

Mennonite Schapansky Ancestry (1640-1925)

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10-minute read.

Introduction

The Sczcepanski family name has been well documented in the context of Polish-Lithuanian nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Members of this aristocratic family worked in close association with the Crown and were well recognized for their royal service. The family's role as regional administrators brought various family members into direct contact with local Mennonite congregations who leased crown lands for farming. However, there are no apparent genealogical links between this powerful family and the Mennonite Schapansky line that emerged in the Elbing area (modern Elblag) in the seventeenth century. This is the story of the Mennonite family, descendants of which migrated to Ukraine in the late eighteenth century and to Saskatchewan in the late nineteenth century.

From Lutheran to Mennonite

The Lutheran Church Registry for Thiensdorf contains an entry for the marriage on 29 April 1696 of Matthias Zepansky of Elbing and Catharina Janzen of Wengeln [1]. Matthias is noted as a laborer and his father, Matthias, is referred to as a "Maltzer", a maltster of grain for use in brewing and distilling. Catharina's father, Claus Janzen, is a Mennonite.

The couple lived in Schwansdorf in 1696 and in Hohenwalde in 1700 [2]. By 1722 Matthias and Catharina had six children, five of whom have been identified by name. Gottfried was born in 1696, Catharina in 1697, Heinrich in 1700, Maria in 1702, and Anna in 1704.

Thiensdorf was a village near the larger population center of Elbing [3].

Early in the eighteenth century the Crown made a grant of land in the lowlands of the Memel River, between Tilsit in the east and Konigsberg in the west, enticing Mennonites to reclaim the swampy land and settle there in exchange for religious freedom and exemption from military service. As early as 1711 Mennonite families began to take up the offer, the Schapanskys among them.

In 1722 Matthias was listed as a farmer in the Lithuanian village of Bogdahnen. His father-in-law, Claus Janzen, was also living in the village, as was Johann Schmidt, who had married one of Matthias' daughters. Her name is not given in the records [4].

At the same time, Matthias's son, Gottfried, was listed as a farmer in the Lithuanian village of Jedwilleiten, not far from Bogdahnen. Gottfried was operating a farm jointly with Gerhardt Eckert [5].

Until 1722 Matthias was still notionally a member of the Lutheran Church. That year he applied for permission to convert to the Mennonite Church. There were legal formalities involved in such a conversion – at the time the practice was prohibited without explicit legal sanction. The investigation of his appeal revealed the following facts. Matthias had been born around 1670 in a village on the outskirts of Elbing to Lutheran parents. He had been in Bogdahnen for eight years, having arrived in 1714, and in that time had not attended a Lutheran church more than twice, for any purpose including communion. He had six children, all Mennonites, as was their mother. One son was currently living in Jedwilleiten, and one daughter was married to the Mennonite Johann Schmidt in Bogdahnen. Matthias was granted permission to join the Mennonite congregation [6].

In 1723 an incident occurred that had unfortunate consequences for the Mennonite community in the Memel lowlands. A Prussian press-gang seized five Mennonite men with a view to forcing them into military service. After the Mennonite community protested the men were released. However, the community went further, threatening to cancel their contract with the Crown unless their contractual rights were guaranteed. The Crown responded with an order expelling the Mennonites from the territory in 1724 [7].

Matthias and his household headed west to the Marienburg area while his son Gottfried headed to Elbing [8].

The Thiensdorf Nachfahrenliste, a genealogy compilation by Alfons Sczepanski, says that a Sczepanski born in the 1690s lived in Lithuania for a period of time before relocating sometime before 1730 to Thiensdorf to farm there. The name of his wife is unknown. He had a son named David, born around 1731 in the Thiensdorf area [9]. It seems clear that this is a reference to Gottfried.

In 1740 an effort was made to entice Mennonites back to the Memel lowlands. This endeavor met with limited success, with some families making the move to estate lands in the Friedrichsgraben area southeast of Bogdahnen and Jedwilleiten. Among the families to move was Gottfried's, who is recorded as a settler there in 1741. Homesteading was difficult in this region due to massive flood damage done in the years before the settlement. By 1749 the family had moved on; Gottfried does not appear on the settler list for that year [10]. Most likely they returned to Elbing, based on the record of family events that followed.

Thiensdorf Nachfahrenliste

Alfons Sczepanski outlines the descendant genealogy for Gottfried in the Thiensdorf Nachfahrenliste (see the source reference below). The following information relies on this source extensively.

Gottfried's son David Schapansky (1731) married Anna Pauls (1736) around 1753. The marriage produced two children. Herman was born around 1754. Cornelius was born in 1765. There is a

David Schapansky (1751) who may have been another son, but this is not recorded in the work of Alfons Szczepanski [11].

Cornelius (1765) was born in Hohenwalde. He was baptized in 1781 in the Thiensdorf church (this fact is also recorded in the church records where he is listed as the surviving son of David). He was married to Maria Phillipsen (born 1782 in Campenau) in 1800. They had one son, Cornelius, born in 1802. The son and his offspring never left Prussia. Maria died of "childbed fever" in 1803. Cornelius did not remarry. He died in Campenau in 1831.

Herman (1754) was born in Thiensdorf. In later years he farmed in Kerbshorst and was also a carpenter, according to an 1811 reference (I surmise this was probably the 1811 Elbing census). Herman died in Schwansdorf in 1824 at the age of 70. He was married twice. His first wife was Maria Klassen, born in 1764, whom he married in March 1785. Maria died of typhus in 1800 at the age of 36. This marriage produced three sons: Herman (1785); Heinrich (1792); and Johann (1794). His second wife was Anna Heinrichs, born in Kerbshorst in 1781. Anna's parents were Jacob Heinrichs (1761-1815) and Anna Ketler [12]. Herman and Anna were married in 1800. She died in Ellerwald in 1857. This marriage produced eleven children: Cornelius (1801); Anna (1804); Cornelius (1806); another daughter who died as an infant (1809); Heinrich (1811); Maria (1812); Anna (1816); Cornelia (1817); Johann (1819); David (1821); and Catharina (1824). It is notable that Catharina's father was seventy years old when she was born, and her oldest brother, Herman, was almost forty.

Herman (1785) was baptised in the Markushof church in 1802 and lived in Kerbshorst. Heinrich (1792) died of typhus in 1801. Johann (1794) died of whooping cough in 1794. Cornelius (1801) died as an infant in 1801. Anna (1804) died in 1807 of "lazy fiber". Cornelius (1806) died in Ellerwald in 1861 at the age of fifty-five. His offspring remained in Prussia. Heinrich (1811) and his offspring remained in Prussia. Maria (1812) died of typhus in 1825 at the age of thirteen. Anna (1816) married and had children (all unknown) and she and her offspring appear to have remained in Prussia. Cornelia (1817) died young. Johann (1819) died young. David (1821) died at the age of 10 in 1831. Catharina (1824) died in 1825 of typhus.

To Chortitza

In 1811 Herman Schapansky (1785) and his family resided at Kerbshorst where Herman was a carpenter [13]. Later Herman was a tenant farmer based in the village of Rosenort, a village 13 km northwest of Elbing. He migrated to Chortitza in 1819. Accompanying him on the journey to Chortitza were his wife and four children. They brought with them cash assets worth 100 rubles, horses valued at 120 rubles and other possessions valued at 300 rubles [14]. They settled in the village of Burwalde.

Herman's wife was a Doerksen but there is no record of her given name. They were married in Kerbshorst in 1806 [15]. The children who accompanied the couple on the relocation to

Chortitza were Kornelius (1807-1819), Heinrich (1811), Maria (1814) and Barbara (1817). An earlier child, Maria (1810-1810), died while still an infant [16]. The genealogy of the descendants from this marriage is sparse except for Heinrich (1811). Many of Heinrich's descendants emigrated to North America, as recorded in the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry. Herman's wife died around 1820, and he remarried [17].

Herman's second wife was Susanna Dyck (-1858). There are no genealogical records proving information about Susanna's parents or other ancestors. However, there is compelling autosomal DNA evidence, adjusted to factor out the influence of endogamy, that she was a child of Martin Dyck (1763-1832) and Margaretha Wiebe [18]. Herman and Susanna had at least eight children: David (1823-1825); Susanna (1826-1826); David (1829); Susanna (1830-1831); Jacob (1832-1909); Susanna (1834); Helena (1837-1907); and Johann (1839-1915) [19]. The genealogy of the descendants of this marriage is richer than Herman's first marriage. Descendants of Jacob, Helena, and Johann have been recorded in the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry, many of whom emigrated to North America.

To Warman Saskatchewan

There are many gaps in the genealogical records for settlers while in Chortitza, providing few clues about the lives of specific settlers. Herman Schapansky (1785) is listed as the head of his household in Burwalde in 1847 [20]. His sons David (1829), Jacob (1832) and Johann (1839) appear in the Grain List of 1663. All three are landless residents of Burwalde [21].

Herman's son Johann (1839) married Helena Hiebert (1842-1928), the daughter of Peter Hiebert and Maria Ens, in 1860. While living in Burwalde they had eight children: Johann (1861-1937); Abraham (1862-1930); Maria (1864-1928); Helena (1865-1866); Jacob (1867-1935); Peter (1869-1942); David (1872-1951); and Gerhard (1874-1957) [22].

In 1875 the family joined the migration to Canada, landing in Quebec on 1 July 1875, en route to Schanzenfeld in the West Reserve of Manitoba. The primary reason for the move from Chortitza was the threatened loss of their military exemption, a familiar theme for Mennonites throughout history.

In Manitoba Johann and Helena had three more children: Cornelius (1876-1881); Helena (1879-1881); and Heinrich (1881-1944).

By the 1890s farmland was being offered in the prairies of the Northwest Territories. The Canadian federal government pursued an aggressive program of settlement in the region that would soon become the province of Saskatchewan. Johann's son, David Schapansky (1872) was one of many young Mennonite men eager to establish a new homestead further west.

David Schapansky (1872) married Maria Loewen (1876-1939) in Manitoba in 1896. Maria had some fascinating ancestors. One ninth great grandfather, Jan de Veer, was the head of a wealthy merchant trading family operating between Amsterdam and Danzig in the sixteen century. Her ninth great grandfather, Jacob Harnasveger, an armorer by trade, was a radical anabaptist reformer, convicted in a plot to overthrow the Catholic civic administration of Amsterdam in 1534. Another ninth great grandfather was the prominent Polish-Lithuanian merchant Matthaues Maraun, who operated a network of commercial enterprises from his base in Konigsberg. Finally, Maria's third great grandfather, Johann Bartsch, was one of two deputies assigned by the Danzig Mennonites to scout the new land in Ukraine being offered by Catherine the Great in the final years of the eighteenth century. [23].

By 1900 David and Maria had three children: Maria (1897-1956); Helena (1898-1979); and Johann (1900-1985). Soon after, the small family left Schanzenfeld and headed to Warman Saskatchewan, joining the migration of pioneers aiming to homestead there. In 1902 the first of their children to be born in Saskatchewan arrived, David (1902-1981). Five more children followed: Sarah (1904-1986); Margaretha (1908-1987); Christina (1910-1910); Abram (1912-1912); and Katharina (1914-1996).

Conclusion

In 1925 a Russlander named Daniel Teichroeb (1904-2005), escaping the turmoil and bloodshed of Stalinist Russia, made his way to Warmen and found work on the farm of David Schapansky (1872) [24]. He met Margaretha Schapansky (1908), and they were soon married. Daniel and Maggie are the author's grandparents.

Notes

[1] The Lutheran Church Registry for Thiensdorf is found in the ancestry.ca archives. This particular record can be viewed at https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryui-content/view/5034494:61250?tid=&pid=&queryId=c37c1bb1-f1e3-43a6-864b-47c4a06f24f1&_phsrc=Rjx33&_phstart=successSource.

[2] A partial translation of the marriage record as well as information about the couple's children and where the family lived until 1700 can be found on page 88 of the book by Erwin Wittenberg and Manuel Janz, *Die Mennonitengemeinde im nordlichen Ostpreussen* (Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany, 2022).

[3] The specific location of Thiensdorf in relation to Elbing is recorded in this article: Penner, Horst, Richard D. Thiessen and Erich Lohrey. "Thiensdorf and Preussisch Rosengart Mennonite Church (Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, Poland)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. May 2021. Web. 21 Aug

2024. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Thiendorf_and_Preu%C3%9Fisch_Rosengart_Mennonite_Church_\(Warmian-Masurian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)&oldid=171472](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Thiendorf_and_Preu%C3%9Fisch_Rosengart_Mennonite_Church_(Warmian-Masurian_Voivodeship,_Poland)&oldid=171472).

[4] Wittenberg and Janz, p. 88.

[5] Wittenberg and Janz, p. 84.

[6] Wittenberg and Janz, p. 116.

In addition, see the article by Glenn H. Penner, "Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective; Part 5: Mennonites from Prussian Lithuania in Russia" (Abbotsford, Mennonite Historical Society of BC, Roots and Branches Vol. 28 No. 2 June 2022). The subject of the article deals with people converting to the Mennonite Church.

[7] Henry Schapansky, Mennonite Migrations (Schapansky, Rosenort MB, 2006), p. 120.

[8] Horst Penner, Die ost-und westpreussischen Mennoniten (Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany, 1978), p. 407.

[9] Alfons Sczepanski, Thiendorf Nachfahrenliste, <https://www.many-roads.com/2015/04/12/thiendorf-nachfahrenliste-2015/>.

[10] Wittenberg and Janz, p. 151.

[11] Henry Schapansky has written that there was a son, David, born in 1751, although Alfons Sczepanski does not record this son. See Henry Schapansky, p. 641. Wes Reimer has written, in Johann & Helena Schapansky Family Book (1839 - 2009), that there was a daughter, Anna. Alfons Sczepanski does not record this daughter. David (1751) certainly existed; he was a settler in Chortitza in the late eighteenth century.

[12] Mary Rempel, Mennonite Church Markushof Marienburg District Baptism, Marriage, Death Register 1787-1818, pp. 8a, 107.
[https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche_preussische_Provinzen_und_Polen_\(Teil\)/Digitalisate/Mennonitische_Kirchenbuecher/Markushof/1787-1818_\(GStA_PK_3631\)/info/3631.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche_preussische_Provinzen_und_Polen_(Teil)/Digitalisate/Mennonitische_Kirchenbuecher/Markushof/1787-1818_(GStA_PK_3631)/info/3631.pdf).

See also Mary Rempel, Mennonite Church Markushof Baptism, Marriage, Death Register 1754-1834. https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/cong_309/3630.pdf.

Note that the name of Anna Heinrich's mother, Anna Ketler, is based only on a publicly posted family tree without source references and for that reason is uncertain.

[13] Glenn H. Penner, The Elbing Territory Census of 1811, https://mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Elbing_1811.pdf.

[14] Peter Rempel, Mennonite Migration to Russia, 1788-1828 (Winnipeg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2000), pp. 120, 156.

[15] Mary Rempel (1787-1818), p. 71.

[16] Mary Rempel (1787-1818), p. 75; and Mary Rempel (1754-1834), pp. 185, 188, 193, 210, 222.

[17] Wes Reimer has written, in Johann & Helena Schapansky Family Book (1839 - 2009), that there was another son, Kornelius, born in 1820.

[18] The relationship between Susanna and her parents is based on autosomal DNA analysis. DNA samples of descendants of Anna Dyck (a known daughter of Martin Dyck and Margaretha Wiebe) were compared to DNA from a known second great grandson of Susanna Dyck. All samples were filtered using the Timber algorithm in AncestryDNA, which seeks to remove endogamous biases from DNA matches. Then candidates were selected if the matching DNA had a minimum longest segment of 15 cM. This tends to filter out false positive matches. Eight descendants of Anna were identified as potentially legitimate relations to the descendant of Susanna. In all cases there were no recorded genealogical relationships between these people and the descendant of Susanna which might otherwise explain the DNA match. In each case the generational distance from Anna and Susanna was consistent with the amount of matching filtered DNA. This procedure gives a statistically probable ancestral relationship.

[19] John Dyck and William Harms, 1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve (Winnipeg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1998), pp. 322,323. In addition, Wes Reimer has written, in Johann & Helena Schapansky Family Book (1839 - 2009), that there were two other daughters born to the couple, Kornelia (1840-1843), and Kornelia (1847).

[20] Annotated List of Chortitza Colony Householders for 1847,
https://mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_1847.htm.

[21] Chortitza 1863 Grain List,
https://mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_1863_Grain_list_by_Surname.htm.

[22] The genealogical information for Johann Schapansky and his son David Schapansky is based on family records maintained by Rosella Wall, a granddaughter of David.

[23] To read more about Maria Loewen's ancestors, see these articles by the author.

"Jacob Harnasveger: 16th Century Anabaptist Reformer" (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian, Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society, Volume 26, No. 1, 2021).

"De Veer: Five Centuries of History", www.mooserungenealogy.com.

"The Maraun Family in the Administrative Records of the Teutonic Order",
www.mooserungenealogy.com.

"Eastern Settlement – The Johann Bartsch Story", www.mooserungenealogy.com.

[24] Barry Teichroeb, "Dan Teichroeb's Family: Revolutionary Russia and the Migration to Canada in the 1920s" (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian, Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society, Volume 28, No. 2, 2023).