

# PRZECHOWKA AND ALEXANDERWOHL--

Beginnings of Alexanderwohl, Tabor,  
Huffnungsau and Other Churches

BY J. A. DUERKSEN

ABOUT sixty-five miles south of Danzig and three miles west of Schwetz (Swiecie) on the west side of the Vistula (Weichsel or Wista) River nestles the small village of Przechowka (pronounced Pshi-hof'-ka), Poland. This village has also been called Wintersdorf. For two hundred years or more this village was the center of a flourishing Mennonite community, extending from the early seventeenth century until 1821 when the major portion of the membership of this church emigrated to South Russia where they established the village of Alexanderwohl in the Molotschna colony.

## Przechowka Old Flemish Church

The Przechowka Mennonite Church was a member of the Old Flemish Mennonite Society of Groningen, The Netherlands. The Old Flemish *Mennisten*, were the most conservative and strict in discipline in Holland during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The newer fashions in clothing were taboo; hair-do's with lace ribbons, braids and other adornments were not tolerated; silver tableware was out of question; and shining polished rings or buckles on horses' saddles and harnesses were frowned upon. It is said that the men

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in Russia.



wore long drab, collarless coats with hooks and eyes instead of buttons. The church ban and avoidance were frequently resorted to as measures of church discipline. No outside marriages were tolerated, not even with members of other Mennonite groups such as the Frisians. Any transgression in this respect was punished by the ban and avoidance.

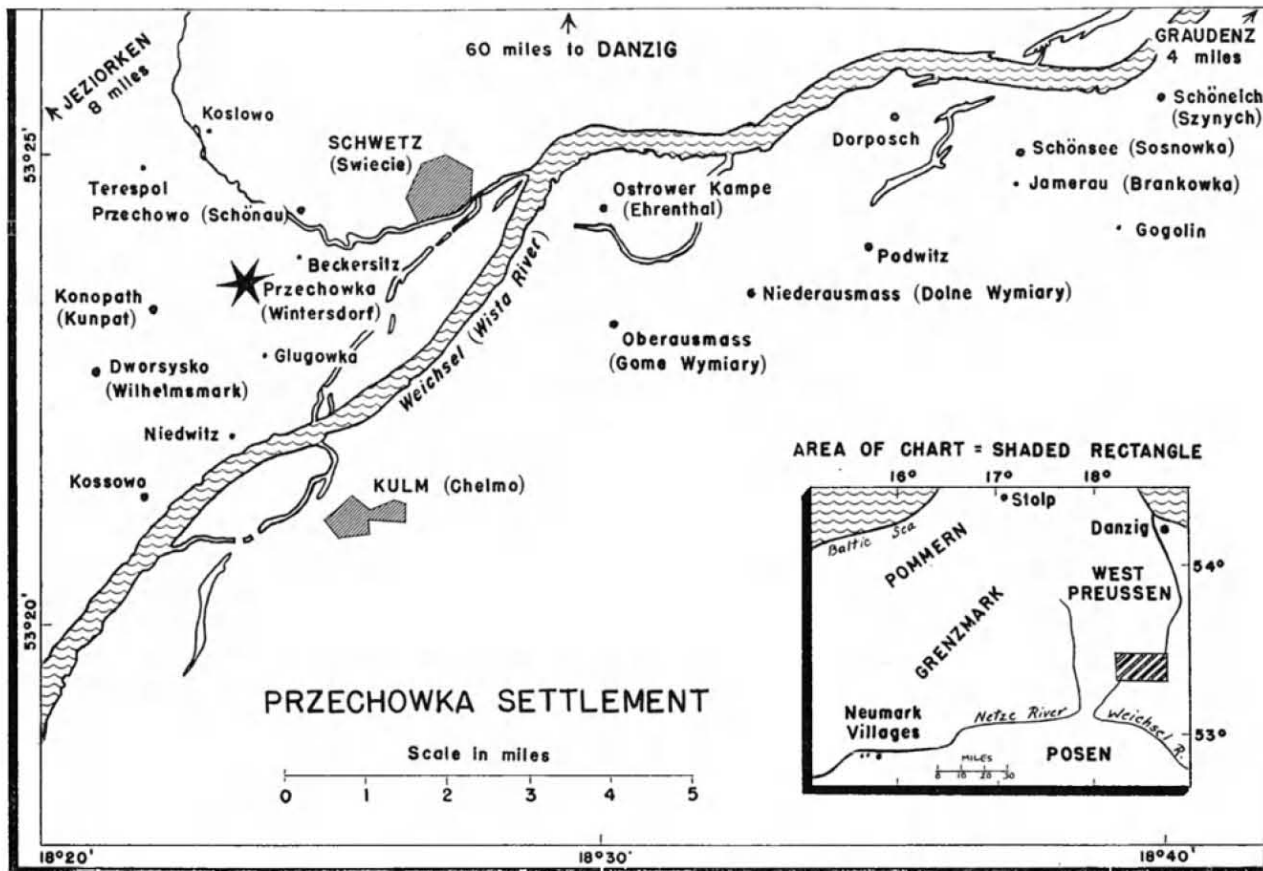
The contempt which the Old Flemish bore against the Frisians is expressed by the following verse cited by Herbert Wiebe:

Die mit Haken und Oesen,  
wird Gott erlösen;  
Die mit Knöpfen und Taschen  
wird der Teufel erhaschen.

(Those with hooks and eyes  
will be saved by God;  
Those with pockets and buttons  
will be seized by the devil.)

The Przechowka Mennonite Church served the Old Flemish Mennonites in about a dozen neighboring villages besides Przechowka itself. On the west side of the Vistula River were the villages of Przechowka, Beckersitz, Konopat, Glugowka, Terespol, Niedwitz and Dworzyska (Wilhelmsmark). On the east side were the Ostrower Kampe (Ethrenthal), Dorposch, Schönsee, Schöneich, Jamerau (Brankowka) and Nieder-Ausmaas. All of these villages were subjected to frequent inundations from river floods which were generally caused by spring rains or ice jamming in the thaws. Time and again these Mennonites were forced by

## Home of Alexanderwohl Mennonites on Vistula River, Prussia



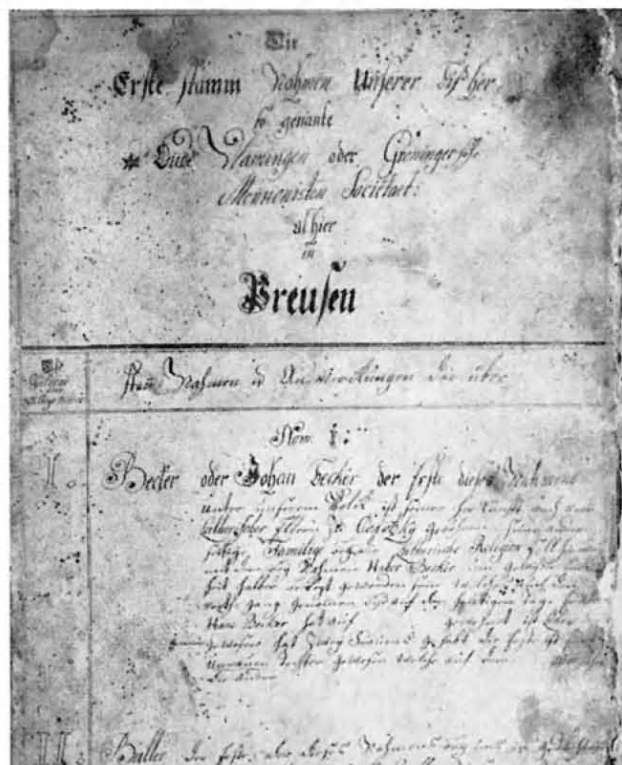
(Right) Title page of Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Record dating back to 17th century described on p. 79 ff.

sheer necessity to appeal to their Dutch brethren in Holland for flood relief. Usually the Dutch Mennonites responded with generous financial aid.

### Economic and Cultural Life

The land was never owned outright by the Mennonites. They leased whole village tracts for periods of forty or fifty years at a time. The first reported land-lease for the village of Przechowka that has been handed down was made in 1642 by the Polish governor, Johann Zawadzki, covering the fifty year period from 1640 to 1690. This lease covered ten small farms of about forty acres each at an annual rental premium of four hundred gulden for the whole village. About half the land of this village was very sandy and consequently rather unproductive. Their farming consisted of dairying and raising grains such as rye and barley. They sold their butter and cheese in the neighboring cities. They were also granted the right to fish in the river for their own table needs. Their meager farm income was supplemented by weaving linen in which they had been experts for centuries.

From its earliest history the Przechowka Mennonites



struggled for the privilege of establishing their own schools and having their own teachers. According to Maercker the Przechowka village school can be traced far back into the seventeenth century. School sessions were limited to the winter season when there was not much work to be done on the farm. Besides the three R's—'reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—religion and singing were also taught. The village schools were supported by assessments against the village inhabitants in proportion to the size of their farms. The teacher's remuneration consisted of a meager salary and material goods in kind, such as milk, eggs and butter. In some villages the Mennonite and Lutheran children attended the same school. In others the Mennonites had their own schools and teachers. The Mennonites preferred the latter arrangement, if at all feasible.

There was a school in each of the following villages affiliated with the Przechowka congregation: Konopat, Dworzyska, Jeziorken, Nieder-Ausmaas, Ostrower Kampe, Dorposch, Schönsee and Schöneich.

### Religious Life

Originally there was only one church and that was in the village of Przechowka. This was the center of the religious life. Although they never were pressured to become either Catholic or Lutheran—the two recognized churches in this area—the Mennonites did not have freedom of worship as we understand it today. They were continually forced to pay certain fees to the church diocese in that area in order to be left free to worship. Religious freedom was actually bought. In 1732, for example, the Mennonites in this area were not permitted to worship according to the dictates of their consciences until they paid the Bishop of Culm 10,000 gulden. An elder, Peter Becker, presumably of the Przechowka church, went to Groningen, the Netherlands, and described the plight of his people who were poor and now faced these exorbitant extortions. As usual, the Dutch Mennonites rallied to their aid with financial contributions.

Nearly all the land contracts contained some provisions for granting freedom of worship and freedom from military service; both of these principles were esteemed very highly by the Mennonites.

### Contacts with Holland

The Groningen Old Flemish Mennonites of the Netherlands maintained a very close tie with their Prussian brethren in the Przechowka area until well into the eighteenth century. Elder Alle Derks from eastern Holland made a ministerial visit to this church about 1710. His list of names of the Przechowka church membership agrees very well with those listed in the first part of the Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Church record. The list of names has been preserved to this day. His successor, Elder Hendrick Berents Hulshoff, made two ministerial visits, namely 1719 and 1733. His diary of the 1719 trip is extant and tells us that he received a

warm welcome from the congregation as well as from the minister, Benjamin Wedel. Hulshoff remained twenty-four days with them. During this time he preached on at least three different occasions, received thirty-one baptismal candidates into the church, observed the Lord's Supper and footwashing, and presided at the election of Abraham Unrau and Jacob Isaac as ministers in the church. He also dealt with a pastoral problem in the church. He had brought along with him a number of Dutch song books, Bibles and other religious books which he dealt out to some of the prominent men in the church. Elder Hulshoff has left us a list of all the adults of the Przechowka community—57 individuals living in Persighofke (Przechowka), 52 in Koenpat (Konopat), 14 in Posterwolde, 13 in Schoonzee (Schönsee), and 21 in other villages; thus a total of 157 adults. Both Alle Derks' and Hulshoff's lists are very valuable in that they give the maiden names of the wives in each instance.

Church worship services were conducted in the Dutch language until the middle of the eighteenth century and Dutch song books and prayer books were used exclusively until that time. It is said that the minister, Jacob Wedel, introduced the German language into the church service when he became minister in 1775. By 1800 the German language appears to have been established.

### Spread of Settlement

In the early part of the eighteenth century a little church was built in the village of Schönsee to accommodate the members on the east side of the Vistula who were frequently blocked by river floods from attending the church services in Przechowka for weeks on end.

About 1730 to 1740 the first outlying village was settled. It was the village of Jeziorken (Kleinsee) in the uplands about eleven miles northwest of Przechowka. The long distance from Przechowka made it necessary for them to have a church of their own. They erected their church in 1743.

Both of these churches remained integral parts of the mother church in Przechowka. They were really only outposts in order to serve more effectively the members of the outlying districts.

B. H. Unruh has told us the interesting story of the Neumark settlement. In the spring of 1765 about thirty-five families from the Przechowka Mennonite Church set out on a 120-mile trek westward to settle in Neumark in the lowlands of the Netze (Notec) River, a few miles west of the city of Driesen. Many references to this migration are found in the Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Church record.

The majority of these families came from the village of Jeziorken. They had been severely oppressed by their landlord, the Polish nobleman, Anton Wybczynski. Other families came from the villages of Przechowka, Schönsee, and Gruppe. In Neumark, Frederick the Great



granted the Mennonite settlers several special privileges such as religious toleration, freedom from military service, recognition of affirmation in lieu of the oath, right to establish their own schools and hire their own teachers, and the right to sell their produce such as butter and cheese in the neighboring cities.

These emigrants established the villages of Brenkenhoffswalde, Franzthal and Neu-Dessau in Neumark. The first few years they held their worship services in private homes. In 1778, they erected a little wooden church in Brenkenhoffswalde. Ehrenst Voht was the first elder. Peter Jantz succeeded Ehrenst Voht as elder in 1776 and Wilhelm Lange became elder in 1810. They also erected a little church in Franzthal. This Neumark settlement flourished for seventy years until in 1834 they migrated as a body under the leadership of their elder, Wilhelm Lange, to the Molotschna settlement, Russia, where they founded the village of Gnadenfeld. About twenty years later, in 1854, they erected their first church in Russia.

Although Neumark was over one hundred miles from Przechowka, it remained an integral part of the mother church. From a recorded business meeting in 1785 nine years after Peter Jantz had been elected as elder in Neumark, it is stated that the Neumark church concurred in the election of the elder in Przechowka and other ministers and deacons.

About 1800, several families including the families of Peter Pankratz, Jacob Pankratz and Tobias Ratzlaff settled in Wionzami and Sada near Plock in Poland. In 1802 they had four ministers according to a list of ministers printed in Holland.

### Beginning of Alexanderwohl

In 1821, the larger part of the Przechowka church, about thirty families, left their homeland under the leadership of their 28-year old elder, Peter Wedel, for the Molotschna settlement, South Russia. This spelled the death knell for the once flourishing Przechowka church.

According to signed statements on emigration passes preserved in the Danzig Archives, the reasons for emigrating to Russia in 1821 were:

1. They were pauperized by the Napoleonic wars.
2. They had no prospects to improve their lot in Prussia.
3. They had no opportunity to become landowners in Prussia.
4. Russia offered them about 160 acres to a family while in Prussia they were allotted only about 40 acres to a family.
5. Their Russian relatives praised Russian conditions and urged them to come to Russia, also.

Alexanderwohl, Gnadenfeld and Waldheim were the principal daughter villages of the Przechowka Mennonites in Russia. Some Przechowka emigrants also settled

in the villages of Michalin, Antonovka, and Karolswalde, Russian Poland.

In 1874, the major portion of the Alexanderwohl church, under the leadership of its elder, Jacob Buller, left Russia and settled in the vicinity of present Goessel, Kansas and established the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church. Dietrich Gaeddert took a group to present Buhler, where the Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church was established. The Tabor, Goessel and Walton Mennonite churches are daughter churches of Alexanderwohl. Descendants of the Przechowka Church are also well represented in the Grace Hill (Gnadenberg), Lone Tree, Pawnee Rock, Kansas; Avon, South Dakota; Meno, Oklahoma and other churches.

### The Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Church Record

In a vault at the home of the elder of the Alexanderwohl Church, P. A. Wedel in Goessel, Kansas, there is preserved the 170-year old record of the Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Church. This church record was taken along when the Przechowka Church transmigrated in 1821 to Alexanderwohl in Russia and again when the Alexanderwohl Church came to Goessel, Kansas in 1874. A microfilm copy of this book is now available at the Bethel College Historical Library for research and genealogical studies.

In 1784, Jacob Wedel, one of the ministers of the Przechowka Church, compiled the historical records of the church membership as far back as was ascertainable at that time. The following year, in 1785 he was elected elder of the church. According to tradition, Jacob Wedel was a well educated man. His beautiful penmanship, clear concise statements of historical facts and his ingenuous setup of the genealogical records tend to bear out this tradition.

The continuous series of dates from 1669 to 1784 arouses the readers' curiosity. It is believed by the author that this set of dates refers to the 115 years of existence of the church by 1784, thus dating the origin of the church in 1669.

The title page of the record book reads, *Die Erste stamm Nahmen Unserer Bisher so genante Oude Vlamingen oder Groningersche Mennonisten Sozietats alhier in Preusen*. Freely translated it reads: "The names of the first ancestral families of our so-called Old Flemish or Groningen Mennonite Society here in Prussia."

On the first few pages of the book the author takes up the families in order. He tells us all that is known about the history of each family and where the first ancestor came from. In many cases the earliest stories are portrayed as partially legendary, thus although not factual in every detail perhaps, these stories nevertheless give a strong indication of the actual underlying facts. Most of the families are traced 125 to 160 years back of the date when Jacob Wedel compiled the book, thus going back to about 1625. The records of dates are very scanty for the first ancestors of each family.



(Left) Peter Balzer and family, a well-known teacher. (Middle) Dietrich Gaeddert, immigrant leader and first minister of Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church; Abram Ratzlaff, who succeeded Gaeddert.

### Early Families

The families Schellenberger, Schmidt and Thomas emigrated about 1640 as refugees from Moravia to the Przechowka area. In that country the persecution was so severe that many Protestants fled to other countries.

The families Becker, Harparth, Tesmer, Nachtigahl and Lierman changed from the Lutheran faith to the Old Flemish Mennonite faith.

The first known ancestor of the Ratzlaff family was a Swedish soldier. After coming under the influence of Mennonite teaching and preaching and learning of their renunciation of military service, he pulled his sword out of its hilt and thrust it into a wood chopping block. Ultimately he joined the Przechowka Mennonite Church.

The first Wedel (Frantz) participated in the leasing of Przechowka village in 1640. The first Isaac (Jacob) was a relatively rich man. He married a beautiful girl of very poor background from the village of Koslowo just north of the Mennonite community. He lived in the village of Przechowka. The first two Richert brothers presumably came from the Old Flemish Mennonite Church in Danzig. One legend has it that these two

Richert brothers sailed from Danzig on a boat along the Vistula River. Their boat was shipwrecked near Schwetz and so they settled there.

The Cornels and Dircks families came from the Frisian Mennonites to join the more conservative Old Flemish Mennonites of the Przechowka Church. Nothing is known about the origin of the first Pankratz (Andreas) except that he lived in the village of Jamerau. All that is known about the first Buller is that his second wife was Dina Thomsen, a granddaughter of the Thomas family which fled from Moravia to the Przechowka area. Buller lived to a very old age. The first Funck (Steffen) came from another people and another faith. His second wife was Trincke Swelers. Nothing is known about the origin of the Frey, Jantz, Koehn, Sparling, Voth, Penner, and Unrau families.

In the last twenty-five years of existence of the Przechowka Church the following new names begin to appear: Gehrtz (Goertz), Gaedert, Abrahams, Stobbe, Baltzer, and Block. In the whole book there is only one reference to Holland: David Voht (No. 1051) is being referred to as being from Holland. The fact, however, that the congregation used the Dutch language in wor-

Heinrich Richert, minister and teacher of Alexanderwohl, and his second wife. Of Elder Jacob Buller no picture is available.



H. P. Richert and P. P. Buller, first ministers of Tabor and Goessel Mennonite churches.

ship and had close contact with Dutch Mennonite churches even during the eighteenth century indicates that many must have been of Dutch background.

In this church book is also recorded a report of a church business meeting held on August 18, 1785, immediately after the communion service. The members from Jeziorken and Culm area were also present. At this meeting they elected an elder (Jacob Wedel), two ministers for Przechowka, two for Jeziorken and two for Culm area (Schönsee). Three weeks later the Neumark Church concurred in this action. This report shows how intimately these four groups were related; they appear as a mother church and three daughter churches operating as one unit.

### Contents of Church Book

The major part of the book is devoted to the records of the members; giving the vital statistics, such as: parents, date and place of birth, date of baptism, marriage, residence and date of death. Those born before 1784 are listed by families starting with the Ratzlaff and Wedel families which were Elder Wedel's relatives, and then follow the other families in alphabetical order. After 1784, the children are listed chronologically according to their birth dates.

Jacob Wedel's successor, Benjamin Wedel, faithfully records the deaths of the individuals usually noting the cause of death. From these records, it appears that about 30 per cent of the children died before they reached the age of three, and only about 35 per cent attained the age of forty years. There are also lists of baptismal candidates for several years and a list of marriages near the end of the book. The last few pages of the book were compiled in Russia. These records deal mostly with genealogical records of close relatives and in-laws of Elder Peter Wedel. Some of the elders succeeding Jacob Wedel did not keep up the records as the

B. H. Unruh, Karlsruhe, Germany, leader of Mennonites from Russia, has just published a valuable study pertaining to the background of the Mennonites of Russia, Prussia, and America which can be ordered through the *Mennonite Life* office for \$4. For full title see under Unruh, B. H., "Mennonite Bibliography, 1954," in this issue.

B. H. Unruh, Germany, and C. H. Wedel, first president, Bethel College.



first author must have visualized that it should be done.

The following obituary of the author is recorded in the church book by his successor, Elder Benjamin Wedel:

Our very beloved minister Jacob Wedel was elected into the ministry on January 22, 1775. He was ordained on March 6, and on March 19, he preached his first sermon in Przechowka. On August 18, 1785 he was elected elder and on November 13 he was ordained as such. On May 2, 1790, he preached the baptismal sermon. He preached his last sermon here in Przechowka on August 7, 1791. On September 5 at six o'clock in the morning he passed away, saved in the Lord I trust. He has served 16 years and 6 months in ministry. (Jacob Wedel died at the age of 37 years.)

### Elders and Ministers

The Przechowka-Alexanderwohl Church had two ranks of ministers: elders (*Aeltester*) and ministers (*Lehrer, Prediger*.) The elder was the only leader authorized to baptize and to distribute the Lord's Supper. The ministers preached and assisted the elder.

No specific list of elders and ministers is given in the church record. However, Wedel frequently prefixes the titles of either *Aeltester* or *Ohm* before the names of elders and ministers. The title *Ohm* may apply to either the elder or minister. It is therefore not always possible to tell who had the rank of elder. Some information has been obtained also from books or papers of Herbert Wiebe, Hendrick Berents Hulshoff, Isaac Fast, Heinrich Banman and B. H. Unruh.

A list of elders and ministers has been compiled, giving the dates of birth and death wherever known, and in a few cases also the dates of election as elder. In many cases the dates of birth and death are extrapolated (extrapolation indicated by question mark) for want of any better information. Of the elders listed, the name of Peter Becker is somewhat in doubt. The church record refers to him only as *Ohm* Peter Becker. Herbert Wiebe refers to an *Aeltester* Peter Becker in the Culm area in 1732, which is believed to be our *Ohm* Peter Becker. There is also a gap of at least ten years between the eldership of Benjamin Wedel (208) and Ben-



C. C. Wedel, late minister of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, father of D. C. Wedel, president of Bethel College.

jamin Wedel (2XL). It is possible that Ehrenst Voht (1073) succeeded Benjamin Wedel (208) and continued as elder in Przechowka until 1765 when he emigrated with his flock to Neumark.

Ehrenst Voht (1073), Peter Jantz (516) and Wilhelm Lange served as elders in the Neumark Church, an integral branch of its mother church in Przechowka. Peter Jantz had been elected as minister in 1762 when he was still living in Jeziorken. He served thirty-four years as elder in Neumark, which was contemporary with the elderships of Benjamin Wedel (2XL), Jacob Wedel (258), Benjamin Wedel (261) and Peter Wedel (262) in Przechowka.



Schönsee Old Flemish Church, Prussia, known as *Kleine Schule*. Drawing by Sylvia Duerksen based on photograph by Herbert Wiebe (1941). At that time it was a dwelling place.

## Elders of Przechowka Church

Number in Church Record	Name	Life Span	Elder
24	Berent Ratzlaff	1660?-	
292	Peter Becker*	1687 - 1749	
208	Benjamin Wedel	1700?- 1759	
1073	Ehrenst Voht*	1730?-	
2XL	Benjamin Wedel	1742 - 1785	
258	Jacob Wedel	1754 - 1791	1785 - 1791
	Abraham Richert*		
261	Benjamin Wedel	1766 - 1813	1794 -
262	Peter Wedel	1769 -	1809 -
1328	Peter Wedel	1792 - 1871	1814 -

### ELDERS OF THE NEUMARK CHURCH

1073	Ehrenst Voht	1730?-	- 1776?
516	Peter Jantz	1744 - 1810	1776 - 1810
	Wilhelm Lange		1810 -

### MINISTERS OF PRZECHOWKA MOTHER CHURCH

	Name	Life Span	Minister
1044	Ohm Voht	1650?-	
2	Johann Becker	1655?-	
1047	Hans Voht	1675?-	
36	Peter Ratzlaff	1689 - 1775	
206	Peter Ratzlaff	1689 - 1775	
54VII	Jacob Isaac	1695?-	
949	Abraham Unrau	1700?-	
341	Hans Buller	1710 -	
515	Peter Jantz	1715?-	
900	Lohrentz Sparling	1718 -	
802	Ehrenst Schmidt	1725 - 1775	1759 -
86	Hans Ratzlaff	1727 - 1788	
822	Jacob Schmidt	1736 - 1798	
975	Hein Unrau	1740 - 1793	1779 -
	Andreas Pankratz		1785 -
58	Heinrich Ratzlaff	1742 - 1805	1791 -

985	Hans Unrau	1757 - 1813	1799 -
139	Jacob Ratzlaff	1765 -	1799 -
865	Hans Schmidt	1766 - 1809	

### MINISTERS OF THE NEUMARK CHURCH

1052	Andreas Voht	1730?-	1755 -
990?	Heinrich Unrau	1760?-	1782 -
555?	Peter Isaac	1745?-	1782 -
839	Hans Schmidt	1766 - 1809	1792 -
	Kornelius Voht		1792 -

### MINISTERS AT JEZIORKEN (KLEINSEE)

47	Peter Ratzlaff	1742 -	1785 -
	Berent Ratzlaff		1785 -

### MINISTERS AT SCHOENSEE (CULM)

712	Peter Pankratz	1729 - 1791	1762 -
224?	Benjamin Wedel	(1747 - 1812)?	1785 -
518?	Tobias Jantzen	(1751 - 1813)?	1785 -

### MINISTERS AT WIONZAMI AND SADA

	Hans Funck	1799 -
	Peter Wedel	1799 -
	Jacob Tesmer	1799 -
	Benjamin Wedel	1801 -

\* Somewhat in doubt but probable.

Some of the ministers listed under the Przechowka church between 1750 and 1785 were probably more directly connected with the Jeziorken and the Schoensee churches.