

25 Years Ago: Start of the Library Renovation Project

Floating in anniversaries, the German Society of Pennsylvania might add another such commemoration in 2019 as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of the Library Cataloging and Renovation Project. The festive event in the Horner Library on November 21, 1994, was most memorable with a keynote by the famous historian Fritz Stern of Columbia University who spoke about "Talent and Genius: German Ideals" with an ironic nod to the white marble busts of Kant, Lessing and Humboldt above the massive bookcases. While the celebration marked the start of a five-year undertaking that would alter the Society irreversibly—we spoke of moving it into the twenty-first century—it also concluded a laborious struggle to secure the necessary funds, a struggle that consumed members, librarians, and scholars as well as politicians and foundation administrators on both sides of the Atlantic. Now might be the right time to recall some of the peculiarities and benchmarks of this endeavor before and after 1994.

Scope and Achievements

First the overall the accomplishment: the Library Project transformed a book collection of about 70,000 volumes that since 1817 had provided knowledge, *Bildung*, and entertainment to the German community, into a research collection that after the loss of this function in the age of the internet became a center for the study of German-American history and culture. Crucial for this transformation of the arguably most abundant collection of German Americana in the country was the decision to maintain the character of the *Volksbibliothek* in its original location as a premier document of this culture. The successful million-dollar fund drive allowed the cataloging of 24,000 titles of the general collection into the RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network) database and the restoration of about 9,000 volumes of the most precious part, the German American Collection, by the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, MA, aside from addressing many needs of a much neglected library.

The momentum of the Library Project was crucial for the launching of a parallel fund drive for the renovation of the building that drew another million dollars mostly from American sources. The support from the German side targeted the books, from the American side mostly bricks and mortar.

At the conclusion of the project in 1999, an international conference was organized in the renovated—though not quite restored—building under the title, "The Future of German-American History." Having saved this cultural treasure and made it accessible for research, we invited prominent scholars, journalists and politicians from the two countries to discuss the prospects of the German-American legacy in light of American-German political relations. The conference, sponsored by the Thyssen and the Max Kade foundations and concluded by Philadelphia mayor Edward Rendell, generated two volumes—in English and German—under the title *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures, 1800-2000*.



At the concluding conference, in the middle Barthold Witte, director of the Kulturabteilung, Foreign Ministry, Bonn.

The Long Road to Financial Feasibility

It took a decade to arrive at the inspiring inauguration in 1994. At this time the overall budget, the *Gesamtfinanzierung*, had been finalized, the cooperation of the University of

Pennsylvania settled, the approval of the Society's board secured, and a Research Advisory Board created which brought area scholars on board. The Tricentennial celebration of the founding of Germantown in 1983 had featured the German Society for a short moment on the national stage and raised hopes for the revitalization of the Society and its unique library. Yet it became clear that the needed changes would rattle the spirit of this ethnic society that had endured the upheavals of the twentieth century and the two wars against Germany by grudgingly learning to keep a low profile, maintain its mission as the guardian of the German heritage within the confines of its proud tradition while the Women's Auxiliary performed most of the charity work. Expert help would have to come from outside. It was sought and accepted as long as it did not clash with the spirit of a self-satisfied ethnic society.

It was to his credit that President George Beichl in 1986 hired a dynamic young woman, Barbara Lang, as the program officer who, on the basis of the 1985 expert survey of the Philadelphia Conservation Center for Arts and Historic Artifacts, drafted a first application to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. She laid out the need to catalog the Library in machine readable form and engage in a major conservation effort. While unsuccessful in its initial form, the project of cataloging and renovating the Library began to be discussed by librarians and historians of the area. Sponsored by the Max Kade Foundation in New York, which remains one of the most generous benefactors of the Society, the preparations for a major fund drive for renovation and cataloging the Library took a decisive shape in 1988 when the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton came on board through its social science librarian, Elliott Shore.

In his planning document Shore integrated in the suggested cataloging and renovation procedures the establishment of a German-American research institute, proposing a bridge between conservation and research efforts. This idea, though not fully realized, re-

mained an important component of the efforts to "rescue" what basically was an ethnic heritage center as a repository for academic scholarship. A few years later the academic component became the crucial condition for the commitment of German foundations and the Foreign Office in Bonn to contribute funds that were primarily designed for research, not for ethnic preservation.

It took indeed a few years until this commitment was secured thanks to the services of the University of Pennsylvania, its research administration and its German Department under Frank Trommler. In the meantime the fund drive received helpful endorsements from Werner Weidenfeld, Bonn's coordinator of German-American collaboration, Hartmut Lehmann, the director of the newly founded German Historical Institute in Washington and Jürgen Ohlau, the director of the New York Goethe Institute. The Society was to receive the sum of \$300,000 from the Stiftung Nordrhein Westfalen. Yet almost a year passed until the verdict came down: the envisaged moneys would go towards rebuilding East Germany's cultural heritage. A German paper concluded that the donation to the German Society of Pennsylvania had become a victim of German unity.

In 1993, the Thyssen Stiftung, the main sponsor of the Tricentennial Conference in 1983, again came through with a commitment of about \$235,000 over five years for the cataloging project as did the Robert Bosch Stiftung with the same amount. Thanks to the earlier connection with Krefeld, the home town of the first thirteen families that founded Germantown under Francis Pastorius in 1683, its former mayor and then member of the German parliament, Dieter Pützshofen, the Foreign Office confirmed its promise of donating \$330,000 towards the restoration of the 9,000 titles of the German American Collection. The German foundations committed the funds under the condition that the German Society would partly match them with the amount of \$300,000 over five years. It was a testimony to the vitality of the Society and its friends in the area that it was able to

raise \$60,000 each year between 1994 and 1999 whereby Penn facilitated the somewhat complicated bookkeeping. In addition to administering the project funds, the University contributed \$15,000, as did the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. The overall project budget was \$1,101,000.

The Five-Year Project and Its Many Collaborators

The anticipation at the November event of 1994 was fully justified. While the transition of the presidency from George Beichl to Bernard Freitag did not go as smoothly as hoped since it brought the long-simmering debate about the Society's mission to a head, the work on the collection proceeded according to the schedule that Elliott Shore, the project coordinator, had laid out, and the Research Advisory Committee, chaired by Frank Trommler, ratified. A painful but necessary step was the selection of more than 10,000 books and journals, partly in English, that seemed outside the library scope for storage. 940 boxes were first stored in John Muller's warehouse in Northeast Philadelphia, later in a warehouse in New Jersey. In another transport the most precious and delicate part of the Library, the German American Collection, inaugurated in 1867 by the Penn Professor Oswald Seidensticker, was taken over by Sherylgn Ogden, the director of book conservation at the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover. The Center completed the restoration within the planned three years, stored the collection temporarily and micro-filmed a substantial portion of the newspapers until the moneys of the Foreign Office ran out. Other parts of the collection were restored by the Philadelphia Conservation Center.

Thanks to the regular reporting of the project's progress in the *Staatsbote*, the catalogers' work found a lively resonance among the Society's members. The articles by the catalogers Scott Denlinger and Bettina Hess as well as Elliott Shore were more than reports, they conveyed the enthusiasm of finding so many unknown treasures and formulate a first impression of the discoveries, from exotic travelogues

in the 18th century and weird titles of popular science to valuable editions of the German classics, rare printings of seemingly lost novels (the first chapters of *Die Geheimnisse von Philadelphia* of 1850), and the papers of Konrad Nies, the most accomplished German-American writer around 1900.

The catalogers, later joined by Henna Heringer, began with the oldest materials. They entered their original cataloging in Library of Congress format into RLIN, the database of the leading research libraries in the country, yet retained the original classification system as a guide to location and the original organization. They found that fully 57% of the books cataloged were new to the database, and close to 20% represented unique titles in U.S. libraries.

Based on this cataloging effort the collection of the Horner Library has been accessible to the international scholarly community, an ongoing undertaking that, thanks to Bettina Hess, our Special Collections Librarian, is being updated on the web-based *Research Guide*: <https://www.germansociety.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/05/Research-Guide.pdf>.

Its first version, sponsored by the German Historical Institute, was created by Kevin Ostoyich in 2006. Soon afterwards, RLIN was merged with *Worldcat*, where the Horner records are available. The *Research Guide* provides an overview of the collections as well as lists of uncataloged pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscript collections. Separately, the Society's *Catalog* lists the titles as well (gsp.library.net). As in the later work with the Historical Institute that in 2007 led to the long anticipated launching of a research program ("GHI-GSP Fellowship at the Horner Library"), collaboration made the Library Project successful both in its restoration of the core of the Society and in establishing it as a viable center of German-American research. Penn's Research Administration delivered excellent service, its Library provided technical know-how, and the German Department helped direct the interest of scholars and sponsors. Project co-chairs Shore and Trommler complemented each other: Shore

who in the meantime became the director of the Bryn Mawr College Library, provided the librarian's expertise, Trommler administered the project and kept the fundraising effort on schedule. Both served on the Society's board and had in President Bernard Freitag an indefatigable supporter in the at times rough waters of ethnic politics. The Library, whose lending services to the members had dramatically decreased in demand with the advent of internet and digitization, was closed between February 1998 and September 1999 for the extensive restoration of the building. On the basis of the one-million dollar master plan that architect Otto Reichert-Facilides, chair of the Master Planning Committee, presented in 1996, the roof was replaced, the old ceiling of the library hall restored, the director's room renovated. New wiring was installed and a new heating, ventilation and air conditioning system established. Fund raising for this work started in 1993 and took off under the direction of Hans Hartleben, who secured major contributions by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Stiftung (Berthold Beitz), and CoreStates Bank. Matching and doubling these contributions required hard work and a special commitment of many members; the generosity of Albert and Hete Barthelmes, John Muller, Peter Kohler and Morgan Churchman deserves to be particularly mentioned.



Bernard Freitag, President (left), Frank Trommler and Elliott Shore, Co-Chairs of the Library Project

It goes without saying that the ceremony of the rededication of the Library at the 235th anniversary *Stiftungsfest* on October 9, 1999, meant neither the completion of the building restoration nor the end of the cataloging effort. Though unfinished at the end of the twentieth century, both endeavors gave lively assurance that the German Society of Pennsylvania was (almost) ready to prevail in the twenty-first century.

- Frank Trommler