

Mexican Mennonites Mull Migration to Tatarstan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A Mennonite boy riding on a trailer in Cuauhtemoc. Families under pressure are seeking greener pastures. **Jose Luis Gonzalez**

CUAUHTEMOC, Mexico — More than a century after Mennonite farmers left Russia for North America in search of new lands and religious freedom, hundreds of their descendants in Mexico are thinking about completing the circle.

Shortage of farmland, drought and conflict with rivals have made some Mennonites in northern Mexico wonder if the best way of providing for their families is to go back to the plains of eastern Europe their ancestors left in the 19th century.

This summer, a delegation of 11 Mexican Mennonites went to Tatarstan, on the southern fringe of European Russia, to look at land that could help them protect their Spartan way of life from the impact of population growth and climate change.

“We’re looking for a future for our children and grandchildren,” said Peter Friesen, 59, one of the farmers who traveled to the town of Aznakayevo in August, himself the great-grandson of Mennonites born in the Russian Empire.

Descendants of 16th-century Protestant Anabaptist radicals from Germany, the Low Countries and Switzerland, Mennonites rejected church hierarchy and military service, suffering years of persecution and making them reliant on the patronage of rulers keen to exploit their dedication to farming and thrift.

Many Mennonites like Friesen living in the colonies around the city of Cuauhtemoc trace their origins to families that settled parts of Imperial Russia in modern Ukraine in the 18th century, during the reign of Catherine the Great.

During the age of European nationalism, their freedoms came under threat, and they began to leave for North America in the 1870s. More followed in the years of turmoil that convulsed Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution and the world wars.

Still speaking Plautdietsch, a unique blend of Low German, Prussian dialects and Dutch, the Mennonites who came to Chihuahua state from Canada in the 1920s have helped turn some of the most barren expanses of northern Mexico into model farmland yielding tons of golden corn, beans, milk and cheese.

But as the fields in Chihuahua grew more plentiful, so did the Mennonites, who are named after 16th century Anabaptist leader Menno Simons, a Frisian. Anabaptists say believers should be baptized only once they are old enough to understand their faith.

Water Dispute

Dressed in plain cotton trousers, a dark shirt and cap, Friesen uses short, simple sentences in Spanish, his face tanned from years spent harvesting crops under the cloudless skies of Chihuahua, which covers an area bigger than Britain.

Only when Friesen’s mobile phone rings and he switches to Plautdietsch does the tempo change. Words trip off his tongue in a much softer cadence than High German and are all but unintelligible to speakers of the modern language.

“You know, we Mennonites always want to grow. And that’s what we can’t do here. Everything’s already taken up,” said the father of 13 and grandfather of 25.

Enrique Voth, who also went to Tatarstan, said farmland can be purchased there for one-tenth the price in Mexico. “We need 10 times more than what we have,” said the father of 11.

The “100 or so” families interested in Russia are still undecided about whether to go, partly because they did not find a single bloc of land big enough for them, Friesen said.

But his blue eyes glitter when he talks of the dark soil, mild climate and rich water supplies the Mennonites found in Tatarstan. Once part of the Mongol Golden Horde, an empire spanning Central Asia and Eastern Europe, the republic harbors flat, fertile terrain fed by the Volga and Kama rivers.

Originally about 7,000 strong in Mexico, the Mennonites today farm about three-quarters of the irrigated corn fields in Chihuahua. But much of the land is leased, and their holdings have increased far slower than their population.

About 1,000 of the first settlers in Mexico returned to Canada, but the Mennonite population in Chihuahua alone is now probably about 60,000, said Peter Stoesz, director of a local Mennonite credit union known as UCACSA.

The Mennonites in Chihuahua started with around 100,000 hectares of land. Today, that holding may not be much more than 250,000 hectares, according to the state government.

Since last year's drought, the land shortage has been felt more keenly, and the Mennonites have been accused by a group of rival farmers known as Barzonistas of sinking 200 illegal wells to irrigate fields, damaging the local water supply.

Chihuahua's government says it has found a few dozen illegal wells, drilled using fake permits. It is still investigating how the permits were issued, and the Barzonistas are not happy.

Seeds Of Conflict

"We're at a disadvantage, but we're Mexicans," said Barzonista Jacko Rodriguez, who believes the Mennonites have had preferential treatment in the water dispute. "We're going to stay here and we're going to live here. They are not."

The feud has taken a number of ugly turns, giving further impetus to the Mennonites' desire to find new farmland.

This summer, one Barzonista declared the pacifist Mennonites were Germans, burning up Mexican lands like the Nazis burned Jews. And when a Barzonista leader was shot dead with his wife in October, some of them pointed the finger at the Mennonites.

"This has caused us a lot of worry," said Johan Peters, 45, a farmer, who said Mennonites were also looking at land in Argentina.

The Mennonites have denied any involvement in the deaths.

Pace Of Change

During the 20th century, Mennonites fanned out into South America, Africa and India. Many preserved a lifestyle tied to tilling the soil while adopting newer technology often still eschewed by their Anabaptist Amish cousins in America.

Lacking pasture and fields to sow, some in Chihuahua have given up farming, turning to services and handicrafts. A few have drifted into drug trafficking and prostitution, locals say.

But UCACSA estimates over two-thirds work in agriculture, which still dominates the rhythm of daily life. Sons may join fathers to work the fields from the age of 12 or younger.

"Farming is the healthiest work a person can have," Voth said. "It's peaceful work without

competition. With a business, you have to fight all the time.”

Plenty of Mennonites in the area are skeptical the answer to the land shortage lies in Russia. Some say the families considering a move halfway across the world have fallen behind. Others worry Mennonites are being swamped by the pace of change.

Though Chihuahua’s Mennonites now use cell phones, many still reject television. Some fret about the impact of the Internet on their children, who can see more and more of the world from the confines of their modest, monochrome bungalows.

“Some people are losing the true reason of being a Mennonite,” said corn farmer Corny Kornelsen, 52. “They grab every new thing that comes their way. But they can’t cope with all the new technologies.”

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