

AN INTERESTING BARON DE KALB LETTER

By A. E. ZUCKER

The facts of the life of Major General Jean de Kalb, who served under Washington in the Revolutionary Army, were often incorrectly given until about a hundred years after the General's death. However, in 1862 Friedrich Kapp published a biography of this Revolutionary hero, establishing among other things that de Kalb was not a member of one of several German noble families of that name, but that church records show him to have been the son of a Bavarian freeholder, born in Hüttendorf near Erlangen. Kapp also discovered the letters de Kalb wrote to his wife during his years in America, and likewise made use of documents in French and American archives. On the basis of this biography one can readily outline de Kalb's life as follows: 1721 born in Hüttendorf; 1743 lieutenant in a German regiment in French service; 1743-1748 fought through the War of the Austrian Succession and 1756-1763 the Seven Years War; 1760-1763 on the staff of the Duc de Broglie; 1762 received the Order of Military Merit for valor at the Battle of Wilhelmsthal; 1768 sent by the French Prime minister Choiseul to America to report on the friction between the Colonies and the English Government, particularly on how the Americans would act in case of a Franco-British war. Four months' investigation convinced him that blood would prove thicker than water and the colonists would fight on England's side against the French. He felt that the colonists were right in their demand for "no taxation without representation" and came to admire their determination to defend their rights. Furthermore, he could not believe that the English Government would be so blind to its own interests as to drive the colonists to rebellion and independence; he felt convinced however that in the long run the colonies could not be governed from the other side of the Atlantic. In 1777 de Kalb with Lafayette crossed the Atlantic to fight under Washington. In 1780 he fell in the Battle of Camden in South Carolina.

In view of Kapp's extremely careful search of State Department files for material on de Kalb, it is rather surprising that he missed the following letter, now preserved in the Archives Building in Washington, which is very revealing as to the writer's motives in fighting for American freedom. At a critical time in de Kalb's life it was very influential in deciding Congress to offer him a major-generalship and thus to secure the services of this gallant and able soldier instead of letting him return to France, as most of his and Lafayette's companions did.

Other aspects of the letter are also rather interesting. It is addressed to Dr. Frederic Phyle, a German physician practicing in Philadelphia, and is dated December 26, 1775. De Kalb met Dr. Phyle in 1768 on his trip undertaken for Choiseul and the two became friends. (Kapp states on page 160 of his biography that early in May 1778 de Kalb contracted a violent fever which brought him to the verge of the grave and the latter stages of the disease were passed in Philadelphia where a fellow-German, Dr. Phyle, who subsequently became his intimate friend, nursed him back to health. As Kapp evidently did not know of the letter of December 26, 1775, he was not aware that de Kalb was attended by a friend of long standing.) The letter reads as follows, partly in English and partly in German:

I am in great distress about your and your family's health and welfare, not having received any news from you since my letter to you of the first of January 1774; whether it was lost by these troublesome times or some other reasons that hindered me from getting an answer I cannot guess. Whatever may be the cause of it I should gladly hear from you and be as gladly apprised of a good harmony restored between the Colonies and the Mother Country. I hardly can believe that the English ministry will pursue the rash and unjust measures and push the colonies to violent extremities to preserve their natural and constitutional liberties—Ich bin ein solcher Freund von Ihrem Land, dass wenn der Krieg zwischen Engelland und ihren Pflanzstädten in der neuen Welt fortdauern sollte, so wolte ich mit Vergnügen meine noch übrigen Jahre zum Dienst Ihrer Freiheit aufopfern und meine 32. jährige Erfahrung in der Kriegskunst zu Ihrem besten und nach aller meiner Fähigkeit anwenden, wenn ich glaubte, dass ich bey dem amerikanischen Kriegsheer könnte nützlich sein, bey Ihrer Hauptversammlung dazu berufen würde. Sagen Sie mir als mein wahrer und guter Freund, ob ich der Versammlung einen solchen Vorschlag kan machen lassen. Was mich auch Theils dazu verleitet ist das grosse Verlangen, das ich habe, Sie mein werther Freund, noch einmal und bald zu sehen. Geben Sie mir, wenn es möglich ist, eine ausführliche Antwort.—if I did not write to you again before this time, a long journey to Germany, which I just now ended, to see my sons in the Palatinate hindered me from pleasing myself in that point, for I look on it as a great pleasure to me to entertain myself with so dear a friend as yourself—if all commerce, correspondence and communication with England is not interrupted you may direct for me under the cover to Henry Keall, No. 121 Fenchurch Street, London.

I am forever
Dear Sir
Your most obedient humble
Servant de Kalb

Translation of German Part of Letter Made for the Benefit of Congress:

I am to such a degree a friend to your country that if the war between England and her colonies in America should continue I could with pleasure devote the rest of my days in the service of your liberty and to the utmost of my ability employ my thirty-two years' experience acquired in the military art for your advantage if I might suppose that I could be of service in the American Army and receive a call from their Congress—pray tell me, my sincere friend, whether I may offer such proposal to the Congress, and give me, if possible, a full answer to this point.

In the first place the letter shows de Kalb's warm sympathy for the American cause that he had acquired during his American visit. The news of Lexington and Concord of course aroused the old soldier's desire to be in the thick of it. He craved recognition by promotion to a general's rank and glory on the battlefield. The idea appealed to him of capping his distinguished military career by fighting with the plucky Americans for their freedom. In this spirit later on, May 12, 1778, he swore his oath of allegiance before George Washington.

DEKALB'S OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

I, John Baron de Kalb, Major General, do acknowledge the United States of America to be Free, Independent and Sovereign States, and declare, that the people thereof owe no allegiance or obedience to George the Third, King of Great Britain; and I renounce, refuse and abjure any allegiance or obedience to him, and I do swear that I will to the utmost of my power, support, maintain and defend the said United States against the said King George the Third, his heirs and successors and his or their abettors, assistants and adherents, and will serve the said United States in the office of Major General, which I now hold, with fidelity, according to the best of my skill and understanding.

John Baron de Kalb

Sworn before me, Camp at Valley
Forge, the 12th day of May, 1778
G. Washington

Congress sent Silas Deane as its agent to France in 1776 to represent American interests at the Court of Versailles. He engaged a dozen or so of French officers who were eager to fight with the "insurgents" and promised them various ranks according to their deserts. Of the group that came with Lafayette and de Kalb, three were given by Silas Deane subject to confirmation by Congress the grade of major-generals—Lafayette, de Kalb and de Mauroy, while the others were appointed majors, captains and lieutenants. When they reached Philadelphia and reported to Congress a very embarrassing situation arose. While Deane had acted in good faith Congress felt that he had exceeded his authority and that it could not honor these commitments. American officers who had been in the field for years resented the promotion over their heads of foreigners unacquainted with America, and who could not even speak English. Hence Congress resolved to repudiate Deane's contracts, but to reimburse the French officers for their expenses incurred as well as their return journey. Most of the officers who had come with Lafayette and de Kalb accepted these conditions and returned to France. An exception was made in the case of Lafayette, who was commissioned Major General. De Kalb had at first been denied a commission, but on September 15, 1777, Congress voted that the newly created major-generalship should be awarded to de Kalb and that it should be dated the same day as Lafayette's. This was done, of course, because a man of de Kalb's long military experience could not be asked to serve under a lad of nineteen who had no battle experience whatever. While there were various factors that caused Congress to change its mind relative to de Kalb, the above letter which Dr. Phyle gave to Robert Morris and he to John Hancock, no doubt was of great influence.

Friedrich Kapp remarks that in all of de Kalb's writings he had not come across a single line in German. Our letter provides us with a specimen of his use of his mother tongue. It gives a stilted impression as might be expected since he had spent his adult years in French environment. He had married a Frenchwoman and French was spoken in his home. His correspondence with his fellow officers in German regiments was carried on in French, as was also his exchange of letters with the Baron von Steuben while both were in this country. The German he had spoken in previous decades was largely confined to that of the military command.

Knowledge of languages was a very important asset to de Kalb in his career, but due to the lack of information concerning his early years we do not know where and how he acquired his French and English; his French is excellent, while his English is fluent but at times not quite idiomatic as shown in our letter by the "to entertain myself with so dear a friend" (derived from "s'entretenir" or "sich unterhalten"). Because of his knowledge of German, Prime Minister Choiseul selected him in 1768 to investigate conditions in America; under the guise of a German colonel he could work more effectively than as an officer of the hated French Army. His knowledge of English enabled him to introduce Lafayette to Silas Deane and to deal with Congress as the only one of the French officers who spoke English. De Kalb's linguistic ability was of course a factor in this appointment as major general in the Army of the United States.

It is even likely that de Kalb had studied Latin as is shown by a passage in a letter to his wife of July 18, 1779, written in a happy mood after the taking of Stony Point on the Hudson:

The staff officers of my division were my guests. We were all very hungry and did full justice to the mutton and the beef which constituted the repast; large round crackers served as plates, in the absence of all crockery. The scene forcibly reminded me of the conquest of Italy by Aeneas and of the words of Ascanius when they had

reached the future site of Rome. There too hunger compelled them to devour the cakes upon which their food had been set before them, and recalled the oracle of the harpies that they would not reach the end of their wanderings and toils, nor call Italy theirs, until they should have eaten their plates with their meals. I have unfortunately no Ascanius with me, but I desire most ardently that my fate may be decided as was that of Aeneas, that the independence of America, like the conquest of Italy may now be realized, and that after we too have eaten our own plates, the close of our warfare and our toils may be likewise approaching.

Of course, de Kalb could have made this truly beautiful poetic allusion on the basis of a translation of Vergil, but since he was throughout his life working hard to improve himself, it seems likely that he, lacking formal schooling, had studied diligently to acquire the fundamentals of a gentleman's education. It may be interesting to quote here in Dryden's translation the charming scene in which Ascanius, Aeneas' young son, recognizes the harmless fulfillment of the oracle that had so ominously hung over the heads of the daring band of Trojans:

Beneath a shady tree, the hero spread
His table on the turf, with cakes of bread;
And with his chiefs, on forest fruits he fed.
They sat (and not without the god's command)
Their homely fare despatched; the hungry band
Invade their trenchers next, and soon devour,
To mend the scanty meal, their cakes of flour.
Ascanius this observed, and smiling said:
" See, we devour the plates on which we fed."

Though de Kalb has been justly described as Gallicised, he did retain an interest in his German background and heritage. He remained in touch with his family in rural Bavaria, even though separated by time, space and social position. There is a letter in which Madame de Kalb thanks "mon très cher frère" for his sympathetic letter on the occasion of de Kalb's death. He sent his two sons to a military school in Colmar which had been established in 1773 by the German poet Gottfried Konrad Pfeffel. In early manhood Pfeffel was stricken by blindness, but despite this handicap he made a success of his school and also attained great popularity as the author of poems extolling civic and military virtues. One that is included in many schoolbooks is *Die Tabakspfeife*, the tale of a crippled veteran who though poor placed loyalty above money.

When Congress had refused commissions to the French officers with the exception of Lafayette, de Kalb set out with a group to return to France. The long voyage across the Atlantic, the march on foot from Charleston to Philadelphia, and numerous other hardships they had undergone had led only to bitter disappointment, depriving him of all chance to obtain the sought-for glory. Despite what must have been a very depressed mood, de Kalb decided to pay a visit to the Moravian settlement in Bethlehem to learn about this institution of German pietists, even though it meant a long detour. In a letter to his wife he gave a detailed description of the Moravian brethren.

It was here at Bethlehem that a messenger from Congress overtook him with the news that Congress had decided, after all, to make him commander of a division. Thus the young United States gained a valiant, experienced general who sealed his devotion to our cause by a heroic death on the battle field at Camden. Hence, on August 16, 1780, was fulfilled the hope de Kalb expressed in his letter, that he might devote the rest of his remaining days in the service of our liberty.