

up and down a railway. Penner says he had at least two, but more likely three, sons.

However, this hydraulic engineer came to Danzig in 1616, which means that he was not a religious refugee, as most of the Mennonite migrants of Frisian-Flemish-Dutch origin to Eastern Europe were, because religious persecution (although not all discrimination) ceased when the Netherlands effectively became independent in the early 1580s.

Penner further cites a family legend, put in writing by a Peter Wiebe about 1880, according to which two brothers, Jakob and Abraham Wiebe, fled from the Spanish Netherlands to Danzig in about 1575, shocked by the horrors of the Duke of Alba's notorious persecution of Protestants in 1568. Jakob settled in Freienhuben and Abraham in Einlage on the Nogat River.

Penner states he found a document in the Elbing City Archives which confirmed the essence of this tradition, but states that brothers Jakob and Abraham Wiebe rented land in Einlage from the city in Elbing and that this occurred in 1640.

I believe that in all likelihood these two brothers were descendants of refugees who, in fact, came from the Spanish-ruled Netherlands between 1568 and Dutch independence. This was the last major stream of religious refugees from that area, who had started coming as early as about 1528, but it probably was the largest wave. In that case, Jakob and Abraham might or might not have been the only survivors of those early refugees. The only reason I consider it possible that they might have been the only survivors is due to the enormous death toll among the early generations which reclaimed the marshy Vistula-Nogat area, a considerable part of which is below sea level, from the sea.

But is it possible that all the Wiebes came from one of three common seventeenth-century ancestors? The 1776 peasant census (which does not include city dwellers in Danzig, Elbing and a few lesser centers) already lists 77 heads of household recorded under the surname of Wieb or Wiebe (including 6 widows).

Yes, it is possible, although I am not prepared to say that it is true. Most people had large families in those days and the Mennonites even more so than most others. Infant mortality was high compared with today and as late as 1709-10 there was a devastating epidemic in Danzig, as the church records of the Danzig congregation clearly show. Nevertheless, three Wiebes could have produced more than 77 Wiebe households within about 5 generations.

Just the same, I have six different lines of Wiebe ancestors among whom I have not been able to establish any relationship, although they all date back at least as far as 1754, despite the lack of specific dates of birth in most cases (which results from the almost total lack of preserved pre-1772 church records for rural areas, where a large majority of the Mennonites lived and from where nearly all the emigrants to Russia came).