

# From ‘Schönster Herr Jesu’ to ‘Eeuwen geleden’

## The strange voyage of a Silesian melody through Denmark and Sweden to the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

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In the Anglo-Saxon world, the *Crusaders’ Hymn* is a favourite song. The melody was first recorded in the German county of Silesia in the 19th century. Translations into English by Joseph August Seiss (*Beautiful Savior! King of Creation!*) and Lilian Stevenson (*Fairest Lord Jesus, Lord of all creation*) made the song well known throughout English-speaking countries. In the Netherlands the song developed a life of its own. In this Christmas article the curious voyage of the Silesian melody from Germany to the Netherlands, by way of Denmark and Sweden, is carefully reconstructed. In the process, some strange misunderstandings occurred which, apart from the beauty of the melody, may have contributed to the song’s popularity in Scandinavia and the Netherlands.

### 1. Germany and Denmark: *Schönster Herr Jesu and Dejlig er jorden*

In the summer of the year 1850 we find ourselves on the island of Sjælland, in the little town of Sorø, “one of the six pearls of Denmark”, in the words of Hans Christian Andersen in his famous fairy tale *A String of Pearls*. Vicar Fenge and his daughter Johanne have come all the way from Lynge to visit their friend, the poet Bernhard Ingemann (1789-1862). Fenge has brought a religious magazine from Germany, which contains an interesting song. Together, father and daughter start to sing:

**287.**  
**Jesus über Alles.**

Sehr mäßig. Aus der Grafschaft Olitz.



Schönster Herr Je - su, Herrscher al - ler Er - den, Got - tes  
und Ma - ri - ä Sohn! Dich will ich lie - ben, dich will ich  
eh - ren, mei - ner See - len Freud' und Kron.

1. Schönster Herr Jesu, Herrscher aller Erden,  
Gottes und Mariä Sohn!  
Dich will ich lieben, dich will ich ehren,  
Meiner Seelen Freud' und Kron'!
2. Schön sind die Wälder, noch schöner sind die Felder  
In der schönen Frühlingszeit!  
Jesus ist schöner, Jesus ist reiner,  
Der unser trauriges Herz erfreut!
3. Schön leucht der Monden, noch schöner leucht die Sonne  
Als die Sternlein allzumal!  
Jesus leucht schöner, Jesus leucht reiner,  
Als die Engel im Himmelsaal!
4. All' die Schönheit Himmels und der Erden  
Ist nur gegen ihn als ein Schein!  
Keiner auf Erden und lieber kann werden,  
Als der schönste Jesus mein!
5. Jesus ist wahrhaftig hoch von uns geliebet,  
Jesus ist wahrhaftig hoch gebenedeit!  
Jesus, wir bitten dich, sei uns gnädig  
Bis an unsre letzte Zeit!

Aus der Grafschaft Olitz.

Eight years earlier, in 1842, *Schönster Herr Jesu* had been published for the first time by Heinrich August Hoffmann von Fallersleben and Ernst Richter, who had noticed it being sung by the people in the Silesian county of Glatz. The title they gave the song, *Jesus über alles*, probably comes from Hoffman himself. A year before, on the isle of Heligoland, he had written the *Lied der Deutschen*, which was to become the German anthem, with the rather infamous line “Deutschland über alles”.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays the Silesian song is not known as *Jesus über alles*, its title having become identical with the first line: *Schönster Herr Jesu*.

Because of this publication the Silesian song of praise became well known in other parts of Germany as well. The general feeling was that Hoffman and Richter had discovered a long forgotten melody of a medieval procession- or pilgrims’ song, a tune the crusaders used to sing on their way to the Holy Land. Accordingly, in the magazine the Fenges brought, the song was announced as an ‘old Crusaders’ Hymn’.

After rendering the German song, the enthusiastic Fenge asks Ingemann to write Danish lyrics to the beautiful melody: “Skriv du nu nogle gode danske ord til denne vidunderlige melodi”. A few weeks later, on 8 September 1850, Ingemann publishes the following song in *Dansk Kirketidende*, bearing the title ‘Pilgrimssang’<sup>3</sup>:

Dejlig er jorden,  
prægtig er Guds himmel,  
skøn er sjælenes pilgrimsgang!  
Gennem de fagre  
riger på jorden  
gå vi til paradys med sang!

Tider skal komme,  
tider skal henrulle,  
slægt skal følge slægters gang.  
Aldrig forstummer  
tonen fra himlen  
i sjælens glade pilgrimssang.

Englene sang den  
først for markens hyrder,  
skønt fra sjæl til sjæl det lød:  
Fred over jorden!  
Menneske, fryd dig,  
os er en evig frelser fød!

The German song of praise has been radically adapted and is hardly recognisable. Ingemann, who believed that the song had originally been sung by pilgrims, describes life on earth as a happy voyage towards Paradise. In the final stanza a desire for peace is expressed, in a Christmas-like scenery with angels and shepherds.

This wish for peace may have been inspired by the First Schleswig War (1848-1851). Ingemann had observed singing soldiers marching through Sorø, on their way to the battle of Idstedt (July 24-25 1850), and he had been quite upset by the war reports. Shortly before the battle he wrote in a letter to his wife: “Gud give nu, det store fjendskab må have udblødt sig og en retfærdig fred må være tilkæmpet.” (God may give that the great hostility be softened and a just peace be fought for)

But above all, the popular Danish poet knew about the magical attraction of Christmas. He was the author of several classic Danish Christmas songs, for example *Julen har bragt velsignet bud* and *I sne står urt og busk i skjul*. From the same year as *Dejlig er*

*jorden* dates Ingemann's Danish adaptation of *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht: Glade jul, dejlige jul*, which in its turn was translated into Nynorsk und Bokmål.<sup>4</sup>

As a translator and adaptor of songs Ingemann was a mediator between German and Scandinavian culture. Just like *Glade jul, dejlige jul*, his song *Dejlig er jorden*, adapted from the German into Danish, was to become a very famous song in the Northern countries, most of all Sweden.

## 2. Sweden: *Härlig är jorden*

On 15 November 1884, in the *Folkhögskolebladet*, a Swedish translation of *Dejlig er jorden* by the author Cecilia Bååth-Holmberg (1857–1920) was published. The title of the song: *Härlig är jorden*<sup>5</sup>:

Härlig är jorden,  
Härlig är Guds himmel,  
Skön är själarnas pilgrimgång.  
Genom de fagra  
Riken på jorden  
Gå vi till paradiset med sång.

Tidevarv komma,  
Tidevarv försvinna,  
Slakten följa slaktens gång.  
Aldrig förstummas  
Tonen från himlen  
I själens glada pilgrimssång.

Änglar den sjöngo  
Först för markens herdar.  
Skönt från själ till själ det ljöd:  
Människa, gläd dig,  
Frälsarn är kommen,  
Frid över jorden Herren bjöd.

The Swedish translation stays close to the Danish version, the only change being that the final three lines have been altered. In Sweden the song rapidly acquired a huge popularity, not only as a Christmas song<sup>6</sup>, but - rather surprisingly- as a funeral hymn (in which case the third stanza is occasionally dropped). According to a poll conducted in 1997, *Härlig är jorden* is no less than 'den allra vanligaste psalmen vid begravningstjänster i Svenska kyrkan' (the most popular song for funerals in the Church of Sweden); in a study suitably called *Gå vi till paradiset med sång* (2002) the theologian Anna J. Evertsson explains this particular popularity on the basis of the song's hopeful content and consoling words.

*Härlig är jorden* thus became a well known song in Sweden, and nowadays, in the Swedish language its title is a famous expression. For example, in the successful movie *Så som i himmelen* (2003) the song appears as a *leitmotiv*: the first stanza is sung a few times by the church choir. In this rather melodramatic film, which deals with matters of life and death, the song may be seen as the 'earthly' equivalent of the 'heavenly' title song. Allusions like these show that in Sweden the song has acquired an enormous traditional popularity.

### 3. Holland: Eeuwen geleden

The Netherlands are the third leg of the voyage; here the melody has become specifically famous as the Christmas song *Eeuwen geleden*. The oldest mention of the song is in a girls' book called *Onder het stroodak*, the debut of Catharina van Hille-Gaerthé (1881-1958) in the year 1915, when she was 34 years old. This intimate family novel is about the life of the country doctor Van Arlevoort and his family. The title refers to the thatched roof of the family house.<sup>7</sup> A highlight of the story is Christmas Eve, when the whole family, after visiting the church, is gathered around the table decorated with burning candles. While grandmother plays the organ, the Van Arlevoorts sing the well-known Silesian melody:

MELODE VAN EEN MIDDEN-EUROPEÏSCHEN ZWEDSCHEN HERSTROALM:

Eeu - wen ge - le - den. Kwa - men ge - tre - den  
Her - ders in Beth - le - hem's ar - men stal. Zacht ziet de  
Moeder neer. Op 't kindje klein en teer. 't Hemelsche licht schijnt overal.

I. Eeuwen geleden  
Kwamen getreden  
Herders in Bethlehems armen stal;  
Zacht ziet de Moeder neer  
Op 't kindje klein en teer.  
't Hemelsche licht schijnt overal.

II. Kindje in den heil'gen nacht.  
Dat ons Gods liefde bracht,  
Ook wij staan om uwe kribbe geschaard.  
Lief, heilig kindekijn,  
Nu wij zoo stille zijn.  
Klinkt 't zacht en teeder: „Vrede op aard.”

Eeuwen geleden. From: *Onder het stroodak* (1915)<sup>8</sup>

“They all listened to the old, well known song, that had been sung on earth for so many years and that Grandmother had taught her own children when they were still too small to read the words.” From this sentence the reader gets the impression that *Eeuwen geleden* has been part of the Van Arlevoorts' family repertoire for generations. However, this is only a literary illusion. Actually, the writer of *Onder het stroodak* is the author of the song text as well, as becomes apparent by several indications.

First of all the text of the song is still a bit wooden. In the first stanza the lexical stress of *hemelsch* (on the first syllable) does not correspond with the musical accent (on the second syllable). And the double *t* in *klinkt 't zacht* will certainly have presented a difficulty of articulation. Nowadays the song is sung in a different way. The stressed first syllable of *hemelsch* is sung on the first beat of the measure, and the suffix *-e* is dropped. The

meaningless element 't in *klinkt't zacht*, that only anticipates the grammatical subject *Vreed' op aard*, is melted together with the final -t of *klinkt*. Thus the way the song is performed has become more natural and fluent.<sup>9</sup> These tiny irregularities are signals that the version of the song in *Onder het stroodak* was of recent origin and clearly represents a rather early stage.

Furthermore, the song was printed together with a musical arrangement for piano. If *Eeuwen geleden* had been truly old and well-known to the reader of the year 1915, the publisher could have saved himself this trouble! The music printed with the lyrics is a clear signal that we are dealing with the first publication of a song that was new and hitherto unknown.<sup>10</sup>

The music is stated to represent: *Melodie van een middeleeuwschen Zweedschen Kerstpsalm* (melody of a medieval Swedish Christmas song). This rather enigmatic reference to time and place has never been doubted; on the contrary, until the present day this information has been taken for granted. However, it is an obvious indicator that the Silesian melody had come to Van Hille-Gaerthé via Sweden. The rather unusual expression *kerstpsalm* (instead of: *kerstlied*) is very probably a translation borrowed by the author herself (in the Swedish language *julpsalm* is the common word for what in Dutch is called a *kerstlied* 'Christmas song').

Biographical evidence further supports the assumption that the German melody has come to the Netherlands by way of Sweden. In her own memories of childhood in the city of Zwolle, written in the Fifties for the journal *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant* and posthumously published as *Zwolse mijmeringen, Herinneringen aan de jaren 1881-1914*, Van Hille-Gaerthé emerges as an eager lover of music. Since her childhood she had been involved in the musical life of the city of Zwolle. The reader learns about piano lessons, about the Sunday school, which she frequented as a child and where she was a teacher as an adult, about a girls' choir, about visits and stays with friends and family, where time and time again many songs were sung and played, about concertos, home organs, song books, weekly rehearsals and annual concerts by the mixed choir of St. Cecilia, in which she sang the alto part.

In the summer she loved to undertake journeys throughout Europe, together with her husband, the philologist-archaeologist G.E.W. van Hille (1872-1944). In the *Zwolse mijmeringen* she tells how she visited the city of Copenhagen in 1903, well before her marriage. As a passionate music lover and a trained elementary school teacher, she must have regarded the abundant Scandinavian song culture with eager and almost professional interest. Thus it seems quite probable that she may have heard about the song on a trip to Sweden or from friends who had been there.

This hypothesis becomes even more plausible when we take a closer look at the Swedish song book possibly known by the Dutch author. As the Dutch song was published in 1915, we need not take into account the hymnals of the Swedish Church, in which *Härlig är jorden* appears only after 1920. Rather, as Van Hille-Gaerthé calls the melody *middeleeuwsch* and *Zweedsch*, her source must have been a non-ecclesiastical Swedish song book that was published before 1915 and in which the song is presented as medieval and originally Swedish.

Among the many Swedish song books published at the beginning of the 20th century, there are actually a few titles that fulfil these criteria. Illustration 3 is a version from the *Svensk Söndagsskolsångbok för hem, skolor och barn gudstjänster* (1908). The music shows some astonishing similarities with the Dutch song in *Onder het stroodak*:

## 18. Härlig är jorden

Mkl. 62.

1200-talet.

1. Här - lig är jor - den, Här - lig är Guds him - mel,  
 Skön är sjä - - lens pil - - grims - gång:  
 Ge - nom de fag - - ra Ri - - ken på jor - - den  
 Gå vi till pa - ra - dis med sång.

Härlig är jorden. From: *Svensk Söndagsskolsångbok* (1908)

Surprisingly, the song is called medieval: *1200-talet* (13<sup>th</sup> century). As no mention is made of the origin of the song, one could easily receive the impression from this (or a similar<sup>11</sup>) edition that the original melody dates from the Middle Ages and stems from Sweden.

Autobiographical data, the way the origin of the song is mentioned in the novel and the Swedish song books themselves thus strengthen the assumption that Van Hille-Gaerthé took the music of *Eeuwen geleden* – possibly with some adaptations of her own – from a Swedish song book.

So much for the music. If we now compare the lyrics of the songs, it becomes clear that the Dutch Christmas song is not a complete and accurate translation from the Swedish. On the contrary, the Dutch song emerges as a rather free adaptation of the final stanza. The first two stanzas of *Härlig är jorden*, in which man's pilgrimage towards Paradise is described, are left out completely. Instead, the Christmas theme of the third stanza has been taken up and [–] enlarged in two stanzas. In the first stanza of *Eeuwen geleden* we hear about the shepherds, the first men to receive the news that Jesus was born, who started on their way to the manger. The classical Christmas tale elements of the Mother and the Child are added. In the second stanza 'we' are introduced, who like the shepherds are gathered around the crib. A striking resemblance within the rather free treatment of the original is that both the Swedish and the Dutch songs' final line ends with 'peace on Earth' (cf. Luke 2:14).

As the Dutch Christmas song's focus lies on the shepherds, *Eeuwen geleden* may be regarded as a *herderslied*, a pastoral song. As early as 1852, the brothers Thijm mentioned the pastoral songs as a group in their own right within the broad Dutch Christmas song tradition.<sup>12</sup> Not only in *Onder het stroodak*, but in her later Christmas story books *Heilige Kerstnacht* (1928), *Advent* (1949) and *In 't midden van de nacht* (1955) as well, Van Hille-Gaerthé seems truly fascinated by the shepherds as an essential element of the Christmas tale.

#### 4. Conclusion

After being discovered and published in 1842 by Hoffmann von Fallersleben and Ernst Richter, the Silesian song of praise *Schönster Herr Jesu* was adapted in 1850 during the First Schleswig War by the Danish poet Bernhard Ingemann as a pilgrims' hymn, *Dejlig er jorden*, a song that was to become very popular in Scandinavian countries, above all in Sweden under the title of *Härlig är jorden*, both a cheerful Christmas song and a consoling funeral hymn. Probably on the base of the third stanza of the Swedish translation of the Danish song, another radical adaptation was published in 1915 by the Dutch author of childrens' books Catharina van Hille-Gaerthé, this time as the pastoral Christmas song *Eeuwen geleden*, in which a desire for peace was expressed that in 1915 may have been as urgent as it had been to Ingemann in 1850, as it still is to all of us in the year 2008. In the process, some odd misunderstandings occurred. In 1850 Ingemann was very much inspired by the idea of adapting an old German crusaders' hymn, whereas in 1915 Van Hille-Gaerthé was convinced she was dealing with a medieval Swedish Christmas tune. Motivated by these misunderstandings both authors wrote moving lyrics that until the present day are sung to the beautiful Silesian melody by millions of people throughout Scandinavia and the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This Christmas article was written especially for Muziekantiquariaat Frits Ham. An earlier version was published as: Von „Schönster Herr Jesu“ bis „Eeuwen geleden“. Die Pilgerfahrt einer schlesischen Melodie durch Dänemark en Schweden in die Niederlande. In: *Berichte en Forschungen, Jahrbuch des Bundesinstituts für Kultur en Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa* 15 (2007). München 2008, pp. 11-25. For additional remarks I am very much obliged to Sybe Bakker (Groningen).

<sup>2</sup> With almost identical lyrics, but with a different melody a similar song is included in *Melodeyen über die Gesänge en Psalmen deß Münsterischen Gesang-Buchs* (Münster 1677). Cf. Johannes Zahn: *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*. Hildesheim 1997 (2. Nachdruck der Ausgabe Gütersloh 1889-1893), nr. 3975 and 3976. Both the Munster and the Silesian melodies have found their way into numerous German church hymnals, for example *Gotteslob, Katholisches Gebet- en Gesangbuch* (1975, nr. 551) and *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (1993, nr. 403). The origin and the secular and ecclesiastical reception in German-speaking countries are amply described by Michael Fischer (February 2005) in the database *Freiburger Anthologie – Lyrik en Lied* ([www.lyrik-und-lied.de](http://www.lyrik-und-lied.de)). However, Fischer does not take into account the tradition as a medieval Crusaders' hymn.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. about the genesis of *Dejlig er jorden* P. Poulsen: *På opdagelse i salmebogen*. København 1962, pp. 159-162. The Danish lyrics are quoted according to *Den Danske Salmebog 2002*, nr. 121, section: 'Jul. Jesus fødsel' (nr. 111 in *Den Danske Salmebog* of 1953). Translation (after Eva Toller 2002): Lovely is the earth, glorious is the heaven of God. Beauteous are the pilgrimages of the souls. Through the fair realms on earth, we go singing to Paradise. Ages come and ages pass. Generations follow their forefathers. Never will the tune from heaven be silenced, in the joyous pilgrim song of the soul. Angels first sang this to the shepherds in the fields. From soul to soul, it sounded: Peace on earth. People rejoice, an eternal Redeemer was born to us.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Øyvind Norheim: 'The development and spreading of "Stille Nacht" in Denmark and Norway', [www.stillnacht.at/de/forschung.asp](http://www.stillnacht.at/de/forschung.asp).

<sup>5</sup> Cited after *Den gamla psalmboken ett urval ur 1695, 1819 och 1937 års psalmböcker*. Under redaktion av Håkan Möller och med inledning av Gunnel Vallquist. Stockholm 2001, p. 227. As a liturgical song *Härlig är jorden* appeared in *Svenska Missionsförbundets sångbok* (1920, nr. 705) in the section "Vid särskilda tillfällen: Årsskifte", and in the section 'Pilgrimsvandringen' in the Appendix to the 1819 hymnal *Nya psalmer* (1921, nr. 504); in the section 'Pilgrims- och hemlandssånger' in *Sionstoner* (1935, nr. 686), in the section 'Gods lov' in *Den svenska psalmboken* (1937, nr. 21), as nr. 297 in the section 'Pilgrimsvandringen' in the oecumenical parts of the hymnals *Psalmbok* (1986), *Cecilia* (1986), *Psalmer och Sånger* (1987), *Segertoner* (1988) and

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*Frälsingsarméns sångbok* (1990); in the section ‘Jul’ in *Finlandssvenska psalmboken* (1986, nr. 31) and in *Sångboken* (1998, nr. 50).

<sup>6</sup> A striking example is the rendition by the singer Jenny Öhlund on the CD *110% svensk jul* (MLPCD 1811). Choir interpretations on records like *Julton, En dokumentärinspelning av Julton 1970* (Cantus LP 14) or *Kända Psalmer med barnkör under ledning av Lennart Hanning* (1976, Telestar TRS 11173) also indicate the song’s traditional popularity.

<sup>7</sup> C.M. van Hille-Gaerthé: *Onder het stroodak*. Met teekeningen van Tjeerd Bottema. Eerste druk. Rotterdam [1915]. *Onder het stroodak* was translated into English: *Under the thatched roof*. Translated by Kate Kortschak, with illustrations by Jan Schaafsma. Honolulu 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Translation: Centuries ago, shepherds came to the poor manger of Bethlehem. Softly the Mother looks down at the frail Child, heavenly light shines everywhere. Child in the Holy Night that has brought to us God’s love, we as well are gathered around your crib. Beloved Child, while we are silent, softly and gently it is heard: Peace on Earth.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g. *Kinderen van één Vader, Een liederenbundel voor gezin en school, verteluur, zondagsschool en clubwerk*. Geheel vernieuwde uitgave. Samengesteld door H.J.W. Modderman, B. Wierenga-Aalbers [etc.]. Vierde druk. Amsterdam 1968, nr. 63: “en hemels licht schijnt overal (...) klinkt zacht en teder”.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from *Eeuwen geleden*, another song has been included along with its music in *Onder het stroodak*,: the *Lentelied* (Spring Song). The music of the *Lentelied* (with the melody title: *Norges herlighed*) has been taken from *Norges Melodier*, the collection of Norwegian folk songs edited anonymously by Edvard Grieg. Cf. *Norges Melodier, arrangerede for Pianoforte med Text*. Kjøbenhavn/Christiania [after 1876], nr. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Another possible source is the *Svensk söndagsskolsångbok till bruk för skolor och barn gudstjänste, Musik med text*. Första upplagan. Stockholm 1910, nr. 22. Here *Skönaste Jesus* and *Härlig är jorden* are printed next to each other on one page, with its music presented as ‘Pilgrimshymn från 12:te årh.’, without any further reference to the country of origin. The musical arrangement again shows some striking resemblances with the Dutch song.

<sup>12</sup> *Oude en Nieuwere Kerstliederen benevens gezangen en liederen van andere hoogtijden en heiligedagen, alsook van de Advent en de Vasten, gerangschikt naar de orde van het Kerkelijk Jaar [...]*. Ten dienste der zangchoren en katholieke huisgezinnen bewerkt door Jos. Alb. Alberdingk Thijm en Lamb. Joann. Alberdingk Thijm. Amsterdam 1852, p. xx.

<sup>13</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon world the melody is known as the *Crusaders’ Hymn*. Translations from the German by Joseph August Seiss (*Beautiful Savior! King of Creation!*) and Lilian Stevenson (*Fairest Lord Jesus, Lord of all creation*) in *The Hymnal 1916* (nr. 356), *The Church Hymnal Revised* (1920, nr. 468), *The Book of Common Praise, Revised* (1938, nr. 604), *The Hymnal 1940* (nr. 346), *The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United States of America* (1971, nr. 46), *The Hymnal 1982* (nr. 383 en 384), *Hymns for Today’s Church, second edition* (1988, nr. 209), *Common Praise, Anglican Church of Canada* (1998, nr. 619), *Together in Song, Australian Hymn Book II* (1999, nr. 203), *Sing Glory: Hymns, Psalms and Songs for a New Century* (1999, nr. 199), *Complete Common Praise* (1999, nr. 823) and *The Church Hymnal (Church of Ireland)*, Fifth Edition (2000, nr. 88).