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The Significance of a Newly Discovered Volume of Verse by Matthæus Gottfried Hehl

The Moravian Archives at Winston-Salem, North Carolina, possess a volume of verse by the Moravian Bishop Matthæus Gottfried Hehl (1705-87) that has remained unknown until now.¹ The volume is handwritten for the most part, but bound together with two pamphlets that contain two poetic translations also by Hehl. The contents make Hehl—with Francis Daniel Pastorius and Conrad Beissel—one of the most prolific early German-American authors of verse. After a sketch of Hehl's life I shall describe the volume and then point to the general significance of the find.

Matthæus (Matthew) Gottfried Hehl was born in Ebersbach an der Fils in Württemberg in 1705, trained to be a Lutheran minister at Tübingen, and then was attracted to the Moravian Church through accounts of one of their members. Hehl spent some time at Herrnhut, the center of the Moravian Church in what is now the German Democratic Republic, and was consecrated Bishop at London in 1751, just before sailing to America. Here he was at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, until 1756 when he moved to neighboring Lititz where he was Superintendent of the country churches in Pennsylvania and Maryland and where he played a leading role in the supervision of educational activities. He died in Lititz in 1787, at age 82.²

We do not know how the manuscript got to the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem. The paper measures 11.5 x 18 cm. The manuscript has contemporary binding and gilded edges. The title page, all in red ink, with special ornamental lettering in antiqua and enclosed in a beautiful decorative border consisting of flowers in various colors, reads as follows:

Carminum | & | Poematum | Matthæi, | è pluribus | selectorum | Fasciculus
| secundus

The first "fascicle" was not found. The verso of the title page is empty, then follow pages 1 through 336. The manuscript must be considered fragmentary since the poem on page 336 is obviously incomplete. Pages 313 through 320 and pages 321 through 328 are made up of two printed pamphlets to

which I shall refer below. The remainder is in Hehl's hand, mostly in black ink; headings and words that he wanted to stand out are in red ink. He usually wrote German words in script, Latin words and their derivatives in antiqua, as was customary at the time. The handwriting is clear, even pretty for the title page and the headings. Preceding the Latin title page, on the first ten pages (also numbered) we find three poems: a fragmentary one to his mother, dated April 30, 1739, and thus the earliest one in the volume, and two to his wife Anna Maria (1746 and 1750). On the next six unnumbered pages follows a poem on the occasion of his son Matthäus Leonhard's "23.^{ten} Geburts=tage" to whom Hehl dedicates "diesen Zweyten Band meiner Poësen als ein Fest-Geschenke . . . Lititz d[en] 28.^{ten} Nov.^{br} 1771." One of the three leaves is slightly shorter than the rest and is pasted in; it contains verses to be inserted between stanzas three and four of the poem. Its verso is empty. The date of the dedication, November 28, 1771, is the latest date found in the volume.³

After the title page we find translations into German of two Latin poems that, according to Hehl, were in the first volume of verse. The translations are dated December, 1770, and January, 1771. The rest of the verses in the manuscript follow in the main a chronological order, beginning with September 7, 1754, and ending with June 21, 1768. All but two poems are by Hehl: There is one by his wife Anna Maria and one by August Gottlieb Spangenberg on the occasion of her forty-third birthday on November 17, 1758. The total number of poems is 185; except for three in Latin they are in German; most of them are addressed to a person or persons and are *Gelegenheitsgedichte*, i.e., occasional poems. Among the occasions that prompt Hehl to pen a poem we find: the birth of a child, a birthday (by far the most frequent reason), baptism, a wedding, death, a love feast, other events of the Church, the laying of a cornerstone and its anniversary, and the arrival or departure of fellow Moravians. Considering that Lititz and Bethlehem had a total population of 891, the more than 130 different people mentioned by Hehl make up a good proportion. Most of the addressees are fellow Moravians at Lititz, Bethlehem, and neighboring communities. Some of them are simple folk, "Arbeiter," that is, fellow workers in the vineyard of the Church; others are identified as leaders or members of various groups, such as the choirs into which the Moravian community was organized. Then there are also well-known personalities like Peter Boehler, John Ettwein, John Heckewelder, David Nitschmann, Sr., Nathaniel Seidel, and August Gottlieb Spangenberg.

In contrast to such variety the contents of the poems are remarkably uniform. We hear again and again of the good news, the fact that Christ's—the Lamb's—blood has given us eternal life and that we should rejoice in that assurance. An example of a few stanzas will best show the type of verse found in the volume (pp. 332 f.):

Auf der led.[igen] Schw.[ester] Margar.[ete] Christlerin, Malattin, im
Chorhaus in Lititz, Geburtstag d[en] 12.^t May. 1768.

1.) Du aus 2 Nationen herstaemende Person!
wo Brüder drunter wohnen, und wo der Schmerzenslohn
dem Lam̃, das für uns starb,

und uns mit Blut erwarb,
aus Seelen wird gesämet von Chams u. Japhets Farb.

Moravians were and are active missionaries, including among blacks and Indians (in the manuscript are references to the Indian mission at Nain). In the above stanza Hehl follows the Bible where the various races are traced back to the sons of Noah.

2.) Du bist uns ein Exempel von beyderley Geschlecht
in unserm Schwestern-Tempel: Sie haben gleiches Recht
am Laß u. der Gemein:
Und weiß- und Schwarze seyn
durchs Blut des Laßes erkaufft zu Eurem Erbverein.

From the remainder of the poem—it has seven stanzas—we learn that Margarete Christler had turned twenty-five and that her birthday coincided with the dedication day of the church in Lititz.

We would very much have liked to know more about Margarete Christler, about her background and about her life in Lititz. But such information is of little importance to the Bishop in this case as in the rest of the volume. He reduces such information to a minimum and stresses instead the message of salvation (the *Heilsbotschaft*). Such uniformity of contents clearly reveals Hehl's outlook: In comparison to the Christian message, to Christ's sacrifice and our salvation, worldly concerns pale and are deemed unworthy of being recorded in a poem. That does not mean that the manuscript does not yield important data on various Moravians of the period, on Church activities, and on the Church year. The many names, dates, and locations alone make the volume a rich source for the genealogist and the Church historian. One could also investigate Hehl's language. As the verses quoted above show, he uses standard German with a vocabulary and imagery reminiscent of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, the benefactor and spiritual leader of the Moravians at the time. Hehl is not an innovator nor a person of great poetic talent. His language shows awareness of dialect variations; very few English words are used. I found "Trouble" (p. 122) and "Awe" (p. 193).

As was mentioned above, two printed pamphlets were bound into the manuscript. Both have handwritten page numbers that continue the numbering of the manuscript. The first pamphlet has the (added) page numbers 313 through 320 and this title (in black and in German script):

ETWAS | aus der | Schatzlade des Alterthums. | Das ist: | Ein Christlicher
Gesang | von dem | Leben und Regierung | Unsers | Hochverdienten HERRN |
JESU Christi, | Seith dessen Erscheinung im Fleisch bis auf | unsere Zeiten. |
[Ornament] | Philadelphia, | Gedruckt bey Henrich Miller, in der
Zweyten = Strasse. | 1765.⁴

Johann Heinrich Müller (the spelling varies, 1702-82) is the well-known Moravian printer in Philadelphia whose *Pennsylvanischer Staatsbote* was the first newspaper to announce on July 5, 1776, the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The hymn starts on page 314 and consists of twenty-one stanzas followed by three additional ones that give Hehl's reason for translating the work. We learn that "Gylonius, ein alter Kirch-Poete, / Hat mir

den Text zu diesem Lied gemacht: / Weil ich so was kaum aufzubringen hätte, / Hab ich sein Griechisch nur ins Deutsch gebracht" (p. 319). In spite of extensive searching I have not been able to ascertain the identity of Gylonius. In a letter dated March 29, 1761, to Reverend Jacob Rogers in Philadelphia Hehl refers to a translation from the Greek and mentions a couple of changes he made.⁵ These changes make it clear that he is referring to the hymn of the pamphlet. Hehl also indicates in the letter that he found the original in "Bibl. Patr. Tom. VIII." A pre-1762 publication with that title and consisting of at least eight volumes could not be verified. The eighth volume of the *Bibliotheca patrum*, edited by François Combefis (Paris, 1762), does not contain any reference to a Gylonius. An almost identical handwritten version of the hymn is found on pages 144 through 153 of the manuscript.

The second pamphlet, hitherto unrecorded, has the following title (on added page number 321, all in black and in German script):

Ein | Marterwoch = Geschenkgen, | für die | Kenner und Bekenner | des | jetzt
zwar unsichtbaren doch liebenswürdigsten | Weiß und Rothen Freundes; |
(1 Pet. 1:8. Hohel. Sal. 5:10.) | zur Erinnerung seiner Schönheit. | [Ornament] |
Philadelphia, Gedruckt bey Henrich Miller, | in der Zweyten = strasse. 1766.

Page 322 is empty, page 323 contains the remark that the verses that follow are "Eine Übersetzung des Englischen Gesangs: Lo! Man rebels, and for one Taste doth chuse, etc. welcher dem Sir MATTHEW HALE, weyländ Baronet in England zugeschrieben wird." The hymn has fifteen stanzas on pages 323 to 327, page 328 is empty. The original is found in the Moravian hymnal entitled *A Collection of Hymns of the Children of God* (London, 1754) on pages 233 f. and is signed M. H. Since, according to the preface, Matthew Hale, the well-known English jurist (1609-76) is one of the authors of the hymnal, Hehl's attribution is justified. Obviously, our Matthæus (Matthew) Hehl was delighted to have found a kindred soul in his English namesake; as Hehl says, "Mein Namens = Vetter redt aus meinem Herzen" (p. 143). An almost identical version of the hymn is found in handwriting on pages 140 through 143.

It is interesting to observe that both Hehl and, before him, Francis Daniel Pastorius, who was also the product of excellent German university training, were intimately connected with teaching in their communities. One must be impressed by the fact that the early German-American settlers did not let the learning they brought with them go to waste in the new world. Considering the pioneer life in Lititz, even in Bethlehem, it is most remarkable that Hehl would find the time to write a number of Latin poems and to translate an English and a Greek one and have his translations printed in Philadelphia. I know that there is more such unexplored material in libraries and, especially, in the archives of religious groups. It deserves our attention.

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Notes

1. I want to express my gratitude to Miss Mary Creech, the Archivist at Winston-Salem, for her kind assistance.

2. There is a sketch of Hehl's life by Edmund de Schweinitz in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, 2 (1886), 264-269. The best account of Hehl's contributions to Moravian hymnals is found in Joseph T. Müller, *Hymnologisches Handbuch zum Gesangbuch der Brüdergemeine* (Herrnhut, 1916). These contributions predate Hehl's coming to America.

3. Matthäus Leonhard had stayed behind in Germany for nineteen years. The only reference to his life in America I found in Mabel Haller, "Early Moravian Education in Pennsylvania," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, 15 (1953), 1-409, where we read that he was a single brother in Lititz and that he served there as an instructor until May, 1771 (p. 98).

4. The pamphlet is listed as being at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Charles Evans, *American Bibliography* (Chicago, 1903 ff.), IV, No. 9967 and, with the remark that "the unique copy is mislaid," in Clifford K. Shipton, James E. Mooney, *National Index of American Imprints Through 1800: The Short-Title Evans* (American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1969), I, 254. A letter from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to the author dated June 28, 1979, states that the copy was still mislaid.

5. The letter is in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

