

## **Mennonite Education in Siberia: Heinrich P. Wieler In a Classroom, 1916-1918**

By Lawrence Klippenstein

*The beginnings of Mennonite settlement in New Russia go back to 1788-89 when about 220 families emigrated from West Prussia and the Danzig region, later northern Poland. They established a number of villages as the new settlement of Chortitza on the west bank of the Dnieper River across from a military fortress, Alexandrovsk, later renamed Zaporozhe. More emigrants from Prussia, a larger group than the first pioneers, began to arrive in 1803 to establish many more village homes in a second settlement, Molotschna, along and to the east of the Molotschnaia River flowing down to the Sea of Azov about 70 miles east of Chortitza.*

*From here the emerging Russian Mennonite community as a body would gradually expand in all directions in the next 100 years or more to numerous other areas of settlement of the land. Though struggling at first, the community would ultimately develop significant and progressive educational, social and religious institutions wherever they moved to as their numbers multiplied throughout tsarist European Russia.*

*Farming continued to be the main occupation for most households, although business ventures began to blossom, both as cottage industries and major manufacturing as well as other enterprises. A veritable population explosion began to create employment problems as many households became landless. In the midst of a prospering growing community, poverty and other social issues became very real. Significant educational, religious and economic reforms made important contributions as the century wore on.*

*National reforms brought on a crisis with legislation that required universal military service. About a third of the families left the country, headed for North America, as one response to these changes. Others settled for an alternative to military service which meant some years of work in forest camps during obligatory service years. All this time the search for more land went on. Government efforts to deal with the land issue brought some relief. It was in this context that unoccupied lands east of the Urals, i.e. the virgin soil of the Siberian steppes offered new development opportunities, hopefully a much sought-after solution in the century to come.*

Mennonite communities emerged in Siberia during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These settlers had their hearts set mainly on farming, and some soon established small businesses. Cultural activities of various kinds also began to flourish almost immediately. Setting up schools had a high priority in developing these early settlements, and remained central to the colonizing of these frontier lands. This applied to Mennonite and non-Mennonite, especially German newcomers, alike.

The study of education in these communities remains a relatively new field of academic endeavour.<sup>1</sup> This introduction to an otherwise unknown Omsk area Mennonite teacher, Heinrich P Wieler, may contribute relatively little, as such, to the broader education story of Mennonites in Siberia. However as a picture in microcosm of how educational work

was progressing in the last years of the tsarist period, and with so many puzzle pieces still missing, it can still make its mark.

### Wieler in Context

Germans interested in Siberian land completed their **emigration** from points west of Omsk, notably the Volga region, within the first generation after the mid 1880s. The completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the ambitious colonization policies of Prime Minister Peter Stolypin, coinciding as they did around 1906, accelerated these moves. By WWI the total Siberian German population, including the Mennonites was just under 100,000. Village communities were common through all the new settlement areas.<sup>1</sup>

Prevailing land acquisition policies gave special incentives to better-to-do immigrants, especially Mennonites, who were interested in larger personal and private holdings, i.e. *khutors* (estates), not infrequently of 1000 dessiatiny or more. A good many newcomers were also taking up residence in cities and towns, for instance, Issyl Kul on the Trans-Siberian Railway and especially Slavgorod after its founding in 1910.

The move of Peter J. and Justina Wiens to the city of Omsk, to set up an agricultural machinery business, as well as several other ventures, the purchase of several small estates, and the founding of the village of Tchunaevka south of the railway just west of Omsk, in 1897-1899, constituted the beginnings of the so-called Omsk settlement. It consisted ultimately of many dozens of villages and estates located generally within 40 kilometers north or south of the railway between Omsk and Issyl Kul, about 165 kilometers to the west.<sup>2</sup>

Within the context of settlement it would be noted that Siberian Mennonite communities were quite heterogeneous, i.e. constituting a mixture of families from

<sup>1</sup> The emigration of non-Mennonite Germans to Siberia, and their early economic progress has been summarized recently in Detlaf Brandes and Andrei Savin, *Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat 1919-1938*, (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2001), 7-22 and presented more analytically in Viktor Bruhl, *Die Deutschen in Sibirien: Eine hundertj hrige Geschichte von der Ansiedlung bis zur Auswanderung. Band 1.* (Nuernburg: Historischer Forschungsverein der Deutschen aus Russland, 2003), 57ff. See also migration literature cited in Toews, *Mennonite Frontier*, 83-87. Donald Treadgold's *The Great Siberian Migration* (Princeton 1957) remains the standard English reference, and J.J. Hildebrand, *Mennonitensiedlungen in Sibirien* (Winnipeg, Man.: self-published, 1952), though anecdotal and episodic in nature, is still a useful reference for Mennonite movements in Siberia, as is Cornelius Krahn, "Siberia," *Mennonite Encyclopedia. Vol. 4* (Scottsdale, PA, North Newton, KS, Hillsboro, KS, 1959), 517-521. Peter Rahn, *Mennoniten in der Umgebung von Omsk* (Vancouver, B.C.: self-published, 1975) (cited below as *Omsk Mennoniten*) significantly enhances, though in a lay historian style, what has been researched knowledge about the Omsk area Mennonites till now. Rahn knew about these communities from personal contact particularly with the Issyl Kul area, and drew what is considered the most reliable map of all village and estate locations of the Omsk region for the tsarist and early Soviet period. Understanding the comings and goings of Heinrich Wieler depends heavily, in part, on having a good geographical knowledge of all these places. A somewhat popularized but reliable and interesting sketch of the entire Russian Mennonite experience (but not including the emigration to Lancaster, PA) is found in Wally Kroeker, *An Introduction to the Russian Mennonites* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> The Wiens story is found in Hildebrand, *Sibirien*, 17ff. See also Rahn, *Omsk Mennoniten*, 9-14, for early settlement data. One source puts the Omsk area Mennonite population at the beginning of World War I as being about 5000. Hildebrand, *Sibirien*, 17.

various parts of the traditional settlement areas in south Russia (later Ukraine). Not a few came from the wealthier class who were equipped to found larger private estates with more **acreage** to farm, and who brought sufficient funds with them to purchase what they wanted.

Poorer families tended to settle in village communities. Organization of these groups some times brought along new patterns of life together, not necessarily maintaining traditional ways. General cultural mores and systems of community life still tended to resort to familiar older ways. What had been considered tried and true methods for obtaining community unity and morals could still dominate the way in which new villages and other parts of the settlements fell into place as time went on.<sup>3</sup>

The school system within which Wieler would find himself in Siberia, had been imported essentially intact from the older Mennonite settlements in Russia. Mennonite communities of western Siberia were no more than a dozen years old when he obtained a classroom of his own among them. Virtually all villages would be attempting to establish their own schools as soon as possible. One historian has stated that “in most of the villages elementary schools were set up in the first years of settlement”.<sup>4</sup>

These local schools functioned under the direction of a local board which often included a minister. This body needed to make regular visits to the schools, with regional teachers’ meetings scheduled as often as twice a month. School building construction and maintenance costs fell upon the communities themselves. School and church life overlapped significantly in every community, with services often held in school buildings till separate church buildings could be built. The school curriculum included religious as well as music instruction, organized to contribute to church life as local communities might wish to have it. Maintenance costs including salaries were generally divided equally between estate owners and local villagers.<sup>5</sup>

A quite universal class schedule set up in the very early years could remain in place for all Mennonite schools till 1920 at which time Soviet administration eliminated all forms of religious instruction. Religion was typically taught first thing in the morning of a school day on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Mathematics followed daily in the third hour. Other time slots were filled with subjects related to German language: reading, spelling, essay-writing, penmanship, etc. Russian language was taught along similar lines. Russian history and geography were added in the fifth and sixth years.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Toews, *Mennonite Frontier*, 90ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 92. This same author also states that the majority of villages constructed schools only after World War I which seems to contradict his statement that most villages had school buildings early. Footnote 20, 92. Not infrequently village schooling began in a home. Rahn speaks of the Omsk settlement as having 33 Mennonite elementary schools serving 40 locations in the prewar period. Rahn, *Omsk Mennoniten*, 112. See also Irina Cherkazianova, “The Mennonite Schools in Siberia from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1920s,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Volume 20, 2002, 9-26. Translated by Victor Doerksen.

<sup>5</sup> Rahn’s brief histories of about a dozen local village communities mention organization of elementary schools in several instances. 112,169,etc.

<sup>6</sup> Rahn, *Omsk Mennoniten*, 114. A helpful history of how education and educational thought had developed in the older settlements, setting the basic assumptions for Mennonite education generally (and hence the background for teacher training, such as Wieler likely had as well) is found in Adolf Ens, “Mennonite

Relations with Russian government departments and officials were, of course, a part of the work environment. It would appear, from minimal data available for this study, that Mennonites could run their schools quite along lines they were used to, and exercise a good deal of independence with respect to setting up educational goals and finding the means to attain them. Education among Russians generally made do with a less structured and standardized process, leaving many children of school age with very little or without any elementary education. Inspectors would occasionally visit Mennonite schools also. It was not unusual for children of better-to-do families to be sent to larger and more central schools in towns or cities. Literacy rates between Germans, including Mennonites, and Russians varied considerably even at this time, i.e. over 50 % illiteracy for Russians, it has been said, but certainly much less for Mennonites.<sup>7</sup>

It is also relevant here to briefly describe the school system of Neu-Samara, the home community of Wieler before he left for Siberia. This daughter colony of the Molotschna settlement was located east of the Volga River about 400 kilometers east of the region's capital, the city of Samara. Neu-Samara was established in 1891 with 12 villages holding about 60,000 acres of land.. By 1917 it would contain a population of just under 4000 persons. Lugovsk, as the largest of 14 villages by then, had a central place in the entire settlement. The annual salary of a village teacher by then was about 700 rubles. He (usually a man) was hired one year at a time by mutual agreement. Parents needed to pay for school supplies which were obtained by the teachers. Usually six grades were placed in a classroom, and a teacher needed to find ways with written assignments, etc., to keep classes busy which he was not addressing at any particular time.<sup>8</sup>

### **Heinrich P Wieler in his classrooms**

The topic of this paper will now need to recognize a source problem which seriously affects providing a complete biographical sketch. However it does not preclude making this introduction of Heinrich Wieler, a Siberian school teacher during the World War I years. We can get at least a glimpse of his pedagogical career and other experiences in the Omsk area service period of his life..

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Education in Russia," in John Friesen, ed. *Mennonites in Russia: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz, 1788-1988* (Winnipeg, Man.: CMBC Publications, 1989), 75-98. See also the chapter on "Pedagogy and Piety" in James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg, Man.: Hyperion Press, 1989), 153-173.

<sup>7</sup> Toews reports that a high school inspector from Barnaul (presumably Russian) was surprised to find 50 schools in the Slavgorod settlement area when he visited the area in 1916, nine years after the settlement was begun. Clearly inspector visits were only occasional in that region at the time. Toews, *Mennonite Frontier*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Wieler had close family connections with Alt-Samara and Neu-Samara, and would find himself corresponding frequently with people there. He would likely have been comparing notes as well with what was going on in the schools of Neu Samara, while no doubt duplicating various aspects of those educational arrangements. See Jacob H Brucks and Henry P. Hooge, comps, and Tena Wiebe, ed. *Neu-Samara: A Mennonite Settlement East of the Volga*, trans. by John Isaak (Edmonton, Alta: the family, 2002), 86ff.

Most of the information here derives from a five-volume journal which Wieler began to write in 1912, just before he got to Siberia, and which he continued through his entire five- year educational involvements in the region. The holder of these journals in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, has only begun to release the material for public use, i.e. translation from German and publications of the materials in one form or another.<sup>9</sup>

Wieler's early life reflects a difficult childhood and upbringing. He was born on 12 February 1891, in the village of Neuhoffnung in Alt-Samara, to Peter and Mary Bestvater Wieler. Seemingly rejected by his family he was ultimately adopted by a John Reimer family which moved to the Molotschna settlement where Heinrich got his elementary schooling and ultimately, at Halbstadt in the years 1907-1909, his teacher training as well. He taught at several schools after this, but always for short terms only.

In 1911 he got a position in the village of his birth, Neuhoffnung, in Alt-Samara, not far from Neu-Samara, the home settlement of his future wife. At this point in his life, after some personal questing, Wieler began to give more attention to spiritual matters and church involvements. It was during this time that he was baptized and joined a local Mennonite Brethren congregation. While resident in Neu-Samara he received an invitation from a relative to come and teach in Siberia in the elementary school at Alexandrovka in the Omsk settlement area. He began his first year of teaching in Siberia there in 1913 and almost immediately faced a startling new reality.

On meeting the school administrator he was asked immediately, "Where is your wife?" When he answered that he was not married, the administrator answered, "We have a lady here who comes from Neu-Samara, not far from where you have just come. She can be your wife. Her name is Suse Nickel and she lives quite close to the village here". After

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<sup>9</sup> The Wieler discussion here rests on 500 pages of a 1500-page document, *The Journals of Heinrich Wieler*, currently in the possession of Arthur Pavlatos, a retired high school teacher in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The materials accrued to him by arrangements made by Harry Wieler, a son of Heinrich, who in 1992 brought the journals out of a very private holding located in an old shed, for Mr. Pavlatos and his wife to hold for posterity. They were brought to the USA at the time the senior Wieler family emigrated from the Soviet Union to the USA in the early 1920s.

The pages utilized here contain the entries for Part II, 1916 – 1919, of which those of 1916-1918 cover the later Siberian teaching years of Heinrich Wieler. Mr. Pavlatos has just sent the first 200 pages of Part I, but they are not yet available for use here. They contain data entered just prior to moving to Siberia.

The quotes and other material used here will reference an English-language draft prepared some years ago by Bert Friesen of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg for the use primarily of Arthur Pavlatos, but now also, by ensuing arrangements, for others to utilize. This draft is lodged in Volume 4235 of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with a working copy also in the files of the author. The document is simply designated here *The Wieler Journal, Part II*, abbreviated to *Journal*, with pagination taken from the English-language document.

some time, and some visits, they decided, early in 1914, that they would marry.<sup>10</sup> Their first child, Lily, was born on 22 March a year later.

His first journal entries are dated 1912, seemingly commencing with his plan to move to accept a teaching position in the Omsk area of Siberia. That period of his work began then in 1913 when he moved to Alexandrovka, 10 kilometers south of the Trans Siberian Railway station of Gorkoe and 30 kilometers southeast of Issyl Kul.<sup>11</sup>

Education facilities in Alexandrovka resembled those of other communities – early on no school building, scarcity of good teachers, and other needs. That changed in 1910, three years before Wieler arrived when a wealthy landowner, Jacob Janzen, provided a loan of 2000 rubles so a regular schoolhouse could be constructed. Among teachers listed for the community were Huebert, Gerhard Wiens from Sagradovka in south Russia, Wieler, Hans Isaak and David Nickel.

The construction of a large church in 1912, and the buildup of a choir gave to Alexandrovka a central place among the congregations of the “kirchliche”( lit. “churchly”) Mennonites. Services would have been held in the new school building for several years, and before that meetings were held in homes.

Other villages nearby also erected school buildings about this time, and with the availability of better teachers, Wieler would have found an energetic, dynamic group of colleagues to work with in this community. With the creation of similar class period patterns, Wieler’s daily schedule might well have been something like the following:

Opening exercises – song and prayer

1<sup>st</sup> hour – Bible stories and studies

Half hour with upper grades as well as catechism

Half hour with the lower grades

2<sup>nd</sup> hour – German language studies

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<sup>10</sup> The story of Alt-Samara has recently received a major new historical treatment in Viktor Fast, comp and ed., *Voruebergende Heimat: 150 Jahre Beten und Arbeiten in Alt- Samara (Alexandertal and Konstantinovka)* (Steinhagen: Samenkorn, 2009). Neuhoffnung is not mentioned in the volume which does not purport to cover the story of all the villages in that settlement. See however the inside back cover with an insert for maps of the settlement and individual villages which do include Neuhoffnung. For the story of Wieler’s early years, first teaching assignments and marriage to Suse Nickel, see his personal unpublished memoir, “Mennonites in Russia”, 1-3, in the author’s file. Some new material submitted recently by a colleague intimates that the marriage took place in 1913. See the author’s files. The family name of Heinrich’s birth mother, Mary Bestvater, is given erroneously as Mary Dyck, it seems, in some sources (and in some earlier versions of this essay). See recent notes on this from Erwin Wieler, Surrey, B.C., in the author’s files.

<sup>11</sup> Information about the Siberia teaching vacancy came from a relative of Wieler’s living in Alexandrovka. The most accurate map of this area, some persons have suggested, is a hand -drawn map which, it would appear, was released with the Rahn volume in 1975. See also a modern abbreviated version in William Schroeder and Helmut Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas. Second Edition. Revised and Expanded* (Winnipeg, Man.: Springfield Publishers, 1996), 44. The journal materials of Part I, from 1912 on, have just been received by the author and are being translated. They were not available for data relevant to this essay.

Reading, poetry, writing and grammar  
 Primer and reader for levels One and  
 3<sup>rd</sup> hour – arithmetic  
 Upper Grades in Russian  
 Lower Grades in German

Lunch hour – one hour

4<sup>th</sup> hour – Russian Language studies  
 Beginners and Intermediate Level  
 5<sup>th</sup> hour – Russian Language studies with Upper Grades  
 Literature, grammar, history and geography  
 6<sup>th</sup> hours – Art, penmanship, singing, etc<sup>12</sup>

The extant journal portion begins with entries for the very last months of what would become a four-year stay in Alexandrovka, at which point Wieler was released. He found the circumstances of the time most disturbing and often shared somewhat depressed thoughts. "It is at once a serious and wonderful time. For nearly two years a disastrous war has been raging which daily demands its sacrifices. Blood flows in streams and the battlefields...we also, a very tiny part of the population of Russia (i.e. the Mennonites – ed), have very little good in prospect. As far as the horizon of our people (can be seen), storm clouds are gathering.... Precisely the law, even if it is newly promulgated, forces us as "Germans" from this country..."<sup>13</sup>

An undated later entry (many entries are not dated clearly) has these thoughts." The long hard winter has finally had to leave the field...For us that means a change in the unvarying monotony of our lives in Siberia. The last quarter of the school year brought some change. One day on a Friday on 18 March (possibly 1916) I started teaching a little earlier in the afternoon in order to be free a little earlier in the evening. Just as I was in the swing of teaching a carriage arrived on the yard. It was the inspector. I invited him in. He saw our wood in the aisle. That gave us a topic of conversation (among other things I gave him advice on how to acquire hard to obtain wood, and then we went into the schoolroom. He asked questions, let the students write, looked at their copy books, and after a good half hour he was gone. The evening before I had talked to my colleague Friesen about him. "He will probably not come," opined Friesen. On the next day he was there! I asked the inspector about a ticket of leave...he promised to give me everything".<sup>14</sup>

Another inspection followed five days later when a certain Mr. Bergen and a Mr. Huebert showed up. They were likely from the local school committee. After listening for an hour to a class in religious instruction they too were on their way so they could get quickly to another village, Kornievka. Wieler added, "They will probably now make these visits annually, the beginning of a new custom for us."

<sup>12</sup> This is an outline drawn from the Neu-Samara school system of this general period. Brucks and Hooge, *Neu-Samara*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> *Journal*, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

Weather changes would bring its ups and downs as well. “Yesterday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of April we had a day full of sunshine. The thermometer climbed to 8 degrees plus in the shade. Spring! Spring! Yesterday a cold northeaster blew. The sun did not manage to break through...In the sky white flakes whirled down: snow, again snow!...it has managed to make foot high drifts Our school yard was already dry but today it is covered with knee high snow....”

Then, as Wieler put it, “things began to unfold as they should”. He dismissed his pupils on Maundy Thursday, 7 April, the inspector having sent a message to close classes before Easter on 10 April. He got the whole amount of his salary for the first time in the years at Alexandrovka, on 15 April. That paved the way for beginning a planned trip to Neu-Samara by way of Alt-Samara to see the parents-in-law. Heinrich and Suse were taken to the train station at Moskalenki and from there could take the No. 4 train to Omsk. After visits to an optometrist and some friends they reached their destination on 21 April, glad to do so because Suse and their daughter, Lily, had not felt well on the journey.

During this visit Wieler made contact with Jacob Janzen who had a camera. After taking some family photos, and meeting someone else who was serving in the medical corps as alternative service, also carrying a camera. .Wieler was captivated by this new-fangled equipment and potential new hobby. On 19 July he went out to buy his own. He would make a good bit of his family income as a photographer later on.

Their vacation ended on 13 August and three days later they were back in Alexandrovka.<sup>15</sup> Wieler had hoped to begin teaching on 1 September but waited till 10 September to do so. He did not in fact get all his students back till 1 October. Suse returned to work in her profession as mid-wife and chiropractor while Heinrich got quite busy ordering photographic supplies and getting his new family business established. They were finding prices had risen; adding to their income had become a pressing necessity.

On 24 October Wieler made reference to his wife’s heavy schedule, and numerous parcels of photography supplies arriving from Moscow - with a prayer to God that they would not become too attached to earthly goods. Prices were continuing to rise and products like petroleum were becoming scarce. In early November he lamented the slowness of mail bringing him photographic supplies, their high costs, and complaining that “the income just dribbles in bit by bit”.

Around 10 November he submitted his invoices for school expenses, with a request for half his salary, wondering if he would get it all for that school year. By now he had started making wall plaques with verses on them as yet another source of income. To his students he suggested at that time that they begin to prepare a Christmas program. Plans ensued for putting on four Christmas plays and reciting a number of poems. His half salary now arrived to relieve financial pressures, nine parcels arrived also (possibly books

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 8-11.

and photographic supplies – ed.). The parents now wondered though if “their William” away on alternative service for the country would return for a visit.<sup>16</sup>

Christmas brought the usual celebrations but also an increase in the sale of wall plaques – and William did arrive, along with wonderful weather. Right after Christmas Suse was called away to her duties. The community had an extra “Christmas Eve” on 30 December to gather donations to help needy persons in the Slavgorod settlement several hundred miles away. A New Year’s Eve celebration brought the community together in a church service to finish the year of 1916. “Another year is behind us again – who knows how many more and what kind?”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Year 1917**

Heinrich could not know that the year would bring involuntary termination of his classroom work at Alexandrovka, and a move to further, albeit brief, employment in Hoffnungsthal nearby. He could not know that this year would also ring in the end of the tsarist regime in Russia. A Provisional Government came next, and then late in fall, the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, seized power to rule for the next seventy years. Heinrich would then in this same year decide to leave Siberia and the country itself as soon as possible.

Still, for much of the time the routines of previous years and some smaller alterations could survive. Early in January the community undertook renovations to reduce the size of its classroom at school in order to save heat. “That,” wrote Wieler “gives us a change in the life of the school”. There were also funerals to attend in those days, and some weddings also. Special church meetings sometimes broke the regular rhythms of daily life. The Wielers missed their parents a lot. Prices of products continued to rise. Suse’s midwifery responsibilities and Heinrich’s photography became an ever increasing part of their daily workload.

Occasional references to relations with village authorities, at this stage “improving”, to quote Wieler, are intriguing – perhaps intimating that Heinrich had his differences (not explained in the writing) with local people disagreeing with him on school matters. The March abdication of the tsar brought some fresh newspapers, and Heinrich removed the portrait of Nicholas II and put it away in a corner.

On 20 March the school inspector forwarded a letter declaring that regular classroom work would end on 24 March with graduation examinations to follow on 5-10 April. Not long before, he had sent a letter urging communities to obey the new government’s laws and regulations.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 12-16. William’s location is not mentioned. About this time the Russian government opened up another forestry camp for conscientious objectors, in the vicinity of Issyl Kul. It was intended to make it possible for Siberian young Mennonite men to serve in a camp closer to home.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 19-21. Margenau had become an educational centre of the Omsk Mennonites with the construction of a secondary school along side one for elementary grades. Jacob Epp, a close associate of Heinrich Wieler spent some years here. Neighbouring villages, too small to construct and maintain their own primary school would often enroll pupils at the Margenau school. Rahn, *Omsk Mennoniten*, 153-155.

The call for a special teachers' meeting on 22 March took Heinrich to a gathering at Margenau where the inspector hoped to obtain extra support from the teachers to prevent his dismissal. Some teachers of the Omsk area were seeking his termination, but others hoped he could stay. A statement providing a vote of confidence for the inspector came out of this discussion. One Gerhard Gaede had provided forms so eight signatures of teachers' support could be submitted now with Teacher Jacob Epp taking the document to the designated office.

Heinrich was asked to supervise examinations to be conducted on 11 April. To conclude this meeting four persons were chosen to represent the Mennonites in a submission to an Omsk conference on 9 April.<sup>18</sup> Jacob Epp of Margenau was asked to chair an Examination Committee. Everything went well for Heinrich's pupils. One David Voth got two 5's (roughly equivalent to A's) and two 4's (roughly equivalent to B's).

From 12 April on Heinrich would need to teach only in the mornings, i.e. with only two grades full time. A week later he brought a statement of school expenditures to the village mayor. He writes that he "was personally very happy that the mayor was not at home to personally receive the statement" (perhaps an indication of what sometimes made meeting village authorities a problem for Heinrich). On 26 April Wieler wrote, "Yesterday I dismissed the students for this school year. Today is the first day of my summer holidays." Then comes the note: "last lines written in Alexandrovka".

In May Heinrich learned about a petition of the Alexandrovka village authorities to get him reassigned to another school, i.e. intimating they wanted to terminate his work at the local school. Heinrich handed in his resignation as soon as he heard about the plan. It had been taken to mean that he wanted to cease teaching altogether. His moved had seemed to close the door to getting hired elsewhere which was not what Heinrich had had in mind. Now it seemed he and his family had no recourse except to make plans to return to Neu-Samara and look for a position there. It troubled Heinrich deeply. "We teachers are a tormented people" is how he put it.<sup>19</sup> The local commissioner however agreed to take up his cause, and light seemed to come at the end of the tunnel.

The commission "trashed" the villagers' petition, and asked Heinrich for a list of what he would need in order to teach. The Wieler family was expecting another child, and they could not consider moving just yet. The commissioner's hopeful comments encouraged them, but no teaching position seemed to be in sight. "We were very impatient," wrote Heinrich. Harry, a son, their second child, arrived on 30 June. Mother and child did well. Other good news for the family was just beyond the horizon.

On July 18 two visitors arrived to notify Heinrich that a classroom vacancy existed. now at Hoffnungstal and Heinrich agreed to accept it. They would now soon be on their way for another year of teaching. He wrote, "O God, to you be praise. Away from Alexandrovka. The joy was great on both sides." They had ten days left before they would leave for their new home and assignment. It had been four years since he had

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<sup>18</sup> *Journal*, 23-24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-27.

come to Alexandrovka on 10 August 1913. At this point he had an eight-year teaching career behind him.

In transition Heinrich spoke of trying to keep up with new government regulations (still the Provisional Government) many new committees, making connections with new associations, etc. Political events were threatening to overwhelm him, it seems, but he looked forward to going on.<sup>20</sup>

### **Hoffnungstal**

Getting going at Hoffnungstal filled Heinrich with some foreboding. “The first days in Hoffnungstal were empty like a desert. Empty of order, empty of any kind of regularity. Everything had to be unpacked ...the process is seldom pleasant”. On 10 August Wieler travelled to Omsk to get his teachers’ status confirmed. What he thought would be routine turned out to be a lengthy interrogation about the circumstances of his departure from his former school. It appeared that he would obtain a final status decision on 1 September. The discussion revealed further that in actual fact he would not necessarily have had to leave Alexandrovka. The interview finally ended successfully with Wieler’s teaching status<sup>21</sup> granted.

By 19 August Wieler had begun purchasing school supplies in Omsk, and was planning to attend a teachers’ convention. He hoped to see several of his earlier colleagues there, but they failed to show up. Eventually he met up with a number of them. After the convention he held discussions with the local village authorities who now offered him a salary of 1200 rubles, double that of his previous year, but , wrote Wieler, “ in this time(of inflation-ed) far too little”.. He and his family attended a Thanksgiving service in Margenau on 15 October. With weddings and other social events continuing Wieler could find an ongoing demand for his photographer services.

On 15 November Wieler noted Christmas program preparations underway, adding that he had taught a class of boys three hours of mathematics and Russian. Journal entries at this time otherwise gave much space to church services, sermons, etc. Contacts with colleagues provided welcome relief from routine requirements in the classroom, and provided good orientation in the larger community including such larger school centres as Margenau.

An entry on 24 November provides a schedule for Wieler’s daily work: classroom work from 8 a.m.-2.30 p.m., 3-4 p.m.-special tutoring for Katja Baecker and Adolf Krause (Russian language?) , 4.30-6 p.m., the same to three other persons of German nationality, rehearsals with a youth group for a special program, 6.30 – 8 p.m., three evenings a week, and Russian language instruction for a Mr. Schmidt from the province of Brandenburg on the other two evenings.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 28-30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 39-41.

School books were slow in arriving. Wieler had been experiencing unidentified difficulties too with the parents of some of his boys which sometimes tempted him to “hang up the schoolmaster’s coat on a nail somewhere.” He hoped, he wrote on 24 November, that tomorrow he could settle once and for all “who is my boss”, the fathers or the boys. Preaching at special meetings in the community continued to provide extensive notes for the journal. Some books were arriving but the primers were not.

A New Year’s Eve service, and carol singing on the morning of 1 January 1918, finished the old year. “And what can the New Year bring us? That remains hidden in the lap of time which remains hidden from our eyes....we are fortunate we can trust in Him!”.

The teaching year for 1918 began for Wieler on 8 January. Near the end of the month he learned from the school inspector, W. Steinborn, that he would be reappointed to teach for the coming year. The future would now depend on his response and the conditions which he would submit for returning to the Hoffnungstal classroom. Wieler was finding himself more and more involved in community music events, a welcome addition for him to his regular routines. “Work makes life sweet”, he wrote.

At the end of month the nation switched to a new calendar. The first day of the next month would not be 1 February, he pointed out, but be designated 14 February. It meant further that until 1 July of the year (1918) the date of the new calendar would always be written with parenthesis leaving the old calendar dates in place to aid orientation to the new dating system.<sup>22</sup> Wieler would now find his 12 February birthday celebrated on 25 February. He would then be 27 years old.

At this point Wieler handed in the list of terms under which he would accept an appointment to a further year of teaching. As salary he would want 800 pud (1 pud being 36.1 pounds) of wheat released to him in four portions on 15 October, 15 December, 1 March and 1 May. He would want exclusive access to the school garden and to have it ploughed at the appropriate time. He would be looking for 2 cubic fad (?) of wood delivered for their stove and half as much manure as the previous year for the school stove. He would want manure spread around the school (possibly for weather proofing of the base line), a reed covered structure (small porch?) before every door in the house.

He soon learned that the village authorities were not prepared simply to accept what he asked. It seemed to Wieler that his terms would be refused, and then, he noted, that would determine the matter of returning the next year, so they could move on. Whether he had deliberately set up the terms so that they would likely not be accepted is unclear. A large church conference would now take place in the area and Wieler set out to record minute details of what transpired there.

Journal entries suggest that a further teaching contract did not materialize. Extensive commentaries about sermons and other church-related matters took over the written record of the following weeks. His writing culminated finally in a section chronicling the last weeks of their Siberian residence, with preparations following to return to Neu-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 52-53.

Samara, the home settlement of Suse's parents. It was something they had pondered, and prepared for during the past year or longer.

### **Heinrich Wieler as a Journal Keeper**

With a teaching career of less than a dozen years that were beset by adverse circumstances and other factors which led him on a quite different path than he might have anticipated. His journal depicts a many-talented somewhat driven person with various interests of which teaching became less and less of a passion, though it may have been much higher at the outset. Evidently he found it difficult in his early working years to obtain a steady position (Alexandrovka seems in fact to have been his longest stretch at one place), hence his experience in a number of schools before he and his family would leave the country for good.

From time to time the entries become occasional, even random, with significant chronological gaps which he would then set to fill with inserts of recollections of events long after they actually took place. Ideally, it seems that he had intended to date his entries but again did so only sporadically. Then would come short stretches where he would revert to a kind of log book format with entries not only carefully dated by day, month and year, but even by the hour in which he did the actual writing. Readers are left with uncertainties about what happened even as he sought to depict actual happenings of the time of writing. Sometimes one misses a clear story line of his life and work, or following themes such as family life or church-related activities in which he was always deeply involved.

The bulk of the writing has a non-systematic, yet strongly theological, devotional and religiously self-reflective character. Such entries reveal a definite intellectual bent seemingly energized by a lot of reading and reflective thought on spiritual themes. On the other hand, he does not actually say much about reading non-school related books during his teaching years. It is not easy to compress the written material into neat sets of themes and a compact body of ideas, even though his comments usually do not lack clarity and precision.<sup>23</sup> Organization of ideas appears to have been an issue.

Wieler needed much of his time for the upkeep of his family, Suse and the two children, Lilly and Harry, who were born during his Siberian teaching terms from 1913-1918. Always a struggle, one can deduce from his remarks that this responsibility weighed heavily on his mind day and night. That burden likely contributed much to the threat of and actually felt depression which circumstances and the various things that he tried to accomplish brought into his life. Clearly, Wieler had his emotional lows, bordering on despair at times, along with his almost ecstatic highs that seem to have kept him going.

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<sup>23</sup> Much of the theological and devotional content of the journal for the years 1916-1918 has been gathered, after translation, and edited to become a published paperback volume of 127 pages. It is the first venture in what the current owner views as a potential series to cover the gamut of material in the five volumes of the journal. See Arthur L. Pavlatos and Michael C. Upton, eds. and abridges. *The Quiet in the Land: A Volga-German's Christian Journals. Russian Revolution Years 1916-18* (Victoria, B.C: Trafford Publishing in cooperation with the family, 2005) Journal entries ceased in 1924.

Interestingly, as intimated even in this brief excursus, Wieler does not record much about his classroom work as such. Contacts with his teaching colleagues seemed important to him, however. There were numerous events where teachers met, and where administrative work for the school system needed to be tended to. Social involvements for his family reached high levels where ever they went, in spite of Suse's schedule which took her away from home a good deal.

Wieler also does not offer much comment on political and economic events of the day, though quite aware of changes happening, and wondering clearly enough about the impact of development not only the local situation, but on the nation as a whole. With respect to economics, of course, both he and Suse were always conscious of shortages and prices of goods, and anything that affected the sheer struggle for existence day by day.

All that said, the journals offer a challenging and a quite illuminating glimpse into the mind and work of a Mennonite teacher, not necessarily typical, but quite revealing of what Mennonite education in Siberian schools included, and had to deal with at the time. This sketch, of course, comprises only a fraction of the total picture. The search for more must go on.

## **Epilogue**

It would appear that Wieler could successfully complete his year in Hoffnungstal. However with a mind made up to leave the region as soon as arrangements could be made to return to Neu-Samara, he would look for further teaching opportunities elsewhere. In Neu-Samara he found a position as teacher of religion in the secondary school at Lugovsk and apparently held that post till 1921.<sup>24</sup> A third child, John, was born in Lugovsk in 1920.

When Heinrich heard rumours that Communist authorities were planning to scatter his family, he made secret plans to leave Russia. Via Odessa and other points he made his way westward. After an interim six-month stay in Poland, the family was able to reach Germany, and in 1923 arrived in the USA. Here they came into the custody of a sponsoring Dunkard family in Chester County, Pennsylvania. After a year the Wieler family moved to the city of Lancaster. The Wielers settled down here to establish a new home.

The Bolshevik takeover of Siberia would bring significant changes relatively soon. Economic enterprise came under centralized control, despite resistance from the farmers who found the new regulations intolerable in many ways. Outright open resistance surfaced, only to be crushed without consideration for local demands. The New Economic Policy of Lenin would provide a short reprieve here as elsewhere but the

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<sup>24</sup> This school had been established in 1908. Though closed during the war years it was opened in 1917. In a brief history of the institution Wieler is listed among the teachers of religion sometime during the next few years. Brucks and Hooge, *Neu-Samara*, 91-92. See also Wieler, "Mennonites in Russia", 3, in the author's files.

initiation of forced collective farming in the late 1920s included all German/Mennonite areas of settlement as well as others.

Schools came immediately under government surveillance and the teaching of religious subject soon had to cease. Teachers were terminated if they would not conform to requirements of the new regime. In due time churches were closed and ministers would suffer the fate of “opponents to the regime” as anywhere else in the Soviet Union which came into being now.

Learning in due time about all that happened next in Siberia, Heinrich and Suse no doubt rejoiced that they had been spared all these troubles, and, together with his much-beloved family, continue life happily elsewhere.

In his new homeland, in Lancaster, Heinrich found work as a security guard, and also began a small business manufacturing plaques and small signs. As well he became an instructor in Russian and German languages in his home, and later at Franklin and Marshall College. A fourth child, Mary, joined the family soon after this and Heinrich became a naturalized citizen in 1932. Susanna, as she came to be called, found various kinds of employment also. She passed away in 1967 at the age of 81 and Heinrich in 1984 at the age of 93.<sup>25</sup>

The much-treasured journals remained intact through all these years, and now became the possession of the oldest son, Harry, resident with his family in Lancaster also. The journals were brought to light in 1991, and subsequently have been held by Arthur and Mary Jean Pavlatos, as members of the Wieler family. They say in closing their volume, *The Quiet in the Land*, “It is our intention with Harry Wieler’s permission to eventually make these primary source materials available for scholarly use, both religious and secular.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Copies of their published obituaries, carried in Lancaster newspapers, are in the author’s files. Susanna was survived by two brothers and two sisters, as well as her own family, and Heinrich, when he passed on, by two sons and two daughters, Lily, Harry, John, and Mary, and their families,

<sup>26</sup> Pavlatos and Upton, *Quiet in the Land*, 124. We warmly thank Arthur and Mary Jean for their forthcoming assistance in procuring duplicates of the Wieler journals to the extent that they have been available for this study. It is expected that more material will be sent us shortly. The author also wishes to acknowledge, with equal warmth, the painstaking work of Bert Friesen of Winnipeg, Manitoba, for doing the rough translated draft which made this project far easier to do, and which opens the unutilized portions of the local photocopies to be read by all interested English readers at any time.