

The Moravian Experience

LEBENSLAUF (“Lay – ben – lauf”)

(The “au” in “lauf: rhymes with the “ow” in “bow”.)

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, each member of the Moravian church was to write out a brief spiritual autobiography some time in midlife. When that person passed away, the pastor finished out this sketch, and read it at the person’s funeral, or at a lovefeast held shortly thereafter in their memory.

This practice has continued in many Moravian congregations to the present day in an altered form: now in most cases the pastor writes this sketch, and after reading it at the person’s funeral, sends it to the denomination’s archives. Today there are over 10,000 of these documents in the Southern Province’s Archives, and many more in the various archives of the worldwide Moravian Unity.

Moravians called this document a *Lebenslauf*, a German word, comprised of “Leben,” for “life,” and “Lauf,” for “path.” So *Lebenslauf* means “life path.” The latter half for the word, “Lauf,” has many uses in German. It can refer to the path a railroad track takes as it winds its way through a landscape. It may also refer to the course of a river as it meanders through a similar landscape, or the course set by a ship at sea. Generally in German, apart from the specific Moravian usage, *Lebenslauf* means a biographical sketch or *curriculum vitae*.

These brief Moravian writings stick to essentials in talking about a life: date and place of birth, names of parents and spouse (but not names of children) and the major factors and chief events which have shaped the course and help in understanding the nature of one’s life, particularly one’s relationship to God and the Christian community. Just as various features of a landscape shape the course of a river; so various influences, events and experiences may have shaped our own lives.

For earlier Moravians, this did not mean any compartmentalizing of life into two realms “religious activities” and “the rest of life.” In contrast to that way of thinking, a Moravian would write about how, **out of the whole fabric of his or her life**, he or she related to God (and at times fell out of relationship with God), and how he or she came into the life of the church or, more importantly, into an awareness that the church was much more than just another of society’s social groups and how at other times the writer fell out of a relationship with any part of the Christian church.

Moravians talked of a “person’s walk” in these documents, their awareness of nearness to, or farness from, God. If a person’s walk was “variable,” it was perhaps a kindly way of referring to “ungodly” phases of a person’s life.

In working on one’s own *Lebenslauf* the process of remembering must be nurtured over time, past events need to be sought out, thought about and reevaluated, with openness to God’s guidance, as one seeks to identify the essential factors concerning one’s life path.

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