

Saskatchewan Bergthalers – The Striemer Family

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Christoph Striemer (1783-1871) was likely an itinerant German worker who, in 1811, joined a group of Mennonites migrating from Prussia to the Mennonite settlements in eastern Ukraine.¹ Christoff was in search of land and opportunity but the group with whom he travelled had other urgent concerns. Certainly, acquiring land was important to them too, but they were fleeing the political threats of societal assimilation and military conscription that would violate their most basic principles.

Christoph joined the Mennonite congregation in the “Old Colony” of Chortitza and married a Mennonite woman, Maria Wiens (1796-1863) in 1814.² They lived in the village of Nieder Chortitza. In the 1816 Census they are listed among the landless residents of the village.³ It seems doubtful that their landless situation improved during all the years they lived in the Old Colony.

Maria was born in Ukraine in 1796, the year after her parents, Gerhard Wiens (1769-about 1806) and Aganetha Dyck (1761-1810), immigrated to Ukraine.⁴ Her parents had lived in Ellerwald and belonged to the Elbing-Ellerwald Church in Prussia.⁵

Christoph and Maria had a large family of three daughters and six sons. As their family grew Christoph and Maria faced the typical concern of parents in those days: acquiring land to support the livelihoods of their children as they reached adulthood. By the 1830s the successful, burgeoning Chortitza Settlement was running out of land.

The community found a solution. They acquired land offered by the Russian government in an area northwest of Mariupol, a coastal city on the Sea of Asov. This new settlement, 200 kilometers southeast of Chortitza, was referred to as the Bergthal Settlement by its new residents, naming it after the central village in the area, Bergthal.⁶ In the years after 1836 approximately 150 landless families moved to this new settlement.⁷ The Striemer family was among the earliest new homesteaders, moving to the village of Schoenthal in 1837.⁸ With ample land at reasonable prices their outlook improved greatly.

In 1846 their eldest son, Heinrich Striemer (1817-1905), married Anna Neufeld (1826-1862), whose family had also moved to the Bergthal Settlement.⁹ Anna’s parents were Karl Neufeld (1802-about 1876) and Maria Dyck (1804-1858). Karl emigrated from Prussia, arriving in the Chortitza Settlement after 1816. Maria was born in Chortitza.

Records of Maria's ancestors date as far back as the 17th century, documenting their membership in the Danzig Flemish Mennonite congregation.

It seems unlikely that Heinrich and Anna ever owned a farm; existing records all indicate that he was a laborer.¹⁰ They had a large family, with eight children born before Anna died in 1862, at the age of thirty-six. Their youngest child, Johann Striemer (1859-1944), was just 2 years old when his mother passed away. In later years he would assume a leadership role in his community.

Russian government records document the registration in 1839 of Franz Giesbrecht (1790-1860) and his wife Elisabeth Mannholdt (1794-1844) as settlers moving from the Mennonite settlement at Chortitza to the village of Halbstadt in the new settlement of Bergthal.¹¹ Franz was the second husband of Elisabeth. She had been married to Gerhard Dyck in 1816 and borne three children. Gerhard died in 1819 and Elisabeth quickly remarried.¹² Subsequently Elisabeth and Franz had five children.

Franz Giesbrecht's parents, Wilhelm Giesbrecht (1767-?) and Maria Klassen (1767-about 1817) had immigrated to the Old Colony of Chortitza in the earliest years of Mennonite migration to Ukraine, around 1789-1790.¹³ Franz was born there in the village of Schoenhorst. His father, Wilhelm, was originally from the village of Heubuden in Prussia and a member of the Flemish Mennonite congregation there.¹⁴ His mother, Maria, was from the village of Petershagen and a member of that Flemish Mennonite congregation.¹⁵

The background of Elisabeth Mannholdt is a mystery. She appears in Bergthal Church records but not in earlier immigration records. A girl named Maria Mannholdt appears in a Chortitza settlement census in 1808. She was 12 years old and was an adopted daughter of Jacob Wiens and Maria Peters.¹⁶ She may have been the sister of Elisabeth. Among Mennonite records in Prussia and the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth the name Mannholdt is rare. In a census taken in 1727 there are two Mennonite men named Michael Mannholdt and Peter Mannholdt.¹⁷ They could be distant ancestors.

The youngest son of Franz and Elisabeth was named Johann (1834-1874). Born in 1834, Johann Giesbrecht was a youngster when the family moved to the Bergthal settlement in 1839.¹⁸ A few years later, at the age of 20, he married Margaretha Doerksen (1835-?), a girl of 19 years.¹⁹ They were second cousins. Johann's paternal grandmother was a sister of Margaretha's paternal grandmother.²⁰

Margaretha Doerksen (1835-?) was born to Jacob Doerksen (1804-1853) and Helena Sawatzky (1806-1882) in 1835.²¹ Jacob's paternal grandparents were from Ellerwald and

belonged to the Flemish Church in Elbing. His maternal grandparents were from Petershagen and belonged to the Flemish Church in Tiegenhagen.²² Helena's family were also Flemish Mennonites. Her third great grandfather, Hans Sawatzky (1680-1752), was a minister in the Rosenort Flemish Church.²³ Her fourth great grandfather, Hans Berends, was a member of the Danzig Flemish Church in the early 1600s.²⁴

There is a story in the Lehn Diary (Translated and edited by Waldemar H. Lehn in 2010) about a delegation of church officials to Königsberg. Hans Sawatzky was one of the delegates. Among the purposes of this visit was a meeting with Deacon Jan Spronk who was guilty of conducting himself in an unacceptably worldly manner. Among his many transgressions were the use of laces instead of buckles on his shoes and granting permission for men's coats to sport pockets on the outside. Spronk was suitably chastised for his errors. This anecdote is a portent of events to come later in the Striemer story.

Johann Giesbrecht (1834-1874) and Margaretha Doerksen (1835-?) had ten children. Their eldest was a daughter, Helena Giesbrecht (1855-1946). Helena grew up in the same settlement as her future husband, Johann Striemer, but they had to travel over 8,000 kilometers to a village in southern Manitoba to strike up a relationship that would lead to marriage.

The Dutch Mennonite Church had been fragmented for years, dating back to the earliest days of the Anabaptist movement. The divisions were not really based on fundamental aspects of their faith but on the practical application of their principles in everyday life, surrounded by Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and ruled by state governments. The main two Mennonite Churches were the Flemish and the Frisian congregations. The Flemish group was the most conservative in outlook and the most resistant to compromising religious and cultural principles. Most of the early settlers in the Old Colony of Chortitza were members of the Flemish congregation and consequently most of the settlers in Bergthal had these roots. This resulted in the Bergthal settlement being biased toward a more conservative world view.

In addition, the Bergthal Settlement was isolated from the Old Colony of Chortitza by distance. Isolation had the effect of crystallizing social and religious views in Bergthal that had been common at the end of the 1830s but were not necessarily consistent with more progressive views that evolved over later decades in Chortitza and the larger Mennonite settlement of Molotschna. Consequently, their views on community, society and governmental interference in daily life remained relatively conservative as time passed.

Until the 1870s each Mennonite community had control over the education of their children. In the 1870s this changed. The Russian government took control of education and brought in curriculum reforms, to the great concern of all Mennonite settlements. Even more alarming was the concurrent introduction of mandatory military conscription, in direct repudiation of military exemption privileges granted by the Tsar that all Mennonites valued so highly.

The general response to these changes throughout the Mennonite communities was protestation and intense governmental lobbying to develop acceptable compromises. The Bergthalers, on the other hand, were not prepared to compromise. Beginning in 1874 there began a surge of emigration to North America that only ended in 1876 when all the land in the Bergthal settlement had been sold and the colony evacuated.²⁵

The Canadian government set aside a large reserve of land on the east side of the Red River in southern Manitoba in anticipation of the wave of Mennonite settlers from the Bergthal community in Ukraine. There, in the East Reserve, the Bergthal community reconstituted its church, naming it the Mennonite Church at Chortitz after one of the villages on the Reserve.²⁶

In the Chortitzer Church records we find Johann Striemer (1859-1944) and his family, as well as Helena Giesbrecht (1855-1946) and her family.²⁷ Johann and Helena were married in 1878 in the Chortitzer Church. They lived in Kronsgart and farmed in the area for several years.

Not long after the East Reserve had been established and populated the government set aside another, much larger, area for more immigration on the west side of the Red River. This new area was the West Reserve. Settlement began there with the arrival in 1875 of a new wave of Mennonites, emigrating mainly from the Old Colony of Chortitza.²⁸ These settlers established their church community in the West Reserve, and it became known as the Reinland Church, probably named for the village of Reinland where the first church building was constructed.²⁹

Many original settlers in the East Reserve observed that the farmland to the west was more desirable than their homesteads and moved their families and farms to the West Reserve.³⁰ Johann and Helena Striemer were among these Bergthalers. By 1891 the Striemers were farming in the Reinland area of the West Reserve. Once again, the Bergthalers established churches in the area, and the largest of these congregations became known as the Sommerfeld Church.³¹

In the Sommerfeld Church records we find Johann Striemer and Helena Giesbrecht with their growing family.³² They farmed in the West Reserve until after 1901.

Within a year or two Johann and Helena family moved further west to the Northwest Territories. They settled in the Vonda area. The 1906 Federal Census lists them as farmers.

Since the 1890s the Northwest Territories, and in particular the region that would soon become the province of Saskatchewan, had been experiencing accelerated settlement. Land offers made by the Federal Government to new settlers were attractive, drawing not only new immigrants from overseas but earlier settlers from such regions as Manitoba. Among these were members of the Sommerfeld congregation. Once settled in Saskatchewan the congregants called their church the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church.

The Striemers were members of this congregation. Johann and Helena and their family are documented in the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church records.

From 1902 until 1908 Cornelius Epp served as an Elder of the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church. His term ended in 1908 after a history-repeating episode in Church affairs that divided the congregation. Epp was scheduled to officiate at a wedding, but he discovered that the bride and groom were dressed in a modern and worldly way that he could not accept. He refused to marry the couple. He quickly discovered that most of his congregation was opposed to his strict ruling in the matter. Epp, having lost the confidence of his congregation, resigned his position, and relocated to the Carrot River area to serve a more conservative group of Bergthalers there. A few congregants followed Epp. Among these were the Striemers.³³

In 1910 Johann was chosen as a Minister in the Carrot River Church. The family stayed in Carrot River for a few years but by 1916 they had moved south to Aberdeen, and a few years later to Laird. In 1927 Johann and Helena rejoined the Bergthal Church as members. A year later, on 1 March 1928, Johann was reinstated as a Minister. He served the Reinfeld Church. The church was still there in 1998 when I visited, but in 2022 when I returned the building had been replaced. Johann and Helena are buried in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church Cemetery at Reinfeld.

Johann and Helena were conservative Mennonites who guarded their culture and principles with great care. However, in the span of two generations their offspring were completely assimilated into modern Canadian culture. They spoke English as a first

language, sent their children to schools in the provincial education system, and a few of their grandchildren served in the Canadian military during World War II.



Foreground seated: Helena Giesbrecht (1955-1946) and Johann Striemer (1959-1944). On the left in the back is their granddaughter Helena (Striemer) Fast (1915-2000), with her daughter Marjorie Fast. Marjorie is the author's mother. Photograph dated 1938.

Endnotes

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12. Dyck, 53.
13. Benjamin H. Unruh, *Die niederlandisch-niederdeutschen Hintergrunde der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. Und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1955), 241.
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19. Ibid.
20. Henry Schapansky, *Mennonite Migrations (and The Old Colony)* (Henry Schapansky, 2006), 503.
21. Dyck, 24.
22. Schapansky, 489, 503.
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25. Krahn.
26. Dyck, 9.
27. Frans Dyck, *Kirchenbuch der Gemeinde zu Chortitz Anfangen in Jahr 1878*, A78, A255.
28. Leonard Doell, *The Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan 1892-1975* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1987), 3.
29. John Dyck and William Harms, *Reinlaender Gemeinde Buch* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994), 7.
30. Adolf Ens, Martha Martens, and Henry Unger (Editors), *Sommerfeld Gemeinde Buch* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2004), ix.
31. Doell, 5.
32. Ens et.al., 97.

33. Doell, 15. Leonard Doell provided me with most of the information about Johann Striemer's role as a minister for the period 1908-1928.