

THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION
4824 East Butler Avenue
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NEWSLETTER

Greetings to all of you, and best wishes for the new year. Our association has been relatively quiet this past year, although several of our members have continued important projects related to Mennonite culture and history in the different parts of Poland, especially in the former West Prussia. Here are some highlights:

1. Cemetery Restoration in the Vistula Delta.

Many of you have seen or been involved in various aspects of the restoration of the Heubuden (Stogi) cemetery. Although our association played a central role in beginning the project, first of all getting it fenced and, through Dr. Arkadiusz Rybak and others, securing official support for establishing it as an important historical site, very soon others joined this effort. Groups from the local community helped to clear out underbrush; Dutch groups came to restore the grave markers; Germans, Dutch, Poles, North Americans and others all participated in creating what has become an attractive, dignified expression of respect for, and interest in, the Mennonite heritage in this area. In addition, a descriptive historical marker has been placed on the adjacent Catholic church. If some of you have not visited this site in the last few years, you will be pleasantly surprised when you see what the combined international and inter-confessional efforts have accomplished.

Now, with special support from Dutch Mennonites, a plan to restore the Ladekopp (Lubieszewo) cemetery is underway. Thanks to the vigorous leadership of Pastors Arno Thimm and Maarten 't Hart, and the tireless work of Margreet Stubbe, a group of Dutch volunteers went to this cemetery in summer 1998 to restore it by cleaning out underbrush, resetting grave markers and otherwise making the site attractive. They also worked with local interested persons to make sure that maintenance of the cemetery will not only keep the site presentable, but also help to build local interest in this effort, and to deepen understanding of the Mennonite contribution to this area.

Also of note is the fact that some participants in these projects, notably Margreet Stubbe, have compiled an extensive list of inscriptions on grave markers.

2. Additional Cemetery Projects Planned for 1999

In a letter dated October 1, 1998, Maarten 't Hart writes that continued cemetery restoration is planned for 1999. Under his leadership, another Dutch group is planning to go to the Vistula Delta and continue this work. This time the cemetery of the former Ellerwald Church, near Elbląg, situated at the village now called Wikrowo, is to be restored. Additional work is also planned at

cemeteries in Thörichthof (Szaleniec) and Marcushof (Marcusy)..

Most of the participants in this ongoing restoration project have come from the Aalsmeer congregation. It is remarkable indeed to see how Dutch Mennonites have become champions of building friendship and understanding with Poles, especially in the Gdansk and Vistula regions. This kind of interest is also reflected at official levels. Thus, the Consul of the Netherlands attended some of the sessions of the 1997 Symposium, held in Nowy Dwor (mentioned in the previous Newsletter). Also, in the same year, the Queen of the Netherlands visited Gdansk on the occasion of the celebration of the city's 1000-year anniversary. Today, a historical marker in the Long Market (Dwugi Targ) bears witness to this event.

3. Renewal in Montau (Maławy)

One of the Association's Board members, Pastor Peter Foth of the Hamburg congregation, once again took a group of interested persons to visit the areas where Mennonites once played a prominent role. This time, the goal was to participate in a special event in Montau (Maławy).

In May 1998, Günter Franz of Bremen, a member of the former Mennonite Church in Montau, announced that an effort to repair the church building was underway. Substantial funding was needed to repair the roof and the foundation; the stained glass windows similarly needed restoration. Those of you familiar with the church will remember that one of the stained glass windows bears the inscription: "Gestiftet: Johann Bartel, Montau." Early fund-raising efforts brought in 10,000 DM. As interest grew, this amount increased.

Since 1998 was also the 100th anniversary of the building of the church in Montau, a number of persons who had direct or family connections with this congregation decided to take part in special celebrations to be conducted in Montau. Peter Foth and Günter Franz organized a tour, and thus took a busload of participants to the commemorative events. The local Catholic priest and Pastor Foth conducted a special service, which included the unveiling of a historical marker with the inscription (in Polish and German): "Hier an der Weichsel haben vier Jahrhunderte lang bis 1945 holländische Einwanderer - Mennoniten - gelebt und gewirkt und an diesem Ort Gottesdienst gehalten." Pastor Foth based his sermon on the Hebrews passage: "For here we have no lasting city." In his report of the ceremony, he noted that the German Mennonites felt that this occasion marked a time of release, a deliberate "giving" of the church building to the present congregation by the members of the former congregation. It was a time of remembrance of the past, but also of unitedly facing the future. In this spirit of community, the pastor of the Catholic church in Ladekopp (Lubieszewo) also brought a warm greeting.

4. Footnote to the 1997 Symposium in Nowy Dwor

Readers of the Newsletter will remember that in 1997 the Association joined in supporting a symposium dealing with Mennonite life in the Vistula Delta. Bolesław Klein, chair and chief organizer of the symposium, reports that his "Club Nowy Dwor" has continued efforts to preserve evidences of Mennonite culture. Among achievements he listed in a letter to me dated November 16, 1998 are the following:

- continued development of the Nowy Dwor Museum, with its artifacts depicting Mennonite life
- increased recognition of the Mennonite heritage by local schools and school administrators
- preserving cemetery grave stones by placing them on display in a building near the Nowy Dwor Museum. According to the Klein letter, a remarkable and unusual wooden grave marker has been preserved and professionally restored.

The projected "Little Holland" settlement near Nowy Dwor has begun. The first structure is a motel, built on the banks of the Linawa, the stream a few miles west of the town. Initial capital investment, according to Klein's letter, has come from interested persons in the Netherlands.

In Memoriam *

A few weeks after returning from this trip, Günter Franz died. He was buried on October 31, 1998. Peter Foth writes that the visit to Montau Church and related events represented a "high point" in his life, and was also his farewell. He had spent a great deal of time in his later years working for mutual understanding and appreciation of Poles and Germans, especially Mennonites who once lived along the Vistula River and in its Delta. His efforts have left a lasting memorial to the triumph of love and reconciliation over alienation and enmity.

Annual dues (\$20.00) may be sent to the address at the top of this newsletter or to The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Canada R3P 0M4

Gifts may also be designated for any aspect of the continuing work of preserving evidences of the Mennonite Heritage in Poland (e.g., cemetery restoration, museum artifacts and preservation in museums in Nowy Dwor or Elbląg, literature for schools, etc.).

For the Association,



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