

Dr. Max Girschner and Pohnpei Island

Vortrag auf der Tagung „Kolonialmedizin, Kolonialpädagogik, Kolonialgeschichte Deutschlands in der Südsee 1884 bis 1914“ am 04./05.11.2011 in Rostock

by Paul M. Ehrlich, Ph.D.

This is a limited portrait of Dr. Max Girschner, a man I wish I had met. Throughout his years on Pohnpei Island, Dr. Max Girschner was far more than the physician who landed on Pohnpei in 1900. He was a natural ethnographer, a gifted linguist, a highly respected member of the German colonial administration, and an exceptional humanitarian. Max and Frau Girschner were active, sensitive individuals who cared for Pohnpei and the people there knew it.

Throughout my research into the German period on Pohnpei Island, Dr. Max Girschner was notable for two reasons: 1) his fluency in the language and his comfortable participation in the Pohnpeian culture; and 2) his efforts to safeguard the German community after the murders of the Governor, Secretary, Engineer, Overseer, and six Mortlock islanders in October 1910. Girschner's decisive action and leadership kept the rebellion from spreading beyond Sokehs, saved the rest of the whites on the island, and spared Pohnpei from more disastrous consequences. Although many Pohnpeians mentioned Dr. Girschner in connection with the most important events, only a few had direct contact with him, but everyone held him in the highest regard..

It seems that Doctor and Frau Girschner learned everything they could about the people, the language, and the culture of Pohnpei. The Pohnpeians were impressed by how quickly the Girschners and Dr. Albert Hahl, the German District Administrator, learned the language and participated in feasts: donning grass skirts, anointing with coconut oil, and drinking *sakau* (kava). Pohnpeians are proud of their island and culture and they enjoy sharing it with foreigners, and they welcomed and admired the Girschners' obvious interest and respect.

Knowledge of the language and sensitivity to the culture helped the Doctor in his work as a physician, but his influence extended far beyond the hospital he established in Kolonia. Over the years, he earned enormous respect as a healer and as a man. When he

called for assistance at the most critical moment at the beginning of the Sokehs Rebellion, the Pohnpeians trusted Dr. Girschner's word, heeded his advice, and sent help.

Oral History on Pohnpei

When I conceived the project to study the German colonial administration of Pohnpei, I knew I had to carry out field research in the Pohnpeian language without a translator. Peace Corps experience in 1967 and 1968, provided a basic understanding of the Pohnpeian language that enabled me to begin interviewing informants who remembered the Germans when I returned to the island in July, 1973.

As with many islands or non-western cultures, oral communication is the main source of news, history, culture, and other information on Pohnpei Island. Eyewitness accounts are always subject to personal perceptions and recollections vary. Despite variances and some inaccuracies, the oral history of the German period on Pohnpei was fairly consistent among the Pohnpeians and matched well with German sources.

Because the Germans had been on Pohnpei from 1899 to 1914, primary informants had to be at least 70 years of age to have experienced enough of the German years to have memories of people and some important events. With the exception of a few informants over 80 and 90, most were in the 70s, and their memories of the Germans were from their early childhood and teenage years. Much of what the younger (early 70s) informants remembered of the Germans was likely the result of conversations with adults who witnessed events or heard about them through the island grapevine. Fortunately, a number of individuals in their 80s and 90s were not only old enough, but had clear memories of individuals and important events: the typhoon of 1905, the Sokehs Rebellion, and the land reform of 1912-13. They remembered individual Germans and incidents, and related their own experiences.

I took field notes and carried a cassette recorder with which I interviewed informants who were willing to be taped. When people were not comfortable with the recorder, I took notes or remembered conversations that I wrote into field notes later.

When I arrived on Pohnpei to begin field research in July 1973, I made a courtesy visit to Leo Falcam, then District Administrator of Pohnpei. Leo is the grandson of Alfred Vahlkampf, one of the German administrators who served on Pohnpei at the end of the

German period (1911 to 1914). Leo noted that it was the last opportunity to converse with eyewitnesses who had personal experience with the Germans. He was correct. I spoke to many eyewitnesses, but almost all the principals in the critical events had already died. Though I received many vivid descriptions of people and events, so much information was already lost.

This was especially true of Dr. Girschner. The Pohnpeian who knew Max Girschner best—Joseph Irriarte, his principal Pohnpeian medical assistant—was no longer alive. A Nukuoran assistant named Mangele was alive but suffering severe dementia, and was unable to converse about anything. No one knew what happened to Girschner's Malayan assistant named Mangapor.

One reason I wanted to investigate the oral history of the German period on Pohnpei was that I wanted to know what the Pohnpeians *thought* was happening. Whether correct or incorrect, peoples' perceptions of events and circumstances influenced their responses to each situation. Many individuals often turned aside questions about events they had not witnessed first hand; but sometimes, despite their preference for direct memory, they offered information they had heard from others, often parents or other relatives.

One could dismiss hearsay as insignificant, but I prefer to consider what the Pohnpeians heard and thought was happening as helpful in providing some understanding of what motivated them and others to act as they did during the most critical events. Here is where Girschner's reputation rises to supreme importance. Most Pohnpeians knew about Max Girschner from conversations with others. They heard about his effectiveness as a physician and his fluency with the language and culture. His and Frau Girschner's warmth and kindness were particularly impressive. How the Pohnpeians viewed Girschner influenced their responses to his warnings and his requests to the leaders of the chiefdoms of Madolenihmw, Uh, Kiti, and Nett for assistance during the Sokehs Rebellion.

The Pohnpei that Max Girschner encountered

With eleven peaks higher than 600 meters, Pohnpei is a rugged landscape. Dense jungle rainforest covers the mountains and extends to mangrove forests at the shore. In

1900 to 1914, access to areas outside Kolonia (where the Germans resided) was by boat or canoe and muddy trails. I experienced that situation in 1967 and 68 when the only vehicle roads on the island were in Kolonia and extended only a couple of kilometers beyond the "town". A trip to any other part of the island was by boat or canoe, and usually consumed an hour or two, depending upon the tides, the size of the outboard motor, and the weather. When I returned to do research in 1973-4, the roads were extending further, but only about thirty percent of the island was accessible by car or motorcycle. Once outside Kolonia, one had to travel over water or walk on muddy trails that traversed rocky terrain.

Throughout the 19th Century, Pohnpei suffered massive depopulation. People suffered from diseases introduced by ships that stopped at the island to provision and trade. Influenza epidemics, measles and other conditions took a steady toll, and in 1854, a smallpox epidemic killed 6,000 to 8,000 people in just six months. Four clans disappeared and the entire line of priestly chiefs was wiped out. Once higher than 30,000, the population had declined to just over 3,000 in 1899, and life was quiet. Pohnpeians live in individual farmsteads that were, and still are, well dispersed throughout the island.

In the early 1900s, people generally stayed close to home and socialized with neighbors or at local gatherings for feasts. They went to Kolonia when they had a few bags of copra to trade for goods at the few stores, to attend church services, or to see the doctor if they were ill.

The few stores that existed outside Kolonia did not carry the variety of goods that were available in "town". People stayed close to home to maintain their local crops and gather food, and were constantly on guard against thievery and hostile behavior. It was a culture of warriors, and men always had to carry a knife or a gun. Dr. Hahl and Dr. Girschner, and all other foreigners were very much aware of the circumstances, and they ventured beyond Kolonia with great care and respect.

Feasts were the most important activity on the island because they were the focus of Pohnpei's social life and prestige economy. Pohnpeians participated in frequent feasts that celebrated the important seasons and harvests, weddings, funerals, births, house building, canoe building, spirit propitiation, and other important aspects of the culture.

The power of the chiefs, the tribute obligation, and devotion to Pohnpeian tradition required the provision of *sakau* (kava), pigs or fish or dogs, breadfruit, yams, and other foods in various combinations, depending upon the occasion. Because feasts were frequent, people focused their farming on subsistence and being able to fulfill the tribute requirements. This left little time or energy to plant and harvest cash crops such as copra, which the Germans hoped to develop into a viable economic product for export. The feasting obligation was to become an increasingly important issue throughout the German administration of Pohnpei.

Most important was the fact that Pohnpei was not "pacified". The Spanish colonial government never controlled the island, and they suffered defeats in four battles against Pohnpeian warriors. Most adult Pohnpeians had guns and traditional rivalries plus serious competition between Catholics and Protestants generated a tense atmosphere in which the threat of violence was always present.

Dr. Girschner, the first full-time physician on Pohnpei

The principal medical issues on Pohnpei in 1900 included the stark prevalence of venereal disease, primarily syphilis and yaws, as well as gonorrhea. Tuberculosis and gastrointestinal diseases were common, and there were some instances of leprosy and filariasis. Aside from those, Girschner and the other District physicians faced local conditions and cultural issues such as poor sanitation and traditional beliefs and practices. Islanders often considered illness or injury the result of some spiritual transgression or evil magic. Pohnpeians often used local herbs and consulted healers within their family or those who were known for particular skills such as massage, herbal medicine, or spiritual knowledge. Going to the doctor was generally a choice of last resort, when all other options were not effective.

Girschner set up a small hospital/clinic with a few beds and hired Pohnpeians to assist in treating and caring for patients. He also learned the Pohnpeian language quickly. By 1906, he had not only achieved fluency but wrote an article that explains Pohnpeian grammar in excellent detail. (Girschner, 1906)

Pohnpeians often said that both he and Frau Girschner were excellent Pohnpeian speakers. Elihsa William who often cleaned the Girschner house and worked at the

hospital, remembered Frau Girschner speaking Pohnpeian on the telephone. She said they both spoke "like Pohnpeians." (Elihsa William, Sept. 6, 1973)

The Doctor often attended feasts where he drank *sakau* (kava) and was anointed with coconut oil. Informants noted that he often donned a grass skirt at these events. Such sensitivity and openness to the culture and the people enabled the Girschners to establish personal relationships that led more and more people to trust their medical skill and their judgment in other matters as well.

One of Girschner's primary assistants was Joseph Irriarte, a Pohnpeian from Nett, where Kolonia is located. From where Joseph lived, the clinic would have been about a half hour walk to work. I regret that I never met Joseph. His memories of Dr. Girschner and the entire German period would have added valuable information and detail about those years. I did, however, meet and converse with his son, Max, who was Nahmwariki (paramount chief or King) of Nett at the time of my research in 1973-74. Nahmwariki Max was not old enough to have remembered the Germans first hand, but he was proud of the fact that his father had been principal assistant to Dr. Girschner and that he was named in honor of the German physician.

Having Pohnpeian assistants and knowing the language as well as he did, Girschner also delved into Pohnpeian medicine and magic. I have assumed he might have suggested local medicines for various ailments when he saw how effective they were. It seems he used them as well. In *The Native Polity of Ponape*, Saul Riesenbergs says, the Germans "listed kava in their pharmacopoeia...", and "Dr. Girschner, the physician on Ponape in German times, is said to have drunk kava every time the ship arrived, which it did semiannually, in the belief that it prevented the cough the ship would bring." (Riesenbergs, p. 103)

During my time on Pohnpei, I used local herbs and medicines for various ailments, and I assume that Dr. Girschner learned of these as well. My ex-wife found that crushing and squeezing the juice of the leaves of the "foreign skin plant" (*tuhkehn kilin wai*) onto the skin, was particularly effective in suppressing and curing psoriasis. A bark called *madeu* (some Americans insist it is sassafras) makes a red fragrant tea that is excellent treatment for sore throat and cough. A poultice of fibers from a young banana tree (*il en uht*) can soothe bad bruises or sore muscles.

Once while farming my own sakau plants with a freshly sharpened machete, I sliced off my left thumbnail and exposed the entire quick. The farmer with whom I worked pulled a small plant from the ground, rinsed mud from the light tan root (perhaps 5 cm long and a few mm thick) in a running rainwater rill, and gently pounded it on a rock with the back of his own machete. He squeezed a light brown liquid that immediately cauterized the wound, with no pain or stinging. He cut a piece of the hem of his t-shirt, wrapped it around the thumb, tied it, and told me to keep it there until I could get home to put a bandaid on it. We continued to work, harvested some sakau, and finished our weeding. The wound never bled again. Later, I washed and covered it with a band aid. It never infected.

These examples were likely part of the medical lore that Girschner absorbed from Joseph Irriarte and other Pohnpeians. One of Joseph's granddaughters once told me that her mother taught her to drink the morning dew from the leaves of the dry land taro to stay healthy. Every mature Pohnpeian has their own family remedies and treatments for various afflictions.

Girschner was open to learning about Pohnpeian medicine and he was a caring, sensitive doctor whom patients learned to trust. He and Frau Girschner were friendly, cheerful people who liked children and cared for every patient. Girschner's fluency in Pohnpeian put people at ease, but Joseph usually translated to make sure that patients understood what he was doing and how he was treating their conditions.

Girschner and the Sokehs Rebellion

Dr. Girschner was exceptional not only because of his abilities as a scholar and healer, but also because of the mutual respect that he had for Pohnpei and that Pohnpei had for him. That mutual respect benefited everyone on the island when the Sokehs Rebellion erupted in 1910.

Beginning in 1907, the Colonial Government began to alter chiefly authority by eliminating traditional feasts, instituting private property over chiefly prerogative, and creating a head tax that required public works labor from men aged 16 to 45. Between 1908 and 1910 tensions grew as Georg Fritz (who became District Administrator in

1907) attempted to begin building roads with the aim of making the island more accessible from Kolonia.

In 1910, Gustav Boeder took over as Governor and was determined to achieve the goals of a road building program that had stalled due to resistance from Sokehs. He set out to make an example of Sokehs by having them complete a bridge across the Mwakote channel that divided Sokehs from the main island as well as a road on Sokehs itself.

Work proceeded in fits and starts and one day, a young man named Lahdeleng was disrespectful to the German road overseer, Otto Hollborn. Hollborn sent him to Boeder who had him lashed with ten strokes across the back with a wooden staff. The prevailing Pohnpeian story says that Lahdeleng was whipped bloody with a wire lined rubber hose—so severely that the skin lifted from his back. That night, the people of Sokehs feasted and decided to kill Boeder and other Germans.

The following day, Hollborn went to the worksite and saw some of the workers dressed in new grass skirts. Their bodies glistened with fresh coconut oil, they carried new machetes, and appeared hostile. He and Road Engineer Haeffner ran to the Catholic Mission at Denipei where Hollborn and the priests wrote notes that a couple of young boys delivered to Boeder that afternoon.

Most Pohnpeian accounts say that Girschner was with the Governor who was determined to go to Sokehs to talk to the High Chief and others. One Catholic priest supposedly warned Girschner not to go to Sokehs. (Andreas Weilbacher, July 26, 1973) Paulus Montal said, Girschner urged Boeder not to go and warned that the people there would kill him. He said, "The people of Sokehs are taking up guns." (Paulus Montal, Sept 29, 1973)

Here is where the Pohnpeian version is weak. Dr. Girschner was NOT with Boeder when Hollborn and Haeffner's notes arrived from the Catholic mission in Sokehs. Girschner was at the hospital tending to patients, and his own report identifies Police Master Karl Kammerich as having been in the office. (Girschner, 1911, p. 127) Kammerich urged Boeder to allow him to go along to Sokehs, but the Governor refused. All present asked Boeder to be careful but he did not listen. (Girschner, 1911, p. 127)

The most prevalent Pohnpeian version in 1973 claimed that Boeder disregarded warnings that the people of Sokehs would kill him. According to their story, he stomped

one foot, clenched a fist and said, "They can't." Paulus Montal said the Governor demeaned Pohnpei and said, "Germany is a big country, and what is Pohnpei?" as if to say, "Pohnpei is nothing." (Montal, Sept 29 1973) Boeder supposedly dismissed warnings that he might be killed and climbed aboard a small boat accompanied by his Administrator, Rudolf Brauckmann, and six Mortlock islander rowers.

When Boeder arrived at the Catholic Mission at Denipei on Sokehs, the Pohnpeians say he asked one person where the Nahnmwariki was and the person asked him, "Do you want to die? Is that why you ask for the Nahnmwariki?" Boeder ignored him and turned to go toward Mwaluk where the main Sokehs feast house was located.

What followed was slaughter and carnage. Boeder, Brauckmann, Haeffner and Hollborn and all the Mortlockese rowers were murdered and mutilated. When Girschner heard about the murders, he took control of the situation. He sent letters requesting that each of the Nahnmwarikis of Madolenihmw, Uh, Kiti, and Nett send 100 men to help guard Kolonia.

Pohnpeians say that Girschner warned the chiefs that the Germans would send reinforcements that would put down any opposition and would punish the murderers and anyone who had anything to do with mutilating the bodies. Anyone who assisted the rebels in Sokehs in any way would be punished. I do not know if this was in his written requests to the Nahnmwarikis or if it was some oral communication then or later.

Lingken Santos told me that Girschner said, "This isn't a game (*kaiden mwadong*). If you play, they [the Germans] will come and make war on Pohnpei and defeat the Pohnpeians. You can't win. So they [the Pohnpeians] put down their guns and went to Kolonia." (Lingken Santos, Feb 21 1974) Lingken did not identify to whom Girschner spoke, but stories such as this spread across the island, and the Pohnpeians believed it. They chose not to help Sokehs.

Girschner's report says that Madolenihmw sent 200 men and Uh 170 to guard Kolonia. Kiti's contingent of 100 included all the chiefs. (Girschner, 1911, 129) The predominantly Catholic areas of Nett and Awak sent men specifically to guard the Catholic missions. (Girschner 1911, p. 129)

Girschner served as acting Governor while the Germans waited for reinforcements. After reinforcements arrived in January, the new Governor Kersting took

control and Girschner resumed his duties as physician and tended to the wounded in the battles that followed. Elihsa William, remembered helping to care for about thirty soldiers whom Girschner treated at the hospital. (Elihsa William, Sept. 6, 1973)

When the Rebellion ended, fifteen men who participated in the murders and mutilation of the Governor, *et. al.*, were executed and 426 people—men, women, and children—were sent into exile to Yap, and later to Palau. Anyone who assisted Sokehs was exiled, including one man from Nett who regularly pounded sakau for the Doctor. (Souwen en Net, January 18, 1974) Dr. Girschner's warnings of retribution proved true.

Impeccable Character and Integrity

Except for his leadership during the Sokehs Rebellion, Dr. Girschner was not prominent in my research into the German years on Pohnpei Island, yet he stood out as the most well liked and respected of the Germans. For me, one anecdote or incident illustrates his sensitivity and humanity.

Hersin Santos (Lingken's younger brother) remembered that not long after the Sokehs Rebellion, Dr. Girschner refused to inject people with a drug that Hersin could not name. He described the medicine as particularly painful when injected into the upper buttock. Extreme pain persisted for at least five days, and prolonged pain and weakness prevented him from working for a few months. According to Hersin, Girschner went away on leave sometime in 1913 or 1914 and a Dr. Mayer from Saipan came to Pohnpei and administered injections to some people. After one woman from Kiti died from it, they stopped the injections.

I do not know where Hersin learned that Girschner had refused to administer the injection. He was emphatic that Girschner and the Catholic Missionaries advised against giving the shot. Hersin might have learned this from other Pohnpeians, but I believe he heard it from a Protestant Liebenzeller Missionary, Adam Syring, a pastor and teacher whom Hersin admired and mentioned often during our conversations.

Hersin's description of the injection and its results corresponded to accounts by other Pohnpeians. One informant echoed Hersin's description of the injection and pointed to the location on his upper buttock where he received it, and said a hard spot remained under the skin sixty years later.

An informant from Nett described a "big injection" that people were required to take because of some "*koasonned*" (law or order). (Souwen en Nett, January 18, 1974) Some people received the injection. Others avoided it. Those who received it often developed infections at the injection site, usually the buttock, but were "treated" (he did not say how) and recovered as long as they stayed inactive. If they did not remain inactive, the shot would become more inflamed, swell, and split open. This happened to his cousin, a girl in her early twenties named Kristina. Her injection infected and opened (*kenspeseng*) and she died in the hospital.

No one was able to name the medicine or why it was given, but I wondered and believe that it was Salvarsan 606, a medicine invented by my namesake, Dr. Paul Ehrlich, who shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with "the much more famous but now almost forgotten Ilya Mechnikov for their work on immunity." (Bakalar, D7). Salvarsan 606 was the first non-mercuric medicine for syphilis and yaws but it was very unstable and required careful administration. The critical ingredient was arsenic and the compound required special handling. It was usually transported in glass ampules and prolonged contact with air could destroy it. It had to be mixed with sterile water with great care. The effects described by Pohnpeians seem to correspond to those of Salvarsan 606. In 1913, *A Handbook of Useful Drugs* said, "In certain cases salvarsan has produced toxic results which are equivalent to poisoning by arsenic. These have occurred more commonly after the intramuscular injections. The intramuscular injection is painful and is usually followed by a tender, inflammatory nodule, which persists for some time." (State Medical Licensing Boards, 1913)

Though Salvarsan 606 was effective against syphilis, a number of deaths in Germany prompted Ehrlich to develop a less lethal and easier to administer version, Neosalvarsan, in 1911. (Thorburn, p. 405) Neosalvarsan became the primary treatment for Syphilis until penicillin was developed for widespread use after 1945, but I doubt that they tried to use it on Pohnpei.

A report from Saipan in 1911 included an entry that recorded the use of Salvarsan and Mergal (a mercury based medicine) by a Dr. Mayer to treat Syphilis and Yaws on Saipan and Rota in the Mariana Islands. (Mayer, p. 189) Were they experimenting on the Micronesians with Salvarsan and other drugs? Is that why Girschner refused to

administer the shots? Or, did he refuse to administer the injections because he was unfamiliar with the medicine and left it to Dr. Mayer who had more experience with it? Was it Salvarsan? I did not know. My enormous respect for Max Girschner expanded as a result. To me it was consistent with all the stories of his impeccable character and integrity.

A Few Final Thoughts

Foreigners who learn the Pohnpei language and participate in the culture find the experience irresistible, often exhilarating, and, at times, intimidating. I believe that the Girschners experienced all of that and more during their years on Pohnpei. The Pohnpeians embraced and respected them. That Joseph Irriarte named his eldest son in honor of Max Girschner shows that they had a deep, abiding friendship that extended far beyond the hospital. I have often speculated about the mutual mentorship that must have developed between them: Max teaching Joseph about modern medical practice and Joseph teaching Max about Pohnpeian language and culture.

Almost all my informants described how many of the Germans often recoiled at coming in contact with Pohnpeians. Although many of the single German men took Pohnpeian mistresses, they rarely entered a Pohnpeian house, despite offers of food and other hospitality. Few of them drank sakau or participated in feasts. Some Pohnpeians said that these Germans felt disgust (*sautiki*) for Pohnpeians.

The Girschners were an outstanding exception. Their genuine respect for the people and the culture were admirable, and the people embraced and held them in the highest esteem. The Pohnpeians trusted Dr. Girschner's word and his warnings. At the most critical moments, the Girschners acted with courage and wisdom. I have often wondered what became of them after they returned to Germany. As I said earlier, I wish I had known them. From all accounts, they were remarkable people.

It has been an honor to participate in this special commemoration of Dr. Max Girschner. Thank you to Manuel Rauchholz for telling me about the conference. Thank you to Dr. Wolf Voelker for inviting me. Thank you to everyone for this wonderful experience

Bibliography

Bakalar, Nicholas

2010 Paul Ehrlich, 1908. *New York Times*, February 1, 2010, p D7.

Girschner, Max

1906 Grammatik der Ponape-Sprache. *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin*, vol. 9, pp. 73-126.

1911 Die Unruhen auf Ponape. *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*. 22:127-132.

Mayer, Dr. Joseph

1912 Erfahrungen aus Saipan (Marianen) über Salvarsanwirkung bei Syphilis und Frambösie. *Archiv für Schiffs- und Tropenhygiene*, 16:189.

Riesenberg, Saul H.

1968 *The Native Polity of Pohnpei*. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington.

State Medicinal Licensing Boards

1914 Salvarsan. *A Handful of Useful Drugs*. American Medical Association. Chicago. pp. 120-122.

Thorburn, A Lennox

1983 Paul Ehrlich: Pioneer of Chemotherapy and Cure by Arsenic (1854-1915). *Journal of Venereal Disease*. 59:404-405.