

A Defiant Dialect Pennsylvania German in Fiction

By Edward W. Hocker



LEVER writers of fiction have sought within the past few years to depict the life of the Pennsylvania Germans. It cannot be denied that the picturesque peculiarities which abound among this people justify the efforts of authors to utilize them for a story setting. And that the Pennsylvania German stories have not been failures is demonstrated by the large sales of Mrs. Helen Reimensnyder Martin's books and by the alacrity with which the magazines take advantage of opportunities to publish short stories by Mrs. Martin and by Miss Elsie Singmaster, the two foremost exponents of this branch of fic-

tion. But the stories of these accomplished young women, as well as the earlier Pennsylvania German sketches of John Luther Long, Nelson Lloyd, "Georg Schock," and other writers, all present a common defect; for when the attempt is made to picture the Pennsylvania Germans in English fiction with that fidelity with which the people of New England, the dwellers of the South, and the settlers of the West have been portrayed in many an interesting volume, an insurmountable obstacle is encountered in the dialect spoken by the Pennsylvania Germans.

In the stories the writers compel their characters to talk in a quaint jargon of broken English. This is altogether at variance with reality, for the

Pennsylvania Germans who cannot speak English with a fair degree of correctness do not attempt to employ that language at all in conversation among themselves. For social intercourse and for most business purposes in all the smaller settlements of the German districts of Pennsylvania, and even to a considerable extent in the larger cities, such as Lancaster, Reading and Allentown, the people employ their own distinctive German dialect.

Many readers who have never visited the Pennsylvania German country gain the impression from the Pennsylvania German fiction passing under their eyes that the dialect of this people is the broken English used in the stories, and they are surprised to learn that the Pennsylvania German dialect is actually so closely akin to German that it is not intelligible to any one who reads or speaks only English. It is this German *patois* that the Pennsylvania Germans employ when they speak to each other. Broken English, such as the story writers introduce, is undoubtedly heard in the Pennsylvania German country, but it is called into service only when the native finds it necessary to converse with an outsider who is unfamiliar with the customary dialect.

The difficulty thus presented in dealing with the language forms the most formidable hindrance to the effort to give a faithful portrayal of Pennsylvania German life in the form of English fiction. Traits, customs and peculiarities can be described with accuracy, but the dialog of the narrative is far from being true to life.

In some of the agricultural districts not more than fifty miles from Philadelphia, the older inhabitants are entirely ignorant of English, and even in small towns of a thousand or more inhabitants scores can be found who do not understand that language. This ignorance prevails chiefly among women, who, condemned to a life of household drudgery, rarely come into contact with any one outside their own limited circle of acquaintanceship.

Public business in the villages and small boroughs is usually transacted in German. Members of the town council and school board, when they meet, conduct their official deliberations in the dialect, although the minutes are kept in English. Sometimes when applicants for franchises for railway, gas or water companies appear before the councils of these towns, the councilmen discuss the applicant's claims in his presence with a frankness which, if attempted in a language which the visitor understood, might result in unpleasantness.

Because all education is in English, the dialect, notwithstanding the tenacity with which the people cling to it, suffers from the inroads of the English. For instance, in dealing with financial matters, in adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, the Pennsylvania German is compelled to resort to English, for that is the only kind of arithmetic he knows. The language of the country banks, therefore, becomes an extraordinary mixture, numerical quantities and banking terms being expressed in English amidst a setting of Pennsylvania German. Here is an illustration: The man who wants to have a check for \$23.75 cashed expresses his inquiry in this form which is neither English nor German: "Kennsht du mir en Check casha fir twenty-three dollars und seventy-five cents?"

It cannot be said that these people cling to German because of any present prejudice against English. The German seems to survive because the Teutonic tendency to adhere to old-time customs has had full sway for nearly two centuries in those districts where the Germans constitute almost the entire population.

When the original German settlers came to Pennsylvania, soon after William Penn had founded the province, they formed communities of their own in the region now included within the counties of Bucks, Berks, Montgomery, Lehigh, Northampton, Lancaster, Lebanon, Dauphin, Snyder and York. They had little intercourse with the

English settlers, and hence did not find it necessary to learn their language. They established German schools in connection with their churches, and resisted efforts to open English schools, believing that the innovation threatened their religion. So, from father to son, from mother to daughter, they transmitted the German.

By far the larger part of the early German settlers came from the Palatinate and the Rhine region. Their speech originally was the imperfect German of the peasantry of those districts. In the course of time the several German dialects of the immigrants were merged into one, and into this consolidated dialect English words made their way. Thus the speech now known as Pennsylvania German originated.

When the man born and bred among people who speak this dialect undertakes to use English, it is only natural that in translating German idioms he should commit blunders that seem ridiculous to those who have no knowledge of German. He will say "The sugar is all," when he means it is all gone. He will insist upon placing an unnecessary "once" or "yet" at the end of a sentence. He will say that he wants to buy "such a hat," when he means "one of those hats," and then when he has bought it his friends will say "he is proud with his new hat, but he'll be tired of it until Christmas yet."

Moreover, he is painfully aware of his defects and wants his children to be better equipped than he is. So he strives to provide good public schools, and is liberal in his contributions toward the educational institutions of his religious denomination. Muhlenberg College, Allentown; Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster; Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove; Lebanon Valley College, Annville; Albright College, Myerstown; Pennsylvania College, Gettysburg; Ursinus College, Collegeville; Juniata College, Huntingdon; Perkiomen Seminary, Penns-

burg; and the State Normal Schools at Kutztown and Millersville, are supported almost solely by the Pennsylvania Germans.

Nearly all the Pennsylvania German towns have commodious public school buildings, and high schools are being established in many of the rural districts. Though the school boards conduct their deliberations in Pennsylvania German, the rule is generally enforced that the children must not speak Pennsylvania German upon the school grounds.

And yet, in spite of these precautions, the chances are that as soon as the children leave the school grounds they will begin to talk in Pennsylvania German. In such circumstances it is no wonder that the effort to teach English grammar, literature, composition and rhetoric in the Pennsylvania German districts involves a huge task for the instructor.

At a spelling-bee in one of the small Pennsylvania German towns a pedagogue not to the manner born, who was "giving out" the words, came to "mortgage." The spellers stared, seeming not to understand.

Again no one attempted to spell the word.

"Mortgage," repeated the teacher.

The county superintendent, who was present, surmised the cause of the difficulty. He announced the word, but pronounced it "morgitch."

Immediately the eyes of the contestants brightened, and the word was spelled correctly at the first attempt.

A few minutes later the word "choose" was announced, and this was the way it was spelled: "J-e-w-s."

The long domination of this dialect forms a terrible handicap even for the brightest pupils among the Pennsylvania Germans. Its earmarks crop out frequently in the cases of some of the foremost educators of the State. It can readily be credited that there was a foundation of truth in the anecdote told about Governor Joseph Ritner and the office seeker from Center county.

Governor Ritner was a typical Pennsylvania German, and this particular Center county man had haunted the State Capitol for some months after the governor's inauguration in the effort to obtain a place. Finally one day he had another interview with the chief executive. After listening patiently, Governor Ritner explained: "Now, you're from Center county. Well, I'm taking up the counties alphabetically. Pretty soon I'll get to 'S,' and then your case will be attended to."

The churches of the Pennsylvania Germans play an important part in preserving their dialect. Every effort made to introduce English or to use it more extensively in the services has given rise to the hottest kind of wrangles. The clergy, as a rule, want to make English the predominant language, but their flocks object. The usual custom in the rural congregations now is to have German services in the morning and English services in the evening. In the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, to which the larger part of the Pennsylvania Germans belong, the pastors, being college trained, employ pure German in their services, although occasionally bits of the dialect crop out in the sermons. These churches also use the old chorales of Germany, but in the singing it is apparent that in spite of the fact that the congregation demands German services, the number who can read the German of the hymnbooks is rather limited. It is safe to say that less than half of those who daily speak Pennsylvania German are able to read pure German.

Besides the Lutheran and Reformed adherents, there are among the Pennsylvania Germans many members of the "plain sects," Dunkers, Mennonites, Schwenkfelders and the like, and also the members of the two branches of the Evangelical Church, which is similar to the Methodist Episcopal. In the services of all these denominations,

Pennsylvania German is the prevailing speech.

The Pennsylvania German dialect is also a factor that must be considered in politics, for in many counties the candidate not conversant with it is likely to make an unsuccessful canvass. In the last judicial campaign in Lehigh county, the two principal newspapers in Allentown took up the issue as to whether or not former Judge Harvey, the Democratic candidate, could speak Pennsylvania German, and the Republican organ accused the Democratic newspaper of resorting to falsehood by attempting to create the impression that the candidate in question spoke and understood the popular dialect. Alluding to the candidate, the Republican organ continued:

Of course it is not his fault that he was born of English parents in the Pennsylvania German county of Bucks, but he came to Allentown when a young man and here he made a vast fortune in the law business. He began his residence in Allentown in the prime of his youth, and nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand would by this time, under the same conditions, have acquired a knowledge of the Pennsylvania German language as the most fluent native of Lehigh. Mr. Harvey, however, chose to look down upon this so-called Pennsylvania Dutch, and the result is that today he can speak and understand very little more of the dialect of our people than he did nearly forty years ago. . . . The question whether the judicial candidate can or cannot speak the Pennsylvania German is a vital issue in this campaign, and it in no way reflects upon the intelligence of any public man to be able to do business in a language that has been spoken from the earliest history of the country. On the other hand, it is important that the man who sits upon the Bench to administer justice with an even hand shall be conversant with the dialect of a large majority of the people, and which does not always admit of strict interpretation.

This argument seemed effective, for, in spite of the fact that Lehigh county is normally Democratic, Mr. Harvey was defeated.

Upon at least one memorable occasion the dialect of the Pennsylvania Germans was heard in the halls of Congress. Ner Middleswarth was a

Snyder county statesman who was sent to the thirty-third Congress. One day an erudite colleague delivered an address which was so replete with classical quotations in Latin and Greek that it disgusted Congressman Middleswarth; and when the orator had closed his speech, the Snyder country representative jumped to his feet and started a vigorous harangue in Pennsylvania German. With considerable difficulty, the Speaker succeeding in checking Mr. Middleswarth, declaring him out of order. Mr. Middleswarth apologized, and explained that he merely wanted to show that the other speaker was not the only man in the House who could speak more than one language.

Although the Pennsylvania Germans have but recently become subjects for the writers of fiction in English, they have long had a literature of their own. This it is true, is rather restricted; for Pennsylvania German, being primarily an oral dialect, has no established orthography, and therefore offers much difficulty to writers. Some Pennsylvania German authors spell according to the German sound of the letters, while others attempt to follow the English rules.

Many newspapers in the Pennsylvania German country print syndicated weekly humorous letters in the dialect. The originator of this form of literature was Edwin H. Rauch, a Mauch Chunk newspaperman who died in 1902. For a score of years or longer, over the nom de plume "Pit Schwefelbrenner," he wrote a weekly column of Pennsylvania German that amused

thousands of readers. One of his most interesting attempts was the translation of a portion of Shakespeare's writings into Pennsylvania German. Mr. Rauch's version of the remarks of the ghost in Hamlet is as follows:

Ich bin dein dawdy si spook;
G'sentenced for a tzeit long rumm laufa
nauchts,
Un im dawg fesht stecka im fire
Bis de schlechty saucha os ich gadu hob in
meina noddoor's dawga
Ous gabrenn'd un ous g'loxeerd sin.
Awer ich darraf der now net sawga
Wass de secrets fun mein g'fenguiss sin.
Ich kent der'n shtory derfu fertzalla
So os 's geringshta wardt
Deer di sale uf reisa dait; di yoong's bloot
kalt freera;
Die tzwae awga ous 'm kup rous gooka
maucha we fireiche shtarna,
Un di hohr uf 'm kup grawd nuf shtella
We dicky, shtelfy si-parshsta.

Several Pennsylvania German poets have produced verses that are considerably above the ordinary. Of these the foremost and earliest was the Rev. Henry Harbaugh, a clergyman of the Reformed Church, whose poem, "Das Alte Schulhaus on der Krick" has become a classic in Pennsylvania German literature.

The late Lee L. Grumbine, of Lebanon, also employed the dialect effectively in prose and verse. Others who have written extensively in Pennsylvania German are Daniel Miller, of Reading; Henry L. Fisher, of York; C. S. Ziegler, of Easton; the Rev. Dr. A. R. Horne, of Allentown; H. A. Schuler, of Allentown; Miss Rachel Bahn, of York county; E. M. Eberman, of Bethlehem, and Colonel Thomas Zimmerman, of Reading.

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