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Rediscovering the Polish-Prussian Legacy

by Peter J. Klassen

In spring 1998, the editorial committee of the *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin* suggested that it would be timely to have an issue devoted primarily to recent developments relative to the Mennonite story in Poland and Prussia. I was glad to accept the invitation to serve as guest editor.

Through articles and photos we wish to present a collage of information that demonstrates the growth of interest in the Polish/Prussian Mennonite

scene during the past two decades. New organizations, historical events, scholarly conferences, study tours and a series of publications all reflect a growing interest in the Mennonite drama that unfolded in the delta and valleys of the Vistula River, from the lowlands between Danzig and Elbing, up the Vistula, to communities in Montau, the Graudenz and Schwetz regions, Thorn, Deutsch Wymśyle, Deutsch Kazun and other places.

For more than four centuries beginning in the 1530s and extending beyond World War II Mennonites were influenced by their Polish-Prussian environment, and, in turn, left their indelible imprint on that area. Ironically, until recently the Polish-Prussian segment of the Mennonite heritage was relatively ignored, at least in North America. Today, it is refreshing to see that groups, individual visitors and researchers from Canada, the United States, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as from several countries in South America, acknowledge the significance of this story.

In the United States, the California Mennonite Historical Society and the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, have played a major role in this histori-

cal and cultural renaissance. In 1979, the society sponsored a study tour of important former Mennonite centers along the Vistula River, from Gdańsk, the former Danzig, to Warsaw. The experiences of this group demonstrated that local tour guides, as well as civic and church leaders, knew very little about the Mennonite role in the history of the region. Efforts were made to establish connections with local government officials, pastors and interested community persons. The result has been a series of activities and projects that have brought significant Polish community and media attention to the Mennonite contribution to local history. Articles on this theme have appeared in the *Gazeta Gdańska* and in the national news magazine, *Rzeczpospolita*, published in Warsaw. Over time, these efforts have produced collaborative activities that have involved persons from Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States.

Efforts have also been made to make more literature available so that information about the Mennonite contribution to Poland and Prussia will become

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In This Issue

The following glimpses of an often overlooked part of the Mennonite heritage will allow us to see the richness of the Polish-Prussian threads that are woven into the fabric of our peoplehood:

- Poland, a Haven of Toleration
- The Polish-Prussian Mennonite Kitchen
- Emigration to New Russia
- Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association
- Markers and Dedications
- Historical Conferences

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you readers can finish it in Plautdietsch.

"Fat cakes"—doughnuts, crullers, fritters fried in deep fat—were a symbol of a prosperous New Year all through the Low Countries. Luise Schroeder advises that the secret of good *Portselkje* is the many eggs. You must beat the egg whites separately until light, she says. From Canada to California many homes still celebrate the New Year baking *Portselkje*. Others stand in long lines at MCC relief sales, becoming again Werder children, patiently waiting for this heavenly treat.

Zwieback baking has been a part of Saturday's routine in Mennonite kitchens since West Prussian days. (This baking may even reach back to the Netherlands.) For readers unfamiliar, *Zwieback* are buttery-rich double buns, one atop the other, baked by the dozens for every Sunday Fasma, holiday, wedding feast and funeral meal. Ulrich Tolksdorf notes that earlier, funeral *Zwieback* were dainty, the size of a pocket watch.

Some ask, does *Zwieback* or *Tweeback* (Low German) bean

double buns, one atop the other? Not so, says our authority Dr. Tolksdorf. "*Tweybacken* means white bread, twice baked"¹² (baked and toasted later). *Zwieback* were popular ship's fare in the 17th century. Danzig bakers made "large *zwieback*" and sold them as *Schiffs Brot* (ship's bread) to ships docked in the Danzig harbor.¹³ This toasted bread didn't get stale, mold or mildew. Mennonite families, fleeing Russia for North America after the Revolution, baked large wicker hampers with *Reeschkjes*, (low German for toasted *Zwieback*, which often lasted the entire voyage. Once again they became *Schiffs Brot*, sustaining these families on their long trek to a new homeland.

Migrations of people are reflected in their foods. A friend says, "tell me what you eat and I'll tell you where you've lived." The delta—now a land of grassy meadows, old farmsteads, vanishing dikes and nearly-forgotten windmills—gifted the Mennonite kitchen with an abundance of simple, hearty country foods. Plain, yes, but good. Looking back over 300 years, most of the old recipes are gone.

Now, in this new land of

plenty, so prosperous and abundant in fresh foods, our cooking has changed immensely. The younger generation cooks differently. We cook American. Nott often do we feast on *Plumekjiekje*. However, remnants of that Polish/Prussian kitchen endure: our classic Mennonite bun, *Zwieback*, refreshing summer fruit soups (Moosses), centuries old Christmas baking—*Pfefferkuchen* and peppernuts, New Year's *Portseln/Portselkje* and nearly everyone loves waffles and *Flinsen* (pancakes). These treasures from the past linger in our contemporary American kitchen. We shall keep them for our children and grandchildren.

Sources

1. Rosenberg, Siegfried. *Geschichte des Kreises Grosses Werder* (Schwentine, Poland: Danziger Verlagsgesellschaft Paul Rosenberg, 1940), p. 101.
2. Klassen, Peter J., *A Homeland for Strangers, An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia* (Fresno, California: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989), p. 15.
3. Tolksdorf, Ulrich. *Essen und Trinken in Ost- und West-Preussen* (Marburg: E.G. Elwert Verlag, 1975), p. 189.
4. Tolksdorf, pp. 187-189.
5. Tolksdorf, p. 189.
6. *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1954) p. 312.
7. Dyck, Arnold. *Lost in the Steppe* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers, 1977), p. 156.
8. Tolksdorf, p. 249.
9. Tolksdorf, pp. 264-267.
10. Rosenberg, p. 206.
11. Tolksdorf, p. 320.
12. Tolksdorf, p. 361.
13. Tolksdorf, p. 239.

Low German spelling is based on *Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch? A Low German Dictionary*, Winnipeg: by Herman Rempel, Mennonite Literary Society.

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more widely known. Thus, in 1989 the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno published *A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia*, by Peter J. Klassen. Also, in 1998 Dutch Mennonites published attractive brochures about early Mennonite settlement in the Vistula Delta. These were published in Polish, Dutch and German; an English version is in preparation.

This issue of the *Bulletin* depicts some of the remarkable metamorphosis that has characterized Mennonite awareness of this aspect of their heritage. The reader is invited to a journey into an important part of the Mennonite past. Thousands of Mennonites today trace their history back to ancestors who lived in the part of Poland that later became part of Prussia. Subsequently, many of these moved to Russia, and still later, to North and South America. Despite these migrations, however, it must be emphasized that Mennonites maintained an unbroken presence in Poland-Prussia for more than four centuries—twice as long as in Russia, and also longer than in North America.