

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association Newsletter

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The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the sixth 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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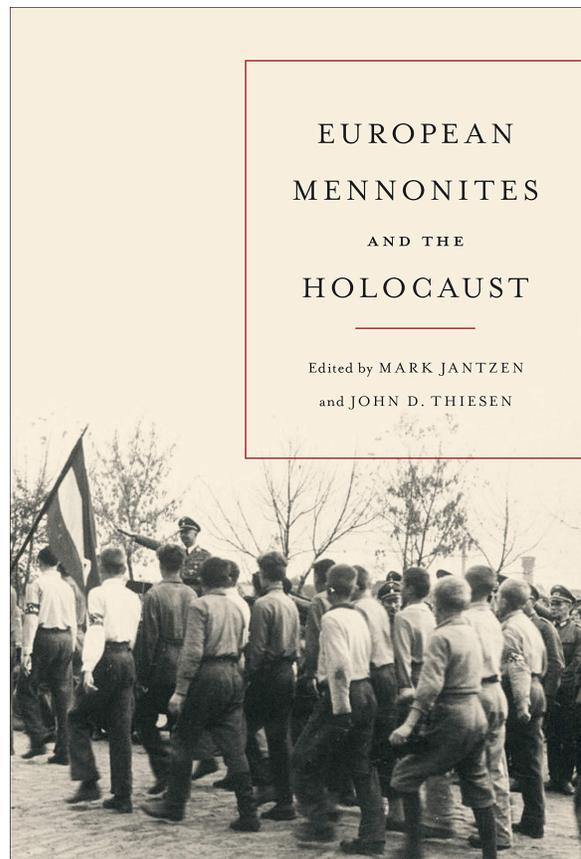
You may donate online at <https://www.bethelks.edu/gift>. Choose "Other" in the Designation box and write in Mennonite Polish Studies Association.

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New book: European Mennonites and the Holocaust

A book resulting from the 2018 "Mennonites and the Holocaust" conference at Bethel College has just been published by University of Toronto Press. It is published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and is volume 1 in the new Transnational Mennonite Studies book series.

During the Second World War, Mennonites in



the Netherlands, Germany, occupied Poland, and Ukraine lived in communities with Jews and close to various Nazi camps and killing sites. As a result of this proximity, Mennonites were neighbours to and witnessed the destruction of European Jews. In some cases they were beneficiaries or even enablers of the Holocaust. Much of this history was forgotten after the war, as Mennonites sought to rebuild or find new homes as refugees. The result was a myth of Mennonite innocence and ignorance that connected their own suffering during the 1930s and 1940s with earlier centuries of persecution and marginalization.

European Mennonites and the Holocaust identifies a significant number of Mennonite perpetrators, along with a smaller number of Mennonites who helped Jews survive, examining the context in which they acted. In some cases, theology led them to accept or reject Nazi ideals. In others, Mennonites chose a closer embrace of German identity as a strategy to improve their standing with Germans or for material benefit.

A powerful and unflinching examination of a difficult history, *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* uncovers a more complete picture of Mennonite life in these years, underscoring actions that were not always innocent.

The book can be ordered from Amazon or University of Toronto Press, <https://utorontopress.com/us/european-mennonites-and-the-holocaust-2>.

No Tour in 2020

Our Poland Mennonite tour for summer 2020, which would have been our 3rd annual, was cancelled due to covid19. We are still planning a summer 2021 tour for July 9-17 (see the prospectus on our web site,

<https://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa/Mennon.Exper.Poland.History%20Tour%202021%20rev%20Jan%202021.pdf>), but those plans could change as the covid situation evolves. But you can certainly join us in 2022!

Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen

The Dutch group that works on Mennonite history in Poland, Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen, celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary on April 28, 2019, in the Mennonite church in Aalsmeer with a gathering of about 65 people. They no longer organized trips to Poland, but were meeting together several times a year until the novel coronavirus put a halt to activities for now. Their 2020 newsletter reprinted in Dutch our article last year about Tilsit cheese now being produced in Newton by Jason Schmidt's Grazing Plains Farm.

Tiegenhof video

In September this year, Klub Nowodworski, the organization of local history enthusiasts in Nowi Dwor Gdanski/Tiegenhof, released a video featuring the city's 450-year history. You can watch the video, entitled *Tajemnice Miasta or Secrets of the City*, here on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/zA2EqECoke>. It is thirty-three minutes long and narrated in Polish by Lukasz Kepski, vice-president of the group. To watch it with English subtitles, first make sure subtitles/closed captioning is turned on by clicking on the CC icon at the bottom of the YouTube movie frame if necessary. Then click on the settings icon, which looks like a little gear. Next click on the subtitles/cc option, which will be labeled as Polish. That pulls up additional options. Click on auto-translate, then scroll down to English and click on that. The translation is automated and thus not always entirely clear but still pretty good. Note that Zulawy is Polish for Vistula Delta and, like other place names, not translated.

Mennonites in the German Democratic Republic

The Mennonite settlement in the Vistula Delta came to an end at the close of World War II as most Mennonites fled the approaching Soviet

army or were evicted afterward by the new authorities. The largest group settled in West Germany, some migrated to Canada or South America. Hundreds, however, found themselves in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany, territory that in 1949 became the German Democratic Republic or East Germany. Mennonites historically had little presence in this area outside of some who had settled in Berlin starting in the late nineteenth century. The history of these Prussian refugees is the focus of a new project by Bernhard Thiessen, a retired Mennonite pastor in Germany. For those of you who read German, you can find out more about their history under Communist rule at

<https://mennoniten-ddr.de>.

The Banking House Loitz from Stettin and the Settlement of Mennonites in the Tiegenhof District

by Johann Peter Wiebe, President of the German Mennonite Working Group

Translated by Mark Jantzen from the 2019 issue of the Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen's Rundbrief.

The History of the Banking House Loitz

The earliest large-scale capitalist companies developed already at the end of the Middle Ages. The Fugger family of Augsburg is the best-known example. Jakob Fugger was one of the richest men of the early sixteenth century. Even today his former banking house is active in the form of various foundations.

A similar enterprise existed to the north, in this case the Loitz family from Greifswald. Their base was in Stettin. Their residence, the Loitz Hof, a Renaissance-style castle built in the sixteenth century, was at the foot of the castle of the Pomeranian Dukes and was restored after World War II.

Hans Loitz I, born in 1370 in Greifswald, the son of Nicolaus Loitz, obtained the right of citizenship in Stettin in 1433. Members of his family had studied at various European universities, including Bologna, and occupied a variety of important social positions. In Stettin he

was a merchant of the Hanseatic League. Working with a number of partners, he was active in the herring trade, the most lucrative Hanseatic market.

His son Michael, born in 1444 in Stettin, died August 8, 1494, married a wealthy merchant's widow who owned a lot of property in the city, including the lot where the Loitz Hof was later built. He expanded involvement in the herring trade, became a city council member in 1473, and in 1484 the mayor. His only son, Hans Loitz II, birth year unknown, died 1539, elevated the house to its greatest heights.

He was elected leader of the seagoing merchants (*Altermann des Seglerhauses*), joined the city council in 1509, and in 1529 became the mayor of Stettin. In 1497 he married Anna Glieneke, the daughter of Hermann Glieneke, the mayor of Neubrandenburg, they were a well-respected family. Significant family land holdings increased the Loitz family wealth, providing for a broader scope of economic activities. He started trade in Holland, invested in herring fishing permits, and fish processing operations in Falsterbro, southern Sweden, and Dragør, Denmark.

Duke Bogislav of Pomerania in 1497 went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, accompanied by Hans Loitz and the Danzig merchant and City Council member Reinhold Feldstedt among others. The two became friends, leading to the founding of a Loitz business branch in Danzig. The families were connected via two marriages. The sons Michael Loitz II in 1529 and Simon Loitz in 1539 married the daughters Cordula and Christine Feldstedt. Reinhold Feldstedt threw the most ostentatious wedding Danzig had ever seen. In 1529 Michael was escorted to his wedding by sixty horsemen dressed in scarlet.

Reinhold Feldstedt, the two-times father-in-law of Michael and Simon Loitz, was a member of one of Danzig's most influential families. His father Rudolf Feldstedt in 1455 became a leading judge, in 1458 a City Council member, and licensed long-distance Hansa merchant. During the Thirteen-Years War (1454-1466) fought by the king of Poland and the Prussian cities against the Teutonic Knights, he sold cloth to the Polish king,

who could not pay the bill. The king therefore in 1472 mortgaged the village of Schönsee and the ferry at Schöneberg to Rudolf so that the income would apply to the debt. Later additional villages in the Vistula delta were turned over to help pay off the debt. Son Reinhold continued these transactions, so that by the time of his death in 1535 he was administrator of the villages of Schönberg, Schönsee, Ladekopp, Orloff, Tiede, Tiegenhagen, and Petershagen. After his death, these mortgage properties were inherited by the Loitz brothers.

Under the brothers' leadership the Danzig branch of the Loitz business grew via personal and social connections with the wealthy Feldstetts. Trade routes into Poland were expanded. The original Loitz business in Stettin also expanded. Hans Loitz II had not picked Danzig by chance. He had a long-term plan to establish a monopoly on the salt trade in the north and east of Europe. Danzig was the main distribution center for salt coming from France where it was extracted from the Atlantic by an evaporation process. He married his daughter to the most important owner of the salt pans production facilities in Kolberg on the Baltic coast.

His son Stephan managed to gain some rights to the Lüneberg salt pans after paying a lot of money. This was the most important salt production site in east central Europe. He gained ownership of additional salt pans through marriage. Finally, the Loitzes bought stakes in salt mining operations in Galicia and Wieliczka near Krakow.

Another important and profitable branch of the family business involved the grain trade. Unlike the salt trade, where rights and permits had to be purchased from kings or other reigning nobility, the grain trade was negotiated with noble owners of large estates. The Loitzes offered a full-service shop, taking on transportation from the estate, storage, shipment, and all financial details, including investing the proceeds for the noble families.

Forest goods including wood, potash, and tar were another business venture for the Loitz family. Thanks to their extensive financial

dealings with the Polish kings, they were given the rights to all royal forestry business in Lithuania.

Thus, the banking and merchant house Loitz rose to become a superpower among early capitalistic enterprises. In addition to transactions involving salt, grain, herring, and wood, all necessary auxiliary markets were covered such as livestock and cloth. They also earned money on the wars of the day. They could deliver everything an army needed, down to the beer for the grunts. For a time, they were involved in copper mining in Transylvania and Sweden. Likely they were also invested in lead mining in England. For a spell, they managed to get a monopoly from the Danish king on sulfur transport and sales from Iceland. Alongside all this merchandise they also ran a loan and money exchange business for wealthy landowners, nobility, reigning families, electors, dukes, and even kings. For the Elector of Brandenburg in Berlin and the Polish royal court they were court purveyors supplying every wish, including such exotic requests as shipping a lion to the Polish court.

Their European-wide business interests were reflected in the number and location of their regional offices. The most important of these were in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Copenhagen, Kalmar (Sweden), Hamburg, Lübeck, Breslau, Leipzig, Prague, Frankfurt am Main, Krakow, and Lyon. The financial dealings with the reigning noble families produced massive profits over the years. They were the foundation for gaining mining rights, obtaining monopolies, but also in buying or taking control of landed estates. The Loitzes functioned as court bankers for Brandenburg, Poland, and Pomerania. Other princes in northeast Europe, such as the Dukes of Mecklenburg, Duke Albrecht of Prussia, and the Archbishop of Riga, had numerous connections with them. Deals with the Abbot of Oliva and the prior of the monastery in Karthaus brought monastic land under their control. Given their financial muscle and extensive organization of their trade area, the Loitz family can be called the Fuggers of the north.

Then came catastrophe. It started with disagreements with the Danish king, who now

demanded a toll from every Loitz ship sailing through his waters. Most of their loans to reigning families ended the same way. The princes did not want to meet their obligations once the small initial loans had grown to mountains of debt. They instead begged off by accusing the Loitzes of having deceived them. They should be happy to get off without being punished for such crimes. The Loitzes were owed money by the Danish king and the heir to the Elector of Brandenburg refused to pay most of his loan back. Instead, he issued an edict accusing them of the most terrible and dishonorable crimes. Duke Albrecht of Prussia also refused to repay most of his loan. Those properties given to provide income in lieu of payment were now taken back without compensation. The worst blow came from the Polish kings. The Loitzes had loaned King Sigismund II several hundred thousand Thalers for a war against Russia. After the death of this last king from the Jagellion dynasty Polish kings were elected. For a short time, Henry de Valois was King of Poland, but he left to become Henry III, King of France. Next Stephan Batory, a prince from Transylvania, was elected. Neither was interested in paying back Sigismund II's debts. In addition, the Loitzes had arranged for 100,000 Thalers from the Pomeranian nobility to be loaned to the Polish court. This amount had to be written off. The officials claimed the money was never registered as state income and must have been a personal loan to Sigismund II so that later kings were not responsible to pay it back.

Now the creditors demanded their money back. The result was a tangle of conflict, lawsuits, and acts of violence. The prosperity and order achieved in the good years were now lost. Many of the ancient noble families lost their estates and sank into poverty. The Loitzes, of course, were seen as utter disgraces. Today we might not think they had much blame to bear. They took part in the largest financial transactions of their day in the hope of turning a profit and did so successfully for years.

The Settlement of the Mennonites in the Tiegenhof District

Rudolf Feldstett delivered cloth for Polish soldiers to the Polish king during the Thirteen-Years War. The bill could not be paid and so the king mortgaged a portion of his land in the Vistula delta that was dedicated to providing income for the royal court, starting with the estate of Schönsee and the ferry at Schönberg. Additional deals were paid for up to 1535 by additional villages. Son Reinhold Feldstett administered the villages of Schöneberg, Schönsee, Ladekopp, Orloff, Tiede, Tiegenhagen, and Petershagen until his death in 1535. Following his death, these mortgaged properties were inherited by the Loitz brothers.

The territory was in shambles as a result of wars and breaks in the dikes. In 1440 nineteen cities and fifty-three nobles meeting in Marienwerder founded a Prussian Confederation, an alliance against violence and injustice aimed at the arbitrary rule of the Teutonic Knights. As leader they elected the king of Poland. The resulting war between these two sides lasted from 1454 to 1466 and devastated the area. There were few battles, but both sides sent out plundering expeditions, causing extreme suffering for the population. Dikes and pumping installations could not be maintained. Some dikes were sabotaged. Long-term extensive flooding resulted. Low-lying land that had been reclaimed earlier was now lost. Later another war between the knights and the king again ravaged the area. From December 1519 to April 1521 the young Grand Master Albrecht von Brandenburg-Ansbach fought his uncle, King Sigismund II. Following the war Albrecht had to swear fealty to the king and then in 1525 he secularized what was left of the knights' territory into a duchy.

The land along the Vistula deteriorated even more, in 1520 and 1543 there were major dike breaks. There was neither money nor local specialists who could undertake repairs. Land that had been won under the knights' earlier efforts was reclaimed by the sea.

The three delta areas of the Vistula were the most productive land in Poland. The yields of grain were higher than anywhere else. In the second Peace of Torun the city of Danzig was given the Danzig or Stüblau delta, west of the Vistula. The Elbing lowlands were given to the city of Elbing. The greater delta and the lesser delta lands in the middle were dedicated to supplying income to the royal court (*Täfelgüter*).



Additional loans to the Polish kings expanded the area the Loitzes controlled under mortgages. Tiegenhagen and Petershagen were added. All of these villages were on the border to land that was below sea level and were therefore particularly susceptible to flooding. The latter two villages were right on the dikes of the Tiege River, north of the town of Tiegendorf, founded later. They were all poor villages, with their fields registered as “water acres,” that is hardly arable. The mortgaged land extended to the north to Tiegendorf on the Elbing delta. To the west the Vistula provided the boundary line, to the east the lagoon. All the property was of little use or income initially. Two independent territories had been carved out, the Scharpau belonging since

1530 to Danzig and the Bärwalde Estates, mortgaged since 1569 to Reinhold von Krockow, son-in-law of Michael Loitz.

Beginning in 1547 Mennonites had been working successfully in the Danzig delta to drain and cultivate that land. The government of Danzig, however, did not particularly care for them. Wherever possible Mennonites were restricted and kept out of the city. But to develop and cultivate the Danzig delta experts from the Netherlands were necessary and recruited, their Mennonite faith did not matter then. Their success was considerable. The value of the land grew tenfold in a short time, resulting in a commensurate increase of income for the city.

Michael Loitz, a City Council member in Danzig, certainly was aware of these developments. In 1548 he resigned from the council and moved his family out to the countryside along the Tiege River. At the site of the future town of Tiegendorf he first built a model estate. Locals called it the “New Farm,” later the name of Tiegendorf (Farm on the Tiege) replaced it. The current Polish name, Nowy Dwor, is a throwback to the first name, being a direct translation of New Farm (*Neuhof*).

It seems 1550 saw the first attempts at cultivate land in the Dutch way with the establishment of polders. The Chronicle of the Mennonite congregation Orloffersfelde, however, names 1562 as the year the Loitzes recruited Dutch people to use windmills, drainage ditches, and dikes to turn the swamps into farmland.

The mortgage villages were all already established during the time of the knights, based on the city law code of Culm. Tiegendorf, north of Tiegendorf, was the central location and perhaps where Dutch settlement started for the entire area. Later the first fire insurance compact was established in this village and a Mennonite church building was built here. The first settlement contracts with the Dutch have not been preserved. The earliest extant rental contracts date to 1578 with Hans von Loitz, the son of Michael Loitz, who had meanwhile been knighted by the Polish king. In exchange for their development work, the renters were released from taxes. The contract ran

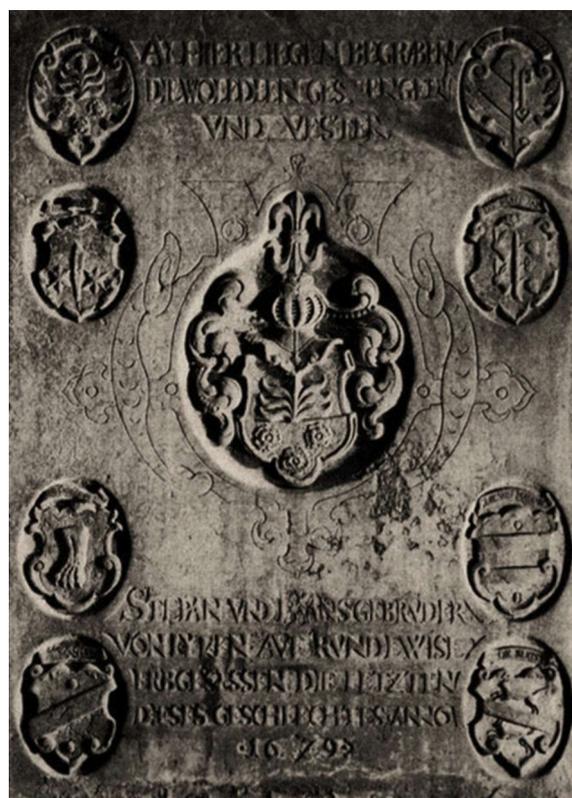
thirty years. Annual rent amounted to 52 Gulden and 13 hens per *Hufe* [about 41 acres]. Settlers were also free from any serf labor, work on the Vistula dikes, and quartering troops. Eventually additional villages were founded as land was cleared. Virtually all of the names of settlers in the contracts point to Dutch Mennonite immigrants.

Hans von Loitz and his wife from the Baysen family in 1569 were given lifelong rights to the area in exchange for a loan of 40,000 Thaler. He started building his residential castle along the Tiege. The Tiegenhof coat of arms even today has three towers in memory of this castle. Following the collapse of the banking and trading house of the Loitzes almost all of their property was lost, but the control of the Tiegenhof area remained theirs for a few more years, but only with great effort. Hans von Loitz died in 1579, done in, no doubt, in part by worry and stress over the fate of the family business. Colonel Ernst von Weyer, a relative of Loitz and a confidant of the Polish King Batory, inherited the Loitz claim to Tiegenhof and finished construction of the castle. He cancelled the contracts with the Mennonites and had new ones arranged that paid him more.

Two sons of the Stettin branch of the Loitz family appeared later in the area. No longer raised or trained as merchants, after studying at universities in Wittenberg and Heidelberg they settled into the noble lifestyle on their estate Rundewiese. In 1629 as the last of their line they were buried in the cathedral in Marienwerder. Their tombstone is there still.

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Loitz grave marker

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