Brother Hantsch Visits the Mennonites--
A Moravian Missionary Diary of 1748

Translated and Edited by Don Yoder

From a missionary standpoint, the most active Pennsylvania Dutch religious group before the Revolution was the Moravians. In the 1740's, from that throbbing heart of the Moravian missionary impulse, Bethlehem on the Lehigh, they sent out preachers who bore the good tidings of salvation through their "Beloved Lamb" to all the "sleeping" Germans in Eastern Pennsylvania.

Although their desire was solely to "awaken" slumbering souls in the established churches, and although they accomplished much in reviving a more spiritual type of Christianity among many of those with whom they worked, the religious leaders of the other churches soon became suspicious of this magnanimous move on the part of the Moravian Brethren. When Zinzendorf's attempt at uniting all Christian forces in eastern Pennsylvania (1742-1748) failed, and they were hemmed in by suspicious and jealous leaders of other denominations, they withdrew into their German shell in the 1750's and devoted their missionary talents henceforth to the American Indians.

From 1748, when the Moravian missionary campaign among the German-speaking population of eastern Pennsylvania was still in flower, comes the following Journal of George Hantsch of His Missionary Labors among the Mennonites. The late Rev. Dr. William J. Hinke discovered the original German copy on his visit to Bethlehem in 1914. For translation purposes I used Dr. Hinke's own longhand German copy, now on file in the Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, at Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa.

On my research visit to the Bethlehem Archives in 1948, Dr. Schwarze the archivist was unable to locate for me the German original, but I was enabled to copy several letters of Hantsch, Spanenberg and others on Moravian missions among the Mennonites. These, with additional materials which I trust readers will send me about the Mennonites mentioned in Brother Hantsch's account, I expect to use in my definitive edition of the Journal, which is destined for publication in the Mennonite Quarterly Review.

From the standpoint of its pictures of the Mennonite communities of Lancaster County, Pa., two centuries ago, this document is of unparalleled historical importance. Will readers of Mennonite background kindly send the editor materials on any of the persons mentioned in the Journal, so that accurate identification can be made in the final edition? And don't let Brother Hantsch's spellings fool you—"Mäuer" is "Meyer," Kräuter the common Mennonite family-name Kreider, Jünriech is "Gingrich," Pachtmann is "Bachman."

Farewell, Bethlehem!

On the 15th of June (O.S.), 1748, I, George Hantsch, Senior, left our beloved Bethlehem, on the visit which the Dear Savior and the dear Brethren had destined for me among the Mennonites. The thoughts of this visit lay very heavily upon me. I felt depressed and shamed in regard to my spiritual state, and how I, miserable Hantsch, should come to sufficient grace. I left with dear Brother Schiel and Brother and Sister Nixdorf.

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On Friday, June 21, we arrived in Warwick, and there I saw my dear Brother and Sister Reimer. We had a genuine case of rejoicing, for they had not been long in Warwick, and neither had my old Father. On Saturday the 22d, I remained at their house, and had a good rest. Brother Schel had with the Nidort to Lancaster.

On Sunday, June 23d, Brother Nieblie delivered his farewell sermon in Warwick, in which he announced that he would go with the ship to England. The service, he baptized a child, to the parents’ salvation. There was a very large crowd present, some even came from town. In the afternoon Brother Schel held a song-service (Ringenstille) in the schoolhouse, with many blessings. There were many people present at that occasion.

On Monday the 2d, we officially began our visit among the Mennonites, travelling back at home with the ship, this time with our dear Brother Hanchs. First we visited J. Ulrich Hilter, who had been with us at church on Sunday. We met him as he was moving out in his meadow. He had no objection to being friendly toward us, yet the conversation did not extend far.

Secondly we visited N. Bauman—too friendly to us, and seemed accused, to lead us to the beloved Lamb. Nor did he object to our visit. We visited also on this day some others, who were not able to talk with him most reasonably. He even urged us to visit him again, when he had more time.

Our third stop was at Peter Levine’s, to whom also our visit was quite pleasant. The Levine pressed themselves quite friendly toward us, and we are to visit them again.

Fourthly, we visited Old Mother Lehn, a widow, where we were especially welcomed. She was also friendly toward us, and would bear any of the beloved Lamb. Our visit with her was quite pleasant with us. Indeed she wished that still more of the hungry souls would embrace the same grace.

Fifthly we went to Cornelius Lehn’s, where we did not stay long—we were not in the mood for some other visit.

Sixthly, we went to visit Jacob Lehn, but he was not at home. Several of his family and friends sat with him somewhat of our beloved Lamb.

Venturing Out Alone

On Wednesday, June 22, Brother Schel and I left home, so that I had to proceed on my visiting adventure. I was a bit sorry to go alone, yet I hungered to go with my Lord and my Lamb to stand by me. I first came to George Reimer’s, who put me on the road to Ulrich Jirich’s, who was quite friendly toward me and at least tolerated my mission.

Secondly I went to Jacob Leiders, who was quite friendly toward me in a new house. Then to Hannes Reiff’s, where also I could say nothing. Then to Hans Reimers, whom I was quite certain, but at his place I could not understand for very well for me—I was able to speak quite freely with him of our beloved Lamb. He and Joseph Reif and his father had stayed over night at his place; moreover, I had in his parlor.

My next stop was at Johannes Heger’s. But I did not stay long there—my visit was brief, as I had to hurry on to another place. I was taken in there. This visit went extremely well with me, and it pleased me in speaking with him of the beloved Lamb and his God.

The Dunkers Want to Argue

Thursday, June 23d, Rimer said if I would just visit his neighbor, I knew he would like to see him visit here. His neighbor was Heinrich Kurf, a Dunker [Täufer], by occupation a tailor. But as we have not at home, my next visit of some great and good to his wife. She wished her husband had been at home, for our visit would have been precious to him.

This woman is my cousin in Quaintenstille.

Because I had been so long at the Synod in Quiotenstille.

Next visit little Hansel Leeman, also his son-in-law, Jacob Friss. They proved quite friendly. I was able to talk with a little bit of him, of what that beloved Lamb had done for him.

We Are Used to Slander by New

Jacob Reber, whom we visited next, was also quite friendly to us. He made me friendly with me, and we could not understand for very well for me. He wished his wife to see me with her joyfulness. She said she would visit him again.

At Heinrich’s, my visit went well for me. Although in the beginning he seemed not to know how to take my visit, I soon saw signs that it would not prove worthless.

Too Busy with the Harvest

When the next person I visited, showed himself friendly, but I did not stay long at his place, as he had little time to account of the harvest. So I went to a widow, Mrs. Michael Meiler’s, where however I could not see even a trace of spiritual life, so I left shortly.

To Heinrich Hanra I saw my visit was very precious. He had been awakened (erweckt) by Nieblie. My visit went well for me, although I was not of the Mennonites.

Towards evening I came to our dear Brother Schel, and told him I would go in Lancaster [Langeist]. I found them quite well, and was pleased to see our visit, it was so good to be with them. I stayed over there.

Sunday, June 25, 1748: The people in this neighborhood were all in the harvest fields. Although I did not stop I would find anyone at home. I got ready and went to Warwick to the house of our dear Brother Rimer and Schel. I stayed over night with them, and it was pleasant to be together, Brother Schel and Rimer came home at night from visiting of some of their people.

Brother Schel preached in Warwick, with grace and many blessings. There were people here from the town, including Brother Nidort. In the afternoon we concluded a blessed service in the schoolhouse. After that I went and with Brother Nidort into town, where at seven o’clock Brother Schel held a blessed song-service. There were very many people present. We remained until about twelve.

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No Special Call for Hans Horby

Monday, June 27, 1748: Brother Schel and I again set out on our visiting. First we went to see Hans Hirsch, preacher. He was not large
gain. His wife fed him, in

and he showed himself friendly toward us. He asked us what was the purpose of our visit. Did we have a special call for him? If so, he would just be free and let us talk to him. He told us that we had nothing especial, that we had simply come to visit him out of love, and to become acquainted with him. We stayed a few hours at his place, where we had a pleasant talk of things holy and in all love.

We took our departure, he accompanying us and proposing us to go to the house of Hannes Mier’s, who was also a preacher, but quite a poor man indeed, had he just known it. Yet he too was friendly toward us, but we could not understand for very well for us. He was a dear man and quite emotional and conscious for his soul. We pointed him to the Savior’s friend. His wife and children were also quite anxious to hear, so that our visit went well for us.

Tuesday, June 28, 1748: We went on further and came first to Heinrich Brenner’s. He was friendly toward us, yet we could not speak with him as we were not able to understand for very well for us. Then we went on farther to Johannes Furtman’s, where, however, we could not say very much. We went to see Brother Schel [Donensalle], where our pilgrimage stopped, because Brother Rimer had promised us a sermon on the following day.

Lancaster County Hospitality

Lancaster was a very pleasant place, and we were quite friendly toward us, and asked us if we were going to be visitors. We had here quite a pleasant meeting. We were all in conversation, so that we had hope that the dear Savior would not be left unprovided.

A Whole Family in the Harvest Field

We also wanted to visit Peter Reay, a preacher. He was not at home, but with his whole family was binding grain, because a heavy rain appeared to be on the way. So we proceeded on our tour to Warwick. On the way we stopped at a widow’s called “Long Mrs. Peter” [die lange Peter], her husband was a very poor preacher. She has five sons and a daughter, all with agreeable personalities. She was quite friendly toward us. At ten o’clock in the evening we got home to dear Brother Schel and Sister Rimer’s, where we had a happy reunion one with another.

Thursday, June 30, 1748: Because we expected to find almost no one at home on account of urgency of the harvest, I remained with the dear Brother Schel in Warwick a few days. But very often the Mennonites came to my mind. I thought of them constantly these days. If only they might be in mind the things that pertain to their souls.

Sunday, July 3, 1748: Brother Schel preached again in Warwick with many others. He said to the widow, “Who that has Ernte leide so sehr?” There were again some here from town. After the sermon Brother Schel went into Lancaster, and in the afternoon held a Song Service. Toward evening I came into town, after Brother Schel, because we still wanted to visit some people around this neighborhood.

Monday, July 4, 1748: We first visited Jacob Hochstatter. Although at first our acquaintance with him was quite unsavory, nevertheless they soon proved