

Traditional Mennonite Village Names

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Those who are familiar with the history of Low-German Mennonites are well aware of the transplantation of village names from West Prussia to South Russia, and from there to other parts of Russia, North America and South America. As fewer Mennonite genealogists have a good knowledge of German, it becomes more important that the origins and meanings of these village names be explained. With this in mind, I have prepared a guide to the meanings of some of the numerous prefixes, roots and suffixes used to generate these village names. In addition, I provide information on the history of some of the original villages of a given name.

First it should be pointed out that, unlike the cases in Russia and early North America, there were very few exclusively Mennonite villages in West Prussia. Land leases and census lists from the early 1600s until the early 1800s show that most of these so-called “Mennonite” villages in West Prussia contained about 10 – 80 % Mennonites. There were approximately 400 villages which fit into this category. However, we can approximately think of these as “Mennonite” villages when compared to the thousands of locations containing no Mennonites, found in West Prussia during this time period.

It should be noted that nearly all of the Mennonite villages in West Prussia were not named by Mennonites, and most existed before Mennonites appeared on the scene. Many of those villages were founded during the time of the Teutonic Knights, nearly abandoned, and then resuscitated by the arrival of a new wave of Dutch and German settlers in the 1500s.

A typical traditional village name was usually combination of one, or more, of a prefix, a root word and a suffix. In most cases there is no root word, in some only a root word (e.g. Tiege). There is even an example of a combination of as many as 4 words (e. g. Neuteicherhinterfeld).

Two misconceptions should be addressed here: 1) nearly all of the Mennonite villages in West Prussia were not named by Mennonites, and most existed before Mennonites appeared on the scene. Many of those villages were founded during the time of the Teutonic Knights, nearly abandoned, and then resuscitated by the arrival of a new wave of Dutch and German settlers in the 1500s, 2) there is no documented evidence whatsoever that any “Mennonite” villages were named after locations in the Netherlands.

Do not read too much into spelling variations of village names. For centuries there were no fixed, “official” spellings of these location names.

Some prefixes used in Mennonite village names:

Alt-	Old.
Baum-	Tree.
Blumen-	Bloom, flowers.
Brod-	Old Slavic term meaning ford.
Eich-	Oak.
Felsen-	Rock.
Fuersten-	Prince, princely.
Gross-	Greater, Big, Large.
Halb-	Main, not “half”.
Hinter-	Behind.
Hoch-	High (higher ground)
Insel-	Island.
Klein-	Small.
Krebs-	Crab.
Krons-	Crown (usually referring to the monarchy)
Lichte(n)-	“open range”, could also mean light.
Linden-	Linden tree.
Muenster-	Cathedral. Related to the English location suffix “-minster”.
Neu-	New.
Nieder-	Lower or Nether. More northern. There was usually an accompanying “Ober –“. Related to the English location prefix “Nether-”.
Ober-	Upper. More southern. There was usually an accompanying “Nieder-“ or “Unter-“. Related to the English location prefix “Upper-”.
Orlof-	From Orlow; Slavic term meaning eagle.
Plat(en)-	Flat. Related to the English location prefix “Plats-”.
Reichs-	Royal.
Rosen-	Roses, but also means horses.
Schön(e)-	Beautiful.
Stobben-	Stumps in Frisian. Has nothing to do with the Mennonite surname Stobbe.
Unter-	Lower.
Vor-	Before (in front of).

Some suffixes used in Mennonite village names:

-au	Variations of this ending were used throughout Europe. May be related to the German word Aue – meadow or pasture land. Note that -kau and -au may have different meanings.
-bach	Stream. Related to the English location suffix “-back or -bek”.
-berg	Hill or mountain.

-bruch	Brook.
-bude(n)	A Bude is a hut or other small building. Related to the English word “Booth”.
-burg	Town. Originally meant fort or keep. Related to the English location suffix “-borough” or “burgh”.
-busch	Bush.
-dorf	Village. Related to the English location suffix “-thorpe”.
-feld	Field.
-gart(en)	Garden. Also note that “-gard” is also of Slavic origin, but unknown meaning.
-hagen	Hedged field or wood. Related to the Dutch word “Haag” (meaning “hedge”).
-heide	A heather.
-hof	Farmyard or estate. Related to the English location suffix “-hope”.
-horst	Raised terrain covered with shrubs. Related to the English location suffix “-hurst”.
-huben	A Hube (<i>pl.</i> Huben) was a unit of land area, much like the acre.
-kamp	A camp or other small settlement. Note that there were many Kampen in West Prussia and most of them were located along rivers. It seems likely that these Kampen were originally temporary settlements used by those who grazed livestock along the river in summer and fall.
-kopp	Old Baltic Prussian term referring to hill.
-kranz	Ring or circle.
-itz	Of Slavic origin. Meaning unknown.
-ort	Place.
-lach	Lake
-land	Land.
-sack	“end of a valley or area of cultivation” [ref]
-see	Lake.
-stadt	Town or city. Related to the English location suffix “-sted” or “-stead”.
-stein	Stone.
-teich	Dyke
-thal	Valley. Related to the English location suffix “-dale”.
-wald(e)	Wooded area or forest.
-weide	Pasture.
-werder	Is an island formed in a river delta. Related to the English location suffix “-werth”.
-werk	A built up area, a settlement.
-wick	A very general term meaning place, village or hamlet (from Latin Vicus – village or estate). Related to the English location suffixes “-wick” and “-wich”.
-wiese	Meadow.

***Some* Root words used in Mennonite village names:**

Tiege	The river Tiege.
Montau	The river Montau

Thiene The river Thiene

The most variations on a single root word:

Tiege
Tiegerfeld
Tiegenhagen
Tiegenhof
Tiegenort
Tiegerweide

Some Comments on West Prussian village Names:

Vorwerk	An outlying built up area, often outside the city or town walls (estate or village). Used to described as a suburb. In Russia Vorwerk was used to describe an Estate (often also called a Gut).
Einlage	In Prussia frequently referred to as “die Einlage”.
Trift	(<i>pl.</i> Triften). Cattle track or path. The villages of Ellerwald and Kerbswalde (both in the Elbing region) were each divided into Triften by cattle tracks.
Bärwalde	Likely named after Peter Bare, who was awarded this village in 1342 – nothing to do with bears (Bären).
Altmünsterberg	Named for Heinrich von Monsterberg.
Wernersdorf	Named after Werner von Orselen, Grand Master of the Teutonic knights.
Rosenort	Originally “Rosseort”, “place of horses”.
Tansee	From the Slavic Czanse, menaing “holy place”.
Leske	From the Slavic Leska, meaning hazel nut bush.

The Teutonic knights were created as part of a crusade against the heathen Old Prussians, a Baltic tribe related to the Latvians and Lithuanians. A few village names survived into Mennonite times – Zeyer, Stuba, Ladekopp and Jungfer.

One of the most confusing aspects of these traditional Mennonite village names is the use of the same name in the same country, state or province. This can be clearly seen in the lists of [Prussian](#) and [Russian](#) Mennonite villages. In Canada these was also duplication of village names between the original Mennonite East and West Reserves.

Origins of Early (pre-1848) Village Names in Russia.

The earliest and most reliable source is the so-called “[Gemeindeberichte](#)” compiled in 1848. These reports provide information on the naming of nearly all Mennonite villages founded in South Russia before 1848.

Chortitza Colony (Colony named after the Khortytsia, a small tributary of the Dnieper river):

Blumengart	Named by the Chortitza colony Oberschulz.
Burwalde	Named after Bärwalde in West Prussia, which was the location of the church for the Bärwalde congregation (later known as the Fuerstenwerder congregation).
Chortitza	Named after the Khortytsia, a small tributary of the Dnieper river. See Delbert Plett’s article in Preservings (June 1995 page 22) for a discussion of the early origins of the name Khortitza.
Einlage	Named after the village of Einlage in West Prussia.
Insel Chortitza	The island of Chortitza.
Kronsgarten	When Mennonites first settled here in the mid-1790s there were remnants of old buildings (used temporarily as shelter) and an orchard which had belonged to the crown.
Kronsthal	Named as a combination of Kronsweide and Rosenthal from where most of the first settlers originated.
Kronsweide	A generic name given by the first settlers.
Neuenburg	The Gemeindebericht indicates that this name originated in Prussia. This does not make much sense since Mennonites never lived in Neuenburg, West Prussia and the group that settled the Chortitza colony did not live anywhere near Neuenburg.
Neuendorf	Named after the village of Neuendorf in West Prussia. Note that there were several locations in West Prussia with this generic name.
Neuhorst	Named as a combination of Neuendorf and Schoenhorst from where most of the first settlers originated.

Nieder Chortitza	Upper Chortitza.
Osterwick	Named after Osterwick near Danzig in Prussia, not because it was a “Mennonite” village (it never was), but due to the fact that it was the village of origin of the highly respected Karl Jaeger.
Rosengart	Named by the Chortitza colony Oberschulz.
Rosenthal	Named by Johann Bartsch, due to the profusion of roses in this valley.
Schoeneberg	Named by the Chortitza colony Oberschulz.
Schoenhorst	Named after the village of Schoenhorst in West Prussia.
Schoenwiese	Named after the village of Schoenwiese in West Prussia.

For more information on these villages (such as founding dates) see the GAMEO article on the Chortitza settlement. In particular, see the *correct* list of Chortitza villages, which has been relegated by the editors to the bottom of the [article](#).

Molotschna (Colony named after the Molochna river):

Alexanderthal	Named after the Czar Alexander I.
Alexanderwohl	Named in memory of the early settlers meeting with the Czar on their way to Russia. See Bob Buller’s analysis of this legend here .
Altona	Named after Altenau in Prussia. During the first 50 years in Russia the name was spelled as Altenau, Altonau and Altona. There is no connection between this village, or Altenau in West Prussia, and the Mennonite location Altona, near Hamburg Germany. Altenau, West Prussia, was founded by the Teutonic knights in 1399, long before the founding (1535) of Altona, Germany (near Hamburg) and long before Mennonites even in Altona, Germany (1601)!
Blumenort	Named, by settler Johann Warkentin, after Rosenort (Gross Werder) in West Prussia.
Blumestein	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Blumestein in West Prussia.
Elisabeththal	Named after the Empress Elisabeth.

Fischau	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Fischau in West Prussia. Often spelled Füschau in Russia.
Franzthal	Named after Franzthal in Brandenburg. This Mennonite village was part of the Old Flemish Brenckenhofswalde congregation.
Friedensdorf	Named so because an early settle, Georg Schulz, was from Friedberg near Frankfurt. Since there was no mountain or hill nearby, the name Friedesdorf was given.
Fuerstenau	Named after Fuerstenau in West Prussia.
Fuerstenwerder	Named after Fuerstenwerder in West Prussia.
Gnadenfeld	Named so because they were allowed to immigrate and settle there through the Czars grace (“Gnade”).
Gnadenheim	Named by Johann Cornies.
Grossweide	Named after Grossweide in West Prussia.
Halbstadt	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Blumestein in West Prussia.
Konteniusfeld	Named after Governer Kontenius.
Liebenau	Named by Oberschulz Gerhard Ens because it had a lovely meadow “liebliche Aue”.
Lindenau	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Lindenau in West Prussia.
Lichtenau	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Gross- and Klein Lichtenau in West Prussia.
Ladekopp	Named after Ladekopp in West Prussia. This was the location of the Ladekopp Mennonite church.
Lichtfeld	Named after Lichtfeld in West Prussia.
Margenau	Named after Margenau in West Prussia. However, Margenau is just an alternative name for Marienau in West Prussia!

Marienthal	Named, at the suggestion of Aeltester Franz Goerz, after the mother of the Czar.
Muensterberg	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens after a location in Prussia. Mennonites lived in Neu- and Alt Muensterberg in West Prussia.
Muntau	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after a location in West Prussia. Mennonites lived in Montau, Klein Montau and Montauerweide in Prussia. The spelling changed to Muntau in Russia.
Neukirch	The early settlers wanted to call this village Schoeneberg, after the location in West Prussia. However, since that name already was being used in the Chortitza colony, which was not allowed by the Oberschulz Toews. Named after Neukirch in West Prussia as suggested by the first village Schulz Johann Enns.
Ohrloff	Named after Orloff in West Prussia. The “h” appears to have been added in Russia.
Pastwa	Named after Pastwa in West Prussia.
Petershagen	Named, at the behest of Abraham Janzen, after Petershagen in West Prussia.
Pordenau	Named after Pordenau in West Prussia.
Prangenu	Named by the first Schulz, Gerhard Wall after Prangenu in West Prussia, the home village of Oberschulz Johann Klassen.
Rosenort	Named, by settler Johann Warkentin, after Rosenort (Gross Werder) in West Prussia. This was the location of the Rosenort Mennonite church.
Rueckenau	Named after Rueckenau in West Prussia. The spelling Rickenau is occasionally used.
Rudnerweide	Named after Rudnerweide in West Prussia, from where many of the early settlers originated.
Schoenau	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Schoenau (Gross Werder) in West Prussia.
Schoensee	Named after Schoensee (Gross Werder) in West Prussia as suggested by Jacob Regier.

Schardau	Named after the villages Gross and Klein Schardau in West Prussia.
Sparrau	Named after Sparrau in West Prussia.
Tiege	Named by Oberschulz Klaas Wiens, after Tiege in West Prussia.
Tiegenhagen	Named after Tiegenhagen in West Prussia. This was the location of the Tiegenhagen Mennonite church.
Tiegerweide	Named Tiegerweide because it was originally pastureland (Weide) rented by Mennonites from the village of Tiege.
Wernersdorf	Named after Wernersdorf in West Prussia.

For more information on these villages (such as founding dates) see the GAMEO [article](#) on the Molotschna settlement.

It is important for researchers to realize that many names associated with “Mennonite” villages were used for villages never inhabited by Mennonites. This is true for both Prussia and Russia. For example, in Russia there were two Molotschnas in South Russia. One was the Molotschna Mennonite settlement and the other was the Molotschna German colonist settlement. Village names such as Rosenthal, Gnadenfeld and many others are also found in the German colonies in Russia.