

MCC's 100th Birthday

1 Mennonite Central Committee, or MCC, had its beginning in 1920 a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution resulted in the Communist regime.

How did the Mennonites happen to be there at this time? That goes back another ~~about~~ 140 years. When Mennonites who lived in Prussia, now mostly part of Germany, suffered under heavy taxation and other

difficulties, they accepted **2** an invitation from the Russian queen, Czarina Catherine the Great, to come and farm land next to the Baltic sea, newly seized from the Ottoman Empire. Most of the Prussian Mennonite population of ~~somewhat under~~ ^{about} 10,000 made the move.

In the early 1870's the Czars embarked on a serious Russification of their cosmopolitan population. The Mennonites were pressured to serve in the military. A large portion of the Mennonite population found new homes in North America, and, if you are of Mennonite heritage, that includes the ancestors of most of you.

Conditions improved again, and for many years the Mennonites who stayed back for various reasons, fared very well. Many became quite wealthy. For example, the Lepp and Wallman machinery factory in Schoenwiese built **3** 50,000 mowers, 3000 threshing machines, and thousands of gangplows annually.

But the Czars and Catherine the Great were heavy spenders as you could have guessed from the earlier slide. **4** Discontent spread across the

country and the **5** czars were forced to give up the throne. That marked

the end of the Mennonites' good fortunes in the early 1900's. **6** The Bolsheviks, the forerunners of communism, gained power in 1917 and imposed heavy taxes. Then a typhoid epidemic swept through their

communities, and then a famine struck. **7** People began cooking anything they could find, including mushrooms and weeds, gophers, crows and

sometimes even cats, dogs and mice. **8** Meanwhile Mennonites in Canada and the US lived quite comfortably and weren't that quick to respond to letters like this one: "Our food since last spring has been black tea and herring, and now dear friends, all of this is gone. If you can't help, then we will die of starvation. In our village on Central Street alone, forty-two persons have died during the summer and most of them for want of food. We are in need, not only of food but also of clothing."

In early 1920 the Russian Mennonites sent four men to Europe and North America to ask for help. Their pleas convinced Mennonite relief commissions in Canada and the U.S. to act. On September 27, 1920, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) held its first official meeting in Chicago, Illinois.

After more than a year of negotiations with the newly established communist Soviet Union, MCC was allowed into the region, under the condition they **9** feed and clothe all people in need, not just Mennonites. MCC agreed and large amounts of grain in bags labeled "In the name of Christ" soon arrived. The first relief kitchen opened in the village of Rosenthal, Chortitza colony on March 16, 1922.

Local villagers helped run the kitchens that fed 800-1,000 people every day. **10** By May that year MCC was feeding (24,000 to) 25,000 people daily in 140 kitchens throughout southern Soviet Union.

MCC workers soon recognized it was not enough to feed and clothe people. They also wanted to help people feed themselves.

Residents of southern Russia lacked many of the necessities to begin farming again. Many of the horses in the country had either died during the war or starved during the famine.

MCC coordinated two shipments of (**11**) Fordson tractors, sent from Detroit, MI, to help with the harvest. These, along with horses and cows, were provided to farmers on credit.

After these hardships, many, including Kathy Cornelsen's parents and grandparents, and the late Mrs. Helen Loewen, Naomi's mom, left Russia and made their new homes in various areas of Canada and the US.

When World War II broke out in 1939 the Mennonites in Russia faced unfathomable hardships again. Because the Mennonites persisted in speaking and teaching German, when the Nazis became a threat to Russia the Mennonites were looked on with suspicion and mistrust. It was at this time that Anne Kroeker's dad and hundreds of others, were herded into boxcars and shipped off to Siberia, most of them never to be heard from again. Sixteen years later Anne's family heard he had died from overwork, malnutrition, and an untreated medical condition, only months after he was arrested.

12 Anne's mother with her five daughters fled the country, together with around 35,000 others, mostly women and children, under torturous circumstances, protected by the retreating Nazi forces. A group of successful survivors arrived at the German border some years later.

13 Peter and Elfrieda Dyck and C.F. Klassen were MCC workers stationed in Germany at the time. Peter, as a young boy in Russia barely survived the 20's afflictions, then moved with his family to the US. When Peter heard about the group of refugees hoping to cross Poland into Germany he and Mr. Klassen arranged for them to be secretly brought

across at night. **14** It was more than a year later that they managed to hire a ship, the Vollendam, to transport close to 5000 Mennonite refugees from Germany to Canada and South America. Peter and his wife did a huge work in Germany, setting up accommodations for thousands of refugees, providing food, both physical and spiritual, for them, and battling bureaucracies to get all the refugees to new permanent homes in Canada and South America. There are probably a number of our congregation who still remember donating to that cause.

Since World War II MCC's humanitarian service in any country open to their aid, regardless of religion, has allowed trust to develop and missionaries to come in and share the great plan of salvation in Jesus Christ.

These are just a few of MCC's projects of the past that relate to us most closely.

Today MCC continues to be involved in many other services.

Locally we have participated in **15** making quilts for poverty-stricken people in many 3rd world countries, **16** We have donated and harvested fields of wheat as a joint effort of Canadian Foodgrains Bank and MCC.

17 With Mennonite Disaster Services we have helped clean up and rebuild homes destroyed by tornadoes, floods, fires, and hurricanes. **18** We have stocked and put together educational and health kits. We have recycled large volumes of goods and clothes **19** through the Morris Thrift Store. We have invited other refugees into our community and churches and have helped them get established here. And we have been supporting MCC financially.

With Christmas fast approaching this is probably also a good time to draw attention to the **20** special Christmas giving projects. What is unique about this opportunity is that it is not just a one-time temporary relief of a poverty hardship, but rather you get the chance to help a family permanently, equipping them to help themselves, which is so important for their self-esteem. **21** These are just a few examples of the opportunities we have.

In the church bulletin is an email address where you can find numerous other gifts for you to choose to buy for the less fortunate in other parts of the world.

22 Happy Birthday MCC!