

# A Mennonite Legacy in the Land of Islam

by D. Frederick Dyck\*

With two wars currently being fought by the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Muslims worldwide calling for *jihād* (holy war) against the predominantly Christian West, it is difficult to imagine that there was a time and place where a small group of German-Russian Mennonites were welcomed by a Muslim ruler to settle on his land. This unlikely event occurred in 1884 in an area of Central Asia known as Turkestan, today the country of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan lies between today's Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, approximately 300 miles north of the border between Iran and Afghanistan.

In 1880, German Mennonites from the Russian colonies of Molotschna and Am Trakt decided to sell their farms, load all of their worldly goods on horse-drawn wagons, and travel to Turkestan to establish a new colony where they could practice their religion without interference from the Czarist Russian government. The decision to go east into Central Asia instead of west to Canada or the United States, where hundreds of German-Russian Mennonite families had emigrated in the 1870s, was influenced by a vague promise of land on which to establish a colony and the chiliast preaching of a self-anointed prophet named Claas Epp, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

For the first 100 years after the Asian Trek (*Asienreise*), primary blame for the failure of this attempt at establishing a viable Mennonite colony in Central Asia was placed on Claas Epp, Jr.. Gradually, since the 1970s-80s, there has been a softening of attitudes about assigning blame or responsibility for this failure, the suffering and hardship endured, and the many deaths that occurred, primarily of children. The exact number of deaths varies according to the many sources, but one oft-repeated as-

sertion is chilling; no children under the age of five survived the Asian Trek.

By late 1882, Mennonite families of the Trek had been traveling for two years when they arrived in the area of Khiva approximately 600 miles west of the large city of Taschkent. Here the trekkers tried to establish a village near an irrigation canal they called Lausan. Their numbers were greatly diminished by death and the decision by some families to remain near Taschkent. The hardships of the journey had convinced many that they had been foolish to embark on the venture in the first place. Even at Lausan further division of this group occurred when about half of the 40 families decided to separate themselves from Claas Epp, Jr..

Because of its special relevance to this article, the first-person account of the Trek by Herman Jantzen, a teen-aged boy at the time, continues the story of the trekkers' arrival at Lausan.<sup>2</sup>

"About three miles downstream lived the Jamuden, also called the Turkmen, who grazed their herds of sheep, camels, and horses on the large forest-free pastures. They are a nomadic, thievish folk who live in tents. They are never unarmed, carrying Russian repeating rifles as well as a dagger in the belt. Since they could not be trusted, we had, by order of the government, a small group of soldiers with three officers who lived in tents nearby.

"The winter was very cold so that the mile-wide Amu Darya froze over solid. The flow of the stream is toward the north, where it flows into the Aral Sea. When spring thaw came, the river was stopped by the piles of ice, so that it overflowed its banks. As we got out of our beds the next morning,

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<sup>1</sup> See January 2007 *MFH*, "In Their Own Words, Part II; and *A Short Sketch of My Life* by Jacob Toews (1838-1922)" for more information about Claas Epp, Jr., and the Asian Trek.

<sup>2</sup> See April 2007 *MFH*, "In Their Own Words, Part III." See *The Heinrich Wiebe Family: Germany, Central Asia, and America* by Ernest Claassen for Jantzen's full account of the Asian Trek.

we stood almost knee-deep in water. We could not remain where we had settled, so we moved a mile inland onto a hill and built a new settlement.

"However, we did not remain as one settlement. About 20 families who opposed Uncle Epp [Claas Epp, Jr.] among whom were Jacob Toews, Johann and Heinrich Jantzen, and our dear pastor J. Penner, and others, moved about three miles farther away and built on another hill.

"The native Jamuden often rode through our village without ever taking anything that belonged to us, so the small troop and the three officers were withdrawn. But now the Jamuden started to steal. They had noticed that we did not have guns. In the lower village where the other 20 families lived, things remained quiet. They had hired two Cossacks as guards.

"One night in bright moonlight, three Jamuden thieves appeared in our yard. We three brothers—Gerhard, Bernhard, and I—had, without Father's knowledge, made some spears and were standing at the window of our bedroom. As they rode into our yard, they gave three warning shots. Two of them dismounted and forced their way into our barn where our seven horses were kept. They led the horses out of the barn, while a third one with a gun rode up and down past our window. We yelled loudly and stormed into the entry of the house. As we came to the outside door, Father stepped into our way with a stern warning as follows: 'Are not you ashamed to resist evil in this way? Because of the principle of nonresistance, our people have left one country after another until we have come here with such difficulty. It becomes necessary for us to be what we have always claimed to be, and you want to deny the faith of your father by striking one blow! Back to bed! As long as God lives, who also sees the theft of our horses, He will not let you starve, even without horses.' With tears, though with inner rebellion, we went back to bed, but Father had passed his nonresistance exam. That battle within him had been intense, as he and

Mother came to realize much later.

"One day an officer of the Cossacks came into our yard where I happened to be. He asked whether the village elder lived here. As I answered in the affirmative, he observed me carefully and asked, 'Boy, are you ill? You seem so pale and thin.' I answered, 'How can one look different when one hardly sleeps at night and then works in the fields in the heat of the day?' Just then Father came out of the house. After a short greeting, the officer said, 'I hear that you are allowing the Jamuden to rob you. Did not you report this to the Khan of Khiva?' Father answered, 'According to the word of God, we cannot do that. We do not resist with force.' The Cossack officer replied, 'But God has provided governments to protect the righteous. How can we protect you if you do not report to us? I will send you people who will protect you.'"

"Perhaps a week later, there came a troop of Khiva soldiers, headed by a well-dressed gentleman. Sternly he asked my father whether he was the leader of the village. Then he had his fine tent set up in our yard. It was furnished with beautiful carpets. A separate tent was put up for his kitchen. He invited Father, and me as interpreter, into his tent. We were invited to be seated. Bread, sweets, and tea were served on a cloth. Again he scolded us for not reporting robberies to the government.

"In the meantime, Mother had baked some *Rollkuchen* and prepared some tea, so she invited us



*Exterior of the Nurallabai Palace of the Khan of Khiva. The reception hall of this palace is where Mennonites laid a parquet floor about 1884. Credit: Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, 2007*



*Reception hall inside the Nurallabai Palace. Note the carpets to protect the parquet floor that Mennonite craftsmen made. All the doors and windows were also constructed and installed by Mennonites. Credit: Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, 2007.*

into the house in order to offer our hospitality. In the house, the officer stepped to Mother's serving table on which stood a beautiful canister. After viewing himself in the cover, he asked who had made this box. Father informed him that his brother-in-law had made it as a birthday present.

"How could the man fasten the glass to the box in such a clever way? One can see no seam or crack, as though it was fastened in one place. Even the color of the wood can be seen through the glass.' After a pause he added, 'Are there more men among you who can do this work?' Father said there were, and the officer continued, 'His majesty, the Khan, was in Petersburg and saw a large parquet that was covered with glass in this manner. Now he would like very much to have such a parquet. I would like to discuss this with your master craftsmen.'"

"Thereupon Father asked some of our cabinet makers to come, and he presented them to the officer. The officer pointed to the box and asked, 'Which one of you made that?' My Uncle Gerhard Esau stepped forward and said, 'I did.' He was asked to explain how he had fastened the glass to the wood. He explained that this was not really glass but a liquid, a varnish. First the wood is polished to

a very smooth surface, then the liquid is rubbed on with wax balls. In this way, the wood becomes mirror-like.

"As a result, two of our masters were designated to ride to Khiva with them and show the box to the Khan. I was to accompany them as an interpreter.

"The following morning I rode with them to Khiva, about 100 miles distant. On the third day we arrived and were presented to the Kahn, with our precious box. He admired it very much and obviously liked it. The next morning we were shown to the palace of the Khan, where the latter personally showed us a large, newly built hall, but the floor was missing. He wished to have a parquet floor laid, with inlaid stars of dark and light wood. This would have to be dry enough and then polished or glazed.

"Our craftsmen promised to complete the task if the Khan would furnish the dark and light wood. The varnish would have to be brought from Petroalexandrowska. He agreed to all this, and then asked how long it would take to complete the work. Our men with ten helpers set the time at six months. After agreeing with all these conditions, the Khan added, 'Your whole village of 40 families will be

brought to Ak-Metchet (a village near the city of Khiva) into a large park. Here you can build houses and lead a peaceful life, for there are no robbers here.”

A remarkable story is one of the first things that comes to mind after reading Jantzen’s account. Then one wonders about the veracity of certain aspects of it. Three young boys willing to confront a group of armed Jamuden with homemade spears? The father’s admonition? Did Mennonite craftsmen really install a parquet floor in a Muslim Khan’s palace? Does it still exist? How long did Mennonites live at the village of Ak-Metchet? What happened to them?

Many decades would pass before definitive answers to these questions were available. Fast forward from 1884 to 2007. In the spring of 2007, a tour of historical sites associated with the Asian Trek was organized by Bethel College in Newton, Kansas. Among those who went on the tour were the author’s first cousin, Carol Schmidt Klingenberg, of rural Peabody, Kansas, and Carol’s first cousin, Karen Schmidt, of Manhattan, Kansas. Both Carol and Karen kept daily diaries of the tour and took many photographs which they generously shared for this article.

Carol’s and Karen’s diaries are no less remarkable than the accounts of the original Trek written by Herman Jantzen and others. What is immediately telling is the warm reception these 21<sup>st</sup> century Mennonites received from their hosts and the Uzbek people. This is because the German Mennonites that came to the region in the 1880s are remembered as good people, good neighbors, and excellent farmers who brought potatoes, tomatoes, and cucumbers to this part of the world. They also brought dairy cows and showed the Uzbeks how to make cheese and butter from the milk.

So fondly remembered are the Mennonites that there is a grass-roots movement afoot to make a museum dedicated to the German Mennonite heritage in the Khiva area of Uzbekistan. No doubt some of this enthusiasm is rooted in attracting tourist dollars, but not all. One Uzbek man told the tour group that so revered are the Mennonites as farmers that in the spring, local farmers go to where the Mennonite cemetery is believed to be and pray for guidance from the spirits of the long-dead Mennonite farmers.

The highlight of the Asian Trek tour for the participants was the arrival at “Old Khiva,” site of the Khan’s palace. The local tour guide informed



*Border detail and field pattern of the parquet floor in the reception hall of Nurallabai Palace. Credit: Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, 2007*

the tour group that the palace itself was closed for renovations but that the large reception hall where the Mennonites did their work was open to visitors.

Carol Klingenberg wrote, "We walked into the reception hall to find all as has been reported to us over the years. The parquet floor was indeed very intricate and beautiful. The Uzbek people have recognized the floor's value and have kept it covered with thick luxurious carpets so that tourists walking through the rooms will not do further damage. We pulled back the carpets to inspect the floor." In addition to the floor, Mennonite craftsmen also made the doors and windows for the hall. As a gesture of appreciation for the Khan's kindness towards them, the Mennonites crafted an ornate four-poster bed for the Khan. The Khan was so enamored of this gift that he used the bed as a throne in the reception hall.

After visiting the reception hall, the tour group was treated to a lavish dinner in a private home a short distance from "Old Khiva." The hostess of the house was the great-granddaughter of the Secretary to the Khan that had invited the Mennonites to Ak-Metchet. Two local journalists were also guests at this dinner. One was named Timur Tshamakov who told the astonished tour group that his mother was a German Mennonite named Olga *nee* Penner who originally came from the Mennonite colonies in Ukraine prior to 1941. Because of his Mennonite heritage, Timur had spent many years researching the Mennonite presence in Central Asia. He showed the assembled group a rare document that he had found in museum storage at Urgench. It was a list of names of the people buried at the Ak Metchet cemetery. Many of the names were recognized as relatives of people in the tour group.

Additionally, Timur related some of the oral history he had learned from local Uzbeks about the Mennonites of the 1880s. Timur: "There is a legend. A Mennonite had five or six sons. At night robbers would come. One son went out to defend with a pitchfork. Father and son disagreed. Father said, 'Remember why we came here—not to take any others' lives!'" While the details are different, this Uzbek legend seems to confirm the story told by Herman Jantzen about him and his brothers wanting to confront the Jamuden and being scolded by their father.

Timur again: "There is a legend about the parquet floor. There was a kind of court official who came to a Mennonite house and saw a black, lacquered coffin box. He saw his own reflection in it and asked, 'How did you get the glass in the box?'"

The Mennonites explained the process. In several years the Mennonites got a contract for the Khan's reception hall floor."

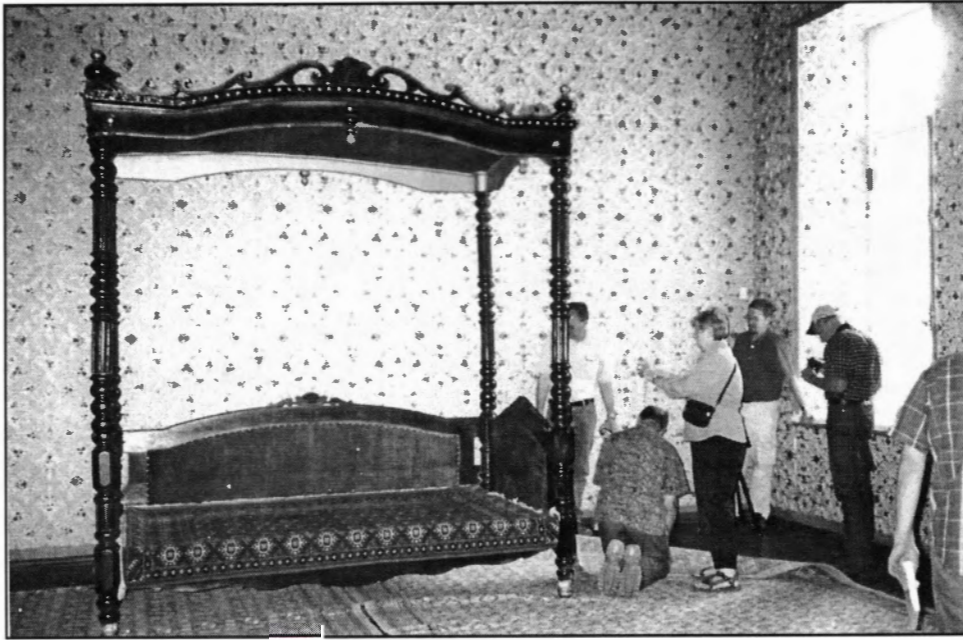
Again, the Uzbek legend confirms Herman Jantzen's written account of how Mennonite craftsmen came to work on the floor of the Khan's reception hall. The best confirmation is the floor itself. From photographs taken by Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, the beauty of the floor is obvious, fit for the palace of a Khan. Also obvious is the high level of skill possessed by the Mennonite craftsmen. Remembering that all of these intricately cut geometric pieces were cut and fitted using only hand tools without electric power is awe-inspiring. How often did the saws, planes, and chisels have to be sharpened to keep a steady flow of pieces ready for the installers? Twice a day? More often? A small crew of tool sharpeners probably kept busy all day long, every day.

While the exterior and interior design of the reception hall/palace certainly reflect Central Asia/Muslim themes in architecture, the floor itself appears to have its design adapted from Mennonite themes of furniture decoration in the Vistula Delta region of West Prussia, Germany. The design of the floor mirrors motifs often seen on Mennonite dowry chests from the Vistula Delta, such as the repeating Greek key.<sup>3</sup> The starburst/sunburst design in the Khan's parquet floor is a recognizable design feature not only of Mennonite furniture but to anyone who has ever seen Mennonite quilts.

The survivors of the Asian Trek can be divided into two groups. Those that eventually returned to their respective home colonies in Russia, with most emigrating to North America, and those that remained at the small settlement of Ak-Metchet near Khiva along the Amu Darya River. Class Epp, Jr. was among those that stayed at Ak Metchet where he gradually succumbed to increasing mental illness and lived an isolated existence before dying of cancer in 1913. The remainder of the small Mennonite community at Ak Metchet sustained its meager existence for another 22 years after Epp's death. And they continued to add to their legacy in ways often unexpected. One example is this story, posted on a website for Khiva, about how photography was introduced to the Uzbeks.

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<sup>3</sup> Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen, and John M. Janzen, *Mennonite Furniture, A Migrant Tradition (1766-1910)* (Good Books: Intercourse, Pa., 1991).



*Four-poster bed made by Mennonites about 1884, presented as a gift to the Khan of Khiva. The Khan sometimes used this bed as a throne in his palace. Credit: Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, 2007*

“One evening an old German Mennonite from Okh Majit (Ak-Metchet) was enjoying a spot of fishing at his favorite place at the local stream. He caught such large numbers of fish that a passing Khivan lad decided to find out his secret. The boy, Mudaybergen, asked a few polite questions and found out that the old man would place a lantern at the end of his rod, attracting the fish to the light. The old man gave his torch to the delighted Mudaybergen and amazed him further by taking a photograph of him holding it. When the old man returned a few days later and presented him with the actual photograph, their friendship was cement-

ed, and Mudaybergen’s lifelong interest in photography began.

“Years later the old man gave his precious camera to Mudaybergen and taught him the basics of photography. This rapidly incensed the local population who considered it blasphemous to reproduce any living thing, and they attempted to stone him. News of this soon reached Feruz Khan, and Mudaybergen was duly summoned to give an account of himself. Mudaybergen satisfied Feruz’s curiosity and vanity by taking a particularly flattering photograph which impressed the Khan so much that he employed Mudaybergen as his official photographer. From then on Mudaybergen accompanied Feruz on all his foreign trips, and he became the lucky recipient of several brand-new cameras. Mudaybergen went on to become the father of Uzbek photography, his work providing a fascinating insight into life at the time of the Khans.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1935, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ordered the collectivization of the Ak-Metchet Mennonites. They refused, non-violently, and were deported into the immense gulag system of the Soviet Union, never to return. The only remaining vestige of the Mennonite presence at Ak-Metchet is a water well.



*Hand-dug well at the site of Ak-Metchet—the only thing left attributable to the Mennonite settlers of the 1880s. Credit: Carol Klingenberg and Karen Schmidt, 2007*

<sup>4</sup> Copy of website posting sent to the author by Karen Schmidt, October 16, 2007.