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The Lotthers

Forgotten Printers of the Reformation

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THE name *Lotther* is so similar to that of our Reformer that it must arouse the curiosity of the reader when he finds this name recorded in Luther's correspondence. Yet most Luther biographies do not even mention this name, and those that do pass it over lightly. Thus the family which has rendered outstanding service to the cause of the Reformation is today all but forgotten.

A closer check will reveal that the Lotthers¹ printed most of Luther's earlier works and that in fact they were the chief publishers of the Reformation until the coming of Hans Lufft in the second half of the 1520's. Hans Lufft, the so-called Bible Printer, is well remembered today, but it must be stated that he neither printed the first editions of the New Testament nor many of the Old Testament² books when they were first published. As a matter of fact, Hans Lufft did not become the first printer of the Reformation until after 1529, when the last of the Lotthers had left Wittenberg. Thus during the most critical years of the Reformation, from 1518 until 1525 and 1529 respectively, most of the works of Luther were printed by the Lotthers. They had an important part in spreading the good news of the Reformation.

The three Lotthers who devoted themselves to this task were Melchior Lotther Senior and his sons, Melchior Junior and Michael.

The date of the birth of Melchior Senior is not known. He was born in Aue in the Saxon Vogtland. In the year 1491 he is well established as a printer's apprentice in Leipzig. Towards the close of the fifteenth century he marries Dorothea Kachelofen, daughter of a fellow printer, Conrad Kachelofen. He is granted the privilege of citizen of Leipzig some time later. He now enters with his father-in-law into joint operation of the latter's printery. Soon his father-in-law turned the printing shop over to him, but must have remained active in it for a long time to come, since we have a few books printed by Kachelofen until 1519. Lotther and his family,

however, move into the house in the Hainstrasse,³ while the father-in-law retires to a smaller one in the Nicolaistrasse.⁴ Besides the printery, Kachelofen owned a bookshop and a tavern. He retains the former until his death some twenty years later, but turns over the *Weinschank*⁵ to his son-in-law. This tavern was quite famous. When Luther came to Leipzig in 1519, he made it his headquarters during the disputation with Eck.

In due time Lotther became the foremost printer in the diocese of Meissen. Until 1520 he was the official printer of the bishop. But besides printing a great number of missals and breviaries, Lotther also became well known as an outstanding publisher of philosophical, philological, and theological works. One of his chief helpers in the Leipzig printing office was Hermann Tulich,⁶ who later became professor at Wittenberg. For some time a branch office was established in Meissen.

The most important event in Lotther's life, however, was his meeting with Luther. Since 1518 he had done some printing for the Reformer, and Luther was apparently so satisfied with the work of the Leipzig printer that he persuaded him to open another branch office in Wittenberg. This was done towards the end of 1519,⁷ after Luther had returned from the Leipzig disputation. Lotther's two sons, Melchior Junior and Michael, were sent to Wittenberg to become official printers for the university there.

There were several reasons for the opening of a branch office in Wittenberg. First of all, Luther wanted to have a reliable printer in town in order to be able to publish his writings as fast as possible after they had been written.⁸ In order to accomplish this, he had to consult with the younger Lotthers and to make necessary changes wherever needed. Secondly, Wittenberg needed a good printer. There had been a printer, Johann Grunenberg, since 1516.⁹ But his work was inferior. When Melanchthon came to Wittenberg to teach Greek, he found out to his dismay that no one could print Greek books. Therefore the Lotthers arrived in Wittenberg with three sets of type: Gothic, Latin, and Greek.¹⁰ As far as the Lotthers were concerned, there was another reason for establishing this branch office. Since the disputation between Luther and Eck, Duke George of Saxony had become the fiercest enemy of the Reformer, and the publication and dissemination of his books

were strictly forbidden. In spite of this strict injunction, however, the elder Lotther continued to publish Luther's books by thousands of copies and distributed them. But he did it anonymously. The elder Lotther remained in Leipzig until his death, which probably occurred in 1528. His last two publications, as far as we know, were the *Schirm- und schutzbüchlein der Diatriba wider Martin Luthers knechtlichen willen durch Erasmus von Roterdham* and the *Sachsenspiegel*.¹¹ Besides his outstanding work for the cause of the Reformation the elder Lotther is remembered as the man who established Leipzig as the printing center of Germany and as the first printer who used Gothic type for German books exclusively, and Roman type for Latin books. He is also the first publisher of Greek books in central Germany.

His two sons, Melchior Junior and Michael, established themselves in Wittenberg. Melchior, who signed his name "*der Jüngere*," openly embraced the cause of the Reformation, unlike his father, who remained cautiously a secret follower of Luther until the day of his death. Besides printing textbooks for the university, a task which did not occupy the full time of a printer, Melchior was kept busy printing practically all of Luther's longer and shorter treatises until 1524. From then on Hans Lufft takes over more and more of the work. Formerly Lufft was credited with the publication of many of the works which Lotther printed anonymously. But it has been well established that Lufft did not enter into Luther's work until much later, after the publication of the "*Neve Testament, Deutzsch, Vuittenberg*." Lotther even did the second edition¹² of the New Testament and signed his name to it.

That both Luther and Melanchthon appreciated the fine work which Lotther put out can be seen from passages in their correspondence. On *Misericordias Domini*, 1519, Luther wrote to Spalatin: "*Venit Melchior Lotterus instructus optimis formularum matricibus. . . paraturus apud nos officinam excusoriam instituere. . . Nobis id decorum, imprimis universitati nostrae, tum commodum auditoribus arbitramur, praesertim praesente Philippo, graecas literas et copiose et fideliter propagare cupiente.*"¹³ And Melanchthon writes to the Augustinian Lang in Erfurt: "*Est apud nos Lottherus TYPOGRAPHOS, per quem sacros et profanos scriptores excudemus.*" Until 1519 four students were kept busy

copying the Greek books which Melanchthon had brought along to Wittenberg. The Greek books which Lotther printed belong to the best that his shop has produced. In contrast to older prints they are clear and bound like modern school texts.

Lotther printed only a few Latin books, because Luther's German writings kept his presses busy.¹⁴ Among his German books he printed the "*Sermon von dem N. Test. d. i. von der heil. Messe*," 1520, and "*Von guten Werken*," 1520. He also began the printing of Luther's *Church and House Postil*, 1521, which he brought out in installments. After the publication of the New Testament, first and second editions and possibly a third edition, and the printing of a few books of the Old Testament,¹⁵ Lotther suddenly moved back to Leipzig, probably at the beginning of 1525.¹⁶ The reason for this transfer of his business is not quite clear. Some think that he wanted to help his father, who was sick; others that he became jealous of the competition of Hans Lufft. But there seems to be some evidence that Lotther had trouble in Wittenberg and thought it wise to leave town. Luther wrote about him to Spalatin on December 13, 1524: "*Melchiorum Lottherum audio quoque apud Principem esse male traductum, quid obsecro opus est afflictionem addere afflicto? Parcamus etiam aliquando, satis habet poenae et mali. Quare esto mediator bonus, et si opus est, ut ipse scribam pro eo, lubens faciam.*"¹⁷ Whatever the outcome of this affair might have been, Lotther left Wittenberg shortly afterwards. He remained in Leipzig until his death, highly respected and prosperous. He also continued to print some of Luther's works. He died in 1542.

The younger of the two brothers, Michael Lotther, remained in Wittenberg and continued the printing shop. The two brothers had worked together most of the time, but we also have a few books that were printed by Michael alone. Michael continued with the publishing of the *Postil* until 1529, when he left Wittenberg and established his shop in Magdeburg. During the four years between his brother's departure and his own he published a number of Luther's works. He continued in Magdeburg and died there in 1554 or 1555. His printing became poorer as he advanced in years, but in spite of it he was swamped with orders. He, too, continued to take an active interest in the Reformation and printed

among others "Auslegung der Evangelien von Ostern bis auff's Advent," 1536; "Die Gantze niedersächsische Bibel," 1536; "Apologia Flacii," 1549; "Lutheri Meinung von den Mitteldingen," 1550; and "Newe Zeytung . . . die sich . . . in Strassburg . . . wider auffrichtung. . . Böpstlicher Messen, so man der Pfaffen Interim nennet, hat begeben," 1551.¹⁸ Thus Michael Lotther was a partisan of the anti-Melanchthon faction within the Lutheran Church and took his stand with Flaccius. It may also be of interest to note that he and his little daughter, Regina, have entered the pages of German literature in Wilhelm Raabe's well-known story "Unseres Herrgotts Kanzlei," written in 1862.¹⁹

Luther, one recent biographer of the great Reformer said, did not accomplish the Reformation singlehanded. He had many helpers. The three Lotthers did their part, and therefore it is a pleasant task to rescue them from obscurity.

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FOOTNOTES

1. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, Leipzig 1884, vol. 19, pp. 273 ff.
2. *Reu, Luther's German Bible*, p. 195.
3. Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, p. 220. The translation "Hay Street," corresponds to the original "Hewstrasse." Later it was "Heunstrasse," now it is "Hainstrasse."
4. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, Leipzig 1881, vol. 14, p. 781.
5. Boehmer, *op. cit.*, p. 278.
6. Works of Martin Luther, Holman Edition, vol. 2, p. 170, footnote.
7. Rade, *Dr. Martin Luthers Leben, Taten und Meinungen*, vol. 2, p. 530.
8. Boehmer, *op. cit.*, p. 261 f.
9. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 19, p. 618.
10. Koestlin, *Martin Luther, sein Leben und seine Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 276.
11. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 19, p. 274.
12. *Ibid.*, vol. 19, p. 276. See also Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 161, and Koestlin, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 563 f.
13. Epist. ed. Aurifaber, I, 164, quoted *ibid.*, vol. 19, p. 275.
14. Koestlin, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 564.
15. Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
16. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 19, p. 618.
17. Epist. ed. Aurifaber, vol. II, p. 232, quoted *ibid.*, vol. 19, p. 277.
18. *ibid.* vol. 19, p. 278.
19. Wilhelm Raabe, *Saemtliche Werke*, Berlin-Grunewald, n. d., Erste Serie, vol. 4.