

Genealogy by the Map: The "Frisian" and "Flemish" Layers

We were late for tea. Our travelling group had spent a wonderful day in that part of northern Poland once called the "Grosswerder," those rolling farmlands created from former swampland. It was late afternoon when our tour bus pulled into the hamlet of Orłowo, known as "Orloff" when the Mennonites lived there.

Our Polish hosts were waiting for us, and cordially welcomed us into their beautiful arcaded home, once the dazzling centerpiece of a Mennonite estate. This gracious Polish family had carefully renovated the old home, and it now housed them and other members of a local farming cooperative. We celebrated with tea and cookies in the parlor, all secretly wishing that we could somehow eavesdrop on those generations of now-silent voices that once had echoed within these timeworn walls. We could only imagine the spellbinding stories that those voices could have told us.

After tea, we gingerly stepped single file down a muddy country land to the old Orlofffelde Church graveyard. We passed the open space between the trees where the church had once stood, and then entered the cemetery itself. The now-familiar overgrowth proclaimed that this was yet another unkept, long-ignored resting place for the relics of an almost-forgotten congregation.

Amazingly, among the few remaining toppled tombstones, we found the still-impressive monument for one of the most prominent leaders of the Orlofffelde Church, Elder Johann Donner. Elder Donner served, for many years, as both the bishop of the congregation and spokesman for all the Mennonites of Prussia.

A glance at the map shows that the Orlofffelde Church was located at the geographic center of the Mennonites of the Grosswerder. Therefore, it seems only natural that its elder would also have been at the center of Mennonite life in Prussia. The map further points out that the Orlofffelde Church was located between, and almost within sight of, the four church buildings of the Grosswerder Congregation: Ladekopp, Fürstenwerder, Tiegenhagen and Rosenort. Surprisingly, the records of all these churches indicate that while members of the Orlofffelde Church lived alongside the members of the Grosswerder churches, they had very little religious contact with those churches. While marriages between members of the four Grosswerder congregations were common, there were virtually no marriages between members of the Orlofffelde Church

and members of the other four churches. When members of the Orlofffelde Church looked outside their own congregation for husbands or wives, they unfailingly looked to more distant congregations, such as Markushof or Thiensdorf, or even Tragheimerweide, Obernessau, or Montau.

Mennonite history quickly reveals the solution to this puzzle: there were, even in those days, different varieties of Mennonites. The Orlofffelde Church belonged to the "Frisian" branch of Mennonitism, while the Grosswerder churches belonged to the "Flemish" branch. This particular division within the church traced its origins to disagreements among Dutch Mennonites that erupted in the 1560s. A group of Mennonites had moved to Friesland (whose residents were called "Frisians") from the land of Flanders (now called Belgium). The residents of Flanders were called the "Flemish." Differences in religious perspectives and practices caused a split that plagued the Mennonites of Holland, Prussia, and even Russia, for the following two and one-half centuries. This schism polarized even those Mennonites who had not been involved in the original dispute, and the terms "Flemish" and "Frisian" eventually came to refer not so much to geographic origin as to these different factions within the Dutch Mennonite Church. Interestingly enough, it was Elder Donner of the Orlofffelde Church who advocated, and largely accomplished, the healing of this schism among the Mennonites of Poland.

To genealogists and family historians, this means that the Mennonite map of Prussia and Poland is three-dimensional. Those tracing family roots back to the Mennonites of Prussia must not only locate the ancestral village there, but must also determine whether they belonged to the "Frisian" or the "Flemish" layer of the map.

There are a number of clues to help you with this dilemma. The first is the surname itself that you are tracing. While there are a number of surnames that occurred in both branches of the church, most of the surnames predominate in one or the other. One startling example is the fact that most *Friesens* are Flemish, and most *Flamings* are Frisian! As strange as this seems, it does make logical sense. A Flemish person, or "Flaming," would certainly not be unique within a Flemish congregation. Consequently, when such a person needed to adopt a surname, it certainly would *not* have been *Flaming*—the

whole congregation could bear that name. But if a person of Flemish background attended a Frisian church, this certainly was unique, and that person could easily be tagged with a new surname: "Flaming." The same could be said for a Frisian ("Friesen") in a Flemish congregation: he would likely be called "Friesen."

We aren't quite sure yet why some of the other surnames occur so predictably in either a Flemish or Frisian setting, but this is certainly the case. Some other examples of *Frisian* surnames are Abrahams, Adrian, Bartel, Ewert, Franz, Froese, Goertz, Hein, Kasper, Kopper, Lohrentz, Nickel, Penner, Quiring, Spenst, Tiaht, Unruh and Voth. Examples of *Flemish* surnames are Braun, Claassen, Enns, Friesen, Harder, Isaac, Koop, Loewen, Martens, Reimer, Siemens, Thiessen, Toews and Wiebe. Names that can be found in both branches include Cornelsen, Dirksen, Jantzen, Kroeker and Wiens.

As a result, if your surname is clearly "Frisian" in origin, you would best begin your search for roots in a Frisian congregation. Likewise, if your name is clearly Flemish, you should start scouring the Flemish congregations for the records you seek. The Frisian congregations in Prussia were located in the following cities or villages: Danzig (outside the Petershagen Gate), Markushof, Memelniederung, Montau-Gruppe, Obernessau, Orloffelfelde, Schönsee, Tragheimerweide and Thiensdorf. The Flemish congregations were located in Danzig (outside the Neugarten Gate), Elbing-Ellerwalde, Fürstenwerder, Heubuden, Königsberg, Ladekopp, Rosenort and Tiegengagen. The Wintersdorf (or Przechowka) congregation called itself "Old-Flemish," but its location, records, and history, connect it very closely with the various Frisian congregations located nearby.

The second valuable clue for the genealogist relates to families that later migrated to southern Russia. The earliest migrations (from 1787 to 1817) were largely composed of families from Flemish congregations. The later migrations, those from 1818 on, were largely composed of families from Frisian congregations. For the Chortitza Colony, therefore, almost all the migrations were from Flemish churches. The sole exception seems to be the village of Kronsweide, which was settled by a contingent of Frisian families, many of whom had earlier left the Memel Frisian Church in Lithuania. For the Molotschna Colony, this means that the earliest villages, largely those in the district headed by the regional governmental headquarters at Halbstadt, were Flemish in background. The later-established villages, largely those in the eastern Molotschna district with headquarters in Gnadenfeld, were Frisian in background.

If you are a modern-day Mennonite genealogist, you may not have taken advantage of the clues that result from this

largely-forgotten division between the Flemish and Frisian Mennonites of Europe. But your search for roots can be measurably simplified if you combine your genealogical curiosity with a basic knowledge of this chapter in Mennonite history.

Alan Peters

Archival vault improvements completed

The renovations in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies' archival vault, announced in the last issue of the *Bulletin*, are now a reality. Both the high-density shelving and climate control systems were installed in January. These improvements represent a significant step forward in the Center's archival program. Anyone is welcome to stop by the Center during its regular hours for a tour of the "new" facilities.

Mennonitische Rundschau indexing project on hold

Two additional volumes of the *Mennonitische Rundschau Index* have recently been completed by the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg. One is the subject index for the years 1900 to 1909 and the other is the author index for the years 1880 to 1909. This brings the total number of volumes to four and brings the indexing project to a temporary halt until funding becomes available. The project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which terminated the program for such projects last year. It is hoped that private donors can become interested in carrying the project to eventual completion. The Center for MB Studies in Fresno should have copies of these new indexes within the next few months.

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Mennonite Weekly Review index now available

The Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas has recently completed an index of obituaries in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* through the