

Unser Übergang ins Englische

by
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Lutheranism in America
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As I was contemplating a topic for this history paper, my interest was peaked by a wall portrait at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, containing a brief review of its history. Since St. John's has a very interesting history extending back to 1850, there have been two anniversary booklets done on its history. One booklet was presented at the one hundred year mark, and the other was presented for the one hundred and twenty fifth anniversary. As I was reading through these booklets, trying to decide which part of its rich history I would write about, I was drawn to that period of time in which they made the transition from the German language to the English language.

This paper will focus on that transition from German to English, or as the Germans put it, that "Übergang." I will not only show how St. John's made the change, but I will also show how American Lutheranism in general had to struggle with the change. I say struggle, because there were opposing views concerning the transition. Some wanted it to happen overnight, while others were very concerned whether it should happen at all. Throughout this paper I will show both views, and will determine which view could help our Synod in the future as more transitions will, without doubt, come into question.

It seems that the language in Lutheranism became one of the first problems that the American Lutherans had to face. One source put it this way, "From its very beginnings until recent years one of North American Lutheranism's major problems was that of language. Lutheran immigrants spoke the languages of the European continent. At first the Lutheran tongues in the New World were Swedish, Dutch, and German." (1)

(2)

"The language problem has not been exclusively peculiar to Lutheranism. Other denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the several Reformed and Eastern Orthodox bodies, have had to live and struggle with it. But none of these bodies has felt it so long or so acutely as have the Lutherans."(2) We have to ask why language was such a problem for the Lutherans? It was, because "Lutherans came from non-English speaking lands. In America they were confronted with the problem of preserving their Lutheran identity."(3)

It is necessary for us to determine when the change actually did place. Many think that, "the era of World War I marked the major turning point. Many congregations dropped their mother tongue as an expression of patriotism and never returned to its use thereafter."(4)

"It would be a mistake, however, to give World War I sole credit for bringing about this cultural transition in the churches. Actually it was a process that had been going on for decades."(5) German had been the major language that the preaching and teaching was done in, but "already in the eighteenth century, children of German parents in Pennsylvania and New York were clamoring for the adoption of American ways and language."(6)

In looking for a specific example of why the war wasn't completely to blame for the desire to change into English, we can look at our own Synod. "Already in 1885, J.H. Ott was called as instructor of English at Northwestern."(7) The desire for our synod to develop English may have come from a push by the government. "There came a day, when in 1889 our Synod believed that its schools were imperiled by a law enacted by the Wisconsin State Legislature. The so-called Bennett Law

was quite evidently an attempt to restrict and to impair the efficiency of our day schools. It established a legal period of time for the school year and required that certain branches must be taught in the English language." (8) We can't say that the government was completely alone in its desire for English to be taught, because there were many in our Synod who also had that great desire. "The desirability of instructing in English at the Theological Seminary had for some time been agitated in certain circles of the Synod; it was felt that the time had come to teach the theological branches in the English language as well as in the German, since the use of the English language was on the increase in the exercise of pastoral duties in the congregations. At the fourth session of the Joint Synod in 1897 a resolution was passed to introduce the required English instruction." (9)

It appears that the use of English was becoming more popular within our Synod at the turn of the century, but there was still much caution to not change so quickly. It wasn't that way with the liberal Lutherans, though, as they made the transition rather rapidly. "By the end of the century the transition to the use of the English in the churches of the United Synod was virtually complete, although there were still a few German congregations in some cities, products of the later immigration." (10) Our own Seminary was blamed for wanting the change to come about more quickly than it should. The long-term effects of a rapid change were not looked at very closely. "The concern for the English language at the Seminary in 1900 as the future medium for the spreading of the Gospel, also was not genuine, in keeping with the truth, when the Gospel itself and the means of preserving it were not given due attention; that is, the untruthfulness inhered in the situation, because the sponsors of the English work were not alert to

the greater need at all."(11)

The sides were becoming divided. There were those who wanted the transition without much planning, and there were those who were very cautious, and didn't want the switch at all. This made for a problem, and a struggle in Lutheranism. "The immigrant churches before World War I faced a difficult task: 1) to reach the first generation in the language that they knew best, and 2) to retain the second generation which, in its eagerness to become 'American,' placed a high priority on the use of English in church, school, and home."(12) Confessionalism also caused much internal strife, together with the language problem. "The language questioned occasioned much internal strife and was intensified by the nineteenth century immigrations which were influenced by the confessional revival abroad."(13)

"The language problem, compounded by the multiplicity of languages used, often to the neglect or total disregard of English, has affected North American Lutheranism in three major ways: First, the language problem isolated Lutherans from one another behind curtains of language and national traditions... Second, the language problem has had an effect upon the numerical strength of Lutheranism in North America. The losses of second and third generations of immigrant families, and of unabsorbed immigrants to English-speaking bodies in the case of the former, or to the ranks of the unchurched are a matter of record...Third, the language problem has asserted itself in the struggle to preserve the confessional identity of Lutheranism."(14)

Lutherans were afraid of losing people, but they were also concerned

about losing their doctrinal heritage. "the language question became a serious problem over the years and gave rise to the charge--not always without foundation--that the use of the English language cut Lutherans off from their doctrinal heritage and opened the door to Puritanizing and revivalistic influences."(15)

Not all areas of the countries felt the same about the transition, nor the worry about losing the doctrinal heritage. In midwest Lutheranism, "opposition to the use of English, or extreme caution regarding it, was rooted in the belief of many that its introduction would result in an erosion of the Lutheran doctrinal position and adoption of non-Lutheran practices."(16) August Pieper thought this, in fact, he was so concerned about losing the doctrinal position because of the switch into English, that he wrote ninety five pages about this in the Theological Quarterly in 1915. In brief he said, "Aber die deutsche Sprache (wir reden immer von der Lutherschen deutschen, wie sie in seiner deutschen Bibel, Katechismen, seinen ubrigen Schriften vorliegt und Sprache der lutherischen Theologie ind Kirke geworden ist, --nicht von der modernen deutschen theologischen und kirchlichen ungeistlichen hurensprache) ist ein besseres Vehikel des Evangeliums als jede andre moderne kultursprache."(16) What he would have said in English is this, "But the German language (now we're talking about Lutheran German, as it is present in your German Bible, Catechism, your remaining writings, and has become the language of the Lutheran theologians and church, --not speaking about the modern german of the theologians and unspiritual, prostitute-like language of the church) is a better vehicle of the Gospel than all other modern cultural language."

Many of the conservative Lutherans felt that the German language had to be retained, for the doctrines to survive. "For some, the conclusive argument was that both the schools and the German language must remain strong because of the dearth of good Lutheran literature in English." (18) There was a wealth and variety of German literature in contrast to the English product, and that was a big concern. Many of the liberal Lutherans reacted to this and called this a myth. "The study and translation of the Confessions occasioned by this issue dispelled the myth, cherished by many who resisted the English language, that the Lutheran faith was so inseparably bound to a European mother tongue that it could not be expressed in English without serious loss and adulteration." (19) Did the liberal Lutherans have a valid point? Could the doctrines survive in the transition? In 1890, Heinrich C. Schwan, president of the Missouri Synod had an answer to this when he commented, "It is not the English language in itself which contains the danger. The danger rests in something...very apt...to appear in the train of the English language. It is the American spirit." (20) Muhlenberg also commented on this by saying, "We should look at language as we look at a bridge over a river. Whether it is made of oak or kanuo is not important so long as it holds and enables us to get across and toward our goal." (21)

The result, then, was that some preached in English, some preached in German, and others preached in a different mother tongue. G.H. Gerberding, in 1914 said, "Ours is the most polyglot Protestant church in America. We like to boast that the Gospel is preached in Lutheran pulpits in more languages than were heard on the day of Pentecost...But while these many tongues are on the one hand our glory, they are on the

other hand our heavy cross."(22)

The question came up as to what should happen. Should the mother tongue be kept in order to satisfy the elder people, or should complete transition take place in order to passify the younger generation? "For many of these immigrants it seemed that the only way to preserve their Lutheran faith was to preserve the mother tongue. Others, however, particularly among the second generation, insisted upon the necessity of using English."(23) The answer was quickly found, because "as time passed, interest and attendance waned. Worship services were held in the German language."(24)

As was mentioned in a previous quote, it wasn't the English language that was the problem, it was the American spirit, and that spirit had a big influence upon the young. "The reluctance of the elders in introduce English alienated large numbers of young people. In the end, thousands left foreign-language Lutheran congregations and joined 'Aerican' denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalean) or lost themselves in the world of the churchless."(25) Theodore Roosevelt and the influence of World War I had a great impact upon the young. "Because of the influence of World War I, anything German met persecution and suspicion of disloyalty to America and the work of our Lord was hindered, especially among the young people."(26)

Our younger generation was being pressured from all sides, but it seems the national spirit won them over, and why not? They were more concerned with fitting in than they were with their doctrinal heritage. They didn't feel comfortable with their heritage, they wanted to take

on a new identity. An extreme advocate of Theodore Roosevelt's '100% Americanism,' asked rhetorically: "What kind of American consciousness can grow in an atmosphere of sauerkraut and limburger cheese?"(27)

Until this new identity was taken and the total switch was made to the English, they never felt comfortable. Ole Edvart Rolvaag, a Norwegian said the transformation comes when "one's emotional life can express itself freely and naturally through the new idiom...Not till that miracle has taken place can one feel fully at home in the new country."(28)

Language wasn't the only thing that pressured the young, it was the total atmosphere of their heritage. It's been said that the "popular prejudice against German extended to other foreign languages as well as to 'foreign' ways of dress and diet."(29)

Because of the prejudice that was facing the young, and because of the great importance in reaching the young, it was apparent that transition was inevitable. Our Synod decided to go ahead with the transition, but with great care. "Care and cultivation of the English language in our country should go without saying, but as a matter of church policy it must have the right motivation."(30) What was the right motivation? It was evangelism. For Muhlenberg "the English language was a tool of evangelism, just as the German was a tool of preservation."

Since the transition came so late, evangelism was not very easy to do, as seen in the following factor: "The changing face of our cities and the disappearance of traditional nationality neighborhoods have also played a role in the transition. Certain neighborhoods are no longer

points to which immigrants gravitate. This has made many linguistic urban churches strangers in their own neighborhoods, unable to reach, win, and integrate any substantial number of new immigrants, and unable or unwilling to evangelize within the shadow of their steeples."(32)

It is important to list some of the products of the transition, and the first I will deal with is in the area of literature. "Between 1900 and 1917 most of the foreign-language Synods established or adopted English language church papers, published some kind of English hymnal and catechism, and tried to provide at least a few devotional books and tracts in English."(33) Here is an example of one change that took place: "The English companion periodical of the Gemeindeblatt is the Northwestern Lutheran, the first issue of which appeared in 1914."(34) It is interesting that "by 1917 most of the churches had established English language periodicals and had published English liturgies, hymnals, and catechisms."(35) All of this was done to keep up with the ever changing times and customs.

Another result of the transition is seen in the relationship the churches had with the mother country. "Dissociation from national origin through the changing of denominational name is a particular which demonstrates linguistic transition. In 1917 the Missouri Synod dropped the word German from its title chiefly because of war-time pressure. The German language, however, continued to be the official language of the synod for a good many years after. The United Danish Lutheran Church in America became the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1945. In 1948 the Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod became the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church. The

Danish Lutheran Church in America became the American Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1953. In 1958 the Slovak Synod became the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and in 1959 the Norwegian Synod became the Evangelical Lutheran Synod."(36)

One very significant outcome that resulted from the transition is still very much a problem today, and that has to do with the liberal Lutheran churches uniting. The liberal Lutherans wanted to get together, and they held this: "If we all speak English and we all teach the Gospel according to the Lutheran Confessions, is there any genuine reason for maintaining our ecclesiastical separateness?"(37) Because of the transition, "there can be no doubt that the linguistic transition to English as the common medium of thought, expression, and communication has been the major single factor in unifying North American Lutheranism."(38)

Throughout this paper, I have been focussing on the history of the transition as it happened in North American Lutheranism. I will now turn my attention toward a specific church, namely St. Johns in Oak Creek, and show how this change took place over the years. In the two anniversary booklets from St. Johns that I mentioned previously, there were very excellent notes from the original minutes taken and combined into each booklet. The booklets varied a little as to their content, but I combined the material. So here is a history of the transition from German to English at St. Johns:

January 1, 1867 -- In the constitution it said, "The German language was to be used at all times, except on rare occasions with the consent of the congregation. Further, that the German language was to be used and remain so long as three members remained who wanted it to stay as such." (39)

1909-- For the first time English song books were purchased to accommodate an extra monthly service to be held in the English language. This action was taken to encourage more young people to attend divine services. At the same time, the pastor was authorized to use an English liturgy. (40)

1918-- It was decided to write the minutes of the meeting in the English language. (41)

1920-- It was decided that all future confirmations be in the English language. Prior to this, German language prevailed. (42)

1921-- The congregation authorized the re-writings of the constitution in the English language so that all would have an opportunity to read it. (43)

September, 1922-- All children who were candidates for confirmation were instructed and confirmed in the English language. However, most of the services continued to be in German. (44)

1923-- It became apparent that the days of the German language services were limited, as in that year it was voted to have English services one Sunday every month. (45)

1937-- Our congregation went on record to alternate German and English services with the fifth Sunday in the month having an English service. This was brought about through the loss of our older members and our younger generation not being familiar with the German language. It was felt that our membership would grow with the use of more English services. (46)

1939-- At the suggestion of Reverend Monhardt the congregation approved of a double service on the Sundays which were designated for the German language. The German services were held at 8:45 a.m. with Sunday School before the English service. It was evident that in the near future the English language would replace the German service in our church. This was proven because in 1941 all German services were abolished because of lack of interest in attendance at these services. A German communion service was retained once a year and is still kept for the benefit of our older members who enjoy the German language. Good Friday evening was designated as the lone annual German service. (47)

1949-- By resolution of the congregation the name of our church was changed from 'The German Evangelical Lutheran St. Johannes Congregation in Town of Lake' to 'St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Town of Lake.' (48)

It seems that the congregations that were near a big city made the transition sooner than a country congregation. I came to this conclusion after doing a personal interview with a former member of one of those country congregations. Arnold Pieper was born in the Township of Rubicon, which is one and a half miles from Woodland, Wisconsin. He was a fourth cousin to August Pieper, since Arnold's father Franz was a second cousin to August's father, also named Franz. Arnold was born in 1903, so he remembers quite much about the transition. He was a member of St. John's in Woodland during the time of the transition. He said that the congregation had two German services each month right up until 1961. As one can see, in comparison to St. John's which is in the city, the use of German in the country lasted much longer. He recalls that in 1919, many parents pushed for the English language, because it was difficult for their children to understand German. He then said that it was in 1923 or 1924 that they started with the English liturgy under Pastor Lescow. This once again shows that the country was a couple years behind in their change. Everybody was German in the Woodland area, he said, and he knows that there are some German services still being conducted in the Neosho Catholic Church.

The main purpose for the transition was to reach out to the young, and bring them back into the church. Was the transition effective? Was there growth? Whether or not this next quote refers directly to growth from the transition, I thought it was valuable. "During the twenty odd years that lie between the union of 1892-1893 and the amalgamation of 1917, the Districts had enjoyed a decided external growth."(49) I thought it would be interesting to check out the pastoral acts of St.

John's in Oak Creek, and see whether or not there was growth in the years immediately after the transition. After studying the statistical summary (Appendix A), I couldn't find any immediate growth. I realize that I am unable to make a judgement based simply upon statistics, but nevertheless, I thought it was interesting.

Some made the transition from the mother tongue rather quickly, and others still to this day are closely tied to their mother tongue. The chart below shows the linguistic complex of North American Lutheran bodies as of 1958. This chart is helpful to show which church bodies still held on to their mother tongue. This information is only up until 1958, but unfortunately, I am unable to produce a more recent chart, as I know that the numbers would be completely different. But for the purpose of this paper, showing the period of that transition, this chart serves a good purpose.

<u>Body</u>	<u>National Origin</u>	<u>Total Congs</u>	<u>Ling. Congs</u>
Eielsen	Norwegian	9	1
E.L.C.	Norwegian	2630	5
Brethren	Norw-Swedish	45	1
Free Church	Norwegian	243	0
Ev. Luth. Synod	Norwegian		no statistics
A.E.L.C.	Danish	79	20
U.E.L.C.	Danish	181	24
Apostolic	Finnish	59	59
Suomi Synod	Finnish	153	146
National	Finnish	66	51
Synod of Ev Luth Chs	Slovak	55	54
Augustana	Swedish	1235	0
A.L.C.	German	2081	no statistics
U.L.C.A.	German	4552	363
Mo Synod	German	5368	567
Wisconsin Synod	German	827	140

(50)

According to this chart, in approximately forty years, eighty three percent of our Synod made the complete transition.

What has the transition meant for us today? Ironically when the Americanized Lutherans made the transition they said, "It is not true, that 'true Lutheranism' could not survive in the English tongue." (51) They must have been thinking about the Wisconsin Synod when they made this statement! Another ironic statement put out by The Lutheran Quarterly in 1961 said, "The appeal of the Lutheran Church to non-Lutherans, experience seems already to have demonstrated in some areas, lies in the confessional position, the piety, the pastoral work, the catechization, the hymnody, and the worship which are distinctively Lutheran. To give these up will result in an extreme 'Americanization' of Lutheranism instead of a modest 'Lutheranization' of America. To give these up will mean that the Lutheran Church will cease to grow and eventually will begin to decline." (52) This exact statement was typified by the liberal Lutherans when they made the overnight transition into English.

If more transitions are to come our way, we have to take notice of the liberal Lutherans' quick change, and realize that it isn't very beneficial to making speedy changes. Instead, we want to learn from the example of those very cautious conservatives who made that change with much care. Because they did use caution, we are where we are today. If Luther would have been present during the transition, he probably would have wanted the transition, but he too would have been very cautious, covering all his bases first.

By God's Grace we have his Holy Word intact this very day. His gracious hand is also seen in the way he has preserved our Lutherran Doctrine, based upon his Word. If we are faced with more transitions in the future, may he graciously be with us again.

(APPENDIX A)

of the

PASTORAL ACTS PERFORMED SINCE JOINING the W.E.L.S. in 1867

St John's - Oak Creek

PASTOR	BAPTISMS	CONFIRMATIONS	MARRIAGES	BURIALS
1866-1870 Phillip Brenner	21	8	2	6
1870-1872 William Dammann	40	16	6	9
1872-1878 John Hodtwalker	55	11	9	16
1878-1887 Christian Reichenbacher	73	31	11	29
1887-1887 Prof. E. Notz	2	14	0	3
1887-1896 B. P. Nommensen	93	24	6	40
1896-1908 John Brenner	74	92	12	31
1908-1917 Adolph Lederer	65	64	26	17
1917-1923 Martin Plass	29	19	7	12
1923-1964 Theodore Monhardt	462	361	138	177
1964-1972 Robert H. Michel	122	138	50	29
Was still serving at the time of the omnibus booklet Roger Ph. Drews	36	52	20	5

★ A break-down of the Baptisms, Confirmations, and Marriages per year for each of the pastors, to see if there was a significant change after the transition to English.

Pastor	Years	Baptisms	Confirmations	Marriages
Phillip Brenner	(4 yrs)	5 per yr	2 per yr	.5 per year
William Dammann	(2 yrs)	20 "	8 " "	3 " "
John Hodtwalker	(6 yrs)	9 " "	2 " "	1 " "
Christian Reichenbacher	(9 yrs)	8 " "	3.5 " "	1 " "
Prof Notz	(.5 yrs)	2	14	0
BP Nommensen	(9 yrs)	10 " "	2.7 " "	.8 " "
John Brenner	(8 yrs)	9 " "	11.5 " "	1.5 " "
Adolf Lederer	(9 yrs)	7 " "	7 " "	3 " "
Martin Plass	(6 yrs)	5 " "	3 " "	1 " "
Theodore Monhardt	(41 yrs)	11 " "	9 " "	3 " "

-27- transition

Endnotes

- 1 Scheidt, David L. Recent Linguistic Transition in Lutheranism. The Lutheran Quarterly. Times and News Publishing Company. Vol 13 1961. p34
- 2 Ibid., p34
- 3 Heick, Otto W. A History of Christian Thought. Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1966 Vol2 p449
- 4 Scheidt., p36
- 5 Nelson, E. Clifford. Lutheranism in North America 1914-1970. Augsburg Publishing House. Minneapolis. 1972. p8
- 6 Ibid., p8
- 7 Lehninger, Professor M. Continuing in His Word. Northwestern Publishing House. Milwaukee. 1951. p29
- 8 Ibid., p215
- 9 Ibid., p34
- 10 Nelson, E. Clifford. The Lutherans in North America. Fortress Press. Philadelphia. 1975. p349
- 11 Koehler, John Philipp. The History of The Wisconsin Synod. Senteniel Publishing Company. St. Cloud, Minn. 1970. p208
- 12 Nelson (1)., p8
- 13 Heick., p449
- 14 Scheidt., p35
- 15 Heick., p449
- 16 Nelson (2)., p350
- 17 Pieper, August. Unser Übergang ins Englische. Theologische Quartalschrift. Volume 15. October 1918 p253
- 18 Nelson (2)., p367
- 19 Scheidt., p35
- 20 Nelson (2)., p350
- 21 Scheidt., p35
- 22 Nelson (1)., p8
- 23 Heick., p449
- 24 St. John's Ev Lutheran Church, Oak Creek. 125th Anniversary Booklet. p23

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- 25 Nelson (1)., p8
- 26 St. John's 125th., p23
- 27 Nelson (1)., p7
- 28 Ibid., p8
- 29 Ibid., p7
- 30 Koehler., p208
- 31 Scheidt., p34
- 32 Ibid., p43
- 33 Nelson (2)., p367
- 34 Lehninger., p264
- 35 Nelson (1)., p9
- 36 Scheidt., pp39-40
- 37 Nelson (1)., 10
- 38 Scheidt., p44
- 39 St. John's 125th., p6
- 40 Ibid., p8
- 41 St. John's Ev Lutheran Church, Oak Creek. 100th Anniversary Booklet. p7
- 42 Ibid., p7
- 43 St John's 125th., p9
- 44 Ibid., p10
- 45 St John's 100th., p7
- 46 Ibid., p8
- 47 Ibid., p8
- 48 Ibid., p9
- 49 Lehninger., p37
- 50 Scheidt., p44?
- 51 Nelson (1)., p9
- 52 Scheidt., p46

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