

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



A Mennonite farmhouse near Danzig.

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.

