

The DURAND-CANTON Family: A Peek at Waldensian Life

By Ronald F. Malan

According to the parish register, Marie Durand-Canton was christened on 6 November 1695 at Rorà, a small village outside Torre Pellice, Torino, Italy. The Waldensian church (called a temple) had been destroyed there, as had been those elsewhere, so she was probably christened at home or perhaps even in the open in the older Waldensian style.

In 1718 she married Jacques Blanchot. Their granddaughter, Marie Marguerite Blanchot, married Daniel Malan; and their grandson was Jean (anglicized as John) Daniel Malan, the immigrant.

Until we began researching in the notary records, all we knew of Marie's family was that she was the daughter of Antoine Durand-Canton (born about 1668, died 1731) and Jeanne Bonnet, and that Antoine was the son of a Barthélemy. Antoine's mother was unknown.

The Durand-Cantons used a compound surname because there were so many Durands in Rorà that some years before, it had become difficult to distinguish among them. Another branch became known as the Durand-Ruets, while some remained simply Durands.

The "Canton" part referred to where the family lived, in the western quarter of Rorà, whereas the "Ruet" part referred to that branch's occupation, involving the spinning machine.

In 1706, Antoine and his family sheltered Victor Amedée II, Duke of Savoy, who was fleeing from the French troops that had invaded Savoy. The Duke had barely escaped as the French had surrounded Torino.

In gratitude, the duke left his personal cup and a silver spoon to Antoine, and granted the family the privilege of burying their dead in their own family garden. This privilege was only revoked late in the 19th century, because of health and sanitation concerns.

That was a desirable grant, for the Waldensians had experienced great sufferings about burials. When Catholics took over during the frequent periods of persecution, Waldensians were forbidden to bury their dead among any Catholics—who were using the formerly Waldensian cemetery. Records show that Waldensian "heretics" were disinterred from what had been accepted cemeteries, the remains being burned or simply scattered.

But what is truly impressive is the willingness of the Waldensians in general and of Antoine Durand-Canton and his family in particular, to hide the duke. He had persecuted them severely; it had been he who in 1685 had ordered the extermination order of 1685; by his orders, his attacking armies had killed any Waldensian who had resisted the invasion and had imprisoned all the others they could round up, herding them into prisons, castles, and dungeons in the towns on the plains. Competent historians estimate some 12,000 Waldensians perished in that extermination attempt.

During the winter, under intense pressure from the Protestant nations, the duke finally relented and ordered the survivors—fewer than 3,000 people—to perpetual exile. Without food, water, or shelter during the winter, the rest had died.

In fact, we learn from a study of the records of the exile and its survivors that Antoine's own father, Barthélemy, had been a victim of the Duke's cruelty. Among the exiles who were forced, by armed guard, to march over the Alps in February, 1686, Barthélemy had died along the way from the effects of some nine months in prison without food or water (except what a few townspeople could smuggle the prisoners under cover of darkness), or shelter.

The notary records also reveal that Antoine served as mayor of Rorà at least three times (there are gaps in the records), town councilor at least once, town auditor at least three times, and tax collector at least once (the tax money went to the duke).

And the notary records identify Antoine's wife as Jeanne Bonnet. The exile records show that she was born in 1666, the daughter of Estienne Bonnet and his wife Maria Gignous-Janavel, a daughter of the famous Captain Giosuè Janavel, whose exploits with a few dozen followers defeated the 6,000 member army of the Duke of Savoy and who, as a result, had been banished to Geneva in exchange for the safety of his people. (In 1685, that guarantee was entirely cast aside by the Duke, of course.)

The notary records also identify Barthélemy's father Gioanni (French: Jean; English: John), who appears in 45 records, serving 6 times as mayor of Rorà and 11 times as town councilor.

Being auditor was not an easy task. When in hard times families couldn't pay their taxes to the duke, the auditor had to make up the difference. One act records the adult children of one such family reimbursing Barthélemy for taxes their deceased Gioanni hadn't been able to pay years before.

In the context of that family history, it is indeed remarkable that Antoine was willing to shield the Duke from the French in 1706.

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