Reading Sample · Halle · Frederick Muhlenberg

Chapter 6: Halle

Halle on the Saale. August 1763 to May 1770.

In early August 1763 a hired coach from Hamburg pulled up before the main building of the Francke Foundations in the Glaucha suburb south of the walls of the Saxon university town of Halle.

Frederick stepped out as the second, behind Peter, before Henry Ernst. The three sons of Muhlenberg had covered, in the previous eight days, the route from Hamburg through Lüneburg, Magdeburg, and the Saale valley — a journey of about three hundred and thirty kilometers, which a single rider on the express post could have made in two and a half days, but which with three boys, baggage, and a hired coach that halted every night at a posting station took the better part of a week. The escort Henry Melchior had engaged in May — Pastor Reiner — had stayed in Hamburg; a Halle messenger, an older man with white hair and a dark traveling coat, had taken charge of the boys in Hamburg and brought them to Halle. Here, in front of the Foundations, he handed them over.

The building before which the coach halted was not a church building. It was a large, whitewashed four-winged complex with an unbroken stone façade, a central gateway, and an inscription in Latin lettering that Frederick could read: *Soli Deo Gloria* — to God alone the glory. It was what his father for twenty years had referred to in the Trappe study as *the main building*, without Frederick ever having been able

to picture how it actually looked. Now he saw it. It was larger than he had expected, and at the same time closer in.

In the courtyard a clerk of the Directorate received them. He led the three boys through the gate, through the inner court onto which the Pädagogium Regium — the Royal Preparatory School — opened, into a waiting room with an oak bench and a table on which a Bible and an inkwell stood, and said that the Herr Director begged to be excused, he was in a meeting; they should wait.

Dr. Gotthilf August Francke

Dr. Gotthilf August Francke was seventy-one years old.

He had been Director of the Foundations for thirty-six years, had taken them over from his father August Hermann Francke, and ran them in a form the father had begun and the son did not wish to change. He was a gaunt man, with thin gray hair and a voice that had once been strong and was no longer quite so. He came into the waiting room after about an hour, in a black robe, with a small book in his hand that he laid on the table.

He welcomed Peter, Frederick, and Henry Ernst in German.

Then he asked after their father. Frederick answered — looking at Peter and Henry Ernst he thought that he was the middle one, to whom the reply belonged, because Peter was too quiet and Henry Ernst too small. He said that his father was well, that the mother had sent her greetings, that the parish in Trappe stood in good order.

Francke nodded. Then he said a sentence Frederick would hear again on a visit to the Directorate five years later, and that held for his whole time at Halle:

Your father is one of the best men we have sent overseas. We hope that you three may also become this kind of man.

It was not a friendly sentence. It was a program. Frederick understood that the Foundations would not admit the three boys to the Latin school as individual pupils, but as three Muhlenberg sons whose father had entered into an obligation with Halle, and for whose fulfillment the sons were now to make good in a second generation. It was an honor, and it was narrow.

Peter nodded. Frederick nodded. Henry Ernst looked at Peter and nodded too.

They lived at first together in the Orphanage, in a dormitory room with eleven other boys from Brandenburg, Pomerania, Silesia, and one Dane from Copenhagen who spoke four words of German and attached himself to Frederick.

In the first months Frederick learned two things.

He learned first that the German he had grown up with in Trappe was not a German that would bear being measured against Halle. It carried Swabian remnants from grandmother Anna Eve, Palatine turns

of phrase from the Pennsylvania German community, English bits from the market at Reading and Trappe. To his classmates' ears it sounded like an accent that one politely did not comment on, but did not want to let near. Frederick began to file his speech — to clip vowels, to swap idioms, to forget the Pennsylvania-German *gell* (right?) and *hawwich* (I have). It was work that took two years and which he never quite finished. His brother Peter did not do it; his brother Henry Ernst did it faster, with the suppleness of a nine-year-old whose language was not yet set.

He learned secondly that he was a Muhlenberg son. In the Trappe parsonage he had been the son of his father, the grandson of his grandfather, the brother of his siblings. In Halle he was the son of *the* Pastor Muhlenberg, who led the American mission, the man whose reports were read in the Directorate and accepted for printing, who filled the *Hallische Nachrichten* with his letters from Pennsylvania. The supervisors of the Latin school observed the three boys differently from the others. If Frederick had a bad Latin test, the supervisor wrote it to Pennsylvania. If he had a good one, also. His father read both kinds of letter in the months that followed and answered them carefully. Frederick learned what it means to be watched.

That was the first lesson.

Peter

Peter lasted two years.

In the summer of 1765 — Frederick was fifteen and in his second Pädagogium year, Peter was nearly nineteen and struggled with the curriculum more than the others — Peter vanished from the Orphanage for the first time. He was found after three days at a farmstead beyond the Saale, brought back, admonished. In the spring of 1766 he vanished a second time. This time he was longer gone, and when he was found, he had presented himself in a Prussian garrison as a volunteer enlistee in an infantry regiment. He was eighteen, physically strong, linguistically flexible enough that the recruiters had believed him when he said he had reached majority. He was in service.

It took several weeks of correspondence between the Halle Directorate, the Hanoverian court, and the Prussian authorities — the lines of negotiation ran through London and Berlin — until Peter could be bought out of the regiment. He came back to Halle in early summer 1766, in the same clothing he had run away in, but with a face that had become different in those three months.

Dr. Francke wrote to Henry Melchior in a long letter that went via Hamburg and London to Trappe and arrived there in late autumn 1766. The letter was diplomatic and unmistakable: Peter was not suited to be a pastor. He was a good young man — decent, strong, honest — but the pastoral office was not his way. Francke proposed a merchant apprenticeship in Lübeck, with a Hamburg shipping firm in association with a Lübeck company, which would take an apprentice under Halle's supervision. Henry Melchior answered in the spring of 1767 with his consent.

In the summer of 1767 Peter went to Lübeck. Frederick and Henry Ernst stayed.

What Frederick lost in his older brother he only learned to name in the following weeks. Peter had been the one who had kept contact with the parsonage — who had written letters to their mother, who had kept the Pennsylvania way of speaking at the table, who had occasionally reminded Frederick and Henry Ernst of things they themselves could no longer recall. With Peter's departure the parsonage moved farther away for Frederick.

In the autumn of 1767 Frederick crossed over from the Pädagogium to the University of Halle.

He was seventeen. Henry Ernst, fourteen, stayed on at the Pädagogium, which he would not finish until 1769. Frederick moved from the Orphanage into a *Burse* — the type of student lodging-house that German universities of the period maintained — in a narrow building on the Schmeerstraße, where he shared a room and a tiled stove with two other theology students. He attended lectures in dogmatics, in Hebrew, in church history. He saw the professors at the lectern in their black robes reading aloud, in a Latin he had brought along from his four Pädagogium years, sentences he understood on first hearing only by half.

The theologian whose lectures most occupied him was Johann Salomo Semler, who had been at Halle for fifteen years and was working on a form of historical-critical biblical reading that was slowly pushing the Halle pietist tradition in another direction, without openly leaving it. Frederick did not in 1767 understand the depth of this shift. He heard Semler as a clear, methodically careful teacher whose lectures he could follow better than those of the older theologians, and who taught him Latin turns of phrase that he noted down. What was being prepared in Semler's lectures — a German theology that twenty years later would no longer agree with the Halle pietist world — Frederick did not see until he was back in Pennsylvania and noticed that he read the Bible differently than his father, without being able to say when he had learned it.

The notebook that had halted on the Atlantic crossing of 1763 after the 26th of May he opened again in the Halle study years. He wrote now differently — more briefly, in Latin and German mixed, with references to lecture passages he wanted to look up later. It was not a diary in the sense of what his father kept. It was a study book. What it recorded was intellectual work, not self-observation.

One thing the university did, of which Henry Melchior in Trappe likely did not know, but which would become decisive for Frederick's later life: Halle trained its pupils destined for Pennsylvania deliberately in English public speaking. In June 1768, at the Public Act of the Halle Orphanage in Glaucha, the eighteen-year-old Frederick delivered an English address. The text survives: a fifteen-page bilingual manuscript in the Lutheran Archives Center at Philadelphia, with German Kurrent handwriting on the left-hand pages and English roundhand running parallel on the right — not a translation made later, but a piece composed from the start in both languages. On the title page Frederick signs himself *"Frederick August Conrad Mühlenberg out of Philadelphia in America"*; he does not yet carry the classicizing *Augustus*. The title: *An Essay of a Proof that Contentment is the greatest Wealth.*

The address is a carefully executed rhetorical *probatio*: thesis, refutation of false images of wealth, *exemplum*, appeal to the authorities, apostrophe to the *"greedy Men of Money"*, theological peroration. The *exemplum* is Bias of Priene, one of the Seven Sages of Greece, with the classical *omnia mea mecum*

porto — all that is mine I carry with me. The authority is Cicero (*"our great, our immortal Cicero"*). The peroration closes with reference to the *"most holy and perfect Religion"* that teaches contentment in the ways of Providence. It is Halle pietism in classical rhetorical form — from an eighteen-year-old, before an audience, in a foreign language.

The English carries plain traces of the German: nouns capitalized throughout, occasional loan translations, *"Walth"* for *"Wealth"*, a syntax audibly carried by German cadence. It is not the language of a native speaker. But it is powerful, ambitious, and on the subject:

"only he is rich who is intirely content with that what Heavens Direction has bestowed him."

It was the language that in two years would become Frederick's working tongue, and in twenty-one years the language of the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States.

Dr. Gotthilf August Francke died

On the 24th of May 1769, a Wednesday, Dr. Gotthilf August Francke died in his house next to the main building of the Foundations.

He had been seventy-one when he received Frederick in August 1763; he was seventy-seven when he died. It was the pneumonia of an old man who had survived the winter but had not lived to see the first warm May. The Foundations rang the bells of the school church, and the boys of the Pädagogium and the students of the university were called to the funeral service. The sermon was preached by the second director, J. A. Niemeyer, in the style Francke had prescribed in his rules.

Frederick sat in the third bench from the front, beside Henry Ernst, who was now fifteen and finishing his last weeks at the Pädagogium, and beside a Danish theology student with whom Frederick worked at the university main building. He listened through the funeral sermon to the end. He took in the closing Hallelujah. He went out of the church with the others.

On the way back to the Burse he thought of his father.

Henry Melchior, in Trappe, had received his call from Francke in 1741, had stood in regular correspondence with the Directorate over the past twenty-eight years, had feared, respected, and persevered with Francke. It was Francke who had sent Henry Melchior to Pennsylvania. It was Francke in whose name the *Hallische Nachrichten* had appeared. It was Francke who had given Frederick the second of his three names. Frederick Augustus Conrad — Conrad had been dead for nine years, now Augustus was dead too. There was only the first of the three name-men left: Friedrich Michael Ziegenhagen, in London, seventy-five years old, who held the world of the Halle-Atlantic mission together alone.

Frederick understood that the world he had come into in 1763 was a world at a generational turn, and that the generation that had embodied the Halle world for him was, in his time there, ending.

He wrote a letter to his father that evening. It is one of the few letters of his Halle time of which we know — not because the letter survives, but because Henry Melchior mentions it in his diary entry of August 1769: *Letter from Friederich at Halle on the death of the Director.*

Spring of 1770, Goethe

In the spring of 1770 it became clear to Frederick that he would be closing his time at Halle.

He was twenty. Henry Ernst was sixteen and had finished the Pädagogium without, like Frederick, going on to the university — the Directorate had chosen a different course of instruction for him, with private tutoring under one of the younger Halle professors. Both would return in the summer by ship from Hamburg to Philadelphia. Henry Melchior had written the letter in January: *It is time.* Frederick had read the letter at the table in his Burse room and passed it to Henry Ernst, who read it and nodded.

While Frederick attended his last lectures in April and May, prepared his ordination, and packed his travel chest, something else was happening at the western edge of the German-speaking world that Frederick knew nothing of, and which nevertheless touches him.

In Frankfurt am Main at the same time, a twenty-one-year-old law student named Johann Wolfgang Goethe was packing his things for a journey. He had been born on August 28, 1749 — a little more than a year before Frederick. He had been in Leipzig from 1765 to 1768, had not finished his studies there because of a serious illness, and had returned to his mother's house in Frankfurt in August 1768, half dead. He spent the following year and a half there — in a slow convalescence, with the reading of works recommended to him by a pietist Herrnhuter woman named Susanna von Klettenberg. Goethe did not become a pietist in those years. But what he read and wrote came from the same Protestant renewal-space in which the Pädagogium of the Francke Foundations — which Frederick was just leaving — was the well-organized, disciplined pole.

Frederick and Goethe did not know of one another. They could have met. From Halle to Leipzig was no more than two days by stagecoach, the student exchange between the two university towns was constant. They probably touched the same tables in the same inns, saw the same pamphlets in the same bookshops. What we know is that in the spring of 1770 they set out almost simultaneously in opposite directions.

Goethe went to Strasbourg in April 1770 to complete his law studies at last. From his encounter there with Johann Gottfried Herder came, in the following years, *Werther*, *Götz*, the first draft of *Faust* — and the construction of what the nineteenth century would call *deutsche Innerlichkeit*, German inwardness.

Frederick traveled in May 1770 in the opposite direction — from Halle to Hamburg, from there across the Atlantic to Philadelphia, and finally back to Trappe. What became of the two men in the following twenty years belongs in the textbooks of two different intellectual histories that have stopped taking notice of one another.

On the third of May 1770 Frederick left the Burse on the Schmeerstraße for the last time. Henry Ernst had taken his luggage to the Hamburg post coach the day before. Frederick himself carried only his travel chest and the notebook he had begun on the Atlantic crossing of 1763, which was now filled with Latin and German notes from seven years at Halle.

He walked on foot through the Glaucha suburb, past the main building of the Foundations where seven years earlier he had read the Latin inscription for the first time. *Soli Deo Gloria.* It was still there. He stood a moment before the gate without going in. He was twenty, ordained for three weeks, with a sealed letter from the Directorate in the inner pocket of his traveling coat — a letter that was to secure him admission in the Pennsylvania parishes wherever he arrived.

He was no longer the thirteen-year-old boy who had stood in this place seven years before. He had buried the man whose name he carried. He had seen what his father meant when he spoke of Halle.

What he now knew that he had not known in 1763 was something else. But that he would only learn to name in Pennsylvania.

He turned and walked to the market square, where the Hamburg stagecoach was being harnessed in the courtyard of the *Zum Roten Hirschen* — the Red Stag — inn.

The complete book: *First Speaker Frederick Muhlenberg — The German Voice in the First Congress* by Andreas Paul John. Available at books.andreas-john.net.