

# People of the Valley: The Vistula River and Mennonite Genealogy

I will never forget the first time I saw the Vistula River. We had ventured away from the beautiful old city of Gdańsk, driving east across the lush green farmlands of northern Poland. The river caught us by surprise, jumping into sight suddenly as we negotiated the little hill before us.

Of course, it was the dike—that ancient dike so masterfully crafted and maintained by those gifted Dutch Mennonites claimed by so many of us as our ancestors—that had hidden the blue-grey waters of the Vistula from our view. Now it stretched before us, carrying both the life-giving waters collected during its long journey and the national spirit of the Polish people as it marches from one end of the country to the other.

The Vistula River not only flows through the center of Poland, from the mountains of the south to the sea in the north. It also presides over the heart and soul and history of Poland. This river brought the Mennonites here and offered them the opportunity to use their skills—first as engineers, then as farmers—to build a new home, filled with hope and productivity, replacing the dreams they had given up when they left their old homeland in search of a place to worship freely.

In earlier articles, we have focused on the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta, and examined the churches of the “Werders,” those artificial islands reclaimed from the marshes of the river bottom. But the Vistula attracted Mennonite settlements along virtually its entire length. Many of us find our roots not only in the Werder, but also along the Vistula Valley south of the delta region.

The four oldest Mennonite congregations in the Vistula River Valley were those in Montau, Schönsee, Przechówka and Obernessau. The Montau Mennonite congregation was well-established by 1568, already having a church building by that time. In the village of Montau, now called Maławy in the Polish language, there still stands a striking brick church building, dating back to 1891—the last church building used by the Mennonites there. Currently a Roman Catholic place of worship, it still is a showcase for the stained-glass windows placed there by its original Mennonite worshippers.

Montau was a Frisian Mennonite settlement, like most of the other “valley” churches. As a result, the names of its families were those we now know were largely Frisian in origin: Adrian, Balzer, Bartel, Flaming, Franz, Goertz, Karber, Kopper and Voth.

The village of Montau is located on the Vistula River, halfway between the modern Polish cities of Nowe (known as “Neuenberg” in the German language) and Grudziądz (or “Graudenz” in German). People attending the Mennonite Church there came from the villages of Treul, Sanskau, Kammerau, Lubin, Dragass and Gruppe (both Obergruppe

and Niedergruppe).

The existing records of this church date all the way back to 1661, making it and the Danzig Church the congregations with the oldest existing records of all the Mennonite churches in the region. Many Mennonites in Canada and the United States can trace their family roots back to this important congregation.



*The former Mennonite Church at Montau, now used by the local Catholic parish in Maławy.*  
*Photo: Peter J. Klassen*

Schönsee, or Sosnówka as it is now known, is located further south along the Vistula, between the cities of Grudziądz and Świecie (or “Schwetz,” as it was once called). The Mennonite settlement here was also predominantly Frisian, with its families bearing names similar to those at Montau. The congregation was an ancient one, dating back at least to the year 1553. The various villages that made up this congregation included Schöneich, Jamerau, Lunau, Dorposch and the two Ausmass villages: Oberausmass and

Niederausmass. Some members also lived on an island in the Vistula in a village known as "Ostrower Kämpe."

Further yet up the Vistula was the next historic Mennonite congregation, that in **Przechówka**, or "Wintersdorf." This congregation was also very ancient, dating back into the seventeenth century. It was unique in that it was not Frisian, but Flemish in origin. However, it seems to have had very close relationships with the neighboring Frisian churches. Many of its members intermarried with members of the Schönsee Church to the immediate north. As a result, the members of the Przechówka Church also carried many of the same names as those in Montau and Schönsee, adding to them such names as Becker, Nachtigal, Schellenberger, Schmidt, Sperling, Unrau and Wedel.

This congregation was unique among the Russian Mennonite churches in that it moved in its entirety to South Russia in the year 1820. There it continued its congregational life and history in the Molotschna Colony as the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church. More amazingly yet, its members again moved as an entire congregation to the United States in 1874, establishing the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church near Goessel, Kansas. Because of these congregational moves, they church still possesses its original records, dating back in some cases to the 1660s. Many genealogists have found important family information in the Alexanderwohl Church records, carrying them back three centuries.

The last ancient congregation along the Vistula River was the **Obernessau** congregation, located in the village of Klein Nieszawka near the city of Toruń, once called Thorn. This congregation, like those of Montau and Schönsee, dates back into the sixteenth century. Since it was also a Frisian congregation, its families carried the distinctive Frisian names found in Montau and Schönsee, while adding such names as Schroeder, Ewert and Kasper.



*The former Obernessau Mennonite Church, which today serves a small Catholic parish in Nieszawka.*

*Photo: Peter J. Klassen*

This church kept meticulous records, which represent one of the tantalizing treasures still awaiting modern rediscovery. According to the last pastor of the church, they were given to the Protestant Church pastor in the city of Thorn in 1941 for safekeeping during the Second World War. They have not been seen since then. If rediscovered, they will provide a wealth of information regarding the Mennonite families from this region.

Those who know the Mennonite congregations of the Vistula Valley are aware that we have "leap-frogged" over the large congregation in the village of **Tragheimerweide**. This church was located north of Montau, just south of the Vistula Delta lands of the Grosswerder.

The Tragheimerweide Church had a unique history. It was established in 1724 by former Montau, Schönsee and Obernessau church members who had just returned from an unsuccessful settlement in the country of Lithuania, far to the north. They had settled in the Memel River region of Lithuania in 1713, but because of the strict Prussian rule of King Frederick William, they fled their new settlement and returned to safer territories to the south.



*The former Deutsch Wymysle Mennonite Church, built in 1864 and used as a house of worship until 1945. Today it functions as a storage shed.*

*Photo: Peter J. Klassen*

Most of these exiles established a new settlement—and new congregation—in Tragheimerweide. Like its mother congregations, it was also Frisian in composition, with those now-familiar Frisian names, including Goertz, Albrecht, Eckert, Lorenz and Ediger. The well-kept Tragheimerweide Church records were begun in the year 1791, and trace many of these families back to the 1760s and 1770s.

These five congregations represent the great Mennonite settlements of the Vistula Valley. However, two other

“Vistula” congregations also must be mentioned, although they are located far from these more historic, northern church sites. They are the **Deutsch-Wymysle** and **Deutsch-Kazuń** congregations.

The village of Deutsch-Wymysle is located much further south along the Vistula, near the town of Gabin (or, in German, “Gombin”). The Mennonites settled here in 1762, coming from the Frisian churches to the north, especially from Schönsee, Przechówka and Obernessau. The village of Nowe Wymysle, as it is now known, still exists. The old buildings once used by Mennonites now house Polish families, whose oldest members still remember the former Mennonite residents in the village. A visit to this village provides perhaps the best-preserved look at what once was a rural Mennonite settlement.

The former Deutsch-Kazuń Mennonite Church still stands, located near a busy freeway interchange not far from Warsaw. The Vistula River flows nearby this old building, which is now a private home. The congregation itself dated from 1776, and was also founded by members of the Frisian churches to the north. Its records have also been preserved, and carry such Frisian families as the Bartels and the Funks back to their roots in Poland.

And so, the spirit of the Vistula River still flows through many of us, reminding us of the struggles and challenges, the disappointments and the opportunities of our forebears. As I said at the beginning, I will never forget the first time I saw the Vistula River. More important, I now see it in each family record that flows from the rich Mennonite heritage rooted in the soil and the soul of the Werders and the valley of the mighty Vistula.

—Alan Peters

## New and noteworthy publications in Mennonite studies

Orlando Harms, *A Conference in Pilgrimage: The Story of the Southern District Mennonite Brethren Conference and Its Churches* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1992).

A history of the conference written by one its long-time leaders.

Julia Kasdorf, *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

The author, born into the Mennonite and Amish community of Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, now lives in New York City. This nationally-renowned collection of poems reflects on living between those two different places.

Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series no. 6 (North New-

ton, Kan.: Bethel College, 1993).

Reimer assesses the contributions of current Mennonite writers in Canada and the United States. Chapter three includes a brief discussion of Jean Janzen’s poetry.

Harry Loewen, *No Permanent City: Stories From Mennonite History and Life* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992).

Forty-five short stories drawn from Anabaptist/Mennonite history from the 1500s to the present.

## Raisin City church records find home in archives

In 1907 J.S. Kuns and J.W. Cline, both members of the Church of the Brethren, established a colonization project about fifteen miles southwest of Fresno along a branch of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The site, originally called Ormus, was later renamed “Raisin City” by the railroad.

Kuns and Cline laid out a townsite and divided the land into small plots of five to ten acres, as well as larger tracts of twenty to forty acres. They offered the land for sale at forty dollars an acre. Hoping to make Raisin City into a Church of the Brethren colony, the promoters offered a lot and one thousand dollars toward the erection of a Brethren church in the town. They promoted the project at Brethren Annual Meetings and in church periodicals. By the fall of 1907 over 2500 acres had been sold to church members from Nebraska, Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, the Dakotas and Canada.

The little group set up a tent in which to conduct church services, and organized itself as a Church of the Brethren congregation on March 28, 1908 with thirty-one charter members. After three years of meeting in a tent, the group agreed to erect a building. Designed in the Craftsman style, it was completed in 1912. The congregation grew rapidly in the ensuing years, and by 1918 had tripled its original membership.

The congregation was unable to sustain this early growth rate, however, and by the early 1930s had experienced a significant decline in membership. This situation, coupled with difficulties in finding steady pastoral leadership, resulted in discussions during the late 1930s whether to close the church.

The situation improved following the arrival of W.I. Liskey as pastor in 1939. Membership gradually increased, as did local community interest. Liskey’s resignation in 1952 was followed by another period of short-term pastorates. During the summer of 1953 the congregation hired Ernest H. Friesen of the Mennonite Brethren Church, then a student at Pacific Bible Institute, to preach Sunday mornings and evenings for \$25.00 per Sunday. Friesen carried out this responsibility for about three months.

Seven years later the Raisin City congregation turned to the Mennonite Brethren Church once again for pastoral leader-