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Early years

The plain statement that Ulrich Zwingli was born at Wildhaus, Switzerland on 1 January 1484, conceals as much as it states. Royalty apart, it is relatively seldom that a birthday can be so surely stated as this, for in the fifteenth and later centuries evidence of date of birth was hard to come by; in some cases a good deal of guesswork is involved. In Zwingli's case however, that New Year's Day, 1 January, was his birthday, and that this was in 1484 can be demonstrated from adequate documentary evidence.[1]

Almost the most unusual thing about the early years of life in the middle ages was survival; most mothers had many children, relatively few of whom grew up. Many were born and died, leaving almost no trace of their existence. The perils of babyhood over, the chief risk was plague and epidemic, less virulently dangerous, obviously, in small villages, but constantly anticipated. When they survived, most children grew up at home with their parents, very much in the open air, and were treated with natural affection combined with a good deal of conventional neglect. Farmyard life was normal, even for city dwellers, and these were relatively few. Parentage, of course, mattered enormously, place of birth rather less, at a time when defined frontiers were almost unknown and even political allegiance was often uncertain. Nowhere in the small civilised world of western Europe was this more apparent than in Switzerland. This predominantly German-speaking area was as difficult to define as the Low Countries or the Indies, and no one was much concerned that this should be so, in an age when areas of territorial uncertainty were not unusual. That 'the Swiss' inhabited part of the Holy Roman Empire was obvious, and if the young Zwingli had a sovereign temporal lord this was the Emperor Frederick III, followed in 1493 by Maximilian I. This, however, was very far from meaning that the Habsburgs ruled in Switzerland, and the extent of their property south of the Rhine and any rights deriving from it were matters of considerable debate. Memories of former hostility, the

[1] For a discussion see Farner, *Zwingli* I, 68–9, II, 309 n. 23; ZWA II, 74–5. Zwingli himself used the spelling Huldrych which may be preferable.

existence of undefined frontiers and unresolved claims to jurisdiction, had led to fighting in 1499, followed by a tacit acceptance of the Rhine as a frontier south of which the imperial writ did not run.

The rulers of western Europe were by now well aware that groups of German-speaking peoples formed a Swiss Confederation, a working alliance or league of communities which had been forced into cooperation by the necessities of existence and of which there were parallels elsewhere. The men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden had some two centuries previously learnt to agree among themselves about pasture for the cattle which provided for their bare existence, and about defence of their persons and possessions against external interference. At first ignored as insignificant, then attacked by their Habsburg overlords as recalcitrant subjects who would not render service or accept jurisdiction, they later became respected because of their proved ability to defeat on their own ground the hitherto almost invincible mailed horseman. In learning self-defence, they learned aggression as well; the direct north–south route between Germany and Italy lay over the St Gotthard once the Devil's bridge had been constructed in the thirteenth century. The control of this passage was of obvious strategic importance and gave the people of central Switzerland a base for, and an incentive to, further expansion.

Larger communities watched and profited, so that Lucerne, Glarus, Zug, Zurich and Berne, with their subjects, allies and friends, joined the original nucleus to form a coherent and self-confident grouping, which demonstrated its efficiency at Morgarten (1315), Sempach (1386) and Näfels (1388). Very poor, simple, rough and self-confident, the Swiss of the later middle ages lived in a bewildering world of local, disorganised semi-anarchy. They are best thought of as forming small, often isolated, independent communities which were reluctantly compelled by circumstances to enter into intermittent ceremonial and formal relationship with one another. Some were primitive democracies where everyone knew that members of the greater families would be chosen to manage affairs; others were growing city-states dominating their own countryside and controlled by nobles or organised craftsmen. Great variety, singular complexity and underlying similarity were distinctive features of this society of very diverse elements. The most obvious characteristic, which explains so much, was poverty. The ideal countryside of the fifteenth century was flat and well watered by navigable rivers leading to the sea. Switzerland was the opposite of this, although to think in terms of 'the Alps', or of an entirely mountainous terrain, is a well-known misapprehension. Mountains were deserts in the middle ages, but even on the lower ground the soil was poor, relatively little grain could be grown, salt for the animals and iron for the primitive tools had to be brought in from outside, and the

livelihood which was gained, mainly from pastures which were adequate for little more than half the year, was very thin.

Whenever an insult was hurled at a Swiss, it was about a cow; this useful animal was to them all that the pig and the goat were elsewhere. In these Swiss valleys it was not possible for a large, or even an increasing, population to live off the land, and starvation was all too close to the resourceful men who scraped a bare existence on a monotonous diet of milk soup and cheese. Horses were relatively few and expensive; men travelled great distances on foot to keep up with their scraggy herds. Poverty and population pressure inevitably led to local rivalries for the better pieces of fertile land and to the search for an easier way of life. The struggle for existence bred a race of strong, virile men who had learnt to make and keep agreements with one another, to work and fight together and to respect their territorial integrity and differing institutions. By the mid-fifteenth century, it had become apparent that fighting, relentlessly cruel, with hand-weapons, bows, knives, long spears and the battle-axe in its many forms, could bring employment as well as security. There was always a large element of organised robbery about medieval warfare: then and much later, armies stole in order to keep alive, and their leaders hoped to secure land, loot and ransoms. In the early fifteenth century, the Emperors had notoriously ceased to exercise effective authority even in Germany, while France and England were engaged in the debilitating hostilities of the Hundred Years War combined with great uncertainty at home. After the return of the Popes to Rome and the end of the Great Schism, a state system had developed in Renaissance Italy in which mercenary armies played a notorious part. Orderly detachments of determined and disciplined men could achieve much, and governments were both able and willing to pay for their services. To be hired as a mercenary was normal in this age when armies had ceased to be feudal and had not yet become national. There was no German nation, and the professional hired soldiers of Europe were to be predominantly German-speaking for a very long while.

If Swiss land-hunger was to be satisfied, it must be at the expense of their immediate neighbours, the principalities of the north Italian plain, the Free County and Duchy of Burgundy, the Duchy of Savoy and the districts of the valley of the Rhine. To well-armed marauders, each of these offered temptation; there was loot to be carried off, and there might be opportunities for annexation of fertile farm land. In the 1470s, during the lifetime of Ulrich's father, Charles the Rash, Duke of Burgundy, potentially the most powerful prince in western Europe, had failed disastrously in his attempt to make the Swiss his subjects, chiefly because of the local resistance organised so effectively by Berne, and encouraged by Louis XI of France.

The Burgundian war marks a real turning point in Swiss history. The inhabitants of central Switzerland saw portable wealth unknown before. After the battles of Grandson (1476), Morat (1476) and Nancy (1477), the Swiss forces were recognised as invincible on their chosen ground. In self-defence, the Confederation could send into the field at least 10,000 incomparable soldiers, and self-defence might easily imply attack. It was difficult to differentiate between security, seen as keeping open the supply route over the St Gotthard, and aggression south of the Alps, and in any case such notions meant little at that time. What was certain was that any band of thirty or more armed men from Schwyz or Lucerne could at any time after 1450 obtain regular and well-rewarded employment with the Pope, the King of France, the Duke of Savoy or of Milan. Killing fellow men was profitable, bloodshed paid, and participation in war became an industry that could secure a favourable Swiss balance of payments.

Of much of this the inhabitants of Wildhaus, whose centre for marketing and justice was St Gall, forty difficult miles to the north-east, were only vaguely aware. Such consciousness of a wider world as penetrated to this remote village was likely to be chiefly of the land across the Rhine ruled by the Austrian Habsburgs. Their immediate western neighbours were Glarus, Schwyz, Zug and Zurich, for whom the appeal of mercenary service was less strong than elsewhere since the demand for it came more from the west and south than from the east and north. The pull of the west was only beginning. Basle and Schaffhausen were not accepted as members of the Confederation until 1501,[1] and Zurich was interested mainly in trade with Baden and Württemberg. The city of St Gall was seeking for independence from the Prince Abbot who ruled the wide monastic estates and was himself a member of the Imperial Diet and a prelate of the Empire. He was, however, only an ally (*Zugewandt*) of the Swiss Confederation. Toggenburg, Zwingli's much-loved homeland, had only comparatively recently come under the abbot's control and his connection with the Toggenburgers, of whom Zwingli was emphatically one,[2] was of recent date. In 1436, after the death without direct heir of Frederick VII, last of the hereditary counts of Toggenburg, Zurich had been prominent among the claimants for the inheritance. This claim was unacceptable to the other partners in the Confederation; war followed, and after some twenty years of struggle Zurich had been forced to relinquish its claims.

Thus, the county of Toggenburg was secured by the abbey of St Gall, which, in 1451, entered into a perpetual alliance (*Burg- und Landrecht*) with Zurich, Lucerne, Schwyz and Glarus.[3] Toggenburg itself, however,

[1] Handbuch 1, 346–7.
[2] Z 1, 166, 578.
[3] EA 2, 864–6.

had a separate pact (*Landrecht*) of its own, renewed in 1469, with Schwyz and Glarus only, and was not, like the remainder of the abbot's territory, under the protection of the other two states.[1] The free imperial city of St Gall was a separate entity, and one of growing importance. Abbot and city were thus reckoned as allies, fellows (*socii*) or associates (*Zugewandte*) of the Confederates but not part of the Confederation. Even Glarus, although accepted as a full member (*Ort*), was in a slightly inferior position as far as external relations were concerned.

It was also partly as a result of the Toggenburg dispute that relations between the Confederation and its immediate neighbours were complicated by the collective occupation and administration of the areas which came to be known as 'Mandated Territories' (*gemeine Herrschaften*). These included the districts round Lugano, Locarno and Bellinzona, Thurgau, Sargans, Rheintal, Baden, Bremgarten, Mellingen, and the 'Freie Aemter' west of Zurich.[2] There were also Protected Districts (*Schirmorte*) like Rapperswil and Engelberg, completely self-governing but restricted in external relations. In addition, there were subject territories (*Untertanengebiete*) like the Bernese Oberland, over which city states like Zurich and Berne exercised complete control.[3]

Thus in modern terms Ulrich Zwingli was 'Swiss' only by naturalisation after he became a full citizen of Zurich in 1521; in his early youth he had been brought up outside the Old Confederation, the Thirteen States in many ways so parallel to, yet so different from, the Thirteen Colonies of another century and a New World. The Zwingli family were well aware of the Abbey of St Gall, whose abbot had legal jurisdiction in Wildhaus and, in the last instance, rights of life and death over his subjects. Monastic officials administered the customary law of the county with its feudal undertones and local applicability. Beyond, in theory, lay the imperial courts to which an appeal might perhaps be tried but was unlikely to have any direct effect, the rights of the former Imperial vicar (*Reichsvogt*) being vested in the abbot.[4] The latter used the services of local agents like the Ammann of Wildhaus to administer his land; these agents, anxious to secure the maximum local autonomy, could also appeal for support from the Protecting powers, Schwyz, Glarus, Lucerne and Zurich, and thus

[1] Oechsli *2*, 97.

[2] Oechsli *1*, 208ff. The correct rendering of Swiss terms into English has always been a difficulty: technical terms are seldom easily transferred into another language. *Ort*, for example, becomes 'canton', but for the sixteenth century the use of 'state' is more meaningful. Some of the conventional translations of *gemeine Herrschaften* (common lordships), *eidgenössische Vogteien* (federal bailiwicks), *Freie Aemter* (free offices), *Leutpriester* (people's priest), are not very meaningful or successful. 'Mandated territories' and 'stipendiary priest' may convey the meaning a little better. See below, 45 n 3.

[3] Swiss constitutional history abounds in exceptions and qualifications which any summary must overlook.

[4] Näf, *Vadian*, 1, 53–63 esp. 55.

play off Abbot and Confederation against one another. The Toggenburgers were understandably concerned to emphasise their status as allies of the Eidgenossen, practically *as* Eidgenossen,[1] to enhance their claims to independence. It was in this atmosphere of active local political discussion that Zwingli was reared.

The Benedictine Abbey of St Gall was one of the earliest founded in Switzerland, a notable example of monastic tradition across the ages, and wealthy from landed endowment originally derived from early Carolingian monarchs. Although some of this property had been alienated, the Abbot of St Gall, chosen by his fellow monks, was a remote but powerful figure to whom the villagers reluctantly made customary payments in service, cash or kind. The abbot from 1463 to 1491 was Ulrich Rösch, son of a baker from Wangen, domineering and aggressive, and much disliked locally.[2] As allies and protectors of the abbey, Zurich, Glarus, Schwyz and Lucerne took it in turn to appoint a local resident agent or commissioner to reinforce security and to watch over their interests. This provided another link with the wider world. There was also the Bishop of Constance, to whose officers payments might have to be made, whether for the chrism which the bishop alone could consecrate, for absolution from graver sins, for release from excommunication incurred, for example, by non-payment of tithe, and many other incidents. The episcopal courts were constantly active. For the rest, the scanty inhabitants were secure in their remoteness and worked hard in the upland open air for a meagre livelihood.

In the village of Wildhaus, where a few score families built themselves wooden shelters for their livestock and homes for their children, the Zwingli family was well known.[3] Hard work, reasonable luck with herds and crops, and an occasional marriage alliance which was profitable to both sides in more ways than one, had brought financial competence and local influence. The father was well enough off to be able to hire occasional assistance, and was a successful farmer who, as Ammann or chief local magistrate, was expected to speak for the physical needs of the little community just as the parish priest would for its spiritual welfare. Life was rough and simple enough, but the boys and girls were not even on the borderline of poverty. There was always food and clothing available. Family relationships were well known, cohesive and significant; from uncles and cousins help and sympathy could be confidently counted upon. Among the Zwingli relations were some literate, educated men who understood Latin, had been to school, had taken holy orders and served as

[1] ZWA XIII (1969), 19.
[2] Näf, *Vadian* I, 54–8. See below, 272.
[3] The much-visited and illustrated house in which Zwingli may have been born is vouched for only by late and unreliable (but reasonable) tradition.

secular priests or monks. It all helped the family prestige; it meant a certain amount of travelling about to visit them and contacts with the hierarchy of the church as well as with the local cattle-raisers.

Young Ulrich, the third of the family, turned out to be an unusually gifted boy, surpassing his numerous brothers and sisters[1] who seem happily to have accepted the undoubted existence of his superior abilities. We wish we knew more about them. Intellectual gifts meant a little less work on the farm for Ulrich and a little more attention to schooling. It was also apparent that the little boy had a good voice and an ear for music just at a time when choir boys were being sought for and appreciated. Everything, in fact, suggested an ecclesiastical career, and young Ulrich was sent to learn the rudiments of Latin from his clerical uncle, Bartholomew.[2] There was no school in Wildhaus, but there was a small one at Wesen (Weesen) on the Lake of Walen, where his uncle was dean.

School teaching in the fifteenth century, at any rate north of the Alps, was remarkably stereotyped. The same basic need, to secure a working knowledge of Latin, produced the same results. Instruction was necessarily verbal and individual. Paper was, indeed, now becoming available, but it was expensive and not much easier to obtain than was parchment in a sheep-rearing community. In both cases a good deal of processing was necessary, and school books of any kind were rare. Hence memory had to be relied upon almost exclusively, and learning in its earlier stages consisted very largely of repetition of the teacher's words. All over western Europe pedagogues were beating the elements of Latin grammar into their pupils as soon as these had learnt their letters. Declensions, conjugations, tenses, agreements, terminations, quantities and the rest were taught on traditional lines from the *Ars Minor* of Donatus, the *Distichs* of Cato and the hexameters of the *Doctrinale* of Alexander of Villa Dei, along with passages from the Breviary, Missal, Vulgate and Lives of the Saints. Grammar was the basis of the liberal arts; trivium and quadrivium, the

[1] Zwingli's brothers were Bartholomew, Claud, Henry, John (Hans), Wolfgang, Andrew and James. There were two sisters, Anna and Catherine, who became nuns at St Maria der Engeln, Pfanneregg (near Wattwil), but later left the convent. One of them was married in Glarus. Ursula, wife of Liehnard Tremp of Berne, was almost certainly not, as is sometimes stated, a third sister. Andrew died in 1520 at Glarus, James died in 1517 as a student at Vienna. ZWA IV, 21–6; Z I, 391. Farner, I, 71–5.

[2] Bullinger, *Ref.* I, 6. Heinrich Bullinger, whose eldest daughter Anna married Zwingli's son Ulrich, succeeded as chief pastor (Antistes, a word used only once by Zwingli) in 1531 and late in life wrote *Historia oder Geschichten, so sich verlouffen in der Eydgnoschaft, insonders zů Zürych mit enderung der Religion, und anrichten Christenlicher Reformation, von dem Jar Christi 1519 bis in das Jar 1532.* He wrote from personal knowledge, assiduously collected local evidence and quoted original documents. He was naturally concerned above all to place his predecessor in as favourable a light as possible. There are a few obvious errors of fact and some significant omissions. A critical appraisal of the *Reformationsgeschichte* could be of great value.

conventional grouping which came to mean what school and college examinations were to mean later, was something inescapable even if not always relevant. Grammar, dialectic, rhetoric; music, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry – the names never vary and were the foundation of the 'arts' courses at the university.

After learning to construe, parse and write simple sentences, Ulrich's contemporaries were expected to proceed to dialectic or logic, the arrangement of an argument or exposition in standard form; and to rhetoric, the embellishment of simple prose. The semi-mathematical disciplines of the quadrivium were supposed to be useful for reckoning dates, including Easter, for grasping the movements of heavenly bodies and for understanding the notation of the choral services. Basically, however, for Zwingli to be put on the road to the university, a working knowledge of Latin, written and spoken, which he could hardly acquire at Weesen, was indispensable.

At the age of ten or under, Zwingli was transferred to the care of a distant relative, Gregory Bünzli, also from Weesen, who lived in the suburb of Basle, Kleinbasel, across the river.[1] There, for two years, he received further and more regular schooling and saw something of the Carthusian monastery with its renowned library. Then, probably in 1496, the lad was moved to Berne, where the learned young Heinrich Wölfflin (Lupulus, the little wolf) had the reputation of being the best schoolmaster south of Strassburg.[2] He was also a musician who could not fail to notice the special talent of his new pupil; he was something of a humanist, and he had travelled to the orient. Environment may not seem influential at thirteen, and for the young Zwingli Wildhaus in the country was home. But he was no longer a country boy; he was literate, and he was becoming acquainted with city life. Berne was to feature considerably in his later life, and it was well that he knew thus early something of its proud and turbulent background.[3] This fortified walled city on the bend of the Aar, with less than 5000 inhabitants, was also at the extreme western boundary of the diocese of Constance, and its territory spilled over into the dioceses of Basle, Lausanne and Sion (Sitten).

From a consciously founded artificial new town built by Berthold of Zähringen in 1191, it had become a free imperial city, rough and small perhaps, but by consistent relentless pressure the centre of a powerful political group. Bit by bit the countryside had been dominated, and when the young Zwingli was there in 1496–8, the boundaries of Berne marched with those of Schwyz and Uri. Burgundy had been defeated, some of the Vaud already occupied, there were shared rights in Aargau, and to the south

[1] ZWA XI, 317–18.
[2] Z VII, 534 n. 10. He wrote some verses in praise of his former pupil after Zwingli's death.
[3] See below Chapter 10.

a moving frontier with Savoy. There were also strained relations with the chieftains of the valleys of Valais.

The new boy was welcomed by Wölfflin, and seems to have liked the place and the people, in spite of an unfamiliar dialect. We know almost nothing of his studies there, but there is good testimony that a serious effort was made to persuade him to become a Friar Preacher. From the thirteenth century onwards the leaders of the Dominicans had constantly kept prominently in mind the need to recruit promising material while young: complaints of enticing or kidnapping boys had been heard often before. Choral services were also generally being developed in large collegiate churches like that of St Vincent's, Berne. For the Dominicans to secure an intelligent scholar who could sing well and had a real talent for music[1] was an opportunity not to be missed.

It would not be an enclosed life in a secluded monastery cut off from the world that they offered, for the Dominicans lived by begging, preaching and hearing confessions in the towns, although by the sixteenth century they were popularly regarded as monks, Religious. They nearly succeeded in their attempts, and there is a distinct possibility that Ulrich was received as a novice. News of this was heard in Wildhaus by his parents and by his uncle with marked disapproval. They were not prepared to lose him to a Bernese friary of not very good reputation. If a church career was now resolved upon, it must be as a secular. The approach must be the normal one through a university, supported if possible by a benefice, then ordination and employment, maybe, as a chantry priest until a parochial cure of souls was available. And so Ulrich was recalled.

It is notable that we know so little about the young Zwingli; there are a few casual references implying normality, but no child psychologist has turned with profit to elaborate the scraps of information available into a convincing explanation of his later mental development.

None the less, the fourteen years between 1484 and 1498 cannot be left on one side as irrelevant: home, parentage, environment, upbringing, are too significant for that, and, in fact, reflections of these appear in the most unlikely places in Zwingli's writings. Relatively well-to-do parents and a stable home background; this he both received and provided for his own children when he lived in a considerable house in Zurich. He never lost his country accent and he wrote naturally in the vigorous Swiss-German of his native Toggenburg, disliked and despised by speakers of good high German like Luther. In addition to the local dialect, Zwingli knew from

[1] ZWA IV, 355–6. Zwingli became later a talented instrumentalist. He once said, 'I know something of the lute and the fiddle, and this is useful in trying to put the children to sleep.' Z V, 54–5; C. Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven, 1966), 9–10, 15, 68. H. Reimann, 'Huldrych Zwingli – der Musiker', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 17 (1960), 126–41 collects a number of references and discusses Zwingli's later rejection of musical services in church.

the closest personal contact his people and their way of life. He often spoke of himself as a peasant or farmer, exaggerating, perhaps deliberately, his rough breeding and ancestry. He was well equipped to understand the needs and outlook of the 'common man'. There were few birds that he did not know by sight and by note, few animals whose feeding, breeding and characteristics he could not expound accurately and fully, few crops he could not identify at a glance, knowing whence the seed came, how it was sown and gathered. He could use earthly metaphors and comparisons with telling exactitude, and he loved the countryside. Again and again he alludes to the conventional virtues of the countryman – simplicity, honesty, fair dealing, hard work, rough fare and trusting faith. What he knew of the relatively narrow world of his boyhood he later applied to his countrymen as a whole. If the Swiss people would but be satisfied with their milk and cheese and not call for dainty victuals, delicate luxuries, elaborate clothes, ornaments, jewels, silks, tapestries, carriages, then they could stand alone. They did not, and should not, need foreign gold and the corrupting luxuries of France and Italy. Such patriotism – for Zwingli can truly be reckoned one of the first of Swiss patriots in the best sense of that overworked word – was comparatively rare. It was almost incomprehensible to the Italians, although Machiavelli might have understood.

All roads led to Rome, and the Pope of the eleven impressionable years between eight and nineteen was the Borgia Alexander VI (1492–1503), whose son Cesare was ever ready to seduce Swiss soldiers to die for the consolidation of the Papal States. As a scholarly young man anxious to improve his knowledge of the external world by contact with travellers, Zwingli can hardly have failed to hear something of the extravagant exhibitionism of the Renaissance Popes and of the drain of money and men southwards. There was danger that the Swiss soil might not be tilled and the hard labour of field and vineyard might be neglected if men left their homeland. Perhaps if he had lived in the harsh highlands of Unterwalden and if he had heard his brothers and sisters cry for bread, his feelings might have been different.

For Zwingli, it was the tightly-knit community of a Swiss valley where every man knew his neighbour, where cooperation was essential for survival and where the leadership of the more prosperous element was taken for granted, that formed the basis of society. Such was the *Gemeinde*, in ecclesiastical terms the parish, with priest, church and common worship; and this, too, was to be the basic unit of the Zwinglian religious organisation much later. Zwingli had, as we have seen, relatives among the Swiss clergy. The village church with its ceremonial, ornaments and obligations had been there all the time, and the boy absorbed all the usual Catholic dogma without, apparently, any difficulty or questioning. In some of the