

Things are moving forward at Trachselwald Castle:

Swiss Mennonite Conference concludes an agreement with the canton of Bern

For a long time the castle was the seat of the regional administration of the Trachselwald district. Since the merging of the Bernese administrative districts in 2009, however, the former official rooms and offices in Trachselwald Castle have stood empty.



Figure 1: *Trachselwald Castle*

The Conference of Mennonites in Switzerland (CMS) has, from the beginning of the discussions about the future of Trachselwald Castle (as of 2008), expressed its interest in a further use of the castle in the area of the history of the Bernese Anabaptists. At first Martin Hunziker represented the Mennonites as the then pastor of the Langnau Mennonite Church, assisted by a small CMS commission (Ernest Geiser, Hanspeter Jecker, Michel Ummel, Daniel Engel). Later, this track group itself represented the position of the CMS in various official discussions and working groups over many years: Within the framework of its available possibilities and existing competencies, the CMS has always expressed interest and willingness to cooperate.



Figure 2: *Door lock to one of the old prison cells in the donjon.*

CMS focused on three topics:

- a) The accessibility of the donjon (tower) with the old prison cells should remain guaranteed for the public,
- b) Faith and life, history and present of Anabaptism in its regional and international dimensions, but also in its relevance to contemporary challenges, should be presented to visitors to the castle in an attractive permanent exhibition (with possible sporadic accompanying events),
- c) The existing Anabaptist history panels in German should be translated into French and English.

The CMS has been supported in this endeavor by international Anabaptist-Mennonite churches and institutions, which have regularly visited Trachselwald Castle with tourist groups for many years. From North America, where many descendants of Anabaptists formerly imprisoned in Trachselwald live, a financial contribution (CHF 30,000) has already been spoken for this purpose as part of a fund-raising tour (2014 by reformed pastor Paul Veraguth). A small amount of this fund now has been used to finance and complete the panel translation project last year.



Figure 3: The Anabaptist history panels are now available in three languages!

As far as the other two keywords are concerned, the Canton of Berne has always assured us that **free access** to the tower will remain guaranteed. Currently, however, the tower is closed for renovation work (probably until May).

More difficult was the question of an Anabaptist history **exhibition**. The long and sometimes difficult negotiations have now led to an important first result. In April 2020, a utility loan agreement ("Gebrauchtsleihevertrag") has been signed between the Canton of Berne as lender and the CMS as borrower.



Figure 4: One of the many meetings of the CMS track group (from left to right Michel Ummel, Hanspeter Jecker, Daniel Engel. Not on the picture: Ernest Geiser)

Under this agreement, the rooms of the cell wing in the castle building (approx. 120m² plus 40m² corridor) will be made available to the CMS for use free of charge. The present usage agreement regulates the use of the designated rooms for a temporary exhibition about the regional Anabaptist history and the leitmotifs of Anabaptist faith and life. Due to the given infrastructure, the opening of the exhibition will be limited to the months outside the heating period. We are still looking for good solutions for this point.



Figure 5: Behind this wooden door in the castle courtyard lies the cell wing, which can be used for the exhibition.

The present utility loan agreement begins on June 1, 2020 and is concluded for a fixed period of two years. After this period, the contract can be terminated by either party by giving 6 months' notice. This provision takes account of the fact that the Canton of Berne is planning to sell the castle in the longer term, but that experience has shown that it will take several years to complete such a sale. On the part of CMS, this means that the planned exhibition must be designed in such a way that it can easily be placed at another location - if no new contract with the future purchaser of the castle is concluded.

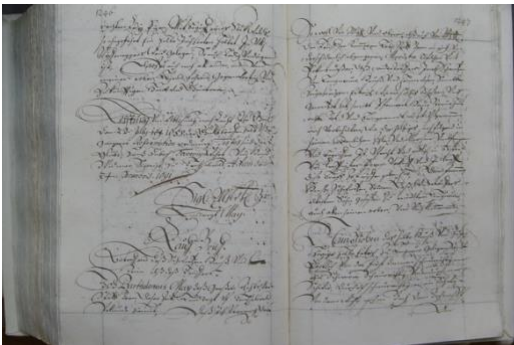


Figure 6: Letter of purchase of confiscated Anabaptist property from the Trachselwald district

The extended CMS track group is already working on the next measures in view of the exhibition opening planned for May 2021. This includes the development and implementation of a concept for content, operations and communication.

This exhibition opens up fascinating perspectives: On the one hand, it provides an opportunity to share about the lives and faith of former Anabaptists in the Emmental (and beyond). On the other hand, it can stimulate reflection about the relevance of these anabaptist positions for the contemporary challenges in politics, society and churches.



Figure 7: For centuries, Anabaptists faced discrimination, repression, and expulsion because of their faith. Many developed new ways of dealing with hatred, injustice, and war. This must be made fruitful for contemporary challenges. (Picture: Collection of relief goods for refugees in Syria and Iraq)

In the practical implementation of this project, the CMS will depend on the commitment of numerous volunteers for the installation and operation of this exhibition, with which we are trying to reach a larger audience from a broader public.

The track group plans to provide detailed information to the CMS congregations in the coming months and invites them to participate.

For the CMS track group: Daniel Engel, Ernest Geiser, Hanspeter Jecker (coordinator), Michel Ummel

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