

A CHRONICLE OF THE LANDIS / LANDEIS FAMILY

The story of the Landis/Landeis Family
From their origins in Switzerland,
their Exodus to Alsace, the Palatinate,
the Ukraine, and to the U.S.A.

by

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A Personal Introduction: the Story Behind the Research

My mother, Anna Marie Wagner (born Landeis) was a natural story teller. She had an excellent memory, which she retained up to her final year. She loved to reflect about her childhood and the flow of her life. Her stories were intriguing when we were young because they dealt with a period of our history that is long past. She told about how her father Alexander and her grandparents, Heinrich and Louisa (Meier) Landeis, came across the sea from Tsarist Russia and they homesteaded on the plains of North Dakota and Montana. All her stories were turned into dramatic adventures which she loved to repeat, each time embellishing the details and the punch lines for greatest effect. By her telling, her father Alex ran down and roped coyotes from horseback, and he was so proficient with a six-shooter that he could punch the same hole repeatedly in a target. Like Paul Bunyan, he rerouted the Musselshell river near their farm in Montana, using a team of horses, dynamite, and his bare hands. Her grandmother told of huge snakes in the Ukraine that gripped their tails and rolled like hoops across the steppes, then cracked like a whip at their prey. She also told hair-raising religious prophecies handed down to her as a child from a mysterious *Sibylla Buch* that foretold the impending Battle of Armageddon and the End of the World, the signs of which she always thought were just around the corner.

Alex and Ida Landeis were the only grandparents that I personally knew when I was young – my father's parents (also Germans from Tsarist Russia) passed away long before I was born. We visited my mother's parents on their farm near Ryegate, Montana, and Ida lived with us for awhile in Portland after she was widowed, so I was able to form first-hand impressions and memories. Grandpa was short, barrel-chested, quiet and oddly shy, with a no-nonsense attitude so we all knew not to cross him. Grandma was a large, strong woman, forthright in her opinions and not at all shy. She was quick to hold her own against grandpa. One of my early memories is of her powerful arms vigorously kneading a sack of cottage-cheese curds, which my brothers and I ate like ice-cream. She wasted nothing. Old flour sacks were transformed into something useful, such as underwear. She often exclaimed in her heavy German accent, "People today, dey vant tings too fancy! Children today dey are schooled!"

One question that puzzled me as a youth was how it came to be that my mother's Landeis and Meier families (and also the Wagner, Reis, and other families on my father's side) immigrated from Russia and yet they were ethnically German. They always said they weren't "Rooshians," and they spoke German dialect in the home. My grandfather did not believe in talking about the "old days." We all complained about how uncommunicative he was.

Fortunately, my grandfather's brother, Ambrose Landeis, was more talkative and on the occasions when he visited he shared his considerable knowledge of the past. He confirmed that the Landeis family had come from the Ukraine, and he remembered that their home village was "Karlsruhe," named after the city on the east bank of the Rhine. Ambrose was the first to explain to us the outlines of the history of Germans in Russia. He knew that the first German colonists were invited by the Empress Catherine the Great in 1763, and they had settled along the Volga river; later groups, including the Landeis family, settled north of the Black Sea, where they established the colony of Karlsruhe.

Years later, two historical societies came into being devoted to preserving the story of the Germans in Tsarist Russia -- the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia in Lincoln, Nebraska, and the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in Bismarck, North Dakota. Publications began to appear on the history of this ethnic group. They were an ethnic group with an almost forgotten past, yet there remained widespread curiosity among many of us

descendants about our history. As these publications appeared, the news quickly traveled through the extended family networks across the nation. Dr. Karl Stumpp, a well-known scholar of German-Russian history and culture, made the early immigration records in Tsarist Russia available and it was possible to determine the original ancestors who settled in each of the colonies in the Black Sea region, along with their points of origin. I was able to reconstruct the broad outlines of Landeis family history going back to 1809, when Jacob Landeis emigrated from Hördt in the Rhine Pfalz area to the colony of Karlsruhe. At that stage of research it appeared that the point of origin of the Landeis family was the Pfalz, an area from which many other families also originated that immigrated to Russia and to America.

In 1991 I decided to explore the microfilmed church book for Hördt available through the LDS church, which has the largest database on family history in the world. Without much difficulty (other than learning to decipher antiquated German and Latin hand-writing) I was able to locate the marriage entry for Jacob Landeis and the birth entries for all of his children. This information matched that available in the Russian census records, so the link was reliable. Interestingly, in Jacob Landeis' marriage entry it indicated that he came from the village of Neckarburken, above Mosbach, in modern Baden-Württemberg. This meant, then, that the Landeis family did not originate in Rhineland Pfalz as I had thought. Unfortunately the microfilm records of the Catholic church book in Neckarburken do not go back into the 1700s, so I was stopped at that point.

In the summer of 1992 I traveled to Germany and visited Neckarburken. It is a very small village, consisting of about 20 houses, with one Lutheran church. The village smelled strongly of hay and manure -- a typical farming village in the outback of Baden. I spoke with several of the old-timers in the local *Bierstube* (tavern), and they all assured me that they had never heard the surname Landeis in Neckarburken. Also, as far as they knew, the village had always been Lutheran. At that point I was even more puzzled. There was not only the mystery of how the Landeis family was connected with Neckarburken, but also the mystery of their religious background, since my family had always been Catholic as far as I knew.

The break-through came as I was browsing through the records of the Institute for History and Ethnic Research of the Pfalz (*Institut für Pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde*) in Kaiserslautern, an institute devoted to tracking the migrations of people into and out of the Rhineland Pfalz (including the territories once historically part of the Palatinate on the east bank of the Rhine, which included most of the Neckar valley). I noted that they had a record referring to Hans "Landeiss" from Horgen, Switzerland, who was married in Neckarburken in 1678. This fact, coupled with the occurrence of this unusual surname in that specific tiny village, provided the missing clue.

The other intriguing detail was that Hans Landeiss was listed as being "originally Mennonite," and a descendant of the "Anabaptist martyr, Hans Landis." This led me to the discovery that the family descended from a well-known person in the early history of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland. This showed that there is indeed a connection between our "Landeis" family and the branches in the USA that spell the name as "Landis." My research had become a fascinating excursion into history with some unexpected detours and surprising discoveries.

Some important sources utilized in this study should be acknowledged. A considerable amount of research has been done on the ramification of the family lines since the first members arrived in Pennsylvania in the early 1700s. Landis family reunions were held periodically from 1911 until 1967, almost all of them at Perkasio Park near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A standing genealogy committee was organized, reports were presented at each reunion, and the

proceedings were published by the Landis Family Reunion Committee. The group operated for several years under the able leadership of Ira D. Landis, a respected Mennonite minister in Lancaster county. The complete set of proceedings is available at the Mennonite Historical Society, in Lancaster. These reports contain valuable genealogical information, especially on the later history of the Landis family in the USA. Over the years descendants of the Landis family have published various attempts at comprehensive genealogical tables, summarizing what was known about the early history of the family in Switzerland. One of the earliest is the "Hirzel Chart" prepared in 1913 by the Director of the Archives of the Canton of Zürich. Jane Evans Best¹ updated the Hirzel Chart with research in the Zürich archives and study of the microfilmed church books. In the mid 1990s Michael Wilcox and I discovered that we were both struggling with the antiquated handwriting from the 1500s in the microfilmed church books of Horgen and Hirzel. We benefited greatly from our mutual correspondence, which is reflected in the articles we each published in the journal, *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*.² The latest attempt to integrate all this research on the early history of the Landis family has been published by Samuel Wenger.³

For my branch of the Landis family, the crucial link was provided by Rev. Heinz Schuchmann, an historian and genealogist from Karlsruhe, Germany. He was the first to demonstrate a direct line of descent from Hans Landis the martyr, through four generations to the Hans "Landeiss" who emigrated to Neckarburken in Baden.⁴ For the chapters on Tsarist Russia, descendants from the German colonies in the Ukraine owe a debt of gratitude to the monumental research of Karl Stumpp⁵ and those of us with roots in the German Catholic colonies in the Beresan valley are especially fortunate to have available the two books by Fr. Konrad Keller, published in Odessa after the turn of the 19th century.⁶

Before we launch onto this journey, I should say a few words about my own orientations. I have been accumulating bits and pieces of the family history for about 40 years; fortunately, I began the process while my parents and several of the older generation were still alive and they could recall details as told by their parents. Personally, I have always found great inspiration from our family's saga – and indeed it is a real saga, involving challenges faced by our ancestors that vastly outweigh anything that we are likely to face today. I hope that you too will derive some inspiration from this narrative, and perhaps a sense of a larger identity that you can carry with you throughout your own life.

As I write these words, I am now retired, after 32 years as a university professor. I received my doctorate in Anthropology. As you might guess, given my background and the natural bent of my interests, I like to view events in their cultural and historical context. Bear with me when I lapse into detailed (sometimes overly detailed) side excursions on various topics– such as the history and background of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland, the impact of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars on the German villagers along the Rhine, and daily life in the German colonies in Tsarist Russia. I have made a distinction between those

¹ Best 1990. See the references chapter at the end of this family history for full citations of all sources utilized.

² Wilcox 1995. Three of the chapters in this present chronicle appeared earlier as articles in *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*: Wagner 1995a, Wagner & Wilcox 1995, Wagner 1995b.

³ Wenger 2005.

⁴ Schuchmann 1963, 1966, Schuchmann & Diefenbacher 1983.

⁵ Stumpp 1971, 1973.

⁶ Keller 1910, 1914.

chapters which provide broad historical background, and those which provide direct information on the Landeis family. Readers who wish to skip the detailed history discussions can jump ahead as they wish. During my career in academia I became accustomed to documentation and footnotes; it has become my natural style of writing and it is too late to change now! The majority of the documentation in this study was derived from my own study of the microfilms of the records and church books of Switzerland, Alsace, and Germany, available through the Genealogical Society of Utah, under the auspices of the L.D.S. church, or personally obtained during my trips to the archives in Europe. Citations of the specific microfilm call-numbers for the source documentation are made whenever appropriate.

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