

JUNG-STILLING AND THE AMERICAN BACKWOODS

By KLAUS WUST

" You think it surprises me to receive letters from North America; no, my dear, that does not surprise me at all for yours is not the first one from that part of the world. Besides, I am used to receiving letters from Asia and from most of the countries of Europe; my correspondence is unusually large and I also consider it a very essential and useful part of my activities. . . ." wrote *Dr. Jung-Stilling, Kurbadenscher Hofrath* in reply to a letter from an unnamed Lutheran clergyman in 1805. The pastor had evidently informed him of the influence his writings had among the Germans in the United States. " I feel like throwing myself in the dust before the Lord of Glory whenever I am given such testimony of blessings spread by my writings," Jung-Stilling continued and then revealed his familiarity with the religious scene in America.¹

The American pastor must have voiced concern about the followers of Johann Georg Rapp who had arrived during the preceding year. The first group of about three hundred Rappites reached Baltimore on July 4, 1804 aboard the *Aurora*. Two more shiploads of 540 persons altogether landed in Philadelphia in September 1804.² Some of these " awakened " Wurtembergers found the German communities in Maryland and Eastern Pennsylvania congenial enough to stay instead of following Rapp to his rigidly organized, utopian Harmony Society not far from Pittsburgh. " As to the Wurtemberg Separatists and their migration to America I must admit, helas!, that much chaff is mixed in with them. For several years already I have earnestly warned in public against such aberrations in *Der graue Mann* and especially in my correspondence. But it was to no avail. No people in Germany have less cause to be Separatists than the Wurtembergers because they still have a large number of awakened and righteous preachers."³

Another disquieting development for the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the American backwoods at that time were the camp meetings conducted by Methodists and their German-speaking counterparts, the United Brethren. These emotion-loaded outdoor services were often marked by corporal convulsions and delirious shouting. Stilling seemed to be well aware of the American revival movement when he wrote: " The news of revivals over there . . . is heart-lifting. I had previously read extensive news about the preachers under open skies in a German American newspaper. I dare not pass judgment on people dropping down and fainting—if it would only further the work of the Lord one might be tolerant in such secondary matters."⁴

Significantly, this passage of Stilling's letter was underlined in ink in the copy of the *Evangelisches Magazin* owned by the Rev. Paul Henkel, the foremost itinerant preacher of the Lutheran church. The same volume,

¹" Brief vom Stilling," *Evangelisches Magazin 1* (Philadelphia, 1812), 132-134.

²Christiana F. Knoedler, *The Harmony Society* (New York, 1854), 6-8.

³" Brief . . . " *loc. cit.*, 134; *Der graue Mann* (1795-1816) was Stilling's own magazine. He refers his correspondent to an attack on the sectarian enthusiasts in No. 16.

⁴" Brief . . . " *loc. cit.*, 133-134.

curiously, contains an admonition to Paul Henkel by the 1811 Synod meeting of the Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania:

"... that Mr. Paul Henkel be the itinerant preacher this year for three months in the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. For certain reasons Dr. Helmuth has been asked to inform him of this synodical resolution and advise him to stay away from Camp Meetings on his tour^s if he should encounter such deviations from our evangelical ways."⁵

Paul Henkel was known to have preached at backwoods revivals in order to offset the appeal of the emotional barrages of Methodist exhorters. Stilling's comment no doubt interested him and probably strengthened his own conviction that the Lutherans should not remain passive lest they lose their rural flocks to the new faith.

Henkel, like many of his contemporaries in the western parts of Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, was well familiar with the books of Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling. Numerous surveys of German books owned by preachers, farmers and craftsmen in the American hinterland between 1780 and 1830 indicate that Stilling was the only contemporary author in Germany who enjoyed widespread and unquestioned popularity. Most of his writings were offered by booksellers and hawkers soon after their appearance in Europe, indeed, new titles were eagerly awaited and when they reached Philadelphia, Baltimore, Lancaster or Hagerstown, printers mused over them to decide whether the sale of imported editions from Germany or a local reprint would be more profitable.

Apart from a few sophisticated immigrants, mainly in the port cities, the German population in the Middle Atlantic and Southern states had simple tastes when it came to books. Religious themes predominated everywhere from the often extensive libraries of clergymen to the limited bookshelf of sectarian farmers. The Bible, T. J. van Braght's *Märtyrer-Spiegel*, excerpts from Martin Luther's writings, Johannes Arndt's *Wahres Christenthum*, the anonymous prayerbook *Ernsthaftes Christenpflicht*, Gerhard Roosen's *Christliches-Gemüthsgepräch* and a few sweet-worded pietistic titles covered the whole extent of literary interest west of the Blue Ridge.⁶ The then contemporary classical literature in Germany was totally unknown to the immigrants of the 18th century and their descendants. Much of it would not have appealed to the backwoods readers at any rate whose "worldly" readings were limited to an occasional broadside describing a particularly gruesome murder or a public hanging. Booksellers evidently did not burden their shelves with Goethe, Lessing or other non-religious authors. Jacob D. Dietrick's *Bücherstöhr* and circulating library in Hagerstown offered the usual pious fare but also—and this was no doubt exceptional so far from the coast—a couple of books by Wieland and Kotzebue in 1801.⁷ Solomon Henkel at New Market, Virginia, published a list of his stock in 1809. From among the thirty-seven German titles advertised (all devotional material or practical handbooks) Stilling with *Der Christliche Menschenfreund* is the sole representative of contemporary writers in Germany.

⁵ *Evangelisches Magazin I* (1812), 15. For Paul Henkel (1754-1825) see Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans* (Charlottesville, Va., 1969), 132-134, 156, 270.

⁶ Wust, "The Books of the German Immigrants in the Shenandoah Valley," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXXII (1958), 74-77.

⁷ Catalogue of Jacob D. Dietrick's Circulating Library (Hagerstown, Md., 1801), 90-98. Copy at Maryland Historical Society.

⁸ *Virginische Volksberichter*, New Market, Va., April 19, 1809.

By that time Jung-Stilling's popularity was spreading throughout the back settlements. Imported copies of *Henrich Stilling's Jugend* and the novels, *Florentin van Fahlendorf* and *Heimweh* made their way into distant parsonages. Their golden words enlivened many a sermon by country preachers whose language thirsted for new, pleasing expressions in an environment of linguistic isolation. Pennsylvania printers soon found it profitable to reprint Stilling's books rather than rely on costly and uncertain shipments from overseas. Dieter Cunz located no less than 13 American reprints published between 1797 and 1821.⁹ The earliest one was *Florentin von Fahlendorf* (Reading, Pa., 1797). Heinrich B. Sage, publisher of the popular *Weltbothe* in Reading which also circulated south of the Potomac, issued among others the first American editions of the combined *Lebensbeschreibung* (1811), *Siegesgeschichte* with *Nachtrag* (1814) and *Theorie der Geister-Kunde* (1816). Extant copies of the Reading edition of *Siegesgeschichte* turned up in recent years at country sales in remote sections of Virginia and West Virginia.

Pennsylvanian printers were not the only ones to cash in on Stilling's popularity. The increasing demand in western Maryland and the adjacent South prompted John Gruber of Hagerstown in 1807 to reprint in two volumes the 1803-05 Nürnberg issues *Der christliche Menschenfreund*.¹⁰ Numerous copies of these pious, moralizing tales have survived to this day, some found in such unlikely places as Bergton, Forestville, Rural Retreat and Toms Brook in Virginia and Green County, Tennessee. Excerpts were welcome copy for newspapers such as Gruber's own *Westliche Correspondenz* and the *New Market Virginische Volksberichter*. In the *Menschenfreund* Gruber offered advance subscriptions to Stilling's *Theobald oder die Schwärmer*, a 420 page edition he produced the following year according to Seidensticker.¹¹ Likewise he proposed to publish Stilling's *Siegesgeschichte der christlichen Religion* for \$1.25. But three years later he admitted in his almanac that he had calculated the price too low. "Nowadays food prices, materials and wages are much higher than before," was his still familiar lament and he now suggested \$1.75 for it. Since the only copies of this title located in Maryland and Virginia all bear Sage's Reading imprint, Gruber might never have printed the *Siegesgeschichte* although years ago Seidensticker found the *Nachtrag* published by Gruber & May in Hagerstown in 1815.¹²

The Henkel firm in New Market, Virginia with its network of agents from Winchester south into Lincoln, Rowan, Stokes and Guilford counties, North Carolina, and Granby County, South Carolina, did not only sell Gruber's and Sage's reprints of Stilling but also issued a brief excerpt of *Heimweh* from its own press in 1815. To this pioneer publisher in a western Virginia hamlet of 300 souls belongs the credit of having printed in 1814-15 the first English translation of a work by Stilling in America:

*Scenes in the World of Spirits.*¹³

The translation from the third original edition was the work of Gottlieb Shober (1756-1838) of Salem, North Carolina. Shober, a member of the

⁹ Dieter Cunz, "Nachwort" in his edition of *Henrich Stilling's Jugend, Jünglingsjahre, Wanderschaft und häusliches Leben* (Stuttgart, 1968), 385. (Reclam Universal-Bibliothek Nr. 662-666)

Felix Reichmann, "German Printing in Maryland, A Check List, 1768-1950," *The Report SHGM* XXVII (1950), 9-70. Item # 100 (pp. 12, 34). For John Gruber (1768-1857) see Dieter Cunz, "John Gruber and His Almanac," *Maryland Historical Magazine* XLVII (1952), 89-102.

Oswald Seidensticker, *The First Century of German Printing in America. 1728-1830* (Philadelphia, 1893), 172.

¹² Reichmann, *loc. cit.*, 12, 36; Seidensticker, *op. cit.*, 194.

¹³ Lester J. Cappon and Ira V. Brown. *New Market, Virginia, Imprints 1806-1876* (Charlottesville, Va., 1942), 8.

Moravian Brotherhood and an ordained Lutheran minister, wielded much influence among the North Carolina Germans and maintained close contacts with English-speaking clergymen. It was not until 1831 that another title, *Heinrich Stilling's Leben*, appeared as *Stilling's Life* in an American English translation in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Altogether, a count of British and American translations based on B. Q. Morgan's bibliography for the period 1810-1864 lists only 10 titles by Jung-Stilling.¹⁴ While simple German-speaking Americans received his works with unusual enthusiasm considering the scant intellectual preoccupations of most of them (not excluding here the rural clergy), to English-speaking Americans Stilling remained virtually unknown outside some religious circles, notably the New England Universalists.

Many reasons may be advanced for Stilling's popularity among the rural clergy and many common people in the German back settlements. The clearly religious tenor of his writings distributed in America exempted them from the scorn and suspicion with which most other contemporary European authors were received. There was nothing in them of "the triumph of reason" against which country pastors so vehemently preached. People in a land that had only recently been tamed, that had still been the raw frontier a generation earlier, were receptive to the strange blend of mystic, spiritualistic and theosophic elements of Stilling's writings. Extant sermons by roving Paul Henkel or by George Daniel Flohr of Wythe County in the far southwest of Virginia betray the same child-like faith and sentimental pietism that pervades Stilling's autobiographic works.¹⁵ The Pietism of Halle which had strongly influenced the early Lutheran ministers of Pennsylvania, seemed sedate, dry and almost lifeless if compared to the emotional approach to faith in the backwoods congregations. Moreover, Stilling masterfully described the good, simple village life as no other writer had, a life that many people on the erstwhile frontier were about to build for themselves. Nor was his piety confined to narrow denominational lines. In a region where Reformed pastor William Otterbein joined Mennonite Martin Boehm to preach Methodist principles, where "Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baptists and Methodists all drew near the Lord's table and many were not able to avoid shouting,"¹⁶ Moravian Gottlieb Shober offered communion in Lutheran churches, William Hauck, the Reformed pastor, was licensed to preach by the Lutherans and the brother of the most ardent Lutheran Paul Henkel was the Methodist pioneer preacher Moses Henkel, in such a region Stilling's openmindedness toward confessional differences was more than welcome. Even the seclusive Dunkers could find pious passages to their liking as a result of Stilling's proximity to the *Täufer* in Elberfeld.

Likewise Stilling's combination of interest in medicine and religion was shared by numerous country preachers who doubled as medical practitioners. At least in the area west of the Blue Ridge, no evidence of any particular impact of *Das Heimweh* could be discerned. Dieter Cunz has pointed out that this four volume novel with its masonic and apocalyptic features was blamed for much of the Swabian emigration to Russia.¹⁷ Generally, secret societies were frowned upon by the country clergy and, save for a few sectarians, the faithful were not infected by the chiliastic

¹⁴ Cunz, "Nachwort," 385-386; Henry A. Pochmann, *German Culture in America 1600-1900* (Madison, Wis., 1957), 346.

¹⁵ Paul Henkel (1754-1825). Manuscript sermons in Tusing Collection, New Market, Va.; G. D. Flohr (1759-1826). A collection of his popular and evangelic sermons in J. T. Tabler (ed.) *Sermons and Essays* (Baltimore, 1840), 1-265.

¹⁶ The *Life and Journal of the Rev'd Christian Newcomer* (Hagerstown, Md., 1884), 99.

¹⁷ Cunz, "Nachwort," 381-382.

fever which had seized so many Wurtembergers in the Old Country. The generation of farmers and hunters grown up along the frontier was too practical-minded to indulge in speculations about the millenium. Fear and hardship of the pioneer days were yielding to an optimism without, however, extinguishing all interest in the supernatural and occult. Superstition in connection with many features of daily life was rampant in all early American settlements. Stilling's *Szenen aus dem Geisterreich* and more yet his *Theorie der Geisterkunde* supplied fare similar to the grim, locally produced broadsides which were found by posterity folded away in Bibles and devotional tracts.

Jung-Stilling's letter cited at the beginning is evidence for the fact that he was well aware of his North American audience and that he relished it. In a way, he was the very last " foreign " German influence on the descendants of the American German migration of the 18th century. With the progressive language transition in the land between Potomac and Saluda his work fell into complete oblivion. Time-worn volumes unearthed in attics and barns, lingering on shelves of country junk stores—one copy was even rescued from a county dump—and finding their way to Saturday vendues among " sundry old Dutch books " bear testimony of Stilling's bygone popularity. Just like this entry among the appraised estate of George Daniel Flohr of Wythe County, Virginia (some 450 miles southwest of Philadelphia), neatly written into the county Will Book by a bilingual clerk:

" Heinerich Stillings samtliche Werke—Henry Stilling's worcks \$10 . . ." ¹⁸

¹⁸Wythe County Will Book III (1827-1831), 265-266.