Mapping life-stories of the Moravian Church 1730-2000

Paper Proposal for the Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries conference

Sverker Lundin and Trausti Dagson, Centre for digital humanities, University of Gothenburg

The Moravian Church was founded by Count Nicholaus Zinzendorf in 1727. A central idea of this new "church" was that its members were encouraged to write an autobiography documenting their life story, a *Lebenslauf*. Its primary purpose was to articulate and preserve the "inner journey", the person's path from a state of sleeping unawareness to his or her rebirth in Christ. Besides being read at the funeral, these *Lebensläufe* were disseminated to parishes around the world, where they were read as a means of edification. Some of them became very popular and were printed. Within the church it therefore emerged what for its time was a relatively "modern" system of print and translation. The *Lebensläufe* played a central role for the church as they portrayed the "inner journey" of its members, which in turn constituted the very core of the "inner church". For this reason an archive was established in Herrnhut in 1762. The main purpose of this archive was to preserve the *Lebensläufe*. When the missionary in the New world had taken off in the latter part of the 18th century, a second archive was established in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Together, the archives in Herrnhut and Betlehem contain about 20 000 *Lebensläufe*, spanning the time period from the establishment of the archive in 1750 to the present day.

The proposed paper is a presentation of a project constituting the first step in a planned process of digitalization, transcription, presentation and analysis of the *Lebensläufe* of the Moravian Church. Only a small fraction of the material is printed, and even less is currently digitized. We have therefore as a first step focused on the metadata that sits in digital form in the archives in Herrnhut and in Betlehem. These metadata contain *place* and *date*, of *birth* and *death*, information about *gender* and sometimes other information concerning the *Lebensläufe*.

We will present a web-portal focused on these metadata. In the centre of the portal stands an interactive map of the world. On this map, the user can visualize subsets of the material based on the information in the metadata. For instance it is possible to show: the birth places of all persons living in a certain period; the death places of all women (or men) coming from a certain place or area or; the relationship between birth place and place of death, shown as arrows, for a subset of the material.

The web-portal is designed to serve several purposes. It will show-case the material and function as a nodal point for the international research community working with *Lebensläufe;* It creates

new possibilities of exploration of the material, especially its spatial and temporal dimensions; It facilitates identification of subsets that can be made the subject of specialized research projects involving digitalization; It can function as an entry-point into the material sitting in Herrnhut and Bethlehem, bringing the old-fashioned possibility of actually going there to look at the *Lebensläufe* to the attention of researchers.

The project has been mainly data-driven with the primary purpose of opening the material up for research. A host of ideas for what to do with the material has been constantly present however. One specific focus is on the Moravian church itself, its spatial distribution as well as its demography in terms of ethnicity, class and gender. The material indicates that the church included a wide variety of people, from slaves and artisans to nobles. Another use of the material is as a more general point of entry to life-worlds of Europe. Because of its heterogeneity, the material provides a wide range of perspectives. Many of the Moravians travelled, which makes the material into a rich source of information regarding migration, between different parts of the world, at different points in time. It has been suggested that the Moravians prefigured later developments, in psychology and education, concerning the self and its development. This, among other things, makes the material relevant for the history of ideas. On another note, the material opens up for various studies employing language technology. For instance, it would be possible to study the spatial distribution of sentiments.

An important question that we presently discuss how to design our database and our user interface to best cater for this wide variety of possible research questions. Should the project focus on *documents*, or on *persons*? Should it only include text, or also include pictures, such as portraits or paintings of buildings? Should only *Lebensläufe* be included in the database, or should it also include related materials, such as contemporary printed sources? To what extent should we try to to link the information about persons found in the archive to biographic lexica?

In our presentation we will explain the design choices we have made, but also invite to discussion concerning the possible futures of the project.