

THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

4824 East Butler Avenue

Fresno, California 93727

December 2001

NEWSLETTER

Warmest Christmas greetings, and blessings of this special time to all of you. Our association has completed its first decade of building understanding and appreciation between Poles and Mennonites, so perhaps it is a good time to look back as well as to gaze into the future. Exciting things have happened, and others are on the horizon.

I. CONFERENCE IN STEGNA, June 14-16, 2002

From June 14-16, 2002, a conference on Mennonite life in the Vistula Delta is being planned for the resort town, Stegna (Steegeen), on the Baltic Sea, within easy driving distance from Gdansk, Nowy Dwor (Tiegenhof) and Elblag (Elbing). The Klub Nowodworski, an organization that has emerged as a major Polish champion of better understanding of Mennonite life in the area, is acting as main facilitator of the event. Mr. Bolek Klein is chair of the organization, and is a warm and effective supporter of efforts to enhance awareness of Mennonite history and culture.

Mr. Klein has asked me to invite Americans and Canadians to participate in this series of events. One of the highlights of this time will be presentation of papers by Polish teachers who have begun to write accounts of Mennonite life in the delta, and who are using this material in their classes. In May and June, 2001, a number of us had an opportunity to hear brief reports from these teachers. The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association will be awarding **four \$250 stipends** to those who present the best accounts. A local committee, drawn from Polish universities, schools and community organizations, is evaluating the writings. Groups of participants are expected to come from the Netherlands and Germany; it is hoped that Canadians and Americans will also be able to join this event. Visits to nearby historical former centers of Mennonite life will be part of the conference.

If you are interested in attending this conference, please contact me for details.

II. TEN YEARS FOR THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

Our organization has completed its first ten years, and in that decade many changes have occurred. Ten years ago, bonds between Mennonites and Poles were few and tentative, and the Mennonite story in Poland/Prussia was largely ignored, certainly in Poland and North America. Mennonite cemeteries in Poland lay desolate and devastated; Polish media virtually never mentioned Mennonites. Four centuries of Mennonite life along the Vistula could be described as the "forgotten centuries."

Visitors to Poland in 2001 saw how remarkably the situation had changed.

A historical study tour brought about 80 Canadians and Americans to sites important to the Polish/Prussian Mennonite story. Many of you receiving this newsletter were on this or an earlier tour, and you experienced the satisfaction of establishing new friendships with those in Poland who have become custodians of our places of memory.

Some of the highlights:

- Meeting with local teachers
In the Zulawy (Werder) Museum in Nowy Dwor, Bolek Klein, founder of the museum, welcomed us and proudly showed the artifacts now on display. They are designed to portray Mennonite life in the region. Klein, together with others, had arranged to have local educators come to share some of their writing on Mennonite history. Five teachers read from their work, designed to be used in the classroom, and the local director of the Gymnasium expressed his enthusiastic support. What a complete change from the time when MPFA began its efforts!
- Government awareness and support
Government representatives from Nowy Dwor, Elblag and Tczew (Dirschau) came to express their support of efforts to build closer ties with Mennonites. The three towns have signed documents stating that they will maintain the restored Mennonite cemeteries. Also, the member from Elblag stated that the Mennonite story was now part of the historical tours offered by the town's tourist office. Ironically, the representative from Tczew asked if I would give approval to move some Mennonite grave markers from isolated, neglected places to locations where care could be provided. I encouraged such action, but stated that I had no such authority; that was clearly a matter for Polish authorities to decide.
- Tour members immediate offer to help maintain cemeteries
When Dr. Arkadiusz Rybak, retired Director of the Agricultural Experimental Station in Stare Pole (Altfelde) announced that weed control was a real problem, and funds to assist would be appreciated, tour members immediately responded. MPFA later sent a check for \$395 USD; in addition, some cash was given to Dr. Rybak as well.

In Retrospect

The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association has completed ten years of building ties between Poles and Mennonites, it is perhaps helpful to list some of the projects in which the association has engaged as it tried to build ties between Poles and Mennonites.

- International cooperation
From its beginning, MPFA has enjoyed a broad spectrum of international support and involvement. Before the organization was formally launched, it received statements

of endorsement from groups such as the Mennonite World Conference, the Mennonite Central Committee, historical societies in Germany, the Netherlands, several church organizations in Canada and the United States, persons who had lived in Poland, historians, writers and other professionals with a strong interest Mennonite sites of memory in Poland, and others. It was clear that the proposal to found the MPFA touched a broad spectrum of European and North American Mennonites.

- Historical Conferences

- (1) Symposium in Winnipeg, July 21-24, 1990

Held in conjunction with the Mennonite World Conference, this event was the first North American scholarly conference devoted to the Polish-Prussian aspect of the Mennonite story. MPFA played a role in initiating this conference.

- (2) Conference in Nowy Dwor

In 1997, on the occasion of the 1000th anniversary of the founding of Danzig/Gdansk, a historical society in Nowy Dwor sponsored a symposium on "Everyday Life of the Mennonites in Zulawy (Werder)." MPFA provided financial support; Peter Klassen read a paper. The presence of the Dutch Consul General from Gdansk underlined the historic ties between this region and the Netherlands.

- Placing Historical Markers and Restoring Cemeteries

- (1) Unveiling a plaque in the former Mennonite Church in Gdansk

On June 25, 1991, a historical study group, led by Paul Toews and Peter Klassen, unveiled a historical plaque in this church. This event enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the local congregation and involved participants from Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States.

- (2) Restoring the Stogi (Heubuden) Cemetery and others

For decades following the end of World War II, the large Heubuden cemetery was neglected and vandalized. When Peter Klassen visited it in 1980, it served as pasture for the nearby collective farm. Fortunately, Dr. Rybak was excited about the possibility of reclaiming this cemetery as a memorial to those who had lived and been buried in this area. His contacts with local authorities led to official permission to restore the cemetery.

MPFA provided about \$2500 to cover costs of fencing the grounds; restoration involved extensive work by volunteers, especially by annual restoration groups from the Netherlands. In addition, some students from a local school and from Gdansk, helped to clear out weeds and brush. The local priest and congregation have warmly welcomed this project.

(3) Additional Restoration Work

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In a related event, Peter Foth, pastor of the Hamburg Mennonite Church and a member of the MPFA Board, led a group of visitors to Heubuden in 1993. In cooperation with the local church, they placed a marker on the west wall of the church. In 1995 a similar marker was placed in the former Mennonite Church near Torun (Nieszawka); then, in 1998, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Mennonite Church in Montau (Matawy), Foth and another champion of better Polish-Mennonite relations, Guenther Franz (Bremen), together with a large accompanying group, helped to repair the structure of the church building. Again, a marker was placed in the church.

- Increased Mennonite exposure through printed materials and media coverage
 - (1) Publication in the Mennonite Quarterly Review (April 1992) of papers presented at the Winnipeg Symposium in 1990
 - (2) Publication by the Dutch of attractive brochures introducing the Mennonite Polish-Prussian story (available in Dutch, German and English). Our association provided \$700 for this project, but the work was done by Dutch participants
 - (3) Media coverage in various Polish periodicals, e.g., Rzeczpospolita (Warsaw, June 19, 1997; interview with Peter Klassen); Zulawy I Mierzeja (The Werder and its Surroundings), June 1, 2001; Gazeta Zulawska (The Werder Gazette), May 30, 2001. If some of you want copies of these articles, I can send English translations, or copies of the original.

In conclusion, thanks to those of you who have supported our association in many ways during the past decade. Through your efforts, the Mennonite Polish-Prussian story has again become part of our heritage of memory and experience. Remember, you are welcome to come to the conference in Poland, June 14-16, 2002.

For details, please contact me at one of the following:

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e-mail: peterk@csufresno.edu or

telephone: 559-255-6335

Membership fees (\$20.00 per annum) and donations for Polish projects, e.g., for cemetery maintenance, scholarships or assistance with Polish conference expenses (designate if you wish) should be sent to one of the following:

Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association, 4824 E. Butler, Fresno, California 93727, or
Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Canada R3P 0M4

Have a blessed Christmas and New Year,



Peter J. Klassen