Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy

Eastern Vision - The Peter Epp Story



I have clear memories of my great grandmother Helena Fast. I was a youngster, not even school age and she was the oldest person I knew. She spoke a language I did not understand but we established common ground from the outset. She made cookies and I ate them.

I remember her small white house in Laird, Saskatchewan as clearly as if I were standing there now. It was a little house at the top of a huge garden. There was a rain barrel by the back door and an outhouse in the yard. The house was too small to have space for a bathroom. I did not realize there was no indoor plumbing. I was intrigued to learn that, in the old days, the older boys would go out on Halloween night, sneaking through the dark, to tip over the outhouses in the village. I also learned that the boys would hoist stray cows onto the roofs of houses. I do not know how much of this is true, but when you are four or five years old it all seems plausible.

I remember only three rooms in the house. The kitchen had a wood stove and a table with chairs. There was always something cooking there. Helena slept in a tiny back bedroom. Her youngest daughter, Dora, lived with her so I suppose she had a room too. And there was the living room. All the adults sat there and talked in Low German to let Helena follow the conversation. I never spoke or understood that language, but I developed an ear for it. As infrequently as I hear it today, I can still recognize it.

I remember the village. Whenever we visited Laird, we would always walk to the grocery store where Dora worked to pick up farmer sausage. There was also a Rogers Syrup pail of cracklings to take back. That was important for frying potatoes. We would wander the gravel roads and go back to the house for dinner.

Helena died in 1962 at the age of eighty-four. She lived a long, eventful life. Born in Russia to Heinrich Epp and Margaretha Rempel, Helena came to Canada as a young teenager in 1892. Fourteen is a difficult age for a child to be uprooted from her home, taken away from everything she has ever known, and moved to a country an unimaginable distance away. At the age of nineteen she married Jacob Fast and together they raised fifteen children. Jacob died at the onset of the Second World War and Helena was a widow for the last 23 years of her life.

At the time of Helena's emigration Mennonites had been living in settlements along the Dnieper River in eastern Ukraine for a century. This territory was part of Tsarist Russia at that time.

Helena's great-great-grandfather, Peter Epp, was among the earliest Mennonites migrating from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to settle in Chortitza, Russia at the end of the eighteenth century. His grandfather, Elder Peter Epp, played a significant role in

encouraging and enabling the mobilization of the Danzig Mennonite community for this transformative undertaking. I wonder if Helena understood the influence her ancestor had in establishing the settlement of Dutch Mennonites in the Chortitza Colony.

Prior to this migration to Russia, Dutch Mennonites had lived for more than two hundred years in the greater Danzig region of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For centuries Danzig had been an important commercial center and trading hub on the Baltic Coast. The Dutch knew the sea route from Amsterdam to Danzig well, having operated large scale commercial trading businesses along the Baltic coast since the fifteenth century or earlier. Mennonites settled in Danzig beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, leaving behind the Inquisition and religious persecution.

Danzig in the mid-1500s was a safe place for the Mennonites to live. They had a reputation for industriousness and commercial acumen that granted them limited acceptance. Danzig's Lutherans and Catholics viewed the Mennonites with a degree of suspicion because of past violent political events that were not forgotten. In 1534 radical Anabaptist extremists had attempted to overthrow the civic government of Amsterdam. This colored the perspective of Danzig's Lutherans and Catholics. The Danzig city officials permitted the Mennonites to practice their religion and to operate businesses and farms, but with restrictions. Most Danzig guilds barred Mennonites from entry and city officials would not usually permit Mennonites to set up households within the city walls. Therefore, they settled in suburban villages such as Schottland and Neugarten and arranged their social lives around closed communities, speaking their own language and preventing intermarriage. In their homes and churches, the Mennonites spoke Dutch and in the larger community they spoke Low German, at the time a universal language of commerce. Since a principle of their beliefs was that they would not swear oaths to state governments, they were excluded from the right to become citizens of Danzig. Adherence to their principles cost them social, political, and economic opportunities but helped to preserve unique customs, religious beliefs and cultural attributes brought from the Netherlands.

By the late eighteenth century political changes in the region made daily life more challenging. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was nominally independent but in practical terms was a vassal state of Russia with a malleable King, Augustus III, who was easily controlled by the Russian crown. When Augustus died in 1763 his successor leaned toward more independence. Of additional concern to the Russians was the Polish nobility's struggle for greater influence and control over the governance of the Commonwealth. The constant unrest initiated a civil war. For Russia, the Commonwealth was a costly distraction when there were more important international challenges to deal with. In 1770 Frederick II, the Emperor of Prussia, proposed a partitioning of the Commonwealth with the twin objectives of reducing the anarchy there and calming the contentious relationships of the Russian, Austrian and Prussian empires through strategic territorial expansion. The proposal was enacted in 1772 with the dividing of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Eventually most Dutch Mennonites found themselves under the rule of Prussia.

Until then the Mennonite communities had thrived, their populations had risen, and their land holdings had expanded. Historically they were granted exemption from military service. However, The Prussian state began to view this military exemption as unacceptably costly. The military service burden was based on land holdings which, over time, fell on a shrinking base as the land controlled by the exempt Mennonites constantly grew. The political solution was to prohibit Mennonites from acquiring new land. This economic restriction, added to the ever-increasing tax burden levied to purchase the military exemption, became difficult for the Mennonite communities to bear.

Social pressure to integrate and assimilate was an additional threat to the Dutch Mennonite way of life. Gradually their use of Dutch at home declined and the more ubiquitous and practical Low German language replaced it. Cessation of Dutch in religious services had been resisted by Elders for years, fearing the erosion of their culture. After the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, church officials gradually replaced Dutch in Church services with High German, the language encouraged by the Prussian crown. In fact, Peter Epp was the last Elder to switch to German. The right of the Mennonites to practice their own religion also became increasingly costly, with onerous taxes charged and transferred to Lutheran church coffers.

A solution to these economic and social problems emerged. Since the seventeenth century Imperial Russia had possessed large tracts of land in eastern Ukraine. After forcefully removing the native Cossacks from these lands, the government welcomed industrious settlers to this vast uninhabited region with offers of generous land incentives and religious freedom. The Mennonite communities in Prussia took note.

Georg von Trappe was an emissary selected by Russian authorities to recruit settlers from Prussia. Despite the restrictions the Prussian government imposed on their Mennonite citizens, it had no economic desire to lose subjects to Russia. Von Trappe had to be circumspect in his recruiting efforts to avoid igniting an international political incident. The convenient loophole he exploited was that in the late 1780s Danzig was not yet under the control of the Prussian Crown. While Prussian officials might resist his efforts, they could not stop him. Von Trappe went to Danzig.

Peter Epp, born in 1725 to Peter Epp and Anna Claassen, was elected Elder of the Danzig Flemish Church in 1779, after serving as a deacon in 1757 and a minister in the rural community of Neuenhuben since 1758. Epp was the first minister of rural origin to be elevated to this important position in the senior Danzig Church. His predecessor, Hans von Steen, had been the Elder from 1754 until his health failed and he resigned in 1779, lacking the capacity to do his work. Von Steen had spent his career advocating for his congregation in representations to the Danzig administrative council and guarding jealously the use of Dutch to protect the congregation from assimilation and integration. Now the welfare of the congregation was in Epp's hands.

In 1786 von Trappe presented his immigration proposal to Elder Peter Epp. Epp had already foreseen that there was no future for his congregation in Prussia. Economic restrictions and encroaching integration were clear threats. He endorsed the project at once. The invitation extended by Catherine II of Russia was read in the Mennonite Churches of Danzig in 1786. Upon learning of this the Danzig city officials summoned Epp and his counterpart in the Frisian Church, Isaac Stobbe, to appear before Council. The Council rebuked the two Elders strongly and ordered them to cease communicating with the Russian emissaries.

Clandestine discussions continued. Epp met with his congregants and this group devised a proposal to send delegates to Russia to scout the land and negotiate terms to bring back to the Mennonite congregations in Danzig. The Mennonites made their proposal to von Trappe, and he accepted. Two delegates made the trip to Russia in 1786, accompanying a group of Lutheran settlers. Johann Bartsch represented the Frisian congregation and Jacob Hoeppner represented the Flemish congregation.

Bartsch and Hoeppner returned to Danzig in 1787 with an offer for settlement they had negotiated with the Russian crown. Von Trappe appealed to Epp to allow the reading of the offer in church. Epp declined, adhering to the strict orders of the Danzig officials. No doubt he was reluctant to exacerbate the sensitivities of the Danzig Council and increase the risk that authorities would find a way to terminate the emigration initiative. Instead, he permitted von Trappe to distribute offer documents outside the church after a service.

The offer was good. It gave the settlers land, funds for travel, capital and materials for building, administrative autonomy, religious freedom, and a coveted exemption from military service. Von Trappe's recruitment drive was successful, and eventually 228 prospective settler households enlisted for the first wave of migration. Exit visas were required by the prospective emigrants, although some families risked leaving Prussia without visas. In June 1788 the Prussian government reluctantly issued formal permission for the settlers to emigrate. While this formality clarified any ambiguities for emigrants, it applied only to landless householders. This constraint proved to be a significant problem even before the settlers reached their destination.

Emigrants wintering in Dubrovno, Russia in 1788-1789 soon found themselves with twelve couples engaged to be married and no church officials to conduct the ceremonies. At that time all the Danzig church officials were landowners and thus ineligible for emigration. The Russian immigrants implored the Danzig church officials to send an elder to help organize the Russian church.

For much of their history the Mennonites held divided perspectives leading to longstanding fragmentation into several disparate groups, the two major ones being the Flemish and Frisian congregations. The Russian crown had suggested they preferred a single unified church. To that end the Russian settlers had committed to establish a single church including both Flemish and Frisian congregants. The pressure to honor this agreement, to establish a stable church in the

Russian settlement and to forestall promiscuous acts by betrothed young people was substantial. In February 1789 Peter Epp declared his willingness to set out in Spring to join the settlers.

Epp's health was in decline, and he fell seriously ill before his Spring departure. Travel was impossible for him. Instead, the Danzig church officials issued a request to the Russian congregation to provide a list of ministerial candidates from which the Danzig church could appoint deacons and ministers.

The settlers complied, furnishing a list of candidates encompassing Flemish and Frisian congregants. However, the Flemish church officials in receipt of the list rebuffed the Frisian candidates, appointing only Flemish members. This fateful decision led to immediate discord because the settlers naturally felt both congregations deserved fair representation in their new ministerial council. Once again, the settlers appealed to Danzig for an Elder to join them and help organize church affairs.

In May 1789 Peter Epp, on the mend, once again agreed to travel to Russia. August 4 was set as the date of departure. A wagon was built and provisioned for the journey. Four families made plans to accompany Epp. Two days before departing Epp gave a farewell sermon. He fell ill the next day and became bedridden until his death in November. Danzig church officials speedily granted the Russian settlers the authority to elect and ordain an elder from among their ministers. Left to themselves, the settlers established separate Flemish and Frisian congregations.

Peter Epp did not live to see the new settlement of Chortitza. His son, Heinrich, and his grandson, Peter, settled there and his descendants lived there for a century before coming to Canada.

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