

Preparing for baptism

Seventeen year old Esther is very nervous this evening. It is the Sunday prior to her baptism, and she is going to church tomorrow to read the articles with the rest of the youths who will be baptised next week. She studies "In Meiner Jugend" and the articles all evening. I can only imagine what is going through her mind the next morning. After chores are finished we leave for church. Once there, the other girls in Esther's age group are waiting, and they are all talking about how nervous they are about the upcoming event. They state that what they fear the most is that they shall forget parts of the article they are to read out loud, and although they know that the bishop will help them if they forget something they all seem very eager to get it right. I am waiting in a shed along with the girls to enter the barn where the service is to be held. The boys cannot be seen, but I imagine that they are just as nervous as the girls. When entering the barn, everyone else is already seated, and we shake hands with the church leaders. Two districts are gathered today, as the smallest of them do not have enough church leaders to perform this ceremony on its own. There are two bishops, two ministers and one deacon present, as well as approximately 200 Amish. Normally there are many participants at gatherings like these as this is a very special event. The men and women are seated on benches facing each other, with the youths who are in center of attention today in the front rows. The leaders are seated along one of the walls, to the left of the women, and right of the men. A man calls out a number and all sing from the Ausbund. One of the ministers holds a short sermon followed by a reading from the Scripture. While the first row is standing, the rest of us turn around and kneel by the benches for prayer. We are seated before it is the bishop's turn. He puts his chair closer to the youths, and they start by reciting the articles out loud. There are six girls and five boys gathered in front of the bishop. They begin with the oldest boy followed by the younger ones, and then it is the girls' turn. Since there are only eleven youths and eighteen articles, some of them recite more than one by memory since all articles need to be read today. Before each youth begins, the bishop asks each one if they know their article by heart. If they answer negatively, the bishop will read the article to them. But almost all of them perform without hesitation. As there are two bishops present they share the responsibility between them and change seats halfway through the session. Following each reading, the bishop use some time explaining each article to make sure that all of them understand the proper meaning of it, and therefore also know what they are agreeing to through their baptism. After all eighteen articles have been read and explained the youths are asked several questions about who is the only God, who they believe in and choose to live in accordance with. All the questions are asked eleven times,

and the youths all have the same answer. Then the bishop sits back among the rest of the church leaders. The preparation for the upcoming baptism is now over. The other leaders give their view on today's service. When all the leaders have stated their opinion the members of the church pray one more time, and we sing as closure. The church event ends as usual with a meal.