

KONRAD NIES, GERMAN-AMERICAN LITERARY KNIGHT

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With the advent of World War I German-American institutions were dealt a deadly blow from which they have never recovered. Today the paucity of journalistic and literary publications in the German language in America hardly echoes the enormous amount of German-American writing which took place prior to the death of the author known as "der deutschamerikanische Klassiker": Konrad Nies (pseud. Konrad von Alzey). One of German-America's most prolific writers, Nies turned to spiritualism during the last few years of his life "heartbroken over the catastrophe which involved the land of his birth and the land of his adoption."¹ On the grounds of his "Waldnest," overlooking San Francisco Bay Nies erected a monument to the muses which he illuminated with multi-colored lights. Here, in the summer house which his friends had purchased for him in 1914, Nies worked vigorously, completing his last volume of poetry which, long delayed on account of the war, reached this country from Germany shortly after the poet's demise. How tragic that he should suffer further from his arrest by federal officers who claimed he had constructed his illuminated monument for the purpose of signaling German U-boats in the San Francisco harbor.² But then this was just one of the many misfortunes suffered by this German-American literary knight throughout his thirty-eight years in his adopted homeland. Beset by money-problems during most of those years, Nies moved from place to place, like a medieval troubadour seeking to earn his way through creativity in the field of literature. Had he been born perhaps a half century earlier, he might have enjoyed the success he so earnestly desired. German-American literature achieved its most favorable receptance during the period from 1830-1880 after which it waned sharply until it succumbed almost completely with the outbreak of the "war to end all wars." Noble attempts to revive it have since failed, and today only the Exil-Literatur of the post 1933 period receives the favorable attention of most noted scholars.

As a teacher Nies had little patience with his students, preferring instead to write and edit. Of the paucity of major German-American writers included in the literary histories of Spiller, Nadler, Engel, Bartels, Klein, Kindermann, and others, Nies is consistently recognized as the most versatile. During his thirty-eight years of literary activity in America he published hundreds of poems, wrote essays, monographs, reviews, Novellen, sketches, and plays. He founded at least one literary society,³ took part in the Baltimorer Blumenspiel of 1904 (at which he won first prize),⁴ contributed to German and German-American anthologies, newspapers and periodicals,⁵ gave lectures on literature, acted on the German and German-American stage, and founded the famous periodical, *Deutsch-Amerikanische Dichtung* which he edited from April 1888 to its demise in April 1890.

Ever since early childhood, Konrad Nies was interested in literature and the theatre. He was born in Alzey in Rheinhessen on October 10, 1861 where he later attended the Realschule. In Worms he continued his education at the Gymnasium, in Leipzig at the Theaterschule. On February 26, 1880 he gave recitations from Goethe's *Faust* and Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*; on May 22 and June 3, 1881 he appeared with the actor, H. Curschmann (Brüning) in several farces and comedies on the German stage. After a short stay in Dresden he began his formal acting career. In 1882 he played Hamlet on the stage in Darmstadt and undertook a series of engage-

ments in Chemnitz, Speyer, Dortmund, Aachen, Kaiserslautern and Mühlhausen i. Elsass. On December 17, 1882 Nies directed and acted in the performance of his monodrama, *Konradin von Hohenstaufen*. Perhaps unhappy with the rather mediocre response to his acting, Nies decided to give his talents a try on the German stage in America. On August 28, 1883 he arrived in Hoboken, then proceeded to Columbus and Cincinnati where he gave his second performance of *Konradin von Hohenstaufen*. From the Queen City he travelled in 1884 to Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Omaha where he appeared on the German-American stage. Interrupting his acting career to study English and German at Duane Academy, a branch of Denison University in Ohio, Nies then entered the employ of the Freidenker Publishing Co. in Milwaukee where in 1886 he met with Otto Soubron to discuss the publication of a monthly periodical which would serve to bring attention to German-American literary endeavor. Noting that in the past the term *German-American literature* had been applied to all German writings written by authors residing in America regardless of the content of their works, Nies sought to publish prosaic and poetic contributions including translations of English-language works which dealt primarily with the American experience. In doing so he hoped to attract the support of American as well as German-American writers.⁶

Nies proceeded to Omaha and in 1887 his Novelle, *Die Volkersfiedel* appeared in print. That same year he consulted several German-American writers including H. C. Bechtold, Max Hempel, E. A. Zündt, Karl Knortz, and Theodor Kirchhoff, who pledged to support his literary monthly. Although Nies had expected support from German-American organizations such as the Turners and especially from the great many teachers of German around the country, he found little interest on their part. With a limited number of subscribers and advertisers to finance his venture, he set up an office at 843 South Seventeenth Street in Omaha where he designed and edited in collaboration with Hermann Rosenthal in New York the first number of *Deutsch-Amerikanische Dichtung* which appeared in April 1888. Rosenthal joined him as co-editor of the monthly when the first number of the second volume appeared in April 1889. The cover to the first issue carried Nies' editorial note:

Wenn wir es wagen, in unserer vom krassen Materialismus beherrschten Zeit und einem der Poesie so ungünstigen Lande wie Amerika eine der Dichtkunst gewidmete Zeitschrift herauszugeben, so geschieht dies zunächst mit dem Wunsche, in unserem Blatte der seither heimathlos herumirrenden deutsch-amerikanischen Dichtkunst endlich einmal ein festes Heim und den deutsch-amerikanischen Poeten ein Organ zu schaffen, das dazu dienen soll, die sich in ihrer Vereinzelung zersplitternden literarischen Kräfte zu sammeln und durch gegenseitige Anregung und fachmännische Kritik fördernd auf das wahre Talent zu wirken, den anmassenden Dilettantismus aber, wie er sich häufig in unserer Tagespresse breit macht und die deutsch-amerikanische Poesie der Gefahr der Verflachung aussetzt, zu bekämpfen.

Late in 1888 Nies moved to Newark, Ohio where he continued to publish his monthly while teaching German at the local high school. Despite a most promising response from some 300 readers, the magazine lasted only two years and brought Nies near to financial ruin. Of the over 100 contributors to Nies' periodical, only a few were able to transcend the epigonistic crutch upon which most of them leaned.⁷ Apart from the disconcerting lack of interest in the arts in America during the period of Nies' activity, another barrier stood against this pioneer publication. Whereas Nies stubbornly refused to consider controversial works on social, religious,

and political questions, most of the contemporary German-American periodicals did not.⁸ Rosenthal, who marketed the *D-AD* in New York, apparently realized that the periodical would have to appeal more to the general German-American reading public and their social organizations rather than to only a select group of poets and poetasters in order to increase the income from subscriptions.⁹ Unlike the popular *Kalender* and *Jahrbücher*, Nies' publication was almost solely devoted to creative literature, essays, book reviews, and cultural notes. Early in 1897 Rudolf Cronau corresponded with Nies concerning the establishing of a successor to *D-AD*, but later that year abandoned the idea.

Although disappointed at the failure of *D-AD*, Nies pursued his goal to promote interest in German-American literary endeavor by writing a repertoire of lectures, six of which he presented in St. Louis in 1889: "Deutsche Dichter von heute," "Deutsch-amerikanische Dichtung," "Aus dem Buche der Poesie," "Das Glück im Lichte der Dichtung," "Amerikas deutsche Dichter," and "Unsere Zeit im Spiegel der Dichtung" which was later published in the *Rheinische Volksblätter* (March 5, 1895). In 1890 he travelled extensively, delivering thirty-six lectures in the East, New England, Colorado, Alabama, Texas, and the Middle West. His unpublished manuscript, "Sommerstage in San Antonio, Texas" was probably composed during his stay in Texas. Exhausted from his teaching, lecture trips, and writing, and still suffering asthmatic attacks, Nies sought a drier climate with a trip to California early in 1893, then a stay in the Catskills before moving with his family to Palenville, New York. In 1894 the family again moved—this time to St. Louis where Nies first taught at the "Toensfeldt Institut," then at the "Viktoria-Institut," a private school for girls which he and his wife directed. While in St. Louis he contributed poems and weekly articles to the *Westliche Post*.

Despite his ailing health Nies continued to teach and write. In 1891, one year before he resigned from his teaching post in Newark, Ohio, he published his own volume of poems (*Funken*) with a financial assist from Rosenthal in New York. The book reached a second edition in 1901.

In 1898 C. Witter in St. Louis published Nies' *Deutsche Gaben. Ein Festspiel zum Deutschen Tag*, and in 1900 the second edition of *Deutsche Gaben* as well as the author's *Rosen im Schnee. Ein deutsch-amerikanisches Weihnachtsspiel in vier Bildern*. These works were followed by *Im Zeichen der Freiheit* (1902) and *Die herrlichen Drei. Festspiel* (Nordamerikanischer Turnerbund: Indianapolis, 1904) which reached a second edition in 1905. In the same year Nies published his second major collection of poems, *Aus westlichen Weiten* (Grossenheim, Leipzig, New York) and departed for a lecture tour in Germany. While abroad in 1906 he met Olga Khripunowa, a Russian noblewoman with whom he travelled to Italy, Egypt, Palestine, and Greece. This brief affaire de coeur eventually led to the author's estrangement from his wife.

Although he earned a considerable amount of money during his lecture tour in Germany, Nies returned to America almost penniless. His wife's excessive demands as terms of their divorce and Nies' extravagant spending brought the author again to the brink of bankruptcy. Shortly after his return to America in 1907 he completed a Novelle, *Im Schatten der Höhe* and in the same year (1908) he departed for Denver where he edited the *Denver Demokrat* and later the *Colorado Herold*.¹⁰ But his strong desire to promote the appreciation of German literature in America did not cease, and so with his manager, Adolf Leon, he made a "Konrad Nies Tournee 1913-1914," presenting the following lectures in various German-American centers: "Ein Abend bei deutschen Dichtern," "Aus dem Buch der Poesie," "Deutsche Dichter

in Amerika," "Das Glück im Lichte der Dichtung," "Die Mission der Poesie," "Das Freiheitsjahr und die Freiheitsdichter Deutschlands 1815," "Einkehr bei Friedrich Schiller," "Auf geweihten Staetten," and "Kalifornien und seine Schönheiten." The following year (1915) his "Stimmen der Höhe" appeared in the *New York Staatszeitung* which Nies considered his best poem. On January 23, 1916 he published his first article in the *Colorado Herold* and continued his agitation against the war with Germany which he had begun with his first war poem, "Ein Brudergruss," written in August of 1914. Although this political agitation cost him his position as editor of *The Colorado Herold*, Nies continued to lament the war, writing his last war-poem in May, 1920. In "Zum Rettungswerk" he calls for assistance to his defeated homeland. Characteristic of his later poetry is a strong note of pessimism and fear of growing old. Death claimed this literary knight of German-America on August 10, 1921 in San Francisco's German Hospital. In accordance with his last wishes, he was cremated. Shortly after his demise his wife received a shipment from W. Haertel in Leipzig of her husband's last volume of poetry, *Welt und Wildnis. Gedichte aus vier Erdteilen* in which are recorded the many sufferings and experiences of a man whose many talents and travels were directed toward literature as an art. The life of Konrad Nies mirrors the tragedy of the German-American who so desperately sought to retain his cultural heritage in a foreign environment. His works are a tribute to his dedication and a monument to a bygone era when German-America was an integral part of the American scene.

The following is a previously unpublished sonnet taken from Nies' *Nachlass*. The sonnet was one of Nies' favorite forms of poetic expression.

BEIM MAIWEIN

Frau Anna Levi¹¹ zur freundl. Erinnerung an den huebschen Abend des 2. Mai 1895.

Waldmeisterduft weht aus krystallner Schale,
 Drin übermüth'ge Rheinweingeister ringen,
 Er will vom jungen Wald die Botschaft bringen,
 Dass uns die Welt im Maienglanz erstrahle.

In neuen Träumen blüht mit einem Male
 Die Stunde auf. Der Frohlust Knospen springen.
 Ein Koboldchen mit bunten Falterschwingen
 Trinkt, neckisch uns zum Elfenbachanale.

Die Gläser klingen. Maienzauber spinnen.
 Waldmeisters Gruss hat es uns angethan;
 Des Alltags kleine Sorgen, sie zerrinnen.

Weit schwillt die Brust in junger Blüten Bann
 Und will sich kühn ein kurzes Glück gewinnen
 Voll Elfenspuk und tollem Märchenwahn.

FOOTNOTES

1. Georg Sylvester Viereck, "Konrad Nies, a Knight of the Blue Flower," *The American Monthly*, XIII, 7 (Sept., 1921), 201. Viereck, Friedrich Michel, E. A. Baruch, Hermann Alexander, Emil Praetorius and other popular German-American writers stood by Nies during those trying last years of his life. Nies' long correspondence with Friedrich Karl Castelhun and Theodor Kirchhoff, if uncovered and studied, would provide further insight into the nature and extent of German-American creative literature.

2. See C. R. Walther-Thomas' doctoral dissertation, "Konrad Nies, ein deutscher Dichter in Amerika" (Univ. Penn., 1933). Cf. also Ernst Rose, "German-American Literature" in *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2nd ed. (N.Y., 1970); *Dictionary of American Biography*; "Ein deutsch-amerikanischer Dichter," *Der Türmer*, XXIV (1921); Fritz Erckmann, "Konrad Nies, ein vergessener Alzeyer Dichter," *Sonderdruck der Rheinhessischen Volksblätter* (Alzey, Jan. 18, 1933).

3. Nies invited his supporters to join a society which he founded as "Der Verein für deutsche Literatur und Kunst in Amerika." The first membership list of the society appeared in the last issue of the periodical. Nies is listed as the poetry editor, Rosenthal as the prose editor, Georg J. Edelheim as the finance secretary and editor of the "Vereinsbeiträge"-section. Listed as members are several prominent German-American authors, including Hermann Alexander, Hugo Andriessen, Hermann Behr, Pedro Ilgen, Georg Juraschek, Marie Raible, Hugo Scheller, Moritz Wiener, and others.

4. His poem, "Die Rache der Wälder" received first prize.

5. Nies contributed to *Die New York Staatszeitung*, *Deutsch-amerikanische Dichtung*, *Der deutsche Vorkämpfer*, *Rheinische Volksblätter*, *Puck*, *Frank Leslie's Rundschau*, *Die Westliche Post*, *Belletristisches Journal*, *Colorado Herald*, *Der Freidenker*, *Hausbuch*, *ein Halbmonatschrift für deutsche Dichtung*, and other periodicals. Sixteen of his poems appeared in the latter publication. Several more appear in the following anthologies: G. A. Zimmermann, *Deutsch in Amerika* (Chicago, 1892; 1894); *Das Baltimorer Blumenspiel* (Baltimore, 1904); G. A. Neeff, *Vom Lande des Sternenbanners* (Ellenville, N.Y., 1905); Max Heinrici, *Das Buch der Deutschen in Amerika* (Phila., 1909); Irving T. Sanders, *Aus ruhmreicher Zeit, deutsch-amerikanische Dichtungen aus dem ersten Jahre des Weltkrieges* (N.Y., 1915); *Anthologie deutsch-amerikanischer Dichtung* (N.Y., 1925-26); Robert E. Ward, *Deutsche Lyrik aus Amerika. Eine Auswahl* (N.Y., 1969).

6. Cf. "Rückblicke und Ausblicke," *D-AD*, XI-XII (1888), 114. Max Nordau wrote to Nies that the main reason German-American writers were not yet appreciated in Europe was that they had no central literary organ in which they might publish their works. Nordau notes that German-American literature would have difficulty in gaining an American reading public because of the anti-cultural trend in "the land of the almighty dollar." See *D-AD*, I, 3-4 (1888), 35.

7. Of the 241 original poems by 94 poets published in *D-AD*, twenty-two were composed by Nies. Included in the various issues are book reviews, essays, sketches, cultural notes, German translations of English and foreign poems, biographical articles, short stories, Novellen, sayings, and aphorisms.

8. Nies' disagreement with Robert Reitzel's comments on the role of contemporary literature led to a short controversy between the two writers which ended in the ninth number with Nies calling the latter a genuine poet and fanatic nihilist. His reply addressed to F. K. in Detroit is strongly worded: "Man kennt R. R. überall zur Genüge und weiss, dass er nur zu bereit ist, selbst mit der schmutzigen Waffe der Gemeinheit gegen denjenigen zu kämpfen, der das Wohlgefallen an den unsauberen Schimpfereien und anarchistischen Phantastereien, die immer mehr und mehr das einzige Element bilden, in dem sich R. R. noch wohl zu fühlen scheint, nicht theilt. . . Wie ewig schade, bei solchen Geistesgaben und solcher Gemüthsfülle: —solche charakterlose Zaunenhaftigkeit!" Reitzel was the editor of *Der arme Teufel*.

9. In a letter to Cronau in March, 1897, Nies wrote:

"Als Redakteur der 'D-AD' hatte ich vielen moralischen Erfolg, und selbst drüben hat mir die Kritik das beste Zeugnis ausgestellt. Das Blatt würde wohl heute noch bestehen, hätte man es in Neu York nicht in den Dienst der flachen Vereinsmeierei stellen wollen. Diesem Vorhaben widersetzte ich mich aufs Entschiedenste und sah schliesslich lieber, dass das Blatt einging."

10. Nies has been credited with editing *Der Flaneur* in Omaha in 1885-1886, but this is disputed. See Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, eds., *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals 1732-1955* (Heidelberg, 1961).

11. The Levi family owned a haberdashery and were neighbors of the Nies family in Alzey. Young Nies was often given ribbons and bright colored materials from their stock which he used when he and other children from the neighborhood played "Theater" in a barn nearby. I am indebted to Mrs. Marie von Aiken of Vineland, N.J. who kindly sent me the original copy of this poem in Nies' own handwriting.