

Chapter 3

The Landis Family at Hirzel

By the 15th century members of the family had moved from Uerikon to various places on the western shore of Lake Zürich. "Hanns Landöse" is documented in Neuenburg, canton Zürich, by 1360.¹ The surname also appeared in the village records of Pfäffikon by 1417, in Hirzel by 1438, in Horgen, Richterswil, Wädenswil, Klingnau, Schönenberg, Kilchberg, Urdorf, as well as in the city of Zürich itself. By 1454 the family had settled even further inland toward the canton of Zug, near the mountain community of Menzingen, south of Hirzel. The oldest chronicle (*Jahrzeitbuch*) of the village of Neuheim reported that members of the family resided at *Hofe Oelegg*, which was a small farmstead in this same general area, about one mile east of the village.² Their settlement farther to the west in Zug was limited, and the family was never particularly numerous in that area. The branch of the family in the village of Neuheim died out in the mid 15th century with pastor Karl Peter Landis, who had no children (being a Catholic cleric).



Horgen ca. 1780

The major focus of their settlement came to be a few miles further north on the hillside above the coastal town of Horgen, on various farmsteads near Hirzel, which is about 12 miles

¹ von Knobloch 1905

² The word *Hof* today denotes a farmstead, but it was originally derived from an earlier form, *Hufe*, which referred to a "hide" of land, equivalent to 25 acres, which was about the maximum amount that could be encircled when a hide was cut into thin strips of cord. See Luck 1985.

southwest of Zürich. Although Horgen is often cited in historical sources as the “ancestral village” for the Landis family, this is actually somewhat misleading. Horgen was the closest larger town and it was a regional administrative center (*Obervogtei*) for canton Zürich. The town of Horgen is located on the west shore of Lake Zürich, hemmed by a low range of hills known as the Zimmerberg which parallel the lake. The Sihl river flows along the western edge of these hills, where it joins the Limmat at Zürich. This broad hillside is called “Horgenberg” or “Horgenberg” (lit. “Horgen mountain”). A road from Horgen climbs steeply up this hillside for about two miles to Hirzel, which is located near the summit, overlooking the lake on the east and the Sihl valley to the west. Hirzel itself is scarcely a “village” in the true sense of the term; it would be more accurate to describe it as a collection of farmsteads, with a church in the center.³ When the old records reported that a person came from “Horgenberg,” the term did not indicate the city of Horgen itself, but rather this adjacent hilly region, encompassing Hirzel and the numerous scattered farmsteads that dot the hillside, including nearby villages such as Neuheim.

Early records sometimes failed to distinguish Hirzel and Horgen due to their close proximity. Hirzel was a satellite of the parish of Horgen until 1617, when their own church building was consecrated. Until that date, births and marriages were recorded in the church book of Horgen, with the annotation that they resided on the hillside. Similarly, those in or near the town of Wädenswil were sometimes interchangeably referred to as residents of “Wädenswilberg.”

Members of the Landis family and those related by marriage resided on the farms which dot the crest of the Horgenberg. The farmsteads were located on clearings that were laboriously carved from the heavy forests that blanketed the hillside. Although most of the forest has been removed by this date, the terrain is not suitable for the large-scale cultivation of grains, which was done in the flatter valleys. As is common in many parts of Switzerland, the families in this area were “hill-farmers,” that is, pastoralists raising cattle and sheep, supplemented by gardening for family produce.

Ira Landis visited Hirzel in 1954 and reported that a house still stands there that was built between 1482 and 1488 by one of the earliest ancestors of the Landis family.

I came to Hirzel, mostly a rustic hostelry and started climbing up the hill, first to the Howard Landis Bakery, and then almost to the top of the mountain. When I left the road to climb more, there was only a path ahead...Alwin Landis is 65 and Berta Baumann, his wife is 52. They have two boys, Alwin, 28, and Eric 26,...His farm consists of 27 “Yoke acres,” depending most on ten head of cows and five head of heifers, and bulls, two hogs, and no chickens nor anything else...We learn that the Alwin Landis home had been a Landis homestead at least since the 15th century.⁴

In the summer of 1994 I too visited Hirzel and met Lydia Landis, the wife of Alwin Landis jr. (both of them elderly at the time). The house that they were residing in was across the road from the Reformed church in Hirzel, and it was of recent construction. The original Landis farmstead was known simply as *Siten* (shown as *an der Syten* on the 1667 map). Today there are

³ The name Hirzel originally derived from “deer-wallow;” there are many marshlands on the Horgenberg. See Winkler 1974, p. 42.

⁴ Landis 1954, p. 134.

two structures, *Untere Siten* and a smaller farmhouse known as *Obere Siten* a few hundred feet farther up the hillside. The original farmstead may have been established by “Heini Landös” who supposedly settled in Hirzel by 1467. According to Hans Frick the Zürich archivist, Heinrich Landis purchased a homestead in Hirzel in 1488.⁵ Winkler⁶ dates the two current buildings on that site from the 1700s (not from 1488, as Ira Landis stated), but they are nevertheless wonderful structures and lovingly preserved, as are most of the ancient farm houses in the area.



Untere Siten (side view), with *Obere Siten* in Background

⁵ Cited in the Landis Family Reunion Report, 1930. A minor contradiction should be noted -- the 1933 report cites Frick as stating that the name was Wilhelm Landis instead of Heinrich. One of the 16 casualties from the parish of Horgen who died at the Battle of Kappel on Oct. 11, 1531 was Heini Landis, who was likely related to this original Heinrich. See Kläui 1952, p. 175.

⁶ Winkler 1974.



Untere Siten (front view)

The earliest records in the church book of Horgen⁷ begin in 1545. Unfortunately the first 20 pages are fragmentary and badly water stained. The surname Landis first clearly appears in 1546, when a child (the name is missing) of "Hans Landis" was baptized. In August of that year another child, Ulrich, was baptized whose father is referred to as "Hanson Landis"-- the suffix indicating that Hans' father was also named Hans. Other members of the family whose children appear in the baptismal records at that time are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar Landis, quite possibly siblings.

Of these, Hanson (born about 1521) is the earliest direct ancestor of the family that can be determined on the *Horgerberg*. He was married to Katherina Schinz (this surname is also spelled as "Schintz" and "Schinss" in the Horgen churchbook, not to be confused with the "Schmid" family that resided in Hirzel at that time). It is interesting to note that the first occurrence of the surname in the churchbook in 1546 is in the form "Landis," and that the spelling changed to "Landös" in July of 1551 when a different minister took over the records. In 1553 the original minister resumed his duties and the spelling reverted to "Landis" once again. This shows that the spellings were still in flux at that point, and that ministers took liberty to render the names as they felt appropriate.

Hanson Landis had a son, likewise named Hans, who was destined to play an important role in the struggle of the Anabaptists for religious freedom in the canton of Zürich. This son, Hans, was the first member of the Landis family to clearly and distinctly stand out in history during the turbulent period of the Reformation. His involvement with the Anabaptists affected not only his life but also that of all his descendants for generations.

⁷ LDS microfilm #0996932



