

THE COLONIZATION OF THE GERMAN MENNONITES FROM RUSSIA IN THE PARAGUAYAN CHACO*

BY DR. WALTER QUIRING

The decision to colonize the Mennonite refugees who had fled from Russia into Germany in November and December, 1929, in the Paraguayan Chaco was taken at the beginning of the year 1930 in the United States. The Mennonite Central Committee, representing all the Mennonite relief organizations in the United States, had appointed a study committee in a session held in Chicago Illinois, December 11, 1929, which was to study the problem of finding a location to colonize the refugees. Six weeks later on January 25, 1930, this committee reported the findings of its investigation to a general meeting of representatives of Mennonite relief committees in Chicago. The committee recommended that the refugees should be colonized in the Paraguayan Chaco. A colony of Mennonites from Canada with over eighteen hundred souls had already been established there in the years 1927-1928 and reported that it was satisfied with its location, and this was considered a proof by the committee and the meeting that it was possible to colonize successfully in this hitherto wholly undeveloped territory. There were other reasons also which led the group to favor the Chaco. In the first place, the colonists were granted absolute freedom of conscience and freedom from military service. They were also granted freedom from tariffs and taxes for ten years. In the second place, the Paraguayan government opened its doors wide to admit the sick and crippled among the refugees without examination, something which no other country was willing to do. Furthermore, the Chaco had unlimited capacity to receive immigrants.

On the basis of the report of the study committee which relied in the main on an official report of the American consul in Asuncion, John B. Faust, and another report by two Mennonite missionaries in the Argentine, Bishop T. K. Hershey and Pastor Amos Swartzendruber, together with a statement from the Canadian Mennonite leaders in the Chaco who reported that they were well satisfied and did not intend to move, the Chicago meeting decided

* Translated from the German.

unanimously to undertake at once to settle the refugees who were then in Germany in the Chaco. The study committee could not know that Faust had visited the Chaco only once in a pouring rain, merely rode through two villages, Gnadenfeld and Weidenfeld, and that in the main he relied upon data which was placed at his disposal by the Corporacion Paraguaya, the owner of the land. The report, in particular that portion dealing with the marketing possibilities for the colony, was for that reason, as it may be imagined, not altogether thorough or reliable. Hershey and Swartzendruber had visited the colony in February, 1929, that is, when the colony was not yet a year old and had failed to touch the important question of market in their report altogether. Otherwise both the Faust and Hershey reports contained much valuable information.

In order to secure funds to finance the transport and settlement of 2,000 refugees in the Chaco, a campaign was inaugurated to collect funds in all the Mennonite churches in the United States. This campaign in a comparatively short time produced the substantial sum of approximately \$100,000.

At the end of January, 1930, Professor H. S. Bender of Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, was sent as agent and representative of the Mennonite Central Committee to Germany to conduct the necessary negotiations with the German government and the refugees regarding the settlement in Paraguay and to purchase equipment for use in the Chaco and arrange for the actual transport thither. The colonists were to be equipped with the necessary household goods and agricultural implements and were to be supported for one year in the Chaco by the Mennonite Central Committee.

At the beginning of March, 1930, G. G. Hiebert of Reedley, California, who had already given service in the famine of 1921-1922 in the work of the American Mennonite Relief in South Russia, was sent to Paraguay to aid in preparation for the colonization of the refugees and to assist in their reception.

The Mennonite Central Committee had negotiated with the Corporacion Paraguaya (hereafter designated as CP) whose chief office was in New York, to which Corporation I referred in my article on the Canadian Mennonite Colony in the previous issue of the REVIEW, and had arranged for a price of \$20 per hectare ($2\frac{1}{2}$ acres) for the land which the immigrants were to buy from the Corporation. Contracts covering the purchase of the land and the mutual obligations of the colonists and the Corporation to each other were signed in Germany before the refugees left for Paraguay. According to these contracts the CP promised to pre-

pare for the settlement of the refugees in the Chaco, to select some land subject to later revision of the choice by the colonists themselves, to transport them onto the land and to arrange for their food and shelter. The Corporation added \$25,000 of its own funds to the funds furnished by the Mennonite Central Committee and handled the funds necessary for the operations in South America in its office in Asuncion. An accounting was made of the operations of this section of the common treasury and given to the Mennonite Central Committee.

On the 15th of March, 1930, the first group of refugees, consisting of 61 families with 357 souls left the refugee camp at Mölln, Germany, and on the same day embarked upon the Steamship "Bayern" for South America. The journey was completed without incident and on the 10th of April the group arrived in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina where they were transferred to the river steamer "Apipe" of the Mihanovich line. The later groups with some exceptions also made the trip up the river on this small and dirty Argentine boat and the colonists in general believe that it is from this vessel that the third group got typhus germs and brought them into the colony, hence the "Apipe" has ever since been called the "typhus boat."

Upon their arrival in Asuncion this first group was received by the president of Paraguay, Dr. José P. Guggiari, who addressed friendly words of greeting to them and gave them a hearty welcome to his country. After further travel the group finally reached Puerto Casado, the river port where they were to disembark, on Good Friday, April 18, 1930, where G. G. Hiebert and the representative of the CP, Alexander Langer, were awaiting them. The Canadian Mennonites from the Colony Menno who were to transport the new immigrants by ox-cart from the end of the railroad at kilometer 145 (mile 90) had made it known that they would not be able to reach the end of the railroad on Sunday on account of the Easter festival. For this reason the new arrivals were detained several days in Puerto Casado where they were cared for in the barracks which had been built a few years before for the Canadian immigrants. On April 23 the company reached the end of the railroad and began the wearisome journey on the ox wagons of the Canadians over the narrow, dusty forest trails under the heat of the tropical sun. The mood of the immigrants was rather depressed and many had lost heart and were gloomy. The distance from other human habitation seemed to them to be tremendous. Ninety miles (145 km) they had traveled on the narrow gauge

railway winding through the primitive forest, and now they had to travel 68 miles (110 km) farther by wagon. The whole vast area of the Chaco, a territory almost as large as Germany, was not colonized. Where were they in this wilderness to sell their products, they asked themselves, provided that the light, sandy soil would be able to produce any products at all in such a heat. Asuncion, the capital of the country and their best market, was approximately 440 miles (700 km) distant from the colony by the river route and difficult to reach. Furthermore, the city was naturally well supplied with agricultural products by the surrounding settlements. They did not know, of course, at this time of the tremendous crops of valuable, fine-quality cotton that could be raised in the Chaco and which were destined to be their chief export product.

On the journey through the forest the new immigrants remarked a great deal about the uniform nature of the stunted forest which stretched away into the invisible distance on both sides. They had always imagined a primitive forest quite different, much better looking and filled with high and large trees. What they saw was really not a true forest but tangled undergrowth with occasional large trees which for the most part were good only for fuel. For some reason or other it did not appeal to them; perhaps they had some forebodings of the hard struggle they would yet have with this forest. But where in this wilderness would they be able to find wood to build with? Here and there, it is true, they could see larger trees but most of them, so the Canadians said, were hard as stone and heavier than water and could not be used for construction purposes. Good wood for furniture was also very rare and when found had to be brought out of the forest for use. And why then had the trees of the forest remained so small? Was it perhaps because it was too dry in the Chaco for normal growth? Or was the soil perhaps too alkaline? Here and there in the forest they saw large white alkali spots which looked like remnants of snow fields in the spring. The leaves of most of the trees were small, smooth and hard, all measures taken by nature to prevent evaporation of the precious moisture.

When it came to locating the colony, they learned from Langer, the former worker in the botanical gardens in Asuncion who had been hired as organizer of the colony by the CP, that they were to be located, not as they had always been told in Germany, west of Hoffnungsfeld and north of Menno, the Canadian colony, but northwest of the Canadians. In this way they were taken unnecessarily far away from the railway into the forest at

least 30 miles (50 km) more than necessary, but the CP had expressly reserved the right in the contract to select the land for the immigrants although they were to be permitted to change their location freely within the first six months if the choice was not satisfactory to them. The region in which they were located was almost completely level with only a gradual rise in elevation westward from the Paraguay River so that the two colonies were at an elevation of 180 meters (about 550 ft.) above sea level. The depth of the wells located on the scattered areas of prairie in the forest became greater the nearer they came to their new location.

At Hoffnungsfeld, $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles (12 km) west of the Colony Mennon, the CP had established an agricultural experiment station which was being managed by Langer, but the experienced immigrant farmers shook their heads at the careless and neglected appearance of the station. They had hoped to find on an experiment station various varieties of tropical plants which they would be able to use in their own farming operations but outside of three kinds of sorghum, a number of mulberry trees and some late watermelon plants they could not see anything. And even later the experiment farm, which had cost the Corporation an expensive amount of money, was of no value at all for the colony.

On April 26, 1930, the first immigrants reached the land which had been selected for them. The Canadians unloaded them at the so-called Corporation camp where there was a half-finished warehouse. Here they stacked boxes and casks of all sorts and hastened back to their own colony again. With great interest the new arrivals looked about them. The so-called "camp," that is, an area without trees, was approximately 550 feet square and looked exactly like many other camps which they had seen during the days of their transport—an area covered with high buffalo grass with only a few large trees. In the middle of the camp was a well which they learned with much satisfaction had sweet water. At the edge of the forest they saw a second building in construction in addition to the warehouse which was to be the company headquarters.

Practically nothing had been done by the CP in the way of preparation for the reception of the immigrants and their settlement on the land. At the edge of the "camp" which had been selected for the first village, a primitive house $20 \times 55 \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ feet with a tin roof had been constructed which furnished shelter for a few families for the first while. The CP had intended to construct similar buildings in all the villages but the colonists were later glad that they had not found time to do so, for such houses had no

special value for them and only increased substantially the burden of debt which was already large enough. Only a small part of the first camp had been cleared of underbrush, merely a strip of 45 yards wide on the side adjoining the forest, and in addition five acres of forest. More serious was the failure of the CP to provide for sweet-water wells. It is true that one well had been dug on the northwest end of the camp but was found to contain alkaline water. Apparently discouraged by the result of the early digging, the representative of the Corporation had not undertaken any further digging. Consequently all the water had to be carried in buckets from the nearby Corporation camp, a distance of about a mile, because there were neither wagons, casks, nor tubs. In spite of the limited extent of the preparation, the total cost amounted to the substantial sum of 218,469.19 pesos (\$3,000). It should be mentioned, however, that the whole movement proceeded very rapidly and that the Corporation was not expecting such a large group, in fact had protested against groups larger than 100 persons.

Finally after several weeks the camps which were to be the locations for the villages were selected and divided into parcels which were assigned by lot to the individual families in the villages. In parcelling out the pieces the settlers made a big mistake which they soon realized but unfortunately could not rectify. The parcels were long narrow strips of from 70 to 165 yards wide. This was much too narrow since each family received a parcel of 100 acres. This meant that each farm consisted of a long narrow strip reaching from the center of the camp into the forest and consequently a great deal of unnecessary labor was created by the unavoidable traveling back and forth. The mixed farming of the Chaco makes it necessary that the farmer spend much more time on his land than is necessary in Europe where wheat farming is practiced. Every day he has to be out on his field in the sub-tropical heat to plant, to cultivate or to harvest, for seedtime and harvest extend throughout a period of approximately three months each. For this reason, a narrow and long farm means much loss of valuable time and physical strength.

In quick succession the additional transports reached the Chaco so that by the end of 1930 a total of 279 families with 1500 souls had located in the Chaco. In 1931, 24 families with 123 souls, and in 1932 the Harbin refugees consisting of 80 families with 378 souls, were added to the group. The final total of immigrants was 383 families with 2,001 souls. This group together established 17 villages which constitute the Colony Fernheim. The list of villages with the year of establishment is as follows:

1930	1.	Lichtfelde	1930	10.	Rosenort
1930	2.	Kleefeld	1930	11.	Waldesruh
1930	3.	Gnadenheim	1930	12.	Rosenfeld
1930	4.	Wiesefeld	1931	13.	Hiebertsheim
1930	5.	Friedensfeld	1932	14.	Blumenort
1930	6.	Friedensruh	1932	15.	Orlof
1930	7.	Schönwiese	1932	16.	Karlsruhe
1930	8.	Schönbrunn	1932	17.	Schönau
1930	9.	Auhagen			

The 383 families were located on 376 farms of 40 hectares or 100 acres each, so that a total of 15,040 hectares or 37,850 acres was purchased and occupied by the settlers by the end of 1932. In addition the CP donated 100 acres of land for the school in each village which adds 680 hectares or 1800 acres to the area so that the total land possessed by the entire Colony Fernheim amounts to 15,720 hectares or 39,650 acres. More than twice this amount of land lies between the villages. It is the plan that in time all of this land should be purchased from the CP for the oncoming generation or for new settlers.

The lack of water in the rather dry territory in which the Colony Fernheim is located was a source of considerable concern for the colonists from the very first day. They soon discovered that on the entire territory of the colony there was not a single spring, brook or stream or even a swampy spot which contains water the entire year around. The nearest river, the Verde, flows 36 miles (60 km) to the south and the Galvan about 110 miles to the northeast of the colony, both of them flowing into the Paraguay River. While the first families were still on the Corporation camp, the members of the first village began to hunt for water. Their first diggings were without good results. It is true that they found water at a depth of 3 to 5 feet but it was alkaline and not potable for human beings. They gave up the attempt because there was other more important and urgent work to be done. They had to have, for instance, a roof over their heads to protect them from the oncoming hot weather. Later they found sweet water after repeated digging although many still to-day haul their water from a Corporation camp. In 1933 one of the villages (Auhagen) still had no sweet water but had to haul it from approximately a mile and a quarter distant. Blumenort had a well at one end of the village, four villages had two wells apiece, one had three, three had four wells apiece, etc. Wiesefeld was best supplied with sweet water, being the fortunate possessor of eighteen good wells. Gnadenheim

had five sweet water wells out of twenty-seven which had been dug. Since the time the author left the Chaco more wells have been found. The handicap for health and cleanliness due to the difficulty of finding water does not need to be pointed out.

Two groups of immigrants require special notice in an account of the settlement of Fernheim Colony, namely, the so-called Polish group and the Harbin group. Soon after the World War the German Mennonites in Poland were compelled to find some place to which they might emigrate. The villages at home were more than full and there was no more place for the oncoming generation. Furthermore it was practically impossible to secure land in Poland for another settlement there. Consequently, in the years 1925 to 1930, about 50 people emigrated to Canada from the settlement Deutsch Wymyschle alone. But these Polish Mennonites with their strong loyalty to their German culture had difficulty in adjusting themselves to permanent settlement in an English country because they saw that their children would inevitably be forced to become English-speaking Canadians in their new home. For this reason they recommended to the rest of the group in Poland who remained behind that they should not come to Canada but should rather endeavor to find another country for colonization. This advice was soon followed.

In August, 1928, Leonard Kliewer with his wife and two children emigrated to Sao Paulo in Brazil. In the following months four young men and a second family followed them to Brazil. All of these were resolved if possible to go to Paraguay later. A year later in August, 1929, one of the group, Cornelius Kliewer, unmarried, went to Paraguay to make a personal investigation of the possibilities of colonization in the Chaco. He found employment on the experimental farm at Hoffnungsfeld and from there visited all the villages of the Colony Menno. After several months stay in Chaco, Kliewer returned to Brazil to bring to the Chaco for permanent settlement the other Polish Mennonites who were there.

Back home in Poland the movement to Paraguay was started with the first group of 17 souls leaving Poland on June 1, 1930. On July 12, 1930, this group reached Fernheim and established the village of Rosenfeld on land adjoining the village of Lichtfelde, the first village of the Russian group. Rosenfeld has remained to date a Polish village. By the end of 1933 a total of fifty Polish Mennonites of nine families had settled in the Chaco in Rosenfeld. In 1933 the village was made a part of Fernheim Colony.

The story of the settlement of the Harbin group in the Chaco

which occurred in 1932 goes back to the year 1927. In that year four Mennonite colonies were established about 56 miles (60 km) from Blagoweschtschensk on the Amur River in East Siberia. The names of two of the villages were Usman and Sawitaja. In a short time the new settlements became quite prosperous. The settlers had hoped that at the great distance from the center of Russia at which they found themselves they would be more safe from the Bolshevik terror. But they were bitterly disappointed. It is true that the terror came much later than in the western part of Russia, but it came with the same methods and the same harshness to them in East Siberia also. Soon they were compelled by various measures which ruined their business to combine into collectives.

Under these circumstances it was quite natural that the colonists began to look longingly toward the blue Chinese mountains in the distance. From China perhaps, they thought, it would be possible to reach North America where they had relatives. First a few individuals made their escape after very careful preparation. Then smaller groups, chiefly of single young men, tried it. Most of them succeeded in their escape although a few were captured by the G. P. U. (Russian Secret Police) and several, unfortunately, were executed. Those who were fortunate enough to reach Harbin, the capital of Manchuria, reported by devious ways to their relatives and friends along the Amur about their experiences, warned them of dangers and gave advice for the escape and the trip into the interior of Manchuria. The number of those who were ready to risk the dangerous flight increased daily as the pressure of the G. P. U. and the merciless tax collectors increased.

The Soviet border patrols soon became aware of the unrest in the German villages and doubled their guard. Soviet spies in Harbin reported the daily increasing number of those who escaped. Day and night the villages were under guard but the determined spirit of the colonists overcame every obstacle and they soon learned how to outwit the G. P. U. In the night of December 16 and 17, 1931, two whole villages, namely, Schumanowka and Pribreshnoje, dared the flight on sixty sleds over the border across the frozen Amur River with all their possessions. The dangerous attempt was successful and all succeeded in getting across safely. On the other bank of the river, however, in Kanifu, the Chinese police received them in characteristic Chinese fashion, thoroughly examined them and used every possible pretence to get the last ruble from them. In Sacholjan, the nearest Chinese border town, the leaders of the group were imprisoned until the necessary money for permission to reside in the country was secured. Finally after endless negotia-

tions and after overcoming the greatest difficulties, they were permitted to set out in rented auto busses for Tsitsikar, the nearest railroad station, which was 310 miles (500 km) distant.

The trip by auto bus was terrible—more frightful than the flight by night across the Amur. Birth and death in the over-filled busses, hunger and freezing, murder and plunder were their lot; they escaped nothing. Exhausted, sick and in absolute poverty, they reached Harbin but no one complained for they were all exceedingly happy and thankful to have escaped the Soviet executioners.

The Chinese police authorities were not at all glad to receive these new immigrants and in numerous cases refused to grant permits for residence. All the refugees above the age of eighteen had to renew their permits every three months and each time were compelled to pay the sum of 10 Chinese dollars (\$2.50). It was only after the German consulate interfered that conditions became more tolerable for the refugees. As more and more refugees came across the border and found their way to Harbin, a "Committee of German Refugees in Harbin" was organized to aid the new arrivals and to conduct them whenever it was possible from Sacholjan or Tsitsikar to Harbin, or to send them money for the trip. By October, 1931, 550 Mennonite refugees had collected in Harbin. The two entire villages referred to above came later.

In January, 1931, the first refugee home was established and in the autumn of the same year two additional homes were secured. For these homes the committee had to pay as monthly rent the sum of 1254 Chinese dollars (\$320). A total of 726 wholly destitute refugees, chiefly Mennonites, but including other Protestants as well as Catholics, were cared for in these homes. In each of the homes there was a school for children. Altogether four teachers and 148 children were enrolled. A small hospital and dispensary also was established. Unfortunately, however, as a result of the exhausting experiences of the flight, the under-nourishment, and the unhygienic conditions, during the year between October 1, 1930 and October 1, 1931, a total of 78 persons died. Of that number 8 died of typhus, 24 of scarlet fever, and 46 of other diseases. Figures for the later period are not available.

The constant endeavors of the Mennonite Relief Committees in Europe and North America were directed to the goal of transporting the refugees as soon as possible from Harbin to America. Over 200 of the refugees in Harbin actually reached the United States during the year 1931, but finally this door was closed as was the door to Canada, so attempts were made to arrange for immigration to Mexico. Finally after this attempt ended in failure, the Men-

nonite Central Committee at a meeting on December 11, 1931, in Newton, Kansas, decided to bring the Harbin refugees to Paraguay and settle them in the Chaco in the Fernheim colony. But it was February 22, 1932, before the first group of 373 persons was able to leave Harbin. The remaining 184 Mennonites had to remain behind in Harbin because of lack of funds. At the present time plans are under way to bring this remnant to Brazil. The group left Shanghai on the 7th of April, 1934 and was to arrive in Rio de Janeiro about June 1, 1934.

The first group made the trip from Harbin to Dairen by rail and from there on the Japanese steamer "Ghoshun Maru" to Shanghai. On February 27, 1932, they sailed from Shanghai in the French steamer "d'Artagnan" of the American Lloyd line. This line actually transported the refugees from Shanghai to Buenos Aires for the remarkably low sum of \$90 per adult, whereas the normal tariff, third class, just from Shanghai to Marseilles in France, is \$112 per head.

The group reached Marseilles on the first of April, numbering by this time 374, one child having been born on the sea journey. Here two families with a total of ten persons had to be left behind because of illness. The others traveled by rail from Marseilles via Paris to Le Havre where four additional passengers joined the group from the refugee camp at Mölln, Germany. On April 5 a total of 367 persons left Le Havre on the French steamer "Croix" of the Chargeurs Reunis and arrived at Buenos Aires on April 28. On May 12, 1932, they finally reached Fernheim in the Chaco after a three months' journey half way around the globe. Here they established four villages east of the earlier settlement which they named Blumenort, Orloff, Karlsruhe and Schönau.

Thus the settlement of Russian Mennonites in the Chaco took place during a period of two years, from April, 1930 to April, 1932, just three years after the Canadians settled there from 1927 to 1928. The Russian colony slightly outnumbers the Canadian colony. The two colonies occupy adjoining areas which together constitutes a very substantial Mennonite settlement whose population at the present time is close to 4,000 souls.



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