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Divided Loyalties: The Political Radicalization of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites in Interwar Poland (1918-1939)[3]

Podzielona lojalność: radykalizacja polityczna menonitów w Wymyślu Niemieckim w międzywojennej Polsce (1918-1939)

Key words: Mennonites, Wymyśle Niemieckie, Deutsch Wymyschle, ethnic minority, pro-German, nationalist, non-resistance.
Słowa kluczowe: mennonici, Wymyśle Niemieckie, Deutsch Wymyschle, proniemiecka mniejszość etniczna, nacjonalizm, bez przemocy

Abstract

By examining the increasing politicization of Mennonites from Wymyśle Niemieckie, Poland during the 1920s and 1930s, this article challenges the common misperception that Mennonites are apolitical. As a German-speaking ethnic minority in Poland, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites felt increasingly isolated and discriminated against as a result of the challenging economic conditions following the Great Depression and the increasingly authoritarian and nationalist policies of the Polish government in the 1930s. As a result, some of these Mennonites looked to German-nationalist

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and pro-Nazi political parties (including the NSDAP) for support; some Mennonites also joined these parties as members. The Polish government came to view some of these Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites as a threat, conducted police surveillance operations against them, and put them on anti-state watch lists. Some of these Mennonites were also incarcerated at the government detention camp at Bereza Kartuska. Collectively, these developments prompted Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to support the Germany occupation forces after the outbreak of World War II.

Streszczenie

Poprzez analizę upolitycznienia menonitów z Wymyśla Niemieckiego na Mazowszu w latach 20. I 30. XX wieku, w artykule kwestionuje się powszechne, błędne przekonanie, że menonici byli apolityczni. W rezultacie trudnych warunków ekonomicznych po wielkim kryzysie oraz coraz bardziej autorytarnej i nacjonalistycznej polityki rządu polskiego w latach 30. XX wieku, menonici z Wymyśla Niemieckiego, jako niemieckojęzyczna mniejszość etniczna w Polsce czuli się coraz bardziej izolowani i dyskryminowani. Sytuacja, w jakiej się znaleźli zmusiła ich do opowiedzenia się za jedną z dwóch opcji: lojalności wobec polskiego rządu lub poszukiwania wsparcia wśród niemieckich partii politycznych działających w Polsce. Sytuacja polityczna w Polsce w latach 1936-1939 sprawiała, że działalność agenturalna III Rzeszy trafiała na podatny grunt. Część menonitów w poczuciu zagrożenia działaniami rządu sanacyjnego, a związanego z ograniczeniem praw obywatelskich, zwróciła się o wsparcie do niemieckich nacjonalistycznych i pronazistowskich partii politycznych (w tym NSDAP). Niektórzy stali się aktywnymi członkami tych organizacji, co sprawiło, że władze II RP zaczęły postrzegać menonitów z Wymyśla Niemieckiego jako zagrożenie. Aktywni politycznie menonici objęci zostali nadzorem policyjnym i prowadzono wobec nich działania wywiadowcze. W wyniku pracy policji niektórzy menonici z Wymyśla Niemieckiego trafili na listy osób stanowiących zagrożenie dla państwa polskiego. Po napaści Niemiec na Polskę we wrześniu 1939 roku menonici z list osób stanowiących zagrożenie dla państwa polskiego zostali aresztowani, a niektórzy zostali osadzeni w obozie internowania w Berezie Kartuskiej. Zerwanie z apolitycznością charakteryzującą menonitów w początku II RP i wejście w sferę wpływów organizacji proniemieckich sprawiła, że we wrześniu 1939 roku mieszkańcy Wymyśla Niemieckiego udzielili poparcia niemieckim wojskom okupacyjnym.

1. Introduction

For centuries, European Mennonites have often referred to themselves as the "stille im Lande" (the quiet in the land) who were "in the world, but not of the world." They had a reputation as quiet, rural people who, among other things, followed Christ's New Testament teachings and Anabaptist principles, did not participate in worldly activities that compromised their Christian beliefs, and affirmed that governments were ordained by God. Some European Mennonites even claimed that their religious faith demanded that they not participate in political movements. They also held that government authority was limited and should be actively opposed – through civil disobedience – when government policies and actions prevented them from living their lives according to their understanding of the will of God (Friesen 1980, 3, 29-40; Urry 2006, 3-4, 6, 25-28; Yoder Neufeld 2007, 171-81; Klassen 2009, 184-92).

These beliefs and practices were shared by Mennonites from Wymyśle Niemieckie, Poland (which the Mennonite inhabitants called "Deutsch Wymyschle", and which is now known as "Nowy Wymyśl") in the early twentieth century.[4] In their writings, sermons, biographies and interviews, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites claimed that they never participated in any of the political parties or movements operating in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. Some even claimed that they had never heard of fascism, Nazism or Hitler prior to World War II. The question that arises is whether these claims are correct. Were Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites as apolitical as they claimed to be? And if not, did Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites support or participate in political organizations, including pro-Nazi political groups? Relying on archival sources, biographies, interviews and other sources, this paper contends that some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were not only knowledgeable about local, national, and international political movements, but actively

[4] Nowe Wymyśle is in Gmina (municipality) Gąbin, Płock Poviat (district), Masovian voivodeship.

supported and participated in some political organizations, including Nazi-sponsored groups, during the interwar period. This article also examines the reasons why these Mennonites became involved in such organizations, and to what extent the policies and actions of the Polish government incited Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to participate in pro-German and pro-Nazi organizations. Finally, this paper contends that Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites understood the political factors that influenced their daily lives, and they were actively involved in capitalizing on those factors to their own political advantage.[5]

2. Historical Context

The German-speaking population that inhabited the Gostyniski poviat, and in particular the Wymyśle Niemieckie and Gąbin areas during the Second Polish Republic, was not homogenous; it was diverse in terms of its ethnic background, cultural and religious practices, as well as language dialects. As noted by the local historian, Albert Breyer,

[5] Archival resources on Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites during the interwar period can be found at Archiwum Państwowe w Płocku (Płock, Poland), Mennonite Heritage Archives (Winnipeg, MB, Canada); Bethel College Mennonite Library and Archives (North Newton, KS, USA); Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Winnipeg, MB, Canada); Mennonite Archives Centre (Abbotsford, BC, Canada), and Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, (Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany). Archival sources on pro-German and Nazi political organizations in the Wymyśle Niemieckie area can be found at Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (Warsaw, Poland), Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (Warsaw, Poland), and Archiwum Państwowego w Poznaniu (Poznan, Poland). There are a few published sources dealing with the history of Mennonites in Wymyśle Niemieckie, the most comprehensive of which are: Foth 1949; Ratzlaff 1971b; Ratzlaff 1979; Ratzlaff 1971a; Goertz 1973. Works dealing with Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite interactions with their non-Mennonite neighbours include: Marchlewski 1992; Marchlewski 1986; Marchlewski 1988; Kizik 1989; Marchlewski 1989. For non-Mennonite perspectives on Wymyśle Niemieckie, see Fijałkowski 2001; Marchlewski 2012; Marchlewski 1986a; Marchlewski 2014; Marchlewski 2001. For biographical, autobiographical and nostaligic accounts of life in Wymyśle Niemieckie, see Ratzlaff 1982; Ratzlaff 1977; Neufeldt 2003; Prochnau 1978; Rennert n.d.; Ratzlaff n.d.a; Ratzlaff n.d..c; Ratzlaff 1983; Hooge 2004; Ratzlaff 1988; Ratzlaff n.d.b; Ratzlaff 2010; Goertz 2019; Neufeldt 2006.

there were a number of reasons for this diversity, including the varied origins of these ethnic German residents (Breyer 1935). During the first phase of German settlement of the area (1780-95), some of the first ethnic German farmers who settled in the region – under the so-called 'Hollander Law' – were from Żuławy Malborskie and also the Grudziądz and Toruń areas. Another group of ethnic German settlers were from the Palatinate, Saxony and Pomerania; after the Third Partition of Poland, they were offered long-term leases to entice them to settle in the Gostyniński poviat (Breyer 1936). These groups spoke their own German dialects and strove to preserve their unique cultural and religious identities. At the beginning of the 18th century, Lutherans, Herrenhuts (Moravian Brethren), and Mennonites were the predominant religious groups in the Gostynin, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas. During the Second Polish Republic, other religious denominations, including Baptists, Adventists, and Mariavites, also thrived in the region.

The origins of the village of Wymyśle Niemieckie date back to the 1760s when West Prussian Mennonites – primarily from Przechowo (near Świece), Górna Grupa (near Grudziądz) Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship, and Głęboczek and Płotnica Lubuski voivodeship – migrated to the Mazowieckie voivodeship, Mazovian region of Poland to settle on the flood plains of Gąbin. By 1762, some of these Mennonites – many of whom were descendants of Dutch Mennonites and who were often called 'Holęder' or 'Holendrzy' in Polish, and 'Holländer' in German – settled in Olędry Czermińskie (later called "Wymyśle Niemieckie"). Other Mennonites from this group settled further east at "Kazuń Niemiecki" (referred to as "Deutsch Kazun" by Mennonites, and currently known as "Kazuń Nowy") south of the Modlin fortress, in the Kicin area northwest of Warsaw (Ratzlaff 1971b).

Most Mennonites who settled in Wymyśle Niemieckie were farmers, but their descendants diversified their business interests, which included an oil-seed mill, a lumber mill, a flour mill, a dairy, a wagon-building shop, and several merchant operations. Wymyśle Niemieckie farms

were small, but they were large enough to provide an adequate living for their owners. Some even hired local Poles to help with the seeding and harvest. Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite families also settled in surrounding communities, including Wąsosz, Gąbin, Leonów, Nowy Zyck, Łady, Sady, Piaski, Strzemeszna, Wionczemin, Alfonsów, Drwały, Wiączemin, Świnary, Arciechów, Olszyna, Śladów, Piotrkówek, Osiek, Korzykow, Kępa Wyszogrodzka, Biniewo, Dobrzków, Okolusz, and Romunki Troszynsk (Ratzlaff 1971b; Marchlewski 2012, 5-10).

The Mennonite homes in Wymyśle Niemieckie typically followed a longhouse architectural style that originated in pre-Reformation Frisia. Most had a timber-frame construction that included living quarters, a livestock stall, and shed connected together under one thatched roof. Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite cuisine was also distinctive: it was simple fare that combined Dutch and German culinary traditions with the culinary practices of central Poland (Krahn 1959b; Marchlewski 2014).

Following the partitions of Poland in the 1790s, Wymyśle Niemieckie came under Prussian control. After the Napoleonic wars and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Wymyśle Niemieckie was in 'Congress Poland'. By 1867 Wymyśle Niemieckie found itself under Russian control. After World War I, the village was in the newly established Republic of Poland [*Rzeczpospolita Polska*].

3. Congregational Life

Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites followed an interpretation of Christianity that originated with 16th-century Anabaptists, and specifically Mennonite congregations in Frisia (now Friesland and Groningen in the Netherlands and Ostfriesland and Nordfriesland in north-western Germany). This faith espoused peaceful non-resistance, the separation of church and state, and voluntary membership in the church through adult baptism. These Mennonites considered one another brothers and sisters in the Lord, and therefore equal in status; no one in the congregation was superior in religious faith or ability. They espoused a purity of life that

included rejecting the ideals and culture of the non-Mennonite world, avoiding support for and participation in government institutions, and disciplining those members who deviated from Mennonite religious, societal, and cultural standards. The community was structured to provide mutual support to church members and to prevent the infiltration of secular ideologies and practices into their community (Jantzen 2010, 16-20; Urry 2006, 3-4, 6, 25-28, 35-36, 45-46; Neufeldt 2015, 2-3).

There were two Mennonite denominations in Wymyśle Niemieckie in the 1920s and 1930s: the *Mennonitengemeinde* [Mennonite Church or MC] and the *Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde* [Mennonite Brethren Church or MBC]. The MC was the first Mennonite church in the village, constructing its first sanctuary between 1764 and 1770. The MBC, which originated in Ukraine in the 1860s, established roots in Wymyśle Niemieckie in the 1880s. By 1940 the MBC had 176 members, while the MC had approximately 50 members (Foth 1949, 5-8, 72-4; Ratzlaff 1971b, 33, 38, 56, 89; Foth 1956; Neufeldt 2002).

Despite its isolated location, the Wymyśle Niemieckie MBC maintained an extensive network of contacts with other Mennonite congregations in Poland, including churches in Kazuń Niemiecki, Wola Wodzyńska and Kicin near Płońsk (Mazowieckie voivodeship), Nieszawka (near Toruń), the Gdańskarea, the Wielkie Żuławy area (including the Dragacz, Montawy, and Dolna Grupa churches between the Vistula and Nogat Rivers), and the Małe Żuławy Klein-Werder region (between the Nogat River and Lake Drużno). Wymyśle Niemieckie residents were also in regular contact with Mennonites in Kiernica-Lviv (Galicia, Ukraine), and Millerovo (Rostav oblast, Russia). The leadership of the Wymyśle Niemieckie MBC also corresponded at length with leaders of the Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden [Union of German Mennonite Communities or 'UGMC'] to determine if the Wymyśle Niemieckie MBC should join the UGMC (Ratzlaff 1971b, 22-33, 56, 89 64-85, 91-3, 98-109; Vereinigung).

4. The Self-Identification Ethos of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites

In their relations with the Polish state and their non-Mennonite neighbors, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites made it clear that their religious beliefs and practices were central to their self-identification as a religious and ethnic minority. In a letter (dated 16 March 1931) to the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, some Mennonites characterized themselves as follows: "…Mennonites believe that in matters of faith, no formalities set up by man are reliable, and the only authority is the Holy Bible. In matters of faith, Mennonites recognize no dogmas set down by man in matters of spiritual faith, as no order or human power can stem from man" (MWRiOP, syg. 1414, 214). For these reasons, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites often limited their interactions with Polish officials and neighbors, fearing that close interactions (through business, social or marital relationships) with non-Mennonites might threaten or compromise their religious self-identity and practices (Marchlewski 1992).

Religious faith and practice were not the only components of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite identity. Their self-identification was also intimately connected to their familial and communal bonds, their social institutions, and their focus on agriculture and agricultural enterprises (Jantzen 2010, 16-20; Marchlewski 2001; Marchlewski 1992). Mennonite self-identification was also expressed in their everyday usage of Low German [Plautdietsch] -- the language of daily discourse. Their Bibles, by contrast, were in High German, the language that Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites used in their sermons and hymns, religious services, church and family records, and written correspondence (Ratzlaff 1991; Ratzlaff 1996; Pauls 1992; Thiessen 2000, 157-63; Krahn 1959a).

Self-identification for Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites was also closely tied to their understanding of Heimat (a German term referring to the immediate area of one's origin, homeland, and local community). For them, allegiance to and love for Heimat often took precedence over

their perceived civic obligations to Poland and its national institutions. Consequently, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites respected Polish institutions and their civic responsibilities to the Polish state, but they were willing to renounce these institutions and responsibilities if they interfered with or limited Mennonite religious, cultural, educational, and economic practices. This is evidenced by the Mennonite refusal to swear an oath in Polish legal proceedings or to the Polish state (Thiessen 2000, 157-63; Marchlewski 2001a; Marchlewski 2001b).

This is not to say, however, that politics was never a part of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite self-identification. But for most Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites, political participation was largely limited to the local village and congregational level. During the interwar period, Mennonites and non-Mennonites living in Wymyśle Niemieckie selected a mayor who set the rules and conventions of community life, enforced traditional local political practices, and served as a magistrate in dealing with civic disputes and petty criminal matters. In the community's interactions with the non-Mennonite world, the mayor of Wymyśle Niemieckie also served as the community's representative at the district level; he represented and conveyed Mennonite values, sensibilities, and concerns to local councils, governmental bodies, and administrators. For these reasons, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites often elected a mayor who not only had respect and credibility within the community, but who could also best represent Mennonite concerns to the larger outside community (Pauls 1991; Claassen 2010; Goertz 2019; Ratzlaff 2019; Schroeder 2019).

Political considerations also influenced Mennonite religious life in Wymyśle Niemieckie, especially in the selection of church leaders. Together with the village mayor, church leaders in Wymyśle Niemieckie played important roles in the civic administration of the village, helping to resolve disputes within the community, serving also as business advisors, marriage counsellors, and representatives of the community to the outside world. In the MBC, for example, the community elected and

reappointed members of the Ratzlaff family to lead the congregation. The patriarch of this family was Peter Ratzlaff (1854-1933) who served as the first lead Ältester [elder] and pastor of the MBC in Wymyśle Niemieckie. His sons assumed leadership positions in the MBC during the interwar period and until the end of World War II: Leonhard P. Ratzlaff (1880-1946) was Ältester and pastor; Erich P. Ratzlaff (1890-1979) was a deacon; and Gustav P. Ratzlaff (1892-1985) served as youth pastor and choir conductor. This Ratzlaff family dominated the MBC in Wymyśle Niemieckie, and their influence also pervaded political, economic and social affairs both inside and outside the Wymyśle Niemieckie community (Foth 1949, 7-8, 72-74; Robert Foth Papers.; Ratzlaff, David 1979, 20-24).6

5. Non-resistance in Wymyśle Niemieckie (1918-1930)

Non-resistance was also a key component of Mennonite self-identification. For much of their history, Mennonite residents of Wymyśle Niemieckie refused to engage in military service, opting instead to participate in alternative service programs when available. Between 1886 and 1914, for example, at least thirty-nine men from Wymyśle Niemieckie and the surrounding area served in the forestry service [*Foresteidienst*] – an alternative Russian military service program that allowed Mennonites to perform forestry work in lieu of military service. During the first years of World War I, at least eighteen Mennonite men from the village qualified for the forestry service and the medical service [*Sanitätdienst*] – an alternative Russian military service program permitting Mennonites to provide medical service to troops (Foth 1949, 74-7, 168-71; Fijałkowski 2001; Ratzlaff 1971b, 99; Neufeldt 2003, 8; Pauls 1991; Ratzlaff n.d.b).

[6] Other church leaders during the interwar period included Johann Kliewer, Heinrich Wohlgemuth, and Johann Schmidt (Foth 1956; Neufeldt 2003, 2-7; Neufeldt 2006, 1, 223).

After World War I, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were called to provide military service to the Republic of Poland. Established in November 1918, the Republic of Poland was soon embroiled in a war with Soviet Russia. During the Polish-Soviet War (1919-21) the Polish government began to scrutinize the loyalty of former citizens of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary now living in the Republic of Poland, especially now that some of these individuals were serving in the Polish military. To curry this loyalty, the Polish government implemented the *Polish State Citizenship Act* (20 January 1920) which, among other things, granted individuals listed in official registers during the Russian rule of Congress Poland citizenship in the new Polish Republic. As a result of this legislation, most Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites received Polish citizenship in 1920. But as citizens, they were expected to provide military service to the Polish state (SLSGC.WN, 1874).

Soon after the Polish Republic's first military draft in 1919, Mennonite men in Wymyśle Niemieckie began receiving conscription notices to serve in the Polish military. These notices alarmed the Wymyśle Niemieckie community, especially when Mennonite draftees were ordered to attend the Polish military tribunals handling conscription matters. Mennonite draftees now claimed their historic and religious privilege of exemption from military service (Porter 2014; MWRiOP, syg. 1414, 252).

From the outset, the military tribunals had trouble with these Mennonite claims, as the issue of Mennonite exemption from military service had not yet been settled by the Polish government. Later, in a memo to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Polish civilian and military authorities tried to clarify the military service obligations of Mennonites (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 13). The memo acknowledged that when the Russian Empire governed Polish territories prior to the Russian Revolution, Mennonites in these territories had been released from any requirements to swear an oath or provide military serve; it also stated that Mennonites were permitted to serve in alternative service programs (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 28). On the basis of this historic exemption, the

Polish Ministry of War issued an order releasing Mennonites from military service but requiring them to serve as medics during military conflict (MWRiOP, syg. 1414, 221). To obtain this exemption, a Mennonite conscript had to present Polish military officials with a letter from his church elder confirming that the conscript was a Mennonite by birth (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 30). At least twenty-one men from Wymyśle Niemieckie and the surrounding area were provided with alternative service opportunities, mostly undertaking non-combatant medical service to the Polish Republic during the Polish-Soviet war (Foth 1949, 74-7, 168-71; Ratzlaff 1971b, 99; Neufeldt 2003, 8).

But there were Mennonites who were required to take up arms and serve in frontline units during the Polish-Soviet war. This was the experience of Jakub Foth, who was conscripted to serve in Grodno (Hrodna, Belarus) in 1920. He subsequently appealed his draft to the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, arguing that:

> ….as a person of Mennonite persuasion, my religion forbids me from serving in any capacity that requires me to bear arms, while I am permitted to serve as a medic. Considering that, as well as the provisions of Article 8495, please kindly have me re-assigned to serve in the capacity of a medic and transfer me to a role that does not require me to bear arms. (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 36)

Polish officials also received a similar appeal from Adalbert Foth, who was ordered to serve in a Polish military unit at Sochaczew (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 37).

During the 1920s, Polish authorities did not resolve the issue of Mennonite exemption from military service. As a result, some Mennonite draftees had to serve in regular military units. In 1929, for example, Piotr Schroeder was conscripted into the 4th Regiment of Mounted Rifles stationed in Płock. Schroeder appealed his military assignment more than once, but these appeals were to no avail (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 73). In 1929-30, the Polish government made a token effort to implement rules to regulate Mennonite military service, but it did not make a final

decision on the issue of Mennonite exemption from military service (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 28).

6. Political Realities in the 1920s

With the establishment of the Second Republic of Poland in 1918, the new Polish government also began implementing policies to unite the country, develop loyalty within the population, and create a more homogenous Polish national identity. These policies, however, made life increasingly difficulty for ethnic minority groups, especially Jews, Germans, and Ukrainians. Some policies were squarely aimed at ethnic Germans (including Mennonites), with the goal of 'de-Germanizing' the fledgling Polish state. This included diminishing the German population in the country, isolating and alienating German communities, and victimizing the socially vulnerable elements of Polish-German society. These measures were in response to a growing perception that Germans were 'unassimilable' (Blanke 1990, 90; Blanke 2015, 54-89, Eser 2010, 15-17).

Józef Piłsudski's seizure of power in 1926 provided ethnic Germans with a reason to believe that their lives would improve, as Piłsudski had previously referred to the ethnic Germans as 'industrious', 'prosperous', and 'socially a positive element' in Polish society. Piłsudski's regime issued new guidelines for dealing with German concerns, and efforts were made to establish coalitions between like-minded Polish and ethnic German political parties. Despite these efforts for greater Polish-German cooperation, some influential Polish groups demanded an intensification of de-Germanization policies. By the late 1920s, allegations of election fraud involving ethnic German populations, public attacks against German businesses, and political trials against members of minority groups became more frequent, especially in the western provinces (Blanke 2015, 92).

The Polish government also conducted regular surveillance of minority groups at the national and local level during the 1920s. This

included the surveillance of some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites, which the Polish government considered to be an 'uncertain element'. In a memo (dated 22 May 1924) to the Minister of Religious Affairs and Public Education, for instance, the *wojewoda* (highest provincial-level official) of the Pomeranian voivodeship discussed the upcoming visit of a pastor from a Mennonite congregation in Przechowo, near Świecie. Among other things, the *wojewoda* wrote: "Personally, I consider the arrival of any intelligent and educated minister to be unwanted from the perspective of public security" He also declared that "we may allow for the arrival of a minister, provided that he holds Dutch citizenship, which would be confirmed by the Polish embassy in The Hague" The embassy was to confirm that the minister is … not a "German in disguise" (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 70).

Another Mennonite under government surveillance was elder Rudolf Bartel, who invited preacher Emil Händiges (from Elbing and later president of the UGMG between 1932 and 1953) to visit the Wymyśle Niemieckie church in 1928 (Crous 1989). The Polish government's Denomination's Department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education ordered the local *wojewoda* to provide reports on Bartel and Händiges.

The Polish government also expected local officials to provide information on the leadership of the Wymyśle Niemieckie MB congregation. In 1931, shortly after the church elected Leonard Ratzław (Ratzlaff) as elder and Henryk Wolgemuth as his deputy, the office of the local *wojewoda* ordered the district *starosta* (office of the territorial administrator) to prepare an assessment of the two religious leaders. The *starosta* reported that the Mennonite elder and his deputy were "Polish citizens who had not engaged in suspicious criminal or political activities, have never been sentenced in court, and had never participated in elections, or voted for the ruling party" (MWRiOP, syg. 1410, 204). On the basis of this report, the *wojewoda's* office in Warsaw approved Ratzlaff's election on 11 January 1932. What is clear from these surveillance activities is

that it was important for the Polish government to know not only who held leadership positions in Mennonite communities, but whether they were loyal to the Polish state.

7. Wymyśle Niemieckie Interactions with the Surrounding Communities in the Interwar Period.

In the 1920s and 1930s Wymyśle Niemieckie was a self-contained community with its own school, store, dairy, creamery, oil seed mill, lumber mill, and steam mill. The villagers grew much of their own food and sold their surplus agricultural and other products to non-Mennonites in the area, including Poles, Jews, and German-speaking Lutherans, Baptists, Evangelicals and Catholics, as well itinerant Roma and Sinti. Wymyśle Niemieckie residents also purchased textiles, household goods, agricultural tools, and equipment from non-Mennonite merchants, peddlers, artisans and farmers in the surrounding area. They made regular trips to Gąbin and Gostynin to conduct business or seek medical advice. A few Wymyśle Niemieckie residents also travelled regularly to Płock, Łódż and Warsaw, where they purchased goods or obtained professional services not locally available (Ratzlaff n.d.b; Neufeldt 2003, 4-14).

These interactions with non-Mennonites were important for the residents of Wymyśle Niemieckie for a number of reasons. For example, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites interacted daily with their Polish neighbors, trading their agricultural and processed products while also sharing local news and gossip. Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites also hired local Poles as agricultural laborers, and some even developed close friendships with their Polish workers and neighbors. Intermarriage between these two groups, however, was very rare (Ratzlaff 1971b., 112-19; Ratzlaff 1991; Neufeldt 2003, 4-6).

German-speaking Lutherans, Evangelicals, Baptists and Catholics also lived near Wymyśle Niemieckie. According to one estimate, approximately 6% of the population in the Gostynin district, where Wymyśle Niemieckie was located, were ethnic Germans. In Wymyśle Niemieckie

there was at least one Baptist and several Lutheran households. Marriage between Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites and their non-Mennonite German neighbors was not encouraged by Mennonite religious leaders, but neither was it expressly forbidden. In some cases, a 'mixed marriage' served to strengthen social and familial links between Mennonites and their non-Mennonite, ethnic German neighbors. In other cases, however, it resulted in the Mennonite spouse leaving the village to live with his or her non-Mennonite spouse and join their spouse's community (Marchlewski 2001b; Claassen 2010; Pauls 1992).

Wymyśle Niemieckie residents also periodically engaged with itinerant Roma and Sinti families that typically traveled through the village during the spring and summer. Because the Roma and Sinti had a reputation as thieves, most Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were suspicious of them, and so few Mennonites had regular dealings with the Roma or Sinti, nor did they hire them for seasonal work. But the Wymyśle Niemieckie community did permit the Roma and Sinti to set up their caravans and tents on the village's common pasture where they typically lived for a few weeks or months (Ratzlaff 1998; Ratzlaff 1991; Claassen 2010; Schroeder 2019).7

Wymyśle Niemieckie residents also had frequent business interactions with the residents of Gąbin [*Gombin* in Yiddish]. Obtaining its charter in 1437, Gąbin was located in the Łódź voivodeship and the Gostynin district for much of the interwar period. The town included Polish and ethnic German residents, but the Jewish population made up the largest ethnic group (Szczepański 2013,14-15; Krzewińska 2000, 8-13; Borysiak 2000; "Gombin" 1989). In 1921, the total population of Gąbin was 5,777, of which over 2,560 were Jews.

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7 Erna Ratzlaff reported that 'gypsies' came every summer to Wymyśle Niemieckie where they settled on common pasture for two months or so. It was common for gypsy women to come to the windows of Mennonite homes to beg for food while at the same time other gypsies stole chickens and other property. Ratzlaff, Erna 1996.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a large percentage of Gąbin Jews worked as artisans or participated in small-scale commercial enterprises in the town. They operated market stands and shops where they sold groceries, small household items, cloth, tanned hides, and shoes. Some Gąbin Jews owned or were employed in the town factories, tanneries, and shoemaking operations. Others made their living by transporting goods (as carriers and owners of transport carts), providing hospitality services to vacationers to the Gąbin area, or peddling their wares in the surrounding countryside. Jewish artisans, peddlers, and grain dealers often travelled to Wymyśle Niemieckie to sell their wares and services, and to purchase grain, eggs, milk, livestock, and other agricultural products from the Mennonites. Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites also frequented the Gąbin market, where they purchased clothes, shoes, and metal wares from Jewish businesses, and obtained the services of Jewish photographers to memorialize their weddings and other special events (Rothbart 1969, 18-33; Greenbaum 1969, 25-41; Ratzlaff 1991; Ratzlaff 1996).

Because relations between Jews and non-Jews in Gąbin were largely limited to the business context, there were few cultural or social interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish groups in the area. Not surprisingly, intermarriage between Gąbin Jews and non-Jews was very rare; when it did occur, it often created familial divisions, with some Jewish families ostracizing the family member who married outside the faith (Greenbaum 1969, 33-35; Szczepański 2013, 187-93; Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne w Warszawie 2016, 139-41, 163-70, 173).

8. The Great Depression Changes Everything

Following the collapse of the stock market in late 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, widespread and devastating economic, political, and social disruption and hardship soon overwhelmed Poland, leading the country into increasing poverty, social dislocation, and political radicalization.

For Mennonite residents of Wymyśle Niemieckie, the economic repercussions of the Great Depression had a disastrous impact on their livelihoods. Many Mennonite families now found it impossible to make ends meet, and soon experienced poverty. To avoid economic disaster, some Mennonites elected to emigrate, following the example of earlier residents of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites who migrated to Russia and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries in search of a better life. But emigration became increasingly difficult in 1920s and 1930s. Emigrating to Soviet Russia was not an option and moving to the United States became increasingly difficult after the American government reduced the quota of European immigrants into the county.

Another possible emigration option was Canada but relocating to Canada was fraught with obstacles. The Canadian government passed legislation in 1919 that prohibited the immigration of Doukhobors, Hutterites and Mennonites because of their "peculiar customs, habits, modes of living and methods of holding property" (LAC, Order in Council, Record Group 2, I, 923, 1 May 1919, and 1204, 9 June 1919). Although Canada later relaxed these prohibitions, Mennonites were left with the impression that Canada did not want them. Moreover, provincial authorities in the Canadian province of Manitoba, where many Mennonite communities already existed, passed legislation that made public school attendance compulsory (Krahn, Ens 1989; Werner 2013, 452–72; Paetkau 1984, 72-85). Some Mennonites interpreted this law as an unreasonable limitation on their religious faith and practice.

Other Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites looked to South America as a land of opportunity. Some eventually migrated to and settled in Brazil, but others went further west to Paraguay where they established Mennonite communities in the Gran Chaco region. As a result of the depressed economic climate in Wymyśle Niemieckie during the interwar period, at least 73 residents – a significant portion of the village's

population of less than 500 residents – emigrated from Poland between 1926 and 1938 (Foth 1949, 84).[8]

Those who remained in Wymyśle Niemieckie endeavored to do the best they could to eke out a living in very desperate economic conditions, and often tried to see their lives from more hopeful, optimistic perspectives. For example, the village miller Erich P. Ratzlaff and his wife Aganeta regularly sent reports to the Canadian Mennonite periodical, "Die Mennonitische Rundschau", describing daily life in Wymyśle Niemieckie. Focusing mostly on religious life and social affairs, their reports rarely make mention of the community's economic woes – perhaps to avoid arousing too much anxiety and concern among their relatives and friends overseas.[9]

The Great Depression also devastated the lives of Polish and Jewish residents in Gąbin and the surrounding area. Between 1929 and 1932, for example, there was a 36 percent decrease in the number of jobs in Poland. At the same time, many Poles and Jews in the Gąbin area saw their daily wages cut in half. Polish landowners suffered as well; with much of their produce sold at less than cost, and many farm families had to revert to subsistence farming. To identify a scapegoat, compensate for their losses, and attract more customers, some Poles called for the boycott of Jewish businesses in Gąbin (WKPP 1938).

To deal with these challenges, the Gąbin Jewish community organized loan cooperatives, Jewish mutual assistance and welfare organizations ('Bread House' and 'Linat Tzedek'), a Popular Bank cooperative, and

[8] Between 1926 and 1938, 27 adults and 9 children emigrated to Canada, 10 adults and 2 children to Brazil, 17 adults and 7 children to Paraguay, and 1 adult to the USA (Foth 1949, 84).

[9] See MR: 29 January 1930, 8; MR: 26 March 1930, 8; MR: 21 May 1930, 5; MR: 11 June 1930, 8; MR: 16 July 1930, 3; MR: 23 July 1930, 12; MR: 20 August 1930, 3; MR: 24 September 1930, 4; MR: 7 January 1931, 12; MR: 11 February 1931, 8; MR: 6 May 1931, 4; MR: 22 July 1931, 5; MR: 9 December 1931, 5; MR: 23 March 1932, 9; MR: 27 July 1932, 4; MR: 4 January 1933, 5; MR: 30 August 1933, 8; MR: 13 April 1938, 2; MR: 29 June 1938, 4; MR: 2 November 1938, 4; MR: 8 March 1939, 6.

a Bank of Artisans and Small Merchants. Despite these Jewish economic and social welfare efforts, the worsening economic circumstances prompted Gąbin Jews to emigrate to other countries: between 1920 and 1935, for example, more than 45 Jewish families and 120 Jewish individuals left Poland ("Gombin" 1989).

The economic troubles of the early 1930s exacerbated underlying racist divisions and social tension among ethnic groups in the Gąbin area. For instance, after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the Polish government's renunciation of the "Minorities Protection Treaty" in September 1934, racial slurs such as '*Schwabe*' or '*Schwabish*' were now often used against Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites. By the mid-1930s, Polish police increased the number of raids of ethnic German and Mennonite households, often on the pretext that these *Schwabe* were acquiring weapons to be used against their Polish neighbors. Polish officials also regularly censored ethnic German correspondence (Foth 1949, 86-91; Ratzlaff 1991).

9. The Radicalization of Polish Politics in the 1930s

The economic chaos caused by the Great Depression led to the increased radicalization of Polish politics and the deterioration of Polish democratic institutions at the national, territorial, and village levels in the 1930s. Now a plethora of political parties and organizations vied with each other for political supremacy in the country. On the political left there were more than fourteen parties and movements, including the Communist Party of Poland [*Komunistyczna Partia Polski*], the Polish Socialist Party [*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*], the Peasants' Party [*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*], the Labor Party [*Stronnictwo Pracy*], and the National Workers' Party [*Narodowa Partia Robotnicza*].[10] On

[10] Other left-wing political parties included the Communist League of Youth in Poland [*Komunistyczny Związek Młodzieży Polski*], Polish Socialist Party – Revolutionary Faction [*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna – Frakcja Rewolucyjna*], the General Jewish Labour Bund in Poland [*Ogólno-Żydowski Związek Robotniczy 'Bund' w Polsce*], the

the political right, the spectrum of parties and organizations included moderate as well as extreme right-wing and nationalist movements, such as the Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government [*Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem*], the National Party [*Stronnictwo Narodowe*], the People's Party [*Stronnictwo Ludowe*], the Camp of National Unity [*Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego* or CNU], and the National Radical Camp/Camp of Great Poland [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny/Obóz Wielkie Polski*].[11]

Adding to the fragmented political scene were more than fifty German and ethnic German political parties and associations that served as branch offices in Poland or were organized in Poland in the 1920 and 1930s. The largest of these German political groups included the German People's Union in Poland [*Deutscher Volksverband in Polen* or GPU], the Young German Party [*Jungdeutsche Partei in Polen* or YGP], the German Union Party for Western Poland [*Deutsche Vereinigung für Westpolen* or GUPWP], and the German People's Union for Polish Silesia [*Deutscher Volksbund für Polnisch-Schlesien*].[12]

Youth Organization for General Jewish Labour Bund [*Zukunft*], Poale Zion [*Poalej Sjon*], Poale Zion-Left [*Poalej Syjon-Lewica*], Poale Zion- Right [*Poalej Syjon-Prawica*], Poale Zion-Right Youth Organization [*Freiheit*], Zionist Organization in Poland [*Organizacja Syjonistyczna w Polsce*], and the National Workers' Party [*Narodowa Partia Robotnicza*].

[11] Other right-wing political parties included Falanga National Radical Camp [*Ruch Narodowo Radykalny-Falanga*], National Radical Camp ABC [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny ABC*], Young Poland Association [*Związek Młodej Polski* or *Młodym OZN*], and Camp of Great Poland [Obóz Wielkiej Polski].

[12] Other German political parties and associations operating in Poland at this time included *Bund der christlichen Deutschen in Galizien*; *Generalgouvernement Warschau*; *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft der politischen Parteien*; *Vereinigung der deutschen Volkstumsbünde* (or *Deutschtumsbund*); *Deutschtumsbund zur Wahrung der Minderheitenrechte*; *Vereinigung der deutschen Abgeordneten im Sejm und Senat* (*Deutsche Vereinigung*); *Deutsche Sozialdemokratische Partei in Polen*; *Hauptwahlausschuss* (or *Neuner-Ausschuss*); *Deutsche Katholische Volkspartei*; *Deutsche Sozialistische Arbeitspartei Oberschlesien*; *Deutsche Partei*; *Deutschen Katholischen Volkspartei*; *Deutschen Volksbund für Polnisch-Schlesien* (or *Volksbund*); *Deutscher Nationalsozialistischer Verein für Polen*; *Jungdeutsche Partei für Polen* (JDP); *Deutscher Volksrat in Polnisch-Schlesien*; *Bund der christlichen*

A defining moment in the radicalization process of Polish politics was the government's introduction of the "April Constitution" in 1935. Based on the idea that the state represented the common good of all the citizens, the "April Constitution" limited the powers of the *Sejm* [parliament] and *Senate*, while also strengthening the president's authority and powers, including the authority to select the members of the government, issue legal decrees, veto legislation passed by the *Sejm*, and dismiss the *Sejm* before the end of its term.

Not surprisingly, opposition parties condemned the "April Constitution" as undemocratic and a veiled attempt by the president to seize power. They also boycotted the parliamentary and senate elections in September 1935. Large segments of the Polish population agreed with the opposition parties, considered the new constitution undemocratic, and refused to participate in the September elections, thereby resulting in a voter participation rate of less than 50%. For the Polish government – now dominated by the Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government – the low voter turnout proved advantageous. The government and its allies now controlled the *Sejm* and used it to rubber-stamp

Deutschen; *Deutschen Volksrat für Kleinpolen*; *Volksrat der Deutschen in Wolhynien*; *Die Deutsche Volksvertretung in Wolhynien*; *Deutsche Volkspartei*; *Deutschen Vereins*; *Bundes der Deutschen in Polen*; *Deutschen Arbeiterpartei Polens*; *Deutsche Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Polens*; *Deutschen Volksverband in Polen*; *Bürgerliche Deutsche Partei*; *Deutsche Kultur und Wirtschaftsbund*; and *Vereinigung der Deutschen in Polen*; *Volksbund*; *Volksbundjugend*; *Deutschen Volksblock für Polnisch-Schlesien*; *Deutsche Partei*; *Volksblock*; *Deutschen Katholischen Volkspartei*; *Verbandes Deutscher Katholiken in Polen*; *Christliche Volkspartei*; *Deutschen Sozialistischen Arbeitspartei*; *Jägerhofer Kreis*; *Deutsche Vereinigung für Westpolen*; *Deutscher Volksverein in Polen*; *Deutsche Jungblock*; *Deutsche Einheitsblock*; *Blöcke*; *Zoppoter Abkommen*; *Verein deutscher Bauern*; *Westpolnischen Landwirtschaftlichen Gesellschaft*; *Deutsche Sozialdemokratische Partei*; *Deutschen Sozialistischen Arbeiterpartei Polens*; *Deutsche Wahlvereinigung*; *Deutschen Volksverband*; *Rat der Deutschen in Polen*; *Deutschen Arbeitskreis*; *Arbeitskreis*; *Deutschen Volksblocks für Polnisch-Schlesien*; *Bund der Deutschen in Polen*; *Deutsche Nothilfe* and *Vereins Deutscher Bauern* (Bierschenk 1954).

government policies. Poland was no longer a democracy (Kulesza 2017, 37-58; Woźnicki 2014; Zamęcki, 2015).

After the death of Józef Piłsudski in May 1935, there ensued a three-way struggle for power between President Ignacy Mościcki, Edward Rydz-Śmigły (General Inspector of the Armed Forces), and Walery Sławek (who was supported by a group of Polish military colonels) ensued. President Mościcki was able to hold onto power by appointing Rydz-Śmigły as Marshal of Poland (Mirowicz 1991; Gruchała 2006, 65-87).

10. Increasing Attacks against the German Minority

The increasing authoritarianism and xenophobia of the Polish government in the latter half of the 1930s resulted in increasing discrimination and attacks against minority groups, including ethnic Germans and Mennonites. Throughout the 1930s, the Polish government passed laws and regulations that reduced the total number of German schools in the country, restricted some German-held businesses, expropriated tracts of some ethnic-German land, limited the rights of ethnic Germans to inherit land, limited the job security of ethnic German workers (especially in Silesia), and dismantled German cooperatives (Blanke 2015, 95-120, 208-14). While many of these measures targeted ethnic Germans in Poland's western territories, they collectively sent strong signals that ethnic Germans were not equal to their Polish compatriots, and they were to be treated as second-class citizens.

Given the increasingly inhospitable political climate in Poland, the German minority often looked outside the country – particularly to Germany – for support. Not surprisingly, the German government responded positively to these petitions for assistance, in part because it felt partially responsible for the deteriorating conditions that ethnic Germans experienced in Poland after World War I. Moreover, the German government wanted to develop a network of reliable allies in Poland who would not only serve as its eyes and ears in the country,

but also advance German interests in the country. By the late 1920s, Germany was funneling financial aid through semi-official government organizations – such as the Association for Germans Abroad (*Verein für das Deutschtum im Auslande* or VDA), the German Foreign Institute (*Deutsches Auslandsinstitut* or DAI), and the German Foundation (*Deutsche Stiftung* or DS)– to ethnic German communities in Poland (Chu 2006, 108-09; Blanke 2015, 121-62).

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 fueled strong German-nationalist aspirations among ethnic Germans in Poland. Many became enamored of Hitler's idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* – an elite German national and social community whose membership was defined by Aryan race and racial purity that transcended German territories. Ethnic Germans in Poland were also impressed by Hitler's promise to create a more assertive and expansive German Reich that would extend far beyond Germany's post-war boundaries. To cultivate loyalty, the German Foreign Ministry, the Foreign Policy office of the NSDAP (which now oversaw DS , the Ethnic German Council {*Volksdeutscher Rat* or VR}, and the Foreign Organization of the NSDAP {*Auslandsorganisation* or AO/NSDAP}) provided financial and cultural support to ethnic German minorities in Poland. Quasi-private German organizations, including the VDA (later called '*Volksbund*'), DAI, Association of Germans Abroad (*Bund der Auslanddeutschen)*, and the German Protective League for Germandom in Borderlands and Abroad (*Deutscher Schutzbund für das Grenz- und Auslanddeutschtum*), also assisted ethnic Germans in Poland at this time. The negotiation of a Polish-German non-aggression pact in 1934 further buoyed the spirits of the German rump in Poland (Blanke 2015, 183-91, 223-32).

Polish government propaganda now repeatedly identified the country's German minority as an internal threat colluding with an external threat – the Nazi regime. The Polish regime also employed local officials and police, as well as pro-government social organizations, paramilitary

groups and veterans' associations, to attack German social and religious organizations and associations. The government also confiscated and redistributed lands owned by some ethnic Germans. By 1938-39, the daily life of the German minority in Poland had become decidedly more difficult, both at the community and individual level (Cezary 2006, 214).

To bring attention to the deteriorating circumstances of the German minority in Poland, the Nazi press in Germany published articles highlighting the experiences of ethnic Germans in Poland. These articles made references to 'Polish hell', 'Polish savagery', and 'Polish terror' to draw attention to the plight of Germans in Poland. At the same time, German government agents operating in Poland intensified their operations. Collectively, these developments prompted the German community to begin organizing self-defense units to protect their communities from government-sponsored violence. The German government also employed some pro-German groups to participate in fifth column activities in Poland. These Nazi allies later proved useful to the German Wehrmacht and Nazi occupation forces during their invasion of Poland in September 1939 (Mantelski 2009, 36).

At the same time, however, the activities of some ethnic Germans in Poland posed problems for the German government prior to World War II. Bitter public feuds between pro-German organizations in Poland – such as the dispute between the YGP and the GPU – created embarrassment for Nazi authorities in Germany. These Nazi officials responded by decreasing their support for the ethnic German community in Poland, purging several pro-German organizations, and enlarging other organizations such as the GPU (Micewski 1969, 155-67; Blanke 2015, 170-82, 189-90). By 1938-39, the German government demanded that the German rump in Poland "stay put, suffer in silence, and not make any demands on the Polish government or otherwise cause trouble" (Blanke 1990, 96).

11. The Radicalization of Politics in Wymyśle Niemieckie (1935-1939)

The radicalization of Polish national politics and the Polish government's increasing authoritarianism had profound repercussions for the entire country, including the communities of Gostynin, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie. Several Polish political parties had tried to recruit Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites into their ranks in the early 1930s, but enjoyed little success. In 1935 and 1936, however, the political landscape in Gostynin, Gąbin and Wymyśle Niemieckie began to change, as many moderate and extreme political groups now made their presence known. Some relied on agitators to incite discontent and hatred toward their opponents and ethnic minorities. German political parties and associations also relied on agents to organize cells in the Wymyśle Niemieckie area. Most Wymyśle Niemieckie residents did not initially understand or adopt these radical, increasingly xenophobic and authoritarian attitudes, but as these perspectives became more prevalent throughout the countryside, some Mennonites began to embrace them as rural communities began to fracture, typically along ethnic, religious and political lines.

Why the change in the attitude among some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites concerning their participation in political movements? There were a host of reasons. They included the ongoing, relentless deterioration of economic conditions as a result of the Great Depression, repressive Polish government policies that discriminated against ethnic minorities, growing Polish nationalism and authoritarianism, increased physical attacks against ethnic minorities, and the active recruitment efforts of some national political parties, all of which were now having a direct effect on their community (SPwG syg, 1, 28; Olejnik 2006).

Another important factor facilitating the moderation of attitudes of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to political participation had to do with the increased attention that the German minority in Poland was receiving in the Third Reich. In the 1930s a number of publications

appeared in Germany that highlighted the idyllic lifestyles, industrious accomplishments, and cultural concerns of ethnic Germans living in central Poland. These publications helped to create self-awareness among German inhabitants in the Vistula region, reminding them that they were important members of the larger German Reich (Breyer 1935; Breyer 1936).

Well-respected Lutheran and Evangelical pastors who lived near Deutsche Wymyschle also played an important role in promoting pro-German political parties to Mennonites living in the area. These non-Mennonite pastors were successful in convincing some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to not only attend local political rallies, but also sign on as members (DK 1.371/ 32 k.1/).

Finally, the ambiguous policies, statements, and actions of Mennonite religious leaders and congregations in Poland and Germany provided tacit support to Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites who engaged in greater political activism, including support of the NSDAP. Shortly after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, for example, the Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonite Congregations congratulated the Nazi leader for bringing about a revolution that God had granted. The UGMC followed suit with its own public endorsement of Hitler. Shortly thereafter, when the Nazi regime made it clear that it had little patience for religious groups that did not support the Führer's military objectives, the UGMC removed its principle of non-resistance from its constitution. UGMC chairman Emil Händiges went so far as to advise Nazi leaders that German Mennonites were willing to perform military service without any reservations (Händiges 1937, 2; Goossen 2017, 123, 127). The statements and actions of the UGMC and Händiges undoubtedly influenced the leaders of the Wymyśle Niemieckie MBC, who were in ongoing talks with Händiges concerning the incorporation of the Wymyśle Niemieckie MBC as a member of the UGMC (Vereinigung; Gerlach 1992, 242).

The pro-Nazi views of the UGMC and other Mennonite organizations were also outlined in the pages of "Mennonitische Blätter", a German-Mennonite publication that many Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites regularly read in the 1930s. In the September 1935 issue of "Mennonitische Blätter", for instance, the associate editor of the paper, Christian Neff, stated:

> I affirm military service. If we enjoy the rights of the state, then we also have obligations to serve.... But even if we have given up the principle of non-resistance..., we should, wherever possible, stand up for those who refuse to serve with weapons and refuse to go to war because of a need for conscience (MB September 1935, 69).

Several months later in January 1936, UGMC chairman Händiges, who also served as editor of "Mennonitische Blätter", wrote:

> Although the war clouds were piling up around us, the wise leadership of our Chancellor Adolf Hitler provided us with noble peace.... The newly established German Reich has become a protective wall against the onslaught of Bolshevism" (MB January 1936, 1).

In the October 1937 edition of "Mennonitische Blätter", the UGMC again declared its "unconditional loyalty to our leader and Chancellor Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich" and affirmed that "there was not a single conscientious objector among the (MG October 1937, 72-73).

It was not only the "Mennonitische Blätter" that published articles strongly sympathetic towards the Nazi regime. Other Mennonite publications, some of which were regularly read by Mennonites in Wymyśle Niemieckie, also published articles that directly and indirectly supported more extreme political groups (including the Nazis), promoted antisemitic themes, or questioned the relevance of non-resistance as a Mennonite tenet of faith. These publications included "Der Berg" (Germany), "Christliche Gemeide-Kalendar" (Germany), "Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter" (Germany), "Mennonitische Jugendwarte" (Germany), "Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten" (Germany), "Dein Reich Komme" (Germany), "Werden! Wachsen! Wirken!" (Germany), "Der

Bote" (Canada), and "Mennonitische Volkswarte" (Canada) (DB 1935, 85; MG 2 (1937), 63-64; MV April 1936, 252-56).

The Canadian Mennonite newspaper "Die Mennonitische Rundschau" (hereafter 'MR'), was perhaps one of the most widely read publications in Wymyśle Niemieckie. After Hitler's rise to power in Germany, MR reprinted articles and speeches by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Heinrich von Treitschke, Joseph Goebbels, and Hitler.[13] The MR also included articles that focused on provocative themes such as the superiority of the German people, '*Judenfrage*' [the Jewish question], '*Judenproblem*' [the Jewish problem], '*Judenangst*' [Jewish anxiety], and '*Judenhetz*' [Jew baiting].[14] The regular inclusion of such articles in MR

[13] For MR articles that dealt with Hitler, see: MR: 7 June 1933, 6; MR: 10 August 1938, 7; MR: 10 February 1937, 3; MR: 30 September 1936, 12; MR: 7 February 1934, 13; MR: 29 April 1936, 10; MR: 20 January 1937, 12; MR: 30 December 1937, 12; MR: 2 May 1934, 5; MR: 14 June 1933, 4; MR: 20 September 1933, 6; MR: 2 November 1938, 3; MR: 15 February 1933, 11; MR: 13 November 1935, 4; MR: 20 November 1935, 2; MR: 12 July 1933, 5; MR: 7 September 1932, 4; MR: 5 June 1935, 12. For MR articles by Houston Stewart Chamberlain and dealing with Hitler and Judaism, see MR: 28 September 1932, 12. For MR articles by Heinrich von Treitschke concerning the superiority of German culture, see MR: 12 January 1938, 12. For MR articles by Joseph Goebbels, see MR: 22 March 1933, 12; MR: 18 October 1933, 12.

[14] For MR issues that included positive reports on Hitler's speeches, see MR, 10 May 1939, 12; MR: 18 October 1933, 12. For MR articles on Hitler and the Jews, see MR: 3 August 1932, 4; MR: 10 August 1932, 4; MR: 29 June 1932, 6. For MR articles about Jews, including anti-Semitic articles, see MR: 14 March 1934, 2; MR: 14 December 1938, 5; MR: 4 October 1933, 3; MR: 28 March 1934, 3; MR: 29 March 1939, 7; MR: 10 January 1934, 3; MR:5 July 1933, 7; MR: 3 May 1933, 4; MR: 5 June 1935, 4; MR: 28 July 1937, 13; 11 January 1939, 10; 28 July 1937, 13; 7 June 1933, 13; 17 May 1933, 11; 26 April 1933, 2; 1 August 1934, 1; 14 MR: November 1934, 8; MR: 26 July 1933, 2; MR: 25 January 1939, 6; MR: 9 August 1933, 6; MR: 5 June 1935, 5; MR: 5 September 1934, 5; MR: 15 August 1934, 11; MR: 1 November 1933, 6; MR: 8 June 1932, 1; MR: 1 June 1932, 3; MR: 25 October 1932, 4; MR: 10 June 1932, 4; MR: 19 April 1933, 3; MR: 12 April 1933, 11; MR: 20 December 1933, 5; MR: 29 June 1932, 2; MR: 1 June 1932, 3; MR: 26 February 1936, 4; MR: 12 February 1936, 2; MR: 2 February 1938, 12; MR: 31 August 1932, 4. For MR articles on fascism and National Socialism, see MR, 1 February 1939, 5; MR: 1 November 1933, 4; MR: 3 October 1934, 3; MR: 1 May 1935, 12; MR: 3 May 1933, 10; MR: 9 January 1935, 7; MR: 1 May 1935, 8; MR: 13 November

issues certainly left some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites with the impression that a growing number of Mennonites in western Europe and North America were sympathetic to the ideas and anti-Semitic policies of Hitler and the Nazis.

The statements of other important Mennonite leaders in Germany also signaled to Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites that their participation in pro-German political movements was acceptable. In the 1930s, for instance, the influential Mennonite leader, Benjamin H. Unruh (who lived in Germany from the early 1920s until 1959), declared on a number of occasions that Mennonites welcomed and supported Hitler. Unruh also promoted the German and Aryan background of Mennonites, recited anti-Semitic slogans in his writings, and declared that past Mennonite suffering in the USSR was due, in large part, to the repressive policies of Bolshevik Jewish commissars (BHURP; BHUP; Goossen 2017, 124, 126, 139).

The statements and activities of Mennonite leaders and congregations in West Prussia, East Prussia, Kazuń Niemiecki, and Kicin also encouraged Wymyśle Niemieckie residents to participate in pro-German political movements. Already in the late 1920s, some of these leaders and congregations publicly declared their pro-German sympathies, and after 1932 many welcomed Hitler and his regime with effusive praise. By the

1935, 2; MR: 5 December 1934, 4; MR: 8 May 1935, 7; MR: 17 May 1933, 11; MR: 7 June 1933, 13; MR: 7 July 1937, 12; MR: 2 February 1938, 3; MR: 4 May 1938, 13; MR: 8 May 1935, 11; MR: 8 September 1937, 13; MR: 10 March 1937, 12; MR: 3 May 1933, 3; MR: 7 April 1937, 12; MR: 18 October 1933, 12; MR: 13 September 1933, 12; MR: 24 February 1937, 7; MR: 24 March 1937, 6; MR: 14 June 1933, 4; MR: 23 October 1935, 10; MR: 3 October 1934, 9; MR: 20 September 1933, 6; MR: 8 May 1935, 7; MR: 15 February 1933, 11; MR: 3 June 1936, 2; MR: 10 August 1932, 4; MR: 5 December 1934, 6; MR: 13 November 1935, 4; MR: 18 December 1935, 2; MR: 19 April 1933, 3; MR: 12 April 1933, 11; MR: 1 May 1935, 8; MR: 12 July 1935, 5; MR: 7 September 1932, 4; MR: 8 July 1936, 13; MR: 21 October 1936, 12; MR: 28 October 1936, 12; MR: 3 February 1937, 12; MR: 25 September 1935, 11; MR: 29 August 1934, 4; MR: 18 May 1938, 12; MR: 13 September 1933, 12; MR: 15 February 1933, 11; MR: 7 June 1933, 13; MR: 15 February 1933, 11.

late 1930s, a number of Mennonites from the Prussian congregations had become members of and leaders in their local Nazi party organizations; a few Mennonites even served as representatives of the Nazi party in government institutions, including the Prussian Parliament and the Governorship of Danzig-West Prussia (BHURP; BHUP; Goossen 2017, 124). These examples of Mennonite participation in local and national government institutions sent a strong message to Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites that participation in pro-German political organizations was acceptable, perhaps even desirable.

12. Non-resistance in Wymyśle Niemieckie in the 1930s

The relaxation of restrictions concerning Mennonite participation in secular politics coincided, to a greater or lesser extent, with changes in Mennonite attitudes to non-resistance as a fundamental tenet of Mennonite belief and practice. Again, it was the statements and activities of Mennonite leaders and congregations in Western Europe and Poland that motivated Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to re-evaluate how important the past religious tenets of non-resistance and exemption from military service were to their current understanding of faith and religious life.

Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were not the first Mennonites to reconsider non-resistance and exemption from military service as matters of faith. By the late 19th century, for example, the government in the Netherlands began revoking Mennonite exemptions from national military service; in response, some Dutch Mennonite leaders now argued that non-resistance and exemption from military service were no longer key pillars of Mennonite faith (Hershberger, Crous, Burkholder 1989; Goossen 2017, 40). Similar views were adopted by Mennonite leaders and congregations in Germany after World War I; as was noted above, they became the official position of the UGMC after Hitler's rise to power in Germany.

The issue of non-resistance and Mennonite exemption from the military service was also discussed at the Second Mennonite World Conference in Gdańsk, Poland in 1930. Some Mennonite delegates at the conference tried, but ultimately failed to draft a unified Mennonite statement on exemption from military service (MWRiOP, syg 1449, 238). This failure signaled to some Mennonites that the issues of non-resistance and military exemption were not essential to defining what it meant to be a Mennonite. This was reflected in Wymyśle Niemieckie churches, where sermons on non-resistance and military exemption were infrequent in both the MBC and MC in the late 1930s.

To what extent the Polish government perceived a growing Mennonite ambivalence to non-resistance and exemption from military service is unclear. The Polish government never enshrined Mennonite exemption from military service in the Polish constitution. Between 1931and 1933, the Polish Ministry of War tried to address this issue through government regulations, but thereafter Polish officials whittled away at these regulations and eventually nullified the 1919 Ministry of War order granting Mennonite exemption from Polish military service (MWRiOP, syg. 1449, 252; Mennonici, syg. 1449, 93). Consequently, when the Polish government initiated a massive military draft in 1939, Mennonite draftees could no longer claim exemption from Polish military service; they now had to serve in the Polish army like everyone else. To avoid the Polish military draft in 1939, a few Mennonites fled to Germany, but most Mennonite draftees served in the Polish army, at least until their service came to an end with the German occupation of Poland in late September 1939 (Matelski 2009, 48).

13. Political Activities in Gostynin County, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie in the late 1930s

In the last half of the 1930s a diverse group of political parties and organizations flourished in the Gostynin, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas. One of these was the Peasants' Party (hereafter 'PP'),

a popular opponent of the Polish government in the late 1930s. Between 1936 and 1938, the PP became more radical in its agenda, calling on citizens to resist Poland's authoritarian government, restore a parliamentary-democratic system within Poland's government, resume free elections, create an independent judiciary and local government, and protect and respect civil rights. The party declared its willingness to work together with peasants and farmers of all nationalities, including ethnic Germans. In the late 1930s, the PP held numerous meetings and rallies, some of which were in the Gostynin county (UWW, 10 August 1936, 31). In the autumn of 1936, for example, 2,600 people participated in PP meetings and rallies in the Gostynin county. In August 1937, the PP organized a national general strike to put pressure on the government to implement land reforms. PP supporters also boycotted the purchase and sale of agricultural produce (Szczepański 1983, 31; Szczepański 2013, 432). And in 1938, the party organized a large folk festival in Gąbin that attracted more than 3,000 people (Szczepański 2013, 433).

Through its rallies, strikes, and recruitment activities, the PP successfully organized several party cells in the Gostynin county, attracting large numbers of small-scale farmers into its ranks. For a variety of reasons, however, the PP did not convince Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites that they should join the party, largely because of its socialist policies and its radical, and at times violent, political agenda.

Another political party that actively tried to recruit members in the Gostynin, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas was the National Party (hereafter 'NP'), a right-wing, extra-parliamentary nationalist party that sought to establish a Catholic Polish state through Catholicism and nationalism. Anti-Semitic in many of its policies, the NP called for boycotts of local Jewish businesses and organized attacks on Jews and their properties in the Gostynin county in the late 1930s (UWW, 10 July 1936, 17; WKPP, 1936; UWW, 10 December 1937; WKPP, 1938).

Not surprisingly, ethnic minorities and non-Catholics found little that was appealing in the NP party platform. It was largely Polish

landowners with large estates as well as students who often found a home in the NP. By 1938 there was a local party organization in Gąbin, but it had a small membership. There are no records indicating that Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites joined the NP during the interwar period.

The CNU, on the other hand, enjoyed limited success in recruiting Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to support its political platform. The CNU was a pro-military party whose leaders viewed Marshal Rydz-Śmigły as the political heir of Marshal Józef Piłsudski. In the Czermno area, Henryk Helenowski (a parish priest) and Józef Szafraniec (head of a local CNU regional council) worked to establish a CNU party cell in the Czermno commune in 1937. By August 1937, CNU cells were operating in a number of villages in the Gąbin area (Szczepański 2013, 98, 307; UWW, 10 August 1937, 10).

One Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonite who had dealings with the CNU was Erich L. Ratzlaff, a schoolteacher whose connection with the party was initiated through the priest Helenowski.[15] Ratzlaff participated in a number of CNU meetings; on one occasion Ratzlaff acted as an assistant to the secretary of a CNU cell and circulated party membership declaration forms to potential recruits. To what extent other Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites participated in CNU activities is unknown, but it is clear that Ratzlaff was attracted to some of the party policies and found it beneficial to attend party meetings. (Szczepański 2013, 98;).

Why would Ratzlaff, who later supported pro-German fascist organizations and became a member of the NSDAP during World War II,

[15] During World War II, Erich L. Ratzlaff's involvement in the CNU came back to haunt him. In 1940, a Nazi supporter, Gustav Neitsch accused Erich L. Ratzlaff of co-operating with Sanitation authorities and acting to the detriment of the German people. Erich L. Ratzlaff responded to the allegation by saying that he played a small part in organizing the CNU meetings. For the priest Helenowski, his acquaintance with Erich L. Ratzlaff also proved to be lifesaving. When the German army began liquidating Roman Catholic parishes after September 1939, Ratzlaff (Amtskommisar for the Gąbin area) intervened on Helenowski's behalf and prevented his eviction to a concentration camp.

support the CNU at this time? It may be because he was encouraged by pro-German political parties to do so. In the mid-1930s, some pro-German political parties recognized that their objectives would never be heard in the Polish parliament unless they cooperated with more mainline Polish political parties such as CNU. And with assistance and direction from the Ethnic German Liaison Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* or 'VoMi') – a German Nazi party agency with close ties to the SS – these pro-German parties often encouraged their German supporters to vote for the CNU in the hope that CNU representatives would promote German interests in the Polish parliament. These collaboration efforts eventually paid off: after the CNU entered the Polish parliament, the Polish President, Ignacy Mościcki, appointed two representatives of the German minority to the senate (Neufeldt 2020, 187-88; Chu 2012, 239).

For most Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites, political parties that focused exclusively on and represented the interests of the German-speaking minority held the most attraction. One of these parties was the YGP. Funded by Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the YGP was an extreme right-wing party that praised Nazi policies and propaganda, demanded that ethnic German children in Poland be instructed in the German language, and encouraged YGP members to participate in espionage and sabotage activities against the Polish state. Another goal of the YGP was to assist ethnic Germans in Poland in emigrating to Germany. To attract and recruit new members, the YGP organized events celebrating 'Camaraderie Evening' [*Kameradschaftsabend*], 'The Fallen Heroes, 1914-1917' [*Die gefallenen Helden, 1914-1917*], and 'The Good Comrades in Loyalty – the Combatants' [*Die guten Kameraden in Treue - die Kämpfer*] (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85; Kochanowski 2003, 12-16, Eser 2010, 552-66). Because of the significant overlap in YGP and Nazi policies, many YGP members in Poland eventually joined the NSDAP in the late 1930s (Szczepański 2013, 436).

In the Łódź and Gostynin areas, some important YGP leaders with Mennonite affiliations included Herbert Wiebe (district leader), Emil

Abram, and Jakob Wutzke. In the Lidzbark territory, Luise Wiebe served as a party deputy, and another Wiebe was a district leader for the Płośnicy area (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85). In the Gąbin area, YGP activities were centered in a party cell established in Wiączemin Polski (in the Czermno commune) in early 1937 (WKPP 1937). There were also YGP meetings in Wiączemin Niemiecki (Deutsch Wionczemin), Sady and Swiniary between 1937 and 1939, and Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were known to attend these meetings (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85).

The popularity of the YGP in the Wymyśle Niemieckie area was undeniable. In 1937, for example, party meetings in the Wiączemin Polski often had between 200 and 300 participants. At one meeting in May 1937, YGP organizers hosted the popular speaker, Waldemar Nykel (Nickel?), from Warsaw who often attracted large crowds; in his speeches, Nykel encouraged attendees to uphold the German spirit, while at the same time remaining loyal to the Polish state.

Another important YGP rally occurred in Wiączemin in early August 1938 and included Senator Rudolf Wiesner from Bielsko and Cardinal Zimmermann from Warsaw. In one of his speeches at the rally, Wiesner listed three demands for the German minority in Poland:

1. the restoration of the right for ethnic Germans to educate their children in German;
2. access to appropriate employment;
3. the immediate discontinuation of the Polish government's parcellation of German-owned estates.

The issue of access to appropriate employment was very important to the inhabitants of Gostynin County because some ethnic Germans in the area travelled annually to Germany to obtain seasonal work; obtaining this employment had become more difficult in 1938 when Polish authorities significantly reduced the number of travel and work permits. Wiesner's demands resonated with many ethnic Germans in

the Gostynin area and resulted in an increase in YGP membership (WKPP, 1938, 21).

Competing with the YGP for the support of local ethnic Germans in Gostynin, Gąbin, and Wymyśle Niemieckie was the GPU, an extreme, right-wing political party that received financial and political support from the German Foreign Ministry. Claiming to provide a "*völkish* alternative to the local German socialist party" and desiring to arouse "sleeping Germandom" in Poland the GPU had more than 25,000 members by 1937 (Chu 2012, 125-26). In Masovian Poland, GPU operations were centered in Łódź, and included Mennonite GPU leaders Henrich Foth, Wilhelm Peters, and Eric Braun. By 1938-39, there were GPU cells and regular party meetings in the following communities in the Gostynin area: Gostynin, Wiączemin Polski, Wiączemin Niemiecki, Mokre Niemiecki, Lwówek, Sady, Borki, Świniary Miałkówek, Nowa Wies, Tuliska, Karolewo, Grabie Niemiecki, Troszyn Niemiecki, Teodorów, Karolew, Nałęcin, Stefanów, Andrzejów, Szczawin Kol., Duninow, and Rezlerka (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85).

In the Gostynin and Gąbin areas, local police reports from the late 1930s confirm that GPU meetings were preoccupied with extolling the Nazi leadership in Germany, its policies, and propaganda; here, members regularly used the '*Heil Hitler*' salute and often gave speeches glorifying Hitler. The GPU also relied on its publications, "Volksfreund" and "Deutsche Weg", to recruit new members and circulate its political agenda. By 1939, the GPU had organized Hitler Youth organizations in various communities in the Gostynin county (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85).

The GPU also organized party cells in the Czermno commune and GPU cells eventually operated in the following communities: Wiączemin Niemiecki under the leadership of Michał Rode (chair), Henryk Rynas (deputy chair), Michał Brokop (secretary), and Daniel Rynas (treasurer); Sady with Adolf Dotzlaf (chair), Wilhelm Dotzlaf (deputy chair),

Samuel Krauze (secretary), and Michał Cykle (treasurer); Michałowice with Wilhelm Witzke (chair, Mennonite), Kornelius Bartel (deputy chair, Mennonite), Edward Foth (secretary, Mennonite), and Edward Foth (treasurer, Mennonite); and Arciechów with Wilhelm Schmidt (chair, Mennonite) (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85; Ratzlaff 1983, 36). A GPU cell was also established in Wymyśle Niemieckie in the late 1930s led by Edward Luter (chair), Henryk Wolgemuth (deputy chair, Mennonite), Bernard Ratzlaff (secretary, Mennonite), and Andrzej Kliwer (treasurer, Mennonite). Other Wymyśle Niemieckie GPU members included Erhard Ratzlaff, Wilhelm Schroeder, Benjamin Foth, Albert Foth and Gottfried Retzlaff, all of whom were Mennonite (WKPP 1938; DVAF syg, 1, 28; Ratzlaff 1983, 36; Ratzlaff 1996).[16]

The growing popularity of the GPU in the Gostynin and Gąbin areas prompted the party to implement a number of strategies to recruit more members. In late 1937 and early 1938, for instance, the GPU organized a flurry of rallies in Lwówek, Troszyn, Dobrzyków, Gąbin, Świniary and Wiączemin; in Gąbin, more than 2,500 participated in forty or so GPU meetings. One of the most popular speakers at these meetings was Foth, an activist of the GPU Board in Łódź. In late 1937, Foth alleged that ethnic Germans in Poland were losing their national consciousness, and he encouraged them to raise their children in the German spirit and to stop speaking Polish (KWPP 1937).

Another popular GPU speaker was Otto Ruppert, a teacher from Łódź who visited GPU cells in the Gąbin-Gostynin area – including Wymyśle Niemieckie, Troszyn, Borki, Wiączemin, and Sady – in early 1938 (WKPP, 1938 February, 221). In many of his speeches, Ruppert strongly "praised the Nazi system in Germany" and urged the local Germans to maintain their German language; he also encouraged ethnic Germans

[16] The GPU also had a cell in Kazuń Niemiecki and which included the following Mennonite leaders: Bernhard Nickel (chairman), Edmund Zielke (vice chairman), Zigmund Schröder (treasurer), Leonhard Bartel (secretary), and Erich Nickel (board member). See UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85.

to limit their use of the Polish language in daily conversations and to greet each other by raising an outstretched right arm and shouting 'Heil'. Ruppert also claimed that a GPU church would soon be established in Poland. Finally, Ruppert promised that if any ethnic German teacher lost his or her job in a Polish school for "spreading German propaganda," the GPU would guarantee that teacher a new teaching position in Germany (WKPP, 1938 February, 221).

While both GPU and YGP rallies aroused spirited enthusiasm and attracted new members within the ethnic German and Mennonite communities in the Gostynin and Gąbin areas, not all rally attendees were in support of these groups; some even challenged their legitimacy and relevance. At one GPU meeting, for example, some attendees claimed that GPU meetings only incited conflict, and that many of those living along the Vistula River were not Germans supportive of the Nazi regime, but peaceful farmers loyal to Poland who did not support Hitler. These attendees also urged anyone who was unhappy with Poland to move to Germany (UWW).

To prevent pro-German political parties, and in particular the GPU and YGP, from working at cross-purposes, the VoMi tried to coordinate the activities of these parties in Poland; the VoMi also attempted to unify the GPU and YGP into one party. This proved challenging, as the leaders of the GPU and YGP did not see eye-to-eye on many issues, including the national question. From the surveillance reports prepared by the administrator of the Gostynin Poviat, it is clear that there were ongoing tensions and disputes between the GPU and YGP at this time (Chu 2012, 231-43).

The GPU and YGP were not the only German political parties vying for the attention of Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites. Germany's NSDAP was also active in the Gostynin, Gąbin and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas in the late 1930s. With regular assistance from the German Embassy in Warsaw and the German General Consulate in Torun, the NSDAP actively recruited supporters in the Gostynin district and developed

a number of active cells under the leadership of local NSDAP leaders Mattfeld, Robert Milke, Jakob Nickel, Edward Arndt, and Bartel. By 1938-39, NSDAP cells held regular meetings in Gostynin, Lwówek, Nowa Wieś, Mokre Niemiecki and the Wiączemin Niemiecki. To win the support of ethnic German families, the NSDAP also organized community events, including an annual harvest festival [Erntedankfest] (UWW 1918-39, syg. 18974-85). Because Germans living outside the German Reich could not join the NSDAP at this time, their involvement in the NSDAP was limited to subordinate roles, and they could not seek senior leadership positions.

According to some Wymyśle Niemieckie villagers, the first NSDAP activities in Wymyśle Niemieckie occurred in 1938-39 when Ferdinand Rennert, the village mayor, began hosting NSDAP propaganda meetings (Pauls 1992; Ratzlaff 1996; Ratzlaff 1991). Some of the more ardent Mennonite supporters of the NSDAP included Wilhelm Schroeder, Erich L. Ratzlaff, Gustav Kliewer, Erhard Ratzlaff, and Daniel Prochnau (Pauls 1992; Ratzlaff 1996; Pauls 1991; Claassen 2010). The extent to which Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites participated in such meetings is unclear, but the fact that the village mayor publicly upheld NSDAP events demonstrated some degree of village support for the NSDAP cause.

14. Polish Government Efforts to Stifle Anti-state Elements.

The rapid expansion of political movements and associations in Poland in the 1930s aroused serious concerns for Polish government officials, especially as they related to the growth of anti-government and pro-German, pro-Nazi political movements. Already in 1931, Polish authorities implemented various measures to limit the activities of anti-state factions (Jastrzębski 2004, 96). One measure was the increasing surveillance of minority populations; in the 1930s the Polish government regularly dispatched agents and police to ethnic German and Mennonite communities to monitor the political, social, religious, and economic

developments in these areas; the activities and publications of local leaders; and the meetings and rallies of political groups. In the Gostynin, Gąbin and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas, for example, Polish government agents and police kept a close eye on German colonists, German social and cultural organizations, ethnic German religious organizations and sects, as well as their missionaries and mutual aid groups, NSDAP cells and their leaders, and pro-German nationalist groups (for example, '*Turnverein 1879*'). Between 1937 and 1939, local police submitted detailed monthly reports to the Ministry of the Interior, the Social-Political Department, the Justice Ministry, the Office of the Prosecutor, and other government offices (UWW 1918-1939, syg. 18974-85; Greenbaum 1969, 33-35; Szczepański, 2013, 187-263).

The Polish government also implemented other measures to denigrate and harass minority groups. These included the enactment of arbitrary laws and regulations that authorized local authorities to arrest and incarcerate anyone deemed to be a security threat to Poland. In 1937, for example, Polish authorities compiled a list of 18,965 names of individuals considered to be national security threats and anti-state elements. Eventually, 1,163 of these security threats were arrested, 8,334 were interned, 362 were subjected to police supervision, and 215 were expelled from the country (Jastrzębski 2004, 96).

The laws to arrest and detain anti-state elements and security threats were expanded in early 1939. They now included, for example, instructions from the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces on how to handle anti-state elements, and they gave more arbitrary powers to voivodeship administrators, county police, local police, and local officials to arrest and detain anti-state elements (Jastrzębski 2004, 97). By the time of the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, more than 39,575 individuals were in detention, approximately 6,000 'anti-state elements'. Most anti-state elements were incarcerated in special camps across Poland. One of the most notorious of these camps was Bereza

Kartuska (Polesie voivodeship), a detention center that held individuals considered to be the most serious threats to the Polish state (Śleszyński 2003; Siekanowicz 1991; Polit 2003).

On the government's list of 'anti-state elements' were the names of several Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites, including Erich L. Ratzlaff (Wymyśle Niemieckie), David Schroeder (Secymin), Wilhelm Schroeder (Wymyśle Niemieckie), Erhard Ratzlaff (Wymyśle Niemieckie), Richard Bartel (Kazuń Niemicki), Arnold Bartel (Kazuń Niemicki), and Julius Foth (Drwały). A number of these individuals were arrested in early September 1939 and subsequently incarcerated at Bereza Kartuska (Schroeder 2019; Ratzlaff n.d.c; Schroeder Thiessen and Showalter 2000, 43).

Life was miserable for those detained at Bereza Kartuska. Through humiliation, harassment, isolation, poor-quality food, slave-labor and torture, camp officials at Bereza Kartuska wore down the psychological and physical strength of their prisoners. Only those detainees who pledged to collaborate with authorities, cease in their participation in political activities, or leave the country and never return could be considered for release from detention (Olstowski 2010).

In late December 1938, shortly after Hitler made territorial claims against Poland (including the Polish corridor), Polish officials began shutting down ethnic German parties and organizations, including NSDAP cells in the Gostynin, Gąbin and Wymyśle Niemieckie areas. More specifically, the Polish government demanded that all pro-German political parties and organizations cease operations in the spring of 1939. The last official GPUmeeting in the Gostynin-Gąbin area, for example, occurred in Świniary on 2 March 1939 (WKPP 1939, 215). Later that spring, Polish authorities ordered all GPU party cells in the Gostynin district to discontinue their activities until further notice (UWW, 29 August 1939). These NSDAP, GPU and YGP cells went underground where their members made plans for a future German invasion of Polish territories.

By early 1939, an anti-German sentiment pervaded much of Poland. The German press in Poland reported on the rising number of anti-German demonstrations and attacks. At the same time, the VoMi tried to control German minority groups and political parties in Poland as much as possible – all in an effort to prevent them from triggering an international incident that would force Hitler to intervene in Poland. Hitler did not publicly acknowledge these anti-German incidents in Poland so as not to reveal his plan invade Poland in early September 1939 (Chu 2012, 244-45). At the same time, Mennonites in Wymyśle Niemieckie became increasingly concerned by this growing anti-German violence; by August 1939, some hoped that the Germany Wehrmacht would invade Poland to bring an end to Polish depredations in Wymyśle Niemieckie (Foth 1949; Goertz 2019; Neufeldt 2002; Neufeldt 2003; Pauls 1991; Pauls 1992; Ratzlaff 1996; Ratzlaff 2019; Schroeder 2019; Neufeldt, 2020, 177-78).

15. Some Final Observations

There were several political, economic, social, cultural and religious reasons why some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites participated in pro-German and pro-Nazi political organizations in the 1930s. Prior to the establishment of the Republic of Poland in November 1918, the centuries-long relationship between Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites and local Poles was characterized by a common fear of Russian authorities, but also ambivalence toward each other. During this period, Mennonites remained an insular community with few close interpersonal connections with their Polish neighbors; the few connections that did exist were largely limited to economic and business relations. It was a relationship of convenience in which Mennonites and local Poles tolerated each other, but one lacking in mutual respect.

The interwar period that followed the establishment of the Republic of Poland in late 1918 proved to be a very difficult time for the Mennonites of Wymyśle Niemieckie. The Polish government's anti-minority policies introduced in the early 1920s deliberately isolated and alienated

ethnic Germans, Mennonites and other ethnic minority groups from the national life of Poland. The economic relationship of convenience between Mennonites and Poles continued, but their tolerance and mutual respect for each other wore even thinner.

The Great Depression only intensified the economic challenges that Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites faced, reducing them to subsistence living and preventing them from advancing economically. The economic devastation of the Great Depression amplified the pre-existing fissures between Wymyśle Niemieckie and their Polish neighbors. At the same time, the Great Depression also made it virtually impossible for Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to emigrate and start new lives in countries that were more tolerant of ethnic minorities.

In the 1930s, growing nationalism in both Poland and German created a political tinderbox. In Poland the actions of the government were like a match that sparked accelerated resentment among ethnic minorities. The increasingly authoritarian and xenophobic attitudes and actions of the Polish government in the late 1930s prompted Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites to become more politically active and throw their support behind political groups that better represented their ethnic identity, rights, beliefs, and interests. These political groups included moderate as well as more extreme pro-German and pro-Nazi political organizations, both of which stoked the Mennonite sense of alienation in their native Poland and promised Mennonites membership in the Volksgemeinschaft of the Third Reich. In this respect, the policies and actions of the Polish government contributed to the 'Germanization' and 'Nazification' of ethnic German and Mennonite populations.

The aggressive programs, rallies and cultural events of the pro-German, pro-Nazi parties and organizations in Poland were successful in identifying, cultivating, and exploiting the sense of alienation and discrimination that ethnic Germans and Mennonites were experiencing in Poland in the late 1930s. After being subjected to this kind of attention

and pressure for years it is not surprising that some Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites eventually signed on as members.

By the late 1930s the Polish government was no longer willing to accommodate ethnic Germans and Mennonites as it had in the past, but neither did it provide ethnic Germans and Mennonites with a clear path to assimilation and full citizenship. For their part, Mennonites were certainly not looking for assimilation; they were seeking accommodation of their religious, cultural, educational and linguistic practices. They did not want to relinquish their unique identity.

Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites who participated in German political parties and movements made a conscious decision to do so, but some also did so in the belief that their religious leaders either supported their decisions, or at least did not actively oppose them. Given the strong support that many European Mennonite churches, Mennonites leaders, and Mennonite publications had demonstrated in favor of Hitler, the Nazi party, and their policies, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites were left with the impression that their fellow European Mennonites supported pro-German and pro-Nazi political parties. This helped to soothe any misgivings or qualms of conscience that Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites may have had after some had thrown their support behind local political groups. And for some of these Mennonites, non-resistance was an expendable tenet of their faith which they were willing to exchange for the support of the Nazi state.

Given these developments, it is also not surprising that few Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites demonstrated much enthusiasm for the Polish government or the Polish nation in the 1930s, especially after the government began drafting ethnic Germans and Mennonites into the Polish army in the summer of 1939. After the war erupted on 1 September 1939 – unleashing weeks of violence against Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites as Poles began arresting and incarcerating Wymyśle Niemieckie men, attacking their homes, and stealing their property – many Wymyśle

Niemieckie Mennonites were convinced that their Polish government and their Polish neighbors were actively persecuting them because of their ethnic German identity, despite the fact that they had been born in Poland and were citizens of the Polish state (Neufeldt 2020). Given this Polish maltreatment before and after the outbreak of World War II, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites welcomed the invading forces of German Wehrmacht. In the early days of the war, Wymyśle Niemieckie Mennonites did not know what horrors the Nazi regime would perpetrate in Poland in the months and years to come: they only saw the Nazi invasion forces as their liberators, saving them from years of Polish discrimination and persecution, and promising them a brighter future.

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SPwG: Starostwo Powiatowe w Gostyninie 1918 – 1939, Archiwum Państwowe w Płocku, Płock, Polska.

WKPP: Wojewódzka Komenda Policji Państwowej, Archiwum Miasta Warszawy. Warszawa, Polska.

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