

The 350-year Booyens Phone Call

by

Harry Booyens



On the seawall of the Eiderstedt Peninsula of Schleswig-Holstein: flat as a pancake and very pretty (2009)

I had thought long and hard before doing this. Most people would probably say it's just plain silly. The phone is ringing on the other side...and just as I am about to hang up, a small voice finally responds rather hesitantly:

"Müller?"

"Frau Anna Müller in Ahnenforschung?" [That would be me talking.]

Carefully..."Err...ja-a!?"

"Frau Müller*, Sprechen Sie Englisch?" [*: Fictitious name]

"Ye-es. Ein leedle beet".

"Frau Müller, I am phoning you from Canada. I have followed my Ahnen from Südafrika to your district, Garding, in 1660. And now I need some help. So I looked for you."

"Souss Afrika! Kanada!?!...yoo phone me from Kanada!? You look for me!?" Frau Müller is clearly astonished.

"Ja! I have your name and I understand that you work in the Archiv in the Kirche in Garding on Wednesdays...err Mittwoch". I stumble and fall over my High School German. It has been 22 years since I last used it, and even back then it was awful.

"Das ist korrekt! I work only on Mittwoch...aber, how you know my name...how you know diss? You are in Garding, Ja?" This clearly just does not sound right to her.

"No, Frau Müller, I am speaking from Canada. I searched for many days on the Internet and I found a Zeitung article that says that, if I want to find my Ahnen on the Eiderstedt, then I must speak to Frau Anna Müller in Garding. I will read it to you". Harry's laboured German accent over here starts kicking in and I read the article for her over there in distant Germany.

"Ja-ja! Das is korrekt!" Wow! She's understanding me! So far, so good. (Keep it together, now, Harry).

"Frau Müller, mein Ahnen come from Katharinenheerd, two...er zwei...kilometer from Garding....in 1660! So I thought maybe you could help me".

"Ja! I can see Katharinenheerd srough my Fenster...errr window.. nauw. It is only drei kilometer away. Err...1660!?...das ist a very long time! But, you are in Garding, Ja!? I am seventy-five year old woman; how you know my telephone number?"

Hmm ...yes. I'll have to explain.

I start carefully at the beginning and explain as best I can in my mixture of English and 1960s High School German. Frau Müller calms down and the English and German start to work better. I explain that I have followed my Bo(o)yens ancestors from Cape Town back to Blokzijl in the Netherlands, and from there to Katharinenheerd in the Eiderstedt peninsula of the present Nord-Friesland region of Germany (Denmark in the 1660s). Then I studied Katharinenheerd and Garding for a few days on Google Earth. I now have the map clear in my mind. I found her name on the Internet as being a person active in the Church Archives in Garding, and that she could help folks trace their ancestors in those archives. The next problem has been finding her contact information. I tried Yellowbook.de and that provided me with only one person of her name in Garding, but hordes of people called Boyens within a 100km radius.

She explains that Johan/Joen Peter Boyens right outside town is in his eighties. He is a "simple farmer" with a wind generator and cannot speak a word of English. (Hmm ... probably just as well that my fax to him failed to go through.) I explain once more that I am looking for the baptism of Johan/Joen Peter Bo(o)yens in Kahatharinenheerd or in Garding in the period 1656 to 1660. I do not really need to speak to another Joen Peter Boyens born 270 years too late.

And this is when she says:

"Ja! I have six children in my family who have Boyens ahnen...ein Gross-Grossmutter. I will look in the archive and I will also ask my children if they have done any forschung."

I have clearly dialed straight into the Booyens headquarters of the planet. I had no way of knowing I was phoning distant family. That's the strange thing about genealogy. I'm enjoying this stuff, and everyone is keen to help...well, almost everyone. Some of the Germans I contacted at first sent me a price list of services along with an offer to accompany me on a ancestor-searching tour. I think I'll confine my efforts to Mrs. Müller. This business is filled with people who lie in wait like crocodiles in the dam-water; just as in the story of little Mabalel who goes to fetch water and is caught by a crocodile, leaving just a leaf floating on the water.

And this is when Mrs. Müller gets her second breath and she starts talking ever faster, as though she was about to miss Christmas. It is becoming more difficult for me to follow the Hoch-Deutsch. So I say, "err..Frau Müller...Bitte, langsam!".

And she responds with:

"Ach, ve try auf Platt: Hoe laat is die klok!!" [Plattdeutsch]

"8 uur !", I answer in Afrikaans from this side.

It appears we have found a way to bridge 350 years of language difference with her reverting to the more archaic form of German dating from the period before they adopted Hoch Deutsch in the early 1800s. In fact, Plattdeutsch is more closely related to old Saxon and was the lingua franca in earlier days in the north and west of the Germanic countries. It was also known as Niederdeutsch, Nederduits, Nederdiets or just Diets. In fact, the English word “Dutch” is derived from it.



One of the Eiderstedt Boyens businesses – this one a metalworking shop renting bicycles in Tating near Garding

The conversation is now flowing well. Frau Müller tells me the Boyens folks in their district are mostly salesmen, businessmen, and printers. She knows them all and would gladly put me in a car to meet them all if I should visit¹. It turns out the key genealogist in the nearby big town of Husum is himself a Boyens. It certainly would seem that some of this stuff is in the DNA.

This world of ours is small and perhaps 350 years are not such a long time, and one extra “o” in the name is nothing to fight about. So my distant relative Anna Müller and I talked as though to melt the telephone cable. Perhaps I may one day find out which Boyens family members died in "De Grote Manndränke" (flood) of 11-12 October 1634, when Nordstrandt Island a few kilometers away disappeared under the ocean with 6,000 souls during a thousand-year storm. The dikes keeping the ocean at bay failed.

Perhaps I should go sit quietly in a corner at the nearest Mormon Church Family History Center and “shuddup”. On the other hand, I have always believed that one can figure out anything with a bit of solid homework and two telephone calls. A year ago, using this very philosophy, I found the grave inscriptions of my great-aunt in Cradock, South Africa, within 45 minutes, resolving thereby my Myburgh ancestry. All it took was two phone calls and a friendly conversation about the potato harvest in the Gamtoos Valley... and ... obviously ... asking nicely.

¹ We would in fact visit the Eiderstedt later in 2009 and this second edition of this article contains photos taken on that visit. The first edition appeared in Afrikaans in Issue 20 of *Genesis*, October 2008; pp.9.

This time it took only one telephone call...to far northern Germany.... over 350 years. We shall have to see whether Frau Müller can help me with the Church Books. But, if she cannot, we can always try to rope in her close friends. They come from Namibia and can probably speak Afrikaans, like all Germans there!

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