

Teichroeb Ancestry: Poland – Russia - Canada

By Barry Teichroeb

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My interest in genealogy began many years ago when an old, worn notebook arrived in the mail. It belonged to my grandfather, Dan Teichroeb. He had asked my father, Peter, to send it along to me. I recognized it immediately because I had seen it often as a youngster, my grandmother referring to it repeatedly when talking about ancient uncles and aunts, but back then I did not appreciate its importance. My great-grandfather Peter Teichroeb (1857-1944) and his father Daniel (1835-1918) had kept careful family records for decades and they had a tale to tell.

The notebook was frail. The records were written in German, the faded ink barely legible. I wrestled with the language, the unfamiliar cursive style of writing, the unusual script, and made some headway. My progress accelerated when Ben Fast, the uncle of my mother, Marjorie (Fast) Teichroeb, agreed to translate it. What I had were names and dates of marriages, spouses, children, grandchildren, in-laws, a few financial records, and an occasional medicinal remedy. There was enough concrete information here to begin the framing of the Teichroeb ancestry, and a comprehensive picture began to emerge once I added data from church and secular records.

The name 'Teichroeb' is said to originate in the northern provinces of the Netherlands. The root of the name relates to *dikes* and the oversight of dikes, not a surprising occupation in the lowland countries.

Daniel was born in 1835 in Schoenhorst, Chortitza Colony, South Russia. In his records he does not mention any siblings and only references a parent once, late in the volume, where he records his father's death in 1857. His father's name was also Daniel.

His father, the elder Daniel, was born in the district of Stuhm, Prussia in 1789. The family records gave me the birth and death dates but no other details. It was necessary to crawl through old church records and census records to fill in the history.

The elder Daniel (1789) arrived in Molotschna in 1803 at the age of 14 with his mother Aganetha and his six siblings. Aganetha was the widow of Michael Teichroeb who was born around 1730-1740 and had lived in the vicinity of Marienburg, Prussia. We do not know when Michael died, nor do we know whether

he was with the family during the migration from Prussia to Russia or whether Aganetha chose to move after his death. Whatever the situation, the courage and fortitude of this woman, to bring a family, single handedly, to a new, unsettled country, is astonishing.

Clearly Aganetha was the driving force of this family, even though her eldest son Johann was recorded as the head of the household in the census lists of 1803. Shortly after arriving in Molotschna Aganetha married Abraham Neudorf who was twenty years her junior. This marriage created the stable family unit crucial for survival in a new land on a new, unbroken homestead.

Not much is known about Aganetha's background. She was born around 1760 and she was the third wife of Michael, who had children with both of his previous wives.

Michael had a son named Peter, baptized in 1781, and a daughter named Anna, baptized in 1790. His first wife must have died not long after Anna's birth because he was married again in 1774 to Helena Dyck. In 1778 twins named Gertruda and Kornelius were born to Helena and Michael but, tragically, the children and Helena died almost immediately afterward. Michael and Aganetha were married in 1779 and had eight children, many of whom survived into adulthood. While their firstborn died in 1785 at the age of two, records show the remaining children all accompanied Aganetha to Molotschna. There are good birth records for some, but not all, of the children who were with Aganetha in Russia.

A census of the Mennonites living in West Prussia was taken in 1776. While there were complex political reasons for the census at that time, the benefit in modern times is the documentary evidence of the names of ancestors available to us today. Michael Teichroeb was listed in that census as a tailor. It is intriguing that there were two other Teichroeb's mentioned, Johann and Abraham. From this census data there is no way to know if these men were related. Other church and secular records provide no additional insight.

The family of Michael Teichroeb was one of many Mennonite families that journeyed to Russia in the late 19th century. I imagine Michael died on the way, but I have found no documents to confirm this.

The migration of Mennonites from Prussia to Russia took place over a period of many years. There were many reasons for the migration. The expansion of the pacifist Mennonite population in Prussia created concerns about the potential displacement of citizens available to the military. Further, the Lutheran Church felt

threatened economically by the growing Mennonite land ownership. In response to these pressures the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II, enacted the Edict of 1789. This edict severely restricted Mennonite land acquisitions and required those with land to pay fees to the Lutheran church. Concurrently there was a major economic enterprise driven by Russia to attract Mennonites from Prussia through the offer of free land in the southern regions of what is now modern Ukraine. The quest for arable farmland was a strong motivator.

The migrant settlers often traveled by ship from Danzig through Riga and then overland by wagon to collecting camps from which they were allotted land, money, food, equipment, and lumber to establish homesteads. Some settlers had sufficient resources to transport their property themselves from the ships. Many others had to hire commercial agents of questionable integrity to transport their goods and frequently these families saw little or nothing of their possessions after setting off on the overland portion of the trip. The early years were challenging.

The first major wave of Mennonite migration occurred primarily between 1789 and 1795 to the Chortitza region southwest of the Dneiper River. The original group of settlers migrated in the period of 1789-1790 when the first 228 households moved from Prussia. There followed a second group of settlers in the period of 1793-1795 when about 57 households migrated. There was sporadic migration thereafter and fourteen towns were established in Chortitza in total.

The second major wave of migration began principally in the 1803-1805 period when the 19 towns in Molotschna, to the southeast of Chortitza, were established. Once again, the people came in pursuit of land, reinforced by further tightening of freedoms in Prussia.

A third major wave began around 1818 and continued for some time afterward on a gradual basis.

Daniel (1789), the son of Michael and Aganetha, left Molotschna in 1813 at the age of 24 and headed to Chortitza Colony where he married Maria, the widow of Bernhard Krahn. There is no record of children from this relationship. Maria died and Daniel remarried, sometime before 1835. His new wife was Anna Wolf.

Anna Wolf was born around 1806 in Chortitza Colony to Johann Wolf and Anna Peters. Her grandparents, Jacob Wolf and Justina Harder, were among the earliest settlers in Chortitza Colony, joining the original group of 228 families who participated in the first migration in 1789-1790. Jacob died around 1790, leaving his

eldest son Johann as the 17 year old head of the household. Fortunately, Justina was able to keep the family on an even keel just as Aganetha Teichroeb had after Michael's death. She remarried soon after Jacob's death to David Giesbrecht. Within another eight or nine years, David died, and Justina married once more in 1801.

Anna Wolf and Daniel Teichroeb lived in Shoenhorst after their marriage. In 1835 she gave birth to my great-great-grandfather Daniel (1835), the first author of the family notebook in my possession. There is no record of any siblings and Daniel was probably an only child. Anna died when he was very young, and his father remarried in 1840. There is no indication that this third marriage produced any children.

Daniel (1835) lived in Shoenhorst and married Maria Abrams in 1856. Maria was the daughter of Peter Abrams and Margaretha Krahn. Margaretha Krahn's parents and grandparents lived originally in the vicinity of Elbing, Prussia in the 18th century. It is a striking coincidence that Margaretha was the stepdaughter of the elder Daniel Teichroeb (1789) who had married Maria, the widow of Bernhard Krahn, in 1813. Peter Abrams arrived in Molotschna Colony around 1819, about a year after his parents Abraham Abrams and Anna Doerksen had settled there. Peter later moved to Schoenhorst to marry Margaretha.

Daniel (1835) and Maria had ten children, the eldest of whom was my great-grandfather Peter, the second author of the family notebook. Daniel (1835) wrote that in 1877 his family had saved 3,500 Rubles and in 1879 they moved to the village of Georgstal in the Fuerstenland Mennonite Settlement. He says that he bought a farm in the vicinity for 2,150 Rubles. Fuerstenland was situated on a 19,000-acre plot of land, subdivided into 154 small farms. Land in the settlement could be rented for about 0.5 rubles per acre or purchased for about 0.8 rubles per acre over a fifty-year term. Land outside the settlement was also available for those who could afford it. Daniel provides no information about the terms of his land acquisition or how much land he received but it seems he found a seller outside the settlement.

Fuerstenland was established principally by inhabitants of Chortitza in the latter half of the 19th century. A proportionately large number came from Schoenhorst. This settlement, like the earlier daughter colony of Bergthal, was motivated somewhat by more conservative Mennonites trying to minimize societal integration. Economics were also a major factor; land was available and with it the opportunity to improve economic prospects.

Maria Abrams died in 1891 and Daniel (1835) remarried. In 1898 Daniel became the mayor of Georgstal. His second wife died in 1914 and Daniel lived until shortly before his 83rd birthday in 1918.

Peter Teichroeb married Agatha Dyck in 1879 after which they moved from Georgstal to Olgafeld to establish a farm of their own. There they had twelve children, the youngest one born in 1904. His name was Daniel, and he was my grandfather. He was always called Dan.

Russian history is generally turbulent, but Peter and Agatha were determined farmers who maintained their land and raised a family during a period of uncommon upheaval. During the last decades of the 19th century there was strong competition for land where the Mennonites lived, extreme inflation in land prices, crop failures, and general social and economic turmoil. Many Mennonite families pulled up stakes in the 1870s and again in the 1890s, selling their land and possessions for whatever prices they could get and moving away from Russia, often settling in Canada. Peter and Agatha remained behind, part of a defiant Mennonite population. They amassed considerable wealth. My grandfather recalled that his family farm was considerably larger than most farms in the area and his father employed many Ukrainian laborers to work the land.

The 20th century brought greater challenges. Russia faced defeat in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, causing dissatisfaction with the prevailing administration and leading to a drive for social reform that precipitated the First Russian Revolution. This uprising was defeated, but the underlying social and economic unrest that triggered it was unabated. World War I devastated and weakened Russia creating conditions conducive to the Russian Civil War in 1917. Concurrently the Ukrainian War of Independence brought additional violence and anarchy to the Ukrainian countryside and the Mennonites living there.

Survival was tenuous in those years. Bolshevik armed forces attempted to occupy and subdue the land. Dan told of the time that Bolshevik soldiers rounded up local young farming men and attempted to impress them into the Bolshevik army by force. Fortunately, the soldiers were outnumbered and overcome.

Meanwhile, in the governmental vacuum created by the revolution, Nestor Makhno assembled an army seeking to establish an independent state and eradicate the widespread poverty and subsistence lifestyle of Ukrainian peasants. Makhno's bands of raiders roamed the countryside in southern Ukraine, sometimes fighting against the Bolsheviks and sometimes allied with them, preying on the wealthiest

landowners and farming communities, and always warring with the White Movement that sprang up to preserve the old order.

Armed self-defense forces were established by many Mennonite estate owners to protect their lives and property from raiders. Dan and his brothers participated in these defensive actions and armed skirmishes. He told stories about the times they would arm themselves and take up strategic positions overlooking approaches to the village and then fire at invading horsemen. They managed to win the skirmishes and avoid the devastating outcomes recorded by families that were unprepared.

In the latter stages of the conflict, around 1921, Dan joined the White Army opposed to the Bolsheviks. He was too young to fight, notwithstanding his earlier experiences, and instead served as a military supply wagon driver. In one escapade, he was overtaken by bandits while he was hauling a load of supplies on a wagon with a team of horses. They took his horses and all the supplies they could carry, and left him alive, alone on the road with his wagon. He had to wait for passers-by to help him get his wagon home.

In 1921 the conflict ended with a Bolshevik victory. Then began the economic rationalization and restructuring that featured prominently for many years in what would become the Soviet Union. Land appropriation and redistribution were fundamental elements of the new governmental program. Dan's family lost everything; all their land, and even their animals, were taken. His sister and her husband lost their flour mill but were permitted to stay on as laborers.

Peter Teichroeb, like so many Russian Mennonites before him, began planning a move to Canada. In the past Canada had welcomed Mennonite immigration most generously. The earlier waves of migration in the previous century brought thousands to settle in Manitoba and eventually homesteads further west. However, attitudes had changed.

By 1919 the doors to further migration were barred by Robert Borden's governing Unionist Party through an Order In Council, which banned Mennonites and others from entry to Canada. The Unionist MP John Wesley Edwards, caught up in the emotional bigotry that followed World War I, gave a speech supporting the ban and said "... whether they be called Mennonites, Hutterites or any other kind of 'ites,' we do not want them to come to Canada ... We certainly do not want that kind of cattle in this country. Indeed not only do we not want that kind of cattle, but I would go further and support the view that we should deport from Canada others of the same class who were allowed to come in by mistake."

Fortunately, this Order was rescinded after the federal election of 1921-22 won by Mackenzie King's Liberal Party. The next great wave of immigration began in 1923. By 1929 20,000 Mennonites had migrated to Canada.

Peter's wife Agatha died in 1922 and Peter married her widowed sister Maria the following year. Shortly after that he finalized arrangements and moved to Canada. Maria made the fateful decision to stay behind in Fuerstenland.

Dan was also left behind in Russia. It took some time for him to obtain a transit visa, possibly due to his service in the White Army. According to family lore he was eventually able to get his hands on a transit visa first possessed by a family friend who died before he could use it. Dan came to Canada in 1925. His route took him by train to a coastal city in Latvia where he boarded a ship for London. After a mandatory quarantine period he boarded the SS Minnedosa, a former Canadian troop ship operated by the Canadian Pacific Shipping Line during World War I and headed for Quebec City.

While at sea a popular way to spend the time was at the poker table. Dan learned to gamble well enough. He earned a few dollars by playing against the heavy drinkers he spotted after their card memory and judgment had lapsed.

After debarking at Quebec, the journey was overland to Saskatchewan where he rejoined his family.

Imagine a young man of 21 years, alone, fleeing a hostile country, crossing a continent, an ocean, and the vastness of Canada to start a new life. His journey parallels the trek made 120 years earlier by his widowed great-great-grandmother Aganetha, crossing a continent alone with seven children to establish her family in a new country.

Dan met a young Canadian born woman named Maggie Schapansky after his arrival on the Prairies and they soon were married. My father Peter was their first son. Peter married my mother, Marjorie Fast. The story might end there except for one remarkable twist. As it happens, Marjorie's fifth great-grandfather was a man named Johann Teichroeb, born in 1744. He was one of the Teichroeb's appearing in the 1776 Census, along with Michael Teichroeb. Following a detailed statistical analysis of Y-DNA samples contributed to the Mennonite DNA Project by descendants of Michael and Johann I have concluded, with a high level of statistical confidence, that these two men were likely brothers.

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