

Research Note

Vanished Mennonite Weavers: An Extinct Dutch Mennonite Community

by Dennis Freels and Lawrence Klippenstein

From the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries Jade Bay in northwest Germany had an extension called the *Swarte Braak*. It had been created by storm floods making a kind of hinterland for the period noted. On the northern shore of this body of water (about 20 kms east of the modern city of Wilhelmshaven) existed two farming communities named Neustadt-Goedens and Dykhausen.

The harbour of the former community had been established by Mennonite seamen from Groningen in northern Holland. Soon a group of Flemish weavers, also from Groningen added these woven materials to their agricultural list of export products and, benefitting also from trade with Oldenburg, the town soon prospered.

The relative remoteness of this area made it an ideal place for several Anabaptists who needed refuge to save their lives. Two men who arrived in the community in 1535 were Dr. Gerhard Westenburg (nicknamed Doktor Fegefeuer) and Hinrich Krechting. Westenburg published Fegefeuer's work and was married to a sister of Andreas Karlstadt who became a preacher in the Reformed Church at Dykhausen.

Krechting had made a dramatic escape during the tumult at Muenster. A lesser known brother of his was a member of the trio which was tortured, executed and hanged in one of the well-known cages which can be seen on a church tower in Muenster even today. For a number of years he was the warden for the church and the poor of the Reformed congregation at Dykhausen.

Neustadt-Goedens, mentioned above, was founded sometime after this. When the area was deeded to the Duke of Oldenburg, Count Anton Guenther, by heiress Maria von Jever, the new owner proceeded to erect a land-reclamation dam nearby. He needed to close the *Swarte Braak* to connect up with his newly-acquired domain. It was a remarkable engineering feat but the dam would cut off the tidal waters, and make Neustadt-Goedens an inland town. Its ships could not reach the open sea any more.

The community got a boost however by the end of the century when a group of Mennonite weavers moved in from the town of Leer, East Friesland, and a horse,

livestock and flax trade flourished for a time. About 190 independent tradesmen could find incomes, and the village soon boasted four congregations, i.e. Catholic, Mennonite, Reformed and Lutheran, along with a Jewish community.

By 1780 a second downturn had begun for the area when the weaving industry was impacted by industrialization and modernization. The tradesmen were able to overcome all problems but one — the influence of the steam-driven weaving loom. This contrivance destroyed their income for good, and when the Prussian government built the new harbour facility at Wilhelmshaven nearby, the temptation to gain an income from employment there became, for many, too great to resist. The Mennonite church, it seems, survived till 1865. One member was known to reside in Wilhelmshaven as late as 1895. But no one seems to know what happened then. The Mennonite congregational records were burned during WW11, though a tea specialty store, "Tee Bakker" on the Bismarckstrasse seems to betray a Mennonite origin even today. There are also suggestions that some members of the Mennonite community returned to their places of origin around the city of Leer and Groningen in The Netherlands.

Notes

¹ The basic text of this material comes from Denis Freels, originally from The Netherlands, who, with his wife, Eileen, operates Kiska Inn Bed and Breakfast at Dead Man's Flat (near Canmore, Alberta). For further information call 1-401-678 4041. Dennis revisited the sites of Dykhausen and Neustadt - Goedens in 1997, and found them "spruced up considerably". Cf. a letter to Lawrence Klippenstein of 3/5/1997.

² On Neustadt - Goedens see also N.van der Zipp, "Neustadt-Goedens", in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (1957), Vol. III, 857. According to this article, Leonard Bouwens, a Dutch Mennonite leader, baptized 20 persons in Goedens in 1551-56.

³ For a brief biography of Krechting, see Cornelius Krahn, "Krechting, Hinrich", *Ibid.*, 234 - 35. Krechting died in 1581.

⁴ Freels noted that further information about Neustadt-Goedens and its Mennonite founders may be obtained from Mr.C. Remmers, Fasanenweg 5, 26452 Sande, Germany. A CD on the town's history is available at that address also. One can still find the building cited as once being the Mennonite meeting house. It holds a plaque saying, "Former Mennonite Church, built 1741, used by Mennonites till 1865" and adding, "Mennonites founded Neustadt-Goedens about 1550". See Freels correspondence, 3/5/1997.