

Elisabeth Hess Wambsganss

Autobiographical Notes *¹

I have a natural dislike to write the story of my life. However, I was persuaded to do so because it is intended to be used in the family history, where it might be of some value. Viewing my past life, as I have lived it so far, through days of joy and days of sorrow, from childhood to old age, I am persuaded to say with a humble and thankful heart: "I am not worthy of the least of the tender mercies which the Lord has shown unto me."

I was born on the first day of August, 1825. When I was baptized, the name Maria Elisabeth Hess was given me. When I was six years old, I started to attend school. I received a good education. In the year 1834 we were all laid low with typhoid fever. All took sick except my sister Margaretha, who took care of us and nursed us back to health.

Who will describe our sorrow when, after our recovery, Margaretha was laid low with the same sickness — and died! Three years later it pleased God also to take my devoted mother. I was 12 years old at that time. Heavyhearted, my father took us to live with my grandmother and leased his home.

Here I was confirmed when 14 years of age. 'Tis true, we still had the Bible in the home and Starck's *Gebetbuch*. I still remembered the prayer which my mother had taught me to pray. Inasmuch, however, as the Word of God was not taught in school or confirmation instruction, I did not arrive at an understanding of God's Word. I had no true knowledge of myself nor of my Savior.

After confirmation I worked as a domestic. I took a liking to the work, for I was healthy and strong and not averse to work. I realized that working as a domestic comes in good stead in later life, especially for those who will later become housewives and mothers. One may adjust oneself more readily to the life of a housewife when having had experience in housework.

In 1845 a Pastor Mueller came to Nussdorf as a vicar who preached the true Word of God. I, too, was among many others who were converted by his sermons. My life was changed spiritually.

I no longer wandered around in spiritual ignorance, but I had found the true foundation which held my anchor evermore. This foundation, brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit, brought peace of mind to my heart such as I have never again experienced in so marked a way. Ridicule and contempt were not lacking, but I could have suffered death for the sake of my Savior.

1 * We are indebted to Pastor Fred Wambsganss, who submitted these notes on his grandmother upon request. Mrs. Elisabeth Hess Wambsganss (1825—1896) dictated these notes to her son Ernst in June, 1885, at Adell, Wis. They were translated by Pastor Fred Wambsganss. The subject was one of the first trained Lutheran deaconesses to come to America to serve in Passavant Deaconess Hospital in Pittsburgh.

Soon after my conversion my two sisters Maria and Salome also were brought to faith in their Savior. Father wanted us to think further about this, but let us go on and even defended us when we were criticized for our religion.

Deaconess Training

Two years later my attention was directed by Missionary Schwarz to the deaconess institute located at Kaiserswerth, where Christian young women were trained in the nursing of the sick and orphans in a service dedicated to God and to the welfare of our fellow men. By nature I was averse to this dangerous and frequently loathsome work. Nevertheless I took courage and entered the institute in 1848. Because of my love for, and devotion to, my Savior I was willing and happy to perform any kind of service. I was on probation for a year and prepared myself for service in America, and consequently also took up the study of English.

My probationary period completed, I went to Nussdorf to say farewell to my loved ones. With a few other sisters, and accompanied by Director Th. Fliedner, we started out for America. We sailed on a steamboat, first class, via Bremen to New York. In Southampton the ship docked for two weeks, during which time we visited London and Plymouth. After 14 days we landed in New York, in July, 1849. Here and in Philadelphia we remained but two days in each place and viewed the wonders of these two cities. Then we proceeded by canalboat to Pittsburgh, our destination.

Under the leadership of Dr. Wm. A. Passavant a deaconess institute had been founded. God signally blest the work. Some features, however, were not so pleasant. When cases of cholera or smallpox were admitted, all of the help left us, and we had to do their work in addition to our own. But we remained happy and rejoiced in the Lord.

Dr. Passavant was not only the director of the institution, but also the pastor of the local English Lutheran church. His congregation, however, was more Reformed than Lutheran. This fact became very noticeable when the Lord's Supper was celebrated. It was not only administered according to the Reformed ritual, but after the Sacrament had been administered to the members of the congregation, the invitation was sent out most urgently to nonmembers and strangers to receive the Sacrament. Many accepted the invitation.

This practice did not offend me. On the contrary, I thought it to be great and saw no wrong in it. The differences between the Reformed and Lutheran doctrines were immaterial to me at that time. The matter that counted with me was a living and active Christian life. The errors I had not detected, and they did not disturb me. 'Tis true, I at times received a letter from a youthful friend who was to become my husband, who had withdrawn from the Reformed (unierte) Church and had joined the Lutheran Church, who directed my attention to the errors of the Reformed Church and the differences [between the Lutheran and Reformed doctrines], but I could not share his views, and when he stressed the danger of holding the Reformed views, I considered his views exaggerated.

Joins Missouri

But in the course of time things changed. A young girl named Franziska Harder, a member of the Lutheran congregation in Fort Wayne, Ind., paid us a visit with a view to entering the Deaconess Institute. As her escort she brought with her a Mrs. Horst, who had served five years as a deaconess in Kaiserswerth and Berlin. Great was our joy at seeing her again. We endeavored to strengthen Miss Harder in her desire to become a deaconess, and she was favorably impressed. However, after having attended the open Communion service on the following Sunday evening, her intention to remain was a thing of the past. On that very evening she vowed to return to Fort Wayne the next day, and that is what she did.

This set me a-thinking. I became restless. Frequent consultations with Dr. Passavant had no effect. Finally I arrived at the conviction to withdraw, and, after a service of four years, was peacefully dismissed from the deaconess organization together with another sister. Dr. Passavant was a very learned man and an eloquent speaker, and also a sincere Christian. He did not harbor any negative or unfriendly attitude toward us, but was as cordial and helpful as he had been before our withdrawal. His great concern was to procure a new home for us. With his consent and upon his recommendation we traveled to Cincinnati, where we remained in the home of Pastor Th. Wichmann until the following spring. At that time I received the gladsome news of the arrival of my sister Maria and her husband from Germany. I journeyed to Fort Wayne, and my friend Pauline accompanied me. The meeting with my sister was a very joyful one.

I must say that Pastor Theodore Wichmann, Dr. Wm. Sihler, and other pastors were most convincing preachers. My heart was filled with gratitude toward God for having led me into the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, in which the Word of God is preached in its truth and purity and in which the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.

At this time I entered the holy estate of matrimony, June, 1853, and lo and behold, my friend did the same thing. She became the wife of Pastor Ebling, and I the wife of Pastor Philipp Wambsgans.² I had been acquainted with him in my youth but never dreamed that God would lead us together as husband and wife. Pastor F. A. Craemer performed the marriage ceremony, and Dr. Sihler permitted us to use his home for the marriage celebration.

How I was further led in my married life is written in my husband's biography, I only wish to say that God's blessing has rested upon us to the present day. He not only granted us a happy family life, but protected us from sickness, misfortune, want, sorrow, and heartache. For this I cannot sufficiently thank my

² Her husband, born in Nussdorf, Rheinpfalz, on December 19, 1823, graduated from the practical seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind., in 1853. He held pastorates of Lutheran congregations in Corunna and Bingen in Indiana and Hochheim and Random Lake, Wis. He died on October 1, 1901, and is buried in the cemetery of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Union Township, Adams County, Ind.-

heavenly father.³

The above article was taken from *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* vol. 27 no. 1, Spring 1955, pages 41-45. (A photo of the Philipp Wambsganss Family taken at about 1867 can be seen on page 44.)

3 Elisabeth Hess Wambsganss died on October 20, 1896 and lies buried beside her husband.