

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 65  June 2011

Zinzendorf's Exile at Ronneburg Castle in 1736 and the Establishment of the Pilgergemeinde

"The lamp burns bright although it is small." So Christian David described the spirit of the early Pilgrim congregation (Pilgergemeinde) assembled at Ronneburg Castle in the Wetterau region of Germany in June of 1736. This month marks the 275th anniversary of Zinzendorf's move to the Ronneburg on June 12, 1736, following his exile from Saxony, and the subsequent establishment of the Pilgrim congregation.

In the 1730s Zinzendorf and his young religious community gained both friends and foes as the Moravian movement spread across Europe. Mounting opposition led to Zinzendorf's banishment from Saxony on March 20, 1736, while he and his wife traveled in Holland. The new Saxon King Frederick Augustus III banished Zinzendorf in absentia following a complaint from the Saxon Baron Huldenberg of Neukirch that his vassals had been enticed away from his service by Zinzendorf to join the "fanatics" at Herrnhut.

Rather than be disheartened, Zinzendorf embraced his refugee status, comparing it to Christ's earthly journey. "I have learnt by experience that there is happiness in being at home everywhere, as He was who passed most of His life as a pilgrim and in exile." In this spirit Zinzendorf established the Pilgrim congregation, a small group of his closest followers set on a vast evangelistic campaign to find and make visible a community of awakened souls drawn from all denominations. He announced, "the time has come to gather the Pilgrim Congregation and to preach the Savior to the whole world. Our home will be that place where at the moment our Savior has most for us to do." Over the next ten years Zinzendorf engaged

in mission across Europe and America while in exile, followed by the ever-present Pilgrim congregation, comprised of his wife, Erdmuth Dorothea, and a core group of church leaders that came and went according to their missions. Its members lived communally and were unsalaried, either self-supporting or receiving support through Zinzendorf's estates, gifts or loans. Each member was prepared to "go anywhere at any time for any purpose in the service of the Lamb."

For a time Ronneburg Castle served as the home base of the Pilgrim congregation. It was a half-ruined castle located in Wetteravia, a poor region east of Frankfurt, which due to its poverty welcomed tenants of various religious views. According to Hamilton, the Ronneburg was a "wild and forbidding place" inhabited by fifty-six families considered social outcasts. Christian David considered it uninhabitable, but Zinzendorf saw the potential for Christian mission, even denying a seemingly better offer of refuge from the nearby town of Gelnhausen: "I listened to their nice compliments...and then went confidently to my wild palace," which he described as "very splendid for a disciple." Within a few days Zinzendorf started preaching, distributing bread and alms to the poor and setting up schools for the local children.



View of the Ronneburg, 1848, drawing by an unidentified American Moravian (MAB).

Although Moravians retained the Ronneburg for a while, Zinzendorf remained only until the end of July 1736; his wife, children and other members of their circle moved out in October. A group of single men continued to live there and Zinzendorf returned on occasion. Another notable event at the Ronneburg was Zinzendorf's first episcopal act as a newly ordained bishop: the ordination of Peter Böhler on December 15, 1737. Zinzendorf's lease agreement for the Ronneburg can be found at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem.

Sources

Sources: Hahn and Reichel, *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüder*, (1977); Hamilton & Hamilton: *History of the Moravian Church*, (1967); A.J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf, The Ecumenical Pioneer*, (1962); Spangenberg, *Life of Nicolaus Lewis Count Zinzendorf*, translated by Samuel Jackson, (1838).