

# Amish Beginnings: Three Centuries of Migration

by David Luthy, 1988

The Amish, residing today only in the United States and Canada, are one of the few minority groups to have escaped the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great "cultural melting pot". Because they have been able to retain a visible group identity, the Amish have become the focus of many books, magazine articles, newspaper accounts, sociological studies, and even a very popular movie. World attention was drawn to the Amish in 1985 by *Witness*, a Hollywood film produced by Paramount Pictures.

Since too often what is written about the Amish is not accurate, the question remains in many people's minds: "Who are the Amish and when did they begin?"

## Swiss Anabaptist Origin

The Amish trace their origin to Switzerland and the Protestant Reformation which swept Europe during the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Their spiritual forebears – the Swiss Brethren – rejected not only many doctrines of the ancient Roman Catholic Church but also many tenets of the newly established Swiss Reformed Church. Because the Brethren did not recognize the baptism of infants as valid – baptizing only adults upon a confession of faith – they were nicknamed "Wiedertäufer" in German or "Anabaptists" ("rebaptizers") in English. They preferred, however, to call themselves "Brethren".

Other doctrinal beliefs which set the Swiss Brethren at odds with the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church were their rejection of military service and any form of personal physical defense and their refusal to swear an oath. They also believed in and practiced a spiritually disciplined life and excommunicated any deviant members.

Immediately after their establishment as a separate church, the Swiss Brethren were persecuted by the religious and civil authorities who in that era were closely linked as Church and State. The first of the Swiss Brethren to give his life for the Faith was one of its founders – Felix Manz. He died as a martyr on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1527 when he was drowned in Zurich by the authorities.



On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1527 the cantons of Bern, Zurich, and St. Gall issued a joint mandate condemning the Anabaptists.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Switzerland they were hunted down as if they were violent criminals instead of peaceful, non-resistant Christians.

In Canton Bern, where the majority of the Anabaptists forebears of the Amish lived, the death penalty was used against the Swiss Brethren until 1571. The authorities ceased using it because its harshness was causing many citizens to become sympathetic with the Anabaptists. The abolishment of the death penalty did not mean, however, that the persecution had ended. The Bernese government continued to capture and imprison Anabaptists. Some died as martyrs from the awful conditions in the dark dungeons of their long confinement.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mennonite Encyclopedia: "Bern" 1955, Vol. 1, p. 287

Imprisoned Anabaptists were frequently visited by clergy of the State Church who tried to persuade them to give up their faith. If after a length of time this did not bring about the desired recantation, the prisoner was tortured. If he still remained steadfast in his faith, he was taken to the border of the canton and was never to return. But the prisoner usually had a family living in the canton, so he slipped back into the territory under the cover of darkness and returned home. Often after a period of time he was captured and banished a second time. Sometimes his entire family was banished with him. The family's property was confiscated by the government and the family sent on its way with what clothing each person could wear or carry. One historical record states that if stones could shed tears, they would have wept while witnessing such a scene of confiscation and banishment.<sup>2</sup>

A form of persecution, considered by many as worse than death, was the selling of Anabaptists as galley slaves.<sup>3</sup> Prisoners were taken to Italy where they were sold as slaves to pull the oars on the galleys. The Bernese government used this form of punishment several times, especially for banished Anabaptists who repeatedly returned to the canton. Two Swiss Brethren – Hans Lüthi (a minister) and Niklaus Baumgartner – from Canton Bern are known to have died while galley slaves. Several others lived through the experience and either escaped or were released after a number of years in slavery. This inhuman penalty was not meted out very often by the officials of Canton Bern because of the protests from private citizens and even other nations.



The condemnation of the Anabaptists by the Bernese government included even their thick hymnal, *Auss Bund*, which could not legally be printed within the canton. It had first been published in 1564, greatly expanded in 1583, and slightly enlarged in 1622. The Bernese government forbade its continued publication so that between 1622 and 1809 there were eight editions (printed undoubtedly in Basel) without a date, printer's name, or printing location appearing on the title page.

## Migrating to Alsace

The Swiss Brethren lived as best they could in beautiful, mountainous Canton Bern. Even though the religious and civil authorities were very intolerant of them, they had no desire to migrate elsewhere even when banished – Canton Bern was their native homeland. Besides, they knew of no country which would grant them religious freedom, having heard that Anabaptists in other countries were also being persecuted. They gathered for secret worship services in houses, barns, forests, and caves.<sup>4</sup> Many times they must have thought of Jesus's words: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head". (Matthew 8:20)

However, by the middle of the seventeenth century a door of hope opened for the persecuted Swiss Brethren. It came as a result of a very destructive war – the Thirty Year's War. The war had begun in 1618 as a religious struggle between German Catholics and Protestants. After a few years it also became a political war and involved many of the nations of Europe (but not of Switzerland). What is now known as modern Germany served as the main battleground.

<sup>2</sup> F. Friesen: *Material Accompanying the Ausbund*, 1977

<sup>3</sup> John Horsh: *Mennonites in Europe*, 1950, p. 109

<sup>4</sup> David Luthy: *The Amish in Europe*, Family Life, March 1973, p. 10-14

Many battles were also fought in neighboring Alsace which today is part of France but then was a German-speaking area.

After thirty years of fighting, the war finally ended in 1648. Germany was left in a terrible condition. Whole cities, towns, villages, and farms had been destroyed. More than half the people had died either from the fighting or from starvation. Two-thirds of the property had been destroyed. The people who survived saw their country in a most pitiable and helpless condition. Rulers paled at the thought of attempting to rebuild their ruined cities and estates.

Just before the war had ended, the Swiss Brethren began quietly crossing the Jura Mountains along Canton Bern's northern border and entered neighboring Alsace. This thumb-shaped country situated along the Rhine River had also been devastated during the war. Its ruler was glad to have the peaceful, hard-working Anabaptists settle in his territory and become renters of his large estates. When the peace which ended the war recognized only three religions for Europe – Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed – the ruler of Alsace paid no attention, allowing more Swiss Brethren to settle on his lands. Anyone who would help repopulate Alsace and rebuild its agriculture was welcome. He realized that the more people who lived in Alsace, the more crops would be grown and the more taxes and rent he could collect.

During the next fifty years many Swiss Brethren found a haven of religious tolerance in Alsace. Some of the emigrant's family names were:<sup>5</sup>

Bachmann	Graber	Lehmann	Müller	Schneider	Wenger
Bigler	Haueter	Liechti	Neuhauser	Sommer	Wittmer
Blaser	Joder	Luginbühl	Reusser	Stauffer	
Eicher	Kauffmann	Lüthi	Richard	Stoll	
Eymann	Kropf	Mosimann	Roth	Ummel	

The Swiss Brethren settled exclusively in the southern half of the country known as Upper Alsace which was still independent of French rule. Not allowed to own land, the rented estates where ever possible. When they met for Sunday worship services once or twice a month, it was generally at a different farm and a long walk for most. Because they lived scattered over a large area, it is difficult today to pinpoint exactly where the congregations were. But using certain towns as central points, it can be determined that eight congregations were established: Markirch, Ohnenheim, Ribeauville, Muntzenheim, Jepsheim, Colmar, Rheinfelderhof, and Pulversheim.

### ***Migrating to the Palatinate and the Lorraine***

Another country into which the Swiss Brethren migrated at the end of the Thirty Year's War was the Palatinate, an independent territory adjoining Alsace at the northern end. It, too, had been damaged and depopulated during the war. Its ruler was eager for farmers to replenish the land. Some Swiss Brethren settled there as early as 1650, but many more came during 1671 when a particularly severe persecution took place in Bern and Zurich. That year an estimated 700 emigrated from Canton Bern to the Palatinate.

When asked why they had not fled sooner, the emigrants gave two reasons: Despite persecution their membership had bloomed like a rose among thorns; and it was difficult to think of moving to an unknown land and leaving behind beloved relatives, even if not of the same faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Mathiot and Roger Boigeol: *Recherches Historiques sur les Anabaptistes*, 1922, p. 15-158

Most of the Swiss Brethren who settled in the Palatinate were poor in material things, for they had been forced to leave their property behind. The Anabaptists in Holland – followers of Menno Simons and thus called "Mennonites" – heard about their poverty and sent aid.<sup>6</sup> They themselves had suffered severe persecution a century earlier but now were tolerated by the Dutch government and financially able to help their brethren.

Several Dutch Anabaptists visited the Swiss Brethren in the Palatinate. Among them was Tielmann van Braght, a Mennonite bishop, who in 1660 had compiled *Martelaers Spiegel*, a volume of more than 1'200 pages relating the history of the Christian Church and containing many accounts of Dutch Anabaptist martyrs. Included also were some accounts of Swiss Anabaptist martyrs. Eventually the huge volume became a standard devotional book in Amish and Mennonite homes, being translated into German (1748-1749) as *Der Märtyrer Spiegel* and into English (1836-1837) as *The Martyrs Mirror* with editions in both languages.

The third area into which the Swiss Brethren migrated after the Thirty Year's War was Lorraine. This independent region with a German-speaking population bordered France to the south and Alsace to the east. The Swiss Brethren may have located there directly from Canton Bern but more likely their lone congregation near Salm was an outgrowth of the congregation near Markirch in neighboring Alsace.

### ***The Amish Division***

By the 1690's the Swiss Brethren from Canton Bern had established congregations in Alsace, the Palatinate, and Lorraine – the largest number residing in Alsace. Quite a few, however, remained in Canton Bern, living in the lonely valleys of the Emmental, in the vicinity of Thun, and in the Bernese Oberland. Persecution and migration had reduced their membership, but congregations yet existed. It is not known for certain in which year the young Swiss Brethren bishop, Jacob Amman, migrated from Canton Bern to Alsace; but his name appeared there by 1696 in the records of the Markirch congregation.<sup>7</sup>

During 1693-1697, Jacob Ammann and his fellow ministers in Alsace were involved in disputes with their fellow ministers in the Palatinate and Switzerland concerning religious doctrine, practice, and discipline. Already in 1660 the Alsatian congregation had adopted the *Dortrecht Confession of Faith* which had been ascribed to by an assembly of Dutch Mennonite ministers in 1632 at Dort, Holland. Its *Eighteen Articles of Faith* were drawn up to doctrinally unify the Dutch Mennonites. It is ironic, then, that the acceptance of the *Confession* by the Alsatian congregations in 1660 eventually led to disunity with the Brethren in the Palatinate and Switzerland.

One major point in the controversy in 1693-1697 was Article XVII: *The Shunning of Those Expelled*. The Dutch Mennonites and also the Alsatian Swiss Brethren felt that an excommunicated member should not only be avoided spiritually at communion but also socially in daily living. Members should not eat with fallen members nor have business dealings with them. In other words, social contact was to be strictly limited so that the congregation would be kept safe from evil influence and the fallen member would be called back to repentance.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Eshleman: *Historic background and annals of the swiss and german pioneer settlers of southeastern Pennsylvania and of their remote ancestors*, 1917, p. 120-121

<sup>7</sup> Jean Ségué: *Les Assemblées Anabaptistes-Mennonites de France*, 1977, p. 130

This teaching was based on a number of Scriptural commands, especially *I Corinthians 5:11* which states: "*But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no not to eat.*" (King James Bible)

The doctrine of "*Shunning*" ("*Meidung*" in German) was just one of a number of points of disagreement.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Swiss Brethren ministers in the Palatinate and Switzerland did not accept Article XI of the *Confession* which called for service in imitation of Jesus who washed his disciples' feet and said "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14). Both the Dutch Mennonites and the Alsatian Swiss Brethren practiced this teaching spiritually and literally.

Some of the Swiss Brethren ministry also criticized Jacob Ammann and his Alsatian co-ministers for conducting communion services twice a year, in the spring and fall, rather than the traditional practice of annual communion. Amman's reason for this innovation was quite simple. He explained that if a member was ill and could not partake of the annual communion and had to wait until the next year, that meant actually that two years elapsed from the time the person had last partaken of communion. Amman and his followers felt that two years was too long. Thus, by instituting semi-annual services, members could partake of communion at least once a year.

There was an undercurrent of other problems beneath the waves of contention. Amman called for stricter plainness and uniformity in attire, stressing a group identity rather than individuality – a concept which would yet typify his spiritual descendants three centuries later. He also felt that men should not trim their beards lest gradually they be shortened and finally shaved off. Time would prove that his observation was correct.

Those who sided with Jacob Amman became known as "Amish". The other side of the division became known merely as "Mennonite". It was in Alsace that Jacob Ammann found his largest following. All eight of the congregations there with twenty of the twenty-two ministers sided with him.<sup>9</sup> The single congregation in Lorraine did too. But in the Palatinate the Amish had just one congregation near Kaiserslautern while the Mennonites had the others. The same situation prevailed in Switzerland where the Mennonites were in the majority. The Amish had only three congregations – all in the Canton Bern: Erlenbach, Thun, and a tiny one in the Emmental. As the eighteenth century began, the Amish had a total of thirteen congregations in four countries in Europe.

### **Forced to seek new homes**

Just before the turn of the century, some Amish began leaving Alsace and returned to their native Canton Bern. A famine had occurred in Alsace, and the region where most of them resided had been seized in 1681 by Catholic France during the reign of Louis XIV. The Amish began to wonder if the religious privileges they had enjoyed in Alsace for fifty years would continue much longer. So, some families began returning to Switzerland.

For almost two centuries the Bernese government had tried to rid the canton of Anabaptists. Now they were faced with the fact that some who had left were actually returning. Utterly frustrated, the Bernese officials wrote a letter on Mai 17<sup>th</sup>, 1699 to the Dutch East India Com-

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<sup>8</sup> David Luthy: *The Amish Division of 1693*, Family Life, October 1971, p. 5-7

<sup>9</sup> John B. Mast: *The Letters of the Amish Division of 1693-1711*, 1950, p. 5-7

pany which was the world's foremost shipping and trading enterprise. The officials asked if it would be possible to ship the Anabaptists (Amish and Mennonites) to some remote island in the East Indies!<sup>10</sup> No one knows what the company replied, but the proposal was never carried out.

Eleven years later in 1710, the Bernese authorities did put fifty-eight Swiss Brethren forcibly onto a ship with the intention of sending them to America. When she ship reached Holland, the Dutch officials put an end to the deed by freeing the captives. Most of them settled in the Palatinate but some bravely returned to Canton Bern.

By 1711 hundreds of Amish and Mennonites were in prison in Bern. The government was desperate to know what to do with them. When the Dutch representative in Bern suggested that the prisoners be freed and allowed to migrate to Holland, the Swiss government eagerly agreed.<sup>11</sup> The journey, which was financed by Dutch Mennonites, began on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1711. The number of Swiss Brethren who arrived at Amsterdam was approximately 530. The great majority were Amish, for many Mennonites had left the ships at towns along the way and gone to their brethren in the Palatinate. The Amish formed two congregations in Holland near Groningen and Kampen.

During this same period of persecution and banishment, some Amish migrated from their homes in the central and southern portion of Canton Bern to the Jura Mountains near the border of France. Some located in the semi-independent Bishopric of Basel while the majority settled in the duchy of Neuchâtel which at that time was owned by Prussia.

Thus, in 1712, Amish congregations were found in Alsace, Lorraine, the Palatinate, Holland, Neuchâtel, and Canton Bern.

### ***Expelled from Alsace***

In 1712 the main concentration of Amish was still in Alsace, but this was soon to change. In the years since Alsace had become part of France, the problem of military service had arisen. Twice Jacob Ammann had presented a petition to the French government asking that his members be exempted. Both times the government had agreed, providing that the Amish paid a special tax each year. Local citizens resented that the Amish had been exempted and were, perhaps, envious that the thrifty farmers had the money with which to pay the tax. Local officials were pressured to write to the King in Paris. The secretary of state responded in a letter dated August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1712 stating that Louis XIV would in no way tolerate the Amish living in his territory since they did not belong to one of the three religions specified in the peace treaty at the end of the Thirty Year's War. He further stated that the Amish should be expelled from Alsace and not be allowed to settle anywhere in France.<sup>12</sup>

The royal order of expulsion came as a very heavy blow to the Alsatian Amish. Had they known that Louis XIV would die three years later in 1715, they might have been slower to leave the region. For his successor, Louis XV, did allow that a certain number might remain, providing the group did not become larger.

As a result of the 1712 order of expulsion, some Amish moved into Lorraine forming three new congregations: Welschland, German-Lorraine, and Bitscherland. Another region in

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<sup>10</sup> Delbert L. Gratz: *Bernese Anabaptists*, 1953, p. 56

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Müller: *Geschichte der bernischen Täufer*, 1895, p. 252-299

<sup>12</sup> Ernst H. Corell: *Alsace*, The Mennonite Encyclopedia, 1955, Vol. 1, p. 70

which some settled at this time was the tiny country of Zweibrücken situated in the south-west corner of the Palatinate. It may also have been at this time that a second congregation was founded in the Palatinate near the town of Essingen.

Another territory into which the Amish migrated at this time was Montbéliard situated a little west of the southern tip of Alsace. It was yet independent of France and ruled by the Duke of Württemberg. The Amish settled on his estate as renters. He allowed them quite a bit of religious freedom, exempting them from the oath and military service. He also permitted them to have their own school and cemetery. The Montbéliard congregation increased to that families moved into the surrounding territory with congregations eventually forming near Belfort and Florimont.

### ***Migrating to America in the eighteenth century***



Still another country which received Amish settlers during the years following the expulsion from Alsace was America, ruled then by England. Such a distant migration was a major undertaking involving a perilous ocean crossing and pioneer living standards. By 1737 enough Amish had located in America that a congregation could be formed in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

By 1770 more had settled in Pennsylvania, bearing such typical Swiss surnames as:

Beyeler <i>Beiler</i>	Fischer	Hürzeler <i>Hertzler</i>	Kurtz	Müller <i>Miller</i>	Treiler <i>Troyer</i>
Blank	Gerber	Joder	Lantz	Oesch <i>Esh</i>	Zug <i>Zook</i>
Bütschi <i>Beachy</i>	Gnägi <i>Kanagy</i>	Kaufmann	Lehmann	Schmocker <i>Smucker</i>	
Dätwiler <i>Detweiler</i>	Herrschberger	Kempf	Mast	Speicher	
Erb	Hostettler	König <i>King</i>	Mischler	Stutzmann	

### ***Settling in Germany***

Germany in the eighteenth century was not a single united country but consisted of several hundred independent and semi-independent cities and states. Some like Prussia were very large while others contained only a few square miles. Since the Amish spoke a German dialect, it was only natural that they searched among its states for a haven of toleration.

As early as 1732 Amish farmers had migrated into the independent state of Waldeck.<sup>13</sup> Three congregations developed near the towns of Waldeck, Wittgenstein, and Berleburg. Then about 1780 others began moving into Hesse-Cassel which bordered Waldeck with a congregation being founded near Wiesbaden. Around 1800 a number of Amish families located near Marburg in the duchy of Hesse-Nassau southwest of Waldeck but not adjoining it.

About 1808 some Amish began settling in Bavaria, one of Germany's largest states. Maximilian Joseph, King of Bavaria from 1799 to 1825, had known and liked Amish tenant farmers in

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<sup>13</sup> Hermann Guth: *The Amish-Mennonites of Waldeck and Wittgenstein*, 1986, p. 9

his native Zweibrücken. Thus, he invited Amish from France to settle in Bavaria. Three congregations were established near Ingoldstadt, Regensburg, and Munich.

Finally around 1810, Amish located near the town of Neuwied in the Rhineland which was a province of Prussia, the largest German state.

During the years when the Amish were moving into Germany and establishing congregations, war was once more raging in Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, set out in 1796 to seemingly conquer all of Europe. The Napoleonic Wars lasted until 1815 when France was finally defeated. Prussia then became the leading power in Europe. The number of independent states in Germany had been greatly reduced, and there was talk on Prussia's part of reducing them still further until there was one unified German nation. The Amish felt very uneasy with the situation. Prussian militarism and nationalism frightened them. Once more they left their homes and migrated.

### ***Migrating to the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century***

The Amish who yet remained in Alsace, Lorraine, and Montbéliard – which territories were no longer independent of France – were also uneasy about the European situation. The French Revolution in 1789 and the years of turmoil and wars following it caused them to also think of moving elsewhere. Their eyes turned toward a continent far away, a land most of them had previously never seriously considered – North America.

While less than 500 Amish had crossed the Atlantic Ocean during the eighteenth century, the first half of the nineteenth century saw some 3'000 migrate to the United States and Canada. Besides locating in Pennsylvania where there were a number of well-established congregations, the later emigrants settled in newer, less-populated areas:<sup>14</sup>

State	Town	County	Year
Ohio	Trenton	Butler	1819
	Richville	Stark	1820
	Louisville		1823
Ontario	Wilmot	Waterloo	1824
New York	Croghan	Lewis	1831
Illinois		Tazewell	1831
		Woodford	
		Bureau	1835
		Putnam	
Maryland	Long Green	Baltimore	1833
Iowa	Charleston	Lee	1840
		Jefferson	1843
	Henry		
	Marion	Washington	1851
	Pulaski	Davis	1854
Indiana	Leo	Allen	1847
	Berne	Adams	1850

<sup>14</sup> David Luthy: *The Amish in America: Settlements that failed, 1840-1960*



Finally after three centuries of migration in Europe, the Amish have found total religious freedom and full-citizenship in the United States and Canada. In 1987 they number some 100'000 living in twenty states and one province where they have 735 congregations<sup>15</sup> and 647 private schools.<sup>16</sup> Never for a moment forgetting their Anabaptist heritage, they still gather – men with flowing beards and women with white head coverings – for Sunday worship services in private homes or barns rather than in churches. And having retained their German dialect, they yet sing from their ancient hymnal, *Der Ausbund*. No longer must it be published anonymously as in the days of persecution – thirty editions having been printed in the United States from 1742 to 1986. The Amish – Bernese yet in spirit and in surname – have found a homeland.

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<sup>15</sup> Ben J. Raber: *The New American Almanac*, 1988

<sup>16</sup> Martha Helmuth: *1986-1987 School Directory*, Blackbord Bulletin, 1986