From *The Secret of the Strength* by Peter Hoover

**The End of Persecution**

As the focus of European attention shifted, the Anabaptists broke up into many little groups, and their numbers declined rapidly. The world no longer feared them, and public executions gave way to fines or lesser punishments.

In southern Germany and Austria the Jesuits calmly went ahead with their counterreformation until not only the Protestants, but practically all the Anabaptist residents of those areas had returned to Roman Catholicism.

From Switzerland's valleys the Anabaptists retreated into pockets of safety: the Horgen mountains west of Lake Zürich, the Jura region and the Kurpfalz (Palatinate).

In the Netherlands the Anabaptists gained toleration under the Dutch government, but they had to build their meetinghouses out of sight behind other buildings and pay special taxes. In this seclusion they prospered, becoming bankers, whalers, and merchants. By the mid-1600s they owned an important share of the Dutch East India Company.

**The Flight from Switzerland**

What happened to the Anabaptists is a long and involving story. I will illustrate it only by telling about my own family (the Hubers/Hoovers) who fled from Switzerland. Anyone else with Anabaptist roots could do the same, because more or less the same thing happened to all Anabaptist families.

My Huber ancestors got converted in the first wave of Anabaptist revival in central Europe. The Protestants executed Ulrich Huber of Signau at Bern in 1538. Johannes Huber, a shoemaker of Braunöken was arrested in 1542 at Wasserburg in Bavaria. Tied to the stake, he was still conscious after the fire had singed off his hair and beard. The presiding magistrate gave him an offer to recant and go home to his family. But he refused, and promptly died.

The Hubers remained Anabaptist. Toward the close of the sixteenth century when thousands apostatized, they kept the faith, but they feared the *Täuferjäger* and withdrew farther and farther up the Alps. Some of them chose the Horgerberg, sunny heights below the shimmering snow, looking down several thousand feet to Lake Zürich. They avoided going down the mountain. Friends of the hidden Horgerberg Anabaptists did their business for them. But their two preachers, Hans and Heini Landis, were discovered and arrested in 1589. Nineteen years later Hans Landis and deacon Jakob Isler were arrested again and escaped. At that time about 40 Anabaptists remained to gather in secret meetings in barns or forests of the Horgen area.

In 1613 Hans and Jakob with four other men were arrested and faced with banishment or galley slavery. Some of them escaped and found their way home from the Solothurn castle prison. Then Zwingli's churchmen caught Hans Landis again and beheaded him on Sept. 29, 1614.[2](http://www.gw.org/Sos/Sos27.htm#FNT1)

In 1637 the Zürich government in a concentrated "Anabaptist chase" arrested everyone they could of the Horgen congregation. They confiscated their property and held the people in Zürich until 1640. Hans Huber was arrested again in 1654, then they all left and the church at Horgen ended.

Other harassed Swiss congregations held out longer in mountain regions further from Zürich and Bern. But eventually all the Anabaptists who refused to conform to the state church moved to Alsace and the Kurpfalz or escaped to the Netherlands and America. The last nonconformed Anabaptists to leave Switzerland were the Sonnenberg people.

The Sonnenberg congregation, hidden in the Jura mountains, existed for centuries in seclusion, cultivating stony land with little water. They wove their own clothing and built their barns in secret places, suitable for their meetings. In the wintertime the congregation met in large upstairs rooms of the members' homes. There they sang from the *Ausbund* and ate pea soup with milk coffee. In the 1800s all their conservative members moved to Kidron, Ohio.

The Anabaptists remaining in Switzerland stopped making proselytes. They accepted noncombatant military service, and the last congregation in the Emmental, at Langnau, chose to join Zwingli's Reformed Church in 1947 to gain tax exemption status.

**The Flight from Germany**

Jakob Huber fled Switzerland for southern Germany in the late 1600s. There he settled with his family in the Kurpfalz. The Anabaptist movement had swept through the Kurpfalz almost two hundred years earlier. But persecution and the Thirty Years, War had nearly extinguished it. Fighting had devastated the land. Its rulers, anxious to rebuild their estates, now invited Swiss Anabaptists to settle on them. They decided to tolerate them for their industry, even though they had earlier killed them. The Anabaptists showed their gratitude for this toleration by not making their faith a public spectacle.

Immigrants from Switzerland poured into the Kurpfalz. Hundreds and hundreds came down the Rhein -- large families with babies and bundles on their backs, austere mountain folk who scorned beds to sleep on piles of straw on the floor. The men came in dark "Anabaptist" clothes and beards. Their wives, wearing black head coverings, spoke nothing but the dialect of their Swiss mountain homes.

But things did not go well in the Kurpfalz. The Kurfürst, Philipp Wilhelm, who had invited the Anabaptists, fled from a French invasion and died in Vienna. His son was a strict Catholic and demanded high "protection fees" from the Swiss. Then word came from America -- William Penn's America where people could live way out in the woods all by themselves. To the Anabaptists of the Kurpfalz, such a place seemed too good to be true, a place almost as desirable as heaven. By the spring of 1717, three hundred of them embarked at Rotterdam for the Atlantic voyage to Philadelphia. Among them traveled Jakob Huber, my Swiss ancestor, with his son Ulrich and family.

The Hubers settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. They worked hard to wrest a living from the frontier. No one bothered them anymore. Gathering in log homes to sing from the *Ausbund*, their troubles in Europe became a legend in the minds of their children while they relaxed in their newfound peace and prosperity.

In America the Anabaptists stopped calling themselves *Schweizer Brüder* (Swiss Brothers) and adopted the name Mennonite. With persecution out of the picture, money in their pockets, and vast landholdings to their names, they kept some Anabaptist forms. But their zeal to bring others to Christ died away and they were content to be the quiet in the land.

Even so, they fared better than those who stayed behind. There, in Germany, they lost not only their zeal to evangelize. They lost their separation from the world and their nonresistance as well. In World War I a few German Mennonite youths still opted for noncombatant service. But in World War II they supported Hitler almost to a man.

**The Flight from Democracy**

The American revolution came upon my Huber ancestors snugly settled in West Manchester Township, York county, Pennsylvania. Ulrich Huber's son Jakob had married Barbara Schenk and bought land there. But the Hubers did not trust the new "United States" government. They feared they would lose the privileges and the religious freedom they had gained at long last under the British crown. Therefore Jakob Huber with his son David started north on horseback to Upper Canada. They crossed the Niagara River and followed the Lake Erie shore west through Iroquois lands into virgin territory until they came to an area of maple trees and plentiful springs of water. They claimed and deeded 2,500 acres of lakeshore property on both sides of the mouth of the Stony Creek between present day Selkirk and Rainham, Ontario. Two years later Jakob Huber with six married sons and three married daughters arrived to make this place his home.

Far from Switzerland, far from the ideals and vision of Johannes Huber who wouldn't give up at the stake, the Hubers were the first white settlers in this part of British North America. Local records say they were "among the most respected and substantial yeomen of Haldimand County."

Jakob Huber died in 1810 at the age of eighty-one years. They buried him behind the little Mennonite meetinghouse on Hoover's Point. (The name Huber became anglicized to Hoover upon the move to Canada.)

**The Flight of the Old Order**

Anabaptists respected instead of persecuted, Anabaptists improving the world's economy instead of turning the world upside down -- in Canada the Mennonite settlers learned how to be "nice people" among their Anglican and Indian neighbours. The world liked them, and before long they came to like the world too.

David Hoover's son Jacob fell in love with Elizabeth Brech, a Catholic immigrant from Düsseldorf on the Rhein. She joined the Mennonites to marry him and became the mother of eleven children. Jacob became deacon in 1838, and he lived with his family in the original Huber house built of rough logs and hand-hewn boards within a stone's throw of the lake. Their fourth child, Peter Hoover (my great-grandfather), was one of their few descendants who stayed Mennonite.

Peter Hoover did not just stay Mennonite. He became an Old Order Mennonite, a guardian of what little there was to rescue of Anabaptist tradition: the German language, simple meetings, and plain clothes.

Peter had a sailboat. It was given to him by two boys who fled across Lake Erie from Ohio to escape military service during the Civil War. Peter loved to sail. He loved to sing and played a violin on the sly until his father burned it. He loved to dance until one night he came to the neighbours' house. Peeking in the window before entering, he saw what looked to him like devils leaping and swirling. He turned around, went home, and decided to "stay plain."

Several years later he married Maria Wideman of the Mennonite settlement north of York (Toronto), Ontario.

Peter and Maria were not married long until D.L. Moody's "Great Awakening" hit the Mennonite Church. Suddenly prayer meetings, revival meetings, church picnics, fancy clothes, politics, the temperance movement, foreign missionary societies, and a host of other innovations threatened to take over their quiet little church on the shore of the lake. Peter and Maria withdrew their membership. They began to meet with a few other families to become an Old Order congregation. Freeman Rittenhouse was their bishop.

It wasn't that Peter opposed a greater spirituality. He opposed the sudden loss of what he thought was the tradition of the forefathers: the faith of the *Ausbund* and the *Martyrs Mirror*. "*Je mehr gelehrt, je mehr verkehrt*," was a favourite expression of his (the more educated, the more perverted). So instead of going to Sunday School and revival meetings, he built a spacious new red brick house, a new barn, and a new plain meetinghouse in the sugar bush on the back end of his farm. They called it the Rainham Mennonite Church.

**The Flight from Urbanization**

The Old Order Mennonites on the Lake Erie shore did not last long. Big cities were too close. Theatres and saloons were too inviting. And with the coming of the automobile, all the old homesteads along the lake became a beach playground.

Peter's oldest daughter, Amelia Hoover, remained a spinster for many years.[3](http://www.gw.org/Sos/Sos27.htm#FNT2) Margaret and Elizabeth died. Charity Hoover married a "man of the world." Only Mary Anne and Peter's youngest child, Menno, found companions and had children who stayed within the Anabaptist tradition. (Mary Anne Hoover Helka and one of her sons, a single man, were the last Old Order Mennonites in the area.)

Peter and Maria, Menno and his family, and a handful of the remaining plain people moved north to Waterloo County Ontario, in the 1920s to "flee from the world." The relatives they left behind in the Rainham area gradually adjusted themselves to Canadian society around them.

In 1979 we attended a Hoover reunion at the Mennonite meetinghouse on the back end of my grandparents' farm. A Protestant minister of Tonawanda, New York (a Hoover descendant) had the main speech. Using an acrostic diagram he spoke about our family:

H ospitable neighbours

O pportunistic businessmen

O riginal settlers

V enturesome pioneers

E nergetic farmers

R eligious plainsfolk

Listening to Jakob Huber's descendant speak, dressed in blue jeans and a tee shirt behind the pulpit, I marveled at how well he summed up the fate of the Anabaptists in America: religion in last place, and that consisting at best of "staying plain." Then another relative sang "Under his Wings" and they brought the big wooden-covered Huber family Bible up from the basement. They wanted me to read from it. Not one of my relatives at the reunion (outside of my own family) understood the German text I read, but when I finished there was a great roar of applause.

Besides my mother, one relative, Mrs. Lanson Jones (of the Brethren in Christ church), was the only woman with a veiling on her head at the reunion in 1979. Mary Jones, faithful soul, wore not only a veiling but a black bonnet over it, with strings tied under her chin. After talking with her I met a younger cousin's new man. She had just divorced her previous one. She grew up on the old Jakob Huber homestead beside the lake. Now she wore a two-piece suit: a cut-off blouse that left several inches of tummy showing between it and her shorts.

The last time I visited Rainham before I moved to Latin America was early in 1981. Slushy snow lay soft on the cemetery. Listening to the music of the surf (the lake has already carried away part of the grounds), I stood for some time looking at Jakob Huber's plain white tombstone. His grandfather, also called Jakob, fled from Switzerland in the 1690s. That Jakob Huber's great grandparents were Anabaptists -- burning at the stake but not ready to recant. Then I drove away, past the old homestead, the A.E. Hoover farm, and long lines of summer cottages along the lake, standing with their windows boarded up and silent in the falling snow.

**The Flight of the Plain People**

After reaching Waterloo county, my Hoover grandparents joined the most traditional branch of the Old Order Mennonites: the David Martin group. Taking a stand against screen doors, indoor bathrooms, and painted barns, the bishop of this group refused to buy seed grain from western Canada after he learned it had been harvested with combines.

In the 1950s the David Martin group split. Menno Hoover and numerous ones of his married children (including my parents Anson and Sarah Hoover) left that group to establish a new one. Menno suggested calling it the "Orthodox Mennonite Church."

The Orthodox Mennonites built a new meetinghouse and were yet more conservative than the group from which they came. Menno Hoover planted maple trees around the meetinghouse, but concerned brothers advised him against it, saying that only worldly churches did such. So he dug them up and planted the customary spruce trees. Eventually we buried him among them.

Among the Orthodox Mennonites I learned the language and became familiar with the history and writings of the Anabaptists. I came to faith and repentance among them. But when I sought baptism as a young teenager I turned to a more progressive Mennonite group.

**The End of the Flight?**

Several years after I left them, I came back with two friends to visit the Orthodox Mennonites. Their young people had gathered at a farm near Linwood, Ontario. Tracks of many steel-tired buggies had cut through deep packed snow in the lane. Bonnets and shawls lay stacked on a table in the wash house. Wire-rimmed glasses, fire in the woodstove, curtainless windows and a calendar with it's picture cut off -- everthing in the low-ceiling kitchen surrounded by solemn faces looked like home. "*Wie geht's?"* They timidly shook our hands, not expecting an answer. For a while we sang old, slow songs. A few of my relatives greeted me warily, but most of them had nothing to say. Then we left the narrow, snow-packed lane, the drifted sideroads, the rolling farmland, and the black, wintry forests of upper Waterloo County to join heavy traffic on the McDonald-Cartier Freeway to Toronto.

Minutes off the freeway's loops and whining tires on corrugated Canadian concrete, we stepped into the Wideman Mennonite Church. Founded by my Wideman ancestors (Anabaptists from Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany), this is one of many congregations in southern Ontario that big cities threaten to engulf. Less than half of the benches were filled. Wrinkly faces and tottering steps . . . almost everyone was old. Tiny net coverings graced some women's silver hair. Here and there I spotted a "cape dress" and one "plain coat." My ancestors' farm nearby had become a golf course. The Almira meetinghouse on that farm was a city storage-rental facility. Another meetinghouse, Altona, stood with broken windows, abandoned on the site of Pickering field, then scheduled to become Canada's largest airport.

I talked that night at Wideman Church with a young boy from Toronto. He was excited about his recent "conversion" to the Anabaptist movement and pressed me for details about them. He told me how he had found the Wideman church through his girlfriend at the university. His "Anabaptist" girlfriend wore slacks and jewelry. She had her hair cut, and he kept his arm around her during the short service. A sister of the Wideman congregation made headlines as the first ordained Mennonite lady pastor in Ontario.

Anabaptists. Anabaptists? I sat deep in thought on the back seat of the car as we headed east out of Toronto that night. Anabaptists in form or in name perhaps, but what about in spirit? Fleeing from the world, fleeing from the cities, fleeing from real or imaginary dangers, some fleeing from fads, some fleeing from dead legalism, fleeing for hundreds of miles and years -- but sadly overtaken in the end by them all.

On the wall of my office I have a chart of my ancestors tracing my roots back thirty-two ways to Anabaptists in Switzerland, once to the Netherlands and several times to southern Germany. Beneath that chart hang two photos: one of an Old Order Mennonite meetinghouse, and one of a family reunion near Rainham by the lake in southern Ontario.

Those pictures hurt. They hurt like the news that every so often comes trickling down to Costa Rica: "Did you hear that Paul and Betty left the Mennonites? . . . Nathan has left home and is going to college. . . . All of Jake's children now belong to this cult." Relatives, close friends, "converts" who were once so happy among us, boys I went to Bible School with -- one by one they go. The Anabaptist movement can no longer keep them. They go and it hurts, because hardly anyone that leaves comes back.

I do not think the hurt I feel is a personal hurt. I am no longer part of a traditional Mennonite group myself. Rather, I feel for those who lose their Anabaptist distinctives and go back to the world. I have seen the vast majority of my friends and relatives who leave the Anabaptist traditions take on inferior traditions of a society with twisted values.

No, let us not go back. Let us go on with Christ! Let us leave the world and press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus: a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

Before they beheaded him at Köln am Rhein in 1557, Thomas von Imbroich left this testimony:

I am willing and ready, both to live or to die. I do not care what happens to me. God will not let me down. I am comforted and in good spirits while yet on the earth. God gives me friendly assurance, and my heart is encouraged through my brothers.

Sword, water, fire, whatever creature may come cannot frighten me. No man nor foreign being shall be able to pull me away from God. I hope to stay with what I have chosen for myself in the beginning. All the persecution in this world shall not be able to separate me from God.[4](http://www.gw.org/Sos/Sos27.htm#FNT3)

Thomas von Imbroich was an Anabaptist messenger and servant of the Word. He preached and baptized and established new congregations along the lower Rhein. He wrote seven epistles and one of the most widely used Anabaptist confessions of faith. When they beheaded him, he was 25 years old. Dare we commit ourselves to Christ like he did?

If so, Christianity will break out from among us again.

1 Before his death, Peter wrote the hymn: "Altogether free, Jesus has loosed us from death and Satan's power."

2 *Hans Landis, elder of the Horgerberg Anabaptist congregation, and the last martyr in Switzerland, was the ancestor of a great number of Mennonites living in Pennsylvania, Ontario and Virginia, today.*

3 *When Amelia finally married she became the wife of Menno Sauder, the independent publisher of the "Elmira Prophetic Mission." They had one adopted son from Russia.*

4 *Ausbund* 23:20-21