

The Harmonists: No Euthanasia

By Hilda Adam Kring and George Swetnam

IN the interest of accuracy in both historical fact and translation, we feel obligated to protest against "The Harmonists and Euthanasia?" by Gertha Reinert (*WPHM* 71, No. 1, pp. 81-83), whose main thesis is that "the Harmonists probably practiced euthanasia in cases of frailness in old age or an incurable illness."

If this Harmony Society memo proves anything in regard to the practice of euthanasia, it is exactly the opposite of what Ms. Reinert suggests.

In regard to her translation:

It is utterly impossible to translate *unsere Familien noch beysammen leben* (lines five and six of the German passage) as "our families do not live together anymore." This relative clause contains absolutely no negative particle after *ohne dass*, "except that," which introduces it as an example of the difference between Harmony Society and Shaker practices. Its plain, positive meaning is, "our families still live together" (although celibate), as opposed to the Shaker custom of having men and women live in separate houses, usually far apart.

Similarly with the second part of the clause, one cannot translate *eines langsamen Todes zusterben haben* as "do no have to die a slow death." Again, there is no hint of any negative element, and the meaning is obviously "they have to die a slow death."

In regard to the interpretation assumed by Ms. Reinert, note that the passage includes no reference to individuals, but to families. Harmony Society families died off slowly (member by member) while Shaker families were broken up by force (on joining the group). *Stoss oder Schlag* probably does not mean real physical violence, but more a push or slap, perhaps in a moral sense. Harmony families were thus able to make more basic adjustments, while Shakers had to react to sudden change.

As to fact, it is well known that Harmony Society families (often including non-family members) *did* live together in the same houses (though sleeping on separate floors), not only at the time of the

Hilda Adam Kring is a native of Germany, whose Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania was on Harmony Society research. Her book, *The Harmonists: A Folk-Cultural Approach* was published by Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, N.J.

George Swetnam, who has written widely on Western Pennsylvania history, has taught both English and German at the University of Alabama.

rapprochement with the Shakers (around 1816) but for six or seven decades more.

The correct translation of the disputed passage, therefore, should be:

... Otherwise than as to financial matters previously discussed everything is similar to your practice, except that our families still live together, as Shaker families did not and must die off slowly, because of which changes come more basically; while you, on the other hand, break them [families] up by force, and therefore cut off this opportunity for changes to come by degrees.

In regard to so-called supportive evidence:

1. If Frederick Rapp's death was "hastened by quackery" we should bear in mind that quack doctors, then as now, were practitioners who tried to do the best they could to cure the patient; they were not executioners.

2. As to Rapp's herb and flower list including *Gratiola Virginica* (in German, *Gnadenkraut* "herb of grace, or kindness"): The Latin name of this hedge hyssop has much the same meaning, but the "kindness" meant was not death. The leaves were crushed and used as a poultice "to relieve the pain of bruises, and promote the healing of wounds." The seventeenth century herbalist Nicholas Culpeper recommended it for dropsy, gout and sciatica, but stated it was "a most violent purgative," and warned that it should only be taken under the care of "the alchymist."¹ If taken in enough quantity to produce death, that would not have been an easy one, but more painful than being beaten to death with a club. Experiments reported in 1893 showed mild narcotic effects lasting about two hours, but violent head pains, as if bones were being smashed and drawn out with pincers.² Experiments with large doses given to dogs showed violent vomiting and purging before death.

3. The Harmonist belief that death was not to be feared, but was the doorway to a better life, complete redemption, and communion with Christ is in no way applicable. If this were evidence on this matter it might appear that Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and almost all other Christian groups would believe in and practice euthanasia, since they, by creeds, hold similar beliefs.

Thus we see that the argument that Harmonists practiced euthanasia will not hold water, either grammatically, by language or by any

¹ Rodale's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (Emmaus Press: 1987), 342; Le Strange, Richard, *A History of Herbal Plants* (Arco Publishing Co.: 1977), 134.

² Millsbaugh, C. F., *American Medicinal Plants* (Dover: 1974), 430-34.

factual evidence. Let us hope that this lays the question forever to rest.

To the Editor of *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*:

George Rapp's Harmony Society: THOU SHALT NOT KILL

By Dr. Karl J. R. Arndt

Based on two unsigned and undated German holographs, one found in Ambridge and the other at Harrisburg, and a herb and flower list, the original of which was not found but claimed to be Rapp's based on a copy obtained from the Allegheny Garden Club, the author of the article "The Harmonists and Euthanasia?" published in the January 1988 issue of your magazine claims:

So far, however, it has not been known that the Harmonists probably practiced euthanasia in cases of frailness in old age or in incurable illness, as the statement suggests: . . . O[ur] families do not have to die a slow death (anymore). . . ." The specter of euthanasia, then, is the real news in the recently discovered document.

Rapp's Harmony Society in the course of its hundred years in the United States built three towns on the United States frontier, moving from one area to the other for reasons clearly given in my documentary histories of the Harmony Society contrary to Ms. Reinert's statement "for no obvious urgent reasons."

Rapp's Harmony Society was to be a reincarnation of the first Christian Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2. Their articles of agreement, dated 1821, clearly stated:

George Rapp and his Association bind themselves further, to supply the aforesaid persons with all the wants and necessities of life to wit: Meat, drink, clothing etc. and indeed not only during their prosperous days, but also if all or any of them get sick or due to age or other infirmity be unable to work, they shall, as long as they remain members of the Community receive and enjoy the same support as before during their better days.

They also stated that if members should withdraw for any reason, they would demand no pay in any form but would have considered their contribution to the Society as for the maintenance of "widows, orphans, the sick and the infirm." These were signed in German, always before witnesses and George Rapp.

The Harmony Society both in Württemberg and the United States was opposed to war or bearing of arms, which their faith considered murder in opposition to God's commandment THOU SHALT NOT KILL.