

THE EXODUS OF THE HUTTERITES FROM SOUTH DAKOTA

by

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I was first introduced to the Hutterites back in 1961 on the Miller Hutterite Colony near Choteau, Montana. The minister at that time was David Hofer. His two uncles Joseph and Michael Hofer had died as martyrs while imprisoned by the United States military in 1918. More than any other issue, it was the martyrdom of Joseph and Michael that finally prompted the Hutterites to emigrate from South Dakota to Canada.

The emigration of the Schmiedleut colonies is most interesting. With the exception of the Bon Homme colony near Yankton, all of the Hutterian colonies in South Dakota emigrated to Canada in 1918. Today only Schmiedleut colonies are found in South Dakota.

By 1918 the Hutterian Brethern had 17 colonies in South Dakota. It was also in 1918 that conscription was introduced and all men in the United States between the ages of 21 and 31 were issued draft cards. This posed a great problem for the Hutterites because the non-resistance tradition has been an important part of the Hutterian belief for centuries. All Anabaptists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed very strictly in the practice of non-resistance. In fact, it is their distinguishing mark according to many historians.

Their long belief in non-resistance can be supported by numerous documents. One of the earliest discussed by Robert Friedman is a translation of an "Anabaptist Ordinance of 1630 on Nonresistance." The text says:

We therefore command you by the power which the Lord has given us, that henceforth no brother should protect himself with violence.¹

John Horsch surmised that Andreas Ehrenpreise was the originator of this document. Several other quotations from this document help explain the long-standing non-resistance position of the Hutterian Brethren:

What he (Ehrenpreise) actually wanted to convey to his brethren in his address of 1633, he said almost at the end of it: "Take off your spotted garments of sin, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev. 7:14)

It is not only unwise to attempt "self defense," it is actually "a defection from faith that a brother should dare to knock down the one who did violence to him" ²

Because of these non-violent beliefs, the colonies did not want to take part in the shedding of blood so the elders of the colonies decided to travel to Washington to discuss the

situation with the War Secretary. The elders were told that they should have the young men register for the conscription so they could be identified by church. They were led to believe that those who did not belong to a church which had strong feelings against military service would be conscripted.

And so they told us everything was all right, just as a birdcatcher who feeds the birds as if he wanted to nourish them but then would only seek their death. And so it happened to our communities, we trusted our good fortune too much.³

Again the colonies sent people to Washington to seek help from the authorities on this matter. They were told to just let the boys be inducted. Then once they got to the camps, these boys should just sit and refuse to do military service that would be against their "conscience and belief." The Hutterian tradition was no violence--even to the point of no self defense. Although many young men, Hutterites, Mennonites, and others, held a nonviolent position, one specific pivotal event led to the mass emigration of the Hutterian Brethren to Canada.

Four young men left from Parkston, South Dakota: David, Michael, and Joseph Hofer, three brothers and their brother-in-law Jacob Wipf. When they arrived at Camp Lewis, Washington, they refused to wear the military uniform. They were placed in the guardhouse and after two months sentenced before a war tribunal to 37 years in prison. This was reduced by the commanding general to 20 years. They were then chained two by two and sent to the prison on the Island of Alcatraz in the Bay of San Francisco.

They were stripped of their clothing, except for light underclothing, and locked in the damp dark cells in the lower part of the prison. Military uniforms were thrown to them, and they were warned that if they didn't conform, they would stay in the cells until they died "just as the other four we dragged out of here yesterday."

During the first four and a half days they did not get anything to eat, and had only half of a glass of water to drink every 24 hours. For the next one and a half days they had to stand with their hands chained to the bars so high over their heads that they could barely touch the floor with their feet. The story of the abusive treatment goes on and on. The boys were later transferred to Fort Leavenworth.

Further bad treatment at Leavenworth resulted in Joseph and Michael being hospitalized. Jacob Wipf sent a telegram home to the Hofer wives. They arrived in Fort Leavenworth at 11:00 o'clock in the evening and found their husbands so close to death that they were barely able to speak.

The next morning when they went back to see the men, Joseph had died. When Maria was finally able to see her dead husband, to her horror they had dressed him in a soldier's uniform, the very thing he had resisted in life. His brother, Michael, died a few days later.

After the relatives had left with the bodies, David Hofer was sent back to his cell in chains. He said, "I stood there all day and cried; but I could not even wipe my tears away, since my hands were chained to the bars of my prison cell." Several days later he was released. Jacob Wipf, however, was not released until April 13, 1919.⁴

This tragic series of events finally prompted the Hutterites to emigrate. The basic motivation for the emigration from the United States to Canada was over their religious refusal to bear arms. The conscientious objector position has been a strong part of the Hutterite way of life since 1528. Historians, geographers, and demographers and others are familiar with the migration push-pull model. When Michael and Joseph were martyred, the push was triggered and a mass exodus of Hutterites from South Dakota started.

The Hutterites selected Canada as their new home because the Canadian government offered them exemption from military service. The Dariusleut and Lehrerleut congregations moved to the province of Alberta. In 1918 six colonies were established by the Dariusleut: Stand-Off, Springvale, West Raley, East Cardston, Rosebud, and Wilson Siding. The Lehrerleut established four colonies: Rockport, Milford, Old Elm, and New Elmspring.

The Schmiedleut colonies chose Manitoba as their new home. Ben Homme Colony purchased land in Canada with the intention of moving. In August of 1918, two families were sent ahead to start building on the new place. Another six families were sent two months later. About a third of the people did get to Canada, but the rest were unable to join them because they were unable to sell the land. They had a "contract" with a buyer to sell the colony but he never showed.⁵

The five colonies that made successful moves relocated in the municipality of Cartier, west of Winnipeg. These five colonies are Maxwell, Huron, Milltown, Rosedale, and James Valley.

Huron colony, 24 families with 131 members in 1918, purchased 3,000 acres of land north and west of Elie, Manitoba. Milltown colony, 21 families with 100 members purchased 3,300 acres of land at \$50.00 an acre west of Elie. Rosedale colony, 26 families with 168 members in 1918, purchased 2,000 acres north of Elie. In 1919, Rosedale Colony divided and established the Iberville colony. Maxwell colony, 28 families with 182 members on 3,000 acres, located on the Assiniboine River. In 1920 they branched out and established the Barickman Colony.⁶

The James Valley Colony had been located in Buffalo County, South Dakota, about 60 miles west of Mitchell. This was further west than other colonies in South Dakota prior to 1918. The Gan Valley location was in ranching country, and the colony had some difficulty in that setting.⁷ When they moved to Canada, the 11 families with 61 members purchased 3,040 acres of land south of Elie.

One of the most interesting colonies among the 350 colonies is the James Valley Colony. The largest family in the colony is that of Joshua and Elisabeth Hofer. For years Joshua was the colony boss but, he is now retired. Two of his sons Jakob and John are ministers.

James Valley also was the home of the Schmiedleut elder. Peter K. Hofer was the elder until he passed away in 1967. It was under his leadership that the last formal statement was made regarding arms. In 1956 the ordnungen (rules) stated:

Guns are also forbidden. If the colony needs a gun against predatory animals and such, it should be kept under strict care and not to be used for hunting.

Although this statement was not in reference to the military, it does reflect the attitude toward guns that still prevails in the colonies.

Following the end of World War I the colonies began returning to South Dakota. The colonies currently found in South Dakota are the daughters and granddaughters of the Bon Homme Colony and the five colonies that emigrated to Cartier Municipality, Manitoba. Most of the South Dakota lands vacated in 1918 are again in the hands of the Hutterites. The Lehrereut and Dariusleut groups, however, never did return. Today 14% of all Hutterites live in South Dakota and 70% still live in Canada.

Over the past twenty-six years I have developed a close friendship with the family of the Hutterite martyrs. The son and grandsons of David Hoffer (the brother who did not die) now live on the Miller Colony in Montana. Also Michael's daughter (Mary Kleinsasser) also lives on the same colony.

The wife of Joseph Hofer died last summer. She lived for some years on the Rosedale Colony, Alberta. The colony divided up last summer and two days after she moved to the Fairlane Colony, she died.

During the summer of 1985 and then again in 1986 seven Hutterite ministers from Canada and Montana came back to the old Rockport Colony, South Dakota. They wanted to clean up the old cemetery where their ancestors were buried. The grave plots were surveyed then all headstones removed and the surface soil leveled and prepared for reseeding. New "headstones" were constructed by pouring a cement pad and installing a marker frame and plaque. In most instances the name and dates are the only indication; however, the two boys martyred have "Martyr" inscribed after their names.

NOTES

1. Harold S. Bender (ed.), Hutterite Studies: Essays by Robert Friedmann (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1961), 233.