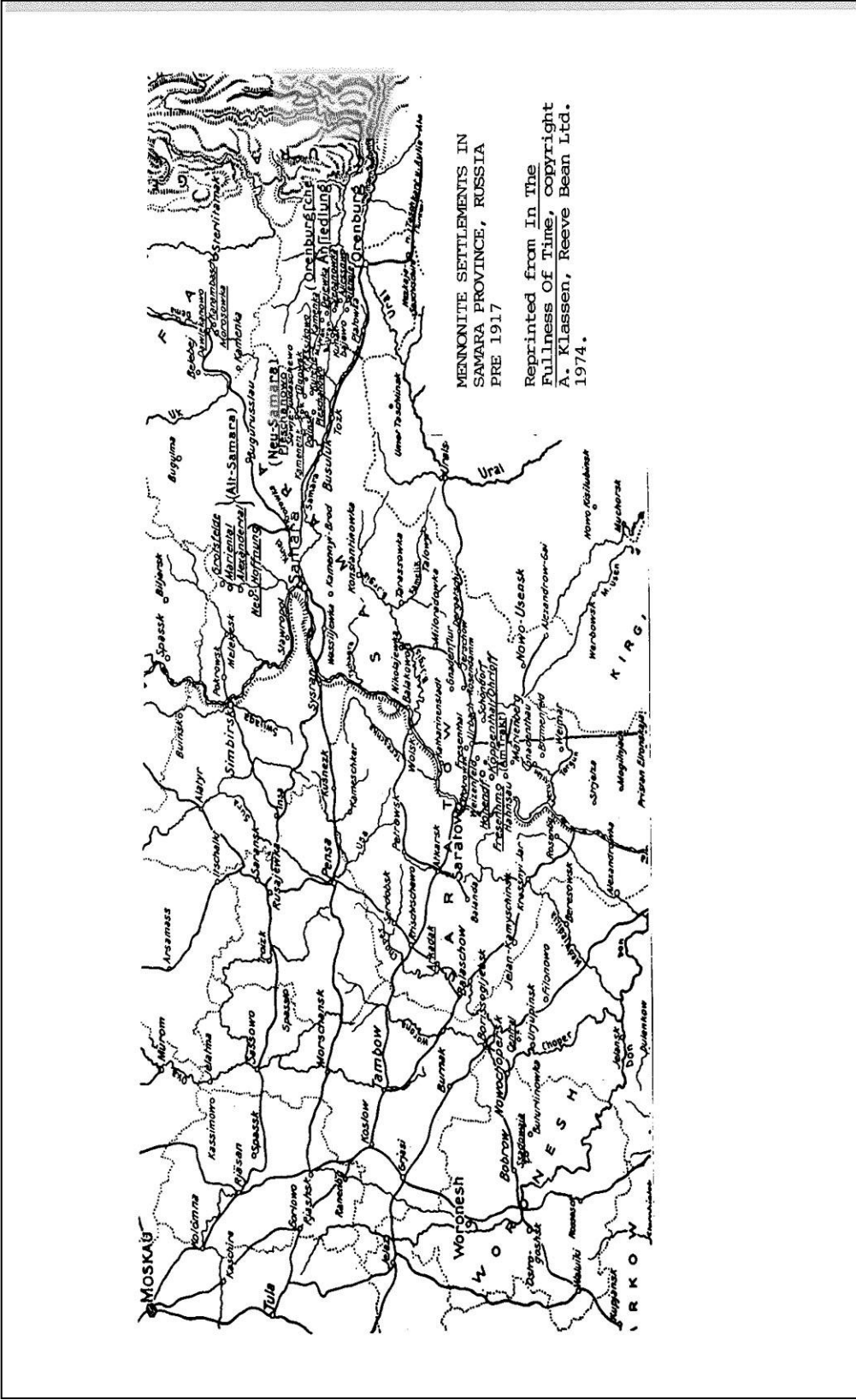


The Promise of Mother Russia

In 1848 universal military conscription was introduced in Prussia. Until then Mennonites had been granted exemption from military service based on their religious belief of complete non-resistance. Even non-combatant military service was unacceptable to Mennonites, such as being part of a medical unit. As a result of the conscription law many Mennonite families in West Prussia made the decision to emigrate to Russia. The precedent for such a move had been established 65 years earlier in 1788.

Under a Manifesto issued in 1763 by the Russian Czarina, Catharine II (the Great), large numbers of West Prussian Mennonite families immigrated to the Ukraine region of Russia in the years 1788 to 1835. This Manifesto of 1763 contained nine articles that made immigration to Russia attractive to Mennonites. Prospective settlers were to be granted the following rights and privileges: (1) Free board and transportation from the Russian boundary to the place of settlement; (2) The right to settle in any part of the country and to pursue any occupation; (3) A loan for building of houses etc.; (4) Perpetual exemption from military and



Map 5
 Mennonite Settlements in Samara Province, Russia, before 1917

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civil service; (5) Exemption from payment of taxes for a period of years; (6) Free exercise of religious practices, and to those who founded agricultural settlements, the right to build and control their own schools and churches; (7) The right to do mission work among non-Christians; (8) The right of local self government for agricultural communities; (9) The right of every family to import its possessions free of duty. The first Mennonite settlement established under the articles of the Manifesto was that of Chortitza in the Ukraine. A total of 462 West Prussian Mennonite families made up the core of this first Russian Mennonite settlement. During the years 1803-1806, the time of French occupation of West Prussia, an additional 365 Mennonite families made the overland trek to the Ukraine and established a second settlement called Molotschna. By the end of migration in 1835 some 1200 families, or about 6,000 people, had made the move to these two settlements of Chortitza and Molotschna. In the 1870s and 1880s many Mennonites from these two settlements would again move, this time to the United States. Most settled in the states of Nebraska and Kansas.

The Russian government granted permission to 100 West Prussian Mennonite families to establish a colony in the Russian province of Samara in 1853. The conditions under which they came differed somewhat from those of the earlier settlements of Chortitza and Molotschna. Exemption from military service was only for 20 years and each family had to make a payment to the Russian embassy in Berlin of 35 talers, a considerable sum in those days. In addition these Mennonites were expected to be model farmers, an example to the surrounding population, and to bring with them to Russia the necessary implements, draft animals, and seeds. Another requirement of the Russian government was that there would be one family of craftsmen for every three of farm families; carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, etc. These stipulations meant that only the more affluent Mennonite farmers from West Prussia were allowed to immigrate to Russia at this time, insuring that no financial burden would be imposed on the Russian government. These 100 families came primarily from the Ladekopp and Furstenwerder congregations and were led by Johann Wall and Claus Epp Sr., the Mayor of Furstenwerder. Johann Wall would later become Elder of the Koepental-Orloff Mennonite Church at Am Trakt. Jacob Dyck (IV) and his two brothers, Dietrich and Cornelius, immigrated to Am Trakt in 1854. The name Am Trakt is derived from the road near the settlement known as Salztrakt, or salt road. This road had been used to haul salt from the Elton Sea for many years. After wintering over in the nearby village of Privolynaya the Mennonites began building in the spring of 1854. The first village in the settlement was Hahnsau, followed by Koepental in 1855. When completed in 1880 the Am Trakt settlement consisted of ten villages on 37,800 acres of land. After

Hahnsau and Koepental came Lindenau, 1856-1859, Fresenheim, 1856-1859, Hohendorf, 1862, Lysanderhoeh, 1864, Orloff, 1871, Ostenfeld, 1872, Medental, 1872, and Valuyevka, 1875. Except for the last two villages all of these names were transplanted from West Prussian Mennonite villages.

The Am Trakt settlement prospered quickly, unlike the sister colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna that endured several periods of hardship before becoming economically stable. The selection process of the Russian government paid early dividends in this respect. The soil of Am Trakt was not as good as that of the Ukraine, but these industrious Mennonite farmers were able to produce good crops of wheat, rye, barley, and oats in the first decades of the settlement. They introduced the practice of crop rotation used by Mennonite farmers in West Prussia. An integral part of this rotation system allowed for fields to be set aside in green fallow for a period of 4-5 years after several years of use. This practice helped to replenish the natural nutrients of the fragile soil of Am Trakt. The use of commercial fertilizers was not known at this time and animal manure was more valuable as a source of fuel than fertilizer. Even with this careful use of the land many acres of farm ground were virtually used up by the early 1890s and crop production decreased.

There was no natural pasture in the vicinity of the Am Trakt settlement and it was only after several years of trial and error that suitable native grasses were found that would sustain herds of livestock. Cropland that would no longer produce was planted in grass and enough hay and forage was available by the early years of the 20th century to allow considerable dairy operations in Am Trakt. A cheese factory was built in 1908.

This area of Samara province was almost totally without trees when the first Mennonite settlers arrived. The first attempts by the settlers to plant trees ended in failure. The harsh climate of hot summers and bitterly cold, long winters killed all but the hardiest varieties of shade and orchard trees. From their nearby neighbors, the Volga Germans, the Am Trakt settlers learned which trees could survive the harsh climate. By 1879 the ten villages of the Am Trakt settlement boasted tens of thousands of shade trees and hundreds of orchards with thousands of fruit trees. On a road that ran between the farms of the villages of Hohendorf, Lysanderhoeh, Ostenfeld, and Medental trees were planted on both sides. This long, straight road lined with shade trees was a magnificent boulevard known throughout the region for its beauty.

Lysanderhoeh village in the Am Trakt settlement is where Jacob Dyck (IV) started his new life sometime after its founding in 1864. In 1873, at the age of 41, he married Justine Wall. Justine was born February 1, 1855, at Mierauerwald, West Prussia. Jacob had been married twice before and widowed both times. His first



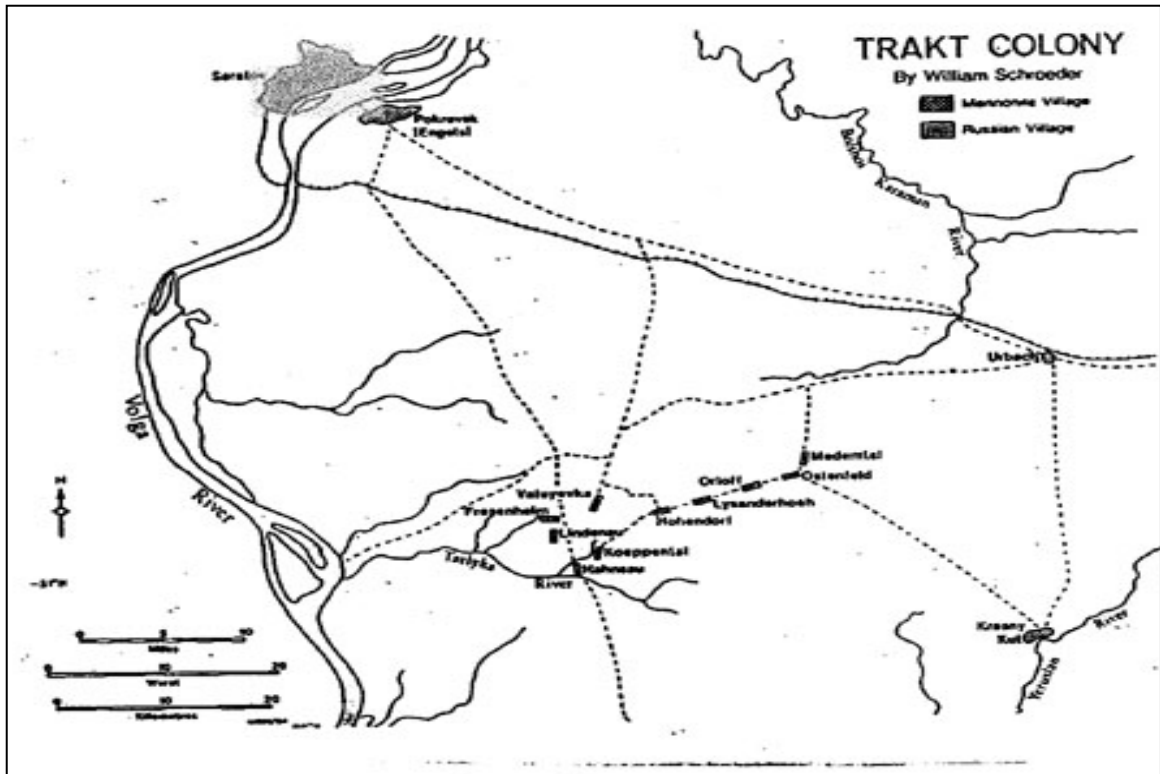
wife was Maria Siebert whom he married in 1860. She died in 1862 leaving no issue. Jacob's second wife was a widow named Anna Penner. Anna was pregnant at the time her first husband died and the house she lived in unfinished. Here she gave birth to her second child, Peter Penner. Anna's first child was a daughter named Catharine. The marriage of Jacob Dyck (IV) and Anna Penner produced one child, a daughter Anna. Sadly, Anna Penner Dyck died giving birth to her daughter. So it was that when Justine Wall married Jacob Dyck (IV) at the young age of 18 she was immediately the stepmother to three children, only one of which was fathered by her husband. Despite this, and their age difference of 23 years, the marriage of Jacob and Justine was considered a great love match.

Jacob Dyck (1832-1882), father of Jacob J. Dyck. Photo *circa* 1875, Am Trakt, Russia.

Photo: Authors' collection.

| The Village Settlement | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|--|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| <i>Farms & Inhabitants in 1897</i> | | | | | | |
| <i>Village</i> | <i>Year</i> | <i>Farms</i> | <i>Farms</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| | <i>Founded</i> | <i>65 dess.</i> | | | | |
| 1. Hahnsau | 1854 | [land sold to non-Mennonites ca. 1880] | | | | |
| 2. Köppental | 1855 | 25 | 36 | 103 | 98 | 211 |
| 3. Lindenau | 1856-59 | - | 26 | 93 | 81 | 174 |
| 4. Fresenheim | 1856-59 | - | 21 | 46 | 57 | 103 |
| 5. Hohendorf | 1862 | - | 18 | 47 | 49 | 96 |
| 6. Lysanderhöh | 1864 | - | 22 | 62 | 57 | 119 |
| 7. Orloff | 1871 | 26 | 17 | 44 | 36 | 80 |
| 8. Valuievka | 1875 | 26 | 8 | 23 | 34 | 57 |
| 9. Ostenfeld | 1872 | 26 | 19 | 66 | 61 | 127 |
| 10. Medemtal | 1872 | 30 | 30 | 118 | 101 | 219 |
| Total | | | 197 | 602 | 574 | 1176 |

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Map 6, above:
Am Trakt Mennonite Colony in Samara, Russia

Map 7, below:
Kolonie Am Trakt as drawn by Arnold Dyck

