

John Horsch: Mennonite Historian.

DURING the past two generations American Mennonites have made a number of notable contributions to the scholarly study of the radical spiritual movements of the Reformation period. As long ago as 1871 there was published at Elkhart, Indiana, a complete edition in English of the works of Menno Simons. More recently, from Goshen College, Indiana, and from the Mennonite Publishing House at Scottdale, Pennsylvania, there has come a series of publications on the history of the Mennonite and Hutterite communities of both Europe and America. The pages of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, founded in 1927, regularly carry contributions by H. S. Bender, John C. Wenger, Ernest Correll, Robert Freidmann, Cornelius Krahn, C. Henry Smith and others, which throw much new light on the history and the theology of early Anabaptism. Some of these scholars are American born; others belong to the great company who of recent years have left European lands in search of larger freedom and peace. A link between the publications which came from Elkhart seventy years ago and those now being produced at Scottdale, as well as a living link with Europe, is provided by the life and work of John Horsch. All those interested in Anabaptist history are his debtors. His career vividly illustrates some of the changes which have come, not only in this field of study, but also in the outlook of the Mennonite communities. Moreover, the fact that Horsch was for a few years in membership with American Baptist churches provides an additional reason for making some account of him available in this country.

Horsch was born on December 18, 1867, in a village in Bavaria, not far from Würzburg. Both his father and his mother came of old Mennonite families of Swiss and South German origin, families which had for generations been engaged with skill and success in farming. They belonged to a hard-working, devout and self-contained community. John's upbringing was strict. His father was a Mennonite "bishop" or "elder", as well as a farmer, a stern and aloof man, but the possessor of a fairly large library of old Mennonite books. John was the fourth of nine children. He was never very strong, and it was chiefly from his mother that he learned a love of the Bible and an

introduction to the devotional writings of Thomas à Kempis, Tauler, Arndt and C. H. J. Spitta. Baptised by his father when fifteen years of age, he was put in charge of the family's dairy herd and in his later teens spent some months at the Bavarian State Agricultural School.

A decisive intellectual awakening took place as he read some of the contributions which Ludwig Keller (1848-1915), the Münster archivist, was making to the study of Anabaptist life prior to the tragic episode of the Münster siege (1533-1535). A generation earlier C. A. Cornelius (1810-1903) had blazed a new trail in Reformation studies by showing how different was the picture of the Anabaptist "Kingdom" provided by the documents, from the exaggeration, condemnation and abuse ignorantly and unquestioningly repeated by opponents for over three hundred years. In 1882 Keller had published a life of Hans Denck and in the following years wrote a number of articles describing with enthusiasm the tradition of spiritual religion to be found alongside of and often in opposition to the Lutheran movement, a tradition with its roots in the Middle Ages, but suspicious of chiliasm, rejecting the sword and standing for toleration and freedom of conscience. Young Horsch responded eagerly to Keller's presentation of that spiritual heritage which was his as a Mennonite. In May, 1885, the youth, not yet seventeen and a half, wrote to Keller asking where the writings of men like Denck and Langenmantel could be obtained. Keller warmed to the young man's interest and lent him Denck's *Von der wahren Liebe*. Then there began a correspondence which lasted nearly ten years and which gave the impetus to much of Horsch's subsequent work. Keller encouraged the young Mennonite to prepare a new edition of the *Theologia Germanica* and of selections from Tauler's sermons, as a first step towards recalling his community to its older spiritual treasures. Together they planned a literary campaign that should have "Back to the times before 1535" as its motto. But as Horsch came to admire Denck and as he studied the story of the Anabaptist martyrs, he became growingly distressed at the prospect of compulsory military service. Shortly before his nineteenth birthday, unbeknown to his father but aided and abetted by his mother, he slipped away from home, made his way to Rotterdam and took ship for America.

Keller at first feared he was losing a valuable recruit and ally but Horsch assured him that he hoped to carry out some of their projects in the larger opportunity provided by the Mennonite community in the United States. Making his way to Elkhart, Indiana, he was successful, at the second attempt, in securing employment with J. F. Funk, the Mennonite editor and publisher,

and quickly demonstrated his own literary and historical interests and gifts. For eight years, broken by brief periods improving his education, the young man continued in association with Funk. Letters to and from Keller crossed the Atlantic. Horsch read steadily the writings of left-wing Reformation figures like Sebastian Franck. He began to build up his own collection of Anabaptist literature. He prepared a new German edition of Denck's pamphlet. He filled the Mennonite periodicals which went out from Elkhart with extracts from sixteenth century writers and brief historical articles. As early as 1890, he even published a short history of the Mennonites in German.

It must have seemed to Horsch and his friends that he had successfully established himself in the New World. In 1893 he married, his bride being like himself a member of an old Bavarian Mennonite family. Two years later, however, his association with J. F. Funk came to an end, and in circumstances which compelled him to sell to his former employer most of his library. For the next few years he tried various means of livelihood—business, teaching and finally the editing of a farming journal. Then in 1900 there began eight years of association with J. A. Sprunger, an ex-Mennonite of evangelical sympathies, who had established an orphanage and various publishing enterprises. Horsch assisted Sprunger, in Berne, Indiana, in Cleveland, Ohio, and elsewhere. It was at this period of his life that Horsch was in membership with Baptist churches. Articles on Mennonite history still came occasionally from his pen and in 1903 he published *A Short History of Christianity*, a book of 300 pages which indicated his growing mastery of wider issues. It became clear that his interests were turning from "spiritual reformers" like Denck, and away from the standpoint of Ludwig Keller, to a greater concentration on the witness of the Swiss Brethren, whose Biblical attitudes, it seemed to him, were rightly reproduced and re-emphasized by Menno Simons.

In 1908, at the age of forty-one, Horsch stepped at last into a position where his powers and convictions found proper scope. He was appointed German editor of the Mennonite Publishing House in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania. This Publishing House had recently bought out the Funk enterprises at Elkhart and was starting on a new and growingly successful career. Horsch's position gave him adequate opportunity for both research and writing. He helped with the starting of the Mennonite Historical Library at Scottsdale, and this library was able to acquire the valuable books he had had to part with to J. F. Funk in 1895. It is now one of the most important collections of Anabaptist and Mennonite material in the world and is housed at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana.

History was for Horsch "an instrument for evangelism in the truest and best sense". Mennonitism was not an antiquarian interest but a way of life. A ceaseless flow of articles and pamphlets appeared, some in English and some in German, and he developed into a vigorous controversialist. In 1916 he published a biography of Menno Simons, which remains the best account in English, though it now requires comparison with the more recent life in German by Cornelius Krahn (1936). In the following years Horsch was drawn into the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. His *Modern Religious Liberalism* (1920) was one of the most trenchant contributions from the side of the Conservatives. Books on Infant Baptism and on the principle of non-resistance followed.

But it was not in these fields that Horsch's most enduring work was done. He had been one of the first to call the attention of Ludwig Keller and others to the fact that there were in Canada and the United States little communities of Hutterian Brethren, living in *bruderhöfe*, the direct descendants of those who had been driven by fierce persecution from Hungary and Moravia eastwards into Southern Russia, and who at the end of the eighteenth century had been allowed to seek a new home across the Atlantic. Horsch's study of this wing of the old Anabaptist movement led in 1931 to his valuable book *The Hutterian Brethren*. In 1922-23 he had been able to pay a long visit to Europe and to the Germany of the Weimar Republic. Old contacts were renewed and new ones formed. Naturally he became a contributor to the important but as yet incomplete *Mennonitische Lexikon*, edited by Christian Neff and Christian Hege, and also to the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

The growingly threatening situation in Europe caused Horsch much distress of mind. He was particularly concerned that certain groups of Mennonites seemed ready to compromise their witness to the principles of non-resistance. The outbreak of the war and the over-running by Germany of the Low Countries, the scene of Menno Simons' work, could not but deeply affect him. After some months of growing weakness he passed away in October, 1941, three months before his seventy-fourth birthday. His main energies during the closing years of his life had been given to a comprehensive study entitled *Mennonites in Europe*. It was published posthumously in 1942 and is likely to take its place as his most important book.

A. H. Newman (1852-1933), W. T. Whitley (1861-1948), and John Horsch (1867-1941) may fitly be named together. The American, the Englishman and the German were contemporaries. They knew and appreciated one another's work and there were a number of links between them. Taken together the detailed

studies of these three scholars may be said to have opened up new vistas for those English-speaking communities, the origin of whose witness is to be found in the left-wing of the Continental Reformation. Judged by technical and academic standards Horsch was not the greatest of the three. Certain of his interpretations of Mennonite history have already been challenged. But Horsch was second to neither of the others in enthusiasm and devotion to his subject, and as a pioneer and propagandist he was probably the one chiefly deserving of honour. Horsch's son-in-law, H. S. Bender, writing of his life and work, refers to "what he so valiantly began."¹ There are British Baptists as well as American Mennonites who will gratefully recognise the truth of the phrase.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

Service Book for the Young. (Oxford University Press, 4s. 6d.)

Prepared by the Church of Scotland Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, this manual should, if rightly used, fulfil its avowed purpose of encouraging orderly and reverent worship in Sunday Schools and at children's services in church.

¹ *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXI, No. 3 (July, 1947), p. 144. The issue is a John Horsch Memorial Number, and includes a full bibliography of his writings compiled by the late Edward Yoder.