

Margaretha Froese

'Mother' of the MB Church?

Jacob P. Becker, the first minister of the Mennonite Brethren Church, kept a hand-written "diary," in which he wrote a detailed history of the beginnings of the Mennonite Brethren Church. On several unused pages in this journal, he also listed the family record of his second wife, Margaretha Wiens.

The family record begins with a certain *ABRAHAM WIENS*, birthdate unknown, who was married in 1822 to *MARGARETHA FROESE* (1801-1873). Abraham Wiens and Margaretha Froese lived in the village of Elizabethtal in the Molotschna Mennonite Colony of southern Russia, and had the following nine children:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1. HELENA | born February 3, 1824 |
| 2. MARIA | born March 7, 1826 |
| 3. CORNELIUS | born December 2, 1827 |
| 4. ABRAHAM | born April 26, 1830 |
| 5. ANNA | born April 16, 1833 |
| 6. ELIZABETHA | born April 21, 1836; died September 27, 1837 |
| 7. MARGARETHA | born December 15, 1838 |
| 8. JOHANN | born March 5, 1841 |
| 9. JAKOB | born November 12, 1843 |

Abraham Wiens died on September 19, 1844. His widow, Margaretha Froese, later married *FRANZ KLASSEN* on January 6, 1846. She died on February 24, 1873. The birth and death dates of Franz Klassen are not known.

This completes the known facts surrounding Margaretha Froese, and there would probably be little interest in her if it were not for a singular event that took place on January 6, 1860, the fourteenth anniversary of her marriage to Franz Klassen: the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

On that cold winter evening, a group of people gathered together at Isaak Koop's house in Elizabethtal. They discussed the problems they were having with church officials because they had celebrated communion privately, in violation of church regulations. After long discussion and prayer, eighteen of the men present signed a document announcing their withdrawal from the established Mennonite churches of the colony.

No mention is made regarding any women being present during the deliberations, but it is highly likely that Margaretha Froese Wiens Klassen was there. We do know that her husband, Franz Klassen, was present, because he was one of the eighteen who signed the secession document. Two other signers were her two eldest sons, Cornelius Wiens, aged 32, and Abraham Wiens, aged 29. Yet another signer, Jacob P. Becker, aged 31, would become her son-in-law by marrying Margaretha's daughter Margaretha Wiens.

In short, four members of Margaretha Froese's family were among the relatively small number of men who risked much by openly seceding from the Mennonite Church of the Molotschna Colony. Members of Margaretha's family would continue to be significant leaders in the new Mennonite Brethren Church from that time forward.

FRANZ KLASSEN, Margaretha's husband, would be elected the first deacon of the new church on May 30, 1860. Moreover, because no elder in the established Mennonite churches of the colony would perform the ordination of the new group's first elder, Franz Klassen was selected to lay hands on Heinrich Huebert, the first elder. P.M. Friesen states that this was due to the fact that Franz Klassen was



Margaretha Froese
Wiens Klassen

the oldest member of the new fellowship.

Signer *CORNELIUS WIENS*, Margaretha's oldest son, would later migrate with his wife, Sara Dueck, and their three children to the United States, settling in Henderson, Nebraska, where he died on June 4, 1885. His widow and children apparently later moved to Oklahoma. His descendants reside in a number of western states, and many of them continue as members of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

It was in his home in Elizabethtal, incidentally, that the private communion service had been held in the Fall of 1859, leading to the secession of the "Brethren."

Signer *ABRAHAM WIENS*, Margaretha's second son, remained in Russia. He and his family moved with other early members of the Mennonite Brethren Church to the Kuban region of Southern Russia, where they established a new, primarily Mennonite Brethren settlement.

Daughter *MARGARETHA WIENS* became the second wife of signer *JACOB P. BECKER*. At the first election of church officers, he was elected minister of the new church. He and his family later migrated to the United States. They resided for a number of years in Fairview, Oklahoma, where Jacob P. Becker died on April 12, 1908. Margaret Wiens Becker died there also on December 8, 1925. Many of their descendants reside throughout the United States, and a large number have made significant contributions to the life and work of the U.S. Mennonite Brethren Church.

Daughter *HELENA WIENS* was married to David Schroeder. She died on October 13, 1876, shortly after migrating to Buhler, Kansas. Many Mennonite Brethren descendants still reside in Kansas and other parts of the United States.

Daughter *ANNA WIENS* was married to Bernhard Janzen. He was also a leader in the settlement of the Kuban Mennonite Brethren Colony. He and his family migrated to the United States in 1879, and many descendants, including a large number of Mennonite Brethren leaders and members, reside throughout the United States. She died June 1, 1895.

Children *MARIA WIENS* (who married a Martin Mierau), *JOHANN WIENS*, and *JAKOB WIENS* remained in Russia. Little is known regarding these children, but it is likely that they and their descendants have provided the same level of leadership and faithfulness that has characterized the other members of Margaretha's family.

Unfortunately, the customs of nineteenth-century Mennonite culture have caused the details of Margaretha Froese's life to be largely forgotten. We do not know her birthplace, although her daughter, Anna Wiens Janzen, reported on 1880 census documents that her mother was born in Prussia. We do not know about her childhood, personality, or education. The records of the time concentrate almost totally upon the men of history, and not the women.

However, we do know this: the impact of Margaretha Froese Wiens Klassen was of such power that her husband, her sons, and her daughters all left their mark upon the history of the church. They sacrificed their reputations, their fortunes, and their safety to publicly affirm their faith. While the historical silence about Margaretha is unfortunate, the evidence of her faith and testimony surrounds us in the fellowship of the church.

—Alan Peters