

Geeritt Roosen (1612-1711) Altona, Germany

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Introduction.

The subject of this article had his name recorded in several variations: Gerrit, Gerhard, Gerard, Rosen, Roose, Rooze, Rose. However, when he signed his own name he regularly used the form "Geeritt Roosen." He died in 1711, only a few months before his one-hundredth birthday. Declining vision and an unsteady hand seem to have made it increasingly difficult for him to write sermons and conduct other administrative business after about 1699. Despite the effects of his grand old age, he continued until his death to be the patriarch of the Hamburg-Altona congregation, one of the key centres of the northern European Mennonite *diaspora* in the seventeenth century. Because he was so involved in local German Mennonite affairs, as well as in the affairs of Mennonites in the Netherlands and beyond, to tell his history is to tell the history of his community.

Family History.

Roosen's family history was both typical of, and different from, most of his fellow Mennonites in northern Germany. First, it was typical because he could trace a large part of his family back to the Low Countries. In the 1680s he wrote a chronicle recording genealogical information for the generation of his children and grandchildren. Branches of his forebears' families had names like Amoury, van Sinteren, Quins, and Goverts. These names were Netherlandic in origin, or, to be more specific, Flemish.

The bulk of northern Germany's early Mennonite settlers probably came from areas like Flanders in the southern Low Countries after the 1560s, when war, persecution and poor economic conditions made life intolerable for them in their homeland. Protestant emigrants from Flanders (large numbers of whom were Calvinists after the middle of the sixteenth century) did not leave only for northern Germany. England and the northern Netherlands were the main destinations. Nonetheless, enough found their way to the regions around Hamburg. As a result, small but rich pockets of Mennonite culture developed there by the seventeenth century. This is especially significant, because without immigration it is unlikely that there would have been Mennonites in northern Germany. The local population and local authorities were almost exclusively Lutheran in allegiance.

Although Geeritt Roosen, like most of his peers, was of Netherlandic ancestry, his family's past was unique in one important

regard. His direct male forebears were very likely the earliest of adult baptizing Protestants to settle in Holstein, one of the regions in northern Germany near Hamburg. In his family chronicle from the 1680s, Roosen recounts the story of Cord Roosen, who apparently moved to Holstein around 1532 to escape unfavourable conditions in his home (the German borderlands of the Low Countries near Mönchengladbach). Cord is said to have settled on a farm near Lübeck, and, although several of his children seem not to have become Anabaptists, the son who inherited the farm, Geerlinck, certainly did

because it placed his family close to Menno Simons. Before Geeritt's father Paul moved to Altona in 1611, he spent some time on the estate of Fresenburg, near Oldesloe, now called Bad Oldesloe, located about halfway between Hamburg and Lübeck. This is where Menno Simons had found refuge before he died in 1561.

Because of a lack of sources, it is not clear why Bartholomäus van Ahlefeldt, the Lutheran lord of Fresenburg in the middle of the sixteenth century, decided to tolerate Menno and his followers. Ahlefeldt certainly did not share the widespread sixteenth-century opinion that

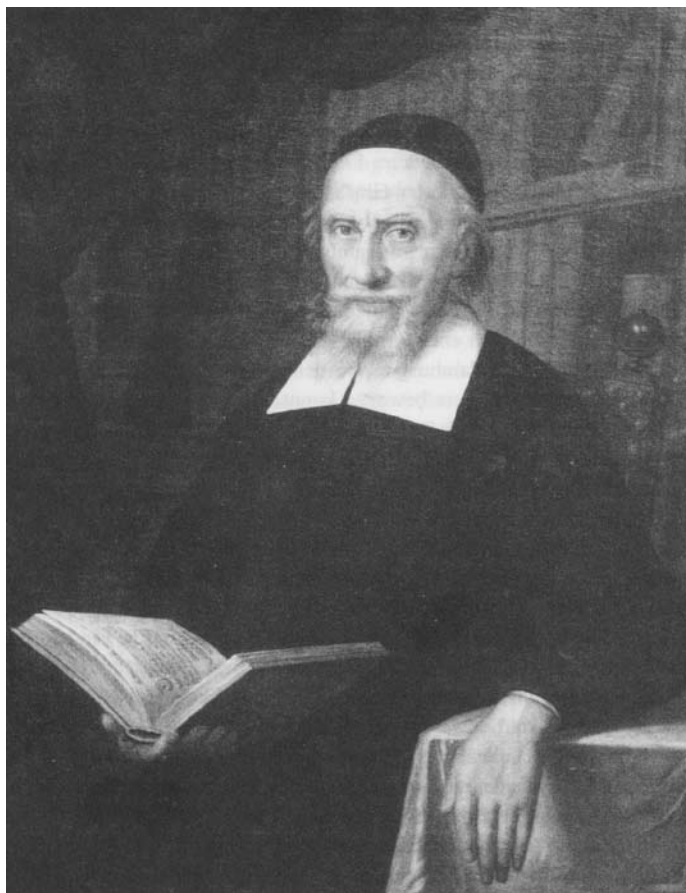
Anabaptists were criminals, and we can speculate that he may even have had religious sympathies for the men and women he tolerated on his lands. However, he never accepted their faith. A very likely explanation for his decision is that he hoped to gain an economic advantage by bringing hardworking and self-disciplining refugees to his lands from the economically prosperous regions of the Netherlands.

Life in Hamburg and Altona.

Because of hostility from most Lutheran authorities in their new home territories, the Netherlandic immigrants to northern Germany found it difficult to establish themselves in urban northern Germany in the sixteenth century. Civic governments in Hamburg published decrees against Anabaptists several times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, Hamburg's constitution required that only Lutherans could hold political office, and Lutheran clergymen insisted frequently that non-Lutherans be expelled from the city. Nonetheless, a small number of Mennonite families had settled in Hamburg by the very beginning of the seventeenth century, and their numbers grew as the century progressed.

Geeritt Roosen was one of the Mennonites who established his household in Hamburg in the course of the seventeenth century. In 1640 he married Maria Amoury and the couple moved to Hamburg's St. Michaelis parish on the city's west side in 1641. Here the Roosens lived for the rest of their lives, conducting their business affairs and raising a family.

Hamburg was not Roosen's town of origin. He was born in Altona in 1612, soon after his parents moved there from the Holstein countryside. In contrast to Hamburg's strict Lutheran policies, Altona's Lutheran authorities were much more tolerant of non-Lutherans. In Roosen's lifetime Altona was controlled by rivals to



Geeritt Roosen (Michael Driedger, Zuflucht und Koexistence. 400 Jahre Mennoniten in Hamburg und Altona, p. 30)

become a Mennonite.

It is from this branch of the Roosen family that Geeritt was descended. Geerlinck Roosen's son Paul, Geeritt's father, was the family member who first moved from the Holstein countryside to Altona, then only a modest village very near to the great port city of Hamburg (today Altona is a part of the city of Hamburg, but until the 1930s Altona and Hamburg were two separate jurisdictions). In short, more than most of his peers, Geeritt Roosen's family had a relatively long history in northern Germany.

Geeritt Roosen was proud of this relatively long local connection to northern Germany,

Hamburg (after 1641 the Danish monarchy). To try to attract business away from Hamburg, Altona's government offered economic and religious freedoms to Calvinists, Catholics, Jews and Mennonites. The Mennonites received their first legal charter of privileges in 1601, and the charters were renewed when a new count or king took power. Because of these freedoms, Mennonites and other non-Lutherans built their places of worship in Altona. Thus, even though Geeritt Roosen spent most of his long life based in Hamburg, he travelled a short distance to Altona to participate in church services and meetings.

Business Affairs.

When Roosen moved to Hamburg, he also began his own independent business affairs. Unfortunately, little information survives about his economic activities. However, his will indicates that he was very wealthy in the later stages of his life. The source of his wealth would have included the sale of stockings. Evidence of this is an early advertisement for stockings from about the middle of the seventeenth century.

He also played a minor part in Hamburg's lucrative whaling industry, one branch of economic activity in which Mennonites played an especially significant role for many generations.

Whaling was of special importance for the history of the Mennonites because record profits from this activity allowed leading members of the congregation to donate enough funds to build a proper church, the congregation's first. The new church was completed in 1675. Before that time, Mennonites met in a simple meeting house in Altona. According to Roosen's own notes, there were about 250 baptized members of the congregation when the new church was completed.

Career as a Deacon.

Geeritt Roosen began his many years of service to his congregation as a deacon in 1649. He replaced his father, Paul, who had died in 1648.

1648 and 1649 were pivotal years for two other reasons. First, 1648 marked the end of the Thirty Years War. Hamburg itself had not been attacked in this series of conflicts, but in the 1620s in the Holstein countryside armies had levelled parts of the estate of Fresenburg, on which some Mennonite families lived. To escape the ravages of war, some fled to Altona. In other words, war, together with attractive legal privileges in Altona, contributed to a shift in the focus of Mennonite life from the countryside to towns. Other towns in northern Germany that had a growing Mennonite population in the early seventeenth century included Glückstadt and Friedrichstadt.

In addition to immigration from the northern Germany countryside, the Mennonite

congregation based in Altona also grew due to the arrival of newcomers from the Netherlands. Although the worst persecutions of Protestants in the Low Countries had diminished by the end of the sixteenth century, there still continued to be a very active movement of Mennonites across northern Europe, between centres like Amsterdam and Danzig (Gdansk). Hamburg

Mennonites in Altona at the beginning of the seventeenth century. However, almost nothing is known about these groups because they left so few records, and they disappeared by the end of the century. The schism that began in 1648 was a disagreement between members of Roosen's own congregation.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, a group of seventeen congregational members declared their belief that baptism was only a true baptism if it was conducted by full immersion of the believer. The small group also expressed opinions about footwashing and communion that Geeritt Roosen and others in the congregation felt were unnecessary innovations. Roosen and his allies in the congregation felt that baptism by sprinkling was enough, and any further requirements were too strict and exclusive.

Disagreements between the two factions continued and escalated. Despite attempts by Mennonites in the Netherlands to mediate between the two sides, the conflict led to a permanent division when in 1656 Geeritt Roosen's family, which owned the property where the congregation met for services, prohibited the immersionist faction from using that property. The immersionists, who became known as Dompelaars (Dunkers in English), survived as a separate group until the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Dompelaar congregation died out.

Career as a Preacher.

Geeritt Roosen was promoted from a deacon to a preacher in 1660. In the first several years of his service as a lay minister, he only preached sermons. It was not until 1663 that he was ordained. From 1663 until just a few short years before his death, he preached, baptized new members, administered communion, and married congregants. Although he was by no means the only preacher in the congregation during these years, he was the most significant.

One of the key issues that Roosen confronted as a preacher was relations with the Dompelaars. In the 1660s representatives from Roosen's faction and the Dompelaars exchanged several pamphlets, which they published. In the 1660s both sides claimed to want a peaceful end to the disputes about baptism, but the acrimony only increased. Roosen himself was not directly involved as an author of these pamphlets, but he did have more to do with the Dompelaars later in his career.

Between the 1680s and the 1740s Jacob Denner was the preacher for the Dompelaars (see *Pres.*, No. 15, pages 142-143). He was charismatic and popular, and Roosen's congregation twice (1691 and 1701) discussed the possibility of inviting him to preach in their church. In 1701 they actually extended the invitation and Denner accepted. Despite the improving relations between the two groups, they never reunited.



A 17th century woodcut advertisement for Geeritt Roosen's stocking business. He was also involved in whaling, and by the time of his death, just a few months short of 100 years, he was quite wealthy.

and Altona were one of the hubs of Mennonite travel. People moved between these centres for familial, business and congregational reasons. As a deacon, Roosen would have helped Mennonite newcomers and travellers, as well as the less advantaged of his congregation.

The second reason that 1648 and 1649 were important years is that they marked the beginning of a schism among Mennonites in Hamburg and Altona. As the Mennonite population grew in the two urban centres, so too did the diversity of opinion about matters of faith. In addition to Geeritt Roosen's congregation, there were at least two other smaller and probably more socially conservative groups of

The 1660s were turbulent years in the career of Geeritt Roosen for other reasons. First, late in 1659 Quaker missionaries from England convinced the family of one of Hamburg and Altona's Mennonite preachers to convert to Quakerism. In 1660 Roosen published a pamphlet against the Quakers. To make matters more complicated, the 1660s were a period of heightened conflict among Mennonites in the Netherlands. A disagreement (known popularly as the "War of the Lambs") between factions of one of Amsterdam's leading churches led in 1664 to a major schism which divided Mennonite congregations throughout the Netherlands and Germany.

Geeritt Roosen had many personal connections with members of the more conservative faction in the Netherlands, and he helped insure that his congregation sided with this group, which after 1664 became known as the Zonists. One of the key beliefs of Zonist congregations was their emphasis on confessions of faith as tools for defining and maintaining Mennonite orthodoxy. The Hamburg and Altona congregation under Geeritt Roosen's leadership remained allied informally with the Dutch Zonists until 1706, when the northern German congregation joined the Zonist Society, a network of allied Dutch congregations. The Hamburg-Altona congregation remained a key member of this Society throughout the eighteenth century.

Under Roosen's leadership congregational government became increasingly formalized. Membership in the Zonist Society is one example of this. Another is a more regular system of congregational record keeping. From 1656 until about 1699 Roosen was the congregation's main record keeper, making notes about baptisms, marriages, births, deaths, and sometimes also meetings. However, it wasn't until 1698, near the end of his career, that meetings of the congregational council were recorded regularly in a protocol book.

Furthermore, before the end of the seventeenth century there were no recorded rules for the conduct of congregational business. 1697 and 1705 were the first times that rules guiding the selection of preachers, the gathering of meetings, and other important congregational affairs were written down in a form that has survived. Roosen played a leading role in these developments.

Geeritt Roosen was incredibly active as a minister. He travelled several times (1660, 1665, 1670 and 1675) to congregations in the Netherlands and once went to visit Mennonite settlements around Danzig (Gdansk) in 1676. He also put a great deal of effort into preaching. Dozens upon dozens of his sermons survive in his own handwriting. He also wrote pamphlets on a wide variety of topics, ranging from religious subjects (baptism, predestination and the nature of Christ), to ethical issues (nonresistance, greed and conduct in marriage), to new cultural trends (the wearing of wigs, and the use of beautiful but impractical tile ovens for heating), to history and politics. Many of these pamphlets and sermons are preserved in Hamburg's State Archives.

Death and Legacy.

In 1711 a large procession of mourners gathered to celebrate the life of Geeritt Roosen. Roosen had died that year, just a few months short of his one-hundredth birthday. He had served his congregation since 1649, first as a deacon and then as a preacher. In that time he had not only contributed significantly to the development of Mennonite life in northern Germany, but he had also won friends from other confessional backgrounds.

The funeral procession of 193 pairs was almost certainly larger than Roosen's congregation, and one of the men who read a eulogy at the funeral was a Reformed preacher from Altona, Laurentius Steversloot. In his will, Roosen granted a significant sum to the local Lutheran parish church, St. Michaelis, its guesthouse, and the local plague and discipline houses. In other words, he was a Mennonite leader who sought and received the respect of his Protestant neighbours.

Roosen's career was also celebrated by Mennonites. A section from the third volume of Hermannus Schijn and Gerardus Maatschoen's *Geschiedenis der Mennonieten* from 1745 was devoted to his memory. His major historian was his descendant Berend Carl Roosen, also a minister in the Hamburg-Altona congregation from 1844 until his death in 1905. B.C. Roosen wrote a book-length biography of his predecessor, a two-part history of his congregation, and a history of his family, together with a biography of Menno Simons.

Major Writings.

The best way for us to judge Roosen's career for ourselves is to read his two most accessible writings: *Christliches Gemütsgespräch* (Christian Spiritual Conversations) and *Unschuld und Gegen-Bericht der Evangelischen Tauff-gesinneten Christen* (Innocence and Protestation of the Evangelical Baptism-Minded Christians). Both were first published in 1702, although the first was written in 1691.

In *Unschuld und Gegen-Bericht* Roosen wrote a defence of Mennonites against Lutheran charges of heresy and sedition. In the 1690s Lutheran preachers in Hamburg had increased their traditional attacks on non-Lutherans, including Mennonites. Roosen's defence was only one of several Mennonite responses to the attacks. In addition to general historical arguments, Roosen also included information about the early history of the Anabaptists in Holstein, as well as a confession of faith plus German translations of three of Menno Simons' writings.

The *Gemütsgespräch* is the more widely available of the two published texts, as it has been republished many times and has even been translated into English. It is a catechism in the form of 148 questions and answers and its intended audience was young believers. In the late eighteenth century, German Mennonites published a text entitled *Auszug aus Gerhard Roosen* (Selections from Geeritt Roosen). The text has a similar format to the *Gemütsgespräch*, but it was almost certainly attributed wrongly to Roosen.

Conclusion.

The content of *Christliches Gemütsgespräch* and *Unschuld und Gegen-Bericht*, together with his other writings, shows Roosen to have been a moderately conservative Mennonite for his time. He was careful to emphasize what he thought were the essentials of the Mennonites' unique faith, including lay ministry, adult baptism and nonresistance.

At the same time, he impressed upon his readers time and again that Mennonites were good Protestant Christians who held orthodox views about the Trinity (in his day anti-trinitarianism was a crime in some European jurisdictions), as well as being especially obedient subjects of secular rulers. While he was tolerant of Mennonites marrying Protestants from other churches, as long as they remained loyal to their faith, he vigorously fought doctrinal deviations by leaders in his congregation. In other words, he hoped to encourage the peaceful coexistence of Mennonites and their non-Mennonite neighbours and rulers, while preserving traditional Mennonite practices and beliefs.

Further Reading.

"Altona-Hamburg Mennonite Church 1601-2001," in *Pres.*, No. 19, pages 82-83.

"Altona Mennonite Church, 1601," in *Pres.*, No. 16, page 128.

William Schroeder, "Balthasar Denner 1685-1749," in *Pres.*, No. 16, pages 127-129.

William Schroeder, "Jakob Denner 1659-1746," in *Pres.*, No. 15, pages 142-143.

N. van der Zijpp, "Roosen, Gerrit (Gerhard)," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, page 357.

Driedger, Michael, "Zuflucht und Koexistenz: 400 Jahre Mennoniten in Altona und Hamburg," book review in *Preservings*, No. 21, pages 133-134.

Selected Bibliography.

For more about Geeritt Roosen, the history of Mennonites in northern Germany, and the literature about these subjects, see the following works.

Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, January 2002. ISBN: 0-7546-0292-3.

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"Mennonites and Whaling," in *Mennonite Life*, January 1956, pages 17-18.