

Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy

The Lehn Diaries: Historical Context

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The Lehn Diaries are a series of journals maintained by Christoph Lehn and several generations of his descendants over the course of more than two centuries. I obtained a copy of the transcribed, translated diaries from Helen (Lane) Fast. The diaries are a valuable source of Lehn family genealogical information. In addition, they are much more than that, containing firsthand insights related to major political events that shaped the destiny of the Mennonite community as well as perspectives about social standards and discipline, Mennonite Church administrative events, practical challenges facing the community and interesting observations about some of my ancestors. I have taken excerpts from the diaries, in chronological sequence, paraphrased them and recast them in a political, social, and genealogical (as they relate to my own genealogy) context for the period spanning the Mennonite time in Danzig through to the migrations to Russia.

1679. Christoph Lehn is born in Danzig.

Christoph authored the original diary, upon which succeeding generations built.

1709. There is a great plague in Danzig and the surrounding territory. Hundreds of Mennonites die and in total about 24,000 people in and around Danzig die.

This refers to the Great Northern War plague outbreak that spread through Europe during the period 1700 – 1721, with the most severe period falling between 1708 and 1712. It reached Danzig in 1709. The city officials were keen to preserve the reputation of Danzig as a vital international trading hub and did their best initially to downplay the impact of the plague. However, their slow response permitted the disease to spread and nearly half the population was taken before the plague receded.

The Great Northern War was a struggle over control of the Baltic region in northern Europe. Sweden controlled much of the Baltic by the end of the 17th century. In 1697 Charles XII was not yet fifteen years of age when he ascended to the throne of Sweden on the death of his father. To steal control of the Baltic from the young, inexperienced king, Russia, Poland, and Denmark combined to plot a strategy to strengthen themselves at the expense of Sweden. Charles XII, not waiting to be attacked, invaded Denmark in 1700, bringing about the two-decade war. Hostilities ended in 1718 with the death of Charles XII by musket ball, but the peace was formalized in 1721 by treaty. In the end Swedish influence in the Baltic region declined. Constant war along with internal political squabbling weakened the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, creating an unstable situation that Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia, used to advantage. He was instrumental in facilitating and backing a new constitution enabling the Commonwealth to stabilize its military and financial base and permitting Russian hegemony to flourish. This political situation would have repercussions for Danzig a few years later in the War of the Polish Succession.

1712. Christoph Lehn is baptized in Amsterdam.

Linda Dyck-Tiessen, in her essay “Mennonites in Danzig: Dutch Origin and Ties”, says that it was common in the 17th and 18th centuries for wealthier members of the Danzig Mennonite community to send their children to Amsterdam for education and religious instruction, following which they would be baptized there before returning to Danzig. Christoph might have been in such a position but there are some unique aspects to his situation. The

diary indicates he was married in 1700 and then remarried in 1706. Neither marriage is recorded in the Danzig Church Book. Perhaps he was married in Amsterdam both times. His baptism is not recorded in the Danzig records either, even though Amsterdam baptisms are often noted in these records.

24 June 1725. Dirk Janssen is elected elder of the Danzig Church in Amsterdam, and he departs for the Netherlands the following September.

Nanne van der Zipp published an article in 1955 that can be found today in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online where he explains that the Old Flemish congregation in Amsterdam had close ties with what had become essentially the mother church in Danzig and confirms that Janssen had been sent to Amsterdam where he served as elder for eight years.

4 November 1725. A Danzig Church delegation meets with Konigsberg Church deacon Jan Spronk in Konigsberg to reprimand him for wearing a Japanese style dressing gown and an otter muff, along with a powdered wig.

27 December 1725. Hans Claassen is banned from the congregation for the sin of homosexuality.

February 1728. A delegation of church officials visits Konigsberg. Among them is Hans Sawatzky, a minister from the Marienburg Werder congregation. Their purpose is to conduct an election for new church leaders in Konigsberg. However, they also make a point of meeting once more with deacon Jan Spronk who has found himself in trouble again. The faults this time are many. He is accused of using excessive silverware at the feast table for daughter's wedding. Further, he has allowed congregants to attend church services at the neighboring Lutheran Church, he uses laces and ties in place of buckles on his shoes, he uses only fancy walking sticks with silver buttons and, finally, he permits men's coats to sport pockets on the outside.

Hans Sawatzky is my eighth great-grandfather.

Although this is Christoph Lehn's diary, Jacob Nehm is also contributing to the entries. Nehm was one of the delegates in the trip described above and this appears to be a firsthand account of the meeting with Spronk written by Nehm.

1730. Hendrick Wilke complains that having been forced to serve as a preacher, he cannot make ends meet at his bakery because of church related time commitments. It is agreed that the church treasury will provide him with a stipend to pay his son to work at the bakery. This arrangement is settled reluctantly by the church officials who are not particularly sympathetic to Wilke's complaint. Preachers are generally unpaid for their time and effort.

14 May 1733. Clarity is given regarding the Church's rules for corporeal punishment. The case in point is the confusion between hired hands and apprentices. It seems that a master is entitled to strike his apprentice, but a farmer is not permitted to strike his hired hand. The clarification handed down is that in the case of a farm hand holding a three-year contract with the farmer, this being like an apprenticeship arrangement, the farmer can indeed strike the farm hand, provided the punishment occurs within the period of the contract. On the other hand, if the farm hand is also a member of the Mennonite Church, then the farmer cannot strike him under any circumstance.

5 June 1733. Dirk Jansen comes to visit from Amsterdam. Among the reasons for his trip is his desire to return to Danzig. On 5 July, a decision is made to formally request that Dirk be permitted to return home to Danzig, on the basis that the Amsterdam church is gradually declining as members of the congregation migrate to Danzig. Thereafter Dirk returns to Amsterdam. On 6 October Dirk moves back to Danzig permanently.

1734. Danzig is heavily bombarded by Russian military forces in a siege. Eventually the Russians withdraw.

For centuries Danzig was a center for international commerce, and it was a privileged city in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth established in 1569.

While the Commonwealth was nominally a sovereign state, it had become a protectorate of Russia following the Great Northern War. When the King of Poland, Augustus II, a Saxon, died of alcohol poisoning in 1733, Russia quickly rallied to support the succession of his son Frederick Augustus to the throne, aiming to maintain political control over the Commonwealth. However, in Warsaw the Polish Parliament supported the election of a Pole, Stanislaus, to the throne. Stanislaus and the parliament aspired for a more independent Commonwealth, and they were supported by France, which had its own geopolitical reasons for reducing Russia's hold over Poland. Russia immediately sent an army to Warsaw to resolve this dispute by force. Stanislaus and key members of the parliamentary assembly fled to Danzig with Russian troops in pursuit. In February 1734 Danzig was encircled by Russian forces and the city fell at the end of June. Mere days earlier Stanislaus escaped the city in the guise of a peasant. The Russian army suffered 8,000 casualties during the siege and Danzig was forced to make reparations, after which the Russians withdrew. Frederick Augustus took the throne as Augustus III.

8 September 1752. Christoph Lehn's son Simeon has now become the diarist. On this day Jacob Wiens is expelled from the congregation for molesting Elske H.

27 January 1754. Jacob Epp, being so drunk that he fell from his wagon, is expelled from the congregation.

20 October 1754. Simeon Lehn's brother Friedrich is expelled from the congregation due to his disorderly lifestyle.

16 November 1755. Simeon lists a series of rather mundane expulsions and readmittances in the diary. There were a few more interesting entries among these. On this day Jacob Mehl is reprimanded for permitting dancing at his daughter's wedding. This foreshadows a more severe dancing situation a few years later.

1756. Around Easter the Russians once again invade Danzig. Citizens living outside the walls of the city flee to the city. The city defenses hold, and the Russians depart, but for a ten-year period they return every winter. During the constant invasions, inflation runs rampant, and prices rise severely. Fortunately trade and commerce boom at the same time and people survive the price pressures. By 1768 the economy has slowed but prices have not fallen, and many people become impoverished.

In 1756 the Seven Years War began in Europe with a Prussian-British alliance facing a French-Russian-Austrian-Saxon alliance. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not a protagonist, but as a vast territory within the geographic scope of the war it was not immune to military occupation. In particular, because of the Commonwealth's fealty to Russia, the Russian military stalked the lands of the Commonwealth throughout the war. Danzig was a major population center and obviously a frequent host of Russian troops. No doubt the economic phenomena witnessed by the diarist were caused by the war.

17 May 1756. Johann Niedorf is expelled from the congregation for having sex with Anna Dijk. There is no indication of Anna's fate.

27 July 1756. Jacob Janzen is expelled from the congregation for striking an unnamed individual. On 12 September he is readmitted.

30 January 1763. Simeon Lehn's son Jacob has now taken the role of diarist. On this day Lennert Janssen and Hendrich Wieb are brought before the church officials because they have been to a tavern with Hendrich's wife, daughter and one of the daughter's female friends, whereupon Lennert has convinced the two younger women to dance with him. Prior to the hearing the women have all apologized for being led astray and no further action is taken against them or Hendrich. Lennert, however, is expelled from the congregation because of his immoral life and behavior.

10 February 1763. The wife of Anton Kouwenhoven is expelled from the congregation for having sex with a Russian officer. On 6 March she is readmitted.

27 February 1763. The wife of Daniel Spenz is expelled from the congregation for drunkenness.

20 March 1763. Kornelius Janzen is expelled from the congregation for drunkenness. Apparently, he is even drunk at his hearing with the church officials.

1 May 1763. Hans Ludwig is expelled from the congregation for beating his wife.

15 March 1770. A passionate dispute arises because Heinrich Focking applies to the Danzig governing officials to marry his wife's sister. Permission is granted. Church officials disagree with this practice and challenge the decision. The mayor Danzig eventually rules in favor of the marriage and instructs church officials to respect the decision.

29 June 1770. A Prussian Colonel with a Light Cavalry force arrives and demands money from the inhabitants of the area. It appears his main objective is the conscription of Prussian citizens, which he proceeds to do.

In the years following the Seven Years War, Russia tightened its grip on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, after the malleable Saxon King Augustus III died in 1763, his successor leaned toward more independence. Of additional concern 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, including conflict with the Ottoman Empire. 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 but as early as 1770 the emboldened Frederick II was comfortable sending his armies to traverse the Commonwealth at leisure. W.O. Henderson reports that in 1770 five thousand Prussian troops entered the Danzig territory and camped in the outskirts, claiming to be in search of army deserters.

14 October 1770. The Danzig city council declares this day a universal day of prayer and repentance. Peter Epp is recognized for the wonderful sermon he delivers today.

Peter Epp is my seventh great-grandfather.

1772. The King of Prussia takes control of Polish Prussia including Danzig and environs. The registration of all inhabitants follows. Billeting of Prussian soldiers comes next and excise taxes are levied on staples such as salt and tobacco.

The first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth happened in 1772. However, Danzig remained outside the Prussian partition, although it was a small independent island in the Prussian Empire.

1773. By royal edict new rules and protocols are established. Fire precautions are enacted, salt taxes levied, law courts set up and feast days are declared with rules pertaining to duration. Thanksgiving and certain other holidays are prohibited. The diarist notes that Thanksgiving had been established in 1660 following the liberation of Danzig after the seven-year Swedish siege.

The liberation of Danzig followed the Swedish defeat in the Second Northern War, one of many Baltic wars through the centuries. In this war Sweden attempted to control Danzig over a period of many years beginning around 1655. There was sporadic fighting, and the Swedish army invested the countryside around Danzig with troops, temporarily closing the Port of Danzig,

although early in the conflict the Dutch, allied with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, freed the port and re-opened trade with the Netherlands.

30 March 1777. On the first holiday of Easter the Dutch hymnals are set aside in Ladekop and High German is adopted for signing hymns.

This was the beginning of the end for the use of Dutch in church services and the demise of a key cultural element of the Dutch Mennonite people. High German was the primary language in Prussia and, particularly after the first Partition of Poland in 1772, this had a growing influence on the language spoken by Mennonites. The old customs and old language had been forcefully championed and preserved by Elders such as Hans von Steen. Von Steen lost influence as his health deteriorated and, sadly, vital cultural elements were lost as well.

26 September 1777. Elder Hans Wall dies, and Peter Epp is elected Elder to replace him.

13 March 1780. Shifting ice on the Nogat River is causing flooding in Halbstadt, Gross Mausdorf and other areas. Winter grain is destroyed, mills are wrecked, and houses are swept away. It takes until autumn for the breakout to be contained and repaired.

Horst Gerlach mentions this devastating flood in an article written in 1994. He says the date was 13 March 1781. The Mennonite congregations took up a collection to provide financial relief to the many Mennonites who lost their homes, crops, and livelihood in this disaster.

24 February 1782. Cornelius Claassen is elected Deacon in Ladekop, whereupon he admits to beating a servant. Church officials consider whether he is qualified to serve and decide in his favor. It later turns out to be a poor decision.

13 March 1782. Shifting ice once again causes serious flooding, this time in Krebsfeld. The breakout is repaired by the summer.

22 January 1783. Once more shifting ice causes flooding, this time on the Vistula River. Rosenort is affected. Lehn reports that where he lives in Neuenhuben there is a foot of water in the building.

5 March 1783. The Nogat River floods causing a breakout in the Elbing region near Krebsfeld. This time Lehn has sixteen inches of water in his house.

24 March 1783. There is a general thaw and flooding becomes even worse. Houses are swept away. By May the flood is contained, and the dikes are repaired. Unfortunately, many acres of crops are destroyed in the spring growing season.

Horst Gerlach also mentions this dike breach in 1783 and the ensuing devastation. Once again donations of money and grain were collected to aid the people coping with this flood.

Lehn goes on to describe winter weather patterns from 1784 through 1792.

1787. Catherine the Great of Russia invites Mennonites in the Danzig region to take up land in Russia. Two delegates are selected from the Mennonite community to travel to Russia and inspect the land on offer. These are Johann Bartsch, my sixth great-grandfather, and Jacob Hoepfner. They select land along the Dnieper River not far north of the Crimean Peninsula. They negotiate key rights such as religious freedom, exemption from military service, land grants, cash advances and food and travel allowances.

Catherine's initial invitation dated back to 1763 when she first invited industrious foreigners to settle in her expanding empire. In the 1780s she sought settlers for the Steppes north of the Black Sea. As her search relates to Mennonite populations, she had to be cautious because, pursuant to the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, most of the western lands occupied by Mennonites were under the control of Prussia. Only the Danzig region was within her sphere of influence. Targeting Prussian citizens could lead to political tension.

1788. As many as 1,800 Mennonites move to Russia.

The original group of settlers, totaling 228 families, took up homesteads in the first eight villages of Chortitza. These people arrived in 1789 – 1790. This group was joined by another smaller wave of migration in 1793 – 1795 amounting to 57 families.

28 June 1788. Cornelius Claassen, Deacon of Ladekop, has given in to drunkenness and immorality. Following great deliberation, the Church officials relieve him of his responsibilities as Deacon.

5 July 1789. Elder Peter Epp dies. In May of the next year Jacob de Veer is elected to replace him.

Peter Epp had planned to make the trek to Russia but in the days leading up to his departure he fell critically ill and was unable to continue.

28 March 1793. Danzig surrenders following a siege by Prussian infantry and capitulates to the Prussian crown. There is a brief rebellion by unorganized townspeople who gather on the city walls and fire down upon the Prussian troops entering the city. After six hours the city council finally puts a stop to the uprising.

The second partition of Poland occurred in January 1793 following a period in which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth continued to struggle for independence, leading to further armed conflict. Danzig was ceded to Prussia. Final vestiges of the struggle in Danzig led to a brief siege by the Prussian military, claiming their new territory.

1793. Two deputies from the Mennonite settlement in Russia, Wiebe and von Barga, arrive in Danzig with complaints of mismanagement by Bartsch and Hoepfner and a request for an Elder or Minister to return with them to Russia to help restore calm and confidence among the congregation. Cornelius Reeger and Cornelius Warkentin are appointed to return with the delegates to Russia.

The complaint about Bartsch and Hoepfner, as understood by the diarist in Danzig, is much different from the view of an eyewitness in Russia at the time. The memoir written by Peter Hildebrand explains that the people in the new settlement were tired, frustrated, and disappointed. The land they had agreed to accept was not available due to the risk of hostilities there with armies of the Ottoman Empire, and they were forced to accept rough, rocky land far north of their anticipated destination and further from trading ports. Most of the settlers were poor and for many, the few possessions they had shipped to Russia were stolen or ruined in transit. Cash advances promised by the Russian government were late, sporadic, and less than agreed to. Even building materials were late, of poor quality and of lower quantity than promised. The final straw was the discovery that Bartsch and Hoepfner had received land bonuses for arranging the settlement agreement and orchestrating the migration. Bartsch and Hoepfner were blamed for much of the misfortune and not acknowledged for their roles in establishing the Mennonite community until many years later when monuments were erected in Russia to recognize their achievements. These monuments now stand in Steinbach, Manitoba.

18 April 1793. Reeger and Warkentin arrive in Russia and restore order. Reeger dies while there. Warkentin installs Johann Wiebe and David Epp as Elders for the settlement and then returns to Danzig, arriving on 19 September 1794.

1796. Jacob Lehn, the diarist at this point, moves to Russia. In total 86 families move this year.

In 1796 – 1797 there was a wave of 118 settler families. 86 families settled in the original eight villages of Chortitza, and the remaining 32 families settled in two new villages established in the Chortitza settlement. Jacob's family was among the group of 86 and they settled in the village of Neuenburg.

15 February 1797. The Flemish Mennonite congregation is established in Russia. Heinrich and Peter Epp, sons of Elder Peter Epp, are elected Ministers of

this congregation. Heinrich officiates at the marriage of Jacob Lehn's son Isaac in 1797.

Heinrich is my sixth great-grandfather.

17 November 1797. Catherine the Great dies and her son Paul ascends to the throne of Russia.

1798. David Epp and Gerhard Willms are permitted to travel to St. Petersburg to seek confirmation from Tsar Paul of the Mennonite privileges granted by the crown. The Russian summer is hot and dry, and the crops are poor. An early winter follows with unusually cold temperatures and a large amount of snow. Cattle feed is in short supply and many cattle die over the winter. Lehn goes on to describe the winters through 1815.

27 October 1800. Epp and Willms return from St. Petersburg with the confirmation of privileges they were after.

12 March 1801. Tsar Paul is assassinated, and his son Alexander assumes the throne.

1803. Nearly 200 Mennonite families arrive in Russia, fleeing Prussia because the government has mandated military service. In 1804 another 200 Mennonite families arrive in Russia.

In the period 1803 – 1806 a wave of 365 families moved to the new settlement of Molotschna.

1818. Isaac Lehn has become the diarist at this point. In the week before Pentecost the Tsar, Alexander I, visits the Mennonite settlement at Molotschna.

September 1825. Tsar Alexander I returns to Molotschna for another visit.

The entries that follow outline successive generations of family genealogy. Isaac's great-grandson notes that his father died of Typhus in 1919 and mentions the "reign of terror" conducted by Nester Makhno in the early 20th century. The remainder of the diary recounts family history from the last years they lived in Russia through the early years of settlement in Canada.

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