

The Mennonite Settlers in Chortitza

Part 6 – Benjamin de Veer and his wife Anna

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Benjamin de Veer (1733-after 1816) and his wife Anna (1736-after 1816)

Benjamin and Anna are the author's sixth great grandparents.

Benjamin and Anna migrated to the Mennonite settlement of Chortitza around 1789, among the first group of 228 Mennonite households to reach the new lands in Ukraine [1].

There is uncertainty about Anna's family name. In his voluminous genealogy notes and charts Herman Thiessen suggested that it might have been Waberstein (Folder 411). Henry Schapansky indicates her name was Bergen [2]. An English translation of Benjamin Unruh's work has a notation suggesting her family name was Bergen, but Unruh did not publish this piece of information [3]. I suspect the latter data was based on Schapansky. Miscellaneous other researchers have postulated that the name may have been Habenstein or Habenstein. Indeed, the 1727 Brandregister Land Census contains references to Hans Habenstein in Einlage, Isaac Habenstein in Klein Mausdorf, and Abraham Habenstein in Krebsfelde, all adjacent villages in the area of the Rosenort Gemeinde, the Mennonite congregation to which Benjamin and Anna belonged in the 1780s [4]. Therefore, Habenstein could be correct, although it is not a common Mennonite name.

Anna's ancestry may be unknown, but Benjamin's family history has deep roots though it contains gaps in the genealogical record that have puzzled researchers for years. Michael Calmeyer completed the first genealogical publication focused on the de Veer family in the early 1900s [5]. His mother was a de Veer. Calmeyer's self-published work was limited to a print run of about five copies using a typewriter. I am fortunate to possess one copy. When one compares facts dated to the 17th century in Calmeyer's work with entries in the Danzig Flemish Mennonite Church records it becomes evident that he used these church records as an important research source. I point this out because Calmeyer had access to this primary source before World War II allied bombs hit the Danzig Mennonite Church housing the records. Records up to the mid-1600s perished in the resulting fire. Calmeyer would have seen and used the earlier records in his research, prior to their destruction, thus preserving a small portion of these lost primary records.

Calmeyer dates the eldest de Veer ancestor to the early 16th century. Jan de Veer lived in Schiedam, today a suburb of modern Rotterdam. There in 1556 Gysbert de Veer (1556-1615) was born. Gysbert married Deborah Harnasveger (1560-1627) in Amsterdam in 1580.

Deborah had an interesting family background. Her grandfather, Jacob Harnasveger (1480-about 1560), an armorer by trade, was a member of a Radical Reformation group that hatched a

plot to take over by force the administration of Amsterdam and expel the Roman Catholic presidium [6]. The authorities discovered the plot and arrested the instigators, Jacob among them. The leaders received severe punishments. Before Jacob was due for his trial he escaped to The Hague. The authorities recaptured him and returned him to Amsterdam for trial. His sentence was lenient by the standards of the day, being expulsion from Amsterdam for two years. After Jacob completed his sentence he returned to continue with his old life. A couple of years later he found himself in more trouble. A spy had overheard Jacob making "anti-papist" comments and for this the authorities once again took an interest in him. An investigation followed but there were no repercussions.

Gysbert and Deborah were among the Dutch Mennonites who joined the Flemish Mennonite congregation in the early years of the Danzig church, establishing de Veer roots in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. The de Veers were in the merchant trading business. They purchased and shipped grain from the rich grain production regions in north central Europe through Danzig to Amsterdam, and no doubt transported valuable trade goods back to Danzig on the return trips [7].

In the early 17th century, the family began to branch out geographically toward the east. There is an expanse of territory known as Gross Werder, a triangle shaped area bordered on the north by the Baltic Sea, on the west by the Vistula River stretching from Danzig south to the confluence of the Vistula and Nogat rivers and then northeast along the Nogat to the city of Elbing. Large populations of Dutch Mennonites settled this area. One son of Gysbert and Deborah, also named Gysbert (1600-1646), married Maria van Dijck, whose family lived in Klein Mausdorf, a village located in the Gross Werder, 16 km. west of Elbing. Gysbert and Maria lived in Danzig after their marriage, but Calmeyer says their son Gysbert (1640-1693) moved to the Gross Werder area.

Gysbert (1640-1693) married Katarina von Roy (1639-1718). This marriage was one of three in which de Veer siblings married von Roy siblings. The von Roy family were prominent merchants in Elbing. Marital arrangements of this sort occurred often among wealthy families who used such alignments to promote business interests and safeguard wealth. In this case, the von Roy family appears to have had marital connections with the important Konigsberg merchant family Maraun. Katarina's father, Wilhelm, was a grandson of Georg Maraun, whose father Mathew had built a substantial business empire in Konigsberg in the 16th century [8].

The de Veer pioneers who settled in Tsarist Russia a century later were descendants of Gysbert (1640-1693) and Katarina (1639-1718) [9]. Based on the timeline of birth and death dates Benjamin would have been a grandson or great grandson of Gysbert. Gysbert lived in the Gross Werder area, and we might expect to find his descendants there. Benjamin certainly lived there. The 1772 Census of West Prussia places Benjamin in the village of Ruckenau [10]. He was a teacher in the village. The 1782-1795 Rosenort Gemeinde Baptism records place Benjamin in Klein Mausdorf in 1785 [11]. Finally, Unruh indicates that Benjamin's son Jacob was from

Krebsfeld before he moved to Chortitza [12]. Jacob was nine years of age when he accompanied his parents on the journey. All three villages are within the territory of the Gross Werder.

The Mennonite DNA Project, through Y-DNA testing, has established Benjamin's lineage dating back to Gysbert de Veer (1556-1615).

Upon emigrating to Ukraine in 1789, Benjamin and Anna settled in Neuendorf, a newly established village in the settlement of Chortitza. With them were four children: Anna (1765); Maria (1777); Jacob (1780); and Cornelius (1784) [13]. Isaac (1763), the oldest son, moved independently in 1795. Henry Schapansky suggests that he had stayed behind in Prussia to wind up affairs [14].

By 1795 daughter Anna de Veer (1765) had married widower Johann Siemens and moved to the village of Chortitza [15]. In 1801 her stepdaughter, Agatha Siemens, died at the age of sixteen. In 1802 Anna's first child, Maria, was born. In 1803 her second child, Anna, was born. After the last birth record entry in the vital statistics for the settlement, the record for the entire family goes silent.

Benjamin may have been employed as a schoolteacher in Ruckenau in 1772, but he became a successful farmer in Neuendorf. The 1801 Neuendorf census lists him with four horses, eleven cattle and ten sheep. This compares favorably with his neighbors in the village of Neuendorf. The 1801 census also lists his occupation as a watch maker. Often people with trades appear in these census records with reduced farming operations in relation to their neighbors. This is not the case with Benjamin, who seems to have been able to balance his farm and his trade successfully. His youngest son Cornelius was 18 years of age in the 1801 census and no doubt contributed significantly to the prosperity of the farm. In 1801 daughter Maria was no longer living with the family. It is unclear what happened to her because no other census records at this point or in later years mention her.

In 1801 Isaac (1763), the eldest son of Benjamin and Anna, had established his family in the village of Chortitza where he had a small farm and worked as a weaver.

In 1801 Jacob (1780), one of the two sons who had immigrated with Benjamin and Anna, was married to Maria Peters (1781). The new couple continued to live in Neuendorf, starting a family there. Part 2 of this series features the story of Maria Peters and her ancestors. That article also describes the family of Jacob and Maria in considerable depth. Part 2 is online at <https://www.mooserungenealogy.com/chortitza/articles/part-2-johann-peters-and-maria-bergen/>. *[Jacob de Veer and Maria Peters are the author's fifth great grandparents.]*

Around 1803 the youngest son of Benjamin and Anna, Cornelius (1784), married and moved to Nieder Chortitza to establish his own homestead. It was around this time that Benjamin and Anna retired, remaining in Neuendorf but moving from their farm. They remained living independently until around 1813 when, at fairly advanced ages for that era (80 and 77

respectively), the couple moved to Osterwick to live with their son Jacob (1780) and his family. They were still living there in 1816, the last year of census records.

Early in 1830 Isaac de Veer (1810-1889), the fifth child of Jacob and Maria, married Margaretha Falk (1810-1863). She was a daughter of David Falk (1759-1818) and Maria Bartsch (1783). David Falk had emigrated to Chortitza in 1793 with his first wife and their children. He came from Plauschwarren in Lithuanian. The Plauschwarren church records list his baptism in 1777 and his first marriage in 1791 [16]. The church records also provide the name of his father, David Falk. *[Isaac de Veer and Margaretha Falk are the author's fourth great grandparents.]*

David Falk's first wife died in 1806, after which he remarried. His second wife, Maria Bartsch (1783) was a daughter of deputy Johann Bartsch. Bartsch was one of the emissaries who made the scouting journey to Tsarist Russia in 1787 to survey the opportunities for Mennonite settlement, responding to a generous offer extended by the administration of Catherine the Great. For a comprehensive treatment of Johann Bartsch see these articles: Eastern Settlement: The Johann Bartsch Story (1757-1821) at <https://www.mooserrungealogy.com/articles/eastern-settlement-the-johann-bartsch-story/> and The Deputies vs. Elder David Epp (1789-1798) at <https://www.mooserrungealogy.com/articles/the-deputies-vs-elder-david-epp/>.

The first daughter of Isaac de Veer (1810) and Margaretha Falk (1810) was Maria (1830-1895), born near the end of 1830. In later years she married Johann Dyck (1826-1921). Part 5 of this series tells the story of Maria de Veer and Johann Dyck. It can be found online at <https://www.mooserrungealogy.com/chortitza/articles/part-5-jacob-dyck-and-anna-dyck/>. *[Maria and Johann are the author's third great grandparents.]*

Source Notes

[1] Glenn H. Penner's article describing the earliest settlers in Chortitza: https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/First_Mennonite_Settlers_in_Chortitza.pdf.

[2] Henry Schapansky, *Mennonite Migrations (and the Old Colony)*, Winnipeg, Schapansky, 2006, p. 487.

[3] Compare Benjamin Heinrich Unrau, *Die niederlandisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18., und 19. Jahrhundert*, Karlsruhe, Heinrich Schneider, 1955, p. 255 with

Enns, Friesen, Janzen, Redekopp, B. H. Unrau's *Research on Mennonite Migration to Russia, 1787-1795*, Winnipeg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2018, p. 61.

[4] The Complete Brandregister of 1727, transcribed by Glenn H. Penner, is online at https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Brandregister_1727.htm.

[5] M. R. H. Calmeyer, *De Geschiedenis van het Geslacht de Veer van 1556 – 1929*, self-published in 1929. In later years abridged versions of Calmeyer's research have appeared in *De Nederlandsche Leeuw*, a well-respected Dutch genealogical journal.

[6] Barry Teichroeb, *Jacob Harnasveger: 16th Century Anabaptist Reformer*, Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian, Volume 26 No. 1, 2021. Also, online at <https://www.mooserungenealogy.com/articles/jacob-harnasveger-16th-century-anabaptist-reformer/>.

[7] Nanne van der Zijpp, "Veer, de (De Fehr, Fehr, Defehr, Devehr, Dever, Devaehr, Du Verre) family.", *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1959, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Veer, de \(De Fehr, Fehr, Defehr, Devehr, Dever, Devaehr, Du Verre\) family](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Veer,_de_(De_Fehr,_Fehr,_Defehr,_Devehr,_Dever,_Devaehr,_Du_Verre)_family).

[8] Joachim von Roy, *Beiträge zur Genealogie der westpreussischen Herren von Roy*, Bonn und Luneberg, Johanni, 1998. These articles contain further information about the von Roy:

Barry Teichroeb, *A Mennonite Dynasty in Danzig (1580-1700)*, <https://www.mooserungenealogy.com/articles/a-mennonite-dynasty-in-danzig/>.

[9] Calmeyer.

[10] See the records for Ruckenaus in *The 1772 Census of West Prussia: Villages Containing Mennonites*, extracted by Glenn H. Penner and found at: https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1772/West_Prussia_Census_1772.pdf.

[11] See *Mennonite Baptisms in Rosenort, West Prussia 1782-1795*, transcribed by Adalbert Goertz and edited by Glenn H. Penner: https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Rosenort_Baptisms_1782-1795.htm.

[12] Unruh, p. 267.

[13] The record is vague on this point. There were six people in the family group, composed of four adults and two children. It follows that Benjamin, Anna, and daughters Anna and Maria would be the adults counted in the family unit, while Jacob and Cornelius would be the children. Although Benjamin and Anna had other children, it appears that with the exception of their eldest son, Isaac, who moved to the settlement in 1795, the other children must have predeceased the migration.

[14] Schapansky, p. 365.

[15] The abundance of census records in the early years of the Chortitza settlement provide much of the information related to events and farming assets described in this narrative. These materials are online at <https://mennonitegenealogy.com>.

[16] Erwin Wittenberg and Manuel Janz, *Die Mennonitengemeinde im nördlichen Ostpreußen*, Bolanden-Weierhof, Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., 2022, p. 177.