

Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy

The Fast – Toews – Heese Economic Dynasty

Copyright 2023 by Barry Teichroeb. All Rights Reserved.

Introduction

For years I assumed that my ancestors in the Mennonite settlements of eastern Ukraine were primarily farmers and occasionally trades people. Many descendants of the Netherlandic Mennonites who migrated to Canada may be under the same impression due to the number of ancestors who established homesteads on the prairies.

Many ancestors certainly were in these professions and some of these farmers in the old Mennonite settlements were quite successful. My great grandfather Peter Teichroeb owned a large farming operation in Fuerstenland that employed local farm workers and housed their families. After the Bolshevik revolution his reward for decades of community investment and hard work was to be targeted as a kulak, deemed an enemy of the state, and stripped of everything he possessed.

Additionally, there were many Mennonite entrepreneurs and industrialists. An article published in 2012 in the Mennonite Historian entitled "Mennonite Economic Dynasties in Zaporozhye Region" by Olga Shmakina tells the story of a number of these creative business families.

I recently uncovered a rich genealogical history of the ancestors of my great grandfather Jacob Fast (1874-1939). Tracing the family lineage was interesting, of course, but I also discovered a tremendous history of entrepreneurial activity demonstrating great business acumen. I also discovered a fascinating pattern of intermarriage among leading business families in the Mennonite settlements. Presumably these families with similar business interests mingled in the same social circles, fostering frequent intermarriage. One can speculate that the family heads were deliberately aiming to concentrate wealth through marriage. Following is the story of this economic dynasty.

The Fast Family

Jacob Fast (1874-1939) was the son of a farmer in Rosenthal in the Chortitza settlement. He attended Zentralschule, probably in Chortitza, where he received formal training as a teacher. When he emigrated to Canada in 1892, he taught school briefly in Manitoba, after which he took up farming in Saskatchewan. His father Johann (1852-1920) continued farming when he came to Saskatchewan. But not all the Fast's were farmers.

Johann's (1852-1920) great grandfather, Cornelius (about 1765-1825), moved from Wernersdorf to the Molotschna settlement in 1821 and settled in Tiegerweide. Cornelius was the husband of

Maria Toews (1764-after 1835), a member of the wealthy Johann Toews family [1]. More will be said about the Toews family later. Cornelius and Maria had a son named Johann (1800-1841) who travelled to Ukraine around the same time, although it is difficult to find him in immigration records. Henry Schapansky has speculated that Johann settled in Ekaterinoslav or the Chortitza settlement and operated a mill in one of these places [2]. There is some information suggesting that the Johann Fast (1800-1841) family had property in Ekaterinoslav until 1857, leading me to conclude that he owned a business there before moving to Chortitza. Johann (1800-1841) married his cousin Aganetha Toews (1803-1862). Aganetha was the daughter of Jacob Toews, and Jacob Toews was the brother of Johann Fast's mother Maria Toews, described above. Johann and Aganetha had several children, two of whom are important to this story.

Jacob Fast (1822-1866)

The eldest son Jacob (1822-1866) married Katharina Heese (1816-1848) and, upon her death, her sister Anna Heese (1826-1909). The Heese sisters were daughters of Heinrich Heese (1786-1868), the well-known educator and founder of the Chortitza Zentralschule. By 1844 Jacob was operating a treadmill in the Chortitza Settlement [3], possibly the same mill that his father Johann (1800-1841) had owned. Helmut Huebert has written that Anna persuaded Jacob to relocate to Ekaterinoslav, where they set up a new milling business. Around 1866 the mill was converted to steam power [4].

Jacob died in 1866 and his wife, Anna, ran the mill with their son, Heinrich (1858-1897). Heinrich's brother, Wilhelm (1864-?) joined the business and in later years ran the mill in partnership with Heinrich. After Heinrich's death Wilhelm took over sole management of the business. In 1890 the mill was destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt in the 1894-1997 period. By 1911 the business was insolvent and taken over by the banks to which it was indebted [5].

The reasons for bankruptcy are vague, but it seems the investment was huge and highly leveraged. Further, competitors threatened by the scale and modern nature of the new facility spread impactful rumors about unsafe conditions in the mill and poor product quality. The financial stresses and reputational damage were more than Wilhelm's firm could withstand. Following bankruptcy, the operation continued in a limited form until it was nationalized under the Bolshevik regime. Years later when Ukraine gained its independence the company began to operate under the name DMK Dnipromyln LLC. It is still in operation today [6].

Jacob's son, Johann (1849-1908), established a lumber mill in Ekaterinoslav around 1875 and was successful for many years [7]. The business supplied lumber for the flour mill operated by his brothers Heinrich and Wilhelm. This was a key source of revenue. When the flour mill failed the lumber mill was financially impacted and eventually became insolvent.

Following the failure of his lumber mill, Johann established an iron foundry in partnership with a son-in-law. This business was successful until the son-in-law died, at which point the operation was downsized [8].

Johann Fast (1832-1885)

The second son of Johann and Aganetha was named Johann (1832-1885). His wife was Judith Rempel (1832-?). They farmed in the Chortitza settlement. (They are the grandparents of Jacob Fast (1874-1939) who led off this essay.) Of interest in this story of interrelated Mennonite dynasties is their daughter Maria, who married Wilhelm Heese, the son of Heinrich Heese (1786-1868) mentioned earlier, and the brother of Katharina and Anna Heese who had both married Maria's uncle Jacob Fast (1822-1866). This is one more example of elite family combinations, and there are others that will be discussed below.

The Toews Family

Earlier I described the family of Johann Fast (1800-1841) and his wife Aganetha Toews (1803-1862) and their business ventures. The family of Aganetha Toews (1803-1862) was also engaged in numerous business activities.

Aganetha's father, Jacob Toews (1768-?) had a wind powered flour mill in Ekaterinoslav. It was destroyed in a fire around 1807. Jacob's son Heinrich Toews (1819-1867) operated a wind powered mill in Ekaterinoslav in 1836 and 1837. Heinrich moved to Einlage in the Chortitza Settlement in 1840 to pursue milling operations there. Later he returned to Ekaterinoslav and in 1857 purchased property from the family of Johann Fast (1800-1841). He built a treadmill powered mill there and ten years later a steam powered mill. He died in 1867 and the business was taken over by his sons, Johann (1841-1915) and Jacob (1845-1883) [9].

Johann Toews (1841-1915)

Johann assumed sole operational control over the family mill in 1880 when his brother Jacob (1845-1883) began another venture. By the turn of the century Johann's son Heinrich had taken control of the business. Concurrently another son, Johann, established a soap manufacturing business, financed by his father. Apparently, he tarnished his reputation with the family when he was caught philandering with one of his servants, by whom he had several children [10].

Jacob Toews (1845-1883)

In 1880 Jacob (1845-1883) went into business with a brother-in-law and built a new mill, leaving his elder brother Johann (1841-1915) to operate the earlier mill [11]. Jacob married Margaretha Heese (1848-1880), the granddaughter of Heinrich Heese (1786-1868) mentioned earlier. After Margaretha died Jacob went on to marry her sister, Susanna Heese (1862-1950). This is yet another example of the elite family combinations that no doubt served to protect family wealth through intermarriage.

The Heese Family

The Heese family were also successful entrepreneurs. Heinrich Heese (1828-1883), a son of Heinrich Heese (1786-1868), entered the milling business with a treadmill powered mill. When it was destroyed in a fire, he went into the grain marketing business. After the Crimean War global demand for Russian grain weakened, causing him to exit that business. In the late 1860s he built a steam powered flour mill, purchasing machinery from England. He left that business to work as a lawyer, banker, and real estate agent [12].

One of Heinrich Heese's (1828-1883) sons, Heinrich (1846-1903), established his own flour mill in 1878 in Ekaterinoslav. His business was successful, and he prospered. He also served on the boards of several private banks and the federal bank. Later his sons, Heinrich, and Peter, took control of the mill and operated it until it was nationalized in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution [13].

Another son of Heinrich Heese (1828-1883), Wilhelm (1846-1920), married Maria Fast (1858-1935). Maria was a daughter of Johann Fast (1832-1885) and granddaughter of Johann Fast (1800-1841).

Conclusion

The Fast, Toews and Heese families were entrepreneurial dynasties with extensive interrelationships through marriage. This is quite a contrast to the image of Dutch Mennonites living basic lives as simple farmers in their villages on the plains.

Sources and Acknowledgements

Helmut T. Huebert, in his two-volume work "Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia", documents a vast collection of information about Mennonite business activities. I was fortunate to have this data to apply to the individuals in my family tree.

[1] Henry Schapansky, Mennonite Migrations (and The Old Colony), Rosenort MB, Henry Schapansky, 2006; p. 383.

[2] Schapansky; p. 383.

[3] Helmut T. Huebert, Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia Volume 2, Winnipeg, Springfield Publishers, 2008; p. 92.

[4] Huebert; p. 104.

[5] Huebert; p. 146.

[6] DMK Dnipromyln LLC, <https://dnipromlyn.com/en/about-company/>.

[7] Huebert; p. 147.

[8] Huebert; p. 147.

[9] Huebert; p. 150.

[10] Huebert; p. 125.

[11] Huebert; p. 150.

[12] Huebert; p. 110.

[13] Huebert; p. 147.