

# Mennonite-Polish Studies Association Newsletter

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Bethel College  
Mennonite Library and Archives  
300 East 27<sup>th</sup> Street  
North Newton KS 67117

<http://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa.php>  
mla@bethelks.edu

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## The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the fifth 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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## Prussian Mennonite cheese is now being produced near Newton, Kansas

Jason Schmidt, the owner of Grazing Plains Farm in rural Whitewater, recently started producing and selling Tilsit Cheese, proudly labeled as "Mennonite Cheese from East Prussia." And indeed it is! The story began with King Frederick William I of Prussia, who had hoped in the early



Tilsit cheese advertisement in the Nowy Dwór museum in Poland

1700s to lure persecuted Swiss Mennonites to his territory of Ducal Prussia, where the population had been decimated by plague and the land was thinly settled in any case. The Swiss, however, preferred Penn's woods in British North America and Frederick William had to settle instead for Mennonites from Poland's Vistula River valley. In 1713 they settled near Tilsit, now called Sovetsk and located in the Kaliningrad district of Russia on the border to Lithuania. Within a decade the "Mennonite cheese" they produced came to dominate the major market of the entire duchy located in Königsberg, replacing imported cheese and saving both the state and customers money. Unfortunately for cheese production, a revival among the Mennoites in 1717 led some Lutherans to join their congregation, eventually marrying into the group. The King's military recruiters, however, refused to consider these converts as real Mennonites and dragged some of them all the way to Berlin to the king. He proclaimed in



disgust he could not abide such a bunch of lowly worms in his kingdom and ordered them all expelled, so back to Poland they went until a new king, Frederick II, came to the throne in 1740 and they were allowed to return and resume their cheese production. Especially by the nineteenth century other industrial cheese production companies had taken over making and promoting Tilsiter cheese, but Mennonite dairy farmers were undoubtedly supplying milk to produce this cheese in this area until the end of World War II. In December 2018 at the Bethel College Math alumni breakfast of all places, talk turned to Mennonite cheese. Miriam Goertzen-Regier was talking to the group about her work as a cheesemaker for Grazing Plains Farm and Mark Jantzen helped her connect to this Mennonite cheese history. YouTube videos on how to make Tilsit Cheese did the rest along with a lot of trial and error and hard work on Miriam's part. Tilsit cheese is now for sale in Newton at Prairie Market and Deli, 601 N. Main Street, as well as other venues in the area, so be sure to support this local revival of Prussian cheese culture. It is historically delicious!

## 2019 Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour

From June 14-25, 2019, thirty-four tour members led by Mark Jantzen, John D. Thiesen, and Richard Thiessen participated in the "Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour."

We started in Warsaw, seeing the Old Town, Warsaw Ghetto and Warsaw Uprising sites, and numerous memorials of Frederic Chopin.



2019 tour group in Warsaw

The next day began the Mennonite portion of the tour, with visits at the former locations of Deutsch Wymysle and Deutsch Kazun, and the impressive open-air museum at the former Mennonite village of Obernessau, near the city of Toruń. This recently-opened "Olender Ethnographic Park" includes six 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. It also includes the former Mennonite cemetery of Obernessau.

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 Gdańsk at the end of the day.

The next four days were taken up with sights in Gdańsk, Elbląg, the Baltic Sea coast, and the Vistula delta. We saw several former Mennonite church buildings, including the one in Gdańsk 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 Gdańsk.

A special feature of this year's tour was several interactions with a German Mennonite group making a similar Polish tour under the auspices of the Mennonitische Arbeitskreis Polen. We attended worship services organized by them at the former Mennonite church buildings in Gdańsk and Elbląg (where tour member Weldon Martens preached) and had supper with the group at a restored Mennonite house in the former village of Petershagen. At the former Mennonite cemetery of Rosenort, the German group had arranged for the restoration of the tombstone of Cornelius Warkentin (who travelled to Russia in 1795 to help establish church organization in the new Chortitza colony there) and held a dedication service there.

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 Kraków region included the Auschwitz concentration camp and the Wieliczka salt mines.

The return drive to Warsaw included a stop at Częstochowa, 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.

The tour will take place again July 10-22, 2020. The 2020 tour is already sold out.

### Reflections on the Church Service in Gdansk on June 19, 2019

*by Horst Krüger, retired social worker and pastor of the Berlin Mennonite Church*

When Johann Peter Wiebe asked me if I would do the meditation for a short chapel service in the former Mennonite church in Gdańsk, I agreed immediately. He suggested that I could use the reading of the day from the German lectionary known as the *Losungen* or pick a biblical text related to our travels, but finally the choice was to be mine. I quickly thought of Peter fishing and in

particular this woodcutting by Herbert Seidel that is placed in front of the pulpit in our Berlin Mennonite church.

Some of us have been here in the Danzig Mennonite church earlier on other trips. Now that I was standing behind the pulpit and saw all the



people gathered, I got a strange feeling. I stood quietly while the gathered congregation was still visiting with gusto. I thought suddenly, who all has stood at this pulpit and tried to preach the Word of God, to interpret it? Prominent and highly respected names came to mind, Hermann Mannhardt, Erich Göttner, and Carl Harder. Many of the preachers here also preached in the Berlin congregation before the war. Suddenly I had an unusual feeling that was created by this building itself. One could sense everything that had happened, been thought, formed, begun, and attempted here by people with God's help and blessing. The congregation became quiet and I became calm. Some tension remained but I also felt myself being carried by the past and the present together. In the woodcut we see how a fisherman is pulling in the net and at the same time is being held by Jesus, who is himself part of the ship. This image has become part of my life, this is what I attempt to communicate when I preach.

### "Remember the Rock From Which You Were Hewn" - Isaiah 51:1

*by Weldon Martens*

I am honored to give the meditation today (June 20, 2019). I am pastor at Grace Hill Mennonite church, which is five miles or eight kilometers from Elbing, Kansas in the United States. Where we sit today in Elbing, Poland is over 5,000 miles

or 8,000 kilometers from Elbing, Kansas. My great-great-great grandparents were at home along the Vistula River Delta - Martens, Friesen, Goertzen and many other common names present on the tour. They are on my genealogy roster. I am learning much. I have much to remember.

My meditation today calls for remembering. It is based upon Isaiah 51:1, "Remember the rock from which you were hewn." The setting for Isaiah 51 is the return of Jews from seventy years of exile in Babylon. The command to remember is not new nor is it first nature. In part, to remember is a venture of genealogy and geography.

Certainly Americans are well known for not knowing genealogy and geography:

Genealogy? One third of Americans cannot name all four of their grandparents. In 1992 I visited Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. I recall visiting with several youth who, commenting on their ancestors, said, "We can name our ancestors for 300-400 years back. After that it gets a little fuzzy." That is remembering. We should all be that fuzzy.

Geography? One in four American high school seniors cannot locate Canada on a map. Given a blank map students were asked to label the provinces. One student labeled Manitoba as Minnesota. Perhaps Canada should build a wall.

But remembering is more than genealogy and geography. To remember is a spiritual task. It has long been the principal task to remember God. Remember God who was graciously present with ancestors like Martens, Friesen, and Goertzen who lived, labored, and worshipped in years and generations before us.

In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, the Israelites paused on the east side of the Jordan River about to enter a land full of promise and peril. The text looks back 1,300 years:

*When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham (1,300 years earlier), to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and*

*olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care (KJV - beware) that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

The task of remembering the gracious LORD is also expressed in Psalm 90:1,

*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or thou formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.*

To remember God who has been our dwelling place in all generations helps us in two ways:

1. We are reminded to not become too cozy with here and now. To remember the rock from which we were hewn is a powerful antidote to any contemporary path that dulls the faith. It is a practice of critical distance from our context.

2. We are reminded to not restrict our living to the present. We are cautioned against the bias of only here and only now. The temptation to completely scuttle the past and pretend that only the present has any pertinent claim upon the church is arrogant and foolish. The well of history is deep and rewarding. It is a living source of inspiration, education, and correction.

A playful representation of here and now is the 2013 Oxford English Dictionary Word of the Year - "selfie." The photographs we take of ourselves with our smart phones. Selfies have become so prolific and hazardous in the United States that the US Forest Service now issues a warning against taking selfies with bears. On our tours may we enjoy our selfies and be safe.

To remember God and our past is a reminder that our lives are not about us. This is a great Biblical principal. It's our lives but it's not about us. The key to real maturity and joy is serving others. Our baptismal task is to live beyond ourselves in Jesus Christ.

For the heritage of this land, the inspiration of people, places, and stories of generations past, and the richness of our gathering in Elbing, may we

give thanks to God for this rock from which we have been hewn. And the rock from which we were hewn points to only one eternal rock and that is the only foundation that is laid which is Jesus Christ.

May God be worshipped and praised forever and ever. Amen.

### Address on the Occasion of Rededicating Cornelius Warkentin's Tombstone

by Johann Peter Wiebe, president of Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen (Mennonite Working Group on Poland)

Honored Mayor, Honored Pastor, dear directors of the Club Nowodworski, and dear friends from Poland, North America, Switzerland, Netherlands, France, and Germany.

After several years of reflection and planning today we are returning the tomb and memorial stone of Elder Cornelius Warkentin who died in 1809 to its former location. Is there really any point to remembering a preacher and elder who lived 250 years ago? Cornelius Warkentin was an outstanding person in his time. He was born in 1750 when this territory was Polish. He lived in difficult times for Mennonites as this area became Prussian following the partitions of Poland. As a shepherd of his congregation he worked to maintain the privileges that Mennonites had been granted by Polish kings. The Prussian kings especially had no understanding for the Mennonite principle of nonresistance and their rejection of military service that followed from it. Repeated new restrictions had to be clarified. These talks often dragged on for months and took Warkentin to Königsberg and Berlin. Seldom were the elders very successful. Prussian law made it impossible for Mennonites to buy additional land and farms since the Prussian state always wanted to link land ownership with liability for military service. In one ruling from March 2, 1799, King Frederick William III wrote to the Mennonites,

As long as you find fulfilling the duty to defend the state that is connected to the ownership of such real estate as incompatible with your religion, you will

only be granted limited tolerance in accord with the existing legal restrictions.

Heinrich Donner, elder of the Orlofffelder congregation wrote in his congregational chronicle about an additional ruling from the Prussian government in that year. This directive labeled the Mennonites as a religious sect that



Warkentin tombstone, front

could not be trusted. Thus all births, deaths, and marriages had to be registered with a Protestant pastor.

In these difficult circumstances, Cornelius Warkentin did not see much of a future for Mennonites in Prussia and supported their migration to Russia. During the course of the nineteenth century the Prussian government succeeded in requiring military service for all. Mennonites were allowed to serve as noncombatants, but they had to join the army. These new conditions allowed the Mennonites to find social acceptance and following the establishment of the German Empire in 1871 they identified more and more with the goals of this state. They even changed the way they viewed

their own history. With the founding of the German Empire the acquisition of this territory by Prussia was increasingly seen as a positive development. Those Mennonites who emigrated to Russia or North America because of these developments maintained a more critical view of Prussian policies.



Warkentin tombstone, back

Considering the circumstances of Cornelius Warkentin's life allows us to have broader view of the connections. This can help different groups of Mennonites to understand each other better and also opens an important window to understanding Polish and Mennonite relations. Cornelius Warkentin was a bridge builder. He worked to overcome the Flemish/Frisian divide among Mennonites. He was the first Flemish preacher to preach in the Frisian congregation of Orlofffelder. In order to settle conflicts in the new Mennonite colonies in Russia he and Elder Cornelius Regier from Heubuden were sent to Russia. Shortly after their arrival there Elder Cornelius Regier died. Cornelius Warkentin skillfully reestablished peace among the colonists after being ordained as an elder by Regier shortly

before he died. Thus the new settlement was set on a development path that was blessed. Mennonites from Russia see him as one of the great Prussian elders.

Peter M. Friesen characterizes Cornelius Warkentin in his book *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, "He was an impressive and attractive personality. He wrote, spoke, officiated, and acted before high and low alike as a man of splendid general and theological education. Not only his fellow believers, but also Catholic and Lutheran clergymen, imperial Russian colonial officials, governors, and important personalities alike treated him with reverential love. His sojourn in the Chortitza colonies was one uninterrupted Pentecostal celebration for those orphaned settlers."

It is indeed worthwhile to remember this outstanding personality with the restoration of this stone. May he be an example to us to be peacemakers and to respect those who think and believe differently.



Rosenort cemetery

### Rosenort Graveyard Devotional

by Richard Thiessen, Executive Director of the Mennonite Heritage Museum, Abbotsford, British Columbia

In Scripture we often read that the pastor is like a shepherd. In Acts 20:28 we read: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." In I Peter 5, Peter commands

the elders to shepherd the flock of God that is among them. The English word "pastor" comes from the Latin word "pastor," which means "shepherd." Shepherding is basic to the Biblical understanding of what it means to lead a congregation.

This afternoon we are honouring the memory of Elder Cornelius Warkentin, Elder of the Rosenort Mennonite Church, a church which stood for many years near where we are gathered this afternoon. Elder Warkentin was a true shepherd to his flock, not only here in what was once West Prussia, but even to the flock scattered far to the east in South Russia.

In 1788, approximately 228 Mennonite families from this community and other West Prussian communities migrated to South Russia and established the Chortitza Mennonite settlement in 1789. As these families were preparing to leave, several of the church Elders gathered together to try to determine how the churches could provide ministers for these people. Elder Peter Epp wrote: "I am concerned that none of the ministers will decide to go along as shepherd for these poor sheep." In the end, only those who did not own land were permitted to emigrate, and as a result, no ministers accompanied the group. Instead, those who immigrated to South Russia chose their leaders after they arrived in Dubrovno, where they gathered over the winter and waited for spring to arrive.

Unfortunately the first elder that they had chosen in 1790, Bernhard Penner, died at the young age of 35 in 1791. His successor, Johann Wiebe, was only twenty-five years old. Perhaps they thought that they needed to select a young man who would at least live for a few years! Spiritual unity in the fledgling church was difficult to achieve, and in many ways, the settlers in South Russia were like sheep without a true shepherd.

The scattered sheep looked back to the leadership in West Prussia and cried for help. In the fall of 1793, two men from Chortitza returned to West Prussia and appealed to the leaders for help. The churches responded by sending Elder Cornelius Regier of Heubuden and Minister

Cornelius Warkentin of Rosenort to provide strong leadership and pastoral care to the settlers in Chortitza, hundreds of kilometers away. The two departed on March 14, 1794, and arrived in the Chortitza settlement on April 18, five weeks later. Unfortunately, Regier became ill shortly after his arrival in Chortitza, and on his deathbed he ordained Cornelius Warkentin to the office of Elder. And so it was left up to the newly ordained Cornelius Warkentin to shepherd the flock, and that he did.

Elder Warkentin officiated at communion services, baptism services, and organized church elections. In the Frisian congregation at Kronsweide, no baptism or communion services had been held for five years! Warkentin served the Mennonites in the Chortitza settlement for close to three months, from April 18 until July 10. Warkentin wrote that on that day, "Even though I had long since said farewell to many people it was still difficult to tear myself away from so many friends. . . . When I returned to my lodging, the carriage stood ready surrounded by a mass of people. It would be tedious to describe all the farewell scenes. I pushed my way through the crowd, called a hearty farewell to everyone and was on my way."

Warkentin returned to his home congregation, where he was formally ordained by his congregation and where he served for fifteen years, passing away in 1809. Warkentin's legacy is that of a true shepherd to his flock, not only here in what was once Rosenort, but to the scattered flock in the young Chortitza Mennonite settlement. I and many here this afternoon descend from those first settlers who made their way from West and East Prussia to Chortitza in the late 1780s. It was our ancestors who were so thankful to Cornelius Warkentin for the leadership he provided in those three months in 1794, and who surrounded his carriage and tearfully waved good-bye as he returned home to his flock here in Rosenort.

We thank the Lord our God for Cornelius Warkentin, a shepherd to his flock.

### Johann Donner Tombstone

Our tour group in 2018 noted the survival of a tombstone of another prominent Vistula Mennonite leader of the early nineteenth century, Johann Donner (1771-1830), in the Orlofferfelde cemetery. He was elder of the Orlofferfelde Mennonite congregation (Frisian) from 1805-1830, succeeding his father Heinrich Donner. Both father and son were leaders among Vistula Delta Mennonites beyond their own congregation. Johann went several times to Berlin to negotiate with the Prussian government about Mennonite matters. Both are also known for writing several long chronicles of congregational historical information, which have shaped how the Vistula Delta Mennonite story has been told up to the present.

There is currently an initiative to repair and restore the Donner tombstone, so it may be the case that the 2020 Mennonite Experience in Poland history tour will be able to visit the restored stone in the Orlofferfelde cemetery.

