



A Typical Doukhobor Village (Michalooka) in Western Canada.

The Doukhobors

NEARLY one hundred years ago the Russian Minister of the Interior informed an English visitor that the Doukhobors were descendants of followers of John Huss. Their own tradition is that they sprang from three brothers, Cossacks of the Don, who were led to forsake the ceremonies of the Russian Church for a simpler worship. About 1777 the Cossacks of the Don fell under the ban of the ecclesiastical law as heretics. From that time the "Doukhoborts," as Senator Lapukhin called them in 1806 were cruelly persecuted both by imprisonment and torture, a ukase reading "Everybody who shall be convicted of belonging to the sect of Doukhoborts shall be condemned to life-long hard labour."

Alexander I. was, however, graciously disposed to restore to them their rights, after his minister Lapukhin, had investigated their disabilities, and some of them came back from the places of their banishment. They were granted an especial place of settlement apart from the Greek Orthodox Russians. Thus several thousands eventually congregated just north of the Crimea and remained there until 1840. It is significant to note just a century ago the first instance of refusal to bear arms on the part of the Doukhobors engaged in the first Turkish War. These men threw away their arms in the midst of the fighting, while two Cossacks, who refused to obey the military authorities were sentenced to death.

The "Milky Waters Colony" in the Melitopol district of the Tauris government consisted of nine villages, the central one being called Terpenie (patience). There sat the parish assembly and in Terpenie was also established the orphan house. It was a large frame building, situated in a park containing fruit and forest trees and was called "Zion" by the Doukhobors. Mr. Joseph Elkinton, in his history of this peculiar people, says that the households generally were in a flourishing condition, thanks to the abundance of land, communal husbandry, and the enterprising spirit of the Doukhobors with regard to agricultural improvements. There were 13,500 acres of arable land in this tract, so that each man had rather more than 45 acres. Their farming was all done in common and the produce divided equally. They also erected storehouses for food in case of famine.

In 1887 there were twenty thousand Doukhobors in the southern settlement. In spite of persecution the colony had not been unprosperous but during the following decade their sufferings became so great that they desired to leave Russia and in 1898 were given permission to emigrate. Major Maude agreed to undertake negotiations with the Canadian government and he and Prince Hilkov accompanied the first two Doukhobor families to Canada. The prospecting party arrived in Quebec, September 10th, 1898, and Professor Mavor of Toronto had succeeded in interesting a number of government officials in the proposed exodus. On January 20th, 1899 the steamship "Lake Huron" landed more than two thousand Doukhobors at Halifax. A paper of that city spoke in favourable terms of the new settlers: "The Doukhobors are people of the purest Russian type, large and strong, men and women both being of magnificent physique. They are characterised by broad, square shoulders, heavy limbs, and a massive build generally. Their features are prominent, but refined, and bear the marks of a life that is free from vice of any kind. The most striking characteristic of all is the bright, kindly sparkle of their eyes, which gives a winning expression to the whole face, and quickly wins confidence in their character. All their habits demonstrate that they are possessed of keen minds."

The first contingent had hardly been landed in the immigration buildings at Winnipeg and elsewhere, when the second steamship, "Lake Superior," brought another two thousand to Halifax, accompanied by Count Sergius Tolstoi, son of the great novelist.

One thousand survivors of the Doukhobor colony in Cyprus were brought out to Canada and were promptly transported to Yorkton and Assiniboia. Then a large party of 2,278 Doukhobors sailed from Batoum and arrived at Quebec on June 6th, 1899. This was the last of the "Larger Party" remaining in the Caucasus and these came from the Province of Kars. Prince Hilkov had previously gone to the Prince Albert district of Saskatchewan to secure land for this party. The Canadian Government preferred to give them sections situated some three hundred miles to the northwest of the other settlements in Assiniboia and Manitoba, where the previous arrivals had settled. The Dominion Government set aside some 270,480 acres of prairie land for the 7,361 Doukhobors (1,500 of these were men) who had taken refuge within its jurisdiction. The larger part of the tract was located near the junction of Manitoba and the territories then called the "Northwest," some seventy-five miles north of Yorkton. The most western settlement is on Duck Lake.

The Doukhobors live in villages. Dr. Saunders of Ottawa reports their houses as "substantially built of logs, and roofed with poles, on which prairie sod about four inches thick is laid and the interstices filled with fine earth. The sides of the houses are well plastered on the exterior with clay mixed with cut straw. The furniture in the houses is all of their own make. Most of the houses consist of one large room for living, cooking, eating and sleeping. The aim is to have in all their villages a house for each family and their houses are being erected at varying distances in two rows with a wide street between them."

Physically, the Doukhobors showed themselves fitted to face the hard work of tilling the soil of a new country and making homes in an unsettled district. They were recognised as a "peculiar people" in religious views, and those of more orthodox belief have, perhaps, made too little effort to understand them. The Anglo-Saxon does not allow his religion to influence his diet and consequently he regards with amiable contempt the vegetarianism which seems to be part of the Doukhobor creed. However the "pilgrimages" may have excited the mingled wonder and amusement of their British-born neighbours, their practical aid has not been lacking when the Doukhobors were suffering during the first years of hardship. Their aversion to warfare has not materially affected the manner in which they are regarded, as farming not fighting has been the pressing need of the West. However, when the Doukhobor's conscience would not allow him to purchase a marriage license, the law mildly persuaded him that it has something to do with the rites of Hymen and that two dollars is not an exorbitant charge.

These people are hard to understand and most people who have described them praise them for their industry and domestic peacefulness. They are so secretive and uncommunicative that they have never revealed the true inwardness of their minds. They are communists, but is it from principle or from some other motive? Have they some secret bond which makes them different from other peoples, and is this bond dangerous to the common citizenship?

An authority who has investigated these people and has made some startling discoveries, will present his finding in next week's issue.