

A History of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church of
Manitoba 1874-1914

by Dennis E. Stoesz

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of History, University of Manitoba,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of a
Master of Arts Degree

8 September 1987
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A HISTORY OF THE CHORTITZER MENNONITE
CHURCH OF MANITOBA, 1874-1914

BY

DENNIS E. STOESZ

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Chortitzer Mennonite Church from the time of the emigration of most of its members from the Bergthal Colony, Russia to the East Reserve, Manitoba in 1874-76 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. It first responded to the establishment of several sister and satellite communities in the West Reserve, Manitoba, and in Minnesota, North Dakota and Saskatchewan. The church further outlined its boundaries through its worship centres on the East Reserve, called meetingplaces. The Ministerial's involvement in various economic, social and political organizations led it to reflect on its role in the community and its adaptation to the Canadian setting: these involvements included borrowing large sums of money from its Swiss brethren and the Canadian government, maintaining schools for the community, and cooperating with the municipal government. A review of the religious leaders helped define the major periods of change and continuity for the church. The ministers were also forced to make some doctrinal decisions as various evangelical and conservative influences were exerted on the community. The theological position of the church was more fully defined by its use of several religious books and its interpretation of some common Mennonite tenets of faith. Religious boundaries became

Abstract

clearer as a result of these struggles and geographic and ethnic definitions of the Chortitzer community declined. The result was a sharper denominational identity of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church by 1914.

PREFACE

This paper was started at the uncovering of Bishop David Stoesz's diary in 1973. Although it mostly recorded information on agriculture, on social visits with relatives and friends, and on the weather, it offered major clues to the history of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church. I had very little previous knowledge about this church since I grew up in the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church, located across the Red River. The discovery of the diary prompted me to write a short biography of Stoesz and to transliterate a quarter of it. Soon after, Lawrence Klippenstein published an article on David Stoesz and his diary. The next few years were filled with piecing together more of the early history of this Mennonite church in Manitoba. The Chortitzer Church registers became available on microfilm, more sermons and documents were brought to light, visits to the Chortitzer Waisen Vorsteher pointed to the wealth of the Waisenamt documents, and trips to North Newton, Goshen and Ottawa proved successful. Finally, after some struggle, the narrative of this church was turned into a thesis.

I need first to thank the David A. Stoesz family, particularly Trudie (Stoesz) and William Harms, and Henry Stoesz, for the preservation of the Stoesz manuscript and for translating the diary. Secondly, I want to thank the

Preface

Chortitzer Mennonite Church for the opportunity to write some things about their early history in Manitoba, and for making available valuable research materials. More specifically, I want to mention the assistance of former Bishop Henry K. Schellenberg, Bishop William Hildebrandt, Waisen Vorsteher D. M. Friesen and D. F. Wiebe, and Gus Dueck. Thirdly, I am grateful to Lawrence Klippenstein of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives for his support in this project. I also want to acknowledge the gracious help I received from Margaret Franz, Mennonite Historical Library, from the staff at various libraries and archives, including the Mennonite Library and Archives, the Archives of the Mennonite Church, the Public Archives of Canada, and from individuals like Ed Wiebe and Henry Fast. Fourthly, I would like to thank my colleagues for their suggestions, criticisms, patience and support at various stages of this paper. Included among the list of names is Jake Peters, Adolf Ens, Leonard Doell, John Friesen, Royden Loewen and Reg Good. I also want to say a thank-you to my advisor, Professor Gerald Friesen, for turning this narrative into a thesis and for his patience while doing so. Finally, I am deeply appreciative of Rhoda (Lehman) Stoesz, my friend, companion and wife, for her support and understanding throughout this project. She also provided the main maps for this thesis and helped edit the final manuscript. I take all responsibilities for any errors in fact or interpretation in this paper, and would appreciate

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if they were pointed out to me.

Dennis E. Stoesz

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the Chortitzer Mennonite Church, Manitoba, from the time of the emigration of most of its members from Russia to Manitoba in 1874-76 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The main thesis is that the church underwent an important transition in identity from an ethnic community to a religious denomination during these forty years. The first chapter describes the migration of this community and its settlement on the East Reserve, located in the vicinity of Steinbach. The next two chapters examine how the church established its boundaries in the wider Bergthaler community and on the East Reserve. The church's involvement in the Waisenamt, schools and politics are documented in chapters four through six. A specific study of the religious leaders in chapter seven clarifies their role in the community, and provides a summary of the continuity and changes in the church. The last two chapters discuss the religious identity of the Chortitzer Church and begin to define its theological place within the wider Mennonite world.

The thesis is developed within the framework of four main themes. First, it explores the boundaries of the church community. Recent studies have begun to delineate the various Mennonite churches. Royden Loewen describes the

Kleine Gemeinde and Holdeman churches in the East Reserve village of Blumenort.¹ Peter D. Zacharias, in Reinland, mentions the Reinlaender and Sommerfelder churches in this western West Reserve village.² Esther Epp-Thiessen, in the history of the prairie town of Altona, and Gerhard Ens, in the Rhineland Municipality, describe the Bergthaler and Sommerfelder churches within the eastern part of the West Reserve.³ Frank H. Epp has described all the Mennonite church groups in his book, Mennonites in Canada.⁴ These works, despite their strengths as local histories, were of limited value as analyses of particular churches because their primary focus was a village, town, or municipality, or in Epp's case, the nation. This study, by contrast, identifies the boundaries of the church and attempts to

¹Royden Loewen, Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1874-1982 (Steinbach, Manitoba: Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983). Hereafter referred to as Loewen, Blumenort. See Appendix No. 5 for list of footnote abbreviations used throughout this paper.

²Peter D. Zacharias, Reinland: An Experience in Community (Reinland, Manitoba: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976). Hereafter referred to as Zacharias, Reinland.

³Esther Epp-Tiessen, Altona: The Story of a Prairie Town (Altona, Manitoba: D. W. Friesen and Son Ltd., 1982). Hereafter referred to as Epp-Tiessen, Altona. Gerhard J. Ens, Volost and Municipality: The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884-1984 (Altona, Manitoba: Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1984). Hereafter referred to as Ens, Rhineland Municipality.

⁴Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People, [vol. 1] (Toronto, Ontario: Macmillan of Canada, 1974). Hereafter referred to as Epp, Mennonites in Canada.

outline how the boundaries changed and were maintained.

Several scholars have written church histories. H. J. Gerbrandt narrates the story of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba from its beginnings on the West Reserve in 1892 to 1972.⁵ A recent book on the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan, 1893-1975, was written by Leonard Doell.⁶ Other examples include those histories of the large General Conference, (Old) Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches.⁷ They provide a church or institutional framework in which to explore the history of Mennonites. Although many

⁵Gerbrandt has opened up the study of the early history of the Chortitzer and Bergthaler Mennonite churches in Manitoba, 1874-92. His main focus, however, is on the Bergthaler church that continued with Bishop Johann Funk in the church division of 1892. A study of the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church is still needed. H. J. Gerbrandt, Adventure in Faith: The Background in Europe and the Development in Canada of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba (Altona, Manitoba: The Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba, 1970). Hereafter referred to as Gerbrandt, Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

⁶Doell tells the story of this church which had its roots in the Bergthaler settlements in Manitoba, but started its own church in Saskatchewan in 1893. Leonard Doell, The History of the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Mennonite Church, 1893-1975 Bergthal Historical Series No. 2 (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1987). Hereafter referred to as Doell, Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church.

⁷Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, Open Doors: A History of General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Historical Series (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1975). Hereafter referred to as Pannabecker, General Conference Mennonite Church; J. C. Wenger, The Mennonite Church in America, Sometimes Called Old Mennonites (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1966); J. A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975).

works mention the Chortitzer Mennonite Church, none have concentrated on it. The one exception is Peter Peters' essay on the Chortitzer Silberfeld congregation near New Bothwell, Manitoba.⁸

Second, this paper examines the relationship between the church and the Mennonite community. Many studies of Mennonites in Manitoba include the social, political, economic, educational and religious life of the community.⁹ Although they have started to describe the church as a separate entity, they have not always clarified its position within the Mennonite society. As Francis, the sociologist, has so aptly indicated this problem in his study of the Mennonites in Manitoba:

It was difficult to make a clear distinction between those elements of their social organization which were essentially an expression of their religion, and others

⁸Most of the books already mentioned take note of the Bergthaler and Chortitzer churches since they represented a sizeable Mennonite community in Manitoba from 1874 to 1920s. There is, however, a general lack of clarity on the boundaries and names of the church groups. Peter Peters has focussed on the one congregation of the Chortitzer Church called Silberfeld. A church building was built about one and a half miles south of Silberfeld in 1944 and people from the areas of New Bothwell, Blumengard, Hochfeld, Schoenthal, Reinfeld and Bergthal attended it. Peter Peters, "History of Silberfeld (Chortitzer Mennonite Conference)" (Steinbach Bible Institute, Steinbach, Manitoba, 1974), p. 42. Hereafter referred to as Peters, "Silberfeld."

⁹Examples include the previously mentioned scholars: Zacharias, Reinland, Epp-Tiessen, Altona, Loewen, Blumenort, Ens, Rhineland Municipality. It also includes the important work by E. K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba (Altona, Manitoba: D. W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., 1955). Hereafter referred to as Francis, Mennonites in Manitoba.

which pertained to purely secular matters and civil government.¹⁰

This paper will specifically examine the religious leadership and will try to articulate aspects of the church's role in the community.

Third, this study analyses the adaptation of Mennonites to Canadian society. Mennonites established a homogeneous social and cultural settlement on two reserves in Manitoba in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They formed village communes, had their own form of government and were in charge of their schools. Their European heritage was altered, however, as they responded to the quality of the land, the commercial agricultural economy, the railways, municipal government, settlement of non-Mennonites in reserves, and the public school system. Three scholars have developed this theme in important works. E.K. Francis, who paints with a broad brush in his Mennonites in Manitoba, covers most of these topics.¹¹ John Warkentin focusses on the agricultural aspects of the village, and illustrates the

¹⁰Francis, Mennonites in Manitoba, p. 83. In studying the village of Reinland, Zacharias has noted the close working relationship between church and civic government: "In general the [Reinlaender Church] ministry, led by Elder Wiebe, was more closely involved in colony administration than had been the case in the Russian Mennonite colonies... Although the day to day administration of village and colony affairs was left to the Schulzen and the colony executive, major directions were under clerical influence from the start..." Zacharias, Reinland, p. 58.

¹¹Francis is a sociologist by profession. Francis, Mennonites in Manitoba.

changing Mennonite settlement patterns on both East and West Reserves.¹² Adolf Ens, whose interest is church and state relations, concentrates on the issues of block settlement, education, and municipal government.¹³ This thesis will attempt to refine some of the insights of these scholars by examining one church within the Manitoba Mennonite community.¹⁴

Fourth, the thesis postulates a theological and intellectual context in which to examine Mennonites. A number of scholars have outlined some basic Mennonite beliefs: the concept of the church, nonresistance, nonconformity, community and missions. They use these tenets of faith to examine the history of the Mennonites. Theron Schlabach examines the outreach of the Mennonite Church,

¹²Warkentin is an historical geographer. John H. Warkentin, "The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba," 2 vols. (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1960). Hereafter referred to as Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements in Manitoba."

¹³Ens is a Canadian historian. Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Relations with Governments: Western Canada, 1870-1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1978). Hereafter referred to as Ens, "Mennonite Relations with Governments."

¹⁴The denominational approach also allows one to compare the Chortitzer Church with other Mennonite church groups, to see how it responded similarly or differently to the various economic, political, religious and social forces at work in the community. John H. Warkentin, for example, has recognized the church differences in attitudes toward settlement patterns, education and the outside world. Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements in Manitoba," p. 42. Another example is Adolf Ens, who takes note of the different responses of the Chortitzer and Reinlaender to municipal government. Ens, "Mennonite Relations with Governments," p. 116-36.

1863-1944, from the peace perspective.¹⁵ James Juhnke examines the overseas mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church.¹⁶ The concept of community has been specifically developed by Zacharias, in Reinland: An Experience in Community, Calvin Redekop, in Old Colony Mennonites, and in the recent book by Richard MacMaster, Land, Piety, Peoplehood.¹⁷ Frank H. Epp's emphasis on the separation of the Mennonites in his first volume of Mennonites in Canada comes close to defining nonconformity. Amos Hoover, within the Old Order Mennonite tradition, adds to that definition in his Jonas Martin Era.¹⁸ These five

¹⁵Schlabach also articulates three of the five main beliefs of the Mennonites: church, mission and peace. Theron Schlabach, Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History No. 21 (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980), p. 16, 24-25. Hereafter referred to as Schlabach, Mission and the Mennonite Church.

¹⁶James C. Juhnke, A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions, Mennonite Historical Series (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1979). Hereafter referred to as Juhnke, General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions.

¹⁷Zacharias, Reinland; Calvin W. Redekop, The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins Press, 1969). Hereafter referred to as Redekop, Old Colony Mennonites. And Richard K. MacMaster, Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790 vol. 1 (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1985) in The Mennonite Experience in America 4 vols., gen ed. Theron F. Schlabach.

¹⁸Epp, Mennonites in Canada; Amos B. Hoover, The Jonas Martin Era: Presented in a Collection of Essays, Letters and Documents that Shed Light on the Mennonite Churches During the 50 Year Ministry (1875-1925) of Bishop Jonas H. Martin, (Denver, Pennsylvania: Amos B. Hoover, 1982). Jonas Martin was a bishop of the Weaverland Old Order Mennonite Church.

Mennonite beliefs can be used as a backdrop for interpreting the church's response to various events. Nonresistance, for example, was one reason for three Mennonite churches to emigrate out of Russia. Thus, there is considerable reason to study the theology of the Chortitzer church.

This work relies heavily on primary sources which are located mainly in Manitoba. Since the minutes of the church, as far as one knows, do not exist for this period, the narrative had to be reconstructed from a variety of other materials. The collection of Bishop David Stoesz in the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg, proved to be the best single source. His diary, 1872-96, was invaluable for defining major events and his sermons for documenting the evolution of meetingplaces. The official communion and baptism sermons, 1881-1902, provided membership statistics as well as data on visits to the West Reserve, Fargo, and Rosthern. The School Constitution of ca. 1878 was found in the Stoesz papers as well. The Chortitzer Church Register books, which are kept by the church at Steinbach, provided basic information on the ministers: who they were, when they served, and their age. The registers also provided demographic data on migrations out of Russia and on the growth of the community in Manitoba. The Waisenamt documents were also useful. They are in the care of the Chortitzer Waisen Vorsteher at Ste. Anne. Articles from newspapers,

 Hereafter referred to as Hoover, Jonas Martin Era.

particularly those of the Mennonitische Rundschau and Herald der Wahrheit, provided further information on migration, visiting ministers, the leaders of the Chortitzer church, and the establishment of schools. Several smaller original collections included such things as the Peter Elias memoirs, correspondence from Cornelius Epp, the Cornelius Stoesz collection, the circa 1903 School Rules and Constitution, and certain Department of Interior files. Some of them were found in such places as Warman, Saskatchewan; Waterloo and Ottawa, Ontario; North Newton, Kansas; and Goshen, Indiana.

An explanation of the Mennonite situation in western Canada and Ontario may be useful because many of the different Mennonite churches and communities will be discussed throughout this paper. The three major groups who emigrated to Manitoba between 1874-80 were the Bergthal, Kleine Gemeinde and Reinlaender groups. They were identified in several ways: by their place of origin in Russia, by local geographic names and areas in Manitoba, and by their religious affiliation.

The families who migrated from the Bergthal Colony, Russia, to the East Reserve, Manitoba, in 1874-76, were popularly referred to as Bergthaler. Their church in Russia went by the same name, the Bergthal Mennonite Church.¹⁹ The

¹⁹A history of this Bergthal Colony has been written by

designation "Bergthaler" is useful, and will be used in this paper to describe any person or group originating in the Russian Bergthal Colony.

Half of the Bergthaler community on the East Reserve moved to the West Reserve, also located in Manitoba, between 1878-90. The Bergthaler community on the East Reserve became known as the Chortitz, or Chortitzer, Mennonite Church.²⁰ This church is the subject of this paper. The Bergthaler community on the West Reserve was known as the Bergthaler Church.²¹ There was a split in this church on the West Reserve in 1892-94. The smaller group took the name

William Schroeder. William Schroeder, The Bergthal Colony 2nd edition, Bergthal Historical Series No. 1 (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1986). Hereafter referred to as Schroeder, Bergthal Colony.

²⁰The title page for the 1887 Church Register identifies the East Reserve Bergthaler group as the Chortitzer Church: "Kirchenbuch den Gemeine zu Chortitz." It literally means "Church Register of the Church at [the village of] Chortitz." It is found in the Chortitzer Mennonite Conference Record Group, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Hereafter referred to as Chortitzer RG, MHCA. Gerhard Wiebe, bishop of the church from 1866-82, lived in this village of Chortitz, from which the name was taken, and the village became the main centre for the church. It was located west of Steinbach, Manitoba. The name "Chortitz" is also rooted in the name of the oldest Mennonite colony in Russia, the Chortitza Colony, 1789-1942, from which the Mennonites in the Bergthal Colony had migrated in 1836.

²¹An 1888 article names the church on the West Reserve "The Bergthaler Church." It also refers to its sister church on the East Reserve as "A different Church in Bergthal," because Bishop Stoesz lived in the village of Bergthal. See "Gemeinden in Manitoba, Canada," in Herold der Wahrheit (1 Mai 1888), p. 130. Hereafter referred to as "Gemeinden in Manitoba," Herold 1888.

"Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba."²² The other larger group became officially known as the Sommerfeld, or Sommerfelder, Mennonite Church.²³

There were also a number of branches of the Bergthaler group. They included, first, the people from the Bergthal Colony who moved to Minnesota in the 1870s. Second, the move of several Bergthaler people from the West Reserve to the Rosthern area in the early 1890s resulted in the beginnings of a Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan.²⁴ Third, members of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba also moved to Saskatchewan during this same time. They started a church at Herbert and joined the Rosenorter Mennonite Church around Rosthern. Fourth, members of the Sommerfelder Church, including some Chortitzers, moved to the Swift Current and Herbert areas in Saskatchewan in the early 1900s. They were affiliates of the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church of Manitoba.

The other two Russian Mennonite emigrant groups who

²²Several reasons why this group took on the name "Bergthaler" are provided by Gerbrandt, Bergthaler Mennonite Church, p. 94-95. His book is a history of this church group, 1892-1970.

²³A 1914 statistical report identifies this group as "Sommerfeld Gemeinde." "Statistik der Mennoniten-Gemeinden in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbien fuer das Jahr 1914," in Der Mitarbeiter (January 1915), p. 32. Hereafter referred to as "Statistics, 1914," Mitarbeiter. The first bishop of the church, Abraham Doerksen 1894-1929, lived in the village of Sommerfeld, thus the name chosen for the church.

²⁴See the denominational history of this church by Doell, Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church.

came to Manitoba between 1874-80 were identified slightly differently than the Bergthal group. The Kleine Gemeinde community were not identified primarily by their geographic origin in the Borosenko and Molotschna Colonies, Russia, but by their religious designation--Kleine Gemeinde.²⁵ The other group, Reinlaender Mennonite Church, were named after a central village of the community in Manitoba--Reinland. This latter group emigrated from the Fuerstenland and Chortitza Colonies in Russia and were popularly identified as the Old Colony Mennonites.²⁶

There were several church splits in and migrations out of these two Mennonite church communities. The Kleine Gemeinde community was divided between two geographic areas in Manitoba in 1874: the East Reserve and the Scratching River settlement near Morris. An 1882 church split resulted in two religious communities: the Kleine Gemeinde and the Holdeman (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite). They were found at both settlements. A later 1898 Kleine Gemeinde split in the Steinbach, East Reserve, area created a third church group, the Bruderthaler (Evangelical Mennonite

²⁵The history of this group was published in 1962. The change of name from Kleine Gemeinde to Evangelical Mennonite Conference occurred in 1952. Evangelical Mennonite Conference, The Sesquicentennial Jubilee: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1812-1962 (Steinbach, Manitoba: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1962). Hereafter referred to as Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

²⁶A history of this church group in Manitoba is found in Zacharias, Reinland.

Brethren). These three church groups will sometimes be referred to as the Molotschner Mennonites in this paper.²⁷

There was no church split in the Reinlaender Mennonite Church during this period. It did, however, excommunicate members. These excommunicated members joined the Bergthaler Church as early as 1884 and began the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Winkler area in 1888.²⁸ The Reinlaender community was geographically divided in the 1890s and 1900s as many moved to the Hague-Osler and Swift Current Reserves in Saskatchewan.

There were several migrations of Mennonites to western Canada from the 1880s to the 1920s. They included the migration out of the United States into several Saskatchewan areas, the Rosenorter Mennonite Church emigration from Prussia to Saskatchewan in the 1890s, and the movement of several Mennonites from Russia to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta throughout this time period.²⁹

²⁷It is a little easier to mention all three church groups in this way. The Kleine Gemeinde emigrant group to Manitoba originated from the Molotschna Colony, Russia.

²⁸A short history of the Mennonite Brethren Church at Winkler is provided by Frank Brown, Mennonite Brethren Church, Winkler, Manitoba, 1888-1963, by faith, 75th (Altona, Manitoba: Printed by D. W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., [1963]). Hereafter referred to as Brown, Winkler Mennonite Brethren.

²⁹The Rosenorter story is told in J. G. Rempel, Die Rosenorter Gemeinde in Saskatchewan in Wort und Bild (Rosthern, Saskatchewan: D. H. Epp, 1950). Hereafter referred to as Rempel, Rosenorter. The emigration of Mennonites to Canada from 1880s to 1920s has been documented by Epp, Mennonites in Canada, p. 303-18. A study of emigrants out of Fuerstenland, Russia, to Canada has been