

# Keep God Before Your Eyes

Heinrich Zschokke



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## Introduction

The Jura Mountains are the “foothills” of the majestic Alps. Rising to only 5640’, they in no way compare to the main range in size and majesty. Although the bottom lands of the Jura range contain some rich soils, the rocky highlands are noted for raising fish, geese, horses, and cattle. Obviously, such a place is not the first choice for farmers. See title photo ...

But when persecution drove most of the Anabaptists out of their homelands in the Canton of Bern in the late 1600s and early 1700s, a few Amish families found refuge with more tolerant lords in these poor, rough regions of the Jura Mountains. The land was mediocre, but at least the bailiff wasn’t knocking on their door.

It was here in these rock-strewn heights that a man by the name of Heinrich Zschokke spent some time among these believers. After his extended visit, Heinrich wrote the following overview of his stay among them. Although his account of these folks could possibly be charged with sentimentalism, there is much to be said from the simple realities he found there ... a people who based their life on the teachings of Jesus and left a shining testimony of grace. Grace to overcome alcohol, gambling, lying, and other common sins, as well as grace to care one for another in a real way.

Our generation is waiting to see Christ’s kingdom manifested among His children ... can they find it among us? What would a traveler spending a few weeks or months in our communities have to say about us?

We share this report as a provocation to love and good works. ~

## Heinrich’s report

They live separated from each other on solitary farms in forests and mountains where, with great diligence, they wring from the least desirable soil an abundant fruitfulness. A mighty race, of purest bloodline, truehearted, peaceful, intelligent, and benevolent. All the neighbors esteem them. Both Catholics and Protestants of the area trust them more than their own people. These honest folks were driven from their homes in Canton Bern because they will neither swear an oath nor carry a weapon. The Prince-Bishops of Basel, wiser and more tolerant than most Protestant authorities, received these persecuted disciples of Menno<sup>1</sup> to their worldly realms. I do not know whether the Anabaptists are tainted with heresy as here and there a theologian insists, but the Lord says, “By their works<sup>2</sup> you shall know them!” In this, it appears to me, they do not stand in peril. One only needs to visit them, and to live with them, and he will come to like them, yes, even to admire them, especially since one finds so few among Christians who are worthy of admiration.

They put me in a mood as if I were living in the sacred times of the early Christians; so content, so God-fearing, without burden of shame, hospitable, and industrious. They lived there in patriarchal simplicity and piety. Among them are no drunkards, no gamblers, no night-revelers, no liars, and no jealous neighbors. Seldom does a dispute rise among them, and when it does occur, it is gently resolved by one of the elders. They address each other, whether brothers or sisters, as *Du und Du* (You and you).<sup>3</sup> One helps another without pay during hay and harvest seasons, or whenever necessary. Temperance and cleanliness afford them good health and extended age. An old man of more than 70 years, who was their preacher (pastors they have none)<sup>4</sup>, led me vigor-

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1 In all reality, these believers would most likely have referred to themselves as disciples of Jesus. The phrase is probably Heinrich’s way of identifying them.

2 Heinrich misquotes the text of the Bible slightly here, using “works” instead of “fruits.” But, since our works—be they good or be they evil—are the fruit of our heart, his quote is not really in error.

3 This is in reference to the German informal or familiar speech. The point is that they knew each other well enough to address each other as family members or good friends might.

4 Probably referring to paid ministers, appointed by the state.

ously over the mountain and valley—like a lively youngster—to visit the families of the brethren. Such genuine love between marriage partners, such tenderness between brethren, such obedience of children toward their parents I witnessed there. Practically their entire education rests simply in the example of the parents for their children and the few words, “Keep God before your eyes.” And still they inherit an upbringing which is often more noble than the finest given in the whole world. What a people, what a Christianity, which is in need of no lawyers, no pastors,<sup>5</sup> no judge, and very seldom a doctor!

On Sunday they gather alternatively, once with this, and next with that preacher, to worship in earnest either in



Heinrich's description of the Amish in the Jura Mountains matches this drawing of a “Swiss Anabaptist” from the same time period.

the open or in a barn, or in a large room. The preacher speaks what is on his heart, according to the needs of the people, or he may read from some old, edifying book. He administers baptism, officiates communion, and performs marriages; yet he is a farmer like all the others. Baptism is normally not administered at communion, but often precedes the marriage of an engaged couple. Yet I must say along with all this that their devotional books, prayer books, and hymn books with their martyr songs smack of ancient times, and are therefore somewhat obsolete.<sup>6</sup> The worship service finished, those who have come from a distance are invited to the noon meal by those on neighboring farms, returning a favor the guests had at another time extended to them.

Clean, but unadorned; as are their simple homes, so also their furnishings and clothes. As with every church group in the Christian world, the Anabaptists too have some religious whims and peculiarities. It would not seem

5 See footnote number four.

6 This and following “negative” comments indicate that Heinrich was not just trying to write a flowery, “stars-in-the-eyes” report, but he is simply describing what he saw as the good and the bad in these people. Having both positive and negative points lends credibility to the positive points in his report, since if everything was “positive” (or negative) one would wonder if the author was trying to distort reality.

so peculiar that the married men—to indicate their manliness<sup>7</sup>—allow their beards to grow ... if their dress were medieval, oriental, or after an Old Testament fashion, like the names of their beautiful daughters. But the short gray coat, the short trousers, and the stockings drawn up over the knees do not harmonize well with the majestic beards. Buttons are forbidden on their clothes; instead they are fastened with hooks and eyes.<sup>8</sup> The women appear just as plain; no gold, no velvet, no silk, not so much as a bright or multicolored ribbon to flutter from a maiden’s straw hat. Yet the maidens know how to find a means to adorn themselves without bringing their religion into danger.<sup>9</sup> One need only to observe how these slim and attractive mountain-dwellers know how to set a hat, or see the delicate hatbands, made of straw, interwoven with straw flowers, and yet all so modest. ~<sup>10</sup>



This drawing from the 1800s shows a “typical Anabaptist weaver and preacher.” During this time, pressures to enter the military caused many Amish to immigrate to America. Those who stayed soon drifted into compromise, and the Amish ceased to exist as a nonresistant and nonconformed people in Europe.

7 Not in a sense of being a show-off or “macho man,” but as a means to differentiate between the genders.

8 At that time, buttons were sort of a stylish thing, especially the big, military-inspired brass buttons.

9 Heinrich seemed to have an “appreciative eye” for the young ladies, obviously something he needed to deal with. At the same time, he reveals a root of fleshly adornment sprouting among the young girls of this otherwise humble folk—accomplished by “the putting on of apparel.” The phrase “without bringing their religion into danger” probably means, “pushing the limits as far as they can without getting into trouble.” People notice these little inconsistencies! “The little foxes spoil the vines ...”

10 Leroy Beachy, *Unser Leit ... The Story of the Amish*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 1st ed. (Millersburg, OH: Goodly Heritage Books, 2011) p. 180-181.