Post-Reformation Mennonite Migration: 1550-1600

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Introduction

This is the third in a series of articles describing Europe during the rise of the anabaptist movement, through the lives of people whom I can identify as ancestral members of my family tree. The Reformation and the emergence of anabaptist theology led to the establishment of a unique Netherlandic Mennonite ethnological group. Historians often portray the story of these people in religious terms. In contrast, this series of articles will present a narrative dealing with the more secular political, economic, and social dimensions of this group.

Challenges to Economic and Political Power

The first two parts of this series explained how the Netherlandic region provided an ideal breeding ground for radical ideas about religious belief in lockstep with progressive economic, political, and social developments. In the early years of the sixteenth century the Anabaptist movement was able to take root and flourish in the Netherlandic area. However, as the movement expanded and the number of adherents grew, it also became more visible to the political and ecclesiastical leaders who prevailed in the region.

The Mennonite movement presented a serious threat to the political system by challenging the principles upon which power rested. If infant baptism was meaningless, as the Mennonite community claimed, then it was a fraud perpetrated by the Catholic Church on generations of parishioners who lived and died believing in the false promise that they were destined for eternal life by virtue of their baptism. Furthermore, if the Catholic Church was a fraud, then its pronouncement of the divine right of Kings, and specifically the divine right of the Holy Roman Emperor, to rule their territorial possessions, was illegitimate. The loyalty of Mennonites to the crown was also suspect. Mennonites refused to give oaths and to serve in the military. Therefore, the perception arose that the emperor could never rely on the loyalty of these subjects.

It was too much for the ruling elite to bear. Whereas the Emperor had previously ordained the illegality of the Anabaptist movement, now he took action to enforce the law with grim violence. The Crown appointed an Inquisitor for the Netherlandic territories. The Inquisition proceeded to root out Mennonite followers with ruthlessness and efficiency.

The Mennonite Reaction

In response to the hostility and violence of the Inquisition, the Mennonite movement went underground, worshipping in hidden churches and doing what it could to avoid the attention of authorities.

Desperate Mennonites fled north and east to escape the Inquisition. The Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, promulgating a longstanding policy of religious tolerance, offered refuge to the dislocated Anabaptists. The enduring tradition of Hanseatic commerce created an opportune environment within which the migrants could flourish. The Plautdietsch language, shared by cities across the Hanseatic League, combined with economic ties and geographic familiarity, made accommodation and adaptation possible for Mennonites anxious to resettle in a more hospitable environment.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century Mennonite settlers established themselves in the major cities of the Vistula delta. Danzig in the northwest, Elbing in the northeast, and Marienburg in the south midway between these cities, saw large numbers of new Netherlandic immigrants. Mennonite merchants, craftsmen, and farmers moved their families and livelihoods to these cities and their adjacent rural areas, grateful to be able to preserve their cultural lifestyle.

As the Mennonite population grew, the marshy lands of the Vistula delta offered opportunities for economic expansion. The new settlers drained marshes, built canals, and reclaimed rich farmland. In time a successful agrarian economy emerged in the delta.

The Mennonites in the Vistula Delta

The Mennonites flourished in the Vistula Delta. They transitioned rapidly from a group of dislocated members of a marginalized religious community to a valued, if grudgingly by political and ecclesiastical authorities, contributors to the economic welfare of the state.

Danzig and Elbing, being larger population centers, hosted a mingling of religious denominations. Families of diverse religious leanings found common purpose in their commercial activities. The intermarriages of the von Roy and the de Veer families of the author's genealogical tree forged a network of relationships among families of disparate religious affiliations that, no doubt, helped to cement commercial alliances.

Gysbert de Veer was among the earliest members of the Danzig Mennonite Church, having moved to the Danzig area in the late 1500s. He was a grain merchant operating trading vessels on the shipping route between Amsterdam and Danzig, in collaboration with a brother who remained in Amsterdam. Gysbert was married to Deborah Harnasveger, a granddaughter of Jacob Harnasveger, the armorer convicted of aiding the radical reformers in Amsterdam in the 1530s (see the second part of this series: *Reformation: 1500-1550*).

The van Dijck family, another Mennonite family, had already settled in the Danzig area as early as the 1560s. Philip van Dijck was born there in 1564. He married Maria Grauwerts, a Mennonite woman born in 1568 in the village of Klein Mausdorf, near the city of Elbing.

Gysbert de Veer, a son of Gysbert de Veer and Deborah Harnasveger, married Maria van Dijck, a daughter of Philip can Dijck and Maria Grauwerts.

Around the same time that the senior Gysbert de Veer and his wife Deborah relocated to Danzig, Georg Maraun also moved to live in the city. He relocated from the city of Konigsberg where his extended family were merchants trading along the Baltic Sea route from Konigsberg to Elbing and Danzig. The Marauns were Lutherans, as this was the official religion of the Duchy of Prussia where Konigsberg was located. A daughter of Georg, Gertud Maraun, married Anthonius von Roy, a Calvinist living in Danzig, in 1587. In later years Wilhem von Roy, a son of Anthonius von Roy and his wife Gertrud, became a merchant and trader in Elbing.

Three of Wilhelm von Roy's children married three children of the younger Gysbert de Veer. One of the grooms, Philip de Veer, became a trader and broker in Klein Mausdorf, the village of his grandmother, Maria Grauwerts. In this time of intense religious polarity and sharply defined boundaries between different systems of belief one is inclined to presume that religious barriers would be difficult to surmount. However, the network of interfaith marriages described above demonstrates that this was not always the case. Families made spiritual compromises in furtherance of commercial interests.

Genealogical Notes

Gerd P. v. Piwkowski completed the genealogical work related to the Maraun family (https://stammbaum.piwkowski.org/index.php). Joachim von Roy completed the genealogical work related to the von Roy family and its relationship though marriage to the Maraun family (Joachim von Roy, *Beitrage zur Genealogie der westpreussischen Herren von Roy*, Bonn, and Luneberg, Johanni, 1998). Michael Calmeyer completed the de Veer genealogical work (M. H. R. Calmeyer, *De Geschiedenis van het Geslacht de Veer van 1556 – 1929*, Calmeyer, 1929).

Joachim von Roy has written that Wilhelm von Roy was the man whose three children married into the de Veer family. This differs from Michael Calmeyer, who asserted that the man was Jan von Roy. In correspondence with Joachim von Roy, he confirmed that Calmeyer's work in this regard was based on an error in the Danzig records upon which Calmeyer relied, and Joachim was confident in his identification of the man as Wilhelm von Roy.

Whether Wilhelm von Roy was the son of Anthonius and Gertrud, is not completely certain. Joachim von Roy says that this was "probably" the case. The commercial circumstances of this group of related families supports this assertion – it was common at the time for wealthy business families to arrange marriages to preserve wealth and capital and secure their businesses.