NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The Harmonists and Euthanasia?
By Gertha Reinert

Among poetry written by members of the Harmony Society, an interesting misplaced document was recently found at Old Economy Village, Ambridge, Pennsylvania: Fragen der Schaker und Antwort — Questions of the Shakers and Answer[s]. It is a fragment, a working copy, undated and unsigned. By mere coincidence, the complementary part of that document was located among unidentified papers in the William Penn Archives in Harrisburg. Both documents are written in the old German script.

The combined papers contain 10 questions and 10 answers and are concerned with religious issues. Judging by the handwriting and style, they were written by George Rapp (1757-1847), founder and first leader of the Harmony Society, most probably during the society’s Indiana decade (1814-1824). At that time, contact between Harmonists and Shakers was frequent, and overtures by the Shakers for a merger of the two groups were made as early as 1816. Although the document, in general, is of special importance because of Rapp’s authorship, it is the answer to question 10 which stresses the peculiarities of Rapp’s thinking and which adds to our knowledge of the Harmonists. Both the original and the translation of question and answer 10 are given here for the scholar who is in command of German.

`Wie ist ihre Auffassung in betreff ihrer Glücksgüter? Kein Mensch der in der Gemeine sich verspricht zu leben hat was Eigen, er muss sich alle Zeit gefasst halten wans vor gut befunden wird Veränderung zu treffen er in Gleichheit zu bleiben Pflicht hat, im übrigen ist sonst alles zimmlich dem euren gleich ohne dass unsere Familien noch baysammen leben, und eines langsamen Todes zu sterben haben, vielleicht aber desto gründlicher entwickelt werden,`

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1 William Penn Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.; General File MG 185; Microfilm 316.
wo ihr dagegen[?] den Stoss oder Schlag auf einmal verrichtet, und
die Gelegenheit abschneidet, welcher Weg der beste ist mag ich
würlich nicht untersuchen denn ich habe würlich nicht
über die Gemeine zu klagen, was bey euch das Tanzen verrichtet
thut bey uns das Wort, welches stark und machtig ist uns in guter
Ordnung der Tugend zu halten.

Translation:
What is your opinion as far as your earthly goods are concerned?
No person who wants to live as a member of our community owns
anything. He has to be prepared at all times, if so decided, to accept
changes which do not deliver him from said obligations. Otherwise,
everything is similar to your practice, except that our families do
not live together anymore and do not have to die a slow death,
whereas they can be developed more profoundly, while you in con-
trast use physical violence (Stoss oder Schlag) and therefore cut off
this opportunity. I really cannot examine which way is the better
one, because I really have no reason to complain about die Gemeine.
While you achieve your objectives with dancing, we achieve the
same with the word, which is strong and mighty to keep us in the
good order of virtue.

It has been generally known that the Harmonists lived by com-
munistic principles, that is, nobody owned anything privately. Die
Gemeine, a religious body and a community as well, owned everything
in common and was guided or even governed by respective leaders at
any given time. It has also been generally known that the Harmonists
changed their permanent homes in America twice for no obvious
urgent reasons. They were prepared at all times “to accept changes.”
That they chose not to live as families but preferred celibacy as the
better, more holy way of life was already ridiculed by contemporaries,
more than one and one-half century ago. So far, however, it has not
been known that the Harmonists probably practiced euthanasia in
cases of frailness in old age or an incurable illness, as the statement
suggests: “... [O]ur families do not have to die a slow death (any-
more). ...” The specter of euthanasia, then, is the real news in the
recently discovered document.

Extensive research after the discovery of the document so far did
not result in any further information which confirms that euthanasia
was practiced; however, additional supportive evidence is given in
other Harmony documents and in the Harmonists’ faith and lifestyle.
To name a few examples: the sick report on Frederick Rapp prior to
his death in 1834 which, seen in context with other events, indicates
that Frederick's death was "hastened by quackery";\(^3\) George Rapp's herb and flower list of 1829 includes *Gratiola Virginica*, and the common German name for the wildflower *Gratiola* is *Gnadenkraut*, meaning herb of mercy;\(^4\) George Rapp frequently overruled physicians in charge by taking the treatment of a patient into his own hands; and the Harmonists are known not to have had seriously handicapped, infirm or incurably sick people among their members. The final piece of evidence is the Harmonists' understanding of death. It rested firmly on the belief that for the Christian, death is not to be feared. The Harmonists considered death the gate to a better life, complete redemption, and the beginning of the undisturbed communion with Christ. To depart from this life spiritually well prepared and painless physically may very well have been considered a privilege.

As mentioned before, the above-quoted document was discovered accidentally, and although it also deals with the Shakers, research for this article was limited to the Harmonists. As for the Shakers, matters have to be left to experts on early Shakerism.

\(^4\) Original not secured. Copy used provided by Allegheny Garden Club, Old Economy Files.