

## **ELI KELLER: PENNSYLVANIA-GERMAN POET**

In Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of His Birth

by

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The house 1312 Chew Street in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is not different from hundreds of its kind in the city. In this modest, yet not unattractive brick row-house, the Rev. Eli Keller spent the last years of his long and active life, and here, on New Year's Eve 1919, he died peacefully. As modest as the house, so was the man. Born on December 20, 1825, in Plainfield township in northeastern Northampton County, he grew up on a farm and became familiar with all aspects of rural life.<sup>1</sup> His best poetry is a reflection of these years.

The Keller family was no newcomer to the area. Eli Keller's great-grandfather, Joseph Keller, landed in Philadelphia in 1737. He came from Schwarzenacker, a small town which is today in the Saarland.<sup>2</sup> In 1742, he settled with his Palatinate-born wife not far from today's Wind Gap, that is, in the region which had just been opened to settlers as a consequence of the so-called Walking Purchase.<sup>3</sup> In 1757, the Keller homestead, still located near the frontier, was attacked by Indians, the oldest boy was killed, the mother and two other boys were captured; only one boy and the mother came back after long captivity in Canada.

The Kellers were not ordinary farmers. One member of the family held a clerkship under George Washington, and Eli Keller's father was a surveyor, a notary public, an associate judge of Northampton County, and a military officer; he married a Lutheran girl whose great-grandparents had come to Pennsylvania at about the same time as Joseph Keller. Eli Keller must have had a highly developed sense for history, he was greatly interested in his ancestors and

the history of his family; his genealogically detailed book of 192 pages, *History of the Keller Family*, was published in 1905.<sup>4</sup> This family history proves that Eli Keller belonged to the third American-born generation. There is no evidence that he ever left the U.S.A. When he writes about the "Vatterland", he means, of course, Pennsylvania, as in his poem "Der Keschtabaam" where he starts his last verse with:

Vun alla Beem im Vatterland, eb wild noch odder zahm,  
Setz ich mich 'slibscht im Schatta hi' vum liewa  
Keschtabaam.<sup>5</sup>

However, even the life of a pastor in peaceful Ohio and eastern Pennsylvania knew tragedy. The Kellers were patriotic and being of the Reformed Protestant faith they bore arms. After the outbreak of the Civil War, three of Eli Keller's brothers enlisted in the Union Army, two of them, officers in the 49th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, fought in the Battle of Murfreesborough, Tenn., in January 1863. One died in battle; the other succumbed to his wounds about three weeks later. Thirty years after this sad event, Eli Keller dedicated a poem in English to him:

Father, my work is done —  
My course almost completed:  
Victory now is won —  
My sword no longer needed!<sup>6</sup>

He may have been thinking of his brothers, when he included in his collection of Pennsylvania proverbs the one which says:

Wer's vorziegt un beim Dadi un der Mami schö dahem bleibt,  
werd net verschosse.<sup>7</sup>

Eli Keller represents the educated class of the Pennsylvania Dutch. For a young man to acquire an education almost always meant giving up farming, moving to the city, and adopting English as the only means of communications. Eli Keller was the exception to the rule in more than one respect. He went to school locally, then in Easton, and afterwards

away to college and theological seminary. Immediately after his ordination in 1856, he moved to Ohio, and the usual chain of events of a bright Pennsylvania country boy leaving home seemed to be repeating itself. But Eli Keller was different. Out in Bucyrus and Bellevue, Ohio, he became homesick and finally returned to Pennsylvania settling in Zionsville, Lehigh County, where most of his finest poetry was written.

Quite unusual was Keller's language talent. To call him a Pennsylvania-German poet is of course correct, but does not do him complete justice: he was a poet and writer in Pennsylvania-German, in English, and in standard German. To be exact, in Pennsylvania-German and English, he wrote non-fiction as well as poetry. We have already referred to his long genealogical book written in English. Interested in just about every phase of a rapidly changing rural life, he also published a long article under the title "Flax Culture and its Utility."<sup>8</sup>

Keller was also the editor and main contributor of *Unser Pennsylvanisch-Deutsch Kalenner for 1885*.<sup>9</sup> In the preface, written in pleasant and humorous Pennsylvania-German prose, Keller gives us sort of a sales talk emphasizing the cheap price ("fuenf Sent") and justifying the inclusion of advertisements which are also printed in the dialect.

The bulk of his English and standard German poetry would fall under the heading of "Gelegenheitsgedichte", written on special occasions, for anniversaries, often dedicated to somebody. Just a few examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

*At Parting*

Life is a troubl'd sea,  
 Storms upon storms arise  
 In dreadful vengeance dress'd,  
     Heav'n does indeed exist,  
     Yet, far above the clouds;  
     Whilst from below arise  
     Dark fears, and gloomy doubts.

Scarce that we've met and tied  
Dear Friendship's band;  
The billows rush between  
And friend must part from friend.  
    But far below these waves  
    The "Rock of Ages" stays:  
    Sink then your anchor down  
    And drive dark fears away.

See in the distant East  
The Morning Star arise:  
Fear not! There yet is hope —  
A rest beyond the skies.  
    What, though we here must part  
    We know in whom we trust:  
    There, true friends meet again —  
    Will we? — Oh yes! We must.<sup>10</sup>

*Dedication Of An Album*

These pages form a shrine,  
Where Friendship freely makes  
Its purest best oblations!  
Though it be but a line —  
Whater'er the heart dictates —  
But, use not vain quotations!<sup>11</sup>

*Album*

Ein Album ist's:  
Wo Blümchen steh'n, in einem schönen Buch,  
und man nur Eins, und zwar recht sehr vermiszt:  
den tausendfach' und süszen Wohlgeruch.  
Es sind jedoch recht viele Namen hier,  
und Freundschafts-Wünsche, die geschrieben steh'n:  
Aus diesen dringt ein Wohlgeruch zu dir,  
den keine Erden-Winde je verweh'n.  
Ein Paradies steht immer noch bereit,  
nach welchem fromme Pilger fröhlich zieh'n,  
wo in Gefilden, hoch und weit und breit  
des Himmel's Blüten frisch und ewig blüh'n!<sup>12</sup>

He speaks as a serious clergyman who is acutely aware of the evil in this world, who has his own moments of doubt, but still has firm convictions, a Christian faith and, here and there, a spark of genuine humor. His idealized concept of friendship is a recurrent theme in his poems and seems to be German of origin, probably reinforced by some of his readings in the German language. Although his interest in standard German may not have been purely academic — after all, Keller was no language scholar — his talent as a poet also comes through when he writes in a surprisingly pure “Hochdeutsch”. Some of his standard German poems are superior to many of his English ones. Every poet has his limitations. Some works do not stand the test of time; some conceived in a serious and solemn mood may elicit belittling smile from a later generation. On Valentine’s Day 1894, Keller wrote a poem to his wife for her approaching 57th birthday:

*To Mrs. E. K. by E. K.*

Mother! — you are 57 now;  
and getting gray —  
Wrinkles gathered on your matron-brow,  
and came to stay.  
The beauty to which you must now be directed  
may not in the outward be longer detected.<sup>13</sup>

Besides its poetic flaws we could also question the soundness of its psychological approach. On the other hand, the poem may demonstrate that in Keller’s days a man’s authority was more important than his psychological insight.

Religion was foremost in Keller’s mind. Most of his poems refer to God in one way or another. In his gloomier moments he is keenly aware of the vanity of vanities of earthly existence. He had a great deal of pride and self-assurance for his brand of Protestantism and the Reformed Church.

Yet despite his strong religious commitment there is no evidence in his writings that he attacked or ridiculed other faiths. He knew quite a bit about the history of Protestantism with its many squabbles and infighting. The basis of the Reformed faith — in contrast to Lutheranism — was the Heidelberg Catechism which was published in 1563, with active support from the Count Palatine and Elector Frederick III the Pious. On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of this event, Keller, then living in Ohio, wrote a poem consisting of 20 stanzas, entitled "Zum 300 Jährigen Jubileum":

Danket dem Vater, der stets sich als Vater bezeuget,  
Sich aus dem Himmel zu Sündern im Staube geneiget  
In seinem Sohn,  
Der unter Schmerzen und Hohn,  
Sein Haupt im Tode gebeuget.<sup>14</sup>

The form of the stanzas is obviously identical with that of the famous church hymn "Der Lobende" by Joachim Neander:

Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren,  
Meine geliebete Seele, das ist mein Begehren,  
Kommet zu Hauf,  
Psalter und Harfe wacht auf,  
Lasset die Musicam hören.

Lobe den Herren, was in mir ist, lobe den Namen,  
Alles, was Odem hat, lobe mit Abrahams Samen,  
Er ist dein Licht,  
Seele vergiss es ja nicht,  
Lobende, schliesse mit Amen.<sup>15</sup>

If we compare these last lines with Keller's concluding stanza the similarities become obvious:

Lob, Preis und Ehre sei deinem hochheiligen Namen,  
 Dasz du uns Sünder gezählet zum heiligen Samen,  
 Vater und Sohn,  
 Und Geist auf ewigen Thron:  
 Rette uns allesamt — Amen!<sup>16</sup>

In both cases the rhymes are: Namen — Samen — Amen. A coincidence? Hardly. The Rev. Keller must have sung "Lobe den Herren" hundreds, if not thousands of times and must have written his text specifically for that so familiar melody. However, this was a common practice. Most Protestant hymns had alternate texts.

While Eli Keller was attending Marshall College in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, the school merged with Franklin College in Lancaster. At Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster he met Henry Harbaugh who was by then a respected minister in the Reformed Church and a known author of church history and hymns, all written in English of course. Keller, then 28 of age, was becoming interested in writing and joined a literary society. It is possible that this encounter with Harbaugh and the subsequent friendship was a decisive influence upon Keller who was no child prodigy and needed years to develop his literary talents. He did not stay long in Lancaster, but Harbaugh's Pennsylvania-German poems which, a few years later, were appearing with increasing frequency must have had an impact upon Keller. The Pennsylvania-German poems of the two have a lot more in common than just the language; we can detect similarities in subject-matter, a similar nostalgic mood trying to recapture the years of childhood and youth, the love of nature and country-life, the religious outlook. It was Harbaugh who, in April 1866, introduced Keller to the readers of *The Guardian* with "S Glatteis Fahre" which is one of Keller's best dialect poems.<sup>17</sup>

Many of Keller's Pennsylvania-German poems appeared in newspapers, among them in *Der Friedens-Bothe* (Allen-

town, Pa.), in *'S Pennsylvaanisch Deitsch Eck* (edited by Preston A. Barba),<sup>18</sup> but also in the important anthology *Pennsylvania German Verse*.<sup>19</sup> Reichard's anthology contains 22 of Keller's poems plus the cycle *Vum Flachsbaue*. If Keller had written nothing except these ten cantos on the cultivation of flax, he would have earned a unique spot for himself in the world of poetry. He had a great love for the tilling of the soil, for old traditions and dying customs. Thus the cycle of poems about the growing, pulling, thrashing, braking of the flax all the way down to the flax spinning should be not only of interest to the student of language and literature, but also to the folklorist and historian. It is in his dialect poems that Keller reaches the height of his accomplishments. He loved eastern Pennsylvania and its people, and at heart he was a story-teller often recalling the days of his youth down on the farm when things were different and perhaps just a little more beautiful. Yet he does not paint these nostalgic pictures of the good old days in order to pine for the past, he simply wants the reader to know what it was like. These somewhat idyllic pictures do not forget the sweat and toil of the farmers or the limited freedom of the children who seemed to accept parental authority cheerfully and without questions. Keller's world seems wholesome, orderly and intact; there is a limited degree of social awareness and concern, e.g. for the plight of the washerwoman (in the poem "Die Weschfraa"). There are some dark clouds here and there; the non-conformist, who does not want to work nor study, is not ignored, as in the poem "Aageweh", which means that it hurts Keller's eyes to have to see a person like that. The card-player is another negative symbol; and there is even a poem about a German tramp ("En Tresp") who is asked to leave because he denigrates Keller's dialect works. This may be a reflection upon the attitude of some 19th century German immigrants who considered their own brand of German so much superior to the Pennsylvania-German dialect. Yet Keller obviously did not think of Penn-



sylvania-German as a separate language. The first of his poems in the Reichard anthology is entitled "Die Deutsch Sproch" which expresses Keller's love, pride, and respect for his language:

Ich schwetz in der deutsche Sproch,  
 Lieb sie ah un halt sie hoch;  
 Sie is ah — ken Hurekind,  
 Das mer in de Hecke find —  
 Sie kummt her vum schöne Rhei,  
 Wu sie Trauwe hen — un Wei!<sup>20</sup>

It is no surprise that a man like Keller was living in harmony with nature and its seasons. Most of his dialect poems deal with outdoor activities, with the change of the weather, with his love of trees, as e.g. "Der Keschtabaam". Another tree poem, "Mei Kerschebaam", reminisces about the beauty and bountiful harvest of a cherry tree which later was struck by lightning, an event which Keller calls judgment ("Gericht").

Keller should be remembered as a poet, writer, editor, as a dedicated pastor and a decent man, and perhaps also as a collector of Pennsylvania-German proverbs which he recorded the way he heard them from the people he loved. The quality of his poetry naturally varies, but also to Eli Keller applies what Harry Reichard wrote in his dedication to his anthology:

Nau wees en jeder, der's wisse will,  
 Wie viel Perle drunner sin.  
 Un die, was net so gut sin,  
 helfen ah mit,  
 en Gesamtbild vum Pennsylvanisch Deutsche  
 Volkslebe un Volksdenke  
 zu mache.<sup>21</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Two biographical sketches of Keller (one of them by him) appeared in vol. 7 (pp. 458-61) and vol. 31 (pp. 47-50) of *The Pennsylvania-German Society*.

<sup>2</sup>Schwarzenacker is located between Neunkirchen and Zweibrücken.

<sup>3</sup>John Birmelin describes the walk in his long ballad "Der Laaf Kaaf".

<sup>4</sup>In Tiffin, Ohio. Press of W. H. Good.

<sup>5</sup>Harry Hess Reichard, "Pennsylvania German Verse: An Anthology of Representative Selections in the Dialect popularly known as Pennsylvania Dutch with an Introduction", *Pennsylvanian German Society*, vol. 48, part 2 (1940), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup>From Eli Keller's manuscript. This is the first stanza.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>In *Pennsylvania German Magazine* (June 1908).

<sup>9</sup>Printed by Trexler & Härtzell in Allentown, Pa.

<sup>10</sup>From Eli Keller's manuscript.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. Keller's spelling and punctuation has been retained with only few exceptions.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. This is the beginning of the poem.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. This is the first stanza.

<sup>15</sup>Neander's first and last stanza. Text variations exist. The quoted stanzas follow Theodor Echtermeyer, *Deutsche Gedichte*, neugestaltet von Benno von Wiese (Düsseldorf: August Bagel, 1966), pp. 107-08.

<sup>16</sup>From Eli Keller's manuscript.

<sup>17</sup>Harry Hess Reichard, "Pennsylvania German Literature." In: *The Pennsylvania Germans*, ed. Ralph Wood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1943), p. 180.

<sup>18</sup>*The Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa.). Several issues in 1967 included a biography of Keller, a study of his works and selections from them.

<sup>19</sup>Reichard, "Pennsylvania German Verse . . .", pp. 148-62.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. iii.