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### Herman Zagel's *Jack Roostand*: A German-American View of Prairie Life

The frontier is a place of great complexity, of individual involvement in community development. As Richard White points out, the frontier constitutes the middle ground, the place of compromise in the confrontation between cultures.<sup>1</sup> It is also the place where new cultural forms are created. The present relatively brief article desires to give some insights into an American author, Herman Zagel, who wrote in German about life on the American frontier in the late nineteenth century. Like many others, Hermann Zagel is now almost forgotten, his works long out of print. He writes about the life of German-Americans, that group of Americans who came from German-speaking areas and their immediate descendants, who were yet imbued with the culture of their German progenitors. The people Zagel is concerned with are those who are at the front lines of American cultural development on the prairie.

Zagel notes that he is writing for the German-speaking American audience in the preface of his *Aus Frühlingstagen*: “. . . and it is for them [Germans in America] that this book is written [who] read and understand the American language very well. . . .” He notes with regard to the reaction of his personified “spiritual child” when he names it “From the Days of Spring”: “That’s it—you said it!” it joyfully remarks [in English]; because as the reader will soon note, it is a real German-American and mixes the English words and expressions in with its German like the baker mixes raisins in the cookie dough.”<sup>2</sup> This is the linguistic compromise of the frontier experience.

Sander Gilman sees appropriately the frontier as a means of approaching and better understanding German-American literature.<sup>3</sup> It contextualizes the writing by providing a framework of reference. Zagel relates the experience of people whose lives are directed toward building community on a new cultural as well as physical landscape. The characters find themselves trying to create relationships within the open structures of community where the rules are in formation. Zagel himself grew up in a frontier environment.

Zagel is not listed in any of the standard works on German-American, American or German authors, a curious omission given the extent of his writings. Zagel was born in Columbus, Indiana, grew up near Decatur on the Piqua Road between the Ohio border and Fort Wayne, Indiana. Piqua Road figures frequently in his stories

and essays. His father was a Lutheran pastor, and the Lutheran Church plays a significant role in the life of Zigel and his writings.

He dedicates one of his books to his sisters, who read his stories, and his wife who proofread for him. Zigel is an American author who treats American life, not just German-American life in German. Zigel's novels, short stories and travel essays have never been translated. The language is different in its structures than "Reichsdeutsch"—a linguistic analysis using careful parsing and comparison would, I believe, show that Zigel's language is influenced by its American environment. Also, his German is slightly archaic and English words are infused here and there where appropriate. It gives a sense of how people spoke here. Zigel's background was northern German. He also wrote some articles in *Plattdüütsch*. Zigel earned his living writing for the *Abendschule*, teaching in German-American schools, and possibly from lecturing and from his published works.

Zigel wrote a number of books and many articles for the St. Louis *Abendschule*, which was a journal publication of the Louis Lang Publishing Co. An ad for the *Abendschule* reads: "The *Abendschule* is the most read German-American journal in the U. S. and offers contemporary observations about questions of the day and current events, solid fiction, scientific and historical, biographical and geographical articles, an especially interesting section for young people, medical advice and more the entertainment of young and old." It had a supplement called "Frauenfleiß." A bibliography of the monographic works by Zigel provides a sense of the breadth of his writing.<sup>4</sup>

Zigel wrote two novels about the life of Jack Roostand.<sup>5</sup> Jack Roostand is the name of a young minister, Lutheran or Evangelical, it's not clear, whose life as a pastor in a German-American community somewhere in the plains states is the object of the novels, the second a sequel to the first. Jack, as his first name might indicate, is born in the U. S. of German immigrant parents, but his life is centered in German-speaking communities. Jack goes to college and becomes a pastor.

The church is usually the center, social and religious, for these frontier communities, thus the life of a pastor provides insight into the nature of community life in ways that are unique. The pastor resolves disputes, provides counsel for individuals and family problems, and in general oversees the well-being of the community, including the critical educational needs of children. The latter is sometimes, as Jack finds out, difficult when dealing with less educated parents who want and often need their children to work on new homesteads.

While there is the somewhat sentimentalized *Familienroman* caste to the novels, they are closer to the American sentimental story than to German *kleinbürgerliche Literatur* of the late-nineteenth century. The novels are distinctly American in theme and style. The westward movement—Jack leaves his comfortable Eastern-Midwest home to venture forth to the prairie to help the German-Americans moving there build strong communities and happy, healthy families.

There is very little discussion about Germany as such. Life centers around happenings in America. Germany is a memory passed down to Jack, maybe a cultural



ideal, but not the object of daily life. Zagel constantly contrasts German and American attitudes and comes down squarely on the American side.

Jack is in fact the quintessential all-American German-American. That holds for his boyhood and for his college life:

When at college you ask students about what kind of a student, what kind of a person somebody is and you get the answer back from a beaming face: Oh, Butch (or Fidi or whatever the nickname used) is all right, with the stress on the word "right," and if you ask further, "all right in what?" and get the answer "all around," then you can be pretty sure that the same question posed to the teachers about Butch or Fidi will illicit the same response, only in a more polished form.

About the senior student Roostand there was at college only one judgment from fellow students and that was "Jack is all right all around."<sup>6</sup>

He was well received by his teachers and the grades he received were always good, with the exception of world history. In this subject in his early student years he had always been quite good. But this changed suddenly in his sophomore year, as a result of an answer he gave on a quiz on the Peace of Westphalia and its results. Jack who "detested the splitting-up of good old Germany into forty-acre principalities and township-kingdoms as much as the hash served in the cafeteria, gave vent to his American feelings and wrote: 'Good old Germany was so ripped apart and divided into so many little countries, states and counties that no intelligent person can figure it out.'"<sup>7</sup>

The professor did not appreciate the sentiment or the humor of the answer. When he returned them to the class, he read the answer sentence to the class. The class, who thought the professor meant it as a joke, broke out in "Homeric laughter," which enraged the professor even more. He berated Jack telling him his thinking is as fragmented as in his opinion Germany after the Westphalian Peace Accord. "From then on a solid 'D' was the only grade that Jack ever received in World History." The reader is led to sympathize with the "American" feelings of Jack and his view of fragmented Germany. Jack's intellectual development is formed by his American environment. German, "good old Germany," is a cultural icon, but Jack's attitudes are distinctly American.

This is apparent in Jack's language as in his use of metaphors, which draw from the American scene almost exclusively. Comparisons are made not with the Rhine but with the Mississippi when he describes his being a pastor and the learning curve involved:

It was for him like for a young pilot who has learned the Mississippi, who has learned where the dangerous spots are and knows how to avoid them, who understands how to steer a steamer and has done it for hours in the presence of his superior—and then one day the Captain says, Charlie, you

take the wheel. I have an hour left in my shift, but I don't feel well and want to lie down. Then it's a question of who feels less well, the Captain or Charlie.

Jack now stood at the wheel, and he wasn't all that comfortable.<sup>8</sup>

While religion plays a strong role in the lives of Jack and the people in his community, in fact exactly what the denomination is finds no particular mention beyond being clearly protestant. Certainly doctrinal issues are not mentioned either, and the church is more a backdrop for the stories of the people. That is to say, this is not devotional literature in any way, but rather narratives about the development of a person, a family and their frontier community. Rather American diversity is praised. Zigel comments on how Uncle Sam looks at the future potential of an immigrant, not the dirty outside of the *Zwischendeckler*. Also, the narrator notes, the people Europe considers "most undesirable," the Jews, are welcomed by Uncle Sam, who sees the future successful business man or merchant. Jack avoids any disparaging remarks about any other ethnic group and seeks mutual cooperation.

Jack is imbued with the optimism of the westward turned America. He seeks his first church assignment in the frontier believing that it is there he can do the most good, but also it reflects his own *Abenteurlust*. Life is distinctly difficult in a physical way. Travel is hard and the weather offers constant challenges. Jack must build a church community from scratch.

The people Jack works with are primarily German immigrants, but highly diverse within themselves. Many German-speaking provinces are represented and their dialects: a German-American melting pot. Many of the Germans cannot understand each other, which tends to exacerbate tense situations. There is frequently conflict in the congregation often caused by language problems. In one instance with a humorous overtone a Southern German dialect speaker is unable to comprehend what a Platt speaker comments about a school development issue. He asks Jack if the fellow congregant is even speaking German and if they are not indeed a German congregation. Jack struggles to maintain peace and community organization.<sup>9</sup>

The frontier provides the environment for extreme conflict: Violence, while not a way of life, is always a possibility. Very early in his frontier experience, on the way to his parish, Jack witnesses a violent killing. The narrator comments that this murder and the view of the result "changes Jack forever." He will always see the possibility of the dark side of life and community.

A central aspect of life on the frontier is the family: The family unit in the isolated areas of the prairie takes on a meaning beyond any religious connotations; it is an imperative element for success and often survival. When Jack deals with families it is a very practical level. The needs in the face of illness, childbirth, and heavy work are extreme and danger always present. Jack learns the tolerance and openness that frontier experience requires. Generally positive, but conflict is not unknown. The focus in Roostand and in much of Zigel's writings is the family and the community.

Hermann Zigel did not write the great American novel, but he wrote works that intrinsically deserve considerably more attention than they have received from scholars



of German-American literature. Indeed Zigel as a writer of the American experience deserves more attention. *Jack Roostand* gives a view of a unique American time, when the frontier and the German immigration intermeshed.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1610-1815* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> *Aus Frühlingstagen; Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben* (Peoria, IL: Im Selbst-Verlage des Verfassers, 1923) 10. All translations by G. Hoyt. Original German: “. . . und für sie ist dies Buch geschrieben[, die] mit wenigen Ausnahmen die amerikanische Landessprache recht wohl lesen und verstehen . . .” “That’s it—you said it!” “jubelte mein Kind; denn, wie der Leser bald merken wird, ist es ein echter Deutsch-Amerikaner und mischt englische Wörter und Redensarten unter sein Deutsch wie der Bäcker Rosinen in seinen Kuchenteig.”

<sup>3</sup> Sander Gilman, “German? American? Literature?—Some thoughts on the Problem of Question Marks and Hyphens,” in *German? American? Literature? New Directions in German-American Studies* ed. by Winfried Fluck and Werner Sollors (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 13.

<sup>4</sup> The monographic works of Hermann Zigel include:

*Reisebilder aus den Vereinigten Staaten* (St. Louis, MO: Louis Lange Publishing Company, 1907);

*Dies und Das und noch Etwas* (St. Louis, MO: Louis Lange Publishing Company, 1908);

*Jack Roostand* (St. Louis, MO: L. Lange Publishing Company, 1909-12), 2 vols. ;

*Aus Frühlingstagen; Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben* (Peoria, IL: Im Selbst-Verlage des Verfassers, 1923);

*Aus Frühlingstagen; Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben* (St. Louis, MO: Louis Lange, 1929);

*Zigels Allerlei : Eine Serie von Plaudereien* (St. Louis, MO: Louis Lange Publishing Co., 1930).

<sup>5</sup> For bibliographic details see note 3. Jack Roostand is a fictitious character, but possibly based on the life of his father, or possibly a composite of the frontier Lutheran ministers he had known.

<sup>6</sup> *Jack Roostand*, p. 21. German original: “Wenn man auf dem College nach dem Wesen, Tun u.s.w. eines Schülers sich erkundigt und einem von großen wie von kleinen Kommilitonen nur die kurze, aber mit strahlendem Gesicht gegebene Auskunft wird: ‘O, der Butch (oder Fidi, oder wie er sonst bespitznamt sein mag) ist all right!’ mit kräftigem Nachdruck auf dem Wort ‘right’—und man weiter fragt: ‘all right worin?’ und die Antwort lautet: ‘All around!’ so kann man ziemlich sicher darauf verlassen, daß man bei einer Nachfrage bei den Lehrern der Anstalt über den Butch oder Fidi fast dasselbe, wiewohl in bessere Form gebrachte Zeugnis zu hören bekommen wird. Über den Primaner Roostand gab es auf dem College nur ein Urteil bei allen Mitschülern und das lautete eben: ‘Jack is all right all around.’”

<sup>7</sup> *Jack Roostand*, p. 22. German original: “Das gute Deutschland wurde so zerrissen und in so viele Länder, Ländchen und Ländle eingeteilt, daß kein anständiger Mensch mehr hindurchfinden konnte.”

<sup>8</sup> *Jack Roostand*, p. 106. German original: “Es erging ihm da etwa so wie einem jungen Steuermann, der bereits zwei Jahre neben seinem Lehrmeister, dem Piloten, ‘den Mississippi gelernt’ hat, der längst die gefährlichen Stellen im Strom kennt und weiß, wie ihnen aus dem Wege zu gehen ist, der wohl versteht, einen Dampfer zu steuern, ja, es in Gegenwart seines Vorgesetzten oft stundenlang eigenhändig getan hat—und dem eines Tages der Lehrmeister sagt: ‘Charlie, nimm Du das Rad jetzt; es ist nur noch eine Stunde bis zur Ablösung. Ich will mich niederlegen, mir ist nicht wohl.’ Da sind plötzlich auf dem Dampfer zwei, denen nicht wohl ist, und es käme auf eine Probe an, zu entscheiden, wem am unwohlsten ist: dem Lehrmeister oder dem Charlie. ‘Jack stand am Steuerrad, aber ihm war nicht recht wohl dabei.’”

<sup>9</sup> *Jack Roostand*, p. 118. Example of the misunderstanding caused by dialect differences:

"Oeitz schloag oaner do' lang hin!" fuhr der alte Rösch auf, "dös lieggt m'r a, zu vernehme, was dös Wabervolk si z'sammendratscht! Dös fehlt a no! Gutzgugguk no amol, hascht net selbscht Verschteschtmí in der Mansard, Kegel, daß D' muscht nofrag'n bei dene Waberleut?"

"Wat will de Kirl?" schrie Kegel kirschrot im Gesicht, "wat will hei? Dütt is `ne dütsche Gemeene; wenn de Kirl englisch köhren will, denn mag hei dat buten dohn! Herr Pastor, ich frage Ihnen, sünd wir deutsch oder englisch?"

"Deutsch, deutsch, lieber Herr Kegel, deutsch an Leib und Seele. Herr Rösch hat übrigens auch deutsch gesprochen."

"Well, wenn das Deutsch war, denn bün ich woll samaritisch."