

Katharinenfeld Colony Memories

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[Translator's Note: What the Katharinenfeld Colony experienced during the Turkish-Russian War of 1877.]

[Begin Translation]

War Unrest and Military Quartering in 1877-1878

(Memories from Katharinenfeld Colony)

From the notes of Pastor M. Fr. Schrenk

There were already court-martials a-buzz in the air in the spring of 1877. Russian newspapers had published various atrocities which the Mohammedans supposedly had committed in European Turkey on Bulgarian Christians of the Orthodox faith. Russia had already earlier expressed much interest for its brethren of kinship faith in European Turkey. In the Turkish-Serbian wars, Russian officers had volunteered in large numbers to fight against the Turks. After the Serbs fought for their independence from the Turkish yoke, the Bulgarians also strove for political independence. But they had to pay more dearly for their desire for freedom than the children of Israel once did in Egypt. Whole Bulgarian villages were occupied by Turkish soldiers, who moved around among the people as if they were cattle. As a result, horrible carnage took place several times, which really stirred up the Christian world, especially those of Russian kinship and common faith. Complaints by the Russian Embassy in Constantinople to the Turkish government were without effect. Finally, the Russian government issued an ultimatum to the Turks and, as this brought no freedom to the Bulgarian Christians, Russia grabbed hold of the sword, to fight for the political and religious freedom of their brothers in the faith. At the end of May, or the beginning of June, 1877, the Russian troops moved out and crossed the Turkish border in two different places, namely, in Europe, over the Danube River in Bulgaria, and in Asia, through the Armenian highlands at the border frontier of Alexandropol toward the Turkish frontier of Karss. For a long period of time both armies were at a stalemate with only minor skirmishes. Eventually, there were hard clashed where, initially, the Turks had the advantage, both in Bulgaria and in Armenia. On the Armenian battlefield, between Alexandropol and Karss, there was a moment when we were unsure just which day the Russian army would be beaten back over the border. If that would have happened, then our Tatars in Georgia (*Grusien*) would have allied themselves with their Turkish brethren in the faith and every Russian village, especially our German colonies, would have been overrun and all of us would have been dead. But before such a horrible fate, our God desired, in mercy, to preserve us.

During this perilous time, a detachment of 70-100 Cossack men were quartered in Katharinenfeld, who were to protect the colony against an attack. Besides these Cossacks, 40 German men had to be put in place to guard the streets and exits to the village every night, which were called "Spanish" riders, to prevent any hostilities from taking place anywhere. In the beginning of September, 1877, just as we pastors had gathered in Marienfeld for our annual synod, a fire broke out in the middle of the night in Katharinenfeld, in the vicinity of the parsonage. The storm bell was rung and now everyone believed that the enemy had arrived and so began the singing and the burning. Because of that, the men first came rushing with their weapons, pistols, shotguns and pitchforks until they realized their mistake and then brought water buckets to put out the fire. There was no enemy in sight anywhere and the fire had broken out due to carelessness. But it was soon extinguished before the house of young Jakob Palmer would have been completely burned down.

The fortunes of war soon turned in the favor of the Russians in the Armenian-Turkish campaign. The Turks were beaten back as far as to the fortress of Karss, which was then literally besieged by the Russians. I think it was on 02 October, 1877 when Karss was stormed and taken by the Russians, who also took the Turkish port of Batum on the Black Sea. The whole huge area from Alexandropol to Arrarat in the south, and to Batum and Erserun in the west, became Russian territory in the Peace of 1878.

Under God's almighty assistance and protection, the times of fear graciously passed. Towards the end of the war, the Katharinenfeld Colony still had a very important task to fulfill, even as did the other German colonies in Georgia. It was that we were entrusted by the military senior administration with the care of wounded soldiers. On the Feast of St. Thomas, the Apostle, on 21 December, 1877, Katharinenfeld Colony was entrusted with the responsibility for 350 seriously wounded men. Each home had the obligation of taking 2-3 men. I did this voluntarily and consented to take two non-commissioned officers. We were allowed only to give the wounded food and a place to stay. Actually, there were 2 doctors, 2 medical orderlies and a pair of sisters of mercy (*barmherzige Schwestern*) who came along. Once or twice a day, the sisters of mercy would go around the village with their commitment to care and bound the wounds of our patients. One of our soldiers was shot through the stomach and the other was shot several times through the right thigh. For a brief time, we even had a third person who was shot in the right hand. However, this one broke out with typhoid fever and so he was transferred to a military hospital for those sick with typhoid fever. So we now had ample opportunity to get to know the misery of war from personal experience and provide the merciful services of a Good Samaritan. Our wounded were also generally very well received and well treated by the colonists, so much so that the military administration was quite satisfied. It was during this time that typhoid fever broke out among the colonists in Katharinenfeld and snatched away 8 reliable adults, also 8 soldier graves cover the last vestiges of the deceased warriors at the edge of the church cemetery. The Crown paid 50 kopeck per day for each wounded that was cared for. Toward the end of March, our wounded were mostly healed, or taken to Tbilisi [Tiflis, Georgia] to continue the healing process. There were some wet eyes when it came to the parting with the rugged people of war. They showed their gratefulness to the German folks for their proven love and affection, also partly for having access to God's Word, which was often freely shared with them.

So this severe war, which has cost the lives of thousands and untold misery upon Russia, has certainly brought blessings to some people and by these seeds of tears some will sprout into an eternal harvest of joy. This war, with its terrors and losses, will remain engraved in the memory of those colonists. No German colony has remained without loss of life. Some, in their capacity as transport people, lost their lives through hunger and cold, or died because of typhoid, which struck every colony and claimed the lives of several victims. However, several colonies came by significant amounts of money, particularly through the construction and trading of German wagons since these colonist wagons were excellent purchases for the purposes of war due to their strength and durability. The price for such a colonist wagon rose to 400-500 rubles, while during peaceful times such a wagon could be had for new from 150-160 rubles. So many blacksmiths and wagon makers in those colonies earned serious money as did the wagon drivers, who were requisitioned for the war theater and were paid 5 rubles per day for drivers with 4 horses. Whoever lived in a frugal and simple life-style could earn a pretty sum during this time. To be sure, however, these wagon drivers also brought home typhoid fever and other illnesses, also syphilis, lice-borne diseases, etc. from off the war theater and some of these died on the battlefield, while others died, particularly of typhoid fever, after they came back home. So the war also brought about it's misery in these Georgian colonies and also the money, which was earned, became for many more of a curse than a blessing. For some it was like this: "Easy come. Easy go." (*Wie gewonnen, so zerronnen*)

28 August, 1939

[End Translation]