

OUR RUSSIAN FOREFATHERS

In his paper "Geschichte der Alexanderwohl Mennoniten Gemeinde bei Goesel, Kansas," published in the 1926 Bundesbote Kalendar, Elder Heinrich Barman writes, as translated into English:

"The grievances endured by the Mennonites in Prussia and the special privileges which the Russian government had promised them caused the so-called Alexanderwohl (Przechovko) Congregation to emigrate to Russia. In the years 1820 and 1821 a number (Isaac Fast gives the number as 30 families) of families in the vicinity of Culm left for Russia in large traveling wagons and settled 90 verst or 60 miles north of the Azov Sea (North of the Black Sea). The old-timers tell us that the devout Czar Alexander of Russia met them on their immigration journey. He asked them 'From where do you come and where are you going?' Our Elder Peter Wedel and the Elder of the Rudnerweide Church answered this and other pertinent questions to the satisfaction of the Czar, whereupon the Czar responded: 'Lebet wohl und gruesst eure Brueder!' In English, 'Farewell give my best regards to your brethren!' In response to the Czar's greeting the word Alexanderwohl was coined for the name of the new village they were about to settle."

Andreas Schmidt and his wife Ancke Ratzlaff with their four children: Ancke, Peter, Heinrich and Andreas, our great-grandfather, was one of the families on this emigration journey. Jacob Schmidt and his wife Anna Schmidt with their baby Anna left Prussia at the same time. However, they settled in Karlswalde near Ostrog, where they lived for three years. Their daughter Eva, our maternal ancestor, was born in Karlswalde. In 1823 they left Karlswalde and moved also to the Molotchna colony and settled in the village Alexanderwohl.

The land on which they settled was known as "The Steppes" similar to our "Kansas Prairies," grasslands without trees. Their principal crops in Russia were wheat, rye, barley and oats. Each family had a fruit orchard and raised horses for their draft animals, and cows, and chickens for food. In later years they practiced summer fallowing which resulted in better quality and larger yields of their grain crops. In the absence of barbed wire fences the village hired a Russian peasant as its cowherd who each morning would gather up the cows and horses, then drive them to the pasture and let them graze. In the evening he returned with his cows and horses and distributed them to the rightful owners. Each farmer had about 175 acres of land. There were 32 full-fledged farmers in the village Alexanderwohl. They had settled in village fashion, 16 on each side of the street, with the church and school in the center facing each other. The good land and the poor land was divided approximately equally among the farmers as well as the distant and the near land was divided equally. Due to the scarcity of land, the number of landless families had increased to 27 by 1874, almost equal to the number of regular farmers. The landless families lived in smaller houses or shacks at the western end of Alexanderwohl. These families were called "Anwohner." For the most part, these