

THE REVEREND ELISHA A. HOFFMAN: MINISTRY, MUSIC AND GERMAN HERITAGE*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The current interest in Elisha A. Hoffman at the West Park United Church of Christ was inspired by a request for information by a local historian (Earl R. Hoover) to Mrs. Virginia R. Hawley, General Reference Supervisor of the Western Reserve Historical Society. The request ultimately was channeled to me in late 1976 by Dr. John R. Sinnema, Director of the American-German Institute of Baldwin-Wallace College.

As a result of the request West Park Church has re-discovered some of its German heritage as well as the role the Church and Cleveland played in the life of a late 19th—early 20th century hymn writer, Elisha A. Hoffman. The paper presented here is an attempt to organize details on the life and work of Hoffman with special emphasis on his links to West Park United Church of Christ and the Cleveland area.

Grateful appreciation for assistance in preparing this paper is extended to Dr. John R. Sinnema of Baldwin-Wallace College, Mrs. Virginia Hawley of the Western Reserve Historical Society, and Jeanne Hoffman (Mrs. Harold N.) McLaughlin, daughter of Ira Orwig Hoffman and granddaughter of Elisha A. Hoffman.

II. ELISHA A. HOFFMAN

Elisha A. Hoffman did not conduct his ministerial or composing careers from what could be considered a German

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ethnic-viewpoint. Yet, his background, the town in which he was born (Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania) and some parts of his ministry are interesting to persons concerned with the heritage of German-Americans.

Elisha was the son of the Reverend Francis and Rebecca Hoffman of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Association. His middle name—Albright—is symbolic of the admiration of his father for Jacob Albright, founder of the Evangelical Movement. In fact, Albright was a frequent preacher in Orwigsburg at the home of George Orwig Sr., grandfather of Elisha Hoffman's wife.¹

The first wife of Elisha A. Hoffman was Susan Orwig who was the daughter of Bishop William W. Orwig of the Evangelical Association. Bishop Orwig was the grandson of Gottfried Orwig who emigrated from Germany in 1741 and founded Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.² In fact, Elisha Hoffman was to later give one of his hymns, *I Must Tell Jesus*, the tune of "Orwigsburg" in honor of his birthplace.

Elisha and Susan Hoffman were to have three sons. The oldest son, Ira Orwig Hoffman, was a life-long resident of Cleveland, a financial editor of local publications, and a hymn writer. In fact, many of the hymns written by Elisha Hoffman were harmonized by his son, Ira. Following the death of his first wife, Susan, in 1876, Hoffman remarried. He and his second wife, Emma S. Hoffman had one daughter, Florence.³

The evidence suggests Elisha Hoffman was a man of boundless energy and evangelical enthusiasm. He frequently held more than one pastorate position in the church at one time. In addition he was an active writer of hymns and operated his own publishing house. Hoffman's preaching style must have been similar to that of evangelist clergymen today. He held frequent revivals for his congregations.⁴ He was also a crusader in the Temperance hymns.⁵ Hoffman's enthusiasm for life and optimism can be detected in a statement he made on the occasion of his 89th birthday:

The world is better now than ever before. The spirit of Christ is more pronounced in business, social, political, and international relations than was ever hoped of when I started my ministry seventy years ago.⁶

III. THE CLEVELAND MINISTRY OF ELISHA A. HOFFMAN

Elisha Hoffman always felt he was destined to enter the ministry. He preached his earliest sermons to playmates in the attic of his home. For a while he flirted with the idea of entering the study of law, but in the end “felt the *Call*” and entered the ministry.⁷

Hoffman served in Cleveland and Ohio early in his career (from 1868 to 1892). It is not possible to discuss all of his ministry here, although it is chronicled in Appendix A. He came to Cleveland as a General Publishing Agent for the Board of Publications of the Evangelical Association. However, while in Cleveland he also served a number of pastorates including that of the Rockport Congregational Church.⁸

The Rockport Congregational Church was founded in June, 1859, near Kamms Corner in what was then Rockport Township. The community later became West Park (named for Benjamin West, a Rockport Township pioneer) and subsequently annexed to Cleveland.⁹ The church currently is called the West Park United Church of Christ and is still in its original location at 3909 Rocky River Drive. The current sanctuary was dedicated in 1957. It replaced the original edifice and a 1904 addition. The church was associated with the Cleveland Presbytery until 1869 when it joined the Congregational Conference of Ohio.¹⁰

Rockport, or West Park Church, has never been an ethnic German church. It might best be described as a community church. Yet, Dr. John R. Sinnema has identified it as a church with a German heritage. Indeed, in 1978, of 301 families on the church list, 121 have German surnames or surnames that can be traced to a German derivative.

Several families with a German background were prominent in both the Rockport community and the Rockport Congregational Church. These families include the Colbrunns, Barthelmans, Klines, and Reitzes, who were active in a number of greenhouse enterprises in the Rockport and West Suburban area. Descendants of these families still attend the church.

West Park United Church of Christ has had several German surnamed pastors in its history. These include Thomas Towler, 1867-1869; Jacob P. Riedinger, 1903-1916; Franklin L. Graff, 1921-1926; Wellington A. Leininger, 1935-1952 (whose widow still attends the church); and Elisha A. Hoffman.

Elisha Hoffman served Rockport Congregational Church twice. His first ministry was from 1882 to 1886. He initially came to Rockport on a temporary basis when the Rev. R. W. Hargreave resigned on February 12, 1882. At the time, Hoffman was pastor of Grace Congregational Church in Cleveland (on West 65th Street). However, from 1882 to 1886, Hoffman served both churches in a joint pastorate. His salary from Rockport Congregational was \$350. Subsequently, he resigned his position at Grace Church. Rockport attempted to raise enough money to keep him as its fulltime pastor. The *Church Record* reads "... it was decided that we offer him three hundred and fifty dollars and one hundred in produce with as much more as we can, also that we try to get one hundred dollars from the Home Mission Society..."¹¹ However, on May 2, 1886, Elisha Hoffman announced the next sabbath would be his last at Rockport. He accepted a call to Grafton because "... we were not able to sustain him."¹²

When the pulpit at Rockport again became vacant in 1888, the Rev. E. A. Hoffman was tendered a call to return to the church. He accepted the position and an annual salary of \$500. In 1892 Hoffman apparently was confronted with a difficult decision. He received a call to serve the Presbyterian Church in Vassar, Michigan at a salary of \$1200 per year. The Rockport Church Record carries the following entry regarding Rev. Hoffman's decision.

... the people wish him to remain with us so we'll promise to raise one hundred dollars more on the salary. Mr. Hoffman not wishing to leave this church, but taking it as a call from the Lord, he is somewhat perplexed of what may be his duty...¹³

After changing his mind twice, Hoffman accepted the call to Vassar on May 29, 1892. Perhaps instrumental in his leaving

Cleveland was that some of the members of the Vassar Church had been associated with churches under his ministry in Ohio.¹⁴

IV. THE MUSIC OF ELISHA A. HOFFMAN

The Rev. Elisha A. Hoffman was a prolific writer of hymns. He composed over 2000 hymns and edited about 50 hymnals.¹⁵ About 1000 of the hymns Hoffman composed were published.¹⁶ Appendix B of this paper lists several of his hymns, hymnals he edited, and hymnals in which Hoffman's music can be found.

The Hoffman family (principally Elisha and his son Ira Orwig Hoffman) operated a publishing house. His publishing firm moved as he moved from Cleveland to Chicago.¹⁷ The firm published a monthly magazine entitled *Hoffman's Music Monthly, A Journal of Song*.

From time to time Hoffman published hymns and hymnals through Hope Publishing Company. The first book published by the firm was entitled *Pentacostal Hymns* and was co-edited by Elisha Hoffman, W. A. Ogden, and Henry Date. Mr. Date gave up a career as an evangelistic preacher to be the first president of Hope Publishing Company. He and Hoffman had a close relationship. Upon Hoffman's death in 1929 his widow sent all of his unpublished manuscripts to Hope, a number of which are still in the company's vault.¹⁸ Perhaps Hoffman's most noted hymnal was *The Evergreen* published in Cleveland in 1873 as the first songbook issued by the Evangelical Association.

What can be said about the hymns written by Elisha A. Hoffman? They were Gospel hymns, and as such do not consist of the great literary merit of writers such as Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, Isaac Watts, John Greenleaf Whittier, and others. Gospel hymns do tend to be imaginative and picturesque and are strong in emotional appeal. They are usually light in character, rhythmic, easily singable, but lacking in the rich harmony found in the better hymn tunes and chorales.¹⁹

At least five of Hoffman's Gospel hymns have been translated into German.²⁰

"Rein in dem Blut" ("Are You Washed in the Blood.")
"Pilgerlied" ("Pilgrim's Song")
"Kindliches Vertrauen" ("Childlike Trust")
"Ein Völliges Heil" ("Abundantly Able to Save")
"Christi Blut" ("Christ's Blood")

The English version of the first of these reveals the emotional appeal and close personal relationship with Jesus that is typically emphasized in Hoffman's hymns. In describing his hymns, Hoffman said:

They are not in themselves of a high literary order. No such claim has ever been made for them. Only this can be said of them...they interpret well the Spiritual phases of the soul's experience.²¹

V. CONCLUSION

The ministry and music of Elisha Albright Hoffman witness to the evangelistic fervor of a gifted late 19th and early 20th century clergyman. It would be wrong to characterize Hoffman as an ethnic German clergyman. Yet, it would be inaccurate to ignore the impact and influence of the German community and families in which he and his wife were raised. Furthermore, he served at least one church with a German heritage: the Rockport Congregational Church. The interest of some German-Americans in his hymn writing efforts became manifested in the German translation of several of his hymns.

Will the heritage of Elisha Hoffman live on? As is evidenced in Appendix B, hymnals of the evangelically oriented, more fundamentalist denominations continue to carry his hymns in their current hymnals. How well future generations accept the hymns of Elisha A. Hoffman will be dependent on their acceptance of the emotional appeal of Gospel hymns.

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