

The Turnvereine and the Experience of German Immigrants in America

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The failure of the Revolution of 1848 in Germany led to a strong increase of German immigrants in the USA in the middle of the 19th century. These immigrants were convinced that they could return to a free and democratic Germany very soon. Up from 1848 they founded the first Turnvereine in America, organized after a German pattern. Life in American Turnvereine was as well inspired by democratic ideas as hitherto in Germany. Whereas in Germany after the failure of the 48th Revolution, Turnvereine were either forbidden as political societies or under strict surveillance by the police, in America, Turnvereine of German immigrants could follow their own path and their own political and social aims, although their radical principles were opposed by native Americans, especially by the Know-Nothing-Movement. Very often Turnvereine became centers of political, cultural, and social life in those towns which had a German-speaking majority. At this time the political slogan of the Turnvereine was: free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men. Their principles were anticlerical and against nativism and slavery.

The participation of the Turners in the Civil War and the high contribution to the Union brought extraordinary respect to the German-Americans, who in the years before were severely criticized because of radicalism, isolation, and presumption. The North American Turner-Association was founded in 1864. The new association had a steadily growing membership till the end of the century. The Turners turned more and more from political to educational activities, trying to bring physical education into American Schools. In this process, the Normal College of the American Gymnastic Union (since 1907 in Indianapolis) played an important role.

Although American Turners declared in 1872 that they had nothing in common with their old fatherland except gymnastics, there was a good relationship between the Turners in Germany and the Turners in the USA, This is mirrored in the *Deutsche Turnzeitung*, the official organ of the *Deutsche Turnerschaft*. Delegations and active Turners were mutually invited and participated in German and American Turner festivals. World War I brought a deep crisis. Although the Americans of German descent sympathized with Germany, they remained loyal to America. Up from this time, especially after World War II there were no political activities in the Turnvereine. Main efforts were made in gymnastics and plays and in cultivating (old) German style of life (social get together).