

## THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

4824 East Butler Avenue

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### NEWSLETTER

Greetings in this year of special remembrance of the 1000th anniversary of the city of Gdansk/Danzig. During much of this spring and summer, the city has celebrated: public ceremonies, visits by dignitaries from around the world, regattas, conferences, musical and operatic events, exhibitions, etc., have kept a stream of visitors coming to this beautiful city on the Baltic.

Several events had special significance for Mennonites, and for our Association. They reflect a remarkable surge of interest in the story of a group that, until recently, was often viewed very negatively. I recall how, some 16 years ago, Mennonites who had once lived in the Delta were often simply dismissed as "fascists." That has changed dramatically.

#### **1. Conference in Nowy Dwor Gdanski**

Many of you will recall that a year ago, our Association, together with the University of Gdansk and California State University, Fresno (the two are partner universities), as well as some other organizations, were planning a joint historical-cultural conference. For a number of reasons external to the Association, that conference did not materialize, and so we decided to join with a local group, the "Klub Nowodworski," in a conference on Mennonites in the Delta. This conference was held on June 7 and 8, with participants from Poland, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands and United States.

The two-day conference examined the role of the Mennonites in shaping life in the Vistula Delta, and was held in Nowy Dwor, formerly Tiegenhof. This city is situated almost in the center of the lowlands between Gdansk and Elblag. These lowlands, known as "Werder" in German, "Zulawy" in Polish, provided a homeland for many Polish/Prussian Mennonites. Settlement began in the middle of the 16th century; a strong Mennonite presence continued until the end of World War II.

In an opening address, Dr. Roman Klim, Director of the National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, paid generous tribute to Mennonites for their central role in making the lowlands a "garden." A similar note was sounded by Boleslaw Klein, Chair of the Klub Nowodworski. A warm welcome, extended by the local mayor, again expressed appreciation for the Mennonite contribution to this region. Several other persons presented overviews of various aspects of Mennonite life. Dr. Arkadiusz Rybak, long-time member of our Association and known to many readers of this letter, demonstrated his deep appreciation for the Mennonites and their story by describing everyday life in Mennonite villages. Edward Krajewski, Baptist minister from Malbork, talked about the "Spiritual Heritage of the Mennonites," and Dr. Marianne Ullrich, former resident of the region, presented a photographic essay on the Wiehler family. Dr. Horst Gerlach, now from the

Weierhof, described the life of Hermann Wiens, a former Mennonite leader in the area, and I presented a paper on the implications of the Prussian seizure of the lowlands in the first partition of Poland, 1772.

A strong Dutch presence at the conference demonstrated that Mennonite churches in the Netherlands have become very much involved in the effort to preserve remnants of Mennonite culture. For several years, the church of Aalsmeer has sent a group to work on restoration of the Heubuden cemetery. Pastor Hart of that church explained how several groups from his church, and elsewhere, have come to repair the grave stones, and to make sure that the dignity and beauty of the cemetery are safeguarded. Pastor Arno Thimm of the Haarlem Mennonite Church also spoke about the importance of building understanding with the local Polish population and at the same time, trying to encourage interest in the Mennonite story here. Dr. Piet Visser, curator of the Mennonite Archives at the University of Amsterdam, and member of our Board of Directors, also stressed the need for continued Polish-Mennonite cooperation, and emphasized the value of joining in the effort to increase understanding of Mennonite life in the lowlands.

The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association contributed \$400 toward meeting local expenses of this conference. Mr. Klein expressed the organizing committee's deep appreciation.

News media, including newspapers and TV, carried reports of the events. The national paper, Rzeczpospolita, ran a six-column headline on page 3, with a lengthy article that commented very favorably on the Mennonite story.

## **2. Educational Efforts**

During the course of the conference, a number of discussions centered on how to strengthen awareness of Mennonite significance for the area. Dr. Edmund Kizik, member of the University of Gdansk History Faculty and member of our Board of Directors, volunteered to write materials which might be used in local schools. This is a potentially very significant step; perhaps some members of the Association would like to provide funds for printing and distributing materials, or otherwise assisting this venture.

Another refreshing sign of generosity was Pastor Arno Thimm's statement that his church would like to purchase a set of the Mennonite Encyclopedia and present it to the University of Gdansk library. I have ordered the ME and had it sent to Professor Kizik. Thank you, Haarlem church!

Several Dutch Mennonites (and others) are making careful copies of gravestone inscriptions. This may lead to an analysis of the theology reflected in these statements, and thus be a reflection of Mennonite views on death and resurrection.

## **3. Future Projects**

Surely one of the more innovative approaches to remembering the past in the proposed "Little Holland." A local architect, M. Hoffmann, has drafted plans for a community in the lowlands. He is calling it "Little Holland," and envisions a subdivision with homes, businesses, recreational

facilities, etc. If any readers of this letter are interested in getting in on the "ground floor" of a remarkably imaginative project, here is your opportunity!

Efforts are currently underway to preserve more of the Mennonite heritage. Part of this effort is to preserve some other cemeteries. Our Association has contributed \$1000 for this new initiative.

Another hope is to support and expand the museum in Nowy Dwor, where numerous artifacts already depict life in former Mennonite communities. It is worth noting that at the present time, museums in Nowy Dwor and in Elblag present important glimpses of the culture and history of the Mennonites who once lived here. You may recall that our Association has made cash contributions to the Elblag museum .

Should any of you wish to designate gifts for these projects, the Association is ready to receive and transmit such donations.

Also, your payment of the annual dues (\$20.00) would be much appreciated. Please send your response to either the address above, or to The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Canada R3P 0M4.

For the Association.

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