

THE MENNONITES OF PARAGUAY

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Because of the expense it has not been possible for the Mennonites of Paraguay to send a representative to the Mennonite World Conference. For this reason I am willing to accept the commission to give a brief report concerning the condition of the Mennonites in Paraguay.

My report will not be a report which goes far back into the past, as has been the case in the addresses which we have just heard, for it deals with the living present. Several thousand Mennonites, who fortunately escaped from the Soviet hell six years ago, are in the process of building for themselves a new home in the heart of primeval Paraguay in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, where they may express their faith and their culture without hindrance. I have been a part of this settlement myself from the very beginning and I know what it means to achieve an economic and spiritual existence in a new land under the most primitive conditions and almost without financial resources.

As has so often been the case in their four hundred years history the Mennonites have also in Paraguay undertaken a tremendous cultural task. The delta of the lower Vistula was drained by them in the sixteenth and seventeenth century by means of dams and canals, and a prosperous garden land was created. In Russia the Mennonites transformed the steppes as far as Siberia and Turkestan and even eastward to the Amur valley into fruitful grain fields. The off-spring of these same Mennonites were pioneers in the settlement of the prairie provinces of Canada in the latter part of the last century, and at present they are pioneering in the development of the Paraguayan Chaco. The Chaco is a territory of about 3,000 square kilometers, more than half as large as all Germany. For thousands of years this portion of the earth has been untouched, inhabited only by some wild Indian tribes until a few years ago when German Mennonites from Canada and Russia came into the Chaco and began to plow their furrows there.

Today there are two large Mennonite colonies in this territory consisting of thirty-eight villages with approximately 4,000 inhabitants. One colony, called "Menno", was founded in 1928 by Mennonites from Canada. They left their native land because of the loss of the school privileges which they had enjoyed, and became pioneers in a colonization project whose significance and ultimate outcome cannot be measured. The settlers who had founded the "Menno" Colony are descendants of West Prussian Mennonites who migrated to Russia at the turn of the eighteenth century and then moved further to Canada in 1874 as the result of the loss of their freedom from military service. "Menno" consists of eighteen villages all laid out on the pattern of the Mennonite villages in Russia. The houses are built on both sides of the street, and in the middle of the village is a school in which the children are taught reading, writing and arithmetic as well as religion. The leadership of the congregations in the colony is in the hands of a bishop who is assisted by several preachers. On Sunday the services are held in the schools, but the colony already has a church building which seats about 500 persons.

In 1930 another colony called "Fernheim" was founded northwest of "Menno" by Russian Mennonites. This colony today consists of nineteen villages. The flight of the German colonists out of Russia in 1929 is still vivid in the memory of all of you. Part of these refugees were brought to Paraguay in 1930. In 1932 another group of 370 persons, who had fled from the Amur region into Manchuria, joined them. Another small group of Mennonite settlers from Poland, to which I also belong, joined the colony the very first year of its establishment.

These Mennonite settlers in the Chaco have undertaken a colonization enterprise under the most difficult conditions, whose success may perhaps open the door to the settlement of thousands, yea, hundreds of thousands of human beings in this region. In the first months of the settlement the unaccustomed climate, shortage of food supplies, hardships and hard work gave rise to sickness which spread rapidly on account of the absence of medical help and took the lives of many. Whole families died out and many widows and orphans were left behind. In "Menno" 180 persons died, more than ten percent of the immigrants; in "Fernheim" 92 persons died or about four percent. In addition to this, rains failed and the

fields could not be planted. In a report from Fernheim concerning conditions at that time, we read the following: "The endurance of the settlers was almost gone. In Moscow the Lord had heard our prayers and had not let us fall into the hands of men. Here we fell into the hands of God. God spoke in terrible earnestness to us. Because of the danger of infection religious services had to be discontinued. Deaths increased so rapidly that coffins and graves had to be made by moonlight. . . . That was a time of bitter testing, a time when we could scarcely understand our Father in heaven any more. But we dared not give up to despair. The strong arm of our God bore us through all the storm of temptation and brought us to rest under His wings. . . ."

Periodical drought which followed, as well as failures in the cultivation of hitherto unknown crops, led to the feeling on the part of many a settler that there was no future in the Chaco. For this reason a strong movement to abandon the settlement developed in 1931 which has not yet altogether died out. In the course of time many families have left the Chaco to seek a better living in eastern Paraguay. At times it seemed as though the entire colony would break up, but ever and again the strong sense of solidarity saved the colony from the danger threatened by the centrifugal forces.

The greatest danger for the colony was the war in the Chaco which broke out in 1932 between Paraguay and Bolivia and which was fought not far from the colony. For months we could hear the roar of the cannon and the rattle of the machine guns and lived in constant danger of being forced to flee. Twice we actually received orders to abandon the colony. But God continued to hold His protecting hand over us and we were permitted to remain. The war brought many difficult experiences so that we almost collapsed at times. Malaria was brought into the colony by the soldiers. More than 90 percent of the population became victims of the epidemic. Even though there were no deaths directly traceable to this disease, yet there were many families in which all the workers were laid up for months.

I could relate many other hindrances and difficulties which placed obstacles in the way of constructive effort in the colony. Let me mention only the inflation, the drought of the past two years, the insect pests, the great distance from the railway, and the difficulty in finding a market. During the time of the war the money inflation

began which has continued to the present time and which has handicapped economic development very much. In addition to this the government has devised a system of control of foreign exchange in the past few years which has robbed the settlers of a large part of the value of the cotton which they sold to foreign markets. And finally last year as the result of the drought the harvest was considerably less than in the preceding year, and in the current year the aphid has wrought considerable damage in the cotton. And from time to time we are threatened by swarms of grasshoppers which are capable of destroying in the course of an hour an entire crop of cotton, which is thus far our only export crop.

For this reason it is quite understandable that the spirits of the settlers have been very much depressed in recent months. Many a father of a family looks into the future with great concern for he does not know how he can care for his children in the coming year. However we do not want to lose courage but work on in trust in God. We sometimes become faint-hearted but we never want to despair. We have the conviction that God has brought us into this new land and has given us who are in Paraguay a commission which we must fulfill. He knows why we are suffering such severe tests, and He will help us to overcome all difficulties.

In spite of all the hindrances which have handicapped our struggle to create a new home in Paraguay, a tremendous work has been accomplished in a short time. Visitors to the colony are amazed when they suddenly reach the neat German villages after a long journey of several days by ox-cart through the primeval forest. In the center of the colony a town, called Philadelphia, has been built in which all the colony enterprises are located. Here is the colony building in which the Oberschulz, who is the responsible leader of the colony, has his office. Here is the saw mill, the oil press, the flour mill, the cotton gin, the co-operative store, the hospital, the printing shop, and the four year middle school. These institutions have all been established by the community as a whole. In the first years of the colony each settler had to give fifty days of labor in the year for the common good. It is only with the aid of such a sense of community solidarity that it will be possible to successfully complete the colonization project which has been begun in the Chaco.

Cultural life in our colony has been very active from the beginning. In the very first year the construction of schools was begun

and today all the children have the privilege of organized instruction in schools. Fernheim possesses sixteen primary schools and one four-year middle school in which our future teachers, bookkeepers, and secretaries are being trained. The church congregations were also organized in the very first days after the arrival and held services ever since, at first in tents, and now in the school buildings. Almost every village has a chorus which takes part in the services. From time to time festivals of various kinds are held in which the entire colony takes part. The great celebration in the colony is the twenty-fifth of November which is celebrated in memory of the wonderful deliverance from Russia. Special emphasis is laid by the congregations on young people's work which is zealously promoted in all the villages.

This ambitious Mennonite community in the Chaco constitutes a continuation of the Mennonitism which was so prosperous in Russia. In Paraguay we have the possibility of continuing the life of our forefathers and giving full expression to our faith. God has also given us tasks which we must fulfill. The Paraguayan government expects from us a great colonizing work; only for this reason has it granted the Mennonites such exceptional privileges. That the government is not disappointed in us is indicated by an official statement in the preface to a booklet entitled, "Las Colonias Mennonitas en el Chaco Paraguayo," which was published by the government in 1934. The preface says, "The Mennonite colonies in the Chaco are a model of the greatest creative power, of iron will, and of an unshakable belief in the blessing of work. Everyone knows who these modest settlers are, who have built their huts in the heart of the Chaco with self denying labor. But not every one knows the magnificence of their achievement. There one can see the hand at the plow drawing furrows as messengers of progress, developing a fruitful land for the economy of our country. Valuable crops are growing in their fields. The publication of this series of essays by government experts will contribute not only to making known the agricultural possibilities of the Chaco but to the appreciation of the achievements of those who have conquered the wilderness with inexhaustible energy. To these sacrificial warriors of peace and labor we dedicate this booklet in grateful recognition."

But the Mennonites have not only been bearers of culture in the land in which they have settled, but they have also been above all

bearers and spreaders of the gospel, for it has been chiefly for the gospel's sake that they have taken the wanderer's staff in hand. In the Chaco God has placed us in the midst of Indians and consequently our congregations feel the responsibility to bring to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Last year a mission was established among these Indians.

In the hard struggle for existence which we have had to fight out yonder, and in all the great and difficult tasks which face us, again and again we have experienced the love of our brethren throughout the world as well as that of our German motherland. Without the brotherly helping hand it would not have been possible for us to establish a new home and to fulfil the tasks which have been ours. Therefore I conclude my address with the expression of thanks to all those who have supported us in any respect whatsoever, and wish to thank particularly our honored Professor Unruh and the representatives of the Mennonite Central Committee of North America who are here present, for their untiring endeavors on behalf of the settlers in Paraguay.



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