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This plate was made by a manufacturing company owned by Jacob Bestvater (Bestvater), an eighteenth-century Mennonite businessman in the Danzig area. (Photo credit: National Museum Gdańsk.)

Polish and Prussian Mennonites: An Enduring Legacy

by John J. Friesen

This article was first presented at the Believers' Church Conference in Fresno, California in October 2009, to celebrate the publication of Peter Klassen's Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia.

Peter Klassen's excellent new book *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia* brings to light a part of the Mennonite story that has been neglected far too long. In the recent past little research has been directed at this history. This lack of material was particularly evident for English readers. The only major recent English language publication about Mennonites in Poland was the republication in 2007 of a 1919 book by H. G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History 1569-1919*, by Bethel College and Pandora Press.

Even in German, most of the publications are not recent. Mannhardt's book, mentioned above, was first published almost a century ago. Wilhelm Mannhardt's book, published in 1863, about the

Polish and Prussian Mennonites' history of nonresistance and rejection of war is even older. A more recent resource is the four-volume *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, of which the first volume was published in 1913, the second in the 1930s, and the final two volumes after World War II.

In the 1930s, Herbert Wiebe, a young Mennonite scholar from West Prussia, wrote his doctoral dissertation about Mennonites along the Vistula River south of the delta region, from Fordon to Wessenberg. Since most books up to that time had focused on Mennonites who lived near Danzig and in the Vistula and Nogat river deltas, this study broke new ground in that it included communities that previously had received little research attention. Unfortu-

nately, Wiebe was killed in World War II and the Mennonite community lost a promising young historian. After the war, in 1952, his dissertation was published in Germany by Dr. Kurt Kauenhoven.

The most recent and comprehensive study of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia in German is the two-volume set by Horst Penner, a Mennonite scholar born in West Prussia who spent his academic career in West Germany. His two-volume study is entitled, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*. Volume I, published in 1978, deals with the history up to the Polish partitions, and volume II, 1987, focuses on events after the partitions.

Now Peter Klassen has provided a carefully researched study in English. The book covers the history up to the Polish partitions at the end of the eighteenth century, and then briefly surveys the rest of the history up to 1945 in the final chapter. Klassen spent decades doing research in the various archives in Gdańsk and in cities along the Vistula River. Many records were lost in World War II, but from what remains, he was able to find much that illuminated the Mennonite story during the Polish era. His careful research gives the study a remarkable depth.

One of the strongest features

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of this book is the context it presents. The Polish Mennonite story is placed within the larger historical developments in the Low Countries, Poland and Prussia, so that the reader feels the influence

De Gulden
HARPE,
Inhoudende al de Liedekens / Die
boortelen by G. V. M. ghemaecht / ende in
verscheyden Voertien opgegeuen sijn / nu hier
al tot een Boeck vermaect op den N. N. C.
ende by hem seldich vercoopen /
/ Een is nooogh.



Caption: One of the first songbooks used by Mennonites in Poland was this 1605 Dutch-language hymnal. (Photo credit: Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.)

of the political and cultural movements of the day upon the Mennonite communities.

Polish Mennonite history began within the Anabaptist reforms of the sixteenth century. Klassen briefly tells the fragmented Dutch Anabaptist story, including the events in the Westphalian city of Münster. Here one of the Anabap-

use of violence. After the Anabaptist movement in Münster was destroyed in 1535, three quite different Anabaptist forms emerged.

One was a spiritualist form of Anabaptism that minimized the importance of externals, including baptism, communion, and even congregational life. This movement emphasized a right inner, spiritual relationship to God.

A second form of Anabaptism was the violent revolutionary version whose members were defeated at Münster, but a remnant of which continued for a number of years. This movement believed that God spoke to them directly and was calling them to a radical, violent reform. This reform, they believed, was in preparation

for Christ's imminent return when he would unleash a great battle of Armageddon against the ungodly.

These two alternate forms frame the third kind of Anabaptism of which Menno Simons became the most visible spokesperson. In contrast to the spiritualism, pietism and violence of the other options, Mennonite Anabaptism was firmly rooted in the Bible; emphasized discipleship, peace, and sharing with those in need; and saw the church as the context for teaching, worshipping, and living the faith.

After the destruction at Münster, the persecution against Anabaptists in the Low Countries (present-day Netherlands and Belgium) intensified. To save their own lives, thousands of Mennonite Anabaptists fled east to the Danzig area (today's Gdańsk) and settled in the valleys of the Vistula and Nogat rivers, all within the Kingdom of Poland. Settling in Poland, and the reasoning for Polish authorities' willingness

tist leaders, Jan van Leiden, believed he was called by God to be a King David to rule over a New Jerusalem, Münster, in which God called him to implement polygamy, community of goods, and the

to grant toleration to Mennonites, is told by Klassen in considerable detail.

Mennonites who migrated to Poland provided Menno Simons' form of the Anabaptist vision with the organizational and community forms that would last for centuries. They organized churches, founded schools, cared for widows and orphans, established fire insurance institutions, and built homes for the aged. These institutions and arrangements met the needs of the day and continued through future generations.

While Mennonites in Poland and Prussia were not actively persecuted, they frequently were placed under legal and financial restrictions, and periodically even threatened with expulsion. In such times, there was usually some authority that came to their defense, be it Catholic bishops, the Polish king, or some local officials. While some authorities valued Mennonites for their economic contributions, their minority religious status continued to create suspicion and opposition.

Usually Mennonites' economic contribution to the region made them too valuable to expel. They had the skills necessary to drain the marshy low lands and make the delta productive. They introduced trades like *Brandwein* production, lace making and other aspects of the cloth making industry that they had learned in Flanders. Klassen shows well the tug-of-war between those who valued the economic contributions of Mennonites, and those who saw Mennonites as unwanted economic competitors or religious undesirables.

Given the important role that the Polish and Prussian story has played in Mennonite history, why has it been largely overlooked? One of the reasons has been the



By the late 18th century, Mennonites in Poland had switched to the German language in both conversation and in worship. This hymnal, in German, was printed in 1780. (Photo credit: Library, Polish Academy of Sciences, Gdańsk.)

strong research focus during the last three-quarters of a century on the sixteenth century Anabaptist story. This emphasis, started by Harold S. Bender in the 1920s, has given Mennonites a sense of being part of a rich theological

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heritage. As Bender pointed out in his article “The Anabaptist Vision,” Anabaptists were Christians who based their faith on the Bible, and were committed to discipleship, peace, non-violence, and the church as a visible community of faith. Anabaptists were willing to suffer and even die for their faith if

necessary. By the 1950s, Mennonites had accepted much of Bender's emphasis, and saw the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement as the basis for renewal.

This strong, positive emphasis on the sixteenth century has caused some of the subsequent sections of the Mennonite story, like the Polish and Prussian eras, to be neglected or overlooked. In some cases, this history has been viewed negatively, as merely traditional, or as the time where Mennonite “culture” was developed. Culture, in that context, is seen as negative, as something that drew Mennonites away from their purer Anabaptist theological source. The sixteenth century was seen as providing the theological compass, and the intervening years, including the events in Poland, Prussia, and Russia, as the cultural distortion of a great theological vision.

Klassen's book may help us see that the Polish and Prussian Mennonite eras were creative in their own right. During this time, Mennonites built on the visions of the sixteenth century and reshaped them into new institutions and communities. These influences have continued throughout history, and it is evident that many

contemporary Mennonite characteristics have their roots in the Polish and Prussian Mennonite experience. Let us identify some of them.

One characteristic was the Mennonites' struggle to survive. As Klassen pointed out in his book, Mennonites left the Low

Countries due to serious persecution. The Spanish overlords there saw every attempt at reform as a threat to their authority.

Then when Mennonites came to Poland, they were not welcomed. They had to learn to negotiate with land owners, government and church officials, and eventually the king of Poland for the right to reside there. In 1642, they negotiated their first *Privilegium* with the King of Poland, but they had been negotiating with many local officials during the preceding century. Mennonites became skilled at dealing with restrictive laws, and unsympathetic church and government officials. This skill, and the determination to survive and even to succeed against great odds, became a Mennonite characteristic, and can be

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seen in Mennonites today in many countries, including Russia, Canada, United States, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

In this context, Mennonites developed the view that they were not tied to any land. If one country did not work out, they were willing to move. This lack of attachment to a specific country provided Mennonites with an alternative context for reading the New Testament teachings on peace, loving the enemy, forgiveness, and not killing. Because Mennonites had no need to create a justification for military service in defense of a homeland, they were free to develop a view of Christian discipleship that rejected the violence of war.

Central to Menno Simons' view of Christianity was that members found their identity within the church, and that was where their character and faith

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was shaped. Within the context of the church, they related to God.

In the modern world of the enlightenment and post-enlightenment, Christian faith is often seen more individualistically. People speak about a personal faith in Jesus, as though the community is inconsequential, or at best optional. Salvation is viewed as complete without discipleship.

For Mennonites in Poland, faith had a communal meaning. Faith in Christ meant being part of a community that proclaimed Christ as Lord of their lives. Having faith in Christ meant that it

not allowed to build church buildings until almost two centuries after they arrived, that is, in the eighteenth century. This further impressed upon their collective minds that church is people.

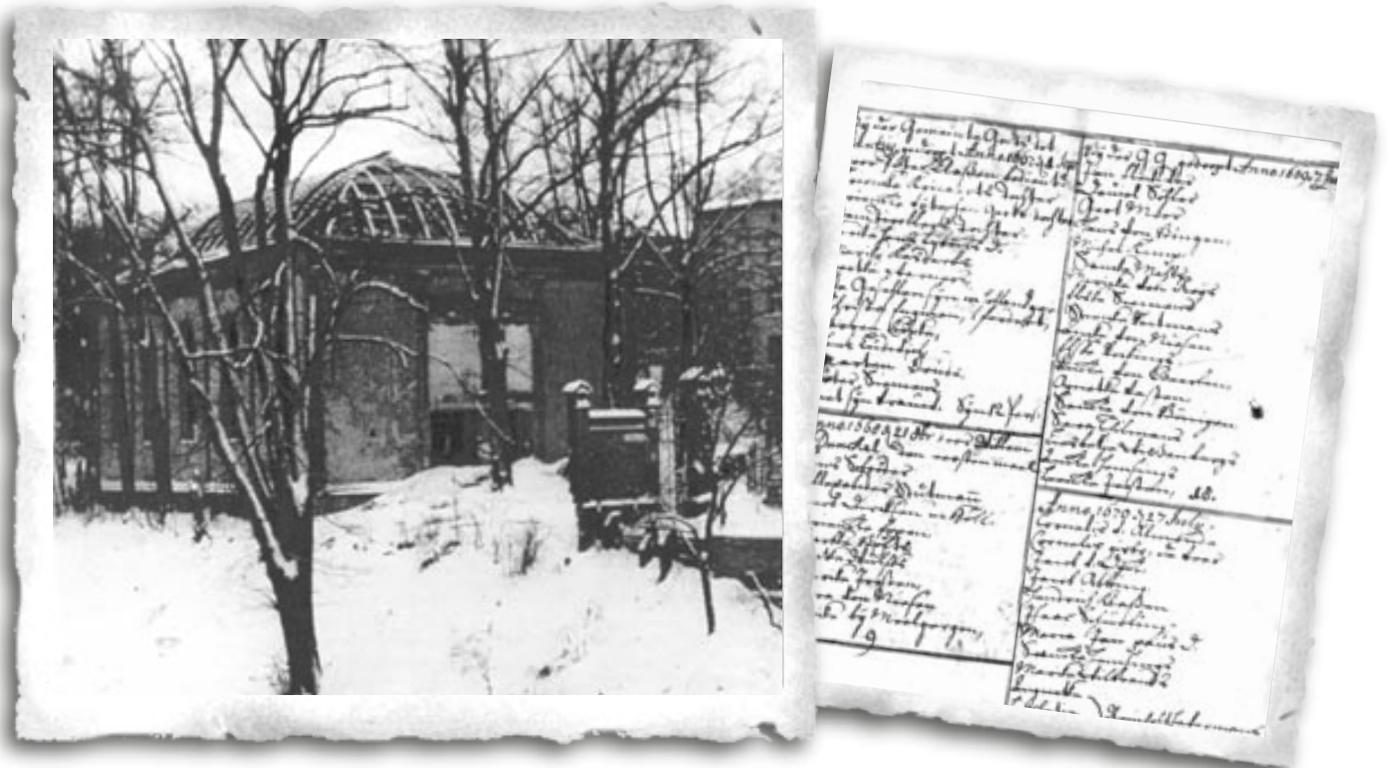
Leaders were elected, not appointed. They came from within the church. Congregations elected *Ältester*, *Lehrer* (ministers, or literally teachers), deacons, and song leaders. Leaders were unsalaried. They were farmers, crafts people, or businessmen. The crucial leader was the *Ältester*, loosely translated as bishop, but literally meaning the elder one. This person led the church, provided spiritual direction, kept the church membership books, served communion, baptized new members, and ordained ministers and deacons.

Many aspects of this understanding of church characterize Mennonite churches today. For churches described as “conservative” in Canada, the United States, and in Latin America, these offices, including unsalaried lay ministers, are still used. Other churches today may have salaried ministers, but utilize lay volunteers for a myriad of tasks within the church. Regardless of the leadership patterns, all Mennonite churches believe that authority resides in the local church.

In Poland, deacons addressed the financial needs of the members. The church provided financial support as well as spiritual fellowship. Thus, the churches assisted the poor, the widows, the sick, and others in need. Mennonites today express this part of their early vision in many forms of assistance: institutions for the elderly, health care centers, relief and development organizations.

transformed their relationship to people, a transformation that was given concrete expression in the church. Faith in God was inseparable from a web of commitments to people in the church. They lived the line in the Lord's Prayer that says, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Every communion service was an occasion to put this commitment into practice.

For Mennonites, the church was the people, not the hierarchy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all state churches were hierarchical, with authority residing in the pope, archbishops and bishops. Among Mennonites, authority belonged to the membership. The congregation made decisions about leadership, about finances, about non-resistance, and about meeting places. In most areas in Poland, Mennonites were



The Gdańsk (Danzig) church building that had been built by Mennonites in 1819. This photo was taken soon after World War II by PAX workers who were in Europe to help rebuild after the devastation of the war. In the rubble of this building, PAX workers discovered fragments of Polish Mennonite church records. (Photo courtesy of Peggy Miller.)

The initial page of a church record book that was found in the rubble of the Gdańsk (Danzig) church building after World War II shows the membership lists for the years 1667-1670. (Photo credit: Historical Library and Archives, Bethel College, Kansas.)

Mennonites in Poland saw the Bible as central to faith and life. Anabaptists in the sixteenth century discovered the excitement of reading the Bible. They believed it should be a guide for the life and faith of individuals and the church. They quoted scripture to their captors and torturers. Many stories in the *Martyrs Mirror* illustrate this view.

One of the alternatives, as the Dutch Anabaptists had learned through painful experience in the Kingdom of Münster, was a runaway spiritualism that was destructive of faith and community. Mennonites in Poland avoided that kind of aberration. Instead, they left a legacy of discerning discipleship in accordance with their understanding of the Bible. This emphasis on the Bible as the basis for faith and life continues to shape Mennonites today.

Mennonites spoke Dutch or Flemish when they emigrated to Poland and Prussia in the sixteenth century. Over the years their language of conversation and worship changed to Low German and later to High German. By 1700, church leaders were complaining that their young people no longer spoke Dutch. As Peter Klassen points out, the language change happened more rapidly in rural areas, and more slowly in ur-

what Mennonites learned. Today we consider Low German to be a Mennonite language, but it was not so initially. Mennonites have continued to speak it long after the people from whom they learned it switched to High German.

For tens of thousands of Mennonites in Canada, the United States, and Latin America, Low German is still the first language –

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ban areas where more contact with the Netherlands was maintained.

Low German was the language of the local German people in the Vistula River area, and this was

the language of everyday conversation. These people are nurtured by its word imagery of a rural, family-centered life; its rich and multi-layered humor; its vivid de-



The post-war reconstruction of the former Mennonite church building of Gdańsk (Danzig.) It now belongs to a Pentecostal church. (Photo credit: Peter Klassen.)

scriptions of relationships; its indirect references to sensitive topics like sex, birthing, and elimination; and its concrete descriptions of life as everyday discipleship.

Many other Mennonites have moved on to become part of an English-speaking world, and in the process have lost something special. As with every language, Low German has its unique genius. To know it is to increase our understanding of the world in which we live.

Sometimes the use of Low German is seen as characterizing those Mennonites who use it as merely "cultural." This is inaccurate because it misses the profound importance of all languages. Identity is largely expressed through language. Words give voice to our thoughts, be-

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liefs, hopes and aspirations. Those who lose their language lose their world of meaning, ritual, and discourse. Thus people who tenaciously cling to their language are to be admired, not chastised.

A second problem with labeling those who speak Low German as cultural Mennonites is that we are all cultural Mennonites. We are all within a culture, use a language, and eat particular foods. A church that uses the English language, resides in Canada or in the United States, and uses typical American food is just as "cultural" as the church that uses the Low German language. Culture and language are the vehicles by which we live our daily lives and express our faith in Jesus Christ.

Mennonites in Poland and Prussia were concerned that their children learn to read and write. Since there were no government schools in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mennonites organized their own schools and paid for the up-keep. These schools

were co-ed. All girls, as well as boys learned to read and write.

Why did they believe so strongly in education? One reason was their belief that all members needed to be able to read the Bible.

In many interrogations of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, court records indicate they were able to read the Bible, knew it well, and could defend their beliefs.

Second, education of all members was necessary in a church where all members were potential leaders. With baptism, members implicitly committed themselves to accept leadership if called upon. This meant that all members had to learn to read and write so they could take up their roles as *Ältester*, *Lehrer*, deacons, song leaders or *Vorsteher* if elected.

A third reason for emphasizing education was their belief that the home was crucial for nurturing their children in the faith. For this to happen, both parents had to be able to read and write.

Schools were established in every community, village or district in Poland. This commitment to education has been one of the most enduring legacies of Polish Mennonites. The conviction that education is important within community can be traced back to the Polish Mennonites.

Mennonites are known as people of peace. During World War II, the majority of Mennonite men in

both the United States and Canada did alternative service rather than join the military. In the United States they served in Civilian Public Service (CPS) projects, and in Canada they worked as conscientious objectors in alternative work camps, received farm deferments, or served in hospitals. This continued a long history of rejecting military service, a practice that began in Poland, not in the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century most European armies had been professional and did not recruit citizens.

Within this peace tradition, Mennonites in the twentieth century not only rejected going to war, they also contributed to rebuilding destroyed communities. After World War I, Mennonites in the United States organized Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)

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to assist both Mennonites and others in Ukraine. Mennonites in Canada organized the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) that brought more than 20,000 Mennonites from the Soviet Union to Canada. After World War II, Mennonites in Canada formed MCC Canada, which absorbed the CMBC and other Canadian Mennonite relief organizations. Through the two MCCs, Mennonites have responded to needs around the world with relief and development assistance.

Mennonite Disaster Service was organized by conscientious objectors after World War II as a response to needs in North America. Mennonites in Canada organized the Foodgrains Bank through which food could be shipped to hungry people in countries around the world, including so-called enemy countries like North Korea. Mennonites have shown that they, as believers in

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Christ, are called to address the needs of all people, thus emphasizing that Christ as the prince of peace is Lord of all, not just of Canadians and Americans.

This view of peace and service is in the Bible, and was rediscovered by Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Menno Simons made this conviction one of the central planks of his preaching. A Christian community, he said, is a community of peace, reconciliation, and mission. If we are a community in mission, we cannot hate the brother, nor kill him, he said.

How to express this conviction in an ongoing way within society was, however, worked out

in Poland. After Mennonites had settled in the Danzig and Vistula River region, they discovered that both Poland and Danzig frequently went to war and demanded that Mennonites also participate. Mennonites refused, saying they believed in peace. To kill was to deny their faith in God and contrary to their character as followers of Christ.

In lieu of military service the government demanded money. These payments became repeated extortions. Then, in 1642, in the *Privilegium* mentioned earlier, Mennonites negotiated the payment of a regular sum of money in lieu of military service, and thus were largely freed from irregular extortions.

From this time on, the conviction that war is wrong has characterized Mennonites. However, those who stayed in Poland when it became Prussia, eventually accepted military service. When Hit-

ler's regime came along, they no longer had the community ability, or fortitude, to question the direction of the Nazi regime, and so they served in the German army.

Today, even our church architecture is influenced by Mennonites in Poland. As Klassen points out, a few Mennonite groups, e.g. in Elbing, were able to build churches as early as the late sixteenth century. In most areas, however, Mennonites were not able to build meeting houses until the eighteenth century, two hundred years after they had settled in Poland. When permission was granted, the stipulations were that church buildings had to be plain, look like houses, and have no bell towers or steeples. The government feared that Mennonite churches, if they appeared too prominent, would attract members from other churches.

The result was that Mennonites made a virtue out of necessity. They continued to build simple, plain churches long after they had moved out of Poland. They followed similar patterns in Russia, Canada, the United States and beyond. Very few Mennonite churches even today have bell towers or steeples. The interiors are often quite plain and unadorned. In many subtle ways, the Polish Mennonite experience in architecture lives on in our church buildings today. In many of the conservative, or conserving, churches, in Canada, the United States, and in Latin America, the church buildings look very much like those of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote *Christ and Culture*, which has become a classic in defining the options that Christians throughout history have chosen

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on this issue. The options he described were Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ over culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture.

Niebuhr’s use of the term “culture” is problematic since every church also has a culture, namely a language, practices, and mores. A more helpful term might be “host society.” Despite the problem with the term, the issue that he describes is a real one. There are always some tensions between a church that commits itself to live by the teachings of Christ, and the host society that lives by different standards and commitments.

Mennonites in Poland and Prussia faced this conflict. The different ways they chose to relate to society created a divide within their communities, a divide that grew through the centuries and still exists today.

To set the stage, Mennonites were refugees in Poland and Prussia. They were Dutch people in a German and Polish region who only gradually learned the local language - Low German. They were foreigners.

Life was hard and Mennonites struggled to make a living. Some officials tried to get rid of them. Mennonites were allowed to rent land and make it productive, because they were skilled at draining the marshy lowlands. They set up businesses, like making lace or brandy. Taxes from these products provided much needed revenue for local governments. With these activities they “bought” their right to settle in the various areas along the Vistula River. In some areas of the lowlands, up to eighty percent of the first settlers died from

diseases in the process of draining the land and making it arable.

In a Lutheran and Catholic land, Mennonites were regarded as heretics. Even though Poland was the most tolerant country in all of Europe, Mennonites were still viewed with suspicion.

Then, to make matters worse, around 1600, a Socinian movement developed. This was a Polish religious reform movement that in many respects was similar to the Mennonites, with one significant difference. Socinians were anti-trinitarian, that is, they believed that Jesus was a great teacher and model, but he was not divine. For more than a century, Mennonites were confused with Socinians, and had to defend themselves against accusations that they denied that Jesus was the Son of God. Had the accusations of heresy stuck, they would have been expelled.

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In addition, their pacifism created difficulties. Because Mennonites were exempt from military service, the government did not allow people from other faiths to join the Mennonite church. It feared that too many people would join Mennonite churches simply to gain exemption from military service. The government also said that in case of a mixed marriage, Mennonite and non-Mennonite, the children would not be exempt from military service. Therefore, some Mennonite groups forbade mixed marriages by arguing that mixed marriages

could lose the peace theology and jeopardize the church’s future.

Most Mennonites lived in the countryside and were farmers. In the early years, relatively few families moved into the cities of Danzig, Elbing, or any of the other cities further south along the Vistula River. As farmers, they lived in agricultural villages alongside Catholics and Lutherans. Intellectually and culturally they lived far from the urban world of the nearby cities.

The divide that developed within the Mennonite community was between those who saw the world, the host society around them, as a threat and danger to their faith, and those who were less critical of the world and willing to relate to it.

The first group tried to maintain separation from the world as much as possible, for to compromise with it was to endanger the church. The second group allowed inter-marriage with non-Mennonites and engaged in businesses. Members of this group moved into cities, became successful mer-

chants, and even entered the cultural life of Danzig and Elbing. Over the years, some of these more acculturated Mennonites left the Mennonite church to join a Lutheran or Calvinist church, because this furthered their cultural or business pursuits.

One could identify these two factions as conservative and progressive, with conservatives suspicious of society, and progressives willing to relate more closely. These two factions largely divided into the Frisians, the conservatives, and the Flemish, the more progressive group, even though

both groups had a range of views on this issue.

At the end of the eighteenth century, when the migrations to Russia started, continuing for almost a century, more conservatives than progressives migrated. Because pioneering in a new land takes courage and daring, I hesitate to call these people conservative. A better term is "conservers," because they wanted to conserve their faith heritage in the face of threats from the society. They were

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not conservative in outlook, but rather they were bold, willing to risk the trials of pioneering in a new territory in Russia.

This divide continued on in Russia. In general, the larger churches were the conservers, and the smaller groups were the progressives. Some of the reform groups, like the Mennonite Brethren that formed in 1860, were progressive. Others, like the Kleine Gemeinde that formed in 1812, were conservers. Later, it was conservers who led the migrations to Canada, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia. They were usually the first to risk new settings.

In the 1870s migrations to North America, the progressives primarily settled in the American states of Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota. Most of those who settled in Manitoba were conservers. In the 1920s, when about 20,000 immigrants arrived in Canada from the Soviet Union, most of the immigrants were progressives.

In the 1920s, many of the conservers, including the best known of this group, the Old Colony

Mennonite Churches, emigrated from Canada to either Mexico or Paraguay. A few conservers from Kansas also joined the Old Colonists in Mexico. Again the conservers lead the way in forming new Mennonite communities in these countries. In the Swiss Mennonite tradition, the conservers are the Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites.

In both the Swiss and the Polish/Prussian Mennonite traditions, the conservers have a long

history of emphasizing separation from the world, the importance of community, and a simple lifestyle. They reject progress for its own sake, even though all gradually and selectively accept new ideas and innovations as long as there is no threat to community. The conservers have to some extent been

"This Polish/Prussian Mennonite story ... is a tremendous heritage."

willing to accept voluntary poverty, or at least a simpler life-style.

Progressives have often viewed the conservers as not quite legitimate inheritors of the Polish and Prussian legacy. I think, though, that despite differences with the progressives, the conservers are legitimate inheritors

of the Polish legacy. In our current concern for the environment and scarce natural resources, they may have something to teach us. In their understanding of a gentle faith lived in humility, they express well the insights of their heritage.

Also, several years ago when we saw the response of the Amish in Pennsylvania to the murder of their children by forgiving the murderer, their Christian witness was profound. The message of the forgiveness of Christ was proclaimed in those simple deeds in a powerful way. It made one think that maybe being for or against society is not the issue. The issue is whether one has absorbed, or nurtured in one's individual and collective character the message of the cross of Christ. This seems to be happening very well in many conserver communities, maybe exactly because they nurture faith in community.

This Polish/Prussian Mennonite story, which Peter Klassen has so eloquently presented in this book, is a tremendous heritage. It has shaped much of the Men-

nonite story and it continues to shape the stories. This new book helps us see the many layers of this history, and appreciate the richness of its texture. Again, congratulations to Peter Klassen for highlighting an important part of the Mennonite story.

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