

Book Review: *Memories of New Ulm: My Experiences During the Indian Uprising in Minnesota*, by Rudolf Leonhart, edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann, review by Timothy J. Holian, in *Yearbook of German-American Studies*, 40(2005), pp.171-173.

Memories of New Ulm: My Experiences During the Indian Uprising in Minnesota.

By Rudolf Leonhart. Translated and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2005. x + 125 pp. \$14.95.

In putting pen to paper in 1880, Rudolf Leonhart was neither unique nor unpredictable by turning to war during the 1860s for the setting of a historical text. He was hardly the first German-American writer to place emphasis upon that weighty topic, and in fact over the previous two decades Leonhart had already published several accounts of the German-American experience during times of armed conflict (*Abenteuer eines deutschen Soldaten in Virginien* [1860; Leonhart's first book]; *Der geheimnisvolle Pedlar, oder die Tochter des Schiffbrüchigen: Roman aus dem amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg*; and *Nord und Süd im Krieg und Frieden, oder Szenen aus der jüngsten Rebellion*). What sets the present account apart from those earlier works is the backdrop: rather than concentrate further on the Civil War during the early 1860s, Leonhart turns his attention here to the struggles of the German settlers of southern Minnesota generally, and the New Ulm area specifically, during the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862. The result is an extensive eyewitness account of frontier life at a formative moment in time, one of the longest and most reliable put into print for the edification of the general public.

Born in December 1832 in Bodenfelde, Hannover, Leonhart came to America at the age of twenty and soon settled in Pittsburgh, working there as a teacher of German, history, and music to forge a living. Early writings for the local German-American press supplemented his income and, more importantly, provided the essential stylistic foundation for his later historical narratives; in total Leonhart would publish thirteen novels—all of which deal with topics of German-American interest, the work here under consideration being the only specifically autobiographical one in nature—before his death in California in November 1901. By that time Leonhart long since had been lauded as an accomplished author, on a wider scale than many contemporary German-American writers due to his ability to compose and publish works in English as well as German. In 1860, dissatisfied with his job in Pittsburgh, Leonhart accepted an offer to teach elementary school in New Ulm, Minnesota. By fortuitous circumstance the brief period of Leonhart's residence there coincided with the 1862 Uprising, generating the necessary experience and perspective to write the present historical account, almost twenty years later and well after his return to

Pennsylvania immediately after the tragic event.

The newly translated and edited version of *Memories of New Ulm* includes a one-page Editor's Foreword and an informative Editor's Introduction, which provides details regarding Leonhart's life and the significance of the book as a contribution to the German-American literary canon. The body of the work is divided into eighteen primary sections containing Leonhart's original text; Tolzmann occasionally adds brief bracketed information, acknowledging instances in which Leonhart misremembers specific events or dates, and corrects those accordingly. A detailed notes section follows the Leonhart narrative and provides further elucidation with regard to historical events concerning New Ulm and the Uprising, as well as recommendations for supplemental reading. A brief index and profile of the editor conclude the work.

While *Memories of New Ulm* is an eminently readable book, one that easily captures and holds the attention of the reader, it is most remarkable for the manner in which Leonhart is able to contextualize what the German-American experience means to him on a collective as well as individual level. By crafting his narrative as a *Rahmenerzählung*, he succeeds admirably at blending his brief but formative New Ulm adventure with the totality of his German-American background. The concept of community stands at the core of the work: arrival in New Ulm is marked by immediate bonding with those who will introduce Leonhart to "old and young, great and small, high and low, as well as to the best of beer in New Ulm" (9). Class distinction ceases to exist in fighting the Indians shoulder-to-shoulder; Otto Barth, publisher of the *New Ulm Pionier* newspaper and a man previously described as being of "small, unimpressive stature," stood alongside the lowliest of refugees, sustaining mortal wounds in defending fellow settlers and earning lasting respect as one who "knew how to fight, and not only with his pen!" (61). Family in particular serves as an enduring source of strength to Leonhart, who recounts with clear agony moments of separation from loved ones and anxiety over illness, ultimately rejoicing in the survival of a daughter at the end of the long trip back to Pennsylvania while noting that, years later, "[this] Minnesotan is the strongest and most Germanic in appearance of our children, as can readily be seen from afar" (102).

Stylistically, Leonhart's account is noteworthy for the degree to which he makes use of his acquired literary skills. A pronounced sense of humor, irony, and even satire runs throughout the work, not least within descriptions of fiduciary matters: early New Ulm is described as perpetually cash-poor, its settlers having "almost completely forgot what money looked like. . . . Children who needed a schoolbook came weekly with the good excuse that their parents had no money" (13-14). At another point Leonhart turns his attention to the daughter of a local rival, noting after the fact that she "had long fingers and had been involved in theft in St. Paul, where she had demonstrated an unusual yen for silver teaspoons" (33). It quickly becomes clear that Leonhart does not seek to write a documentary here, but rather to tell a story, a word picture in which the reader may see clearly critical people, places, and events through his eyes and, by extension, those of others in the community. Particularly vivid are the accounts of hunting and Christmas in and near New Ulm, as well as descriptions of early relations between the settlers and Indians who, in detailed portrayals, "surpass even the slickest Caucasian tramp as beggars. They practice the profession with a dignity, as if it were the most honorable profession on earth" (34).

Ultimately the greatest value of *Memories of New Ulm* may be seen in sociolinguistic terms. Tolzmann's service in translating and republishing the work reinforces the notion that there are still many original German-language texts, containing a treasure trove of first-hand accounts of pioneer German-American life, waiting to be reintroduced to scholars, local and regional historians, and a general public lacking substantive knowledge of German. Original versions of such books also are subject to the laws of supply and demand: as the editor points out in one of the endnotes, recent Internet sale prices for copies of *Erinnerungen an Neu Ulm* have run as high as \$3,500. Thus in addition to the many scholarly benefits of the republished work, Tolzmann has provided readers with yet another tangible reward: a net savings of some \$3,485—a development which the prospective bookbuyer will surely appreciate.

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