

Hutterite History as a Refugee Story

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Abstract: This article gives an overview of Hutterite and Bruderhof migrations over the past five hundred years, forced on them by persecution. It emphasizes the conviction that gave men and women the courage to flee from one land to another rather than submit to laws that violated their consciences.

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Prologue

Anabaptism can be thought of as a pilgrimage—both physically, as its adherents migrated across the globe, and also temporally, through the past five centuries. Again and again, as the world around them changed, Anabaptists were faced with three choices: to yield to outside pressure, relinquish their faith, and continue to live securely at home; to face imprisonment and even death; or to flee. Often, holding onto their beliefs meant uprooting and starting over in a new land. Repeatedly, they left their homes, and in this way traversed much of Europe, Russia, and North and South America.

I write from the perspective of the Bruderhof, which started independently in Germany in 1920 and was incorporated into the Hutterian Church in 1930. My parents were both born in the first Bruderhof in Germany (in 1930 and 1932), and they always thought of themselves as refugees. As children, they had to flee Germany for the principality of Liechtenstein when the Bruderhof's license for a private school was revoked at the end of 1933. From there, they moved to England because Liechtenstein could not protect the Bruderhof's young men who were trying to avoid Germany's military draft. And when World War II began, they emigrated to Paraguay because the Bruderhof's German members were to be interned as enemy aliens.¹

We have now been allowed to live out our beliefs in peace for some seventy years. But it was always part of my consciousness that we need to be ready to suffer for the sake of our faith. I was just entering my teens when I heard for the first time the stories of the early Anabaptist martyrs. They made a deep impression on me, and this is probably part of the reason that I have studied their early history.

¹ Barth, *Embassy Besieged*.



Early Hutterite Migration across Eastern Europe

When the first Anabaptists rebaptized one another in 1525, they took a very brave step: adult baptism was illegal and carried a death sentence. And yet, they believed that the salvation of their souls was at stake, and for this they were ready not only to have themselves baptized, but to proclaim the good news and urge others to take the same step. Early Anabaptist leader Jakob Hutter (ca. 1500–1536), for whom the Hutterites are named, felt the burden that he placed on his converts. He explored the possibility of finding a refuge and learned that Moravia in today's Czechia offered freedom of religion. He wrote to those remaining in Tyrol:

At this time, the cruel dragon, bloodhound and devil is devouring and consuming one faithful child of God and dear brother after another. Oh, dear brothers and sisters, this fills me and all of us with great pity and compassion! Every day and every hour we are in great fear, expecting to be told that you, too, have been captured. I have written this to you twice already, and now I am writing you for the third time with tears and a weeping heart: we all urge you to come out of that accursed, sodomite, and murderous land. Flee, flee away from those ungodly and wicked people! Surely God has given you enough reason to do so.²

Anabaptists fled to Moravia from all over south Germany and Austria and in time developed their communities.³ As *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* describes:

God granted his people quiet times and rich blessings.... For twenty years or more there was no general persecution, except for a few incidents now and then.

They lived in the land God had provided especially for them. They were given the wings of a great eagle and flew to the place God had prepared for them (Rev. 12:14), and they were sustained there as long as it pleased him. They gathered in peace and unity and preached the word of God.⁴

For the first seventy years or so, the Hutterites regularly sent missionaries across Europe. One of their fiercest opponents, Christoph Andreas Fischer (1560–ca. 1610), wrote of them:

I compare the Anabaptists to the doves in a dovecote. Just as the doves fly out and bring foreign doves home with them, the Anabaptists send out their false apostles every year to seduce the people, both men and women, and bring them to their dovecote. It was reported to me that in the year 1604 they lured more than two hundred people out of the German empire and led them to their dovecote.⁵

During the Counter-Reformation, the Hutterites, who had been flourishing in Moravia, were driven out. The Thirty Years War began in 1618, and their communities were raided by plundering

² Barth Maendel and Seiling, *Jakob Hutter*, 80–81.

³ The years 1565 to 1578 are discussed in Gross, *Golden Years*.

⁴ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 1:402, 403.

⁵ Quoted in Barth Maendel and Seiling, *Jakob Hutter*, 297–298.

armies. Livestock was stolen, buildings were burned down, men and women were attacked and brutally killed. In 1622, a mandate was issued commanding them to leave Moravia on pain of death. Nevertheless, the church initially persisted faithfully.⁶

The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren reports that, in the 1660s, many could not stand the test and “abandon[ed] the Lord and his church.” “They were just like the children of Israel who left Egypt, but as soon as they were faced with suffering, hunger, and cold, thought about Egypt (where they had had bread in plenty), and turned back.”⁷ Those who chose to remain with the church emigrated from Moravia into what is now Slovakia (then called Hungary) and Transylvania in today’s Romania. Here, they survived times of famine and continued war. Spiritually, they were in a time of decline. Eventually, their communal way of life fizzled although they still attended church together and preserved their sermons.

Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, a devout Catholic, ruled from 1740 to 1780. She regarded the Protestants as threatening to the state and tried to convert them to Catholicism. In Alwinz, Transylvania, the Hutterites were treated with great cruelty to force them to convert. Their precious books were stolen, their men imprisoned, and Jesuit priests entered their meetinghouses and co-opted their services. Those who refused to attend the services were beaten. The Jesuit priest Johannes Theophilus Delphini was indefatigable, and the Hutterites, already spiritually weary, succumbed.

Renewal and Flight

The Hutterian Church would probably have passed into extinction in the eighteenth century. It was saved by a group of Lutherans who, driven out of Carinthia in Austria to Transylvania, were responsible for a revival among the Hutterites. (Today’s Hutterites are largely descended from this Lutheran group.) Two of the Lutheran group who had been forced out of Austria were hired by Hutterites in Alwinz in 1755. Noting that the Hutterites lived differently than others—despite their spiritual decline—the Lutherans asked them about their faith. “They were delighted about what they heard, for when they compared it with the gospel they found it corresponded exactly.”⁸ Community of goods was reestablished in 1761.⁹ “God had delight and pleasure in the gathering of his people, so he brought peace and reuniting.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, Delphini did not rest. His plan was to take their children and put them in an orphanage, and by this act, force the Hutterites to convert to Catholicism. However, the civil authorities would not consent to this, so he went to Vienna, where Maria Theresa gave him complete power and freedom to root out the Anabaptists.¹¹ The Hutterite remnant (sixty-seven people) resolved to flee.

⁶ The difficulties and initial stamina of the group under pressure are discussed in Harrison, *Andreas Ehrenpreis*.

⁷ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 1:675.

⁸ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 2:377–378.

⁹ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 2:391.

¹⁰ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 2:394.

¹¹ Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 2:409.

They set out on October 3, 1767, with two wagons, young children walking, carrying what they could. The journey was grueling: they forded rivers and traveled through forests and over the Carpathian Mountains to safety in Ciogirla, Wallachia—beyond the reach of Delphini and of the Hapsburg Empire.

The Jesuit Delphini had planned to take our children from us and put them in the orphanage. He had induced the Roman Catholic empress, Maria Theresa, to consent. Everything had been prepared in the suburb of Hermannstadt. Beds stood ready for the children. But God brought Delphini's plans to nothing, for the net he had spread to trap us was torn, and when he came to take us, we were already out of the country. Praise to God who did not leave us a prey to our enemies' teeth! We escaped with our lives, like a bird from the fowler's trap; the trap broke and so we escaped.¹²

They only lived in Wallachia for about two years. Skirmishes between the Turks and Russians unsettled the country, and once again the Hutterites—as foreigners by language and by faith—were a target for raiding mobs of soldiers. In 1770, they left Wallachia, eventually establishing themselves in Ukraine, in a place called the Wischenka Colony. Yet this location, initially seen as a safe haven, would prove to be as impermanent as previous locations, and a century later, in 1874, the Hutterites immigrated to the United States.

Migration to North America

In the 1860s, the Russian Tsar Alexander II began a series of reforms in the interest of developing the Russian Empire and instilling a greater sense of national identity across the vast country. These efforts included a uniform curriculum for elementary schools and a new military conscription system (introduced in 1874). This was bad news for the Hutterites (and the neighboring Mennonites), who had been living in cultural islands where they preserved their German heritage and their nonresistant pacifism.

This time, the reason for the uprooting was not persecution as such. But maintaining control of their children's education and the threat of compulsory military service was reason enough.

The last Hutterite migration took place in 1918, again because of their refusal to obey a military draft. When the United States entered World War I, declaring war on Germany in 1917, the U.S. army was small compared to the armies of Europe. The Selective Service Act of 1917, enacted May 18, 1917, authorized the U.S. federal government to raise a national army through conscripting men between the ages of 21 and 31.

There was no clear provision for conscientious objection. The Hutterites agreed that their young men should register, but that they would not wear a military uniform or obey military work orders.¹³ At Camp Funston, young Hutterites and Mennonites who refused to cooperate were harassed and severely punished. Four of them were sentenced to thirty-seven years in Alcatraz,

¹² Hutterian Brethren, *Chronicle*, 2:421.

¹³ Hofer, *History of the Hutterites*, 62.

where they received very little food or clothing (since they refused to wear the military uniform) and were chained and beaten. They were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, where two of them died.¹⁴

A transcript of the court martial of David Hofer, a young Hutterite man, married with five children, illustrates his simple, uneducated resolve when faced with harassment in the United States:

Q. Have you any sympathies,—I mean, do you favor the cause of Germany as against the United States in any way?

A. Well, I ain't got nothing for Germany. I wouldn't talk one word for Germany, because they done our old folks.

Q. They persecuted you?

A. Yes; killed just thousands of our old folks four hundred years ago.

Q. Would you be willing to grow wheat for the poor and needy ones?

A. If it would go for the poor and needy ones. And work hard, too. But for poor and needy ones only.

Q. Do you vote?

A. No; never voted. None of our members never voted. We don't take any part in this world; not a bit. If we are persecuted out of this land, we go to another one. If we are persecuted there, we go on to another one, just like Christ said. If the government wants us to go out, we leave our property right there and go out, just like we are here, and with our children. Before we do something we shouldn't, we sooner do that.¹⁵

The story of the death of David's two brothers, Joseph and Michael, was published as "*Crucifixions*" in *the Twentieth Century*. The author, identified as "an Army Officer," interviewed Jacob Wipf, a cousin of the Hofers who suffered the same treatment they did, in his hospital bed.

As this bearded man with the beseeching eyes recounted his nearly unbelievable tale of religious persecution there seemed to spring from the trite words of his narrative a vitality of Will to Believe. I saw manifested there an indomitable spiritual courage to live to conviction and to permit no coercive interference with the still small voice of conscience. These were the virtues so evident in the man—qualities indeed which not only define the strength of any personal religion but which essentially characterize man's progress toward all spiritual freedom. Such were the virtues that authority's persecution had violated—and, as my sympathy

¹⁴ Stoltzfus, *Pacifists in Chains*.

¹⁵ Record of Trial by General Court Martial of Recruit David J. Hofer, 29th Company, 8th Battalion, 166th Depot Brigade, Camp Lewis, American Lake, WA, June 10, 1918, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA.

and admiration surged to the man, I suddenly felt twisted into some abhorrent nightmare of a past inquisition.

Unquestionably the story should be told—and retold; for, while it probably instances one of the worst of the present war's persecutions in America—it still typifies the spirit under which the war heretics had to suffer. Words, however, seem inadequate to tell the story as related to me by this C.O., for it is, in reality, written only in the indelible characters of his terrible sufferings and in the deaths of his comrades.¹⁶

There was also strong local sentiment against their home communities because of their Germanness and because they refused to buy war bonds. On one occasion, patriotic neighbors drove off one hundred colony steers and one thousand sheep.¹⁷ As a result, most of the Hutterites emigrated to Canada.¹⁸ The Canadian government was eager to have them because of a labor shortage and assured them of military exemption and religious freedom. As a result of the persecution of Hutterites in the United States in 1917 and 1918, today more than 70 percent of Hutterites live in Canada.

The Bruderhof as Refugees

Alongside this story of Hutterite migration, there is the story of the flight of the German Bruderhof under Nazi Germany, to which I referred in the prologue. The Bruderhof began in 1920, growing out of the ministry of Eberhard Arnold, who had immersed himself in Hutterian writings and led the young fellowship in Anabaptist theology.

When Adolf Hitler seized power, Arnold was immediately concerned. Several times he warned his people of martyrdom, relating to the early Anabaptist martyrs. At Easter 1933, he said:

1900 years after Jesus died on the cross, we find ourselves standing under the sign of the gallows, the cross. With trembling hearts we hear that in the year 1933 Hitler has erected a gallows in Germany. The important thing now is to ask ourselves whether we are prepared in this year to be hanged on this gallows.¹⁹

On another occasion, he spoke of the martyrdom of Jakob Hutter and his wife, Katharina:

Jakob Hutter and his wife, who was expecting a child, were arrested and thrown into prison, in two separate prisons, because special proceedings were to be taken against Jakob Hutter as he was known to be a leader of the Anabaptists. His wife was freed after a short time, but her husband was put to death. Afterward she still stayed for a time in the caves and mountains of the Tirol, doubtless under the protection of the brothers and sisters, but a short time after was again imprisoned

¹⁶ "Crucifixions."

¹⁷ Hofer, *History of the Hutterites*, 63.

¹⁸ Kleinsasser, *Blessings and Burdens*, 1–35.

¹⁹ Barth, *Embassy Besieged*, 51.

and followed her husband by being put to death. To the end she was steadfast and joyful and sure of her calling.

Katharina Hutter is an example for us of a youthful surrender of one's life to Christ and his way, to the witness of his truth and to humble and simple fulfillment of his will. We do not lash out in a proud, scholarly irony at moral shortcomings [of the Nazis]. Rather we wish to approach them as brothers of the same flesh and blood...with the love that experienced the same condemnation and the same redemption through the saving power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.²⁰

In November 1933, there was a national proposition that all Germans were expected to affirm. Bruderhof members glued a statement to their ballot sheet, stating that their allegiance was to God alone. That evening, Eberhard Arnold spoke:

It is something great when individual people stand firm in full community and unity in Christ. It is something greater still when a church community is kept on this way so that it can demonstrate before the whole world the character of the kingdom of God in daily work and daily witness through word and deed. It is something great when people are found worthy to be cast into prison or killed for the sake of the Gospel. It is greater still when a church community is called and found worthy to abandon the place of communal work it has built up slowly and laboriously and to go out into the unknown; when, standing on the threshold between having something and having nothing, between being and not being, it can yet demonstrate the perfect unity, peace, justice and brotherliness, and the firm togetherness of the kingdom of God and of the church of Jesus Christ. And it is greatest of all if it is given to such a fellowship in such an hour to love its enemies in the spirit of Jesus Christ and to embrace, with the spirit that reaches out and serves, precisely those who want to drive them out into misery and oblivion.²¹

He spoke on Jesus's missionary command from Matthew 10:23: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another."

Fleeing does not correspond with the heroic ideal that is popular today. Yet it is the way of true manliness and objectivity, for truth is glorified and human greatness is avoided. He does not want his servants to seek martyrdom, or to be praised for their heroism in death. Certainly, they must be prepared to die for the sake of the witness, but it should be as unassuming as possible.

If we have no permanent place, no permanent Bruderhof in any country, but are always prepared for flight, then we cannot cling to property, nor think we have a

²⁰ Eberhard Arnold, Versammlungsprotokoll (meeting transcript), September 1933, 0000000109_36_S, Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY.

²¹ Eberhard Arnold, Versammlungsprotokoll (meeting transcript), November 12, 1933, 20126129_09_S, Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY.

good position in our work. Then we will be prepared to do the lowest service, like Jesus, for our whole life is a pilgrimage.²²

The German Bruderhof was dissolved by the Gestapo on April 14, 1937. Its members were allowed to emigrate to England. However, when England declared war on Germany, the Bruderhof's German members came under suspicion, and the entire Bruderhof emigrated again, this time to Paraguay in South America, where they were granted the same privileges as the Mennonites. One mother wrote in her journal:

We've taken leave of a beautiful home and are now preparing for a new life. The goal, the castle and the city in which Jesus lives is and remains the same, even if there are many unknown paths before us. We must look unwaveringly to Jesus; Peter was able to walk safely on the water as long as he looked to Jesus.²³

In the 1960s, the Bruderhof centers were consolidated in the northeastern United States. Since then, we have expanded and spread to approximately thirty communities—some up to three hundred members, some under twenty, mostly in rural settings, and a few in urban centers. We have grown accustomed to a secure and more comfortable lifestyle than our forebears knew. If hard times and persecution should face us again, we pray that we will have the same courage of our convictions.

Reflecting on the story of Hutterite and Bruderhof migration, century after century, one is reminded of texts from the biblical book of Hebrews:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one (Heb. 11:13–16, NRSV_{UE}).

For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come (Heb. 13:14, NRSV_{UE}).

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²² Eberhard Arnold, Versamlungsprotokoll (meeting transcript), January 9, 1935, 20126150_14_S, Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY.

²³ Barth, *No Lasting Home*, 3–4.

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