The founding of Sarepta

In 1891 a dramatic decision was taken by the Unity Elders’ Conference (UEC), the leading committee of the worldwide Moravian Church. In the manor house of Berthelsdorf near Herrnhut, seat of the UEC, it was decided to call back all church officials serving in the most eastern Moravian settlement of Sarepta on the Wolga River. By calling them back to Germany the rift between the Sarepta community and the Unitas Fratrum was complete; in the following year the official separation of Sarepta from the Unity was declared. Church membership of the inhabitants was terminated and the archives of the Sarepta community were transferred to Herrnhut, where they were added to the collections of the Unity Archives.

Before we take a closer look at the Sarepta records and at the other records concerning Russia in Herrnhut, we have to define who the Moravians were. The Moravian Church is the English name for a group that in other languages is known as the Unity of the Brethren, Brüdergemeine or Eglise des Frères; probably the name Herrnhuters is even more familiar. What today is an established Protestant church with branches in 30 countries on five continents started as a controversial religious movement in the eighteenth century. In 1722, Protestant refugees settled on the estate of Nikolaus Ludwig Count Zinzendorf (1700–60), founding the community of Herrnhut. Under the leadership of Zinzendorf the Moravians (so named after the country of origin of some of the first settlers) developed their own form of piety that drew from many different sources including Lutheranism, German Pietism, medieval mysticism, and the traditions of the ancient Unitas Fratrum. Central to their ideas was a personal surrender to Christ whose suffering and death on the cross was to touch the heart of every Christian. Within a few years, Moravians founded Christian communities in Europe and America and started mission stations in distant corners of the globe.
Interest in Eastern Europe, and more specifically in Russia, among Zinzendorf and other Moravians can be traced back to the 1730s. Zinzendorf sent David Nitschmann to St. Petersburg in 1735 to make inquiries concerning Russia: “What does it look like there? What can

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