

BALTIMORE 1861: WE WANT RAPP

A Letter, Translated and Edited by ALICE H. FINCKH

On June 30, 1861 Wilhelm Rapp, erstwhile editor of the Baltimore *Wecker*,¹ wrote a letter to his father in Germany describing the bloody riots which took place on April 19 and 20 in Baltimore. The offices of the *Wecker* on Frederick Street and Rapp himself were among the chief targets of the mob. As Dieter Cunz points out in *The Maryland Germans*, accounts of the damage done have differed considerably² and Rapp's letter, written nine weeks after the events, is an important first-hand account which sheds light on several aspects of them. The German original of the letter is in the possession of Mr. William R. Kemper of Chicago, a grandson of Wilhelm Rapp. Part of it was translated and published in *The Forty-eighters*, edited by A. E. Zucker,³ but its importance in the annals of those times merits a fuller publication of it in these pages. The letter begins with a description of Rapp's new life in Chicago as an editor on the *Illinois Staatszeitung* and a brief discussion of political opinions of the day. It continues:

"And now a few words about my experiences in Baltimore, some of which have already become known in Germany. From October 1857 until the time of the secession riots in April 1861 I lived in this city whose infamous reputation is the result of the

murderous bands which were allowed to rise to political power. During all this time I was the sole editor of the *Wecker* whose policy I maintained from the first day to the last in line with the principles of the Republican party. From the very beginning my position was difficult: the publisher of the paper, a man named Schnauffer,⁴ is an ignorant, stupid, timid person and, contrary to the prevailing custom in American journalism, (of which he understands nothing whatever) he constantly tried to interfere with me because he did not like the boldly free tone of the paper. He always had to give in to me, and the *Wecker* remained Republican because the readers always took my side when our quarrels became public. Still it was bitter for me constantly to have to fight battles behind the scenes. Added to all this was the fact that although the paper appeared daily I had absolutely no help whatever either with the editorials or in arrang-

¹ Wilhelm Rapp (1828-1907) had been a student of theology at Tübingen when the revolutions of 1848 broke out and he joined the Tübingen volunteers. He served a year's jail sentence and came to America in 1852 after a short stay in Switzerland. He edited the *Turnzeitung* 1855-1856, and the *Wecker* 1857-1861 and 1866-1872. [See Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), p. 274; and Dieter Cunz, *The Maryland Germans*, p. 273.]

² Page 306.

³ Pages 102-104.

⁴ Wilhelm Schnauffer was the brother of the brilliant founder of the *Wecker*, Carl Heinrich Schnauffer. After the latter's death in 1854, when the paper had been in existence only three years, it was taken over by his widow for a time and then by his brother. Other persons do not deal so harshly with Wilhelm Schnauffer as does Rapp in this letter.

ing the news items. I even had to translate the telegrams which arrived till all hours of the night, and therefore I was very much overworked. In spite of these difficulties I stuck it out in Baltimore because I was rather proud (and rightly so) to be the outpost of the freedom party in the slave state of Maryland, "a forlorn post in the war for freedom." At first, I must say, the slaveholders' party, the so-called Democratic party, left me alone because at that time it was still dominated in Baltimore by the powerful Know-Nothing-Party. When the main political battles came, however, I began to have trouble, especially last fall during the big presidential campaign when my life was really in danger a number of times. While the other German paper in Baltimore, the *Correspondent* vacillated between Breckenridge and Douglas, and the Anglo-American press was divided between Breckenridge and Bell, I held out fiercely day after day for Lincoln. Supported by courageous German and American friends I arranged public meetings in favor of the Republican presidential candidate. Two of these meetings were broken up by raging mobs of Democrats. During one meeting held in the open air in Richmond Market the howling mob bombarded us with bricks, rotten eggs and other Democratic missiles, and fired pistols at me and at several Germans and Americans who stood on the platform with me. None of us was seriously hurt, but my neck and chest were dripping with egg yolks (I looked like a canary bird) when I returned to my office to write a nice article thanking the Democratic party for awarding me its own typical medals of honor at Richmond Market. Another time, a mob of several thousand bullies surrounded our meeting place (the Front Street Theater) and hurled bricks and acid at us. They wanted to hang me when I went home but a police guard with drawn revolvers protected me from the threatening crowd.

Better times came for me when Lincoln won the election on November 6 last year and in spite of the shameless terrorism of the slaveholders and their minions an unexpectedly large number of votes was cast in Maryland for him. Since I had been one of the pre-election leaders of the victorious party my favor was sought even by some of the people who had previously hounded me. But things got so much the worse from February 1861 on, for even in Baltimore the terrible Southern conspiracy gained more and more and its leaders who had always considered me obnoxious now placed me at the head of their black list. During March they contented themselves with making all sorts of threats, hoping to frighten me enough so that I would leave the city. Then after the bombardment of Fort Sumter when the Southerners became increasingly arrogant my life was no longer safe in Baltimore. I was insulted on the street in broad daylight and received many threats of murder. The Friends of the Union began to lose courage and one after another of my most trustworthy supporters left town. Every attempt to organize the patriots for armed resistance against the ruthless conspirators failed.

The Union government at that time had no troops. The police—who never had liked the Republicans—tended to side entirely with the traitors, and I was advised to hide or to leave the city. However, I did not leave my post; I stood firm day after day and fought calmly against the conspiracy. Then the bloody secession riots of April 19 and 20 broke out; it was at noon on April 20 that I was visited at my home by several upright men who begged me to withdraw to a hiding place since the drunken mob which was roaming the streets was shouting my name and preparing to march to the office of the *Wecker* in order to kill me. After I had eaten my lunch I went calmly to the offices of the *Wecker* in order to organize armed resistance against the

rioters if possible. But except for Mrs. Schnauffer, the wife of the publisher,⁵ all the others had lost courage. Only she and I and one lone, breathless party member who had sought refuge with us, were in the office when suddenly the whole street was filled with drunken ruffians, some of them armed, who advanced against the door and shouted, "We want Rapp." I was still on the ground floor with only a door separating me from the raging mob.

The crowd kept shouting that it wanted only me and that it would not touch Mrs. Schnauffer (consideration for the female sex is inborn even in the most ordinary Americans). Stones pounded against the building and the beasts outside tried everything they could to storm it and drag me out until at last a squad of police appeared and draped a Secessionist rag out of one of the windows. They told the mob that I had escaped and after a while the crowd thinned out. However, a few of the worst of the rioters hung on the near-by street corners to watch for me. When twilight came I left the building, ducked right past one of the corners occupied by these lookouts and down the street to the Berliner *Weissbier* brewery belonging to Mr. Pringsheim. Like all the other buildings, this one had been locked in order to keep out those beasts in human form, but when I called I was let in without the fellows on the corner noticing anything in the dim twilight, and was shown to a hiding place. From there I could hear how a fresh mob went roaring past, firing pistols and shouting, "Where is Rapp? Hang him! Hang him!" They marched to the offices of the *Wecker*, smashed the lower door, and then decided to leave when the terrified neighbors assured them that I had long since fled miles away.

The next morning at eight o'clock I left my hiding place and went to the *Wecker* offices which looked completely deserted. A few drunken

Irishmen staggered around in front and told me pleasantly that they would find "that damned black Republican newspaper writer and hang him." Luckily they did not know me personally. Urged by my neighbors I returned to my hiding place by a slightly roundabout route and since the rabble continued its orgies in the streets all day I was not able to leave it. That evening I sent for a barber whom I knew to be friendly to me and he shaved off my beard. The next morning at three o'clock I left my hiding place dressed in black from head to foot, and clean shaven, and walked to the railroad station at a leisurely pace in order to escape to Washington on the early train. But the early train did not run; railroad service had been halted. I could not go back into the city for I would have been recognized in broad daylight in spite of my changed appearance, and the streets were now fully in the hands of the victorious Secessionist mobs. Therefore, I decided to make my escape on foot and I walked down the railroad tracks without hindrance because I was taken for a harmless clergyman, and had no further difficulties. I arrived in Washington that same day since I soon obtained a ride.

That is the story of my flight from Baltimore! Many of my friends there had left on the two preceding days, and most of them had gone to Philadelphia because Washington was still very much in danger of a surprise attack by the Secessionists. The rest of what happened in the Baltimore rebellion you know through the newspapers. In Washington I was, of course, very well received in government circles and the whole Northern press, including that of the Democrats, reported very flatteringly and favorably on my work and ordeal in Baltimore, as it had already done in connection with the Lincoln campaign. Postmaster General [Montgomery] Blair offered me a juicy plum in the

⁵ This may have been Mrs. Carl Heinrich Schnauffer, the wife of the founder of the paper. (See Cunz, *op. cit.*, p. 306.)

customs service or the post office in either Washington or Baltimore—whichever I wished—but I decided to accept an offer of a position as an editor of the *Illinois Staatszeitung* which the publishers, honest Messrs. Hiffgen and [Georg] Schneider, had made.

Although this position pays much better and is much more pleasant than working on the *Wecker*, I had refused the first offer some time ago because I felt that I owed the sacrifice to my party in Baltimore. Before I moved here to Chicago I visited Baltimore again; indeed, three days later I was back there when the city was finally and permanently occupied by Union troops. Some of the people who had thirsted for my blood a few days before now appeared to be extremely friendly as General Scott drew his strategic circles closer and closer around the traitor city. I did

not feel like accepting again the position of editor of the *Wecker* no matter how sweetly Schnauffer offered it to me since I could not have stood being overworked any longer. In fact, as my doctor said, with the lack of exercise and the resultant increase in my weight I should certainly have suffered a stroke within a few years. A great many people suggested that I start my own paper in Baltimore, but I did not want to do this since I did not wish to compete with Schnauffer, and anyway, in these times of uncertain business outlook I much prefer the position of a well paid editor such as I now have to that of a business man, which is what a newspaper publisher is and should be...."

The letter concludes with some personal remarks regarding relatives and former acquaintances of his father who had visited Rapp in Chicago.