

## A Christmas story from Schleithem

Celebrating one last Christmas...

She would like to celebrate Christmas one more time in her home village of Schleithem, the Anabaptist Anna Meyer told the bailiff. It was September 1642, and she made her wish in response to the news brought by the bailiff - he said the town council of Schaffhausen had ordered the expulsion of Anna's husband, Christian Bechtold, for his refusal to give up his faith. He had remained firm despite being interrogated, beaten with the rod, and - like the other four who had broken out of jail with him - had had his fields and livestock taken away. Anna's faith had also been challenged. How would the family get through the coming winter? The year's harvest had already been gathered and handed over to pay for Christian's escape from jail. The men had broken out of their cell by widening a stovepipe opening, and fled the town by removing a large stone from the town wall.

What else was there to live from? They still had the vineyards they leased from the community, which lay on the other side of the village stream on the sunny Staufenberg, just beyond Schaffhausen's territory. Christian made an important contribution to the quality of the local wine thanks to his well-kept vines. This was well known and appreciated in the village.

It was now winter and Anna often thought about the Anabaptists who had emigrated and were no longer heading for Moravia as they had done previously. The new destinations were the lands of the Palatinate and Kraichgau, devastated by war, and which were still being ravaged. Even Schleithem had been attacked and plundered. That was in 1633 when Anna's youngest child was just six year's old. Anna had fled with the children into the forest to hide in a place she knew well since it was where the Anabaptists would gather. The village was barely recognisable when they returned. It was terrible. Would they soon have to live among the soldiers?

But first came the Christmas celebration. Even though snow was already covering the ground and temperatures were noticeably dropping, Anna had decided to celebrate at the Anabaptist meeting place. This was along the wide path cut through the forest known as the Chälle. Anna found peace and certainty in her faith there. In the village lived many people who were even proud of their malice and misdeeds. She could hardly bear that anymore.

The beautiful, large village church was also no longer a welcoming place since the pastor had to read out the council's mandate directed against the beliefs of the Anabaptists. It was important for Anna that their children would, when they were of age, make their own decision to be baptised after repenting of their sins. Aware of this, the pastor did not insist on infant baptism - he even declared from the pulpit that he would not baptise their children. However, when the deacon arrived from the town, he enforced infant baptism, which is why all three children, Christian, Barbal und Margret, were baptised and registered as such.

The snow crunched under foot as Anna, along with her husband and their nearly grown children, made their way under the cover of darkness. There hadn't been any new snowfall to slow their progress. The Chälle, located in the community forest at Randen, was a good hour's walk away. Not far from the footpath that led over the Randen to the town, two Anabaptist families had lived about a hundred years earlier. Their simple huts had been torn down on the council's orders.

As the family reached the high ground separating the village from this part of the forest, Anna could see a fire between the trees where the Anabaptists from the surrounding villages and town had gathered. It gave her a warm feeling. It was as if she was very close to God's kingdom, and she wished to belong to it more than to this world, where war raged and one ruled over the other. The heavenly kingdom was to her the source of peace and justice. Anna looked forward to reading the Bible with the others who had gathered.

And at the end of the Christmas story she stood up and spoke, and everyone listened to what she had to say: "Our family too must move away from here, just as Joseph and Mary had to flee with the Christ child from Herod's persecution. But my home is not here. It is in heaven with God. We must be brave here on Earth and listen to God, not to people. Thus, the light of heaven shines down upon us."

As Anna passed around sweet pieces of pear, everyone gathered around her curiously. "About 20 years ago, in 1620 - around Easter, when I was a young woman working in the field, the bailiff gave me a quarter measure of dried pieces of pear. It was so delicious. But afterwards he was made to pay a heavy fine since it was forbidden to provide us Anabaptists with either food or shelter. He had to go before the council and make a formal apology. But I'm still grateful for his deed. These pieces of pear that I dried this Autumn are a reminder of all the support we've received during these times of persecution."

As the family made its way home at dawn, Anna wished that the holy night had not come to an end.

She would remain in Schleithem for another six years until the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648. She then would help with her family rebuild the devastated lands in Kraichgau. Their descendants live today in the Canadian province of Ontario. When some members visited Schleithem recently they were surprised to discover that their ancestors hadn't been forgotten. The information boards along the interpretive Anabaptist Trail recall the escape from jail and the pieces of pear.

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19-12-2019



The Anabaptist Trail of Schleithem

| 1622       | Rind.     | Lettern                         | Gewittere.                   | 16      |
|------------|-----------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------|
| 13. Octob. | Jhuar     | Groeg Stamm<br>Madem Kreen      | Don Stamm.<br>Barbar Stamm.  | 1. Jan  |
| 17 Novemb. | Hma       | Groeg Stamm<br>Hma Mynor        | Gralki Dertfur.<br>Hma Kopf. | 12. Jan |
|            | Groeg     | Groeg Miceur<br>Hma Weman       | Groeg Stamm.<br>Hma Stamm.   |         |
|            | Christian | Christian Duffloch<br>Hma Mynor | Sans Wigen<br>Madem Trisi.   | 19. Jan |
| 24 Novemb. | Barbar    | Sans Dmm<br>Barma Dertfur       | Sans Stamm.<br>Hma Dertfur.  |         |
| 8. Decemb. | Emil      | Wering Stamm<br>Barma Dertfur   | Sans Stamm.<br>Barbar Stamm. | 26      |

Christian, Barbal und Margret, were baptised and registered as such. (Parish register of Schleithem 1622)