

## **A brief overview of the Hübert family history from their arrival in Russia to the present time.**

Context: When the Israelites crossed over the Jordan to the Promised Land an individual from each tribe was commanded to take one stone from the bottom of the Jordan and use it to make an altar of 12 stones on the road to Jericho. When the descendants of these Israelites asked, “What is the meaning of these stones?” they were to be reminded of the crossing of the Jordan on dry land and the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land.

If we were to replicate this event for our time, would we erect a cairn in the middle of the intersection of South Fraser Way and Clearbrook Road and tell everyone who was stopped by the cairn, remember your past, think of your history, be reminded of why you are here and how you got here? This family reunion challenges us to reflect on these questions.

I have been asked to do a brief retrospective of the Hübert Family history from when David Johann Hübert arrived in Muntau in the Molotschna in 1803 to the present time, in the context of the question “What does it mean to be a Hübert in 2015?”

I’d like to do this with reference to a photo, taken about halfway through this 200-year period, in 1898 in Southern Russia. The photo was taken between a dividing point of sorts. Compared to the chaotic century which was to follow, for villagers in Russia, and in Europe more generally, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was fairly stable. Village life in 1810 would have been easily recognized by a time traveller to the same village in 1890. Not so of the villages between 1910 and 1990. The children and grandchildren of David Johann would have had little difficulty recognizing their own community when the photo was taken in 1898.

The photo and the following data from B.H. Unruh will serve as a basis for comments on the first of these centuries. Due to the relative paucity of information from this century, the comments will be shorter than I would prefer.

The 1898 photograph gives us much more concrete information and I would like to key on four brothers and one sister who appear in the photo. The descendants of three of these brothers are here in Abbotsford. The brothers are Franz Franz, Jakob Franz, Heinrich Franz and David Franz. They had one sister and this was Anna. From the context of the question, “What does it mean to be a Hubert in 2015?” I personally know the history of the Franz F. better than the histories of the Jakob F. and the Henry F. families, and I would like to suggest that we use this Treffen to fill in information to give a more complete picture in response to the question. Depending on how this effort develops, there may be merit in submitting the result to such publications as Roots and Branches, the Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC or the Newsletter of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, or even the Mennonite Quarterly Review.

In the photo of 1898 we see David Johann Hübert's grandson Franz Jakob (b. 1850), surrounded by his sons and daughters. Although Franz Jakob had not inherited the family farm, and so, by implication, was not a major landowner, the photo indicates that this was nevertheless a family of some means. Franz Jakob is dressed in peasant garb, but his sons are all fashionably dressed and their mustaches would have been acceptable in the court of the Tsar. There are a Bible and a flute on the table, which is covered with a crocheted table cloth, with potted flowers in front of the table. Franz F. sports a sterling silver pocket watch, attached to a clearly visible silver chain. Obviously, the family appreciated music and beauty and attached enough importance to the Bible to make it part of the centerpiece of the photo. They were of sufficient means to have a photographer take a family photo. There was a desire on the part of the family, paterfamilias Franz Jakob obviously included, that the family should be pictorially immortalized in this way. Compared to some others in the Mennonite Colonies of Southern Russia, all this demonstrated that the Hüberts were among the progressive members of the larger community.

This branch of the family had not been the heirs of the *Wirtschaft* [farm, business] in an agrarian society, but they had nevertheless been capable of making reasonably comfortable lives for themselves in this farming society. The fact that the whole family relocated to Siberia to become landowners around the turn of the century indicated the importance they continued to attach not only to landownership, but also to farming.

Mennonite historian B.H. Unruh<sup>i</sup> provides the following interesting information about the forebears of this Hübert family in *The Dutch and Lower-German Background of the Mennonite Movement to the East in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*:

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The 27 October, 1808 Census Lists of the Mennonite Settlers of the Following Colonies of the Molotschna.

Arrived in Kolonie Muntau on June 21, 1804. Family 21, Davit Hübert, 40 years old, from (the village) Einlage, County Einlage, farmer, wife Maria 37, daughters: Aganetha 7, Anna 3. Farm inventory—1 wagon, half a plow, 1 harrow, 3 horses, 7 cattle, 90 sheaves of unthreshed grain and 12 loads of hay.

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Kolonie Muntau: Family 21, David Hübert; Son Jacob born on February 2 1812.

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Molotschna 1803: Hübert, David, Einlage, 35 years, worker to Lindenau [Odessa. Ztg. 1804], married, Giesbrecht Agnetha, Einlage 35 years old to Lindenau, children, Catharina 4 ½, Agathe 1 ½. becomes a teacher (preacher) in 1804.

The information garnered from these source documents leads to the following conclusions:

In 1803 David (Davit) Johann Hübert was a 35-year-old worker from Danzig, married to Agnetha Giesbrecht with two daughters. In 1804 he becomes a teacher (preacher). A son, Jakob, was born in 1812. David was of typical Mennonite means when he arrived in Muntau. In 1808, when this census was taken, he was a farmer, and his farm consisted of a wagon, a half plow, a harrow, three horses, seven cattle, 90 sheaves of unthreshed grain, and 12 loads of hay.

From an examination of the records of the other twenty families who settled in Muntau in 1803/4, it appears that Hübert was of ordinary means. There are individuals with more farm inventory, but there are also individuals with less.

When David died, his son Jacob, born in 1812, would have become the sole heir of the Wirtschaft. This Jakob became the father of Jacob Franz in 1850, and this Jakob F. , in turn, fathered the five children referenced above.

It appears that David David Hübert (1850-1917) was the eldest son of Jakob and he would have inherited the farm from his father. A plan of the village of Margenau, Molotschna, circa 1917, with an attendant family tree obtained from the physician/historian Helmut Hübert of Winnipeg, shows that two David Hüberts resided in Margenau. One David Hübert home is situated between the homes of Johann Abrams and Kornelius Harder, and the other between David Dirks and Peter Loewen. Neither of these Hüberts is part of the immediate Jakob F. family tree. No other Hübert is mentioned on the village plan.<sup>ii</sup> It is clear that all the family of Jacob Franz moved from Margenau to Siberia, where they established another Margenau.

Of the five siblings in the 1898 photo, let me deal first with Anna and David. I can recall no mention of Anna in my growing-up years. David F. is another matter. On first seeing the photo under discussion, I asked Uncle Peter about this David, but Uncle Peter didn't want to talk. I got the impression that David F. had gone over to the other side—that is, had become a Communist. This would have been considered a terrible betrayal of everything Mennonites considered proper.<sup>iii</sup> Then in the first Hüberttreffen in 2011 in Germany, my brother Henry Allan raised this question, and Erwin, grandson of Henry F., reported that Tante Mieke, daughter of Henry F. and recently arrived in Germany from the former USSR, had written that he was "*ein bunter Vogel.*" He was a colorful bird that had left his family and remained unrepentant. For MBs in the 1920s this would have been a scandal at least as troublesome as going over to the other side. In any case, the others became estranged from this branch of the family.

Having no access to land in the Molotschna, the family of Franz F. moved to the Omsk region of Siberia in 1906. Henry, son of Franz F., was born in Molotschna in 1905 and Catherine (Tina), the next sibling, was born in Tiegerweide, Omsk, in 1907.<sup>iv</sup>

The families of Jakob F. and Heinrich F. settled in Issul Kul and Margenau respectively, and the family of Franz F. settled in Tiegerweide. All were farmers, but in addition, Jakob F. was ordained the Ältester of the Mennonite Brethren Church in this part of Siberia in 1913,<sup>v</sup> and had a heavy workload as a result of this responsibility. In addition to farming, Henry F. was a teacher in the local village school. Franz F. was elected Schultze [village chair; effectively, the mayor] in Tiegerweide, but was informed by a Russian official that he was ineligible for this post because, according to Russian law, he was not yet old enough.<sup>vi</sup>

As already stated, Jakob F. was an MB, but while his children all became MBs, Franz F. remained a member of the Grosse Gemeinde (Big Church—literally, the main church) all his life. However, most of his in-laws, with whom he settled in Tiegerweide, were MBs, and therein lies a story. The story was related to me by Tina Kroeker, the eldest daughter of Franz F. and Helena Barg.

Grandfather Hubert (Franz F.) was a shrewd and aggressive businessman and an able manager. By the time of the Russian Revolution, and the Civil War which followed, he had built up a large and successful farming operation. He ran a strict household and brooked no nonsense. When his eldest son, Franz (by his first wife, Helena Wiebe), who was about 11 or 12, acted out, Franz F. ordered him to leave the family home. The young boy, deeply distressed, asked his sisters Mary and Elizabeth what he should do. They suggested that he apologize to his father and promise never to act up again. This Frank did, and his father relented and permitted him to stay. He stayed until he was 19, when, during the Civil War the White Army requisitioned a load of wheat from Franz F. The wheat was loaded onto a wagon, the team of horses hitched to the wagon, and Franz left to deliver the wheat to the White Army. His family never again saw or heard from him.<sup>vii</sup>

The Civil War was difficult for my father as well. One day officers from the White Army appeared in the village, pointed their guns at young men and ordered them to come with them. Though pacifist, they thought better than to refuse. They were ordered to drag cannon through the forest until they neared a railroad track. There, on a Sunday morning, they set it up and the White Army waited until an armoured locomotive pulling several cars came into range. The armoured locomotive, which I thought of when I saw the movie *Dr. Zhivago*, was part of the effort of the Red Army to control the countryside. The officers of the White Army fired a fusillade at the locomotive and disabled it. Dad reported that when the villagers in the church heard that the train had been wrecked, they came out of the church singing songs of thanksgiving. The peasantry, at least in this part of Russia, disliked the Communists.

Sometime later the White Army and the Red Army got into a battle, and the White Army was routed. Dad, with three other young men from their village, escaped. Later in the day, being hungry, they approached a peasant family and immediately experienced the hospitality for which Russian peasants are famous. They were invited to share a meal, and then they made an almost fatal mistake. While the peasants all crossed themselves before partaking of the food, these Mennonite boys just bowed their heads and offered a silent grace. On seeing that they didn't cross themselves, their hosts concluded that these were atheists and therefore Communists. Before the meal was out, White Army soldiers appeared at the door and marched the four unfortunate young Mennonites to the edge of the village to a makeshift firing range. Fortunately, as the firing squad was preparing the execution, the White officer in charge recognized them as his men and called the execution off.<sup>viii</sup> Had the execution proceeded, none of the descendants of the Jakob Frank Hubert family would be here today, and perhaps this Hüberrtreffen would not be taking place. That's another way of saying thanks to my brother Henry, and especially to Frank and Marg Martens, for all the work they have done in organizing this event. I'd like all the descendants of Jacob Frank Hubert to stand just to acknowledge that the really minor, some would say insignificant, events can radically change the fortunes or even existence of a family.

Back to Aunt Tina's story. As early as 1923, Mennonites in both Southern Russia and Siberia began exploring ways of leaving "*dies Land der Schrecken*" (this land of terror).<sup>ix</sup> In Southern Russia the emigration efforts were led by B.B. Janz and the *VBHH (Verband Bürger Holländischer Herkunft)* (The Union of Citizens of Dutch Ancestry) and in Siberia by C.F. Klassen and *AMLV (Allrussischer Mennonitishcher Landwirtschaftlicher Verein)* (All-Russian Mennonite Agribusiness Union). However, Franz F. thought that Communism didn't have staying power and would collapse under its own weight, so he decided to wait it out. However, by 1926 this hadn't happened, and that year a village soviet in Tiegerweide began enacting Communist ideology— "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Franz F., having become a successful farmer and businessman, had the ability. One of his brothers-in-law, not nearly as ambitious or hardworking, had a large family but a small landholding. The brother-in-law and his family had the need. Ergo, give half of Franz F's. farm to this brother-in-law. This was done, but this so angered Franz F. that he decided to emigrate. Not surprisingly, this also caused a serious family rift, not to mention a church quandary. How could the brother-in-law, an MB no less, be so unreasonable as to accept the land?

Franz F's. brother, Elder Jakob F., was called from Margenau to help try restoring harmony to the family and the church. Nevertheless, the decision to emigrate stood. Franz F. converted all his holdings into gold and in 1927 the family left for Canada. The gold was sewn into the women's underwear and the entire family managed to get through the Red Gate safely.

Two questions immediately emerge from these events. What would have happened to Franz F. and the family had the gold been discovered? An overactive imagination is not needed to come to a realistic conclusion. The second was what would have happened to Franz F. had he stayed in Russia? The first of the Five Year Plans was introduced by Stalin in 1929. It mandated and forced massive collectivization, with its attendant attacks on those who had “exploited” their fellowman. Exploitation was defined as anyone who had hired someone else—that is, lived by exploiting the work of another. These were designated *kulaks*, and they, as a class, were now the enemies of the state. Hundreds of thousands were sent to the gulag, and there is no doubt that Franz F. would have ended his days in northern Siberia’s White Wilderness—the Gulag,<sup>x</sup> as an enemy of the people. Aunt Tina ascribed the confiscation of her father’s land to the providence of God, for that confiscation saved him from the Gulag.

Fast forward to 1978 and the Mennonite World Conference at Wichita, Kansas. At this conference I was told that a Johannes Dyck was looking for a Hübert from Canada. Eventually we connected. A member of the Jakob F. family from Brazil met with a member of the Franz F. family from Canada. Johannes reported that another member of the Jakob F. family was also at the conference, and we agreed to meet the next day. At the appointed time and place, Henrique and Helene Enns joined Johannes and me. Helene, a first cousin to my father, had such a strong physical resemblance to my father that there could be no mistaking her for a Hübert. In the conversation that followed, I learned that the Jakob F. family was hoping to come to Canada in 1930, and that Franz F. had already bought a quarter section of land for his brother. However, as Howard Palmer explains in his book *Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta*, in 1930 the Premiers of Alberta and Saskatchewan prevailed on the Prime Minister to prohibit any further immigration of Mennonites, Hutterites and Doukhobors, three groups that had refused the call to arms in WW1, and despite the herculean efforts of Franz F., the doors of immigration to Canada remained firmly closed. The family of Jakob F. found no refuge in Canada.

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<sup>i</sup> B.H. Unruh, *Die neiderländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*.

<sup>ii</sup> The David Hueberts of Margenau, private correspondence received from Helmut Huebert, May, 2015. It is noteworthy that the names of this family are identical to the names of the Jakob Franz Huebert family. Were Jakob Franz and David David twins, as both were born in 1850, or did Jakob, born in 1812, have a another brother not mentioned in the record? Or was David David born in very early 1850 and Jakob Franz late in 1850? Or is there another explanation?

<sup>iii</sup> Colin Neufeldt examined archival records in Chortiza from the 1930s and when he reported that Mennonites had condemned other Mennonites to the Gulag, his documented conclusions were met with incredulity and denial. For some, this destroyed the idealized image that had developed of the Mennonites in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>iv</sup> See Maria Kliewer's report on the [Heinrich] Hübert family on the Hüberttreffen Website (and presumably on the following DVD).

<sup>v</sup> Apparently the last Ältester ordained among the MBs.

<sup>vi</sup> Told to David E. Hubert by Franz F. himself. Presumably when Franz F. turned 35 he became eligible.

<sup>vii</sup> Stories told to me by my mother, who lived with the Franz F. family for more than two years after her marriage to Jacob F. Hubert (my father) on November 25, 1934.

<sup>viii</sup> Stories told to me by my father, Jacob F. Hubert.

<sup>ix</sup> Quoted from a family history of J.B. Janz. *Up and Away to Canada*.

<sup>x</sup> *In Wologdas weissen Wälder*, translated to English under the title *No Strangers in Exile*, is a fictionalized account by Johannes Harder of Mennonites who were sentenced to the Gulag (*Verbanung*) in the northern forests of the USSR.