Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy

Eastern Settlement - The Johann Bartsch Story

By the eighteenth century the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while nominally independent, was effectively a protectorate of the Russian Empire. After tolerating years of distracting and costly civil unrest aroused by factions striving for true independence, the Russian crown finally grew impatient with the Commonwealth. In 1772 Russia forcibly partitioned the Commonwealth and distributed much of the vast territory it encompassed among Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Corresponding to this geo-political upheaval there began an era of socio-economic disruption and hardship for the Netherlandic Mennonites who had settled in the Commonwealth and thrived for two centuries. After the partition, most Mennonites became subjects of the Prussian crown. Soon the crown restricted them from acquiring new land for their burgeoning populations. Taxes climbed to pay for military exemptions and religious freedom. Gradually the cornerstone of their culture, the Dutch language, languished, replaced in their homes by Low German and in their churches by High German. For the second time since the days of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands this independent and resourceful cultural group began to seek opportunities farther afield.

About a decade after the partition an emissary named Georg von Trappe, representing the Russian crown, visited the Mennonite Churches in Danzig on a mission to recruit settlers for a project to populate the unoccupied farmlands of South Russia, comprised of the territory in eastern Ukraine, at that time under the control of Tsarist Russia. There was tremendous interest among the Mennonites, who proposed a fact-finding initiative to explore the opportunity in more detail. The Mennonite congregations deputized two representatives to proceed to the South Russian territory and evaluate the offer. These men were Johann Bartsch and Jacob Hoeppner.

In 1786 when the two deputies planned their journey to Russia Bartsch was a twenty-nine-year-old married man who operated a small farm and a dairy in the Danzig area. He was a son of Jacob Bartsch and Christina Philipsen. His wife, Susanna Lammerts, three years younger than Johann, was a daughter of Jacob Lammerts and Susanna von Niessen. Johann and Susanna were my sixth great grandparents.

Bartsch and Hoeppner set off for the eastern territories of Ukraine in October 1786, charged with scouting the land on offer and negotiating terms for a proposed settlement. They were hopeful they might also intercept Catherine the Great, rumored to be planning a journey to the Crimea in Spring 1787. An audience with the Tsarina would potentially lend royal assurance to terms the deputies might negotiate.

The first stage of their journey was by ship on the Baltic Sea from Danzig to Riga. Riga, now a major city in the Republic of Latvia, was formerly a city in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Swedish crown captured the city early in the seventeenth century and it remained part of the Swedish Empire for a century. The Russian Empire captured Riga in 1710, and it was still a Russian Baltic outpost when the deputies passed through it in 1786. In early November when they arrived in Riga, winter had set in. After arriving in Riga Bartsch wrote a letter to his wife, Susanna. In it he tells her of their eight-day voyage, high winds, and dangerous weather. The crossing must have been harrowing because he admits his relief that the stormy seas caused no casualties. He tells her that the Russians are paying for travel expenses on a timely basis, enabling them to continue their trip without delay. He encourages her efforts to manage their farm and raise their children. Genealogical records make it clear that the couple had three daughters, Susanna, Maria, and Sara. However, in his letter he also refers to his young son.

Their destination was Kherson at the mouth of the Dnieper River on the Black Sea, north of the Crimea and on the route Catherine's entourage would take. The deputies would travel overland across the snow-covered steppe to reach Kherson, a distance from Riga of 1,500 km. The first leg of the overland journey took them 500 km to Dubrovna (in current day Belarus) where they arrived at the end of November.

In Dubrovna Bartsch wrote again to Susanna. He tells her that the previous overland journey took twelve days, a good pace for travel by sleigh through heavy snow. The party was all healthy. He mentions that, while travel monies are flowing regularly as promised, the quality of the food they can buy is not of the high caliber to which they are accustomed, and the prices are high. He tells her that there is exciting potential to make money by producing superior quality produce, for which attractive prices can be set. He encourages her again to take care of the children, tells her not to favor the older ones over the younger ones, and curiously, reminds her that they have the children together. He then tells her that he regards the way she treats the youngest child (their son) as a personal favor to himself. Bartsch does not reveal the meaning underlying his words of concern for the boy.

From Dubrovna the deputies went to Kremenchug (in current day Ukraine), a city southeast of Kyiv on the Dnieper River. From there the last leg of the trip took them south to Kherson, bypassing the westward bend of the river, unaware that the land situated at the bend would one day host the first Mennonite settlement in South Russia. They stayed in Kherson for the balance of the winter.

During their time in Kherson the deputies stayed at the headquarters of Grigory Potemkin, Governor General of the vast southern steppe region through which Bartsch and Hoeppner had recently travelled. One of Potemkin's delegates served as their guide during the winter months, helping them inspect a range of potential settlement sites in the vicinity of Kherson and in the Crimean Peninsula. They chose a site on crown land near Beryslav, 65 km to the east of Kherson on the west bank of the Dnieper River.

The deputies favored this site because it had ample space for expansion as the population grew. It was near ports and built-up population centers, providing markets and trade

opportunities to support the commercial activities of the settlers. The river would support a fishery.

Having established the specific land on offer to the Mennonites, it now fell to Bartsch and Hoeppner to set the terms under which they would agree to take the proposal back to Danzig for consideration and approval. First, they confirmed existing elements of the Russian offer, including tax exemptions, loan terms and provision of seed grain. To this they added other important terms, the first among them being a stout exemption from military service and other duties in furtherance of military activities. Other terms stipulated specific lands to be set aside for the settlers' exclusive use for grazing and timber harvesting. Demonstrating remarkable economic insight, they also stipulated rights to build factories and other commercial buildings, to engage freely in commerce throughout the region and to participate in trade associations and guilds. Finally, they demanded timber for houses and flour mills, along with millstones.

The deputies submitted these terms to Potemkin for approval, but Catherine's royal tour, for which Potemkin was preparing, took precedence and the deputies had to wait for a reply. In Spring 1787 Catherine arrived in Kremenchug where attendants formally introduced Bartsch and Hoeppner to her. They must have made a favorable impression because she invited them to accompany her tour of the Crimea. They could not refuse the royal invitation, particularly as they were seeking to negotiate generous terms for the proposed settlement. They soon found themselves participating in the entourage. For the next seven weeks Bartsch and Hoeppner toured the Crimea, eventually returning to Kremenchug. There they received Potemkin's agreement to their proposed terms. To Potemkin's annoyance they next requested an audience with the Crown in St. Petersburg to solicit royal sanction for the agreement. Potemkin resisted but the deputies were persuasive.

By September, Bartsch and Hoeppner were in St. Petersburg where they received the coveted royal decree approving the agreement arranged with Potemkin. While they remained there Hoeppner had time to recover from a leg injury received during the trip to St. Petersburg. At one point in the journey their stagecoach flew off the roadway, out of control, and rolled over. Hoeppner broke his leg and suffered in pain for the balance of the trip.

Bartsch wrote to Susanna during his stay in St. Petersburg. In this letter we learn that during the past winter he froze all his toes. He says he was quite ill and indicates that at times he was delirious. He does not go into further detail except to wonder how such a thing could happen. Fortunately, he recovered satisfactorily. He goes on to remark that the prices of inferior quality butter and cheese are extremely high where they are. In closing he tells her they are planning to travel back to Danzig overland and, anticipating they would be leaving soon, says he does not expect to send any further correspondence.

With the royal edict in hand, the deputies set out on their return journey to Danzig, by way of Riga and Warsaw. In Riga they encountered a group of Mennonite settlers stranded and without finances. This was a surprise because the terms of settlement were still in the

possession of the deputies and not public knowledge. Von Trappe, who was with the deputies, directed this group to Russian authorities who could lend them assistance. Bartsch took the opportunity to write one last letter home.

His letter contains a curious comment. He warns her against paying attention to rumormongers who might spread lies about unfortunate incidents that have delayed the deputies. He does not refute the notion of misfortunes but instead says that only certain well-informed people can speak knowledgeably about these things. He says nothing further in this letter and his meaning is open to speculation. He could be referring to the advance party of settlers although this encounter does not seem like a misfortune. It indicates the goodwill of the Russian authorities to aid a preemptive settlement initiative before the proposal has reached the Mennonite community in Danzig. It might be that Bartsch has in mind the entirety of the emigration enterprise and a wariness that news of the project's progress might have become known to Danzig authorities. They were certainly not in favor of Mennonites leaving the city. Alternatively, he might be referring to special compensation arrangements made for the deputies and his concern that news of this has become public prematurely, leading to animosity.

Bartsch and Hoeppner received healthy compensation for their work to secure a settlement agreement and for the next stage of the undertaking, involving continued leadership of the Mennonite community embarking for Russia. Although officials announced this remuneration arrangement in Danzig along with the terms of the settlement agreement, it helped to inflame jealousy, division, and discontent in the new settlement when the early years turned out to be more challenging than the settlers envisioned. Under the terms of the compensation agreement the deputies were each given a flour mill with a fifteen-year period to repay the original construction costs, private pastureland not given to other settlers, the right to operate a store and bakery along with financial incentives to establish these commercial enterprises, brewing rights for beer and vinegar, and, finally, a waiver of requirements to repay loans for travel and homesteading expenses.

The deputies arrived back in Danzig around the end of October 1787. Bartsch discovered that Susanna had managed to keep the dairy running smoothly, the cows milked, sales maintained and the family healthy. The Mennonite community received the news about the settlement proposal with excitement. Strong resistance raised by the Danzig authorities to defy the emigration initiative did little to stop families from enlisting in the project. Emigrants required permission from the Prussian crown to leave the territory. Authorities granted this grudgingly following pressure from the Russian crown. They imposed a difficult stipulation, however, denying permission to landowners. Consequently, the first wave of colonists was comprised of laborers and tradespeople with limited means and little capital.

There has been speculation about the reason that Johann Bartsch chose to emigrate. He was already relatively successful in the Danzig area. However, the circumstances imply that he was not a landowner and only rented the farm he operated. Joining the new settlement was his

opportunity to finally own land, and the additional incentives granted to the deputies would have been very enticing.

In March 1788, the first group of emigrant families set out for the new settlement. Hoeppner and his family were members of this group. Bartsch and his family followed with another group of settlers in November. The route taken was usually overland. The travelers went through Riga, stopping at length to rest their animals, and then on to Dubrovna. Dubrovna was the winter stopover point at which the settlers congregated to await the Spring thaw and suitable conditions to continue the journey.

Initial experiences were good. The people were well housed and in Riga they received transportation reimbursements and food allowances on time, as expected. During the stay in Dubrovna the Russian government began to default, foreshadowing challenges and disappointments to come. Payments slowed and amounts were less overall than agreed. It took years before the Russian government paid all the promised expenses.

In Spring 1789 Hoeppner took a group of men to Beryslav to take possession of the settlement lands and receive the construction materials that the settlement agreement had promised. Potemkin intercepted them in Kremenchug with the astounding news that the settlement territory was no longer safe due to open hostilities with the Turks. He advised them to inspect a settlement area on land he possessed farther upriver around the town of Chortitza. It seems clear that Potemkin fabricated this rationale as part of a scheme to settle the Mennonites on his own land rather than crown land in the expectation of reimbursement from the Russian government. Potemkin died unexpectedly in 1791 and took his motives with him. Whatever the truth was, Hoeppner had no choice but to travel back upriver to the designated region.

In Chortitza Hoeppner found a deeply wooded steppe, difficult to clear, with less fertile soil than Beryslav. Villages that had existed in the past were now only the flattened remnants of sites vacated by earlier inhabitants forced to leave. The location was inferior for commercial reasons because of the long distance to ports on the Black Sea. Potemkin was insistent that this would be the location of their new settlement.

When the news of the relocated settlement reached the main party of settlers heading south from Dubrovna the reaction was bitter and emotional. They accused Bartsch and Hoeppner of exchanging the premium settlement land in Beryslav for the Chortitza wasteland and pocketing the profits. The earliest days of the new settlement were rancorous and divisive and yet, the situation would get worse.

Families that shipped their possessions down the Dnieper river on hired barges often discovered that, if thieves had not taken the property en route, what they received at the end of their journey was damaged or destroyed. Over the course of the winter a dozen young couples had formed, and these people were anxious to be married. However, at the beginning there were no church officials to administer the nuptials, adding to the general climate of frustration. The need for shelter took precedence for the new community. For this the settlers

were reliant on timber promised by the Russian government. Following the pattern already seen, timber supplies trickled in slowly, arriving late and damaged. Thieves stole timber supplies that reached the settlement unless the settlers guarded them diligently.

It was in these circumstances that Bartsch established his new home. He settled temporarily in a vacant house standing on the Island of Chortitza, just east of Chortitza village where the Dnieper widens before heading west on its way to the sea. He was not there long before he moved to a permanent homestead in the village of Rosenthal. For Bartsch the early years became more difficult when his wife, Susanna, died in 1790. Bartsch remarried not long after this. His second wife was Magdalena Lammerts, the younger sister of Susanna. There is no trace in any census records of the young son he referred to in his letters to Susanna.

The Russian government assigned formal oversight of the settlers to a series of directors stationed far away from the site of the settlement. The directors often found it convenient to delegate their responsibilities to the deputies, Bartsch and Hoeppner. This had the unfortunate result of pitting the settlers against the deputies, adding to the animosities already harbored by them.

If the hardships and isolation experienced by the early settlers was not enough for them to endure, along with their general suspicion of the deputies, dissatisfaction with church leadership made their fractious circumstances worse. There were good leaders, but also others who were divisive and self-serving. In addition, while the settlers had begun their mission as a unified congregation, blending the traditional Flemish and Frisian sects of the Mennonite church, fracture lines began to emerge. The cause of this was partly the poor ministerial choices made by church officers in Danzig, who did not select fairly and rationally the representatives of the two sects in the unified congregation ministry. Fragmentation resulted. This was not a happy community.

This festering discontent continued for years. Most settlers, in an alliance led by Elder David Epp, were in constant conflict with the deputies. Bartsch and Hoeppner had few allies. The frustrated settlers made rash accusations that the deputies had mismanaged the settlement and skimmed from the monies paid out by the Russian authorities. Bartsch and Hoeppner defended themselves vigorously, calling their accusers Munsterites (in reference to the radical reform movement of the sixteenth century that attempted to take control of the city of Munster) and making pointed accusations against David Epp.

The community looked to the church in Danzig to resolve the conflict. In response the Church sent two officials on the arduous journey to investigate and broker peace. They were successful in arranging a truce but before long the local church officials exacted revenge by expelling both deputies from membership in the church. This was a devastating punishment. The survival of a family in this foreign outpost required a supportive community.

Bartsch begged forgiveness, admitted to errors of judgment and wrongdoing, and won reinstatement of his church membership. The retribution of the church was not yet complete,

however. As a condition of his re-admittance the church forced Bartsch to give up his prized musical instruments, the rationale being that to make music was contradictory to proper religious behavior.

The Mennonite settlement at Chortitza prospered and grew. Bartsch and his family were also successful after surviving the tempestuous early days. In time the Mennonite community in Russia developed a more generous and compassionate view of the remarkable contributions and sacrifices made by the deputies. In the years following their deaths the community erected a pair of monuments to honor both men. Today these monuments stand in Steinbach Manitoba.

A final comment on genealogy

Maria de Veer (born 1830), my great-great-great-grandmother, was a great-granddaughter of Johann Bartsch and Susanna Lammerts. Maria had an auspicious family lineage. Not only was she a descendant of Deputy Bartsch, but she was also a descendant of the de Veer commercial dynasty based in Amsterdam. The de Veer ancestors had settled in Danzig in the last decades of the sixteenth century to manage the Danzig operation of the family's trading business. Maria's ancestor, Gysbert de Veer (born 1640), had married Katarina von Roy (born 1639), a granddaughter of West Prussian aristocrat Anthonius von Roy (born about 1560). Anthonius' wife, Gertrud, was a daughter of Georg Marun (born about 1545), a successful businessman based in Konigsberg. Another of Maria de Veer's ancestors, Jacob Harnasveger (born about 1480), had been an infamous Protestant reformer, arrested in connection with the 1534 reformist plot to overthrow the Roman Catholic administrative council of Amsterdam. For his crimes, the court sentenced him to a two-year expulsion from Amsterdam, after which he returned to raise his family and continue his trade as an armorer.

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