

THE GERMAN LANGUAGE PRESS IN MINNESOTA,

1855 TO 1955

by
Donald Tolzmann
Minneapolis

"Deutsch-Amerikanertum" has blossomed in Minnesota since 1850 when the first German immigrants entered the state. Minnesota has usually been falsely conceived of as "Swedeland, U.S.A.," for the state received far more German than Swedish immigrants in the period 1850 to 1900.¹ By 1860 there were 18,400 persons from Germany residing in Minnesota according to the U.S. census.² And by 1870 the German population consisted of 41,364 persons born in Germany and 2,647 persons born in Austria.³ The German-speaking population of the state was estimated at one hundred thousand, that was a fifth of the state's population.⁴ Minnesota's German-Americans established a foreign language press that spanned a century, from 1855 to 1955.⁵

By 1855 enough Germans had congregated in Minnesota to justify the establishment of the first German-language newspaper in St. Paul for the new territory, Die Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung. Two prominent Germans of St. Paul, F. A. Renz, owner of a bakery, and Dominik Troyer, a brewer, together with Governor Alexander Ramsey (who was of German descent) were the founders. Friedrich Orthwein and Albert Wolff were contracted as the business manager and editor.⁶ Wolff played a key role in the history of the German-language press in Minnesota. He had been a theological student at the time of the 1848 revolution in Göttingen. A military tribunal had sentenced him to

death, a sentence which had been commuted to expulsion from his homeland. Under Wolff the *Zeitung* adopted an anti-slavery policy which was opposed by Orthwein who attempted to force his influence into the editorial position of the paper. Disenchantment caused Wolff to leave his position to become the editor of the *Minnesota Thalbote* in Chaska, Minnesota where there was a large settlement of Pennsylvania Germans and German immigrants.⁷ In the interlude the *Zeitung* was acquired by Samuel Ludvigh who was infamous for his radical socialist and anti-clerical viewpoint. From 1857 to 1866 he edited the *Zeitung* until it had become a considerable force and influence in German-American circles. In 1866 Wolff and T. Sander gained control of the paper from Ludvigh who could not make the paper a financial success because of his increasingly radical outlook. Sander was an able manager and Wolff a gifted journalist, and together they produced a German newspaper that gained wide recognition beyond the boundaries of the state. Its descendent is the *Volkszeitung-Tribüne* which is published in Omaha, Nebraska.

In 1856 a second German-language newspaper was founded in St. Paul which espoused the political philosophy of the Democratic Party, the *Minnesota Volksblatt*. The editor and owner was Philip Rohr who had previously edited the *Pfälzische Volkszeitung* in Rheinbayern. Both the *Minnesota Volksblatt* and the *Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung* were determinative as opinion leaders and centers of intellectual life for the German-Americans of the state. They served as vehicles for the publication of various literary contributions, they strove to

preserve the German language and culture by supporting the work of amateur and professional theatricals and authors in various German-American societies, by seeking to arouse interest in German-English schools, and contributed immensely to the introduction of the German language in public schools. The July 24, 1858 issue of the Minnesota Staats-Zeitung expressed the concern that all German-American intellectuals would promote the cause of German-American newspapers amongst "the intellectually blind and the unintelligent masses."

Der Wanderer, a German paper established for Roman Catholics in 1868, stated that it was a Christian messenger with news and educational material for the German-American home. Literary, educational and cultural material flooded the pages of these three newspapers. Many articles and editorials dwelt with the problem of the preservation of the language and harshly criticized German-Americans who renounced their cultural heritage in exchange for Anglo-Saxon folk-ways. An August 3, 1867 article in the Minnesota Volksblatt entitled Ein Wort an die amerikanisch sein wollenden Deutschen refers to the alarming speed with which some parents ban the language from their home and attempt to forget their ancestral heritage. Weak character and the desire for acceptance were cited as the main reasons for such behavior. Readers were urged to learn English but to not cast aside the German. Ludvigh stressed German achievements in music, literature and art as the means of gaining the respect of non-Germans. Other writers foresaw a rapid disintegration of institutions and customs unless German was taught, read and maintained, if not in the school, at least at home.

Alexander Schem's *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Konversations-Lexicon* was probably the most important German-American literary effort and one that received considerable comment in St. Paul's early German press. Prominent German-Americans contributed to the *Lexicon* which was to be to the German-American what Brockhaus and Meyer were to the German. It was published by E. Steiger of New York in 80 issues.⁷ St. Paul's Germans were urged to support this venture in many issues of their press.

German-American bookstores placed many advertisements in the German press for certain authors: Schiller, Koerner, Auerbach, Reuter, Boerne and Freiligrath. German-American prose and poetry was also highly recommended and widely advertised. Johann Straubenmueller's *Gedichte für die Jugend* and Henicus vom See's *Gedichte* were popularized as representative German-American literary art. The newspaper complained that German-American poetry had been ignored too long. Attention was specifically called to Karl Heinzen, Otto Ruppis and Theodor Mundt, and the German-American anthology *Heimatgrüsse aus Amerika*, containing poems on the 1870 victory of Prussia over France. Albert Wolff published *Gedichte gemischten Inhaltes* in 1867 which was quite favorably received by German-American readers in the Midwest. *Der Wanderer* published mainly religious and Roman Catholic books but did bring forth the work of several German-American authors. In 1891 it published *Land und Leute; Reisebilder und Skizzen* by Alexander Berghold of New Ulm, Minnesota. Berghold advocated the German-language press of



Albert Wolff

Minnesota to the new German immigrant:

Für deutsche Auswanderer geben deutsche Zeitungen auch gerne Auskunft; man thut gut, sich auf solche Zeitungen zu abonniren, ob man in Europa oder in Amerika wohnt. Zeitungen zu halten and zu lesen ist ein grosser Vortheil in jedem Lande.⁸

All of St. Paul's bookstores had rental libraries. A German rental library was established in 1858 in Van Hamm's bookstore and was open from eight in the morning to eight in the evening. Initial membership was one dollar, and three cents per day per book borrowed or else fifty cents a month if two books were borrowed. The rule was: "Wer ein Buch verliert, beschädigt oder der Kupfer beraubt, hat den Ladenpreis zu bezahlen."⁹ R. T. Hoelterhoff opened his bookstore in 1861 with German books, periodicals and dictionaries. C. Hoeniger started a rental library in 1868 with works by Auerbach, H. vom See, Schuecking, G. Sand, Mrs. H. Ward, Spielhagen and many others. Bure's book shop was the third rental library advertised in the Wanderer in 1870 with a specialty in German-Catholic materials.

The German-language press in Minnesota also supported the German-language press in the United States. It advertised the Deutsche Volksblätter from Oshkosh, Wisconsin which was a monthly devoted to science, history, travel and memoirs. Gerhards Deutsch-Amerikanische Gartenlaube of New York was so popular that the St. Paul press reprinted many of its articles. Kaspar Butz's Deutsch-Amerikanische Monatshefte

was also quite popular. Other advertised papers were: Dr. Carl Dilthey's New York Illustrierte Familienblatt and Ludvigh's Die Fackel which served as the spokesman of liberal views. Der Wanderer supported Alte und Neue Welt and Der Katholik.

The New Ulm Pionier was the first paper in the frontier settlement of radical socialists and refugees of the 1848 revolution. It was published from 1858 to 1862 by Ludwig Bogen who had been a law student and a member of the Frankfurt Parliament. Bogen's motto was "Freier Boden, Freie Menschen, Freie Arbeit, Freie Presse."¹⁰ The founders of New Ulm visualized a newspaper that would be free of party cliques and would advocate radical change and also disseminate knowledge regarding conditions in the state and serve as the intermediary for members of the Ansiedlungsverein and Turnverein of New Ulm.

Several other publications are noteworthy. 1,800 Mennonites immigrated from Russia to Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1873. There Russian-Germans soon established their own schools, churches and press. J. J. Baergen published Unser Besucher from 1901 to 1922 at the Mennonite stronghold in Mountain Lake. Other German-Russian papers were published in New Ulm. The Dakota Freie Presse from 1932-36 and also the Deutsch-Ungarischer Familienkalender from 1939-52 were published in New Ulm. The latter was the "Jahrbuch der Deutschen aus Batschka, Banat, Burgenland, Slavonien, Ungarn und der Arader Gau in Amerika."¹¹

The German-language press in Minnesota grew steadily until World War I when "German-American institutions were dealt a deadly blow from which they have never recovered."¹² The one

daily and eighteen German-language papers in Minnesota did not escape this death blow. Bernhard Ritter, formerly of the New York Staats-Zeitung, was the editor of the English-language Pioneer Press during the War and supported the German-Americans vigorously. More decidedly pro-German in sentiment was the position of Joseph Matt of the Wanderer. He maintained that German-American Catholics should support their co-religionists in Germany in their endeavors to defend themselves against French accusations. He further urged Anglo-Saxon Americans to realize the just indignations of the German-American Catholics over the calumnies which were being hurled against "everything German" which they cherished as their "precious heritage."¹³ Matt constantly defended the German culture transplant to America and stated that Germany was fighting against the anti-Catholic forces of the world. His statements brought thunderous disapproval from anti-Germans and anti-Catholics. Extracts from Matt's paper had to be submitted to the Safety Commission for scrutiny. The other German newspapers were also thoroughly investigated as to their patriotic character. On August 1, 1917 Joseph Matt and Friedrich Bergmeir of the Volkszeitung of St. Paul appeared at the request of the Commission. The state of mind of the German publisher in America was discussed and the two editors promised to cooperate with the Commission. Unfortunately, on August 10, 1917 Bergmeir was interned in prison for disloyalty to the United States for making anti-war and pro-German statements.¹⁴ The German-language press did survive the War in spite of its removal from churches and schools.

In 1913 the St. Paul Volkszeitung had a circulation of 15,301, according to Ayer's Directory, and in 1921 had 17,122. However, by 1939 circulation had dropped to 16,250. In 1941 the paper was transferred to Omaha, Nebraska to merge and become the Volkszeitung-Tribüne. It is still subscribed to by German-Americans in Minnesota and circulates about three to four thousand copies.¹⁵

The disastrous anti-German hysteria of World War I and the passing of the first-generation of German-Americans can be registered in the closing of several German-language publications in New Ulm, Minnesota. In 1921 the New Ulm Volksblatt closed, followed by Hermanns-Sohn in 1928, the Amerikanische Turnzeitung, the Freidenker, and Die Neue Zeit in 1932, and the next year the New Ulm Post ceased publication. The closings in New Ulm signified the end of an era. However, it was not quite the end of the German-language press for Minnesota. Four German-American papers survived in Winona, which was to be the last stronghold of the German-language press in Minnesota. In 1925 the publishers stated that they had been publishing nine different papers in which 43 older papers had been merged. In 1955 this publishing company moved and sold its newspapers to the Omaha Volkszeitung-Tribüne. For the first time in one century the state of Minnesota was without a German-American newspaper.

FOOTNOTES

¹Sister John Christine Wolkerstorfer, "Ramsey County's German Americans: Their Struggle with Pride and Prejudice," Ramsey County History, 5 (Spring, 1968), p. 3.

²Karl Arndt and May E. Olson, German-American Newspapers and Periodicals, 1732-1955, History and Bibliography (New York, 1965), p. 220.

³Arndt, p. 220.

⁴Arndt, p. 220.

⁵Arndt, pp. 220-37.

⁶See Otto Rudnick, Das Deutschtum St. Paul's in Wort und Bild, Eine Historische Beleuchtung Deutsch-Amerikanischer Tätigkeit in St. Paul (St. Paul, 1924).

⁷There is a paper in the Minnesota Historical Society by Estella Elke, The Moravians in Carver County.

⁸Alexander Berghold, Land und Leute; Reisebilder und Skizzen (St. Paul, 1891), p. 365.

⁹Margarete E. Mussgang, Literary Interests of the Germans of St. Paul, 1855-70 (Minneapolis, 1932), p. 24.

¹⁰Arndt, p. 225.

¹¹Arndt, p. 226.

¹²Robert E. Ward, "Konrad Nies, German-American Literary Knight," German-American Studies, III, 1 (1971), 7.

¹³Sister John Christine Wolkerstorfer, Anti-German Nativism in Ramsey County 1850-1918 (Minneapolis, 1968), p. 61.

¹⁴Wolkerstorfer, p. 77.

¹⁵See Ayer's Directory.

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