

Anabaptist Heritage
by Esther Becker
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When my brothers and I were young we enjoyed getting out our copy of the Martyrs' Mirror to look at the pictures. These were pictures of horrible atrocities; beheadings, burnings at the stake, drownings, stonings, torture of other kinds. Not exactly children's fare but I guess our parents thought if it is the Martyrs' Mirror it is OK. I was very impressed that there was the story of ancestors of ours included in the book.

I am the 15th generation since Hans Jacob Hess and his wife Anna, who both died in Othenbach prison. Here is their story.

Hans Jacob Hess, with his wife, A.D. 1639

Among those who suffered in the Swiss persecution, there was none of the least Hans Jacob Hess, a chosen and confirmed minister of the Christian church.

He was apprehended for the third time in the year 1639; for from the two preceding imprisonments, the first of which had occurred already, in the year 1637, the Lord, beyond all expectation, had remarkably delivered him, through the aid of those that were imprisoned with him; as also out of this third imprisonment. The first lasted nineteen days; the second, eight weeks: the third, eighty-three weeks, or more than a year and a half.

But in the meantime his life was made very bitter and vexatious; for he was stripped, and, together with some of his fellow believers, put in iron bonds sixteen weeks, which he nevertheless patiently bore with a steadfast mind, until the time of his deliverance. (Records show that he died in Othenbach.)

While this was taking place, namely in the same year, also his wife was apprehended, who was first imprisoned in the council house, and then in Othenbach, where, through bad treatment and unfit food and drink, for sixty-three weeks, she was so impaired in her constitution, and weakened, that she was seized with consumption, and after suffering much misery, died in prison.

This, then, was the end of this pious heroine of Jesus, who, to receive the eternal, blessed life, because of the uprightness of her faith, chose to die a lingering death rather than enjoy the temporal rest and pleasure of this life; wherefore the gracious God shall hereafter crown and reward her, with all those that have valiantly suffered and fought for His name's sake, with the unfading crown of honor.

The property of Hans Jacob Hess was seized by the authorities, who realized from the sale of it 4000 guilders, without restoring anything of it to those who remained. O great injustice!

I wonder, would I have been able to bear such suffering? Would I have taken so extreme a stand for something I believed in? Would I even think it necessary to do so? I don't know, I have never faced such circumstances. The blood of these martyrs, however much diluted, runs in my veins. I hope I have some of the strength they had. And my wish for myself when faced with situations where I need to speak my beliefs, is that I will do so in spite of the possibility of derision or ridicule. Whatever discomfort I might experience will be nothing as compared to the suffering of these people, my ancestors.