«КРУЇЗИ МЕНОНІТСЬКОЇ СПАДЩИНИ» У МІСТАХ ПІВДЕННОЇ УКРАЇНИ: ЕМОЦІЙНИЙ, КУЛЬТУРНИЙ ТА СВІТОГЛЯДНИЙ ДІАЛОГ ІЗ ВТРАЧЕНОЮ ТА НАБУТОЮ БАТЬКІВЩИНОЮ, 1995–2018

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Анотація. *Мета дослідження полягає в тому, щоб проаналізувати вплив «Круїзів менонітської спадщини» (соціально активного явища з елементами народної дипломатії) на локальні варіанти політики пам'яті та відновлення пам'яті про менонітську діаспору на території українських міст (Запоріжжя, Дніпро, Молочанськ, Мелітополь, Бердянськ) у 1995–2018 рр. Автори простежують комеморативну, академічну та благодійну діяльність круїзів, емоційний та світоглядний діалог, що виник як результат розробки спільних проєктів та взаємосприйняття між root (місцевою) та guest (гостьовою) спільнотами. На території міст сформувалися кроскультурні групи пам'яті, нові топоніми з'явилися в умовах декомунізації, зведено нові меморіальні об'єкти. У свідомості містян сформувалося більше емоційних зв'язків та історичних знань, відбувся процес «додавання пам'яті».*

Ключові слова*: політика пам'яті, меноніт в Україні, Менонітський Центр, Молочанськ, кроскультурні групи пам'яті, етнічна історія України*

Повнотекстова версія статті доступна англійською мовою.

MENNONITE HERITAGE CRUISES AND CITIES OF SOUTHERN UKRAINE: EMOTIONAL, CULTURAL, AND WORLDVIEW DIALOGUE WITH THE FATHERLAND LOST AND REGAINED, 1995–2018

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Abstract. *The purpose of the study is to analyze the impact of the "Mennonite Heritage Cruises" (a long-term socially active program with elements of public diplomacy) on the local politics of memory concerning the Mennonite diaspora in several Ukrainian cities (Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Molochansk, Melitopol, Berdiansk) in 1995–2018. The authors examine the commemorative, academic, and charitable activities of the cruises, the emotional and ideological dialogue that developed as a result of shared projects, and the root and guest communities' perception of each other. Cross-cultural memory groups were formed in these cities, new toponyms appeared in the course of decommunization, and new memorial objects were constructed. New emotional connections and historical knowledge formed in the minds of the local population in a process of "adding memory".*

Keywords: *politics of memory, Mennonites in Ukraine, Mennonite Center, Molochansk, cross-cultural memory groups, ethnic history of Ukraine*

An individual is not distant from his place: he is that place
Gabriel Marcel

Relevance of the study

In the historical and cultural dimension, the city appears as a unique space, able to miraculously accumulate, preserve, and transmit the past – its region's history with its crucial moments, changes of regimes and ideologies, political transformations, ethno-cultural characteristics, etc. However, the historically formed "text" of what each city appears to be is not always open to reading and interpretation. Individual chapters of the past are cognitively dynamic; they are able to "disappear" or to be periodically reproduced at society's request (or "reminders"). These theoretical considerations are illustrated by the history of the Mennonite Heritage Cruises (hereafter MHC), which transcended the boundaries of a purely tourism-oriented project and succeeded in restoring the memory of this ethno-confessional group[1] in those Ukrainian cities and towns where Mennonite diasporas existed in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The sporadic evolution of the original aims and essence of the MHC unfolded over more than twenty years of annual journeys to southern Ukraine (1995 – 2018). The cruises started as a form of nostalgic tourism aimed at narrow ethnic optics and "domestic consumption". We must note that ethno-tourism has been a real trend in recent decades (Russel 2008). The end of the Cold War and new openness of the world allowed certain diaspora groups (the Galicians, the Greeks, the Jews, the Armenians, etc.), which had lost their homeland as a result of political and religious repression, to visit their ancestral lands. Although the first Mennonite tours were purely nostalgic undertakings (Rožnova, Teres 2013; Nora 1989), they developed into a socially active phenomenon with elements of public diplomacy and cultural leadership (*Kulturträger* in a positive connotation of the term, meaning cooperation and mutual enrichment of cultures). Cruise participants worked together with local residents on commemorative, social, and academic projects in cities that are important to the Mennonites (Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Molochansk, Melitopol, Berdiansk). The Mennonites's activities had a significant influence on the cultural life of a number of small towns and big cities and on the efforts to reconstruct their historical past in the post-Soviet era.

This study aims to explore the socio-cultural impact of the Mennonite Heritage Cruises on the local politics of memory and revival of Mennonite history in Ukrainian communities. We also attempt to trace the emotional and ideological dialogue that developed in the course of working on shared humanitarian projects and the mutual perception between the root and host communities (Urry 2011: 60 – 64; Smith 1989: 3 – 11).

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[1] In academic research, Mennonites are considered as an ethno-confessional group. It is a protestant denomination that has acquired the characteristics of an ethnic group due to long religious isolation (Bruk & Cheboksarov & Chesnov 1969).

Prehistory: urban Mennonite diasporas

Mennonite communities emerged in industrial cities of the Russian Empire's Ukrainian provinces as a result of foreign colonization in the late 18th – early 19th centuries. Economically influential diasporas of Mennonite entrepreneurs sprouted up in most urban areas of the region (Ekaterinoslav, Alexandrovsk, Melitopol, Molochansk, Berdiansk) (Venger 1998: 215–228, 353–378). Historical research has proven that their activity in the processing industry, metallurgy, and agricultural engineering in the late 19th to early 20th century significantly influenced the course of modernization in southern Ukraine, and that Mennonite manufacturing was used as a regional base for industrialization during the early Soviet period (Venger 2009: 472–474; 644). A long success story of several generations was completely erased by the Bolsheviks: the fate of the Mennonite population in Ukraine was tragic after the establishment of the new regime. Several mass emigration attempts in 1923–1929 (Ostasheva 1998: 148–169), the deportation of the German population in 1941, the westward departure with the retreating Wehrmacht in 1943, and the forced repatriation of 1945–1946 almost destroyed the urban Mennonite communities (Epp 1998: 59–75; Eisfeld & Brul, 1999; German 2006: 570–580; Martynenko 2020). As a result of all these events, most of the German-speaking population found themselves either in the east of the USSR (in camps or the labor army) or reunited with fraternal communities in Germany, USA, and Canada (in cases of successful outcome for individual families). The memory of the Mennonite population of cities and surrounding settlements disappeared from the pages of textbooks and historiography for a long time. They were declared "class enemies and traitors to the Fatherland". Since the early Soviet times, the Mennonite community was recognized as one that should be totally forgotten. As noted, the American historian Paul Toews, speaking about the urban centers of Ukraine: "Being in the shadow of the Soviet rule, our former cities were lost to the Mennonites" (Toews 2007: 1).

The Canadian researcher J. B. Toews named one of his books *Lost Fatherland* (Toews 1967). It tells the story of the mass exodus of the Mennonites and Germans from the Soviet Union in 1923–1926. This departure (as well as other subsequent waves) was a voluntary but painful choice for the ethnic community. Emigration was a form of protest, signaling the inability of this ethno-confessional group to coexist with the Bolshevik regime. Since then, a sad legend of forced exodus from the motherland and the GULAG (as the Mennonites saw the fate of those who remained) has persisted in the memory of this group, whose descendants now live in the United States, Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and other countries. A spiritual and worldview dialogue with Soviet Ukraine, which (they were sure of that) did not need the once successful Mennonites anymore, was perceived as incomplete. The result was a wide range of painful emotions at the communal and individual levels.

Public ethnic associations of exiles from the USSR, which were formed both in Europe and North America, partially helped to alleviate the sadness for the past. Among the particularly active societies one may mention, for example, the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR), founded in Kansas City in 1968 (Pleve 1997) and the Plautdietsch-Freunde, functioning in Germany since 1999 (Vintz 2005; Erina

1998). A similar association operates in Stuttgart, where the so-called "Hoffnungstal meetings" of descendants of German colonists from Odessa and adjacent settlements take place every year (Kholtsvar-Koher 2005). The membership of these organizations has grown due to recent immigration. About 200,000 Mennonites have moved to the Federal Republic of Germany since Perestroika (Vintz 2005: 20). They are the descendants of those who were exiled and deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia in 1930s–1940s. They were born far from Ukraine and never visited the land of their ancestors. However, they were brought up with a sense of love for the motherland, which is mythical for them. A strange desire to regain their ancestral roots, which works almost at the genetic level, unites all former natives of the Ukrainian lands.

Such nostalgic sentiments are persistent and can be reinforced by associative memory, which preserves vivid recollections of the past, still "living" and maintained in the form of family legends and ethnic myths. Communication, memories, and longing for their once native lands encouraged former refugees and their descendants to travel. Although individual Mennonites occasionally made the journey back since the 1960s, the rupture with their former country that had "thrown them out" seemed "final and irreversible" during almost the entire period of the Soviet Union's existence (Epp 1989).

However, the political situation in the world changed over the years. There appeared new opportunities for the Mennonites to "return", both in the sense of physical (visiting former hometowns) and historical (restoring the ethno-confessional group to the context of Ukraine's past) presence after the wave of progressive revolutions in Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, as independent Ukraine strove to embrace democracy and open up to the West. A religious community with a tradition of self-organization, Mennonites living in different countries of Europe and North America easily organized themselves for travel. At the outset, such journeys were a form of genealogical and nostalgic tourism (Russel 2008), one of the key goals of which for the travelers was to return to their ancestors' former places of residence.

It should also be noted that during the years of their "absence" administrative and territorial changes took place in Ukraine, and as a result some former Mennonite settlements-colonies were absorbed into cities (for example, the Upper Khortytsia and Rosenthal colonies became part of Zaporizhzhia, the Ladekop colony merged with the town of Tokmak, etc.).

The socio-political circumstances of the Mennonites' "return" to Ukraine and the background for the emergence of cross-border local memory groups

While Mennonite tourists, who arrived on ships and in bright buses, provoked interest among the local inhabitants, the effectiveness and emotionality of the dialogue with the host community were also ensured by a counter-process—the readiness of the Ukrainian people to accept new local history actors, who could enrich the cultural tradition of Ukraine's cities by their return.

The first contacts between the Mennonites and the local population were of a sporadic nature. They were recorded beginning in the mid-1960s (the period of the so-

called Thaw, when only individual trips took place), becoming more frequent in the 1980s (during Perestroika) and mid-1990s (when Ukrainian-American, Ukrainian-Canadian, and Ukrainian-German relations were established). In these later years, the Mennonite tourists were no longer considered citizens (spies) of enemy states, and tourists from the Federal Repubic of Germany were no longer treated as Nazis. Professor of History P. Toews participated in most cruises and to some extent influenced the formation of their ideological basis. He noted that in the 1990s the memory of World War II occupied an important place in people's minds in the post-Soviet independent states. However, the professor stressed that "expressive anti-fascist comments" disappeared, and "Germany is no longer [considered] an ideological opponent of Ukraine". It was important for the German-speaking Mennonites because being German had been seen as a negative feature in Russia and Soviet Ukraine (Toews 1995: 15).

The post-Soviet religious revival, fostering of religious tolerance, and respect for religious freedom also were among the factors that opened up positive prospects for dialogue between the "host" and "guest" communities. Ukraine was once again dotted with churches and parishes of various denominations. The Mennonites, who eventually expressed a desire to rebuild their houses of worship, were no longer treated as ideological "terrorists" and bearers of a religious ideology unacceptable to the state. On the contrary, their actions were perceived with understanding. Even more, they were welcomed!

One should keep in mind the possible pragmatic motives on the part of urban community leaders. During the time when Ukraine tried to feel its way into the future and rebuild an independent economy, the state needed support from the "collective West". The search for investments was in full swing. Any attention from representatives of Western countries was greeted positively. At first, local authorities sometimes harbored suspicions that the "pilgrims" wanted to obtain restitution – the return of property. But these thoughts were quickly forgotten. It turned out that the Mennonites were coming to Ukraine for emotional compensation – they wanted to reconcile with their "past". The tourists were motivated to "give" to their former homeland (in form of financial assistance and practical experience), rather than to get something from it. Moreover, they rejected the idea of establishing any for-profit businesses and never deviated from this principle.

Thus, there were many objective reasons for a positive reaction to the Mennonites' "return". In the newly independent Ukraine, urban communities were ready to "open up" to the Mennonites and their projects — academic, memorial, and philanthropic. This helped the pilgrims to feel the significance of their return and to heal the moral pain of generations.

The evolving meaning of the MHC: from nostalgic tourism to a new concept

While originally the cruises served a purely tourist purpose (visiting places memorable to the Mennonites), with time their functions became much broader. "Returning to their roots" took the form of first private and then collective tours, because the sense of religious community was always important to the Mennonites as a Protestant

congregation. Even though such cruises became commercial since 1995 (they were organized by the Mennonites Walter and Marina Unger from Canada), they did not lose their spiritual essence. Given the travel logistics and demands of nostalgia, the mandatory tour program included cities (Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Melitopol, Molochansk, Kherson, Odesa) and nearby villages, covering former factories, religious and secular buildings, and necropolises belonging to the Mennonite heritage. Over time, these sites became the objects of care and concern not only by the Mennonites, but also by the local communities. The ship stopped for three or four days in Zaporizhzhia, during which time sightseeing and thematic bus tours around the city and to the former Mennonite colonies in Molochansk and Melitopol were organized.

Information about the MHC on the home page of the cruise website used to be rather fragmentary, including notes, photographs, and speeches. According to these sources, the number of travelers in one tour never exceeded 200 people. Thus, according to simple estimates, more than 5,000 Mennonites visited Ukraine over 26 years. The travel agents and authors of the business idea Marina and Walter Unger collaborated with the cruise company Chervona Ruta (Kyiv) and Intourist-Zaporizhzhia (under the leadership of Larisa Goryacheva). Both the organizers (a Mennonite family) and the participants saw their cruise as a journey of a "floating pilgrims' community" (because it was made on a cruise river-sea ship). The MHC attracted descendants of Ukrainian Mennonites mainly from the USA, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Paraguay. This small association brought Western Mennonite communities into contact with the population of the cities of southern Ukraine.

Over more than twenty years of its existence, the cruise enterprise eventually acquired its informal ideological leaders. They helped to combine travel (cruises) with events honoring the Mennonite ethno-confessional memory in Ukraine, and further on with philanthropic projects. Representatives of the Mennonite academic and cultural elite (scientists, scholars, artists, amateur historians) played an important role in the evolution of cruises' meaning. They participated in the MHC directly, and thus influenced its agenda and program, working to give it more substance and combine travel with good deeds. In addition to the original organizers – the Unger family and L. Goryacheva – the following individuals should be mentioned: Harvey L. Dick (Professor of History at the University of Toronto, Canada), Paul Toews (Professor of History at Fresno Pacific University, USA), Alan Peters (genealogist, Fresno, USA), Stephany Martens (music guide), Rudy Friesen (architect from Winnipeg–Vancouver in Canada and author of a guidebook (Friesen 2004)), and Peter Letkeman (famous Canadian pianist and amateur researcher of the history of totalitarianism). Launches of various projects conceived by them were connected with the cruises and included in the tour program.

The Mennonites themselves never used the concept of historical trauma and redemption with respect to their community. Speaking about the essence of the MHC, its organizer W. Unger called his tour a "triple journey" – a tour around Ukraine; a path into your past (meeting the ancestors as a way to establish connection with the present); and a journey into yourself (as an important event in each pilgrim`s life) (Unger 1999). Being

a Mennonite, W. Unger treated his business as his mission, and this conception also applied to him as a member of the "floating pilgrims' community".

Professor P. Toews, the "official historian" of the tour, whose 'lectures on the deck' were later published (Toews 2019), shared his expectations and feelings about the tour in 1999. He recalled his first trip to Ukraine, which he had made with his family. That was when he felt his identity to the full extent (Toews 1999: 1). In a speech addressed to MHC participants, Paul Toews uses the metaphor of searching for the "Mennonite Grail" – the meaning of life, which is associated with worldview elements important for the members of this congregation (Toews 1999: 2). Although the Mennonites, with their Protestant iconoclastic convictions, have a long history of refusing to worship things, they still carry love for the land (family home or Fatherland), which acquires sacredness for them (Ibid.). Summarizing his thoughts, P. Toews observed: "...I have strong feelings for these places. This world was built by my father's contemporaries... The city where I live in the USA is a product of many other people's endeavors. But only here in Ukraine did I perceive what a 'feeling of one's place' can be for a person" (Ibid.).

When thinking about ideas connected with the cruise, Mennonites also mention "sacrifice" and philanthropy – a code of behavior important to every Anabaptist since the book *Martyrs Mirror*, classic to the Mennonites (Ibid.: 3). Their favorite character is a man fleeing from mortal threat who stops and defends another person at the cost of his life (Ibid.: 4). The Mennonites' attitude towards these legends reflects certain values that lie at the root of the humanitarian programs realized by them in communities of southern Ukraine.

Expanded urban memory groups: "common pain" and charity

Thanks to the active work of the Mennonites cruises, a new memorial niche was formed in the cities they visited, and it gradually came to be accepted by their residents. Thus, the first emotional experience of returning home was associated with not just visual exposure to places and landscapes known from ancestral stories, but also communication with the "host community"—the population of these cities, the "host side", whose friendliness was no longer in any doubt. These were former neighbors of the Mennonites, Ukrainians who unexpectedly found themselves in possession of a valuable asset—the Mennonite heritage. Thanks to such contacts, this heritage gained historical significance in the eyes of the locals and became a part of their shared Ukrainian history that needed recognition and care.

W. Unger was convinced that the cruise acquired a special flavor "thanks to the Ukrainian people's hospitality and sincerity". He motivated his tourists: "You will learn how much in common we have. We inhabited these lands together, united on a common ground, cultivated the same land. Much of what we consider to be the Mennonite origin, was borrowed from the Ukrainian people" (Toews 1999: 1). Expanding on Walter's thought, P. Toews predicted that they would meet a Ukrainian senior woman who remembers her Mennonite neighbors. Probably, she would recall the name of one of her former neighbors and then give some fruit from her garden to the tourists. She will

embody the hospitality of those who remember Mennonites and who like the fact that the congregation still cherishes the memory of Ukraine (Ibid.: 8). These statements testify that, despite their traumatic past, the Mennonites have always distinguished between the political regime and the people next to whom they used to live. Internally, they were searching for recognition and understanding from their former fellow countrymen and the Ukrainian people.

Important moments of the MHC have been captured not only in numerous amateur photographs, but also in art. One should mention the drawings by Heinrich Heidebrecht — an architect from Stuttgart whose parents came from the village of Ladekopp (now Tokmak). His artwork has found place in various parts of the Mennonite world, including the Museum of Russian-German Cultural History (Detmold, FRG) and the office of the German consul Heinz Brown in the Neuland colony (Chaco, Paraguay).

Angelika Holzwarth-Kocher (Stuttgart), a representative of the Hoffnungstal Society (FRG), tells about her journey to the village Tsebrykove and Odesa. The local Orthodox church received the travelers kindly, and the local deacon Father Vasily allowed the Protestants to plant in the churchyard a tree seed brought from Germany. Holzwarth-Kocher wrote, "this seedling is considered as a symbol of friendship and the memory of mutual history…" (Kholvartz-Koher 2005: 22–23). The tradition of commemorative tree planting is quite demonstrative and common among the Mennonites. Cruise members took with them acorns found under the famous Khortytsia oak tree, which is a symbol of Ukraine in the Mennonites' memories, captured in many old photographs. Currently, a tree from that seed grows near the Mennonite Heritage Archive in Winnipeg, Canada. In our view, this symbolism reflects their sincere attitude towards Ukraine, where they had left their roots.

Initially, the locals noted the latest-model buses that stood out among the traffic in the streets. Later, there were meetings held as part of cruise tours, where the local residents witnessed commemorative events and learned about the presence of Mennonites in their cities. Sometimes children from nearby schools were invited to attend events. While the first cruises attracted attention only visually, each following year such programs became more common. The tourists got off their buses and went on walking tours around former Mennonite sites (for example on Khortytsia), singing songs in Plattdeutsch (German dialect). Vivid memories of the townspeople were left in the mind of every traveler. For example, one of them is about a local resident, "a Mrs. Reimer", who treated travelers with fruit when she heard the German language. Frank Wall from Ontario had an even more exciting encounter. A man with a photograph was standing near the cruise ship in Dnipro, and F. Wall recognized his grandfather (a construction worker on the Tokmak Railway) in that picture. This was how the two cousins found each other (Toews 1996: 15). Some elderly locals stopped a tourist group asking whether the Mennonites would return. An unknown woman told how she missed the singing and the German songs that used to be heard from their houses of worship every Sunday and on holidays (Toews 1996: 17).

At the stage of purely "nostalgic tourism", the travelers, who had old maps of colonies, tried to find the houses that belonged to their ancestors. Since the quality of

Mennonite buildings was high, such searches often brought results. Lasting contacts were established around these houses; they were maintained, and this led to closer communication with the families that owned them now. The author of this publication more than once had an opportunity to be present at the formation of such interfamily (cross-border) memory groups. For those who returned it was important to touch their native walls, to recognize the view from the window. The new residents told about their family, the state of the house, the local community. Such visits always ended with gift exchange, subsequent correspondence, and visits to necropolises.

As a result of the sporadic formation of this kind of complex memory groups, old burial places were personified and formerly Mennonite buildings (private and public) were perceived as objects of personal participation and care by the local Ukrainian communities. To use a term proposed by Barbara Rosenwein, such "extended family memory groups" can be called "emotional pain groups". They brought together people who adhered to shared norms of emotional expression. Such memory groups voluntarily took on "common responsibility" for the actions that became important for them, and which they performed according to a personal calling and motivation (Rosenwein 2006: 2).

The system of meanings that developed around the tour extended beyond emotional expectations. MHC members felt responsibility not only for their (Mennonite) past, but also for the Ukrainians who had been their neighbors. W. Unger encouraged the travelers: "We will visit those cities that have experienced no Mennonite presence for 50 years. But they are waiting for us and will start shining thanks to curiosity and energy that we will bring there" (Unger 1999). Dr. Leonard Friesen stated that thanks to Unger's enthusiasm the cruises (as a close-knit community of people who travelled together) introduced numerous initiatives, from fundraising to the founding of libraries (Friesen 2018: 324). Recalling numerous commemorative events, P. Toews urged the Mennonites to think about helping modern Ukraine: "We do a lot for the dead. Let's do something for the alive!"

Gradually, the practice of cooperation between the cruises (their organizers and members) and local public institutions or individuals became more and more common. The two sides became long-term partners and collaborators, working together on social issues, preservation of architectural monuments, and more. As mentioned above, such cooperation created cross-border memory groups that were exposed to Mennonite culture and became involved or interested in spreading it. These included representatives of religious communities, entrepreneurs in tourism and other spheres, history teachers, and artists. It should be noted that such groups were not necessarily institutionalized, with the exception of those that were mediated by religious organizations that acted as first partners of the Mennonite communities.

The Mennonite revival in Ukraine started in 1995. The first small parish was formed in Zaporizhzhia. Its first members were either persons of German origin or those who chose Protestantism during the general revival of religion in the post-Soviet world. "Mennonites by blood" (whose parents were anabaptists) didn't interfere with it, since proselytism was in keeping with the tradition of this ethnic confession (one should note

that Ukrainian Baptism arose in 1848 precisely under the influence of colonists (Beznosova 2014). By 2007, there were six Mennonite congregations in Ukraine. Three of them were founded in the cities of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Molochansk (Toews 2007: 1). The beginning of church activity was also associated with the establishment of a German national minority organization, Wiedergeburt. Those members of the organization who knew about their Mennonite past started gathering separately for religious meetings, and by 2007 their number reached 75. Later, they received help from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and congregations from the FRG (mostly North Rhine-Westphalia) (Ibid.: 2). The Canadian pastor F. Dick, who had resettled to Zaporizhzhia, personally oversaw the revival of the community there. The local communities greatly influenced the renewal of the church tradition in the former Mennonite settlements of Kutuzivka and Balkove in Zaporizhzhia oblast. According to the Department of Religious and National Affairs of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, 8 Mennonite churches were functioning in the country in 2018. The department also had on record 7 Mennonite pastors and 6 Sunday schools for children (Religiyno-informatziyna Sluzhba).

The Mennonites ran their long-term charitable projects through the Mennonite Center, founded in Molochansk in 2000. As early as 1997, the office of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) moved to that town, important for the Mennonites. Historically, the MCC (founded in 1922) has always been involved in humanitarian projects – one could recall its participation in the antifamine campaign of 1921–1923 (Toews 1967: 50–64). The establishment of a local branch was a matter of great importance for the rather small town of Molochansk. The Mennonites saw this event as an act of "returning home" (Toews & Unger 2004).

Planning possible charitable projects, the Mennonites resolved to provide Ukraine with urgent support aimed, among other things, at organizing high-quality health care and education for people not only in Molochansk, but also in other former centers of Mennonite culture. Mennonites from around the world were involved in these programs, including the families of F. and N. Dyck, P. and S. Kehler, J. and D. Unrau, and others. In April 2000, members of the Mennonite Heritage Club (Toronto, Canada) discussed the possibility of acquiring a historic Mennonite building in Molochansk, where they planned to set up the local MCC headquarters. Canadian Mennonites also founded the organization Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine, chaired by H. Dick. (Toews & Unger 2004: 8–9).

The Mennonite Center was still active at the beginning of 2022. Together with the MHC, it had become the base for many humanitarian projects, such as helping orphans, lending to local businesses, and training pastors. During its launch, the then mayor of Molochansk O. Saenko, who had been collaborating with the Mennonites since 1998, expressed optimism: "I know the Mennonites very well... I hope that the Center will provide our exhausted people [meaning the post-crisis period after 1998] with a crumb of hope, and the former gymnasium will become 'light at the end of the tunnel'" (Ibid.).

The Mennonites allocated an initial 300.000 dollars for such projects as providing regular meals to the elderly, improving the ambulance service in the city, and purchasing

a computer class. Thanks to the "pilgrims", the small town was able to provide local children with conditions for very competitive education. Kids and teenagers received a unique opportunity to learn English from native speakers and study computer science using cutting-edge equipment. The Mennonites established small medical institutions. Training seminars for doctors took place in the Center annually, free consultations by qualified ophthalmologists were offered, some medical equipment was acquired (Toews 2007: 3). By 2018, a fund to improve the fire service had been established and new cars for the local police force had been provided. The Mennonites announced the launch of a support program for refugees. Until 2018, every MHC made a point of visiting Molochansk and the Center, continuing to finance the projects.

No less important humanitarian programs were realized in Zaporizhzhia. Two nursing homes were established in the city and its vicinity. A Family Center was opened in Zaporizhzhia in 2004 under the patronage of the Benevolent Society of Manitoba. The Mennonites set up medical classes for families who had to take care of seriously ill relatives (Toews 2007: 3). The organization "Florence of Zaporizhzhia" (Ibid.), named after its founders (Professors Florence and Otto Driedger), started a cooperation program with Zaporizhzhia University. The project was intended to provide psychological, social, and psychiatric assistance to families in crisis (Ibid.). University students gained valuable practical experience working as interns alongside Canadian specialists. Many families struggling with complex health conditions, including children's diseases, received qualified assistance from Canadian and German doctors. Needless to say, such "public return" of the Mennonites was received by these cities' residents with great enthusiasm.

History projects. New memorial initiatives in cities of southern Ukraine

Mennonite communities are immersed in their history. The sense of the shared past of a small community is very important to preserve its identity. There have always been a large number of people interested in their genealogy among the Mennonites. Studying genealogy always gives a sense of connection with the history of the family, congregation, and community. Focused on their identity, members of congregations always treated with respect historians who studied their ethnic group`s heritage. First interactions between the Canadian Mennonites and Ukrainian scholars go back to the early 1990s. In the middle of that decade, Prof. Harvey Dick (Toronto University) visited Zaporizhzhia to do research in the state regional archive. He may have been the first Canadian historian to visit the regional museum of history. A very quick glance around the exposition led to a completely predictable conclusion: the history of the Mennonite population of the city and the region was completely absent from the museum's displays. A new exhibit had to be created – if not stationary, then at least a mobile one (Friesen 2018: 324). Negotiations with the museum and city authorities (particularly M. Sidorenko from the Zaporizhzhia Regional Center for Cultural Heritage Protection of the Zaporizhzhia Regional Council) had to be held to obtain permission for the project. H. Dyck succeeded in persuading the officials. According to Dr. L. Friesen, the project's success was mainly due to the authorities' long familiarity with the work of Intourist-Zaporizhzhia and the personal contacts of L. Goryacheva (Ibid.: 325). The project was headed by Yurii Shapovalov, director of the

Zaporizhzhia Museum. Surprisingly, he had special sentiments connected with the Mennonites: his mother had worked for a wealthy Mennonite many years before and told her son about her positive experience with her employer (Ibid.: 326).

Searching for materials, Prof. H. Dick communicated with Mennonite communities in Canada and specialists from the Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto, Canada). Also, he initiated a fundraising campaign (Fiesen 2018: 325). Ukrainian historians from the Ukrainian-German Research Center at Dnipro National University were also involved in developing the concept of the exhibit. As the museum employee O. Chayka stated, "the creation of the exhibit was possible only thanks to the joint efforts of the Ukrainian and Canadian sides" (Chayka 1999: 26).

The opening of the exposition in May 1999 was synchronized with an international history conference in Zaporizhzhia and a Mennonite cruise. The list of participants shows the significance of these two events for Zaporizhzhia. Among the invited guests we find the Canadian ambassador Derek Fraser and chairman of the Coordinating Council for Economic Assistance to Ukraine Karl Brunner (FRG).

The new and widely advertised exposition presented a broad panorama of Mennonite history in Ukraine: from colonization (18th and 19th centuries) to deportation (1941) to repatriation (after World War II). The last section touched on the Mennonite cruises, which embody a theme sacred to the Mennonites – the idea of the quest for the Grail (Ibid.: 28). After a year in Zaporizhzhia, the exposition was transferred to the Dnipro Museum of History. It is important that during this time both casual visitors and school/undergraduate students were able to see it. Thus, themes from Mennonite history appeared in the school program. This was thanks primarily to individual teachers who brought their students to the regional museums of the two oblasts.

The recognition of Mennonite history by Ukrainian society at large was a crucial factor in healing the communal social trauma. MHC actively worked in this direction. As already mentioned, the Mennonites make great effort to understand their history, its achievements and failures. No less important were the viewpoint and impact of Ukrainian historians. Scholars from Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro National Universities offered a broader perspective on the events of the Mennonite past in their research. Academic cooperation gained an impetus thanks to close contacts with Prof. H. Dick, P. Letkeman, and R. Wiebe. Additionally, US and Canadian historians worked with sources for Mennonite history in the regional archives of Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, and Kyiv (Toews 2003: 4–5). A library-related project also contributed to international collaboration. Collecting literature in English and German for the university libraries in Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro became a common cause for the Mennonite academic communities of the United States and Canada. The boxes with books were brought to Ukraine by the cruises (Friesen 2018: 323).

Meanwhile, H. Dick and the local historians from the Ukrainian-German Research Center made a joint decision to organize a big international conference. The academic forum "The Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union" (also known as Khortytsia-99) took place in 1999. The cruise of 1999 turned out to be a kind of "professorial steamboat". The passengers consisted mostly of conference participants who represented renowned schools from North America and Europe. The following well-

known historians were among them: P. Visser (Kingdom of the Netherlands); J. Staples, P. Toews (USA); H. Dick, O. Subtelny, L. Friesen, L. Klippenstein, R. Loewen, Marlene Epp (Canada); and J. Dick (FRG). Scholars from the Russian Federation also participated in the conference; Stavropol, Omsk and St. Petersburg Universities were represented. Canadian ambassador Derek Fraser attended the opening of the conference.

Information about the academic forum as well as the cruise appeared in the local and national media. Dr. L. Friesen wrote: "During all these four days [the event's duration] the Mennonites' voice, which had been absent for many years, was heard in Zaporizhzhia again" (Friesen 2018: 328). Borys Letkeman, a Mennonite and a volunteer from Zaporizhzhia, recalled after the conference: "Other Mennonites and I can walk round the city streets with our heads held high" (Ibid.: 329).

After this successful start, which stimulated research on the Mennonite problem in post-Soviet historiography, the next international academic event, a conference on "The Mennonites and Their Neighbors", took place in 2004. P. Letkeman, a well-known Canadian pianist who had done amateur research on the history of deportations and totalitarianism, spoke to students of the Faculty of History at Zaporizhzhia National University before the conference. He started his speech with the following words: "Today I returned to a place that my parents called their home. I brought my two sons to show them beautiful land where our ancestors worked and ended their labor lives. It is always difficult to go back to the past" (Letkeman 2004). Starting a complicated conversation about political, national, and religious persecution that decimated his religious community, he recalled a phrase from *The GULAG Archipelago* by A. Solzhenitsyn: "No matter how terrible the past was, its oblivion can create even more terrible future". These two statements reflect the Mennonites' general attitude towards the events of that era. The text of the speech was discussed with H. Dick. The lecture was intended to draw the attention of the media and the local community to the conference (Harvey Dick to Peter Letkeman 2004). No less important was the dialogue with the students, who represented a new generation of Ukrainians. The Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe also spoke to students at Dnipro National University (Toews 2007: 6). The correspondence between P. Letkeman and H. Dick shows that the Mennonites expected Ukrainian society not only to understand their history and bring it out of oblivion, but also to recognize a special (greater) degree of suffering that this ethnic and religious community supposedly experienced during the repressions. This thesis was championed with particular insistence by Harvey Dick. He urged the lecturer to "take a hit": "…Our thesis in Ukraine is in comparison and contrast! [N. V.: in the sense of the similarity and difference in historical destinies]" (Harvey Dick to Peter Letkeman 2004). As this assertion indicates, the Mennonites doubted whether they would have support from Ukrainian society at large. However, these doubts were groundless.

The plan of the 2004 conference on "The Mennonites and Their Neighbors" envisaged holding panels in Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Melitopol, and Molochansk. 10 out of 39 papers were presented by Western historians (Toews 2007: 5). The conference also included thematic exhibitions in the Zaporizhzhia, Melitopol, and Dnipro Museums of History. To mark the occasion, US Mennonites presented 139 original historical

photographs to the community of Molochansk. As was tradition, the Canadian ambassador Andrew Robinson attended the opening event (Ibid.).

Commemorative practices and the remembrance of the Mennonites in the urban memorial landscape of southern Ukraine

Thanks to the post-Soviet historians who during the independence wrote a new ethnic history of Ukraine (including its Mennonite component), residents of cities and towns with a history of Mennonite presence came to understand this protestant congregation better. This knowledge gradually spread thanks to conferences, school education, and the media. For example, today the residents of Zaporizhzhia associate their renowned local enterprise Motor Sich with the activities of Mennonite entrepreneurs (P. Lepp, A. Wallman, A. Kop, K. Hildebrandt) (Venger 2009: 472–474). Dnipro residents also have learned that the Dnipromlyn flour mill was originally founded by the Toews and Fast dynasties, which were well known in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And these are just two of many examples. Thus, Mennonite culture has begun to recreate the symbolic and memorial resource that was destroyed during the Soviet times. There are small museums on the premises of the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro enterprises mentioned above. They are visited not only by the employees, but also by schoolchildren and sometimes tourists. The sense of shared historical past has proven to be the main instrument of the symbolic transformation of the recently reconstructed past into an inheritance of the present. It is especially important for the new generation of citizens, who are brought up to perceive the history of their cities and Ukraine in general as a multicultural synthesis of traditions.

Special commemorative events organized during cruises contributed to the restoration of the Mennonites to the historical landscape of the southern cities. The process started with visits to necropolises (cemeteries and mass graves), some of which are now located within the cities. Traditionally, cemeteries are sites of individual or family memory. The poor condition of many former Mennonite necropolises was a painful issue for the pilgrims. Mennonites shared legends about abandoned cemeteries, or tombstones used by local Ukrainian residents in the construction of buildings and paving of roads. They tried and even succeeded in bringing some gravestones to Canada and the USA. However, the situation has changed. Now cemeteries are sites of partnership for the local Mennonite communities and their neighbors. Preserving a necropolis, the local communities also share a specific view of the past and become the bearers of historical memory about the Mennonites.

The Khortytsia National Reserve in Zaporizhzhia became home to the project "Memorial of the Mennonites of Khortytsia". The project envisages gathering in one place tombstones from numerous destroyed Mennonite cemeteries (Memorial hortic'kih menonitiv 2021). The tombstones date to the 19th and 20th centuries and belong to both well-known individuals (such as Kateryna Kop, the wife of a famous entrepreneur, or Bernard Schellenberg, a doctor from the village of Khortytsia) and ordinary people. While the exhibit currently includes only 15 tombstones, their number should grow in the near future.

About twenty years ago, the Mennonites established the International Memorial Committee. This public body was to promote memorial projects in Ukraine, and it was run by Mennonite historians: P. Toews, P. Klassen, and H. Dick. From the start, the commemorative events were intended to be public. Local residents, secondary school students, officials, and representatives of the Orthodox Church would be invited. The first memorial plaques were installed on a former Mennonite prayer house (today in the vicinity of Zaporizhzhia) and on a cemetery located on the island of Khortytsia[1] in 1999. Speaking at the event, the local priest Father Vasyl admitted that, as a Ukrainian, he felt "ashamed of what happened to the Mennonites on these lands…". At the end of his speech, he added: "I would like for the Mennonites to return home…" (Toews 2007: 7). These words struck the travelers deeply: although the Mennonites were not granted an official apology from the authorities, they received moral compensation from ordinary Ukrainians (Ibid.).

The commemorative events arranged by the cruise organizers drew a lot of attention from the locals. Attending the events, the region's residents and casual observers discovered the historical past of their cities in a new way. Watching the audience reaction, Prof. P. Toews notes with optimism: "We will make a fire, but not the ashes from the altar of Mennonite past in the Russian Empire" (Ibid.: 8). He was convinced that the lesson on how to respect history, taught by the Mennonites, was important to Ukrainian society. Toews was sure that "the Ukrainians would learn how to make this fire" on their own by the calling of the soul, because they were impressed by the Mennonites` attitude towards their native culture.

Traditionally, memorial events ended with common worship services held by the two churches (Protestant and Orthodox). This was not new for the Mennonites, with their ingrained ideas of ecumenism. For example, during the 2004 conference in Molochansk, a joint prayer service was held, led by the pastors Jacob Wiebe (Canada) and Johannes Dick (FRD), who delivered sermons on mutual history and shared trials (Toews & Unger: 9).

Monuments built by the Mennonites had a double purpose: to identify the sites of former presence of Mennonite congregations and to remind of the repressions that affected the German-speaking communities. A series of commemorative events took place in Molochansk in May 2004 during the international conference "The Mennonites and Their Neighbors". The unveiling of monuments in Molochansk and at the Svitlodolynsk train station was the emotional culmination point of commemoration in that town. The monument was placed in the central square of Molochansk. Today, it reminds the residents of the town's founders. The Canadian designer Paul Epp fashioned the monument in the form of an agricultural implement—a threshing stone, which symbolizes the Mennonites' contribution to the economic development of the region. P. Epp explains the monument's symbolism in the following way:

> One of the most important functions of art is to make ordinary things special… The labor tools are simple and understandable for everyone… I took this common

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[1] Other monuments were built in the villages (former Mennonite colonies) of Novopetrivka and Ulianovka (Toews 2007: 7).

object and turned it into a special one… In Ukraine the Mennonites were distinguished by their agricultural labor… What could symbolize the Mennonites' industriousness better than a threshing stone, thanks to which the result of labor is a grain that is a main achievement of a hard work?" Further goes the following: "The names of the settlements are engraved on separate sides of the monument, which makes the viewer to bypass an artifact… Rotation round is a symbol of eternal life and history, which changes. Although it changes, it returns to the origins… Our returning here with the purpose of participating in the conference is a movement from nowadays to our ancestors` history. (Preserving 2004: 62)

Another monument by P. Epp, "The Disappeared People", is also very expressive and clear in its symbolism. Its full name is "Soviet Mennonite Victims of Tribulation, Stalinist Terror and Religious Oppression" (Deck 2009). It was installed in November 2009 on Rosenthal Street, near the former Mennonite women's gymnasium in Zaporizhzhia. The monument addresses the subject of political repressions, painful for both the Mennonites and Ukrainians, and commemorates the Mennonites who became victims of the Stalinist repressions and religious oppression. The monument consists of three granite slabs with the silhouettes of a man, woman, and two children. As the author explains, the sculpture symbolizes a bookshelf with photographs, from which the images of the persecuted—"people's enemies" and their children—have been removed. Ukrainians read this simple symbolism quite easily. In the words of H. Dick,

> … the story of 30,000 Soviet Mennonites… chronicles a tragic past and opens us more fully to the suffering and heroism of Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, peoples of Siberia and Central Asia and people around the world. (Ibid.)

Even though the Mennonites emphasized matters of religion and positioned themselves as a religious community, their history, accepted and recognized by the local population, became part of not sacred, but secular memory. It was integrated into the general context of Ukrainian political history. This process was made easier for the urban communities of southern Ukraine by the fact that the Ukrainians did not feel guilt towards the repressed minority. They considered themselves victims of the Soviet repressions as well. It should be noted that the "special sufferings" thesis, insisted on by Harvey Dick, has not gained traction in contemporary Ukrainian historiography. On the other hand, historians do admit that belonging to German culture and German religious denominations was a factor that increased the risk of falling victim to Stalinist terror (Eisfeld 2018: 121–122).

In a literal sense, the return of the Mennonites to the urban historical landscape of southern Ukraine was reaffirmed by the policy of decommunization. A number of names associated with this congregation appeared in the toponomy of Zaporizhzhia (Shoenwiese, Niebuhrivska, Andreas Wallman, Gerhard Rempel, Mennonite, Rozental streets), Dnipro (Khortytska, Ivan Izau streets), and Berdyansk (Mennonite Street). These names either replaced old Soviet figures or took their place next to the new Ukrainian pantheon of heroes formed during the years of independence (such as the heroes of Kruty, V. Chornovil, R. Shukhevych, and others). In Molochansk, many pre-Soviet ideologically neutral names were restored in the course of decommunization. The old toponymy of Molochansk (Sadova, Parkova, Teatralna streets) brought back a touch of old-fashioned

charm. As for the role of the Mennonite population, it found reflection in the town's anthem: "Here Cossack *chaikas* traversed the vastness of the milky river. The Mennonites founded you – you became known as Halbstadt forever!" These simple, easy to remember words confirm the local recognition of the Mennonite heritage and the success of the MHC in promoting their multi-vector programs.

Conclusions

Summing up the first decade of the activity of the MHC as a platform for promoting Mennonite commemorative programs in their lost homeland, Paul Toews wrote:

> The Ukrainians and the Mennonites from different countries are collaborating together nowadays. They work in effective partnership with humanitarian agencies, churches and church associations, universities and archives, agricultural cooperatives and small businesses. The Mennonites can again inspire people who have suffered for a long time and for whom the despair was endless. They easen life of old and feeble people, provide medical care to those who are in need, carry on various social practices, create conditions for social justice, support new research to understand our shared history. (Toews 2007: 2)

In fact, quite practical things hide behind these stirring words. In the midst of the ideological and historical upheaval and "moral revolution" in which Ukraine and its people found themselves after gaining independence, the Mennonite communities, in an effort to reassert their memory, successfully organized a dialogue with the population of the cities where their diasporas had flourished before. Such "return" to historical memory helped this ethno-confessional group to heal its old social trauma, caused both by the loss of the Motherland and by the unjust oblivion into which they had been violently thrown by the Bolshevik Regime.

After long decades of absence, the Mennonites returned to their native cities (Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Molochansk, Melitopol, Kherson), first in the form of individual tours and then collectively, as the Mennonite Heritage Cruises. At the beginning, the MHC (as a limited in number, close-knit association that represented the Mennonite congregations of the USA, Canada, FRG, etc.) were entirely a phenomenon of so-called nostalgic tourism. However, the cruises changed their goals very quickly. The shift was made under the influence of the intellectuals that participated in this "pilgrims' community".

It was crucially important for the Mennonites to return to the public and historical context. The Mennonite Heritage Cruises initiated important philanthropic and commemorative projects, which were inspired by their sense of duty to their forebears as well as to their former fatherland. Also, the new goals were in keeping with the Mennonites' traditional practice and their ethics of maintaining a dialogue with the society around them. Thus, these kinds of activities were very organic to the Mennonites as devoted followers of Protestantism. This public form of "returning" led to a sporadic formation of cross-cultural memory groups, bringing together Mennonites and those representatives of the local population who became familiar with, recognized, and accepted Mennonite culture as a part of their cities` historical past.

The outcome of the public commemorative events, stressing the idea of shared historical destinies, as well as charitable projects functioning on a permanent basis, was that the urban communities came to perceive the Mennonites as their former neighbors and fellow citizens. Academic programs supported research concerning the history of the German population in Ukraine. Mennonite toponyms appeared on city maps, and the memorial landscape of urban centers welcomed landmarks honoring the memory of this ethno-confessional community.

New emotional connections and knowledge related to the Mennonite diaspora gained a foothold in the minds of the local population. The so-called process of "adding memory" enriched the cities' history. Even though the thesis of the "special sufferings" of the Mennonites, enshrined the congregation's own "myth", was not accepted by Ukrainian society, the group received "compensation"—respect and emotional response from ordinary people. Just as the Mennonites regained their homeland, the cities of southern Ukraine regained the Mennonites.

The establishment of a Mennonite exhibition withing the territory of the Khortytsia National Reserve, on the ground truly sacred to the Ukrainian people, looks very symbolic. That is exactly what the Mennonites aimed for: to be placed next to the Ukrainians in the history of the region.

Even though the MHC suspended their activity in 2018, the Mennonites are still present in Ukraine: most of their programs remain relevant and continue under the auspices of the Mennonite Center. These projects show Ukrainian society the example of a proper attitude towards both one's past and present. The Mennonite congregations of the US and Canada remain committed to Ukraine in good times and bad.

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