

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 69  November 2011

Abraham Roentgen, Moravian Furniture Maker (1711-1793)

This year marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Roentgen, world renowned furniture maker and devoted Moravian. We know much about Roentgen's life from his memoir and a book written by his son, Ludwig; both sources were composed after his death. Roentgen was born January 30, 1711, in Mülheim (now a district of Cologne), Germany, and learned the furniture making trade from his father. Ludwig Roentgen described his grandfather as a Lutheran "fanatic" and his grandmother as a "pious, exemplary Christian." This devout upbringing set Abraham on a quest for a pious life which led him to the Moravian Church.

Roentgen began traveling around Europe as a journeyman when he was twenty years old. He reportedly learned from the "best masters of his time" in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague, and then sailed to London when he "could learn no more" on the Continent. In London his career soared as he was in demand and "richly rewarded" for his fine marquetry, engraving and mechanical expertise. This success and money however nearly caused his ruin as he succumbed to what he called "youthful lust" and "temptations of the opposite sex."

Roentgen experienced a spiritual awakening at St. Paul's Cathedral in London as he gazed at a sculpture of St. Paul on the road to Damascus above a door of the cathedral. He was so overcome with emotion that he fell to his knees and wept a steady stream of tears while thinking: "I am not worthy to lift my eyes to you, whom I offend with my sins." He realized then that he, like the sinner Saul (Paul), could only be saved through Christ's blood.

Not long afterwards Roentgen heard Zinzendorf preach in London and became acquainted with the Moravian community there. He was especially influenced by Peter Boehler, whom he credits with his conversion. In 1738 he left London to join the Moravians in Marienborn, Germany, and began to plan for life as a missionary. He married Susanna Maria Bausch in 1739, and after a few months left on a mission trip, but instead found himself stranded in Galway, Ireland. He returned to Germany and re-established himself as a furniture maker in the Moravian community of Herrnhag, where he produced furniture in the "English style" for the community's patron, Count Ernst Casimir of Isenburg-Büdingen, and the neighboring aristocracy.

After moving to the Moravian community of Neuwied in 1750 Roentgen's career blossomed, but in the next decades he experienced financial hardship due to the economic uncertainty caused by the Seven Years' War. Although Roentgen's workmanship was beneficial to the church in seeking noble patronage, his financial instability was an embarrassment. In 1756 church leaders wrote, "It may be necessary to drop this family before they go bankrupt." Further strain between the church and Roentgen ensued in 1768 when he and his son sold furniture through a lottery to avoid another bankruptcy. Roentgen however remained faithful to the church throughout his life and retired to the widowers' house in Herrnhut in 1785; he later died there in 1793.

His son, Ludwig, described him in the following manner: "Because of travel associated with the production of his furniture, he developed acquaintances in many circles,

both large and small, which raised his spirit out of the narrow sphere of bourgeois life, and likewise, the narrow-minded ideals of the Moravian Church at that time. This gave him a versatility, an elegance, a noble-mindedness, and a toleration and kindness toward all men that was rare for his time, and indeed is still rarely found."



Sources

Portrait of Abraham Roentgen (Kreismuseum Neuwied, Germany). Sources: Lebenslauf of Abraham Roentgen (R.22.36.81, Unity Archives, Herrnhut; Ludwig Röntgen, *Das erste Buch meines Lebens*, Rotterdam: J. Van Baalen, 1845; Heidrun Zinnkann, *Roentgenmöbel aus dem Bestand, Museum für Angewandte Kunst*, Frankfurt, 2005.