

The Deputies vs. Elder David Epp

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The early years of the Chortitza settlement were difficult for many reasons, among which was a long running dispute between secular and religious leadership in the settlement. The two original Deputies representing the Mennonite communities in Prussia, Johann Bartsch and Jacob Hoepfner, had negotiated the entire Mennonite settlement arrangement with the Russian Crown prior to the initial migration in 1789. In the new settlement the Deputies had considerable influence and were recognized as the de facto community leaders by settlers and by representatives of the Russian Crown. In time the leadership of the Chortitza Flemish Mennonite Church began to challenge the authority of the Deputies, with unhappy and undignified results.

There occurred in this long running dispute an event to which I have numerous close ancestral ties. Michael Teichroeb's son Peter, from his first marriage, was a signatory to a letter written in 1793 (dated 3 September 1793) attempting to have Elder David Epp removed from office. Other signatories included Jacob Bartsch and Johann Sawatsky, two other ancestors of mine, and Johann Krahn, brother of another of my ancestors, Bernhard Krahn. While the attempt failed it is interesting that so many of my family members were involved in the effort to defrock David Epp. Here is the story.

[Michael Teichroeb is the author's 4th great grandfather; Johann Bartsch is the author's 6th great grandfather; Johann Sawatsky is the author's 6th great grandfather; Bernhard Krahn is the author's 4th great grandfather.]

In 1789 Mennonite settlers began to arrive in Ukraine and learned from Governor-General Grigory Potemkin that the agreed settlement site on Russian Crown lands was not available due to armed conflict with the Turks to the south. They were required to accept land farther north on Potemkin's own estate in Chortitza. This event reinforced earlier suspicions that the Mennonites were being misled by the Russian Crown and the generous offer cloaked an ulterior motive. Unfounded suspicion was also cast upon the Deputies, Johann Bartsch and Jacob Hoepfner, who, as unofficial leaders of the Mennonite community, were accused of being complicit in this perceived bait and switch land scheme. There is absolutely nothing in the historical record to demonstrate any illicit behavior by the Deputies, who appear to be blameless. Potemkin's motives remain open to speculation.

Despite their dissatisfaction with the relocation of their settlement, the settlers put down roots in Chortitza.

A series of unfortunate events followed, adding to the misery, disappointment and suspicion felt by the settlers. Belongings shipped to the new settlement were ruined, ransacked, and stolen. Settlement loans from the Imperial government were delayed, causing great hardship in the

early years. Timber for building was stolen. Horses were stolen. Government appointed Russian Directors, responsible for governance of the settlement, were incompetent, disengaged and sometimes skimmed funds payable to the settlers. [1]

The Directors, to avoid the unpleasant task of dealing directly with the constantly disgruntled settlers, chose to delegate through the Deputies who, during the early years, were seen as the community leaders. This raised the suspicion and ire of the settlers toward the Deputies, who, with no official authority, had no ability to resolve problems the community encountered and consequently were generally ineffective in the role thrust upon them. They were caught in a most difficult position.

During this time a formal Flemish Church leadership group was gradually established. By 1792 the Mennonite community had elected two elders, four ministers and three deacons. One of the elders was David Epp, a man who appears to have been neither particularly likeable nor well suited for the role. There are suggestions that Epp had a track record of troublemaking and improper behaviour long before his move to Chortitza, events that seem to have been managed and resolved by the highly respected and influential Danzig Church Elder, Peter Epp. David Epp's election had been found wanting by the majority of the other Church leaders in Chortitza. Following his appointment in 1792 the other Church leaders petitioned the Danzig Church to hold new elections with a view to replacing him, but this request was not granted. [2]

[Elder Peter Epp is the author's 7th great grandfather.]

Despite Elder David Epp's unsavory reputation, the general feeling of the settlement by 1793 was that management of the affairs of the Chortitza settlement would be more successfully conducted if leadership was passed from the Deputies to the elected Church leaders. To that end the legal documents and decrees underpinning the terms of the Mennonite Settlement were transferred in 1793 from the safekeeping of the Deputies into the possession of the Church leadership under the auspices of Elder David Epp. This symbolized the formal handover of community leadership from the Deputies to the Church leadership. [3]

A small group of settlers loyal to the Deputies felt aggrieved. They retaliated in autumn 1793, writing to the Danzig Church to accuse Elder David Epp of financial misappropriation and receiving stolen property, among other misdemeanors. It appears that the charges were generally well founded and true. [4]

In response a delegation from Danzig made the journey to Chortitza in 1794 to hear the accusations made by both parties and restore order. A reconciliation was achieved. No punishment was imposed on either group. It seems that the false suspicions about the Deputies were finally dispensed with, and the wrongdoing of Elder Epp was covered up for the sake of peace and community harmony. [5] However, this was not the end of the conflict.

Problems with the Government-appointed Russian Directors continued to plague the settlers. Finally in 1798 the community filed a formal complaint about past illegal behavior by various

Directors, tangentially mentioning the Deputies, Bartsch and Hoeppner. At this point Elder David Epp had his revenge. In a clear example of guilt by association, Elder Epp and the Church leadership used this complaint as the rationale to excommunicate the Deputies from the Flemish congregation in Chortitza. Bartsch quickly made apologies and amends, following which he was reinstated in the congregation. Hoeppner, on the other hand, would not reconcile. His problems became worse two years later when dubious charges were levelled against him about irregularities in financial dealings. He was found guilty and fined. Unable to pay the fine Hoeppner was imprisoned briefly. He never returned to the Chortitza congregation, instead joining the Frisian Mennonite congregation located in Kronsweide.

Notes

[1] See Henry Schapansky's discussion of the many challenges endured by the early settlers in Mennonite Migrations (And the Old Colony), Rosenort MB, 2006, pp. 165-166.

[2] See Schapansky p. 164 for local concerns in Chortitza about David Epp. For insight related to previous behavioral issues see Adolf Ens, *The Tie That Binds: Prussian and Russian Mennonites (1788-1794)* (Winnipeg, The University of Winnipeg, Journal of Mennonite Studies Vol. 8, 1990). P. 39.

[3] See Schapansky, p. 165.

[4] See Schapansky, pp. 168-169 and Ens, p. 40.

[5] This is my interpretation of the nature of the resolution based on the facts available. See Lawrence Klippenstein's essay "The Mennonite Migration to Russia 1786-1806", p. 50 for an alternative interpretation. This essay can be found in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia*, Winnipeg, CMBC Publications, 1989.