

**THE GERMAN LANGUAGE —  
MIRROR OF THE GERMAN-AMERICAN STRUGGLE  
FOR IDENTITY AS REFLECTED IN  
DER DEUTSCHE PIONIER (1869-1887) AND  
THE ACTIVITIES OF DER DEUTSCHE  
PIONIER-VEREIN VON CINCINNATI**

by

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With many other heritage societies, the Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati shares three main characteristics: 1. pride in its heritage 2. the conviction that this heritage is valuable to society 3. an undercurrent of fear that its heritage is threatened and requires special efforts to be preserved. The Pionier-Verein was founded in March 1868. Its main purpose was “die Bande alter Freundschaft zu erneuern und zu befestigen, wie auch die Geschichte und Erlebnisse der deutschen Pioniere von Cincinnati und Umgegend für spätere Generationen durch Sammlung desfallsiger Documente, Notizen, ec. aufzubewahren.” With the publication of its journal *Der Deutsche Pionier* in 1869, the search for documentary material became nationwide. When the journal ceased publication in 1887 for lack of financial support, the quality and quantity of materials published over eighteen years was so impressive that 20th century authorities on German-Americana like Arndt and Olson refer to it as an “indispensable source for the history of Germans in the U.S.A.” Don Heinrich Tolzmann in his 1975 bibliography on German-Americana calls it “the best nineteenth century journal of German-American history.”

Given such auspices, it seems legitimate to concentrate on the journal and the society’s characteristics as a representative model of the German-American struggle for identity in the second half of the 19th century.

The particular conditions under which this first German pioneer society and the journal were founded and prospered

could be considered ideal for the United States of that time. In 1870, with more than one-fifth of the population German, Cincinnati could be called a bi-lingual city. Most Germans lived in an area of the city known as "Over the Rhine," with a rich social, cultural, and political life of its own. Numerous "Gesangvereine," "Turnvereine," literary societies, churches, and German language newspapers attest to this. Diversity in every respect fostered a climate of liberalism and tolerance, which, however, did not exclude bitter rivalries. The charming environs of Cincinnati seemed to realize an impossible dream: another Germany, without the economic and political limitations of the homeland. Above all, the people "over the Rhine" were united in their lifestyle and language. Essential for the foundation of the Pionier-Verein and the journal was a sufficient number of people with enough leisure, education, intellectual curiosity, and pride in their German heritage. Such extremely favorable conditions explain some of the euphoric expectations concerning the future of the German language and "Wesen" in the United States as expressed in *Der Deutsche Pionier* and speeches of the Pionier-Verein.

Preservation, emancipation, and propagation of the German heritage characterize the contents of the journal *Der Deutsche Pionier*. It was argued that German contributions to America's growth and development, although numerous and great, had practically been ignored by the writers of American history, including the more recent German sacrifice for the Union in the Civil War. Children of German-American parents should regard their heritage with pride and follow the examples of famous German pioneers. As Emil Klauprecht said: "Ein Volk darf nur dann Achtung bei seinen Nachbarn und ergebene, opfermuthige Freunde und Wohlthäter in seiner Mitte erwarten, wenn es die Grossthaten und das Verdienst seiner Vorfahren ehrt und ihr Gedächtniss fortpflanzt von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht" (*DDP* 1, 2). The assertion of German-American achievements was also a reaction against the disrespect and insult suggested by the word "Dutch," against nativism, and the Knownothing movement. Negative experiences and Anglo-American contempt for and

opposition to things German, whether imagined or real, made German-Americans aware of their own characteristics and values. They discovered their "Gemüthlichkeit" and cultural mission as opposed to what Heinrich Armin Rattermann termed the dismal, hypocritical Puritanism, "abstrakter Materialismus," and "absolute Geldwuth" (*DDP* 9, 368) of the Anglo-Americans. Other allegedly German characteristics such as "Fleiss," "Treue," "Ehrlichkeit," "Ausdauer," "Idealismus," "abstraktes Denken," "Familiensinn," "wahre Humanität," and "Gesittung," are quoted. These clichés frequently served as serious arguments in *Der Deutsche Pionier* to describe the value of the German heritage and its superiority to the Anglo-American way of life. However questionable the validity of these arguments, they form an important aspect of the German-American struggle for identity and become crucial when linked to the German language issue.

In *Der Deutsche Pionier* much attention is devoted to the sociology and statistics of immigration. The sheer number of German-Americans in comparison to the total American population at that time seemed to warrant a greater say in cultural, educational, and political affairs than the German element actually possessed. German-American self-respect was also enormously boosted by the unification of Germany under Bismarck's leadership in 1871. Previous feelings of inferiority gave way to national pride and even chauvinism. German music, science, philosophy, literature, and education were often considered superior to their Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American equivalents. These are the main motivations for the foundation and growth of the Pionier-Verein and its journal, *Der Deutsche Pionier*.

At that time, there was wide-spread confidence in the future of German culture in America. At one end of the spectrum there were voices convinced that the "Germanisierung" of the United States was inevitable. At the other end were more cautious people like Friedrich Schnake who observed "dass das Deutsch-Amerikanerthum eigentlich nur in seinen Vereinen voll pulsiert und belebend und anregend

wirkt" (*DDP* 13, 510). In its constitution and activities, the Pionier-Verein appears retrospective, conservative, and slightly isolationist. Members had to be male, natives of Germany, at least forty years of age, with twenty-five years of residence in Cincinnati (later extended to the entire U.S.). Apart from witnessing "echt deutsche Gemüthlichkeit" on the occasion of the annual "Stiftungsfest," there was no opportunity for the children of German-Americans, Germans under forty, or Anglo-Americans interested in things German to participate constructively in club activities. This exclusiveness is difficult to reconcile with the frequent complaints voiced in speeches about the decay of the German language among German-American children and their indifference toward their heritage. The Pionier-Verein was cultivating a private German life within the small circle of family, club, and neighborhood, separated from a public Anglo-American world. Ideally, it was hoped that the German heritage would influence Anglo-American life to such a degree that German-Americans could feel at home in it. Carl Rümelin seemed to perceive the danger of isolationism in the statutes of the Pionier-Verein. On the occasion of the first "Stiftungsfest" he said: "Es ist aber der Hauptvorzug unserer früheren deutschen Einwanderung in Cincinnati gewesen, dass sie zwei Bildungsmittel nie aus den Augen liessen, das ist, sie entzogen sich weder dem aufregenden Einfluss ihrer englisch redenden Mitbevölkerung, noch liessen sie den Faden der Verbindung mit Deutschland, in geselliger und wissenschaftlicher Beziehung, ganz aus ihrer Hand schwinden. Wir wollten hier weder ein blosses Neu-Deutschland gründen, noch wollten wir einfach in Amerika untergehen" (*DDP* 1, Beilage, 7). Like Rümelin and the majority of moderate German-Americans, Wilhelm Sohn considered the fusion of the better aspects of the German character and life with the better features of the American way of life a major task of the German pioneers. He believed the introduction of German into primary and high school would be an important step in this direction: "Es ist eine unumstössliche Wahrheit, dass man keine Sprache erlernt, ohne zugleich den Charakter, die Anschauungsweise, Sitten

und Gewohnheiten des Volkes kennen zu lernen, das diese Sprache spricht" (DDP 4, 158).

The issue of retaining German as a field of study and a language of instruction remained a major one throughout *Der Deutsche Pionier*. The journal helped to promote some of the most productive German-American educational projects of the period. It was very tempting to envision children and other language learners imbibing cherished German values and characteristics through the language. Once German could be introduced on equal terms with English in the public schools a major step in the direction of maintaining the German heritage and influencing Anglo-American life would have been taken. As early as 1840 Cincinnati's German-Americans had achieved legislation to institute German-English schools. These were truly bi-lingual public schools where classes would be taught in English and German by bi-lingual teachers on the elementary level, and alternately by German and English teachers on the more advanced levels. In 1845, 800 students attended these schools; in 1858, 3,422. A Cincinnati school report mentions a substantial number of Anglo-American children among the students. Unfortunately, few students continued their German studies in the intermediate schools, and the parents were blamed for not sustaining their interest. *Der Deutsche Pionier* reports conscientiously on the foundation of other German-English schools in the United States and supports the movement as an almost ideal solution. Rattermann, editor of *Der Deutsche Pionier* from 1874-1885, in referring to the dispute about the introduction of German in New York City primary schools in 1875, quotes from the *New Yorker Staatszeitung*: German, spoken by one-fifth of the population should not be called a foreign language in the United States, especially since English was only the adopted official language, not a native American language (DDP 7, 73). The issue in New York was lost. *Der Deutsche Pionier* quotes from *Wächter am Erie*, a Cleveland paper: "Man sieht in der Einführung des Deutschen in die öffentlichen Schulen ein *Zugeständnis*, nicht aber ein *Recht*" (DDP 7, 497). The same article claims German as a "Landessprache." Such

claims are based on the high concentration of Germans in Cincinnati, New York, and St. Louis, which was not typical of the rest of the country. Even in such German-American strongholds, bi-lingual schools and other educational projects often lacked sufficient support from the German-American population. High German immigration figures were misinterpreted, creating false expectations about the future role of the German element in the United States.

Not a single article in *Der Deutsche Pionier* discusses American educational policy in the second half of the 19th century. At that time America was still concerned with becoming a nation and faced with the problem of an ever growing number of immigrants who did not speak English. As the common bond between all Americans, English was considered a key factor in integrating the immigrant. Efforts on the part of minorities to maintain their native language and customs were viewed as counteractive to the process of Americanization.

In his speech "Die deutsche Sprache in der amerikanischen Schule," held at the Deutsch-Amerikanische Lehrertag in Davenport, Iowa in August 1881, Rattermann pointed to a very concrete problem of German-American identity: the need for truly German-American textbooks to motivate children to learn German. He accused German-American schools of being European in concept, whereas Anglo-American schools were clearly American-English, not European English. He renewed his plea for genuine German-American textbooks "um der deutsch-amerikanischen Jugend einen selbstständigen nationalen, unserer Sprache befördernden Gedanken einzupflanzen" (*DDP* 13, 170). Citing convincing examples, he exposed the inadequacy of texts Prussian and royalist in spirit for the children of German-Americans who had fled political oppression and subservience in the central-European monarchies. In addition to extolling militarism and obedience these books contained material completely unrelated to the German-American experience. German-American textbooks should have room for German-American life in the United States, major contributions of Germans to the making of

America, and German-American literature that had so far been completely neglected in schoolbooks.

*Der Deutsche Pionier* helped to promote the foundation of three important German-American educational associations: the Deutsch-amerikanische Lehrerbund, the Nationale deutsch-amerikanische Seminar, and several branches of the Nationale deutsch-amerikanische Schulverein. Concern for the language, a need for well-trained teachers, and discontent with American schools and teaching methods were the main considerations that led to the foundation of the Deutsch-amerikanische Lehrerbund in Louisville, Kentucky in 1870. It was modeled on a similar organization in Germany. All participants at the Louisville convention agreed "dass eine Reform des amerikanischen Volksschulwesens im Sinne von rationellen und naturgemässen Unterrichts- und Disziplinar- methoden mit allen Kräften angestrebt werden müsse" (DDP 15, 70). Such statements reflect self-confidence and a pronounced missionary spirit on the part of German-American teachers. They were convinced that German educational theory and practice could improve American schools significantly. During the Louisville meeting the members resolved to publish a journal (*Die deutsche Schulzeitung*, later called *Erziehungsblätter*, and familiar today as *Monatshefte*). The necessity of a teachers' seminary was recognized, resulting in the foundation of the Nationale deutsch-amerikanische Lehrerseminar in Milwaukee in 1878. The last volumes of *Der Deutsche Pionier* reflect a tendency toward establishing closer ties with the homeland. An example is the formation of the Chicago branch of the Nationale deutsch-amerikanische Schulverein. Its models were affiliated organizations in Germany and Austria which tried to counteract alleged efforts on the part of Hungarians, Czechs, Croats, and Serbs to suppress the German language and culture in their territories. Constantin Grebner's introductory article on these Schulvereine abounds in words like "Vorsehung," "Selbsthilfe," "kampfbereit," and "Propagandaschriften." He considers ninety percent of the non-German population of America to be "Gegner des deutschen Wesens und der deutschen Sprache"

(*DDP* 17, 85). Although it is legitimate to relate to the homeland in matters of language and culture, it must have seemed inconsistent to detached American observers that German-Americans were now joining in an official effort by the very same monarchies that crushed the 1848 revolution.

In spite of the enthusiasm for teaching German in public schools, there was wide-spread skepticism among educators about the ability of German-American children to maintain and propagate the spoken language. Lack of practice, dialects spoken at home versus the "Schriftsprache" taught in school, and the desire of the younger generation to be accepted as Americans, are frequently mentioned. Informed editors and educators saw a constant influx of immigrants as the only guarantee for the survival of spoken German. Some saw a future for German as the language of the educated—the language of science, philosophy, and general scholarship. Its study was considered rewarding in itself, comparable to the study of classical languages. C. L. Bernays says: ". . . es sind die höheren Bevölkerungsklassen, in deren eigenlebigen Streben sich die deutsche Sprache erst als Modeartikel, dann als Bildungselement einzahnt, bis sie geradeso wie einst die französische Sprache völlig mit dem Bildungsmaterial jener Stände verwachsen ist" (*DDP* 9, 409-410).

German newspapers and journals were the most effective means of language communication, of preserving and propagating the German heritage. They reached the most isolated German-Americans, and came closest to offering a living, day-to-day experience in the German language. The very existence of the German press in America depended on the survival of the language, which explains their strong educational commitment. The by-laws of the Pressverein von Pennsylvanien, founded in 1862, list among its goals: "Wahrung der Reinheit der deutschen Sprache, Förderung, Hebung und Geltendmachung des deutschen Elements in Volks- und Staatsleben" (*DDP* 7, 465). S. K. Brobst, President of the Pressverein, lists the major achievements the society helped to institute: the introduction of German into Pennsylvania's public schools on equal terms with English; the



founding of German-English schools; acceptance of and respect for the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect. Future tasks of the Pressverein according to Brobst would include: support for German-English teacher training schools; the introduction of edifying German folksongs to a larger public; support of German-American publishing enterprises; bridging the gulf between older German-Americans and the new immigrants (*DDP* 5, 127-130). When the Pennsylvania Pressverein changed its name to Deutsch-amerikanischer Pressverein in 1876 (*DDP* 17, 465) in order to consolidate the German-American press and increase its impact, Rattermann foresaw a glorious future: "(Die deutsche Presse) wird im Stande sein, die Macht der politischen Caucusse zu brechen; sie wird die Professionspolitiker auf schmale Ration setzen, man wird sie fragen müssen, welche Kandidaten ihr angenehm sind" (*DDP* 7, 468). This contrasts sharply with the realism of Karl Schurz who at the annual meeting of the German-American journalists in 1886 commented: "Es ist die Aufgabe der deutschen Presse, denjenigen Landsleuten, welche kein Englisch können, amerikanisches Wesen zu erklären" (*DDP* 18, 156). Throughout its existence, *Der Deutsche Pionier* summarized, excerpted and reprinted articles from the German-American press. A substantial number of those articles was concerned with the role of the German language and related educational topics.

What started as an attempt to preserve and vindicate German contributions to the making of America became an effort to propagate German language, lifestyle, and culture. Many favorable factors encouraged high hopes for the future. Those who believed in the survival of spoken German on a wide scale tended to ignore certain realities: the irresistible sway of English as the language of daily public communication; the inevitable disintegration of ethnic communities; and an educational climate not very favorable to minority cultures. The failure of German-American children to maintain the German language is crucial in this context. More than a matter of parental encouragement, lack of national pride, and interest, it seemed to be a conflict of identity. The life they experienced outside the home was steeped in English. Those

who looked beyond mere utilitarian purposes and learned German for its intrinsic value must still have felt the strangeness or even inadequacy of a language that did not function in the mainstream of American life. For the great majority, German remained the stigma of not being Anglo-American.

The assumption that a language can live detached from a specific social environment and be separate from a person's identity was a far-reaching deception on the part of many contributors to *Der Deutsche Pionier*. Numerous articles reflect the attitude of "Kulturkampf" with the emphasis on confrontation rather than cooperation with the Anglo-American world. In its extreme form this attitude led to the painful and damaging allegiance of many German-Americans to imperial Germany in World War I. The zeal to demonstrate "Deutschtum" in America at times seems to have distracted German pioneers from another, probably more rewarding task: serious efforts to share "Deutschtum" with Anglo-Americans.

#### NOTES

1 *Der Deutsche Pionier* 1, 27. The journal is hereafter referred to as *DDP*.

2 Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals 1732-1955: History and Bibliography* (Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer, 1961), p. 441.

3 Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *German-Americana: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1975), p. 69.

4 *DDP* 15, 333 lists Pionier-Verein in 1883 modeled on the Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati in the following chronological order: Covington, Ky.; Newport, KY.; Canton, Ohio; Dayton, Ohio; Toledo, Ohio; Philadelphia, Pa.; Indianapolis, Ind.; Aurora, Ind.; Newport, Ky. (second club); Detroit, Mich.

5 Cf. Alvin F. Harlow, *The Serene Cincinnatians* (New York: Dutton, 1950), p. 197.

6 *DDP* 11, 408 contains an open letter submitted by Friedrich Schnake. It calls for documents and information on German participation in the Civil War, "damit nicht, wie es bisher im hiesigen Lande fast immer geschehen ist, der Antheil der Deutschen an diesem weltgeschichtlichen Ereigniss in Vergessenheit gerathe" (commentary by the editor of *DDP*).

7 "Germanisierung" remains a rather vague term throughout *DDP*. It centers around modification and "improvement" of Anglo-American life through German cultural influence. Cf. Wm. Lang's speech (on the

occasion of the annual "Stiftungsfest" of the Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati on May 26, 1874), *DDP* 6, 110: "(Der Deutsche ist) im Begriff, Amerika zu germanisieren." Cf. H. A. Rattermann's speech (on the occasion of the annual "Stiftungsfest" of the Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati on May 30, 1876), *DDP* 8, 155: ". . . und wenn dann das blutarme Yankeethum, welches sich heute nicht mehr vermehrt, sondern kaum noch stationär zu bleiben vermag, über eine Weile in untergeordneter Stellung gerath, dann wird ganz Nordamerika das werden, was der verstorbene August Becker ihm so oft prophezeite, *germanisch vermittelt*." Cf. "Die Germanisirung Amerika's," *DDP* 16, 318-321.

8 *DDP* 1, 27-29.

9 F. H. Röwekamp, "Geschichte der deutsch-englischen Schulen in Cincinnati," *DDP* 13, 217-226. This historical sketch had originally been published as a pamphlet in 1859 to revive interest in Cincinnati's German-English schools.

10 Cf. H. Schuricht, "Deutsches Schulwesen in den Ver. Staaten," *DDP* 17, 141: "Die Gesamtlage des deutschen Schulwesens in den Ver. Staaten liefert jedoch, ungeachtet seiner Ausdehnung und Bedeutung, kein allzu hoffnungsvolles Bild. Noch immer erhält die Mehrzahl der Kinder deutscher Abkunft *keinen* deutschen Unterricht, und die Masse der deutschen Bevölkerung verhält sich der Erziehungsfrage und der Pflege des deutschen Unterrichts gegenüber nahezu unthätig." Cf. H. Schuricht, "Das Deutsch-Amerikanerthum und die deutsche Sprache," *DDP* 13, 304. Cf. Röwekamp, "Geschichte der deutsch-englischen Schulen in Cincinnati," *DDP* 13, 224-25, 226.

11 Cf. Carl Theodor Eben, "Das Deutschthum in Amerika und 'Deutsche Gesellschaften'," *DDP* 10, 281: ". . . und nichts als ein beständig und in genügender Stärke herbeiströmender Nachschub vom alten Vaterlande vermag dem Aussterben deutscher Sprache und Sitte in diesem Lande vorzubeugen. Auf der fortdauerenden Einwanderung allein beruhen unsere Hoffnungen." Cf. report by the *Volksfreund* about a speech by Friedrich Hassaureck given at a monthly meeting of the Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati on Feb. 5, 1880, *DDP* 11, 505: ". . . dass die zweite Generation des Deutschthums hier viel von ihrem wahren Charakter verliere, und eine neue Einwanderung sei nöthig um das Deutschthum hier in seiner Reinheit zu erhalten." For a very pessimistic view on the future of German in the United States see Dr. Adolph Douai, "Die Zukunft der deutschen Sprache im Auslande," *DDP* 12, 256-262.

12 Cf. "Professor Felix Adler über die Aufgabe des Deutschthums in Amerika," *DDP* 10, 233: "Die Deutschen sind die Griechen der Neuzeit, und bei den Griechen galt der Grundsatz der harmonischen Ausbildung des Körpers und des Geistes in seiner ganzen Ausdehnung . . ." *DDP* 14, 438 quotes Professor Moore (St. Paul, Minnesota, Staatsuniversität): ". . . als Grundlage zur allgemeinen Geistesbildung sollte das Deutsche mit Fug und Recht den Platz der altklassischen Sprachen einnehmen."

13 Cf. G. A. Dobbert, "The Cincinnati Germans, 1870-1920: Disintegration of an Immigrant Community," *Bulletin of the Cincinnati Historical Society* 23 (October 1965). Dobbert shows the failure of Cincinnati's German press to inform Cincinnati's German community objectively about the war and its political background, in this way misleading many of its readers.