Germans in America - 2008

Precis – Allen Krumm

Germans In America is a poignant retrospective of the immigrant experience and a refreshing reminder of the breadth and depth of the German contribution to the development of America. Coincidentally, this documentary also illustrates the importance of popular narrative in engendering and sustaining identity, whether collective or individual. Knowing needs to be clothed in good telling, for without artful, effective (and relentless) telling, knowing tends to wither and die.

After the Second World War, ostensibly as an unspoken condition of re-admittance into the polite society of nations, Germany seemed to voluntarily relinquish any and all narrative rights. Into this self induced vacuum stepped the western media and academia, who took up the task of defining Deutschtum with triumphalist gusto. Balancing light and shadow and negotiating nuances in telling the story of Germany could not be said to have been a priority.

The central theme, with a few brave exceptions, reiterated relentlessly in movies, documentaries, commentaries, and virtually every imaginable format, was apparently this: the only way to achieve a proper perception of Germany, whether from the distant past looking forward, or from the present looking back, was through the lens of the Third Reich. Consequently, in the decades following the war, the image of Germany disseminated comprised a rather narrow range of negatively tinted traits.

Germans In America exemplifies a heartening tendency in recent years to reassert a narrative tradition from the German perspective, to reclaim as it were an autonomous and positive self image. Although some of the conditions and characteristics emphasized by the West in the post-war period certainly had existed in Germany, the Germany thus projected onto the public consciousness was only a fractional Germany, a caricature of a much larger and richly variegated whole.

Germans In America goes some small way towards enlarging the historical conversation, and perhaps setting the record a bit straighter. It was to a considerable degree because of many positive German traditions and traits rarely emphasized, sometimes scarcely mentioned, which German immigrants brought to this land, that America was able to realize a large measure of the meaning of its foundational creeds.

Immigration entails emigration, so the question poses itself: So why did so many Germans come to America? With apologies to Camus, one has only one Fatherland, so
why did over 5 million Germans leave that Fatherland and come to America in the nineteenth century. Director Fritz Baumann makes it abundantly clear in his first segment *Into The Promised Land*, (Thursday, October 2 at 7:00pm) that the answer can usually be reduced to one word – misery. For commoners, the Fatherland wasn’t very fatherly and there was precious little land.

On arrival, German immigrants found what all immigrants to America find: endless possibilities and the potential of great rewards mixed with pain and staggering challenges. Many found themselves trapped in the almost unbearable conditions of the slums of New York’s Lower East Side. Yet their descendents are proof that *soziale Aufstiegsmöglichkeiten* was more often the rule than the exception for subsequent generations. For those who bypassed the east coast and made it to the Midwest, they found what can best be described by a word broken by history, but utterly apropos in its original sense – *Lebensraum*. They found land in abundance beyond imagination.

As illustrated in the second segment, *The Price Of Freedom*, (Thursday, October 2 at 9:00pm) immigrants also found that America in theory could be very different from America in practice. Notwithstanding the panegyrics of travel writers like Gottfried Duden (*Bericht über eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten Nordamerikas*) the imagined America was not necessarily synonymous with the particular America awaiting them. The fate of German immigrants to Texas, who refused to support the Confederacy, taught them that Germany was not the only land where the arbitrary power of the state could crush the individual. Later generations of German immigrants, during and after both world wars, would find that Americans were not exempt for their own brand of xenophobia.

The third segment, *Little Germanies*, (Friday, October 3 at 7:00pm) chronicles the bittersweet experience of assimilation, a trans-generational process of holding on and letting go. This process was intensively synergistic and reciprocal, resulting in two unique products: americanized Germans and an surprisingly germanized America. Watching centenarian Adele Wotherspoon gaze at pictures and fondle the artifacts of the lost world of her childhood kindles a intense awareness of the fragility of such ethnic microcosms.

The third segment, along with the fourth, *A People Disappears*, (Friday, October 3 at 9:00pm) also catalogues the prodigious contributions of Germans to American life, ranging from the economic and technological to the social, political and artistic. Along the way, German immigrants also provided instruction on some of the finer points of partying and parades. What is perhaps most surprising is the living tradition of political dissent, non-violence and human rights which was embodied in many of the original German immigrant communities or in leaders of those communities, exemplified by the pacifism of the Amish of Lancaster county as well as by John Moisebach’s enlightened interaction with the Comanche Indians in Texas.

There was no prototypical experience for Germans who came to America. For a tragic minority, the quest to start a new life ended in failure, crushed as they were by circumstances beyond their control, or unable to maintain their psychological balance amid their struggles after the long leap of faith from the old country. A few, like the Steinways or Carl Schurz, ascended to heights unimaginable when they left Germany to seek their fortune and destiny in America.

Most German immigrants, however, like those who came to Hermann, MO or the original settlers of Fredericksburg, TX simply managed to cope in quietly heroic ways, and set down roots. And although their descendents may cling with varying degrees of intensity to some aspect of their heritage, that very heritage has also enabled them to disappear into their Americanness. So in the end, when one ponders as to why there came to be so many Germans in America, one probable answer is that there was already much of America in those Germans.