

New to the Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association

Times change now just as they did in the 16th Century. We want to give you an update on our activity and leadership.

Since 1988, *the Mennonite Polish Friendship Association* has endeavored to strengthen awareness of the role Poland has played historically in the life of the Mennonite community. In the early 16th Century, Poland became a haven for Mennonites being persecuted in many parts of Europe. Policies adopted by Polish rulers as well as many local Polish authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular, offered Mennonites a land where they could live in freedom.

Since the early 1980s, some of us have had an opportunity to examine Polish archives and examine the rich sources of information regarding the sojourn of Mennonites there. The Polish people have shown themselves welcoming to those of us who have wished to see where our forefathers lived. Moreover, the Polish themselves have moved to restore and preserve places in their communities that are of historical significance to us.

Under the leadership of Peter Klassen, Alan Peters, and Paul Toews, numerous tours of this former Mennonite homeland have been conducted. Hundreds of persons, mostly from North America, have visited this land. Many participants had not been aware that Poland played such a pivotal role in offering a haven where their ancestors could find freedom of worship and new opportunities in agriculture and business.

Friends with similar backgrounds in other countries, especially the Netherlands and Germany, joined in the effort to revive the telling of the Mennonite story in Poland. Joint conferences have been held - some at a sea resort, another in the former Gdansk Mennonite Church, and others in a variety of venues related to the Mennonite story. In 2013, a conference with Polish, Dutch, and German was held in the Delta. In addition to speeches and meals at various sites of interest, this gathering of Mennonites from several countries enjoyed an event at the former Rozgart Mennonite Church. The adjacent cemetery had been renovated and a beautiful new brick gate with appropriate plaques had been installed by the German group. There was wonderful food and music - all planned and executed by our Polish hosts. Details of earlier events are available at our website.

We North American and European former residents, have left our marks in several ways. Most notably, several cemeteries were restored using funds from North America, hands-on efforts by Europeans, and the cooperation and continuing care by the Polish. We have intervened with Polish authorities who looked to our group for permission to designate ownership of former Mennonite property to present occupants. Credit for projects such as the Zuławy Museum in Nowy Dwor must go to the Polish. Similarly, collecting and preserving gravestones in a lapidarium and reconstructing a typical Mennonite home, all reflect strong Polish interest in history. Former Polish community leaders such as Bolek Klein and Arkadiusz (both deceased) have given leadership in renewing local interest.

Another aspect of the work has involved broadening Polish awareness of Mennonite contributions to the areas in which they now live. We worked with local schools by sponsoring essay contests; local teachers and administrators were been very welcoming and supportive. Often these efforts were recognized both in the local press and on television.

Now for the future of our organization:

Professors Paul Toews and Peter Klassen are now retired and have invited professors Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, from Newton, Kansas, to take up the torch and continue to build bridges of understanding and appreciation of our history in Poland. Professors Jantzen and Thiesen are uniquely prepared to take on this project and will no doubt do so in new ways. We commit the Association to their visions.

For the MPFA

Paul Toews

Peter Klassen