

The "Step Daughters"¹ of the Reformation in Switzerland and South Germany.

*Everlasting Father in heaven,
I call on you so ardently,
Do not let me turn from you.
Keep me in your truth
Until my final end.*

Margaret Capit

*To walk through your power into death,
Through sorrow, torture, fear and want.
Sustain me in this,
O God, so that I nevermore
Be separated from your love.*

Hymn of Annelein of Freidburg, drowned then burned 1529²

It was exciting to be part of a BWA Anabaptist/Reformation tour to historical sites in Germany and Switzerland where 16th century believers experienced God, taught, witnessed and sometimes suffered for their faith. To follow the footsteps of the trail-blazing Anabaptists was difficult. Unlike the Reformers, their Anabaptist cousins are not national identities in the lands of their birth, like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. For a Baptist pilgrim this was disappointing. Even more frustrating was the search for the women of the Anabaptist faith of the sixteenth century.

We celebrated the memory of pioneer Anabaptist Felix Mantz, at the Limmat River in Switzerland, where he was drowned for his faith. But Margret Hottinger, who shared the same prison cell and died for her faith, was not mentioned. We heard of the courage of Balthasar Hubmaier but his wife Elsbeth, drowned for her beliefs, was hardly spoken of. We were moved by the fortitude of Michael Sattler but learned that his equally brave wife, unnamed in the original records, was simply assigned the name "Margaretha". We are indebted to Canadian authors Snyder and Huebert Hecht, for helping make Anabaptist women known..

¹ The term "Step-Children of the Reformation" was used by W. Estep on the study tour and I have adapted it to represent the women of the Anabaptist movement.

² C. Arnold Synder, and Linda A Huebert Hecht, Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers, (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University, 1996), p.199

The Heart of Anabaptist Theology

While water baptism was the most vivid identifying mark of the Anabaptists, a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work in leading to faith in Christ and new life was evident. This was important, for the Spirit led both men and women to a living faith. The importance of the reading of Scripture, under the Spirit, led to extra-biblical revelations, dreams, and visions, granted to both women and men. While sometimes women in the Church of the ages received recognition, even sainthood, Anabaptist women faded into virtual obscurity. Living a life led by the Spirit of God was expected of women and men alike and sometimes led to radical social action, and often to martyrdom.

Personal responsibility was basic, which meant yielding to God and to the body of Christ on earth and often led to a spiritual "calling" and to prophetic activity. Anabaptist women often had prophetic leadership and were frequently the key to the movement's survival.

The Role of Women in the Anabaptist Movement.

The "calling of the Spirit" as a foundation for the Anabaptist movement was egalitarian and personal and so included women. They were expected to be faithful even under imprisonment, torture or threat of death. Bainton and Williams claim a "radical equality" between Anabaptist women and men while Clasen concludes that Anabaptists "showed no inclination to grant women a greater role than they customarily had in sixteenth century society." Records suggest that while Anabaptist women were not usually equal with men they certainly experienced considerable freedom of choice. Huebert Hecht and Weber agree that in the early days of the movement women had some equality and prophetic roles but as the early creative period passed their role decreased.³

³ See Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis:Augsburg, 1971); George H. Williams *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p.506-507

Jürgen-Goertz maintains that Anabaptist women were not of the literate elite but were nonetheless self-confident and able. They believed in the “priesthood of all believers.” He claims documentary evidence exists that women were engaged in “corner preaching, evangelizing and even baptizing” but this is not confirmed by Anabaptist sources.⁴ Women engaged in anti-clerical activities mocking the priests or muttering during sermons. The clergy to many women represented a world of inequality while Anabaptist visionaries such as Ursula Jost sought justice and equality.

Court testimonies have left a written legacy, even if written by enemies of Anabaptist women who themselves have left a written testimony in letters and hymns. (See the start of this paper.)

Women in the Swiss Anabaptist movement

The first Anabaptist congregation in Switzerland was in the village of Zollikon, near Zurich. Felix Mantz and Conrad Grebel were the first to preach, while George Blaurock started a baptizing ministry. When in 1525 the Zurich authorities sent an official to Zollikon to collect fines from the “re-baptized” he was met by very angry and stubborn women.

“The wife of the local overseer had been baptized, but refused to pay her fine.” Another woman joined her saying “If I were involved in this thing like the others, then we women would stick together and we would see if we had to pay the fines or not.” She continued to give the officer a tongue lashing “with many nasty words.” Others echoed her sentiments. Elsy Boumgartner added a common peasant complaint, “God created the earth for her as much as for milords,” indicating a class as well as religious struggle.⁵

⁴ Hans Jürgen-Goertz *The Anabaptists* (London: Routledge, 1996). P. 114

⁵ Hans Jürgen-Goertz, p. 253

Apparently women did not preach, baptize or preside at the Lord's Supper. But the women of Zollikon did have their say!⁶

The Women

Elsbeth Hubmaier

The wives of Sattler and Hubmaier were martyred but are hardly mentioned in their husbands' stories. A rare reference to Elsbeth Hubmaier was that after Hubmaier's martyrdom in 1528, "Elsbeth, who had loyally followed him on his long journey ... to Vienna, was drowned three days later in the Danube."⁷ However Elsbeth does receive more attention in Anabaptist Portraits. When Hubmaier was charged with sedition and insurrection in Walshut Elsbeth was taken to Vienna with him and questioned. After a few days the Hubmaiers were taken to the Kreuzenstein, an old castle, where they were charged with heresy, incarcerated separately and questioned under torture. Hubmaier recanted several times during his life but the persecutors said of Elsbeth "She was hardened in the same heresy, more constant than her husband."⁸

Margaretha Sattler

The gentleness and courage of Michael Sattler was noteworthy but little is known of his wife. In The Life of Michael Sattler we read of her arrest with her husband at Horeb, her first mention in the original sources. She is identified as "Margaretha, wife of Michael Sattler from Staufen." In Sattler's last letter to his congregation he writes that he had surrendered himself entirely to the will of the Lord and that he with all the brothers, his wife and some other sisters were prepared to witness even to death. He asks the readers to care for his wife if he is killed.⁹ Margaretha is referred to as a "refined and comely little woman" who was drowned in the Neckar River two days following her husband's cruel martyrdom in Rottenburg in 1527. She

⁶ Jürgen-Goertz p. 254

⁷ Torsten Bergsten, trans. by Irwin Barnes and William R. Estep: Balthasar Hubmaier: Anabaptist Theologian and Martyr (Valley Forge: Judson 1978) p. 379

seemed as composed as her husband when this verdict was read and spoke words of encouragement to the court assembly.¹⁰

The wife of Count Joachim von Zollern tried to persuade Margaretha to give up her faith and live with the countess a part of her court. The courageous woman decided that she would be faithful to her beliefs and the memory of her martyred husband—she stated that she would have preferred to be burnt with him.¹¹

Margret Hottinger of Zollikon

This courageous, young woman from Zollikon was determined to follow her own conviction even to death. Margret came from a lower-middle class family very involved in religious reform. She stands out with her zeal, and prophetic gifts. In 1525 she was arrested for Anabaptist beliefs as part of a crackdown by the Zurich authorities. She was placed in the tower within Zurich with Grebel, Sattler, Mantz, Tech, Linck and Blaurock. The official records note of Margret, “It is our decision that she ... be asked whether or not she will persist in rebaptism and the teaching of Grebel, Mantz, etc. And if she persists, she should be placed in the Wellenberg.”¹²

Sattler and Linck, both to become Anabaptist leaders, showed much less determination than Margret. They swore to desist from promoting “re-baptism” and were released. Margret refused to recant and was placed in the tower with other “stubborn ones”.

Margret Hottinger has said that she holds infant baptism to be incorrect and rebaptism to be right. Likewise she asked milords that if they can prove to her that infant baptism is correct, then she will desist.¹³

⁸ John Allen Moore: *Anabaptist Portraits* (Scottsdale: Herald 1984) p. 241

⁹ Moore p 112

¹⁰ Moore p. 118

¹¹ Moore p. 119

¹² Snyder and Hecht p. 47

¹³ Snyder and Hecht p. 47

Margret, still in prison the following March, when asked to recant, declared that an opponent of believer's baptism was "a child of the devil." Margret and other women were condemned to the New Tower. Finally after six months of harsh imprisonment Margret confessed that she had erred. She was released but that was not the end of her rebellion.

In 1526, Margret traveled to St. Gall where she showed herself to be a charismatic and prophetic woman. Kessler, not a sympathetic witness, described her in the *Sabbata*, as a woman loved by the Anabaptists and who lived a disciplined way of life. He says she "claimed to be God" but others doubt she made this claim.¹⁴

Despite all efforts to repress the Anabaptist movement Margret remained strong. In 1530, Margret and some family members fled to Moravia where there was religious freedom. They were arrested north of Ravensburg. Margret was drowned as an Anabaptist. One account tells of her being pulled from the water and being asked to recant but she refused and was drowned.¹⁵

Agnes Linck from Biel

In 1528, Agnes Linck from the Swiss town of Biel was questioned on a charge of heresy. She called the Catholic and Reformers' practice of the Lord's Supper "useless." and claimed she had not been "re-baptized" except by the Spirit of God. Agnes was exiled. She does not appear in the records for two years. In Basel she confessed to having been "re-baptized" in Biel and to being an Anabaptist. Her original defence that her baptism was by God was commonly used by Anabaptists. Her subsequent history shows dogged opposition to her accusers despite threats of death.

Adelheit Schwarz of Watt

Adelheit Schwarz was married to Balthasar Spilmann. Records show her in prison with a company of defiant Anabaptist women. Adelheit had been charged with not attending the state

¹⁴ Snyder p. 256

¹⁵ Snyder p. 258

church as required by law, and not participating in the Lord's Supper. In 1529 the Zurich authorities arrested twenty-eight people including twelve women. One was Adelheit Schwarz.

The responses of the women to questioning indicates their strategy of passive resistance. The scribe noted that Adelheit would not give a straight answer. She contended that baptism was commanded of God but would not say which baptism. A second woman answered the same way. A third admitted to have been "re-baptized" but would not say by whom. The next answered only "yes" or "no" and the last admitted having been baptized as a believer but said nothing further. These women refused to aid the authorities. Torture by beating and thumbscrew were introduced and under this pressure some women named the man who baptized them. The records show that Adelheit had not been "re-baptized" yet chose to stay with her Anabaptist friends in prison for at least twelve months. Although she finally consented to the official wording of baptism it seems she did not change her views.

Because Adelheit had left her husband with thirteen children, seven of them hers, he divorced her. In court she stated that "she wished to be obedient to God, and not to earthly authorities." There is no further record of Adelheit for seventeen years until Hans Fisher was arrested and recanted, and quoted Adelheit's name as part of a forest community, to which they both belonged.

Margaret Hellwart of Beutelsbach

Anabaptist women had to contend with civil authorities and Lutheran church leaders. At Beutelsbach, Lutheran leaders tried to exile the Anabaptist women, many of whose husbands were not Anabaptists. This brought hardship to the families so the women were chained to the floor of their houses so they could look after their families. In 1608 Margaret appeared before the church court, and was asked why she refused to conform to Lutheran faith and practice. Refusing

to yield Margaret was chained up no less than twenty-one times between 1610 and 1621. Apparently she could get relief for she was able to attend Anabaptist meetings. This was a self-confident woman able to endure the struggle for her faith, and to convince many to join it.¹⁶

Anabaptist Women of South Germany

The mystical, spiritualist and apocalyptic beginnings of South German Anabaptists were not a direct continuation of the Swiss movement. Yet the two groups recognized each other. Early chaos gave way to the establishment of settled communities especially after 1528. Like other Anabaptist movements it closely interwove political experience with scripture reading and theological reflection. The foundations in South Germany are focused in the Peasant's War of 1525 and the theologies of Müntzer, Denck and Hut. There is evidence that women were involved in much of the non-formal leadership. They played a big part in the proselytization within the "kinship, friendship and leadership networks."¹⁷ In the Hutterite communities submission by women was expected as we know from what Peter Riedeman writes in his *Rechenschaf*: "Since woman was taken from man, and not man from woman, man hath lordship but woman weakness, humility and submission, therefore she should be under the yoke of man and obedient to him."¹⁸

Women were given the freedom to leave "unbelieving" spouses, for "obedience to God" was considered more important than marriage or family ties. Some walked the trail to martyrdom for their devotion to God.

Anabaptist Women in Augsburg

Opposition from civic and church authorities sent Anabaptists underground in Augsburg. The only records are from the court. Anabaptists formed a congregation in 1527 and were

¹⁶ Snyder and Hecht p. 64-66

¹⁷ Snyder and Hecht p 71-78

influenced by Denck and Hubmaier, while Hut gathered the first congregation. This group met with fierce opposition from the authorities culminating in a raid on the house of Susanna Doucher where several hundred Anabaptists were meeting for worship. Eighty-eight people were imprisoned and interrogated under torture. The rack was used on men, the thumb screw on women.

Some women in Augsburg helped hold the community together. They used their homes for meetings and offered accommodation to itinerant ministers and refugees. If caught they were branded on both cheeks and exiled from the city for life.¹⁹

Susanna Doucher

Susanna was married to a prominent sculptor, who did not support her Anabaptist involvement. She was hostess the night the authorities raided the Anabaptist gathering. She revealed her own courage while trying to exonerate her husband. The normal penalty for harboring Anabaptists was branding on both cheeks and exile. Since Anna was pregnant the branding was omitted but she was led out of the city bound in irons. Anna was exiled for life but as she the wife of a prominent citizen was later allowed to return.²⁰

Katharina Wiedenmann

Katharina and her cobbler husband made their home a center for clandestine Anabaptist activities. Simprecht, Katharina's husband, complained to the authorities that poorer members were treated more harshly than wealthier members. Both were exiled and unlike some wealthier colleagues, were never allowed to return.

Sabina Bader

Sabina Bader was from a prominent family in Augsburg. She and her husband were baptized but fled when the authorities came to arrest them. In 1529 the Baders promoted some

¹⁸ Synder, p 260

¹⁹ Snyder and Hecht p. 82-84

apocalyptic theories in a settlement near Ulm. In 1530 the whole Anabaptist community was imprisoned. Sabina sought her children's release but was only successful when the area became Protestant in 1536. Sabina was a literate and accomplished woman who had a vision of being part of the new world promised by Hut and others.²¹ The apocalyptic views she and her husband held were among the reasons the wider Anabaptist movement was often ridiculed.

Women who defied the authorities came from all walks of life and different social strata. Some hosted meetings in their houses, some distributed alms. They fed and housed refugee Anabaptists and shared the faith with others. They were remarkably resolute and courageous.²²

Magdalena von Pappenheim

Magdalena was a Benedictine nun who left convent life and became involved in the controversy between Anabaptist leader, Marpeck, and Silesian spiritualist, Schwenckfeld. The protagonists sought to convince the influential and radical women of the area, one of whom was Magdalena, and was described by Williams as the "War of Radical Ladies".²³ Magdalena was a follower of Marpeck. The two sides discussed the central issue in radical Protestantism, the work of God's grace and justification. Central to their discussions was the difference in Christology, Marpeck believing in the joint humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ while Schwenckfeld denied that Christ was ever a "creature." Magdalena was involved in the correspondence revealing an ardent search for truth.²⁴ Here was a woman, not universally known, but with great intellect and devotion.

²⁰ Snyder and Hecht p 85

²¹ Snyder and Hecht p. 106-109

²² Snyder and Hecht p 88-100

²³ Snyder and Hecht p. 112

²⁴ Snyder and Hecht p. 111-119

Conclusion

Most 16th century history was written by males, and women's stories were neglected. Today's research is remedying this for Anabaptist women. The accounts of these courageous, dedicated women, are important. Mainly denied positions of leadership these "step-daughters of the Reformation" had considerable influence and shaped the Anabaptist movement and its offspring with their beliefs, devotion, hospitality and compassion.

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