

# THE VISTULA MENNONITE HOUSE IN POLAND, THE SOVIET UNION, AND AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

Driving through the flat prairie in the southern part of the Canadian province of Manitoba one encounters a number of elongated farm villages which seem to belong more to Northern Europe than to Western Canada. Not only are these settlements characterized by the clustering of farmsteads, unlike the typical dispersed settlement pattern of the prairies but the houses in these villages are unusual as well. Man, beast and crops are all sheltered under a single roof, in sharp contrast to North American custom. These structures call to mind the farmsteads of the Netherlands and Northern Germany (See Plate 1). Indeed, the inhabitants of these houses, a religious group known as Mennonites, speak among themselves a dialect known as *Plautdietsch* or Low German, a tongue which has a close affinity with the Dutch language. Their names also suggest a Dutch origin (e.g., Janzen, Thiessen, Dyck). The forefathers of these people, however, migrated to Canada not from the Low Countries but from the Russian Ukraine.

Upon closer examination, the traditional houses of the Manitoba Mennonites reveal numerous characteristics that call to mind Eastern European custom rather than Dutch. The house appears to be a hybrid Dutch (Lower Saxon) and Slavic form. The story of this distinct traditional building form is in fact the story of the Mennonite people and their wanderings over a period of about 400 years. The American historian, George Burcaw speaks of traditional house forms as a reflection of the people that inhabit them, specifically a revelation of the changes that the inhabitants have experienced, and, "a living record of something that happened in the past." (Burcaw, p. 111) The study of the Mennonite house is particularly interesting for it presents an unusual opportunity to examine the effects on house form of numerous migrations over a relatively short period of time.

As suggested by their language and family names, the Mennonites did originate in the Low Countries. Severe religious persecution there resulted in the emigration of large numbers of Mennonites to the Vistula Delta region of Northern Poland, beginning in the first half of the sixteenth century. It was here, in the Vistula lowlands, near the city of Gdansk that a distinct 'Mennonite' house developed, a building form that the group would carry along to the Russian Ukraine in the late eighteenth century, to Canada and the U.S. a century later, and to Mexico and South America in this century.

## ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISTULA MENNONITE HOUSE

Evidence of the early material culture of rural Mennonites in the Vistula Delta is virtually non-existent. One presumes that Dutch Mennonites introduced some type or types of pure Lower Saxon farmhouse to Northern Poland but there are no sixteenth or seventeenth century examples of these extant. The earliest remaining Vistula Mennonite houses date, in fact, from the early eighteenth century. These represent a fully developed form, a hybrid which incorporated numerous non-Dutch features.

The fully developed Mennonite house was characterized by a long, single-storey building form with dwelling, stable and barn (threshing floor) lined up end to end. In outward appearance this house did not appear different than what one might find in the Netherlands. In the interior appointment, however, there were numerous features that were of obvious Slavic origin. The dwelling, for example, usually of a transverse, two or three bay arrangement, showed similarities with traditional farmhouses throughout Poland (Grisebach) and regions east. A prominent feature of Vistula Mennonite houses was the black kitchen, sometimes referred to as a Polish kitchen. Located in the centre of the house, the black kitchen was a large, square, chimney-room in which the cooking was

done with an open, tapered ceiling above which served as a smoking chamber. One or more large brick or clay heating ovens were grouped around the kitchen. The prototype of the black kitchen is presumed to be the primitive Slavic tent, originating from the nomadic period, which was square with a pyramidal roof. (Dobrowolska in Burcaw, p. 29)

The actual construction of the dwelling, which was of log, also reflected more the building tradition of Eastern Europe than Western Europe where timber-frame (*Fachwerk*) was the norm. Log construction was considerably more efficient than half-timbered construction in a low-lying area such as the Vistula Delta. For one thing, logs withstood the effects of flooding much better than the clay or masonry infill on frame houses. In the event of severe flooding the log structures were sometimes completely dismantled and easily re-erected on higher ground (Fenner).

If the dwelling was largely Slavic in form, there were numerous features on Vistula Mennonite houses which hearkened back to Dutch tradition. For example, exterior doors were often of the split type (*Agterdeur*) which are very common in the Netherlands. The built-in cupboards, found in virtually all Mennonite houses also suggest Dutch custom. Yet another feature, distinctive of Mennonite farmhouses, was the *Beischlag*. This was a large, raised platform in front of the main entrance. This platform is very characteristic of townhouses in Gdansk, a city noted for the Dutch character of its old central core.

The stabling on Vistula Mennonite houses most clearly retained Lower Saxon custom. This part of the structure was generally laid out with three longitudinal aisles in typical Dutch fashion. Livestock were housed in the two outer aisles, with heads facing into the interior aisle. The stall was entered from the dwelling via a narrow passageway from the central bay of the dwelling, in the case of three-bay dwellings, and directly from the large hall (*Flur*) in the case of two-bay dwellings. The stable was usually of timber frame, not unlike in the Low Countries.

The barn on Vistula Mennonite houses, while under the same roof as the dwelling and stable was completely unlike Lower Saxon farmhouses in its layout. The threshing floor, for example was of a transverse type, running perpendicular to the long axis of the entire structure, whereas in traditional Dutch farmhouses the threshing floor was usually situated in the centre longitudinal aisle of the stable. In some regions of the Netherlands and Frisia, where farmers practised exclusively dairy farming there was no threshing floor. The barn too was of timber-frame construction with a cladding of vertical boards.

It seems likely that the Mennonites introduced some sort of purer Saxon farmhouse type to the Vistula Delta when they arrived. A likely prototype was the simple *woonstalhuis*, a three-aisled structure with stabling at one end and dwelling at the other (See Plate 2). As Mennonites were initially settled in areas situated below sea level there would have been no need of a threshing floor, as the newly-drained marshes, while providing excellent grasses for dairying, were too wet to support the growing of grain. Indeed, the Mennonites of the Vistula River Delta were known principally for their dairying abilities (Driedger, p. 18).

Concrete evidence for the dwelling/stable house (without barn) as a prototype does exist. Examples of such a house form can still be found in the Vistula Delta (Zulawy) although these are of a relatively recent vintage (nineteenth century). They suggest the persistence of an earlier traditional form. Grisebach, in his work on the Polish farmhouse describes just such a type, without threshing floor (See Plate 3), as being an early hybrid form of the Kujavian folk (a Slavic group inhabiting Northern Poland since historical times) and the Dutch settlers of the area. (Grisebach, pp. 90-91)

The changing farm economy of the area, which was related to the whole process of land drainage, was most likely responsible for the adoption by the Mennonites of a barn with threshing floor. As drainage work progressed the water table dropped which would have allowed the growing of other crops such as grains. These would have required a threshing floor and greater crop storage. The barn form that the Mennonites adopted was a type that reflected both their Polish (Slavic) and Germanic (Middle German) neighbours (See Plate 4).

The adoption by the Mennonites of a Slavic dwelling type was most likely an adaptation to new building methods, namely log. The transverse, two and three-bay layout of the Slavic house represented the most logical way to subdivide a rectangular log structure. The incorporation of the black kitchen and attached brick ovens made sense due to the greater efficiency of this heating system over the Saxon open-hearth.

As mentioned, it was in the stable of the Vistula Mennonite house that Netherlandish custom was most literally adhered to. This is hardly surprising when one considers the fact that the Mennonites continued to practise a highly-developed dairy culture as they had known in their Dutch homeland. In fact, this is likely the reason why the Mennonites continued to house man and beast under a single roof, namely the farmer's need to maintain a watchful eye on his cattle. One has only to look at the two regions in Western Europe where dairy culture is most highly developed to see that this is true. In both the mountainous regions of Switzerland and Southern Germany and the low-lying coastal regions of N.W. Europe the combined house/barn finds its fullest expression. So if it is true that, "a kind of house goes with a kind of people" (Burcaw) then the Vistula Mennonite house reflects a people for whom dairy cattle were economically central.

#### LATER DISPERSIONS OF THE VISTULA MENNONITE HOUSE

Limited space does not allow a lengthy discussion of the later dispersions of the Mennonites from Northern Poland. Suffice it to say that in each of the major migrations the tradition of the combined house/barn was carried along. While each of these moves resulted in accommodations to local building materials the over-all form of the house remained little altered. In the Southern Ukraine, for example, dwellings came to be built largely of clay or masonry, although stables and barns continued to be of timber frame (Plate 5). In the Canadian prairies Mennonite farmhouses were of log or of timber construction with a clay or log infill and as such represent building traditions from both Poland and the Ukraine. Those Mennonites who migrated to Mexico from Western Canada in the 1920s often built their entire houses of adobe, reflecting building traditions there.

One thing that is worth mentioning briefly is the settlement pattern of the Mennonites in Russia. Unlike in Northern Poland, where each Mennonite farmstead was located on its own farm, resulting in a very spread-out village pattern, in the Ukraine conditions favoured a compact village with farmers having their land in several parcels, situated away from the farmstead. The result was a linear settlement of very regular appearance with all farmhouses spaced evenly apart at intervals of about 60 metres. This village pattern was to be repeated by the Mennonite migrations.

The present century has seen a gradual evolution of the Mennonite house in Canada from a traditional form, virtually identical to the Vistula house (See Plates 6), to a total abandonment of the earlier type. These changes reflected both changes in the farm economy (from mixed

farming to large-scale grain farming) and the overwhelming influence of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. Interestingly, a similar process could be observed among those Mennonites who had remained in Northern Poland. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an increasing adoption of Middle German building forms in which farm functions were separated from one another. This change in the house form of the Vistula Mennonites paralleled the increasing identification of the Mennonites in Northern Poland with the dominant German culture of the area.

Until recently Mennonite historiography has largely ignored the Mennonite house as a cultural artifact of the group. While a detailed discussion of this is not possible here a couple of significant points are worth mentioning. For one thing, the changes and development of the Mennonite house form give a clearer picture of the economic life of the group. Perhaps, more importantly, it reveals some significant information about the acculturation process of the Mennonites. For example, until recently, Mennonite historians have tended to view the Polish Mennonite experience almost exclusively within a German or Prussian context (Friesen, p. 94). The Mennonite house would suggest, however, that the rural Vistula Mennonites of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lived in an environment that was as much, if not more Slavic than German and that they were influenced to a considerable degree by their Slavic (Polish) neighbours.

#### THE NEED FOR MEASURES TO PRESERVE THE MENNONITE HOUSE

Unfortunately, examples of this unique house type are rapidly dwindling in Canada, to the point where there are perhaps no more than 50 well-preserved examples of the Mennonite house left in the entire province of Manitoba. Attempts to preserve the Mennonite house are limited to a single structure in an open-air museum in Steinbach, Manitoba. No attempts have been made to maintain the form in its original rural farm village setting.

The situation is not much better in other countries where the Mennonite house can be found. In Northern Poland good examples are relatively few due, more than anything to neglect. With the complete displacement of Mennonites from the region after the Second World War, others, who had no connection with the traditions of this house type, came to inhabit them. This led to alterations and a lack of proper maintenance (A. Baranowski, lecturer in architecture at the Gdansk Polytechnical Institute). The Polish government has attempted to give protection to some of the remaining Vistula Mennonite houses but the universal problem of lack of funding for heritage structures has made preservation difficult. The situation in the Soviet Union is very similar with all Mennonites being displaced from their Southern Ukrainian villages during World War II. In Brazil, where Mennonites from Russia settled in the 1930s, almost all traditional Mennonite house/barns have been demolished to make way for modern homes.

It is the hope of the author that this paper will spark greater interest in the preservation of a unique house type. The Mennonite house provides an excellent opportunity for the interpretation of the migration of traditional house forms across diverse cultural and geographical boundaries. Hopefully, within this context those countries in which examples of the Mennonite house remain, can seek to co-operate in this endeavor.

# PLATES

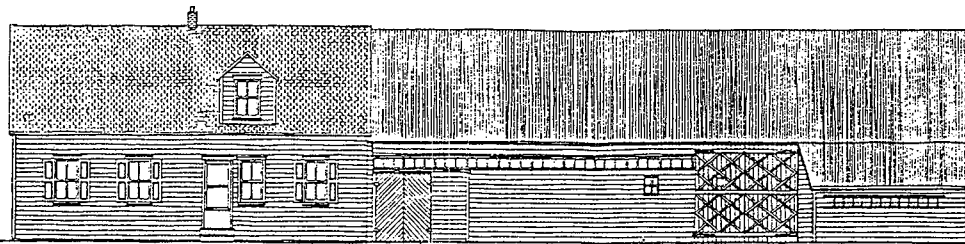


Plate 1 - Mennonite House,  
Reinland, Manitoba

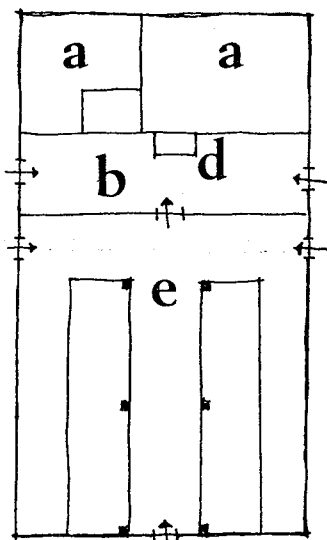


Plate 2 - Farmhouse, South Holland

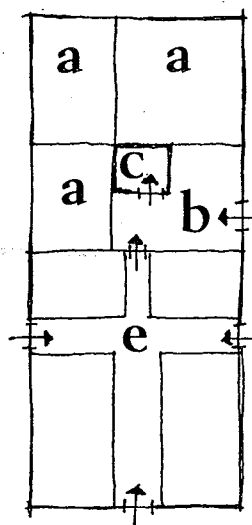


Plate 3 - Kujavian Farmhouse

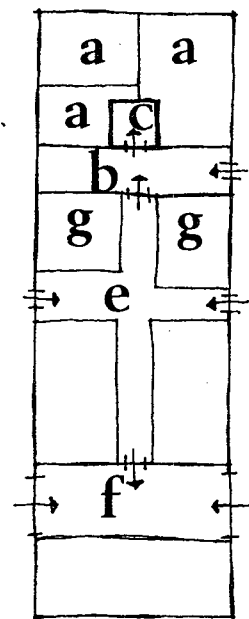


Plate 4 - Vistula Delta  
Mennonite House

## LEGEND

- |                   |                     |                  |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| a - room          | d - open hearth     | g - storage room |
| b - hall          | e - stable          |                  |
| c - black kitchen | i - threshing floor |                  |

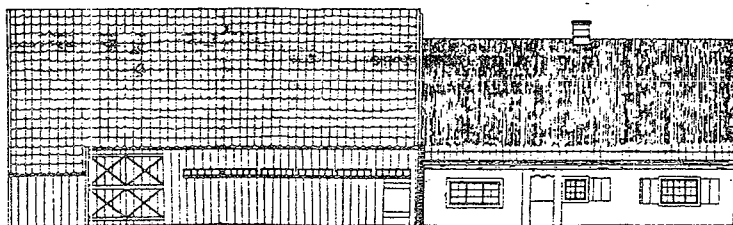


Plate 5 - Mennonite House, Chortitza, Ukraine

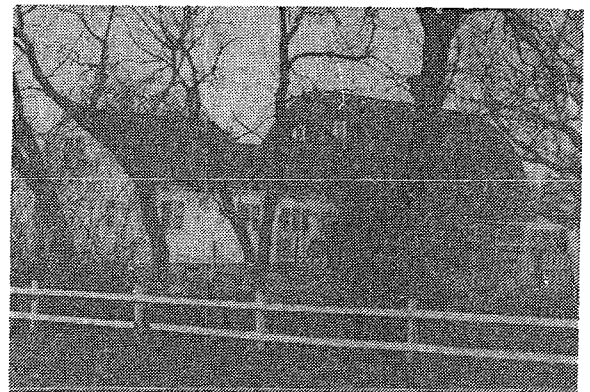


Plate 6 - Transitional Mennonite House,  
Reinland, Manitoba

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THE VISTULA MENNONITE HOUSE IN POLAND, THE SOVIET UNION  
AND AMERICA

by Jerry A. Dick

English Summary

The Mennonite house of Western Canada offers a special opportunity to examine the effects of migration on traditional building form. The Mennonites, a religious group originating in Western Europe, experienced a series of major migrations during their 450 year history. Beginning in the first half of the sixteenth century Dutch Mennonites began an eastward movement that was to take them to the Vistula River Delta of Northern Poland and later, in the eighteenth century to the Southern Ukraine. The last two centuries saw a further dispersion of the group to various parts of the New World, including Canada, the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Paraguay. With each of these migrations the Mennonites carried along the tradition of their house, which was a form of the connected house/barn, in which the farmer shared one roof with his livestock and crops. While the overall form of this building type suggests a strong kinship to traditional farmhouses in the Low Countries (Lower Saxon) the Mennonite house shows definite Eastern European (Slavic) influence.

The Mennonite house developed as a distinct form in the Vistula River Delta, near the city of Gdansk during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The presumed prototype was the three-aisled woonstalhuis, common in much of the Netherlands. As the drainage process proceeded in the Vistula Delta and the economy changed from one based exclusively on dairying to mixed farming the Mennonites adapted their houses, often borrowing features from their Slavic and German neighbours. Other concessions were made to new building materials such as log. That the Mennonites continued to house man and beast together suggests that 'cattle culture' remained central in their economic life.

The Vistula Mennonite house was carried to the Russian Ukraine and later to North America with little change in form. Adaptations were made to new construction methods, such as various forms of masonry in Southern Russia and adobe in Mexico.

After undergoing a gradual evolution in Western Canada the traditional Mennonite form was abandoned, reflecting major changes in the farm economy and the overwhelming influence of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. A similar process could be observed among those Mennonites who remained in Northern Poland until the Second World War. There, an increasing assimilation into the dominant German (Prussian) culture resulted in the adoption of German building traditions.

Few examples of the traditional Mennonite house remain in the various regions where it was once commonly found. The author hopes that international cooperation can lead to the preservation and interpretation of this unique Lower Saxon-Slavic building form.



## La Maison Vistule Mennonite à la Pologne, à la Russie et le Nouveau Monde

La maison mennonite de l'ouest du Canada offre une occasion spéciale d'examiner les effets de la migration sur la forme de construction traditionnelle. Les mennonites, une secte religieuse originaire de l'Europe de l'ouest, ont connu une série de migrations majeures au cours des 450 ans de leur histoire. A partir de la première moitié du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle les mennonites hollandais entreprirent un mouvement migratoire vers l'est qui devait les mener jusqu'au nord de la Pologne dans le delta de la Vistule et plus tard, au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle, jusqu'au sud de l'Ukraine. Au cours des deux derniers siècles, la diaspora s'étendit à travers le Nouveau Monde y compris le Canada, les Etats-Unis, le Mexique, le Brésil et le Paraguay. Partout où ils allaient s'établir, les mennonites emportaient toujours avec eux la tradition de leur habitation. Celle-ci était une forme du bâtiment maison/grange contigues, dans laquelle le fermier partageait un seul toit avec son bétail et ses récoltes. Quoique la forme générale de ce genre de construction suggère un lien direct avec la maison de ferme traditionnelle de la Basse-Saxe, l'habitation mennonite porte définitivement la marque d'une influence slave.

La maison mennonite prit sa forme distincte dans le delta de la Vistule, près de la ville de Gdansk pendant les 16<sup>e</sup> et 17<sup>e</sup> siècles. On présume que son prototype était la woonstalhuis à trois passages qui se trouve presque partout à travers les Pays-Bas. A mesure que s'accomplissait le drainage du delta de la Vistule et la transformation d'une économie basée sur une agriculture exclusivement laitière en une économie basée sur une agriculture mixte, les mennonites adaptèrent leurs habitations, empruntant des détails à leurs voisins slaves et allemands. On adopta de nouveaux matériaux de construction tel que le billot. Le fait que les mennonites continuèrent à vivre sous le même toit que leur bétail indique que l'élevage du bétail demeura au coeur de leur vie économique. L'habitation mennonite de la Vistule passa en Ukraine russe et plus tard en Amérique du Nord sans trop changer de forme. On adapta de nouvelles méthodes de construction, telles que diverses formes de massonnerie au sud de la Russie et l'adobe au Mexique.

Dans l'ouest canadien, après une évolution graduelle, la forme mennonite traditionnelle fut abandonnée, ce qui reflète des changements majeurs dans l'économie agricole et l'influence prépondérante de la culture anglo-canadienne dominante. On observe une évolution semblable chez les mennonites qui restèrent en Pologne septentrionale jusqu'à la deuxième guerre mondiale. A cet endroit, l'assimilation graduelle à la culture allemande (prusse) dominante eut comme résultat l'adoption des traditions de construction allemandes.

Il se trouve très peu d'exemplaires de l'habitation mennonite traditionnelle dans les diverses régions où jadis on en trouvait partout. L'auteur espère qu'une coopération internationale mènera à la préservation et à l'interprétation de cette unique forme architecturale de style saxon-slave.