
Mennonites in Poland: An Expanded Historical View

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In the sixteenth century, Danzig, West Prussia and Prussia were all part of the United Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. Poland had gained control over this area in the fifteenth century. When Mennonites settled in this area, they thus settled in areas which were under Polish rule. This paper will suggest some of the implications of interpreting the Mennonite experience in the Vistula and Nogat River regions within the context of Poland. The study is thus a conscious attempt to broaden the traditional interpretation of this region which has tended to place its history largely within the context of Prussian and German histories.

All histories interpret from some standpoint and perspective within history. It is quite understandable why earlier studies of this region placed Mennonite history within Prussian and German history. This study will analyze this earlier history of interpretation, and show that if the context is broadened to include the Commonwealth of Poland, new dimensions of Mennonite life are revealed which will allow for a fuller understanding of Mennonite life in the Vistula and Nogat River regions.

The extremely harsh persecution of people in the Low Countries by Margaret of Parma and the Duke of Alva in the middle of the sixteenth century resulted in Dutch refugees fleeing to the Polish regions of Danzig, Royal Prussia and Prussia.² They settled in areas belonging to the Polish Kingdom or Commonwealth. The term Commonwealth was frequently used since Poland was a country in which Poland and Lithuania were joined into a united political entity in 1569. In the preceding two centuries Poland and Lithuania were more loosely united in that they had a common king. After 1569 the United Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania established a joint parliament, called the Sejm in which sat elected representatives from both countries. In 1596 the meeting place of the Sejm was moved to Warsaw, from the old capital of Cracow, because Warsaw was more centrally located in the new United Commonwealth³.

Not all the Dutch who fled eastward were Anabaptists. Some of the earliest settlers who came before the persecutions were probably Roman

Catholic, others were Reformed.⁴ They settled in regions which for centuries afterward were referred to as "Hollaendische Doerfer"⁵ Within these Dutch settlements were Mennonites, and it seems that some of the Dutch may have been converted to Menno's faith after they had settled in the Polish regions.

In most Mennonite history books the area in which Mennonites first settled is described as Danzig and West Prussia. Occasionally some references are made to the Polish kings, but the over-all impression tends to be created that these political jurisdictions operated largely independently during most of the Mennonite experience in this area prior to 1772. The actual political inter-relationship of these areas within the Commonwealth of Poland is frequently not spelled out very clearly, and the implication of the political structures for Mennonites is not developed.

Gdansk, or Danzig, was a free city within the Hanseatic League, a Baltic and North Sea area association of cities for the purpose of promoting trade and cultural exchange.⁶ Gdansk, was also, however, a free city within the Commonwealth of Poland. Gdansk owed allegiance to the King of Poland and in its external policy had to respect the foreign policy of Poland. Gdansk did receive a great deal of freedom in determining its internal affairs. The Mennonites who settled in villages immediately to the east of the city of Gdansk up to the Vistula River came under the control of Gdansk. This included, though, only a portion of the Mennonites in the Vistula area. The Mennonites immediately to the south of Gdansk in the old Scottish settlement of Altschottland were under the political protection of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kujawy.⁷ Since Gdansk became Lutheran in 1525, the political, religious, and economic rivalry between the Lutheran controlled city and the Roman Catholic controlled country side aided the Mennonites. Other Mennonites who settled closer to the cities of Elblag and Malbork were also outside of the jurisdictions under Gdansk's control.

The area usually designated as West Prussia was not Prussian in the sixteenth century, although it had been Prussian in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1466, in a decisive war between Poland and Prussia, the Teutonic Knights who ruled Prussia were defeated and had to give up both Gdansk which became an incorporated city within Poland, and the Prussian province of West Prussia. West Prussia was organized into a new Polish voivodship (province), responsible to the King, and thus named Royal Prussia. This province of Royal Prussia included all the regions from Torun in the south to the Vistula-Nogat River deltas in the north in which Mennonites settled. Thus Tiegenhof, Elblag (Elbing), Malbork (Marienburg) as well as Grudziadz (Graudenz), Chelmno (Culm) and Torun (Thorn) were all part of the Polish voivodship of Royal Prussia. To understand the history of Mennonites in that area the policies of the Polish Crown should be taken into consideration.

Even Prussia itself, in which few Mennonites settled, was forced to become a vassal state of Poland as a result of the battle in 1466. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, and after 1525 the secular Duke of Prussia, regularly had to swear allegiance to the Kings of Poland until 1657. After 1657 Prussia became increasingly independent and Poland either did not want to or could not enforce its authority upon it. The reason was Poland's increasing preoccupation with problems in the east, in particular with the newly born and expansionist Russia led by Moscow. In the seventeenth century Poland was fighting to retain control of the Ukraine and much of what is now the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belorussia and thus had little time to pay attention to Prussia. The Teutonic Order converted to Lutheranism in 1525 and its subjects thus were all expected to convert likewise. When Dutch Mennonites refused, Albrecht of Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia, expelled them in the 1540's. Most of them resettled in the Polish province of Royal Prussia. A few Mennonites in the capital city of Koenigsberg were allowed to escape expulsion because of their important economic contributions.

The question can legitimately be asked why the fact that the regions within which Mennonites settled was Polish has not become a greater factor in the interpretation of the Mennonite experience in the Vistula-Nogat region. After all, the United Commonwealth of Poland was the largest country in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It occupied the lands from the Ukraine to the Baltic. Its political and geographic preponderance should have been obvious to interpreters. The reason for this omission lies entwined in the interlocking histories of Poland, Prussia, Russia and Germany. Poland, although it was the largest country in Europe in the seventeenth century, was not able to resist successfully forceable dismemberment in the eighteenth century. By 1795 Poland had disappeared from the map of Europe. The regions within which Mennonites had lived were incorporated into an expanded Prussia. From 1795 to 1920 Poland was either totally obliterated from the map, or existed only in amputated form as a series of vassal states.

During the Polish era up to 1795, Mennonites in the Vistula River region were not involved in historical interpretation. Culturally they related most closely to their Dutch fellow believers in the Netherlands, used the Dutch language, read Dutch books and preached sermons in Dutch. They did not produce historical interpretations of their own during this era. The Dutch book, *Martyrs' Mirror*, published in final form in 1659 primarily provided their historical framework for understanding themselves.

Mennonite historical self-consciousness finally awoke during the nineteenth century Prussian era. This was after Poland had disappeared from the map and after Mennonites had adopted the local "Werder Platt" language in their everyday communication and High German in their

schools and churches. When the historical self conscious reflection began, they shaped it within the political context of their day. The Polish world had disappeared.⁸

In 1854 Gdansk Mennonites established the periodical *Mennonitische Blaetter* which began to make the first thrusts toward historical self-interpretation.⁹ Right from the beginning, the editor Jacob Mannhardt included historical articles in the *Mennonitische Blaetter*.¹⁰

A few years later, in 1863, Wilhelm Mannhardt, the son of Jacob Mannhardt, produced the most substantial historical writing by Mennonites in Prussia during the Prussian era in his *Wehrfreiheit der Altpreussischen Mennoniten*.¹¹ In it Mannhardt attempted to show that the emphasis on peace and the resulting rejection of military service had been an historical Mennonite belief and practice originating in the sixteenth century. In the process he discussed the experiences in the various areas of Danzig, Culm, Thorn, Graudenz and the "Werdern" in the Vistula-Nogat region. In this study, as well as in the interpretations in the *Mennonitische Blaetter*, the context of interpretation was the immediate political situation. References are made to Poland by Mannhardt, but no extensive interpretation of the Polish context was included. Considering that by 1863 Poland had disappeared this was understandable. Nevertheless, it coloured Mannhardt's interpretation of Mennonite history in the preceding three centuries, and it affected his projection of Mennonite self-identity. By 1863 most of the Mennonites who had had difficulty with the political, economic and religious policies of Prussia had emigrated to Russia. His readership consisted of people who had come to terms with the Prussian world. In his study of "Wehrfreiheit," though, Mannhardt recognized an area of life in which Prussian Mennonites had not yet completely accommodated themselves to the Prussian spirit.

In 1867 the North German Confederation was formed by Prussia. Its new constitution made no provision for exemption from military service for religious reasons. In 1868 the King of Prussia, in an Order-in-Cabinet, extended to Mennonites the right to serve in non-combatant roles in the army. Exemption from military training was not possible any more. In 1870 Prussia and the German states went to war against what was considered in the German states the ungodly country of France. Even before the war began, the university educated Wilhelm Mannhardt rejected his own conclusions in his major book on "Wehrfreiheit," and argued that the aims and ideals of the Mennonite heritage of peace were in full accord with the aims of the Prussian state.¹² Belief in nonresistance, he argued, did not mean rejecting military service. The war against France, he stated, was so eminently just that to fight in the war was itself a sign of love for the neighbor who was threatened with ungodliness. Mennonite self-identity was being forged within Prussian and German nationalism. His article received very wide acceptance.

H. G. Mannhardt in *Die Danziger Mennonitengemeinde. Ihre Entstehung und ihre Geschichte von 1569-1919*, also wrote from the context of Germany.¹³ The context was, however, very different from the context of W. Mannhardt's writings around 1870. In 1919 Germany had lost the Great War and was being divided. The German spirit was in crisis. It is to Mannhardt's credit that he dealt in great detail with the early history of Gdansk when it was a free city within Poland up to 1793. At the end of this study he commented that again Gdansk is to be a free city. Then his true feelings about the earlier Polish period came to light when he exclaimed:

Was man vor mehr als hundert Jahren den Freistaat Danzig nannte, war ein unfreies Gebilde voll Not und Elend. Hoffen wir, dass es diesmal nicht so schlimm damit bestellt sein wird, wenn auch die Losloesung vom alten Vaterlande schon bitter und schmerzlich genug ist.¹⁴

In the 1930's Mennonite historical interpretation was taken up again. Mennonite self-identity was shaped by the new National Socialist government led by Adolf Hitler. Mennonite self-identity was influenced by the recovery of self-confidence, self-respect and pride which Hitler inspired in the German people. Kauenhowen in 1935 began a new publication which was to promote Mennonite genealogy. In the foreword to the first edition he quoted Isolde Kurz: "Ahnenkult und Ahnenstolz haben ihren tiefen Sinn. Es ist nicht gleichgultig, aus welchem Blut wir stammen."¹⁵

It is evident that Kauenhowen accepted the standard of racial superiority of National Socialism, and was convinced it was both desirable and possible for Mennonites to prove their racial purity. Mennonite identity was intertwined with racial purity and superiority.

The same theme is taken to the extreme in a publication by Heinrich Schroeder entitled *Russlanddeutsche Friesen* published in 1936.¹⁶ Schroeder undertook a statistical study of the names of Mennonites in Russia to show to what extent Mennonite blood was racially pure, and to what extent it had been corrupted by Slavic blood. His conclusion was that about 90% of all Russian Mennonite names originated in lower Germany, and about 63.5% were actually Frisian.¹⁷ Most gratifying for him was the conclusion that only 1.3% of all Russian names were Slavic.¹⁸ Thus racial purity had been very largely protected by Russian Mennonites.

The purpose of his study was to awaken Russian Mennonites to a realization of their racial purity, that they belonged to the best of all German races, the Frisians, and that they should as Frisian Mennonites grasp fully the heritage that this racial purity implied.

Two studies in the 1930's by young doctoral students which showed far more careful scholarship and much less polemic were those by Horst Penner who wrote the history of Mennonites in the Gdansk, Malbork and

Elblag area and by Herbert Wiebe who wrote the history of Mennonites south of Malbork up to Torun.¹⁹ Penner was born in Gdansk, and Wiebe in Gross Falkenau, a village immediately to the west of the Vistula River, and belonging to the Heubuden congregation. Both completed most of their work before the war broke out on September 1, 1939, thus before Gdansk was reunited with Germany. Both utilized the local archives, especially those of Gdansk. Because of Wiebe's emphasis on Mennonites further south along the Vistula he also utilized the archives of Torun, Grudziadz and Chelmno.

Herbert Wiebe concentrated his study on the history of Mennonite settlements south of the Vistula-Nogat delta up to Fordon. Wiebe's study is very thorough and yields a great deal of helpful information. As the title of the dissertation indicates, *Das Siedlungswerk niederlaendischer Mennoniten im Weichseltal*, Wiebe attempted to make the point that Mennonites were of Dutch background. This was written within a context in which there was discussion of racial purity and Arian superiority, and also a context in which there was antagonism between Germans and Poles. Since most of the area which Wiebe was researching was under Polish control up to September, 1939, his intent was probably to lift Mennonites out of this antagonism and conflict. At least this emphasis was designed to help blunt the negative feelings of the Polish government toward the Mennonite residents within its borders.

When Wiebe discussed the sixteenth to eighteenth century Mennonite history in the Vistula area, it is evident that his sympathies lay with the earlier Prussian rather than with the Polish rule. The Polish rule was considered a time of cultural and economic decline, and comparisons were made with the Polish rule of his day.²⁰ In his regional references he also always used the term "West Prussia" instead of the Polish provincial name of "Royal Prussia". Wiebe's study is especially strong in providing a great amount of detail from local government records, but he did not place these local events within the context of the larger Polish political, economic and military events.

Horst Penner's study *Ansiedlung Mennonitischer Niederlaender im Weichselmuendungsgebiet von der Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn der preussischen Zeit*, focused to a large extent upon the lists of inhabitants in the various villages in Gdansk, Malbork and Elblag areas during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²¹ From these lists he was able to establish Mennonite movements in and out of the regions, the offices which Mennonites held, negotiations with governments, tax roles and various other local information. Penner's study included a wealth of settlement history based on the contents of the Gdansk archives. His work was, however, not highly interpretive. He expended only a minimum of effort in interpreting local events within the larger context of either Poland or Gdansk. The study concluded with lists

prepared by Gustav E. Reimer of Dutch Mennonite inhabitants of various villages during the years from 1675 to 1773.

Penner published an expanded version of his doctoral study in 1978.²² The perspective did not change significantly but the history was more comprehensive. It dealt more extensively with Mennonite social and religious life. His most significant contribution in this publication was his study of the geographical origin of various Mennonite names.²³ In this study Penner established that approximately two thirds of the Mennonite names originated in the Low Countries. He thus continued his quest of Dutch origins, but did not elaborate on the Polish context.

A recent series of articles in Polish by a Polish writer K. Mezynski, reinterpreting Mennonite history in Poland, is still very strongly caught up in the antagonisms resulting from the second World War.²⁴ He, however, also raised the possibility of looking at Mennonite history anew from a Polish perspective.

The de-emphasis of the Polish context of the Mennonite existence in the Vistula River region from the 16th to the 18th centuries becomes understandable historically. As a result of the forcible partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795 Mennonite settlements in the Vistula River region were incorporated into the Prussian Kingdom. In the formation of the German Empire in 1871 they became part of the Empire. Mennonites were gradually acculturated and assimilated into the Prussian and German values and mores. Consequently the fact that they had been received and granted religious toleration by Poland receded into the background. Even the early serious difficulties with the Prussian kings gradually appeared less significant. It was much more attractive to identify with a vibrant new German Empire than with a state which had lost its political existence.

In the inter-war years, Mennonite scholarship was clearly affected by the racial policies of a resurgent Germany under the leadership of National Socialism, and by the antagonism between Germany and Poland, a country forcibly created by the victors over Germany in the First World War.

It is thus evident that there were significant reasons why Mennonites in the Vistula River region, when they began to write their history in the late 19th and early 20th century, were unable to place their earlier history within the Polish context. The need to do this task remains, however. The immigration of Mennonites into the Vistula River regions was possible because Poland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was tolerant of dissenting religious groups. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation refused to tolerate dissenters anywhere, and even after the treaty of Augsburg in 1555, allowed only one religion in any one state. Anabaptists were specifically proscribed in the Empire after 1526. In the face of this, Poland prided itself in exercising religious toleration. Its policy of religious toleration was unique in Europe. This

policy was extended to dissenting Christian minority groups and also to Jews. Jews, persecuted in the Western European countries of England, Spain, France and also in the German Empire, found Poland a haven of refuge. The first Polish ruler who formally granted Jews toleration was Casimir the Great in the 14th century.²⁵

This policy of tolerance helps to explain why noblemen along the Vistula from Gdansk to Torun were willing and able to accept Mennonite settlers onto their estates. Poland's official policy allowed this. It protected the Mennonite settlers and the tolerant nobles even when local bishops or archbishops on occasion attempted to put pressure on religious dissenters.

Another aspect of Polish political life which affected Mennonites was that Poland was the most democratic and least autocratic of the central and eastern European countries. Prussia, Austria, Sweden and Prussia developed very strong, autocratic governments in which hereditary kings established themselves. Poland developed a remarkably democratic political system.²⁶ The central political institution was the Sejm, or the parliament, which was moved from the old capital Cracow to Warsaw in 1596 after Poland and Lithuania had joined into one Commonwealth in 1569.²⁷

The Sejm was divided into two houses, an upper house, or Senate, which included the upper nobility and clergy, and a lower house which included a large representation of the lower nobility or gentry.²⁸ The gentry tended to carry much of the power in Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An elected representative government was also established in the voivods and another structure of elected government existed at the local level. They were called Land Diets, *conventiones particulares*.²⁹ There were in Poland thus three levels of elected representative government. In Poland as in the English parliamentary system of the same era, the lowest class, e.g. peasants, did not have the vote. The vote was largely restricted to the land-owning class.

This setting is important for understanding the Mennonite experience in Poland and may require a new look at some aspects of their history. It helps to place the "Privilegia" which Mennonites negotiated with Polish kings within a larger context. The "Privilegia" can be seen as negotiated with a central ruler, the king, who was responsible to the local gentry for his actions, but who was often also in considerable tension with them over issues such as finance as well as the treatment of foreigners and non-citizen minorities like Mennonites and Jews.

What has in the past probably also not been sufficiently recognized is that Mennonites learned from this Polish context the system of elected local representative government. The form of representative government was limited, however, only to those who had the legal status to vote.³⁰

An aspect of Mennonite life in the voivodship of Royal Prussia that

has always been puzzling is the national composition of the people in the area. Were they German or Polish? According to some studies the area appears German; according to others it is evident there were many Poles present. This puzzling situation is understood more clearly if it is placed within the context of Polish settlement and immigration history. During the middle ages various peoples, including Wends, Sorbs, Lusatians and Poles had pushed westward past the Oder and Neisse Rivers into Brandenburg. In the latter middle ages and on into the early modern era, German people from various German states were encouraged to settle in territories east of the Oder and Neisse Rivers.³¹ These settlers usually located in towns and were frequently engaged in business and crafts. They were thus quite often the elected leaders in towns and prominent in local guilds. Numerous towns were thus largely German and usually chose to live under German law. Some Polish towns also chose to live under German law. The countryside, however, remained largely Polish, and the local gentry was also largely Polish. In the areas of heavy German concentration, e.g. in Royal Prussia, these German burghers would sometimes also buy land and enter the ranks of gentry.

Gradually, over the centuries, numerous Polish gentry adopted the German language and customs in Royal Prussia because of the preponderance of Germans in the urban areas. The areas in which Mennonites settled were mixed in racial composition, with fairly heavy concentrations of Germans in the cities. Studies which concentrated on the towns, the burghers and the business community, tended to see primarily German people. Social histories of the area recognized more clearly that there existed large numbers of Poles in the same area.

A related factor in Mennonite settlement in the Vistula region is that when Mennonites settled in the area they were identified as Dutch and not as Germans.³² Poland was open to settlers from many different countries. Large areas were identified as Dutch, and it is in these areas that some of the earliest Mennonite churches developed. Other Mennonites came from Swiss, or Austrian-Hutterite regions, and had their own Swiss or Austrian identity. The point to note here, though, is that Mennonites were not identified initially as German, and did not identify as such for a couple of centuries. They were a double minority, Dutch and Mennonite in a context of Poles and Germans who were Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist.

An examination of the "Privilegia" drawn up between Mennonites and the Polish kings has considerable parallel to the "Privilegia" drawn up between Jews and Polish kings. The necessity for these "Privilegia" was occasioned by the fact that in Poland, as in most European countries of the late middle ages and the early modern era, citizenship was not country-wide nor based upon birth.³³ Citizenship was specially conferred by local princes, dukes or city councils upon a select number of

people. Usually full citizenship was urban, non-transferable within Poland, and based upon religious affiliation.³⁴ In the middle ages this normally meant that non-Christians, e.g. Jews, could not attain full citizenship. After the reformation in the sixteenth century, citizenship was dependent upon belonging to the Christian faction that was dominant or tolerated in a particular local political jurisdiction.

The most important Jewish "Privilegium" was drawn up between Jews and the Polish king, Casimir the Great in the fourteenth century. In Lithuania the "Privilegium" with the Jews was drawn up about 56 years later. The "Privilegia" had to be negotiated or reconfirmed with each successive king. These agreements provided the basis for protecting life and property, they spelled out religious rights, defined the organizations which could be established, regulated where Jews could settle and own property, and determined the taxes and other obligations to the state.³⁵ The "Privilegia" thus did not really set out privileges for Jews which citizens did not enjoy. Rather, "Privilegia" distinguished Jews from other non citizens and spelled out the legal conditions under which they could exist within the country. Since the size of the Jewish community was very considerable, possibly about ten percent of the total population by the time of the partitions, it was rather important to clarify Jewish status.³⁶ Even though the Mennonite population was much smaller, the kings chose the same pattern to clarify Mennonite legal status within Poland.

It should be noted that these "Privilegia" were always negotiated between the king and the minority, that is non-citizen groups. He conferred upon them a special status between citizenship and non-citizenship, and offered his protection and guarantee for the conditions he conferred. Citizenship was, however, not conferred by kings but was conferred by local jurisdictions. The "Privilegia" thus set the stage for repeated instances of conflict between these two jurisdictions.³⁷ Both the Jewish and Mennonite histories in Poland are rife with examples of such conflict. In most such cases, the Crown defended the minority group against either local political jurisdictions, or against over-zealous local religious powers.³⁸

During the latter part of the seventeenth century Mennonites in Poland were accused of having an Arian anti-trinitarian theology. This accusation occasioned a number of responses by the Mennonites. The Mennonite theological defenses were formulated primarily by Georg Hansen.³⁹ This controversy between Mennonites and the Polish government fits into the context of Polish political decline during the latter half of the seventeenth century. In the years following 1648, Poland suffered a series of severe crises. Sweden attacked Poland and devastated large areas of the land, the Cossacks revolted in 1648 and were subdued with great difficulty, and the first of many unfavorable treaties were concluded

with Russia in 1664 in which Russia received the territories on the left bank of the Dnieper, as well as the cities of Kiev and Smolensk. This era is frequently referred to in Polish histories as "The Deluge."⁴⁰

Poles asked themselves why this calamity was befalling the large and noble land of Poland. Some Poles answered their own question by stating that the Commonwealth's problems must be due to the existence of heretics within the land.⁴¹ This answer was especially promoted by the Jesuits who had already been admitted into Poland in 1565.⁴² Consequently Mennonites had to defend themselves against the accusation of being Arians. Since the fourth century "heresy" of Arianism had emphasized that Christ was subordinate to God the Father, the accusation of Arianism thus implied that Mennonites did not believe in the full divinity of Christ.

By being accused of being Arians, Mennonites were also being identified with another outlawed movement, namely the Socinians. Socinianism was a Polish reform movement of the late sixteenth century which stressed adult baptism, pacifism, and rejected Christ's divinity. In 1658, one portion of the Polish reform movement, the Polish Brethren were expelled. However, this conflict between Mennonites and the Polish state should not be seen solely in terms of religious conflict, but also within the context of political anxiety among Poles about the future of their nation.

The experience of Mennonites in the city of Gdansk will also be viewed differently if it is interpreted from the perspective of Poland rather than from the perspective of Prussia. The usual interpretation of Gdansk places it within the context of the German and Prussian histories.⁴³ It is true that Gdansk from the time of its conquest by Prussia in 1308 and the subsequent massacre of its Polish population had become largely Germanic.⁴⁴ The guilds as well as the city government were under the control of Germanic people.⁴⁵ This, however, did not translate into a pro-Prussian political inclination among the citizens of Gdansk. Rather, Gdansk, throughout its 16th, 17th and 18th century experience, up to the second partition of Poland in 1793, allied itself repeatedly with the Polish kings against Prussia. Gdansk was accorded the status of an incorporated city by Poland with considerable control over its own internal affairs consistent with other legally incorporated cities in Poland.⁴⁶ Its elected representative form of government was similar to that in other Polish cities. This form of government was very different from the highly centralized autocratic Prussian form of government. Gdansk feared coming under Prussian control, and its fears were proven well founded when Prussia dismantled the representative city government when it took over the city in 1793, and again in 1814 after the Napoleonic era.⁴⁷ The resentment toward Prussia was so severe that riots broke out in Gdansk against

Prussia in 1819, 1821, and 1822, largely because of the economic problems caused by the Prussian rule.⁴⁸

Other aspects of Polish history will also need to be analyzed in order to help understand the Mennonite experience in the Vistula region. The economic history, for example, of the area needs to be analyzed anew. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Poland increased its grain production very significantly. As a result there was increased export of grain through Gdansk to the Western European states. This seems to be the setting for the entry of Dutch settlers to help make acreages arable which were earlier swampy and below sea level. The effect which this increased trade had on the economic possibilities of Mennonites in Gdansk needs to be studied in greater detail.⁴⁹

The areas indicated as requiring new research are not exhaustive, but rather suggestive of the potential that is available. The whole area of social history may prove to be the most fruitful in helping to understand the life of Mennonites in the Vistula–Nogat River valleys. Other disciplines like legal history, history of education, the history of minorities, and religious history should all provide helpful new insights into the life of the Mennonite communities.

This approach for studying Mennonite history by placing it within the context of Polish history is not designed to deny or reject the earlier histories which interpreted the Mennonite communities from within the context of Prussian and Germanic histories. In some cases the earlier histories may have arrived at false conclusions because they were reading a later Prussian/German setting back into an earlier era. More often however, the problem has been that the context was too small. By enlarging the context from the immediate Germanic communities which surrounded the Mennonite settlements to include the Polish residents in the same area, as well as the Polish political, economic, legal, social and religious settings within which all were living, a much more balanced, and more accurate picture can be constructed.

This direction of Mennonite research may also have significant implications for Mennonite self-understanding. It may help to bridge the gap that exists between the Anabaptist identity that is portrayed by research into the sixteenth century experience, and the identity of Russian Mennonitism. The two areas frequently appear to stand in disjointed juxtaposition to each other. By developing the time period during which Mennonites lived under Polish rule, these periods may be tied together.

Through this approach, Mennonites may also be helped to see themselves as a people who have been shaped and reshaped by a series of different cultural and national situations. Mennonite identity may prove to be not something static and unchanging, some kernel which has remained constant through the ages. Mennonite identity may prove rather to be an identity that is in process, moving from Dutch, to Polish, to

Prussian/German, to Canadian settings, and in each creating community.

Notes

¹Many of the German language studies of the general history of the areas of Danzig, West Prussia and Prussia have placed them largely within Prussian and German histories. Some examples of this are two books by Erich Keyser, *Danzigs Geschichte* (Danzig: Verlag A. W. Kafemann G.m.b.H., 1928 2nd ed.), and *Westpreussen. Aus der deutschen Geschichte des Weichsellandes* (Wuerzburg: Holzner Verlag, 1962). Another study which shows a similar interpretive viewpoint is Siegfried Rosenberg, *Geschichte des Kreises, Grosses Werder* (Danziger Verlagsgesellschaft Paul Rosenberg, Study completed 1939).

²The persecution of the people in the Low Countries by the Spanish was due more to political than religious reasons. The Dutch yearned to be free of Spanish political and economic control. Their acceptance of the reformation was to a large extent an attempt to further distinguish themselves from their Roman Catholic oppressors. For discussions of the Dutch situation during this era see E. H. Kossman, A. F. Mellink, *Texts concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), Pieter Geyl, *History of the Low Countries* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964) and Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

³Warsaw was the capital of the state of Mazovia. This state remained independent of a united Poland until 1526. Shortly after joining the Union, it began to play a central role in Poland. Stanislaw Arnold and Marian Zychowski, *Outline History of Poland. From the beginning of the state to the present time* (Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1962), p. 50.

⁴For a discussion of Dutch settlements in Polish regions see: Felicia Szper, *Niederlandsche Nederzettingen in Westpreussen gedurende den Poolschen Tijd* (Amsterdamder Diss. Enkuizen, 1913).

⁵Horst Penner, *Ansiedlung Mennonitischer Niederlaender im Weichselmuenungsgebiet bis zum Beginn der preussischen Zeit* (Weierhof/Pfalz: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1940), p. 15.

⁶For a discussion of the role and function of the Hanseatic League, and Gdansk's place in it see: Philippe Dollinger, *The German Hansa*, translated by D. S. Ault and S. H. Steinberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970).

⁷Kujawy was one of the ancient political jurisdictions of Poland. Upon the rearrangement of Polish voivodships (provinces) after the defeat of the Prussians in 1466, the political region of Kujawy was incorporated into the voivodships of Royal Prussia and Greater Poland. The bishopric of Kujawy however remained and included the region up to the city of Gdansk.

⁸During the Prussian era an attempt was made by the government to remove all references to "Poland" in official documents. Mennonites will certainly have been affected by this official attempt to remove the memory of Poland. William John Rose, *Poland Old and New* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1948), p. 79.

⁹There were studies of Mennonite life prior to 1854 which included the Mennonites in the Vistula and Nogat River areas. They were, however, written by non-Mennonites and thus did not necessarily reveal Mennonite self-understanding. The principal studies were Wilhelm Crichton, *Zur Geschichte der Mennoniten* (Koenigsberg, 1786), Frh. v. u. Wadzek Reiszwitz, *Beitraege zur Kenntnis der Mennonitengemeinden in Europa und Amerika* (Berlin, Bd. I, 1821, Bd. II, 1829).

¹⁰The articles Mannhardt included in the first few years were: J. von der Smissen, "Ueber den Ursprung der Taufgesinnten welche Mennoniten genannt werden," *Mennonitische Blaetter* 1 (January 1854) 3-7; B. C. Rossen, "Kurze Geschichte der Hamburger-Altonaer Mennoniten Gemeinde," *Mennonitische Blaetter* 1 (March 1854) 9-24, and (May 1854) 21-26; Johannes von der Smissen, "Ueber die Anfaenge der Mennoniten in Preussen," *Mennonitische Blaetter* 1 (July 1854) 29-33, and (December 1854) 51-54. The periodical is available in microfilm at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

¹¹W. Mannhardt, *Die Wehrfreiheit der Altpreussischen Mennoniten. Eine geschichtliche Eroerterung* (Marienburg: Im Selbstverlage der Altpreussischen Men-

nonitengemeinden, 1863). Wilhelm Mannhardt was the first Mennonite from the Vistula River region to gain a university education and to attain a doctorate.

¹²W. Mannhardt, "Zur Wehrfrage," *Mennonitische Blaetter* (December 9, 1868), 74-76; (January 1, 1869), 5-8.

¹³H. G. Mannhardt, *Die Danziger Mennonitengemeinde. Ihre Entstehung und ihre Geschichte von 1569-1919* (Danzig: Selbstverlag der Danziger Mennonitengemeinde, 1919).

¹⁴Mannhardt, *Die Danziger Mennonitengemeinde*, p. 210.

¹⁵*Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes der Danziger Mennoniten-Familien. Epp-Kauenhowen-Zimmerman*. Edited by Dr. Kurt Kauenhowen (Goettingen, 1st edition June, 1935). In the opening editorial in the same issue, Kauenhowen, in his own words expressed a similar sentiment regarding racial purity and the place of Mennonite genealogical studies. "Durch 500 Jahre sind unsere Sippen rassisch unvermischt niederdeutsch gewesen und geblieben . . . Als niederlaendische Religionsfluechtige brachten sie nicht westisches Blut wie die Hugenotten, nicht ostisch-alpines wie die Salzburger in den deutschen Osten, sondern niederdeutsches Blut, das die auch rein gehalten haben bis heute."

¹⁶Heinrich H. Schroeder, *Russlanddeutsche Friesen* (Doellstaedt-Langensalza: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1936).

¹⁷Schroeder, *Russlanddeutsche*, p. 80.

¹⁸Schroeder, *Russlanddeutsche*, p. 80. Heinrich H. Schroeder, a native of the Molotschna settlement in the Ukraine, wrote extensively in *Der Bote*, a Canadian Mennonite periodical published by the 1920's immigrants from the USSR. One of the eighteen articles of his which *Der Bote* carried was entitled "Kommt Menno Simons unter die Nationalsozialisten." It is interesting to note that the German periodical, *Mennonitische Blaetter*, published in Danzig, did not carry any of his articles.

¹⁹Herbert Wiebe, *Das Siedlungswerk niederlaendischer Mennoniten im Weichselal zwischen Forden und Weissenberg bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg a.d. Lahn: Johann Gottfried Herder-Institute, 1952). This study was completed in 1941. The author died in the war. After the war the study was published by the Johann Gottfried Herder-Institute. Horst Penner, *Ansiedlung Mennonitischer Niederlaender im Weichselmuendungsgebiet von der Mitte des 16. Jahrhundert bis zum Beginn der preussischen Zeit*. Anhang: Gustav E. Reimer. "Die Familiennamen der westpreussischen Mennoniten" (Weierhof/Pfalz: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1940).

²⁰Wiebe, *Das Siedlungswerk*, pp. 12 and 15.

²¹Penner, *Ansiedlung Mennonitischer Niederlaender*, pp. 71-86. The attempt to emphasize the essentially Dutch background of Mennonites in the Vistula and Nogat River regions was also undertaken by Benjamin Unruh, a Russian Mennonite who had settled in Karlsruhe, Germany during the 1920's. He argued his case in "Niederlaendische Hintergruende der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Preussen im 16. Jahrhundert", *Mennonitische Blaetter*, 84 (1937). His primary purpose in arguing this case was to gain a more favourable attitude toward Mennonites in the Soviet Union from the Soviet government.

²²Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten in ihrem religioesen und sozialen Leben in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen* (Weierhof/Pfalz, Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, E.V., 1978).

²³Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten*, pp. 227-361.

²⁴K. Mezynski, *From the History of Mennonites in Poland* (Warsaw: Akademia Rolnicza Warszawie, 1975).

²⁵Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland. A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), pp. 27. Casimir the Great granted Jews privileges in 1334 and 1364. This was in the form of a legal document, a charter, which applied to all territories under the control of the crown.

²⁶Aleksander Gieysztor, et al, *History of Poland* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1958), pp. 120f. After 1454 the Kings of Poland regularly called the gentry together to get their support for war and other measures, most of which required money. Thus the Polish parliamentary system developed within a context in which the King could not impose taxes except upon the approval of the gentry.

²⁷Gieysztor, *Poland*, pp. 181f.

²⁸The law "Nihil Novi" of 1505 decreed that the King of Poland had no right to legislate without the joint consent of the two chambers. William John Rose, *Poland Old and*

New (London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1948), p. 48. This law of "Nihil Novi" laid the foundation of the principle in the succeeding centuries known as "liberum veto" according to which a proposed law had to be approved by every member of the Sejm. The dissenting voice of even one member defeated a motion. This led to a "tyranny of individual caprice," and eventually paralyzed the Polish Sejm.

²⁹Gieysztor, *Poland*, pp. 130f.

³⁰This may be an antecedent for understanding the village structure as it developed among Mennonites in the Ukraine.

³¹Gieysztor, *Poland*, pp. 99f, and 154f. See also Philippe Dollinger. *The German Hansa*, p. 129f.

³²This seems fairly clear on the basis of the studies by Horst Penner referred to above, which are based on the Gdansk archives.

³³Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, p. 134, 160.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 132.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 134, 160.

³⁷The tension of Royal and regional interests on the issue of the status of minorities is illustrated in the case of Mazovia. The voivodship of Mazovia, including its capital Warsaw, joined the Polish Union in 1526. Mazovia had not ever allowed Jews to settle in its borders, and was thus free of Jews. When it joined the union in 1526, the King granted the continuing right of Warsaw to prohibit Jews from settling within its borders despite the fact that in the rest of Poland Jews were tolerated.

³⁸See Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, and Penner *Die ost-und westpreussischen Mennoniten* for examples where Jews and Mennonites experienced conflict between the Crown and local authorities.

³⁹*Mennonitisches Lexikon*, Vol. II (1937), pp. 250-251.

⁴⁰O. Halecki, *The History of Poland. An Essay in Historical Synthesis*. Translated by Monica M. Gardner and Mary Corbridge-Patkaniewska (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1942), p. 123f.

⁴¹Gieysztor, *History of Poland*, p. 250.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁴³See, for example, Erich Keyser, *Danzigs Geschichte* (Danzig: Verlag A. W. Kafemann G. m. b. H., 1928, First published in 1921).

⁴⁴Simon Askenazy, *Dantzic and Poland*, translated by William J. Rose (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1921), p. 8.

⁴⁵Gdansk had four principle guilds: builders, schoemakers, smiths, and bakers. Askenazy, *Dantzic and Poland*, p. 16.

⁴⁶According to the "Treaty of Torun," 1466, Gdansk was given the following rights: to enact and execute its own laws; to coin money; to treat with foreign powers; to a crown in the coat of arms; to the red wax in the mayors seal; to the full privilege of free shipping. Askenazy, *Dantzic and Poland*, p. 13.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁹Norman Davies, *God's Playground. A History of Poland*, Vo. I The Origins to 1795 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) discusses the very important role that Danzig played in the export and import of products into Poland. He also discusses the relationship between grain export and the status of the serfs.