

#13/DE#3

Johann Bartsch's letter to David Epp

Translation and all notes by Ed Hoepfner, Sep 2004

Riga 1788 Dec 12

Esteemed and beloved Friend Davit Epp

Your letter of the 18th November I received safely on the day of my arrival at Riga [Note 1]. Please do not think ill of me because my departure from Danzig was so silent and clandestine, there were certain reasons for that, for as one well knows that the Black Eagle on Langgarten [Note 2] is not well-disposed toward me and if my departure had been too ostentatious then its talons probably could have given me serious wounds in Koenigsberg, and we had enough trouble as it was without that, and each one of us was specially examined most stringently and I thanked God that it ended as well as it did, and I spoke with almost no other persons there. From noon until evening they tormented us and as soon as dawn broke we hurried to leave that city. Our route was, firstly from Danzig along the coast to Pillau, ferried across at Pillau [Note 3] which cost us 5 Thalers, my people waited for me at Pillau for 2 days and a night which cost me 9 Talers [Note 4], NB., oats were 3 1/2 florins per Scheffel [1.51 bushels] up to Pillau. From Pillau we drove through the country to Koenigsberg but over abominable roads, 3 Meile [22.68 km] beyond

Koenigsberg reached the seashore [probably at Cranz/Zelenogradsk at the base of the Kurische Nehrung] and then along the shore [ie., the seaward shore of the Kurische Nehrung] to Memel, it was very cold along this shore for there was no shortage of wind, but we only tipped over once along this shore, rather close to the sea so that the waves splashed into our belongings, we could not tarry there for long because all our things were getting wet and the snow and wind were able to strike my entire company hard, but with time we reached Memel. From Pillau through all of Prussia we had, everywhere, to give one Thaler [Prussian] for every Scheffel [1.51 bu] of oats, further from Memel to Libau [Liebau; now Liepaya, Latvia] we again drove along the shore, but from Libau through the entire country to Mitau [now Yelgava, Latvia] through all of Courland [Kurland - as that area was then known] up to Riga we did not meet with cheap rates, but the best of it was that one cannot miss the way because there are Germans everywhere in all of the farms. Three days journey before Riga all of my children became ill, they all had the measles and are in bed very ill, but we grown-ups are healthy, praise God, particularly we men who walked the entire way on foot: three weeks and 2 days we spent on the trip, in all it cost me 30 Thalers for 21 people and 7 horses up to Riga, where I found a good 20 families of Mennonites, good people, and a priest, and right away on the first Sunday I went to church, this was in Peter[?] Classens's quarters, a nice big room: the priest was a remarkable dignified man, a man who does no more than read the text from the Testament and then preaches a good 2 hours worth, and the longer he preaches the more he has in reserve.

How long I will remain in Riga I do not yet know, I think right after Christmas, if our loving God gives us health, we will travel further, for everything in Riga is quite expensive. I do not know much to tell you about the war [Note 5], if some of you follow, which I heartily wish and beg you to do, and I should no longer be in Riga, they should ask the way to the Sand Gate and to Fischer's house in the suburb there, he is a reasonable man and has lovely quarters there,

right now many of our people are living with him; as long as it is possible I will prefer to await them but do not know if I will be able to do so, for the Comptoir [Note 6] is urging us strongly to travel further, but I advise you to travel before the spring, because something could happen that it will not be possible anymore by spring [Note 7], but whoever travels right now will be fully received in Riga only if he has a Pass from the Resident [Note 8] at your location, I send hearty greetings to Ohm Neufeld, Ohm Tiessen [Note 9], and all good friends, and continue to remain your obliging friend.

Riga 1788 12th December:
J. Bartsch

Note 1. According to D.G. Rempel's "From Danzig to Russia"(Mennonite Life Jan 1969), Bartsch left Danzig 1788 Nov 12. In this letter he states that he travelled 23 days to Riga, so he arrived in Riga 1788 Dec 04 and received David Epp's letter that day.

Note 2. Black Eagle on Langgarten - a reference to the effigy of the Prussian black eagle which was affixed to the front of all government buildings of the Kingdom of (Brandenburg-) Prussia. The building housing the Prussian diplomatic representative, the Prussian Resident, to the Free City of Danzig, was situated on the street known as Langgarten. Additionally, it could be understood as a reference to the flag of Prussia, which was centered by a black eagle with upraised sword in one claw and clutching a thunderbolt in the other. Because Bartsch as a Delegate had, and was, promoting the emigration of Mennonites from the territory of Danzig - thus reducing the population (and wealth) of Danzig which Prussia hoped to acquire - he was persona non grata to the royal Prussian authorities in Danzig who could make trouble for him when he passed through Prussian territory at Koenigsberg.

Note 3. Pillau was a town, port, and fortress at the one break in the Frische Nehrung where ships on the Baltic Sea could enter the lagoon on their way to Koenigsberg, or depart from thence for the open sea. At one time the postal coach road from Berlin via Danzig went eastward along the Frische Nehrung to Koenigsberg. But all road traffic had to be ferried across this break at Pillau.

Note 4. Later in this letter we learn that Bartsch's group totalled 21 people; in this passage the reference to 'his people' waiting for him and his family suggests that some of this group had left a few days prior to his departure, perhaps by design to make Bartsch's departure ' ... less ostentatious ... '

Note 5. The reference to the war must be to Catherine the Great's second Russo-Turkish war which began in August 1787. Sweden also declared war on Russia in 1788, in June.

Note 6. "Comptoir" was the French term for an office or agency which was applied to the Tsarist Russian " Office of Guardianship of New Russian Foreign Settlers" first established by Catherine II. It had a branch office in Riga, the port of entry for many immigrants at this time.

Note 7. " ... Because something could happen ... "this might refer to a number of things -such as possible hostilities by Sweden against Russian territory at Riga, but more likely the Comptoir at

Riga may have warned Bartsch that the Russian Government would soon stop all further immigration to New Russia because of the war with Turkey- as in fact did happen.

Note 8. "Resident at your location" - The Russian diplomatic representative to Danzig -the Russian Resident at Danzig-- had his official office, the Russian Consulate-General, on Langgarten also but somewhat further toward the east than that of the Prussian Resident. A pass issued by him to people emigrating from Danzig to Russia would identify them as immigrants to Russia who had already been officially accepted as bona fide immigrants.

Note 9. " Ohm" - A term of respect used by Mennonites in referring and/or addressing a church minister or Aeltester.

Edited 11 Aug 2019 and 18 Jan 2024 by GHP.