

# THE CANADIAN MENNONITE IMMIGRATION INTO THE PARAGUAYAN CHACO, 1926-27\*

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The migration of Canadian Mennonites to Central and South America (1922-27) was the result of the nationalistic legislation of Canada during the World War. The Canadian Mennonites of the West who had emigrated in 1789 from West Prussia to Russia and in 1874 from Russia to Canada held tenaciously to their native German, their mother tongue. They were aided in this by a government grant of 1875 which made them a privileged group with cultural autonomy. This grant permitted them to maintain their own schools in the German language. Until 1914 scarcely any English was taught in these schools.

In the war the Canadian Government quite correctly realized that an unusually favorable opportunity had presented itself to "Canadianize" the numerous foreign racial elements which had immigrated into the country. Consequently, in 1915 the so-called "One Language Law" was passed which forbade the schools to give instruction in German. Religious instruction was also banished from the common schools and left to the various religious bodies to be conducted outside of the school system. The Mennonites were greatly disturbed by this law which would very probably transform them in a few decades into English speaking Canadians. Consequently, numerous individuals, groups, and congregations appealed to the Provincial and Dominion school authorities for permission at least to teach German in their private schools as a foreign language. However, the Government persistently refused all these appeals.

As a final resort an appeal was made to the Dominion Government in Ottawa, which was forwarded to the highest court of the empire in London, the Privy Council. The decision of the Privy Council (1919-20) was in favor of the Mennonites. The grant of privileges, according to the judgment, was binding upon the Dominion Government but not upon the provincial authorities who had independent power in the management of education. Furthermore,

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\* Translated from the German.

the decision of the Council pointed out that the important document granting the privileges was not confirmed by Parliament, and the copy which was in the Government archives did not agree in text exactly with the copy in possession of the settlers.

There remained now but one possibility for the German Mennonites to maintain their native language and native culture, namely, emigration. This was the decision of largest proportion of the Mennonites in Manitoba. For 85 years they had been loyal to their native culture in Russia and likewise for 46 years in Canada, and they were now ready to leave house and home a third time that they might not be compelled to be assimilated into a strange culture. It was accordingly clear that the notion which frequently appeared in the newspapers was not true which said that the Canadian Mennonites emigrated because they did not want to learn English. Rather they emigrated because they wished to remain German at any cost not only in language but in culture.

Already at the time of the passage of the "One Language Law" the Mennonites had taken up the idea of emigration, and after the final decision of the Privy Council in London had been given, their leaders at once began to look out for a land which would grant for the Mennonites to the fullest extent the privileges which they had lost in Canada, even if such a land should not offer quite so favorable prospects for economic prosperity as Canada.

The pioneer work for the emigration was the energetic and consistent activity of the so-called "Old Colony" group, one of the more conservative Mennonite groups in Manitoba. They had originally come from the "Old", that is the oldest Mennonite colony in Russia, the Chortitza Colony in the Gouvernement Jekaterinoslav, and had immigrated in 1874-76 to Canada together with the other Manitoba Mennonites.

The "Old Colony" group sent a delegation of six farmers in 1919 to Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina to investigate the possibilities of colonization. However, not a one of these countries was willing to grant them the privileges which they desired: namely, freedom from military service and absolute independence in school and community affairs.

In 1920 another section of the "Old Colony" group, from Hague in Saskatchewan, sent a second delegation to South America with instructions to go as far as Paraguay. Through a New York financier, General Samuel McRoberts, they had learned of possibilities of colonization in the Paraguayan Chaco. McRoberts had had contact with the Paraguayan minister in Washington, the later

President Manuel Gondra, regarding immigration of the Mennonites into the Chaco, and was not indisposed to support the project financially.

The above named investigating commission went up the Paraguay River as far as the port of Pinasco where they followed the narrow gauge railway a short distance westward from the river and then continued further by automobile a total of 90 kilometers (about 56 miles) into the Chaco. But this dry territory did not seem to them to be adapted to agriculture so they returned to Canada with a negative report.

The report of the second commission put an end to the project of emigrating to South America so far as the "Old Colony" group was concerned. They began instead to emigrate to Mexico in 1922 where they established a colony in the next two years of approximately 4,000 persons in the state of Chihuahua.

Other Mennonite groups soon took up the project of settlement in the Chaco. In February, 1921, the Sommerfeld and Choritz groups in Manitoba sent six delegates to Paraguay with the commission to devote special attention to the possibilities of colonization in the Chaco. They, too, had made contact with McRoberts and had received his promise of financial support.

In Buenos Aires the delegates opened negotiations with the Carlos Casado Company which owned  $2\frac{1}{2}$  million hectares (about  $5\frac{1}{4}$  million acres) of land in the Chaco. When the group arrived at the port of Casado, north of the above mentioned port of Pinasco, the owner of the port and partner in the Company, Senor José Casado, equipped an expedition for an investigating tour of the Chaco. In the late autumn, that is, at the end of April, the time of the year which is climatically the most pleasant because it is the coolest, the six delegates started into the Chaco. The railroad, which had been built exclusively for the export of quebracho wood from which tannin is secured, at that time extended only 60 kilometers (about 40 miles) into the interior so that the journey from the end station of the railroad had to be continued by ox cart. Indians under the direction of several white men preceded the company and cut a passage through the thick forest. The group penetrated a distance of 255 kilometers (about 160 miles) into the jungle and during the journey made shorter or longer side trips to the right or left into the forest. At the location of their westernmost camp, which was reached on the 20th of May, 1921, they fastened a wooden cross onto a large tree which is now on the land which belongs to the village of Kleefeld in the Colony Fernheim,

The delegates observed that the part of the Chaco which they had been able to investigate was covered with an immense forest of low trees interspersed with smaller or larger "pampas" or open places which totalled perhaps one-fourth of the entire area. The whole region was absolutely flat. The forest appeared to have little timber which could be used for building purposes, yet the delegates thought that there would be enough for modest houses. The attempts to dig wells for water were not always satisfactory yet here and there sweet water had been found. The comparatively long, juicy, fresh buffalo grass growing on the pampas seemed to them to be excellently adapted for pasture, although they did not know at that time that this grass was bitter and is not eaten by cattle.

The exhausting journey occupied a month so that it was the end of May before the expedition returned to Puerto Casado. The delegates at once telegraphed to the home land that "the conditions are satisfactory in every respect", and started for North America.

The delegates reached New York by the end of July but did not return at once to Canada, going instead at the request of the home group into Mexico as far as to Mexico City, to investigate colonization possibilities in several Mexican provinces. However, in their judgment, the Chaco was unqualifiedly better than Mexico, not the least also because "they would remain unmolested longer there".

In their written report to the churches in Canada, they made the following statements: "We are of the opinion that the land in general is well adapted for agriculture, stock-raising, fruit growing and the raising of vegetables. We believe that grain, such as wheat, etc., can be grown at certain times of the year. . . . We believe that this land, blessed with its various advantages and its mild climate, would be well adapted to colonization if the necessary railway connection with the port on the river is established . . . ."

The Paraguayan Government was from the beginning exceedingly well disposed toward the immigration of these capable farmers and favored the undertaking in every way possible, since it meant that an area of land would be opened for development consisting of 29 million hectares (in comparison it might be noted that Germany possesses 47 million hectares) of which the Government in 1885 had sold 5 million hectares to the Carlos Casado Company for eight and one-half cents per hectare. Already in August, 1921, the Senate and Congress of Paraguay had passed a law which un-

conditionally granted the prospective immigrants all the privileges which they had requested.

However, the prospective emigration from Canada to Paraguay was not undertaken at once. The economic crisis of 1921 brought all these plans temporarily to an involuntary end. The above mentioned New York financier, McRoberts, together with his associate, Mr. Robinette, who had been ready to take over the land and equipment of the group in Canada and trade it for land in the Chaco, withdrew from the project and the group of Manitoba farmers were not able in their own strength to finance the emigration, particularly since it was for the group a matter to be taken for granted that the poorer families would be taken along at the expense of the entire group. The cost of the trip to Paraguay was reckoned at \$100 per family on the average so that for the poorer families alone \$60,000 had to be provided. Another important factor in blocking the emigration was the fact that the price of land and grain in Canada had fallen more than 100% as a consequence of the economic crisis and that therefore so much land could not be disposed of in a short time without extraordinary loss.

The matter rested then until 1925, although the prospective emigrants remained in loose connection during the entire interval with McRoberts and Robinette. In that year at last new and favorable prospects for emigration appeared. The economic situation had considerably improved and Mr. McRoberts resumed the negotiations with those who desired to emigrate. He and Robinette founded in Paraguay (Asunción) a corporation under the name of *Corporación Paraguaya* (C. P.), and in Canada (Winnipeg) the Intercontinental Company (I. C.). The latter company finally, after lengthy negotiations, took over the entire land of the prospective emigrants amounting to 43,998 acres at a total sale price of \$902,900.39. The price per acre varied from \$6.50 to \$42.00 with some of the land in the neighborhood of the towns exceptionally priced at \$50.00 per acre. Of the total sale price \$7.00 per acre was paid in cash to the emigrants. The balance had to be taken out in land in the Chaco which was furnished by the C. P. at \$5.00 per acre. On this basis the group secured 137,920.4 acres in the Chaco. The C. P. had bought the land from the Carlos Casado Company at a price of \$1.25 to \$1.50 per acre.

The way for the emigration movement was now open, but the strong drive to migrate which had started the movement originally had considerably weakened during the long period of waiting. The greater portion of the group had finally accepted as their lot the

fact that their children had to learn English exclusively in the Canadian schools and that religious instruction had to be transferred to the Sunday School. One group had emigrated to Mexico already. Consequently only a minority of the Manitoba community finally decided to go to Paraguay.

On November 28, 1926, the first transport of 309 souls left the little town of Altona in Manitoba, traveled to New York via Chicago and there boarded the Steamship "Vasari" for South America. Eight additional groups rapidly followed the original transport. The list is as follows, with date of leaving Manitoba:

1.	November 28, 1926	309	Persons
2.	December 18, 1926	216	"
3.	December 24, 1926	111	"
4.	January 30, 1927	335	"
5.	April 16, 1927	336	"
6.	August 27, 1927	100	"
7.	October 16, 1927	337	"
8.	April 10, 1930	21	"

The total number of the immigrants who left Canada was 1765 distributed among 279 families.

Upon arriving in Ascunción the immigrants were warmly welcomed by the President of Paraguay, Dr. Eligio Ayala. The first group reached its goal in Puerto Casado on the 30th of December, 1926. Very little had been done by the C. P. for their reception at Puerto Casado and nothing at all for their further transport and colonization in the Chaco. The new arrivals were temporarily located in five emergency barracks near the river but most of them voluntarily relinquished these dwellings which would naturally have to be surrendered with the arrival of later groups anyway. They began to live in tents which they had brought along, or later in small huts which they built and for which the C. P. furnished lumber free of charge. A sixth barrack which was somewhat larger than the others was made to serve as a kitchen in one end and as a meeting place in the other end.

The new immigrants waited impatiently to press on into the Chaco, but the C. P. made no moves to aid them. The delegates from Canada had inspected a considerable area of land in 1921 but had not chosen the exact location for the settlement. This was to be reserved for the actual settlers. This choice, they assumed, would not be difficult as the C. P. was expected to mark the four outer boundaries of the tract or reserve which they had bought from the Casado Company. This, however, the C. P. had neglected

to do. In 1925 McRoberts had sent one of his associates to Paraguay, a Mr. March, to secure a survey before the arrival of the settlers of the land purchased from the Casado Company. However, March had not been able to agree with the survey office in Asunción regarding the price of the proposed survey and had returned to New York without accomplishing his mission.

The representative of the C. P. in Puerto Casado at the time of the arrival of the first group was a Norwegian by the name of Fred Engen, a good-hearted man but one who lacked the necessary strength of character and firmness of will as well as the essential organizing ability to successfully perform the task assigned to him. It was the middle of January, 1927, when he organized an expedition of five people to go into the Chaco which, however, got no farther than Hoffnungsfeld, 12 kilometers (about  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles) east of the present settlement, and then had to return on account of lack of food supplies. The group were pleased with the land but disappointed in the failure to discover much timber that was usable for construction purposes, for the jungle seemed to have little of it. They believed that they would be able to adapt themselves gradually to the great heat. A third group in April of the same year reached kilometer 216 (mile 135) and confirmed the judgment of the first expedition about the land. Then everything was quiet for awhile. Months went by without anything being undertaken, either by the immigrants or the C. P. In the meantime the typhus epidemic which had broken out, the return of some disillusioned immigrants to Canada, and the attempt of a small, more active group to colonize in Eastern Paraguay, diverted the group in general from its most urgent task, namely, that of pressing forward into the Chaco.

The health of the group which at the first had not been bad among the adults, gradually became less and less satisfactory. The time for the immigration was the least favorable imaginable, since the colonists came out of the severe Canadian winter directly into the high summer of the tropics. The change was so extreme that on the very first day after the arrival a child died, and on the third three children died. From that time on for months frequent deaths of children occurred. In January and February alone 26 children were carried out to the cemetery. Soon adults began to take sick. The living in close quarters, the dirty and always lukewarm water, the unaccustomed and generally inadequate diet, the unsanitary toilet facilities which were located near to the barracks, the lack of the least opportunity for bathing and, finally, not the least, the flies

and other insects, prepared the way for the catastrophe which was to cost almost 200 human lives. In April, 1927 the first adults died, apparently from dysentery. However, all the symptoms pointed to abdominal typhus although Casado and his physician, Dr. W. Walter, did not want to admit it. In September after 83 people had already died, the C. P. secured a second physician, Dr. Karl Meilinger from Encarnación on the Paraná River. Dr. Meilinger was to give medical care to the colonists on their way into the Chaco. He at once determined that the disease was typhus and ordered the most stringent quarantine and isolation of those who were sick. He also took other measures to stop the epidemic, but little could be done. The disease laid low one victim after another. Soon mound after mound appeared in the cemetery. Everyone who could started out into the Chaco, if only to escape from the infected harbor. But death pursued those who fled. People went about as in a dream with certain death before their eyes.

The plague continued until February 1928 and then gradually died out. It had raged terribly among the immigrants. Parents were sorrowing for their children and children were sorrowing for their parents. By the end of 1928 a total of 185 persons had died. This number was distributed as follows:

- |                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. On the journey to Paraguay        | 6   |
| 2. In the port of Casado             | 121 |
| 3. On the way into the Chaco         | 48  |
| 4. In the newly established villages | 12  |

But let us go back to the beginning of 1927 again. With each passing day after the arrival at Puerto Casado, the immigrants became more and more restless, and inquired more and more impatiently about the further movement into the Chaco which had been dragged out so unconscionably long. They demanded that Fred Engen should act but he hesitated. Many blamed Casado but he had nothing to do with the immigration. Nothing seemed to be of any avail. At last the immigrants wrote to Canada and requested the home group for speedy help. The home folks stirred up the I. C. and informed McRoberts. The latter, after trying in vain to handle the matter by cable, sent one of his best associates, the Vice-president of the I. C., Alfred Rogers, to Paraguay.

Rogers reached Puerto Casado at the end of May, 1927 and immediately took up the leadership energetically. However, he failed to move the settlers to determine the boundaries of their land with even the most primitive means so he returned to Asunción to negotiate with the survey office. On the 16th of June, he



returned to Puerto Casado, accompanied by McRoberts, who had meanwhile come himself to Paraguay, called the immigrants together and decided with them to send an expedition at once into the Chaco to make the final selection of the land. But it was July before the 12 representatives of the group got started and reached kilometer 216 (mile 135) on the trail which had already been traveled three times. They followed the example of their predecessors, made short trips to the left and right of the trail, dug wells, tried to find building lumber in the forest and finally chose a territory about 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of the port as the place for the settlement. Here they found larger pampas and observed that the land was not swampy as it was in the region near the river. On the 14th of August they returned to the port and secured the consent of the entire immigrant group to their choice.

It has already been mentioned that several families had pressed on into the Chaco to get away from the harbor and in order to be near to their future homes in the interior. Already on the 12th of February, 1927, six families with 31 persons had started out to settle down somewhere. This group had been used to work and could no longer stand the idleness at the port; they also hoped no doubt to be safer from sickness away from the port. After 12 long hard days on the journey, they reached kilometer 112 (mile 70), also called Pozo Azul, constructed emergency dwellings, began to clear the open pampas of the few scattered trees and bushes on them, and prepared to plow the first fields in the Chaco.

A few days later Fred Engen with a second group went into the Chaco and reached Hoffnungsfeld. Here this group also settled in emergency dwellings and sent for their relatives to follow so that before long 30 families reached this place and a village was established.

A third group went into the Chaco and on the 9th of August reached a place about 20 kilometers (about 13 miles) beyond Hoffnungsfeld and settled at a spot called Luma Plata not far from the place where the present village of Reinland lies.

In August and September two further settlements were made, one near Palo Blanco, 1½ kilometers from the present village of Gnadenfeld, and one at Laguna Casado.

Finally at the end of August, 1927, the survey of the land was begun. The immigrants took new courage and soon hoped to be able to settle on their own land and not waste any more time and money and above all physical strength, which is so important in the tropics. But the firm of Infram and Bibellini, which was to do the

surveying, was moving at a snail's pace. By the end of December, that is, four months, they had only progressed 53 kilometers in one direction; consequently, the C. P. cancelled the original contract with the company for the surveying and agreed upon a price of \$90 per kilometer. From that time on the work suddenly went forward with speed and dispatch. But it was the middle of April, 1928, before the outer boundaries of the Mennonite area were surveyed and marked by trails cut through the forest.

In February before the surveyors had completed their work, the locations of the villages were chosen and the inner boundaries surveyed so that by the first of March the tracts of land could be assigned to the individual families. Each village was to consist of 16 to 20 farms of 160 to 200 acres in each. Each family was permitted to join the village of its own choice provided the village would receive it.

Finally, in April, 1928, 16 months after the arrival of the first immigrants in Puerto Casado, the great hour struck when the group as a whole were permitted to actually locate on their own land. The colony which was now founded received the name of Menno after Menno Simons, the early leader of the Mennonites in Holland. One village after the other was located in the forest and soon 14 were established. In the following four years (to 1932) four additional villages were established. Following is the list of villages together with the year in which they were established:

- |                 |                    |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1. 1928 Bergtal | 10. " Schöntal     |
| 2. " Laubenheim | 11. " Halbstadt    |
| 3. " Waldheim   | 12. " Strasberg    |
| 4. " Gradenfeld | 13. " Chortitz     |
| 5. " Weidenfeld | 14. " Silberfeld   |
| 6. " Reinland   | 15. 1929 Neuanlage |
| 7. " Bergfeld   | 16. 1930 Lindenau  |
| 8. " Osterwick  | 17. 1932 Grünfeld  |
| 9. " Blumengart | 18. " Grüntal      |

However, not all the immigrants had been patient enough to hold out during the apparently endless time of waiting. The typhus, the privation and the tropic heat, the homesickness for their relatives in Canada and for the cool weather and the wheat fields, the uncertainty about their future in the Chaco which no one could foretell, together with all the other dark sides of their long sojourn in camps along the way before they settled, made them lose heart and despair. The general dissatisfaction which was the result of various causes just mentioned finally found expression in 1927 in a

movement which had as its objective the transfer of at least a portion of the settlers to eastern Paraguay. One of the original six delegates, Isaac Funk, together with several others, traveled to Villa Rica east of Ascunción where negotiations were undertaken with a land owner by the name of Schären in regard to settlement near Pasto Rio, northeast of Villa Rica. The prospects for economic advancement seemed to them to be incomparably more favorable here than in the Chaco. Here there was good drinking water everywhere, the forest was filled with good timber, the city of Villa Rica was comparatively near and Ascunción was also much nearer than it was to the Chaco, and finally, the land was without a doubt much better and more than 60 percent cheaper than in the Chaco. But group discipline and the feeling of solidarity among the settlers was stronger than the striving of individuals to guarantee their own economic existence at the cost of the group. A few families did go to Villa Rica, but within a month left and returned to Canada.

In March, 1927, the first families returned from Puerto Casado to Canada and started a movement which was not to cease until the final settlement in the Chaco was accomplished. The high point of the movement was reached at the turn of the year 1927 to 1928 after which it gradually ebbed. A total of 371 persons returned to Canada although but very few of these returned emigrants came from the villages after they were once established.

A long row of graves marks the road of these peaceful conquerors on their way into the wilderness of the wild Chaco. At the expense of tremendous sacrifice of lives, of strength and of health, these pioneers opened for themselves and for others the hitherto undeveloped and unexplored regions of the Chaco. After six years of the most severe labor, the pampas which have been settled and a small portion of the forest have been transformed into cultivated farms, and the settlers have learned to win their daily bread from the prevailingly light soil in quite different agricultural conditions than they were previously accustomed to. But their economic future is still uncertain and the market for their products is far away and probably inadequate. So far the colonists have had a modest income through the cultivation of cotton.

[The second article which follows in the next issue will deal with the immigration of the Russian Mennonites into the Chaco and the character of Chaco agriculture.]



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