

Barbara Wiedemann-Citera

The Role of the German-American *Vereine* in the Revitalization of German-American Ethnic Life in New York City in the 1920s

The participation of the United States in World War I affected the political, social and public life of all Americans, but none more so than the German-American ethnic group. In a wave of superpatriotism everything German, including language, music, and publications, was considered as "the enemy." The highly regarded German-Americans lost their status within American society and withdrew from public life. The degree of resiliency that German-American communities displayed throughout the United States varied from place to place. In Hoboken, New Jersey, also called "Klein-Hamburg" before the war, German ethnic life was extinguished. This was mainly a result of changing demographics caused by the use of the Hoboken waterfront (the heart of the Hoboken German-American community) as a military staging area. As the German-Americans moved out, their clubs moved with them.¹ Just across the Hudson River in New York City German ethnic life survived and continued albeit on a much reduced scale. The survival and consequent resurgence of German life in New York was due in large measure to the efforts of the German *Vereine* of this city. This essay is about the reorganization of the German *Vereine* in the 1920s, the problems they were confronted with and the role the societies played in the revitalization of German culture in New York.

World War I and its impacts were not the only factors in shaping German-American life. Geographic dispersion throughout the city was also a shaping force. Nearly a fourth of New York's population in the early twentieth century was of German descent. In 1910 New York's population included 842,000 inhabitants of German descent, 508,000 of whom were born in America. Only Berlin had at that time a higher percentage of German urban dwellers than New York. German-

Americans were; however, geographically dispersed throughout the five boroughs and lacked a distinctive German district. German "centers" could be found in the Upper Eastside (Yorkville) and Brooklyn (especially the Williamsburg and Bushwick sections). Upward social mobility also contributed to geographic dispersion. For successful German-Americans the ethnic community lost its attractiveness, they preferred an "American" environment. There also existed the desire to distance themselves from the "poorer immigrants" of other nationalities.²

The emergence of numerous German *Vereine* in New York (approximately three hundred in 1914 as well as in 1925) was in part due to this geographic dispersion. We find societies all over the city, fitted to the needs and desires of the immigrants. There was a society for every purpose and for every interest. In New York we find *Vereine* literally from A-Z from the *Arion* singing society to the *Zitherklub*. Some *Vereine*, such as the *Deutscher Geselliger und Wissenschaftlicher Verein von New York* and various reading societies, the so-called *Lesegesellschaften*, concentrated their activities on the cultivation of German *Kultur*, or German-American history such as the *Deutsche Historische Gesellschaft von New York*. Others limited their activities to a *gemütliches Beieinandersein* such as a smoking society *Blaue Wolke*, the *Vergnügungsverein Edelweiß* or even the Worry Not Club, an association of "life loving German-Americans." Many *Vereine* had different departments for special interests. The New Yorker *Beethoven Männerchor* not only had a *Damenverein* and the almost obligatory *Kegelabteilung*, but also a bachelors society, the *Beethoven Bachelors*.

There were a lot of occupational associations such as the *Deutscher Apothekerverein*, and the *Kaufmännischer Verein*. In addition, many German society types were repeated in numerous locations throughout the city. Workers had their own insurance and support associations. The *Arbeiter Kranken- und Sterbekasse* alone had over seventy local branches in New York. A number of German-American unions existed, from the *Bäcker* to the *Zigarrenmacher*. The unions were part of the American workers movement, but were organized in German-language groups. They were mainly politically motivated and separated clearly from the church and other "bourgeois" organizations.

The different regional backgrounds of German-Americans were mirrored in their club life. The Bavarians, the Hessians, and the Saxons had their own organizations that were sometimes so numerous that they were organized under central associations. There was, in New York for example, the *Bayerischer Zentralverein* and a northern German organization as well, the *Plattdeutscher Volksfestverein*. Most of the societies were organized on a local level and many were also members of the *Vereinigte Deutsche Gesellschaften* in New York. Only a few societies were organized on a national level like the *Turner*, which had twelve branches in the

New York district. With such a large array of *Vereine* to choose from, multiple membership in different societies was a common phenomenon.³ In the *New Yorker Staatszeitung* we find the definition of a *Vereinsmeier*:

Was, Sie sind Turner, Sänger und Schütze zugleich? Ganz einfach: ich bin Vorstand des Sängerkreises der Turnerabteilung unseres Schützenvereins!⁴

During the war German-American *Vereine* kept a low profile and at least reduced, if not cancelled public appearances. Not all the societies fared the same in this environment. In fact one society, the *Heinebund*, managed to profit from it. Their mountain cabin on the Hudson was turned into ruins when locals "were driven into patriotic insanity"⁵ since they thought the peaceful wanderers were spies. In an ironic twist of fate the *Verein* sold the land in 1920 with a 600 percent profit. This was enough to buy not only property in New Jersey, but also another cabin in the Catskill mountains. But most *Vereine* in New York were not so lucky and continued to struggle for survival. It became difficult to find places to meet. This happened to the *Geselliger Wissenschaftlicher Klub* in April 1919 when a hotel owner refused to rent a room the society needed for a concert, because the *Verein* was not "American" enough for him.⁶

Some societies that had survived the war, discontinued soon after the war ended. Generally the newer organizations, like the *Deutschwehr* founded in 1914,⁷ were the first ones to go, but the war also sounded the death knell for some old traditional *Vereine*, like the *Carl Sahn Club*.⁸ Some societies survived by merging with one another. With the mergers the *Vereine* hoped for a better chance of survival in the 1920s, a direct result of the "lessons learned from the war."⁹ Often the *Vereine* did not officially merge but held meetings and events together, e.g., the smoking society *Blaue Wolke* and the *Goethe Loge*. *Vereine* began to reorganize at least on a local level. In 1921 the Bavarian Association which had fifteen chapters before the war, reorganized its remaining seven sections.¹⁰

The impressive number of societies that survived the war was expanded by some newly founded societies. Among these the most significant was the Steuben Society founded in 1919. More than the other German-American *Vereine*, the *Steubengesellschaft* emphasized its Americanism: only American citizens were allowed to become members. Soon units of the Steuben Society were organized all over the country. The Steuben Society, however, never reached the level of organization or influence of the disbanded National German-American Alliance (NGAA). But more than any other contemporary organization, the Steuben Society succeeded in mobilizing the masses. The *Steubentag* in September 1924 in Yankee Stadium attracted more than forty thousand visitors. The political ambition of the Steuben Society was demonstrated by the selection of

Senator La Follette, a known pacifist, as guest of honor at this event. As the National German-American Alliance before it, the Steuben Society was not able to establish political cohesion—a "German-American vote"—within the German-American community, and more surprisingly not even among its members.¹¹ However, the Steuben Society did attract positive public attention. Events of the society in New York were acknowledged and visited by city officials. New York's Mayor Walker attended a Steuben Society dinner function in October 1926.¹¹ He spoke only complimentarily of the contributions of Americans of German descent and stated: "I don't know who started the war and I don't know who won it, but what I do know is this: let's forget it for once and for all!"¹²

In the new decade after the war German-Americans were becoming more visible again. In the hall of the *Männerchor* in October 1921 the first postwar German Day was conducted in New York City by the German-American societies. It was such a huge success that increasing attendance forced German Day celebrations out of the club hall into the Hippodrome in 1922.¹³

More than any other events and happenings, the resumption of the tradition of the *Sängerfeste* was the epitome of the revival of German ethnic festivities. They were also used as reminders of the German-American contribution to the American war effort and showed the connection of the *Sänger* to the United States. A lot of German songs were sung in the English language to support this point. The spring peace concert of 1922 was positively acknowledged by the American press and politicians. President Harding sent a message to the organizers with his best wishes, and New York's Mayor Hylan was the guest of honor at this event which attracted almost five thousand singers and seven thousand people in the audience. Among those present were many Americans that were not of German descent. Consequently the German singers were invited by the mayor to the city park concert in September 1922 in Central Park. The president of the *Vereinigte Sänger* received threatening letters which announced that if songs were sung in German retributions would occur. Fortunately, police protection helped to make this concert trouble free. This also indicated that a sort of "detente" was finally taking place in New York City. In spring 1923 the mayor again invited the *Vereinigte Sänger* to the silver anniversary event of the City of Greater New York. This recognition by city officials signaled the removal of the stigma that was upon the German-Americans. It was the singer societies that rebuilt the bridge to the American public. Almost four years after the war they succeeded not only in maintaining their ethnicity, but also in integrating themselves into the American social and public life and therefore helped to ease ethnic tensions. The *Sängerfeste* of the following

years became a foundation of German-American life within American society.¹⁴

The most important activity of New York's German-American *Vereine*, however, was the organization of the relief effort for Germany. In July 1919 the Central Committee for the Relief of Distress in Germany and German Austria was founded in the *Liederkranzhalle* in New York. This was the first concerted action of New York City's German-American community since before America's declaration of war in 1917. Contributions were made from German-American society funds and from member participation in collections and activities. Within one month after the founding of the committee, the first relief shipment left for Germany. It was the *Vereine* who supported the relief efforts wholeheartedly with collections, bazaars, balls, and even concerts. Not only did these events garner support from the societies for German relief, they also were a means of entertainment and social gathering in an inconspicuous though public setting. These events became the focal point of New York's German-American life. Events soon included more public events, like the performance of the opera *Hänsel und Gretel* in October 1920, which would have been impossible a year before. In 1920, as a result of its success, the Central Committee was reorganized at the national level. Six years later, in April 1926, the Central Committee ended its work officially. Over nine million dollars in food, clothes, financial aid, even cows were sent to war-distressed Germany and Austria.¹⁵

While most of the German *Vereine* did survive the wartime experience, it became obvious that the retention of members was becoming difficult. The war undoubtedly speeded the assimilation process, but the natural aging process along with the disinterest of following generations (the majority of Americans of German descent were already second and third generation) contributed to the decline in membership. After the war this decline in membership especially of the more affluent members continued to have a major impact. But when immigration from Germany was again permitted after 1921—about four hundred thousand Germans immigrated to the United States in the 1920s—the decrease in membership slowed down.¹⁶ This meant new blood for many German-American *Vereine*, as noted by the *Volkszeitung*:

Für den, der in den deutschsprachigen Kreisen des Ostens verkehrt, bringen die Hamburger und Washingtoner Zahlenangaben nichts Neues. Denn er trifft in jeder Vereinigung und Versammlung, überall dort wo deutsch-sprachige Kreise zusammenkommen, neueingewanderte Männer und Frauen . . . Der Begriff "Grünhorn", der für die deutschsprachigen Elemente dieses Landes kaum noch eine Bedeutung besaß, wird plötzlich wieder zu einem lang vermißten Faktor.¹⁷

On 16 January 1920 the Eighteenth Amendment—Prohibition—went into effect, presenting the German-Americans and their organizations with a major problem. The brewing industry traditionally had sponsored many events and German societies traditionally gathered in beerhalls and restaurants. In Brooklyn alone a thousand bars were closed and many *Vereine* lost their gathering places not to mention the job losses. The loss of revenue was severe, since the sale of beer at functions was a major income source for the societies. As a result, the number of events and member participation diminished. *Vereine* that were never bothered during the war lost their homes and had to move from place to place, often for years until they found a permanent hall.¹⁸ German-American newspapers suffered as well, due to the loss of advertising.

Prohibition was only one dimension of the nativism that continued in the 1920s. Anti-German sentiment was still present in the 1920s. German-American events and activities aroused the suspicion of organizations such as the American Legion, the National Security League, the Ku Klux Klan, and even smaller societies like the Daughters of Cincinnatus in New York whose forte was spying on German-Americans. In New York, the American Legion was responsible for the downfall of the Star Opera Company which after massive protests and legal proceedings had to accept the fact that the time was not ripe for German music and theater.¹⁹ Even the much less publicized presentation of a German musical by the *Norddeutscher Club* and the *Plattdeutscher Verein of Long Island* had to be canceled because of demonstrations in front of the building.²⁰

German-American societies now began to protest any sign of discrimination. The *Vereinigte Sanger of Brooklyn* and the *Brooklyn Turner Association* sent their complaints about the American Legion activities to the federal government. German-Americans now sought protection under the law. The New York societies asked for and received police protection for their activities. This cooperation with the police showed that part of the administration was willing to protect the German-Americans. Many events like the concerts of the *Kreutzer Quartettclub* or the *Schwabischer Sangerbund* could take place in peace and quiet because of increased police presence at the events.²¹

With the passing of time it became easier for the German societies to maintain their German culture, including the language. A lot of German *Vereine* had switched to English as their official or at least second language during the war to demonstrate patriotism and to protect themselves. After the war the majority of them returned to German, but some kept English as the official language often because of the pressure from members of the younger generation. Because of the ban of the German language, language maintenance was reduced to a minimum. It

became the realm of the surviving language press, churches, *Vereine* and families. Even in New York where German was again taught in public middle and high schools after 31 July 1920, it was still regulated: there had to be a minimum of seventy students for the classes and the Lusk Law demanded proof of loyalty and special licenses for teachers in private schools.²² Supported by the German-American press, German societies now became the main mediator of the language, next to the families. In New York there was cooperation among churches and *Vereine*. In 1919 the German-American *Schulverein* opened three schools in church rectories and in the hall of the *Turnverein* of New York. As an interesting side note there was a sinking level of proficiency noted (compared to the prewar level), which documents at least some language loss in children of German-American descent.²³

Besides language maintenance, the German *Vereine* strove to maintain a certain "cultural" level. New York City had a blossoming German theater tradition. Before 1917 there were two permanent German theaters. After the summer of 1917 all German theaters closed and German-language theater went "underground." It was the German *Vereine* in New York that gave shelter and the means of survival for actors, singers (including famous former members of the Metropolitan Opera), and musicians, through their sponsoring of performances in gymnasiums, German restaurants and clubhouses. This support continued after the war when German plays and musicals had to be canceled because of demonstrations and protests.²⁴ When the Star Opera Company was founded in July 1919, the German-American societies gathered the needed capital within one month by contributions out of club funds and member purchases of opera subscriptions.²⁵ As mentioned before, due to the violent protests, the performances of the company were canceled soon after opening night.

German theater performances continued to be confined to gymnasiums and clubhalls for lack of a permanent stage. Performances like the German theater week in the theater at Irving Place in 1921 were still the exception giving the German-American theatergoing audience "just a taste."²⁶ The steady support of the German *Vereine* gave the German theater groups not only the needed help to survive but also a financial boost to be able to move on to real stages. The first full theater season after World War I occurred in 1925-26. It lasted thirty weeks and was sponsored to a large degree by the German *Vereine* of New York. Even though a permanent German theater could not be reestablished in the end because of the lack of cooperation among competing German theater companies, the situation in New York was still better than in other cities. The *Volkszeitung*, however, put some blame on the quality of the shows:

Es [das Deutschtum] besuchte Operetten, schlüpfrige Schwänke, blöde Possen—und wenn es hoch kam ab und zu einmal ein sentimentales Lustspiel—aber die moderne Schauspielkunst, die wertvollen Gaben der deutschen, dramatischen Kunst wurde von ihm boykottiert.²⁷

With the ongoing assimilation of the German-Americans into the American society, American theater became more attractive to them. This was especially true in New York, where Broadway and the American musical had a booming time in the 1920s.

Additionally, the film and radio industries provided serious competition to the theater. In New York there were even showings of German movies, such as the silent films *Siegfried* and *Krimhild's Revenge* in the second half of the twenties.²⁸ The radio became a showcase for the cultural ambitions of the German-Americans. On 20 February 1925 the first German radio show in America took place. Every Friday there was the *Deutsche Radiostunde in Amerika*, which was celebrated enthusiastically by the German-Americans. Even though it was produced by the *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, it became a forum for German societies. The *Sängerbund*, the *Liederkranz*, the *Vereinigten Sänger of Brooklyn*, the *Kreutzer Quartettclub*, the *Schwäbischer Sängerbund Brooklyn* and the *Arion* all performed in this new medium.²⁹

German-American ethnic life recovered faster in New York City than in other places from the consequences of the war. The fact that New York was still a city of immigrants was definitely a plus. The fact that 25 percent of the population was of German descent was a plus. The fact that German-Americans were geographically dispersed was a plus. In this environment it was easier for the German-American *Vereine* to survive. German-American societies were able to reorganize and to expand their activities in the 1920s from the club level to a more public setting. The relief effort for Germany and Austria manifested the success of the concerted action of these societies. The maintenance of the German language, though still mostly on the shoulders of the families, became an important goal of the societies. The *Vereine* continued to promote the German language through the teaching of the younger generations in their own schools. Even more support from the societies was given to German language theater. Though the New York Germans could not reestablish a permanent German theater, it was only through the support of the *Vereine* that German theater performances took place at all. The most successful public relations occurred through the efforts of the *Sängervereine*. Literally with music, German-Americans were reintegrated into the public life of the city. The efforts of all the German-American

Vereine allowed for the revitalization of German-American ethnic life in New York City in the 1920s.

Monmouth College
West Long Branch, New Jersey

Notes

¹ Barbara Wiedemann-Citera, *Die Auswirkungen des Ersten Weltkrieges auf die Deutsch-Amerikaner im Spiegel der New Yorker Staatszeitung, der New Yorker Volkszeitung und der New York Times 1914-1926* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 312 pp., 96, see also Howard B. Furer, "Heaven, Hell or Hoboken. The Effects of World War I on a New Jersey City," *New Jersey History* 92 (1974).

² Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, NY, 1972), 83-85; Wiedemann-Citera, 18-19.

³ The information about the German Vereine in New York was mostly gathered from the examination of the *New Yorker Staatszeitung* and the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* 1914-26; see also Wiedemann-Citera, 26-29.

⁴ *New Yorker Volkszeitung* 1914-26; see also Wiedemann-Citera, 26-29.

⁵ *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 5 October 1925.

⁶ *New York Times*, 13 April 1919.

⁷ *New York Times*, 24 March 1917.

⁸ *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 22 June 1919.

⁹ *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 20 April 1920.

¹⁰ Wiedemann-Citera, 160-65.

¹¹ Cf. Robert H. Billigmeier, *Americans from Germany: A Study in Cultural Diversity* (Belmont, 1974), 147; Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (De Kalb, IL, 1974), 320; Wiedemann-Citera, 181-85.

¹² *New York Times*, 26 October 1926.

¹³ Cf. *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 17 and 18 October 1921, 22 and 23 October 1922; *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 23 October 1922; *New York Times*, 23 October 1922.

¹⁴ Wiedemann-Citera, 213-17; *New York Times*, 29 May 1922; *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 28 May 1923.

¹⁵ Don H. Tolzmann, *The Cincinnati Germans after the Great War* (New York 1987), 144; Wiedemann-Citera, 202-10; La Vern Rippley, "American Milk Cows for Germany," *North Dakota History* 44 (1977): 15-23.

¹⁶ Hartmut Bickelmann, *Deutsche Überseeauswanderung in der Weimarer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1980), 38; Wiedemann-Citera, 285.

¹⁷ *Volkszeitung*, 21 Juli 1923.

¹⁸ Tolzmann, 187; Wiedemann-Citera 192-96.

¹⁹ Tolzmann, 187; Wiedemann-Citera 192-96.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 27 November 1919.

²¹ Wiedemann-Citera, 245.

²² *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 17 April 1920 and 21 November 1921.

²³ *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 8 September 1919 and 11 September 1921.

²⁴ Wiedemann-Citera, 274-75.

²⁵ Wiedemann-Citera, 223.

²⁶ *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 1 May 1921.

²⁷ *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 4 October 1922.

²⁸ Wiedemann-Citera, 274-83.

²⁹ *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, 23 February 1925.