

Camphill: The Moravian Dimension

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Introduction

In his book *The Camphill Movement*, Karl König identified three stars of the Camphill movement: Jan Comenius, Count Zinzendorf and Robert Owen. What did they all have in common? According to König they all longed for a reformed human community and imagined a new social order wherein a true brotherhood could be established. The words and deeds of these three pioneers were in König's opinion alive and active in the Camphill movement. But what else did they have in common? Comenius and Zinzendorf had been bishops in the Moravian Church, whilst Robert Owen, the social reformer, had been profoundly influenced by the life and work of Moravian Settlements in England (e.g., Fairfield Settlement in Manchester).

The focus of this article is on the possible influence of the Moravian Brethren on the subsequent birth and development of the Camphill movement. In 1929 Karl König visited Gnadensfrei, the birthplace and home of the person he was later to marry: Mathilde (Tilla) Maasberg. In *The Builders of Camphill* Lindenberg notes that the heart-religion of the Moravian Church awakened in König a deep Christianity that he had been looking for since his early childhood. König himself comments:

In Gnadensfrei a special experience awaited me which entered deeply into my soul and became a pivotal element in my destiny. Something hitherto unknown took hold of me and made strings vibrate whose melodies had never sounded within me before. Gnadensfrei was at the time a small village... it still preserved its character from its foundation in the middle of the eighteenth century. It was one of the typical settlements of the Herrnhut communities founded by Count Zinzendorf...seldom had I been so directly gripped by a place and its atmosphere.

(Lindenberg, 2004; p. 82–83).

There can be little doubt from this extract that König's encounter with the Moravian Brethren represented a critical turning point in his life or as he expressed it—a pivotal moment in his destiny. That being so, it is important to learn a little more about the Moravian church and Moravian communities. Whilst this is not the place for an extensive discourse on either topic, it is important to provide some background.

History of Moravian Church

The Moravian Church, which is one of the smaller religious bodies in Europe, has a long and distinguished history. The name Moravian refers to the fact that this historic church had its origin in ancient Bohemia and Moravia in what is the present-day Czech Republic. In the mid-ninth century these countries converted to Christianity chiefly through the influence of two Greek Orthodox missionaries, Cyril and Methodius. They translated the Bible into the common language. In the centuries that followed, Bohemia and Moravia gradually fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Rome, but some of the Czech people protested. The foremost of



Gnadensfrei, the birthplace and home of Mathilde (Tilla) Maasberg

Czech protestors, Jan Hus (1369–1415) was a professor of philosophy and rector of the University of Prague. The Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, where Hus preached, became a rallying place for the Czech reformation. Gaining support from students and the common people, he led a protest movement against many practices of the Roman Catholic clergy and hierarchy. Hus was accused of heresy, underwent a long trial at the Council of Constance, and was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

Jan Hus had been profoundly influenced by John Wyclif (c. 1320–1384), the English reformer. It was Wyclif's belief that the church should return to the more primitive form of Christianity that existed in the days of the apostles. He attacked the power of the papacy and its attendant hierarchy and welcomed the secularisation of ecclesiastical properties. He believed that the Bible should be the common possession of all Christians and be available for common use in the language of the people.

The reformation spirit did not die with Hus. The Moravian Church, or *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren), as it has been officially known since 1457, arose as followers of Hus gathered in the village of Kunwald, about 100 miles east of Prague in eastern Bohemia, and organized the church. This was 60 years before Martin Luther. By 1467 the Moravian Church had established its own ministry. In 1517 the Unity of Brethren numbered at least 200,000 with over 400 parishes. Using a hymnal and catechism of its own, the church promoted the Scriptures through its two printing presses and provided the people of Bohemia and Moravia with the Bible in their own language. A bitter persecution which broke out in 1547, led to the spread of the Brethren's Church to Poland where it grew rapidly. By 1557 there were three provinces of the Church: Bohemia, Moravia and Poland. The Thirty Years War (1618–1648) brought further persecution to the Brethren's Church and the Protestants of Bohemia were severely defeated at the battle of White Mountain in 1620.

The leader of the *Unitas Fratrum* in these tempestuous years was Bishop John Amos Comenius (1592–1670). He became world-renowned for his progressive views on education. Comenius lived most of his life in exile

in England and in Holland where he died. His prayer was that some day the 'hidden seed' of his beloved Unitas Fratrum might once again spring to new life. The 18th century saw the renewal of the Moravian Church through the patronage of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a nobleman from Saxony. Some Moravian families fleeing persecution in Bohemia and Moravia found refuge on Zinzendorf's estate in 1722 and built the community of Herrnhut. The new community became the haven for many more Moravian refugees. Zinzendorf encouraged them to keep the discipline of the Unitas Fratrum, and he gave them the vision to take the gospel to the far corners of the world. August 13, 1727, marked the culmination of a great spiritual renewal for the Moravian Church in Herrnhut.

From the time of its creation, the Moravian Church has believed moral reform to be more urgent than doctrinal reform. It recognizes the same creeds as the other Protestant traditions, but is more concerned with experiential Christianity than with doctrinal correctness. The Moravian tradition is also known for its Christocentricity and ecumenicity. Throughout their existence the Moravians have sought to emphasise the importance of simplicity in all things (Weinlick, 1959). Both John Wesley (1703–1791) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788), the founders of the Methodist Church, were for a time members of the Moravian Society in London. John Wesley always acknowledged the spiritual help and direction he had received from the Moravians.

The modern Moravian Church, with about 825,000 members worldwide, continues to draw on traditions established during the 18th century renewal, in particular their long tradition of missionary work which is reflected in their broad global distribution. In the USA it is an active member of the National Council of Churches: the Northern Province of the American church has held observer status in the Consultation on Church Union, indicating the intention to keep seeking common ground with fellow Protestants. The Moravians in Germany, where the central settlement remains at Herrnhut, are highly active in education and social work. In England the Moravian Church is fully involved in ecumenical matters and belongs to the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Churches Together in England and the Free Churches' Council.

The Moravian Community

What made the structure of the original Moravian Community so unique? Believing that men and women had different religious needs, Zinzendorf in 1736 organized the Moravian community around groups of members known as 'Choirs' who lived apart in large houses. Age, gender and marital status determined what Choir a person would live in and each group provided spiritual and social guidance to its own. When children reached 18 months of age, their parents sent them to the communal Nursery. At four they moved to either the Little Boys' or Little Girls' Choir. At age 12, they joined the Older Boys' or Older Girls' Choir and at 19 moved into either the Single Brothers' or Single Sisters' Choir. Married members became part of the Married Peoples' Choir and when a spouse died, the surviving spouse joined either the Widows' or Widowers' Choir. The Brethren's House housed the community's single men.

Faithful Moravians worshipped several times each day. In the Brethren House, Brothers awoke at 5 a.m. to the gentle sound of softly sung hymns. Breakfast at 6 a.m. began with a benediction and the announcement of a particular word or phrase with a religious theme that the faithful were to contemplate throughout the day. When they reconvened at noon for their main meal, they sang hymns both before and after dining. At 7 p.m. the entire congregation met for an hour of worship, which was followed by a brief fifteen-minute prayer service among members meeting with their Choirs. At 9 p.m. all returned to pray together as a community. The day concluded at 10 p.m. with evening benediction in each Choir. While the faithful slept, each day a different person offered intercessions on the day's theme every hour around the clock. From ten at night to five in the morning, the night watchman sang hymns to mark each hour.

Life within the Brethren's House centred on work as well as worship. The Brothers began their chores promptly at 7 a.m. The original Moravian communities were organised in such a way that all members would share the labour and receive in return food, shelter and clothes. This communal system, known as General Economy, freed members to worship and work as 'pilgrims' providing spiritual nurture both for those within the community and those that lived outside. In this communal economic system, each member of the *Hausgemeinde* (house community, non-missionary) worked to support the *Pilgergemeinde* (missionaries), whom the Church sent to spread the Gospel. The General Economy also provided a mutual support network that helped the Moravians preserve their unique culture. While the Choirs only lasted until the 1760's, at which point Moravians decided to live again in family units, their communally-based economic arrangement lasted for two more decades before the Church elders in Germany decided to replace it with privately owned enterprises.

Camphill and the Moravian Brethren

Whilst reference is made in Camphill literature to the fact that Karl König visited Mathilde Maasberg in Gnadenfrei and that he was deeply impressed by the Moravian Brethren settlement set in the beautiful Silesian countryside, there is virtually nothing written about Mathilde's parents (Müller-Wiedemann, 1996; Bock, 2004). Genealogical research recently undertaken through the good offices of the Archiv der Brüder-Unität in Herrnhut, has revealed that Mathilde's father was Ludwig Johannes August Maasberg (Beeb, 2007). He was born on Christmas Eve 1863 in Paramaribo, Surinam—a child (*Missionkind*) of the Moravian Mission to Surinam (formerly Dutch Guyana). Ludwig Maasberg was later to marry Luise Emilie Furter who was born on the 12th May 1878 at Neustaedl in Silesia and died on the 3rd September 1952 in Stuttgart.

During his early years Ludwig Maasberg held a number of managerial posts in different Moravian Brethren settlements (Gnadenfeld, Neuwied, Zeist), as his father had done. In 1889 he was appointed *Vorsteher* (warden) of the Brother's Houses in Gnadenfrei with responsibility for the manufacture of textiles, shoes and cutlery. Because of the economic recession in the 1920's, all the businesses in Gnadenfrei went into a decline with the exception of textile manufacturing. Slowly through the

enterprise of Ludwig Maasberg the business expanded but then came to a further halt with the outbreak of war. After the war the business flourished and today Maasbergs is one of the leading textile manufacturers in Bavaria, based in Münchberg, and run by Rainer Maasberg—Ludwig’s grandson! Ludwig Maasberg was also responsible for editing one of the few publications that describes the life and work of a Moravian settlement (Maasberg, 1911). It is clear from the information provided by the Herrnhut Archive that Ludwig Maasberg was a leading member of the Moravian Brethren, from which it follows that Mathilde Maasberg (Tilla König) was well placed, by virtue of her father’s prominent position, to have gained a good understanding of what was needed to lead and administer an intentional religious community.



Herrnhut, the central settlement for the Moravians in Germany

Mathilde Elisabeth Maasberg was born on the 9th March 1902 in Gnadenfrei, the fourth of seven children. Christof König, Tilla König’s eldest son, has commented that the idea to start Camphill with disabled children resulted from his mother’s initial work with her sister in the family holiday house in Silesia (von Freeden, 2004). He also observed, with some justification, that his mother’s significant contribution to the creation of Camphill has not been accorded the merit it deserves. With respect to the influence of the Moravian Brethren, Christof noted that the Moravian dimension in Camphill derived from his mother and was woven inextricably into the fabric of Camphill, in particular: ‘the aspect of devotion and of prayer, the aspect of order and beauty and the aspect of devotion to small detail’ (von Freeden, 2004, p. 60). He also noted that she had made a huge contribution to all that had to do with the care of the handicapped child. In Christof’s judgement his mother was essentially a homebuilder and a homemaker, possessing practical gifts that contributed significantly to the process of community building. Renate König, Tilla’s daughter, has indicated that the love of nature, order and simplicity were the key influences of her mother; all of which reflected and embodied the way of life of the Moravian Brethren (Sleigh, 2005). This point was underlined by Margarete von Freeden who noted that Tilla had the ability to create order, peace and culture wherever she went and who during the formative years of Camphill stood like a pillar of strength, becoming the ‘Mother’ to all the young mothers, showing them how to care for their children. Barbara Lipsker has commented on the beauty and order of Tilla König’s house and her attitude of devotion in everything that she did (How, 2004). What seems beyond dispute is that Tilla König’s influential role in the creation of the Camphill movement has for too long been understated.

Conclusion

When visitors are asked to describe the characteristics of Camphill communities that have made the most impression upon them, more often than not they identify features which have a strong Moravian provenance: the beauty and tranquillity of the environment; the devotion to detail evident within the houses; the ordered daily rhythm; the rituals attending the beginning and end of each day; and the attention paid to spiritual

values. Is it too much to claim that the heart religion of the Moravian church, so valued by Karl König, gave to the Camphill movement its heart? George MacLeod, one of the leading Scottish churchmen of the twentieth century, strongly welcomed the creation of Camphill in the 1940’s, as he saw it as an example of a return to a more simple, authentic and direct expression of Christianity—indeed one could argue a form of experiential and ecumenical Christianity that would have found favour with John Wyclif and Jan Hus!

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