

theological questions, the order in the church and the lifestyle of members of the congregation. Within a few years different movements developed; these were named after those regions where their adherents originally came from. Like the liberal-moderate “Waterlanders” or the more conservative-restrictive “Flemish” and “Vriesen”. These deeply religious Flemish and “Vriesen” strove for a simple life, separated from the outside world, in a closed religious community. Marriage between members of the different groups was forbidden. The “Flemish” and the “Vriesen” disintegrated later into further groups, so that at the end of the 16th century there existed more than half a dozen subdivisions.

THE MENNONITES AND THE LINEN TRADE IN EAST-FRISIA AND LEER

From the 16th century on East-Frisia experienced economic growth. Leer became the centre of the linen industry and trade. In the 16th century, Dutch people, persecuted for their faith, fled in large numbers to East-Frisia, where they had a big share in its prosperity: until then weaving had been a cottage industry. But the Dutch refugees were able to establish a thriving linen industry within a few years. This reached its peak at the beginning of the 17th century. Many of the Dutch were prosperous and successful merchants and artisans from cities of trade such as Antwerp, Amsterdam and Groningen. Among these families were also a large number of Mennonites, who were to control the linen trade in Leer in the centuries to come, such as the families Alring, van Hoorn, Vissering and Zijtsema. The Mennonites especially showed great skill as artisans and a talent for economics. The linen industry became the main branch of trade in Leer. They did not produce only for the region, they also found further markets at home and abroad. In their capacity of “Leinenrheders”, as the linen merchants from Leer were called, they bought yarn and sold it on to the local weavers. Subsequently they bought back the woven cloth and sold it in the big trading cities in the Netherlands, England and Spain. Around 1740 one in five of the approximately 5,000 residents of Leer lived on either the linen trade or of linen manufacture. In the transition period between 17th and 18th century the linen merchants extended their scope of business. They became ship merchants and traders in other goods. Of the total of 43 merchant houses in Leer at the end of the 18th century 32 were in Mennonite hands.

EASTBOUND MIGRATION - THE HISTORY OF MENNONITES IN POLAND AND RUSSIA

Owing to the ongoing persecution in the Netherlands many Mennonites fled in the 16th century to West-Prussia. In 1569 they established the first Mennonite church at the mouth of the Vistula. This area is very swampy. Dutch farmers, willing to exploit this barren land, were welcome – even if they were Mennonites. Many Dutch merchants and artisans settled in the cities, especially Danzig. By the end of the 16th century about 5,000 Mennonites lived at the mouth of the Vistula – approximately ten percent of the population. In 1780 their number had grown to about 13,000. For roughly 200 years Mennonites lived there and developed a fairly good relationship with the Polish government. After the First Partition of Poland in 1772 West-Prussia became part of the State of Prussia. The modern ideas of Frederick II regarding the functioning of a state led to increased control by the state. This was achieved by new laws and edicts, partly at the expense of the Mennonites. Thus, they were only able to acquire land from other Mennonites. Due to their high birth rate there was not enough land for all of them. At this time the Russian Czarina Catherine sent messengers to the area of the Vistula to recruit settlers for the south of the Ukraine. Many Mennonites accepted this offer because the promises of freedom and land were tempting. Several thousand migrated east, as far as the Dnjepr and the Black Sea. After initial difficulties they settled successfully and founded four colonies with a total of about 20 villages. In the early 20th century more than 100,000 Mennonites lived in Russia and the Ukraine.

THE “AMISH PEOPLE” IN AMERICA

Among the groups of Anabaptists who still exist today the Amish People are those who are best known to outsiders. Possible reasons are: their obviously different lifestyle compared to the world around them, their strange and old-fashioned clothes and their far-reaching reserve toward technical innovations. Ignorance and prejudice concerning their way of life were widespread. At the end of the 17th century the “Emmentaler group” around the elder Jakob Ammann, split off from the other Mennonites. Ammann advocated an extremely strict discipline within the congregation. Attempts to mediate between his supporters and more liberal groups failed, and Ammann excluded anyone who did not share his views. In Switzerland and the Alsace “Amish” (named

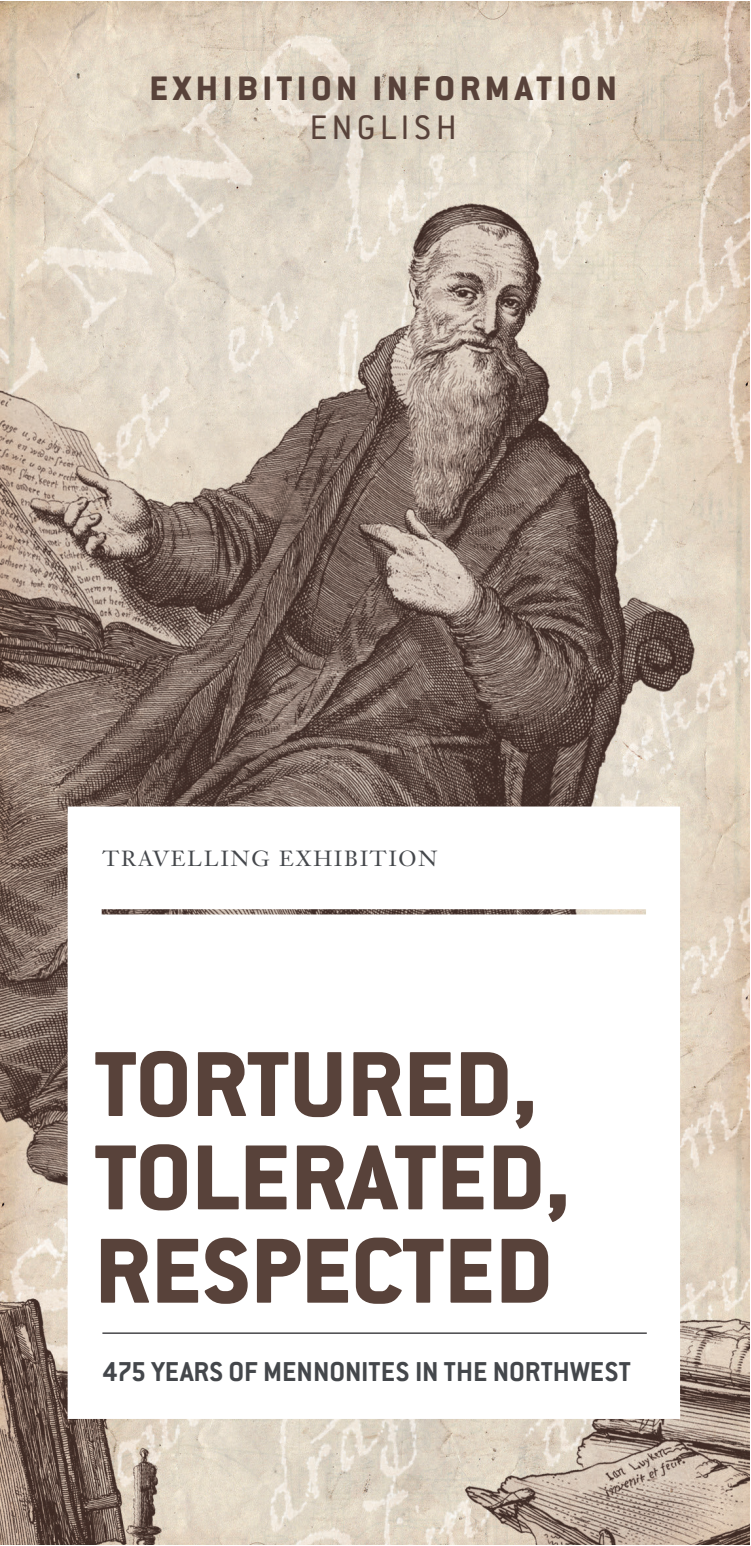
after their elder Ammann) communities came into being. Due to the ongoing persecution, the “Amish” emigrated to Pennsylvania. The Amish communities which had stayed in Europe gradually fell apart and mostly joined the Mennonite congregations. In the German-speaking territories the last Amish community in Ixheim, (now Rhineland-Palatinate) united with the Mennonites in 1937. The way of life of the Amish People is to this day determined by a separation from the non Amish. This applies both in spatial and social sense. They settle mostly in rural areas. The Bible is for the Amish the principle of their faith and guidance for life. The Bible is taken literally, interpretations are rejected. A special feature is their language, which is even today still spoken by many Amish: the “Pennsylvania Dutch” is based on dialects from the South-West of Germany, like the Palatine.

THE MENNONITES AND MILITARY SERVICE

The Mennonites base their absolute rejection of violence on the Sermon on the Mount. In order to be allowed to live according to their belief in nonviolence, the Mennonites had to pay large sums of money for many centuries. Thus everytime the government needed money they were forced to pay again for their exemption from military service. By rejecting military service, they evoked distrust within the community at the beginning of the modern era. He who did not participate in the defense of his community and his city, was branded as a traitor and a rebel. A turning-point were the wars of liberation against Napoleon. Public pressure, as well as the appeal of the Prussian king to his subjects, caused the Mennonites in Prussia to support the fight against Napoleon with huge amounts of money. Many, mostly young Mennonites even got carried away by the enthusiasm and signed up as volunteers of military service. In East-Frisia the Mennonites had to pay 13,000 Reichstaler for their exemption – although the total number of Mennonites living in the East-Frisian communities was hardly 500. In 1867 the exemption from military service for the Mennonites was abolished within the North German Confederation. The Mennonites protested. A year later a compromise was reached by mutual concession: Mennonites were exempted from the duty to carry weapons, however, they had to serve in the medical service or in the baggage train, which allowed for provisioning and transport. Some Mennonite congregations decided to emigrate; the majority however, accepted the compromise. Both in the WW I and

WW II this arrangement remained in force. While in the WW I a third of the people concerned still made use of it, in the WW II it no longer played a role.

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For centuries the church suppressed all attempts of reform and any deviation of the official doctrine. Dissenters were persecuted as heretics, usually in a cruel way. Not until the onset of the reformation did the church permanently lose its monopoly of interpretation. Across Europe, within the shortest time, new trends occurred. Faith was redefined and practiced in a different way; the old, the false was rejected. One of the new denominations was Anabaptism.

Since 1528 there have been reports of individual (Ana)baptists (“Wederdopern”) in East-Frisia. The lay preacher Melchior Hoffmann plays an important role in the Lower German region. In Emden he preaches in the Great Church and baptized approx. 300 adults. Out of this group originated the oldest congregation of Baptists in Northwest Germany. Melchior Hoffmann and his followers, called “Melchiorites”, founded further parishes in other cities, especially in the Netherlands.

THE KINGDOM OF ANABAPTISTS IN MUENSTER

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Mathys announced for Easter 1534 again the return of Christ, which again did not happen. He left the city, which, meanwhile, was besieged by the bishop of Muenster, with a small number of followers and was slain. Under the leadership of Jan van Leiden the Baptists in Muenster were radicalized. Polygamy, the right to marry more than one woman at the same time, was introduced. Jan van Leiden himself married more than a dozen women. Muenster was declared “the heavenly Jerusalem” and Jan van Leiden “the king of the new Temple“. In June 1535 the city was conquered after a siege of more than a year. Hundreds of defenders were slain, the remaining Baptists were executed, Jan van Leiden and two of his commanders as late as 1536.

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