

## Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy

### Do The Mennonite Schapanskys Have Aristocratic Roots?

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#### Introduction

Horst Penner, in his book "Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten", outlines the origin of many Mennonite surnames. Schapansky is one of these. Stemming from his historical research and the events Penner describes, there arises a suggested genealogical link between the Polish aristocratic Szczepanski family and the Mennonite family of the same name.[1] This is a tantalizing prospect, but could it be true?

The purpose of this article is to review the information available and assess the possibility that the Mennonite Schapanskys had aristocratic ancestors. Fortunately, there is more data in the public domain now than in 1978 when Penner's work was published.

Penner finds the name Szczepanski in historical records as early as the thirteenth century. He traces the evolution of the family name to the sixteenth century when Jacob Szczepanski holds the position of Sheriff of Graudenz. Jacob, born in 1556, marries a daughter of Austrian nobility, Susanna Gingerin. After Jacob dies in 1630, Susanna assumes the duties of Sheriff. In 1645 her grandson, Gabriel, becomes Sheriff, presumably upon her death.

During the family's tenure in Graudenz several land lease arrangements are made with the local Mennonite congregation, thus demonstrating the exposure of the family to the Mennonite community, and possibly hinting at a possible affiliation with them.

Penner explains that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was led to ruin by constant wars with Sweden, the most devastating being the Second Northern War (1655-1660) that resulted in the financial destruction and impoverishment of much of the Commonwealth and its population. The Szczepanskis also suffered tremendous financial loss.

Newly impoverished members of the family moved east to Elbing, a major population center. Penner's view seems to be that the Szczepanskis by this time may have joined the Mennonites or even become Mennonites and therefore were heading to the large Mennonite community living in Elbing and the countryside surrounding it.

This is the origin story of the Schapansky name, according to Horst Penner. Given that centuries ago surnames often reflected a town or estate, how plausible is it that the Mennonite Schapanskys were related to the aristocratic Szczepanskis? To answer this question, we must compare the latest information available about the Mennonite family to the genealogical material published about the aristocratic family.

### The Mennonite Schapanskys

Glenn Penner has identified the earliest known Mennonite Schapansky ancestors.[2] There was a Matthies Schapansky living in Elbing in the mid-seventeenth century. He was a member of the Lutheran Church. In 1670 he had a son whom he named Matthies. In 1696 the son married a Mennonite woman named Catharina Jantzen in a Lutheran church ceremony. Catharina was the daughter of Claas Jantzen of Wengeln in the Marienburg Klein Werder. Matthies and Catharina had six children, all christened Lutheran.

Around 1714 Matthies and Catharina moved to Lithuania. At this time settlement in the Memel Lowlands was being actively encouraged in a program to restore the region following a devastating plague that struck the Baltic Coast in 1709. The population and the economy had been decimated. Generous terms were offered to attract settlers. In response, a major Mennonite settlement was established there. Whether Matthies and Catharina were part of the Mennonite group at the outset is unknown.

By 1722 all six children had become Mennonites and members of the Frisian congregation. Matthies subsequently appealed for permission to convert from Lutheranism to the Mennonite Church. In those days, the conversion of Lutherans was strictly controlled. An investigation was conducted by the authorities, and approval was granted.[3]

In 1723 five Mennonite men were seized by a Prussian press gang and held for military service.[4] The Mennonite community protested, and the men were freed. That might have been the end of the matter, but the Mennonite group was not yet satisfied. They threatened to cancel their settlement contracts with the crown unless they were given a guarantee to respect their exemption from military service. The king, Friedrich Wilhelm I, objecting to this brinksmanship, responded in 1724 with a formal expulsion order. The result was that in 1724 some 115-120 Mennonite families were forced to leave Lithuania, including the family of Matthies Schapansky. According to surviving records, the family headed west to the Marienburg Klein Werder region to the south of Elbing.

They joined the Frisian congregation at Thiensdorf. A grandson, David, was born there sometime before 1731. We do not know the name of David's father, but he could have been one of the young men forcibly conscripted in the episode that led to the Mennonite protest and subsequent expulsion.

David married Anna Pauls. One of their sons, David (ca 1751), emigrated to Russia, arriving in the Chortitza settlement in 1795. One of their grandsons, Herman (1785), a son of Herman Schapansky (1754-1824), emigrated to Russia in 1819 and settled in the village of Burwalde in the Chortitza Settlement. People living in North America today who can trace their ancestry to a Mennonite Schapansky from Russia are likely to be descendants of David Schapansky and Anna Pauls.

### The Aristocratic Szczepanskis

Based on the Polish Biographic-Genealogical Dictionary published by Janusz Baranski, the family surname was taken from an estate by the name of Szczepanki, located near Graudenz, a city on the Vistula River. Baranski documents the three known lines of the aristocratic family.[5].

The first family line begins with Jakub Szczepanski (ca 1556-1630). He belonged to the Polish noble clan Dolega and held the position of Sheriff of Graudenz, among other titles. Genealogical work published by M. J. Minakowski states that the parents of Jakub were Wawrzyniec Szczepanski (ca 1520) and Dorota Galczewska (ca 1530). Jakub had a half-sister, Febronia (ca1560), by his father's second wife.[6] There are no other known siblings of Jakub.

In 1596 Jakub Szczepanski married an Austrian woman named Zuzanna Gingerin (ca 1566-1645). Zuzanna was a daughter of Kosma Gingerin von Wolfseck and Katarzyna Heidenreich. Kosma was a well-connected member of the Austrian nobility, recognized by Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II who granted him the Wolfseck estate.[8]

Jakub and Zuzanna had at least one child, Zygmunt Ferdynand Szczepanski (ca 1598-1660). According to Baranski, Zygmunt assumed the position of Sheriff of Graudenz in 1645. However, this is probably not accurate. It is believed that Zuzanna held that position from 1630 when Jakub died until her grandson, Gabriel, took over in 1645, presumably around the time of her death. Whether Jakub and Zuzanna had any other children is not known. However, Zuzanna's epitaph in the Carthusian Church Monastery of Katuzy does not identify any other children.

In 1623 Zygmunt married Zofia Konstancja Sobieska (ca 1606-1650) of the clan Janina. The Sobieski family was of considerable importance among Polish nobility and can be traced back to the early fifteenth century. Among the most significant descendants was John III Sobieski, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1674 to 1696.[9]

Zygmunt and Zofia had a large family but of their eight children, six died in early childhood. The two surviving children were a daughter, Regina (died ca 1690), and a son, Gabriel Ferdynand (died 1690). It appears that Regina was the elder sibling. Zygmunt remarried after Zofia's death. With his new wife, Justyna Czapska (ca 1610-1653), he had another daughter, Teresa.

Gabriel was a colorful figure. On his genealogy website Peter Kutty says that Gabriel was a Florentine Knight of the Order of St. Stefan and in 1645 assumed the duties of Sheriff of Graudenz.[10] Gabriel was married twice but neither marriage produced children. His first marriage was in 1649 to Teresa Elzbieta of Konopat, daughter of Jakub Octawian, Governor of Elbing.[11] This marriage ended in 1652 when it was discovered that Gabriel was in a polygamous marriage to Anna Barbara Scharpffenberg. The records are silent on the duration of the marriage to Anna. However, he also had a relationship with a woman named Katarzyna, of whom little is known except that she had a son with Gabriel sometime after 1650. This son was Gabriel Dominik Szczepanski (ca 1650).

There is nothing further known about this line of the Szczepanski family. If the information outlined above is accurate then there certainly does not appear to be a genealogical linkage between this family and the Mennonite Schapanskys.

The second line of the family described by Baranski follows the descendants of Bartlomiej Szczepanski (ca 1590), also belonging to the clan Dolega. Adam Bilinski has published genealogical work that identifies Bartlomiej as a son of Jakub.[7] Other genealogies do not make this association.

According to Bilinski, Bartlomiej had two sons, Franciszek, and Andrzej. While there are no dates in Bilinski's published account, they might have been born around 1615 based on an average generational length of 25 years. Baranski's genealogy agrees that there was a son named Andrzej, but he does not identify a second son named Franciszek.

Andrzej had four sons: Ignacy, Jan, Maciej and Tomasz. There are no dates associated with any of these people and the best estimate is that they were born around the middle of the century. Maciej is the Polish form of Matthias, and it is tempting to draw a connection to the Mennonite family. However, the only known son of Maciej is Kazimierz.

Baranski identifies a third line of the family, the progenitor being Michal Szczepanski, born around 1710. Michal was not associated with the clan Dolega. This line postdates the earliest known Mennonite ancestors, Matthies Schapansky, and his son Matthies (1670). It does not provide any genealogical insight that would suggest a connection between this family of aristocrats and the Mennonites.

## Conclusion

The subject of this article is the possible relationship between the earliest known ancestors of the Mennonite Schapanskys and genealogies published online for Polish aristocratic families named Szczepanski. To establish a relationship, even a hypothetical one, in the absence of concrete records, there should be correspondence in names, dates and locations. That alone would not be conclusive, but it would support a hypothesis.

For the most well documented line, that of Jakub Szczepanski, the available historical information agrees with Horst Penner's research. For this line the last known male descendant is Gabriel Dominik (ca 1650), born around the same time as the earliest known ancestor of the Mennonites. Whether the family ever lived in Elbing is unknown. Consequently, the data does not support the proposition that there is a genealogical relationship with the Mennonite family.

The second line, through Bartlomiej, does not provide enough information to draw an informed conclusion. There is the grandson Maciej who may have lived at the same time as Mathies Schapansky and shared the same given name. However, we do not have any geographic information about this aristocratic Szczepanski line to indicate they lived in or near Elbing when Matthies Schapansky lived there. Further, what we know of Maciej's descendants does not point to a relationship. Once again, the data does not suggest a relationship to the Mennonite family.

The third line, through Michal, is dated too late to be a match with the Mennonites.

The Mennonite DNA Project database has a Y-DNA sample contributed by a descendant of David Schapansky (ca 1751).[12] To demonstrate a relationship with the aristocratic Szczepanski ancestors, Y-DNA samples from living descendants of the aristocratic lines are needed to make a comparison. The resulting information would likely resolve this question.

## Sources

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