

FoLA NEWS

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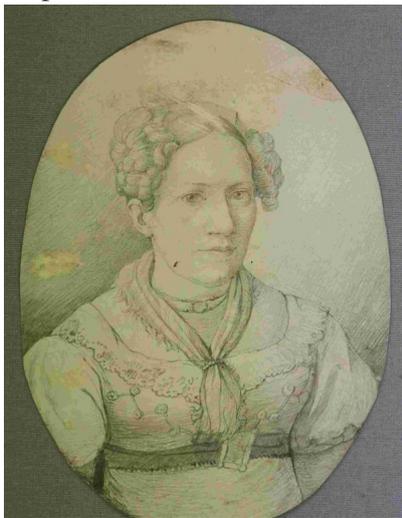
November 2009

Faces from the Shadows

(gratefully dedicated to Mrs. Friederike Christiane Koch, Hamburg)

Their names are barely remembered, although they meant so much to Pastor Fritzsche and his emigrant congregation on the *Skjöld*. It was Anna Christiane Nehrlich, née Rodatz, (1780-1863), a Hamburg widow, who gave the final 1100 Taler that Fritzsche's congregation needed to pay their passage to South Australia. By then her daughter Dorette (Dorchen) was engaged to Fritzsche, so Mrs Nehrlich decided to accompany them to their new homeland.

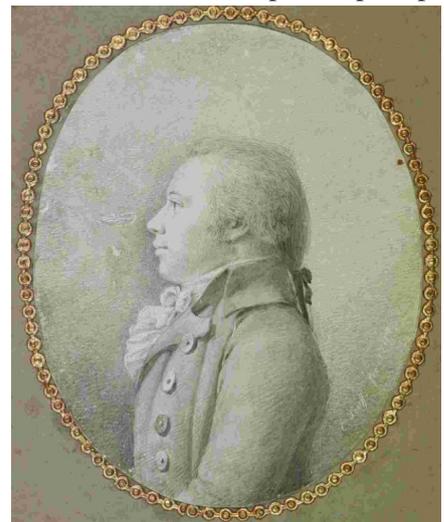
Iwan, the historian of Old Lutheran emigration, told the story of how the Nehrlichs became involved with Fritzsche, as he had read it in a manuscript (now lost) by a descendant of the family. Dorchen's father was Johann Petrus Theodor Nehrlich, a musician and composer in Moscow (1770-1816), who died in a fire there. His widow and her two daughters were now living in Hamburg, and shortly before 1840 they had moved into a larger apartment, with rooms they could sub-let, at the Deichtor, where the Oder barges carrying the Old Lutherans always docked. As a Lutheran, Mrs Nehrlich took an interest in the emigrants, took them into her vacant rooms free of charge and nursed the sick. Fritzsche made their acquaintance, and made a strong impression on Mrs Nehrlich, while a close relationship developed between Dorchen and the pastor, prompted



Anna Christiane ("Hannchen")
Nehrlich née Rodatz (1780-1863)

in part by their mutual interest in music.

In *Under the Southern Cross*, Brauer tells us that Fritzsche's people were proud that their pastor was to marry such a cultivated and accomplished lady, while she charmed everyone with her modesty, her kind heart and loving manner: during the *Skjöld* voyage which claimed so many lives, Dorette Nehrlich gave aid and comfort to many grieving mothers. Describing the small and primitive hut where Fritzsche and Dorette were married – and the wedding breakfast that



Johann Petrus Theodor Nehrlich
(1770-1816)

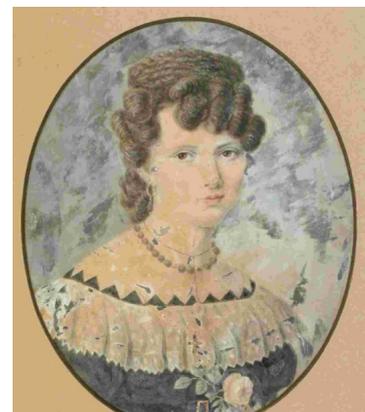
consisted of boiled potatoes – Brauer contrasts the deprivations of life in a new colony with the refined life the Nehrlichs had led in Hamburg. Life as the pastor's wife in Lobethal was not easy, with Fritzsche often absent for weeks at a time, and often virtually penniless. Then Dorette's tragically early death prompted her sister Lisinka to travel to Adelaide on the *Hermann von Beckerath* and take her mother back to Hamburg.

So their names disappeared from our history, and their faces were never recorded here – until now. Dedicated genealogist Detlef Papsdorf, introduced to FoLA members in May 2008 on account of his work on German tombstones in Australia, has struck gold in his persistent pursuit of the story of Fritzsche and his Dorette: the Nehrlich family documents in the Stade Archives.

Detlef writes of his long fascination with genealogy, and the trail which led him to Stade: "My older sister and I received the chronicle of the Papsdorf family on Easter Day 1978. Reading it was an unforgettable experience that caused lots of 'lump in the throat' emotions. To learn that Papa was wounded in 1943, and while he recovered in an army hospital the rest of his military unit was ordered to Stalingrad! None of his comrades came back, but Papa survived the madness - and a new baby was born in December 1944.

So my genealogical researches started in 1978, concentrating on our family and on our homeland Saxony. It turned out to be a 'virus' I would never be free of again. After many years of researching, during a trip to Australia in 2005/2006 I started to get interested in the early Lutheran settlement of mainly Prussians in Australia, creating a project *'German' Headstones in Australia* (www.ozcem.net). When I visited Lobethal in 2006 I was electrified to learn that Pastor Gotthard Daniel Fritzsche was born in Liebenwerda, now a pretty little town in southern Brandenburg, but part of Saxony at the time when Fritzsche was born. Church book research in and around Bad Liebenwerda has illuminated Fritzsche's genealogy - and that research has not come to an end yet. Because no-one ever had been involved in this genealogy, each new mosaic stone was a little bit of 'terra incognita'. And I have now been able to convince the local council that Fritzsche deserves the honour of having a plaque placed on his birthplace.

The basis for research on his wife 'Dorchen' née Nehrlich was to be found in Australia, but nothing else seemed to be known about her. So I put question after question into the Internet, and finally found an ancestral file Harzheim recording the connection between the Fritzsche and the Nehrlich family. So, after these rather boring beginnings, things became more and more satisfying. In one of the older publications on the Nehrlich-Rodatz families I found a note that the legacy of the former "Familienarchiv Nehrlich" is kept in the Lower Saxonian State Archives in Stade near Hamburg - reason enough to contact this institution in November 2007. In response, the archive recommended an online search of the central database izn-AIDA. After checking this database I was convinced I had made a once-in-a-century find: many details on the family, more than one thousand original letters, and some beautiful and expressive paintings, daguerreotypes, silhouettes which make the 'faceless' women of the first years of South Australia into exciting living beings. By the way:



Johanna Dorothea ("Dorchen, Dorette") Fritzsche née Nehrlich (1807-1845)

Fritzsche's mother-in-law 'Hannchen' Nehrlich, long before being the benefactor of Lobethal, supported members of a Moravian congregation in Russia financially. The name of this - again existing - congregation was Sarepta and the place name is Volgograd - formerly Stalingrad or Old-Sarepta. Do you think this story is full of co-incidences? I think the veil of history was wafting - history definitely lives, as part of our present!"

This treasure trove of letters between family members in Australia and Germany will present an image of the voyage of the *Skjöld* and the early years in Lobethal as we have never seen it before, but just as importantly, they will reveal the early years of these extraordinary women, and perhaps show what led them to sacrifice their comfortable lives in one of Europe's most affluent cities for a simple life in a new Australian village. Mrs Nehrlich, on the eve of her return to Germany, wrote to her sister Lisette: 'Oh, what will you think of my decision to renounce my peaceful Lobethal ... Fritzsche was very unhappy to see us go, he was very downcast at our departure, and that made me downcast too, that it is not possible here on earth to combine everything which is dear to us and to which our hearts are attached.'



Peter Suhr: Hamburg, Deichtor, about 1840 (barges like the "Oder barges" in front)

These priceless documents were safeguarded for many years by Mrs Friederike Christiane Koch, a descendant of the family, and deposited in Stade in recent years. We are very grateful that Mrs Koch, who has recently celebrated her 86th birthday, is favourably disposed to Detlef's exciting project and has kindly allowed us to reproduce the pictures in this article.

If you can read old German script or translate 19th century German into English, you are invited to join an international team under Detlef's leadership to transcribe and translate these priceless documents to make them available to both the German and Australian public.

Detlef Papsdorf & Lois Zweck