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Pilgrimage to Witmarsum

From Days of Menno to the Present

By LEO LAURENSE

In 1535 the village church of Witmarsum, Friesland, was crowded every Sunday. Even from the surrounding villages people came to hear the parish priest, Menno Simons. They admired him as an "evangelical" preacher, although he was still serving in his Catholic Church. However, there were already a number of church members who refused to attend the Catholic worship service. They preferred private Bible studies where they aimed to worship God in spirit and in truth. For this purpose they met secretly in private homes, in barns, and in out-of-the-way places. They considered themselves the true church, the brotherhood of believers and re-born children of God.

This was the origin of the Mennonite church of Witmarsum. The danger of persecution, imprisonment and death prevented the brethren from keeping any records and, therefore, nothing concrete is really known about the first century of the congregation.

Menno was in touch with this group from the beginning and did not report them to the government. He himself was almost fully convinced that he should be on their side and not in the church which was so closely associated with the government, but it was hard for him to give up everything for Christ.

However, in January 1536 Menno left the Catholic Church and joined this little flock. Naturally he could not stay in that community but had to go where he was not known. As the Reformation spread in the Netherlands, the Catholic Church disappeared and the Reformed Church was established as the state church. Although other denominations were forbidden, the little group of brethren survived in Witmarsum. They even dared to organize a church and remodel a home into a plain meetinghouse one mile east of the village. According to an old tradition, Menno is supposed to have preached in this home for some time. It is unlikely that this is true. Because of the severe persecution, Menno Simons, who had left the Catholic Church, could not have preached here without being imprisoned. Nevertheless, this meetinghouse was referred to as Menno Simons' Preekhuis (place of preaching). From an old picture we know what the style of meetinghouses was at that time. In front, next to a little pulpit, we see a bench for the ministers and deacons. The men sat on benches along the wall and the women sat in the center of the room.

The Mennonites of the Netherlands commemorated Menno Simons for the first time in 1835. The Mennonites of Witmarsum had gone through hard times. Nevertheless, with the help of others, spiritually and financially the fellowship remained alive. The old dilapidated church was remodeled. A more church-like building with modern windows and even a little steeple on the roof was erected on the old foundation. At the entrance of the building an inscription stated that Menno Simons was supposed to have preached here to his first followers. Inside a portrait of Menno Simons was found. Such was the situation since 1828.

The next Menno Simons commemoration took place in 1936. During this second Mennonite World Conference, Mennonites from all over the world came to Witmarsum. The old Menno Simons' church was gone and a new church had been erected. The people had grown tired of walking a mile through the fields to the old church. So it was decided that a new church was to be erected in Witmarsum in 1877.

What should happen to the old memorable Menno Simons church? Some thought it should remain a Mennonite monument. The majority was opposed to this plan. The church was torn down and a simple stone monument was erected in its place. Generations of Mennonites came to see this monument with its inscriptions, including "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). This monument was erected in 1879, surrounded by shrubs, ditches filled with water, pastures and fields of waving grain. Whoever visits this spot and listens carefully will be reminded of the "faith of our fathers living still ... we will be true to Thee till death."

What do we find in Witmarsum now, in January 1961, 425 years after the conversion of Menno? There is still the monument in the fields. The village again has a new Mennonite church. The one erected during the nineteenth century could no longer serve the congregation nor was it a worthy place for visitors. The front is more or less in the pattern of the old Menno Simons church in the field. The inside is a pleasant place for the worship of the local congregation. The visitors from other places and countries have been kept in mind. A Mennonite exhibition is on display telling the story of the Mennonites of the past and present. It is to be a church for the whole Mennonite brotherhood everywhere. This new building was erected through gifts from Mennonites the world over. Mennonite voluntary service workers from everywhere helped in the project during the summer of 1960. The church will be dedicated on January 31, 1961. It is to serve the God of our fathers, the "help in ages past" built on the foundation, Jesus Christ, through the working power of the Holy Spirit.
Where Menno Lived and Died

By OTTO REIER

BAD Oldesloe, a city of 15,000 inhabitants, is located between Hamburg and Lübeck in northwestern Germany. The northern edge of this town affords a beautiful view. In the distance is a meadow with a huge linden tree in the shade of which stands a small white building with a gray roof. Approaching the tree, it assumes larger proportions. Crossing a little stream, one has reached the Menno-Kate and the Menno Linden Tree.

As one reaches the tree, it no longer appears so overwhelming, and one realizes that the house is larger than it appeared from a distance. According to tradition, Menno Simons lived here and printed his books in this house. It is he who planted this linden tree more than four hundred years ago. There is no reason to question the accuracy of the tradition. It is a fact that Menno found shelter on this estate and that he had a print shop. It is also known that an underground Anabaptist printer of Lübeck, after having been discovered, moved to this place. Both this cabin and the linden tree are now monuments protected by the state.

These two items are not the only historical markers in this area as far as the Mennonites are concerned. Next to the building and tree surrounded by trees and shrubs is an area which contains the Menno Simons marker. In the background are fir trees and in front are small markers given by congregations and groups which contributed toward the establishment of this shrine. This is an impressive corner.

Menno-Kate

The white-washed cabin with the thatched roof has a long history. It was erected more than four hundred years ago and has survived the Thirty Years' War and other calamities throughout its long history. The village, Wüstenfelde, in which Menno Simons and his followers lived during the last years of his life, was completely destroyed during the Thirty Years' War.

Nothing else is known about the print shop except that it was used for this purpose during the lifetime of Menno. No records have been preserved of the generations of people who have lived in this house since that time. Today it is occupied by three poor families. By the fall of 1961 this place is to be vacated and the Conference of Mennonites of Germany will take over the building and restore it. After that it will become a monument.

The cabin, covering some thousand square feet, is a rather commodious dwelling. A few steps lead into the hall from which a number of doors lead into the various rooms and a stairway leads to the attic. Through a back door one can enter the old kitchen, which still has a floor made of shallow flagstones picked up in the fields. As in olden times, the house is lit by an old kerosene lamp. The hall and the neighboring room will be equipped with antique furniture and a Mennonite library containing books written by and about Menno. This will become the "Menno Room." In addition to this, visitors will be informed about the immediate environment and the Mennonite congregations of North Germany. The disposition of the rest of the house is still to be determined. To establish a modern dwelling place with electricity and running water would require much money and, in addition to this, would alter the appearance of this old house completely. It would, however, be easy to transform this cabin into a meeting place where people can stay over night. In this case a small modern dwelling would have to be erected near by. These are some plans which could possibly be realized.

The Menno Monument

This monument has been in existence over fifty years and, therefore, we know its history. In 1902 the Conference of the Mennonites of Germany erected a marker at the place Schadhorn at Wüstenfelde where Menno Simons had been buried in his own garden. This marker consisted of a large granite rock placed on a native rock as a foundation. In 1906 the Mennonite Church of Hamburg-Altona contributed a bronze plaque featuring Menno Simons, which was dedicated August 26 of that year.

In view of the fact that it was very difficult to reach this monument when the roads were bad, very few people were able to visit this place. In addition to this, in December 1950 the bronze plaque was stolen. This fact became known to the German Student Organization, members of which had received food from the Mennonites of America immediately after World War II. Looking for a project to express its appreciation, the organization decided to collect funds from students of all West German universities to cast a new bronze plaque of Menno Simons for this marker. The sculptor Küohl fashioned the plaque.

At this time the thought originated to have the marker moved from its solitary spot to the well-known Menno cabin and linden tree. The proprietor, Baron von Jenisch, agreed to contribute a larger plot of ground near the cabin, and have the monument moved. Otto Schowalter of the Mennonite Church of Hamburg-Altona negotiated in this matter. The American PAX boys, together with Otto Regier, Georg Isert, and local agen-
cies all cooperated in the transfer of the marker which was completed in ten days after it had been started on September 23, 1953. The landscaping and planting of trees was completed in 1957 free of charge by the park authority of Bad Oldesloe.

Dedication Service

During the summer of 1957 the sculptor had presented the Menno bronze plaque which was dedicated on November 30, 1958. After some introductory remarks by Otto Schwalter, the mayor of Bad Oldesloe, Barth, stated that the city was interested in keeping the memory of Menno Simons alive as part of its history. After this the student representing the University of Kiel and his associates expressed their appreciation and gratitude to the Mennonites for the help which the German student body had received after World War II and presented the memorial plaque. (See article in this issue.) Following this the chairman of the Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennoniten Gemeinden, Abraham Braun, accepted the monument and the memorial plaque for the Conference.

Near the site of the former marker an unnamed donor had another simple marker erected in 1957, so that the memory of the final place of labor and burial of Menno Simons would remain alive.

At last we have the monument, the Menno Simons' cabin and linden tree together as a beautiful memorial. Representatives of the Mennonite congregations of Hamburg-Altona, Lübeck and Kiel have organized a Board to administer this memorial. The wish has been expressed that the Mennonites of Germany will establish a foundation when they commemorate the Quadricentennial of the death of Menno Simons on January 31, 1961. The income from this foundation would be used to take care of this place. Mennonites the world over will be given opportunity to contribute to this cause.

It is inspiring to note that the public high school of Bad Oldesloe has included information about Menno Simons in its history course and has included four pages of outline to him. This should inspire us Mennonites everywhere to cultivate the memory of Menno Simons after whom we are named. This memorial is not meant to give undue honor to a human being. Our concern is expressed in the following words:

"All this is done not so much because of the person, Menno Simons, but in order to prevent the loss of his contribution as time goes on. His thoughts and ideals should spread so that help for those in need, the poor and the starving, will not decrease but rather continue and multiply."

I would like to conclude: may the living church of Christ as Menno Simons conceived it and which he strove to realize grow and spread in our day and age.

An Expression of Gratitude

At the Dedication of the Menno Marker

By KARSTEN KÖHLER

Dear Friends:

We have gathered here at this venerated place for a quiet hour—an hour which is impressive as an occasion for thankfulness and thoughtfulness. We are moved to thankfulness for a deed which has been recorded in the history of the German universities and reflection on the man in whose spirit this deed was performed.

When World War II came to a close and people returned from the front with great losses, they came to the destroyed West German cities to build up new communities. At that time a new generation of students entered the universities in order to prepare for the reconstruction of their country. Universities also suffered greatly under the circumstances of that disturbed time. Buildings were gone, auditoriums were bombed out, all facilities for instruction had gone up in smoke, and those who were to teach had lost their lives in the war. The students experienced difficult times. They found no satisfactory shelter; they slept on straw. They were happy when they were able to get a uniform. There was a great scarcity of all necessities of life, including food. Nevertheless, somehow they had to move on and up; and go on they did. A welcome help at this moment was the aid given by the Mennonites of America "in the name of Christ." Through this channel a food program for students at German universities was inaugurated.

With this external help came internal help. This deed gave that generation of students the awareness that there were still human beings who recognized the need of others and who were willing to help. New courage, new hope, strength and self assurance were generated.

For this deed of Christain help I am today privileged to express our thanks. How does it happen that a young student stands here to express this gratitude—one who was not a student at that time and did not experience these hardships at the university?

Every generation of students is a link in the chain binding the university in a firm bond. We today feel the common bond with the students who suffered after the war. This will continue, and so I am standing here before you to express appreciation in the name of those who received help from the Mennonites.

That we students from the University of Kiel have come here does not mean that only students from our university have received help through the Mennonites. Help
came to all students of West German universities and, therefore, it is my pleasant task to thank you in the name of all students of Germany.

I can assure you for all that your deed will not be forgotten. It was an example for us as to how to deal when one sees a fellow human being suffer. It seems to me we can extend sincere thanks only if we also commit ourselves to a promise. This promise is that we must help wherever the wounds of war have not yet been healed, wherever students are in need. This promise is our thank you. We must take care that this will not be words only but will become deeds. An expression of appreciation cannot be contained in words. It must become visible and must be felt.

How can I express this gratitude without mentioning the man after whom you are named and who left a heritage which enabled you to do this deed? This man is Menno Simons in whose spirit the Mennonites crossed borders of nations and denominations to help where help was needed. In the name of the German Student Organization (Deutsche Studentenschaft) I am presenting this plaque with the picture of Menno Simons to the Mennonite congregations of Germany (Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden) as the representative of the Mennonites the world over as a token of appreciation.

Thus, this thank you and this commemoration are related. To thank you for the help granted and to honor the memory of a man in whose spirit this was done, I present this plaque. May it adorn this memorial of the Mennonites, and may it remind all people to follow the example of the Mennonite congregations.

(See pp. 27-28.)

**Menno Simons as a Frisian**

**By JAN A. BRANDSMA**

**MENNO SIMONS** was born in the village of Wittmarsum in the Dutch province of Friesland. He was a very productive writer. He wrote his first pamphlet in 1535 as a Roman Catholic priest, and his last one in 1559, two years before his death. There are more than forty writings, including letters, devotional, polemical and theological writings and two poems. The last Dutch edition of his writings, *Opera Omnia Theologica*, was published at Amsterdam in 1681.

The writings of Menno Simons are not of great theological and scholarly significance, but they give us an opportunity to get a fairly good view of the conditions in the Low Countries during the time of the Reformation. More significant is the fact that he wrote and presented them at a crucial time and by doing so influenced the religious development of his day. Generations of believers benefited by these writings and molded their religious lives accordingly.

It is surprising that Menno, who was a Frisian, did not write in his native language. He grew up in the village of Wittmarsum between Bolsward and Harlingen, attending a school in which Frisian was spoken, which is very different from the Dutch language spoken in the other provinces of the Netherlands. Frisian shows some similarity with the Scandinavian languages. In those days a priest in Friesland was required not only to speak in the language of the people, that is Frisian, but also to write and preach in this language.

Yet we have nothing that Menno wrote in the Frisian language. In a recent book entitled *Minne Simens en de Minnioten*, M.S.E. Visser states that Menno did not use Frisian because that would imply patriotic love which he considered "worldly." He was primarily interested in religious life, which was not restricted to the Frisians. It is clear that this assumption is wrong. The book by Visser in general shows that he has little understanding of the Anabaptists and Menno Simons.

We must look for other reasons to answer the question why Menno did not use his native language in his writings. Two years after his birth, July 20, 1498, Friesland lost its independence when Duke Albert of Saxony became the ruler. In 1515 his son, Duke George, turned over his rights to Charles V; in 1524 the latter became the emperor of all Germany. Eight years later, in 1524, the Frisians paid homage to the emperor. Consequently, the Frisian language and culture suffered severely. The first book published in Frisian appeared in 1470, and now the Frisian had to make room for the Dutch and French languages. The last known Frisian document of that time is dated 1573.

However, this was possibly not the most important reason why Menno did not use his native tongue in his writings. Immediately after he left the Catholic Church at Wittmarsum in 1536, he left the province of Friesland. The tradition that he remained in Wittmarsum for a while preaching the Gospel is not based on facts. His life was not safe in Friesland, and he would not have survived if he had stayed. By the end of 1536 he was in Oldersum, near Emden in the German province of East Friesland. He also spent some time in the province of Groningen, returning occasionally to his native village of Wittmarsum, Friesland. In December, 1542, there was an imperial edict issued against him in Friesland. From then on he lived primarily in Germany, including such places as Emden, Cologne, Lübeck, Wismar and Wüstenfelde near Oldesloe. He visited his native province of
Friesland only occasionally in brief periods, as in 1549 and again in 1557.

Thus we understand why his writings appear primarily in the Dutch language and not in the Frisian. They were to be read by all Anabaptists of the North Sea and Baltic Coast from Flanders to Danzig. Dutch was understood everywhere in this area. Yet to meet the needs of the population of North Germany, his writings were adapted to the linguistic peculiarities of that territory. Some of his writings appear in the Oosters (eastern) dialect. His sentence construction, too, reveals the influence of his German environment.

The contemporary Frisian writer, Jan Pef Benga, states in his *Skiednis fan de Fryske Skriftekennissee* (1557) that every Frisian ought to know who Menno Simons was and what he stood for. And yet hardly anybody has attempted to translate Menno’s writings into his native Frisian language. In 1930 Sjouke de Zee translated Menno’s *Meditation on the 25th Psalm* into Frisian. This he did because he considered this booklet most significant for the knowledge of Menno’s personal and spiritual life. He expressed his surprise that a witness like this from the sixteenth century could have been completely lost sight of by the Frisian population.

What is most needed in the Netherlands is a scholarly edition of Menno’s writings, which has never been published. After this we will need to translate some selections of the writings of Menno into the Frisian language. The Fryskte Akademy of Leeuwarden, established in 1938 and interested in the promotion of Frisian culture and scholarship, is contemplating such an edition of selections from the writings of Menno Simons. Interest in this matter was created through a number of articles in *It Beaken*, the publication of the Akademy. It is hoped that a selection of the writings of Menno Simons in the Frisian language will be forthcoming in the near future.

The Nineteenth Country Added

**Mennonites in British Honduras**

By WALTER QUIRING

The world-wide migrations of the Mennonites, which began in Switzerland more than four hundred years ago, have not yet come to a close. Two years ago a group of Mennonites from Mexico added another country, the nineteenth in our history, to those “conquered.” The country is British Honduras.

A World-Wide Migration

The Swiss Mennonites scattered involuntarily into Southern Germany during the sixteenth century. Although many moved on from here, most of them remained in Southern Germany. Swiss Mennonites continued their migrations into the nineteenth century. However, the “world-wide wanderers” among the Mennonites were those of Dutch background. Of necessity the first ones moved from the Low Countries eastward during the sixteenth century. Following the Baltic Coast, they settled in Poland and Danzig. Later they migrated to Russia, the United States and Canada. They also found new homes in Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. From Paraguay some moved to Bolivia.

Meanwhile, some Mennonites from Russia residing in Canada have migrated to Mexico and Paraguay, while some Prussian Mennonites have gone to Uruguay. Thus, Mennonites are found in the following nineteen countries: Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, the United States, Canada, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Mexico, and British Honduras. (This does not include individuals and smaller groups who have moved to many other countries, including Palestine and Australia.) That is an unusual record and must be taken into consideration when we encounter the many unique characteristics and features of our Mennonite heritage the world over.

Why did the Mennonites of Mexico choose to go to the sub-tropical British Honduras to start a new settlement? First, there was a scarcity of land in Mexico, which made it difficult to find homes for the large Mennonite families. In addition to this, Protestant northern European settlers in the Spanish-Catholic country find the adjustment difficult. The bureaucracy and the business practices of this environment remain strange to them. An additional reason was the social security law of the Mexican government, which the Mennonites feared because it could limit their freedom.

Investigating British Honduras

Recently delegates were sent to British Honduras. Among other things they reported that this country was an English colony, with a population of only 85,000 and an area consisting of 8,900 square miles. The majority of the population consisted of Negroes, mulattoes and Indians. They found the land near the coast and the capital, Belize, unsuited for settlement, but west of Belize and Hondo it was fertile and covered with forests. The