

Poland: Exploring My Ancestral Roots

By Theresa Berg, Resident

This past July, I embarked upon a tour to Poland to explore my paternal ancestral roots. The tour was led by TourMagination out of Ontario, Canada. The 14 tour members all had similar ancestral backgrounds consisting of Dutch Mennonites who settled in Poland beginning in the late 1500s. They were persecuted in Holland for their religious beliefs which threatened the status quo of the government and the state church. Mennonites were non-violent resisters who refused to take up the sword. They also refused to baptize their infants, which was a requirement of the state church. The Polish government invited the Dutch Mennonites to settle in the Vistula Delta to reclaim the swampy land as they had done in Holland. Our group's ancestors stayed in Poland until the early 1800s when they were invited to settle in South Russia by Catherine the Great and her grandson, Alexander. The Mennonites who stayed behind were forced out during WWII due to the devastation of the area and Russian occupation.



The 13-day tour started in Prague, Czech Republic, and continued to the main cities of Krakow, Warsaw, and Gdansk in Poland, and included exploration of the agrarian Polish countryside. The last five days of the trip were based out of Gdansk and from there we took day tours around the Vistula Delta where our ancestors lived. Poland is overall a very rural country with lots of flat agricultural land. Our ancestors were farmers and settled around small villages. We saw many of our ancestral villages, churches (all Catholic now), and cemeteries where our ancestors were buried. Some of the local Polish people have a real interest in Mennonite history and are in the process of restoring the cemeteries. There was even a Mennonite Museum near Torun that included several homes and barns that had been relocated to the museum site. Traditional Mennonite homes and barns consisted of one large connecting structure.

In addition to investigating our Mennonite roots, we also visited other sites including the beautiful city of Prague, Malbork Castle, built by the Teutonic Knights in 1200s, the UNESCO Krakow Salt Mines in operation since the 13th century, and the sobering Stutthof Concentration Camp. Visiting Warsaw was also particularly eye-opening. To understand that 85 percent of the city was destroyed in WWII and to see it now, restored in replicated architecture, speaks to the resilience of the Polish people in spite of their times suffering.

In Poland, we saw many storks. They make their nests high up on utility pole platforms. The electric companies built special platforms for the stork nests because previously the storks would try to build directly on the utility poles which caused problems. The sighting of storks is considered good luck. So, when you see them in their nests or in the fields, you say "1, 2, 3, dear stork, bring luck for me."