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Robert Reitzel and the Haymarket Affair

On 4 May 1886 a bomb was thrown near Chicago's Haymarket Square which caused the first "red scare" in America and produced the first American anarchist martyrs. A mass meeting of workers had been called together in Haymarket Square on the evening of the fourth, in order to protest police brutality of the previous day, when the police had killed one and seriously injured six other McCormick Harvester strikers, who had been agitating for an eight-hour day. The English version of the announcement read:

Attention Workingmen!

-----Great-----

MASS - MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7:30 o'clock,

-----at the-----

HAYMARKET, Randolph St. Bet. Desplaines and Halsted

Good speakers will be present to denounce the latest
atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our
fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

This so-called "great mass meeting" which was to begin at 7:30 P.M. and which was expected to attract many thousands of workers, actually drew only a crowd of about twelve to thirteen hundred people, and did not start until after 8:30 P.M.¹ The weather changed as the last speaker of the evening was speaking; it began to drizzle, and the crowd, seeking shelter, quickly dwindled to three hundred or less. Just as Samuel Fielden was winding up his speech, captains John Bonfield and William Ward appeared with a police column of 180 men and told the crowd to

disperse peaceably. Suddenly, without warning a dynamite bomb was thrown into the midst of the police, killing officer Mathias J. Degan immediately; six other policemen later died from their wounds. During the ensuing panic several of the fleeing people were killed and two hundred wounded.² Although in Frank Harris' ostentatiously sensational novel, *The Bomb*, Rudolph Schnaubelt is identified as the bomb-thrower, no one could, in fact, be implicated, and the identity of the bomb-thrower is still unknown today.³ Nevertheless seven men were arrested and charged with the murder of policeman Degan. Albert Parsons, who had fled from Chicago, later turned himself in, so confident was he that he would not be tried because of complete lack of evidence. But he, as well as other prisoners, completely misjudged the hysterical mood of Chicago which was whipped up by the police, who seemed only interested in retribution, and by the press, which fed on the fears of the public by describing vividly an imagined communist and anarchist conspiracy by foreign-born fanatics threatening their very lives and property.⁴ Of course, it was not only the city's papers which added to the hysterical mood of Chicago. Generally, the conservative American as well as the ethnic American papers were all solidly lined up against the Haymarket prisoners. Their rights were defended only by socialist and anarchist papers, though by no means by all of them and the support of some of those papers was merely lukewarm.

The chief prosecutor Julius S. Grinnell did not even try to prove that the defendants had thrown the bomb, rather he attempted to establish a conspiracy. All eight defendants were found guilty of murder by the twelve jurors, "whose admitted prejudices against anarchism were declared by Judge Gary to be 'no cause for exclusion.'"⁵ Seven were condemned to death, while Neebe received a fifteen-year prison sentence. Subsequently, Spies, Parsons, Engel, and Fischer were hanged on 11 November 1887. One day before the execution the death sentences of Schwab and Fielden were commuted to life imprisonment by Governor Oglesby, while on that same day Lingg committed suicide by exploding a bomb in his mouth. The trial, it is now commonly agreed, was a judicial farce and a gross miscarriage of justice:

A biased jury, a prejudiced judge, perjured evidence, an extraordinary and indefensible theory of conspiracy, and the temper of Chicago led to the conviction. The evidence never proved their guilt.⁶

Society took its revenge against these men who, in newspapers and public speeches, had encouraged and supported striking workers and had called for a social revolution.

In 1893 Governor John Altgeld of Illinois granted an absolute pardon to the three remaining prisoners, because, as he stated in his pardon message, the jury had been packed, the jurors legally incompetent, the judge prejudiced, and the evidence insufficient to show that the defendants were guilty.⁷ Historians today are in general agreement with this summary of the Haymarket Affair.⁸

The events in Chicago captured Robert Reitzel's (1849-98) interest right from the start. His own socio-economic revolutionary ideas were similar, though less inflammatory, to those expressed by the Chicago anarchists. Nor did he ever call for a violent overthrow of the existing social order, as several of the defendants admitted to having done. He came to view the trial itself as a major political event, as a dangerous assault on the First Amendment, and as a proving ground for the viability of a free America. Thus, his initial active interest in the Haymarket Affair soon changed to a consuming passion. He eloquently and vigorously defended the anarchists in speeches and especially in the pages of his popular, weekly literary journal *Der arme Teufel*, of which he was the editor and main contributor from 1884 until his death in 1898. Although Reitzel was well known among German-Americans of the last century, not only because of his journal,⁹ but also as an able, charismatic public speaker,¹⁰ he failed to mobilize support of any consequence for the condemned Haymarket prisoners. It might have turned out differently, if he had joined forces with others. But his temperament was far too individualistic to allow him to become an adherent of any dogma or movement. The Social Democrats had ruined socialism for him, he once said, the Christians Christianity, and the anarchists anarchism.

Some of the circumstances of Reitzel's life help to explain how he came to have such an extreme political outlook. In his carefree student days at the University of Heidelberg, Reitzel had studied history and philosophy rather half-heartedly and had left the university without receiving his degree. Consequently he was unable to find employment in Germany and therefore willingly heeded his father's advice to emigrate to America. And so he left the Black Forest and arrived in New York City in 1870 at the age of twenty-one. But life was just as grim in America; he was again unable to find a steady job; he and some companions tramped through New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland, often having nothing to eat, no place to sleep, most of the time treated like the scum of society or sometimes even like common criminals. He kept a journal of the first year of his wild and colorful experiences in America. These entries into the journal later formed the skeleton of his autobiographical novel *Abenteuer eines Grünen*, which not only gives a fascinating and at times disturbing historical, sociological and economic portrait of America in the 1870s, but is also a German-American *Sprachkunstwerk* of the first rank in clear, crisp prose, heightened with romantic yearning à la Eichendorff and irony reminiscent of Heine.

Late in the fall of 1870 Reitzel found a mentor in a minister from Baltimore named Pister who decided that a theological career was the only option open for him, and who found him a temporary job in a wine cellar. No one was more sorry than Reitzel himself, when the time had come to prepare his first sermon, for this meant he had to give up his work in the wine cellar. As he remarked: "Hatte ich doch nichts weniger als Sehnsucht nach dem Weinberg des Herrn, der Weinkeller war mir lieber" (30 April 1887, 173). It is not surprising—given such a jocular attitude coupled with his shockingly unorthodox sermons—that his attempt at the ministry failed in less than a year. For more than a decade

he then traveled across America, a welcome speaker before liberal German-American audiences. In Detroit some of his friends helped him found *Der arme Teufel*, the freshest, most exciting as well as one of the most controversial German-American journals. Finally he had found a receptacle for his extremely liberal ideas.

For the remaining years of his life he continued to speak out, to write and to edit his paper. During the last four painful years he was laid up in bed, in his *Matratzengruft*, not unlike Heinrich Heine. Robert Reitzel died 31 March 1898 in his fiftieth year.

Reitzel's impassioned defense of the Haymarket prisoners was met with other voices, of course. He had printed a long letter by August Spies in the *Armer Teufel*, a letter which he likened to a monologue from Büchner's *Dantons Tod*. The *Chicago Daily News* published an English translation of this letter and by way of explanation to its readers identified the *Armer Teufel* as an anarchistic paper devoted to free love, revolution and the sharing of property, while agitating against society, the law of the land and religion.¹¹ Reitzel responded in a manner typical for him, first by feigning mocking exasperation, and then by cheerfully poking fun at this assertion:

Ist je einem Menschen so Verleumderisches auf den Kopf zugesagt worden?

Ich soll gegen das Gesetz sein, ich, der ich das gesetzliche Alter abwartete, ehe ich heiratete und ehe ich eine Zeitung herausgab! . . . Ich soll gegen Religion sein, da ich doch mehr Feiertage halte als im Kalender stehen! (25 September 1886, 340).

An essay by Reitzel with the Latin heading "Vae Victis" appeared in the 15 May 1886 issue of the *Armer Teufel*. His information about the events in Chicago was incomplete at this time. He wrote that a few thousand protesters had gathered in Haymarket Square who wanted to avenge the continuing injustices and brutalities perpetrated on the workers. Actually, as already stated, there were never more than thirteen hundred people present and only three hundred or less at the time the bomb was thrown. The speeches that evening by Spies, Parsons and Fielden were no more inflammatory than others given at political gatherings before 4 May; nor was there in those speeches any threat of personal violence against the police.

Reitzel had expected the workers to revolt at some point; for him the Haymarket tragedy was purely the result of a struggle for material interests. He foresaw all too clearly that society would demand the spilled blood of the policemen be avenged, and that a witch-hunt would begin against anarchists, communists and socialists, who were now all conveniently lumped together.

For the next one and one-half years the Haymarket Affair became the most important and most painful concern in the *Armer Teufel*. Hardly an issue was published without a reference to it. The cheerful tone of the paper and its carefree banter diminished drastically. Reitzel became personally more and more involved with the fate of the eight prisoners,

especially after traveling to Chicago in July 1886, where he met all of them. A number of letters by Spies and Lingg addressed to Reitzel were published in the *Armer Teufel*. He spoke at numerous mass meetings to raise money for the defense of Spies and the others, and to rouse the people to action. His report about his first trip to Chicago—"In der Höhle des Löwen"—sounded surprisingly optimistic. Being present in the courtroom during the proceedings and talking to the defendants must have buoyed his spirits. He knew this trial was a "bedeutendes Kulturereignis," but for the onlooker it might have appeared to be merely an amusing comedy of errors. He relished the bizarre irony of distributing to each defendant in the courtroom the latest issue of the *Armer Teufel*. And Judge Gary who liked to have women hovering around the bench during the trial was described in a mocking way:

Der Richter—das Bild eines richtigen alten amerikanischen Philisters. Wenn ihm einige Zeitungen nähere Beziehungen zu den ihn beständig umgebenden Damen insinuieren, so müssen, nach meiner Meinung, diese Beziehungen sehr gestandener Natur sein, denn die um diesen Salomo versammelten Weiber sind sicherlich schon mit der Mayflower herübergekommen (31 July 1886, 276).

At the end of his essay, in a more serious vein, he warned not to underestimate the able prosecutor Grinnell; William Perkins Black, chief attorney for the defense, was also judged to be a skillful lawyer who clearly had feelings of sympathy for the defendants; however, he was prone to lose his temper which, Reitzel remarked, might end up doing more harm than good.

The pronouncement of the death sentence for seven of the eight defendants surprised even the prosecutor Grinnell, Reitzel claimed. Now, however, Reitzel tried even more desperately to rouse the people out of their lethargy to action. In general, people sympathetic to the cause of the labor movement felt the hanging would never be carried out. Reitzel knew better:

Wenn es möglich war, daß ein solches Urteil gesprochen und bestätigt wurde, dann ist es auch möglich, daß es vollzogen wird; wir müssen uns mit der Tatsache vertraut machen, daß man sieben kräftige, gesunde Menschen vor der gesamten zivilisierten Welt hinmordet, hinmordet mit kalter Überlegung (16 October 1886, 364).

In bold juxtaposition he compared the fate of Jesus with that of the anarchists, the city of Chicago with Jerusalem: "Jerusalem — Chicago — dasselbe Trauerspiel, dieselben Akteure, dieselbe Vergewaltigung des Gerechtigkeitsgefühls" (30 October 1886, 380). Was not Jesus' preaching an incitement to anarchy? Did not Jesus have to die, he argued, because he was too great a threat to law and order, and to the high priests of religion?:

Haben nicht die acht Männer in Chicago mit demselben Stolz wie der Menschensohn die Anklage des Anarchismus, der Volksaufwiegelung,

der Revolutionspredigt beantwortet mit einem: "Du sagst es"?! (30 October 1886, 380).

Did Judge Gary not perceive the similarity of his position with that of his colleague of two thousand years ago, Pontius Pilate? Though when Pilate had pronounced sentence he declared himself innocent of the spilling of blood by washing his hands before the crowd, thus showing his weakness and inability to change matters, perhaps even his nobility of soul. Judge Gary showed no such weakness nor nobility of soul, and he chose not to wash his hands publicly.

As the eleventh of November 1887 moved inexorably closer, Reitzel's mood darkened and he became even more somber. The Supreme Court of Illinois had sustained the verdict of the lower court on 14 September and a pardon by Governor Oglesby seemed highly unlikely. Speeches and polemical writings in the *Armer Teufel* on behalf of the anarchists reached a fever pitch. What was about to happen in Chicago, he warned his audience in Detroit on 16 October, was not a blow against the anarchists,

sondern gegen alles freie Denken gerichtet . . . gegen jede Emanzipations-Idee, namentlich wenn sie vorzugsweise von Eingewanderten vertreten wird, gegen das republikanische Bürgertum überhaupt (22 October 1887, 370).

Would they allow seven men to be slaughtered who had courageously and selflessly fought for the people, he asked? In Chicago, a few days before the execution, Reitzel apparently even considered freeing the prisoners by force from Cook County Jail, an idea he quickly abandoned, when he realized there was no chance of success.¹²

On 12 November, the *Armer Teufel* was published draped in black. Reitzel was back again in Chicago to deliver the funeral speech the following day. Six thousand people marched in the funeral cortege, one quarter of a million lined the route, over ten thousand, maybe fifteen thousand came to Waldheim Cemetery to listen to the eulogy of the dead by Captain Black, the defense attorney of the Haymarket martyrs, by Thomas J. Morgan, a socialist labor leader, by Albert Curllin, a former editor of the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, and by Robert Reitzel.¹³ All of them spoke in English, except for Reitzel who addressed the crowd in German. He began his moving oration with a feeling of nausea, great sorrow, and defiance:

Freunde der Freiheit! Mein erstes Wort an diesen Särgen soll eine Anklage sein, nicht gegen den Geldpöbel, der heute in seinen Kirchen dem Herrgott dankt, daß er wieder einmal ein gerechter Richter gewesen ist, sondern gegen die Arbeiter von Chicago. Denn ihr, Arbeiter von Chicago, habt fünf eurer besten, edelsten und konsequentesten Vertreter eurer Sache in eurer Mitte ermorden lassen (19 November 1887, 405).

They were crucified on Good Friday, he continued, though this day was an Easter Sunday which must become a day of resurrection for all time

henceforth. Shame and sadness marked his closing words, and a violent rage:

Wir haben keine Ursache für diese Toten zu trauern; sie starben den Heldentod, und wie das Kreuz einst zum Zeichen der Liebe wurde, so wird der Galgen im 19. Jahrhundert zum Zeichen der Freiheit werden. Aber trauern müssen wir über unsere eigene Schmach, über unsere Unentschlossenheit, über unsere Feigheit. Laßt uns von diesen Gräbern mit den Worten Herwegs im Herzen scheiden:

Wir haben lang genug geliebt,
Wir wollen endlich hassen!

(19 November 1887, 405)

The execution of the anarchists was probably the most devastating blow of his life. Events of the last nineteen months had physically and emotionally exhausted Reitzel.¹⁴ When he had returned home to Detroit from Chicago on Friday night, the eleventh, he found there a telegram with the request that he deliver the eulogy at Waldheim. So he rushed back to Chicago and then back again to Detroit emotionally devastated and suffering from acute depression. For a while his life hung in the balance, an artery had burst, and as his blood ebbed away, so did his life, it seemed. Absolute rest, prescribed by his physician, did help him recover, but for the ten remaining years of his life he became a quieter, a more contemplative man.

A poem Reitzel had written earlier celebrating the New Year 1887 had been a resounding clarion call for action:

Was frommen bei zertretenen Saaten
Der Sehnsucht friedliche Schalmein?
Wir wollen statt der Tränen Taten
Und Blut statt Wein.

(Reprinted in the 31 December 1887 issue, 33)

A year later, however, when no social upheaval had followed in the wake of the Haymarket Affair, disillusionment set in. In a grim poem filled with bitter grief he wrote resignedly

Es war wie immer,
Es blieb beim Alten,
Wir haben uns alle
Recht brav gehalten.

Wir hatten Mut
Im Wirtshaus-Orden;
Wir schauten zu
Wie andre morden.

Wir sagten uns selber:
Es muß so sein!

Und tranken grimmig
Unseren Wein.

Wir haben dem Volk
Recht brav geraten—
Jedoch der Henker
Verzeichnet die Taten.

(31 December 1887, 33)

At the first anniversary of the execution of the Haymarket prisoners, on 11 November 1888, he again was one of the speakers at Waldheim Cemetery, this time before a crowd of over seven thousand people, as he reports (17 November 1888, 405). Having conquered his debilitating sadness, his address was not one of sorrow, but rather one of protest against the legal murder of five men who had belonged to humanity. They had not been guilty of any crime, he maintained, other than exercising their right of freedom of speech.

The guiding impulses of his work and life were liberty, love and beauty. His love embraced particularly the poor, the disadvantaged, the oppressed, the persecuted. Thus it was only natural for him to be drawn to the Haymarket prisoners, and he always fiercely rejected any suggestion that his motives were self-serving or not based on facts:

[. . . daß ich in] meinen Äußerungen über die Chicagoer Tragödie, speziell über August Spies, durch nichts anderes beeinflusst worden bin, als durch die Tatsachen und mein menschliches Gefühl, das mich manchmal zu weit, aber selten irre führt (7 January 1888, 43).

He had painfully learned to remain faithful to oneself, to the true nature within, so that one may be free, even though the cost to the self may be prohibitive.

Although a man of great conviction, a splendid stylist and an engaging public orator, Reitzel's impact on the Haymarket Affair in the end turned out to have been negligible. He did raise considerable sums of money for the defense of the Haymarket prisoners, and convincingly took up their cause in his journal and as a public speaker. But all his life he prided himself in fighting his battles alone, in never joining forces with others: "In meinem Leben habe ich keiner Partei angehört . . ." (17 November 1888, 404). While such extreme individualism may be admirable in many ways, it did considerably weaken his political influence, and thus his impact on the Haymarket Affair was minimal.

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Notes

¹ Facsimiles of the flyers in German and English are reproduced in Edward Baumann, "The Haymarket Bomber," *The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 27 April 1986, p. 12.

² Andrew S. Berky and James P. Shenton, eds., *The Historians' History of the United States* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1972), 2:961.

³ Frank Harris, *The Bomb* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963). Recently George Meng has been mentioned as the most likely person to have thrown the bomb. See *The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 27 April 1986, pp. 12-21.

⁴ Albert R. Parsons and Oscar Neebe were the only native-born Americans, although Neebe spent his childhood in Germany. Samuel J. Fielden was born in England, while the others—George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Louis Lingg, Michael Schwab and August Spies—were all born in Germany.

⁵ Roderick Kedward, *The Anarchists* (New York: The American Heritage Press, 1971), 36.

⁶ Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1936), 541.

⁷ For the complete pardon message see John P. Altgeld, *Live Questions* (Chicago: Geo. S. Brown and Son, 1899), 365-400.

⁸ See, for example, Henry David, 236ff., still the most detailed and exhaustive study; Berky and Shenton, 964ff.; James Joll, *The Anarchists* (New York: The Universal Library, 1966), 143; Roderick Kedward, 36; Dumas Malone and James Rauch, *The New Nation, 1865-1917* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), 116; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1969), 463.

⁹ At its peak, the circulation of *Der arme Teufel* was over 7,000. Reported in Adolph Zucker, *Robert Reitzel*, *Americana Germanica*, vol. 25 (Philadelphia: American Germanica Press, 1917), 49.

¹⁰ For example, Reitzel spoke to a crowd of 1,700 attending a protest rally in Detroit on Sunday, 16 October 1887, against carrying out the death sentence of the five Haymarket defendants who had been condemned to die. See *Der arme Teufel*, 22 October 1887, 372. All Reitzel quotations in the body of my text are taken from *Der arme Teufel*, and are identified by date and page number only.

¹¹ Under the headline "Humor of the Gallows. Anarchist Spies Relates his Experiences in Jail to the Poor Devil," *Chicago Daily News*, Evening Issue, 20 September 1886, p. 4, said this about the *Armer Teufel*:

"Der Arme Teufel"—The Poor Devil—is the significant title of a weekly publication in Detroit. It's tendency is against law, society, and religion, and for free love, revolution and the division of property—in one word, it is the most rabid anarchistic sheet published on this side of the water.

Reitzel quotes the above (except for the first sentence) with obvious relish in *Der arme Teufel*, 25 September 1886, 340.

¹² See Carl Nold, "Anarchists: Robert Reitzel," *Man!* (July 1933): 5.

¹³ David, 464-65. Berky and Shenton (967) report a much higher figure of worker participation in the funeral cortege: "At the funeral 25,000 working people marched."

¹⁴ It is, however, revealing to observe that at the very time when the Haymarket Affair became Reitzel's consuming passion, he serialized his whimsical, wildly funny autobiography *Abenteuer eines Grünen* in his journal from December 1886 to March 1888 as a counterweight to the Haymarket tragedy.

