

Swiss castle envisioned as Anabaptist museum

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Trachselwald Castle in Switzerland, a medieval fortress with an important place in Anabaptist history, is up for sale.



Trachselwald Castle in Switzerland served as a prison for Anabaptists and could become a museum. — Dale D. Gehman

Swiss Mennonites are raising funds to preserve the castle as a museum honoring the memory of Anabaptists who were imprisoned and tortured there as heretics between the 16th and early 18th centuries.

The district of Bern, which owns the castle, would like to sell it for one symbolic Swiss franc. Emmental district governor Markus Grossenbacher recently announced the terms of handing over of the castle to a potential foundation, of which the Swiss Mennonites will be a partner.

To take possession of the castle — worth an estimated 2 million Swiss francs (\$2.2 million U.S.) — the offer has to include a plan for a foundation to keep it financially sound for years to come.

European and North American Mennonites are being invited to participate in fundraising, joining with Swiss congregations and municipalities.

“We need to uphold this symbol and keep it open as a reminder of faith worth more than life and love stronger than death,” said Paul Veraguth, a Swiss Reformed pastor who is helping Swiss Mennonites raise 500,000 francs.

At Trachselwald Castle, Veraguth believes, “the cloud of witnesses can be literally felt more than at any other museum of Anabaptist history.”

Veraguth, who has Anabaptist ancestors, traveled from Pennsylvania to Indiana in late July and early August encouraging U.S. Anabaptists to partner with Swiss Mennonites.

A projected 3.3 million francs are needed to make the castle viable as a museum. Two million francs have been found in public and private foundations. Other funds will come from a lottery that will add 1.2 million francs once the foundation is established.

A project group oversees the castle’s future. It consists of the Emmental governor, local mayors, a representative of Emmental Tours and a Mennonite representative from the Langnau or Jura congregation. Its main goal is to raise funds by the end of the year so the foundation can be established.

Renovations will start next year. The castle has stood empty since 2010 when the district government offices it housed moved to Emmental.

Grossenbacher, the Emmental governor, says the castle is a site of national importance.

“We need to preserve its history — the Peasant’s Revolt, the Reformatory for the Poor . . . and especially the moving history of the Anabaptists,” he said.

Supporters believe it is imperative to preserve this treasure of Anabaptist history. If the castle is sold to a private owner, it could become just another site where tourists stop to take a picture.

Swiss awareness

The Swiss people recently have become more aware of the Anabaptists. Their history books typically gave the Anabaptists no more than a footnote. But in 2003, at a “Heal Our Land” conference in Winterthur, Swiss Reformed clergy asked for forgiveness of Amish and Mennonites for the sins of the past.



Since the 16th century, Anabaptists were held in a prison cell at Trachselwald Castle in Switzerland. Paul Veraguth, left, is a Swiss Reformed pastor who visited U.S. Anabaptists in July and August to encourage them to partner with Swiss Mennonites in raising funds that would protect the fortress as a museum. — Dale D. Gehman

In 2007 the government had a *Täuferjahr* (Anabaptist year) remembering Anabaptist history. North American Mennonites traveled to Switzerland to participate.

But it was a brief segment on a TV show that brought Anabaptists to the nation's attention. The show, *Hot Air Balloon*, features a TV crew traveling around Switzerland by balloon. They land at unplanned stops, go to the nearest house and ask for a story.

In 2007, the balloon landed at the "hiding place" near Trachselwald Castle, where a barn with a hidden room protected Anabaptists from hunters seeking to turn them over to authorities.

The prime-time TV exposure caused a nation to care about what had been done to the Anabaptists.

"They might have heard something, somewhere, sometime, but they did not have an idea of the measure of the whole thing, the size of this persecution and the cruelty or the role that the state or even the church was playing," Veraguth said. "There was a state of shock going through Bern."

Plans for the site

In the project group's plan, the castle tower, with its cells where Anabaptist prisoners were held, will be open for visitors at no charge. The tower will illustrate Anabaptist history and the Peasants' Revolt of 1653.

The courtyard will show the castle's use and expansion. The hall will have an exhibit on the Emmental region. The upper two levels will feature a special events area and Anabaptist history exhibits.

The complete plan can be seen at trachselwald-castle.ch.

The website has a two-part video about the castle and tourist sites. The Hesston (Kan.) College Choir played a major part in this video, providing music in different locations of the castle.

A calendar with photos from the castle and Bible verses can be purchased from the site. In the near future the site will offer means to donate to the project.

To donate directly to the project, checks can be made to Anabaptist Reconciliation, memo: "for Trachselwald." Mail to Light of Hope CSO, 426 South Queen St., Lancaster, PA 17603. Light of Hope is a 501(c3) organization, and receipts will be mailed to donors. By Dec. 31, Light of Hope will wire the donations to the Swiss Mennonite account for the Trachselwald project.