

Research Note:
Paul Tschetter's "Chicago Fire" Hymn

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In the summer of 1873, a 31-year-old Hutterite minister, Paul Tschetter, accompanied by his uncle Lohrentz, joined a delegation of ten Russian Mennonites, on a well-known four-month exploratory journey to North America. A Russian government edict (*ukase*), announced by Tsar Alexander I in 1870, threatened to strip away many of the political, educational and religious rights that Mennonites and Hutterites had enjoyed for almost 100 years. Particularly alarming was the retraction of agreements granting the Anabaptists (along with other German-speaking colonists and some Russian religious dissenters) exemption from military service. The Mennonites and Hutterites were also to lose full control of village and colony schools and some local government offices. In response to this new policy, the Hutterite men had come west to investigate the possibility of resettlement for thousands of Anabaptists living in the Russian Empire.

Paul Tschetter was born in 1842 at Blumenort village in the Molotschna Colony, the same year that the entire population of about 400 Hutterites relocated to the Molotschna region from their previous residence (Raditschewa) northeast of Kiev. The Hutterites were given considerable organizational and financial assistance from Johann Cornies, the Mennonite chair of the Agricultural Improvement Society.¹

Tschetter spent most of his growing up years in the village of Hutterthal, established a few miles south of the Molotschna Colony in 1843. Here he attended school and worked on the family farm. At age 18 Tschetter married Maria Waltner and six years later (in 1866) was ordained to the Hutterite ministry. He held this position during a difficult and contentious period in Hutterite history, when a number of members resurrected a communal way of life in adherence to historic traditions that had been given up in 1821.² From 1868 to 1874 Tschetter

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1. Hutterian Brethren, eds., *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, Volume II* (St. Agathe, Man.: Hutterian Brethren, 1997), 632.

2. A discussion of the communal/noncommunal Hutterite division is included in Rod Janzen, *The Prairie People: Forgotten Anabaptists* (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of

served as minister at the noncommunal Hutterite church at the Neu Hutterthal village. He was chosen to represent both communal and noncommunal Hutterites in the 1873 exploration due to recognized leadership capabilities as well as an adventurous willingness to make the excursion.

During this important journey Tschetter and the other Anabaptist delegates, accompanied by Mennonite publisher John F. Funk and Northern Pacific Railroad personnel, looked at undeveloped land between Nebraska and Manitoba (some of the delegates also visited Kansas and Ontario), traveling by land, rail and steamboat. Along the way the group analyzed land prices, settlement patterns, and water and feed sources, as well as access to markets. In general, Tschetter was pleased with what he saw, especially in the Red River valley in what is now northeastern North Dakota. He loved the "rich black soil" in the Pembina area and the fact that there was forested land nearby.³ Tschetter was concerned, however, that the United States government had not confirmed exemption from military service. For this reason, in August 1873 he, along with his uncle, Lohrentz Tschetter, and a Volhynian Mennonite minister named Tobias Unruh, secured a personal audience with President Ulysses S. Grant, before their return to Russia.⁴

Throughout his travels in 1873 Tschetter maintained a diary recording details of all aspects of his journey.⁵ The diary also gives a clear indication of how Tschetter viewed "the world" and is an important window into the late-nineteenth-century Hutterian mind. Tschetter complains often, for example, about frivolous behavior. On one occasion, after seeing large groups of men and women dancing at a Hamburg eating establishment, he wrote that they should "rather be praying than dancing."⁶ In the eastern United States, Tschetter was dismayed when he met Mennonites and Amish who grew and smoked tobacco. Many also owned guns and a few played musical instruments.⁷ The Hutterites were opposed to these practices.

Paul Tschetter's handwritten journal is divided into three small booklets.⁸ Some of the pages show that Tschetter has written over the top

New England, 1999), 5-6; 16-23; 62-78.

3. Jacob M. Hofer, ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter," *MQR* 5 (Oct. 1931), 204.

4. The story of the Tschetters/Unruh encounter with President Grant is told in Ernst Correll, "President Grant and the Mennonite Immigration From Russia," *MQR* 9 (Oct. 1935), 144-149.

5. Jacob M. Hofer, ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter," *MQR* 5 (July 1931), 112-127; *MQR* 5 (Oct. 1931), 198-219.

6. *Ibid.*, 116.

7. *Ibid.*, 127.

8. The diary is presently displayed inside a simple manila folder in a glass-enclosed case

of a previous composition, perhaps indicating that, after returning to Russia, he (or someone else) created a more readable draft, using his travel notes. It is noticeable, for example, that two full lines of text were originally positioned incorrectly, then crossed out by whoever did the transcription. Hutterite ministers often asked family members or friends with good penmanship to make handwritten copies of sermons. Perhaps Tschetter did the same with regard to his diary.

In 1931 *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* published Tschetter's diary in an English translation by his grandson, Jacob M. Hofer. The translation did not include eighteen hymns that Tschetter composed that same summer, and that appear in the diary, interspersed within the narrative.⁹ These hymns, however, express important viewpoints characteristic of Hutterite thinking during the late nineteenth century and are worthy of closer examination.

Choral music itself represents one of the few accepted forms of aesthetic expression found among Hutterites. Most Hutterite hymns were written during the sixteenth century. About one-eighth of the hymns in *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brudern* were composed by one individual—the mid-sixteenth-century leader Peter Riedemann, who also wrote *An Account of Our Religion*, which continues to serve as the Hutterite confession of faith.¹⁰ Hymn melodies were transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Paul Tschetter's compositions are therefore novel. He may have intended them for personal use only, although he provides suggested melodies for every song and his hymns are filled with moral teachings and biblical references—prominent characteristics in all Hutterite hymns.¹¹

This research note includes the first published English rendition of one of these songs, the "Chicago Hymn" (*Ein Lied von der Stadt Tschakaga*), which has been translated by the poet Jean Janzen.¹² This hymn has been selected due to its very specific reference to the historic

at the Heritage Hall Archives in Freeman, S.D. In May 2004 an archivist, Duane Schrag, granted permission to make a copy of this document. Schrag's willingness to make the manuscript available was crucial for the analysis contained in this article.

9. Jacob M. Hofer's son, Lloyd, indicates that his father felt unqualified to translate poetic song lyrics, which require an informed aesthetic sensibility.—Lloyd Hofer, interview, April 2005.

10. Helen Martens, *Hutterite Songs* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2002), 290. See also John J. Friesen, *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1999).

11. Martens, *Hutterite Songs*, 23-59.

12. Jean Janzen, author of a number of works of poetry—including, most recently, *Piano in the Vineyard* and *Tasting the Dust*—worked from a transliteration provided by Albert Berg and a rough translation done by Matthias Dueck.

Chicago Fire of 1871 and Tschetter's appraisal of why God had allowed this very destructive fire to occur.

THE CHICAGO FIRE OF 1871

Chicago's "Great Fire" began on October 8, 1871, and continued for two days.¹³ Ultimately 300 people lost their lives as a result of the fire and another 90,000 were left homeless. Property damage was estimated at \$200 million. But these figures do not adequately reflect the fire's devastating effect.

In 1871 Chicago's population of 330,000 made it the fourth-largest city in the United States, a metropolitan center connected by rail lines to major eastern cities. Chicago was a central shipping hub and the heart of the nation's meatpacking industry. It served as a symbol of industrial development in the American Midwest and had grown in size from less than 5,000 people forty years earlier. City buildings had thus been constructed quickly and carelessly, and often of wood. The fire received national and international attention and the extent of the damage included 18,000 buildings and about twenty-eight miles of streets.

Between 1871 and 1873, the city of Chicago was rebuilt in a remarkably rapid fashion—largely with stone and steel—making it clear to the nation that urban industrial areas could respond quickly and successfully to disasters, while also making significant improvements in infrastructure. A heady pioneering spirit energized Chicago residents, who continued to believe that the city had a bright future. In the decades that followed new industries developed and the city's population grew exponentially with the addition of thousands of immigrants. The energetic response to the Great Fire was a source of pride for the city and for the United States as a whole.

THE CHICAGO HYMN

Paul Tschetter arrived in Chicago by train on May 22, 1873, after spending almost two weeks in Elkhart (Indiana) at the home of John F. Funk. Funk was the bilingual editor of the *Herald of Truth* (also published as *Herold der Wahrheit*), who had negotiated travel arrangements with railroad companies on behalf of the Russian Mennonite delegates. He also accompanied the group on their tour of the North American plains.

13. Although the fire originated in the vicinity of a cow barn near a cottage owned by a man named Patrick O'Leary, contrary to popular belief there is no proof that it was Mrs. O'Leary's cow (kicking over a lantern) that started it. Two important sources for information about Chicago's Great Fire of 1871 are Ross Miller, *The Great Chicago Fire* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), and Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans & the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

While in the Elkhart area Tschetter visited church leaders and delivered sermons at three different Mennonite congregations, using texts such as Acts 2 and I John 5:14.¹⁴ Now he was en route to St. Paul, Minnesota, where the entire twelve-member Mennonite/Hutterite delegation planned to meet before visiting Dakota Territory and parts of Canada.

In his diary Tschetter wrote that Chicago "was nearly burned to the ground one and one-half years ago," showing that he was aware of what had transpired.¹⁵ Due to widespread international publicity, Tschetter may even have heard about the Great Fire while he was in Russia.¹⁶ Tschetter was also aware of the major rebuilding effort that had taken place, writing in his diary: "By this time [May 22] large portions of the city have already been rebuilt. There are buildings from seven to eight stories in height."¹⁷ Tschetter could see all of this with his own eyes. But he did not view the project positively, warning in his diary that "according to all these things, the end of world must be nigh."¹⁸

Tschetter arrived in Chicago feeling tired and ill so he went immediately to the hotel where the delegates were to spend the night, deciding not to join the rest in a sightseeing venture. Later, while walking on the city streets by himself, Tschetter sighted "two wild and uncivilized men from a distant island, caged up." This upset Tschetter and was another indication, to him, of the debauchery of urban populations.¹⁹ Tschetter wrote that even when he was in his hotel room, he was "surrounded by so much noise and tumult that my head ached."²⁰ These experiences likely influenced the lyrics of the hymn he then composed.

In his journal Tschetter suggests that the hymn be sung to the melody "Come with me, citizens of Zion" (*Kommt ihr, Mitburger von Zion*). According to Hutterite educator Tony Waldner, this melody is well known among contemporary Hutterites but is generally associated with the hymn titled *Ich komme vor dein Angesicht*.²¹

14. Hofer, "The Diary of Paul Tschetter," 123-127.

15. Paul Tschetter's diary follows the Julian Calendar dating system, which was (in 1873) twelve days behind the Gregorian Calendar. The Julian Calendar was commonly used in Orthodox Church societies into the early twentieth century.

16. Perhaps this was the result of conversations with John F. Funk, talks with other delegates or fellow travelers, or the reading of newspaper accounts.—Hofer, "The Diary of Paul Tschetter," 198.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Tony Waldner, Forest River Colony (Fordville, N.D.), correspondence, Sept. 2005. The latter hymn (#144) is found in one of the three hymnals presently used in Hutterite colonies that Hutterites commonly refer to as "Songbook #105."—*Gesangbuch: Eine*

However, even though Hutterite hymnals suggest the *Von Himmel hoch* tune for *Ich komme vor dein Angesicht*, the melody Hutterites actually sing is quite different from the version of the tune found in modern Lutheran, Mennonite and other Protestant hymnals.²² Musicologist Helen Martens transcribed Lehrerleut, Dariusleut and Schmiedeleut Hutterite renditions of *Von Himmel hoch* in the mid-1960s. This continues to be the way that the hymn is sung. According to Martens the melody is likely a rendition of an old German folk song.²³

The Chicago Hymn — “Ein Lied von der Stadt Tschakag”

Paul Tschetter, 1873

(Jean Janzen, trans.)

1. I will sing a little song
Here in this strange city.
May it please you, oh God,
From your unworthy servant.

2. I sing about a city;
With God's help I will do it well,
This city called Chicago
In the land of America.

3. In October of 1871
The Lord punished this city
Destroying her with fire,
Judging her for her sins.

Sammlung geistlicher Lieder zur allgemeinen Erbauung und zum Lobe Gottes (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980). The melody suggested for this hymn is the well-known Martin Luther tune, *Von Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her*. Luther originally wrote this hymn in 1534, as a Christmas carol for his son, Hans, and provided specific instructions for the initial performance of the hymn, including the request that a man “dressed as an angel” sing the first seven verses, followed by a group of children singing verses eight to fifteen in response. J. S. Bach later used the tune in various compositions, including his *Christmas Oratorio*.—Lester Hostetler, *Handbook to The Mennonite Hymnary* (Newton, Kan.: General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America Board of Publications, 1949), 314-315. Assistance in music analysis was provided by Helen Martens, Arlene Steffen and Roy Klassen.

22. Helen Martens, telephone conversation, Oct. 2005.

23. Helen Martens, correspondence, Nov. 2005.

4. From their hearts, loose and distant,
Poured deeds of shame and horror.
Therefore the fire poured over them,
But they did not understand.
5. Even as they allowed
The words of the Prophet
In his holy speech
To be beaten into them,
6. As though under their skin,
Yet they found no rest
Because they despised
The teachings of Jesus.
7. With pride they erected the city again,
With rocks and fine wood,
And with lofty splendor
To the Lord's great displeasure.
8. For Jerusalem, that great city
Is elected by God, the temple
In the middle, that place
Where we may call on his name.
9. When these despised God's Word
The Lord abandoned them,
Gave them to the pagans
Who made of them an open grave.
10. A person is like a city
Created by God the Lord
Who must be holy and pure
And faithful to the Lord.
11. It is the same in a city
Which has an ungodly heart
As it is with the people
Who surrender to sin and lust.

12. When this city is exalted
In pride and great splendor,
The Lord will punish her again,
Will ruin her with eternal fire.

13. So let us preserve the city
That the enemy may not conquer it,
The walls not be destroyed,
The interior be protected.

14. For the city can also be understood
To be the community of the Lord
Who shall be holy, just and pure,
The Bride consecrated to Christ.

15. The temple in this same city
Is Christ our Lord alone,
He is the Spirit of the community,
The One who governs with excellence.

16. You, my brothers and sisters,
May this enter your hearts:
There is no other security.
Contemplate this, oh pious heart.

“CHICAGO HYMN” ANALYSIS

Paul Tschetter's "Chicago" hymn is typical of late-nineteenth-century Hutterian thought. In the first stanza Tschetter indicates that he is in a "strange city," which, like all large urban centers, he associates with iniquity and he feels a great deal of discomfort.²⁴ Tschetter's hymn also reflects basic Hutterite humility as he refers to himself as an "unworthy servant" of God (first stanza, line 4).

24. During the previous year (1872) Tschetter experienced similar angst while in St. Petersburg trying to secure an audience with the Tsar.

Vom Himmel Hoch

Bench Colony Shaunavon, Saskatchewan Lehrerleut 1965



Mixburn Colony Minburn, Alberta Dariusleut 1965



Grand Colony Oakville, Manitoba Schmiedeleut 1965



Figure 1. Transcription by Helen Martens of Lehrerleut, Dariusleut and Schmiedeleut renditions of *Vom Himmel Hoch*. Print notation by Rebecca Tillery.

In stanza three Tschetter makes it clear that the Great Fire was God's punishment on Chicago "judging her for her sins." He delineates these sins in stanza four as including "loose and distant" hearts and "deeds of shame and horror." This brings to mind the practices Tschetter attacks

throughout his diary—from smoking, dancing and card-playing to outspoken women and the exhibition of human beings in cages.

References to “the Prophet” in the fifth stanza may refer to Isaiah, with additional figurative comparisons made to Jesus in stanza six.²⁵ In stanza seven Tschetter describes the “pride” with which Chicagoans have reconstructed their city, likely referring to the rebuilding of Jerusalem as described in I Kings 6. Tschetter even names some of the same building materials (e.g. rocks and fine wood) that are mentioned in the Book of Isaiah. Tschetter believes that the post-fire optimism that pervades the city is in fact “To the Lord’s great displeasure.”

Stanza eight contrasts this city with Jerusalem, a city originally “elected by God” with a temple placed in the “middle.” The next stanza describes how God “abandoned” Israel and “gave them to the pagans” when the people “despised God’s Word.” The hymn then changes course, moving in stanza ten in a very personal direction (“a person is like a city”). Tschetter continues to use Old Testament covenant language—words like “holy and pure” and “faithful”—to indicate important Christian principles. He implies that individuals involved in a life of “sin and lust” (stanza eleven) will suffer consequences similar to those incurred by cities exhibiting these characteristics, like Chicago, for example, which “is exalted in pride and great splendor” (stanza twelve) yet will be punished by God in the end (who “will ruin her with eternal fire”).

“So let us preserve the city,” against the “enemy,” exhorts Tschetter in stanza thirteen, using the word “city” metaphorically to refer to individual Christians. In the next stanza (fourteen) this definition is expanded to incorporate the church as a whole, “the community of the Lord.” The church must be kept “holy, just and pure” as the “Bride” of Christ.²⁶

In stanza fifteen Tschetter shifts emphasis again, now identifying the “temple” in his new “city” (the church) with “Christ our Lord alone,” who is “the Spirit of the community,” following a line of thinking found in the New Testament book of John (chapter 4). In stanza sixteen

25. Tschetter may also be comparing himself to the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. In chapters 40-48 Isaiah is often described as a “suffering servant” of God. The Isaiah passages also include many “servant songs” and reference the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C., events in which God uses the Babylonian Empire to punish Israel. Audrey Hinds, of the biblical studies department at Fresno Pacific University, provided assistance in analyzing the Chicago Hymn for biblical references and their meaning.

26. Until the time of his death in 1919 Tschetter remained an advocate of strict church discipline as he held the line against ecclesiastic and theological innovations in the non-communal Hutterite churches in Dakota Territory (later the state of South Dakota).—Janzen, *The Prairie People*, 89-92.

Tschetter asks his Hutterite brothers and sisters to allow this "Spirit" to "enter" their hearts and suggests that this alone will provide security.

Tschetter's "Chicago" hymn interprets this major historical event from a biblical, and specifically Hutterite, perspective. Tschetter believes that the 1871 Chicago Fire was God's judgment on the city's general immorality. The quick rebuilding process, and the lack of Christ at the center of this endeavor, indicated to Tschetter that little had been learned from God's previous judgment. In the future another conflagration was almost certain to occur. In fact the "End Times" might be near (as Tschetter surmises in a diary notation). Tschetter adds moral commentary with regard to the importance of preserving purity in both the individual Christian and in the Hutterite church as a whole.

In the future it will be important to translate Tschetter's seventeen additional hymns. These too should be evaluated from historical and theological perspectives. Tschetter's unique poetic creations are perhaps as significant as his narrative account of the 1873 journey to North America. They provide important insights into the way that nineteenth-century Hutterites viewed the world at large.