

Where Were They in 1835?

Observations From the Molotschna Census

By Alan Peters

The discovery of the 1835 Molotschna census enables us to answer the intriguing question, “where were they in 1835?” Genealogists—and historians in general—often uncover fascinating insights by locating people of historical significance at certain milestones during their lives. For example, we carefully keep track of the places where someone was born, married, and where he or she died and was buried. We also log the movements of people during the course of their lives.

This focus on locations helps us to know where to look to find more information about a person. It can also help us answer questions about why people acted the way they did, and what influences they experienced during their lifetimes.

The 1835 census provides a point of reference for understanding our Mennonite forebears in Russia. The census data captures the demographics of the Molotschna Colony about halfway between its establishment in 1804 and the exodus of many of our ancestors in the 1870s. In fact, we can find many of our immigrant ancestors—that is, those who later migrated to North America—in the census.

One of the first things that most persons do when they sit down with a copy of the census is to hunt for their ancestors who lived in the Molotschna when the census was taken. What a thrill it is to find them in one of the village households, and learn about their families and neighbors, caught in a still picture now more than 160 years old.

To see what this process can tell us, let us search in the census for the households of those eighteen men who signed the famous 1860 document of secession that established the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Molotschna Colony, and see what we can learn from this exercise. This will give us information about these persons twenty-five years before that fateful day in January of 1860 when they decided to chart a different course in their religious pilgrimage.

The eighteen men who signed the document in 1860 were described as follows:

Elisabethtal	Abraham Cornelsen Cornelius Wiens Isaak Koop Franz Klassen Abraham Wiens
Lichtefelde	Martin Klassen Abraham Wiens

Schardau	Daniel Hoppe August Strauss
Rudnerweide	Jacob P. Becker
Pastwa	Isaac Regehr Andreas Voth Jacob Wall
Liebenau	Johann Claassen Heinrich Huebert
Ladekopp	Abraham Peters Peter Stobbe
Mariental	Dietrich Klaassen

The first thing that I discovered in looking for the location of these men in 1835 is that some are still impossible to identify. We know so little about some, and their names are so common in the census, that we cannot identify them with certainty. Included in this number are Franz Klassen of Elisabethtal, Martin Klassen and Abraham Wiens of Lichtefelde, and Jacob Wall of Pastwa.

Several of the men are not listed at all in the census because they had not yet come to the Molotschna Colony. Included in this number are Daniel Hoppe and August Strauss of Schardau (there were no persons with those surnames listed in the 1835 census at all), Jacob P. Becker of Rudnerweide, Andreas Voth of Pastwa, and Peter Stobbe of Ladekopp. It is likely that several of these came later in the year 1835 at the time of the Gnadenfeld migration; the census was taken just a few months before the major influx of “Gnadenfelders” arrived in the colony.

I believe that we have located the remaining “founders,” either in the 1835 census or otherwise, as follows:

Abraham Cornelsen of Elisabethtal

He is listed as a nine-year-old step-son of Abraham Abraham and Maria Wall at household #1 in the village of Grossweide. Since he is listed as having been born there, it appears that his father died in Grossweide, and his (step?) mother later married Mr. Wall, who took over the family farm. Since Mrs. Wall is listed as being twenty-eight years old in 1835, this raises some questions about the parentage of Agatha (Cornelsen) Gaede, Abraham's older sister, who was born in 1810. Further research regarding this family may

shed more light on the full and step relationships involved. There were two Wall sons—Cornelius, age four, and Gerhard, age one—also listed in the 1835 census. These would presumably have been step- or half-brothers of Abraham Cornelsen.

Cornelius and Abraham Wiens of Elisabeththal

These two brothers, aged seven and five respectively, appeared in the census as the sons of Abraham Abraham and Margareta Wiens at household #16 in Elisabeththal. Also listed is their mother and their three sisters, Helena, Maria and Anna. From other family records we know that their father, Abraham A. Wiens, died in 1844 and his widow remarried Franz Klassen of Elisabeththal, who appears above as one of the founders we have not been able to identify with certainty. All we know is that Mrs. Wiens married him after the death of her first husband, and he apparently came to Elisabeththal to become the head of the household there. Since a Wiens daughter, Margaretha, who was born in 1836 (after the census), married Jacob P. Becker, we know that four of the eighteen founders were connected to this one family.

Isaak Koop of Elisabeththal

He is listed as a seventeen-year-old son of Johann Andreas and Katerina Koop at household #21 in the village of Elisabeththal. The family is recorded as coming to Russia in 1819, settling first in the Chortitza Colony, and moving to Elisabeththal in 1824. This means that Isaak was born in Prussia before the family came to Russia. Besides the father and son, also listed in the household was Mrs. Koop, Isaak's older brother Johann (age eighteen), and one sister, Katharina (age fifteen).

Jacob P. Becker of Rudnerweide

Jacob P. Becker is not listed in the census, since he was born in Russian Poland (probably in the Volhynia region) and moved to the Molotschna with his parents some years after the 1835 census. It is interesting to see that he resided in Rudnerweide at the time of the 1860 event. He writes in his diary that his mother lived there. We do know that he was first married to a Widow Goertz, and there are a number of Goertz families listed in Rudnerweide in 1835. Presumably, he married a widow there and perhaps assumed responsibility for her household at that time. She died and he later married Margaretha Wiens, the step-daughter of founder Franz Klassen of Elisabeththal, and the sister of founders Cornelius and Abraham Wiens, also of Elisabeththal.

Isaac Regehr of Pastwa

We cannot yet identify this Isaac Regehr with certainty, since we know so little about him. There were, however, relatively few persons by this name in the colony in 1835,

and we therefore suspect that he is the same person as the Isaac Regehr, age five, who is listed as the son of Jacob Bernhard and Sara Regehr at household #18 in Rudnerweide. The family is recorded as having moved to Russia in 1808, settling originally in the Chortitza Colony, but moving to Rudnerweide in 1826. Others listed in the household are four brothers: Johann, Bernhard, Peter and Abraham. This



Jacob P. and Margaretha Becker

Photo: Center for MB Studies

family had other connections with the early Mennonite Brethren community, in that Isaac's next older brother, Abraham (age seven in 1835), may have later married Maria Becker, the sister of founder Jacob P. Becker. Further research is needed to confirm this suspicion.

Johann Claassen of Liebenau and Dietrich Klaassen of Mariental

These two men were brothers, and are listed in the 1835 census as the sons of David and Agnetha Klaassen at household #40 in Sparrau. Their father had died sometime before the census, and since widows could not legally own property, it seems that the legal owner of the property was Dietrich and Johann's older brother, David. At the time of the census, Dietrich was already twenty-six years old, married, and the father of two sons, David and Heinrich. Johann was fifteen years old at the time of the census. There were a number of other family members listed in the household at the time of the census, including the wives of David and Dietrich, and two additional brothers and three sisters of Dietrich and Johann. The census indicates that both Dietrich and Johann were born before the family moved to Russia.

Heinrich Huebert of Liebenau

Heinrich is listed as a twenty-four-year-old married son of Klaas Klaas and Anna Huebert at household #14 in the village of Münsterberg. Also listed are Heinrich's wife Agatha, and a two-year-old daughter, also named Agatha. There are a large number of others in the household, including three full brothers of Heinrich and one half-brother, plus two full sisters and two half-sisters. We do not know the circumstances that caused Heinrich and his family to move later to Liebenau.

Abraham Peters of Ladekopp

Abraham Abraham Peters is listed as a twenty-five-year-old head of household residing at household #27 in Ladekopp. He moved there in 1831, presumably at the time of his marriage to the Widow Johann Johann Martens. Martens died in 1830, and in the household as of 1835 are three sons and two daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Martens. We do not know if any children were born to the Peters marriage. The entry for Münsterberg #26 indicates that Abraham Peters moved from there in 1831. He was the son of an Abraham Peters, but apparently the step-son of Johann Johann Reimer, who headed the Münsterberg household in 1835.

Observations

There are a number of interesting conclusions that can be drawn from the above-mentioned entries in the 1835 census. First, a surprisingly large number of the founders were immigrant, rather than native-born, members of the Molotschna settlement. Indeed, a significant number appear to have migrated even after the 1835 census. Given that the large majority of Molotschna residents were descended from settlers who came long before the 1830s, this seems to indicate that the founders of the Mennonite Brethren Church were different in this respect from the average Molotschna Mennonite.

Second, there is a definite "east colony" bent to the eighteen founders. The founding families were clustered in the southeast corner of the colony, with only the Ladekopp and Liebenau families outside this close geographical area. When we consider that the majority of the founders appear previously to have been members of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church, this makes only the Ladekopp "outsider" Abraham Peters somewhat conspicuous in his presence in the group. The village of Liebenau is known to have been populated by a number of Gnadenfeld Church members.

Third, the village of Elisabethtal had a clear dominance as the home of a large number of founders. This is due to some extent to the close family relationship between the Wiens brothers and their step-father, Franz Klassen. But the fact that Abraham Cornelsen and Isaak Koop were also from that village makes it clearly a center of early Mennonite Brethren sentiment.

The 1835 census has clearly added a wealth of new information about the early Mennonite Brethren families of the Molotschna. As some of the other founders are definitely identified, even more insights will be revealed. We welcome any additional information about the other founders so that we can increase our knowledge about them and their families. Undoubtedly, the census will be a "gold mine" of new information for all Mennonite historians who are seeking answers to the many questions that still exist regarding the Molotschna Colony and its inhabitants.

Early Mennonite Brethren Membership Lists found in St. Petersburg Archives

By John B. Toews

The current microfilming project in the Russian imperial archives in St. Petersburg, spearheaded by St. Petersburg Christian College, promises a rich supply of documents for future historians and genealogists. The first microfilm reel from this project contained an unexpected surprise for researchers interested in the early Mennonite Brethren Church. On this reel were two membership lists for that group: the first compiled on February 29, 1860, and the second on January 5, 1861.

We have always know about some of the founding persons thanks to documents published by Franz Isaac and Peter M. Friesen.¹ Our only knowledge of the other earliest Mennonite Brethren members, however, derives from the eighteen signatories to the secession document of January 6, 1860, and the fifteen additional names attached to the March 30 letter addressed to the leadership of the Ohrloff and Halbstadt churches.² These two documents account for all but one of the names—Johann Hubert of Wernersdorf—compiled on the newly-discovered list of February 29, 1860. In the patriarchal fashion of the day, district officials listed only the male heads of families, but it seems reasonable to believe that their wives shared their convictions. The register, while containing mostly known names, nevertheless provides new perspective—the early Mennonite Brethren Church did not consist of 25 family heads, but of 130 persons, both male and female. Obviously there were other "mothers in Christ" like Katherine Reimer Claassen (the wife of Johann Claassen), some of whose letters were published by P. M. Friesen.³ We can only speculate what role the wives of Abraham Cornelsen, Dietrich Klassen or Jacob Reimer played in disciplining their large families to become the next generation of Mennonite Brethren.

The listing of February 29, 1860 clearly delineates the demographics of the early Mennonite Brethren movement. Most of the dissidents were concentrated in the southeastern villages along the Jushanlee River: Elisabethtal, Schardau,