

The Mennonite Settlers in Chortitza

Part 1 – Jacob Wolf and Justina Harder

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Jacob Wolf (ca 1753-1790) and Justina Harder (1758-1840)

Jacob and Justina are the author's fifth great grandparents; their son Johann is the author's fourth great grandfather.

Justina Harder was the daughter of Johann Harder of Heubuden, a village situated about 7 km west of the larger population center of Marienburg. In 1772 The Harder family farmed about 300 acres of land [1]. In the 1776 Census of Mennonites in Prussia the Harders were listed as farmers who owned their land [2]. Their economic categorization in the 1776 census was "Low", placing them within the large, main economic category constituting of about 76% of the Mennonite population of about 2,600 households [3]. Glenn Penner notes that among the rest of the Mennonite population less than 1% are categorized as "Good", 22% as "Middle", and 1% as "Poor". Without knowing how wealth was determined by the census takers for this categorization, it is difficult to judge the financial situation in practical terms. However, as farmers owning their land, the Harder family's circumstances were probably better than those that rented. Harder later appears in the 1789 Land Census and has only about five acres, indicating he had probably sold his farm by this time [4]. He was likely in his mid to late 60s at the time of that census.

Jacob Wolf was baptized in 1773 in the Heubuden Flemish Mennonite congregation. The church records indicate he lived in the village of Heubuden. There is no information available to determine who his parents were.

Jacob Wolf married Justina in July 1776. When the census was taken in 1776 Jacob and Justina lived in Willenbruchs Huben, a hamlet that formed part of Heubuden. The couple had no children when the 1776 census was taken. They were members of the Flemish congregation at Heubuden. Justina's baptism in 1774, their marriage in 1776, and the births of two children, were all recorded in the Heubuden Church Registry.

In the 1776 census they were recorded as laborers with rented land. Their financial situation was characterized as "Low". Not all households in this economic category were necessarily in difficult financial straits, but as laborers with rented land Jacob and Justina probably were at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Their economic prospects would have been bleak because by then Mennonites were prohibited from acquiring land except for purchases from other Mennonites. With a growing population there was no reasonable expectation that land ownership would be attainable for young couples just starting out.

When the offer of land in New Russia was made by the Tsarist government, Jacob and Justina were among the earliest families to grasp the opportunity and move east. Jacob and his family

arrived in the new settlement of Chortitza in 1789 and settled in the village of Schoenhorst. Records show that they received about 22 Rubles to compensate for travel expenses, under the terms of the arrangement between the Mennonites and the Russian Crown [5]. Four children were recorded among the arrivals, Johann (1778), Christina (1789), David (1784), and Peter (1786). Shortly after their arrival in the new settlement a fifth child was born, Jacob (1789).

The family received a land allotment of about 175 acres [6]. Included in the allotment was space for a house, barn, garden, pasturage, and arable land. The typical Mennonite settlement pattern was to establish a village where the houses and farm buildings were located and to have the farmland located on the outskirts of the village. Generally, each residential property would be located along a main street, with the house facing the street and the barn placed behind the house at the back of the village lot, often adjoining the house to allow direct passage between the two buildings.

By the time of the 1795 census of the Chortitza settlement, the family had been completely upended [7]. At some point before 1792 Jacob had died. Justina remarried. Her second husband was David Giesbrecht. Giesbrecht's circumstances are somewhat unclear. He had moved to Schoenhorst in 1789 as part of the original group of settlers. His household when he arrived appears to have included his wife and one child. Both his wife and his child must have died soon after they arrived in the new settlement. By 1792 David and Justina were married and had a new son. Justina was living with David at the time of the 1795 census but her children with Jacob Wolf remained living on the Wolf homestead. How this arrangement worked from a practical standpoint is unclear because some of the Wolf children were still very young. The eldest son, Johann (1778) was listed as the head of the household.

The 1797 census provides modest information about the financial situation for the settlers, in terms of livestock. For the 228 households in the original group of settlers there are 980 horses (an average of about 4 per household), 3,012 head of cattle (an average of about 13 per household), 630 sheep (an average of about 3 per household), and 465 pigs (an average of about 2 per household). The Wolf homestead had no livestock at all, but the David Giesbrecht homestead, where the Wolf children's mother lived, had 2 horses, 12 head of cattle and 4 sheep. This is a little less than the average for the community as a whole but not substantially less. It seems probable that the Wolf and Giesbrecht homesteads were operating like one family unit spread across two properties. This is what one would expect if Justina was trying to preserve the Wolf property for her children while they were still teenagers.

In 1801 the Wolf children were still living on the original Wolf homestead. There is a note in the census of this year indicating that the eldest child, Johann, shared title to the property with his mother. The youngest sibling, Jacob, who had been born in the new settlement, was not listed. Presumably he had died in the years after 1797. Meanwhile, Justina's second husband, David Giesbrecht, had also died. Justina married once again, this time to Johann Epp who was 20 years younger. Johann Epp moved into the Giesbrecht homestead with Justina, and it is referred to as the Epp homestead hereafter.

The 1802 census offers a rich source of data to evaluate financial circumstances for the settlers. Once again, the Wolf homestead has no livestock and no equipment. However, the Epp homestead has 3 horses, 14 head of cattle, 5 sheep, 2 pigs, 2 harrows, 1 wagon, 1 spinning wheel, and they share a plow with another family. Compared to the entire village of Schoenhorst, the combined Wolf-Epp family had about 30% more livestock and equipment than the average household, and of course double the amount of farmland. Furthermore, compared to the entire Chortitza Colony the family assets (livestock and equipment) were about equal to the average household. This supports the suggestion that the Wolf-Epp family group was operating as one family unit spread across two homesteads.

In 1803 a major change was introduced to the already complex Wolf family structure. The eldest child, Johann Wolf, got married. His new wife was Anna Peters (1783), the daughter of a tailor in Schoenhorst. Anna's family was among the group of original settlers who established Schoenhorst in 1789. Following the marriage, Johann and Anna took full control of the Wolf farm. The siblings moved out, David and Christina going to live with their mother, Justina. Peter moved out on his own and is reported in later years as a landless resident of Schoenhorst. Being landless does not mean Peter was necessarily poverty stricken. It means he did not own a farm. He could have been a tradesman, a laborer, a teacher or held some other occupation.

Johann and Anna had their first child, a daughter they named Anna, in 1806. She was destined to marry Daniel Teichroeb (1789) years later. *[Daniel and Anna are the writer's third great grandparents.]* Six additional children followed Anna.

Johann's sister Christina married Peter Harder in 1811. Following their marriage Christina and Peter took over the Epp homestead. Christina's mother, Justina, and her husband Johann Epp moved out and are listed in subsequent census records as landless residents of Schoenhorst. Christina's brother David remained behind, living with his married sister until 1815. It is likely that David died in 1815 or early 1816.

The last detailed census available for the settlement of Chortitza was completed in October 1816. This record shows the landowner households of Johann Wolf and Peter Harder and the landless households of Johann Epp and Peter Wolf. The economic information contained in the census, in terms of livestock and equipment, shows that both Johann Wolf's farm and Peter Harder's farm have fallen below the average in relation to other landowners in the village of Schoenhorst and the entire settlement. This may be the result of dividing the family assets among the four households.

Johann Wolf's household in 1816 included a servant named Jacob Loewen (1800). He was the son of Michael Loewen (1771) and Maria Bueckert (1778). *[Jacob is the third great grandfather of the writer.]*

Johann's brother Peter eventually left Schoenhorst in 1825, moving to the village of Wernersdorf in the settlement of Molotschna [8].

Johann Wolf was still living in Schoenhorst in 1847, the year before he died [9]. Anna Peters had predeceased him in the 1820s. Johann married Helena Niebuhr and they had a daughter they named Justina.

Notes

[1] Data about the year 1772 are found in the census taken that year.

See https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1772/West_Prussia_Census_1772.pdf.

[2] The source of detailed demographic information dated to 1776 is source from the census taken in 1776 to determine the number of Mennonites in Prussia following the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. See a transcription of the census at https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf.

[3] See Glenn Penner's commentary about the economic categories in the 1776 Census at https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf.

[4] See the 1789 census at https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1789_Land_Census_West_Prussian_Mennonites.htm.

[5] See the First Mennonite Settlers document constructed by Glenn Penner at https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/First_Mennonite_Settlers_in_Chortitza.pdf.

[6] See this article for information on land allotments [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Land_Distribution_\(Russia\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Land_Distribution_(Russia)).

[7] Census records for the settlement of Chortitza can be found at <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/>.

[8] This information can be found in "English Translation of the Russian 1835 Census of the Molotschna Villages" published in 1995 by the Genealogy Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society.

[9] The Householder List of 1847 can be found at https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_1847.htm. The record of Johann Wolf's death is found in <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/diarydeaths.htm>.