

The Bethesda Mennonite Church of Henderson, Nebraska has its roots in the Protestant Reformation of Europe. Henderson Mennonites came from the lowlands of Belgium, Holland, and Friesland in the 1500's and 1600's, where many individuals sacrificed their lives in persecution by the kings of Europe. We came to be called Mennonites as followers of Menno Simons, a Catholic priest who converted to Protestantism in Holland.

The leaders of Poland, being more open to Protestantism, invited the Anabaptists to come to Poland in the late 1600's. Knowing of the Dutch skills in draining low-lying swamp land, they were settled in an area between the Vistula and Nogat Rivers, just south of the Baltic Sea. Through their hard work, the Werder (island) was raised up from below sea level; and this part of Poland became a prosperous dairy and haying region.

When Poland came under the rule of Germany (Prussia) in the late 1700's, Frederick the Great began making military demands of the Mennonites. Even though they were able to make monetary payments in lieu of military service, the Mennonites began searching for a land that would give them religious freedom. The Mennonites became Germanized, when the King of Prussia required that our Dutch ancestors speak, read, sing and worship in High German. They retained the Low German vernacular (Platte Deutsche) as their everyday language.

Queen Catherine the Great, issued an invitation to the Polish/Prussian Mennonites to settle a large, fertile land mass she had taken from the Turks in a war in southern Russia (Ukraine). Being of German origin herself, she knew of the hard work ethic of the Mennonites. In exchange for settling the area, the Russian government granted the Mennonites freedom from military service, and the privilege of organizing their own village government, roads, schools, and churches. From 1789 to 1820, many families relocated to Russia. Our ancestors settled the Molotschna Colony, just north of the Black Sea. After many difficulties in the early years of resettlement, they tamed the prairie and again became prosperous.

By 1870, Russia's rulers began to rethink the guarantees made to the Mennonites a hundred years earlier. Men were required to serve, either in the military or in work camps in the northern reaches of Siberia, in the Red Cross, or as non-combatant medics in war. The government began to require Russian in the schools. After less than 100 years in Russia, the Mennonites again searched for a new land, which would grant them religious freedom to practice their beliefs.

Our ancestors had several reasons for coming to North America. Most commonly regarded was the right to not bear arms for military duty. However, they came to North America without a guarantee of this right. The other reason for coming was the great need for land for the sons and daughters of the growing Molotschna Colony. They came in large groups on the first two ships, the Teutonia (900) the Cimbria (600) in 1874. Between 1874 and 1880, about 110 families settled in York and Hamilton County Nebraska.

The main tenets of the Mennonite faith are Anabaptism, or adult believer's baptism upon profession of one's faith; and pacifism, refusing to take up arms in war for government. Thirdly, we do not believe in transubstantiation. Some faiths believe that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ Jesus. We, as Mennonites, believe that communion is an observance of the Last Supper, where the bread and the wine merely represent the body and blood of Christ.