

The Mennonite Settlers in Chortitza

Part 2 – Johann Peters and Maria Bergen

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Johann Peters (ca 1754-1826) and Maria Bergen (1753-1804)

In one ancestral line Johann and Maria are the author's fifth great grandparents and their daughter Anna is the author's fourth great grandmother. In a second ancestral line Johann and Maria are the author's sixth great grandparents and their daughter Maria is the author's fifth great grandmother.

Maria Bergen was likely the daughter of Heinrich Bergen (or von Bergen in some records) of Leske, a village situated about 10 km north of the larger population center of Marienburg [1] in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Villagers in Leske belonged to the Heubuden Mennonite congregation. Johann Peters might have come from the village of Ladekopp because church records show that Maria married Johann in 1776 in the Ladekopp Mennonite Church. However, they lived in Leske, about 8 km south of the village of Ladekopp, according to the 1776 Census of Mennonites in Prussia [2].

Maria and Johann were farmers who rented their land. In the 1776 census they were assigned to the economic category of "Low", placing them within the large, main economic category constituting about 76% of the Mennonite population of about 2,600 households. The couple had no children at the time the 1776 census was taken. As farmers renting their land, the Peters' financial circumstances were probably not as good as those who owned land. Their economic prospects for the future would have been challenging too - when the territory occupied by the Mennonites fell under the rule of the Prussian crown in 1772, leading to the 1776 census, Mennonites were prohibited from purchasing land except from other Mennonites. With a growing population there was no reasonable expectation that land ownership would have been attainable for this young couple. They probably considered themselves fortunate to be able to rent land upon which to earn a living.

Johann and Maria were among the earliest families to respond to the offer of land in New Russia made by the Tsarist government. They set out on the journey east and arrived in the new Mennonite settlement of Chortitza in 1789.

In the years leading to their arrival in Chortitza, Johann and Maria had six children, a son and five daughters. The first five children, born in Leske, were recorded in the Heubuden Church records. It appears that the sixth child, a daughter named Susanna, was born during the journey from Leske to Chortitza - the record of the first settlers indicates they had six children upon arrival [3].

The family established their homestead, with a land allotment of about 175 acres, in the village of Schoenhorst. In the 1795 Chortitza census we see the entire family represented. However, by 1797 Susanna, the youngest child, had died. She would have been less than eight years of age [4].

In 1797 the family possessed 4 horses and 14 head of cattle, around the average livestock holdings for homesteaders in these early years. Johann was a tailor or a weaver (records differ) in addition to operating the farm.

By 1801 the three oldest children had moved away from the family home.

The eldest child, Jacob Peters (1776), married Maria Bueckert (1777), the widow of Michael Loewen (about 1771-1800). Jacob moved to the homestead belonging to Maria in Neuendorf. It appears that this property had originally belonged to Maria's father, Daniel Bueckert (about 1755-1790). Living with Jacob and Maria were her two children from her previous marriage, Jacob Loewen and Maria Loewen. *[Jacob Loewen is the author's third great grandfather in a separate ancestral line.]*

The next child in line, Katarina Peters (1778-about 1810), married Jacob Loeppke. They moved to a homestead in Schoenhorst.

The third child, Maria Peters (1781), married Johann Driedger (about 1740-1801) around 1800. The genealogical records are not very clear and require creative interpretation. It appears that Driedger, although four decades older than Maria Peters, had school age children when his first wife died, probably around 1800 or somewhat earlier. Thus, anxious to find a wife to mind the children, he married the much younger Maria. How this marital arrangement came about is unknown and one can barely imagine how the 19-year-old Maria felt about it. It appears they had a child born in 1801 who died while still an infant. Driedger also died in 1801, leaving Maria a widow. Later the same year she married Jacob de Veer (1780-1823), a descendant of the venerable de Veer family whose ancestry can be traced to fifteenth century Amsterdam. Maria retained the Driedger homestead in Neuendorf, and her new husband Jacob took over the farm in 1801. *[Maria Peters and Jacob de Veer are the author's fifth great grandparents.]*

In 1802 the parents, Johann Peters, and Maria Bergen, were still living in Schoenhorst. With them were their two youngest daughters, Anna, and Sara. Johann continued to work as a tailor, but the family also operated the farm. According to the 1802 Chortitza census the family possessed 6 horses, 8 head of cattle and 3 pigs, roughly the average for livestock holdings in Schoenhorst. Though this was only about 75% of the average for the settlement of Chortitza as a whole, they had a considerably greater number of horses than the average. Furthermore, they owned more domestic and farm equipment than the average. It is difficult to assess their financial success from this data, but it appears they were keeping pace with the other settlers, although the mix of their assets was different than the average settler homestead.

Maria Bergen died around 1804. There are no records to provide a precise date of death but by the time of the next census, in 1807, Johann had married Elizabeth Penner and started a new family, with the first child of the new marriage arriving around 1805.

In the meantime, the remaining daughters left the family home. Anna (1783) married Johann Wolf (1778-1848) and moved to his homestead in Schoenhorst. *[Anna Peters and Johann Wolf are the author's fourth great grandparents. Their story is told in Part 1 of this series at <https://www.mooserungenealogy.com/chortitza/articles/jacob-wolf-and-justina-harder/>.]*

Sara Peters has left no trace. It is possible that she died prior to the 1807 census.

Johann Peters remained in Schoenhorst with his second wife and new family. In 1816 the Chortitza census indicates that he had hired a worker named Isaac de Veer, a nephew of his son-in-law, Jacob de Veer. According to information in the Grandma Database Johann lived in Schoenhorst until his death in 1826 [5].

Maria Peters (1781) and Jacob de Veer (1780-1823)

Jacob de Veer was the son of Benjamin and Anna de Veer. He was a young boy when his family made the trek from Prussia to the Chortitza settlement in 1789. The de Veer's established their homestead in the village of Neuendorf. Likely this is where Jacob met Maria Peters. By 1801 Maria, at 20 years of age, had already experienced an eventful life. She had married Johann Driedger, a man 40 years her senior, borne a child, become a widow, lost her new child, inherited a homestead in Neuendorf, and remarried.

In 1801 Maria's three stepsons from her first marriage, ranging in age from 11 to 19 years, were living with the newly married couple. A year later the boys were gone, and the couple had a new daughter. The farm was growing as well, with the total livestock count increasing from 19 head to 26. In 1807 the family included three daughters. Jacob is listed as a blacksmith in the census of that year.

At the time of the 1811 census, dated November of that year, the family was thriving. Now there were five children with another one on the way. Then tragedy struck. Late in November one of the children died. A few days later the newborn infant died.

The pace of change continued. The family moved to the village of Neu-Osterwick, a new village established in the Chortitza settlement in 1812. The farm there was prospering in 1813. Total livestock had more than doubled by this time. The family continued to grow. Another child had been born. Jacob's elderly parents, Benjamin, age 80, and Anna, age 77, had come to live with his family. In addition, Jacob's nephew Issac de Veer had joined the family to help with the farm. Issac would later go to work for Maria's parents in Schoenhorst.

In 1816, the final year of robust census data, the family was still in Neu-Osterwick. In addition to significant numbers of horses and cattle the family possessed a significant herd of sheep at this

point. Sheep farming had become popular because sheep were not only profitable but well suited for grazing on land that was less productive for crops.

In later years the family continued to grow. In total Maria and Jacob had twelve or thirteen children, of whom nine survived past childhood. One of these children was a son, Isaac de Veer, born in 1810. Isaac would go on to marry Margaretha Falk in 1830. *[Isaac de Veer and Margaretha Falk are fourth great grandparents of the author.]*

Jacob de Veer died in 1823 at the age of 43. There are no records available to tell us more about Maria Peters [6].

Notes

[1] The relationship between Maria Bergen and her father Heinrich is somewhat speculative. For insight into this see Henry Schapansky's comments in *Mennonite Migrations*, pp. 598 and 657.

[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](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776%20West%20Prussia%20Census.pdf).

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. See his commentary about the economic categories in the 1776 Census at [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776 West Prussia Census.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776%20West%20Prussia%20Census.pdf).

[3] See the First Mennonite Settlers document constructed by Glenn Penner at [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/First Mennonite Settlers in Chortitza.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/First%20Mennonite%20Settlers%20in%20Chortitza.pdf).

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

[5] The Grandma Database is a subscription service available online at <https://grandmaonline.org>.

[6] See Henry Schapansky's analysis of the family in *Mennonite Migrations*, pp. 487-489 and information without source references in the Grandma Database.