

This Month in Moravian History

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Anna Maria Lawatsch (1712-1760): 250th Anniversary of her Death

Anna Maria Lawatsch's death in Bethlehem on January 20, 1760, offers a fascinating glimpse into Moravian ceremony and funerary practice during the 18th century. Hers was the first of several major deaths to rock Moravian leadership in 1760, with the deaths of Zinzendorf and his second wife, Anna Nitschmann to follow in May. Zinzendorf believed the death of a true laborer was rare, and indeed a "miraculous" occurrence. This is reflected in the nearly 60 pages in the Bethlehem diary, describing Lawatsch's demise, death and burial and honoring her life and work as a significant female leader devoted to Christ.

As a teenager Lawatsch fled to Herrnhut as a refugee from Moravia, where she had sustained beatings and "other things" while caring for her mother and sister imprisoned for their faith. Later nicknamed "Ave-Mammy" by the children in the Bethlehem nursery, Lawatsch began her church career working with children, specifically as governess to Heinrich XXXI Count Reuss ("Ignatius") in 1733. She had such a profound impact upon the small child's spirituality that Zinzendorf was compelled to observe one of her lessons during which he "fell on his knees and led the hour with her." The following year she became governess to Anna and Maria Agnes von Zinzendorf. Lawatsch quickly assumed increasing responsibility within the church: vice eldress of the single sisters' choir in Herrnhut (1737); eldress of the married women in Herrnhut (after her marriage to Andreas Anton Lawatsch in 1738); then vice general eldress for the women of all Moravian communities (1740), a position she sometimes shared with Anna Nitschmann.

In 1752 she moved to Pennsylvania with her husband where she served as eldress of the married women in Bethlehem and Nazareth, and furthermore oversaw with spiritual welfare of all Moravian women in America, making official visits to many Moravian communities and Indian missions and participating in various synods. Prior to her death in 1760 of tuberculosis she ordained at least twelve women as deaconesses in America.

Due to her significant position within the church, the minute details of her death were recorded. The diarist recorded her daily decline beginning on January 12, and emphasized her preparation to meet her Bridegroom (Christ), her willingness to leave her fate in God's hands, and her ability to die "happy and blessed" in anticipation of joining the heavenly congregation. Uncanny premonitions of her death are described, including Lawatsch's vision of a friendly Christ separated from her by a small room, "which he would soon bring her through." Prior to her death she gave precise instructions for the preparation of her body for burial, and—shockingly—ordered her sick nurse to retrieve her personal diaries and letters and burn them in front of her eyes. Touching images of Peter Böhler weeping at her bedside and her husband keeping vigil are included.

Lawatsch died at last on January 20. At her viewing she was dressed in a white robe belted with a red sash (typically worn by male leaders), and for her burial she received a fresh white robe embroidered in red with the daily text, *Your heart shall live forever* (Psalm 22:26). 800 people attended her funeral from Bethlehem, Nazareth and

other country congregations. Her walnut casket was carried by 24 bishops and deacons of the church, followed by 15 groups encompassing all the Bethlehem choirs, a contingency from Nazareth, and a musical chorus accompanied by violins and trombones "playing alternately." After her burial a lovefeast was held in the Saal whereby her portrait was displayed and a cantata composed and sung to honor the "blessed Ann Marie . . . kissing the hands, feet and side of the dear Lamb for all eternity."



Sources

Memoir of Anna Maria Lawatsch in the Bethlehem Diary 1760, p. 26-38; 63-106; *Dienerblätter; Gemeinnachrichten*, December 19, 1758. Image: Anna Maria Lawatsch, by Johann Valentin Haidt (Moravian Archives).