

“The Land of Opportunity,” An Article on America by a German Immigrant in Cincinnati, 1924 By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Dr. Don Heinrich Tolzmann is the author and editor of numerous books on German-American history and culture. He has received many awards, including the Federal Cross of Merit from Germany, the Ohioana Book Award, the German-American of the Year Award, and the Outstanding Achievement Award of the Society for German-American Studies. He served as Curator of the German-Americana Collection and Director of German-American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Currently, he is President of the German-American Citizens League of Greater Cincinnati and Curator of its German Heritage Museum. He also is historian for the Covington-Cincinnati Bridge Committee, the Steuben Society of America, and the German-American Hall of Fame. He has assisted in the production of several PBS programs, including: “The German-Americans” and “Zincinnati Reflections.”

Introduction

I recently came across an article entitled “The Land of Opportunity,” by Herman J. Ahaus (1900-75), a German immigrant who arrived in Cincinnati in the early 1920s. It sheds light on German immigration after World War I. (1) It was published in 1924 in the *American House News*, the newsletter of the American House that was established in Cincinnati after the war to welcome recently arrived immigrants. The article provides insight into the life and time of a recently

arrived German immigrant. (2)

Ahaus’s article reflects his strong belief in America as “the land of opportunities.” Remarkably, no mention is made of the anti-German hysteria of the war. The message Ahaus conveys is strikingly similar to a letter written by another German immigrant, Josef Rieberger, who arrived in Cincinnati in 1841, and which became the subject of an article I wrote about it. The views of both authors reflect the continuity of the positive image German immigrants had of America, and their thoughts on the possibility of attaining success in the New World. (3)

In that 19th century letter by Rieberger “a very positive picture is painted of America and all that it has to offer... This fits very well with the positive to glowing image of America in general and of Cincinnati in particular at that time, and which contributed so greatly to the German immigrations. The contrasts to the social, political, and economic conditions in the German states must have been stark to those that read such letters.” (4)

The same comments hold true for the 20th century article by Ahaus. Here a positive image is also presented of America, and contrasted with conditions in Germany. It is more than likely that Ahaus sent letters home conveying similar thoughts to members of his family, as well as friends. So his article provides insight into the views of a post-World War



Historical marker on the Cincinnati riverfront for Cincinnati’s German Heritage

I German immigrany regarding America in general, and Cincinnati in particular.

Of course, these are but two examples of the perceptions of recently arrived German immigrants in Cincinnati. However, they can be compared with other letters and writings of German immigrants in Cincinnati and elsewhere. (5)

Ahaus's Article

I came to America because America is the land of opportunities. I had heard and read that every young man and woman who has a good will and ambition to work can make a living, but he can also save some of his earning and thus have a certain degree of independence and also insure himself against poverty in old age.

I therefore decided to make a change and try my fortune in this world-famous land of liberty. I have not been disappointed in my expectations.

Here in America every man has the same opportunities to make a success and everyone can get an education without distinction of race or religion. Education is not only for the favored few like in most European countries, but for all who wish to take advantage of same whether rich or poor. By earnest effort and hard work everyone can gradually advance himself to a better position, as is proven by the fact that many of the greatest men this country has had have come from the lowest ranks of society. Ability and character count more than high birth.

A further reason for my coming to America was that Europe, especially Germany, has been badly crippled by the late war, and Germany is suffering terribly from its effects. It is almost impossible to earn a livelihood there. Under present conditions I could have worked for ten years and never gotten any further in life. I felt that my fortune was across the ocean.

Upon my arrival in Cincinnati, I received a wonderful reception from my relatives, especially my cousins showed me every mark of kindness and affection and helped me in every possible way to get started here. I like to go to school at the American House, and I greatly appreciate the kind welcome extended to every foreigner. I have an excellent teacher who is very kind and considerate; she makes the lessons so easy and interesting that I feel I shall

learn a great deal there. Everything in school is so pleasant and I enjoy especially the little social gatherings arranged by the American House every month.

Conclusion

Riepberger was a farmer, whereas Ahaus, according to the Cincinnati city directory (1926), was a printer, and both attained success in their chosen fields of endeavor, according to their writings. The immigrant success story theme is one that typifies many letters and articles written by immigrants, and one that no doubt struck a chord with friends and family in their hometowns, prompting them to consider immigration as well. Although Riepberger does not mention any contacts in the Cincinnati area, Ahaus does note that he had relatives who assisted him in getting settled. This would mark his immigration as a clear case of chain migration, the process whereby immigrants join friends and family in America.

Ahaus emphasizes the importance of immigration to America, noting that conditions were terrible in Germany, and that: "Under present conditions I could have worked for ten years and never gotten any further in life. I felt that my fortune was across the ocean." This is reminiscent of Riepberger's comment: "I advise all young people to come to America. Their fortunes are ten times better than in Germany." (6)

Ahaus's article adds to our understanding of how German immigrants in the 1920s viewed America as "the land of opportunity," and shows that it is part of a recognizable continuum that can be traced back to the 19th century, as exemplified in the immigrant letter by Josef Riepberger in 1841. No doubt there are other such letters and articles written by German immigrants, and finding and connecting them to the continuum discussed here will definitely contribute to our understanding of the German immigration experience. (7)

As to the continuum of the positive image German immigrants had of America, and in this case of Cincinnati, the article by Ahaus can certainly be placed in this historical context, as can the letter by Riepberger. They clearly follow in the path of earlier images of Cincinnati as envisioned and written about by German immigrants, authors, and travelers to the area. (8)

Notes

1. Herman J. Ahaus, "The Land of Opportunities," *American House News*. 2:1 (May 1924): n.p. His birth and death dates can be found at the Find-a Grave website, which indicates that he was buried at St. Mary Cemetery in Cincinnati.
2. For discussion of German immigration to Cincinnati after World War I, see the author's book: *The Cincinnati Germans after the Great War, With a New Introduction*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Clearfield Co., 2013).
3. See: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, "A German Immigrant Letter from Cincinnati, 1841," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 20:4(1995): 200-05.
4. Ibid, p. 204. Here the author noted: "One of the most important links between Germany and America was formed by the correspondence sent from immigrants to their families and friends in the old country. These letters brought not only news from loved ones, but contained informative reports and details about life in the new world. Research has shown that such immigrant letters contributed to the chain migration from one area in Germany, for example, to a destination point in the U.S., where there was a contact person, who had written letters home," p. 200.
5. For a collection of German immigrant letters, see: Walter D. Kamphoefner et al, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Pr., 1991).
6. See: Tolzmann, "A German Immigrant Letter from Cincinnati, 1841," p. 201.
7. The author requests that information about letters written by German immigrants in Cincinnati be forwarded to him at: dhtolzmann@yahoo.com.
8. See the author's article on this topic: "The German Image of Cincinnati before 1830," in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Das Ohiotal - The Ohio Valley: The German Dimension*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp.21-37.