

GERMAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN*

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The writers of ethnic history in the United States have a tendency to emphasize “contributions” to American society, especially the contributions of men. In German-American accounts we read that von Steuben contributed to military discipline, Carl Schurz to political life and Wernher von Braun to the conquest of space.¹ The contributions of the people so honored are substantial and are recited with understandable pride, not only in works specifically designed to honor exceptional individuals, but also in more general histories.

Needless to say, there are not many women among the German-Americans singled out for recognition. Anna Ottendorfer, the nineteenth century newspaper woman and philanthropist is the one most frequently mentioned. She is the only woman to rate a separate article in the Bicentennial volume prepared by the German Information Service and one of five in Tolzmann's *Bicentennial Minutes*.²

Entire sections devoted specifically to women are not often found. Faust's *The German Element in the United States* is an exception. In a seventeen page chapter he recounts the contributions of female philanthropists, singers, writers and professors of German, with Anna Ottendorfer again in first place.³ Besides that, German immigrant women have recently become the object of family publication efforts and their stories have been included more frequently in German-American journals. They have received some serious attention in Neidle's *America's Immigrant Women* which combines narrative about immigrant women in general with an

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anecdotal approach to describe the famous and their contributions.⁴

The achievements of individual German female immigrants should most certainly continue to be uncovered, described and analyzed; however, the need for a general social history is great. It could shed some light on such things as the status of German women in America, their adjustment to a new society and their eventual assimilation. This is no easy task. Women are difficult to group and classify. They are scattered throughout the population and their experience has, until recently, not been considered worthwhile recording.⁵ This is particularly true of German immigrant women.

The women who immigrated to North America from the German speaking countries of Europe usually came as the wives, daughters or other dependent female relatives of immigrating men. Immigration laws discouraged single women and Germans had a tendency to migrate in family groups and settle in family groups. Not surprisingly, the dominant roles among immigrant women were those of housewives, mothers and servants. Such women are not usually a "visible" group and the Germans among them are no exception. What little commentary can be found in German-American history books is usually very laudatory about the skills of the German-American housewife. Frederick Luebke suggests that "The German *Hausfrau* was commonly recognized as a model of cleanliness and efficiency and her daughter was valued as a reliable house servant or maid."⁶ Hawgood discusses the "widespread employment of German girls as domestic servants in American homes" and Langenscheidt's 1926 edition of *Land und Leute in Nordamerika* mentions under "Dienerschaft": "Deutsche Mädchen finden immer Beschäftigung und sind überall gesucht."⁷ Wittke notes that "German housewives and German cooks have added much to the culinary varieties of the present-day United States, as evidenced by the many articles of food which have not only been adopted as delicacies by the American stomach but have also found their way into American dictionaries, frequently with their originally German spelling unchanged."⁸ Hawgood

reports that H. L. Mencken, hardly a Germanophile, admitted German influence upon American cooking.⁹ German domestic women were assigned a very important place in American society by Faust:

The domestic type includes the great majority of German women and their daughters in the United States and if this were not a fact our country would not be what it is in vigor, population and the bedrock civilization that comes from home training. Historically the emphasis laid upon the household arts, as cooking, sewing, care of the house and children, by so large a formative element of the population from the earliest period of German immigration to the present time, cannot have resulted otherwise than in impressing the economic advantage of the principle and furnishing an example for imitation. German women have contributed far more to the greatness of the German race than is recorded in history; the superstructure is that which attracts attention, yet the security comes from the foundation of the building.¹⁰

Since they were so accomplished, so sought after and so important to the structure of the whole society, one would naturally assume that German American women were held in high esteem by the German community. This, however, does not seem to have been the case. Luebke tells us that "some native Americans thought the Germans treated their women badly" and that it was assumed German women would not swell the ethnic vote, because of the lowly role they were assigned by their society.¹¹ During Colonial times, German farmers were accused of taking better care of their livestock than of their families. As an example, Wittke quotes the Pennsylvania German couplet:

**Weibersterbe isch ka Verderbe! —
Aber Gaulverrecke des isch e Schrecke!**¹²

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a Forty-Eighter had reason to complain that German women were becoming Americanized and "disdainful of newly arrived Germans." Girls brought up "after the German manner" were hard to find and since all meetings between young couples had to occur in public places, it was difficult for a future bride and groom to learn much about each other. He was particularly disturbed

that a man could not discover such important things as his potential bride's attitudes toward "that which relates to a wife and her duties." But the worst thing a German man in America can do is marry an Irish wife, he warns. They drink, refuse to work for their husbands and scold back when scolded!¹³

While the status of German immigrant women seemed very low to Americans, Germans were amazed at what they considered the very high status of American women. A Catholic bishop touring the United States in the Twenties exclaimed: "Die unabhängige und selbstständige Stellung, deren sich die Frau erfreut, macht sie selbstbewusster, herrischer, wählerischer. Das Weib besitzt vielfach eine grosse Selbstachtung. . . ." He was also surprised to see "kein unanständiges Benehmen in Wort und Blick, keine Belästigung der Frauen."¹⁴ Similar commentary can be found in many other sources. Billigmeier, for example, discusses the reactions of German-Americans to the position of women and the division of labor in America. "Over and over, German-Americans made a point of emphasizing how much women were honored in the United States. It seemed that women expected and received deference. While they worked hard at cleaning and ordering the household (sometimes even helping in the garden), the farm females never worked with their men in the fields. Some observers were sure that American women had little to do and were dull and indolent." Billigmeier, as well as Rippley, quotes the following German commentary as an example of German attitudes:

The husband must buy the groceries, start the fire, and milk the cows. Outside of doing the wash, the American wife is more or less free. The general respect for womanhood causes parents to spoil their daughters and neglect teaching them the necessary skills for managing a household. It is little wonder that they often attend such ridiculous women's rights conventions where they praise women's rights in society, even though one can find no where else so few housewives as in America.¹⁵

German immigrant families, on the other hand, caused comment among their neighbors, because their women did

work in the fields and their men most emphatically did not help with household duties. It can be inferred from statements such as the above that few German women took an open interest in women's rights conventions and that most of them fulfilled the obligations they had been trained to assume.

One of the most extreme, even hysterical, German commentaries on the position of women in America can be found in the above-mentioned Langenscheidt reference book. The author informs his German readers that the United States has become a matriarchy, where women exert powerful influence on public life and wield great power in private life. As examples he cites the right of women to greet men first, their right to various chivalrous services, the conveniences and luxuries at their disposal and their freedom from household chores. He reports that a man will do all household work in order to please the woman of the house who is still considered a "Kleinod," as in the days when women were scarce on the frontier. "Die Erinnerung an das Kleinod ist eben so angeboren, dass man die Frau zu schonen hat, ihr alles aus dem Weg räumt, was ihr der Gebieterin störend sei." He also assigns blame for this situation to the schools where American children are almost entirely taught by women, men having left for more highly paid jobs. "Die Frau ist dem Amerikaner über den Kopf gewachsen. Sie kann alles tun was sie will, und hat praktisch mehr zu sagen als der Mann. . . . Die ungesunde Verwöhnung der Frau konnte naturgemäss nicht ohne Einfluss auf die Charakterentwicklung bleiben. . . . Auf innerer Anziehung beruhende Anschmiegsamkeit, Anlehnung und vertrauendes Emporblickenwollen zum Manne, die zu den liebenswertesten Eigenschaften des echten Weibes gehören, ist bei den meisten Amerikanerinnen wenig zu finden." Like the German bishop, the author noticed that women are not molested on the streets, but unlike the bishop he finds this prohibition objectionable, especially the \$25 fine or possible jail sentence!¹⁶

It would be interesting, of course, to hear from immigrant women themselves. How did they see their situation, their roles, their status? Such accounts are not plentiful. When

women wrote letters or diaries, they usually wrote about their families rather than about themselves and when they did write about themselves, they usually excluded the domestic sphere as uninteresting. A case in point is the autobiography of Katharina Dicke, written at the request of her children and grandchildren in 1924. She was then ninety-two years old and fondly remembered her childhood in Württemberg. Her father was a shepherd who spent the summer on the "Schwäbische Alb" herding his sheep while her mother did the work in the field with the help of a maid. Her two older sisters emigrated to America in the company of an uncle and aunt lured to America by a swindler. They were sorely missed by the mother who managed to convince the whole family to follow them in 1849. There is a detailed account of the voyage to America during which the family witnessed a revolution in Mannheim and saw whales which circled the boat. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, Katharina, like her sisters, worked as a maid in the homes of English-speaking Americans. In looking for work she searched out families who left all household work to her so that she could learn more. She was a very pious woman and when a minister from Michigan proposed marriage to her by mail, he was able to convince her that it was God's will that they marry. She did not know her future husband at all. From her description of the journey to his new parish near Saginaw, we learn that he rode a horse and she walked seventeen miles on foot. Because Pastor Dicke seems to have been a man of frail health who suffered fever spells whenever he preached, his wife taught the school in his stead. But she reports that she was never homesick in Michigan and that the whole family was happy once the Pastor was well again. Two children were born during the first three years of their marriage. In 1857, the Dicks moved to Wisconsin where the author spent the rest of her life. But while she devoted almost ten pages of her autobiography to the first twenty-five years of her life, barely a page can be found about the last sixty-seven. She refers her offspring to her husband's autobiography, then thanks the Lord for food and clothing and all His blessings although their lives were lived in "circumstances that could be called 'almost

poverty'." She closes with an apology for writing "too much of my childhood and youth in Germany, because I was reliving it as I wrote what seemed important to me."¹⁷ One could add that Katharina Dicke also described what seemed important and interesting for her descendants to know. She naturally assumed that her life in America was familiar to her children and grandchildren and that they were much more interested in her early years in Germany.

The sources quoted here span a period of 130 years and do not provide a complete picture, of course. The image which emerges from this admittedly limited sample is one of women who were hard-working, accomplished and domestic, who accepted their subordinate role and did not question their status. The authors of the works examined seemed to find the stereotype of the German *Hausfrau* transplanted to America. From German commentaries about the lot of American women, we can infer that German women in America were in no danger of becoming pampered adornments. Those who did question their status, who supported the women's suffrage movement, are not usually dwelt upon in German-American history books. Mathilde Franziska Anneke is usually mentioned in connection with accounts of the Forty-Eighters and, of course, in general works about the women's suffrage movement.¹⁸ Future research should examine the influence of this movement and take into account such factors as the traditional German work ethic, the male/female ratio among the immigrants and changing conditions during the various historical periods.

NOTES

1 Two recent examples are: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *America's German Heritage: Bicentennial Minutes* (Cleveland, 1976); Gerard Wilk, *Americans from Germany* (New York, 1976).

2 Wilk, *Americans from Germany*.

3 Albert Bernhardt Faust, *The German Element in the United States, with special reference to its political, moral, social and educational influence* (New York, 1909), II, 448-65.

4 Cecycle S. Neidle, *America's Immigrant Women* (Boston, 1975).

5 For an interesting discussion of this argument see Ronald W. Hogeland, *Woman and Womanhood in America* (Lexington, Mass., 1973).

6 Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I*, Minorities in American History (DeKalb, Ill. 1974), p. 60.

7 John A. Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America: The Germans in the United States during the Nineteenth Century — and after* (New York and London, 1940), p. 37; *Land und Leute in Nordamerika*, ed. Ernst Smithanders, 2nd ed., Langenscheidts Handbücher für Auslandskunde (Berlin, 1926), p. 191.

8 Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (New York, 1940), p. 215.

9 Hawgood, p. 42.

10 Faust, pp. 464-65.

11 Luebke, pp. 60-61.

12 Wittke, p. 8.

13 "German Life in America — 1858," excerpts from Karl Theodor Griesinger, *Lebende Bilder Aus America*[sic](Stuttgart, 1858), in *The Germans in America 1607-1970: A Chronology and Fact Book*, ed. Howard Furer, Ethnic Chronology Series, No. 8 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., 1973), p. 124-25.

14 Xaver Geyer, *Bei den Deutschamerikanern* (Godesberg am Rhein, 1923), p. 223-24.

15 Robert Henry Billigmeier, *Americans from Germany: A Study in Cultural Diversity*, Minorities in American Life Series, ed. Alexander DeConde (Belmont, California, 1974), p. 66-67; La Vern Rippley, *The German Americans*, The Immigrant Heritage of America, ed. Cecyle S. Neidle (Boston, 1976), pp. 56-57.

16 *Land und Leute*, pp. 261-69.

17 *Autobiography of Grandmother Dicke*, TS, Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

18 Rippley, p. 56.

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