

Genealogy by the Map: Finding Your Roots in Prussia

This past summer, forty of us wandered again through the Polish streets, fields and forests that our ancestors once knew so well. We saw the Wiebe-built bastions of Gdańsk, the massive, ancient fortress of Malbork, the last remaining Dutch windmill at Wikrowo—all dating back to the days when Mennonites lived and worked around and in them.

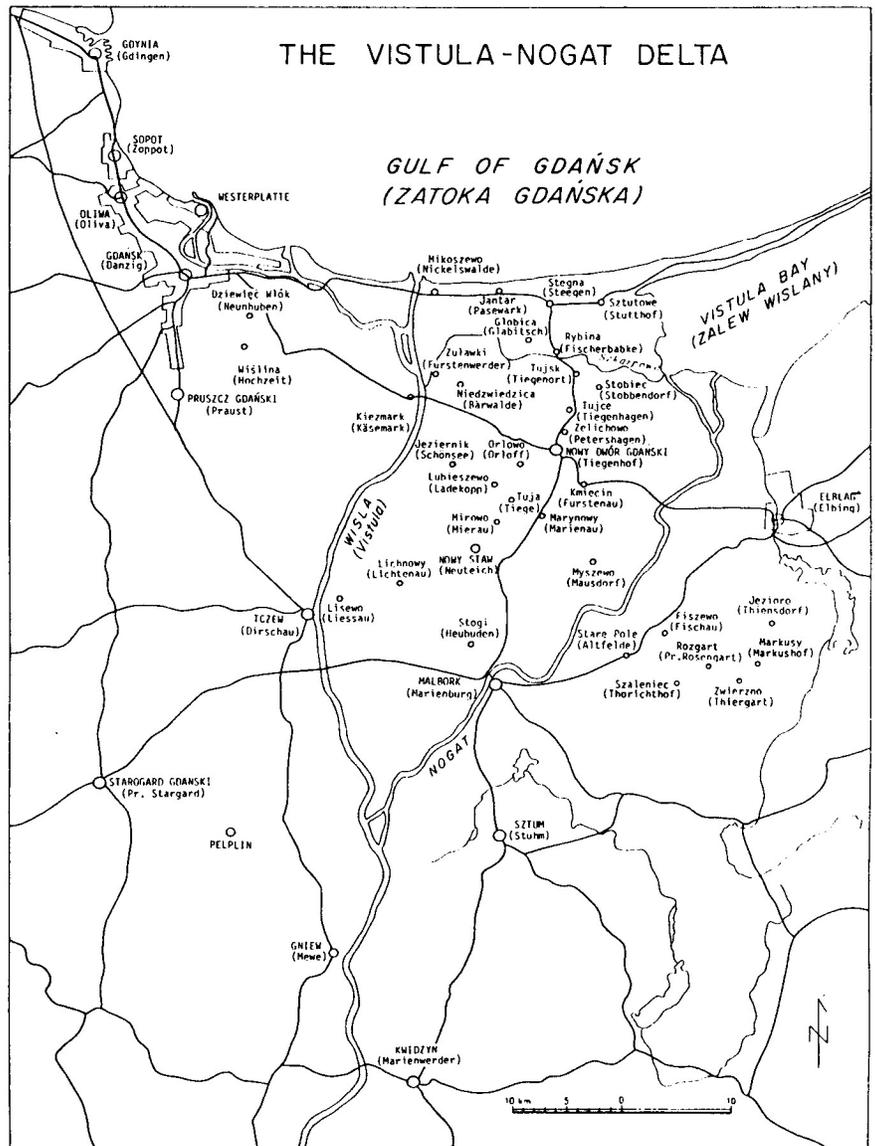
We entered the old churches of the Mennonites and saw the clearings where other ones once were, and we worshipped there ourselves. We trudged along forgotten paths to the old Mennonite cemeteries, now largely overgrown and unkept, and there we found the scattered, time-worn markers that still guard their bones.

For me, it was a revitalizing feeling to see and smell and touch and hear the neighborhoods of my own ancestors. As I retraced their steps throughout this beautiful, remarkable country, I realized that I would never again view my genealogical research as I had before. Prior to this trip into my own past, I had always considered my family studies to be a search for the records, monuments and histories of the dead. However, as a result of this summer pilgrimage, and for as long as I continue to study Mennonite family history, I will consider genealogy to be the search for the times and places and events that still shape us, because they represent what our parents and grandparents, generation after generation, have lived through, and then given as a mysterious gift to us who carry on their heritage and history.

Perhaps the greatest revelation that I experienced this summer was a new and overwhelming recognition that any genealogical research is flawed if it focuses only on family history, and overlooks family geography. Consequently, this begins a new series of genealogical articles in the *Bulletin* that will examine and describe the special assistance that we can gain, in our own family research, from knowing about the geography of our ancestors. I call the series "Genealogy by the Map."

Closer than you think

Somehow, the compact nature of the Mennonite regions in Poland surprised me. The Mennonites in America constitute such a small number of widely-scattered people in an enormous country. Likewise, the nature of distances in Russia is even more extreme: the Soviet Union is so large, and the Mennonite colonies were so many and so isolated. In short,



Map reproduced from Peter J. Klassen, *A Homeland for Strangers (Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989)*.

I've always viewed Mennonites as being "small fish in a very large sea," wherever they were.

Why should the Mennonite areas of Poland—or that portion our ancestors called "Prussia"—be any different? Using this line of reasoning, I always assumed that the Mennonites of Prussia were also scattered and isolated, with little ongoing interaction—each congregation being, in essence, an island of Mennonites in a very alien counter-culture. I was wrong.

We stayed during the first days of our trip in Gdańsk—it used to be called *Danzig* in the German language. This city was one of the first places in Prussia where Mennonites

settled, perhaps as early as the 1530s. Menno Simons himself spoke of visiting the church, and its first elder was reportedly Dirk Phillips, Menno's follower and friend.

The city of Gdańsk lies on the northwest corner of the Vistula River Delta. This delta was originally a marshy, swampy, unwelcome stretch of land when the Mennonites came—perhaps that is why they were allowed to purchase it and live on it. However, they brought with them their Dutch knowledge of reclamation, and turned the swamps over the years into the finest farmlands of Poland, which they still are today.

I always thought of the Vistula Delta as a large, spacious, spread-out area. I was wrong again. It took only a short time for us to drive across the delta to the city of Elbląg, formerly called *Elbing* in German. This city marks the opposite end, the northeast corner of the delta. It took us even less time to drive to the city of Malbork, once called *Marienburg*, located at the southern tip of the delta. The real geographical fact is that this delta is a relatively small, compact area, similar in size to the triangle joining Fresno, Reedley/Dinuba and Kingsburg in California. It is about thirty-four miles from Danzig to Elbing, about eighteen miles from Elbing to Marienburg, and about twenty-seven miles from Marienburg to Danzig.

This very compact triangle of land is the original ancestral homeland of most of our Mennonite forebears. They lived, worked and worshipped in very close proximity to each other, and apparently knew each other very well. The churches they attended were relatively few in number. Three were located at Danzig, Elbing and Heubuden, a small village just outside Marienburg, one church at each corner of this triangle. In



The last remaining Dutch windmill in Poland, located at Wikrowo.

Photo: Barbara Toews

the center of the triangle was the so-called Gross Werder church, named after the largest reclaimed "island" of land within the delta triangle, the Gross Werder.

The Gross Werder church was more a "congregation of people" than a building, due to the fact that the authorities did not permit the Mennonites to build any church building in the Werder until 1768, more than two hundred years after they first settled in the delta. During those two hundred years, the congregation met in various barns, owned by prominent Mennonite farmers throughout the countryside. When they finally were allowed to erect church buildings, the Gross Werder congregation had become so large that four different buildings needed to be constructed to hold them all: the Fürstenwerder Church toward the northwest, the Ladekopp Church toward the southwest, the Tiegenhagen Church toward the northeast, and the Rosenort Church toward the southeast.

One again, without knowing the geography of the area, we can wrongly assume that these churches were far apart and isolated. In fact, they were quite close together, and kept in close touch with each other. For many years the same church elder served all four churches, performing all baptisms and leading all communion services. The church records of these seven churches—the so-called "Flemish" Mennonite churches of the delta area—further indicate the closeness of their relationships. Inter-church marriages were very common. The Danzig Flemish church records, indeed, have frequent references to the church at Heubuden, twenty-seven miles away, and document the many marriage that occurred between members of the two churches. There were also regular transfers of membership between these two presumably isolated churches.

Even more amazing are the records of the four Gross Werder churches. We tend to worry about which church record book to search for a specific entry, but they don't even seem to have had clear congregational boundaries. People from the same village attended different churches. Children in the same family often have their births recorded in different church records. A person's birth may be recorded at one church, the later baptism in a second, and the eventual marriage in yet a third. Either church-hopping is an ancient phenomenon, or congregation boundaries in the Gross Werder were ignored or nonexistent. Even the Heubuden Church, at the very bottom of the triangle, was attended by residents of villages close to one or another of the Gross Werder churches. Distances didn't seem to mean that much, even at a time when travel was by foot or wagon.

The lesson I learned was this: *Don't jump to conclusions about locations in Prussia.* Records of a specific event can be found in almost any of the church records, and an exhaustive search of *all* records is sometimes necessary to locate the single record that you are looking for. Specifically for this reason I am now in the process of developing a master index of vital records, covering all the church records we know of from the old Prussian Mennonite churches.

There is one additional complication in locating the "right" church record, however. This relates to the distinction between the "Flemish" and "Frisian" congregations. The

importance of this distinction will be the subject of our next "Genealogy by the Map" installment.

Alan Peters

News Items

Center for MB Studies Announces Extended Evening Hours

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies is pleased to announce that it will be open from 6:00 until 10:00 pm on Monday evenings during the 1991-1992 academic year (September-May). For many years the Center has been open only during regular work hours, making it inaccessible for persons who work during those same hours. The Center staff hopes that by offering these extended hours, more people from the community will be able to take advantage of the Center's valuable Mennonite resources. Archivist Kevin Enns-Rempel will be available to provide reference assistance during the extended hours.

The Center is a resource for people interested in Mennonite studies at any level. Professional scholars, genealogists, students or lay people interested in reading a good book on a Mennonite topic—all are welcome. All paying Historical Society members qualify for special borrower privileges in the Center, and may check out most library books for use at home.

These extended hours are being offered on a nine-month experimental basis. If the experiment receives a good response during the coming months, the extended hours will be continued in the future. Should the Monday evening hours not generate sufficient interest in the community, they will be discontinued after May of 1992.

Please call (209) 453-2225 for more information about hours of operation and services provided by the Center. We hope to see many of you on Monday evenings during the coming winter and spring.

Archives Vault Renovations Approved

At their most recent meetings, the boards of Fresno Pacific College and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary approved funding for additional shelving and improved temperature and humidity control in the Center for MB Studies' archival vault. The renovations are to take place during the coming year.

The bulk of the funding will be used to install "high-density" or "mobile" shelving in the vault. This type of shelving is mounted on tracks and can be rolled using only a few pounds of pressure. Because the shelving is moveable

the vault can be almost completely filled with shelf rows, leaving only the width of one aisle open. Staff members roll the shelves in order to open the appropriate aisle for access to the material they need. This shelving system will add over 125% of additional storage area in the vault. Given that current archival holdings take up about 105% of the existing space, this new system will not only ease the Center's current space problem but provide adequate storage space for years to come.

The installation of improved temperature and humidity controls in the vault will help insure that archival materials there will be housed in an environment conducive to their long-term survival. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity are among the worst enemies of paper, greatly accelerating the chemical processes that cause them to become brittle and discolored. The existing environmental controls in the vault are not adequate to prevent these destructive fluctuations. The new system will maintain more stable temperature and humidity levels, and thereby prolong the useful life of materials in the vault.

Genealogical Committee Work Underway

At the 1991 Annual Meeting in Reedley the Society Executive announced the formation of a Genealogical Project Committee. Under the leadership of Jane Friesen, that committee has begun working toward a computerized genealogical database of Prussian-Russian Mennonite and Hutterite families. Since its first meeting last June the committee has sent out a letter to other agencies with Mennonite genealogical interests, alerting them to this project and seeking responses from them. Several responses, mostly enthusiastic and encouraging, have come back to the committee from these organizations.

The committee's main concern at this point is the design and implementation of a software program capable of storing and managing the vast amounts of data that will be entered into it. The working name for this program is "Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry," or "GRANDMA." Given the magnitude of this project, the committee assumes that no commercially-available genealogical software can be utilized. It does, however, intend to design its program to perform many of the same functions—pedigree charts, family group sheets, tables of descendants—and to be compatible with these other programs. A set of general program specifications have been drawn up to guide the programmer in designing the software. Committee members plan in the near future to contact other national genealogical organizations who might have designed similar software. The committee may decide to utilize parts of any such existing programs if this seems appropriate.

Questions or comments regarding the Genealogical Project Committee's work should be directed to Jane Friesen at (209) 591-4154 or to the Center for MB Studies at (209) 453-2225.