

HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH-GERMAN SCHOOLS IN BALTIMORE

By ERNEST J. BECKER

Nobody knows just how many families in Baltimore still speak German regularly today. Probably not many. The steady decline of immigration from the old country in the present century; the first world war; intermarriage with non-Germans, or with persons of German descent who had lost the art of German speech—these and many other causes have contributed to a progressive decrease in the number of families in which German is the regular medium of communication.

To the overwhelming majority of our people today German is just another foreign language. And as the years roll on and the older people who today still cling to the parent speech die off, that condition is likely to become increasingly evident.

The situation was far different up to and well into the new century. Here, too, reliable statistics are lacking. But it's been stated on good authority that about a fourth of Baltimore families in 1890 spoke German in their homes and business; and it's safe to say, I think, that following the period of greatly increased immigration in the mid-1800s pretty nearly as many people of all ages spoke German as spoke English only. Many of us older people, ourselves the second or third generation of German-Americans, learned to speak German before we learned English, and have gone through life with the rare gift of being equally, or nearly equally, at home in two languages.

In the 1870s, when the use of German as an everyday language was at its height, the demand for instruction in it in the public schools became insistent. In other cities, notably Phila-

delphia, English-German schools had been in operation for many years; and with that argument the German-American got what they wanted here.

In 1873 a resolution was reported by the Joint Committee on Education of the City Council of Baltimore, and unanimously adopted by both branches, requesting the Board of School Commissioners "to consider the propriety of introducing the study of the German language in the public schools of the city." The matter was referred to a special committee of the Board, in connection with the Superintendent, who made a full and thorough examination of the methods of instruction in the German language pursued in other cities in connection with the public schools. They reported that it was inexpedient to introduce the study in the Grammar Schools, as then organized and graded, without impairing their success in the English branches; and that the best method to accomplish the desired object was to establish separate schools, under the supervision of the Board, in which the English and German languages could be simultaneously taught. The report of this committee was fully considered by the Board and it was deemed expedient to adopt its recommendations and establish English-German schools, separate from the other schools now in operation. By way of testing public demand for this kind of instruction, only one school was established, to which all were admitted who desired a knowledge of German "simultaneously with their English studies."¹

Almost immediately upon its establishment several hundred pupils applied for admission in the new school,

¹ *Report of Board of School Commissioners*, Nov. 1, 1874.

and were duly enrolled; and the early establishment of additional schools was at once indicated. "Instruction is given to pupils in both languages every day. The benefit to them is twofold: first, to the children of English parents who wish to obtain a knowledge of German; and secondly to those of German parents who wish to receive instruction in the English language as well as their own. The great advantages of a knowledge of the German language for business purposes are apparent to everyone; and if we can furnish the foundation for this knowledge in the lower department of our schools, it will be much easier for the pupils to acquire greater efficiency as they are advanced. . . . The success (of these schools) will depend very much upon public sentiment with reference to the subject.

Our purpose it to furnish the best teachers, and every possible facility which will assist them in their work. . . . In other cities they have grown rapidly in public favor, and a large proportion of pupils in attendance at the public schools are availing themselves of the opportunity thus offered. . . . If a like success follow in this city, it will indicate that we are not mistaken in supposing that the people earnestly wish the establishment of such schools for the public benefit."²

In the following year two additional schools were established. "These schools," said the School Board, "have thus far been eminently successful, and have met with public favor to such an extent that we find it difficult to meet the large demand for admission."³

About 1500 pupils entered within a few weeks after the schools were opened. Of these, all but five were "pay" pupils from choice: that is, they paid a book fee of \$4 per annum.

By 1875 four English-German schools were in regular session:

- Number 1: Biddle St., near Fremont.
12 teachers; 575 pupils.
- Number 2: 174 Hamburg St.
13 teachers; 558 pupils.
- Number 3: Trinity St. near Exeter.
13 teachers; 615 pupils.
- Number 4: Aisquith St. near Fayette.
2 teachers; 67 pupils.

In 1876 another school (Number 5) was opened on Fremont St. near Lombard. The total attendance in the five schools had reached 2,963, an increase of 1,332 pupils. "The schools," says the School Board, "have been eminently successful, and have grown in public favor so rapidly that it has been impossible to furnish proper accommodations. The attendance, 89.6, is higher than in any other department of the schools." Said the Superintendent, Dr. Henry E. Shepherd, "these schools have been a marked success. Considerable efficiency is acquired in the German language, as I can testify from careful examination of the classes and observation of their progress. It is my hope that they may accomplish all that their most sanguine advocates could desire, and tend to diffuse a thorough knowledge of the German tongue, so valuable an acquisition to the scholar, the man of business, the student of literature and the philologist."⁴

In 1878 a movement was started to make the English-German schools "tax free." As no public schools were ever taxed, this probably means that pupils were to be freed from the \$4 tuition and book tax hitherto in force.

In 1879 the name of the English-German schools was changed to "Public Schools." The purpose of the change was probably to meet opposition which had sprung up in various quarters to the general idea of teaching any language but English in the public schools at the tax-payers' expense. Schönrich⁵ has this to say about the matter:

Of course, the schools met opposition from the beginning. As long as they could be

² *Ibid.*

³ *Report of Board of School Commissioners*, Nov. 1, 1875.

⁴ *Report of School Commissioners*, 1876.

⁵ *Baltimore, seine Vergangenheit u. Gegenwart* (1887): Karl Otto Schönrich, Article "Schulwesen," sect. II.

considered an experiment of very doubtful effectiveness, they were treated with scornful indifference. But when they began to attract favorable notice; when pupils from them were found to give a good account of themselves in the examinations for high school—this despite the fact that the instruction in German reduced the teaching time for regular subjects; and when the schools seemed to be gaining a permanent place for themselves, then the opposition began to get really busy. The chief argument advanced against these schools was the mistaken assumption that they might become instruments of "Germanization"; whereas they could in the true sense of the word be considered promoters of Americanization. Various forms of persecution were brought to bear, but the friends of progress were equal to them, ably aided by the German press of the city.

After 1885 all opposition seems to have disappeared.

In 1880 there were still only five schools, with 3440 pupils and 77 teachers. The principals received a salary of \$1500, the Vice-Principals \$1008, and the "male assistants" \$600. What the female assistants received is not recorded.

In his report for the year 1880 Superintendent Shepherd states: "These schools have received a new designation during the present year, which is not only ambiguous but equivocal and misleading. I have no especial comment to make in regard to their condition. The teachers are generally entitled to commendation for the zeal and assiduity with which they have labored. In some instances their work has been executed with remarkable intelligence, and they are by no means to be censured for failing to accomplish results which the very conditions under which they labor render impossible of attainment."⁶

From these remarks it is obvious that the Superintendent was not pleased either with the change of name or with the working conditions in the schools. He was especially displeased with the work of several teachers of German who had previously run private schools of their own and who themselves had very poor command of English.

In the same report Assistant Superintendent Henry A. Wise states: "In some of the schools there is a great disproportion in the number of English teachers to the number of German—the rule requiring that there be about an equal number of each having been disregarded. In one school there are 9 English teachers and only 4 German teachers. Some of the teachers, eligible and competent only to give instruction in English, give instruction in German also; this, too, in the lower primary grades, requiring *oral* instruction in German."

By 1883 the enrollment in the five schools had reached 3869. Number 2, to be sure, had been given a new building, corner Charles and Ostend Streets, but already it was "so crowded as to be uncomfortable." An addition was recommended. This addition was provided in 1884. Commenting on conditions in School Number 5 the Board's report states: "There are 900 pupils in a building intended to accommodate 600. In consequence, it is uncomfortably overcrowded." The location was considered undesirable in consequence of its proximity to factories "in one or more of which recent explosions of boilers occurred, causing a panic in the school which would have proved a serious disaster except for the excellent control of the teachers."⁷

In 1885 the enrollment figure had risen to 4,616, with 105 teachers but still only five buildings. In Number 5, despite explosions, there were over 1000 pupils. It had now become customary to rent houses to accommodate the overflow, but that didn't help much. Some classes from Number 5 were held in other schools. Said Superintendent Wise about Number 5: "Eight of the rooms are not fit for classrooms on account of size and imperfect lighting and ventilation."⁸

In March, 1886, a course of study in German for grades 1 to 8 was adopted. "It is suggested that con-

⁶Report of Board of School Commissioners, 1879.

⁷Report of Board of School Commissioners, 1884.

⁸Report of Board of School Commissioners, 1885.

versation form an essential feature of the German course in all grades, and every effort should be made towards giving the pupils the ability to speak and write German correctly. The amount given in the textbooks is quite sufficient. The scope of these schools hardly includes a special study of theoretical grammar; and to speak to the children of grammatical laws which they cannot possibly understand and which are of practically no use to them seems a waste of time."

The course included for all grades:

Reading and *oral* spelling.
Writing.
Language (on model of English).
Arithmetic.
Memorizing.

The textbook was by L. R. Klemm, Supervising Principal, German Department, Public Schools, Cleveland, Ohio. There was a different book (called "Kreis") for each of the eight grades. The first Kreis consisted of "Fibel"; the eighth of an epitome of German literature. It was good stuff.

In 1887 the name of the schools was very sensibly changed back to English-German. There were still only five of them, with makeshift arrangements to take care to some extent of the overflow. In 1888 and 1889 the enrollment rose to 5030. There were 114 teachers—97 female—and conditions were rapidly becoming impossible. But the School Board remained optimistic. "These schools continue to increase in number of pupils and excellence of instruction," said President Morris of the School Board. "The erection of a new building for No. 5 will furnish desirable accommodations for pupils and teachers who have been suffering great inconvenience in the old house on Fremont Street."

In 1900 this new building for No. 5 was finally completed and occupied. It was located on the old Waesche property on Lexington Street near Fremont.

President Morris has this to say about the English-German schools in general at this time: "These schools were organized seventeen years ago as a part of our school system. It was at first intended that such instruction (i. e. in German) should be given in all the schools where a sufficient number of the pupils desired it to justify the appointment of a special teacher. But afterwards it was determined that it would be better and less expensive to establish special schools. . . . These schools are composed of pupils in the primary and grammar grades, and instruction is given daily in the English and German languages. This parallel course of study is approved by many educators, who think that this daily instruction to the pupils in the German language does not interfere with the English studies, but that each assists the other. There are others, however, who have a different opinion and think that the instruction given in these schools is of but little practical value, and that it interferes with the English studies; that therefore it should not be given. There are also many who are opposed to giving instruction in a foreign language at the public expense, and think that the true policy is to furnish only English instruction. Public sentiment in our city seems to be favorable to the continuance of these schools, and it is our duty to make them as satisfactory as possible."⁹

By 1893 the number of pupils in attendance at the English-German German schools had risen to 5,439, representing about 10% of the total number of pupils enrolled in the elementary and grammar schools of the city. The six regular school buildings were still inadequate to the needs of the situation, and many classes were held, as before, in rented buildings and rooms.

This condition continued to grow worse with every year; the Superintendent reported regularly each year,

⁹Report of School Commissioners, 1891.

in almost the same words, that the schools "have a larger number of pupils on roll than their buildings will properly accommodate and it is important to correct this condition." By 1897 the population of Baltimore had increased to 455,427, with over 63,000 in the public schools. Of these, 6,780 were in English-German schools, now increased to seven. But they were rapidly losing their special character, the Superintendent complaining of "the loose manner in which pupils are allowed to go to English-German schools is injurious to discipline and instruction, and causes a waste of school space."¹⁰

The problem of proper accommodations continued unsolved during the next four years. During that period no reference was made by the School Board or by any school official as to the effectiveness of the German instruction in the English-German schools, or to the desirability of continuing the study of German parallel with that of English. It is quite evident, however, that the special character of the English-German schools was gradually being lost, although German was still being taught in them. By 1899 the enrollment was 6931.

In 1901 the new Superintendent of Public Instruction, Mr. James H. Van Sickle, instituted the "group system" of school organization, and the English-German schools were apparently merged with other groups. Dr. Charles A. A. J. Miller, Principal of Group S, became the chief supervisory officer in the German language field.

Superintendent Van Sickle's early reports contain no recommendations regarding the future of these schools. But his report of January, 1903, indicated that they were still functioning. He says: "The success of the

English-German school under a plan which gives the English branches much less than the full time suggests similar adjustments in other departments of school work, notably industrial arts. . . . Thirteen schools are either wholly or in part English-German schools. Children who attend them are usually of German parentage, have their time divided between English and German instruction. The correlation of work in the two languages is such that the English branches do not seem to suffer in the least from neglect. Pupils . . . complete the elementary course in the regular time allotted to it. Judging by the record of these schools, where, if anywhere, the curriculum may be said to be crowded, it is not the number of studies in the program of a school that retards the progress of pupils, but the monotony and dullness which sometimes characterize school work."

After 1904, no reference is made specifically to English-German schools in the official reports of the School Board and the Superintendent. However, they continued in somewhat modified form until the war period in 1917, when all German instruction practically came to a stop in the public schools. Today, no foreign language is taught in the elementary schools of the city. Such instruction begins in the ninth grade junior high, and extends as an elective through the senior high school period. The number of pupils electing German in these schools dropped to nearly zero during and for some years after the first world war; picked up again and was on the increase until the outbreak of the present war. What the effect of that situation on the study of German will be remains to be seen. But the old English-German schools are completely dead.

¹⁰ Superintendent's report, 1896.