

Henry S. Reuss

Reflections of a Wisconsin Congressman of German Descent

The following talk was given by former Congressman Henry Reuss, Wisconsin, at the evening session of the 1984 Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at Madison on April 27, 1984. [The Editors.]

The German-American Studies program has asked me to set down some thoughts on my German ancestry, and what effect it might have had on my life in politics. So, with my computer command on GERM:ORIG, I have scrolled through times gone by, and here is what I found.

Where I Came From

My roots are indeed German. On my mother's side were Schoellkopf and Vogel, on my father's Lachner and Reuss—all forty-eighters themselves, and all from that part of the ancient kingdom of Württemberg which lies between Stuttgart and Kirchheim unter Teck.

I early learned of the princely House of Reuss, Younger Line, with its capital at Greiz on the Weiße Elster in Thuringia. The little principality had been one of the thirty-six member states of the Holy Roman Empire which Napoleon dissolved in 1806. All the princes of the line for half a millennium had borne the name of Henry, and it seemed a reasonable bet that I had princely blood coursing in my veins.

Thus it was that in December 1964 I found myself, accompanied by an American Quaker missionary and by an official of the German Democratic Republic at Pankow, paying a visit to this tiny "Graustark." Needless to say, this was the first visit to the GDR by an American official, and I had solemnly promised the State Department that I would carefully refrain from anything which might be characterized as formal recognition of the Pankow regime. I enjoyed the former principality—the summer palace, the winter palace, the parliament building, the military caserne. But the commissars of the GDR were now sitting in the

seats of power, and any attempt at a restoration would have been hopelessly romantic.

Besides, as the family Bible clearly established, my forebears were Swabian rather than Thuringian, and common rather than princely. The Reusses—my Reusses—were in fact needlemakers. The trade required great skill: you had to move fast to put that eye in the needle, and accurately lest you leave a jagged edge that could cut the thread.

As a matter of fact, I became quite proud of my Swabian heritage. At the Swabian *Spanferkel* roasts at the Donauschwaben picnic grounds west of Milwaukee, I would remind my audience what Julius Caesar had had to say about the Swabians: *Sueborum gens est longe maxima et bellicosissima Germanorum omnium*,—the Swabians are the greatest and bravest of all; and that I too was a "Schwob," whose grandfather had been suckled on the savory Swabian noodles—"mit Spätzle groß geworden!"

Bricks, Boots, and Beer

My forebears were forty-eighters, but their motivation for emigrating seems to have been more economic than political. My grandfather Gustav Reuss came over in 1853, landed in New York, got a job as a messenger in Wall Street for \$1.50 a week, and soon heard of an opening for a German-speaking young man in far-off Milwaukee. The new Milwaukee banking house of Marshall & Ilsley, founded by two Yankees in 1847, hired the youth. He worked hard, married Miss Marie Lachner who had been born in Milwaukee in 1847, and later became president of the bank.

Historians tell us that the first secondary products of a developing society are bricks, boots, and beer, made from the clay, skins, and grain of the new land. My ancestors seized on each one. Great-grandmother Vogel in the 1850s ran one of Milwaukee's first brick kilns, using the cream-colored clay that gave early Milwaukee the name of the Cream City. Other Vogels founded the Pfister & Vogel Tannery, which became the world's largest until an overstocking of hides for army boots after World War I led to its demise. Other family connections had to do with the early Schlitz and Pabst breweries.

Making the World Safe for Democracy

The Milwaukee into which I was born was America's most Germanic city, rivaled only by Cincinnati and St. Louis. The two World Wars ranged German-Americans against their kinsmen across the Atlantic. Wisconsin's Senator Robert M. LaFollette and Congressman Victor Berger opposed World War I, arguing that America should stay out of European quarrels. The Senator was stigmatized by President Wilson as one of "the little group of wilful men" who were interfering with U.S. support for the Allies; the Congressman was convicted of abetting resistance to the military draft, and was three times denied the seat in the House of Representatives to which Milwaukee's voters had elected him.

But generally Wisconsin's German-Americans survived the trauma of World War I. Whatever my family's inner view on the war might have been, they dutifully tied a tin can to the rear of their locomobile on Armistice Day 1918 and drove through the streets of Milwaukee celebrating the defeat of the kaiser.

Often in the twenty-year interval between the two World Wars I traveled to Germany with family or friends. There were relatives in Aachen or Weimar or Berlin or Kassel or Mecklenburg-Schwerin to visit. There were trails in the Schwarzwald to be hiked, which helped to inspire my love for the Ice Age Trail in Wisconsin many years later.

There was a hard look at the Great Inflation of 1923, when the mark appreciated a million-fold, ruining the middle class and dooming the Weimar Republic. German cities and towns were issuing their emergency money, *Notgeld*, on beautifully engraved paper or porcelain or cloth. I amassed a considerable collection of it, which now reposes in the Goethe Haus in the Milwaukee Public Library.

There was the whiff of delicious decay in the Berlin of Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, and Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, as observed by a callow visitor from the Wild West Bar of Haus Vaterland, the leading nightclub tourist trap of the era.

By the summer of 1935, there was also the premonition of horror of the Hitler days—the airfields and military camps on the plains of Pomerania, the Hitler salute on every street, the hateful signs at the gates to the towns, "Juden unerwünscht."

The onset of World War II in September 1939 exposed all the internal conflicts of the Wisconsin German-American. The Nazi Bund goose-stepped at Camp Hindenburg on the Milwaukee River. Phil and Bob LaFollette, heirs to Old Bob and now Governor and Senator, adopted the America First position.

Recalling what I had seen in Germany, I ranged myself on the other side, and became a founding member of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. At the end of 1940, with Hitler holding the Continent and eyeing Britain and America, I decided to take my part in what was soon to be called the war effort. To Washington I went, to become Assistant General Counsel of the Office of Price Administration, whose mission was to prevent runaway inflation before it started. From Washington I answered the call of my friends and neighbors in Milwaukee to report to the induction center. Thus I was in the 75th Infantry Division when we crossed the Rhine in March 1945 and helped seal off Field Marshall Model in the Ruhr pocket and thus bring the war to an end.

After the fighting I found myself with a captain's rank and a general's job, as head of the Military Government's *Preisbildungsstelle*. Our official mission was to contain inflation. In ruined Germany this meant essentially dealing with the symptoms of inflation. We did occasionally manage to make the symptoms go away. One day the chief of U.S. Military Government, General Lucius Clay, ordered me to go down to Stuttgart to do something about the open black market the displaced persons were operating in the ancient marketplace. "It's a

disgrace, and I want it stopped," the General told me. I saluted smartly, raced down to Stuttgart in my jeep, and with the aid of the Military Police cleaned the whole operation out of the marketplace. I promptly reported to General Clay that the mission had been accomplished, and he commended me. No matter that the *Schwarzhandel* reestablished itself three days later on the other side of the River Neckar: We had driven it out of the marketplace!

In the Steps of Carl Schurz

At the end of 1945, home to Milwaukee and my wife and two-year-old son, to my interrupted law practice, and shortly, in company with so many other returning veterans, into politics. Not for me the conservative Republicanism of my forebears, and particularly not the demagogic corruption of Republicanism that soon became synonymous with Senator Joe McCarthy. Instead, in company with young men like Jim Doyle and Tom Fairchild and John Reynolds and Horace Willkie, all later judges, and Gaylord Nelson and Pat Lucey, I helped breathe life into a liberalized Democratic Party, fortified by some remnants of the old LaFollette Progressives.

Young men in politics need a role model—a Jefferson or a Lincoln, a Teddy or a Franklin Roosevelt. My model—one that seemed right for me both ethnically and ethically—was Carl Schurz.

There he was—a hero of 1848, a friend of Lincoln, a passionate foe of slavery, a gifted orator and writer, a scrapper for the underdog, a protector of the environment, an exemplar of clean government, a staunch opponent of imperialism and war from the Caribbean to the Pacific. I even identified with his shift from the Republican Party to the Democratic when he felt that the GOP had forgotten its Lincolnian origins.

Schurz' definition of the true patriot is one I long ago adopted for my own: "My country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right!"

I hope that more admirers of this noble American may make the pilgrimage, as I did in 1980, to Schurz' birthplace at Liblar near Cologne, in the old castle where his grandfather lived as manager of the estate of Count Metternich.

My political career touched on German matters in both the ethnic and the foreign policy sense.

Ethnic Joys

I practiced ethnic politics for years before it was recognized as an independent discipline of political science.

For one thing, I enjoyed it. At summer picnics, at winter banquets, at weddings and christenings and funerals the year round, my Germanic juices flowed freely. Whether it was at the *Liedertafel* or the *Turnverein*, with the Donauschwaben out on Silver Spring or with the Lustige B'ua at Bavarian Park, these friendly people became my friends—and remembered me on voting day.

In the presidential campaign of John Kennedy in 1960, I was made co-chairman of the Nationalities Section, launched at the compound at Hyannisport shortly after JFK got the nomination. My ethnicity was by no means restricted to German-Americans. Wherever two or three Slovenians, Slovaks, Slavonians, Serbs, Bohemians, Moravians, Poles, Austrians, Danes, Norwegians, or Swedes were gathered together, I was upon them with fraternal shouts.

In those early years after World War II, Democrats like myself had plenty of fence-mending to do among the German-Americans. It had been under Democratic Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt that the two wars against Germany had been fought. This was not lost on Wisconsin German-Americans, who had changed their political allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans over the years. Bringing them back to the party of Jefferson and Jackson took some doing, and ultimately ethnic solidarity was a lot more effective than endless haranguing about historic responsibility.

Besides votes, there was another positive result to be obtained from ethnic politics. Age-old differences between peoples in the Old World tended to sour the civic solidarity in the New. German and Polish neighbors fought endlessly over there, and imported some of the bad blood with them. The Polish leader in Milwaukee for thirty years before his death in 1983 was my colleague and friend Clem Zablocki. He was fiercely Polish, but even more fiercely American. It could be that our friendship helped to sublimate Polish and German nationalism into the larger American interest.

The Harbor Bridge that joins Milwaukee's North Side to the South Side may serve only a marginal transportation function. But we tried to make it a symbolic cord connecting the Poles and the Germans.

The Fractured Mother-Tongue

My extensive German-American activities were conducted over the years with the most minimal linguistic equipment. This is strange in view of the extensive German-language training to which I have been exposed.

My first school was the venerable German-English Academy, which still stands on Milwaukee's Broadway, handsomely rehabilitated. Instruction by that time was in English, so I learned no German. There was one excellent year of German teaching in high school, at the hand of Paul Friedrich, who later originated the radio Lutheran Hour out of St. Louis. At Cornell University, I was for some reason drafted to head up the *Deutscher Verein*; fortunately, its proceedings were conducted in English.

My language studies improved when, at the end of World War II, I found myself stationed at Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, in the I.G. Farben building in Frankfurt. Turning to the sympathetic young German steno-dactylo in my office on my first day, I said "Here's a copy of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. We are going to read it from start to finish, and I am going to learn German." We did read *Buddenbrooks* from start to finish, and I actually learned some German.

But far and away the best introduction to the language came one autumn of my congressional career. We adjourned early, and I reported at the Naval Intelligence Language School at Anacostia for an intensive total immersion. Twelve hours a day and six days a week, together with a couple of naval officers bound for Bonn, I was carefully drilled in conversation, using as our subject matter lengthy analyses of the German-Polish campaign of 1939 and of unidentified flying objects. But my German improved—enough to give the word at a German picnic in Milwaukee, a Kennedy memorial address in Karlsruhe, a convocation on political freedom in Innsbruck, or student gatherings at the Universities of Heidelberg, Hamburg, Vienna, Bonn, and Berlin.

Most importantly, I found myself caught up with the idea of the new Federal Republic, a Germany that could be peaceful, free, democratic, and prosperous. As Deputy General Counsel of the Marshall Plan, I found myself in Frankfurt in 1949 helping with the organic law that created the Federal Republic. I knew the great German leaders—Konrad Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard and Heinrich von Brentano; Fritz Erler, Willy Brandt, and Kurt Schumacher.

What pleased me most was to have had some part in creating the German Peace Corps. I had worked on the American version since 1958, and was proud that President Kennedy had put it into action shortly after his inaugural in 1961. That spring Speaker of the House John McCormack called me in to help a delegation of German officials who said that they would like to set up a Peace Corps in Germany. So I spent a month in the Federal Republic helping work out plans for their Peace Corps, and by November 1961 the Bonn government formally announced that it was promptly setting up a Corps. The prospect of young Germany harnessing its energies in an idealistic way excited me.

But then the Bonn government got an attack of the slows. For eighteen months little happened, and the project was no nearer fulfillment. Then one afternoon in May 1963 JFK called me over to the White House, told me he had decided to visit Germany the next month, and asked whether I might have any suggestions on an itinerary. Of course I suggested a visit to the Berlin Wall ("Ich bin ein Berliner"), and a speech at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt where democracy flickered briefly in 1848. And then I added—and may Heaven forgive me!—why didn't he review the new German Peace Corps which was just being set up? The German Embassy in Washington, in alarm, passed the request to Bonn; Bonn, in alarm, recruited a Peace Corps in a matter of days; and the American President enthusiastically reviewed the first contingent; and the German Peace Corps remains a strong force for good until this day!

Today, for the first time since World War II, clouds hover over the German-American relationship. Thirty years of subservience to the U.S. has produced its inevitable reaction. Skill and wisdom as never before are needed on both sides.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Washington, D.C.