

Genealogy by the Map (III)

Out of the Ordinary: Mennonite Families in the Kleinwerder

It was the brick bell tower next to the church building that caught our eye as we descended from the tour bus. Our tour group had reached the small Polish hamlet formerly known as Preussisch Rosengart. The tower was an unexpected attraction, and we knew at a glance that this was not like the other Mennonite churches that we had seen in the Werder country. "This is the only known example of such a bell tower among the former Mennonite churches of northern Poland," explained Dr. Arkadiusz Rybak, a Polish government agricultural official and expert on the historic Mennonite sites in the Vistula Delta region of northern Poland.

After we snapped our fill of tower photographs, we turned our attention to the church itself, now used by a rural Roman Catholic congregation. The parish priest scurried over from



The bell tower of the Mennonite Church at Preussisch Rosengart.
Photo: Paul Toews

his home nearby, and welcomed us into the building. He even let us explore the balcony, play the organ, and sing a haphazard collection of English and German hymns. We felt right at home!

This "bell tower" experience should have told us that this was no ordinary Mennonite area. The "Kleinwerder" has a unique flavor that makes it stand out among the other Mennonite regions of northern Poland.

The Vistula Delta region consists of three major sections, each known as a "Werder," or "island" of reclaimed marshlands. The area around the city of Gdańsk (formerly Danzig) stretching all the way east to the Vistula River, is known as the "Danzig Werder." The larger region to the east, lying between the Vistula and the Nogat rivers, carries the name "Grosswerder." Finally, the smaller, easternmost region across the Nogat River came to be known as the "Kleinwerder."

Mennonites in the Kleinwerder, unlike the other sections of the delta, were predominantly "Frisian" Mennonites. Their congregation was usually called the "Marcushof/Thiendorf Church," a name which derived from the fact that the two largest church buildings were in the towns of Marcushof and Thiendorf. A smaller church building was later built at Preussisch Rosengart, and it was this church that erected the distinctive, memorable bell tower.

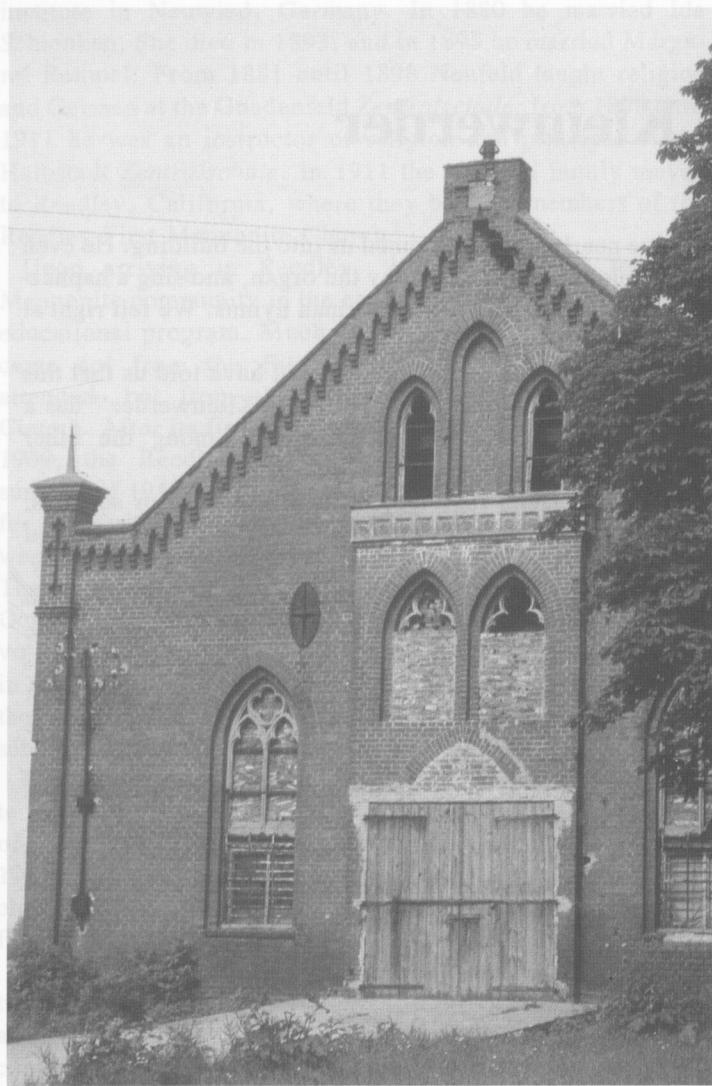
There was no Flemish Mennonite congregation in the Kleinwerder itself. Any Flemish Mennonite living in this area must have attended the church in Elbing to the north or the country church just to the west of Elbing, in the five drainage strips known as the "Ellerwald."

The primary Mennonite-occupied villages in the Kleinwerder, beside Marcushof and Thiendorf, include Aschbuden, Augustwald, Baalau, Brodsende, Campenau, Eschenhorst, Grunau, Güldenfeld, Hohenwald, Kerbshorst, Kerbswald, Kronsnest, Schwansdorf, Thiergart, Thörichthof, Wengeln, and Wengelwald. Few of these names reappear in Russia or North America following later migrations.

The predominant Mennonite surnames of the members of the Marcushof/Thiendorf congregation are as follows: Albrecht, Allert, Bestvater, Cornelsen, Dau, Dircksen, Eds, Engbrecht, Froese, Funck, Gerbrandt, Grunau, Harms, Horn, Hein, Heinrichs, Holzrichter, Jantzen, Kaetler, Kliewer, Lammert, Mackelburger, Martens, Nickel, Ollwitz, Otto, Pauls, Penner, Peters, Philippson, Plenert, Quapp, Riediger, Scheffler, Steingart, Stobbe, Unger, and Vogt. Again, these names largely represent the rarer, more exotic of Mennonite surnames, some sounding strange even to those who have

studied Mennonite families for years.

This feeling of "strangeness" persists even when we look at the male given names commonly reported in the Marcus-



The Mennonite Church at Thiensdorf, today used as a storage building.

Photo: Peter J. Klassen

hof/Thiensdorf church records. Along with the ever-present common biblical names like Abraham, Jacob, Johann and Peter, there is an uncommon frequency of names like Absalom, Adam, Bartel, Christian, Darius, Georg, Melchior, Nathaniel, Simon, Stephen and Tobias. These names don't even sound "Mennonite" to most of us!

Another unusual twist in the Kleinwerder church records is the unaccountable mix of High and Low German expressions. One entry will use a Low German term such "Ancke" for a newborn child, while the very next entry, sometimes written the same day by the same person, will use the equivalent High German term, "Anna," for the next child born.

Putting all this together made me sit back and ask, "What is going on here? Why is this area so different from all the others?" The only clue that hit me was that so many of the uncommon male first names are much more like those in the Hutterite families that I have also studied over the years.

Imagine my surprise when, in reading *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, a recent English translation of the oldest history of that group, I came across an account of a short-lived Hutterite settlement in Prussia. The chronicle relates that seven Swiss/High German families, numbering at least thirty-seven persons, moved in the year 1604 from the Hutterite communities of Moravia, intending to settle in Prussia. Their goal was to establish a community in the city of Elbing. When the city leaders objected and refused permission, the group bought a farm in the village of Wengeln.

The Chronicle reports that the group abandoned this project several years later (mentioning, in the process, some unkind things about the neighboring Mennonites). Wilhelm Wiswedel, however, concludes his article on Wengeln in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* with the intriguing statement: "In the course of time this settlement was absorbed into the Mennonite Settlement." Here is the likely answer to our question, "Why do the Mennonites of the Kleinwerder seem so different?" The reason is that they *are* different! They represent the descendants of a mixed congregation, containing both High and Low German families. The surnames represent a mixture of the Dutch and the German, and the first names clearly represent the infusion of a non-Dutch, definitely Hutterite influence.

The matter seems almost settled when we hear that one of the Hutterite leaders, who brought the group from its Moravian homeland to Prussia, was a certain *Darius Heyn*. Not only do we see the first of the long string of "Dariuses" to follow, we also see the probable ancestor of many Mennonites with the surname "Hein."

Unfortunately, the existing Mennonite church records for the Kleinwerder congregation reach back only to the 1770s. However, I believe that further research will uncover more information about the historic linkage between the Hutterites of Moravia and the Mennonites of Prussia.

There is one last note of interest. The later historical records of the Hutterites contain an account regarding a delegation of Hutterite leaders that met with the Mennonites of Prussia during the 1780s, shortly after the few remaining Hutterites had migrated to Russia. In their need for financial assistance, they turned to the Prussian Mennonites for help. They even persuaded some Mennonites in Prussia to move with them to the newly-established Hutterite settlement in Russia, whose descendants still live in the Hutterite colonies of the United States and Canada. It is hardly surprising, given the connection between Hutterites and the Kleinwerder, to learn that they received their greatest support from Elder Gerhard Wiebe, who was the leader of the Mennonite church in Elbing, the nearest city to the Marcushof/Thiensdorf congregation.

The next time you hear someone talking about the Hutterites, don't just consider them as interesting but unusual examples of another branch of Anabaptism. Instead, stop and realize that they just might be your long-lost cousins.

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