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KELPIUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

BY DR. HENRY V. GUMMERE

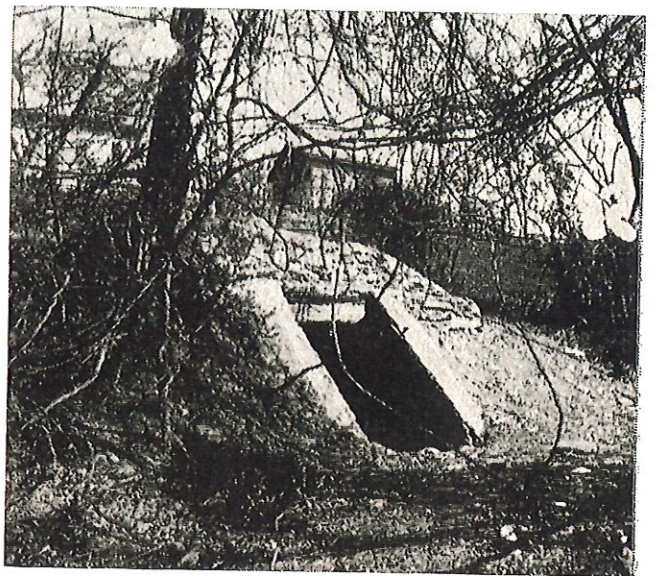
Late Astronomer of Haverford College

IN THE latter half of the 17th century there was much spiritual unrest in Germany. In many places small groups of persons who were dissatisfied with the teachings or the ritual of the local church, Protestant or Catholic, associated themselves together, usually under the leadership of some learned person, for religious study and development. Most of these groups were of strongly mystical tendencies, because of the influence of the inspired writings of Jacob Boehme, the shoemaker of Silesia, Theosophist, and of the much earlier Johannes Tauler, whose followers called themselves "Friends of God," and sought by prayer and meditation, to achieve that state of ecstatic spiritual exaltation in which, they believed, that, like Enoch, they truly walked with God. Many of these 17th century groups were but local in their significance; some, however, were of such vitality that similar groups were organized in many places, under one general leadership. Of course, in every case, very soon after they were started these groups came under the ban of the church, and edicts of suppression were issued against them.

One group, of the vigorous type, was that formed by Philip Jacob Spener, of Dresden and Berlin, who "advocated a system of personal and practical piety, having for its central principle that Christianity was first of all life, and that the strongest proof of the truth of its doctrine was to be found in the religious experience of the believing." Organizations formed under his doctrines were known as Collegia Pietatis, or Schools of Piety; their members were called "Pietists," and this name came to be applied in general to many others of these revolting groups. At Erfurt, in Thuringia, a center of this Pietist movement was organized under the leadership of Rev. August Hermann Francke, assistant pastor at the Augustine Church. This was about 1690. This soon became a rallying-point for students, and Mystics from all over Germany, and very soon met with stern suppressive measures from the church. Francke himself, a very learned man, was excommunicated, ordered out of Erfurth, his books were forbidden, the meetings of his followers suppressed. What wonder that, under such persecution, their thoughts turned longingly towards the new world, and especially to Pennsylvania, where, under Penn's proclamation, they could be assured of religious freedom?

One of Francke's enthusiastic followers was John Jacob Zimmerman, pastor of the Lutheran Church in

the Duchy of Wirtemberg. He wrote a letter, appealing for help in getting to the new world, to Benjamin Furley, of Rotterdam, in Holland, a wealthy Quaker, who was Penn's agent in that city. Having made sure that this group was a desirable one, Furley rose nobly to the occasion; he fitted out a ship for them, paid for their passage and keep (a matter of about 130 pounds sterling), and assigned to them 2400 acres of land in Pennsylvania at an



Entrance to the Cave of Kelpius

almost vanishing rental. Zimmerman himself died just on the eve of sailing; most of his party, however, including his widow and four children, sailed in the ship provided and came to Philadelphia.

A few, however, did not do this. Instead, they went to London, arriving there in August, 1693. Here they had considerable intercourse with the so-called "Philadelphists," a society formed under the leadership of Jane Leade to study and explain the writings of Jacob Boehme. This band was under the leadership of Johann Kelpius, a native of Transylvania, then but twenty years of age. It is with him and his group that we are particularly concerned. At sixteen years of age he graduated from the University of Altdorf, in Bavaria, with the title of Doctor of Philosophy and the Liberal Arts. He was always referred to, however, as Magister, or Master, Kelpius. This was because when Zimmerman organized his "School of Piety," or, as he called it, "Chapter of Perfection," with himself as Master, he named

Kelpius as Deputy-Master, and, at Zimmerman's death, Kelpius became Master.

Zimmerman was skilled in the Mathematicks, and had predicted that the Millennium would begin in the fall of 1694. The London group was, therefore, anxious to begin their journey to America, and finally, on February 11, 1694 (O.S.), they embarked on the "Sarah Maria", at London. There are two accounts extant of this voyage; one, the diary of Kelpius himself, the other, a letter sent back to Holland shortly after their arrival, which letter was published. It was written by a member of the party, Daniel Falkner, who afterwards became the secular leader, as Kelpius was the spiritual. At the beginning they encountered a furious storm; things came to such a pass that they thought all was lost, when Kelpius, stirred by some inward prompting, went to the captain and told him that more dangers were impending but that they should arrive in safety. After a long delay at Plymouth, waiting for their convoy which never came (nearly all European nations were then at war with France), they finally left under the protection of but one ship, the "Providence." On the way they had a fierce encounter with several French war vessels, but not only escaped but even captured one of the French vessels and took it with them as a prize. On June 12th they had their first glimpse of the new world, and on June 14th entered Chesapeake Bay. Five days later they landed and immediately made their way across to Delaware Bay, where they took a sloop to Philadelphia, arriving there on June 23, 1694. There were forty of them, the number prescribed for a "Chapter of Perfection," all men. Their first act was to call upon Benjamin Fletcher, Captain-General of Pennsylvania, and his Deputy-Governor, William Markham, to take the oath of allegiance and explain their reason for coming. They then made arrangements for lodging for the night. That evening a number of them, tired as they were, participated in a curious ceremony. They betook themselves to a highland, just northwest of the city proper, known as Fairmount, and there performed the mystic rites peculiar to St. John's Eve.

The next day, Sunday, St. John's Day, before sunrise, they started to walk to Germantown. It took them four hours to make the trip. Here they found anxiously awaiting them a friend in need, one Jacob Isaac Van Bebber, who secured them shelter and sustenance and looked after their every need.

This little band of forty enthusiasts, this "Chapter of Perfection," was composed of men in many different walks of life, many of them very well grounded in the learning of the day. The nobility and gentleness of their characters soon made them welcome guests in The German Township. Mystics as they were, devoted as they were to their purpose of retiring from the world, to prepare themselves by prayer and meditation for the "Coming of the Bridegroom," which they were assured was very near. they

took an active, even energetic, part in the affairs of their adopted community. To their great surprise, they found that, in all the Province of Pennsylvania, there were no specially designed places of worship except the Quaker meeting-houses, although there were representatives of many different sects, as might be expected. They found religion, even the morals, of the community at a low ebb. They undertook to correct this by holding meetings for worship at various times and places, where their eloquence and sincerity won them many converts. They undertook also instruction for the children, for which they were eminently well fitted; being also, some of them, learned in medical science, they were of great assistance in a community where there were no regular doctors. When the time came that their own tract of land, some distance out of Germantown, was surveyed and made ready for them by Thomas Holme, the official surveyor of Pennsylvania, and they made preparations to build their own home on this tract, they met with much opposition from those who said that such talents should not be wasted in the wilderness, but should always be readily available in the community. When they persisted, being steadfast in their purpose of retirement, for a short time praise was turned to blame, and many ugly stories about their incantations and sorceries were circulated. They chose a spot near this cave, and on it built, of massive logs, a Tabernacle, forty feet square, and oriented to the points of the compass. It contained a large room for their services, a school-room, and cells for the individual recluses. Surmounting the roof was an observatory, where some of the scientific members kept nightly watch with a telescope and other instruments, so that if the Bridegroom came in the middle of the night He would find them ready and waiting. On top of this was the emblem of the Rosicrucians, a cross within a circle, so placed that the first rays of the rising sun would flood it with rosy light. Kelpius himself, wishing to be able to retire altogether from all others, and having found this cave, fitted it out for his own dwelling. Here he lived for fourteen years, and this cave is all that is left of their structures. They brought over with them many ancient treatises on Rosicrucianism and Theosophy, and some of these still exist, in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and elsewhere. The nature of these books proves them to have been true Rosicrucians.

The following eulogy of Kelpius was taken from some MSS. at Ephrata:

"Kelpius, educated in one of the most distinguished Universities of Europe, and having had advantages of the best resources for the acquirement of knowledge, was calculated to edify and enlighten those who resorted to him for information. He had particularly made great progress in the study of ancient lore, and was quite proficient in theology. He was intimately acquainted with the principal works of the Rabbins,

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Kelpius and his Followers

(Continued from page 10)

the Heathen and Stoic philosophers, the Fathers of the Christian Church, and the Reformers. He was conversant with the writings of Tertullian, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Tauler, Eck, Myconius, Carlstadt, Hedio, Faber, Oslander, Luther, Zwingli, and others, whose opinions he would frequently analyse and expound with much animation. He was also a strict disciplinarian, and kept attention constantly directed upon self. To know self, he contended, is the first and most essential of all knowledge. . . . He directed a sedulous watchfulness over the temper, inclinations, and passions, and applauded very much the Counsel of Marcus Aurelius: 'Look within; for within is the fountain of good'."

An old manuscript in the handwriting of Pastor Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg sets forth that, in 1742, Daniel Geissler, a trustworthy man of over sixty years of age, and the former *famulus* and confidential assistant of Kelpius, gave to him the following interesting particulars of the death of Kelpius:

Kelpius, among other things, was of the firm belief that he would not die a natural death. . . . As his last hours drew near, the Magister spent three long days and nights in praying to God. . . . At last, on the third day, after a long silence, he ceased his pleadings, and, addressing himself to his faithful *famulus*, said: "My beloved Daniel, I am not to attain that which I aspired unto. I have received my answer. It is that dust I am, and to dust I am to return. It is ordained that I shall die like unto all children of Adam."

Kelpius thereupon handed Geissler a box or casket, which was well secured and sealed, and told him to carry it to the Schuylkill, where the water was deep, and cast it into the river. Geissler took the casket as far as the river bank, and being of somewhat an inquisitive nature, concluded to hide the casket until after his master's death, and then possess himself of the secret of its contents. Upon his return, Kelpius raised himself up and, with outstretched hand, pointing to his *famulus*, looked him sharply in the

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eyes, and said: "Daniel, thou hast not done as I bid thee, nor hast thou cast the casket into the river, but hast hidden it near the shore." Geissler, now more than ever convinced of the occult powers of the dying Master, without even stammering an excuse, hurried to the river bank, and threw the casket into the water as he was bidden.

The MS. goes on to state that, as the mysterious casket touched the water, the "Arcanum" exploded, and for a time flashes of lightning and peals like unto thunder came from out of the water. When Geissler returned to the bedside of Kelpius, at the Tabernacle, the latter told him that now was accomplished the task he had given him. A few days after this episode the pious Magister entered into rest. All tradition seems to agree that his remains were consigned to a grave within the orchard or garden belonging to the Tabernacle.

* This article was submitted by Mrs. Henry V. Gummere, of Germantown, the mother of Dr. Gummere, Head Master of Penn Charter, and the widow of the author, who used this material when he headed a pilgrimage made to Kelpius' Cave, on the West banks of the Wissahickon in a ravine along Hermit's Lane under the Henry Avenue Bridge. Since Kelpius was a most interesting and historic religious character in Philadelphia before 1700, it seems that the cave in which he lived, and which is still in existence, should be well marked, as well as the road leading to it on both sides of the small bridge over the Wissahickon and leading up Hermit's Lane to a path near the top of the hill. There, another marker should be placed, pointing down to the valley where the cave is located and where stood the famous Tabernacle of the cult. Kelpius lived here until his death in 1708. Some of his followers started the historic cloisters at Ephrata (now a Pennsylvania State Park), and some of them again returned to the Wissahickon and founded the "Monastery" and Baptistry on the East Banks of the Wissahickon near Kitchen's Lane.—G. E. N.



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