

REFLECTION

“Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh”: The Story of a Children’s Prayer

Margaret Loewen Reimer

The children’s prayer, *Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh*, is dear to the heart of many Mennonites who grew up in German-speaking homes. A recent request for an English translation sent me on a quest to discover what was available. The translations I found were unsatisfactory, and so I resumed work on my own translation, which I had begun years ago. Meanwhile, I decided to trace the origins of this classic little prayer. The search uncovered a surprisingly rich story.

Müde bin ich first appeared in a songbook for nursery school children compiled by Theodor Fliedner in Kaiserswerth, Germany in 1842.¹ That is why the tune is sometimes identified as “Kaiserswerth” or “Fliedner.” It is likely that the melody is based on a popular folk tune, as are many familiar hymns.

The words were written by Luise Hensel (1798-1876), a widely-read religious poet and hymn writer, and a woman who led a remarkable life.² Hensel’s father was a Lutheran pastor in Brandenburg. Her brother, well-known painter Wilhelm Hensel, was married to Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of Felix. After the death of her father in 1809, Luise moved to Berlin with her mother. Here she captured the attention of several remarkable men. Romantic poet Clemens Brentano acknowledged her influence on his poetry and apparently shared with composer Ludwig Berger an unrequited love for Luise. Another poet, Wilhelm Müller, was also attracted to her. Today, Müller is remembered for his *Waldhornisten* poems, which Franz Schubert set to music in his song cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*. Another friend, Ludwig von Gerlach, who would later become a teacher of Otto von Bismarck, drew Hensel into the upper ranks of the Center Party, a political force in Germany at the time. These activities apparently conflicted with her

religious feelings, however, and in an emotional crisis she joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1818.

From then on, Hensel led the life of a pilgrim, moving from place to place as a religious teacher and writer. She was head teacher at a school for girls in Aachen for six years, until ill health forced her to return to her brother's home in Berlin. (In Aachen she turned down a proposal of marriage from Clemens August Alertz, who later became personal physician to Pope Pius IX.) After her mother's death in 1835, Hensel again wandered from school to school until finally settling in a convent in Paderborn, a city in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany. Here she died at the age of 78. There is a monument to her memory in Paderborn.

Hensel's poems consist mostly of pious verses composed for special occasions. Some of her poetry, freely altered by Brentano, appeared in an 1829 work entitled *Geistlicher Blumenstrauss* (Spiritual Bouquet). Poems by Hensel and her sister were published in 1857 under the title *Gedichte von Luise und Wilhelmine Hensel*, and a compilation of her letters was published posthumously. *Sämtliche Lieder*, which includes *Müde bin ich*, her most popular song, was published in 1869.

The man who first published *Müde bin ich* in his songbook for children was himself a fascinating character. Theodor Fliedner (1800-1864) was a German Lutheran pastor in Kaiserswerth, now part of Dusseldorf, who was deeply concerned about the poor and needy in his parish, including prisoners who lived in appalling conditions. During a trip to Holland, he "observed Mennonite congregations that frequently were served by deaconesses who looked after the women and children and assisted the sick, needy, and poor."³ Shortly after, in 1836, Fliedner founded the first "Deaconess Mother House" to train nurses and deaconesses for work in parishes, among indigent groups, and in foreign missions. By 1864, the Kaiserswerth movement had 30 mother houses and 1,600 deaconesses. Protestants in many other countries, including Mennonites in North America, adopted Fliedner's model: "Almost all the first North American deaconess programs took as their inspiration the work of Pastor Theodor Fliedner . . . and his wife Friederike . . . in Kaiserswerth, Germany."⁴ The most famous deaconess associated with Kaiserswerth is Florence Nightingale. She spent time there in 1851, observing the program and gaining her first nursing experience. That year she wrote *The Institution*

of Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, for the Practical Training of Deaconesses, her first publication.⁵

Mennonite Use of the Hymn

Müde bin ich has found its way into many Lutheran and Mennonite hymnals, in addition to being passed down through family lore. (I recently saw fond mention of it by a Jew raised in communist Yugoslavia who learned it from a German-speaking grandmother.⁶) Although I did not check European Mennonite hymnbooks, I found this children's prayer in a number of North American hymnals, both German and English. The 1942 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten* (General Conference Mennonite Church) places it among the *Abendlieder* (evening songs) and identifies the tune simply as *eigene Weise* or "own tune." (*Lieber Vater, hoch im Himmel*, another popular children's prayer, is with the children's songs.) The 1965 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten*, published by Faith and Life Press in Newton, Kansas, includes it in the children's section, with the tune identified as "Kaiserwerth, 1842." In the Mennonite Brethren (MB) tradition, the song appeared in the *Heimatklänge* (Sounds of Home) collection brought over from Russia, which became part of the *Drei-Band* (three-volume) hymnal. It was not in the MB *Gesangbuch* of 1952 or later English hymnals.⁷

The 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal* (Mennonite Publishing House), edited by J.D. Brunk for Swiss Mennonites, includes the words of *Müde bin ich* in its *Deutscher Anhang* (German supplement). The *Deutsches Lieder und Melodienbuch* (Mennonite Publishing House, 1926), based on an 1895 hymnal, includes the prayer in its *Abendlieder* section, but with an entirely different tune!⁸ Ontario Swiss Mennonites I spoke with did not know *Müde bin ich*, but a man who grew up in the Amish tradition remembered singing it, perhaps because the Amish retained the German language longer.⁹

Neither *The Mennonite Hymnary* of 1940 (General Conference) nor *The Mennonite Hymnal* published jointly by the General Conference and (Swiss) Mennonite Church in 1969 include *Müde bin ich*, even though both have some German hymns. *The Youth Hymnary* (Faith and Life Press, 1956) has an English translation by someone identified only as H.J.L. The same version is found in *The Children's Hymnary* (Faith and Life Press,

1968) with the translator listed as Lester Hostetler. In *The Youth Hymnary* the melody is entitled “German folk tune,” while *The Children’s Hymnary* identifies the tune as “Kaiserswerth, 1842.”

Variations and Translations

Luise Hensel’s hymn appears in several German variations. In some versions, the second line reads “Schliesse beide Äuglein zu” (close both little eyes) and the seventh line says “Jesu Blut” instead of “Christi Blut.” Some versions use “treuer Gott” (faithful God) instead of “lieber Gott.” The fourth verse has the most variations. (I remember only three verses from my childhood, so I chose a fourth one I thought most in keeping with the rest.) The version that appears with Hensel’s biography on Wikipedia has this fourth verse: *Kranken Herzen sende Ruh, / Nasse Augen schliesse zu, / Lass den Mond am Himmel steh’n / Und die Stille Welt beseh’n* (Send rest to ailing hearts / Close weeping eyes / Let the moon stand in the heavens / And overlook the silent world).

The 1942 Mennonite *Gesangbuch* closes the song with lines that strike a different tone than the rest of this gentle prayer: *Lass, die noch im Finstern gehn, / Bald den Stern der Weisen sehn* (May those still wandering in darkness, / Soon see the star of the Magi). These German lines also appear in the *Youth Hymnary* and *Children’s Hymnary*. In the 1965 *Gesangbuch*, the last two lines become *Hab auf alle gnädig acht, / Schenk uns eine gute Nacht* (Watch favorably over all, / Send us a good night), which seem more in keeping with a children’s hymn. I also came across a whimsical fifth stanza that would surely appeal to little ones: *Jedem Tierlein überall / Gieb ihm Schutz and gieb ihm Stall. / Jedem Blümlein seinen Traum / Wiege leise jeden Baum*. (Loosely translated: Give every little animal protection and shelter, every little flower its dream; gently rock each tree.)

A number of English translations of the prayer exist, but none, in my opinion, measures up to the lovely childlike quality of the original. Most translations rely too heavily on the diction of sin and atonement, thereby altering the original’s tone and theological “simplicity.” The second stanza, especially, illustrates the shift. The German version simply asks God to ignore or “not to notice” any wrong (*Unrecht*) that might have been done today. The reassuring last line of that stanza, difficult to translate within the

given meter and rhyme scheme, conveys the comforting image of a God who undoes all injury or harm (*Schaden*) and makes everything better again (“kissing it better” comes to mind).

Mennonite translators, undoubtedly influenced by the subjective language of American evangelicalism, transform this notion of external wrong into a confession of personal guilt. For example, a translation in *Prayers for Everyday* hardens the tone by rendering *Unrecht* and *Schaden* as “evil” and personalizing the need for redemption: “Have I evil done today, / I pray, dear Lord, do not repay.”¹⁰ Lester Hostetler’s second stanza emphasizes personal salvation even more: “All my guilt Thou dost forgive, / Through Thy mercy Lord, I live.” He ends the fourth verse with an equally “unchildlike” sentiment: “Weary travelers in the night, / Lead them to eternal light.”

An 1869 translation by Frances Havergal, the British hymnwriter who wrote “Take my life and let it be,” remains close to the original meaning of the second stanza: “Jesus, Savior, wash away / All that has been wrong today.” (I prefer her emphasis on “washing away” the wrong to Hensel’s use of “Christ’s blood” to imply that idea.) In the rest of her translation, however, Havergal departs substantially from the German original. Havergal’s version, found in Lutheran hymnals, can be characterized as warm piety with a moral tone. Opening with “Now the light has gone away,” she closes with this fifth stanza: “Thou, my best and kindest Friend, / Thou wilt love me to the end. / Let me love Thee more and more, / Always better than before.”

In my own translation, I tried to capture the “non-pietistic” sense of the original, with its lyrical, simple diction and rhyming couplets. In the second stanza, I found “Christ’s blood” impossible to rhyme, so I used “Christ slain,” admittedly not a very childlike or simple sentiment. In the third stanza, I substituted “sheltering arm” for the image of resting in God’s “hand,” again because of rhyme. The last part of the third stanza, *Alle Menschen, gross und klein, / Sollen dir befohlen sein*, also proved difficult to capture within the limits of the verse. Literally it says, “All people, great and small, shall to Thee commended be.” The word “commended” hardly seemed suitable for a children’s prayer, so I focused on the sense of refuge in God. One translation that appealed to me was “All Thy children, great and small, / Let Thy love surround them all.” I opted, however, to keep

the word *sollen* (shall), which can express both certainty and hope, and to reiterate the sense of safety evoked by the “sheltering arm.”

Below is the German version I learned as a child (plus a fourth verse), and my English translation.

Müde bin ich, geh' zur Ruh

Translation by Margaret Loewen Reimer

*Müde bin ich, geh' zur Ruh,
Schliesse meine Augen zu.
Vater, lass die Augen dein
Über meinem Bette sein.*

Weary now, I go to rest,
Close my eyes in slumber blest.
Father, may Thy watchful eye
Guard the bed on which I lie.

*Hab' ich Unrecht heut' getan,
Sieh' es, lieber Gott, nicht an.
Deine Gnad' und Christi Blut
Macht ja allen Schaden gut.*

Wrong I may have done today,
Heed it not, dear God, I pray.
For Thy mercy and Christ slain
Turns all wrong to right again.

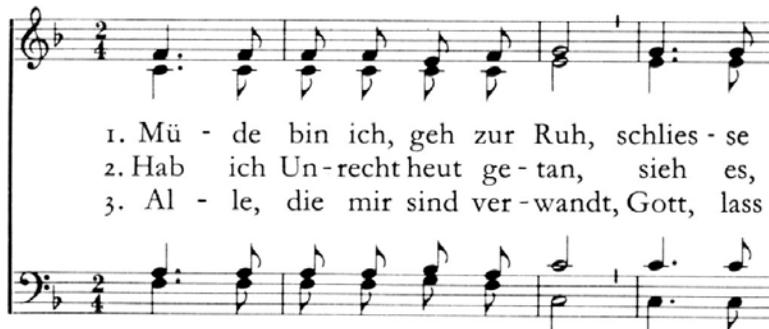
*Alle die mir sind verwandt,
Gott lass ruh'n in Deiner Hand.
Alle Menschen, gross und klein,
Sollen dir befohlen sein.*

May my loved ones, safe from harm,
Rest within Thy sheltering arm.
All Thy children everywhere
Shall find refuge in Thy care.

*Kranken Herzen sende Ruh,
Müde Augen schliesse zu.
Gott im Himmel halte Wacht,
Gib uns eine gute Nacht. Amen.*

Send Thy rest to hearts in pain,
Close the weary eyes again.
God in heav'n Thy vigil keep
Grant us all a restful sleep. Amen.

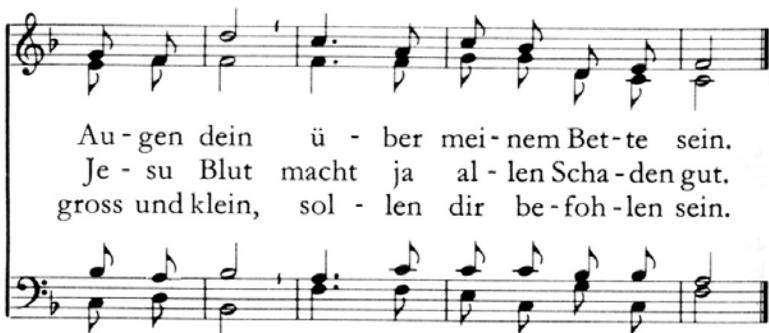
Kaiserswerth, 1842



1. Mü - de bin ich, geh zur Ruh, schlies - se
 2. Hab ich Un - recht heut ge - tan, sieh es,
 3. Al - le, die mir sind ver - wandt, Gott, lass



mei - ne Au - gen zu; Va - ter, lass die
 treu - er Gott, nicht an! Dei - ne Gnad und
 ruhn in dei - ner Hand; al - le Men - schen,



Au - gen dein ü - ber mei - nem Bet - te sein.
 Je - su Blut macht ja al - len Scha - den gut.
 gross und klein, sol - len dir be - foh - len sein.

Notes

¹ According to the *Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (1942), the song first appeared in the *Liederbuch für Kleinkinder-Schulen* (Kaiserswerth, 1842).

² Biographies of Luise Hensel are available on the Internet, including the online *Catholic Encyclopedia*. She is also in the *Dictionary of Hymnology*, Vol. 2, edited by John Julian (New York: Gordon Press, 1979), first published in the 1890s. *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers* by Katharina M. Wilson (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 1991) provides references for further study.

³ Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006), 822. The deaconess ministry among Mennonites goes back to the Anabaptists, but Fliedner's homes initiated a "professional" nursing order for women, imitated by German and Russian Mennonites who brought the practice to North America. In 1898, the Bethesda Hospital in Goessel, Kansas, inaugurated deaconess work. Bethel Deaconess Hospital was dedicated in 1908, followed by other Mennonite deaconess hospitals in Kansas and Nebraska. For further details, see the "Deaconess" entry in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO).

⁴ Ibid. A biography entitled *Life of Pastor Fliedner, the Founder of the Kaiserswerth Sisterhood of Protestant Deaconesses*, was translated from the German in 1867 by Catherine Winkworth, a British hymn writer. Winkworth is best known for her translations of well-known German hymns such as "Now thank we all our God" and "Jesus, priceless treasure." *Hymnal, A Worship Book*, used by Mennonite Church Canada congregations, includes thirteen of Winkworth's translations.

⁵ See "Florence Nightingale" entries in *Encyclopedia Britannica* and on Wikipedia online.

⁶ See Zdenka Novak's online memoir, "When Heaven's Vault Cracked – Zagreb Memories," detailing Jewish life during World War II. Viewed in 2008. See also Zdenka Novak, *When Heaven's Vault Cracked* (Braunton, UK: Merlin Books Ltd., 1995).

⁷ The Mennonite Brethren did, however, pick up another hymn by Luise Hensel: *Immer muss ich wieder lesen* ("Ever would I fain be reading / in the ancient Holy Book"). This hymn was included in the 1952 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde* and its English version, *The Hymn Book*, published by the Canadian MB Conference in 1960. This hymn also appears in *Evangeliums-Lieder*, an 1891 German translation of gospel songs (*Kernlieder*) compiled by Americans Walter Rauschenbusch and Ira D. Sankey, which was used in Mennonite Brethren churches and on occasion in the Berghthaler Mennonite Church in Manitoba, the church of my childhood.

⁸ Unidentified in *Deutsches Lieder und Melodienbuch*, the tune is a slight variation of "Mercy," the tune of "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine" (# 508 in *Hymnal, A Worship Book*).

⁹ From a conversation with Ferne Burkhardt, an Ontario Swiss Mennonite who is currently News Editor for Mennonite World Conference. Burkhardt also told me that *Müde bin ich* was on the lips of Frank H. Epp, Mennonite historian and editor, as he lay dying in 1986. The Menno Singers, a choir founded by Swiss Mennonites in Ontario, learned the prayer so they could sing it at his funeral.

¹⁰ Elaine Sommers Rich, compiler, *Prayers for Everyday* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990). According to Rich, the first two stanzas were translated by Marlin Jeschke, former philosophy and religion professor at Goshen College, and the rest taken from *The Youth Hymnary* version.

Margaret Loewen Reimer, a Waterloo, Ontario writer and editor, has written extensively on Mennonites and the arts. Her most recent book, One Quilt, Many Pieces: A Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada (Herald Press, 2008), grew out of her work as managing editor of Canadian Mennonite.