

The Mennonite Settlers in Chortitza

Introduction

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During the latter half of the eighteenth century many Netherlandic Mennonites lived in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They preferred the rich farmland in the region of the Vistula delta, an area roughly spanning the cities and surrounding territories of Danzig (Gdansk, Poland) to the northwest, Marienburg (Malbork, Poland) to the south, and Elbing (Elblag, Poland) to the northeast. The Mennonite congregations thrived.

The year 1772 brought a foundational geo-political change for the Mennonites, with the empires of Russia, Austria, and Prussia taking control of the Commonwealth and dividing it up among their respective regimes. The territories inhabited by the Mennonites, excluding for a time the city of Danzig itself, fell into the hands of the Prussian crown. The highly centralized, military, and controlling Prussian state quickly began to encroach on Mennonite independence, while restricting land acquisitions, raising taxes, and threatening the Mennonite language and culture.

Meanwhile, during the eighteenth century the Russian Empire had gradually gained control of territory beyond its western borders, slowly building up a new province occupying the lands that today form much of central and eastern Ukraine. This region became known as New Russia.

New Russia was a sparsely populated land holding great economic potential under the right leadership. Grigory Potemkin, Governor-General of this province, embarked on an ambitious plan to wrest control from the unruly Cossack inhabitants and encourage economic expansion through colonization. For the Mennonites enduring unfavorable treatment in Prussia, the invitation extended by Potemkin was very attractive. Many stepped up to accept land along the Dnipro River north of the Black Sea, together with other rights, freedoms, and economic incentives being offered.

The first Mennonites to move from the Vistula delta to new homesteads on the Dnipro River settled there in 1789 and 1790. The land they were allotted was a portion of Potemkin's estate 450 km southeast of Kiev and 160 km north of the Black Sea.

The settlers had hoped to settle farther south, nearer Black Sea ports that would facilitate agricultural exports more easily. They were frustrated in this hope by unrest and danger in the southern territories caused by the second Russo-Turkish war, not concluded until 1792. In consequence they accepted the wilderness area known as Khortytsia, along with a large island of the same name that rose out of the Dnipro River.

This is the story of some of those settler families.