



Jürg Rettenmund

On the trails of the Sumiswald Anabaptists

Guide to the Anabaptist Way



Hans Haslebacher

In 1532 Heinrich Summerer was the pastor here in the church of Sumiswald. In his sermon on a Sunday he wove in the remark that Anabaptists would better make puppies or calves than leave their children unbaptized.

When these words were uttered the imposing church building was only 20 years old, having been built in 1510 by the Teutonic knights. They were, though, 20 eventful years: In Zurich Ulrich Zwingli preached and in 1528 the city of Bern introduced the Reformation. However, not all were happy with the new state church. The Anabaptists desired a more thoroughgoing renewal of the faith. They wanted to baptize only adults. They refused to swear oaths and serve in military service. This is why the authorities felt threatened by these former companions and fellow travelers of the reformers.

Beyond Zurich

Already before the Reformation and beginning in Zurich, the Anabaptists spread into the region of Bern, initially in the city of Bern itself, then into the Aargau and Oberaargau regions, and increasingly also into the Emmental. In 1532, the same year that Pastor Summerer let out his disrespectful words, Reformation representatives met with the Anabaptists in the town of Zofingen for discussion about the faith in a so-called disputation. Both sides fancied themselves the victors. This is why Hans Haslebacher, a farmer from the village of Kleinegg, would not accept the disparaging words. In the middle of the worship service he stood up and answered back the pastor in the pulpit. That sparring match led to an invitation to appear before the church court.

Hans Haslebacher was probably born around 1500. In 1525, together with others from the town of Sumiswald, he bought himself free from the serfdom of the Teutonic knights. In 1538 the city of Bern sent invitations for a

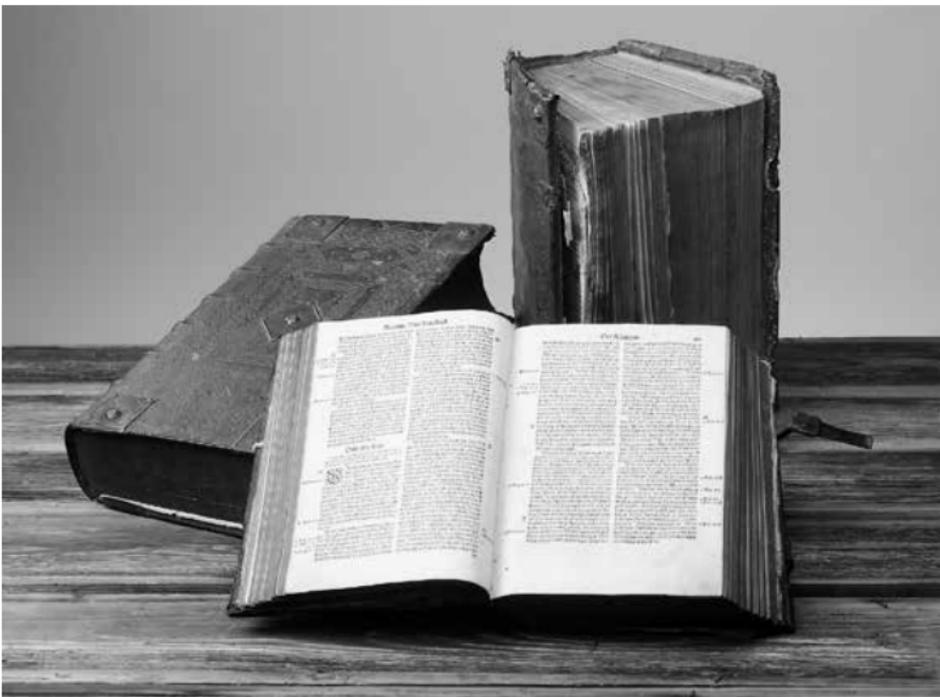


further Anabaptist disputation – this time in Bern itself. In the meantime, Hans Haslebacher came to be an important figure among the Anabaptists: He was among those from the Emmental that took part in this discussion.

The Haslebacher Bible

That Hans Haslebacher thought deeply about the foundations of the faith is proven by the Bible that still today is preserved at the homestead of his descendents: it is a Zurich or Zwingli Bible, printed in Zurich in 1553.

Again in the 1538 disputation the Bernese authorities did not allow themselves to be convinced. A severe persecution began and Hans Haslebacher was among the victims. It is a matter of record that between 1561 and 1569 he and those of his household were fined a number of times because he was an Anabaptist. In 1571 he was arrested and put to death – the last Anabaptist executed in what is now the Canton of Bern.



*Three Bibles from the Haslebach farm:
from 1553 (in the front), 1684 (on the right in the rear)
and 1739 (on the left in the back).*



Nikolaus Zurkinden

In January of 1533 Bailiff Nikolaus Zurkinden received a letter from Bern here at Sumiswald castle. The lower council wrote him that one understood with the greatest consternation that there were many Anabaptists in his bailiwick and this, despite all the admonitions of the authorities to stay away from this “sect”. He received the order to go house to house requesting the inhabitants of Sumiswald and Dürrenroth to come to an assembly and present them with the mandate of the authorities that foresaw a severe punishment of the Anabaptists. With the Reformation Bernese bailiffs moved for a time into the Sumiswald castle of the abolished Teutonic knights. From 1532 to 1534 the second one was Nikolaus Zurkinden (1506–1588). Apparently, from the results of the Zofingen Anabaptist disputation he also understood that the government had assured the Anabaptists would be tolerated. He let them preach in the towns of Dürrenroth and Sumiswald that belonged to his bailiwick. In any case, the Dürrenroth pastor reported this and criticized the fact that in this the Anabaptists criticized the pastor. In the same week an Anabaptist teacher in Sumiswald had already preached and planned his next appearance at the Huttwil village market.

Arrested – and free again

The Bailiff of Trachselwald arrested the Anabaptist leader in the lower Emmental region, the preacher Christian Brügger from Rohrbach, and took him to Bern. He was one of those who participated in the Zofingen Anabaptist disputation. Now he was exiled from the country but nevertheless came back and was arrested again three weeks later. He remained imprisoned around a year but was then able to escape.

In this situation the letter that was sent to Zurkinden was actually a reprimand; he was there admonished to



conscientiously advance the “matter” in accordance with his oath of office otherwise his church congregation would be obliged to indict him. He was, in fact, to read this to them so they would know.

Zurkinden remained the bailiff in Sumiswald only until 1534; he then enjoyed a sterling career in the Bernese public administration. He became the council and city secretary, bailiff, “welschseckelmeister” (medieval tax revenue officer in charge of the taxes and booty from the Waadt region – where Lausanne is) and general commissioner in Waadt, conquered in 1536.

The experiences with the Anabaptists, however, influenced the (at that time) 25 year old for life and made him – in a 16th century dominated by religious wars and persecutions – one of the rare determined advocates for tolerance. In Waadt he came into contact with the Geneva Reformer John Calvin and he wrote him in 1554 in relation to an execution that he most likely had to witness in 1537 or 1538:

“Unbelievable example”

“I happily admit that I also belong to that number who wish to see the sword applied as seldom as possible as a coercive against the opponents of the faith, whether they are mistaken out of principle or ignorance. And I am not so much influenced in this by those places in scripture that are cited to keep the sharpness of the sword far from the handling of matters of faith as by the unbelievable examples that occur in our time in the punishment of the Anabaptists. I witnessed how here an eighty year old woman and her daughter, a mother of six children, were led to their deaths for no other reason than that they had denied infant baptism in accordance with the known and popular doctrine of the Anabaptists. And this only at their own risk since it was not to be feared that two women could corrupt our world with their false doctrine.”



The Haslebach farm

On the Haslebach farm in the village of Kleinegg direct descendents of the Anabaptist teacher Hans Haslebacher live and still farm today. The grandparents Fritz and Lydia Haslebacher-Bögli in the “stöckli” as well as Hans and Gertrud Haslebacher-Bangerter with their children Adrian, Bernhard, Christoph, Samuel and Martina in the farm house represent the 14th to 16th generations who have lived there. In 1971, on the 400th anniversary of the execution of their ancestor, they had a memorial plaque made and put up on the farm house.

Between the Anabaptist teacher and Isaak Haslebacher, who from 1582 is the first encountered in the Sumiswald church records as an ancestor of today's farmer, there exists some uncertainty in the family tree. What is sure is that a Josef and an Isaac were sons of Hans Haslebacher. What the relationship was between them and Isaac the younger cannot be decided, based on what we know today.

With press and tannery

The Haslebach farm is described in more detail in a 1572 inventory: house, corncrib, oven house and a press (for pressing fruit), 18,5 acres of pasture land and 0,7 acres for planting as well as an alpine pasture for 8 cows. From the tributes one can read off the products: hay, spelt, cheese, hens, and eggs. Following the death of Jakob Haslebacher-Ryser (1627–1702), a representative of the 5th generation, an additional tannery is mentioned in his will that, in succeeding years, is found in the records again and again. In the final clauses, for the widow and unmarried sons, hemp and flax plantings were added as well as spinning and weaving which were listed as work done in the home.

In 1844/1845 the first cheese dairy in the community of Sumiswald was built in Haslebach. Production ceased



there in 1995. Since then the milk has been delivered to the Affoltern cheese dairy (which is open for public viewing) but the building still stands.

Today, on the Haslebacher farm with its nearly 49 acres, the main activity is milk production. In the stable there are between 18 and 20 cows and the fields are mainly there to produce animal feed. Only rarely is wheat also planted in addition to fodder beets. 38 acres of forest (a large one) also belong to the farm. This is very important to the current manager. The oldest of the farm buildings is the corncrib. Together with the oven house and a new farm house, it was built in 1783 by Peter Haslebacher-Rothenbühler (1767–1856) from the 9th generation. In 1863 the oven house was converted into a “stöckli” as Peter Haslebacher Sommer (1793–1872, from the 10th generation) gave the farm operation to his son Hans Haslebacher-Stalder (1822–1890). The farm house was totally renovated in 1893 by Friedrich Haslebacher-Hirsbrunner (1851–1901, 12th generation).

Court employee, judge, member of the local parliament

After Hans, the first in the family lineage and Anabaptist teacher, no further Anabaptist connections have been found for the Haslebacher family. Also one doesn't encounter the name among the rebels during the 1653 peasants' revolt. On the contrary: shortly afterward the first representative in a public office appears with Jakob Haslebacher-Ryser (1624–1702, 5th generation): It is recorded in 1667 that he was a court employee in the regional government. His descendents included a tax revenue official, a member of the judiciary, a district judge, and a member of the local parliament. It could have been the Jakob mentioned above who in 1684 acquired the first Piscator Bible that the city of Bern printed. This also indicates that the family was on the side of the state church and municipal authorities because the Anabaptists did not accept it and held firmly to the Zurich Bible.



An Anabaptist teacher

Nothing is really known about what Hans Haslebacher said or wrote as an Anabaptist teacher. It appears that the minutes of the court hearing just like other records from the Anabaptist persecution were deliberately destroyed. For a contemporary of Haslebacher, the 1566 executed Wälti Gerber from Röthenbach i.E., the situation is fortunately different: from the cross examinations of other Anabaptists one can form a fairly accurate image of his ministry: Bernetta Blindenbach stated that Gerber instructed her in Hertisholz near Sumiswald. Cathrin Wenger from Wattenwil admitted that she was rebaptized by him in a stream on Buchholterberg (a mountain). Peter Räber from Buchholterberg confessed that Wälti Gerber explained the scriptures so well that he no longer had any doubts about his convictions. Michel Imhof from the town of Stettlen admitted that he was present in an assembly in a barn near Wälti Gerber's «sässhaus» (his dwelling) and was also baptized. Uly Scherler in Schliern near Köniz confessed that Wälti Gerber, blessed be his name, baptized him on Buchholterberg.

Communion in the forest

Barbel Rüsser from Steffisburg celebrated communion in a forest. Wälti Gerber gave out the elements. Her daughter-in-law Cathrin Rettenmund told how she had to earn her bread while abroad in her youth and was often present, on the side, at “juheien” (wild parties). Despite going to church regularly she could not resist worldly things until she became part of an Anabaptist congregation. From the moment of her conversion, she felt she could stay away from such things and no longer had any desire for them. Following this experience, circa 14 years ago, she was baptized again by Wälti Gerber on the Buchholterberg in a forest, in broad daylight. Not



more than a bowl of water was needed and, after receiving the scripture, it was poured over her head three times. In this she had to promise to continue in what she had been taught, as God gave her grace, and make it known to others.

Cathrin Rettenmund's husband, Niklaus Rüsser, explained they were also married by Wälti Gerber. Up till now five children had been born to them, all of which had been baptized in the parish church of Steffisburg, under duress, by orders of the authorities. Barbli Ummel-Rüsser from Kiesen avowed that she was instructed by Wälti Gerber that one could call on God and serve him with devout hearts just as well in the field and forest. She let him baptize her again because in her first baptism she was not conscious what she should believe. Her daughter Anni Ummel also stated that she had been baptized by Wälti Gerber shortly before his arrest.

Baptized at night

Verena Schöni from Röthenbach said that she was persuaded by Wälti Gerber to forsake the regular church preaching and to follow his instruction. She was also baptized by him on a Sunday night because she had no knowledge of her first baptism and, at that time, had no understanding to believe with. She and her husband were given to each other in marriage by Nikli Zedo at night in a forest down by the Aare River near the town of Kiesen. Almost like in a church, he opened the scriptures to them and put their hands together in a brotherly way and in the name of the holy trinity.

Following Wälti Gerber's execution this Niklaus Zedo, from the towns of Bottigen and Bümpliz, was the most important teacher of the Bernese Anabaptists. He was also arrested and, in the cross examination, let it be known that Wälti Gerber had led him to a house on the Sense River, was there with them for the first time, and was instructed by him.



Schürch from the Tanne area

As three boats with Anabaptists departed Bern, down at the “Matte”, for Holland on July 13th, 1711, on board was also someone from Sumiswald with his family: Ulrich Schürch from the village of Vogelsang, today’s Gsang by Wasen. The family comes originally from the upper Tanne area on the Schonegg where, records show, they have been since 1425. Right up to the 20th century, the upper Tanne has also been called “Schürchtanne”. The first indication that these Schürch turned to the Anabaptists is found in 1667.

Continually intensified

Over the course of the 17th century the city of Bern continually intensified the persecution of the Anabaptists. However, during this difficult time the Anabaptists had allies: their companions in faith, the influential Mennonites in the Netherlands. In 1710 they made it possible for the Anabaptists to leave the country legally a year later.

During the persecution, among the Tanne Schürchs, some left the Anabaptists. Nevertheless, the records show that Ulrich Schürch (1663–1739) was in prison among the interned Anabaptists in Bern from the summer of 1710 on. He was released in January of 1711 so he could prepare himself for the exodus. He left the boat, along with most of the Emmental Anabaptists already in Mannheim in the Palatinate region of Germany. There they did not step onto a land that was totally new for them: since the end of the thirty year war (1618–1648) Bernese Anabaptists found refuge in this ravaged and depopulated country and a new place to live.

It is not known where Ulrich Schürch and his family stayed after they left the boat. 17 years later he arrived in Philadelphia on the Mortonhouse ship. Also, in this second phase of his emigration, Schürch was following



along prepared paths: the English Quaker William Penn (1644–1718) had also invited the Anabaptists living in the Palatinate to immigrate to Pennsylvania (which was named after him), where he wanted to create a new place to live for the persecuted religious minorities from Europe. The Anabaptist Franz Georg Pastorius and 13 families from Krefeld were the first to accept this invitation and, in 1683, founded Germantown – today a part of Philadelphia.

Center in Lancaster County

Among the “palatiners” that migrated to Pennsylvania one encounters Swiss Anabaptists again and again. In 1710 ten Swiss Anabaptist families were especially mentioned that settled on the headwaters of the Pequea Creek in Lancaster County. This county became a center for Anabaptist immigrants. In 1717 the stream over the Atlantic began to swell with three ships and over 300 settlers and, from 1727, a wave of immigration set in with several ships a year. In 1732 Ulrich Schürch also found a new place to settle in Lancaster County: Most likely in memory of his place of origin, he named his new settlement Schoeneck. However, Pennsylvania did not only become a paradise for the Emmental Anabaptist emigrants as was promised them by William Penn. In the American War of Independence (1763–1789) they were once again caught between the fronts. Those who opposed the creation of the new United States of America then moved northward into today’s Ontario where fruitful and favorably priced tracts of land beckoned that were still under the English crown.

In 1789 and 1793 two grandsons of Ulrich Schürch were among them. They settled on the north shore of Lake Eire and named their settlement Sherkston. Today, there is a large number of Ulrich Schürch descendents widely scattered throughout the whole of North America, possibly even the majority of the families with the names Sherk, Shirk and Sherrick.



Anabaptist hunters

Even with the 1711 migration the city of Bern was not able to «solve» the Anabaptist problem as they had hoped. This is seen in an episode that Hans Käser in his booklet about the Emmental Anabaptist persecution tells, based on the sources. This leads us in 1714 right into the region that Ulrich Schürch left three years earlier: “Spies sniffed around the area of the Oberwald. In the district between the towns and villages of Sumiswald, Affoltern-Weier, Mühlestetten, Oberwald and Schonegg they discovered Anabaptist hideouts. One whispered about an Anabaptist hunt that was to take place shortly. Among the farmers in the surrounding farms indignation was stirring. Distinguished men sided with the Anabaptists. Farm boys were burning to take care of the Anabaptist question once and for all with their fists.

But the Anabaptist hunters crept stealthily closer to the hiding places of the sought-for Anabaptists. Before one noticed it, they led those they captured, bound together on a line, in triumph down the valley toward Sumiswald. But unexpectedly, 60 to 70 of the farmers pounced on the ‘hunting party’. With their fists the farmers grabbed and tore the Anabaptists from the claws of the henchmen. They freed them from their bonds and let them go free. The Anabaptist hunters, though, were paid the part that belonged to them in the form of ‘unburned ash’ on their shoe soles. Bleeding from scrapes and bruises they crept back to the castle, in order to complain about their misfortune. They didn’t dare try to track down those that had been freed again.

Retribution

This time retribution was long in coming since those in Bern now proceeded thoroughly. The council created a committee charged with investigating the case. Those among the accused who were found were questioned and



examined. Some were stubborn and brazen before the nobles. After all the evidence had been sorted and evaluated, the council began the final negotiations and handed down the sentence on April 24th, 1715. The accused had to pay the hunters an amount of 100 talers (ca. \$10 000). In addition, those who had been beaten received as compensation for their pains a portion of the fines that had been levied. The main offender, Andreas Sommer in the Neuenmatten, was fined 100 taler. Peter Sommer, a veterinarian for horses, had sheltered the Anabaptists. During an exile in the French-speaking part of the country, he had a year to ponder his crime against the state.

Bendicht Widmer, the school principal, who had also helped, lost his position and was sent away to Brassus for half a year. Bendicht Ryser, who sat on a court bench in Lempenmatt, failed to denounce the Anabaptists according to his oath and duty. He had also sent his two sons out with clubs. Removed from his office, he also wandered for some months in exile to St. Croix. His two sons, who had hit hard with their bludgeons had to pay fines of 90 crowns («Kronen»). Peter Sommer, the son of the horse doctor, received a year in St. Cergue (i.e., in the French-speaking part of the country). Andreas Christen, the hired hand at the Tannen farm, though, had to sit for 24 hours four times because he also participated in this 'dreadful state of affairs'. All those who were banned to the French-speaking part of the country were under observation by the police.

Not the only case

This was indeed the most spectacular case of resistance against the Anabaptist persecutors but by far not the only one. In the populace Anabaptists enjoyed broad sympathy. There were so-called half-Anabaptists who joined in with the Anabaptists without, though, resigning from the state church. Others only aided the Anabaptists and warned them from the hunters with 'horns, shooting, shouts and similar signs'.



An Anabaptist hideout

Katharina Zimmermann, with her book “Die Furgge”, was not the first to make the Emmental Anabaptists literary figures. Already in 1938 Walter Laedrach penned “Passion in Bern”, an Anabaptist novel. Laedrach settled his half-Anabaptist family Flückiger in the fictional Kleegarten on the Schaufelbühlegg, but within the parish of the Sumiswald pastors. In the book, among other things, he described an Anabaptist hideout:

“Then they entered the back room, the man opened a cabinet door with a creaky key, reached behind the clothes hanging there and shoved a board to the side. Frau Anna slipped then noiselessly under his arm, which he was using to hold the clothes back, into the darkness. The cabinet door was then closed again; the farmer opened a small sliding door in the living room and went again into the kitchen. [...]

Where Anabaptist teachers spent nights

Meanwhile Frau Anna sat in the dark on a stool in a hideout that was ca. 50 inches wide and the length of a normal room. There she prayed softly the song that was composed by the seven brothers in the Gmünd prison, a verse for each one. [...] Then everything was quiet around her. On her left in the narrow, windowless chamber, which was inserted in such a way between the two living rooms of the small farmhouse that an uninitiated would not notice it was there, lay a sack of straw on the floor. There people slept back in the time of her father and still now, an Anabaptist teacher every so often. On the right, the room ended at the ceramic stove that, being in both rooms, warmed them and made it possible to stay in the hideout both summer and winter. He didn't only have books on the upper step [of the ceramic stove] that the father valued but were suspicious



for the church authorities: the ‘Ausbund’ [...], and also Michael Sattler’s open letter to a church of God [...]. In addition there were also several copies of beautiful and new spiritual songs, like the song of Hans Haslibacher from the commune of Sumiswald, which records his life and death, or the Dürsrütti song and the Zürich song and many others.

Besides these writings of the defenseless Christians there also lay a Froschauer Bible and, so that these books here were not only safe from any seizure by the authorities but were also usable, there stood next to them a heavy, iron candle stand with a thick, homemade tallow candle.

When in this way the spiritual needs of the person in hiding were well cared for, those of the body were also not forgotten, because an oven stone, two hands wide, could be taken out and through the hole thus made one could pass through not only bread and any other food from the kitchen using the oven shovel, no, a burning sliver could also be conveyed in the same way with which one could light the candle and the chamber made livable. If fire was burning in the oven, one was cut off from passing food but, without any outside help, one could obtain fire using a piece of pinewood that had been prepared and transfer it to the candle. [...]

At some time in the past, the father, a carpenter, had had the old, dilapidated house torn down and a new one built several years ago with the help of journeymen. However, when the workers had gone, he all by himself put up a new wall that separated the secret room from the larger living room.”

Walter Laedrach (1891–1958) was a secondary school teacher in the town of Hasle-Rüegsau and later junior college instructor. He was the author of various local history tales, novels and poems, historical texts and folkloric non-fiction books. He was a coeditor of the “Berner” and “Schweizer Heimatbücher”.



Assembly places and cemeteries

The persecution by the state authorities forced the Anabaptists to hold their assemblies and worship services in secret as it was recorded about Wälti Gerber many times. That could have easily happened in a cut back forest like here in Lochwald. Also in the community of Sumiswald there are memories of such an Anabaptist “hole”: if one goes down the Lüdern lane into the Kurzenei by Wasen to its entry into the forest by Murboden, on the left a grassy path there leads to a hidden, narrow way (“Hohlweg”). According to oral lore, Anabaptist assemblies were held there and in the hollow that lies back of the hill.

The location for undiscovered assemblies should have been imminently suitable as the following observation shows: a woman teacher went to see the Anabaptist “hole” with her class. In the hollow behind the Hohlweg she and her pupils sang a song. The forester who had led her there and waited on the Hohlweg heard nothing from the song even though it was sung only a few meters away.

The Anabaptist field (“Täufermätteli”)

According to other records Anabaptists who died were supposedly buried in the Anabaptist “hole”. Folk accounts have it that a 24 “aren” (0,6 acre) lot in the Eierwald by Tannenbad served the same purpose. Recorded for it are the names Stegmattmösli, Schuhmachermätteli and Täufermätteli. In the land register and predecessors, the contract minutes, it is shown as a quadratic clearing. A ditch 40 to 50 centimeters deep surrounds it and the old Tannenbad road crosses over it lengthwise.

Before the lot was reforested in 1983/1984, the archeological services of Canton Bern examined it. The former cantonal archeologist, Hans Grütter, summa-



rized the results as follows: “The uncultivated lot no. 170 was examined with the aid of eight probe trenches with a length of ca. 105 running meters. The extremely damp, loamy terrain showed no traces of occupancy or other disturbances below the scant humus layer. A utilization as cemetery can be excluded since the ground is extremely unsuited for graves. It must be said that in the immediate neighborhood of the lot boundary a few massive red pine trees have been cut and the tree rings in the newest instance shows that they go back at least 260 years. Taken cautiously these findings indicate that this lot was free for use around 1700. The question remains open as to whether at most an assembly place existed there.”

Twice America

It could be that a further place name that is found twice in Sumiswald stands in connection with the Anabaptists: “Amerika”. One of them can be found in the immediate vicinity of the Anabaptist “mätteli” in Eierwald: If one follows the hiking trail from Tannenbad in the direction of Kriegershaus, after the climb in the forest it lies from the beginning of a level terrace over to the place where one leaves the forest. The other lies by the Fritzenmatte in Hornbach: in the curve between Fritzenmatte and Gütschhüsli a grassy path turns slightly to the right. The entrance to the forest is also called “Amerika”.

Christoph Jakob in his book “Sumiswald Streiflichter” explains the connection with the Anabaptists as follows: “Since the Anabaptists did not wish to have a church memorial service for their dead, but an explanation for a person’s disappearance was required, they buried the dead at secret places in accordance with their customs and reported that the missing had gone to America.”



Captured and executed

On August 29, 1571 the Bern council ordered the Trachselwald bailiff to arrest the Anabaptist teacher Hans Haslebacher and to bring him to Bern. Hans Käser reported this too afterward:

“On a day in late summer of 1571 a strange traveling group moved along from Trachselwald castle down to Grünenmatt and further past the village of Ramsei and the Wegissen heights toward Bern. An armed man led a horse holding its reins. Behind it walked a second armed man. On the horse, though, sat a bearded old man with a large slouch hat on his head and a rough coat over his shoulders. Whoever looked him in the face saw that it was a man in which a strong conviction was paired with a rare love, a man that would not let his beliefs be altered an iota but, in his exchanges with his fellows, showed only love.

It was the old Hans Haslebacher, the Anabaptist teacher from Haslebach by Sumiswald. What all he had not already endured due to his faith! He was captured and then exiled. From his relatives the bailiff levied a fine of 500 pounds, most likely all he had. But the old Haslebacher did not stay away. He had to move to his brothers in the Emmental in order to strengthen and console them. If the farmer who at one time was respected and wealthy was now without any rights and poor, what did that matter? He had acquired citizenship in another world; his riches could be affected neither by moths nor rust.

Punishment for the son

Once more he returned to the house that once was his. As punishment his son, who took him in, had to pay a high fine. Only too soon did the bailiff's henchmen from the dark Trachselwald fortress announce themselves.



The old Hans was again confined like a dangerous criminal. How often already had he had to travel to Bern in order to answer before the stern authorities! Today Hans Haslebacher made this journey for the last time. We imagine how here and there a farmer leaned on his farming implement and followed the old fellow while thinking about the lords in Bern with a clinched fist in his pocket. We also see how from out of a thicket a bearded Anabaptist brother peered in order to see the beloved teacher once more. Now, now he had seen him for the last time. Tears ran down his rough cheeks. Overwhelmingly did it well up in his heart but with no feelings of vengeance. There is no room for vengeance in the soul of a right Mennonite. Love must take the place of revenge in the heart.

Haslebacher, though, was brought into the capital and imprisoned. The learned came to him several times in order to convince him of another conviction. According to tradition he was even tortured. This is certainly possible. As all conversion attempts failed to produce fruit, Haslebacher was condemned to death.

One day in the fall of 1571, after he had enjoyed the last meal, he was led to the place of execution. By all accounts the faithful Hans was confident and a smile could have played about his mouth as the death blow fell.”

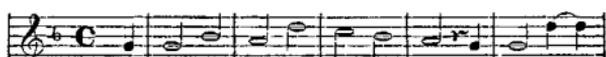
Hans Käser (1892–1965) from Walterswil was a teacher in Bannwil (1913–1919) and afterward, up to his retirement in 1959, in his home community of Walterswil. Author of the local history “Walterswil and Kleinemmental, from the history of a rural community” (1925). Editor of “Habkern, Valley and People, Sagas, Heritage and Tradition” from the estate of Melchior Sooder (1964). Author of various religious writings.



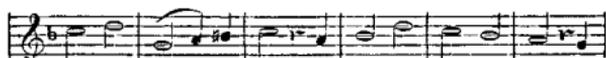
The Haslibacher song



Was wend wir aber heben an R
M



Was wend wir a • ber he • ben an Zu sin • gen von



ei • nem al • ten Mann, Der war von Has • li • bach. Has •



li • ba • cher ward er ge • nannt Aus der Kitch • h • ori Su • mis • wald.

In 32 verses, the Haslibacher song tells of the imprisonment and execution of Hans Haslebacher on October 20, 1571. In the last verse, an imprisoned Anabaptist reveals himself as the author. The oldest preserved printing is dated 1630 and is to be found in the public library of Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. The first indication that appeared in Bern is dated 1670. In 1692 the Bern Council wrote that Anabaptist books were spreading: First the “Ausbund”, secondly the “Confessio” from Thomas von Imbroich and thirdly the confession of faith of the Dutch Anabaptists. Also “damaging” songs were sung and sold by wandering book and song carriers



in the markets. Bern did not want to tolerate this any longer. It ordered that these books and songs should be confiscated and the singing of songs in the market should be stopped. Even when the Haslibacher song is not expressly mentioned, it can be assumed that it was also meant. A year later the pastor of Eggwil wrote a colleague in Bern that in his parish only one out of a hundred regards the history of Hans Haslebacher without God-fearing faith.

“Ausbund” and “Röseligarte”

From 1742 the Anabaptists in North America included the Haslibacher song as the 140th and last song in their “Ausbund”, the traditional hymnal of the Anabaptists that in its core goes back to the 16th century. Among the staunch believers of the “Old Order Amish” it is still sung today in church services and as a spiritual folk song. It has also been taken up in the “Im Röseligarte” folk song collection of Otto von Greyerz (1908). For it, the Bernese painter Rudolf Mürger created a frequently reproduced woodcut. Von Greyerz put the text to the melody of the song “Warum betrübst du dich mein Herz” from the “Deutschen Liederhort”, published in 1894 by Ludwig Böhme and Hans Magnus Erk. In addition, the song can be found in “Anderi Lieder” by Urs Hostettler (1979). In 1976 Hostettler, together with Martin Diem and Luc Mentha, recorded a portion of it.



Rudolf Mürger's illustrations to the Haslibacher song in the “Röseligarte”.



The Haslibacher-song

1.

This is what we want to begin,
To sing about an old man
Who was from Haslibach,
He was called Haslibacher,
From the district of Sumiswald.

2.

When the loving God let it come to pass
That he was harshly accused,
Verily because of his faith,
Then men caught him roughly,
Led him toward Bern, indeed into the city.

3.

And now when he was apprehended,
Tormented and tortured severely,
Verily because of his faith alone,
Nevertheless he remained steadfast
In his torture, anguish, and pain.

4.

On a Friday, I do understand,
The learned ones came to him,
Into the prison indeed,
And began to dispute with him,
That he should renounce his faith.

5.

Haslibacher, at that point,
Had out-debated them,
Then he promptly said to them:
From my faith I will not depart,
Sooner would I give my body and life.

6.

And now when it was Saturday,
The learned men went there again,
Speaking to him earnestly,
You must leave your faith,
Or man will strike off your head.

7.

Very quickly he gave them this answer:
I will not depart from my faith,
I hold to it steadfastly,
For my faith is acceptable before God;
He will keep me in His protection and care.

8.

And thus it was on Saturday night,
An angel of God came with might
Thither to Haslibacher,
Saying, God has sent me to you
To comfort you before your end.

9.

Further do I counsel you,
From your faith do not depart,
Thereupon stand firm and steadfast,
Your faith is precious before God,
He will keep your soul in good care.

10.

Even if man will threaten you severely
And would judge you with the sword,
Do not be afraid thereof;
I will stand by your side,
No pain will you receive through this.

11.

And so when it was Monday,
The officials came once again
To where Haslibacher was,
Started to talk with him,
That he should deny his faith.

12.

If not, said they without mockery,
Tomorrow you must suffer death.
Then Haslibacher said:
Before I give up my faith,
I would sooner let my head be cut off.

13.

Listen how it was on Monday night,
When Haslibacher was fast asleep,
Until about midnight.
Then he dreamed it was day,
And men wanted to behead him.

14.

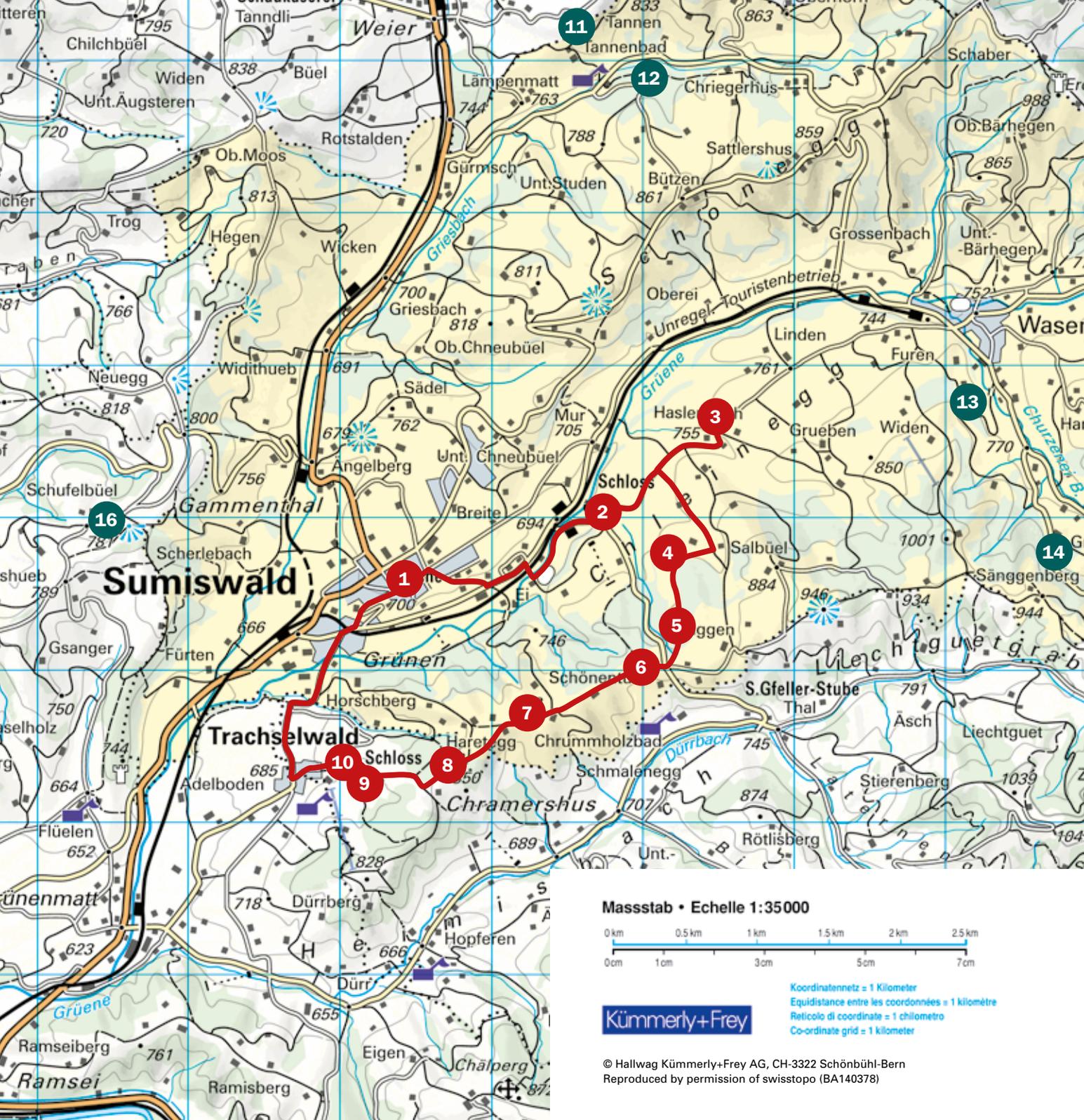
Thereupon Haslibacher woke up,
Then about him it was bright as day;
A book lay before him.
An angel of God said to him,
Read what is written in this booklet.

15.

Then when he read this booklet,
He found written therein
That men would behead him.
Three signs would God let appear,
That man had done him injustice.

16.

And when he had finished reading it,
The darkness of night returned.
Quickly he fell asleep again,
And slept until the dawn of day.
Then the men came to him in prison.



Hiking trail

— (ca. 8 km)

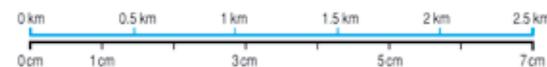
Places to see along the hiking route

- 1** Sumiswald church
- 2** Sumiswald castle
- 3** Haslebach farm
- 9** Trachselwald castle

Further places to see

- 11** Obere Tanne (Station 5)
- 12** Anabaptismätteli and Amerika in the Eierwald (Station 8)
- 13** Gsang/Vogelsang (Station 5)
- 14** Anabaptist hole in Murboden (Station 8)
- 15** Amerika near Fritzenhus (Station 8)
- 16** Schaufelbühl (Station 7)

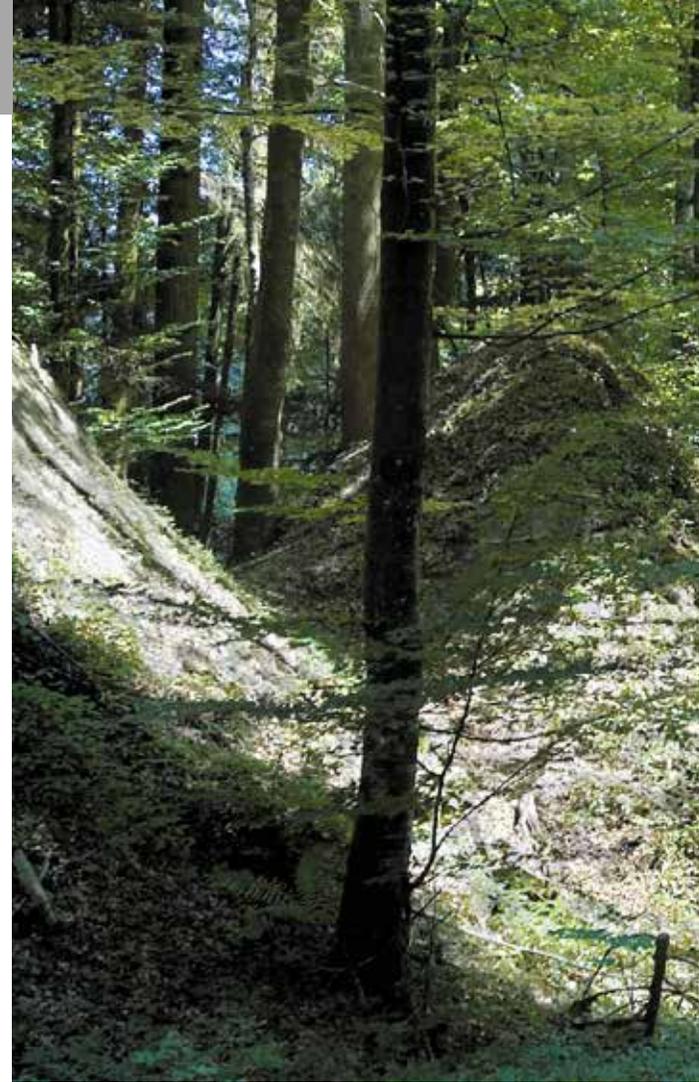
Masstab • Echelle 1:35000



Kümmerly+Frey

Koordinatennetz = 1 Kilometer
 Equidistance entre les coordonnées = 1 kilomètre
 Reticolo di coordinate = 1 chilometro
 Co-ordinate grid = 1 kilometer

Stations



- 1 Hans Haslebach
- 2 Nikolaus Zurkinden
- 3 The Haslebach farm
- 4 An Anabaptist teacher
- 5 The Schürch from the Tanne
- 6 Anabaptist hunter
- 7 An Anabaptist hideout
- 8 Assembly places and cemeteries
- 9 Imprisoned and executed
- 10 The Haslebach song

A beautiful spiritual song of Haslebach, how he was judged from life to death. In the tune: “Why do you grieve my heart”.

- 17. The men bade him “good day”,
As soon as he thanked them.
The men said to him
That he should listen to God’s Word,
Or he must eat the “hangman’s meal”.
- 18. From my faith I will not depart,
The Word of God I know myself,
My cause I commit to God,
It is to my heart a light atonement,
That innocently I must die.
- 19. They then led him into the inn
And offered him food and drink,
With the executioner beside him,
Reminding him of the coming horror
If he would not recant his faith.
- 20. The Anabaptist spoke kindly to the executioner,
Now eat and drink, and be of good spirit,
You will this very day
Take my life and offer up my innocent blood.
However, it is well with my soul.
- 21. He also said, God will let you see
Three signs that you will understand indeed;
Man will see these shortly.
When you will cut off my head,
It will spring into my hat and laugh aloud.
- 22. The second sign will take place,
This will men see on the sun.
The third notice carefully,
The sun will become red as blood
And the town well will also sweat blood.
- 23. The judge to the lords said,
On these three signs take notice
And see on this indeed,
When all this should happen
It will be woe to your soul.
- 24. And when the meal was ended,
They wanted to tie his hands,
Then Haslebach said,
I request from you, Master Lorenz,
That you leave me unbound.
- 25. I am willing and prepared,
My death certainly brings me great joy,
That I shall depart from hence.
But may God be merciful
To those who sentenced me to death.
- 26. When he came to the place of execution,
He took his hat off his head
And laid it before the people.
Good Master Lorenz, I bid you,
Let me lay my hat here.
- 27. With this he fell upon his knees,
The Lord’s Prayer, once or twice
He there did pray.
My cause is now committed to God,
Now let your sentence be carried out.
- 28. After man had cut off his head,
It sprang back into his hat.
The signs they did now see;
The sun was red as blood
And the town well sweated blood.
- 29. Then spoke an old gentleman well,
“The Anabaptist’s mouth laughed in the hat”,
Then said a venerable old man,
“Had you let the Anabaptist live,
It would have forever gone well with you”.
- 30. The lords said secretly,
“No more Anabaptists will we judge”.
Then said an aged man,
“Would it have gone according to my will,
Man would have let the Anabaptist live”.
- 31. The executioner said with displeasure,
“Today I have judged innocent blood”.
Then said an older gentleman,
“The Anabaptist’s mouth laughed in the hat,
This signifies God’s judgment and rod”.
- 32. He that wrote this song for us
Was in prison for his life’s sake;
He did it with love for sinners.
A man brought him quill and ink,
He gave us this as a farewell gift.

Imprint

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