

# The Hofers and Their Kin: An Overview of Hutterite Family History

Over the years, the makeup of those who call themselves “Mennonite” has been in a state of continuous change. New families with previously unfamiliar names have joined the church, while others with many years of history in the church somehow faded away. Thus, the members of almost every Mennonite congregation represent a rich but ever-changing tapestry of people with many different cultures, traditions, family names, and national origins.

One of the most significant “subcultures” that is now a part of the Mennonite Brethren mainstream in the United States, and in certain General Conference Mennonite congregations in South Dakota, is that thread represented by those of Hutterite ancestry. The Hutterites trace their origins to the hatmaker, Jakob Hutter, who shepherded the Anabaptist congregations of Austria and other parts of Central Europe until his martyrdom in 1536. He and his followers established many Anabaptist communities in the German-speaking territories to the east of Switzerland. Simultaneously, other Anabaptists more familiar to most of us were moving north to Germany and the Netherlands, establishing the congregations that later became known as “Mennonite.” Today, nearly all of the world’s remaining Hutterites live in the states of North and South Dakota and Montana, and the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The beliefs of the Hutterites closely parallel those of other Anabaptist groups (including the Mennonites), except one element of faith that is unique to them. They taught that all property and possessions were to be jointly owned by all. To this day, many Hutterites live in communes in which the congregation holds all property in common, and all members of the community share their goods for the benefit of all.

Fiercely persecuted by the Catholic rulers of the Austria-Hungarian empire, the once-numerous Hutterites dwindled to a handful of families who in 1767 fled during the dead of night from Transylvania to Wallachia, which is part of modern-day Romania. The sixty-seven persons who survived this dramatic escape later settled in Russia, where they eventually reestablished contact with their distant cousins, the Mennonites.

As early as the 1820s, intermarriage between the Hutterites and the Mennonites of Russia began to occur. Today many Mennonites trace their ancestry to these Hutterite survivors of 1767. Because the number of survivors was so small, there are only a handful of surnames that clearly mark the presence of Hutterite ancestors in a person’s background. These are **Glanzer, Gross, Hofer, Kleinsasser, Mendel, Miller, Pullman, Stahl, Tschetter, Waldner (or Waltner), Wipf, Wollman, and Wurz.** More recently, several Low German

Mennonite families joined Hutterite congregations and added their names to this short list. Low German surnames found among the Hutterites include **Decker, Janzen, Knels,** and most recently, **Teichroeb.**

There were also Hutterites who left their own congregations and joined the Mennonite communities in Russia. Most notable of these was Andreas Wollman, who settled in the Chortitz Colony and became the partner and son-in-law of the wealthy industrialist, Peter H. Lepp. Together they established “Lepp and Wallmann,” the largest Mennonite-owned manufacturing firm in Russia.

Some Hutterite families, in turn, trace their origin to a group of former Lutheran families from the Austrian province of Carinthia. These Lutherans, also persecuted by the Catholic leaders of Austria-Hungary, joined with the Hutterites in the 1750s, and soon became prominent leading families in the Hutterite community. These former Lutherans include the surnames **Glanzer, Hofer, Kleinsasser, Miller, Waldner, and Wurz.**

The close-knit nature of the Hutterites makes it quite easy to trace their family histories. Fortunately, the Hutterites have carefully preserved and maintained their church records and vital information. Every modern-day member of a Hutterite community can easily trace his or her ancestry back to the sixty-seven escaping survivors of 1767, due to the complete nature of the records that they have carried with them in all their subsequent migrations.

For example, all Hutterite (and consequently, Mennonite) Hofers are descended from Johann (born 1711) and Anna Hofer.



*A sixteenth-century woodcut depicting Hutterite dwellings and styles of dress.*

They, their five sons and two daughters represent the ancestors of all later Hofers within the Hutterite-Mennonite fold. Reverend Jacob D. Hofer, for example, is a great-great-great-great grandson of this progenitor, Johann Hofer. Interestingly, all of the intervening generations involved five consecutive Paul Hofers. Johann Hofer had a son Paul, born in 1751, who had a son Paul, born in 1779. He, in turn, had a son Paul, born in 1801, who had a son Paul, born in 1841. This Paul then had a son Paul, born in 1865, who was the father of Jacob D. Hofer.

In a similar fashion, all of the Hutterite descendants can be traced back to the original families who escaped to Russia. The Kleinsassers are all descended from four brothers: Johannes, Stephanus, Matthias and Joseph Kleinsasser. The Waldners find their progenitor in Joerg (born 1712) and Anna Waldner, who came to Russia with their three children. The comprehensive church records enable each family to be precisely traced to its original ancestors.

The fact that so few Hutterites survived and became the founding families of a new Hutterite community adds an additional twist to Hutterite family history. This has caused most persons with Hutterite ancestry to be descended many times from each of the "founding" families. Since only sixty-seven persons in the original families are the ancestors of many thousands of people in later generations, modern-day descendants find themselves descended over and over again from the same ancestral couple.

Since such intermarriage continues to this day among those in Hutterite colonies, they keep very careful records to avoid genetic difficulties to the extent possible. It is almost a given fact that any two people of Hutterite ancestry who marry are related to each other perhaps dozens of times. This limited "gene pool" creates definite concern and potential hazard!

Since persons of Hutterite ancestry are now commonplace within the larger Mennonite community, the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry ("GRANDMA") maintained by the California Mennonite Historical Society already contains most information regarding Hutterite families and their history. This computerized family resource is available for public use at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in the Hiebert Library of Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

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*("Jacob D. Hofer," continued from page 2)*

not grown up in the congregations they served.

According to this line of reasoning, if a church knew a pastor too well, members might have difficulty accepting his teaching and admonition. Memories of small indiscretions from the past, family problems and youthful mistakes might all serve to limit his effectiveness. This was, however, the very reason Mennonites traditionally wanted spiritual leaders whom they really "knew," from their own communities. It kept the leadership humble and expectations perhaps more realistic.

It is true that the traditional multiple ministry was necessary because of the unsalaried condition of each pastor. But it also represented a different, more communal, view of ecclesiastical

involvement. Now a monopoly on scriptural interpretation began to pass from a variety of people in the traditional multiple ministry, to a single individual. That person was no longer expected to work full-time alongside members of the church so as to, theoretically, better understand them while securing supplemental income. The administration of church affairs became a profession and ministers were no longer ministered to, at least not from the pulpit.

Throughout his ministry, Hofer had to face the contemporary reality of this transition. He received a salary, generally served congregations in communities he did not grow up in, but still had to secure outside employment so as to provide adequately for his family since ministerial salaries were quite low.

In 1929 Hofer moved his family back to Dinuba where he temporarily returned to farming and eventually joined the Reedley MB Church ministerial team. He also conducted revival meetings up and down the West Coast. In 1932, Hofer was called to help in a revival at the Reedley MB church that had continued into its third week, as decisions for Jesus were still being made. The nature of his deep spiritual commitment is shown by the fact that on the morning before services began Hofer went out alone into the vineyard. When he came back to the house at the end of the day he told his family that he had "conversed with God" and "humbled himself."<sup>10</sup> Now he was ready to preach that evening.

In 1933 J.D. was selected, via a seventy to twenty vote, as a minister in the Reedley MB Church. His assignment was to work specifically with the English preaching services, newly established "for the sake of the youth."<sup>11</sup> He also began the practice, followed throughout much of his ministerial career, of asking the church he served for two free months in his annual contract to conduct evangelistic services.

Mennonite Brethren churches of this era placed major emphasis on yearly revival services where unsaved persons were confronted with their sinful condition, "backsliders" were brought back into the fold, and all members of the church were urged to recommit their lives to the service of Jesus. Instead of calling upon their own ministers to preach at such services, congregations generally called persons designated as "evangelists" by the conference. Since these revivals sometimes went on for two weeks at a time, "until the spirit was no longer convicting people," evangelists like J.D. Hofer had a significant amount of work to do.

These evangelistic meetings were major events in the lives of the MB Church; they were the most important social-religious occasions on the church calendar. Though some young people used these events to explore dating possibilities and other social issues, the major focus of the meetings was to convince members of the audience to fix their hearts on spiritual matters.

Evangelists possessed the ability to convince people to change their lives, to alter the way in which they related both to God and to other people. Effective evangelists brought forth radical individual transformations through hard-hitting, emotion-laden preaching. Mennonite Brethren evangelists also played an important role in establishing and maintaining connection between the scattered groups of believers in the various district conferences. Evangelists provided contact between newly-established MB congregations and the more established assemblies.