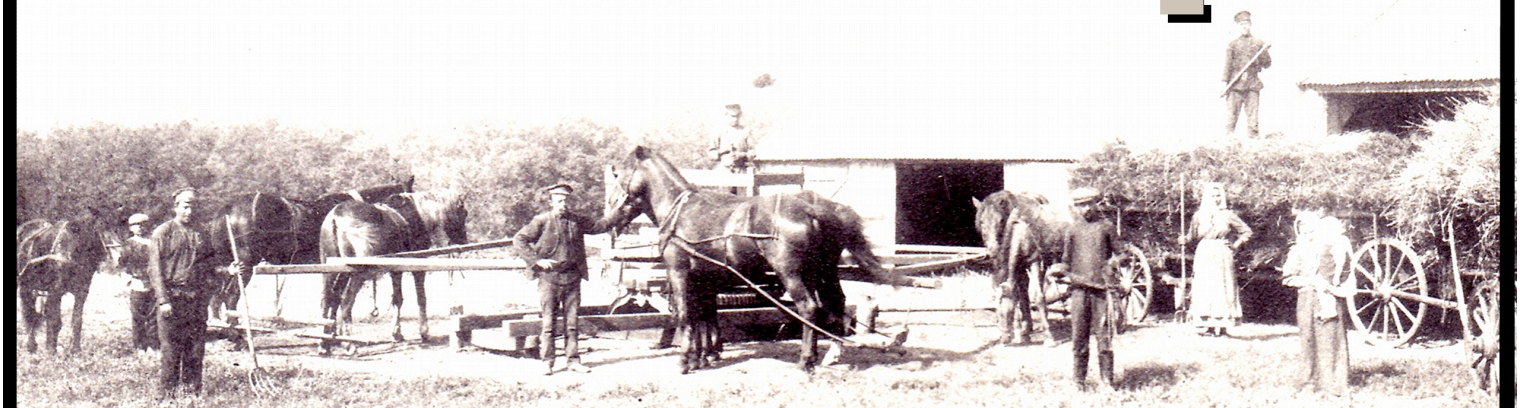
The Arkadak Papers



By Victor Epp

A centennial tribute to the last populated Mennonite colony in south Russia in sixteen parts, largely in the words of its pioneers.

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Acknowledgements

The Mennonite Heritage Center archives have proved to be a valuable resource in furnishing copies of the first hand accounts of events in and about the colony by such pioneers as Heinrich J. Epp, David Hübert, Johann P. Bueckert, and Johann Klassen. Without the able help of people such as Conrad Stoesz, Art Redekopp, and Adolph Ens, even this small contribution would not have been possible.

Foreword

What causes these periodic eruptions of interest in unknown places and unknown events? What small spark ignites our curiosity about places half way around the world with names we find hard to pronounce and lifestyles we can only imagine? Yet it happens all the time in different places around the world. Not knowing where to go without knowing where you've been is likely at the heart of it. Someone has wisely said that in order for a house to stand, one must first build a solid foundation. Perhaps we are looking for the strong corner stones of our foundation. It is no different with Arkadak, daughter colony of the Chortitza colony, a land of opportunity for the landless of an already overcrowded settlement.

Long gone are the fields of wheat and the fruit orchards that promised so much to the little daughter colony called Arkadak. Yet every so often something stirs a memory and suddenly there is a thirst to follow it to its source. Gone too are the flourmills, the brick plants and the other industries born of the fruits of the soil in Arkadak. Yet the root of many of the skills we use in pursuing our vocations and trade practices today can be traced back to Arkadak.

Even the name of the colony, foreign to our lips, fades gradually into the sands of time. Then someone says the word 'Arkadak', and a gentle nudge stirs an unknown familiarity that feels like home deep in the subconscious. But there is no one left to ask about this place. Nor is there anyone left to tell about it. Or is there? The bones of Arkadak's pioneers lie buried on three different continents. Their descendants dot the landscape of these far-flung places where they live and work and raise their families, oblivious the common ancestral bond.

Arkadak is the place where our ancestors worked and worshipped together, where they married and raised their families. This is the place

where they built their dreams and struggled with their day to day problems. This is the place where all those hopes and dreams were ground into the dust by their oppressors. It was from this is the place that they brought their wounds and scars and hopes for a fresh start. Along the way customs and habits as well as memories and skills filtered into the mosaic that colors our makeup, often without our noticing. Only when we look back in time do we notice how close we still are to the energies and the forces that drove those pioneers to stake their claim on a tiny corner of history.

It is said that very little has been written about Arkadak and in a sense that is true. There is a brief account of the colony covering its complete history. There was a research paper whose thirty-seven-page dissertation included ten pages of early Mennonite history as well as maps and tables and a healthy bibliography. Perhaps that was all there was. After all, the colony had a relatively short life. Why then did it all seem so hollow, so impersonal? The facts after all, were accurate and detailed, but the people had no faces. They were in the abstract. There were the settlers, the landless, the Wolost, and so on. It seemed that these were only reference points to various events.

The few letters and accounts quoted extensively in the above-mentioned accounts provided the key. Largely written in the early 1940's by Arkadak pioneers themselves told about their own experiences or personal involvement and the story suddenly sprang to life. Seen through the eyes of these authors, the landscape blossomed in to vivid color. The community was suddenly full of activity, building the homesteads, planting and harvesting the fields, interacting with itself and taking care of business. The joys and sorrows, the achievements and the hardships were all etched in to the letters even though they were written some twenty years after it was all left behind. This was the real story.

It seems that every twenty years or so there is a flurry of activity in reaching back into the history of the settlement to tell its story. It rises up out of the ashes with a burst of energy, flourishes, and then fades once again into the background. This sporadic interest could be construed as a generational thing, with each succeeding one searching for that cornerstone in the family's foundation, something to call its own from out of the past.

In undertaking this project it soon became clear that the Arkadakers intended to leave a lasting legacy for their descendants. I can think of no

higher tribute to these pioneers than to let their own voices be heard. It was by their own hands that the colony was created, that it flourished, that in times of unimaginable turmoil it survived as long as it did. As they passed the torch to their sons and daughters, it was clear that they wanted their story to be known. In publishing excerpts from their work along with other stories and anecdotes, we will perhaps in some measure have fulfilled their wishes and our obligation.

The Epp and Hübert Papers

Part One - Ich Bin Ein Arkadaker

Vic Epp

April 8, 2004

If someone had spoken those words to me even a year ago, it would have been hard to imagine. Of course I knew something about Arkadak. That's where my father grew up. The rest was vague except to note that they came to Canada in 1924, settling in Niverville first and then later moving to the Petersfield district - that is to say, my grand parents, their three sons and families. We ourselves moved to Winnipeg in 1942, taking us out of the immediate family loop.

To us children, Arkadak was some surreal and distant place that had likely been demolished by the Communists years ago and no longer existed. Our world was centered around the city and our own little events so reminiscences about the old homeland were of little interest to us. Stories and conversations of Arkadak usually took place at the Sunday dinner table with the guests father would inevitably drag home from church whenever he got the chance. Things old people talked about could not really be compared to things that mattered to young people. Our young bodies were glued to the chairs, politely awaiting the end of the meal while our minds were drifting around some sport, or going swimming at Omands Creek, or perhaps building a raft. They certainly weren't on the conversation at hand.

A chance comment at our first ever family reunion changed all that. It was too bad, said a cousin, that some of grandfather's writings had been lost. That was a complete surprise since I knew little of his activities other than sitting in his big leather chair, inhaling the sulfur powder fumes to relieve his breathing from his asthma affliction. Well, that and trimming my fingernails with his pocket knife. Much pleasanter memories come from my grandmother who was expert at over-baking jam roll pastries to the point where they had to be pried from the pan with a knife, and one could crunch away at the caramelized sugar until everything was gone.

For years I had urged our father to write his memoirs so we might have something to pass on to our descendants. Somehow he had never

managed it, but now there was a needle in a haystack to find. With the help of the Mennonite Heritage Center, find it I did, and much more. Reading through Heinrich Epp's eulogies for the first time, I discovered a man much different than the one I knew. This was a man with enormous energy who, as one of the pioneers of Arkadak, was seemingly everywhere at the same time helping in the development of not only his own village, but in congregational and municipal affairs of the whole colony. In the last few years of his life, he was collaborating with David Hübert to publish an account of Arkadak from beginning to end.

Now the whole colony came to life before my very eyes. The personal accounts of David Hübert, Johann P. Bueckert, J. Klassen, and Heinrich Epp revealed a love and a passion for the colony that could not possibly be captured by any historian. These were only four of the sixteen hundred or so people who lived the birth and growth of the colony with an intense energy and grieved its demise for the rest of their lives. No matter where they settled, they could not break free of the roots they had set down so deep in the place called Arkadak.

It was just my luck that Heinrich Epp would write his notes in the old German script - one that I had not used for nearly sixty years. Nonetheless I persisted. Slowly it all came together. He described his home village like this; 'Number five (Wjasemskoje) had an idyllic location. The yard sites run to the steep riverbank. Only two of them had a flat bank. On the other side of the stream is an oak forest where in the summer nightingales held concert until the morning'.

That brought me up short. I knew that forest! That was where they hid the horses from the eyes of various armies who had no aversion to plundering whatever they wanted whenever the mood struck them. Father, Peter Hildebrand, Heinrich Pätkau, and Gerhard Martens, just in their mid-teens by then tended the horses in that very forest until they were needed again. In my mind and I could almost smell the woods and the sweat of the horses under the care of the boys.

'To the east at the end of the village was a tall grassy entrenchment. It was a natural landscape that fell steeply to a beautiful meadow below where the stream ran quietly. The old Russian farmers told of how the prince (Wjasemsky) had wanted to build a summer castle there but had been hindered during the 1905 insurrection. Thereafter he kept a troop of Cossack

cavalry who had free run of the place. The riding drills of these Cossacks were impressive. It was uplifting to see them riding home singing, rank and file'.

Reading this passage brought gooseflesh out on my arms. I could picture the Cossacks riding at full gallop, swinging sideways in their saddles and picking up handkerchiefs with the points of their sabers as they thundered along. And their music, their music rang in my ears. I even knew the songs from father's singing and from the selected records of Cossack music we had in our house.

Suddenly all Arkadak sprang to life before my very eyes. The sights and sounds and smells are burned in to my memory even though I have never been there. Unbeknownst to my father and unnoticed by me, my own roots had stretched across the ocean to that far place and planted themselves in Arkadak. It seems 'Ich bin ein Arkadaker'.

Part Two

The Workers' Quarters

Vic Epp

April 12, 2004

If only walls could speak, what stories they could tell! One of the photos in Gerhard Lohrenz' 'Heritage Remembered' is of the Mennoniten Gemeinde church in Arkadak. Straight and tall, it seems to stand as a lonely sentinel in the middle of a grassy field, its many windows keeping watch in every direction. David Hübert describes it this way: 'One large, two story brick building that had served as a workers quarters lay in the middle of village number five was appraised and assessed to the entire settlement. The upper story was later remodeled as a main church.'

He goes on to say, 'Other than that the place was to be used for things other than congregational gatherings. The lower level was later to be used by village number five as a school until the actual school building was completed'.

'At first, before it was used as a church and school, it was a provisional hotel for the settlers. Every inch was utilized and it sheltered as many families as a mid-sized hotel. The (partition) walls separating the families were made of old cupboards, doors, old boards, carpets, sailcloth and anything else that was available. It was crowded, but at least it was a solution'.

Envisioning such a place with its makeshift partitioning and bustling population, the energies, the dreams and the hopes of the settlers fairly jump off the page. Heinrich Epp writes, 'Even the big two-story workers' house already harbored some settlers. The great, spacious pantry was filled through donations. Blankets and boxes were distributed in the rooms'.

From here the settlers went out daily to their various plots of land to build homes and barns and seed their fields. At day's end the house provided a safe haven to rest and feed and clothe themselves. The close quarters could have caused untold tensions between neighbors, yet it doesn't seem to have

happened. The common goal of building a colony out of bare land, that was what the focus seemed to center on.

The real sense of community in these raw conditions is perhaps illustrated in an excerpt from Heinrich Epp. He writes, 'The settler Peters who belonged to (village) number six had brought his elderly parents with him. The father was ill, yet when the sun shone he sat outside in front of the door and spoke eagerly about helping with the new construction. But his days were numbered. He died even before Peters moved to number six'.

'The family was now in a quandary as to how to arrange the funeral. The big pantry was of course amply supplied. The settlers could sing at the funeral, but where would they find a preacher to conduct the service? I felt sorry for the family'.

'Peters was living with an older settler in a house that he now bought. They were in agreement to ask another settler, former teacher Abraham Martens if he would consider holding a service, if even only a short one. At first he declined. When they begged the question again he decided in favor of it. His reasoning was that if one knows of something worthy to do and refuses, it would be a sin. He delivered a very good service'.

'But where would they dig the grave? Everything was strange and new. The snow was deep and we wanted to have a cemetery that would be accessible in winter. Now the settlers of village number five held probably the first meeting of village leaders and resolved to locate it on the hill where there was little snow. Though it proved impractical and was later abandoned, Peters' grave was placed there. He would not be alone long! How wondrous are the workings of mankind'.

'Sickness broke out in village number six and two children died. Here too, Martens led the funeral service. Sadly, Martens died in the second year of the settlement. He too was carried up the hill and laid to rest beside the man over whom he had held the first funeral service. Amazing events'!

How many such events such as this would the walls of the former workers' quarters tell if they could speak? From settlement business meetings to congregational gatherings to school lessons to co-operative administrative meetings, it seems the whole history of the colony is soaked up under the very eyes of this edifice. Much as the famous hundred-year

oak, this lone building has stood over one hundred years and still stands, although neglect and age are taking their toll. Amazing events, indeed.

Part Three

Harvest of the Land

Vic Epp

April 19, 2004

It must have been a considerable disappointment to Prince Wjasemsky to see twenty-five thousand acres of his former potato land to be turned into fields of wheat, rye, and barley. These new crops certainly put a strain on the potato supply for his distillery in Arkadak. It might well have been one of the reasons that the settlers' scheme to name the villages after the prince's family members hoping for favors never bore fruit. The settlers never really liked the names given to the villages anyway which is why they always referred to them by number. The Wjasemskys returned the favor by not making any donations to schools, hospitals or other community projects.

In spite of Russian predictions of failure, there was a dramatic change in the landscape and the economy in very short order. David Hübert best described the mindset of the settlers as they began to work the rich soil of Arkadak. In the minds of the Mennonites he said, there were three fundamental rules to build up agriculture. 'To farm successfully', he said, 'one must firstly sow a lot of wheat. Secondly, one must sow a lot of wheat, and last but not least, one must sow a lot of wheat'. The wisdom of that philosophy is born out by the number of flourmills that soon sprang up in Arkadak as well as a large modern grain elevator.

The soil in Arkadak ranged from light sandy soil to heavier red and black loam. It had been thoroughly cultivated during Wjasemsky's time and presented itself well to the settlers. Today we might not know exactly what to do with such a variety of soils, but the Arkadakers certainly did. Time and again they have proven themselves to be expert in coaxing a credible harvest out of the earth. Every inch of ground was carefully considered and used according to its makeup. Epp explains as follows: 'The four villages on the left bank of Arkadak have flat land, sandy soil with good drinking water and shallow wells. (Village) number two is somewhat higher and has more black soil. The roads are always good and thankfully, cultivating the land is easy. The soil on the west bank is much different. Deep black-red soil produces

greater yields. It is higher land with deep lighter streaks. Here the settlers grew fine, light hay'.

Epp paints a vivid picture of the practicality of the settlers as he describes the location of number seven. '(Village) number seven', he said, 'in order to have a good and practical location had to settle in the middle of a field of rye. There amid a sea of rye blowing in the wind shone the village'. Even at number six, as Hübert explains, 'a layer of pottery clay was found for the manufacture of roof tiles', which he did with good results.

From these descriptions one can look at a map of the village locations and almost walk through the whole colony, knowing exactly what each area contains. It becomes quite obvious that when it came to selecting and cultivating land, the Arkadakers were as expert as any. They had tricks up their sleeves that would have escaped the Russians and leave today's farmers with their jaws hanging open. An example of that was given about the sandy, somewhat stony land on my little hobby farm that I considered marginal pastureland at best. It was, according to my father, good soil for early crops. His reckoning was that the liberal sprinkling of small limestones was good for warming the soil. Sure enough, he was right. The chemical companies would not be impressed.

We are told too that the settlers vigorously pursued the cultivation of fruit orchards after a timid start with mainly apples. This was soon extended to cherry and plum trees as well as berry stocks. In spite of the abundant rabbit population the orchards thrived. The settlers quickly learned how to guard against them by binding the saplings with straw in winter. Had they been able to explain to the rabbits what a roast rabbit looked like on the Sunday dinner table, it might have been even less of a problem.

The orchards must have indeed been a great source of pride for the Arkadakers. Hübert writes rather poignantly 'It is hardly imaginable that even a trace of the young gardens exists today for "Where savage powers rage mindlessly, no structure can unfold"'.

It is easy to understand the great optimism and joyous hope held out for this blossoming colony and the overwhelming sorrow over it's slow and deliberate demise. Yet, many of these very same people whose successes as well as trials and tribulations would have defeated a lot of us today, re-emerged in many parts of the world to begin again. It is a testament to an

unshakable faith and a deep-rooted kinship with the land. There are some things that just cannot be taken away from such people.

Part 4

The Landless

Vic Epp

April 20, 2004

The establishment of new Mennonite colonies in Russia was no haphazard exercise. The Russian government had its own objectives of holding up these foreign colonists as examples of agricultural progress to its own people. Together with the Mennonites they developed a legal process which would encourage their perpetuation well into the future. That these objectives ran parallel those of the Mennonites in land acquisition was perhaps coincidental. The system of who could own land, how much, and provision for future expansion were well thought out and documented. The system though, would be put to the test in Arkadak.

It was a matter of supply and demand and demand always far exceeded the supply. Eligible settlers were clearly defined in order of priority in four categories. When the allocations got to the point of the demand exceeding the supply, the remaining settlers were selected by lottery until all the sites were gone. Those who were unlucky in the lottery just had to wait for the next opportunity.

There was one particular clause in the land purchase contract that each property must be built on and be occupied by the selected owner within three years of taking possession. It was the interpretation of this requirement that would bring human nature into conflict with the intent of the agreements.

On the one hand the first category was guaranteed land in the new colony, but some eligible settlers were already gainfully employed where they were. Others in the next categories who were eligible were subject to terms of a lottery with no guarantee of obtaining land. Hübert best describes what followed from the actions of some in the first category. 'It had been their intention from the outset to "silver over" their right of title with the Chortitzer Wolost (Municipal Authority). They would likely never make use of it and here they had an opportunity to gain several hundred rubels as though in their sleep. They sold their rights to those who had been less lucky

than they, put from two hundred to a thousand rubels in their pockets, stayed where they were and let Arkadak be Arkadak'.

Hübert goes on to describe the storm that followed. 'The harvests were good from the very first year, payments were easy to manage and the future looked bright. And the roosters began to crow from all corners. Now the crowing storm was in full force. The candidates from the two categories who were close to eligibility for the lottery put pressure on the Chortitzer Wolost and demanded strict adherence to the original contract. The Chortitzer Wolost found itself in a situation similar to the British in Palestine today: the Jews want to get in and the Arabs don't want to leave, and the British have their hands full.(*Note that this was written in 1947) Such was the problem with the Chortitzer Wolost'.

The accusation was that those settlers who had bought the right from others to move to Arkadak were there illegally and that the entire agreement had been broken. By the end of the third year a Commission was sent to Arkadak to make a list of the illegally occupied properties. Then solicitor Heinrich Heese from Jekaterinoslaw was ordered to make an accounting. 'But the complaint was not only against the "illegal" occupants but against all the settlers. One or the other for instance, may not have made his payment within the prescribed time and that constituted sufficient grounds to liquidate the whole contract. Why this action should go against all the settlers and not only the guilty might possibly be understood by a lawyer, but certainly not by an ordinary mortal'.

'The solicitor H. Heese explained to the court that this action was directed only at the eighteen "illegal" settlers (dubbed Rabbits) and all the others remained unaffected by it. Thus the judge had no alternative but to declare the contract null and void'.

'With the judgement in its briefcase a second commission appeared in Arkadak. This time it was the enforcement commission to carry out the judgement against the eighteen "rabbits". There were bitter words and heated blood, but the action was clear. The rabbits had to run'.

'The eighteen homesteads that became available through this action were distributed to the next eighteen eligible candidates through a lottery. They moved on to their properties without delay and undertook the obligations of their unlucky predecessors. The Chortitzer Wolost saw to it

that the latter got what was coming to them. Altogether the settlement returned to its normal progression and steered slowly to its undeserved and evil end’.

It would be unfair to arbitrarily judge any of the parties in this affair without actually seeing the contract documents, but it should be noted that the 'Rabbits' were the only ones to lose in this. Those who sold them the rights never repaid them and in addition, they had to carry their own moving expense. The one thing that can be said with certainty is that everyone put up a good fight for what they believed in, which seems to be typical for Arkadakers.

Part Five

Sustenance and Suffering

Vic Epp

April 20, 2004

It wasn't until I read David Hübert's description of the Molotchna (Milk) River that the ingrained humor of the Mennonites struck a chord. Of course mother and her brother hailed from the Molotchna colony while father and his brothers came from the Chortitzer. Whenever they all gathered together one could be sure of some good-natured teasing, but usually not until after each had a second helping of apple pie.

Be that as it may, when it came down to serious business of helping one another in times of need, there was no hesitation. Heinrich Epp tells the story of a particular Thanksgiving in Arkadak, at which the colony was asked to help with food for the Molotchna colonists, who were experiencing a famine that year.

'In 1921 the settlers had a light harvest. Thanksgiving: The church was decorated with beautiful garlands reflecting the season that already displayed golden autumn colors. The fruits of the field were displayed, as were vegetables of all sorts. A talented German pharmacist who lived in the village built a pyramid of the finest varieties of apples that the settlers brought out of their gardens'.

'On this particular day the settlement had an unexpected visit from Mr. Cornies. The Mennonites from the Molotchna colony had sent him to collect donations for the needy in the area because failed harvests had caused great hardship. Mr. Cornies' own words to the settlers were; "Here I felt like an unknown child at the sharing under the Christmas tree and nothing else but that we were all brothers." Then he described the need and begged for help for the hungry brothers and sisters. His request was not overlooked. The donations that came from the Arkadak settlers were altogether quite good. A clear, detailed list of donations showed what, how much from each was donated to whom as well as the overall donations to everyone in general. The donations were mostly potatoes, vegetables of all sorts, especially a lot

of the nicest tomatoes. There were also many sacks of the finest wheat flour - two wagon loads in total'.

'To the great disappointment of the donors, and even more so the recipients, neither the quantity or the quality set out in the lists was received in spite of having two elected people pick up the donations and "deliver" them. The donations were taken in by the German Association and distributed in Molotchnia. The donors never knew how it was done. It was covered up. In point of fact, a mother had sent some of the best wheat flour to her children. After an inordinate amount of time she received a rather cool letter thanking her for the nice rye flour'.

The tampering with the donations was indeed a thorn in the side of the donors as well as the recipients and did not go unnoticed. But the spirit of selfless giving according to need prevailed. With that in mind one can speculate that the reason for Epp continuing his story with the following was to make that exact point.

'An experience of Ältester Isaac Dyck of the Chortitzer congregation is revealed in the following words. "I am gladdened that a small token of acknowledgement was given to the Molotchna Mennonites for the great and selfless help to us in Chortitza and vicinity through medical and hospital services that were given. Through the Machnowtze, typhoid fever raged among us and our brothers and sisters lay in one house together with the Machnowtze, as corpses or helplessly ill"'.

Once again the common thread of solidarity comes through as second nature to the Mennonites, whether in difficulties or in humor - which reminds me, Hübert's comment about the Molotchna River was that it was a complete misnomer. He opined that it couldn't possibly remind one of milk - not even from a black cow!

Part Six

An Out Migration

Vic Epp

April 22, 2004

About as thorough an account as one can expect to find of the out migration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union is contained in Frank Epp's Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons 1962). The efforts of the few who formed a network stretching from Russia to Germany to the Netherlands to South and North America are astounding. It was largely their single-minded tenacity and little else that made a new life possible for thousands. Often having to think on their feet when circumstances might change from minute to minute, these resourceful and dedicated brothers often boldly went where angels feared to tread, confidently entrenched in their faith.

Without these Herculean efforts many more settlers would have been lost of course, but there is even more. Epp provides us with a rare glimpse of the lengths the sponsors went to in Rotterdam in welcoming the emigrants and looking after their needs.
He writes: 'the untenable situation led to out migration to America, mainly Canada. The first groups left in 1923, then 1924 and 1925. Individually, some left later. While Canada deferred the travel costs, emigrants went to Mexico because there was no travel expense. Many however, soon came to Canada'.

The emigrants to Mexico passed through Holland - Rotterdam, from where they continued their journey by ocean steamer. In Rotterdam there were two people who met the emigrants with great enthusiasm and dug deep in to their own pockets in order to help them. They were advised by the Rotterdam Mennonites about going to Mexico but no pressure was put on them.

"Yes," answered the emigrants, "we wanted to go to Canada too, but there the doors are closed to us."

The Rotterdam Mennonites replied, "Let that be our concern. We will work out the travel allowance and take the sea voyage cost out of our accounting."
'How quickly the emigrants received their travel allowance to Canada! All the German emigrants received free board and room at a hotel of the wealthiest Rotterdam Mennonite by the name of DeMonshie, to his great delight. He showed them the city with the tour facilities - shipyards, highways and railway. Even the historic windmill and its history was shown. When the emigrants boarded the ship, these two came on board with them until the ship signaled its departure'.

Clearly the hardships suffered by the settlers in being uprooted, the difficulties in getting the necessary papers, in being separated from family members in some cases caused a great deal of trauma of varying degrees. The kindness shown to them according to this account must have gone a long way to give them comfort. These activities that seemed to delight their hosts as much as they reinvigorated the emigrants are noteworthy in recording the character and make up of 'Mennonitentum'.

The Bueckert Papers

Part Seven

Harvest of the Seed

Vic Epp

May 7, 2004

Human nature is a force as mighty as any of the other forces of nature, even in Arkadak. What they sowed was wheat - enough of it to keep three big modern flourmills operating at full capacity. To all intents and purposes this little daughter colony was a jewel in the desert.

But beneath the rich Russian soil lurked another, more sinister crop. The Russian government had held their own people up to ridicule in the face of Mennonite successes in an attempt to increase Russian productivity. The result was a growing envy and resentment of these foreigners who came in and squeezed Russian "gold" out of Russian soil. How dare they?

The ill wind that blew in the advent of the First World War only served to fan the flames of this resentment in to full-blown hatred and wrath against the "Germanzy". J. P. Bueckert describes the situation he witnessed himself as he threw his energies into stemming the tide. He writes; 'As it generally happens in this world, the shining rise of the colony bred envy and hate, which was fostered in all possible means by a certain class of propagandists. Self-educated people and scholars alike were not ashamed to think up the most ridiculous nonsense in order to rile the people up against the hated "Germanzy"'.

Of course not everyone was of the same mind. He speaks of a constable and another man by the name of Okarjev who drew him in to a committee to downplay the strong propaganda. Certainly their efforts were greatly appreciated by the Mennonites.
Even so, the Mennonites were drawn in to these propaganda plots wherever possible. After a particular public religious service at the marketplace (in Arkadak) that this committee was required to attend, one of the propagandists came up to the committee members and said, "We here have been too lenient toward the 'Germanzy'. In these days I was in the market on

the Volga and there they killed the Germans like field mice!" The message was not lost on them. It was as though the sleeping giant had been wakened and there was no way to return him to his rest. It was a difficult and uneasy time for them.

For a short time it seemed that the tide would turn with the building momentum of the Bolshevik revolution. Now the propaganda pendulum swung toward freedom for the peasantry. Soon they would be out from under the thumb of the aristocracy. The spirit of the time is vividly captured in Bueckert's description.

'This was the atmosphere among neighbors around the settlement on Monday March 17th at the bazaar. The first "swallows" emerged to signal the approaching spring and a new era of hate. There were people in the capital these days asserting themselves as farmers' and soldiers' governments. They sought out the constable and disarmed him. The eyewitness who told of this was standing at the market hoping to sell two of his horses for a good price. This action spoiled not only his sale but trade for all the merchants who quickly vacated the area'.

'I was barely home when already there was a message from the reeve that there was to be a celebration of the long awaited 'Swoboda" or freedom in the Arkadak marketplace. Everyone one must attend. Some went out of pure curiosity. Others would rather have stayed home but the fear of appearing counter revolutionary by not attending overshadowed such thoughts and most everyone went'.

He goes on to describe the euphoria at the meeting with speaker after speaker praising the hotly sought after freedom saying that all should be brothers with equal rights. He writes; 'How shocked I was when among the festive speakers a Mennonite appeared and in his way offered such warm congratulations that applause for him was not less than for the others. We went home with the impression that something wonderful would happen through peaceful dethroning of the monarch. But quietly no one could be convinced of that'.

The war was not yet over and only added to the dissatisfaction of the peasants who wanted to get on with their newfound freedom. To say it was an uneasy time is an understatement although the fruit from the seeds of envy and wrath were yet to be harvested.

Part Eight

The Meaning of Freedom

Vic Epp

May 10, 2004

Freedom, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For the Mennonites it was the freedom to worship, to educate their young, to work their land and to reap the benefits of their labors. This was what they had come to expect in their Russian homeland for more than a hundred years, and what they deemed to be their right. For the Russians it meant something quite different.

Bueckert writes; 'The cost of visitors who came to deal with the liquidation of the German colonies had not yet been clearly established with us. This situation, aggravated by the desire of Russian farmers to occupy German settlement lands did not let up, but was soon renewed. For a time though, war weariness bred dissatisfaction within the army and the people themselves with the result that the German settlements returned to what they had been. There was a lingering fear that one day somehow the attitude toward the enemy would be acted upon'.

That fear was soon to be realized. The storm clouds had been gathering over a long time and it was just a matter of time before they could not longer be contained. Bueckert graphically describes how the storm broke in Arkadak. 'In the month of September there was an annual market in Arkadak, which was always attended by surrounding Russian villagers. One worried that perhaps it was the place where unrest over the colony could break out. Out of that fear therefor, it was quietly determined that the Germans not attend the market. In spite of this some people could not resist and went anyway. Others, when they had heard nothing by noon were preparing to go too'.
'Then about 1:00 p.m. a wagon came racing in to the village and the driver called out, "Don't go to the market! People are being killed!"'

'That sparked a great panic and the people gathered around the one who had brought the terrible news. At Cornelius A. Petkau's of village

number two he told the following tale of approximately what he himself had seen and what others who had been there before him had heard. A grain trader named Galkin had owned some land in a neighboring village, which the farmers had taken away from him. That had led to an argument in the market. As the protagonists hurled insults at one another, the trader threatened them with a stick. Thereupon the farmers got together and beat him. Then Galkin brandished a revolver and threatened them with it. While he had his arm stuck out, someone struck it with an iron bar, breaking it. He dropped the weapon that was picked up by others and now the fight turned in to a matter of life and death. Men and women surrounded the unlucky one. Someone hit him from behind with an iron bar, crushing his skull. When he fell, his attackers worked him over with fists and boots so that after about half an hour their "sacrifice" was flat as a pancake’.

'The incident had unleashed the beast in people,' says Bueckert, 'and it ran away with them as they ran through the fields to find and deal with others’.

'What had been so much feared had arrived. But thanks to a wondrous, protective God, not a hair on the head of any German was disturbed. (Those) who had agitated against fell into the pit they had dug for others. Any protection from other than above was unwelcome. The policemen of the then government barely dared show themselves’.
'The people had interpreted the idea of freedom to the fullest measure and now wanted to take full advantage of it’.

Part Nine

Military Service and Bearing Arms

Vic Epp

May 11, 2004

Without the Priviligium guaranteeing exemption from bearing arms in military service there would likely never have been a single Mennonite colony in Russia. It was a coveted tenet of faith that was defended with fearless vigor and passion each time it was attacked. It was only the dedicated pursuit of the right to exemption under the law that allowed it to endure for as long as it did. But eventually, even that passed into history under the Bolsheviks.

One must not confuse defense of exemption to military service with cowardice or lack of sense of duty. Quite the contrary, Mennonites had a long and proud history of alternative service in essential areas such as the Red Cross on hospital trains, in the forestry service, even as guards in prisoner of war camps and administrative jobs. They had a love of king and country that ran as deep as that of any Russian. But these were volatile times. J. P. Bueckert describes it most vividly in his letter to Cornelius Krahn of May 15, 1943.

'The first revolution did not change the policy, but when the second revolution broke out in the fall of 1917, those in service soon came home. The Soviet government discharged the former army and recruited a new Red army. With them, in time they also called up those in the forestry with very few exceptions and those from the cities as well. It did not take long before our young people were again called in to service. The Soviet government had issued a decree calling on Mennonites and others who refused to bear arms on conscientious grounds to appear in court in order to be released from the obligation'. It is not made clear what the consequences might be without representation in court, but imprisonment was only the first step.

To address this issue an association of counselors comprising various groups including Mennonites from northeast Russia was formed under the chairmanship of a man named Tschertkov, former secretary to Count Leo Tolstoj. Tschertkov's stature gave significant standing to the association of

which Bueckert was a member. It turned out to be highly effective since, in Bueckert's own words, 'To my knowledge almost no conscientious objectors from the districts of Saratov or Samaria were ever convicted'. Of course the association was only as effective as its members. Further excerpts from Bueckert's letters reveal both his dedication and his formidable abilities in this minefield of Soviet politics.

'The religious association under the name of "Objedinjenyj Sovjet Religiosnyj Obschtin I Grup" had negotiated with the Soviet government to gain authority on behalf of the persecuted, that on its personal security those arrested could be released from prison by giving notice to the courts and conditional on bringing the matter to trial. I myself was entrusted with such authority from 1918 to 1925 and was able to have a number of Mennonites as well as some Russian believers released from prison. I brought more than two hundred young Mennonites and older brethren to the courts and was able to exempt them all from military service'.

'The trial process in the beginning was not very difficult. I was able to obtain exemption for one hundred-fourteen men with only one of them being called to testify. The magistrate had people under oath to his left and to his right to present arguments as to why Mennonites could not bear arms. Then I would have to relate a bit of Mennonite history of how they left house and home more than once over this very thing and emigrated to other lands seeking acceptance of their conscientious freedom, whereupon those under oath gave a favorable opinion'.

'But even in the north the matter became ever more difficult. In March 1925 I was for the last time with a group of young men in the court in Saratov. I was advised in the friendliest manner but with unmistakable meaning to give up representing the young people. The magistrate told me before witnesses, "You have spoken well and rightfully, but in the long run you will not prevail". In August we emigrated and my successor went to court only once, perhaps several times at most. After that he was taken prisoner himself and banished'.

In the safety of relatively stable governments and relative economic comfort, one can only look in awe at the courage and determination with which people like Bueckert, both men and women alike, faced down adversity and danger without regard to its outcome. It was a matter of faith. It was just what had to be done.

Part Ten

Capitalists, Kulaks, and Bloodsuckers

Vic Epp

May 15, 2004

The Arkadak settlers had heard this kind of talk many times before from the Soviets, but never in their wildest dreams did they ever expect the sting of such words from the German commissars. It was unthinkable. Yet these harsh words fell on the ears of Bueckert and Warkentin as they attended a town hall rally in Saratov where it was advertised that German commissars would be speaking.

It had come down to this, according to Bueckert. 'The Bolsheviks were of a mind to take over everything so that local governments overstepped their authority and took more than they rightfully should. In order to protect us from such anticipated seizures a Mennonite organization was formed - The Mennonite Committee - to look out for our rights'.

Cultivated and otherwise developed land was being plundered as was grain, machinery and livestock. This was too much! Rather than stand by helplessly, the committee appointed Peter Warkentin and J. P. Bueckert to seek protection from higher authorities. There was said to be a commission for the wellbeing of Germans in Saratov, and the two went there to make their representations. Bueckert's account of the meeting reveals the astuteness and determination of these two advocates.

'We had a long time to wait before being called. During this time we were eye witness to one person after another being led in to trial under heavy guard and how others who were waiting told us that some were sentenced to death. It came in to our minds - at least mine - that we should quickly leave that place and vanish as though we had never appeared. But Brother Warkentin seemed more optimistic and we stayed'.

'When our turn finally came and we were introduced and told to express our wishes, Brother Warkentin was the first to speak. He told these young gentlemen in sincere fashion how the local Soviets had dealt so unfairly with us and repeated a number of times that they took "our" horses

and "our" machinery. It was after all, "our" property. Thereupon the one in the middle straightened up, stared sternly at us and said, "Gentlemen, you are obviously not at the right address. We are the representatives of the workers and the working farmers"'.

'Then I posed a counter-question. "Excuse me, whom do take us for then? Are we not the working farmers when we ourselves work our land?"'

"Well I suppose, if that is so."

"Then we are at the right place", I said.'

'With that the matter was resolved and we could continue to bring our complaints forward'.

It was an uneasy end to the meeting as the two men came to realize that these communists were no different than those in Arkadak. It was likely this unease that cause them to attend the evening rally to perhaps get to know these officials better. After listening to the shocking tirade of curses against Capitalists, Kulaks and Bloodsuckers in the German language by the war minister, Bueckert and Warkentin became aware that some of the officials at a nearby table were pointing at them with their pencils. To make sure they were the ones being singled out, the men moved and stood against the wall. The pencil pointing followed them.

In Bueckert's own words, 'We squeezed in behind the people and sneaked toward the exit and saw to it that we left that place, since we were afraid that in the end we might just get free lodging from which there was no help. That very evening, or better said during the night, we left the city'.

These were not yet the perilous times that were to come, but they were fast approaching. Yet in these and other deliberations, the people of this new little daughter colony showed the spirit and steadfastness that was its very soul.

Part Eleven

Protection Certificates

Vic Epp

May 17, 2004

A Mennonite Committee had been struck in Arkadak to see what could be done to derail the plundering by the Bolsheviks in general and the local authorities in particular of land, livestock and grain in the settlement. Shock wave after shock wave assaulted the colony as the best of their belongings were confiscated. This was serious business and they needed to do everything in their power to protect the colony in the face of continually changing circumstances.

Ever vigilant, the committee was quick to notice certain conditions contained in the peace treaty between Germany and Russia relating in part to German subjects living in Russia and also those who had placed themselves under German protection. These conditions assured that all authority requested through the Bolsheviks was to be restored. It was an opportunity to be acted upon without delay.

The committee wasted no time in evaluating each and every property in each village as well as some industrial undertakings to establish true values for a quick sale. A separate list was prepared for each village and David Hübert of Village Number One and J. P. Bueckert of Village Number Two were dispatched to Moscow to find out more about this and obtain protection certificates if possible. The year was 1918, and according to Bueckert, the month was May.

It is noteworthy to describe conditions in Moscow at the time. Bueckert writes, 'Bread in Moscow was very rare and white bread was only available to those who had it sent from home'. The All Russian Land Association where they were billeted was only marginally better organized. 'The Association still had quite a bit of butter in its larder and everyone was given a quarter-pound daily. The slab of butter we received was not much smaller than the piece of dark bread we got. But we had brought a good supply of white bread with us from home. On the first evening we were invited as guests for tea. When we brought a zwieback and cutlet for

everyone at the table it was a feast for the company the like of which they had not had in a long time'.

The two men wasted no time in going about the business they were sent to Moscow to conduct. The lobbying was swift and effective. Mr. Heinrich Andres of Nikolaipol, delegate of the southern Mennonites to Petersburg introduced them to helpful people like Professor Lindeman and the Duma delegate Baron von Nolde. Within a day Bueckert and Hübert had an appointment with the consul Buchfink. After a two-hour interview they were dismissed and instructed to attend the general consulate in another quarter of the city where the protection certificates would be issued. This was done of course, without any delay or confusion, rather with military precision.

The success of this mission was all the more remarkable given the confusion of wars within wars, that is to say the uneasy peace with Germany and the Red army fighting the White army and both of them fighting various gangs of bandits like Machnow. Bueckert vividly describes the situation as it was.

'Again we were lucky to get another similar cabin in a first class car which was especially good since we ran into a very undesirable delay at the station. We were namely between two fronts where the Reds were fighting the gangs. We were delayed for two days and could go neither forward or back. The food in our baskets went for naught. But soon a merchant set up a food stand in the train yard and we could buy a zwieback for a ruble and did not have to go hungry. One day there was even some shooting going on near us but no bullet struck our cabin. We had locked the door from inside and the outside door was also locked so no one disturbed us. Finally after two days we could proceed and came home without further incident'.

The success of this mission, so typical of anything the Arkadakers undertook of course was soon to be dashed. The fortunes of war would soon end any hope of restoring anything to the settlement as Huebert explains in his account.

'On our arrival we of course distributed the protection certificates to the villages and the private owners which unanimously heralded a higher outlook. They had advised us in Moscow not to argue with the Reds. Rather

we should keep a very accurate record of what they took from us. Later they would have to pay us for everything.

'I can no longer say for certain how long it was before a bomb was thrown in to the ambassador's house and he had to flee the country since Germany had lost the war on the western front. Then we had to hide our protection certificates so they did not fall in to the hands of the Reds. That would have been very bad for us'.

A hundred years later one has to marvel at the resourcefulness and stamina of these settlers.

The Klassen Papers

Part Twelve

1929 – A Year of Sorrow and Hardship

Vic Epp

May 24, 2004

When most of us are reminded of 1929, we think of the Wall Street crash in the United States and the beginning of the Great Depression. In Canada we think of the terrible drought where fertile topsoil was blown across the prairies, leaving parched dead crops in the fields and cattle dying of thirst. We think of soup kitchens, of riding in railway boxcars across the country looking for work. It was a hard time to be living in the West.

1929 was a hard time to be living in Arkadak as well, but for entirely different and far more sinister reasons. It was the escalation of the softening up process that would rob the people not only of their possessions, but their resolve and their will as well. By 1928 the District Administrative Authority or "Rayon" already had a representative sitting on every village counsel in order to take control of its activities. In order to force the settlers to sell more grain, quotas were set for the amount that must be sold (to the state). Seven families in the villages were singled out as being well off (Kulaks) and for them the required quota was doubled. But since these seven families were to be underwritten by his own commission and it refused, the representative could do nothing about it.

Since the scheme of assessing quotas did not work, a new tack was taken. J. Klassen describes it in his account of 1952. 'Since the scheme for the sale of grain did not succeed, they assessed a certain sum (of value) against all the farms to be paid over if the grain was not sold by a set time. Thus an amount of equal value in machinery or livestock would be confiscated. As a result many of the Mennonite farmers went to their Russian neighbors on the Steppes in the night and bought the needed grain to sell to the state. They would have to pay double the price, but it was to no avail. They would fill the required quota only to be given another, larger one. In the end they (the local authorities) would go on to various yards and take horses, cows, machinery and even household goods. They were

especially fond of centrifuges and sewing machines. The biggest affront was that everyone had to guarantee in writing to seed the land the following spring. Should anyone tell the authorities they had no seed, he would reply, "You still have enough hidden away". In this way the people were made vulnerable and compliant in order to get them to join the collective as soon as possible. These turbulent times quickly started an exodus to Moscow'.

The systematic dismantling of Arkadak under the iron fist of Stalin had reached an irreversible momentum. Settlers now were fleeing to Moscow in order to emigrate, often in the night and leaving everything at home standing so that no one knew whether they had gone or not. When the authorities noticed this activity they tried to stop it by refusing to issuing train tickets from the Arkadak station. That meant travelling to other surrounding railway stations in order to reach their destination.

But even this last hope came to an end, adding to the misery of the settlement. The hammer fell again on Arkadak, as Klassen relates. 'So it was on the eighth of November, about four o'clock in the afternoon that a gathering was assembled (they happened almost every day). This time members of the G. P. U. had come out. In a shock to us all, they came to our house with my father, accompanied by three men from the G. P. U. Mother and we children all had to sit together. Father was made to stand beside us. We were guarded by one G. P.U. member while the other two searched the house. When they were finished father, along with old letters, antiques, photographs etc. was taken away. It was a terrible day. Yet this tragedy happened not only at our place, but was conducted at fifteen places in our settlement, and on the same afternoon'.

'These people were imprisoned in Boloschow and on the third of March, 1930 after terrible trials were sentenced to five, eight, and ten years imprisonment. At that time ten years was the maximum sentence. Anyone with a sentence over ten years was shot. The men were sent to Kottlas'.

'Now that the people had been frightened in to submission, it was only a short while before they all volunteered to join the Collective. The families of the fifteen fathers were required to write a special request in order to be included. That is how, in December of 1929, the Collective was established in our settlement'.

One paragraph in Klassen's letter gives a little glimpse of the tremendous wealth of the Arkadakers that went well beyond material things and was the true foundation of their enduring strength. Even the Bolsheviks could not take this away from them. 'Thus the year 1929, already with much sadness and suffering came to its end. Even so, the suffering was released by the rich blessings of a Christmas program on December 24th. Since no Christmas program was allowed at the school, the youth had got together and presented a fine program under the direction of Peter Braun. This was the last congregational Christmas celebration. For a room they used the granary of Peter Hübert.

Who can say more?

Part 13

The Soviet Agenda

Vic Epp

May 28, 2004

It has been said of farming in Russia that crop yields depend more on the weather than on the seed and soil. Generally that is true. High winds for days on end parch the soil and drive the rain clouds across the skies without so much as a drop of water. The prospect of famine is always lurking in the shadows. As far as can be determined, none of these hazards ever threatened the settlers of Arkadak. But they would face a severe famine. It was one that no amount of skill and hard work could have averted. Of course, this was the manufactured famine orchestrated by the Soviets to suit their own ends. J. Klassen, in his letters of 1952 describes it this way.

'Since the harvest of 1932 must be fully sold to the state, nothing could be returned to the workers (Collectivists). I can't report on the number of deaths but many people bloated up from mal nourishment. Many things were eaten that were normally considered inedible and as a result there were many more illnesses'.

'The intention of this orchestrated famine was as follows: The state wanted foreign currency such as gold and silver. So in Arkadak a store was set up where anything imaginable could be purchased, but only for the above named currency (while all the other shops stood empty). The dollar was worth 1 Rubel - 94 Kopeks, then it was reduced to 1 Rubel - 50 Kopeks. In the store 16 kg flour, for example, cost 2 Rubels, 57 Kopeks. 16 kg oatmeal cost 3 Rubels, 25 Kopeks, whereas the price in the free market for 16 kg flour was 150 Rubels and a Seaglass of oatmeal was 3 Rubels, though very seldom was anything brought on the market'.

'The euphoria over being able to obtain so and so for such and such value is indescribable. There were few among the old married couples who wouldn't exchange their wedding rings for survival. And so, not only dogs and cats disappeared from the streets, but also wedding rings from fingers'.

The wind that parched the earth and emptied the larder of the colony this time was the ill wind of political tyranny causing famine and misery for the settlers. In hardly more than twenty years Arkadak's bright rising star had plummeted even lower than at the colony's founding. It was being systematically ground into meteoric dust under the boots of Soviet machine. The once proud settlement was now reduced to measures of basic survival. It is heart rending even to think about the indescribable hardship and humiliation that the settlers were forced to endure. This was just another step in the long succession of injustices to be endured. They had already witnessed the exile of a number of families in 1930 for the sake of manpower in the mines of Kazakhstan as Klassen describes.

'These families had to leave their homes with only carrying packs. They were taken by rail across the deserts of Kazakhstan as far as the railway went. At the end of the rail line they all had to get off and walk another two hundred kilometers to their destination (according to letters and reports). They were not only Mennonites, but all foreign nations in Russia who had suffered the same fate'.

'Since there was no building material yet the people had to dig out earthen bunkers and live in them until a barracks was built. A notice soon came that Abram Dyck's parents and Heinrich had died. Mines were opened in the area. So in a short time a large city was built'.

It seemed as though the last vestiges of human dignity were being stripped away from a once proud community of people. In trying to analyze the Russian motive behind these brutal activities it is difficult to determine whether they were aimed against the Mennonites and other foreigners living in the country for a vengeful purpose. Perhaps it was just a blind disregard for ordinary people who were merely pawns in the government's pursuit of its own aims. After all, only sixty or seventy years had passed since social reforms had begun to take place in Russia. Perhaps it was a little of both. Nevertheless, the Arkadakers who had been unwilling or unable to emigrate were paying a heavy price. And now they had neither opportunity nor resources to escape. Only faith and a faint hope would sustain them.

Part Fourteen

Mass Arrests of 1937 - 1938

Vic Epp

May 26, 2004

The settlers of Arkadak had already experienced a number of individual arrests and banishment starting in 1929. In the fall of 1937 the mass arrests began in earnest. Now the authorities came in trucks, loaded them with men and even some women and drove off into the night with their prisoners in to "never to be seen again" uncertain destiny. Klassen describes the means by which these arrests were carried out.

Usually someone from the village counsel would have to accompany them. In village number two for example, the feared ones came to the schoolyard (now Club) when not enough local counselors were available to go along with them. 'Three men from the N.K.W.D. (Peoples commission for interior activities) would arrive. They would go to a selected window, wake the person and demand they come to the Club immediately. One never knew whether he himself must go (be banished) or not. It always caused a great deal of agitation and great concern for the families of the awakened ones who waited with much worry about their return'.

'At the 'Club' a ticket was handed out with the name of the one sought after. "Do you know this man?"

"Yes."

"Then show me where he lives."

'So one went, accompanied by a man from the N.K.W.D. through the dark street without uttering a single word. Here and there windows were lighted. Having heard the vehicle, one knew that people would again be taken'.

'There was always a great inner turmoil even if one appeared calm on the outside. They came to their intended person and knocked on the window. "Open up immediately!" One knew that this was an instant pass to Siberia.

The N.K.W.D person made a quick search of the house. The housewife took a prepared sack which she had previously packed from the clothes hamper, since it was usually too late to pack the necessities once the tyrants were in the house. The father gave his sleeping children one last hug and tearful kiss and disappeared with his bundle on his back toward "never to be seen again" into the dark night. The Lord alone know where to and for how long this separation will last'.

The shock of these sudden forced separations fell like mighty hammer blows on the victims and on the settlement. Numbed by the traumatic events, each had to go toward his own fate. In his 1952 writings, J. Klassen paints a bleak picture of life in the villages.

'Now that most of the men were gone and the children were at school, all the work that had to be done in the Collective fell to the women. Outside of their heavy duties of the household chores and raising children, they had to punctually be at their workplace by nine a.m. They were then able to go home an hour early at noon and in the evening. Children under six years of age had to be brought to Kindergarten where they were looked after. If there was a meeting called in the evening (which happened almost every evening), the housewife had to spend the whole evening there too. (Immediate judgement) Should she withdraw from this it was considered to be a very serious matter from a woman whose husband was already banished. (Freedom and Equality!)

'The kindergarten was closed for the winter and so the housewife was able to stay home provided she wasn't the only income earner who had to work to earn a living'.
And so in spite of the Herculean efforts of community and its leaders, the Soviets had slowly and methodically ground the hopeful, energetic colony to a mere shadow of it's former self. They looked upon the people in it as little more than livestock. All that was left was to endure. Even that was no guarantee of survival.

Part Fifteen

Distress or Hope

Vic Epp

May 30, 2004

Turbulence and uncertainty hung over Arkadak like a dark unmoving cloud, raining down hardship upon hardship. When first reading about the seemingly relentless onslaught of abuses and indignities, one marvels that the settlers did not just give up and submit to Soviet doctrine. Some did of course, but certainly not many. Never far beneath the surface was the unshakable faith that sustained them in their trials. Nor was the vigilance over the events that might improve their lot ever out of their minds. Careful note should be taken too, in J. Klassen's letter of 1952, that the hand of God can be seen in measuring the steps of the Mennonites.

Even though the young men could no longer avoid military service, strange coincidences kept cropping up. Firstly, the Soviets were still having trouble with the Priviligium and it's amendments. That would mean the eligible young men would be called up into the Red army, but sent home into the Collectives with the proviso that they could be recalled at any time. This is a strange way for an army to do business. Klassen paints a more vivid picture in his "Kriegseinwirkungen - 1939" description.

‘Since the mass arrests had now diminished somewhat we believed it was possible to recover. Yet the so-called pause would soon be interrupted. It was the conflict between Russia and Finland. Renewed thoughts sprang up about whether we would face a new fate or release (from bondage). We would not be in the dark for long. Immediately all men of military eligibility were called up although they were sent back with the old proviso. But many wagons and horses were taken’.

‘Great hope sprang up among the Mennonites when Russia occupied Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bessarabia and West Ukraine. In the meantime a non-aggression treaty Germany and Russia allowed the Germans to remove Germans from those countries. This news also trickled down to our settlement. At first it was only spoken about in whispers. But the joy was so

great to be able to leave the Russian parody, it was talked about ever more freely. While no religious songs had been sung for some years, one heard with a broken heart the beloved old tunes in a lovely evening that had been sung to the old and the sick at their windows by the youth. It was as though we dreamed a beautiful dream. It was too good to be true'.

'Instead of emigrating, the young Mennonites were called up again in May of 1941. So again all hopes were dashed'.

Alternative service was no longer an option or even a question, whether it be in the Red army or for those who later escaped to the German side. In a conversation with Walter Bergen who had spent a year in Arkadak in 1933, he described exactly how it was with military service. Having been "liberated" by the Germans, they now expected eligible young men to serve them. By way of explanation they restated what they had done for the Mennonites. Now that they needed soldiers, they expected volunteers. Should no volunteers come forth, then they would issue a direct order. Should the order be disobeyed, the naysayers would be considered the enemy. Of course, the enemy was to be shot. To anyone who has ever looked down the business end of the legendary German Luger, this was a powerful incentive to volunteer.

But someone else was watching over many of the Mennonites, even in the army as Klassen relates. 'At the beginning of the war between Russia and Germany on June 22nd in 1941, the German boys were called up too. They were obedient soldiers for the most part. After a short time they were no longer allowed near the front. Arms and equipment were taken away from them and they were required to do work such as transporting munitions, kitchen duty etc. yet they were never left alone'.

'If the opportunity arose where someone could escape the Russians, the German army would welcome them. For the most part they were well trusted and used as interpreters'.

By September of that year the entire colony was evacuated and its occupants scattered throughout Asiatic Russia on various collective farms. Barely thirty years had passed since the torch of this vibrant settlement was lit. Now, amid the ravages of war, the flame flickered its last and Arkadak sank in to darkness.

Part Sixteen

Arkadak's Harvest

Vic Epp

May 30, 2004

The inscription on the front of the book of descendants of Heinrich and Katharina Epp reads; "Not a day passes that men and women of little note do great deeds, speak great words, and suffer untold sorrows. Of these obscure heroes the greater part will never be known. Therefor it is our obligation to the memory of our ancestors that we preserve our heritage for future generations".

This series of essays has embraced such a principle in bringing some of those deeds and words and sorrows to light for those who might have forgotten or those who have never known. Presented not as a historical overview but rather from the pens of the pioneers themselves the excerpts and quotations take on particular significance as they reveal far more than a passion for the colony. In the course of exploring the rise and fall of Arkadak, we see the resourcefulness of the settlers, their remarkable resilience, and their deep-rooted love for the land they called home. At times it seemed that no other place existed. For some that was true, no matter what the price.

The journey on to the Russian Steppes through the eyes of the settlers in and of itself has been an exciting one. In many ways it almost feels like home. One has the distinct sense of regret at not having been there to interact with the pioneers themselves at the time.

There is a tremendous urge to mourn the loss of this stellar community, but perhaps it is worthwhile to put the matter in to proper context and examine what has been lost. Of course one must cry for the suffering and anguish that the settlers had to endure at the hands of their oppressors. This is our flesh and blood after all, and even though the time is long past, we still carry their pain. But what else must we mourn? Fortunes were made and fortunes were lost, even in Arkadak. Exile and banishment

wiped out positions of prominence in the community. Yet none of these things are new or exclusive to Arkadak. One only needs to look around to see that nothing has changed. It is the way of the world. The irony is, if one were to exhume the graves of our ancestors as well as their oppressors and lay their remains side by side, it would be impossible to determine who was wealthier, or better, or more important. Mother Earth it seems, is the great equalizer of our worldly state.

What then is the legacy of Arkadak that the descendants hold so dear? Having gotten to know the authors of various accounts of the colony through their diligent writing, there are little hints of familiar traits in ourselves, our children and grandchildren that can be traced right back to the colony. Then as more and more anecdotes come to the surface behavior patterns begin to emerge. It doesn't take long to realize that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Arkadak and all that it was still lives. The very thing the Bolsheviks sought to destroy but could never find still thrives. There are tiny sparks of that bright star that shone over Arkadak scattered here and there all over the world. That is the real legacy.

It is a lovely notion to imagine the surprise Mister Putin would have should all the descendants of Arkadak's pioneers converge on those villages to till the soil once more. Surely its star would be bright enough to light the way as far as Moscow.