

FORUM #103

Written for participants in the German Special Interest Group: G-SIG has been an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society & the German American Heritage Society (www.facebook.com/groups/gahs.stlouis/). *FORUM* contains genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German culture & ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) compiler-coordinator.



First World War Mess

By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)

The danger existed in 1914, but many people thought the nations of Europe were still sane in their approach to international relations. The First World War proved otherwise.

For Americans, the war posed the prospect of relatives fighting relatives. That's right. A German immigrant family had little choice but to give up its young men when America called and sent armed soldiers against -- *of all nations!* – GERMANY! *The INFAMY!*

America had been a special haven for German immigrants who sought freedom, land, and a safe future. Being nearly half a world away from Europe and its entanglements of war, German settlers looked forward to life in the New World. That is, until the First World War.

German Americans did not relish the thought of shooting at their former countrymen. Still, once Uncle Sam called men to arms, they had little choice.

Wise thinking among U.S. officials, however, resulted in a guarded approach to use of former Germans. Immigrants with ties to the Old Country might purposely or inadvertently provide insights and information that could “sink a ship.” So they were carefully utilized.

Such was not the case when it came to stateside reaction to people who spoke German or exhibited their Germanic customs and holidays. There was outright animosity against them in some cities. You can probably go online or check with your library on sources that elaborate.

It was during this time that German organizations tightened their memberships or shifted to English in an effort to complete their Americanization. Churches also were enclaves for German immigrants and their descendants. Congregations offered safe venues for German expression and ideals, albeit English was gaining hold. By the Second World War, English dominated. In the postwar years of the later 1940s, many German-speaking persons hung up their old language in place of English. Thankfully, in more recent years, that German heritage is being rediscovered.

Back to the First World War. It was dangerous to entangle the nations with intricate alliances. When the first “domino” fell, it resulted in nation after nation being pulled into the conflagration. Honestly, it was the final great war that involved the nobility and aristocracy of the past to a significant degree.

The German side of the war was summed up initially in Austria-Hungary. The ruling nobility snubbed Serbia with an ultimatum that resulted in Serbia not complying completely. War was declared on July 28 of 1914. Russia was tied to Serbia by alliance and began its weeks-long process of mobilization. Germany, as Austria-Hungary's ally, was ready for war against Russia and declared this on August 1, 1914. France was reminded of its treaty with Russia which then put France against Germany and Austria-Hungary. By August 4 of 1914, Britain felt morally obligated by its treaty to France and was ready to stand beside that ally.

Interestingly, Japan was allied to Britain, so its involvement in the First World War was against Germany. Because of British colonization its commonwealth of nations pulled these lands into the conflict: Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa.

The U.S.A. held out until entering on April 6, 1917.

Although Italy had been allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary, it saw their acts as aggression and, thereby, initially escaped the obligation to defend those allies. Declaring neutrality at first, Italy later became allied with non-German powers.

Imagine being a German American during that time. As much as you hoped for peace, you were torn by former ties to the Fatherland. As much as you wanted to retain your identity, you still longed to become mainstreamed into American life. And you felt as if you were being watched. Chances are, you were – not so much by the government but by

neighbors and local officials who honestly could not keep score fast enough to really know what was going on in the early months of the war.

Yet, national pride was on the rise among nations. In America, that reached a fevered pitch with entry in 1917.

If you have letters or documents relating to your family and that war, consider them precious. Consider your ancestors even more precious for having lived during that era. Equally important, if those documents are in German, have them translated.

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German Pride in the Present

It isn't quite fashionable to wear lederhosen and dance with heel-slapping verve, but it certainly is in keeping with German heritage and German-American Day.

That's right. German Americans have their own prideful day to make merry of their ancestry. Why not? Some experts claim that German ancestry is the largest minority segment of society. Question is: How will YOU celebrate?

The date is October 6. Why that date? That day in 1683 saw the arrival of 13 German families who departed from the area of Krefeld near the Rhein and settled in Philadelphia. That was the group which formed the nucleus of what became Germantown, Pennsylvania.

Although the First World War put a damper on Germans celebrating their American heritage, the matter turned remarkably better in 1983 when President Ronald Reagan announced the official reinstatement of German American Day on the 300th anniversary of the Krefeld experience. With the passage of Public Law 100-104, German American Day has grown in activities.

Add to your insights by going to:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German-American_Day

How can YOU mark the day?

Bake something German. Enjoy it yourself or share it with others. If you have friends with German heritage, why not have a little party and make it a food-fest? Or sing German songs? Play German music? Enjoy German artwork?

You could compare pictures of your recent family and ancestors and talk about their German traditions. Or explain how you are passing along your German ideals to the younger generation(s).

If you choose to keep your commemoration low-key, then read something about German, watch a movie or DVD (no war pictures, please!), or treat yourself to buying and reading a good book on Germanic history and traditions.

You could make it a big celebration by visiting a German site nearby. Or contact the German American Heritage Society (see top of page 1) and join in the society's celebration!

There is a tremendous amount of positive German heritage and accomplishments of which we can be proud, whether those are realized in America or abroad. Keep that positive spirit growing!

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Can you honor two flags?

IT'S WORTH A TRY! In some gatherings of German Americans, the national anthems of Germany and of the U.S.A. are sung. That's OK, if you want, but let's not forget our land is THIS land: America. When making presentations in Germany, I tell my audiences that I will speak in English since it is the chosen tongue of my German ancestor. Out of respect to him, I stick with English more than German. They appreciate this! It is an honorable way to retain both types of heritage. You could honor the German flag in like manner. It is your "ancestral" background you honor more than a different country. And if you choose to pick only one flag, make it the American—after all, many Germans strove to make this land a place of freedom and opportunity.

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Try your hand at these sites online:

<http://www.imperialteutonicorder.com/id49.html>

<http://www.sacgergensoc.org/> *about Germans in Sacramento*

The first site will lead to merry opportunities to track past and present activities of the Teutonic Knights and their philanthropic efforts.

The second site will help you realize that there are German influences in widespread places in the U.S.A.

In fact, when it came to settling the area that we now call Sacramento, it was a healthy influx of gold-seeking German Americans who were among the first big waves of folks to choose the West Coast as their home of choice!

Lastly, see http://www.genealogienetz.de/misc/emig/ham_pass.html if you have connections to Hamburg. At that site there are many options to explore when it comes to emigrants leaving Germany.

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Know of a good book about Germany?

Why not tell your library to find it for you! Or ask the library to purchase a permanent copy. You could even offer to buy it for the library.

You may be helping others in the process!

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Take time to see: <http://www.lidamemorialsociety.org/>

Back page: Late Gothic altar by Tilman Riemenschneider

For this and other examples of German art, explore:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_art



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