

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association NEWSLETTER

BETHEL
COLLEGE

MENNONITE LIBRARY
AND ARCHIVES

300 East 27th Street
North Newton, Kansas
67117-1716

MLA.BETHELKS.EDU/INFORMATION/MPSA.PHP

January 2025

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the tenth 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

**Mennonite Library and Archives
Bethel College
300 E 27th St
North Newton KS 67117**

You may donate online at

<https://www.bethelks.edu/gift>.

Choose "Other" in the Designation box and write in Mennonite Polish Studies Association.

If you are receiving this newsletter in paper format, would you be willing to switch to email delivery? If so, please let us know at mla@bethelks.edu

2025 Tour is Full!

The 2025 tour is scheduled for June 6 to 17, 2025. We are (more or less) full, but we can put interested persons on a waiting list in case spots open up. Please email Mark Jantzen at mjantzen@bethelks.edu if you are interested in joining us!

2024 Tour

The year's tour group of thirty people were in Poland July 12-24. Every year we find some changes to familiar sites and make new discoveries, and this year had revealed many such changes. After gathering in Warsaw and enjoying the Old Town and a Chopin concert, we left the next day driving up the Vistula River. Although we did not



Changed view of former Deutsch Kasun church building, summer 2024

have time to stop, we noted that the road construction close up to the former Deutsch Kazun church building is still ongoing. Our first stop was at the former church building in Deutsch Wymysle. This building has continued to deteriorate every year and the changes this time were stark. The roof has collapsed at both ends. We were told that the Open-Air Museum of Vistula Settlements in Wiączemin Polski (Skansen Osadnictwa Nadwiślańskiego w Wiączeminie Polskim), a rural branch of the regional museum in Płock (Muzeum Mazowieckie w Płocku), still has plans to restore this building and use it as a branch location, but they are waiting on grant money to become available. The walls were already in such a weakened condition that the roof could not have been rebuilt on them in any case; they are planning on building a new roof on new pillars.

At the end of the day, we arrived at the Olendarski Etnograficzny Park in Wielka Nieszwaka for a special event. The museum incorporates the former cemetery of the Obernessau Mennonite church. In the 1870s Wilhelm Ewert was the elder here, until he migrated to Hillsboro, Kansas, in 1874. He was the only one of the delegates from Europe who in 1873 scouted land for the Mennonite migration the

next year who was from West Prussia; all the others came from the Russian Empire. The museum was marking the sesquicentennial of this event with a program that was held in one of the long barns on the museum grounds. University of Toruń professor Michał Targowski and Mark Jantzen engaged in a dialogue about Ewert and the Mennonite migration out of this area for a crowd of about 100 local people. Afterwards our tour group and some of the local organizers enjoyed a meal on the museum grounds. You can find additional information about Ewert and this migration in the latest issue of [Mennonite Life](#). His passionate plea for Mennonites to stay true to their belief in biblical nonresistance is also translated and printed there.



Deutsch Wymysle church building, summer 2024

The next morning, we drove to the former Mennonite cemetery in Przechówko, where a renovation has been ongoing for the last several years. There is a separate article about that in this newsletter. Some in our group were now able to identify ancestors, since the cemetery has been maintained and some stones replaced in a standing position.



Making connections to the 150th anniversary celebrations in Kansas. Mark Jantzen with translator on the left, Michał Targowski on the right.

We visited the Nickelstein and the Schönsee cemetery, the town square of Culm/Chełmno, and the church building of Montau on our way to Gdańsk. The next day we toured the city of Gdańsk and the former Mennonite church building there, where we also heard about upcoming changes detailed in the opening article of this newsletter. One connection we noticed was that the summer concert series of the Capella Gedanensis was advertised in the main church, St. Mary's, as "[Fifth Summer Evening Festival at the Mennonites](#)." These were held in the former Mennonite church building Thursday evenings from June 27 to August 22. Knowing the history of tension between the Lutheran City Council who had controlled that church and kept Mennonites from living in the city limits for centuries, and then Communist control which would have prevented such public advertising, it was jarring to see a poster in the main Catholic church now urging people to go to the Mennonites.



Steve Voth at the gravestone of one of his ancestors.

While some people used the afternoon of that day, July 16, to visit museums in Gdańsk, others toured some of the Mennonite villages out in the Vistula delta. On the way home, we drove through a lot of wind and rain on a rocking bus. For those of us from the Great Plains, it helped us feel right at home. The next day when we went to visit the Marienburg castle and then the Heubuden cemetery at Stogi, we saw a lot of storm damage. A couple of gravestones were even broken by falling limbs. We heard a few days later that local crews had already cleared the fallen limbs. We are grateful for the care and expense taken to

preserve the cultural heritage of Mennonites in Poland.

In the late afternoon, we spend a delightful time with the people from Dawna Wozownia (The Former Coach Shed) in Miłoradz. They provided us with lovely refreshments and a chance to visit with local people.



Wind damage in the Heubuden Cemetery, July 17, 2024.



Many trees along the roads were blown over and crews were out to remove them.

One of the oddest changes to Mennonite history sites in Gdańsk has been the transformation of what had been a Mennonite restaurant and distillery known as Zum Lachs/At the Salmon/Pod Łososiem. Starting in 1598, a Mennonite family made a variety of liquors here, the best known of which is Goldwasser. You can read details of this fascinating history [here](#). Passed down in family hands until the early nineteenth century, after the war local people revived this tradition. A restaurant serving traditional local food was located here for decades but closed already shortly before Covid. A rebranding as a different type of

restaurant was short-lived. This year we discovered that a Harry Potter-themed café, named The Ministry of Magic, has taken over this historic locale.



Entirely different types of potions are now available under the sign of the Salmon.

On July 18, we visited the Werder Museum in Tiegendorf/Nowy Dwór Gdański, led by Łukasz Kępski. We also had a lecture on the history and importance of Low German by Prof. Tomasz Wicherkiewicz from the University of Poznań. We concluded the tour up north the next day with a visit to the Concentration Camp at Stutthof and returned to Warsaw. A number of us continued on to Kraków the next day.

Since participation in the Kraków extension has been somewhat limited, that feature will not be included in the future. Its omission will allow for extra time in and around Toruń, and greater engagement with the Mennonite history connected to the former congregation at Przechówko.

Major Changes Coming to the Former Mennonite Church in Gdańsk

At a [news conference](#) held on December 4, 2024, in the former Mennonite Church in Gdańsk, the president (mayor) of Gdańsk, Aleksandra Dulciewicz, announced major renovations to the building that would restore it to its original floorplan. This will include rebuilding the west entryway that originally extended into the courtyard and served as a cloakroom. That function would be restored and handicap-accessible bathrooms added. Placing the entryway along the long wall would reorient the space to having the pulpit and stage area on the long east side where

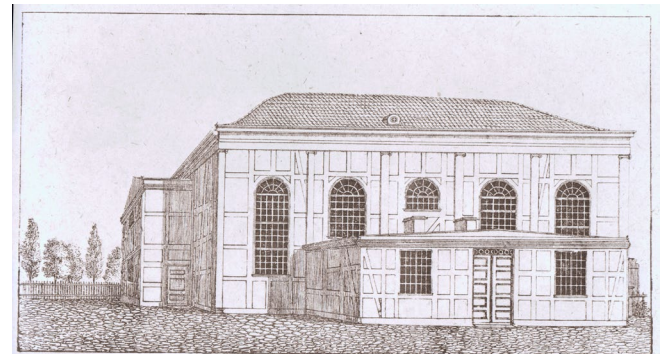
it was originally. There used to be a canal there and city walls; now train tracks run there. A new heating system will also be installed.

The building has been used by a Pentecostal congregation since World War II. They were able to claim the building from Communist authorities and repaired the war damage with great effort and in the face of arrests and repression of congregational leaders. They eventually removed the south balcony and added Sunday School rooms there, that space will now revert to its original shape as well. The congregation has been planning to move to a new location for months already — a renovated shipyard warehouse — as they need a bigger space and one that is better designed for a contemporary worship service that includes contemporary music, acoustics, and streaming.

The new tenants of the building will be Capella Gedanensis, a group formed in 1981 in Gdańsk to take up the tradition of a City Council Ensemble that was an important part of the cultural history of city from the 1560s to the 1750s. The musical group performs Baroque music, highlighting area composers as well as European composers from this era. In recent years they have held summer concerts in the church building but have lacked a home venue. The director, Marek Więclawek, also spoke at the press conference, which was covered by the regional news channel TVP3 Gdańsk.

The project is funded with a 12.9 million złoty (\$CAD 4.5 million, \$US 3.2 million) cultural grant from the European Union and a matching contribution from the city of 5.7 million złoty (\$2CAD million, \$US 1.4 million). The renovation is expected to begin sometime around July 2025 and take more than a year, after which time the building will be open again to tourist groups who wish to visit. As a

Mennonites were not originally allowed to build church buildings in or near Gdańsk. There were at that time two congregations, a Frisian one that was able to build their first church in the suburb of Neugarten, now Nowe Ogordy, in

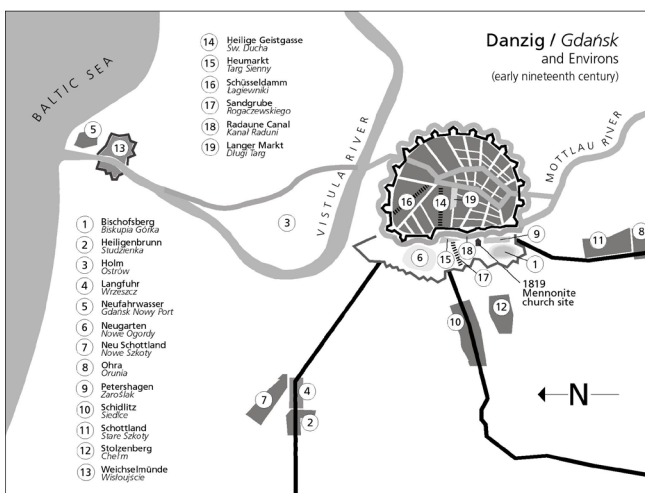


Ansicht des Bethauses der Mennoniten-Gemeinde zu Danzig.

1638, and a Flemish one, whose first building from 1648 was in the nearby suburb of Petershagen/Zaroślak. The Flemish building burned down in 1734 and was rebuilt, then remodeled in 1805. The Frisian building was expanded in 1788. It burned down in 1806 when the Napoleonic Wars arrived in the region and the two congregations merged, using the Flemish building. This building was destroyed in turn in 1813 as the French were driven out of the area. The current building was thus built at a new location in 1819 and will now move on to a new purpose connected to music, the arts, and the local community. If you are interested in the history of this congregation and this building, many additional details are available in the book by Hermann G. Mannhardt, [The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569-1919](#). Originally published in German, making this volume available in English was one of the first publishing endeavors of the Mennonite Polish Studies Association. This book contains an epilogue written by pastor Tomasz Ropiejko that details the efforts of the Pentecostal congregation to reclaim this house of God from the Communist government after the war.

Polish Scholars Visit South Central Kansas

In the latter part of October 2024, three Polish scholars who work at interpreting Mennonite history for Polish people visited Mennonite museums in south-central Kansas to make connections with Mennonite communities here whose roots go back to Poland. The visit was arranged by Rod Ratzlaff and grows out of his work on the Mennonite community and cemetery at Przechówko (see the next



multi-purpose cultural space for the city, in addition as serving as the home concert venue of Cappella Gedanensis, it would also be available to use for conferences, theater, and educational events.

article). The group visited museums in Hillsboro, Goessel, and the Newton area, the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies at Tabor College in Hillsboro and the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College in North Newton.

Michał Targowski, a researcher and historian at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, has done significant public history work interpreting Mennonite history in the context of the middle Vistula River valley around Toruń and Świecie with the Olendarski Etnograficzny Park in Wielka Nieszawka, the Przechówko cemetery and the Lower Vistula Landscape Parks Complex, which hosts an educational center in an [arcaded farmhouse](#). Łukasz Woźniak and Piotr Chomicz who do programming for the local community from this center were also along.

One highlight of the tour in the Hillsboro area was to see the sites of Wilhelm Ewert's farmstead and of the Bruderthal church that he founded. Ewert had been the elder of the Obernessau congregation before emigrating to Kansas in 1874. The Olendarski Etnograficzny Park grounds include the former cemetery of this congregation. Having people from there follow up on his travels 150 years later was an amazing event.



Targowski speaking at Alexanderwohl church

On October 26, Dr. Targowski spoke at the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church of rural Goessel, Kansas, on the topic of "The Przechówko Mennonite Cemetery: Its History and Restoration." That congregation was the progenitor of the Alexanderwohl congregation in the Russian Empire and it moved almost in its entirety to Kansas in 1874, making for an important connection between Mennonites related to this congregation and Poland.

Targowski served as the keynote speaker at Kauffman Museum's Living Endowment Dinner on October 25. Over 160 people attended this event, where he talked on "The First New Homeland: Mennonite Migration to and from Polish Prussia in the 16-18th Centuries." The group spent the afternoon ahead of the talk at Kauffman Museum in



At Kauffman Museum

talks with museum staff. They noted many commonalities and similar issues: how to engage people in local history, how to find, display, and preserve artifacts. Some differences were also evident. All of the Polish institutions received state support, which provides for much more budgetary stability, but also means that everything that happens depends on paid staff and following national museum guidelines. The Kansas institutions all rely on copious volunteer labor and have lots of donated Mennonite artifacts to choose from for their displays. Since the Mennonites left Poland either as emigrants long ago or as refugees at the end of World War II, relatively few Mennonite artifacts remain in Poland, which is why museums there highlight architecture, an enduring cultural legacy of the Mennonites.



Kauffman Museum current exhibit "Unlocking the Past: Immigrant Artifacts and the Stories They Tell"

The Przechówko Cemetery Project

The former Przechówko Mennonite Church near Świecie/Schwetzn Poland has a unique legacy as a congregation. Founded in the mid-sixteenth century, it had a mixture of Dutch, South German, and local people join. It was one of two Groningen Old Flemish congregations in Poland. This group stood for plain living and separation from the world when other Dutch Mennonites were beginning to acculturate to the rising wealth of the Netherlands. The Przechówko congregation was more isolated than the nearby other congregation at Schönsee, which was interspersed with a Frisian Mennonite congregation in the same area. This congregation planted numerous important daughters, including Brenkenhoffswalde and Franzthal in Brandenburg, Gnadenfeld and Alexanderwohl in Molotschna Colony and Alexanderwohl and Hoffungsau in Kansas. The 1820s migration to the Russian Empire ended the existence of the congregation in Poland. The congregational books that go back to the seventeenth century are now with the Alexanderwohl congregation near Goessel. An important history of this congregation was recently published by Rod Ratzlaff in *Mennonite Life* and is available [here](#).



2024 tour group members with ancestors in the cemetery

Tour groups over the years have sometimes been able to find the cemetery, which is all that remains, but it was completely overgrown. Our own tour groups tried and failed to find it in 2019 and 2022. In the meantime, Rod Ratzlaff, who was part of our tour group in 2019, returned on his own, found the cemetery with the assistance of Dr. Michał Targowski, and made connections with local groups who were also interested in restoring this cemetery. With financial support from the Dutch Mennonites, the cemetery was cleared in 2023 and work on mapping and restoring gravesites and the remaining



Wider view of the cemetery

gravestones is ongoing.

The work is being carried out by the Lapidaria Forgotten Cemeteries of Pomerania and Kuyavia, which since 2017 has been locating and restoring abandoned and forgotten cemeteries in the region. Mostly these are cemeteries abandoned by Germans as they left the country after World War II. The organization is led by Michał Wieśniewski. The progress of the project can be followed on Facebook by following [Pamięć Przechówka \(Remember Przechówko\)](#).



Sign says "Warning: Area is Monitored"