THE MOTHER OF THE REFORMATION

The Amazing Life and Story of Katharine Luther

by Ernst Kroker

Translated by Mark E. DeGarmeaux

Peer Reviewed
INTRODUCTION

On the four hundredth anniversary of her birth [thus in 1899], Katharine von Bora, Luther’s “Katie,” found a noted biographer in Albrecht Thoma. With equal diligence and love, Thoma gathered together all the little passages that had come down to us about her life and her character and tried to compile them into a unified presentation. He called his work a historical biography.

With the nature of what has been passed down to us, it is not really possible to write a life history of Katie. We will have to content ourselves with a depiction of her life and character. The individual pieces do not make up a complete colorful painting, but, put together, they are like a mosaic. A mosaic cannot compete with an oil painting either in splendor of color or in the richness of details or the refinement of the transitions. Yet even with its limitations it has its own artistic rules, and these apply also to our picture of Katie’s life. Here, too, the most important task is to insert the countless little pieces in the right place and to emphasize the outlines of the picture clearly, but certainly also to keep the whole thing tightly together.

The presentation that Thoma has given us—apart from individual mistakes—suffers from a certain unevenness of treatment. The author tries again and again to take up the biographic thread, which is thin from the very outset, and with Katie’s marriage is cut off for a period of twenty years. Other people’s engagements and weddings, visits and travels, diseases and deaths give no picture of her life. Through what has come down to us, we are led, rather, to a three-part arrangement of the rich material. The first parts, which discuss her youth, are essentially biographical; the next parts, which describe her as homemaker, wife, and mother, gives us the foundation of her character; and the last parts, which tell of the hard times of her widowhood, are again biographical. Finally, in a summary and closing section, the picture of her character is brought out as precisely and as true to life as possible.
I think I can be confident that my portrayal is based on the best witnesses. However, the scholarly proofs are lacking, which—I hope—most readers will not really miss; for the wider audience, an abundance of notes is useless. For the narrow circle of scholars, I have followed one of the important sources about Luther and Katie’s life, so I don’t particularly need to justify that here. For this I may refer to the introduction to my publication of Luther’s Table Talk in the Mathesi collection. My essay “Katharine von Bora, Her Birthplace and Her Youth” in the New Archive for Saxon History and Archaeology, Volume 26 (Dresden 1905), pages 251–73, forms the scholarly basis for the first section of this book. Those are the introductory words, which I gave by way of the first edition of my book in the year 1906, also. Since then, with the celebration of the Reformation anniversary in 1917, several new biographies of Katie have appeared. How these books are related to my book, their authors probably know best. As the publishing house of Johannes Herrmann in Zwickau, Saxony, publishes a second edition of my book at the forthcoming commemoration of Luther and Katie’s marriage, on June 13, 1925, it is with the desire of bringing the book to a wider audience. The text did not need to go through thorough changes; one will notice some additions and correction in details, however, in numerous places.

Leipzig, Easter 1925
Ernst Kroker
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FROM NIMBSCHEN TO WITTENBERG

Luther in the Monastery

In 1505, a short time after her father brought Katie to the convent school at Brehna, Pope Julius II made the momentous decision to replace the old venerable Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome with a splendid new building according to the plans of Bramante.1 About the same time, on July 17, 1505, in the university city of Erfurt a young law student, Martin Luther, stood at the gate of the Augustinian monastery, seeking admission. The foundation stone for Saint Peter’s was laid on April 16, 1506 in the presence of the Pope and numerous church princes. The reconstruction was to set the power and the glory of the papacy before the eyes of the whole Christian world. In the quiet Augustinian monastery, however, a young monk, who almost despaired from pangs of conscience, and after years of struggling in his soul, would come to the realization that this papacy in all its power and glory was of no help to the desperate soul. His stay in the monastery, where he had hoped to find peace, became for him only the preparation for a whole life full of struggles, but also full of victories and rich in blessings.

Doctor Johann von Staupitz cast the first light into Luther’s clouded mind. This distinguished, pious, well-educated man, for whom Luther retained the most heartfelt gratitude his whole lifetime, had been the Vicar General of the Augustinian Order since

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1 Donato Bramante, Italian architect and painter, born about 1444; died in Rome, March 11, 1514.
1503. For Luther he became a second father, a spiritual father. Staupitz tore Luther from his self-tormenting brooding over sins that were not sins, and comforted him by referring him to God’s all-merciful kindness that does not reject the penitent. He filled him with faith in the Redeemer through whom we become partakers of divine grace. His astute and expert insight detected at the same time, however, that a fiery spirit such as this ought not to be smothered in the oppressive silence and narrowness of the monastery. At his instigation Luther stepped out of his monastic cell and into university professorship. Soon afterward, he was appointed as a professor at the new University of Wittenberg. Luther moved from Erfurt to Wittenberg at the same time Katie went from Brehna to Nimbschen, at the end of 1508.

Luther in Wittenberg

Even in Wittenberg, Luther lived as a brother of the Order in the monastery of the Augustinians, the Black Friars, as they were called due to their black cowls. A return to Erfurt, a pilgrimage to Rome, the return to Wittenberg, his promotion to Doctor of Theology, and his quiet activity as a teacher at the University and a preacher in the parish church and in the monastery filled the next year of his life. Luther’s brothers and superiors had confidence in him and selected him as subprior in 1512 and made him district vicar in 1515 over the ten Augustinian monasteries of Saxony. Several like-minded friends already saw him as their leader: friends like George Spalatin, the influential court chaplain of Elector Fredrick the Wise; Wenceslaus Link, the prior of the Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg; and Johann Lang, who likewise moved from Erfurt to Wittenberg, but returned to Erfurt in 1516 as prior of the Augustinian monastery there.

Luther’s name was still rarely mentioned in wider circles. From the second decade of the sixteenth century, we have several handwritten lists of scholars who were considered the most important in Germany at that time. Henning Göde and Christoph Scheurl were named among the lawyers in Wittenberg, and among the theologians, Andreas Karlstadt; but Luther’s name is absent.
An external cause pushed him onto the battleground where his powerful figure soon towered above them all. The new building of Saint Peter’s, the beginning of which had coincided with his entrance into the monastery, continued to exert a most crucial influence on his future life. The amounts of money, which the foundations had already devoured, were enormous. It was said that the building was just as deep below ground as it would rise later above ground. In order to bring in funds, a new indulgence was announced to Christendom. This business was brought to Germany by Archbishop Albrecht, the Hohenzollern, who in an unprecedented move, and against church law, gained control of the two archdioceses of Magdeburg and Mainz and the bishopric of Halberstadt. On his behalf, Johann Tetzel traveled throughout central Germany with the indulgence coffer, and the shameless way in which this Dominican monk ran the ugly business forced Luther to emerge from his seclusion. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

The Reformation Begins

That trumpet blast was the call to battle, and Luther did not shrink from the decision, even though at the beginning only a handful gathered around him when he so boldly sounded the rallying cry. One of the greatest scenes in the drama of world history is when this simple monk in the little city of Wittenberg with only Holy Scripture in his hand stepped onto the field against the Bishop of Rome, who called himself Pope and his church’s princes! Was it any wonder that Luther was at first willing to have things better explained to him?

But in their blindness the papists did not want understanding; they required absolute submission. The rather light skirmishes with cardinal legate Cajetan in Augsburg and with the papal chamberlain Karl von Miltitz in Altenburg were quickly followed by the Great Disputation with Eck at the Pleissenburg in Leipzig in 1519. The next year, 1520, brought the three powerful polemical writings of Luther: To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, The Freedom of the
Christian—each writing, a new campaign; each attack, a new victory.

Luther Excommunicated

The excommunication launched by the Pope, bounced off without effect. But the brainstorms of the German monk flashed brilliantly, blow by blow, against the Roman papacy and its self-made dominion. With his head held high, Luther stood before the Emperor in Worms on that fateful day of April 18, 1521. Restless in the Wartburg, he began the greatest work of his life, the translation of the Bible into the German language. On March 5, 1522, when he returned from the Thuringian mountains to Wittenberg, which was shaken with unrest, he was ready for the task that was waiting for him: to lay the groundwork for a renewed church, amidst general tumult. Holy Scripture was to be the foundation stone, and the church was not to become a showy building like Saint Peter’s. He and his co-workers simply and faithfully added stone upon stone. Resolutely he deterred the storms and agitators; he opposed revolution with all his might. His life’s work would be the Reformation.

From Monk to Reformer

Outside in the fresh air of the mountain forests of Thuringia, Luther had become a different person as well. He was no longer the emaciated monk (someone in Leipzig had thought one could count all his bones). His body had become fuller, his attitude self-confident. This is how the young Swiss Johann Kessler, who studied in Wittenberg 1522–23, describes him:

When I saw Martin in 1522 when he was forty-one, he had a natural, rather strong, upright bearing, so that he leaned more backwards than forwards, with head held high toward heaven, with deep dark eyes and eyebrows, blinking and twinkling like a star that can’t be ignored.
One phrase in Kessler’s description could easily be misunderstood and actually was. At that time the words, “a natural, rather strong person” [\textit{ainer natürlich zimlichen faiste}], did not mean that Luther was “rather fat” [\textit{ziemlich feist}], but the exact opposite, that he had a strength that seemed to fit his medium built and his natural age, that is, naturally; it was only later that he became fat.

We also encounter his stately appearance, still youthfully strong despite his forty-some years, in Cranach’s paintings of the young bridal couple soon after his wedding with Katie. By this time he had already gotten rid of the full beard he had come home with from the Wartburg. “Luther got married,” Desiderius Erasmus scoffed in 1525, “yes, encouraged and urged by his brothers, he even set aside the ascetic’s mantle and the philosopher’s beard.” Already in 1523, in the rooms of his monastery, Luther wore secular clothing instead of the monk’s cowl, and on October 9, 1524 he even stood in the pulpit for the first time without his cowl. Since then, instead of the monk’s hood, he wore the biretta that came to him as a Doctor of Theology. And instead of the cowl that was held together by a cincture, he wore a wide doctor’s robe that came down far past the knee, the so-called \textit{Schaube}. This old garment, with small modifications, is retained in the robe of the Protestant clergy even to our time.

Erasmus was quite well informed when he wrote that Luther had laid aside his cowl only at the urging of his closest friends. Later Luther himself repeatedly said that his cowl was quite threadbare and patched when Elector Fredrick sent him a piece of cloth and told him that he should have a robe or a cap made for himself. And the prince had said to Spalatin, that even if Luther wanted to have a Spanish cap made—Spanish dress had first come into the empire as the latest fashion only with Emperor Charles V and his attendants—then who could blame him for that? But his friends urged him for a long time before he wore secular clothing. Even in this relatively small matter we see his basically conservative character, which required only that he live in accord with all the main points of Holy Scripture and remove whatever was against the will of God. But in lesser matters he wanted to
preserve the old and avoid any coercion. In his writings, however, and especially in the Latin treatise *Concerning Monastic Vows*, written while he was still at the Wartburg, he had taken up the right for everyone else to leave the monastery, to lay aside the outward signs of monasticism, and to get married, but no one should be forced into it.

Luther continued to live in the Black Cloister at Wittenberg with his Prior, Eberhard Brisger, even when they were the last two brothers of the Order in the deserted building. For many more years he put up with his miserable strawbed and meager food. It was very difficult for him to make the decision to marry. While others rushed to put his teachings into practice, many with selfish ulterior motives, any thought about this at all for himself was quite distant. He held his followers back, rather than pushing them, for he knew that the seed that was sown needed time to mature. He wanted hearts to be won first; he wanted people to be sure of things, before outward rules might be changed. He wanted to proceed step-by-step. They were actually giant steps, and the ground rumbled and erupted under them.

### The Reformation Spreads

From the passing of the old way, however, new life sprang up everywhere, and hearts opened willingly to the teachings that were proclaimed from Wittenberg. With lightning speed Luther’s writings flew across the country. Even if the Emperor and Pope wanted to outlaw and ban them and subject them to the fire, and even if zealous abbots and abbesses still wanted to keep the windows of their cloisters tightly barred—still the living Word hurdled the barricades that had been placed on the printed word, and even the printed writings found ways and means of passing secretly from hand to hand despite the supervision of the authorities. If Luther’s doctrine made its way even into such a strictly guarded convent as Neuenhelfta, how could someone like Margarete von Haubitz have protected her Nimbschen convent?

A half hour from Nimbschen was the Electoral city of Grimma. The majority of the inhabitants were evangelically minded, and in the Augustinian monastery at Grimma many monks also cheered
for their great brother in the Order at Wittenberg. The Saxon nobleman Wolfgang von Zeschau was the Prior of the monastery. He voluntarily resigned his position in 1522 and with a number of like-minded brothers withdrew from the Order. He became hospital chaplain of the Johannite Hospital of the Holy Cross in Grimma, later (from 1531) he was pastor in nearby Hohnstädt. Two of his relatives, however, now lived in the Nimbschen convent, the two sisters Veronika and Margarete von Zeschau, perhaps his nieces. They escaped from the convent along with Katie. Although we have no express testimony that this Wolfgang von Zeschau arranged the introduction of Luther’s teachings into Nimbschen, the assumption is that he very likely did. Through his relationship with the two sisters, access to the convent was easier for von Zeschau than for others. However, the alleged underground passage leading from the Cistercian convent in Nimbschen to the Augustinian monastery in Grimma that would have allowed “godless” nuns to meet with “apostate” monks and “wicked” evangelical preachers in Grimma, and the rumored tryst Katie was supposed to have granted Doctor Luther at a spring in the forest near the cloister, the so-called Luther Well—these are all ridiculous fables.

Katie Escapes the Convent

The Nimbschen nuns only dared turn to Luther, who, of course, had more important things to do in Wittenberg, when every other assistance failed them; when in their distress, as Luther himself reports, they knew no other way out than to escape from the convent. Luther’s doctrine had taken away everything that had previously given meaning to their lives: the belief that they had done a God-pleasing work with their vow of chastity, the hope of securing for themselves the right to a place in heaven through penitential exercises and monastic discipline, trust in the merit and intercession of the saints and the power of their relics to grant indulgence. What Luther’s doctrine promised them—the sure confidence of God’s grace and inner peace—they could attain only outside the convent walls in a pious, active life, faithful to their duties. Nine nuns were ready to break their vows and leave

First they wrote to their parents and relatives, urgently asking their help in getting out of the convent since “such a life in order to save their soul was no longer tolerable to them.” They would gladly do and endure everything else as obedient children. Their relatives’ responses were negative, as was to be expected. The Gospel had not yet grown in the hearts of these simple landed gentry, to the extent that they would daringly and fearlessly be willing to lend a hand to an act that was so risky and so unprecedented as was planned by the nine girls in leaving the convent. Also, for most of them the reason they had intended their daughters for the religious estate was certainly the same as it had been with Katie’s parents. For the poorer landed gentry, the convents served as an institution of support for their daughters, and in the Catholic period no one had taken offense at that.

Abandoned by their families, the nine nuns sought Luther’s advice and assistance, and Luther regarded it as his Christian obligation to assist them in their predicament. Since their superiors would never voluntarily let them go, they had to be abducted from the convent, secretly and sneakily, because force could not be used, if only on account of the Elector, who for all his gentleness nevertheless would have punished an open breach of the public peace. The operation was dangerous enough anyway, because abducting a nun was threatened with the death penalty.

But Luther knew a man who had enough courage and cunning to bring the risky undertaking to a successful conclusion and who at the same time was protected from every vile suspicion by his prestigious position and his dignified age: Leonhard Koppe. Coming from an old Torgau family, he was fifty-nine at that time and was a universally respected and educated man, having proven himself in several offices. Beginning in 1495, he had studied for several years in Leipzig and in Erfurt, and then he had been councilman from 1504–09 in his home city. Since 1510 he had served the Elector for a while as tax collector in the Torgau district.
We have already heard about his business connections with the Nimbschen convent. With Luther’s repeated visits to Torgau in 1519 and in April 1522, he became better acquainted with Luther.

Koppe, however, did not alone feel up to the undertaking and its dangers; therefore, he secured two hearty comrades. One, his nephew, was probably the younger Leonhard Koppe. The Torgau chronicles report that he participated in the raid on the Torgau convent still during Elector Fredrick’s lifetime and therefore had to flee because of the prince’s wrath. The other, Wolf Dommitzsch, was also a citizen of Torgau and, like the Koppes, he also came from a respectable family who had lived in Torgau for a long time.

We do not know the method Koppe used to communicate with the nine nuns. Perhaps he went to Nimbschen sometime at the beginning of 1523 and secretly discussed the escape with them. Perhaps the hospital manager, Wolfgang von Zeschau in Grimma, took over the arrangements. At any rate, the greatest caution had to be taken, and some notes must have passed back and forth before the day and hour for the escape could be determined. The day when Christ once rose from the dark night of the grave was to bring the poor nuns release from the convent walls. On the night of Easter Eve to Easter Sunday—which in 1523 fell on April 5—they dared the escape, and succeeded, “miraculously enough,” as Luther writes.

Later on, people would tell all kinds of stories about the detailed circumstances of the escape, and even into the nineteenth century every visitor was shown a window with the remnants of old sandstone decoration in the rubble of the convent, whose bare walls are now covered with wild grapevines. This is where Katie’s cell was supposed to have been. Through this window she supposedly began her journey to freedom. But the size of the window should have cautioned the eager storyteller away from locating Katie’s cell in this part of the ruins. The nuns’ narrow cells were certainly not in the tall main building, which are the only remnants still standing.

A precious “relic” is still kept in the modest convent inn, and whoever has rested a while under the high linden trees to eat and drink something after visiting the ruins, would not miss going into the lower pub. Here, in a small glass case, a silk shoe is on display,
a slipper. Katie is supposed to have lost it when she climbed through the window on her escape. But unfortunately the shoe is too elegant for a poor nun and at least two hundred years too late for the first quarter of the sixteenth century!

In the absence of facts, fables were spun. Since it was known that a contemporary reported that the fugitives had to break through a mud wall before they could gain their freedom, it was imagined that Katie escaped in secular clothes dressed like a dancing girl. Another reported that Koppe would have come to meet them in the convent garden and would have helped them climb over the wall. A third person, as we already heard, has them climbing out through the window beforehand. A fourth thinks that, after they had successfully escaped from the close, they probably would have slipped out through the poorly guarded back gate. Finally, a fifth assumed that the gate girl could have been in collusion with them and could have let them through the gate by night. All of these stories are unwarranted speculation. There were many ways for them to escape.

Nuns and Herring Barrels

Concerning the means of the escape, however, an old Torgau chronicler, who lived around 1600, still had definite information. He writes that Koppe, the liberator, abducted the nine noble young girls “from the convent with particular cunning and agility, as though he were bringing out herring barrels.” This chronicler must have known that Koppe drove to Nimbschen rather frequently with herring and that when Koppe arrived with a new shipment, of course, he would have returned to Torgau with the empty barrels from the previous shipment. A more recent Torgau chronicler, who was told about this account of his compatriot, also understood it correctly. He writes in somewhat more detail that Koppe brought the nine nuns out “in a covered wagon, just as if he were bringing the empty herring barrels.” The only things that are new in this more recent account are the specific mentions of empty herring barrels and that Koppe alone brought a covered wagon for the escape. We may regard this latter point, in fact, as confirmation that Koppe came in with a regular freight wagon in order to arouse no
suspicion en route or near the convent. The statement of a contemporary also indicates that Koppe indeed carried the nine girls away in a single large wagon, and not in several carriages.

This simple and in fact truthful account by the Torgau chronicler was later misunderstood in a strange way. A version of the story attests that Koppe actually loaded the empty herring barrels at the convent gates in the middle of the night and inverted one barrel over each nun. The poor things! Later someone took offense at this means of transportation, but still thought they had to keep the empty herring barrels in the story, and so it was assumed that Koppe probably set the barrels up in the front of the wagon like barricades to keep curious eyes from seeing the fugitives sitting behind them. But the Torgau chronicler doesn’t say anything about actual herring barrels at all! He is only comparing the live freight, which Koppe had in his wagon this time, with a load of empty barrels he usually transported as return freight from Nimbschen. The nine girls may simply have been pressed close together under the wagon tarp.

When we were young, we still saw people driving these old freight wagons on the country roads. They could be covered with a tarp on semicircular hoops, and if the large tarp was pulled over it and a broad-shouldered wagon driver sat in front on the driver’s seat in his blue overalls, one would have to have good eyes to detect what was behind him in the wagon. If the fugitives were simply hidden under the tarp, the only precaution they needed to take was to sit very still if, for instance, they met someone walking, and not to give too free a rein to their innate female talkativeness, which probably had not been squelched in the convent, or to rejoice to loudly over their liberation.

Their rescue was still miraculous, even without the fabled empty herring barrels. The fact that there was no traitor among the many who knew about it, that no one carelessly blabbed the secret, that the exchange of letters in which Koppe had to prepare and discuss everything for the escape was not discovered, and finally that nine nuns were able to leave their cells undetected on Easter Eve and escape from the convent unimpeded—all this might have seemed truly miraculous to the man in Wittenberg who awaited
intentely the successful outcome of the bold and indeed risky undertaking. How easily another nun or one of the servants could have come in, even at the last moment, and noticed the large wagon that Koppe and his two companions had waiting in the nearby forest or when they were on the dark road at night! When the wagon with its precious cargo finally rolled through the meadowland toward Grimma, the greatest danger was over, because the convent had no horsemen who could have rushed after the fugitives on horseback and returned them by force. And in the villages they had to travel through, they had to be more afraid of encouragement than interference. Their journey led them through electoral territory, first down along the Mulde and then east to Torgau. They stayed the night there and probably even rested the entire next day, Easter Monday, because they had a long distance behind them and because the trip had not been comfortable. It had been a very bumpy ride on bad roads in their covered wagon.

Katie in Torgau and Wittenberg

Katie’s stay in the city of Torgau was a strange coincidence. At one time this was the cradle of the convent from which she fled. Here she took a short rest when she entered the secular world, and one day this would be her final resting place. The Nimbschen nuns still had patronage over the city’s parish church. Did Katie with her eight companions actually attend Easter Monday service in order to thank the Lord for their marvelous rescue? Perhaps her headstone in the parish church at Torgau is in the very place where she knelt then.

On Easter Tuesday, the fugitives drove on to Wittenberg. One of the Torgau clergymen, Master Gabriel Zwilling, called Didymus in Latin, is thought to have led them. The trip from Torgau to Wittenberg was not as far as the distance from Nimbschen to Torgau. It was probably still daylight when they approached Luther’s city through the Elbe floodplain and over the bridge. The city was situated along the right bank of the river in front of them. In the west the stately edifice of the Electoral Castle rose proudly, behind it the Castle Church where just six years earlier Luther’s hammer blows on the door had stirred an echo that resounded
throughout the world and roused the silent monasteries. In front of them the Parish Church rose above low roofs in the north. Two years later, Katie, who fled as a nun, would attend church here for the first time as a married woman at Luther’s side. Further to the east were the high gables of the University and Melanchthon’s house situated between homes of other citizens. To the extreme east, bare and plain, was the long structure of the Black Cloister where Luther lived, and thus where Katie, as the Doctor’s wife \textit{[Frau Doktorin]}, would find the greatest happiness of her life in tenderly caring for her husband and her children.

The arrival of the covered wagon with the nine nuns drew a lot of attention in Wittenberg. Later, on May 4, 1523, the young Austrian Wolfgang Schiefer, who was studying with Luther and Melanchthon at that time, sent a letter to his former teacher, Beatus Thenanus in Basel. At the end of the letter he mentions the arrival of the nuns in Wittenberg as an important bit of news. The wagon was supposedly quite full of nuns, he writes, and with a joking wordplay he adds that they were probably longing for suitors \textit{[Freier, liberators]} as well as for liberty \textit{[Freiheit]}.

They were given their freedom again, but what would become of them from now on? Luther bore the responsibility for their escape. To him also fell the provision for their future. And he did not shrink from it either.

With the wonderful candor that was his own, he immediately admitted to the act publicly. He had suggested it; he had advised it; he had chosen the man he thought could do it. The whole world should know it; he would defend it. In addition, everyone should know the name of the brave man who had successfully accomplished the task so that the poor girls would be kept from vile gossip. It was during this time that Luther wrote an open letter to the careful and wise Leonhard Koppe at Torgau, his special friend, and also had it published on Friday of Easter week: \textit{Reason and Answer That Young Women May Leave Convents in a Godly Way}. He calls the act a new work that nation and people will sing and talk about. And if others would say phooey to Koppe and call him a robber and a fool for letting himself get caught up with the condemned heretical monk in Wittenberg, then he, Luther, will
instead call him a blessed robber. That he states this and doesn’t keep it secret comes from sincere motives: First, because he does what he does in God, and does not shy away from the light; secondly, so that the honor of the young girls and their relatives is not shamed by venomous tongues that would like to allege that they let themselves be abducted by rogues, while in fact they were brought out of the convent with all decency by respectable men such as Koppe and his companions; and thirdly, that it might be an example to others.

Luther knew that many parents wanted to get their children back from the cloister, where only human work was promoted and the Word of God was never preached to them purely and plainly. “But may one break his vows?” some might ask. Others say: “One should not give offense!” Luther answers: “God does not want vows that are unchristian and harmful. Offense here, offense there! Necessity breaks all rules⁵ and gives no offense.” Therefore he, who had advised and prayed for the undertaking, takes the responsibility for himself and for Koppe and his companions who carried it out, and for the young women who needed to be released; but also for all who want to follow their example: “I am also certain that in this regard we want to stand blameless before God and the world. We have a judge over us, who will judge righteously.”

At the conclusion of this open letter—so that everything is freely out in the open—he lists the names of the nine girls. He likewise gives their names in a letter he writes to his friend Spalatin on April 10, and he also expressly emphasizes to his friend that they were brought out by respectable citizens of Torgau so that no malicious suspicion may dare to come near them.

On April 11, Nikolaus of Amsdorf, who at that time was still professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, also writes to Spalatin. He calls the refugees poor, miserable, and abandoned by their relatives, but in their great poverty and fear, quite patient and happy. “I pity the girls.” He adds: “they have neither shoes nor clothing.” So even four days after their arrival in Wittenberg the

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⁵ *Not bricht Eisen* [Necessity breaks iron].
nine nuns had to go around in their habits, and certainly not in new robes. So Amsdorf urges his friend to ask the court noblemen and the Elector if they could provide them with food and clothing.

Luther had addressed the same request to Spalatin. He certainly could not feed and clothe the fugitives from his own holdings, which at that time amounted to 9 old Schock, that is, 9 Gulden, and his Wittenbergers were tough Saxons who kept their cash firmly in their purse. But there were rich lords at the court. Spalatin was to ask for support so that the girls could be taken care of for one or two weeks. By that time he hoped to find ways and means. He would first ask the girls’ relatives to take them in. If they were not willing, he would accommodate them elsewhere. Several people had already promised to take one or another into their home and even find a husband for the younger ones. And likewise Amsdorf jokingly writes to Spalatin:

There weren’t nine, but twelve nuns who left. Nine have come to us. They’re beautiful, dignified, and all from the aristocracy. I do not find a fifty-year-old among them. The oldest among them, the sister of my benevolent lord and uncle, Dr. Staupitz, I have appointed for you, my dear brother, to be her husband, so that you may boast about your brother-in-law just as I boast about my uncle. If you want a younger one, however, then you are to have the choice among the most beautiful.

Luther had not yet contacted the Elector. Did he simply want to wait and see how the prince would take the news about nine nuns being abducted from a convent that was under his sovereignty? Finally on April 22, in a second letter he did ask the Elector through Spalatin for support for the poor girls: “Oh, I want to keep it secret from him and tell no one!” He did not ask in vain. Fredrick the Wise maintained the same attitude, in this matter also, that had enabled him so far to keep his hand over Luther and his work, protecting him from emperor and empire. Even if he only dared to slowly follow Luther’s turbulent progress, and even if in his inmost heart he still might have doubted whether it was possible for a nun
to break her vows, it was not up to him as the prince to make decisions in religious disputes. It was his princely obligation to punish only where there was violence. He did not want to intervene in questions of conscience. Some weeks later on June 9, when the abbess of Nimbschen and also the abbott Petrus of Pforte as superintendents of the Nimbschen convent submitted their complaint to Fredrick that the convent was ruined with the help of his subjects, he rejected this, answering on June 13:

Since we do not know how this happened and who incited the girls from the convent to undertake this, and since we have never dealt with this and similar matters before, we leave it to their own responsibility.

Fredrick also held back when the example of the Nimbschen nuns had the effect Luther expected. The convent in Nimbschen lost half of its residents within two years. Three others escaped almost at the same time as the nine girls who had regained their freedom on Easter Eve 1523. Since, according to Amsdorf’s account, they did not come to Wittenberg, they had probably each turned to their relatives. Again, on Pentecost, three girls were demanded from the convent by their own relatives. Others followed. Even Katie’s aunt, Magdalena von Bora, left the convent. At the end of 1525 there were only twenty nuns in Nimbschen. From the convent Beutitz in the province of Weissenfels eight nuns had fled; from Wiederstedt in the Mansfeld district sixteen fled at one time.

Throughout the country, the “exodus” had begun. It even reached over into the Ducal Saxony. What use was it that George the Bearded had Heinrich Kelner, the citizen of Mittweida who had abducted a nun from the convent Sornzig, beheaded in Dresden and disgracefully had his body put on a stake above the gallows? After six noble young girls from Sornzig had already fled on April 28, 1523, thirteen more nuns, with Luther’s help, escaped from the regions of the Duke on the night of September 29, 1525, and this time also Leonhard Koppe, the “convent robber” and “Father Prior” as Luther jokingly called him, seems to have had a hand in it. And the cases where we have more detailed accounts are certainly only
a small part of what really happened. The infection, from which the country was to be protected, was more powerful than all prevention.

In the monasteries for monks, the exodus had already started earlier. Many of the monks and nuns who fled found lodging or a little work in their homeland or with their relatives who fed them fairly well. Many, however, came to Wittenberg. Luther was supposed to help them, and in his poverty he untiringly helped them with advice and assistance. In this regard he was not spared some very bad experiences. Among the defectors were some who had not taken to heart the word about the freedom of a Christian, but only talked about it. Luther unsuspectingly condescended also to help hypocrites and cheats. He must have experienced the most aggravating disappointments. And he learned the meaning of the proverb that says: “the fish belongs in the water, the thief on the gallows, the monk in the monastery.”

The Future of the Refugees

What later happened to the nine nuns can show us how Luther provided for those in his charge. His appeals through letters were received favorably wherever their relatives lived in Electoral Saxony and could be assured the protection of their lord, but in the event that they refused, they could expect Luther’s repeated and rather sharp reminder of their obligation. Of the nine girls, six were able to leave Wittenberg again after short time.

Magdalena von Staupitz was the oldest of the nine, but according to Amsdorf’s account she was not yet fifty years old. She had been in the convent since 1501. She was a sister of the famous Vicar General of the Augustinian Order, Johann von Staupitz, who now lived in Salzburg as abbot of the Benedictine Cloister of Saint Peter. Another brother, Günther von Staupitz, was in Motterwitz near Leisnig. Magdalena lived with him for a while after the escape. At Luther’s recommendation, in 1529 “with honor and thanks to her brother Dr. Johann Staupitz” she received from the excise officers³ a little house in Grimma, which was situated on the

³ Visitatoren.
Mulde, south of the old Augustinian Cloister, which had previously owned it. Here she established a girls’ school, the first in Grimma. When the Electoral debt-collectors wanted to take the house back again in 1531, Luther forcefully intervened and protected her in her property. She married Tiburtius Geuder, a citizen of Grimma, and died in 1548.

**Elsa von Canitz** perhaps came from the branch of the family that had lived at Thallwitz (Dallwitz) near Wurzen. Yet in 1527 she was not in Thallwitz, but at Eiche, which is probably the farmstead at Eiche between Leipzig and Grimma, a much-visited place of pilgrimage in Catholic times. Since 1525 it had been the property of the electoral knight and counselor Hans von Minckwitz. On August 22, 1527 Luther writes to the “honorable and virtuous young lady Elsa von Kanitz, now at Eiche” that she is to come to Wittenberg to teach young girls. He offers her room and board in his house—he had married Katie in the meantime—and asks her not to refuse. We do not know whether she heeded his invitation. In 1537 she also had a house in Grimma.

**Laneta (Lonatha) von Gohlis**, of unknown descent, was close to thirty years old, so she had been in Nimbschen since she was a very young girl. She had a sister in Colditz, found refuge with her, and married a pastor in Colditz on August 24, 1523. However, a shepherd killed her husband just a few weeks later. She was married a second time in 1527 to Pastor Heinrich Kind in Leisnig.

Likewise **Ave Grosse**, raised in the convent from childhood on, came from a knightly family that lived north of Grimma at Trebsen on the left bank of the Mulde. Her brother Magnus had also taken Holy Orders and had fled from the Benedictine Cloister in Chemnitz shortly before her escape. Two other brothers, Reinhard and Christoph, had taken over their father’s property at Trebsen, but soon sold it to Hans von Minckwitz. Ave Grosse was later married to Hans Marx (Marcus) in Schweinitz.

**Veronika and Margarete von Zeschau**. Just a little north of Trebsen to the right of the Mulde lies Obernitzschka, the property of Heinrich of Zeschau. His daughters Veronika (Luther inadvertently calls her Katharine in his letter to Spalatin; it is corrected as Veronika in his open letter to Leonhard Koppe) and
Margarete had been in the convent since 1505. Since Obernitzschka was a fiefdom of Electoral Saxony, the two sisters would have returned to their father’s property. Or did they find accommodation with their uncle, the head of the infirmary, Wolfgang von Zeschau, in Grimma? Nothing more about their life is known.

Parents and siblings of the three other nuns were subjects of Duke George the Bearded, and with them Luther’s appeal had no chance of success. If they did not want to provoke the anger of their lord on themselves, they had to treat their disobedient children as lost children or at least make it seem to the prince as if they did.

Sisters **Margarete and Ave von Schönfeld** were the daughters of George von Schönfeld at Löbnitz and Kleinwölkau near Delitzsch. Since the two girls could not return to their relatives, Luther had to accept on their behalf eager offers from those who were willing to help. Perhaps both the Schönfeld girls stayed in Cranach’s house in Wittenberg until they got married. Luther took a certain fancy to Ave. One time he later publicly stated that, if he had wanted to get married at that time, he probably would have chosen Ave von Schönfeld, because he considered his Katie to be proud; but he wasn’t sure about getting married at that time. Ave von Schönfeld soon married the young physician Basilius Axt, who had studied in Wittenberg and at that time managed Cranach’s pharmacy. As a doctor of medicine, he was later physician of Duke Albrecht of Prussia, the loyal patron of Luther and his household. Ave’s sister Margarete later married the Braunschweig nobleman von Garssenbüttel.

And **Katharine von Bora**? Her father was probably no longer living. The fact that he is not mentioned during these weeks is not especially noteworthy, considering the fragmentary condition of what has been passed on to us. In the contemporary accounts, there is little mention likewise of the parents and siblings of the rest of the Nimbschen nuns at the time of their escape from the convent. The fact, however, that Katie’s father is not named even two years later when she married Luther, and also that there is no mention of him at all in the extensive correspondence between Luther and his co-workers and in the abundant collection of Luther’s *Table Talk*, leads us to conclude, that it was highly likely that he had died at an
old age shortly before Katie’s escape from the convent. When Katie came to Wittenberg, probably only her stepmother Margarete and her adult brothers were left, living in poverty at Zölsdorf. Even if Frau Margarete von Bora had dared to defy her lord, Duke George, on account of her poverty alone she would not have been in the position and would hardly have been inclined to suddenly take back her stepdaughter, who, in her opinion, had been best provided for in the convent.

Katie stayed in Wittenberg.
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