

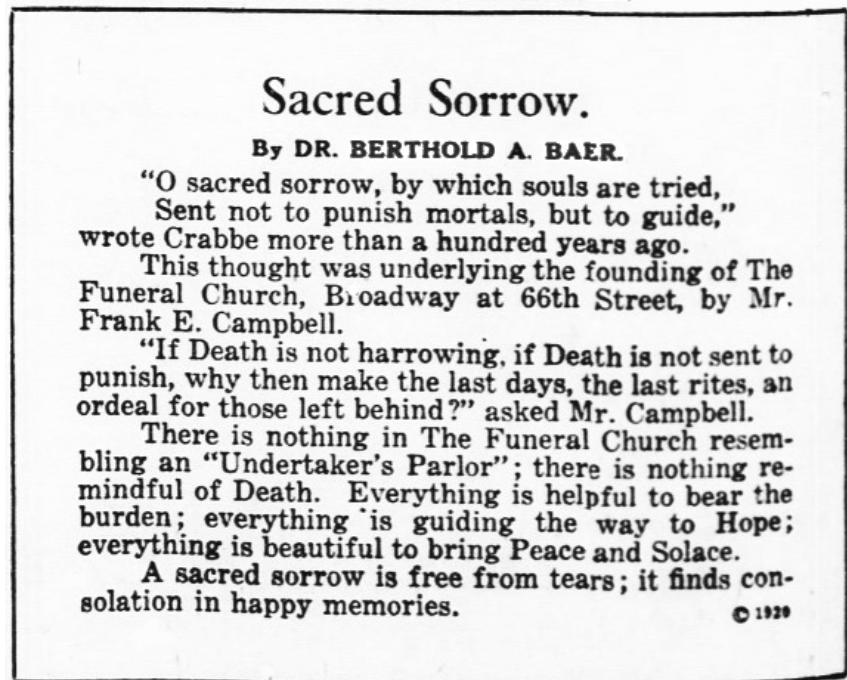
“I Write About the Beauty of Death So You May Enjoy More Beauty in Life”: Dr. Berthold A. Baer, 1867–1924

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A recent box of donations from the German Society of Pennsylvania’s Joseph P. Horner Memorial Library contained their duplicate copy of *Wär nicht die Liebe* (Were It Not for Love), a book of poems written by Berthold A. Baer and published in both Berlin and Philadelphia by C. Sessler in 1905. Creating a catalog description for this item resulted in several intriguing research possibilities into the roles played by German-speaking immigrants in America’s history.

First a brief look at the publisher. Charles Sessler (1854–1935) was born in Galgocz, Austria (now Hlohovec, Slovakia). He came to the United States in 1880, settling in Philadelphia, where he became one of the world’s foremost dealers in rare books and manuscripts, specializing in the works of Charles Dickens. While Sessler printed many rare book lists, his name is associated with only a few monographic works, most in Hebrew, along with one Bible in German. Baer’s book appears to be somewhat of a rarity in itself.

All of Berthold Baer’s poems in this collection are in German, although his dedication to his wife is in English: “To my dear Leah.” Baer introduces his poems with a note that many of them were previously published in various magazines and journals, and a few of them have been set to music. His copyright statement indicates that “all rights, including those of musical composition, are expressly



New York Tribune May 5, 1920, p. 10

reserved. Inquiries in this regard should be directed to the author,” with his contact information given as Dr. Berthold A. Baer, 3042 Oxford Street, Philadelphia, PA., U. S. A.

The following page lists other works by Dr. Baer, with publication dates ranging from 1894 through 1905. These include several books of poetry, a play, humorous writings, and translations into German of two detective novels by Anna Katherine Green, one of the first writers of crime mysteries in America. Of the books of poetry, many are not to be found in any libraries in the United States, nor are they being offered for sale by used-book vendors.

In *Wär nicht die Liebe*, Baer arranges his poems into sections,

such as *Lieder des fahrenden Sängers* (songs of the traveling singer), *Spielmannsleben* (minstrel life), *Deutschland’s Frauen* (Germany’s women), *Dem Vaterland* (to the Fatherland), and *Vom sonnigen Westen Amerika’s* (from America’s sun-drenched west). It is in this section we find the poem, “Die letzte Karte” (the final card). This non-rhyming piece depicts, mainly in dialogue, a Wild West card game between Billy and Brigham, which ends when Brigham shoots the cheating Billy dead

Then—a flash!—a bang!
The player
moves his hand to his heart
and falls lifeless from his chair.

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This poem stands out among Baer's others in both its subject and style, and we find a note at the end that it was awarded a prize at the "Baltimorer Blumenspiele," which opens the door to even more research possibilities. cursory investigation reveals that the Baltimore *Blumenspiel* (flower game) was a competition specifically for German-American poets that took place on April 21, 1904.¹ C. O. Schoenrich writes about the event in a 1904 issue of *Pädagogische Monatshefte / Pedagogical Monthly*, noting that it was modeled after the *Blumenspiele* that took place in Cologne and was organized by the Baltimore German Club and engineers Fritz Mayer and Dr. Ernst Henrici (whom Wikipedia summarizes as "a German grammar school teacher, writer, colonial adventurer, and anti-Semitic politician").

Schoenrich points out that the Baltimore festival was not celebrated on the first Sunday in May, as is the Cologne *Blumenspiel*, in "tender consideration, so as not to disturb the saintly Puritans." Music and singing set a regal atmosphere in the German Club's ballroom, which was decorated in flowers and vines. Young girls scattered petals as the chosen Flower Queen, Mrs. G. W. Gail, and her ladies of honor made their grand entrance, followed by the seven judges. It would be interesting to learn more about all of the participants and the poets who were honored, though some of the names are already familiar to those who work in German-American studies, such as Konrad Nies and Edna Fern (Fernande Richter), both of St. Louis,

and Dr. Heinrich H. Fick of Cincinnati; but what of New York's Paul Brandner or Milwaukee's Hermann Scheuning, or Pastor Alfred W. Hildebrandt from Greenfield, Mass., who was "summoned five times before the throne of the Flower Queen?"

And then there is Fräulein Anita Schade of Washington, DC, who assisted in the presentation of prizes. The German Society of Pennsylvania owns her scrapbook covering the years 1891 to 1957; their finding aid describes Anita as "well known in the literary and musical circles of Washington." A teacher, amateur actress, poet, lecturer, composer, and writer, she was the daughter of German Forty-Eighter Louis Schade, who in 1878 bought the house in which President Abraham Lincoln died in 1865.

But to return to Dr. Berthold A. Baer: it is intriguing that his prize-winning poem features death, as this provides a segue into a bold development in his career. Born March 3, 1867 in Bruchsal, Baden, Berthold A. Baer was an ophthalmologist, writer, editor,² playwright, and translator; he also wrote a popular song, "Don't Say Good Bye" (1920).³ He may have come to America in 1895, and in 1897 he married Fransisca Leah, née Schwartz, in San Francisco.⁴ Baer next spent several years in Pennsylvania, and then moved to New York City, as he became known for his writings on the subject of death, specifically his advertising copy (all in English) for funeral home pioneer Frank E. Campbell.⁵ Before Campbell, funerals were usually held in the homes of the deceased; Campbell's funeral-parlor chapel approach was possibly the first to advertise such a business, which sought to offer "a service so sublimely

beautiful, in an atmosphere of such complete harmony, as to alleviate the sorrow of parting."

The currently digitized pages of historic American newspapers at *Chronicling America* (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>) yield just over 200 results in a search for "Berthold A. Baer"; about 100 of these are Baer's advertisements. While the majority of the ads are for Campbell's New York funeral chapel, Baer also wrote copy for similar businesses elsewhere in the nation. These ads, all attributed to Dr. Berthold A. Baer, are presented as stories of individuals facing the loss of a loved one, or as pensive thoughts on the brevity of life with an emphasis on the comforts to be offered by a good funeral parlor when the end inevitably comes. They usually exhort readers to call the Campbell Funeral Chapel when death intrudes, and have such titles as "Falling Twilight," "Whispering Flowers," "Idealizing Death," "Family Secrets," "Delicacy," "For Women Only," and "Silence." A few quotes give the flavor of Baer's writing:



"This photograph shows Dr. Berthold Baer just before the plane started for the lower bay with the urn containing Mrs. Brown's ashes in his arms." *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal*, July 10, 1920, p. 2

The Funeral Church is a milestone “at the end of the road.” It helps the grief-stricken to bid a smilin’ last farewell and to retain fond memories of a life well lived to the end of the road.

“He takes the sting from death,” said Mrs. H. in my hearing; “I came here in the depth of despair—I go away in the heaven of sorrow.”

We respect a woman after demise the same as in life, [and offer] women attendants [and embalmers] who gladly render any service that may be desired. . . . Could wives or mothers be in better hands?

May your earthly pilgrimage be full of happiness and contentment, and may . . . you [learn] the lesson of joy, so as to be ready for the lesson of grief when you are called home.

Other essays forgo the topic of death to discuss charitable outreach, such as a Mother’s Day event at the Funeral Chapel with “a program of Singing and Thanksgiving, and [. . .] a flower for every mother” or some words to honor the passing of Theodore Roosevelt. There was a Christmas Day event for children, where “over their cold fingers we pulled warm mittens; over frozen ears we pulled woolen caps. We did not give them a chance to say thanks; there were so many and we had to be quick. But, oh my, wasn’t it glorious!”

Dr. Baer’s essays on death were so popular that Campbell offered a book of them, “profusely illustrated with

pictures of the objects of art in the Funeral Church building, free for the asking.” In one advertisement, Baer printed excerpts from letters they had received:

“I have read with great interest your wonderful advertising, and I . . . never let pass a chance to read everything regarding your organization. I certainly feel that I must have a copy of Dr. Baer’s Essays and hope that you can send me one.”

“I never discard my paper until I have read [Dr. Baer’s] Essay of the day, which is always instructive and interesting.”

Campbell and Baer’s approach to publicity was recognized in the Nov. 27, 1920, issue of *Advertising & Selling*:

[With the] flowery essays by Dr. Berthold A. Baer, the Funeral Church has become one of the best-known institutions in New York. The number of daily visitors (many from out of town) and the quantities of mail received indicate the real effect of this small campaign.

And, as a true sign of popularity Baer’s writings attracted the attention of humorists, some of whom seemed slightly offended by his advertising approach to death. Examples include a reference to Baer as “the man who has weakened New York’s love of life by his lovely little blurbs”; chiding him for not being original in his writings about the Grim Reaper; satirical pieces such as “Selling Cheese on the Strength of the Hole: The Man

The Hole in the Cheese

By Punny D. F. Mitchel

WERE it not for the hole, the oil supply of the world would forever remain in the depth of the earth.

Were it not for the “Doughboys,” the World War would not yet be over and millions would still be fighting and crying for Liberty, Freedom and Right.

And were it not for the Doughnuts, what would have become of the “Doughboys”?

The world therefore owes a debt to that which made possible the Doughnut: “the hole,” for without hole there is no Doughnut.

The same relative position as the Hole in the Doughnut, only in a more important ratio, plays the Hole in the Swiss Cheese. The gastric gases, so important to the tender organ of the digestive system in a lady of refinement, find circulation in the holes of the cheese. The larger the hole, the more free the circulation, the purer the ozone, the sweeter the flavor.

Professor Dorbojinski, in his famous dissertation “Est, est,” has proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that the smallest hole in a Swiss cheese must measure one-sixth and two-thirds of an inch, while the extreme expansion should not be more than eight and one-third of the same inch.

We cater exclusively to the ladies of the upper classes.

Our price for Swiss cheese may be somewhat higher than that charged elsewhere. But, oh, the holes!

Bring your own tape measure, please.

CHARLES BENSON
The Society Grocer
439 St. Quentin Street


From “Selling Cheese on the Strength of the Hole,” satirizing Baer’s writings, *Advertising & Selling*, Nov. 20, 1920, p. 36

Who Made Famous the Hole in the Ground Turns His Attention to the Hole in the Sweitzer”; “In Case of Murder, Call . . .” or “Just Before Passing, Call . . .”; and proclaiming “If we should die tonight, and you should come to our cold corpse and say, ‘Are you going to let Dr. Baer’s boss do the job?’ we should arise in our large white cravat and say, ‘Well, if you are, please pay the Doc a 10% amusement tax.’” Dr. Baer is mentioned in a theatrical review of John Barrymore as Hamlet: “Our old friend Dr. Berthold Baer would have referred to [the ghost] unctuously as the demised . . .” and in such ditties as:

A tisket, a tasket,
Come help me pick my casket.
Let taste and art, when I depart
Encompass me. I ask it.⁶

Baer's ads made Campbell's end-of-life services so popular that his Chapel has been referred to as "the place New York City's elite are dying to get into." Despite all this, finding an image of Berthold Baer has proven difficult. One grainy image of the man comes from the July 10, 1920 issue of the *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal*, in an article about how,

[i]n accordance with a wish made in writing fourteen years ago, the ashes of Mrs. Sarah D. Brown, temperance advocate and writer of children's stories, who died in her New York home, were strewn from an airplane flying over the Statue of Liberty.

And so we come to Berthold A. Baer's own demise—he died on October 21, 1924, in Manhattan, from pneumonia. From what can be found, his death was not widely announced, and there were no long, stirring obituaries. An announcement of his passing in the Oct. 22, 1924 issue of *Advertising and Selling Fortnightly* points out that "his advertising of the Campbell Funeral Church a few years ago created wide and controversial comment," while a much later article on Campbell has these more poignant lines: "Dr. Berthold Baer, now gone, penned flowery odes to 'the last enemy.' He poetized the vast beauty of transition and argued against tears" [*Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1932]. Baer is buried in Congregation B'nai Jeshurun Cemetery, Elizabeth, New Jersey. 

NOTES

¹ It appears there was only one *Baltimorer Blumenspiel*.

² Of *Die Glocke*, edited by Baer and published in Pittsburgh, not much has yet been discovered.

³ He also holds patents for several inventions, such as a sound recording and reproducing machine, a water-cooler, a signaling device, and the means for sealing burial caskets.

⁴ Their daughter Francisca was born in 1898; she later married Charles J. Basch, Jr., of Newark, New Jersey.

⁵ Frank E. Campbell married Amelia Klutz, whose father was German-born August Klutz.

⁶ Also this barbed post-WWI remark from Philadelphia's *Evening Public Ledger*, December 10, 1919, p. 10: "On learning that the Doc is a German we understand more clearly his enthusiasm for funerals. For certainly Germany has been the cause of more of them in the last few years than any nation ever was before."

The Newsletter of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies is published three times a year at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Submissions are invited and should be sent to:

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