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# THE BEGINNING OF THE REFORMATION IN ESTONIA

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The history of the Estonian nation begins about 2000 B.C. when they settled down in the land which is now known as Estonia. Roman historians called all the peoples of the Baltic area collectively by the name of "Aesti"; later that name came to apply to the Estonians alone. Tacitus thought that the "Aesti" spoke a language "similar to that of the Britons", whereas in fact the Estonians, Finns and Livs spoke a so-called Finno-Ugri language, utterly distinct from the languages of Slavs, Germanic groups, Latvians and Lithuanians.

In the period from A. D. 1208-1227 Estonia was conquered and "Christianized" by the newly established (A.D. 1202) military order "Fratres Militiae Christi," more popularly known as the "Order of the Brothers of the Sword." The methods which the crusaders employed were not such as to secure easy converts. A German priest wrote in his "Chronica Livoniae:"

> "When we arrived there, we spread troops over all the roads, villages and districts of the country; we set on fire and destroyed everything, we killed all who were of masculine sex, captured women and children and took away much cattle and horses . . . and returned to Livonia with great rejoicing."

The Brothers held the sword and consequently they became the most powerful class in the land. They built castles and made the land safe for the bishops, priests and monks; now they claimed the right to rule the conquered territory. In 1237 the Order of the Brothers of the Sword was absorbed in the Order of Teutonic Knights, but the Livonian branch maintained considerable autonomy and the Master of the Knights was the most important man in the Land of Mary.[1]

Gradually, when there was no outside enemy to be feared, the Order lost its compactness and the Brothers their original warrior strength. Constant quarrels with other classes had undermined the popularity of the Order, luxury had robbed it of its noblest qualities and laziness had changed the warriors into weaklings.

> "Of the three monastic vows of the Order, the first—poverty—was never kept for an instant: the Knights had come to the Baltic to make their fortunes while serving God, and they settled down not as monks but as feudal landlords. The second—chastity—was soon forgotten: the Knights fornicated like soldiers and married like country gentlemen. . . . The third vow—obedience—was almost as grossly, though not so openly, disregarded. Being good feudalists, the Knights felt themselves obliged to acknowledge some suzerain; but they considered them-

selves at liberty to choose between the Master of the Order and the bishops, and to change their allegiance as convenience dictated."[2]

The Knights were intended to be the protectors of the Roman Catholic Church in the land, but now, when help was needed against the approaching Reformation, they were unable to offer it.

Almost equal in power to the Knights was the Archbishop of Riga with his subject bishops of Tartu, Tallinn, Saare-Lääne and Courland. Most of the bishops possessed large territories, were ambitious for secular power and demanded the right to decide important matters in the diets. The quarrels of bishops and Knights often culminated in battles and bloodshed. Both parties sought help from Rome, but there the policy was, "divide et impera." No wonder that the Knights were reluctant to help bishops later in their struggle against the invasion of the new teaching of the Reformation.

The clergy in Estonia could be accused of the same sins as in other European countries. Archbishop Henning von Scharfenberg complained in 1428 that priests were not taking good care of parishes.[3] These complaints were renewed in sharper forms at the Diet of Walk in 1442 and at the Diet of Wolmar in 1513. Worse than laziness was the immorality of the clergy. There was hardly a church council where priests were not rebuked for having concubines or indulging in drinking and gluttony. At the Diet of Wolmar (1513) the subject of concubinage was brought up again. The complaint was that the wives of the clergy were too proud and lived in the same luxury as the wives of the nobles. The aging Archbishop Jasper Linde declared himself helpless in the matter. He pointed out that already there were not enough priests in the land, and if any stricter demands were made, then those remaining would also leave the country. Moreover, he knew that even higher churchmen like cardinals had wives in other countries. The matter ended with an exhortation that the wives of the clergy should be humble and not use the same finery as the ladies of the nobility.[4] Evidently the parish priests were quite glad to abandon celibacy and accept the more liberal teaching of Protestantism which helped them out of many difficulties.

Monasteries were never very popular in Estonia. In 1499 the City Council of Tallinn accused the near-by monasteries of sheltering thieves and murderers. Complaints grew constantly more frequent in the beginning of the sixteenth century that monks and friars were too greedy. Dominicans in Tallinn had a special skill at acquiring legacies[5] and especially of laying hold of the wealth which had no master. Such estates of deceased persons should have belonged to the city, the citizens thought. When reformers made the misdeeds of the Catholic clergy and monks a matter of public discussion, there was no power to protect them.

The "third estate" was the rising power of the liberally minded cities. Tartu had about 6000 and Tallinn 4000 inhabitants, which was quite a number considering that the largest city on the Baltic Sea—Lübeck—had only about 10,000 inhabitants at the time.[6] Tallinn and Tartu were both members of the Hanseatic League and important commercial centers. Foreign merchants mingled with local merchants, carrying the most important international news to Estonia. Thus a possibility of education was open to the cities which was not available to the rural areas. On the whole the merchant class was the most broadminded and progressive group in Estonia. On this liberal soil the first seed of the Reformation was sown.

The situation of the peasants was lamentable. They had not forgotten that Christianity was brought by fire and sword and had finally made them slaves. Frequent uprisings failed to restore their lost liberty. The Catholic Church was never dear to Estonians. The people held fast to their old faith. Though they were forbidden to worship the old deities openly, they did it secretly. The policy of the Church was short-sighted. For the sake of immediate advantage churches were built on the holy hills or some sacred grove. The old deities were identified with Catholic saints without much change of ideas. Church councils complained that sacrifices were brought openly to the god of thunder and to sacred trees and stones.[7] As far as ethnic Estonians were concerned, then, they were ready to welcome the message from Wittenberg primarily for social and economic reasons. When the first message of the Reformation reached them which promised "Christian liberty,"[8] they were certainly for it. Uprisings of peasants were so serious that the Knights turned against the Reformation, blaming the new faith rather than themselves.[9]

Estonia was a well prepared ground for the Reformation, but the seed had to be imported and sown before the fruit could appear.

In Livonia the name of Martin Luther was officially mentioned for the first time at the Prelates' Conference at Ronneburg on July 28, 1521.[10] There were assembled Archbishop Jasper Linde; Johann Blankenfeld, Bishop of Tallinn and Tartu; Johann Kievel, Bishop of Saare-Lääne; and Basedorf, Bishop of Courland. One item in the agenda was "von der Sache des Doctors Martinus Luther."[11] The bishops decided that each one of them should gather the people of his diocese together to the cathedral church and inform them, either in person or through a representative, about the bull against Luther. This indicates that as early as 1521 the bishops saw some possibility of Luther's influence in the Baltic lands. The isolation was not as tight as one might think in these days of trains, automobiles and jet planes.

The first definite effect of Luther's teachings that we can prove, reached Estonia through Riga. Riga, as the capital of the Land of St. Mary, stood in close connection with the Estonian cities. There were mainly three channels through which Riga helped the cause of the Reformation in Estonia: 1) The union of the cities, formed in 1522 (for common protection of their interests), 2) correspondence between the reformers in Riga and Estonia, 3) visits of the reformers of Riga to Estonia.

The Reformation came to Riga in 1522 through Andreas Knopken 1490?-1539).[12] The reformer was born near Küstrin, and studied at Frankfort on Oder. His younger brother was a canon at St. Peter's in Riga and Andreas followed him there in 1517. Becoming discontented with his environment, he went to Treptow, in order to continue his studies. There he was working under the guidance of Bugenhagen when both became followers of Luther. Knopken returned to Riga in 1521. In the following year Knopken published his 24 theses and there was a disputation between him and certain monks which set the reformation movement rolling in Riga. He wrote letters to his friends of similar views in Tallinn encouraging the reformation in Estonia. Also his books and hymns found their way to Tallinn and Tartu.

Another reformer of Riga—Sylvester Tegetmeyer[13]—was also in close contact with Estonia. He was born in Hamburg and studied in Rostock and in Leipzig. After serving for two years as a chaplain in Rostock, he came to Riga in 1522. His methods were more radical than those of Knopken. His church—St. Jacob's—became the center of the overzealous party. Several riots occurred, and at least one outbreak of iconoclasm in the cathedral was led by Tegetmeyer himself. He was not satisfied until the monks and priests were sent out of the city.

Tegetmeyer's influence in Estonia was much greater than that of Knopken. Estonian nobles looked at him as the leader of the whole movement and attempted to kill him in 1525.[14] Later he came to Tartu where he preached for four weeks, quieting the riotous crowds.

The Reformation in Estonia was greatly helped by Melchior Hofmann,[15] a German Anabaptist and mystic and leather dresser by trade. This "Apostle of Livonia," as he came to be known, had an appeal to lower classes especially and rendered a great service to Estonia in spite of his extreme doctrines. When Hofmann's theology was questioned by his fellow-reformers, he went to Wittenberg where his views received full approval from Luther[16] and Bugenhagen.

Martin Luther himself wrote several letters to "Den Auszerwelten lieben Freunden gottis, allen Christen zu Righe [Riga], Revell

[Tallinn], and Tarbthe [Tartu] ynn Lieffland [Livonia] . . "[17] We can hardly overestimate the encouragement and impetus which his letters brought to the daring few. It was a stimulating thought to be in direct contact with the great leader of the Reformation movement.

The hotbeds of the Reformation in Estonia were the cities, first of all Tallinn and Tartu. There was some reform preaching going on in Tallinn before Luther's teaching reached Estonia. When the news of the Reformation was heard from Riga, supported by Luther's letter (1523), the local reform-minded people felt at once kinship between the teaching of the German Reformer and their own discoveries. The local leaders accepted the news gladly, but at the same time their own advanced views were absorbed by the more developed ideas of Luther, and the two movements became one.

The outstanding person in the early years of the Reformation movement in Tallinn was Johann Lange. He was born in Germany, but the exact location of his birthplace is not known. From the city of Stade he came to Tallinn as a Premonstratensian monk.[18] In 1523 Lange became chaplain of St. Nicolas Church in Tallinn. Since preaching was his chief duty, he had a good opportunity to win the people over to his views. He was anxious to lay bare the evils of the church and to call the people back to the simple faith and teaching of the New Testament.

Lange's message was shared by Zacharias Hasse and Hermann Marsow. The lives of both of these men are extremely obscure. As a preacher of the Reformation, Hasse had made such an impression on the people that in 1524 he was installed as a pastor of St. Olaf's Church. This was sanctioned by the city government in spite of the bitter opposition of St. Michael's Monastery, the patron of St. Olaf's.

Hermann Marsow was born in Riga. In 1523 he was registered as a student at Wittenberg University and a few months later we find him preaching in Tartu. In the next summer he was banished from the city by Bishop Blankenfeld and Marsow came to Tallinn.

These three men with others, whose names we do not know, were devoted to the new cause. Their outspoken sermons soon became a cause of bitter opposition. Monks especially could not tolerate any criticism of the Church. The reformers replied to the monks and friars by pointing out the evils of the monasteries. Friars on their part made wicked fun of the evangelical preachers.[19] In the spring of 1524 the discord took more serious form. The municipal council proposed a debate between the reformers and friars, but the friars refused to accept it. Their excuse was that the Pope and their ordinances forbade them to dispute on doctrinal matters.[20] The city government now turned against the friars and forbade them to preach in the Estonian

language; in German they must preach only the simple teaching of the New Testament. The citizens demanded fewer holidays and the municipal council granted the request regardless of the opposition of the Catholic authorities.

The Catholic party of Tallinn sent a letter to Wolter von Plettenberg, Master of the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Knights, accusing the city of heresy and of illegal treatment of the monastic orders. Plettenberg wrote a letter[21] to the city government (March, 1524) in which he advised against preaching the Gospel in such a way that quarrels might arise; peasants should not be taught to rebel against their masters and due respect should be paid to the monks. The city was already determined to stand for the new doctrine. The municipal council replied to Plettenberg that no evil had been done, only some evils of the monks had been corrected.

The friars of St. Catherine's saw that their case was hopeless and started to carry out the treasures of the monastery. The city liked the valuables as much as the friars; and since the convent had less power, the city ordered an inventory of all the property of the monastery, forbidding them to remove anything. When in spite of this some things disappeared, the property of St. Catherine's was confiscated and the cellar was turned into a storehouse for munitions. The other rooms which were not necessarily used by the friars themselves, were reserved for the sick from the country. The friars were asked to save their souls by caring for the diseased. The most radical merchant organization, Schwartzhäupter, demanded back from the monasteries all their gifts which had been presented during the preceding 150 years.[22]

Some Cistercian nuns of St. Michael, mostly relatives of the nobles, left the nunnery and married with the citizens. This displeased the vassals greatly. They had received no part of the confiscated wealth of St. Catherine's and now their relatives were permitted to leave the nunnery and marry with men of no noble rank. They demanded that all the married nuns should be sent back to the nunnery and that the men be excommunicated who had married them.

Plettenberg wrote another letter to the magistrates of Tallinn in 1524, asking that the treasures of the monasteries be given back, that no violence be used against the Catholics and that the nuns be sent back to the nunnery. This letter was read to the citizens of Tallinn. As a result of the dissatisfaction which it created, a riot broke out. The first object of the riot was the hated St. Catherine Monastery. From St. Catherine's the crowd proceeded to the Church of the Holy Spirit and then to St. Olaf's. Altars, icons and relics were destroyed, treasures were opened and many valuables were carried off. This was all done

in three hours by a mixed group of Germans and Estonians. Encouraged by the riot, the three reformers—Lange, Hasse and Marsow —presented to the city government a program of action in behelf of the Evangelical Church.[23] The plan, which was presented between the 15th and 19th of September in 1524, provided that Lange be appointed the superintendent of all churches in the city. No changes were to be made by other pastors without his consent. He was to appoint and discharge pastors with the approval of the municipal council. The services were to be held either in German or in the Estonian language. All the treasures taken from the Catholic churches were to be used for the poor. The treasury for the poor was to be supervised by a council of eight men, representatives of the municipal council and the major guilds. This act marked a definite victory for the Reformation. On January 12, 1525, monks and friars were given the choice of accepting the reformed faith or of departing from the city. They chose to leave. Now reformation was introduced into every department of life in Tallinn.

The second center of the Reformation in Estonia was Tartu. Herman Marsow is the first reformer of whom we have definite knowledge. He came to Tartu in the spring of 1524. His sermons were heard with the unanimous approval of St. Mary's congregation and public pressure was brought upon the municipal council that Marsow should be made a regular priest. The city government yielded to this demand though the right of the bishop had to be ignored. But the Bishop of Tartu, Johann Blankenfeld, was an able and strong opponent to the reformers. He succeeded in expelling Marsow from Tartu in July, 1524. In 1525 Blankenfeld became the successor of Archbishop Jasper Linde and later he sought help from the Pope and from Emperor Charles V against the Reformation; he travelled to Rome and Spain for this purpose, but died before he could return to Livonia.

In the autumn of 1524 Melchior Hofmann entered Tartu. He was an untrained lay preacher who by force of religious fervor, vehemence of speech, and directness of appeal, exercised a marvellous influence over the common people. He knew the Bible well and apocalyptic ideas were especially favored by him. The number of his followers grew rapidly. Blankenfeld decided to expel him as he did Marsow. Acting on the order of the Bishop, the bailiff of the castle made an attempt to arrest Hofmann when he was preaching to his followers on Sunday, January 7, 1525. The reformer was protected by the people. The unsuccessful attempt of the bailiff led to an iconoclastic uprising. A disorderly group invaded the Church of St. Mary where Catholic mass was in process. The priests and

choir were driven off and Hofmann was placed in the pulpit; images were taken down, carried to the market place and burnt. The same was done to the church of St. John. Mary Magdalene and St. James monasteries, with the nunnery of the Holy Spirit, suffered equally. A few days later a group of two hundred men gathered at the gate of the castle, and after a fight succeeded in entering it. Cannon were brought and directed against the citadel which sheltered the terrified clergy.

A complete break with the Catholics had occurred. No reconciliation was possible. The city government wrote a letter of explanation to the Master of the Livonian Order asking his help against Bishop Blankenfeld. At the same time it was understood that the religious situation was beyond Hofmann's ability for organization. Sylvester Tegetmeyer was called from Riga to quiet the stormy city. The Reformation in Tartu had to confront greater difficulties than in Tallinn. Bishop Blankenfeld's opposition, the banishment of Marsow, the radical teaching of Hofmann and the riots, all left their imprints on the constructive work. But finally, Tartu adopted a "Kirchenordnung" similar to that of Tallinn.

The Reformation had won the two largest cities in Estonia. From them the movement spread to the towns and villages. According to the pattern of Tallinn and Tartu, soon Narva, Rakvere, Viljandi and Uus-Pärnu were reformed. The nobility, who had the greatest influence on rural affairs, had no unified program either in favor of or against the Reformation. The exhortations of bishops were ignored and as for the Master of the Knights, Plettenberg, it is hard to decide whether he favored the Catholic or the reformed church; but it seems that his actions were motivated more by political expediency than by religious convictions. There are some allusions to preachers who taught the peasants of the Reformation. Plettenberg's letter of 1524 speaks of certain preachers who taught the Estonians to disobey their masters. In the same year the bailiff of Rakvere wrote to the Master of the Knights about certain men who taught the peasants that they need not work for the nobles nor pay taxes.[24] The peasants of the Harju-Viru region carried their interpretation of the Reformation teaching to practical conclusions. They demanded from their landlords the right to confirm or oppose the appointment of their pastors; that corporal punishment must cease, because it is not in harmony with Christian liberty; that the forest and water should be opened to free use, etc.[25] This shows that the Twelve Articles of the German peasants were known also in Estonia. One manuscript copy of the Twelve Articles has been discovered in the archives of Tallinn. But the unrest and uprisings of peasantry were suppressed

by the nobles, and the Reformation failed to fulfill the expectations of the Estonian peasants—redemption from social and economic oppression.

The Reformation in Estonia did not share in the theological disputes of Central Europe, because it was solely a Lutheran movement and it was not contested by other Protestant theologies, apart from the Hofmann interlude. In the initial period of the Reformation the anti-Catholic note was predominant in the sermons of the reformers, but gradually it gave way to more constructive emphasis on the essentials of the new faith, based on Luther's Small Catechism. Also, the first known printed book in the Estonian language belongs to this period. It was a Luther Small Catechism with parallel texts in Low German and Estonian, edited by S. Wanradt and J. Koell and published in 1535. This publication, however, contained too many errors and consequently the whole edition was destroyed by order of the municipal council of Tallinn. Another catechism was published in Estonian in 1554 by F. Witte, a clergyman of Tartu.

The victory of the Reformation in Estonia was officially recognized by the Diet of Wolmar in 1554. In the next year George Sieberg von Wischlingen signed the Peace of Augsburg on behalf of the Baltic provinces, which act may be interpreted as a sanction in international law of the Reformation in Estonia. The final development of the Reformation in Estonia was interrupted by political events. In 1558 the Russian Czar Ivan IV the Terrible invaded Estonia. His savage troops devastated the country, and initiated decades of war. The result was partition of Estonian territory between Sweden, Denmark, Poland and Russia. Fortunately, during the reign of Gustavus II Adolphus, Estonia was reunited under benevolent and enlightened Swedish rule. Gustavus Adolphus also erected a lasting monument to himself in Estonia by founding Tartu University in 1632. By the encouragement and help of the succeeding Protestant rulers of Sweden the Lutheran Church was firmly established in Estonia, and, I am convinced, it will outlive the present communist Babylonian Captivity.[26]

1. The conquered lands—Estonia, Livonia, Latgalia, Kuronia and Zemgalia—were dedicated to St. Mary in order to attract crusaders. The Grand Master's injunction to the Teutonic Knights was:
   "Dies Schwerdt empfang von meiner Hand
   Zu schützen Gottes und Marien Land."
2. Jackson, J. Hampden, *Estonia.* London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., Second Edition, 1948, pp. 46-47.
3. Reiman, Villem, *Eesti a jalugu* [History of Estonia]. Tallinn: Kirjastus A. S. Varrak, 1920, p. 56.
4. Arbusow, Leonid, *Die Einführung der Reformation in Liv-, Est- und Kurland.* Leipzig: Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, Vermittlungsverlag von M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1921, pp. 66-67.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
6. Pohrt, Otto, *Reformationsgeschichte Livlands. Ein Überblick.* Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers. 1928. (Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte, Jahrgang 46, Heft 2 /Nr. 145/), p. 7.
7. Reiman, p. 54.
8. The phrase was widely used by the peasants.
9. Bienemann, Friedrich Gustav, *Aus Livlands Luthertagen.* Tallinn (Reval): Franz Kluge, 1883, p. 75 ff.
10. Pohrt, p. 19.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hoerschelmann, D. F., *Andreas Knopken, der Reformator Rigas.* Leipzig: A. Deichert 'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf. (Georg Böhme), 1896, 257 p.
13. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie.* Herausgeben durch die Historische Commission bei der Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Bayern). Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker and Humbolt, Vol. 37, pp. 529-530.
14. Kruus, Hans, *Eesti ajaloo lugemik* (Textbook of Estonian History). Tartu: Eesti Kirjastuse Selts, 1924. pp. 156-158.
15. Linden, Friedrich Otto, *Melchior Hofmann, ein Prophet der Wiedertäufer.* Haarlem: De Ereven F. Bohn, 1885, 477 p.
16. According to Pohrt, p. 65, two years later, in 1527, Luther regretted his earlier judgment, writing in a letter: " . . . ich habe ernstliche Vorwürfe über mich ergehen lassen müssen wegen meiner Empfehlung, die ich jenem Mann (Hofmann) unbedachter Weise und von ihm getäuscht gegeben habe . . . "
17. The first lines of salutation of Luther's first letter to Livonia in 1523.
18. Arbusow, pp. 279, 282.
19. A letter by the municipal council of Tallinn to Wolter von Plettenberg. Kruus, pp. 170-174.
20. Bienemann, p. 21.
21. Hansen, Gotthard, *Aus baltischer Vergangenheit. Miscellanean aus dem Revaler Stadtarchiv.* Tallinn (Reval): Franz Kluge, 1894, pp. 123-125.
22. Kruus, pp. 171-174.
23. The reformers called themselves "evangelische prediger." The document of the "christlicker ordinancien" is printed in Bienemann's *op. cit.* pp. 65-68.
24. *Usupuhastus eestlaste maal* [Reformation in the land of Estonians]. Published by the Reformation Jubilee Commission. Tartu: Ed. Bergmann, 1924, p. 45.
25. Reiman, p. 61.
26. I wish to express my gratitude to Professor John T. McNeill who encouraged me to write this essay and made a number of valuable suggestions. Also I wish to thank Dr. Victor Koressaar, an Estonian historian, for reading the manuscript.