

# THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

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## NEWSLETTER December 2002

The year 2002 has been an eventful one for our association. The previous newsletter outlined prospective events and developments for 2002. The following summary shows that expectations were met, and sometimes exceeded.

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

The conference in Stegna (Stegen) was a remarkable event. Reports in the local press indicated that more than 100 persons attended. This included a busload of participants from Germany, led by Pastor Peter Foth, Hamburg Mennonite Church, as well as a busload from the Netherlands, led by Pastor Arno, Thimm Aalsmeer Mennonite Church, and by Albert Bolt, chair of the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Dutch Mennonite Connections in Poland.

The conference, held in the resort town of Stegna, within walking distance of the Baltic Sea, was organized by a group of interested Polish friends and officials. Bolek Klein, chair of the Klub Nowodworski and Tomek Kwoczek, head of the Gymnazium Nowy Dwór, were the chief organizers of the conference. Significantly, several mayors of local towns and villages also gave their support, as did a number of museums and other organizations. Parts of the conference and related visits to historic sites were reported on television and in newspapers. A number of participants were interviewed by Warsaw television; later we received reports about the remarkable coverage given this event.

Several research papers were presented: "Building Bridges Between Holland and the Vistula Delta, 1530s-1772," by Peter Klassen; "Mennonites in Danzig and the Werder Region, XVI-XVIII Centuries," Professor Edmund Kizik, University of Gdańsk; "Mennonites in Science and Culture in Old Danzig," by Professor Andrzej Januszajtis," Gdańsk Polytechnical University.

For those of us who have been involved in Polish-Mennonite studies for some time, it was especially rewarding to see two graduate students receive rewards for their research on themes related to the Mennonite-Polish story.

Gabriela Strug reported briefly on her study of arcaded timbered houses in the region, and Anna Marzalek on the coming of the early Mennonites and their impact on agriculture in the delta, especially with the introduction of new drainage techniques. Both received stipends from the Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association. The judging committee was chaired by Professor Kizik.

A delightful dinner in the conference center followed the formal presentation of papers and awards. Then, in the evening the priest of the local Catholic Church in Stegna, Stanisław Knapik, together with his congregation, welcomed the conference guests to a service where he spoke enthusiastically about the spiritual and historical connection that Mennonites have to this region. A local instrumental group presented a delightful concert.

Saturday, June 15, was devoted to visiting historic sites. A choir composed of school children and a local women's choir greeted the visitors at the Mennonite cemetery at Rozewo (Rosenort). This site had long been overgrown with bushes, and many of the gravestones broken or taken away. In a remarkable new development, the mayor of Nowy Dwór, Zbigniew Piorkowski, assumed responsibility for restoring the cemetery. He, together with the local priest, Leszek Wojtas, welcomed the conference participants. The choirs, each with perhaps twenty members, set a tone for warm fellowship, and made us feel like friends, not strangers.

Several other cemeteries were also visited: Niedzwiedzówka (in the former village of Bärwalde) also reflects a strong local interest. Here the owner of the land on which the cemetery is located has placed the remaining grave markers in a neat row, removed the rubble from the fire that destroyed the former church in 1990, and made a very attractive park-like setting. Here the group was welcomed by the Stegna mayor, Roman Pawlowski, and the village priest, Tomasz Bielicki.

Following these visits to cemeteries, the group continued on to Nowy Dwór for lunch. This was served in a restaurant housed in a complex formerly owned by the Stobbe family. A son of the former owner, now resident in Germany, was a member of the tour group. This was followed by a visit to the Żuławy (Werder) Museum, where a number of artifacts depict life in the Vistula-Nogat Delta. Bolek Klein has been the leader in fostering development of this record of the past.

When the group visited the Mennonite cemetery in Stogi (Heubuden), the mayor of Malbork (Marienburg), Pani Danuta Zalewska, not only enthusiastically hosted the gathering, but also urged us to use the now-empty schoolhouse to create a local museum. It was a gracious gesture, but most members felt that this was not a realistic possibility. A similar invitation was extended when the group visited the former Mennonite church in Thiensdorf (Jeziorko). That building, a former storage facility, now stands empty.

The village of Marynowy (Marienau) has one of the largest arcaded timbered houses in the delta. Here the present owner held a reception for the group, and Professor Henryk Ratajczak, University of Toruń, presented a historical analysis of similar houses in the region. He noted that, in the latter stages of the last war, this area was flooded by the German army as it tried to stop the advancing Soviet forces. As a result, many of the houses remained standing in water for approximately two years. In addition, there was uncertainty as to the political future of the region, and so little was done to preserve these historic structures. Now they have been placed under historical preservation protection, but are costly to preserve and maintain. The owners hope to offer bed-and-breakfast accommodations in the Marynowy house in the near future.

This day of visiting a variety of fascinating places ended with a delightful dinner and social evening at the conference resort. In recognition of their efforts on behalf of mutual support and understanding between Poles and Mennonites, Bolek Klein presented plaques to Foth, Thimm and Klassen.

On the following day, the group from Germany left for home; others continued visits to more historic sites, including Zwierzno (Thiergart), where the Director of Historical Preservation in Elbląg, Jerzy Domino, discussed the challenges confronting those who seek to preserve historical artifacts. A visit to Marcusy (Markushof) concluded the visits to former centers of Mennonite life.

## **OTHER ASPECTS OF THE POLISH-MENNONITE SCENE**

### **1. The Ravages of Time**

Many readers of this newsletter will recall that in 1990 the former Mennonite church of the Fürstenwerder congregation was destroyed by fire. As the conference in Stegna began, participants were informed that the oft-photographed windmill in Wikrowo, one of the last remaining in the delta, had just burned and was essentially destroyed.

### **2. Translation of *A Homeland for Strangers***

During the past year, Aleksandra Borodin, a tour guide from Warsaw who has excellent English and historical training, has translated Peter Klassen's *A Homeland for Strangers*, into Polish. Some copies have been sold, and about 200 copies have been distributed to schools in the delta.

**3. Media Reports Available**

The conference in Stegna was covered by TV and newspapers. Copies of the latter are available in Polish or in English translation. Send requests to Peter Klassen.

**4. Polish Study Tour**

There will be another tour of Mennonite historical sites, as well as selected Polish cultural centers: **May 12-21, 2003**. For details, contact Marina Unger, Conference World Tours, 4141 Yonge Street, Suite 402, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M2P 2A8  
Phone: 1-800-387-1488, ext. 324  
Email: [walterunger@ica.net](mailto:walterunger@ica.net)

Membership fees (\$20.00 per annum) and donations for Polish projects should be sent to one of the following:

Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association (address above), or  
Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Canada R3P 0M4

Shalom for the new year,

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