

Ezechiel Sangmeister's Way of Life in Greater Pennsylvania

The Reformation ran headlong into the Enlightenment between the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. The most radical byproducts of sixteenth-century Europe's religious reform movements settled in this colony hailed by Enlightenment thinkers as a beacon of toleration. Nothing probed the parameters of that toleration as pointedly as the celibate sect that established the Ephrata Cloister on the banks of Cocalico Creek. *Leben und Wandel*, the autobiography of Ezechiel Sangmeister, offers historians the most detailed perspective on the daily life and culture surrounding that community in Pennsylvania and flowing south down the Shenandoah.¹

"Leben und Wandel" means "Life and Change" in direct translation. As Sangmeister moved around German-speaking Europe and North America, he roamed a world with a liminal "Lebenswandel"—a "way of life" suspended between Reformation and Enlightenment—lost to our Anglo-American histories. His autobiography, which he began writing on May 6, 1754, while living on the Shenandoah, describes the network of practices that constitute a culture—from food and furniture to sex and sacraments.

Sangmeister's account begins with his birth "into this miserable world" in 1723 "about one mile from Wolfenbuettel."² His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all belonged to the bottom rung of the Lutheran clergy. They were schoolmasters. Sangmeister's father maintained the family's tentative claim on respectability through piety but struggled with "constant burdens, sickness, and distress" and enjoined the future monk to "stay single." Following the deaths of his father and three siblings, Sangmeister left school at the age of nine and spent the next seven years as an underfed carpenter's apprentice. With his training complete, Sangmeister bid farewell to his mother and set forth as a journeyman car-

¹ *Leben und Wandel des in GOTT ruhenten Ezechiel Sangmeisters; Weiland Einwohner von Ephrata*, 4 vols. (Ephrata, PA, 1825–27), trans. Barbara Schindler in *Journal of the Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley* 4–10 (1979–85). Felix Reichmann, "Notes and Documents: Ezechiel Sangmeister's Diary," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 68 (1944): 292–313, questions the authenticity of the document; Jeff Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata* (University Park, PA, 2003), 61, testifies to its veracity.

² Schindler, "Leben und Wandel," 5:63, 64.

penter. He landed in Wuerttemberg and joined those who had decided “to travel to America in the hope of finding joy in the new world.” Once docked in Philadelphia, the ship’s merchant conspired with a profiteer to place him in a four-year indenture.

Sangmeister’s spiritual awakening followed the arrival of Anton Hellenthal as a fellow servant in the household. After a time with the devout Hellenthal as his “priest,” God “rapped” on Sangmeister’s heart and produced “a great desire to begin another life.”³ Hellenthal met a shoemaker connected to the Seventh-Day Baptists who had formed the Ephrata Cloister near Lancaster under the leadership of another orphaned German journeyman, the charismatic Conrad Beissel. In 1748, Sangmeister sold all his possessions and went to Ephrata with Hellenthal. In contrast with Peter Miller’s laudatory *Chronicon Ephratense*, Sangmeister’s *Leben und Wandel* describes the difficult physical and psychic adjustment to life without personal belongings or independence of action in a community of immigrant men and women divorced (legally, physically, and metaphorically) from the bonds of European patriarchal society but reconstituted into their own spiritual meritocracy.

Three years before Sangmeister’s and Hellenthal’s arrival, scandal had rocked the cloister when the Eckerlin brothers (Israel, Samuel, and Gabriel)—three Salzburg orphans who had played a crucial role in the cloister’s formation—decided to leave. Beissel had come to see Israel as an intellectual and Samuel as an economic threat to his domain. The cloister’s greatest economic success came out of the brothers’ efforts to develop craft and agricultural expertise, and Israel had become the prior of the institution. His ego and Beissel’s proved incapable of coexistence; the brothers moved south to start their own settlement. They came back for a visit to the cloister, met Sangmeister, and convinced him to move away from Ephrata’s complex social structure to lead a solitary life near their current camp on the Monongahela.

On October 2, 1752, Sangmeister and Hellenthal escaped the cloister under cover of night and headed southwest on foot. Shortly before winter, they stopped on the Shenandoah, where they bought six acres from Mennonite Henry Funk. They bunked in Funk’s stable while Sangmeister returned to carpentry and Hellenthal “worked on the land.”⁴ As spring approached, they built a house.

³ Ibid., 5:67.

⁴ Ibid., 6:14.

With the establishment of Sangmeister's household, three groups of celibates existed in the geographic region culturally dominated by Philadelphia and populated by migrants from southern Germany and northern Ireland. Although he technically resided in Virginia, Pennsylvania remained the center of Sangmeister's society. Whether seeking cures for physical or spiritual ills, Sangmeister and his neighbors looked to Ephrata, Lancaster, and Germantown for the serums and sermons to salve their ever-ailing bodies and souls.

Sangmeister and Hellenthal exchanged visits with the Eckerlins, and both settlements of celibates aroused anxiety in the wider area as tensions rose with France. Sangmeister built a prayer hut where his neighbors feared he practiced alchemy and/or Catholic rites. The Eckerlin brothers' more remote location near French-allied Indians convinced many—including George Washington—that they were spies. Sangmeister "really did not know from which side to anticipate the greatest danger, from the savages or from the so-called Christians."⁵ Israel and Gabriel Eckerlin died while being detained by the French, even as their brother Samuel argued their innocence in Virginian custody.

Samuel Eckerlin joined Sangmeister after his brothers' deaths, and their household became the medical and spiritual hub for nearby German settlers. In 1759, he returned from a trip to Ephrata with a scandalous woman, Barbara Landes; set up housekeeping; and, according to Sangmeister, "dressed her in white according to his impression with an English gown, which wasn't really English and not really Irish."⁶

Sangmeister spent five more years tormented by women and worn down by work—on the farm, in Eckerlin's pharmacy, as a carpenter for his neighbors, and at home, where he shared household tasks with increasing numbers of Ephrata's outcasts. In 1762, Brother Anton disappeared in the night, leaving Sangmeister without his closest companion.

When the Proclamation Line set parameters for civilized settlement and the Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia, Sangmeister sought safety back in Lancaster County with a group of celibate siblings he met on the Shenandoah. He retreated into the smaller life of this ad hoc family and died among them in 1785 as Pennsylvanians debated their place in a new nation. The moment when orphaned German artisans could take advan-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:91.

tage of Enlightenment toleration to promulgate the Reformation's most radical reveries had passed.

Sangmeister's autobiography unveils the tenuous coexistence and violent ruptures in a gender-bending, interracial, multiethnic, nondenominational world that lacked cohesion beyond the need to survive and the desire for salvation.

Northwestern University

ELIZABETH LEWIS PARDOE