

# Mennonite-Polish Studies Association NEWSLETTER

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January 2024

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association

This is the ninth 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.

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## 2024 Tour is Still Open!

The 2024 tour is scheduled for July 12 to 24, 2024, and we still have room to take more people. Please email Mark Jantzen at [mjantzen@bethelks.edu](mailto:mjantzen@bethelks.edu) if you are interested in joining us!

## 2023 Tour

The 2023 Mennonite Experience in Poland History Tour led by Mark Jantzen and Richard Thiessen took place from June 30 to July 8 with twenty-five participants. We have noticed over the years an increasing amount of interest and engagement with Mennonite history by local people and institutions and this tour broke all records for getting into the media.



*Changed view of former Deutsch Kasun church building, summer 2023*

We did not notice much impact of the war in Ukraine during our stay in Poland, although the Poles have done an amazing job of hosting at least a million and a half refugees. One visible sign was the new name for the street in Warsaw that runs past the Russian embassy, which is now called Victims of Russian Aggression Street.

Our first stop at the former Mennonite church building of Deutsch Kasun presented a radically altered view. The trees along one side had all been cut down, so the building is much more visible from the road. In addition, a new exit from the highway that runs past it has been cut in the dirt close to the building. The people still living there are not sure what these changes will mean for them, but undoubtedly everything will look different again when we go back this summer.

As we reported in our last newsletter, a rural branch of the regional museum in Płock (Muzeum Mazowieckie w Płocku), the Open-Air Museum of Vistula Settlements in Wiączemin Polski (Skansen Osadnictwa Nadwiślańskiego w Wiączeminie Polskim), has taken up the task of restoring the Mennonite church building in Deutsch Wymyschle/ Nowe Wymyśle. The building was in very bad shape when we visited, with the holes in the roof even larger. The side door was now closed off and the building was marked with yellow signs warning people to stay out. It is a relief to



*Deutsch Wymyschle church building, summer 2023*

know that this building will be taken care of just in time. We will stop here again in summer and see what progress has been made.

We arrived at the Olender Ethnographic Park in Obernessau/Wielka Nieszawka on an auspicious day. The open-air museum was hosting a community celebration with kids' activities, crafts, historical re-enactors, and even a mechanical cow for the kids to milk. Our group photo was taken here. Museum staff informed us they were thinking ahead to 2024, which would be the sesquicentennial of Elder Wilhelm Ewert's migration from there to Hillsboro, Kansas,



*Summer 2023 tour group at Olender Park*

where he helped to found the Brudertal Mennonite Church. They hope to produce a small exhibit to commemorate the occasion and invited our group to participate in a special event in the summer of 2024. A number of people in our group were direct descendants of Ewert, a surprise for everyone to find this connection embodied in our tour and a good reminder of how we are indebted to local people for preserving and commemorating our history for and with us.

On July 3 we visited the former Mennonite cemetery at Przechówko, where we were greeted by Dr. Michał Targowski from University of Toruń, Paweł Knapik, the vice-mayor of Świecie, Jerzy Wójcik, chairman of the Świecie City Council, and Michał Wieśniewski, president of the local foundation, Lapidaria: Forgotten Cemeteries of Pomerania and Kuyavia, which is working to clear and survey the cemetery, and a TV crew. All of these local institutions have been working together to preserve this important place in Mennonite history, which is among other things the home congregation of the large Alexanderwohl and Hoffungsaus congregations in Kansas. The main North American connection has been with Rod Ratzlaff and the project has also been supported by the Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen (Mennonite Organization Netherlands-Poland) as their final project and the Mennonite-Polish Studies Association. The news spot on Świecie 24 that resulted from our visit can be viewed on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5MMdPUVZIE>, where you can see the progress made on clearing the cemetery even if you cannot understand the commentary and interviews We were also in the local newspapers:

<https://www.radiopik.pl/2,111017,holendrzy-i-amerykanie-pomoga-wyremontowac-mennon&s=3&si=3&sp=3>

and <https://swiecie.eu/mennonici-z-usa-odwiedzili-mennonicko-ewangelicki-cmentarz-w-przechowku/>.

After arriving in Gdańsk and touring the Old Town, we drove out to Preußisch Rosengart/Rozgart and had a joint chapel service with the German Mennonite tour group led by Johann Peter Wiebe. We met the group again a couple of days later for a service in the former Protestant church in Neuteich/Nowy Staw followed by a meal all together in Mielenz/Miłoradz, hosted by the local history club Dawna Wozownia (The Former Coach Shed). Several members of our group found friends or relatives among the German group, so the evening ended up as a big Mennonite family reunion hosted by our new Polish friends. The local cemetery has the grave of Maria Fast Dyck (1829-1857) whose premature death left behind a widower, Peter Dyck, to raise several small children. He remarried and moved to Whitewater, Kansas, in 1876. The story brought out local reporters again, so that our group appeared in the local paper, *Dziennik Bałtycki* (Baltic Daily): <https://dziennikbaltycki.pl/mennonici-wracaja-na-zulawy-goscie-z-ameryki-i-europyprzylechali-do-ojczyzny-przodkow/ar/c1-17718153> (Translations of the newspaper articles are here:

<https://mla.bethelks.edu/information/mpsa/newsletters/2023%20Polish%20newspaper%20articles%20translated.pdf>)

Another quite different indication of local interest in Mennonite history was the creation of a Pokémon

gymnasium at the site of the Heubuden/Stogi cemetery. Pokémon is a Japanese media universe that involves movies, video games, and in this case an augmented reality game Pokémon Go that shows video creatures overlaid on your smart phone in the locations one visits in real life. These creatures can be developed with various interactions and used in competitions with other players. Places with more traffic are given virtual gyms where humans and their virtual creatures can hang out and develop their skills. One has to wonder what the Mennonites back in the day would have made of this new feature in the area where they used to tie up their horses during church services?

Our last day on the coast included a sobering tour of the Stutthof concentration camp, followed by a short drive to the Baltic Sea beach for ice cream. 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, which had just opened a new visitors' center and redesigned the beginning and end of their tour. We also visited 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.

### Elder Wilhelm Ewert of Obernessau



One hundred fifty years ago this year Elder Wilhelm Ewert and his family migrated from Obernessau in Prussia, today Mała Nieszawka, in Poland, to Marion County, Kansas. He was a prominent leader in efforts to avoid the military draft being imposed in those days in both the German and Russian Empires. He visited the Russian Empire and North America along with other delegates to find suitable alternatives for Mennonites to live out their

non-resistant faith. After settling in Kansas near the town of Hillsboro, he became the founding elder of Brudertal Mennonite Church. The cemetery of his congregation back in Prussia was in the neighboring village of Wielka Nieszawka or Großnessau. Today the Olendarski Ethnographic Museum, an open-air museum dedicated to telling the story of Dutch and Mennonite settlers in this area, is centered around this former Mennonite cemetery. The museum is planning a small exhibit this year around this important anniversary.

Wilhelm Ewert was born February 23, 1829, in Stronske, just across the river from Thorn/Toruń. He was the youngest child and the only one from his father Peter's third wife, Maria Thiart, who died just a couple of years after his birth. He received a better education than his older siblings, attending the Bürgerschule, a type of high school, in Thorn. He trained to be a carpenter and builder, but after marrying Anna Jantz on May 30, 1854, and acquiring thereby a well-established farm, he turned to agriculture. He was baptized in 1843 by Elder David Adrian and elected preacher in 1860. By that time his oldest brother Peter had become the elder. At the request of the congregations in Russian Poland in Deutsch Wymysle und Deutsch Kazun, the two in 1863 had planned to travel there together to assist in elder elections, but the Polish January Uprising against Russia made travel too dangerous. Peter's death early in 1864 changed those plans even further. Wilhelm instead arranged for elders Peter Bartel from Graudenz and Johann Penner from Thiensdorf to travel with him in June and July. Thirty-two young people were baptized in Deutsch Kazun and six in the branch congregation in Wola Wodzyńska. H. Bartel was elected elder in Deutsch Kazun and Gerhard Bartel in the Frisian portion of the congregation in Wymysle. After his return, Wilhelm Ewert was elected elder for the Obernessau congregation.

In the 1860s in Prussia, the Mennonite principle of non-resistance was sorely tested by three wars and a change in law in 1868 requiring that they serve as non-combatants. In response, in 1870 Ewert traveled extensively with Preacher Peter Dyck from Tiede throughout the Russian Empire looking for options to settle there. Yet by then it was clear that the military service exemption in Russia was also under threat. Back home in Prussia, Ewert signed many petitions with other elders to government officials seeking to change the law or regain an exemption for those Mennonites who were not willing to serve. Most Mennonites in Prussia, however, were willing to serve as regular soldiers or as non-combatants at this time. Elder Jakob Mannhardt of Danzig, who was also the editor of the Mennonite newspaper, *Mennonitische Blätter*, wrote a series of articles in 1872 making the argument for Mennonites to join the army, although he preferred that they take up the option of non-combatant medical service. After waiting for almost a year

in vain for the main leader of opposition to military service, Elder Gerhard Penner of Heubuden, to respond in writing, Ewert finally wrote his own response in 1873, a powerful critique of Mennonites' accommodating to German nationalism at the expense of their traditional loyalty to the biblical way of peace.

By the time his article was printed, he was in North America as the only Prussian delegate to join those from Russia who were looking for new settlement areas. Ewert visited Manitoba, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas as well as Mennonites living in Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. He did not spend much time in Manitoba and was unimpressed with the loose attitudes toward alcohol he found there. He set his heart on Marion County already during this first visit. He arrived there in 1874 with the main wave of migration from Russia while most other Prussians only came in 1876 and settled east of Newton, Kansas, or west of Beatrice, Nebraska. Only a handful migrated with him from his own congregation, including the Franz Funk family.

After arriving in Kansas and establishing the Brudertal congregation, Ewert was active in wider Mennonite activities. He chaired the Kansas Conference of Mennonites for seven years. He encouraged mission work and especially education. His son Heinrich was a teacher at the Halstead Seminary from its inception in 1883 until he was called to start the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, in 1891. Wilhelm was a key supporter of the Halstead school and its successor, Bethel College, although he died in June 1887, just as Bethel was getting organized.

Wilhelm's wife Anna Jantz died a few months before him. Both were buried in the Brudertal cemetery. Their graves were moved to the Haven of Rest cemetery east of Hillsboro when the Brudertal church and cemetery were flooded by the Marion County reservoir project in the 1960s.

## "Bringing Deutsch Wymyschle, A Forgotten Mennonite Village, Back to Memory"

*Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Fall Conference at Lendrum Mennonite Church, Edmonton., September 23, 2023*

*Observations by Bill Franz*

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The conference may be viewed at:

<https://youtube.com/live/YA2YozDRnDs?feature=share>

Approximately eighty people gathered at Lendrum Mennonite Church in Edmonton for the MHSA Fall Conference, with additional people participating from afar

by YouTube. The theme of the conference arose from Frieda Claassen's personal connection to the village of Deutsch Wymyschle in Poland, where she was born prior to WW2, and from the research interests of Colin Neufeldt and Wojtek Marchlewski. Colin's maternal family came from this area, and he has collaborated with Wojtek, a Polish historian interested in the Mennonite sojourn in Poland.

MHSA Chair, Katie Harder, welcomed us to the conference. Katie expressed gratitude for those that were able to participate in the Russlaender 100 tour events this past summer, and for those supporting the work of MHSA and the archives. She thanked Lendrum Mennonite Church for hosting the event, and, in particular, Dave Toews and others at Lendrum for planning and helping at this conference. Katie reflected on the variety of human responses to war and suggested that we ponder how we might respond in such situations.

Lendrum pastor Sherri Guenther Trautwein welcomed us to Lendrum. She has appreciated learning more about Mennonite history. Master of Ceremonies Colin Neufeldt then introduced the speakers, Frieda, Wojtek, and himself.

Frieda and Wojtek presented on Frieda's childhood growing up in Deutsch Wymyschle, with Wojtek asking questions to Frieda's reminiscences. Her post-WW2 experiences were traumatic, to say the least. As an eleven-year-old girl, she was "farmed out" as farm labour to Polish farmers. Times were very difficult for everyone, and many of the Poles took out their revenge on those of German descent for the harms they had suffered under German occupation. She related how she, her siblings, and her mother were ordered to stand against a wall to be shot. Her mother asked if she could pray with her children first, and after they prayed, the guard lifted his weapon and did not shoot. Rations were inadequate for everyone, and in particular, for the Germans. At the collective farm, Frieda could see that her sister was becoming very thin. She told her mother that she would run away, and she did. She then would save small morsels of her own food so she could bring them to her sister. On one of her return visits, someone asked, "Isn't this the girl who ran away?" Her mother told her to leave immediately. Frieda's mother never despaired; she told Frieda that things would get better, and she always prayed with Frieda before she left.

Frieda lamented about how inhuman war and suffering has become normalized. She said that suffering can become a path to love. In her case, it took a second conversion. "What makes it for people to become good?", she asked. A Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker in post-war Poland found Frieda and her family and helped them move to the British Zone in Germany, where they were reunited with her father who had been released from a POW camp. The family was able to come to Canada in late 1949 and settled in Coaldale, Alberta.

Wojtek and Colin then spoke of their research, based on a thorough analysis of historical evidence from many different sources, including archival records (in Poland, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.), personal interviews, church records, biographies, and academic books and articles. They always try to present people's individual stories within a broader historical perspective. Their first article, "Divided Loyalties: The Political Radicalization of Wymysle Niemieckie Mennonites in Interwar Poland (1918-39)," was published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* by Goshen College in October 2022. Their second article, "Escape to Freedom and Return to Bondage," is an analysis of who could flee (and who could not) from Deutsch Wymyschle ahead of the Red Army offensive of January 1945. It will be published in *The Polish Review* by University of Illinois Press. They are now starting their third article. As a Polish historian, Wojtek can open doors that Colin cannot. They showed a variety of historical documents from WW2 and the pre- and post-war eras obtained from archives.

Wojtek was invited to present a poster display at the "Mennonites in Mazovia in 18th-20th centuries" conference at Wionczemin Museum. The conference was held at the open-air museum in Wionczemin, near Deutsch Wymyschle, in November 2022. He invited Frieda and Colin to participate as well. Colin was unable to get away, and Chris Friesen, the former pastor at Lendrum was invited. Chris, now in Toronto, is writing a novel based on Frieda's life and Wojtek has suggested it could be turned into a one-act play in Polish. Frieda was presented with flowers at the conference, and she asked that the former Mennonite church in Deutsch Wymyschle be made into a place where people of different faiths and experiences can come together to talk and to promote peace. Wojtek announced that funding from the Polish government has just been committed to restore the building for this purpose.

Chris Friesen then read, by Zoom, from his novel, still a work in progress. He can be contacted by email if people are interested in receiving a copy. It will be a poignant read. Chris's email address is [friesenbiz@gmail.com](mailto:friesenbiz@gmail.com).

Dave Toews then closed the formal part of the conference with his reflection that he's drawn to people's stories. "The past is always with us." When Frieda returned from Poland, Dave thought her story and the research of Colin and Wojtek would be of interest to many. We should celebrate and commemorate that Frieda, her family, and our ancestors were able to come to Canada and live here in peace. He referred to several things he heard today, one from Frieda that "what makes us, shakes us, breaks us". Wojtek wrote a book about the Mennonites in Poland complete with recipes, as he reasoned that people like to eat and if the food is good, they will keep that book with recipes. Dave spoke of Colin's maternal family history in Deutsch Wymyschle, and how this has become a research

focus to benefit others as well. Finally, Dave prayed for the work of MHSA and for the delicious Faspa that awaited us.

## Visit to Franzthal and Brenkenhofswalde

*In late summer 2023, Rod Ratzlaff from Olathe, Kansas, and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz, linguistics professor from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, visited the sites of the former Neumark or Netzebruch villages, today in western Poland, where Mennonites from the Vistula Valley lived from the 1760s until most migrated to Russia in the 1830s. This is an abbreviated version of Rod's report of the visit.*

During the trip to Głęboczek/Franzthal and Błotnica/Brenkenhofswalde, Tomasz Wicherkiewicz and I focused on looking at the churches, cemeteries, and oldest houses. Magdalena Szydełko (Magda), the mayor of Stare Kurowo (Głęboczek and Błotnica are in Stare Kurowo Gmina) was our guide. Magda is not an historian at all, but she's lived in these villages all her life, knows all the people, and is very enthusiastic. She's curious to learn more and would even like to add some Mennonite history for the local schoolchildren.

*Impressions:* The area is generally depressed and poor. The ground is very spongy, and one can almost feel it give way beneath the feet. It strikes me as a bad place to build structures due to instability. The soil is fertile but perhaps not good for crops. There are very few large trees but many bushes, shrubs, fruit trees, and some willows, all covered in weeds, grasses and vines. The local clay is yellow so many buildings are built of yellow bricks. There has been little effort to preserve history in the area, particularly history related to Germans. Very few old buildings remain in Błotnica while quite a few still stand in Głęboczek.



Church in Błotnica

*Churches:* The Błotnica church strikes me as fairly typical late-nineteenth century Lutheran style. It is not currently in use due to the poor condition of the roof. According to Wikipedia, it was built at the end of the nineteenth century by Lutherans and consecrated as a Catholic church in 1946 (Church of St. Michael the Archangel). It does apparently stand in the same spot as the Mennonite church did.

The church in Głęboćek is still in use but the building strikes me as in very poor repair. The floor is badly buckling and caving due to the unstable nature of the ground upon which it stands. Built on a stone foundation, it is in the same spot as the Mennonite church but we apparently do not know when it was built (Mennonites built a church here in 1787). According to Wikipedia, this building was consecrated as a Catholic church (Church of St. Barbara) in 1946.



*Aerial view of the two villages; cemetery areas circled in red*

*Cemeteries:* Mennonite records do not seem to clearly note the presence or location of Brenkenhofswalde and Franzthal cemeteries. B.H. Unruh gives the clearest mention of the Brenkenhofswalde cemetery but does not indicate location. Confusion about location could be because of the wet nature of the ground in the villages. It looks to me as if the water table in both villages is very high; in digging, one will very soon hit water. The ground generally slopes upwards to the north. The railway (built in the 1840s), about a mile north of the villages, is likely built on more solid ground. Cemeteries now associated with Błotnica and Głęboćek are directly north of each village, very near the railway line, both on small terps or raised areas. Błotnica cemetery is at about 52°51'19.5"N 15°41'21.0"E and Głęboćek cemetery at about 52°51'27.6"N 15°44'51.1"E. Both these locations appear as large clumps of trees on Google satellite view and both are similar size – about 200-foot square plots.

*Village layout:* Głęboćek in particular was a bit strange because it had no road running through the middle of the village. The road ran along the southern perimeter, but the houses are generally aligned along the canal. Thus, houses have long driveways to the south out to the road. Błotnica was originally set up in the same way but a road has been

built through the middle of the village and most houses have been rebuilt along it.

The Petrie Canal, built about the time when the Mennonites arrived in the area, runs through both villages. The canal is neither wide nor deep but provided crucial drainage for both villages. Today it is not well-maintained, and Magda pointed out that neglect has had detrimental effects.



*Canal between the two villages*

## Przechówko Developments

You can keep track of new developments with the Przechówko cemetery and related historical activities at this Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/przechowkomemory>