

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
HERMAN FREDERICH BELSER
(1862 - 1900)

The place of my birth is Mössingen and is a large village (market place) with 4,000 inhabitants. It lies in the lovely Steinlach Valley in Würtemoerg at the foot of the Farrenberg, a beautiful single foothill of the Swabian Alps about 3 hours south of the well known Würtemberg University town of Tubingen.

My father Joseph Belser was schoolmaster in Mössingen, besides he conducted a private seminary in which he trained young men in the profession of teaching. Only special gifted teachers in Würtemoerg could have this special privilege. He likewise was born in Mössingen and was the teacher in that town from the time he began his career until his death, which was 32 years.

My mother was Louise Kegelen. She was born in Düszligen one hour from Mössingen where her father was a notary. But since her mother died soon after her birth her grandmother in Mössingen took her and raised her as her own child.

I was born March 13, 1829 the second child. Marie my sister being two years older. Later she became the wife of Karl Ehrhardt in Altburg at Calw. She died two years ago. Then I had two younger brothers, Gustave and Paul. The former was a candidate for notary but since he was to become a soldier, and did not want to be, fled to America in 1853 the same year that I emigrated. He never let us hear anything of him and I assume that he must have died soon after he came here. My younger brother was a teacher and came to America in 1860 where I hoped to have him study for the ministry. However I was never privileged to see him. When he landed in New York the Civil war with the south had broken out and since it was thought this would not last long he volunteered into the army. He was in the battle against Richmond under Mc Clellen. He came back safely but died of the dysentery not long after in Baltimore. So now I stand alone being the only one left of my family. My father died in 1851 and my mother six years ago in Altburg at my sister's home.

I have little recollection of my childhood except that as a child I had a terrible disease of the eyes and as a result of this am almost entirely blind in my right eye. Until I

was 12 years old I attended the common district school. Then my father instructed me himself, preferring for me to teach school and until I was confirmed I had no other idea than that I would become a school teacher like my father.

However after my confirmation my father allowed himself to be persuaded by the pastor at Mössingen (Pichler) to allow my brother Gustave and me to study theology.

With this in view he sent both of us to Tubingen to the Lyceum. We had board and room with our uncle Himel whose wife was a sister to my mother.

We were very comfortable with our uncle but this made the course through the Lyceum all the more distasteful to me. I was at once placed in the 4th class partly because of my age and partly because I fulfilled all of the requirements in the German language in that grade. However in Latin I had scarcely made a start and had no Greek at all, while the other students in the class had made considerable advancement in both languages.

So it was expected that I should overtake the other students in those branches. This was extremely hard for me

since I never excelled in either of these studies for I never had a great love for the study of languages. You can imagine how hard this was for me for all my life I had always been a leader of my class.

I did accomplish in 4 years at the age of 18 to complete the work and enter the University.

Of all the teachers at the Lyceum there was only one for whom I had real love. That was Dr. Wildermut, husband of the famous authoress Otille Wildermut. Among other branches he taught principally mathematics in the 4th and 5th class. Of this subject I had then as ever since a great love. Dr. Wildermut seemed very fond of me and it was he who brought me to the study of the German Poets and guided me in this. Also as a student in the University I continued to live with my uncle together with my nephew Firtz Voltz from Mössingen. Later I rented a special room for myself and also had free board and room for six months in the seminary building. This is an old arrangement for indigent students and I belonged to these. My father was not poor but much less was he rich so I was obliged to live very meagerly. Because of this I lost out on all student

activities, participation in which would have given me the utmost pleasure.

As a student I led a quiet, retiring life in company with a few friends of like taste. My chief amusement was walking on the beautiful hills about Tübingen and often I spent the Sundays in Mössingen. Regarding my studies in the first year, I heard attentively the reading of the written lectures, first on philosophy (by Drs. Rerff and Fischer) and then on theology (by Drs. D.D. Ewald, Baur, Beck Schmidt and Landerer). My study periods in the university were perhaps more distasteful to me than were those in the Lyceum. My best effort was then already not only to gain knowledge but truth and coupled with that peace for spirit and heart.

First I sought it in philosophy as the study of the lectures presented it. I not only studied the philosophical system, I live it but I did not find what I sought. Then I sought it in theology but with the same result.

Each of our theologians had a system of his own, one disagreeing with the other. Dr. Beck attracted me the most. At least I have him to thank that the Bible once more became for me the Holy Scripture.

This time was for me a terrible time full of inner warfare day and night without a peace. I then set about to find my own philosophical and theological system which should pacify me. I found it too and out of the Bible but only after a long time and gradually. I had become very tired of listening to the reading of lectures and the last year seldom attended them and longed to get from Tubingen.

This longing too came unexpectedly into a fulfillment but it was not in a pleasant way. But still I saw in it the directing of a gracious God. Namely my father became ill and needed an assistant. So I decided to leave the University and take over his work with the consent of the Dean of Tubingen. I still had one semester to stay there.

So I taught my father's school which consisted of 100 boys 12 to 14 years old. Besides this, I gave instruction to his preparatory teachers. Besides this I had all the

funeral sermons and wedding addresses to deliver which were held in this large village.

My father died of tuberculosis after an illness of 3 months in 1851 only 49 years old.

I was asked to supply his office until the next election would take place. This was delayed a long time because of difficulties over the salary to be paid. So my work as teacher in Mössingen lasted a whole year. In the mean time I often did services for the pastor of Mössingen (Bruegel) by conducting the children's hour on Sunday afternoon. This activity was very good for me for it relieved my unrest for a long period and once again my spirit found rest.

This experience also made me quite proficient as a teacher, which was profitable in later years. Although my inner feeling created in me little desire to go into the ministry in Wurtemberg (hypocrisy was always abhorrent to me) so I decided to take the examination to be in a position to take the place of a teacher. In the spring of 1852 I took the examination but alas my papers showed too plainly my attitude toward the conditions in Wurtemberg to gain the

good will of one Dr. Stirm. But they gave me six months to change my views. Soon after I became Vicar and House teacher with Rev. Ludwig Volter at Zuffenhausen near Ludwigsberg. There was plenty of work there. Every day I had five hours of teaching besides the private lessons to the Reverend's three children and a number of boys at the village who were to learn some subjects not given in the village school.

As Vicar I had the children's hour at Cathachusation every Sunday and often substituted for the pastor at weekday services and in school.

My stay in Zuffenhasuen in the mean time was very agreeable. Especially I shall never forget the friendly wife of the pastor. I never had much association with the Pastor Volter himself except at mealtime. He was very much engaged in literary works and spent most of his time in his study.

Once at the beginning of my work he came into my room and observed the instruction as I gave it too the children. He never came again and left all that work wholly to me. Concerning my stay in Zuffenhausen I should like to state

that it was there that I learned to know the Bishop of Jerusalem (Dr. Gobat). He was the brother-in-law of Volter and came once with his wife for a visit. I received from him as a souvenir, a letter weight made of black stone in the form of a book. The Lord's Prayer was engraved on it in Arabic.

With so much work as I had in Zuffenhausen I had little time for preparation for the examination. Therefore I resigned my position after six months and returned to Mössingen to prepare for the examination during the winter. (But man proposes and God disposes.) During that winter I read in *Cristen Boten* (a paper published by Holfer Burk in Stuttgart) a call for candidates for the ministry to the Evangelical Church in America. The call awakened in me immediately the resolution to follow it. I thought in free America my spirit would find room to develop itself better than would the existing conditions in Wurtemberg. Since a number of families in Mössingen expected to migrate in the spring of 1853, among them were relatives of mine, I resolved to undertake the trip in their company.

We closed a contract with a merchant in Stuttgart named Gast who promised to convey us from Manheim via Bremen to

New York. This included our meals (between decks on the ship, i.e. steerage). On May 12, 1853 we left Mössingen and traveled next to Stuttgart where Helfer Burk gave me the letters of recommendation to America. On the following day I traveled with the conductor who accompanied us to the ship and was to care for us, by way of Heilbron to Manheim where we met my traveling companions. Early in the morning we sailed in a steamboat down the Rhine to Cologne. From there, on the following day, we went by train to Bremen. Here we purchased the things necessary for the long journey and were then taken by steamboat to the Beldenberg Village Brake ten hours below Bremen where our boat lay. It was not a real immigrant ship but a merchant vessel and had first to be arranged amid ships for us. The ship also was not large, 200 immigrants completely filled it. But it was a good ship practically new and was called the Fune. We were obliged to wait five more days before it was ready to sail. On May 26th, 1853 we departed.

Since we could not make our way through the English Channel because of adverse winds we took a course through the North Sea around Scotland. All in all we had a pleasant voyage. No severe storm, but generally adverse wind so we were obliged to zigzag much of the way so our journey lasted

almost 8 weeks. The health of the passengers was very good. No one died but two children (twins) were born. I preached every Sunday from the cabin deck weather permitting. Here I must remark that I was not obliged to make the sea voyage between decks (steerage) like the rest of the people from Mossingen. I was not satisfied there in as much as there were no windows. By having our conductor intercede for me I was given a place in the cabin where it was more agreeable than between decks. However it cost me 10 dollars more. However we had the same meals as those who sailed between decks. We landed at last on the 17th of July 1853 in New York. It was a beautiful Sunday after having a heavy thunderstorm the night before. Here we could see the entrance to the harbor.

In the harbor of New York I held my last address on the ship. The next morning we were about to separate. We did (not?) anchor a little out from shore and we were taken ashore in small boats. On Monday morning we were taken from our steam ship and brought into town. My companions from Mössingen at once made arrangements for the long journey to Cincinnati Ohio, but I stayed back for the time being and tried to find the friend of my youth, Gotthold Ruolf, where I expected to find my brother Gustave. He had

a marble shop but very far distant from the harbor. I found his house without any difficulty but my brother had not yet arrived. So then I sought Rev. Steinle to whom I had a letter of recommendation from Helfer Burk in Stuttgart. He was at that time assistant pastor of St. Mathews Evangelical Lutheran Church in New York. Pastor Stolman was chief pastor. Rev. Stolman received me in a friendly manner and invited me to conduct a Bible class on Wednesday evening. I did that and immediately at the close of service I was asked by one of the men present whether I would consider taking a small congregation near New York. He said he had relatives there and the people there desired very much to have a pastor. He offered to take me there.

This was all right with me, because after the long journey, I desired rest and beside I had very little money. So I consented and the next Saturday we drove out about 20 miles from New York into the state of New Jersey. The place was called Long Hill. On Sunday I preached there, stayed one week and preached twice more. Then it was decided that I should stay and until such time that the parsonage could be made ready, I was to stay with a farmer whose name was Nischmiz (who had been an inhabitant of the Palatinate Pfalzrt) with whom I had stayed the week before. But soon

difficulties presented themselves, which put an end to the whole business. The congregation was a mixture of Lutherans and reformed. The reformed branch wanted a preacher of their school and had already asked a Presbyterian man from Patterson New Jersey to come. His name was Rosentha.

He came while I was there. At first he tried to convert me to join the Presbyterian Church and made a glowing proposition. But in spite of this I refused. That evening he held a congregational meeting in which he made inviting promises - money support from his congregation if they would join with him. This pleased many of them because the congregation was small, poor and scarcely in a position to meagerly support a pastor themselves. However nothing was definitely decided at this meeting. The next day I went around among the prominent members to learn the sentiments. But what I found out there, decided me to clear the field for I did not want to begin my work with a quarreling congregation. This decision I carried out the next morning and journeyed back to New York. When I arrived at Ruolf's he told me that my brother had arrived in the mean time and that he had gone with a farmer out to his farm. He did not

know where or with whom and I never saw my brother again nor heard from him.

On the advice of Rev. Steinle I decided to turn my steps further west where there seemed to be better opportunities for German pastors. Pastor Steinle gave me a letter of recommendation to a pastor Scheid of Cincinnati. So I left New York on August 13th and went to Cincinnati by way of Buffalo and Sandusky City arriving on the 18th in 1853. Here I sought out my host named Lutz. He was born in Osterdingen near Mössingen and I knew him. He kept a coffee and boarding house (Zum Goldenen Hirsch) the Golden Deer on Main Street. Here I also met some of my traveling companions from Mössingen but only not the one I most hoped to find. That was John Miller formerly of the church council in Mössingen. He emigrated a widower with two children. Why I do not know. He was in good financial circumstances. I had learned to love him very much on the trip across the sea and I looked forward to meeting him again in Cincinnati where he worked. Now I was in a particularly bad situation. My money had melted away so that I only had \$2.00 and no one seemed to know anything about Reverend Scheid to whom I had a letter of recommendation. So I decided to seek any kind of work and

earn money before making further effort to get a preaching position. So I soon found a place in one of the large pig slaughterhouses, which has earned the title of "percepolis" for Cincinnati. But here again the old saying came true "man proposes and God disposes." On the very day I secured the position in the slaughterhouse I became acquainted with a preacher in Cincinnati by the name of Grassow. He told me he had besides his city congregation, a country charge which he would gladly turn over to me if I cared to take it and invited me to drive out with him the very next day to clear up the matter. I naturally consented and drove out with him about 12 miles from Cincinnati. After the services the pastor Glassow talked with the congregation in my behalf and it was decided that I should come and teach school and preach several times and then they would decide. So on September 18th I moved out and on the 19th school began in the church with three children. To board and room they had placed me in the home of an Englishman by the name of Bean where another schoolteacher boarded. It was a very decent family. After teaching school a few days my foot became sore so I could not leave the house. During this time there was a funeral of a child and I was obliged to preach, sick or well. On Sunday October 2nd Glassow was to come but failed to do so and since there were only four

persons attending the service it was omitted. In the afternoon I visited a Lutheran Minister in the neighborhood by the name of Pollak. I wanted more information concerning the conditions in the congregation, which I was to serve, for I heard he had been pastor of it. What I heard here was of such a nature that I lost all desire to stay longer since I had already seen and heard much that did not please me. Since Mr. Pollak offered me his home until I should find another place I accepted his offer with thanks. The next day I notified the deacon of the church of my decision where upon he and his wife abused me beautifully.

Pastor Pollak with whom I now lived was a member of the Missouri Synod. He made a very good impression on me and what he told me about his Synod pleased me too, so that not much argument was necessary to win me to join it. Pastor Pollak now advised me to go to Fort Wayne Indiana where the president of the Synod Dr. Sihler lived and where also the practical preseminary of the Synod was located under Dr. Kramer.

By help of the Missouri congregation in Cincinnati I was put in financial position to undertake the trip. I

traveled by canal boat for at that time there was no Rail Road from Cincinnati to Fort Wayne. The trip consumed a whole week and was most tiresome in view of the fact that it rained most of the time. Arriving at Fort Wayne on the 27th of October I at once tried to locate Dr. Sihler. He had however gone on a trip and would not be back for several days. But Mrs. Sihler took me into her house and I slept with Dr. Sihler's assistant Pastor Follinger and ate with the Sihler family. Informed by Mr. Sihler that there was another Lutheran pastor in Fort Wayne and that he was a Wurtenberger by the name of Hofstetter, I at once located him and found in him to my great joy an old friend and fellow student at Tubingen with whom I had lived in the new building. He also had not been in this country a long time and had a small congregation in Fort Wayne, which had separated from Dr. Sihler's congregation because of a quarrel. Hofstetter belonged to the Ohio Synod and described to me the picture of the Missouri Synod in a light so that I no longer desired to join it. When Dr. Sihler returned I therefore explained to him at once my resolution that I expected to join the Ohio Synod and moved to Hofstetters.

He at once wrote in my behalf to the president of the Northern District of the Ohio Synod by the name of Beilberg. However before the answer came back, I had a request to come to Huntington Indiana, 25 miles from Fort Wayne, to take over a congregation there. I went there on Hofstetter's advice again on a canal boat. I was not familiar with the conditions there. Only this I knew, those who wanted me had likewise left a Missouri congregation. I held my first service in the courthouse for the church was still in the possession of the opposing party. However in the course of the week the court opened the church to me so that on the next Sunday I could preach there. The people unanimously chose me to be their pastor and I, tired of this continual moving about, accepted the call on November 13th in spite of the fact that the conditions were in no way attractive.

The congregation was small and could scarcely collect \$100 for my support. Added to this was the quarreling of the Missouri faction. My board and room I had for a while at first with a member of the congregation named Poler who lived near the church. He had a stone quarry near the house and he was a lime burner. I stayed with him all winter without paying anything. There was a parsonage at

the church, however the Missouri pastor (Stecher) still lived there until the following spring. When he moved out I set up quarters in the church. This was a frame structure about 12 feet high. On the east end were two quite small rooms partitioned off for a parsonage. One was my study and from this a door led to the church, which served also on weekdays as a schoolhouse. The place where the church stood was very nice and there were 3 acres of land, which lay on the hill from which the whole town and the entire Wabash Valley could be seen. I prepared my own breakfast and supper. I received from a sympathetic church member a broken cook stove which did me good service. In the morning I cooked my coffee and smoked my pipe and in the evening I smoked my pipe and cooked my coffee and had bread many times more than I liked since the women of the church supplied this plentifully. The noon meal I took with members of the congregation without any pay.

Since the Ohio Synod was to meet in 1854, I decided to go to the meeting in as much as I wished to join this group in spite of the fact that I was suffering from intermittent fever, which was very prevalent in Huntington. On October 1st 1854 I started out at 10 o'clock at night by canal boat for Fort Wayne where I arrived the next morning. There I

met Hofstetter who was about to leave Fort Wayne for Toledo Ohio where he had taken a congregation. Also his successors P. Kkleinegens and P Borchers, who he had installed the day before, traveled along. We arrived in Toledo Ohio on Tuesday morning and stayed there all night with the Lutheran Pastor Ritter whom Hofstetter was to succeed. I had scarcely arrived when I suffered an attack of fever and was obliged to go to bed. With a few doses of medicine I conquered it again so that I could travel with the other pastors on Friday to New Washington Ohio (Crawford County) where Synod was to meet. We traveled on the Rail Road to Plymouth where we arrived as night approached. From here we were obliged to ride by wagon 12 miles and I arrived in New Washington very much exhausted. I asked to be assigned to my quarters at once. It was not very far from town with a farmer named Biber. On October 7th the meeting of Synod was opened in the old log church by Reverend Beilharz who up to this time had been president. In his place Pastor Lang of Fremont was elected. On Sunday occurred the declaration of the new church in New Washington by president Lang with the help of Pastor Beilharz and Pastor Grätz the local pastor. On Monday candidates Michaelis, Karnbaum and I were examined by the Synod and on that evening we were solemnly ordained. With

my ordination I was requested to leave Huntington since the Synod did not wish to continue the quarrel with Missouri and Dr. Sihler had made a complaint against me. I gave my promise since I did not like Huntington and there was not much prospect that the congregation would grow. I also had a prospect near New Washington before leaving there and was asked to preach there the next Sunday. However I was again attacked by the fever and did not feel myself in condition to preach but wished to get home as quickly as possible. My host Biber drove me to Bucyrus on Saturday where I could get a train for Fort Wayne but not before Monday. The railway was not quite completed to Fort Wayne so we were obliged to go 5 miles on a cold night in an open wagon to town where I stayed all night in a hotel. I returned to Huntington and became very ill so that I remained in bed for a week (at Pöler's) but then the fever had run its course and I never had it again.

When I announced to the congregation that I must leave they were very much displeased and begged and entreated me to stay at least until they had the prospect for another minister. I allowed myself to be persuaded even though I already had my call to Sandusky Ohio. But I stayed the whole year longer. However in as much as the conditions at

Huntington were no better and the Synod of Ohio earnestly requested that I leave I decided to go in the fall of 1855 and accepted a call to Mansfield Ohio. On the Sunday after Christmas I delivered my farewell sermon and left Huntington on January 1st 1856. A few days before this I became engaged to Mary Kocher who later became my wife and my life companion for many years. She was the daughter of a farmer Mike Kocher. He was a member of my church in Huntington but lived about six miles from town. I often held services in a schoolhouse in his vicinity and hoped to organize a congregation there. I often went to his house and there learned to know his daughter. But since I could not think of marrying in Huntington, I concealed my affection for her until I received the call to Ohio. Then I asked her and received Yes for an answer without much difficulty.

I left Huntington on the first train on the first of January 1856 on the Wabash Rail Road. It was a bitter cold day. Arrived at Fort Wayne I made immediate connection with the Pittsburgh Rail Road and rode to Crestline Ohio where my goods were unloaded. Four miles from here in Gallion Ohio lived Reverend Schaltermundt from whom I should take over the congregation at Mansfield. I drove

out to see him and he took me the next Sunday to Mansfield where I preached and was unanimously elected. On the next Sunday we drove to the two country charges, which I was also to serve 12 and 15 miles away. Here too I was at once elected. So I brought my belongings from Crestline to Mansfield where for the time being I had secured board and room with a tailor by the name of Seibert. His wife was crazy and his children devilish. I had no separate room for myself and in order to keep warm I had to repair to the tailor shop. My salary was small - all told about \$300.00 without free living and besides I had heavy work.

The End

(Note: This text was entered and edited (*italica*) by Karl Arnold Belser in June 2005)