

THE GERMAN BROTHERHOOD

*254 Years of History
from the Volga River
in Russia, U.S.A.,
Canada, South America,
and Siberia*

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Happy Birthday

Sister Felker

Love

Sister Klaus



The purpose of compiling this history of the German Russian Brotherhood is two-fold.

Many times brothers have been asked as to when and where the brotherhood had it's beginning, and this information will acquaint interested persons, along with the second and third generations of the German Russian colonists of their heritage.

The second reason is to point out the uniqueness and necessity of the brotherhood principal of the "universal priesthood of all believers", which is demonstrated by the brotherhood lay movement within the church. Our history will reveal where this need was first evident, and how it still exists today. A great deal of the information on the following pages was taken from Professor George Eisenach's book, Pietism and the German Russian in the United States. Other facts were gathered from various history books and also actual experiences.



PASTOR WILHELM STAEKEL
VON NORKA



PETER EHLERS
EVANGELIST HEINRICH

From 1764 to 1768, 104 German colonies, with a total population of 23,019, were established along the Volga River in Central Russia, in what were then the governments of Saratov and Samara. This large territory was for the most part a treeless plain, or steppe, where nomadic semi-savage tribes of Tartars, Bashkirs, Kieghiz, and Kalmucks lived.

The Russian government had attempted to establish a defense against these tribes by colonizing this region with Russian settlers. The plan failed, however, because the Tartar tribe soon attacked and destroyed the settlements. Moreover, the Volga region had been a place where criminals, fugitive slaves, escaped convicts, and exiles banded together and became a terror of the entire province. Because of these circumstances the Russian settlers found it to their advantage to either join the vagabonds and marauders or to return to their original homes.

In 1763, the government tried a new plan. Instead of settling her own people in this region, Catherine II, in a manifesto issued July 22, invited people of other nationalities to settle this Volga area, offering special privileges as an inducement. She hoped in this way to bring in a higher type of culture than was found among the Russians and set up a defense against the nomadic tribes. The Empress looked above all to the German farmers who, by the example of advanced methods of farming, were to encourage the Russians. The response to the invitation was made almost entirely by Germans.

The invitation came when conditions in Germany were almost at their worst. The Seven Years' War had ended in 1763, the year the manifesto was issued. Poverty was widespread and fields were waste. Commerce and manufacturing had suffered heavily. People began to think of emigration, and many went to Poland, to Hungary and to America. When the manifesto was issued, it found ready response and thousands of Germans turned their faces toward the land of Volga.

The charter of privileges given to the German Colonists by the Empress included the following guarantees:

1. Full religious liberty except they could not encourage their faith among the Russians.

2. They would not have to serve in the Military Service.
3. Complete control over their own churches and schools.
4. Granted 30 "dessiatine" (65 acres) to every immigrant family.
5. Almost complete independence in local government. Their only connection to the Russian government was through a court which acted as guardians at Saratov.
6. Free transportation from Germany to their new home in Russia.
7. Tax exemption for ten years.
8. Interest free loans on 500 rubles.

As a result of these attractive terms, thousands of Germans mostly from Hesse, Saxony, the Palatinate, Westphalia, Swaben, Baden, Wuerttemberg, and Bavaria moved to the Volga from 1763 to 1768. Included in this group of Germans were farmers, tailors, barbers, craftsmen, officers, students, artists and even a few wigmakers. Rosslau, Regensburg, and Freiburg were gathering centers. From these points they went to Luebeck and Danzig to board a ship to Kronstadt, the distributing center and then on to Oranienbaum, where they took an oath of allegiance to Catherine II. After a brief stay they continued their journey to Moscow and St. Petersburg. From there they moved southward to Saratov, then a city of 10,000. Here the Empress had established a branch of the guardian court which handled all governmental affairs affecting the German colonists. At this point they received enough money and means to make a start in farming. In wagons they were then taken to the open plains along the Volga where they were to settle. It was a long journey with many hardships and disappointments, with hunger, cold, sickness and death.

But colonists continued to come until 1768, when emigration from Germany was stopped by the German government. By that time 104 colonies had started, 59 on the

eastern side and 45 on the western side of the Volga. The colonists were grouped into small farm villages from 20 to 80 families. The houses, barns, and stables generally all under one roof, were located on both sides of a long wide street. The first buildings were made with mud walls and thatched roofs. The farm land reached out and away from the village.

In spite of long years of suffering, sacrifice and struggle that followed, population increased so rapidly that population increased from 23,019 in 1768 to 668,896 by 1914.

From among these German colonies there arose a lay movement called the "Brotherhood", with deep religious convictions. Three conditions mostly responsible for the general religious awakening in which the Brotherhood movement began were:

1. Very difficult economic and social conditions. Poverty, hardships and the suffering of the colonists made the message of the revivalist all the more convincing. Life for the newcomers was hard at its best. They were cut off from the world at large on the eastern border of civilization and suffered unusual hardships. Their hopes and dreams were shattered immediately upon their arrival at their places of settlement. They had been promised that everything would be in readiness, that houses would be built, and that machinery and livestock would be on hand, but little or nothing had been done. They had been told that the Volga region was a paradise, but when they arrived they saw nothing but an endless plain. When they were told that that was to be their future home, they looked at each other with frightened expressions. "Is this our paradise?" asked one of the colonists bitterly. "Yes," replied another, "but it is "Paradise lost."

The early settlers passed through times of famine and sickness. The dark winter days and the long nights seemed never to end. They were separated from all mankind and lived miserably and in greatest need.

In some places there was such a shortage of wood that the colonists had to build underground dwellings in the manner of the nomadic tribes. Continuous crop failures, attacks by packs of wolves, epidemics of malaria, typhoid fever, and smallpox that ravaged many of the settlements and killed entire families - all these hardships brought about endless distress and hopeless confusion. The prospects were indeed gloomy. In their disappointment some of the immigrants started back to Germany only to lose their lives on the way.

The distress of the colonists was still further intensified by the fact that during the first fifty years of their life on the Volga they were exposed to the attacks of semi-savage tribes of Tartars, Bashkirs, Kalmucks, and Kirghiz. These nomadic packs of the steppe prowled about on horseback and looted and devastated many of the German villages. Women were carried off and sold into the harems of wealthy Mohammedans. Many men, old and young, were killed. Old men were tied to the tails of horses and dragged to death. The entire population of some villages was sold into slavery. Forts with ramparts and trenches were built around many villages, making them look like army camps.

The Rebellion of Emerlian Pugachev, which took place from 1773 to 1775, also caused untold suffering for the German colonists. In May 1773, this bold Cossack gathered round him discontented Russians, as well as non-Russians, and led a rebellion which covered all east and south-west Russia. He captured town after town on the Volga and in December was master of Samara. In 1774, he moved his uprising to the Middle Volga. With his band of robbers he swept like a tornado over the Volga colonies, stealing everything in sight. Many men met their death at the hands of these invaders, and women and children were driven from their homes. Houses and barns were burned to the ground, and the cattle were driven away. Suffering and sacrifice, struggle and dis-

appointment, all helped in paving the way for the colonists to respond to the preaching of a living gospel, and made of their settlements a fertile field for Pietism.

2. Shortage of Ministers. A second condition, which accounted in part for the beginning and development of a religious lay-movement among these immigrants, was the shortage of professional religious leadership. The Russian government had promised to provide and support clergymen for the German colonists, but from 1764 to 1772, only seven Volga colonies had been given pastors, and as early as 1769, the government refused to support even this number. By 1820, the need for Protestant ministers had become so urgent that frequently Roman Catholic priests - 29 of the 104 Volga colonies were Catholic - were asked to minister to the spiritual needs of Protestants. In that year, the 75 Protestant settlements had only fourteen pastors, of whom one served a parish of 12 churches; and as late as 1860, there was only one minister for every 6,400 souls. The average membership of the Protestant parishes in 1914 was 13,393. Here, indeed, were sheep without a shepherd.

Moreover, the ministers the colonists did have, with the exception of those from the Moravian colony of Sarepta in Russia, were not of a high caliber. Immorality and drunkenness, was found among them. Individuals who had made themselves "impossible" as pastors in their homeland, came to minister to the Germans in Russia. There were even a few who posed as clergymen, having done other work before coming to the Volga. Preaching was cold and formal. One of the ministers confessed that he often entered the pulpit with as little spiritual power and forethought as a "squeezed lemon has juice."

Johannes Scheurl, a Moravian evangelist, declared that among the early pastors there was only one worthy of the profession, namely Re. Janet, a Swiss Pietist.

To have no shepherds at all is bad; to have immoral and powerless shepherds is worse. Added to this condition was the indifferent state of religion in the church, a third influence which played a role in preparing the ground for spread of Pietism among the colonists. It was, indeed, a fertile field for the evangelist.

3. Orthodoxy of Church. The Lutheran Church was the main religious body among the Protestant colonies in Russia. Within its fold were seventy-eight per cent of the Volga Protestant Christians, the remaining were from the Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The sole requirements made upon the members of the Lutheran Church was reception of the Word and sacraments, and obedience to several ordinances affecting church life. Religion was dry and formalized and worldliness and spiritual indifference spread through the congregations. However, individuals and groups, no longer finding satisfaction of soul which their spirits craved, began to doubt that the religion of the church, which paid more attention to doctrine, than holiness of character, would assure one of salvation. What they desired was a personal and individual religion which showed itself in Christian conduct and gave a rightful place to genuine conversion. Groups of laymen, who lost hope in the increasing formal religion of the church, sought to revitalize faith by a strong emphasis upon evangelism and revivalism.

Some of the principal sources from which Pietism came to the German colonists in Russia were (1) the Moravian community of Sarepta in Russia, (2) Wuertemberg Stundism, (3) Millennialism and (4) Moravian evangelists from Germany.

(1) The Moravian Community of Sarepta

In 1765, the Moravian Brethren established a colony in Russia, in the immediate neighborhood of heathen Kalmucks, Kirghiz, and Tartars, and on the eastern border of

the area which was being settled by the Volga Germans. The chief purpose of the colony, named Sarepta was to do missionary work among the Kalmucks.

Mission work among this tribe was almost impossible due to the language and the peculiar religion of the Kalmucks so that in several years of toil only one convert was baptized by the Sarepta missionaries. Because of the unsuccessful attempt with the Kalmucks, the Moravians turned their attention to the German colonists.

The man who induced the Sarepta Brethren to carry their missionary services to the Volga Germans was the Rev. J. Janet, a Swiss Pietist, who, in 1764 was commissioned to labor among these immigrants in Russia. Rev. Janet, whose religion was warm and vital, was the first of the Swiss Pietists to find his way to the eastern frontier of Protestant Christianity, and was the right man to carry on the work among the colonists. He visited the Moravian settlement of Sarepta in 1776, a year after his arrival in Russia, and brought back with him Brother Johann Heinrich Langerfeld, a lay evangelist, who became his assistant. Rev. Janet was from the United Brethren.

Brother Langerfeld, possessing child-like faith and deep experience and knowledge of the Word of God, gave himself without reserve to his task. He organized prayer meetings, conducted local revivals, and gave religious instructions. After two years, he was succeeded by Brother Johannes Scheuerl, a watchmaker. He lived in Sarepta as a watchmaker, but made regular evangelistic tours among the colonists. Under his preaching small groups of converts were gathered into prayer meetings especially in Anton, Dietel, and Balzer, and through his activity and that of Rev. Janet, a revival swept the colonies of Anton, Doenhoff, and Dietel in 1769.

In 1777, the Sarepta church appointed a married couple, Daniel Willy and his wife,

to live among the German immigrants and to devote full time to missionary activities. Johannes Nitschman followed two years later, and in 1782 a second couple, Lukas Stoeckly and his wife, were sent out. Other evangelists followed until 1821, and during a period of fifty-seven years the Sarepta colony sent eighteen missionaries to the German Colonists.

In 1820, the Moravian mission was suddenly closed by the General Consistory of the Protestant Churches in Russia. For another year the Moravian Brethren carried on their work, mostly in the guise of cobblers and tailors to escape detection. During the day they pursued their occupations and at night conducted prayer meetings. But this continued only until 1821 when the last Sarepta evangelist sent to the Volga Brother C. F. Lessing, terminated his services. This year marked the end of a fifty-seven year period of Moravian activity.

The preaching of Moravian missionaries was the simple story of salvation. They presented no well-defined creed. The characteristic doctrine of the Brethren was free redemption justification, and salvation through the Blood of Christ. They dwelt on a personal acquaintance with the Savior. Unbroken fellowship with the Man of Sorrows was the central theme of their teaching. In their meetings with the German colonists, the Moravian Brethren centered their preaching around the Crucified Christ, and to this day the theology of the Cross remains a basic doctrine of the Russian German Brotherhood movement.

As a result of the earnest and widespread evangelism of the Moravian Brethren, thousands of colonists entered into a Christian experience. Surrounded by uncertain economic conditions and filled with terror as they looked out upon the barren region into which they had been placed, they found security in the Christian faith.

When Dr. Fessler, superintendent of the General Consistory of the Protestant Churches in Russia, in 1820, took the necessary steps to have the Moravian mission terminated, he

opposed, at the same time, the Brotherhood among the colonists, on the ground that a laymen's movement of a religious character would undermine the work of the Church.

Although the Brotherhood suffered a general decline in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, converts, here and there, continued to hold their meetings of prayer, sometimes in secret. As a whole however, the spirit of prayer lay dormant, waiting for evangelists that were soon to come.

(2) The Stunden

Another source from which Pietism came to the German colonies in Russia was Wuertemberg Stundism. (Wuerttemberg was a region in Southwest Germany and Stunden meant devotional hours.) Dr. Spener was the spiritual father of the religious awakening in this area and it grew out of the conviction that the type of christianity that was practiced by Lutheranism was in need of reform. In Spencer's writing he recommended these means of reviving the Church; (1) Outpouring of the Bible among the people, accompanied by earnest Bible study; (2) doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which would give all the right and duty to instruct and to edify, and to share in the church government; (3) knowledge of Christianity should be practical and show itself in charity, forgiveness and devotion.

These Stunden unified the followers into a life of close religious fellowship and proved to be an important sign of vital Christianity. They were founded on the doctrine of universal priesthood of all believers, and procured for every Christian the opportunity of testifying of his own religious experience. These Stundists aspired to carry on their movement within the church, holding prayer meetings, conducted by lay members called Stundenhalter, by attending church services and participating in the sacraments.

(3) Millennialism

Another display of Wuertemberg Pietism which

deeply affected the religious life of the German colonists in Russia was Millennialism. This belief, which may be defined as a devout faith in the imminence of the second coming of Christ and immediately the beginning of Millennium, took deep root in Wuertemberg under the influence of Bengel, Petersen and Jung-Stilling.

(4) Moravian Influence and History

The Moravian Brothers were followers of John Huss and were sometimes called Hussites. John Huss was a Bohemian religious reformer and martyr. The English reformer John Wycliffe influenced him and his death as a martyr, that set off a civil war in Bohemia, inspired Martin Luther in his revolt against the Catholic Church some years later.

Huss was a priest and influential preacher and because of his continued attacks against the policies of the Catholic Church, which he considered was contrary in many ways to the Bible, he was burned at the stake by the Council of Constance, a body of church leaders and Emperor Sigismund.

His followers, the Hussites or Moravian Brothers were organized to avenge the killing of Huss, 40,000 strong. The army of Emperor Sigismund was 100,000 in number, but the Moravian Brothers were victors in the battle. Pope John 23rd, then called out all devout Catholics to fight against the "church robbers" and assured them a good place in heaven if they joined the battle, and a strong army was gathered. Again the army of Emperor Sigismund was defeated along with the Catholic Church. Twice more they battled, but each time the Moravian Brothers were victorious. After their four victories, the Moravian Brothers received their four previous requests of the Catholic Church:

1. The open Bible from which to preach.
2. Preaching in their native tongue and not in Latin.
3. All members of the church were to participate in the Lord's Supper with bread and wine, and not only the bread.

4. Preachers were to be from their own people, and not from Rome.

The Catholic Church agreed to these terms, but in return they had to agree to be subjects of Emperor Sigismund and a treaty was signed. The treaty was a defeat however, because the Brothers then divided into two groups, those who went along with the treaty and those who still opposed the Catholic Church. War again broke out, and those who opposed the treaty were soon defeated and the Catholic Church and Emperor Sigismund were soon in full control. The Church decided to do away with this group of brethren, so it was necessary for them to meet and worship in secret. So many were persecuted, that before long there were only 200 Moravian Brothers left.

The Catholic Church gave this group of 200 believers an ultimatum of either leaving the country or adhering to the doctrines of the church so the Brethren journeyed to Germany, and settled on land offered them by Count Nikalous von Zinzendorf, a pious German who had an estate in Saxtony. After a town of Herrnhut was established, the Moravian Brothers began their mission work.

The most characteristic feature of Moravianism is its missionary zeal. Ten years after the arrival of the first settlers a Herrnhut, in 1732, there was a decided movement to settle in foreign lands. This eagerness to colonize was due to their missionary interest. From the time they settled in Herrnhut until they began their mission work among the German Russians from the mission station in Sarepta was only 42 years, and they worked there continuously for 57 years until they were forced leave. After a period of 45 years, two Moravian Brothers again came to the Volga to re-establish their work with the colonists along the Volga. The Moravian Brethren started their missionary work at a time when churches in Europe had no interest in foreign missions. Most of these missionary settlements were formed in the middle of the eighteenth century, and they led to their successful missions among the heathen. The missionary fame of the Moravians has been increased by the fact that their settlements were made mostly in such regions as were inhabited by people still almost entirely uncivilized.

The Moravian Brothers are also referred to in history as the Hussites, the United Brethren, the Bohemian

Brethren, and the Herrnhut Brethren. We can find none of their work among the German Colonists on the Volga recorded in history, with the exception of the book by George Eisenach, Pietism and the Russian Germans in the United States. Even a Moravian pastor that was contacted, was not aware of this missionary endeavor. The Brotherhood should be very grateful to Professor Eisenach for his book that contains information that is so unique to them.

A great debt is owed to the Moravian Brethren by the German Russian Brotherhood for in a sense the German Brotherhood is a part of the Moravian Brotherhood.

Henry Hartwig, who was the first scribe of the Brotherhood Conference which was organized in 1871, speaks in his Manuscript of two Moravian Brethren who had been active evangelists in the Herrnhuter churches in Germany and came in 1868 to the Volga where they began their missionary activities in the villages of Balzer and Messer. Being cobblers, they went from village to village, and from house to house, carrying on their trade. Henry Hartwig, who became acquainted with them in his twenty-third year, states that both possessed considerable ability in singing, which helped in their evangelistic efforts and also their trade.

The divine fire which these two Moravian Brethren kindled, spread from Balzer and Messer to Mehr and Guten and then south to Dobrinka, and then on to Doenhof, Straub, Laub and Dinkel. Nothing seemed capable of putting out the flame. These evangelists were soon regarded as "beings from another world." Their meeting had to be held in secret because of a governmental Church Law of 1857 started: 1. That religious meetings which exceed the bounds of family devotions may hereafter not be conducted by laymen without previously notifying the civil authorities and obtaining permission from the Consistory; 2. That in such meetings no one has the right to preach or administer the Sacraments, and that all religious exercises therein shall be limited to the reading of the Scriptures, without explanation, or to such religious transactions and discussions as will be permitted by the Consistory, without any additions or further explanations; and to the singing of the spiritual hymns and the offering of prayer, which also must be examined and approved by the Consistory; 3. That

these meetings shall not be held at the time of the regular church worship services, and that they shall in no case cause dissension within the Church or in no wise conflict with spiritual or civil regulations.

The Moravian evangelists, whose meetings were conducted in violation of both the spirit and letter of this Church Law, were reported to the local authorities at Balzer and taken into custody. As a punishment, they were whipped and all villagers were invited to attend the spectacle. Henry Hartwig, a young medical practitioner, who had witnessed the persecution in which one of the evangelists had been whipped into unconsciousness, pronounced him "dead" in order to save his life, and was so moved that he joined the Brotherhood. Later he became the first scribe of the Brotherhood Conference. After the evangelists were released, they continued to make their rounds in the various villages, saying that one must "obey God rather than man." Persecution continued, but the movement grew in spite of it, or because of it. The speakers attracted a large number, and many became leaders of the movement in their own communities. In Doenhof, Brother Becking became an evangelist, in Straub, Brothers Heinrich Rudolph and Johannes Roth became leaders, in Laub it was Brother Rehn, and in Dinkel, Brother H. P. Ehler, who as an evangelist served the Brotherhood from 1871 to 1924.

Clergymen and civil authorities viciously and relentlessly opposed the missionary activities of the Moravian Brethren and that of other religious bodies.

Organization and Expansion of the Brotherhood

It was the Rev. Wilhelm Staerke who gave organization to the Brotherhood movement. Born and reared on the Volga, and converted in one of the revival meetings there, he received his theological training in the Basel Missionary School. His heart beat warmly for his countrymen, to whom he returned to minister, and his great contribution to the Brotherhood was guiding the converts in organization of their religious endeavors and leading them through many hardships.

Under his personal guidance and supervision the first Brotherhood Conference was organized in 1871, in the village of Brunnental. Its purpose was to consolidate the strength of the Brethren, to give them official recognition, to protect them against persecution, to

clarify the doctrinal position of the converts, to set up rules for the individual prayer meetings, and provide the opportunity for fellowship.

This new organization rendered a great service by bringing a large group of people together. Because the individual prayer meetings were scattered over a wide area and had had little opportunity for intercommunication, they were in deep need of mutual sympathy and encouragement, and no other factor united them into a closer bond of love and inspired them with greater zeal than did the Conference.

An important step taken at the Conference was the passage of a resolution that the Brotherhood members should retain their church membership. Rev. Staerkel pointed out that the privilege would be to their decided advantage in that they would otherwise have no anchor and be exposed to the "four winds of sectarian influence." Evangelist Ehler always advised the Brethren to stay in the Church, saying on numerous occasions: "Brueder, bleibt bei der Kirche." He declared he would leave the Brotherhood, should it become sectarian. One of the rules drawn up during the organization of the Conference reads that the "Brethren should be active members of the Church." They have always regarded themselves as "Kirchliche Brueder." (Church Brothers). It was the singular fortune of the Brethren of Russia that they maintained their movement within the Church, adhering to the pattern laid down by Spencer and Francke.

An equally important step taken at the Conference was the election of two evangelists, H.P. Ehlers and Johannes Koch. These men were zealous believers of conversion by the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the need of repentance, complete submission to the will of God, and the necessity of righteousness in all endeavors. Their message, which surrounded the individual communities in a heaven-like manner won enthusiastic reception, for the people heard them gladly. Brother Lorenz reports that the enthusiasm of the evangelists became contagious, and many joined the fellowship where God's spirit was "so real and active." These messengers carried the "Good News" from village to village, and soon little bands of converts were found in almost all the colonies. They revisited the villages to encourage the Brethren in prayer and exhortation, to hold revival meetings, and to participate in and lead conferences.

An important service rendered by the Conference was

to give organization to the individual prayer meetings. The rule was established that each meeting should have two elders, who should be held responsible for the welfare of the organization. They were to be men of sound judgement, truly devoted to God. It should be their disciplinary duty to advise, to reprove, or to exhort, as the occasion might require. They were to select the leaders for each meeting, to represent their prayer meeting at conferences, and to make occasional evangelistic tours within and beyond their village and community.

This conference, organized in 1871, was the mother organization of twenty-three daughter conferences. All were held according to a single pattern. They usually began Saturday afternoon and ended Monday afternoon. Four to eight separate meetings were held. Assisted by two elders in the village where the conferences were held, Evangelist Ehler was moderator of the conferences east of the Volga river, and Evangelists Koch and Becking were moderators of the conferences west of the Volga. They were also assisted by two elders and frequently by the Rev. Wilhelm Staerkel, minister in the village of Norka.

The conference dates were so arranged that all conflicts would be avoided, thus giving the evangelists the opportunity to attend all the sessions. The meetings were usually held in the school house, otherwise in the open. Only a few business matters were transacted, and a special committee handled all financial matters. The main emphasis was placed on religious services, with prayer and testimony outstanding. While it afforded opportunity for fellowship, its main purpose was to save souls. The conferences brought together large groups of people and caused them to think about the sacred things of life. The claims of religion were thereby presented to thousands who otherwise might never have been spiritually moved.

Now that the Brotherhood had organization and had received effective leadership from its own ranks, it grew in importance. This development prepared the way in no small measure for the extensive revivals which beginning in 1872, swept the whole Volga region.

The moving spirit and guiding force of the movement during these years of its greatest development was H. P. Ehlers, evangelist from 1871 to 1924; his was a noble service, remarkable for its length, covering fifty-three years.

Heinrich Peter Ehlers was born March 2, 1845, in the village of Dinkel, the only son of village peasants. His parents vowed that he should become a servant of God in the Christian ministry. Unfortunately, the father died after two years, leaving the widow and her two children Heinrich Peter and his sister, in extremely meager circumstances. The boy's education was limited to seven years of training in the village school. He was a gifted pupil and very popular because of his wit, joviality, and trickery. One of his favorite sports was to imitate clergymen.

He soon fell into bad company, and at the age of sixteen he was smoking and drinking, frequently in the company of older men. Because of his humor and silly fancies, he was the favorite not only in his group, but in the entire community. His mother, who was deeply disturbed about him, and who often reminded him of his parent's vow, found it necessary to frequently fetch him from the tavern at midnight hours.

Two experiences brought about a change in his life, the last leading to his conversion. In his home village he was helping to construct a windmill tower. One afternoon, after completing the tower, he said to the workmen and others gathered there: "Do not leave yet; I want to conduct a worship service for you." The leather mittens of a workman were to serve as the Bible; a large hopper attached to the windmill tower to serve as the pulpit. After he had climbed into the hopper he "lined" his opening hymn, an unsavory street song. His audience roared. After the completion of his song Ehlers announced: "Today you will hear a sermon by a Russian priest." Just as he was making a bow, the hopper became unfastened and Ehlers fell headlong to the group, and suffered serious injury. Everyone felt that this was an act of God's judgement. Ehlers himself vowed that should he recover, he would change his life. But he did not keep his promise for long.

But a second experience did bring about a lasting change in his life. It was on a Sunday morning while attending church with his mother. During the sermon the minister who was preaching on the story of the widow of Nain and her deceased son, said: "Probably here in Dinkel there is a widow with an only son who should be the support and comfort of his mother, but who through sin and shame has died a 'spiritual death.' The mother of Ehlers broke out in a cry: 'O my only son; my poor lost son.' Hearing the woman's cry, the

minister interrupted his sermon and said, "Dear mother, we will bring your prodigal son to God in prayer, who also caused the spiritually dead to arise. This incident affected the young man so deeply that after he returned home from church he said to his mother: 'Now I will either change my life or commit suicide.' Together on their knees they prayed God forgiveness of sins. That Sunday marked the turning point in his life. He immediately went about to right old wrongs, and there burned in him the desire to share his experience with others. His friends now became his enemies and his enemies his friends. He was even opposed by his pastor. The village officials forbade him the right of speaking in the homes and meetings. He was often beaten, regarded as a fanatic, called an imposter and a hypocrite, but he remained faithful to his convictions and served God diligently to the end of his life.

His rare ability in speech and tactful leadership, his courage and breadth of mind, were qualities that singled him out as evangelist. Brothers Hartwig and Lorenz describe him as cordial, genial and charitable, yet "terrible" in denunciation of sin; wrong-doers were afraid of him, gentle and kind as he was. In his travels from village to village his good judgement and spirit of unity was a helpful influence wherever he labored, and his counsel was accepted by all. Brother Hartwig distinguishes him as the "great friend of the poor." More than once he gave his last ruble to a needy person. On his evangelistic tours he received many gifts, all of which he turned over to the poor. To no one was it given to have a greater influence in all the phases of the Brotherhood. When the Brethren count up their jewels the greatest of them is always Brother H. P. Ehlers. Such was the character of the man who gave direction to the Brotherhood movement and who was the prime mover of the revivals. He and Evangelists Koch and Becking preached wherever the harvest was ready and wherever people would listen to them. Frequently an entire community would come under the spell of their preaching. The movement was now pressing into every Volga settlement. Then came the Great Revival in 1872, the ground for which had been well prepared. Every German Protestant colony on the Volga came under its influence. There was not a village without a prayer meeting. The revival continued until the early 1890's. Young men and women made up a large proportion of the converts. In groups they would march up and down the streets, sing-

ing spiritual songs, where before they had been singing worldly songs. Lack of seating room made it necessary to hold separate meetings for young people. This was a blessed day for the Brotherhood. By 1900 there were 488 Prayer Meetings on the Volga with a membership of 31,290.

The influence of the Brotherhood movement was far greater than the number of its converts would seem to suggest. For one thing, not only converts attended the prayer meetings, children and young people attended with parents, and a goodly number of non-Brethren went to the meetings regularly, others occasionally. More important, these meetings left their deep impression directly and indirectly on the entire social and religious life of the inhabitants of every village on the Volga.

Near the turn of the century, about 1895, the Great Revival almost over, a decline in the Brotherhood set in. But this was only a temporary decline, lasting ten years. Power from within sustained the Brotherhood, for vital personal religion lay at the bottom of this movement, - and in 1904 there came another awakening. Brethren who participated in this revival, thousands of whom are now in this country, proclaim that it was the most powerful awakening and miraculous manifestation of spiritual power they had ever witnessed. They liken it to Pentecost in Bible times. "Never," they say, "had we seen such an interest in, and a searching for spiritual things." Evangelist Ehlers was assisted by his son Jacob, and Evangelist Weissheim by Brother Fink. The earnestness and passion with which these men proclaimed the Gospel during those years is the subject of many a conversation in Brotherhood circles to this day. The next religious awakening came during the first World War, and still another in the years of the great famine in Russia, from 1921 to 1923, when the entire Volga region was again deeply stirred.

Settlement in the United States

One force behind the emigration of a large number of Germans from Russia was the government determination to Russianize all its subjects. A law of 1890 required that a Russian teacher be placed in every German school, and in 1897 it was decreed that Russian instead of German was to be used as the medium of instruction. It became evident that the German language and customs which had been maintained for many years were gradually

but unmistakably being undermined. The effect of this policy upon the colonists is seen in the fact that during a period of six years, from 1898 to 1904, over 41,000 of their number came to the United States.

An outstanding reason for emigration was the search for religious freedom. During the 1860's the Brotherhood had been growing in influence and numbers. It has been noted that most of the clergy, with the help of the local civil authorities, attempted to hold the movement in check by means of persecution. After the Brotherhood Conference was organized in 1871, the clergy became more alarmed than ever. Persecution was now intensified and widened in scope. Meetings were broken up. Elders were subjected to bitter treatment. The result was that thousands of Brethren emigrated to "the land of the free" where they would be permitted to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience. How strong this motive was is indicated by the fact that the majority of the early immigrants were converts.

Added to these causes of emigration was economic distress. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the entire Volga region suffered a series of famines caused in part by land shortage which developed as a result of the rapid increase of population. Knowledge of the opportunities in the New World was conveyed to Russia through German newspapers printed in this country and in personal letters from earlier emigrants. These letters were read aloud wherever people gathered and passed from hand to hand throughout the village. They even traveled to neighboring villages and made their impression there. When a few of the pioneer emigrants returned to their native villages for a visit after some years of prosperous life in America, groups of interested listeners and questioners gathered around them to hear about the advantages of America. All these motives and incentives had their effect - thousands of colonists came to America in search of religious liberty and the opportunity to improve their lives economically. They were determined not to be made full-fledged Russians. Emigration began in 1872 and continued until the outbreak of the first World War. The United States Census Bureau for 1910 lists 243,361 Russian Germans, first and second generation. By 1920, this number had increased to 303,532.

Transplanting the Brotherhood

The Brethren in America attempted to reproduce in the New World as much of their religious life as possible; and wherever the Russian Germans settled, the Brotherhood movement took deep root, for the majority of the early immigrants were converts. True to their convictions, they organized prayer meetings and conferences, held revivals, and sent evangelists into the field.

Here, as in Russia, the Brotherhood is a lay movement. The clergy may have a share in it, but the principle of the universal priesthood of believers underlies it, and expresses itself in the religious activities of the Brethren. The principal purpose of the movement is the salvation of the individual soul.

The first conference was organized in 1887, in Sutton, Nebraska, thirteen years after the arrival of the first converts. Sutton was located in the midst of Russian Germans in Nebraska and Kansas. The organization took place in a newly-built barn owned by Brother John Doehering. The Brethren were aware that that was a remarkable birthplace, for it was similar to that of their "highly exalted Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ." Those who helped organize and conducted the meetings on that memorable occasion were Brothers Heinrich Franz Schuhmann, Phillip Hein, Ludwig Batt, George Hoelzer, Johannes Miller, Peter Koehler, Johannes Kreis, and George Ross. It may be questioned whether any gathering of theirs since has been so meaningful, for it served as a connecting link between the movement in Russia and here. The central theme of the meeting was the carrying on in this country of the faith of the fathers.

Here as in Russia the principal purpose of the Conference was to give the Brethren united strength and provide the opportunity for Christian fellowship and to bring about and maintain uniformity in matters of faith and practice. Brethren who lived in isolated places found in the warmth of conference meetings a new courage to face and overcome the peculiar obstacles which life in the New World presented. The greatest value of the Conference was always to be found in the closeness of spiritual contact and the enjoyment of Christian fellowship, which in turn united the converts into a close bond of sympathy and inspired them with new zeal.

As more Russian Germans immigrated, additional conferences were organized. By 1915, nine states and

and fourteen district conferences had been established; by 1940 the state conferences numbered thirteen and the district conferences thirty-two.

Evangelists

In America, the same procedure was adopted for evangelists, as was in Russia. In 1896, the Conference elected Heinrich Franz Schuhmann who served as evangelist for five years. He was succeeded in 1901 by Heinrich Weizel, and he in turn, in 1902 by Heinrich Kern, who served until 1905. These evangelists traveled from community to community, and the meetings prospered under their counsel and inspiration. Compelled to work under the most trying of circumstances, they counted all else as loss except the opportunity to spread the glad tidings of the pure Gospel among their countrymen.

Because of the rapidly expanding field a new procedure was instituted in 1905. All the most qualified Brethren in each prayer organization were to assume the responsibility of carrying on the necessary evangelistic work as circumstances required. Though their main efforts were to be limited to their own community, region, or state, they were also expected to make extended tours that would touch the work of the Brotherhood in its entirety. This plan has worked out well and no community is neglected. In fact, visitations are made to some prayer circles eight times or more a year.

Relation of Brotherhood to Church

The Brethren in America, adhering to the practice established in Russia have not withdrawn from the Church. Although they organize private circles for prayer and Bible study, they participated at the same time in all the functions of the Church.

Finding a Church Home

Although the Brotherhood has been the primary religious organization of the Brethren, they participated at the same time in all the worthy activities of the Church. The first conference in this country, organized in 1887, resolved that "Brotherhood members must also be church members," and article IV of section B, of the Brotherhood Constitution reads that "in no case and under no circumstances may a prayer organization regard itself as being religiously self-sufficient."

But the vast number of denominations encountered here by these Pietists led to considerable bewilderment among them. They were confused even by the Lutheran Church which they knew as a single body in Russia but which they found divided here into several groups. As a consequence, while a few of the Brethren affiliated themselves almost at once with either the Lutheran or Reformed Church, the vast majority did not join any church for a decade or more. To make matters worse, some denominations ignored these immigrants. In a number of sections the Brethren were not even received by the Lutheran Church with which almost all had been affiliated in Russia. Other churches, too, were doubtful of these Bet-Brueder (Prayer Brothers) who were conducting private prayer and worship services exclusively in the German language. The Brethren in turn were critical of all churches, for they had just come from a country in which they had been persecuted by church authorities.

Nevertheless, having experienced the advantage of "remaining with the Church" while in Russia, they decided against separatism and began to look about for a religious denomination which would at least grant them the freedom to hold prayer meetings and to worship in the German language. In the meantime, they maintained their religious life in prayer meetings and worship services conducted by laymen in private homes.

The freedom for which they had longed they eventually found in Congregationalism, that "system of church government which recognizes the equal rights of all believers, the independence and autonomy of the local church, and the association of the churches through voluntary organization devised for fellowship and cooperation, but without ecclesiastical authority." It was inevitable that a decided turn toward complete Congregational Independence should early manifest itself among them. They had come to this new world with a certain prejudice against higher church authority. In Russia they had observed that the pastor, whose civil and spiritual powers were closely related, frequently over-emphasized his dignity, and that the church often asserted its authority unwisely. The basic principles of Congregationalism - the authority of each local church to govern itself and the priesthood of all believers - appealed to these Pietists, who were already practicing these principles within their own movement. Moreover, within Congregationalism they found opportunity for the free exercise of their religion in the German

language.

Although the Brotherhood is still in complete agreement on the fundamental issues of faith and practice, on which it stands or falls, it is slowly but unmistakably undergoing changes and modifications from the pressure of surrounding circumstances, or more particularly from the impact of modern life. One disintegrating influence is the loss of the original zeal. Many Brethren no longer have the intense piety which in former years they had and which the founders had possessed. Another reason why the early fire is burning lower is religious tolerance in America. The Brotherhood has not been persecuted in this country. In Russia, the more violent and relentless the opposition the more the Brethren found it necessary to organize and to discipline themselves. Individuals were called upon to make greater sacrifices, the leaders were urged to put forth their highest efforts, and the aims and ideals of the movement were planned more carefully. America, by her very tolerance, has been a greater spiritual danger to the Brotherhood than the most relentless persecution in Russia.

Another cause which has tended to undermine the unique character of the Brotherhood organization is the economic success of the members. Even if they did not share in the pleasures of the world, they began to share more and more in its duties. Furthermore, a detrimental influence grows out of the conflict between the immigrant parents and their children who are American-born. In the transition from an older to a newer culture many young people are displaying tensions and unrest, and confusion in which they find themselves occasionally manifests itself in disobedience to their elders. The language problem, is also playing a decisive part in the decline of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood in America as an organization may some day die, but the genuine religion it contains, that which really is alive, will not die. In these believers we see piety as its best. This will continue to live.

Brotherhood Movements in Canada, South America, Siberia and Germany

German Brotherhoods presently exist in other countries. German Russians began to settle in Canada in 1900 and prayer meetings and large conventions are held in Calgary, Medicine Hat, Winnipeg along with other areas in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

There are also a number of German Russian prayer

groups in South America. In 1943, there were 42 groups served by 6 pastors. The North American brothers learned of the South American prayer meetings through the Congregational Church paper, The Messenger, while it was in print.

Most of the Germans who remained in Russia along the Volga River were moved from the region in 1941 by the government as the invading German armies moved eastward. The Germans were evacuated and resettled in Western Siberia and Middle Asia. Even in Russia, wherever the Communists will allow them to assemble, the brothers meet for prayer four times a week. There are no pastors in Siberia to minister to these German Russian brothers, so earnest believers in the Brotherhood perform the duties of a pastor, baptising the children, conducting marriage and funeral ceremonies and performing the communion services. The necessity of the principal of the "Universal Priesthood of all Believers," is clearly demonstrated in Siberia.

From Brother Eisner, who was given freedom to go to Germany from Siberia upon reaching the age of seventy years, we read in a letter sent to the U.S.A. "Only God knows what we have endured since the time we were forced to leave the Volga, and placed in labor camps in Siberia, until we were released and allowed to go to Germany." Upon his arrival in Germany he established a prayer group and 70 people were in attendance at the first meeting. This fact seems to give support to Pastor Eisenach's comments that the American Brotherhood has lost its original zeal because in America the Brothers have never been persecuted.

Michigan and Flint History

It seems proper that this history of the Brotherhood should include Michigan and Flint as this information was compiled for and dedicated to the 64th convention in Michigan that is being held in Flint at the First Reformed Church in September of 1976.

Some of the earliest prayer meetings established in Michigan were in Owosso, Akron and Saginaw. Several of the pioneer brothers were Brother John Berg, Brother Fred Baker and Brother Gottfried Schempf.

In 1917, while visiting a Michigan convention in Owosso, several of us brothers were told of the number of German Russian people in Flint that were without a church or prayer meeting, so we paid a visit to Flint. Finding a goodly number of middle-aged and younger German Russians

living in Flint, we held a prayer meeting in the yard of Brother John Adolph. While singing the familiar gospel songs in German, many present were touched and wept. Some in attendance were children of Brothers in Russia, and had come to the United States to escape the restrictions of the Christian life in their parent's home in Russia, and remarked that now, 6,000 miles from Russia, they find the same prayer meetings being held. Others encouraged us to move from Sheboygan, Wisconsin to Flint and establish a permanent prayer group. We promised to pray about it. In a short while, four of us decided to move to Flint to do mission work. In this group was Brother John Henry from Owosso, and from Sheboygan, Wisconsin were Brothers Chris Gorde, Henry Ruppel and myself, Brother Alex Gaus.

On the 20th of July, with our meager possession, we arrived and rented a garage house, which was constructed on only four posts, in which to live. The rent was cheap, and the conveniences were very few - the rain came through the roof and the grass grew through the floor boards.

Together we had only \$50.00, which wasn't enough to even set up limited housekeeping. We found jobs at the Buick Motor Division. At that time, each Buick plant had its own Employment Department to hire workers for that plant, and the employees were not paid each week as they presently are. In order for us to have money for groceries each week, one of us had to quit our job each Friday, in order to receive a pay check, and then we would have to rehire into another Buick plant the following week. Since we were unknown in the area, it was not possible to make any of the necessary purchases on credit. These times were difficult, but with the help of God, we struggled through.

To get a prayer meeting established, we began to call on the people and invite them and urge them to attend. At times we went into the saloons to fetch out the younger people to come to the meeting, and at times we were successful. At one home on which we had called several times inviting them to come, the housewife said, "Oh, Lord God, they are coming again." Before too long, and after much endeavor, the prayer meeting was well on its way, and some of the first converts to the Flint Brotherhood were Brother Phillip Miller and wife Mary from the village of Grimm, Brother Phillip Sack and wife Anna Sack from Huck, Brother Henry Schleiger and wife Catherine from Norka, and Brother Jacob Lehr and wife Amelia from the Messer village in Russia.

With new converts and other families moving to Flint from out of the state, the prayer group reached about 50 families in two years. However, these families were without a church. There was a Missouri Lutheran Church on Hamilton Avenue, but the majority of the Germans in the Pasadena area, where they had settled, were from a Reformed background from Messer, Huck, Norka, and other such villages in Russia. The Lutheran Church would not accept these people from the Reformed circles into their fellowship.

While serving as missionaries, we went to Pastor Anderson of the Missouri Lutheran Church and requested communion, but he informed us we would have to separate ourselves from the Reformed Germans in the prayer meeting before we could participate in the Lord's supper, which of course, we did not do.

In 1919, a group of families who had come from the villages of Huck, Messer, and Doennhof started to build a Reformed Church in Flint. When the church was completed, the brethren became members, as the Brotherhood Constitution required, but we were only members who supported the church financially - without voting rights and our names did not appear on the membership roles. When Reverend Wilhelm Reitzer came to Flint to pastor the Reformed church, he persuaded the Brethren to become active members, which we did and the membership was increased from 85 to 353 within a few years. The Brothers have always been active in the church in Flint since that time, serving in every capacity, and have supported the church financially.

After many successful years in Flint, Pastor Reitzer left and Pastor Albert Weinbrauck ministered to our needs. Reverend Arthur Kroehler came to Flint after Reverend Weinbrauck retired, and Pastor Kroehler was a great inspiration to the Brotherhood. After Reverend Kroehler left Flint, our pastor was Reverend Conrad Heidel, and now Reverend Jackman serves us.

Jesus said, in Matthew 23, "I am your Master and ye are all brethren."