

Prisoners Can Sing: The Origins of the *Ausbund*, 1535

Background: This is the story of the origin of *Ausbund*, the hymnbook first published in 1564 and the oldest Anabaptist hymnal and the oldest Christian song book in continuous use. The core of the *Ausbund* is based on 51 songs written by Anabaptists from Passau. The hymns were composed in the dungeon of Passau Castle where the Anabaptists were imprisoned between 1535 and 1540, many of whom were martyred. Terms in the story include:

Definitions:

- Münster:** Name of a German city which a group of Anabaptists had ruled for a year in 1534-1535 and which became an all-embracing byword for fanaticism and disorder.
- Turks** Islamic forces (the Ottoman Turks) from the east who in the 1520s and 1530s threatened to invade central Europe with invasion. In 1529 and 1532 they mounted major assaults on Vienna, a major Danube River city 50 miles downstream from Passau. European Christians were understandably terrified of possible Turkish Muslim invasions.
- Recant:** To say one no longer holds a belief considered to be heretical.

Requirements: Four parts—male or female.

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Narrator 1: The story begins. Today, in 1535, noise and confusion swirl around the courtyards of the Passau city prison. Border police have just hauled in 50 suspects, captured at the riverside. Passau dominates commercial river traffic at the confluence of three rivers forming boundaries between South Germany, Austria and Moravia. Fortress Passau, overlooking the great Danube River, is the scene of dismay and panic among the captured travelers. These 50 prisoners have been intercepted on their way home, up the Danube, to South Germany. Who are they? What is their story?

Narrator 2: A few years earlier, a number of Anabaptists had left their homes in South Germany and gone down river to Moravia where they settled in farm-colonies—families living in extended communities of 200 to 300. They lived peaceably for a few years, but in 1535 the imperial authorities began forcing them to leave their houses and lands. Now on their way back to their places of origin in South Germany, the authorities in Passau stopped, arrested, imprisoned and sternly interrogated them.

Interrogator: What is your contact with the events at Münster?

Prisoner: (*Indignantly*) None whatsoever! Genuine Christians would rather suffer than ever use brute force.

Interrogator: So you say! What about the Turks? Do you support the Turks? Have any of your number ever joined the Turks?

Prisoner: Absolutely not. Your question shows that you totally misunderstand our intentions. We have simply been living in farm-colonies in Moravia as pious Christians.

Narrator 1: Suspicious, unsure what to do with these people, the guards threw them into the prison in the Passau castle. The authorities brought them to trial but did not sentence any of them to death. Yet the authorities imprisoned the Anabaptists for many years, sometimes in dungeons. Some they released. Although a few recanted, most eventually died in prison.

Narrator 2: The Passau prisoners passed their days in keeping each other's spirits up. They quoted the Scriptures they knew by heart, they prayed, and they sang. Several of them composed new hymns and songs. It was much safer to sing out loud in prison than anywhere else where people who were heard singing might be arrested. During the first five years, from 1535-1540, this group of prisoners produced a collection of 51 hymns. These hymns formed the nucleus of the hymnbook which came to be called *Ausbund* meaning "selection."

Narrator 1: The *Ausbund* hymns soon became known outside the prison and were circulated widely in handwritten copies. The first of many published editions appeared in 1564. The hymns served many Anabaptists in worship among small groups or clusters who met in secret—in homes, barns, caves, under bridges or in forests. They also prepared Anabaptists for persecution and interrogation by the authorities.

Narrator 2: Twenty years after the appearance of this initial cluster of hymns and songs, an enlarged collection was published in 1575, including 80 additional hymns drawn from a wider geographical area—Holland, North Germany and Bohemia. By this time the *Ausbund* as we know it today was virtually complete. *Ausbund*, the hymnal of the Amish, is the oldest Christian hymnal in continuous use from the 16th century to the present day.

Narrator 1: Some of the *Ausbund* hymns, though apparently none of those written in Passau, have been translated into English and used in current Mennonite hymnbooks. See *Hymnal Worship Book* 32, 33, 407, 438 and 535. Let's look at 535, "Who now would follow Christ," and 32, "Our Father God, thy name we praise." These reveal the characteristic spirituality of early Anabaptists. As you hear them, note the biblical frame of thought. Consider these questions:

- What are the attitudes toward suffering of individuals and communities?
- What emotions do they express—explicitly or as undertones?
- What attitudes do they express toward enemies?
- What or whom do they cling to for security?

Narrator 2: Look at the small print lines under each hymn. Notice that although hymn 535 was translated by an American Mennonite, hymn 32 was translated by an English Baptist leader. This hymn appears in some Baptist hymnals. This reminds us that the 16th-century Anabaptists are a source of inspiration for Christians in many traditions today in many parts of the world.

Sources: *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, I, s.v. "Ausbund," (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1955), 191-192.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ausbund>.

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