

## MENNONITES IN DANZIG: DUTCH ORIGINS AND TIES

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There is no doubt that the history of the Mennonites in Danzig has, for the most part, been neglected by Mennonite and non-Mennonite historians. When one pages through the classic books of Mennonite history such as Cornelius Dyck's An Introduction to Mennonite History or C. Henry Smith's Story of the Mennonites, one is impressed by the scarcity of information on the Mennonites in Danzig. The reason for this apparent lack of research on the Mennonites in Danzig is the commonly held view that Danzig was merely a way station for the Mennonites en route from Holland to Russia and is therefore of secondary importance. Moreover, Mennonite documents and records in Danzig have only recently been made available to researchers by the Polish government.

The Mennonites who lived in Danzig from the mid 16th to the 19th centuries were largely of Dutch origin. This is substantiated by the large number of Flemish and Frisian names of those Mennonite families which lived in Danzig at that time. However, many Mennonite families lived in Danzig and the surrounding area before the Reformation and joined the Mennonite faith after the large influx of Mennonites from the Lowlands. Research into the matter shows that this was the case for Mennonite families bearing the following names: Harder, Penner, Reimer, Andres, Wiens and Warkentin. Moreover, according to Egli's Aktensammlung zur Zürcher Reformation and the Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz, a substantial number of Swiss Mennonites especially from the Canton Zurich migrated to Prussia as a result of the Täufer or Anabaptist persecution in Switzerland and of the Anabaptist's determination to fulfill the Great Commission:

i.e., to preach, teach, and baptize those around them. There was a tremendous missionary zeal among the early Swiss Mennonites who attempted to spread their faith eastward to Moravia, Bohemia and Prussia. Thus, whereas the majority of Mennonites living in Danzig from the 16th to 19th centuries were of Dutch origin, many other families traced their origin to Switzerland or lived in Prussia prior to the Mennonite migration there.

The migration of Dutch Mennonites to Danzig was due largely to the religious persecution of Dutch Taüfer or Mennonites (as they were called in Holland - named after their Dutch organizer Menno Simons). Mennonites objected to close church-state relations. They adhered to conscientious objection, refused to swear the oath and to perform military service, and they rejected pedo-baptism. For us in the 20th century who, in Canada and for that matter in most of western society, enjoy religious liberty, it is sometimes difficult to comprehend why the Mennonite stance on the preceding issues resulted in such severe persecution. It is for this reason that I wish to elaborate somewhat on the Mennonite conception of the church and state and to explain why it resulted in the persecution that it did. The Mennonite view of the church was largely based on the conception of the Believers' Church. The Anabaptists sought the restitution of what they considered to be the true apostolic church whose membership was based on personal faith and conviction. For the Anabaptists, the true church was a community of believers or saints who were members of the body of Christ - i.e., "eine Heiligkeitskirche für eine kleine Auslese." Membership was based on personal faith and conviction only. The baptism of committed and conscientious believers was to be the external manifestation of such a church. For the Mennonites, personal repentance followed by the experience of regeneration and the commitment to a new life was the only legitimate basis for baptism.

Since baptism and the commitment to a new life required sin consciousness and repentance, the Mennonites argued that baptism could not be administered to infants since infants could not discern between good and evil. The Mennonites maintained that since their church was comprised of true believers, i.e., followers of Christ, they could not bear arms since Christ had clearly denounced the use of all violence as recorded in Matthew 5:43-44. Members of the Mennonite faith considered themselves as part of the body of Christ, the Corpus Christi. They felt they were in the world but not of the world. Therefore, the church and state were viewed as two distinct entities: the church was part of the otherworldliness, God's kingdom on earth, and the state was very much a part of this world. The state was therefore to have no jurisdiction over religious matters. Consequently, the extensive use of the oath by state was not accepted by the Mennonites. The Mennonites argued that since the oath was designed to ensure that the truth was spoken it could not be taken by Christian disciples who always spoke the truth as a matter of course.

The Mennonites' conception of a Believers' Church was a radical departure from the corporate idea of society which dominated the political and religious thought of that time period. In the 16th century most European countries maintained the medieval conception of a Corpus Christianum - a unified Christian society in which church and state worked in harmony to realize the will of God. There was no concept of a separate church congregation. The political assembly was an assembly of Christians and hence a religious assembly as well. The church was considered a mixed body of believers and unbelievers. As Zwingli, the Reformer argued, no human could look into the heart of another human and determine the truth of his faith. Therefore, the church had to remain a mixed body. Infant baptism was the external sign of membership in the mixed body of the earthly church

which was identical with the political assembly. The Anabaptist or Mennonite repudiation of infant baptism was considered seditious for it precluded membership in a Christian society and threatened the corporate nature of that society. The Mennonites' refusal to swear the oath brought them into direct conflict with the state since the oath was used not only to ensure that the truth was spoken but to ensure political loyalty as well. Many European monarchies at that time demanded an oath of allegiance from their citizens. When Mennonites failed to comply, it resulted in their loss of citizenship, their imprisonment and, ultimately, persecution. Since universal conscription did not exist in the 16th century the Mennonites' position regarding war remained largely a rhetorical one. However, in light of the constant warfare in Europe at this time (for example, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, was constantly at war with either the Pope or Francis I of France, and, as well, there were numerous territorial disputes and the threat of the Ottoman Turks) - the Mennonites' refusal to defend their homeland was considered disloyal and treasonous. To sum up what has been said, the Mennonites' view of a believers' church threatened the corporate ideal of society and challenged the assumptions upon which 16th century society rested and therefore brought persecution to the Mennonites in the Lowlands who subsequently sought refuge in Danzig.

Those Mennonites from Holland who migrated to Danzig and the surrounding area during the mid 16th century maintained close ties with Holland. For at least two centuries after their arrival in Danzig the Mennonites remained in contact with their religious counterparts in Holland. There is evidence that the first Mennonites came to Danzig from Holland in 1529. For the next 20 years the growing Mennonite community met in private homes, in barns and open fields

for their worship services. It was Menno Simons, a Dutch Mennonite leader from Witmarsum Friesland who, in 1549, began to organize the growing Mennonite community in Danzig into a congregation. The personal correspondence of Menno Simons indicates that he acted as the first elder or Ältester of the Danzig Mennonite Community from 1549 until his death in 1561 when another Dutch Mennonite from Amsterdam, Dirk Philipps, succeeded him as the Danzig Ältester. Whereas Menno Simons continued to administer the Danzig church from his home in Friesland, Dirk Philipps settled in Schattland near Danzig. When, in the early 1560's the Duke of Alba, Governor of Holland, intensified the Mennonite persecution in Holland resulting in a larger influx of Dutch refugees into Danzig, Dirk Philipps requested the aid of an assistant from the Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam. In 1561, the church in Amsterdam sent Hans Sikken to help Dirk Philipps in the leadership of the Mennonite Church in Danzig. Dirk Philipps and Hans Sikken led the Mennonite community in Danzig from 1561 to 1568. Indeed, at that time, the names of all the lay preachers and founders of the Mennonite church in Danzig were Dutch as the following list suggests: Hans van Amersfoort, Gijsbert de Veer, van Eyck, Beulke, van Buygen, van Almonde, Symons, van Dyck, Janzen, Mahl, van Beuningen, and Leenard Bouwens. After Dirk Philipps' death in 1568, two other Ältester from Amsterdam and Rotterdam led the Mennonite congregation in Danzig. They were Dirk Janssen of Rotterdam and Adriaan van Gameren of Amsterdam. From approximately 1600 onward, the Mennonite community in Danzig chose its elder from within the Mennonite congregation by lot and elders and preachers were no longer requested from Holland. However, contact between the Mennonites in Danzig and Holland was maintained. The more than 300 documents in the Mennonite Archives of Amsterdam indicate that considerable sums of money were sent by the Dutch Mennonite

Committee for Foreign Needs in Amsterdam to the Mennonites in Danzig during the 17th and 18th centuries. It was also very common for the wealthier members of the Mennonite community in Danzig to send its young sons to Amsterdam to complete their education and to participate in the catechism instruction offered by the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam where many of the Danzig youth were consequently baptized. The Danzig baptismal registers of the 17th and 18th century almost always contained an appendix of those Mennonites who were baptized in Holland.

The Dutch language was used in church services and in Mennonite homes in Danzig until 1780 when the Mennonite community lost much of its strength as a result of the large Mennonite migrations to the Ukraine (It is estimated that three-quarters or 2,000 of 2,890 members of the Mennonite community in Danzig resettled in Russia at that time). After the rapid decline of the Mennonite church community in Danzig, the process of acculturation accelerated and High German began to take the place of Dutch used in church services and in the homes the Plattdeutsch spoken in the area came into use. At the same time, i.e., 1780, a German song book (actually printed by the Lutherans) was introduced into the congregations. It was not until 1908, however, that the Mennonites in Danzig printed their own hymnbook, Gesangbuch zur kirchlichen und häuslichen Erbauung.

What characterized the Mennonite community in Danzig and the surrounding area was a division, which had already occurred among the Mennonites in Holland between the Flemish and Frisian Mennonites. From approximately the late 1560's to the 1860's these two factions actually became two distinct congregations which existed side by side. The spiritual division between the Frisian and Flemish groups was to a degree compounded by their geographical division. The majority of the Flemish lived in Danzig, the Grosser Werder

and Elbing whereas most Frisians lived in the Marienburger Werder and in the Weichseltal area. The Flemish faction remained the larger congregation and considered itself the real Danzig Mennonite Church. Indeed, until 1786 it was customary for the Flemish to rebaptize members of the Frisian group that sought membership in the Flemish Congregation. The Flemish group called itself the fine and pure ones, "Die Feinen und Klaren." The Frisians, who were more liberal, on the other hand, considered themselves the Coarse Ones - "Die Groben." The terms fine and coarse, used to differentiate the two groups, came from the symbol of the net (which was used by both groups to symbolize their congregations). The size of the holes in the net were symbolic of the degree to which the congregations opened their doors to Mennonites and outsiders. The Frisian congregation was open to most any Mennonite desirous of fellowship with God and other Christian disciples, while the Flemish congregation did not welcome all those who sought to gain membership in the church. The Flemish accepted only those whose faith and personal conviction could be tested and affirmed by the congregation. Although the Flemish and Frisian groups were divided in their biblical interpretations, the two groups were united in a conference called Konferenz der Ost und West Preussischen Mennoniten. Through this conference the two groups negotiated as one unified body with the various government organizations. Consequently, the two factions merged on July 29, 1859 when the membership of both groups was declining because of the continual migration of Mennonites from both congregations to Russia. Despite the unification of the two groups, tension in various forms continued to exist between the Flemish and the Frisians. Limitations of space, however, preclude any further elaboration on that subject.

Research into the history of the Mennonites in Danzig is

in its earliest stages and this particular study of the Danzig Mennonites can only be considered an introduction to that topic. However, it is hoped that what little information was presented here has illuminated the history of the Mennonites in Danzig and their Dutch cultural linguistic and religious ties.

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