

# In Their Own Words: Life in the Vistula Delta of West Prussia

by Johann Epp (1835-1922), translated by Arnold C. Claassen,  
and edited and annotated by D. Frederick Dyck\*

## Introduction

Over the course of the many years that I have been engaged in genealogical research about my Mennonite ancestors from West Prussia and Russia, I have accumulated a collection of journals, memoirs, and remembrances by my ancestors and their contemporaries. These have always held a special fascination for me because in addition to the valuable genealogy they often hold, there is a story told by a voice from the past—our Mennonite history.

This remembrance is written by Johann Epp and introduces a series of short memoirs written by Mennonites who immigrated from West Prussia to the Russian Mennonite settlement of Am Trakt just east of the Volga River and the city of Saratov. These memoirs/remembrances follow a chronological line that encompasses the history of Am Trakt from its beginnings in 1853 through its destruction in 1941. Heavy emphasis will be placed on the remembrances of three people that participated in the Asian Trek of Mennonites from Am Trakt and Molotschna into the wilderness of Turkestan in an attempt to establish their own settlement.

In 1848, universal military conscription was introduced in Prussia. Until then Mennonites had been granted exemption from military service based on their religious belief in non-resistance. Even non-combatant military service, such as being part of a medical unit, was unacceptable to Mennonites. As a result of the conscription law many Mennonite families in West Prussia made the decision to immigrate to Russia. The precedent for such a move had been established 60 years earlier in 1788.

Under a manifesto issued in 1763 by the Russian Czarina Catherine II (the Great), large numbers of West Prussian Mennonite families immigrated to the Ukraine region of Russia in the years 1788 to 1835. The first Mennonite settlement established under Catherine's manifesto was that of Chortitz. A total of 462 West Prussian Mennonite families made up the core of this first Russian Mennonite settlement. During the years 1803-1806, the time of the French occupation of West Prussia,

an additional 365 Mennonite families established a second settlement in the Ukraine called Molotschna.

In 1853, the Russian government granted permission to 100 West Prussian Mennonite families to establish a colony in the Russian province of Samara. This would be named Am Trakt. Am Trakt prospered until the years of World War I and the Russian Revolution in 1917. After the Communists took over the Russian government, Am Trakt began a decline that culminated in the complete destruction of the colony by 1941. During the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, many Am Trakt residents died of famine, were executed, or deported to slave labor camps in the far north of Russia and eastern Siberia.

But years before Joseph Stalin would bring famine and terror to Am Trakt, Johann Epp was born in West Prussia. And we begin our story there.

Any additions to the memoir were made by the editor and are marked by brackets.

- D. Frederick Dyck

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“Written by Johann Epp, son of Cornelius Epp. These are some notes of my parents and relatives, to the best of my remembrance, and then of my life, written in the winter of 1894-1895, in Newton, Kansas, America.

“My father was Cornelius Epp. He was born October 20, 1785, in Broeskerfelde, near Neuteich, Marienburg, West Prussia. His father was Abraham Epp, and his mother was Anna, *née* Wall. On this Grandfather Wall's side, therefore, were these cousins of my father:

1. The father of Franz Wall, Orloff [a village in Am Trakt, Russia].
2. The father of Peter Wall, Koeppental [a village in Am Trakt, Russia].
3. The mother of Frau Thiessen, Koeppental, who was married to Johann Dyck.
4. The mother of Frau Peter Dyck, Koeppental, who was married to a Reimer, Barwalde, West Prussia.
5. Johann Wall, Neumuensterberg, West Prussia [one of the co-founders of Am Trakt, the other being Claas Epp Sr.].

“On another line, cousins of my father were the late Franz Wall from the Samara settlement [Am Trakt, Russia], his brother Jacob Wall of the same settlement, as was

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Frau Peter Regier, who died in Samara, and the mother of Abraham Esau, who belongs to the Emmaus Church, Butler County, Kansas. These four were brothers and sisters. Frau Regier from Altenau, West Prussia, was a half sister of these four cousins also. She is the mother of the 'Alte Frau B. Regier' of Newton, Kansas. Therefore, my father was the cousin uncle of Frau B. Regier and she and I are second cousins.

"My parents were married July 20, 1830. My mother, Elisabeth Klaassen, was born April 3, 1805, in Stadtfelde, near Marienburg, West Prussia. Her father was Isaac Klaassen. One of my Grandfather Isaac Klaassen's brothers was Hans Klaassen. His two sons (cousins of my mother) migrated some years ago to America and settled in California. Their sister was Frau Warkentin from Siemensdorf [Simonsdorf, West Prussia]. She was my mother's cousin also. She was the mother of the late Johann Warkentin, Koepental, Russia, and his brother, Peter Warkentin (who earlier went to America).

"My mother had only one older sister, Agnete, who was married to my father's cousin mentioned above, Franz Wall from Broeskerfelde, the father of Peter and Isaac Wall, Russia. The children of this, our Aunt Franz Wall were:

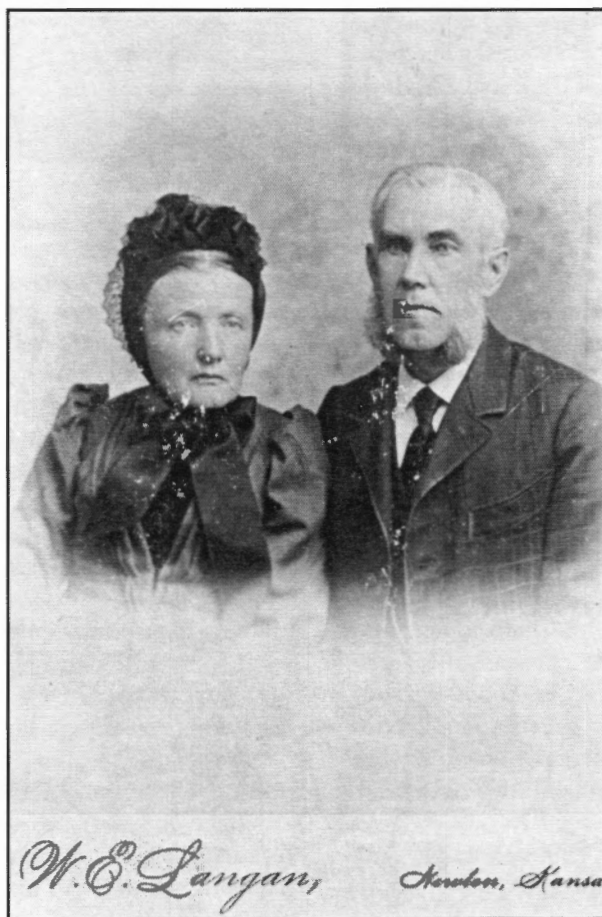
1. Anna, married to D. Huebert, Molotschna [Russia].
2. Franz Wall, who died in Hahnsau [Am Trakt, Russia].
3. Elisabeth married to Franz Epp, at that time of Hahnsau, now of Halstead, Kansas, America. He died in 1859.
4. Johann Wall, who died in Lindenau, in Russia. This Johann Wall was 2 days older than I.
5. Renate married Johann Dyck, Fresenheim [a village in Am Trakt, Russia. Renate was the second wife of Johann D. Dyck, (1826-1898), Oberschultz (Mayor) of Am Trakt 1866-1884].
6. Peter Wall, Koepental.
7. Isaac Wall, Hohendorf [a village in Am Trakt, Russia].

"My father's brothers and sisters were, so far as I remember:

1. Abraham Epp, living at Vorwerk Brodsak, West Prussia. He was the father of Abraham Epp, Medemtal, [Am Trakt] Russia.

2. Johann died as a boy.
3. Anna (Epp) married Klaas Buekkert of Stadtfelde near Marienburg [West Prussia]. She was the grandmother of Johann and Jacob Peters, Russia.
4. The wife of Isaac Bergman, Petershagen [West Prussia], a grandmother of the Bergmanns of Lysanderhoeh [a village in Am Trakt, Russia].
5. Maria married Isaac Klaasen. She was my mother's stepmother.
6. Katherina.
7. Ida. (Both were unmarried by old age).

#### "Children of Uncle Abraham Epp:



Rev. Johann Epp (1835-1922) and wife Margaretha (1839-1914). Photo ca1900, Newton, Kansas. Photo: Wilbert Wiebe.

1. Cornelius died as a bachelor in Lindenau, Russia.
2. Anna married Peter Wall in Hohendorf, Russia. Her children were: I. Anna, wife of Claas Wall, died in Hohendorf, Russia. II. Johann Wall, Orloff, Russia. III. Katharine married Isaac Wall, Hohendorf, Russia.
3. Katharine married Franz Klaassen, Hahnsau, Russia.
4. Maria married Jacob Nikkel of Lindenau. Her children from her first marriage with Gerhard Wall (who died in Halbstadt, West Prussia): I. Peter Wall, Lindenau. II. Gerhard Wall, who died in Medemtal, Russia. III. Maria married Johann Peters, Fresenheim. IV. Abraham Wall of Medemtal, Russia. Children of her second husband were: I. Jacob Nikkel, Lindenau [a village in Am Trakt, Russia]. II. Elisabeth married Cornelius Froese, Lindenau. III. Heinrich (who died). IV. Katherine married Johann Froese, Lindenau.
5. Johann Epp. He died in Ellerwald, West Prussia. He was the stepfather of Frau Gustav Andres and her sister Frau Peter Claassen, Newton, Kansas, America.

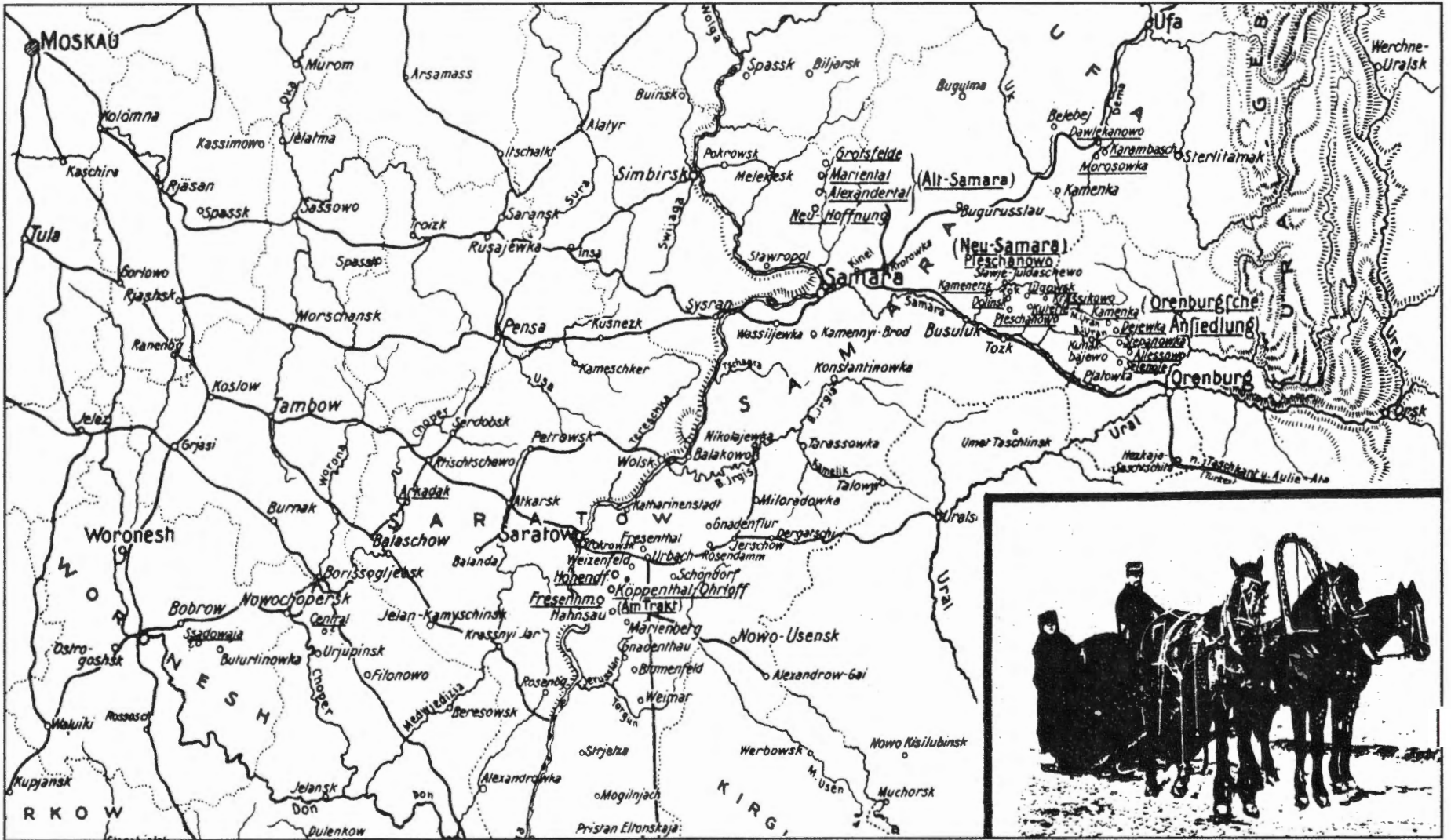
6. Abraham Epp. He died in 1892 in Medemtal, Russia. His children were Katharine who married Wolf ?, in Medemtal, Russia and Abraham Epp.
7. Ida died unmarried.

#### "Children of my Aunt Buekkert:

1. Anna married Johann Peters. She died in Fresenheim, Russia.

"Children of my Uncle Isaac Bergmann of Petershagen, West Prussia:

1. Jacob Bergmann. He died in Petershagen, West Prussia. He left one daughter, Anna, who married a Hiedebrecht.



*Mennonite Settlements in Samara Province, Russia, before 1917.*

Reprinted from *In the Fullness of Time* by A. Klassen, 1974.

2. Katharina married a Peters from Pletzendorf. Her children were: I. Anna. II. Katherine. III. Isaac. IV. Jacob. V. Margarete. VI. Helene.
3. Isaac Bergmann of Vierzehnhufen. He had two children: I. Isaac. II. Anna. Isaac lives on his father's farm in Vierzehnhufen, and Anna was married to Johann Harder, Schoenau, West Prussia.
4. Cornelius Bergmann. He died in his old age as a bachelor. He was a farm manager at Broeskerfelde for my two aunts, Ida and Katherine Epp, at the time when we went there to school. For us, he was a most beloved, fatherly friend.
5. Anna Bergmann. She married Johann Dyck of Petershagen, West Prussia. Her children were: I. Anna married Peter Penner of Fresenheim, Russia. II. Helene. III. Katherine.
6. Abraham Bergmann. First lived in Petershagen, then at Broeskerfelde, [West Prussia] and finally in Lysanderhoeh, [Am Trakt] Russia. His children were: I. Johann. II. Abraham. III. Anna. IV. Peter. V. Agatha. VI. Jacob. VII. Katherine.

"My Aunt Maria, *née* Epp, married Isaac Klaassen. She was my step-grandmother. She had no children of her own. These are the relatives, on my father's side as well as on my mother's side, so far as I can remember. My mother had more relatives, but I don't know the connection between them. One of my mother's cousins was Herman Wiens. His photograph is in our album. He lived in Halbstadt and later in Lindenau [West Prussia], on the farmland where I was born. And still later as a man of means in Elbing, West Prussia. This is where he died. He was a long time friend of our family. We often visited and communicated with each other. Another of my mother's cousins was Johann Wiens. He was living in Reinland, as was Cousin Frau Isaac, of Tiegenhof [West Prussia]. These three were brothers and sisters.

"When my parents were married on July 20, 1830, they stayed with Mother's parents (my grandfather Isaac Klaassen) in Lindenau [West Prussia]. Grandfather Klaassen died about one year after my parents were married.

"My father took over as administrator of the farm, which was quite indebted. However, [with] my father's thrifty and circumspect management, and also because of improving economic conditions in general, the financial position got better from year to year. When he sold the farm in 1852, he could say that he had 10,000 Marks clear money on hand in addition to the money from the sale of the farm. But then, it was very rich soil. Half was under cultivation. The other half was meadow (lower ground) for hay, and pasture. We kept 10-12 milk cows, which brought a yearly profit of approximately 30-40 Taler, which at that time already was a considerable sum. Father [Cornelius Epp] used to say that the income from the dairy covered all the expenses of the entire farm, and the income from the grain, he could put aside as surplus.

"The farm, 2 Hufen, 15 Morgen (45 acres), was about 1/4 mile away from the village of Lindenau [West Prussia]. It was a little lonely situated, but surrounded by tall trees, especially there was a row of ash trees around the farmstead. **These trees on the farm were especially splendid specimens! [Ash was prized by Vistula Delta craftsmen for making furniture, especially dowry chests.]** There was also

a nice orchard, with big apple trees of different varieties. I clearly remember the old night watchman, **Eiserman**, whose duty it was soon after breakfast, to gather all the apples that had fallen overnight. He piled them in the summer room. Usually, they were taken to market twice a week to Tiegenhof [West Prussia]. My father drove with the load to market and in an hour all the sacks were empty. Since my father did not ask the highest price, and the people knew it, our wagon was often closely surrounded and the buyers jostled each other to get at the fruit.

"We had 2 summer and 2 winter pear trees. When they were ripe they were a point of attraction to us children. The same in the fall, the two walnut trees attracted us. They were so close to the gable of the house that we children could pick the nuts through the attic window.

"*Our farmstead, perhaps because of its isolated location but a very beautiful site, was called 'Unter dem Blauen Himmel' (Under the Blue Heaven). I had a very happy youth, and often remember the 'good old days' of my childhood.*

"One of the first memories of childhood that I can think of, were the walks, at the hand of my lovely grandmother, who at that time still owned the farm, to the nearest fields where the reapers were starting to cut the crops. As was the custom of that time, they wound a ribbon of fresh-cut wheat around the arm of the owner. Only after she had tipped them or given them a little schnapps could she start to inspect their work.

"Another memory from my youth, is the memory of workmen of many years. There was the foreman Johann Werner, who had served in Berlin in the *Garde-Ulanen* (regiment of the Guards-Lancers). His brother, Cornelius Werner, the second workman, had served his military service in the Infantry, and a third brother, Jacob Werner, worked intermittently at our place. There was also a stock feeder, Johann Kruppke. They were all from Krebsfelde. These men were in the employ of my parents for many years.

"When the daily work was done, they gathered together in the wide aisle in the barn on a bench, we boys among them. Many patriotic songs were sung. The foreman Johann Werner, in particular, was an excellent tenor. In between songs, many tales from their military life were related. It was such an enjoyment for us children that we would ask, when evening came, if it was not too soon time to rest. In summer, we would naturally spend that time under the linden or chestnut trees. These were nice, and for me, unforgettable evenings.

"The work day, even during harvest, was well organized. There was certain work that had to be performed every day. There was never the rush and hurry that we later experienced in Russia.

"Northeast of us lay the village of Grossmausdorf, where a few Mennonite families lived. Since it was nearer than Lindenau, we often went there. The Siemens family in particular were our close friends. The widow Siemens was the same age as my grandmother. She had three unmarried daughters, Barbara, Elisabeth, and Anna. The second was

the same age as my mother. She [the widow Siemens] had a farm manager of many years by the name of Weins.

"The widow Siemens was the aunt of David Froese of Lysanderhoeh [Russia], she was also the aunt of the mother of Frau Tgahrt of Ostenfelde. We met this Frau Tgahrt there often when she was still 'Penner's Lischen' (Penner's Little Elisabeth), and we were good friends and playmates. Even after 40 years when we met again in Russia, we enjoyed reminiscing with pleasure with each other about the old days.

"In my eighth year (1843) I was brought to Broeskerfelde near Neuteich [West Prussia] for my education in a higher private school where my older brother and sister were already.

"I was the third of six children (all born in Lindenau, West Prussia):

- I. My brother Isaac was born April 16, 1831.
- II. Sister Anna was born September, 1832.
- III. Johann (myself) was born October 19, 1835.
- IV. Cornelius (I've forgotten his birthday). He was three years younger than I.
- V. Franz was born June (July?) 1841.
- VI. Herman was born July (June?) 1850.

"We were boarded during our school years with our aunts Ida and Katherine Epp. They were very good to us and were like real foster mothers. Most of the time we went home to lunch, but when it was cold or muddy outside, we took our meal along. The aunts tried their best to make them good and tasty for us. Among the meals, I remember how I relished my aunts' pancakes, which they had covered with butter and honey. These were warmed up in the school oven. Aunt Ida (Judith as she signed herself) often helped me with my homework. She told us stories about her younger days which we, in time, almost knew by heart but still listened to with a show of great interest.

"In this school there were at that time 40-50 students from all the Mennonite villages, far and near. Our loyal and faithful teacher was Karl Gottlieb Roller. Roller taught us in his department with love and devotion. He sowed the seeds of God's word often in the hearts of his scholars. It is still vividly before my soul, the concern he had to urge God's truth upon us in Bible stories and religious classes.

"My teacher Roller had a nice custom in that he gave every scholar who left his school a special Bible verse as a farewell gift. The verse which he gave to me reads 'Suche Jesum und Sein Licht, all andre hilft dir Nicht.' (Seek Jesus and His light, all else cannot help you.) Even if my dear teacher's words may often have been forgotten, it turned out again and again to be a sacred exhortation for me.

"He [Roller] was usually serious and severe (strict), however, he had some cheerful and even humorous stories to tell. Since he had been in the so-called 'Freiheitskrieg' (Freedom War) of 1812-1814 [Napoleonic Wars], he always got excited when the battle at Dennewitz was mentioned during the German history hour. 'There were such as we there too,' he said discreetly, and then he told us boys to amusement how he was at the assault of a bridge almost

the only soldier left unwounded, and his lieutenant had shouted at him, 'My dear Roller!! Would you perhaps STORM that bridge by yourself!' And how at another time he took a Prince of Coburg prisoner, who later sent him a present in memory of the event.

"In writing this (February, 1895, which is about 50 years later), I can remember quite accurately the established schedule in that school:

Monday Morning:

- I. First Period—Bible study, 2-3 Proverbs, and a verse of a hymn.
- II. Second Period—Arithmetic.
- III. Third Period—Reading.

Monday Afternoon:

- I. World History.
- II. Geography.
- III. Writing and Spelling.

Tuesday Morning:

- I. Religion and Proverbs.
- II. Arithmetic on the slate.
- III. Bible Reading.

Tuesday Afternoon:

- I. Grammar.
- II. Physics (Mature Study).
- III. Singing hymns and school songs.

Wednesday was like Monday.

Thursday was like Tuesday except in the afternoon we studied zoology, botany, and mineralogy in the second period.

Friday Morning:

- I. Bible story.
- II. Review of all the week's Proverbs, Church hymns, and catechism.
- III. Church stories, recite poems.

Friday Afternoon:

- I. Different handwritings from written letters to read.
- II. Drawing (art). Choose a monitor for the next week. Teacher gives out report cards.
- III. Conclusion. Usually dealt with the chapter of the Gospel for the next Sunday.

"After the yearly exam we had 4 to 5 weeks vacation. My sister and brothers drove home with our parents, but I often stayed there all the time with my aunts, for which I received a silk tie or some other present.

"Lindenau was about 13/4 German miles from Broeskerfelde. My parents often came that distance on Sundays to the aunts and went to church in Ladekopp, which was nearby. Our schoolmates Agathe and Peter Dyck, the neighbors next to our aunts, were our close friends. We maintained this friendship as we grew up and as young adults.

"I have not forgotten the mission observances which were held annually in the school. We children had to sit in the attic, which had a big trap door through which we could see all the festival and hear the preachers speak. Each time some of the Lutheran pastors from Danzig or vicinity united with our Mennonite preachers in preaching the sermons. Sometimes it was necessary just for the festival to add a wing to the schoolhouse, which was made of linen sheets of mill sails. Frequently, the pastors brought their families along. It was a special pleasure for them to make a visit to the country.



The Vistula Delta area of West Prussia, ca1930. The Vistula River is on the left, flowing south to north into the Baltic Sea at the top of the map. Map courtesy of Adalbert Goertz.



*The ancestral home of Abraham Claassen (1825-1910) at Simonsdorf, West Prussia—typical of most Mennonite homes built in the Vistula Delta in the late eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. Above is the front of the house and below is the rear of the house. Courtesy: Jacob J. Dyck: *Am Trakt to America* by D. Frederick Dyck.*



"They were quite unusual guests for the neighbors, since the country dwellers were even less acquainted with the wants and customs of the townspeople than we are today.

"After the end of my school time (1849), my parents continued to live at Lindenau (*Der Himmel Blau*) until the spring of 1852. Because it was too far, about 1 1/2 hour drive to our church in Rosenort, to which Lindenau belonged, we went to the Lutheran church in Grossmausdorf, where our usual place was beside the organ in the choir loft. Under the direction of the organist Lietz we chanted the liturgy. The Pastor at that time was a Mr. von Schaven. His sons, whom we met sometimes on the ice where the youth met to skate, were called '*Junkers*' (country squires) because their father belonged to the nobility (in the Prussian territories). In this diocese of Grossmausdorf, the preacher was given 2 hufen of land (about 30 acres) instead of a salary, which he cultivated himself.

"Now the good Mr. von Schaven, an educated man, sometimes used different agricultural methods than his church members. The story goes that he once planted some so-called 'Swine Beans,' which are a worthwhile crop for fodder. He plowed them under (instead of planting correctly) so they naturally did not come up. Later, when a farmer's crop was slow to sprout, they would jokingly say, 'It will come up when Pastor's beans come up.'

"Every 4 weeks in a neighboring village, Klein Lesewitz, we attended a Mennonite Filial (church service) conducted by the church of Heubuden which we often attended also.

"Most of the time we young people went there on foot. One friend of our group was Bernhard Reimer, who now lives in Beatrice, Nebraska. His parents lived in Klein Lesewitz, as did the widow Kroecker, now of Newton, Kansas. She was reared in Halbstadt. Through these fields our footpaths led, where we and the young people from Heubuden walked together.

"In the year 1852, we sold our farm at Lindenau for 12,000 Taler to my mother's cousin, Herman Wiens of Halbstadt, and bought a farm at Broeskerfelde for 11,900 Taler, from my Uncle Franz Wall. This Wall family moved to Russia in the company of my future brother-in-law, Cornelius Wall, and the parents of Claas Epp Jr. (Chiva). Johann Wall and Claas Epp Sr. were the founders of the settlement near Saratov, 'Am Trakt.'

"On the second day of Pentecost 1853, I was baptized in our church in Ladekopp, West Prussia, by the Elder Peter Regier of Tiegenhagen, because our Elder was away at the time.

"In the same year I went to a master driller, H. Toews, in Neumuensterberg. I also learned lathe woodworking from him. I turned out a spinning wheel entirely independent of him after my first year there. During the time of my stay at this place, I went along with my master to a variety of places to repair mills and fixed other equipment. It was a welcome change from the otherwise everyday woodworking. Especially interesting was the work on the beer brewery of Mr. Westphal in Rothebude, on the Vistula

River; there that delicious sweet, unfermented beer I relished was made. And I relished the English pancakes there. Rothebude lay at the Vistula River where the canal which flows from Tiegenhof unites through a large gate with the Vistula. On Sunday I usually went home, but if I did stay there, I attended the Lutheran church in Barenhof, which is just across the canal from Neumuensterberg or I went to the Mennonite church in Furstenwerder.

"In the fall of 1856, Cornelius Wall, the oldest son of Elder Johann Wall, came from Saratov, Russia (Am Trakt settlement across the Volga), to visit in West Prussia. The following winter he married my sister Anna. In the summer of 1857, he and my sister, together with quite a large party, moved to Russia. Among them were my schoolmate and friend David Toews, the parents of Jacob Neufeld from Koepental, Heinrich Froese and others. The group made the trip by way of Stettin [formerly the capitol of East Prussia, now Kaliningrad, Russia, on the Baltic Sea]. There they boarded a ship and sailed across the Baltic Sea to Petersburg (Leningrad). From there they traveled by train to Tver [a city just north of Moscow] and from there they went down the Volga River by steamship to Saratov.

"The following year, 1858, my parents sold their farm for 15,000 Taler to Cornelius Wiens from Neuteich and we moved to Russia also. Only my brother, Isaac Epp, who married Helene Toews, daughter of Elder Johann Toews, in 1857 remained in Prussia with his in-laws. A few months before our departure my brother Cornelius Epp died of typhoid fever. He was about 20 years old. He died in the happy knowledge of his Savior, whom he openly confessed.

"Our entourage consisted of 8 wagons. We had 3; Johann Peters (the parents of Johann and Jacob Peters) 1 wagon; Gerhard Huebert, father of Frau Dietrich Janzen of Medemtal, 1 wagon; locksmith Minkleid from Tiegenhof, 1 wagon; Peter Jantzen, Lindenau, and his parents, the Jacob Jantzens, 2 wagons.

"We arrived at our destination after the relatively short time of seven weeks and four days. But then we had traveled a totally new route which Elder David Hamm had sent to us. During all our journey, we had no accident or sickness to us or our horses, as had been the case of some previous migrants. We had left West Prussia on July 3 and arrived in Koepental, Am Trakt, Russia, on August 26, 1858. We were joyfully welcomed by our sister Anna Wall in her home. For a short time we stayed with the Cornelius Walls, who had 3 small rooms in their newly built barn.

"Soon, that same fall of 1858, a party from our settlement, to which I attached myself, drove to the nearest estates to seek out new lands to buy, but this project was not successful. The party consisted of the leader, Jacob Hamm, the father of Frau Johann Bartsch, and Peter Esau, who was the uncle and foster father of my future wife. I married Margarethe Bergmann on January 29, 1859 (10 February, new calendar style).

"We received the church's blessing from the preacher, Peter Horn, who performed the marriage. The wedding festivities were performed in the Peter Esau home

because my wife and her only brother, Jacob Bergmann, were regarded as members of the Esau family. Their mother had died on the journey from West Prussia to Russia, near the little town of Tardshin in Poland on August 15, 1855. She had attained the age of 50 years and 27 days.

“My dear wife, Margarethe Bergmann, was born on May 18, 1839, in Prangenu, near Neuteich, West Prussia. Her father was Jacob Bergmann, born January 10, 1798, died June 13, 1851. Her mother was Margarethe (*née* Neufeld), born July 19, 1805, and died August 15, 1855. Her father, my wife’s grandfather, was Dietrich Neufeld. His second brother, Johann Neufeld, lived in Blumenort [West Prussia]. A third brother, Cornelius Neufeld, Prangenu, whose sons Gerhard Neufeld and Johann Neufeld are my wife’s cousin-uncles. We visited them in Prussia on our travel to America. They had been my schoolmates and friends of my youth. A fourth brother, Jacob Neufeld from Orloff, West Prussia, was the grandfather of Jacob Neufeld of Koepental, Russia. He was also the father of Frau Dietrich Klaassen of Koepental, Russia. She is a cousin of my wife’s mother. A fifth brother was Peter Neufeld who also lived in Prangenu. His unmarried daughters were my wife’s mother’s cousins. We visited them also on our trip to America.

“My wife’s mother had 2 sisters and 1 brother, David Neufeld, who died, a bachelor, at the age of 28. One of the above-mentioned sisters was Justine, Frau Peter Esau, of Koepental, Russia. Both her daughters died young and single. Her second sister was Agnethe, who married Jacob Harder of Neuteichsdorf. She was the mother of Jacob Harder of Tralau and of Frau Johann Bergmann of Neuteichsdorf.

“Brothers and sisters of wife’s father were:

- I. Katherine Bergmann, who married first a Phillipsen, then Heinrich Wiebe (who was a brother of Frau Elder Jacob Toews’ father, who was Christian Wiebe).
- II. Heinrich Bergmann, who died as a bachelor.

Half brothers and sister of wife’s father were:

- I. Cornelius Epp.
- II. Isbrandt Epp.
- III. Half sister—Widow Warkentin of Tiegenhof.

“After our marriage, we took possession of Peter Esau’s farm in Koepental together with all the necessary equipment for farming, for 4,000 Rubles. Included were 6 horses and 2 cows. The next year, 1860, Peter Esau built himself a new farmstead on the next plot of ground. For that purpose, I gave him my piece of farmland free of charge. I had received the land free as a Prussian immigrant. The land was very cheap then.

[At this point in Johann Epp’s narrative he seems to have taken a lengthy break in his writing, perhaps as long as ten years. When he resumed his writing he rapidly progressed though the years and wrote about highlights without much detail.]

“In 1860 my brother Isaac Epp and his wife came from Prussia to Koepental, too. They stayed the first few days with our parents, at Cornelius Wall’s. Then they moved in with us for the winter. In the spring (1861) they established their own farm in Fresenheim, on their own ground.

“In 1863, we sold our house and home to Johannes Thiessen, who had immigrated a year earlier from Prussia, for 5,800 Rubles and bought a new empty farm on which we erected all new buildings.

“In 1863, we also laid the cornerstone for the church in Koepental. With God’s help, the structure was so far advanced that the roof was on for the winter, and the following year it was finished and furnished and the ceremonial opening and dedication was in 1864. Our house and farm buildings, however, had been completed in 1863.

“On August 7, 1859 (according to the new style



*Cemetery of the Heubuden Mennonite Church in the Vistula Delta. The cemetery was vandalized and neglected for decades after WW II, but lately the Polish government as aided in its restoration. Courtesy Jacob J. Dyck: Am Trakt to America by D. Frederick Dyck.*



*The Heubuden Mennonite Church in the Vistula Delta, West Prussia. Built ca1768, the church was destroyed by the Russian Army after 1945. Courtesy Jacob J. Dyck: Am Trakt to America by D. Frederick Dyck.*

calendar) I was elected a preacher in the school building in Hahnsau where the preaching was done. The election was by voice vote and by lot. My co-nominee was Peter Kopper. Each of us got 40 voice votes, but the lot fell to me to be the preacher.

"I found it quite hard to accept this important position, but I could not withstand the urging and was finally persuaded by the Elder Johann Wall and the rest of the preachers. On the following Sunday, August 14, 1859, I was installed at the school in Koepental which in those days was used for the worship services. On October 2, 1859, I gave my inaugural sermon.

"In May 1864, my wife's aunt Justine died. She was Frau Peter Esau (*née* Neufeld). On December 5, 1865, Uncle Peter Esau also died. He left an only daughter, Maria, who after her father's death stayed with my wife's only brother, Jacob Bergmann, who inherited the farm from his uncle Peter Esau. Maria Esau died February 1, 1868.

"My brother-in-law, Jacob Bergmann, died on February 12, 1875, of tuberculosis. He had suffered 3 or 4 years from the disease. He tried various remedies. Even a cure of 'Kumyss' for which reason he had taken in a family of Kirgisiens who owned a few milk mares. Only these people knew how to brew the drink from the mare's milk.

"In 1872 or 1873, I went in company with Elder Jacob Toews to Petersburg on church matters. There we met with the delegates from Chortitza and Molotschna. From

Chortitza were Elder P. Klaassen and preacher, now Elder, Heinrich Epp. From Molotschna were Elder John Harder from the Orloff church and preacher Isaac, Elder Jacob Toews from the Lichtenau settlement, Elder B. Peters of the Marienau church, Elder Fr. Goerz of the Rudnerweide church, Elder Js. Peters of the Alexandertal church and Preacher Peter Goerz of Steinfeld.

"In 1878, I traveled with a delegate from our settlement to the conference held in Molotschna, South Russia. On the return trip I visited the Chortitza settlement also.

"In 1879, I went to Petersburg twice. The time was in March, in company with Brother Martin Klaassen, and Brothers Abram Peters and Buller from Molotschna. We were there during Passion Week and over the Easter holidays. We had an urgent need to speak to General von Todleben about emigrating to Turkestan but could not arrange an audience with him. However, we received what we wished to know from his adjutant, General Schildner, who had been with Todleben at Molotschna. The second time, I went in company with Jacob Toews and Abram Peters from Molotschna, in September of that same year. This time we were in Petersburg almost five weeks. This was mainly because General Governor Kaufmann, Governor of Turkestan, after we had an audience with him, said he would travel to the Crimea to see His Majesty the Czar and that we should wait for his return, as he personally wished to present our petition to emigrate to Turkestan to His Majesty.

"In this long waiting time we had the opportunity to speak with Ministers and other Dignitaries about our interests. This was made possible through Pastor Dr. H. Dalton, minister of the Reformed Church; Pastor Findeisen, pastor of the Petri church and Pastor Hans, preacher of the Herrnhuter Brethren Church. Several times we conferred with Baron von Mirbach, (Aide de Camp) adjutant, who addressed us as 'Brothers.' He was definitely a religious man, a '*Glaubiger*' (true believer). He was on our side and totally understood our problems. He helped us in advice and in deed. We were admitted to an interview with the Secretary of the Interior Makow, Minister of Domain Waluyew, where we conferred only with his adjutant, (Furst Lieven), who later became Domain Minister, and got into conversation with the Councilor '*Gehiemer Rat*' Regel, who was chief of the Royal Botanic Gardens. His son knew the region of Tashkent very well.

"The Vice-Governor for Samarkand, General Korolkoff, took up the matter with enthusiasm to describe the conditions in his home region to us. We stayed in the Hotel De-la-Pai [*sic*], on Bolshaya Morskaya. From there we sailed by steamship to Fort Kronstadt and also to the Imperial Palace, Peterhof. The special diary which I kept on that journey, I unfortunately left in Russia. We tried hard several times to see Czar Alexander II. I got to see him close by, but only a glimpse.

"In 1885, I went once again to the conference in Molotschna, in the company of Mayor Johannes D. Dyck. At this opportunity, I visited two of the Forestry Camps where our young men had to perform their service. [Excerpt from the diary of Johannes D. Dyck describing this trip: 'May 15 Coronation celebration. At 4 P.M. I and Johannes Epp went to Saratov, and from there by train to the Molotschna. 19 Sunday. I and Loewen went to the island of Chortitza to chief mayor Hildebrand. This island is in the middle of the Dnieper River, consists of 6,250 acres, rather light soil in part, and is divided among eighteen families. Hildebrand and his brother circled the island with me. It is partly very romantic and picturesque with its rocky shores and ruins of fortresses of warring tribes and peoples, among whom Taras Bulba was one. 20 Monday morning I went to the regional office with Hildebrand, who showed me the document that Czarina Catherine II had given and Czar Paul had confirmed to the Mennonites who first came to Russia. 21 Meetings started in the Wallman office. Discussions about the 1885 budget for the barracks. These discussions lasted until Thursday evening. 24 Went by train to the Molotschna.]

"The church in Orloff was built in 1874. The later occurrences are more or less known to the children. Written June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1904.

"As the last of our children have now left their parents' home, and have founded their own, it is very quiet in our house, and the infirmities of old age appear more and more, so the thought strikes me about a farewell from this earth, and in my heart, I try to free myself from this life's hustle and turmoil, and through God's strength and mercy wend my way to the Heavenly goal, the Eternal home of all God's children."

Johann Epp's narrative ends on this rather melancholic note when he was 68. He would live another 18 years, dying at age 87 in 1922. It is curious that Johann wrote about his years in Am Trakt, Russia, in a "fast forward" style compared to his writing about living in West Prussia. Johann Epp was a very influential minister at the Koeppental-Orloff Mennonite Church and a well-respected man in the Am Trakt settlement.

When compulsory military service was forced on the Russian Mennonites in the 1870s, many families made the decision to immigrate to America or Canada. There was some criticism by those that left of those that remained in Russia and accepted the compromise of service in the Russian Forest Service. This criticism was echoed by Mennonites in America. Johann Epp had been instrumental in arranging for alternative service for Russian Mennonites during his trips to St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1873 and again in 1879.

In 1875, in response to criticism of those Mennonites who had remained in Russia, Johann Epp wrote a long letter to John F. Funk, editor of the *Herald of Truth* published in Elkhart, Indiana. Johann Epp was critical of Funk's pro-immigration position for Russian Mennonites. Funk's response was to refuse to publish Johann Epp's letter, although he did not destroy it. Ninety-nine years later Johann Epp's letter was published in the October 1974 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* with introductory material by Leonard Gross. Johann Epp could not foresee the coming catastrophe of the Russian Revolution of 1917, but he did portend what would eventually happen to American and Canadian Mennonites when compulsory military conscription was forced on them.

Another area about which Johann Epp is strangely silent on in his narrative is the Asian Trek (*Asienreise*) of Mennonites from Molotschna and Am Trakt into Turkestan. This immigration into Asiatic Russia caused major upheaval in the Russian Mennonite colonies. There seem to have been as many reasons for this immigration as there were participants. Primary among them were compulsory military service, lack of available land for growth in the colonies and the most notorious—Claas Epp Jr.'s millennial prophesying. In spite of their having the same last name there was not a close kinship between Johann Epp and Claas Epp Jr., although the two certainly knew each other well.

Johann Epp was finally persuaded to immigrate to America in 1893. The Epp family settled in Newton, Kansas, where Johann Epp became minister at the First Mennonite Church of Newton.

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"In their Own Words: Part II" will deal with the origins of the Asian Trek (*Asienreise*) with firsthand accounts of the Trek by Herman Jantzen Jr., Jakob Klaassen, and Helena Graeve.