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No. 8

BERNESE ANABAPTISTS  
*And Their American Descendants*

By Delbert L. Gratz

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*Täuferloch* which was used by the Anabaptists<sup>21</sup> during times of persecution as a place of meeting and burial.

So ended a century of great growth for the Anabaptists of Bern. But this increase was not reflected in the number of them still in Bernese territory at the end of the century, for it was also the century of their greatest emigration.

### *Emigration from Bern*

#### ALSACE

Strasbourg became a place of refuge for the Anabaptists soon after the beginning of the Reformation. Although not given complete liberty there they were able to exist while persecution raged in other lands. In Ensisheim south of Strasbourg they fared less well. Six hundred Anabaptists were executed here during the first years of the Reformation. By the time the first wave of emigrants from the state of Bern arrived during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) there were still remnants of the earlier groups.

A letter dated March 12, 1643, written by a Catholic minister at Sainte Marie-aux-Mines (Markirch) to a fellow priest in Metz gives the first indication of Bernese Anabaptists in Alsace. He writes that for some time they have been entering the area and holding meetings in a wood between Sainte Marie-aux-Mines and Sélestat. He says they met here in a barn. For special occasions ministers from Switzerland would come. In another document the Anabaptists are mentioned as settling in the middle section of the Vosges mountains in the valley of Sainte Marie-aux-Mines where they were farmers, living especially from cattle raising.<sup>22</sup> During the extremely difficult times from 1671 until 1711 several hundred Anabaptists left Bern to find a new home in Alsace. A Bernese patrician, Beat Fischer, aided them in founding a settlement in 1671 at Reichsweyer near Rappersweyer.<sup>22a</sup>

The names of some of the families that migrated from the state of Bern to Alsace during this period are Liechti, Ummel, Reusser, Bigler, Eicher, Stauffer, Wittmer, Lüthi, Lehmann, Kropf,

<sup>21</sup> Geiser, *op. cit.*, 416, 417.

<sup>22</sup> *Archives Départementales du Haut Rhin*, E2792, E2024.

<sup>22a</sup> Staatsarchiv Bern. R. M. August 24, September 22, and October 23, 1671.

Bachmann, Müller, Eymann, Roth, Schneider, Wenger, Blaser, Graber, Kauffmann, Haueter, Joder, Neuhaus(er), Luginbühl (Lugbull), Richard, Stoll, Sommer, and Mosimann.<sup>23</sup>

### *Palatinate*

As early as 1527 we read of the work of Hans Denck at Worms and Landau where he founded Anabaptist fellowships.<sup>24</sup> Anabaptist teaching took root especially in the area near Bruchsal and in the Alzey district. As in the other lands of the south Germanic tongue where Anabaptists were located in the sixteenth century, here in the Palatinate they suffered persecution in the form of mandates, executions, and banishment. Some migrated to Moravia where they were gladly taken in by the Hutterite Anabaptists. By the time the emigration from Switzerland started (about 1650) there were few or none of the native Anabaptist stock left in the Palatinate to greet them.

During the Thirty Years War the Palatinate was laid waste and nearly depopulated. Persons who had been banished before were now welcomed back. Religious persecutees from France and Switzerland were invited to rebuild the devastated land. As persecution was taking place in Switzerland at that time a number of families left for the Palatinate.<sup>25</sup> They settled as early as 1652 in the Kraichgau (Northern Baden today) especially in the districts of Sinsheim a.d. Elsenz, Hilsbach, and Reihen.<sup>26</sup>

At first the Anabaptists were merely tolerated on the east side of the Rhine. Their economic contribution was appreciated but their religion was always a source of fear for the state-church government. Finally they were permitted to stay by paying a tax of six gulden (\$90) per person each year. They were permitted to hold meetings only if the number of those taking part was twenty or less.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ch. Mathiot, *Recherches Historiques sur les Anabaptistes de l'Ancienne Principauté de Montbéliard, d'Alsace et des Régions voisines*. (Belfort, 1922), 150-158.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Hege, *Die Täufer in der Kurpfalz* (Frankfurt a. M., 1908), 13ff.

<sup>25</sup> The Palatinate included a portion of present-day north Baden located on the east side of the Rhine. This included the cities of Heidelberg, Mannheim, and Sinsheim a.d. Elsenz.

<sup>26</sup> Christian Hege, "Kraichgau," *Mennonitisches Lexikon* II (Weierhof, 1925), 555.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Hege, "Kurpfalz," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, II, 588-597 *passim*.

As early as 1650 Swiss Anabaptists arrived at Kriegsheim on the west side of the Rhine.<sup>28</sup> Others arrived from Switzerland in the years following but no sizable migration took place until 1671 when an especially severe persecution took place in both Zürich and Bern. It has been estimated that approximately 700 persons arrived in the Palatinate during this year from the state of Bern.<sup>29</sup> Several letters have been preserved telling of the desperate conditions of these immigrant Anabaptists during this time. Jacob Everling, a minister at Obersülzen near Dirmstein, wrote letters to the Mennonites in Holland describing the conditions in which they came. By November 2, 1671, he reported, 200 had entered the Palatinate. Among them were cripples, old persons up to 90 years of age, and families with as many as twelve children. Most came without money or possessions and carried all they owned on their backs, and their small children in their arms. By January, 1672, Everling reported, there were some 643 in the Palatinate. When asked why they had not left Switzerland earlier they gave the following reasons: first, they saw that despite all persecutions their numbers were continually increasing, and their church "bloomed as a rose among thorns"; second, it was not easy to immigrate to a foreign country and leave behind many close relatives who were not members of their faith.<sup>30</sup>

As the native Mennonites in the Palatinate had little means of their own they could not assist the immigrants to a great extent. Letters were written to the brethren in Holland requesting aid. Tielmann Jansz van Braght, a Dutch Mennonite minister and author, visited the Palatinate and saw the conditions just as had been described by Everling. Already in 1660 the Dutch Mennonites had formed an organization to aid their Swiss brethren, the Committee for Foreign Needs. Eleven thousand gulden (\$150,000) were given by the Dutch Mennonites for their aid.<sup>31</sup>

In the years following, the life of the Swiss Mennonites in the Palatinate was not easy. They were never considered on equal legal standing with the other persons there. Continually there was

<sup>28</sup> Walter Fellman, "Kriegsheim," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, II, 572.

<sup>29</sup> See note 17.

<sup>30</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, 194-197.

<sup>31</sup> Christian Hege, "Kurpfalz," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, II, 597, 598.

some law of restriction to cause them anxiety. Some moved on to Holland in 1710 where they formed settlements at Groningen, Sappenmeer, and Kampen. For several generations they retained their language and distinctive church regulations but by the beginning of the nineteenth century they joined the Dutch Mennonites so that today only a few names can be recognized as being of Swiss origin such as Boer (Baur), Gerber, Meihuizen, and Latscha (Lörtscher). Even as early as 1671 some Mennonites of Swiss origin, from the Palatinate, had settled at Sappenmeer and Groningen, so that those who arrived in the eighteenth century were referred to as "new Swiss." In 1720 they formed two separate church organizations, those arriving later being more conservative than the earlier settlers. The division lasted until about 1780. In 1824 the entire Swiss group joined with the Dutch Mennonites.<sup>32</sup>

The first emigrants from the Palatinate to leave for America left from Kriegsheim in 1685. Two brothers, Peter and Isaac Schuhmacher,<sup>33</sup> joined the Germantown, Pennsylvania, Mennonite-Quaker settlement that had been founded by persons from Krefeld two years earlier.<sup>34</sup> However, the Mennonite stream of emigration did not begin until 1707, when a number of families arrived at Germantown. Later this settlement spread north into the Skip-pack region. The largest migration of Swiss Mennonites to America took place between 1717 and 1732 when approximately 3,000 emigrated from the Palatinate to Pennsylvania to form the bulwark of the major group of Mennonite churches in America today, namely, the (old) Mennonite Church and the (Old Order) Amish Mennonite Church, both of which have spread across the United States and Canada.<sup>35</sup> The difficult times in the Palatinate together with the cordial invitation of the Penns to religious persecutees to

<sup>32</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, 279ff.

<sup>33</sup> Possibly descendants of the earlier Schuhmacher family of Safenwil, Aargau. See J. Heiz, *Täufer im Aargau (Taschenbuch des historischen Gesellschaft des Kantons Aargau)*, (Aarau, 1902), 158.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, C. Henry, *The Mennonite Immigration to Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century* (Norristown, Pa.), 75-94. It is certain, however, that these and all other emigrants from Kriegsheim and the Palatinate to Pennsylvania before 1707 were Quakers. Although they had once been Mennonites, they were members of the Kriegsheim Quaker congregation which emigrated en masse and all joined the Quaker congregation at Germantown. The first real Mennonites to emigrate from the Palatinate to Pennsylvania were members of the Kolb family who arrived in Germantown in 1707.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 96.

settle in their colony, as well as favorable letters from their brethren who had left before, helped many to decide to migrate to Pennsylvania.

The Palatinate emigration took on a more definite form when in Rotterdam a group of 300 assembled to make the trip to America. Leading this movement were Jacob Burkhalter and Benedict Brechbühl. The Dutch Mennonites gave considerable aid to their brethren and even aided a few in paying their passage. For ten years only a scattered few left for America but in 1727 another wave of emigration started that continued unabated for five years. Regardless of discouragement and warnings from the Dutch Mennonites and admonishings from the Palatinate elders the "America fever" spread through the Palatinate churches, nearly depleting them by 1732 when the stream of emigration came practically to a close. During these five years alone the Dutch Mennonites recorded some 3,000 Palatinate brethren having passed through Holland en route to Pennsylvania. Christian Hege estimated the Mennonites in America descended from these Swiss settlers at 150,000 in 1935.<sup>36</sup>

The Palatinate Mennonites also had representatives in the migration to Jülich and Cleve during the latter part of the seventeenth century, and in the decade of the 1780's a sizable number left for Galicia where they settled in the area of Lemberg.<sup>37</sup> The settlements in Jülich and Cleve died out in the nineteenth century, but the one in Galicia persisted until 1945 when it was expelled by the Russian occupation; after a period of existence in West Germany as refugees the remnant of this group migrated to Uruguay in 1949.

Those who remained in the Palatinate had their own difficulties, both external and internal, although they enjoyed a period of prosperity in the nineteenth century. The Amish schism affected them in 1693-1700. Although the Amish group never was large, it persisted until the 1930's when the last Amish congregation joined the Palatinate Mennonite conference. The government restricted their worship and freedom well into the nineteenth century.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Neff, "Amerika," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, I, 51, 52. Christian Hege, "Kurpfalz," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, II, 599.

<sup>37</sup> Bachmann, Peter, *Mennoniten in Kleinpolen*, 177ff.

Today there are approximately 1500 baptized members of the Mennonite Church in the Palatinate.

### *Bishopric of Basel*<sup>38</sup>

The present stronghold of the Anabaptists in Switzerland is the Bernese Jura, which, until the French Revolution, was called the Principality and Bishopric of Basel. Only a portion of it was allied to the Bernese state by defensive and offensive alliances signed in 1486. This territory originated in the year 630 as an ecclesiastical legacy. In 1528, when the Reformation came and won part of his people, the Bishop changed his place of residence from Basel to Porrentruy (Pruntrut), although the greater share of his principality remained Catholic. In exception to the general rule in Catholic states the Bishopric of Basel early gave semi-toleration to the Anabaptists fleeing persecution in the state of Bern.

Tradition has it that during Reformation times Bernese Anabaptists sought protection in the Bucheggberg in Solothurn territory but when their safety here became uncertain they moved on into the Bishopric of Basel, coming first to Péry, north of Biel, and settling in the mountain meadows of the Montoz. From there they moved to the mountains of Graiter and Münster. From Péry others moved westward forming for some time the churches of Wannan and Tschanner. Between 1540 and 1570 the first families arrived.<sup>39</sup> The Gerber family came from Stadel near Langnau; the Nussbaum family from Ichertswil in the Bucheggberg district of Solothurn, and a Tanner family probably from Lützelfüh. These were the first in this migration.<sup>40</sup>

But it appears that even earlier than this Anabaptists existed in the Bishopric of Basel. The first evidence of an Anabaptist being in this area is given by the list of those who attended the debate in Bern in March, 1538, in which appears Hans Heinrich Schneider

<sup>38</sup> Now usually referred to as *Fürstbistum Basel*. The ruler was not only Bishop of a diocese but prince of a secular domain as well. The terms *Fürstbischof* and *Fürstbistum* were never used until after the French Revolution when the Bishopric and Principality arrangement no longer existed. The title that was earlier used was *Bischof von Basel, Fürst des heiligen Römischen Reiches*. The area that he ruled was called *Stift, Hochstift, Bistum* or *Fürstentum*. See A. Membrez, "Das Hungerjahr 1771 in Fürstentum Basel," *Der Rauracher* XII, No. 3/4 (Aesch, Basel-Land, 1940), 37.

<sup>39</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, 234, 235.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

from Münstertal.<sup>41</sup> On August 17, 1538, the Bernese government wrote to the Prince Bishop of Basel that he should not tolerate the Anabaptists in his domain; rather, he should expel those who were in the Münstertal. It appears that these earlier Anabaptists were not Bernese in origin but rather Alsatian. The records are silent from this time until June, 1596, when the Prince Bishop Jakob Christoph wrote to the prior and church at Münster that the Anabaptists in Seehof have increased rather than decreased as the case should have been. He decreed that no more should be allowed to settle there without the Bishop's previous knowledge of it.<sup>42</sup> The records are silent for another quarter of a century until in 1622 when Bishop Wilhelm gave authority to the prefect of Delémont (Delsberg) to imprison Heini Stähli who was living at Seehof.<sup>43</sup>

Various conditions forbade the Anabaptists to find refuge in the Jura during the especially difficult persecution times of the 1670's and 1690's. On March 10, 1693, the Prince decreed that no Anabaptists may settle in his land.<sup>44</sup> The larger migrations to the Jura which nearly depleted the Emmental churches took place in the fore part of the eighteenth century. This will be discussed in the following chapter.

#### *Amman-Reist Controversy*<sup>45</sup>

Although persecution made life for the Anabaptists of Bern nearly impossible during the last half of the seventeenth century they nevertheless found occasion to disagree among themselves. This division in the Bernese Anabaptist ranks became the greatest in all the history of Swiss Anabaptism, continuing to the present day in America, although in Europe it has been healed everywhere so that no Amish are left in Europe. The cause and course of the division follows.

<sup>41</sup> U. P. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Staatsarchiv Bern. Ehemaliges Archiv des Fürstbistum Basel. 245. Mappe 29 June 11. 1596. (This portion of the Staatsarchiv is hereafter referred to only by the letter B followed by the section number.)

<sup>43</sup> B 245. Mappe 29. May 20, 1622.

<sup>44</sup> Geiser, *op. cit.*, 446.

<sup>45</sup> The most thorough study to date on this subject was made by Milton Gascho. "The Amish Division of 1693-1697 in Switzerland and Alsace," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XI (October, 1937), 235-266.

An Anabaptist elder named Jakob Amman from Erlenbach near Thun<sup>46a</sup> made a tour of the various Anabaptist congregations in Bern and Alsace in the year 1693, accompanied by several other Anabaptist ministers. It was his sincere belief that the congregations were becoming lax in the practice of true Christian ordinances; so he sought to reinstate a stricter church discipline, stressing a firmer policy on the principle of avoidance of persons no longer in fellowship with the church. This was probably imported from the practice and teaching of the Dutch Mennonites, since previously in the Bernese Anabaptist congregations avoidance had always been interpreted as nonparticipation of the banned member in Holy Communion. In all sincerity he endeavored to reform the Anabaptist congregations over an older and stricter pattern.

Amman first came to the bishop Niklaus Moser in Friedersmatt near Bowil and then to Peter Giger in Reutenen near Zäziwil, both in the Emmental. Neither of these showed interest in introducing the strict avoidance into their congregations. Some time later a number of elders and ministers met at the home of Niklaus Moser to discuss and decide what to do. Hans Reist (called Hüsli Hans), an elder from Obertal near Zäziwil, was also invited but did not attend. Amman accused Reist of being a plotter against this doctrine and insisted that he should be excommunicated. In spite of urgent pleadings he excommunicated all those who would not join with him. The opposing party came to be known as the Reist or Emmental party.<sup>46</sup> The teachings of Amman thus were rejected in the Emmental but found fertile soil in the Bernese Oberland where in 1711 his followers were found in the Simmental, Frutigen, and Hilterfingen and in the vicinity of Thun.<sup>47</sup>

Several years after the division footwashing was introduced into the services of the Amish group as a part of the Lord's Supper. Greater strictness in the plainness of costume also followed.

The Amish division spread at once to the churches in Alsace and the Palatinate where it found better soil. On March 3, 1694, seven ministers from the Palatinate and nine from Switzerland met

<sup>46a</sup> See Delbert Gratz, "The Home of Jacob Amman," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXV, (April, 1951), 137-9.

<sup>46</sup> Gascho, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, 316.

