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DB - 10
Birth, Death, and Regeneration:
Giessen University, 1607-1700

Plockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
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522 Fifth Avenue
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

History, as Thucydides remarked, is likely to repeat itself. Such is the case with Giessen University, which was founded just 350 years ago as a partial solution to a family feud.

Seventeen years later, in 1624, the feud appeared to have been settled. The university was closed. It took a war and a recurrence of the feud to get it open again.

The historical repetition occurred during the last dozen years. By the time the first American troops entered Giessen in March, 1945, the university lay half-shattered by bombs. But no one thought the patient would die. Yet only a year later, the university was ordered to shut down. Factors behind this order included officials of the new Hessian State Government, the American Military Government, and last, not least - some feuders in the family of Hessian universities.

Now, in 1957, the feud appears to have vanished. The occupation authorities are gone. And, a couple of weeks ago, the State decreed that Giessen could once again claim full membership in the community of learning.

It is so hard to conceive something good; so easy to kill it. There are those who scoff at the idea of a small university, those who scorn the isolated, jerkwater towns where such institutions are usually located. Yet there is an attrahent quality in the good small universities that no metropolitan mind factory can duplicate. Whether Giessen's university rates as a good one remains to be seen. In any case, the observation is already on record that there are no "bad" universities in Germany.

The story of how a university happened to begin in the 17th century quagmire that was Giessen dates back nearly 400 years.

Philipp the Magnanimous, Count of Hesse, founded Marburg University some 17 miles north of here in 1527. His aim was to strengthen the Lutheran faith, to which he had become so attached (see DB - 6) following his acquisition of a second wife. Marburg's special mission was to shore up the bulwarks of Lutheranism with theological scholarship.

Before he died, Philipp generously willed that each of his four sons should receive an equal part of Hesse. The university at Marburg was to belong to all four and to act as a binding tie between them. The will, in 1562, also stipulated that the university was to remain loyal to the Augsburg Confession - orthodox Lutheranism.

By 1604 deaths among Philipp's descendents brought all Hesse under the control of two counts - Moritz The Scholarly of Hesse-Kassel (north), and Ludwig The Loyal of Hesse-Darmstadt (south).

Moritz inherited the area including Marburg from his relative, Ludwig IV. A convert to Calvinism, Moritz reformed his holdings and Marburg University in 1605 despite the stipulation of the family will. Meanwhile, Ludwig The Loyal was already entering claims on the university as well as demanding that the Lutheran faith be kept in force there.

Moritz's sudden reform of the university unloosed a king-sized quarrel among its theologians. Chroniclers speak of "open tumults" between professors who stayed by Lutheranism and those who had switched to Calvinism. The thundering religious disputes in the upper Lahn valley rocked everyone in Hesse - especially Ludwig V.

It was soon clear that Moritz would brook no interference and no resistance to his stern faith. The Lutheran professors of Marburg found themselves out in the cold. At this point, Ludwig V journeyed up to Giessen from his residence in Darmstadt, and had a chat with Superintendant Viëtor, head of the Lutheran parishes here. Then and there, Ludwig decided to offer refuge to the Marburg Lutherans. On October 10, 1605, Ludwig opened a "gymnasium illustre", which was staffed by a dozen Marburg refugees. Among his acquisitions were the theologians Johannes Winckelmann and Balthasar Mentzer, and the jurist, Gottfried Antonii.

Meanwhile, Ludwig V, known as a "hard, inflexible man," was toying with the idea of turning his gymnasium into a full-fledged university. It would further the faith of his forefathers and present a prickly piece of competition for cousin Moritz. Ludwig made representations to Kaiser Rudolf II.

This was a time in Germany when the power of Kaiser and empire were declining. Into the vacuum rushed the princes of a hundred different petty holdings. They had grown rich in the Reformation, largely from annexed church lands. It was also the time in which no less than 17 universities were founded by these German princes. However, the Kaiser still had the privilege of granting charters to universities, a privilege accorded only to popes and emperors, from the Middle Ages on.

Thus Ludwig V was obliged to negotiate with Rudolf in order to found a legitimate university. On May 19, 1607, the Kaiser signed the deed. Five months later, the university was festively opened. It had a score of professors representing the four ancient faculties: theology, law, philosophy, and medicine. Some 320 students were enrolled in the school, most of them coming from outside Hesse. Professors and students alike were crammed into the little walled town. The population then was about 3,000, and the university represented more than 10 per cent of it.

Whether or not Giessen was to become a "gloomy fortress of sectarianism," as happened with many Reformation universities, was still to be seen. It is a matter of record that Ludwig chose Giessen over Darmstadt because the wine consumption was lower here and the atmosphere appeared soberer. Little did he imagine that Giessen would one day earn the distinction of having the second-highest beer-consumption rate of all the cities in Germany. Nor did Ludwig have any foreknowledge that Giessen would become famous throughout the land for its rowdy students, bloody duels, and quarrelsome professors.

At first, the new university was quartered in the Rathaus and a couple of rooms in the old castle. Professors were accustomed to hold lectures in their own homes. In 1611, Ludwig ordered the construction of Giessen's first university building, the Collegium Ludoviciana, on the Brandplatz. It stood until 1838 as the main building. Meanwhile, a botanical garden had been started in 1609, the fourth oldest in Germany.

Moritz The Scholar was just as much a Hessian as Ludwig; in other words he was stubborn. Not a man to take the Giessen "solution" lightly, he forbade his subjects to have anything to do with the upstart school. He also encouraged his Marburg professors to make abusive attacks on the Giesseners.

Moreover, one of Moritz's loyal followers went so far as to take a shot at a 52-year-old Giessen professor in 1608. The professor was Johannes Winckelmann, a theologian with a bulbous nose and a large wart on his cheek. His attempted assassin was a man named Ungefug, which means "clumsy." Ungefug was royal master of Moritz's kitchen in Kassel. He was also one of Winckelmann's several brothers-in-law.

Winckelmann was the Rektor (president) of the gymnasium illustre from 1605 to 1607. A native Hessian, he soon entered into a hefty dogmatic dispute with his colleague, Mentzer. The question at hand was the ubiquity of the body of Christ. The argument started in 1616. A year later, Ludwig V called both theologians to Darmstadt to try to settle it. It was no go. They kept arguing until the Thirty Years War broke over Hesse in 1621. It was the first of many theological disputes which were to keep Giessen lively well into the 18th century.

The first Rektor of the university was the lawyer, Gottfried Antonii. A native of Westphalia, he was an expert on loan laws and constitutional law. His period in office lasted from 1607 to 1618. It could hardly have been an easy administration. Plague broke out here in 1613 and decimated the population. Its ravages caused professors and students to flee into the countryside.

Antonii and his Giessen colleagues were loyal supporters of the Kaiser and his imperial claims. This was a natural consequence of Ludwig's obligation to the emperor, regarding the establishment of his university.

The policy of loyalty to the emperor soon brought the Giessen jurists into conflict with other lawyers. Antonii, in fact, entered into a dispute with his former Marburg teacher, Hermann Vultejus. The Marburg professor claimed that the Roman Empire was no longer a pure monarchy. It had changed, he said, into an aristocracy of princes whose diet could depose the Kaiser. The Lutheran, Antonii, countered these claims in 1608 with assertions of imperial sovereignty.

Eleven years later, another Giessen jurist, Dietrich Reinking, expanded Antonii's thesis. Reinking had earned his doctorate here in 1616. A year later he was named professor. He asserted that the empire was a creation of God for all time, and that the Kaiser was an absolute power. Only the Kaiser could declare war or make peace - not the princes. This was an enormous protest against political realities - especially when one considers that it was made at the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. But Reinking was accustomed to dealing with irrealities: In 1621 he offered an opinion in a local witch trial in which he stated his conviction that witches exist.

The importance of these early theologians and jurists cannot be overstated. For Giessen was the official south Hessian university. Its lawyers and theology students were trained to serve the regime - trained in Lutheran orthodoxy and "Lutheran" law.

During this time, Ludwig V was still pursuing his case for partnership in Marburg at the imperial court. The obstinate count was not satisfied with his lot and he demanded his rights. According to Ludwig's interpretation of the family will, he had a say in the administration of Marburg University. In 1622 Ludwig sent Professor Reinking to Vienna to argue his case as councillor at the imperial court.

A year later, Kaiser Ferdinand II issued his judgement in the Marburg Succession dispute. Moritz was denied his share in the inheritance. The next year, Ludwig marched into Marburg under the protection of imperial troops and occupied the university. And on May 26, 1624 Ludwig suspended the University of Giessen. Then, just as Moritz had "converted" Marburg to Calvinism, Ludwig reconverted it to Lutheranism. Giessen's professors moved back to Marburg and so did the students. Indeed, Marburg now became more an extension of the former Giessen University than a continuance of its Moritzian period. It seemed as if Giessen's claim to academic fame was extinguished.

Ludwig V: Founder of Giessen University

However, the Thirty Years War greatly weakened the Hesse-Darmstadt line. In the fall of 1645, the widow of the Hesse-Kassel count, Amalie Elisabeth began the so-called Hessian War. Her troops occupied Marburg by force of arms. The Giessen-Marburg professors didn't have an easy time with the countess, for they remained loyal to the Hesse-Darmstadt House.

Negotiations for peace had begun in the maintime at Muenster-Osnabrück. Simultaneous with mediation on the Thirty Years War, the differences between Kassel and Darmstadt were dealt with - including the university.

The final settlement between the two Hessian houses was reached in April, 1648. But the matter of the university was still unsolved. Following two more years of discussion it was agreed to split up Marburg again. A number of Marburg professors left for Giessen, taking a few students with them.

The decision to restore the second Hessian university was not reached overnight. There was a question of financing, which the Darmstadt count, Georg II, approached gingerly. For a while it was a toss-up between Giessen and Darmstadt as far as the location was concerned. A comparison of city budgets gave Giessen the edge. Actually, Giessen had suffered a considerable economic loss - estimated at 90,000 gulden - when the old university was shut down. And the war had temporarily reduced the population to 426.

However, the town and its burghers pitched in to make it worth the university's while. In 1651 the city voted to give the school 200 gulden a year from its wine monopoly. Moreover, it presented 10 wagon-loads of timber for new buildings, and 21 acres of woodland. The latter was stipulated for use by the professors. They were allowed to keep pigs there, and to cut firewood.

In addition, the old professorial privileges of the 1607-1624 period were reinstituted: freedom from taxes and tributes, billeting of soldiers, and customs duties on imported books. Beyond this, the city's guilds and some individual burghers collected 1,075 gulden which they presented to the university as a gift. Finally, Giessen got back a certain number of books and instruments which had been moved to Marburg during the intervening period.

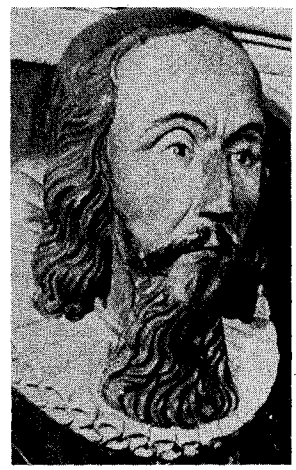
It was a day for jubilation, May 15, 1650, when the university was ceremoniously reopened. Long-haired Count Georg II arrived with a train of nobles. Professor Peter Haberkorn preached a festival sermon in the Pankratiuskirche. Another theologian, Professor Justus Feurborn, was named Rektor. There were lots of Latin speeches, a big parade to the university building, and a banquet. An observer reported that many guests had tears in their eyes.

The Academia Ludoviciana began life anew with 14 professors and 142 students. The heaviest emphasis now as before was on theology. About a third of the students were enrolled in that faculty. Indeed, piety and orthodoxy played an essential role in the development of the university. In the earlier period, two professors were dismissed because they had joined the Rosecrucians. Faculty members were obliged to attend worship services and to be loyal to the faith.

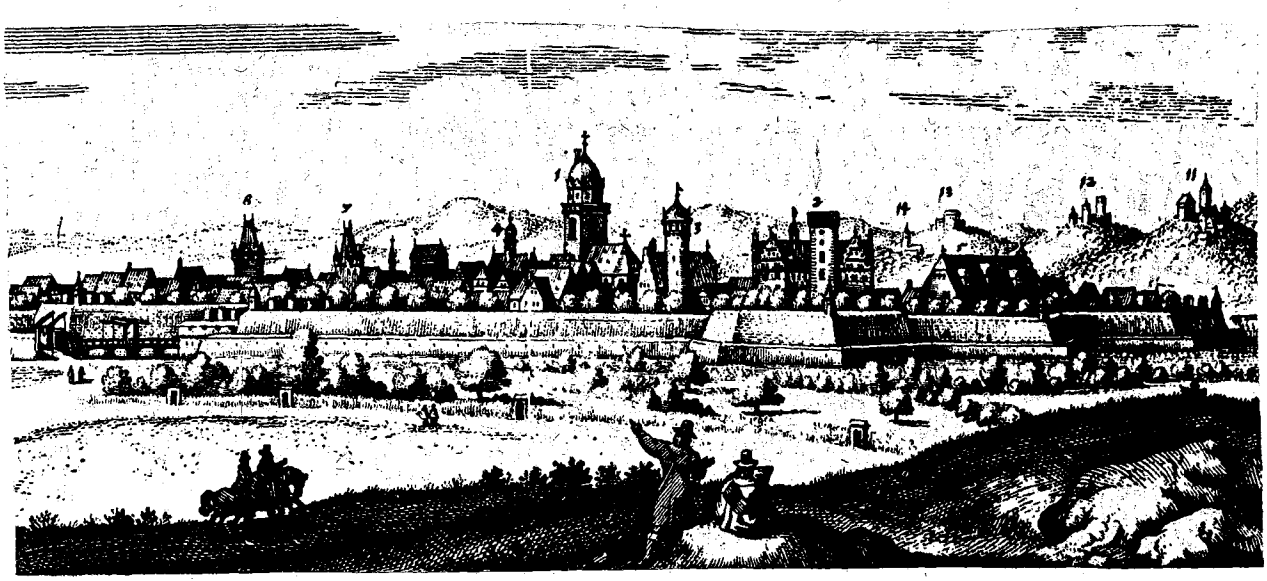
The new theological faculty had another professor named Balthasar Mentzer, the son of the former professor of the same name. This was the first instance of what was later to become a tradition - the Giessen professor families. Even into this century it has been a remarkable heritage wherein father, son, and sometimes grandson followed the academic profession at the same university.

A touch of the old Giessen spleen was soon manifested by the theologian, Haberkorn. He entered lustily into scrimmages with other dogmatists, including a Rhineland Jesuit named Johannes Rosenthal. Professor Haberkorn disputed several times with the priest - once in 1653, and again in 1655. Together, Haberkorn and Rektor Feurborn constituted a formidable team for the Lutheran cause. An old Giessen couplet goes:

"Der Feurborn und Haberkorn,
Die haben die ganze Welt verworr'n!"
(Feurborn and Haberkorn,
They've bewildered the whole world.)


Peter Haberkorn

Lutheran orthodoxy lost strength in the latter part of the century as pietism gained in popularity. The traditional intellectual ideal of Christian experience was challenged by the new emphasis on devotion. Giessen's first prominent Pietist was Johann Heinrich May, who arrived here in 1688. But the old-line Lutherans didn't give up without a fight. The quarrel between the old and new orthodoxies lasted until 1695.


Giessen in 1650: Second building from right is the

In April of that year, the University senate ruled that the word "Pietist" was no longer permissable as a term of invective. Several Lutheran orthodox professors were replaced by Pietists. One blessing they brought with them was a greater degree of tolerance for other faiths.

Medicine was represented at Giessen by three professors during most of the 17th century. Their lectures were based mainly upon the writings of the ancients - Hippocrates and Galenus. Among the subjects taught were hygiene, nutrition, pharmacology, and surgery. The third-ranking professor, Ludwig Jungermann, had charge of the botanical garden. He wrote the university's first work in the field of botany - a catalogue of Giessen plants. In 1650, the medical faculty established its own apothecary, Offizin zum Goldenen Engel (Laboratory of the Golden Angel), which is still doing business today as a private firm.

The philosophy faculty was not without distinction in the 17th century. Perhaps the outstanding figure in the early period was Johann Balthasar Schupp, a native of Giessen. He lectured on history and theology. Almost alone among his contemporaries, Professor Schupp wrote most of his works in the German language; this despite the fact that Latin remained the academic language in Germany well into the 18th century. Schupp was court preacher to several noblemen, and took part in the diplomatic negotiations for the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which ended the Thirty Years War.

Philosophy was an all-embracing conception in those days. Professors on this faculty taught everything from mathematics to poetry. All students were obliged to attend lectures in the philosophy faculty for several semesters before moving on to the "higher" or more specialized faculties of law, theology, and medicine. This rule applied well into the 19th century. It provided for a kind of general education.

The century closed on an uncommonly peaceful note as far as Giessen University was concerned. In 1697, the philosophy faculty created a chair for a professor of history, Gottfried Arnold, who lectured on church history and heretics. The law professor, Johannes Nikolaus Hert, was winning renown with his prodigious number of juridical publications. In 1693, several faculty members engaged in a lively dispute over the existence of ghosts. It was established that they did exist.

As the Age of Enlightenment dawned, Giessen University was shedding its role of defender of the faith and supplier of court lawyers. No political thunderheads threatened on the horizon, and the Giessen theologians seemed to have run out of wind.

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