

Werner School in Sarata

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Formation of the Werner School in Sarata

By Gottfried Fittbogen

1.

The Werner School in Sarata, the first high school and teacher training institution (*Zentralschule*) in the German colonies of Bessarabia, is generally regarded as the work of the Pietist **Christian Friedrich Werner**, the friend of Ignaz Lindl, who emigrated from his homeland with his followers, Catholic Bavarians and Protestant Swabians, and founded here in the far east a refuge for them, where they could live their faith unchallenged and expect the return of Christ in quiet eagerness (1822-1824). This Werner, a wealthy and charitable man, left the municipality of Sarata a significant fortune that became the basis of an advanced (*gehobenen*) school. This school is called Werner School. So what could be more obvious than to assume that Werner had only supplied the basic fund of capital for the maintenance of this school, that the idea of school itself had also originated from his head, his understanding of what was necessary for the German colonists? Still the last author to comment on these things, Georg Leibbrandt, in his very meritorious book *Die Auswanderung aus Schwaben nach Rußland 1816-1823* (Stuttgart 1928, p. 197), seeks to derive the origin of the school idea from the life history of Werner: the excellent school system of his Württemberg hometown Giengen made a great impression on him, so it was quite natural for him that in far off Russia suitable teachers had to be provided for; this thought is an ancestral heritage; to realize it, he had quite certainly given the community (*Gemeinde*) significant capital. As general as this assumption is, it is wrong. Werner had made available most of his wealth to his beloved community; but he did not even think about the foundation of

an advanced school, about the formation of teachers for the elementary schools of the German colonies.

Werner thought of something completely different. He was a Pietist and as such was filled with the then still young but powerful and captivating idea of mission. He also wanted to serve this idea beyond death, and so he bequeathed most of his wealth “for the good and benefit of the church, but especially for missionary purposes or for the spread of the kingdom of God.”¹ He therefore thought of the establishment of a missionary institution and the formation of God’s Kingdom workers among the Gentiles. Young people from Sarata should leave their homeland and spread the kingdom of God in a foreign place—whether they received all their training in the institution to be founded, whether they were taught here for a German missionary institution. It is the same thought that reappeared two years later when Samuel Keller, the later evangelist—certainly knowing something about Werner's plan—during his work as a pastor in German colonies of southern Russia and Crimea (1880-1899), set up a preschool in his parish of Neusatz, where he prepared young sons of farmers for admission to an internal German missionary institution.² Yes, he even thought of a missionary enterprise in Abyssinia. On both occasions, the Russian authorities rejected this idea. The first time, the capital donated by Werner was apparently too small for such an undertaking. It was probably premature during the development stage of the colony. But even then, as was later the case in Keller's time, the Russian authority was unsympathetic to the idea that an heterodox, ecclesiastical community should be training missionaries (or mission pupils) on Russian soil which was in the domain of the Orthodox Church. In any case, the Minister for Popular Enlightenment did not authorize the implementation of Werner's legacy. What now? Since the purpose of the foundation could not be achieved, there was a danger that the capital would have to be left unused.

This dilemma was a help for an interpretation that gently turned the foundation's idea around. It was said that the training of evangelical teachers was also a kind of work of the kingdom of God. In order to make this clear and to secure the interpretation against any attack, the church side of the training was emphasized and the curriculum was endowed with more religious hours than would otherwise have been the case. Thus the idea of the foundation was taken into account and at the same time something useful was created that did not go beyond the horizon and power of the community. The minister approved this proposal and found it “useful and expedient to establish in the Sarata village school a special class³ where teachers could be trained both for Sarata itself and for the other German colonies.” So, in 1831, eight years after Werner's death, the highest official approval for the establishment of a “Teacher Training College” (Mutschall) took place. The realization, however, dragged on for a long time, only in 1844 could the Werner School actually be opened.

¹ Wilhelm Mutschall, *Geschichte der russischen Werner-Zentralschule zu Sarata von 1844-1894*.

² Samuel Keller, *Aus meinem Leben*. Bd. 1, Freiburg i.B. 1917.

³ the village school already exists, new is the “special class,” in the Central School.

But from whom does the idea of a teacher training institution come from? This cannot be said with complete certainty, but presumably it did not come from the minister himself (he only had to give his permission to do so); it came from the office, which was created with the only task of providing for the colonies. And within this authority, it seems to be the State Council Samuel Kontenius, in whom we can see the originator of the idea. Kontenius was chief justice of the “Tutel-Kontor of the Foreign Settlers in Southern Russia” in 1800-1818, then after the transformation of this ministry, assistant to General Insow, the president of the “Welfare Committee,” in both positions he approached the colonies with understanding and acquired the trust and love of the colonists. He died in 1830. His remains are buried in the cemetery of the Lutheran colony of Josefstal near Jekaterinoslaw. The grateful posterity gave him a beautiful marble memorial.

Kontenius himself (and this most strongly suggests that it was he who turned the mission foundation into a school foundation), has left behind a school foundation for the German colonies. Although the details of the information differ, they are essentially the same. According to one,⁴ Kontenius left behind a legacy of 15,540 rubles “to educate two colonist youths to become school teachers;” according to others,⁵ in general, “to train able sons of colonists,” but without limitation to the mention of two; according to the third indication,⁶ his legacy, in the end, only amounted to 4,500 rubles. After that, one is able to assume that he had donated a capital of not very large amounts, the interest of which should be used to train two colonist sons as school teachers. This capital was combined with the capital of Werner, but probably according to his own intentions. Without this already existing Werner share capital, his smaller legacy would have been completely up in the air. It was to serve to enable the institution to train two more pupils than it could have trained with Werner's capital alone. So it was Kontenius who was the first to recognize⁷ what the German colonists in Bessarabia needed: useful school teachers who were called upon in their own country.

It would be desirable to follow the footsteps of this man. That would lead to the midst of the activity of the Welfare Committee, whose history is still unwritten. The support of the school system was later resumed by State Councillor Eugen Hahn, first as an assistant (1841), then as successor to General Insow (1845). He is also the one who led the individual colonies to submit the reports on the origin and development that are so valuable to us today.⁸ However, how far a

⁴ M. Fr. Schrenk, *Aus der Geschichte der Entstehung und Entwicklung der ev.=luth. Kolonien in den Gouvernements Bessarabien und Cherson*. Odessa 1901, S. 116.

⁵ Conrad Keller, *Die deutschen Kolonien in Südrußland*. Odessa 1905, Bd. I, S. 49.

⁶ *Die Wernerschule und Lehrer Karl Baisch von 1844-1883*. Odessa 1884, S. 5.

⁷ It is a report by Kontenius from earlier times, from 1800, that Adolf Ehart is aware of in *Das Mennonitentum in Rußland* 1932, p. 38.

⁸ Georg Liebbrandt, *Die deutschen Kolonien in Cherson und Bessarabien – Berichte der Gemeindeämter über die Entstehung und Entwicklung der lutherischen Kolonien in der 1. Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1926. J.A. Molinowsky, *Die deutschen Katholischen Kolonien am Schwarzen Meere. Berichte der Gemeindeämter über Entstehung und Entwicklung dieser Kolonien in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1927- — It also contains information on other reports from 1848, which were published shortly before the war.

history of the effectiveness of these two men, especially that of Kontenius, can be written, how far the files that testify to him still exist today, is a question that we cannot answer from here.

In any case, the fundamental realization is already emerging: the initiative to develop schools beyond simple elementary schools to advanced schools, so-called Central Schools (*Zentralschulen*), does not come from the colonists, but from men of the colonist authority. Werner was no exception. If it is said that the Welfare Committee acted completely as guardians of the colonists and educated them to be self-sufficient, that its activity was therefore harmful to them and that its abolition in 1870 was a blessing,⁹ that is, at the least, very exaggerated. In the first half of the century, the Welfare Committee, especially through Kontenius and Hahn, undoubtedly acquired significant gains for the colonies. Who is going to try to write its history—be it ever also only fragmentary?

[Translation Ends]

⁹ Johannes Brendel, *Aus deutschen Kolonien im Katschurganer Gebiet, Geschichtliches und Volkswundliches*, Stuttgart 1930, S. 21, 30.