

# WITH THE MENNONITE REFUGEE COLONIES IN BRAZIL AND PARAGUAY

## A Personal Narrative

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### I. *Brazil*

A few short years ago there were no Mennonites in Brazil, except perhaps one family in Rio de Janeiro, Frederick Arentz, who left his home in Hamburg some forty years ago. Today there are at least fifteen hundred Mennonites in this great land, approximately three hundred families. It has been my privilege to spend the past ten days visiting these people, and as I sit here in my hotel room in the city of Curitiba tonight, the evening of July 1, waiting for the plane that is to take me to the Mennonites of Paraguay, I have been trying to gather my impressions into one composite picture of the Mennonites of Brazil. Perhaps those interested in Mennonite life and history may be interested in a brief account of what I have observed during these past ten days.

My contact with the Mennonites of Brazil started last Sunday, when I reached Rio after a five-day flight by Pan-American plane from Miami, Florida. Frederick Arentz, mentioned above, was at the airport to meet me on arrival, a most welcome reception in a totally strange land. The Arentz family showed me splendid Christian hospitality. I was happy to learn that Mr. Arentz still holds firmly to Mennonite principles, even though he has not had the privilege of direct connection with a church of his faith for forty years. He has reared his four sons in this same faith, and all of them have clung to the nonresistant faith of their fathers; so that they have refused military service, preferring to lose their "political" rights rather than their faith. The price they had to pay was surrender of all rights to vote and hold office; after all, not such a serious loss.

On Tuesday the plane again took me about five hundred miles down the coast to Paranagua, where another Mennonite met me, Heinrich Martins, of Blumenau in the state of Santa Catharina, who had traveled a day and a night by train and bus to the port. Mr. Martins was the leader of the first group of Mennonite refugees from Russia who settled in Brazil in February, 1930. Though

it took us practically two days to reach his home, where we arrived late Thursday night, the fellowship during the journey was very pleasant, and was a splendid introduction to the Mennonites of Brazil, whom Mr. Martins knows as perhaps no one else does. At the present time he is bookkeeper in a large export firm in the thoroughly German city of Blumenau, although for the past five years he had been a teacher in the German school in the city until it was closed recently by the government.

From Blumenau it is only about one hundred kilometers to the large Russian Mennonite settlement in the Krauel valley, but we were on the road all day, traveling steadily from six in the morning till six in the evening. It was winter in Brazil, and even though that does not mean snow and ice, it means cool weather and rain in this region. Heavy rains had made the roads almost impassable, and since the last forty miles of our route had to be over primitive, partly mountainous roads, we had some interesting experiences before we reached the Mennonite settlement, driving in a light coach with four horses struggling through deep mud and rain. Altogether during the next four days we traveled over 150 miles over these almost impassable frontier roads, chiefly in light farm wagons. But the hospitality enjoyed in the Mennonite settlements made up for the hardships passed through in reaching them.

Two days were spent in the main settlement here, which is located in a narrow valley between mountains which often reach three thousand feet in height. About 160 refugee families were settled in the valley in 1930 with the aid of the German government and the Dutch Mennonite Relief Committee. The colony is organized into three villages, the chief one bearing the name "Witmarsum," after Menno Simons' birthplace in Holland. The other two are named Gnadental and Waldheim.

With the aid of thousands of Dutch guilders, a sawmill, a starch factory for extracting starch from the roots of the aipim plant which is the chief money crop in the colony, and a modest hospital have been built. The settlers themselves have cleared on an average ten acres apiece of their fifty acre tracts which they bought from a land company, and have gradually brought considerable land under cultivation, with aipim as the chief crop. They have had to work very hard, for the land was covered with thick Brazilian forest which had never been touched by the hand of man, and much of the land is very hilly. Their labor has been made harder by the forty miles of bad roads which they must cover with their wagons before reaching the nearest market town. However they have made en-

couraging progress, have built themselves modest homes and schools, and are looking forward with confidence to the future, happy to have been delivered from the terrible conditions under which they had to live in Russia. They are still bitterly poor, and probably will remain so for another generation, for they still have debts to pay on their land and to the German government for transportation, and the average cash income per family certainly does not exceed two *contos de reis* in Brazilian currency, which equals about \$100 of our money at the present rate of exchange. This is approximately the salary of the schoolteachers and other officials of the colony. The doctor alone, also a Mennonite refugee gets the enormous salary of about \$20 per month and house rent. Yet, since prices are low, they are able to get along. The elder of the Brüder Gemeinde church in the colony, a truthful man, told me that the family of four for which he is the provider, gets along on about 50 milreis or \$2.50 cash per month for living expenses. Living conditions are naturally still very primitive in every respect, yet I found as much contentment, if not more, here among these struggling, poverty-stricken Mennonite refugee families, as among our wealthy and prosperous Mennonite farming communities in North America, where autos, tractors, radios, pianos, etc., are counted as necessities of life.

The two leading groups of Russian Mennonites are represented in this colony, although, the one, the Brüder Gemeinde, has about eighty per cent of the people, and most of the twenty preachers, while the other group, the so-called "Kirchen-Gemeinde" is weaker. Gerhard Rosenfeld, the elder or bishop of the Brüder Gemeinde, is fully aware of the dangers both moral and spiritual, which face this small, struggling group of Mennonites who are trying to maintain the faith of their fathers in a strange land. He is chairman of the so-called K. f. K., a joint committee of church leaders, (Kommission für Kirchliche Angelegenheiten) which supervises the religious life of the settlement. Until this month, the colony has had its own German Christian schools, (three elementary and one high school), poor as they are, but the new laws of Brazil forbidding foreign language schools with foreign teachers, make it probable that these schools will have to close, which means a very serious loss to the settlement. It is worthy of note in passing, that the colony maintains a co-operative store, and operates the sawmill and starch factory on a co-operative basis. The entire colony is organized into three villages, each under a leader known as a "Schulz," all under the leadership of a colony leader, called "Oberschulz," who at present is preacher David Nikkel, a fine and capable man.

Part of the original group of refugees who came to Brazil were settled on a neighboring plateau, about five miles away, called Stoltz Plateau. This settlement, formerly about eighty families, has now been reduced to less than thirty by emigration, so that it is now very small, almost too small to maintain itself. It was a pleasure however to visit them, and to note their steadfastness, patience and hope under trying circumstances—a pleasure also to eat oranges and bananas from young Mennonite orchards here. The bishop or elder of the Brüder Gemeinde on Stoltz Plateau, Johannes Janzen, formerly of Turkestan, Russia, is the schoolteacher of the colony, and is also a capable painter. He has promised to paint some typical scenes from the Mennonite colonies in Brazil for the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College.

After a day on Stoltz Plateau, I started out for the last and youngest Mennonite settlement in Brazil, a group of nearly a hundred families living near the large city of Curitiba, capital of the state of Parana, a city of 130,000 people about 150 miles from Blumenau, first mentioned above. My experiences in reaching this city demonstrate the rather primitive character of Brazilian transportation; for although the first part of the journey was covered efficiently, even over mountain roads, with a very modern, up-to-date Chevrolet bus with a diesel motor, a total of 26 weary hours was spent in covering this distance. The small, dirty, puffing, wood-burning train was due to arrive at 7:30 p. m. at its destination after an all-day run covering about 120 miles, but we did not arrive until 5 a. m. the next morning, nine hours late, and no pullman sleepers furnished the weary passengers. The next day the same train was 11 hours late. But the passengers took it good-naturedly, apparently having learned the good Brazilian virtue (?) of "patientia," which means, take things easy. Even a casual traveler in Brazil soon sees that there has been and still is far too much *patientia* in Brazil, a wonderfully rich country, with a very backward population, low standards of living, and much poverty and ignorance.

In Curitiba I was met by Franz Goertz, one of the first settlers here, who moved from the Krauel colony about 7 years ago, hoping to find a place where he could have a better chance to make a living. A total of about 80 families have followed him to date, the last ones having arrived a few months ago. The mother colony at the Krauel and Stoltz Plateau, as well as the Holland Committee and the German government, have been bitterly disappointed by this emigration. Not only has the loss of 80 families seriously weakened the mother colony, but the new settlement, close to a large city, and

lacking good leaders, is exposed to great moral and spiritual dangers. In consequence of the emigration, considerable bitterness has developed between the two colonies, so that even today they are unable to find any basis for co-operation, not even in a church conference. May the time soon come when this strife will be a thing of the past, and the two colonies will work together in every way, for surely these two small Mennonite settlements in a foreign land need each other badly.

The settlement at Curityba is altogether different in character from that at the Krauel. Here the land is a level plain, much like Kansas, at an elevation of almost three thousand feet. The Mennonites of Curityba are practically all dairy farmers, each having about 15 acres of land and 10 to 15 cows. In a short time the Mennonites have almost captured the milk business of this city, and every morning about fifty Mennonite milk wagons can be seen driving to town delivering bottled milk. Materially the Curityba settlement is much better off than the one at the Krauel, but spiritually it is worse off. Great dangers face this settlement, which now has almost 400 souls. Many of the young people are attracted to the city, and the church does not seem to be strong enough to stem the tide. The leaders who sense the problem are much discouraged.

Due to lack of time I was unable to visit the group of some sixty young Mennonite men and women who are working in the great, busy city of Sao Paulo; some as domestics, some as clerks, etc. I hope it will not be long till these young people find their way back to their homes in the colonies, where they are badly needed, and where they will be protected from the evil influences to which they are subjected in the great million population city of Sao Paulo.

When the Mennonite settlements were established in Brazil, no one thought that they would have any difficulty in maintaining their German language, their German schools, and their traditional way of life as they had it in Russia. Unfortunately, the wave of nationalistic feeling which is now sweeping Brazil has led to the enactment of drastic anti-foreign legislation, which means, if carried out to the letter, that no schools or cultural, social, or economic organizations can be maintained by foreigners in Brazil. This places our Mennonite colonies, together with the other foreign groups in Brazil, in a very serious situation. Our Russian Mennonite people are German. They have great difficulties to conquer in establishing their settlements in a material way. If during this trying time they cannot have their own schools, conducted in their own language and by their own Mennonite teachers, and must send their children to Bra-

zilian schools taught by Portuguese (or rather Brazilian) teachers, they lose one of the chief means they have to teach and train their children in the faith of their fathers. The Mennonites of Brazil, as everywhere else in the world must keep themselves rather separate from the surrounding world if they expect to maintain their faith, but in Brazil they face the further danger of assimilation in a culture and way of life which is morally, intellectually, socially, and in every other way much lower than their own. It is easy to adopt this lower standard of living, but if this takes place with the oncoming generation, the Mennonites of Brazil are lost to Mennonitism. They have a hard struggle ahead, a severe conflict with the forces which would tear down what has been built up over many generations, and to have to go through this struggle in the midst of a desperate struggle for a material existence makes things doubly hard. The main colony on the Krauel is fighting a valiant battle. The Curityba colony is weaker on this point, and the Sao Paulo group are in the greatest danger of all. If the present nationalistic wave does not retreat, but rather increases in force, and if the Mennonites of Brazil lose all their cultural and religious institutions, except possibly their church life, they will be placed in the greatest danger. It will be the duty and privilege of the Mennonite relief organizations, and the Mennonite Church round the world, to help in every way possible. Even then it may not be possible to maintain real Mennonitism in Brazil under this terrific handicap. If so, nothing will remain, if the Mennonites of Brazil are to save themselves, but to seek to find a new home elsewhere, as they did when they left Russia in 1929-30.

Curityba, Brazil, July 1, 1938.

## II. *In Paraguay*

The capital of Paraguay, Asuncion, lies almost directly west of Curityba, about 500 miles distant, but the route is over trackless, impassable tropical forests. Until last year the trip had to be made by boat down the coast to Buenos Aires, and then up the Paraguay River by boat or by rail, a total distance of over 2000 miles, requiring at the very best eight days' time. The new Pan-American Airways route covers the direct trip to Asuncion in three hours, and at considerable saving of expense. So on the wings of a fleet airplane I was able to reach Paraguay, the home of over 4,000 Mennonites, in a short time and with a minimum of expense.

At the airport of Asuncion I was met by a group of six Mennonites who represent to some extent the various types of Mennonites

in Paraguay today. In the group was, by chance, J. A. Braun, the "Oberschulz" or leader of the very conservative Canadian colony in the Chaco, called the "Colonia Menno." Then there were several men living in Asuncion and engaged in business there; particularly Franz Heinrichs, formerly leader of the Russian Mennonite colony in the Chaco, called "Colonia Fernheim," who now owns and operates with success a bus line in Asuncion. Among the others was a young Mennonite from the Chaco who is attending school in Asuncion and working his way by clerking in a store; a former Mennonite who now operates a fleet of taxis in Asuncion, and the business manager of the colony Fernheim who was in Asuncion to sell the cotton of the colony. In spite of the fact that the Mennonites came to Paraguay as farmers, there are now over sixty of them, about ten families, living in the city, including perhaps about twenty-five young people who are attending school or working in homes and clerking in stores. An attempt is made to hold the group together by holding services Sunday afternoons in the German church, and by occasional social gatherings for the young people, but it is difficult to maintain high ideals of faith and life in the midst of the destructive influences of the city, where the low standards of life which are so common in Paraguay find their full expression. There is a real need for effective work in Asuncion among young and old, especially the young people, and the Mennonite ministerial body of the Chaco needs help in providing regular ministerial visits or in establishing a permanent work in the city under a resident pastor. I appreciated very much the kindness of Franz Heinrichs, who was a great help in my work in the city, and who is glad to receive all foreign Mennonite visitors who come to Paraguay.

Paraguay is a small country compared to its great neighbors—Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia—but it is after all rather large, especially when one includes the Chaco, itself a territory larger than the state of Ohio. It is very thinly populated, with less than a million people, and is very poor and undeveloped, with practically no roads or railroads. The broad Paraguay River, which bisects the country from north to south and is navigable for large ships, is the great and cheap artery of transportation. This country has enormous quantities of undeveloped fertile land and needs above everything else man power, which it can get only by immigration. For this reason the Mennonite settlers from Canada and Russia were welcomed with open arms by the government and given every aid and favor, including a tremendous grant of privileges which includes virtual self-government in the Chaco, absolute freedom in every

respect, and exemption from taxes and import duty for ten years. The Mennonite settlers have amply repaid these favors by creating in a few short years (first settlement in 1927, second in 1930) flourishing colonies which have increased the wealth and prosperity of the nation appreciably. Last year, for instance, the Mennonites produced one-third of all the cotton produced in Paraguay. The native Paraguayans are very poor farmers, and the government expects great stimulus from the Mennonite colonies. I am reporting this, not because economic and material concerns are the most important, but merely to show that the Mennonites are not unworthy immigrants drawing from the land only selfish gain, but a valuable asset to the country, who are fulfilling their obligations to the land which has given them asylum.

I wish it were possible to speak of the Mennonites of Paraguay as one united body, but alas, this is not the case. The largest group is the Canadian colony, "Menno," who migrated to the Chaco from Manitoba in 1927 to maintain their German language and German schools. They are a substantial, prosperous group, very conservative in their beliefs and practices, and living to themselves, desiring little contact with others. Their religious leader is Bishop Martin Friesen. I had the privilege of visiting Bishop Friesen and the Canadian colony, and found him an able man, determined to maintain uncompromisingly the principles of his group, and evidently succeeding in doing so. He has a large farm of 900 acres, and has great authority among his people. The colony has recently organized its economic and civil life under an "Oberschulz," J. A. Braun, whom I also visited, and found him an able and devoted servant of his people. Until recently the Canadians had no colony organization and no industrial enterprises, but now they are following the example of the Russian colony and setting up a complete organization with a cotton gin, saw mill, oil-press, etc., with a central town. The total population of this colony is about 1800, distributed over about 20 villages, occupying a large compact tract of land of many thousand acres.

The second settlement in Paraguay was made by the Russian Mennonite refugees who were brought there by the Mennonite Central Committee of North America in 1930. This group is somewhat larger than the Canadian group, and was settled on adjoining land, north and west of the Canadian colony. Unfortunately the original settlement of over 2000 population of this colony, called "Colonia Fernheim," has lost considerably by emigration, so that today it has only 282 families with approximately 1400 souls. Ap-



proximately 1000 persons have left the colony since its establishment; two hundred of these during the course of the eight years have scattered, a small group of twenty-five families settling near Horqueta, thirty miles inland from Concepcion on the east side of the river, about half-way down the river to Asuncion, and the rest largely in Asuncion, with a few scattered families, including one in Buenos Aires. Approximately 145 families, 800 souls, left the colony in a body a year ago and settled on a tract of land about thirty miles inland from Rosario, another river port on the east side of the Paraguay River, about half-way between Concepcion and Asuncion. This new colony calls itself "Colonia Friesland." I met representatives of the Horqueta group for a brief conference in Concepcion, and spent two days visiting the "Friesland" group, but spent most of my time, a total of ten days, visiting the mother colony in the Chaco, the "Fernheim" colony. This is the most important and most interesting of all the Mennonite groups in the Paraguay, for this group represents the great relief project which was undertaken in 1930 by the Mennonite Central Committee to help the needy refugees from Russia who were at that time in Germany and for which the committee continues to have responsibility. This is also the best organized, the most prosperous, and spiritually the soundest Mennonite colony in Paraguay; and in fact, in my judgment, the outstanding colony in all South America.

The trip from Asuncion to Fernheim is an arduous one. It is something of an adventure with some hardships thrown in along the way. It would be possible to charter a private plane in Asuncion and fly to the colony, landing on one of the broad, flat village streets, as the American Minister in Asuncion plans to do, thus reaching the colony in a pleasant three-hour flight of less than 400 miles. But for various reasons this was impossible, so I took the usual route, side-wheel river steamer upstream from Asuncion to the port of Casado and then inland. The trip upstream lasted from Tuesday afternoon at 5:00 P. M. until Friday morning at 10:00 A. M., due to the frequent stops to load wood for fuel, but the fast down-stream trip on the oil-burning steamer has been made in twenty-four hours, including stops. The actual distance up the winding stream is 320 miles. A narrow gauge railroad of 90 miles runs from the port straight west toward the colony, and the rest of the route must be covered by wagon in fifteen to twenty hours, or by an auto truck in five hours. The total distance from the city of Philadelphia, "capital" of Fernheim, to Asuncion is 70 miles by road, 90 by rail, (total 160 to Casado) and 320 by boat to Asuncion, or 480

miles. The direct airline distance from Philadelphia to Asuncion would be approximately 400 miles.

The Fernheim colony is organized into eighteen villages and one central town, called Philadelphia. Each village is composed of ten to fifteen families, each occupying 250 acres of land. About thirty-five families live in the town, which contains the colony headquarters, the high school, the central store, and the industrial enterprises including the sawmill, cotton gin, oil press, kaffir-flour mill, etc.

In spite of much hardship and difficulty, including two bitter drought years, 1934-36, Fernheim has made remarkable progress in material things. Each family has an average of thirty acres of land under cultivation and owns a team of horses and ten to fifteen head of cattle. Chief crops are cotton, peanuts, kaffir and beans. Last year over a million pounds of cotton were produced in the colony, with one farmer producing over 15,000 pounds. The highest cash income of any one farmer last year was over \$600, although the average was considerably lower than this. This year the prospect was for the best crops in the history of the colony, but unfortunately grasshoppers took three-fourths of the cotton, so that the total output was less than a million pounds against an anticipated four million pounds. Some farmers were hit very hard with the entire crop ruined. Prices also have come down. The average cash income this year in Fernheim, per family, is probably less than \$100. Some families will need help, but food crops are plentiful, so that the colony as a whole can get through until the next crop without difficulty. Living expenses are fairly cheap, although one must be content with a low standard of living as is evidenced by the fact that the highest salary paid in the colony is \$30 per month, while most of the teachers and employees receive approximately half that amount.

In spite of the poor crop this year, the colony is paying a substantial amount on its debt and looks forward with confidence to the future. I found an unexpectedly strong spirit of courage and cheerful optimism. The general feeling seems to be that, while hard times and hardships must still be faced, the worst is past and better times are coming. Economically, Fernheim is at least twice as prosperous as the colony in Brazil, and if reasonable crops can be harvested next year, with reasonable prices, the total cash income of the colony should easily reach \$100,000. Thus has God blessed the efforts of these people, who came to Paraguay absolutely penniless and who had to be fed the first year entirely by money furnished them through the Mennonite Central Committee by the churches of North America. From this point of view the enterprise has been

well worth while and Fernheim can be considered a material success.

However, the churches of North America are more interested in the spiritual and cultural life of the Fernheim Mennonites than their material progress. I took considerable time to visit the colony and interviewed the leading men, including preachers, teachers, and leading laymembers and I came away from Fernheim with an excellent impression. Conditions on the whole are good. There is a well-organized, active church life with capable ministers and leaders, a good school system, wholesome moral and spiritual ideals, and a strong devotion to the faith of the fathers which these people brought with them from Russia. They have maintained a staunch Mennonitism thus far and are determined to maintain it in the future, including the principle of complete nonresistance. Cut off as they are from much contact with the outside world, able to provide for themselves, with good leadership, protected by the government in their rights and privileges, Fernheim Mennonites have a unique situation, such as Mennonites have nowhere else in the world today. There are good reasons why most of us from North America would not want to exchange with them, but compared to the lot of their brethren who were not able to escape from Russia, Fernheim Mennonites are living in Paradise. They appreciate this very much, too, and are anxious to prove worthy of their privileges and blessings. They are anxious for fellowship with the Mennonites of North America and look forward to frequent visits from ministers and others from North America. Not everything in Fernheim is perfect, and not everything is as it ought to be, but there is no need to enter into details here. In any case these people will have many years of privation and struggle ahead, with no doubt occasional crop failures and difficulties of various kinds, and they will continue to need sympathy, support, and help for many years to come. An outstanding need is a good Christian doctor. It is a tragic and desperate situation for three thousand people to live 150 miles from the nearest doctor year after year, and to have such dangerous diseases as trachoma, which leads to blindness, increase as it has been increasing in Fernheim until thirty per cent of the people are afflicted with this disease. They have a hospital and dispensary, but need a doctor desperately.

Fernheim is very happy, as all Mennonites are, to know that at last peace has been restored between Bolivia and Paraguay. Now that the war clouds are definitely dispersed, the development of Paraguay will proceed more rapidly, and much good can come for Fernheim. The peace treaty provides, among other things, a free

port for Bolivia at Casado, or near by, which means that the railroad which is to be built from Bolivia to this port will go through the Chaco very near to the colony. This will be a great boon, and will go far toward solving the problem of transportation and markets. It will then be possible to reach the colony by rail all the way from Buenos Aires. May this development be hastened.

A few words in conclusion about the group which split off and settled in the new colony of Friesland. At first the impression went out that these people left Fernheim because of economic necessity, or because they were convinced that it was not possible to make a living in the Chaco. I learned, however, that this is not true. In fact, many of the wealthier and more successful families left the Chaco, some with as much as \$1,000 cash which they had accumulated in the colony. It has been estimated that the entire group took at least \$25,000 cash with them when they left. The main cause of the emigration was, as several leaders of the Friesland colony told me, dissatisfaction, friction, and party strife in Fernheim, and only ten per cent climate or bad economic conditions. The new colony is located in a better climate, where more fruit and vegetables grow, and is thus to some extent in a better location; but the Chaco colony has much better economic prospects than the new colony.

The new colony also suffers severely from a lack of capable leadership along religious and cultural lines, since all the strong men remained in Fernheim, while only two preachers and two teachers went with the new colony. Also the new colony lives in a Spanish community, without the privileges granted to the Mennonites of the Chaco. It is my conviction, as well as the conviction of others, that the emigration was unnecessary, and was a serious mistake; which not only has weakened the Fernheim colony, but also exposes the new settlers to grave dangers spiritually and morally. They also have the hard task of pioneering in the tropical forests a second time. However, the Mennonites of North America should continue their concern and help for these people as well as those in Fernheim, and I am sure that the Mennonite Central Committee and the churches of North America will do so.

Asuncion, Paraguay, August 5, 1938.



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