

November 12, 2023

Susanne asked me to share some reflections from my trip to Uzbekistan in September. On this Peace Sunday morning, I hope my thoughts are an opportunity to reflect on the story of a group of Mennonites who firmly believed they should never serve in the military. I also hope that the stories I share encourage us to continue initiatives that promote interfaith dialogue and relationships.

When friends asked me why I wanted to go to Uzbekistan in Central Asia, I often jokingly responded “Why not retrace the journey taken by a group of deluded Mennonites travelling east from the Ukraine believing the end of the world was imminent?” This chapter from Mennonite History called “the Great Trek” has long fascinated me. Buried deep in my memory I see Peter Dyck, a wonderful storyteller, sharing the story of this “Great Trek” with 500 youth at a conference also named “The Great Trek.”

There is no doubt that my ten days in Uzbekistan deepened my understanding of the motivation and experience of the 120 families who the colonies of Molotschna and Am Trakt for Central Asia in 1880. 20th century Mennonite historians (Fred Belk, Franz Bartsch, Waldemar Janzen) saw that it was the leadership of a preacher, Claas Epp Jr., who inspired and guided or rather misguided these families on the trek east to prepare for the return of Christ. One essayist described this chapter in Mennonite history as “Mennonite Millennial Madness.” (Walter Unger, 1999). As a tour group we explored how the reasons for immigration to central Asia were far more complex than merely the prophetic teachings of one individual. Government reforms in Russia in the 1870s were unsettling for the Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine. Exemption from military service; the right to self-government and the privilege to educate their children in German were all coming to an end. A growing population in the colonies limited access to land and economic opportunities. Thousands of Mennonites choose to immigrate to North America at this point. Mennonites who choose to go “east” also had a deep distrust of the growing democracies in the West. Going east and remaining under the protection of the Christian czars of Russian would be preferable if they were granted continued exemption from military service. In 1879, leaders from these two colonies travelled to Tashkent, the current capital of Uzbekistan, to get assurances from Russian Governor General Von Kaufman that Mennonites would be welcomed, given land and exempted from military service.

A day long bus ride through the desert of Uzbekistan, reading excerpts from diaries and memoirs, brought both the depth of their convictions and the harsh realities of their journey, to life.

Martin Klassen wrote of his experience: “Our journey (to Tashkent) had taken 15 weeks. On the way we had to bury 12 children. We arrived ... on the 18th of October, 1880. Several weeks later a second train of 22 families arrived... and this group also had all manner of incidents along the way, especially since it had become cold in the meantime.”

In the summer of 1881, the group of trekkers separated; 72 families went to Aulie Ata (which is in present day Kyrgyzstan) and 40 families continued to Bukhara west of Tashkent. Jacob Klaassen described the ongoing challenges: “ ... the road led directly through the desert where it was impossible to drive with the wagons. Therefore a caravan was hired, our wagons dismantled and like all other things, loaded onto camels, the ships of the deserts ... All the women and children, as well as the men ... for whom there were no horses, had to mount the camels... The mounting of the camels proceeded with many cries of fear.”

The Great Trek established two thriving Mennonite communities. These colonies existed for over 50 years until Stalin's policy of collectivization led to their demise. The group at Ak Metchet lived undisturbed, hardly noticing World War I and the change of government when the Soviets took over in 1917. When the local Soviet government in 1925 wanted to collectivize the community at Ak-Metchet, the group sent a delegation to Moscow and received permission to continue their way of life unchanged. Their Asian neighbors, however, were forced to join the collectives. Ten years later in 1935 the Soviet authorities again asked the Mennonites to form a collective. This time when they refused, ten men from the community were arrested and tried as counterrevolutionaries. Death by shooting was the sentence and their families were to be exiled. On the following day the Soviet trucks appeared at Ak Metchet to take the condemned families into exile. All the women of the settlement came out, clustered around the trucks, and piled up in front of the wheels, demanding unitedly that none of them or all be taken. The agents seemed to be overwhelmed by the women's shouts of "All or None" and the terrified cries of the children. The Soviets officials returned to the city of Khiva leaving the trucks. After a few days more trucks came to take the entire group. The Mennonites of Ak-Metchet were forced to leave the place that had been their refuge for more than half a century. They were transported into the desert where they were forced to pioneer with the few tools that they had brought with them. How long any of them survived is unknown.

We listened to this story as we gathered on the actual site of the former Ak Metchet community. This group of Mennonites, like many whose stories are told in the Martyrs Mirror, were willing to sacrifice their life rather than their beliefs.

One of the trekkers on the journey, wrote a hymn "Through the dessert goes our journey" and Lynn has graciously agreed to lead us in that hymn.

The second theme of my reflections arises from the stories of the interactions between the Mennonites in Central Asia and their helpful and hospitable Muslim neighbors. Might these stories help provide a model for interfaith conversations and relationships in the 21st century?

One remarkable instance of Muslim hospitality to Mennonites happened over the winter of 1881-82 when the families travelling to the western part of present-day Uzbekistan were stranded in the village of Serabulak. Jacob Klaassen writes of the hospitality of the Muslim community. "Here we took up winter quarters and distributed ourselves over the various courtyards. Four to five families moved into the mosque in which we also had our worship services."

Now in 2023, we were again warmly welcomed to the village of Serabulak. The hospitality was overwhelming as they managed to serve us two full meals within the space of a couple of hours. The grandfather of our host family heard stories from his grandparents about the Mennonites that had been hosted in the village about 140 years ago. We learnt that 12 baptisms and two weddings were celebrated that winter thanks to the hospitality of this Muslim village. The fact that there were two tour participants who had ancestors which spent the winter of 1881-1882 in Serabulak acknowledged a very special shared history. We also met the leaders at the mosque, and they proudly showed us a new mosque which was being built for the community.

The very existence of the Ak Metchet community is another example of Muslim hospitality and is a story of the peaceful co-existence of two faith communities. When the Khan of Khiva heard of the difficulties the 40 Mennonite families were experiencing in 1882, he offered them a large park owned by his brother where they could build houses and live a peaceful life. The relationship between the Khan and the Mennonite community of Ak Metchet was very positive. The Khan utilized the services of the Mennonites as wood craftsmen and

seamstresses. Two Mennonites gifted in languages, served as translators and advisors in the Khan's court. Mennonites in Ak Metchet were recognized as innovators in agriculture sharing their knowledge of crops like potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers and cabbage. They were also seen as innovators importing technology like sewing machines and cameras. To recognize this remarkable relationship and the contributions of the Mennonite community to the larger Uzbek society, there is now a museum within the walls of the restored fortress of the old city of Khiva. There is also a local Uzbek group that plans to partially reconstruct the former village. I hope that continued research by Mennonite historians and Uzbek academics sheds more light on how these two communities existed peacefully beside each other for 50 years.

On this Remembrance Day weekend and throughout the year, it is important to tell stories like those I have shared or stories like that of the French Protestant community of Le Chambon. They provided a haven and safe passage abroad to 2,500 Jews during World War II. Sharing stories of faith communities who reach out to help neighbors of different faiths and of different cultures and sharing stories of diverse faith communities who live beside each other in a spirit of respect and cooperation, may be the way forward when too many voices seem to want to divide our world into "us" and "them."

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