

# The Autobiography of Johann Donner (1771 – 1830)

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The following autobiography is translated, with the help of optical character recognition (ORC) software and DeepL translation. The original is part of the Orlofferfelde church records found at the Mennonitische Forschungsstelle in Weierhof, Germany. This translation used the transcription found on pages 71 to 102 of the 1932 (41<sup>st</sup> edition) of the Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalender.

All umlauts have been changed to ae, oe and ue. Names of people and locations are retained. In some cases archaic spellings have been standardized. Most scriptural quotations are from the NIV rather than freely translated. Note that the genealogical data in the first few pages has been incorporated into the GRANDMA database.

It is left to the reader to identify the people and locations mentioned in this document.

A few definitions:

*Ohm* - literally means uncle in Dutch, but is used as a term of respect, usually for members of the Lehrdienst (church officials).

*Altester* (pl. Aelteste) - Elder or bishop.

*Calash* - an open carriage with facing passenger seats and an elevated couchman.

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# Autobiography

To my dear children

Written by Johann Donner, 1825



## **In the Name of God!**

The origin of my surname and that of my first forefathers is unknown. The first named in our family book was Daniel Donner, born in Hamburg, (year and day of his birth is not recorded). He was married on July 13, 1656 to Elisabeth Rosen, who was born in or near the city of Thorn. This couple has 2 sons, Johann, born September 16, 1667 and Samuel, born April 30, 1671. Both were educated by their parents in Hamburg. Each pursued a trade, the first to be a lacemaker and the other to be a clockmaker and both went on to practice their trades.

Samuel stayed in Amsterdam and changed his name at the amusing insistence of his master, changing the "r" to a "t", since his mischievous master repeatedly said that the name Donner sounded too frightful, while the name Donnet sounded pleasing to the ear; and so, a Donnet family came into being, one descendant, a Samuel Donnet was an engraver in Danzig. The last with this name was Johann Donnet who died unmarried in Danzig at the end of the 18th century. Whether there are still descendants named Donne (r) t in Holland, I don't know. Here in Prussia only one grandchild of the copper engraver, a Bestvater's daughter, who is unmarried, is alive in Danzig. Her nieces and nephews with the name von Kraenskys, are still alive in Prussia and Poland.

Johann Donner took up residence in Danzig and married the widow Mrs. Sara Janze, née von Duehren, on October 10, 1694. His son Johann Donner was born July 16, 1696. Four more children who were fathered by him in this marriage died young.

He was elected as a preacher in the Mennonite congregation in Danzig on January 13, 1697 and died on February 14, 1718. Johann Donner, born in 1696, was my grandfather; after his father's death, he lived in his father's estate in the White Swan in the Tischlersgasse on the Redaune near the Schluefeldammer Bridge and, like his father, ran the distillery and brandy bar. On September 30, 1725, he married Adelgunde Hekker, the daughter of the landowner Heinrich Hekker from the *Kampe*. Among several children born in this marriage and died young, Johann was born on January 23, 1730. He lived and died unmarried in Tiegenhof, April 12, 1773.

On September 14, 1735, my father, Heinrich was born. On June 16, 1737, my grandfather was elected preacher by the Mennonite congregation in Danzig. There was a dispute in the congregation about the wearing of wigs, because the Aeltester Heinrich von Duehren wanted to excommunicate all members of the congregation who wore wigs. Johann Donner advised him to take more lenient measures, so he was elected, against his will, by a part of the congregation to the office of Aeltester, and the Aeltester appointed from Holland for his ordination had already arrived, when he (my grandfather) fell ill because of grief over the division in the congregation and died on July 11, 1740 in his 44th year.

His widow married the merchant Heinrich Kliewer on September 10, 1741 and gave birth to the Aeltester of the Mennonite congregation Jakob Kliewer, born January 7, 1743, and the dyer [*Faerber*] Abraham Kliewer, born March 30, 1747, who has already died in Tiegenhof. In 1744 they had moved to Tiegenhof, where

they had bought the trading house (later owned by Julius Wiens).

Heinrich Kliewer died January 4, 1762 and his wife (my grandmother) died December 30, 1767, both are buried in Orloff.

My father, Heinrich Donner, married the widow Elisabeth Allert , née Grunau on November 15, 1757, in Orlofffeld. From this marriage my half-sister Adelgunde was born on August 29, 1758. She is the widow of Peter Stobbe in Tiegenhof, and is still alive today. After his first wife died on November 23, 1766, my father entered into his second marriage with Elisabeth Stobbe on November 20, 1770, in Schoensee, where he had moved in 1761. From this marriage 3 sons and 3 daughters were born, of which I am the oldest. My father Heinrich Donner was elected preacher by the Mennonite congregation in Orlofffeld on September 21, 1766, and on May 31, 1772 this congregation elected him as its Aeltester. He administered this office with fidelity and steadfastness until the end of his life. The well-known dispute over the baptism of persons baptized out of a mixed marriage and persons baptized as infants, who were admitted to our congregation, was decided according to his wishes, and he experienced the reconciliation of all congregations who had opposed him on these issues, as well as the calming of the formerly restless members of his own congregation.

Since the well-being of all Mennonite congregations in Prussia necessitated it, he traveled to Berlin in the company of others on five different occasions, each time justifying the trust that all the congregations had placed in him. He attended the two homage ceremonies of the most noble Kings Frederick William II and III and, as it is generally known, he tried to protect the welfare of all and also the spiritual and physical welfare of his own congregation until the end of his life. He had [ordained] two Aelteste, Heinrich Roth and Jakob Kliewer in Danzig, and Johann Sperling and Dietrich Allert of the Klein Werder. He was a gifted speaker and communicator.

He preached his last two sermons at the communion celebrations held on the two Sundays of the 17th and 18th Trinity in 1804, during which he expressed an inkling of his imminent death. Already weak and due to the onset of illness, he no longer came to church. After twelve weeks of painful illness from dropsy, he passed away gently, being hopeful and blessed, and complete in his faith and trust in God's grace and Jesus' merit on January 2, 1805; and is buried in the Orlofffeld cemetery together with his second wife, my mother, who died, in the same year, on November 18, 1804.

So, it is to these worthy parents that I owe my existence, as well as to God. I saw the light of this world on September 26, 1771, in the village of Schoensee in the Tiegenhof district of West Prussia, after my dear mother was saved from death by the difficult birth of her firstborn only by God's gracious help. This, my first danger of death, was soon followed by several in my earlier life, from which the gracious and protective hand of God saved me each time. To the praise of God and for the memory of my dear children, I will describe them as they really happened to me. The first danger happened to me in my 4th year, the circumstances of which I remember more from the stories of my parents than from my own memories. My parents were about to drive to Tiegenhof, when on the village road close to my father's farm a loose horse with a hanging sack came running up, my father, who jumped out of the calash, wanted to grab the horses' reins. However, our horses spooked and stampeded, causing my father to be knocked over and dragged a distance by the reins. But when he noticed that the horses were jumping into a ditch, he let go of the reins and called to my mother to jump out, but she thought that she should stay with her boys. When the horses took a sudden turn, I fell out of the calash. She grabbed me by the coat and pulled me back, so that I fell at her feet with my head down. She then grabbed the reins and tried to restrain the horses. The horses, however, ran away so wildly and so close to the partly dry village ditch that the calash tipped sideways three times. Fortunately, each time the calash hit the willow trees growing on the road side and was thrown back. If the carriage had fallen between the willows, my mother and I would have been crushed, but it remained upright, and the horses were restrained by our servants, so that they finally ran through the gate onto the farmyard and could be seized and restrained at the stable.

Thus, the merciful God saved my mother and me from death, except for slight bruises. My dear father had all flesh torn off of his fingers on both hands by the reins, down to the veins and tendons, which caused him great pain and from which he had the scars for the rest of his life.

I was even closer to an accidental death in my fifth year, when my parents were driving back from a visit to my mother's mother at Schoenseerfeld in the evening, and the horses, which had otherwise been very calm, suddenly became frightened and jumped into the millrace running along the road. My mother jumped from the wagon and remained lying on the bank, and looking up, with everything in the ditch. She only saw a small flap of my father's coat above the water; his head was stuck so firmly in the soft ground that he could only get loose with the greatest effort and roll over the water. When he came out, he immediately shouted: "Where is the boy? Whereupon my mother cried fearfully:

Oh, he is in the ditch! Thereupon my father finally found me lying in the bottom of the ditch between the front wheels of the wagon and the hind feet of the horses and initially thought I was dead. But I recovered after both parents did everything they could on the spot to save me. It was always noteworthy to my parents that the horses, while I was lying at their feet in the water, behaved quite calmly, but as soon as I was out, they raged so violently, as if they would trample the whole wagon, until finally they too were pulled out of the water by bystanders who rushed over. God's mercy thus graciously saved me.

Later, when I was grown up, I was in mortal danger a couple of times, once when the farmhand with the ladder wagon, on which I was sitting, drove carelessly down the steep Vistula embankment, so that the wagon tipped over, but I suffered no injuries except for the fright. Another time, during the winter after I had gotten married, I was on the *Frisches Haff* along with several other sleds, which we were being using to collect wood. My horse spooked and ran away, tripping the sled over, but I held onto the lead and was dragged behind. I was afraid that my horse might run so far that I would not be able to find it again. There was a thaw and water on the ice so that as the horse ran at full speed, the water on the ice sprayed all over my body, soaking my clothes completely. There were very large rocks protruding from the ice along the high bank where this happened and I could easily have been crushed against them. But thankfully God protected me, and since my horse had run for quite a distance into the open lagoon, it fell down once, but picked itself up sooner than I could and ran away even faster.

At this little pause I had the advantage of seizing only the left rein, thinking that the horse would at least run in a circle and return to the other sleds, but this failed, as he continued in a straight line just as fast as before, until at last he fell down exhausted. This time I was very quick to pull myself together and threw myself on the horse's head and kept it lying down until my companions came to me and tied my wild horse to my other tame horse, which the servant was driving, and we were able to continue our journey to Sukase. Praise be to the Lord that he protected me so graciously this time as well.

My education was better in the local rural way than most farmers' sons enjoy. My father, born in the city [of Danzig] and brought up by urban pious parents, was able to teach me more useful knowledge than most country folk have at their disposal. Also, I was so fortunate to enjoy the instruction of the rather learned school teacher named John in Orloff, after my father had moved back to Orlofffeld from Schoensee in 1778. My mother sought to form and keep my

soul pure by instilling in me from my earliest years the dignity of prayer and the bliss of a firm daily trust in God. Other knowledge, insights and useful concepts were instilled in me by my father through his teaching and good books, and my love of reading was very beneficial to me in my adult years. I had such a great inclination for painting from my youth that my father was determined to apprentice me to an artist, which my mother, however, prevented by her great devotion and love. In the end, she alone resisted the will of my father, all my relatives and also my own desire to go to Amsterdam with a Dutch Mennonite merchant, Mr. Bostin, who was staying in Danzig. Mr. Bostin visited us often and asked me to take everything with me, with the assurance that he would teach me the trade with his rich relatives and give me lessons in the art of painting. But since my mother did not give her consent, I did not go and as time passed it became apparent that having gone would have worked greatly to my disadvantage, because the young foreigners in Holland were very oppressed during the French revolution and the religious liberty of the Mennonites were completely abolished by Bonaparte.

The Lord's counsel is wonderful, but he guides everything out marvelously. In addition to my mother, Cornelius Grunau a preacher from Orlofffelde, loved me and wished me to stay here, once gave me the following poem to think about: "Should I swim to distant shores, to find a faraway paradise, perhaps, but contentment can bloom at home, far from the foamy beach". His wish was fulfilled. He lived to see my first marriage engagement to the widow Helene Quiring, née Bestvater, here at Beyershorst in my 28th year. Before my marriage, however, he died in September 1794. After the death of my first wife, I married his daughter Maria Grunau in the spring of 1799, and so the poem he had given me earlier was sufficient to assure me of his fatherly love, which he would undoubtedly have granted me if he had lived longer.

In my youthful years I was exposed to many temptations; young relatives, who often visited my parents' house, sought to portray sin to me in a charming way under the pretext of permissible pleasures and to lead me into company where respectability was sometimes violated. My parents warned me with pious vigilance, and if it seemed hard to me at that time when they kept me back from such gatherings, I have recognized their care with heartfelt gratitude at a more mature age, without which I could have been very easily seduced. Even in my later years I was guided by my parent's admonitions. Before my first marriage, free thought became very fashionable in this region, and such books and persons were known to me. During this time, I was persistent in prayer to God seeking to know the true faith that I did not fall into unbelief. The thorough



explanations of my father were very useful to me in strengthening my faith. In general, I must confess to the glory of God that just as He saved me so often from apparent danger to my life, He also graciously protected my soul when the temptations were at their greatest. The first grace in this regard was that God gifted me with a quiet mind and I also suffered a lot from headaches, both of which kept me from many soul-damaging pleasures. Furthermore, when I was really in sinful company, my eyes, ears and thoughts were kept pure, about which they mocked me, but I nevertheless escaped sin without even knowing how, e.g., as I once did not take part in the amusements of the youth at a guest bidding, and someone from the company teased me with the words: "What do you want? To read the Bible?"

Yes, I answered, which pricked his conscience, at which point he fell silent and left me alone. It even happened to me that under the pretense of close friendship, one sought to intoxicate me with sweet-tasting drinks in order to make me capable of sins that would have stained my soul forever if I had practiced them. But through God's watchful care, the urge to sin had to be weakened, and instead of the irritation, I felt a violent disgust for the offered opportunity to turn to sin, the near and great danger from which the hand of God saved me. When I recall all this and more now in my later years, I sink deeply ashamed at the feet of my God and Savior and exclaim deeply moved: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant." Genesis 32:10. Without any merit on my part, the Lord Jesus has fulfilled in me what He promised His disciples. Luke 10:19, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." and Mark 16:18, "and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them". Hereby I cannot and must not in the least put myself on a par with those holy disciples of the Lord, but I must rather confess that I have in many ways departed from God and am in sin and lack the glory that I should have before God, Romans 3:23, and if my evil impulses were not restrained by a higher power, I would perhaps have sunk into the greatest vices. But to the eternal praise of God and as a warning to my children I must confess how the great goodness and long-suffering of God alone has protected me so wonderfully from gross sins and vices and with inexpressible wisdom has led me to repentance. May the eternal mercy of God also guide and lead me the rest of my life completely according to His will and also protect my children and children's children as much as possible from all sins!

The events of my pilgrimage have often been unusual enough to record them for the memory of my children. The first ten years of my married life flowed



tranquilly; when in the eleventh, the all-powerful hand of God the Father shifted me to a more important sphere of activity. After the death of my father on January 2, 1805, the congregation of Orlofferfelde, through God's guidance and under the supervision of the Aeltester Dietrich Allert of the Marcushoff congregation, first elected me as a preacher on February 24, 1805, and on September 29 of the same year (in my 33rd year and with 129 votes) as an Aeltester.

Our merciful God abundantly bestowed his help, strength and blessing on me and soon circumstances arose in which it was mainly the grace and help of the Most High that counted. In 1806 the war with France broke out, which was very disastrous for Prussia. After the defeat in battle at Zena in October, and the dangers of the war came closer and closer, the Mennonite congregations in Prussia decided to offer the King 30,000 Reichsthaler for the soldiers, widows and orphans. Since the Royal Family had fled to Koenigsberg, the King was informed of the intended offer by the Mennonite deacon, Abr. Nickel from the Kulm congregation during his presence in Graudenz, whereupon the money was paid in Osterode according to the Royal instructions. I wrote the accompanying letter and the King issued a very grateful letter of appreciation to the congregations. Since this incident, all the churches have placed their trust in me, which I owe more to the grace of God than to my own skill. After the terrible war years of 1807 and 1808, which thank God left our religious freedom untouched, in 1810 an important statesman made a proposal to all the Mennonite congregations through addresses to the Koenigsberg congregation to buy themselves out of threats to loss of privileges through a further offer of 100,000 Reichsthaler. The urban communities were completely in favor of this, but the rural communities had already suffered too much in the war and were therefore quite unable to raise this much money. I seriously opposed the purchase of protection and all the members of the rural communities strongly supported me. However, an attempt should be made to raise a considerable sum and to offer it to the King as a gift. After repeated consultations, two protection funds, namely 10,000 Reichsthaler, were tendered and put together with effort. This was announced by the Aeltester Johann Wieler in Koenigsberg to the aforementioned gentleman. Since the latter did not respond to repeated inquiries, the said Johann Wieler declared that he did not have any further advice and believed that the 10,000 Reichsthaler was too small a sum to be offered to the King; he therefore left it to the rural community to do with this money what they thought best. A year had now passed about this matter, and since the Royal government in Marienwerder had learned that the 10,000 Reichsthaler was in Marienburg, it requested the Treasurer, Mr. Cornelius Wiens several times to pay this money to them. However, they did not want to do this without the King's permission and so

it was decided at a meeting in 1811 to offer the King the 10,000 Reichsthaler as a free gift for the needs of the state in a humble presentation.

I had to make this presentation again and to the comfort of all of us the King answered in very gracious terms with assurance of the continuation of his special grace and immediately issued an order to pay the money into the central treasury of the government at Marienwerder, which was done by me in the company of the Aeltester Peter Regehr and the Treasurer Cornelius Wiens in Marienwerder. Soon thereafter it was announced in the Berlin newspapers: "That the Mennonite congregations in Prussia, moved by pure patriotism, had offered His Majesty 10,000 Reichsthaler for the needs of the state, which is a remarkable sign of special attachment and loyalty". Through this and other circumstances, the trust of all the congregations in me was strengthened even more, including the terrible years of 1813-1815, in which our enemies and adversaries did everything they could to make the Mennonites liable to military service. Our religious freedom was entrusted primarily to me, although the other Aelteste and preachers supported me fully. And as frightening as these challenges from the *Landwehr* [militia] and *Landsturm* [Reserve Militia] and the drafting of *Trainknechten* [Transport or Supply Units] were to the Mennonites, our merciful God powerfully accompanied my feeble efforts and simple letters to the King and other high authorities with his blessing. God rewarded me with the trust and heartfelt love of my fellow servants, all the Aelteste and preachers of the Prussian congregations, to the point that I often found myself moved to tears of gratitude. And only this loving trust, together with divine help, could give me the courage and steadfastness to face the most difficult challenges and conquer them successfully. This required constant vigilance and every resource of body and mind, and caused many sleepless nights filled with fear and anxiety. In 1813 when the French army was defeated in Russia and had already retreated as far as Silesia and Saxony, the Prussian General Jork was still in East Prussia with his forces and formed *Landwehr*, which had not existed in Prussia before that time. He declared that the Mennonites in East and West Prussia and Lithuania were personally obligated to these *Landwehr*, or that they had to redeem themselves with the equivalent of 25,000 Reichsthaler and 500 head of suitable cavalry horses. In Koenigsberg, a general commission was appointed for the establishment of the *Landwehr*, headed by Lieutenant General von Massenbach as Military Governor and Minister von Dohna as Civil Governor.

At the beginning of February 1813, this Commission requested all Mennonite congregations and especially the West Prussian ones (because they are the most numerous) to send deputies to the Commission as soon as possible in order to comply with this demand. From West Prussia, *Ohm* Peter Regehr from Siebenhuben, Aeltester of the Ladekopp congregation and I, were appointed to

do so at a meeting in Marienburg. Before this meeting, however, we first wrote to the President of the Government, von Wissmann, and asked for clarification of the request he had issued for war contributions, because we had been so urgently called upon to do so by the *Landwehr* Commission. Before we received an answer, however, we left on March 9. In Elbing, however, we received the decision of President von Wissmann, which had been sent to us by relay from Marienburg, so that we could act accordingly. The President explained that the Commission was not entitled to ask us to make this contribution. But this turned out not to be the case. The journey to Elbing was very difficult and had to be made on foot, because the Elbing area had been flooded the night before by the damming of the lagoon up to Tiegenhof, and the roads were completely impassable due to deep muck and frost. So, we went to Gross Mausdorf and by then we often had to wade in water up to our knees. From Gross Mausdorf we were taken on horseback to Halbstadt. From here we were transported by boat and wanted to go from Sommerau by express post, but we received the message that the lowland near the Fischau at the *Lame Hand Inn* was also flooded and the riding would be impossible. So, we had to walk along the Nogat dam. At the Nogat pastureland and while there was still no water to be seen, we were told that it was the most direct way to Elbing. It was already 8 o'clock in the evening and soon we encountered so much water that we had to walk in it up to our knees and break the weak ice before we could continue. So, we arrived in Ellerwald with soaked boots, stockings and pants at 9 o'clock in the evening at the home of *Ohm* Regehr's brother-in-law Penner. We stayed overnight to dry out our wet things a little, but the time was too short and so we left with wet feet early in the morning to Elbing. Here we took a passport from the Director's Office (Intendantur), and President Bax encouraged us to comply with the Commission's demand. In the afternoon at 2 o'clock we left by express mail and from the Klein Werder *Ohm* Franz Cornelsen from the Thiensdorf community and Jakob Claassen from the Marcushof community accompanied us. Also, two from the Elbing church had already gone ahead. We spent the night in Braunsberg and arrived in Koenigsberg on March 11 under hard frost and constant snow flurries.

I and *Ohm* Regehr lodged with the Aeltester *Ohm* Johann Wieler. After we reported, we were received very graciously by the Minister von Dohna. We had to sit down on the couch (Canapee) and he even offered us breakfast. We had to appear before the Commission several times, of which the following persons are still in my memory, namely the General von Massenbach, the Minister von Dohna, the Count von Bardelsberg, the Count von Lehndorf and others, General von Massenbach took the floor and suggested that we could be released from the *Landwehr* on condition that we pay the 25,000 Reichsthaler and deliver 500

horses. He then asked us whether it was possible for us to meet this demand. We replied that we thought it was our duty, but that we had been so run down by the war of 1807-1808 that it seemed quite impossible for us to raise so much money. The General explained that our religious freedom was worth so much that even the heaviest sacrifice should not seem too great to us, and since I replied that we, as deputies, had been told in the name of the community on our departure that it would not be possible for them to make the entire demand, and that we therefore did not see any way of raising everything, we humbly asked that the demand be reduced by half. The General came closer to me, pulled me by the buttons of my coat and said: "Dear friend, you have suffered a lot because of the war, I have experienced it myself with my goods and the war has not made me rich, but poor, but you must value your freedom more than money; if you are allowed to stay at home, then we will have to bleed in the war, and no money can buy human life! Oh! what I would give if I could bring back to life my son (Major Massenbach) who was lost in the battle at Mietau! Oh, my son, oh, my dear, dear boy!" At this he looked up and tears ran down his cheeks. When you consider this, my dear friend, he continued, then you must make such a painful sacrifice to your country and only through this will you be to some extent be justified compared your fellow countrymen who are fighting and bleeding for the fatherland. Finally, it was approved that we should raise only 20,000 Reichsthaler and 300 horses, but this should be reported to His Majesty the King, for which the General gave us permission to do it immediately from Koenigsberg and to ask for the highest permission, and he would report it to the King in the name of the Commission.

This was done, for which the Koenigsberg Mennonite merchant Jakob Aimmermann prepared a draft, and I also prepared one; mine was approved and forwarded as written. Before we left, we discussed how to raise the money, and we deputies from the rural communities asked the urban communities to pay proportionately more, because the cities, especially Koenigsberg, had gained more in the war than they had lost. The Koenigsberg deputies were inclined to do so, if the Elbing, Marienburg and Tiegenhof churches would do the same; but this was thwarted by the two Elbing deputies, von Riesen and Thiessen, who chided us rudely.

Thereupon we traveled back again and awaited with fear and hope for King's decision which arrived soon and His Majesty declared: that, since they could not judge from a distance how much the Mennonites would be able to contribute, they would exempt us from the *Landwehr*, but they left the regulation of their equivalence to the General Commission etc. And the Commission now regulated

us without any compassion, because immediately after receipt of the King's Resolution, it issued an order to Aeltester Johann Wieler in Koenigsberg: that the 25,000 Reichsthaler and 500 horses demanded by General Jork had to be paid in 8 days or the religious freedom of the Mennonites would be suspended. The claim would accordingly be collected by military enforcement, and it would send an officer to Marienburg to collect the horses. This harshness was mainly the result of the complaints meanwhile received by the Commission from the estates, dike judges, dike jurors [Deichgrafen, Deichgeschworenen] and other superiors of the Gross and Klein Werder, who demanded once and for all that the Mennonites should not be exempted from the *Landwehr* at any price, while still slandering the Mennonites in the worst way. The Koenigsberg church responded to the demand of the Commission by immediately paying half the whole demand. We had to get this money there within 8 days and the last half the following week. This caused fear and anxiety, many could not pay and those who could would not pay more than their part, but with much effort everything was raised in due time. In Marienburg, the officer arrived and selected 500 of the best horses from the many that had been brought there, and the Mennonites had to listen to a lot of sneering abuse from people of other faiths, such as: Captain, don't accept horses from the Mennonites, fallen soldiers can't be purchased with horses, or, this is how the Mennonites want to buy themselves out and we should protect them and lay down our lives for them, etc. However, everything went off without any real commotion, although there were many threats of revolution because of our freedom.

While all this was going on, I lay ill in bed, for on the Koenigsberg journey with wet feet I had caught such a cold that soon after I became ill with river fever, which alternated with such violent pains in the skull that at times it was almost unbearable and from which I had to lie in bed for seven weeks. During this time, our enemies constantly proposed everything they could to destroy our religious freedom and got the government to such a turmoil that in East and West Prussia some young Mennonites were actually conscripted as *Trainknechten*. All of our proposals were scornfully rejected and those conscripted were not released. At a meeting it was decided to travel to Koenigsberg again to ask the government for help, for which I had to draft a presentation from my bed. The Elbing congregation had already written the government and considered this trip unnecessary, and when *Ohm* Peter Regehr and *Ohm* Bergthold traveled nevertheless, the Elbing preachers met them quite rudely, some even saying that they should be held back from the trip by force, and the wheels of their wagons should be broken. In the meantime, God turned the hearts of the governors to our good, and those who were arrested were immediately released. Through God's help and protection, none of my parishioners were drafted, but the fear

among the young people was so great that most of them tried to hide by fleeing to other places, and while *Ohm* Regehr and Bergthold were in Koenigsberg, many also came to me and sought protection, which I could not promise them. I took them into my house, where they only asked: whether I had hope that this threat would be resolved in our favor, and only after I testified to being hopeful were they reassured. Even in this crisis, all the communities and also the young people had expressed their trust in me, and always inquired about my well-being and then called out to each other: Donner is still alive! But the Elbing Mennonite preachers and others during this anxious month were very displeased with the Aelteste and preachers of the rural congregations and especially with *Ohm* Peter Regehr and me, without just cause. As mentioned above; earlier in Koenigsberg they did not want to pay more than the rural congregations, and yet they themselves expressed before the Commission that we could well afford the whole demand of General Jork, and since Koenigsberg brethren also agreed with this, it can be assumed that this was also the reason why the government acted so harshly. Afterwards they blurted out that I and *Ohm* Regehr had dealt with the Commission as if one were dealing with Jews, and although on our departure all congregations and even the Tiegenhof Mennonites urgently asked us not to agree to the entire demand, the Tiegenhof Mennonites agreed with the Elbing Mennonites and scolded us both in an ugly way, even publicly calling us soul-sellers who had so enraged the Government by their actions that it would soon abolish our religious freedom altogether.

I was able to gain perspective on these accusations and my conscience told me that I had only sought the best for all the congregations, but Peter Regehr took it very much to heart and he often sat at my bedside and wept over the unjust and ungrateful treatment. I comforted him as much as I could with our understanding of scripture, our integrity, and especially with the hope that God would vindicate us soon. Thank God that this did happen. The terrible war in Silesia and Saxony caused the organization of a *Landsturm* throughout Prussia and this was a new signal for our enemies to make a new attack on our religious freedom. The Mennonites were called upon to be treated in the same way as other military draftees. The counter-submissions to the sub-authorities, to the governments, even to the governorate in Koenigsberg were scornfully and harshly rejected, even the latter declared, neither God nor the King can absolve us from *Landsturm* conscription. The Mennonite mayors and prominent citizens were appointed officers and non-commissioned officers of the *Landsturm* and their hats, sashes and sabers were sent to their homes. During this time, the French, who were besieged in Danzig, made a foray into the Spit, and the *Landsturm* of the Marienburg and Elbing districts were mustered including the Mennonites.



The War Councilor [*Kriegsrat*] Koenig von M. governed the *Landsturm* and came through Tiegenhof, so I and *Ohm* Regehr then went to the Office of the Director and asked the War Councilor to spare the Mennonites and waive our members (who had already been informed beforehand) of all personal participation in the *Landsturm*. The War Councilor was harsh and threatening and promised neither protection nor sparing, and so now and then Mennonites were carried off by force or maltreated. But since the French could not cross the Vistula, the *Landsturm* in Fuerstenwerder came to an end without war. Thereupon, at a meeting of all the Aelteste and preachers, etc., at Heubuden it was decided and I was commissioned by all to prepare a draft and send it off quickly. I refused, saying that I had been grossly slandered and accused by the Elbing and Tiegenhof people, of whom some were present. They asked me not to take it so seriously since it had been done in the heat of the moment, and all the Aelteste and preachers did not relent until I agreed. The suggestion of a preacher from Danzig to entrust the matter to a competent lawyer was unanimously rejected, and it was declared that we ourselves must know and defend our faith, and that the only trust placed in my letter was that with God's help it would be successful. Thereupon I wrote out an urgent letter on August 11, 1813 and traveled with it to Marienburg, where several Aelteste came to sign it. Before sending it by mail, we asked the Colonel of the *Landsturm*, *Landrat* [State Council] von Huellmann, to spare the Mennonites from confiscation until we had received a resolution, which he granted and advised us to send the petition via an extraordinary messenger, because we did not know where the King was with the army. This was done and on August 25 the Royal Resolution arrived from Teplitz in Bohemia, which to our consolation and to the annoyance of our enemies also absolved us from the *Landsturm*.

This acquittal from the *Landsturm* aroused unspeakable joy among all Mennonites in Prussia, which I felt doubly, because through my small letter our gracious God saved our freedom of conscience. The congregations now had even more confidence in me, but on the other hand, true consternation arose among our enemies and enviers, because this fierce attack had failed. Just as my health improved after these incidents and because of the rest I had been able to take, my faithful colleague, the Aeltester Peter Regehr of Siebenhuben, began to fall ill the following winter, presumably partly as a result of a wet cold in March and partly because of grief over the aforementioned unjust accusation, and fell into a deadly nervous fever, from which he died gently and hopefully blissfully at the end of February 1814. He did not experience the joy of our vindication, which took place soon after his death. The aforementioned slanderers in Elbing and Tiegenhof had, on the occasion of the appointment of General von Massenbach



as Governor of Danzig, assumed that he would now take revenge on the Mennonites because of our conduct during the previous year before the General Commission of the *Landwehr* in Koenigsberg. Immediately after his [Regehr's] death I received a very polite letter from the Governor, in which he graciously mentioned the earlier negotiations concerning our exemption from the *Landwehr* and offered his most sincere congratulations. Through this, as well as through the complete peace and security that had arisen in our community, our said members were now also convicted of their error, and the most important among them soon confessed their wrong against me and asked me most sincerely for forgiveness.

Thus, the gracious God inclined even these few displeased ones again with satisfaction and trust to me to my most beautiful reward. To Him be praise and honor!

However, the faith of our community was soon to be tested again. By order of the ministries a new kind of cantonal-revisional list was made, which was named Stammrolle. In this list the Mennonites were listed as well as the other religious groups. With this listing, a new attack on our religious freedom was to be suspected. However, it remained a secret until the cantonal revision, with which the beginning was made here in the Tiegenhof area itself on the 3rd Pentecost holiday in 1815. In the decree issued beforehand by the revision Commission (the War Councilor Koenig as district administrator and the Major von Wolfrath) to the mayor's offices, the Mennonites and their sons were asked to provide as well as the military conscripts. We, the Aeltester of the Gross Werder, decided to speak to the War Councilor verbally on the evening of Pentecost, and since we did not meet him at home, I drafted a written protest in Koczelitzky, which *Ohm* Hiebert handed over to him in the evening. However, since it was foreseeable that the War Council would neither be able nor willing to spare the Mennonites, it was immediately decided that I and *Ohm* Hiebert should travel to Marienwerder on the 3rd holiday and speak with the President of the Government von Hippel about this incident. On the 2nd holiday in the morning, before I went to church, I received the answer of the War Council to our protest of the day before, in which he stated: "that he was surprised how the Aeltester could come up with the idea that the Mennonites should be overlooked with the cantonal revision, since it was decreed both in the edict of September 1814, as well as in this year's official gazette, and now ordered by the Royal Ministry. He (the War Councilor) now made it the duty of the Aeltester to bring the young people before the Commission themselves and if this did not happen, they should be handed over to the criminal court as disobedient and contrary to the orders of the state and

punished". Against this gross imposition and threat, I immediately drafted an even more serious protest, in which I declared: "that since neither the edict mentioned nor the official gazette mention the Mennonites with a single word, and since we are not aware of any other Royal decree according to which the Mennonites should now be forced by force to join the military, this threatened procedure would be an unheard-of intolerance in Prussia, about which we would complain in a higher place, etc."

I took this draft with me to the church, with which *Ohm* Bergthold went immediately in the afternoon to the Aeltester *Ohm* Abraham Wiebe in Tiegenhagen, where I had also summoned the Aeltester Isaak Schulz from Fuerstenwerder in the morning, and after performing the Holy Baptism I traveled in the afternoon to Koczelitzky to *Ohm* Hiebert, in order to go to Marienwerder tomorrow (3rd holiday). At Tiegenhagen, my draft was written down in detail and handed over to the War Councilor Koenig in Tiegenhof in the evening (2nd holiday) (where the Commission had already gone). The War Councilor had become very heated and angry with the Aelteste and had asked who had written the document and when they answered that I had drafted it, he took down my name and said that he would speak to that person. He had it backward, I would speak to him. And so, he dismissed the Aelteste with harsh threats. *Ohm* Bergthold wrote me about the behavior of the War Councilor in the name of the Aelteste and sent it through the young Wiebe from Orloff, who arrived in Koczelitzky with it at 1 o'clock in the morning, just before we arrived. I read this report to *Ohm* Hiebert and said that the War Councilor does not have this authority. We wanted to hear first what the President would say and *Ohm* Hiebert said, the War Councilor is an old bully whose bark is worse than his bite. Since young Wiebe told us that one of the Aelteste had said that it would be best if it were announced in the congregations that the young people should present themselves voluntarily before the Commission, but that the others were of a different mind. I wrote to *Ohm* Bergthold that he should seriously advise everyone in our congregations against this, inform the other Aelteste of my opinion in this regard and assure all that God's Will would prevail. We then left Marienwerder at 3 o'clock in the morning, drove via Rehhof and from there asked *Ohm* Adrian from Klein Schardau to be here this evening in order to learn of about our actions when we returned. In Marienwerder we learned that President von Hippel had a large banquet (baptism of a child) and would probably not be able to see us. In the meantime, we went to him and asked the servants to announce us. But he replied that he was not allowed to do so, because today is a holiday and, moreover, there is a big feast here, so that the President does not allow anyone to come before him. I replied: "Our request is so urgent that it cannot be delayed. If you do not want to announce to us, we will announce

ourselves," he asked: Where are you from? I answered: From the area of Tiegenhof (assuming that the President knew what was going on here). Then he announced us, came back and said that we could come forward in a moment. When a gentleman exited, the President beckoned us from the open door. We entered the dining room; the table was already set with precious silver service. The President asked us about our request, whereupon we asked for protection and amendment of the measures of the Cantonal Commission (and in the received resolution of the War Council), since we believed that it would not be the will of His Majesty the King that we should be included in the resolution. The President replied, I cannot change the matter, because the Ministry has determined that the Mennonites should be examined like the others and be enlisted as *Trainknechten*. So, I can do no more than order that they be treated respectfully. But what will you do, he continued, if the King says that you are to be subject to military service? For in 8 days I expect to hear what is to be done with you. I replied, Mr. President, the King is far too wise and merciful to deal so harshly with us. Quite right, he said, but if the opposite should happen, what would you do then? Emigrate? Deny your faith? In this case the King would not be able to forbid you to emigrate, because if he does not want to tolerate and protect you as Mennonites, then he must allow you to emigrate. He cannot and will not force you because the laws of the land do not permit this. This explanation of the President was comforting to us with regard to the worst case, but we also learned that it was a serious test that was before us. The President now looked at the clock; it was soon 4 o'clock in the afternoon and the guests were to appear soon. Therefore, he dismissed us with the promise to give us a resolution at 7 o'clock in the evening, but with the repeated remark that he could only command discretion.

This good man did so emphatically and the matter in Tiegenhof soon took on a completely different form. After we received the resolution at 8:30 in the evening, we left immediately and arrived at midnight in Rehnhof, where *Ohm* Adrian was waiting and heard the latest news from us. We rested a little and then left at 4 o'clock in the morning. In the afternoon, I arrived with *Ohm* Hiebert, in his wagon, at Wiebe's in Orloff, and asked him to drive with me to Tiegenhof to the Cantonment Commission. To which he replied, "I will gladly drive you home, but not to Tiegenhof. For the Commission has already imprisoned 8 Mennonite fathers because they had not presented their sons for the muster.

I jokingly replied, if they also place me, then I would be the 9<sup>th</sup> and you could be the 10<sup>th</sup> which would complete the company. Wiebe, however, was in great fear for his safety, because the War Council (as mentioned above) under threat had learned and recorded my name. *Ohm* Bergthold had not written me of this and

Wiebe only told me afterwards. Since he now saw that I fully intended to go to Tiegenhof, he drove there with me at 5 o'clock in the evening. The Commission had completed its day's work and was enjoying itself in the Director's Garden. I handed Mr. Hippel's letter to the War Councilor, he read it over seriously, and because the President remarked in it that the Commission was not justified in expecting the Aelteste to muster their young people and, incidentally, very seriously demanded that they be spared. The War Councilor said to me somewhat scornfully: "I have nothing to do with the Aelteste, but now I will use my authority all the more". Now he ran away from me scolding me, but immediately came running toward me again very threateningly and shouted: I have already had 8 Mennonites imprisoned, and anyone who resists shall suffer the same. Tomorrow I will send out the constables and have all those arrested who do not come voluntarily. And when I replied: If you consider yourself authorized to do so, Mr. Councilor, you will not refrain from doing so. He ran away again quite raving and threatening, and since I did not answer him, he came to me and asked me: What do you say to this? I said that I was merely asking for your protection, Mr. War Councilor, looking at the President's document that he had in his hand. Now he stroked my cheeks and said very sweetly: "Dear father, there is nothing I can do. This decree comes from higher up and states that the Mennonites are to be used as *Trainknechten* and that they are also noted with a "T" in the muster roll. Incidentally, I feel compelled to do this because I have a large cantonal district under me and I always provide only a few recruits each year, about which I often receive reprimands from higher authorities, and this is only because so many Mennonites live in my district". I refuted this trivial objection with the following questions: "Mr. Councilor, have the Mennonites only settled here now or only a few years ago? Whereupon he turned around and left me unwillingly and tried to explain his objection also to the Major, who, however, sat quietly and did not say a word. I now came closer and asked this again, and since he did not answer, I continued: The Mennonites were invited to the country several centuries ago and have lived here since then, so it has certainly been known to the Royal Prussian authorities how many Mennonites and how many others live in your district and that you, Mr. War Councilor, should not be reprimanded for this reason.

Now he approached me again in a friendly manner and said that the mobilization order was not so bad and that the Mennonites would not become soldiers, but merely *Trainknechte*, who would be employed only in the transport service *Fuhrwesen*. To this I replied: "Mr. Councilor, the service of a *Traindienst* and the service of a soldier [*Soldatendienst*] are different in their practice, but not in their obligation. According to the military laws, the *Trainknecht* is subject to martial law just as much as the soldier. In case of transgression, he must suffer the

same punishment, and if there is a break in the line troops during the war, he must step into line without delay. Consequently, the *Traindienst* is the first step to serving as a soldier (Soldatendienst), which no Mennonite can take on as long as he wants to be a Mennonite. And since King Frederick the Great has absolved us in our privilege of grace from all forms of military service forever, and since the present King has absolved us from the *Landwehr* and *Landsturm*, we are also firmly convinced that it is not the King's will that we should be forced into serving as soldiers". The War Councilor was not able to refute this, but he said that since it had now been decreed by the Ministry, he could not completely ignore it. He therefore asked me to tell the members of our communities that they were only required to present themselves; not a single one was to be evaluated or inspected. (Whereby the War Council gently stroked my cheeks and always called me dear, dear little father). I now once again made my appeal and asked to be spared. In response, Major von Wolfrath squeezed my hand and said, "Good night dear, dear Mr. Donner." Mr. War Councilor made no mention of my writing on the 2nd holiday. As I and Wiebe were leaving, the 8 prisoners (Mennonite fathers) in question arrived (for they had been let out of their prison in the constable's garden) and asked how things stood. I consoled them that they would soon be released from their imprisonment and recommended that they remain steadfast. The next morning they were released, and the War Councilor asked them to present their sons, which they did not promise to do. The War Council kept its word. None of the young Mennonites who turned themselves in were evaluated, and soon no one else presented themselves anymore, once they had learned of my actions. Only the fathers and guardians came and apologized when asked by the War Council why they had not brought their sons. One said, my son is away from home and the other, because my son is a Mennonite, he must not come here, and the War Councilor was satisfied. It has always been remarkable to me that really no one was evaluated or inspected here, as it happened to many Mennonites in other areas.

While this was going on, the Mennonites in East Prussia were also suddenly and seriously threatened in 1815. As a result of the impending war with France, attempts were made to force Mennonites everywhere, including in East Prussia and Lithuania, into military service. In Koenigsberg, some young people from the local congregation were summoned for conscription and the protests of Aeltester Johann Wieler was rejected by the city authorities and the East Prussian government itself. *Ohm* Wieler then wrote to me and requested that in the name of all Mennonites a supplement be sent to the King as quickly as possible. Before this could happen, however, he wrote to me again that, since the authorities had already determined that the day for the enlistment [*Aushebung*] of said persons was very near, they had felt compelled to write urgently to His Majesty the King on behalf of their congregations. Here I must note that *Ohm* Wieler and I had arranged for our correspondence between Koenigsberg and Elbing to be carried out by relay and between Elbing and Bayershorst by fast foot messenger, and so we received news back and forth in 24 to 36 hours. In the meantime, as this was going on in Koenigsberg, great anxiety broke out among us. The status of the war often seemed to be uncertain. Therefore the *Landwehr* and the *Landsturm* were organized again throughout the country. The Mennonites were called upon to do the same as the first time (in spite of the Royal exemption), our protests were scornfully rejected, and the Mennonites who had been commissioned as officers, etc., were threatened by the Royal Director at Tiegenhof who scheduled the day of their first posting just the night before. This caused great consternation in our congregations. Trusting my advice, which had been so successful up to now, the Mennonite mayors and others came from all over the Tiegenhof and Schardau area and asked me for advice on how they should respond. I advised them that no one should comply with the request, but that the mayors should explain to the Director that the Mennonites would by no means take part in the *Landsturm*, since they had once been absolved of it by the King himself, etc., and that the Director should act as the King's representative and if the Director as Major of the *Landsturm* or his superior should want to use force, then we would again represent our community and seek help from the highest authorities. The mayors promised to follow my advice. But late in the evening the Tiegenhof leaders came to me and said that they had already spoken with the Director and that he had laughed at their refusal and had issued harsh threats in case of their absence.



They now demanded that I should speak to the Director tomorrow morning, before the *Landsturm* draftees presented themselves, and try to persuade him to spare us. I promised to do this and also ordered them to summon Abraham Wiebe from Tiegenhagen, who had been newly elected in place of the deceased Peter Regehr, to Tiegenhof at the appointed time.

Although the good Lord had so far always protected me from too much timidity, this incident nevertheless caused me much anxiety, since I could not understand how the authorities could undertake to act against the Royal Cabinet decree of August 25, 1813, and that the King would have acted against his word. Thinking about what our immediate response should be, I lay sleepless in bed until 2 o'clock in the morning, when I heard someone on the other side of the river Linau calling very loudly. The voice sounded familiar, I jumped out of bed and asked out of the window who was calling, and the foot messenger from Elbing answered, "Let me pass right away, it's very urgent." As he came over, he handed me the Royal Resolution of June 5, 1815 (on the aforementioned presentation of the Koenigsberg community), which exempted us once again from all personal military service and whose legally verified letter of refusal *Ohm* Wieler sent immediately after receiving it. I can hardly describe the pleasure at receiving this resolution. The messenger had left Elbing at 9 o'clock in the evening and had run very fast, including the two crossings. I immediately gave him something to eat and then let him rest. Now I copied the resolution a few times and immediately sent it to the other Aelteste in West Prussia. I took the authenticated original and a copy with me to Tiegenhof, where I met the Tiegenhof Mennonites gathered at 8 o'clock in the morning at the home of Dr. Wiebe. I comforted them without showing them the resolution I had received, but they said that I was always confident, but this time everything would probably be lost. When the Aeltester Abraham Wiebe also arrived, who also showed little hope, I pulled the resolution out of my pocket and said, "Oh, we don't have to be so fainthearted, here I have our salvation." Now they all approached me joyfully and shouted, what is this? What do you have there? Now I read them the Royal Cabinet decree, which they were not expecting so soon, and this suddenly changed sorrow into joy.

Now the Aeltester Abraham Wiebe and I went to the Director and asked him to spare the Mennonites from the *Landsturm*, after we would have been acquitted once (without us saying anything about the resolution).

The Director said very politely that the first Royal exemption could only be applied to the first contingent of the *Landsturm*, but not subsequently, consequently he could not overlook the Mennonites either, etc. Whereupon I



remarked that in the Cabinet order given to us by the *Landsturm* there was no mention of either the 1st or the 2nd muster, but only of exemption in general, because we hold military service against our conscience, consequently we believe that we are to be forever relieved of it, because no Royal counter-order would be known to us. Should the Director have one, we would ask him to show it to us, to which he replied that he did not have a counter-order, but that the head of the *Landsturm*, the War Councilor Huellmann, also understood that the Cabinet order was only given for the 2nd deployment and that consequently the Mennonites would now have to participate in the 2nd deployment. I then explained that, since it has always been known that the Mennonites cannot personally participate in military service, and that for this reason Frederick I has exempted us in our privilege from all forms of military service, we hope that the Royal authorities would not do us any violence. By the way, I said, we had again received a Royal resolution that would protect us once again. And now I showed him the verified Cabinet order of June 5, 1815, which I had received from Koenigsberg. He read it over with great attention and then he said somewhat embarrassed: "That is something else! Yes, that is something else! That's what I thought, that you would worry about something again, that's why I also postponed the establishment of the *Landsturm*, because elsewhere they had already started 8 days earlier." We thanked him for his (apparent) kindness and excused ourselves. Nothing has ever come into my hands more perfectly, at the moment of greatest necessity, than this gracious resolution. God be sincerely praised for it!

Just as in the defense of our freedom of faith and conscience there were many hard tests to pass, so during this time I also experienced other tests of faith from individual persons with whom I came into contact because of my office as Aeltester, whose erroneous beliefs had initially found enthusiastic listeners, before their false logic was revealed. In all of these tests, God graciously preserved me.

In 1810, on the day of the St. Margaret Annual Fair in Tiegenhof, the Mennonite preacher Heinrich Hamm (#98652) of Elbing came to me with an unknown man, whom he introduced to me, after the usual greeting, as Mr. Schoenherr of Koenigsberg in Prussia, who claimed to have discovered special new reasons regarding Christian doctrine, which should immediately resonate with the Mennonite religion. This is why he wished to make acquaintance with the Mennonites in general and also to discuss them with me. So, I arranged a gathering at my brother-in-law Peter Stobbe's home in Tiegenhof, and several Mennonite preachers came as well. Here in an upper room, we had an opportunity to see and hear this miracle man. I say miracle man because he

wanted to seem wonderful, both in his teaching and in his life.

He was an unmarried man of some thirty years, of medium height, wore a green new-fashioned jacket, had long yellow hair hanging down over his shoulders and an equally significant long beard, and always had to have milk and honey when eating and drinking coffee. He sought in general and especially with the hair to look similar to our Savior, etc. With his teaching he intended, as he said, to improve the Christian religion or to found a completely new one, which should have as its final purpose to counteract the new enlightenment and freethinking. He especially wanted to refute the doubt that the Christian religion did not harmonize completely and to give the proof that the teachings of Jesus and his apostles could be understood perfectly with human reason and contained nothing incomprehensible. About these reasons, which seemed good, he now held a very long speech in Stobbe's house, which was quite incomprehensible to me, without answering my questions about this or that. Finally, since it was time to part, he promised to visit me soon once in my house to then discover his reasons in more detail, which was to happen on October 25 of the same year. But since on this day my dear wife Maria née Grunau, who died on October 18, was buried, he stayed with the Aeltester *Ohm* Peter Regehr (\*3.10.1776) in Siebenhuben and came with him to me the next day on October 26 in the morning.

Since I had heard a lot about this man since the first conversation in Tiegenhof, and since he had many followers in Koenigsberg and admirers among the Lutheran country preachers as well as among the Mennonites, I went alone beforehand and prayed heartily to God that he would give me his Holy Spirit and wisdom so that I would be able to discern what was truth or deception so that I would not be deceived or treat the man unjustly, but that I would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to confess the unadulterated teachings of Jesus in true joyful faith and to defend them steadfastly.

My request was also this time very gloriously heard by our gracious God. This peculiar man declared before an assembly of our and Flemish preachers and other members gathered in my house, that he had let his beard and hair grow, because God had created him this way and because this was the true form of the man. He was convinced, by the way, that by shaving he would cut off his spiritual powers and his higher wisdom. He gave a speech about his religious principles, which lasted from noon until the following morning, and which was only interrupted by eating and drinking. He explained that he had arrived at this higher knowledge, especially through the exploration of the plant and animal kingdoms, by staying for a long time in forests and deserts. He also tried to prove that the paradise in which Adam lived after creation had extended from the

Euphrates to the Baltic Sea, because amber is more expensive than gold in the Orient. He declared the city of Koenigsberg to be Mount Zion, where all believers gather to be one shepherd and one flock. Moreover, his speeches were mystical and for the most part incomprehensible, dark and incoherent, and so he also explained the atoning work of Christ in an incomprehensible way, claiming that God did not know the fall of the first men when it happened, otherwise he would not have allowed it to happen, etc., etc. However dark his continuous torrent of words was (for he never let himself be interrupted), I noticed so much from it that he believed neither in the omnipotence, omniscience nor omnipresence of God. Most of the listeners left that night without becoming wiser. A few ministers listened to him until early in the morning. One of them was already very fond of him from before and now said during the night, if the Lord Christ should ever appear visibly on earth again, it must be this man. I could not agree because I don't yet know this man well enough; but we must never forget the words of the Lord Jesus: false Christs will come. In the morning before his arrival, he wanted to know my opinion about his way of teaching. I told him freely that many things were incomprehensible to me, but that it seemed that he did not believe in the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of God. To this he answered quite freely, I do not believe in them either! Because if God was omnipotent and omniscient, he would not have permitted the fall of our progenitors, and he cannot be omnipresent at all; for how can one be here and in America at the same time and work in both places at the same time?

And yet I can work in all parts of the world in one day or in one hour, if I initiated it earlier by correspondence, and the eternal Most High and only God the Creator of heaven and earth and all things should not be able to do that? Now I stood up, looked at him seriously and said solemnly, Mr. Schoenherr, if your beliefs are correct, then the Bible and our Christian creed is wrong! And so it is? He now spoke eagerly. Now I said: then we have talked it out and I don't need to hear anything more from you. Hereupon he, who adhered to him, sought to support him by saying to me: *Ohm Donner, Ohm Donner*, I do not ask you to be zealous. If *Ohm Donner* first had the light from this man, as I have it, then he would think differently. To this reflection I answered seriously (by putting my hand on the Bible lying on the table), dear *Ohm P. D.*, every light which does not come from this book I consider to be wrong and if an angel from heaven would bring it to me! Gal. 1:8. Now the other preacher B. joined me and said: I am in complete agreement with *Ohm Donner*. Mr. Schoenherr now sought to explain his reasons in more detail and exclaimed once over the other: It is certainly and truly true! I answered him now quite gently: why do you need such vehement affirmations? If you can rest in your faith, then it is good. I cannot understand your arguments with my intellect. I'll stick to my Bible and my faith. And so, this dispute ended,

praise and thanks be to God, to my soul's reassurance.

Soon after that, Mr. Schoenherr was recognized by most of his admirers as a gusher, as his printed little booklets clearly show. After a few years, he himself recognized and confessed his errors, cut off his hair and beard, even married, and it was said, led a pious life.

A few years after this incident, news came that a Mennonite preacher from Holland was traveling around in the Upper Congregation and was preaching everywhere with much acclaim and really seemed worthy of all the love that was shown to him there. I and my fellow preachers were invited to hear him there and then have him to come to us. He had not clearly stated his circumstances and the final purpose of his journey. His name was Abr. Rheen and the place of his congregation, Huisduinen, agreed with the Danzig Name directory of 1805. However, he concealed the fact that he had left the ministry and the congregation.

I felt no inclination to travel to meet him, although my fellow ministers urged me to do so, and it was better that I stayed behind. For before he arrived here, I received a letter from Danzig together with an accompanying letter from the preacher and head of the missionary seminary, Mr. Jaenike in Berlin, in which he warned the local Mennonite congregations against the aforementioned Rheen, since according to news from Altona, he had denied his ministry, congregation and faith and had gone over to the Jansenists in Holland, and after some time he had also left them. He had come to Berlin and wished to be employed as a missionary, but since he had also led a dissolute life as a seminarian, he had been expelled and, suspecting that he would also visit and deceive the Mennonites in Prussia, Mr. Jaenike, out of Christian love, thought it necessary to report this to us. This was enough for me to inform all the congregations and to take my measures to receive the deceiver. A few days after receiving the said letter, he came to *Ohm* Bergthold in the evening and although he questioned widely, Rheen did not let anything out. The following day, *Ohm* B. came to me with him. I did not begin an argument, but asked him straight out whether he could prove by certificates that he was still a Mennonite preacher. And since he wanted to excuse this with outdated certificates from his employment and partly with the assertion that he had had to leave the congregation because of poverty, but remained a preacher, I then told him what I knew and lovingly, but seriously, rebuked him for his lies with which he had intended to deceive us. Now he blushed and fell silent, and *Ohm* Bergthold stood up and said to him with a serious expression: "Up to here you have come and no further! Now Rheen

began to show repentance and asked me to recommend him as a Dutch school teacher to wealthy Mennonites who would like to have their children taught the Dutch language. Since I knew a Mr. Convent in Marienburg, I wrote to him and reported that Rheen had vowed to live virtuously and to attend the lessons diligently. This evil man immediately betrayed our trust on the way there, since he asked the coachmen on the way over the Nogat near Marienburg whether there were houses of joy (whores) and other amusing places in Marienburg. This was overheard by someone who knew his intention and immediately reported it to Mr. Convent, whereupon he was shown the door because of his evil inquiry on the Nogat. Now he went to Frauenburg and tried to ingratiate himself with the Catholic monastery clergy, who, as it seemed, soon got to know the truth about him. He was also in Koenigsberg and on his return he brought me a greeting from the local Elder *Ohm* Johann Wieler with the request to find him a teaching position in this region.

At this request, I reproached him for his bad behavior, which he partly denied and partly considered too insignificant to bear on him being employed as a school teacher. But I rejected him completely and advised him to go back to Holland. At this he became angry and scolded the local area as well as the Mennonites, saying: "Oh, I have come to a country where virtue is taken for vice and vice for virtue! I replied, "Yes, you are right, if chastity and sobriety are vices and fornication and drunkenness are virtues. Then he departed and I have not seen him since. For a short time he was a school teacher in Schoensee, but was soon dismissed because of his wicked lifestyle, and after that I heard nothing more of him.

A few days later Elder Wilhelm Lange of Brenkenhofswalde near Driessen and a Moravian Brethren preacher of the year traveled around the Mennonite congregations and preached to much applause and also gave the Aelteste and preachers much good advice on how, in addition to preaching, they should in the meantime also come to the aid of their congregations with advice and action in the practice of true godliness and above all try to persuade them to deny the world and to true humility of heart. As salutary as this advice was, it was exaggerated in some places, and this most sadly by the preacher Hans Albrecht in the Mennonite community of the Kulmian lowlands. This man demanded of his listeners, whether they were Mennonites or of other denominations, such a sudden denial of the world that they should burn all new-fangled clothes, silk cloths, etc., which many obeyed. In addition, he held evening prayers almost daily, sometimes also in the morning, in this or that dwelling, wherever his spirit led him. On his way to these hours of prayer, he would invite all the people he met who were only curious, onto his wagon, regardless of their intended

business. And so he led people away from the butchering of pigs and the milking of cows, so that one did not know where they had gone. Also, in the cities, for example in Schwetz, he sometimes stopped at the market, sat down with his companions, knelt down in the market and prayed loudly and for a very long time for the edification of the crowd which gathered around them out of curiosity. In his own house, too, he did this in an objectionable way by going with the young women into the garden at night to pray and he generally preferred to see young women in his gatherings.

This and his condemnatory judgments, which he pronounced in his sermons on those who were not of one mind with him or who spoke out against his fantasies, finally became public, so that the authorities interfered and threatened to punish him if he did not cease his activities.

The Aeltester and the other preachers could not bring him to change his mind, so they invited all West Prussian Mennonite congregations and their Aelteste and preachers to consider the matter with the preacher Hans Albrecht and, if possible, to silence him. On January 5, 1817, we traveled there and held a discussion with Albrecht in the evening. On January 6, on Three Kings Day, the entire congregation was in general brotherhood after the devotion. I had to give the sermon and advised Albrecht to completely stop his previous actions, which he promised to do, and I advised the congregation to reconcile, but the congregation was too divided. Albrecht's opponents demanded his removal from the preaching ministry, and his supporters defended him most zealously. It looked strange how his followers, who were mostly young people, the men with beards and pins on their clothes according to their pattern, and the women with simple old hooded caps, without hoods, in quite old-fashioned, seemingly humble clothing, walked along.

Since no reconciliation could be brought about, the local Aeltester *Ohm* Jakob Frantz left with his preachers to discuss things, and now they obliged me into *Ohms'* room and asked me for advice. I advised them to proceed as mildly as possible in order to prevent a congregational split, and so it was decided that Albrecht should not be deprived of his preaching ministry, but that he should be forbidden to preach until he had recognized and renounced all errors, and that he should be placed under the supervision of the Aelteste and the other preachers, so that he could do nothing without their permission. This was now also completely according to the wish and will of the church officials there, in that they believed that I had orders and instructions from the Chief President [*Oberpraesident*] von Schoen in Danzig to present this to them, because the



regional council there had said that the Chief President had ordered the chief Aeltester Donner to order Albrecht to be silent. However, I never received this order. Now we went back to the church, and as I presented the resolution, the whole congregation was satisfied with it.

Albrecht remained quiet for some time, but began to hold his prayer meetings again, and since the Aelteste and the other preachers referred him to our decision and his followers grew cold over time. Eventually his listeners dwindled and he was not reaccepted as a preacher again, because of his ungodly lifestyle. He finally died in complete seclusion, whereupon complete reconciliation took place and peace and love were restored in the local community.

During this time, namely in the years 1816 and 1817, a threatening cloud hung over the Mennonite congregations in Prussia, by which the enemies of the Mennonites intended nothing less than to undermine or remove our freedom from military service. The matter began when a degenerate, evil-minded Mennonite in Elbing by the name of David von Riesen had made his fortune through wicked living, and his creditors wanted to have him imprisoned. He escaped from this, and after he had spent some time on the Polish border, he volunteered as a soldier in 1815, took part in the campaign in France, and after the end of the campaign returned to Elbing where he wanted to be accepted as a member of the Mennonite congregation again without leaving the military. Because this congregation refused his request, he sued them before the magistrate in Elbing. To answer this complaint, I had to make the draft at the request of the Elbing Mennonite Church Council. Riesen then complained to the Royal government in Danzig. The government issued a written threat with the order that the congregation in Elbing should immediately accept D. v. R., and if this did not happen, the Aeltester, the preachers and the leaders would be investigated and punished by the Royal High Court for disobedience against the demands of the state. The Elbing Mennonite Church Board demanded that all Mennonite congregations take up the matter and that I, in particular, should take the lead. The issue was unavoidable and so I reluctantly agreed to this, and so at a meeting in Koezelitzky the Aeltester Abr. Regehr of Heubuden and I and the Aeltester Abraham Wiebe of Tiegenhagen were appointed to support the Elbing congregation.

The Higher Regional Court in West Prussia disagreed with the government in Danzig and submitted its findings in a lengthy essay to the Royal Ministry of Justice in Berlin, stating that it did not find the Mennonite congregation in Elbing and its leader liable to prosecution.



This Ministry and the Ministry of the Interior rejected these views and wrote a threatening order to the Mennonite congregation in Elbing to accept the D. v. R. immediately, otherwise the Aeltester and the leaders should be investigated and severely punished as criminals against the order of the state. Thereupon I drafted an urgent letter to the Ministry of Justice, which was signed in the Elbing Church Council, by Abr. Regehr, myself and Abraham Wiebe, and sent on May 4. However, without answering this, the said ministries gave the order to the Higher Regional Court at Marienwerder: to initiate a criminal investigation against the Elbing church congregation and, after completion, to send the files to them, so that in the case of a possible persistent refusal to accept the D. v. R., punishment could be decreed. The Higher Regional Court organized this investigation in Elbing, through a legal adviser from Berlin named Boltzenthal, on June 21 and the 3 following days. Aeltester Jakob Kroeker, preacher Heinrich Hamm and Bern. v. Riesen, and deacon Jakob v. Riesen, were each questioned by the investigators in private on the same day. At the request of these four, I also came to Elbing with Abr. Regehr and Abraham Wiebe, and since the Inspector demanded printed documents of our creed from me. Kroeker, on my advice "*Cornelius Ries' Glaubenslehre*" was handed over to him, and so also our Privilegium and other Cabinet decrees. Before the final date, the Inspector asked the Higher Regional Court whether the three Aeltester Abr. Regehr, Johann Donner and Abraham Wiebe, who were also signed in the presentation of May 4, should also be called for examination, whereupon they were also taken with us in Elbing, September 11, 12 and 13. On the 22nd the Inspector re-read the declarations against us, with the warning that if we persisted, we would have to expect serious punishment, and since we remained determined, we were offered councilors who wanted to defend our cause and were very willing, half a dozen of whom appeared. We declined their help, however, with the explanation that since it was our beliefs that were at stake here and since it was a matter of our freedom of faith and conscience, we would know best how to defend it, whereupon the judicial commissars departed with scornful looks. Thereupon the Elbing City Court falsified the files, (by not including the enclosure of some articles from "*Cornelius Ries' Glaubenslehre*", our Privilegium, and the Cabinet Order of November 24, 1803) and sent them off to Berlin.

Now several months passed in anxious expectation, until finally, at the beginning of March 1818, our fear was transformed into joy. Through a benefactor, I secretly received a copy of the decision of the Criminal Senate of the Court of Appeals in Berlin of January 24, 1818, which had already been issued to the Higher Regional Court of West Prussia and which absolved us from the acceptance of D. v. R. and all legal costs and did complete justice to our

principles of faith.

On March 30, the three of us had to present ourselves in Elbing, where the former Inspector published our news, but did not read it out because of its length, and since I asked for the copy, with visible embarrassment he promised to give it, this also happened, but was also falsified, since the references against the Elbing City Court were omitted and only copied what the latter wanted to let us know, this falsification was only obvious when my copy received from Marienwerder was compared. [this rather long sentence is unclear]

On my advice, the Aeltester Jakob Kroeker now had to demand a certified copy, which the city court, however, refused him with the explanation that the wrong parties would not get a copy. Thereupon the preacher Berh. v. Riesen wrote to Berlin and demanded a certified copy from the Criminal Senate, which was also done immediately and by which we are entitled to make use of it for our legitimation should the occasion arise. To my own reassurance, my presentation of May 4, 1817, has been accepted as the main reason for our justification.

God be heartily praised and glorified!