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# Mennonites in Deutsch Kasun Make Peace in 1881

**Translated and Edited by John B. Toews** *University of Calgary*

Over a century ago the Mennonite congregation of Deutsch Kasun, then under Prussian jurisdiction, was locked in a bitter conflict with its elder. In order to resolve the issue they appealed to the larger brotherhood for help. Most of the constituency lived in the numerous Mennonite villages of the Vistula Delta near cities like Danzig, Koenigsberg, Tilsit and Elbing. Some of their forebears had already migrated to East Prussia during the sixteenth century. In the decades and centuries which followed the steadily expanding settlements encountered a bewildering array of Prussian or Polish sovereigns. Their attitudes towards the pacifistic colonists under their rule were often equally bewildering. In an era of absolutism exemptions and privileges were entirely dependent on the consistency of the king himself. There was little respect for legal precedents. Generally the princes under which the Mennonites found themselves responded to the pressures of the moment.

Deutsch Kasun, situated near the Vistula River just north of Warsaw, was first settled by Mennonites in 1776. It was then under Polish jurisdiction. The region reverted to Prussian control with the third partition of Poland in 1795. This encouraged a steady influx of Mennonite settlers from elsewhere in Prussia and spawned a number of small villages in the vicinity of Deutsch Kasun. The village built its first church in 1832. Five elders served the congregation from its inception until its dissolution at the end of World War II. The elder mentioned in the account, Heinrich Bartel, was elected in 1864.

Some knowledge of the time frame is essential when interpreting this account. When Bartel assumed his new post the question of Mennonite exemption from military service had not appeared on the political agenda for some years. Rather suddenly in 1867 the parliament of the North German Confederation, pressured by Bismarck, passed a law decreeing universal military service. Though modified by a cabinet order in 1868 to include alternative service in a clerical or medical capacity, it marked the beginning of significant changes among the Prussian Men-

nonites. The intensification of assimilative pressures was coupled with the gradual loss of nonresistance. Increasingly outside marriages, the salaried ministry, open communion and active participation in the military became the order of the day. By 1881 the older, stricter discipline to which elder Bartel subscribed in 1864 had been substantially modified. The dialogue between Dyck and Bartel possibly mirrors that change.

The account reflects the traditional structure of the Prussian Mennonite church. Each larger congregation usually had one elder, four to six *Lehrer* (teacher-ministers) and two deacons. Elders, ministers and deacons were elected from within the congregation. They were men who had proven themselves and enjoyed the confidence of the congregation. It did not always matter whether they had the gift of preaching or possessed any theological training. The elder presided at all important services and as a rule administered the ordinances of baptism and communion. The *Lehrer* functioned as preachers, counsellors and supervisors of community life. Together with the elder and the deacons they served on the *Lehrdienst*, a type of ministerial council performing a broad range of duties including property law and property right, public mischief, local quarrels, theft, child welfare, juvenile delinquency, the supervision of schools and even assault.

The simple, compassionate account of elder Dyck also conveys something of the dynamic of *Bruederschaft* (brotherhood). The idea of the church as a body voluntary in its membership and separated from the prevailing political structure was affirmed by Mennonites in both the Prussian and Polish settings. Lay participation in the decision making process was an essential ingredient of the *Bruederschaft* concept. While the elders and ministers were respected, there was no unquestioning obedience to their authority. In the case of the Deutsch Kasun the congregation did not remain indifferent to the elder's narrow views on the male and female adornment. The role of the visiting elders was restricted to persuasion and good counsel. The restraint and delicacy with which they dealt with layity discontent was an eloquent testimony to the strength of the congregational principle. The congregation could not be manipulated. Its response to the preaching and pleading was an autonomous if spontaneous one.

The 1881 account of Elder Johann Dyck of Altonau was preserved thanks to its publication in the Russian-Mennonite periodical *Der Botschafter*, VIII (1913), no. 39, 2; no. 40, 2; no. 41, 2; no. 42, 2; no. 43, 2. I have tried to provide a rather free translation of a slightly ponderous late nineteenth-century writing style.

In Remembrance of Our Journey to Russian Poland  
and Our Activities There  
by Johann Dyck (Altonau, 1881)

At the general elders and teachers conference at brother Klaassen's

[residence] in Thoeirichthoff\* on July 12 of this year (1881) Peters, a representative from the Kasun church in Russian Poland, presented a petition. He requested that several brethren out of our midst come to them in order to resolve with God's help the disunity in their church. Some indication of that unfortunate situation had surfaced through earlier correspondence, but only became public knowledge at this conference. This information confirmed brother Peters' verbal report concerning the sad conflict between the Elder Heinrich Bartel and his church, which had already progressed so far that the church was divided into two groups through a judicial decision. One of the groups now [sent] its representative with the request which both had made by letter: "Come and help us or we perish."

The leader of the conference, Elder Penner from Koenigsdorf asked if a response to the request was necessary. After the conference answered with "yes", it proceeded with the election of deputies. Elected were elders Friesen from Rosenort, Wieler from Markushof, and Dirks from the Thorn church. I was elected as the fourth delegate. The departure for Poland was set for July 27 and the [Polish churches] were notified. We did have some concerns leaving just before the harvest, but since the matter tolerated no postponement, the dear Lord finally granted joy for the undertaking. In order to gain a better understanding of the situation before we left, I wrote to Elder Penner, Koenigsdorf, whose answer later proved the means of reconciliation. When we were about to leave Marienburg, on July 27, I had the unpleasant experience of forgetting my passport at home. Instead of leaving with my colleagues at 10 o'clock in the morning, I took the next train at four in the afternoon. I reached the Russian border station Mlava at 11 o'clock in the evening, spent the night in the train station and left next morning at 7:00. When the train stopped in Neuhooff I was met by Elder Dirks from Thorn, who had joined the other two elders the day before via the Thorn-Insterburg railway. He led me to the carriage of a brother who lived in the vicinity, who drove us to the bank of the Vistula in about half an hour. That was at 9:30. We three stepped into a large boat. On the other side we got into the waiting carriage of Mr. Tjahrt and hurried to reach Kasun, where the congregation was assembled for worship and had already begun to sing. After warmly greeting my travel companions and the local church teachers, we agreed to the sermon order and walked into the church.

Elder Friesen gave the first address on I Cor. 2:1, 2: "when I came to you"; I Cor. 3:11: "for no other foundation"; Luke 19:42: "If thou hadst known." After this elder Wieler spoke on Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man is come." Finally I spoke on Philippian 3:12: "Not as though I had already attained." My words were approximately as follows:

Two kinds of apprehension are mentioned in this text. First Paul is apprehended by Jesus Christ and further, he strives after perfection. The

first Paul experienced on the way to Damascus and the two previous speakers have beautifully and clearly shown how we too must be apprehended by Christ. That occurs when we understand what is essential to our peace and in repentance stretch our hand of faith to our Savior, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. This is the most important in the life of every man. Then, however, it is also our duty in this life to comprehend what is God's will, what is right and good. Our first apprehension [by Christ] must be something definite, firm and secure. Concerning this apprehension we must always think: "Not as though I had already attained, neither were already perfect." Even in this current dispute each side must remember: "Not as though." That is the first condition for the success of our peace mission to which we were called and now have come. Each party has to go home and think in how far it wishes to compromise with the other party, and that after all have secured the Word in their hearts — "I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

After the worship it was decided to hold an afternoon meeting with the party which opposed the elder. During the interval Elders Friesen and Wieler informed me that Elder H. Bartel had met them at the train station and that they had lodged at his house the past night. There they had received the disheartening impression that from the [elder's] standpoint a reconciliation with the other party was unthinkable. In a sense it was providential that my arrival had been delayed for now I could attempt to dialogue a second evening with the elder who had been harsh and severe with the other elders.

Already during the noon meal at Franz Peters' the conversation naturally turned to those matters which occupied the minds. During the afternoon the room filled with like-minded people and on the basis of their portrayals as well as those of Elder Bartel the day before we became cognizant of the following situation.

Around 1862 or 1863 the church at Deutsch-Kasun lost its elder through death. In response to a request Elder Bartel from Gruppe and Elder Penner from Koenigsdorf came here in 1864 to help the congregation to select and ordain a new elder. This process elected the current Elder Heinrich Bartel from the village of Czonskov, who was then confirmed in his office. In preparation for the Lord's Supper which was to follow, the church was informed about the Prussian [Mennonite] custom forbidding the wearing of any military designations, a mustach for example, [to symbolize that] one participated in no military activities. It was agreed to follow that example for the coming Lord's Supper, even though it should not be mandatory for the future. (Up to that point nothing was known in Russian Poland about this Mennonite rule practise in Prussia). At that time the congregation decided to abide by the wishes of the Prussian elders, but the new elder conceived of the mustache ban as a definite decree which it was his duty as elder to enforce. Things proceeded peaceably for a number of years until several members found the decree burdensome and no longer observed it. Out of this emerged a

dispute which could not be resolved. In fact when the nonresistance of the Russian Mennonites was modified in 1870 the clamour for the removal of this Mennonite regulation intensified, while Elder Bartel became more determined in upholding it. This, combined with neglect of old-time simplicity, like the use of the head covering by the fairer sex, generated such rigor in the elder that he excluded all such offenders from the Lord's Supper. That led to a conflict between the elder and a few like-minded colleagues and the church teacher Janz supported by the far greater congregational majority. The struggle intensified until the church was split by a judicial process with each group retaining equal right to the equal use of the building (called school here).

Naturally this did not end the quarrel, in fact all Christian and religious affairs degenerated to such an extent that it became unbearable for both parties. Through written and verbal communication they expressed the desire to invite Prussian elders and teachers and with God's help end the sad, highly critical state of affairs. The deputy, Peters, who was sent to us, spoke despairingly about the prospects for reconciliation between Elder Bartel and the congregation. He advised us to continue along the lines which had been inaugurated and to regulate and finalize the separation. The conference [of Prussian elders and teachers], however, wanted to inform itself about the local state of affairs before deciding upon a course of action. It was first and foremost determined to make earnest efforts at reconciliation, since [if this failed] there was ample time to organize two congregations. We decided to act according to these priorities.

After having provided this background information let me return to the meeting which was held in the home of the former deputy Franz Peters on the afternoon of July 28, but at which Elder Bartel was not in attendance. Here six speakers, including the church teacher Janz, brought strong accusations against their elder. [They noted] how he had always responded negatively, even repulsively and harshly to their requests for a moderation of his rigid views on the issues [previously mentioned]. After one of these accusers by the name of Peter Tjahrt surveyed the basic course of the misunderstanding, we could not justify the elder's inflexible endorsement of the old regulations. Conversely we could not condone the actions taken against him — accusing him before the law for example — and told them they had not dealt with him in a spirit of toleration and peace. According to Paul's teaching they were to pay him special honor and not lay their hands on the Lord's anointed. We therefore requested them to reconcile themselves with their elder and unite their congregations, on the condition that the elder could be persuaded to modify his controversial views. They categorically refused to accept this condition because they did not believe the elder would live in peace with them afterwards. They only wanted to separate from him and

his supporters. We opposed this on the basis of Scripture and [our own] life experience. Unity alone was the best and only right thing for their conscience and [also] for [their] future. The meeting was closed with song, an encouraging discussion on Isaiah 49:14: "But Zion said, the Lord hath," and an earnest prayer. A forenoon meeting was arranged in the church for the next day where both parties would be heard and possibly united.

As already mentioned, my night lodging was to be at Elder Bartel's as he had personally invited me. His son-in-law Schroeder drove me to his [house] and that evening was a witness to my discussion with the elder. After we had openly conversed about the sad state of affairs and he had pointed to the growing worldliness of his church, [I] naturally shared his earnest concern, sympathized with his difficult problem and [perceived] his sincerity. I then had to call attention to the fact that, his faithful service notwithstanding, his rigid adherence to certain rules like the prohibition of mustaches and flower adornment [on the clothing] of the fairer sex could not be so important as to determine the soul's salvation or to split the congregation. After warning and admonishing could he not simply make such matters the responsibility of the individual conscience and continue to serve God and the congregation in his office [as elder]?

He replied: "Yes, if only the elders at that time had not emphasized this as strongly as [they did]. Who can release me from this proscription? If one of those elders had come here later and freed me from this agreed-upon obligation, I could renege upon my promise.

"Well, dear brother," I said to him, "I carry this release of an elder in my pocket." With this I pulled the letter from Elder Penner which I mentioned previously out of my pocket. In it he lamented the fact that he had introduced something into that congregation (Kasun) which gave rise to such strife. He should not have done it and in retrospect asked for forgiveness.

This [information] motivated the elder to respond: "Well, if that is the case I don't want to concern myself with the issue. In these matters I'll leave it up to the individual."

After this I spoke with the elder about several other things related to the peace making. Then I went to bed, deeply thankful to God.

On Friday morning they assembled in the church. Elder Friesen presided over the opening and precisely laid down the agenda. At first negotiations between the elder and his small group of associates were held in the church office. The elder openly declared that he was retracting his former demands and was prepared to reconcile himself with the opposing party provided they would not elect any persons with full beards or mustaches in the forthcoming election. Elder Friesen modified

this condition to the effect that whoever was elected as teacher would shave off his beard. The elder agreed [to the change].

The other party now took the floor. Much work remained to be done. All four of us deployed all our presence of mind, knowledge of the Scripture and powers of persuasion to break down the stubborn resistance [and bring about] reconciliation. No one trusted the constancy of the feared elder. Only when we explained to them that the success of our attempt at reconciliation for which purpose we had come fell squarely on their shoulders did the hearts begin to soften. Incredibly, the two main protagonists voiced no further objection on that day. The one declared that "during the night the Lord had become too strong for him" and together they were the first to extend their hands to the elder. Now they became our allies in the struggle and with them and God's help one [person] after another was conquered. One [person] after another came and after years of enmity, with tearful eyes and warm hearts reconciled himself with his elder. No one wanted to remember what had been, all had to be forgiven and forgotten. It was a moving moment over which the angels in heaven must have rejoiced. I wished that all my loved ones at home had been present. It was a moment that was more than enough compensation for all the effort and difficulty of the trip. I count it among the most praiseworthy and spiritually exalted experiences of my entire life. The goal towards which we had worked and prayed and towards which the prayers and blessings of my beloved colleagues and friends were directed had been achieved. Filled with thanks we all went into the church where elder Friesen gave expression to our feelings with a fervent prayer of thanksgiving. All this took until 2 o'clock in the afternoon. When we were divided up for lodging I and Elder Dirks went to friend Tjahrt, Elder Friesen to P. Bartel and Elder Wieler to Peters.

A service had been scheduled for Saturday at 3 o'clock at which the reunification of the entire congregation was to be discussed as well as the preparatory service for the holy Lord's Supper the following Sunday. In the afternoon we therefore drove to church with Franz Balzer. I conducted the first portion of the service in which I spoke on I Samuel 7:12, "Thus far the Lord has helped us," and reviewed for the congregation what had happened up to this point. Then Elder Bartel spoke and declared that he no longer upheld the contentious issues and wished to unite with the congregation in love. On the assumption that no single person would withdraw from this bond of peace, I spoke in some detail on Psalm 118:21-25 and on the basis of [this text] sought to illuminate the experienced events and with God's Word strengthen the concluded peace. Elder Friesen then spoke on Joshua 3:5, "Sanctify yourselves then," stressing ideas of repentance as the proper preparation for the holy Lord's Supper. Finally Elder Bartel accepted a woman into the

congregation who had contracted a marriage outside of the church. With that the service closed.

On Sunday we came to the church somewhat earlier than usual and since this could not be done at any other time, we held the installation of minister Balzer in the church office. Following this Elder Dirks, who had not been able to give his address because of hoarseness, gave the introductory sermon on the wedding garment based on Matth. 22:11-12. It was an excellent talk. Next Elder Wieler spoke on I Cor. 11:11-26, "What I received of the Lord." Elder Bartel held the Lord's Supper sermon and presided over it. When this service had been completed Elder Friesen took charge and presided over the election of teachers. Two teachers were to be selected. Upon the express wish of Elder Bartel an exception was made in this election. The candidates were not elected by the council but by the entire congregation which voted twice. Everything proceeded in a brotherly fashion and the choice fell upon P. Tjahrt and Nickel. Neither refused their election. Elder Bartel directed a serious charge to the newly elected teachers before the congregation and concluded the service. A third teacher, who had not yet accepted his election agreed to serve at our urging.

For lunch we went to Deacon Bartel. In the afternoon at 3 o'clock the congregation met again for the last service of thanksgiving as well as our farewell. After the singing I spoke first on Psalm 34:9: "Taste and see," and related it to Gal. 5:13: "For you Brethren." Elder Wieler spoke next on Revelation 3:5: "Whoever." Then Elder Dirks expressed all our thankfulness for this rich experience of grace and strongly encouraged the young teachers not to despair. At last Elder Friesen spoke briefly and closed with a fervent prayer, committing the future of this congregation to God.

For the last time we parted from this little unpretentious church in which we had experienced so much blessing and mercy. The joy over the successful restoration of peace shone from the eyes of these dear people and many did not know how to express their thanks, which they felt they owed us. They fully trusted the Lord. He would continue to help and not forsake them. We said goodbye to as many as we could and then went to brother Tjahrt for the night. Monday morning we were to go to Warsaw, some four miles away. Before breakfast Elder Bartel was already there with Schroeder, who held the position of an overseer, in order to bid us a last adieu. I went with him on his wagon to the Vistula River where we bade each other a heartfelt good-bye.

Now I have to mention something which delayed my return home for four days. While we were active in the Kasun church two fellow brothers from the Gumbin congregation near Plotzk came and invited us heartily to visit them as well. Their elder had died last year and they had only one teacher now, who needed to have an assistant elected. The



church also needed to celebrate the holy Lord's Supper once again. At first none of us wanted to go until Elder Wieler announced he would return with them. Since there were important duties to perform, it was felt another one should accompany him. The other two elders felt they could not make this journey hence I decided to go. One of the other brethren left for home on Monday while the other waited until we returned from Warsaw. In the company of two brethren, Tjahrt and Elder Dirks' brother Gerhard Dirks, an estate owner in the vicinity, we viewed the old Polish residence of former rulers as well as other rare sights. We also met an administrator named Wedel, a resolute Christian-minded Mennonite. After we returned in the evening we spent the night with this friend Gerhard Dirks, who acquainted us somewhat with his type of estate holding. At nine in the morning he drove us [to our destination]. Elder Friesen and Elder Dirks went to the station in Neuhoft for the return journey, while I and Elder Wieler, in the company of our new leader Bartel, awaited a steamer at the Vistula River which would take us eight miles down the river to the Gumbin congregation. It, like Kasan, was situated on the left bank. After a four hour journey on the river we halted and were received by our colleague Peter Kliever from Polish Vovrimin, who had preceded us. He brought us to a small but well-kept nearby farmstead. Here we spent a blessed evening and delighted ourselves in the faith and Jesus' love of this worker in the vineyard of the Lord.

Since we would only be there a few days, brother Kliever had already scheduled a service for his congregation on the next day, that is Wednesday morning. It was to be a preparation for the holy Lord's Supper. After a journey of twelve hours we finally arrived at the lovely almost new, solidly built little church at Wymyschle. After we were warmly greeted by several more dear brothers. We found the situation as it had been previously described [to us]. Two congregations held their services in this church, namely a Flemish and a Frisian one. They jointly owned the church. Each group had its elder who served it according to his own ritual in child instruction, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The worship services were held jointly with the sermons preached alternately by both. Each congregation elected its own song leaders (*Vorsaenger*), who nevertheless led the service together. If, however, one elder dies or resigns the other is not in a position to represent him for the other congregation. Elders from elsewhere must then perform the service. The deceased elder had led the Frisian congregation together with his only fellow worker, brother Kliever. He asked us to celebrate holy communion and instigate an election for two teachers, which we proceeded to do.

The elder of the Flemish church, Elder Todt, was present and participated in a brotherly fashion during our visit. Elder Wieler spoke first on Matthew 11:28: "Come unto Me." I then spoke on John 10:9: "I am

the door." Before we began in the morning we were asked to conduct an afternoon service, during which I spoke on Luke 15:1: "All were crowding close." Brother Kliever spoke next and finally Elder Wieler. On Thursday we had another important duty to perform in addition to holy communion and the election of teachers. It was a task of reconciliation. I spent the night at Elder Todt. In his congregation there was a brother with whom they were displeased because he had dealt falsely. He had now become arrogant. The elder had taken sides with the brother and as a consequence a deep enmity had arisen. They hoped we might be able to mediate the dispute. This was certainly difficult for us, and we found ourselves faced with a God-given task, which we could never accomplish without his help. In this instance the Lord also heard our prayers. Even before we went to church I indicated to the elder what he could do to prepare the way for peace. He promised to do so.

Thursday morning we went to church where holy communion and the election of teachers was to be held as well as the reconciliation. I gave a preliminary address on the Passover Feast of the Israelites (Exodus 12:11) after which Elder Wieler spoke on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

Following communion two new teachers and a song leader were elected. In all probability all accepted God's call to work in his vineyard. Thereupon we invited all disputing congregational members into the church office. In a considerable state of agitation, as happens in such circumstances, they listed each others sins and in the process we derived a deeper insight into the situation. The elder began to acknowledge his own wrong. Soon both sides saw their faults and we suggested that they stop accusing the other side and judge themselves before God. Thanks to God's leading, the actual cause of the conflict had been clarified and settled. It only remained for the episode to be forgiven and forgotten. Thank God they all realized this and heartily forgave, reconciled and united their hearts and souls in love, to which the merciful God could give his ye and amen.

Another service was scheduled for Thursday afternoon at 3 o'clock. Normally one might have been concerned about material for a sermon. Here, however, in the atmosphere of God's nearness and in the refreshment of such heart-warming activity we could preach His Word with joy until the very end. As previously [in Kasun] we held a special thanksgiving and farewell service. I first spoke on Psalm 34:3-6: "Magnify the Lord with me." Then a minister of the [Mennonite] Brethren by the name of Steinberg, who was stationed in Leonberg, spoke on the Savior's [very] applicable command of love. Elder Wieler then spoke on Galatians 3:23: "You are God's children." Elder Todt concluded the service with 2 Corinthians 6:1-2: "We admonish you." It was a stirring and gripping address which [he] ended with a fervent prayer and praise to God.

The visit to this congregation was also very important for us and

filled with blessing. God grant that the congregation, whose manpower has now been augmented, can live its faith in Christian simplicity. After we returned to the home of deacon Bartel in the evening, we had a confiding and agreeable visit. We found them so compatible that it seemed as though we had always known each other. This made saying good-bye from such a home all the harder. On Friday morning we already left at 3 o'clock in the morning since we had to drive by wagon to the city of Kuttno where the train to Thorn left at 11 o'clock. Deacon Bartel, an upright and good man, and one of the newly elected teachers named Kliewer were our drivers. Enroute we stopped for breakfast twice: the first time at Bartel's son, who lived on an estate, the second at a certain young Luther whose father, who was still alive, had given by far the largest contribution to building the church at Wymyschle. He is a man of many possessions. I don't know if they are heavenly ones.

In Kuttno we separated from these last dear friends, committed each other to God's protection, and left for home with joyful hearts. In Thorn Elder Dirks suddenly walked into our compartment. He knew that we would travel through on this train and inquired about our later visit to the last congregation. He shared our joy that God had given a blessing here as well and would continue to do so. At the next station Elder Dirks again left us and I and Elder Wieler continued on, happy in our fellowship and thankful to God, until we reached the destination of our journey at half past nine in the evening.

\*Located in the *Grosser Werder* near Marienburg in West Prussia.