Chapter One

Childhood and Education

The future reformer of Zürich was born on January 1, 1484, at Wildhaus in the steep valley of the Toggenburg. He belonged to a family of well-to-do farmers. It seems that his grandfather already was *ammann,* i.e. mayor of the village. In any case, his father certainly filled this post and brought up a numerous family. Documents which have been preserved transmit the Christian names of five brothers who lived on the family estates. In the register of church tithes for 1534 the name of the Zwinglis recurs fifty-five times: they appear there—these nephews or cousins—as a robust tribe. Besides the five farmers, the immediate family of Ulrich included three sisters; a brother, Jacob, who was born in 1490, became a monk, attended lectures at the University of Vienna, and died in 1517; and also a brilliant young brother, Andrew, who was born in 1500. The latter, who was Ulrich's companion in the Zürich presbytery, was carried off by the plague in 1520.

Wildhaus at that time was a series of houses scattered over the Alpine slopes rather than a village whose streets huddled around the church steeple. The altitude—roughly 3,300 feet—made cultivation of the land difficult. Such land as was in fact usable, and which had been patiently won from the clearing of forests between the 12th and 14th centuries, left to the inhabitants hardly any other resource than that of rearing stock. The road which serves the high valley and links it with the region of Buchs dates from the beginning of the 15th century; it facilitated the sale of butter and cheese in the localities of the Rhineland plain and as far

as Feldkirch. The relative prosperity of the Zwingli family was doubtless the consequence of this.

By an odd set of circumstances the parish was ecclesiastically dependent on the bishopric of Chur, while politically the valley belonged to the abbacy of St. Gall, which had acquired it in 1468 from the heirs of the counts of Toggenburg. Historians attach a certain importance to the bond with Chur, which was the capital of the Grisons; it is thought to prove the penetration of Rhaetian-Roman elements into the area and to suggest that the inhabitants of Wildhaus were only superficially Alemanni. Must we impute to these far-off origins the very Latin clarity of mind which Zwingli evinced? In such matters, schematization is dangerous. In the last analysis, both Alemanni and Franks were Aryans. It is personal aptitude rather which plays a role of capital importance.

The influence of the family circle is much more in evidence. From his father Uly and his mother Margaret (cousin of the Abbot of Fischingen) the boy received a good dose of common sense, simplicity and piety. In the house attributed to them by tradition and which the tourist respectfully visits—the Lisighaus—there was little enough room to accommodate eleven children and several servants. Education could not be a finicking business on modern psychological lines, but the mixing together of characters in a big family—shouts, arguments, games in common, smacks and rewards—achieve more, in an atmosphere of faith and hard work, than the smartest pedagogical recipes. In later life Ulrich recalled the stories told by his grandmother to the little scamps already half-asleep. She would describe Peter and Jesus on their travels sleeping in the same bed. "And Peter," she would tell them, "slept on the outer side of the bed, while our Lord rested against the wall. The woman with whom they lodged used to call them every morning, but Peter alone did she pull by the hair to awaken him." The anecdote brings to mind the mattresses on which Ulrich and his brothers slept two by two; it suggests the rustic and healthy character of such a childhood. "When father

appeared with the big stick, all the children would piously exclaim: 'I won't do it again'", wrote the reformer one day when thinking of his young days.

In the Zwingli household, love was mingled with severity. Ulrich was later to compare the goodness of God with that of a father offering his son a bunch of grapes picked from the vine-arbour. In the village which had no imported luxuries—he notes that they did not know the taste of ginger, wine of Malvoisie, spice or oranges—the grape must have been for them the most delectable delicacy.

At Wildhaus, apart from Grandmother's tales and the good advice of parents, it was impossible for an intelligent boy to learn the slightest thing. When the boy was five years old, his parents decided to entrust him to the care of his uncle and godfather, Barthelemy, who was Vicar of Wesen on the Lake of Wallenstadt. Paths which were passable from April, once the snow had melted, put Toggenburg at a few hours' walking distance from the valley. The separation was painful, but the father wanted his son to make his way in life as well as was possible. A revealing remark of his has been preserved: "I would rather have a philosopher than a play-actor!" he exclaimed when Zwingli, who was admirably gifted for music, confided to him, in a letter written from Vienna, his plans for the future, and mentioned among his other interests his favourite musical instruments. Like Luther and Calvin, Zwingli was not the child of a nonentity, but rather of a true educator who was fully aware of his responsibilities, and capable, if need be, of roughly handling his offspring.

Of Barthelemy Zwingli, who for five years watched over the moral and intellectual development of his nephew, we know but little. He concerned himself anxiously with his godson. First a priest in the village of Schännis, he was offered in 1487 the living of Wesen and officiated as dean in the area. Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, describes him as "a pious man, held in honour and esteem". Little Ulrich doubtless owed to him, along with the rudiments of Latin, the happy decision to continue his studies. In 1494 his

uncle sent him to Basle, where he became the pupil of Gregory Bünzli. It was also doubtless owing to the prestige of the aged Barthelemy that Zwingli was later to find himself, while still quite young, offered the envied post of Vicar of Glarus.

With the 15th century the Middle Ages come to an end. Intellectually and commercially, towns are rapidly developing. Many ties are being created which break down former barriers. Men, merchandise and ideas are getting into circulation.

The boy who, at ten, left the quiet shores of the Lake of Wallenstadt to go to Basle, had no idea as yet that he was living in a world in ferment. He admired, at the end of another lake, the city of Zürich with its many steeples, not foreseeing that he would one day become the much-heeded preacher of the Great Minster. He took his schoolboy's lodgings at Basle without discerning the figure of Erasmus, who was to make the city a centre of letters, and to become a few years later the object of his fervent admiration. Such is the mystery of destinies which intersect and mingle. The man is born in the child without the latter realizing it, and the years which will both exalt him and make him cruelly suffer unroll before him.

Bünzli, "a good man, cultured and very mild", won the gratitude of his pupil. He ran very ably a school for Latin studies, where Zwingli spent two years; after which his master sent him back home, with the advice that, in view of his gifts, he should continue his studies. Their friendship was not to end until 1527 with the death of the older man, who in 1507 succeeded Barthelemy Zwingli as Vicar of Wesen. In 1496, Ulrich entered a school at Berne which was managed by the humanist scholar, Henry Wölflin, known as Lupulus (Little Wolf). Thanks to this new master, a Christian in the old style, a faithful servant of the Church, a zealous pilgrim, author of a life of Nicolas de Flue and translator of Samson the preacher of indulgences at the time of his round in Switzerland, the boy now made the acquaintance of

classical antiquity. The classics, in which he came to delight, penetrated his fresh mind. A strange episode might well have lastingly modified the course of his career: the Dominicans of Berne, enchanted by his voice and musical gifts, tried to attach him to their monastery, and even, so it would seem, went so far as to admit him as a novice. But neither his father nor his uncle agreed to the plan. On their urgent advice, Ulrich set himself afresh to his studies, and, directed by Lupulus, proceeded from Berne to Vienna.

We have very little exact information about these years of preparation, which, in their humble fashion, correspond to the years now spent at a grammar school. If they shaped the intelligence of the adolescent, they did not effectually detach him from his rural origins. His whole life long, Zwingli described himself as a peasant. A bit of straw, the manure heap, the smell of the fields, the creak of carts, the cries of the farmyard, accompanied him to the very end. It remains true that pure urban civilization is a comparatively recent creation. With its seven thousand inhabitants, Zürich was still in close contact with the fields and the woods. In consequence, Zwingli, as later Péguy, never yielded to the dizzy raptures of intellectualism: nature is the framework of his meditations up to the hour when death lays him low on the meadow of Cappel.

The years spent at Vienna are also little known. The student who arrived in the capital of Austria in the autumn of 1498 found Swiss comrades there. The names of several of them have been spotted alongside his own on the old register where he appears as *Uldaricus Zwingly de Glaris.* Mention is made further of the payment of the usual boarding fees. The adolescent was lodged, like most foreigners, in one of the houses set apart for scholars. Spent under the supervision of humanists, such as Giovanni Ricuzzi Vellini, known as Damers, and the famous Conrad Celtes, the poet crowned by the Emperor Maximilian, these eight terms procured for him a solid culture. Apart from its intrinsic value, Vienna has left hardly any traces in the work of Zwingli, but he made some excellent friends there. To one of them,

Joachim Vadian, he remained closely united; their correspondence is a precious mine of information about the later activity of the reformer.

Historians have been puzzled by a stroke of the pen which has erased the first inscription of the name of Uldaricus and by the *exclusus* which an obviously later pen has inserted into the register. Must we see in this the trace of an expulsion incurred as a result of unruly conduct, or is it a question of a later act of vengeance against the student who became a heresiarch? Whatever be the truth of the matter, if he was banished for one reason or another in 1499, Zwingli returned and pursued a regular course of study in Vienna up to 1502, when he went to Basle. In view of the tense relations between the Confederates and the Austrians, which marked this period, Oscar Farner thinks the likely cause was a political feud amongst the students. In the margin of a copy of Josephus, facing the story of Isaac athirst, driven far from a fountain by inhospitable maidens,[1] Ulrich has inscribed: "I well remember this impious woman who, when I was on my way home, at Lindau, on my return from the University of Vienna, did not allow me to enter her house, although on account of the cold I was incapable of continuing my journey, my strength was spent and I was on the verge of despair." Is this note an allusion to a flight in mid-winter or to the terminal return home at the end of an icy March? The mysterious confidence has not unveiled its secret.

His time at Basle (1502-1506) is somewhat better known. Zwingli gained there the degrees of Bachelor of Arts in 1504 and Master of Arts in 1506. He earned some of his maintenance money by part-time teaching at the school of St. Martin. He won new friends, in particular Leo Jud, who was later to be the companion of his struggle at Zürich, Nicolas de Watteville, the future canon of the Chapter at Berne who prepared there the way for the victorious progress of the reformation, and Nicolas Wyttenbach who as chief magistrate of Bienne was to bring that future industrial centre into the orbit of new ideas. Among his masters, mention should

1. A Jewish legend, not found in the Bible.

be made of another Wyttenbach, Thomas, who gave lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and on certain parts of the New Testament, especially the Epistle to the Romans. Zwingli owed to him his first serious contact with Holy Scripture, and, if we are to believe Leo Jud, the desire to study it more deeply, leaving aside the "follies of the sophists".

Is it possible that the rest of his studies aroused in him a feeling of disgust for scholastic subtleties? Such is not the opinion of Walther Köhler: at Basle, Zwingli worked especially on Thomas Aquinas and under the influence of this illustrious doctor came to feel the need for a solidly constructed theology in which reason is given a place of honour. Luther, on the contrary, through Gabriel Biel, came under the influence of Duns Scotus, the apostle of the irrational. It is said that a difference in scholastic training explains the opposition which later divided Zwingli from Luther. This thesis is not without its attraction, but skirts too lightly over the enormous difference of character which certainly played a part in the clash at the colloquy of Marburg.

However this may be, Thomism brought the Basle student into contact with Aristotle, whom he studied very seriously. The volumes of his library which have been preserved contain among other things a copiously annotated copy of the edition of this author published at Venice in 1495. The original work of Zwingli contains many a proof of his Aristotelian training, from the conception of God presented in his *De Providentia* to the knowledge of physics and natural history which is shown here and there in various writings.

To return to Thomas Wyttenbach; this scholar, in a public dissertation, was to attack indulgences several years before Luther. Zwingli pays him the homage of having learned from him that "the death of Christ alone is the price of the forgiveness of sins". Whether Wyttenbach took up his position in 1505, as some consider, or in 1515, as others insist, it is certain that his criticism is prior to the famous theses of Wittenberg, though it did not produce the same

stir as the latter. In the sphere of ideas as in that of science, there can be an extraordinary coincidence in research. At the same time, in laboratories or in different university chairs, men who do not know of each other's work reach the same conclusions. In 1509, in his *Praise of Folly,* does not Erasmus also show some anxiety on this score: "What shall I say of those whose calm confidence lies in indulgences, who count so much on their efficacy that they measure as with a water-clock the time they have to spend in purgatory, calculating the centuries, the years, the months, the days and the hours with as much accuracy as if they had drawn up mathematical tables?"

In the autumn of 1506, the studies of Ulrich were suddenly brought to an end. Johannes Stucki, Vicar of Glarus, which was the chief town in the canton of the same name, died. A priest of Zürich, Henry Göldli, a man of good family and well in favour at Rome, seemed ready to inherit the incumbency. The Curia, according to a deplorable custom, had already authorized him to occupy the benefice and to have it administered by a vicar. It was about to be added to the benefices which he already had, his canonry of Embrach and his cure of Baden. The parishioners of Glarus, somewhat dissatisfied, would have preferred to an absentee, whose pockets would have to be filled, a priest residing in the parish. Meantime, old Barthelemy Zwingli at Wesen was watching carefully over his flock. His good pastoral reputation served as a letter of recommendation to his nephew. The student was asked to go and preach in the neighbouring town of Rapperswil, and shortly afterwards the people of Glarus made up their minds in his favour.

In haste, he was ordained priest and on September 29 celebrated at Wildhaus his first mass. A week later, his flock entertained him with delight. The banquet which was offered by the parish gathered around the young priest—who was not yet twenty-three—his father, the authorities of Glarus and those of the neighbourhood. But Göldli possessed his rights; to effect his withdrawal, Zwingli promised to pay by instalments a hundred florins—which was a

considerable sum. When twelve years later on his election to Zürich he gave up Glarus, his parishioners, together with his Einsiedeln friends, liberated him finally from his debt by paying on his behalf a last instalment of twenty florins. This painful financial adventure was to open Ulrich's eyes to the curious way in which the Church was administered.