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## The Woman Who Had a Baby in Jail

In 1637 they caught the minister, Hans Meyli, of the Horgerberg, in the foothills of the Alps south of Lake Zürich in Switzerland. They tried him and threw him into the Oetenbach tower dungeon, but after forty-three weeks he escaped. The Protestant authorities (of Zwingli's Reformed Church) were furious. They did continual house searches and harrassed the believers. Thirty *Täuferjäger* (Anabaptist hunters) found out where the Meylis lived and with bare swords and firearms stormed the house, hacking through doors and throwing things around to find the escaped minister. They cursed and swore and blasphemed God. When they realised that he was not there, they took his two sons, Hans Jr. and Martin Meyli captive. Martin was already married. They grabbed his young wife and tied her up tightly. Her name was Anna. She had a fourteen-week-old baby, which they took from her and gave to people from the state church to keep. They took the captives to Zürich, tried them and locked them up in the Oetenbach tower.

They took off the men's clothes and chained them to the stone floor for twenty weeks, torturing them with spiders and caterpillars. They gave them just enough food and water to stay alive. But the prisoners would not recant. After one year the two men escaped "with undamaged consciences" and after two years, on Good Friday, 1641, Anna escaped as well. They fled

from place to place, but the people betrayed them. Anna fell into the hands of the *Täuferjäger* again and was imprisoned, first at the Oetenbach, then in the Spital jail. This time she was expecting a baby. They left her shackled until the pains of labour came upon her. Then they loosened her to have the baby, and “with the help and grace of God” she escaped. After her husband found her they fled across the mountains and through the Black Forest to Germany.

That woman, Anna (Baer) Meyli, was my ancestor, eleven generations removed.

When I repented and chose to follow Christ at the age of fifteen, I wanted nothing more than to follow her on the narrow way to eternal life. But I did not know for sure which way that was.

We lived among twenty-five kinds of Mennonites and Amish in one densely populated county in southern Ontario. From the most acculturated to the most traditional, every type of Anabaptism was represented there. Every group claimed to be a legitimate heir of the “Anabaptist heritage” we all had in common, and they all claimed to be travelling on the narrow way. But their claims became jumbled in my mind.

During the 1950s, my parent’s group (which had left another one in 1917) suffered a deep inner crisis. My parents then took part in establishing the group in which I was born and spent my childhood. When I was 13 we entered another time of turmoil, and my father became the lead minister of a new brotherhood. Then, two years later, we practically disintegrated, and now, by the time I was a young teenager, we were not attending meetings at all.

That a true remnant of the true church still existed somewhere—surely somewhere—among the Anabaptists’ descendants, we felt certain. My father spoke of making a trip through the eastern United States and visiting all groups that looked like possibilities for a safe church home. But we had little hope that the trip would do any good. All our lives we had lived in a

constant struggle over lifestyle issues—what to allow, or what to reject as “worldly” and of the devil. My parents never wavered in their dedication to Anabaptist beliefs. They kept on looking for something suitable among the groups. One of my sisters had contact with the Amish. But I turned, on long Sundays at home, to the Anabaptist writings. . . .

Late on a cold afternoon in 1975 a Städtler (a man from the city) stepped from the Canadian winter into the dim light of our horse stable where I was working. His car had slid off the road and he had gotten stuck. I pulled him out with the heavy team and he gave me fifteen dollars. Another man gave me ten for the same reason, and I began to look forward to fresh snowfalls. With my money I bought the *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, the *Aelteste Chronik der Hutterischen Brüder*, the *Ausbund*, the *Artikel und Ordnungen der Christlichen Gemeinde* and all other Anabaptist-Mennonite books I could afford. A friend of our family, J. Winfield Fretz of Conrad Grebel College, took a special interest in my studies. He gave me valuable books and directed me to Mennonite college archives in the United States and Canada. Another Mennonite professor, Frank H. Epp, became a personal friend and inspiration to me. He let me “work” on his unpublished manuscripts and introduced me to Anabaptist social concerns.

Then I met a World War II refugee from Yugoslavia. This man, living in the city of Kitchener, Ontario, knew history and owned a wealth of rare and untranslated Anabaptist writings. He was not primarily a historian, nor a scholar, but he spent hours with me, a fifteen-year-old, intensely, earnestly, calling me beyond what I knew of the Anabaptists into strange and exciting territory.

It was in my contacts with this man, and while reading the literature he gave me from the Anabaptists in southern Germany and Moravia, that I began to sense, for the first time, a clue to their secret. I began to sense an incredible power behind the

things they wrote, the power of a *new world coming, a time when men are free . . . and we shall be his people and He shall reign in peace!*

Beyond the darkness and gloom of four centuries, beyond the tunnels of the traditional, the historical, and the academic, I began to see a strange new light in the accounts of those who went out “with shining eyes” to die. Dimly at first, but slowly and surely it dawned on me as a young teenager, that this light from heaven would surely break forth again, and that *someday a strong wind would blow and the raindrops and clouds would be gone . . . and the darkness would leave me, and the sunshine would see me, as I walk . . . as I walk . . . a new road.*

That new road has been longer and rougher and narrower than I expected, and it is definitely taking me to where I did not plan to go. It is taking me from the shelter of a long-established “background” into the raw uncertainty of going out, not knowing where to or with whom. It is taking me from the riches of my “goodly heritage” into dreadful loneliness—the forsaken loneliness of the cross, where all men are equally poor. Out of the familiar traditions of my childhood into a frightening, totally unknown world, where “backgrounds” do not count, where terrible consequences must be taken in stride, where glances into the dark night ahead make the blood run cold . . . with visions of hatred and rejection, of high-sounding religious denunciations, of fierce opposition from family and friends, a world of coercion, of fire-arms and murder, of castle dungeons and bloody torture, of treachery and terror and death.

This new road, I have discovered, is the road of the woman who had her baby in jail.

Do you want to be on it?

If not, you should forget about finding the secret of the strength and stop reading this book.