How did the Moravian Brethren, scattered across the globe in settlements and missionary outposts, succeed in maintaining a communal identity at a time in which international communications were so irregular and uncertain? This is the question that I will explore in the following.

In 1787, the philanthropist Christian Gotthilf Salzmann called the Moravian Brethren “citizens of the world”:

One has written so much since then about cosmopolitanism, about being a citizen of the world—but I nevertheless find it nowhere so pronounced as in this community. Indeed, we often speak with lively engagement of everything happening in the world: We pass judgments on the decisions of the American Congress, on the plans of our great Emperor, on the whale catch near Greenland, as on the lasciviousness of the residents of Otaheite—but talk and judge is all we do. The Moravians speak little, and acts all the more. As soon as it has to do with the will of the Savior (please allow me to use their language for a bit), he goes with the same sense of joy to Greenland, from there to St. Croix, and from St. Croix to Sarepta, that we feel when we go from one small town to another to visit a brother. On his journey, he finds brothers and sisters in all parts of the world. And when one speaks with him, he talks with delight of his brothers in Gnadau, Sarepta, Berbice, and on the Thomas Island …

1 “Man hat zeither soviel von Weltbürgerschaft geschrieben—und gleichwohl finde ich sie nirgends in einem so hohen Grade als bey dieser Gemeine. Wir sprechen zwar oft mit großer Theilnehmung von allem, was in der Welt geschieht, urtheilen über die Entschlüsse des Amerikanischen Congresses, wie über die Pläne unsern großen Kaisers, über den Wallfischfang bey Grönland, wie über die Lascivität der Bewohner von Otaheite—aber sprechen und urtheilen ist auch alles, was wir thun. Der Herrenhuter spricht aber wenig und handelt destomehr. Sobald es des Heilands Wille ist (erlauben Sie mir, daß ich mich einige Zeit ihrer Sprache bedienen darf), geht er mit eben der Freudigkeit nach Grönland, von da nach St. Croix, und von hier wieder nach Sarepta, mit welcher wir aus einem Städtchen in das andere zum Besuche eines Bruders reisen. Auf seiner Reise findet er in allen Weltgegenden Brüder und Schwestern, und wenn man mit ihm spricht, redet er mit Entzücken von seinen Brüdern in Gnadau, Sarepta, Berbice
In Salzmann’s view, the Moravians rightly deserved this title more than many of his enlightened contemporaries. The latter did, in fact, carry on intensive communication across borders and participate in events far away, but their knowledge of the world was not generally gleaned from travel and their own observations. It was different with the Brethren. For enlightened progressives the notion of belonging to humanity as a whole instead of to a single nation was primarily a programmatic notion and symbolic formation of identity, which did not necessarily entail a way of living that crossed national borders. Immanuel Kant, as was well known, could be a citizen of the world without having to leave his home in Königsberg much at all. In contrast, the Moravians had a lifestyle that led them all over the world and, simultaneously, made them at home anywhere.

From its very beginnings, the Moravian community was extremely mobile. Initially, it consisted primarily of refugees from Moravia who, since 1722, settled on the estate of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Herrnhut in the Oberlausitz region of Saxony. The group grew rapidly and attracted women and men from different areas of Europe and of diverse religious backgrounds, who sought a lifestyle suitable to their religious ideals.


3 The Moravians remained a relatively small group whose membership never exceeded 20,000. In 1761, the global Moravian community had approximately 12,000 members (5,747 on the European continent; 3,442 in Great Britain; and 3,015 in North and South America). By 1857, the membership had increased to just 20,000, with 6,188 of the members living on the European continent; 5,161 in Great Britain; and 8,414 in America (Dietrich Meyer, Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine. 1700–2000 [Göttingen, 2000], p. 174). The Moravian Brethren were not oriented toward mass growth, as were, for example, the Methodists; rather, their community was based on a certain elite religious consciousness. The converts in the countries of their mission stations were generally not accepted as members but rather stood in a paternalistic relationship. According to an 1839 report from missions abroad, in Greenland there were 25 missionaries from Herrnhut, as compared to 2,000 converts; in Labrador the ratio was 31/1,300; in Canada 5/150; in the U.S. 3/100; in South Africa 39/2,745; in Suriname 14/4,000; and in the Danish West Indies 36/10,000. On several islands in the British West...