

Excerpt from the Moravian Mission Diaries of David Zeisberger (1776)

Abstract

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Reformation in Bohemia and Moravia, which began in 1415 (after the burning of Johann Hus), developed into an anti-Habsburg Protestant church, whose members were called “Moravian Brethren” when they had to flee to Saxony from the military counter-reformation at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The group was named *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine* after its post-migrant spiritual and administrative center in Herrnhut (Upper Lusatia), founded by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760). In 1726, the Zeisberger family with their three sons fled there from a Carpathian village. Ten years later the parents emigrated to Georgia with other members of the brotherhood, but left David Zeisberger (1721-1808) behind. On his own initiative, he soon followed and was trained as a missionary until 1745. His brothers and sisters also worked as missionaries, in South India (Tranquebar) and in Surinam. David Zeisberger helped to build two mission locations in the Ohio Valley, Schönbrunn and Gnadenhütten.

As usual, he kept a mission diary, which was sent to the main mission location every quarter. From there a shortened copy was then sent to Herrnhut. The diaries were by no means of a private nature. They were intended to record progress in spirituality and mission and also to report on everyday life, baptisms, visits and celebrations. The diary was intended primarily to serve the edification of the readership. Zeisberger described how the “Indians” who settled in the area wanted to hear the word of God and helped the Herrnhutters to build the village. He did not conceal difficulties and delays: the Indian “Minque” left the mission, another asked about the compatibility of the “Chief” office with Christianity. The text excerpt covers the founding of another mission site, Lichtenau, in April 1776 on the Muskingum River, a tributary of the Ohio. The passage also exemplifies how precise local observations, for example on topography, are framed within the scope of a missionary’s imagination.

Source

The 13th After the early service, our first work was to stake out the *Town* and show each family their lot do that they could set up and get settled in as well as possible for now. Then each person went to work diligently and cut down wood on the building site in every direction. Five Brothers had accompanied us here from *Schönbrunn* and helped us. They offered to frame in a house for Brothers *David* and *Heckewelder* and get it under roof before they returned home, and they immediately got to work on this.

We had many Indian visitors from *Goschgosching* today. They wanted to hear about the Savior, and the Indian Brothers were immediately prepared to serve them in this way. Then they looked around the place where the *Town* is being built and how it is laid out, and they returned home towards evening. Currently we have only 1 road staked out with 2 rows of houses, running from north directly south following the lay of the land along the river, and we have designated the site for the Congregational and Meeting Hosue.

The 14th *Chief Netawatwees* traveled here by water and many of his people by land for the sermon, which was

preached under the open sky. It was about the text for today, Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? [Luke 24:36] Some *Cherokees* who live in *Goschgosching* also came with them. Everyone was very attentive during this and afterwards the Indian Brothers continued talking about this subject in companies where they had gathered by the fires, and they discussed many aspects of this with them. Then they returned home in the evening.

The 15th We continued cutting down wood and preparing to build. Our building site looked like a wasteland and there was so much destruction so that you could hardly figure how to get through it. There are sometimes very strong storms here, so it is necessary to cut down the nearby trees to be safe. *Munsee* and *Minque* Indians visited us. The latter were *Agnes'* friends. They spent the night with us and *Isaac* proclaimed the Savior to them. However, the *Minque* had no ears to hear; he painted himself the next morning and went away, leaving behind his wife who wanted to stay here longer.

The 16th *John Killbuck*, *Netawatwees'* grandchild (he is like the superintendent of *Goschgosching*) arrived with a pretty large number of Indians and offered to help us with our work. We gratefully accepted this and we put them to work framing in houses. They also helped us on the 17th and yesterday and today the 4 *Cherokee* joined in the work diligently. Our *Noah*, who had come with us in order to see them, had an opportunity to talk to them a good deal about the salvation the Savior won for us through his blood.

The 20th We moved from the river, where we had been camping until now, to the site of our *Town*, and each person went to his lot. One family from *Goschgosching* asked for permission to live with us and we agree to this. They are the first to come to us and there are 6 of them altogether. The man is *Netawatwees'* grandchild, our *Thomas'* brother, and his wife was baptized in the *Congressional Meeting Hall* in Bethlehem by Brother *Joseph* when she was 13 years old. She was given the name *Hanna*. Her mother had also been baptized and received the name *Magdalena*, and then died some years ago in *Gekelemukpechünk*, but she had led her away from the congregation. She came here with her belongings in a *Canow* early the next morning and moved in with us for good.

The 21st before the sermon, which was the first service we had on the site of our *Town*, we dedicated this little place with prayer and supplication. We prayed that the Savior would enter with us and remain with us, that He would gather a congregation from the Indians in this area for himself, to honor and glorify His name, through the word of his cross that will be preached here, and that thousands more might seek and find their salvation in his wounds. Our Watchword for the day also provided the most beautiful assurances of this. It said, In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee. Guard your house and your herd, which are so dear and worthy to their shepherd. Guard them from outside and from inside, and may the entire beginning of the residents be well founded [Isa. 54: 14].

Netawatwees was present with a great number of his people, both men and women. The Brothers spoke separately with the former for a long time about the foundation of our salvation in Jesus' blood, that he shed for our sins. He listened attentively during this and you could see that he was seriously thinking about it.

There was another man named *Gelelemend*, or *John Killbuck*, who was designated to be Chief after *Netawatwees*. Among other things he asked Brother *David* to what extent a believer or person who wants to become a believer could be involved with *Chief Affairs*. Brother *David* answered him: to the extent that a person could be spared heathen matters, *Ceremonies*, and traditions. Then his office of *Chief* would not get in the way, and a *Chief* could become a believer as well as someone else who was not a *Chief*. However, he must renounce pagan ways once and

for all. He then said that since the fall he had felt a desire in his heart to move to our place. He had also told his uncle the *Chief* some time before he had come here that he had wanted to move to *Gnadenhütten*. At that time he had not really objected to this. However, later he had told him he should not hurry but wait a little, because he hoped the Brothers would come here. Since this was now happening and we were there, he thought he would talk to him again and see if he could move in with us now. Brother *David* answered him he should just do it, but if he met any hesitation it would be better to wait before moving here. He had already chosen himself a site and lot where he would plant and live, and he asked that we keep this place for him. We promised we would do so. It is no wonder that until now *Netawatwees* has not wanted his best and most useful people to leave him and go to us. You cannot think badly of him for this, because he would be an afflicted man if his *Counselors* left him. Now that we live here, though, he will not be opposed to this.

Source: *The Moravian Mission Diaries of David Zeisberger, 1771-1781*, edited by Hermann Wellenreuther and Carola Wessel, translated by Julie Tomberlin Weber. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, pp. 310-14.

Recommended Citation: Excerpt from the Moravian Mission Diaries of David Zeisberger (1776), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-74>> [December 04, 2023].