

This Month in Moravian History

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Zinzendorf and Anna Nitschmann

On June 27, 1757, Count Zinzendorf and Anna Nitschmann married in Berthelsdorf near Herrnhut. Zinzendorf had been a widower for a year and thought it was time to remarry. This unusual union between an imperial count and a woman of humble origin took place 250 years ago this month. Although different in class, they were equal in their spiritual nature, devotion to Christ and to the church.



The last years of Zinzendorf's first wife, Erdmuth Dorothea, were difficult. She had never really recovered from sorrow following the death of her son, Christian Renatus, in 1752 and she suffered from severe depression. Her condition suddenly deteriorated in June of 1756 when she caught a cold and became

very weak. Erdmuth Dorothea passed away early in the morning of June 19, 1756.

In the previous years Zinzendorf and his wife lived separately for most of the time: he lived with his staff in London while Erdmuth Dorothea resided in Herrnhut where she supervised the finances of the Moravian Church in and around Herrnhut. When Zinzendorf moved from London to Berthelsdorf in 1755, Erdmuth Dorothea remained in Herrnhut.

During the long years of separation from his wife, Zinzendorf had developed a close relationship with his confidante, Anna Nitschmann, eldress of the women and "mother of the church". Later he claimed that during his journey to Pennsylvania in 1742 he came to the realization that Anna Nitschmann could one day be a suitable candidate to marry, should Erdmuth Dorothea die before him.

Zinzendorf had now become a widower. In the early months of 1757 Zinzendorf began discussing the matter with his son-in-law, Johannes von Watteville, and Anna's brother, Johann Nitschmann. He let a year of mourning pass before he married Anna Nitschmann in the Berthelsdorf manor house on June 27, 1757. The wedding ceremony, however, did not take place in

public, but was kept confidential. Only a few close church leaders were let into the secret. More than a year later, in November 1758, Zinzendorf and his wife sent out an official notification to the congregations.

Why all this secrecy? It was not so much the age difference of 15 years that made the marriage

problematic, but more so the immense social difference between the groom and the bride. Zinzendorf was an imperial count (*Reichsgraf*), whereas Anna Nitschmann came from a peasant family. Zinzendorf feared the disapproval about this violation of class distinction not only by members of the church and by society, but also by his mother, who was still alive in Berlin. We are not informed about their reactions after Zinzendorf finally announced his second marriage.

The marriage lasted almost three years. On May 9, 1760, Ludwig von Zinzendorf died in Herrnhut; Anna, his second wife, passed away not even two weeks later, on May 21. Both were buried on the Hutberg, close to where Erdmuth Dorothea was buried four years earlier.



Source: Wilhelm Jannasch, *Erdmuth Dorothea Gräfin von Zinzendorf, geborene Gräfin Reuss zu Plauen: Ihr Leben als Beitrag zur Geschichte des Pietismus und der Brüdergemeine dargestellt* (Herrnhut, 1915).

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