

SINGING MENNONITE:  
LOW GERMAN SONGS AMONG THE MENNONITES  
OF SOUTHERN MANITOBA

A thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of Graduate Studies  
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In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology

by  
Doreen Klassen  
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These Mennonites...  
When I talk with them  
I hear English with Low German accents  
and sometimes it is still Low German.  
Sometimes  
when I talk to them  
I feel like I am  
talking to myself.

(Suderman, 1974:12)

With grateful appreciation to

These Mennonites, who shared so graciously of their  
time, and their knowledge of Low German folk-  
lore *en Plautdietshe Leeda*

My family and friends, for their prayers and  
encouragement

My advisor, Dr. Louise Sweet, and her dogs and cats,  
who have all learned to 'sing Mennonite' during  
during the past five years

My typist, Leona Hiebert, and her family, for putting  
up with disruptions in their family life in order  
to complete this manuscript

## ABSTRACT

Mennonite folklore researchers assume that the Low German song tradition is a thing of the past. Many southern Manitoba Mennonites think that it has never existed. Likewise, Mennonite historians and novelists have invariably referred to Mennonites as singing in High German, Russian or English.

Contrary to popular belief and traditional historical data, recent field research has shown not only that Low German song does indeed still exist, but that it is presently experiencing a renaissance among certain groups in southern Manitoba. In fact, not only does Low German song exist, it exists in genres other than 'mere' children's songs or rowdy street songs, the only categories in which some Mennonites expect to find Low German songs. Furthermore, interviews and library research have shown that Low German song has been part of Mennonite experience for at least two hundred years, almost half of their four hundred and fifty year history.

These findings raise several questions. Firstly, what are the implications of singing in a language in which people presume they do not sing? Secondly, why is there substantial diversity of Low German song repertoire within a single ethno-religious group? And thirdly, what factors account for changes in lyric content, melodic sources and performance contexts over the past one and a half centuries?

The present study, based on field research among southern Manitoba Mennonites from October 1976 to June 1979, addresses these questions.

The assumption that one does not sing in Low German, is clarified in the light of sociolinguistic research on 'diglossia', where findings on 'low status' languages imply that Low German songs are found primarily within a minority group among the Mennonites themselves.

Secondly, the diversity of Low German song repertoire among Mennonites is understandable when we observe the degree of religious and socio-economic fragmentation among the Mennonites.

Thirdly, the changing Low German song repertoire is representative of patterns of Mennonite resistance and accommodation to their Ukrainian, German, French and English-speaking neighbors in nineteenth century Russia, early twentieth century and post 1970 Manitoba. Even in songs in a low status language, we observe musical borrowing from ethnic groups of higher prestige, while the musical resources of groups considered culturally inferior to the Mennonites are ignored.

This study of Low German songs, therefore, is a study of music as socially symbolic behavior, reflecting the viewpoint of ethnomusicologists like John Blacking who see music as both a sonic and social phenomenon.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One person after another told me that there were no Low German songs and there never had been. Well, I finally did find a few - four of them to be specific - but two of them were remembered with great difficulty.... In at least one place, therefore, the Low German song is a part of a dead tradition (Kliwer, 1961:112).

Mennonite folklore researchers, like Kliwer (1961) and Wiens (1958), assume that the Low German song tradition no longer exists. Many southern Manitoba Mennonites assume that it has never existed.

Mennonite historians and novelists have invariably referred to Mennonites as singing in High German, Russian or English (Epp, 1962; Lohrenz, 1976; Wiebe, 1970). If they make reference at all to singing in Low German, it is always with respect to lullabies sung to children (Kroeker, 1976; Epp, 1974). Even writers of Low German short stories describe people singing in High German (Ens, 1971).

Contrary to popular belief and traditional historical data, recent field research has shown not only that Low German song does indeed still exist, but that it is presently experiencing a renaissance among certain groups of Mennonites in southern Manitoba. Furthermore, interviews and library research have shown that Low German song has been part of Mennonite experience for at least two hundred years, almost half of their four hundred and fifty year history (Firmenich, 1854).

Not only does Low German song exist, it exists in genres other than 'mere' children's songs or rowdy street songs, the only categories in which some Mennonites expect to find Low German songs.

As we shall see, the songs collected for the present study range from love songs to occupational songs to historical ballads.

How did these songs come into being when people claim that no one sings in Low German? What sociological significance can we attribute to the singing of songs in a language which apparently has no songs?

A second group of questions stem from the fact that various groups of Mennonites have traditionally known and sung Low German songs which are substantially different from those known by other groups of Mennonites. How does one explain this diversity of repertoire within a single ethno-religious group?

Other questions arise from changes in lyric content, melodic sources and performance contexts over the past one and a half centuries as the songs migrated from early nineteenth century Russia to mid-twentieth century southern Manitoba. What accounts for these changes? Are explanations to be found within Mennonite society itself, or do we need to look farther afield?

The existence of these songs, their diversity, and their changing character demand an explanation. The present study is designed to provide an explanation by showing how differences in the Low German song tradition, with respect to lyric content, melodic sources, performance context and social function, reflect the changing socio-political conditions of the Mennonites.

The primary assumption underlying this study is that music is socially symbolic behavior and thus can serve as a window through which we can get a closer look at a given society. This assumption contrasts with that of sociologists like Marion Levy who, while

including a "structure of integration and expression" in his system of social analysis, nevertheless relegates it to the position of a "residual category" (Levy, 1952:504).

Instead, this assumption reflects the thinking of anthropologists like Raymond Firth who, writing at much the same time as Levy, concluded that an anthropology of the art had to address two problems:

The first problem is the effects on a society of producing and using the art objects. The second problem is the nature of the values which are expressed by the formal characteristics of the art objects (Firth, 1951: 162).

In other words, Firth asserts the necessity of studying not only an art object, but also the social context which produces and uses that object.

Ethnomusicologist, John Blacking, develops this position when he says

Man makes music as a patterned event in a system of social interaction, as part of a process of conscious decision-making; but there is also a sense in which music makes man, releasing creative energy, expanding consciousness and influencing subsequent decision-making and cultural invention. The anthropological study of music and music-making must therefore be concerned with the products of man as music-maker, and the processes by which feelings and ideas are expressed in patterns of sound, and patterns of sound evoke feelings and ideas (Blacking, 1979:4).

Blacking, therefore, sees music not only as representational, that is, as simply reflecting social conditions (c.f. Fischer, 1971:174), but as causational, or capable of effecting change within whose social conditions.

One further assumption about music as social behavior needs to be made explicit here: that music is symbolic in a limited, rather

than in a general sense. That is, music and music-making are symbolic not of society as a whole (c.f. Lomax, 1962), but reflect "the interests of the particular social group or class that has created it" (Berger, 1972:215), though works of art may transcend these interests and become works with universal appeal.

This assumption is integral to the understanding of yet another level of musical symbolism: the symbolism inherent in the choice of a particular language in sung communication. From this standpoint, the study relies on the field of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguists tell us that "language is symbolic of political and economic boundaries" (Jackson, 1977:65), and that

the language that prevails in an institutional sector... provides a good clue as to the linguistic group that controls that institution (Breton, 1977:91).

Another sociolinguistic finding which figures prominently in the interpretation of Low German songs in this study come from Ferguson's classic study on 'diglossia', which he defines as the use of two or more varieties of a language within a single speech community (Ferguson, 1959). These varieties he calls 'H', for high or prestige form of the language, and 'L' for low or colloquial form of the language. Furthermore, he cites the use of 'H' for politics, literature, poetry and religion, while 'L' is relegated to the domains of informal conversation and domestic contexts. These findings certainly have implications for the way in which Mennonites themselves view Low German songs.

Based on these assumptions of music and language as symbolic behavior, the study of Low German songs should provide insight not

only into Mennonite society itself, but also into Mennonite relations with their host and neighboring societies.

Based on these assumptions as well, the present study seeks to avoid the collector-archivist approach which has characterized much of North American folklore studies and Canadian Folk Culture Centre publications by researchers like Kenneth Peacock (1966/1970). Though this approach has swelled the archives, it has frequently produced totally atheoretical studies. As Carlisle tells us, although

there exist in Canada today impressive archives of tape recordings of the music performed by many Canadian minority groups, the quality of anthropological documentation pertaining to the music, however, varies considerably from good to non-existent (Carlisle, 1974:98).

This study also seeks to avoid the purist approach based on the traditional European approach to folklore in which

reports on immigrant folklore have tended to bemoan the collapse of a given Old World complex in its New World setting and to degrade and ignore those processes and phenomena that in the virorous contact situation so richly exemplified by immigrant folklore, inevitably diverge from the old, established models (Klymasz, 1973:131-132, c.f. Degh, 1966:553).

Instead, this study reflects the orientation of North American folklorists like Carpenter (1979) and Degh (1966), ethnomusicologists like Erdely (1979), Klymasz (1970b) and McCullough (1980), and anthropologists like Graburn (1976a) who have studied the arts of immigrants and native peoples in changing cultural contexts.

It seems obvious that even in the initial study of a neglected area of research such as Low German songs (Martens, 1972:366), one cannot indulge in the luxury of mere collecting of 'authentic folksongs' while ignoring the formulation of explanations for the phenomena one encounters.

The emphasis on the anthropological rather than the strictly musicological aspects of the music (i.e., formal product only), differentiates this study from previous studies of Mennonite music by scholars like Burkhart (1952), Duerksen (1956), Hohmann (1959), and Martens (1968). Moreover, in direct contrast to these and other scholars like Kadelbach (1971) and Yoder (1961), who have focussed on the religious music of the Mennonites, this study is aimed at the predominantly secular songs sung in Low German, providing a unique insight into the life of an ethno-religious group.

As stated earlier, Mennonite historians and novelists rarely mention music and music-making, let alone Low German song. From that standpoint, the present study offers another perspective: the retelling of the folk history, as opposed to the telling of the official history, which is generally told from the standpoint of one of the dominant groups among the Mennonites.

The present study, then, relies on, but also makes contributions to, a range of academic fields of study: North American folklore studies, Canadian ethnic studies, sociolinguistics, ethnomusicology, Mennonite music, and Mennonite history in general.

Obviously we can assume that there would be few library resources with direct bearing on a topic with no preceding academic research. There are, however, a number of relatively useful sources for comparative purposes, especially with respect to attempts to date and trace origins of materials.

Evidence of diversity in the Mennonite folklore tradition as a whole is already found in the work of Firmenich, a German folklorist writing in the mid-nineteenth century. Reporting on his findings

among the Mennonites in the Molotschna Colony in south Russia, he says that Frisian-Flemish folklore predominated at that time, though there were numerous inter-village differences in folklore repertoire which he attributed to differing points of origin in Prussia where the Mennonites had lived before they moved to Russia.

He identifies these people as Prussian Mennonites who speak Low German, but comments that

All of these folkarts in the mother tongue are influenced by the all pervasive written (High) German language through church services, teaching, etc., an ever-increasing influence (Firmenich, 1854:442, my trans.).

None of the materials he collected among the Mennonites are found in the present collection, possibly because very few Mennonites from the Molotschna Colony where Firmenich did his research, have migrated to Manitoba. Nevertheless, his conclusions remain of interest for the present study: the diversity of material, the predominance of Frisian-Flemish materials, and the interference of High German with the perpetuation of the Low German tradition.

Several collections contained many variants of the songs found in this collection. These included Frisian Low German songs found by Meier (1972, reprint of 1868), Prussian collections by Frischbier (1867, 1877), Schleswig-Holstein collections by Meyer (1927 reprint of 1878) and Tardell (1928), and a general collection of Low German songs by Alpers (1924).

With respect to comparative High German materials, Erk and Boehme's three volume Deutscher Liederhort (1893) proved most helpful in tracing materials, particularly those translated from one language to the other. Some recently published collections used were compiled by Schneider (1958) and Diekmann (1975).

A number of recent folklore collections containing Low German folklore have direct bearing on this research. Kenneth Peacock's Twenty Ethnic Songs of Western Canada contains two Low German songs included in this study. Another Low German song can be found on one of Peacock's tapes (PEA-224).

Several Low German parody songs are found in Reuben Epp's Plautdietsche Schrefts teckja (1972). Only one of these, a parody of "Oh Bury me not on the lone Prairie", is reported to have been sung in Manitoba.

Manitoba Mennonites have published a small number of Low German songs. These include songs found in Veleda Unger's De Goldene Shlut (1974), a book of Low German children's rhymes, riddles, etc., and Veertien Plautdietsche Leeda, a book of Low German translations of High German hymns published by the Gospel Light Hour (now Mennonite Brethren Communications) c.1965.

In an unpublished collection entitled "Folk Songs collected among Mennonites in South Russia" (n.d. microfilm in Conference of Mennonites Archives), Heinrich Friesen lists only five or six Low German items among the 170 or so folksongs, proverbs and poems he collected. The remainder appear in High German. The Low German items include two "Heimatlieder," or songs about the homeland, a Christmas poem, a humorous love poem, and a variant of the song "*Aus eck yingk met de Hoak oppe Dehl*," ("When I went to the threshing place with my rake") which is found in the present collection. Friesen provides no details of when or where he collected the materials though the presence of this last song suggests that the collection may stem from the Chortitza Colony in Russia, and have come to Canada in the 1920's,

since the song has not been found among Mennonites of other Mennonite colonies, or of earlier migration periods.

As mentioned earlier, American Mennonite scholars Wiens and Kliever concluded that the Low German song tradition belongs to the past. Wiens, however, wrote

We sang much, but always in High German or Russian. A single Low German song, mixed with Russian, is still in my memory.

*Tjemmt e'Jud jefoare*  
 (A Jew comes riding)  
*Met de blanke Droschtje.*  
 (With a shiny wagon.)  
 "Kuda jedjes ch?" - "Na, basar."  
 ("Where are you going?" - "To market.")  
 "Brinj mi mett Kartoschtje."  
 ("Bring me along potatoes.")

(Wiens, 1958:6, my trans.)

The second verse ends with the request to bring a pot of cracklings. Wiens used the song to tease his brother, a student at a "Zentralschule" or 'central school' in the Molotschna Colony in southern Russia, because his landlady insisted on feeding him only fried potatoes and cracklings, both of which he thoroughly disliked.

Though this song was not found in current research in southern Manitoba, its teasing function certainly bears resemblance to the social usage of many of the Low German songs found in Manitoba.

Newspaper accounts of contemporary events at which Low German songs were sung were of minimal utility. Accounts of musical and dramatic performances in Low German, always focussed on drama, despite the fact that the newspapers carrying them were published in Altona (Red River Valley Echo), Winkler (Winkler Progress, now called Pembina Times) and Steinbach (The Carillon News) which is to say, in predominantly Mennonite communities noted for their musical activities.

In fact, a two-column write-up concerning a Landmark Low German evening at which seven Low German songs were sung, was devoted entirely to the dramas presented. Only a picture and brief caption indicated that any music appeared in that program (Friesen, 1977:1).

Low German discography is a very recent phenomenon. The songs published in *Veertien Plautdiets che Leeda* have been recorded both on record and cassette tape for distribution to radio audiences. "*Sprie*" ("Chaff"), the first commercially produced record of Low German songs by a Mennonite group, "*De Heis chraitje en de Willa Honich*" (Locusts and Wild Honey) was marketed in early 1981, approximately ten years after the production of the first Low German drama and poetry recordings. Privately produced cassettes of Low German songs, such as that recorded by "The Doerksen Sisters" of Steinbach - who have not been included in the present study because their material was discovered too late - are rare. Apart from this, most tapes containing Low German songs are archival records of Low German evenings of entertainment or village reunions.

The material on which this thesis is based was gathered in southern Manitoba between October 1976 and June 1979. Approximately 130 songs, all included in the study, were found. This is a very modest sample by comparison with researchers who have found several thousand Ukrainian and French-Canadian folksongs, and will certainly require an explanation. Yet, the collection is large enough and diverse enough to be able to make some valid generalizations about Low German song.

The research milieu was favorable to the study. Growing public awareness, especially through the media, of the multicultural

aspect of Canada, increased historical awareness through the celebration of Canadian and then Mennonite centennials, and a "Low German renaissance" (Reimer, 1979a:10) within the past decade made this an opportune time to study Low German song.

Songs were located by various means, but were most often taped or transcribed in an informal interview context, even transcribed on grocery bags or paper towelling when necessary!

The hundred or so interviewees were selected by the reputational technique: on the basis of interest in singing, knowledge of Low German, and acquaintance with Mennonite history and especially folklore. Note was also taken of which particular groups of Mennonites claimed they knew no Low German, or said they had sung High German poems, but recited them in Low German.

Interviews were carried out in centres of high Mennonite population and their surrounding villages, including Altona, Steinbach, Winkler and Winnipeg, among persons of both sexes, and varied educational and occupational backgrounds, ranging in age from 5 to 85 years of age. Attempts were made to include persons of all major periods of Mennonite immigration to Manitoba: the 1870's, the 1920's, and the post World War II era, in addition to Mennonites presently immigrating from Latin America. Post 1970 immigrants from Russia were not included in the present study because of time limitations.

A fourth generation immigrant, the researcher is functionally fluent in Low German, and thus dispensed with the need for a translator. Most persons interviewed were bi- or even tri-lingual, speaking English, High German and sometimes Russian, in addition to Low German, but interviews were conducted in Low German whenever possible

to facilitate the recall of material. Since the researcher introduced herself as someone wanting to relearn her mother tongue, which she had not used since childhood, informants seemed tolerant of her occasional halting attempts at expressing herself, though they often commented on her distinctive dialect, which betrays her descentance from the 1870's immigrants who settled west of the Red River, in the Pembina Valley.

In addition to interviews, the author was a participant observer at numerous communal events such as reunions and Low German evenings of entertainment. Presentations on radio, at banquets, at Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society meetings and published articles (Klassen, 1978, 1979, 1981) helped to make the research project known among Mennonites, resulting in further contributions of material.

The ensuing discussion of Low German songs is introduced by three types of historical data which need further explication to define the context of the study: an overview of Mennonite history from 1525 to the present, focussing particularly on the Manitoba Mennonites, a history of Low German usage among Mennonites, and a brief discussion of music among Mennonites.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Some immigrants...came because they wanted to preserve a distinctive way of life, and saw the isolation of the rural Canadian frontier as an ideal setting in which to do this... Among the many somewhat strange and separate immigrants who came to Canada there were many Mennonites (Regehr, 1974:15-16).

The migration of thousands of Mennonites to Manitoba in the late nineteenth century was by no means the first relocation for them in their four hundred and fifty year history. Sometimes called 'the step-children of the Reformation', they had already been scattered across northern Europe and into Russia by religious persecution and economic pressures. Amid constant uprootings and migrations, the main themes of their history repeated themselves with almost monotonous consistency; they would be threatened by religious persecution or restriction of religious privileges, whereupon they would look for

the promise of privilege and toleration in another land in exchange for the application of agricultural skills; after a prolonged sojourn the Mennonites once more faced renewed economic and religious pressures often resulting from material overachievement; a search for new settlement areas naturally resulted (Toews, 1970:118).

In their search for freedom they often accepted, in fact chose, both geographical and sociological separation from the peoples around them. They had no country of their own, they borrowed their language and their music, they were often threatened by internal fragmentation, yet they developed an identity of their own. Who were these people? What made them different?

## Mennonite History<sup>1</sup>

Though the history of the Mennonites dates back to the time of the Reformation, the early leaders of the movement did not identify with Luther and Zwingli whose state-supported reforms were not radical enough for them. Instead of a state church, they envisioned a community of believers baptized on confession of faith. This ruled out infant baptism. Their practise of re-baptizing adults earned them the name of Anabaptists, or 'those who re-baptize'. The first of these baptisms was held in Zollikon, Switzerland in January of 1525.

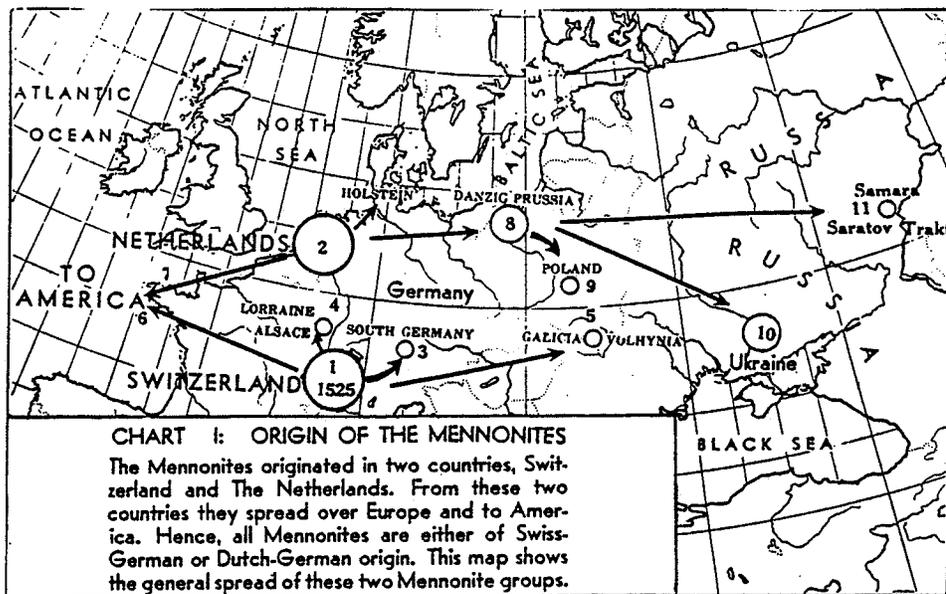
The Anabaptists also distinguished themselves from other Protestant reformers by their emphasis on "die Nachfolge Christi", or 'following Christ' as a way of life. Jesus teaching about loving one's neighbor, they felt, was diametrically opposed to the use of the sword or other force in settling disputes. Consequently, their commitment to "die Nachfolge Christi" had priority over their allegiance to the state, when and where the two ways conflicted.

Because this statement of commitment was seen as a threat by the state, those adhering to it were convicted of treason and often tortured or martyred for their faith. Many others fled to various parts of Europe, including the Netherlands. Here Menno Simons, a young Catholic priest joined the movement and was persuaded to become the leader of the believers there. This group and its descendants became known as Mennonites.

---

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the references cited, the discussion of Mennonite history relies on Bender (1973b), Gering (1972), Hamm (1969), Krahn (1959b, 1969b, 1973a), Mannhart (1972), and Rempel (1933).

Religious persecution and economic pressures continued to drive the Mennonites from the Spanish Netherlands across northern Europe where they found a degree of religious tolerance and economic opportunity. Many Mennonites eventually settled under Polish rule, though some went to the free cities of Danzig and Elbing as early as 1530. Others went in response to the need for laborers on the Vistula Delta drainage project begun by Polish noblemen around 1547, while yet others went as a result of continued harassment after 1567, by the Duke of Alba.



(Mennonite Life, 1953:2)

It was during this time that Menno Simons and Dirk Philips went to Prussia to help establish the church there. Flemish/Frisian divisions among the Mennonites originating in the Netherlands were visible in their settlement patterns in Prussia. The Flemish, who were more orthodox in such matters of church discipline as

intermarriage, chose to live in Danzig and the northern coastal area where they continued their artisan professions. The Frisians, farmers by occupation, moved to the Vistula Valley where they soon distinguished themselves for their work in swamp drainage. According to one Mennonite historian

the Frisians acted in a more brotherly fashion to believers in other denominations, demonstrated a more genuine piety and a greater tendency to cultural and church improvement (Friesen, 1978:53).

The beginning of the seventeenth century witnessed several changes: the rural Mennonites gained strength both ecclesiastically and economically, the Mennonites in the Danzig area received exemption from military service by a cash payment, and one of the first Mennonite cooperative services, a fire insurance company, was organized.

Problems continued to plague the Mennonites. Their pacifism rendered them defenseless to a government which exploited them by demanding huge sums of money, until 1642, when they were granted a charter. Although it is estimated that as many as eighty percent of the Mennonite population died of marsh fever during the years it took to drain the swamp, the population continued to increase, placing a strain on available land resources. Pressures from militaristic Polish leaders confined the non-resistant Mennonites to a small area of West Prussia. Some of this pressure was relieved by the availability of scattered farms and meadows belonging to the former Teutonic Knights.

With the partition of Poland in 1772, things began to change. Initially Frederick the Great, because he favored farmers, continued