

THE FOUNDING OF THE FRENCH-REFORMED CHURCH OF BERGHOLZ in 1687 (Part I)

(This is a German to English translation, by Eugene Camann, of an account written by Leopold Cordier in 1957)

In 1687, 266 French Reformed persons came into the Uckermark. They consisted of 77 men, 64 women, 63 sons and 62 daughters. There may have been more, but these 266 can be definitely established because they were at the time involved with churchly offices, and also because after the expiration in 1697 of 10 free years, they were for the first time listed on the tax rolls. Of the 77 men, 52 were farm operators, 5 were artisans, one a plantation man and one pastor. The occupation of the remaining 18 is not available. The average age of the men was 40 years, which was physically the best age. They had already gained some experience in their occupations so that they could readily embark on a new existence. Those who were actually 40 years old had been about 18 years old when they left their homeland (France) and had certainly already witnessed persecution and abuse, or even had to suffer the same themselves. Before they came into the Uckermark they had already lived in the Palatinate for about 20 years, under the conditions and restrictions imposed on refugees who were allowed to live there. Not all the citizens of the Palatinate were willing to receive refugees, even though their government may have wished it so. Another factor was the length of time involved, over 20 years and sometimes even longer. So the goodwill and the compassion of the hosts weakened. And the refugees also wanted to be active; they did not want to merely exist on alms (handouts), but they wanted to be doing something. They wanted to have an actual homeland again with everything that goes with it. They wanted to again be able to pursue their occupations, for that was specifically what their faith required, to work for the glory of God and for the benefit of the congregation and their family.

So in the first days of April in the year 1687 a caravan of refugees moved from Berlin through Eberswalde, Angermuende, Prenzlau, Baumgarten, Bruessow to Bergholz. Leading it was Philippe Gombert, a young man of 27 who later became the French Mayor of Bergholz. He was descended from Holland dwellers and, therefore, was probably somewhat familiar with the German language. At his side was Pastor Henri le Franc, the first pastor, who was not much older than Philippe, and still unmarried.

The immigrants were far from being poor people. Many had wagons, and many carried a pouch with shiny imperial coins or ducats. In the middle of the procession, sitting on a flat wagon, was the oldest immigrant, Pierre Laurans, 87 years old. He was the ancestor of the Laurent and Lorenz families. He still lived 12 years more in the new homeland whereby word and deed he worked with his son Abraham, who had taken over a deserted farmstead in Fahrenwalde, right up to the time he was called into eternity in November 1699 at age 99. And now for the reception in Bergholz. It is certain that the mayor there, Kaspar Suckow, would have tried to communicate with Phillippe Gombert or the pastor. The refugees would have learned many a German word in the past 20 years, but that was in Palatine_German, and here Uckermark low German was spoken. It couldn't have been very easy but they must have made it work somehow. First the travelers should be

allowed to rest. Travel at that time, even in wagons, was not a comfortable matter. The few existing houses would not have been enough to accommodate so many immigrants. At the time there were only 13 families residing in Bergholz. So for a short while, many an immigrant would still have had to spend nights sleeping on a wagon.

And now I seem to hear far off over the ruins of what was then Bergholz, the song of praise: "Rejoice all you lands to honor God; celebrate the Glory of His Name,.." With fervent emotion they would have sung the fourth verse of that Psalm: "You often entangled us in difficulties, piled burdens on our shoulders; You let other men suppress us, squeeze us from all sides. Often we wanted to surrender our courage in fire- and water-distress, still You came to lead us out and fed us with heavenly bread." For how could these men and women of the confessing and conquering church of Christ conclude this journey any other way than with a thankful upward glance to the Almighty God who had led them out of "Egypt", out of the land of plagues and servitude?

In the following days, then, the negotiations were undertaken with the official in Loecknitz who was to assign them the vacant homesteads. Bergholz took the most immigrants: 37 families with 122 person in all, of whom 21 were farm operators. So now the Bergholz population was almost three-fourths French. Of the descendants of these Bergholz settlers, the Sy and Hurtienne families are still living there today; and in Ploewen, the Houdelet family which had developed a farm operation there somewhat later. All other families have either died out or moved elsewhere in the course of years as, for example, the Salingres to North America.

The next largest settlement was in Rossow where 15 families with 70 persons settled themselves, of whom 13 were farm operators. Descendants of the Lebauves, Bettacs and the Shoemakers L'aramee still live there today. Fahrenwalde accepted 9 families with 19 persons, of whom 6 were farm operators and one was a wagon maker. There only the name Laurent remains, all other families came there later: the Vangermains came from the Battin parish and the Sy's from Wallmow. The ancestor of all the many Sy families still living here was Abraham Sy; his wife was Elisabeth Conte. Eight families with 30 persons went to Grimme, of which 6 were farm operators. Of those first families in Grimme, no descendants remain anymore. In Zerrethin, were 6 families with 26 persons settled, only the name Villian (William) still survives. Finally, Ploewen is to be considered where only one family had originally settled, the Senechals. They were 2 brothers, one of whom was "empty" and the other one was married with 2 sons.

For almost 5 years the immigrants in Battin, Bagemuehl, Woddow, Wallmow and Gruenz belonged to the Bergholz church, until they obtained their own pastor in 1692. Sundays, the colonists came to the forenoon church services in Bergholz, except one in each house always stayed back. Now we are happy if at least one from each house comes. The church life was also very zealous. For Communion, and on Easter, Pentecost, Harvest Festival and Christmas, as well as on the two consecutive Sunday that followed each festival, everyone always attended, with the exception of those who had been excommunicated by church discipline. - For baptism, the children were brought to Bergholz, as a rule no older than three days. As sponsors, one man and one woman were

selected from among the relatives or friends; in some cases it would also be the parents themselves. - The marriages at first took place only in the Bergholz church. - The French custom of burying the dead without church participation, was apparently quite soon discontinued.

There was as yet no Confirmation as it is known today. The youth learned in school sufficient Bible stories and the catechism of the French confession of faith of 1559. Of course, the Bible was the reading book, the primer. Whoever considered himself ready to participate with the congregation in the Lord's Supper, would let himself be examined and, after being presented to the congregation, he was allowed to come to the Table of the Lord by the Presbytery at the next following Sunday. His name was entered in the communicant list and for celebrating Holy Communion, he was given the marks, the sign which must be given to the officiant at the Table, without which no one was allowed to commune.