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## Were Prussian Mennonites *Die Stillen im Lande*?

by Ron Froese

### *The Move to Prussia*

In modern societies, the wishes of minorities are either highly vocalized by an aggressive group that asserts its rights, or are significantly muted by an unobtrusive group that seeks to remain on society's fringes. Mennonites, who would identify more readily with the latter group, were at times protected, and at times harassed while living in various Prussian regions, both urban and rural. Their treatment varied by both time and by place. Suburban Mennonites did not receive as thorough a protection as their rural co-religionists. "*Die Stillen im Lande*" was exactly that, the quiet in the country, not to be confused with 'the harried in the city'.

Sixteenth-century Poland fervently desired growth. Territorially, it was the largest country in Europe, including present-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine. Economically, it was behind western Europe so it was open for business expansion. In the 1500s, an expanding economy



*The former United Flemish and Frisian Mennonite Church in Gdansk (formerly Danzig). (Photo by Peter J. Klassen.)*

set the stage for the arrival of the Mennonites. Religious convictions drove the Mennonites from Flanders, Brabant and the Dutch provinces, and economic opportunity attracted them to Prussia.<sup>1</sup> They received protection because they contributed to the economy. Mennonites did not evangelize nor demand political rights. They only wanted to practice their religion privately.

As such they were considered *die Stillen im Lande* and often (though not always) were granted religious toleration.

The Poland of the 1500s-1600s was essentially a medieval society without inalienable individual rights. The only right a person had was to belong to a group that was protected in society. Since Mennonites did not belong to one of the recognized churches

of Poland, they had no political, social or economic rights or privileges. In order to survive in such a society they had to obtain licenses or permits to guarantee protection in Polish society.

The treatment that Mennonites in Polish Prussia received was far from universal. The policies of the national, provincial and urban governments towards Mennonites were inconsistent by place and time. The treatment of

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urban Mennonites differed from the treatment of rural Mennonites. As long as Mennonites remained *die Stillen im Lande*, they were not harassed for religious reasons. However, their industry, which initially earned them a legacy with the Polish crown, came to haunt them as their accrued wealth incurred jealousy.

Initially, Mennonite refugees

to Prussia were either: urban skilled artisans of Dutch or Flemish extraction; or rural Frisian or Dutch farmers. In the heated religious atmosphere of the Low Countries, authorities had persecuted Anabaptists/ Mennonites for their evangelism. They understood that their ‘heresy’ would be tolerated in Poland, but that evangelism would invite persecution and possible expulsion. Hence the epithet *“die Stillen im Lande”* became appropriate for the Polish experience of Mennonites.

### Urban Conflict

Most of the first Mennonite refugees arrived by ship through the bustling seaports of Danzig or Elbing, each with international communities. Urban political battles that pitched these Mennonite communities against the burghers, or citizens of these cities became commonplace over the next two centuries. For survival, Mennonites would need some form of protection. In Danzig, the local Catholic bishop provided protection by allowing them to settle in Schottland and Stolzenburg, ecclesiastical lands outside the city walls. Eventually, the nobles who controlled the city government came to the defense of Mennonites because the latter produced goods that offered direct competition to products of the city’s guilds.<sup>2</sup> This suited their

purposes because the patricians were seeking to break the guilds’ economic power. These patricians were trying now to abolish or reduce the power of the guilds because their products were too expensive and they restricted trade.

The urban conflict was further complicated by religious affairs. Sometimes the members of the upper clergy harbored Mennonites and even promoted their high standard of craftsmanship (which lined clerical pockets as well). In Polish Prussian cities, the Lutherans outnumbered the Catholics. Catholic alliance with Mennonites was a veiled attack on Lutheran control of the guilds.<sup>3</sup>

In some respects, charters from the Polish crown protected Mennonites much as they protected the Jews. Their charters set up a separate Jewish society with a separate court system. These charters, however, did not allow Jews to live within the city walls unless restricted to specified areas. The distinguishing point between Jews and Mennonites was that the charters that protected Jews protected them everywhere in Poland, whereas most charters extended to Mennonites were intended for specific groups in specific locations.

For urban Mennonites, opposition arose primarily from guild members. The guilds instigated expulsion of

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The region was known as “Royal Prussia” (*königliche Preussen*), in contrast to the territory held by the Teutonic Order, which was known as Prussia. When the Order’s lands were secularized, it became known as the Duchy of Prussia. In 1701, the elector of Brandenburg became the king of Prussia (*königreiche Preussen*). Not to be confused with *königliche Preussen*, the Poles designated their portion now as “Polish Prussia.” Karin Friedrich, *The Other Prussia*

(Cambridge, England: University Press, 2000), 149. Another designation was “*Preussen Polnischen Antheils*,” that is, the part of Prussia under Polish control. When Polish Prussia became part of the kingdom of Prussia, the whole territory was divided into West and East Prussia.

<sup>2</sup>A. Brückner, “Polish Cultural Life in the Seventeenth Century,” in Reddaway et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Poland*, 566; Aleksander Gieysztor, *A History of Poland* (Warsaw: PWN, Polish Scientific

Publishers, 1979), 129, 131.

<sup>3</sup>Kazimierz Mezynski, *From the History of Mennonites in Poland* (Warsaw: Akademia Rolnicza w Warszawie, 1975), 15f.

<sup>4</sup>Wolfgang Froese, “Stets hilfreich und tolerant entgegengekommen? Die Politik des Elbinger Rates gegenüber den Mennoniten bis 1772,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 49 (1992): 57. George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirkville, MD: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 616; John Friesen,

Anabaptists in Elbing by a royal order, as early as 1550.<sup>4</sup> In 1571, the city issued another decree of expulsion.<sup>5</sup> By 1600, Elbing

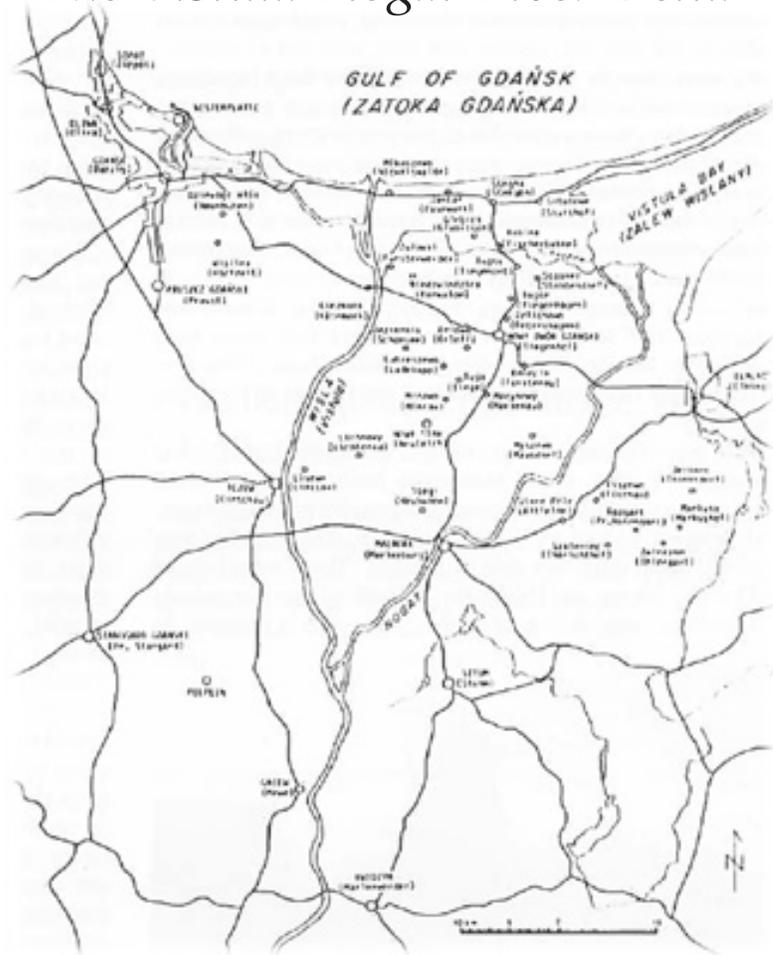
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restricted city commerce of Moravian Hutterites.<sup>6</sup> The guilds also attempted, but failed, to thwart Mennonite involvement in the city’s brandy distilling business.<sup>7</sup>

Danzig never offered citizenship to Mennonites until 1800, and the opposition of Danzig guilds was more abrasive. With the introduction of silk weaving in Elbing, the city council offered citizenship to Mennonites. The introduction of lace-making into Danzig took a different course. From 1623 to 1750, Danzig’s lace-making guild constantly sought protection from Mennonite lace-makers, who had introduced the skill.<sup>8</sup>

In the seventeenth century, many Danzig guilds relentlessly pursued legislation to restrict or expel their archrivals. According to the records, they raised the issue at every council session.<sup>9</sup> In

## The Vistula-Nogat River Delta



Most of the Mennonites who migrated to Prussia beginning in the 1530s settled in the Vistula-Nogat River Delta. This triangular area was defined by Danzig to the northwest, Elbing to the northeast and Marienberg to the south. It was a very small area—the distance in a straight line from Danzig to Elbing was less than forty miles. For purposes of comparison, most Mennonites in Prussia lived in an area roughly the same size as a triangle between Fresno, Visalia and Reedley. Mennonites eventually spread beyond this original area, creating new settlements to the south along the Vistula River and in other parts of the country. Many left Prussia beginning in the late 1700s, at which time Mennonites first began to settle in South Russia. This map originally appeared in “A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia” by Peter J. Klassen (Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989).

“Mennonites in Poland: An Expanded Historical View,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986): 96; Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten in ihren religiösen und sozialen Leben in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen* (Weierhof, Pfalz, Germany: Mennonischer Geschichtsverein, 1978), 1:60f.  
5 Sam Myovich, “A Review Essay of ‘Mennonites in Danzig, Elbing and the Vistula Lowlands in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century and in the

Eighteenth Century: A Study in the History of a Small Confessional Community’ by Edmund Kizik.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 70 (April 1996): 223; Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1: 143.  
6 *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* (Gotha, 1912), 447f. as cited in Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1:73f.  
7 *Archiwum Państwowe w Gdańsku* 369,1/108, 152.  
8 Hermann Gottlieb Mannhardt, *Die Danziger Mennonitengemeinde: Ihre*

*Entstehung und ihre Geschichte von 1569-1919* (Danzig: Selbstverlag der Mennonitengemeinde, 1919), 58ff.  
9 H. G. Mannhardt, 55.  
10 Gotthilf Löschin, *Beiträge zur Geschichte Danzigs und seiner Umgebungen* (Hanover-Döhren, Germany: Verlag v. Hirschheydt, 1977), 12.  
11 Harvey Plett, *Georg Hansen and the Danzig Flemish Mennonite Church: A Study in Continuity* (Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 1991), 96-98.

1621, the brewers' guild accused Mennonite brewers in Schottland of tax evasion and called on the city government to forbid the sale of the Mennonite beer.<sup>10</sup> The council issued decrees in 1622, 1625, 1648, 1649, and 1651 seeking to restrict commercial activities of Mennonites.<sup>11</sup>

In 1664, Danzig brewers petitioned the city council because of the overwhelming advantages (and success) of Mennonite brewers.<sup>12</sup> The city government apparently ignored their grievance, and the guild had to re-submit its complaint to the Polish king, John III Sobieski in 1681.<sup>13</sup>

The pressure of the guilds intensified, yet Mennonites stayed in the Danzig area for centuries. As early as 1552, Anabaptists were expelled from Danzig by royal order.<sup>14</sup> In 1560,<sup>15</sup> 1566,<sup>16</sup> 1572 and 1573 they were expelled out of the city proper and into the suburbs.<sup>17</sup> In 1596, a law forced Mennonites outside the city.<sup>18</sup> The courts, however, did not enforce many of Danzig's edicts.<sup>19</sup>

### Rural Challenges

Rural Mennonites did not face the same challenges as their urban co-religionists, most notably, the opposition of the guilds. The contracts they signed indicate that what was acceptable in one place was not necessarily acceptable in another. For instance, the city of Danzig leased the Reichenberg

estate to Dutch immigrants in 1547.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, Sigismund II issued decrees of expulsion for the urban Elbing and Danzig Mennonites. Simultaneously, the king was confirming contracts to Mennonite farmers on crown lands near Culm (south of Danzig) and in the Vistula delta.<sup>21</sup>

Certain Mennonite farmers and trades people obtained some protections and exemptions from

*“The royal court determined that [the rural delta] Mennonites had improved unproductive lands and that anyone who denied them of their rights and privileges would be punished.”*

the Polish kings. Usually the charter required a sizable money gift in return. This was considered an “application fee” rather than bribery. This application was due at the accession of every new king. Thus, Sigismund III (1587-1632) issued a special privilegium

to protect Mennonites at the beginning of his reign.<sup>22</sup>

The Mennonite lace makers of the Danzig area requested protection from the lace-making guild. Sigismund III issued a privilegium in 1623 which stipulated that they could sell their lace goods at the lucrative annual Prussian fairs. This charter was renewed by Wladislaw in 1644 and by his successor John II Casimir.<sup>23</sup>

Other indications of the porous Polish administration took place during the reigns of Wladislaw IV (1632-1648) and John II Casimir (1648-1668). These kings confirmed the contracts of Mennonite farmers in the Tiegenhagen area of the delta in 1639<sup>24</sup> and in 1650.<sup>25</sup> During the 1640s, however, Wladislaw allowed his treasurer, Haxberg, to expel Mennonites from crown lands in the delta region. They avoided expulsion by submitting a petition appealing to their former rights, which they accompanied with a lump sum of money. The king then issued a charter to Mennonites in December 1642, confirming rights that his predecessors had extended and broadening previous privileges. The document suggests that the crown had consented to the original settlement agreement and that Mennonites had not come illegally as Haxberg implied. The decree “called for an unspecified sum to be paid in exchange for

12 APG, 300,10, 27. Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1:99.

13 Plett, 102.

14 H.G. Mannhardt, 50.

15 Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1:107, 109; Mezynski, 144.

16 Myovich, 225; Gottfried Lengnich, *Ius publicum civitatis Gedanensis oder der Stadt Danzig, Verfassung und Rechte*, 1769, 529 as cited in H.G. Mannhardt, 51.

17 H.G. Mannhardt, 51.

18 Edmund Kizik, “Polnische Forschungen

zur Geschichte der Mennoniten” *Deutsch-Polnisches Jahrbuch, Band IV* (Bremen, Germany: Deutsch-Polnischen Gesellschaft, 1999): 89.

19 Lengnich, *Ius publicum*, 529 as cited in H.G. Mannhardt, 52.

20 Horst Penner, *Ansiedlung Mennonitischer Niederländer in Weichselmündungsgebiet von der Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn der Preussischen Zeit* (Weierhof, Pfalz, Germany, Germany: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1963), 12f. APG

300.7.167b,1.

21 APG, *Privilegium Divi Sigismundi Augusti super Villa Letzkow*.

22 Mezynski, 16.

23 Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1:95-97.

24 APG, 358,32; Penner, *Ansiedlung*, 46, 49; Mezynski, 22.

25 APG, 358,139 as cited in Penner, *Ansiedlung*, 49.

26 APG 358,132; Myovich, 224; Plett, 111-113; Mezynski, 17, 22;

the royal concession and the guarantee of protection.”<sup>26</sup>

Haxberg continued to harrass Mennonites on the delta, requiring a large property tax in 1650. The farmers then requested protection

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from John II Casimir.<sup>27</sup> Previously, Wladislaw had exempted them from this tax. The royal court determined that these Mennonites had built up unproductive lands and that anyone who denied them of their rights and privileges, would be liable to strict punishments.<sup>28</sup>

Polish Prussia bore the brunt of two Swedish invasions in the 1600s, the second of which destroyed the Mennonite settlement in Schottland, outside the walls of Danzig. By 1660, the city forbade reconstruction of these homes along with the exercise of Mennonite religion. Due to the wars with Sweden and the interruption of maritime trade, Danzig’s treasury was depleted.

The city government deemed it necessary to curry favor with its guilds.<sup>29</sup> However, when a royal commission recommended the expulsion of Mennonites (associating them with Antitrinitarians who had been expelled in 1658),<sup>30</sup> the Danzig city council came to their defense.<sup>31</sup> The Antitrinitarians (or Polish Brethren) and the Anabaptists/ Mennonites both adhered to nonresistance and adult baptism<sup>32</sup> but differed on views of the trinity. Others did not understand the distinction.

When the call came for expulsion of the Mennonites, John II Casimir protected these predominantly simple farmers. He did not agree with their beliefs, but he believed that their faith was neither heretical nor unorthodox. Spiritual authorities had granted toleration toward Mennonites and their worship was private. Mennonites, unlike Polish Brethren, had remained unobtrusive. Moreover, their expulsion would devastate the royal income.

The document refers to those harassing the Mennonites as mounting a foolish attack on the public peace. It did not guarantee rights and privileges, it merely granted protection from opposition forces that clamored for the removal of Mennonites. This royal protection was extended only to Mennonites living on the crown estates in

Tiegenhof and Bärwalde.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this royal decree, a Danzig representative in the Prussian parliament requested that Mennonite settlements not be rebuilt. John II Casimir, again king, defended Mennonites. He argued that Mennonites were a protected group, and he offered financial assistance to rebuild their homes.<sup>34</sup> The king threatened the city with retaliation if they prevented the reconstruction.<sup>35</sup> The motives for denying permission to rebuild were largely to protect the cities’ guilds.

The next two Polish kings also had to deal with official’s attempts to expel Mennonites

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from the country. John III Sobieski (1674-1696) was confronted with a corrupt government administrator who sought to ruin Mennonites. The governor of Pommerellen (the western part of Royal Prussia) devised a plan, in 1676, to drive the Mennonites out of the Marienburg district. Having failed to convince the Prussian provincial parliament, he took his

Penner, *Ansiedlung*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Haxberg acted with impunity, knowing that he could not be removed from office.

<sup>28</sup> P. Skwarczyński, “The Constitution of Poland Before the Partitions,” in *The Cambridge History of Poland: From Augustus II to Pilsudski (1697-1935)*, edited by William F. Reddaway, J.H. Penson, O. Halecki, and R. Dyboski (Cambridge: University Press, 1950), 2:61.

<sup>29</sup> APG 358/184.

<sup>30</sup> Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen*

*Mennoniten*, 1:198.

<sup>31</sup> The Antitrinitarians, or Polish Brethren, had been vocal in their support of the Swedish invaders during the war. Peter Brock, “Dilemmas of a Socinian Pacifist in Seventeenth-Century Poland,” *Church History* 63 (June 1994): 196; Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 168. At the Diet of Warsaw in 1658, John II Casimir re-issued a decree that had been used to drive Hussites out

of the realm in 1424. Now he applied it towards Polish Brethren and other groups that collaborated with the enemy during the Cossack and Swedish wars (1648-1660). Stanislas Lubieniecki, *History of the Polish Reformation and Nine Related Documents* (translated and interpreted by George Huntston Williams) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Myovich, 227.

<sup>33</sup> Brock, 190.

<sup>34</sup> APG, 358/184 as cited in Wilhelm

agenda to the national parliament, which also thwarted his efforts. His plan was revealed as a brutal and lucrative land grab,<sup>36</sup> and the king issued a special decree of protection in 1677.<sup>37</sup>

In 1694, John III renewed the charter and added privileges<sup>38</sup> extending to all the inhabitants of the Polish realm and the Prussian states. The official document recounts the exemplary exploits of the rural Mennonites of the Vistula River basin and delta.<sup>39</sup>

In 1697, Augustus II (1697-1704, 1709-1733) was elected king. In his first year, he affirmed all Mennonite privileges. That did not prevent charges of Antitrinitarianism from being brought against them in 1699 and 1700. The attack surfaced at the provincial parliament in Marienburg, with some deputies calling for the absolute expulsion of the Mennonites, others only of their removal from crown lands. The charge of heresy was finally laid to rest, at least as far as the Catholic Church was concerned, in 1699, after a submission of the declaration of their beliefs in Latin and Polish. The pope now considered Mennonites as Christian.<sup>40</sup>

## Die Stillen im Lande

Time and again, Mennonites were told that they could live in Poland if they practiced their religion privately, and did not

attempt to convert others. In the Netherlands of the 1500s, there was considerable Mennonite evangelistic activity, prompting persecution. By the time they reached the Baltic shores of Poland, they had developed a desire to remain separate from society.

As the fortunes of the nation deteriorated in the middle of the seventeenth century, religious intolerance increased. The Polish Brethren became scapegoats for the disasters of seventeenth century. Poland's policy of tolerance became suspect, not its political or economic structures. With the expulsion of the Polish Brethren and the authority's exemption of Mennonites in this order, it is clear that the government perceived no political threat from *die Stillen im Lande*. Even religious arguments against Mennonites made little headway.

The economic arguments were not so much directed against the rural, agrarian-based Mennonites. The perceived enemies of these peasant farmers were those who envied their prosperity. Urban Mennonites of Danzig and Elbing were victimized by the burghers and the guilds because of Mennonite economic advantages.

Another challenging aspect of Polish administration was the number of decrees issued against Mennonites, including expulsion, which were completely ineffective. Economic jealousy

usually prompted attacks from the guilds. The relentless attacks resulted in occasional decrees from city or local governments that were rarely enforced. Otherwise the Mennonite presence in the area would have eventually diminished.

Were it not for the protection of some Catholic bishops, the patrician class in the cities, and the crown policy of guaranteeing rights and freedoms to those Mennonites who farmed its lands, the toleration of Mennonites in Polish Prussia would have been curtailed. As royal protection enhanced the fortunes of rural Mennonites, Mennonite population expanded. As pressures mounted for their urban co-religionists, the number of Mennonites in the cities declined. *Die Stillen im Lande* would be just that, a quiet minority in the countryside, unlike those who were harried in the Prussian cities.

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*This article was adapted from Ron Froese's thesis "The Treatment of Mennonites in Royal Prussia/West Prussia, 1550-1800". The Center for M.B. Studies has a copy of the thesis for anyone with an interest in further details of this story. Ron has a B.A. in Hellenistic Near Eastern Studies from the University of Toronto (1980), M.A. in Semitic Languages and Literature from Fuller Theological Seminary (1982), and an M.A. in History from California State University-Fresno (2002). Ron teaches at Reedley College. He and his wife Norma live and farm near Dinuba, along with their three children.*

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Mannhardt, *Die Wehrfreiheit der altpreussischen Mennoniten. Eine Geschichtliche Erörterung* (Marienburg: Altpreussische Mennoniten-Gemeinde Verlag, 1863), 1-14.

34 Gottfried Lengnich, *Geschichte der preussischen Lande polnisches Anteils* (Danzig, 1724-1727), 7:244.

35 Mezynski, 17f.

36 Lengnich, *Geschichte der preussische Lande polnisches Anteils*, 8: 126f.

37 John "realized that Poland must be a

home, not a prison, for its non-Polish and non-Catholic inhabitants . . ." O. Forst DeBattaglia, "Jan Sobieski, 1674-1696," in *The Cambridge History of Poland: From the Origins to Sobieski*, edited by William F. Reddaway, J.H. Penson, O. Halecki and R. Dyboski (Cambridge: University Press, 1941), 555f. D. Wilhelm Crichton, *Zur Geschichte der Mennoniten* (Königsberg, 1786), 25-27.

38 Plett, 118.

39 *Privilegium of John III Sobieski* (1694) as

cited in W. Mannhardt, 89.

40 Plett, 120; Mezynski, 20; Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, 1:175.