

BLANK FAMILY

**Prepared by Ruth Blank wife of Fritz Blank,
grandson of David Blank**

When we came to live in Montreal, an old Jew, noticing during services that he was a newcomer, asked Fritz his name. When told the old Jew immediately said, "You come from Odessa, Russia?" "No," said Fritz. "Your father came from Odessa." Again, the answer was no. "Your grandfather came from Odessa." Again, no. "You are a liar", the old man said.

We can effectively trace the genealogy of the Blank Family back to 1672, to the small towns and villages of Hanover – at that time an independent kingdom, after 1866 a province of Prussia – and Lippe Detmold – founded by a princely family and made a principality (like Monaco) in 1720 and then a republic of Germany in November 1918. In 1945 Lippe was incorporated in North Rhine – Westphalia. But who knows what happened before 1648, when the Treaty of Westphalia was concluded after the Thirty Years' War and expulsions of Jews were the main order of the day.

Although Lippe was off the beaten path of the Middle Ages, we find traces here and there of a few Jews who lived there as early as 1297. One was an Augustin friar who converted to a judaizing sect of the time. He was arrested in Paris and burned alive. In 1343 a report on some astronomical figures concerning the calendar was written by a Chajjim Titmold (> from Detmold most probably). In 1374 a Jew called Vivus de Lemgo (obviously from the town of Lemgo) and his family were granted the right of residence in Dortmund for a period of 6 years. He had to pay a yearly tax, one for the Count of the province and one for the city of Dortmund.

The oldest right of residence paper (Judenschutzbrief) still in existence dates from 1500. It was given to Anshel the Jew, his wife and servants to live in Detmold. He must have rendered unusual services to the County, because he was given the privilege to move elsewhere if he so wanted. Much later, when many Jews lived in Lippe, this privilege was very seldom granted.

Lippe was a small principality. The reigning princes in the 17th and 18th centuries wanted to emulate the French Court, but their revenues being modest, they needed added income. It was to be increased by the Jews. They were assigned to revive the commerce shaken by the Thirty Years' War when army and foreign occupation destroyed these regions.

One of those Court Jews was a certain Isaac and his son Israel. Isaac received the residence rights in 1552 in Salzufeln, (Lippe) by Count Simon IV. He must have been well off because he owned a lot of land. Isaac and his son became economic and political advisers of the Count, but they did not get along as well with the Salzufeln people. Continual quarrels ended up with the expulsion of Isaac and another Jew, Abraham Rub and his family from Salzufeln in 1587. The order came from an assembly of the notables of the town. But the dissensions did not end there and in

1599 the Count obliged the reticent notables to grant the residence papers to Israel (son of Isaac). The rights were never automatically carried over from parents to children.

Later on Isaac got his rights renewed and after that the whole parentage, so that more than 30 families gradually came to Lippe and established themselves in the surrounding villages near Salzufeln. Isaac was engaged in even more important financial operations for the Count. In 1610 Isaac and Israel were offered a horse along with the guarantee that feed would be at their disposal at all times. In 1613 the Count died.

The town council confronted with enormous debts incurred by the Count, took possessions and money from the Jews. Isaac and Israel, leaders of the Jews in Lippe, were thrown into prison, while other Jews were deported. But after 27 weeks in prison, the two were fined and released. A Count tried to have the fine reduced.

They left Lippe for other cities and finally landed in Prague. There in 1614 they asked the authorities in Lippe for the restitution of their stolen possessions, claiming they had been granted protection in Lippe – rights of residence. The Thirty Years' War stopped the proceedings. In the meantime, Isaac and Israel died. Israel's children took the lawsuit again. In 1659, Emperor Leopold I intervened for the son of Israel, a butler at the Court of Vienna, the converted Carl Damiani. In 1671 he finally received a small sum in Vienna, at a time when Jews had long since returned to Lippe.

We know officially of more than 60 Hofjuden (Court Jews) residing in Lippe between 1580 and 1823. Besides money they supplied the Counts with coins, jewelry, tobacco, cattle and meat. Some were bank agents, seal-engravers; one was a lottery office keeper. This was a thin upper crust and underneath were the vagrants and beggars who lacked the rights of residence. Others may have peddled stolen goods and still others may have been organized bands of robbers and thieves. Not a few converted to Christianity and made clever use of the chance to have a foot in both the Christian and Jewish camps. Some again were simply average *Schnorrers* who appealed to the charity of one Jewish Community after another. They were housed in beggars' hostels and given the *Zettel* (receipts) to receive meals at Jewish households.

But between 1648 and 1858 – date of the official emancipation of the Jews – the average member of a Jewish village community in Lippe was vested with the residence rights. However, he was not free to change residence. He could pursue a trade. He was allowed to slaughter animals for the household like everybody else, except that he had to conform to the ritual slaughtering of kosher animals and sell the parts of the animal he would not eat.

Often the rights were granted to relatives of those already residing in the County. They had to be renewed at first every year and later depending on where you lived, every 10 years. Many rules and conditions were attached to them concerning trade, leasing, borrowing relationships with Christians on their festivals, on our festivals, the payment of taxes and dues, the month before maturity and the rights of the widow in case of remarriage, etc. No less than exemplary conduct was expected of the Jews.

It is hard to determine when exactly the Jews were permitted to a home and land. In

Horn Lippe, it was not before the 19th century with restrictions as to location. They were assigned one portion of the main street in Horn: the Mittelstrasse. Indeed Blank's house can be seen on that street. The natives called that part of the street der Judenort (Jewish square). One Jewish owner in Lippe, happy to own a house, decorated it in the same fashion as was the town custom then except that on the front outside beams of the house he put a Hebrew verse: "Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings", then he signed his name and the Jewish date. His signature and the Jewish date were also included. The homeowner had to pay a tax to the mayor, business tax and a tax for the protection of the town (or become a guard himself).

In 1684, the Jews requested the services of a Rabbi. Until then an influential Court Jew was handling their affairs or interceding on their behalf with the Count. The Jewish community was growing and in 1720 they had a treasury, trustees and delegates to the authorities. The tax load was growing with amendments and conditions that varied from case to case and year to year. To mention a few: If a Jew wanted to marry he had to receive permission. Musicians at the wedding had to apply to receive a certain fee for their services. The death tax was a little lower than the marriage. Authorities knew that fortunes could be lost. No death taxes were levied for poor Jews or infants. Then there was a visitors' tax, and a tax for Christian ministers that each homeowner had to pay in case of baptism or death. Of course it was exacted from Jews as well. Instead of the priestly vestment fee, the Jews gave the minister an 8 lb. veal roast. A rather unusual, was the delivery of the tongue of each slaughtered cow to the Count.

Evidently, the Jewish community, being overburdened with taxes and taking care of their own poor members was constantly in debt. It meant that besides the regular taxes they had to put aside a sum for the arrears, or they were threatened with deportation. In one case, in Horn, they had to deliver pewter dishes, candlesticks and copperware to clear a debt. The Counts were chronically in debt and were constantly begging for higher revenues. They became the terror of the entire population.

On the occupational side, the village Jews were more than willing to avail themselves of new opportunities, but the obstacles were formidable. Money lending was left for hundreds of years to the Jew. Usury was forbidden to Christians by medieval law, but the Jew, prevented by law of the Torah from lending upon usury other than strangers, was thus able to make a living, to have a *parnassah*. This explains the frequent occurrence of a particular trade among the village Jews.

Many were cattle and horse dealers, but almost by force of circumstance, they offered the services of a banker in the villages. If a farmer had money he would not buy his cattle from the Jewish dealer, after all there were also plenty of non-Jewish cattle dealers to be found. But when he was in need of credit, he turned to the Jewish dealer, who often had to wait a very long time until he received payment both for his merchandise and for his services. Some Jews peddled ribbons, buttons, aprons and accessories in a neighbouring village because the potato field, the pear tree, the goat and the chicken that were all he owned, were not sufficient to make a living.

In the end, often at the urging of their sons, they would give up the goats and chickens and open a dry goods store. By and large those who owned land – planted with wheat,

rye, barley and oats – did so chiefly to support their cattle trade. While the Jewish retailer and wholesaler – mostly textiles – was almost always a respected citizen, the wealthy Jewish cattle dealers, prominently engaged in real estate dealings – especially division of larger peasants' holdings into single lots – did not always enjoy a good relations among Jews or Christians.

Wherever Jews settled, the first thing they negotiated after the terms of settlement had been fixed was the acquisition of a burial ground. In Lemgo (Lippe), for example, the existing Jewish cemetery did not originally belong to the Jewish community. In 1721 a Court Jew bought it, but Jews who wanted to bury their dead on his burial ground had to ask for a special permit. That rule was even extended later on to the heirs of the owner. As far as synagogues are concerned there were some even before the expulsion of the Jews from Lippe in 1511 and 1545. We know that the Count gave his consent to the famous Isaac we spoke about earlier, when he wanted to build a synagogue behind his house. He even offered the wood for the construction of it.

The biggest Jewish community in 1666 was concentrated in Detmold. The Jews from the neighbouring villages were allowed to pray there on high holidays. The synagogue was actually a house rented from the city and converted into a synagogue or a prayer room. The oldest such synagogue – end of the 16th century – and still existing in the middle of the 19th century, was the one in Horn. It had then to be taken down and a beautiful synagogue was erected in 1856. The inauguration was an event for the Jews and also the Christian population who participated in it. The government offered a contribution for the building of the synagogue.

Adjacent to the synagogue we find the Jewish school. In those times, schools were mainly teaching Jewish subjects and religion besides writing. The Jewish children being taught how to write were one step ahead of Christians until school attendance became compulsory later on. In 1808 Jewish schools added the curriculum of the public schools to their parochial subjects.

The teacher had a special status. First of all he was not only a teacher but also an acting Rabbi so to speak, a *schochet* and a *hazzan*. They were mostly bachelors, did not need residence rights and supplemented their income with private tutoring. Sometimes a few parents shared one teacher for their children. Around 1760, the Jews in Lippe were still struggling to make ends meet. The County did not look favorably upon teachers who wanted to get married, or did not come to the County with a substantial contract. They were also forbidden to pursue a business on the side. But Jews were inventive and ingenious in eking out a living under the most difficult circumstances. The teachers married outside Lippe and they supplemented their teacher's salary in a variety of ways, be it rewards for *mishaberachs*, marriage brokerage, archival enquiries, representative of insurance companies, the selling of lottery tickets and if they knew how to read and write in German, they were chosen by the administration of the County to take care of the Jewish birth and death registry.

How did the village Jews manage to retain their human dignity despite the often – vicious intentions of neighbors and governments of countless centuries? The essential point which determined the personality of the rural Jew (Landjude) was a simple, deep-seated and genuine feeling of both awe and love of God. A genuine piety (echte Religiosität). The Jews in the villages did not even attempt to define their attitude

toward religion. The feelings were anchored with unswerving faith in Jewish tradition.

A Jew would put on his Tephilin in the train unselfconsciously in the presence of non-Jews. He would not have started the day without a minyan. Instinctively he knew that having publicly worshipped God, he was part of the *Khal Israel*, as he was a citizen of his country, whether he confessed it or not.

That emotional-religious attitude of the village Jew made him strong and resistant, a quality not found in the cities. City life often contributed to a faster deterioration of religious Judaism, but the same Jewish village communities simply lived according to ancient traditions and handed them on to the next generation, not by teaching them from a historical perspective but by practising them in their daily lives.

One has to realise that Judaism developed as the religion of a farming people. The festivals are built around the agricultural rhythm of ancient Israel and the agricultural religious laws in the Talmud testify to the fact that Jewish people had been in the beginning of their history a nation of farmers. The agricultural cycle was a present reality for the village Jew who dealt daily in the miracle of food production.

There is no doubt that the development of technical civilization would have eventually drawn the village Jew into closer contact with the city where the bonds of religious devotion might have slowly weakened and dissolved. But as far as the history of the 19th and early 20th centuries is concerned, one cannot overestimate the strong emotional resources that grew and were preserved in the quiet agricultural environment of the village.

We hope that this flashback into the lives of the Jews in Lippe will render the following genealogical tree of the Blank family more alive and friendly.

Sources

Die Juden in Lippe von 1648 bis zur Emanzipation 1858 by Michael Guenter

Village and Small-Town Jews in Germany

by W.J. Cahnman; Yearbook 1974 Leo Baeck Institute.

The Blank's House, built in 1680. Horn in Lippe:

Left beam shows a latin quotation: Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren dwell together in unity. (Psalms 133)

Right beam on top of store shows a German quotation: The Lord is with me, I will not fear, what can man do to me? (Psalms 118)

David Blank, owner of the house, came from Hanover County to Remminghausen in 1850, from there he moved to Horn and bought the house in 1858. He was well off and besides being a Landowner and a farmer, he was a grain dealer. He was a citizen and paid the tax for the citizenship papers. (Buergergeld). In 1858 there were 1855 mostly Protestant town people in Horn, a few Catholics and 72 Jews. The building was still in existence in 1960-70 and converted into an exclusive restaurant.