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A HISTORY OF THE KLIPPENSTEIN FAMILY  
IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to give meaning to the story of our family, it needs to be set in its historical context. From that one can establish the identity of the family to its past. Also one can recognize the traits in its strengths and weaknesses as they are in us today.

Our history in the past was a part of the history of the Mennonite people. A brief historical sketch will help us to understand ourselves. Mennonites formed a separate identity during the 16th Century, that is at the time of the Reformation. They believed that the church should be free from state controls and that membership should be completely voluntary. They marked this by baptism of adults (hence the Anabaptist) upon their own confession of faith and held the New Testament to be the only guide for faith and life. Discipleship, patterned after Christ's life which included loving one's enemies and a readiness to suffer for one's faith were requirements. The state church rejected these views and much persecution followed.

Anabaptist groups originated in Switzerland, South Germany and Tyrol and in the Low Countries: Belgium, Holland and in parts of northwestern Germany. Persecution drove the southern Anabaptists down the Rhine and into the Palatinate and Alsace. It also drove those from Flanders and Belgium north into Holland and into northwestern Germany. In northern Holland and in east Friesland our people gathered seeking havens from persecution. From here many went to East and West Prussia. There was regular communication between the Dutch and Baltic sea-ports of West Prussia. So it was natural for the people to go there. Furthermore, the conditions were similar there, in that part of the Vistula Delta was below sea level, similar to that in the Netherlands. Many of the people who came had been adept at marshland farming and the reclamation of land from the sea. Some were also artisans who settled in the cities. Among them were architects, artists, weavers and tradesmen in the cities of Danzig, Elbing and Marienburg. Especially in the city of Danzig their presence became evident. Many prominent buildings, fountains and gates were designed and built by Mennonite architects and builders.

Mennonites stayed in West Prussia from the middle of the 16th Century to the end of World War II. 1945 saw the break-up of the settlements in both East and West Prussia. During the centuries their well-being and fortunes varied. There were times of extreme hardship caused by war, famine and flood. Because of hardships, but also because of promises and opportunities, many followed the invitation of Catherine the Great of Russia to settle and occupy the lands vacated by the Turks in the Crimea. Promises for land and exemptions and privileges were attractive. In 1788 the first emigration took place from West Prussia to the Ukraine. Two main colonies were established: (1) Chortitza, also known as the Old Colony on the banks of the Dnieper River at the site of the present Zaporozhe. (2) The other colony was the Molotschna, somewhat to the southeast. When the population increased, daughter colonies were formed. The first colony from the old colony was the Bergthal colony settled to