

Chapter 7

Across the Rhine into the Kraichgau

The lands of the *Kurpfalz* along the Neckar valley and below it in a region known as the Kraichgau, were a magnet for Anabaptist settlers at various points in the 17th century. This area had been periodically decimated during a string of wars -- from the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the Dutch War (1672-1678), and the Nine Years' War (1688-97). As marauding armies passed through the area, the local people fled for safety and many never returned. Those who were fortunate enough to avoid death from starvation and disease may have found safer niches elsewhere. In the aftermath, new settlers from other regions, such as Switzerland, repopulated the vacated villages.

Switzerland was spared these wars and it had experienced steady population growth for more than two centuries. The Swiss cantons altogether included a population as large as that of the British isles, contained within a much smaller area.¹ Their available land and economic resources had reached a saturation point. Adding to this burden of population pressure, the canton governments attempted to tighten their control during the Thirty Years War and the class structure had become more rigid and polarized. Young families increasingly were driven to emigrate.

From 1646 to 1651, some 1,277 persons, mainly non-Anabaptists, left the canton of Zürich. About 1,700 Anabaptists were expelled after 1649.² A surge of emigration occurred after 1653 when another peasant's rebellion in Switzerland was crushed, followed by a ruthless purge. Political refugees and their families fled to the north, along with impoverished farmers and young men seeking economic advancement. The Anabaptists in particular fled in great numbers at this time, and it is apparent that once again they had been targeted by the authorities during a period of political unrest. Most left by 1660. By 1700 it is estimated that virtually all the Anabaptists had been driven from Zürich. Most of these emigrants went to Alsace, the Rhine Pflaz, or across the Rhine to the Kraichgau in northern Baden.

The lower Neckar valley was owned by the *Kurfürst* of the Palatinate, whose landholdings (the *Kurpfalz*) straddled both sides of the Rhine. His realm had been decimated during the Thirty Years War from warfare, starvation, disease, and predatory looting by the soldiers, and it remained so for decades afterward. The *Kurpfalz* and Baden had been the center of fighting at virtually every stage of the war. General estimates are that about 40% of the population throughout the region was lost. The average loss of population in the major river valleys, such as the Rhine and Neckar, was especially high, at least 70%, and by some estimates as high as 85%.³ Before the war the Palatinate had a population of 500,000, but afterward only 43,000 people remained. Most villages near the Neckar between Wimpfen and Wiesloch had less than 20 residents, and some were completely depopulated.

¹ Lunn 1952, p. 151.

² Zbinden 1981.

³ Benecke 1979; Fenske 1980.

The Dutch War (1672-1678) simply added to the misery. After Louis XIV's attempt to invade the Low Countries failed in 1674, his armies retreated through the Palatinate into Alsace, leaving a trail of ruin in their wake. The military campaigns spilled across the Rhine into the Neckar. Sinsheim, in the heart of the Kraichgau, about 20 kilometers from the Neckar, was burned in 1674.⁴ There was massive displacement of the population, and they fled wherever they could for safety.

Although Louis XIV did not succeed in holding the Low Countries during the Dutch War, he had emerged as the major monarch in Europe, and the ambitions of the so-called "Sun King" were boundless. The Nine Years' War (1688-97) soon followed, triggered by Louis's reckless actions - notably the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which caused a mass flight of Huguenots into the Pfalz, and his extension of territorial claims into the German Rhinelands, including strategic cities on the east shore of the Rhine. France was confronted with a strong coalition of forces from England, Holland, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. During the war, French forces assaulted Mannheim, then pushed into the Neckar valley to Heidelberg, wreaking havoc eastward at Neckargerach, Mosbach, and other wine villages in their path. A report from 1689 detailed the damage, stating that French troops cut down nearby trees and orchards to turn houses into defensive bulwarks.⁵ In the archbishopric of Speyer it was reported that French soldiers broke open the consecrated graves in the cathedral and there, before all the people, amused themselves by playing bowling with the skulls of the German emperors. They then set fire to the city and much of it was reduced to rubble. They also attempted to destroy the cathedral by tearing down the ornaments and firing the tapestries on the walls, but that structure alone withstood their devastation. Eventually, after all the parties to the conflict were financially exhausted, a treaty was negotiated in 1697. Louis's control of Alsace was affirmed, but he was forced to abandon all claims to the east bank of the Rhine and to return Lorraine to its original owner.

Anabaptists in the Kraichgau

The Kraichgau⁶ was a patchwork of independent estates, each a few square miles in size, containing one or more small villages. The major political power in the region was the *Kurfürst*⁷ of the Palatinate, but other royal families included those of Baden-Baden, Baden-Durlach, and about a dozen other petty nobility. The conditions there in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War were as deplorable as in the Rhine valley. Schuchmann⁸ reports that in the Neckar valley, the area between Wimpfen and Wiesloch had suffered greatly from the various armies that had passed back and forth, looting and confiscating whatever they found. Near the end of the war villages such as Steinsfurt, Reichen, and Richen typically had fewer than 20 residents.

⁴ Schuchmann 1963.

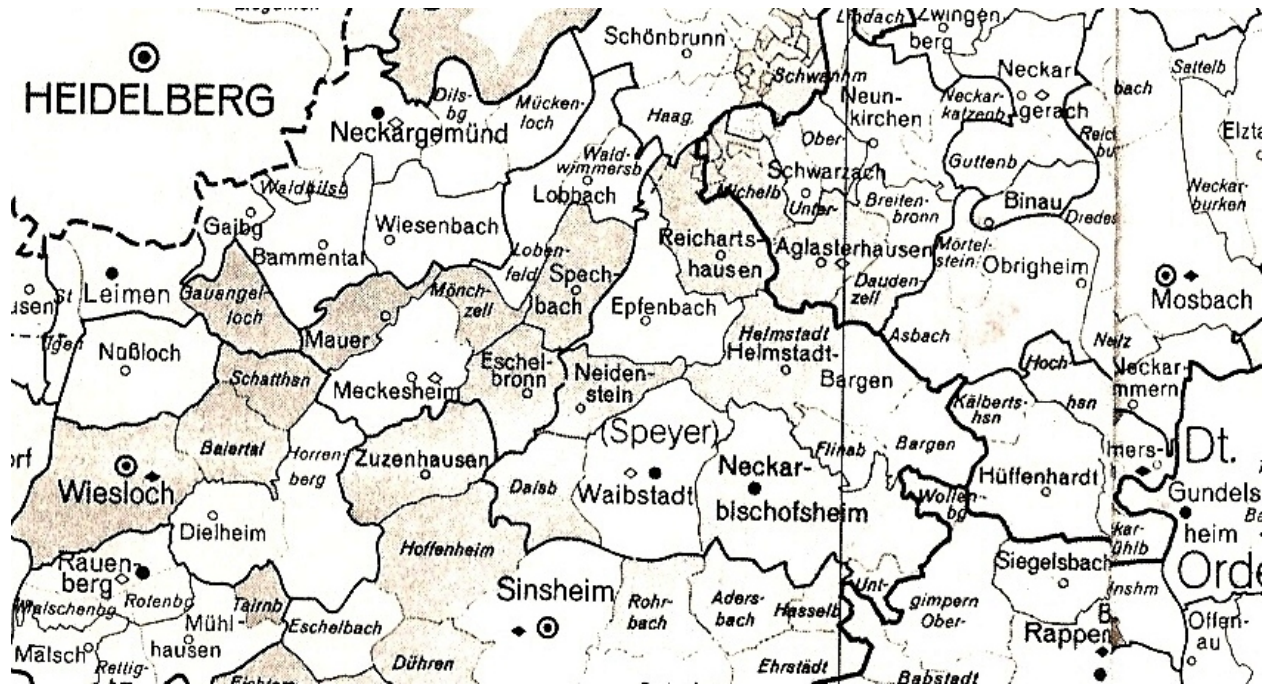
⁵ von Raumer 1930, p. 304.

⁶ The Kraichgau region derives its name from a small stream known as the "Kraich."

⁷ The title *Kurfürst* denoted the special status of being one of the royal Electors for the Holy Roman Emperor, who was based in Vienna. The territories owned by the Elector of the Palatinate on both sides of the Rhine were referred to as the *Kurpfalz*.

⁸ Schuchmann 1963.

The nobility in the Kraichgau had been left without sufficient tenant farmers to till their estates, so they welcomed the influx of Swiss immigrants. The first immigrants began to appear in Kraichgau village records by 1650. Schuchmann has provided a list of 1,500 Swiss immigrants to the Kraichgau. He estimates that by the late 17th century they comprised 35% to 45% of the population. The influx of Swiss immigrants was so strong that it has been estimated that about one-third of the modern population in the former *Kurpfalz* territories as a whole may ultimately stem from Swiss immigrants during this period.⁹



Territories in the Kraichgau

An important indicator of the scale of the Swiss influx into the Kraichgau is shown by the fact that many of the churches there had Swiss Reformed pastors, especially of the Zwinglian rather than of the harsher Calvinist persuasion. By the year 1600 there were already an estimated 350 Swiss pastors in the territories of the *Kurfürst* of the Palatinate. Many left during the war, but returned when peace was restored. From the canton of Zürich alone, an estimated 140 pastors left for the *Kurpfalz*. The Kraichgau in particular had the greatest concentration of Swiss pastors and congregations.¹⁰

Many of the petty nobility in the Kraichgau were in desperate straits. Their estates had suffered economic devastation and depopulation during the recent war and they were eager to attract industrious settlers. Generally the nobility in the Kraichgau were free to set their own

⁹ Guth 1983.

¹⁰ Schuchmann 1963; Zbinden 1981.

policies regarding religious toleration. Although there had been an imperial decree in force against Anabaptism since 1529, the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 reconfirmed the right of the nobility to dictate the religion to be tolerated in their territories. Technically only three religions were specified: Catholicism, Lutheranism (Evangelical), and Reformed, but most nobility tended to be liberal in the matter.

After the war, the new Palatine Elector, Karl Ludwig, introduced changes in religious policies in his territories. His family, the Wittelsbachs, had alternated between Lutheranism and the Reformed faith since the middle of the previous century. Karl Ludwig was of the Reformed faith, but he adopted a liberal policy by which all three of the major religions -- Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Reformed -- would henceforth be tolerated throughout his territories. His liberalism was somewhat tempered concerning Anabaptism, but he consented to them as tenant farmers in the territories of the *Kurpfalz*, although they weren't allowed to hold church services. Each time they were caught doing so, they were fined 50 *Reichsthalter*.

The area around Sinsheim in the Kraichgau drew especially large numbers of Anabaptists. Sinsheim was owned by the *Kurfürst*, as was the nearby village of Steinsfurt. The villages of Weiler, Rohrbach, Gicklersheim, and Dühren, adjacent to Sinsheim, were owned by the von Venningen family, which had played an influential role in protecting Lutheranism during the early years of the Reformation. Guth¹¹ reports that representatives of the von Gemmingen, von Venningen, and other noble families actually traveled to Alsace around 1652, recruiting Anabaptists to come and live as tenants on their estates, which at that time were largely deserted.

The Landis Family in the Kraichgau

Such were the conditions that prevailed in the Kraichgau when the Landis family and other Anabaptists departed from Switzerland about 1651. We have seen that Hans Jacob (the son of Oswald Landis) emigrated to Alsace where he initially settled in Heildesheim. He appears to have remained in Alsace for only four years. By 1655 he and other Anabaptist families moved across the Rhine to the Kraichgau, settling in Weiler, Rohrbach, and Steinsfurt which was in the parish of Sinsheim. Schuchmann¹² cites an unidentified report in the Zürich archives filed by the pastor at Hirzel which states that "Jacob Landes and children are residing at Eichlersheim, Venningen, apparently a district in the Kraichgau." Eichlersheim (modern Eichelberg) is located near Hilsbach, and these villages were owned at that time by the von Venningen family.

Schuchmann's data indicate that Hans Jacob died in Weiler not long after his arrival on March 20, 1656 "*ohne geläut*." This latter phrase likely means that Hans Jacob was buried "without the tolling of the bells," suggesting that his funeral was held without church service -- an allusion to his Anabaptist beliefs. The following year his son, Hans Caspar, died in Weiler on June 26, 1657, at the age of 13. His wife Verena was reported to have been born in 1602, and to have died in Weiler on December 2, 1672.

In addition to Hans Jacob, his brother Hans Heinrich (born 1611) also emigrated with him to the Kraichgau. We can date the approximate time of their arrival because several members of the family were arrested by the authorities in Hilsbach on March 2, 1661. Their report states that

¹¹ Guth 1983.

¹² Schuchmann 1963.

Hans Heinrich Landis “of Rohrbach,” Rudolf Landis “of Weiler” (this was likely Hans Jacob’s son), Rudolf’s mother (Verena), and his sister (probably Barbara), all were arrested at Steinsfurt at an Anabaptist church service. Hans Jacob Landis was not included on this list because he was already deceased by this time. Those arrested were part of a congregation of 53 persons, residing in the nearby villages of Rohrbach, Reihen, Ittlingen, Streichenberg, Weiler, Steinsfurt, and Dühren.¹³ On this occasion they had met privately in the home of a widow without receiving prior official permission. The meeting began at 9:00 in the evening, but it was disbanded by the authorities after they heard them singing a hymn, which betrayed their presence. Five of the participants were taken as security for the others, all of whose names were taken, and they had to present themselves for punishment. They were interrogated by the authorities at Hilsbach on March 29, 1661. On April 4, 1661, a report was filed by Johann Baptista Parandin to *Kurfürst* Karl Ludwig:¹⁴

In response to the official order by the noble and worthy Elector concerning the Anabaptists of this region, relative to their night-time meeting at Steinfurth on March 2 when they were arrested, I have most humbly and faithfully the following to report about those of Steinfurth and Immelhausen, whom we ordered to be examined by the church warden on March 29 near Leöheim collectively and individually as follows:

That some five or six years ago they began to come into this land, that through two of your agents they made themselves known to your Highness the Elector, and requested that one might most considerably tolerate them, and that they might be permitted to conduct their worship activities.

Then they were given from your Lordship the oral resolution that no one had been given the order to oppose them, and that no person would do anything against them. Now and then they were rated as citizens.

They say also that some time ago a distinguished merchant of the same faith came to Frankenthal on behalf of a friend and spoke most courteously to Your Highness the Elector, and was thought to be one of their assembly.

Because neither once or twice any order was given, they lived in the hope that they would be permitted to worship quietly, and that they might be permitted to do good without many knowing of it.

A large number are also some of the other side of the Rhein, particularly some who hold their services in houses and barns, and their migration to your kingdom was tolerated.

We are announcing that on numerous occasions they were visited by your observer at Süntheim and warned concerning indoctrinating their children, but he usually received no answer, and he is asking if he should permit them to have their meetings or if he is to forbid them.

They are unreachable and they freely admit that for two winters in succession they met frequently in the home of widow Meuthen at home at Steinfurth, another time

¹³ The complete list of names of those arrested is presented in Good & Guth 1983.

¹⁴ From the *Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe* 77/4336, translated by Good and Guth 1983.

Seichshoff house at Rohrbach, and in the house of one Sommers in the Steinfurther forest, very quietly and conducted without people knowing about it.

They declare that they do not mislead anyone, or advise anyone to join them, and, moreover, that all those who have come to them are all Swiss people of this faith before, but that they are not allowed to increase in numbers.

We most urgently request that one most strictly forbid them to meet in houses in one place or another, confiscate the house in which they meet, for rather than give up their meetings they would leave the land.

The remainder of the report lists the names of the arrested participants with the estimated value of each person's assets. One point that stands out in this report is that they stated that they began settling in the Kraichgau "five or six years ago," which would date their earliest arrival around 1655. They confirmed that they had originated in Switzerland and had lived for a time across the Rhine.

On July 6, 1661 a decision was handed down by *Kurfürst* Karl Ludwig that the Anabaptists which were arrested should be fined 100 *Gulden* for having the unauthorized church service. Since they were "unreachable" in their convictions, this fine did not deter them and they continued to meet every Sunday. The Inspector in Sinsheim, Peter Grill, again contacted Karl Ludwig for instructions. He was informed on January 4, 1662, that the Mennonites should no longer be forbidden to meet -- to the great dismay of the local Reformed church authorities. Karl Ludwig stipulated that no more than 20 persons were allowed to attend a given meeting, and they had to pay a fee each time. Finally, Karl Ludwig issued the *Generalkonzession* on August 4, 1664 which granted the Anabaptists throughout the Palatinate the privilege to hold church services and an exemption from statute labor and military service. However, strict conditions were laid down. Villages with five or more Mennonite families were allowed to conduct religious services, but no more than 20 persons were allowed to attend at any one time. They were not allowed to "rebaptize" new members. Non-Mennonites were forbidden to attend their religious services or to become converts. Mennonites could not proselytize, engage in religiously seditious activities, or speak against the government. The attendance tax was modified into an annual fee of six *Gulden* per family as "Mennonite Recognition Money." Karl Ludwig eluded the legal technicality of the imperial edict of 1529 against the *Wiedertäufer* by granting his concession instead to the *Mennonisten*. The term *Wiedertäufer* had always been regarded as derogatory, and his edict was the first official recognition of the new term "Mennonite" to designate this religious sect.¹⁵

Despite the strict terms of the Concession of 1664, it was viewed favorably by the Mennonites. A very positive report was filed on the Mennonites in the Kraichgau in 1666. It stated that they were continuing to clear forests, drain marshes, and pay their debts, and also that they were aiding the poorer members of the congregation in paying their dues. Indeed, it stated that the estates would lie desolate if these families moved away.¹⁶ All these improvements directly benefited the nobility. The Mennonites remained tenant farmers since they had little if

¹⁵ Hertzler, Lichti, and Lichti 1983

¹⁶ Hege 1955, p. 676; Hoffman 1959, p. 110

any opportunity to purchase land. Their congregations were difficult to maintain since they were widely scattered on various estates.

After a reign of 32 years, during which the Mennonites enjoyed relative freedom of religion in the Palatinate, the Elector Karl Ludwig died in 1680. During the reigns of the following Electors, this toleration of Anabaptism began to be rescinded once again. The Mennonite Recognition fee was increased, special taxes were levied, and the purchase and sale of their property was subject to special restrictions.

Coinciding with this withdrawal of legal toleration for the Mennonites, the general conditions of life also collapsed for the entire population of the Pfalz during the so-called Dutch War (1672 - 1679) and the Palatine War (1688 - 1697). During both wars the French armies invaded the Palatinate, spilled across the Rhine into the Neckar valley, and caused widespread devastation.

Members of the Landis family (most likely the descendants of Hans Jacob and his brother Hans Heinrich) remained in the Sinsheim area through the 18th century, and their descendants reside there to this very day, several of whom have remained Mennonites.¹⁷

¹⁷ There are several sources on the Mennonites in the Kraichgau. See Ira Landis 1954, p. 76; Schuchmann 1966; Hacker 1983; Burgert 1983; and Guth, Lemar, and Mast 1987.

Landis family in the Kraichgau, reported at the Steinsfurt Meeting in 1661

Descendants of Oswald Landis (134) and Anna Schappi

1341 Hans Jacob Landis, bap. Aug. 10, 1600, Hirzel; m. **Verena Pfister**, emigrated ca. 1651 to Heidelberg, Alsace with wife and three children. Settled in the Kraichgau, near Sinsheim, Baden; buried March 20, 1656 in Weiler. Widow Verena attended the Anabaptist service at Steinsfurt in 1661.

13416 Hans Rudolf Landis, bap. Jan. 6, 1639, Hirzel; attended the Steinsfurt meeting.

13418 Hans Caspar Landis, bap. Nov. 28, 1643; d. 1657 in Weiler, Baden, age 13.

13419 Barbara Landis, bap. April 14, 1645, Hirzel; probably attended the Steinsfurt meeting with mother Verena and brother Hans Rudolf.

1348 Hans Heinrich Landis, bap. July 21, 1611 Horgen, marr. Magdalena Bollier, emigrated ca. 1650 to Heidlezen near Colmar, attended the Steinsfurt meeting in 1661.

13486 Hans Heinrich Landis (jr.), bap. Jan. 10, 1641 Hirzel.