

The

**Bergthal
Colony**

by

William Schroeder

THE BERGTHAL COLONY

William Schroeder

CMBC Publications
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3P 0M4

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First Edition December 1974.

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CANADIAN MENNONITE BIBLE COLLEGE

Library of Congress Catalog No. 74-25506

Printed in Canada

FOREWORD

It is fitting that during the centenary of the coming of the first Russian Mennonites to Canada, a study be published on the history of the Bergthal Colony in Russia. The Bergthal Colony is important both for the history of Mennonites in Russia and for the history of Mennonites in Western Canada.

The Bergthal Colony was the first Mennonite "daughter" settlement in Russia. As such, its experience provided a model that was utilized by both Chortitza and Molotschna in later years to solve the problems posed by the existence of the landless people. Bergthal was a small settlement, and somewhat isolated from the two larger Mennonite settlements of Chortitz and Molotschna. Consequently, the people in Bergthal developed a very strong group loyalty and identity. The isolation and pioneer experience also cast the Bergthal people into the role of "preservers" of the traditions, rather than innovators. This was reflected in their schools, their churches, and in their attitude to the threatened loss of privileges in the 1870's.

The Bergthal people have also had a very important role in the story of the Mennonites in Western Canada. Of the approximately 7,000 Mennonite immigrants who came to Canada in the 1870's, about 3,000 originated in the Bergthal colony. A few people from Bergthal moved to Chortitza, and a few settled in the U.S.A. Most, however, agreed with the majority decision to move to Canada.

In Canada, the Bergthal people ceased to speak with a united voice. Various forces fragmented them. They found themselves on both sides of all the major issues facing Mennonites in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century. They made their contribution to the heated discussions on the formation of municipalities, to the establishment of public schools, to the pressures to acculturate into a society dominated by an aggressive Anglo-Saxon faction. From the Bergthal people also originated numerous Mennonite Churches: The Chortitzer, the Bergthal, and Sommerfelder Churches just to mention the earliest ones.

Some of the descendants of the Bergthal people also constituted a major portion of the emigrants from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920's and 1940's.

William Schroeder's study of the Bergthal colony is significant because it is one of very few detailed studies of this settlement. Some of the pioneering work on the history of the Bergthal colony in Russia has been done by J. J. Hildebrandt, Winnipeg. Unfortunately most of his research has not appeared in published form. Mr. Schroeder's study is also significant because it tells the story of a people who must be understood and given due recognition by those who wish to understand both Russian and Canadian Mennonites.

Mr. William Schroeder is a descendant of the Bergthal colony immigrants who settled in Manitoba. He received his early education in southern Manitoba, and continued his education at the University of Manitoba. At present he is a high school teacher in Winnipeg.

This book is a revision of an earlier limited edition published by the author in 1974.

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GLOSSARY

- Aeltester*: the leading minister of the church
- Dessjatin*: a measure of land area equal to 2.7 acres
- Gebietsamt* (German) or *Volost*: an administrative district comprising several villages
- Oberschulze*: administrative head of a number of villages
- Pud*: a measure of weight about 36 lbs.
- Ruble*: 100 *Kopeks*; money equal to about \$.75 in American currency in 1873
- Schulze*: mayor of a village
- Tschetwerik*: a measure of grain about 45 lbs.
- Tschetwert*: a measure of grain about 360 lbs.
- Werst*: a measure of distance, 3,500 ft. or two-thirds of a mile

THE BERGTHAL COLONY

I. INTRODUCTION

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Mennonites had migrated from Holland and various parts of Germany, where they suffered religious oppression, to the Vistula Delta in Polish Prussia upon invitations from the State Church and from noblemen who desired industrious farmers to settle on their swampy estates in these lowlands. The Mennonites of Holland were experts in the art of reclaiming swamp lands by means of dikes, canals and windmills. In exchange for their economic worth, the Prussian Church and States issued several royal charters which guaranteed them the right to worship in public buildings, to administer their own schools, and to be exempt from military service.

However, by 1787 the Mennonites were in danger of losing these privileges. Both the Prussian state and the Lutheran Church were determined to avert any further growth of Mennonitism in the land, for they had seen the Mennonites become increasingly affluent and numerous during the eighteenth century. Also, the non-resistant Mennonites were a menace to the militaristic Prussian state. Numerous restrictive measures were imposed. A royal decree was issued which prohibited Mennonites from increasing their land holdings and forced them to pay special taxes to support a military academy. As a result, the Mennonites in Prussia began to look for a new home where they could live in peace.

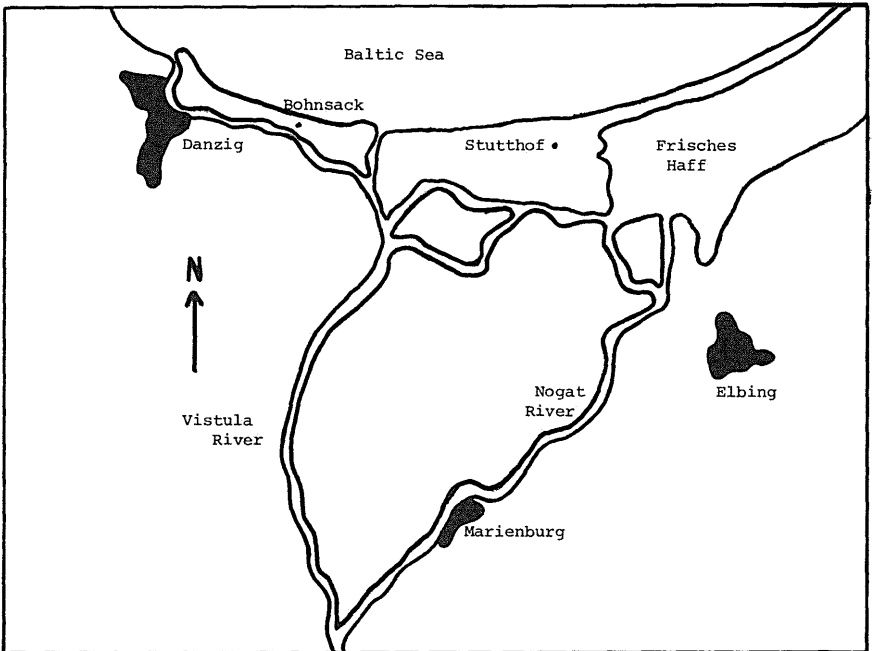
While the Mennonites in Prussia were looking for another country, Catherine II was looking for competent settlers to populate the territory which Russia had just gained through a series of wars with her European

neighbours. As a result of war with Turkey, the entire Ukraine had been annexed to Russia.

During the Seven Years War (1756-63), Russian officials such as Rumanzow saw the prosperous Mennonite communities in Prussia and discovered that they were looking for new land. The Mennonites were recommended to Catherine II by Rumanzow since he felt they would make good prospective settlers for the Ukraine.¹

Very soon a special envoy, Georg von Trappe, was sent to the Danzig area to induce the Mennonites to migrate to the area immediately north of the Black Sea. The

The Vistula Delta



Mennonites migrated from Holland to the Danzig area in the sixteenth century.

oppressed Mennonites could not refuse the generous offers which von Trappe extended to them and which were later confirmed by two delegates, Hoepfner and Bartsch, who had been sent on a tour of inspection to the proposed territory in south Russia. This offer included, among others, the following terms: free transportation to Russia, one hundred seventy-five acres of free land per family, a loan of \$250.00 and support for each family at a cheap rate until the first harvest, complete religious freedom, complete freedom in respect to language and schools, full military exemption, self-government within their settlements, and no taxes for ten years.²

The first group under the leadership of Jacob Hoepfner left Bohnsack, a village near Danzig, at nine a.m. on Easter Sunday, March 22, 1788. They travelled alternately by sleigh and wagon to Riga and then south along the Dongava River to Dubrovno where 228 families had to spend a terrible winter. In June, 1789, the first settlers arrived at the point where the small Chortitza River joins the Dnieper. The "big oak" provided their first shelter. The Chortitza Colony consisted of eight villages at first and later grew and spread out. New tracts of land were purchased as more families arrived from Prussia. In 1824, the colony included eighteen villages.

These settlers of the Chortitza Colony suffered severe hardships during their pioneer years. To begin with, they had been members of the poorer class, the landless, in Prussia. They had no money, and weak leadership. Furthermore, they were disappointed with the land. They refused to settle down and blamed the two deputies, Hoepfner and Bartsch, most severely. During the first winter many died of dysentery.

The religious life of the colony left much to be desired. There was no minister among them. After prolonged disputes, one was elected from among them and another was sent from Danzig, but he soon died. Their leaders, Hoepfner and Bartsch, were excommunicated. One of the greatest difficulties was that the two factions, Friesians and Flemish, were constantly in strife with each other. Because of all these internal problems the colony made very slow progress during its first thirteen years in Russia.

Meanwhile, in 1796, when the worst religious and economic problems had been at least partially overcome,

Catherine died and was succeeded by her son Paul. The colonists, concerned that they might lose their special privileges, sent a delegation to St. Petersburg. After a prolonged absence they returned with a special document, the heading of which was printed in gold, which guaranteed in perpetuity their special privileges.³ This guarantee prompted a much larger group of more prosperous Mennonites to migrate to Russia. This new group settled along the Molotschna River.

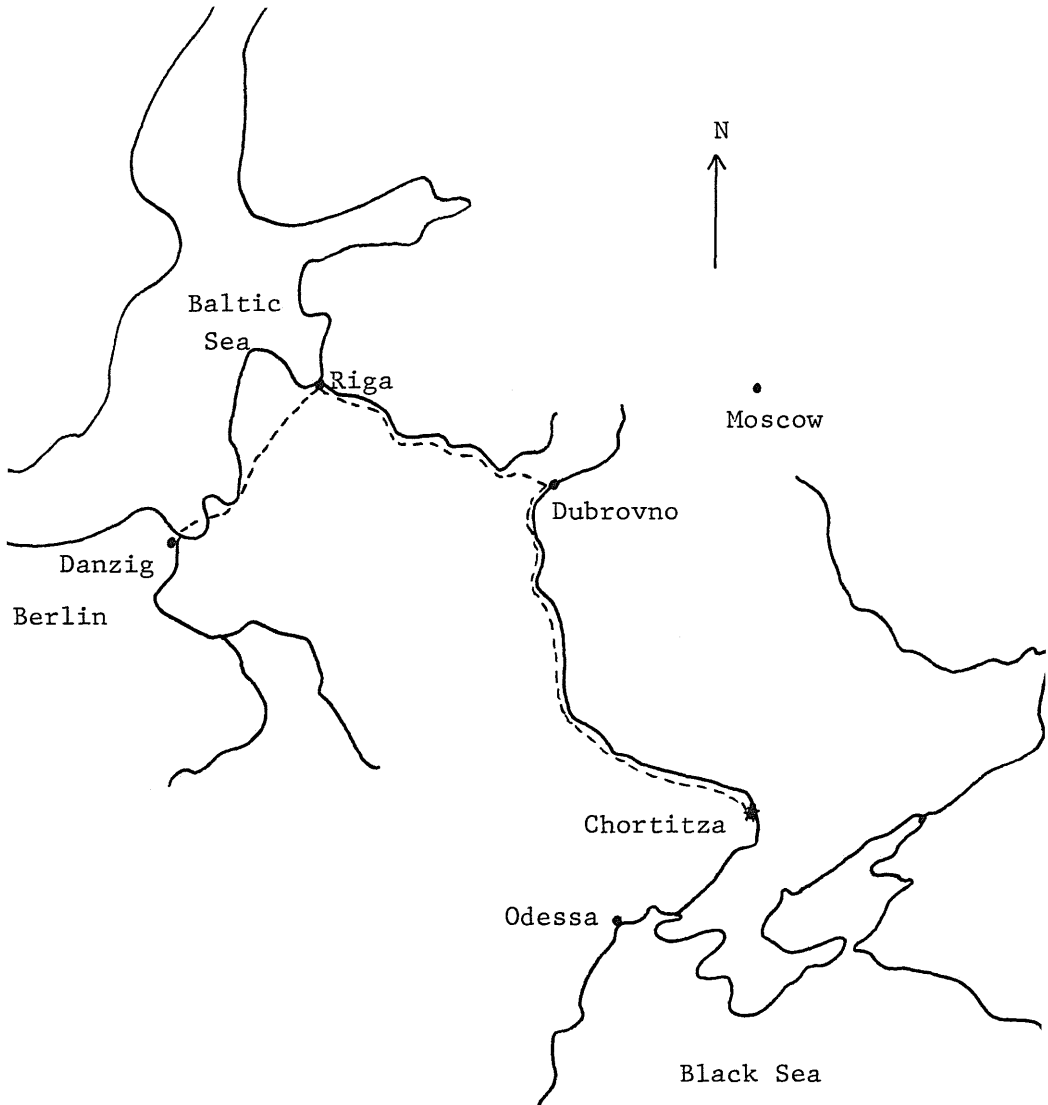
A rapid increase in population, and the law that the entire estate must pass intact to one member of the family, created a large number of landless families. Many of these were granted a small patch of ground upon which to build a house and make a living as best they could, usually as farm labourers. These landless families were known as *Anwohner*. Consequently, the Chortitzza Colony and the *Fuersorgekomitee* requested the government to help them solve this population problem.

The government responded to their request and on March 30, 1833,⁴ gave them a tract of land along the Bodena River, a small tributary of the Berda, where they could establish the first daughter colony.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

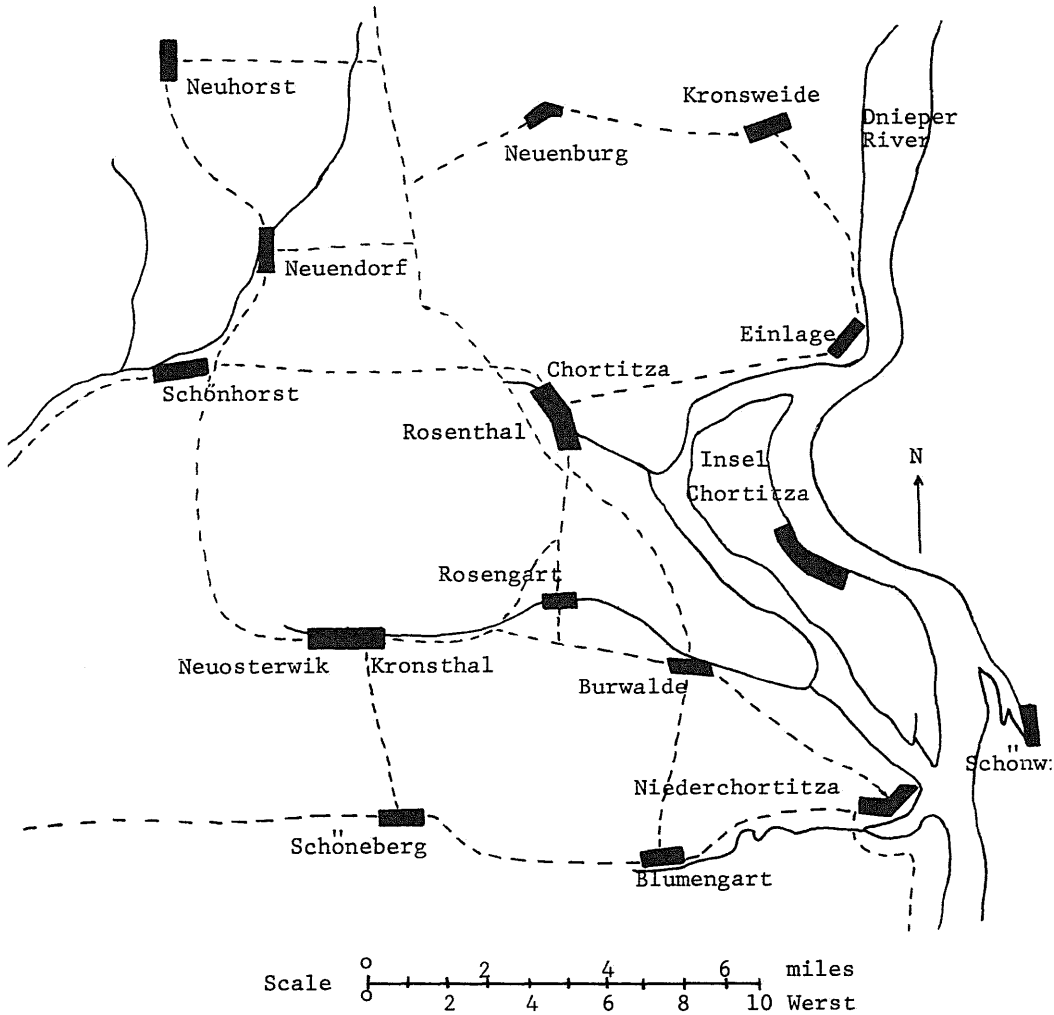
On March 30, 1833 the *Tutelkomitee fuer Hebraer*, which had been formed on March 25, 1817, was dissolved¹ and the unused land in the Mariupol area reserved for Jews was given to the Ministry of the Interior to be used for the establishment of new German colonies. With this land at their disposal, the Ministry of the Interior could respond to the request of the *Fuersorgekomitee* and the Chortitzza Colony for help in solving their growing population problem. Consequently, the Chortitzza Colony received 9,540 *dessjatin* of land which, in terms of Canadian land measure, would be equivalent to about forty sections. This land was located about fourteen miles south of Grunau and twenty miles north-west of Mariupol, along several small spring-fed tributaries of the Berda River: the Bodena River (also spelled Bodnii, or Bodni), the Malaja Podnja (small depression), the Blubokaja (the deep one), and the Karatesch.

This area, like the rest of the Russian Steppe, was relatively level, treeless, and grass-covered land, with occasional deep valleys running across it.



This map shows the route taken by the Mennonites as they migrated from Danzig to Chortitza in 1789.

The Chortitza Colony
1833



The Chortitza Colony, consisting of eighteen villages, was established during the years 1789-1824. The village of Kronsgarten, not shown on this map, was located about fifty miles north of Chortitza.



One of the rock formations in Kamennaja Mogila or Gami Oba. This area is now a state park.

An exception to this rather monotonous terrain was a curious granite formation² spread over an area of 217 *dessjatinen* (585 acres) on the west side of the Karatesch River, about six miles north-west of the village of Bergthal. The Greeks called these rocks Gami Oba (*Schiffhuegel*) because, when viewed from a given angle, their overall profile resembled a sailing ship. The Russians called them Kamennaja Mogila (*Steinhuegel*). The highest extrusion in this formation reaches a height of more than three hundred feet. A spring-fed creek had its source in the Gami Oba, and then ran into the Karatesch River.

The Bergthal Colony was very fortunate to have this exposed granite on its boundary because here its masons quarried stone not only for the foundations of buildings, but also for threshing stones and millstones.

The climate in this region was mild. The highest summer temperature reached 38 degrees Centigrade, and the lowest winter temperature dropped to minus 24 degrees Centigrade. Because of the absence of physical barriers,

such as forests or mountain ranges, the region was subject to almost constant winds. During the winter months the winds blew from the north-east and during the summer from the south-west.

The soil was slightly sandy but otherwise quite fertile.³ The topsoil, consisting of black humus was from 20 to 28 inches deep. Under average conditions, this soil could yield crops of about eight times the amount seeded.

Weather Conditions - 1852

	high	low	hoar-frost	sleet	nights with frost	nights without frost	days with frost	days without frost	clear days	partly cloudy days	cloudy days	north wind	east wind	south wind	west wind	rain	snow
Jan.	0	-23	0	6	21	10	24	7	10	15	6	3	10	5	3	6	13
Feb.	0	-8	3	0	18	11	18	11	8	8	13	6	11	7	5	0	2
Mar.	10	-12	3	0	14	17	12	19	16	9	6	2	14	6	4	2	2
Apr.	12	-6	3	1	3	27	3	27	11	9	10	3	5	10	12	9	2
May	22	9	0	0	0	31	0	31	11	9	11	3	4	12	12	8	0
June	24	11	0	0	0	30	0	30	10	18	2	3	12	7	8	16	0
July	35	13	0	0	0	31	0	31	15	15	1	4	3	14	10	10	0
Aug.	32	11	0	0	0	31	0	31	19	12	0	7	13	7	4	7	0
Sept.	26	6	0	0	0	30	0	30	19	7	4	7	6	16	1	3	0
Oct.	15	-10	17	0	17	14	14	17	19	7	5	8	7	5	11	5	0
Nov.	8	-11	1	1	7	23	7	23	8	8	14	4	8	10	8	7	1
Dec.	8	-10	2	0	13	13	18	13	10	6	15	6	16	7	7	1	1
Total			29	8	98	268	96	270	156	123	87	56	109	106	95	74	21

This chart shows various weather conditions in Grunau, a village about fifteen miles north-west of Bergthal. This table was copied from *Unterhaltungsblatt* 1853. The temperature is given in Reamur.

The Bergthal area revealed an abundance of evidence that the region had been occupied by earlier civilizations. Scythians occupied this territory between 1000 and 500 B.C. Their burial mounds, called Kurgany, exhibited a diameter of 200 feet and a height of 50 feet, and were found along the Karatesch River between Friedrichsthal and Gami Oba.

The Scythians also made crude stone sculptures resembling human figures and called *baba*. These life-size figures, possibly used as idols in ancient times, have been found throughout the Ukraine.

After Catherine the Great had annexed the Ukraine, her first governor in the area, Potemkin⁴, permitted 20,000 Orthodox Greeks from the Crimea, who centuries earlier had intermarried with Goths, to settle in twenty-four villages along the Kalmius and Berda Rivers. One of these villages, Marinsk, at the mouth of the Kalmius River, became the city of Mariupol in 1780. When the Crimea was annexed to Russia in 1784, the persecution of the Greeks as well as their migrations to the Mariupol hinterland ceased. This left a vast area of land intended for the Greeks unoccupied. For many years this land was used to graze sheep. Johann Cornies rented 3000 *dessjatin* of land just north and west of what a few years later became Bergthal. The *Fuersorgekomitee* acquired this unoccupied land and permitted Low-German speaking Lutheran and Catholic Prussian immigrants to settle on it. They settled twenty-seven villages during the years 1822-43, and Grunau, a village fifteen miles north of Bergthal, became the capitol of the district.

The southern part of this former Greek Reserve was set aside in 1817 for the settlement of Jews but when this plan miscarried, as mentioned above, the vacant land was given to the Chortitzza Colony. Upon it these Mennonites could settle many of their landless families and thus establish their first daughter colony.

III. BERGTHAL IS ESTABLISHED¹

When Chortitzza was given permission in 1833 to resettle its landless people, there was no immediate hurry to do so. The year 1833 was the worst the Mennonites had experienced in Russia. Almost total crop failures had

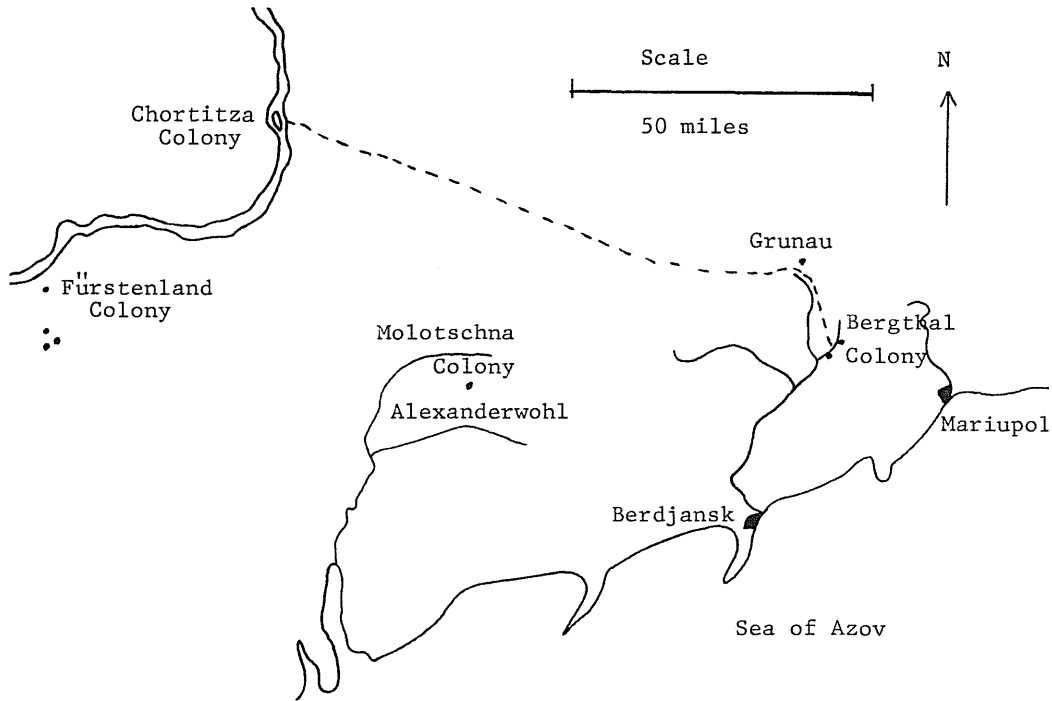
made it necessary for many farmers to use the straw from the roofs of their houses to keep at least some of their cattle alive. However, as the economic situation became brighter, the colony proceeded to establish its new settlement.

Chortitza remembered all too well the problems its people had encountered during their first decade in Russia, and therefore applied every precaution so that this would not be repeated in Bergthal. First, only families that belonged to the Flemish Church were chosen to go to Bergthal. Thus, any strife between the two factions, the Friesians and the Flemish, was precluded. Second, a minister, Jacob Braun², was sent along with the first group to look after the spiritual needs of the people. Finally, three competent *Wirte*, Wilhelm Rempel, Jacob Martens and Johann Wiebe, were elected to go along with the settlers and supervise the formation of the new colony. It was their duty to choose an appropriate site for each village and to plan the general lay-out of the villages in a functional and meaningful way.

Most of the *Anwohner* were very poor and therefore did not have the means to move their belongings a distance of 133 miles. Therefore it was decided that each family would be allowed five wagon loads for the removal of all its belongings, except for cattle and horses which were tied behind the wagons. These wagons were supplied free of charge by the *Wirte* of Chortitza under a system of community service known as *Reihendienste*.

The farewell service for the first Bergthal settlers was held on a Sunday morning during the spring, or early summer, of 1836 in the Chortitza Church. Katharina Friesen (1825-1899) was eleven years old at that time and lived to tell her story to her great grandchildren. Katharina had been asked to look after her older brother's children while they went to the church which was just across the street. Katharina wanted very much to overhear the service and soon bribed her oldest niece to look after the little children in return for some whipped cream. Her charges thus taken care of, she ran across the street and sat down in the shade of the church under an open window and listened to the service. Aeltester Gerhard Dyck spoke the words of farewell and many people in the audience wept. Before long, the little girl sitting under the window was also moved to tears.

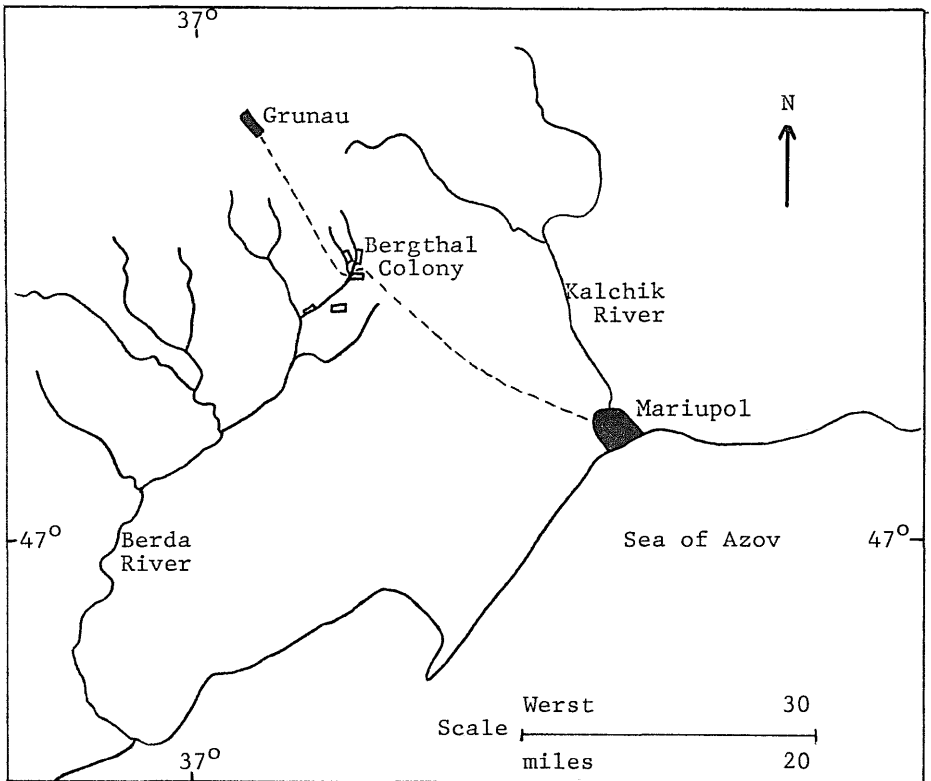
With the farewell over, and the wagons ready, the long caravan crossed the Dnieper by ferry and embarked on a three or four day journey in a south-easterly direction to their new home.



About one hundred fifty families from Chortitza travelled along this route and settled in the five Bergthal villages.

The three deputies decided that the first village should be located in the Bodni Valley on the trail that went from Grunau to Mariupol. The streets of the village were laid out in a "T" shape. Each yard was 120 feet wide and 840 feet long. Every family received a total of 65 *dessjatin* of land (175 acres). By the time the first summer ended, twenty-nine families had moved to Bergthal, and three more joined them the following summer, thus bringing the total number of *Wirte* to thirty-two. The name Bergthal was suggested by the Chortitza Oberschulze, Bartsch, because it described the geographical setting of the village. The *Berg* was a fairly high hill just north of the village and the *Thal* was the Bodni Valley.

Except for a few small huts belonging to the herdsmen of Count Tolstoi, no buildings were found on the land. Upon their arrival, they built temporary homes such as sod huts and tents which they used for the first two or three months until their conventional village dwellings were completed. The permanent structures had a foundation of flag stones which they could obtain from a quarry less than a mile up the Glubokaja River. The sun-dried bricks for the walls were made from the yellow clay just under their rich black top soil. The floor was also made of clay and the roof of thatched grass. The timbers needed for the beams in the roof and ceiling presented a real problem because the region had no trees. These had to be hauled from forests east of Mariupol, an excursion done in caravan style which took as long as a week.



Mariupol and its Hinterland

The first winter in Bergthal was very difficult for the twenty-nine newly-transplanted families. They had no grain or vegetables of their own. There had just been time enough to build a house, gather some fuel and cut some grass for feed for the animals. All other essentials of life which had not been brought from Chortitzta had to be purchased from Grunau or Mariupol. About their first difficult winter, Katharina Friesen said, "We thought we were very poor when we lived as *Anwohner* in Chortitzta, but now we really knew what poverty meant."

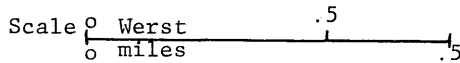
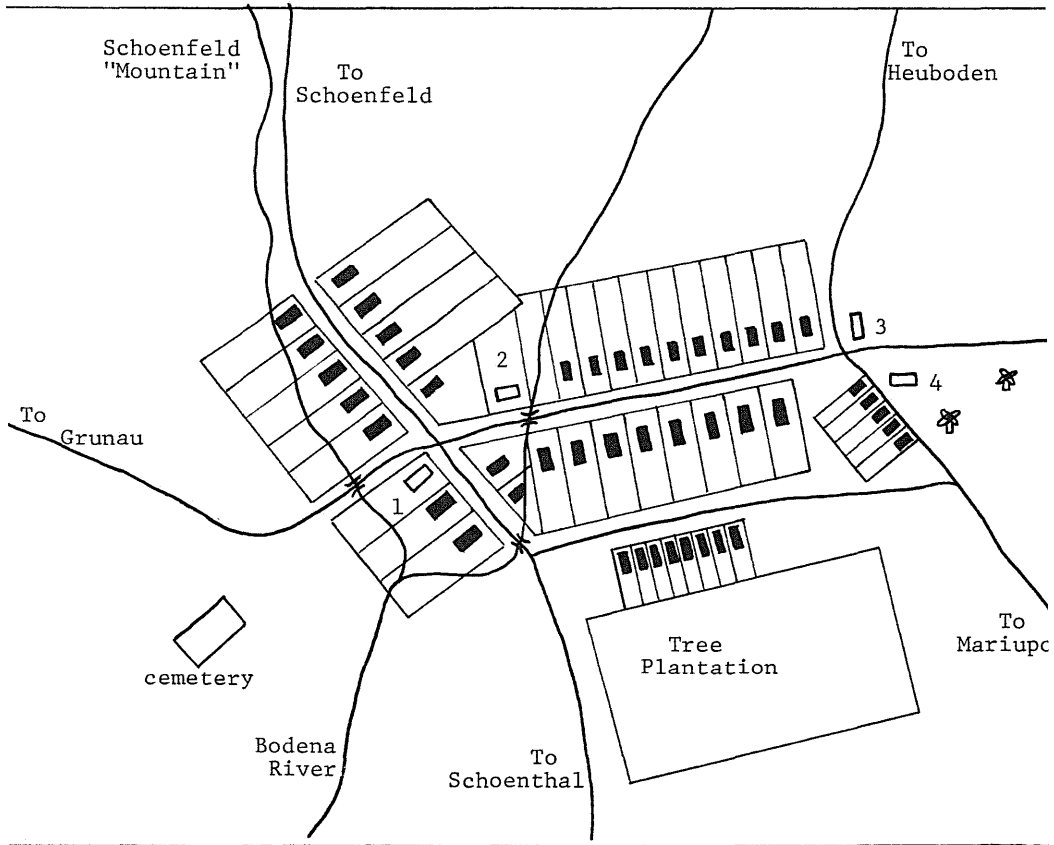


A drawing of Bergthal, Russia, shows the streets laid out in "T" shape and the "Anwohner" street on the right. The original drawing belonged to Jakob Klassen. (Photo courtesy H. Gerbrandt)

As might be expected, the settlement in the subsequent four villages was not nearly as difficult. Later settlers could get help from the people that already lived in Bergthal, until their own homes were ready for them.

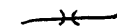
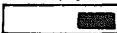


Schoenfeld was settled in 1837 by twenty-five families. The planning committee at first selected land on higher level for a village site, and gave the future village the name Schoenfeld. However, before any buildings

THE VILLAGE OF BERGTHAL
1848



Legend

- 1 church
- 2 school
- 3 municipal office (Wolost)
- 4 village granary (Gemeindespeicher)

-  bridges
-  landowner (Wirt)
-  landless (Anwohner)
-  windmill

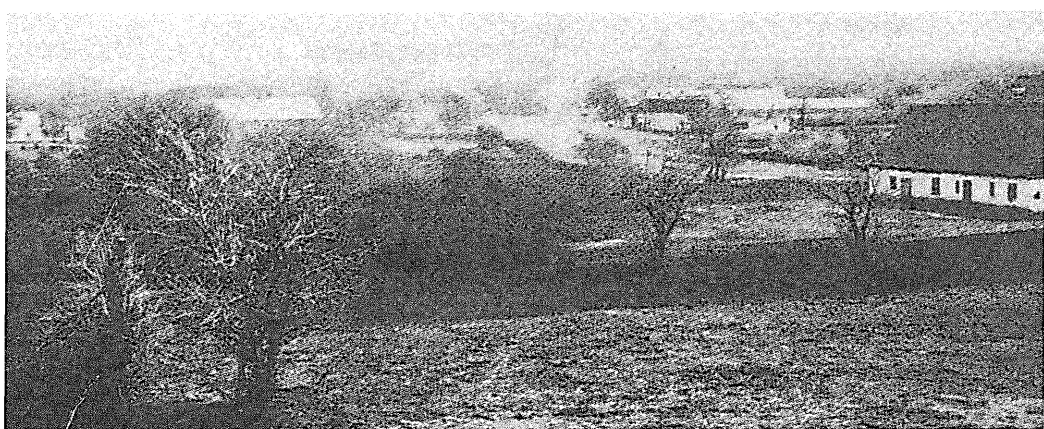
were erected, they wanted to make sure that they would have a supply of water. When they could not find water after digging fifty-two feet into the ground, they abandoned the original site and built their village on the east side of the Malaja Podnja River less than a mile north of Bergthal. Yet they kept the original name.

In 1838 another twenty-two families left Chortitza and moved to Bergthal where they settled in a small valley just south of the Bodni, about two miles south-west of Bergthal. Nine more families settled here in 1839, and brought the total number of *Wirte* to thirty-one. The site was in a beautiful valley and therefore they named the village Schoenthal.

Heuboden was settled in 1839 by twenty-eight families. They chose a site on the east side of the Glubokaja River about one mile north-east of Bergthal. The name Heuboden was used because the valley had an abundance of grass.

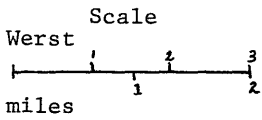
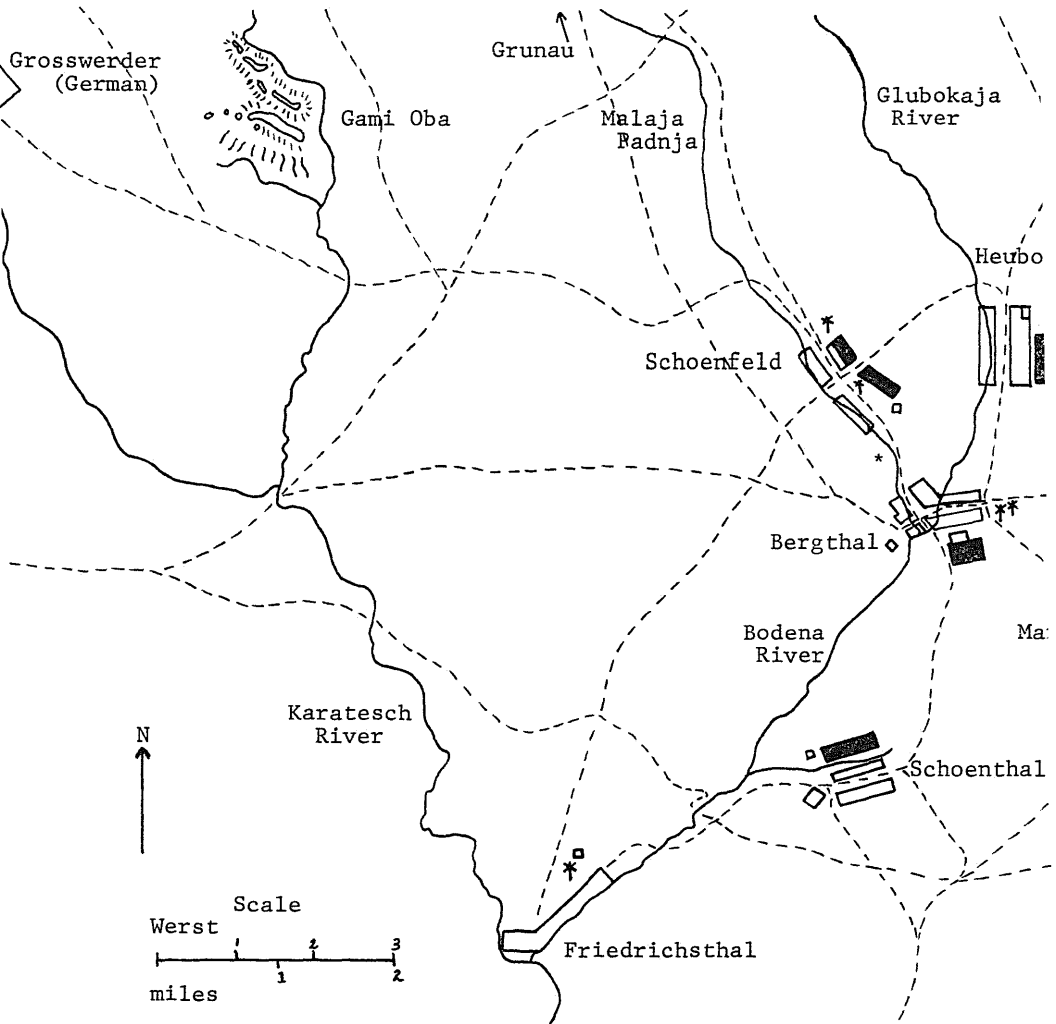
With the founding of these four villages, the first phase of settling the Bergthal Colony was completed. The special committee of three *Wirte* from Chortitza had accomplished its mission and handed responsibilities to Bergthal administrators. The minister, Jacob Braun, was ordained as *Aeltester* in 1840, and Mr. Siemens was elected as the first *Oberschulze*. With these transactions completed, Bergthal had received its "independence".




The Bergthal villages were well planned and beautiful. The streets were straight and wide, with a row of wild pear trees standing along each side. A neat row of mul-








A photograph of the village of Bergthal. (Photo courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.)

THE BERGTHAL COLONY

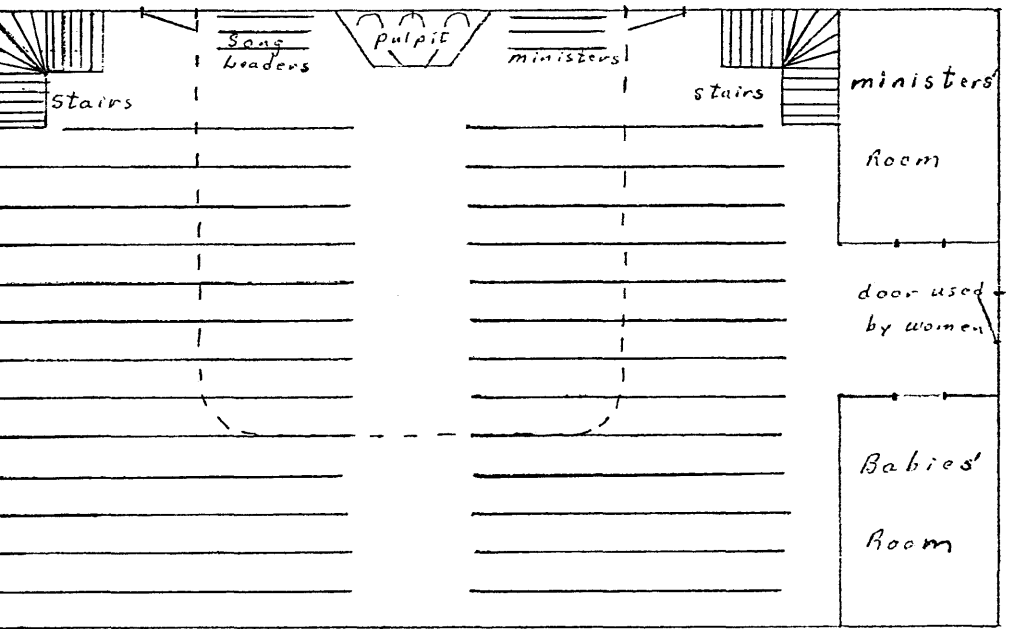
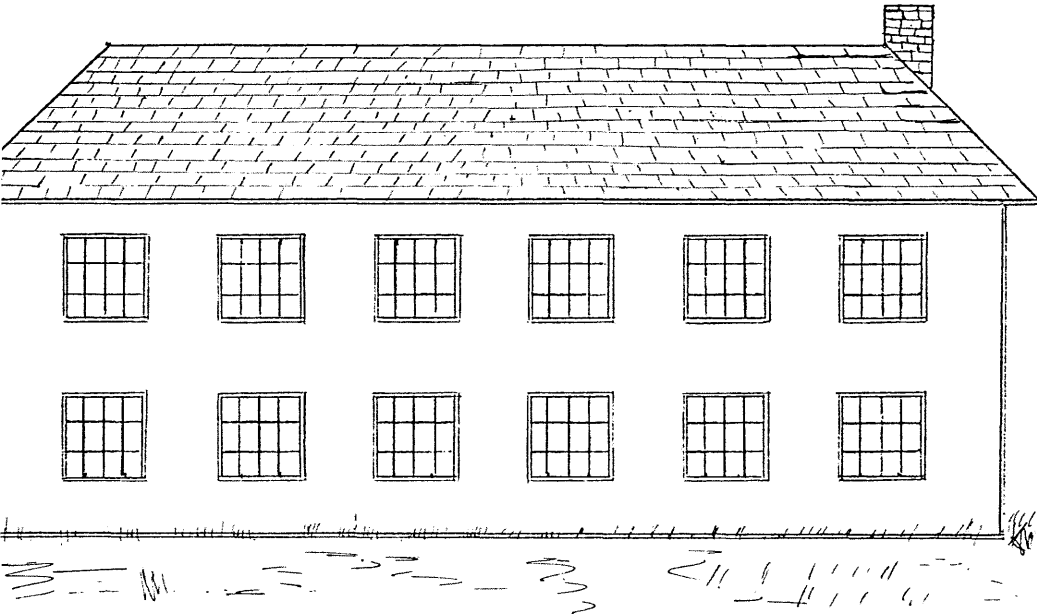


-  village
-  tree plantation
-  rock

Legend

-  river
-  trail
-  Schoenfeld "Mountain"
-  windmill
-  cemetery

ALEXANDERWOHL CHURCH



berry trees divided one yard *Feuerstelle* from the next. In 1845, Johann Cornies could report to the *Fuersorge-komitee* that Bergthal had 401 apple trees, 400 pear trees, 197 plum trees, 295 cherry trees and 36 apricot trees in addition to many other shade trees.

At the request of Czar Alexander I, another major tree planting programme was begun in 1842. Every village was asked to have a tree plantation of one-half *dessjatin* per *Wirt*. This meant that the village of Bergthal, with thirty-two *Wirte* had a plantation of sixteen *dessjatin* (43 acres). The purpose of this plantation was to provide future generations with a minimum supply of lumber, and to enhance the aesthetic appearance of the Mennonite villages. About one-third of these trees were mulberries and the rest comprised a mixture of other trees. In 1845 the village of Bergthal had 3,982 trees on its plantation.

Friedrichsthal, the last and smallest of the Bergthal villages, located on the north side of the Bodni River almost five miles south-west of Bergthal, was settled in 1852 by a mere 19 families. The *Gemeindeberichte* of 1848, and Cornies' Report, which are the two main sources of information about the first four villages, were written before Friedrichsthal was settled. Consequently, very little is known about this village. According to various family records, a fair number of the young couples that settled here had grown up in one or other of the older Bergthal villages.

IV. LOCAL GOVERNMENT¹

The lowest level of government in Bergthal, as in all other German colonies in Russia, was the village assembly, called *Schultenbot*, which was made up of all the landowners in the village. This assembly was headed by a *Schulze* (mayor), and two assistants called *Beisitzer* and clerk. The *Schulze* and *Beisitzer* were elected by the *Wirte* for a period of two years. The business meetings were held in the home of the *Schulze*.

The *Schulze* was responsible for everything that went on in his village. He hired a teacher and cowherd for the village. He was responsible for the maintenance

of peace and order, the prompt payment of taxes, the proper maintenance of roads and bridges, and for the general welfare of the village as a whole. It was his duty to settle disputes among colonists and to enforce fire prevention regulations, as well as to prohibit the sale of liquor to persons addicted to drunkenness. His authority also extended to the villagers' homes and fields and to his church. He told the *Wirte* when to plow, seed and harvest his fields, and saw to it that the women kept their homes clean and spent enough time in spinning and weaving. Finally, the *Schulze* had the unpleasant duty of checking whether villagers went to church on Sunday and holidays, and listened to the Word of God. The *Schulze* and his two *Beisitzer* formed the "court of first instance" in civil cases and minor offences involving his villagers.

The *Gebietsamt*, or district assembly, was the second level of government. The officials here were the *Oberschulze*, two *Beisitzer* and the *Gebietschreiber*. The *Oberschulze* and *Beisitzer* were elected by the *Gebietsamt* which was made up of representatives from the villages called *Zehntmänner*, so called because the villages could send one representative for every ten *Wirte*. The *Oberschulze* was elected for three years and received an annual salary of twenty ruble, while the *Beisitzer* were elected for two years and received only fifteen ruble each. The *Gebietsamt* secretary, a man capable of reading and writing Russian, was a full-time employee of the *Gebietsamt*.

The duties of the *Oberschulze* were to co-ordinate and supervise the work of the five village *Schulzen* and to preside over the *Gebietsamt* (district assembly) consisting of about fifteen representatives. The *Oberschulze* and his assistants formed the "court of second instance" in civil cases. He could impose fines and under some conditions even corporal punishment. However, as the *Schulze* was responsible to the village council, so the *Oberschulze* was responsible to the district council for all his actions.

The first *Oberschulze* in Bergthal was a man named Siemens. He was succeeded by Jacob Peters, a loved and respected man from the village of Heuboden. Peters held that office for at least twenty-two years in Russia and continued to serve in a similar capacity in Manitoba until municipalities were organized in 1884.²

The first *Gebietsschreiber* was Abram Klassen (1810-1864). He served as secretary from 1847 to 1855, when he returned to Chortitza and took over a similar position there.

He was replaced by his apprentice, Jacob Friesen, who held that job until 1876.

The *Gebietsamt* Office, or *Volost* was located in the village of Bergthal. One half of the building constituted the residence of the secretary. The other half had a board-room where the *Gebietsamt* met, and an office for the district secretary.

A special committee of guardians, known as the *Fuersorgekomitee*, with an office in Odessa, was organized in 1818 by the Department of the Interior to supervise the various German colonies in Russia. This Committee consisted of a president, two assistants and clerical staff. They had at their disposal a survey team, a medical doctor and a veterinarian. Because of the great area they had to administer, they established several inspectorial divisions; one of these inspectors was located in Grunau fifteen miles north of Bergthal. Kirchner was the inspector in Grunau for many years.

The president and aides of the *Fuersorgekomitee* formed the "court of third instance".

An interesting and unusual example of the authority which the *Fuersorgekomitee* possessed has been preserved for us. On January 8, 1848, Eugen von Hahn (1807-1874), Chairman of the *Fuersorgekomitee* in Odessa, wrote a letter addressed to the *Schulze* and teacher in each village under his jurisdiction, in which he instructed them, for the benefit of future generations, to write the history of their village according to an outline that he provided. He concluded the letter with the following command, "I am allowing you four months to complete this assignment."

Within four months, every German village, including the sixty-five Mennonite villages, sent its historical report to Odessa. These reports were obtained by German historians during World War I and have served as an invaluable source for this story of Bergthal.

V. AGRICULTURE AND OTHER INDUSTRIES IN BERGTHAL

As mentioned earlier, before Bergthal was settled, the entire area was used for grazing sheep because the product, wool, could easily be transported to markets over great distances. However, in 1832, a sea port was opened

at Mariupol, and Italian grain merchants were invited to locate there. As a result, the price of wheat increased from four to twenty-two ruble per *Tschetwert*¹ (360 lbs.). The hinterland of Mariupol now became commercial grain country.

According to Klaus, of the land given to Bergthal in 1867, some 2,749 *dessjatin* were used for grain, 4,997 for pasture, 1,483 for hay and 220 for villages and tree plantations. Klaus also states that Bergthal had only 105 farmers with a full quota of land, while another 44 possessed only parts of farms.²

The arable land allocated to each village was divided into small strips called *Kagel*. Each *Wirt* received several of these strips, some of them of better quality and some less fertile in quality, some near the village and some farther away.

The three-field system of crop rotation was used. The summer fallow was used to grow corn, pumpkins, potatoes and watermelons. The main cash crops were wheat and flax, with barley, rye and oats reserved for local use.

An undated report (possibly from 1852 or 1853) states that the Mariupol colonies had exceptionally good crops in 1838, 1846, 1847 and 1852. During 1840 and 1845, however, they had almost complete crop failures. In 1852 barley yields were 20 times the amount seeded.

Farming methods were very simple during the time the Bergthal people lived in Russia. The seed was broadcast by hand and then covered with a harrow. The grain was harvested by scythe or sickle and bound in sheaves. The dried sheaves were taken to the village and threshed by flail or horse-drawn threshing stones on the backyard of the *Wirt*. After the harvest, the farmer plowed his field with a one-share plow. He worked his summer fallow with a "Bugger" (cultivator).

When the field work was completed, the Bergthal *Wirte* loaded their bags of grain into wagons. For safety reasons, the grain was hauled to Mariupol in caravan fashion.

Sheep raising was very important during the first years in Bergthal. In 1840, each *Wirt* had at least 40 sheep and, according to Cornies' Report of 1845, the sale of wool was a major source of income. During the winter of 1840-41, about one half of the sheep in the colony died from lack of feed.

The Mennonites had very good cattle which they had brought from Prussia and Holland. The cattle were grazed on common pastures by village herdsmen. The herdsmen took the cattle out to pasture in the morning and returned them in the evening. Each *Wirt* was allowed to have as many as 25 head of cattle on the common pasture.

In addition to this, every villager had chickens, ducks or geese, and pigs, besides an abundance of fruit trees, and a large vegetable garden. Syrup made from water-melons and honey provided the sweets they needed for their diet.

Economically the Mariupol colonies, both Mennonite and Grunau, never achieved the level reached in Chortitza and Molotchna. However, they did have a few small industries, other than the spinning and weaving which were carried on in each home. First in this category were the industries related to the windmills. The windmills gave the colonists a cheap and reliable supply of energy. A good mill could produce as much as forty-five horse-power of energy and gave evidence to the fact that the village was economically well above the subsistence level. Mennonites had learned the skill of building and using mills while still in Holland. This skill made them economically desirable on the Vistula Delta during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Hoepfner and Bartsch remembered their economic and industrial dependence on the mills when they made the agreement with Catherine II, and therefore requested that the government supply them with the timbers and grinding stones required for two windmills.

The Bergthal Colony had at least five windmills, two in Bergthal, two in Schoenfeld, and one in Friedrichsthal.³ Once constructed, the mills required very little maintenance and each provided employment for at least two people. The mills were primarily used for grinding rye and wheat into flour and to crush grain to be used as feed for farm animals. Some mills were also used to cut logs into lumber. Schoenfeld used a big mill to pump water from its village well.

Abraham Doerksen (1827-1916) the father of Abraham Doerksen (1852-1929), the first *Aeltester* of the Sommerfelder Church, had a machine shop in Schoenthal where he manufactured farm machinery such as plows, harrows, cultivators and wagons. He employed four carpenters and one blacksmith.⁴

During the winter season, some of the Bergthal farmers supplemented their income by working in construction

crews. Johann Schroeder (1807-1884), from the village of Bergthal, was in charge of one such crew.⁵ They built barns and sheds for some Greek sheep and cattle ranchers that lived along the shore of the Sea of Azov between Mariupol and Berdjansk.

VI. THE CHURCH IN BERGTHAL

The church was the most important institution in Bergthal. Its leader, the *Aeltester*, if not officially at least in practice, held the most important and influential position in the colony. The *Aeltester*, as well as the ministers, called *Kirchen Lehrer*, and deacons were elected by the church for life-long service.

The physical plan of the church, the order of worship, the song book and catechism used were all identical in form to those used in Danzig a hundred years earlier. Church services were conducted on Sunday mornings and on special holidays. During the service, men sat on one side and women on the other. Along one side of the church was a long platform with the pulpit in the middle and a bench on each side, one for the ministers and one for the *Vor-saenger* (song leaders).

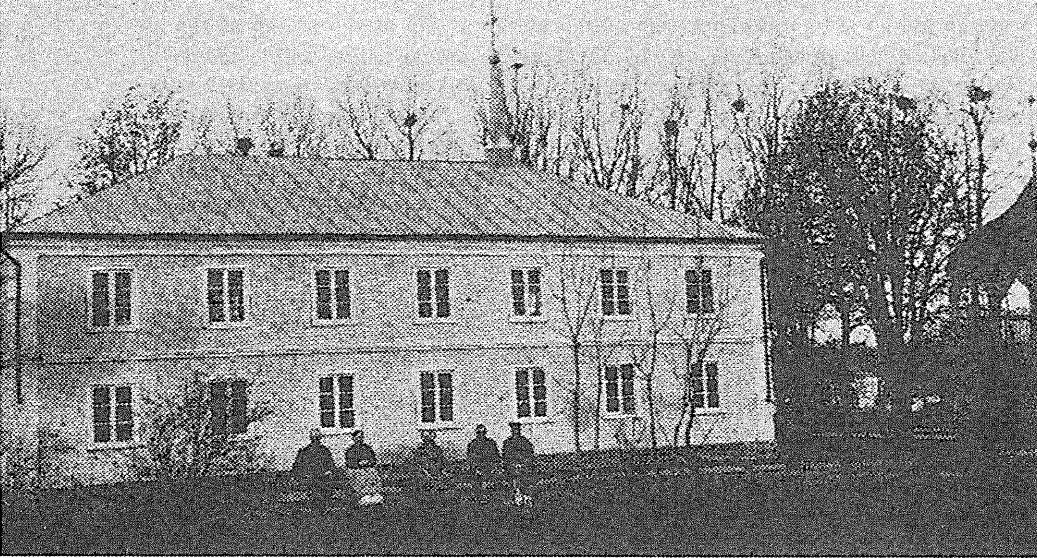
Only the village of Bergthal had a church, but as indicated earlier, Heuboden and Schoenfeld were less than a mile away, which fact made it easy for the three villages to use one church. In time the church in Bergthal was replaced by a well-built structure with a large U-shaped balcony. The church could seat one thousand people.¹ Villagers who did not have access to a church held their worship services in the local school.

Young people joined the church between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two through baptism. Baptismal services were held every spring following a series of Sundays of special instruction during which sessions, among other things, the candidates recited answers to questions from a catechism.

The first *Aeltester* of the Bergthal Church was Jacob Braun (1791-1868).² He had been ordained as a minister in Chortitzza in 1824, and came to Bergthal with the first settlers in 1836. He was ordained as *Aeltester* in 1840 and held that position till he resigned because of old age in 1866, when he was replaced by Gerhard Wiebe

(1827-1900).³ The latter held that position till 1882 and played a key role in the migration to Manitoba.

It should be noted at this point that at least three young ministers died in Bergthal at this time. One of them, Peter Epp (1807-1852), in particular, was a capable man and a popular minister, but unfortunately, he and others like him were gone when the election for *Aeltester* took place in 1866.



The church in Bergthal, measuring forty by one hundred feet, had a seating capacity of one thousand. The cross and bell tower were added after 1876. (Photo courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.)

VII. THE SCHOOL IN BERGTHAL

A school was located in the middle of each village. One half of the building was used as a classroom while the other half served as the teachers' residence. The classroom furniture consisted of long crudely-constructed tables and benches. Boys sat on one side of the room and girls on

the other. There were no teaching aids, such as maps or charts¹, and the teacher, hired by the village *Schulze*, usually had no special training in his field. Some teachers were hired from the Chortitza Colony but more often they were simply local villagers who were asked to serve in this capacity.

The class was divided into three groups. The youngest students learned to read from a *Fibel* and wrote their a-b-c's on a slate. The middle group read from the New Testament and the third group from the Old Testament. Much time and effort was spent in learning the catechism. They also learned a little arithmetic. Writing was taught by copying from the Bible. One teacher in Friedrichsthal had his students copy the privileges, which Paul I gave to the Mennonites in 1801, as a writing assignment.²

Johann Cornies, in his report to the *Fuersorgekomitee* in 1845, stated that he would personally see to it that the Bergthal schools would be staffed with teachers trained in the Molotschna Colony.³ However, before this plan to improve the level of education in Bergthal could be carried out, Cornies died and with him all hopes of making reforms in Bergthal.

Aeltester Wiebe describes an incident that happened when Baron von Korff visited the Bergthal Colony and particularly the schools.⁴ During his visit to the school, he showed the students books which he had brought along and asked them if they wouldn't like books such as that. The students responded with an unanimous "yes". Then Korff explained to the teacher and village *Schulze* who was also present that it would be much better to use texts such as his books for instruction rather than the Bible. He suggested that they should teach religion and read from the Bible when they were older. A few days later the *Schulze* came to Aeltester Wiebe and explained what Korff was planning to do for the schools. When the *Schulze* had finished his story, Jacob Peters, the *Oberschulze*, who was also present, asked Wiebe why he was so serious. Aeltester Wiebe had just observed a spider spin a net on one of the rafters in the room and explained that in effect, that was exactly what Korff was doing. He was weaving a net in which to capture the innocent children and then the whole colony.

A meeting of ministers and teachers was arranged at which this alarming problem was discussed. At the close of the meeting, the teachers promised to be loyal to the church and to deal with Korff on his next visit as directed. The teachers followed these instructions to the letter.

When Korff returned and presented the picture books to the class, the students as instructed, remained absolutely quiet. When he could not motivate any response from the children, he asked the teacher what the strange silence meant. The teacher simply replied, "We have no permission to accept those books". Then Korff asked the *Schulze* if this was true, and if he thought likewise. When the *Schulze* replied that this was true, and that he was of the same mind, Korff took his books and went away.

In light of the event just described, a rather unusual event took place in 1867 or 1868. A scout looking for prospective students for the *Zentralschule* in Chortitza visited Bergthal. He found two young men who apparently met his qualifications, and he persuaded their parents and the church leaders to send them to school in Chortitza for a period of four years after which they were to return as teachers to Bergthal. One of these young men was Peter Schroeder (1852-1920) from the village of Bergthal. When his father took him to Chortitza and arranged for his room and board, he left Peter with this admonition, "Now make something of yourself".

Four years later the boys returned to Bergthal with the hope that they would be given a teaching position. After Aeltester Gerhard Wiebe had observed these "educated" young men, he replied, "Es fuehrt nicht zur Demut".⁵ (It does not contribute to humility.) Consequently Peter Schroeder went back to Chortitza and taught in the village of Rosenthal.

The best that can be said for the Bergthal school system is that its graduates knew their catechism, and many of them, as the letters, diaries and wedding announcements that have been preserved indicate, could read and write.



Peter Schroeder (1852-1920)

VIII. SPECIAL INSTITUTIONS

In order to grant the colonies more social and economic security, several supporting institutions were established.

It was not uncommon for the colonists to experience a partial or total crop failure caused by drought, grasshoppers, hail or even gophers. To combat the effects of such a misfortune, the *Fuersorgekomitee* set forth rules for the construction and operation of a common granary (*Gemeindespeicher*) in every village¹. Every landowner contributed a prescribed amount of grain for storage, annually. If the crop was satisfactory the following year, and particularly if the quality was better, the reserved grain would be replaced by new grain. However, in the event of a crop failure, every farmer in the village had at least a minimum supply of grain for a year's supply of flour and seed for the next spring.

Another very useful mutual aid institution was the *Waisenamt* (Orphan's Office)². It was organized in Chor-titza, in 1792, for the administration of the estates of orphans and was supervised by two elected officials called *Waisenvorsteher* or *Waisenaeltester*. In the event of the death of both parents, two *Vormunde* (guardians) were appointed to look after the orphans. The children were given to foster homes, the farm was taken care of, and the money was invested at 6%. When the orphans came of age (girls 18 and boys 21), the farm and money were assigned to them.

In time, the *Waisenamt* became a trust institution and almost a bank. Colonists could deposit money at 5% and borrow money at 6%.

The *Waisenamt* in Bergthal³ was organized in 1842 and the first *Waisenamtaeltester* was Peter Ens from the village of Bergthal. Their *Waisenamt* was transferred to Manitoba in 1875 and functions to this day.

The *Brandordnung*⁴, or fire insurance, was a third supporting institution which the Mennonites had brought with them from Prussia. The *Brandordnung* was headed by an elected *Brandaeltester* who was aided in his work by two assessors in each village called *Brandschulzen*. Each farmer's buildings were assessed and the annual premium depended on the number of fires the colony had had during the year. In the event of fire, the owner received two-thirds of the assessed value of the buildings. Bergthal and Chortitza had a joint *Brandordnung*.

IX. BERGTHAL DURING THE CRIMEAN WAR

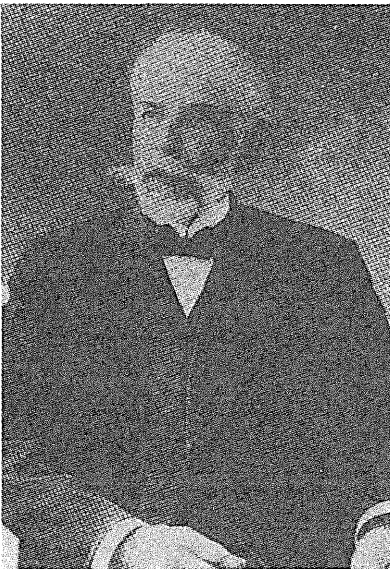
In 1854, England and France, fearing that Russia might seize Constantinople, dispatched a naval expedition to the Black Sea to besiege the Russian fortress of Sebastopol. With the theatre of war at their doorstep for a period of two years, the Mennonites could not help but become involved.

Shortly after hostilities began, the Mennonites in Chortitzza, Molotschna and Bergthal were asked to organize caravans of supply wagons to deliver feed for the horses and food, primarily dried bread, to the Russian Army.¹ On their way back, these wagons frequently carried wounded soldiers which were then cared for in the Mennonite villages.

Abram Dyck, from the village of Schoenthal, drove one of the supply wagons.² The military officials had been instructed not to send these wagons within enemy firing range. However, on one occasion Mr. Dyck was ordered to go into the danger zone. When a superior officer discovered this, Dyck was asked to observe the punishment meted out to the one who had ignored regulations.

During one winter, the *Gebietsamt* in Bergthal³ was used as a supply depot. Jakob Klassen remembers that his father had to move his desk into the family living quarters because the council room and office were filled to the ceiling with military supplies.

For a short time during this war, French ships also fired on the cities of Berdjansk and Mariupol. The farmers in Bergthal could clearly hear the cannons when they were working on their fields. Many of the residents in Mariupol fled to the Bergthal villages and stayed there till the enemy ships had withdrawn. A rich Italian grain merchant and a man who owned a fish



Jakob Klassen (1847-1919)

market stayed with Klassen's neighbours. The latter had brought many expensive dried and salted fish which he hung along the walls of the shed. The Klassen family enjoyed many delicious fish during those months.

When the war was over, Jacob Peters, the Bergthal *Oberschulze*⁴, received a gold watch from Czar Alexander II.



Alexander II gave this watch to the Bergthal Oberschulze, Jacob Peters, shortly after the Crimean War. An inscription in the lid reads; "To the Mennonite Jacob Peters for diligence in the years 1854 and 1855". (Photo courtesy A. Warkentin)

In some ways the Bergthal people benefitted from this war. During the shelling of Mariupol, one of the big grain elevators was destroyed and some of the grain had been damaged by fire. The Bergthaler had had a poor crop that year and therefore bought this grain at a very low price.

Also, Totleben, the general in charge of the Russian Army, learned to love and admire the Mennonites who kept his forces supplied with the necessary provisions.

Twenty years later, Jacob Peters, Gerhard Wiebe and other Bergthal leaders received permission from Totleben, then special governor of southern Russia to migrate to Manitoba.

Not all the Mennonite leaders were happy with the work done by the supply wagons. Cornelius Jansen, at a meeting in Alexanderwohl in January, 1872⁵, accused them of not only transporting food, as had been agreed upon earlier, but of also carrying loads of ammunition on several occasions.

X. HERE AND THERE IN BERGTHAL

The following is a series of unrelated events and incidents which, hopefully, will contribute in some measure to a better understanding of everyday life in the colony. All dates are on the Julian calendar.

1. At about eight-thirty a.m. on January 11, 1838, the entire region north of the Black Sea, from Odessa to Tagenrog, was disturbed by an earthquake. The trembling in an east-west direction lasted from one to three minutes and caused terrible fear among the people and animals. People stared in horror at the trembling earth. Pendulums on clocks stopped and several wells in Marienthal, Molotschna caved in. In most areas the water table rose several feet after the quake.

2. The entire area was afflicted by an extreme heat wave in July and August of 1839. The temperature went as high as 117 degrees Fahrenheit. People and horses collapsed when they tried to work.

3. On Wednesday July 22, 1842 (at 3 p.m.), the Bergthal area was hit by a severe storm bearing hurricane force winds and coming from the south-east. Hail stones, the size of walnuts, and very heavy rain caused much damage. The wind upset several hay stacks as well as wagons loaded with hay. The wind destroyed a windmill in Tiegenhoff and severely damaged a newly-constructed Lutheran Church in Grunau.

4. The crops in 1842 looked very promising. However, early in the season it became evident that a major part of the crops could be ruined by an unusual number of gophers (*susliki*). The representative of the *Fuersorgekomitee* in Grunau gave orders that each family should bring eighty dead gophers to their village *Schulze*. This task was accomplished by pouring water into the gopher

holes and clubbing the rodents to death as they came out for air. Many of the young mice were drowned in the burrows. The crops were saved.

5. The winter of 1842-43 never really set in. They had no snow except for one brief snowfall on Christmas Eve.

6. The entire area was hit by another terrible snow and dust storm. The storm, coming from the east, began on December 26, 1847, and continued until January 15, 1848. Snow drifts as high as the buildings formed in the streets and on the yards so that churches and schools had to be closed. The weight of the snow was a great threat to the thatched roofs. Consequently, snow was shovelled from the roofs day and night. Feeding and watering the farm animals became very difficult because the wells and hay stacks were all covered with snow. Considerable damage was done to fruit trees.

7. A very unusual event occurred in the village of Bergthal about 1852. A German drama club came through the village, probably destined for Mariupol, and asked permission of the *Gebietsamt* to perform a play. The secretary, Abram Klassen, persuaded the *Oberschulze* to give his consent for such a performance. However, Bergthal had no concert hall, so various improvisations had to be made. A farmer's shed (*Scheune*) was cleaned and a stage with curtains (blankets) as well as benches for the audience and other makeshift devices were furnished. The performers also requested that they be accompanied by the Bergthal orchestra which consisted of two musicians, a fiddler and an accordian player.

Klassen remembers that the plot of the play was a tragedy, but does not remember the narrative. During intermission, a stunt-man gave the Bergthaler a demonstration of his skill in throwing five or six balls, plates and finally knives into the air and catching them.

8. Johann Schroeder (1807-1884) was probably one of the more colourful characters in the village of Bergthal. Besides being a farmer and a carpenter, he was by popular demand, or by self-appointment, or any combination of these two, the "chief of police", the "fire chief" and at times a "social worker" and "marriage counselor". His first wife, Justina Schellenberg, had died in 1836 shortly before he moved to Bergthal; his second wife, Maria Schellenberg, had died in February, 1859, leaving him with four young boys of whom Peter, the youngest, was only seven years old.



Maria Dyck (1840-1900)

Consequently he had to hire a housekeeper, Maria Dyck (1840-1900), to look after his children. By early June, 1859, he decided that it was time for him to remarry. Planning to go to one of the neighbouring villages to "try his luck", he polished his boots and his buggy (*Federwagon*) and groomed his horses. As he was about to leave, he reminded the maid to take good care of the house while he was gone. At this point Maria Dyck, the maid, who had been sitting near the door and watching him in his preparations for the great event, asked him, "Is it necessary to drive

that far when you can have what you want right in your own home?" and "Couldn't I have that good fortune?" Then she quoted some lines of Goethe's poetry to him:

Willst du immer weiter schweifen
Sieh das Gute liegt so nah
Lerne nur das Glueck ergreifen
Denn das Glueck ist immer da.

Schroeder was taken completely by surprise and could only say, "Do you really mean that?" To others he said later, "At that point my eyes were opened".

Johann Schroeder, aged fifty-three, and Maria Dyck, aged nineteen, were married in the church at Bergthal on June 28, 1859.

9. In 1865, the Russian government had a team of cartographers draw up a detailed map of the area north of the Black Sea. The map, drawn to a scale of two miles to one inch, shows relief by *hachures* and indicates trails, small streams, villages, grave yards, mills, churches and

tree plantations. This map was used to prepare the two maps, "The Bergthal Colony" and "The Village of Bergthal".

10. Gerhard Wiebe states in his book that when they first came to Bergthal some of their horses were stolen. This is actually an understatement. The horses the Mennonites raised from Western European stock were much superior to the horses which the neighbouring Greeks and Russians had. Consequently, these neighbours stole great numbers of horses before the Bergthaler people had proper stables where they could lock them up for night. By 1848, Schoenthal had lost sixty-five horses, and Schoenfeld thirty-one. In other words, on the average every farmer in Bergthal lost one or two horses in this way.

11. On April 12, 1863, a baby boy was born in a small house at the north end of the village of Heuboden. The house belonged to a Russian named Petrowitsch. The baby's mother, Netzell, had until a few days prior to this event, worked as a maid in Schoenfeld. She did not want the baby so an older woman in the house tied a cord around the baby's throat, wrapped it in some rags and gave it to Petrowitsch to dispose of. Petrowitsch walked along the back side of the village and threw the baby into a pig pen.

Fortunately, Mrs. Johann Derksen also went around her neighbour's back yard on her way to visit a friend. As she walked past the pig pen, she heard a strange noise. Seeing the baby she jumped into the pen and rescued it. Another neighbour, Mrs. Jacob Harder, who also had a baby, offered to nurse the little creature until he was old enough to eat by himself. The Harders named him Johann and kept him for more than a year, when he was given back to the Derksens again.

When the real mother discovered that her baby was still alive, she made several more desperate attempts to kill the baby, but her plans were foiled every time.

Mrs. Derksen died and the stepmother who replaced her was quite indifferent to the child's needs. When the Bergthal people moved to Manitoba, she told Johann that they could not afford to take him along. The evening after his step-parents had left, Oberschulze Jacob Peters found the broken-hearted child lying by the village well. Peters took him home and brought him to Manitoba in 1876. When he joined the church in 1887, he adopted the name Peters.

Johann Peters married Katharina Falk (1868-1947) in 1889. They had nine children. Johann Peters died on September 12, 1946.

12. The Bergthal children were fortunate to have several very interesting playgrounds close to their villages. The older children could go to the fabled Gami Oba (Kamennaja Mogila), a nesting place for hundreds of birds, while the smaller ones enjoyed many hours of fun playing on the slopes of a hill which was located between Bergthal and Schoenfeld. The hill was called *der Schoenfeldsche Berg*, because it was on Schoenfeld property. Those who climbed to the top were rewarded by a beautiful view of the Bergthal villages.

XI. BERGTHAL'S POPULATION PROBLEM

When the settlers in the first four Bergthal villages had overcome their initial pioneer problems, the writer of the village reports in 1848 could honestly say, "We are a people that are glad to be here". However, as time went on they experienced the same population problem which their mother colony, Chortitz, had encountered in 1830. Statistics reveal that the number of new families increased by leaps and bounds:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Landless Families</u>
1848	55 ¹
1857	30 ²
1867	218 ³
1874	350 ⁴

The founding of Friedrichsthal, in 1852, relieved the problem temporarily.

During the eighteen sixties, the leaders in Bergthal made a serious effort to buy 12,250 *dessjatin* land for 145 families at a cost of 245,000 ruble, which amount they wanted to pay in thirty-five instalments of 7,000 ruble each. But even this plan could not really solve their problem. At the current rate of increase, they would have another waiting list of several hundred families by the time they had paid for the first complex of land. In other words, the situation was hopeless, and the plan was not carried out. We hear about this plan only once

more when Gerhard Wiebe writes, in 1874, that they used 5,000 ruble, which had been collected some years earlier to buy land to pay the ocean passage for poor families.

It is not surprising that, when the deputies reported that there was free land available in Manitoba, many Bergthaler were interested in migrating to Manitoba.

At the same time, it is hard to understand why the *Fuersorgekomitee* helped Chortitza and Molotschna establish eleven daughter colonies between 1843-1874, five of which were bigger than Bergthal, when they left Bergthal to destroy itself economically by way of overpopulation.

XII. MIGRATION TO MANITOBA

A. Reasons for Emigrating

Pressures from outside the country, such as the rise of militarism in the Germanic states and the general spread of democracy at the time, and pressure from nationalists within his own country, prompted Czar Alexander II to inaugurate a program of Russianization of the German colonists. The Russian language was to be used for business transactions in the *Gebietsamt* and as the medium of instruction in schools. The *Fuersorgekomitee*, the centre of Mennonite autonomous local self-government, was to be abolished and the colonies, like the rest of the country, were to be governed from St. Petersburg. Universal conscription or compulsory military service was to be introduced.

Isbrand Friesen and Cornelius Jansen, both from Berdjansk, heard about these planned reforms from General von Katzeboo in Odessa, in 1870. These men immediately informed the Mennonite leaders about the Czar's pending Russianization program.

A first meeting of Mennonite leaders from the various colonies was held in the Alexanderwohl Church on December 18, 1870 to discuss the problem and to plan a course of action. After a second and third such conference it was decided to send a delegation to St. Petersburg to negotiate for a continuation of their privileges. During the next two years, four such delegations were sent to the Czar, but all returned without any apparent success.

In the meantime Cornelius Jansen (1822-1894) embarked on a program of his own. Jansen had come to Berdjansk as a Prussian consul and later became a grain merchant. He read German, English and Russian. He had a considerable library of his own and subscribed to several foreign papers. Jansen did not see any future for the Mennonites in Russia and consequently recommended and promoted migration to America.

Jansen's contribution to this migration was a threefold one and consisted of gathering information on the conditions in America, influencing his brethren in Russia and West Prussia in their decisions, and contacting government officials of Canada and the United States¹. He wrote his first letter concerning possible emigration to the leading Mennonites in the United States on February 15, 1870. John Funk of Elkhart, Indiana answered the letter on April 8, 1870. This correspondence continued till Jansen was expelled from Russia in 1873.

In January 1872, Jansen wrote a letter of inquiry about possible exemption from military service in Canada to his friend, Zohrab, the British consul in Berdjansk. Zohrab sent the letter to the British Foreign Office, together with a dispatch of his own in which he explained the situation the Mennonites were in and recommended them as industrious farmers that would be an asset to any country. The Foreign Office forwarded this material to Ottawa.

Canadian officials had already heard about the intentions of the Mennonites to migrate to America from their immigration agent, William Hespeler, who was in Baden, Germany at the time. Hespeler obtained this information from a Russian official, Count Menchikoff.

The Minister of Agriculture advised Hespeler to proceed at once to the Mennonites in Russia, to assure them of military exemption and to try to persuade them to come to Manitoba.

Before Hespeler arrived in Russia, Jansen had published and distributed a pamphlet, Notes About America, in which he summarized information which he had gathered from his factfinding letters.

Hespeler arrived in Berdjansk on July 25, 1872 and visited several Mennonite leaders and villages before the police discovered his purpose for coming to Russia and asked him to leave. Hespeler arranged another meet-

ing with Heinrich Wiebe and Jacob Peters from Bergthal and Jacob Buller and Leonard Suderman from Molotschna in Odessa, in the beginning of November 1872. During this meeting Hespeler suggested that the Mennonite colonies send competent delegates to visit Canada at government expense.

Meanwhile, the Mennonite leaders who were still trying to negotiate acceptable terms with the Czar, called another meeting at Alexanderwohl on January 29, 1873. At this meeting they read a letter written by Pastor Hans from St. Petersburg², in which he recommended that the Mennonites write a petition to the Czar in the Russian language, stating their willingness to co-operate with his reform program provided they were exempted from military service.

The paper had been written as recommended and was presented to the conference for ratification. Four leaders -- Gerhard Wiebe, Leonard Sudermann, Jacob Buller and Isaac Peters -- fearing the possible consequences of such an almost unconditional agreement refused to sign the paper. The majority, however, signed and delegates were appointed to take the petition to St. Petersburg.

The Bergthaler feared that even now they might be held to the agreement in the petition because it had been signed in the name of all the Mennonites³. When they returned to the colony, a conference was held during which they decided to write their own petition.

Soon word came back from the other colonies that the Bergthaler had really muddled things up. At the next meeting in Alexanderwohl, the eighth of its kind and the last for Aeltester Wiebe, the Bergthal letter was read and the leaders present agreed that it contained nothing offensive or damaging to their cause. The persons who had made all the accusations against Wiebe were reprimanded. However, the damage had been done. Wiebe, who for years had been held in contempt by the leaders of the older colonies, could not take any more. After a few words of farewell he walked out of the conference, and from then Bergthal went its own way.

B. Deputies Spy Out the Land

Hespeler's offer to send delegates to see Manitoba was accepted and before long the various groups

interested in migration elected their representatives and sent them to America.

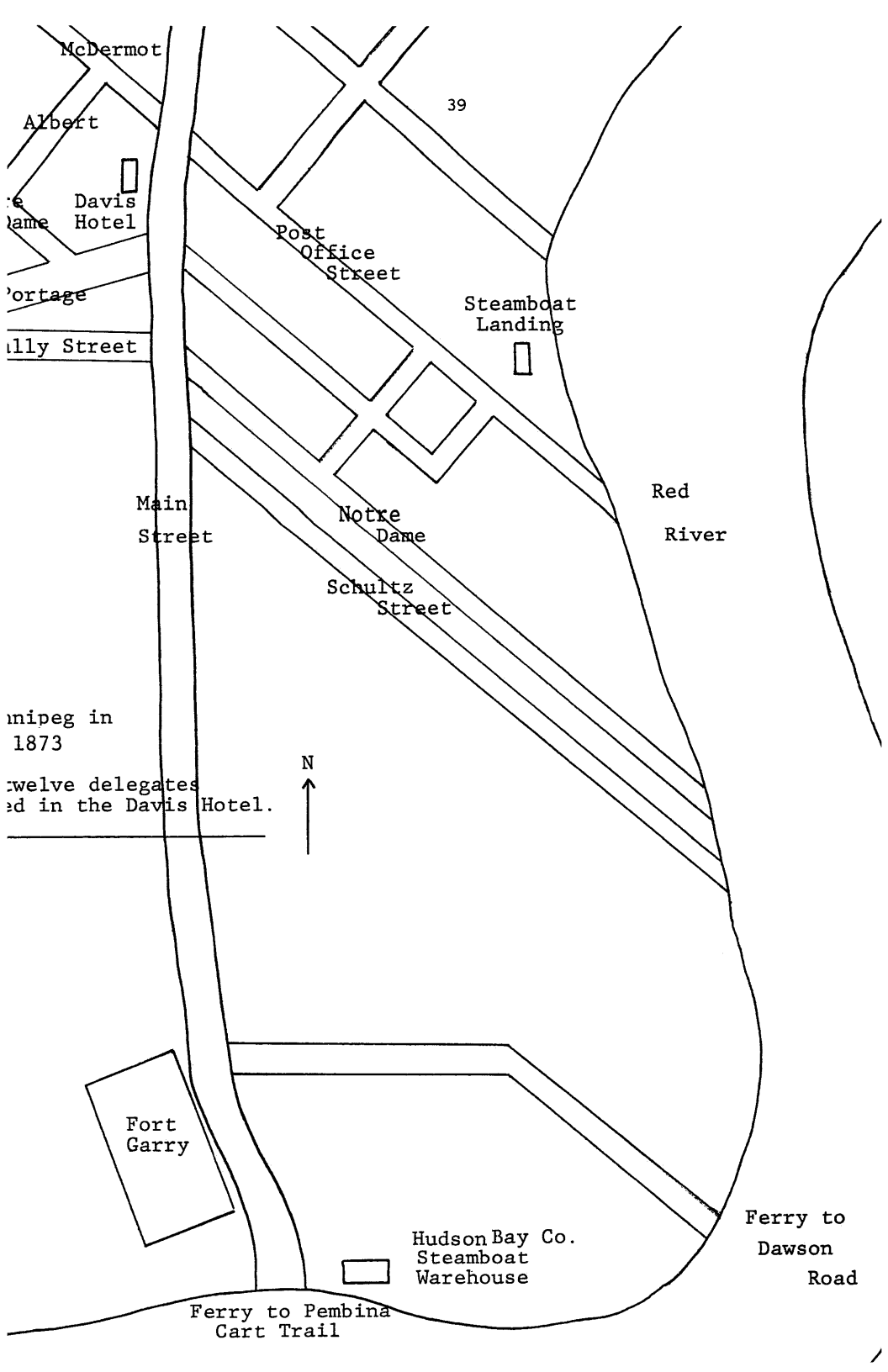
The Molotschna Colony sent Leonard Sudermann from Berdjansk, and Jacob Buller from Alexanderwohl. The Kleingemeinde Colony at Borsenko sent David Klassen from Heuboden and Cornelius Toews from Gruenfeld. Paul and his uncle Lorenz Tschetter represented the Hutterites. Tobias Unruh and Andreas Schrag were elected by various churches in Volhynia, and Wilhelm Ewert represented a Mennonite church from West Prussia.

The Bergthal Colony elected two men to carry out this momentous task: Jacob Peters, their sixty-year old *Oberschulze* from the Village of Heuboden, and Heinrich Wiebe¹, a thirty-six year old minister from Schoenfeld. A third man, Cornelius Buhr, who owned a big estate east of Bergthal, went along at his own expense.

A special service was held for the delegates on Sunday, February 25, 1873.² Both Wiebe and Peters made farewell speeches. Early the next morning they were taken to the Nikolajewska Station near Jelonawka, on the newly constructed Tagenrog-Kharkav Railway. From there they travelled across the country to Hamburg and then to Liverpool where they boarded a ship for Halifax. Their first job was to contact two Mennonite leaders who had been corresponding with leading Mennonites in Russia. The first was Jacob Y. Shantz in Berlin (Kitchener), Ontario, and on April 23 they arrived at the home of John Funk in Elkhart, Indiana. Two days later they met Bernard Warkentin, one of four young men from Molotschna who had made a visit to America the year before. Warkentin accompanied them on a tour through Nebraska, Kansas, and as far south as Houston, Texas.

The twelve delegates had agreed to meet at Moorehead and visit Manitoba as one group. They arrived in Fort Garry on June 17, were introduced to government officials and then taken on two extensive tours, first to the East Reserve and a second tour north-west to Neepawa.³

The delegates from the Bergthal and Kleingemeinde Colonies chose Manitoba because, as Gerhard Wiebe said, it was under the British Throne and they thought they could enjoy religious freedom longer under a monarchy than in a republic. Heinrich Wiebe told Paul Tschetter in St. Paul that he did not like the country (U.S.A.).



McDermot

Albert

39

Davis Hotel

Post Office Street

Steamboat Landing

Portage

ully Street

Main Street

Notre Dame

Red River

Schultz Street

Winnipeg in 1873

Twelve delegates met in the Davis Hotel.



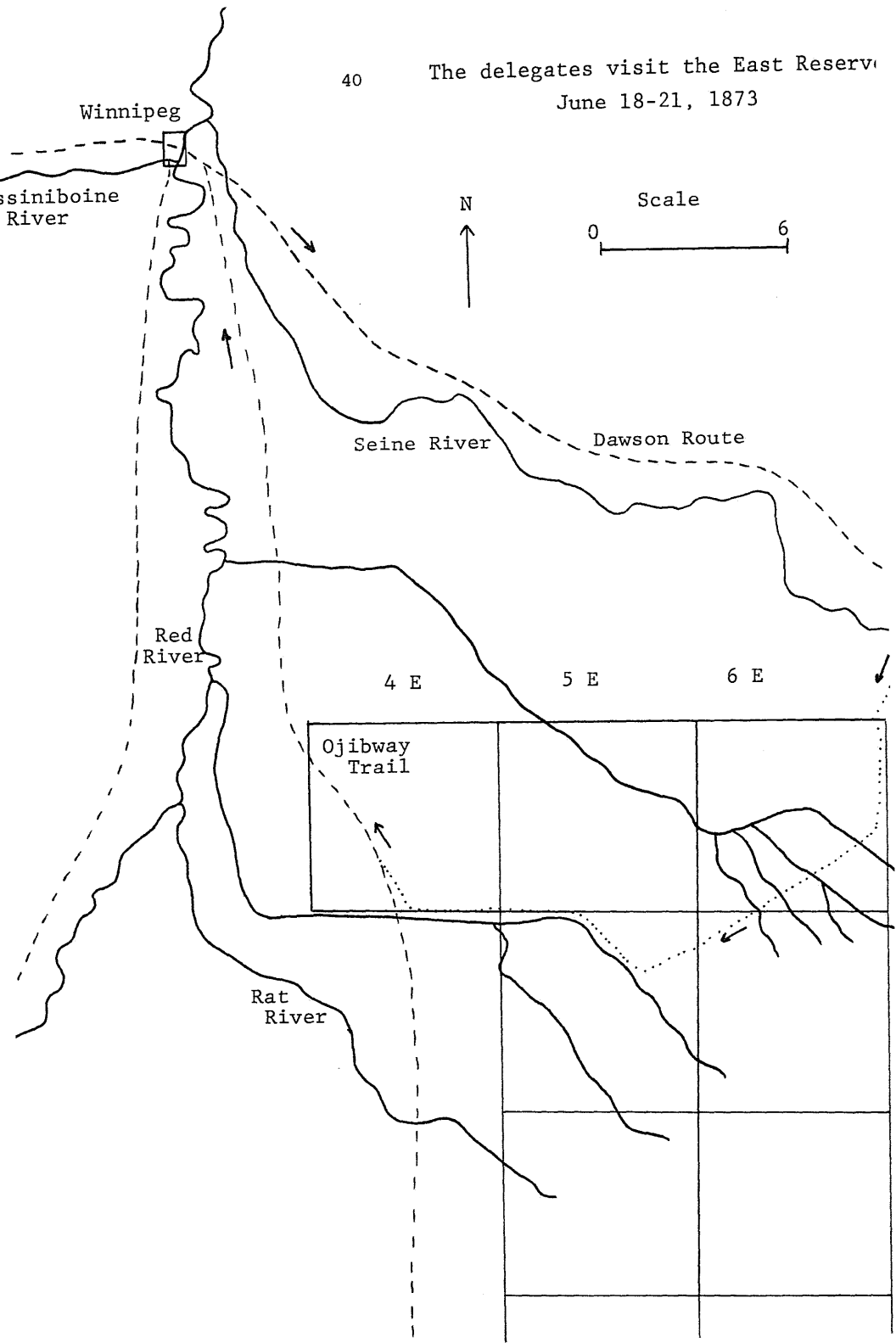
Fort Garry

Hudson Bay Co. Steamboat Warehouse

Ferry to Dawson Road

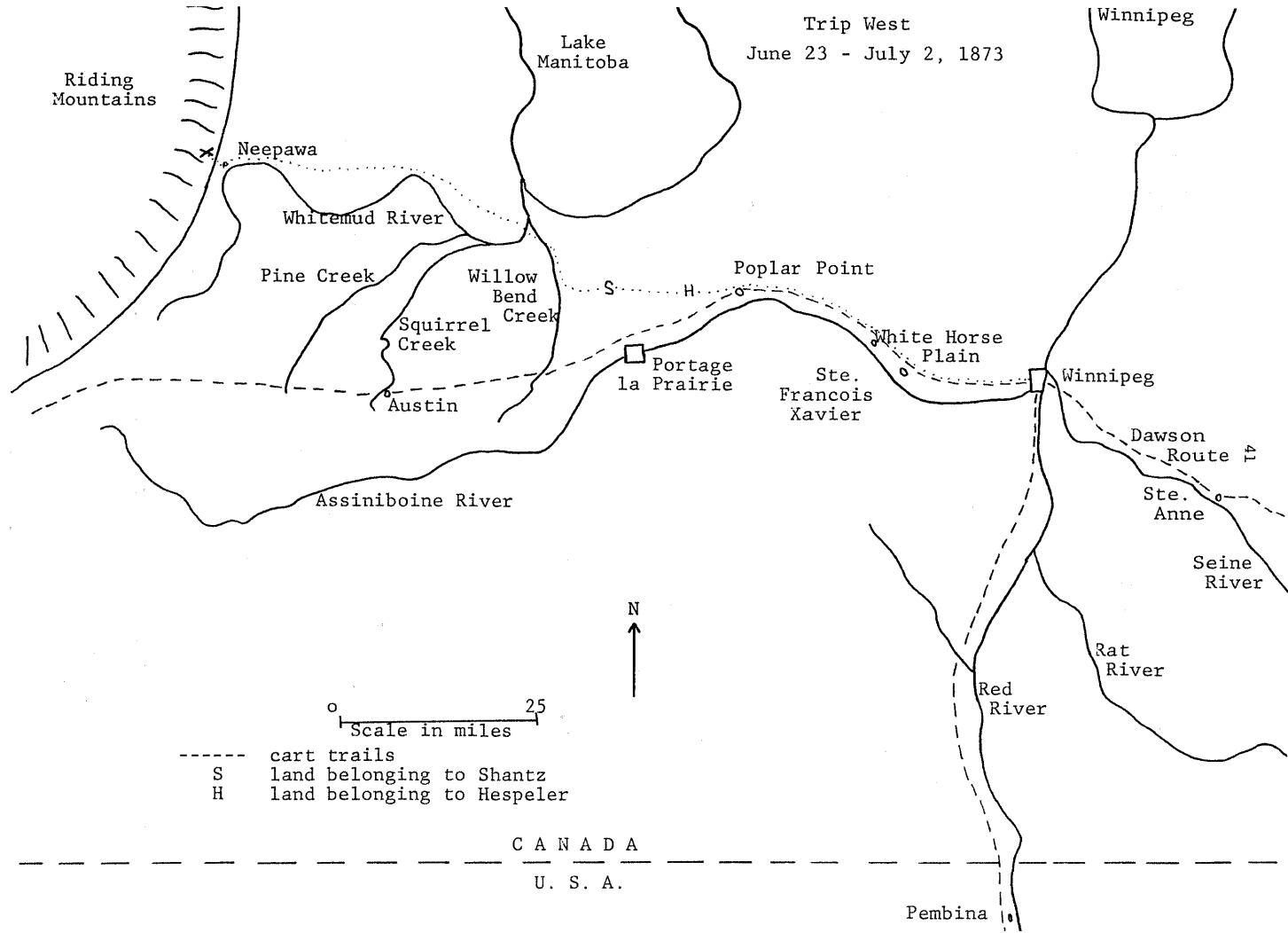
Ferry to Pembina Cart Trail

The delegates visit the East Reserve
June 18-21, 1873



Trip West

June 23 - July 2, 1873



0 25
 Scale in miles

----- cart trails
 S land belonging to Shantz
 H land belonging to Hespeler

C A N A D A

U. S. A.

Pembina

Also he did not think they would get complete exemption from military service there and that, after all, had been the reason why they made this long journey. Klaas Peters remarked that their delegates chose Manitoba because the land here was free, whereas in the United States they had to buy most of the land at a considerable price from railway companies.

The Bergthal and Kleingemeinde delegates proceeded to Ottawa where on July 23 they received a letter in which the government summarized its promises.⁴

From Ottawa the delegates went to New York where they boarded a ship for Europe on July 31. They arrived home in Bergthal in August during the threshing season, after an absence of about six months.

As soon as the Bergthaler heard that their deputies were home, a wave of excitement spread through the colony. By the evening of the first day both Wiebe's and Peters' yards were filled with the horses and wagons of inquirers.

The church was filled to capacity when the deputies gave their report. They explained that every adult could have one hundred sixty acres of free land, that they could live in villages or on individual farms, and that they had a written document in which they were given complete exemption from military service. Many of their listeners became very interested in migrating to Manitoba.

C. Todleben's Visit

Fearing that possibly the majority of the Mennonites might leave the country, and reluctant to lose so many excellent farmers, Alexander II dispatched General Todleben, the German-born military engineer, to the Ukraine with the special authority to offer the Mennonites forestry service as an alternative to military service.

Todleben arrived in Molotschna on April 11, 1874¹ and received a warm welcome in the homes and villages that he visited. A majority of the leaders in Molotschna and Chortitza were happy to accept his offer of forestry service for their young men. The General also held a special meeting with those who had already sold their land and were waiting for their passports. He promised to return their property to them if they changed their



*General Eduard Ivanovich Todleben
(1818-1884)*

'minds. When they refused, he gave instructions to give them their passports. Later in his report to the Minister of the Interior, he said that he had given the minority permission to leave the country so as not to arouse the suspicion of the majority.

The Bergthal delegation came to Halbstadt on April 20², and as usual Gerhard Wiebe had his own meeting with Todleben. First, Todleben connived a way to force the Aelt-ester to stand face to face before him during the meeting. Then the

General asked Wiebe what the Bergthaler thought of the Czar's proposal. Wiebe replied that they could not accept anything without the consent of the Church. Then Todleben instructed Gerhard Wiebe to go home and present the offer to the Church and report back to him in Chortitza on Wednesday April 24. While Wiebe was trying to explain that this would be impossible because of time and distance, Johann Epp tried to embarrass him by asserting that the distances Wiebe had quoted were not true. (Wiebe was right.) Then Todleben tried to arrange for Wiebe to come along to Chortitza with him in the same carriage. This no doubt would have been a very interesting trip, but the Aeltester was probably aware of possible unpleasant events and therefore asked if they might come in their own wagon.

On Thursday, after a two-and-one-half day trip, the Bergthaler were in Chortitza and explained to Todleben that their people feared the future course of events in Russia and requested permission to procure passports. Todleben told them to send one or two men to the governor, who was standing beside him, and he would give them their

passports. As soon as they got back home, Peters and Abram Doerksen went to Ekaterinoslaw to get the passports for the first group that would migrate to Manitoba.

D. Preparations for Leaving

Bergthal was legally entitled to sell its land because the people had acquired personal titles for the same in 1867, when they tried to purchase land for a daughter colony. However, the local Justice of the Peace refused to give them the necessary documents to do so because he had been offended by the Bergthal *Oberschulze*. Jacob Peters had not notified the Justice of the Peace when he went to America the year before.

Finally, the supervisor of the Jewish colonies, Ilja Antonowitsch Kowalsky, offered a solution to the problem¹. He would arrange a party to which both the offended official and Jacob Peters were invited. During the party Peters gave the Justice of the Peace five hundred ruble. He accepted the money only after Peters assured him that it was just a gift. The "gift" was accepted with a threat of severe punishment to anyone who would talk about this incident. Bergthal then got the papers they required without any further delay.

Aeltester Wiebe provides us with this interesting account of the unique arrangement they made to sell their land and to help their poor families migrate to America².

First, they decided to migrate over a period of three years: 1874, 1875 and 1876. While the first group was establishing the East Reserve in Manitoba, those remaining in Russia would try to sell the land and bring the money with them later. The farmers in each of the five villages transferred the ownership of all the land to a committee of three who then had the authority to sell the land.

Next a fund was created to pay for the migration of the poor families and orphans. The *Waisenamt* had about fifty thousand ruble that had been deposited on behalf of the orphans. To this they added five thousand ruble which had been collected in 1867 for the purchase of land. And finally they deducted, on a voluntary basis, twenty-five percent from the larger personal deposits in the *Waisenamt*. Everyone concerned was asked to co-operate with this plan. Those who had deposits did not withdraw more than necessary and those who received help or

borrowed money promised to pay it back as soon as they could. With very few exceptions all promises were kept. The *Waisenamt* continued to function in Manitoba as it had in Bergthal.

Most of the furniture, farm machinery and animals were sold at public auctions over a period of several months before they intended to leave. The sale at these auctions was very poor because their neighbours, the Germans, Russians and Greeks, knew they had to sell. As a result, goods were sold at about one third of their normal price.

Peter Schroeder (1852-1920), now a teacher in Rosenthal, had a very difficult decision to make³. He was engaged to Maria Klassen, also from Rosenthal, whose father thought very little of the "America fever" that occupied the minds of so many at this time, and under no circumstances would he allow his daughter to migrate to Manitoba. Peter came home to Bergthal to say good-bye to his family and friends a few weeks before they left for Manitoba. He stayed at his brother George's house for the night. That last night he could not sleep. He heard his two young nephews, John and Frank Schroeder sleeping peacefully in the *Kleine Stube*, and wondered if he would ever see them as well as the other members of his family again.

One hundred and sixty families were preparing to emigrate during the summer of 1874. The men began to crate the few things they could take along and the women roasted bags full of bread which would be their food from Bergthal to Liverpool and from Collingwood to Manitoba.

E. The Journey to Manitoba

The day of departure was Sunday, June 16, 1874. After a short farewell, the long line of wagons set out for the Nikolajewska Station about forty miles to the north-east. The journey of about ten thousand miles would take about seven weeks. They would travel on eleven different trains, five ships and two wagons. On the average, about eight people died and three or four were born, per shipload of immigrants.

Frank Harder, a young man of eighteen, and David Stoesz, a minister, both from the village of Friedrichs-thal, were in this first group and kept diaries of their experiences.

The following is a translation of the Harder Diary¹. A map on page 47 is included to help the reader follow this day-by-day account of the journey.

We left our home on June 15, 1874. It was raining when we were driving away--we came to Abram Harders during the night.

June 16--drove to the Nikolajewska Railway Station--boarded the train cars at four in the afternoon.

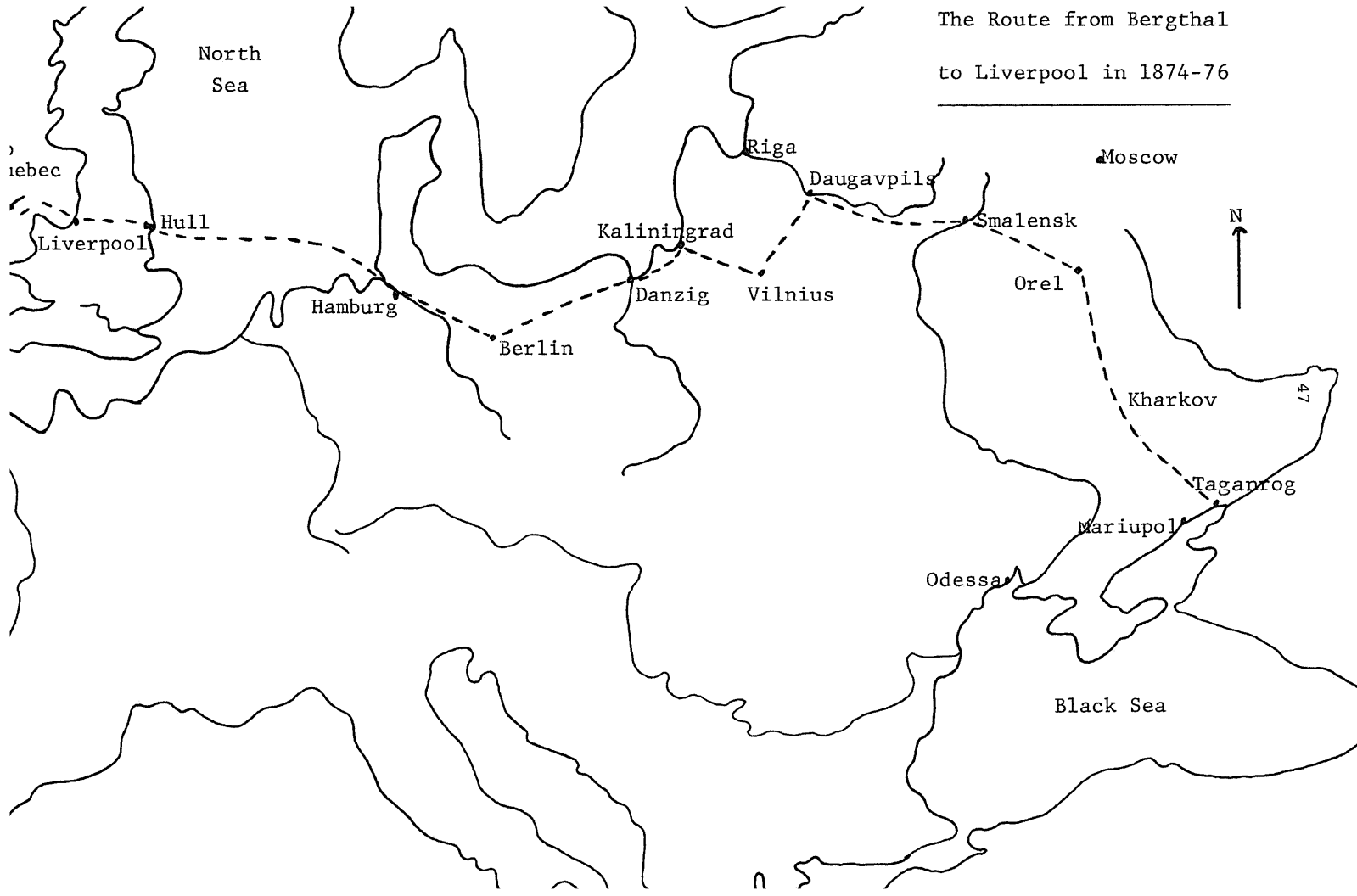
June 17--stopped for a few minutes at Charkow (Kharkav) eight o'clock in the morning--stopped for a few minutes at Bjelgorod (Belgorod) eleven o'clock in the morning--arrived at Kursk four-thirty in the evening--boarded another train at five-thirty in the evening--arrived at Orel eleven-thirty in the evening--two children died this night, a daughter of Abram Loepky, and Abram Groening's son.

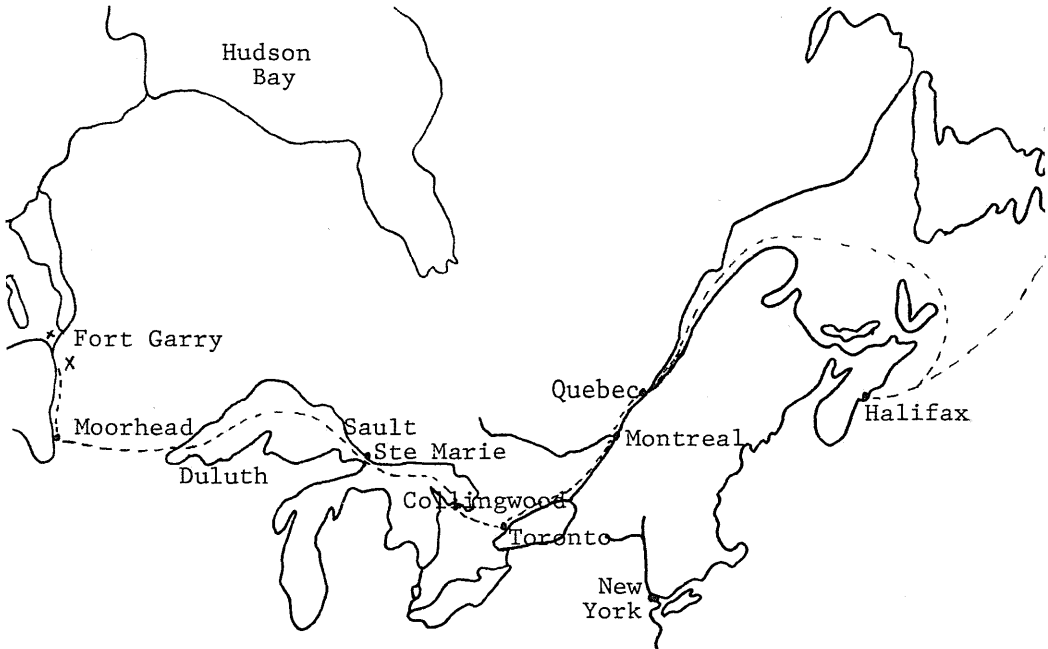
June 18--boarded the third train at four in the afternoon--stopped for several minutes in Karatschew (Karachev) at seven in the evening--stopped for several minutes in Bryansk at eight-thirty in the evening.

June 19--stopped at Smolensk at five in the morning--arrived at Vitebsk at nine o'clock in the morning--we met our Aeltester and Kornelius Enns there--boarded the fourth train at eleven o'clock in the morning--stopped for several minutes in Polotsk at one-thirty in the afternoon--arrived in Duenaburg (Daugavpils) at seven in the evening--boarded the fifth train at eleven o'clock in the evening.

June 20--stopped in Wilna (Vilnius) at seven o'clock in the morning--we went through a dark mountain--went through another longer dark mountain--stopped for several minutes in Wirbalen at two o'clock in the afternoon--drove over the boundary to the Prussian city of Eitkun at three o'clock in the afternoon--boarded the sixth train at four in the afternoon--stopped for a few minutes in Insterburg (Cheryakhovsk) at six in the afternoon--stopped for several minutes in Koenigsburg (Kaliningrad) at ten in the evening.

The Route from Bergthal
to Liverpool in 1874-76





The map on this page as well as the one on page 47 are based on the Harder Diary. They trace the route followed by the immigrants from Bergthal to the East Reserve. The journey was made in about seven weeks. They travelled on eleven different trains, five ships and twice on wagons.

June 21--arrived in Berlin at four o'clock in the afternoon. Our train was attached to another train which was carrying our other brethren and we continued our journey together at eight o'clock in the evening.

June 22--arrived in Hamburg at four o'clock in the morning and went into the Tehrhof. It was a six-storey building. We were in the sixth storey.

June 23--in the Tehrhof.

June 24--in the Tehrhof.

June 25--boarded the ship at six o'clock in the evening--sailed along the Elbe River.

June 26--sailed on the North Sea.

June 27--arrived in Grimsby at eleven in the morning--we went into the custom-house where we were examined--boarded the train at two o'clock in the afternoon and arrived in Liverpool at nine-thirty in the evening and immediately went into the *Traktehr*.

June 28-July 1--we were in the *Traktehr* in Liverpool.

July 2--boarded the big steamship at eight in the morning and began our voyage at one in the afternoon.

July 3--stopped at Queenston at ten in the forenoon--left at four in the afternoon--till Thursday we could see land or mountains.

July 4--a storm developed--almost everybody got sick--in our family only our father stayed well.

July 5--neither storm nor sea sickness have let up.

July 6--the storm has abated and most of the people got up again.

July 7--more waves and sea sickness.

July 8--the water is very calm.

July 9--it is quite cold. Those who had a winter coat wore it. We saw icebergs during the night.

July 10--we stopped at the city of St. John, in Newfoundland today at six in the morning and left again at eight. It is a nice pleasant morning. Now it is getting foggy and there are many icebergs. We travel very slowly and even stopped several times because of the ice.

July 11--a very pleasant clear day.

July 12--a two-year old daughter of Peter Friesens died at eleven a.m. She was lowered into the water at one p.m.--arrived in Halifax at one-thirty in the afternoon.

July 13--departed early in the morning at three o'clock.

July 14--a fairly severe storm today.

July 15--arrived in Quebec at eleven in the evening.

July 16--we got out of the big steamer and went into the immigration house.

July 17--boarded a train at four in the morning and arrived in Montreal at six in the afternoon--got out of the train and went into the immigration house for a meal--we boarded the second train at nine in the evening.

July 18--arrived in Toronto at five in the afternoon --got out of the train and went into the immigration house--Kornelius Ginter's child died at ten in the evening.

July 19--the child was buried at nine in the morning --also at nine in the morning a daughter was born to Peter Hieberts--boarded the third train at one in the afternoon and arrived in Collingwood at seven in the evening. Half of the passengers boarded a steamship and left at ten in the evening. There wasn't room for all of us on the ship so we stayed for night in the railway station.

July 20--after breakfast we went into the immigration house. David Friesen's daughter died during the night between the twentieth and the twenty-first.

July 21--Peter Friesen's son died at five in the afternoon.

July 22--we had a funeral for the two children today.

July 23--we boarded the steamship at five in the afternoon and steamed away.

July 24--sailed in nice weather.

July 25--Kornelius Ginter's daughter died at one in the afternoon. We arrived at Sault Ste. Marie. The dead child was given to strange people for burial. We left at three in the afternoon.

July 26--except for fog which we had during most of the day, this day was quite pleasant.

July 27--arrived in Duluth at ten in the morning, got out of the ship and went to the railway station --left at three in the afternoon.

July 28--arrived in Moorehead at seven in the morning. We encamped on the bank of the Red River and waited for the ship.

July 29--still on the bank of the Red River.

July 30--at three in the afternoon several families got into the barge which carried the baggage and drifted down the Red River. Our parents and some other families stayed in Moorehead to purchase provisions and left two days later.

July 31--at four this afternoon the steamship in which our people were travelling, caught up with us and fastened our barge to the ship.

August 1--stopped for several minutes at Frankfurt [Grand Forks].

August 2--steamed along the Red River.

August 3--disembarked at a point adjacent to our land at eight o'clock in the evening.

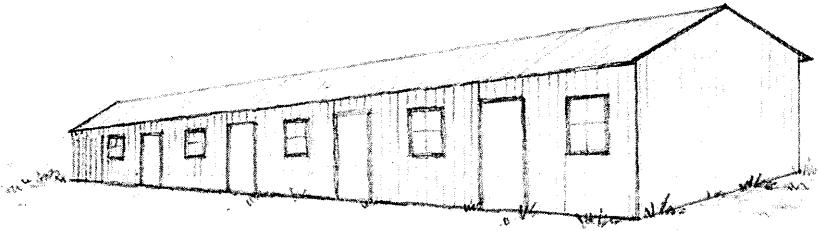
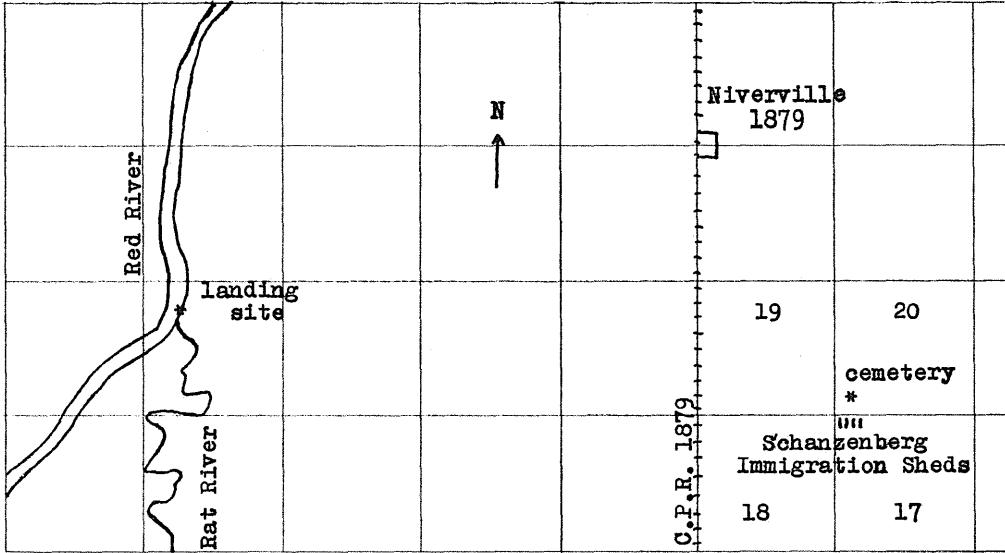
All dates are according to the Julian Calendar--add 12 days to get corresponding Gregorian Calendar dates.

F. The Arrival at the East Reserve

The first Bergthal group arrived at the confluence of the Rat and Red Rivers on August 3, 1874 (August 15 Gregorian Calendar). The women and children were loaded on ox carts and taken to immigration sheds about five miles away (see map on page 52).

J. Y. Shantz of Kitchener, Ontario had built four sheds twenty feet by one hundred feet in size at the north-west corner of section seventeen (Township 7, Range 4 east). These sheds had no foundation, no floor and no shingles. The inside was divided into numerous small rooms with a larger dining area in the middle. About these sheds Abram Isaac asserts: "They protected us from the sun and wind and partly from the rain." In time these four sheds came to be known as Schanzenberg. Mrs. Johann Doerksen (1887-) of Niverville, who played in and around these sheds as a small girl, supplied the

Arrival in the East Reserve

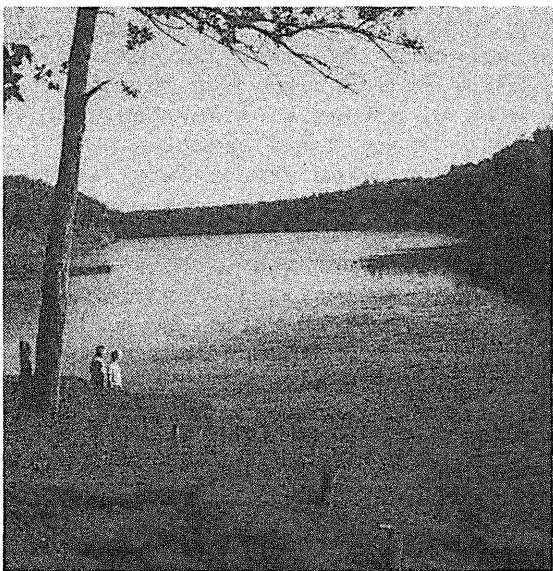


Jacob Y. Shantz from Berlin, Ontario, came to Manitoba in June, 1874, and with the help of a team of Metis built four crude, temporary, immigration buildings in the north-west corner of section seventeen in township seven range four east.

details for the sketch of one of these sheds accompanying the map. She thinks these sheds disintegrated about 1895.

The Bergthal, as well as the Kleingemeinde immigrants stayed in these sheds from one to three weeks, until each family had decided on the quarter section which it wanted to have and the group as a whole had decided where they wanted to locate their villages.

The long journey was very hard on the pioneers, particularly on the very old and the very young. By the time the three years were over, thirty-five people had been carried to a grave yard located on the south slope of a pronounced ridge about a quarter of a mile north of the immigration sheds. These were people who had died on the riverboat less than a day's journey from the landing-site or within two or three weeks after their arrival at the sheds.



The landing site at the confluence of the Rat and the Red Rivers.

During the first few days at the sheds, they carried their water from the Red River but soon agreed¹ to dig a well. During the course of the digging the sides of the well caved in and covered Johann Hiebert and Johann Reimer. They were rescued only with great difficulty. One of them was permanently injured.

As soon as they had chosen their village site, they began to build their first temporary homes with any materials they could find. A few who had

some money built better homes but most of them built some type of sod house, or if they found enough logs, they built a thatch-roofed *sarai*.

Back in Bergthal, another group of twenty-two families left their homes on September 12, 1874. When this group boarded a small ship in Liverpool which was to take them to the big ocean liner, Johann Schroeder, now sixty-seven years old and blind, who was guided by his eleven-year old son, Jacob (1863-1941), slipped from the ramp and fell into the ocean. Fortunately he was carrying a big bag of roasted bread which served as a buoy. A sailor jumped into the water and pulled out the bag of bread and with it Johann Schroeder!

Because it was late in the summer when these twenty-two families arrived in Canada, they stayed with the Mennonites in Ontario during the first winter and then continued to Manitoba the next spring.

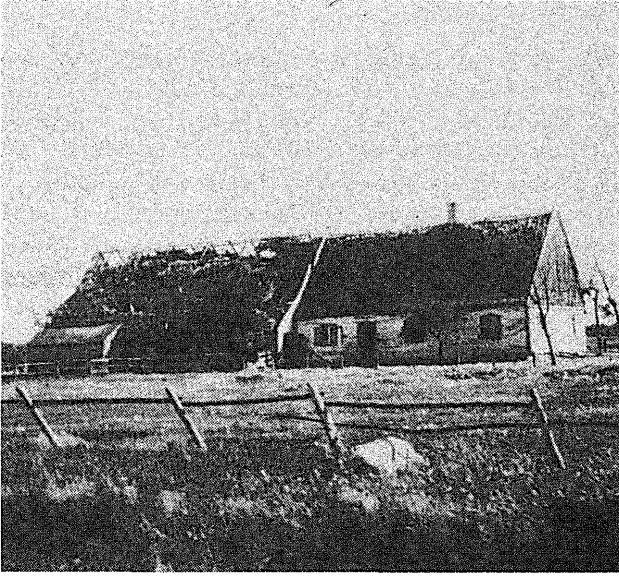
The winter of 1874-75 was very severe and a trial for the pioneers who had made it to Manitoba. The homes as described earlier were very fragile, and the weather was considerably colder than what they were accustomed to. The furniture was almost exclusively make-shift in character. The boxes in which their freight had been packed became their tables, beds, benches and cupboards.

Their clothing was adequate the first year because they had brought good supplies from Russia, but by the second winter these were worn to shreds and they had to make clothes from flour bags. These would create a comical sight, especially when brand names and quality, indicated in big letters, appeared on a man's back or pant legs².

Food was by far the greatest problem. There had not been enough time to grow vegetables, and they had next to no cows, chickens or pigs and therefore no milk, meat or eggs. Day after day they ate noodles made from water, flour and some lard. Flour, beans and some small rations of meat were bought with money borrowed from the Mennonites in Ontario.

During that first winter, the men brought many loads of logs from the treed areas to their homes where they were used to build more substantial homes the following summer.

During the spring of 1875, small plots of land were plowed and seeded with grain and vegetables. At first the crops looked quite promising, but by mid-summer they were destroyed by hordes of grasshoppers. The Mennonites were now facing starvation. Consequently, the government was



*A typical pioneer house - barn with a thatched roof.
(Photo courtesy A. P. Dueck)*

asked to give them a loan of about one hundred thousand dollars. Shantz used this money to buy much-needed farm machinery and flour. However, the boat that was to deliver the flour to the Rat River was stalled a few miles south of the American border because the river was beginning to freeze up. As a result, the flour had to be hauled by sleigh and ox team along the Red River during the winter.

Three boats loaded with pioneers embarked from a port on Lake Sarnia in May, 1876. They had come from Russia the year before but had stayed in Ontario for the winter to earn some money. With this early start they hoped to be in Manitoba in time to plant their own gardens. However, when they came to within twenty miles from Duluth all three boats were marooned for fifteen days by a vast area of drift ice. During this time all their

food supplies were given to the starving crew and other passengers. The pioneers were saved from death when a suitable wind shifted the drift ice so as to permit the boats to work their way to Duluth.

G. More Problems in Bergthal

During the fall of 1874, Aeltester Wiebe had one more encounter with a Russian official who had obviously come to taunt and humiliate him¹. The official, as well as many leaders in Molotschna and Chortitza, thought Wiebe was deliberately misleading his ignorant people.

Wiebe received a summons to appear before a representative of the Czar in Grunau. First Wiebe was asked to make any request on behalf of his church. The Aeltester went back to his church and they requested permission to leave the country. Then he gave Wiebe a chance to request anything he wished for himself. The Aeltester replied that God had given him a flock to lead and that he could in no way make a request for himself and thereby desert those whom God had placed in his care. The official was speechless at Wiebe's strength of character and presence of mind. This man was not as naive as he had anticipated.

When it was time for Wiebe to go home, he asked permission to shake the official's hand. This permission was granted. While the Aeltester held the hand of the Czar's representative, he bowed his head and prayed. Among other things he prayed that they might meet again in heaven where there would be no social barriers.

During the spring of 1875, group after group bade farewell and embarked for a new home on the East Reserve. While the fourth and last group for 1875 waited at the train station in Jelonowka, a strange red glow became visible on the horizon to the south-west². Bergthal was in flames!

A Jewish family had rented the Inn (*Gasthaus*) which had earlier belonged to Karl Winter. Towards evening, the innkeeper's daughter prepared some tea in a *samovar* for travellers that had just arrived. She placed the *samovar* in front of the house just under the thatched roof. The flames from the chimney of the tea machine ignited the straw in the roof overhead. The straw was very dry, the wind suitable and almost all the men were involved in transporting the immigrants to Jelonowka. As

a result, the flames spread very rapidly and in less than two hours had destroyed all the buildings on twenty yards which was almost half of the village. Thirteen of these were big buildings belonging to *Wirte*, and seven were smaller *Anwohner* buildings. The fire was stopped only when it came to more recently-built homes that had *Dachpfannen* (clay shingles).

What was even worse now was that fire insurance officials in Chortitza, with whom they had a joint fire insurance, accused them of arson. They thought the Bergthaler, who as yet had not been able to sell the land, had set their buildings on fire deliberately so as to get at least some money. After long and bitter negotiations, Chortitza finally paid two-thirds of the amount they should have paid. (Bernhard Friesen says they paid only one-third.)

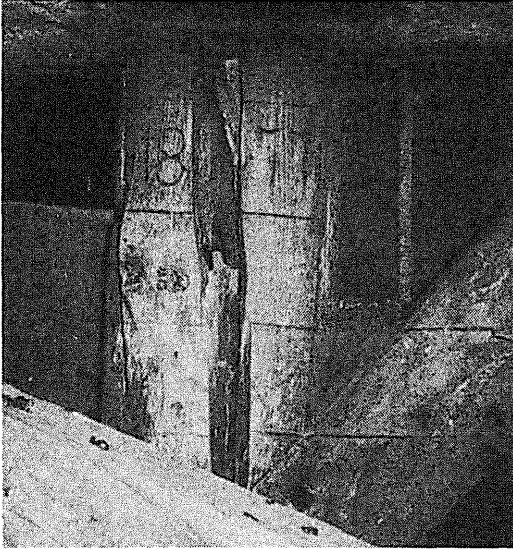
However, shortly after this devastating fire, buyers were found for all five villages. The Planer or Grunau Colony bought Bergthal for the Catholics in their colony and Schoenfeld for the Lutherans. Heuboden and Schoenthal were bought by the *Evangelische Separierten Brüdergemeinde* from the village of Neuhoffnung near Berdjansk, and Friedrichsthal was bought by Russians.

Just what they sold their land for is not certain. Bernhard Friesen, the son of the Bergthal secretary, claims it was thirty-five ruble per *dessjatin*, while Josef Malinowsky, a descendant of the people who bought the land, says they paid nineteen ruble per *dessjatin*. Perhaps Friesen is talking about cultivated land.

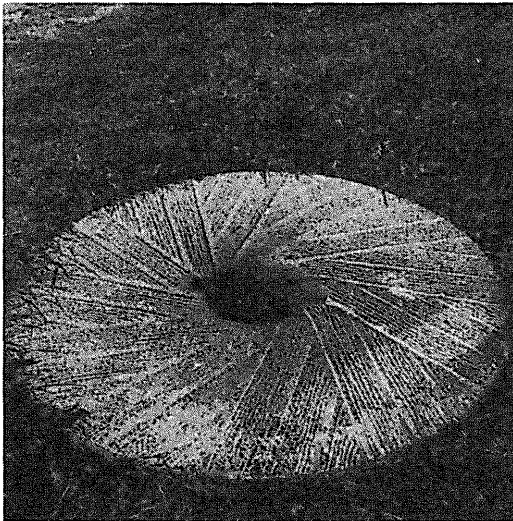
Sunday, July 19, 1876 was a memorable day in Bergthal³. The final farewell for the last eighty families remaining in the colony was held. Every seat in their big church was filled. There were Greeks, Lutherans and Catholics. Pastor Heine from Neuhoffnung near Berdjansk, who had been a missionary to Sumatra, and also visited them again many years later in Manitoba, had a moving farewell address.

This group had not been as successful in collecting the money for their property as they had hoped. Seventy thousand ruble of the one hundred ninety thousand ruble had still not been paid. Erdmann Buhr, who wanted to stay in the area, was authorized to collect the money and send it to Manitoba.

With the arrival in Manitoba of this last group, the migration from Bergthal to Manitoba was completed. An entire colony of about three thousand people had been transplanted from one continent to another.



The date "1877" carved into the beam of a barn in Eigenhof, East Reserve.



A mill stone five feet in diameter from a windmill owned by Gerhard Schroeder (1848-1910) in Eigenhof.

Over a period of three years, forty-six (perhaps even more) villages were established on the eight townships in the East Reserve. Five of these were Kleingemeinde villages and the rest were Bergthal villages. In spite of the fact that the rainfall was five or six inches above average between 1877 and 1881, their small farms continued to improve.

In 1876, a small steam mill was built in either Tannenau or Schoenwiese and three small windmills were purchased in Winnipeg and set up in Eigenhof and Tannenau. A small store was also opened in Tannenau. The pioneers harvested a fair crop in 1877 which provided them with enough grain for their own use. This proof that grain could be raised, and prospects for a lumber industry, prompted A. S. Friesen to build a large windmill in Steinbach in 1877.

The Bergthal people built their

first church in the village of Chortitz because their *Aeltester*, Gerhard Wiebe, had made his home there.

H. Lord Dufferin's Visit to the East Reserve

The three-year old colony was honoured on August 2, 1877, by the visit of Lord Dufferin, the Governor General of Canada, and his wife¹. A special place for the meeting was prepared on a raised elevation several miles west of Steinbach, from which twelve villages could be plainly seen.

Jacob Peters read a prepared speech which was translated by Hespeler. Then Lord Dufferin gave a long address in which he assured the Mennonites that their warfare would be only against the forces of nature (cold winters, floods, grasshoppers, drought, etc.).

In the Winnipeg Free Press a few days later, he praised the industry and achievement he had just seen in the Mennonite colony.

I. Looking for Greener Pastures

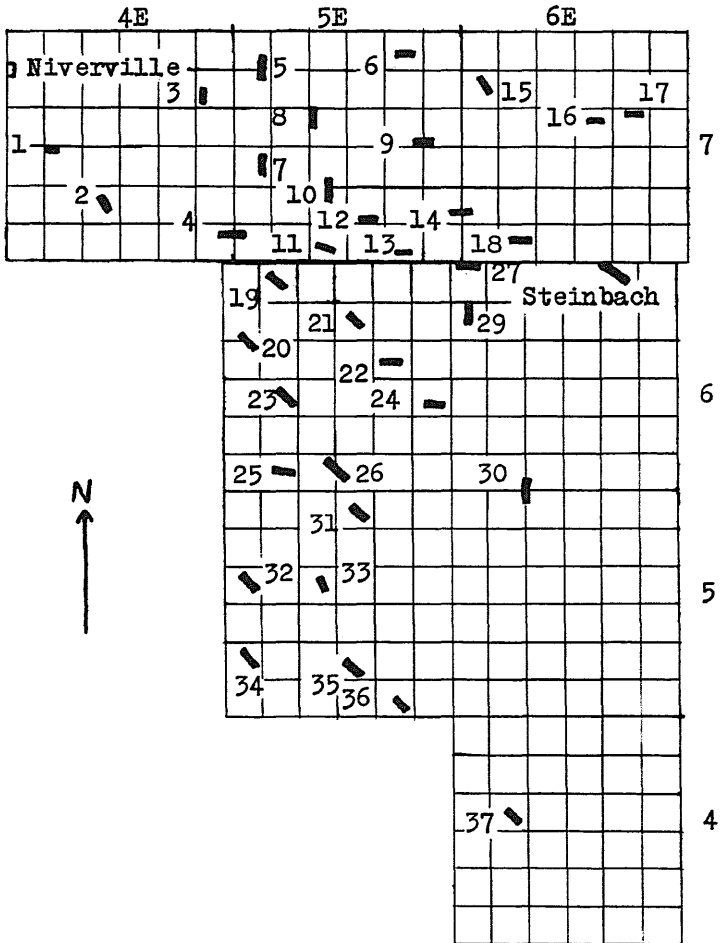
Not all the pioneers that came to the East Reserve in 1874-76 were satisfied with what they found.

A number of the families in the Kleingemeinde group that arrived in Manitoba in 1874 did not like the land that was assigned to them. Before winter had set in, they had settled in the two adjoining villages of Rosenhof and Rosenort, along the Scratching River, west of the Red River.

In the spring of 1875, twenty-eight Bergthal families who had made a half-hearted effort to settle in Manitoba, but had found the land wet and flat as a table and the mosquitoes fierce and big, sent some scouts to Mountain Lake, Minnesota, to look for better land¹. These scouts were so impressed with what they found that they immediately sent word to their families and friends to follow them. They settled in Watanwon County, north of Butterfield. They built their church in the middle of their settlement, four miles north and one mile east of Butterfield. Locally the area was for many years known as Bergthal, Minnesota.

By 1878 it became more and more obvious that the East Reserve could not support the great number of people that had settled on it. The East half of the West Reserve was still unoccupied. However, almost every man

The East Reserve

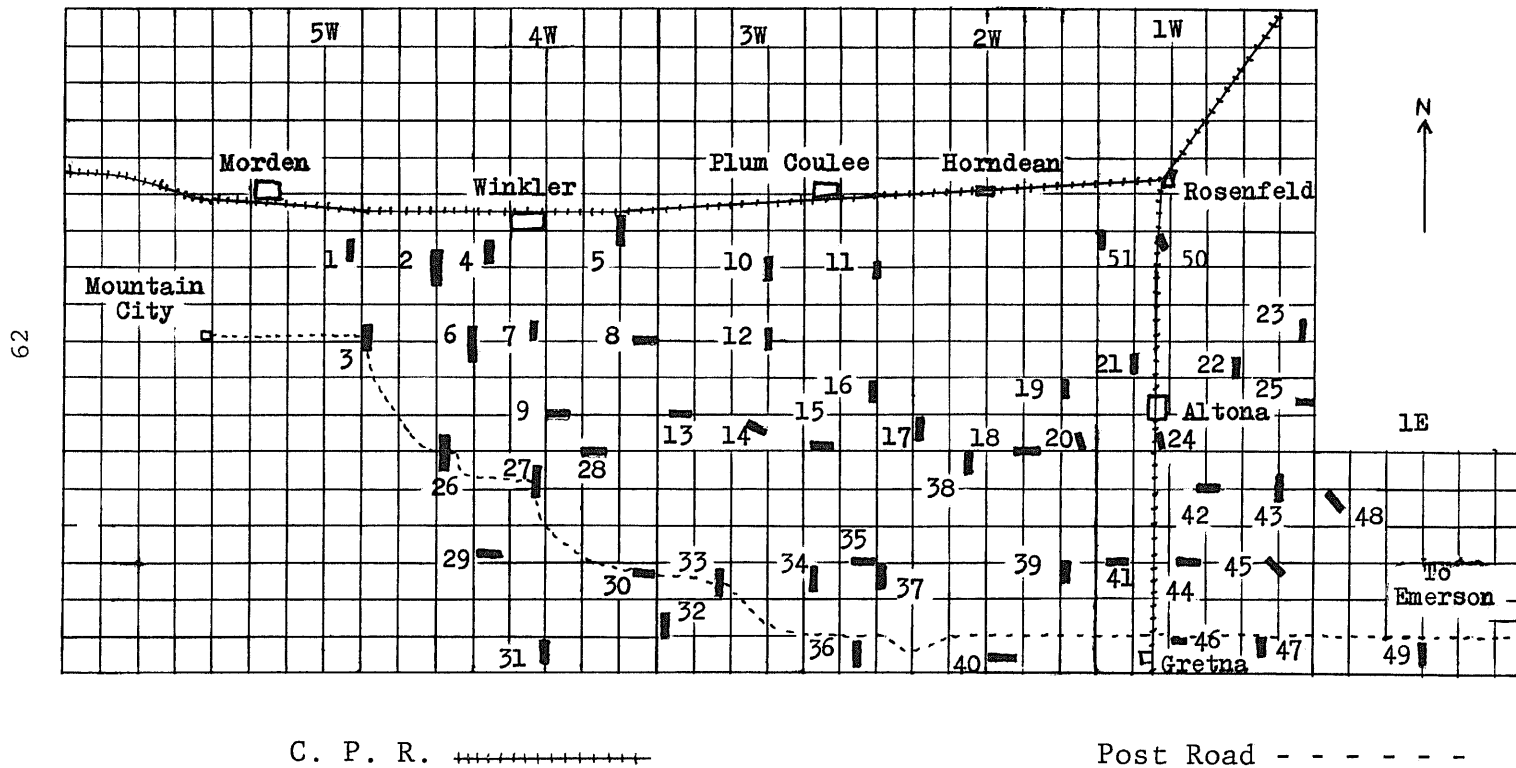


This map shows the approximate location of thirty-seven villages in the East Reserve. Most of these villages were abandoned a few years after they were settled.

Villages in the East Reserve

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Schanzenberg | 20. Schoenau |
| 2. Pastwa | 21. Rosenfeld |
| 3. Osterwick | 22. Schoenfeld |
| 4. Heuboden | 23. Blumstein |
| 5. Kronsthal | 24. Rosengart |
| 6. Blumengart | 25. Friedrichsthal |
| 7. Reinfeld | 26. Hochstadt |
| 8. Schoenthal | 27. Vollwerk |
| 9. Bergthal | 28. Steinbach |
| 10. Schoenwiese | 29. Reichenbach |
| 11. Tannenau | 30. Burwalde |
| 12. Chortitz | 31. Schoensee |
| 13. Eigenhof | 32. Gnadenfeld |
| 14. Rosenthal | 33. Gruenthal |
| 15. Hochfeld | 34. Bergfeld |
| 16. Blumenort | 35. Hoffnungsfeld |
| 17. Blumenhof | 36. Kronsgart |
| 18. Ebenfeld | 37. Neubergfeld |
| 19. Gruenfeld (Kleefeld) | |

The West Reserve



This map shows the approximate location of fifty-one villages in the West Reserve. The C. P. R. was completed in 1883.

Villages in the West Reserve

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Schoendorf | 26. Osterwick |
| 2. Blumstein | 27. Hochfeld |
| 3. Waldheim | 28. Neuenburg |
| 4. Hoffnungsfeld | 29. Blumenfeld |
| 5. Reinfeld | 30. Reinland |
| 6. Chortitz | 31. Gruenfeld |
| 7. Schanzenfeld | 32. Rosengart |
| 8. Friedensruh | 33. Schoenwiese |
| 9. Rosenthal | 34. Neuendorf |
| 10. Kleefeld | 35. Rosenort |
| 11. Reinthal | 36. Neuhorst |
| 12. Blumengart | 37. Kronsthal |
| 13. Ebenfeld | 38. Neuhoffnung |
| 14. Gnadenthal | 39. Blumenhof |
| 15. Kronsgart | 40. Blumenort |
| 16. Heuboden | 41. Gruenthal |
| 17. Rudnerweide | 42. Gnadenfeld |
| 18. Lichtfeld | 43. Neubergthal |
| 19. Schoenau | 44. Silberfeld |
| 20. Altbergthal | 45. Schoenhorst |
| 21. Schoenthal | 46. Neuanlage |
| 22. Hochstadt | 47. Edenburg |
| 23. Kleinstadt | 48. Sommerfeld |
| 24. Altona | 49. Halbstadt |
| 25. Eigengrund | 50. Rosenfeld |
| | 51. Weidenfeld |

that wanted to take his family to this new location first walked to the West Reserve and found a quarter section that he liked and then went back, loaded his family and material possessions on a wagon and moved to the West Reserve. More than two hundred families, or almost one-half of the Bergthal Colony, moved to this area and established the villages south and east of the present town of Plum Coulee.

By 1893 the Bergthal immigrants had reorganized themselves into three church groups. Those remaining on the East Reserve became known as the Chortitz Mennonites, while the majority on the West Reserve adopted the name Sommerfelder Mennonites and a smaller group retained the name Bergthal Mennonites.

J. About Their Debt

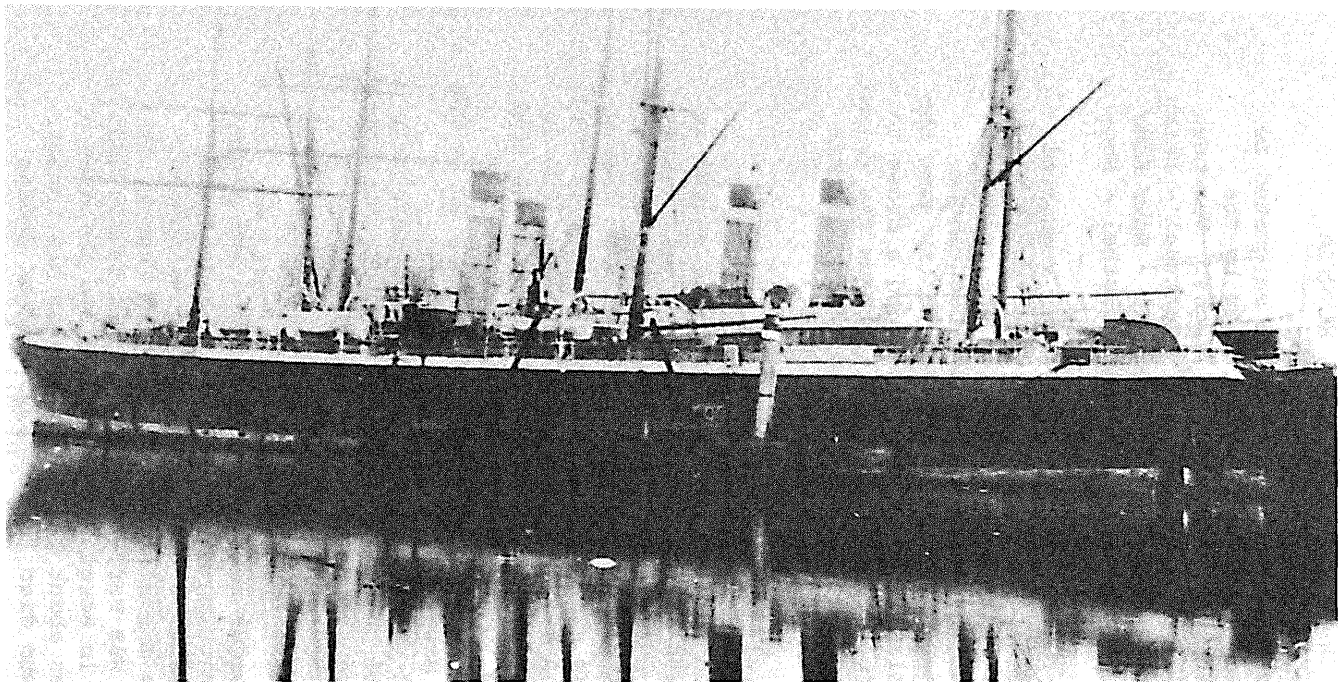
Despite crop failures and other hardships associated with pioneer life, the Mennonite settlers in Manitoba repaid all their debts. The complicated financial arrangements the Bergthaler made in Russia were carried out. The old *Waisenamt* books show how individual families made payment after payment, sometimes amounting to only two or three dollars until all their debts were paid.

When the Mennonites asked the Canadian Government for a loan in 1875, one of the Members of Parliament speaking in favour of it, assured parliament that the Mennonites would repay their money. He said, "It is a part of their creed that every man pay his dues and the obligations he has undertaken".¹

The last payment on the loan, which together with interest amounted to \$130,386.58, was made in 1891.

This repayment of the loan prompted the Minister of the Interior to make the following statement in his annual report. "In all the history of our country there is not to be found a case in which a company or individual has more faithfully met his obligation to the government than has been the case here."

The full report was carried in *Mennonitische Blätter*, a paper printed in Prussia and read by Mennonites in Russia.²



The Allan Line steamship *Nova Scotian*

Launched in 1858, the vessel was lengthened to 366 feet (3,300 tons) in 1873 by the Montreal Ocean Steamship Company. The first group of 283 Bergthal Mennonites under the leadership of Heinrich Wiebe crossed the Atlantic on this ship, landing at Quebec July 27, 1874. A second group of 120 from Bergthal arrived at Quebec October 22, 1874 on the same ship. (1889 photo courtesy Public Archives of Canada).

XIII. BACK TO BERGTHAL, RUSSIA

Even before all the Mennonites had emigrated to Manitoba, their villages were being occupied by the people who had purchased the various villages. The new owners gave the villages Russian names: Bergthal - Petro Pawlowka, Schoenfeld - Ksenjewka, Schoenthal - Nowo Romanowka, Heuboden - Sergejewka, and Friedrichsthal - Feodrowka.¹

As soon as the Mennonites were gone, a quarrel developed about the ownership of the big church in the village of Bergthal which had belonged to the colony as a whole. The result was a court case that continued until 1882 when the highest court in the country gave the church to the Catholics. The Catholics added a cross to the top of the church and a small bell tower on the ground beside it. Pfarrer Josef Roether was in charge of this church for many years.

Bernhard Friesen Visits Bergthal

As mentioned earlier, Erdmann Buhr had stayed in Bergthal and had been authorized to collect the balance of the money still owing on the property.² When the people in Manitoba had not heard from Buhr for more than twenty-five years, Bernhard J. Friesen, the son of the last Bergthal secretary, went back to Bergthal in 1905 or 1906 to see what had happened to their money. Friesen found that Buhr had remembered to collect the money (Friesen saw receipts for 70,000 ruble) but he forgot to send it to the rightful owners in Manitoba!

Friesen had taken a camera with him on this trip and took pictures of the church, the *Gebietsamt* (his former home), and a picture showing part of the village.

Peter Schroeder Visits Bergthal

Peter Schroeder married Maria Klassen and after several years of teaching bought a farm in Rosenthal. From the numerous letters that he wrote to his nephew, Johann Schroeder, a minister in the Chortitz Church, it is evident that he was very lonesome for his family and his childhood home in Bergthal.³ He told his children many amusing stories about the adventures of his father, Johann Schroeder, who died in Schoenhorst near Gretna in 1884.

When one of his sons had to work in a *Forestei* (forestry work), they requested that he be stationed a few miles south of Bergthal. This gave Peter an opportunity to visit his son in his childhood home, Bergthal. After his return he wrote a long letter to his nephew in which he describes what he saw.

Rosenthal, June 4, 1909

Dear Nephew and Niece, Johann and Katharina Schroeder,

...On May 21, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Johann and I each bought a ticket at our station in Chortitza, to travel to Grunau. The tickets were third class costing two ruble and seventy-five kopeken each. The powerful iron horse pulled us across the high bridge near Einlage and pushed on with restless speed, and always new scenes appeared and disappeared in the windows on both sides of the train. I was especially interested in this ride because I had often travelled along this route with horses and wagon in my younger years. Consequently many old memories were brought back to my mind.

We passed through Alexandrowsk, Komischowat, Scherebetz and Richwat and on towards the goal we had longed for. We arrived in Grunau about twelve o'clock midnight and stayed there for the night. At seven in the morning we were up again and continued our journey of thirty *Werst* by horse and open wagon in the pleasant morning air.

We drove through Rundewiese, Kaltschenowka, Neujamburg, Schoenfeld and Bergthal. When we were on the hill near Schoenfeld, I could see a great distance and I assure you that I strained my eyes to their limits to take in the sight. First there were the villages of Schoenfeld, Heuboden, Bergthal and in the distance Schoenthal, and the beautiful green forest of Asow in the distant horizon. Seen at a distance, it was still the same beautiful scene as in former years.

The villages have improved in the last few years. One gets the impression that the people are prosperous, for almost every house has been rebuilt since that time. Some of the buildings are grand structures. The houses where P. Funks, and J. Peter Funks lived, in Schoenfeld, are especially imposing. In Bergthal, the big bridge was just being repaired so that we had to go over the small bridge and then along the *Anwohner Reihe*. On the way down we saw your home only from the back. On our way home though, we also saw the front of your yard. As you know, one end of the village burned down when it was still occupied by some Mennonites. Because the walls of your parents' house remained standing, it still resembles the former place. The barn is smaller and the shed is completely gone. In its place there is a building whose rafters go to the ground which does not contribute positively to the appearance of the yard. The trees are very big, but have much dry wood on them, and were badly damaged by insects. I did not notice the well.

Our driver, Fritz, who had lived in Bergthal for many years, could explain everything. He said the present owner of your former home had died; hence, the yard looked so neglected.

The trees along the streets, and for that matter, all the trees and the forest are much bigger now, but they seem to lack proper care for dry branches can be seen everywhere; that creates a bad impression. The church is still the same and the trees around it very tall. The houses belonging to Jacob Sawatzkys, Daniel Ennses, your Grandparents, Jacob Rempels and many more are gone. Some of the other homes are still standing but are very neglected. This bothered me very much, for every tree and every house, every hill and every valley is dear, like a friend from the wonderful days of our youth. I also wanted to see the graveyard, but I did not get around to it, I only saw it from a distance and remembered many of our loved ones at rest there.

We arrived at the *Forestei* at ten in the morning... I rented two wagons and, together with three young boys from our village, we drove to Mariupol on Saturday evening...

Mariupol has improved very much. All the buildings are new, much bigger and built of stone. At the market near the church I was reminded of your parents once more, for there I was with them for the last time...

When I was at the Annual market place, I remembered another incident from my youth when Johann, Abram, Father and I returned home late from Mariupol. We stopped at an Inn, called *Der Schwarzen Schenke*, which was seven *Werst* from Mariupol, and drank some *Quass* ... At five o'clock we were back at Peter's boarding place again the beautiful green forest. Two older Greek men came riding towards us and greeted Peter in Greek; he also answered in Greek. This reminded me again of my childhood. As a small boy I also frequently came in contact with these people.

Monday Peter got up very early, prepared some coffee and with another young man went to Grunau for some flour. In that way we got to the train station at seven in the morning, without any cost to us. At three-thirty in the evening we were at home again with our family...

Your Uncle and Aunt, Peter
and Maria Schroeder

Bergthal Today

Bergthal, now called *Respublica*⁴, with a population of 578, is the centre of a sixteen thousand acre collective farm. The town has an eight room school, a library and a club house. Two monuments honouring war heroes have been erected.

Granite is still being quarried at Gami Oba, now called *Kamennaja Mogila*, and the entire region, because of its natural beauty, has been made into a state park. And, as a hundred years ago, children are playing on the slopes of the *Schoenfeldschen Berg*.

FOOTNOTES

I. INTRODUCTION

¹M. Woltner, Die Gemeindeberichte von 1848 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1941), p. 3.

²D. Epp, Die Chortitzer Mennoniten (Rosenthal, Russland, 1889), pp. 16-23.

³See Appendix A, p. for an English translation of this document.

⁴Zakon Polnoje Sakonow, Volume 8, No. 6085, p. 78.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

¹Zakon Polnoje Sakonow, Volume 34, No. 26,752, pp. 119-123.

²Josef Malinowsky, Die Planerkolonien am Asowschen Meer (Stuttgart: Ausland und Heimat Verlag, 1928), p. 13.

³M. Woltner, op. cit., p. 192.

⁴Josef Malinowsky, op. cit., p. 17.

III. BERGTHAL IS ESTABLISHED

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all the information is taken from M. Woltner, op. cit., pp. 191-194.

²See Appendix E, p. 92.

IV. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

¹The description of the three levels of government is taken from the following two sources:

Josef Malinowsky, op. cit., pp. 50-57.

David Rempel, "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia" (Stanford California: Stanford University, 1933), pp. 113-119.

²See biographical sketch in Appendix E, p. 93.

V. AGRICULTURE AND OTHER INDUSTRIES IN BERGTHAL

¹Alexander Prinz, "Die Planer Kolonien", Heimatbuch der Deutschen aus Russland: 1957 (Stuttgart: Landsmanschaft der Deutschen aus Russland).

²Alexander Klaus, Unsere Kolonien (Odessa, Russland: "Odesser Zeitung"), 1869.

³According to a map made in 1865. The scale is 1:126,000.

⁴John E. Doerksen, living in Niverville, Manitoba.

⁵Schroeder Genealogy (unpublished).

VI. THE CHURCH IN BERGTHAL

¹Bernhard Friesen, "Die Auswanderung der Bergthaler aus Russland", Der Mitarbeiter February 1907 (Winnipeg: Der Nordwesten).

²Bergthal Church records.

³See biographical sketch in Appendix E, p. 90.

VII. THE SCHOOL IN BERGTHAL

¹Jakob Klassen, Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben (Rosenthal, Russland, 1914), pp. 5-10.

²Frank Harder's "Note Book".

³Jakob Stach, Grunau und die Mariupoler Kolonien (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1942), pp. 58-59.

⁴Gerhard Wiebe, Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika (Winnipeg: Der Nordwesten, 1900), pp. 16-17.

⁵Story as told by Mrs. Jacob Kasdorf, daughter of Peter Schroeder, and Jakob Klassen, op. cit., p. 10.

VIII. SPECIAL INSTITUTIONS

¹Josef Malinowsky, op. cit., p. 44.

²David Epp, op. cit., p. 92.

³Waisenamt records.

⁴K. Knauer, "Gemeinnuetzige Einrichtungen in den deutschen Kolonien im Schwarzmeergebiet", Heimatbuch der Deutschen aus Russland: 1954 (Stuttgart: Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Ostumsiedler), p. 78.

IX. BERGTHAL DURING THE CRIMEAN WAR

¹N. Schilder, Graf Eduard Ivanovich Todleben (St. Petersburg, 1885), pp. 707-710.

²Story told by A. P. Dueck of Chortitz, Manitoba.

³Jakob Klassen, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

⁴Jacob Peters of Steinbach, Manitoba still has the watch.

⁵Gustav Reimer, Exiled by the Czar (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Publishing Office, 1956), p. 52.

X. HERE AND THERE IN BERGTHAL

1. Jakob Stach, op. cit., p. 26.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 37.
4. Josef Malinowsky, op. cit., p. 43.
5. Jakob Stach, op. cit., p. 32.
6. Ibid., pp. 17-18.
7. Jakob Klassen, op. cit., p. 11.
8. Schroeder Genealogy (unpublished).
9. See maps, pp. 12, 14, 16.
10. M. Woltner, op. cit., pp. 191 and 194.
11. Wm. Enns, Das Verstossene Kind (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1944).
12. Mrs. John E. Doerksen of Niverville, Manitoba.

XI. BERGTHAL'S POPULATION PROBLEM

¹M. Woltner, op. cit., pp. 191-194.

²Ibid.

³A. Klaus, Unsere Kolonien (Odessa: Odessaer Zeitung, 1869), p. 231.

⁴Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 26.

XII. MIGRATION TO MANITOBA

A. Reasons for Emigrating

¹Gustav Reimer, op. cit., p. 45.

²Ibid., p. 65

³Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 24.

B. Deputies Spy Out the Land

¹For a biographical sketch see Appendix E, p. 94.

²Klaas Peters, Die Bergthaler Mennoniten (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1925), pp. 11-16.

³See Appendix B, p. 81, for a day to day account of this trip.

⁴See Appendix C, p. 85, for a copy of this letter.

C. Todleben's Visit

¹N. Schilder, op. cit., pp. 212-219.

²Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 28-30.

D. Preparations for Leaving

¹Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 37, and Bernhard Friesen, op. cit., February, 1907.

²Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

³Peter Schroeder, unpublished letters.

E. The Journey to Manitoba

¹Harder Diary, courtesy of Mrs. Jacob Peters, Steinbach, Manitoba.

F. The Arrival on the East Reserve

¹J. B. Peters, "Die Ersten Pioniere aus Sued-russland in Canada", Steinbach Post October-December, 1939 (Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers).

²Klaas Peters, op. cit., p. 40.

G. More Problems in Bergthal

¹Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., pp. 32-37.

²Bernhard Friesen, op. cit.

³Ibid.

H. Lord Dufferin's Visit to the East Reserve

¹C. Henry Smith, The Coming of the Russian Mennonites (Berne, Indiana: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927), pp. 181-186.

I. Looking for Greener Pastures

¹Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 41.

J. About Their Debt

¹Ernest Correll, "The Mennonite Loan in the Canadian Parliament, 1875", Mennonite Quarterly Review, Volume XX (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1946), p. 259.

²"Die Kanadische Regierung und die Mennonitische Anleihe", Mennonitische Blätter, Vol. X, May, 1893, p. 7.

XIII. BACK TO BERGTHAL, RUSSIA

¹J. J. Hildebrand, Zeittafel (Winnipeg: Regehr Printers, 1946), p. 260.

²Gerhard Wiebe, op. cit., p. 41.

Klaas Peters, op. cit., p. 39.

Bernhard Friesen, op. cit.

³Letters courtesy of A. P. Dueck, Chortitz, Manitoba.

⁴This information is taken from The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Ukraine.

List of Maps

The Vistula Delta, p. 2, based on a map in Heimathbuch der Deutschen aus Russland: 1957 (Stuttgart: Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland), p. 48.

Route from Danzig to Chortitza, p. 5, based on the account of the journey in D. Epp, op. cit., pp. 37-47.

The Chortitza Colony, p. 6, based on a map in Heimathbuch der Deutschen aus Russland: 1957, op. cit., p. 55.

The Migration to Bergthal, p. 11, based on descriptions in Jakob Klassen, op. cit., pp. 14-16.

Mariupol, p. 12, based on a map in Heimathbuch der Deutschen aus Russland: 1957, op. cit., p. 34.

The Village of Bergthal, p. 14, this map was made by enlarging the Bergthal section of the 1865 map. Some details were copied from a village plan in the Jakob Klassen papers.

The Bergthal Colony, p. 16, based on a map prepared in 1865. Scale 1:126,000.

Three maps illustrating the delegates visit in Manitoba are based on the diaries of Sudermann, Unruh, and Tschetter. See pp. 39, 40, and 41.

Maps on p. 47 and 48, *The Route from Bergthal to Manitoba* are based on the "Harder Diary".

The Arrival in the East Reserve, p. 52, based on numerous interviews and field trips.

The East Reserve, p. 60, based on Henderson's Directory for 1877-80, topographical maps, air photos and field trips. Professor J. Warkentin of Toronto permitted me to copy from his map what I could not determine from my own research.

The West Reserve, p. 62, based on air photos, topographical maps, field trips, Otto Gaube's map of 1898 and a map owned by Mr. Dan Livingston of Morden.

APPENDIX

A. Charter of Privileges Granted by Czar Paul I

We, by the grace of God, Paul I, emperor and ruler of all Russians.

This charter received our most merciful ratification in response to a petition that came to us from the Mennonites settled in the New Russian government, who according to their superiors and because of their outstanding industry and proper conduct serve as models to the colonists, deserve our special attention, we have with this charter not only confirmed the privileges and advantages made in earlier agreements but to stimulate their industry and carefulness in agriculture, even more we most graciously want to grant them the following additional advantages:

1. We confirm the religious freedom which was promised to them and their descendants so that they might practise unhindered their tenets and customs. Also we grant most graciously that, when the occasion demands it in court, their verbal "yes" or "no" be accepted as valid in place of an oath.
2. We confirm their possession of the specified sixty-five *dessjatin* of arable land per family as incontestable and inheritable by their descendants in perpetuity. But we forbid anyone regardless of circumstances to cede, sell or deed even the smallest part of it to an outsider without special permission from the authorities set over him.
3. To all Mennonites already residing in Russia, as well as those who decide to settle here in the future, we grant permission to build factories or carry on any other useful trade, as well as to join guilds and corporations, not only in their own districts but also in cities and towns throughout the whole country.
4. According to the right of ownership, we permit the Mennonites to enjoy any and every use of their land, also to fish and brew beer and corn whiskey, not only for their own use but also for retail sale on their own land.

5. On the land belonging to the Mennonites we forbid outsiders to build inns, taverns and other public houses and the leaseholders to sell whiskey without their permission.

6. We assure them with our royal word that no Mennonite neither those that have already settled here nor those who plan to settle in this country nor their children and descendants will at any time be forced to do military or civil service without their own wish to do so.

7. We exempt all their villages and homes in their colonies from all types of quartering (with the exception when troops march through in which case the regulations for quartering are to be observed), supplying relay horses, and crown labours. In return for this it is their duty to maintain roads, bridges and the mail coach stations in their district.

8. We grant most graciously to all Mennonites and their descendants complete freedom to dispose of their well-earned personal property as each sees fit. However, if one of them after having paid all his debts wishes to leave the country with his possessions, he must pay in advance the taxes for three years on the property he has acquired in Russia, the amount to be declared dutifully and conscientiously by him and the village authorities. The same procedure is to be followed with the estate of a deceased whose heirs and relatives happen to reside in another country. In addition, the villages are given the right to appoint guardians according to their custom over the property of minor orphans.

9. We confirm the tax exemptions granted to them for a period of ten years, and also extend the same to those Mennonites who intend to settle in New Russia in the future.

After completing an investigation it was evident that, because of crop failures and diseases among their animals, they were in economic need and because of the crowded settlement in Chortitza it was decided to relocate some of these families. In consideration of their need, it was decided that those who stay on their land will have the exemption extended by five years and for ten years to those who are moved to a new settlement. But, when this period has expired, every family will pay

for each of its sixty-five *dessjatin* fifteen kopeks per year, but is exempted from all other taxes.

The loan that was extended to them is to be repaid at the end of the above-mentioned free years, those who stay on their farm in ten annual payments and those who move, in twenty years.

10. In conclusion of this our imperial charter granted to the Mennonites, in which we have guaranteed their privileges and advantages, we command all our legal authorities not to hinder them in their peaceful enjoyment of the privileges given to them but in all cases let them experience your help and protection.

Paul
Graf von Rostoschin
Sept. 6, 1800

*Translated from the German text given by D. H. Epp,
Die Chortitzer Mennoniten, pp. 64-67.*

B. Mennonite Delegation Visit to Manitoba*

June 13, 1873 (Friday)

The twelve delegates left Moorehead on the river boat International.

June 14 (Saturday) The crew and passengers took part in a church service conducted by John Funk.

June 16 (Monday) The International crossed the border into Canada.

June 17 (Tuesday) arrived in Fort Garry at 5 a.m.
 - lodged in the Davis Hotel (see map p. 39)
 - Hespeler introduced the delegates to Lieutenant Governor Morris and Premier H. J. Clark.
 - several of the delegates went on two short tours in and around the town.

June 18 (Wednesday) tour of East Reserve begins
 - a caravan of seven wagons carried the twenty-four people and supplies. Two of the wagons carried tents.
 - they were photographed before they started the journey. Tschetter and Unruh disliked this.
 - they crossed the Red River by ferry and travelled along the Dawson Road. They had covered ten miles by noon. A sudden heavy rain made the rest of the trip along the Dawson Road very difficult. The two wagons with the tents got lost.
 - they stayed for night in a Hudson Bay store at Ste. Anne. For supper they had eggs with bread and butter and drank tea.

June 19 (Thursday) Sudermann read Psalms 19 for a devotional.
 - the two lost wagons containing the tents arrived at 11 a.m.
 - continued journey at 3 p.m.
 - arrived at the N.E. corner of the East Reserve by evening.
 - pitched five tents.
 - made fire for tea and to drive off mosquitoes.
 - during a short service after supper they sang some songs and prayed that if their people would live here they might be "partakers of Christ".

- June 20 (Friday) finished breakfast by 6 a.m.
- travelled along east side of reserve.
- came to a farm, settler's wife spoke German.
- crossed several streams.
- June 21 (Saturday) got up at six and washed.
- sang praises to God and knelt in prayer.
- travelled another (15 Werst) 10 miles.
- while eating dinner they decide to return to Winnipeg. Their tour to this point has taken them over four townships.
- from Tschetter's description it seems that they did not return to Ste. Anne. They possibly travelled along a Chippewas and Ojibway Indian trail (shown on map) back to Winnipeg.
- the caravan returned to Winnipeg late at night.
- Lorenz and Paul Tschetter, Ewert, Schrag, Unruh and Funk got on a boat and went back to Moorehead.
- June 22 (Sunday) Shantz and Heinrich Wiebe attend an English church service.
- Shantz and Sudermann went to a Methodist service in the afternoon.
- June 23 (Monday) the trip West.
- leave Winnipeg at 2 p.m.
- cover 11 miles by evening.
- June 24 (Tuesday) pass Long Lake and Poplar Point.
- stay over night with an Irish farmer who lives about 53 miles west of Winnipeg.
- June 25 (Wednesday) had a late start
- two horses had wandered away during the night.
- travelled north of main trail to see land belonging to Hespeler (S.10, T.13, R.6 W.) and Shantz (S.10, T.13, R.7 W.)
- travelled along the Rat River (now called Willow Bend Creek).
- crossed Whitemud River near present Westbourne.
- stayed for night in a Hudson's Bay Store a few miles west of Westbourne. This place was 84 miles from Winnipeg.

- June 26 (Thursday) get started at 6 in the morning
- travel along Whitemud River for 32 miles and come to the "Mountains" (possibly Neepawa).
 - Suderman and Buller decide they do not want to see the 14 townships reserved for them. They want to go back and meet the other delegates at Moorehead.
- June 27 (Friday) Suderman, Shantz and Buller return the same route they had come.
- June 28 (Saturday) Suderman gets very impatient with his slow driver.
- the driver of the wagon wants to stay in Portage over Sunday. Buller wants to walk to Winnipeg.
 - visited mills, etc., in Portage.
- June 29 (Sunday) read John 16.
- visit an Episcopal Church.
- June 30 (Monday) arrive at Poplar Point at noon.
- stayed for night at a place 25 miles from Winnipeg.
 - they slept well.
 - the barn had stalls for 23 horses.
 - for supper they had 3 eggs, 1 potato, pickled meat, two cups of tea and fresh strawberries.
 - two Indian women served them; one of them smoked.
- July 1 (Tuesday) met many ox-carts on the way with pioneers travelling west.
- arrived in Winnipeg at 11 p.m.
 - saw Dominion Day celebrations
 - left Winnipeg by boat at 12 midnight.

Though no written record exists, it seems that the Bergthal and Kleingemeinde delegates also decided against visiting the fourteen townships reserved for their people. They also returned to Winnipeg. However, they were in no hurry and I would assume that they travelled south from Neepawa to the main trail and then east to Winnipeg.

At about four o'clock p.m. on Tuesday, July 1, the remaining five delegates and Wm. Hespeler were driving along the road about two miles from House's Hotel at White Horse Plains, when the driver of their party got into a

quarrel with a Metis who gathered up a number of his friends and cornered the whole group in House's Hotel. If it had not been for a cavalry troop from Winnipeg which came to their rescue, it is doubtful whether they would have escaped with their lives. Disaster would no doubt have ended any plans for a large Mennonite migration to Manitoba.

The last group of delegates probably left Winnipeg on July 8, 1873.

*All dates according to the Gregorian Calendar.

- C. *The letter which John Lowe gave to the Mennonite delegates which they considered as the legal document spelling out the Privilegium.*

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

IMMIGRATION BRANCH

Ottawa, July 23, 1873

Gentlemen:

I have the honour under the instruction of the Hon., the Minister of Agriculture, to state to you in reply to your letter of this day's date the following facts relating to advantages offered to settlers, and to the immunities afforded to Mennonites, which are established by the statute Law of Canada and by orders of His Excellency the Governor in Council, for the information of German Mennonites having intention to emigrate to Canada via Hamburg.

1. An entire exemption from military service is by Law and Order in Council granted to the denominations of Christians called Mennonites.

2. An Order in Council was passed on the 3rd of March last to reserve eight townships in the province of Manitoba for free grants on the condition of settlement, as provided in the Dominion Land Act, that is to say: "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 Lands, for the purpose of securing a homestead in respect thereof."

3. The said reserve of eight townships is for the exclusive use of the Mennonites, and the said free grants of one-quarter section to consist of 160 acres each, as defined by the Act.

4. 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.

5. If next spring the Mennonite settlers on viewing the eight townships set aside for their use should prefer to exchange them for any other eight unoccupied townships, such exchange will be allowed.

6. In addition to the free grant of one-fourth section or 160 acres to every person over 21 years of age on the condition of settlement, the right to purchase the remaining three-fourths of the section at One Dollar per acre is granted by law so as to complete the whole section of 640 acres, which is the largest quantity of land the government will grant a Patent for to any one person.

7. The settler will receive a Patent for a Free Grant after three years' residence, in accordance with the terms of the Dominion Land Act.

8. In event of the death of the settler the lawful heirs can claim the Patent for the Free Grant upon proof that settlement duties for three years have been performed.

9. From the moment of occupation, the settler acquires a "homestead right" on the land.

10. 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.

11. The privilege of affirming instead of making affidavits is afforded by law.

12. The Government of Canada will undertake to furnish passenger warrants from Hamburg to Fort Garry for Mennonite families of good character, for the sum of thirty dollars per adult person over the age of 8 years; for persons under 8 years, half price, or fifteen dollars; and for infants under one year three dollars.

13. The Minister specially authorized me to state that this arrangement as to price shall not be changed for the seasons 1874, 1875 and 1876.

14. I am further to state if it is changed thereafter, the price shall not, up to the year 1882, exceed forty dollars for an adult and children in proportion, subject to the approval of Parliament.

15. The immigrant shall be provided with provisions on the portion of the journey between Liverpool and Collingwood; but during other portions of the journey they are to find their own provisions.

I have the honour to be,
Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant

JOHN LOWE

Secretary of Department of Agriculture.

Messrs. David Klassen

Jacob Peters

Heinrich Wiebe

Cornelius Toews

Mennonite Delegates from Russia.

D. This is the document that the government of Canada had in its files which spelled out the arrangements with the Mennonites.

P.C. 957

Certified Copy of a Report of the Committee of the Privy Council, approved by His Excellency the Governor General on the 13th of August, 1873.

The Committee of Council have had under consideration the annexed memorandum, dated July 28, 1873, from the Honourable the Minister of Agriculture, stating that he has made an arrangement with certain delegates from the Mennonites settled in South Russia in view of their formal announcement to him of their intention to settle, together with the Mennonite colonists whom they represent, in the province of Manitoba, and submitting for Your Excellency's approval the terms of the said arrangement as set forth in the said annexed memorandum.

The Committee advise that the arrangement so made be sanctioned.

RODOLPHE BOUDREAU,
Clerk of the Privy Council.

Secret.

The undersigned has the honour to report that he has made an arrangement with the following named delegates from the Mennonites settled in South Russia, in view of their announcement to him in their joint letter of the 23rd July, instant, of their intention to settle together with the Mennonite colonists whom they represent, in the province of Manitoba: David Klassen, delegate of Heuboden colony; Jacob Peters, delegate of Bergthal colony; Heinrich Wiebe, delegate of Bergthal colony; Cornelius Toews, delegate of Grienfeld colony: -

The arrangement made is to the following effect: -

1st. That an entire exemption from any military service, as is provided by Law and Order in Council, will be granted to the denomination of Christians called Mennonites.

2nd. That eight townships will be reserved, under the Order in Council passed on the 3rd March last, in the province of Manitoba for free grants on the conditions of settlement, as is provided in the Dominion Lands Act, that is to say: "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 lands, for the purpose of securing a homestead right in respect thereof."

3rd. The said reserve of eight townships to be for the exclusive use of the Mennonite settlers, and the free grants of one-quarter section to consist of 160 acres as provided by the Act.

4th. That should the Mennonite settlement extend beyond the eight townships set aside by the Order in Council of 3rd March last, other townships will be reserved to meet the full requirements of Mennonite immigration.

5th. If next spring the Mennonite settlers, on viewing the eight townships set aside for their use, should prefer to exchange them for any other eight unoccupied townships, such exchange will be allowed.

6th. That, in addition to the free grant of one-quarter section to every person over 21 years of age, on condition of settlement, the right to purchase the remaining three-quarters of the section at one dollar per acre is granted, as provided by law, so as to complete the whole section.

7th. That the Mennonite settler, will receive a patent for a free grant after three years of residence, in accordance with the terms of the Dominion Lands Act.

8th. That, in the event of the death of the settler, the lawful heirs can claim the patent for the free grant, upon proof that settlement duties for three years have been performed.

9th. That from the moment of occupation the settlers acquire a "Homestead Right" in the land.

10th. That the Mennonites will have the fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles, and educating their children in schools, as provided by law, without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever.

11th. That they will have the privilege of affirming, instead of making affidavit, as is provided by law.

12th. That the Government of Canada will undertake to furnish Passenger Warrants from Hamburg to Fort Garry for Mennonite families of good character for the sum of \$30 per every person over the age of eight years, half price, or \$15, for persons under the age of eight years, and for infants under one year, \$3.

13th. That the arrangement as to price shall not be changed during the seasons of 1874, 1875 and 1876.

14th. That, if such arrangement is changed after the year 1876, the price shall not, subject to the approval of Parliament, for a period to extend to the year 1882, exceed \$40 per adult; and for children in proportion.

15th. That the immigrants shall be provided with provisions during the portion of the journey between Liverpool and Collingwood; but that during other portions of the journey they are to find their own provisions.

He respectfully recommends that the arrangement as herein-
before recited with the Mennonite delegates be concurred in.

The whole respectfully submitted.

(Sgd.) J. H. POPE,

Minister of Agriculture.

Department of Agriculture,
Ottawa, 28th July, 1873

E. Biographies of Several Leaders

JACOB BRAUN

Jacob Braun was born in the village of Chortitza on August 4, 1791. His parents were Jacob Braun and Christina _____. He had two older half-sisters. He was baptized by Aeltester Jacob Dyck in 1813 and married Susanna Lemke (or Leike) (1796-1864) on January 6, 1814. They had eleven children. (Their youngest daughter, Margaretha, born in 1839, married Johann Funk, the first Aeltester of the Bergthal Church on the West Reserve). He was elected as minister and ordained on October 2, 1824.

When the Bergthal Colony was established, he was asked to go with the first settlers in 1836 to look after the spiritual needs of the people. He won the respect and co-operation, not only of the Bergthal people, but also of the leaders in Chortitza. During the winter of 1840-41 Aeltester Braun made arrangements for a loan from Franz Thiessen, a tradesman in Neuendorf, Chortitza. The money was used to aid the stricken Bergthal colonists who had lost almost half of their sheep and this at a time when wool was still the main cash product. In 1855, he was asked to ordain the Chortitza Aeltester, Gerhard Dyck.

His wife died in 1864 and two years later at the age of seventy-five he resigned as Aeltester. Jacob Braun died on December 15, 1868 and was buried in the cemetery at Bergthal.

JACOB PETERS

Jacob Peters was born in the village of Kronsweide, Chortitza Colony on October 17, 1813. His parents were Peter Peters (1777-?) and Katharina Siemens (1778-?). He was the fifth in a family of eight children. He married Elizabeth Friesen (1814-1871) in 1834 and moved to Bergthal where he settled in the village of Heuboden in 1839. They had four children of whom only Jacob (1845-1922) and Peter (1846-1913) lived to maturity. They also had an adopted daughter, Sara Wall.

The Peters family adopted Johann, *Das Verstosene Kind*, in 1874, or 1875 when he was abandoned by his previous foster parents as they emigrated to Manitoba.

Jacob Peters is listed as one of the *Beisitzer* to *Oberschulze* Siemens in the Cornies' Report of 1845. He was elected as *Oberschulze* a few years later and held that position until the Hanover municipality was organized in 1884.

He was one of the twelve delegates sent to America in 1873 and was in charge of the last group that came to Manitoba in 1876. They settled in the village of Vollwerk.

Peters spoke on behalf of the Mennonites at a special meeting held for the Governor General when the latter visited the East Reserve in 1877.

The man who had done more for Bergthal than anyone else, died about 1890 and is buried in an unmarked grave in a small family plot in the former village of Vollwerk.

GERHARD WIEBE

Gerhard Wiebe was born on July 25, 1827 in the Chortitza Colony where his parents, Gerhard Wiebe (1800-1858) and Agatha Dyck (1804-?), lived as *Anwohner*. He was the oldest of six children, three boys and three girls. In 1839 when Gerhard was twelve, his family moved to Bergthal and settled in the village of Heuboden. He was baptized by Aeltester Jacob Braun in 1846 and a year later married Elizabeth Dyck (1828-1876), a niece of the Chortitza Aeltester, Gerhard Dyck. They lived in the west end of the village of Bergthal and had a family of ten children, eight sons and two daughters. Their first child born in 1849 died at birth.

Wiebe was elected as deacon in 1854 and as minister in 1861. In 1866 at the age of thirty-nine, he was ordained as Aeltester of the Bergthal Church by their retiring Aeltester, Jacob Braun. As a spiritual leader he believed in divine guidance and in prayer. He stressed honesty and particularly humility, so much so that some of the leaders in Molotschna and Chortitza considered him abnormally naive and ignorant and therefore ridiculed him whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Wiebe represented the Bergthal Colony at eight meetings in Alexanderwohl in connection with the emigration and delegations sent to the Czar. During these years he personally met at least two top ranking Russian officials, General Hase in Jalta and Todleben in Halbstadt and Chortitza.

He happened to be one of the few men left in the village of Bergthal when it went up in flames in 1875. The Wiebe family migrated to Manitoba in 1875 and settled in the village of Chortitz. The first two years in Manitoba were tragic for them. The mother and three children died. Gerhard Wiebe resigned as *Aeltester* in 1882.

During the last years of his life he wrote or dictated the notes which after his death in 1900 were published in a booklet called: Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika.

Gerhard Wiebe died on May 3, 1900 and is buried in an unmarked grave in the cemetery at Chortitz (East Reserve), Manitoba.

HEINRICH WIEBE

Heinrich Wiebe was born on September 28, 1839. His parents were Gerhard Wiebe and Agatha Dyck. According to the Bergthal record books the Wiebe family settled in Heuboden, but the inscription on Heinrich's grave stone states that he was born in Schoenfeld. Since he is born at the time when the village of Heuboden was established it can be assumed that Heinrich was born while his family stayed with friends in Schoenfeld for several months or even longer while their home was being built in Heuboden.

He was baptized on June 1, 1859 and married Margaretha Falk (1840-?), the daughter of Wilhelm Falk from the village of Schoenthal on October 25, 1859. They made their home in Schoenfeld and had at least seven children. (His records in the Bergthal books go only to 1876.)

Heinrich Wiebe was ordained as deacon on April 23, 1864 and as minister on February 28, 1865.

He was obviously pleased when his older brother was elected *Aeltester* in 1866 for half a year later Heinrich had another son and named him Gerhard.

He was actively involved in the migration to Manitoba and was chosen to represent his colony in the delegation that visited America in 1873. He was one of four ministers who accompanied the first Bergthal settlers to the East Reserve in 1874.

October 1876 was an eventful month for the Wiebe family. First, two of their children, Wilhelm age seven and Susanna age twelve, died and then a few days later Agatha was born.

From a letter written by Wiebe in 1894 in which he thanks the Mennonites in Ontario for their assistance during the difficult immigration and settlement period we learn that he had been one of the prime negotiators for that aid.

After he had helped in reorganizing the church on the East Reserve, he moved to the West Reserve and settled in the village of Edenburg where he continued to serve the church till his death on January 30, 1897. He was buried in the Edenburg cemetery.

Heinrich Wiebe's grave stone was found a few years ago and has been relocated at the corner of the Post Road and Highway 30 near Gretna.

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