

Heinrich Donner Diary (1774-1803) – Background

Glenn Penner (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

Note that a glossary appears at the end of the translated diary.

The writings of the Orloffsfelde *Ältester*/Bishop Heinrich Donner make up one of the most important collections of material we have for the early Prussian period in Mennonite history. During his lifetime, Donner wrote a diary (*Tagebuch*), a Chronicle (Chronik), a year-by-year summary of events in his life (*Hausbuch*). In addition to these, he wrote many letters and petitions, some of which survive in various locations.

The diary, which is translated here, gives us a very rare look into the many trials and tribulations a Mennonite Bishop had to endure. In addition to his years-long conflict with Thiensdorf Bishop Hans Siebert and his family there seemed to have been endless difficulties to smooth out with the Prussian authorities and members of his own congregation.

Donner appears to have been the go-to person whenever there was a problem with the Prussian government. Donner evidently had a knack for working with government officials and often seemed to have the upper hand when it came to disputes with other Mennonites, which were brought before the government. A progressive man with a powerful intellect, one can feel the frustration he experienced when dealing with the more conservative and stubborn members of the Mennonite community.

Heinrich Donner travelled to Berlin at least 4 times and is known to have appeared before the King on at least 3 occasions, all as a representative of the Prussian Mennonite community:

1. 1775 Jul 18 – Aug 12 (4 weeks), Peter Regier of the Heubuden congregation. Went to Berlin, regarding renewal of the Privilegium. Met the King on July 30th. [see LDS film #1056552 for Prussian government documentation which includes signatures of Donner and Regier.]
2. 1777 Aug 26 – Oct 26 (9 weeks), with Johann Busenitz of Marienburg (of the Flemish congregation in Heubuden). Went to Berlin to present a petition for reduction of the Cadet (protection) money and with respect to obtaining a Privilegium. See also Gerhard Wiebe diary pages 25 and 26.
3. 1780 Apr 18 – Appeared (with others) before the King in Marienwerder in order to receive the Privilegium.
4. 1786 Sep ?? – attended the West Prussia tribute celebration for the newly crowned Frederick Wilhelm in Koenigsberg. Presumably he, Cornelius

Warkentin, and others (Wilh. Zimmermann, Dirk Jantzen and Abr. Rosenfeld?), attended and presented a petition for renewal of the Privilegium to the King.

5. 1787 Feb 3 to May 17 (duration unknown). Went to Berlin with Cornelius Warkentin in order to obtain right to purchase property from Lutherans without authorization. Unable to obtain permission but did receive confirmation of the Privilegium from the new King.
6. 1801 Feb 6 – Jun 11 (18 weeks). With Jacob Classen of Schoenebergerfaehr (not in 1802 Naamlijst of Prussian Mennonite ministers). Request to be relieved of fees paid to Lutheran clergy. Request was granted on October 3rd.

Donner dedicated a significant part of his diary to his struggles having to do with the *Aussentrau*, the marriage of Mennonites with non-Mennonites, and the acceptance of non-Mennonites into the Mennonite congregations. There was a deep-seated paranoia among the Prussian Mennonites that accepting non-Mennonites through marriage or conversion would open the Mennonite community up to military conscription. In particular, the accepting of baptismal candidates who were children mixed-marriages was a contentious issue. Donner fought tooth-and-nail with his fellow Bishop Jacob Siebert (and members of Siebert's family) over this issue. In the end Siebert's Thiensdorf congregation split, with the smaller faction (the Marcushof congregation) siding with Donner, and the Tragheimerweide congregation nearly split.

We have only one other diary for any Mennonite leader from the period before 1800; that of Donner's fellow Bishop Gerhard Wiebe of the Flemish Elbing-Ellerwald congregation. Donner's diary greatly differs in one historically important issue – the amount they wrote about the emigration to Russia. Wiebe wrote many pages and copied many letters to and from Russia. Since few Frisian Mennonites emigrated, and since the Frisians appear to have looked down on this migration as unnecessary, Donner dedicated only a few paragraphs of his diary to the emigration. During this time period he was busy locking horns with Siebert and other likeminded Frisian Bishops.

As Elfriede and I worked through this diary we came to think of each section as another installment of a soap opera – what would the Sieberts do next, what decision would come down from the Royal Government regarding the conflict or the situation of the Prussian Mennonites in general? One passage from Donner's diary (at the end of 1780) took us both by surprise. Was this written by a Mennonite Bishop of 250 years ago? We have been conditioned to think that the Mennonite church leadership of the past was highly conservative, somewhat intolerant of other religions and highly isolationist.

**Comments made out of love...may they be judged in love:*

Hereby, I make a note as a message to my successor in my ministerial position, that he loves all those who seek to follow the Lord Jesus in whatever congregation they wish. In this way, one has

great practice in offering an all-encompassing love and is thereby strengthened with peace. I do not pay attention to all the accusations from my dear brethren, who judge my loving relationships and dealings with the Flemish, and blame me for enlarging the church community all too much. They still have no awareness of true Christianity in that they still zealously call for sectarianism. Christ is here! Christ is here! The future days will reveal that the followers of Jesus come from all nations and religions. May God gather all of us together in his mercy. I especially love my congregations with all my heart, and seek to bring them to my Jesus because they have been entrusted to me. However, I also love all souls that are searching for God, and are part of whatever religion they may belong to. I seek to be encouraging towards others in my walk of life, with a steadfast hope grounded on truths found in Paul's verses in Galatians 5:6 and Galatians 6:15, that those who do the will of God, are brothers of Jesus. May God reveal all the idiosyncrasies in the ignorant souls, so they find reason to learn what it means to be poor in spirit and be saved by His grace. Then they will gladly come down from their lofty heights and assume the penitent stance of the tax collector, coveting His grace. May God allow my hope to be fulfilled. Amen.

Heinrich Donner performed the following ordinations of Bishops/Aeltester (all Frisian Mennonites):

1. 1789 May 20 – Heinrich Roth of Danzig
2. 1792 Feb 26 – Johann Sperling of Marcushof
3. 1798 Apr 1 – Jacob Kliewer of Danzig
4. 1799 Oct 13 – Dirk Allert of Marcushof

[Donner himself was ordained on 3 May 1772 by Bishop Jacob Siebert of the Klein Werder (Thiensdorf) congregation.]

A number of interesting events are mentioned in Donner's diary. What follows is a sampling of those events.

1772 – Donner hit the ground running as a new Bishop. Within months of his ordination he and his fellow Bishops had to deal with the massive complications which resulted from the Prussian takeover of the territory where the Mennonites lived.

In 1778 (p. 15) and 1781 (p. 28-29) he collaborated with the Flemish Aeltester Gerhard Wiebe, first on a new catechism, then on a major reprinting of the Confession of Faith.

On May, 5, 1779 (p. 13) he reports that the Danzig (Frisian) church had installed an organ!

On 11 Oct 1779 (p. 17), he notes that Jacob Bartel of the "Thorn" congregation preached in their church (Orlofferfelde) *in High German*. This was during the time of transition from Dutch to German in the Prussian Mennonite churches.

At one point he threatened to resign his position as Aeltester rather than recognize infant baptisms (i.e. accept into the church those children of mixed marriage who were

baptized as infants, without adult baptism). First in front of the ministry (3 May, 1782) and then in front of the entire congregation (5 May, 1782). See pages 32-33.

On pages 39-40 (Apr 1783), and 47-48 (Apr 1784) he describes the visit by a pair of Hutterite men (April 1784). See also the diary of Gerhard Wiebe (p. 73 & p. 88).

On pages 51 and 52 (1783), he describes how 3 Mennonite men from “Driesen” (the Brenkenhofswalde congregation in Brandenburg) joined the army and caused a lot of problems for the Bishop of that congregation, and indirectly, for Donner. This is also mentioned in the Gerhard Wiebe diary.

In the 14 March, 1794 entry (p. 81) he specifically mentions that Cornelius Regier ordained Cornelius Warkentin as an Aeltester in Russia before dying.

In a 1796 (p. 82) entry he notes the possibility of Mennonites settling in South East Prussia. Unfortunately, this migration possibility fell through.

In 1797 (page 83 on) he welcomed the Swiss Mennonites Jacob Bergthold and Christian Ewy. Bergthold in the Orlofferfelde (Frisian) church, “*He also preached in all of the Flemish churches!*”

In 1801 (p.89) he reports on the brutal execution, by being broken alive on the wheel, of a young Mennonite man [Peter Wedel], who murdered his pregnant (non-Mennonite) girlfriend.

Please address any questions or comments to me at gpenner@uoguelph.ca .

Glenn Penner.

The following are a few links to material related to the life of Heinrich Donner:

Heinrich Donner’s number in the GRANDMA database is #694630.

A short summary of his life can be found in this GAMEO [article](#).

Heinrich Donner’s prayer book. <https://mla.bethelks.edu/books/donner/>

See also the memoirs of his son Johann, which are translated [here](#).

See here for a scan of an *Attest* he wrote for the 1793 transfer of one of his parishioners, David Stobbe. Note the red wax seal of the Orlofferfelde congregation. From the Amsterdam archives.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Item-1-Stadsarchief-Amsterdam1120-318OrlofAttest-Edit.pdf>

See here for the translation of a letter he wrote to one of the Dutch churches. From the Amsterdam archives.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Item-2-Hendrik-Donner-Dutch-Letter-1788-translation.pdf>

See here for a letter from the Prussian government consenting to the installation of Donner's nemesis, Hans Siebert. The original in the Mennonitische Forschungsstelle.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Item-3-1789-Letter-from-Prussian-Gov.pdf>

A Letter from Gerhard Wiebe, Aeltester of the Elbing-Ellerwald (Prussia) congregation to Lorenz Friedenreich, Aeltester of the Neuwied (Swiss Mennonite) congregation, in which he gives his opinion of the Donner-Siebert controversy.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GerhardWiebeLetter.pdf>

1780 Letter to King Frederick the Great requesting deferment of the Cadettengeld payment.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/1780-Letter-to-King-Frederick-the-Great.pdf>

Gerhard Wiebe Diary entries regarding Heinrich Donner.

<https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Heinrich-Donner-In-Gerhard-Wiebe-Diary.pdf>