

# Mennonite-Polish Studies Association NEWSLETTER

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January 2023

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## The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the eighth 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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## 2023 Tour to Poland

**There is still room on our 2023 tour, scheduled for June 30-July 12, 2023. Please join us! [Access the prospectus here.](#)**



2022 tour group in Chelmo

## The 2022 Tour

From July 8-19, 2022, twenty-eight tour members led by Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen participated in the "Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour." The tours originally planned for 2020 and 2021 had been cancelled by the covid epidemic, so some of the tour participants had been waiting for 3 years for this tour.

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

The next day, Sunday, July 10, were the first specifically Mennonite stops of the tour, all locations along the Vistula Valley: Deutsch Kazun, Deutsch Wymyschle, and Obernessau. In Deutsch Wymyschle we found the home of one of our tour members' grandfather. The last stop was at the "Olender Ethnographic Park" open air museum, which includes the Mennonite cemetery of Obernessau.

The next day continued down the Vistula valley including Chełmno (site of the Mennonite-funded military academy building), Przechówko (where many Kansas Mennonites have ancestry), the only Vistula Mennonite monument (the Nickelstein), the large Schönsee cemetery, coffee break with local folks at Gross Lunau, lunch at the mall in Graudenz, the former Mennonite church at Montau. 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 countryside. We stopped at numerous former Mennonite villages, cemeteries, and church buildings. Some highlights included a 1718 windmill in Drewnica, the gigantic Malbork castle, being able to step inside the early Mennonite church building in Elbląg (studio of a blind sculptor), and the former Claassen farm near Simonsdorf (ancestors of two tour participants). At Orloffelfelde our group participated, along with local representatives, in the dedication of the restored tombstone of Johann Donner (Orloffelfelde elder and author of the Orloffelfelde Chronicle, one of the key sources on Vistula Delta Mennonite history). The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association gave funding for the tombstone restoration. (see next article) A sobering tour of the Stutthof concentration camp, followed by a short drive to the Baltic Sea beach for ice cream and seeing the seaside occasioned a certain amount of cognitive dissonance.

The tour then went back to Warsaw by bus. Several participants departed from here, but the rest of the group continued south to Kraków, with its many outstanding historical and architectural treasures. The three days in the Kraków region included a tour of Auschwitz and of the Wieliczka salt mines. The return trip to Warsaw included a stop at Częstochowa, famous for its role in Polish national memory and location of the "Black Madonna" icon. Tour participants departed the next day from Warsaw for home and other travels.

The 2023 tour is scheduled for June 30-July 12. We still have plenty of room for additional participants.



Mark Jantzen speaking, beside Łukasz Kępski, vice president of the Klub Nowodworski, at the Donner tombstone dedication

### Johann Donner Tombstone

On July 14, 2023, our Poland Mennonite tour group participated in the dedication of the restored tombstone of Johann Donner (1771-1830) in the former cemetery of the Orloffelfelde Mennonite congregation in the Vistula Delta. Donner was elder of the Orloffelfelde congregation (Frisian) from 1805-1830 and a prominent Vistula Mennonite leader. He and his father Heinrich (also elder at Orloffelfelde) 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.

See our Jan. 2022 newsletter for close-up photos of the tombstone and translated texts of its inscriptions.

Our Poland Mennonite tour in 2018 discovered the Donner tombstone on a visit to the cemetery; at that time it was on the ground in deteriorated condition. Klub Nowodworski in the town of Nowy Dwór Gdańsk (Tiegenhof) arranged for this tombstone to be restored and returned to the cemetery. The Mennonite Polish Studies Association supported this effort financially.

Representatives of Klub Nowodworski, local elected officials, and the tour group were all

present to recognize the restoration of the Donner tombstone.

### Stray documents from Danzig

Many of you have heard of the “seagoing cowboys,” Mennonite and Church of the Brethren young men who took cattle and horses to Europe right after World War 2 to aid in agricultural recovery there. Those who went to the Gdańsk region visited the sites of former Mennonite churches and gathered up documents and artifacts to bring back with them. Much of that material ended up in Mennonite historical collections at Goshen and Bethel right after their return to the US, but some was retained and continues to slowly trickle in as the “Greatest Generation” passes away.



Gerhard von Bergen arithmetic book

We recently received a batch of materials collected by Wesley Hooley (1921-2019) which was given to the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College several years ago and transferred here to the Mennonite Library and Archives in 2022. A large part of the papers consists of financial reports from the Danzig congregation from the 1790s. You can view all of the items at [https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/V\\_18/](https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/V_18/) under the subsections box 28, box 29, and box 30.

We also recently received two handwritten, illuminated arithmetic books, one of them

pictured here by Gerhard von Bergen (b. 1785). In contrast to the Hooley materials, these were handed down within families who came to the US in the 1870s-1880s. We already had a few other examples in the MLA.

We always hope for more such discoveries of scattered Vistula Mennonite documents.

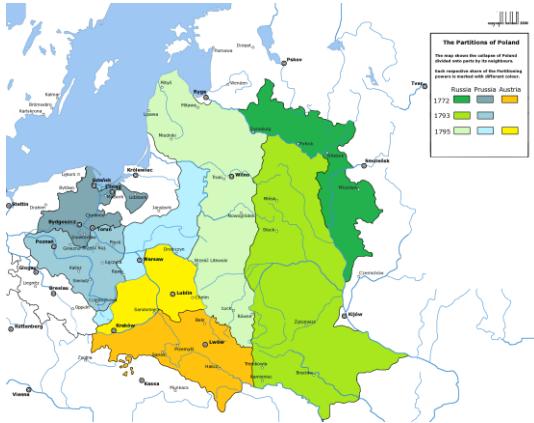
### 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Partition of Poland

This past fall marked the 250th anniversary of the first partition of Poland. This event in 1772 was the beginning of a 23-year time period that saw Poland extinguished as an independent country until 1918. Poland’s neighbors Austria, Prussia, and Russia (but especially Russia) had long interfered in Poland’s internal politics. A military revolt against Russian influence, the Confederation of Bar, 1768-1772, was defeated and ended with the three neighbor powers taking parts of Polish territory. A manifesto proclaiming the territorial seizures was issued Aug. 5, 1772, and the Polish Sejm (parliament) was forced to sign the treaty on Sept. 18, 1773.

Prussia took over much of the Vistula delta, but not the city of Danzig and its immediate territories, and also the lower Vistula Valley, up to but not including the city of Thorn. So all of the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta, except in Danzig, came under Prussian rule while those farthest upstream in the Vistula Valley, such as Deutsch Wymyschle, stayed part of Poland for the time being.

On Sept. 27, 1772, representatives of the newly acquired territories, including Mennonite representatives, were called together at the great castle in Marienburg to pay homage to the new Prussian king. The Mennonites provided 2 fattened oxen, 400 pounds of butter, 20 cheeses, 50 pairs of chickens, and 50 pairs of ducks for the banquet. They also handed in a request that their religious freedom and freedom from military conscription be recognized.

This time period of the last quarter of the 18th century saw quite a bit of Mennonite migration into territories that were near or part of the



Map of partitions of Poland (from Wikimedia Commons)

partitions. Prussia received control of more of the Netze District, near where Mennonites from the Vistula Valley had settled just a few years earlier in 1765, but their villages were on the Prussian side of the border; the area just to the east of them, within a few miles, changed from Polish to Prussian in 1772. In the next few years, Mennonites of Swiss background in 1781 moved to Galicia which became part of Austria in the later partitions; Mennonites from the Vistula Valley and from Swiss background moved to Michalin in 1787 and in 1801 to Volhynia, both of which still remained Polish in 1772 but came under Russian rule in the later partitions.

The Prussians conducted a census of their new territory in 1772, which is the earliest comprehensive source of demographic information on the Vistula Delta Mennonites. The Prussian bureaucracy also required Mennonites to start keeping records of births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths, which meant that the Vistula Delta congregations began keeping regular church membership books. (A few congregations, or individual elders, had kept less complete records earlier.)

The 250th anniversary of the next partition is coming in 20 years, 2043. Presumably you're waiting with bated breath.

## Request from the Olender Ethnographic Park at Toruń

Dear Visitors,

The Ethnographic Museum in Toruń opened the Olender Ethnographic Park in Wielka Nieszawka in 2018. The Park is dedicated to the life of German settlers and Mennonites on Polish lands.

We care very much about collecting memories of as many people as we can who were either born on Polish or Prussian lands or whose parents or even grandparents originated from these areas, as they might know the stories from conversations. Our request concerns both the people coming from Żuławy and Lower Vistula Valley and also from Masovia region.

Our intention is to collect these memories in as much detail as possible and in the future, to publish them in the publication by our Museum. It is important because these stories may be lost and forgotten and we are sure they deserve our commemoration, especially for the future generations. It is the last moment when this kind of memories can still be captured.

We are certain that such a publication would be very valuable not only for your community, but also for the Polish people within whom negative stereotypes still exist. Therefore, it would have a bit educational aspect and would make contribution to spreading tolerance. It would be optimal for such publication to be trilingual (in Polish, German, and English) so it could reach the widest group of recipients. We hope that it would also become an important source for learning the history of Mennonites living in these areas and their everyday life.

In order to simplify, below we are presenting several aspects around which the memories can be prepared, not avoiding the difficult and painful matters (both from the Nazi period and the banishment after the war):

- *Family stories* – how big the families were, what the education of people was, what family relations were kept, what the family celebrations looked like (christenings, weddings, funerals,



birthdays, names' days), what the relations and family bonds looked like (women, men, children, the elderly)

- *Houses and farms* – how the interiors were organized (furniture, equipment), how the walls were painted, where people slept, what was in the kitchen, etc., what decorations of the walls in rooms were, if there were any pictures (what kind of), photographs (what kind of), where the furniture was bought most often (which from the craftsmen and which from the stores (where stores were)), how everyday life was organized in the house and on the farm (how the farms, wells, and fences looked like);

- *Food* – what was eaten during common days and holidays;

- *Clothing* – what people wore (differences between married and unmarried women and married and unmarried men; clothing of children and of the elderly), if married women wore caps (how they looked like), what was worn every day and during holidays, if the clothing was made by oneself (if so, how), who sewed it or where was it bought, what everyday clothing and holiday clothing looked like (differences in styles and fabrics, where the clothing was bought most often, and what kind of);

- *Landscape* – what the region looked like, how the greenery was organized (trees, orchards, gardens (both vegetable and flower garden)), which flowers were grown in pots and which in the gardens adjoining to houses;

- *Work* – what people did in the houses and on the farms, if the jobs were taken up outside of place of residence (if so, where), where people shopped, to which towns people went to and how, how the work around the household was organized (both on the field and the farm and what the rhythm of the day looked like, which tools were used, what was grown on the fields and bred on the farms;

- *Neighborhood* – what neighborhood and friendship relations looked like (also with Poles, if they happened to live nearby);

- *Religious life* – its role in life, the way it affected everyday life, items connected to the cult; how, when, and where people prayed in the houses; churches and what they looked like

inside, how the cemeteries were taken care of, which plants were planted there, how the graves were decorated;

- *Family mementos*;

- *Stories from the Second World War period* – how the relations shaped after the start of the war in 1939, the participation of men in the war, stories of leaving the places of residence and departure to Germany or other countries, which belongings were taken.

Of course, we do realize that not everyone feels confident at storytelling but the memories can be of various length (both short and long). All of them are extremely valuable to us. The point is to gather as much information as possible and through that to PRESERVE MEMORY. Each memory has its own individual value, even if someone feels that their story is very common, for us it would be PRICELESS.

It would be an additional value if you could also present us with photography scans which show your families' lives up until 1945 and scans of family documents. Each photography, along with the persons' portrayals, would be very valuable to us and would bring a lot both to the planned publication and to our project.

Thank you for taking time to read this information. We invite you to share your memories!

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## Dutch and German Partner Organizations

The Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen (Mennonite Organization Netherlands-Poland) has sent out its last newsletter. Their board members are getting older and the interest in their projects among the Dutch congregations has declined. They noted with satisfaction that the goals they set for themselves over thirty years ago have been fulfilled with a lot of help from Poles, especially Arkadius Rybak and Boleslaw Klein. Much restoration work of Mennonite cemeteries and other sites has been done. Mennonite history is now much more alive and recognized in Poland. Polish initiatives on Mennonite history are numerous and highly visible. The international contacts and the bank balance of the organization have been transferred to the International Menno Simons Foundation, also located in the Netherlands. The funds have been earmarked for an initiative by Dr. Michal Targowski from the University of Torun to work on a project related to the Mennonite cemetery of Przechówko.

The Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen (Mennonite Working Group on Poland) reported on their plans for a tour of Mennonite sites in Poland in July 2023. They have graciously invited our tour group to meet with their group on two occasions, once for worship in the former Mennonite church building in Preußisch Rosengart/Rozgart and a second time for a chapel service in the former Protestant church in Neuteich/Nowy Staw followed by supper together in Mielenz/Miłoradz hosted by the local history club Dawna Wozownia (The Former Coach Shed).

## Deutsch Wymyschle/Nowe Wymyśle

A rural branch of the regional museum in Płock (Muzeum Mazowieckie w Płocku), the [Open-Air Museum](#) of Vistula Settlements in Wiączęmin Polski (Skansen Osadnictwa Nadwiślańskiego w Wiączęminie Polskim), has taken up the task of restoring the Mennonite church building in Deutsch Wymyschle/Nowe Wymyśle, an important stop on our tours. Last year the owner of the building, the government of the commune or county of Gąbin, donated the building to the Voivod (or province) of Mazovia. This government in turn charged the branch of their museum in Wiączęmin Polski with carrying out the renovations and running the site as part of their open-air museum. Plans include connecting the two sites along with other sites of Mennonite settlement in a bike path. The church building is currently in bad shape, with the roof already partly collapsed. After World War II it was used in part as a movie theater and as the offices of a magazine before standing empty the last couple of decades. Now the local government is putting their resources and attention into preserving this important piece of Mennonite history. Although no specific timeline has been announced, the clarification of responsibility and ownership of the project is a significant step forward.

([See this Polish news article.](#))