

The Last Visit of Emperor Alexander I to the Mennonite Colonies

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The following is a translated version of a handwritten, German document found in a private collection. The document is no doubt a copy of a pamphlet written by A. Fadeiev and printed by Carl Kraÿ, St. Petersburg, in 1827. While the printed version of the document was not available to us, we know of its existence from other sources. In his biography of Johann Cornies (1789-1848), David H. Epp includes three paragraphs verbatim from Fadeiev's account of Emperor Alexander I 1825 visit to the Molotschna Colony and names Cornies as one of the Emperor's hosts on this visit.¹ This was to be the last visit of this Emperor to the Mennonite colonies. He died later that year.

The account of this visit is only one among other accounts of Emperor Alexander's good will toward and interest in his Mennonite subjects. P.M. Friesen in his history includes a most interesting account concerning the Emperor's visit to the Mennonite colonies in 1818.² It is interesting to compare the two accounts with regard to the light they shed upon the Russian government's concerns and hopes for its southern settlements and the Mennonites' response to the royal honours bestowed upon them. Friesen also mentions the "second visit of this monarch on October 25, 1825"³ to the Mennonite colonies, but he provides no details concerning it. With regard to the two visits he quotes Franz Isaak as follows: "The extent to which the government was concerned to expedite and bring to fruition the Mennonite responsibility of being a model in work and conduct can be seen by the fact that His Majesty Alexander I visited the colonies in 1818 and 1825, which inspired the inhabitants to go about their work with joy and courage; for they saw him face to face who was, in so large measure, the promoter of their well-being. His gracious condescension to enter many of the homes and his friendly fatherly encouragement filled the community with the joyous

confidence, and silent prayers to God and tears of gratitude followed after the much-loved father of the country."⁴

The author of the account below, Andrei M. Fadeiev (1790-1867), was well known to the Russian Mennonites. Fadeiev was an assistant to Samuel Contenius (1749-1830) of the Guardians Committee, which was responsible for the settlements, and he later succeeded Contenius as president of this committee in Ekaterinoslav. The Guardians Committee worked closely with the colonies in general and with Johann Cornies, chairperson of the Agricultural Society, in particular.

Account of the Last Visit of the Lord and Emperor of Glorious Remembrance, Alexander I, to the Molotschna Mennonite Colonies, Melitopol District, Province of Taurida.

The Lord and Emperor honoured us with his glorious and memorable visit to the Molotschna Mennonite colony on his journey from Tagenrog to Crimea on 22 October 1825, exactly four weeks before his grievous end, which cast all of Europe into sorrow.

The first settlement of Mennonites on this journey consisted in the farm of a Mennonite named Steinbach.⁵ The Monarch arrived there at 12 o'clock in the day. While alighting from the carriage at the driveway, His Majesty⁶ was welcomed to the house by me and the elders of the Mennonites. After hearing the verbal report on the prosperity of the colony, and receiving a written report on the populace, economic set-up, and plan of the Molotschna district, he said, "Permit me to ask, with whom have I the pleasure of speaking?" When he received the answer, he deigned to ask, "And where is C...us?"⁷ I [answered]: "In Ekaterinoslav; he is not well." With these words I placed a letter from him before His Majesty. Thereupon, the Monarch turned to the elders, and with an amicable smile received written greetings and welcome from them as follows:

Most Gracious Monarch!

Providence has granted us the pleasure once more to see His Imperial Majesty, our Most Gracious Monarch and Father, in our midst. Under your kind reign, under your shield and protection we live here happily and in peace. Accept from us, Most Gracious Monarch, our thankfulness, devotion, and love. Accept the assurance of our hearty and perpetual prayers to the Most High. Yes, may God the Lord crown you, your whole majestic household, and all your great and sovereign undertakings with His blessings.

Signed by the spiritual and temporal elders of the Mennonite Church [*Gemeinde*].

The Monarch entered the room, met the host and hostess and greeted them amiably.

I was honoured by an invitation to the dinner table. As I entered the dining room, I found the Monarch already seated behind the table.

He bid me to be seated with the Russian expression: "Pray be so good as to be seated." His Majesty began the following conversation:

Monarch. "What is wrong with C...us?"

I. "He has an illness of the chest, Your Majesty."

Mon. "Perhaps it is his age. How old is he?"

I. "Seventy-six years [of age]."

Mon. "Greet him, brother, for me and say that I greatly regret that I cannot speak with him, and especially for the reason that he could not be present here. Tell him that I would heartily wish to be able to subtract twenty years from his age, but this is beyond my power."

Thereupon the Monarch asked several questions about H.J....w⁸ and other leaders of the colony and said: "Are there only two houses in this colony?"

I. "This is no colony, Your Majesty, but the estate [*Vorwerk*] established on the land granted by Your Majesty to the late Mennonite elder, Wiens, for his zealous service and establishment of the first forest plantation in this district. The present landlord is his son-in-law."

The Monarch, looking out the window: "But whose small Little-Russian houses are those?"

I. "The labourers of the landlord live in those."

Mon. "The Mennonites, I believe, do not build houses in this manner?"

I. "By no means, Your Majesty."

Mon. "How many Mennonites migrated here from Prussia in the past year?"

I. "Five families."

Mon. "What are the principal occupations of the Mennonites?"

I. "Cattle breeding, farming, and various occupations."

Mon. "What type of cattle do they have?"

I. "Mostly German [cattle] crossed with Little Russian [cattle]."

Mon. "And horses?"

I. "Likewise; for the initial Mennonite immigrants brought cattle and horses along from Prussia."

Mon. "What grains do they generally sow?"

I. "Wheat."

Mon. "How many cattle did they lose during the past winter?"

I. "One fifth."

Mon. "At that time did they use the straw taken from the roofs to feed the cattle as the local inhabitants do?"

I. "A few did."

Mon. "Are any among you apprehended for tax arrears?"

I. "Very rarely."

Mon. "Are there any factories?"

I. "A small cloth factory, that Your Majesty honoured by a visit with Hoch in 1818."

Mon. "Yes, I remember that."

W...ie. "It seems to me that we did not travel through here in 1818."

Mon. "No, we travelled from the Dukhobor villages where we lodged for

the night at the village Takmak, and from there [we proceeded] straight to Marienpol."

Turning to me again [he asked]: "Are there any serious crimes to be found among the Mennonites?"

I. "In the course of my eight year administration only one has taken place."

Mon. "Of what sort?"

I. "A Mennonite, who was drunk, took the life of a child by running over him on the road with a wagon."

Mon., motioning with his head, said: "That was not intentional [but an accident]! Are there some [people] who are addicted to drink?"

I. "Very few."

Mon. "These are good people." Then, jokingly, [he spoke in French] to H.W...ie: "Isn't it true, that you are here among your co-religionists?"

W...ie. [Answering in French] "No, Your Majesty! I attend the Episcopal Church!"

Mon. [Again in French] "Which church do you attend in St. Petersburg?"

W...ie. [Answering in French] "The Anglican chapel."

Mon. turning to me, [reverting to German] "Do they [the Mennonites] live peaceably with the Nogais [a nomadic tribe]?"

I. "The latter disturbed them to some extent, but the local authorities generally endeavour to stop the highhandedness [of the Nogais]."

All the windows were crowded with Mennonite women from neighbouring colonies, clothed in festive garb. A strong north wind with rain came up.

The Monarch said, "The poor ladies are all getting wet!" Thereupon he asked me: "Is there always such bad weather here in October?"

I. "On the contrary, Your Majesty, the wind and rain come more often in September, before and after the equinox; in October we usually have pleasant, warm, and quiet days, with fog in the mornings and evenings only."

Thereupon the Monarch asked W...ie and Solomka with whom they had lodged in Nogaisk, whether they had had good quarters. M...er brought vegetables. The Monarch said, "Are these local vegetables?" He [answered]: "No, Monarch, but I found them here."

The Monarch saw a bone [-handled] knife, with which W...ie cut bread, and which M...er had handed him from the other room. Looking at the inscription, he said, "Inscribed Moscow, in Latin lettering! Our factories have a fancy to inscribe either London, Paris, or even Moscow or Petersburg on their products, but always in Latin lettering." W...ie asked me whether the knife was not made here. I answered, "No."

The Monarch asked me whether I know the Swiss man [evidently a missionary] who settled among the Nogais.

I. "I know him to some extent."

Mon. "What do you know about him?"

I. "As far as I know he seems to be of high morals and has good intentions."

B. Diebitsch. "In what do they [the intentions] consist?"

I. "In learning the character, beliefs, customs, and spirit of the Nogais, and imparting these observations to the Basel missionaries whose aim it is to convert the Mohammedans to the Christian faith, thereby helping them to achieve better results."

Mon. "Yes! Truly so! There is an institute in Basel where missionaries are trained. I wish him success but I have my doubts."

The Monarch glanced at the clock, and arose from behind the table.

After dinner His Majesty entered the other room. After several minutes the Mennonite elders were called. The Monarch asked them whether they were satisfied in everything and whether they might not have some complaints. After they answered that in every respect they were happy and satisfied, and that nothing remained for them than to thank the Monarch for his charity and grace, he said, "I am likewise satisfied with you for your quiet life and diligence. However, I wish that on each farm you would plant trees—particularly the American acacia that grows quickly in this area—in groves up to half a desiatin in size. Thereupon he dismissed them, and again called the host and hostess, thanked them, bestowed generous gifts, and departed.

I received permission to accompany the Monarch to his night lodging, which was arranged in the last Mennonite colony, Altona, and travelled right behind His Majesty. Except for the colonies through which he passed on the way, the Monarch proceeded swiftly. The Monarch travelled via the new colony, Prangenau, Neukirch, and close to the Lichtfelde colony. In Ruekenau the Monarch talked to the landlord of the house beside which the horses were changed, asking him whether they were satisfied with everything, etc..

In the Ohrloff colony, the horses were again changed beside a Mennonite house which was distinguished from the others in size and class. The Monarch climbed out of the carriage and entered the house alone. The landlord,⁹ who had ridden before the royal carriage, had run to change his rain-soaked an mud-spattered coat. The timid hostess stood at the front door. Two of my adolescent daughters and their accompanying female relative, who had come from Ekaterinoslav in the hope of seeing the Monarch, stood in the other room. [The Monarch] noticed them, came up to them, and asked them who they were. Then he graciously asked about their mother and whether they had brothers and sisters, etc.

Returning to the front room and learning from the landlord that the woman standing in the corner was the landlady of the house, His Majesty approached her and took her hand. The hostess, thinking that the Monarch would shake her hand according to Mennonite custom, freely offered her hand. However, the Monarch kissed her hand; this totally unexpected graciousness surprised her so much that she retreated several steps, turned pale, and became speechless.

The Monarch put several questions to the landlord regarding his house: when it was built, how expensive it was, and then bowed and went out.

In the entrance, the Monarch noticed me. "Your family is here?" he asked affectionately.

I. "Here, Monarch, are two daughters [of mine] who hoped to have the good fortune of being honoured by your appearance."

[Mon.] "But where is your wife?"

[I.] "In Ekaterinoslav."

Monarch. "Your children told me that she was born a F... in Do...kai."

I. "Exactly."

Mon. "Which D...kai?"

I. "Of the Prince P.W...tsch."

Mon. "Not the one who served under the uhlands?"¹⁰

I. "By no means. My father-in-law had the good fortune to serve as Major-General under Your Majesty's Most Honourable Grandmother,¹¹ and was discharged in the beginning of Your Majesty's father's reign."¹²

The Monarch raised his eyes, bethought himself, then shrugging his shoulders, he said, "I cannot recall that." Afterwards he asked, "And the lady who is with your children is your relative?"

I. "Yes."

Seated in his carriage, His Majesty said, "The present landlord here possesses a better house than the others!"

I. "He is more well-to-do than the others."

Mon. "And what house is this at the end of the colony, opposite the school?"

I. "A house of worship."

Mon. "Is it going to be stuccoed [whitewashed]?"

I. "In the coming year the Mennonites are planning to carry that out."

Mon. "Like this one?" [he asked] pointing to the house in which we had been.

I. "Yes, just like it."

The Monarch, with a smile of approval, commanded the coachman to move on.

After the arrival at Altona, the Monarch entered the house designated as his night lodging, called the host and hostess, children and grandmother to him, asking them about their condition, age, etc.

For the night a watch was posted to guard the carriage and the quarters according to the wishes of the Mennonite elders and the most watchful landlord himself.

Before departure the next day, 23 October, the Monarch deigned to command my children to be led to him, talked with them very kindly, enquired in detail after their mother, grandfather, etc., and embraced them. Then he also showed such condescension to the lady who accompanied them. Finally, he called the host and hostess, thanked them for the night's lodging, and bestowed generous gifts [upon them].

At his departure, I awaited the emergence of the Monarch at the door of the house. Coming towards me, His Majesty stood still and said to me: "I

thank you and I am well pleased to have become acquainted with you.” Thereupon, in a voice of paternal sympathy [he said]: “Tell me, are you and your family happy?” With tears of deep feeling and gratitude to a dear father and Monarch, I answered in the affirmative. His Majesty bowed and seated himself in his carriage.

At that instant, a Nogai thrust several assignats [paper money] of the old currency into B.J.J.D...sch’s hands. The Monarch looked at them and said, “Ah! These are from the old currency. They are now illegal. How many are there?”

D...sch told him there were two hundred fifty rubles.

Mon. “Give him...”

D...sch ordered S...ky to do this. Thereupon, the Monarch bowed and set out on his further journey.

On this day the Monarch had dinner at the estate of a landowner, Prudnitzky, on Utluk Creek, a 60 werst journey from the [Mennonite] colonies. A.D.S., whom I met soon after, told me that a discussion of the Mennonites began at the dinner table. A.D. said he had told the Monarch that he had requested me to find a Mennonite family for him to send to his village in the Tambov Province, to manage a cattle breeding operation. To that the Monarch replied:

I wish you success. Perhaps Fadeiev will fulfill your wish, but I doubt about its success. Every Mennonite who settles here seeks prosperity, not only for himself but also for his descendants. In the midst of his brethren he finds himself as in his original fatherland. They help him in time of need and familiarize him with the local conditions and circumstances. With you, however, far away from his brothers, he would be deprived of these comforts. Besides, I don’t believe that their church would agree to relinquish one of their good people, because of the danger that foreign practices and vices would prove corrupting to such a person. And for the bad ones you would have no use.”

This farsighted conclusion of the Monarch was confirmed by the results; for in spite of all my efforts, I could not convince one of my Mennonite acquaintances of good character to accept this obligation.

A.F...w.

Notes

¹David H. Epp, *Johann Cornies. Züge aus seinem Leben und Wirken* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Echo Verlag, 1946), p. 137.

²Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood In Russia (1789-1910)*. Trans. from the German (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), pp. 173-75

³*Ibid.*, p.175.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 193-94.

⁵The German text reads: “Die erste Ansiedlung von Mennonisten bestand auf dieser Reise in der Fern eines Mennonisten Steinbach genannt.” This is undoubtedly a reference to the Mennonite village of Steinbach in the Molotschna Colony.

⁶His Majesty is rendered "S.M." (*Seine Majestät*) in the original.

⁷"C...us" is no doubt a reference to Samuel Contentius of the Guardians Committee. On Contentius and the work of the Guardians Committee, see James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789-1889)" (Oxford: Unpublished D. Phil. dissertation, 1978), pp. 138-41; 190-91. There are other names in the MS which are indicated by initials or first and last letters. While the identity of these persons is unknown to us, this does not detract from the substance of Fadeiev's account.

⁸Identity of H.J...w unknown to us.

⁹This landlord is no doubt Johann Cornies. See Epp, *Johann Cornies*, p. 137. See also Agronomist Gavels's obituary of Johann Cornies, published in a supplement to the *Unterhaltungsblatt* of October, 1848. Gavel notes that Alexander I visited Cornies in 1825.

¹⁰A body of cavalry armed with lances that formed part of the German army.

¹¹Empress Catherine II, who reigned from 1762 to 1796.

¹²Emperor Paul, who in 1800 issued the Charter of Privileges.