

Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association Banquet

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Memorial Hall at Bethel College, North Newton KS

The Swiss Commemorate Anabaptist History: Trachselwald Castle and Other Events in the Emmental by Don and Joanne Hess Siegrist

We are pleased to share with you news from Switzerland a little country, near and dear to our heart, much smaller than the state of Kansas but packed with history, castles, monasteries, cathedrals, snow covered mountains, lakes, many different Swiss German dialects, and the birthplace of the Anabaptist movement.

The Emmental (the valley of the Emme River) has a terrain and building architecture style different from the rest of Switzerland. It is very hilly with many small farms scattered along the hillsides and ridges.

The people in the Emmental speak the Bernese Swiss German dialect "*Bern Dootsch.*" a dialect which tends to be a bit slow, low, and rumbling. The Bernese pride their dialect as one of the most beautiful dialects in CH. Needless to say, a person who can speak standard German can barely understand the Bernese dialect.

In CH there are numerous jokes about the Bernese people being slow. For example in the Zurich train station a lot of people are seen rushing to and fro. In the train station in Bern, if anybody is running, they are from Zurich. Never tell a Bernese man a joke on Friday night, because by the time he figures it out he will burst out laughing in church on Sunday morning. The Swiss said Joanne looks Bernese but she talks too fast.

Our account is based on ten trips to CH over the past 13 years meeting mostly with Swiss Reformed people and also with some Swiss Mennonite leaders. What we say is not meant to be the whole story. For those who wish to know more, we encourage that you collaborate our story with Mennonite historians such as John Sharp, John Ruth, or Swiss Mennonite historian Hans Peter Jecker.

Historical Background

Before the Reformation, all of CH was catholic. After the Reformation, northern and western CH became protestant reformed while central and southern CH remained Catholic even to this day.

The Anabaptist movement began 1525 in Canton Zurich where it was eventually wiped out by 1650. It was in the Canton of Bern that the Anabaptists had the greatest numbers and the longest stretch of history. The state was never able to drive out all the Anabaptists

Presently, there are about 2,500 Swiss Mennonites with about 14 congregations. The congregation in Langnau is the oldest continuous Mennonite congregation in the world. Most of the Swiss Mennonites live near the French border in the Jura Mt region where in the past

they were allowed to live with more religious freedom but in a higher, colder elevation less desirable for crops.

What did our Anabaptist ancestors look like?

The Anabaptists were a people who stood for their faith despite paying a terrible price at the hands of the government.

Since the Emmental is in the Canton of Bern, many of the Emmental Anabaptists were sent to Bern for imprisonment. Bern has a wall with many towers for security and had the authority to declare the death sentence. The deep, fast flowing Aare River provided a barrier on the other three sides.

The Kafigturm (men's prison), Frauenturm (women's prison), Obere Spital (upper hospital), and the Tittlingerturm, were some of the numerous places used as prisons for Anabaptists. Many of the prisons had a torture room infamous for interrogating people under torture to coerce people to recant or reveal their Anabaptist friends and meeting places. We do not know how many Anabaptists ended up in prison for their faith. The city of Bern was infamous for its persecution of the Anabaptists. The Kafigturm is the only prison building still standing. The Bluturm (blood tower) down around the Aare River is thought to have been used for interrogation under torture.

When we visited the Museum of History in Bern there was this exhibit -- The executioner's mantle in the official colors of Bern, two swords used for execution, and the rack. Interrogation by the rack was the most widely used instrument of torture till the 18th century. The victim's arms were placed behind their back and roped together at the wrists. Another rope was placed between the wrists to slowly lift the person off their feet with their arms behind their back. A stone weight was attached to the ankles to increase the pain. Shoulders were often dislocated. Fear of the rack was often enough to cause the prisoner to cooperate.

The placard on the wall states these two swords were made in Bern 1620. "The sword of execution bears the inscription "Sol deo Gloria." (To God alone the glory): the executioner acted in the certainty of representing divine justice on earth." About 40 Anabaptists were known to be sentenced to death in Bern. The men usually executed with the sword and the women drowned in the Aare River.

Trachselwald castle was first built around the late 1200's with additions at later times. We saw this 1654 drawing of the Trachselwald Reformed Church and the castle in the background when we visited the friendly Reformed pastor and his wife in the parsonage.

According to one source, there was a torture chamber that was removed about 1750. I don't know how many Anabaptists were imprisoned here. There must have quite a few because the persecution lasted over 300 years. Very few windows are on this side of the prison tower.

Most every American Anabaptist tour group stops at Trachselwald castle. The castle is quite picturesque and appears in good repair. In the past Switzerland had many castles with prison

towers and torture rooms. Torture was thought to be the best way to get the truth from a prisoner.

The cold, dark prison tower is about 60 feet high. There are some windows here but as I recall not into the prison cells. To walk through this windowless prison cell is somewhat spooky. If you could have visited 2, 3, 4 hundred years ago when the place was full of prisoners, imagine the sights, sounds, and smells. Imagine being locked in here for months. There are about 2-3 cells per floor, probably not more than 10 cells in the entire prison. A very narrow spiral stone stair takes you up to the worst cell.

The Hans Haslibacher homestead is about 4 miles north of the castle. Most every American Anabaptist tour group visits here. Hans Haslibacher, a prominent early Anabaptist leader in the Emmental, was exiled from Switzerland. 30 years later he returned home to visit his son who remained Reformed. Unfortunately he was captured again and put in the Trachselwald prison tower. Then sent to Bern where he was tortured and beheaded in 1571 -- the last Anabaptist execution in Bern. There is a song about Haslibacher in the Ausbund which the Amish still sing.

The Bernese government launched wave after wave of campaigns against the Anabaptists. They were put in prisons for months with miserable conditions. Their properties were confiscated, their marriages declared void, and their children illegitimate. They were expelled and told never to come back. The persecution lasted about 70 years in the Netherlands but over 300 years in Switzerland

Hiding the persecution story.

Over time it became painfully obvious to the Swiss that there was a very dark side to the Swiss Reformation. What an awful story of the Swiss Reformed church persecuting its own people who lived an upright moral life, the Anabaptists.

What happened is that the Swiss historians briefly mention the Anabaptists and greatly under reported the severity and magnitude of the persecution. Modern day Anabaptists knew all about the persecution while the Swiss general public knew nothing.

So this beautiful setting with an old castle with its dark history was hidden for many years. Local historians knew the history but it was taboo to talk about it. Our human eyes can not see every thing. What about faith? 2 Cor 5:7 "We live by faith not by sight." The Anabaptists lived by faith and did not bear arms against their enemies, they forgave their oppressors, and let God take care of history.

Above this prison setting was a higher power. Does the Spirit of God take care of history?

In God's timing a cast of Swiss characters with curious minds and compassionate hearts happened upon the hidden dark side of the Reformation.

Using their talents and positions in power, they brought light into darkness, let truth be known, honored the Anabaptist beliefs, and wanted to make amends.

Events in the Emmental of Switzerland.

Katharina Zimmerman A Swiss author of 20 books. As a newly wed wife of a Swiss reformed pastor, Katharina knew nothing about the Anabaptists. She and her husband were assigned to this little church in Schangnau in the southern Emmental, a region where early persecuted Anabaptists once lived. Katharina soon discovered old chests within their large church parsonage. Curious - she started opening the chests and there she found church records written in old German script. Compelled to know more, she took it upon herself to learn how to read the old German script. With her detective mind and six years of research in the archives of Bern and in the Netherlands, she was able to piece together the persecution story of Christen Hirschi and Madleni Schilt of Shangnau who married, had children, and were driven out of Switzerland. In time she completed an historical fiction novel with all the characters and places being real. The book *Die Furgge* (the name of the mountain south of the church) was published in 1989 and it became a best seller in Switzerland.

After meeting Katherina four times at her home in Bern and numerous phone calls, this book was finally published in English in the summer of 2017.

Peter von Gunten. As a well known Swiss documentary film writer, Peter wondered why the Anabaptists were willing to suffer for their faith. With permission from the Bern government, he made a movie titled *In Life and Thereafter* about the Mennonites in Switzerland and Bern, Indiana. The closing part shows a Swiss Mennonite baptismal service. In 2005 this movie was shown in Swiss theaters... and much to everyone's surprise, its showings lasted 8 months rather than the expected 4 months.

Geri Keller. As a Reformed church pastor in the Bäretswil region of Switzerland – Geri Keller knew nothing about the Anabaptists. Seeing busloads of American visitors hike into the woods to visit the Bäretswil Cave he wondered what prompted those hikes. Eventually he discovered what was happening and he was deeply moved. He said to himself - something has to be done to deal with the sins of the past. Later he became the founder of Schleife, a non-denominational Christian movement in Winterthur and then he became a leader for the “Heal Our Land” conference at Winterthur in 2003. Amish and Mennonites from North America were part of the 900 attendees. There was a time of sharing, apologizing, forgiving, and restoring broken relationships. As a symbol of reconciliation, Swiss Reformed pastors washed the feet of Anabaptists.

“Unlocking Our Inheritance Conference 2005 “ Amish and Mennonites – those who were at Winterthur hosted a three day event at Petra Church of New Holland PA in 2005. 22 Swiss Reformed delegates came – most who were pastors. They expressed their pain and shame that their beloved church had so terribly persecuted the Anabaptists. The 800 attendees heard the Swiss apologies and there was clearly a desire for friendship, respect, and mutual understanding.

One of my favorite high school teachers, Myron Dietz, spoke this one liner to the full audience: “Never in my wildest imagination

would I have ever dreamed that this apology would happen.”

During that conference, we hosted THREE Swiss reformed pastors, including Peter Dettwiler (center) for 5 nights lodging in our home. We had such a good time together that in return they all invited us to visit their homes in Switzerland. That step opened many new doors for us. Their friends and friends of friends soon connected with us and we were invited to numerous homes for meals and warm hospitality.

Since 2005 we visit Switzerland most every year and we are blessed beyond our expectation. It is like meeting long lost relatives.

The Year of the Anabaptists 2007 (Taufjahr 2007)

As more and more details of the Anabaptists surfaced over the previous decade, the Bernese government and Reformed church authorities in the Bern Canton decided to expose the long hidden persecution story in an event called Taufjahr 2007. Täufer (the baptizers) was the derogatory name given to the Anabaptists in the 1600's. Translated into English Taufjahr 2007 means “Year of the Anabaptists in 2007.” The theme was “The Truth Shall Be Made Known.”

As the authorities met to discuss the structure of such an event, there were Reformed people who wanted to accept Anabaptist beliefs, especially believer's baptism. However, the president of The Reformed Church of the Canton of Bern firmly declared that **the event could be held, but “the Reformed will remain Reformed and the Anabaptists will remain Anabaptists.”**

Reconciliation for the official church meant maintaining individual identities but relating to each other as respectful friends.

A committee of Reformed and Anabaptist leaders were chosen to plan the event.

In the Canton of Bern Taufjahr 2007 was a huge event. Over the course of that year 200 events were planned at 37 locations. There was a lecture series at the University of Bern, presentations and exhibits at various places, church services focused on Anabaptist history, and best of all, International Days on July 26, 27, 28, 29, 2007.

Events We Personally Attended

Exhibit on the Amish, their quilts, books, toys, and clothing

These Amish clothes were purchased from our Amish neighbors.

For certain the Swiss are fascinated by the Amish lifestyle.

In many ways the Amish preserve early Swiss ways.

Village of Trub. The folks of this village designed a wonderful hiking trail called “Experience the Path of the Anabaptists” with 12 exhibit stops.

(water baptism) By a stream another site explained the Anabaptist practice of water baptism for believers.

Open Air Drama This drama was called “*Wehrlos*” (which means defenseless). The drama took place near Durrenroth and featured the Anabaptists of the 1600’s. All sold out.... night after night for 15 showings... each with about 300 attendees.... and people of all ages.

Stop a minute to imagine with me your thoughts and feelings while sitting with those whose relatives persecuted your early ancestors. That event is something we will never forget... a powerful reenactment remembering the faith of our fathers and mothers.

International Worship Service, July 27, 2007 All the local churches were closed so that the people could attend this combined service for the Swiss Anabaptists and Reformed people. The audience consisted of about 2,500 Swiss folks and Anabaptists from North America.

There was a large brass band to begin the service. This International Sunday Morning Worship Service was led by leaders of the Reformed church and of the Mennonite church.

The opening prayer given offers mutual understanding -- by Sumiswald Reformed Church Pastor, Dorothee Bertschmann.

“Oh Lord of creation of heaven and earth..... we have gathered from different directions and we stand in awe.... The children of those who had to leave this region are here. The children of those who had to undertake troublesome journeys have returned, and the children of those who stayed behind are here.

We thank you, eternal God, that you have walked with us on our journey....., even when we went wrong. Thank-you for staying at our side. We praise you for your faithfulness.

Jesus Christ, you are THE WAY in which we walk..... You are the TRUTH we rely upon. We ask you to help us to meet each other with an open heart and with respect.

Fill our hearts with your living hope. Through your spirit who unites into one what was separated...and who is able to bridge the gulf between different people groups and communities. We ask all this in Jesus name. Amen”

A music group from the Mennonite Church in Langnau led congregational singing.

Bernard Ott, a teacher at the Mennonite Bible School called Bienenberg, gave the sermon titled “The Good News Is All About Jesus.”

Open Air Worship Service with Anabaptist themes on the hillside below Trachselwald Castle Sept 14, 15, 16, 2007. A group of Swiss Reformed pastors, receptive to Anabaptist teachings, planned a three-day outdoor worship event on the hillside below the Trachselwald Castle/Prison. The Sermon on the Mount - Matt 5, 6, and 7 was read - one chapter a day in Pennsylvania Dutch. An estimated 10,000 people attended this three-day event.

Anabaptist Bridge - Centuries ago, Anabaptists would gather under this bridge deep in the forest of the Jura mountains to hold worship services.

Sept 2010 was the dedication for the construction of a new **Anabaptist bridge**.

To commemorate Anabaptist history, the local government and interested groups spent \$150,000 to build a new foot bridge which is now part of a well marked hiking trail with guide books in 3 languages – German, French, and English.

Thankfully we were able to attend that dedication service. In turn I was surprised when invited to bring greetings since Don & I were the only attendees representing Mennonites of North America.

There is a brand new 6 foot high granite memorial made of 6 moveable cylinders created by a Mennonite Artist, Jean-Pierre Gerber. Each cylinder represents one specific century. The top cylinder holds the Swiss Mennonite Church logo.

Hansreudi Henni is a well known retired Emmental school teacher, an avid Anabaptist historian, and a choir member at Langnau Reformed Church. About once each month he connects with us by phone or by e-mail. Since those of the Emmental tend to be slow to open up to outsiders, he is extremely helpful in introducing us to them.

Beat and Therese Kuntz (standing beside me). These devout reformed folks visited us twice in PA and we visit them often in CH. They loved spending time with our Amish and Old Order Mennonite friends.

Back in CH on November 6, 2011 they organized a slideshow to tell of their new adventures with the Amish. The gathering was held at their church in Hasle and over 100 people attended. They placed two new Amish hats by the entrance doors and an offering of \$800 was donated to be divided between MCC relief work and the work of Christian Aid in Ohio.

New Commemoration Plaques about the Anabaptists may now be seen at various places in the Emmental. A plaque is at the entrance to the Trachselwald Prison Tower.

Reformed Church in Sumiswald A plaque is mounted on the stone wall near the entrance to the church to remember 7 Anabaptists from that region who were executed in Bern.

In 2018 in **the city of Bern**, there are brand new Anabaptist commemoration plaques which are designed to be a children's mystery adventure. A popular Swiss way for children to learn history is to make a series of signs - each telling a clue for where to go next. These new signs are to discover the story of the Anabaptists. Today the Mennonite Church within the city of Bern is pleased to partner for this project with the Reformed Church at the Munster.

Finally, during the last ten years, plans are being made to convert one section of the Trachselwald Castle into an Anabaptist history museum. While the castle is owned by the Bern government there are definite plans to use one of the rooms for an exhibit prepared by the Swiss Mennonites to tell the early Anabaptist history in German, French, and English.

These last 13 years brought wonderful exchanges and we're glad to keep connecting.

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