

THE MENNONITE-POLISH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

December 2008

Dear Members and Friends,

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of our association. It is a pleasure indeed to see how awareness of the Mennonite story has grown in Poland since 1988. In recent months our association has been involved in helping three groups become better acquainted with the history, faith, church life, role in society, and the conclusion of the Mennonite presence in a land where Mennonites lived for more than four centuries.

The past year has seen a remarkable expansion of interest in the Mennonite story in Poland. Several events and developments demonstrate that interest in this chapter of Mennonite history is becoming part of the recognized cultural landscape of this region. This was apparent in media coverage, both in newspapers and on television, as well as in a number of significant events.

Tours Celebrate Tabor College Centennial

As part of the Centennial Celebration of Tabor College, two tour groups recently explored Mennonite roots in Poland and Ukraine. The first one visited Poland from May 25-June 9; the second from June 2-9; both groups then continued on to Ukraine. Sites visited included the historic former Mennonite churches in Gdańsk, Elbląg, Maławy, Nieszawka, Wymyśle, and Nowy Kasun, as well as numerous former Mennonite villages and homes.

Over the years we have helped to place numerous markers and plaques in some of these structures. Now official markers denoting historical significance have often been added by various government agencies. When our association began this process, almost no such markers could be found. Today, strong organizations from the Netherlands, Germany, and North America share in these efforts of renewal and preservation.

Polish Involvement in Restoration and Preservation

-A Special Event in Rozgart

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Polish communities and authorities are taking pride in the Mennonite heritage in the delta as well as along the Vistula to less well-known areas. At the same time, preservation and education efforts enjoy support from international groups. This summer events in Rozgart powerfully demonstrated such broad involvement.

On June 5, 2008, one of the visiting Tabor Centennial groups participated in the rededication of the long-desolate cemetery in Rozgart. The impressive entry gate, devastated earlier, had been restored, largely through efforts led by Torsten Brockmeyer from Germany, whose grandfather was a leader in the adjacent Mennonite church,



Plaque on the restored Mennonite cemetery gate in Rozgart

and lies buried in the restored cemetery. Local authorities joined in the efforts and gained support from the European Union. Now, on June 5, visitors from Canada, Germany, United States, as well diplomats from the Netherlands and Germany joined local mayors, priests and villagers in the celebration. The Tabor Centennial group sang two songs and a considerable array of speakers commented on the significance of the occasion. The church had standing room only; afterward, villagers treated all participants to a sumptuous reception. Seldom have I seen such warmth and appreciation expressed by a Polish village to visitors from so many countries and organizations.



Tabor College group singing at dedication ceremony



Part of the festive crowd at the ceremony

Traveling Exhibition Tells Mennonite Story

Last year, an excellent Mennonite exhibition opened in the Gdańsk-Oliva National Ethnographical Museum. Following a well-attended stay here from June through September, the exhibition moved on to the Elbląg Museum, then in June 2008 to the museum in Kwidzyn (Marienwerder). Local press reports indicated a very positive public response.



A portion of the traveling exhibition

“Mennonite Story in Poland” with Tourmagination

Another large touring group (38 participants), organized by Tourmagination, studied the life and influence of Mennonites who once lived along the Vistula River from Warsaw to Gdansk. While traveling near the village of Herrenhagen (Pielica) in the delta, a member of the group suddenly said, “That’s the house where I was born!” When we stopped to see if the current occupants might welcome someone whose family had fled from here at the end of World War II, we were all delighted to see that, after the surprise of such a meeting, warm embraces demonstrated that openness and dialog can still overcome injustices and suffering that war so often brings.

This is the kind of reception that Mennonite visitors usually now receive. What a change from twenty years ago!



Angie Goertz (left) and Brigitte Ediger (right) with their new Polish friends



The “zoomie” at work!

German and Polish Youth Groups Restore Cemetery

This spring a youth group from Germany, helped by some Polish friends and led by Friedhelm Janzen, cleaned and renovated the Mennonite cemetery in Orłowskie Pole, known to most of you as Orloffelfelde. The MPFA was pleased to supply funds for purchasing a brush cutter. When we later visited the cemetery we saw that the group had done a great job. Congratulations, Friedhelm and your industrious co-workers!

A Continuing Impact on the Community Through Education

Readers of this newsletter will recall that the MPFA gave financial support to a school in Nowy Dwor, where our long-time friend, Director Tomek Kwoczek, provided strong leadership so that students might study and research the Mennonite history in the region. This summer, when one of our groups was visiting the Stutthof museum, the guide stated that she had first learned of the Mennonites while studying them in her school and reading the Polish translation of my book *Homeland for Strangers*. Numerous articles have appeared in the local papers reflecting a strong interest in Mennonite contributions to the history of this region.

A New Book on Mennonites in Poland and Prussia

Many of you are aware that I have been working on a history of Mennonite life in early modern Poland and Prussia. Johns Hopkins University Press has notified me that it will be available early in 2009. Since several of you have asked about this, I invite you to check in the appropriate place below and I will forward further information to you when it becomes available.

Church Restoration in Wymysle?

This summer, while visiting the former Mennonite village Wymysle, the local mayor told us she would like to see the church restored. As the photo at the right shows, the church is in a sad state of neglect. It is, however, one of the few preserved former churches not now being used. The MPFA is willing to make a modest financial contribution if local persons will rebuild the church. What do you think?



Tour group members visiting the Wymysle Church.

The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association, founded in 1988, is open to all who share the association's goals. Its Advisory Board has members from Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and United States. Checks, designated for the MPFA, should be made payable to, and sent to the following agencies:

In Canada:
Mennonite Heritage Centre
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4

In the United States:
Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies
1717 S. Chestnut Ave.
Fresno, CA 93702

If you wish, you may check, detach and return:

- Annual dues (\$20.00)
- Support for () cemetery maintenance () museum exhibits () student research
- Please send information about *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*

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Previous reports, including the 15th anniversary booklet, are available at calmenno.org/mpfa