

PETER WILLER

A Mennonite master builder and engraver in 17th century Gdansk.

A translation, with editing, of “Peter Willer. Ein mennonitischer Baumeriser und Kupferstecher im des 17. Jahrhundert.”

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Peter Willer is an interesting personality who has shown himself to be a subtle artist in his observation and rendering of Old Danzig architectural images. He had received his education in Holland, the stronghold of architecture and engineering in those days. In the 17th century, he had been fully trained here in civil engineering, in bridge, lock and canal construction, in difficult types of foundations. On the other hand, with the appearance of Jacob van Kampen (1598-1657), the main master of the classicism that began early here, the building construction shows the delightful contrast and picturesqueness of the baroque.¹ Peter Willer was a pupil of Jacob van Kampen [during the construction of] a major example of the strict late Renaissance; the town hall in Amsterdam. Reputation and recommendations brought him to the court of King Casimir in Warsaw in 1651. In his service he built a wooden castle at Nieporent at the mouth of the Druga, where Sigismund III had a wooden castle built, a lock [*Freischleusse*] over 40 feet wide and the royal pleasure palace, called "Holländerhof", as well as a brewery. He also built a pleasure house for the female court and a grain mill in Warsaw next to the palace of Queen Ludowika Maria.

When the Swedish-Polish War broke out in 1655 and the Swedes forced King John Casimir to flee to Silesia, Willer also left Poland and continued his technical studies in Holland. He found employment in hydraulic engineering and in the difficult foundation work during the expansion of Amsterdam. He also tried to perfect himself in architecture. He was involved in the construction of the Amsterdam City Hall and was involved in the enlargement of the Admiralty Court there.

When Sweden and Poland made peace in 1660, Peter Willer returned to the East, to Danzig. His family probably came from Friesland.² In Danzig he belonged to the Frisian Mennonite church. As early as 1660 he married the widow of the distiller Peter Kinn from Breitgasse.³ Hans Kinn, preacher and “*Vermahner*” of the Danzig Frisian community, is her relative. He also lived in the Breitgasse and operated brandy production and trade in general.⁴ After the wedding, Peter Willer continued to run his wife's brandy distillery as a side business.⁵ He was later accused of this by the non-Mennonite competition in that, as an artist, he had a better livelihood from the city purse than any distiller could ever have, especially since he was not entitled to bourgeois and civil trade freedoms like other Mennonites.⁶ One year after the wedding, Willer submitted an application for employment as a city architect. As he stated in his application, his art and science consisted of 1. civil architecture or general architecture, 2. hydraulic engineering, and 3. mill building.⁷ In order to be particularly recommended, he made it known that he could build both a cutting mill and a modern excavator, which would be of great benefit to the city of Gdansk. The new excavator could dredge out 216 barges of mud a week, while the three excavators currently in use could not even produce the same thing in the same time, but only 180 barges. The

increasingly threatening sand deposits in front of the Vistula estuary and Willer's new excavator were the decisive factors. The young master builder was accepted as an architect on a trial basis for one year. As a salary, he initially received only 300 guilders. At the end of the probationary period, he was finally employed on 12 March 1663 with a salary of 1,000 guilders per year and free official residence.

In 1666, at his request, he also received the vacant office of the master-builder on the *Zimmerhofe* "and what was attached", which meant the hydraulic structures. There is no talk of an improvement in his salary. The great urban debt burden – created in the last war – forced brutal austerity. In order to be able to live better with his family, Willer had to look for income from brandy production and private construction. The latter was hardly possible for him as he could hardly take on the construction of private buildings with his increased official business.

In 1668 he therefore asked for an increase in his salary, as he would have had high medical costs due to his wife's long period of illness. It was denied him; but in 1671 he was allowed to build a two-story massive house without *Fachwerk* on a plot of land owned by his wife in Petershagen on the border with Schottland. When his wife died on August 1 of the same year, he and his children remained in joint ownership of the new building.

He himself lived in his official apartment with the associated garden, which he provided with a number of mechanical works of art in the taste of those days. A water feature splashed in the hallway, a mechanical dog was able to frighten by rearing up and barking. Paintings in the artist's hand delighted the eye. Willer owned a large number of instruments, books, drawings,

copper engravings, paintings, the legacy of a very versatile artist and engineer. On his death, at the beginning of January 1700, his relatives Albrecht Schröder and Behrendt Holtzrichter from the Klein Marienburger Werder asked the Council if they could take over the objects in the house in return for reimbursement of their value.⁸ The Council, however, rejected and decreed that the legacy must remain in place.

During Peter Willer's term of office, there was little opportunity for new creations given the city's depressed economic situation. The times of the great engineering buildings, 100 years ago the magnet for great builders, were finally gone. Nevertheless, there was enough to do for the city architect. In 1670, Peter Willer placed a tower on the municipal hospital, also known as the smallpox house, on whose weathervane poor Lazarus was depicted; his festering wounds licked by dogs. Further tower buildings on St. Brigitten and the Church of the *Heilige Leichnam* were built by him. Also noteworthy is the extension of this church, which is under the patronage of the city. He arranged a large new wing in the direction of the hospital. The old enclosure was broken up and the pulpit on the corner was set up, "all the listeners from the old and the new church can see and hear the preacher". The exterior, in the combination of clichéd forms with pointed arch windows and blinds, consciously takes into account the old church and offers an instructive example to the preservation of monuments. In the stone architecture you can see the leading construction method of his teacher Jacob van Kampen.

Peter Willer will have carried out some other building. The design of St. Salvator's Church is certainly his work. In addition to hydraulic work and land survey work, his activity will have often consisted of the preservation of the numerous public

works.⁹ In the past, the archives of the city of Danzig contained a large number of maps and *maps* of various districts made by him with great accuracy, which provide valuable information about some older buildings and medieval fortification plans. His maps of the Danzig Spit and Scharpau, which were more impressive than those of his brother-in-faith Samuel *Donnet*, also show us how far the diking and drainage work of the Mennonites towards the lagoon had progressed 300 years ago. On behalf of the council, he drew and wrote, a sign of his versatile talent, buildings and surroundings of Danzig in copper as an illustration of Curicke's famous "Chronicle of the City of Danzig" of 1688. Peter Willer undoubtedly pursued painting as a hobby. Also, that his relatives wanted his estate with all the rest offered to the council for purchase, suggests that they had a certain value for the city and that the original drawings of these copper engravings were among them. In the first days of 1700, Peter Willer apparently died alone in his official apartment. For almost four decades, he had served the old Hanseatic city in a variety of ways as a master builder in building, civil engineering and hydraulic engineering, as a cartographer and, last but not least, as an artist, painter and engraver.

1. Cuny, Danzigs Stadt. Frankf. a.M. 1910. P. 59 ff.
2. In 1646 the Mennonite Poppe Willers lives in Norden/Ostfriesland (Müller, Die Mennoniten in Ostfriesland. 1887. p. 215).
3. Gdansk State Archives 300, 10 No. 27.
4. Ibidem.
5. Ibidem.

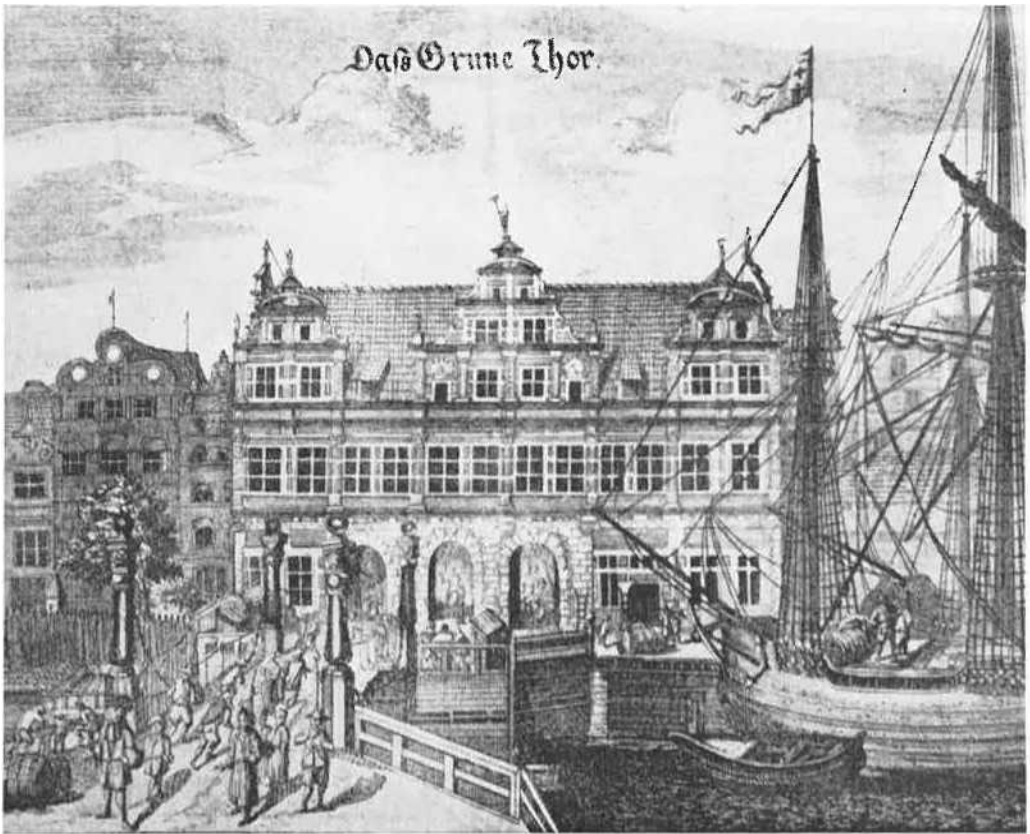
6. Ibidem.

7. Cuny op. cit. p. 60 ff.

8. The Behrendt Holtzrichter was apparently a relative of his wife, because the *Vormahner* Hans Kinn was married to Maria Holtzrichter (Marg. Suter: Verzeichnis in der St.-Salvator-Gemeinde zu Danzig vor 1784 erworbenen Erbbegräbnisse *in*: Danziger familiengeschichtliche Beiträge. Danzig 1929. S. 71 ff.). As late as 1776, the Mennonites in the Kleiner Marienburger Werder had the names "Schröder" and "Holtzrichter" [see [here](#)]. The name "Willer" also existed in 1776 among the Mennonites in the Gross Werder.

Willer, derived from the name Wilhelm such as Wilke, is not to be equated with "Wiehler". This name comes from the place name Wyler = hamlet. The Mennonite surname Kinn (Kühn, Kien) apparently disappeared at the beginning of the Prussian period in Danzig and West Prussia. In 1938 it can still be found in the municipality of Deutsch-Kazun, which was founded around 1776 from West Prussia, mainly the Schwetz, Graudenz and Culm area, near Warsaw. (Herbert Wiebe: Menn. Surnames in the Weichselniederungen from Graudenz to Thorn *in*: Menn. Gesch. Bl. 1939. p. 37).

9. Cuny loc. cit. p. 61 et se.



The Green Gate in Danzig, according to a copper engraving by Peter Willer



Der Artushof in Danzig 1688, according to a copper engraving by Peter Willer.