

GERMAN IN TEXAS SCHOOLS, 1849 - 1939

by

Hubert Heinen

As of 1945, Ella Gold, a noted local historian, could say the "German language is still widely used in Gillespie County." To a degree, the statement has validity even today, but the joke she recounts in this context is a bit more far-fetched. When the son of a prominent citizen went to college, so the story goes, he "wrote home asking his father for advice -- what foreign language should he take? The father's answer came. It read, 'Take English, Son; it's getting to where everyone speaks it some here now.'"¹

While traveling through Texas in 1849 W. Steinert observed, "Schools, where there are any, are almost altogether English. The Germans who want to live in full enjoyment of their freedom [of choice] therefore often prefer not to send their children to school at all. [Others would like to but cannot.] . . . You have practically no chance at all as a schoolmaster if you do not know English well."² Steinert had, to be sure, found German schools in operation in Galveston, New Braunfels, Fredericksburg, and Industry. A few confessional schools were founded by Germans in Austin and Fayette Counties in the early 1840s, and German schools continued to crop up. In 1849 Adolphus Fuchs petitioned the state legislature for aid, remarking that schools conducted in English were "undeniably the best way to Americanize the German population of Texas and to make good citizens of them."³ Over the next decades school associations were founded by Germans to provide schools and, when state aid was available, to augment the short terms commonly funded. "In 1854 at a mass meeting in San Antonio, the Germans asked that the state establish public free schools . . . that attendance be made compulsory, and that state examinations be held for teachers."⁴

Though the Germans' drive to provide universal schooling for their children, deriving in large part from their background of such schools in Europe, was understandable, it carried with it the seeds of conflict. Heinrich Ochs, one of the first teachers in Fredericksburg and a respected educator in Gillespie County in the last half of the nineteenth century, taught from 1852, but only from 1856 was he "paid a salary (not so much per pupil) and had to start teaching English."⁵ He must have done so reluctantly, and perhaps with some difficulty. As early as 1859, I. B. McFarland, Chief Justice of Fayette County, had complained that the law of 1854, as amended in 1858:

. . . provides that no school shall be entitled to the benefits of the Act 'unless the English language is principally taught therein.' This is entirely too indefinite . . . We made payments to two or three

teachers who hold limited certificates from the Board of Examiners, and have since learned that the children in the schools were taught to read the English language for a short period each day, and that all the balance of the exercises were conducted in the German language.⁶

One of the provisions of the law of 1884 which finally provided a sound basis for public education was that English had to be the language of instruction, and violations of this provision in areas with large Spanish, Czech and German-speaking populations were decried.⁷ In the Lutheran schools, and to a lesser degree in the German Methodist ones, the predominance of German had a confessional motivation, but in most cases pupils and teachers were simply following the path of least resistance and using the language most natural to them. In Rheingold, as in most German communities,

. . . the early curriculum of the school was well pervaded by the German language. The extent to which the German language was used in the school room differed somewhat with the teacher. Some, who seemingly felt constrained to use English for instructing in the school room, nevertheless used German for administering scoldings and did this so effectively that some of their pupils after sixty years can still quote some of their statements.⁸

The striking expressions remembered may have been as innocuous as that reported by Johanna Helntze of La Grange.

For several years in the late sixties the Rev. Herms, a Lutheran pastor who had been educated in Germany, taught near Warrenton. The work he taught consisted mostly of reading, writing, arithmetic, singing, and religious instruction, all work being conducted in the German language. He was not very proficient in English but taught it to some extent. . . . His favorite expression when his pupils made an error was "Na, da hast du mal einen Bock geschossen [Now you've really made a blunder (literally: shot a billy goat)]."⁹

It is perhaps a reflection of the curriculum that in the Lutheran school in Fredericksburg, according to information from 1865, most of the texts (Bible and hymnal, Luther's small catechism and a Bible history, a German grammar and one of German and English, and a geography text) were in German -- only McGuffey's readers were completely in English.¹⁰ The primary function of these classes was probably preparation for confirmation, and the confessional schools frequently supplemented, rather than supplanted, public schools. In rural Washington

County, for example, much emphasis "was placed upon religious instruction as afforded by the local pastor. Indeed, one of the complaints of the county board of education as late as 1912 was that so many parents were taking their children out of the public schools to send them to the 'confirmation classes,' and that many of them did not continue their education after confirmation."¹¹ Frequently, such instruction was given in summer sessions. Many of the schools in predominately German communities, however, had ten-month terms which would have made such an arrangement difficult. Confessional schools at which Czech, Norwegian, or Swedish was prevalent were also common in the late 19th and 20th century; there were also isolated Wendish and Polish communities in which pastors gave some instruction in the ancestral language. As late as the 1930s some pupils at the Freyburg school near Schulenburg first attended a Lutheran school partly taught in German. Perhaps this school was closer to their homes; perhaps its bilingual nature softened the shock of going to a school taught in English. Conversely, my father attended an Episcopal kindergarten in Comfort and remembers that it was there he learned enough English to cope in school, where by the 1910s everything except German was taught in English.

Even when the teachers were native Germans, most tried to emphasize English as well as German. For example, "Professor Paul Stuercke assisted by Mr. Ernst Goeth taught in High Hill [now a part of Schulenburg] during the time of the War between the States. German and English were taught on alternate days. Prof. Stuercke . . . was very strict about the correct pronunciation of the English language. Mr. Stuercke had been educated to be a lawyer and was a graduate of a German university."¹² Nevertheless, much of the teaching was done in German. Miss Lulu Kleberg, the daughter of Robert Justus Kleberg, went to school in Meyersville and Yorktown in the 1860s. She recalled: "My father would always try to get up schools so his children could go to school. I went to Mr. [Otto Fuchs's] school. . . . [Mr. William T. Eicholz in Yorktown was another teacher, one who taught mostly in German. He later taught a German summer school in Cuero, where he edited the Cuero Deutsche Rundschau.] We had a German teacher at Meyersville and he would use any kind of German book. We studied both English and German. Prof. [Otto] Schmidt taught Latin in German."¹³

Rudolph Kleberg, her brother, told of his education in glowing terms.

I learned my a-b-c's in a little log school house from the itinerant country school teacher. Later on, however, I had the advantage of excellent private teachers; from Germany young students drifted out into this new country for adventure and fortune. In fact, nearly all of these pioneers were well educated, and their culture as well as their precept and association have left a lasting impression upon me and my brothers and sisters.

But above all, it was the intelligent tutorship of loving parents that lifted me up into the life of mental and moral endeavor and cultivated a taste for study and the acquisition of substantial knowledge. On my rambles after the sheep and livestock, I carried along and read the "Nibelungenlied", Schiller's "Robbers", "Wallensteins Lager", etc., and from my mother I learned to sing "Mignon", "Des Maedchen's Klage", Koerner's War Songs, and Abt's and Schubert's songs, etc., while from my father I caught the dashing and spirited words and melodies of the German student's songs.

I was fond also of general literature, history, languages and poetry, and I took advantage of our father's library, which, although small, was well selected. Our private teacher, Mr. Albert Schluter, was a man of fine attainments. He wrote a beautiful hand, was a fine mathematician, and a walking lexicon of history. From him we learned early Grecian mythology, Ancient and Medieval history, geography, and, of course, reading, writing and grammar. I shall always feel deeply indebted to him for those rudiments of knowledge which he imparted to me. Later on Mr. Otto Fuchs, a gentleman and a scholar, continued teaching us in these branches, adding to English and German, French and Spanish. And still later, it was the precept and example of Mr. G. Maetze, of Millheim, Austin County, Texas, that aided me further on these same lines of knowledge.¹⁴

Kleberg, born in Cat Spring in 1847 but raised in DeWitt County, subsequently taught school for a short while, studied for and passed his bar examination, edited a newspaper, practiced law, and had a distinguished career in politics. His educational history parallels that of a number of first-generation German Texans.

My grandfather did not have the advantages of the Klebergs or, for example, the Rombergs, Goeths, or Fuchsés. He grew up on a sheep ranch speaking German and was eighteen years old before he first spoke English with someone who knew no German. In his autobiography he described school as it was when he attended.

There were two teachers in a two-room school building. Each teacher took care of two classes or grades: the first and second in one room, the third and fourth in the other. If a pupil failed (only in rare cases) . . . he stayed there for another year before being promoted. There were no written tests, but a good deal of written

work was done, and preserved, with corrections, in copy books. One half of the lessons were supposed to be conducted by Mr. Herbst in English, the other half by the other teacher in German. Since German was the only language spoken on the school grounds -- and in the homes -- and hardly any English-speaking people lived in the immediate vicinity, it is understandable that very little English was learned. . . . There were regular readers -- first to fourth grade -- both in English and German. The alphabet was learned first. Then reading [aloud] by the phonetic method -- German was easy, English naturally difficult. To an Anglo-American -- if one had the opportunity to listen in -- our pronunciation and "butchering up" of the English language, no doubt, would have been both amusing and horrifying. There were a few English-speaking pupils: Louis Schreiner of Kerrville, and Bert and Elmer Parsons . . . These pupils should have been a help to us, but they had no alternative but to learn to speak German on the playground. . . . Arithmetic: At the time I attended school here at Comfort (1881 - 1884) Herbst taught arithmetic, and to the best of my recollection, in German. I remember definitely there was a German arithmetic being used. The four fundamentals: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and possibly division were taught the first year, and these fundamentals were taught very thoroughly. Pupils . . . all had learned to count -- at least in German -- up to 100 before entering school.¹⁵

After three and a half years at Comfort, my grandfather returned to the ranch, where for a year he was taught with some neighbors by Emil Habecker, a sheepherder turned schoolteacher who had emigrated from Germany at the age of seventeen and learned English from a fellow sheepherder. Though impatient, Habecker was intelligent, literate, and an inspiring teacher. Still, when my grandfather decided to go to business college some ten years later, the first thing he needed was coaching in English.

Schooling was catch-as-catch-can. With luck good teachers could be found. Even so, classes tended to be chaotic. Accounts from various sections of Texas and from the mid- to late-1800s and into the early 1900s corroborate so many details of Mr. M.G. Eckhardt's recollections of school days in DeWitt County that I want to insert them here, even though they bear only peripherally on the question of German in Texas schools.

We had a private school right down here in this back yard. It was a one room building made of lumber, and four families came to this school. A Miss Duerr taught, and when she quit, my eldest sister taught. One of my uncles liked to recite poetry. He would stretch out on a bench and recite aloud, not matter what was going on. Mr. Eicholz taught the normal. We called it the little public school. Discipline was strict. The girls sat on one side and the boys on the other. When the boys were bad they had to sit with the girls. There was one teacher that made the pupils strike out the word God whenever they came to it in the textbooks. The wood-pile was in one corner of the room to keep people from stealing wood. We used the blue-backed speller, McGuffey's Reader, and a history which was called the Definer. We came six or seven miles to school. Prof. Schumacher threw some boys out of school simply because they were Americans. German, reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography were taught, and much attention was paid to penmanship. Prof. Eicholz slapped you til you turned like a top.¹⁶

Mr. Eckhardt, in speaking of "a private school," was probably referring to the common custom of extending the short school year paid for by the State of Texas (probably the "normal" referred to above) by having students pay tuition (and/or by having a school association pay for additional instruction). Schumacher, in ridding the school of Americans, may have been expelling freeloaders, or he may have been dealing, in the only way he knew how to, with the problem of how to teach native and nonnative speakers of German -- by eliminating the latter. In Brenham, where German Texans were but an influential minority, the annual report of the Brenham public schools for 1895 states that the problem had finally been solved there. As Arthur Grusendorf summarizes the solution: "An arrangement had . . . been made for the teaching of the pupils of German parentage and the pupils of Anglo-American parentage in separate classes, which, according to the report, 'proved so successful that it will be best to follow that plan for the present.'"¹⁷ My grandfather told an anecdote which demonstrates part of the problem teachers (and students) had. A pretty young girl learned to declaim German with great precision and effect and was both the apple of her teacher's, my grandfather's, eye, and the object of great admiration by colleagues who were visiting the school. Only by accident did they find out that the girl had learned the sounds and music of German, to read the score of the printed page, as it were, but did not understand a word of what she had read.¹⁸

Occasionally, of course, the problem was reversed. E.R. Dabney started teaching in Gillespie County in 1893 at the age of seventeen and a year later was asked to teach German. He writes:

I did not even know the German alphabet; however, I got a German reader and began to learn German. Mr. August Oehler, with whom I boarded, assisted me very much in the beginning of my study. When school closed, I entered Fredericksburg High School. Most of my time was devoted to the study of German under Professor J.F. Roege, who was kind and patient and an excellent instructor. By the time school opened in the fall I had made sufficient progress in my study of German that I was able to teach the pupils German as far as it was desired.¹⁹

By 1918, with the passing of a free textbook law, the problem was beginning to resolve itself. One of the provisions of the law, occasioned most likely by growing Anglo-American distrust not only of Germany and Austria (including the Czech population) but also of Mexico, was that English was to "be used in the elementary schools . . . to the exclusion of all other languages."²⁰ In a number of communities German was also dropped in the high schools, but in Comfort, for example, it was retained till the mid-1930s and in Weimar it was dropped in a curriculum reform in 1938 in part to combat the "old world" notions of the residents of the area.²¹

Throughout this sketch of the clash of German and English, parallels have cropped up between the situation of other ethnic groups and the Germans. The closest parallel is between the Germans and the Czechs, as they frequently lived in close proximity and had similar problems. Nevertheless, a common plight did not lead easily to a common cause. Indeed, the tensions between these two groups, largely abated today, still linger in the memory of older citizens. Often separate schools would be established to avoid contact. "The Grieve School was established in 1882 at the same time that the Novohrad School was. As a result of a rivalry existing among the residents of the community, the citizens of Bohemian origin established the Novohrad School, while the German settlers opened the Grieve School."²² In 1906, George August Stierling, County Superintendent of Fayette County, reported: "The population of Fayette County is mostly Bohemian and German. As a rule they do not have much to do with one another and consequently have in several communities two separate schools, where one would be stronger and able to employ two teachers; but it is probably best to let them remain in separate schools."²³ Sometimes no split was possible. For example, of two towns with a mixed population: in Engle, Czech prevailed; in Freyburg, German. During the late 1920s and early 1930s an American teacher in Freyburg "had a hard time trying to teach English to a bunch of German and Czech pupils. Even the Czechs were speaking German."²⁴

One area in which Germans and Czechs are clearly together is in their present-day attitude toward bilingual education. Most of them experienced great difficulty in adjusting to an English-speaking environment. Some to this day have difficulty speaking English. Others left their

close-knit communities and experienced severe culture shock when they discovered their new classmates or co-workers did not speak their language. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of the hurdles they had to clear, they are almost all vehemently opposed to teaching any language but English in the elementary schools. This may be, in part, due to an anti-Hispanic bias, but it probably also reflects the sink-or-swim methods their teachers used in teaching them English.

My grandfather was fond of telling how one teacher in Comfort managed to get her young pupils to speak English by pretending not to understand German. In 1915, after she had moved away, this teacher wrote my grandmother, apologizing for her awkward German; she considered it "a disgrace to our family . . . of which I am thoroughly ashamed."²⁵ More radical measures were taken by Audrey Bailey at the Freyburg School. She "was bound and determined that there would be only English spoken on the school grounds. She armed a few hand-picked students . . . with pencil and paper, and they took down your name every time they caught you speaking German during lunch and recess."²⁶ Offenders were punished.

The problems and opportunities of German in the larger cities, where German-American schools provided a high standard of education, but where the public schools never did fully solve the question of what to do with bilingual students, were sufficiently different from those in the rural and small-town schools I have mentioned that I felt I should not discuss them. I was also not interested, for this sketch, in how German could be taught to pupils unacquainted with it. The dates I chose, 1849 - 1939, are arbitrary. Indeed, I have mentioned earlier and later ones. However, the problem of how to cope with pupils whose dominant or sole language was German (and, indeed, in the 1800s with such teachers) was an acute one for less than a century and is now clearly historical. In this era of controversy over bilingual education, and in view of a resurgence of interest in ethnicity, the history of the clash between German and English has more than a merely antiquarian interest. Pure, non-English monolingualism may strengthen ethnic bonds, but it handicaps those trapped in it. My grandfather, whose precise English was second in expressiveness only to his fluent German, felt uncomfortable to his dying day when he had to speak English. On the other hand, those most at ease with two languages were those who were taught, from an early age, the splendors of both. The opportunity was lost -- it may not have been within reach -- but if it should come again, it should be seized.

NOTES

¹Ella Amanda Gold, "The History of Education in Gillespie County," M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1945, p. 15.

²Gilbert J. Jordan, trans. and ed., "W. Steinert's View of Texas in 1849," Southwestern Historical Quarterly, 81 (1977 - 78), 65; cf. 80 (1976 - 77), 61, 294.

³Cited in Rudolph Leopold Biesele, The History of the German Settlements in Texas, 1831 - 1861, w. p. (Austin) : n. p., 1964 (first printing 1930), p. 213.

⁴Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," p. 20.

⁵Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," p. 23; cf. pp. 106 - 7.

⁶Report of the Treasurer and Ex-Officio Superintendent of Common Schools of the State of Texas for the Fiscal Year Ending August 31, 1859, p. 32; cited in Johanna Caroline Walling, "Early Education in Fayette County," M.Ed. thesis, University of Texas, 1941, Appendix C, p. 12.

⁷Byron Freedman Lackey, "The Contributions of State Superintendents of Public Instruction to the Development of the Public School System in Texas from 1884 to 1930," M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1930, pp. 20, 24. See also Frederick Eby, The Development of Education in Texas, (New York: MacMillan, 1925), pp. 198 - 99.

⁸Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," p. 89.

⁹Walling, "Education in Fayette County," p. 121.

¹⁰Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," p. 33.

¹¹Arthur August Grusendorf, "The Social and Philosophical Determinants of Education in Washington County, Texas, from 1835 to 1937," Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas, 1938, pp. 456 - 57.

¹²Walling, "Education in Fayette County," p. 129.

¹³Dorothy House Young, "The History of Education in DeWitt County," M.Ed. thesis, University of Texas, 1943, p. 125; cf. p. 129.

¹⁴Young, "Education in DeWitt County," p. 128 - 29 -- the order of paragraphs has been reversed.

¹⁵Hubert Heinen, "Autobiography, 1872 - 1965," pp. 18 - 19.

¹⁶Young, "Education in DeWitt County," p. 126. For a balanced and detailed account of education in a rural German community, see Gilbert J. Jordan, Yesterday in the Texas Hill Country (College Station: Texas A & M UP, 1979), pp. 96 - 115.

¹⁷Grusendorf, "Determinants," p. 408. When, in 1913, the Fredericksburg High School established graduation requirements, four units of English and three of German were required (Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," p. 49).

¹⁸Interview with Glenn Gilbert in Comfort, 1962 (taped).

¹⁹Gold, "Education in Gillespie County," pp. 123 - 24.

²⁰Lackey, "Contributions," p. 101.

²¹R. H. Mayfield, "A Description of the High School Program in Weimar, Texas 1938 - 41," M.Ed. thesis, University of Texas, 1941, p. 67.

²²Theodore Hamilton Leslie, "The History of Lavaca County Schools," M.Ed. thesis, University of Texas, 1935, p. 199. The "Germans" were probably from present-day Czechoslovakia, as the patrons of both schools had Czech names.

²³Monroe R. Henniger, "George August Stierling, Early Educator and County Superintendent of Fayette County," M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1941, p. 54.

²⁴Letter to me from Walter Cordes, San Antonio, 28 July 1980.

²⁵Heinen, "Autobiography," p. 57; interview with Glenn Gilbert; letter from Tonie Palmie (DeWitt County, 1915) to Else Heinen.

²⁶Letter to me from Florence Farek, Schulenburg, 29 July 1980.

²⁷For a less elegiac account of the status of German in Gillespie County and a complementary sketch of German as it was taught there, see Barbara Ann Reeves Moore, "A Sociolinguistic Longitudinal Study (1969-1979) of a Texas German Bilingual Community," Ph. D. thesis, University of Texas, 1980. This excellent study was brought to my attention after the completion of my manuscript.