

## **MIGRATION OF HUTTERITES FROM RUSSIA TO AMERICA**

For three centuries the Hutterites had made a pilgrimage from land to land. From the Tyrolean Alps and Moravia where fierce persecution almost rooted out their faith, to Hungary where their sufferings and untold hardships continued, to Walachia where for a short time they enjoyed peace only to have Turkish armies force them to seek yet another land of refuge. Then on to Russia, a group of about 40 families, where at last the Hutterites and other German groups became a state within a state and were granted special privileges. In the year 1870, because of the growing democracy of the times and the spirit of militarism, the Czar began a program of Russianization which not only meant the end of military exemptions, but complete government control of the school system and local governing policies as well. The days of special privileges were at an end and all Germans were to become full-fledged Russians.

The paths of the Mennonites and the Hutterites have often crossed throughout the years since both groups share a common Anabaptist ancestry and differ in their basic beliefs only in the communal way of life. Johann Cornies, a leader among the German Mennonite Colonists in Russia assisted the Hutterites to find good land on the Molotschna River and gave them valuable assistance when the Hutterites found themselves in dire need both spiritually and financially. The Hutterites divided into two groups, one remaining as a Bruderhof and the other locating in villages on private farms. In passing one should mention that the Bruderhof Hutterthal was founded in 1842, in 1853 Johannesruh was established, and Hutterdorf, Scheromet and New Hutterthal after 1857.

In March of 1871 delegates from various Mennonite colonies and Hutterite settlements appeared at St Petersburg in behalf of their common concern. This first attempt to get a favorable hearing was not very successful. The delegates returned home without definite assurance as to their future and with a growing conviction that their privileged days were numbered. Several more times delegations tried to obtain personal interviews with the Czar, but these too proved unsuccessful. The only result seemed to be that the Czar announced provisions in the forthcoming conscription act for exempting Mennonites and Hutterites from Combatant service. General von Todtsben, a man of German background was sent through the settlements in the spring of 1874 to explain the provisions of the act as it would effect them, and to try to have them reconsider the decision that had been made by this time, that again there would need to be a journey to a new land. The

German culture and language was such an inseparable part of their life and religion that the loss of it was almost unthinkable.

In the meantime those who refused to accept any form of limited service under the military authorities, were casting about for a suitable refuge in case emigration should become unavoidable. Australia, South America, North America, and also other areas suggested themselves as possibilities. To each there were some objections. Each country had popular impressions that prevailed at the time. Of America it was said, "America was a country interesting for the adventurer, an asylum for convicts. How could one live in peace under his vine and fig tree amid such people, to say nothing of the native savage." Such a life might be possible "for those who had their pockets full of revolvers", but for a non-resistant people it would be impossible to find homes amid such surroundings.

Then one had also to think of the long voyage across the Atlantic, loss of valuable property if a considerable number should decide to emigrate, the severing of ties of home and country---all these one must consider and these weighted heavily on the minds of those who loved their own beautiful homes and pleasant surroundings. Yet, considering all these facts they were willing to leave, because of their religious convictions, to a new frontier. America became the choice of almost all who decided to emigrate.

Cornelius Jansen who was a merchant and because of his official position and intimate knowledge of political affairs, from the very beginning preferred America to all other lands of freedom to those who might wish to emigrate. As early as 1871 Jansen and J. F. Funk, editor of the *Herald der Wahrheit* began a correspondence about the resources and industries of the different sections of the country, the customs of the people, and above all the laws regarding military service. He also inquired of the English Colonial Secretary of London whether Mennonite immigrants would be welcome in Canada and whether they would be free from military service.

In reply they were assured a welcome in Canada and yet the English government did not wish to encourage the emigration movement unless Russia would consent to their leaving. At about the same time the Ottawa authorities learned of the probable migration from another source, namely William Hespeler, a Canadian immigration agent. Hespeler who was of German birth had gained this information while on a visit to southern Russia and immediately forwarded the information to the Canadian Immigration Department. Hespeler was forced to leave Russia because the authorities suspected the purpose of his visit, which was of course to encourage the emigration. He had suggested that it would be wise to appoint a delegation

of competent men to investigate the lands in Canada which might be suitable for the kind of settlement they desired.

Also in 1872 a group of four young men from the Molotschna Colony had set out on an adventure of their own, touring sections of the United States and visiting Mennonite groups already here. The favorable report brought back to Russia by these men no doubt also added considerable impetus to the emigration movement. It was decided at this time that a delegation would be sent made up of delegates from the various colonies to investigate the promised land more fully and to report it's findings to the respective villages.

In the early spring of 1873 delegates were chosen for this venture. The Molotschna Colony chose Jacob Buller and Leonhard Suderman, also chosen from other groups were Cornelius Buhr, Tobias Unruh, Andreas Schrag, Wilhelm Ewert, Heinrich Wiebe, Jacob Peters, Cornelius Toews, and David Klassen. Paul Tschetter, a young minister twenty-nine years old, and his Uncle Lawrence Tschetter were chosen by the Hutterites. In this story we are primarily concerned with the emigration of the Hutterites and therefore we will follow the travels of the Tschetters.

In early ay 1873 the Hutterites, Paul and Lohrentz Tschetter, along with Cornelius Toews and David Klassen arrived in New York on the Silesia after an ocean trip of thirteen days. From the diary of Paul Tschetter one is able to travel the route that this delegation traveled, taking them to Elkhart, Indiana where they visited with among others John Funk who accompanied them because the group was not able to manage the English language very well. Old Mennonites and Amish groups were also visited. From Elkhart they traveled to Chicago, on to St Paul, Minnesota to Duluth where they were joined by other members of the delegation.

The frontier of America in the early seventies, where cheap land or free lands were still available in quantities for large settlements ran from Winnipeg south through the Red River Valley, across the southeastern corner of the territory of Dakota, through central Nebraska and Kansas down into Texas. This was the region the delegates were interested in. The prospective colonists were a varied lot who desired to live together and consequently areas were sought where even the poorest would be able to purchase land. Since farming has always been the prominent vocation in the lives of these people so even now they were searching for land situations that were similar to those of Russia. Unsettled prairies, wilderness was by no means an objection because in Russia they lived in closed communities in large compact land areas which had originally been uninhabited crown lands at the time of purchase. To reproduce the same kind of settlements here

would only be possible in such frontier regions where the government still owned large uninhabited stretches of land. The instructions to the delegates had included the following guarantees from the government where land would be purchased.

1. Religious freedom, and exemption from military service.
2. Land of good quality, in quantity sufficient to meet their needs, at moderate prices and easy terms.
3. The right to live in closed communities, have their own form of government, be able to use the German language as they had been permitted to use it in Russia.
4. To be desired was advance of sufficient money to cover transportation expenses from Russia to America.

Today these demands seem extravagant but at that time every western state as well as railroad companies still held vast areas of rich land anxiously awaiting industrious settlers. It was considered a worthy undertaking to employ every effort to get settlers, especially the Mennonites and Hutterites who were known as among the most successful farmers in Europe.

The delegates toured Winnepeg, which in 1873 was a village of nineteen houses and less than five hundred people. The nearest railroad was four hundred miles away. The only means of entrance was by the way of the Red River from the south or by a combined land and water route from Lake Superior on the east called the Dawson Route. After touring Manitoba for several days they were not favorably impressed because the land appeared to them as almost swamp land. Here it was the middle of June and the ground would not be ready even for seeding, where in Russia the grain was about ready for harvesting at this time of year. The Tschetters, Ewert, and Unruh felt that they had seen enough of Canada and started for Dakota. The region near Fargo was an original choice of the delegates as a possible site of a settlement. But because favorable congressional action could not be secured for land reservation in this region the hope of a settlement was abandoned. During the time of approximately three months that the delegates spent in the United States and Canada they stopped in various sections of Manitoba, Dakota Territory, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. Two of the delegation, Buller and Ewert, traveled as far south as Texas.

The Tschetters were concerned about securing something more definite in the way of a promise from the proper authorities for their people back in

Russia, so they availed themselves of a few days of leisure to visit President Grant. The visit, arranged by Hiller of the Northern Pacific railroad gave opportunity for a petition, mostly in the form of questions, to be presented in behalf of the Hutterite group. This petition concerned itself with the possibility of a fifty year exemption from military service or obligations, the privilege of living in colonies or villages, to conduct their schools in the German language, the right to be excluded from jury service, and the swearing of oaths with official papers. President Grant informed the Tschetters that he would need time to study the petition. It was after the Tschetters returned home to Russia that they were informed that to grant these privileges was beyond the power of the president as the states had jurisdiction over such matters.

The journey of this committee of twelve had important results. The lands of Canada and America had been investigated for settlements, and as they could preliminary arrangements for the emigration of their people in the following year had been made leaving the completion of these plans in the hands of friends here in America.

While preparations for the great adventure were already under way in Russia during this time interest reached a new high when the delegation returned. Several small groups had already left Russia but now plans were made for a mass migration. The enthusiastic reports of the committee and the information that there was land to be had in any quantity and on easy terms with religious freedom in both America and in Canada aroused great interest in the winter of 1873 and 1874. Where the emigration fever was the highest, steps were immediately taken to dispose of their property so that an early departure the following spring to the new land would be made. Everybody wanted to sell and there was nobody to buy. The marketability of the land was restricted because some of the land was original Crown land with only limited ownership of the soil. So it was only the use of the land that could be sold. Although buildings and improvements belonged to them but without land they were not of great value. So often these farms were sold for a mere fraction of their actual worth.

Another task was to secure the necessary passports permitting emigration from Russia. Often this too was a tedious and long drawn out process demanding heavy fees and accelerated only by liberal gratuities to corrupt government officials. This often took several months before passports were obtained and every step was attended with heavy expense. It is reported that the average fee paid by each family for necessary emigration documents was about fifty dollars.

When the Russian government realized that a mass migration was underway and that there was a strong likelihood that Russia would lose forty thousand of its most industrious farmers in South Russia, efforts were underway to stem the tide. It is to be remembered that Hutterites and Mennonites were not the only ones involved in this migration. Even though the military issue was a most important consideration for Mennonites and Hutterites, other German groups such as German Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholics had also decided to leave Russia because of the program of Russianization the government had adopted. It meant that these groups too would lose their privileged status which they had enjoyed up to this time.

One needs also to recognize the fact that as in all groups: Mennonite, Hutterite, or others, there were those who decided to cast their lot with the religious absolutists for economic reasons. In every westward movement in history there has been a large contingent of the landless. So all these motives must be taken into consideration when seeking for the ultimate causes back of the emigration movement.

In America preparations for the emigration were also continuing. Not only American Mennonites, but western railroad companies and land departments were interested in this movement. Often serious rivalry between groups or state desirous of new settlers, led to crime and fraud as was the situation reported in the Daily Press and Dakotan of Yankton concerning a group of immigrants who with fraud and shrewdness inveigled an innocent, weary and unsuspecting group into turning aside from their original destination. The Mennonites already settled in America offered their assistance both financially and in helping the new arrivals find suitable homes.

Rumors traveled quickly. Often derogatory reports were circulated to prevent settlements from being made in one state and thereby encouraging settlement of another area. One such rumor among others was a letter circulated in Russia in which the writer stated that Yankton has sunk, people in the region were starving, and that a war with the Indians was inevitable. The story supposedly was to have emanated from some confidence men employed by the great railroad companies having lands to sell. The frontier press too played a unique role in boosting their respective states and territories. Dakota was as well represented by these boosters as any region.

Jacob Brauch, a territorial immigration commissioner, was instrumental in bringing many Mennonites and Hutterites to Dakota who might not have come otherwise. The large groups of Hutterite Brethren who came in 1875 as well as others, came largely through his efforts. According to Brauch one of the best and cheapest mediums of advertising in countries abroad was the

"American Letter". He believed that by writing relatives and friends in Russia about their experiences and opportunities; more could be accomplished to further immigration to Dakota Territory than if an agent were sent to Russia.

Of the Hutterites, Elder Michael Waldner and his congregation at Scheromet and Elder Darius Walter with his congregation at Hutterdorf and others in private ownership in this village were of the first desiring to leave for America. Samuel Kleinsasser, Johannes Decker, Christian Stahl, and Mathies Waldner journeyed to Alexandrowsk to make the necessary preparations for one hundred and nine individuals who were to arrive from Scheromet. The following day all the brethren and sisters arrived with their baggage. After a five day train trip they arrived at the German-Russian border. After the necessary pass and tariff inspections they crossed the border and camped for the night in the Eidtkunan Park near the railway station. The following day they left for Konegsburg and Berlin to reach Hamburg. After spending the night in the immigration home and being joined by Darius Walter with his congregation they embarked on the Harmonia which left the same day and was to be their home for the next sixteen days while sailing the Atlantic Ocean.

On Friday, July 17 full of hope and trust in God, they landed in New York. Shortly before sunset, after customs inspection and purchasing of railroad tickets, they began their journey to the Midwest. This journey took them through Detroit, Chicago, and to Lincoln, Nebraska where they had been influenced by railroad agents to establish their homes.

In Lincoln, finding the location unsatisfactory, they sent three brethren from each group on a land inspection tour farther into Nebraska. The rest of the group remained in Lincoln. The six brethren returned several days later and since they had not found a suitable locality, they decided to travel to Dakota to investigate land there. The brethren remaining hired out for wages.

Because of inadequate provisions and the hot dry summer, soon after arriving in Lincoln, an epidemic of dysentery broke out among the children causing thirty-six deaths. Here too an older man Darius Stahl died at the age of seventy-eight years. On August 17 they left Lincoln, arriving in Yankton the next day.

The Michael Waldner congregation found a suitable tract of land in Bon Homme County, located on the Missouri River about eighteen miles from Yankton. It is probable that the rolling prairies of Dakota which reminded them of the Russian Steepes, the condition of the soil, and the climate made them decide for Dakota. Another reason was that they hoped to locate on a

single large tract of land rather than individual homesteads and therefore did not consider taking advantage of the Homestead Act, where each individual of legal age could have a tract of 160 acres free simply by personally residing on the tract to qualify for ownership.

As the regulations of the Homestead Act were not advantageous to the establishment of a Hutterite Colony, they decided to buy a tract of privately owned land of 2,500 acres. The Dakota Herald, an English paper in Dakota reported in its August 25, 1874 edition: "Honorable W. A. Burleigh yesterday sold 250 acres of his large farm in the neighborhood of Bon Homme. The buyer is a group of Russian-Germans who have united after the fashion of Apostolic Communists. Of the purchase price of 25,000 dollars, they pay 17,000 dollars cash, the balance they pay on time." This colony has been the mother colony from which several other colonies have been formed.

The other colony group led by Darius Walter and the minister Jorg Hofer located at Silver Lake in Turner County on government land. This was a temporary location. The winter, which was a severe one with terrible storms, was spent in earthen huts. In the spring of 1875 the group moved to James River near Wolf Creek from which the colony derived its name. This tract of land consisted of 5,400 acres.

The other Hutterites who had lived in private ownership in Hutterdorf who accompanied this group to Dakota Territory settled near Freeman on government land, which consisted of 160 acres per settler. In the fall of 1874, Paul Tschetter from Neu Hutterthal with several families and single men followed the earlier settlers. The group spent the winter in Elkhart, Indiana, where John Funk and other helpful Mennonites helped them through the winter. The following spring of 1875 they too came to settle in Dakota on private tracts about nine miles from the Darius Walter Colony along the Wolf Creek.

The two colonies just mentioned as well as all the other congregations of the Hutterites emigrated to America in the years 1874-1879. Several groups came at various times, some groups were as large as 350 and others as small as five families. The usual estimate is that 800 Hutterites came to America but 1,200 or more would probably be a more accurate number. It is to be said that those Hutterites who had practiced community of goods in Russia, continued to do the same in Dakota. About one third of the Hutterite immigrants lived in colonies, while the other two-thirds lived on private farms.

Although practically the entire group left Russia, several families did remain. Among these were a Stahl family, Tschetter family, Knels family, and a Wollman family. Wollman owned in partnership with Lepp a large factory and it is very probable that his economic status kept him from emigrating. The descendants of these families suffered along with others who remained in Russia as they lived through the hardships of the revolution that came later.

We are informed that this Mr Wollman who had become extremely wealthy encouraged a nephew of his to come back to Russia from America for funds that Wollman made available for the Hutterites here. The nephew never returned to his home in Dakota although a trunk containing a Russian fur coat and about \$300 arrived here. After investigation it was discovered that the nephew had arrived in New York but disappeared and no further evidence of his whereabouts has ever been found. It has been suggested that the character and the personality of the nephew was inclined toward a boastful and rather arrogant nature and that this may have been in part responsible for his disappearance as this was in the days before checks, bank drafts, and other security measures available today.

So a pilgrimage of some one hundred twenty years traveled thousands of miles; on foot, on horseback, on wagon, by boat, steamship, and finally by train which ended in the Dakota Territory.

Today, as we reminiscence of one hundred years since our forefathers came to this land, we are reminded of the words in Deuteronomy 6:20-25. That in days to come when our children ask what these stories mean we shall be able to tell them. We need to ponder and appreciate the heritage that is ours, remembering we have a torch to hold high that we did not light, but it was given to us by other hands. The torch is ours to keep burning bright, ours to pass on to other generations.

Deloris Stahl