Poland, a Haven of Toleration
by Peter J. Klassen

During the stormy 16th century, when reformers such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin led major movements of religious change and renewal, Europe was often the scene of war and religious oppression. The Anabaptist-Mennonite movement encountered vigorous persecution because of its emphasis on voluntary membership in a believers church, baptism of believers, call for separation of church and state, and emphasis on a life of love and peace, patterned after the example of Christ.

Remarkable in its degree of toleration for various religious groups was Poland. Among those who found a refuge here were many Mennonites who fled from the oppression experienced in the Netherlands, especially the southern area (today’s Belgium), where Philip II used his army to try to exterminate heresy. The Anabaptist-Mennonite exodus to the regions around Danzig began as early as the 1530s and continued throughout the century and beyond. Most of those who joined this flight were seeking freedom to practice their faith; others, however, saw new economic opportunities. At that time, commercial relations between Danzig and Dutch ports, especially Amsterdam, were extensive, and sometimes as many as a thousand ships from Amsterdam sailed to Danzig in one year.

At least in part, Poland’s remarkable degree of religious toleration was due to a high degree of political decentralization. The weak central Parliament, the Sejm, could enact laws, but enforcement depended on regional authorities. Similarly, land ownership was very diverse. Thus, when Mennonites began coming to this area, they sometimes were invited to settle on church lands, city property, or royal domain lands. Fortunately, Mennonites brought skills that could be readily applied. In 1642, Poland’s king, Wadysaw IV paid high tribute to Mennonite settlers: We are well aware of the manner in which the ancestors of the Mennonite inhabitants of the Marienburg Werder, both large and small, were invited here with the knowledge and by the will of King Sigismund Augustus, to areas that were barren, swampy and unusable places in those Werder. With great effort and at very high cost, they made these lands fertile and productive.

Drainage of marshlands was certainly a factor in determining the response of authorities to the Mennonite request for a new home. The Ellerwald, one such area lying west of Elbing (Elblag today), was brought into fruitful productivity as Mennonites began to settle there shortly after the middle of the 16th century. The city of Elbing owned this land, but leased it to Mennonites for long periods of time. Near Tiegenhof, a nobleman wanted to bring swampy land along the Tiege River into production; the result was extensive Mennonite settlement along its banks, in villages such as Tiege, Tiegenhagen and Tiegenhof.

Sometimes, the local Catholic Church itself made land available to Mennonite settlers. It was the convent attached to St. Brigidy’s Church in Danzig (later to become well known as the church of Lech Wasa), which invited Mennonites to settle on its lands just outside the Danzig city walls.

Gradually, Mennonite congregations arose throughout the Delta and up the Vistula to Warsaw. Often, they were not permitted to build churches, and so they met in homes. Not until 1768 did the local Catholic bishop allow Mennonites under his jurisdiction to build churches in the Werder. In other areas, this permission came much earlier. Thus, the city of Elbing had a Mennonite church as early as 1590.
Economic factors also sometimes created difficulties. The historian, Gottfried Lengnich, writing in the middle of the 18th century, noted how ironic it was that Mennonites, who had introduced Danzig to the making of lace and certain kinds of cloth, were eventually barred by the local guilds from practicing the special craft they had brought to the city. It was this kind of economic protectionism that led Danzig to bar Mennonites from citizenship until 1800. This, however, did not bar Mennonites from practicing various professions and carrying on business within the city.

A few noted successes of Mennonite entrepreneurs and skilled craftsmen may be noted. As early as 1598, Quiring Vermeulen founded an establishment that became noted for its good food and the liqueur Goldwasser distilled there. It was he who financed the printing of a Dutch Bible to be used by the Mennonites in Danzig and elsewhere. It should be noted that most of the early Mennonite settlers in this area came from the Netherlands, and thus spoke Dutch. Only in the second half of the 18th century did the Danzig church begin to use German. Another Mennonite from the Netherlands, Adam Wiebe, was hired to give Danzig an efficient water system; his engineering skills were also used to build part of the earthen walls that protected the city. For this project, he developed a special cable car system that provided aerial transport to bring soil from a nearby hill. Several other architects and artisans also left their mark on the city.

Most of the Mennonites, however, who settled in this area found new homes away from the city in the marshy delta. Their skills in constructing drainage systems, building dams and windmills, dairying, and raising a variety of crops so established them as the model farmers of this area that a visitor described the transformed marshes as a fertile garden.

Here also, the Mennonite communities established their churches, even if they had to meet in homes. Polish authorities allowed Mennonites to settle here and also to practice their religion, but full religious equality was rare. Yet, compared to much of the rest of Europe, the relative toleration enjoyed by Mennonites in Polish Prussia was remarkable for that time. This was all the more important, since the church served as the religious and social center of the Mennonite community.

From the early 16th to the late 18th century, Mennonite communities continued their growth and development with relatively little interference from political authorities. When, in the latter part of the 1700s, Poland was divided among Prussia, Russia and Austria, most of the areas inhabited by Mennonites came under Prussian rule. The ensuing government pressures for military service and restricted land acquisition led many Mennonites to seek new homes, mostly in New Russia, but also in North America.

Nonetheless, a significant number of Mennonites remained in the lands along the Vistula River until the end of World War II. They played an increasingly important role in the economic, cultural and religious life of this region until World War II effectively ended the Mennonite presence in this region. It is estimated that, in the closing days of the war and immediately afterward, about 10,000 Mennonites fled to the west to seek a new home.