

ALEXANDER CONZE: AN EARLY
MILWAUKEE GERMAN-AMERICAN POET

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One of the most promising young men to come to Milwaukee while the German community was still in its infancy was Alexander Conze. Unfortunately his stay was brief, too brief to have been of significant importance for the community. Those who knew him however, long remembered him for his outstanding talents and his youthful enthusiasm for life in America. Conze was born in 1819 in Bückeberg and completed his studies in philology and botany at the Universities of Jena and Leipzig. In 1845 he was lured to the United States by a fascination for its political institutions as well as a desire for adventure and freedom. Shortly after his arrival in Milwaukee he began a private school for the instruction of German and English.¹ He lived and taught in the home of the widow of Louis Trayser, one of the early German arrivals in the city. It is not known how successful the school was, but after Conze left Milwaukee it was continued for a short time by Chs. Combes de la Porte.²

His pleasant personality soon made Conze a popular figure among his peers and he joined such men as Dr. Franz Hübschmann and Moritz Schöffler, both important cultural and political contributors to the German-American community; a favorite meeting place for political discussions, singing and drinking was a tavern called the "Latin Grocery."³

Close association with his fellow Germans was not however, as with so many other nostalgia-suffering immigrants, a means of escaping the harsh realities of the new homeland. It was soon evident that his restless spirit would not permit him to settle into a comfortable and secure life. Thousands of Americans were already migrating to the Far West and the slogans of the day, "Fifty-four forty or fight," and "All of Oregon or none," whetted his innate wanderlust and desire for adventure. Conze was in the United States only a few months when he wrote his *Oregon Lied*, which reveals an insight into the American urge to open the West under the guise of "Manifest Destiny."

Frisch auf des Westens Söhne,
 Die Ihr das Feld nicht sä't,
 Die Ihr als freie Schützen
 Ein ruhig Loos verschmäht,
 Der Wandrung Strom von Osten
 Dringt nah und näher schon,
 Es schwinden Eure Wälder--
 Drum auf nach Oregon!

Und Ihr, nach Abenteuern
 Begierig und nach Streit,
 Nach Jagen und nach Wagen,
 Nach Waldeslustbarkeit,
 Herbei aus allen Staaten
 Der weiten Union!
 Es lebe Berg und Prairie!
 Es lebe Oregon!

Wohl Tausend stark, wir sammeln
Uns an Missouri's Fluth,
Der Niedre und der Hohe
Ob reich, ob arm an Gut,
Die tausend Herzen bindet
In Eins ein einz'ger Ton;
Begeisternd schallt die Losung:
„Frisch auf nach Oregon!“

Unübersehbar vor uns
Blüht, duftet die Prairie,
Des Urwalds Wipfel rauschen
In wilder Poesie,
Und über Fels und Schluchten
Zieh'n muthig wir davon,
Das Sternenbanner pflanzen
Wir auf in Oregon!

O, dies sind nicht die Herzen,
Die zittern vor'm Gefecht,
Die, wenn Monarchen drohen,
Entsagen ihrem Recht.
Als Freie zieh'n sie westwärts,
Und nach errung'nem Lohn
Als Freie auch behaupten
Sie glorreich Oregon!⁴

The popularity of the Oregon Lied would certainly have ranged far beyond the German community if it had been written in English, for it reveals not only the poet's bold energetic temperament but also, through a surprising number of idealist Yankee traits, Conze's own Americanization. Certainly the poet is not addressing fellow German immigrants who did not seek out wild frontier territories but generally preferred to settle in areas which were reasonably secure and offered the opportunity of ultimate success, even if this meant years of hard work. Searching for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was left to the Yankee, who was willing to cross the Missouri, the plains and the mountains to plant the star-spangled banner in Oregon.

In spite of the obvious enthusiasm, Conze did not join the westward trek to Oregon. In the last stanza of the Oregon Lied he is no longer a participant in the movement he has espoused. Perhaps he already felt the possibility of an even greater venture in the south as the rumblings along the Texas-Mexico border became more ominous and dangerous than the disagreement with England over the territorial outline of Oregon. The Texans were not afraid to fight for the freedom which they felt was threatened by Mexican law. When the news reached Milwaukee that political efforts had failed and that war had been declared against Mexico in early May 1846, many Germans enthusiastically proclaimed that they were willing to join the military and to serve their new homeland. Because of the slowness of communications and other governmental delays, the Wisconsin German

volunteers were not called to service immediately. In the intervening time many had second thoughts about the sanity of non-citizens serving as cannon-fodder, and as a result much of the original eagerness quickly waned.⁵

For Alexander Conze the delay was intolerable. He refused to wait until the Milwaukee company could be completely organized and prepared to march. With his friends Hermann Upmann and Carl von Rekow he hurried to Chicago to join an Illinois Regiment which was ready to move on to the staging area in Alton, Illinois.⁶

There was another delay at Alton as the military units were formed and drilled. During the interim Conze composed the following farewell poem.

Abschied von Milwaukie

Der Abschiedsang,
 Der trübe Klang
 Des letzten Bechers ist verklungen,
 Der Freunde Arm,
 Geliebt so warm
 Hielt mich zum letzten Mal umschlungen.

Leb' wohl nun, Ort,
 Am Ufer dort
 Des See's so malerisch gelegen;
 Wo ich auch sey,
 Ich denke treu,

Milwaukie, dein auf fernen Wegen.

Der Kessel braust,
 Der Dämpfer saust
 Dahin durch leichtbewegte Wellen;
 Die Ehre winkt,
 Die Büchse blinkt,
 Des Vaterlandes Feind zu fällen.

Nochmals Ade!
 Und fort dann Weh'
 Der lang' gemiednen Trennungsstunde;
 Heiz', Maschinist,
 Denn sicher bist
 Du nicht mit Mexico im Bunde!⁷

Although Conze had been in Milwaukee for less than one year, he was already well known and for the benefit of his many friends the poem was published in the Wisconsin Banner on July 18, 1846. The youthful idealism of the Oregon Lied is evident here too, but it now seems somewhat more forced and pseudo-heroic. No doubt there is an awareness that the ultimate dangers which the poet so loftily extolled in the previous poem are now very real for him. Nevertheless, it is also clear that he has volunteered his life for the good of his country, with no hint that he was ever anything but an American.

A few days later he wrote another poem, this one directed to his friends at the "Latin Grocery."

Alexander Conze
 Der verehrlichen Abendgesellschaft
 bei Herrn Heß, General a.D.

Dampfboot Ohio auf dem Illinoisfluß, d. 28. Juni 1846,
 abgesandt von Alton d. 2. Juli 1846.

Motto: Die Langeweile gab mir's ein,
 D'rum--ist's langweilig--müßen Sie's
 verzeih'n.

Aus dem winzig engen Raume
 Einer Dampfbootkoje trug
 Mich von Illinois im Traume
 Nach Milwaukee heut' mein Flug;
 Was der Traumgott ließ erscheinen
 Mir auf dieser Pilgerfahrt,
 Sing im Großen wie im Kleinen
 Ich nach Bänkelsänger Art:

Von des Pieres weiter Strecke
 Wandr' ich durch die Hurongass',
 Biege rechts dann um die Ecke,
 Geh' entlang die Wasserstraß',--
 Guck hinein in's Werbquartiere,
 Dort die Liste anzuseh'n,
 Wo auf mächtigem Papiere
 Dünn Wisconsin's Helden steh'n!--
 Bald komm ich zur rothen Brücke;

Gar behutsam, säuberlich
 Prüf ich die geflickten Stücke,
 Ob sie tragen auch wohl mich;
 Dank dem Himmel und Herrn Grotkie!
 Dieses Wunder ist gescheh'n:
 Leidlich sicher Mensch und Rindvieh
 Kann hinüber jetzo geh'n.
 Ja, ich wag's, und schreite weiter,
 Thut doch kühn're Dinge schier
 Für das Vaterland ein Streiter,
 Ein Milwaukee-Voluntier!

Und ich seh' ein Häuschen winken,
 Einst die „Latin Grocery“,--
 Pfl egt' dort manches Glas zu trinken
 In fideler Compagnie.
 Freudig tret' ich in die Halle,
 Finde sie versammelt da,
 Die gewohnten Gäste Alle,
 Treiben grad' Politica.
 Ist mir's recht?--seh' ich nicht scheele?
 Ist das da der General?
 Glaub t' ihn doch in meiner Seele
 Längst im dicht'sten „Chapperal“.
 Er beginnt mit mächt'gen Schlägen
 Auf den Tisch zu hämmern bald,
 Und, die Herzen zu bewegen,
 Spricht er folgender Gestalt:

„Lassen Sie uns eiligst räsen
 „Hier ein Jägerregiment,--
 „Lieb' einmal's Soldatenwesen,--
 „Krieg war stets mein Element.
 „Zu der Patrioten Zeiten--
 „(Ich war damals dünner noch)--
 „Thät' ich beinah' tapfer streiten,
 „Canada befrei'n vom Joch.
 „Oberst würde ich vor allen,
 „Keiner sonst die Sachen kennt.
 „Auf nach Montezuma's Hallen!
 „Herrgott--Himmel--Sacrament!!"--
 „„Dummes Zeug!""--läßt sich vernehmen
 Der Jenenser Doctor nun--
 „„Sollten Sie wahrhaftig schämen,
 „„So zu faseln, alter Coon!
 „„Sind ein kleiner Blücher heute,
 „„Weil der Kümmel grade gut:
 „„Aber morgen Sie's gereute;
 „„Schwör's bei meinem Doctorhut!""--
 Drauf Herr Heß: „Grob sein kann Jeder!
 „Dazu braucht's kein Studium.
 „Dächt', die Herren von der Feder
 „Sollten suchen bessern Ruhm.
 „Doch die Loco's, wie bekannt schon,
 „Sind ein ungeschliff'nes Volk;
 „Whigs allein besitzen Weltton:
 „Hurrah Taylor gegen Polk!
 „Mutterwitz ward mir gegeben,

Mehr, als Einem wohl von Euch;
 Mache leicht mein gutes Leben;
 Weg mit dem geschwoll'nen Zeug!"--
 Spricht Herr Winkler: „„Gar nicht übel
 „„Scheint des Gen'rals neu'ster Plan.
 „„Zu des Ruhmes höchstem Giebel
 „„Klimmert kühnlich er hinan.
 „„Drum, zu zeigen meinen Willen,
 „„Daß die Sache schreite vor,
 „„Biet' Kanonenfieberpillen
 „„Unentgeltlich ich dem Corps." "--
 „„Meine bombenfesten Röcke"--
 Tönt im süßesten Accent
 Eine Stimme aus der Ecke--
 „Kriegt dies honest Regiment.
 „Doch ist dabei die Conditio,
 „Daß es sende mir zur Frau
 „Eine Dame von Tampico,
 „Sei sie schwarz, grün oder blau." "--
 „„Wär's nicht gut, daß dies Versprechen
 „„Man gleich schriftlich machte hier?
 „„Sich'rer und nicht leicht zu brechen
 „„Ist, was steht auf dem Papier." "--
 So Herr Hanschke. --Doch dagegen
 Spricht mit Wärme der Gen'ral:
 „Solches Vorurtheil von wegen
 „Des Geschrieb'nen herrschte mal;

„Doch die Zeiten sind vorüber,
 „Kehren nimmer wohl zurück;
 „'S ist mir auch un Vieles lieber:
 „Volle Freiheit nur bringt Glück."--
 „„Lassen wir doch diese Sachen" "--
 Fängt Herr Lackner nunmehr an--
 „„Möchte wissen, was wohl machen
 „„Unser Conze und Upmann?" "--
 „Was sie machen? --nun--sie fressen
 „Ohne Zweifel Pork und Beans,
 „Hätten gern zum Mittagsessen
 „Frisches Fleisch und etwas Grün's.
 „Ochsen, Foole sind sie Beide!
 „Doch der Cuhnze dauert mich,
 „Konnt' ihn wahrlich sehr gut leide,--
 „Wird's bereuen bitterlich!"--
 „„Lieber Stolze!" " --spricht das Göth'chen
 „„Gar vernünftig redest Du;
 „„Jeder findet sein Stück Brödchen,
 „„Hier noch leicht in Fried' und Ruh'.
 „„Nie, bei Gott, werd' ich verspritzen
 „„Für dies Land mein theures Blut.
 „„Lot' mir's, so beim Heß zu sitzen
 „„Und zu schlürfen Best'sche Flut.
 „„Aber wenn im Ländchen Baden
 „„Die Tyrannenherrschaft fällt,
 „„Werd' ich gleich das Büchsen laden,
 „„Kämpf' mit Ehrenström als Held!" "--

Grade wollt' ich mir erbitten
 Von dem George ein Cerevis--
 Ah! --da kam dahergeschritten
 Ein Muskitovieh und biß
 Unverschämt mich in die Nase.
 Weg war Traum und Seligkeit.
 Nichts genoß ich aus dem Glase,--
 Von Milwaukee war ich weit.⁸

No doubt his friends enjoyed this witty sketch of their individual foibles as armchair warriors, even though the humor is at times somewhat caustic, especially with regard to the heroics of saving Canada and Baden. In the letter which accompanied the poem Conze described his surroundings and the activities in the camp and indicated that he had been assigned to the First Company of Belleville, St. Clair County, a unit which called itself the Texas Guards. He also related his favorable impression of American soldiers and ascribed their good behavior to the fact that in America everyone was basically free and thus they had to learn to rule themselves instead of always looking to a superior for guidance.⁹

His last letter arrived in Milwaukee late in November, dated Camp Crockett, Texas, September 10, 1846. Here he described the trip down the Mississippi and the march through Texas. The rigors of the trip and the mistreatment of the men by their officers had eroded the morale of the troops, so much so that most of the volunteers would have rather returned home than continue on to Mexico. A few however, including himself,

were still eager to cross the Rio Grande. His disillusionment with the entire campaign is expressed in the closing lines of his letter.

Wie herrlich stimmt das mit dem
 Enthusiasmus, der vor einigen
 Monaten Sieg oder Tod auf unsere
 Fahnen schrieb, und dem erst die
 Fluthen des Stillen Oceans eine
 passende Grenze zu sein schienen!
 --Hoffentlich mehr vom mexicanischen
 Gebiet!¹⁰

The only news to arrive from Mexico however, was the notice that Private Alexander Conze, Company H, 2nd Regiment of Illinois had been killed on February 23, 1847 at the battle of Buena Vista. A companion who had been at his side in battle later wrote that Conze had been a courageous model soldier, admired by officers and men alike. His philological training had aided him in quickly learning enough Spanish to be of still further use to the military unit. Until shortly before his death he had continued collecting botanical specimens, identifying them and keeping some in his back pack for later study. The loss of this gifted young man was a blow to the meager cultural life of the Milwaukee German community in the mid-1840's. Some of his closest friends believed that Conze had been despondent and that his great desire for adventure was actually a yearning for death.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

¹ Wiskonsin Banner, May 8, 1847, p. 2; April 17, 1847, p. 3; Wilhelm Hense-Jensen, Wisconsin's Deutsch-Amerikaner (Milwaukee, 1900), I, 116.

² Rudolf A. Koss, Milwaukee (Milwaukee, 1871), pp. 194, 217; Wiskonsin Banner, November 14, 1846, p. 2.

³ Hense-Jensen, I, 67.

⁴ Koss, pp. 194-195.

⁵ Koss, p. 233.

⁶ Hense-Jensen, I, 114.

⁷ Wiskonsin Banner, July 18, 1846, p. 1. The poem is dated June 22, 1846 and appeared in the paper with a letter from Alton, Illinois dated July 2, 1846. Koss' version of the poem on p. 224 differs slightly in spelling and orthography.

⁸ Koss, pp. 225-228. Identification of the names appearing in this poem.

Heß; John Heß, owner of the tavern formerly called the "Latin Grocery." (Koss, p. 215).

Hurongasse, Wasserstraße; streets on the east side of Milwaukee.

Werbquartier; located at J. A. Liebhaber's tavern. As previously mentioned, recruitment to fill the German Washington Guard was rather slow.

Rothe Brücke; the Chestnut Street bridge, originally finished in 1841 and painted fire-engine red. The bridge broke under its own weight within a year, was rebuilt but destroyed again during the "bridge war." After it was rebuilt again it was in constant need of repair. (Koss, p. 125).

Grotkie; Carl Grotkie was the bridge tender on the red bridge for several years and was considered to be the town character. Later in the poem Conze pokes fun at him with a reference to "Bombenfeste Röcke." Grotkie spent much of his spare time designing such things as tanks, bulletproof vests and steamships propelled without steam; as is also evident in the poem, he was not very successful with the ladies. (Koss, pp. 200-206).

Der Jenenser Doctor; Dr. Franz Hübschmann, politician and recognized leader of the early German community in Milwaukee.

Winkler; Karl Winkler, pharmacist-apothecary. (Koss, p. 161).

Hanschke; J. Hanschke, shoemaker. (Koss, p. 138).

Lackner; F. C. Lackner, merchant. (Koss, p. 158).

Göth'chen; (?) Göth, watchmaker. (Koss, p. 217).

Best'sche Flut; Best Brewery, forerunner of today's Pabst Brewery.

George; David George, captain of the Washington Guard. (Koss, p. 223).

⁹Wiskonsin Banner, July 18, 1846, p. 1.

¹⁰Wiskonsin Banner, November 21, 1846, p. 1.

¹¹Milwaukee Sentinel, May 8, 1847, p. 2. The Sentinel carried an excerpt of the letter written to the New York Evening Post. See also Koss, p. 224.

GERMAN-AMERICAN RESEARCH

Recognizing the danger that many important German-American publications may be lost if action is not taken, the MAX KADE RESEARCH CENTER in cooperation with other organizations is endeavoring to procure such materials and to provide adequate services for housing, cataloguing and making them accessible to scholars through the facilities of the recently opened Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. It is hoped that owners of German-American books, manuscripts, magazines, newspapers, annuals, calendars, etc., will be willing to present them to the Center, or if necessary to sell them. In particular, libraries, historical societies, German-American clubs and other groups which for lack of space, or because of other priorities, wish to dispose of their German-American material, are encouraged to turn them over to the MAX KADE RESEARCH CENTER. Although our funds are limited we would be glad to pay packing and shipping expenses. -- Erich A. Albrecht & J. A. Burzle