

Genealogy

Mennonites and Poland: A Mutual Rediscovery

by Alan Peters



Ewa Hajnrich, the Polish tour guide of the Mennonite tour, points out the official government sign marking the cemetery as a historical site.



The local Catholic priest in Szynych describes how the parish is maintaining the former Mennonite cemetery at Schoensee. Credit: Photos courtesy of Alan Peters

Our tour through Poland was filled with surprises. One such surprise happened when we were searching for a well-hidden cemetery of the former Mennonite church at Schoensee, in the Vistula Valley. The church is long gone, but the cemetery is still there—somewhere along the highway from Chelmno to Grudziadz.

We actually passed it, but saw a group of workers by the side of the highway, cutting into the overgrowth of bushes and trees alongside the road. Suddenly, we knew we were there. There was the local Catholic priest from Szynych, whom we knew from previous

persecution brought about by the official state churches—both Catholic and Protestant—which were vying for religious superiority in Western Europe. The King of Poland had decreed that the Polish kingdom would not duplicate the horrendous brutality occurring in the West, and vowed that adherents of all religion would be welcome in his kingdom. This brought Mennonites and Jews and all sorts of other persecuted groups to Poland where they found religious tolerance and the opportunity not only to worship freely, but also to join in the excitement of participating in the

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years. He greeted us warmly, and told us how he and the other men were cleaning up the former Mennonite cemetery there because he had heard that a group of Mennonites was coming. Men from his Roman Catholic parish had come to “tidy up the place a bit.” He spent the next minutes regaling us with how much the Polish nation owes to the Mennonites who once lived there. It was a moment to cherish and ponder.

Four hundred years ago, when the first Mennonites came to Poland, they were fleeing the brutal

growth and economic development of a nation struggling to succeed.

This connection between Mennonites and Poland lasted, with its inevitable ups and downs, until the end of the Second World War. The invading Russian army sought to eliminate all traces of their Nazi enemies and caused all people with any sort of “German” connection, including Mennonites, to be expelled from the country—or worse. The contributions that the

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Mennonites had made in Poland were forgotten and all German-language relics—churches, cemeteries, businesses, historic accounts, and memorials—were relegated to oblivion.

At the same time, Mennonites themselves tended to forget their years in Poland. Many had left generations ago, migrating to South Russia—now Ukraine—and the memories of their former haven in Poland faded from their minds. Russian, and later North American, memories crowded the older history out of its rightful place of honor and distinction.

Our own Peter J. Klassen is one of a handful of scholars who began to call for the rediscovery of our Mennonite roots in Poland. Now we see Poland, after years of oppressive occupation, reliving the memories and reviving its factual history. The Polish nation is restoring the churches and the cemeteries while it is coming to terms with the impact of its own multicultural and multiethnic history. Mennonites are part of that rediscovery.

For a number of years, Peter Klassen led tours back to Polish locations important to Mennonite

history. He also retold the stories of Poland’s own history, how it created the “safe haven” for Mennonites and gave them a rich cultural environment to adopt as part of their own heritage. Many traditional Mennonite dishes that we thought to be Ukrainian in origin are actually Polish. At one time Poland extended to the Black Sea so the cultures were mixed. According to our Polish sources, foods such as borscht, varenyky, and pirogi/bierocks originated in Poland. Our Low-German dialect, so dear as our “Mennonite” tongue, was spoken as a dialect by most of the inhabitants of the Vistula delta region, and is often referred to as “Werder Platt” because it was the informal language of the “Werder”—or delta—region.

The tours of Poland have continued over the years. The California Mennonite Historical Society sponsors a tour called “Seeing Poland Through Mennonite Eyes,” which retraces the Polish roots of Mennonites in Poland. The latest tour visited Poland in July 2012, with 37 participants. The next tour is planned for June 2013. Those interested may contact Alan Peters, (559) 222-5554 or at: LNPTRS@comcast.net for further information.

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Center for MB Studies Becomes “Mennonite Library & Archives”

The historical library and archives collection at Fresno Pacific University, formerly known as the “Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies,” has recently changed its name to “Mennonite Library & Archives.” The name was changed to avoid confusion with the recently-established “Center for Anabaptist Studies” at the seminary, and also because the new name more clearly describes the functions of the historical library and archives programs. The old CMBS name will still exist for publishing projects, but will no longer be attached to the historical library and archives.