

A Guide to the Genealogy of Prussian Mennonites

Glenn H Penner (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

Draft: 1 June 2020

Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

- A. Introduction and History
- B. Flemish, Frisian and Old Flemish Mennonites
- C. Mennonites in Lutheran and Catholic Records
- D. Reading Old Gothic Script
- E. Spelling of Surnames
- F. Female Surname Endings
- G. Naming Patterns
- H. Traditional First Names
- I. Frequently Encountered Words
- J. Recording of Dates
- K. Births
- L. Baptisms
- M. Marriages
- N. Deaths (and causes of death)
- O. Units (weights, measures, currency, etc.)
- P. Land Ownership
- Q. “Mennonite” villages
- R. Occupations
- S. Inheritance among Prussian Mennonites
- T. Adoption and Orphans
- U. Geography and Maps
- V. Beware the Internet

A. Introduction and History

Before I begin I should remind everyone to properly reference sources. Genealogists are notoriously bad in this respect. Never simply provide a web page address (URL). Please clearly note the *true* origin of each bit of information. A future researcher should know exactly where to look for each fact you include in your work. What you do will determine if future genealogists will praise you or curse you!

The purpose of this document is **not** to provide information on the many sources available but to serve as a guide in order to help researchers use and understand the original sources. Scans (or links to scans) of many original documents or translations and transcriptions of those documents are now online: <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/> . This is **not** a guide on how to do genealogy. If you are interested in how to get started you should look elsewhere. This guide assumes that you have already done the basic genealogical research needed to trace your ancestry back to Prussian Mennonites and that you are now interested in examining and understanding the original sources.

This guide covers mostly the region that was once known as the province of West Prussia but is also applicable to the early Mennonite settlements in East Prussia (Königsberg and Lithuania) and Brandenburg (another province of Prussia, which contained a small Mennonite community). The material covered here applies to the time period before about 1820. That is, before the last big migration of Mennonites from these regions to Russia.

Many of those interested in their ancestry do not seem to understand that there is more to genealogy than just a bunch of names and dates. Genealogy should also include geography and a historical context. Information on occupations, causes of death, local history and geography are is a vital part of family history! It is also very important to obtain scans (or at least photocopies) of important documents. Label these properly.

Unfortunately, no one comprehensive history of the Mennonites in Poland and Prussia has been written. [GAMEO](#), the online Mennonite encyclopedia, has several good, but very outdated, articles. A short history has been written by Peter J. Klassen (2009). A very readable history of Mennonites in Prussia can be found in the book “Mennonite Migrations ...” by Henry Schapansky.

B. Flemish, Frisian and Old Flemish Mennonites

This topic and its relevance to Mennonite genealogy is covered in a future article. To summarize, these were congregational/theological differences. Being a member of one of these groups in Prussia tells you nothing about their origins in the Netherlands.

C. Mennonites in Mennonite, Lutheran, and Catholic Records

In 1772 the majority of the region of Poland where Mennonites lived was taken over by the Kingdom of Prussia and became the province of West Prussia. In September of that year Mennonites were ordered to start keeping registers of births, marriages and deaths. Before that time most Mennonite churches either did not keep such records or kept records irregularly. Many of the Prussian Mennonite church registers have not survived.

In 1800 the Prussian government ordered the state church, known as the Evangelische Kirche, commonly known as the Lutheran church, to record all births, marriages and deaths of dissidents. This included Mennonites. These records are of tremendous use to Mennonite genealogists for several reasons: 1) they cover villages for which the original Mennonite records did not survive, 2) they often contain much more information than Mennonite records and 3) they can be used to corroborate information found in Mennonite records. In 1874 the Mennonites of the newly created German Empire were finally granted citizenship (losing military exemption in the process) and Mennonite church records were officially recognized by the government.

There are also Mennonite entries in some pre-1800 Lutheran and Catholic records. These are mostly burial records. Very few Mennonite congregations in Poland, and later Prussia, were allowed to have their own cemeteries. As a result, many Mennonites had to bury their dead in Lutheran or Catholic cemeteries. This always required the payment of a fee. Entries for Mennonites buried in Lutheran or Catholic cemeteries ranged from simply a name, fee and date of burial to name, location, age, date of death and date of burial.

Some Lutheran and Catholic death/burial records indicate whether some sort of rights were performed in the church or at the gravesite. If you see terms such as “mit Leichen Predict” (or simply “mit Predict”), “mit einer Parentation”, “mit einer Collecte”, or “mit Gesange” the record you are looking at does NOT refer to a Mennonite. These rights were reserved for members of the church. If no funeral rights were performed (as in the case for Mennonites) there will be no mention of them or the term “im Stille” or simply “Stille” will be used.

Note that, when looking for Mennonites in Lutheran or Catholic registers, Mennonites may or may not be designated as such (Mennonite, Menist, Anabaptista). Some Lutheran congregations kept separate registers of Mennonite vitals. A trap that many have fallen into is to assume that all Penners, Wiebes, Janzens, Epps, etc. were Mennonite. [See: <http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/44.2.MHJun18.pdf>] This may have been mostly true for some surnames like Penner and Wiebe, but most “Mennonite” surnames were also found among the local Germanic population. A comparison of the 1772 census of West Prussia and the 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia makes this obvious. There are many families with Mennonite sounding surnames in the 1772 census, who can not be found in the 1776 census. This is not because they all died out or moved away between 1772 and 1776 – they simply were NOT Mennonite. See sections H and K for hints on how to figure out whether a person found in a Lutheran or Catholic register was a Mennonite, when not designated as such.

D. Reading German and Old Gothic Script

One of the biggest challenges in doing historical and/or genealogical research on Mennonites in Poland/Prussia is reading the old Gothic German script.

This set of blog entries by Steve Fast, who had no previous knowledge of reading old Gothic handwriting, is an excellent place to start:

<https://mennogenforum.blogspot.ca/search/label/handwriting>

Doing real research (as opposed to simply doing Google searches) involves collecting and examining the original documents of interest. In some cases, you will discover that information found online, in a genealogical book or in the GRANDMA database does not seem to make sense and examining the original document will bring a previous translation or transcription error to light. Genealogy is not just a matter of collecting a bunch of names and dates. You may find material written by or about your ancestor which will add to the history your family.

Once you have a transcription of the Gothic script you can always put that through online translation software in order to get a rough translation. A related problem is that the spelling of some German words have changed over the centuries. Some words you may find in these documents may be obsolete. A good English/German dictionary from around 1800 can be found at:

A – G:

<http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/resolve/display/bsb10582062.html>

H – R:

<http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/resolve/display/bsb10582063.html>

and

S – Z:

<http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/resolve/display/bsb10582064.html>

E. Spelling of Surnames

This is often a contentious issue among Mennonites. It is usually very difficult for the novice to discern spelling variations of the same surname from two very similar sounding yet different surnames. For those who know the Low-German language it's a no-brainer, spelling variations are irrelevant since there is only one Plautdietsch pronunciation of a given surname, and two surnames that may seem similar in English are pronounced quite differently in Plautdietsch.

It is important to realize that prior to the late 1800s there was no consistent way of spelling ANY surname (including Penner). Those who could write spelled their surnames phonetically and often signed their surnames differently on different [documents](#)! Therefore, when someone who currently spells their surname Gorz (and whose father and grandfather also used the same spelling) claims that they are a separate family from those named Goerz, Goertz, Gertz, Goertzen, etc., they simply do not know what they are talking about.

It should also be realized that the vast majority of recording of people's names was *not* done by the person themselves, but by a government or church official. As a result, an individual's name

could easily be spelled several different ways in several different records made during that person's lifetime.

Genealogical researchers should NOT get hung up on the spelling of surnames!!!

Below is a short guide for those with no, or little, knowledge of Mennonite surnames:

Buhler ≠ Buller

Delesky = Selesky ≠ Tillitzky

Gedde ≠ Geddert

Goetz ≠ Goertz

Goetzke ≠ Goertz

Heide ≠ Heidebrecht

Hein ≠ Heinrichs

Driedger ≠ Riedger/Riediger

Voth/Foth ≠ Vogt

Regehr = Regier

Krueger = Kroeger ≠ Kroeker

Berg, Barg, Baerg, etc. ≠ Bergen, Bargaen, Baergen, von Bergen, etc.

Friesen = von Riesen = van Riesen

Friesen ≠ Froese

Cornies ≠ Cornelsen

Cornelsen = Knelsen = Cornelius

Bergman = Barkman

Kettler = Kessler ≠ Kehler

Note that = means the two names are the same family, while ≠ means they are unrelated families.

Much of this has recently been confirmed by the Y-DNA results of male members of these families.

In some cases, the old Dutch spelling which uses a, e or i is replaced by the German ö/oe or ü/ue.

Some examples are:

Dyck = Dick = Dueck

Niebuhr = Neubauer

Ginter = Guenther

Bickert = Bueckert

Derksen = Doerksen

Kreker = Kroeker

Schreder = Schroeder

Etc.

Note that traditionally German uses a bar above a letter to indicate that the letter is repeated. As a result, Penner is occasionally *Peñer* and Lammert may be *Laṁert*.

Occasionally surnames ending in -er will be written as -ert. For example, Pennert, Kroekert, Buhlert, Koppert, etc. This is a variation occasionally used by non-Mennonites when recording Mennonite surnames. It was very rarely, if ever, used by Mennonites.

F. Female Surname Endings (suffixes)

Note that in the case of females, surnames often ended in -in (or occasionally -en) and -sche. The -sche ending was used only for married or widowed women (as is still the case today in the Mennonite Low-German dialect). The GRANDMA database contains many women whose surnames incorrectly end in -in, -en or -sche.

G. Naming Patterns

Mennonites during the time period covered in this guide followed the Germanic practice of naming children after relatives.

The following pattern was used:

First son named after paternal grandfather

Second son after maternal grandfather

Third son after father

First daughter after maternal grandmother

Second daughter after paternal grandmother

Third daughter after mother

Although these naming patterns were not rigidly followed they are an excellent guide in predicting who the grandparents of the children in a family were.

Due to the use of these naming patterns some first names became very common among certain families or branches of families. On the other hand, some common names were rare in certain families or branches of families.

H. Traditional First Names

Please do NOT impose modern English (or any other language) first names on your ancestors! Modern English names like John, Henry, Mary or Ann were simply not used by Mennonites during the time period discussed in this document.

The use of middle names prior to the 1820s was very rare among Mennonites and is a reliable way to rule out a person you find in an old Prussian record as a non-Mennonite. See:

<http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/43.3.MHSep17.pdf>

Note that K and C in most first names are completely interchangeable in such names as Katharina, Klaas, Jakob, Kornelius and Karl. There seems to have been a shift from C to K after the migration to Russia.

th = t (Anthon = Anton)

dt = d = t (Isbrandt = Isbrand; Dietrich = Diedrich)

hr = r (Gehrt = Gert; Berend = Behrend)

tz = z (Frantz = Franz)

nn = n (Johann = Johan)

1. Male Names (used by at least 99% of Mennonites prior to 1820):

Names separated by a “/” like Aron/Arend indicate that these names are completely interchangeable.

Abraham/Abram – these two are completely superimposable.

Absolon – rarely found outside of the Frisian Mennonites

Adam – very rare and found only among Old Flemish Mennonites.

Adrian – rare.

Albrecht – rare.

Andreas

Anton

Aron/Arend

Benjamin – **not** the same as Bernhard. Very rare outside of the descendants of the Old Flemish Mennonites.

Bernhard/Behrend/Bernd – these are completely superimposable.

Christian and *Christoph* – very rare and found among the Frisian.

Conrad/Konert – rarely found outside of the Frisian Mennonites

Cornelius/Knels

Daniel

David

Diedrich/Dietrich/Dirk

Elias

Erdman(n) – rare and found only among Frisian Mennonites (but common among German non-Mennonites)

Esau – rare and occasionally used instead of Isaac.

Franz

Friedrich/Ehrenfried – very rare and found only among Flemish Mennonites. Also common among German non-Mennonites.

George (Jorge) – rare and not the same as Gerhard.

Gerhard/Gert

Heinrich/Hendrick

Herman(n)/Harm

Isaac

Isbrand(t) – found only among Flemish Mennonites.

Jacob

Johan(n)/Johannes/Hans/Jan/Jonas

Julius/Gillis

Leonhard – rare and found only among Flemish Mennonites.

Melchior – rare and found only among Frisian Mennonites.

Michael – rare and nearly died out by the time of the migration to Russia (but very common among German non-Mennonites).

Martin

Nicolaus/Klaas

Paul – rare and found only among Flemish Mennonites.

Peter

Philip – rare and found only among Flemish Mennonites.

Siebert/Siewert – rare and found only among Frisian Mennonites.

Simon/Siemon

Solomon – very rare

Steffan – rare

Tobias - rare

Tomas – rare and found only among Flemish Mennonites.

Wilhelm/Willem

Zacharias – rare

Some male first names which were common among the local German population but extremely rare, or not found at all, among Mennonite men include: Adolf, Adalbert, Gustav, Ludwig and Gottlieb (or Gottfried). These people may not have been Mennonites.

2. Female Names: (used by at least 99% of Mennonites prior to 1820):

Note that in Prussia the –a ending on female first names was often written as –e (Agathe = Agatha). This was occasionally done by Prussian officials, but very rarely by Mennonites. Mennonite church records often include the old Dutch/Low-German version for female first names. These are in parentheses below. Note that ck = k (Ancke = Anke).

Adalgunda (Gunke) – found mostly among the Frisian Mennonites.

Agatha (Atke) – note that this name is NOT the same as Aganetha!

Aganetha/Agnetha/Anganetha – note that this name is NOT the same as Agatha!

Anna (Anke)

Barbara (Barbke, Buschke)

Carolina – vary rare and found only among the Flemish Mennonites.

Catharina (Trinke)

Christina (Stinke/Stienke) – became Justina in Russia.

Cornelia (Nelke) -
Elisabeth (Elske)
Eva (Efke)
Gertruda (Trudke or Gardke)
*Helena/Magdalen*a (Lenke)
Judith (Judke)
Margaretha (Gretke)
Maria (Marike)
Petronella (Nelke) – found only among the Frisian Mennonites.
Sara (Sarke/Zarke)
Susanna (Sanke)

Some female first names which were common among the local German population but extremely rare, or not found at all, among Mennonite women include: Henriette, Dorothea and Wilhelmina. These people were likely not Mennonites.

I. Frequently Encountered Terms

1. German Terms

Below is a list of words you might encounter which are not occupations (note that in German nouns are always capitalized):

Witwe = widow
Witwer = widower
Jungfer = Jungfrau = spinster = previously unmarried female
Junggeselle = bachelor = previously unmarried male
Mitnachbar = Nachbar = a tax paying property “owner”.
Einwohner = inhabitant
Einsasse = inhabitant (insasse = inmate in modern German)
Wieland = formerly (a formal term implying that the person had died)
Ehrbare(n) = honourable (often abbreviated as Erb.)
Eigener = Eigentümer = actually owned their land
Erbpächter = owned a hereditary lease (see § P)
Frau = wife
Mann = husband
Gatte = husband (male spouse)
Gattin = wife (female spouse)
Sohn = son
Tochter = daughter
Stiefsohn/tochter = stepson/daughter
Pflegesohn/tochter = foster son/daughter
nachgelassene(r) = surviving

hinter(ge)bliebene = hinter(ge)lassene = surviving

verstorbene(r) = deceased

ehemalige(r) = former (used to describe the previous location or occupation of someone who was retired or deceased).

For occupational terms see:

<http://www.many-roads.com/2015/02/13/old-german-terms-occupations-etc/>

2. Latin Terms

Mennonites occasionally appear in Catholic church records. These are usually written in Latin. Here are a few commonly used Latin words you might find in Catholic church records:

Pater = father

Mater = mother

Filius = son

Filia = daughter

Uxor = wife

Gemini = twins

Widua = widow

Testes = witnesses

Dies = day

Hebdom = week

Mensis = month

Annus = year

J. Recording of Dates

German language records give dates in the logical order of day, month, year. In those days people thought in terms of “the nth day of ...”. For example, “on May, 10th ...” is thought of as “on the 10th (day) of May...”, or in German “am 10ten Mai ...”.

Here are a few month abbreviations occasionally found in Prussian records:

8ber = October (not August, the 8th month)

9ber = November (not September, the 9th month)

10ber = Xber = December (not October, the 10th month)

Note that in a few cases the date given for an event is referred to as a saint’s day or some religious holiday not necessarily observed by Mennonites (and possibly no longer observed by most Christian groups). In such cases you will need to determine the date for that day in the given year.

If you find an exact age in a church register and would like to accurately calculate a birth date use an online calculator such as <https://www.timeanddate.com/date/dateadd.html> . Note that ages are not always that reliable. Comparing ages at time of marriage or death between Mennonite and Lutheran church records will make this obvious. Do not get too hung up on having ages agree exactly.

Note that there is a difference between the Gregorian calendar used in Prussia and the Julian calendar used after the immigration to Russia.

K. Births

Births always took place at home (or the home of a relative), usually under the supervision of a female Hebemme (midwife).

As the state church, the Lutheran (Evangelische) church was required to record all Mennonite births from 1800 until 1874. On rare occasions Mennonite births might also be found in Catholic records. In both cases these were recorded as “Taufen” (christenings). While searching Prussian Lutheran or Catholic Church records for Mennonite entries always keep in mind the Mennonite children were *not* christened. Mennonites were Anabaptists which meant that they did NOT baptize their children. Since Mennonites did not baptize their infants, one should *not* see any witnesses or god parents (Zeugen in German or Testes in Latin) included in the birth record of a Mennonite child.

Some things you should check when looking at births of children within a family:

- 1) Mennonites **never** gave siblings with the same father the same name even if they had different mothers, unless the first child had died before the birth of the second child of that name. A woman might have two children with the same first name but only by different husbands. These half-siblings would usually have different surnames.
- 2) Be very suspicious of cases where two siblings from the same mother were born less than a year apart.
- 3) Be very suspicious of cases where a child is born more than 9 months after the death of its biological father.
- 4) Every time you see a gap of several years between the births of a couple’s children, there is a good chance another child was born during that gap. It is also possible that there was a disruption such as an illness of one parent or a major migration.
- 5) Although it was not uncommon for men to father children in their 50s or early 60s be wary of births of children to fathers over 60.
- 6) It was very rare for women to give birth after the age of 45.

Illegitimate births were rare but certainly did happen. In German the term “unehelich” is used in the church records. The recording of illegitimate births shows one of the differences between the Flemish and Frisian Mennonites. The Flemish were more conservative and rather puritanical. They rarely recorded illegitimate births. However, if that birth happened after 1800 the

corresponding Lutheran record (see section C.) should be found if the register is still available. If the mother was unmarried the father's name might appear in the Lutheran record. Illegitimate births were more likely to be recorded in Frisian registers, but the father's name rarely appears. An illegitimate birth is one of the main reasons for two men with the same surname not having matching Y-DNA results.

L. Baptisms

Baptisms took place in the church and could only be performed by an Ältester (Bishop). Ministers (Lehrer) did not perform baptisms. The GRANDMA database and some genealogies often incorrectly give the person's village of residence as the baptism location.

Baptisms traditionally took place around Pentecost which is in May or June. Baptisms occasionally took place in April or July. Be suspicious of any baptism date between August and March. An exception is the 17th century baptismal list for Montau, which does have baptisms outside this range.

As Anabaptists, Mennonites practiced "adult" baptism. Baptismal registers are available for most Prussian Mennonite congregations from about the 1770s on. By this time typical age ranges for when young people were baptized had been established. Because of this, birth years can be estimated from baptismal years. This is very important since early birth registers for many Prussian Mennonite congregations are not available. In the Frisian congregations nearly all baptisms took place at the age of 15 give or take 2 years. In the Flemish congregations it was 19 give or take 2 years. No proper statistical analysis has been done on Mennonite baptismal ages in Prussia.

There are two areas of inconsistency and uncertainty in Prussian Mennonite baptismal records. First, some congregations are careful to indicate whether the baptismal candidate was the child or surviving child of the named father. This is important since it tells us if the father was still alive at the time of the child's baptism. Second, there is some uncertainty as to the location given in baptismal records. Is the location that where the child lived at the time of baptism or where the family lived? If the named father was already dead, is the stated location where the father lived when he was still alive or the location of the child's surviving family lived at the time of baptism?

Summary of information available from pre-1820s Prussian Mennonite baptismal registers:

Congregation	Years	Father's status given
Danzig	1667 –	no
Elbing/Ellerwald	1778 – 1795, 1810 –	yes
Tragheimerweide	1782 –	no
Heubuden	1772 –	no (names rarely given)
Rosenort	1782 – 1795	yes

Tiegenhagen	1782 –	yes
Ladekopp	1782 – 1804, 1808 –	yes
Bärwalde/Fürstenwerder	1782 – 1805, 1814 –	yes
Orlofferfelde	1727 –	yes
Thiendorf/Marcushof*	1758, 59, 63, 81, 89 –	not 1758, 59 and 63.

* In 1791 part of the Thiendorf congregation split off to form the Marcushof congregation.

M. Marriages

When a previously unmarried couple was married, that marriage usually took place in the home church or residence (often in the barn or other large building) of the bride's family. In some cases the newlyweds would live for a time with or very near the wife's family. This is known as matrilocality. This can often explain why a man's marriage, or even the birth of the first child, can be missing from the records of his home congregation. His birth and/or baptism will be found in those church records, and the birth (and deaths) of children will appear later. His marriage is missing because he found a wife in another congregation, was married (and the marriage recorded) by that congregation, but he remained a member of his home congregation.

Be very suspicious of marriage ages under 18, particularly in Flemish congregations. Couples simply could not be married before both had been baptized and were members of the congregation.

Women tended to marry fairly early and usually did so when in their early 20s. Do not be surprised to see bachelors getting married in their 30s or even 40s. Men were expected to have established themselves economically before marrying.

There are no marriage age statistics for Mennonites during the time period of interest here.

N. Deaths (and causes of death)

Life expectancy during the time period of interest was short. Infant mortality was high. Do not be surprised to find couples who did not have surviving children. Many family names died out during the early Polish period.

Because it was common for couples to have a child every year or two, it was not uncommon to see children born after their father's death. In such cases always check to see if the two events happened within about 9 months.

If a male ancestor died leaving behind a widow and you are not able to find the death record of that woman it may be due to her remarriage. As a result, her death will be recorded under the surname of her new husband. Men and women who had young children usually remarried. Always look for a remarriage within a few years after the death of a spouse.

Although the original church registers usually provide the cause of death, published genealogies, online transcriptions/translations and the GRANDMA database rarely include these. One should always check the original (not the transcription/translation) in order to see what additional information is available. One must take into account that these are often guesses at what actually caused the death. A very good listing of causes of death given in the German language is given here:

<http://www.many-roads.com/2014/10/13/german-illness-death-terms-and-translations/>

O. Units (weights, measures, currency, etc.)

This is an extremely confusing topic. Not only did weights, measures and currency change with time, they changed significantly from one region (or even city) to the next. Simply searching online may add to the confusion due to one's unfamiliarity of the geography of north-eastern Europe. Take a look at the following for example:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obsolete_Polish_units_of_measurement and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obsolete_German_units_of_measurement .

The only comprehensive guide relevant to the Mennonites of West Prussia can be found here:

<http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/31.1.MHMar05.pdf> Although this guide is a significant simplification it may also be hard to follow. Below is a watered-down version which pertains specifically to the early Prussian period (1772 until about the 1820s):

1) *Land area:*

1 Hufe (*pl.* Hufen) = 30 Morgen = about 41 acres

1 Morgen = 300 Ruten (Quadratrueten)

2) *Currency:*

Thaler (Reichsthaler) = 3 Polish Gulden = 3 Florin = 90 Groschen = 90 Zloty

1 Groschen = 90 Pfenig

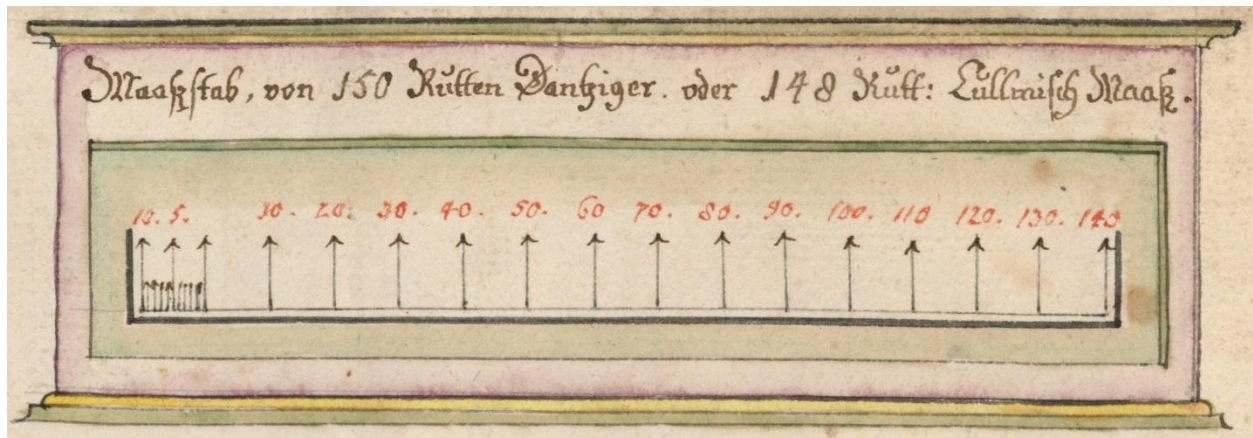
3) *Volume:*

An important measure of volume was the Scheffel (*pl.* Scheffeln) which is related to the English word shovel. For example, the 1772 census of West Prussia frequently gives information on how many Scheffeln of various grains each village or farmer was producing.

4) *Length:*

The commonly used unit was the Ell, which was 2 feet. Building dimensions were often measured in Ell.

The base unit for distance was the Rute/Ruthe (*pl.* Ruten/Ruthen), which is linguistically related to the English word rod and pronounced "ruten" not "ruthen". This was about 4 meters. The Meile was 1000 Ruthen. Danzig, Polish Prussia and Poland used a different Ruthe from that used in West Prussia. This is illustrated by the scale (shown below) taken from a 1777 map of the village of Czattkau showing that 150 Danzig Ruthen was equal to 148 Culmisch Ruthen.



P. Land Ownership

It should be made clear right from the start that during the years covered by this guide *very few* Mennonites were truly land owners. Much of the land “owned” by Mennonites was the result of hereditary long-term leases of 20 to 50 years. Farmers were virtual owners in that they could buy and sell their property and modify their property as if they owned it. By the mid-1700s agricultural land in West Prussia was scarce. Yet, at the same time the percentage of landowning Mennonites was increasing. Since the traditional Prussian military system relied on the landowning families to provide soldiers the Prussian government did not allow Mennonites to acquire new land after 1788. The 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia shows that about 25% of Mennonite families were without land.

There were 3 land sovereigns in West Prussia:

1. The Towns and Cities – for example the city of Elbing owned entire villages.
2. The noble land lords – for example the Mennonite village of Jeziorka was owned by a nobleman.
3. The Crown (King) – many of the villages in which Mennonites lived were owned by the crown. Some of these villages were founded, and originally owned, by the Teutonic knights and later by the Polish crown and, after 1772, by the Prussian Crown.

Emphyteuten – lived on crown land

Eigengärtner – owned a garden

Erbpächter, Hochzinsler, Erbfreie, Koelmer lived on non-crown lands.

Eigenthümer – owned the property they lived on.

Eigenkätner/Kätner/ Kätner – owned a Kath or Kate – a cottage.

Bude – a hut or other small building. Linguistically related to the English word booth.

Mietsman – renter

Mietsgärtner – rented a garden

Q. “Mennonite” villages

The term “Mennonite village” as applied to Prussia has a different meaning as when applied to Russia. The vast majority of Mennonites who lived in imperial Russia lived in their own villages which were usually within Mennonite administered colonies. This situation continued in Canada for a few generations and continues to be the case in many Mexican and South American Mennonite communities. This, however, was not the case during the 400 years that Mennonites lived in what was known as Prussia. After the first partition of Poland in 1772 nearly all of these Mennonites lived in the province of West Prussia. The hundreds of villages in West Prussia can be broadly divided in two groups. The majority of villages had no Mennonites. A group of about 200 villages contained at least a few Mennonite families and a few dozens of these villages were predominantly Mennonite. During the period for which we have reasonably complete records it was rare for a West Prussian village to be over 90% Mennonite (unlike many of the Mennonite villages in imperial Russia and early Canada). The 1772 census of West Prussia provides a snapshot of the situation when the Prussians took over. After three big waves of emigration to Russia the Mennonite populations in these villages were much lower, and this is shown by a census of 1820. For example, the “Mennonite” village of Heubuden went from having 85% of its households being Mennonite in 1772 to 66% in 1820.

I have created a list of what I consider West Prussian “Mennonite villages” here:

http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/West_Prussian_Mennonite_Villages_Alph.htm

Note: One area of confusion is the duplication of “Mennonite” village names (even within a country). This is also true for West Prussia. Here is a list of such duplicate village names for West Prussia (Polish name in brackets):

Baumgarth – one in the Elbing region and one in the Stuhm region.

Einlage – one in the Danzig region and one in the Gross Werder region.

Ellerwald – one in the Elbing region and one in the Marienwerder region.

Heubude in the Danzig region and *Heubuden* in the Gross Werder region.

Kommerau – one in the Schwetz region and one in the Elbing region.

Neudorf in the Gross Werder region, and *Neuendorf* – one in Danzig and one in Gross Werder.

Neuenhuben in the Gross Werder and *Neunhuben* – one in Schwetz and one in Danzig.

Rosenort – one in the Gross Werder and one in the Klein Werder.

Schoensee – one in the Gross Werder and one in the Culm region.

Weisshof – one in the Danzig region and one in the Marienwerder region.

Note that, in some cases, individuals or families are recorded as living in the “**Hospital**”. These were not hospitals in the modern sense. They were essentially poor houses. They housed people who were destitute and homeless, often the result of illness. These individuals or families had no relatives who could take care of them. These Hospitals were owned and funded by Mennonite congregations and run by the deacons and deaconesses of the church.

R. Occupations

The traditional goal of a Mennonite family was (and still is) to live off the land. However, due to the shortage of land in Prussia many Mennonite household heads had to practice a trade. Many of those who did hold land and had a trade on the side. One of the consequences of the land shortage was that many young men supported themselves with a trade until such time as circumstances allowed them to acquire a farm.

For a list of old German occupations see:

http://www.european-roots.com/german_prof.htm

or simply do a search for “old German occupations”

Also see:

http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf

S. Inheritance among Prussian Mennonites

Inheritance in West Prussia, and in Poland before that, followed the Flemish inheritance customs. For some historical background see pages 17 – 19 of:

http://www.plettffoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Preservings_2006.pdf

This was **not** a uniquely Mennonite practice. It was the commonly used inheritance practice in West Prussia. However, it was taken along with the immigration to Russia and was part of the privileges specifically requested by Mennonites before leaving for Russia.

The land occupied by Mennonites in Prussia was not divisible. According to the Flemish tradition husband and wife jointly owned the land they occupied. If one spouse died the value of that person’s half of the estate had to be paid to that person’s surviving blood descendants. Step-children never inherited from their step-parents. If an adult child died before a parent, the child’s surviving blood descendants received the deceased child’s portion of the inheritance. Sons were eligible to receive inheritance (i.e. had reached the age of majority) at age 18 and daughters at age 16. The eligible heir was referred to as “*mündig*” and a minor (underage) heir was referred to as “*unmündig*”. Each minor child was assigned two guardians (*Vormund*, pl. *Vormünder*) who were to ensure that the child received their inheritance when they reached the age of majority. The property and inheritance records for the West Prussian Mennonites are located in various Polish archives and provide a considerable amount of genealogical information. The records I have digitally photographed, together with a more detailed description, can be found at:

https://mla.bethelks.edu/metadata/VI_53.html

If a descendant was in Russia that person would be notified. Some of those records have survived in Russian archives:

http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Prussia_to_Russia_Mennonite_Inheritance_Documents.pdf

T. Adoption and Orphans

Life expectancy during the time period considered here was short. If the mother or father of a family died leaving children behind the surviving spouse usually remarried within a year or so. In some cases, the new spouse also had children. This could result in a family which was too

large for a couple to support and some children might be sent off to live with relatives or close friends of the family. This was the case for some very poor and/or large families.

Any formal education a child might receive ended at the age of 12 when they were put to work. It was common for children, 12 and over, to be employed by another family. These were not adopted or foster children. Girls served as maids or housekeepers while boys were usually farm hands or apprentices under the tutelage of a master of a trade.

There was never such a thing as formal adoption among the early Mennonites in Prussia. Orphaned children *always kept their original family names* and inherited their deceased parents' estates, not those of the adoptive parents. None of the (hundreds of) inheritance records I have read ever included adopted or foster children (*Pflegekind*, pl. *Pflegkinder*) as heirs to any estate. If anyone does find a (documented) case of a child changing their surname or of a child inheriting from foster parents in pre-1820s Prussia I would be very interested in knowing about it.

U. Geography

Genealogists are notoriously ignorant of geography (and history). As a result, genealogies (and in particular the GRANDMA database) often contain geographical errors which could have been avoided. In West Prussia one of the biggest problems is the inclusion of an administrative district or geographical region in designating a location. Just like counties and municipalities in North America, these administrative districts changed with time. Frequently mentioned administrative and geographic regions are named at the end of this section.

Our ancestors always used the German names of Prussian locations. In fact, most of these names were in place from the time of the Teutonic knights, when many villages were founded and named, until the end of WW2. Most of these villages still exist in Poland and now have Polish names. Many of those names were created after the war in an effort to Polonize the region. Although it may be considered politically correct to use the current Polish names, if you do so fellow Mennonite genealogists will not know what location you are talking about. The GRANDMA database uses only the old German names. Most importantly, the old German names are the ones your own ancestors used for many generations. Although Mennonites lived in Poland for many generations before the Prussians took over (in 1772) and the region our ancestors lived in is now part of modern Poland, it is preferable to refer to locations as being in "West Prussia", "East Prussia", Brandenburg, etc.

Another problem is the frequent use of a nearby city or major town in family records. For example, Peter Rempel's book [*Mennonite Migration to Russia 1788-1828*] has pages of lists of families who emigrated from West Prussia to Southern Russia. These entries frequently use locations such as Danzig, Elbing, Tiegenhof, Neuteich, Marienburg, Marienwerder, Mewe, Stuhm, Culm, Schwetz and Neuenburg as the points of origin. Very few Prussian Mennonites actually lived in these locations. These names often represent the location of the government

office where the Mennonite family would apply for permission (and a visa) to emigrate from Prussia.

Villages are also referred to according to their geographic region. These were not administrative or political districts and often had no definite boundaries. Examples are *Gross Werder*, *Klein Werder*, *Danziger Werder*, *Danziger Niederung*, *Nehrung* and *Scharpau*.

V. Beware the Internet

Serious genealogists have developed a love-hate relationship with the internet. On the one hand a tremendous amount of information, including scans of original records, are now available online. On the other, there is an immense amount of incorrect genealogical information put together by individuals on many websites. If one concentrates on the time period of interest here (pre-1820 Prussia) one will find a staggering amount of completely incorrect speculation and assumptions made by individuals including down-right fake genealogies. Use the internet with caution and always look for original sources and images of those sources. If someone makes an assumption or a claim that does not make historical or geographical sense challenge that person and insist that they convince you by producing the primary sources for their genealogical work.

Created 21 February 2021
Formatting by Richard D. Thiessen

[Return to the
Mennonite Genealogy
Prussian Mennonite Genealogical Resource Page](#)