

This Month in Moravian History

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Georg Schmidt, Moravian Missionary in South Africa

Three hundred years ago the first Moravian to work in South Africa was born: Georg Schmidt. Although he had to end his mission prematurely, he laid the foundation for the work of many generations of Moravians who returned to the area fifty years later.

Georg Schmidt was born on September 30, 1709, in Kunewalde (Kunín) in Moravia. After hearing about a Christian community in Herrnhut, Schmidt decided to leave his home and join the Moravian community there. He was sixteen years old when he walked to Herrnhut during the winter months of 1726. The young Schmidt felt a strong urge to preach which often put him at great risk. When he preached in the neighboring town of Zittau to a group of awakened people he was put in jail for ten days. This episode only strengthened his evangelical fervor and in 1728 Schmidt left again on a preaching mission—this time to the suppressed Protestants around Salzburg, Austria. While traveling together with Melchior Nitschmann through Bohemia, they held religious gatherings wherever they could. It would not be long before both men were arrested and locked up in prison in Schildberg (Štítý). This time the jail term was not for just ten days: Georg Schmidt would spend six long years as a prisoner. Unfortunately, Nitschmann did not survive the ordeal and died in prison in 1729. In 1731 Schmidt was moved to Brno where he had to dig trenches and build fortifications on the Spielberg fortress. Finally, after converting back to Catholicism, Schmidt was released and made his way back to Herrnhut on July 22, 1734.

The Herrnhuters were shocked when they heard how Schmidt had regained his freedom. They accused him of a lack of perseverance in his faith. The following year Schmidt made another journey: this time to southern Germany and Switzerland. Again, Zinzendorf was not pleased with Schmidt: during the journey Schmidt had claimed to be a Lutheran. For Zinzendorf the distinctions between the denominations were important and he did not want his Brethren to take their confessional identity lightly. "We can no longer tolerate him in the congregation," Zinzendorf angrily wrote in February of 1736, just when a request arrived from two ministers in Amsterdam to send a missionary to the southern Cape. On February 14, 1736, only two weeks after his return from Switzerland, Schmidt left for Holland.

In light of the disapproval of the Herrnhut leaders for

Schmidt, the question why he was chosen to go to the Cape must be raised. Was it some sort of punishment for his earlier behavior? Did he volunteer to go, possibly to make up for his wrongdoings? More research is necessary to resolve this issue.

Schmidt's voyage to South Africa was not without setbacks. Upon his arrival in Amsterdam he had to undergo an exam by the church council and he needed to wait for the September meeting of the Dutch East India Company to grant permission for his voyage. Finally, on December 4, 1736, he was able to board a ship that would take him to the Cape. But now contrary winds prevented the ship from leaving the harbor. It was not until March 11, 1737—almost a year after his arrival in Holland—that Schmidt's ship left. Four months later, on July 9, he set foot in Capetown.

Schmidt settled east of Capetown in Baviaanskloof. (later renamed Genadendal (Valley of Mercy)). He gathered some Khoi-khoi who attended his prayer meetings but after baptizing five of them in 1742, the Dutch governor raised questions about the legitimacy of Schmidt's work. Schmidt was also beginning to suffer from loneliness. When he realized that no assistance was to be expected from Europe, Schmidt asked for permission to return to Europe. In the fall of 1743 he bade farewell to his group in Baviaanskloof and returned to Germany.

Schmidt would never return to South Africa. But seven years after his death in 1785 Moravians returned to Baviaanskloof. From the ruins of Schmidt's house and garden they built a mission station which remains a center of Moravian activity in South Africa.



Image: Schmidt Teaching Agriculture, study by J.V. Haidt (MAB). Sources: Lebenslauf in *NadB* (1836). G. Schiewe, *G. Schmidt* (2009). H. Weigelt, *Korrespondenz zwischen L.F. zu Castell-Remlingen und Zinzendorf* (1982).