

“A Hoosier Author You’ve Probably Never Heard Of, and Likely with Good Reason”

The problem with this Hoosier author, who should be recognized as significant, is that he wrote exclusively in German. We are talking about Hermann Zagel’s writings, especially his novel *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.¹ 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. This group constituted the largest ethnic group to immigrate to America before Hispanics. The people Zagel is concerned with in his writings 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 as noted 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.”² 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.³ It contextualizes the writing by providing a framework of reference. Zigel 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. Zigel himself grew up in a frontier environment.

Zigel 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, though my friend Roger Franke, historian from Fort Wayne, considers him to be the “German-American Mark Twain”, which is a fair designation. Zigel was born in Columbus, Indiana, in 1859, one of eight children of Rev. Johann Andreas Zigel and his wife Anna Sophie Fürchtenicht Zigel. He grew up near Decatur on the Piqua Road, once an important route following an old trail from Piqua OH in Miami County to Fort Wayne. The 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 in the German language American life, not just German-American life. Zigel's novel, general 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 Zagel'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. Zagel's background was northern German. He also wrote some articles in Plattdütsch. Zagel earned his living writing, teaching in German-American schools, and from lecturing and from his published works.

Zagel 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 US 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 also had a supplement called "Frauenfleiß". A bibliography of the monographic works by Zagel provides a sense of the breadth of his writing:⁴

Reisebilder aus den Vereinigten Staaten. [Travel Scenes from the United States] St. Louis, Mo.: Louis Lange Publishing Company, 1907.

Dies und Das und noch Etwas. [This and that and then something else-essays] St. Louis, Mo.: Louis Lange Publishing Company, 1908.

Jack Roostand. St. Louis, Mo.: L. Lange Publishing Company, 1909 1912. Book 2 vols.

Aus Frühlingstagen; Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben. Spring Days: Reminisces of a happy boyhood] Peoria, Ill., Im Selbst-Verlage des Verfassers, 1923.

Aus Frühlingstagen: Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben. St. Louis, Mo.: Louis Lange, 1929.

Zagel, Hermann H. *Zagels Allerlei : eine Serie von Plaudereien*. [Zagels Collection: a series of conversations-essays] St. Louis, Mo.: Louis Lange Publishing Co., 1930.

Zagel writes basically three types of literature: travelogues, reminiscences, and fiction. The first deals with his trips in the US, he never did travel outside the US and

Canada, the latter he found too English and boring. The essays cover his visits and work assignments in Minnesota, Louisiana, New York, and the Mid-West. His reminiscences are written with an understated humor and a great eye for detail. The reader learns a lot about life on the Midwestern frontier. For example he describes his childhood home, the parsonage on the Piqua Road:

When the parsonage was built—the writer was at that time not yet in the world—a certain farmer named M. played an important role in the congregation, and he declared openly in the congregational meeting in which the determination to build a parsonage was made, “[in Plattdütsch] If that house is better than mine, then I’m not giving anything for it.” That was the building plan and the design for the parsonage. M. had a cabin with two rooms, so the pastor got a cabin with two rooms. Since M’s cabin wondrously did not front the good old Piqua Road but like a shy maiden looked off to the side, thus the new parsonage did likewise. ...

The view to the west was completely cut off by the various outbuildings; to the north in spite of the two windows, which the house had on each side, one couldn’t see anything because the church was there and the thick trees of the orchard that provided a view only in the winter when the leaves were gone. To the east was nothing but forest, thick, dark forest, and to the south-well, the house had no windows to the south. This was the front of the house! It wouldn’t have done any good to have windows anyway since the view was blocked by the so-called “Schmokhaus” in which mother smoked ham, bacon slabs and delicious wurst (ach the wurst!) and by the church school partially constructed of logs. Is it a

wonder then that we children, who grew up there, did not clearly understand the concept of horizon, and even today I don't always see what's on the horizon!

Zagel went to both the *Gemeindeschule*, Lutheran church school and, in the winter months, also the public school. His descriptions of that are quite telling and amusing:

Our State School (Public School) on the Piqua Road.

I was just a little shaver of eight or nine and every winter when that splendid time had arrived and Riers Schoolhouse opened its doors trotted contentedly in thick leather boots and scarf wrapped head next to my brother through the thick snow to the "English School". I liked to go; not out of thirst for knowledge, I got enough of that at the church school where that was satisfied sufficiently. No, there were other reasons. There was above all the fabulous lunch bucket that my brother carried and from which came deliciously the molasses sandwich and buck wheat cake. That pleasure I did not have at the church school; there I ate at home where the usual family fare was presented. Indeed, the lunch bucket was a very poetic idea and provided going to school a particular fascination. Then going there involved sleigh rides often enough. The farmers took logs to the saw mill and let us sit on top, and, if the sleigh were empty, the ride was fast down the road just to make us boys happy. Now that made going to school worth it.

Zagel wrote two novels about the life of Jack Roostand.⁵ 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 US 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. Zigel 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.’ ...”⁶

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.’”⁷

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 of 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 Rhein 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."⁸

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*, the poor immigrant travelling below decks in steerage. 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 “Abenteuerlust”. 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: it's a German-American melting pot. Because of the different dialects many of the Germans can't 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 regarding 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 reassures him and struggles to maintain peace and community organization.⁹

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 on 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 Zagel's writings is the family and the community.

Hermann Zagel didn't 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. Good translations would, of course, help the cause. Indeed Zagel 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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¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1610-1815* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

² *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.“

³ 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.

⁴ The monographic works of Hermann Zagel 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.

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Zagel, Hermann H. *Zagels Allerlei : eine Serie von Plaudereien.* St. Louis, Mo.: Louis Lange Publishing Co., 1930.

⁵ 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.

⁶ *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.‘"

⁷ *Jack Roostand*, 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."

⁸ *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.‘"

⁹ *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 Verschteschtni 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.“