

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
OF
RUSSIAN MENNONITE IMMIGRANTS
OF THE 1920's (Ontario)

Interview #4 in a series of oral history interviews of Russian Mennonite immigrants of the 1920's conducted by Henry Paetkau of Conrad Grebel College under the direction of Walter Klaassen.

Date of Interview: Thursday, May 27, 1976, 7:30 - 9:30 p.m.

Place of Interview: Residence of the interviewee

Interviewee: Mr. Alex Classen
175 David Street
Kitchener, Ontario

His sister-in-law, Miss Agnes Unrau, who came to Canada at the same time as Mr. Classen, was also present.

Interview:

PAETKAU: . . . you were born, what year, and a little bit about your own background.

CLASSEN: I was born on a big settlement--my grandparents had a big piece of land, began to get rich--I was born 14 miles from the city of Kherson on December 23, 1898, just before Christmas. Now I am about 78, this December I will be 78.

PAETKAU: So your father was a farmer?

CLASSEN: Yes. My grandparents were farmers and my father was a farmer--that was a big farm--about five and a half thousand sheep, and maybe around 400 oxen--those days they used to cultivate the land by oxen--3 yoke oxen were pulling a plow, a two-furrow. Generally, as I can remember, we had about 42 cows. We sell the skim milk here for quite good money now. That skim milk on the farm used to go to the pigs--we just took the cream off and made butter which was sold, maybe once in three weeks.

PAETKAU: What kind of education did you get?

CLASSEN: My education started at the farm because we were so separate. We had a teacher come in for my sister and me and

then about five or six of the servants' children. That was the beginning, and after five years I went for four years to Zentralschule, that was at Orloff in the colony. That was quite far from us. We had to travel by train a day and a whole night and another day, and after those four years I went to Kommerzschnule--that was eight grades in the Kommerzschnule. Because the revolution was on I just came to the sixth grade and that is where I stopped. I couldn't finish. I was up to Christmas.

PAETKAU: You were telling me about when the war broke out, when the revolution broke out.

CLASSEN: You were asking about my education. That's where it stopped. In 1917 the civil war started. At the beginning I was in the Selbstschutz (Mennonite). That year we had the German army who occupied the district and in October they left. I know I prepared myself--I bought a Helm (helmet) a German Seitengewähr and a 350 Rubels worth German gun and ammunition and I served then with the Mennonite Selbstschutz until February. We were in a field. The Makhnov, the enemy, he was a bandit, he used to come to the villages and rob and kill. I fell on the ice and I got wet and there was no chance to dry, and it froze, and I got so badly frost bitten, and so I took sick, the next day I had to return and that's when I left the colony and went to the Crimea. The Selbstschutz broke down, the Red Army occupied after all that, and so we stayed in the Crimea until the White Army came. The White Army fought the Red Army. That was in 1919. And again the White Army occupied more than half of Russian territory. They came up to the city of ⁴⁵ that is quite close to Moscow. But then something happened that the Cossacks, they weren't treated very well, and they left the front and then the Reds took over and the whole White Army collapsed. That was the failure of the White Army. Otherwise I think they would have gained the victory over the REDs.

PAETKAU: What were the feelings of the Mennonites toward the White Army?

CLASSEN: Very friendly because they didn't do any harm and they were protecting us. Just opposite what the Bolsheviks did. The Bolsheviks began to confiscate, to take away, to arrest and so on and so on. They were sure harsh.

PAETKAU: Did quite a few join the White Army?

CLASSEN: Oh, yes! Quite a few joined. I would say the young people surely went. I was serving, my brother was serving, every village I would say. But of course only Mennonites were too small percentage against the country.

- PAETKAU: What were the feelings toward the Tsar?
- CLASSEN: To make it short Russia always had some good points and bad points. The Russian Tsar was for us Mennonites we had very--well I should say--we were very good off, but if you consider against the poor Russians, they were not so good off. There were restrictions, they couldn't go to high schools, they were very poor. That's again what the Bolsheviks made more level, but if you consider the living, well they actually of these rich capitalists and so on, finally they came to the kulaks. Who were the kulaks? They were their best farmers. That is why Russia is buying wheat at this time. In the Tsar's time Russia used to export so much. We used to send bushels of wheat and grain, and now they are buying. I think that's their mistake.
- PAETKAU: Did the people really support or love the Tsar? Were they loyal to him?
- CLASSEN: Oh, yes, they were very loyal. But in the Tsar's time the Jews were persecuted. The Jews were always kind of rebellious. Well, you can see in the Old Testament. They were always the Jewish nation and I would say they weren't treated so very well. In the first place, they were not supposed to stay in Moscow for 24 hours, and in Petersburg only 12 hours, and then they used to have the if the melitz, that was in the Tsar's time, the they thought the Jews lifted their heads up too much, they made pogrom, then they were down, quiet. That's where the Jews were very much against the Tsar. As soon as the revolution came, who was so happy? Especially the Jews. We used to have all these Jewish commissars, they went in the armies, I know they sure were not friendly in our villages, these commissars.
- PAETKAU: How did the Mennonite people feel then when the Tsar was abdicated?
- CLASSEN: I remember we were all shocked at the beginning. We didn't know what would come now. Some thought it would maybe improve and others thought, no, the dark clouds are gathering now. So far it went really good. The First World War the young Russians had to join the army, and even our Mennonites had to go--they weren't in active, but in the Red Cross they used to serve, and in the forest they used to serve--to clean the forest, to guard--the Forstei. The main thing during the First World War our Mennonites were serving in the Red Cross, in the hospitals and on these Red Cross trains where they used to gather the wounded and soldiers from the front line.
- PAETKAU: Do you think maybe the Mennonites changed their attitude toward Russia, towards staying in Russia after the Tsar was killed. Did that have an effect . . .

CLASSEN: No, we were very much--we loved Russia just as our motherland, because we were--our grandparents and parents were born there already. By Catherine the Great our grandparents came in. All these years, about 152-8 years we lived in Russia. We were of German descent and we looked up to Germany, but nobody of us would like to live in Germany again. That was our homeland, and I would say, der russische Boden der war geeignet zur gute Ernten, durchweg--as a whole it was good ground. As soon as the Germans immigrated and occupied that land, like the Black Sea, and Militoba, Crimea, that was like a prayer, and all Mennonites cultivated that land. Now at the end it was such a beautiful rich land, and those colonies, at the end of the First World War, before the revolution. I know we had some Americans, Canadians, I know there was a Mr. Schlegel, he came through and he said nowhere in the world could he see anything like these colonies, so clean and everything was organized, the fruit gardens all way around and everything was planted. That changed as soon as the Bolsheviks took over.

PAETKAU: What were the feelings then of the Mennonites toward the Germans and the German army when they came in?

CLASSEN: Friendly. They were like liberators--sie wollten befreien. Before the Germans came we were under the first communists already, they took away so much, and then as soon as the Germans came, then we were liberated. But we often asked them, how long are you going to stay? And they always said, Es haengt ab von der westen Front. That was 1918. Von der westen Front. It looks during the summer very good on the western front for the Germans, but then in the fall the whole front collapsed and they had to leave Russia and then began the civil war. The White army began to organize, the Selbstschutz, but that was in the beginning kind of weak because we didn't have a good supply of guns and so on,

PAETKAU: Did the people want to go back to Germany at all--would they want to move out of Russia?

CLASSEN: No, we never had that conversation that we would go back to Germany. As soon as the White Army came up, we had the faith that the White Army would stay, and it was in 1919, they made very good progress and in the beginning of 1920 they began to retreat and we saw that they will--You see the Russian Cossacks opened the front, and as far as I know the Russian Cossacks thought they would get autonomy. The Russian Tsar gave them privileges and land, they still didn't have eigener Autonomie, and that is what they were after. This ^{7 26}, there were more than one, that was the head general of the White Army, and he rejected.

PAETKAU: What kind of government did the Mennonites think that the White army would establish? Why did they hope for the White army?

- CLASSEN: Well, the White army had a kind of liberal. We didn't expect to get a Tsar again, but we thought we get a kind of liberal government.
- PAETKAU: What did you think of the provisional government and Kerensky?
- CLASSEN: That is what we would call in Russia the Zeitregieuring, that was just to establish a temporary government and then through--durch die Wahlen--through the voting would permit a permanent government. But it never came that way. The Kerensky started with the revolution, and he was overthrown by the Bolsheviks and the communists, Lenin and Trotsky took it over.
- PAETKAU: That's when things got worse.
- CLASSEN: Yes. The arrests and the mass murdering, I tell you, people disappeared fast, and always during the night. They had a few cars. That is the way I remember. As soon as you heard a car coming, then look out! Someone would be arrested. You never saw those people again. Many of them. Now in the present time they arrest too, they send them to some concentration camp and they have got to work, but in those days they were mostly shot. . . . They went to jails.
- PAETKAU: Did they take away your land?
- CLASSEN: They would search the house and would take away what they want, like clothes, food, jewelry especially, but the land, not at the beginning, later on, like the present, I think the land is all divided to the Russians again. There is not many Mennonites left anymore. Because if we write letters we always write to Siberia, to Kakistan, a city on the other side of the Ural Mountains.
- PAETKAU: Did the Bolsheviks set up their own government?
- CLASSEN: Yes, it was Lenin, and Lenin died in 1923, and then Trotsky but Trotsky we got in again. That was our luck and then Stalin. But Stalin forbid completely the emigration. Our Mennonites - a big bunch came to Moscow, and they were all sent back, a small percentage came through Germany, but most of them went to Siberia.
- PAETKAU: What was the relationship like between the Mennonites and the Russian peasants around them?
- CLASSEN: Not bad. I would say we could understand each other very well. But what made trouble was the Red army, the first Red army. They were rough. Some units were not bad, but generally they used to take away, and then the bolshevik system they set up,

I still remember, in the district where we used to live in the last years, there was a bogun(?) in each village, and they were rough. No justice, they used to take away anything and that is what made it so hard for them.

PAETKAU: But they got along well before?

CLASSEN: Oh, yes, yes.

PAETKAU: What about in the villages, did the Bolsheviks set up their own government in the colonies too?

CLASSEN: Yes, each village had what we called soviet.
Before it was a Schulzenamt and now there was generally a German Bolshevik and they used to rule the whole village.

PAETKAU: Were they the ones who carried out these orders to arrest?

CLASSEN: No, there was a secret police that they worked through. That was a completely different and they sure were,
for us they were really dangerous. As soon as you would see a Cheka, and then they called themselves GPU, and after we were here already, from the new immigrants, KJB, and I think they still got the KJB, the Russian secret police, all the same.

PAETKAU: Could you vote for the commissars of the Soviets?

CLASSEN: They were appointed. There was no voting whatsoever.

PAETKAU: How did they treat you? How did they treat the Mennonites?
How did the Mennonites react to them?

CLASSEN: In our family, I know there were 100 cases the same. We lost everything, we had only 4 horses, a wagon, when we came to the colony. Because we had those 4 horses, we used to lend them out in harvest time, the farmers used to give so much for each horse, I would say, three bushels of wheat for a horse for one day working. So if you had 4 horses, 12 bushels would come in a day. Well, maybe during the harvest it was 2 1/2 weeks, so we had in our attic about 140 bushels wheat. And I know they came in the fall, it was a Jewish commissar, he looked over, he asked how many bushels there, and we said, at the beginning there were 140 bushels, but we took some. Put down 155 bushels! I said there weren't that many. Put down 155 bushels! That was a Jewish commissar. Then they took away the wages, and there never was 155 bushels. Then we had to buy and to give it, or to get the full amount. That was hard. You give the last one. And as far as I remember then they used to collect from each village, we used to live in Orloff, each village, that was at the end of November. Each village was supposed to give 2 complete

uniforms for a soldier, 2 guns, mit einem Wort, eine Ausstabilierung for 2 soldiers. I was in the army, I remember they took my trousers and my jacket, my high boots, they left me the cap, and the rest somebody else gave.

AGNES: You have to mention the contribution they put on . . .

CLASSEN: Well, that is natural. . . if anyone could not give that amount they had to pay so much money. But the money was again. Today it was so much, and in a month's time it was disvalued so much, I remember the time we emigrated, it was 1924, a dozen was 1 million rubles, and that 1 million, I had 1 million in my pocket, I came to Canada here in Quebec, on one side it was printed 1,000 ruble, on the other side it was 1 million and I remember I couldn't speak English so I stood on the platform and a railroad man came and he said "What you got there? What do you want for it? I give you 50 cents." He took out 2 quarters, gave them to me, and took the And then I was so happy, I had my girl friend and I remember I bought three sandwiches, one for her, and for somebody else, and one for myself. Then there was 5 cents left-- 15 cents - that was in Quebec where we landed.

PAETKAU: You mentioned before you went out into the Crimea.

CLASSEN: Yes, that was at the beginning of the Selbstschutz.

PAETKAU: Did you move up with the White army?

CLASSEN: Yes, I would say so. The road was open again. The Red army retreated, that is the way I came out, and then I joined the White army.

PAETKAU: That was still under Denijken.

CLASSEN: Yes, that was under Denijken. He was the head of all the armed forces in south Russia. I think there were seven generals. From Siberia came a big general, that was Kolchak. He had his I tell you that was a big force. If it wasn't for those Cossacks. They made a big blunder. I think Russia had a change for something better, not communist. Because the people weren't prepared for communism and even now, the communist party is not so very strong, only they keep it under iron rule. There is force.

PAETKAU: And then the White army was driven back again.

CLASSEN: Yes, they retreated. And then what happened. Many Russians who were soldiers in the White army, they ran over and joined the Red army. Whoever was victor, they ran over there. But not for the officers. . . .

PAETKAU: And then under Ra they moved up again.

CLASSEN: After Djneken the next spring came Ra but he was too
weak.