

Taken from the Mennonite Historian [Dec 1988](#) page 4.

## **A Letter From Hoepfner And Bartsch To Potemkin**

Translated by Edwin Hoepfner

Dr. David G. Rempel discovered the original of this letter in the State Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R. in 1962. Rempel provided a copy to the late Peter M. Hoepfner, Winkler, Manitoba, some time around 1970. The letter is in a form of Gothic script which is quite difficult to read. Subsequently Rempel provided a not-quite-complete transliteration to this translator, who deciphered the remainder in September, 1978.<sup>1</sup>

*Most Serene High Prince,<sup>2</sup>  
Most Gracious Lord!*

*Since our community<sup>3</sup> gave us the mission to provide it with a detailed report, not only on the nature of the lands and soil, but also on the waterbodies, herbage and other natural products essential for trade; and to select low-lying areas for the Colony, primarily, however, lands along the Dnieper between Ekaterinoslav and Cherson or along another [stream] in the vicinity of Saint Elizabeth;<sup>4</sup> we venture most humbly herewith to suggest to your Most Princely Serene Highness that it would be far more advantageous for us to undertake the journey there in spring when there will be more snowcover<sup>5</sup> and everything will be dry. Therefore we petition your Princely Serene Highness to permit us to remain in this city until the end of March and for our greater personal security commit ourselves to the protection of Your Princely Serene Highness. We petition further that until that time our money<sup>6</sup> may either be paid to us in advance, or that a responsible man be appointed from whom we could receive the same each month without the slightest<sup>7</sup> delay.*

*Since we already have experienced the most adequate evidence of Your Princely Serene Highness' grace, it might serve to promote the undertaking of our community: that in the meantime someone in the service of Your Princely Serene Highness would go to Dantzic with a letter from us in order to encourage it concerning our project; and to provide it with news concerning the benevolent attitude of Your Princely Serene Highness. Since all this does not constitute a considerable expense to the Crown, we, therefore, anticipate the fulfillment by Your Princely Highness Grace: of the most humble petition of those remaining in the greatest possible respect*

*Your Princely Serene Highness.*

*Our most gracious Lord's  
Most humble servants.*

*Anno 1786 the 12<sup>th</sup> December*

Jacob Höpner<sup>8</sup>  
Johann Bartsch

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Near the top right hand corner of the letter is a stamp (Stempel) which, according to Rempel, reads *Sosudarstvennyi Archiv M.I.D.* [State Archive Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. The contents of the letter do not specifically indicate either its place of origin or its intended destination. We do know, however, that Bartsch and Hoepner spent most of the winter of 1786/87 in Kherson. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the letter was written in Kherson. It is also recorded that the delegates departed Dubrovno on 1 December, 1786, destination Kremenchug, for the purpose of discussing the object of their journey with Potemkin. Consequently it is reasonable to conclude further that Potemkin was present in Kremenchug in December, 1786, and that the letter's destination must have been this city.

<sup>2</sup> In the German original the delegates address Potemkin as *Durchläuchtiger Fürst*. The term *Durchlaucht* was a form of address originally restricted to princes of the Holy Roman Empire German Nation. Catherine II of Russia obtained this title for Potemkin from the Emperor Joseph II of Austria in 1776. There is no simple English equivalent of *Durchlaucht*.

<sup>3</sup> Gemeine has been translated as community. This community would, in the strict legal sense, appear to refer to the Mennonite population of the territory of the city-state of Danzig, under Polish sovereignty until 1793. Peter Hildebrand states that 60 Mennonites signed the document which gave power of attorney to the delegates to represent the community in this undertaking. He also states that no Mennonite of the adjacent areas of West Prussia, under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Prussia, could dare to sign the power of attorney.

<sup>4</sup> St. Elizabeth, founded in 1754 as a border fortress, was renamed Yelizavetgrad in 1775, and after a succession of name changes during the Soviet period, finally become Kirovograd in 1939.

<sup>5</sup> Eighteenth century Russia was notorious for the paucity of its roads and their poor state. Overland travel was easiest while the ground and water surfaces were frozen.

<sup>6</sup> "Their" money refers to their travel and living expenses, which, by prior agreement with Potemkin's representative, Georg Trappe, were to be paid by the Russian Crown.

<sup>7</sup> As the subsequent Mennonite immigrants' experience was to confirm, the eighteenth century Russian bureaucracy's efficiency left much to be desired, partly due to endemic and persistent corruption. This will have become apparent to the delegates almost immediately.

<sup>8</sup> Although Jacob Hoepner's signature appears first, the letter was most likely written by Johann Bartsch. Peter Hildebrand remarks that Hoepner was the speaker, whereas Bartsch was the writer [ref]. It is interesting to note that the spelling of the name in the signature is "Höpner", although the latter's son-in-law, Peter Hildebrand, consistently uses the form "Höppner".