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GERMAN CHURCHES OF THE LEHIGH VALLEY

The Lehigh Valley in southeastern Pennsylvania is an area rich in its diversified ethnic heritage. Germans were the first settlers in the area, and during the nineteenth century many of the institutions of the Valley were strongly German in character. Although a great many German-language churches were to be found in the Lehigh Valley during the last century, today only a handful remain. Two representative German churches of the area are St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Allentown and the Holy Ghost Church, Roman Catholic, of Bethlehem.

Lutherans first came from Europe to Manhattan in 1626, therefore, they are to be counted among the earliest settlers in the New World. During the first half of the eighteenth century they established themselves firmly on the American scene under the able guidance of men such as Justus Falckner, Christoph Berkenmeyer, Christian Knoll, and Joshua von Kocherthal. The Salzburger of Georgia came under the leadership of Bolzius and Gronau.¹ The arrival of Heinrich Melchoir Mühlenberg in 1741, the patriarch of the Lutheran Church in this country, led to a solid foundation and organization for the Lutherans by 1748, the year which witnessed the establishment of the first Lutheran Synod of America, the Ministerium of Pennsylvania.

One of the most perplexing difficulties faced by the Lutheran Church in the United States was that of language. Church leaders desired to bring the word of God to their communicants in Luther's language: German. However, they soon realized that the rapid assimilation of the German-speaking immigrant, and the decreasing number of the immigrants' offspring who spoke the language of their parents necessitated the gradual phasing out of the German language in the church.

The German influence in the evolution of the United States manifested itself particularly strong in southeastern Pennsylvania; a generation or two ago often as much German or Pennsylvanian-German could be heard in this area as English. Of course, due to a multiplicity of factors, the usage of German here is dying out. German is spoken usually only by older people in rural areas whereas consistently fewer younger people seem at home in the language.

Of the German-language churches which have existed in the Allentown area, only one remains: St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Less than one hundred German-speaking communicants still attend Sunday services in German.

St. Peter's is situated in the first ward of Allentown which has experienced a major ethnic transition in the last decades. The once strongly represented German element of the section has been replaced by other non-German minority groups which are mainly non-Lutheran. Many of St. Peter's parishioners travel long distances to other churches which offer German services.

St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded on February 26, 1866, and dedicated August 9, 1868. Following the pastorates of Karl Schlenker (1866-1867) and Jakob Zentner (1867-1868) the church retained the services of Pastor Samuel Kistler Brobst (1868-1876) who was well-known among German-Americans in Pennsylvania for his enthusiastic role in public, fraternal, and church life. Pastor Brobst was active in the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, in the founding of Mt. Airy Seminary, was instrumental in the reorganization of Muhlenberg College from a seminary into a Lutheran institution, and was among the founders of Kutztown State College.² He was editor and published of the *Lutherischer Herold* (1858 ff.) which was subsequently renamed and is still published today in Philadelphia as the *Kirchliches Monatsblatt*.

During the able and inspiring pastorate of Georg Friedrich Gardner (1877-1904), St. Peter's experienced a period of rapid growth. Pastor Gardner had come from Germany to study

American educational institutions; however, he never returned to his native land, choosing instead to dedicate his life's work to the Lutheran Church in America. Among his papers are to be found documents listing the statistics of St. Peter's during its earlier years. In 1880 the parish had 245 members, an increase of about 90 since 1870. In 1882, some of the younger parishioners convinced Pastor Gardner that he should conduct evening services in English at least once a month. However, Sunday School classes at St. Peter's were held only in German from 1876 to 1904.

St. Peter's is allegedly the first American parish to erect a monument to Martin Luther. It was dedicated on the 400th anniversary of Luther's birth and was modelled after an original monument in Germany. Today this memorial stands proudly in the courtyard of the only Lutheran Church in Allentown and carries the inscription: "Gottes Worth und Luther's Wehr Vergehen nun und nimmermehr."

From 1904 to 1909, Pastor William Allen Lambert served as St. Peter's pastor. Pastor Lambert instituted services in Slovak in 1908 (the first Slovak church services in Allentown) before leaving his pastorate to minister to the growing Slovak community in South Bethlehem.

Pastor Frederick William Wackernagel guided the parish through the turbulent years of World War I (1910-1920). Despite the pressures exerted on the church and community by the anti-German hysteria of that period, St. Peter's remained a steadfast carrier of the German language in America.

From 1920-1924 the young and energetic Rev. Robert H. Ischinger (from Stuttgart) became pastor at St. Peter's. These years witnessed many changes in the physical structure of the church as well as the establishment of various new church affiliated organizations. A new bell was installed next to the original one donated by Pastor Brobst. The original bell rings even today during the saying of the Lord's Prayer and is affectionately known by all in the neighborhood as the "Vater Unser" bell.

The depression affected St. Peter's rather severely because most of the parishioners came from the working-class. Numerous projects begun under Pastor Ischinger had to be initially altered or even abandoned during the earlier years of the economic chaos, the time of Pastor Franz Adolph Posselt's charge 1925-1950.

September of 1942 witnessed a radical transition in the format of worship; by a vote of 213 to 96 the English-speaking element of the church initiated an English-language service just prior to the German one every Sunday. This innovation has existed to the present day.

The attacks upon the German language and German culture in the United States during World War II were by no means as hysterical as during the first war; yet, St. Peter's did feel the effect of intimidation and Pastor Posselt countered with the statement: "The language of Luther was not a language of politics, but of theology." In addition, the composition of the parish had been altered; the majority of the German-speaking members was no longer from Germany or of German background but rather from Austria, especially the Burgenland area. The loyalty of German-Americans was not now the debated question it had been in World War I.³ Pastor Posselt reported in 1944 that 262 members of his congregation were serving in the American Armed Forces.

During the next five years (1950-55) Dr. Hagen A. K. Staack (from Berlin) led the church as its pastor. Upon receiving a call to become professor of theology at Muhlenberg College, he turned the pastorate over to Fred Chartron (1955-1960) whose diligent and giving spirit has not been forgotten by the parishioners of St. Peter's.

The present pastor, Walter J. Kopperman, a native of Estonia who has served the Church in his native country, in Germany, in Sweden, and in the United States, has steadfastly carried on the cosmopolitan traditions at St. Peter's.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in Bethlehem goes back to the middle of the 19th Century. The Church had

a labored beginning due to the initially small number of Roman Catholics in the city. Father Tanzer of Easton came once a month (beginning in 1854) to minister to their needs. By Christmas of 1856 the first church was built on the north side of town on Union Street. Father Tubely was appointed to aid in the Lehigh Valley, an area now too large for one priest. Father Tubely selected Allentown as his home and journeyed to Bethlehem every third Sunday to celebrate mass. Replacements during the next few years were Father Schrader, Father Kuenzer, and then Father McEnroe, who was to care for the English-speaking people, was appointed together with Father Kaier, who was to be pastor to the German-speaking Catholics of the Lehigh Valley.

Consequently, beginning in 1862, Bethlehem German mass was given on alternate Sundays. Because the number of Roman Catholics showed a rapid increase in South Bethlehem, Father McEnroe took up residence there in 1866 and founded the Church of the Holy Infancy. Since, in the meantime, Father Kaier had been transferred, the German Catholics again lacked a priest who could minister to them in their own tongue. Finally, in 1871, the German Catholics in Bethlehem received a resident pastor, Father Albert; he was replaced in 1874 by Father Winter who was replaced by Father Badde in 1877. During these years the German Catholic population was increasing steadily, settling generally in South Bethlehem in close proximity to the steel mills and the zinc mines. Father Bernhard Korves then came to Bethlehem and was granted permission to build a German Catholic Church in South Bethlehem; ground was broken on December 21, 1885. Within two years the two-story structure was completed, the church on the second floor, the school on the first. The new church was blessed as St. Bernard's and this original building of Bethlehem's German Catholic Church still stands today, known in the parish as the "Casino."

In 1891, Father Fretz came to replace Father Bernhard Korves who was transferred to Philadelphia. As a result of

the rapid growth of the parish, an assistant, Father Albert Korves, was appointed; mass was now said for the German Catholics twice each Sunday. On June 21, 1895 ground was broken for a new church building which was to be named after the Holy Ghost, in Whom the parishioners placed their faith and to Whom the new building was to be dedicated. Eventually a single story edifice was built which today forms the basement of the Holy Ghost Church. On March 1, 1896, the new place of worship was blessed. As the parish continued to expand and prosper, work on the upper structure commenced. The sanctuary, still worshipped today, was completed externally on May 19, 1907; and the magnificent inner sanctuary, admired as one of the most beautiful of the area, was completed during the following two years. The church was blessed on September 25, 1910.

When the First World War broke out, the Holy Ghost parish also found itself in a precarious situation as a German parish. Many felt personal loyalties to the Central Powers, having themselves come from either Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire or still having many of their closest family members in Central Europe. Yet, when the United States entered the war, parishioners gladly went to the aid of their adopted country.

Father Fretz retired in June 1931 and was succeeded by Father Fasig. Today, Father Bollinger is the priest at Holy Ghost Church. I am indebted to him for generously providing me with information for this manuscript.

At Holy Ghost Church German presently enjoys at least semi-official recognition as the language of the church. Father Bollinger, fluent also in German, ministers to many parishioners in that language. Today, as is the case with St. Peter's in Allentown, the majority of German-speakers are Austrian, especially from the Burgenland region. About thirty-five per cent of the confessions Father Bollinger hears is given in German.

The Roman Catholic parochial school in Bethlehem also played a major role in the formation of this German parish.

The first such school was started by German Catholics on January 28, 1875 with an enrollment of forty children under the direction of the Franciscan Sisters of Glen Riddle. The first school building was part of the church on the north side of Bethlehem. In 1888, with the completion of the new combination church and school building on the south side of the city, the school moved and had an enrollment of 140 pupils. The school grew so rapidly that a new school building, still in use today, had to be constructed and was completed in 1900 with an enrollment of 325, a number which continued to grow over the next years. English was the language of instruction at school for all subjects except religion and singing; both were conducted in the German language up to the year 1931. Today only English is used for instruction.

The interior of Holy Ghost Church presents a magnificent sight with its beautiful frescos, its towering main altar with scenes from the crucifixion, its artistic windows, and its exquisite rose window. The frescos above the arches in the sanctuary and down the middle aisle of the church represent the endowments of the Holy Spirit. They comprise a cycle of sixteen scenes, each adorned with an inscription in German.

The Holy Ghost Church uses German only semi-officially; St. Peter's maintains its German services, but with an ever declining number of communicants. The German-speaking element of both parishes is mainly composed of older people. Among the past years few young persons have joined the parish who are fluent or show an interest in German. It is most probable that within one more generation, the once rich German-language church life of the Lehigh Valley will be but a memory.

NOTES

¹See Albert Bernhardt Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, vol. II (New York, 1927), pp. 409 ff.

²See Charles Rhoads Roberts, *History of Lehigh County*, vol. II (Allentown, Penna., 1914), pp. 152-153.

³See Ralph Wood et al., *The Pennsylvania Germans* (Princeton, 1942).