The Pursuit of Solyma: Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling's Letters as Part of His Spiritual Autobiography

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Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling's novel *Heimweh* (published in 1794-96) stirred up an enthusiastic response in Germany and beyond. His idea of Solyma, the far-away land of peace, the refuge of all true Christians at the end of time, was a major theme of Jung-Stilling's thinking in the latter period of his life. The importance of Solyma is far greater than one might normally expect of a literary image. It was instrumental in launching large scale historical developments such as the migrations and colonization efforts of German radical chiliasts to Russia from 1814 till as late as the 1880s. In addition, through Russian translation of his works Jung-Stilling's idea of Solyma incited chiliastic enthusiasm and subsequent internal migration of Russian non-Orthodox believers to the Caucasus in pursuit of the millennial kingdom in 1830s.[1]

In spite of the fact that the theme of Solyma was so central to Jung-Stilling's *Weltanschauung* in his later years, it has been largely neglected by the scholarship on the German writer and theologian. Hans W. Panthel, in his article on Jung-Stilling's apocalypticism and Tsar Alexander I of Russia, and Andrei Zorin in a recent article on a similar topic, examined links between Jung-Stilling's eschatology and such issues as the victory over Napoleon and the Holy Alliance between Christian monarchs of Austria, Russia, and Prussia.[2] However, they failed to fit the idea of Solyma into the picture. Any talk of Jung-Stilling's chiliasm will be incomplete unless the notion of Solyma is incorporated into the discussion. Tatjana Högy devoted a section to the notion of Solyma in her study on

Jung-Stilling and Russia;[3] however, she did not look beyond the text of *Heimweh*. According to Högy, Jung-Stilling always insisted on a purely spiritual meaning of his *Heimweh*, which at the same time contradicted his "prophetic feeling."[4]

I will show that Jung-Stilling's correspondence reveals the dynamic development of Solyma in Jung-Stilling's thought. A closer analysis of Jung-Stilling's letters reveals that there were at least three distinctive phases in the author's approach to Solyma. Jung-Stilling, who at first regarded Solyma as a fiction, became excited to see his literary fantasies fulfilled in reality, and supported those who tried to find Solyma in the south of Russia. Gradually he took a more balanced approach to mass migrations, precise calculations of the year of Christ's return and excessive religious enthusiasm in general. The search for a balance between trusting God and his prophecies on the one hand, and the necessity of avoiding excessive religious emotionalism and spontaneous action one the other hand was a major practical concern of Jung-Stilling towards the end of his life. Thus, Solyma serves for the late Jung-Stilling as an integral eschatological reference point. Solyma must become a reality prior to the beginning of millennium, but nobody can force it to become a reality, so Christians are reminded to watch and pray.

Jung-Stilling earned a wide popularity and recognition through a series of autobiographical books. Given the lack of any autobiographical works for the last thirteen years of Jung-Stilling's life, his correspondence serves as a crucial source of data for the understanding author's spiritual change and development in later life. I will be using a recently published edition of Jung-Stilling's selected German letters, edited by Gerhard Schwinge. Jung-Stilling authored somewhere between 20,000 to 25,000 letters in his lifetime, of which only about 1,200 pieces of correspondence survived. The edition I have used includes 372 letters. The editor's principle of selection of specific letters was based upon fair, even and representative coverage of Jung-Stilling's different life phases, periods of work on specific books, theological views, relationships to a wide circles of people and groups of people.[5] This paper will focus particularly on letters from 1806, when the idea of the last refuge in the east became a frequent topic in Jung-Stilling's correspondence, till the end of his life in 1817. The letters that have been used reflect the general importance of the idea of Solyma for Jung-Stilling during the later period of his life.

Land of Solyma as Ongoing Theme in Jung-Stilling's Later Period

Soon after its publication many of Jung-Stilling's readers began to perceive the insights expressed in his novel *Heimweh* as prophetic. In a letter to Markgraf Karl Friedrich von Baden as of December, 1796 Jung-Stilling acknowledged that "my *Heimweh* has become a great sensation, and wherever German is spoken, the book is widely read; it is also being translated into other languages."[6] The book was perceived as symbolic by its readers already at that time, and Jung-Stilling had to write a "*Schlüssel zum Heimweh*," a key to the book, where he explained "the use of the whole allegory of the conversion and salvation of a Christian."[7] One of the things he specifically wanted to point to through his allegories, was the imminence of "the last great battle between Light and Darkness."[8] At that time, neither the author nor his readers anticipated any material and tangible fulfillment of the insights expressed in the novel, and its description of Christian von Ostenheim's pursuit of the land Solyma somewhere in the symbolical east.

The French Revolution with its decidedly anti-Christian pathos, the rise of Napoleon, and spread of secularism created for Jung-Stilling an apocalyptic environment and convinced him that the end time was near and that true Christians would soon have to flee the power of Antichrist. In the eyes of Jung-Stilling, Napoleon was an apocalyptic figure who was preparing the way for the biblical "man of sin" (Thessalonians 2:3).[9] Napoleonic France, therefore, was the "military camp of the kingdom of darkness."[10] Jung-Stilling closely watched Napoleon's military efforts and interpreted them from his apocalyptic point of view. He wrote as early as 1799 about Napoleon's invasion of then Turkish Palestine: "this has something in common with the ascension of the beast from the bottomless pit, or with the man of sin, actual Antichrist."[11] This is the context for his idea of Solyma the place of refuge. The author located it far away from Europe, for the novel was written at the time when Napoleon was still expanding his power in Europe and beyond. Jung-Stilling's emphasis on the idea of a place of refuge in a far away land was a natural reaction to the spread of revolutionary ideas and ungodly influence. The literary image of the Christian land of peace was a mirror reflection of the harsh reality the author had to live.

Christian von Ostenheim, the protagonist of Stilling's *Heimweh* (1794-96), traveled to the East in search of the land of last refuge of true Christians before the coming tribulation. Jung-Stilling called that land

Solyma, a name apparently derived from "Jerusalem" and the Jewish word "shalom," that is, peace. As Jung-Stilling continuously noted, Solyma for the author at that time was merely fictitious. It was a symbolic reflection in a literary form of his belief in the place of the refuge that God would prepare for his faithful towards the end of times.

In his letter to Johann Jakob Hess of Zurich as of December, 1809 Jung-Stilling acknowledged that at the time when he was working on *Heimweh* in 1793 and 1794, he felt quite excited, calling it "the most pleasant time in my life."[12] He continued: "this all was a mere fiction, my heart did not think of any [literal] fulfillment, but I always suspected that the Lord would in due time bring his faithful to some safe place."[13] However, many of Jung-Stilling's readers desired more precision. Soon after the book was published "a gentleman of a high rank" wrote to the author asking him how he knew of a "gathering of some people on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and on Egyptian pyramids" mentioned in the *Heimweh*.[14] Jung-Stilling answered that he did not know anything about them, and that they were only fictitious events. In a following letter the same correspondent assured Jung-Stilling that God must have revealed it to the author, because what he wrote was actually coming to pass. Soon after a man whose father was supposedly an emir from Syria, visited Jung-Stilling and told him that his father was a member of the society that gathered on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.[15] These encounters prepared him to regard as prophetic what was initially written as a fiction, and made him more receptive to re-interpretations of his novel.

The first mention of Solyma appears in Jung-Stilling's letter to Markgraf Karl Friedrich von Baden as of May 1801 and is simply limited to his signature. He signs off as a "humble fellow traveler to Solyma," meaning a spiritual journey.[16] The next mention of Solyma occurs in Jung-Stilling's letters almost five years later, in February 1806, in a letter to the same correspondent. There Jung-Stilling was more specific, pointing to the Volga River and Crimea in Russia as the place of refuge (*Bergungsplatz*) "which is being prepared for the true worshippers of the Lord, where they will be able to flee in ten to twenty years."[17] Russia was an important destination of religious immigration from Germany from as early as 1763 when members of the Pietistic Moravian Brethren were allocated 6,500 hectares of land in the Lower Volga area and guaranteed complete religious freedom and administrative autonomy in their settlement. The famous colony and town of Sarepta was founded by those settlers, and by 1810 it had over 500 inhabitants. Jung-Stilling was aware of the Moravian

colonization and missionary efforts on the Volga as well as of the benevolent policies of Alexander I and his administration towards religious settlers.

Therefore, by 1806 Jung-Stilling had already linked the idea of Solyma initially born as an allegory, to a specific geographical location. This marks the second, "enthusiastic" phase of the development of Jung-Stilling's idea of Solyma. He now expected a mass migration to that tangible and material Solyma to begin around 1816 (as it in fact did!). The particularly notable fact about locating Solyma in Russia by 1806 is that from about 1804 the Russian theme powerfully enters Jung-Stilling's thinking. Already in August 1804 he wrote in a letter to a secretary of a Christian Society (*Christentumsgesellschaft*) Christian Gottlieb Blumhardt that "there is a powerful awakening in Saint-Petersburg, and two very noble Russian gentlemen are translating my religious writings into the local language."[18] Somewhat earlier, in May of the same year, Jung-Stilling mentioned that he was aware of the translation of his work into Russian. In the same letter the German thinker praised and invoked God's blessing on Tsar Alexander, who he heard was an excellent ruler.[19]

Letters written in 1809-1810 demonstrate how certain poetical and literary insights of Jung-Stilling evolved into a "fulfilled" prophecy. This sense of fulfillment, of an image and a symbol becoming reality in the perception of both the author and his readership, stirred up tremendous enthusiasm and had a lasting historical effect. Around 1809 Jung-Stilling accidentally learned of a colonization and missionary effort of a Christian community from Edinburgh in Scotland that established an intentional settlement on the Don River, in the southern part of European Russia. His letter to Johann Friedrich von Meyer of Frankfurt am Main testifies to the writer's amazement when he realized that his speculations about Solyma had been literally fulfilled. "The Missionary Society of Edinburgh in Scotland has sent to Petersburg seven missionaries, who did not know a word of my *Heimweh*, to obtain permission to establish there, in the Caucasus, a mission."[20] Initially preaching among indigenous non-Christian (mostly Muslim) ethnicities was the declared goal of Scottish missionaries. It should be noted that converting Orthodox people into any other faith was at that time a criminal offence. I do not know for sure to which church the Scottish group belonged, but one can assume that the group came to Russia under the same terms as the Moravian Brethren, and might have been associated with them. Jung-Stilling learned about the Scottish group through his contacts with Herrnhut who shared the first

letter from the Scots with the writer.[21] Jung-Stilling entered into a correspondence with the Scots (although it is not clear who initiated the letter exchange). It turned out that the Scots were happy in a new land, and asked their famous German correspondent to send other Christians over there.[22] They reported the climate in the new land was mild, the soil very fruitful, and that their community enjoyed autonomy and privileges from the Russian authorities.

Jung-Stilling interpreted the news in an apocalyptic manner, which was characteristic of his thinking in last decades of his life. He wrote, that "the place is being prepared for the wife clothed in the sun in Russian Asia."[23] Elsewhere in his letters Jung-Stilling said the land given to the Scottish missionaries was "a paradise."[24] Throughout his correspondence, Jung-Stilling invariably called the prospective land of refuge "Asia" although the North Caucasus (*Cirkessien*)[25] and Don River basin are still the southernmost part of European Russia, near the Caucasian mountain range which is the geographical line between Europe and Asia. According to the novel *Heimweh*, the literary Solyma was initially located by the author "in the East, near Samarkand," in former Russian Central Asia, presently Uzbekistan.[26] It is possible to assume that at the time of writing the novel, Jung-Stilling chose such an exotic location quite arbitrarily, due to its exoticism and the lack of factual knowledge about Samarkand among German readership.[27] However, the writer later corrected his idea of Solyma's physical location under the influence of circumstances, and moved it westwards to what is now southern Russia, because those areas were open for colonization and resettlement by the Russian imperial administration.

The feeling of a sincere and deep astonishment with the literal fulfilment of his fantasy about Solyma is re-iterated time and again in Jung-Stilling's letters written in 1809 and 1810, particularly to the Christian Society in Basel, Switzerland.[28] At the same time, members of the Society and enthusiastic believers in Switzerland and southern Germany, who included masses of impoverished by Napoleonic wars peasants and townspeople, grew impatient about prospects of finding earthly refuge in the East. Theologian Daniel Joahim Köppen (d.1808), parish priest in Zettemin, whom Jung-Stilling held in high esteem, had declared that both Johann Albrecht Bengel and Jung-Stilling in his *Siegsgeschichte der christlichen Religion* were erring. Köppen set the new date of the beginning of apocalyptic events for 1816, and not for 1836 as thought Bengel.[29] However, Jung-Stilling chose to take a more balanced

approach towards chronological calculations. He considered it necessary to constrain the excessive enthusiasm of those radical believers that were ready to abandon their homes and immediately leave for desired Solyma.

Hans Panthel analyzed the pieces of Jung-Stilling's correspondence where the writer explicitly pointed to a specific timeframe for the anticipated apocalyptic events.[30] In the earliest of those letters, sent to Johann Georg Siebel, then Bürgermeister of Freudenberg in Nassau-Siegen, in April 1807, Jung-Stilling pointed to 1818 as a possible date of the start of millennium.[31] However, already in 1810, having acknowledged his belief in the imminent beginning of apocalyptic events, Jung-Stilling underlined that he had always believed that 1836 was only an "exegetical hypothesis, although highly probable."[32] He continued that the same was his opinion of 1816 and another suggested date, 1819. This points to the concluding stage of Jung-Stilling's understanding of Solyma, characterized by a balanced and cautious approach. He emphatically put an end to chronological speculations saying: "enough, the Lord will come *unexpected*."[33] He touched upon the closely related topic of Solyma in the same letter, saying that it would have been unreasonable to talk openly right away about the start of the millennial kingdom of the Lord (*Zukunft des Herrn*) in 1816 or actual Solyma already existing in the Caucasus. He wrote: "however, the place is being prepared in the Caucasus, and those, whose situation is too difficult, can flee there."[34]

Thus, following the sensational popularity of the novel in Germany and beyond, Jung-Stilling faced the necessity to constrain the limitless enthusiasm of many, who were ready to set off immediately in pursuit of promised Solyma. Predictions of Bengel, coupled with the enthusiasm stirred up by Jung-Stilling's works and overall difficult material situation, prevailing in Germany following the Napoleonic wars, resulted in a massive flow of migration known as Swabian emigration to Russia (*Schwäbische Auswanderung nach Russland*).[35] Jung-Stilling more than once warned in his letters of the danger of excessive enthusiasm or emotionalism (*Schwärmerey*), pointing to enthusiasts' lack of solidity and tendency towards wishful thinking.[36] He warned already in April 1810: "No! My dear! The move to Solyma is not really that near, many things are yet to pass."[37] Nevertheless, the writer was not able to halt the movement that already gathered momentum, nor he was directly responsible for it. With some bitterness he wrote to his friends, pastor Gabriel Rudolf Dulliker and his wife Rosalie: "There will be yet enough of fanaticism (*Schwärmerey*); this cannot be otherwise in times like ours, this

moves us to watch and pray."[38] Nevertheless, the mass migration of Swabian Separatists to Solyma in southern Russia started around 1814 and continued well beyond Jung-Stilling's death.

Conclusion

Jung-Stilling's correspondence is an autobiographical source of utmost importance for the period when the writer authored no further autobiographical works. The Karlsruhe period of Jung-Stilling's life (1804-1817) was characterized by the author's increasing apocalypticism and emphasis on millenarian expectations as well as by the ongoing presence of the Russian theme in his thinking. The period coincides with the reign of Alexander I of Russia, a monarch whose personal quest of truth was not any less important for him as the most burning issues of the European politics. For Jung-Stilling Alexander I, the defeater of Napoleon, promoter of religious tolerance and sponsor of religiously motivated immigration into Russia, was a providential figure. In particular, the theme of the land of refuge being prepared for true Christians in southern Russia became a continuing topic in his late correspondence.

Jung-Stilling's opinion (based on Johann Albrecht Bengel's predictions) that true Christians will need to look for a place of refuge in the east towards the end of times, allegorically expressed in his novel *Heimweh*, contributed to a rise of eschatological expectations and mass migration of pietistic enthusiasts from Germany (*Schwärmer*) and elsewhere to the southern part of Russia. Successful colonization attempts undertaken by various religious groups led to the increasing popularity and authority of Jung-Stilling as a prophetic figure.

The allegory of Solyma, a far-away eastern land of peace, and a refuge for true Christians, became associated with southern provinces of Russia, particularly the Caucasus, open at that time for foreign settlement. Successful examples of Moravian, Mennonite and other religiously-motivated colonization in the south of Russia strengthened the prophetical enthusiasm of Jung-Stilling and his readers. The dynamics of this process are evident in Jung-Stilling's correspondence of the latter period of his life.

Jung-Stilling's correspondence reveals that the writer was not nearly as radical as the people who accepted his literary work as a guide to action. Jung-Stilling called for a more balanced and rations approach. Apparently, the writer realized his partial responsibility for the emerging *Auswande*

rung movement, and he urged enthusiasts not to make any hasty and spontaneous decisions. Yet, Jung-Stilling remained faithful to his belief in the future Solyma in Russia till the end of his life. In July 1814, at an audience with Alexander I in Brussels, the German thinker discussed with the Emperor "a place of refuge in his state, if the time of trial comes,"[39] and reminded the monarch of the Scottish mission in the Caucasus. Keeping a balance between the role of a prophet and that of a Christian author of fiction was a major preoccupation of Jung-Stilling in the latter period of his life.

Endnotes

1. For recent scholarship on the Molokan and Doukhobor migration see Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 49-83.
2. H.W. Panthel, "Jung-Stillings Weltendzeit und Zar Alexander I von Rußland," *Germano-Slavica* I, no. 2 (Fall 1973): 61-66; and Andrei Zorin, "Star of the East": The Holy Alliance and European Mysticism," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 313-342.
3. Tatjana Högy, *Jung-Stilling und Russland: Untersuchungen über Jung-Stillings Verhältnis zu Russland und zum "Osten" in der Regierungszeit Kaiser Alexanders I.* (Siegen: Im Selbstverlag der J.G. Herder-Bibliothek Siegerland e.V., 1984).
4. Högy, *Jung-Stilling und Russland,* 53.
5. Gerhard Schwinge, "Introduction to Johann-Heinrich Jung-Stilling," in *Briefe*, ausgewählt und herausgegeben von Gerhard Schwinge (Giessen-Basel: Brunnen, 2002), 11.
6. *Briefe*, 193.
7. *Briefe*, 193.
8. *Briefe*, 193.
9. *Briefe*, 230.
10. *Briefe*, 230.
11. *Briefe*, 234.
12. *Briefe*, 437.

13. *Briefe*, 440.
14. *Briefe*, 437.
15. *Briefe*, 437.
16. *Briefe*, 278.
17. *Briefe*, 371.
18. *Briefe*, 348.
19. *Briefe*, 342.
20. *Briefe*, 431.
21. *Briefe*, 430.
22. *Briefe*, 432.
23. *Briefe*, 441.
24. *Briefe*, 461.
25. *Briefe*, 449.
26. Quoted in Högy, *Jung-Stilling und Russland*, 46.
27. It is worth mentioning that a group of Russian Mennonites from Lower Volga colonies, stirred up by millenarian expectations based upon Jung-Stilling's *Heimweh*, left for Central Asia as late as 1880 led by Klaas Epp, Jr. and founded a colony near Samarkand (see Franz Bartsch, *Our Trek to Central Asia* [Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1993]).
28. See, for instance, *Briefe*, 433, 440.
29. *Briefe*, 420, 429, 440.
30. Panthel, 61-65.
31. Panthel, 62.
32. *Briefe*, 452.
33. *Briefe*, 452.
34. *Briefe*, 452.
35. For more detail see Andreas Gestrich, "German Religious Emigration to Russia in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," in *In Search of Peace and Prosperity: New German Settlements in Eighteenth-Century*

Europe and America, eds., Hartmut Lehmann, Hermann Wellenreuther, Renate Wilson (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 77-98.

36. *Briefe*, 303.

37. *Briefe*, 453.

38. *Briefe*, 453-454.

39. *Briefe*, 550.