

Moscow: 1929

Extracts from *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*

Compiled by Marvin Rempel

In summer 1929, 55 Mennonite families who had travelled to Moscow to obtain exit visas were granted permission to emigrate from the Soviet Union. As word of their success spread, approximately 13,000 Mennonite and German families from throughout the Soviet Union made their way to Moscow in fall 1929 with hopes of also gaining permission to leave the country. Canada was their preferred destination. However, due to growing unemployment and a poor economic outlook, Canada appeared unwilling to accept more immigrants at this time. The refugees' situation in Moscow, who had sold homes and possessions and left everything behind, seemed hopeless.

At this point the German government came to their rescue, agreeing to accept up to 13,000 refugees and to provide temporary shelter in Germany until such time as they could move onwards to Canada, Brazil, Paraguay, or other countries. The German Reichstag provided a large sum of money for the temporary care of the refugees, and three refugee camps were established in Prenzlau, Hammerstein, and Mölln.

The situation grew more and more desperate as the continued influx of potential refugees became an embarrassment to Soviet officials. By October 1929, Soviet officials began arresting Mennonites and others wanting to emigrate. On the 15th and 16th of November alone, over 300 Mennonite men were arrested in or near Moscow and government officials tried to force them to agree to return home.

[List of Mennonites Arrested in Moscow, 1929](#)

The first group (the so-called "Kiel Group"), with 323 men, women, and children, left Moscow on 29 October for Leningrad. They embarked on the Felix Dzerzhinskii and arrived in Kiel on 3 November. They were temporarily housed first in Kiel and later in the Überseeheim in Hamburg. This group was later the first to be transported to Mölln on 21 December 1929.

[Passenger List of the Russian Ship "Felix Dzersinsky" from Leningrad to Holtenau](#)

A second group (the so-called "Swinemünde Group"), numbering 396 persons, left Moscow on 31 October en route to Leningrad, where they arrived on 6 November. Here they were detained by local officials hoping to earn bribe money. The group was finally allowed to sail aboard the Aleksei Rykov on 29 November and arrived in Swinemünde, Germany on 2 December 1929. They were housed here temporarily until the Camp in nearby Mölln was ready to receive refugees.

Throughout November, negotiations between German consular staff and Soviet officials continued for the release of the estimated 13,000 refugees remaining in Moscow. Just over 5,000, mostly Mennonites, were finally allowed to leave in 9 train transports between 29 November and 9 December. The remaining 8,000 or more were transported back to their home regions or to labour camps in northern Russia and Siberia.

[List of Refugee Families in the Prenzlau Camp, Barrack 3](#)

[List of Separated Families in the Refugee Camp in Prenzlau, Barrack 3](#)

[List of Persons in the Refugee Camp in Prenzlau, Barrack 4](#)

[List of Persons in Mölln](#)

Due to its proximity to the port of Hamburg, Mölln became the staging point for all refugee transports from Germany to Brazil, Paraguay, and Canada. Persons travelling to South America sailed aboard German ships, with passage and credit (to be paid back over a ten-year period) provided by the German government. Mennonites traveling to Canada sailed on CPR ships as credit passengers, with guarantees provided by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization.

[Burials at Old Cemetery in Mölln, 1930-31](#)

Sources:

Letkemann, Peter. "Mennonite Refugee Camps in Germany, 1921-1951: Part II - Lager Mölln." *Mennonite Historian* (December 2012): 1, 2, 10.

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