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Part I

The Legacy of Mennonites in Poland

Part II

Mennonite Migration to Manitoba – 1870s

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The Polish Mennonite history, that is the 250 years from the 1530s to the late 18th century, is a largely ignored part of our Mennonite story. This era covers more than half the time span from Menno Simons until today. It is no wonder that it has had a powerful influence on shaping subsequent Mennonite reality. In this presentation I will discuss some of the ways in which this legacy has shaped and continues to shape Mennonite identity up to the present.

Fortunately, in the past few years, a number of excellent studies about this history have been published in English. One study is by Peter Klassen of Fresno California and the other two by Jantzen and Thiesen of Bethel College, Newton, Kansas. The last one is a recent published translation in English of an older work.


First let me show a few maps that will orient us to the geography of the region we will be discussing. [Find these maps at the end of this document, pp.20-22]

**Beginnings**

It is important to note that the Polish Mennonite story transmitted the sixteenth century Anabaptist story and vision to us. In many areas of Europe, the initial burst of Anabaptist activity was crushed by fierce persecution - and the movements died out. This happened in large parts of central and south Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Not so for the Mennonite movement in the Low Countries, present day Netherlands and Belgium. True, Mennonite Anabaptism in what is today Belgium was crushed, and the Flemish Mennonites who survived moved north into what is today the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, however, Mennonites groups were able to survive through the persecution era which lasted up to about 1580.

After 1580, Mennonites were grudgingly tolerated by the new independent Dutch government which was Reformed by religion. During the following century, that is during the seventeenth
century, Dutch Mennonites increased in membership, and became a wealthy, well-established part of Dutch society.

Up to about 1580, the severe persecution in the Low Countries by the Spanish emperors Charles V (1500-1558), followed by his son Philip II, (1519 – 1598) forced many Mennonites to find places of refuge. Some found refuge in the Danzig and Vistula River areas of Poland. The Polish kings and nobles, when they saw the bloody religious wars in western Europe between Catholics and Protestants, had decided to be tolerant, and not go to war over religious differences. Mennonites were thus able to find places of refuge on the estates of Catholic and Protestant landowners in Poland.

Mennonites who migrated to Poland gave the Anabaptist vision organizational and community forms so that it could last for centuries. Mennonites in the Danzig - Vistula River areas organized churches, founded schools, set up institutions to care for widows and orphans, and organized fire insurance institutions. They translated vision into everyday, ongoing institutions that could meet the needs of the day, and continue the Mennonite faith vision from generation to generation.

Let us now look at some of the characteristics and features of the Mennonite communities that developed during these 250 years in Poland. As we will see, many of these ideas and institutions continue to shape and influenced Mennonites today. I will refer to this 250 year history as Polish, since during this whole time, from the 1530s to 1772, Mennonites lived under the jurisdiction of the King of Poland. The Prussian phase of this history, which began in 1772, was of quite a different character, and resulted in the emigration to Russia starting in 1789. We heard that story yesterday.

A. Survival
One of the characteristics of the Polish Mennonites was their struggle to survive. Mennonites left the Low Countries, that is, present-day Netherlands and Belgium, because of serious persecution – their lives were literally in danger. The Spanish overlords in the Low Countries saw every attempt at religious and social reform as a threat to their authority. They ruthlessly hunted down every reformer, and whoever was captured was executed.

When Mennonites arrived in Danzig and the Polish regions of the country on one of the many merchant ships sailing between Amsterdam and Danzig, they were at first not welcomed. Danzig, which became Lutheran in 1525, forbade Mennonites from settling in the city, an order which was never rescinded. Mennonites had to learn to negotiate with land owners, government officials, and church dignitaries for the right to rent farm land. What saved Mennonites was that they knew how to drain land below sea level. With this skill, they were able to “buy” their right to exist as a minority religion.

In 1642 Mennonites finally negotiated a Privilegium with the King of Poland that gave them the right to the live in the Kingdom of Poland under certain conditions. These rights were based on a century of negotiating with many local officials. Mennonites had become skilled at dealing with restrictive laws, and unsympathetic church and government officials. This skill, and the determination to survive and even succeed against great odds, has become a Mennonite characteristic, and can be seen in Mennonites in many countries today, where they have negotiated rights of settlement, including Russia, Canada, USA, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, etc.

Throughout this 250 year Polish era, Mennonites continued to see themselves as pilgrims who were not tied to any land or country. Mennonites had no homeland. If one place or country did
not work out for some reason, they are willing to move. This can be seen when Prussia took over the region. Many were willing to move to Russia and start over again.

B. Church
Central to Menno Simons’ view of being Christian was the church. It is in the church that Christians find their identity, and where their faith is shaped and given form. It is within the context of the church that they relate to God.

In the modern world of the enlightenment and post-enlightenment, Christian faith is often seen individualistically. Some speak about a personal faith in Jesus in terms that almost ignores community. Salvation may be seen as complete without discipleship. Many of our hymns have a strong “God and I, or “Jesus and me” emphasis. This personal connection has its place in that it affirms the individual, but it can also distort the gospel if it is not rooted in community.

For Mennonites in Poland, faith had a strong communal meaning. Faith in Christ meant being part of a community that proclaimed that Christ is Lord - it transformed their relationship to people, both within and outside of the church. Faith in Christ meant being part of a persecuted minority, who supported each other in the face of danger.

Mennonites in Poland viewed the church as people, not hierarchy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all other churches were hierarchical, with authority residing at the top: in archbishops, bishops and the Pope. For Mennonites, authority resided within the membership. The congregation made decisions about who their leaders were, about finances, about where to meet, and how to negotiate with governments.

Leaders were elected, not appointed. They came from within the church. All leaders were unsalaried. They were farmers, crafts people, or businessmen. The central leader was the Ältester, loosely translated as bishop, but literally meaning the elder one. This person lead the church, provided the spiritual direction, kept the church membership books, served communion, baptized new members, and ordained ministers and deacons in their offices.

Ministers, or Lehrer, preached and provided pastoral care for the congregation. Ältester were selected from the group of Lehrer. Deacons provided the financial assistance to members in need, and assisted the Ältester and Lehrer as needed. Song leaders selected hymns, and led the congregation in singing. This system was also an apprenticeship system. Deacons were often chosen from the circle of song leaders, Lehrer from the Deacons, and Ältester from the Lehrer.

Most of our churches today have salaried ministers, but the pattern of lay people volunteering for a myriad of tasks within the church is still alive and well in our congregations. In many so-called conservative Mennonite churches in Canada, USA, and Latin America the Polish pattern of lay unsalaried leadership is still followed. Regardless of the leadership patterns, all Mennonite churches believe that authority resides in the local churches. The church is people, not hierarchy.

Entry into church was by adult baptism upon confession of faith. This followed catechetical instruction. Different catechisms were used over the years, first Dutch ones, then later catechisms written in Poland.

Faith in God and commitment to fellow church members was reaffirmed a number of times during the year in communion services. This was in contrast to the larger churches. Catholic
churches celebrated communion services, or mass, at every worship service. It was the centerpiece of their worship service. For Lutherans, the sermon was the centerpiece of worship services, and communion was not celebrated every Sunday, but maybe monthly. Mennonites in Poland followed the Protestant pattern in which preaching of the word was the centerpiece of the worship service, but they celebrated communion services only two or three times a year.

The role of deacon was especially important. It emphasized that the church provided not only spiritual care and fellowship, but also addressed the practical financial needs of everyday life. This was especially important in an era where the state provided virtually no social or financial services to its citizens. Thus the churches assisted the poor, the widows, those with illnesses, and others who needed help. We today carry on this conviction in many forms of assistance to people in our midst, building institutions for the elderly (e.g. Bethany), establishing mental hospitals (e.g. Eden in Winkler), MCC, MEDA, MDS, and others. Our services now extend far beyond the members of our local congregations, but the principal of assisting the needy has continued.

C. Bible
Menno Simons discovered the excitement of reading the Bible. He rejected those who tried to justify violence on the basis of the Bible, as happened in the Kingdom of Muenster in 1534-35. Menno rejected the Münsterites who viewed visions, dreams and direct revelation from God as more important than the literal word of Scripture. Menno rejected those who spiritualized the Bible to address only the inner soul of the person. Menno believed the Bible should guide the life and beliefs of people in the church, and guide how they ought to relate to friends, strangers, and enemies. For him, Christ was the key for understanding the Bible. On the front page of his writings, he quoted I Cor. 3:11: “For no other foundation can anyone lay, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Mennonites in Poland became people of the book. Whatever the church did and believed needed to be supported by the Bible. Sometimes this resulted in a literalism that we today may find problematic, but its significance was that Mennonites held the Bible in high esteem.

This emphasis on the Bible as the basis of faith and life has continued to shape us even today. Whether Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church, or Old Colonist, the Bible is central, even though we may differ on interpretations and meaning.

D. Language
When Mennonites came as immigrants to Poland in the sixteenth century, they spoke Dutch or Flemish. Over the years their language of conversation and worship changed to Low German and later to High German. Low German was the language of the local Polish German people. It was also the language of the Hanseatic League in the 16th century. It was thus the language of international commerce.

By 1700 Mennonite leaders where complaining that their young people no longer could speak Dutch. The language change happened more rapidly in rural areas, and more slowly in urban areas. The urban areas maintained more contact with the Netherlands.

Today we see Low German as a Mennonite language, but it wasn’t so initially. Mennonites simply learned to speak the language of their neighbours and used it long after the people from whom they learned it gave it up in favour of High German.
For many tens of thousands of Mennonites in Canada, in the mid-USA, and in Latin America, Low German is still their first language – the language of everyday conversation. Its word imagery of a rural, family-centered life, its rich and multi-layered humour, its vivid descriptions of relationships, its indirect references to sensitive topics like sex, birthing, and elimination, and its concrete descriptions of life continue to nurture these people. All of us have become part of an English-speaking world, but with this gain something has also been lost.

Sometimes the Mennonites who use Low German are characterized as being merely “cultural.” This is a false characterization. It’s false because we thus miss the importance of language. Our identity is largely expressed through our language, the words that give voice to our thoughts. Lose the language, and we are cut off from our world of meaning, ritual, and discourse.

A second problem with labeling Low German speakers as cultural Mennonites is that we are all cultural Mennonites. We all live within a culture, use a language, and eat various foods. A church that uses the English language, resides in Canada or in the USA, and uses typical American food is just as “cultural” as the church that uses the Low German language, drives horse and buggy, and eats tortillas. Culture is the vessel, the vehicle, by which we live our daily lives and express our faith in Jesus Christ.

E. Education
Mennonites in Poland were concerned that their children learn to read and write. Since there were as yet no government schools in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mennonites organized their own schools and paid for their up-keep. These schools were co-ed. All girls, as well as boys learned to read and write.

Why did they believe so strongly in education? One reason was that they believed all members needed to be able to read the Bible – to search the scriptures for the truth. In the many interrogations of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, court records indicate that Anabaptist/Mennonites were able to read the Bible, knew it well, and could use it skillfully in debates. This conviction lead to an emphasis on education, and we see this conviction resulting in the formation of primary schools in Poland.

Second, education of all members was necessary in a church which believed that all members were potentially leaders. As noted earlier, all leaders were elected from within the membership. This meant that all members had to learn to read and write so they could continue their self-education, and prepare to take up their roles as Ältester, Lehrer, deacon or song leader if chosen by the church.

A third reason why education was important was they believed the home was crucial for their children’s education and nurture in the faith. Thus, it was important that mothers also be able to read and write and train their children. Mennonites emphasized education for both girls and boys long before Europe generally had co-ed education.

The result was that schools were established in every community, village or district in Poland. This commitment to education has been one of the most enduring legacies, and was taken to Russia, to Canada, to the USA, to Mexico, and beyond.

F. Peace-Nonresistance
Mennonites are known as people of peace. During the First World War virtually all Mennonite men in Canada were exempt from military service because they were part of a peace church. During the Second World War, about two thirds of Mennonite men did alternative service rather
than join the military. They did forestry work, were fire fighters, worked on farms, or served in hospitals. This pattern of rejecting military service goes back to Poland.

The vision for this view of peace and service is in the Bible, and rediscovered by the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Menno Simons made peace one of the central planks of his preaching. A Christian community, he said, is a community of peace, reconciliation, and mission. If we are a community in mission, we cannot hate the brother, and kill him, for he is a potential brother in Christ.

How to express this in an ongoing way in the society was, however, worked out in Poland. After Mennonites had settled in the Danzig – Vistula region, they discovered that both Poland and Danzig frequently went to war. In times of war, the governments demanded that Mennonites also participate. Mennonites refused, saying they believed in peace and not in killing. To kill was to deny their faith in God.

The pattern developed that in times of war, the governments demanded money payments in lieu of military service. These extortions became ever greater. Then, in 1642, in the Privilegium mentioned earlier, Mennonites negotiated with the Polish King the annual payment of a specified sum of money in lieu of military service, and thus were largely freed from irregular extortions.

This exemption from military service was negotiated with every Polish king until 1772. The conviction that war is wrong has characterized Mennonites from then on. However, those who stayed in Poland when it became Prussia, and did not emigrate to Russia, Canada, or the USA, eventually accepted military service. When Hitler’s regime came along, Mennonites in Prussia/Germany no longer had the community faith conviction to resist the demands of the Nazi regime, and so they served in the German army.

Sometimes I wonder whether Mennonites in Canada today are in a similar situation. Do we still have the ability to see through the war propaganda of our governments to realize the inhumanity of war, its inability to deliver what it promises, and its fundamental contradiction of the gospel? After 9/11 are we so concerned about security that we allow our governments to trump the Bible on its teachings about peace?

G. Architecture
Our church architecture is influenced by Mennonites in Poland. A few Mennonite groups, e.g. in Elbing, were able to build churches as early as the late sixteenth century. In most areas, though, congregations were not able to build meeting houses until the early eighteenth century, two hundred years after they had settled in Poland. When permission was granted, the stipulations were that the churches had to be plain, look like houses, and have no bell towers, stained glass windows, or steeples. The government feared that Mennonite churches, if they appeared too prominent, would attract members from other churches.

The result was that Mennonites made a virtue out of necessity. They continued to build simple, plain churches long after they had moved out of Poland. They largely followed similar patterns in Russia, Canada, United States, Mexico, Paraguay, and beyond. Very few Mennonite churches even today have bell towers, steeples, or elaborate stained glass windows. The interiors are often quite plain and unadorned. In many subtle ways, the Polish Mennonite experience in architecture lives on in our church buildings today. The Polish architecture is continued most clearly in the meeting houses of the many conservative, or conserving, churches, in Canada, the United States, and Latin America.
H. Financial and Social service organizations

In 1622, Mennonites in Poland organized their first fire insurance organization in which all members of the church had their property insured. The church appointed a person to head up the fire insurance, called a Brand Ältester or Vorsteher, who together with some helpers administered it on behalf of the church. In case of fire, the insurance paid out 80% of the assessed value of the property to the owner, with the owner paying for 20% of the loss. Church members of course also helped clean up the debris after a fire.

The insurance dues were collected after the fire. All members were assessed their portion of the dues based on the amount of land they owned. Thus wealthy members paid more than less wealthy members. The insurance system had no need to carry large reserves, because all members were assessed an annual fee to cover losses for the year. This system has worked well for hundreds of years. In Manitoba two such Mennonite insurance agencies morphed into commercial insurance institutions in the 1940s, one called the Manitoba Mennonite Mutual Insurance Co., and the other the Red River Valley Mutual Insurance Co. In 1997 they merged into one organization called the Red River Mutual Insurance Co. with offices in Altona and Winnipeg.

The other major social service agency was the Waisenamt, Orphans’ Bureau. The Waisenamt as an organization was first developed in the Chortitza colony in Russia in 1792. Its core purpose was to protect the estates of orphans and widows. Whenever a father or mother died, the estate was assessed, and one third was assigned to the surviving spouse, and the other two thirds was divided equally between all the children, sons and daughters. The estate, or land, need not be sold, but the value was protected, and the cash was deposited in the Waisenamt. In case the surviving spouse remarried, the inheritance of the children was protected.

In cases where there were surviving children who were not of the age of majority, the Waisenamt appointed guardians whose duty was to make sure that the orphaned children were properly cared for. Money for their estates was used to pay for the children’s care. The guardians were also responsible to protect the orphans from abuse or neglect by the surviving spouse, or by new marriage partners. Where both parents died, the guardians found new homes for the orphans.

Since the Waisenamt accumulated considerable cash, and paid a return of 5 percent on the principal to the estate of orphans and widows, it had to loan out the money to earn a return. They loaned money out at 6 percent. The one percent difference was used to pay for overhead costs to manage the Waisenamt. The Waisenamt thus served as a local financial institution, and during the pioneer years in Russia and Canada, protected members from loan sharks and other unscrupulous financial predators.

Although the Waisenamt as an organization did not exist in Poland, the basic inheritance principals were practiced by Mennonites. The basic inheritance principles go back to the sixteenth century Mennonite roots in Flanders. According to those principles, both daughters and sons inherited equally. The estates were divided with one third going to the surviving spouse, and two thirds to the children. The inheritance of minors was protected until they were of the age of majority. The church, and the relatives, would assist children who lost both parents, to find new homes were they would be well taken care of.

As was noted earlier, the deacons played a significant role in Polish Mennonite communities, providing aid to widows, orphans, those who were invalid, and the elderly. The architecture of
the churches in Poland reflected this care for the needy in the community in that the second floor was supported by heavy wooden beams, so that grain could be gathered from members and stored on the second floor for those in need during the winter.

I. The Great Divide
Mennonites in Poland faced the issue of how to relate to their host society which was Lutheran in Danzig, and both German Lutheran and Polish Catholic in the countryside. Furthermore, they were Dutch people in a German and Polish region, who only gradually learned the local language - Low German. They were foreigners who were valued for their skilled trades, ability to drain the land and hard work. But they were also seen as heretics. They were neither Lutheran, nor Catholic nor Reformed, the three major tolerated religions. Even though Poland was a tolerant land, Anabaptist Mennonites were still looked upon with suspicion.

Then, to make matters worse, around 1600, a Sozinian religious reform movement developed in Poland. In many respects its beliefs were similar to those of the Mennonites, except that the Sozinians denied belief in Jesus as divine. Sozinians were Unitarian, whereas Mennonites were trinitarian. For more than a century, Mennonites were accused of being Sozinian, and had to repeatedly defend themselves against accusations that they also denied that Jesus was the Son of God. Had the accusations of heresy stuck, they would have been expelled.

Then their pacifism got them into difficulty. Because Mennonites were exempt from military service, people from other faiths, like Catholics and Lutherans, were not allowed to join the Mennonite church. The government feared that too many would join in order to gain exemption from military service.

The government thus stipulated that in case of a mixed marriage, Mennonite and non-Mennonite, the children would not be exempt from military service. So, some Mennonite groups forbade mixed marriages. Marriage had to be only with another Mennonite, otherwise the peace theology could be lost, and the church’s future would be jeopardized.

Consequently, a divide developed within the Mennonite community. Some saw the host society around them as a threat, a danger to their faith, and they tried to remain separate from it as much as possible. They forbade intermarriage with non-Mennonites.

Others were less critical of the host society, and willing to relate to it at more points. They allowed inter-marriage with non-Mennonites, engaged in businesses, moved into cities where possible, became successful merchants, and eventually entered the cultural life of Danzig and Elbing. Some of these more acculturated Mennonites left the Mennonite church to join Lutheran or Calvinist churches, because this furthered their cultural or business pursuits. This of course confirmed for those opposed to close relations with the society that such relationships were dangerous, and would result in a weakening, or demise, of the church.

One could identify these two factions as conservatives and progressives, with the conservatives suspicious of society and more separatist, and the progressives willing to relate more closely to the host society. These two factions largely divided into the Frisians and Flemish factions, with the Frisians as the more progressive, liberal group. These labels are not quite accurate, though, because both the Frisian and Flemish groups had a range of views on this issue.
At the end of the 18th century, when the migrations to Russia started and continued for almost a century, most of the migrants to Russia were conservatives. Since pioneering in a new land takes courage and daring, I hesitate to call them conservatives. A better term is likely **conservers**, because they were concerned to conserve their faith heritage in the face of threats from the society. They were bold, and willing to risk the tribulations of pioneering in south Russia. Later, it was the descendants of these conservers who led the migrations to Canada, to Mexico, to Paraguay, and to Bolivia. They were always the first to be willing to risk new settings.

This divide continued on into Russia. In general, the larger churches were the conservers, and the smaller groups were the progressives. Some of the reform groups, like the Mennonite Brethren who formed in 1860, were progressive. Others, like the *Kleine Gemeinde* who formed in 1812, were conservers.

In the 1870s migrations to North America, the progressives settled in the USA: in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota. Most of those who settled in Manitoba were conservers. In the 1920s, when about 20,000 immigrants arrived in Canada from the Soviet Union, most of the immigrants were progressives.

In the 1920s, many of the conservers, including the Old Colony, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer and Sask. Bergthalers, emigrated from Canada to either Mexico or Paraguay. A few conservers from Kansas also joined the Old Colonists in Mexico. Again the conservers lead the way in forming new Mennonite communities in these countries.

In the Swiss Mennonite tradition, the conservers are the Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites.

In both traditions, the Swiss Mennonite, and the Russian Mennonite, the conservers have a long history of emphasizing separation from the world, the importance of community, simple life style, rejection of progress for its own sake, even though all will gradually and selectively accept new ideas and innovations if they do not threaten community. The conservers have to some extent been willing to accept voluntary poverty, or at least a simpler life-style.

The fact is that the progressive have often viewed the conservers as not quite legitimate inheritors of the Anabaptist Mennonite faith legacy. The progressives directed mission efforts at them to convert them from their conservative errors. Even though the conservers are different from many of us, I believe they are legitimate inheritors of the Anabaptist Mennonite heritage mediated by the Polish Mennonite churches.

**Conclusion**

These are some of the important Polish Mennonite characteristics which have influenced subsequent Mennonite history. It is a rich history. It is a history on whose shoulders we stand.
Thank you for inviting me to your society’s annual meeting. Promoting historical knowledge is extremely important, for we can only know where we are going, if we know from whence we came. Historical societies like yours, and events like this week-end, pass on the heritage, for it is by telling stories we energize ourselves and our communities.

I was asked to tell the story of the 1874-5 arrival of Mennonites to Manitoba. This will be followed by having Leonard Doell tell the story of Mennonites settling in Saskatchewan. Then, tomorrow morning, we will look at the story of the Polish Mennonites, and their influence on subsequent Mennonite history.

Background
So how and why did Mennonites move from Russia to Manitoba? (I will use the term Russia to include what is now Ukraine, because Ukraine as a separate political entity only originated in 1920, long after the migration to Manitoba in the 1870s.) To understand the migration, we need to look briefly at the shape of the Mennonite settlements in Russia, to understand what aspirations and character they brought with them to Manitoba.

Mennonites settle in Russia
In 1789, Mennonites began their migrations into Russia from Poland and Prussia for the following reasons:

- To escape the militarism Prussia had imposed upon parts of their community after it had taken over West Prussia. 1772, when Prussia, Russia and Austria partitioned Poland, Prussia took what they called West Prussia, which is where most Mennonites lived.
- To find land for themselves and their children.

Whereas Poland had exempted Mennonites from military service, Prussia was reluctant to do so. Prussia finally agreed to exempt them, but in exchange the Mennonite community could not buy additional land, plus it had to make a heavy annual payment to support the military officer training school in Culm. The restriction on buying land meant that many Mennonites would become landless, since ever more Mennonites would be forced to live on the same acreage.

So, Mennonites looked for emigration possibilities. Exactly at this time, Russia was advertising for settlers in its newly conquered territories in southern Russia, today Ukraine. Russia offered Mennonites and all potential immigrants: freedom from military service, their own schools, local self-government, and land. Mennonites sent two delegates, Jacob Hoeppner and Johann Bartsch, to inspect the land, and they came back with a favourable report. The land was good, plentiful and fertile. In an official document, the government promised Mennonites exemption
from military service, control of their own schools, and freedom of religion. So they decided to emigrate to south Russia.

Starting in 1789, and continuing for about 70 years, thousands of Mennonites, mainly surplus population, migrated to Russia, founding four major settlements.

The first was Chortitza, also called the Old Colony, in 1789 on the banks of the Dneper River. The second was Molotschna in 1804, somewhat larger than Chortitza, and some distance east of the Dneper River. Prussian Mennonites continued to migrate to Molotschna for the next 30 years. Then in 1856, Prussian Mennonites founded the third colony. This one was near the Volga River, and was called Am Trakt, that is, on the salt road to Moscow. Three years later, in 1859, Mennonites founded a fourth colony, also near the Volga River, called Alexanderthal, or Alt Samara.

These settlements were not part of local municipal or regional governments, but under the control of the Russian crown, through a special agency, called the Fuersorge Komitee, set up to administer all settler communities. Through this agency, Mennonites were given the right to self-government of their local civil and legal matters.

After about 50 years in Russia, the first settlement of Chortitza was full, and more land was needed. So in 1836 Chortitza founded a daughter colony called Bergthal to the south east of Chortitza. Before long, Chortitza need even more land, and in 1864 founded Fürstenland, to the south west of Chortitza.

Church groups
When Mennonites settled in Russia, they formed two church groups: the Frisian and the Flemish, each with their own Ältester and multiple Leherer or ministers. In 1812, in the Molotschna settlement, a new immigrant from Prussia, called Klaas Reimer, observed that Mennonites were required, by the Fuersorge Komitee, to administer corporal punishment for crimes, e.g. stealing, by imprisonment or whipping the offender. Reimer said this was wrong, and contrary to Mennonite belief in nonresistance. These transgressions ought to be dealt with by the church through a process of reconciliation and restitution, rather than as a crime with punishment by the local civil Mennonite organization. Most Mennonites in the Molotschna settlement did not agree with Reimer, and so he began to worship separately, and formed a little church, The Kleine Gemeinde.

By 1865, the Kleine Gemeinde asked for, and received permission, to found a new settlement called Borosenko to the north west of Molotschna. The Kleine Gemeinde soon experienced divisions. Unity was elusive.

Progressives and Conservatives or Conservers
In the 1820s, a progressive group emerged in the Molotschna. Its most famous person in this groups was Johann Cornies. He advocated new and progressive forms of agriculture, new and better schools, started a teacher training school in Ohroff, and imported new teachers from Prussia who introduced progressive educational ideas, plus Pietist ideas and hymns. Before long a small progressive church formed in the Molotschna settlement, which was opposed by the larger conservative churches. Progressive and conservative groups also formed in the Chortitza settlement. Most of the Bergthal and Fürstenland members remained conservative.

In 1860, after more than 30 years of Pietist influence among Mennonites in Russia, the Mennonite Brethren church started, first in the Molotschna settlement, and then also in the
Chortitza settlement. It originated as the result of the influence from two separatist Pietist movements. The Molotschna settlement was influenced by separatist Pietist Lutherans who lived in villages immediately to the west of the Molotschna settlement. The Chortitza settlement was influenced by Pietist German Baptists, also separatists. During the 30 years that Pietism had already been present among Mennonites in both the Molotschna and Chortitza settlements, it had been integrated into the churches as one of the emphases. Both the Lutheran Pietists and Baptists advocated that the Pietist Mennonites withdraw from the larger churches, and form their own churches. So when the Mennonite Brethren Church started in 1860, it accepted only people into membership who committed themselves to Pietist ideas and practices.

**Russian Reform**

In the early 1870s, Russia announced that it would pass new laws to modernize the country. It had suffered defeat in the disastrous Crimean War (1853-56), and in 1861 it had emancipated its serfs. So a new legal and social structure was necessary to reorganize the country so it could accommodate these new realities. One of these new measures was that all settlers, including Mennonites, Lutherans and Catholics, all of German background, would no longer have special privileges, but need to become citizens.

Among other things, this meant that Mennonite young men would need to do military service, and the schools would be taken over by the government and have to use the Russian language and curriculum.

When Mennonites heard about these pending changes, they were appalled. In 1800, the Privilegium they had received from Czar Paul had specifically stated they were guaranteed their own schools and were exempted from military service forever. Now it seemed that “forever” had come to an end, and they felt betrayed.

Delegation after delegation of Mennonites went to St Petersburg to speak to the government to try to get exemptions. All attempts failed. So, some Mennonites turned to the idea of emigration.

**Investigating emigration options**

In 1873 Mennonites in Russia, joined by the Hutterites in Russia, as well as some Mennonites in Prussia, sent delegations totalling 12 men to North America to investigate settlement possibilities. They met with Jacob Y. Schantz, an Old Mennonite from Waterloo, Ontario, and with John Funk, an Old Mennonite from Elkhart, Indiana. Schantz presented the advantage of settling in Manitoba and living under guarantees of the British crown. Funk argued for settling in one of the new states in the American west being opened up for settlement.

In July, 1573, all delegates arrived in Winnipeg and inspected the lands both east and west of Winnipeg. The government had already set aside eight townships of land for Mennonites if they decided to immigrate to Manitoba. After two inspection trips, in which they were shown the best parts of the land reserved for them, most of the delegates decided against Manitoba and left to inspect lands in the American west, including the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

**Canadian Offer**

The two Bergthal delegates, plus the two Kleine Gemeinde delegates decide to recommend migration to Manitoba. They received a letter from John Lowe, secretary of Agriculture who, on behalf of the Canadian government gave them a letter stating the commitments of the Canadian government to Mennonites. This letter was confirmed by the Privy Council in August of the same
year in a slightly revised form. The delegates, and subsequently the Russian Mennonites immigrants, saw this letter as their Privilegium in Canada. Among other things, it stated that:

1. No. 1 stated: An entire exemption from military service is by Law and Order in Council is granted to the denomination of Christians called Mennonites;
2. No. 2 stated: Any person who is the head of a family, or has attained the age of 21 years, shall be entitled to be entered for one quarter section, or a less quantity of unappropriated Dominion land, for the purpose of securing a homestead in respect thereof.
3. No. 4 stated: Should the Mennonite settlement extend beyond the eight townships set aside by the Order in Council of March 3rd last, other townships will in the same way be reserved to meet the full requirements of Mennonite immigration.
4. No. 10 stated: The fullest privileges of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded the Mennonites, without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever, and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools.

Thus Mennonites were promised exemption from military service, their own schools, and plentiful land, and more land if they wished. Later they were granted a “hamlet” exemption to the requirement to settle on their own quarter section, so that villages could be established.

Decision to emigrate
After confirming these conditions with the Privy Council in London, England, the delegates returned to Russia and reported to their respective settlements.

The Kleine Gemeinde delegates reported to their church in Borosenko, and they decided to migrate to Manitoba. Eventually, only two thirds ended up in Manitoba, with a third settling in Nebraska.

The Bergthal delegates reported to the Bergthal Colony, which decided to migrate as a total settlement and church, taking with them church membership books and Waisenamt books.

The Bergthal delegates also reported to the Chortitza and Fürstenland colonies, which at this time operated as one church. Here there was a divided opinion. The Chortitza bishop, who resided in the Chortitza settlement, was not in favour of emigration. His assistant bishop, who resided in Fürstenland, was in favour of emigration. Thus a portion of both the Chortitza and Fürstenland colonies decided to migrate, together with the assistant bishop from the Fürstenland colony.

The migration
The Kleine Gemeinde and about a third of the Bergthal colony migrated in the following year, in 1874. The immigrants that year totalled 1,543 people. They arrived in Quebec, were duly noted in ship lists, which are still available, and went west by rail to Collingwood, then by ship to Duluth, Minnesota, by train to Fargo ND, and then by boat down the Red River to Winnipeg. They disembarked at the confluence of the Rat and Red Rivers, were they were taken to sheds arranged by government agents (William Hespeler). From there they travelled into the open wilderness to lay out villages on the eight townships of what was later called the East Reserve. Provisions were purchased in Winnipeg, at that time a small city of about 5,000 people. William Hespeler, a Canadian government agent who had already contacted them in Russia, met them, and made arrangements for their arrival.

The Kleine Gemeinde laid out seven villages. Five, Blumenort, Blumenhof, Steinbach, Kleefeld, and Rosenfeld were on the east side of the Red River on the East Reserve, and two villages
west of the Red River, Rosenort and Rosenhof, north of the town of Morris. This land north of Morris was not reserved for Mennonites, but made available to the Kleine Gemeinde for settlement. The two Kleine Gemeinde groups on the two sides of the river were almost equal in size.

The Bergthaler Mennonites, who were a much larger group, settled in villages from the north to the south within the eight townships of the East Reserve set aside for Mennonite settlement.

Next year, in 1875, more Kleine Gemeinde people arrived, the second third of the Bergthaler church arrived, plus two new groups: one from Fürstenland and the other from Chortitza.

The groups from Fürstenland and Chortitza decided not to settle on the East Reserve, and asked for land to be reserved for them on the west side of the Red River. This request was granted by the government, and they received 17 townships in the Red River valley along the American border. In total, 3,261 Mennonites arrive in 1875.

In the third year of emigration, 1876, the final third of the Bergthaler Mennonites arrived plus some others. The total number of immigrants in 1876 was smaller, 1,352. During the following years 1877 to 1880, approximately another 800 people arrived to total 6,940 immigrants from Russia. These all settled on the two reserves plus on the two villages along the Scratching River north of Morris.

As already noted, about a third of the Kleine Gemeinde settled in Nebraska, and in the early years, numerous people moved back and forth for various reasons. Of the Bergthaler group, a sizeable group was erroneously diverted to Mountain Lake, Minnesota, but upon arrival, decided to stay there.

The total number of Bergthaler who arrived in Manitoba was 2,833.
The Kleine Gemeinde group totalled 696.
The two Chortitzer and Fürstenland groups, who formed the Reinländer Mennonite Church upon arrival, totalled 3,411.

**Neighbours**
When Mennonites arrived in Manitoba, they were surrounded by neighbours. In 1871, two years before the Mennonite delegates arrived, Aboriginals had signed treaty One. The Aboriginal reserve closest to the Mennonite East Reserve was the Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation, about 20 miles southwest of the Mennonite Reserve. Aboriginals continued to migrate seasonally through Mennonite areas for a number of years, offering Mennonites valuable knowledge about how to survive in this new land, including how to hunt deer, make warm, dry footwear, and what berries to eat, and more.

To the north was the French community of Ste. Anne, which had existed there for about 40 years. On the reserve itself, the settlers discovered that a French Metis squatter community was located close to the present community of Kleefeld. The government move the Metis, promising them alternate land, a promise not honoured for many years. On the east side of the Reserve resided a group of Anglo Saxons, called the Clearspring settlement. In contrast to the Metis, this community was allowed to stay, and their land was carved out of the Mennonite reserve. Some land in the southeast portion of the reserve was not taken up by Mennonites in the early years, because it was not seen as favourable for settlement. After some years this area was settled by German Lutherans, and by both Orthodox and Roman Catholic Ukrainians.
Mennonites on the West Reserve also had neighbours. To the west, in the slopes of the Pembina escarpment, a group of Anglo-Saxons had settled before Mennonites arrived. Unfortunately, the West Reserve included part of their settlement. For a number of years there was tension and conflict over this disputed area. The dispute was finally settled when Mennonites gave up the land settled by the Anglo-Saxons, and in exchange were given two additional townships along the American boarder. These Anglo-Saxon settlers later formed the heart of the town of Morden.

For some years, land on the northeast corner of the Reserve could not be settled because it flooded every spring and thus was a swamp all summer. When the government put in a drainage canal, the land was made arable. By then the Reserve was no longer closed, and a group of Lutherans from eastern Austria in Galicia settled here around the present hamlet of Rosenfeld. Along the east side of the Reserve, up to the Red River, the land lay empty for a number of years after Mennonites arrived, until a group of French Quebecers, from the American New England states, settled here, and founded the towns of St. Jean Baptiste and Letelier. By and large, there was little social contact between Mennonites and their neighbours. Each ethnic and religious group remained separate from the others.

**Church groups**

When Mennonites arrived, they formed three church groups, or Gemeinden, each with their own Ältester or bishop. The Kleine Gemeinde Church was led by Ältester Peter Toews. The Bergthaler Church Ältester was Gerhard Wiebe. The combined Chortitzer/Fürstenland church, which named itself the Reinländer Mennonite Church, elected Johann Wiebe as their Ältester.

Soon, however, there were four churches. When the last of the Bergthaler Church members arrived, they decided not to settle on the East Reserve, rather, they also moved to the West Reserve. The Reinlander had settled on the western half of the West Reserve, so the Bergthaler established villages on the eastern half. In the next few years many Bergthaler from the East Reserve moved onto the West Reserve, because so much of the land on the East Reserve was not very fertile.

This Bergthaler group on the eastern part of the West Reserve was far from the East Reserve where the bishop resided, and thus it was hard for him to serve them properly. At first the Reinländer Ältester, Johann Wiebe, invited the new settlers to join his church. That would have resulted in one large church on the West Reserve. However, Johann Wiebe’s vision for the church was too conservative, too separatist, for many Bergthaler.

So in 1882, the West Reserve Bergthaler ordained their own bishop, Johann Funk, and they took the name Bergthaler Mennonite Church. When this church formed, some of the Reinländer members, who found Johann Wiebe’s church too restrictive, also joined the Bergthaler Church.

When the Bergthaler Church formed on the West Reserve, the East Reserve Bergthaler took the name Chortitzer Mennonite Church. So there were now four church groups: Kleine Gemeinde, Chortitzer, Bergthaler, and Reinländer.

Soon, however, there were five churches. Shortly after arrival, the Kleine Gemeinde Ältester Peter Toews began to correspond with John Holdeman, an American Swiss Mennonite in Ohio who had been influenced by the evangelical renewal movements sweeping across the USA. Holdeman had left the Old Mennonite Church to form his own church, called the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, but usually referred to as the Holdmean Church. Toews visited Holdeman in Ohio, and invited Holdeman to come to Manitoba to hold revival meetings.
The result was that in 1881, Ältester Toews and almost half of his church were rebaptized by Holdeman, and formed a Holdeman Church in Manitoba. The other half, however, refused to join Holdman. Every Kleine Gemeinde church split: Blumenort, Steinbach, Kleefeld, and Rosenort/Rosenhof. The division was bitter. Holdeman himself moved from Ohio to Kansas, where he won many converts among the newly arrived immigrants from Russia for his church. So the Holdeman church succeeded because of the converts from the 1870s immigrants in both Manitoba and Kansas.

And then there were six churches. In the mid 1880s, two Mennonite Brethren ministers came from Minnesota and Nebraska. They made contact with relatives in the Reinland Mennonite Church, held revival meetings, and soon had converts. In 1886 they held their first immersion baptisms north of Winkler, and the first MB church in Canada was born.

About the same time, another small church was born near Gretna in the mid 1880s. I mention it because it plays a role in the later settlement in Saskatchewan – that is the Swedenborgian church. Most of the Swedenborgians on the West Reserve eventually migrated to the Rosthern area, and the church disappeared from the West Reserve.

In the early 1890s, the seventh Mennonite Church formed in Manitoba. This happened when the Bergthaler Church on the West Reserve split into two parts. This split happened over the issue of education – higher education. Johann Funk the Bergthal Church Ältester realized that their village schools needed more and better trained teachers. So in 1889, he set up a teacher training school in Gretna. The teacher he hired, William Rempel, did not feel adequate for the task.

So the school board, together with the Manitoba Department of Education, went to Kansas and hired Heinrich H. Ewert to come to Manitoba and become principal of the new government recognized teacher training school in Gretna. This was the forerunner of the present Mennonite Collegiate Institute, still in Gretna.

At first, both the Bergthaler and the Reinländer churches supported this school. But then the Reinländer Church withdrew its support, feeling that this school was too closely allied with the government – with the world. Heinrich Ewert was not only the government appointed principal of the teacher training school, he was also hired by the government as inspector of those Mennonite schools that registered with the government and used their curriculum. Using the provincial government’s school curriculum, and not the traditional Mennonite curriculum, seemed like a betrayal of their right to control the schools.

Then a large part of the Bergthaler Church also questioned the wisdom of the school, for some of the same reasons. So, in the early 1890s, the Bergthaler Church split into two uneven parts. Less than a quarter of the Bergthaler Church remained with their Ältester Johann Funk to support the school. The majority formed their own church, which they named the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. They chose Abraham Doerksen, from the village of Sommerfeld, as their Ältester.

Thus there were now seven Mennonite churches in Manitoba. A number of these appear in Saskatchewan in a few years.
Land
During the 1880s, land was becoming scarce on both reserves. Mennonite population growth was rapid, and soon more land was needed for the young families. On the East Reserve, the expansion happened after the Kleine Gemeinde and Holdeman split. The Holdeman took up vacant land north of the reserve, and north of the villages of Blumenort and Blumenhof, near the town of Ste. Anne. They called the settlement Greenland. The Kleine Gemeinde people also needed more land. A number of years later they also settled land north of the reserve, but further west, and formed the present town and community of Landmark.

Initially, the West Reserve had some vacant land within the northern part of the Reserve, but when this was filled up, Mennonites took up land north of the reserve, up to the present towns of Lowe Farm, Kane and Myrtle. Much of this land was being sold by land speculators who had bought large tracts of land, but had no intention of farming.

But all of this was still not sufficient. More land was needed. Then the opportunity came with the arrival of the railway, and with the defeat of Riel in Saskatchewan.

Railways
In 1878, the first railway line arrived in Manitoba from the USA, and ran along the east side of the Red River, through Dominion City to Winnipeg. It by-passed the East Reserve, and in the later years, no railway line was ever guilt across the East Reserve, although the lines were near the Reserve on both the east and west sides.

On the West Reserve, the railway lines ran right through the Reserve, even across villages. Railway stations were erected every six miles. Now Mennonites could more easily market their grain, and wheat farming expanded rapidly. Towns sprang up on the West Reserve around these railway stations: Rosenfeld, Altona, Gretna, Horndean, Plum Coulee, and Winkler which brought the world to their doorsteps. English, German and Jewish merchants located in these towns, and modeled a different lifestyle of dress, commerce, religion, and much more. The Mennonites' closed world had burst open.

Railways also made it much easier, to move to other places in Canada. As rail lines were laid across Saskatchewan and Alberta in the 1880s and early 1890s (Saskatoon 1890), Mennonites began to look west to meet their growing need for more land. The defeat of Riel’s Metis in 1885, and the surrender of Chiefs Poundmaker and Big Bear in the summer of the same year, opened up the area north of Saskatoon for settlement, and Mennonites soon took advantage of this opportunity.

Very few Mennonites from the three churches on the East Reserve moved west, that is from the Kleine Gemeinde, Holdeman or Chortitzer churches. Some Holdeman, though, moved to Alberta, in the Linden area, northwest of Calgary. Most of the settlers in the Saskatoon area came from three church groups from the West Reserve: the Reinlender, Bergthaler, and Sommerfelder.

The first settlers came from the Bergthaler Church before it split into two parts, and arrived in the years 1891 and 1892. Consequently, when they began to organize churches, they naturally named them Bergthal Mennonite Churches. However, when the Manitoba Bergthal Church divided into the Sommerfeld and Bergthaler Churches during the 1890s, the settlers in Saskatchewan were also affected. They continued to call themselves Bergthal Mennonite Church, but most identified with the more conservative Sommerfeld Mennonite Church in Manitoba in their views of education, and relationship to society.
Those Bergthaler who in Manitoba supported the school in Gretna, Manitoba, when they moved to Saskatchewan, did not identify with the Bergthaler Church in Saskatchewan. They eventually found a church home and identity when in 1902 and 1903, the Manitoba Bergthal Church under Johann Funk, and the newly arrived Rosenorter Mennonite Church from Prussia, led by Peter Regier, formed the Conference of Mennonites in Western Canada, the forerunner of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada.

Reinländer Mennonite Church members arrived a little later, and constituted the largest, and most organized, group migrating westward. In 1894, their bishop, Johann Wiebe, applied for a four township reserve to be set up between the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers, in the area around the present towns of Hague and Osler. This request was granted the following year. This allowed the Reinländer to establish the village, or hamlet, style of settlement, and numerous villages were founded.

The move west was so successful, that the church applied for and was granted two expansions of the reserve, both in 1898. First one township was added to the reserve, and then another five were added. The Reinland Church was thus able to establish the community and village organizations they had had in Manitoba, including locally elected church and community leaders.

I think I will conclude the story here. I will not detail the migration to areas south of Swift Current around 1905 by both the Reinländer and Sommerfelder Mennonites. Leonard will take the story from here tomorrow morning.

The story of settlement in Manitoba is one of conviction, courage, perseverance, and success in many ways. But most of all, it is our story, a story that laid the foundation for the subsequent history of Mennonite immigrations from Russia to Canada.
ROUTE OF THE MENNONITE MIGRATION
From the Vistula Delta to Chortitza [1787 - 1789]
By William Schroeder