

DR. J. H. STEPLER, CLEVELAND'S GERMAN-AMERICAN PASTOR-POET

by  
Robert E. Ward  
Youngstown State University

Of the various professional people who contributed to the largest body of non-English American literature, no group exercised a more profound influence on the German-American culture than the Lutheran pastor.<sup>1</sup> Through its literary organs and publishing houses the Lutheran Church made a most profound contribution to the great fund of German-American literature<sup>2</sup>--at a time in our history when the Church played such a vital role in the lives of the second largest group of immigrants. It was largely the Church to which German-speaking immigrants first turned for their education, social, religious, and cultural needs. And like Luther himself who united his followers through language, so the Lutheran Church in America with its German congregations served as the unifier of both the spirit and the mind of the German-speaking immigrant who was faced with the task of integrating himself into a foreign, often hostile environment. Thus the Church stood in the very center of the German immigrant's life: German schools, English classes, social organizations, religious instruction. In order to facilitate a common ground for communication the Church established a press and literary organs printed in German. One of the most important German-American presses was the Central Publishing House in

Cleveland which published the official literary organ of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, Die Kirchenzeitung. The publications of the Central Publishing House, the numerous church organs, and the German newspaper, Wächter und Anzeiger established Cleveland as a center for German-American literary activity.

Dr. Johann Heinrich Stepler (1841-1928), poet, writer, and editor of Die Kirchenzeitung in 1923 served as the pastor of the old Second Reformed German Church in Cleveland, Ohio.

My fourscore years on earth are gone,  
 While still my days are marching on.  
 The Indian Summer of my life  
 Now finds me free from care and strife.  
 My work on earth is almost done  
 As now I face the setting sun.  
 And while I look resigned ahead  
 I see the sunset glow with red;  
 And evening breezes whisper soft:  
 "O weary pilgrim, look aloft!"  
 Above, a better day will dawn--  
 And so the Master leads me on.

Thus wrote Pastor Stepler on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in the preface to his autobiographical sketch "Leaves of my Life's Book of over Fourscore Years"<sup>3</sup> to which he added: "I have had my place among men as a tree stands among trees...in no way exceptional, just the ordinary kind. Leaves have their time to fall. In the autumn of my life the following leaves are dropped to fall where they may."<sup>4</sup> The flow of these lines reflects the poetic nature of this man of God whose life and literary activity<sup>5</sup> have earned him a place in the chronicles of Ohio history.

Pastor Stepler's first poetic work, *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit*, was published in Cleveland in 1878. His collection of poems entitled *Feldblumen* appeared in 1899. As the editor of "Die Kirchenzeitung" he continued his literary efforts. In 1905 he contributed a lyric poem as well as an epic one to G. A. Neeff's<sup>6</sup> anthology, *Vom Lande des Sternenbanners*, and in 1907 his poem commemorating the erection of the Goethe-Schiller monument in Cleveland appeared in the *Gedenkbuch der Goethe-Schiller Denkmalweihe in Cleveland, Ohio, den 9. Juni 1907*. All of the poems in his "Nachlass" have recently appeared in print.<sup>7</sup> In addition to his poetic activity, he wrote a biography of the well-known German-American historian, Reverend H. J. Rütenik<sup>8</sup> which is written in a smooth, even style, demonstrating a firm grasp of his adopted language and a keen sense for organization. Pastor Stepler's English autobiography was written as a supplement to his "Erinnerungen" which appeared in some twelve numbers of *Die reformierte Kirchenzeitung* (Feb., March, April, 1902). The biographical elements which follow have been drawn for the most part from his typewritten manuscript.

Pastor Stepler was born on October 15, 1841 in Maar, Kreis Lauterbach in Central Germany as the youngest of three brothers and three sisters. The Steplers had all been agrarians, and religion found a central place in their daily lives. At the age of eighty, he fondly recalled his father "reading with stress the morning prayers and occasionally a sermon by Scriver or Arndt."

As a boy Pastor Stepler witnessed the violence and turmoil of the Revolution of 1848 only slightly since its effects were felt less in rural areas than in the cities. His comments on the state of religion and morals during that period give us interesting insight into the social frame of a typical rural community of mid-nineteenth century Germany:

Aside from that politically restless year of storm and stress, there was moral and spiritual quiet. In fact it seemed as if a general spiritual death was prevalent. The church itself seemed dead in formalism. True, a child so young can hardly be a competent witness in such weighty matters and I am only stating the impression on my own mind. Still there lingers in my memory a strong contrast as to religion and morals. Actual crime there was next to none. Aside from too much use of whiskey and drunkenness, and some infractions of the law of chastity, especially of the unmarried, there was a fair moral rectitude. Of theft, highway robbery, burglary, perjury, murder, suicide, etc. there was none. As for divorce, I have no recollection of a single case. Would a boy up to fourteen years remember such an occurrence? Very probably, for in such a quiet, monotonous community any such unusual event would be the subject of gossip and talk for an indefinite time.

I can account for this contrast in a dead state of religion and a healthy state of morals only when I remember what others have said about it. The ethical condition was an inheritance of better generations when there was no such contrast. Rationalities had undermined faith, but it boasted of building up good morals.

In thus looking back on my early years I find much to be thankful for. I am glad that the land of Luther was my fatherland, and the language on which he left his impressions was my mother tongue.

On Whitsunday 1855 young Stepler was confirmed in the Lutheran faith and in the same year completed his eight years of study at the common school. In his recollections

of his early youth he relates the circumstances (so typical of the time) which led him to emigrate to America.

My oldest brother having married, he according to the old custom inherited the home and "Bauerei" and thus became "der neue Herr". It is true that by prenuptial contract he paid a price for it as agreed on and also engaged to provide for the parents who were growing old. The sum paid by him was to be divided among the remaining two brothers and two sisters then living. But home was then no longer what it had been. We were not driven out, but felt we were tolerated. As for me, the youngest, I was to learn a trade by being apprenticed to a cabinet maker. The brother eight years older than myself had in 1853 emigrated to America. He felt lonely in the strange land and longed for some one of the family to follow him across the ocean. While none of the sisters, married by that time, cared to leave the fatherland, I desired to seek my fortune over the sea.

On June 11, 1856 he left home and on the nineteenth sailed from Bremen for New York, arriving there on the fifth of August. His father had provided him with enough money to reach Kenton, Ohio. Being young and inexperienced, Stepler was an easy mark for unethical businessmen, and consequently he reached Cleveland with very little money. His predicament was solved when his brother arrived in the "Forest City" ten days later. The two brothers left immediately for Upper Sandusky where they found employment with the Pittsburgh-Fort Wayne-Chicago Railroad. During the next eleven months the brothers earned their living at a variety of jobs in western Ohio and young Johann quickly gained an elementary proficiency in English.

In the summer 1857 the two brothers took a job cutting cordwood in Forest, Ohio where they made the acquaintance

of some fellow Germans, "mostly railroad men who longed for public worship."

In the log cabin of one Nicholas Hartman we would meet on a Sunday evening to sing some hymns, read a sermon, and so try to satisfy the soul's sincere desire for communion with God. This seemed better than nothing, but oh we felt happy when Rev. Henry Bentz came to preach and pray with us. Then he succeeded in securing Peter Joerris to come to us. We organized a Reformed Church, and now enjoyed the use of the means of Grace.

It was on a Sunday evening I had read in a Lutheran Church paper an appeal to young men to devote their lives to the ministry. This appeal challenged me. I had from boyhood an undefined feeling that I should become a minister. Thus far I had suppressed it, there being no prospect of attaining anything so high. On the Sunday just mentioned, the Rev. Joerris, who could know nothing of my inner feeling, asked me straight out whether I did not feel called to prepare myself to the ministry. I did not have the courage to own up at the time, but from that day on, the inarticulate call within me became more definite, and I felt that my pastor would not let me go, even in his prayers. For weeks, for months, I had no power to dismiss that feeling. Then I corresponded with the Rev. Mr. Anstead of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania with the result that the day was set when I should start for the Lutheran institution at Gettysburg. As the day approached, money and courage failed me, and that feeling cooled in me. So some months passed. Late in the autumn of 1857 while in the employ of Dr. Stanley at Patterson (near Forest), I felt an impulse to take a trip to Tiffin, thirty miles away. I went, and called on Rev. H. J. Rütenik, hardly knowing why. Then in my embarrassment I asked him the way to Heidelberg College. He told me curtly and I went there. Professor J. Kecher, whom I had met once before, asked me if I had come to remain. In a brief interview it was decided that I should enter upon my studies there within a week. And so I started in a new direction.

Young Stepler began his studies at Heidelberg College with less than twenty dollars in his possession. He received eighty dollars annually from the Board of Beneficiary

Education, and frequent loans and gifts of money from his brother "who earned meager wages as a common laborer." From 1858 to 1862 he taught at Reformed Church schools in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Lima, Ohio, worked as a harvest hand at various farms in western Ohio, and as a colporteur for the American Tract Society for Hardin County.

In his "Erinnerungen" Pastor Stepler recalls that he was teaching school at the time of the Presidential election of 1860.

My schoolhouse was used as a townhall for voting. It narrowly escaped being burned to the ground. It was a cold day, and some of the voters, perhaps intoxicated, lingered in the schoolhouse that night, keeping a roaring fire in the stove. After they left in the morning the building started to burn, but was discovered just in the nick of time. So Lincoln's first election was even to me a memorable event.

The political questions of the day, just prior to the Civil War, mainly about slavery might have occupied much of my attention if I had understood more fully what those questions involved. But this was not the case, and the exceeding excitement in politics of the day had little attraction for me. Decades later I fully realized what momentous issues were before the country in those days. Years after the children kept singing "John Brown's Body Lies A-mouldering in the Grave, but his Soul Goes Marching on!".

After April 1861 the war had broken out and indeed during those terrible four years of its duration I continued largely to ignore what was taking place. I heard, of course, the appeals of the recruiting officers. I was aware of the excitement in the country but was not carried away with the noise around me. That was largely the feeling of the mass of people in the North. All the while, though, party spirit rose high and often there was bitter enmity in the churches and in the neighborhoods, one part blaming the other.

In the fall of 1862 after the resignation of Pastor J. C. Ruhl, Stepler was urged to enter the ministry before the completion of his studies at Heidelberg College because of an urgent need for pastors. "So it happened that I was called to the pastorate of the Second Marion Charge, which after re-adjustment consisted of St. Jacob's Church (one mile east of Horton), St. Joseph's (six miles north of Horton), Prospect (seven miles west of same) and Burwick (eight miles north of Prospect)."

The text that follows constitutes the last eight pages of Stepler's 14-page typewritten manuscript. Only obvious errors in orthography and punctuation have been corrected.

[From Johann Heinrich Stepler's "Erinnerungen"]

#### MY FIRST CHARGE

Each of these little congregations had its own marked peculiarities. In point of spiritual interest, St. Joseph's seemed ahead of the others. Among those good people I had my home. St. Jacob's congregation had no church of their own. A "Block-Kirche" was held and used in common by the Reformed and Lutherans. There had been lack of harmony, but later there was some improvement. Very different was the little flock at Middletown, now Prospect. There the members were Pennsylvania-Germans. They had no church of their own but we held services in a Presbyterian church in the evening.



Three officers, main pillars of this church, were brothers Jacob, Levi and Phillip Woodring. The oldest of these was Jacob, an elder who was rarely seen in church. He claimed that there were too many churches in that village and that the preachers were to blame for the war. In a sense he was right. Too many churches was proof that the people were not united and especially Methodist ministers being agitate against slavery, were a cause of the war. Years later it was this elder who did most to build the Reformed Church and subsequently, too, a parsonage. To me there was little encouragement there. Even Levi and Phillip Woodring fell out with each other.

I had a little more satisfaction at Burwick, later called Greencamp. These people were poor, having settled in the primeval woods. They were trying to hew out farms where they were destroying mighty timber. They lived in cabins, log cabins. The old dilapidated schoolhouse in which we worshiped at first scarcely furnished shelter when it rained--for the table, the Bible or the Preacher. Later we held services in the private homes while they vainly endeavored to build a log chapel. Ere two years had passed, I was discouraged and resigned. At the time I was as yet no citizen of the United States and the bitter party spirit seemed to me foolish and wrong. I felt like taking a middle course, not going so fast in the direction of abolition nor the opposite. It seemed to me then, and has seemed to me since, that the slaves should have been prepared gradually

for freedom. It is true when emancipation came it was abrupt and was called a war measure.

#### NEWVILLE, INDIANA

When it came to be known in our ministerial circles that I was inclined to resign, there was no lack of invitations to other fields. My old friend, Rev. P. Joerris, was anxious that I should go to Watertown, Wisconsin, but the Rev. P. Vitts prevailed on me to go to Newville, Indiana. I preached there one Sunday in August 1864, was elected, and accepted the call. In this charge I had the Swiss church at Newville and the two Rock Creek churches west of Bluffton. These two consisted mainly of Pennsylvania-Germans, also a few good families from Crawford County, Ohio. My new parishoners were also mostly Democrats, but less violent. Here also as in my first charge I officiated in both languages. Here as in Marion County, Ohio there were many miles between my different churches and the roads were often in a terrible condition. But I took those hardships as matters of course. I did not think that I was too good for such a country charge, when again the salary was only three hundred dollars. However, the members kept my horse in feed and remembered the pastor besides in many ways, also the pastor's wife.

I should have mentioned before that I had married in 1863 a daughter of Dr. Sagabiel of Kenton, Ohio. A good wife, a helpmate who in her quiet way enabled me to live in and for

my work. In this I seemed fairly successful. The indications were that I could continue there for years had it not been for the ill health of my wife. Rather weak before, she took sick in the autumn of 1866 and died November 9th the same year. Aside from this I have no misgivings about those two years on the upper Wabash, notorious at the time for much malaria. There were large tracts of primeval forests that contained much moisture, breeding mosquitos in great abundance, this again aggravating the prevalent malaria. It was very bad in a wet, hot summer. Indiana was still at the time new in many respects. Drainage, good roads and such things came later. As my Newville congregation consisted almost entirely of Swiss, I came to understand and to love them. They were good citizens, churchly and upright as a class. Up the Wabash River the settlers were nearly all Swiss for ten miles, mostly on the east side of the River. Aisde from my own members the Evangelical Association was represented. More numerous were the Mennonites, very estimable as good, peace-loving citizens. An offshoot from them were the Amish people, still more ossified in their religious views and ways. They were noticeable at once for the cut of their clothing and beards. Those externals seemed to be a big part of their religion. Perhaps on account, in part, of their spiritual formalism, a new sect had sprung up among them called the "Neue-Täufer." They too were "wehrlos" like those mentioned. Also rural and extremely fanatical. Only they were real Christians--the "little flock". They hated an educated ministry (also me).

It was during the Civil War, 1864, that the government needed more soldiers. There was conscription but the Mennonites and even the Amish proved by their religion and history that their religion forbade war or the bearing of arms. The Neuer-Täufer had neither creed nor history to prove that they were to be exempt from the draft. They had to write a creed. They did try it and then came to me to translate it into English. I undertook to do them this service but found it very difficult, as their so-called "creed" was merely a confused string of words with little connection or sense.

It was now the last year of the Civil War, however the end was not in sight. Extreme and narrow-minded members of the Democratic Party, bitter against the war and the Lincoln Administration, suspected that the war spirit was kept up with intent and that peace was as far off as ever. Some joined a secret organization known as the Knights of the Golden Circle. They were Southern sympathizers and plotted secretly against the government of the United States. Some were discovered, arrested and brought themselves into serious trouble. One of my own church officers lost his farm and all his property in consequence. The war was nearing its end. Only ignorant people, blinded by party prejudice and led by disloyal newspapers failed to see this.

As for myself, for various reasons I kept aloof as much as I could from the malignant party strife. It was impossible for me to go with either party. It was not until about 1880

that I came into a fuller agreement with the Republican Party of Garfield, Sherman and Blane. In earlier years I took no interest in party politics and for years abstained from voting.

In view of my wife's ill health I resigned the Bluffton charge and accepted a call to Sharon, Pennsylvania to which my friend, Rev. M. Mueller had recommended me. But she died before we could move, leaving me and Meta and Calvin at less than three and less than eight years old respectively. Their aunt, Mrs. Vogler, in Kenton took them and kept them until I had a home of my own again in Sharon.

#### SHARON, PENNSYLVANIA

The change from Indiana to Pennsylvania meant much to me in every way. My new members were nearly all coal miners. In those days no pastor could remain indifferent to the church questions involved. I too had my views and they were as in my former surroundings, opposed to the High Church contentions. True, the laity around me were not affected by the theological controversies raging in the church publications, but the ministers as a rule were partisans. As a whole the pastors of West Pennsylvania sided with the Mercersberg Theology. This was at times painfully evident in the meetings of Synod, especially so at the old mother Synod at Hagerstown, Maryland in 1868. It seemed then that there was a determination to crush Dr. J. H. A. Bomberger, the main champion of the old Reformed Church Principals. In the

Pittsburgh Synod organized subsequently the same spirit prevailed. However the liturgical conflict had now reached its climax and the asperities began to subside. At least they became less violent so that my intercourse with the High Church ministers was not seriously marred. In fact I have only kind recollections of these good brethern. They have now all passed away, but I cherish their memories.

My pastoral work in the Sharon charge had some peculiarities. The men were largely occupied as coal miners. They had hard work and fairly good pay, but were measurably poor though some owned their modest homes. They were mostly by extraction people of the old Palatinate, more moral than religious. Indeed some were like the Phariseen of old, "tugendstolz", which is dangerously near to being self-righteous. In those cases even the good qualities of heart and conduct became impediments to conversion and spiritual life. Otherwise they were good citizens and estimable people. I had three small churches; one near Sharon, one six miles east of Sharon, one little preaching point across the state line in Ohio. At Hickory (Jerusalem's) six miles east of Sharon we had at first a union log chapel with the Lutherans. The building was old and not worth repairing. The Lutheran people were too few and dispirited to maintain their organization, so we undertook to build a Reformed Church. There as elsewhere the language question gave us much trouble. To me, and others, the English language seemed necessary to use. Some Pennsylvania-Germans were stubbornly opposed to this.

While at Sharon I found and married Dorothy B. Reimold, oldest daughter of J. G. Reimold near Orangeville, Ohio. This little town like Sharon itself is on the Ohio-Pa. state line. Rev. Cyrus Diffenbacher and Rev. Fred Pilgrim officiated at our wedding Aug. 13, 1867. While at Sharon there was born to us Rosa, who died at twenty months of scarlet fever, prevalent there at the time. Our Emma, Lousia and Phillip were also born there.

There also with the help of my father-in-law I bought nineteen acres of land and built a cottage, so we had our own home. Later when away from it for many years it was not a good investment--rather a loss. During my pastorate at Sharon I was present at the organization of Pittsburgh Synod, voted in favor of founding the St. Paul's Orphans' Home, and attended the meeting of Pittsburgh Synod at Buffalo. I took part in the laying of a cornerstone at Titusville, a dedication at Brady's Bend and the installation of D. D. Lebbermann at Meadville. My pastorate at Sharon lasted from November 1866 to October 1875. After seven years at Sharon I felt that a change was desirable. Resigning again, I came back to my dear Ohio, near Tiffin.

#### AGAIN IN OHIO

My new field, the Caroline charge, consisted of three congregations; the Baseline Church located on the Seneca-Crawford County Line, the Windfall Church on the "pike" (so-called), a road from Sandusky to Columbus, and thirdly

the Caroline congregation which had no church of its own. Of the three in my time the Baseline congregation was best. The services were well attended and I had the respect and goodwill of the people.

In 1876 we built the parsonage, one mile south of Carrothers. In this our youngest daughter, Clara, was born on April 23, 1877. Had it not been for an ill-natured quarrel in the Windfall Church about the burial of the dead, I might have remained there for an indefinite time. I loved the people and was prepared with horse and buggy, sulky, sleigh and saddle.

In the Classis and Synod I felt at home. In 1874 I was elected Stated Clerk, in which capacity I served Heidelberg Classis for 14 years. In 1875 I was elected as a member of the board of directors of the "Buch-Anstalt" (Central Publishing House). After this I was re-elected as such a member many times. So I came to have a part in the management under Dr. Rütenik as well as Rev. Becker.

#### IN LIMA, OHIO

Early in 1878 I received a call from the Reformed Church in Lima. The salary named and fully paid during my 10 1/2 years was six hundred dollars and parsonage. Lima at that time had about 7,000 people and was a railroad center with some other industries. The German population was less than 10%. My membership was about 150, after ten years 325. We arrived in Lima on the eighth of May 1878. A few days later I went



as a delegate to General Synod at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This was an event in the church and also one in my life. My horizon enlarged and my name became known. I may say I was growing.

I missed my full church in Lima, as I had on the Baseline. But there was growth and improvement in various ways. In the town I myself and the church came to be known. So I came to enjoy the goodwill of the community--quite an advantage later; the Reformed Church in Lima had, prior to my time, quite a checkered career. The very plain brick church had been built in 1868. No pastor remained long. When a few good Swiss people came there, an improvement took place. But the growth of the congregation, like that of the town, was slow. Also in [sic] my time and the years passed quietly. I endeavored to do my duty in the pulpit and as pastor. The good seed was sown, some no doubt fell on good soil. There were no phenomenal conversions, but there was improvement in the church life, in morals and goodwill.

In regard to the General Synod of 1878 it might be worthwhile to say a few words, but as it is a matter of our church history, I will omit it here. While pastor of the Reformed Church in Lima I enjoyed in the Sunday School the much valued assistance of H. S. Prophet, a prominent attorney and vice-president of my Sunday School, English though he was. Similarly an old Presbyterian minister attended my church quite regularly. Like Mr. Prophet, Mr. Johnston loved the German language, though he had but a limited knowledge of it.

Our plain brick church was in need of some repairs. Some of my men opposed spending much money on the old building. They rather favored waiting and in time building a new church.

A very shabby fence enclosing our church property also called for repairs. Mr. J. Schlosser favored a new fence, as treasurer he had money for it (a fund surplus of the minister's salary). In 1886 when the matter was up, the question took the form of a new fence or a new church. I used all my influence to get permission to see what money we could raise for a new church. In three days I had over \$3,000 on the subscription list. Everybody was surprised at this, however, it was not smooth sailing. But in time I secured over \$11,000 and we got started to build in 1887. When the church was dedicated January 1, 1888, it was nearly paid for, costing about \$14,000. It was a bit of work on my part; we had no rich members in those years; oil and gas had not been found as yet or brought money to members. On the part of many of my members I received credit for my work and success in those ten years. Still I felt that there were a few who quietly seemed to desire a new pastor for the new church. As yet there was no real opposition, but I did not care to remain until an opposition made itself felt.

When in 1882 the Second Reformed Church in Cleveland was apparently unable to survive, the Mission Board desired to take the poor little mission, but nothing came of that. It was well--the only chance for survival at that time occurred when Rev. Mr. Young, a neighborly pastor, came to the rescue

with a goodly number of his members. So the Second Church was saved at that time. The Rev. Mr. Young fitted in well; he was fairly successful until he died in 1886. Then again vacant, they wrote to me, but as the movement for the new church in Lima had just begun, I declined. They then applied to Rev. C. H. Shoepfle. He accepted their call but in less than two years he was practically forced to resign. They then turned again to me. I resigned in Lima as I felt my work there was done. I have no regrets for having gone there in 1878, not for leaving in 1888.

#### IN CLEVELAND

Looking back now over that and previous turns and changes in my life, it does seem to me that there was a higher hand that led me on each important change. I had now been twenty-six years in the ministry. Could I anticipate that I would be another twenty-six years in the harness, in this one little congregation? I have not regretted coming to Cleveland where God led the way. Here my life and that of my family was cast in this fine, big city located favorably, growing steadily, with a large variety of commercial and industrial enterprises. We have here enjoyed good street car service, public libraries, parks, the Lake, river and public lectures, etc.

True, in Lima we left a fine, new church and a good parsonage. In Cleveland I had an old parsonage and a cheap old frame church. But here also we found good friends who

received us kindly and remained faithful and true. For a few years Calvin College students used to come frequently to assist in our Young Peoples' Society. So it came to pass that eventually Paul H. Land was to marry my daughter Louise and Jacob S. Kosover, persisting, took our Emma away from us. In 1892 Owen W. Ohl from Bloomville, Ohio had taken the oldest daughter, Meta, as his farmer wife.

Living in Cleveland was also decisive for the youngest son Phillip. His preference was farm work--rather gardening. He, Phillip Melanchton, learned his life-work with Martin Luther Rütenik while they were raising cabbage, etc.

We had in my church a Frauenverein, Jugendverein, Sunday School and, in 1890, organized the Bauverein<sup>9</sup> the object of which was to gather a fund for the building of a new church. This organization bought the lot corner E. 38th and Woodland Avenue. This location at the time proved best for our purposes, being fairly central. Our members lived then east and west, north and south of this location. At the time there were as yet no Russian Jews there, but in 15 years they were all around in complete possession there.

Early in 1893 we had an offer of \$6,000 for our church property from a Catholic-Slovak congregation. They bought it, much to the chagrin of Bishop Horstman, who in my presence gave them a memorable tongue-lashing for wanting a church of their own. It became necessary for us to think of building. Our lot was only 50 X 120 ft. on which to build

Church and parsonage. But there was no thought of building a wooden church. While figuring on brick, a stone company made us a very tempting offer, so it came to pass that we built the stone church. When we were through building in 1893 we had an investment of about \$20,000 with a debt of \$3,500. A fine property, the location later on not so good for our purpose, was nevertheless valuable in a great street... [Editorial omission]. The debt mentioned, while not large, was nevertheless heavy when the financial condition of the members was considered. This and the removal of members, owing to the surroundings, prevented the church from growing.

When in this manner, laboring under increasing depression, still a brighter prospect opened. The First Evangelical Protestant Church located for many years at the corner of Erie and Central Avenue could no longer maintain itself at that downtown location. Being independent of any denomination or supervision, they were free to dispose of their property as they pleased. They sold it, paid their debt, and agreed to divide the balance. The majority, receiving about \$7,000 were led by President John Rock. They desired to unite with us. They took, however, thirty months to decide. Meanwhile they worshipped with us to see if they would feel at home with us. On Easter Sunday 1890 in connection with the Holy Communion, they to the number of 75 members, by rising, were received into the Second Reformed Church. True among the 75 there were many mere nominal members, still quite a number of good members came to us in this way. My congregation

was increased and strengthened financially and otherwise with the \$5,000 which they brought to us. We paid our debts, bought the adjoining lot and remodeled the church to gain room for a pipe-organ. This again caused us to incur a new indebtedness which was however not a great burden.

My people now appreciated what I had done and voted me a vacation to go to Europe if I wished. In this way I had my only real vacation in fifty years. With my youngest daughter I made a flying trip--three days in England, three weeks in Germany and one week in Switzerland.

On the third day of May 1903 when the church had just been renovated and remodeled, a torpedo factory near us exploded, doing immense damage all around us and completely wrecking our windows. They were repaired but were not what they had been. This increased our debt again by \$300.

A degree of disappointment came over me some months later and I was disposed to become Rev. Kosover's successor in Glenville. However, I was not elected. Later, wishing to rest or retire I bought a lot in the west end of Lakewood to build for my last trek. However it was not to be. Not even when I received a call from the Euclid congregation, when by unanimous vote my people refused to accept my resignation. This was gratifying to me at the time. I took courage again and although the surroundings changed for the worst, and some members left us by removal, in a measure we held our own. Church work continued as well as could be expected.

In June 1912 we had sold the church property but the purchaser, unable to pay, lost his "Angeld". October 15, 1912 my Sunday School teachers surprised me and lit 71 candles. November 12, 1912 my jubilee--fifty years in the ministry. In the evening the ministerial conference came to congratulate me. Revs. Belser, Roengten, Rütenik spoke. At 7:30 p.m. in the Church basement a banquet by the Ladies' Society, full house, music and speeches by Revs. Becker, Bomberger, Prof. Woltman and 18 other ministers present. Even Father Lindensmith, Roman Catholic, aged 90 had come. Near the end Prof. Woltman handed me ten time \$10 in gold with a fine speech.

Mrs. Stepler had suffered a stroke of paralysis at the end of October 1911. Her left side was paralyzed, dead, except for the pain. It became necessary to employ a nurse and a housekeeper, until Sister Margaret, the nurse, offered to take care of patient and the house. This continued until Mama's death on September 12, 1915.

Nov. 16, 1913:

Now I've been pastor here for 25 years. Mr. Woldmann spoke of this in a public meeting very feelingly. At the end of the meeting it was decided to accept the offer of Mr. Shanmann for the church property. It was \$19,000. Later the trustees bought the building back, to take it down stone by stone, cart it away and build it up again as before. (In church papers, as well as in the Cleveland German daily, there were lengthy reports of my Jubilee.)

February 15, 1916:

Today my congregation voted unanimously to buy three lots at Olivet Avenue and East 99th Streets. Total cost: \$10,000. To me, not quite agreeable, but seemed the best that could be done. It was necessary to come to a decision to avoid fractional spirit.

In December 1913 I had bought the lot on the east bank of Rocky River, contracted with H. V. Christmann to build a two-family house. June 13, 1914 we moved into the new house. The dear invalid wife enjoyed the pretty home for 15 months. August 2, 1914 we laid the cornerstone at East 99th. This day the war began in Europe. We held services in the hall in Cedar Avenue. I continued to serve my church from my home in Lakewood, even after I had resigned in August. November 15, 1914 my resignation became effective. Farewell sermon--full house--Mr. Woldmann also John Rock, elders spoke feelingly at the close. Their eyes, and many others, were wet. To me it was bitter-sweet.

After this I supplied the Monroeville Church for one year. Then I surrendered it to Rev. Mr. Belser. In July Mrs. Stepler became worse, the end was approaching, in great pain except when under the influence of sedatives. We had Dr. Waltz and Dr. Otto Miller, earlier Dr. Hastings. The end was peaceful on the day named, Sunday evening. It was a mild autumn day. Funeral was on the 15th, sermon in church on East 99th. Many friends showed sympathy. I remained in my home on Sloan Avenue. Herbert Land was with me and



Sister Margaret remained with us a housekeeper another four years. I disposed of my real estate and was no longer confined so closely to my home. We had company on and off.  
August 1916:

I suffered of extreme heat, reduced in weight, voice was affected and my strength decreased. I recovered very gradually. Later on I was myself again.

June 1917:

Erie Classis asked me to write a biography of Dr. Rüttnik. I enjoyed it, and wrote as requested, also in English.

It being wartime, Rev. Dr. Roentgen came to be in ill favor in Washington and was no longer allowed to write the Kalendar. I then became his successor in that work. So I am the author of the same in 1919, '20, '21, '22, '23. Congenial work, but I earned my fifty dollars per annum.

Went east again in January 1920. I was two weeks in Baltimore, two at Lake Worth, Florida and three weeks at Rock-Ledge. In returning I was another two weeks in Baltimore. Later in 1920 Herbert, myself, and "Dupes" kept house in my home on Sloan Avenue. At times I stayed with my son in Rocky River. When the Sommerlottes came, October 25, 1920, I made my home with them. During 1920 I had enjoyed good health. During this year I preached on and off at various places, and officiated at the installation of Rev. William Klein, Rev. Sommerlotte, Rev. Belser and Rev. Kielsmeir.

On April 19, 1921 my left shoulder was dislocated

while riding in the automobile of Brother Sommerlotte. It was a severe ordeal. After adjusting it became again dislocated, the second adjusting was a horrible experience. November 1, 1921:

The last four months have been full. In July I went in an auto with Rev. Holtkamp to Helvetis, W. Virginia. Was there six to seven weeks. Enjoyed the mountain scenery. Just home again by the end of August I was called to Sharon, to be a guest at the Golden Wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Sholz whom I had married fifty years before. The following Sunday I preached to my former church at Sharon. As the older people had all passed away, the congregation looked to me as strange. After that I was again called to West Virginia to preach three weeks in Wheeling.

October 15, 1921 was a great day as I now completed my four score years. I recorded over 70 birthday cards and letters of congratulations. Same evening the surprise at Rev. Sommerlottes, all the members of the family that could be here were present. The last Sunday in October I preached in First Church. First Sunday in November I preached in Second Church and on November 13 at Mitiwanga, Birmingham, South Carolina.

\* \* \* \* \*

The manuscript ends here. Seven years later Reverend Stepler passed away in his eighty-sixth year, and was laid to rest in Lakeview Cemetery in Cleveland in the presence of friends and members of the German-American community.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Robert E. Ward, "Reflections on Some German Poems by Lutheran Pastors in America," *Concordia Hist. Institute Quarterly*, XLIV, 3 (August 1971), 114-121.

<sup>2</sup> An important influence on German-American culture was exerted by Lutheran publishing houses in the midwestern states, especially Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio: Concordia Publishing House, Louis Lange Publishing Co., Eden Publishing House (St. Louis); The Wartburg Publishing House, formerly Deutsches Verlagshaus, Verlag der Evangelischen Gemeinschaft (Cleveland). The Methodist Book Concern (Cincinnati) also played a vital role in educating the German-American reading public.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to the following descendants of Dr. Stepler who generously provided me with a copy of the pastor's autobiographical sketch: Miss Miriam Schroeder of Toledo, Ohio, Mrs. Evelyn Kirkhart of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, and Miss Virginia Stepler of Rocky River, Ohio.

<sup>4</sup> To this brief autobiography Stepler modestly added the post script: "This meager life story...is in no sense worth printing. It is of no interest to anyone except perhaps to some one of my descendants fifty or one hundred years hence, who may wish to know something of the first American progenitor of the family."

<sup>5</sup> See Franz Brümmer, *Lexikon der deutschen Dichter und Prosaisten vom Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. VII, Phillip Reclam jun. (Leipzig, 1913), p. 61; G. A. Zimmermann, *Deutsch in Amerika; Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutsch-amerikanischen Literatur*, Eyler & Co. (Chicago, 1894), pp. XiiV, 233; L. L. Leser, "Deutsche Dichtkunst in Amerika" in *Das Buch der Deutschen*, ed. Max Heinrici, Der Deutsch-Amerikanische Nationalbund (Phila., 1909), and G. A. Neeff, *Vom Lande des Sternenbanners, German-American Authors' Agency* (Ellenville, N.Y., 1905). See also Robert E. Ward, *Dictionary of German-American Creative Literature*, Amer. Library Assoc.: Chicago (In press).

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Gotthold August Neeff (1869-1909) served as a Lutheran pastor in Nebraska and Ellenville, N. Y. from 1889 until his death. From 1892-1898 he served the Church as a missionary in New Mexico and Arizona. Like Stepler, he too was a prolific writer and German poet. Neeff was born in New York as the son of Pastor Gotthold Ludwig Neeff from Stuttgart. See Brümmer, vol. V, p. 109, and Ward, *Dictionary of German-American Creative Literature*.

<sup>7</sup>See Robert E. Ward, *Deutsche Lyrik aus Amerika. Eine Auswahl*, The Literary Society Foundation, Inc. (N. Y., 1969), p. 31, and Robert E. Ward, Jacob Erhardt, and Irene Heydle, "Deutschamerikanische Dichter: Ihr Leben und Schaffen," *Wächter und Anzeiger* (Feb. 14, 1969, p. 6; March 10, 1969, p. 4; March 13, 1969, p. 4; April 28, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Dr. Hermann Julius Rütenik (1826-1914) was Stepler's predecessor as pastor of the Second German Reformed Church in Cleveland. Reverend Rütenik wrote several volumes on church history as well as German grammars and religious stories for children. He also edited several Lutheran periodicals, among them *The Evangelist* (1856-1875), and *Die reformierte Kirchenzeitung* (1875-1880). His famous book, *Berühmte deutsche Vorkämpfer für Fortschritt, Freiheit und Friede in Nord-Amerika von 1626 bis 1888* was published by the Forest City Bookbinding Co. of Cleveland in 1893. See Ward, *Dictionary of German-American Creative Literature*.

<sup>9</sup>At a meeting of the German Reformed Church on July 3, 1892 in Cleveland, Stepler proposed that Cleveland should have a place "where sick and needy Germans and others could be taken care of in a kindly, sympathetic manner." On July 31, 1892, the Society for the Christian Aid to the Sick and Needy was formed. Through the efforts of this society Cleveland's German Hospital was built on September 8, 1896. The hospital's name was changed during the anti-German hysteria of World War I to Fairview Hospital, one of the finest hospitals in the Greater Cleveland area today. Dr. J. H. Rütenik served as the hospital's second superintendent.

Photos of Stepler and Rütenik as well as biographical data on them may be found in the first edition of *Cleveland und sein Deutschtum* (Cleveland, 1895).

\* \* \* \* \*

#### GERMAN-AMERICAN RESEARCH

Prof. Robert E. Ward, editor of *German-American Studies* is seeking data and material, especially old theatre programs, to assist him in his research on the history of the German theatre in Cleveland and northern Ohio. Contact Prof. Ward at 4156 Claridge Drive, Youngstown, Ohio 44511.

#### ATTENTION RESEARCHERS

Manuscripts are solicited for the forthcoming volume (VI) of *German-American Studies*