

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

No. 10

August 2006

Erdmuth Dorothea von Zinzendorf (1700-1756)

This month we remember the death of Erdmuth Dorothea, Countess von Zinzendorf, which occurred 250 years ago on June 19, 1756. A non-Moravian who attended her funeral reported attendance at “1800 strong” and stated he had never before witnessed such genuine sorrow at a burial. What caused the mourners such sorrow was the loss of their “Mama” - who for more than thirty years had overseen the development of the renewed Moravian church alongside her husband, Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf.

Erdmuth Dorothea von Reuss was born on November 7, 1700 in Ebersdorf, Thuringia. She was raised with her siblings in a devout Pietist atmosphere - a *Schlossecclesiola* [palace congregation], in which the entire household was occupied with matters of salvation, rather than typical court frivolities. As a young child Erdmuth developed a personal relationship with God, influenced by visits of Pietist clergy like Philipp Jakob Spener and Hochmann von Hochenau. Under the tutelage of her capable mother, Erdmuth gradually assumed management of their estate from the age of sixteen. These early spiritual and administrative gifts would later prove indispensable in her marriage to Zinzendorf and her role within the church.



Initially Zinzendorf was dazzled by Erdmuth's older sister, Benigna. He found her mystical nature and blissful love of Jesus deeply inspiring. After many long spiritual conversations with Erdmuth, however, Zinzendorf became attracted to her “fine character” and in time proposed. The couple wed on September 7, 1722. Together they forged a *Streiterehe* [marriage of champions] in which

“the wife would assume all the administrative, economic, and family responsibilities and leave her husband free to serve the Lord.” Erdmuth assumed all of these duties over the course of their marriage. Importantly, she not only believed in her husband's vision, she *shared* it.

Erdmuth's role in overseeing the practical matters of the church have been well-documented. In 1723 Erdmuth assumed supervision of her husband's properties, sometimes selling her own jewelry to finance the young community's building projects. Zinzendorf greatly admired his wife's skills handling money, since he

confessed he had none himself. Left to his own financial administration, Zinzendorf's mission would not have made it out of Herrnhut, much less to all corners of the globe.

While managing all financial and administrative aspects of the church, Erdmuth also conducted diplomacy missions as far as Denmark and St. Petersburg, bore twelve children, and raised four into adulthood. During her later years in Herrnhut she provided counsel to those who sought it, accepting visitors from six o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night! In quiet moments she penned many accomplished hymns, some of which we continue to use in worship.

In more modern terms, Erdmuth was the true *yin* to Zinzendorf's *yang*. Their marriage embodied the perfect Christian complements of spirit and stewardship. On their 25th wedding anniversary Zinzendorf praised his wife, stating “*I have learned through 25 years of experience that my assistant is the only one from the four corners of the earth that fit my calling.*” Without Erdmuth's careful stewardship and dedication, the fruits of Zinzendorf's missionary zeal would not have been realized.

Sources: This month's newsletter is taken from the *Gemeinnachrichten*, June 25, 1756; and Erika Geiger's biography, entitled *Erdmuth Dorothea, Countess von Zinzendorf, Noble Servant*, translated into English by Julie Tomberlin Weber in 2006. This book is now available through the Moravian Archives for \$11.95, plus tax and postage.

This Month in Moravian History is compiled by Paul Peucker and Lanie Graf (Moravian Archives) in cooperation with Markus Gill (Moravian Church Utrecht, Netherlands). Image courtesy of Unity Archives, Herrnhut, Germany. www.moravianchurcharchives.org