

Hans Meier Tells His Story to a Friend

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Dear Myron,

Some time ago already, after your visit, you asked me to answer some questions concerning my life in Zürich during World War I, how I came to join the Bruderhof, the rise of Hitler, our experiences with the Mennonites and the Confessional Church in Germany, our imprisonment by the Nazis and how we got out, the early years in England, our trip to the USA in 1940, and our migration to Paraguay. I can answer all these questions only very inadequately, but I will try.

I was born in 1902 in Zürich, Switzerland, to parents who belonged to the Protestant (Zwingli) Church. They had me baptized as a baby, although I cannot remember having made a conscious decision for Christ. You know that in the sixteenth century Zürich was the cradle of the movement of the so-called Anabaptists, who at the hand of Zwingli suffered immediate persecution, several being drowned in the Limmat, the river that flows through Zürich. In the elementary and higher schools we were told that the Anabaptists were a religious sect who tried to overturn the democratic government of the town and who took the Bible so literally that they crawled around in their meetings like toddlers, because Jesus had said that they should become like children.

My father was a Socialist and member of the Trade Unions, and as such a delegate to the Second International Congress of Socialists in Basle in 1912. I remember his telling me afterwards that there would be "no more war" because the workers of all the countries had sworn to strike if their governments should declare war. When I asked him why there was a war going on in the Balkans, he pointed out that the people and workers there were not so well educated and organized as they were in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and England, etc. It was therefore a deeply shocking surprise in 1914 when the majority of all those "well educated" Socialists enthusiastically went to war. Switzerland was surrounded by the warring nations--on the one side Germany and Austria and on the other side France and Italy. Although politically neutral, Switzerland took part in the war by making ammunition for both sides. Through Switzerland the Red Cross exchanged prisoners of war who were so crippled that they were unable to fight anymore. We could observe hospital trains full of thousands of young men without legs or arms, or blind, or with mutilated faces and bodies, returning to their home countries on both sides. Why? The main Churches on both sides blessed the soldiers and their weapons in the name of God and Christ. The real victory in the war was on the side of the powers of death and misery for millions of human beings, including children.

This recognition woke up many people, specially among the youth, to dedicate their lives for peace and justice and life instead of death and injustice. And many Christians felt that the war was a call to repentance, a call to change their lives from an empty and hypocritical confession for Jesus to a real following of Christ in love to one's neighbor and to one's enemy. One could speak of a wind of God's Spirit blowing, waking up men's hearts to seek earnestly for His Kingdom. This led to a movement fighting for peace and justice and brotherhood, which for many meant starting a life in community. In this way quite a few community settlements came into being in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Holland, among them the Bruderhof. Our books, *Seeking for the Kingdom*, *Torches Together*, and *Eberhard Arnold, A Testimony to Church Community from His Life and Writings*, give you a much better picture of that time than I am able to give here.

In Zürich I joined a youth group called the *Freischar* (Fellowship of Freedom), which had originally belonged to the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), from which it was ousted because of its radical stand for peace and justice. We read the writings of Tolstoi and were very much interested in the non-violent fight of Gandhi in India. We became ardent pacifists, and some became vegetarians out of reverence for life. In the "oldest democracy," as Switzerland sometimes is called, conscientious objectors to war and military service were not recognized: they had to go to prisons for months every year anew, or be declared insane. To show that we were not shirkers but meant it seriously, we organized work camps for the International Voluntary Service for Peace (IVSP). During our holidays we worked in these camps without pay: helping poor people in the high Alps or rebuilding villages destroyed by war or other catastrophes.

Margrit and I had met in the *Freischar* and were married in 1929, and in 1930 we took part in such a work camp in the South of France, where an inundation of the River Tarn had ravaged a whole valley. After our return to Switzerland we started a community near Zürich with two other young couples. One couple had visited the Bruderhof in Germany in 1928, and I had met them there on my trip by bike through Germany and Holland, visiting many communities. This couple, Max and Eva Lezzi, whom we knew from the *Freischar*, had been at the Bruderhof three weeks already, and after my arrival Max stayed with me another three weeks as a visitor and co-worker. During this time we helped dig out the foundations for the Children's House. Max, who came from a Waldensian family, and Eva were deeply impressed by the life and witness of the Bruderhof, while I for my part was not open to the basic Christian faith of the Bruderhof members, although I recognized the fact that they were able to live in community.

After this visit Max and I continued our bike trip through Germany and Holland, visiting several other communities. The *Neu Sonnefeld* community in Thuringia was of special interest to me because it was vegetarian and pacifist, but shortly before we arrived, it had lost half its members because of impure and unfaithful relationship between married members, leading to violent personal attacks.

Then we attended a Religious Socialist conference in Heppenheim, which revealed a deep disunity among them, and after that we met with the leader of a Catholic community in the Rhineland. He told us in great sadness that he had been called to the Bishop in Cologne, who forbade him to represent radical pacifism because it is not the teaching of the Catholic Church. He was torn in his conscience between his loyalty to the Church and his innermost recognition that Christ called His disciples to work and live in active peace.

In Holland we met Kees Boeke, married to Betty Cadbury, both heirs to great fortunes who had given all their properties to the poor to follow Jesus. They belonged to the circle that had started the Fellowship of Reconciliation after the war in Europe. They had just begun a community, called the *Groene Kan* [the Green Jug, a small café] which, as we heard later, did not last long. Near Hamburg we visited another community, supporting a modern boarding school for needy children. Also this attempt at the communal life soon came to an end. And a few years before, a community in Switzerland founded by religious Socialists also near Zürich, broke up after a year because of disunity.

In spite of these failures we felt an urge to start a life in full community (that is, community of goods, of work, and of life, each one giving all he has and is able to do, and each one only receiving what he needs for a simple life) because we felt that such a brotherly life in justice and peace *must* be possible, otherwise we would have to give up all hope for humanity; and secondly we felt that we could not challenge the world to live in peace and justice if we ourselves were not able to do it even in a small circle. The question was only: how? on what basis? To find the realistic and practical answer to this question we started to live together with only the informal commitment not to give up until we had found it. We were three young couples, each one expecting their first baby; these babies were later born in the community. Max and Eva Lezzi were religious *Socialists*, Peter

and Anni Mathis were *religious* Socialists, and Margrit and I were rather ethical *Socialists* without a deep faith in Christ, but sympathetic to the movement of the Religious Socialists around Leonhard Ragaz. We were all pacifists and nonpolitical Socialists (not belonging to a political party) in the direction of "A Call to Socialism" by Gustav Landauer, who also had an influence on the Jewish Youth Movement which led later partly to the third Aliya and the formation of the Kibbutzim in Palestine after World War I.

Soon after we had started the community, which we called *Werkhof* (in the sense of working together at one place) another family, Hannes and Else Boller, asked to join. They had four children, and Hannes was a pastor in the Zwingli Church. He and Else felt very strongly that they should live what he preached and were looking for a realization of a genuine Christian community, which they hoped to find with us. We gave them the advice to make a visit to the Bruderhof in Germany to experience a more mature community, so that they would be able to help our group when they returned.

They followed our advice, but their experience at the Rhön Bruderhof led them to join there. In the first two years the circle at the *Werkhof* grew to about twenty members including the children, but our spiritual unity had not grown as we had hoped. Human good will is not sufficient to bring unity, the basis of *community*. the Spirit of God visits many people of good will, but He can only enter into hearts that are completely open for Him and do not try to mix Him with their own ideas. There are often as many good ideas as there are idealists, which is divisive in spite of the best human efforts.

Looking back, I must confess that I at least was standing in the way with many of my own ideas about community. After two years Peter and Anni got tired of the fruitless efforts to find unity and decided to leave the *Werkhof* with the intention of starting another community. Max and Eva gave them the advice to visit the Bruderhof before giving up so as to experience a community which had been able to fight through again and again to true unity. Peter and Anni followed this advice-- and joined the Bruderhof.

At this point the others at the *Werkhof* woke up to a certain extent and faced their true situation, and after some correspondence with the Bruderhof they tried to find a way to come to a uniting of the two communities. This failed because we on the *Werkhof* still had some reservations about the working of the Spirit, which could have brought us together. But since this divisive power was not only at work between the two communities but within the *Werkhof* too, the disunity there was felt more and more. After only half a year the tension at the *Werkhof* grew to such an extent that it needed only a further challenge by the fact of the unity at the Bruderhof, expressed in a letter and a visit from there, for Margrit to decide to join the Bruderhof. I accompanied her there, and after a short time it became clear to me also to where *that* Spirit called us which unites people.

You ask me how this conversion happened. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to explain it in words; Jesus uses the picture of the wind blowing. But the living witness of the brotherly life at the Bruderhof and the clear and vivid witness of Eberhard Arnold to the work of the Spirit of Christ from the early Christians through the time of the Baptizers (Anabaptists) until now was instrumental. Later a few more members of the *Werkhof* came to the Bruderhof, and the *Werkhof* itself came to an end after another two years; Max and Eva returned to life in "normal" society.

Margrit and I and our little son arrived at the Bruderhof on the very day that Hitler came to power. Eberhard Arnold, who had a deep understanding of the historical atmosphere and situation of the hour, knew immediately what this change in the government for Germany and the world and for the community. On the one hand, in many letters to the government and even personally to Hitler, Eberhard expressed the united determination of the Brotherhood to stand for and represent only the Gospel and the discipleship of Jesus Christ, at the same time asking God to protect the government so that they could truly fulfill the task God had given them, warning them earnestly not to shed

innocent blood.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand Eberhard warned all the members of the Bruderhof either to be ready for persecution or else to leave. A few guests and novices left the Bruderhof, and the rest of the members united in faith for the task of giving a living witness for God's Kingdom, in contrast to all the kingdoms of this world, knowing that we would not be able to do it in our own human strength but only in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

With this attitude we could never use the enforced public greeting of *Heil Hitler* (which would have meant that we expected salvation from Hitler), and when officials insisted on this greeting, we answered that we wished everybody the best, including Hitler, but that we expected salvation only from Christ.

The first official reaction came after the plebiscite in November 1933. On the ballot-paper was the question whether we agreed with the politics of Hitler. We answered with personal signatures that we stood only to the way of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with our whole life and that we asked God that His will be done also through the men of the government. A few days later over one hundred SA and SS men led by a Gestapo chief, revolvers ready in their hands, "stormed" the Bruderhof from all sides and started a thorough search for hidden weapons.<sup>2</sup>

As we had none, they couldn't find any, and they were very disappointed not to find any trace of violent opposition to the State. Eberhard Arnold, who was bedridden with his broken leg in a cast, gave a powerful witness of our faith to the chief, which somehow touched his heart, at least so much that he did not arrest him. He did order his men to take away all the books with red covers in our library as proof of our "communist" leaning, together with some minutes of Brotherhood meetings, to investigate whether Eberhard or some other members had not uttered subversive words against Hitler and his government. The result of this visit was an order from the police that closed our school and forbade us to take any visitors in. It is all right, one of the SS officers told us at the end of their visit, if you preach to one another, but we will not let you make any propaganda for your faith, and your children will be educated by teachers who conform to the new time in Germany.

In the next few days we sent our children of school age and German nationality to Switzerland and after a month there, to Liechtenstein, since the Swiss government would not allow them to stay in their country out of fear of Hitler and, as a high official in the Foreign Service in Berne told me, because they refused to help us to be disobedient to the government in Germany.

In regard to visitors, we invited the seriously seeking ones to be members of our household and warned the superficial ones of the danger of being persecuted with us when living with us; this made them soon leave.<sup>3</sup>

To prevent our giving a witness to our faith, the government practically closed down our publishing house by forbidding us to sell our books. In this connection, after repeated applications for permits to sell our books, we received an answer from the chief of police that throws a light on the whole situation until our dissolution. The letter is dated June 10, 1936, and is signed by the police chief of our district:

"My rejection of a permission for [names of four members of the Bruderhof] is based not on the personal unreliability or unsuitability of these four persons but exclusively on the fact that the propaganda that emanates from the Bruderhof is dangerous to the state. The 'Eberhard Arnold Verlag' is only a part of the Bruderhof...therefore there cannot be any doubt that the publishing house is active in

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<sup>1</sup>For the best statement of our attitude to government, see Peter Rideman's *Confession of Faith: Account of our Religion, Doctrine and Faith*, 2nd ed. (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1970), pp. 205-223.

<sup>2</sup>SA: *Sturm-Abteilung*, "brown shirts"; SS: *Schutz-Staffel*, "black shirts."

<sup>3</sup>The legal closure came in 1937, see page 17.

the same direction as the Bruderhof itself. And this activity is dangerous to the State. I refer to all the facts that are documented in our files over the last three years. These admit of no doubt that the members of the Bruderhof community, who formerly called themselves 'élite Communists' [which is true but a slander, because we never felt ourselves to be an 'élite,' nor were we Communists in that sense], represent a *Weltanschauung*, and even make propaganda for it, that is completely communistic and in complete opposition to the National Socialist State. For instance, they repudiate the priority of the interests of the nation and the State, even as they refuse to recognize the basic national socialistic laws about blood and race.

It is a further fact that the members of the Bruderhof community refuse to do any military service. When the new draft law for military service came into effect, they quickly sent all their members, all those who were German citizens and of military age, to their daughter Bruderhof in the Principality of Liechtenstein to withdraw them from their obligation to serve in the army. The members of the Bruderhof have declared publicly that they are not able to become National Socialists. Far be it from me to impair the liberty of conscience of individual members of the Bruderhof, and as Sheriff of the district I would not see any reason to prosecute if the Bruderhof community would confine itself within its present circle without enlisting new members. But they don't do that. The lively addition of new members shows that they have made very attractive propaganda for their ideas. The activity of the publishing house only serves their ideas of a *Weltanschauung*, which in my opinion is dangerous to the State. Therefore I am not in a position to give the required permission."

This letter reveals, among other things, that the Bruderhof was under close observation by the Gestapo right from the beginning of the rule of Hitler and, secondly, that we never made a secret of our faith. It is a miracle that in spite of this the Bruderhof was tolerated until 1937. That was not man's but God's doing and His protection.

Immediately after the visit by the Gestapo (Secret State Police), I was sent to Switzerland to take all the minutes of our meetings (two big rucksacks full of them) to a safe place for the future. Twice I was stopped by suspicious policemen, and both times an angel kept their eyes from seeing what was in the rucksacks. From Switzerland I wrote to the Elders of the Hutterians in North America about the situation of the Bruderhof in Germany, because this would not have been possible from Germany, where our correspondence and telephone was closely watched by the Gestapo.

To find a refuge for our school children I visited a community (*Communauté d'Essertine*) between Geneva and Lausanne. After some hesitance they decided to take our children in if the Swiss government would give their permission. An inquiry with the cantonal government in Lausanne and with the federal government in Berne produced a negative answer, as already mentioned.

Then I was sent to Prague in Czechoslovakia to find out whether we would be able to immigrate there. If possible we wanted to settle on the site of a sixteenth century Bruderhof that still existed. With the help of a written introduction from Leonhard Ragaz (a well-known Swiss Religious Socialist) to his personal friend Jan Masaryk (the President of Czechoslovakia), I was able to speak with his secretary (Masaryk was ill), who became sympathetic to our request. But none of the old Bruderhofs in Moravia and Slovakia, which still existed as *Habaner-höfe*, were available because they were under protection as national monuments. Instead, the government offered us land in Slovakia, which turned out to be disputed by Hungary. Knowing today what happened to Czechoslovakia, we can be thankful that this plan was never realized.

In the meantime I had been away from the Bruderhof for two weeks without any news of what might have happened during this time. How thankful I was after stealthily creeping up to the Bruderhof through the snowy forest at night to find the Brotherhood gathered around Eberhard's bed.

Soon afterward Hans Boller and I were sent to Berlin to find out three things. First we visited the headquarters of the Gestapo at *Prince Ferdinand Straße* to find out what their intentions were with us. We were received by one of the high officials in his office, behind double doors that could only be opened with a key. He took pretty thick file down from the shelves and leafed through it. Then he excused himself for a few minutes and left the room, leaving the file open on his table. We used this opportunity to have a good look at the place where the file was open, and we discovered a letter from the German consul in Winnipeg to the Foreign Office in Berlin, communicating that the Hutterian Brothers in Canada had inquired of him about the attitude of the government to their brothers in Germany.

When the official returned he closed the file, put it back on the shelf, and ushered us out of his office with the remark that he could not tell us anything special. In the first few years of his rule, Hitler had hoped to stay "at peace" with France, England, and America, and free to attack Russia. Therefore he was anxious not to appear to the Western countries as a man who persecuted people for their faith. This may have been one of his reasons for not destroying us right away. But we know ultimately God has his people and their history in *His* hands.

Our second task in Berlin was to visit Professor Benjamin Unruh, an important Mennonite leader in Germany, to find out whether there was any possibility of standing with them in our witness on the basis of our common Anabaptist history. Unruh understood our concern immediately, knowing the history of the Anabaptist movement very well. But he explained that the German Mennonites of today had a different attitude to the State and its government, which would prevent us from standing together. It was a different understanding of chapter 13 of Paul's Letter to the Romans that separated us. In 1937, after the dissolution of the Rhön Bruderhof by the Gestapo, the Mennonites felt they should distance themselves publicly from us, fearful that the Gestapo would confuse them with the Hutterites. Mennonite President Händiges, (Elbing), wrote in *Mennonitische Blätter*, (Elbing, 1937, No. 6), that in contrast to the Hutterites "the German Mennonites had much earlier declared themselves willing to do auxiliary service in the army. Already in the great World War of 1914-1918, it was only a small number of Mennonites who appealed to a government order of 1868, which allowed the sons of long-standing Mennonite families to serve in the army as nurses, secretaries, or wagoners, but the majority served with weapons. A great number of them fell on the battlefield, from many Churches as much as six percent of the congregation. Many Mennonites also hold responsible positions in the government. In the new statutes, accepted by the Federation of the German Mennonite Church on June 11, 1934, the principle of nonresistance (*Wehrlosigkeit*) was given up."

After Unruh we visited Martin Niemoeller of the Confessional Church in Dahlem. Our question was whether or not we could stand together in the oncoming spiritual fight to make a united Christian witness against the dark powers of National Socialism. But Martin Niemoeller immediately refused to have anything to do with us because we were not obedient to the appointed government, according to his understanding of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 13. He said that in obedience to a call from the government he would immediately go and serve in a submarine again; all he would resist was any restriction by the government on preaching the Word of God. (After the war, during which he was held in a concentration camp, Martin Niemoeller changed his attitude.) There was another leader of the Confessional Church whom we were not able to see, because his wife asked us very fearfully at the door of their flat to go away before the Gestapo saw us there.

Early in 1934, in spite of the cast on his broken leg, Eberhard traveled to Switzerland with Emmy to visit the school children. He went to look for a new refuge from them, because Switzerland

would not allow them to stay any longer. He felt a leading to go to the tiny principality of Liechtenstein and ask there.

In the sixteenth century the town of Nikolsburg in Moravia belonged to the Counts of Liechtenstein. One of them became a baptized member of the Anabaptists movement and opened his town for all the refugees from Tirol, Bavaria, Swabia, Hesse, and Switzerland. For a short time it was the center of the movement, where such leaders and Balthasar Hubmeier, Hans Hut, and others met with about 12,000 Anabaptists from all over Europe. It was there that after intensive and heated discussion the movement split into two parts. The *Schwertler* believed they were allowed to use violence for defense, and the *Stäbler* represented nonviolence as the attitude of a disciple of Jesus. The latter soon started to live in full community.

Would the Principality of Liechtenstein, the land of the Liechtenstein family in the twentieth century, offer refuge for persecuted Hutterians? Its government agreed to give us provisional refuge, and the Alm Bruderhof was started in a little hotel 4,500 feet high on the slopes of a mountain. The down payment and starting costs were given by God through a new member who brought her property and gave it in.

Otherwise we had to install a turning shop for the production of wood articles, to be manned by brothers from the Rhön Bruderhof. In addition we had to send a few brothers to Switzerland every week to sell our books and craft work and to provide an income for the support of the little community. In March 1935 the Hitler government introduced a general draft, and all our young men of military age left Germany for Liechtenstein. The Alm Bruderhof grew and the Rhön Bruderhof diminished. This inorganic separation of the original community at the Rhön Bruderhof into two communities brought with it not only economic and practical difficulties but also inner danger. In spite of the impediment of his broken leg, which did not heal properly, Eberhard Arnold frequently traveled from one place to the other in a spiritual fight for living unity, which is, as Jesus said (John 17:20-23), *the witness for God's Kingdom in a world so terribly disunited*. It was a shocking and shaking experience for the two little communities when God took Eberhard away from us into His Eternity in November, 1935.

In the spring of 1936 the government of Liechtenstein approached us in confidence, telling us that Hitler's government had asked them to extradite our young men of military age. They would not like to do it, but they were too small and weak a country to resist. Therefore they gave us the opportunity of moving our young men out of their country quickly before Hitler clamped down on them. But where could our young men go? The Brotherhood decided to start a new Bruderhof in England and for this purpose sent a few English members (who had joined the year before) to explore such a possibility there. At this moment France closed its frontiers to all Germans because Hitler had occupied the Rhineland, violating the treaty of 1918. Our German brothers were unable to go from Switzerland to England through France. The other way around Germany through Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Sweden and then by ship to England was out of the question because of its cost and the many visas needed.

Three brothers were in greatest danger, and one of them was not even allowed to enter Switzerland. A fellow student of one of our members, who studied at the University of Zürich, offered to pay the fare for him on a plane that did not touch Germany or France on its way to London. He was able to leave by this plane, but was returned the next day to Zürich because he was refused permission to land in England: the English brother whom I had advised of his coming had not received my telegram and therefore did not meet him at the airport in London. In the Brotherhood meeting at the Alm Bruderhof we came to the decision that the three brothers would have to go via Italy, the only country without entry restrictions for Germans, and from there find any possible way to England. As they did not know any language but German and were not used to making such big trips through unknown lands, I was asked to accompany them. The steward emptied his cash box to the last cent and gave me the equivalent of thirty dollars.

With this small sum we started our journey and went first to Milan and Genoa to try to work our way over to England on a ship. But there were no freighters to England because of the League of Nations' embargo against Italy to punish Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia. So we went along the Mediterranean Sea toward the French frontier, sleeping in a small tent and eating bread dipped in olive oil, the cheapest food available. From Ventimiglia we tried to sneak over the Alps into France, although we had been warned against it by the French consuls in Milan, Genoa, and Ventimiglia, where we tried again in vain to get visas. We did not know that because of the political tension between France and Italy their frontier was occupied by the military and declared out of bounds for civilians.

Hardly had we set foot in this region than we were arrested under suspicion of being spies. We were interrogated by a senior police officer, who threatened to send us back to Genoa with possible forced repatriation to Germany. But somehow God moved his heart, and with the intention of getting rid of us he sent two policemen with us to the frontier, and they pushed us over it with an exit stamp from Italy on the last page of our passports.

It was night, and we still had to pass the French border control on the other side of no-man's-land. There must have been angels holding their hands over the eyes of the border officers and police officers, because they did not see that they were checking German passports; they only looked for the Italian exit stamp on the last page to see whether we had come over the Italian border legally. The next morning we were able to board a train direct to Paris, where we arrived at midnight the same day.

This had cost us the last cent we had in our pockets, however and we were penniless and without a proper visa in the French capital. The rest of the night we spent in the park beneath the Eiffel Tower, trying to evade police officers, or when this was impossible, asking them the way to the next post office. In the morning we tried a collect phone call to England to tell our brothers where we were and to ask for some money by telegraph so we could continue on our way to England and buy some food, having starved for a few days, Annemarie was at the other end of the line and could not believe that we were already in Paris, imagining us somewhere in Africa. When we arrived at Le Havre and were about to board a ship for England, the immigration officer who checked our passports felt unable to give his exit permit stamp without a stamp for an entry permit, which of course we did not have. He threatened to arrest us and extradite us to Germany, but in the end he let himself be moved to stamp an entry permit into our passports *himself*, and let us go.

In Southampton, where we landed the next morning, the immigration officer nearly let us through until he discovered the stamp in the passport of the brother who had been refused entry in London the week before. "Are you trying to come in by the back door now, after you have been thrown out at the front door?" It was good that Arnold Mason had come to meet us because he could explain why he had not been able to meet this brother at the London airport. In the end we all got a permit to stay in England for two months, and we were able to go to the place that was to become the Cotswold Bruderhof in Wiltshire. We arrived just in time to prepare and celebrate its founding. God opened the doors that men had tried to close.

One year later, in 1937, the German government used the Gestapo to confiscate the Rhön Bruderhof on the basis of "paragraphs 1) and 4) of the law for the protection of the German people and State and its defense against violent communistic attacks." A full description of what took place is given in Emmy Arnold's book *Torches Together*.<sup>4</sup> The end of her report mentions that the Rhön Bruderhof's executive committee of three brothers had been imprisoned. At the end of a meeting in

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<sup>4</sup>Emmy Arnold, *Torches Together: The Beginning and Early Years of the Bruderhof Communities*, 2nd ed. (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1971).

Fulda (the capital town of our district), called ostensibly for the purpose of arranging the last details of our journeys to Liechtenstein and England, the chief officer of the Gestapo took three of us (Hannes Boller, Karl Keiderling and me), into "protective custody," again on the basis of the "Law for the protection of the State against violent communistic attacks." He let all the other members of the Rhön Bruderhof leave and travel to the other Bruderhofs, even those of military age.

After a day or two the government changed the indictment against us from that of preparing a violent communist overthrow of the government to "criminal bankruptcy." A bit too late they remembered that two Hutterian brothers from Canada had been present at the dissolution of the Rhön Bruderhof. These two would be able to report in North America that we were being persecuted, allegedly because we were Communists, bent on overthrowing the government by violence, which everybody knew to be a lie. So the Gestapo had to find another reason for destroying the Bruderhof. They asked us to pay our debts, after they had confiscated everything we had! We asked them to give back to us what they had taken away which had a value several times more than the debts. They refused to do this and bullied a creditor into signing a charge against us of having defrauded him (which he recanted shortly afterwards). When we protested against this false accusation, the officer of the Gestapo answered mockingly that even if the criminal judge were to let us go free, they would take us from the prison (from which we could not possibly escape) to concentration camp, because we were dangerous to the National Socialist state.

In the meantime our brothers and sisters and the children, including my family, had been taken in and cared for by Dutch Mennonites in a very loving way until they were able to emigrate to England. In prison we were not forced to work but were free all day to be together. We used this opportunity to read the Gospels and Gottfried Arnold's *Kirchen-und Ketzer-Historie* (History of the Churches and the Heretics). This book has three columns on each page in the first the history of governments, in the second the history of the established (mostly Catholic) Church, and the parallel history of heretical movements and their persecution by the Church and the State, right from the first Christians up to the Anabaptists.

The prison wardens treated us decently and were even willing to procure Arnold's book for us from the University of Marburg. Only once were we threatened with solitary confinement, and only bread and water for a week; that was because we protested a false accusation against one of our co-prisoners, but in the end they did not do it.

In the hallway of the prison we saw from afar a Catholic priest being led away to Berlin to appear before the so-called People's Court for having slandered the national socialist fatherland in a letter to a fellow priest in Canada, which was regarded as a capital crime and as treason.

One evening the prison warden came to announce that the next day Karl would be led under escort to the physical examination for military service. Together we wrote and signed a letter to the officer in charge of this examination, declaring our faith and attitude and the reasons we could not submit to this first step toward military service. The next morning we took leave of Karl, not knowing whether we would ever see him again. To our relief Karl came back after three hours, during which time Hannes and I prayed God to give him strength for a clear witness. When Karl had produced the letter mentioned, the people at the medical center said they were not able to answer it because it was addressed to the highest official, who was not present that day. So they did not force Karl to submit to their examination but let him go back to prison (under escort), where he could not escape them but be found again the next week, when the officer in charge would be there.

We thanked God from our hearts for this protection but were very conscious of the danger for the next week. But before they could call up Karl again, something happened that led us out of prison. On Saturday morning the warden came to our cells and announced that we were to leave the prison within an hour. Then he came again, canceling his previous announcement and murmuring something about a wrong number. Half an hour later he came again, this time shouting, "Keiderling, Boller, Meier, pack your things and leave quickly; a car is waiting for you in the street!" In the office

they handed us all the chocolate and cakes and cookies that had arrived from our relatives in Switzerland but had never been given to us, and we distributed them among the other prisoners.

Outside the big iron door of the prison was a black car. We did not know who had sent it or where it would be going. We definitely decided that we would not of our own free will board a car sent by the Gestapo to take us to a concentration camp. I went round it to the driver's side. He beckoned me to come and gave me a white envelope. He had been sent by our lawyer. We got into the car quickly and drew the curtains so that nobody could see us in this town where we were well known. He drove us at high speed in the direction of Frankfurt on the Main and after an hour's drive stopped in the middle of a forest and told us to get out without being seen with him by other people. In the envelope was a short notice from our lawyer that we should proceed to Königstein in the Taunus and go to a certain hotel, where he would meet us during the next week. He included twenty marks and advised us to destroy the letter as soon as we had read it.

We walked to the next train station and took a train for Königstein. It was an express train from Munich and was full of men in SA, SS, and police uniforms, traveling to a national meeting of the Nazi party in Frankfurt. They looked us over suspiciously and asked where we came from. We answered, "From the Rhön." But they left the train shortly afterward in Frankfurt, while we went on. The station was full of people wearing all sorts of national socialist uniforms. They were gathering for a big rally over the weekend.

We found out later that the judge who dealt with our case was not a Nazi at heart and knew our lawyer well. He could not find anything criminal against us but was under orders not to let us free without telling the Gestapo. He had purposely waited until that Saturday to let us free, knowing that the chief officer of the Gestapo in Fulda was on his way to Frankfurt for the rally. That meant he would hear of our release from prison only on Monday, which put two days distance between him and us. The judge had fulfilled his "duty" to inform the Gestapo office (probably a subordinate secretary without any authority) of our release on Saturday morning.

We arrived at the hotel in Königstein at ten o'clock at night, but the man at the door would not let us in; he did not know us and had not heard of our coming. After a few minutes he came out of the hotel by the back door and beckoned us in. There we met four Quakers, two from England and two from Germany, who had heard of us. (Gilbert McMaster, an American Quaker had visited us once in prison, accompanied by a friend from Holland with the name van Gildemeester.) They offered to give us a rest in the hotel for a few days to recuperate, but we felt we should seek the first opportunity to travel to our Cotswold Bruderhof in England. They agreed in the end and gave us 100 marks for the journey. Now, Karl and I had no passports, and Hannes had one that was no longer valid. How were we to get out of the country? To leave the country, Karl, as a German subject of military age, needed a military permit as well, which we naturally could not apply for, especially since they were now looking in vain for him in the prison. We decided that I would go to Frankfurt and try to get a passport from the Swiss consul, somehow inform our brothers in England by telegram of our release from prison, and ask for Karl's joint passport, with his wife Irmgard. Karl and Hannes would go to Kleve in the meantime, a town near the Dutch border, where we would meet again the same evening.

When I reached the Swiss consulate in Frankfurt and told them my passport was in the hands of Gestapo, the consul gave me a new passport immediately. After having sent off the telegram to England, I traveled to Kleve, where I found Karl staying with friends of the Bruderhof who were very hospitable. Hannes came back from Rotterdam later. He had been able to get into Holland without the immigration officer detecting that his passport was no longer valid, and in Rotterdam he had been able to get it extended. He brought the news that Gildemeester was on his way to Germany with Karl's passport. But where could we meet him, not knowing where he could be and he not knowing where we were? The next morning we tried to contact him through our lawyer in Hanau, and to our joy he had just that moment arrived there. We arranged to meet halfway, in Cologne,

where he hoped to get the military permit for Karl to leave the country from a friend high up in the city's police force.

Here it is necessary to say a word about Gildemeester. He was a Dutch fishmonger in Rotterdam. Single and relatively rich, he felt an urge to help suffering humanity. At the end of World War I he offered his services to the Quakers in their food program for hungry children in Germany. After this had come to an end, he started a one-man-movement to free prisoners who were held for political or conscientious reasons. After the war, France had occupied Rhineland, which contained the biggest armament industry, as some sort of a guarantee that Germany would not make war preparations anymore. Many fanatical German nationalists who later joined the National Socialist Party protested against this occupation publicly and in demonstrations, and a number of them were imprisoned for this by the French. Gildemeester now was able to get some of them out of prison especially those who had committed no crime. For this reason there were quite a few people in prominent places in Hitler's government who knew him and were obliged to him. And this he tried to make use of now to free people in prison in Nazi Germany for the sake of their consciences. This had led him to offer his services to us. In this instance, he hoped to get a military permit for Karl to leave Germany from the Police President of Cologne, who was a "customer" of his because he had helped him out of a French prison years earlier. But this man had just been replaced by another whom Gildemeester did not know. So we had to find a way across the Dutch border on our own, in reality asking God to show us a way through.

Between Kleve in Germany and Nijmegen in Holland there is a big forest with the border running right through it. While I was going by train to Nijmegen to try to remove any obstacles to their entry into Holland, with the help of a Dutch Mennonite pastor, Karl and Hannes tried to sneak across the border through the forest at night. In the darkness they lost their way at first and came out of the forest again on the German side. In the second attempt, already past midnight, they had the feeling that they were already well into Holland when suddenly a German border guard detected them with his flashlight and stopped them, asking what on earth they were doing there at that hour. They were able to explain to him truthfully that they had missed the way earlier in the evening and that they were expected by friends in Holland, who probably would be fearful by now that they had lost their way in the forest. Hannes was doing most of the talking in his Swiss German dialect. In the end, the officer looked around and when he did not see any superior, showed them the way to the next village in Holland.

In this way, after a few tense hours, they arrived in Nijmegen. It was quite clear that it was not we who found the way, but God who had opened it by moving some men's hearts, for which we gave thanks. The same afternoon we traveled to Rotterdam, where we were taken in very hospitably by a Mennonite pastor. We met his family, among them a son who later died a tragic death, as we heard after the war. He and a few other young men had been helping to hide Jews in danger of being deported to the gas chambers. The Gestapo caught them and, with the exception of those who had weapons on them, let them go free. The son of this family had a revolver in his pocket and was shot on the spot.

Overnight we traveled to England and were united again with our brothers and sisters and with our families in great thankfulness for God's protection.

In England, right from the time we began in 1936, many earnestly seeking people visited the Bruderhof at Ashton Keynes in Wiltshire. It was called the Cotswold Bruderhof because it was close to the Cotswold Hills. God moved friends to help us financially, and the Spirit moved the hearts of many people to join and share all they possessed with the brothers and sisters, who had arrived in England without a cent. In this way the household of the community grew from 150 at the beginning to 350 in four years. In 1938 the remaining members of the Alm Bruderhof also came to England, on the day of the *Anschluss* of Austria to Hitler's Germany.

In the years before World War II there was a movement in England in which seeking people

felt challenged to find a real answer to the questions of peace and war and justice and injustice. This led to quite a few attempts at living in community. We came in contact with many of them.

By 1939 the Cotswold Bruderhof had increased so much that we had to start another Bruderhof in the neighboring village of Oaksey, four miles to the west. We earned our living by mixed farming, market gardening, wood turning, and publishing and printing. We published a quarterly in English and German called "The Plough" and a reprint of Peter Rideman's book, *"Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehr und Glaubens, von den Brüdern, so man die Hutterischen nennt, ausgangen 1565."* We reprinted it from one of the few existing copies which was in the British Museum in London. Years later we published an English translation of this important Confession of Faith (in England in 1950 and again in the United States in 1970).

Although the communities were situated in Wiltshire, which was very conservative, our neighbors were in general very friendly toward the community--until the war broke out. On the day Chamberlain made his declaration of war, a Quaker friend visited us. On his way to the Bruderhof he stopped for a snack in a bar in Ashton Keynes, and he overheard some half drunk people say that they were going to burn down the Bruderhof that same night. Our visitor warned the police of their intention and of course told us what he had heard. We were going to meet the group of half drunk men at the entrance of the Bruderhof to persuade them with love not to carry out their evil intention. But two police were already there and were able to convince them to return home.

After this incident we were left in relative peace until after the defeat of the British and French forces and their evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940. Then everybody expected the invasion of the British Isles by Hitler's victorious armies. Until then there had been hardly any fighting between the British and German armies in northern France, and people were telling us that the English were not fighting against the German people, but against National Socialism. But when the soldiers fled from France across the Channel, they left all their modern weapons in the hands of the enemy, leaving England with its poorly armed Home Guard practically defenseless in the face of an immediate invasion by Hitler's armies.

Not unlike the experience of the Japanese Americans on the West coast after Pearl Harbor, from this moment on we experienced the mass psychosis of fear and mistrust toward any foreigner. This was true of our neighbors, who had been so friendly just before. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the Germans on the Bruderhof lived together in peace with quite a number of English citizens, who as conscientious objectors refused to defend their country with arms and for this reason were despised as traitors. This excited atmosphere led to serious and ridiculous incidents. The sale of produce from our garden, dairy, poultry, and bakery was stopped. There were some nasty incidents when brothers were harassed by the Home Guard during their inspections of the place. Two brothers once were ambushed in the night on their way from one Bruderhof to the other and saved themselves only by hiding underneath a haystack in the fields. Big concrete blocks were put in our fields to "prevent German parachutists or gliders from landing." When neighbors saw an accidental light in the direction of the Bruderhof during a blackout, we were accused of sending light signals to the German bombing airplanes. Neighbors who in earlier times had greeted us and even invited us for a cup of tea now withdrew and shut their doors when we passed.

At the outbreak of the war all the German, Swiss, Swedish, and Dutch nationals on the Bruderhof were classified as "neutral aliens" and restricted in their movement to within a radius of five miles. If they wanted to go farther, they had to get a special police permit, which we normally obtained very easily. One English sister married a German brother and automatically became an "enemy alien." She was interned in a camp on the Isle of Man for six weeks until she received the classification of "neutral alien."

The coalition government in London was friendly and liberal toward us during this time. They defended us in Parliament against false accusations and recommended leaving us in peace. The tribunals for conscientious objectors freed all our English members from military service and in most

cases even from alternative service. They recognized the life commitment to a Christian community on the Bruderhof as a genuine and serious proof of conscientious objection to war.

By the summer of 1940 the situation in England had become very tense because of the possibility of an invasion from Germany. The government in London approached us, saying that they had their hands full with the defense of the island and were no longer able to defend us against the unreasonable attacks of our neighbors. So they suggested that either they intern our German members for their own safety or that we emigrate. We felt that splitting up the community, especially along national lines, would be against the witness to peace in the spirit of a brotherly Christian life, so we decided to look for a country that would accept us.

Because our Hutterian Brothers were across the sea, we thought in the first place of Canada or the United States. Usually, and in times of war, an immigration permit is needed before anyone is allowed to settle in a country. This is normally a lengthy procedure. To expedite this procedure we looked for a way to send brothers over to North America who, in cooperation with our Hutterian Brothers, would try to get such an immigration permit quickly. One brother who already had seaman's papers from earlier times was able to work his way over to Canada on a freighter. He had to return on the same ship, however, after a stopover of only two days in Montréal. He was only able to contact David Hofer Vetter in James Valley and Julius Kubbassek in Ontario by phone, asking them for help.

As the next step we tried to send an English family over to Canada, members of the British Commonwealth. But an initial permission by the Canadian High Commissioner in London was canceled only hours before they should have sailed, apparently because the father was a conscientious objector.

The next opportunity to get a visitor's visa for the United States opened up in an extraordinary way. Gildemeester had opened an office in Vienna through which he helped persecuted Jews. Cooperating with him, we at the Cotswold Bruderhof had taken in ten or twelve children whose parents had been deported by the Gestapo. One of the girls of this group later became a baptized member of the community and is still among us as the mother of a large family. The parents of one of the boys were able to flee from the grip of the Gestapo and turned up in Venezuela, where they hoped to be reunited with their little son. But how to get him to Venezuela? It was wartime and travel, especially overseas, was very restricted. The Jewish Committee in London had nobody available to accompany the boy to his parents. Here we offered our services. We offered to send somebody with him to Venezuela, hoping at the same time to be able to contact our Hutterian Brothers and other friends in the States personally. In this way it might be possible to start our immigration process in New York while waiting for the American boat to Venezuela.

The Jewish Committee in London immediately accepted our offer and the Brotherhood decided that I and another brother should travel together. I was able to get a visitor's visa for Venezuela and the other brother a visitor's visa to Jamaica, where his uncle was a Methodist bishop. Then the American consul in Bristol, knowing there was no fixed timetable for shipping during the war and understanding that we would like to visit our Brothers in the States, offered us visitor's visas for ninety days in the US. After we had filled out the long questionnaire for this purpose, the official fetched a big Bible and asked us to swear on it that we had answered the truth. I opened the Bible at Matthew, chapter 5, and showed him where Jesus had said that we should not swear. He was astonished and rang up the embassy in London for advice. From there he got the answer that it was legally permitted simply to affirm with the signing of the questionnaire, but with the threat that any lie would be punished as perjury. With all the papers in order we set out for New York on the first of August, 1940, on board the "Scythia," not knowing when and where or whether we would ever again meet our brothers and sisters and families. We entrusted all completely to the hands and protection of God and asked Him to lead us wherever he willed, in thankfulness for what He had done until then.

The journey from Liverpool to New York took twelve days because the boat went zig-

zagging all over the North Atlantic to evade German submarines. One morning there was a false alarm because the lookout mistook a big gray whale for a submarine. We traveled in a third class, four-bunk cabin and had to leave the door open all the time so as not to be trapped in case of a torpedo explosion; we always had to carry a life belt with us. In third class there was also a group of Polish Jews, probably Hasidim. With them speaking Yiddish and us German, we were slowly able to communicate and learned that they had been able to flee across the Baltic Sea, leaving and losing many of their relatives in the hands of the Gestapo in Poland. When I asked what they thought of the situation in the world, one of them with a skullcap and earlocks answered that I should simply read the book of the Prophet Daniel, and I would know everything. When I persisted he explained a bit more what he meant, saying that God had history in His hands and used such people as Nebuchadnezzar--and today Hitler--as His tools "But," he added, "you will see, God has sent him in His anger and will take him away in His wrath; he will come to an evil end, and I don't hate him."

There were also twelve black men from British Guiana traveling third class with us. They were reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and complained about the exploitation of the Negroes in the British colonies. They were being sent to the States to man a cargo boat that the British government had received through the Lend-Lease Treaty, and they hoped that through their service they would be able to win independence for Guiana. If not, they threatened to navigate their boat with all its cargo to Russia instead of England. Up in the first class saloons was a famous Russian, Kerenski, the Menshevik leader of the first Russian revolution (March 1917) who was ousted by Lenin and Trotsky in the Bolshevik revolution (October 1917) and had been living in exile since then.

We were very thankful to God when we arrived in New York on August 12. When I showed my passport and the papers of our Jewish boy to the immigration officer and he learned that I was not Jewish, he became suspicious. We were kept on board until a representative of the Jewish Committee of New York arrived to check our papers and identities. He declared that they found it rather irregular for a Christian to accompany a Jewish boy to his parents in Venezuela and that they therefore would take the boy into their own care and see that he was accompanied by a Jewish nurse to Venezuela. He was taken to the Kindergarten on Ellis Island until his departure for Venezuela and looked after very well, as we found out by visiting him. Later we heard he had arrived safely and joined his parents in Caracas.

In this way we were freed to pursue our task of finding a way to immigrate into the United States or Canada. Apart from our Hutterian Brothers in South Dakota and Manitoba, the only person we knew was Ori O. Miller of the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania. Some of our members had met him in 1936 at the World Mennonite Conference in Amsterdam. He and the Mennonite peace group there had promised to help us if we ever should be in difficulties on account of our peace witness. We had only been allowed to take the equivalent of ten dollars out of England, so after paying for a few nights at the YMCA in New York City we had just enough left to get by train to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. From there Ori Miller's son took us by car to his father's house. We were received there in a very friendly way, and Ori Miller immediately offered the services of the MCC for our task and gave us \$200 for expenses. This sum was later repaid by our dear Michel Waldner Vetter of Bon Homme Bruderhof, South Dakota. But as Ori did not know anybody who could have been helpful in the government in Washington, DC, he introduced us by phone to the AFSC (American Friends Service Committee).

At the AFSC they were more familiar with the federal government. They gave us the name and address of a senior officer in the State Department and introduced us to him by phone. In addition they offered us accommodation at the International Student Home on New Hampshire Avenue in Washington, DC for very little money. At both places we were well received and given hope that we could get on quickly with our task. In the meantime we corresponded with our Michel Vetter at Bon Homme Bruderhof, who soon sent us an affidavit of support for our whole group from England, signed and sealed by the government of the state of South Dakota. It included an offer to

buy for us an old Bruderhof that had been vacated by the Lehrerleut (who had moved to Canada) and stock it with all the necessary animals and machinery for farm work. Somehow through this, Senator Mundt of South Dakota heard of our presence in town and invited us to visit him in his office on the Hill. He also offered to help us immigrate. He said he knew the Hutterites very well and had visited Michel Vetter in Bon Homme often, especially in the so-called dry time, the years of economic recession, when in contrast to all other farmers, the Brothers never asked the government for help. He could not understand why the Hutterites did not vote, and he expressed the hope that we would vote for him if we were able to immigrate, in spite of our insistence that we had the same attitude as the Hutterites. He sent his secretary to accompany us on a tour of the Capitol and repeated his promise to do everything in his power for our immigration.

Yet the answer to our application at the State Department did not come, and time dragged on and on. In the meantime we tried to approach the Canadian government at Ottawa with the help of our Brothers in Manitoba. We had a letter of introduction and recommendation addressed personally to Prime Minister Mackenzie King of Canada. It was written by friends of his in high political circles in England, who had become acquainted with the Bruderhof when a member of their circle joined us. With this letter in hand, we hoped to be able to start our application for immigration at the top of the Canadian government. But because of some misunderstanding, we got the telegram from Henri Lasserre in Toronto too late, telling us that two Hutterian brothers were on their way to the government in Ottawa.

After a night train trip from Washington, we arrived in Ottawa only to find that two brothers from Manitoba had conferred with the government the day before. We found out through a telephone conversation with Henri Lasserre that he had accompanied David Hofer Vetter and Joseph Kleinsasser Vetter from Manitoba to the respective ministers and that they had received a negative answer to their request for our immigration. He told us that the two Hutterian Elders were now with Julius Kubbassek's group in Bright, Ontario, and that if we would like to meet them he would take us there in his car. But we should go to Toronto immediately. We arrived at midnight, and after spending the night there, Henri Lasserre drove us to Bright.

Henri Lasserre was a man well-known in the movement of intentional communities in Europe and North America. He came originally from Geneva, Switzerland, where with a few friends he had founded a community at the end of World War I. When this attempt, founded on mere idealistic efforts, failed after a few years, the capital was not distributed among the former members but given as a foundation to the Swiss Cooperative Association, to be loaned out with very little interest to other intentional communities only. As we were recognized as such, we had already received a loan from this foundation for the Cotswold Bruderhof. But this was the first time we met Henri Lasserre personally. He had become a professor of French literature at the University of Toronto and was still very active in the movement of intentional communities. But he himself never again joined such a community.

In Bright at the Kubbassek community we met the two brothers from Manitoba. Julius Kubbassek had been a young Communist in Hungary, where he was born. When the regime of Béla Kun (the Communist dictator) fell under the attacks of Horthy, young Julius had to go underground and was in hiding for a long time under a friend's house. It was then or after his escape to North America that he experienced a conversion and joined the Nazarene Church. Dissatisfied with the social injustice tolerated by that Church, he was looking for a more radical life of discipleship. In this search he met the Hutterites in Alberta, who after a certain time helped him to start a Bruderhof in Ontario, with the task of mission work among the Hungarian refugees there. A few Hutterian families joined him. I do not know all the reasons that brought an estrangement between Kubbassek and the Hutterites, but there was tension to be felt when we met the two Hutterian Elders at the "Community Farm of the Brethren" in Bright, as the Kubbassek group called itself.

We were overjoyed to meet David Vetter again, three years after his visit with Michel Vetter

to the Cotswold, Alm, and Rhön Bruderhofs. Through God's leading they had been present at the dissolution of the Rhön Bruderhof by the Gestapo. We were deeply impressed by the warmth and depth of faith of the Elder of the Schmiedeleut, Joseph Kleinsasser Vetter from Milltown, whom we met at Bright for the first time. He was already Elder at the time of Eberhard Arnold's visit in 1930-1931 (and his son Joseph Vetter of Sunnyside was Elder of the Schmiedeleut when it came to a reuniting on the 7th of January, 1974). Accompanied by Henri Lasserre, the two brothers had visited the government in Ottawa the day before two arrived and were told in no uncertain terms that they did not wish us to immigrate into Canada (which was at war on England's side) because they already had enough difficulties with Hutterites. We all came to the same conclusion, that it would be useless, even unwise, to approach the government again. Sad about the outcome of this visit, we separated again and hastened back to Washington to put even more effort behind immigration into the States. The official we dealt with at the State Department already knew where we had been during our absence, because the FBI had followed us.

At one point we telephoned Thurman Arnold, the Assistant Attorney General in F.D. Roosevelt's cabinet, who was a distant relative of the Arnold family. But he immediately refused to see us because, he said, his department was a department of conformity, and he had had reports from the FBI that we were nonconformists. But about a month later he rang us up and asked us to take a taxi and come immediately to his office in the Department of Justice. We were led by police to his office, a very large room. He was sitting at the far end behind a table, with a battery of more than a dozen telephones. When we entered the room he got to his feet and looked at us, more or less shouting, half laughingly, that he was glad we had not come barefoot. He said he had heard from the FBI about our beards, knickerbockers, and long stockings. But in the meantime he had also heard from a friend of the Amish and was impressed. He asked us whether we were Amish, so we told him briefly of our history and of Eberhard's witness in Germany. He was very impressed that he had had such a courageous relative in Hitler Germany and promised to help us in any way he could to immigrate to the States. In our presence he started to phone several offices to tell them that he was personally interested in expediting our application.

Then he invited us to dinner, and a few weeks later he invited us to his house in Alexandria to spend Sunday with him. He told us that in the meantime he had heard a few questions about us. One question was about our attitude to war and military service. Thurman was of the opinion that our attitude was not illegal because the US draft allowed conscientious objection and doing alternative service under civilian authority. Then he asked us whether we would salute the flag, because just in those days the Supreme Court had decided against the Jehovah's Witnesses: their refusal to salute the flag was a crime to be punished with imprisonment. We told him that we would not be able to do it and referred to the attitude of the early Christians. As he himself was not in agreement with this decision of the Supreme Court, he had an understanding of our attitude but pointed out that this was now law and he could not change it. He recommended that we consider the question again and left the problem at that.

Also at this time Clarence Pickett of the AFSC invited us to visit him at his house in Pendle Hill, where we spent a very interesting weekend. Apart from Clarence we met Howard Brinton and his wife and Wilhelm Sollmann, whom I knew from Germany when I was working in Cologne in 1928-1930. He had had to flee from Germany and became a Friend. They were all very warmheartedly concerned about our situation and wished to help us to come to the States. Clarence especially tried to find ways to help us. He knew the Roosevelts personally and even confided to us that he had been asked to go as American Ambassador to Berlin because President Roosevelt felt that, in the situation at that time, only a Quaker would find an ear with Hitler and his government because Quakers had helped hungry Germans after World War I. Clarence was ready to go, not because he felt able to fulfill such a task in the diplomatic field but simply because he was ready to do anything that he believed would help toward peace. In the end he never was sent to Germany as

Ambassador.

Clarence suggested that we meet the Roosevelts in the White House and ask for their help. We did not act on this idea because of the protocol formalities connected with such a visit. But through Clarence's efforts we received an invitation to have breakfast with Eleanor Roosevelt at her retreat in New York City. We went there after reading her newly published book *Democracy and the Sermon on the Mount* (or something similar). We had a very informal conversation with her and her secretary during breakfast, in which she represented that the United States was no true democracy because the black people were treated so unjustly. Therefore the country needed a witness such as the Bruderhof's, and for this reason she would support our request for immigration. But--she added--she was not the President and had not his power, although she would try her best to help us. Eleanor Roosevelt reported our visit later in her widely published syndicated column "My Day" of September 24, 1940.

Clarence also introduced us to Haverford College, where we met Douglas Steere and Rufus Jones, who also promised to help us where possible. Douglas, at this time a professor at the college, had once been a visitor to the Rhön Bruderhof in Germany. Other people in Washington who became aware of our presence and task offered to help us emigrate to Liberia (Africa), Chile, a Caribbean island (I don't remember which one), and Mexico. The Mexican Ambassador in Washington invited us to go to Mexico City to confer with the government there, but when we visited him to get the necessary visas, he was unable to grant them. He had not been able to get through on the telephone to Mexico City because there was a little revolution going on just then, one president chasing the other around the country, so to speak.

All these attempts led to nothing, and we finally got a confidential answer from the US government that the current political situation was too sensitive to allow us to come into the country. The affidavit of support from our Hutterian Brothers in South Dakota was not seen as legally sufficient because the law recognized only a natural (in contrast to a legal society) guarantor with a reasonable bank account. Of course it was not possible, as some people thought, to divide the capital of the Bruderhof among its members for this purpose and let each one open up a bank account. Therefore it would be necessary to introduce a special bill in Congress for us, recognizing the collective affidavit of the Brothers for our immigration. But this would have meant a political move at a time when the election campaign for the third term of President Franklin Roosevelt made it advisable not to bring into Congress such a debatable matter as the immigration of a group of radical Christians. We were advised to hold on to hopes for the future. But the situation of the community in England did not allow us to wait much longer.

When Orié Miller of the MCC heard the negative results of our efforts, he approached the Paraguayan Ambassador, who contacted his father-in-law, the Paraguayan President Estigarribia, who then invited us to see him. He told us we would be welcome in Paraguay under the same law as all other Mennonite immigrants: freedom to organize our colonies according to our conviction, freedom in the use of language and the education of our children in our own schools, and freedom from military service for the immigrants and all their descendants. How Paraguay came to have such a remarkable law is another story, too long to tell here.

We communicated this news to the Brotherhood in England and received the answer to go ahead with the preparation of our immigration to Paraguay, a landlocked country, we needed also transit visas through Argentina. Argentina asked for a deposit of \$7,000 as guaranty that nobody would stay in their country when traveling through. At first a wealthy Quaker in Washington was ready to lend us that sum, but after a visit at the Argentine Embassy he was doubtful whether he would ever get his money back from them. So we had to try to raise that sum some other way.

At this time a meeting of Mennonites, including the MCC, was due in Chicago, at which the question of the general situation of the Mennonites in Paraguay and of our immigration was to be raised. To this meeting the Hutterian Brothers from South Dakota were also invited. To my great joy

I met Michel Waldner Vetter of Bon Homme there again. He came with Daniel Wipf Vetter of Rockport, a younger Servant. At this meeting deep concerns were expressed about the situation of the Fernheim ("faraway home") Colony in the Chaco (Paraguay), where Russian Mennonites who had come to Paraguay through Germany were seriously infected by the spirit of Nazism, especially teachers. The hope was expressed that we would be a certain counterbalance to these influences. Otherwise the MCC offered its services and help with our settlement there, except for financial aid, which they expected from our Hutterian Brothers.

Now the Brotherhood in England asked me to go straight to the Mennonite colony at Fernheim, Paraguay, where the MCC had arranged for us to live in the school houses (unoccupied during the long summer holidays) until we were able to build ourselves. We would have to find land ourselves near Fernheim, but we could buy it from the land corporation for a relatively low price. The other brother was asked to visit the Hutterites in South Dakota and other friends to try to raise some financial help for our new beginning in South America and for the Argentine deposit (which by the way was completely paid back later by the Argentine government.). When we had set out to find a refuge, we had never thought of Paraguay, and now we even had to find out on the map where Paraguay was.

I went to the Pan-American Union in Washington to learn the best and quickest way to get to the Paraguayan Chaco. After consulting many maps and timetables of ships and trains, I was advised to go by boat to Rio de Janeiro and from there by train via Sao Paulo to Porto Esperanza on the Paraguay River in the Mato Grosso. I should then travel on a riverboat to Puerto Casado, from there another hundred miles on a narrow-gauge railroad and the last sixty miles by horse-drawn wagon. So I set out at the beginning of November on a 33,000 ton Good Neighbor Ship to Rio with a one-day stopover at the Island of Barbados. There we were followed all around the island by half-naked black children who begged, while the British overlords had their segregated club in a luxurious house on stilts on the coast.

On the way to Rio I started to learn Spanish (the official language of Paraguay) in a Berlitz School on board ship. But this was no help on my way through Brazil, where the people speak Portuguese. It would have been much more difficult if I had not experienced on this whole journey the help of fellow passengers, who looked all through the train for somebody who could speak either English or German or French to help out when they discovered my helplessness. One such passenger even took me by taxi from one railroad station to another in Sao Paulo and paid for it. And on this train journey through half the continent to the Mato Grosso, which took three days and four nights, there was always some friendly co-passenger who spoke German or Yiddish or English and invited me out at long stops of the train to visit some friends and have a good cup of coffee.

We arrived in Porto Esperanza one day late because we were held up by the derailment of a train in front of us, and because our train ran over a man who was walking at night on the railroad tracks, the only way through the jungle in that region. The train had to back for many miles to get him to a hospital. As we arrived so late in Porto Esperanza, the riverboat to Paraguay had already passed by and would return only after a week, I used this time to write letters, read, and learn Spanish from a book, staying at a "hotel," which was really only a shack covered with tiles, and half of them were blown off one night in the first tropical storm I experienced. According to the timetable, the riverboat should have made the journey from Asuncion in Paraguay to Corumba in the Brazilian Mato Grosso and back once a week, but when it was due again the next week, we got the message that this trip had been canceled because of repairs in Asuncion. Hoping not to lose another week, I took a small Brazilian riverboat, but it did not go farther than the border town of Porto Murtinho, where I was stuck again for a week until the original boat from Asuncion passed by on its return journey from Corumba.

After only two hours we arrived at Puerto Casado, where I was given a telegram from England with the request to proceed immediately to Asuncion. There with the help of the Paraguayan

government, I should find out what happened to the \$7,000 that had been sent to Buenos Aires for our transit visas but had never turned up there. In the meantime my riverboat had already gone on to Asuncion, and I had to wait another week for its return.

During this time I met quite a few Mennonites who were traveling through from the Chaco to Asuncion. Among them was an evangelist on his way to Encarnacion to evangelize among Russian refugees where, whose language he spoke. When he represented that even if they were converted they could not become Mennonites, because only Germans can do that, I understood some concerns I had heard at the Mennonite conference in Chicago. At the terminus of the narrow-gauge railroad I met a representative of the Fernheim Colony and was reassured again that we would be welcome among them in the Chaco and that they would put the school houses at our disposal for accommodation until we had our own houses. In the colony we would be able to buy all the necessities for our beginning.

When I arrived at last in Asuncion I was told that the government was out of action because the President had just died in an airplane accident, provoking a fight for power among his successors. Nobody was there to help me find the lost \$7,000 for the Argentine government, but with the help of the Swiss Consul I got a visitor's visa for Argentina from their consul in Asuncion, and after another three day's river journey I arrived at Buenos Aires. There I was welcomed by my sister and brother-in-law and their family (Rasmussens). With their help (because they spoke Spanish fluently) we immediately started the search for the missing money, probably lost in some office of the government. We made two or three attempts, each of which took a day because the offices opened only at midday and closed again at four o'clock, the first hour always being lost because the employees drank their cup of coffee peacefully while we were looking on. But we were still not able to trace the deposited money. In the end we approached the British shipping company in whose ships our people were to come over. In a short time, through their intimate contacts with the ministries, they found the deposited money, which made it possible for the transit visas to be issued.

There was nothing left for me to do now but to wait for the arrival of the first group, and I used the time to learn Spanish and find friends in the town. During this time I met a Swiss engineer, who was near to the Swiss Religious Socialists in his attitude and who was very helpful to us by providing powdered milk for the children on the river journey up to Paraguay and gallons of fruit juice for the grown-ups, at a time when they would all come from the European winter into the subtropical summer of South America. Later he helped us to get a substantial gift of wheat from Swiss flour mills to provide bread for the hard beginning in the jungle of Paraguay.

For safety's sake during the submarine war, neither the community in England nor the shipping company in Buenos Aires were able to tell me when the ship with the first group could leave England or arrive in South America. Not until they were in relative safety of the territorial waters of Brazil, Uruguay, or Argentina could they give any news. So suddenly one day in the second half of December I received an airmail letter from the first group with the news that they had arrived safely in Rio de Janeiro and that I could expect them to arrive in Buenos Aires a few days later. It is difficult to describe our thankfulness and joy when we met our brothers and sisters and families again a few days before Christmas.

After a not eventful journey of four days and nights upriver on the Parana (one night the boat was grounded on a sandbank, but got free again), we arrived in Asuncion on December 25, Christmas Day. There we had to transship onto another boat to go farther upriver to Puerto Casado. From there we went by train on a narrow-gauge railroad for one hundred miles into the Chaco and then the last sixty miles to our first destination with a fleet of horse-drawn wagons that the Mennonites had sent from Fernheim to meet us. In the middle of the jungle during a rest on the first night of our wagon journey, we celebrated the last minutes of 1940 and the first minutes of 1941. What would the new year bring? We could only put our trust in God, who had protected us this far in a wonderful way, through no merit of our own.

The first group of about one hundred brothers, sisters, and children was given a very friendly welcome by the Mennonites in Fernheim. They were also thankful that one of us was a medical doctor, who could immediately start work in the hospital. Until then they had had only occasional visits from doctors. We soon started looking around for a suitable piece of land to start a Bruderhof, and at the same time we investigated all the other aspects of settling in this part of Paraguay. We had to buy the land from a corporation, which we knew had originally simply taken it from the Indians. So we felt that we should also ask the Indians for their consent. Accompanied by a Mennonite interpreter (their language was Lengua), we rode with the chief of the tribe around their territory, looking for a place where we could settle. After a few hours of riding on a little pony with no saddle and only two sheepskins on its back, we came to a big grassy area surrounded by forest that he offered us. He told us that his tribe would be very happy to have us living near them because we worked and lived in community like them. When he was asked for the price of the land, he answered "one dollar"--a token sum. And instead of written deeds he simply offered a handshake, which for him was more important than all papers.

On our return to the place where his tribe was living, we found about twenty to thirty people, old and young, sitting on the ground in a circle beneath a tree. The oldest woman was in the middle distributing food to each one according to what she felt he needed. She was, so to speak, the steward of the tribe. Everybody brought what he had hunted, found, or earned to her to be used and distributed according to the need of each one.

Mennonite settlers who had employed these Indians on their farms, especially for picking cotton in the hot sun (which their constitution seemed to allow without danger to health), told us that they could leave their houses open without any danger of being robbed or molested by the Indians. When the Indians earned some money, they went to the Mennonite co-op store, pointed out what they would like to get, put their money on the counter, and received the change without counting it, in full trust that they would not be swindled.

The Indians suffered especially from tuberculosis which had been brought by the Europeans and against which they had no natural immunity. They brought their sick people to the Mennonite hospital, but our doctor was warned that they would take revenge on him if one of their people died during the night. Their religion assumed two powers, a good one that ruled in the light during the day, and an evil one that ruled in the darkness during the night. So they beat drums in the night to drive away the dark powers and demons, and they tried to prevent any of their people from dying at night, so that his soul would not be fetched by the dark demons.

Originally these Indians had been cannibals. When missionaries came and impressed it on them that this was a sin, they had answered that if it was a human sacrifice to their god and an honor to the sacrificed one. Then they said they had the question whether the white people and the missionaries did not in their wars sacrifice millions of their young people to their god "Fatherland." They had come away from their cannibalism, and we experienced only friendliness from them.

The location of Menno-Kolonie, near which Fernheim was later built by refugees from Russia, was originally chosen by Old Order Mennonites from Canada and the States. They did not want their children to be educated in State schools and were looking for a place far from any world civilization where they would be free to live and educate their children according to their own conscience. Because they were known to be good farmers and conscientious workers, the Paraguayan government and parliament decided on a new law that would attract them as settlers by giving them the freedoms they asked for.

Although we also felt that a radical Christian life and witness must be separate from the social order of the world, we did not feel a calling to hide from humanity. Therefore we were soon investigating possibilities of settling nearer to the capital of the country. After two months we found a place farther south on the opposite side of the River Paraguay, also situated near a Mennonite colony called Friesland. With a small down payment we were able to buy 20,000 acres of mixed

jungle and camp land for \$8,000, forty miles east of the so-called port Rosario (just a spot on the river bank) and seventy miles in a straight line from Asuncion, the capital. It was the small remainder of a much bigger German colonization plan from before World War I, which never was realized because of the war. One of the owners was still living there in a simple adobe house and a shack. Those were all the buildings on the place. On a small hill two miles to the east of this place we started a new Bruderhof from scratch.

A big quantity of pottery shards came to light when we started plowing and there were many trees with sweet oranges in the woods nearby. This indicated that there had been a settlement there in much earlier times. None of the neighbors could remember it. It was probably a Jesuit Reduccion, a Jesuit community settlement of indigenous Guaranis, two or three centuries earlier.

The sisters and children found hospitality in the nearby Mennonite colony (about six miles away), while the brothers started building primitive housing, digging wells, and preparing the ground for farming. It is too long a story to write down in such a report all the difficulties and hard times we experienced in starting again from nothing in unfamiliar surroundings and a subtropical climate. We had no immunity to the many indigenous diseases. It was the children who suffered most, and twelve little children were called back into Eternity during the first three years.

During 1941 the rest of the members of the community in England crossed the seas to South America safely, without the loss of a single person despite the very serious danger of submarine attack. Practically all the ships we came on were sunk by submarines on their way back from Buenos Aires to England, loaded with foodstuffs. This wonderful protection from God, for which we thanked Him from the depths of our hearts, could only mean a challenge to us to dedicate our lives fully to God and His Kingdom.

We lived in Paraguay at this place called Primavera for twenty years. During this time three settlements were built up, situated in a triangle, each separated from the others by about two miles of jungle. They were connected by roads and footpaths cutting through the jungle. Slowly the practical situation, the outward conditions, improved over the years of toil and suffering, but not the spiritual. We were protected by God through a dangerous time when there was a civil war. We refused to help either side of the struggle in any way in the mutually destructive fight, and we were accused by both sides of being dangerous Communists, whom they would punish after their victory. But apart from losing some cattle, horses, and wagons, nobody was hurt.

In order to describe in a few words the spiritual situation and experiences during this whole time, which is more important than the practical. I would like to use the message of a dream that Eberhard Arnold had in 1935 and that turned out to be prophetic. In the New Testament the Church is compared to a lampstand with seven lights. In his dream the center light was Jesus Christ, and the other lights corresponded to the different characteristics of the Church such as love, unity, community, justice, etc. Eberhard saw how the lights were shifted around by a dark hand, which put community in the center and took Christ from the center, where He belongs. This is what actually happened in our life more and more, and it brought division and disunity among ourselves and with our Hutterian Brothers. This led in 1960-1962 to a crisis in Paraguay and in Europe (England and Germany), where during and after the war Bruderhofs had been started anew), and the communities lost many members. It became necessary for the rest to move to the North American communities to gather again in a deep inner sense. The way of repentance back to faith and trust in the only true center of life and community, Jesus Christ, led by Heini Arnold, brought about not only a united Brotherhood but also a joyful reuniting with the Hutterian Brothers in 1974.

Thankfulness for God's protection in all these years, in spite of our sins and weaknesses, includes a daily turning toward Christ in faith and trust. He is stronger than all the powers of darkness that attack continuously from within and also attack the outer life and community, given by God as a witness to His coming Kingdom.