

Songs of Protest From Edenwald

Jonathan F. Wagner

BY NOW, THE THEME of protest in the 1930s and 1940s has become somewhat hackneyed. Nevertheless, the subject still fascinates, particularly if the protest is viewed in a fresh way or the protester is unknown or forgotten. Generally speaking, the best known protests from the Depression and wartime have involved significant groups; the best known protesters have been politicians or dissident faction leaders. Moreover, most of the protest studied has been that registered by English- or French-speaking Canadians. But this is not the entire story, for the Depression and subsequent wartime produced widespread discontent among many anonymous non-English or non-French Canadians who grumbled to themselves or voiced their concerns to a limited audience. The poems published here for the first time express the irritations and discontent of one such "ordinary" person living in that difficult period. They are the fresh sounds of the German-Canadian storekeeper, Josef G. Mohl, of Edenwald, Saskatchewan.

Mohl, who died in 1976, immigrated to Canada from the Austrian Empire. Born in 1881 to German-speaking parents in the small, lower Austrian town of Hoflein, Mohl enjoyed a happy and stable childhood. His father, a civil servant one generation removed from the peasantry, encouraged his son to display ambition. When the family moved to the outskirts of Vienna in the early 1890s, Josef was launched upon an academic career. From the beginning the youth showed himself to be a gifted student — diligent, curious, and with an obvious flair for language and literature. After high school the serious youth (at the age of 13 he wished to become a priest) attended the teachers' training institute in Wiener Neustadt. Graduating in 1903, he spent the next several years employed as an itinerant instructor to the scattered German settlements in the Austrian Bukovina. The life of teaching in one village for two months and then moving on to another did not satisfy Mohl. He desired the security of a more permanent position. At this point he learned of the opportunities in western Canada. Longing to return to the traditions of his peasant ancestors (in his own words he desired "Land, a vineyard, just a little piece of land to dig and plant"), Josef decided to emigrate.¹

¹ J.G. Mohl, "Family Tree of the Mohls," Public Archives of Canada (hereafter cited as PAC), MG30 C131.

Jonathan F. Wagner, "Songs of Protest From Edenwald," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 269-275.

Arriving in Saskatchewan in 1903, Mohl first worked in Edenwald as a teacher and part-time farm worker. In 1909 he established his own homestead. A year later he married. He remained on the farm until 1912, when he joined with a neighbour and set up a general store. Once established in the village of Edenwald, Mohl soon became town secretary and postmaster. In 1919 he changed jobs, accepting the position of secretary-treasurer in the Edenwald Co-op. He continued in this capacity until 1933, when he once again started his own general store. With perseverance, he weathered the Depression. In the ensuing decades he expanded his business to include not only the store but a farm equipment agency and a gasoline station as well. When Mohl died at 95, he held assets worth several hundred thousand dollars.

During his nearly 70 years in Edenwald Mohl never remained preoccupied with business. Throughout his life the lively, diminutive Mohl (he was five feet, four inches tall, had sparkling hazel eyes, and wore a full beard) exhibited a strong interest in literature and politics. This was so because he had brought to Canada a keen, sophisticated intellect and a broad sympathy for his fellow man. More specifically, Mohl's thinking synthesized traditional Christian humanism with Marxist and liberal sentiments. He was, he admitted, ever conscious that "history from the earliest recorded times up to the present day has accumulated a mass, a library of facts to show that there have always been individuals, groups, cliques or classes in possession of power on one side and an oppressed or at best underprivileged class on the other. . . ." Yet he did not despair. Reason and humanity would prevail, for he was convinced that "the forces which have brought us from savagery through barbarism, slavery and feudalism to our present form of civilization will lead us safely on to the next step in our march forward and upward." Mohl, the born but not practicing Catholic, needed to believe in man. "Why," he asked his great-granddaughter two years before he died, "should mother nature, so stingy in dealing out weapons of defense to each species never give more than what is necessary for its survival, why should she have gone out of her way to equip only the species homo-sapiens with an intellect far beyond the requirements of the immediate task? Why a sense for the beautiful, the exalted, for good and evil? Perhaps the answer is that these apparently useless functions of the intellect are as necessary to the survival of homo-sapiens as teeth and claws to the lion — to fight off the chilling and killing sense of pessimism?"²

Because he harbored such beliefs, Mohl's politics were always left of centre. For example, in the 1970s he vociferously opposed the American involvement in Vietnam; in the 1960s he battled the Saskatchewan medical profession's resistance to socialized medicine and he decried the efforts of some NDP members to oust the more radical members of the party. In the

² J.G. Mohl to Wanda, 2 Oct. 1972, PAC, MG30 C131.

1950s he wrote President Truman, asking leniency for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and he publicly defended Stalin and opposed Canada's participation in the Korean War. In the 1940s Mohl spoke out on every occasion against fascism.³

If anything, Mohl was even more involved politically in the 1930s than later. Although he never formally joined a political party, he supported the CCF in Saskatchewan from its beginnings. When the Nazi movement began to make headway among Saskatchewan's German community (there were some forty pro-Nazi German-Canadian Bund units in the province by 1939), Mohl led the campaign of opposition. For instance, in fall 1935 he publicly accused the German Day Rally staged by the German-Canadian Association of Saskatchewan as being "a Hitler demonstration pure and simple."⁴ And in 1939, under the aegis of the Communist Party, Mohl delivered a radio address against Nazi and pro-fascist machinations in Canada. "Must we," he asked his fellow German Canadians at that time, "approve of the bonfires made of priceless German books, of the banishment of 2400 German scholars, of the persecution of the Jews in order to be true to our blood...? If so, why should we want to remain a German?"⁵ While doing these things, Mohl also wrote political poetry.

The following poems, all produced between 1935 and 1941, are interesting for several reasons. Most obviously, they provide some telling reflections on the Depression and ensuing war. Beyond this, they comment on the issue of immigrant assimilation. In these poems Mohl exhibits a neat synthesis of German and Canadian elements. In three of the four examples, the issues he describes are Canadian ones. Moreover, he does this in his adopted language. At the same time, the author had not ceased to be German. Indeed, one could argue that the mechanism of satire employed here was more German than Canadian, for the politicized song had been standard fare in the Austrian coffee houses and German cabarets before the turn of the century. Specifically Mohl set his satirical poems to traditional music: "Marching to Victory" was to be sung to "Marching through Georgia;" "Why we are Poor" to the tune "In the Sweet Bye and Bye;" the "Righteous Man's Marching Song" to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and most bitterly the "Nazi *Weihnachtslied*" to the traditional German Christmas carol, "*Das Weihnachtsmar.*" Finally, these songs of protest illustrate the political idealism and humanitarianism of the "little" man from Edenswald.⁶

³ See collection of Mohl letters to editors in Mohl papers, PAC, MG30 C131.

⁴ Mohl to editor, *Regina Leader Post*, n.d., PAC, MG30 C131.

⁵ J.G. Mohl, "Communist Party Radio Broadcast," 3 Feb. 1939, PAC, MG30 C131.

⁶ All poems are to be found in the Mohl papers. PAC, MG30 C131.

Marching to Victory

Bennett, back in nineteen-thirty, said: "Come, vote for me,
 Unemployment I shall end in twenty-four hours. You'll see,
 Boys and Girls in Canada as busy as can be,
 I'll give you jobs and security.
 Hurray, hurray, relief camp jobs with pay,
 Hurray, hurray, at twenty cents a day,
 If you do not like the job I'll fetch you right away
 Into a place of security."

Back in nineteen-thirty-five Mackenzie King did say,
 'Twas a shame to let young folks in idleness decay,
 Unemployment he would end without the least delay
 Just by appointing a commission.
 Hurray, hurray, that made the lawyers gay,
 Hurray, hurray, two hundred dollars a day!
 Having all the facts and figures they can file away
 Now the report of the commission.

Bennett and Mackenzie King have fooled us all too long,
 Now the Youth of Canada is singing another song,
 Singing as we march along five hundred-thousand strong,
 As we are marching to victory.
 Hurray, hurray, we are on our way,
 Hurray, hurray, we're going to have our say:
 C.C.F. for evermore! Let fall in step who may,
 As we are marching to victory.

Why We Are Poor

You all know (it's just three or four years)
 Politicians, their eyes full of tears,
 Used to tell us, and were deadly sure,
 About the reasons why we were so poor:
 Too much wheat,
 Too much meat,
 And a surplus of everything we need.
 Let's burn up
 Our crop!
 Coffee and tea
 Best would be
 In the sea. (Could it be?)

Now the same kind old gents come around
 And with tears in their eyes they expound
 Th' only reason why we are so poor,
 And again they are absolutely sure:

Not enough
 Of the stuff,
 That we eat and drink and chew and snuff,
 Shortage here, Shortage there!
 Lack of rain,
 That is plain,
 Means less grain. (They explain.)
 Whether one or the other is true,
 For us people things look very blue,
 Whether shortage or surplus, I'm sure,
 They grow rich and the people stay poor.
 We have toiled,
 It would seem,
 And the fifty bigshots got the cream,
 Let them sow,
 Mow and hoe!
 We refuse
 To produce
 For their use. (That's good news.)

The Righteous Man's Morning Song

Lord, I thank Thee that Thou madst me different
 From these bastardly relief-recipients,
 Who eat and drink
 and never think
 Who's going to pay the shot,
 Low-down lot!
 Glory, glory, glory, glory haleluya,
 Glory, glory, glory, glory, Haleluya,
 Who eat and drink
 And never think
 Who's going to pay the shot,
 Low-down lot!
 That I pay more taxes than the lot of them
 No, it doesn't seem a bit to worry them.
 On top of this
 Four families
 I'm keeping off relief,
 Out of grief.
 Glory etc.
 No, it can not go this way much longer,
 For my indignation's growing stronger.
 With pick and spade

For their daily bread
 I make the bastards sweat,
 You can just bet!
 Glory etc.

Nazi Weihnachtslied*

Von Himmel hoch da komm'ich her,
 Ich bring'euch Bomben gross und schwer,
 Der guten Bomben bring'ich viel,
 Davon ich singen und sagen will.
 Heil Hitler.

Ich weiss wohl eine schoene Stadt,
 Die viele Haeuser und Kirchen hat,
 Die Maenner sind im Felde fort,
 Doch Weiber und Kinder sind am Ort.
 Heil Hitler.

Sie sperren Augen auf und Maul,
 Ich schmeiss'eine Bomb'herab nicht faul,
 Sie rennen in die Kirchen nein,
 Meine Bomben schlagen wie Blitze ein.
 Heil Hitler.

Bald brennt es heil und lichterloh,
 Sie werden ihres Senders nit froh.
 Von Rauch und Flammen halb erstickt
 Ins Freie draengen s'wie verrueckt.
 Heil Hitler.

Hei, du mein gut Maschingewehr
 Speil ihnen auf die Weinhachtsmaer,
 Die deutsche Maer vom wilden Heer,
 von Krieg und Kampf, von Schwert und Speer.
 Heil Hitler.

Die Kugeln hauen wacker ein,
 Sie machen nieder gross und klein,
 Sie machen nieder jung und alt,
 Da ist kein Ansehn der Gestalt.
 Heil Hitler.

Wir danken dir, Herr Hitler wert,
 Dass du geschmiedet uns ein Schwert,
 Das noch in deiner Hand, o Held,
 Wird machen uns zu Herrn der Welt.
 Heil Hitler.

* A rough translation of the Nazi Weihnachtslied might appear as follows:

Nazi Christmas Carol

I come to you from heaven above
 Bearing large and heavy bombs.
 I bring many such bombs
 about which I wish to sing
 Hail Hitler.

I know a beautiful city
 which has many homes and churches.
 The men are all away at the front,
 but the women and children remain.
 Hail Hitler.

With enthusiasm I rain bombs down upon them
 They gape, they stare.
 They run to the churches.
 My bombs strike like lightning.
 Hail Hitler.

Soon the town is all ablaze.
 The people are not pleased with their benefactor.
 Half dead from the smoke and flames,
 they flee like madmen.
 Hail Hitler.

Whoppy, you my good machine gun.
 Keep playing the Christmas carol,
 the German carol of armies gone wild,
 of war and battle, of sword and gun.
 Hail Hitler.

Gallantly, the bullets rip and tear.
 They cut down both large and small.
 They cut down both young and old.
 There is no respect for individuals.
 Hail Hitler.

We thank you, worthy Herr Hitler,
 for giving us a sword which
 in your hands, oh master, even
 now will make us rulers of the world.
 Hail Hitler.

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