

CHAPTER XXI

MENNONITES

A. ORIGIN

1. The Mennonite Church had its birth in Zürich, Switzerland, in the year 1525. The first name of this Church was simply "Brethren" until such time as Mennonitism had spread to other countries, when it became customary to refer to the ones who had first founded the Church as the "Swiss Brethren".

2. Since the majority of Mennonites who might fall within the mandate of IRO are those who originally came from Holland, it is proposed that this section of the Church will be dealt with in this outline. The seed of the Mennonite Church was sown in Holland in the year 1530. The faction which became the precursor of the modern movement was known as the "Obbenite Brethren" after one of the leaders—Obbe Philips. In 1536, however, the "Obbenites" won to their cause a very able catholic priest—Menno Simons—who became the outstanding leader of the group. As a result, people began to name the group after Menno, first using the name "Menist" about the year 1544, and later changed it to Mennonite.

3. Mennonitism is a proscribed religion whose members have been persecuted since the time of its founding. One of the most striking beliefs of the Mennonite faith is its policy of non-resistance and their conscientious objection to the use of armed force.

4. In Holland, as in Switzerland, the new movement was persecuted. It will be recalled that at approximately this time the Inquisition was sweeping over Holland and Flanders and the persecution of all sects was one of the principal policies of the Spanish occupation forces. The persecution in Flanders, for example, was so severe that except for a few who fled, only a small number of the Mennonites survived. Because of this intense persecution the Mennonites began to look for a new home.

B. EXODUS TO PRUSSIA

5. As early as the middle of the sixteenth century, Mennonite refugees from Holland found their way to the deltas of the Vistula and the Negat rivers in Polish Prussia where they founded various Mennonite congregations. Both Dutch factions, Flemish and Frisian were represented amongst these congregations.

6. Various charters were issued by the successive Kings all through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries guaranteeing the Mennonites the original privileges which had been granted them as, for example, exemption from military service. These refugees were extremely popular because of their frugality and industriousness which enabled them to reclaim many of the heretofore swamp lands and waste areas. As a result of this popularity, when the Duchy of Prussia became a Kingdom in 1701, King Frederick I sent an invitation to the "Swiss Mennonites" who at this time were being driven out of the Canton of Berne. A few accepted this invitation and located near Tilsit.

7. However, as the Mennonites began to increase in population and in wealth, restrictions began to be enforced on them because of their extensive property holdings. In addition, the war-like Prussians began to conscript the young Mennonites into the army irrespective of their religious belief which denounced warfare and refused to become a part of it.

8. As a result of these restrictions the Mennonites began to explore the possibilities of finding a new home where they might be free to live up to their religious convictions without governmental interference. After many vacillations they finally accepted the invitation made to them by Catherine of Russia in 1786. Soon afterwards, approximately 6,000 Mennonites left Prussia and the deltas of the Vistula to emigrate to the fertile steppes of Southern Russia along the lower Dnieper and Molotschna rivers.

C. THE EXODUS TO RUSSIA

9. By the fall of 1788 a number of families had found their way to the new settlement, a site on the Chortutz, a small branch of the Dnieper. It is not considered necessary to detail all the various small settlements made by the Mennonites in Russia. However, a few of the larger ones will be outlined below. In the main it may be stated that the Mennonite refugees settled principally in the Crimea. The most important settlements were :

- (a) Deutsch-Kazun and Deutsch-Wymisle
- (b) Deutsch-Michalin
- (c) Those who settled on what was called the "Salt Tract" along the Volga.

10. In addition to the group who came from Prussia, a number of "Swiss Mennonites" migrated before the close of the eighteenth century to Polish Russia. They originally came to Galicia from the Palatinate and Montbeliard, France.

11. Later the large Crimean colonies outgrew their land allotments and were forced to found other daughter colonies for their surplus population. The principal daughter colonies were :

- (a) Bergthal
- (b) Borsenko
- (c) Grossfürstenland
- (d) Karassan.

12. It is estimated that all in all approximately 8,000 Mennonites came to Russia from 1788 until 1874 by which time this number had increased to approximately 45,000, a rather unusual population increase when compared with population growth elsewhere.

13. It should be noted that not all the Mennonites in Prussia went to the Crimea. Some remained behind, others moved into Danzig and still others settled in Poland proper; they have remained there until the present day.

D. EXODUS FROM RUSSIA 1874 TO 1945

14. The Mennonites in Russia exercised complete self-government, retained their own customs and had little or no contact with the native Russians. These privileges

were extended not only to the Mennonites but also to the 500,000 German settlers who came to Russia at approximately the same time as the Mennonites and who settled in adjoining communities.

15. The Mennonites during their long stay in Prussia had adopted the German language and customs and were considered as part of the German colonists by the Russians. They established their own schools in these colonies where only German was taught. Platt-Deutsche was usually the language spoken in the house. They could be differentiated, however, from the German colonists surrounding them, because of their religion and by some of the old Dutch customs which they had brought from Holland.

16. The days of special privileges could not and did not last forever and as early as 1870 the Czar decided that these privileges must cease and that all Mennonites were to become full-fledged Russians. Because of the Czar's decision, one-third of the 45,000 Mennonites in Russia in 1874 had emigrated to the Americas by 1884. Emigration thereafter was sporadic and diminutive in character because of the various restrictions imposed by the Russian Authorities. A second large exodus, however, occurred in 1929-1930 when over 25,000 Mennonite refugees left Russia for Canada, Brazil and Paraguay. The remainder who wished to leave were not permitted to do so legally by the Soviet Authorities.

17. The third and most recent exodus from Russia occurred during World War II when approximately 35,000 Mennonites came to Germany from 1941-1945. Some of these persons were sent by the German Authorities to Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Poland (Warthegau) while others left Russia with the retreating German armies. It is estimated unofficially that 25,000 of these persons later returned to Russia voluntarily or were forcibly repatriated under the terms of the Yalta Agreement.

E. MENNONITES AT PRESENT IN GERMANY, AUSTRIA AND ITALY

18. There are now in Germany, Austria and Italy four different categories of Mennonites:—

- (a) *Danzig Mennonites*, who came to Germany during the war either voluntarily or were expelled by the Poles as Volksdeutsche. It is estimated that there are approximately 2,500 of such persons in Western Germany, the majority of whom are in Schleswig Holstein of the British Zone of Germany.
- (b) *East and West Prussian Mennonites*. These came to Germany in the same manner as the Danzig Mennonites mentioned above. It is estimated that there are approximately 3,000 in Germany although some may have found their way to Austria and Italy.
- (c) *German Mennonites*, habitually resident in the Western Zones of Germany. It is estimated that there are approximately 25,000 in Germany and a few in Austria.
- (d) *Polish and Russian Mennonites*. As was implied in subsection D para. 4 above, it is estimated that there were approximately 11,500 such persons in Germany. Of this number, the great majority have been resettled to overseas countries such as Canada and Paraguay. These were mostly to be found in Germany, although smaller numbers are to be found in Austria and Italy.

F. ELIGIBILITY STATUS OF THE VARIOUS GROUPS MENTIONED ABOVE

19. *Danzig Mennonites* : Those persons who are in Germany are to be considered as excluded from the Mandate of IRO under paragraph 4 of Part II of the Definitions. Danzig Mennonites in countries other than Germany will be held in suspense and no assistance will be given to them.

20. *East and West Prussian Mennonites* : Those persons who are in Germany will be regarded as German nationals in their country of nationality. Outside Germany they will be regarded as ordinary German nationals.

21. *German Mennonites* : — Those who are in Germany will be regarded as the East and West Prussian Mennonites above.

22. *Russian and Polish Mennonites* :—Russian and Polish Mennonites will have their status determined on the same bases as any other refugee. The Dutch ethnic origin of these persons, while interesting, cannot be used as a criterion effectively since (as was seen above) they left Holland approximately 300 years ago and their culture is not unequivocally Dutch. On the other hand, they are not to be considered as Volksdeutsche as it is felt that because of certain cultural characteristics and their distinctive religion, they may be distinguished from the Volksdeutsche group.

23. Recent information received on this group indicates that :

- (a) The Berlin Documents Centre has shown that some Mennonites applied for German citizenship as early as 1942.
- (b) There was no duress or compulsion used by the Nazi Government on persons who applied for German citizenship in the Umsiedler camps of the Warthegau and other places.
- (c) The Berlin Documents Centre has shown that a number of Mennonites served in various reprehensible German units such as the Waffen SS and the Sicherheitsdienst.

24. It is considered necessary, therefore, that the names of any new Mennonite applicants should be referred without exception to the Berlin Documents Centre and that eligibility decisions on applications from Mennonites be held pending receipt of the reply from the Documents Centre. It appears, on the basis of evidence available, that some Mennonites have voluntarily assisted the enemy forces in their operations against the United Nations.

25. Furthermore, it should be the normal rule that any Mennonite in Germany who has registered with the Einwohnermeldeamt as a German citizen or a Volksdeutsche should be regarded as a German national in his country of nationality and therefore not within the mandate. It will still remain possible for exceptions to be made to the normal rule if the individual can make it plausible that the reason for his registration or acceptance of German citizenship was to avoid forcible repatriation. In view of recent information, it would seem, however, that such cases would be extremely rare.

26. Mennonites found in countries other than Germany who are registered as Volksdeutsche or who have become German nationals, will be treated in accordance with the relevant sections of this Manual.