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The Germania Club of Chicago – a History and some Curiosities

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In 1965, the Germania Club of Chicago celebrated the 100th anniversary of its founding to considerable fanfare, including a 65-page *Centennial Book* that highlighted an image of a ceramic tile tableau entitled “Glory of Germania” (cf. illustration). Inside the booklet we find out more: roughly 18½ feet high, 14 feet wide, and made of some 1,057 tiles, it was a product of the *Berliner Porzellan-Manufaktur* and graced a wall of the Grand Ballroom of the Germania Clubhouse in Chicago. Inspired by a painting by the 19th century artist Anton von Werner, it had been sent to the Chicago World’s Colombia Exhibition in 1893 as part of Germany’s display in the Palace of Industry. After the exhibition, the Germania Club purchased it.

It is the goddess Germania who reigns supreme in the center of the scene, an anthropomorphic manifestation of the German people. She is seen against the background of the towering twin spires of the Kölner Dom, the Cologne Cathedral, as one of the jewels of German Gothic architecture and

no doubt symbolizing Germany’s spirituality. Representations of historical figures in the arts and sciences form a group to the right of Germania. Some of whom we are still familiar with today such as the theologian Martin Luther, the artists Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer or the printer Johannes Gutenberg.

On the right you see a billowing imperial flag, in turn on the left medieval-looking troops with flag references to Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg and Baden – the German lands Bismarck united in 1871. Returning to the mythological, at the bottom we observe an allegorical figure of Father Rhine, thoroughly enjoying himself with a barrel of wine and a maiden. Two dwarfs allude to the Rheingold, the treasure of the Nibelungen, a founding myth of the Germanic people. Finally, across from the lofty spires of the Cologne Cathedral, we see angelic figures with palms and trumpets. They likely symbolize peace and, in a sense, proclaim the mix of myth, legend and history below as quintessentially German, or you could say, more specifically, “Wilhelminisch”, that is Wilhelminian, the era in which the artwork was created and referring to the two Hohenzollern emperors Wilhelm I and his grandson Wilhelm II, the latter in power at the time when the ceramic painting arrived in Chicago. The Germania image and what surrounded her no doubt represented their concept of what was German.

From the perspective of the Germania Club, a more general cultural-historical essence of what was German ended up transcending the Wilhelminian of the artwork, a period in history which ultimately turned out to be rather bellicose anyway. The aforementioned *Centennial Book* concludes its description of the ceramic artwork with the following words: “The picture glorifies what we desire to keep for America: The traditions of world wisdom, sagas, the arts and sciences. May we always be inspired by the spirit radiating from this masterpiece!”

Oddly, it was Lincoln’s tragic assassination on April 15, 1865 that led to the founding of what was to become the Germania Club. When the former president’s casket lay in state at the Chicago Court House on May 2, some 300 German, male voices sang a requiem and funeral dirges. One can probably assume that the vast majority of these men had been strong supporters of Lincoln’s anti-slavery policies since most German-Americans of the time had been moved by the liberating spirit of the 1848 revolutionary movement in German lands. Soon after, on June 25, the choir was organized as the Germania Männerchor and was even officially chartered by the State of Illinois on March 31, 1869. The men were Germans, of course, but there was nothing overly patriotic here. In fact, the motto of the Chor was, “Wo man singt, da lass dich ruhig nieder. Böse Menschen haben keine Lieder” (Where people sing, let yourself belong. Bad people have no songs). They simply wanted to be good citizens of the expanding country and take part fully in its social, political and economic institutions, a point that pervades much of the history of the Germania Club, all of this in a city that in the late 1800’s had the third largest

German population in the world after Berlin and New York, and could count some 450 German clubs.

The Chor even had space in the Deutsches Haus, a facility used by numerous German organizations at the time but destroyed by the Chicago Fire in 1871. The Chor needed to find another space, and so a bond issue was floated in 1887-88 for \$100,000 in order to construct a new building, designed by a fellow German, William Augustus Fiedler, and officially opened on April 6, 1889 to much fanfare on the corner of North Clark and Germania Place. Sam Steele wrote the following in 1899 when the Club had a male membership of about 550:

Its membership includes, and for years has included, what may be justly termed the elite of the German-American element. The Mannerchor, though kept well up to the mark, is perhaps more of an adjunct to the social life of the organization than anything else, while the club has grown notable for well managed social entertainments, and a lavish hospitality dispensed at its spacious and handsome modern club house on North Clark Street near Lincoln Park.

The quote already refers to the Club by its new name, the Germania Club, a change from the Germania Männerchor that didn't occur officially until December 16, 1914. However, the name didn't stay that way for long at all since anti-German sentiments surrounding World War I motivated a further name change to the Chicago Lincoln Club on May 20, 1918, thus harking back very clearly to the organization's beginnings and an allegiance to the United States. It ended up being a period of membership prosperity for the Club since in 1921 it reached its 1000 member limit. As Raymond Lohne has written, the Chicago Lincoln Club "was swinging with the rest of America during the Roaring Twenties." On May 14, 1925, with the image of Germany in much better shape, the name was changed back to the Germania Club, and that's the way it remained, even surviving the terrible Hitler years when things German were once again in great disrepute.

The social activities also mentioned in the quote were pretty much what you would expect them to be of a Germania Club. A roll-call of the Germania Club's committees in the year 1934 provides an idea of the activities and how highly organized they were in true German fashion: there was a Plan Committee; a House Committee; Entertainment Committee; a Literary, Library and Publication Committee; a Membership Committee; a Grievance Committee; a Speakers Committee; a Finance Committee; a By-Laws Committee; an Athletic Committee; a Publicity Committee; a Card Committee; a Germania Male Chorus Committee; a Billiards Committee; a Young Germania; a Germania Arts and Crafts Group; a Parades and Public Receptions Committee; a Bowling Committee; a Club Interrelations Committee, and the Germania News. The Germania Club Restaurant no doubt also played a key role in the social activities of the organization.

In the course of the years, the Germania Club also had many prominent members: Harry Rubens and Fred Busse were heavily involved in Chicago politics, both ran for mayor,

Busse successfully in the early 20th century; Rubens was also President of the Germania Club for a while; Charles Henry Wacker who implemented Burnham's Urban Plan of 1909 for the city of Chicago and has the two-tiered Wacker Drive named after him; Oscar Mayer, the wurst magnate of the first half the 20th century; Everett McKinley Dirksen, an Illinois representative and senator for many years starting in the 1930's. Over the years, prominent guests included: Albert Einstein, the bacteriologist Robert Koch, the composer Richard Strauss, Konrad Adenauer, the music conductor Herbert von Karajan, the boxer Max Schmeling, and Prince Henry (Heinrich) of Prussia (the brother of Kaiser Wilhelm II).

The official occasion of Prince Henry's visit was a new imperial yacht his Kaiser brother had had built in New York, and which the Prince was to pick up in 1902. The Germania Club sensed an opportunity, mobilized Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison, and an invitation was extended to the Prince, which he accepted. Louis F. Bockmann, a very active member of the Germania Club for many years, reported on the event as follows:

In 1902 our Grand Ballroom and the entire clubhouse were elaborately decorated for this occasion. Fifty members of the Club were invited to dine with the Prince, together with many Chicago notables and the Prince's personal suite. There were 150 guests at the luncheon and the entire membership of the Club was invited to the reception. The cost was \$100 per plate. Expenditures including decoratings, invitations and entertainment were said to have totaled \$20,000.

That significant amount for the time was to haunt the Germania Club as we shall see later.

In any case, it was a contradictory and curious event in the sense that many of the original founding members of the Germania Club had been 1848 liberals and adherents of Lincoln's republican policies; the Prince, of course, represented the old order. Nonetheless, it all somehow came together, at least on the surface. The opportunity to hobnob with the Prince may very well have smoothed things over for the Germanians, aside from interacting with many other Chicago elite attending the events such as Marshall Field (of the department store), John G. Shedd (of the later aquarium), Robert Todd Lincoln (a son of the assassinated president) and many others.

As we have seen with the Prince Henry visit, the Germanians' "liberal" foundations could be pragmatic, but they suffered from other limitations, at least from a contemporary perspective. Let me quote from the 1941 By-Laws of the Germania Club regarding its membership: "Only white persons over the age of twenty-one (21) shall be eligible for membership in this club." This no doubt rubs us the wrong way today. To their credit, the Germania Club dropped the stipulation of "white" in 1942, but I was not able to ascertain if they ever had black members.

This story will continue in the June/July edition of the DANK Journal.

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Continuation of the story from the April/May edition of the DANK Journal.



When we talk about the membership, let us also not forget that the Germania Club was originally a Männerchor. Women became an add-on that was expressed in the aforementioned By-Laws as such:

Any woman conforming to the requirements of these By-Laws, and particularly Article II Section 2 thereof, may be elected to membership under the classification of feminine member. Such members shall have all the privileges of the club, except the right to vote or to serve as an officer or director, and shall pay such dues as may from time to time be prescribed by the Board.

So when it came down to it, the framework of the Germania Club really remained a men's club. That did not mean, however, that the women weren't engaged in Club activities. In fact, the Germania Woman's Club, organized on Feb. 8, 1938 as a kind of subgroup within the Germania Club, grew steadily to about 250 members in 1971, and it apparently became one of the largest such organizations in Chicago with monthly meetings, card nights, bowling, and literary discussions. They had their own membership fee structure and, in fact, gave financial assistance to the Germania Club during periods of financial stress, aside from finding themselves in the odd situation of being required to pay the Germania Club to use its facilities, literally the women writing checks to their own husbands for this privilege.

In any case, a charitable attitude was certainly part of the

tradition of the Germania Club. With regard to World War II and its aftermath, it must be said that the most engaged group was probably the special unit of the Red Cross that the Germania Women's Club formed in 1942. Founded by Mrs. Harry [!!!] E. Hoff – her first name by the way was Jane –, it did all sorts of knitting and provided other handmade items for the American soldiers' fight abroad. It ended its activities in January 1946, having accumulated some 121,258 hours of volunteer work, and was replaced by the Germania Sewing Club that made clothes for a Germany suffering under the post-war conditions.

As I mentioned at the outset, 1965 was the 100th anniversary of the Germania Club, which was celebrated on Nov. 13 of that year with a gala event that included His Excellency Sigismund Freiherr von Braun, Ambassador of the Federal Republic to the United Nations. He spoke and ended his remarks by quoting Goethe:

*Solch ein Gewimmel möchte ich sehen,
Auf freiem Grund mit freiem Volke stehen!*
(Such crowds do I want to see,
To stand on free soil, with free people!)

He added: "And it is with this in mind that I wish your Germania Club on its 100th Anniversary full success for its future!" 1965 was a big year for the Club, and with some 600 members, the situation seemed stable.

However, the Club needed the ambassador's good wishes, for its history is certainly also one of stubborn financial challenges. The Club more or less flourished until World War I, which negatively impacted its membership numbers and activities. By 1928, it had rejuvenated itself, although not at the same level as in the 1890's. The aforementioned bond of \$100,000 to build the Club facilities came due at \$160,000, compounded by \$20,000 worth of expenditures for the Prince Heinrich gala event. Of course, the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929 didn't help either since the Great Depression brought the next financial challenges that also decimated the membership ranks. By 1937 there were only 63 members, few of them active. The Club seriously reorganized, got out of a debt of \$230,000 and acquired new prosperity in the 1940's and 1950's. A high point in membership was in 1940 with some 1,100 members. However, the building began to show its age and required higher maintenance costs, aside from now, after the White Flight of the 50's and 60's to the suburbs, lying in largely poor, socio-economic surroundings (cf. illustration of the building today). With declining memberships and little young blood, the question arose: To sell or not to sell? To save the building or not to save the building? To move or not to move to another location?

A general club meeting was held regarding those questions with only 100 of the 400 remaining members in attendance. The vote was split. A little later an offer of \$500,000 for the club's property apparently also went nowhere. In 1975, the Germania Club requested landmark status from the Chicago City Council, which was denied, partially based on a flip-

pant charge that the Club had been used by the Bundists, the American Nazi party, and that some of the German Club officers had been pro-Nazi. The truth seems to have been that the Germania Club on one single occasion in 1938 allowed the Bundists to use the Germania Club facilities for a meeting, but since it had caused a disturbance that involved the police, it was limited to that. In any case, voices in favor of historical preservation of the building began to prevail and it was granted Chicago Landmark status in 2011, too late to help the Germania Club per se.

For on February 12, 1971, Treasurer Frank Gerbing, Jr. wrote to President Joseph Gies that the Club was losing an average of \$3,183 per month and had many debts:

The Club has been unable to operate at a break-even point or to generate a small profit for the last ten years. Any prudent businessman who could not show profits over that long a period would close up his business and salvage whatever he could for himself and his shareholders. Since the officers and directors seem to be what might be described as prudent businessmen, it appears that a plan of liquidation under Section 337 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code be adopted and the Club assets liquidated and a distribution of assets be made to members after payment of all just debts.

As a result of the situation, a financial restructuring plan was proposed and approved, but it only delayed the apparently inevitable. Nothing helped, and eventually the Germania Club was disbanded in 1985. Regarding the Germania Club building itself, it was sold to Harold Rider & Associates and turned into a multi-use facility. As to the furnishings, including the artwork, a members-only auction was held in June of 1986. Some items ended up in the Museum of the DANK House in Chicago.

All of this now returns us to the fate of the Glory of Germania. An attempt was made to find a buyer for the ceramic artwork, which failed, and, out of style and deemed as “kitschy,” it couldn’t even be given away. It was apparently unprofessionally removed from the wall of the Grand Ballroom, packed up into boxes and supposedly stored in the basement of the Altheim, a senior living facility originally for Germans located in Forest Park. My attempts to ascertain from the Altheim whether this is true initially seemed to be confirmed, but as I tried to pursue the idea of possibly resurrecting the Glory of Germania and putting it on display again, I was met with a strange silence. And so that’s the last curiosity I can tell you about the Germania Club and its significant history in the German-American community in Chicago.

German happiness hits record high thanks to the Ossis



A new study shows that Germans are more satisfied with their lives now than at any point since reunification in 1990.

The research by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) released on Friday showed that life satisfaction among Germans had hit 7.5 out of ten on their happiness scale.

The DIW has interviewed 30,000 people each year since 1984 on a variety of themes including work situation, health, education and income to understand how Germans are doing in their lives.

As far as possible, the study always interviews the same people.

On the question of life satisfaction, 10,000 people are regularly asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale of one to ten, from “completely unsatisfied” to “satisfied in every way.”

The DIW says that the score of 7.5 for 2015 is largely thanks to improved life satisfaction among east Germans.

“It is sobering to see that satisfaction among east Germans still trails that of west Germans after all these years, but at the same time, the gap is smaller now than it has ever been,” said study director Jürgen Schupp.

While residents of the former states of West Germany scored an average life satisfaction rating of 7.6, residents of the former communist states scored a 7.4.

The lowest rating ever scored nationwide was in 2004, when respondents gave an average score of 6.9.

Schupp said that the high level of satisfaction was largely due to the fact that Germany had weathered the financial crises of the past few years so successfully.

While other EU states had been hit by debt crises and rising unemployment, Germany had seen unemployment fall to record lows, he pointed out.

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