

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 66  July 2010

Cornelis Schellinger, Moravian Financier

Thanks to a group of dedicated wealthy sponsors, Zinzendorf was able to found congregations and missions all over the world. Who were these financiers? One of them was Cornelis Schellinger, a Mennonite from Amsterdam, who became the owner of Zeist, the Moravian center in the Netherlands. His 300th birthday is this year.

Cornelis Schellinger was born on August 21, 1711, in a Mennonite family in Amsterdam. He made his fortune as an iron merchant and on July 18, 1736, he married Sophia Centen (1717-69). His older brother Jacob had been in close contact with the Moravians ever since he met August Gottlieb Spangenberg during his first visit to Amsterdam in 1734. After meeting Zinzendorf two years later Jacob was baptized in the Moravian Church. Jacob financed the founding of the first Dutch Moravian settlement, Heerendijk, in 1736. Initially Cornelis did not show much interest in the religion of his brother but in 1742 we read that Schellinger was “completely won for the Savior.” He joined the newly founded Dutch Moravian mission society and he, together with his wife, became involved in the Moravian congregation at Amsterdam. Zinzendorf now wanted to use Schellinger for one of his big plans.

The congregation at Heerendijk had been struggling for many years. In 1745 the Moravians decided to move this Dutch settlement to another location where condi-

tions proved more favorable. Gnadenthal, a stately home with an estate near Cleves, seemed to offer a suitable environment. Cleves was just outside the Netherlands but the spoken dialect in the area was Dutch. Furthermore, it was Prussian territory and the Moravian Church was fully recognized in Prussia. Zinzendorf thought Cornelis Schellinger to be the right person to purchase Gnadenthal and allow the Dutch Moravians to settle there.

In April of 1745 Zinzendorf discussed the matter with Schellinger in Amsterdam. Together they traveled to Gnadenthal to inspect the house and estate. Both parties seemed satisfied with what they saw. Zinzendorf returned to Germany and Schellinger went back to Amsterdam. From Amsterdam he wrote a letter to the count stating he wanted to purchase Gnadenthal in order “to live there in true brotherly love” together with other Moravian brothers and sisters. Although Schellinger had indicated his willingness to purchase the estate near Cleves, the project never materialized.

On his way back from Gnadenthal to Amsterdam, Schellinger passed through Zeist, a small village located just a few miles east of Utrecht. In Zeist he must have looked at the grand mansion that was for sale. The manor house of Zeist was built during the 1680s and was surrounded by spectacular formal gardens. The last owner

had died in 1742 and the manor had been for sale ever since. The beauty of Zeist and the idea of becoming lord of the entire Zeist domain made Schellinger change his mind. Instead of Gnadenthal, he purchased Zeist in August of 1745.

The Moravians, somewhat surprised by the sudden change of plans, soon began the construction of the congregational settlement: choir houses, as well as a number of private houses—all in a grand style similar to the manor house. The inhabitants of Heerendijk and some of the Amsterdam Moravians moved to Zeist. Zeist became the center of Moravian activity in the Netherlands and has remained so until this day.

Schellinger enjoyed his new position as lord of Zeist. Moravians, on the other hand, were worried their settlement would be at risk should Schellinger ever change his attitude towards the Moravians. They were living in Zeist at his mercy. A solution was found in 1767 when Schellinger sold the house and estate of Zeist to Marie Agnes von Zinzendorf, who held the estate as proprietor on behalf of the Moravian Church. Schellinger and his wife continued to live in the Zeist community until they passed away; Sophia in 1769 and Cornelis in 1778. The house where they lived the last decade of their lives is still called the “Schellinger Huis.”

Sources

Image: silhouette of Cornelis Schellinger, courtesy of the Unity Archives in Herrnhut. Source: Peucker, *'s-Heerendijk: Herrnhutters in IJsselstein* (Zutphen 1991).