



MAX KADE INSTITUTE

FRIENDS NEWSLETTER

Volume 33 No 3 • Summer 2024

Why I Went to Kansas: A German Immigrant Grandmother's Journey from Suburban Chicago to a Remote Cattle Farm

Antje Petty



The train station at Dunlap, Kansas, undated photograph

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Among the hundreds of letters, diary entries, memoirs, and other ego-documents in the Max Kade Institute Library, one item stands out: a hand-bound book of sixty letters written from January 1889 to October 1890 between Emil C. Gaebler (1828–1898) in Milwaukee, and Catharina (Ruetz) Jussen (1811–1891) in Clay Center, Kansas. The word “Soprano” is handwritten on the cover. The final pages include a newspaper clipping announcing the marriage of Emil and Catharina

on January 5, 1891, a poem “Spätherbstblüthe” (late autumn blossom) written by Emil to his bride, and a letter of condolence from Carl Schurz¹, a nephew of Catharina by her first marriage, written to Emil after Catharina’s death only four months after their wedding.

The “Soprano” collection is unique as it includes both sides of a correspondence. The writers, both widowed, knew each other when they lived with their families in Watertown, Wisconsin, in the 1850s–60s,

but had lost touch. Twenty years later, they sent updates on their lives and communities, providing context for today's readers that is frequently lacking in personal letters. The book now invites us to follow the love story of an elderly couple, who against many odds decided to enter a second marriage in their "late autumn."

There are many topics of interest in these letters. This article will highlight only one passage: Catharina's description of her move to Kansas in October 1881 and the year she spent on a remote cattle farm there.

Catharina and Emil both came from upper middle-class families in Germany that valued education and the arts. Emil grew up in Eisenberg, Thuringia, studied music and worked as a music teacher. Frustrated with the inability to make a living in his profession in Germany, he emigrated to the United States in 1848 and eventually settled in Watertown, a

small city that drew many progressive and highly educated German immigrants at the time. Emil became a cornerstone of the music scene in his new home state. He founded choirs and orchestras, taught voice and piano, directed classical music performances, and led some of the great festivals of the German singing societies. He owned a music store and built instruments himself, such as the then popular melodeons. His daughter Sophie, who features prominently in the "Soprano" correspondence, was a world-famous pianist who had studied under Franz Liszt.

Growing up in a progressive-minded family in the city of Cologne, Catharina received a higher education that not only included the study of music (she was known to have been an excellent soprano singer and pianist), but also pedagogy, a growing new field at German universities. From 1832 to 1840, Catharina was the respected principal of a school for girls of 6 to 14 years of age in Jülich, a small city 40 miles west of Cologne. Catharina had to give up the position when she married Jakob Jüssen (1799–1880), a recent widower with five children, owner of a fabric store, and the mayor of the city. Today, in Jülich, two streets are named after the couple: Catharina-Ruetz-Straße and Jakob-Jüssen-Straße.²

In 1848, the Jüssens—including Jakob's two youngest children, four small children from their own marriage, and Catharina's parents and brother—immigrated to Watertown. There Jakob (now Jacob Jussen) opened a liquor store which he expanded into a saloon, the Rock River House, a business venture that



Catharina Jussen Gaebler

proved to be disastrous, as Catharina later told Emil Gaebler:

With the Rock River House, we not only lost what little capital we had, but went into deep debt despite all our hard work. If it hadn't been for the generosity of my unforgettable, loyal brother, we would have been in dire straits. When later [in 1861] my husband became postmaster of Watertown, thanks to Carl Schurz' advocacy on his behalf with Lincoln, we had to use most of the income to pay off our debts. We used only the bare minimum to live, while still trying to keep up appearances."
[1889_09_20]

Postmaster appointments were highly coveted, and there were several prominent candidates in Watertown. Many people were not happy with Carl Schurz for using his newly gained political influence to secure a federal position for a family member.³

Ten years later, Catharina and Jacob



Emil C. Gaebler, ca. 1891

Continued on page 4

Greetings Friends and Readers!

The capstone of every year for us at the Max Kade Institute is always our MKI Friends Annual Meeting, which this year took place in Sheboygan County. It was a wonderful event, and I am grateful to Karyl Rommelfanger, Antje Petty, and Randi Ramsden for all the hard work they put into the preparations. Thanks, Karyl, Antje, and Randi!

In early April, Antje, Randi, and I traveled to Austin, TX, for the 48th Annual Symposium of the Society for German American Studies. Each of us presented talks there, as did Friends Board member Maria Sturm. The connections between the Society and our Institute extended further. One of the local organizers was Jana Weiß, a faculty member at UT–Austin who is a past visiting scholar at MKI and has now been elected to the Friends Board together with our colleague at UW–Milwaukee, Viktorija Bilić, who also presented at the symposium. The current SGAS President is Marcel Rotter, a German professor at the University of Mary Washington who earned his Ph.D. in German literature at UW–Madison; the Vice President is Josh Brown of UW–Eau Claire, a former Friends Board member; and Antje serves on the society Executive Committee as Membership Coordinator. Josh is the lead organizer for next year's symposium, which will take place in Milwaukee in April.

We are already looking forward to the 2024–25 academic year, which is

planned to start off on September 19 and 20 with an international symposium, “From Russia with German: Migration Experiences across Three Continents.” You can read more about this event on page 14.

I am happy to report that in April Antje was awarded Distinguished status with the unanimous and enthusiastic support of the review committee and Dean of the College of Letters and Science, Eric Wilcots. Congratulations, Antje, on this major career milestone and recognition of your excellent work on behalf of MKI, our College, and the University!

In closing, I want to thank you, our Friends, for your steadfast support, both material and moral. All of us on the MKI team are deeply grateful to be able to advance the Wisconsin Idea with your assistance. *Vielen herzlichen Dank!*

With gratitude,
Mark

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Continued from page 2

left Watertown to live with children in New York and Chicago, where Jacob passed away in June of 1880. A year later, Catharina embarked on a journey to Kansas to start a new life on a farm and cattle ranch with her daughter Auguste [1842–1935], Auguste's husband John William Hood [1844–1929], and their two small children. Trained as a salesclerk, John Hood wanted to try his luck at cattle trading in the West, possibly to follow the example of his oldest brother "Major" Calvin Hood, whose success in that trade made him one of the richest people in Kansas.⁴

In 1881, John purchased a farm near Dunlap, Morris County, Kansas,

a town with an unusual history: In the spring of 1878, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a former slave, chose Dunlap as a location for freedmen to establish their own homesteads. Over the course of a year, hundreds of people followed his call and by 1890, half of the population of Dunlap and the surrounding area was Black.⁵ In her account, Catharina describes arriving at the Dunlap train station, seeing Black people on her way to the farm, and Black farmhands working for her son-in-law. However, she does not comment on larger developments in the society around her. This is her account of her first year in Kansas, written on April 11, 1890.

Why I went to Kansas

After the death of my beloved husband (Jacob Jussen, August 2, 1880), I stayed in Chicago for 15 months with my dear children Edmund and Toni,⁶ who did everything to make my life easy. [...] I refused to wallow in sorrow about my loss, but looked for a pursuit which would give me responsibilities and keep my mind active. With the help of my daughter-in-law, I started to teach German and French to young, mostly married, women, an activity I very much enjoyed since all my students were eager learners. This is how the first year passed.

Then, one day in September 1881, I received a letter from my dear Auguste, who with her children George and Katie had been boarding for 17 months [in Michigan] with the sister of her husband while my son-in-law tried to make some money in Indian territory.⁷ She gave me the news that she would go back to Kansas in early October with her children. Her hus-

band had bought a farm southeast of Emporia, a so-called cattle farm, and he had asked Auguste and the children to join him.

After all the unfortunate experiences that my son-in-law had had in Kansas, and since my daughter didn't like the state at all, we had hoped that they would settle in one of the eastern states. The thought of my Auguste living so far away, lonely on an isolated farm, was horrible. For a moment I was beside myself. But then an echo vibrated through every fiber of my heart: "I will come with you!"

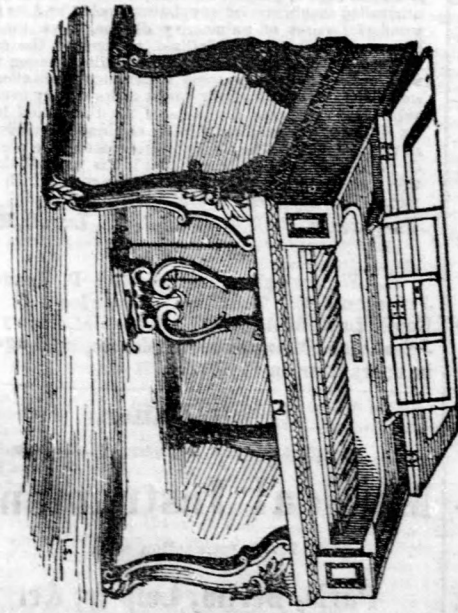
I immediately let my daughter know about my decision. She, however, did not want to accept this sacrifice, as she called it, and laid out all the deprivations that I would have to suffer. But I stayed firm. All the warnings from my relatives, friends, and acquaintances could not make me waver or dissuade me from doing what was dictated to me by duty and love. On October 4th, Auguste, the two children, and I, started the journey to our new Heimat.

In Kansas City, my son-in-law was waiting for us. What a heartfelt reunion it was! Auguste had made sure that the little ones would not forget their Papa. They recognized him immediately, because she had shown them his picture so many times. [...]

In Emporia we stayed a night and a day with the family of Calvin Hood, an older brother of my son-in-law, who 15–16 years ago came to Kansas with \$20,000. Through hard work, diligence, prudence, and some good luck (!)—everything he started turned out to be a success—he today is worth two million dollars.

The next day, we continued our journey by train to Dunlap, where my son-

Emil C. Gaebler,



Sells his superior Melodeons at greatly REDUCED PRICES and warrants all his instruments. Second hand Melodeons taken in exchange. Pianos, Organs, Melodeons and Accordeons tuned and repaired.

SHEET MUSIC

Constantly on hand, for sale cheap.
Schempf's Block, Main St. Watertown, Wis. a38y

Watertown News, 18 April 1862



Private residence of Major Calvin Hood and his family in Emporia, 1898
Source: *Annals of Emporia and Lyon County, Kansas*, page 18

in-law greeted us with his two-seater buggy, pulled by two mules. We still had to go 25 miles to our future home. These 25 miles were pure torture since the trail was undeveloped and crossed barren, rocky, and often steep hills. The eye looked longingly for any sign of civilization. Here and there a few dilapidated huts appeared, seemingly glued to the hillside, where Black people lived. Dirty, ragged children stood in front of them, looking at us with curiosity. There was nothing encouraging in this desolate wasteland.

Finally, at sunset, we climbed a very steep hill and to our complete surprise, a valley opened before us. A little river ran through it, flanked by trees. "This is our farm," said my son-in-law, who hadn't talked much all day. Now he looked happy, as he saw we were pleasantly surprised. He had never made any promises. He is not that kind of person. Therefore, everything seemed much better than we had expected.

Even the little cabin, our new home, was cozier than we had thought. It had, of course, only a few rooms: a single room which served both as the bedroom for the Hood family and as our living room, made up the front of the little cabin. The kitchen took up the back. A tiny attic room served as my bedroom. We set ourselves up with the few pieces of furniture that we had brought, and after a few days the place looked quite homey and cozy.

Our determination to throw ourselves into our work with courage and a cheerful disposition guided us through thick and thin. There was a lot to learn for us city dwellers, —and a lot to learn to manage without.

My son-in-law acquired 100 cattle and 100 hogs with the farm. We also had a barn full of beautiful chickens, turkeys, and ducks, and we very much looked forward to a splendid egg harvest in the new year. Then our first misfortune happened: chicken cholera struck and emptied the barn leaving us

only 8 birds. We learned too late that our predecessor had lost his poultry to the same disease. My son-in-law built a new barn and repopulated it with poultry. We were successful after that.

On nice winter days we took little walking expeditions across our land. Far away from our house, we found a big, overgrown orchard: 200 peach trees, 50–60 apple and pear trees, and a lot of grape vines, which were so overgrown that it was nearly impossible to prune them. Around the house we had additional peach, cherry, and pear trees. This promised to be a magnificent harvest in the coming summer. When the children were sitting on my lap, I told them stories about how we would bring whole cartloads of fruit to the kitchen for their Mama to can. But things turned out differently. In the spring, strong night frosts destroyed all the buds. We were even cheated out of seeing the beautiful fruit blossoms. Now all our hope rested on the grapevines, which looked healthy and well in May. But this joy was taken from us, too: just one night frost, and everything was killed.

Now we only had the vegetable garden left, which Auguste and I had dug and cultivated with a lot of hard work and effort. We successfully planted all kinds of vegetables and kitchen herbs. Our garden was our pride and joy. Early in the morning I went there, hoe and rake over my shoulder, and worked as if I had never done anything else in my whole life. Auguste and the children did some housework and then joined me.

One morning, though, Auguste did not show up. My son-in-law and his farmhand had left early to go to Dunlap, and we women and the children

were all alone on the remote farm. I went back to the garden gate to look for her and to my shock I saw two martial-looking Indians standing with her and the children near the well, gesturing animatedly. Before I could decide what to do, I saw two of our neighbors walking toward us. They had followed the Indians, since they knew that we women were alone that day. After a brief back and forth with the Indians, they left the farm, and we never had visitors like them again.

My son-in-law, who had never held a hoe in his hand, cultivated the fields together with his farmhand. He did this with great prudence and skill. He erected fences and constructed barns and oversaw the feeding of the animals. Everything seemed good. The corn harvest promised to be a big one. But just before the corn ripened, a hot southern wind and a heavy dust storm descended upon us. This dried out the milk in the corn kernels, reducing the yield by two thirds. A bitter disappointment! We were able to get through this, though, since the corn harvest in other regions was plentiful. Corn was cheap and we could afford to purchase it as feed for our animals.

My son-in-law devoted most of his attention to the feeding of the cattle and the hogs, and they visibly gained weight. It was a sight to behold, and my son-in-law was mighty proud of his livestock. About two weeks before Christmas he told us that those hogs that he had brought inside the barn were still gaining weight, and that he expected to fetch a nice price for them in February. The proceeds might even allow him to pay off the remaining \$600 on the mortgage for the farm.

But sadly (!) our joy was premature. A week later, the farmhand found

three dead hogs on the edge of the woods. We called our neighbors, and they didn't know what to make of it either. Nobody knew of hog cholera back then. This contagious virus hadn't arrived in our region yet. But how could this killer plague have made it to our remote farm? My son-in-law still had a small passel of pigs when he left the Indian Territory, and he shipped them by train to a station 35 miles from here. From there two men drove them to our farm. Tragically, the hogs spent the previous night in a barn that had housed animals afflicted with the cholera. My son-in-law learned this only after it was too late. For several days we now had to witness the sad spectacle of whole wagonloads of dead hogs passing by our cabin. In less than two weeks, we had lost \$2,500! That was a hard blow! My son-in-law almost lost his mind. Oh, what an unspeakable, terrible time we endured back then, my Auguste and I!

When Auguste's reassurances and words of comfort didn't go anywhere [with her husband], she secretly sent a

messenger to the brother in Emporia, and he came to the rescue. He took over the farm with all assets and liabilities and helped his despondent brother with advice and actions. He found the position for him, which he still holds [as loan officer at a bank in Clay Center, Kansas.]⁸

That's how we came to Clay Center which back then was a young, still blossoming, little town. The move required some major sacrifices, but it was a salvation for all of us! We stopped at a hotel, and I can't describe how happy it made me to sit at a table with worldly people. [On the farm], our only company were uneducated Black people, who worked for us as farmhands. Later I could not tear myself away from the window in my room. I enjoyed the view of all the cozy houses with their lights, and I felt at home. Delirious with happiness, I danced around the room like an excited little child.

The next day was a Sunday, and church bells rang around me. It was the most beautiful music to my ears. I

Hymeneal.

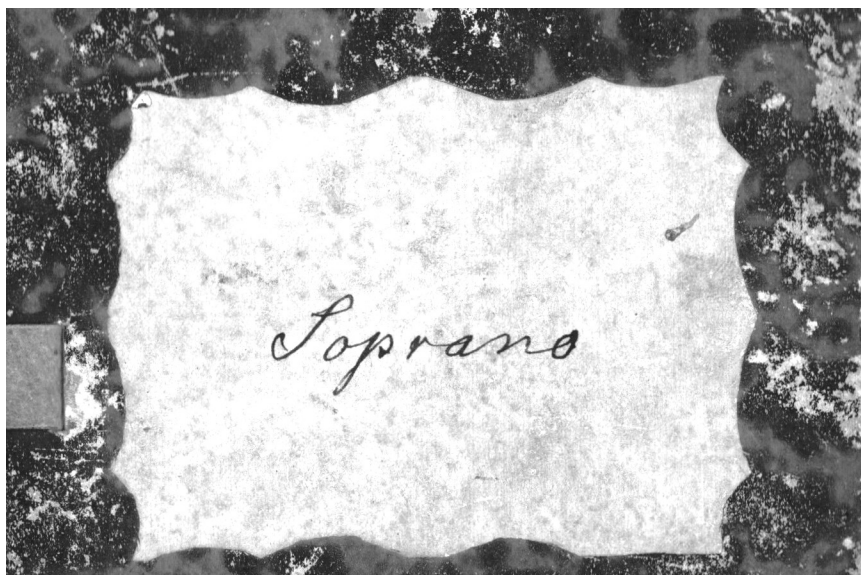
A marriage creating no little surprise here is that of E. C. Gaebler, of Milwaukee, to Mrs. Catherine Juessen, (born Ruetz), of Clay Centre, Kansas. The ceremony, uniting the two as man and wife, was performed by Rev. J. Kilian, brother-in-law of the groom, at Lomira, Wis., Monday, January 5th. The bride will be remembered as the wife of the late Jacob Juessen, former postmaster of this city.

Watertown News, 14 January 1891

reveled in the sight of the churchgoers, all dressed up for the occasion. I had not dared to dream that I would ever see this again. I had resigned myself to spending my remaining years on the farm. I had even picked a little spot for my final resting place. If anybody back then had told me that I would be able to visit my loved ones in Chicago and New York again, I would have called them false prophets. The first of April marked the seventh anniversary of our coming to Clay Center.

As excited as Catharina was to move to Clay Center after a year on the farm, by the time of her correspondence with Emil Gaebler, her enthusiasm about the little town had waned:

I dearly miss the music of which our little town is as poor as Kansas is poor of beautiful landscapes. There are no mountains here, no forests, no pretty rivers, and our little town is completely lacking any public spaces. During the first three years [our town] was growing rapidly and advanced in many ways, but then there was an economic bust that brought it to the verge of bankruptcy. Since last fall four retailers have closed, a bank has failed, and the population has shrunk to half its size. All electric lights have been shut off, only one streetcar uses the tracks, and over 200 personal residences have been abandoned, including some very nice ones. Now they are sitting empty and are falling apart. Three years ago, our town had a marching band, but now the music director has moved away. A good harvest would make all the difference for Clay Center. It looks good, if only one wouldn't have to fear nature's destructive furies. [1889-06-30]



A close-up view of the "Soprano" cover for the collected letters

The entire Gaebler–Jussen correspondence has been transcribed by the Max Kade Institute *Kurrent* Transcription Group. If you are interested in this work, contact Kevin Kurdylo: mki@library.wisc.edu 

Endnotes

¹ Carl Schurz (1829–1906), a nephew of Jacob Jussen, was a German political activist and revolutionary who migrated to the United States after the failed revolutions of 1848–1849. He became a prominent member of the new Republican Party and a supporter of Abraham Lincoln. Schurz served as Secretary of the Interior, US Senator from Missouri, and US Ambassador to Spain.

² <https://www.juelich.de/stadtarchiv/strassennamen>

³ <http://www.watertownhistory.org/articles/postoffice.htm>; Chicago Tribune, 10. October 1884, p. 3

⁴ https://www.ksgenweb.org/archives/1912/h3/hood_calvin.html

⁵ <https://legendsofkansas.com/dunlap-kansas/>

⁶ Edmund Jussen (1830–1891), stepson of Catharina Jussen, and his wife Antonie (1837–1923), a daughter of Carl Schurz

⁷ The 1880 federal census for the City of Caldwell in Sumner County, Kansas, lists John W. Hood as a “Dealer in Cattle,” and his wife Auguste and children George and Katie as “Visiting.”

⁸ John W. Hood worked as a “land loan agent” for a branch of Emporia National Bank, of which Calvin Hood was President at the time.

Friends of the Max Kade Institute Annual Meeting 2024

Antje Petty

The 2024 Annual Business Meeting of the Friends was held at the Riverdale Country Club in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Participants heard from their Board of Directors and MKI staff members about the Institute's many activities and the important initiatives of the Friends. The membership elected four candidates to three-year terms on the Board of Directors. [See page 10.]



Mike von Schneidemesser, Antje Petty, Karyl Rommelfanger, Viktorija Bilić, Charles James



Karyl Rommelfanger and Bill Petig

While we enjoyed a delicious buffet luncheon, Katie Reilly, research team leader at the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center (SCHRC) gave us an overview of the German immigrant history in the area. Starting in the late 1840s, the small harbor town on Lake Michigan was a port of arrival for German-speaking immigrants who had traversed the Great Lakes by boat. Many made the city their home, bringing with them their cultures and traditions. Show-

ing unique photos from the SCHRC archives, Katie depicted the German presence in the area and how it shaped local culture. There were German businesses and banks, churches and schools, social clubs such as the Concordia Singing Society and the Turners, traditional celebrations such as Fasching, and of course the butchers and sausage manufacturers who made Sheboygan the “bratwurst capital of the world.” Later, during our tour of the SCHRC in Sheboygan



Conversation among Friends



The historic building housing the Sheboygan Falls Historical Research Center



Above: Jennifer Balge at the *Waelderhaus*
Below: Kay Gruling, Tim Buttke, and their granddaughter, Navya



A happy corner

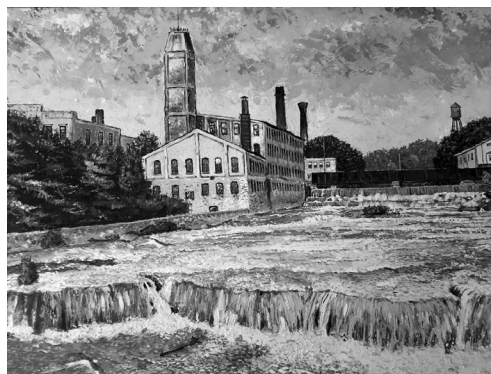
the Kohler Company, which manufactured farm implements and enameled cast iron hog water troughs. The latter turned into the manufacturing of bathtubs which started the company's hugely successful business of bathroom and kitchen fixtures. Factory workers, most of them immigrants, lived in company housing near the plant. They were the first residents of what would become the Village of Kohler.

Although built and decorated in the style of an Old World farmhouse, the *Waelderhaus* was intended as a meeting

place and for public lectures and performances. It also housed the Kohler Woman's Club and the Kohler troop of the Girl Scouts of America, which Marie Kohler had founded. On the ceiling of a second-floor meeting room one sees the emblems of national Girl Scout organizations around the world, painted in the late 1930s. Conspicuously missing is Germany, whose Girl Scout troops were closed by the Nazi government around 1934.

A few of the tour participants had themselves been Girl Scouts in Kohler, and reminisced about their time in the *Waelderhaus*.

We thank all of our Friends who came and spent such a pleasant time with us in Sheboygan, and wish everyone a wonderful summer! 🌿



Left: A woolen mill in Sheboygan Falls

Below: Recognizing Girl Scouts from other nations



Falls, we were able to explore the many resources of the Center ourselves.

Our second tour brought us to the *Waelderhaus* (house in the woods) a few miles down the road from Sheboygan Falls in the town of Kohler. Here we were treated to a fascinating tour by Jennifer Balge and her colleagues. The house was built in 1931 by Marie Christine Kohler (1776–1943) as a memorial to her father John Michael Kohler II. Austrian architect Kaspar Albrecht designed the building as a replica of a traditional house in the Bregenz forest, the home region of John Michael Kohler. In 1873, John Michael founded

The Friends Welcome Two New Members on the Board of Directors

Antje Petty

At the Friends Annual Meeting on May 4, 2024, four new Board members were elected to the 2024–2027 Board of Directors, and two, Karyl Rommelfanger and William Petig rotated off. All of us at the MKI and the Friends are grateful for their many efforts supporting the Institute. Thank you, Karyl and Bill!

Calla Buttke and Maria Sturm were elected to a second term, while Viktorija Bilić and Jana Weiss join the Board for the first time.

Viktorija Bilić is Associate Professor of Translation and Interpreting Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she also teaches in the German program. She grew up in a bilingual household in Stuttgart, Germany, speaking both German and Croatian. Many of her German relatives immigrated to New York a century ago, which sparked her interest in German America.

After earning a Ph.D. at the University of Heidelberg in 2013, Viktorija joined UW–Milwaukee in 2014, where her research focuses on historical translation in the field of German American studies. She published a monograph on strategies for translating historical immigrant letters (2014) and translated and co-edited (with Alison Clark Efford) a volume on the letters of the German American feminist Mathilde Franziska Anneke (*Radical Relation-*

ships: The Civil War-Era Correspondence of Mathilde Franziska Anneke, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021). Currently she is working on translating Walter Kamphoefner's book *Germans in America: A Concise History* into German. In 2020, she started a project with the Pabst Mansion Museum in Milwaukee to transcribe and translate 350 letters written by members of the Pabst/Best family. Graduate students in the UWM translation program are an integral part of this project.

As a member of the Friends Board of Directors, Viktorija hopes to engage with local communities and to support the MKI's outreach efforts and networks with German American institutions and organizations.



Viktorija Bilić



Jana Weiss

Jana Weiss is a historian who joined the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin in 2022 as DAAD Associate Professor. With a focus on US and transatlantic history, her research interests include 19th and 20th century immigration and historical studies of knowledge, religious history, and racism.

After studying at the University of Bremen, she received her Ph.D. in 2013 at the University of Münster. For her thesis, she examined the role and functions of civil religion on US patriotic holidays after 1945. She is currently working on her second book titled *The Lager Beer Revolution in the United States: The History of Beer and German Americans as a Re-invention of Ethnicity, Knowledge, and Consumption*. Here she analyzes the

technological and cultural transfer of the German art of brewing to the US, from the early 19th century until Prohibition in 1920.

From 2015 to 2016, Jana was a research fellow at the Max Kade Institute and conducted research trips to archives across Wisconsin. She became a member of the Friends and has avidly followed and participated in MKI's activities, at first from Germany, now from Texas. She regularly attends MKI's virtual lecture series, and has also presented a virtual lecture. As a Board member, Jana looks forward to working on organizing public outreach events and spreading knowledge of the rich history of German Americans.

At a brief Board meeting after the annual meeting, the new Board of Directors elected the following of-

ficers: Dorothy Smaglick (President), Pamela Tesch (Vice President), Calla Buttke (Treasurer), and Susan Marshall (Secretary).

Thank you to all the Board members, past and present! 

Friends of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies Membership

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 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
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| ☐ Family (one address)—\$50 | ☐ Lifetime, Family—\$1,500 |

Please make checks payable to the *Friends of the Max Kade Institute*, 432 East Campus Mall, Madison, WI 53706-1407.
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- *Friends of the Max Kade Institute* is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization that supports the research, outreach, educational, and publishing activities of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies.
- Membership covers the calendar year (January–December). Payments received after November 1 of the current year will be credited for the full succeeding year.

The Disappearance of New York City's German Americans, 1880-1930

Kevin Kurdylo

Ziegler-McPherson, Christina A.
The Great Disappearing Act: Germans in New York City, 1880–1930. Rutgers University Press, 2022, 224 pages.

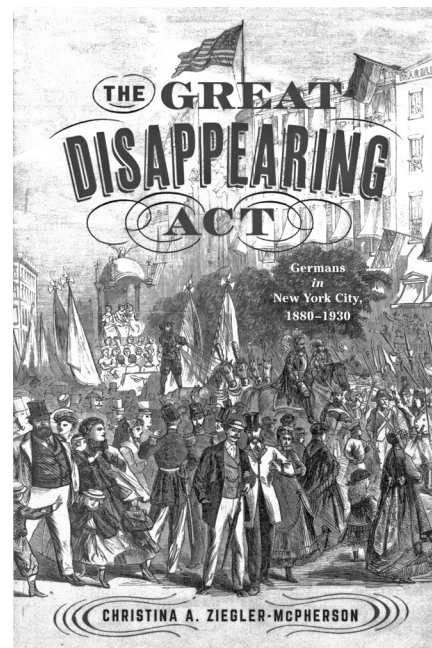
In this fascinating and well-researched volume, historian Christina Ziegler-McPherson deftly weaves primary source material and statistical data to chronicle fifty years of German immigrants and their descendants in New York City. From 1880 to 1930, the city's German Americans shifted from having their own distinct and thriving community structures—and from being “the ethnic group best positioned to promote alternative visions of American society and theories of assimilation” (4)—to virtually disappearing, dispersed throughout the city and assimilated into the dominant Anglo American culture.

By 1880, the Lower East Side of Manhattan was known as *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany), a vibrant and nearly self-sufficient community where a newly arrived immigrant could find a hundred thousand German speakers, thousands of German stores and social clubs, hundreds of beer gardens, more than thirty churches and synagogues, and some twenty German-language periodicals (14–15). Ziegler-McPherson asserts the importance of social organizations—known in German as *Vereine*—to this community, as they allowed for expressions of cultural identity

and the maintenance of the German language, itself a foundation of ethnic identity. *Vereine* ranged from immigrant aid groups (often based on place of origin) to insurance benefit societies, worker unions, Turners or other sports groups, shooting clubs, fraternal orders and, often the most highly regarded and longest lasting in the community, singing societies.

German Americans “took their music seriously as an expression of their culture,” and even anarchist German workers gathered to sing (16). But some aspired to higher levels of culture, like the *Deutscher Liederkranz der Stadt New York*. Founded in 1847 by twenty-five men, by 1880 it had 1,500 (male) members, many from the upwardly mobile German American business and political classes. But the prominence of the *Liederkranz* caused non-German business and political elites to view it as a networking venue. William Steinway, the wealthy manufacturer of pianos, complains (in English) in his diary about *Liederkranz* members speaking English or bad German [The National Museum of American History has Steinway's diary, with annotations, available online: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/steinwaydiary>.]

While German Americans with commercial ambitions had to learn some English in order to interact with the larger Anglo population (Steinway learned it before leaving his home



in Braunschweig), these business elites valued their “Germanness” and often sided with community leaders who promoted a pluralistic understanding of American society in which the preservation of German language, culture, and institutional structure was defined as a societal benefit (67). Ziegler-McPherson notes that this pro-German sentiment did not prevent industry leaders from adopting the ruthlessness of American-style industrial capitalism; Steinway clashed frequently with his mostly German workers over issues ranging from higher pay to an eight-hour workday (36). It is also noted that Steinway had moved out of the *Kleindeutschland* neighborhood by 1857.

Verein culture made German Americans visible to their Anglo neighbors, positively and negatively. While often celebratory, with parades or events that non-Germans could

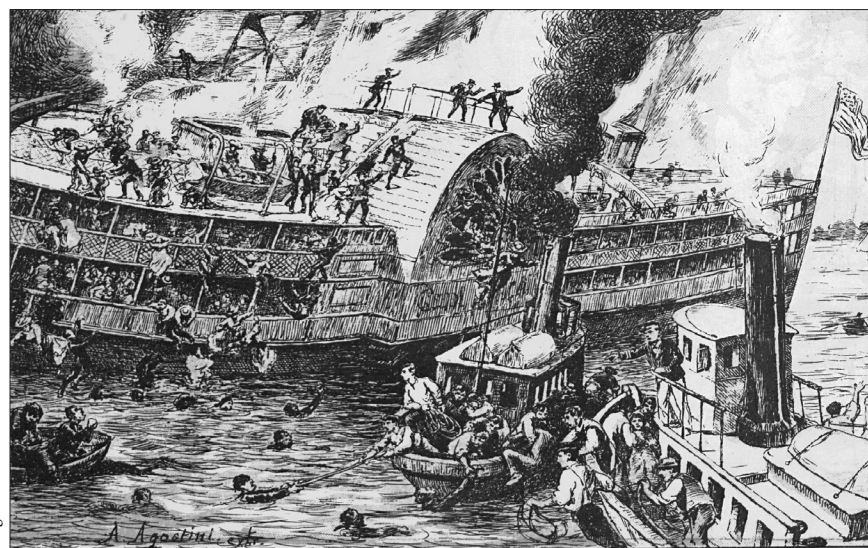
also enjoy, Germans' relaxed attitude toward alcohol consumption—in settings that included women and children, and on Sundays, no less—ran against the grain of 19th-century America's pervasive religious and moral conservatism, and was an affront to the powerful Anglo-American temperance and prohibition movements. While German Americans did engage politically, especially to fight against alcohol regulations, they were never a match for the Irish, who dominated Tammany Hall. Ziegler-McPherson also clarifies that, "although Germans were a large minority in the city, they were never able to control the public or Catholic parochial school systems as they did in some other cities. . . . [T]his meant that German American children were educated primarily—if not exclusively—in the English language, and thus, the preservation of German required active effort on the part of both parents and children." (142–143) Both language and culture, the underpinnings of German ethnic identity in New York City, were already under strain by the turn of the century.

On June 15, 1904, New York City was stunned by the tragic loss of 1,021 people—mainly German American women and children from *Kleindeutschland*—when the *General Slocum* steamboat burned and sank in the East River on its way to a church picnic. Ziegler-McPherson addresses a misperception, which began in English-language newspapers shortly after the disaster, that the heartbreak of this loss hastened the disintegration of *Kleindeutschland*. The author's research reveals that *Kleindeutschland's* established and upwardly mobile German-speaking residents had already moved to other areas of the city, leaving behind a mixture of newer German immigrants, Eastern European Jews, and Italians. While the tragedy was momentous, for Ziegler-McPherson it is World War I and its attendant anti-German sentiment that is to blame for the disappearance of New York's strong German American community.

This part of the story and the factors involved are complex, and reading the author's excellent research is recommended to understand how

New York City's German Americans experienced this period, especially in regard to language. As nationalistic Anglo-Americans, riled up by war news (soon limited to the British perspective), insisted on "100% American" loyalty and English as "the American language," German immigrants and German Americans hid their culture—especially their language and their institutions—behind closed doors, attempting to make themselves invisible while still existing as a German community. No longer could German Americans argue that their language and culture was beneficial to America, nor raise as a shield the American value of liberty to live as one pleased. Now loyalty was defined as conformity to Anglo-American values and behaviors. Yet Ziegler-McPherson points out that the "white American" culture and society into which German Americans assimilated was one that had already been influenced by nearly one hundred years of German immigration and cultural exchange. Thus, while Germans became more American, so had Americans become more "German."

Ziegler-McPherson's work provides access to a wealth of research that not only illuminates the rise and fall of a German immigrant community in New York, but also expands our understanding of America's long history of nativism and aggressive capitalism, and its complex, ever-fraught relationship with "new" immigrants. And the question of language shift as the primary signifier of integration or assimilation is, of course, one that America faces even today, and deserves further examination. 



An etching of the *General Slocum* disaster by Angelo Agostini, published in the Brazilian weekly magazine *O Malho*, 30 July 1904.

Max Kade Institute Symposium
From Russia with German: Migration Experiences across Three Continents
September 19–20, 2024
Free and Open to the Public

Please join us September 19 and 20, 2024 for an international symposium, *From Russia with German: Migration Experiences across Three Continents*, live and streamed from the Pyle Center on the UW–Madison campus.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, over 300,000 German speakers left the Russian Empire. Most settled in the Great Plains states and Prairie provinces of Canada, while a few thousand migrated to Brazil and other South American countries. Other Russian Germans followed during the Cold War years and after the fall of the Soviet Union, most by way of Germany. They all brought with them the distinct cultures, traditions, life experiences, and identities that they had forged in the isolated settings of the “German colonies” established in the late 18th and early 19th centuries along the Volga River, the Black Sea, the Volhynia region, the Caucasus, and other areas in Russia.

This symposium will explore the migration history and the experiences of Russian Germans in the Americas, their evolving traditions, and identities, as well as their and their descendants’ attitudes toward their two ancestral homelands.

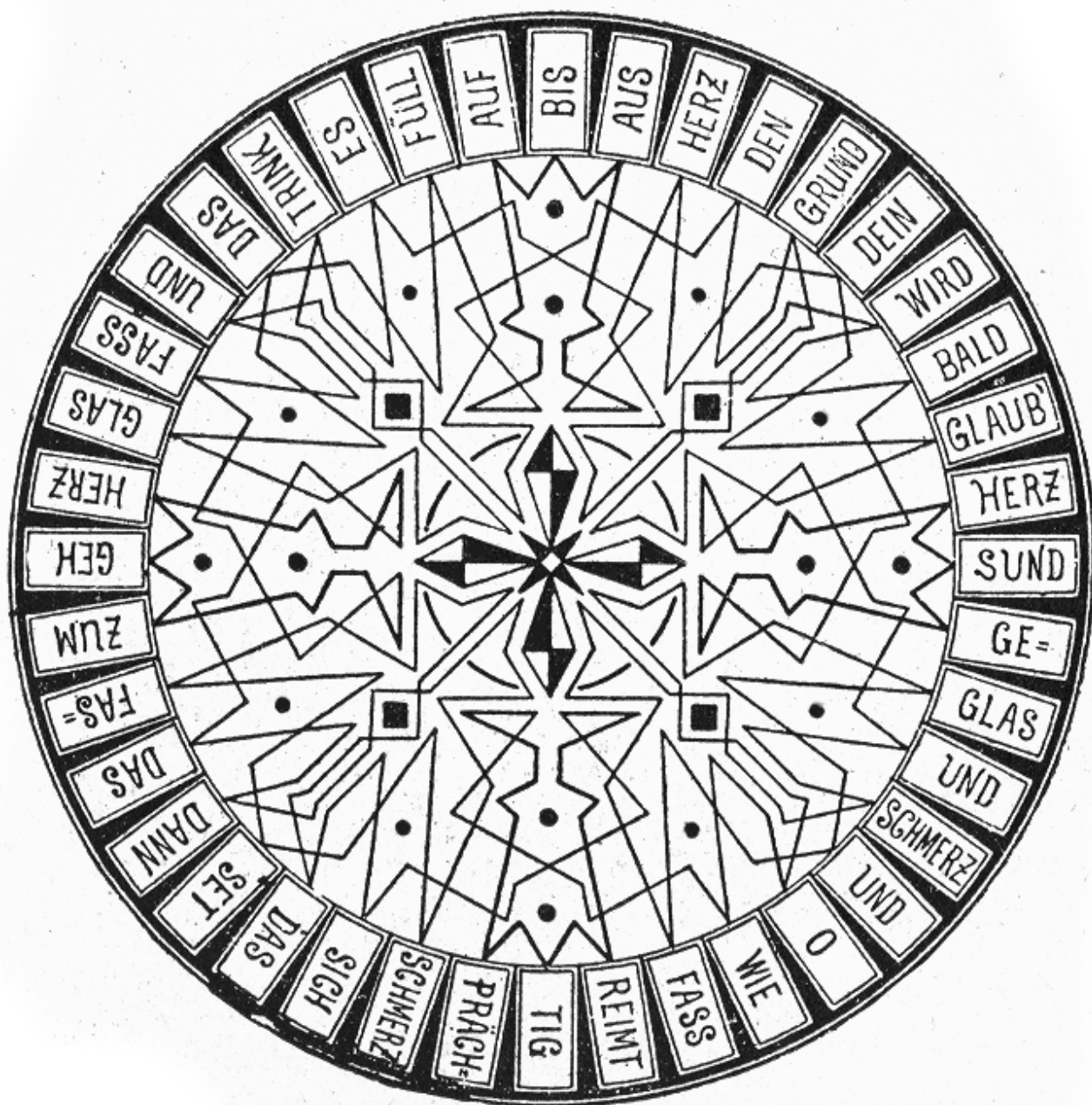
The program will feature the following speakers and topics:

- **Ann Braaten**, Associate Professor [retired], School of Design, Art, and Architecture, North Dakota State University: *Ethnic Textiles and Clothing of the Germans from Russia*
- **Aileen Friesen**, Associate Professor of History, The University of Winnipeg: *When the Russlaender Met the Kanadier: Cultural Complexities of a Mennonite Reunion*
- **Mark Loudon**, Professor of Germanic Linguistics, University of Wisconsin–Madison, *Germans from Russia and Diversity in German America*
- **Stefan Manz**, Professor of Global History, Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom: *In the Fold of a “Greater German Empire”? German Speakers from Russia and Diasporic Connectedness before 1914*
- **Nancy Martin**, Lecturer in Apparel Design, San Francisco State University: *“A Stocky, Almost Round, Appearance”: An Analysis of German Russian Women’s Dress from 1850 to 1900*
- **Göz Kaufmann**, Adjunct Professor of German Linguistics, Albrecht-Ludwigs University, Freiburg, Germany: *Russian Mennonites in North America: Three Countries – Three Identities?*
- **Travis Olson**, Ph.D. candidate in Art History, University of Wisconsin–Madison: *“Making It” on the Edge of the Edge of the American West: The Prospective Landscapes of German-Russian Settlers in Southwestern North Dakota*
- **Claudia Maria Riehl**, Professor of Germanic Linguistics, Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, Germany: *Being Volga German: Historical Background, Sociolinguistic Development, and the Formation of Identity*
- **Peter Rosenberg**, Senior Scholar of Linguistics, European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany: *A Brief Sociolinguistic History of Plautdietsch in the Altai (Russia)*
- **Eric Schmaltz**, Professor of History, Northwestern Oklahoma University: *“Voices Crying Out in the Wilderness”: Germans from Russia Transnational Networks across Eurasia and North America during the Soviet Dissident Period, 1972–1987*

If you are in the Madison area, we invite you to join us at the Pyle Center, where you will have the opportunity to personally engage with our presenters. An option to participate via Zoom will also be available. The program schedule, registration information, and other details are forthcoming. Check <https://mki.wisc.edu/events/> later this summer.

Below is an example of a visually appealing *Bilderrätsel* (word puzzle) that appeared February 2, 1896 in *Scherz und Ernst* (Humorous and Serious), a Sunday supplement to the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*. A six-line poem can be reconstructed, beginning with the words "Herz und Schmerz," by following the maze-like lines. Be careful, words appear more than once along the edge of the circle. The solution will appear in the Fall issue of the MKI Friends Newsletter. Enjoy!

Bilderrätsel.



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