

Jacob “Berliner” Kehler (1863-1923), Ebenfeld

Jacob Ketler (Berliner) Kehler (1863-1923): Pioneer Farmer, Personality and Raconteur,
by grandson Al Reimer, 115 Wordsworth Way, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3K 0J6.

Introduction.

I never knew my maternal grandfather Jacob K. Kehler, who died four years before I was born. And yet I’ve often felt that he knew me, that he has lived inside me all these years, inspiring my love for language, firing my bursts of imagination, shaping my temperament and slyly stimulating my fondness for verbal acrobatics and the telling of tall tales.

Why do I make this somewhat bizarre claim? Because the older I get the more strongly I can feel my immediate begetters, my parents and grandparents, wrapping themselves ever more tightly around my own identity--like those Russian dolls that fit so snugly inside each other. And the more I think and learn about those begetters, the more intimate that feeling becomes. And the more richly satisfying the process of self-exploration becomes.

Accomplishments.

By all accounts, “Berliner” Kehler, as he was known far and wide, was a colorful, dynamic man who lived life at full throttle until he was struck down by cancer in his late fifties. Although a life-long farmer, this gifted man also had a fascinating range of other interests. He was active in politics and served as a councillor for Hanover municipality. Jakob Kehler is listed a Municipal Councillor for 1906, replacing Jakob Harder, Bergthal. Jakob Kehler served in 1907 but was replaced by neighbour Jakob B. Peters in 1908.

Jakob Kehler was also a government weed inspector, and for years served as a kind of male nurse who vaccinated children in the community against small pox.

As an accomplished linguist fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, English, German and Yiddish (he even spoke a little French), he was much in demand as an interpreter for political candidates. In fact, according to his son, Peter S. Kehler, he was a kind of political handyman who arranged political meetings from Sarto in the south to Lac du Bonnet in the north.

On the spiritual side, Berliner Kehler served as a Vorsänger in the Chortitzer church and liked to write poetry when he had the time. Having received a sound basic education in Russia as a boy, he even tried teaching briefly as a young man but didn’t like it because it cooped him up inside too much. Above every-

thing, his local fame stemmed from his charismatic personality. He was a ready wit and a brilliant raconteur who kept everybody around him royally entertained. He loved people and they in turn were equally drawn to him.

Family Background.

The Gerhard L. Kehler family had come to Manitoba from Russia in the summer of 1875, settling in the new village of Hochfeld, eight

Pioneering.

Lacking a house of their own, Gerhard and his sons helped a Hiebert family finish their new house that fall, in return for the use of a room in the house for the winter. The family of 13 had to adapt themselves to living in a sixteen-square-foot room. The parents slept on a roughly carpentered bed while the 11 children slept on the floor. The only other furniture was a table so small that the family members had to eat their spartan meals in shifts.

The one thing the family did have in abundance was a supply of warm clothing, including fur coats, which the parents had the foresight to bring with them to what they knew would be a severe climate. In the early spring of 1876, however, there was a fire in the Hiebert house and the Kehlers lost everything except the clothes on their backs. The modest insurance money (Brandgeld) was enough to purchase a span of oxen and a wagon, but not enough to replace the much-needed warm clothes they had lost in the fire. But they were able to build their own house that summer, and the crowded family situation was further alleviated when three of the Kehler daughters got married that first year with a fourth following soon thereafter.

During one of the early years there was a terrible infestation of grasshoppers and the Kehlers, along with the other settlers, lost almost their entire crop, a meagre one to begin with. Normally a strong, optimistic man, father Gerhard sank into a mood of despair. It got so bad that he sat down one-day and wept over the hopelessness of it all.

His wife, who was made of sterner stuff, asked him why he was crying. In Russia, Gerhard replied, they had everything they

needed but here in Canada they didn’t even get to eat the potato peels because they were needed to plant new crops.

Well, his wife wondered, don’t you remember why we came here to Canada? For the sake of the boys, of course, said Gerhard. They would have had to go into military service in Russia. All right, then, his wife pointed out, what we have to do is trust in God and everything we need will be given to us. And so it was; the next year there was a good crop and things got a little better.



Jakob “Berliner” Kehler and Elisabeth Schulz Kehler, with their oldest granddaughter Annie Penner, circa 1913. All photographs for this article are courtesy of Tina Bergen, Box 1108, Steinbach, Manitoba, R0A 2A0.

miles northwest of Steinbach. While the family brought with them adequate personal possessions they had little by way of ready cash.

There were 11 children in the family with Jakob, 12 at the time, ninth in line. According to the later reminiscences of Jakob’s older brother Gerhard, the family went through particularly trying times in the early years. Although free of debt, the Gerhard Kehlers came with only \$75.00 in cash, just enough to secure a quarter section of land and purchase a cow and a few sacks of flour. The first winter was especially hard.

Youth.

By this time, though, the Kehlers were in debt and three of the sons, including the future "Berliner", now 13, were obliged to find jobs to help pay off the debts. Young Jacob began working for Dr. Isaac L. Warkentin (1845-1929) (a popular lay doctor) in Blumenhof. There the young man with the sparkling personality and gift of the gab quickly became a family favorite.

In later years, Mrs. Abram Giesbrecht, who as a young girl was also working for the Warkentins at the time, remembered that Jacob's eloquence so impressed his employer that he believed everything he said no matter how exaggerated or extravagantly expressed.

She also described a personal grievance that arose from Jacob's love for practical jokes. One of their jobs was to fetch sheaves from the field with a hayrack and oxen and bring them home to the village. Normally, Jakob would drive sitting in front behind the oxen, but when they got to the village street he would ostentatiously seat himself beside her on top of the load, much to the girl's embarrassment. As soon as they left the street he would again resume his usual seat. Since Blumenhof was a very strict Kleine Gemeinde village where even the most casual contact between the sexes was frowned upon, the girl became so upset by Jacob's brazen behavior that she finally complained to Warkentin. Their employer, however, was so completely under the boy's spell that he curtly told the girl: "Jacob would never do such a thing," leaving her more frustrated than ever.

Jacob also worked for seven years for a

Mager family in Winnipeg near the Red (Presumably these were the Magers that owned the public house and stables where most Mennonites overnighted when travelling to Winnipeg to sell their produce). There Jakob learned the



Jakob K. "Berliner" Kehler, taking his new 1914 Model T Ford out for a spin. Elisabeth Schulz Kehler is seating in the right side in the back seat. The passengers are Mr. and Mrs. Peter Doerksen, Hochfeld. Daughter Elisabeth Kehler is seated with her mother. See Historical Sketches, page 115.

fluent English he made such good use of in his later political activities.

Jacob still liked to play practical jokes but one of them almost ended in tragedy. As he related the incident later, he and a friend were crossing the Red one day in a small boat. Jacob, who was a good swimmer, decided to play a joke on his friend by tipping over the boat. He assumed, of course, that his friend could swim but discovered to his horror that he couldn't. Fortunately, the friend, presumably with Jacob's help, was able to make it to shore. By his own admission, the lesson Jacob learned that day was that you can't fool around with death.

Marriage.

In April, 1884, when Jacob was 21, he married Elisabeth Schultz, who was 18 at the time. Berliner liked to say that all he had to do to find a bride was look over the garden gate, as the Kehlers and Schultzes lived next door to each other in Hochfeld. The connection between these two families goes back to Russia and is an interesting story in itself. Whether aware of it or not, my grandfather Berliner and my grandmother were descended from the same ancestors, namely Michael Kehler and his wife Elisabeth Loewen Kehler. That made them the grandparents of Berliner Kehler and the great-grandparents of Elisabeth Schultz Kehler. The genealogy shows that the Kehlers and the Schultzes had been intermarrying since at least 1826. So it was a natural marriage for the boy and girl next door to each other if there ever was one!

"Berliner" Kehler.

The young couple took the unusual step of not only moving off the family farm but moving out of the village altogether and setting up house on a vacant school lot half a mile east where there was no village at all. It was a bold move considering that Jacob at the time of his marriage possessed the grand sum of seven dollars. Their house was small and cramped and Jacob still had no land of his own. He was not a farmer by nature anyway, but in those days farming was the accepted way of life for Mennonites and few departed from that norm no matter what other interests they had.

Both Jacob and Elisabeth were warm, outgoing people and already had many friends. Not long after establishing their home, a departing friend asked Jacob what the place they



Wigwam, pitched on the northwest corner of "Berliner" Kehler's farm in Ebenfeld, 1907 (NE6-7-6E). A common sight in the early years. See Historical Sketches, page 115. "Indians used to pitch their tents in the bush, one mile north and 1/2 mile west of Ham Dog House, NE6-7-6E, which was actually the original quarter of Jakob Kehler. The Indians went around begging during the day. In the fall they left again for the winter." Grandson Gerhard J. Kehler, former owner of Bothwell Transfer, used to play with the children.



Jakob K. Kehler farm, Ebenfeld. SE6-7-6E, photo from the Municipal Road, looking west. The land was later purchased by John Stahn, and became the townsite of modern-day Mitchell. The farmyard is still in existence today, although the buildings were torn down and rebuilt. Grandson George J. Kehler recalls that the original quarter section of land of Jakob K. Kehler was the NE6-7-6E, but when the SE6-7-6E became available, he purchased it and built his yard there.

were living at was called. Jacob, remembering that he had passed through the great city of Berlin, Germany, on his way to Canada, jocularly replied that it was called "Berlin." And that was how the most widely known nickname in the East Reserve came about. In fact, the nickname was so exclusively applied to



"Berliner" Kehler had designed a pulley gearshift for his car, so that the motor could be used to power his sawmill and feed crusher.

him that many people didn't even know his given name. Even the members of his own family always referred to him as Berliner.

Ebenfeld.

In 1891, Berliner purchased a farm at Ebenfeld, three and a half miles west of Steinbach (just north of the present town of Mitchell), SE6-7-6E, currently the main townsite of the village of Mitchell. Here he was able to farm on his own at last. By this time the young couple had five children and were desperately in need of more living space and an enlarged income. The farm required a lot of work in the early years, as the land was stony and cluttered with brush.

A strong, energetic man, Berliner struggled to get ahead while waiting for his older sons to grow up into helpers. All the lumber he needed for his house, barn and other buildings he himself cut and sawed in the bush. He built a large barn because he kept a lot of stock, especially horses, of which he was very fond. He liked to buy young bronchos and break them himself. One such animal, a bay mare with crooked forefeet, an almost hairless tail and no front teeth, turned out to be a trotter which ran like the wind when hitched to the family sulky, and apparently scared grandmother half to death whenever they used it to go visiting.

To augment his income for his growing family, Berliner took outside jobs wherever he

could. In winter he worked at a sawmill in the bush and continued to do so when his sons were old enough to join him. In the early years he also worked for Jewish cattle dealers who bought cattle in the district which had to be rounded up and driven to Winnipeg.

Berliner made many such trips with a dozen or more cows and calves tied to his wagon. On one such trip, an ill-tempered young cow knocked him down unexpectedly and kept him pinned helplessly to the ground. Every time he tried to move away he received another vicious butt. Finally, his oldest son Jacob, who was along on the trip, threw him a hammer, but it fell beyond his reach. He did finally reach the hammer and managed to fight off the crazed animal.

Accidents.

Son Peter points out in his memoirs that Berliner, while blessed with good health and a robust physique, was peculiarly accident prone and cites a long list of such accidents. As a bold, utterly fearless man he probably put himself at risk in potentially dangerous situations as a matter of course. Once he was kicked in the head by a cow, but although shaken up came away without serious injury. On another



February, 1909. Funeral of Maria Kehler Penner, daughter of Jakob and Elisabeth Kehler. L.-r.: Probably, brother Johann S. Kehler; father-in-law Mr. Penner; Grandfather Aron Schulz; father Jakob "Berliner" Kehler; brother Gerhard S. Kehler; possibly brother Peter S. Kehler; sister-in-law Helen, Mrs. Jakob S. Kehler; brother David S. Kehler; brother Jakob J. Kehler, husband to Helena; husband Abraham Penner, holding daughter Annie Penner, later Mrs. Herman Ratzlaff; mother-in-law Mrs. Penner; mother Elisabeth Schulz Kehler, sister Susanna, later Mrs. Heinrich U. Wieler; boy in front is Heinrich S. Kehler; little girl in front is sister Elisabeth S. Kehler, later Mrs. P. J. B. Reimer, and the smaller boy in front is Cornelius S. Kehler. Photo identification is courtesy of Tina Bergen, Steinbach, Manitoba.

occasion he was helping at a barn-raising when a six by six supporting timber slipped and hit him on the head.

That time he was less lucky and was taken home half dead. Another time he was knocked cold when his son John inadvertently hit him in the head with a fifteen-foot long board they were trying to lay across a haystack. And Peter once knocked his father down with a piece of firewood while they were sawing wood. Again, Berliner had to take to his bed for several days. While repairing a telephone line he was almost killed when a car hit the wire that was lying across the road, throwing him across the wagon standing between him and the road and almost cutting off his ear. Another time, while doing some blacksmithing, he had the red-hot bolt he was handling fly from his tongs into his overalls and burn through his pantleg at the knee. He was so badly burned, especially his hands when he tried to smother the fire, that he was confined to bed for weeks.

As if the accidents weren't enough, Berliner contracted typhoid fever during an epidemic and almost died. He lay in bed for a long time before he recovered. In his delirious state he referred to his socks as "Bock and Breit," the names of his oxen. His unquenchable spirit enabled him to overcome these various setbacks and with a never-flagging energy and enthusiasm he threw himself into various activities which helped to relieve the tedium of farming.

With a long line of eight sons growing up, he could in later years delegate most of the farm work to them and free himself for his political activities and other interests. Berliner liked to move with the times and in 1914 bought his first car, a Model T Ford for which he invented a device which allowed him to use the car to power his feed-cutter.



1923. Six sons of Jakob "Berliner" Kehler carry their father to his last resting place in the Hochfeld cemetery. The pallbearers on the photographer's side of the coffin, l.-r., are: Jakob, Aron and George. John is the pallbearer in the middle on the other side.

Hospitality.

As already mentioned, both Berliner and his wife were gregarious by nature and their hospitality was boundless. Even with a household of children, the Kehlers were constantly



1923. Jakob "Berliner" Kehler's funeral. Grandma Elisabeth Schulz Kehler grieving by her husband's coffin. The man at the left side of the photo, with hat brim slightly turned down, may be son Johann S. Kehler.

entertaining guests--friends and strangers alike. From politicians and prosperous businessmen to Jewish pedlars and outright beggars, all were welcome to stay for a meal and for the night, if necessary. At times up to 20 guests stayed at the Kehlers' overnight, making their home in Ebenfeld seem more like an old-fashioned country inn than a private home. Friends and neighbors also dropped in at all hours. And of course Berliner was the perfect host enjoying a ready-made audience for his hilarious anecdotes and witty sallies.

Kehler Humour.

Of the Kehlers' fourteen children, eleven--eight sons and three daughters--lived to adulthood. They were Maria (who died at the early age of 24), Jacob, Gerhard, Aaron, John, Peter, Susanna (Saun), David, Henry, Elisabeth (my mother) and Cornelius (Neil). And virtually all of them inherited Berliner's gift of the gab and his skill at telling jokes and tall tales. To hear them all talking at once and laughing uproariously at each other's wisecracks and Schnette (tall tales) when the whole family met at our house on festive occasions, was an unforgettable experience.

I once tried to capture the amazing spectacle of my Kehler uncles in full cry in a poem, part of which reads:

They could make the local wel-
kin ring
the Low German air turn blue
for miles around
with their crackling salvos

of comic gusto.

They needed no wine or beer or schnapps
to lubricate their verbal bearings.

Peanuts, sunflower seeds and strong black
coffee

mechanized their jaws

and greased their vocal chords.

While Berliner himself was no longer present at these boisterous gatherings, in retrospect I know that his jovial spirit must have hovered over them approvingly as his sons



1923. The children of Jakob "Berliner" Kehler and Elisabeth Schulz Kehler pose for a photograph. L.-r.: son Heinrich, Gerhard, David, Elisabeth, Cornelius, Aaron, Johann and Jakob. Missing are Susanna, Mrs. Heinrich U. Wieler, and Peter S. Kehler, taking the photograph.



The Jakob K. "Berliner" Kehler farmyard in Ebenfeld, SE6-7-6E, view towards the south, the Municipal Road, now Centre Street, is visible to the left hand side of the photograph. Photo taken at Jakob "Berliner" Kehler's funeral in 1923. The bush where Mitchell is located today, is visible in the background.

and daughters and their children indulged themselves in endless bursts of wit and merriment. It was a family saying that "You should never bury a Kehler until you're sure his mouth is dead too."

Poetry.

In his late fifties Berliner was stricken with cancer. In 1920 he underwent an operation that removed one of his kidneys and part of his liver. It was a trying time for him and he suf-



A view of some of the cars of the people that came to Jakob "Berliner" Kehler's funeral. In the background are the buildings of Jakob B. Peters (1869-1937), NW5-7-6E, see aerial photograph in Preservings, No. 11, 71

fered a great deal of pain, but his lively nature and buoyant spirit remained undimmed. During his lengthy recuperation from the operation he turned to the writing of poetry as a way of communicating with his legion of friends and acquaintances.

His long narrative poems in rhyming couplets describing his illness, operation and recuperation are remarkable and were published periodically in the *Steinbach Post*. "Ein Lied aus der Erfahrung" (A Song from Experience), published in the *Post* March 2, 1921, captures Berliner's inimitable personality and witty optimism perfectly. In flexible and well-turned couplets, he describes his operation and re-

covery in vivid detail. Nor is his customary wit lacking as he tells in one stanza how the doctor informs him that "money can provide a remedy." And so they put him on an operating table and "cut [him] open like a fish."

Berliner followed up with another poem in the May 4, 1921, edition of the *Post*. Here he reports on how his six month recuperation has gone, again with his customary verbal flair. The *Post* kept issuing regular bulletins on Berliner's protracted illness.

Death.

When he died in June, 1923, the *Post* reports that it was a very large funeral with a funeral procession of some 80 cars following Berliner's casket for burial in the Hochfeld cemetery. Around 500 people paid their last respects at this immensely popular man's funeral.

But the Berliner Kehler story does not quite end with his death. There was one last twist, which occurred when his widow Elisabeth died in Steinbach in 1943. Grandmother had requested that she be buried beside her husband in the Hochfeld cemetery.

It was February and a severe snowstorm had left the cemetery deeply buried in snow. After considerable searching the gravediggers were able to find Jacob Kehler's grave and grandmother Kehler was buried beside him. That spring, after the snow melted, it was discovered that she had been buried beside the wrong Jacob Kehler, a man who had died in 1898 and who had, in fact, been her brother-in-law. Berliner's grave was some distance away, and to this day the graves of the couple remain separated.

Berliner himself would no doubt have had some witty things to say about this weird mistake. He might have said that he found his wife by looking over the garden gate and lost her again in the cemetery. But then again, if his gravestone had identified him as "Berliner"

Kehler, the mistake would probably not have happened in the first place.

Editor's Note:

In 1921 Berliner wrote a 14 stanza poem commemorating the 100th birthday of his neighbour, Peter Neufeld (1821-1922), Ebenfeld--*Preservings*, No. 11, pages 64-68. The poem is reproduced by Linda Buhler, "Ebenfeld," in John Dyck, ed., *Historical Sketches*, pages 119-120. Son Peter S. Kehler collected some of his father's poems and published them together with a selection of his own poetry.

The Gerhard L. Kehler family was unique in that they had Old Colony origins, one of only a few in the E. Reserve; how this impacted on the subsequent history of the clan has not yet been discussed. According to son Gerhard K. Kehler, he was born in 1861 in the village of Hochfeld, Alexandrowsker Kries, Jekatherinoslav. Since there was no village of Hochfeld in the Old Colony itself, this meant that Gerhard L. Kehler had already moved out of the Old Colony, possibly to the Yazykovo Colony founded in 1869. A group of Old Colony families had settled in Chortitz, E. R., in August of 1874 but soon moved on to the West Reserve.

The fact that the name "Hochfeld" was chosen as the name of the new village in the East Reserve demonstrates the influence of Gerhard L. Kehler.

Sources:

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Henry Schapansky, "Bergthaler Kehlens," *Preservings*, No. 10, Part One, page 66.

Al Reimer, "Elisabeth Schulz Kehler (1866-1943)," in *Pres.*, No. 10, Part Two, pages 28-30.

All the photographs for this article were taken by son Peter S. Kehler, Ebenfeld, who was an avid photographer. Later he became a minister of the Chortitzer church.