

DORA GRUNEWALD: REMINISCENCES

by

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Whenever Milwaukee German-Americans assembled in fellowship during the troubled times of World War II, the spirited voice of Dora Grunewald was sure to be heard as a part of the program for that day. Her presence usually marked the cultural highlight of the day's activities: her words always evoked nostalgic recollections in the hearts of her countrymen toward the historically rich legacy of the German nation. In her own way she rekindled and recalled for her audience the humanistic ideals of the Humboldtian educational system known to every German school child. Such was the value of her own verse at these occasions which expressed the sentiments dear to Germans at a time when their national allegiances were being sorely tried. From her poetic themes Germans could derive a needed consolation and pride in their homeland which reassured them that the political tragedy of the moment was but a passing one.

Born in Hanau, near Frankfurt on December 31, 1895, Dora Grunewald is the eldest of a family of three daughters. Her father was an architect whom she describes as "a studious and nature-loving man."¹ Both of her parents shared a particular love of poetry and nature. Able to read when she was three years old, word-rhyming came to her early as a mode of self-expression. Because of the nature of the father's profession, the family often moved: Dresden, Chemnitz, Offenburg, and lastly Braunschweig.

After finishing her formal education, Dora Grunewald attended a business college for a year, worked another year in an attorney's office, and then studied for the next four years at Teachers' Preparatory College at Rothenburg/Fulda.

From 1918 until 1922 she taught in a small country school in the province Hesse-Nassau and for a time in Hanover. Deciding to take a leave of absence from her position in Hanover, Dora Grunewald came to Milwaukee, her present home. In Milwaukee she was to meet her future husband, thus ending her teaching career in Germany.

With the birth of a son, now a professor of finance and business administration at Michigan State-East Lansing, she devoted all of her time to her family. Nevertheless, she pursued during these years the study of languages and continued to write verse during her leisure hours. Her poems were regularly printed in German-American newspapers. She also attended classes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Marquette University where she studied Latin, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Russian. Ultimately, she was awarded an M. A. in German from Marquette University in 1960. While taking courses at these universities, Dora Grunewald substituted in practically all of the Milwaukee area high schools until she received a permanent position at Washington High School. Here she taught Spanish, German, and Ancient History until her retirement in 1968. Even before grade school foreign language instruction (FLES Programs) became popular, Mrs. Grunewald conducted German classes for thirty-two years at one of the Milwaukee *Freie Gemeinden* centers. It was as a grade schooler that the writer of this article received his first formal introduction to German at one of these Saturday morning sessions. Still active at the present, Dora Grunewald continues to offer regular evening classes in Italian, Spanish, French, Russian, and English-for-the-foreign-born at the Central YMCA in Milwaukee.

By her own admission, Dora Grunewald is a nature poet. Nature is the main theme and interest of her verse. In the "Foreword" to her *Gedichte* she explains the underlying intent of her collection of poems which in its inspiration resembles the Goethean *Weltanschauung*, especially the poet's views of man and nature during the classical years at Weimar which were

to become the inheritance of the German Romantics, and the legacy of German Idealism: "Die Gedichte dieses kleinen Buches sind der tiefsinnigen Liebe zur Natur entsprungen. Der Mensch ist ein Teil der Natur, und nur in enger Verbindung mit ihr kann er rein, wahr und glücklich bleiben. Ich habe das selbst an mir erlebt. Draussen, in freier Gottesnatur, fern von der grossen Stadt, fällt so vieles Hässliche vom Menschen ab. Er denkt und fühlt freier, und die Seele bekommt Flügel."²

Poetry has been a way of life for Dora Grunewald, and as she confesses, her "greatest joy."³ Before her husband passed away, the Grunewalds used to spend weekends at their lake cottage at Bark Lake near Milwaukee. Each time they returned from the lake to their home in the city, she brought along a poem or two which had been inspired by being close to nature. The small collection of her verse entitled *Gedichte* is but a sampling of the verse she has written over the years. In a year or so Mrs. Grunewald intends to have a second volume of verse published. At the present, however, her poems appear almost weekly in the *Milwaukee Herald*, a German-American newspaper printed in Omaha, Nebraska. Thus she continues to enjoy a special talent that has given so much meaning to her life.

If nature is the thematic material (*Stoff*) of Dora Grunewald's verse, then the message (*Inhalt*) of her poems reflects the moral presence of the Creator in the universe. The seasonal moods and nature's phenomena are a source of inexhaustible joy to her:

Wenn der Schnee zergeht
und der Lenzwind weht,
ist mein Herz so froh,
so hoffnungsvoll, so frei.

Wenn die Sonne glüht,
und die Rose blüht,
jauchz ich auf in tiefer,
voller Sommerlust.

.....

Ist zur Winterzeit
alles eingeschneit,
staunt mein Auge
ob der weissen, hehren Pracht.

Mögen Blitze glüh'n,
schwarze Wolken zieh'n,
immer, Erde, bist du, ach
unendlich schön.⁴

Der Winter floh, es kam der Frühling,
und nun die gold'ne, heisse Zeit.
So reihen Jahre sich an Jahre,
wie liegst du, Jugend, ach so weit!

Bald naht der Herbst, die Früchte reifen.
Es eilt die Zeit, sie steht nie still.
Sie zieht mich mit in Riesenschritten.
Wie lange wohl? Nun, wie Gott will.⁵

Yet that joy which pervades the poetess' celebration of nature is always closely linked with the deeper awareness of the Divine Presence:

Es zucken Blitze, Donner grollen.
Ich sage leis ein fromm Gebet.
Nichts hat Bestand in allen Welten.
Nur ewig Gottes Geist besteht.⁶

Durch deine Träume
wehet der Hauch der Ewigkeit.⁷

Jahre kommen, Jahre gehen,
Und ich ziehe meine Bahn,
Folgend ewigen Gesetzen,
Doch das Aug' glänzt sternenan.⁸

Gott der Welten: voller Inbrunst
nennt mein Mund den Namen dein.⁹

The solace that comes to man in returning to a natural setting where he can once more be responsive to musing about the origins of life, makes the return trip to his "civilized" life style increasingly difficult. This recurrent motif echoes Dora Grunewald's devotion to nature:

Es brennt die Sonne aufs weisse Gestein,
es flimmert die Luft im Mittagsschein
Die Menge jagt in wilder Hast,
die grosse Stadt kennt keine Rast.

.....

Da sitzt verträumt an der Mauer Rand
ein alter Mann; mit blasser Hand
wehrt er dem grellen Sonnenlicht.

.....

.....

Und Stunde um Stunde er starrt und träumt,
ihn eilet nicht, er nichts versäumt,
und niemand ruft ihn, volle Liebe bereit:
Die grosse Stadt hat keine Zeit.¹⁰

Das ist die grosse Stadt,
die steinerne Stadt,
die keine Seele hat,
wo die Menschen sich drängen
durch der Strassen Engen,
sich mühen und plagen,
das Glück zu erjagen,
zu erhaschen das Geld,
das ihre Sinne gefangen hält.

Doch tief drinnen im Herzen
brennen heisse Schmerzen.
Da rührt sich ein Sehnen
nach Licht und nach Sonne,
nach Reinheit, nach Wonne,
nach Atmen in freier Gottesnatur.¹¹

The stylistic format of Dora Grunewald's verse is undoubtedly rooted in the tradition of the *Volkslied*: the words are direct, the message clear, the prosody and melody simple and unadorned. Poems which exemplify the folk element in her verse are those which reflect upon the cultural adjustment experienced by the German in a strange land. These poems single her out as a distinctively German-American poetess and endeared her to the generation of the war years:

Lang, lang ist es her,
seit ich kam übers Meer
in das neue Land,
das ich Heimat genannt.

Ich strebt' voran mit Herz und Hand,
schuf mir ein neues Heimatland.
Die Jahre flohen schnell dahin
Es jagt der Mensch nach Glück, Gewinn.

Viel Ängste gab's und Sorg' und Plag',
an Mühen reich war jeder Tag.
Es wuchs das Haus, der Freunde Zahl,
und Liebe lacht beim vollen Mahl.

Doch oft, in tiefer Abendstund',
wenn selig schweigt der Kindermund
und still die müde Hände ruh'n
von all des Tages em'sem Tun,

die Seele fliegt ins Heimatland,
dort, wo das Vaterhaus einst stand,
und träumt und denkt der holden Zeit.

O Kinderland, wie liegest du weit!
O Eltern traut, o Jugendglück!
was einstmals war, kehrt nie zurück.

Der Morgen graut, der Tag beginnt.
Heiss mir im Aug' die Träne rinnt
Fahr wohl, fahr wohl mein Kinderland!
Es ruh' auf dir des Glückes Hand!¹²

Was ist das schönste Lied auf Erden?
Das Lied, das einst die Mutter sang
als ich daheim bei ihr gesessen,
ihr süßes Lied ins Ohr mir drang.
Was ist so teuer meinem Herzen?
Der Mutter Sprache, Mutter Laut,
die sie mit frommen Eifer lehrte
dem Kind, das gläubig ihr vertraut.
Was ist der schönste Platz auf Erden?
Der Ort, wo meine Wiege stand,
wo ich der Jugend Traum gelebet,
geleitet an der Mutter Hand.

Nie könnt' der Heimat ich vergessen,
sie machte stark mich, fromm und gut.
O Heimatsprache, Heimaterde,
mögs stehen du in Gottes Hut.¹³

To the German-American immigrant the foregoing nostalgic expressions denote a cultural void that evokes nostalgic reminders. To the native of this land such sentiments are often received unfavorably — based on a lack of appreciation for the cultural ties which are strongest in the lingual development of the child. Dora Grunewald's verse voices the immigrant's indelible romance with the language of childhood: the only cultural legacy that most stubbornly resists Americanization. The unpublished poems, "Muttersprache" and "Amerika und Deutschland," summarize this very human plight of the German-American: his deep gratitude toward the land of his adoption, and his lingual privation which is his deepest awareness of all that we conveniently label *Heimweh*:

Amerika und Deutschland,
zwei Länder gross und schön!
Wer hätt' in allen Zeiten
je Fein'eres wohl gesehen?

Und als in schwersten Zeiten
es arm, verlassen stand,

Amerika, du Grosse, gabst
helfend ihm die Hand.

Kunst, Denken, Fühlen, Wissen
tauscht ihr mit'ander aus.

.....

Amerika und Deutschland,
zwei Länder kühn und schön,
mög' eurer Freundschaft Bande
nun nimmermehr vergeh'n.

Mög' Weisheit stets Euch leiten,
in schicksalschwerster Zeit
zum Heile aller Völker
für jetzt und Ewigkeit.¹⁴

Die Sprache ist ein Heil'ges Erbe,
uns von den Vätern anvertraut,
dass wir getreulich hüten, pflegen
der Kindheit Lieder süßen Laut.
Wo du auch immer mögest weilen,
in fremdem Orte, fernem Land:
Die Muttersprache sei dir heilig,
gewalt'ger Schätze Unterpfund.
Und bist allein du, und verlassen,
drängt dich die Welt in irrem Lauf,
so falte still die müden Hände,
schau gläubig du zum Himmel auf.
Dann in der Muttersprache Lauten
formt sich in dir ein fromm Gebet,
der Kindheit Zauber liegt darinnen,
ein Glaube, der im Kampf besteht.
O Muttersprache, schönstes Erbe,
das Gott uns in der Wiege gab.
O pflege sie, sie sei dir heilig
dein ganzes Leben bis zum Grab.¹⁵

In conclusion what can be recorded of Dora Grunewald's life and verse? From her verse which is the record of her life we know she treasures a lifelong communion with nature, she raises her voice in pious gratitude for the gift of life, she nourishes an abiding love of the language and the land of her birth. She writes of a Germany known in her childhood, a Germany that has seen many changes, but whose cultural richness endures in the hearts of those who have made a home in foreign lands. In her recollection and praise of this Germany, the cultural Germany which transcends time and survives with each succeeding generation, she truly can be termed a patriot viewing the lasting qualities of her heritage in a foreign context. Such a literary disposition is, in essence, the ledger of German-American literature. Yet beyond the national traits of Dora Grunewald's poetry and life one senses notes of a deeper admission: her work conveys a happiness that can only come from personal contentment, a mystery in every land and age.

NOTES

1. Biographical material has been taken from Mrs. Grunewald's correspondence of July 16, 1972 with the author of this study.
2. D. Grunewald, **Gedichte** (Milwaukee, 1967), p. 3.
3. **Grunewald-Ritter Correspondence.**
4. "Wenn der Schnee zergeht," **Gedichte**, p. 9. Hereafter only titles from this work will be cited.
5. "Sommerandacht," p. 20.
6. **Loc. cit.**
7. "Schlummerlied," p. 39.
8. "Sehnsucht," p. 45.
9. "Leise senkt die Nacht sich nieder," p. 47.
10. "Stadtbild," p. 78.
11. "Die grosse Stadt," p. 86.
12. "Fernes Gedenken," pp. 42-43.
13. "Heimatsprache, Heimaterde," p. 83.
14. "Amerika und Deutschland" (1972).
15. "Muttersprache" (1972).

VERFALLENES DEUTSCHES WIRTSHAUS IM MOHAWKTAL

Ein Wirtshaus hier
mit grossem Saal,
dort sangen unsere Sanger,
sie tranken sonntags kuhles Bier
und ruhten im Garten lang und langer.

Verklungen langst die Sangerfeste,
das Wirtshaus stirbt, steht grau und morsch,
im Friedhof ruhen seine Gaste,
doch Glaser klingen, Geister singen —
horeh, ja horeh!

Herman F. Brause
Rochester, N. Y.