

Chapter 9 - Karassan

Gerhard's time in Karassan will be dealt with in the next chapter. This one will deal with an introduction to the Crimea and what we know of the village of Karassan.

The Crimea lies south of the Molotschna and is currently part of Ukraine¹. It is a fertile peninsula that extends into the Black Sea. Based on soil type, climate, and precipitation, it can be divided into two different sections: the northern low steppes that cover three quarters of the land mass, and the gradual climb to the southern Crimean Mountains that hug the coast. The northern steppes are a continuation of the Nogai Steppe that includes the Molotschna area.

The climate in the south is subtropical and is known for its natural spring spas and retreats. This contrasts with the Northern climate that experiences dust storms in the summer and severe cold that are intensified by cold Arctic winds in the winter. At its widest point, the Crimea is about 150 miles, or 250 kilometers wide. It is about 100 miles, or 150 kilometers from the northernmost city of



Perekop, to the southern tip near Yalta. In the south there is an abundance of vegetation. The oak trees retain their leaves year around. As well evergreen laurel, olive trees, nut and fig trees grow wild in the woodlands. The northern steppes consist almost entirely of vast plains, destitute of trees, but covered with pasture area, except where they are interspersed with heaths, salt -lakes, and marshes. This is the area for grain growing and sheep and goat grazing.

The Salgir River (aka Salghir or Salhyr), which flows from west to east, divides the north from the south. Although called a river it is just a wide creek and is the only one of any importance in the peninsula

The present name "Crimea" comes from the Crimean Tatar word Qirim (and the Greek – Kriméia). It has been controlled by many groups, over the centuries, including the first known inhabitants, the Cimmerians, then the Taurians (after whom the Greeks gave the

¹ Russia 'annexed' it in 2014 after the 2013-2014 Ukrainian Revolution. According to official Russian and Crimean sources 95% of the people voted to reunite Crimea with Russia. The legitimacy of both the referendum and the purported results have been questioned by the international community. Hence the statement that it is part of Ukraine.

peninsula an early name “Tauris” from which the province Taurida came). Other groups included the Scythians, the Greeks, the Goths, the Huns, many others until the 1500s when it was taken over by the Ottoman Turks, and eventually became part of the Ottoman Empire. After this it was taken over by the Russian Empire and remained so while my Greatgrandfather, Gerhard Willems (1820 – 1900) was living there.

Mennonites had been familiar with the Crimean Peninsula for some time. Johann Cornies, one of the wealthiest and most influential Mennonites in all New Russia, got his start by peddling cheese and butter produced in the Molotschna and transporting it to markets throughout the Crimea. The cheese and butter expanded to other goods, and he gradually got to know the Crimea and brought back tales of its German settlers and vast lands. During the Crimean War (1853 – 1856), the Russian government conscripted horses and wagons and food from the Molotschna Mennonites², as well as young men to drive them. They had the young men haul food and supplies as well as transport troops from the Molotschna to the front in Sevastapol, Crimea and then bring wounded soldiers back to Molotschna for medical treatment, many to Halbstadt and others to individual villages. The young men brought back tales of horror, various communicable diseases, and worldly ideas but they also brought back tales of the vast open land that was available in the Crimea; land that was very similar to that in the Molotschna. With the ongoing land crisis in the Molotschna coming to a head, Mennonite land scouts travelled to the Crimea searching for suitable settlement sites. Land was still available in there at very low prices³. In 1860,⁴ Karassan, the first Mennonite settlement was formed in the Simferopol District.⁵

² They also conscripted the same from other colonists in much of South Russia.

³ Czar Nicholas I gave huge tracts of land on the Crimean Steppe to his princes and military leaders for their support during the Crimean War. He rented out some and relied on their Serfs and the local Tatar population to farm the rest for them. After the war several hundred thousand Tatars fled Crimea fearing retribution from Russia because of their support of the Islamic Turks. They were also encouraged to leave by wandering Islamic Holy men who called on them to abandon their lands and leave the land of the ‘infidel’ (see

http://www.hks.re/domains/hks.re/wiki1/lib/exe/fetch.php?media=the_forgotten_minorities_of_eastern_europe_-_crimean_tatars.pdf). Many left and with few left to farm the lands (or possessing the knowledge to farm it) the crops withered and the value of the land plummeted. After Czar Alexander II’s land reforms of the 1860s, Russian Serfs finally gained their freedom and were legally able to own land, other settlers including the Germans and Mennonites were also able to purchase land as individuals (rather than as collective colonies) and came and bought much of the devalued land.

⁴ Even though most sites indicate 1862, I believe in 1860 that Mennonites arrived in Karassan. A GRANDMA entry for Gerhard (born 1820) cites a church book that states Gerhard was a member of the Karassan Church in 1861.

⁵ German Lutheran and Catholic colonists had been settling in the Crimea since 1805

Karassan⁶ ⁷(aka Karrasan aka Karrassan aka Karasan aka Karaşan), now known as Rivne or Rovnoe⁸ is located in the Krasnogvardeisky district of the north eastern portion of the Crimean steppes. The coordinates are 45° 20' 49" N, 34° 20' 49" E (45.347, 34.346) It is in a relatively low-lying area, sitting 53 m above sea level and 2 km east of the right bank of the Salgir, the longest river of the Crimean Peninsula. The village itself was beside a small rivulet, the Burulcha, a 76 km tributary of the Salgir.

Before it was known as Karassan it was Tatar⁹ village named Karagasan and belonged to Ak-Murza, a member of the Tatar Shirin clan, a large and influential dynasty in Crimea. On December 18, 1794, Ak-Murza sold his ancestral village of Karagasan to Semyon Antonovich Zherdev, treasurer of Simferopol County for 500 rubles. Two years later he used the property as collateral in a deal gone bad and it was subsequently used for payment to the creditor, Karl Ivanovich Gagendorf, who lived/owned a nearby village. On May 12, 1797, Gagendorf became the new owner of the village and more than 2000 *dessiatines* of land. In September 1818 Finnish-born Russian botanist and entomologist, Christian Christianovich Steven, purchased¹⁰ the village and property for 3500 rubles. His wife and manager, Joseph Bohun, took care of Karassan while Steven spent the summers there and visited during the rest of the year.

In 1826 Steven became the Russian Chief Inspector of Silk Farming, and the agriculture inspector of Russia's southern provinces, including the Chortitza and Molotschna Mennonite colonies. He had quite an interest in viticulture as apparently the wine sales provided a great deal of the income needed to pay for the upkeep of his 3 estates, including Karassan and one at Sudak, in the southern Crimea. As part of his agriculture inspector's role, he often visited the Molotschna and Berdiansk. This is where he met

⁶ Not to be confused with the stone Karasan Palace (aka Rayevski Palace) located in Alushta on the Southeast coast of Crimea. The grounds house the Karasan Sanitorium (i.e. health resort for the treatment of patients with chronic nonspecific diseases of the lungs).

⁷ Карасан in Cyrillic

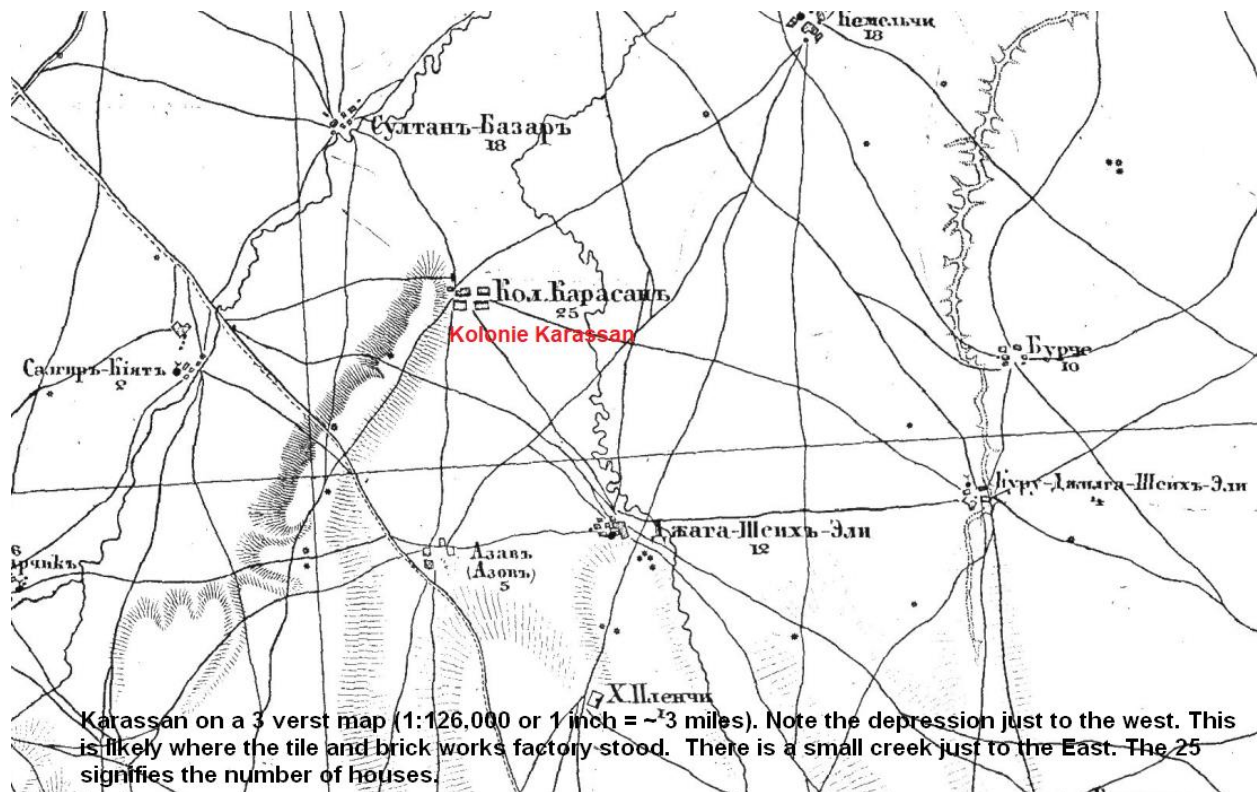
⁸In 1947 its name was changed to Rovnoe or Ровное, in Cyrillic. This was the Russian name; Rivne is the Ukrainian name.

⁹ The Crimean Tatar's are considered an indigenous people of Crimea who descended from the various peoples including Scythians, Greeks, Goths Italians Buglars, Sarmations and others, who lived in Crimea during different historical periods. Over the centuries a common language (Turkic dialect) and religion (Islam) consolidated them into one very powerful group who controlled not only the Crimea but the steppes in the later named Taurida Province and the Nogai who lived there. They, themselves, were part of the Ottoman Empire which was defeated by the Russians in the 1768–74 Russo-Turkish War. In the treaty, after the war, Crimea was to maintain independence, but the Russians annexed the peninsula in 1783 and, as part of their policy began a 'forced immigration' of many Crimeans Tatars. Periodic deportations continued over the years especially in 1812 when Russian fears of Tatar loyalty emerged during Napoleon's advances and then again after the 1853–1856 Crimean war and the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War.

¹⁰ Steven was quite renowned for starting one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world, Nikita Botanical Garden, and his interest in plants were partially what intrigued him about the Karassan area.

many Mennonites,¹¹ studied their vineyard methods and become familiar with their reputed agricultural prowess.

In 1841, the Russian government awarded Steven 1500 *dessiatines* of land for his impeccable service; the land included an abandoned village of Besharan, adjacent to his property at Karassan. In 1850 he retired to focus on his writing and vineyards. After his wife's death in November, 1859, Steven bequeathed the estate in Sudak to his eldest son, Anton, and Karassan to his second eldest son, Alexander. Alexander eventually relocated to St. Petersburg to attend university and then joined the Russian government civil service.



Meanwhile, post Crimean War had many Crimean Tatars either choosing to leave or being encouraged to leave by the Russian government. Over time the steppes of Crimea began emptying of the Tatars and many villages were abandoned. We don't know for sure, but it is very possible that this was the reason that in 1860, Christian Steven advised his son, Alexander, to rent out part of his Karassan estate to some Mennonites from the Molotschna. It may have been to supply income for Alexander, or it

¹¹ Epp et al. (Epp, Ingrid I., et al., editors. *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies, Volume II: 1836–1842*. University of Toronto Press, 2020) note, "In close consultation with Christian Steven, the famous Crimean agronomist who acted as the Ministry of State Domains' main agricultural expert in the region, Cornies experimented with British wheat, Turkish tobacco, Crimean barley, and countless other crops."

As an example of the vineyard connect is noted in a letter dated 2 March 1837, Cornies thanks Steven for supplying him with some vines for growing and requests more.

may have been that Christian Steven did not want to see the crops, vineyards and fields return to their natural state. Regardless, his son followed through, and a number Mennonites relocated there. This is where my Ggrandfather Gerhard Willems emigrated to, around¹² 1860 - 61.

With the death of Christian Steven in 1863, Alexander became the sole owner of the lands and he continued to rent it out to Mennonite tenants as he was too busy with his schooling and then state affairs.¹³ Alexander retired from his civil service position in 1871 and on February 20, 1873, he sold his Karassan estate to his Mennonite tenants. On March 6, 1874, the Simferopol district court officially transferred the Karassan estate as the property of 28 Mennonite settlers, including Gerhard. The landowners were:

Nikolaus Jakob Esau, Jacob Fedor Wiebe, Abram Peter Giesbrecht, Johann Johann Wiebe, Johann Johann Klippenstein, Johann Johann Braun, Hermann Abram Janzen, Kornelius Kornelius Fast, Peter Abram Harder, Peter Bezganz, Heinrich Heinrich Friedel, Peter Johann Harder, Peter Dietrich Janzen, Abram Jakob Wittenberg, Jacob Jacob Wittenberg, Peter Peter Giesbrecht, Franz Johann Wiebe, Johann David Warkentin, Andreas George Unrau, Gerhard Gerhard Willems, Abram Jakob Schellenberg, Johann Zelengur, Heinrich Peter Becker, Abraham Peter Isaak, Gerhard Peter Isaak, Jakob Weiss, Gerhard Hermann Wall, and Peter Peter Isaak

The original list follows; Gerhard is #20 Герхард Герхардович Виленс (translates to Gerhard Gerhardovich Vilens).¹⁴

¹² The last available information we have of the family in Molotschna was the 1857-58 Molotschna school records which shows the family still in Lichtenau. The next records are that he was a member of the Karassan Mennonite Church, which was officially founded in 1862, though the GRANDMA records state he was a member in 1861.

¹³ In 1861 he graduated from the Simferopol men's state gymnasium with honours. He then entered the Imperial St. Petersburg University in the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, graduating in 1865. In 1866 he was sent to Paris and was awarded the title of Titular Consul and prepared for Russia's involvement in the following year's Expo. After Expo he had a series of government appointments and then retired from Civil Service. He was appointed to some state boards and was then elected as a representative of Crimea. He tried to draw the attention of local authorities to the problem of protecting monuments of history and culture of the Crimea peninsula. He founded the library "Tavrik", where books and manuscripts about Crimea in Russian and foreign languages were collected. Now this collection has become the basis of the "Tavrika" library at the Sevastopol Regional Museum of Crimea.

¹⁴ Gerhard was the only Willems (Vilens in Russian transliteration) in Karassan and from church records we know that he lived there at the time. I originally thought this was referring to Gerhard's son since the official recording was in March 1874 and I assumed Gerhard Sr. would be busy caring for his ailing wife and preparing, or at least considering, a move to North America. However, Katharina didn't pass away until May 10, 1875, one year and three months later than the transfer. Additionally, records indicate that Gerhard Jr worked as a blacksmith in Keneges (on the east coast of Crimea) until 1873 and then relocated to Karassan, also as a blacksmith, until Feb. 25, 1874. He began working in Alexanderfeld (Kutyuki), Crimea on Feb. 26, 1874. It is highly unlikely that he was the landowner since he had chosen the trade of blacksmith, he was working in Keneges at the time of the sale, and he moved to Kutyuki only a month before the official transfer of land. Consequently, I now believe that the records refer to Gerhard (b. 1820).

Собственно Карасаном согласно опубликованной в 1874 году расчетной земельной платы владели следующие лица:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Николай Яковлевич Эзау | 15. Яков Яковлевич Витеберг |
| 2. Яков Федорович Вибе | 16. Петр Петрович Гизбрехт |
| 3. Авраам Петрович Гизбрехт | 17. Франц Иоганович Вибе |
| 4. Иван Иванович Вибе | 18. Иван Давыдович Варкенштейн |
| 5. Иван Иванович Клименштейн | 19. Андриан Георгиевич Унру |
| 6. Иван Иванович Браун | 20. Герхард Герхардович Вилене |
| 7. Герман Абрамович Янцен | 21. Абрам Яковлевич Шелленберг |
| 8. Корнелиус Корнелиусович Фаст | 22. Иван Зеленгур |
| 9. Петр Абрамович Гардер | 23. Генрих Петрович Беккер |
| 10. Петр Безганц | 24. Авраам Петрович Исаак |
| 11. Генрих Генрихович Фридель | 25. Герхард Петрович Исаак |
| 12. Петр Иванович Гардер | 26. Яков Вайс |
| 13. Петр Дитрихович Янцен | 27. Герхард Германович Вааль |
| 14. Авраам Яковлевич Витеберг | 28. Петр Петрович Исаак |

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Without more information it's difficult to ascertain which village each of the families came from. From what can be found, it appears that most came from the Molotschna, but none appear to come from Gerhard's village of Lichtenau. Interestingly, it seems that not all the people were from the Lichtenau congregation as some appear to have come from villages that were more progressive.

With the founding of the Karassan Mennonite Church in 1862, Jakob Wiebe¹⁶ ¹⁷ became the first elder and Gerhard Wall was the first deacon.

The first school was built in 1862, with a larger structure built in 1880. This building was made of fired brick and roofed with tiles. A total of 4000 rubles was spent on its construction.

The school was allocated 1280 square meters (1530 square yards or .3 acre) of land, of which 208 (250 square yards) occupied the school yard, the rest of the area housed the school building, a vegetable garden, and a vineyard. The school building was divided into two parts: the classroom and living quarters for the teacher. There were two rows of desks in the classroom, girls in one row and boys in the other. The teacher was paid 600 rubles a year and was allowed to use the living quarters for free. In addition to teaching, the teacher was expected to lead singing lessons and provide other programs for the community.

¹⁵ Каспер, В. *Карасан – имение Стевенов и "дело о миллионе"* (translation: *Karasan – Steven estate and the "case of a million"*) Simferopol. Undated.

¹⁶ Jakob was the brother of Philipp Wiebe (son-in-law of Johann Cornies) and was a teacher at the Halbstadt Zentralschule in the Molotschna before he emigrated to Karassan, Crimea. He became the first elder of the Karassan Mennonite Church when the church was organized in 1862.

¹⁷ It appears there were two Jakob Wiebes who were elders of their respective churches. The one in Karassan and a Jakob Wiebe who was elder of what became the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church. It was an affiliation that separated from the Kleine Gemeinde and was in Annenfeld (aka Annowka), located about 20 km NW of Karassan. In the spring of 1874, the settlement moved their entire church community to Hillsboro, Kansas where it was known as Gnadenau.

Wilmsen's¹⁸ recollections also indicate that the Mennonites quickly established a brick and tile factory, quarrying the limestone from an area on the west side of the village at the bottom of a hill behind the elementary school. The factory was fired by straw (and likely dung bricks like that used in the Molotschna) as there was little wood and none to spare for such an enterprise. The brick and tile were used to build the local houses, tile the roofs and build the fences that fronted each house (and the church and school). It wasn't long before they were selling their products to other villages and towns.

In 1895 there were 60 children enrolled in the Karassan Elementary School with parents paying an annual fee of 10 to 12 rubles. On top of that the textbooks were bought by parents. There was no library in the school however, since about 1875 the village had a public library, one which the teacher oversaw. By 1895 it housed 232 books. Apparently however the number of regular readers was only about a dozen.

A teacher prep school, (*Zentralschule*) opened in Karassan on September 15, 1905. Wilmsen provides a description:

The building is a limestone-shell rock structure standing on a U-shaped high brick plinth. The gables are made of bricks. Decorative curbstones installed at the corners of the building are carved from bryozoan limestone. Inside, the building consists of a spacious hall, illuminated by spacious windows, around which classrooms are grouped. Heating of the building was done through several fireplaces.¹⁹



The *zentralschule* differed from the elementary school in that it was for boys only. A *madenschule* (girls' school) was established for a short time, from around 1910 til

¹⁸ ИЗВЕСТИЯ ОГИК МУЗЕЯ" №11. И. В. Черказьянова Воспоминания В. П. Вильмсена как источник для повседневной истории меннонитов Крыма и Сибири ("ISVESTIA OGIK MUSEUM" No.11. I.V. Cherkazianova V. P. Wilmsen's memoirs as a source for the history of the Mennonites of Crimea and Siberia). Henceforth noted as Wilmsen.

¹⁹ Ibid.

approximately 1915²⁰ but due to the Bolshevik Revolution, and subsequent formation of the USSR, was never able to be completed.

After the Soviet takeover, the primary school was reclassified as a 1st level school and



Main hall of Mennonite Zentralschule, Karassan. Courtesy Discover Crimea - <http://discover-crimea.ru/krym-mnogonatsionalnyj/nemetskie-poseleniya-mezhdurechya-zui-i-burulchi-tsentralnyj-krym-ot-sultan-bazara-mostovoe-do-nej-telenchi-nizovoe>

the central school as a 2nd-level school.²¹ In 1926, there were 45 children enrolled in the 1st level (8 - 11 years) and 23 in the 2nd level (12 – 17 years). Wilmsen reports that the Mennonites created a cohesive group and resisted the Soviet propaganda. To combat this, the Soviets replaced the "politically unsuitable" teachers with ones that were loyal to the Soviet government. Soon, Soviet policy encompassed all aspects of Mennonite life. After the German invasion, the school building housed the commandant and his offices. When the Soviets retook the Crimea, the school was used as a warehouse.

²⁰ Huebert, Helmut T. *Crimea: The Story of Crimea and the Mennonites Who Lived There*. Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers. 2013

²¹ In 1923 the Soviet Union divided schools into types, each known by the number of years: "four year", "seven year" and "nine year" schools. Four-year schools were 1st level and were only available for the first 4 years of education. These were available in most villages and towns. Secondary (seven and nine-year) schools were scarce, making it difficult for the pupils to complete their secondary education. In the 1920s only in four villages in the Crimea (Karassan, Neizac, Okrekhre, Zurichtal) had a first and second level school. Wilmsen. Ibid.



Old well near Karassan. Courtesy Discover Crimea - <http://discover-crimea.ru/krym-mnogonatsionalnyj/nemetskie-poseleniya-mezhdurechya-zui-i-burulchi-tsen-tralnyj-krym-ot-sultan-bazara-mostovoe-do-nej-telenci-nizovoe>

Karassan had good drinking water from its two wells. Later big pumps were brought in from England and water was supplied to all households, and public buildings. The system was a rarity in the area and was built so it could withstand severe cold.

In the centre of the village were two wells that provided Karassan with a good source of drinking water. Nearby, set on mounds, were two large wooden vats that served as holding tanks for the water. Big pumps, brought in from England, fed water from these tanks to all buildings of the village. The system was designed to withstand severe frost. Near the pumps were two large troughs, which were filled in the morning and evening, and

served to water all the cattle in the village.

The population and the importance of Karassan grew steadily. The first written reports show 16 'people' (more likely families as early records²² tended to count the yards rather than the individuals) in 1864. The next records²³ of 1874 (when it was sold) show 28 families. By 1886 the Russians were completing accurate censuses and the records show 223 people living in 43 households, a Mennonite prayer house, a school, and a tile factory in operation. The following year showed a slight decline to 219 people and by the 1902 revision there were 230 people in 33 households. From there, there was a steady increase to 460 people in 1914. By 1926, Soviet lists show there were 664 Germans, 23 Russians, 10 Ukrainians, and 6 others for a total of 708 people living in

²² The 1887 edition's title translates to the "10th revision...." Consequently, I assume it wasn't until 1877 that the first accurate count was done

²³ Most of these statistics come from a series of annual books which translate to the "*Memorial Book of the Tauride Province of year xxxx*" or, *Settlements in the Tauride Province for xxxx (year)* e. g. *Таврическая губерния. Список населённых мест по сведениям 1864 г / М. Раевский. Центральный статистический комитет Министерства внутренних дел Типография Карла Вульфа, 1865. — С. 40. — 137 с. Which translate to something like *Tauride province. The list of settlements according to the information of 1864 / M. Raevsky. - Central Statistical Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. - SPb. Karl Wolf Printing House, 1865. - P. 40. – 137 p. available online <https://search.rsl.ru/ru/record/01003831183>**

139 households (yards). In October 1932, the village was declared a state collective farm; 25 of the Mennonite colonists “sold: their houses to the state and moved. Others were moved in and by August 1937, Karassan was the largest village in the district, home to 1,054 people of whom most were German.

Karassan did not escape the devastating famine²⁴ of 1921-1922. Though information is sketchy hunger did force most to resort to extreme measures.²⁵ Wilmsen²⁶ shared one memory of their family being forced by starvation to eat a cat. Although all family members joined in, the one concession was that the dish was cooked on the street, not in the kitchen. Attacks on religion became more pronounced in the early 1930s. At first prohibitions were made against anyone under eighteen receiving any religious instruction and ministers of various religions being forbidden to teach in the schools. Then church taxes were raised so high that congregations could not afford to keep the buildings open. The Karassan Church closed in 1930 and the building was turned into a clubhouse.²⁷ By the mid 1930s all religious life was curbed, and ministers were sought out, tried, and exiled, imprisoned, or shot. The Russian government continued their course of compulsory collectivization and the continuing forced export of grain and cattle in the Crimea. As a result, the Crimea underwent a second famine²⁸ in the years 1931-33. The former beautiful homes and yards of the Mennonites, and other Germans, were often destroyed or at the least left to lapse into disrepair. On January 26, 1935, the Crimean ASSR²⁹ created the German National Telman District (немецкий национальный Тельманский район) of which Karassan was a part. On August 18,

²⁴ This was a devastating famine that killed well over 5 million people, in what is now the Ukraine and included both the Molotschna and Crimea areas. Officially Russia stated that the famine was caused by a drought and poor harvest but, this was only a part of the problem. The bigger aspect were the political decisions of the government in the requisitioning of grain, cattle, and other food supplies well beyond what the peasant farmers could safely provide, leaving them constantly on the brink of disaster. The drought pushed them over the brink. At first Lenin rejected international aid but after a series of uprisings he was forced to reconsider his decision. Many countries and groups, including the Mennonites provided aid in the form of food and equipment.

²⁵ Many reports speak of cannibalism; eating of pets was commonplace. Those who could flee, did, but the overcrowding and lack of sanitation caused outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. For more see <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/cccp-history-famine.htm>. Additionally see Rempel (Rempel, David G, and Cornelia R. Carlson. *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) in which he quotes a letter from his brother which in part reads, “Cases of cannibalism are not wanting, parents and children murdering one another. In a window at the headquarters of the Cheka in a neighboring city almost daily were posted pictures of people who had been condemned to death for cannibalism, in order to deter others from doing the same thing. But hunger knows no fear of punishment.”

²⁶ Wilmsen. Ibid.

²⁷ Goerz, H. Op. Cit.

²⁸ Also known as the Holodomor (which translates to “to kill by starvation”) Famine, or the Great Famine was another manmade famine. Today the Ukraine (and 15 other countries) refer to it as a genocide on the Ukrainian people by the government of the USSR. The time era is also seen as a genocide against the Crimean Tatars, millions of whom were killed or deported.

²⁹ On 18 October 1921 the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created as part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russian SFSR – Russia became the USSR in 1922)

1941, shortly after the Germans invaded³⁰ the USSR, the Crimean Germans, including the Mennonites were deported,³¹ first, east to the Stavropol Territory in the Caucasus, and eventually further east into northern Kazakhstan.³²

During the Second World War, Karassan was hardly damaged, however before they retreated the Soviet troops blew up a forge and a power plant. During the occupation, the German commandant's office was in the house of the director of the state farm while prisoners of war were kept in the former Mennonite Central School.

In the post-war years, the village was actively re-populated by residents from different



According to an article in the online "Encyclopedia of Germans from Russia" (available <https://enc.rusdeutsch.ru/articles/211>) this is a picture of the 'meeting house' or church approx 1967 before it was converted into a club.

regions of Ukraine and Russia. Most of the Mennonite houses were divided into apartments (up to six residents).

In 1967 a new school building was built. At the same time, the church was rebuilt into a club (a stage was built, a new foyer was added).³³

³⁰ On August 22, 1939, Russia and Germany signed a 'non-aggression pact'. During this time, the two nations attacked and occupied Poland (Germany from the west and Russia from the east) and divided it between them. The pact held until June 22, 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. That same month, Stalin and the Soviet Union joined forces with the Allies powers.

³¹ The Karassan area Germans, including the Mennonites, were shuttled to the Feodosia railway station, on the east coast of Crimea. From there and other Crimean stations, more than 61 thousand Crimean Germans were deported.

³² This is where some of Gerhard's surviving descendants ended up. Gerhard's (born 1844) son Peter, born 11 November 1877, in Kutuyki, Crimea (aka Alexandefeld) about 65 km NE of Karassan moved to Yalantusch (aka Marienfeld, Ialantush, Jalantusch, and Jabantusch) where most of his children were born. His son, Gerhard was one of these children and his children were all born in Kazakhstan (Spaskoye, and Atbasar). Presumably he was deported there in 1941. He died in 1997 in Espelkamp, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany. Some of his children moved to Germany and others stayed in Kazakhstan.

³³ Черказьянова И.В. "КАРАСАН, меннонитская колония". *Энциклопедия немцев России*. (Cherkazyanova I.V. "KARASAN, Mennonite colony" *Encyclopedia of Germans from Russia*). Undated.

At present, the Rivne rural settlement unites the settlements of Molochnoye, Nekrasovo, Novonikolskoye and Rovnoye. In 2014 there were 1399 people in Rivne. The oldest buildings are concentrated on the renamed streets, Lenin and Gorky. The houses of former residents, Dr. Johann Zavadsky, as well as that of Johann Johannovich Vibe, Peter Gergardovich Valla, the houses of some former Central School teachers, and a number of other have survived. In some places, stone fences have been preserved near the houses. Current residents use old



Remains of a fence and the front yard of a former Mennonite house in Karassan



Two Mennonite cemetery memorial stones in the Karassan Cemetery

cellars (for example, in the former houses of I. I.Vibe, P. G. Valla). The village has a library, a post office, a secondary school, an outpatient clinic, shops, a club, a church of the Orthodox community of St. Martyrs Florus and Lavra, Kara Asan Jamisi Mosque.³⁴ Several Mennonite gravestones have been preserved at the local cemetery but unfortunately most have been destroyed.

Unfortunately, as well, history was not kind to the Stevens family. According to Ena et al.³⁵ Christian Stevens died in 1863 and was buried in a family crypt in the yard of the family house just outside of Simferopol. In 1921, Stevens' grandson, Alexander, who had served for less than a year as a minister in the Crimean Regional Government, was shot by the new Communist government. His wife and his two young daughters were evicted from their house which was then set up as a homeless shelter. The following year the family crypt was plundered and the remains of Stevens, his son, Alexander, Alexander's wife and Steven's daughter Julia were removed, eventually gathered and reburied in a common grave in nearby Petrovsky cemetery. By the 1970s the house had been destroyed and all Steven's belongings had been confiscated by the government. It

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ена В.Г., Ал.В. Ена, and Ан.В. Ена. "Открыватели земли Крымской" (Google translation: Ena, V. G., Al.V. Ena, and An.V. Ena. "Discoverers of the Crimean Land")

took several years for the Nikitsky³⁶ Botanical Gardens to recover them and to get permission to erect a marble bust to Stevens. In 1997 he was “rehabilitated” and today there is a sign on a street named after him, noting that he had lived there. His gravesite remains unfound.

³⁶ The Nikitsky Botanical Garden is the oldest in Ukraine and operates as both a public garden and research centre. It was founded by Christian Stevens in 1812.