where Jakob Dick raised the question whether they should return home directly or preach and work in each village for about three days, returning at a slower pace. “We want to work as long as it is day”, was the reported response of the missionaries.<sup>35</sup> Leaving Panjutino, the missionaries entered Makhno-held territory. They frequently encountered his troops, who continually harassed their services. Undaunted, they continued on to the Mennonite village of Nikolaipol in the Mennonite settlement of Jasykovo, where they decided to serve for a period of time. The inhabitants of the settlement were in a state of agitation, as large numbers of Makhno cavalry had made their home in the villages, robbing and abusing the inhabitants.

On the morning of 25 October, 1919, the missionaries gathered for prayer in the home of a fellow believer.<sup>36</sup> Then they divided into three groups, each destined for a different village. Jakob Dick, four other missionaries—Oskar Juschkewitsch, Golitzen, Elisabeth Hübert-Sukkau and Regina Rosenberg—and Johann Schellenberg from nearby Reinland, an experienced itinerant minister from the Einlage Mennonite Brethren Church, went to Eichenfeld. Until then no evangelicalistic services had been held here. Eichenfeld was of particular concern to the tent missionaries as this staunchly conservative Mennonite community had a history of opposition to the evangelicalistic movement.

Upon arrival in Eichenfeld, Jakob Dick received permission from local authorities to hold meetings and the first was set for that very afternoon. On the morning of 26 October, a disorganized group of about 400 bandits, loosely known as “Makhnovze,” took over the village. It is perhaps not coincidental that this was the second anniversary of the Bolshevik coup. This unruly band, likely without the sanction of the Makhno cavalry but certainly not opposed by it, entered Mennonite homes to demand meals and lodging. Just as the missionaries were sitting down to breakfast at the home of a widow Peters, a number of Makhnovze entered and without a word sat down at the laden table. When they pressed the missionaries to join them, Jacob Dick explained that they were evangelical Christians and therefore did not eat before holding morning devotions. Eventually more and more Makhnovze entered, until the room was quite full. Jakob Dick preached until noon. When his voice began to break, Mrs. Peters brought him raw eggs to soothe his throat.

At midday the Makhnovze left, and Jakob Dick and Johann Schellenberg accompanied Elisabeth Sukkau and Regina Rosenberg to the schoolhouse, to arrange a meeting with the children. After a brief conference with the

teachers, they bent their knees in prayer. Suddenly several Makhnovze entered the schoolroom and demanded that Jakob Dick show his papers of authorization. They stood before him with lowered eyes and Dick observed that these men carried dark intentions within their hearts. The missionaries did not know that the bandits had planned a village-wide massacre that night to avenge the murders of three members of a nearby village soviet, allegedly perpetrated by residents of Eichenfeld.<sup>37</sup> In the meantime, other Makhnovze returned to the home of Mrs. Peters and found Golitzen. When they discovered he was a preacher, they began to beat him until he agreed to lead them to the missionaries.

As they entered the school, the bandits ordered the evangelists to place themselves against the wall. The evangelists did what they were told. When the teacher entered and begged that they should not be murdered in the classroom, the Makhnovze ordered the missionaries to an empty shed across the street. As the missionaries were being led away, the wife of the school teacher watched through the window of another classroom. She saw how the missionaries submissively followed their captors. Jakob Dick covered his face with his hands and two Makhnovze, propelling him forward, slashed his face with a bare sabre. Just as they entered the shed, she heard a shot and then saw Regina Rosenberg, accompanied by a bandit, coming out of the shed for a brief time, and saw too that her eyes seemed to radiate joy. She could see that Rosenberg was explaining something and pointing heavenwards. In the meantime, the Makhnovze fetched Oskar Juschkewitsch and forced him to enter the shed. It was later revealed that Juschkewitsch received his death blows while testifying on his knees with his Bible in his hand. Regina Rosenberg was the last to die.

After night fell, the rampage began.<sup>38</sup> A troop of bandits galloped through the village at full speed and set a guard at each end so that no one could escape. Each household was visited and the heads of the households were asked if they owned property. If they answered in the affirmative, they were forced outside to undergo all manner of atrocities. The schoolteacher's wife, who earlier had witnessed the murder of the missionaries, was raped beside her husband who lay on the floor gasping his last breath. That night, three women were murdered while protecting their husbands and sixty-five men, almost every male over 16 years of age, were either shot or stabbed to death.

Dawn broke and the gruesome tragedy of the night was revealed. Cries of horror and grief rang through the damp and chilly morning as the mutilated corpses of loved ones were discovered lying beside straw piles or on dung heaps. There was no time to bury the bodies and there was no other thought but to flee. About 45 widows and 200 fatherless children fled on foot through the mud to relatives and friends in the neighbouring villages. After the survivors departed, the bandits reappeared to plunder, setting fire to many of the buildings.

Several days later, men from neighbouring villagers returned with the

widows to gather the dead. Among them were the tent missionaries Salov-Astakov and Heinrich Epp, who came to identify the bodies of their slain comrades. Upon entering the shed, they came across an unidentified body, likely Reverend Schellenberg, and the missionaries. Dick and Golitzen were found dressed in their underclothes and lying with their heads towards the door. Their faces were mutilated. At the door lay Juschkewitsch, face down in a position of prayer; a hand under his head and a deep wound in his neck. Somewhat further on lay Regina Rosenberg who had also been murdered in a position of prayer. She had two deep wounds in her neck and head. Not far from her lay Elisabeth Hübert-Sukkau, also murdered with a sabre.

The victims were placed in large, open graves, most of them just as they were found and without a formal service. Only later, presumably when the White Army had regained control, was it possible to fill in the graves and to hold a proper service. One villager, his spirit broken by the events, took his own life. He was buried with the tent missionaries in a common grave. Johann Schellenberg was returned to Reinland for burial.

### **Subsequent Mission Ventures:**

Rumours of the deaths of the Eichenfeld villagers and the loss of the tent missionaries soon reached the Molotschna. A full and comprehensive report was not possible until March, 1920, when Rev. Heinrich Braun gave the details to the Halbstadt congregation.<sup>39</sup> Of the 35 volunteers who had participated in the tent mission thus far, all but eight were dead or too ill to continue. Nikita Salov-Astakov became president of a newly organized tent mission. Adolf Reimer, who during this time was residing in Alexandertal, took on the Mennonite-based activities.<sup>40</sup> With Heinrich Enns and other leading ministers, he founded an itinerant Bible School, teaching four-week courses. H. H. Goossen took charge of the music and, in the spirit of the tent mission, promoted Russian gospel songs that would attract local Russians.<sup>41</sup> In February, the tent mission was in Alexandertal, in March, in Kleefeld and in April, in Rückenau. Here they began with a mission and song festival, where much of the conversation focused on the recent atrocities in the Mennonite villages.<sup>42</sup>

The involvement of the female tent missionaries had left its mark. Several questions were raised in the Bible School related to the equal participation of men and women in mission and church work and whether women should be allowed to preach. Concepts of equality between the sexes popularized by the revolution may have influenced the discussion. As at this time it was not deemed biblical to ordain women, it was decided that preaching by women was not pleasing in the eyes of God. The special role of women in attending the sick and singing and praying with women and children was reaffirmed, however.<sup>43</sup>

In the fall of 1920, the tent mission obtained permission for its activities from the Commissariat of the Interior for the Ukraine. In 1922 and 1923, the small team concentrated on the cities of Moscow, Petrograd, Smolensk and

Kharkov.<sup>44</sup> During a four month visit to Kiev early in 1922, Adolf Reimer fell ill with typhus and was carried home to die. A special memorial service was held in the Rückenau church that August.<sup>45</sup> After the death of Adolf Reimer, Heinrich Enns continued the work with the Russians, visiting churches far and wide. His sister, Sara Enns, worked in an orphanage in Schönau, until it was disbanded in 1922.<sup>46</sup> When, in 1923, attempts to re-register the tent mission failed, it was also formally disbanded.

Letters to America from former Makhnovze who were converted through the tent mission suggest the extent to which Russian Baptist churches were flourishing during this period of time. By 1925, the Sherebetz Brethren Union in the area of the Schönfeld settlement included 22 congregations. Bible conferences for the preachers were held frequently, led by Reverend Pöttker from Wernersdorf and Heinrich Enns from Alexandertal.<sup>47</sup> Heinrich Sukkau gained a large following and was eventually elected elder of ninety Russian Baptist congregations.

This period of remarkable growth in the evangelical community came to an end in 1929, with severe anti-cult legislation. In 1929, Heinrich Sukkau was arrested for his religious activities and sent into exile on the Dvina River. Around 1934, he was released and when last heard from, had fled again to Turkestan.<sup>48</sup> In 1932, Heinrich Enns was arrested for his activities and sentenced to prison and exile. He managed to flee and returned to the Molotschna to gather his family in order to take them to the Caucasus, where conditions were thought to be better. Upon his return to the Molotschna, he succumbed to typhus and died. He was buried near Adolf Reimer in Alexandertal.<sup>49</sup> Their widows moved to Melitopol. Mrs. Enns was later sent to Kazakhstan and was never heard from again. Mrs. Reimer was banished to Siberia, where she later died. In 1924, Jakob Dick's wife, Tina, emigrated to Ontario with her sibling. In 1926, Nikita Salov-Astakov emigrated to America, where he wrote books and travelled widely to lecture and preach. His wife, Katherina Enns, was likely the last surviving tent missionary. She died in Winnipeg in 1994.<sup>50</sup>

Despite persecution, arrest and exile, the tent missionaries left behind a legacy of thriving Russian Baptist congregations. In 1966, I.G. Ivanov, who as a young man had been converted by the tent mission in Moscow, became president of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Soviet Union.<sup>51</sup> As confirmed by the representatives of this organization at the 1989 Russian Mennonite bicentennial celebrations in Zaporozhye, Mennonite contributions to Soviet evangelism were significant.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> James Urry, "Mennonites and the Pan-evangelical Impulse in Early Nineteenth-century Russia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 16 (1987), 213.
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, "The Pashkov Papers," *Mennonite Historian* 15 (1989), 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Ken Reddig, "Mennonite Publishing in Russia: The Raduga Press of Halbstadt," *Mennonite Historian* 13 (1987), 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Abraham H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde*, (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1955), 278.
- <sup>5</sup> *Friedenstimme*, 80 (October 1914), 8 & 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Adolf Ehrst, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland*, (Berlin: Julius Belz, 1932), 112.
- <sup>7</sup> See Al Reimer, "Sanitätsdienst und Selbstschutz: Russian-Mennonite Nonresistance in World War I and its Aftermath," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993), 135-148.
- <sup>8</sup> "Evangelisation in Russland", *Friedenstimme* 56 (1 October, 1918), 3.
- <sup>9</sup> For Jakob Dick's biography see Aron A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, (n.p., BC: self published, 1949), 132-134.
- <sup>10</sup> "Einweihung der Zeltmission im Christlichen Soldatenverein in Moskau", *Friedenstimme* 44 (20 August, 1918).
- <sup>11</sup> For Heinrich Sukkau's biography see Töws, *Mennonite Martyrs*, (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990), 216-223.
- <sup>12</sup> For Heinrich Enns' biography see Töws, *Mennonite Martyrs*, 79-84.
- <sup>13</sup> For Adolf Reimer's biography see Töws, *Mennonite Martyrs*, 183-188.
- <sup>14</sup> For the Oskar Juschkeiwitsch biography see Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 134.
- <sup>15</sup> John P. Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs: Excerpts from the Diary of Peter J. Dyck*, (Springstein, MB: self published, 1981), 49.
- <sup>16</sup> *Friedenstimme* 44 (20 August, 1918).
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> "Der Erste Brief aus der Zeltmission", *Friedenstimme* 53 (22 September, 1918).
- <sup>19</sup> *Friedenstimme* 53 (22 September, 1918).
- <sup>20</sup> "Die Zeltmission in Russland", *Friedenstimme* 52 (17 September, 1918).
- <sup>21</sup> "Aus der Zeltmission", *Friedenstimme* 64 (29 October, 1918), 1.
- <sup>22</sup> *Friedenstimme* 52 (17 September, 1918).
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 64 (29 October, 1918), 1.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs*, 52.
- <sup>26</sup> *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 8 March, 1936.
- <sup>27</sup> *Friedenstimme* 56 (1 October, 1918), 3-4; 57 (5 October, 1918), 3-4.
- <sup>28</sup> Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs*, 62.
- <sup>29</sup> Harold Jantz, "A Brief Moment of Opportunity" *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 12 January 1996, 8.
- <sup>30</sup> "Aus der Zeltmission", *Friedenstimme* 27 (10 August, 1919), 7.
- <sup>31</sup> For Regina Rosenberg's biography see Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 135.

<sup>32</sup> Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Friedenstimme* 27 (10 August, 1919), 7.

<sup>34</sup> “Der grosse Arzt”, *Friedenstimme* 35 (18 September, 1919), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> The description of the last day of the tent missionaries and the discovery of their bodies is from an account written soon after the event by Salov-Astakov and published in Abram Kroeker, *Bilder aus Sowjet-Russland* (Striegau in Schlesien: self published, 1930), 13-19. Jakob Dick’s wife in later years recalled a somewhat different version of the events as related in Katherina Ediger, *Under His Wings: Events in the Lives of Elder Alex Ediger and His Family*, (Kitchener, 1994), 178-179.

<sup>37</sup> See Gerhard P. Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace and Judgment*, (Lodi, CA: self published, 1974), 114-116 and John B. Toews, “The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite Selbstschutz in the Ukraine,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46 (1972), 33.

<sup>38</sup> Descriptions of the Eichenfeld massacre are from the privately published memoirs of Helena Harder Martens and Katharina Harder Patkau (in the files of the author) and Neil Heinrichs, et.al., *Kornelius Heinrichs and his Descendants* (Altona, MB: Kornelius Heinrichs History Society, 1980), 81-85.

<sup>39</sup> Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs*, 111.

<sup>40</sup> Jantz, “A Brief Moment,” 8.

<sup>41</sup> H. H. Goossen, *Adolf Reimer, ein treuer Bote Jesu Christe unter die Deutschen und Russen* (Yarrow: self published, 1960), 30.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Peters, *Diary of Anna Baerg*, (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1985), 57-58.

<sup>43</sup> Harold Jantz, “Die Zeltmission in Russland,” *Mennonitische Rundschau* (April, 1995), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Jantz, “A Brief Moment,” 9.

<sup>45</sup> Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace*, 223.

<sup>46</sup> John J. Enns, Letter to the Editor, *Mennonite Historian* 14:2 (1988), 7-8.

<sup>47</sup> Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace*, 187.

<sup>48</sup> Töws, *Mennonite Martyrs*, 223.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Jantz, “A Brief Moment,” 7.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Sawatzky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1981), 181.