

Lebensbild

(Warheit in Licht Und Schatten)

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Reverend William A. Helfrich, Reformed Pastor



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These excerpts are from a book that is generally just called the Helfrich Book. Its actual title is Lebensbild, or Wahrheit in Licht and Schatten. This translates to biography, or Life Picture, and Truth in Light and Shadows. It is written entirely in German and is about Reverend William Helfrich, who served this parish 125 years ago, and who kept a diary from which his son published this book in 1906.

I think it appropriate in this anniversary year to recall some of this material because it gives a picture of church life in the middle years of its existence, and gives names some will recognize as their forebears. Also, it's appropriate because out of the 250 years the Church has been in existence, four members of the Helfrich family served it for 127 years or a little over half of the total years.

Rev. Helfrich, at one time or another, served most of the rural churches in the valley from Tamaqua to Longswamp and Macungie, such as Heidelberg, Lowhill, Zeigel's, Lehigh, Indianland, Lynnville, and Weisenberg. Plus some other; I don't have a complete list, but he often served three to five congregations at a time.

I cite this vast experience because it gives significance to what he had to say about Heidelberg Church and its people. In debating whether he wanted to accept a call from a Trexlertown church, where they would build him a parish home if he accepted, he wrote, "I know also that my work here at Heidelberg and Friedens has born more fruit than anywhere else," and so he turned it down. At another time he said, "None of my congregations has had a consistently better church council than has Heidelberg."

Heidelberg Church as it looked in 1849-1913



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At another point he writes, "What a great difference between my upper and lower congregations. Up in Heidelberg the people dress simply, don't want to be more than they really are, and are "sparsam" - saving. Their tables are loaded, and with wholesome food, even though barely adorned. Everyone helps himself. In short, one finds in them still the simple tried and true Swiss character.

Altogether different in Macungie. There the farmers want to be gentlemen already. There the people trade the simple ways for the city ways and are clothing conscious. Here each farmer's son has his own horse and buggy, with which, on a Sunday, at a festival, or other occasion, he drives back and forth on the street. In many farmhouses you find elegantly appointed parlors with fine pianos on which they pummel murderously. And here the table is fashionable and city customs prevail.

Rev. Helfrich's reference to the tried and true Swiss character of the Heidelberg people is especially interesting to me because the Sells are said to have emigrated from Switzerland, and also because he further states the most of the local names with only four letters are of Swiss extraction. If you look at current congregational lists, you still find a lot of names such as Fink, Frey, Hill, Kern, Loch, Muth, and of course the pastor's name, Hess, to name just a few that come to mind.

In an August 1865 diary entry he notes that Daniel and Jacob Peter cut down some chestnut, white ash, and white oak trees that he would use to build a house. Members of the congregation hauled the logs to Krause's and Hensinger's saw mills on the Heidelberg Creek, where they cut it into boards. In the end, the cost of the wood and the sawing came to \$95.00, quite a bargain compared to today's cost of building a house. In fact Rev. Helfrich, himself, called it "Ein spottpreis" - a ridiculous price.

On August 29, 1868, the Sunday School Festival was held at Heidelberg. Following schoolmaster Geiger's plan, they decided to hold it outdoors, in contrast to prior custom. The Sunday school children marched in procession to small woods several hundred yards away where a long table was laid out with cold foods, bread and all kinds of cake. Around this table circled almost 200 children. A song was sung, a table prayer spoken, and then they ate, with the schoolmaster serving. After the children had eaten, the parents and the rest of the congregation came carrying baskets of food. At two o'clock Rev. Helfrich gave a short talk and then conducted an examination of the children, which he termed very satisfactory. My thought here is that 200 children seems like such an inordinate number that it may have been a ballpark figure that was out of the ballpark. At any rate, was this the forerunner of the outdoor picnics by the Sunday school? It may well have been.

It should be noted that at this time schools were a function of the Church, but already there was agitation for a separation of Church and School, which Rev. Helfrich opposed vigorously.

In 1846 he wrote that church festivals, such as cornerstone laying, organ dedication, and at this time, the 100 year Jubilee, are in Eastern Pennsylvania "grossartige" celebrations - grand or grandiose celebrations. I left that word in the translation because it was my great-aunt's

favorite word; everything was grossartish. Well, these festivals were "extraordinary." Already weeks earlier it is announced in the newspapers in advertisements and invitations and near and far everyone prepares to attend. In most congregations they try to pay off a part of the created debt with a heavy collection. So, the more people who attend, the better the prospect. It is the money and not the occasion that is the purpose of it.

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Hand in hand with this evil, yet another - the Market-tenders. These parasites are hucksters who deposit themselves around the church in a massing without comparison, and exert a worldly and devotion-disturbing influence over the huge gathering. Often two or three rows of market-wagons encircle the church, and a cloud of white tents surrounds the church. Under these tents stand the public tables with all kinds of candy, cakes, and cigars. The beer barrels lay on the wagons, between which and the tents, the sellers place themselves and with all kinds of manipulations try to inveigle the customers. There they stand then around the wagon and tent, old and young, eating zuckerstangl (candy sticks), cake, and drinking beer, and the thirsty Schanpps-bruder also drinking whiskey, bottles of which lie hidden (verstegt) in the straw on the wagons. Frivolity and a worldly atmosphere prevail.

In the forenoon, when a noted preacher speaks, the church is customarily full. But in the afternoon service, the church is empty in contrast to the swarming hordes outside by the Market-tenders. There they promenade back and forth, seek acquaintances and talk and laugh. Sabbath church, and Service are forgotten. I have myself seen youths wink to each

other, get up and leave the church in droves. By the end of the service, half the audience was outside the church. The Minister asked for quiet and more got up and left.

My impression of such a festival is that it is a worldly display where the Devil rules and not God. All this I saw for the first time at the organ dedication at Siegfried's Church. My conclusion is that this must be broken up.

This practice finally ceased in 1858 when Lowhill build a new church, and before the dedication Rev. Helfrich threatened to sue the hucksters if they appeared and also threatened to leave the parish if the church council did not keep them away. The hucksters cursed him as a tyrant who was talking their freedoms away, but in the end they stayed away and the practice was broken up for good and Helfrich had, as he put it, the last Amen.

On page 244 is a bit of history that might be of special interest to the Hunsickers of the congregations. On April 13, 1856, Rev. Helfrich held the funeral of Christian Hunsicker in Heidelberg. "Christian and his brother, John, both married young, moved together into one house, lived together and ate at the same table, had a common purse, bought additional land, on which they built a new house and barn, all paid for in common, raised their children together in Christian spirit, and in all the years never had a single disagreement.

When the new house was finished, Christian, the younger of the two, insisted that John must move into it and they settled up with the greatest satisfaction to both of them. When they moved apart, both families cried even though the new house was only a field away." Rev. Helfrich asks, "Was this not a fine example of Christian sociability and compliance with the Word, letting everything be done in Love?" "Truly," he said, "Such families are scarce." He also notes that after the funeral, brother John impressed him a ten-dollar gold-piece, the first he ever received for holding a funeral.

Funerals were frequent occasions in those days before there were cures for the prevalent diseases of the day like Typhoid, Diphtheia, and tuberculosis. In this same year of 1856, Helfrich had 73 funerals, which is an average of one every fifth day. He mentions a request by a Rev. Zuilch of Steinsville to hold a funeral for a daughter whom Helfrich describes as an unusually lovely girl, who died of typhoid fever. Then he lost a second daughter, then his only son, who had just finished at Seminary, and finally his wife, also.

Helfrich had lost his own six-year old son several weeks before. When I read this, I couldn't help wondering if the animals lovers of today, who protest so strenuously the use of animals in medical testing, would like to go back to the old days, when to put it into modern language, if you got it, you had it.