

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association NEWSLETTER

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January 2026

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the 11th 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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Choose "Other" in the Designation box and write in Mennonite Polish Studies Association.

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2026 Tour is Full!

The 2026 tour is scheduled for July 10 to 21, 2026. 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!

2025 Tour

The 2025 tour from June 6-17 was the earliest in the year we have ever done. We moved the dates up so that several members of our group could take advantage of the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism event in Zurich on May 29 before starting the tour. Thirty-one people led by Richard Thiessen and Mark Jantzen gathered then in Warsaw for



Changed view of former Deutsch Kazuń church building, summer 2025

our opening dinner hosted by Ewa Hajnrych, our tour guide, and Andrzej Puchacz of TravPol travel agency who began working on Mennonite tours to Poland with the very first Peter Klassen tour in 1991.

After a day to tour Warsaw, we headed for Toruń. Along the way we drove by the former Mennonite church building in Nowy Kazuń (Deutsch Kazuń). The S7 highway goes to the south of the building, headed for the secondary Warsaw airport in Modlin. Over the last couple of years, a new bypass to the east has been built that now incorporates the former county road that went along the north of the church. Access to the church, which had been from the north, has now been cut off. Instead, one has to follow a long access road that begins in the west and circles around from the south. We settled this time just for a drive-by photo.

Our first stop then was the former Mennonite church building in Nowe Wymyśle (Deutsch Wymyschle). This structure had been slowly deteriorating for years; last year the roof had finally caved in. This year we found the reconstruction work that had long been planned was now well underway. The Mazovian (regional) Museum in Płock has a branch that opened in 2018 in the village of Wiączemin Polski, the Open-Air Museum of Vistula Settlement. The buildings and church on the grounds are from German Lutherans who lived in the area before the war. This museum is only a ten-minute drive from the Nowe

Wymyśle church, and it has acquired the building and is doing the renovation. The photo shows the status of the project when we visited in June; other reports now indicated that the roof is on and the windows are in. While the building was more exposed, one could see the decorative painting on the walls in the sanctuary, not a typical feature otherwise of Mennonite churches in Poland.



Deutsch Wymyśle church building, summer 2025



Interior of Deutsch Wymyśle church building, summer 2025

Our next stop was at the Olenderski Park Etnograficzny (Dutch or Mennonite Ethnographical Open-Air Museum) in Wielka Nieszawaka (Obernessau). The museum grounds encompass the cemetery and have three farmstead ensembles that display typical farm and daily living arrangements from the days when these buildings would have been inhabited by Mennonites. We posed for a group photo in front of one of them. They are working on moving another house barn to the museum now as well.

This museum maintains good connections to the Catholic parish that uses the former Mennonite church



Tour group 2025 at Wielka Nieszawaka

building of this congregation. Elder Wilhlem Ewert left from here for Hillsboro, Kansas, in 1874; our tour group marked this sesquicentennial two years ago with a panel discussion and supper at the museum. The church building had been undergoing renovation when we were there last time, but this time we could get inside and had a chance to visit with the priest, with Dr. Michał Targowski from the University of Toruń providing interpretation.



In the former Obernessau Mennonite church

The next morning we drove to Świecie, where the city council sponsored a reception for us at the former refectory (monks' dining hall) in the town's Teutonic Knights' castle. Although the knights would have been gone before Mennonites moved here, the Mennonites would certainly have been used to seeing the castle. We were greeted by Vice-Mayor Sławomir Siemaszko and an historical interpreter in era costume who told us what life in the castle would have been like.

Our next stop was the cemetery in Przechówko, now just a short drive from the city. We were met by Dr. Michał Targowski and Michał Wiesniewski of the foundation Lapidaria, which has done the renovation work. You can

*Świecie castle*

read more about the cemetery in the next article. Pictured here are the tour members with ancestors buried here along with Michał Wiesniewski, second from left.

*Przechówko cemetery*

A new stop on the tour this year after the cemetery visit was lunch at the Mennonite Cottage in Chrystkowo. The arcaded house from 1791 is now used as an educational and meeting center for the Lower Vistula Landscape Parks Complex (Park Krajobrazowy Doliny Dolnej Wisły), a series of nature preserves along the river. One of the ironies of this visit is that while the architecture of the buildings is the typical Dutch settler style, no Mennonites ever lived on this farmstead, although a few families would have lived elsewhere in the village. Yet “Mennonite” is now a well-established tourist draw in Poland, so the label for the house is more about marketing than history.

Another addition to the tour this year was an extra night in Toruń, which gave us time for a city tour. Two main tour attractions featured in the old town are its history of gingerbread baking (Lebkuchen) and its most famous son, Nicolaus Copernicus. Our city tour guide, Ana Siebers, ably told us about that and much more. Yet she came to our

group with a question of her own. Her regular job is as an IT worker, but she took the training and passed the test to become a certified city tour guide during Covid, when she was otherwise working from home and looking for something to do outside of work. Now she picks up tours when she has time or gets interested in a group. She chose us because we were listed as a Mennonite tour group and her first question for us was if anyone was from Kansas. Turns out, her father had been a trainee with Mennonite Central Committee back when MCC had a Polish Agricultural Visitor Exchange program to bring Polish young people to North America during the cold war. Her father in 1980 had been on Randolph and Laura Flaming’s farm near Goessel. As it happened, the Flamings’ daughter Charlotte was in our tour group with her husband Brian Warkentine and Ana’s dad had been at their wedding! That seems like a pretty big win at the Mennonite game, Polish edition.

*Chrystkowo Mennonite Cottage**Warkentines and Ana Siebers*

This year we spent a couple of nights in Elbląg (Elbing), where the Mennonite church building from 1590 was the

only building in the old town to survive World War II. Joe Friesen, one of our tour participants, was born here. He now



Friesen bakery

lives not too far from Elbing, Kansas, which was named for this Elbing by immigrants to Kansas from the Heubuden congregation. So, this visit felt like a homecoming at several levels for Joe. He actually grew up in the nearby village of Stare Pole (Altfelde) where his grandfather had a bakery. He led us to the house, which is still standing, and showed us the window on the left side of the photo where the baked goods had been on display. The bakery itself was around the back. He remembers delivering baked goods with a horse and wagon with his grandfather. He left the area when a young boy as a refugee fleeing the Soviet army and was able to tell our group about the family's flight to Danzig and then eventually escape by taking a small craft from the mouth of Vistula River to a staging point further north and then escaping to Denmark by boat.

From Elbląg we had easy access to the Elbląg canal that connects Elbing to Lake Drużno and the Drwęca River. Our bus took us to the starting point at Buczyniec down south and then we worked our way back north to Elbing on the



Canal trip

canal. The 330-foot/100-meter difference in height was considered too expensive to do with locks in the mid-nineteenth century when the canal was built, so a series of five inclined planes were used instead. At the end of each segment, the canal boat is maneuvered into a cradle that is then pulled up or down the slope to the next segment.

The last inclined plane brings the boats to Lake Drużno or Drausensee. This lake was much larger in former times, but sediment and drainage have greatly reduced its size. It now covers 5-10 square miles/13-26 square kilometers. It is at the same level as the Vistula Lagoon, which connects to the Lake via the Elbląg River, so wind and weather impact its size. Most of it is quite shallow, averaging 4 feet/1.3 meters, but there is a channel in the middle deep enough for boats to cross it. There is an astonishing variety of bird life here as it is a protected nature preserve. This trip was quite the dramatic introduction to the waterways where our ancestors used to live.



Gdańsk church under construction (credit Tomasz Ropiejko)

We spent several days in the city of Gdańsk and in villages and towns in the Vistula delta. We visited, of course, the museum in Nowy Dwór Gdański/Tiegenhof, that features an entire floor of Mennonite history. Our guide here was Łukasz Kępski, the vice-president of the Klub Nowodworski that runs the museum. In Gdańsk we were the last tour group to see the former Mennonite church building in its current form as a Pentecostal church. The city of Gdańsk, in part with European Union money, will be renovating it over the next couple of years to return it to its original configuration. A balcony will be reintroduced, the orientation of the sanctuary will be turned so that the focus is on the long side where the original preaching platform was, and a vestibule that was torn down after the war will be rebuilt to provide accessible bathrooms. After the renovation, Capella Gedanensis, the city ensemble that specializes in performing baroque music that was written and performed in historical Danzig, will use the building

for its performances. The space will also be available for other cultural events and will remain open to tour groups.

On our final day in the area, we traveled to the mouth of the Vistula River for a short boat ride out to the Gulf of Gdańsk. The sandbars just past the estuary provide resting grounds for seals and sea birds that provide quite the show. The departure point was the same place that Joe Friesen's family left from in spring 1945 but on the other side of the river. This time he was back on the waters with his wife Lois on their wedding anniversary. That was a lovely finish to our tour and was the luckiest timing that just happened without any planning.



Joe and Lois Friesen

Major Cemetery Renovation

One of the most amazing stories of the last few years culminated on September 13, 2025, with a ceremony in Przechówko to mark the restoration of the cemetery there. This Old Flemish congregation, now just on the southwestern edge of Świecie (Schwetz), was founded in the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century and had members living in several surrounding villages. The oldest gravestones in the cemetery are simple carvings on fieldstones and are today the oldest Mennonite tombstones in Poland. A number of daughter congregations and settlements derived from here and the final Mennonite inhabitants left for the Molotschna colony in the Russian Empire in the 1820s. After that, German Protestants took up residence in the village and their graves are also preserved here.

The cemetery, now owned and managed by the city of Świecie, has been visited over the years by various tour groups, but was overgrown, unmarked, and difficult to find as it was located on a sand track that was blocked by a locked car barrier. The immediate vicinity is dominated by a paper mill, now Mondi Świecie, built on the former grazing lands of the village. Most village inhabitants moved

away when the mill opened in the 1960s. Our tour group in 2019 tried unsuccessfully to find it on foot. One of our tour members that year, Rod Ratzlaff, has roots in this congregation and began persistent efforts to find and restore the cemetery. The congregation's descendants founded the Alexanderwohl and Hoffungsau congregations and many Holdeman Mennonite congregations in south central Kansas and were as well key parts of the Mennonite community in Freeman, South Dakota. Rod Ratzlaff published an excellent overview of the Przechówko congregation in the [2024 issue of *Mennonite Life*](#).

With the help of a local historian at the University of Toruń, Dr. Michał Targowski, Rod was able to locate the cemetery, which was completely overgrown. The two developed a plan to clear and renovate the cemetery and gathered willing collaborators for this project. One of them was Michał Wiśniewski, the president of the foundation Lapidaria, which works to restore abandoned and neglected cemeteries in this area of Poland. This foundation carried out the work of locating graves and restoring and placing tombstones and burial planters that marked graves. The city of Świecie supported the work and helped with approvals and permits. A Facebook group, Pamięć Przechówko (Przechówko Memory), has regularly provided updates. Important funding also came from outside Poland. One source was the Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederlands-Polen (Dutch Foundation for Netherlands-Poland), the Dutch Mennonite organization which had been working on preserving the Dutch Mennonite heritage in Poland since the early 1990s. This group disbanded about this time and gave its remaining funds to the project. The Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen (MAP) (Mennonite Working Group on Poland) also contributed. This German Mennonite group is composed largely of refugees and their descendants from the Vistula River delta and valley after WW II. Different German Mennonites have been working on reconciliation and restoration in Poland since at least the 1980s. The Mennonite Polish Studies Association and individuals from North America also supported this effort.

By the summer of 2021 the area had been cleared so that



Summer 2021 cemetery view

the basic outline of later graves could be seen. By late spring of 2023 permitting and fundraising were finished and work on restoring the cemetery began. When our tour group arrived in July 2023 the barrier to the sand road was raised and we were met in the cemetery by city officials, both Michałs, and a local TV crew, as reported in our MPSA newsletter from 2024. This cemetery is now a regular part of our tour; last year the city hosted a reception for us in the newly restored refectory of the former Teutonic Knights castle in Świecie before we drove out to the cemetery (see the previous article). German groups and other Mennonite tour groups have also stopped in here.



July 2023 cemetery visit

An additional feature of this cooperation was the visit to Kansas in October 2024 of Dr. Michał Targowski and Łukasz Woźniak and Piotr Chomicz, staff members of the Lower Vistula Landscape Parks Complex which runs the Mennonite Cottage in Chrystkowo near Przechówko. This visit was reported on in more detail in our last newsletter. Since many of the Przechówko descendants ended up in south central Kansas, the visit was a unique way to close the loop on immigration by connecting those descendants with people who now live there and care for the congregation's legacy. While here, Dr. Targowski spoke at a program at Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church and at Kauffman Museum's Living Endowment Dinner.

At the dedication on September 13, Rod Ratzlaff and Johann Peter Wiebe, the chair of MAP, were present and part of the program, as were Dr. Michał Targowski and Michał Wieśniewski. Vice-Mayor Marta Makokczak spoke on behalf of the city. A memorial stone at the cemetery was also unveiled. It was created by Robert Adrych, who lived in area until the early 2000s in one of the last Mennonite houses there. The memorial has a relief map of the village with fourteen houses, school/church building, and cemetery as it would have appeared early in the twentieth century. It also has the inscription in Polish and German

that translated reads, "To the Mennonites and Protestants of Przechówko (Wintersdorf) and the surrounding area who found their final resting place here. Peace to their ashes." The reverse side of the memorial has an engraving of Robert's house and an inscription acknowledging him as the artist. A YouTube video of the event can be found [here](#).

Afterwards, a panel discussion was held nearby at the Mennonite Cottage in Chrystkowo that included Polish specialists and the international guests, including some from the Netherlands. The city of Świecie has since paid for and installed a fence to protect the cemetery from wildlife and an information board has also been posted.

Early German Maps of Poland's Vistula Delta

By Dan Jantzen (danjantzen@gmail.com)

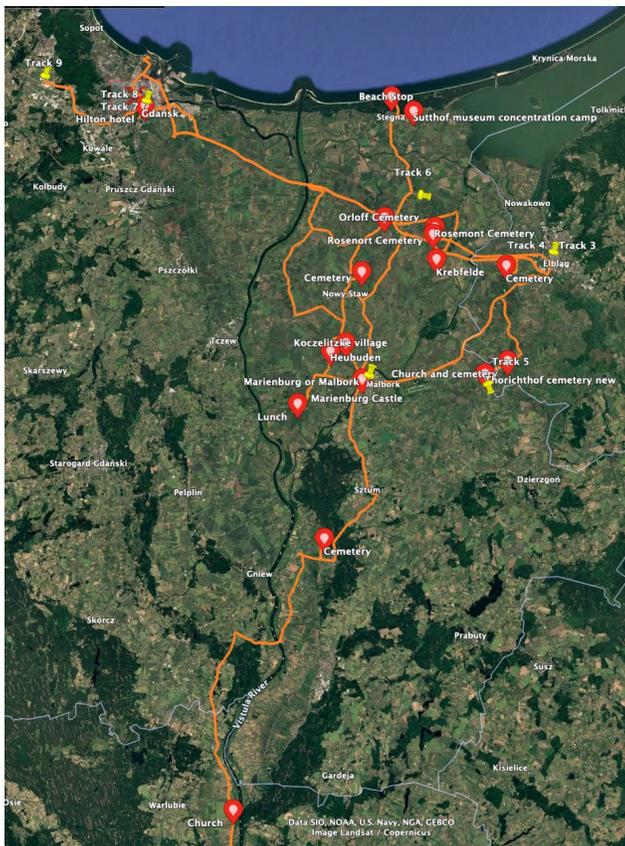
In preparation for a 2025 tour of Mennonite areas of Poland led by Dr. Mark Jantzen and Richard Thiessen, I geo-referenced a set of old German maps of the Vistula delta area we would be traveling through. Using these maps, and an app on my mobile phone, I was able to:

- Follow the position of our bus, or me walking the cities, on a map in real time as we moved across the countryside;
- View our position on the map relative to the features and German place names in use around 1900, which more closely correspond to the names our ancestors used, as opposed to the Polish names used today;
- Make, save, and download for use on other apps including Google Earth, our tracks showing where we went each day, including both walks around the towns and road travel;
- Enter waypoints on our tracks with a name or other explanation, to mark a particular point and help remember place names and what we saw where.



View of the app after some tracks and waypoints have been collected. The red balloon is our hotel location.

In this brief article I want to explain where these geo-referenced maps may be found, and how the maps can be used with the Avenza Map app—in case participants on future Mennonite tours of Poland would like to do something similar using their own phones.



Google Earth image of our travels in 2025, using the tracks downloaded from Avenza

The 1:25,000 scale map images, without geo-referencing, were selected from a [Mapster website](#), and then trimmed using Photoshop to leave just enough margin outside the map area for the latitude and longitude coordinates. These trimmed images were geo-referenced using free QGIS software. The geo-referencing process assigns the latitude and longitude coordinates of each of the four corners to the map. Using these coordinates and interpolating between them allows the app to take a GPS reading of the current location of the phone and place a blue dot in the correct position on the subject map. Many of these dots combined together produce a track line indicating where the phone has been. Touching a button on the app places a waypoint at the current location, and a name or other explanation can be attached to the waypoint. A total of 58 maps, each 1:25,000 scale, and covering 6 minutes of latitude by 10 minutes of longitude, plus one Index map covering all of Poland, and one 1:1,000,000 scale map encompassing the area from Warsaw to Gdańsk, can be freely downloaded by anyone using this link:

<https://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa/Poland%20maps/>

The index map at the end of the list of maps marks with a pink dot each of the maps included in the geo-referenced set of 58 maps. The 58 maps were selected on the basis of where our tour group was likely to go.

In order to use these maps on a mobile phone, a suitable

app is required. One of the best is Avenza, which can be purchased from either the Apple Store or the Android Play Store. Avenza comes in Free, Plus and Pro versions. The Free version can only load 3 custom maps at a time into the software; the US\$35/year Plus version can load 20 custom maps; and the \$160/year Pro version can load an unlimited number of maps, subject to memory space on the phone. I initially tried to use the Plus version, but soon grew frustrated with its limitations, and paid up for the Pro version. A 30-day free trial of the Pro Avenza Map subscription is available when downloading the app from the Apple App Store or the Google Play Store, and this might suffice in the case of a two-week trip. The Avenza app is able to download and install maps from a variety of sources by entering the correct link.

The Avenza app comes with a full set of [tutorials](#), and tutorial videos are also available on YouTube. Anyone proficient in using mobile phone apps, and willing to spend some time experimenting with settings and navigation within the app should be able to download a set of maps to the phone, set up the app, and get it working in a couple of hours. The tracking function can be turned on and off, and it should be turned on each morning of travel and then kept on throughout the day. I kept my phone in my shirt pocket and it seemed to catch the necessary GPS signal just fine, even inside the bus. The app uses a bit of the phone's battery power, and the phone will likely need daily recharging if the app runs all day. Additional problem solving when the app does not behave as desired can be obtained by explaining the problem in Google Search and reading the AI generated overview reply.