

Letters of Mennonite Clergymen.

The following letters were read at the January meeting of the County Historical Society. They were written by two prominent Swiss Anabaptists at the request of the Dutch Anabaptist Commission of Inquiry, at Amsterdam, April 25, 1710.

They are not only valuable in themselves as being direct and unimpeachable evidence of the manner in which the people known as Mennonites were persecuted even in Switzerland, but also because with them were banished fifty-five men and women of the same faith, who came to Pennsylvania in 1717. As most of the names are familiar in Lancaster county to-day, it is quite probable they found their way here, and were among the early settlers in this county. It might prove a work of much interest if some one were to undertake the task of hunting up the records of these people, if such a thing is possible. The story would prove an interesting chapter in our local history.

F. R. D.

Benedict Brechbuhl's Account.*

On January 12th, 1709, the Government of Bern sent seven soldiers, with an usher, early in the morning to my house. It frightened us so that my wife and I tried to hide. I hid myself under a hay-stack. They searched my

*Benedict Brechbuhl, von Trachselwald, teacher and elder in Mannheim. He had been exiled previously from Bernese territory, and had gone to Germany. He returned to fetch his wife and children, when he was again taken prisoner and condemned to be transported to America. Eventually, he went out to Pennsylvania in 1717.

house all through. At last they came around to the hay and thrust their swords into it; they soon discovered me. Then I came out, and they seized me, and asked me my name, and if I was a preacher, which I willingly acknowledged. They then took me into my room, where two ushers gave me a smart blow on the ear; they bound my hands behind my back and took me out of my house. My children cried and wept so pitifully that a heart of stone, as the saying is, would have been melted. But the soldiers were very glad they had caught me. They took me thence to the town of Bern, with two other brothers, put us in prison, and that during the very long cold winter. There we lay bound. When we wanted to be warm, we had to pay dear for the wood. After six or seven days they brought me into another prison. There they chained me with iron chains. The government had given 100 thalers to the men who had caught me, which same money my people had to pay out of my own private means. After two days they brought me again to the tower, placed me in a small cell, and chained me with an iron chain. So I lay eighteen weeks long. Then they took me with all the other prisoners to the Spital. There we had to work carding wool from four o'clock in the morning till eight in the evening. They fed us on bread and water, but did not let us suffer in any other way. That lasted thirty-five weeks. For the last ten weeks the work was easier. The whole time of my imprisonment in Bern was one year, seven months and seven days. That was in the forty-fourth year of my age.

Melchior Zahler's Account.

In two years, 1708-9, the Bernese Government issued very stringent orders against the Anabaptists, or Mennonites, wherein it was forbidden

for any of their subjects, under penalty of losing their property and citizenship, to harbour or conceal any of us. It was ordered that immediate notice should be given to the minister, if a Mennonite were in the district. Rewards were offered of from 50 to 100 Reichsthalers, and all citizens were forced to swear an oath that they would deliver us up to the authorities. One evening, between 10 and 11, I wanted to fetch some bread and some wine for my sick wife; I was met on the way and asked if I was not an Anabaptist. I did not deny it, so they said they must be true to their oath, as they did not wish to perjure themselves on my account; otherwise they would not have betrayed me. They took me away, but I managed that time to escape, thanks to the help of a good friend.

Later on the Government ordered hostages to be sent from Bern to all villages where Anabaptists were supposed to be. They were kept in the town, at the expense of the several communities. This was in order that we should be hated by the landspeople; on this account many of us went to Alsace, to Mompelgard and to Neuenburg, where they lived in great misery, because everything had been taken from them.

About this time I went to Neuenburg. My brother-in-law and a very dear friend of mine sent to me to say I was to come back home. I succeeded in so doing, and went to this friend, who shewed me all friendship and love, and who wanted to give me back my two children, so that I could now take charge of them. I wanted to visit my brother and sister, and my other children, and, while I was there, my friend went to the minister and betrayed me, and told everything; when and how I came back. Everything he told to the minister. That same evening they

sent three soldiers, who took me prisoner, bound me, and took me to the vicar, who questioned me about my faith, about infant baptism, about taking oaths, about the necessity of bearing arms to defend one's country, about government, etc. I was taken in chains to Bern on February 27th, 1710. Previously, in 1706, I had been three weeks in prison and now in Bern I was shut up and chained by my right hand, and fed on bread and water. All this time I was in much trouble and sorrow, because I had been so miserably betrayed by my so-called friend, and then they had taken away my five children and my own property. Besides my children, they had taken 15,000 gulden from me, had exiled me from my native land, and condemned me to be transported to America, like a slave, with the following people, without giving me a penny for the journey: Hans Burki, Christian Sattler, Isaac Baumgartner, Benedict Brechbuhl, Jacob, Ulrich and Peter Zalfanger, Kaspar Bieri, Christian Fankhauser, Christen Berger, from Lauperswyl; Daniel Moser, from Langnau; Ulrich Schmied, from Langnau; Nicholas Blaser, from Lauperswyl; Peter Hofer, Christian Krahenbuhl, Samuel Reber, Ulrich Ellenberger, Durs Rohrer, Rudolf Stettler, Michael Aeschlimann, Nicolas Baltzer, Melchoir Zahler, from Fentigen; Mathys Krahenbuhl, Benedict Muster, Benedict Maurer, from Diesbach; Hans Berain, Nicolas Moser, Benedict Nussbaum, Peter Wuthrich, from Trub; Nicolas Luthi, from Lauperswyl; Peter Kohler, Heinrich Wenger, Christian Steiner, Hans Jacob, Jacob Schwander, Peter Thoneu, from Grentigen; Hans Gasser, Hans Stubet, Hans Rupp, from Ligriswyl; Hans Murdt, Nicolas Hager, Ulrich Fahrni, Hans Ramseier, Yost Kopfler, Hans Engel, Katharina Ebersold, Elisabeth Gerber, Elisabeth Gerber, from

Lignan; Elisabeth Krieg, Elisabeth Steiner, Anna Schenk, Barbara Fahrni, Margaret Engel, Margaret Aeschlimann, Catharine Ellenberger, Magdalena Eichenberger, Barbara Frutiger.

The above-named men and women had to suffer many persecutions and hardships on account of their religion. After they had been in prison for many months, they were put on board some boats at Bern and shipped down the Aar and the Rhine to Nimwegen, where they were freed by the intermission of the States General and their Mennonite friends in Holland. A few years later many of them went to Pennsylvania.

FANNY CARPENTER.

The above information was translated from Muller's "Bernese Anabaptists."

Author: Diffenderffer, Frank Ried, 1833-1921.

Title: Letters of Mennonite clergymen / by F. R. Diffenderffer.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Zahler, Melchior.
Brechtbuhl, Benedict, 1665-
Mennonites--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.
Mennonites--Switzerland.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society,
1901-02

Description: [39]-45 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 6,
no. 3 & 4

Notes: Translated from Muller's "Bernese Anabaptists"

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.6

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

=====

+++++

Institution Name

Institution Address

Institution Phone Number

Institution E-mail Address