

U.S. Mennonites Return to Find Their Roots

Tiny Swiss Villages Offer Insight Into Ancestors' Travails

By COTTEN TIMBERLAKE
Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE

WASEN, SWITZERLAND

THE SCENE THAT the word Switzerland conjures up is usually this one in the Emmental region. It is a vista of gently rolling Alps dotted alternatively with rippling green cow pastures and clusters of pine forest. Here, strangers still greet each other in passing and vegetable gardens are works of art.

The peacefulness of this place, however, belies its violent history of religious persecution. It is in these parts that 16th-century Reformed Protestant bounty hunters, on galloping horses and aided by snarling dogs, hunted down the original Anabaptists with a zealotism that still astonishes.

Today, a number of American Mennonite descendants of those first Anabaptists, the Swiss Brethren, return to this place to find their roots and come to terms with what their forefathers were forced to endure, and give up, for their convictions.

It makes for a different kind of European tourism. While other American tourists climb the Eiffel Tower, throw coins in Rome's Trevi Fountain and line up to watch the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, these folks instead make a reverential pilgrimage far off the beaten track. It often follows single lanes through nothing more than farm country.

"It gives them an appreciation of our heritage," says tour leader Lois Ann Mast. "The more fast-paced society becomes, the more we have to find our roots, walk the same trails our ancestors did, and learn from our history."

Began as a Family Trip

Mrs. Mast is expert at helping Mennonites do exactly that. This is the seventh time that she and her husband, Lemar, who run a bookstore and publish the quarterly Mennonite Family History in Morgantown, Pennsylvania, have organized this tour. Originally a family trip, it has grown into a formal, three-week, six-country "Mennonite Heritage Tour," one of three or four such groups that come to Europe for this purpose every year. (The Mennonites' more conservative counterparts, the Amish, generally are too orthodox to make such a journey.)

During its excursion through Switzerland, France, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany, the Mennonite group visits the birthplaces and homesteads of Anabaptist leaders including Menno Simons (1496-1561), after whom the Mennonites are named. They stop at Mennonite places of worship, including a Swiss cave

behind a waterfall where Anabaptists once huddled and prayed in secret. They view sites where their ancestors were brutally killed. They stay not just in hotels but also in the homes of European Mennonites.

This latest group consists of two dozen people, mostly in their 50s and 60s, from eight American states, but mostly from Ohio and Pennsylvania, where America's Mennonites and Amish are concentrated. The group is made up both of practicing Mennonites of varying degrees of orthodoxy and non-practicing descendants of Mennonites.

About half the members are in traditional, modest dress. The men sport beards, dark pants and suspenders. The women wear cape dresses and tuck their hair buns under bonnets made of fine white netting. They boast no adornment of any kind, not even wedding rings.

They identify themselves both by their current and ancestral family names, and some clearly enjoy the chance to show off their ability to communicate with Swiss Germans by speaking their Pennsylvania Dutch language, which is actually a German, or "Deutsch," dialect.

For many of them, this \$3,000-plus tour is their first visit to the old country.

"To me, this is the best way to see Europe for the first time," says Sanford Slabaugh, a computer database specialist from Rockford, Illinois. "It gives you a feeling for what our ancestors were going through."

Severe Persecution

Mennonites trace their history back to the Swiss Brethren, who formed their first congregation on Jan. 21, 1525. The Anabaptists refused to baptize their infants and wouldn't take up arms, and for these and other reasons the members of this radical reform movement were persecuted by the state church led by the Reformation theologian Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531).

This severe persecution — which included imprisonment, torture, beheading, burning at the stake and drowning — forced the Swiss Brethren and their religious cousins to scatter around Europe.



Mennonites visiting a Swiss cemetery

They emigrated to Alsace, France, the Palatinate in Southern Germany, and the Netherlands, places where their farming skills were welcome.

In 1663, Mennonites began emigrating from their adopted homes to North America, where they could practice their religion freely and own land. There they flourished, and today Mennonites number some 460,000 world-wide. They form a frugal, hard-working, evangelical brotherhood imbued with strong family values in a nonconformist world apart.

Jesus Christ is their highest government, and they live by their interpretation of the Bible. Mennonites don't take up arms, hold public office, use the legal system or swear oaths, which they consider unnecessary since they live honestly. They believe in adult baptism, usually involving three immersions in a stream or a pond, and they perform foot-washing rituals.

Although deeply devout, the Mennonites on this tour also exhibit a refreshing pragmatism — a number of them e-mail and fax back home — as well as a wonderful sense of humor and a joy of living.

Yes, they take turns saying blessings — heartfelt ones — before smoke-free and generally alcohol-free meals. And they take turns leading morning devotionals that include enthusiastic hymn singing on the bus. But there are jokes aplenty, as well as an appreciation of the simplest of things in life.

The kinds of things that interest these folks are a near-vertical potato field on a steep slope; the generous size of the overhang of the Bernese chalet-barn roofs; a farmer's square manure pile with a braided pattern on its edges; a hardware store, because that's where local people shop.

But there are serious historical destinations on the day this reporter tags along, with entertaining commentary provided by Leroy Beachy, a Mennonite historian whose knowledge enthralled the others.

The stops include the farm site where the Anabaptists had a major schism in the 1690s that led to the creation of the Amish branch. The group also visits the building housing the oldest continuous Mennonite congregation in the world, located in Langnau, and wanders around a neighboring, pansy-filled cemetery where many of the

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE CROSSWORD

Cryptic

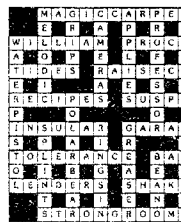
- | | |
|--|--|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1. The way of Sir Arthur's man! (5,6) | 1. Translate Braille: an entertainer appears |
| 7. Hold up of the Continental song | 2. Two ways to get door open? It holds one! (3-4) |
| 8. Grades flag | 3. Taking action to increase the unemployment figures |
| 10. Dancing fish in a circle | 4. Often wooden carriers - of Ash, for instance |
| 11. Ray is of heavenly origin! | 5. Conclusive piece of creative work? |
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| 16. Making a corner? That's not straight (2,2,5) | 9. Recorder, in the 17th Century, needed daily paper (6,5) |
| 18. Keep short showshoe for the month | 14. Keeps pushing? Goes ahead anyway (7,2) |
| 19. High-sounding torturer's achievement | 15. Investment for one? (4,5) |
| 22. Begin being put back on the sun (5,2) | 17. U.S. vets causing fear in Paris |
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| 25. Mind stem church, mad but showing shrewdness | 21. Work for another start at sport |

Concise

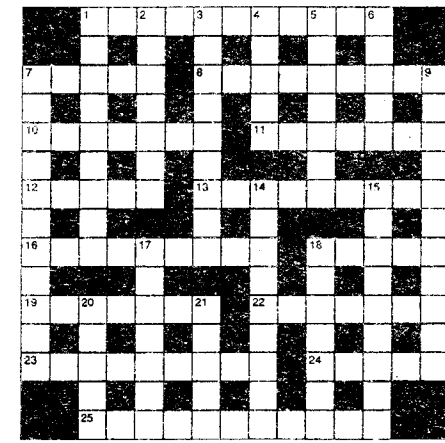
- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1. Old fashioned sleeve (3-2-6) | 18. Senses (5) |
| 7. River (5) | 19. Takes on (7) |
| 8. Hobbes (9) | 22. Raise spirits (7) |
| 10. Hits about (7) | 23. Nabend Park (9) |
| 11. Pulls abroad (5,2) | 24. Banquet (5) |
| 12. Odds & - (5) | 25. Sincere (11) |
| 13. Miss the end (9) | |
| 16. Biscuit (9) | |

LAST WEEK'S ANSWERS

Cryptic



Concise



Concise DOWN

1. Great distance (5)
2. Smokes (5)
3. Gets pilot's license (5)
4. Absinthe (5)
5. Towers (5)
6. Fox eggs (5)
7. Accompanying (5)
8. Bone! (4,2,5)
9. Way out person (5)
10. Workers (5)
11. Farm worker (5)
12. Cheap woman (5)
13. Cheeddar (5)
14. View (5)

Cryptic and concise have different solutions for grid. Answers of more word are followed number of letters Solutions next F

names are familiar to Mennonites. It stops to see a hiding place behind a trap door in a barn at the Fankhauser home, where the family once hid Anabaptists on the run. Members of the group are invited to lower themselves into the two-square-meter space.

A tour like this churns up feelings, some highly personal.

Leonard Groff, an office manager of a farm-equipment dealership in Gap, Pennsylvania, says that during a yodeling concert one evening on this latest trip it occurred to him that the ancestors of the yodelers may have persecuted his own ancestors.

"You don't want to hold this people, but you think about it," But sadness, not pride or any many participants say they feel.

John Hueppli, a Swiss-based who joins the group briefly, notes abaptists left this country more religious than economic reasons.

"These people probably have a relationship with Switzerland, typical American descendant," says. "It's more of a bittersweet loss rather than a feeling of pre-

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Beauty of this place, however, is the silent history of religious persecution in these parts that 16th-century protestant bounty hunters, on horses and aided by snarling dogs, down the original Anabaptists' names that still astonish. A number of American Mennonites of those first Anabaptists, brethren, return to this place to visit and come to terms with their forefathers were forced to endure up, for their convictions. This is for a different kind of European. While other Americans climb the Eiffel Tower, throw coins into the Trevi Fountain and line up to get a slice of the guard at Buckingham, these folks instead make a pilgrimage far off the beaten path in follows single lanes through valleys than farm country. It is an appreciation of our country's tour leader Lois Ann Mast. As the fast-paced society becomes, the time to find our roots, walk the paths our ancestors did, and learn their story.

Family Trip
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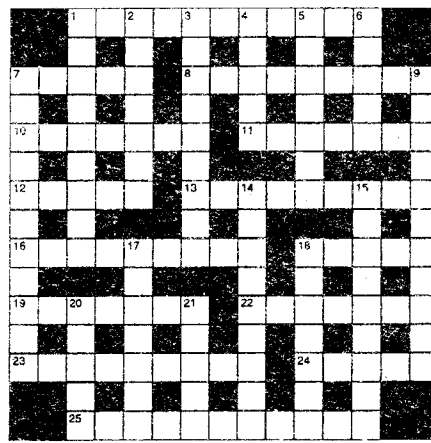
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Cryptic

- | ACROSS | DOWN |
|--|--|
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Concise ACROSS

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Old fashioned sleeve (3,2,6) | 18. Senses (5) |
| 7. River (5) | 19. Takes on (7) |
| 8. Hobbies (9) | 22. Raise spirits (7) |
| 10. Hits about (7) | 23. National Park (9) |
| 11. Pulls abroad (5,2) | 24. Dance! (5) |
| 12. Odds & - (5) | 25. Sincere (11) |
| 13. Miss the end (9) | |
| 16. Biscuit (9) | |

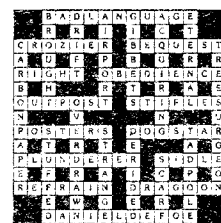


LAST WEEK'S ANSWERS

Cryptic



Concise



Concise DOWN

- | |
|-------------------------------|
| 1. Great distance (5-4) |
| 2. Smokes |
| 3. Goes pilot's licence (5-4) |
| 4. Absolute |
| 5. Towers |
| 6. For eggs |
| 7. Accompanying meals (5-6) |
| 8. Bore! (4,2,5) |
| 14. Way out person! |
| 15. Workers |
| 17. Farm worker |
| 18. Cheap woman |
| 20. Crieder |
| 21. View |

Cryptic and concise clues yield different solutions for the same grid. Answers of more than one word are followed by the number of letters in each. Solutions next Friday.

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