

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association NEWSLETTER

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January 2022

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the seventh 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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No Tours in 2020 or 2021

Our Poland Mennonite tours for summer 2020 and 2021 were cancelled due to covid19. We are still planning a July 2022 tour, but it is already full, with a waiting list. Plans could change as the covid situation evolves, but you can certainly join us in 2023!



John D. Thiesen viewing the Donner tombstone in 2019

Johann Donner Tombstone

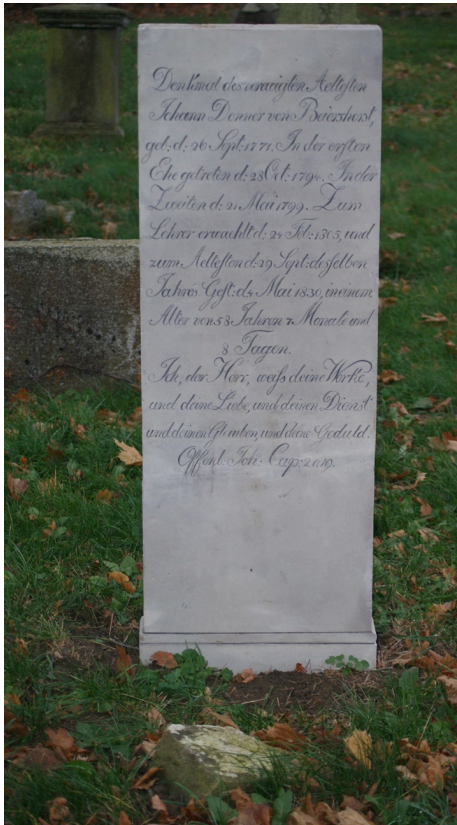
As we noted in our 2020 newsletter, our tour group in 2018 found the broken tombstone of prominent Vistula Mennonite leader of the early nineteenth century, Johann Donner (1771-1830), in the Orloffelfelde cemetery. He was elder of the Orloffelfelde Mennonite congregation (Frisian) from 1805-1830, succeeding 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.

Klub Nowodworski in Nowy Dwór Gdańsk (Tiegenhof) did all the work to arrange for this tombstone to be restored and returned to the cemetery. The Mennonite Polish Studies Association supported this effort financially. The 2022 Mennonite Experience in Poland tour will visit this newest restored piece of Mennonite history in the Vistula Delta.

Front of tombstone:

Memorial to departed Elder Johann Donner of Beiershorst, born Sept. 26, 1771. Entered into his first marriage Oct. 28, 1794, the second May 21, 1799. Elected preacher Feb. 24, 1805, and elder Sept. 29 the same year. Died May 4, 1830, at the age of 58 years, 7 months, and 8 days.



Restored front of stone

I, the Lord, know your deeds, your love and your service, and your faith and perseverance. Rev. 2:19.

Back of tombstone:

After heavy vineyard labor and testing more than once

this loyal shepherd has entered the dawn of a new life.

God's voice called to him: Come home to blessed rest,

You were one of my devoted, I grant you joy in heaven.

This comforts us in hours of melancholy sorrow

For each will feel times of bitter suffering
The Lord's counsel is good, He knows our every deed

After suffering He will lead us to blessed joy.



Restored back of stone

Two new tri-lingual Mennonite history resources out of Poland

Klub Nowodworski has been busy on two other projects related to Mennonite history as well. Their Vice-President, Łukasz Kępski, has teamed up with Michał Targowski from the University of Toruń and Wojciech Marchlewski to create a website in Polish, German, and English entitled "Mennonites in Poland: Common Heritage," <https://www.mennoniciwpolsce.pl/en/>. The website is designed to be viewed by scrolling through the sections sequentially or by clicking on the headings that can be accessed under the banner. The main sections are history, values, material culture, and remembrance. The history section

notes the beginnings of the Mennonites in the Netherlands and their emigration from there to Poland, along with an explanation of why Poland was an attractive destination for Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. The origins of the settlements are organized by three geographic regions, the Vistula Delta, the Vistula Valley, and the Mazovia area west of Warsaw. The values section highlights faith, work, and solidarity or mutual aid. Material culture covers houses and farms, furniture, and church buildings. The remembrance section at the end highlights the ways in which Polish people, many of them refugees themselves from further east after World War II, started to care for the memories of these geographic locations, especially after the end of Communism. This story is little known in North America and is a special interest of the Mennonite Polish Studies Association, so it is gratifying to have these important activities documented in English here.

A second website links to the izi travel platform, [here](https://izi.travel/en/d2d7-mennonici-w-polsce-wspolne-dziedzictwo/pl?fbclid=IwAR1mCaChH5k9AosxUQKt00KDKtADOMhYxtZtALA_idKRXkL919ATOEUWzGQ)^{*}. It also appears under the label of “Mennonites in Poland: Common Heritage.” An audio tour of Mennonite history sites throughout the region can be downloaded via a QR code or explored on the website where one can listen to the audio, read the text, and see the photos associated with each of 29 sites. This even has one entry for the Mennonite community of Brenkenhofswalde in what was eastern Brandenburg but is now western Poland.

^{*}https://izi.travel/en/d2d7-mennonici-w-polsce-wspolne-dziedzictwo/pl?fbclid=IwAR1mCaChH5k9AosxUQKt00KDKtADOMhYxtZtALA_idKRXkL919ATOEUWzGQ

Schönsee church door

In September 2021, a rare Vistula Mennonite artifact arrived back in its home region, the door and lintel of the Schönsee/Sosnówka Mennonite church. The church building in the village of Schönsee was located on the south side of the Vistula River between Swiecie and Grudziadz. The early history of the congregation is very

poorly documented but probably goes back to the late 16th century. The congregation which built the building belonged to the Frisian side of the long-standing Flemish-Frisian division among Dutch and Vistula Mennonites. There was also a small Flemish congregation at Schönsee and a much larger Flemish congregation across the river to the southwest at Przechówko.



Lintel with inscription in 1978. Part of the inscription was damaged by the placement of a cross-beam sometime in the past.



Map showing cemetery (which still exists) and church building

The Frisian congregation built a church and school building in 1618, which was remodeled after 155 years, in 1773. It was known as the “alte Schule” - “old school” - which phrase can be seen on the lintel. The congregation continued to use the building for another 172 years, until 1945 when it was dissolved with the end of World War 2. The building had been in use for a total of 327 years. After 1945, the building was unused and decaying, and was torn down sometime after 1978. A local person

apparently rescued the door and lintel at the time the building was razed.



Church building in the 1930s

In the 1990s the door and lintel were offered for sale in the Netherlands, apparently an illegal export. There was little local interest in Poland at the time for this kind of historical artifact and apparently the seller hoped for a market among Dutch Mennonites. Arno Thimm, at that time pastor of the Mennonite church in Haarlem and himself a native of the Vistula Delta, purchased the door and lintel and they remained in Haarlem for the next several years.



Church building in 1978

In Poland, interest in local history has grown significantly in the last couple of decades. Thimm decided to transfer the door and lintel to the Olender Ethnographic Park near Toruń (opened in 2018). This took place as part of a Mennonite history tour to Poland by the Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen (Mennonite Working Group for Poland). There was a send-off gathering for the door in Haarlem, sponsored by the Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen (Mennonite Foundation Netherlands-Poland).

Then it was on display in Bechterdissen, Germany, for three weeks. Then the door and lintel traveled by tour bus as the group visited in the Vistula Delta and Vistula Valley. On Sept. 1, 2021, the door and lintel were formally given to the Olender Ethnographic Park, with the event covered on regional television.



Presentation of the door at the Olender open air museum

(summarized from reports in the *Mennonitische Arbeitskreis Polen Rundbrief* 2021 and the *Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen Nieuwsbrief* 27 (2021))

The Vistula-Nogat Delta - Drainage Technology from the Medieval Era to 1940

(translated from article in *Mennonitische Arbeitskreis Polen Rundbrief* 2020)

If we visit the mainly agricultural area on the lower Vistula, one can be of the opinion that we are seeing an essentially natural land. But the sight of mighty dikes and countless drainage ditches hints at extensive human interventions in nature. The country used to be characterized by many wind-driven drainage mills that could be seen from afar, which have now been replaced by electrical systems.

I. The Vistula Delta before these interventions

Originally, the Fresh Lagoon (Frisches Haff) extended to the gates of Danzig. The natural

flowing Vistula and Nogat claimed a great expanse in their course through many embedded islands. Any flood could spread unhindered and changed the river bed. The coarser sediment load was deposited on the sides of the river and so the direct bank areas were raised more. Finer sediments were widely distributed throughout the floodplain. Many smaller branches formed the estuary. With the constant raising of the main arms due to annual flooding, a lower branch could then become the new main drain in the event of a flood. So the land was increased evenly.

Hugo Bertram, senior building officer of the Danzig Dike Association, in 1907 and 1922 undertook a reconstruction of the Vistula-Nogat delta around the year 1300, i.e. before the extensive human interventions began, and published the results in a map. One can see the almost continuous water surface of the Fresh Lagoon up to the city of Gdańsk, but also the Drausensee (Lake Drużno), which extends far to the west. The contour lines shown indicate the deepest zones in the area of the tributary that flows between the Vistula and the Nogat. Today it is the Schwente and Tiege. The Alte Damm (Old Dam) is shown in the Danzig Delta, which was probably built before 1300.



Bertram map of the Vistula Delta ca. 1300

II. The Early Era of the Teutonic Order

In 1231, at the invitation of the Duke of Mazovia – seeking help against the persistent attacks by the Pruzzen – a force of the Teutonic Order crossed the Vistula and initially secured the Kulm region against the resistance of the Pruzzen. As early as 1231, the order founded Thorn Castle as the first fortification. In 1234, Pomesania, east of the Vistula, was conquered and secured by castle complexes. The influx of Low German settlers consolidated the rule of the knights. Despite various setbacks, the Order was able to finally subdue the Pruzzen in heavy battles between 1261 and 1271. In 1309 the seat of the Grand Master was moved from Venice to Marienburg.

The Large Marienburg Delta came into the possession of the Order in 1242. The fertility of the alluvial land was quickly recognized and there were farms for cattle breeding to supply the residents of the Marienburg castle and breeding stations for the supply of the horses they needed. A limited settlement in the higher areas of the southern part of the Large Delta began as early as the second half of the 13th century. The main settlement by the order took place in the years 1300 to 1360.

In the first half of the 14th century, the Large Delta was secured against flooding by a ring dike. An unbelievable cultural achievement was accomplished here. Who did this work is not certain. While some historians see it as the construction work of the early German settlers, others suspect that Pruzzen and Lithuanians who were subjugated and captured in combat were forced to do this work by the Order. The dike followed the unaltered bank of the Vistula from the Montauer Spitze to the Danziger Haupt and then followed the Elbing Vistula. The dike was not built directly on the bank of the Vistula, but at different distances. In the area of larger river islands and thus the great width of the Vistula, or if there was very low land near the river, the dike was often drawn deep into the land in large curves. On the Nogat, the dike ran as far as below the Marienburg castle, then branched off from the Nogat at the heights of

Halbstadt and finally ran north on the western bank of the Stubaschen *Lake* (a *Lake* was a major drainage canal). A large piece of land between the dike and the Nogat, the Einlage was reserved for flooding during high water. From here the dike was continued to the southern bank of the Elbing Vistula. Now the ring dike was closed and the diked area was protected from flooding by the Vistula or Nogat. Within this ring dike around the Large Delta, a considerable area, some up to 1.5 meters below sea level, was separated from the lagoon.



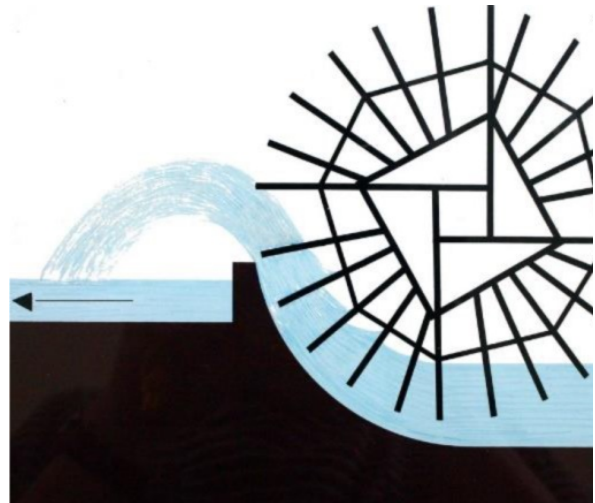
Order-era drainage windmill

Since the land is very wet, the area above sea level also had to be drained for agricultural use. This was done through a close-meshed network of drainage ditches that drained the absorbed water into receiving basins. Serving as main receiving channels or basins were the three Werder rivers, the Linau, the Order-era drainage mill Schwente / Tiege, and the Jungfer *Lake* and natural and artificially created tributaries. While in the higher areas the water was naturally drained off via the receiving basins, these rivers in the lower areas also had to be secured by dikes and the water had to be pumped up. To drain the low-lying areas, polders (an area of low-lying land protected by dikes) were created village by village at different heights.

During their stay in the Middle East at the time of the Crusades, the Order had learned about pumping stations powered by windmills for irrigating fields. This technique was now used to drain the land along the Vistula. A large

wheel with many blades is driven by a windmill. The paddle wheel moves in a narrow channel and throws the water from the lower-lying fields into the higher-lying drainage system. The maximum delivery height of this technology is about 80 cm.

Sluice gates were installed wherever there could be a backflow from the side of the receiving channels. A sluice consists of a gate that can only be opened from the inside by the water if the water level is lower outside than inside. When the water level in the drainage system is higher, the water pressure closes the gate and prevents backflow. Such a sluice also prevents the backflow of the pumped water into the discharge chute of the water-pumping mill.

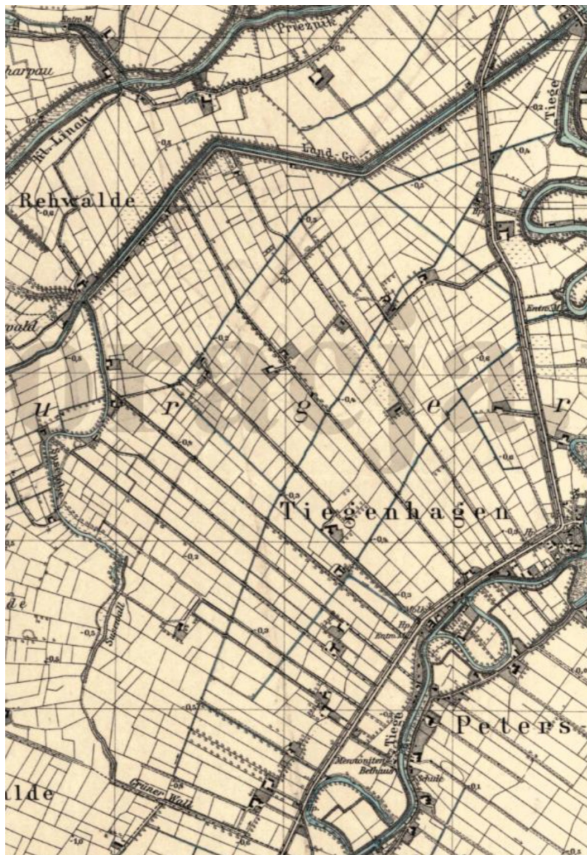


Water-throwing wheel

The dikes and also the drainage ditches required constant maintenance. Everything was regulated in the village charters. The trenches had to be cleared of the rapidly spreading vegetation every year.

Villages were founded early on in the depressed areas. The village of Petershagen was founded as early as 1328. Tiegenhagen already existed a few years before 1349. This means that even then the dikes were raised on the lower reaches of the Werder rivers and the polders formed in this way could be drained. This technology was used here earlier than in the Netherlands. Every village in this area was a polder, but they were at different altitudes. With windmill drainage, you are dependent on the

wind. In winter, when everything was frozen, the water could not be pumped, so in spring the fields were under water. When there were strong winds from the north-east, the water level in the lagoon and thus also in the rivers flowing away was dammed up. Then additional pump water was not allowed to raise the water level. The order in which the fields are drained was already regulated in the times of the Order. If the higher-lying polders begin to drain under such conditions, this water then ran over the dikes into the lower polders. Only when the drainage could begin in the deep polders were the other mills were allowed to start working. Only when a certain mill, the so-called mark mill, began to pump water – the rotating windmill blades could be seen from afar – were the other mills were allowed to start operating. Of course everyone wanted to drain their fields



Tiegenhagen, with the Tiede on the east boundary, in the south the Green Wall, in the west the Suse Wall and Suse canal, and in the north the dam between the Suse Wall and the Tiede dike

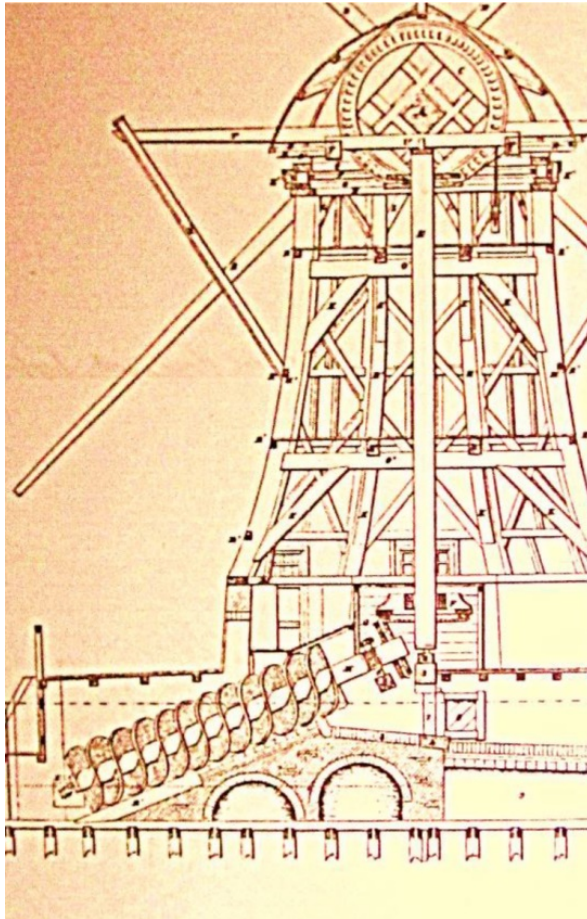
as quickly as possible in order to start the spring tillage, but everyone made sure that these rules were observed. We saw ourselves as a community that could only cope with such a work with a lot of community spirit.

The village of Tiegenhagen can serve as an example of the applied polder technology. On the map you can see the village of Tiegenhagen, about 0.5 meters below sea level, surrounded by ramparts. On the eastern side is the deep dike. In the south, the polder was bordered by the Grüner Wall. From there the Susewall leads north to the Suselake. In the north of the village a dam was built that connected the Susewall and the deep dike. It was not until much later in the 16th century that an additional drainage ditch, the Landwehrgraben or Landgraben, was dug on this wall. These dikes are said to have been built by many Pruzzen and Lithuanians. The drainage ditches led to the Suselake or the Tiede, where they were emptied out by scoop mills.

After the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410, the Order was defeated by the Polish-Lithuanian army. But the Order was not completely defeated. A long, uncertain time followed with new wars. In addition, there were dike breaches with devastating floods. The possibilities to maintain everything were no longer available. Many settlers came after others left the country and nature recaptured the land, it became a shallow lake again. The western part of the Order territory left the Order and placed itself under Polish suzerainty in 1466.

III. New initiatives in drainage technology from the Mennonites in the 16th century

A new settlement phase did not begin until the middle of the 16th century. The area had meanwhile been left to the Loitz banking house by the Polish king. They brought settlers from Holland, Mennonites, who had experience of drainage techniques and the agricultural use of such wet soils, into the country. Ditches and dikes and drainage systems had to be maintained or newly constructed.



Wind-powered screw pump

To gain new land, polders were created in Holland from the early 15th century, which were drained by water mills. In Holland, the principle of the Archimedean screw was applied anew, which was already known in ancient times in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but was forgotten. The Dutch settlers brought this knowledge with them to Prussia.

The screw pump works like a meat grinder. The mill drives a spiral located in a trough. The rotation draws water upwards. These mills were more powerful than the bucket mills with throwing wheels and also exceeded their delivery height. While the bucket wheels of that time allowed a maximum conveying height of 80 cm, the screw pump reached 1.8 m. In the 19th century, the bucket wheels achieved delivery rates of 55 m³ / min, the screw pumps delivered 75 m³ / min.

In this way, areas in the north of Large Delta that are up to 1.5 m below sea level and whose development was not yet possible in the days of



Horse mill

the Order could now also be drained.

The horse mill, an invention attributed to Adam Wiebe, made it possible to drain the land even when there was no wind. At the horse mill, the bucket wheels are driven by a horse-powered *Göpelwerk* [vertical drive shaft and simple gear shaft output; horse mill, horse capstan, whim gin].

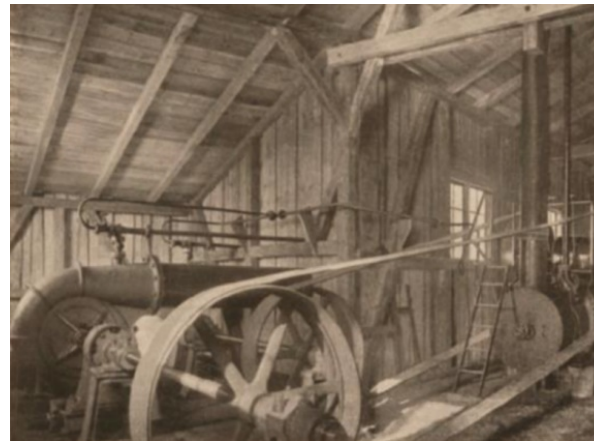
IV. The application of new technology in the 19th and 20th centuries

One problem with using wind energy is that it is not always available. The steam engine was invented in the 18th century and was then used in many ways. In the 19th century, the technology began to be used for drainage. In the spring of 1853 there was long-lasting lack of wind and in May the Tiegenhagener Land was under water. So in Tiegenhagen, too, the desire to build a steam drainage mill emerged, which was then built by the Schichau company in Elbing and went into operation in the spring of 1854. The machine had 30 hp and cost 7,000 thalers. In 1871 a second steam mill was added in the northern part of the village. Instead of the previous landmarks of the country, the rotating windmill blades visible from afar, the chimneys

of the steam mills now towered into the sky. Pump technology also changed. Powerful centrifugal pumps were now also used.

Despite all the innovations, drainage always remained difficult. The Linau Association was founded in the mid-1920s. An area of 22,000 hectares belonged to the association, of which 1/6 of the area was natural, i.e. freely drained, 5/6 had been pumped out by 50 wind pumping stations. A powerful pumping station with three pumps was built on the Elbing Vistula, initially driven by three diesel engines, later two with electric drive, a third with drive by a diesel engine. On September 1, 1930, the pumping of the Linau began. After just three days, the water level had dropped by 2 meters. The groundwater level was now approx. 0.5 m below the lowest point in the association area. For agriculture, this meant that a number of other crops could now be grown. The complex was completed by a connecting ditch to the Linau that was created in 1931. Each of the three pumps had a delivery rate of 7 m³ / sec, whereby the water had to be lifted by 2.5m into the Elbing Vistula.

For the area east of the Schwente / Tiege, a similar pumping station was put into operation on the Elbing Vistula in 1940.



Steam pumping station in the Danzig delta 1906-7

