

The Prairieleut: A Forgotten Hutterite People

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"They knew they would have to give up their possessions and their self-will in surrender to God and the Christian community . . . They therefore remained in the Swiss brotherhood, where this was not required."

(*The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, 1565)¹

"Fats said, 'Yeh, bo, this is quite a town. Quite a town. Everybody in it is related. Full a Hofers and Kleinsassers and Tschetters.' Fats cleared his nose with a gurgling sniff. 'Yeh, an' when the Hofers get t'huffin,' an' the Kleinsassers t'sassin,' an' the Tschetters t'spittin' seeds, you got somethin.'" Fats allowed himself a chuckle at his own wit. But Elof said nothing. People had laughed at his name too. Elof scowled. How could one laugh after having seen the lonely stones of the Tschetters and Kleinsassers in the country graveyard?"

(Frederick Manfred, *The Chokecherry Tree*, 1948)²

Introduction

The communal Hutterian Brethren, the Hutterites, today number nearly 35,000 people and live in close to 350 colonies located primarily in the northern plains states and provinces of the United States and Canada. They are a much-studied, analyzed and visited group because of their unique economic system and social practices and the fact that they have retained this communal system for over 450 years.

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1. The Hutterian Brethren, eds., *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, Volume I* (Rifton, NY, 1987), p. 391.

2. Frederick Manfred, *The Chokecherry Tree* (Albuquerque, 1948), p. 198.

Sociologists study them because of their historic success at living communally; theologians, because of their unique anti-individualistic understanding of the Christian faith; geneticists (and there are an amazing number of these studies) due to Hutterite inbreeding.

These communal Hutterites are the descendents of about 425 Hutterite people who came to southeastern South Dakota from the Ukraine in the 1870's and immediately established three *Bruderhofe* or colonies. Almost every Hutterite left his or her home north of the Black Sea at this time and came to America.

What is often forgotten, however, is that these 425 people represented only one-third of those individuals—all of whom had the same ethnic and historical roots—who in the 1870's referred to themselves as "Hutterites."

By the time of the 1880 United States census, 443 "Hutterites" were living communally in colonies, but another 822 (including the Rev. Paul Tschetter and his uncle Lohrentz, the "scouts" who had convinced the Hutterite people to settle in South Dakota in the first place) had no interest in this sort of Christian communism and had settled instead on individual farms like most other South Dakota immigrants during that time period.

These were the Prairieleut, the "people of the prairies" as communal Hutterites called them. They settled on private farms, taking advantage of the Homestead Act or buying out previous settlers who had given up on South Dakota for one reason or another.

Many of these Prairieleut were in fact members of families that had lived with full community of goods only sporadically from the mid-17th century on. Wherever the Hutterian Brethren had lived, in Hungary, in Transylvania, in Russia, there were often two groups which called themselves Hutterites; one practiced full communal life; the other did not. The one that did not was often the larger group. Both groups continued to observe similar social and religious customs and practices.

The Prairieleut therefore felt they represented a valid form of Hutterian Christianity (much as members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints considered themselves true Latter Day Saints). The Prairieleut thus established independent Hutterite churches in South Dakota in the late 19th century in order to maintain their unique understanding of correct and not fully communal Hutterite teaching which was indeed—oddly enough—the majority teaching among Hutterites 100 years ago.

To South Dakota

The Hutterite people came en masse to what is now the state of South Dakota in the 1870's, across "the great world ocean," as one immigrant described it, "swimming around on the stormy ocean."³ They had been encouraged to settle in Dakota Territory by two representatives—both Prairieleut—who visited the northern plains of Canada and the United States in 1873. Paul Tschetter and his uncle Lohrentz, the two Hutterite "spies" to North America, indeed represent two very different characters. Paul was a young dedicated minister with strict conservative beliefs; Lohrentz a suspected womanizer and heavy drinker. It is said that on the trip to America in 1873 whenever Paul did not know Lohrentz's whereabouts (he occasionally disappeared in eastern cities) he always knew he could find him in a bar somewhere.⁴

As noted, only one-third of the Hutterite brothers and sisters opted for a communal way of life when they arrived in South Dakota. The rest continued to live somewhat like the communal Hutterites but on private farms with family-controlled finances. Deloris Stahl noted: "Those Hutterites who had practiced community of goods in Russia continued to do the same in Dakota."⁵ The majority of Hutterites, however, did not opt for communal life either in Russia or in North America.

The purpose of this paper is essentially descriptive, to tell the story of a group of people whose communities are still in existence but who have been overlooked by Hutterite scholars in general. In the process of doing this, however, the extent to which non-communal Hutterites have retained a sense of historic Hutterianism is also evaluated. Have the Prairieleut "sold out" and become assimilated into the mainstream of American culture or have they maintained some sense of a separated peoplehood?

In South Dakota, the communal Hutterites divided into three main branches: the *Schmiedeleut* (followers of the blacksmith—*Schmied*

3. Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots* (Freeman, SD, 1985), pp. 80, 83. This book includes birth, death, baptismal and marriage records which have been used as the source for much analysis in this article.

4. Substantiation for information on Lohrentz Tschetter has been extremely difficult to secure. Stories included in this article come from conversation with many prominent Prairieleut individuals who prefer to remain anonymous. These stories are told too often and by too many individuals to ignore. They have become part of the folklore of the Prairieleut community, whether certified or not.

5. Deloris Stahl, "The Migration of Hutterites from Russia to America," in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *A History of the Hutterite-Mennonites* (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, 1975), p. 51.

—Michael Waldner); the *Dariusleut* (followers of Darius Walter); and the *Lehrerleut* (followers of a teacher—*Lehrer*—Jacob Wipf). There was at least one case in which an individual family was represented in each of the three communal *Leut* groups.⁶

The larger two-thirds—the *Prairieleut*—organized their own independent Hutterite churches. The first *Prairieleut* to arrive in America accompanied the Darius Walter communal group and settled near Wolf Creek (west of present-day Freeman) on homestead land. David Waldner, Wilhelm Tschetter and Johannes Hofer were the ministers in that group.⁷ The second *Prairieleut* group to arrive in South Dakota was the Paul Tschetter-led group from the Ukrainian village of Neu-Hutterthal. They settled nine miles north of the Wolf Creek group.

Prairieleut Hutterites opted to live outside the family of the "ark" (as Schmiedeleut founder Michael Waldner, following 16th century Hutterite leader, Peter Walpot, compared the separated, non-worldly life of the colonies with the "saved" lives of those spared by God in Noah's ark in the Genesis account). The *Prairieleut* took their chances on divine election even without the observance of fully communal theological principles.

The *Prairieleut* had indeed observed a great many semi-communal practices while living in Russia. For example, in contrast to the Mennonites, the Russian Hutterites in their Molotschna Colony villages often had two families living in one basic house structure which was much like the duplex one sees at American Hutterite colonies today.⁸ But in America the *Prairieleut* had to give up many semi-communal practices and live a separated and isolated existence on private farms. This was due to their inability to procure large contiguous sections of land. Opponents of the United States Senate "Mennonite Bill" had created this predicament. The *Prairieleut* could no longer live in villages.

While the communal Hutterites held daily church services on the colony grounds during early settlement years, the *Prairieleut* met

6. Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 11. The Alan Peters geneological collection. This collection, which has information on hundreds of thousands of "Mennonite" families (much of it now accessible via computer), includes a significant amount of information on *Prairieleut* families. The records are housed in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California.

7. Emil J. Waltner, *Banished For Faith* (Freeman, SD: 1968), p. 129. This is a translation of the *Kleingeschichtsbuch* of the Hutterian Brethren, 1755-1874.

8. Arnold M. Hofer, "Former Hutterite Dorfs in Russia visited in 1976," in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 109. Hofer noted: "The houses (in Russia) were planned for two families." Before the 1970's most Hutterites lived in buildings which housed four or more apartments. This is still typical among the *Dariusleut* and *Lehrerleut*.

together in their homes for Sunday services. Their religious life, however, did not impress visitors. Samuel S. Haury, for example, the first missionary licensed by the General Conference Mennonite Church, visited churches in the Dakotas in the fall of 1877 and obtained a very low opinion of the "spirituality" of Hutterite and Mennonite groups in the area.

Haury referred to Dakota Mennonites as "spiritually dead." And he was particularly shocked by the lack of spirituality found among the "Hutterische" who had left the colonies, the Prairieleut.⁹ Haury viewed the whole area as one big "harvest field" for missions; an even larger mission field, he insisted, than the Indian reservations. Early years of settlement for any immigrant group are difficult times, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the Rev. Haury discovered what he did. One might anticipate spiritual matters taking second place in the lives of people whose main priority was simply trying to survive. One might also speculate that the highly formal and ritualistic worship practices of Prairieleut Hutterites—with great importance given to 200-year-old *Lehren*—were not fully or fairly understood by Haury.

The Prairieleut did indeed continue to think of themselves as "Hutterites," just as much representative of Hutterian tradition as the "colony people." In their view, the community of goods practiced by relatives in the colonies was not biblically mandated. Other Anabaptists did not preach community of goods as a prerequisite for following the life of Jesus; neither did the Prairieleut.¹⁰

Most of the Prairieleut churches operated in traditional Hutterite fashion but without the full communal life emphasis. Prairieleut ministers were in fact divided over whether to include or delete parts of the 17th century *Lehren* (sermons) which emphasized communal life. Still, the *Lehren* were the only sermons delivered in the Prairieleut churches at that time.¹¹

In the 1870's all Hutterite men wore plain dark clothes, beards and long hair. Women wore dark blue or black dresses. Homes were simply furnished, and women in neither group (communal Hutterites or Prairieleut) were permitted to wear hats or "gay-colored" dresses.¹² Prairieleut minister Paul Tschetter once refused to marry a

9. C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, KS: 1957), p. 49.

10. John P. Kleinsasser, "Memoranda," in Jacob J. Mendel, *A History of the People of East Freeman, Silver Lake and West Freeman* (Freeman, SD: 1961), p. 164.

11. Reuben Goertz, "Religious Life of the Volhynian Swiss Pioneers in East Freeman," (unpublished presentation given at Freeman College, Freeman, South Dakota, April, 1983), p. 10.

12. John A. Hostetler, *Hutterite Society* (Philadelphia: 1974), p. 105.

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couple because the groom wore a mustache (traditionally associated with militarism by Hutterites and by the Amish), a rigid collar and stiff cuffs on his shirt.¹³ Wedding gowns were not acceptable for Prairieleut brides. Instead, the Prairieleut churches insisted on a traditional dress with apron and shawl. Women parted their hair in the middle and braided it. Common gathers were used on dressed instead of pleats.

As late as 1921 the Hutterthal Prairieleut Church passed a resolution which stated that women should wear triangular-shaped shawls, not hats, to church as a head covering.¹⁴ It was even expected that one cover one's head when praying at home. In fact it seemed "disrespectful" to God and certainly made one feel "uncomfortable" not to cover one's head before prayer even when one was outside the church building.¹⁵ At baptism, too, a woman's head was to be covered.

An historic sense of communal separation did not leave the Prairieleut when they settled on private South Dakota farmland. The Hutterisch Tryolian-Carinthian dialect, distinctive ethnic foods and a 450-year historical separation from non-Hutterites, set the Hutterisch Prairieleut people apart even from Mennonite groups who settled nearby. The Rev. Paul Tschetter in his diary sounded in fact very much like a modern-day Hutterite minister in his continuing concern with "the world." At one point he exclaimed: "What will you do with the world? World is world and will remain world until the Lord will come and end it all."¹⁶

The Hutterian Brethren of course perceived the non-communal Hutterian tradition to be unbiblical; representative only of historical periods of spiritual fragility. Yet this non-communal Hutterianism was the only form of Hutterianism in existence from 1690 to 1757 and again from 1821 to 1859. And from 1859 on into the early years of the 20th century it was not a majority movement within the ethnic Hutterite enclave.

"Crossing Over," the Prairieleut-Hutterite Relationship

Due to the fact that most of the initially independent Prairieleut churches eventually joined together with different branches of the

13. John D. Unruh, *A Century of Mennonites in the Dakotas* (Freeman, SD, 1972), p. 101.

14. David P. Gross and Arnold M. Hofer, trans., "Hutterthal Church congregational records," (unpublished documents in the possession of the Hutterian Centennial Committee, Freeman, South Dakota).

15. Conversation with Marie Waldner, Prairieleut educator, 1987.

16. J. M. Hofer, ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5 (April, 1931), 34.

Mennonite church, the Prairieleut are not today generally described as "Hutterites." The communal Hutterian Brethren have, as noted, never thought of them as true Hutterites. As Peter Ridemann, the 16th century Hutterite leader and author of the Hutterite *Confession of Faith*, put it: "When a brother leaves community and returns to private property, it is a sure sign that he has turned away from God and left the first love."¹⁷ Rideman also noted (with regard to non-communal Hutterites): "Nearly all of them have returned to private property, leaving the house of the Lord to go to rack and ruin."¹⁸ Yet the Prairieleut in the independent Hutterisch churches represented temporarily, from 1874 to the 1940's, an alternative Hutterian tradition in America, and even today Prairieleut descendants generally refer to themselves as "Hutters" or "Hutterite-Mennonites."

Relationships between communal and non-communal Hutterite were common, particularly during the first years of settlement in America. Many family divisions in fact materialized with regard to the issue of whether or not to join one of the colonies. Much interchange of persons occurred between the two groups.¹⁹ Both societies, as noted, worshipped and dressed in a similar fashion. There were visits back and forth, and some marriages even took place, although they were generally discouraged.

The most extensive movement between the colonies and the private farms of the Prairieleut occurred during the pre-World War I era. Previous published works have underestimated the extent to which this took place. John Hostetler, for example, noted that "scarcely more than" ten Prairieleut families joined the colonies before 1895 and that "parts of" seven Prairieleut families left the colonies before 1918.²⁰ Prairieleut publisher Jacob J. Mendel, however, in various *Freeman Courier* articles, identified parts of nine Prairieleut families who joined the colonies.²¹ He also recognized, by name, at least twelve Hutterite colony families who became Prairieleut.

In addition, Mendel identified a large number of "crossovers" (people who lived initially on the prairie, then joined the colony and eventually returned to private property). Mendel did not equate

17. Hutterian Brethren, eds., *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, Volume I*, pp. 167, 168.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

19. David P. Gross, ed., "Paul Tschetter's Report of Why We Had to Leave Russia," in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 100.

20. John A. Hostetler, *Hutterite Society*, p. 122.

21. Jacob J. Mendel, *A History of the People of East Freeman, Silver Lake and West Freeman*. These figures are based on analysis of the entire Jacob J. Mendel manuscript which is for the most part a collection of stories which first appeared in the *Freeman Courier*, often referred to as "the Hutter gossip sheet."

"crossover" with the nine Hutter families who entered colony life permanently nor with the twelve who left. Since he only mentioned these situations in passing (he was not engaged in any formal study of the matter), older Prairieleut (including Prairieleut historian, Arnold M. Hofer) have always insisted that there could easily be three to four times as many "crossovers" as Mendel specifically named.²²

Hostetler's assessments were low due to the fact that he did not appear to include in his count much of the continuous movement back and forth which occurred during the first half-decade on the plains when many families had a difficult time deciding which direction to go. Even after the first five years, however, the figures under-represented communal/non-communal intermovement. They did not, for example, appear to include the many single individuals, both men and women, who went one way or another independent of the rest of their families.

In general, the Hutterian Brethren thought of the Prairieleut as less committed to the gospel than they were because of the less demanding (in their view) individualistic lifestyle. Colony life required daily cooperation, openness, group discipline and an emphasis on simple living. The Hutterites felt the Prairieleut were selfish and materialistic.

Communal Hutterites believed in the philosophy of *gelassenheit*, a complete individual yielding to the will of God. This yieldedness meant a willingness to give up all one's possessions to the church as exemplified in Acts, chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6; in Jesus' own "little colony of disciples" and in the various apostolic churches. The Hutterites believed that the various New Testament-era Christians lived communally and supported this view with biblical references.²³

The spiritual attraction of the colonies was indeed felt deeply by many Hutterers (Prairieleut). Yet the non-communal tradition was also enticing, and so a number of people who joined the colonies on arrival eventually returned to private property.²⁴ An important relationship between communal and Prairieleut Hutterites was cemented because of the extensive use of Hutterite flour mills, by Hutterers, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hides were also taken to the colonies for tanning.

In Russia, Michael Stahl (original ordained by Mennonite pastor

22. Arnold M. Hofer has confirmed this conjecture based upon his substantial collection of Prairieleut documents.

23. Hutterian Brethren, eds., *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, Volume I*, pp. 265-275.

24. Elenora R. Wipf, *The Andreas and Susanna Glanzer Family Record, 1842-1962* (Freeman, SD, 1962), p. 3.

Peter Wedel) was a non-communal Hutterite Elder at Hutterthal village. When he first arrived in the Dakotas, Stahl continued a non-communal existence with the Prairieleut. His conscience bothered him, however, and within a year, guided by a number of dreams and visions, he left his farm and joined the *Dariusleut* Wolf Creek Colony (on July 31, 1876).²⁵ Michael's brother, Johann, joined him three days later.

Often when the early Hutterite settlers joined and left colonies, they did so accompanied by large families. We are therefore discussing the fate of two hundred or so people, perhaps one-sixth of the entire Hutterite population moving between the prairie and the colonies and vice-versa. This was not at all a minor phenomenon involving just a few individuals.

From ship list records we know that a Peter Entz joined Elmspring Colony when he arrived in America. But many of his children did not. One Benjamin Stahl homesteaded but two of his sons, John and Michael, joined Wolf Creek Colony. Many families were split up in this manner as both individuals and families disagreed with regard to whether or not they should join the colony river settlements. One Joseph Wipf, for example, made the decision to become one of the Prairieleut. But his children did not uniformly follow his lead. Three of his children did join him; three others entered the life of the colony.

It is important to note, in addition, that families were sometimes divided not only with regard to the communal life/private property issue but also with regard to which of the three communal *Lent* groups (*Schmiedeleut*, *Lehrerleut* or *Dariusleut*) to join. This created an even more complicated situation. Tremendous familial tension emerged at a time when the lives of all persons involved were undergoing tremendous stress due to geographic relocation.

In 1890 Prairieleut Mary Glanzer, exemplifying Jacob J. Mendel's contention that "for many years girls on the farm were married to young men in the colony," joined Bon Homme Colony, marrying Andrew Kleinsasser.²⁶ When one examines documented crossover occurrences from the earliest years, diary accounts, ship lists and 19th century church records, one finds an incredibly broad series of Prairieleut-Hutterite interrelationships. Hostetler's figures, furthermore, did not include those people who lived without community in

25. Arnold M. Hofer, trans., "The Joseph Hofer Diary, 1873-1905" (unpublished document in the possession of the Hutterian Centennial Committee, Freeman, South Dakota), July 1876 entry.

26. Jacob J. Mendel, *A History of the People of East Freeman, Silver Lake and West Freeman*, p. 16.

Russia but who moved immediately into a colony (a radical restructuring experience) on arrival in South Dakota.

The Rev. John Kleinsasser, one of the first ministers at the independent Prairieleut Hutterthal Church (near Freeman), eventually sold his farm and joined Elmspring Colony. Another Hutterthal minister, John Waldner, made a similar decision, joining the Jamesville Colony. This was a very strange story, indeed, as two non-communal Hutterite ministers joined colonies associated with different communal *Lent* groups (with the *Lehrerleut* and *Schmiedeleut*, respectively). Waldner then, later in life, left Jamesville and re-established himself on private land near Freeman!²⁷

Another man, Joseph "Yos" Hofer, who was a "private owner" in the Ukraine, first joined the *Dariusleut* Wolf Creek Colony when he got to South Dakota. Hofer was well-connected, being a brother-in-law of Darius Walter, the colony leader. Hofer was also the author of a recently unearthed diary account of the years 1873-1905, which included commentary with regard to an official visit to St. Petersburg on behalf of the Ukrainian Hutterite villages, in 1873. Hofer's journal also dealt with his sojourn with communal Hutterites at Wolf Creek Colony from 1874-1877, and Hofer's life as a Prairieleut leader thereafter.

Due to a number of conflicts with Wolf Creek Colony leaders, Hofer left the community in 1877 and moved to the *Schmiedeleut* Bon Homme Colony, near Tabor, South Dakota, where he served for eleven months as farm manager. Eventually Hofer and family left Bon Homme as well, however, telling the the colony leadership they intended to rejoin Wolf Creek. It is said that enroute to that colony, however, the Hofers stopped to visit one of Yos's sisters who was a non-communal Prairieleut. In the course of their conversation she had exclaimed: "What do you want on the colony?" Their visit evidently convinced Joseph not to go back "in." He proceeded, therefore, to purchase private land on the prairie and was eventually selected as minister of the small Olivet Prairieleut fellowship which met biweekly in private homes, where Yos preached Sunday sermons both morning and afternoon.²⁸

Communal Hutterites tell the following story with regard to Joseph Hofer's wife: According to this frequently told account, Anna Hofer had never wanted to give up community life and continued, throughout her life as a non-communal Hutterite, to insist that she be dressed in "colony clothes" when buried. "When I die," she re-

27. Ibid.

28. Arnold M. Hofer, trans., "The Joseph Hofer Diary, 1873-1905."

quested, "dress me in the clothes that are in my closet (i.e. colony clothes)." Anna's family did not, however, follow her wishes, placing her in a casket in Prairieleut garb, which had, over the years, gradually become more stylish. The clothes, however, kept getting wet, for no apparent reason, and after changing her a couple of times, the family put colony clothes on her instead. These clothes stayed dry, and Anna went to her reward in peace.²⁹

Numerous individuals did indeed have trouble deciding whether to take communal or non-communal paths. Two blind orphaned sisters, Rebecca and Katherine Wollman, went in two directions upon arrival in South Dakota. Rebecca joined a colony; Katherine the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren.³⁰ John Z. Kleinsasser, who eventually led a group of Prairieleut to California's San Joaquin Valley, is another example of someone who lived in the colonies several years before homesteading on the prairie.

Jacob Janzen, a Mennonite originally from the Ukrainian Chortitza Colony, also represented the historic Anabaptist tendency to drift. Janzen had his first encounter with Hutterites in 1845 when, after receiving high recommendation from Mennonite leader Johann Cornies, he began teaching 91 students in the Hutterthal village school. Janzen was given authority to perform Hutterite marriages.³¹ Soon after his first wife died in 1848, Janzen was married to Maria Waldner, a sister of soon-to-be *Schmiedeleut* Elder Michael Waldner.

Upon arrival in South Dakota Janzen and his family lived at Bon Homme Colony.³² But they left soon thereafter to homestead northwest of Freeman. Jacob then made many attempts to get his one child who remained at Bon Homme to leave. (This son, Peter, became well-known as a teacher and shoemaker and a contributor to the *Kleine Geshichtsbuch* of the Hutterian Brethren for the years 1874-1899.) Jacob was unsuccessful. One time, Peter even hid in the barn to avoid his father.³³ Peter later sent reports on colony affairs (sometimes via his father) to Jacob J. Mendel's Freeman *Courier*, but he remained committed to the communal Hutterian Brethren.

In 1894 the Rev. Joseph Waldner and his family went in a different direction, leaving Milltown Colony for the prairie. Waldner had

29. Conversation with Hutterite ministers Michael Waldner and Hans Decker (July, 1987).

30. David P. Gross, ed., "Paul Tschetter's Report of Why We Had to Leave Russia, in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 79.

31. "Hutterite Marriage Records," in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 70.

32. Francis Janzen Voth, *The House of Jacob: The Story of Jacob Janzen, 1822-1885, and His Descendents* (Phoenix, 1986), p. 13.

33. Conversation with Hutterite minister Michael Waldner, Pearl Creek Colony, 1987.

originally joined Bon Homme Colony and in 1876 accompanied Michael Waldner on a missionary journey to Russia to invite remaining immigrants to join the colony when they came to America. But he eventually got tired of living communally and left.³⁴ Prairieleut farmer, Sam S. Hofer, spent most of his life "on the prairie" but at age 70, right before his death in 1923, he joined Rockport Colony, Alexandria, South Dakota.³⁵ Communal life had remained attractive to him throughout his life as a non-communal Prairieleut.

There are numerous stories of dreams and visions leading Hutter individuals to enter and/or exit colony life. The following stories represent a few examples of this phenomenon.³⁶

For example, according to most sources, sometime in the late 1880's Prairieleut settler Fred Waldner had a dream while napping on a *schlafbank* (a sleeping bench) after a meal. In the dream he saw Jesus laying dead in the corner of his house. This upset Fred a great deal. He had no interest in seeing Jesus dead and particularly not in his house.

At this point in Fred Waldner's dream Jesus began slowly to come to life but he appeared to resurrect not in Fred's house but in what Fred recognized as Michael Waldner's home at Bon Homme Colony where he had occasionally visited friends and relatives. Just as Jesus began to wake up, Fred also resurrected. Three days later, the meaning of the dream became clear to Fred. He interpreted the vision in the following manner: Fred's house was not really "his own." In fact, while he lived in it, Jesus was, in a spiritual sense, dead. Jesus would give life to Fred's house via his spirit only if he lived in community. In essence, Jesus would empower Fred with supernatural direction only if he sold his farm and joined a colony. Amazingly enough, he proceeded to do this.³⁷

Another Prairieleut settler, the Rev. Michael Stahl, who in Russia held the position of Senior Hutterite Elder, had an equally striking

34. Jacob J. Mendel, *A History of the People of East Freeman, Silver Lake and West Freeman*, p. 160.

35. "Ship List Records," in Arnold M. Hofer, ed., *A History of the Hutterite-Mennonites*, p. 79.

36. Sources for traditional Hutterite stories include a number of South Dakota and Manitoba *Schmiedeleut* ministers and colony members. I have written the narratives according to the most commonly adhered to renditions.

37. Information on Fred Waldner was obtained via conversations with the Rev. Michael Waldner (June, 1983 and July, 1987), Arnold M. Hofer (July, 1987), the Rev. Hans Decker (July, 1987), Hutterite genealogist and German Teacher Tony Waldner (July, 1993) and with numerous other Hutterite and Prairieleut individuals. This is a composite account based upon the most commonly-told and reliable versions.

vision.³⁸ According to most sources, in an initial dream (which Stahl experienced while still in Russia) an angel had taken him ("like the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk") by the hair, carried him over the Atlantic Ocean (his ears were "whistling") and set him down in "nice, flat country" on a stone somewhere in South Dakota. The angel then showed Michael some people living north of Freeman, in small shacks. "They call themselves Hutterites," said the angel "but they are all corrupt—even the ministers—and will not last." Michael dreamt this sequence twice in one night. When he arrived in South Dakota, however, he still decided to live outside the colonies.

One day Stahl hitched up his oxen and headed down a river trail north of Freeman, toward a farm where he intended to purchase some cows. On the way he sighted a peculiar stone which seemed so familiar to him that he stopped and contemplated its significance. "Suddenly it seemed to him," he noted, that it was "exactly the rock which I have seen in my dreams in Russia." This was a shock for Stahl as the angel in those dreams had indeed commented that "all these [referring to the Prairieleut] will go to condemnation." All of this greatly concerned Stahl, particularly because he was a leader among the possibly condemned persons.

Stahl sat down on the rock which had precipitated his *deja vu* experience and looked first to the left, noting that all the Prairieleut lived in that direction. To his right then Stahl could see the colony people; the communal Hutterites. He noted that this was exactly how the new world scene had been pictured in his original dream in Russia.

The Rev. Stahl was so struck by the whole experience that he went home and told his wife they were joining the colony. They loaded up all of their personal belongings, even taking wet clothes from the line outside, and joined Wolf Creek Colony (Olivet, South Dakota). At Wolf Creek Stahl was placed "on trial" but was allowed to retain ministerial status.

One of Schmiedeleut leader Michael Waldner's visions also dealt specifically with the relationship between the enlightened communal Hutterites and the backslidden Prairieleut. In a "spiritual dream,"

38. The story of Michael Stahl's decision to live communally is also a composite account taking into consideration a variety of stories, all essentially similar but differing on specifics. The following sources were consulted: Rudolf Brednick, *The Bible and the Plough: The Lives of a Hutterite Minister and a Mennonite Farmer* (Ottawa, 1981), pp. 33-38, David P. Gross, ed., "Paul Tschetter's Report of Why We Had to Leave Russia," in Arnold Hofer, ed., *Hutterite Roots*, p. 101, the Rev. Michael Waldner, (June, 1983 and July, 1987), Arnold M. Hofer (July, 1987) and the Rev. Hans Decker, (July, 1987). The Joseph Hofer diary account also helped substantiate parts of the story.

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Waldner in fact "saw many of our people (i.e. the Prairieleut) among the damned."³⁹

The Contemporary Scene

Today the total Prairieleut Mennonite population has been estimated at 3500 people.⁴⁰ Most of these attend Hutter-dominated Mennonite churches in South Dakota. One Prairieleut church was started in Dinuba, California in 1909 when John Z. Kleinsasser (minister in the Bridgewater and Huron areas, the founder of the short-lived Bethel College and a well-known land speculator) and a few families caught the "California fever" and started the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church. These people were later joined by other Hutterites during the Depression years. Today there are Prairieleut scattered throughout the California Mennonite Brethren churches. The Zion Church itself disbanded in 1990.

Other Prairieleut are scattered throughout the United States and Canada (there are a number in the Langham, Saskatchewan area) and are difficult to locate due to marriage and attendance outside Mennonite churches. It has been estimated that the larger Prairieleut population (if one includes all those people with at least one Hutter grandparent) "should easily total 20,000 or more."⁴¹

The 3500, Prairieleut Mennonites thus represent only 17.5% of the total Prairieleut ethnic population. Hutterite-Mennonites, however, have had a significant influence on the development of theological and ecclesiastical understandings in all the churches they attend. Numerous leaders in Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonite churches, and a few in the Mennonite Church, have Hutterisch ethnic background.

A certain spirit of ethnic exclusivity does show itself in Prairieleut documents. The writer of the *History of the Hutterthal Mennonite Church*, published in 1968, for example, stated (concerning ministers in the Hutterthal Church): "All except the last four were of our own Hutterisch people."⁴² The use of the words "our own" (or *unser leute*)

39. Stefan C. Christopher, ed., "A Description of the Beginning of True Christian Community Among the Schmiedeleut Hutterians, As It Began by the Power of the Spirit," (unpublished manuscript, 1972), p. 4. This document is in the possession of the writer.

40. Arnold M. Hofer obtained this total by consulting Mennonite church membership lists; then adding children. In order to do this he obviously had to know a great deal about Prairieleut family connections.

41. Conversation with Arnold M. Hofer duly, 1987).

42. Erwin R. Gross, ed., *History of the Hutterthal Mennonite Church 1879-1968* (Freeman, SD, 1968), p. 10.

denoted a certain exclusivity as well as proud recognition of the ethnic past. The phrase "our people" was also used in many Prairieleut family histories and autobiographical jottings.

On a darker note, one Prairieleut descendent was involved in the Guyana social-religious experiment of Jim Jones' People's Temple. Alfred Tschetter, son of Krimmer Mennonite Brethren minister David W. Tschetter and grandson of the Rev. Paul Tschetter, was a highly motivated individual who achieved national recognition for his work as an x-ray technician at Baylor University Hospitals.

Alfred's first marriage was to a Hutter; his final to a woman from Indiana who was involved with the Jim Jones movement there. Alfred and spouse eventually moved to Guyana where they drank poisoned grape punch and died at Jones' insistent invitation. Before going to Guyana Alfred paid one final visit to his mother, brothers and sister in South Dakota in an unsuccessful effort to collect his inheritance.⁴³

On a somewhat brighter side, a great many Prairieleut served as public schoolteachers, and a number of these took positions in Hutterite colony schools. A 1992 study noted that 22% of contemporary non-Hutterite colony teachers understood the Austrian Hutterisch dialect!⁴⁴

Most Hutterite children attended school in colony schoolhouses where they were provided with certified teachers by local school districts. Prairieleut instructors often requested these positions. Since they spoke Hutterisch and maintained common cultural memories, if not practices, Hutterite schoolchildren quickly warmed up to them. This made it easier for the children to adjust to the "outside" educational system they were forced to be part of.

A controversial yet common practice, positive or negative, depending on one's general feeling about the Hutterite way of life, was the utilization of Prairieleut schoolteachers, by Hutterite individuals, as contacts between themselves and the outside world. Hutter teachers, for example, occasionally serve as conduits for the sale of black market Hutterite goods, such as beautifully decorated rolling pins. Markets were thus expanded and proceeds diverted from the communal colony treasury.

Some Prairieleut schoolteachers were involved in other questionable dealings as well. Some, for example, arranged to have photographs developed for students and their families (who indeed encouraged this). These operations were not acceptable to Hutterite

43. Conversations with Arnold M. Hofer (August, 1986, July, 1987, July, 1993).

44. Max E. Stanton, "Current Status on non-Hutterite Teachers in Hutterite Colonies," (presentation at Communal Studies Association annual meeting, October, 1992), p. 3.

leaders even though almost every Hutterite had photographs in his or her possession (some even owned wedding albums).

These subversive practices, facilitated by Prairieleut and other public schoolteachers, undermined fundamental principles of communal existence. Many Hutterites, however, viewed these activities as "minor" divergences, believing they provided a necessary outlet for individualistic inclinations which if not given catharsis might lead to large-scale defection and/or major immediate change, in non-communal directions. One Hutterite individual told the author that "photographs are harmless." "Just go look in the minister's desk," he continued, "you'll find all the pictures you are not supposed to have."

Prairieleut collaborators felt sorry for the "deprived" lifestyle of their Hutterite schoolchildren. Desiring only to make life a bit more pleasant for pupils (and their families), they felt there was nothing unethical about helping them occasionally subvert the system. Hutterite leaders were well aware that members sought out such collaboration but they still labeled these activities—on both sides—as "sin." Another "sinful" practice engaged in by Hutters, in association with Hutterites, related to unusual financial arrangements between employers and laborers. Prairieleut farmers who hired Hutterite boys, for example, sometimes paid the workers twice, first with a check for the colony treasury, and second with cash, to be pocketed by the workers.

As one assesses the contemporary Prairieleut worldview, it is perhaps most ironic that Hutters have become such loyal supporters of United States military endeavors. This has occasionally created conflict between the Prairieleut and their communal relatives, since Hutterites do not serve in the military. Since the 1940's, particularly, the Hutterite commitment to pacifism and refusal to defend the United States militarily has become a great embarrassment for the Prairieleut.⁴⁵

As early as the World War I period, Prairieleut Dr. A. A. Wipf became a member of the South Dakota Council for the Defense which pushed a philosophy diametrically opposed to the pacifism which the majority of Hutters still espoused at that time.⁴⁶

Some of the strongest opponents of government-supported privileges for communal Hutterites have also been distinguished Prairieleut. This opposition has developed due to the high-stakes

45. "87 Percent Approve New Law Restricting Hutterite Expansion," in *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* (dated 1955; no author noted).

46. Katherina Hofer Tschetter, *My Life Story* (Chicago, 1945), p. 15.

competition for available land between Hutterers and Hutterites throughout this century. The Prairieleut feel the Hutterian Brethren have a great advantage over them when it comes to the purchase of land.

In the mid-1950's when the state of South Dakota made a legislative decision to place restrictions on the Hutterian Brethren with regard to their ability to incorporate colony operations, Prairieleut Edwin Wollman spoke out publically against the colonies at the state capital.⁴⁷ Anti-colony feeling has run particularly strong among Prairieleut farmers in Beadle, Spink and Sully counties of South Dakota.⁴⁸

The Prairieleut "in tune with the times" way of life certainly differed from the 16th century peasant ambience and dated social customs of the Hutterian Brethren. Since they desired association with mainstream American culture, an embarrassment with regard to the past has become an obsession for some Hutterers. This residual shame was related to the common association of Hutterers with Hutterites. ("They don't have to live that way," it was often exclaimed.)

This manifestation was common among second and third generation Americans who experienced immigrant embarrassment as a kind of identity crisis, propelled by the essential differentness of parents and grandparents. Sons and daughters wanted to be accepted as "good Americans" like the people they went to school with, worked with, and (in the 1990's) saw on television. This crisis was then accentuated by ridicule received from those American citizens further along the assimilation road.

Most ethnic groups in America thus eventually assimilated and the past was lost, only to be rediscovered as a quaint historical interest or hobby, a source of pride in one's ancestors, long after the ancestors were dead (which made it easier to appreciate them).

What made it extremely difficult for the Prairieleut to follow this historical pattern was the continuous and increasing presence of a large number of Hutterites all around them, representatives of an older immigrant tradition, now fossilized in the sense that Hutterites held fast to customary ways of life. Hutterers found it difficult to escape from their communal cousins. They were constantly associated with them even if it was only through their last names. One found little embarrassment only in California's Prairieleut community where communal Hutterites were virtually unknown by the surrounding society. (The same manifestation was evident on the West Coast in the Mexican-American community, where third and fourth genera-

47. Conversation with Arnold M. Hofer (July, 1987).

48. John D. Unruh, *A Century of Mennonites in the Dakotas*, p. 124.

tion Hispanics were often embarrassed, eternally it seemed to them, by the continuous arrival of new immigrants from Mexico.)

Therefore Prairieleut individuals often joked about the (in their view) uncouth lifestyle of their distant relatives in the colonies and reiterated appreciation that their families, sometime in the past, left the communal way of life. Many deplore the thought of even visiting the colonies. Prairieleut women in particular frequently held the view described above seeing the inferior way (according to modern perception) in which Hutterite women dressed, worked and were treated in the male-dominated Hutterian communities.

It was in the Huron, South Dakota, area particularly that Prairieleut sought disassociation from their Hutterian past. But other areas of South Dakota and the northern plains were affected as well. One Prairieleut minister, in the 1980's, used to get very upset when anyone would call him "Hutterisch." Many Prairieleut remember being referred to as "dirty Russians" by classmates when growing up. They got tired of this and have never forgotten the identification outsiders made and continue to make, at times, between them and their communal relatives. If, as Miriam Warner suggested, Mennonite Brethren in particular "suffer from a lack of collective self-confidence" the Prairieleut identity dilemma may be most acute for those who have joined Mennonite Brethren churches.⁴⁹

Conversely, it is significant that just when much Prairieleut ethnic and cultural separateness has disappeared, and in the very midst of a community still strongly affected by different forms of immigrant embarrassment, a new interest has arisen, in the past two decades, in preserving written materials, photographs and artifacts which tell the Hutter story.

In 1973, a century after Paul and Lohrentz Tschetter's fateful journey to America, a group of Prairieleut individuals decided that something needed to be done to preserve the Hutter narrative. They therefore established the Hutterian Centennial Committee in order to coordinate publication of a book commemorating the 100th anniversary of the emigration of all ethnic Hutterites to America.

The Hutterian Centennial Committee, under the leadership of Arnold M. Hofer, has continued, ever since original plans were completed, to pursue the goal of preserving communal and non-communal Hutterite history, honoring Hutterite and Prairieleut ancestors and the founding traditions, and focusing particular attention on making history come alive for younger generations of Hutterites. Many Prairieleut, as a result, developed a strong appreciation for and un-

49. Miriam E. Warner, "Mennonite Brethren: The Maintenance of Continuity in a Religious Ethnic Group" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1985).

derstanding of the Hutterian heritage, not forgetting the way of life of contemporary communal Hutterites.

The Prairieleut, though strongly separatist in the organization of their churches, have also produced one unique feature absent in most American Mennonite denominations until recently: support for political activity among the membership.

This political involvement, traditionally not accepted by Anabaptist groups due to their commitment to the non-resistant teaching and lifestyle of Jesus, was particularly prevalent among the Prairieleut who joined the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren churches. This small conference inadvertently allowed many people to develop leadership capabilities. Many opportunities to develop leadership skills were available in the KMB conference. Some persons ultimately utilized these skills by going into politics.⁵⁰ This political involvement then tended to show direct correlation with the relinquishing of pacifist theological principles.

The Prairieleut had a history of participation in local self-government in their villages in Russia. Some Hutterites even held the position of magistrate. But political power exerted there was designated only for fellow and sister Hutterites, not for a mass citizenry. Still, as early as the year 1885, Prairieleut Jake Tschetter was appointed United States deputy marshal in which position he was later called upon to officially place a noose around the outlaw Jack McCall's neck.⁵¹

In the decade of the 1980's, a number of Prairieleut individuals served in political office. Harvey Wollman served as a South Dakota state senator, as lieutenant governor and as governor; Roger Wollman, as a South Dakota Supreme Court chief justice (he presently serves as a justice on the United States 8th Circuit Court of Appeals). Harris Wollman held the position of Secretary of Education and Cultural Affairs for the state of South Dakota. Leland Kleinsasser and Benny Gross served in the state legislature. All of these persons were members of or were raised in Krimmer Mennonite Brethren congregations.⁵²

Hutterian Remnants

Near the end of the 20th century, the Hutterisch dialect, distinctive foods, and folk customs continued to define the Prairieleut way

50. Rod A. Janzen, *Terry Miller: The Pacifist Politician* (Freeman, SD, Pine Hill Press, 1986), pp. 69-71.

51. John D. Unruh, *A Century of Mennonites in the Dakotas*, p. 99.

52. Rod A. Janzen, *Terry Miller: The Pacifist Politician*, pp. 117, 118.

of life on the northern plains. These were the most visible manifestations of the Hutterian past. This was particularly true of the South Dakota communities where the "protection" (as Jacob J. Mendel described it) of the larger Anabaptist-Mennonite social structure helped preserve the Hutterisch culture.⁵³ Young persons raised in South Dakota's West Freeman community still considered themselves "Hutters."

Other sociological, psychological and theological distinctions were difficult to grasp but still discernible. Interpersonal relationship structures, feelings about self, interpretations of Christianity, all had a unique character in the Prairieleut community. They all emitted the faint glimmer of the Hutterian past.

A warm sense of camaraderie, for example, pervaded the "Hutter" commonwealth. Older Prairieleut remembered Sunday afternoon visits which were "not long enough," noting "the great love amongst the people." It still existed in the 1990's. On occasion communal emphases too re-emerged even if in unique forms. Barbara Kleinsasser Wiens, mother of naturalist Douglas Wiens (killed in a dynamite explosion in the Sierras in 1981), noted: "He (Douglas) knew that we ought not live to collect things."⁵⁴

The Prairieleut have retained some identifying characteristics and customs and lost others. Hutter individuals did tend to be forthright and honest in their discussions of both contemporary issues and mundane concerns. Detractors in fact accused Hutterers of being "rude," "loud," "discourteous" or "unsophisticated."

Since the Prairieleut always considered themselves industrious and frugal, they sometimes expressed negative opinions of those they felt did not work as hard or save as much as they did. An attitude of careful stewardship even carried over to international missions operations. In 1948, the Rev. John J. Kleinsasser, chair of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions, responded to one missionary's request for additional funding (to cover an exploratory excursion to a neighboring country) in the following manner: "The trip to Colombia it seems to me would more or less be useless if you feel you have no call to that place, so why go there?"⁵⁵

53. Jacob J. Mendel, *A History of the People of East Freeman, Silver Lake and West Freeman*, 105.

54. Delbert Wiens, Marj Gerbrandt Wiens, eds., "A Family Tribute," in Frances Janzen Voth, *The House of Jacob: The Story of Jacob Janzen, 1822-1885, and His Descendents*, p. 319.

55. Correspondence from John J. Kleinsasser to Sylvester Dirks (December 22, 1948). Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Conference files, located at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California.

It is this kind of honesty which was expected, indeed demanded, by Hutterians of all stripes. In 1984, after reading a book I had written about the South Dakota Hutterites, a Hutterite minister informed me that I had been "too soft" on them. "There wasn't enough salt," he insisted. When outsiders—even conference leaders—entered the playing field of the Hutterian community, they sometimes misunderstood the "tension" they felt they had encountered.

Hutters do not even excuse ministers from honest expressions of dissent. A Prairieleut individual once responded to an opinion expressed by the minister of his congregation by saying (in a public setting): "Oh pastor, you're crazy." This statement was not intended as a personal attack. It simply expressed disagreement with a particular position.

Hutters have also traditionally had close, tightly-knit families. Detractors have even described them as "tribal," or "cliquish," as a group of people who looked out for their own and thought of themselves as "a cut above the rest." This strong sense of family, of community, of belonging to a social entity which was doing something important, however, was exactly what helped ensure, through the social-emotional attachments which accompanied it, the endurance of Hutters as a separate people.

New Hutter openness to relationships with, or at least respect for, Hutterite traditions, left open the possibility that the communal Hutterian Brethren might influence future social and theological developments in the Prairieleut community. It might also mean the Prairieleut would in turn influence the direction of communal Hutterite thought. Interpersonal contacts have a way of forcing mental restructuring when both sides involved recognize a common purpose, which in this case might be an agreed-upon vision based upon the 16th century Anabaptist dream.

Relationships between Hutterites and Prairieleut would perhaps have been closer had the communal Hutterites not left, nearly en masse, for Canada during the World War I era. Fourteen of 15 South Dakota colonies were left uninhabited at that time. *Dariusleut* and *Lehrerleut* branches left South Dakota for Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan and never returned. A few *Schmiedeleut* who had once lived in South Dakota did return but the reestablished themselves slowly; as late as 1935 there were only three colonies.

A fissure in time, a relational gap, was created at a critical juncture in Prairieleut history during a period when assimilationist forces were most potent. During this important time there were no communal relatives nearby to provide a critique of the changes occurring in the Hutter community. In the interim Prairieleut churches had

experienced a major ideological shift toward fundamentalism with a concomitant rejection of their traditional isolationism and pacifism.

It is also significant that Hutterers had many more relatives among the *Lehrerleut* and *Dariusleut*, who never returned to South Dakota, than among the *Schmiedeleut*. Neither group then had close connections with the other for a number of decades, though some Prairieleut continued to visit the colonies and many Hutterites subscribed to Jacob J. Mendel's Freeman *Courier*.

Contemporary interaction between Hutterites and Prairieleut appears to be increasing. In the late 1980's, two older Prairieleut men entertained a Hutterite minister in their home every other week while members of his colony went shopping. The minister preferred conversation with Hutter friends to bi-monthly shopping excursions in downtown Freeman. There were many examples of such contacts. Many Hutterers, for example, went out to the colonies in the evening to share a glass of rhubarb or chokecherry wine.

In July, 1993, the Prairieleut family reunion of descendents of Paul Tschetter and Maria Walter included special music by a group of girls from Oak Lane Colony.⁵⁶ Some Hutterers expressed a sincere hope that communal Hutterites would not give up their way of life. As Prairieleut Amos Kleinsasser put it: "I hope . . . that they continue with their type of life as their belief is biblically based on Acts 2: 42-47." 57

Today Prairieleut are torn between recognition of the Hutterian legacy preserved to some extent in still-vibrant customs, and rejection of that 450-year heritage, due to a powerful sense of cultural embarrassment. A sense of loss appeared most strikingly evident as one heard Hutterers commonly refer to the "Hutterisch community" or "our Hutter churches" or "our way of life" as something which "had been." Many Hutterite-Mennonites interviewed used the past tense "were" when speaking about distinctive Hutter ways of thinking and living, as if to suggest that it was extremely difficult, looking at the contemporary situation, to identify that which made Hutterers unique.

Most ethnic groups in America have followed a path which shows strong correlation between economic and social success and assimilation with an accompanying loss of traditional ways of experiencing life. One might wonder, thus, where Hutterers will find them-

56. "Around the Town," Freeman *Courier* (July 21, 1993), 9.

57. Amos Kleinsasser, untitled reflection on visits to a number of colonies, a class

assignment for "Hutterite Studies," Freeman College (January 31, 1985).

selves 100 years from now. As their young people marry outside the Prairieleut group; as churches become increasingly evangelical and ethnically mixed, it appears doubtful that the movement to preserve and/or transmediate traditions of the past will face anything but a hard uphill struggle in the years ahead.