

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association Newsletter

Bethel
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Bethel College
Mennonite Library and Archives
300 East 27th Street
North Newton KS 67117

[http://mla.bethelks.edu
/information/mpsa.php](http://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa.php)
mla@bethelks.edu

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The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the fourth issue of the *Mennonite-Polish Studies Association Newsletter*. Our association exists to encourage the study and awareness of Mennonites in Poland and the Vistula valley, to foster understanding between Mennonites and Poles, and to inform an English-reading audience of activities related to the Polish/Prussian Mennonite story, such as museum exhibits and research projects.

To support our work via annual membership and to be added to our contact list, you may send annual dues of \$25 (checks payable to Bethel College) to

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2018 Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour

We still have plenty of room on the 2019 tour (June 14-26) and we'd be happy to have you join us. Please see the prospectus:

<<https://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa/Menno.Exper.Poland.History%20Tour%202019.pdf>> or contact us directly <mjantzen@bethelks.edu>.

From June 29 to July 11, 2018, 37 tour members and 2 tour leaders participated in the first "Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour." Although this was the "first" such tour, it is the inheritor of a tradition of previous tours led by



Tour group in Gdańsk

Peter J. Klassen and Alan Peters from Fresno, California.

The tour also included a view beyond a strictly Mennonite horizon. We started in Warsaw, seeing the Old Town, Warsaw Ghetto and Warsaw Uprising sites, and numerous memorials of Frederic Chopin.

The next day began the Mennonite portion of the tour, with visits at the former locations of Deutsch Wymysle and Deutsch Kazun, and the very impressive new open-air museum near the former Mennonite village of Obernessau. This newly-opened "Olender Ethnographic Park" includes 6 houses and farm buildings in the Dutch/Olender style used by Mennonites and others, brought to the museum location from the surrounding area and carefully restored. The following day continued down the Vistula river, including several stops related to the former Przechowka Mennonite congregation where many of the tour participants had ancestors. We arrived in Gdansk at the end of the day.



Olender Ethnographic Park

The next 4 days were taken up with sights in Gdansk, Elblag, the Baltic Sea coast, and the Vistula delta. We saw several former Mennonite church buildings, including the one in Gdansk that is still used by an active Pentecostal congregation. We visited many villages and cemeteries connecting to former Mennonite presence in the delta. A sobering stop was at the former Nazi concentration camp Stutthof near Gdansk.

A highlight of our time in the Vistula Delta area was a communion service on July 4 in the Heubuden cemetery led by Pastor Brett Klingenberg of First Mennonite Church, Beatrice. As is well-known, this congregation was the most adamant in its rejection of military service in the German army in the late 1860s and 1870s. Scores of families left here to settle east of Newton,



Tour group in the former Mennonite church in Gdańsk

Kansas, and west of Beatrice, Nebraska, starting in 1876. Less well-known is the fact that Elder Gerhard Penner brought the Heubuden communion set with him to Beatrice when he left. In his view, no Mennonite could serve in the military and all those who remained had agreed that Mennonites could at least serve as non-combatants. Since there were no Mennonites left in Prussia by his definition, there would be no sense in leaving the communion set behind. That set is now housed at Kauffman Museum in North Newton, Kansas, where a portion of it is part of the permanent display. Our group had several members from Beatrice or with that background, so in a sense communion was returned to Heubuden.

The tour then went back to Warsaw by bus. Several members departed from here, but the majority continued south to the old Polish capital of Krakow, with its many outstanding historical and architectural treasures. Other stops in the Krakow region included the Auschwitz



Menno Simons marker erected by the Catholic parish at Montau that now uses the former Mennonite church building (Dale and Margo Schrag)

concentration camp and the Wieliczka salt mines. The return drive to Warsaw included a stop at Czestochowa, famous for its role in Polish national memory and location of the "Black Madonna." Tour members departed the next day from Warsaw for home and other travels.

Mennonites and the Holocaust Conference

The "Mennonites and the Holocaust" history conference held at Bethel College March 16-17, 2018, was a landmark event. There were 20 presenters, from Germany, the US, Canada, Ukraine, and the Netherlands. Over 200 audience members were registered, a remarkable number for an academic history conference. The initial impetus and partial funding came from Mennonite Church USA, and the conference was organized by Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen of Bethel College and John Sharp of Hesston College.



Large attendance at Doris Bergen keynote address (Vada Snider/Bethel College)

Topics presented included pre-war theological and academic discussions in Germany and the Netherlands, Mennonite actions during war-time especially in the Soviet Union under German occupation, and post-war reflections and memories of the events, including literary reflections. Doris Bergen, a well-known Canadian Holocaust scholar and of Mennonite background, was the keynote speaker, on "Neighbors, Killers, Enablers, Witnesses: The Many Roles of Mennonites in the Holocaust."

From the perspective of Polish Mennonite studies, three presentations were of particular interest. Colin Neufeldt from Concordia University of Edmonton, Alberta, spoke on Mennonite participation in the persecution of Jews in Poland, "Jewish-Mennonite Relations in Gabin, Plock County, Masovian Voivodeship, Poland, prior to and during World War II." Joachim Wieler from the Fachhochschule Erfurt in Germany spoke on "Family Responses to the 1930s and 40s in West Prussia" (published in *Mennonite Life*, <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-72/article/family-responses-to-the-1930s-and-1940s-in-west-pr/>). Steve Schroeder of the University of the Fraser Valley spoke on "Selective Memory: Danziger Mennonite Reflections on the Nazi Era, 1945-1950."

A book publication of conference presentations is currently being prepared.

Cornelius Warkentin and Cornelius Regier

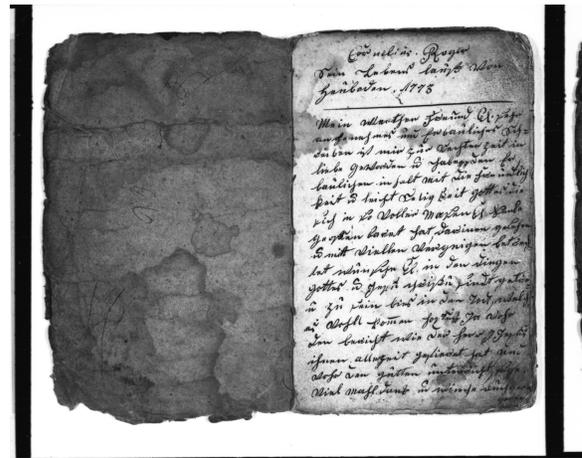
The German counterpart to the Mennonite-Polish Studies Association is the Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen (MAP). One special feature of our tour this summer will be meeting on three occasions with a tour group they organized. We will share two worship services in former Mennonite church buildings in Gdansk and Elbing and we will meet with them for the rededication of the tombstone of Elder Cornelius Warkentin in the Rosenort cemetery. His tombstone had been knocked over and broken, MAP has paid for its restoration. Cornelius Warkentin is linked in Mennonite history, with another Cornelius, Elder Regier of the Heubuden congregation. The two travelled together in 1795 to the new Mennonite settlement of Chortitza, today in the Ukraine, in order to reestablish church life for the Flemish settlers there. Regier died before the mission was completed, so he ordained Warkentin as Elder to complete the job. Warkentin returned to Prussia where the congregation affirmed his appointment as Elder. He led the Rosenort congregation until his death in 1809. The inscription on his grave marker notes his importance to congregations in both Prussia

and Russia, so its rededication provides an opportunity for us to note the historical influence of both men.

Personal information about Vistula Delta Mennonites of this time period, beyond basic names and dates, is quite rare. Cornelius Regier, however, left a brief autobiographical account written in 1773. The original no longer exists, but it was published in 1883 in a volume of devotional writings put together by southwest German Mennonites,¹ and at least 2 early handwritten copies exist. One such copy came down through the generations of a Buhler family now in Saskatchewan. Another copy was microfilmed by the Mennonite Library and Archives in 1964,² when it was noted “Manuscript belongs to father of John Dyck, Winnipeg, Manitoba.” It indicates it was copied in December 1838 by a Johan Klaassen in Neuosterwick. The current location of this copy is unknown.

The Buhler copy was made by a Johann Buhler in 1840, and an English translation of it by Rev. Abram Buhler was published in the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* in 2013 (issue #2). The photos published with the translation, compared with the MLA microfilm, show that the Buhler copy does not match the layout of the Klaassen/Dyck copy, although the text matches. The translator indicates the original document was addressed to his ancestor Abraham Buhler, a minister of the Rosenort congregation 1753-1791, although the text itself simply addresses “My dear friend” without giving a name.

We thank the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* for permission to reprint this translation.



First page of the Dick/Klaassen copy of the Cornelius Regier autobiography

My valued friend Abraham Buhler!

Your loving, very pleasant and encouraging letter has arrived at the right time. In its uplifting contents I have seen with great pleasure and observed the friendliness and love of God which in great measure is evident in your soul. I wish for you that, concerning the things of God and Jesus Christ, you may be faithful unto death, which I truly trust.

Yes, for your account of how the Lord Jesus has at all times led you, and for the good teaching, I say many thanks and I hope to come as far in the ways of the Lord as you have. However with me it is still at the beginning; but I hope that the love of Jesus will not depart from following and enlightening me, since he is the true light that came into this world to enlighten all mankind (John 1:9), which is my wish, prayer and desire.

It has been my desire to write you of the leading of my soul from my youth and to reveal my unworthy condition to you. I declare that I have been led to do so. The reason that I have procrastinated so long is partly due to many troubles and hindrances, but the greatest is the unworthiness I feel. Please interpret this all in love. O Lord, let this all be done to your glory.

When as a boy my parents started me in school, I was wild and knew how to take advantage of situations and behave thoughtlessly in front of the other students. After this had gone on a while and my conscience bothered me, our loving God won my love and revealed his saving grace to me.

¹Jakob Ellenberger, *Bilder aus dem Pilgerleben: Gesammelt in der Mennoniten-Gemeinde*, vol. 3 (Friedelsheim: Ellenberger, 1883), 5-14.

²Mennonite Library and Archives microfilm MF MSS 42.

With his great friendship and love, he revealed to me that all my worldly friends and deeds were vanity and I had the feeling I must die and woe unto me if I did not accept God's grace, and similar thoughts.

These thoughts kept knocking at my heart's door, even though I tried to ignore them. But our loving God kept on until I couldn't stop them and I had to believe it was the truth. Once I was convinced, my desire was to love Jesus and be like him.

Since my parents lived in Rosenort, it so happened that one Sunday I went to church with them in Rosenort and that Uncle [Ohm] Abraham Buhler preached from the words of Jeremiah 14: 7-9: "O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many. We have sinned against thee." etc.

Out of these words he presented a very sharp repentance message and this was the first sermon I had listened to with my heart and it was not without fruit. At that time I was approximately 13 or 14 years old [ca. 1756] and from that time on I had a desire and love for God's word and I especially wanted to hear Abraham Buhler preach and I wouldn't let a Sunday go by without hearing him.

His words echoed so deep in my heart that I wrote pages full of my thoughts and these were not without effect upon my soul; with God's help it became a driving force in my life. The trivial friends who once gave me pleasure were now bitterness to my soul and when I saw them coming, I would hide in the bake-house in the garden. There I would fill my time in prayer and sing in my loneliness.

Although I was not without doubts that God would hear my prayers, and was still besieged with temptations, yet I had a sweet pleasure with my God, for this was the first love where God blessed me with his kiss of peace and through this revealed his friendship; and I continued in this way for a while.

While I was feeding the cattle one winter's day I determined to read through the Bible. As I was reading in the books of the kings of Israel and Judah, I rejoiced when reading about the wise

kings and when I read about a wicked king, I was saddened, just as it also happened with your people.

I finally determined to be baptized and join the church. After my baptism I thought to myself, now you will have to serve the Lord with more zeal. But I fell into depression and instead of becoming more active for God, I became lukewarm and forgot my first love. I again started to keep company with my old friends from whom I had parted. I had the reputation of a good man but I fell so low that I still haven't forgotten my downfall and often sigh with David: O Lord, remember not the sins of my youth.

In 1764, I was married in our Heubuden church and since a minister was needed, it pleased our loving God to have me and my brother Peter Regier elected to serve God's word. This brought with it doubts, especially when considering my unworthiness. After three weeks I presented my first message from the words that Jesus preached in Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe the gospel."

For the gift of being able to memorize, with which our loving God blessed me, I thank him, but my speaking wasn't with the true Spirit's power. I well knew the way to Jesus, and knew also how to present this way so a poor soul can find grace, but I, myself, was slack in beseeching the Lord in prayer. I was hanging onto both sides, for I had the reputation of having many talents and famed for my sermons, so I was satisfied.

Some members of the Tiegenhof church had lost their love for Jesus and this affected some of our members who then came to me for advice. This awoke in me a new stirring so that I again searched for Jesus but not without fear and anxiety until I felt that Jesus would offer me grace; but then even this hope fell away because I had left the first love. During this time of alternating between thunderstorms and sunshine, in 1769 I was encouraged to entrust my sermons and myself wholly to God and not write them out but speak the words that the Lord Jesus would give me at that hour. This advice seemed good but I lacked faith and confidence in Jesus and couldn't

carry it through. It happened that a certain G.W. told me of his experience. He had also felt the spirit tell him to preach the words that Jesus provided at the moment. He had doubted but finally tried it, relying on God's grace, which then had assisted him.

This was a new demand on my heart: won't you also trust Jesus who can help you in small things as well as great things? So it happened as we approached Christmas and it was my turn to preach, that I experienced a soft inner urge to trust Jesus: he will supply the words you should speak. Yet, this caused a debate in my soul until the day came. Yes, the first day I took a written message based on Luke 2:1-14, which I had used previously. In the afternoon I determined to use a different text the next day but when I came home I had a guest who hindered my resolve, which saddened me, and he also stayed the night.

With this lonely feeling I could not gain victory in prayer and supplication from Jesus; the hope I had enjoyed sank within me and I decided to keep on as before. But when I awoke on the second holiday [day after Christmas], I again was convicted to fully trust Jesus and in response to his word throw out the net. So I resolved to speak on Luke 2:15-20 about the shepherds' zeal to find and worship Jesus. But as I prepared to speak I was still in doubt. In spite of my doubt I went ahead and thought: now you will see what our loving God will do with you. For the opening, I chose the words of the dying Jacob: Lord I wait on your salvation. My intention was to start with Jacob's words and speak as much as the Lord would give me. As I began to preach I felt joy, and when I turned to the text, I was confident that the words to speak would be given to me, that Jesus would grant me success.

On the third day of Christmas, I chose a different text where I again had victory, but after Jesus had brought my unworthy self thus far, Satan sought to rob me and fill me with pride. There now arose in me such proud thoughts: look, now you are someone! Grace such as this God only imparts sparingly and now you are among those who experience special favor. Thoughts like these and others plagued me much and the judgment of

those who spoke of this as a wonderful thing until I became fearful of losing God's grace. I besought my Jesus in humility not to let me fall into this snare but to always keep me humble and small; then I felt his help to rid me of this horrible pride. In this way, the dear Saviour has helped me, so that to this hour, I can in faith trust and rely on him to speak whatever his love demands.

In 1770, it pleased our loving God to gather to himself my father-in-law [Gerhard von Bergen], who had served our conference as *Ältester* for almost 30 years. This caused me no small anxiety, as I wondered whether this position might fall on me, for which I felt much too small and unworthy. But that summer I was elected *Ältester*. How I felt I can hardly describe, as I was only 27 years old. I fell into depression and lost all courage and trust in Jesus and I was tossed about like a ship in a violent storm with no anchor.

When I returned home I went into my little room, fell on my knees, and prayed to Jesus for his grace. But it seemed the only answer I got was: You are far too great a sinner; this office is for your eternal damnation. Otherwise, you might have received forgiveness for your sins, but with this position you will be lost and there is no mercy for you. While these thoughts were so sharp in my conscience, I was determined to go to the *Ältester* who had led the election, namely Dirk Thiessen, and refuse to accept the role. However, after reaching this conclusion, I felt in my heart as if someone was saying to me: wait a while and ponder this through.

With these thoughts I refrained from resigning; besides, the words of Paul in 1st Timothy 3:2-4 rang in my heart: "A bishop then must be blameless." etc. I also remembered the verdict the angel gave to the church at Sardis: you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

So I lived for a time without hope and comfort and had little or no reason to believe that God would be merciful and forgive my sins. Yes, all the comfort which the Lord had granted, that I should have grace, was now completely gone. When I considered what an example I should be and how faultless, then all my courage sank and I thought that if I didn't have this heavy responsibility I

could at least be saved, but not now.

But in God's word I found: As I live saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live (Ezekiel 33:11). Then I thought, I want and God wants all sinners to repent; so I must accept this and say: Dear God, if you don't want the death of sinners, but rather that we poor sinners repent and live for you, then you, dear God, do this to me and make me blessed. I do want your blessing so much, my God. You know my heart and condition better than I can say. If I can't obtain salvation in my position, then please release me from my bishopric. Do with me what you please, my Saviour. I give you my soul, body, and life; make me your own.

This gave me some comfort and having entrusted myself into his care I asked him to mould me to his will. More comfort came to me from Zechariah chapter 3, the account where the high priest Joshua had filthy clothes and the angel told him to remove them and he was cleansed from his sins. Then festive clothes were put on him. I prayed my Jesus to forgive my sins for his love's sake and clothe me with his righteousness, that I might become more like him, which is still my daily desire and prayer.

Oh, if only man would in true knowledge, zeal, faithfulness, and love earnestly seek to become clothed with Jesus Christ; to bind and wed himself with joy and true faith with Jesus in judgment and eternity, just as I have understood from your writing that you are clothed therewith and have joy in your peace with God.

So often when the dark clouds gather and the dark days hover over my soul, I say: I come in misery and pain. O Lord, acknowledge my misery and distress and forgive all my sins, which are ever before me.

I have to confess that very often I could not claim joy and peace with God in my soul but I thank my God that I can withstand the tempter through the grace of Jesus.

When I in danger pray and sing,
Then will my heart rejoicing ring;
Your Spirit freely tells me this
will be a foretaste of heaven's bliss.

With this I strengthened my belief and in my soul rejoiced that I lived in Jesus' grace and comforted myself that as long as I lived in this tabernacle, his grace was sufficient for my soul.

This is my daily prayer, desire, and supplication: that I might be ever faithful. Oh, my Lord Jesus, bless me herewith and make me faithful; may we always continue in prayer to God in the name of Jesus that he will make us true and steadfast.

Prayer is necessary at all times; yes, may he enlighten us that we will do what is right in all things and learn to have compassion with our weak neighbor and through our prayers, example, and counsel, help him. That we might learn to receive the weak in his weakness and not confuse his faith but point him to Jesus. Yes, may we from the depth of our heart desire to lead the wandering soul to the good shepherd who will gladly receive him.

I very humbly ask you to interpret my insignificant writing in love. The reason I haven't written sooner was due to my feeling unworthy, but since you so openly wrote of your life, my heartfelt love demands it of me. I hope that you will at an opportune time honour me with a letter.

After greeting you in the name of Jesus, I want to entrust you into his care and remain your friend and brother, Cornelius Reger.

Alt Münsterbergerfeldt, February 11, 1773

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