The Moravian Archives at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

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Archives of the Moravian Church

MANY springs must mingle their waters before a stream is born. So the broad current of our American way of life has sprung from countless sources, remembered or forgotten. Not the least significant among them are the many different religious movements that have helped to make this country the land we know today. It is my privilege to speak about one of the smaller of these communions, the Moravian Church, and more specifically about the voluminous records it has created and preserves in the Moravian Provincial Archives at Bethlehem, Pa. Recognizing, as you certainly do, the claims of a church to the loyalty of its members, I hope that you will deal charitably with any unduly enthusiastic comments you may detect in this paper. Though I shall try to treat my subject objectively, familiarity with a specialized field often makes it difficult to view it in proper perspective. Yet, so far as I know, there are not many depositories of church records in our country that contain holdings of the scope or variety to be found in our own at Bethlehem. To say this is admittedly to stake out quite a claim. Let me try to justify it. You will be the jury.

Our library of books is not unusually impressive as to size. We have something over 7,000 volumes. Yet certain features of this collection bear underscoring. In the first place, I wonder whether there are many church libraries in this country with a nucleus of books that can be traced back to the middle of the eighteenth century. Our earliest catalog is dated 1751. At that time the Moravian library at Bethlehem contained 194 titles, and most of these are still on our shelves. Before the end of the century the collection included an interesting number of works on art, architecture, and medicine, besides those you would expect to find—volumes on theology, philology, literature, and travel. Further, our present holdings embrace a special library gathered nearly a century ago

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by William G. Malin of Philadelphia. His interest centered in the history of the Moravian Church, and he spent much time and money in acquiring books, among them many rare volumes that had survived the counter-reformation in Bohemia and Moravia, when Protestant literature was systematically hunted out and destroyed. Czech scholars have assured us that ours is a really important collection of early Moravian works.

Other visitors to the Archives have become enthusiastic about the paintings on the walls of the mezzanine floor, particularly a series of 32 portraits of eighteenth-century Moravian Church dignitaries, the work of Valentine Haidt. He was an artist turned clergyman, who preached with his brush. By preference he depicted scriptural scenes, especially those relating to the Passion. He spent the latter part of his life in America, from 1754 to 1780, and he is increasingly recognized as a noteworthy figure among colonial painters.

On the third floor of the building we treasure an important collection of early music, mostly in manuscript. This also dates chiefly back to the eighteenth century, when music served both as a channel for inspiration and as one of the few forms of recreation available in the frontier Moravian settlements. Many of these scores were composed by our forefathers; even more of them represent music they had learned to love in Europe and had painstakingly copied for the use of the little orchestras that nearly every Moravian center then boasted. This practice has resulted in the discovery of compositions that have been lost to Europe in the interval. Indeed, these yellowing pages are coming into their own again, and growing interest in Moravian music, vocal and instrumental, is being shown by authorities in this field.

But the main holdings of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem consist of the manuscript records of our church in America. Let me first briefly outline the number and range of these documents and then devote most of the time you have allotted me to a discussion of the motives and the forces which created them and which led to their preservation.

According to a fairly careful estimate, the main manuscript room contains more than 500,000 pages of material covering many fields of church activity. Besides these some 800 manuscript maps and sketches of Moravian locations or plans for buildings are stored in the map room. Still another room houses the records of the church in its business undertakings, particularly those carried on during the period of the so-called Economy—that is, roughly, the

first 20 years in Bethlehem. At that time those living there shared in an experiment of communal living; all served the church without thought of financial reward and were willing to have their industry support extensive Moravian religious activity among settlers and Indians. The community kept detailed records during these years, listing articles acquired or sold, goods produced, stocks kept, industries attempted, farms worked, and the like. Let me give you a list of the various occupations covered by these accounts during the eighteenth century: the apothecary and surgeon, the baker, the blacksmith, the brick and tile maker, the leather-breeches maker, the butcher, the carpenter and cabinet maker, the cloth weaver, the cobbler, the cooper, the distiller and dyer, the foundry operator, the fuller, the gristmiller, the gunstock maker, the hatter, the locksmith, the mason, the millwright, the oil miller, the pewterer, the potter, the nailsmith, the saddler, the saddletree maker, the sawmill operator, the silversmith, the skinner, the soap maker, the stocking weaver, the tailor, the tanner, the tawer, the turner, the wagon builder and wheelwright. Besides these trades or professions, accounts were kept for church activities proper and also for the farms, the forests, the dairy, the orchards, the stage coach, the ferry, the store, the taverns, and the schools. There are more than 700 manuscript books in this section of the Archives, together with drawers full of loose records. The total in this room alone must be more than 300,000 pages.

You must add to all of this the individual archives of the various congregations other than that at Bethlehem, the documents belonging to the denominational boards, and the records of the theological seminary, the college, and the church schools. A conservative estimate places our total manuscript holdings at more than a million pages.

Quantity is one thing, however, quality another. The real significance of the Moravian collection must rest not upon its size but upon the nature of its documents. In trying to indicate their character, I must touch briefly upon the history of the church and the kind of people who created these records.

Our church came into being in Moravia in 1457 or 1458. It began as a fellowship of earnest men and women, influenced by the teachings of John Hus and by the ideas of other even more radical social reformers, prominent among whom was Peter of Chelcic. In 1468 our forefathers organized an independent Protestant church with an episcopate of their own. They called themselves the Unitas Fratrum but were known commonly as the Bohe-

mian Brethren; their enemies by preference applied far less complimentary terms to them. The movement flourished. When Luther nailed his theses to the door of Schlosskirche at Wittenberg, the Brethren numbered in the hundreds of thousands, with churches spread throughout Bohemia, Moravia, and Poland. The Thirty Years War and the counter-reformation, however, brought all organized Protestant church life to an end in Bohemia and Moravia. Only here and there a religious underground continued to cherish the faith of their fathers.

Then in 1722 a few Moravian refugees fled across the border into Saxony, searching for liberty of conscience. They found refuge on the estates of Count Zinzendorf, who became their patron and later their leader in a renewal of the Unitas Fratrum, thenceforth known as the Moravian Church. Zinzendorf is much too complex to be adequately described by a thumbnail sketch. Whatever his shortcomings were (and he was unusually successful in stirring up opposition on the part of all manner of folk), there is no question of our church's lasting debt to him. He gave himself and his means without stint to the cause. He inspired his brethren, and through them the whole church of Christ, with a new sense of the urgency of the scriptural command to win disciples among all nations. It is now generally admitted also that Zinzendorf was two centuries ahead of his time in his commitment to the ecumenical ideal. Further, he had many creative ideas relative to the nurture of piety within a Christian congregation.

Zinzendorf had a sense of the importance of historical records. Early he gathered a considerable collection of family papers in the manor house at Hennersdorf. With the coming of the Moravian exiles, these increasingly took on the character of church archives. But later Zinzendorf himself became instrumental in scattering these documents. In 1736 the archives followed him into exile. Thereafter on his constant journeyings he often would take with him trunks full of papers, to have them available when negotiating with public authorities or influential private persons. In time the church archives were dispersed among centers like Herrnhut, Hennersdorf, Lindsey House at London, Geneva, Zeist in Holland, the Wetteravia, and other places. Remarkably enough, the person who first showed concern over this development was the Count's valet, one of the five young exiles from Moravia who bore the same name —David Nitschmann. In time he came to be distinguished from the other four by the title of Syndic and was consecrated a bishop of the church. Nitschmann did his utmost to keep track of the records

and to organize them effectively. In 1765 he spent some time in Bethlehem and put the American records in order. The catalog that he produced lists the manuscripts under 300 or more headings.

A trait of Zinzendorf's also helped to promote the creation of extensive records in the remote outposts of the church, such as Bethlehem two centuries ago. The Count earnestly desired to keep alive among the Brethren a strong unity of spirit, a quality the more essential to the church the farther afield its settlements spread. To help achieve this he developed a remarkable system of intercommunication. Each congregation was charged with keeping an official church diary. Usually one of the ministers served as diarist, carefully recording day by day any events that seemed to him to have importance for the community. Bethlehem and many other Moravian centers were then and long remained "closed communities"—that is, towns in which none but members of the church were permitted to reside or to own property or to conduct business. For this reason the civic no less than the ecclesiastical life was under church control. Its affairs too were duly chronicled in the diary, as were many happenings outside the settlement that affected it. Periodically a copy of the diary was dispatched to headquarters—headquarters being wherever Zinzendorf resided at that time. He employed a corps of copyists, who condensed the diaries as they came from congregations in the homelands and the mission fields. The abstracts taken from them were then combined to produce a record of the life of the whole denomination at any given time. Of this enough copies were produced to supply the major Moravian centers throughout the world. The Bethlehem Diary from 1742 to 1871 contains 33,352 manuscript pages. The entries were made in German until 1865; the change to English came on June 14 of that year. The Bethlehem set of the volumes containing the Unity Diary from 1747 to 1818 has approximately 93,500 manuscript pages.

The system outlined above enabled the Count to keep abreast of important developments throughout the Moravian fellowship, and he was one who believed in one-man rule. More important, as I have indicated, this interchange of news made for solidarity within the church. The significance of this can hardly be exaggerated. During the early days Moravian settlements were effectively divorced from the life of neighboring communities. The Brethren purposely paid this price in an effort to promote vital godliness among their membership and to keep them free from destructive influences. Because of such isolation the ties that bound them to

others of their fellowship were most important to them. Thus, for instance, in the early years the diary repeatedly records that the Moravians in Bethlehem observed the church festivals according to the Gregorian calendar, so as to be one in spirit with their coreligionists in Europe, even though in Pennsylvania most settlements still followed the Julian year. Bethlehem Moravians constantly hungered for word from overseas. Often in a single church service reports would be read from places as widely separated as Russia, Egypt, the West Indies, and South America. When war interrupted communications with the homelands, this represented a real trial. Note, for instance, this entry in the diary for 1777:

> On September 12, we had the great joy of receiving once again addresses and reports from Europe together with the Watchwords[1] for the year and letters from various Brethren and Sisters and of hearing of the well-being of the Schaukirks, Rusmeyers, and Gambolds. Provision for these hard times; God is faithful!

But, though the church diaries represent an important element in our collection (and the Archives has copies of similar diaries from most of the early Moravian congregations in America), they are by no means the only church records on our shelves. As can be expected, we have the vital statistics of Bethlehem, and of quite a number of our other congregations: births, marriages, deaths; also the records of ecclesiastical acts, such as confirmations, admissions to the Holy Communion, and ordinations. Since, for the first half century and more, American Moravians leaned heavily on the use of the lot for guidance, we have detailed reports of decisions thus reached. So too there are meticulous records of the services held and minutes of church boards, both local and denominational.

But another distinctive characteristic of the Moravian settlements has added appreciably to the number and the significance of our holdings: that is the organization of each congregation into the so-called "choirs." In them the membership was divided into separate sections. The married people formed one choir; the widowers another; the widows a third; the single men, the single women, the older boys, the older girls, and the children each made up a choir of their own. Special church workers had charge of each group and sought to provide it with spiritual guidance in terms appropriate to the age and station of those composing it. Each group had its own devotional life and its own regulations. In certain cases

[1] The Watchwords were collections of scripture texts for each day in each year, designed to help members of the church maintain unity in their devotional life as well. The first such manual was published in 1731; the book still appears annually.

a choir occupied a home of its own, where the members worked and ate together and shared joys and sorrows with each other. Each choir kept careful records, including diaries of its own. These too add color to the picture of the past.

Though our forefathers sought to be a people set apart, they could not, of course, avoid contacts with the authorities in the land. These became critical during the day of the Indian wars and again when the American Colonies threw off British domination. At that period the overwhelming majority of Moravians refused on conscientious grounds either to bear arms or to take an oath. This led to serious problems and to their repeated persecution by some military and civil authorities, though the records show a remarkable degree of understanding and broadmindedness on the part of the highest colonial leaders. These men had become familiar with the industrial output of Bethlehem, Nazareth, Lititz, and other Moravian centers, for Bethlehem particularly lay uncomfortably close to the lines of the struggle. When Philadelphia fell, some members of Congress found temporary asylum among the Moravians. At various times buildings in Bethlehem and Lititz were commandeered as hospitals. All this led to active correspondence between the church fathers and those who represented the Government. Needless to say, such letters now belong among our special treasures.

One other area of corporate activity has greatly enriched the Moravian Archives: the missionary enterprise of the church. Here the mission to the American Indians has special importance. It was administered from Bethlehem, though under the ultimate control of the church leaders in Europe. The missionaries had their headquarters in the American settlements, and this resulted in much coming and going. The Rev. John Fliegel recently spent some years cataloging and indexing about 50,000 manuscript pages in this section of our Archives. Among them are diaries, journals of travel, linguistic studies, observations on Indian customs, and the tragic story of the unending clash between settlers and redskins as the frontier advanced westward.

Second in importance to the Indian mission records are those describing the early evangelistic activity of the Moravians among German settlers in most of the 13 colonies. It is true that these documents deal primarily with the message given and the response it awakened in individuals and communities, but incidental comments at times shed light upon matters of specific interest to the historian. It must be admitted, however, that in this field one often

has to do a lot of threshing for a very limited amount of grain. Other Moravian missions are represented on our shelves, but less completely. Among them the missions in the West Indies and British and Dutch Guiana have provided the more significant collections. Labrador and Greenland are represented by only a few documents. In later years work among Eskimos in Alaska and Indian tribes in Central America has added to our holdings.

Finally, mention should be made of the personal records in the Archives. These include letters, incidental poems, birthday and autograph books, travel accounts, and the like. But easily the most significant items in this part of our collection are the autobiographical accounts of early Moravians. Of such accounts we have cataloged nearly 2,000. Many more, however, are incorporated in the diaries and in the archival collections of the individual congregations. During the eighteenth and well on into the nineteenth century it was customary for members of our church as they reached the eventide of life to set down their outstanding experiences. This was done in preparation for the memoir which would be completed by the minister and read at the funeral. The record was intended primarily as grateful testimony to the mercy of God, His providence, His faithfulness. It was the record of their *Gang durch die Zeit*—freely translated, earthly pilgrimage. Therefore, these documents relate chiefly to the realm of the spirit. It must be confessed that taken as a whole they contain a good deal of repetition and show a marked similarity to each other. Yet, religious convictions being a very important part of any man's life, this personal witness to the significance of such convictions in so many lives is itself historically valuable. Other historical facts are often to be recovered from these memoirs as well, so that research students in sociology have found their study rewarding. They have emphasized one unusual feature of this collection. The men and women whose experiences are thus described were not all leaders of the church or persons outstanding in their community. As a rule they were run-of-the-mill individuals, the common folk whom Lincoln said God must have loved. Apparently the social historian loves them too, for from these accounts he can draw a well rounded picture of what life was and meant for the average member of the church 200 years ago.

The Bethlehem Archives indicates the unusual value set upon historical records by early Moravians, for they preserved what most men thoughtlessly destroyed. I am impressed by a note in the

hand of Bishop John Ettwein, attached to the Bethlehem Diary for 1747. It was written in 1790 and reads in translation:

When the Synod at Herrnhut in 1789 discussed the Church Archives, mention was made also of the Bethlehem Diaries for the years 47, 48 and 49. The opinion was again expressed that they needed revision to make them intelligible and useful to posterity, because they were expressed in playful style and employed unusually many diminutives in accordance with the language of that time. I promised my Brethren to read through the diaries, etc., of those years, to make excerpts of what was useful and to get rid of the . . . [illegible].

In Nov. 1790, I read through most of the diaries for this purpose. However, I found it would be too considerable a task for me to make an abstract from them at this time. And to destroy the whole seemed a pity to me, although I do not know in what way they may serve posterity, except to provide evidence of the church life and activity of the Brethren.

This attitude is typical of the pious regard in which our forefathers held their church records. We cannot be too grateful for their having preserved them as they did. With the passage of time the records have been used in ways unimagined perhaps by those who first deposited them in the Archives. It is our task to cherish the treasure we have thus inherited, and to use it to the full.