

Genealogy

A Story My Grandfather Told Me

by Alan Peters



Wedding photo of Dietrich D. Peters and Elizabeth Wiebe, grandparents of Alan Peters. Dietrich Peters related incidents from his childhood to his grandson, including a story about being present on the day in 1891 when Claas Epp believed he would ascend to heaven. (Photo courtesy of Alan Peters.)

At one time, I was convinced that history books described people long ago and far away, people who had nothing to do with my life. Now that I'm reaching an "historic" age myself, I am learning that the books actually tell the stories of people just like us. Sometimes, those stories are about people who participated in an event that changed the course of history. Most amazingly, the years have taught me that even our own families were participants in the very events that we read about in our church history books! Consider, for example, these stories that my grandfather told me many years ago.

long journey by wagon on this ill-fated quest for the thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth!¹

Another larger group was led by a self-proclaimed prophet by the name of Claas Epp, who not only steadfastly believed that the return of the Lord was imminent, but also claimed for himself a special role in the coming kingdom. He even declared that he was the son of Jesus and the fourth member of the Trinity! After having a prophetic dream, he announced that he would soon ascend into heaven, and he set the date—August 8, 1889—for this remarkable event. When his first attempt to ascend was unsuccessful, he rein-

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My grandfather, Dietrich D. Peters, was born in 1883 in Nikolaipol, a Mennonite village in Turkestan, Central Asia—now part of Kazakhstan, as far as I can tell. His parents had made the famous trek to Central Asia from the Mennonite Molotschna Colony in South Russia in 1880, believing that the Second Coming of the Lord would soon occur in that faraway place. Dietrich's own grandfather, Elder Abraham Peters, was the leader of one of the groups that made the

interpreted his dream and set a second date, this time in 1891, for his ascension into heaven.

All of these events have been recounted in a number of historical accounts—both in contemporary and later reports—that many of us have read. But before his death in 1960, my grandfather related to me his own memories of Claas Epp's second ascension attempt. Grandpa would have been a lad of only about eight years old

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A Story . . .

“[my grandfather’s] parents made the famous trek to Central Asia from the Mennonite Molotschna Colony in South Russia in 1880.”

at the time, so his memories are anecdotal at best, but his story adds details that I have not found in other sources.

He said that he and his family traveled to witness the newsworthy event, even though they did not belong to Epp’s congregation. A platform had been constructed in the center of a large field, and a large congregation of witnesses had gathered, seated on blankets on the ground around the platform. At the proper moment, Claas Epp appeared, dressed in flowing white robes and stood atop the platform.

The day slowly passed without any sign of a miracle, and the crowd became more and more restless. Finally, late in the afternoon, many in the congregation began to shout their displeasure and started to dismantle (my grandfather said “tear down”) the platform. Chuckling a bit, grandpa recalled that Epp tumbled down onto the ground and hastily retreated from the scene. Again, this account comes from one who was only eight when he witnessed it, but it does provide a very personal eyewitness report. Other sources finish the story by saying that Epp subsequently lost most of his followers and died in obscurity in 1913.

In another event of historical significance in Mennonite Brethren history, my grandfather gave his own report about his grandfather’s death. According to the Peters Family Bible, Elder Abraham Peters died on February 4, 1882 in Tashkent, Central Asia, at the relatively young age of forty-nine. My grandfather related that his parents told him (he himself had not yet

been born) that on his deathbed, Elder Peters instructed his followers to join the Mennonite Brethren Church. This “death-bed” instruction is not found in any other sources. In fact, Elder Peters’ death date is not found in any known record other than the Peters Family Bible. The other sources document the establishment of two churches after Peters’ death: the Romanovka Mennonite Church and the Nikolaipol Mennonite Brethren Church. In any event, grandpa’s story may give some explanation for the sudden emergence of a Mennonite Brethren congregation in the Central Asia area.

These are some of the stories that my grandfather told me. They bring the history of the Mennonites in Russia out of a “far away and long ago” mentality into an “up close and personal” framework.

Note: If this excursion into family tradition and historical reminiscence has struck a familiar note or reminded you of events in your own family’s memories, we invite you to write them down and submit them to the CMHS Bulletin for consideration as future articles. E-mail your stories to the editor at hope.nisly@fresno.edu.

ENDNOTES

1 For accounts of this event, see Franz Bartsch’s account, *Our Trek to Central Asia* as translated by Gerhard Ens and Elizabeth Peters (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications and Manitoba Historical Society, 1993); and Fred Richard Belk’s book *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-1884* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976).

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