



The Morning Star of Wittenberg Transcript

Martin Treu: One of the most famous philosophers and theologians of the 19th century, Soren Kierkegaard has said, "It is only important that Luther had married. It is quite unimportant whom. He could have married a door post." End of quote. It seems that Soren Kierkegaard, who was never married, by the way, was in error.

Kirsi Stejerna: She becomes more than just a private mother doing a wonderful job. But she becomes a model in a sense, that a woman can do anything a man can do.

Jutta: Katharina von Bora Luther lived from 1449 to 1552. She is best known as the ex-nun who married Martin Luther. Katie Luther, was a woman of the middle ages. In one respect, ordinary. At the same time, exceptional. For a woman of the middle ages to be remembered at all is significant. She would need to be a royal celebrity or an influential writer who left a written testimony, or an exceptional person spiritually, a religious leader with exemplary faith. A saint. Katie wasn't any of these.

Stejerna: Most people know Katie as the ex-nun who married Luther. And we know that she was of noble birth. She was born 29th of January in 1499 to a family that used to be wealthy, in Lippendorf. But a family who had lost their wealth. And that might be one reason why Katharina was sent to a monastery at a very young age.

Martin Treu: From the written sources there we know that the family was very poor. Of course, normally people were expected to bring a gift along when entering a monastery. And her father paid only 30 Goshen which is a very measly sum compared to what is normal in the records. In the written records.

Kirsi Stejerna: It is interesting that Katie was sent to the convent right after her mother died. And her father re-married, Margarita Von Edne. And it sounds like the evil step mother came and that is why the little girl was sent away. But that is not necessarily the case. But we don't know. But we do know that she went to a convent and stayed there for five years. And then she was sent to the Sistersion Convent. In Ninbschen.

Martin Treu: And we know from the written records that the monastery in Ninbschen was a large one. Quite rich. And it seems that quite a lot of what house keeping meant in the early 16th century Katie has learned there.

Kirsi: When she was sent to the convent she was five years old. When she was sent to another convent she was 10 years old. And at that point it seemed that her destiny was sealed. Her family had no money for a dowery. Which was needed to marry her well. Her

family didn't want her back. Which must have broken her heart. Why didn't they want her back?

Jutta: While Katie was at the convent, Augustinian monk and theologian, Martin Luther, began questioning the church's practice of selling indulgences. He also questioned the roll of monastic life. There can be little doubt, that Katie and other nuns learned of the tumultuous events taking place to the north, in Wittenberg. Katie von Bora and Martin Luther were about to cross paths. Exactly how, remains a mystery.

Martin Treu: The most influential book of that time on the question of what the future of nun's and monk's should be is Luther's "On the Works of Monks." There was one very, very rare edition, obviously done in Grimma near the monastery in 1522. So it really seems that the intention was to smuggle it into the convent.

Kirsi: We don't know exactly what Katharina heard. Or learned. But she must have been aware of Martin Luther's criticism of the monastic life. Based on his own experience. His own frustration. That he is trying so hard to please God. To find perfection. And it doesn't seem to be working. And the revelation that justification comes from faith alone. You don't have to live in a monastery to do that. You can do that if that is your calling. But you don't have to. You can live a holy life outside. You can get married, have children. Live an ordinary life. And that is holy. And sacred. That was the message that these women heard loud and clear.

Jutta: In the early morning hours, Easter day, 1523, twelve nuns fled the convent in Ninbschen. A popular legend describes the nuns fleeing in the back of a fish wagon owned by a friend of Luther's.

Treu: There is always a question, how many nuns fled the monastery. The evidence points clearly to 12. But only nine nuns arrived in Wittenberg. The other three obviously got back to their own families. Because they lived in the region of the Luther friend, Frederick the Wise. The Saxon Prince. Whereas the nine who came to Wittenberg had their families in the territories of the other branch of Saxony, Prince George. Who was deeply apposed to Luther. So they had to flee to Wittenberg.

Kirsi: This is quite a scandal. It is Easter Sunday and here are all these nuns coming. These were not the first nuns to leave their orders. This is the first time it happens in Wittenberg. And these ladies come to Luther who is feeling very much responsible for them. Most of them found a home easily. Some of them went home. Some of them married. But then there is three left. One of them is Katarina. And then she is the last one left. Nobody seemed to want her.

Treu: We are not quite sure where she lived in Wittenberg. It was quite possible it was the Cranach house. But the one thing is sure. To be unmarried for more than two years in Wittenberg, staying all alone with out the family, which means the social background, which kept you as a person in the early 16th century, is quite a remarkable feat. It shows that she was a strong, independent, and even strong willed person.

Kirsi: She fell in love with a very beautiful, handsome, rich man. His name was Baumgardner. Jerome in English. They fell in love. They planned to get married. This was a very prestigious young man falling in love with Katarina. Which proves wrong all the assumptions that she was unattractive. Difficult. Not marry-able. Not good marriage material. She was. She got one of the best. The problem was, this mans family didn't want their precious son marring an ex-nun who had no money.

Treu: But when his family found out about the whole thing, they whisked him back to Nuernberg and married him to a much younger and suitable person from noble decent. And with quite a lot of money in the background.

Kirsi: So the man leaves, saying, "I will be back in a few months. We will get married. Have a few children. Live happily ever after." And he rides away. Katharina waves goodbye. And Lucas Cannock, at whose house she is probably living at that time, probably comforts her and says, "Yes, he will probably come back." Knowing that he won't. His parents forbid him ever to go back to Katarina. Not to even write to her. They quickly arrange an engagement with Cibila Dichtel. A very wealthy, beautiful young teenager. And Katarina hears about this rumor. An announcement. Never, ever heard from him again. Her heart is broken.

Treu: So Katie still remained unmarried and on Luther's hands. He tried to marry her off to a colleague of his. Some body named Casper Glatz. And Katie declined.

Kirsi: I wish we had a picture of him. But the way Katarina responded to his was like, "No way!" She said, "I have no love. No desire in myself for him." Period. She would not marry for the safety. This was a good man. No way.

Treu: There is the famous sentence related by Nicolas Von Amsdorff, Luther's friend. "If she could not have Amsdorff or Luther, she would remain a spinster."

Kirsi: Nicolas Von Amsdorff was a determined bachelor. And we can assume that Katarina knew that. That was an absurdity. Nicolas would not get married. But Luther? After all. He was the one who started it. He was the one writing all these treatises. How wonderful marriage is. How good it is. He could get married. Although he had waited pretty long. All the other reformers were married at this point. He was not. And there probably were reasons for that. He was too busy writing. He had no time for looking for a wife. And also he knew that his life was in danger. He was a good man. He probably thought that if I get married, I drag a decent woman into my misery. Misery meaning his life being in danger. But there was something in Katarina that made him change his mind.

Treu: We are not quite sure how romantic love played a role in the thing. You see, this kind of love is an invention of the 19th century. The idea in the early 16th century is that people should like each other when marrying. And love starts after the marriage, not before.

Jutta: Katie and Martin's married life began amid the backdrop of the peasants war. Luther sided with the nobility and now had Pope and peasants looking for his head. It didn't appear to be the best of times to get married.

Treu: It was quite a big surprise for everyone in Wittenberg when the marriage in June 1525 was announced. Even Luther's best friend, Phillip Melancthon was not informed before hand. And consequently was not invited to the marriage. Which he resented deeply.

Kirsi: First they got engaged. Consummated the marriage in front of witnesses. They had a brief and simple ceremony. Brughenhagen, the pastor of the city church in Wittenberg married the couple. Two weeks later, June 27th, they have a big celebration. A parade through the town. Students are there. Protestors and jeers. A lot of demonstrators against the marriage joined the parade.

Treu: The negative reaction to Luther's marriage from the Roman Catholic side could be expected. But the negative reaction of his friends and the reformed front was something which surprised Luther himself. The problem was, in the eyes of his followers he had made himself wide open to traditional criticism. The best known is, of course, the one of King Henry VIII of England who explained that this would be the true revelation of the reformed spirit. The monk just wanted to get married. That is what the whole reformation is all about.

Katie: Some people said, "Marry anybody. But not here." Why? We don't really know why. But there was something in Katarina's personality. In her strength. In her being who she was that made some people uncomfortable. And even today, women who are very strong, who don't take crap from anybody, who are willing to stand on their own. And are not people pleasers. They often annoy people. And then are often portrayed in a very bad light. And that is what we see happened with Katarina. There are all kinds of rumors. "This lusting dancing girl. This pig. This nearly prostitute who was actually living with Luther and having sex and having children before they even married." And she became this very bad person in peoples minds. Because she was marrying Luther.

Treu: And so the young couple, which wasn't so young by the way, any more. He was 43. And what is more important, she was 26. Quite old for marriage at that time... had, not an easy start. The Prince elector gave away the monastery as a kind of silent gift. But only a third of the house at that time was habitable. Especially the prince, expected Luther to move with his wife into some more suitable, into a more suitable home. Along the lines Phillip Melancthon got 10 years later as a gift. But it was Katie who decided to stay. And built a house. Set up a household. Which cannot be compared to anything we normally have today. It was more like a convention center. Coupled with a students home. Sometimes an infirmary. At the same time Katie took over the economic rule of the household. Luther had no idea about money or what to do with that. His only idea was to spend it. And as a monk he never got used to handling money.

Kirsi: She saw that it was very important for them to buy something permanent. And that was land. She was a noble lady. She loved land. She can't live without land. So she convinces Luther that they can invest and buy a piece of land. The farm of Julesdorff.

Treu: She was a managing director of a middling enterprise. She had her servants to control. And we know from the sources that those servants were quite often not easy to control. So she had quite a lot to do. What made her most famous was her own brewery.

Kirsi: Luther was very fond of her beer. She was in charge of making good German beer. And every body enjoyed that. The students. The visitors. And especially Luther. And Katarina was in charge of all that. Because Luther was busy being Luther. Writing, teaching, arguing, having beer, having conversations. He used to give fabulous wedding gifts and throw huge banquets. Until Katie came in and said, "No way. We have to feed our family and our guests." Luther was very eccentric. Very difficult to live with. Very high maintenance spouse. He was sometimes, probably smelly. He didn't really take care of his hygiene or diet or anything. His bed was rotting. He forgot to change the straw. Katie knew all about this. And this was an older man. 42 year old. Katharina was 26. So what was the attraction there? If there was an attraction it was probably on a spiritual and intellectual and mental level. Katarina must have had tremendous respect towards Luther. Even before they got married. And once they got married her respect and love shows in her always deferring to Herr Doctor in public. Probably not in bed. But in public. Herr Doctor Martinus Luther.

Treu: When Luther finished the bible translation in 1534 he wanted, of course, that his wife should read it. But how to incite her to do that? So he promised her 50 Guilders if she would read through the whole bible within six months. She did, and he paid.

Kirsi: He had this very weird habit of, when he felt ill he would lock himself into the study. And Katarina waited for three days. Four days. And thought, this is it. And had the door taken down. So here is Luther, looking at here. "What did I do wrong?" Well, Katie thought it was better to eat something good. And fix a nice meal. And Luther felt better.

Treu: The children they had were six in number. Two died very early. Which was a very good percentage after the custom of time, where nearly a third of the children didn't survive the first year.

Kirsi: Katie and Luther lost two of their children. Elizabeth, a young daughter. At the age of 13 months she just died. And later Magdalena died at the age of 13. Two daughters Katie and Martin loved tremendously. They loved all their children. They would have died for any of their children. But when you lose a child, you really realize what you are losing. And they were devastated by the lost of that.

Jutta: As the story of the reformation unfolded around them, Katie and Martin's relationship developed into a deep, abiding love and mutual respect.

Treu: Besides being the managing director, she was also the partner of Luther during his life. This shows for instance in the case that she was the only woman allowed into the circle of the table talk. You know, after the meals which were taken downstairs, with the whole family and the servants and the friends, Luther and his friends and the more influential visitors went upstairs into his preserved room where they had their after dinner cup and the famous table talk. Which was written down by the students who attended. So the writers were quite unhappy with the active role she played. They called her the Dorcorissa, which is an artificial word meaning the doctors wife but even more, meaning, a female doctor. Something which was unthinkable for the 16th century. There were quite a lot of people, friends of Luther's who asked him to curb the tongue of his wife. Which he never did.

Jutta: It is through letters written to Katie, that we learn about a relationship that began as a practical matter, and grew into a romance.

Kirsi: He starts writing of this cherished... my beloved one. My dearest one. Whom he wouldn't change for Venice or Florence or France or anything. A woman he loves dearly. It is not that usual for a medieval, late medieval, renaissance man unless he is a poet to write about his love and affection in quite a public manner. And to talk about his love. And to write love letters to his wife. Luther, this monk, fell in love with Katarina Von Bora.

Jutta: Luther wrote to Katie from the Marburg castle, where he and Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli squared off in a debate about "real presence" of Christ in the communion elements.

Voice of Luther: "Grace and peace in Christ, Dear Lord Katie! You should know that our amiable colloquy at Marburg has come to an end, and we are in agreement on almost all points, except that the opposition insists on affirming that there is only simple bread in the Lord's Supper, and on confessing that Jesus Christ is spiritually present there....Say "good night" to all, and pray for us. We are all still alert and healthy and live like kings. Kiss the children on my behalf. Your obedient servant, Martin Luther."

Jutta: While Luther's friends met in Augsburg presenting the Augsburg Confession, the outlawed Luther was housed at the Veste Coburg where he wrote to Katie.

Voice of Luther: To my dearly beloved, Catherine Luther, mistress of the house at Wittenberg. I have received all of your letters. This is the fourth letter I am writing to you....Together with the box, I have also received the picture of Lenchen. At first I did not recognize the little strumpet. If only there will finally be an end to the diet! We have done and offered enough; the papists do not want to give a hair's breath.

Jutta: In the last weeks before his death in Eisleben, Luther shared news of his declining health.

Voice of Luther: My dearly beloved mistress of the house, Katherine Luther, a doctor, the lady of Zolsadorf and of the pig market, and whatever else she is capable of being. Before all else, grace and peace in Christ, and my old poor, and as our Grace knows, powerless love. Dear Katie. Yes, on the way shortly before Eiselben, I became dizzy.... Give my greetings to all the table companions. Your loving Martin Luther, who has grown old."

Kirsi: Katarina was afraid of losing Luther. As Luther had been afraid of losing Katarina. Earlier when Katarina was sick, Luther had said something like, "Don't just die and leave me. You can't go." Katie did all she could. She did the best of medicine. The best of beer. The best of care. And yet Luther had to travel. He just couldn't stop traveling. Luther died away from Katie. He died with two of his sons in his presence. Katie was far away. She had gotten Luther's letter a few days before he died. She was heart broken. Interesting enough, again, a sign of Katie's extraordinary nature, she inherited Luther. Women didn't inherit their husbands. It was the oldest son, usually who inherited. And then he would be the guardian of the property and take care of the mother. Luther, before he died, made a will. And let Katie know that you will inherit me. That I make sure that you will have the land.

Jutta: Following Luther's death in 1546 war and plague broke out in the region.

Treu: In this war she had to flee twice from Wittenberg because of the invasion of the Spaniards. And she was afraid for her own life and for the life of her children which she took with her. And those escapes were so expensive that she lost nearly everything she had gotten from Luther in cash.

Kirsi: She had to go on for six more years. And those years were the most difficult in her life. Because after Luther died, there was no funding. We have letters to Christian III, King of Denmark, who's father had been her friend. Asking for his financial support. For his support to get money from the elector. It must have been very humiliating for her also. But she saw that it was necessary. She was fighting for her children.

Voice of Kaite: I am moved by urgent need to submissively beseech Your Royal Highness in my wretched plight in the hope that Your Royal Highness will look graciously upon my unworthy epistle, written by a poor widow now abandoned by all and sundry.

Kirsi: And then in 1552 plague hit Wittenberg again. And this time, really bad. And basically everybody left. The university people left. So Katie packed her horses and left. And on the way, the horse got scared of something. And she tried to tame the horse. Fell from the horse. Got injured. Fell in the cold water. And probably died out of those injuries and pneumonia a few months later. In Torgau. She was buried in Torgau. Which is not her home. But because of the political situation that is where she had to be buried.

Treu: You see, every time projects it's own ideas into the 16th century. And of course German professors writing about Katie in the 19th century couldn't imagine that the wife plays a more important role than just providing three meals and a clean bed every day.

But what happened in the 16th century with the Luther family was clearly different. They had their own independent lives. And she was more important for showing Luther, the monk, every day life and the important of the every day life for the simple people than everybody else could have done.

Kirsi: She symbolizes the sacredness of every day life. She thoroughly enjoys being a mother and a wife. And she sees holiness in that. The holiness of being married. Giving birth of children. Nursing them. Seeing that as a form of ministry. That was new. That came with the reformation. For women in Christian history it has always been a baggage to be a woman. You are born with female sexuality. For a woman to hear the word of gospel. That you are created by God the way you are. As a holy human being. It is ok to fulfill that purpose of your life. That could be your vocation in life. That was pure gospel for women.