

# Tracking Our History in the Soviet Union

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## Translator's Introduction

Mennonite historians writing about Russian Mennonites from a North American perspective usually use the experience of the Molotshna and Chortitza colonies as a sort of master narrative to define the experience of Mennonites in Russia. This narrative usually ends with the migration to Canada in the 1920's. However, this narrative is neither the end of Russian Mennonite experience in Russia, nor is it particularly inclusive. On the one hand, many Mennonites remained behind in Russia after the migration. On the other hand, Mennonites had spread through a significant portion of the vast Russian empire by the time of the revolution. By 1914 a string of Mennonite villages followed the Trans-Siberian Railway past the Ural mountains eastward. They centered around Omsk and Slovgorod. While some of these village inhabitants made their way to Moscow in the 1920s to join the Canadian<sup>1</sup> and Fernheim, Paraguay,<sup>2</sup> migration, many stayed behind. Mennonites from the Ukraine and elsewhere<sup>3</sup> were added to this group in the 1940's when German speaking people were exiled or banned eastward. Flourishing institutional and business life had faded away as a result of communist policies in the 1930's. Spiritual nurture was limited to small, secretive groups meeting in homes.<sup>4</sup> However, after the war the reorganisation process began. The story of this renewal is recounted in the following series of articles published by *Hilfskomitee Aquila*, the Aquila Aid Society.<sup>5</sup>

Hilfskomitee Aquila is a mission organization founded by members of Mennonite congregations in Germany. These congregations were formed by Aussiedler, or settlers from the Soviet Union or Russia. The Aquila leadership was born in Siberia and Kasachstan after the World War II era. They were nurtured in those churches which their parents and grandparents painstakingly crafted after the second world war. They are the generation that forms the bridge between the need to re-evangelize the remaining Mennonite populace (which is what those early churches of the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's did) and the need to reach out beyond the Mennonite world. They are a bilingual generation who have taken advantage of the fall of the communist regime to migrate to Germany and use the resources they have acquire there to carry on the ministry in Siberia and Kasachstan. They provide resources to the churches so that they can evangelise the vast Siberian region. Recent ventures have included trips to the Kamchatka peninsula, summer riverboat missions along rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean, and even Snowmobile treks in winter. They provide food, clothing, medical supplies, building supplies, literature, sound equipment, computers, etc. They also organize short term trips from Germany to help in camps, orphanages, construction work, and on evangelistic trips.

The *Aquila Rundbrief* is the quarterly newsletter of this mission organization. In 1997 they began publishing a series of articles about their spiritual history. The first article is a biographical sketch of one of the early leaders. The second article is a historical overview of the churches in the Omsk region. The third discusses church development in Kasachstan. There was a great deal of interaction between Mennonites and Russian Baptists -- including some conflict. However, this joint effort from decades ago helped set the stage for the present situation when so many Mennonites have left yet continue to provide support for these churches via the Aquila mission organization. There are many more articles in later issues that give more details right up to the present. Some are thematic, covering topics like the development of music, children's work, etc. in the churches. Others talk about specific leaders and/or congregations.

When I read the historical articles, I felt they ought to be translated so that Mennonite historians in North America could use the information to add to the still unfolding story of Mennonite life in Russia. Interestingly, as a result of the evangelistic efforts supported by Aquila, it is as ethnically diverse as the work in North America. Both the indigenous peoples of Siberia and Russian nationals are being reached. This little known slice of ongoing Russian Mennonite history deserves to become part of our wider story.

### **I Johannes Dyck, "Here in Karaganda was my Field of Work"<sup>6</sup>**

Many brothers and sisters in Karaganda fondly recall Peter Bergmann (1898-1979). He became a spiritual father and example for many young men, who at the ages of sixteen or seventeen were sent to Karaganda as part of the "Trudarmee" during the war years. Until the 1970's he served the Lord and the church with many

blessings. His wife Tina (1896-1976) was faithful at his side. In the summer of 1976 Peter and Tina Bergmann celebrated their golden anniversary. One of their guests, Arpad Arder of Estonia, recounted their life. Their daughter, Maria Bergmann of Bielefeld, made available the recording from that occasion to serve as the basis of this article.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Mennonites from Ukraine settled in the Orenburg village Number 14, Pretoria. The poorest were the first to settle and the more wealthy followed. Among them was Tina Neufeld who was to become the wife of Peter Bergmann. Her parents belonged to the Mennonite Church whose elder, Peter Dyck, was born again. He preached very well. At his suggestion, Bible studies were begun in the church. A revival resulted. Many people were saved, among them Tina's parents. This disturbed some in the village who felt that conversion was unnecessary. Tina's parents joined the Mennonite Brethren church in the neighbouring village of Kamyschewo. Tina was saved at the age of eight or nine as a result of the preaching of a missionary. At age fifteen she was baptised. Peter and Tina Bergmann were married on June 26, 1926. Before the wedding they had hardly known each other. She had often seen him on the platform and had heard him preach. He had heard her sing solos. From the Lord and by the Lord was how Peter described his marriage fifty years later. The wedding was large with the whole village invited and church elder David Janzen performing the ceremony. Peter Bergmann recalled that the wedding sermon was based on Jude 2, "Mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance."

This wish of blessing came from a Bible schoolteacher. When the Mennonite Brethren Bible School in Crimea was closed down, former students from Tschongrav began a school in the Orenburg settlement. Peter Bergmann studied there. When this school was also closed in January of 1926, Peter had to look for new employment. He belonged to the poorer social classes. In official documents his social origins were described as "poor" and his social situation as "servant."

The rough times had begun. The position of preachers was dangerous. Shortly after the wedding, Peter and Tina Bergmann lost their rights as citizens. At that time such people were considered to be voiceless. After that the church was closed and the building confiscated. Peter Bergmann was the only preacher left - all the rest were arrested. There were no more formal worship services, however if someone wanted to be baptised or there was a funeral Peter Bergmann was called upon. The authorities responded with fines. Finally these could no longer be met. Despite his social designation, Peter Bergmann was tried several times, but always released. The last trial was open. It occurred in the former church building. The judge came from the regional city of Orenburg. The charge was theft. In the village the real situation was well known. Someone had helped themselves to property from the Kolchosa and was blaming the theft on the disenfranchised. Even before the process the investigating judge was clear, "For people like this there is no place in Soviet territory. They will be destroyed!" Even on this occasion Peter Bergmann remained free. Finally an acquaintance in the village authority warned that on the next occasion he would not get off.

Peter Bergmann reported, "We brought the matter to the Lord. First the house had to be sold and, believe it or not, a buyer came the next day! Household effects were sold by lottery. Then we left Orenburg and came to the Pichugino Station in southern Ukraine. There we were accepted into a Kolchose in a miraculous way. In the first year (1934) it was extremely difficult. We managed only because we knew it was God's way. We had even built a house. And then came the war."

The war brought separation to the Bergmann family. It lasted exactly five years to the day and hour. The father was inducted into the Trudarmee and sent to Solikamsk. There he was a carpenter for three months, then in a brigade for the weakened for a further three months, and in a hospital for the final three months. Then he was documented and sent to Kustanai. He wanted to go to Orenburg but the Lord led elsewhere. At this time at the age of 44 he was so weak that it took fourteen hours to travel three kilometres. He could not remember the names of his relatives. In the NKVD his age was revised ten years upward and his birth year documented as 1888.

In Kustanaj a miracle occurred. Peter Bergman stated, "I became a guard on the Bachtscha (a field) armed with a rattle. Within fourteen days I could run. Everything that grew on the Bachtscha I could eat." People occasionally brought him small gifts. He was paid with eggs and milk. In time he managed to gather seven sacks of dried bread - riches in that day. On December 31, 1943 he was suddenly recalled and brought to Karaganda.

Peter Bergmann continues, "In January I arrived in Karaganda and in the spring I was able to visit a church for the first time. The entire time since Orenburg - ten years until 1944 - I was never in a single church service. It was a Russian congregation. First I told the story of my conversion. I was unable to do more (in Russian). Then someone gave me a Russian New Testament and I memorised Psalm 23. On the next occasion I preached on that text. This Psalm described my life and my experiences in coming to the Lord particularly well. The sermon divisions were: suffering under the weight of sin, becoming free from the weight of sin, salvation without the weight of sin. Then I was sent to Michailowka (a part of the city of Karaganda) and from there I was free to travel.

In 1945 many Germans came from Poland and there was a great revival. There I preached in German, in homes. At that time there was a fair amount of freedom. We congregated. The Russian congregation was not yet registered. Before registration we gathered in this way: all windows were covered, all the doors were closed, no benches were carried. The church was very small, there were only a few sisters. Boards were placed across metal bed frames. All the young attenders stood on tables at the front and the house was extremely crowded. I sweated. The church was led by Iwanowitsch Kolesnikow. He had a good memory. If he greeted someone once he always remembered their first and last name. With the Germans we always had services in the homes.

When after five years the family came to Karaganda I had a half a pail of potatoes. I lived in one room with four other people. My wife came with five children. The youngest was six and the oldest was old enough to work. In Karaganda I found

brothers and sisters (believers) and preached for two years. Here in Karaganda was my field of work.”

## **II Jakob Penner, “The Ninety Year Jubilee of the Independent Conference of Churches in the Omsk Region”<sup>7</sup>**

The ninety year jubilee of the German Conference in the Omsk region took place on June 8, 1997 on the familiar property of Brother and Sister Langemann in the birch forest in the village of Iwanowka. The theme of this festive gathering was from I Samuel 7:12: “Hitherto has the Lord helped us.” Approximately 6000 members and guests from the surrounding villages and other regions met at 10:00. A joint choir of over 200 singers served. Many photographic displays and other information from these years could be seen at the entrance to the huge tent. There were also newspaper articles from the time when atheism battled the region by portraying the churches and their leaders in a negative light. In the morning Brother Peter Epp from Issil-Kul rehearsed the history of the brotherhood from 1906 to 1987. In the afternoon Brother Peter Langemann from Iwanowka described the period of freedom from 1988 to 1997. Choral and group music, testimonies, and remembrances fleshed out the reports of the brothers. Both segments ended with invitational messages by Brother Johann Wall from Waldheim and Brother Nikolaj Dueckmann from Marjanowka. Many souls were touched and accepted the friendly invitation of the Saviour to follow him. During the lunch break coffee and cake, prepared by the brothers and sisters was available for everyone. I would like to pass on parts of the historical presentations.

The first Russian Baptist believers in Omsk were the Beljaew and Bulgakow families and Sister Dejewka who prayed for revival in 1896. The first Russian congregation was begun in 1899 under the leadership of A.L. Jewstratenko in the village of Usowo. The first Mennonites came to the Omsk region in 1897 and began their first Mennonite Brethren congregation in 1901 in the village of Tschunajewka. The church elder was Brother Heinrich Ewert. The first German Baptists came to the region in 1904 and founded their first congregation in Hoffnungstal under the leadership of Marten Krueger. From 1906 to 1912 a large stream of settlers came to the Omsk region and settled along the newly constructed trans-Siberian railway. Before them lay the vast Siberian steppe and a spiritual vacuum which they sought to make productive.

In 1907 three conferences were founded at approximately the same time. Congregations from the station Tokuschi to St. Tatarka belonged to the Mennonite Brethren conference. Their descendants are part of the present conference. Headquarters was at Tschunajewka with Preacher Jakob Wiens until 1913. From 1913 to 1929 the headquarters moved to Margenau. During this time the brotherhood was led by Elder Jakob Huebert. In 1913 there were 10 congregations at Tschunajewka, Kremlof, Smoljanowka, Masljanowka, Kornejewka, Margenau, Solnzewka, Apollonowka and Friesenhof. Joint services or conferences were held monthly.

The following congregations belonged to the conference of German Baptists: Hoffnungstal, Halbstadt, Trubezkoje, Scherbakuul, Babajlowka, Mironowka, and Wodjanoje with headquarters in Hoffnungstal. They were led by Brother Martin Krueger. In 1918 this conference expanded to Altaj and parts of Kasachstan. The first congress of Russian Baptists in Omsk occurred in 1905. They were led by Gawriil Iwanowitsch Masaew who had recently settled in Ppropowlowsk. In 1907, during the third congress the Siberian division of the Baptist conference consisting of nineteen delegates and led by G.I. Masajew with headquarters in Omsk was called into being. The churches from North Kazachstan and Altai region belonged to this conference.

At the beginning of the 20th century services were held in schools. By 1907 the first church buildings were built. A church seating 300 was built on leased property in Margenau. This building was turned into a club by the communists in 1930. In Hoffnungstal a 500-seat sanctuary was built with the help of a loan. This building burned down at the end of the 1920's. In the city of Omsk a 2,500-seat sanctuary was built with funds provided by Masajews. The communists turned it into a police station. In 1990 this building was returned to the Baptist church.

During the First World War Russian Germans and Russian Baptists were seen as collaborators with the Germans. The German language was forbidden. After the October Revolution a law separating church and state was passed. This provided freedom for evangelistic preaching. The separation of schools from the churches brought difficulties for schools conducted in German. The collectivization process brought difficulties for believers to live together. Despite the difficulties, a lot of church growth was noticeable.

Joint worship services began to be held. Particularly in winter there were itinerant preachers who travel from village to village. Brother Jakob Wall explained the plan of salvation in the churches. Brother Ostermann, a former Austrian prisoner of war, who was saved in Halbstadt, travelled around the villages as an evangelist. Brother Hammer, pastor from Babajlowka, travel 300 wersts by camel in the winter of 1927 visiting the congregations. Brother A.L. Jewstratenko, pastor from Omsk, reported at a Russian Baptist workers conference that in 1926 there were 34 evangelists who conducted 4250 days worth of meetings in 1150 locations, travelling 8500 kilometres. Brother Schelochowskij travelled 1300 kilometres on a bicycle and Brother Podsewnij walked 140 kilometres in order to spread the gospel. Brother Daniel Prizkau was on the road from October 26, 1926 to March 27, 1927. Brother W.P. Stepanow visited 21 locations in a month and a half and recorded 580 conversions. During the prayer week there was a lot of emphasis on praying for revival and holiness and the Lord answered the prayers of his children. The revival began in Hoffnungstal where 60 people were saved in one evening. In the next service another 105 people were saved. In Halbstadt 40 people were saved, in Moskalenki it was 19, and in Aleksejewka there were 30. In 1927 on Pentecost 103 people were baptised in Hoffnungstal. Present on the occasion were 1000 witnesses and 160 horse-drawn wagons. The examination of the baptismal candidates lasted from 8:00 in the morning until 2200 hours in the evening. 53 people were baptised in the

summer in Moskalenki, 54 in Neufeld, 35 in Aleksejewka and 30 in Babajlowka. In total, 290 people were baptised. In 1909 Brother Franz Wiens, the son of Jakob Wiens, and his wife went to India as missionaries. They stayed until 1914.

Choral singing was an integral part of the churches and choirs were begun as soon as the churches were started. The first choir festival consisting of choirs from Tschunajewka, Kremlow, Margenau and Friesenhof was held in 1910. By 1914 there were seven choirs, in 1919 there were four in Margenau, and in 1922 there were six in Heimatal. In the German Baptist conference a conductors' board was organized in 1923. Their duties included establishing courses in conducting, support for choirs without conductors, the learning of new songs (In three years 80 new songs were learned.) and the organizing of choir tours. The choirs from Babajlowka and Mironowka were particularly active in this organization. In 1926 the German Baptists had their first choral festival in Halbstadt. Six choirs with 133 singers participated. By 1400 hours 500 people appeared. 68 songs were sung. Beginning in 1910 there were preaching workshops in Margenau. In 1927 the workshops were held at Appolonowka. In 1926 the conductors' workshop was held in Margenau.

The churches grew and flourished. In 1928 the German brotherhood had a membership of 1776. The Russian Baptists had 88 church buildings and held services in 518 in 1926. They had a membership of 17,614. Brotherly fellowship existed between the three conferences. Joint choir festivals were held. Brother Jakob Wall visited the Russian churches as a preacher. Brother Jakob Wiens participated in the ordination of R.B. Jewstratenko. The Russian and German Baptists formed a joint conference in 1927.

In the 1920's the church was weakened by Mennonite immigration to America. The worst evil came in 1929 with the new law regarding religious organizations. Preaching outside of church buildings was forbidden. Church life was strictly controlled and influenced by the state. Every course and instruction was forbidden. Bible studies and Sunday Schools were no longer permitted. In 1930 most church buildings were closed and many leaders were arrested. By 1937 all church leaders had been arrested and all churches had been closed. Most of the brothers never returned from their imprisonment. At the outbreak of World War Two all capable men and women were drafted into the "work army." Open church life was ruined. All activities were crippled. Faithfulness unto death, fervent prayer in tribulation, clinging to family devotions on the one side, and fear, coldness, falling away characterized this period.

### **III Peter Ens, Andreas Wiebe, Peter Hamm and Viktor Fast, "From the History of the Churches in Kasachstan."<sup>8</sup>**

In the 1930's and 1940s demoted kulaks, exiles, prisoners, deportees and members of the work army came to the region. Believers and/or German-speaking Russians always represented a large part of this stream. After the war a portion of this forcibly resettled group was settled in work camps at Saran, Wolnaja, Dubowka,

Aktas and elsewhere to the southeast of Karaganda. Later, in 1954 Saran was included in the city limits. When the first settlers arrived there wasn't even a hut on the empty steppe. With the help of tractors, two pits were dug and covered with branches. These pits became the living quarters - one for the men and one for the women.

There were believers who called out to God in their need amongst the very first group of prisoners. At least ten Russian brothers and sisters who served the Lord were known to be there in 1947. They were the couples Banikow, Besdetko, Larin, and Prokopjew and the sisters Archipowa and Soplina. Later others joined. Sister Grunja Archipowa is the only member of this group who still lives in Saran. In order to attend church services they had to walk 30 Km to Kopaj (a part of Karaganda). Here there was a mud hut that had been a stable that served as Baptist church. This presented difficulties for the older people, although they seized every opportunity to have fellowship with other children of God. When the weather permitted entire families travelled the distance on bicycles. In addition to this, they began to assemble in homes in Dubowka in the 1940's. At the same time German speaking people of Lutheran and Mennonite background began having services in German.

The services were simple and lively. There was a lot of singing, scripture was read and explained simply with applications to the current situation. After years of drought and loneliness, the people were eager to receive the milk of evangelism and to lean on God in their difficulty. In the Russian group, which was led by Brother Desdetko, a difficult internal situation arose in 1950. A brother Browarenko infiltrated the Baptist group. He was a good preacher and split away with a few followers to form a Pentecostal group.

In 1951 Andreas (Heinrich) and Katharina Wiebe moved from Karaganda to Saran. Both had been saved in 1950 and attended the evening services begun in private homes in the Schachtiner region by the Kopaj group. They found the move difficult but after prayer and fasting they were encouraged by Brother Robert Knauz. Soon after, in 1952, Kornelius and Olga Reimer and E. Ewert joined them. There three families met amongst themselves for a time. Then they heard about the Russian and German services in Dubowka. After that they attended these services which were held alternatively in Saran, Dubowka, and the coal mine 106. The Russian and German believers sometimes met together and sometimes met separately with the Germans meeting in Saran and the Russians meeting in Dubowka. Christian gatherings had to be held secretly at this time and families like the Bartels, Kronhardts and others who offered their homes for these purposes took a big risk. Some of the brothers and sisters were very daring with their testimonies. It was noteworthy that repentance occurred after only a short discussion about scripture. As a result, conversions were frequent. There were no official elders or leaders but everything was done in an orderly way and blessing was experienced. After a while the congregation was led by others. Peter Bergmann from Karaganda frequently visited the group and provided preaching and teaching. In the spring of 1953, Karl and Anna Goetz, who had been saved in 1952 in Karaganda, came to Saran and became active participants. In 1954, after two years of waiting, the Brothers Wiebe and Goetz were

baptised. Immediately after this Brother Goetz began to preach regularly in the large services (approximately 1000 participants) in Kopaj.

In 1956 it was possible to build a new church in the same location in Kopaj. However, a number of unbiblical restrictions particularly among German believers who did not understand much Russian, including the forbidding of meeting to be conducted in German, even private ones, led to the wish for a new church in Karaganda. This Mennonite Brethren Church was organized in 1957. In 1956 the families Goetz and Reimer left Saran and moved to Woroschilowka bei Tschu where they found a new ministry in church planting. They returned to Saran in 1959. In 1957 Andreas (Heinrich) and Elisabeth Zorn came from Altaj to Saran and joined the M.B. church. In the summer, Heinrich Penner, a preacher in the M.B. church, baptised Peter and Erna Friesen, Margareta Warkentin, and Lena Penner in Karagandinka. These brothers and sisters attended the services of the German Baptists and a few churchly Mennonites (General Conference). The first choir sang for Christmas in 1957. It consisted of 12 to 15 singers and was led by Brother Jakob Thiessen, a later elder of the Mennonite Church in Karaganda. Among the first singers were Jakob and Agathe Bartel, Frieda Hildebrandt, Elisabeth and Katharina Peters, Jakob, Maria, and Katharina Thiessen, Heinrich and Katharina Wiebe, Georg Wiens, Heinrich and Elisabeth Zorn. Later, sister Tina Peters led the singing. In 1958 21 people were baptised. In the same year at the harvest festival a split occurred between the German members in Saran and the church in Kopaj. As usual everyone gathered in Kopaj for the special service. The evening celebration had been planned for the Bergmann home. The elders of the church in Kopaj warned the leaders in Saran not to meet in private homes. Some members obeyed but most of the Germans gathered anyway and experienced a rich blessing. As a result, the Wiebes and others left the Baptist church and joined the M.B. church in Karaganda. The German group in Saran became an affiliate of that church and often received visits from the preachers.

The leadership of the M.B. church recognized the need to ordain preachers in Saran so that they could lead the independent services, have communion and conduct marriages and baptisms. After a number of council and congregational meetings the brothers Zorn and Wiebe were selected. On May 10, 1959, David Klassen and Franz Ediger were ordained as preachers. With this move the group in Saran became substantially independent and could nourish the faith. On October 11 a house warming and thanksgiving service was held at the newly built home of the Wiebes (at Gastello 29). Three choirs from Number 33, Kirsawod (a suburb of Karaganda) and Saran sang. However, persecution from the Soviet government was increasing. Teachers and deputies visited the services, participants were recorded, and congregations were warned or disallowed. In 1962 arrests and trials occurred. As a result the congregation at Saran was disbanded and the Zorns and Knaus families moved to Belowodsk in Kirgisia. Those who were able again began attending the services in Kopaj. Some older people even took taxis.

When K. Goetz came back to Saran in 1959 he joined a different group that also met in homes. Since most of the participants were Russian, the services were held in

Russian. Brothers Goetz and Stigunow were the unofficial leaders of this group, which belonged to Kopaj. In Kopaj, Karl Goetz and Johann Koop became translators for the newly established German sermons.

On August 21, 1963 Brother Heinrich Wiebe was set free from a work prison and the group from the M.B. church met in the evening at the home of Liese Peters to celebrate her birthday. With this event, despite still being forbidden, the German meetings began again. Meetings with Russian believers also became more frequent. In effect, the two groups joined despite the coercion. Under H. Wiebe's leadership the choir sang again.

In 1963 Brother Goetz built a house at 23 Komsomolskaja. In the right-hand corner he placed a stone and told his wife, "This house will become a house of God." By the end of 1963 the brothers Goetz and Strigunow were elected as leader and substitute of the church. The change in arrangements attempted by Elder Posharitzky resulted in Brother Strigunow's death. After that Brother Goetz proposed registering the congregation and began working towards obtaining a church building. After the purchase of a house in Samostrojka was forbidden, a large house in Finskij Posjolok was obtained. The roof was raised and a vaulted ceiling was built so that the interior was up to 6.5 metres high. The work was done with joy and united the members of both groups. At this point the city council began heated opposition against Baptists and the city court expropriated the house. Despite the positive reaction of the council for religious opportunities in Moskau, the house was confiscated in 1965 and renovated into a Kindergarten.

This development caused consternation and some of the members no longer wanted to pursue registration. Brothers who supported the organizational committee (that had constituted and united the church, at the second level of Baptist leadership, who had spoken harshly against the state limitations on church work and opposed registration on the basis of existing religious laws) visited the church in Saran and warned against joining the registered body.

As a result, a congregational meeting was held which resulted in the division of the church. H. Wiebe announced that they would meet in private homes upon the invitations of hosts. K. Goetz announced that they would continue to work on registration despite everything and services would be held regularly at his house at 23 Komosomolskaja. Slightly more than half the group (over seventy) gathered around H. Wiebe. Most of the singers who were part of the choir conducted by H. Wiebe were part of this group, as were most of those who preached like Peter Friesen, Johann Pauls (who later became leader of the Bible mission for Slavic evangelism), Abram Braun, Peter Letkemann, Johann Klassen and others. Brother Wiebe served communion from 1964 to 1966 when the group joined Church 33 which was a division of the Karaganda M.B. Church. Christian writings and song books were duplicated via Hektograph. K. Goetz did not become discouraged and began to have services in his home. A stage was set up and Bible verses appeared on the wall. Despite being forbidden by city authorities and molestation by the police, the services continued regularly. Brother Peter Weyer from Karaganda was invited to form a choir which soon beautified the services. Brother Peter Weyer led

this choir for approximately 15 years even though it meant travelling from Karaganda two or three times per week on the bus. On the 5th or 6th of November of 1965 Karl Goetz had the long-awaited opportunity to present the request for the registration of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church in Saran and the recognition of its executive council and elders. This was a victory for him, but also the beginning of a new battle. The church grew and the inside walls of his house had to be removed so that the entire house became the church. The Goetz family had to move into another house. A couple named Obuchow moved into a small house next door in order to guard and heat the church. Bible studies and prayer meetings were begun, as well as a regular children's and youth ministry. It must be noted that spiritual instruction of children and youth (Bible studies were considered a form thereof) was strictly forbidden by Soviet law. The first youth leader was Jelena Gargulja. In March of 1966 Karl Goetz was ordained as elder and Kornelius Reimer, Johann Goerzen and Ewald Grundmann were ordained as deacons by Waschtzchuk Makarij Stepanowitsch, Pasyharitsky Pjotr Iwanowitsch and Gerhard Harder. In 1966 12 people from Saran were baptised in a baptistery in Kopaj by Brother Goetz. The other church also had baptismal candidates.

The contact between the two churches in Saran was never entirely severed. Many visited services in both locations. The leading brothers had a good relationship and felt that they belonged together. They worked along side one another but never against each other. So, in November, 1966 there was a joint council meeting. Everyone felt it would be better to have one congregation in Saran. The acceptance occurred according to Romans 15:7. It was announced that German services led by Brother Wiebe would be held in the church building on Sunday afternoons. The German choir sang in these services. The joint choir, which had now become larger and stronger, sang in the Russian services. A little later, Johann Pauls became the leader of the large youth group. He began an orchestra and youth choir. The church grew and had 171 members by the end of 1967. The church building was too small and in 1970 there was an opportunity, against the will of the authorities, to buy a neighbouring house. As a result, the church could be substantially renovated. The walls were raised by a meter, the ceiling was vaulted, and an upper area was created that had room for about 300 children. At the dedication of the renovated building 32 people, mostly youth, were saved. The Lord's blessing was given and confirmed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My father and his sister joined his uncle's family on this trek in 1929.

<sup>2</sup> I have translated the memoirs of Abram Klassen who went to Paraguay from Siberia at this time.

<sup>3</sup> Several of my mother's relatives were sent east of the Urals from Belorussia where they

had been living since the mid-1930's, including the parents of Jakob Penner who is one of the directors of Aquila.

<sup>4</sup> This was the only form of church life my mother had known until she arrived in Germany in 1943. Her older sisters have told of being baptised secretly by their uncle in a forest in Belorussia.

<sup>5</sup> I became aware of Aquila and began receiving the newsletters right at its inception. Jakob Penner, one of the directors, is my cousin. He visited Canada shortly after immigrating to Germany and again in 1998. I visited him in Germany in 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Originally published as: Johannes Dyck, "Auf den Spuren unserer Geschichte: Dokumentensammlung zur Geschichte der Gemeinden in und um Karaganda," *Aquila-Rundbrief*, 3 (25) July-September, 1997, pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Originally published as: Jakob Penner, "Aus der Geschichte der Gemeinden in Sibirien," *Aquila - Rundbrief*, 3 (25) July-September, 1997, pp. 10-12.

<sup>8</sup> Originally published as: Peter Ens, Andreas Wiebe, Peter Hamm and Viktor Fast, "Aus der Geschichte der Gemeinden in Kasachstan," *Aquila - Rundbrief*, 3 (25) July-September, 1997, pp. 13-19.