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## THOSE WHO HELPED THE SWISS-VOLHYNIAN MENNONITES By David E. Ortman— Excerpts

Czarina Catherine invited many Germans to Russian territory, but the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonites (S-VM) who left Russia in 1874 (and following years) to settle in the Freeman/Marion area of then Dakota Territory and the area around Moundridge, Kansas, were not among that group. The S-VM would have been in dire straits indeed, had not other European rulers extended them a welcoming invitation, landholders such as the ones listed below.

**1671 Prince Charles August of the Palatinate.** 700 Mennonites in Switzerland moved to Kurpfalz estates. **1684 Prince Karl Ludwig (I),** Ruler of Palatinate, offered limited religious liberty to Swiss Mennonites in the form of the “Mennisten Konzession.” Mention could also be made of Casper Sherer and Johannes Hardenburg who allowed Jost Krehbiel to purchase their lease to the Pfrimmerhof farm in the Palatinate in 1709.

Two S-VM groups, one from the Palatinate (Group I) and one from Alsace (Group II) made separate journeys eastward to join up in Volhynia (then Russia).

### GROUP I FROM THE PALATINATE

**1781 Emperor Joseph II** of Austria. Over 3,000 German families moved from Palatinate to Galicia (then Austria). Mennonites petitioned Joseph II asking if they could also settle on his lands just south of modern L'vov, Ukraine: *Falkenstein* (1784) settled by Bachman, Ewy, Krehbiel, Mundlein, Schrag; *Einsiedel* (1786) settled by Albrecht, Mauer, Muller, Schmidt, Sutter, and Zercher; *Rosenberg* (1786) settled by Bergthold and Rupp.

**1770 General Count Romonzov** of Russia invited Hutterites to *Wichenka*, Russia (briefly joined by some S-VM families – Muller, Zerger, Bergthold, Krehbiel, Mauer, Schmidt, Sutter and Schrag).

**1779 Prince Prot Potacki** (Kiev Province) of Poland. From Galicia to Michalin in the western edge of Kiev Province (today part of Poland).

**1801-1802 Prince Edward Lubanirsky (or Lubomirsky)** of Volhynia. Michalin to Dubno, northwest of Kiev Province; then soon north to *Wignanska* and *Futtur*, and some to *Edwardsdorf-Kotosufka*.

### GROUP II FROM THE ALSACE

**1712 Prince Leopold-Eberhard** of Montbeliard. King Louis XIV of France had ordered Mennonites expelled, including Gerings, Grabers, and Roths who moved to Montbeliard.

**1791 Prince Adam Czartoyrski of Poland.** Montbeliard to Podolia and Volhynia. Passport given to S-VM party (Gering, Graber, Lichti, Kaufman, Roth) to travel to Poland (*Urszulin* and *Michelsdorf* after a short stop in *Einsiedel*) with Flickinger and Stuckey families. Mundlein (from Falkenstein, Galicia) and Sutter, Mauer, Wolbert, Schrag, Albrecht, an adopted Voran, and German Lutheran Senner and Schwartz family names were added.

1807 Due to poor farming conditions, most of the *Urszulin* and *Michelsdorf* community moved to *Edwardsdorf*, *Zahoriz*, *Hecker*, *Gorritt* and *Futter*, Volhynia to join Group I from the Palatinate.

1837 The remainder of the *Urszulin* and *Michelsdorf* community moved to *Horodischitz*, *Dosidorf*, and *Waldheim*, Volhynia (Voran, Graber, Kaufman, Flickinger, Preheim, Gering, Schrag, Albrecht, Stucky, Schwartz, Rysz, Senner, Strausz, and Krehbiel).



## MERGED GROUPS I AND II AT EDWARDSDORF

**1861 Czar Alexander II** of Russia abolished serfdom and opened large tracts of land in Eastern Volhynia. The larger portion of the merged group at *Edwardsdorf* moved to *Kutuzovka* and *Neumanovka* in eastern Volhynia. Dirks and Ortman names were added.

Former Bethel Professor James Juhnke reminds us, "The generosity or benevolence (if that's what it was) of noblemen landowners to Mennonite farm laborers needs to be seen in the context of the last stages of feudalism. They did not invite Mennonites just out of the goodness of their hearts. Many of the noblemen were deeply in debt and desperately needed diligent farm workers to get the land into production. At the same time they were under pressure from rising national states to pay taxes and other feudalistic dues." Gary Waltner notes one should not underestimate the loss of population in many eastern areas due to disease. As a result, the need to replenish farms gave the nobles an opportunity to invite better farmers.

And just as S-VM directly benefited from the US Government's military dominance and removal of Native Americans in South Dakota and Kansas, together with breaking one treaty after another in the 1800s, it should be remembered that lands in Europe also were often inhabited by others who were ousted by war or disease before the S-VM came along. Other uninhabited areas in Eastern Europe, such as the marsh/wetlands in the Vistula Delta area and forested areas in Volhynia, were radically modified by Mennonite farming practices, as was the American Midwest upon their arrival.

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I have long thought that some scholar ought to do further research into the question of Swiss Volhynian legal arrangements for working on the land in the old country. Our people moved to eastern Europe in a time of the great transition from feudalistic to capitalistic land ownership. Central to the transition were conflicts between noblemen landowners and the rising national governments. Not until 1861 did our Swiss Volhynian ancestors have a chance to purchase land, and even then they couldn't generally get it free and clear. Kirsten Zerger touches on this topic in her excellent essay that introduces *Family History and Genealogy of Joshua Zerger and Freni Stucky Zerger 1858-2001*. On p. 20 Kirsten explains how our people were able to buy "the estate of a banished rebel, Prince Kotosuf. Along with the estate came existing tenants who objected to their eviction. A court case was eventually initiated to resolve the dispute, which lasted the entire time the colony was in Kotosufka."

Prince Kotosuf had owned the land. He had some kind of relationship with the serfs or peasants living on the land. But then the Russian government banished the prince, took over the land, and sold it to some Mennonites. Of course, those who had been living on the land didn't want to move off just because the noblemen owner had been banished and the government had taken possession. This kind of conflict was almost universal in the demise of feudalism. The matter in Kotosufka was not settled by 1874, which means that our ancestors who migrated from Kotosufka to South Dakota or Kansas never had had clear and undisputed title to the land in Russia. Our Swiss-Volhynian ancestors in the old country were not farmers in the sense we experienced in America. They were peasants or serfs who wanted to be land-owning farmers. For most of them (nearly all, I assume), America was the first place that they had undisputed title to their own land. This needs further study.

The generosity or benevolence (if that's what it was) of noblemen landowners to Mennonite farm laborers needs to be seen in the context of the last stages of feudalism. They did not invite Mennonites just out of the goodness of their hearts. Many of the noblemen were deeply in debt and desperately needed diligent farm workers to get the land into production. At the same time they were under pressure from rising national states to pay taxes and other feudalistic dues. Czar Alexander II's greatest policy change, as world-transforming as surely as Abraham Lincoln's ending of slavery, was his abolition of serfdom. Next to that, his program to Russianize the German and other minorities (including military service), was a minor side show.