

Seventh Day Adventists

When our ancestors came over from Russia, they came as either Lutheran or Mennonites. Our heritage, which began in Germany, was Lutheran and that is the faith that was embraced in Russia. There was not a trained clergy at that time so that lay people were in charge of the services and messages were mainly read from one of their theological books. Each district had a bishop who would visit the churches, some only once a year. At that time he would baptise the infants, perform marriages and, when possible, burials. A Pastor Holtfreter was the traveling pastor during our great grandparents era in the Grünau area. One can see that there was not a lot of spiritual nurture. The Mennonite Brethren Church was birthed in the Molotschna in 1860 out of a renewal movement that left them with an evangelistic zeal. As a result, men were sent out to the surrounding areas to preach the gospel. One of these men was Abraham Cornelson who went to the Bellowsch area. Many made commitments to Christ at that time, among them Great Grandpa Christof Seibel. This group that became known as *Kolonists* joined the more traditional Low German Mennonites when they left for America in 1874 and following years. They settled near Hillsboro, Kansas, and began the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church. I understand the blending of the two groups caused some tension. Land being scarce in that area caused some to move to Oklahoma during the Cherokee Run (Great Grandpa Christof Seibel and most of that family went sometime later) and others to go to South Dakota (Great Grandpa Heinrich Delk). Hundreds of our relatives settled in the Wittenberg area. Some came as Lutherans, others as Mennonite Brethren. Very little is known about the tensions between the Lutheran family and the Mennonite Family. Soon there was to be a third dimension of tension added when the Seventh Day Adventists entered the picture. To tell this part of the story I am going to borrow heavily from an article written by Adaline Werner Reimche in the Spring 1987 issue of the *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*. Adaline [her husband's name is Elmer Reimche, Grandma Katherine Delk Seibel's cousin] took her information from an article entitled, "How the German Work Began", which was printed in *Adventist Review*, April 29, 1982, pp 8-10. Whatever I quote directly will be in quotation marks. I will use only selected material that is relevant to our "story". I did ask a member of the board of AHGR for permission to use the article.

On April 9, 1882, the first German Seventh Day Adventist church in America was organized. But the story of how the German work began reaches back to Russia as well as Germany.

"In the eighteenth Century, responding to Catharine the Great's invitation, many Germans migrated to Russia. From the Hessian area, home of Martin Luther King, some of the Reiswig, Reimche, Bechtold and Baumbach families settled in the Ukraine near Chernigov"

From the Rhineland, Johannes Seib with his wife and 2 year old daughter, Anna Marie (Elmer's maternal grandmother), also joined a group bound for Russia. Johannes was handicapped, having been born with only one arm. They had neither wagon nor cart, so he prepared a wheelbarrow that he could handle with one hand plus a strap over his shoulder. On this wheelbarrow they loaded their belongings. Many of the emigrants carried all they had in sacks on their backs.

In Russia the families lived in colonies. They did not integrate with the Russian people. If the village or *Dorf* did not have a school, the parents taught the children the three "R", with religious instruction the most important subject in each home and the Bible as the reading book. States.

These German colonies provided the nucleus for the future Adventist work among Germans in the United brother] and his wife, and Henry Bechtold and his wife, sailed for America. In 1874 Conrad Reiswig and his wife, and Henry Bechtold and his wife sailed for America. Going by train to the Dakota Territory, they worked in the Yankton area, sawing cordwood for 50 cents a ten-hour day. In the spring they took up a homestead in the Wittenberg area, south of Milltown, South Dakota.

Michael Bechtold, Henry's father, and Anna Marie, his stepmother, with eight members in the family, sailed into New York Harbor October 20, 1875. They had sold their home in Herrendank in the Crimea, Russia, and taken the train to Hamburg, Germany, port of departure for America. Anna Marie Bechtold was the former 2 year old Anna Marie Seib and now the mother of Jacob and Mary Anna Reiswig (Elmer's mother). In 1878 Mary Anna married Conrad Reimche (Elmer's father) [grandma Katherine Delk Seibel's uncle], an emigrant from Rundewiese, Russia.

Philip Reiswig (Adaline's paternal great grandfather) [great grandmother Marie Reiswig Delk's father] and wife Catherine, who came to the Milltown area in 1876, were accompanied by their daughter, Marie Elizabeth (Adaline's grandmother, who married Frederick Werner, Adaline's paternal grandfather in 1877. They filed for a homestead in section 30, the southeast 160 acres. Marie's father, Philip Reiswig, filed for the northwest 160 acres, section 30 [29?]. Adaline's maternal great grandfather, Henry Baumbach, and his sons, Conrad, George, Johann, and Christian, with their families and Henry II, Adaline's grandfather, came from Herrendank, Russia via Hamburg, Germany.) They, too, homesteaded in the Wittenberg area. These families were Lutheran and met in a sod building each Sunday to worship. One Sunday in 1878, on the way home in their one-horse carriage, Jacob Reiswig, (Elmer's maternal grandfather) and family picked up a young man. Since a baby was on the mother's lap and a little girl (the late Mary Reiswig Tebelius) was seated on the floor at their feet, the young man had to ride standing on the axle at the back of the carriage.

The young man inquired about the meeting and upon finding it was of a religious nature, started talking about the Scriptures. They reached a fork in the road. The young man had planned to take the other road, but Jacob invited him home so that they could continue the Bible discussion. Although Jacob spoke but little English and the young man could not speak German, the two managed to communicate. They studied together until two o'clock in the morning. The next day, as the young man was leaving, he gave Jacob a German tract, "*Warum nicht früher entdeckt?*" (Why not discovered sooner?) It gave many texts dealing with the seventh-day Sabbath, and Jacob spent much time the rest of the week studying it. [See Jacob Reiswig's obituary at the end of this article.]

The following Sunday at the study group, Jacob related his experience with the young man and told the leader about the tract. He stated that he felt the tract gave a definite proof for the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath and that he could not find any text in the Bible that pointed to Sunday sacredness. The group asked Jacob to bring the tract to the next meeting. He did so, whereupon the leader asked for it and said he would be able to answer it the next Sunday with plenty of proof for Sunday keeping, the group had a lively discussion and decided to worship on the seventh day.

Richard Conradi reported that E.H. Pullen went to the Russian settlement at Milltown in 1878 and distributed some reading matter. He could speak very little German, but he tried to present to the people, as best he could, the arguments for the present truth by giving them, from his English Bible, the references to proof texts, which they looked up in their German Bibles. In a little while about thirty-five accepted the Sabbath.

Since there were no German ministers at that time, the work did not progress very fast. However, a German paper, the *Stimme der Wahrheit (Voice of Truth)* began in July 1879-first as a quarterly, later as a monthly. This paper gave the new believers added knowledge about present truth. S.B. Whitney visited the group, but they could not agree on some minor points. Nevertheless, the group continued requests for a German worker, and on February 13, 1882, L.R. Conradi was sent to Milltown. By this time the group had split into factions. [I have reason to believe the Baumbachs were one of the factions. They allegedly began their own church called the Seventh Day Church of God which later relocated to Lodi, California. There is a Baumbach cemetery in the Wittenberg area.]

Elder Conradi reported in March: 'Arriving again at Milltown, I commenced a regular course of lectures, and the plain truths of the message have melted away the peculiarities which existed here, Sabbath we had our first German Sabbath school. Over forty were in attendance. We did the best we could without lesson sheets. Sunday night we again met for the purpose of talking over the subject of their uniting with us.'

On a Friday afternoon in April, Elder Whitney was called to attend a funeral in Bridgewater. Then he went to Milltown, where he found 'the company fully in the faith of the message as the result of the faithful labors of Brother Conradi.' Reporting on his findings, Elder Whitney wrote: 'only those who understand the situation can appreciate what these labors have been or the importance of the results reached. It is one of the great triumphs of truth, and its influence will reach much further than this immediate time and locality. Yesterday, April 9, the church was fully organized with a membership of fourteen. In the afternoon two were baptized and in the evening these, with one another, united with the church.' Later events proved this to be a prophetic statement indeed.

Jacob Reiswig, (Elmer's uncle) was chosen as elder, Conrad Reiswig [Great Grandmother Maria Katherine Reiswig Delk's brother] the deacon, and Henry Bechtold the Sabbath school leader and treasurer. The group built a sod church on Philip Reiswig's [her father] lots near the James River. Later a frame building replaced the sod one. An 1885 report listed more than forty members, with every charter member still faithful. Each Sabbath they left the church singing the old Lutheran hymn, 'Take Thou My Hand, O Father,' the German pioneer's prayer.

Many from the Milltown church became ministers and worked for the Germans in the Dakotas, other states, and Canada. Jacob Reiswig was sent to Battle Creek for training and was ordained in July 1885. He then was placed on the conference committee and took the burden of the German work in other parts of the field. His son, Jacob Judson Reiswig, went to school at Union College, Nebraska, and in 1907 began work in the North Dakota conference as an evangelist. In Canada he served as Young People's secretary and then as president of the Alberta Conference. Subsequently he was president of the Oklahoma, Montana, and New York Conferences. (He retired as the associate pastor of the Fairmont Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Lodi, California, and frequently visited surrounding churches. It was not unusual for him to have three preaching appointments on the weekend.)

Other ministers included Conrad Reiswig (the young man who came in 1874), his son Christian, Valentine Leer (a former Baptist minister from Russia) and his son Carl.

"The influence of the group in Milltown also bore fruit in the Crimea, Russia, as members sent papers and tracts to friends and relatives. Philip Reiswig, 67 years of age, had lost his wife and had a speech impediment. But he had a son, relatives, and friends in the Crimea, and he determined that they should know about the Adventist message. He sold his property and, in November 1883, with a trunkful of Seventh-Day Adventist tracts and papers, returned to Russia at his own expense.

His age and speech impediment proved to be an advantage under the prevailing circumstances, for he was not permitted to preach openly. He would go to the market place and ask someone to read to him from the pamphlet. Then he would make some remarks about the passage read. If the reader showed any interest, he would let him keep the leaflet. He visited in the homes and also called on the Lutheran pastors. After two years Phillip came back to South Dakota, but later returned in 1887 with more literature, even selling his American boots for enough money to pay his fare to Crimea. He died in Russia. [just as a reminder, I have reason to believe this is great-grandmother Maria Reiswig Delk's father.]

When L.R. Conradi went to the Crimea in July 1886, he found a dozen Sabbath keepers in (Vypasnoye) and learned of as many more scattered within a radius of 50 miles. During that summer he organized the first Adventist church in the Crimea with nineteen members, former Baptists and Mennonite Brethren. He found many people who spoke of the 'good old man' (Phillip Reiswig) who came from America and scattered the seeds of truth. In Conradi's report in the General Conference Bulletin, in 1901, he wrote, 'only the day of judgment will show how many souls have been brought to the knowledge of the truth through the publications circulated by that faithful old brother'.

One of the nineteen members was G. Tetz. He later became a pioneer worker in southern Russia and elsewhere. (His influence extended into Canada when Andrew Tetz married Elizabeth Humann. Many Adventists in Canada remember Henry Humann, Elizabeth's brother, one of the presidents of the Alberta Convention.)

John Werner's home was one of the homes in (Vypasnoye) where Phillip spent some time in 1883. In October 1884, the Werners (Adaline's paternal great-grandparents) arrived in New York on the *Suevia*. John, with his sons and sons-in-law, Adam Eberhardt, and Adolph Knittel, took up homesteads in Wells County, North Dakota. They were members of the Bowdon Seventh-Day Adventist Church, where they worshiped in a sod building erected in 1897. Later some of the Werner families moved to Canada, California, and other states. Many of the descendants of this family are Adventists and laborers for the church).

As the families in the Wittenberg, South Dakota, area moved to other states and Canada, they also helped to spread the three angels' messages. Many of their descendants became educators, doctors, nurses, and other workers for the church. Art Reiswig, wishing like his great grandfather, Phillip Reiswig, to see lives changed through the reading of Bible-oriented literature, engaged in the literature program of the church for thirty one years. His last position was literature evangelism director for the West Coast-California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Hawaii.

Adaline's maternal great-grandfather, Henry Baumbach, his sons and their families, accepted the Sabbath. Conrad and his son, Carl, joined the Milltown church, but the others continued to worship in their building. Christian, with his family and mother Wilhelmina, moved to Kansas. When grandpa Henry took his family to Kansas to visit, he preached the Sabbath message. When he moved to Lodi, the Baumbach church was the place of worship for some of his converts-the Reuscher family, the Young family, the Erhardt family, and others. This church is now the Seventh-Day Church of God.

Surely the organization of the Milltown German church, April 9, 1882, did reach out to influence thousands beyond its immediate time and place.

Great grandpa Christof Seibel had a sister, Heinrich, of whom there is very little known-even his direct descendants have very little information about him, not even the maiden name of his wife-she may have been a Baumbach, where they lived or where they died. I have been told that he may have had a physical deformity, perhaps a hunch back. His children were John married to Miriam Bechtold, Jacob, Caroline Buchmiller, Katie Matz, Lizzie Wiegand, and Ida Suelzle. This family embraced the Seventh-Day Adventist faith, but I do not know where the contact was made or if the entire family became Adventist. John, his son, was a long time pastor of the Bowdon, North Dakota, Seventh-Day Adventist Church and is buried in that cemetery. There is no record of or for him having been buried there. Most of this family relocated to the West Coast. Rev. John was often present at funerals in the Harvey M.B. Church and, as long as his cousin, grandpa John C. Seibel, was alive close contact was kept.

Great grandpa Christof Seibel also had a sister, Margaretha Elizabeth, married to Johann Christian Hagen in the Bowdon area. They also lived in Washington State at some time and she is buried there. This family also embraced the Seventh-Day Adventist faith.

Great grandpa Christof Seibel also had a sister, Anna Marie, married to a Conrad Ollenberger, who had a daughter Elizabeth who married Johann Tebelius. I do know the Tebelius' were Seventh-Day Adventist, but whether or not the Ollenbergers were or whether or not they came to America, I do not know. I went to school with Tebelius descendants but did not know we were relatives..

Thus the story as to why some of us are Lutheran, some of us are Mennonite, and some of us are Seventh-Day Adventist. It is a long and colorful history, fraught with heartache and tears, alienation and reconciliation, by now a history long forgotten! Our forefathers were confronted with these schisms at the same time they were confronted with taming the frontier! Their decisions then have affected the lives of many of us in various parts of the world. Were they the right decisions? Only eternity will tell?

Jacob Reiswig

(*Herald der Wahrheit* -December 15, 1887)

On the ninth of December the sad news circulated that our brother, elder Jacob Reiswig, after a seventeen week illness, was relieved of his suffering through death.

Brother Reiswig was born on September 10, 1856, in Dorf "number 5", Gouvernement Katharinaslaw, South Russia, and died November 30 of this year, reaching the age of 30 years, 2 months, and 20 days. He was born on December 2.

He was one of the first Germans who heard the "truth" in Dakota, accepted it and became a member of the first [German Adventist] church established by Br. Conradi in America. Later he became, as every believer should, an enthusiastic worker, and after attending our College, he labored as a minister among the Germans in Dakota.

He suffered from consumption and had wasted down to a skeleton, so that his death was actually viewed as a relief. With tears in his eyes, he thought of the work until his very last breath, and prayed for it to progress. His tireless work may partially be to blame for his early demise.

His family and fellow members who are thankful for his healing, sorrow over his loss, but not as those who have no hope, but with blessed hope of the resurrection, when those asleep in Christ shall rise in glory and eternal life.

Grace Seibel Thiesen