What Happened After the First Wave of the Swiss Brethren?

Pastor Kessler of the state church of St. Gall was one of the strongest opponents of the movement, in an attempt to point out their deceptiveness, unwittingly gave a beautiful testimony of the faith of the Swiss Brethren:

> "Their life was a shining one, altogether pious, holy and blameless; they avoided costly apparel, despised costly food and drink, clothed themselves with coarse cloth, and covered their heads with broad felt hats. Their life and walk were humble, they carried no weapon, neither sword nor drink. They urged more righteous works than did the papists."

Before describing this vision it is well to note its attractiveness to the masses of Christians of the sixteenth century. Sebastian Franck, himself an opponent, wrote in 1531, scarcely seven years after the rise of the movement in Zurich:

> The Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered the land as it were. They soon gained a large following, and baptized thousands, drawing to themselves many sincere souls who had a zeal for God.... They increased so rapidly that the world feared an uprising by them though I have learned that this fear had no justification whatsoever.



In the same year Bullinger wrote "the people were running after them as though they were living saints." Another contemporary writer asserts that **" Anabaptism spread with such speed that there was reason to fear that the majority of the common people would unite with this sect."** Zwingli was so frightened by the power of the movement that he complained that the struggle with the Catholic party was "but child's play" compared to the conflict with the Anabaptists.

The dreadful severity of the persecution of the Anabaptist movement in the years 1527-60 not only in Switzerland, South Germany, and Thuringia, but in all the Austrian lands as well as in the Low Countries, testifies to the power of the movement and the desperate haste with which Catholic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian authorities alike strove to throttle it before it should be too late.

The notorious decree issued in 1529 by **the Diet of Spires** (the same diet which protested the restriction of evangelical liberties) summarily passed the sentence of death upon all Anabaptists, ordering that **"every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex should be put to death**

by fire, sword, or some other way." Repeatedly in subsequent sessions of the imperial diet this decree was re-invoked and intensified; and as late as 1551 the Diet of Augsburg issued a decree ordering that judges and jurors who had scruples against pronouncing the death sentence on Anabaptists be removed from office and punished by heavy fines and imprisonment.



Finding, therefore, that the customary method of individual trials and sentences was proving totally inadequate to stem the tide, the authorities resorted to the desperate expedient of sending out through the land companies of armed executioners and mounted soldiers to hunt down the Anabaptists and kill them on the spot singly or en masse without trial or sentence.

What Was the Worse Persecution During This Time Period?

The most atrocious application of this policy was made in Swabia where the original 400 special police of 1528 sent against the Anabaptists proved too small a force and had to be increased to 1,000.

An imperial provost marshal, Berthold Aichele, served as chief administrator of this bloody program in Swabia and other regions until he finally broke down in terror and dismay, and after an execution at Brixen lifted his hands to heaven and swore a solemn oath never again to put to death an Anabaptist, which vow he kept. The Count of Alzey in the Palatinate, after 350 Anabaptists had been executed there, was heard to exclaim, **"What shall I do, the more I kill, the greater becomes their number!"**

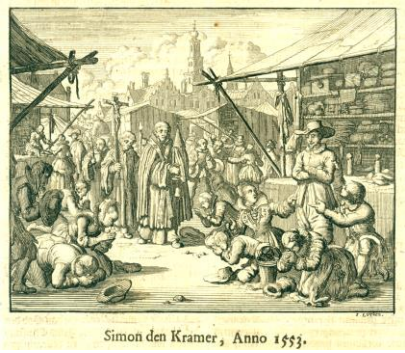
During this Time many of the Swiss Brethren and South German Brethren fled to Moravia or found little places scattered thought Europe that they could eke out a living.

Some rave souls stayed and faced constant threat of persecution.

The Anabaptists of Berne, Switzerland:

From earliest times Anabaptist was strong in Berne. It is evident from a letter written by Bullinger to the ministers at Bern that Anabaptists were there already in 1525. Following the lead of their fellow ministers in Zurich, The Reformers of Berne took immediate measures to stop the re-baptizers. They started the process by making a series of official mandates against all Anabaptist in their area.

1st Mandate:



On March 2, 1533, the Bernese senate issued another mandate, lamenting the continued spread of the Anabaptists, and calling upon them to receive instruction from the official clergy. If they refused to hear the clergy, they were at least to keep quiet and keep their faith to themselves. If they did so, they would be under the care and protection of the government. But if they refused, they would be imprisoned and fed on the income from their property as long as it lasted; thereafter the government would feed them on bread and water until they died or recanted.

Being Silent Not Enough:

On April 4, 1533, however, the government began to demand of those who applied for protection that they obey the mandates, that they go to the' state church services every Sunday, and that they have their children baptized.

2nd Mandate:

On Nov. 8, 1534, another sharp mandate appeared against "the Anabaptists and the papists." Three times each year, said the mandate, the communion service will be held. Anyone who does not attend for conscience' sake shall report to the pastor or cider. **Pastors shall perform all marriages**. Those who cannot subscribe to these regulations by oath shall leave the country at once. An appendix was added to this mandate on March 13, 1535, providing that Anabaptists and papists should be imprisoned for eight days in Bern to give them opportunity to consider taking the oath. If they refused, they were to be led to the frontier and threatened with execution if they ever returned, the men with the sword, the women by drowning.

Did the Protestant Reformers of Berne Execute Anabaptists Like in Zurich?

Unfortunately the reformers of Berne did persecute the Anabaptist like they did in Zurich—perhaps even worse. Old records in the Berne archives testify to these deaths.

Through an unusual opportunity there has been preserved a list of the Anabaptists who suffered the death penalty at Berne. Hans Lorsch , an Anabaptists prisoner, had the chance to go through the prison records of the Anabaptist prisoners. Reading from their files, Lorsch copied down a list of 40 Martyrs that were executed in the early days of the Anabaptists in Berne. From the first martyr Hans Hansmann who was drowned in 1529, to Hans Haslibach who was beheaded in 1571 reports of the martyrdoms are given. Some of the details are gruesome. There are even in some places that little details are given like the amount of money someone was paid for turning in an Anabaptist. This list was published in the Martyrs Mirror on page (Pg 1129-1130)



Hans Haslibacher:

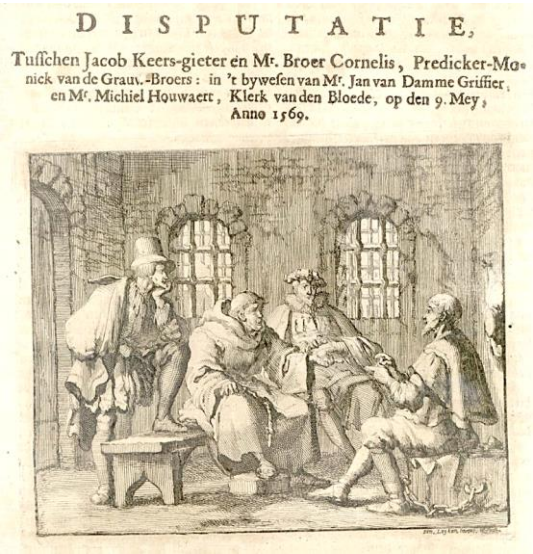
The last martyr in Berne was Hans Haslibacher. An Anabaptist preacher of Sumiswald in the Emmental, Bern, Switzerland, active as early as 1532, a participant in the great Bern disputation of 1538.

Haslibacher suffered severely for his faith. At first he was exiled and his property worth 500 gulden was confiscated. Once in 1571 he returned home to visit his son who was still of the Reformed faith. His son had to pay a stiff penalty just for letting him stay with him. Hans was executed by beheading on 20 October 1571. He was the last Anabaptist martyr in that canton. A vivid description of Haslibacher's imprisonment and death is given in a 32-stanza poem composed, as the last verse states, in prison by another Anabaptist prisoner. The poem reports that after torture and strong attempts by the Reformed preachers to cause him to apostatize, Hans

never gave in. After a day of torture Haslibacher dreamed that he would be beheaded, and that three divine signs would accompany his execution. Namely, his severed head would jump into his hat and laugh; the sun would turn crimson like blood; and the town well would give forth blood. The poet claims that all three happened.

Other Forms of Persecution:

Executions were not the only means of coping with the Swiss Brethren, however; the government also employed severe fines, total confiscation of property, long imprisonments, fearful torture, and banishment from the country.



What Rationale Did the Reformers Give for These Persecutions?

The occasion for these extreme measures was not fear of riot or a revolution-that is not mentioned. The reasons for the persecution of the Anabaptist were clearly over what the Reformers saw as a wrong view of scripture. One reports from a reformed preacher about the differences of the Anabaptist says:

> "Anabaptists do not attend the state church services because of the many sinners in the church; they will not participate in the communion services of the state church; they set up their own church; do not baptize their children; refuse all oaths; desist from litigation; do not participate in war; accept no governmental offices; wear no lace collars or ornamentation, which they regard as a sign of pride; speak slowly and sing softly; shun taverns, and baptism and marriage celebrations; go to market but little, and do not trade and barter much."

What Was the Response of the Swiss Brethren?

In an attempt to explain themselves, the Swiss Brethren submitted a memorandum to the Bernese government on Dec. 18, 1585, containing the following points:

> (1)The Brethren have the true faith and do not belong to any sect. They desire the Holy Spirit to be their judge.
>
> (2) The mandate which has been issued against them is contrary to the mandate of Christ and His Gospel, because no one shall use force upon another person in matters of faith.
>
> (3) They want to be obedient to the government as far as their conscience allows; but they want to leave to others the matter of fighting for their fatherland.
>
> (4) They reject infant baptism, but not without reason.
>
> (5) According to the institution of God they hold to marriage, the ban, and the Lord's Supper, just as Christ commanded, and request that they be allowed to hold to their faith.

Their explanation was not received.

Nevertheless, even through all of the terrible trials and persecutions Anabaptism continued to grow. The court records from this time period reveal the earnest that the reformers had for snuffing out the Brethren. For example:

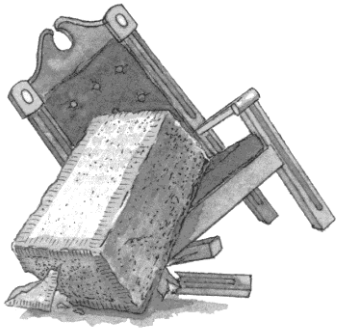
> "The constable of the Emmental was paid six pounds for locating Anabaptists; in Trachselwald the constable got two pounds, and in Signau eight pounds for "hunting" Anabaptists. It was reported that there were 300 Anabaptists in Rued."

You Can Run But You Can't Hide!

The persecution of the Anabaptists in Bern led many to immigrate to Moravia in search of peace. But the government didn't like this either. This led to a mandate dated April 15, 1592, calling upon the Bernese officials to imprison the Moravian missionaries. The property of those who left Bern was to fall to the government.

On April 3, 1610, the senate felt compelled to try to stop the secret exodus to Moravia. On March 6, 1690, the children of Anabaptist marriages which had not been solmnized by the state clergy were declared ineligible to inherit anything from their parents; the estate was to go to the government.

How Did the Common Person Feel About All of This?



In December of 1644, by decree of the civil authorities of Canton Bern, a mandate against Anabaptists was to be read at a specified time from the pulpits of a number of Bernese villages. The mandate declared that the offspring of marriages performed outside the state church were to be regarded as illegitimate. Defiant adults were to be jailed in Bern and their children assigned to the orphan's asylum. Teachers, preachers, and all other Anabaptist instigators were to be branded with a hot iron. Then the account says, "the day the mandate was read, at the very hour, a thunderstorm raged all over the country. In the church at Bern, a great stone fell on the chair of the Burgomaster and demolished it." "That proves God is on the Anabaptist side," the people said. This phenomenon created such fear in the hearts of the populace that the persecution of Bernese Anabaptist practically ceased for a number of years.

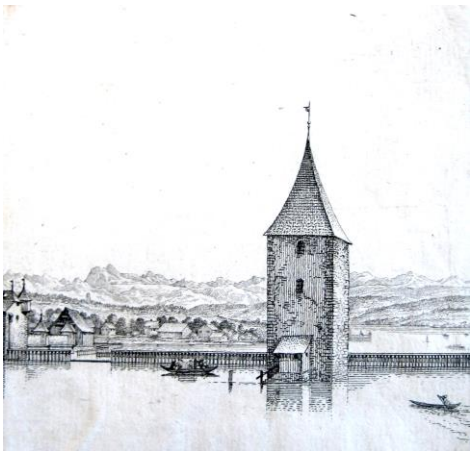
When Did the Reformers Stop Killing Anabaptists in Switzerland?

While the last "official" execution in Berne was in 1571 Zurich's last one was 1614.

Hans Landis:

A Swiss Brethren martyr, a preacher from Wadenswil in the canton of Zürich, Switzerland, was **imprisoned in the Wellenberg in 1608**. **After a few months his fellow prisoners managed to release him from the chains, and everyone escaped.** The others were soon captured, but Hans reached his native village. After this, another attempt was made to indoctrinate the Anabaptists to win them to the state church.

On 21 January 1613 the first disputation of the government with them took place at Wadenswil. It was fruitless, as was also the second one, held on 23 February. Seing that the Anabaptist of Wadenswil would not give up, Hans Landis was again put in prison with five other Brethren. In early August negotiations were begun. Landis remained "stiff-necked." **He refused to emigrate, saying that the earth was the Lord's; no one had authority to send them away out of the country; they were going to stay in the country.**



On 25 August 1613 all six Brethren were condemned to life as Galley salves. They were delivered to the French minister at Solothurn on the next day. But before they went, one last time they were given permission to emigrate, with a week's time to think about it. Three wavered and consented; **the others encouraged Landis to be faithful.** These three (Hans Landis, Galli Fuchs, and Stephan Zehender) were taken to Solothurn and lodged in prison to await transport. **But in three days they escaped!**



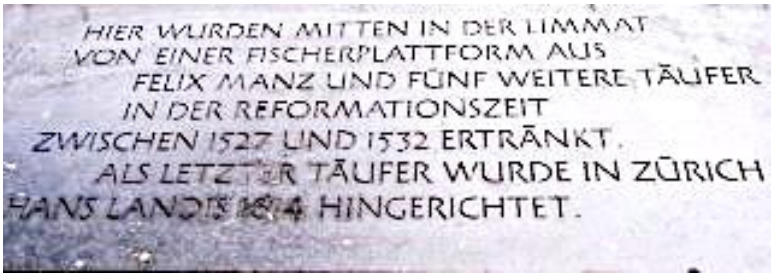
In December 1613 Hans Landis, having returned to minister to his flock, was again seized. In prison he wrote to his church and his friends. He asked his wife for the Confession of the martyr Thomas von Imbroich. **He was then tourtured and interrogated on the on the rack**. The decision of what to do with the old bishop was difficult. They gathered on September 29, 1614 to determine what to do with the "harmful, all-consuming, cancerous sect of the Anabaptists. The council consisted of 200 men. They heard the testimonies of the brethren that were captured. The brethren pleaded for toleration. The Council was not moved. The decision of what to do with them was difficult. They wanted to severely punish him but he was a godly man and well respected in the community. Some favored life imprisonment, others execution. The debate went way into the evening. Finally at "12 o'clock midnight a majority vote of 125 sentenced him to death. They were to **"bind his hands, lead him to the executioner's place**

and have him executed by sword." Perhaps wanting to avoid a crowd they rushed to have him executed the next morning. However their plan did not work. A crowd quickly gathered including his wife and children. The people were visibly moved.

Hans Landis had a stately figure, **"a long black beard mixed with gray and a manly voice." When he was about to be killed the executioner asked his pardon for what he was about to do; Landis replied that "he had already forgiven him; may God also forgive him; he knew very well that he must carry out the government's orders."** When his wife and children came to the place of execution with "sorrowful crying and mourning, to bid him at the end an eternal good night," he asked that they leave him, so that "his good resolution and his good courage for the death facing him might not be moved or hindered." In the Ausbund, No. 132, is a song of 46 stanzas commemorating his death. It begins "Ich hab ein schön neu Lied gemacht."

What effect Did His Testimony Have?

After the execution, at the next council meeting they realized that they had done a great wrong. They decided never again to execute an Anabaptist. Interestingly, three official reports of the events of the execution reads: "and so died the pious Hans Landis, a leader in the church of God.



The English translation of the inscription reads: *"Here in the middle of the Limmat River from a fishing platform, Felix Manz and five other Anabaptists were drowned between 1527 and 1532 during the Reformation. The last Anabaptist executed in Zurich was Hans Landis in 1614."*

This death of Hans Landis resulted in a rest in the persecution in Zurich for about 20 years

Did the Persecution Cease After Hans Landis?

The two decades between 1635-1655 were very difficult for the Anabaptists. While it was true that the reformers around Zurich stopped executions after Landis, there were however, no stop in other forms of persecution.