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**Gustav Körner, Lieutenant Governor of Illinois,
Honored Fugitive and Champion of German Unity:
On the 150th Anniversary
of the Frankfurt Drive of April 3, 1833**

In 1983, the tercentenary of the arrival of the first group of German immigrants looking for freedom and a new life, we also celebrate the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the struggle for freedom from oppression by German students under the leadership of Gustav Körner. He led his fellow students in an unsuccessful uprising against the authoritarian powers, and then fled to America to obtain freedom and escape persecution from Prussian authorities. With the following essay Karl J. R. Arndt wishes to honor the memory of this great German-American who like Carl Schurz and many of his fellow countrymen rose to prominence in his adopted land. [The Editors.]

The great impact which the refugees of the revolution of 1848 made upon the United States has tended to obscure the heroic earlier patriotic drive of the *Burschenschaften* on April 3, 1833, to take over the city of Frankfurt and there to bring about the unification of a divided Germany, yet in this earlier attempt lives were lost, many people wounded, and either imprisoned or driven into exile. The leader of this "Frankfurter Attentat" was Gustav Körner, who managed to escape to the United States where he made a successful career as an eminent jurist and political leader as lieutenant governor of the State of Illinois and later as ambassador of the United States to Spain. In German-American scholarship he stands out for his book *Das deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika 1818-1848* (Cincinnati, 1880). We wish to commemorate this neglected chapter in the history of German and American relations and specifically to call attention to Körner's lost "Chicago Archiv der deutschen Burschenschaften," which contained the diary of Gustav Körner.¹

The spirit which drove Körner and his comrades to their action on April 3, 1833, is stated in the following words translated from his diary, as quoted in the original by Dietz, who still had an opportunity to examine the diary:²

We all were firmly convinced that even if our drive should fail and all of us should perish, nevertheless some action must be taken. We were convinced that every drop of blood that might be shed would ultimately bear thousandfold results. We were convinced that failure would set us back only in appearance, because all of us had gained the incontrovertible view that no deed inspired by a free, manly decision based upon self-sacrifice can remain without achieving the results intended. We believed in the truth and justice of our spirit and therefore also in our action much too much so that we did not doubt at all that our cause would surely be victorious, even if not immediately.

Their faith was an important forerunner of the Revolution of 1848.

The plan to seize control of the Free City of Frankfurt depended very much on the cooperation of the citizens of that city, which cooperation had been erroneously inflated by reports from within to the conspirators in Heidelberg. The two centers of control of the city which would have to be taken over in an open attack were the Hauptwache and the Constablerwache, the main center of watch and the constabulary. With these centers of power in the control of the conspirators it was believed that the citizenry would join in the uprising of the good cause of a united Germany. On the evening of April 3 the conspirators assembled at places previously designated and at 9:30 the march toward their objectives began. Thirty-three men, all Heidelbergers, reached the Hauptwache first, which was manned by fifty-one soldiers. After some resistance the Hauptwache was in the hands of the conspirators. One soldier was killed and six wounded. Körner was wounded in the left arm by a bayonet. The noise of the conflict quickly attracted a large crowd. The conspirators urged the Frankfurt citizens to join their cause in the name of freedom, but not the least interest was shown anywhere, contrary to the reports that had been made. At the constabulary the struggle was more serious and turned into a pitched battle. Exact figures were not given because the conspirators rushed their dead and wounded off to cover and safety, but the records mention 9 killed—6 soldiers, 1 citizen, 2 conspirators. Twenty-four were seriously wounded—14 soldiers, 8 citizens, 2 conspirators. The appeal of the conspirators to the citizens of the city of Frankfurt to join their cause was received here just as passively as it had been at the Hauptwache.

The plan of the impending attack had been betrayed to the Hauptwache in advance and because the leaders of the drive had been informed of this betrayal, they gave each conspirator the choice of withdrawing from the attack if he so desired. The victory of the conspirators at the Hauptwache and at the constabulary was of brief duration, because heavy reinforcements of troops were quickly brought in and both centers of city control retaken. Those conspirators who did not or could not flee into the safety of exile were arrested and sentenced to prison.

Gustav Körner was bandaged, dressed in women's clothes, adorned with curly locks under a woman's hat and with his sister rode to safety, ultimately landing in Belleville, Illinois, among the Latin farmers. He

had studied law in Germany and now continued that study in the United States.

Gustav Körner, Frankfurt's loss and the United States' great gain, was born in Frankfurt November 20, 1809. The extensive contribution of that great German city to the population explosion of these United States is a subject calling for a special volume. Körner studied at the *Gymnasium* of his paternal city and at the age of eighteen went to the University of Jena, which at that time was the center of the *Burschenschaften*. The patriotic spirit of the German students of that time found an important champion in Körner who espoused this cause of German unity with warm enthusiasm. Gustav Körner and the *Burschenschaften* believed in and were determined to carry out their mission of a united and strong Germany. Körner and his comrades lived to see their early drive for German unity achieved eventually, although in a more modified form than they had hoped for in their youthful faith and enthusiasm. What he thought of the freedom eventually gained in that later united Germany is reflected in the "Vorwort" to his *Das deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika 1818-1848*:

Deutschland ist zwar nicht mehr der enge Käfig, wie vormals, in dem kein freier Flug denkbar war. Aus dem Käfig ist ein kolossales Vogelhaus geworden, in dem sich die Bescheidenen so frei bewegen können, daß sie glauben, sie flögen in unbegrenzten Räumen. Ein Adlerflug würde sich aber bald an den starken Drähten stoßen, welche das große Gehäuse einschließen.³

To remain within Körner's point of comparison, it is only fair to call to mind that the onward march of what is called civilization has not only threatened the very existence of the American eagle but also the great South American condor. Without in the least wishing to diminish my admiration for our German-American Gustav Körner, we "latter-day saints" will perhaps have to recognize that man's proliferation is his worst problem and that modern man will have to reconsider Goethe's adage: "Es irrt der Mensch, solang' er strebt."

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Notes

¹ My own searches for this unique historical collection have not been successful, due mainly to the fact that archivists no longer read German script or Fraktur but also to limitations of staff. Searches of this kind, so experience has taught me, must be undertaken personally by local individuals having a zeal for the discovery of German-Americana. Hopefully, these lines will find such an individual in the Chicago area.

² Dr. jur. Ed. Diétz has studied this neglected chapter of history in his book *Das Frankfurter Attentat vom 3. April 1833 und die Heidelberger Studentenschaft. Ein Stück deutscher Kultur- und Rechtsgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1906). Because this article is limited to the bare essentials of the rather brief encounter itself, we refer to his book for further details.

³ Second edition, with additions and corrections (New York: E. Steiger & Co., 1884), p. 11.

