

# Unraveling the Origins: “How Much Dutch?”

The issue of “nationality” first confronted me when I was in the fifth grade. I remember the teacher asking us all to find out what countries in the world were the original homelands of our ancestors. “Ask your parents and grandparents,” she suggested, and so we all set out to discover the different places in the world where our forebears had lived. The end-product was to be a striking bulletin board display, with a map of the world and pins and strings connecting each of us to all the different nations represented by members of the class.

All four of my “Low German” grandparents clearly struggled when I presented the class assignment to them. They knew that they and their parents had come from Russia, but they were sure that they were not Russian. They acknowledged that German was their “mother tongue,” but they couldn’t remember anyone in the family saying they had come from Germany. Since “Mennonite” wasn’t a country, they couldn’t just give that as the easy answer that probably was closest to the truth!

Surprisingly, each one came up with the same solution: they all reported that they were “Dutch.” After all, wasn’t Menno Simons from Friesland, a province in Holland? Wasn’t the “Low German” language that they all knew and loved really a Dutch dialect? Most convincingly of all, didn’t they even call each other “Dutch?”

I dutifully reported this to my teacher and, unlike most of the other students whose strings branched out to all sorts of different places, my string was lonely but proud, leading solely to Holland. For years, I have been convinced that we “Low German” were unquestionably Dutch in origin.

Of course, I was aware of the special efforts within the Mennonite Brethren Church during the last century that brought other German-speaking folks into the church. Such names as Seibel, Ollenberger, Reiswig and Prieb represent the fruits of these early efforts at outreach. I also knew that the merger of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Brethren churches had brought a larger number of former “High German” Hutterites into the denomination, represented by such names as Hofer, Kleinsasser, Waldner and Wipf.

But it was always clear that the origins of these new groups were quite different, and we “Low Germans” still felt deep inside that we were “Dutch.” It is interesting to note that H. H. Schroeder, a Mennonite author residing in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, wrote a lengthy treatise proposing that the Low-German Mennonites of Russia were clearly of Dutch ancestry. His portrait at the beginning of the book, in which he is dressed in his Nazi uniform, might imply that one of the purposes of his theory had to do with demonstrating the so-called “Aryan” origins of the Russian Mennonites.

As time has gone by, we have discovered that our so-called “Low German” heritage is looking less and less Dutch. We

have begun to realize that the Low Germans among us represent a tapestry of national origins that might best be described as “variegated Anabaptist.”

## The problem of determining origins

The existing records of Low German Mennonite families often stretch back no further than Russia. In other words, our grandparents’ memories and traditions usually faded out somewhere in the distant past *after* the Mennonite migration to Russia. We now know that most of our ancestors settled in Russia sometime between 1789 and 1825. Our grandparents were generally too young to personally remember back that far. Even Mennonite family histories and genealogies generally have problems going back earlier than the Russian period. In many genealogies—including recent ones—when the author knows that someone moved to Russia from “somewhere else,” that “somewhere” is often given as “Holland” even though we now know that virtually no Mennonite family migrated directly from Holland to Russia. The “jumping off point” for almost every Mennonite migration to Russia was actually located in what is now Poland.

But all that information does is move the problem of origins from Russia to Poland. Here too the records are faint. Most Mennonite congregational records, and therefore most Mennonite family records, date back only to the end of the eighteenth century, with most records beginning in the 1770s or 1780s. Only the Danzig and Montau Mennonite church records go back earlier, both to the 1660s. However, most Mennonites stem from ancestors that came to Poland (often also referred to as “Prussia”) much earlier—anywhere from the 1530s to the early 1600s. Consequently, the “Dutch origins” theory has basically gone unquestioned until recently, even though it was itself based on assumptions and suppositions, rather than upon exhaustive research and documentation.

## Recent discoveries

For some time, scholars have been uncovering new documents and proposing new theories that recognize a significant “non-Dutch” origin for many of the Prussian-Polish Mennonites. Adalbert Goertz, for example, noticed that the earliest records of the Montau Mennonite Church, dating back to 1661, were written not in Dutch, but in High German. Moreover, he surmised that many of the surnames in that record were not Dutch, but Silesian, Bavarian, or Swiss.<sup>1</sup> This includes especially those names ending in -er or -el, such as Balzer, Becker, Decker, Buller, Karber, Kliever, Kopper, Bartel, Nickel, Rempel and Wedel.

We are now learning that the influx of non-Dutch Anabaptists into Prussia began as early as 1535, when sixty Anabaptist families, totalling two hundred persons, were expelled from Moravia and came to the area around Thorn and Graudenz in the Duchy of Prussia.<sup>2</sup> These constituted the core families in the Mennonite churches of that region.<sup>3</sup> Goertz believes that these “High German” immigrants from Moravia constituted the main core of the Montau Mennonite Church for more than four hundred years.

The *Chronicle of the Hutterite Brethren* relates how the persecutions of the early Anabaptist churches in Austria, Moravia, Silesia, Bavaria and Hungary caused the scattering of believers to many locations throughout eastern Europe. The *Chronicle* does not specifically mention the migration of 1535, but does state that a group of believers moved to Poland in 1536.<sup>4</sup> From that year on, the *Chronicle* relates dozens of new settlements and relocations throughout Europe caused by persecution and exile.

The most significant entry in the *Chronicle* describes the effort in 1604 to establish a Hutterite community in the region around Elbing, Prussia, where many Mennonites already lived. The migrating group was led by Joseph Hauser and Darius Heyn from Moravia to establish a community at Wengeln, Prussia, in the so-called “Kleinwerder” near Lake Drausen.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the much-later records of the Thiensdorf and Marcushof Mennonite churches show unmistakable traces of this Hutterite settlement. There are many non-Dutch names reflected in the church records, which begin in 1772, including Funk, Hein and Martens. It is likely that the Prussian Mennonite Hein family stems from this Darius Heyn who led the Hutterites to this area. In addition to these non-Dutch surnames, the records of these two Mennonite churches contain numerous first names that are very uncommon among the Dutch, but frequent among the Hutterites. These include such names as Darius, Tobias, Zacharias, Matthias and Absolon. Many families in the Thiensdorf and Marcushof Mennonite churches are even recorded as living in the very village of Wengeln where the Hutterites tried to establish their community.

Horst Penner also describes the significant influence that the Hutterite Anabaptists had upon the Mennonites of Prussia. He suggests that most of the Frisian Mennonite churches of the Vistula River Valley (Montau, Schönsee, Przechówka and Obernessau) were largely “High German” in their origins, and that most of the families in these churches were descendants of exiled Hutterites from Moravia. He further notes that when the Hutterites of Moravia were expelled in 1622, many of the “tens of thousands” of fleeing Hutterites joined their religious “cousins” in Prussia.<sup>6</sup>

Even though it seems that most of the High German influences were felt within the Frisian Mennonite churches of the Vistula Valley and the Kleinwerder, the Flemish Mennonites were also impacted. The early records of the Danzig Flemish Mennonite Church, for example, have a number of references to a man named Adam Tiroller. With our current understanding of the Hutterite influence in early Prussia, it is likely that “Tiroller” was not his surname, but rather an indication of his geographic origins in the Tyrol region of Austria, where the Hutterite

movement had its roots. Even his first name “Adam” and his wife’s name “Ursula” show more of a High German flavor than a Dutch, or Low German, one.

So now, many years after fifth grade, I look at my own family heritage, and see there such names as Reimer, Kasper, Voth, Wedel and Nachtigall. I suspect that the bulletin board display was probably all wrong. Granted, there certainly is a considerable amount of Dutch ancestry in my Low German heritage. However, we Low Germans now appear to have a serious streak of High German background.

In his 1976 study of the Montau Mennonite Church, Adalbert Goertz concluded that Prussia Mennonite names, so long considered exclusively Dutch, were probably in reality seventy percent Dutch, twenty-five percent High German or Swiss, and five percent of local Prussian origin. As time goes by, I am beginning to think that the High German influence in our Low German heritage may be much higher than Goertz, or anyone else, has ever realized!

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#### NOTES

1. Adalbert Goertz, “The Marriage Records of Montau in Prussia for 1661-1704,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 50 (1976): 240-250.

2. Horst Penner, “West Prussia,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 922.

3. Goertz, 240-250.

4. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, vol. 1, trans. & ed. by the Hutterian Brethren (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 155-156.

5. *Ibid.*, 561-564.

6. Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten in ihrem religiösen und sozialen Leben in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen*, vol. 1 (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1978), 76.

(“In Their Own Words,” continued from page 2)

“As we continued traveling south on Highway 81, we arrived in Columbus, Nebraska, sometime after the first of November. This town was the junction at Highway 30, leading west. We felt that we had reached a great milestone as we now turned west toward California.

“Merrily we rolled west along Route 30, hugging the banks of the Platte River—the scenery was beautiful. . . . For several days the road followed the winding river. Finally, the river turned into the north-west and Highway 30 turned due west. Our faces were turned west, for ahead of us lay our destination—Reedley, California. We had not traveled far in the State of Wyoming when we reached Cheyenne. Here we had our first encounter with the highway patrol. . . . The officer explained that he could not let us go any farther west on this route because it was too late in the fall season. He said the winter storms had already begun in the Rocky Mountains and the roads were very hazardous. He urged that we not continue because it could mean disaster for the whole family. . . . [He] suggested we travel south . . . through Denver, Colorado, and into New Mexico. Our first reaction was to disagree with the officer, as this new route seemed a lot longer and we were determined to continue west. Upon further study of a map and consultation with the officer, we turned south. . . .