

OUR PRUSSIAN FOREFATHERS

In the Przechovko Church Book (frequently called "The Old Prussian Church Book"), we find this entry by the then elder Jacob Wedel.

"Schmidt der Erste dieses Nahmens unter unsern Volck von dem ist einer Muthmassung ob er nicht mit Tobias Schellenberger . . ."

A liberal translation of this unfinished statement is: "There is a conjecture that the first one among our people by the name SCHMIDT together with Tobias Schellenberger . . ." This incomplete sentence seems to suggest that the first SCHMIDT came into the Culm-Schwetz area together with Tobias Schellenberger, who had fled from Moravia to Hungary in wake of the fierce Catholic Counter-reformation which was raging in Moravia at that time, then resided in Hungary until the persecution also became unbearable there, whereupon he continued his flight to the Culm-Schwetz area where he settled in the village Dorposch about 5 miles east of Schwetz, now Swiecie.

Our great-grandparents (great-grandparents of my wife Louise Schmidt), Andreas Schmidt and Eva Schmidt, are direct descendants of this first SCHMIDT. Most of their ancestors in all lineages lived about 200 years in this area, within a radius of less than ten miles. We cannot trace any of the ancestors of Andreas Schmidt nor of Eva Schmidt directly to Holland. However, the Dutch language was used in this church until 1785. At least as late as 1819 this church had a very cordial relation with the Flemish Mennonites in Groningen in Holland, as is evidenced by the visit of elder Hendrik Berents Hulshof from Zenderen near Borne, who had come here to baptize 31 young people, to serve Holy Communion and to conduct an election of two ministers. All of this indicates very strongly that the original nucleus of this settlement came from Holland. Most of the ancestors of Andreas and Eva Schmidt lived in the village of Kunpat, Przechovko, Glugovka, Jeziorken, Beckersitz and Terespolna on the west side of the Wisla (Wiechsel) River and in Dorposch, Schoensee, Ostoever Kampa and Jamrau on the east side of the river. The church of this Flemish Mennonite congregation was located in Przechovko; there were two smaller meeting houses in the more distant villages of Jeziorken and Schoensee.

The early history of this Mennonite settlement is rather vague and uncertain. The first settlers appear to have come from Holland in the latter part of the 16th century. Some historians place the date of settlement as early as 1540. The first settlers from Holland came to West Prussia in response to an invitation by Polish noblemen to settle in the lowlands along the Wisla River, to drain those lowlands and to build dikes and levees along the sides of the river to hold the river in its course.

Each village complex was leased by a Polish nobleman to the inhabitants of that village for a period of 40 to 50 years at a time. Frantz Wedel, the great-great-great-grandfather of our Andreas Schmidt was one of the signers of the lease of Przechovko which Johann Zawadzki leased to the inhabitants of this village in 1642 for a period of 1640 to 1690. In general, the land was divided into strips perpendicular to the river bed, so that all families