

## **Reformation, Hutterite Beginnings and Persecution (1517-1770)**

Much of the information on Maternal Ancestry was excerpted from a booklet, "History of the Hutterite Mennonites." It was published in 1974 for the "Centennial Observance of the Coming of Hutterites to Dakota."

My mother's name was Barbara Tschetter. To understand the Tschetter ancestry and legacy it is necessary to start with the Reformation and the Anabaptist movement. The Reformation began within the Catholic Church itself. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a monk and professor of theology, wrote his Ninety-Five Theses and posted them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther believed that people were saved only through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom alone righteousness sufficient for salvation could be found. The doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone was the heart of Luther's belief. It contradicted the church's teaching of grace and good works as a way to salvation.

Calvin and Zwingli from Switzerland also broke away from the Catholic Church. Now known as the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, respectively, they insisted that people must belong to the ruling church and must bring their babies to be baptized into the new church. There were other men who did not believe in infant baptism and who believed in a free voluntary church. They were called Anabaptists (re baptizers) because they did not recognize infant baptism. Among the early leaders of the Anabaptist movement were Menno Simon and Jacob Hutter. They were highly educated and intelligent men. Many of the Anabaptist leaders were ex-monks or Hebrew scholars.

On January 17, 1525, Zwingli and his followers called a public debate with the Anabaptist leaders. The date of this public debate is known as the birthday of the Anabaptist church. The Anabaptist leaders believed that the Bible taught:

1. The Word of God as a standard for being a Christian, not those who were baptized as infants and attended mass.
2. The Church was separate from the State. They did not want government appointed ministers and government paying expenses of the church.
3. They believed in baptism upon confession of faith.

4. They believed in the way of love instead of war, strife and violence; they were pacifists.

Zwingli, Calvin, Luther and other “State” church leaders did not agree with these teachings and joined forces with the Catholics in an attempt to kill the movement. The Anabaptists were persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant authorities. Persecution set in immediately directed against the leaders. Soon after, Jacob Hutter and other believers formed a religious community in Moravia based on the above beliefs, as well as the belief that all material possessions should be held in common. These communities were called Bruderhofs or colonies. This was the beginning of the religious communal way of life; it is still practiced by the Hutterite colonies of South Dakota and Canada. In 1536, persecution became more severe. Jacob Hutter was beaten, alcohol was poured into his wounds, and he was tied to the stake and burned.

The Hutterites, as they are called after their leader, Jacob Hutter, have a history of almost continuous persecution. In subsequent centuries, many of them paid the ultimate price for their convictions. Some were left to rot in prisons, while others were broken on the rock, thrown into rivers, burned at the stake, sold as galley slaves, beheaded or buried alive. Between 1550 and 1564 was known as ‘the time of the great persecution.’ During this time 16 colonies were destroyed, 81 members murdered and 140 sold into slavery in Turkey. (I would like to have a DNA analysis done on me to find out how much, if any, Turkish blood I have). From 1564 to 1612 was reported as “the good time of the church” during which persecution was less. Even during these times when persecution was not severe, they suffered frequent loss to thieves. Because of their pacifist stance, renegade soldiers and others felt free to rob them without fear.

Then a religious war broke out called the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Many armies marched through the country and plundered the Hutterite Bruderhofs since they had large amounts of food and other materials. These soldiers stole from their granaries, tortured, and killed Hutterite men. The Hutterites suffered horrible atrocities. On September 22, 1622, the Austrian government issued a decree that all Hutterites were to leave Moravia in not less than four weeks or they would be put to

death. They fled to Hungary leaving behind twenty-four Bruderhofs. The estimated value of the property left behind was \$367,000. New colonies (Bruderhofs) were established.

The Turkish war followed the Thirty Years War and again the Hutterites were subjected to the ruthlessness of the invaders. The Turkish armies carried off the rich spoils from their storehouses and livestock. This was all taken easily because they were believers in non-resistance. Because of these experiences, the Hutterites decided to abandon their communal way of life in 1686. Their large supplies of food and other essentials in one place seemed unwise because of the repeated raids by the Turks. (The gene pool was again contaminated by the Turks). Everyone returned to private ownership after the property was divided. During the eighteenth century, the Hutterites had a tremendous struggle for survival. Because of persecution, they switched back and forth between communal living and private ownership several times.

### **Maternal Ancestry - Tschetter Family Beginnings (1760)**

In 1760 in Hungary, the Jesuits received permission from Maria Theresa to force the Hutterites to convert to Catholicism. Abram Tschetter a Catholic priest was sent to convert them but instead was converted and joined them. There is another reference that states that Abram Tschetter was later arrested for opposing the state church and recanted his faith and returned to the Catholic Church. THIS IS THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE TSCHETTER FAMILY NAME. Hutterite homes were searched and religious material that was found was burned. The Hutterite ministers were put into prison and were promised freedom only if they became Catholic. One source states that by 1760, terrible persecution reduced the number of Hutterites to sixteen. This may have referred to adults only, as another reference records that in 1767 the entire group comprised 67 souls. Whatever the exact number, they were few. This mere handful fled Maria Theresa's Empire and crossed the Carpathian Mountains into Romania. They left all their possessions and avoided well-traveled roads so they would not be found.

The Hutterites rented lands from Romanian noblemen. A colony was established. A year later war broke out between Turkey and Russia. Turkish

raiders again swept down on the Hutterites. Sametin, a Russian general, and his army were camped near the Hutterite colony. The general told the brethren that Czarina Catharine the Great of Russia welcomed farmers to her country. She had large areas of unimproved lands that needed to be developed. He was sure that they would be granted exemption from military service, be given control over their own schools and their own local self-government such as had been already granted to other immigrants, including Mennonites. General Sametin helped Hutterite representatives obtain passports so they could negotiate with Field Marshal Count Romanzov who had large areas of land; he needed good farmers. The Count and the Hutterites drew up an agreement that gave them freedom of religion, their own schools, no one forced to take an oath, exemption from military service, no interference with community living and own local self-government. The terms on the contract with the Russian seal beautifully stated that the length was from “eternity to eternity to eternity.”

### **The Russian Years (1770-1874)**

On August 1, 1770, the Hutterites arrived in Wischinka, Russia to live on the lands of Count Romanzov. He gave them a loan so they could start building and farming. They settled down enjoying the time of opportunity that had come. The Hutterites were excellent wheat growers and industrialists. Soon their Bruderhofs became prosperous.

It was in this era that a form of the name (Mendel) of my maternal grandmother first appeared. In the early 1780's three companions – Wollman, Tittel and Paul Mandel – left Szobotch in Ungerland (today's Czechoslovakia) and went to the Colony (Bruderhod) in Wischenka, Russia. The Wollman name remains common among Hutterites. My mother's sister, Mary, married John Wollman; thus, I have numerous Wollman relatives. There is no further record of the Tittel name; apparently, he had no male descendants. Paul Mandel was a Bohemian and was my maternal great-great-great-grandfather. It is written that Paul Mandel was persuaded by Wollman and Tittel to go to Russia, and that he left in his working clothes without notifying his employer or parents about his whereabouts. I have no record when or why they changed the name to Mendel. Paul Mandel died in

Hutterthal in 1846. He had a son, Paul, my maternal great-great-grandfather, and a daughter named Lea. Paul, my great-great-grandfather, had a son named Paul with his first wife. That son died at the age of 99 years at the Elmspring Colony in South Dakota. With his second wife, he had three sons and four daughters: Jacob (my maternal great-grandfather), Michael, Peter, Maria, Elizabeth, Anna, and Kathryn. My great-grandfather, Jacob Mendel, married Anna Hofer in Hutterthal on December 4, 1849.

In 1796, Count Romanzof died. There were many changes in the Russian leadership. The new leadership did not feel bound by the promises of the earlier leaders. For a time, it seemed that the Hutterites would end up as Russian serfs. Finally, in 1801 after many petitions and appearances at St. Petersburg, Count Ekatharinoslav declared them a free people. When the representatives returned from St. Petersburg with that resolution, there was great joy because it meant they would not be under the bondage of serfdom. The Hutterites were given three months to move off the property at Wischinka where they had lived since coming to Russia. They had lived there for 32 years. In 1802, they moved 10 miles from this original location. There were many difficult years over the next four decades. Communal living fell on hard times; in 1819, the Bruderhof was disbanded and each family moved on its own land. Communal ownership and living had broken down. However, they continued to use the sermons written by their forefathers and founders of their faith. This resulted in several attempts to reestablish the communal living system. Much of the altruism that made the early years in Russia so successful disappeared. There were complaints of selfishness, laziness, dishonesty, discontentment and jealousy. There were disagreements among the leaders. Families left the colony and later returned. Property and land was divided as families left. Their land was scattered in 43 different locations in a radius of approximately 15 miles.

The leadership realized that the Hutterites could not thrive spiritually or physically in this area; therefore, they asked the government for permission to move elsewhere. In 1842, the government advised them that they could move to Molotschna in Province Taurien in the Ukraine. This was approximately 600 miles

south. Approximately 50 families moved. The Russian government chose that location because there was a Mennonite settlement there. The government reasoned that the Hutterites had approximately the same beliefs as the Mennonites, especially on military service. This was correct because the main difference in beliefs was that the Mennonites did not believe in a communal form of life. Johann Cornies, a leader among the German Mennonite Colonists in South Russia assisted the Hutterites to find good land on the Molotschna River. He gave them valuable assistance when the Hutterites found themselves in dire need both spiritually and financially. Here for the first time the Hutterites came into close contact with the Mennonites. The village of Hutterthal was established. The Hutterites divided into two groups, one group living in a Bruderhof (colony) and the other group locating in villages on private farms.

Here the church organized according to Mennonite principles. Apparently, their relationship with the Mennonites was good. The word Hutterian or Hutterite applied to their language or dialect, as well as to their religion, in order to distinguish them from the "platt-deutsch" of the Mennonites. They prospered.

In 1868, 20 families agreed to relocate and start a new village. It was named Neu Hutterthal. The families of my grandfather and grandmother were in that group. (See their autobiographies in the last part of this section). They secured several thousand acres of land approximately 130 miles northwest of Hutterthal. The community prospered. My maternal great grandfather, Jacob Mendel, operated a large farm, a windmill, and a brick-burning factory. He had the plans and materials bought for a large barn or granary and a new home at the time of his death. On a business trip 65 miles from home, he contracted cholera. He died a few hours after returning home on June 2, 1872. He left a widow with 8 children, the oldest being 21 years and the youngest 3 weeks. An indication of the prosperity of great-grandfather Jacob Mendel was that when they arrived in Yankton, South Dakota, great-grandmother Anna Mendel purchased a 640 acres farm including cattle, horses, sheep and all equipment for \$4000. She purchased the farm with the advice of her brother Joseph Hofer.. That was a lot of money at that time; moreover, that was after the trip from Russia with eight children. My mother often

said that grandmother's family was very prosperous in Russia, and I believe it. Obviously, Great-grandfather Jacob Mendel was a go-getter.

When the Russian government decreed in 1870 that there was to be universal military training in that country in the future, there was great uneasiness among those groups who believed in non-resistance. The Hutterites and the Mennonites were two such groups. The Hutterites numbered about one hundred families. Thirty-two of these families lived in two colonies or Bruderhofs, whereas the remainder lived as private owners in villages as was then customary in that country. The government exempted the Hutterites and the Mennonites from military training under Czar Paul I. This exemption was now seemingly withdrawn by Alexander II. A delegation that included Rev. Paul Tschetter, then twenty-nine years old went to St. Petersburg in January 1873 to determine their status regarding military obligations. Paul Tschetter was my paternal grandfather's uncle. The Russian authorities offered them non-combatant service instead of military service; in addition, all Mennonite and German citizens were given a ten year reprieve. This was unsatisfactory to the Hutterites; therefore, they decided to send a delegation to America to learn whether they could secure more favorable terms concerning military service.

The delegation was composed of the above mentioned Rev. Paul Tschetter and his Uncle Lorenz Tschetter (my paternal grandfather's great uncle). They journeyed together with ten Mennonites, also delegates from Russia, who came to America for the same purpose. The nearly daily detailed diary of Lorenz Tschetter is preserved in the translated form from the German into English. The diary covers the time from April 14, 1873 to July 27, 1873. Lorenz Tschetter was a keen observer of farming conditions, amount of rainfall, fertility of soil, temperature, crops, water supply, etc. He wrote in detail about all of these subjects. As one reads the report, it is clear that he took careful notes so that he could report his findings accurately upon returning home rather than relying upon his memory.

The big issue, however, was military service. On July 27, 1873, the delegation met with President Grant. The diary report describes the meeting as follows: "The President received us in the most friendly manner and we presented our petition to

him personally. After reading it very carefully, the President replied that we must have patience to wait for an answer to our petition." Several weeks after returning home, the answer came from Hamilton Fish representing President Grant. In that letter he states: "Since personal military service, citizenship obligations, jury service, and control over schools are all matters that fall under the jurisdiction of the various states in which they wish to settle, the President says that he cannot exempt them from the laws of the states and the laws to which other citizens are subject." Then comes this strange sentence: "It is true, however, that for the next fifty years we will not be entangled in another war in which military service will be necessary. But should it be necessary, there is little likelihood that Congress would find justification in freeing them from duties which are asked of other citizens."

### **The American Years (1774-present)**

Despite receiving no promises on military obligations, the Hutterites decided to immigrate to America. They received no promises from the United States that were better than those offered by Russia; apparently, they did not trust Russia but did trust the United States, especially for religious freedom. Also, as noted earlier, there was tension between those who believed in the communal life and those who espoused private ownership. The move to America gave them an opportunity to choose which path each family wanted to take. A new start! Between 1874 and 1879 nearly all of the Hutterites migrated to America. However, a Stahl family, a Tschetter family, a Knels family, and a Wollman family remained in Russia. The descendants of these families suffered along with others who remained in Russia as they lived through the hardships of the revolution that came later. Of the 1254 persons who immigrated, approximately 40 never made it to South Dakota. Thirty-six children died in Lincoln, Nebraska.. About 800 immigrants chose private ownership; the remaining 400 chose communal ownership and living in Bruderhofs. Those who chose private ownership are the prairieleut or prairie people. Those who chose to live a communal life are the colony people. I am so glad that my ancestors went the direction of private ownership!

The autobiographies of my maternal grandparents that follow tell about their lives in America. Their spiritual pilgrimage is especially pertinent. As I read about

my ancestry, I have questions about their spiritual status. I do not understand how the Hutterites could have been such devout people, willing to give their lives for their faith, and not have a true Christian faith as my grandparent's autobiographies seem to imply. Whatever the case, there certainly was a genuine awakening which started with Grandfather John Tschetter. The Mennonite churches that came from that original awakening have remained true to the Gospel. The colonies formed by the 400 that chose a communal form of life, largely, have a cultural form of Christianity. They pay lip service to the basic tenets of evangelical Christianity, but it is a dead orthodoxy. (Maybe this is the way it was among the Hutterites before my grandfather's spiritual awakening. I wonder). Individuals, who have left the colonies and have had spiritual awakening, seem to verify that observation.

For 350 years before coming to America, the Hutterites were resolute in their belief in pacifism, religious freedom, and separation from the secular society. There is, however, no evidence that they exerted much spiritual or other influence on the society around them. They suffered and died for their beliefs. I admire their convictions; however, I question the validity of some of their beliefs, especially pacifism.

With the outbreak of World War I some of the first generation American born Hutterites (hereafter, when I use the term Hutterite, it refers to descendants of the 800 who chose private ownership. The term "colony" refers to those who chose to live a communal life) served in the armed services. In World War II the next generation of Hutterite young men served in the military. Grandmother's younger brother, David J Mendel (1868-1951), served in the South Dakota State Legislature. During this same time (1875-1940), others went to colleges and universities. They integrated into American society as farmers, businessmen, lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses, politicians, Christian leaders, and innumerable other professions. Within 70 years of the immigration to America, Hutterites discarded many of their basic convictions. Marriage outside the Hutterite community became common. During the 100 year stay in Russia, there was not a single recorded instance of intermarriage with Russian neighbors. My mother, her sister Susie, three of her

brothers, three of my siblings, most of my cousins and I, married outside the Hutterite circle. The gene pool is certainly stronger because of this.

What is my conclusion? I believe that integration into American society has made the Prarieleut Hutterites a better people. I also believe that America is better because of the Hutterites. Hutterites remain a positive force in American and world society; they have much more influence for good than when they were cloistered unto themselves. I am very thankful for the strong heritage of Christian faith. I am pleased to be of a people to whom beliefs and convictions mattered. I am proud to be a Prarieleut Hutterite.

Now a word about the Hutterites in the colonies. Many of these people are my distant relatives. There are many Tschetter's and Hofer's in the colonies. Overall, their intelligence, most likely, approximates that of the Prarieleut Hutterites. In 1974, it was stated that the four Bruderhofs of 1880 with 400 individuals had grown to over 200 Bruderhofs in the United States and Canada totaling over 20,000 people. Their mode of life, customs, education, culture, etc. has remained pretty much as it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yes, they have modern conveniences and tools such as refrigerators, tractors, telephones, and power tools. They still do not have an education beyond grade school. When farm work was done with horses and was much more labor intensive, many workers were required. Modern farm machinery requires fewer workers. Some colonies have gone into manufacturing items such as steel hog feeders and watering troughs. There is so little opportunity for a person to break out of the colony life. A young person leaving the colony – male or female – has not had the education or training to make it on the outside. Young men have the best chance of making it on the outside because they can work on farms. Young women have no real opportunity. Depression, consequently, among young colony women is high. Young colony women have a somewhat hopeless situation. I believe it was an unfortunate choice that the 400 made when they chose a communal life. Their descendants have not had the opportunity to live up to their potential.