

Welchen Jubel Welche Freude

A Bessarabian Christmas Carol

By Carolyn Schott

In the December 2001 issue of the Bessarabia Newsletter, I published an article about an old German Christmas carol, “Welchen Jubel Welche Freude,” which a cousin in Germany had asked me about. It had been very popular in Bessarabia—he wanted to know if I’d ever learned this carol. I had to admit I’d never even heard of it.

After some research, we discovered that the tune of this Christmas carol was the same as the tune for “Shall We Gather at the River?” written by an American, Robert Lowry, in 1864. I asked the question “Does anyone know how this became a Bessarabian Christmas carol?” Fortunately, reader Herbert Klukas did!

The German carol was written by Ernst Gebhardt, born 1832 and died 1899 in Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart, Germany. As a young man, Gebhardt was well traveled, spending four years in Chile before returning to Germany where he was very popular in his local community and known to be a good singer, pianist, and dancer.

He met Gustav Hausser, who had formed a prayer and study group focused on the teachings of John Wesley. In 1857, the first Methodist minister came to Heilbronn, Germany, and founded a church fellowship there. The works and teachings of this group spread to Ludwigsburg and the surrounding areas. New Year’s Eve 1858, Gebhardt experienced a serious illness and key turning point in his life with this Methodist fellowship. On the first of January 1859 he wrote a poem describing his conversion, how he’d been born again and seen the “radiant face of the Savior.”

After studying in Bremen, Gebhardt’s faith led him to become a traveling minister in the Ludwigsburg area. Before or after his sermons, he often sang a song to his congregations.

During a trip to England in 1875, he became acquainted with the songs of the English free churches and began to translate these songs from English to German. In 1876, he published a song book called “Frohe Botschaft” or “The Gospel.”

This book appeared in 63 editions between 1876 and 1912 and sold over a half million copies. It found its way from Germany to isolated German villages in Eastern Europe (including Bessarabia) to the German church communities in America. It was the common songbook of the Methodists, Baptists, and other free churches, as well as the national Lutheran church in Germany.

The song “Welchen Jubel, Welche Freude” appeared for the first time in this book. It was not a translation of the English version of the song, but rather an original Christmas poem written by Gebhardt and was the only Christmas song included in the “Frohe Botschaft.” It was one of the most commonly sung Christmas carols, along with “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” and “O, Du Fröhliche, O Du Selige Weihnachtszeit.”

Welchen Jubel Welche Freude	Welchen Jubel—Translation
<p>Welchen Jubel welche Freude Bringt die schöne Weihnachtszeit Fröhlich sieht man alle Leute In der ganzen Christenheit.</p>	<p>What rejoicing, what joy, The beautiful Christmastime brings. One sees all people merry In the whole Christendom.</p>
<p>Ehr sei Gott, so laßt erschallen Und Fried auf Erd', dem Mensch Wohlgefallen Euch ist ja der Heiland geboren Der Herr in der Davidsstadt!</p>	<p>Glory to God, let it resound, And peace on earth, goodwill to all. To you the Savior is born The Lord in David's city.</p>
<p>Wieder strahlt im Glanz der Kerzen funkelnd uns der Weihnachtsbaum, Und es fassen unsere Herzen All die Herrlichkeiten kaum.</p>	<p>Again in the glow of the candles The Christmas tree is sparkling. And our hearts hardly can Grasp all the splendor.</p>
<p>Doch nur kurz sind solche Freuden, Bald verlöscht der Kerzen Licht; Jesus kann allein bereiten Freuden, die vergehen nicht.</p>	<p>Yet such joys are short-lived, Soon the candle lights go out; Jesus alone can give us joy, Which never ends.</p>