



House/barn style of dwelling typical of Mennonite homes in West Prussia, although this one is spectacular. All of these paintings date prior to 1940 and are about 30 inches by 36 inches in size.

Marie Birckholtz-Bestvater

An Outstanding Mennonite Artist

by D. Frederick Dyck*

In 2022, while researching Mennonites and art for a previous article titled “Abraham Claassen (1825-1910), Artist and Naturalist” printed in the October 2023, *Mennonite Family History*, I read the lengthy essay from



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the GAMEO website (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online) on Mennonite artists.

Under the subheading of German artists, a few brief sentences caught my attention. They began with, “The outstanding modern artist of the West Prussian Mennonites, however, was Marie Birckholtz-Bestvater (b. 1888 at Preussische-Konigsdorf, near Danzig, West Prussia) studied in Berlin and Munich 1908-1913, and lived in the Danzig-Zoppot area, where she had her studio until 1945.”

To discover that there had been a Mennonite artist of outstanding ability and some renown in West Prussia

was a surprise to me. That it was a woman added to my surprise. Until well into the twentieth century, very few women artists, Mennonite or otherwise, were recognized for their ability.

For such a talented, educated, and productive artist, little is known about Marie Birckholtz. My scattered network of helpful researchers have yielded a frustratingly small biography. My first cousin, Carol Schmidt Klingenberg of rural Peabody, Kansas, is adept at using her GRANDMA CD program, so I asked her to look for Marie's family/ancestry.

The small chart she found filled in some blanks. Marie Alice Bestvater (maiden name), GRANDMA #1818953, was born July 24, 1888, and was married to Reinhold Waldemar Birckholtz, born February 28, 1888. There is no genealogy on the GRANDMA CD for Reinhold. Nor was a marriage date shown on the CD. Neither are there any death dates for Marie or Reinhold.

Caption (Right): John Thiesen, curator of the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College, pulling Marie Birckholtz's paintings for photographing.

Caption (Below): Winter scene of a wealthy Mennonite's home in West Prussia.





Seascape of village and church. Strong sea winds have distorted the trees.

No children are shown either. There is a fair amount of information about the family of Marie's father, Johann Bestvater (August 12, 1855-March 7, 1902) married to Renate Penner (April 23, 1856-December 27, 1921). Renate's parents are Johann and Maria (Cornelian) Penner—no dates and no further genealogy is given for Renate's family.

Five generations of Marie's Bestvater ancestors end with her third great-grandparents, Hans Bestvater (1716-November 1793) married to Anna Quapp (d. November 1785). In an April 1954 article for *Mennonite Life* magazine titled "My Mission as an Artist" (available online), Marie wrote that her "sister Clara had researched the Bestvater family history and was in possession of an original 1639 print." What was actually on this print is unknown.

When World War II ended in 1945, the military of the Soviet Union/Russia occupied all of the German lands of West Prussia. Large numbers of Mennonites

were victims of the war and were killed, wounded, displaced, or homeless.

Marie Birckholtz was among the displaced persons and fled to Berlin, Germany, in 1947. Requesting a visa to relocate in another country was virtually impossible. With the complete collapse of the German government in 1945, the country was divided into zones of occupation by the French, British, Russian, and American military. Each zone ran with its own harsh system of rules designed to punish German civilians instead of aiding them.

As more details of the Nazi concentration camp system and the Holocaust became known, the consensus opinion by the Allied visitors was that all German people were complicit in myriad crimes. There were few countries in the world who would accept German refugees under these circumstances. Most countries who did accept German refugees were clustered in South America or the Middle East.

So it was that Marie Birckholtz immigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina. How she managed the journey is unknown. The scant information I have does not even say if Marie's husband had survived the war and traveled with her to Argentina.

After my interest was piqued about Marie Birckholtz by the GAMEO article, I wrote to friend and Professor Art History (retired) Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen. Professor Janzen had taught at Bethel Mennonite College in Newton, Kansas, for a number of years, and I wondered if she knew anything about Marie Birckholtz.

Professor Janzen responded that she recalled that several of Marie's framed paintings hung in the Bethel College Library and thought that there may be more stored in the archives. In the 1954 article, Marie wrote in *Mennonite Life* that Marie had lost many of her paintings due to Russian bombs. The paintings she had saved and carried to Argentina were likely carefully selected. Cut from their frames, canvasses

could be rolled and placed in tubes for transport in luggage.

This information prompted me to write to John Thiesen, curator of the Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA) at Bethel College. For over 25 years, John has assisted me with information, ideas, copies of documents and maps including old photographs for my writing projects. He has an encyclopedia knowledge of the library, archives, and museum at Bethel College. Additionally, John is the author of numerous award-winning Mennonite history-related articles, essays, and books.

John's response regarding Marie Birckholtz's paintings was that Bethel Archives had a collection of her art and that he would assist my sister, Christine (Dyck) Sehnert in photographing the collection. Christine lives in our old family farm house about 18 miles from Newton, Kansas, so this was easily arranged.

Following the photo session, Christine ecstatically related her impression of Marie's paintings in a telephone call to me and later sent copies of all the photos.



Village on the coast of the Baltic Sea, West Prussia.



Windmill along one of the drainage canals in the delta (Werder) between the Vistula and Nogat Rivers.

Following Marie's education in Berlin and Munich, as well as subsequent travels in Italy after World War I to study the art of past masters, she embarked on this mission to preserve in paint the West Prussian landscape of her Mennonite ancestors. Marie knew that her art was recording a place and culture that was unique, not just dear to her heart. She did not, however, anticipate its complete destruction by 1945.

The unique nature of Marie's paintings in recording a by-gone era and culture is emphasized by the rarity of photographs of West Prussian Mennonite churches, houses, and farms. Some of Marie's most evocative paintings are of windmills that drained the low lands of the delta (*Werder*) between the Vistula and Nogat Rivers.

Some of these windmills were likely hundreds of years old by the time that Marie painted them. These windmills show a direct connection to the countries of origin for nearly all West Prussian Mennonites. Holland Flanders/Belgium paintings of the house/barn combination show a style of architecture that was taken to

the Russian Mennonite colonies beginning about 1800 and then later to the plains states of America and prairie provinces of Canada in the 1870s.

Water is seen in many of Marie's paintings. The Vistula and Nogat Rivers certainly influenced the life cycles of people, livestock, and crops in the *Werder*. Canals also crisscrossed the region.

The city of Danzig in northern West Prussia was a major port on the coastline of the Baltic Sea that dated from the time of the Hanseatic League in the fourteenth century. Marie's studio was near this city. The sea, rivers, and canals meant that ships and boats of all shapes and sizes were common sights.

One of my favorite of Marie's paintings shows a harbor lined with buildings and ships at anchor. This may be Danzig or somewhere near.

Some of the seascape paintings border on an Impressionist or Minimalist style rather than a Realist style. None of Marie's paintings are of a "pure" Realism. Realism in art had been passed over by many artists after

the advent of French impressionism in the 1870s.

One of the things I was hoping to see in Marie's paintings was some recognizable Mennonite churches such as at Furstenwerder or Heubuden. There are churches in Marie's paintings, but they are seen from a distance and are part of a town or village scene. Then too, the churches pictured have prominent steeples which did not appear on Mennonite church buildings.

There is one impressive house that Marie appears to have painted several times. Who lived there? There is no indication on the back of the painting or is there any description of the scenes on any of the paintings in the Bethel Archives.

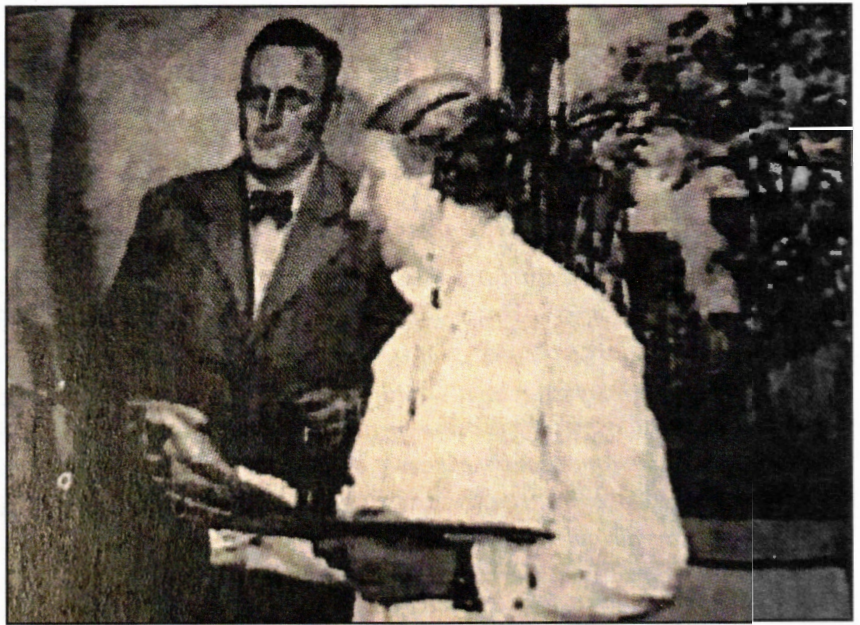
Studying Marie's paintings in an attempt to divulge missing parts of her life story has not worked well. Was she such a private person? Were the people from America/Bethel College who had contact with her that uninterested in Marie's personal story? Or did she discourage any attempt at more than basic friendship collegiality?

Might she have had a desire to live in America? This is one thing that I believe might have been true. Living in Newton, Kansas, near Bethel College would have seemed like a natural fit. Perhaps even a teaching job at the college. Was this an opportunity missed, or just not feasible?

While living in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Marie worked for a ceramics company named Tadeco that is still in business according to its internet site. An educated guess is that Marie was employed as an artist to paint decorative plates, vases, bowls, etc.

What kind of life did Marie have in Buenos Aires? She certainly had contact with fellow Mennonites in the United States as evidenced by an article she wrote for *Mennonite Life* in 1954. This was likely sent through the mail. The occasion for this article seems to have been Marie's recent rediscovery by either Mennonite missionaries in Argentina or perhaps some interaction between Marie and the large Mennonite Colony of West Prussian Mennonites in neighboring Paraguay.

Mennonites arrived in Paraguay after World War II on shipping arranged by American Mennonites, Peter J. Dyck and his wife Elfrieda. This couple wrote a book



Marie Birkholtz-Besvater (b. 1888) in front of a painting of her husband.

about their experience titled *Up From the Rubble* that is widely available on the used book market.

The next known interaction between Marie and American Mennonites is evidenced by a 1964 photograph online of H.E. Suderman, Carl Suderman, John Suderman, Erwin Goering, and historian Cornelius Krahn with a group of Marie's paintings.

The occasion marked the acquisition of Marie's art for Bethel College. It had been Marie's wish as stated in the 1954 *Mennonite Life* article that her paintings could someday be reproduced in color for a wider audience. In 1954, Marie said that the available technology was not up to the task. More than likely, the expense would have been overwhelming.

Nearly 70 years later, the technology to reproduce Marie's paintings in color is widely available. Thanks to *Mennonite Family History*, a selection of Marie's paintings photographed by my sister Christine accompanies this article. A quality papercover book of the paintings in the Bethel College Archives should not be out of the realm of possibility.

The knowledge that these paintings exist may spur some art lover/entrepreneur to sponsor such a book. Another possibility would be an exhibit of this collection at strategic sites such as Mennonite colleges and universities.

The rarity of a Mennonite woman artist of this caliber should mean that her paintings are treated as a precious part of our heritage and proudly displayed as the equal to antique furniture, quilts, and fraktur.