

Part I: The Golden Age of the Mennonites (1909-1913)

Chapter 1

September 1909, Bolshoi-Tokmak Ukraine

I stepped out of the house and breathed in the crisp autumn air. The sun rose and lit up the fields and the farmlands around me. To the west of me was the Wintergruen Estates owned by my uncle, while to the east of me was another property I owned called the Katerinovka Estates. On that land, I bred and raised prized horses for the tsar which I had been doing for many years. The land between the two was the Marianovka Estate which contained my flour mill, surrounded by fields of wheat and an orchard.

A group of Ukrainian and Russian workers loaded bags of flour in the wagons. Laughter broke out among the men as they teased and goaded each other. They were about to set on a long trek to the Port of Berdyansk. It took many weeks, sometimes months, before they returned back home. I greeted the workers and joined in on their banter. We commiserated about the government and the yearly trek the workers went on to deliver the flour to the ships.

"We'll see who survives this time. Artem squealed like a malyshka when he saw a rat snake." Bagon grinned while the rest of the men guffawed as Artem turned beet red.

I clasped a hand on Artem's shoulder. "Don't worry, Artem. You'll show this group what a true man you are."

Artem nodded. "For sure, Mr. Wall. Nothing will scare me this time."

I turned to the group. "Thank you for doing this yearly trek. I wish there was an easier way to transport these goods over rough terrain and through bad weather. We do our best not to lose any goods on the journey. Katerina has packed you some food for your trek."

The men whistled in appreciation as one of the men said, "Mmm-hmmmm. Her cooking and baking alone is worth the journey." The men chorused in agreement.

"Gather around, everyone. I want to pray for all of you before you set out on your journey." The men shuffled closer and took their hats off. "Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the bountiful harvest this year. Please go with these men as they journey to Berdyansk. Please put your hand over them and protect them as they travel. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the men echoed back.

"Safe travels and I'll see you in a couple of months."

Led by Bagon, the group of men in their five wagons headed out of the gates and traveled toward the Port of Berdyansk where the flour would then be transported throughout and beyond Russia.

As I saw the wagons off, my heart went out to the men. Whether it be the unexpected weather, bandits or broken wagons, the trek was filled with dangers at every turn. If only there was a way to reduce their time travelling. The sound of hooves clumping on the ground interrupted my thoughts as my coachman, Metrofan, came down from the barn just behind the house to the left driving a Droschka, a four-wheeled wagon with two draft horses pulling it.

“Good morning, Mr. Wall,” greeted Metrofan. He tipped his hat. “Is your family ready?”

I chuckled, “You know how women are in getting ready in the morning. They like to take their sweet time.” I turned to the house. “Children, it’s time to go! We are going to be late for church if you don’t hurry up.”

The pounding of feet echoed through the house as my seven children rushed outside. There was Peter (16), Anna (15), Mary (11), Johnny (10), Cathy (8), Jake (7), and George (4). My sons were dressed in their best suits and my daughters in their best dresses, their hair in braids with bonnets or fancy hats on their heads. Maria, my wife, came out last with our newest addition to the family, Abram, who was a year old. They clambered into the wagon, and we headed down the one street leading through our village.

Our colonies had grown since Catherine the Great called my ancestors to farm this land. We had divided into two colonies; Chroitza and Molotschna. My family lived in Molotschna, which is divided into two districts governed by our own people: Gnadenfeld and Halbstadt. Each colony had about fifty or sixty small villages with usually one road connecting the majority of the villages. At least with our ancestors coming here, we were able to practice our faith freely.

We arrived at our church in Schoensee about four kilometres from our village in Bolshoi-Tokmak. Metrofan dropped us off at the church before hitching the wagon to a wooden post alongside other wagons on the street. My family and I entered through the doors under the bricked archway, and my daughters followed my wife to the left, where they entered a cloak room while my sons followed me to the right. We hung up our hats and took our seats in the pews. I greeted Mr. Kliever and his sons who sat beside us. My heart raced when I caught a glimpse of Leslie sitting with her parents. *What is she doing here turning up from nowhere?* I glanced at my wife who sat as far away from her sister as possible. *Oh, what to do? What to do?* I ruffled my hair, then smoothed it back in place. Peter gave me a curious look.

He leaned over. “Vati, are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m fine, Peter.”

He turned away and talked with his brothers. I leaned back in my seat and stilled my shaking hands. Leslie must be here on a visit since I haven’t seen her in so many years not since... I shook off the memory. I made eye contact with her and gave her a brief smile of acknowledgement. She directed my gaze to a young thirteen-year-old girl who sat with my brother and his wife. “Is that her?” she mouthed. I nodded my head and she gave a watery smile. She turned back to converse with her parents. I caught Maria’s eyes from across the

room and she glared at me. I lowered my eyes and my foot tapped on the floor while waiting for the service to start.

The rest of the people trickled into their designated sides. The elders took their seats on small wooden pews on either side of the altar, and the deacon dressed in all black except for his white collar strode up to the front. The deacon was a farmer elected by our village to teach us the Word of God. As we sang a few hymns, the sunlight came through the windows and bathed the church in its light. Through the rays of the sun, dust danced through the air.

I sunk into my seat and allowed the words of the hymns and the sermon wash over me. All of our voices filled the room and I relished the fellowship with these men. Our sense of community has continued to grow over the years passing down from generation to generation to the point where we were a close-knit group.

After a brief sermon and a closing hymn, the village congregated in a field beside the church where families brought out dishes of food. I searched for signs of Leslie. I scanned through the crowd where children frolicked and played by the bubbling brook. A familiar dark blue bonnet caught my gaze which reminded me of times past. It was Leslie. She took out a handkerchief to dab her eyes and with what looked like Melvina running away from her. I took a step towards Leslie but stopped when a man took her arm. He whispered into her ear and led her away. She was gone, most likely never to be seen again.

I jumped when a hand clasped my shoulder. The man chuckled. "Who knew you could be scared so easily, Mr. Wall?"

I grinned seeing one of my friends, Mr. Kliever. "I was deep in thought. Didn't hear you coming."

He chuckled again. "How did your harvest go?"

"It was a big harvest this year. My men left this morning to deliver the wheat to the Port of Berdyansk. I wish there were another way we could transport the wheat to make it easier on my men and horses. They lost a few loads last year when they travelled amongst the terrain."

"May their journey be a safe one," said Mr. Kliever. He beckoned me to come closer and said, "But there is a way we can rectify the journey."

"And what would that be?"

Mr. Kliever gestured to the small group of men with him. "We have decided to build a railroad through the villages which will make it easier for people to transport wheat and goods to other villages and cities throughout Russia. What do you think?"

I gazed at the children and envisioned a train running through our villages. It would bring supplies to remote villages. Not only that, it would shorten our journey to deliver supplies to the Port of Berdyansk. We would definitely not lose the amount of supplies to terrain, weather, wild animals, and bandits. I nodded. "It would bring a lot of business to our small villages especially to those who have difficulty receiving shipments. Do you have men to invest in the railroad or have any idea of how you are going to build it?"

“We are still working out the details in our plan, but it should be successful. We are going to present it at our next town meeting and have a vote on it. If it passes, we’ll develop a plan to submit to the Ministry of Transportation.”

“All right. But you are going to need a solid plan if you want the Ministry of Transportation to approve it.”

Mr. Kliever chuckled, “Don’t worry, Jacob. We have it under control.”

We said good-bye to each other before we collected our wives and children to head home to rest and socialize with relatives.

The month was busy with the town meeting and the planting of winter wheat. At the end of the month, I went out into my fields on the Marianovka Estate to assist my workers, Russian peasants, in getting ready for the new season. Winter wheat, was a coarser grain compared to spring wheat.

I went to the barn, grabbed a bag of seeds, and joined the workers on my fields. We greeted each other with waves, firm handshakes and boisterous voices. My workers and I worked in unison for the rest of the morning. When we took a break for lunch, I headed to the flour mill where my factory foreman, Abram Lepp, oversaw the operations. I entered into a large wooden building, one of a few on my property, where a flour mill was located. It was a funnel that channeled the wheat into the vat for stone-grinding. Once it grounded into flour and poured into bags from the meal spout, the workers would close the bags and move them to storage. Abram stood with his arms crossed and watched the workers pull levers on the machine while others poured the flour into bags.

“How are things, Abram?”

Abram grinned. “It’s going well, Jacob. We have a lot of flour to sell. How are the crops?”

“It was a bountiful harvest this year. This afternoon we’ll be planting the winter wheat.”

Abram chuckled. “You have turned this flour mill into a prosperous business ever since your stepfather handed this to you when he retired.”

My heart clenched at the mention of my stepfather.

I shrugged my shoulders and focused on Abram. “All thanks to God.”

Abram clapped me on the shoulder. “Indeed, and with you being a hard worker has contributed to that as well. Before you go, you need to find an engineer of some kind.”

“Why’s that?”

“We had great difficulty when the flour mill had malfunctions last week. It will be great to have someone experienced in that field just in case something serious goes wrong.”

“Ah, I see your point. I’m on my way to Germany to see some prized horses for breeding for the tsar next month. I will look for someone then.”

“Excellent. What did you think about the railroad idea that the men presented at the town meeting?”

“It’s a great idea especially since these men work around the clock to help me operate the flour mill. I’ll welcome anything that would help reduce the men’s workload and save them from making dangerous treks each year to deliver supplies to the ships. I need to head to my office. My credit manager mentioned there were a few men who maximized their credits for the flour.”

“Hopefully you can do something about it.”

We tipped our hats to each other and parted ways.