

This Month in Moravian History

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Zinzendorf's Death in Herrnhut: May 9, 1760

After a relatively short illness, Count Zinzendorf, leader and founder of a worldwide religious movement, passed away in Herrnhut on May 9, 1760. His death occurred 250 years ago this month and will be commemorated by many people around the world. In this issue of This Month in Moravian History, we will follow the official newsletter of the Moravian Church, the *Gemeinnachrichten*, of 1760. This report was read in all congregations around the world. The count's last days on earth were reported in a style and with words reminiscent of the traditional readings during Holy Week. Thus, Zinzendorf's death was paralleled with the death of Jesus.

Although Zinzendorf was already feeling ill, he attended a Sabbath lovefeast on May 3, 1760 in Herrnhut. When a letter from North Carolina was read about the new community of Bethania, Zinzendorf was very upset to hear that non-Moravians were allowed to live there. "He protested against this with such force that those who heard his words would not forget them for the rest of their lives." It would be Zinzendorf's last public address.

Despite growing weaker, the count tried to keep up his work schedule during the following days. He corrected the Daily Texts for 1761, met with the leader of the Single Sisters, and visited his wife, Anna Nitschmann, who was also very ill. "He did not eat much, almost nothing and complained about increasing thirst and drank several glasses of water." Zinzendorf had trouble sleeping because of a pulmonary edema. The main leaders of the church took turns sitting at his bedside. "Today was a very hot day and when someone lamented

that Papa [Zinzendorf] had to stay in bed in such heat, he answered he did not know of any heat and he did not feel any pain either." The coughing hindered Zinzendorf from talking. Long-term friend Friedrich von Watteville sat with him and played the cittern for several hours.



Zinzendorf on his deathbed, miniature grisaille found in a souvenir book owned by his granddaughter, Anna von Schweinitz, née von Watteville (1754-1813) (MAB). A similar image is owned by the Unity Archives in Herrnhut.

On May 8 it is reported: "Today was the most cheerful day of his sickness. He said to Johannes [von Watteville] and other visitors: 'I love you all so much. I am so delighted. We are together like the angels in heaven—as if we were in heaven already!'" That afternoon he finished the 1761 Daily Texts, and when his secretary "kissed his hand on the completion of this task, little did he know this would be the thanksgiving on behalf of the entire church for all of his writings."

When alone with David Nitschmann later that afternoon, Zinzendorf asked him: "My dear David, what has He done during our lifetime? Could you have imagined at the beginning the Savior would do so much as

we can see now in our congregations, in the diaspora and among the heathen? I intended only to find a few first fruits, and now there are thousands!" That evening his speech began to slur and he suffered another attack of edema.

"For the Brethren's Church May 9 was the unforgettable day our Lord let his disciple enter into His joy and permitted him to rest from his labor at His wounds." Zinzendorf called for his son-in-law, Johannes von Watteville, to discuss with him some "pressing matters." He spoke: "Well, my dear Johannes, I will go home now. I am ready and I am all right with my Lord and He is satisfied with me. He does not need me here any longer, and so I am ready to go to Him. Nothing stands in between."

He called for the children of the congregation but when they came, he was not able to speak. "He looked at them kindly and greeted and blessed them with a nod of his head."

There were about one hundred people in his room and in the adjoining rooms. "It was at the end of the ninth hour when the edema ended and the Disciple [Zinzendorf] laid back his head and closed his eyes."

When Anna Nitschmann learned of the death of her husband she said: "I have the most blessed prospect of you all. I will be with him soon." Zinzendorf was buried in God's Acre in Herrnhut on May 16. His widow died on May 21.

Sources

Account of Zinzendorf's last days, in *Gemeinnachrichten (Jüngerhausdiarium)*, May 1760, ms. available in most Moravian archives.