

A LITTLE HISTORY

The Mennonites are a denomination of Protestants who reject infant baptism and baptise adult persons only, and then on a profession of faith. They were first called Anabaptists but were later named Mennonites for Menno Simon who became their leader in Holland in the early 1500's. Because of their doctrine of non-resistance and non-combativeness, the Mennonites had to suffer great persecution in those early war like times, at the hands of the government, and the established churches. They were compelled to wander from one country to another until the great Frederick of Prussia, in whose dominion everyone was permitted to go to heaven in his own fashion, extended his hospitalities to them.

The Mennonites in Prussia were noted for their industry and success as farmers. When they fled The Netherlands because of religious oppression they brought with them their expertise in the art of reclaiming swamp lands by means of dikes and canals. Because of their economic worth they were welcomed and granted religious toleration by church and government. Over a period of time they came to own the lands they leased. At first, living in isolated groups in sparsely populated land, they were able to lead a quiet and unmolested life. As they grew in numbers and became prosperous, acquiring more land, the native citizens grew to resent these thrifty and sober Dutch farmers and artisans speaking a foreign tongue and practicing a proscribed religion.

After a change in the Prussian government they were again subjected to persecution and oppression. The edict that made military service compulsory upon acquisition of new land could not be tolerated as sons were no longer able to acquire land of their own. Once the possibilities of owning new lands were exhausted these farmers had to take up a trade or craft. Once again they moved on; a portion of them immigrated to the United States (the Pennsylvania Dutch) while the main body accepted the proposals made by Catherine II of Russia after an agreement was reached with the Russian government in 1786.

The Mennonites were invited by the Russian Empress to colonize in the Crimea area in the province of Taurida. She wanted colonists in the south of Russia because after the Turks were pushed out the nomadic tribes harassed the steppeland and the Russian peasants were not interested in living in this unsafe region. The new land had to be opened up and there was a great need for capable and industrious workers, above all farmers. She offered them exemption from military service, religious freedom and grants of land of approximately 170 acres each. These privileges were guaranteed them for 100 years. They accepted her invitation and emigrated from Prussia to the fertile plains of Southern Russia near the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and established their first settlement in 1789. Here they turned the steppes into a paradise with wheatfields and groves of trees which they planted and by building orderly and beautiful villages in what had been a land of nomads.

With the favorable treatment they received, the Mennonites prospered and their settlements spread. They were granted an additional tract of land in which their second colony in the Molotschna River area was founded and they spread over the entire country adjacent to the Black Sea, comprising the provinces of Taurida, Kherson and Ekaterinoslav. They grew in wealth and opu-