

April 17, 2019
(March Letter)

Dear Samantha,

I was sorry to hear that you and Matt broke up. Whether a good thing or not, it is always stressful to make such a change (or have it made for you). I hope you are doing well.

Your breakup came at a time when I was exploring some interesting stories from our family history about how our various parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents got together. It made me realize how your experience with Matt (and other intimate friends you may have had) is such a complicated and uncertain process.

One of the most interesting and intriguing family stories emerged as I was looking at those my grandfather told me about his parents. This would be my great-grandparents and your great-great-great-grandparents. The story is mentioned when my grandfather told his daughter about their history in southern Russia (see: <http://billreimer.net/personal/documents/PJReimerHisStory3.pdf>).

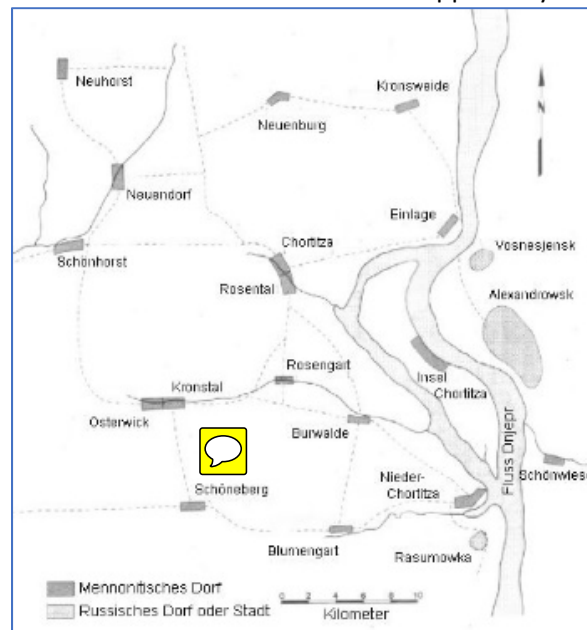
The story begins with a conflict in the Chortitz Mennonite settlement about 1878 including the village of Schöneberg

([https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Chortitza_Mennonite_Settlement_\(Zaporizhia_Oblast,_Ukraine\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Chortitza_Mennonite_Settlement_(Zaporizhia_Oblast,_Ukraine))) regarding the location and management of a dam that controlled water for the fields and families. Apparently one group wanted the dam to be built farther down the river than it currently existed. I presume from this that they felt unjustly treated in getting access to the water. It may have been, for example, that the families and villages higher up the river were taking more of the water than they felt was unfair, or that the control of the water was in some way unjustified.

In any case your great-great-great grandfather Jacob Reimer, his brothers, and friends overheard these conversations among the elders. As young adolescents they were obviously drawn into the controversy.

At one point, they decided to take matters into their own hands. They conspired to hike up to the dam, alter it enough to increase the water flow towards their village and sneak back home. On the way back, however, Jacob was bitten by a poisonous snake. Most likely this was a small viper. They were not particularly populous in the region, but were dangerous enough to warrant immediate attention. The boys did their best to try and deal with the bite, even, according to my grandfather, by using a belt as a tourniquet. However, they had to carry Jacob part of the way home since he was in poor condition.

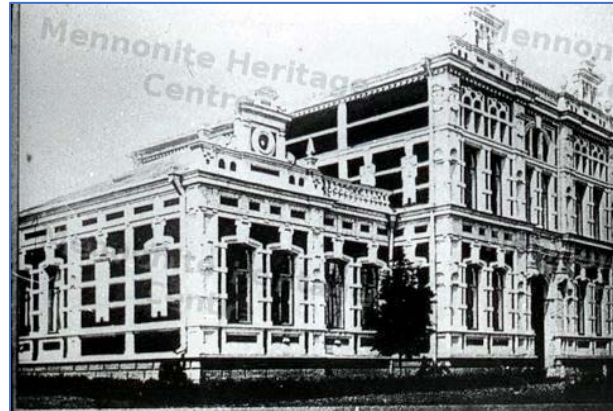
Jacob's recovery must have taken a few days or weeks. Grandpa mentioned that it involved frequent visits from a young woman from a nearby home. Her name was Maria.



I expect that Jacob and Maria met each other at the local school or church since so many of the activities in the small communities were shared among the families in the settlement. In fact, we know that the education of young Mennonite children was unusual in two respects.

First, there was a relatively well-organized system for educating children. This itself was uncommon in those days, but the Mennonites placed a high value on education and therefore established the institutions to support it.

We also know that the schools in Mennonite settlements were coeducational at that time. This changed in 1881 when the Russian state decreed that schools had to be separated by gender. It was part of their takeover of the educational system throughout the region.



The young woman's school established in the Chortitz region was one of the first in the country, once again reinforcing the importance of education and to the Mennonites. The Mennonites felt it was necessary to establish a school for young girls as well as boys. The photo shows the girl's school in Chortitz about 1910. That was about 20 years after Marie and Jacob were living in the village.

In any case, Marie and Jacob most likely were aware of each other although they were 7 years apart in age. My grandfather provides the anecdote about how Marie helped nurse Jacob back to health after he was bitten by the snake (see PJReimerHisStory3.pdf above).

What we do know is that Marie was an important person in Jacob's recovery. After his recovery, he worked on his family's farm, then was conscripted to the forest service as an alternative to military service. This was a common thing for Mennonite boys since Catherine the Great had promised the Mennonites that they would not have to participate in the military (since they were pacifists). Instead, they were sent to forestry camps and medical facilities. I have included a photo of Jacob in his forestry uniform.



After Jacob's obligation to the state was completed and he decided to marry, it was Marie who became his chosen partner. This was in 1890—about 12 years after the snake story.

I also find it intriguing that dams continued to play an important part in their lives—but that part of the story is for another letter.