

This Month in Moravian History

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Lost at Sea, But Not in Our Hearts: Ernst Hermann Reichel (1861-1910)

In Herrnhut's cemetery or God's Acre, only one monument is dedicated to an individual person. The monument does not honor Zinzendorf or another well-known leader of the church, but rather Ernst Hermann Reichel, today a relatively unknown man. Reichel, a member of the Unity Mission Board, died in a shipwreck off the coast of France while traveling to Paramaribo, Surinam, on an official visit in 1910. This year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of his untimely loss. His death shocked and saddened many Moravians on both sides of the Atlantic due to the horrific circumstances of his demise and the feeling that he was taken in "his very prime, at the summit of his energy and usefulness," a mere 49 years of age.

Prior to his sudden death, Reichel's life was marked by success. In 1861 Reichel was born in Zinzendorf's manor house in Berthelsdorf, the son of Bishop Gustav Theodor Reichel, a member of the Unity Elders' Conference, and later its president. He attended the Moravian boarding school in Niesky and the Theological Seminary in Gnadenfeld, where he later served as professor after graduating from university in Berlin in 1889. In 1897 he was called to the pastorate of the Moravian congregation in Koenigsfeld, a small resort town in the Black Forest. Here Reichel was known as a powerful orator and published a collection of sermons. Although viewed as highly competent and popular, he never displayed any personal "desire or ambition, other than that of preaching the Gospel of the Savior." His talents, however, soon drew him into the larger Moravian arena. At the synod of

1905 he was elected to the Directing Board of the German Province, where he was charged with the oversight of the leper asylum in Jerusalem, and in 1906, he was elected to the Mission Board.



The Synod of 1909 stressed a move toward independent mission fields, and Reichel was assigned to facilitate this transition in the complex field of Surinam, comprised of missions to a variety of cultures (Creole, Hindustani, Chinese, Javanese) in various stages of maturity. His reputation as a "logical thinker" and "skilled administrator" possessing "delicate tact" made him the perfect (and unanimous) choice for this appointment. On January 21, 1910, he departed Amsterdam on the Royal Dutch steamer, *Prins Willem II*, along with two clerks destined for service in the Moravian mission business, Kersten & Co. in Paramaribo. When the steamer failed to

arrive in port on February 7, initially no one panicked. However, as weeks passed, anxiety about the steamer's fate grew until March 16, when wreckage of the ship washed ashore in France and its fate was finally known.

During the General Synod of 1909 Reichel had occasion to befriend many of his American colleagues. In published memorials in *The Moravian* Reichel was described by these peers in particularly sentimental terms: "genial, gentle, joyous, gracious, sunny, magnetic, tender and deeply sympathetic, giving to every one his due, offending no one." Paul DeSchweinitz described him as "one of the most loveable men in the entire German Province." Bishop Leibert perhaps summed Reichel up best: "true as steel, good as gold, loving and cordial in everything, he was needed everywhere, his loss will be felt by everybody." As church leadership was left reeling from this keen loss, Bishop Hamilton recollected with irony Reichel's final words to him at the Herrnhut railway station: "He never yet mistakes hath made in His vast government."

Sources

Hartmut Beck, *Brüder in vielen Völkern: 250 Jahre Mission der Brüdergemeine* (1981); "Dienerblätter." *Missions-Blatt*, May 1910; *The Moravian*, February-May, 1910.