

Chapter 2. The Radical Turners of New York

[Sigismund Kaufmann's] name is indelibly linked with the history of the Turner Union and the Turner movement as one of the founders of the *New York Turnverein*. He was first chairman for many years. He was also one of the founders of the [national] Turner Union, whose chairman he became at that time.

[Heinrich Metzner], "Sigismund Kaufmann," August 24, 1889

The founding fathers of the New York Turner Society were radicals. Many had risked their lives in the European uprisings of 1848 and 1849, and when they failed and the reaction set in, they were forced to flee for their lives. In the United States they were welcomed as freedom fighters. Their passionate political commitment was not entirely foreign to New York German-Americans, and many sympathized with the aim of overturning the repressive monarchies. A close look at the 1850s reveals unexpected twists. The first Turners, refugees of revolution, were intent on making an impact and saw in their organization an instrument for social and political goals. Physical exercise was a major part of the activities, but it did not diminish the zeal and involvement in the public sphere. The Turner Society (*Turnverein*) of New York was not simply a local organization; it proved to be most effective in establishing the viable basis for a national network. It acted as a catalyst. The history of the decade reflects a significant development, which included the formation of a national union of Turners.

Even before the outbreak of the revolutions in Europe, a German-American labor leader, Erhard Richter, owner of a brewery and saloon, took the extraordinary step of addressing all Germans in a call for revolution. In his hand-written message, copied and which was distributed in lithographic form in Germany, Richter called upon citizens to revolt against the German rulers, and, taking the United States as a model, to replace the monarchy with a republic. In the United States, Richter asserted, there was freedom of movement, and a country of united people from every part of the world.

Richter called for action to eliminate the rule of princes, religious leaders, bureaucrats, and mercenaries. He did not hesitate to call for the death of all these pillars of the repressive order. Germany should look to the United States to see the flowering of a republic and think realistically, break loose from chains, and look upon the United States, where people hate aristocracy and philistine attitudes. Richter saw in the United States a strong desire to join the Germans with the victorious flag of the republic in the struggle for freedom. His admonitions were dated August 12, 1847, but in the following year, during the revolution, they also appeared in printed form.¹ The expressed radicalism continued to be a driving force behind Richter's work for the labor movement and for his support of the Turner Society.

When the revolution broke out in March 1848, Karl Heinzen, a prominent journalist, was in New York, where he was preparing to return to Europe to take part in the struggle. The large group of Germans who applauded him and expressed their strong support of the revolution included Erhard Richter. Heinzen reported on a meeting in Mechanics Hall on March 23, 1848. The speeches supported the revolution and sent a message to that effect with Heinzen to Europe. Present were Jakob Uhl (chairman of the meeting), A. Krüer, Louis Försch, and Richter.² Another member of this group was Eugen Livre, who also became a key supporter of the New York Turner movement.

In Germany many people looked to the Turners to provide an organization to support political ends. Not all members approved of the transformation of their societies into political tools. The spirit of the revolutionary movement infected many Turners, however.

The first wave of refugees of revolution did not waste time in promoting the establishment of Turner organizations. In November 1848, the founding of the New York *Turngemeinde* (Turner Society) was among the first ones. According to Felix Reifschneider, one of the founders, the first organizational meeting took place in late June or early July 1848.³ Erhard Richter's saloon on Forsythe Street became its headquarters. The members were soon embroiled in a controversy. A struggle raged between those young people who, according to Reifschneider's account, just wanted to come together to drink, and those who were serious about gymnastics and politics. In June 1850, the acrimonious debates split the society into two irreconcilable groups and led the activists to form an entirely new group, the Socialist Turner Society (*Sozialistischer Turnverein*). The newly formed society was aggressive and prevailed not only in New York; it served also as a catalyst for the formation of a national network. Reifschneider summarized his own role in the divisions and the founding of a new society.

After some of the original older Turners discussed this and realized that there was nothing else they could do against the formidable young additions on the other side, Reifschneider and Engelhardt suggested resigning during the next meeting and starting something new with renewed enthusiasm. And that is how it happened. . . . Reifschneider jumped onto a chair and called (to the amazement of the men) for the Turners who had resigned to go to Beekman Street to deliberate about the new socialistic Turnverein. Sig[ismund] Kaufmann and Ger[main] Metternich joined us immediately. We marched arm in arm from 22 City Hall Place to Stubenbord on Beekman Street. No one who is still alive will forget that evening when we decided to put out a call to action once again, in fact it was on the next Sunday morning, June 6th, 1850. We went our separate ways late in the evening. It was a grand, truly Turner-like, brotherly act in the truest sense. That is how the current, strong-standing New York *Turnverein* came into existence.⁴

Reifschneider's story of the New York society's beginnings names the Turners who became the most active leaders in the subsequent years. Kaufmann had taken part in the Frankfurt Turner organization during the revolution, but he had to flee because there was a warrant out for his arrest.⁵ One of the most aggressive Turner leaders was Germain Metternich, who had come to the attention of authorities as early as 1833. Spending three years in prison did not eliminate his revolutionary zeal. A police report of September 1847 listed him, along with Gustav Struve, one of the most famous German revolutionaries, as a suspect in plotting to set up a national organization of Turners. The goal of union would be, among other democratic initiatives, the freedom of the press and the right to bear arms. The police recognized the political threat behind. The failure of the revolution prevented the implementation of an overarching Turner Society in Germany.⁶ For Metternich and many others, the defeat in Germany was not a final chapter. Within only about three years, both experienced a second chance in New York.

The founding of the Socialistic Turner Society took place when New York Germans experienced a flurry of wide-ranging political activities. Societies representing a diverse range of interests sought to arrive at a consensus. Up to this time Kaufmann, who became chairman of the New York Turners, had been part of a group that called itself a Society of Resolute Progress (*Verein des entschiedenen Fortschritts*), which conducted meetings with other organizations such as the Social Reform Society (*Social-Reform Verein*) and the Free Society (*Freier Verein*). Members of these diverse groups joined forces to appoint Metternich and Richter as chairman and deputy chairman,

respectively.⁷

The efforts to find a common direction that united a broad spectrum of views pointed in the direction of the newly founded Turners. They appeared to show the determination and organization that seemed appropriate. Although the newly established society suffered a reduction from about 150 members to 36, its ability to draw energy from many sectors of the German community, including that of leaders of the active labor movement, generated a powerful impetus. The new waves of German immigrants coincided with the disturbances and conflicts caused by a strike of tailors in the city; the drastic measures of the police against the strikers, many of whom were Germans, fostered insecurity and, at the same time, the desire for unity.⁸ Eduard Müller became the society's gymnastic teacher. He had come from Mainz, where he published a Turner newspaper, the *Mainzer Turn-Zeitung*, in 1846. In New York, he published a manual for gymnastics, the title of which indicated that it was for all members of the Socialistic Turner Union and all friends of physical education.⁹ The spirit guiding the newly formed society was a revolutionary spirit, and energy it inspired quickly brought about the emergence of a national union of Turners.

The minutes of the first meetings of the New York Turner Society indicate that Kaufmann and Metternich, as the most active leaders, collaborated in all aspects of the society's organization. They were instrumental in assuring a rapid expansion. For them establishing a strong national union was a priority. Soon after that, the national *Turn-Zeitung* appeared, under Kaufmann's editorship.¹⁰

Ludwig Engelhardt belonged to the party of radicals that had split from the original Turner Society, and even before the formation of the Socialistic Turner Society, he had called for a union of all Turner societies in America. His joint proclamation with the Newark Turners, published in the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* on April 10, 1850, stressed the duty of Germans to introduce the Turner concept as a unique and creative contribution of the German spirit. He stated what was well known to be the old motto of the Turners in German: that only in a healthy and strong body could there be a healthy political disposition and fortitude. That had been exhibited by the Turners in the first rows of the fight for freedom in Dresden, Frankfurt, Hanau, and Baden. The Turners foresaw a network of societies that would provide an asylum against persecution by tyrants. A few weeks later, after April 10, the New York Socialist Turner Society and the Turners of Brooklyn took up the challenge by drawing up the constitution of such a union.¹¹ On October 5, the circle of delegates met in Philadelphia, where representatives from New York, Boston, and Baltimore were also present, and agreed on a provisional organization. For all practical purposes, the National Union

of Turners (*Turnerbund*) became a reality, and it flourished in the following two years under the leadership of Sigismund Kaufmann, who was also the chairman (*Vorsitzer*) of the New York society. Engelhardt later became the society's trusted secretary.

The *New York Daily Tribune* and its outspoken editor, Horace Greeley, were evidently pleased with these developments. When the paper reported on the Philadelphia meeting ("The German Gymnastics Society of North America"), it featured the Turners' resolution that stressed as its first principle "the furtherance of socialism." The Turners resolved "that with the bodily cultivation of men, [each member] must unite and realize socialism, that is, the greatest possible independence, and join himself to the great struggle of humanity for the emancipation of the human race." At the same time, the paper was impressed by the "great movement among all the German trade and scientific associations."¹² Another example of this movement was the impending congress of "Working Associations" called by German labor leader Wilhelm Weitling. The goal of the meeting was the unification of all labor organizations in the United States. Weitling's congress met from October 22 to 28, also in Philadelphia, with delegates from ten cities.¹³

The feverish activities of labor leader Wilhelm Weitling were short-lived. Weitling was responsible for the publication of the *Republic of Workers* (*Republik der Arbeiter*), which appeared from January 1850 until July 1855. Although the first two years of the decade appeared promising, as the frequent reports of the *New York Daily Tribune* testify, Weitling's failures and the death of his paper reflected the gradual decline of the labor movement in New York. Horace Greeley opposed strikes, and after the tailors' strikes, and the violence connected with them, his *Tribune* reported less and less about the labor movement. A parallel trajectory can be observed in the strong assertion of socialistic initiatives among the Turners. The intertwining of common membership and mutual support explains the period of impressive successes in the labor and Turner movements. The names of men such as Erhard Richter, Eugen Lievre, Sigismund Kaufmann, and Germain Metternich—to mention only a select few—appear prominently in the reports about the meetings of these organizations. Eugen Lievre's Shakespeare Hotel on William and Duane Streets became a favorite meeting place of labor leaders and the Turners. For the *Turnerverein*, Lievre provided spaces for a library and exercise.¹⁴

In October 1851 the national organization formally adopted the name *Socialistischer Turnerbund*, which indicated that radicals like Kaufmann had prevailed against conservative members such as Aaron Frank of the original New York Turner Community and the Boston Turners.¹⁵ The political activists of New York also won a victory in having the union declare itself officially as supporting the platform of the Free Soil Party. This victory did

not put the controversy to rest. When Kaufmann resigned from his position as leader of the national organization in October 1853, he appeared to be frustrated by the opposition to political activism. Nevertheless, he could be proud of a successful national organization of nearly sixty individual societies, representing thousands of members.¹⁶

The newspaper of the national Turner Union (*Turn-Zeitung des Turnerbundes*) appeared for the first time on November 15, 1851 in New York. During its first years the thrust of this publication was to disseminate ideas of socialism. In the first issue, socialist Gustav Struve reviewed the defeat of Turner ideals at the hands of the German authorities and cautioned that in the United States the danger for the Turners was a relaxation of the determination to be free. Struve did not present a program. Perhaps he sensed that the political activism he advocated did not have a bright future in the United States. In subsequent issues, along with Friedrich Engels, Joseph Weydemeyer and Abraham Jacobi, both with links to Karl Marx, wrote articles. A number of essays elaborated the relevance of socialism to the tasks of the Turner Society. Although attention to news about Turner activities throughout the country was consistently available, in the first years, political issues took prominence.

The radical leftist politics of the Turners went hand in hand with their willingness to fight aggressively for what they considered to be their rights. Even the issue of the right to sing in the streets, generally forbidden by the strict Sunday laws of those days, could become a serious matter. The New York City Turners tested the limits of this issue during celebrations with the Brooklyn Turners that took place together in June of 1850, soon after the founding of the organization. After celebrations, speeches, and beer, the Turners were singing as they approached the ferry on their way home. The police perceived a violation of the Sunday laws. The Turners were not willing to be arrested without a fight. According to Turner reports, the police, aided by the "rowdies," who were armed with knives and stones, attacked the celebrants. Several men were wounded. The police arrested twenty-two Turners, each punished with a one dollar fine. To the German-American community this was injustice.¹⁷

In the eyes of many immigrants, a similar injustice occurred the following year, during Hoboken May Day celebrations. According to one German report, 15,000 Germans attended the event. A fight broke out between the Turners and the Americans, variously referred to as "rowdies," "short boys," and "loafers." This time, several on both sides were wounded, one house was damaged and one man was killed by the Turners. The police arrested fifty-one Turners. The *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* reported that after these confrontations, several thousand Germans came together at the

Shakespeare Hotel to hear news of the events and to support the Turners' conduct in the fighting. Richter, Metternich, Kaufmann, and Lievre were prominent among those delegated to defend them.¹⁸ These confrontations with the authorities did not damage the reputation of the Turner Society among German-Americans. On the contrary, membership continued to grow. In 1854 Franz Sigel, respected as a military commander because of his leadership role in the revolution, received the responsibility for the technical and military organization of the Turner Union.¹⁹ In 1856, the memory of the Hoboken incident was still fresh, and extra care was taken to confront any conceivable actions by the "Short Boys." There were several military companies commanded by Franz Sigel. The Turners, about 500 in number, "were dressed in their usual uniform—brown linen coats and pants and Kossuth hats."²⁰

In the early 1850s, as the labor movement gradually declined, the Free Soil movement, after the dramatic impact of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, was replaced by the antislavery movement. This transition was reflected in a joint meeting of the German Social Reform Society and the Socialistic Turners. A meeting attended by Kaufmann, Richter, and Lievre called for the establishment of a "Radical Free Soil Party." The resolutions passed also included opposition to slavery "in whatsoever shape."²¹

Excitement about the Kansas-Nebraska Act began even before Congress passed the bill. The first of many meetings consisted of a noisy and chaotic assembly of some 900 to 1,000 people, with shouting on both sides. Neither the supporters nor the opponents could get a hearing during the first hour. The reporter of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, representing the administration's and Senator Douglas's Democratic position in support of the bill, and a journalist of the *New York Daily Tribune* referring to the iniquity of the Douglas bill, gave widely different views of the events. According to the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, an organized group of young people came into the meeting and started a fight, after which the meeting concluded. The *Tribune* reporter evidently went beyond this "conclusion." He described the organized young people as members of the Turners, who appeared suddenly with the sound of a horn and with broken table legs attacked the "rowdies" and "short boys" and drove them out. The *Tribune* reporter wrote: "Many hats and caps were lost, and one policeman received a black eye." With the hecklers ejected and order restored, Erhard Richter, elected chair by the majority, was now able to address the crowd. The assembly, reduced now by one-third, voted overwhelmingly for Richter's resolution that declared the bill "a rascality and iniquity."²² The Turners demonstrated once again that they were willing to fight aggressively when they believed a cause just. At this time they were clearly siding against the idea of extending slavery into the newly opening

territories of Kansas and Nebraska. The radical Turners had discovered a new cause.

The slavery issue dominated the meetings of the Turner national convention in Buffalo in September of 1855. There were heated discussions of Wilhelm Pfänder's project to create a settlement of Turners in the western territories. The project received only conditional approval. Then the issue of slavery dominated discussions, in which William Rapp and Franz Sigel were influential speakers. The resolution adopted declared that the Turners opposed slavery and its extension.²³

Much has been written about the German participation in the Civil War. Many New York Turners took part and contributed substantially. Franz Sigel's name is conspicuous in the annals. It is less known that in the years leading up to the outbreak of hostilities between the North and the South numerous German "Forty-Eighters" and Turners throughout the United States lent their energies to the newly formed Republican Party. Turners fought with arms in Kansas against the extension of slavery. At the 1860 meetings at the *Deutsches Haus* Chicago, which preceded the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for the presidency, attendance consisted primarily of this segment of the German-American population. Initiatives for influencing the nominating process came from the German Republicans in New York. Friedrich Kapp, Sigismund Kaufmann, Germain Metternich, and Andreas Willmann were actively involved in these efforts. The evolving and transformed spirit of the early 1850s was in evidence. During his successful presidential campaign and later during the trials that faced him as president, Lincoln owed much to this spirit.

The career of Sigismund Kaufmann (1825–89), who was born in Schotten near Frankfurt am Main, was at the center of all these developments.²⁴ His education and training in printing and publishing took him to Paris and Strasbourg. At the outbreak of the revolution, he joined the Turners of Frankfurt, and the police began to search for him with a warrant for his arrest. He escaped and emigrated to the United States. Soon after arriving in New York, he began to study law, and by 1852 he had received permission to practice. His name was eminent as a leader in all meetings of the labor movement and Turner affairs. For a time, like his fellow revolutionaries Metternich and Struve, he promoted socialism in America. His political involvement against the Kansas-Nebraska Act led him to become a cofounder of the New York Republican Party. He was a leading member of the New York German Society, which helped the immigrants arriving in New York. He cofounded a German savings bank in 1859. In 1860, he was chosen as a presidential elector, and, after serving in the Union army, he returned to New York political life. In 1870, he became the Republican candidate for the office

of lieutenant-governor of New York.²⁵

Kaufmann's distinguished career highlights important aspects of early Turner history in New York. His idealism mirrors not only the spirit of many other Forty-Eighters and Turners in New York but also throughout the country. The failure of the 1848–49 revolutions did not break that spirit; the revolutionary spirit acquired a second life. The experience and involvement in radical change in Europe brought new energy to the Free Soil and labor movements. Although that success was short-lived, the revival of the Turner gymnastic program in the United States was most successful, bringing with it political potential in the framework of a national organization. The initiative quickly spread Turner organizations throughout the country. By 1857, the New York Turners dropped "socialistic" from the name of the society. Fighting against the extension of slavery became a priority. When Henry Villard, reporting for the *New York Herald*, reviewed the names of the German-Americans to whom Lincoln owed his election, he named Sigismund Kaufmann as one of a small group of nine from the entire country.²⁶ Villard recognized him for being a leading part of a movement that began with the revolutions in Europe and was given a strong impetus in New York. The organizational skill that Kaufmann demonstrated infected others. It was also characteristic of many Forty-Eighters and Turners who participated in the process that led to Lincoln's nomination and election.

Notes

¹ Veit Valentin, *Frankfurt am Main und die Revolution von 1849/49* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1908), 157–59.

² Karl Heinzen, *Erlebtes* (Boston: Heinzen, 1874), 200.

³ Heinrich Metzner dates the actual founding of this society as October 22, 1848. *Jahrbücher der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Turnerei* 1 (1892): 24.

⁴ See article by Reifschneider in Appendix A.

⁵ See Appendix C.

⁶ Hannes Neumann, *Die deutsche Turnbewegung in der Revolution 1848/49 und in der amerikanischen Emigration* (Stuttgart: Hofmann, 1968), 13; see also Falck, *Germain Metternich*.

⁷ *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, June 1, 1850.

⁸ *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, August 17 and 30, 1850; *New York Daily Tribune*, July 19, 25, and 29, 1850.

⁹ *Die Turnerei: Ein Leitfaden für die Mitglieder des sozialistischen Turnerbundes und alle Freunde der Leibesübung* (New York: John Weber, 1853). The City Library of Mainz retains Müller's *Turn-Zeitung* for 1846.

¹⁰ The archives of the New York Turnverein are located now at the Max Kade Center for German-American Studies of the University of Kansas. A detailed description of their contents is found in Nora Probst's catalogue, which is available at the center's Web site: <http://www2.ku.edu/~maxkade/>

¹¹ See Engelhardt's proclamation in Appendix B.

¹² *New York Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1850.

¹³ Hermann Schlüter, *Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1909, repr. 1984), 82–85.

¹⁴ Other prominent names of radical German leaders at this time are: Franz Arnold, J. A. Foersch, and Gottlieb Kellner. Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 115.

¹⁵ Heinrich Metzner, *Geschichte des Turner-Bundes* (Indianapolis: Zukunft, 1874), 6.

¹⁶ *Turn-Zeitung*, October 15, 1853, 294–95.

¹⁷ *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, June 27, 1850. Cf. Appendix A.

¹⁸ *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, May 31, 1851; *Republik der Arbeiter*, May 31, 1850. Cf. Appendix A.

¹⁹ Metzner, *Jahrbücher der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Turnerei*, 1:212.

²⁰ *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), May 24, 1856.

²¹ *New York Daily Tribune*, August 26, 1851.

²² *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, February 24, 1854; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 6, 1854. Cf. Levine, 162–65.

²³ Metzner, *Jahrbücher der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Turnerei*, 1:264–69.

²⁴ See Appendix C.

²⁵ The Democrats prevailed in that election.

²⁶ See Villard's list in Appendix O.