

THE BRETHERN COMMUNITY
GNADENFREI IN SILESIA



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THE HISTORY OF GNADENFREI

Whoever hears the name Gnadenfrei for the first time may not have a clear idea about the origin of the name. In contrast to many town names in Silesia which are of Slavic origin, this obviously German word allows for all sorts of speculation as to its underlying meaning. However, it is not necessary to speculate about this, as the history of Gnadenfrei does not go back to times immemorial, as it was one of the many settlements founded in the Frederickian era. As we shall see, the history of the origin of Gnadenfrei is reflected in its name.

Around the year 1300 Silesia had lost its autonomy as a duchy when it came under the rule of the Bohemian kings. But this yoke was not seen as a particularly heavy one. There is evidence of a strong intellectual life which developed once the Reformation had established itself in most parts of Germany. In Silesia, too, the Reformation gained a firm foothold almost everywhere at a very early stage. This unrestricted spread of the new teaching only met with resistance after the Habsburgs had acquired Bohemia, including Silesia. In some parts of Silesia, for instance in the principalities of Liegnitz, Brieg, Wohlau, Öls and in the city of Breslau¹, things were dealt with in a relatively mild manner.

But in the rest of Silesia, Protestants were put under considerable pressure to return to the old faith. The establishment of three churches in Schweidnitz, Jauer and Glogau that had been agreed upon in the Treaty of Westphalia had not even been built when it was decreed that all Protestant churches should be taken over and the ministers driven from the country.² Consequently in the winter of 1653/54 254 village churches were taken from the Protestants in the principalities of Schweidnitz and Jauer alone and the Protestant preachers expelled. Since that time the two churches in the neighbouring town of Peilau, as well as the church in nearby Habendorf, have not been Protestant. It was not until nearly 200 years later that the present Protestant church in Peilau was built and Habendorf, a mostly Protestant village, still has no Protestant church even to this today. The seizure of the churches was soon followed by more forceful measures such as sending vast numbers of Jesuits into the country, establishing monasteries and applying all means available to the Catholic Church to accomplish the task of converting the people.

However, the Convention of Altranstädt at the beginning of the 18th century brought a temporary respite. Not only were six new Protestant churches² approved and 121 churches given back but there was also an overall lessening in the constant effort to convert the Protestants.

While the Protestants had been united in opposing a common enemy which had pressurised them so much, it became evident that there were also deep divisions among the Protestants themselves. Pietism had won supporters in Silesia with the result that the orthodox Lutherans started a crusade against them. The former enemy, the Catholics, became their ally in a fight

¹ Now Wrocław.

² Gnadenkirchen [churches of mercy] The term for the Silesian Protestant churches which had been approved in the Convention of Altranstädt 'by mercy' of the Emperor Joseph I.

against the Pietists, for whilst the government had shown great leniency to the Protestants, this did not extend to the Pietists.

The places, where pietistically minded groups gathered, were parishes like the one of Pastor³ Sommer in Dirsdorf and Steinmez in Tepliwoda or manors like the ones of Lord von Pfeil in Dirsdorf, Count Promnitz and Lord of Seidlitz in Oberpeilau. The latter was to become the founder of Gnadenfrei.

Ernst Julius von Seidlitz was born on the 10th of October 1695 at the Red Court in Mittelpeilau. Later he became the chatelain of Schönbrunn Castle and soon came into contact with the Pietists in Silesia. Due to these links he purchased the manor in Oberpeilau (Seidlitzhof) to provide the Pietists who were living in Peilau with a centre. These gatherings on his manorial land were not widely known, and as a result attracted little attention. This changed when in 1735 Seidlitz visited Count Zinzendorf in Herrnhut. Zinzendorf, the reformer of the old Bohemian-Moravian Brethren Church, sent Brethren from Herrnhut to work in the way of the Brethren Community with those who had gathered around Seidlitz. This did not go unnoticed.

Now the situation rapidly came to a head. The local Catholic priest warned his Protestant patron and then gave up his parish. But not all the priests in the region were so tolerant. Their complaints combined with those of the orthodox Lutherans. As a result Seidlitz was summoned to appear in front of the government in Jauer on the 9th of July 1739. During a five hour-long hearing at which he remained standing throughout, he had to give evidence of the gatherings. His innocence was established but he was nevertheless arrested until the matter had been further clarified. His imprisonment might have dragged on for a long time – there was talk that he was to be taken to the fortress in Glatz – but then he was set free because of the Prussian invasion of Silesia. Both events are clearly connected. On the 16th of December 1740 Frederick II entered Silesia and on the 21st of December Seidlitz was released from prison. The chronicles give the following account: *“He took the next stagecoach, sang ‘Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr!’⁴ etc. at the gates of Jauer and arrived in Oberpeilau on the 23rd of December to the joy of his family and all the Awakened.”*

Not only in this case but in general Frederick II's success was the start of a new era for the Silesian Protestants which brought them the blessing of religious freedom. The various denominations of the Protestant Church were now tolerated and acknowledged in Silesia - including the Herrnhuter.

Count Zinzendorf, to whom reference has been made, had relocated descendants of the old Bohemian-Moravian Brethren, whose independent church had been destroyed in 1620 during the battle at the *Weissen Berge*, on the territory of his manor Berthelsdorf in the Saxon part of Upper Lusatia. It was here that the village of Herrnhut was founded in 1722. The Moravians were joined by Pietists from all parts of Germany who had moved to the area. As a result they restored the bishopric of the old Brethren church – Zinzendorf who had joined the clergy became bishop – and established a Protestant free church in Germany. More communities were

³ In Germany ‘Pastor’ is the official title for a Lutheran minister.

⁴ German Protestant hymn.

founded and there was hope to establish settlements in Silesia too. The Prussian government was not opposed to this idea since the exemplary character of the social institutions of the Brethren and their industriousness could only be of benefit for all the people's prosperity in the new province. The result of the negotiations was the so-called General Concession (25th of December 1742) which stated: "*that the Brethren concerned may establish themselves in all Royal countries, therefore also and especially in Silesia, [and that] in addition [they] enjoy complete freedom of conscience together with the permission to hold their services in public and operate their church according to their own ways of discipline ... [that they] will be subject of their own bishops only under the Highest Rule and Protection of His Majesty, the King ... etc.*" In particular they were granted permission to build four churches and to establish four communities in Silesia. One of the churches and its appendant settlement were to be built on the land of Lord von Seidlitz in Oberpeilau.

When Seidlitz returned from imprisonment the gatherings on his estate started afresh, at first with just a few participants. Gradually the number of participants grew once again and at the same time the link with Herrnhut was also maintained. However, not enough had yet been put in place to unite the various parties involved. Consequently it was necessary to establish an organised community to make sure that this religious movement did not just end in talk as had happened to many religious movements on previous occasions in the past. The urgent need for such an organisation became apparent as more and more people were attracted by the gatherings in Peilau. The Awakened came from more than a hundred villages in the principalities of Schweidnitz, Brieg, Münsterberg, the area around Breslau, from Upper Silesia and Moravia; this combined with an equally growing number of delegates from Herrnhut. Therefore it became inevitable that one of the four mentioned churches which the Prussian government had granted to the Herrnhut Brethren was built in Oberpeilau.

This first church was erected on the Lord's estate in autumn 1742 and the first public sermon was given there in January 1743. The Brethren Community in Gnadenfrei has existed since that day.

On the occasion of Count Zinzendorf's visit in the autumn of the same year, the location for the settlement was chosen. The first idea was to build the village on the slope of the *Mittelberg* along the already existing road from Reichenbach to Frankenstein but then, at the request of Zinzendorf, it was built in immediate proximity to the estate. At this time the name 'Gnadenfrei' came into being – in grateful remembrance that Seidlitz, the founder of the new village, had been set free from jail due to an act of human and divine mercy.⁵

The village was laid out in similar fashion to Herrnhut with a large rectangular Square at its centre. In 1745 a new church was built in the centre of the Square because the one on the estate proved too small. Along both sides of the Square the choir houses were built because here, as in Herrnhut, the Brethren's unique choir system was set up. In order to organise pastoral care in the best way possible, the members of the community were divided into separate choirs according to gender and age. In this way the choirs of the unmarried Brethren, the unmarried Sisters, the married Brethren etc. came into being. Accordingly a Brethren's House, a Sisters'

⁵ 'Gnadenfrei' as a compound word consists of 'Gnade' (mercy) and 'frei' (free)

House and a Widows' House were built. In Gnadenfrei, as well as in Herrnhut and other settlements of the Brethren Community, these houses catch the visitor's eye because they are the biggest houses in the village and are built in a plain yet elegant style featuring attic roofs.

In 1755 Seidlitz gave the estate to his son-in-law, Lord von Heuthausen. But he always felt drawn back to this settlement for which he had been concerned and for which he had prayed. Consequently he found his last resting place in the cemetery of Gnadenfrei when he died in 1766. His headstone at the *Mittelallee* of the graveyard bears the words:

*Hier ruhen die Gebeine
des treuen Bekenners
Jesu Christi
Ernst Julius v. Seidlitz;
Er war d. 10. Oct. 1695 geboren
in Mittel-Peile
und ging
in seines Herrn Freude
in Gnadenfrey
d. 3. July 1766.*

[Here rest the mortal remains
of the faithful confessor to
Jesus Christ
Ernst Julius v. Seidlitz.
He was born on the 10th of Oct. 1695
in Mittel-Peile
and passed on
rejoicing with his Lord
in Gnadenfrei
the 3rd of July 1766.]

We should not forget about another grave which is located nearby – not only because it reminds us of the fact that the highest authority of the Church of the Brethren, the Elders' Conference of the Unity as it was called in those days, was based in Gnadenfrei during the years 1788/89 but also because the man who is buried there is closely connected to the history of the Church of the Brethren at this time. It is the grave of Johannes von Watteswilles who was Zinzendorf's son-in-law and assistant. Another important Brethren Church leader of this time is also buried in the cemetery: Johannes Loretz who had served in the Netherlands and who appears in Goethe's 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul' as Major von L.*⁶

⁶ In the source text the * indicates a footnote which possibly contains more detailed information either on the person or the character in Goethe's play but which is not included in this copy.

But let us go back to the development of the village. Five years after it was founded, Gnadenfrei was said to have had 700 inhabitants. Even if this figure cannot be accurately verified, it is safe to say that Gnadenfrei soon flourished. In 1768 the second church had become too small and as a consequence a new, large prayer hall was built in the garden behind it. In the following year both halls were connected by way of two wings which also housed official residences. Another larger building which was erected at the same time was the grand mansion which Georg Sigmund von Seidlitz, Ernst Julius' son, built after he had bought back the *Seidlitzhof* from his brother-in-law Heuthausen. (In the 19th century this mansion was extended to the rather plain so-called *Gölzerhaus*.) During the first decades of its existence, building activities were going on everywhere in Gnadenfrei.

The reason for this was the industriousness of this young community. Already in 1764 there were 12 trades and professions represented in the Brethren's House followed by almost 20 more – partly in the Brethren's House, partly elsewhere in the village during the 18th century. In 1758 the *Staentkesche Wollwarenfabrik* in Gnadenfrei employed almost 1000 weavers in Bielau, Peterswaldau, Steinseiffersdorf, Steinkunzendorf and Habendorf. Although this factory acted mainly as the collection point for the goods produced by homeworkers, there must have been considerable commuting, a constant coming and going which by no means made Gnadenfrei – as one might think – a quiet and remote village. In the following period the woollen goods production gradually declined because there was no market large enough for them. This probably resulted from the unfortunate border situation in Silesia. In Gnadenfrei, as in other places, woollen goods manufacture was increasingly replaced by linen weaving.

This high level of trading activity in Gnadenfrei needs to be put into context because it was going on in the most adverse of political circumstances. Frederick the Great's warfaring often reached into Gnadenfrei's immediate vicinity. The first years of the Seven Years' War went more or less without serious consequence but over time the misery of war became noticeable. Army brigades were continually marching through, a considerable financial levy was imposed on the village by General Laudon in 1761 and ongoing inflation brought constant disruption, worry, hardship and even the immediate experience of the horrors of war in the battle of Reichenbach (the so-called '*Schlacht am Fischerberg*') on the 16th of August 1762 during which Gnadenfrei miraculously escaped being hit by cannon and firearms. Also in 1778 when the War of the Bavarian Succession started, large Prussian army divisions marched through Gnadenfrei. The local minister Heinrich von Bruiningk, an impressive preacher, developed a very positive influence on the soldiers who were lodged in Gnadenfrei. In his obituary published after his death it reads:

"It was a special sight, this gathering of rough people who at the start had only on their minds to jeer and mock the assembly and who then – because of his [the minister's] powerful preaching and his unique way of gradually capturing the audience's attention at first and then irresistibly winning their hearts – were so touched that they not only listened in utter silence but also with tears in their eyes. The yearning for hearing the Gospels became so strong among the soldiers that, when they finally received orders to leave for Bohemia before the next Sunday, they unanimously asked for an extra sermon during the week – a request which was conveyed by their officers on their behalf. They were granted their wish. They were asked to gather on the Saturday and the ample hall in Gnadenfrei completely filled with them. This sermon was special because he had to speak to people who were

probably going towards an imminent death. The name of God, the Saviour, so powerfully revealed himself in the sermon that on the way out of the hall many could be heard saying: 'Let us take these words with us to the battle field'."

Although the wars of the time affected Gnadendorf, it nevertheless continued to steadily develop. However it was hit by a disastrous fire in 1792. It was on the 4th of August at noon when the fire started in one of the buildings behind the Brethren's House. The extreme summer drought together with westerly winds had a devastating effect and within hours the biggest houses in Gnadendorf were ablaze. At night time, when the fire eventually was under control, the Brethren's House, the church including both halls and the residential extensions, the Sisters' House, the Widows' House, the business premises of W.G. Thraen and seven more houses lay in ashes. It was a terrible blow for Gnadendorf. But this situation provided a demonstration of the community's vital strength and trust in God, for by the middle of the following year the village had been fully restored to its former appearance.

Prussia's decline at the start of the 19th century coupled with the Liberation Wars had an impact on Gnadendorf. We hear of hardship and poverty, of insecurity caused by bands of robbers and all sorts of disruptions. However, Gnadendorf was spared the actual and immediate misery of war, although the fighting once again took place nearby.

At this time Gnadendorf started what, apart from its industry, it is mainly known for - its educational system. The Brethren Community followed the Pietists' tradition of establishing boarding schools. After a few abandoned attempts schools for boys and girls were eventually built in Gnadendorf which still exist today. In 1791 in the house now known as the old Provost's House, between the Sisters' and the Widows' House, a boarding school for girls was established which was soon relocated to the place where it is today. Only in recent years after the old rooms had become increasingly unsuitable was it allocated to the present buildings and divided into boarding school and day school. Apart from that another boarding school for older, already confirmed, girls gradually formed in the Sisters' House. In 1814 a boarding school for boys was opened in the Brethren's House. In 1896, when it had been officially recognized as a middle school (today *Realprogymnasium*: middle school/pre-grammar school), it was moved to a large house at the *Questenberg*. The house served as the school's own residential home. From 1819 to 1832 Ernst von Seydlitz, the well-known geographer, was one of the first headmasters of the boys' school (and at the same time for the girls' school).

At this time, from 1819 to 1821, Johann Baptist von Albertini – schoolday friend of Schleiermacher⁷ and, according to his contemporaries, the first clerical poet of this time apart from Novalis⁸ - was preacher in Gnadendorf. His sermons which combined Zinzendorf's warm, emotional style with the elaborate use of language typical for the Romantic period were of significant and lasting influence in Gnadendorf; the growth of the Brethren Community in these days can also be attributed to him.

⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Protestant theologian, philosopher and pedagogue.

⁸ Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (Novalis; 1772-1801), author, philosopher and mining engineer.

There are a considerable number of extraordinary preachers in Gnadenfrei's history. Heinrich von Bruiningk has already been mentioned. As a more recent example, we would like to name Theobald Wunderling who is still remembered by many. Born in Gnadenfrei he worked there as a minister from 1855 to 1878, for the last twelve years of this period he was the First Preacher. Despite his unstable health he was gifted with a brilliant talent as a public speaker and in every other way he had what it takes to be a minister and preacher.

He had excellent organising skills that he put to good use while serving the Kingdom of God. For example, there were the Mission Celebrations in the *Tränkegrund* in the *Eulengebirge*, the Community Celebrations on the *Rummelsberg* which still take place every year, the support for the work of the Brethren Church in Bohemia and finally his essential part in the founding of the *Verein für innere Mission* (Committee for Inner Mission) in the districts of Reichenbach, Frankenstein and Nimptsch. One result of his activities is the Rescue Home Morija that is located in the area of Oberpeilau but is managed by Gnadenfrei. The pupils of this institute attend the *Stiftungsschule* that is located at the *Kleinen Seite* and was also founded by Wunderling.

The developments that have been described here have given to Gnadenfrei its unique character. There is still something noble about Gnadenfrei's character that reminds us of the time of its origin. There is its special religious orientation as a Brethren Community, its educational institutions and its advanced industry; all of these contribute to its unique character. But there have been many changes, much of the past has gone and been replaced by something new. However there is still enough left of what makes Gnadenfrei special and we will see this on our visit to Gnadenfrei.

A VISIT TO GNADENFREI

At Liegnitz, the town known for its vegetables and for the number of civil servants who live and work there, we board the train to Kamenz-Neiße which will take us to Gnadenfrei within two hours. It travels at high speed through the blessed and open fields of Middle Silesia. The fields owe their fertile soil to the *Sudetes* which come into view in the southwest and which seem to come closer and closer the further we travel. Leaving Schweidnitz behind the scenery features mountains on either side. Soon after the train has left Reichenbach it races through a rocky ravine which suddenly opens to a quiet, fertile valley on the right hand side. White houses with red roofs shine through the green of the trees and between the buildings there are high factory chimneys, witnesses to a busy industry even in this quiet corner of the world. Behind this lovely scene which unfolds like a panorama, there are the mountains of the *Eulengebirge* towering like a gigantic wall. The rounded, wooded peaks alternate with high mountain passes in this ancient mountain range. The gneiss with its beautiful silvery mica and the black tourmaline strands reach far into the foothills where they then break down to fertile clay soil.

We would like to continue to enjoy the view of this strikingly contrasting scenery but the train stops and the call "Gnadenfrei" tells us that we have arrived. This is by no means a metropolitan

train station which welcomes us but the Breslau-Nimptsch-Gnadenfrei train which terminates here and people from town and country join together in a colourful mix.

Without further ado we hire one of the cabs which wait in front of the station and go straight to Gnadenfrei which is about half an hour away. We pass through one part of a long *Reibendorf*⁹ (row of cottages) which can be frequently found on the slopes of the *Sudetes*. Peilau, which takes two hours to pass through along the *Peilebach* valley, has not much of interest to offer. Most of the traditional houses have now gone making room for more modern buildings. After a short while the road begins to look more attractive. There are villas on either side and then we are greeted by a familiar name which we have seen many times at home on neat catalogues. So this is the place from where packages labelled *Mechanical Weaving Mill Th. Zimmermann* are sent all over the world. We make a mental note of the business hours during which the bright and spacious showroom is opened to keen shoppers because we dare not return home without being able to give our eager wives a detailed account of all the attractive things which can be purchased there. How disappointed they would be if there was no parcel, neatly wrapped in the familiar green paper, emerging from the bottom of the suitcase. Only a few more steps and the cab stops in front of the Guesthouse of the Brethren Community with its friendly looking attic roof which seems to offer us a safe haven. In common parlance the guesthouse is called 'Community Lodge' which reminds us of its original purpose. In the past it was only available for the travelling members of the Brethren Community who came from other places in order to provide them with accommodation and meals. Hence the guesthouse still gives the impression of good middle-class respectability. After the excitement of the journey this setting allows for a soothing calm free of all noisy bustle and without the formality of a hotel. It is a delicious treat to enjoy a glass of beer in the garden in the shade of tall old lime trees.

After the long train journey it feels good to take a walk and just opposite the guesthouse, there is a promising looking avenue flanked by lime trees which leads uphill. We step into the cool shade, all the way the branches of the sky-high trees join like gothic arches. Looking up we seem to see the long, high nave of an enormous green cathedral. The tree trunks are like pillars, split and hollowed here, covered with deep wounds there, battered by storms endured in their long lives and yet they carry young branches which continually grow skywards. At the end of the avenue we step through a stone arch which points upwards like the trees. The green cathedral expands and the rustling of the leaves and the humming of myriads of bees attracted by the heavy scent of the lime tree blossom sounds like a tune played on a powerful church organ. Rows of gravestones are gleaming peacefully between the tall tree trunks. We have arrived at the cemetery. When making our entrance to this place of death we are greeted by words of life written on the arch: '*I live and you shall live, too!*' And true enough, for the people who had laid out this cemetery death had lost its horror. Many of them courageously went far afield to pagans possessing different languages in order to bring them the Gospel of life. Now they are resting here from their hard work; only the moss-covered stones tell of their lives and it will not take long for the rain to erode the engravings. Is this really the end, set as the final goal for a life full of work? In the deep shade light flickers between the stones but further up around the cross which commemorates dead soldiers, it shines with glorious power. It is not the shadows of death

⁹ Typical form of settlement in Germany.

that are the final destiny of man. They will go from this resting place to the eternal light and to blessed life.

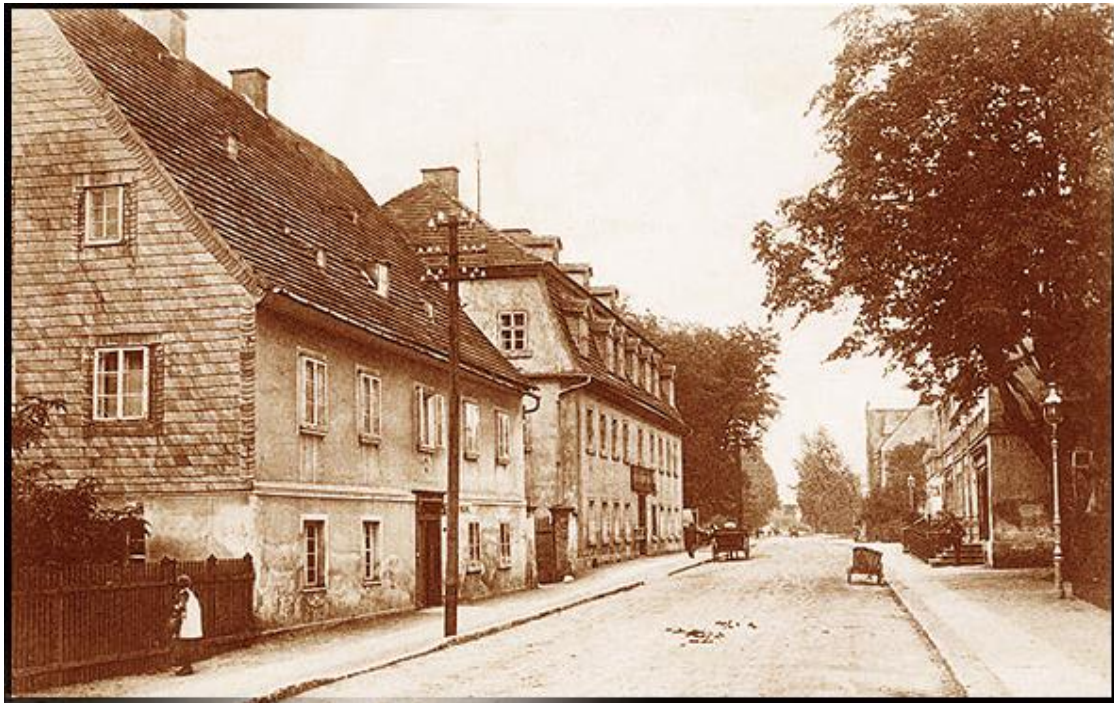
We step out of the cemetery. Now we look over gardens, houses and wooded hills. Behind them inviting-looking walkways lead uphill to the *Questenberg*. The blue mountains form a promising background. How bright it is again around us! From the big castle-like building to the right, the Boys' School, we hear chirpy voices. In the spacious playgrounds to the left a group of boys is engaged in lively play. There is much rough and tumble and the buzz of voices. It must be good to share the joys and worries of childhood with so many friends, guided and encouraged by the teacher who lives with them as educator and friend. But we walk on and soon we are high up on the *Questenberg* the peak of which we had already seen from the train. Which one of the many walkways through the leafy green shall we take? We would like to enjoy the views, therefore we walk along the grove and around the mountain. Now we stop and look around. Further down there is the peaceful village, half hidden in the green, the houses grouped around the small church with its broad shiny red roof and the roof top beneath the curved green spire. The architecture of the houses is in harmony with the church, built in the same homely, simple and practical way. Even the building of the Boys' School which, when seen from the train, stands almost too imposingly above the village, seems to retreat modestly behind a hill. Now we turn our gaze away from this lovely scene and look towards the mountain range in the west. In front of us we see the winding of the *Peiletal* along which the village Peilau is built. The houses furthest away blend into the town of Reichenbach with its many turrets. Behind Reichenbach an open plain stretches far into the distance where we can see the spire of the old church of Schweidnitz and we enjoy unrestricted views over the blessed fields of the foothills of the *Sudetes*. If we turn further to the left we see a completely different picture. From the depth of the *Peiletal* the steep and dark mountain chain of the *Eulengebirge* rise up. The keen eye can make out the *Bismarckturm* on the *Hohen Eule* standing out against the clear sky. At the foot of the mountain range we spot the rows of white houses of the weaving villages of Peterswaldau and Langenbielau which are known worldwide. They seem to stretch in vertical lines towards the mountains and vanish into their slopes. The silhouette of the *Eulturm* at the northwesterly end of the mountain range and the shape of the formerly proud Frederickian fortress *Silberberg* rise sharply from the rounded mountain peaks. From the Guesthouse of the Brethren Community, it took us about twenty minutes to get to this spectacular viewpoint.

The people of Gnadenfrei are really to be envied for this view of which one can never get enough especially when at night the crimson sun sets behind the mountains and the sky glows in all colours. As everywhere else in Middle and Upper Silesia, the sunsets here are accompanied by a particularly beautiful play of colours. For this phenomenon, which is noticed by everyone who has lived in other parts of Germany, no valid explanation has yet been found.

It is possibly linked to Gnadenfrei's special climate which is influenced by its proximity to the mountains. Although Gnadenfrei's average altitude is not more than 325 metres, the air here is extraordinarily fresh and there is almost always a breeze which keeps the summer heat from becoming muggy and in the winter it gives a healthy flush to people's faces. Those for whom the pleasures of the summer are spoilt by the fear of thunderstorms will especially appreciate that Gnadenfrei is located off the main route on which the heavy, often devastating storms move



Gnadenfrei - Main Square



Gnadenfrei - Main Square

from west to east when passing over Central and Northern Germany. The infrequent local thunderstorms mostly drift along the neighbouring valleys and only very rarely build up right above the peaceful village.

But we have already stayed for too long at the airy top of the *Questenberg*; if we still want to take a look around the village we need to make our way back now. We walk down the *Questenberg* along the shady avenue flanked by chestnut trees. At the Boys' School we take a left turn down into the village. The gatekeeper of this proud building reassuringly tells us that the house is open to visitors at any time and we decide to visit this well-known school and educational institute of the Brethren Community in the afternoon when there are no lessons. For a short distance we walk down the street and then arrive at the Square.

In the centre there is a rectangular building, the Community House with the church or Hall. Around the Square there are rows of houses among which the beautiful big Sisters' House and the Widows' House on one side and the equally spacious and impressive Brethren's House on the other side are the tallest. The layout of the Square is typical for a Brethren Community which focuses on religious life. There is something solemn and dignified about the Square. Is this due to the tall old lime trees which seem to shield the Community House with their branches or to the plain large houses with their deep attic roofs and numerous white framed windows?

In the Brethren's House we ask if it is possible to see the church. The Hall Attendant who lives there takes us to the church. Its exterior and interior design is kept in a plain style. We step into a spacious, white painted hall with a high ceiling. Its only decoration consists of biblical quotations on the wall, a marble cross, elegantly curved choirs one of which carries a large and beautiful church organ, high and bright windows and a number of brass chandeliers. On one side several steps lead up to a plain table covered by a green cloth. This is the liturgy table, the very place where some preachers who became well-known beyond the Brethren Community have spoken the Word of God. In front of the liturgy table, on either side of the room, there are plain wooden benches separated by an aisle. The Hall Attendant tells us that the benches on the right side are for the Sisters and the girls, the ones on the left side are for the Brethren and the boys. The Brethren's side and the Sisters' side are accessed by separate entrances. All churches of the Brethren Community have these hall-like features. Although the services, the Assemblies, are held in such a plain room and the preacher does not wear a vestment, they do not lose in solemnity; rather they gain in sincerity. The more they dispense with superficiality; the more they become real community celebrations in the true Protestant spirit.

This becomes particularly evident at the many evening and festive assemblies of the Brethren Community which take place separately from the regular Sunday service. Often the singing of the community and the choral music form the main part of the service. For church the Sisters wear a delicate white bonnet which is neatly pinned together. If they belong to the choir of the unmarried Sisters they wear their bonnet with a pink ribbon. Married and widowed Sisters wear blue or white ribbons. For especially festive occasions, particularly for the choir celebrations, they also wear a white shawl around their shoulders. The special celebrations of the Brethren Community and the important church festivals traditionally gain their typical solemnity from the music of the Brass Choir which consists of several Brethren who have voluntarily joined for this

purpose. In the morning the community is wakened by chorales and in the evening the day ends to the sound of trombones in the Square.

We accompany our friendly guide back to the Brethren's House. This large building was built as a home for the unmarried Brethren who were offered the opportunity to work for different trade businesses and stay in a shared household. Even though this does not represent the main purpose of the house today, it is still the social centre for the unmarried Brethren who find here a homely common room equipped with a library. For their spiritual care the preacher's assistant, the Brethren's Carer, lives in the house. The male youths who have left school also meet here, where they can participate in training courses several nights per week or in useful activities and play under the guidance of the Brethren. It is a trait of the Brethren Community and has always been their aim, to care for the needs of all ages.

When leaving the Brethren's House we should not forget to purchase some of the delicious *Gnadenfreier Zwiebacken*¹⁰ from the bakery. This speciality is sent far and wide from here and from the bakery in the Sisters' House. It is remarkable that not just Gnadenfrei but also the Brethren Community more widely enjoy an excellent reputation for the high quality of their products. This is due to the care which the Brethren put into their work. Accordingly we see numerous shops and businesses during our tour and we note their efficiency in relation to the small number of 800 residents. Right by the Brethren's House we stop at the community shop. This shop was established by W.G. Thraen in 1780 and belongs now to the Unity of Brethren. It is widely known for its excellent cigars. The housewives of Gnadenfrei also appreciate the shop because it supplies them with a wide range of groceries for cooking and storage and with china and glassware for the household. The merchant O. Zemsch & Co. is well-known beyond Gnadenfrei as a mail order company dealing in wine and cigars. Another more fancy article is sold from Gnadenfrei: artificial horses! The company S. Otte makes them. Among its customers are quite important people and the quality of its products have been acknowledged at many exhibitions. If we take a left turn at the corner of the Square into the Main Street we only need to walk a few steps and we encounter another familiar name: the sausage producer von Böhme from where sausages and ham are sent to many places in Germany.

If we look from here down the Main Street we realise that the village is a very special one. The neat pavement and the attractive walkways indicate prosperity but without any showiness. The houses are modest yet have a certain nobility due to their simplicity and neatness. You could say that all this conveys the spirit of middle-class respectability at the end of the 19th century but without it being backward in any way. Gnadenfrei is not urban in character. You only need to take a look into the narrow quiet lanes parallel to the Main Street which lead to the *Kleinen Seite*; nor is it rural because there are the tall houses and a noticeable absence of the typical countryside 'characters' in the streets.

You, dear little village, don't trust any of the ambitious land speculation ventures found elsewhere which, masquerading as progress, have levelled, defaced and destroyed much of the healthy traditional life of our homeland! On our way back to where we started, the guesthouse,

¹⁰ Traditional bread baked twice.

one of the many shop windows we pass on the Main Street is the window of the Confectionery Elsner. It stands out because it seems to us like a town scene painted by Richter or Schwind. The small round-shaped roof with its old sign and inscription over the window is probably as old as the tradition of producing the much valued *Gnadenfreier Pfefferminzkekübel*. They are made using particularly fine peppermint oil from herbs which have been grown for many years on the company's own fields.

Our next visit will take us to the schools of which there are four: the *Realprogymnasium*: (middle school/pre-grammar school); the girls' school; the girls' boarding school; and, the boarding school in the Sisters' House. We are amazed to find so many educational institutions in such a small community. Yet it has always been a particular concern of the Brethren Community to dedicate a major part of their work to the Christian upbringing and sound education of the young. Over time the institutions, which were originally intended for the benefit of the community's youth, have increasingly become educational centres for other children from all over Germany. Parents like to entrust the Brethren Community with the education of their children. The result of this comparatively large number of educational institutions is that the average standard of education among the inhabitants of Gnadenfrei is higher than one would normally expect in a small community. In this way the residents maintain a diversity of interests and relationships which ensures that this relatively small place possesses a special open-mindedness. Various events take place here, such as concerts, lecture evenings etc.

First of all, we walk up to the Boys' School. This handsome and spacious building houses the *Realprogymnasium* and the boarding school for external students. The classrooms on the mezzanine floor are open and pleasant and provide a healthy learning environment for the 119 students who attend the school. In two pre-school classes and from 5th to 10th grade the boys are taught in order to obtain the middle school certificate for which they sit the final exam at Easter or at Michaelis¹¹.

The syllabus of this officially recognised school closely follows the curricula for the Prussian gymnasias so that students can move on to the higher grades of any Prussian gymnasium without any difficulty. The small class numbers allow for individual support for each student and the link to the boarding school gives the opportunity to monitor and assist with homework. A bright and wide staircase leads to the upper floors which house the rooms of the boarding school. Here the students live in groups with their room mates and their teachers under the same roof. The headmaster's rooms are in one of the wings of the building. This family-oriented living of teachers and students provides the best possible setting for: informal educational influence: teaching regular tasks; encouraging various intellectual interests; and taking into consideration the individuality of each student. The educational aims of the Brethren also focus on combining personal and religious education and the development of true and whole-hearted piety. Pleasant, spacious and airy dormitories, functional washrooms, bath and shower rooms ensure healthy physical conditions. And how much more will the boys enjoy their food in the big dining hall after they have been out playing happily in the yard or in the playgrounds on the school premises. Whereas today there are demands for play and sports being included in every [state]

¹¹ St. Michael's Day, 29th of September.

school, the Brethren schools have always done so and have provided a good example of professional practice. The daily life in the boarding school is carefully scheduled so that every day, time is set aside for outdoor activities and for enjoying the beautiful surroundings by taking frequent walks or cycling. As a result everything necessary is in place for the student's well-being and for their upbringing in physical and emotional health. The bond between the school and former teachers and students is kept up by the newsletter *Gruß aus Gnadenfrei* which gives ample evidence of how peoples' feelings of attachment for the school stay alive.

We leave the Boys' School and walk down to the Square to pay a visit to the girls' boarding schools. Located at the corner of the Square and the Main Street, there is the building housing the Girls' School where we are going to be shown around. The house was converted to its present layout in 1907. The formerly narrow rooms are now bright and spacious. The wide corridor and stairs, the agreeable and bright dining hall, the airy dormitories and the dressing rooms are practical yet by no means clinical, they rather fit in with the cosiness of the drawing rooms where teaching staff and students live in small family groups. These rooms feel very homely. This is how it should be in an institution for girls who are to be brought up to fulfill their roles in the house and family life. The institution accepts girls from the age of 8 to 19 and aims to guide them towards developing a healthy personality and religious sincerity. The Brethren Community is a particularly suitable place for this because its religious life with its many services and celebrations cannot fail to impress the female mind. The institution also ensures the physical well-being of the female youth whose more delicate constitution needs especially careful attention. Drawing rooms and dormitories provide light and fresh air in abundance and the food is excellent, in addition the extensive landscaped garden with its shaded seats and pleasant playgrounds near the house provide generous opportunities for informal play and outdoor activities. Apart from that, the ample time which is set aside for daily recreation is extensively used for walks in the beautiful surroundings. The institution pursues two main educational goals according to the different age groups of the students. The upbringing of the younger ones focuses on a thorough educational grounding which is provided in close conjunction with the Girls' School. The older, already confirmed, girls are taught in the cooking and householding departments of the institution where they gain an all-round practical knowledge of all kitchen-related issues and making and maintaining clothing and textiles. The so-called fine arts and music can be cherished here by the girls who are not yet troubled by exam stress and on our way through the house scales and studies played by keen pianists can be heard everywhere.

When stepping into the school yard which features many picturesque nooks due to the nature of the structuring of the back of the house, we only need to walk a few steps to reach the new purpose-built school building which every morning opens its doors to eager girls. The boarding school and the day school were formerly managed by a headmaster, now the education at the boarding school is overseen by a matron, while the day school has its own management. This division of management seems appropriate given the difficult situation private girls' schools are in at present. If they want to compete with the official higher girls' schools they need to surrender in part their special status and comply to the newly organised girls' education system. Consequently the Girls' School in Gnadenfrei aims to make it possible for its students to move on to an official higher girls' school. Despite these adjustments (to the official education system)

the Girls' School still aims to provide the girls who are willing to attend it with an all-round full education for their future lives.

Finally we pay a visit to the Sisters' House which is located next to the girls' boarding school and opposite to the church. Despite its quietness the long white corridors give some idea of just how many people are provided for in this friendly house with its many windows and protecting attic roof. The general sense of calm is proof of the exemplary good order of this large household. Massive walls with deep window bays give a feeling of security. Looking from a corridor window down onto the rectangular courtyard, which is enclosed by tall buildings and flanked by cloisters, it almost seems to us as if this was a secluded monastery. It is no coincidence that the Sisters' House resembles the old choir house, a world of its own in noble seclusion. The choir of the unmarried Sisters and its choir life probably have been the least disturbed by modern times. The plain white choir hall is particularly beautiful; its friendly brightness and its plain structure are quite appropriate to the simplicity of Brethren piety. The large dormitory which takes up the whole attic of the rear building is of great architectural interest. Its ceiling is like a huge white dome rising from the floor. Whoever sleeps in it will feel that they are well looked after. It is interesting to see the bakery of the Sisters' House which is run solely by women, for baking is a trade usually pursued by men. However, the fact that women are at work here is to the benefit of the products, proved by the widespread and high reputation of the *Zwiebäcke*¹² which are delivered from here.

Since the days of its foundation the members of the Sisters' House, as the Brethren in the Brethren's House, have paid attention to the adolescent choir. In the *Mädchenstube* (Girls' Room) the confirmed girls have the opportunity for further intellectual education and learning manual skills. This Girls' Room took a path similar to that taken in other schools: it developed into a flourishing boarding school. From far afield parents send their daughters here to have them educated under the guidance of the Brethren Community in Christian spirit and to be taught how to become capable household assistants. The main part of the spacious house is made available for the boarding school so that the girls' accommodation is healthy and comfortable in every way.

Lessons include the subjects essential for general education supplemented by private foreign language tuition, domestic science and needlework. The large and pleasant garden provides a facility for physical education through play and gymnastics. Although the boarding school, as can be seen from its history, provides mainly a further education and householding skills for confirmed girls, it accepts a considerable number of younger girls. These children who are required to attend school are students of the Girls' School which we have already seen. The institution is managed by two matrons assisted by several female teachers who live with the girls according to the general educational principles of the Brethren Community.

We cannot leave the Sisters' House without taking a look at the 'sales room'. In the past artistic products made by the residents of the house were offered here for sale (e.g., dried seeds; pearl embroidery; and colourfully hand-painted memo pads). Today these particular products are no

¹² See footnote 11.

longer on offer, instead anything can be found here which may be useful for the residents, along with beautiful needlework.

We still have half an hour left of our stay in Gnadenfrei and we are advised to visit the *Seidlitzteich* which is an important place of remembrance for all 'old Gnadenfrei-ans'. We go back to the guesthouse and take a turn to the left, away from the Main Street and past the gas works which supplies the streets and houses of Gnadenfrei with light. Soon we arrive at the pond. Its surface is calm and restful, slightly rippled by a light breeze. The dark sheet of water reflects the contrasting white boulders of the avenue along the north bank. The houses at the far end of the pond seem to blend into the water and from the dark and distant shore line the reflection of the blue sky stretches to where we stand. It is pleasant to take a walk around this large pond. Walking along its northern bank, the view is concealed at times by the cosy little houses which stand along the street that leads through the village of Peilau. It is not so long ago that from most of these homes the clatter of looms could be heard, a sound which now has become much rarer.

The front gardens are full of flowers and the seats next to front doors seem to invite a rest: all give the impression of an idyllic village. Now and then there is a gap between houses and if we stand right at the steep edge of the pond it seems to us as if we are looking down into a deep blue abyss from which white clouds rise up and scatter by the massive pillars of the castle-like manor. Below the pond, where the waters of the *Peilebach* rush over the dam, the wavy line of white stones seems to invite us to follow the narrow winding of the green valley. A few houses cling to its rocky face and on the right we can see the woods of the *Fischerberg*. But we need to hurry now and we take a left turn up the road between the manor and the big weaving mill of Erxleben & Co. The latter belongs to the world-famous company from Herrnhut, Abraham Dürninger & Co. By this way we return to the west end of the Main Street. While further down the view is narrow and enclosed, it now opens again and we can see as far as the hills of the *Eulengebirge*. In front of us an avenue flanked by white tree trunks and crowns full of snowy blossoms leads us towards a dark wood which has been called, for good reason, *Schwarzbusch*.

We can now see why the boys and girls who spent their youth in the institutions here grew to love 'their Gnadenfrei'. We have certainly taken to the place during our short stay. Those able to keep an open mind will be enriched by the lovely scenery, the village with its air of bygone times and the people of the Brethren and their quiet but hale and hearty ways.

Photographs taken in the Main Square of Pilawa Gorna, Poland (formerly Gnadenfrei, Silesia) on the 15th September 2007



