

NJS Presents**Invited Talks****In this Issue:*****“Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken:”******Anti-German sentiment in Hoboken, 1917-1918, some examples*****By Jonathan Lurie****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i1.101>**

In the early 20th century, urban centers in New Jersey, especially locations such as Newark, Hoboken, and Camden, were home to many immigrants from Europe. Hoboken stands out amongst these as it was the major port of embarkation for American troops en route to the World War I. The city saw American immigrants supporting the war effort in varying ways. Irish immigrants, for example, may well have looked at American support for Great Britain in a different light than native-born American citizens. Similarly, German-Americans, especially between 1914 and 1917, were ambivalent as American “neutrality” towards Germany shifted towards outright hostility. What can local newspapers, some of which catered to ethnic interests, tell us about the tensions between ethnic loyalties and the call for patriotic support for the Allies as the United States went to war? This paper focuses in part on editorial comments on the need for “loyalty,” and/or “patriotism” once war was declared in April, 1917. It was originally presented as a paper at the NJ Historical Commission’s 2017 conference, “New Jersey and The Great War,” held November 3-4, 2017 at Rowan College at Burlington County and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

At the outset, a few words should be said about the title of my paper. The phrase was supposedly coined by General John Pershing, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF)

commander. He had said that the members of the AEF would be in 'Heaven, Hell or Hoboken' by Christmas of 1917. The AEF embarked and disembarked at this New Jersey port. The phrase became popular among the numerous soldiers in process of being transported across the Atlantic, even though Pershing's time frame was off by almost a year. Some 25,000 of its members never returned to Hoboken. Whether they ended up either in heaven or in hell remains uncertain.

In 1917, Hoboken had a population of about 70,000, and that total included large numbers of foreign born, Germans, Irish, Italians among the most predominant, but the largest group were the Germans. Not without reason was Hoboken often referred to as "Little Bremen." Blessed with incredibly functional harbors, Hoboken had long been an important arrival and embarkation point for foreign travel, especially to Western Europe. Large ships and piers to hold them were owned both by the Hamburg-America and North German Lloyd Lines. According to Christina Ziegler-McPherson, "there was always a ship arriving at, and another departing from the Hoboken piers."¹

Indeed, the Hoboken waterfront represented a vast area of walk ways, boarding houses, shipping offices. and, of course saloons. Hoboken possessed at least 320 of them, with probably the great majority located near or on the waterfront, many of them open 24 hours. Some did not even bother to close on Sunday, until the era of World War I, when much changed for "Little Bremen." In the first place, trans-Atlantic travel greatly diminished. In 1914, 1,218,000 immigrants entered the US. By 1915, that number had fallen to 326, 700. Between August 1914, when the war started, and April 1917, when the United States entered the conflict, only one ship

¹ Christina Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken: One-Way ticket 1845-1985*, (Charleston: History Press, 2011), 102.

docked in Hoboken, while some twenty-seven German liners had been barred from leaving Hoboken and the Port of New York, of which it was a part.²

Further, within two weeks of the war declaration, the Army had seized not only the Hoboken piers belonging to the Hamburg-America and North German Lloyd lines, but also the German ships that had been moored to them, as well as a number of buildings where officials of the shipping lines and their families resided. Indeed, the Federal authorities “confiscated several million dollars’ worth of German property,” and especially around the waterfront area, turned Hoboken into a military town. Its port became the prime location for Embarkation. By the fall of 1918, an estimated 2 million servicemen passed through the city on their way to Europe. With thousands of enlisted men and officers attached to the Embarkation service, their need for housing near the waterfront area became acute, as they had to cope with what the *New York Times* called an atmosphere of “Kaiserliche Teutonicus sympatheticus.”³ How was this attitude reflected in the city between 1917 and 1918?

In her book, *Immigrants in Hoboken: One-Way Ticket 1845-1985*, Christina Ziegler-McPherson emphasizes “the use of the wartime atmosphere of super-patriotism to pursue personal vendettas or transform personal conflicts into questions of national security, loyalty and patriotism.”⁴ Undoubtedly such incidents did occur, and not just in Hoboken. But extensive examination, from April 1917 to November 1918, of the *Hudson Observer* (published daily in Hoboken), reveals a very mixed emphasis on both due process as well as patriotism. Shortly after the Congressional Declaration of War, the *Observer* ran a very short editorial entitled “Good Advice to Everybody.” It quoted the U.S. Attorney General to the effect that all aliens should “obey the law and keep your mouth shut.” But the editorial added that “that advice also applies

² Ibid., 102.

³ Ibid., 108.

⁴ Ibid., 118.

to everybody.... In this crisis be an American! Uphold the law, unfurl the flag and stand by the President.”⁵

Certainly, noted the paper three days later, “no true American desires to be unfair to those of Teutonic blood who are citizens of this country and who for years, by their deeds and activities have shown themselves to be good citizens. The Federal authorities will take care of those who abuse their citizenship. The person who transmits false rumors ...is harming a fellow citizen and not living up to American principles.”⁶

On April 18, the *Observer* expanded its position. “Think as you wish, but keep your mouth shut.” This edict “may be hard for Americans to accept, but it is just as advisable in their case as in that of the alien within our borders. The rights of free speech, if exercised fully at this time, are liable to result in extremely unpleasant experiences, and silence is by far preferable...There have already been cases where circumstances seem to indicate that the necessity for utmost scrutiny of men and women and their expressions of opinion has been turned to revengeful purpose. In view of the times, and to avoid unpleasantness, it is better that each one should think over carefully what he intends saying, and even then keep still. Think as you wish, but don’t proclaim your opinion from the housetop. Remember, this is war time.”⁷

A few weeks later in an editorial entitled “The German Population Here Unquestionably Patriotic and Law-Abiding,” the *Observer* emphasized that “there is nothing to be feared from the so-called German population of the city.... Those born in Germany are not to be blamed for retaining an affection for the Fatherland....It is but natural to have a feeling of reverence for old home attachments. But despite this it is safe to say they are with this country, as well as of and

⁵ *Hudson Observer*, April 7, 1917, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1917, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, April 18, 1917, 8.

in it, and will be found at all times patriotic and law-abiding. The Government can be assured that there will be absolutely no trouble in this city or county.”⁸

Six days later, the paper reported an incident which has an intriguing resonance for our time. Two patrons were eating dinner in the Kaiserhoff Hotel in downtown Hoboken, when the orchestra began playing the national anthem. They kept on eating, and did not stand up “in spite of the fact that everyone else stood up.” In the face of remonstrances from other diners, they still declined to rise. Soon, a “miniature battle was in active progress, with the two men getting very much the worst of it.” The Hoboken police arrived, and “All of the participants were placed under arrest and taken to police headquarters.”

In the station house, however, the ardor of the combatants had cooled to a considerable extent. None of them wished to bring any charges against any of the others. One of the pair, Eddie Meyers, apparently indicated that he “did not recognize the national anthem and that he refused to stand up on that account. He is said to have stated that he would have stood up if he had known what it was for. Finally, as no complaints were made, all the men were released. There was no record of the affair made.”⁹ A century later, I suspect that few would be persuaded by Meyers’ position. But prior to World War I, the national anthem did not have the familiarity given it today.

A final example of concern with due process may be cited. It involves the case of one Frederick Meissner, a longshoreman working for the Hamburg-American Company, who had been injured in July 1914 when a barrel fell upon his leg. The company paid him some \$9,000 for lost wages, and then declined to pay him any more “on the ground that he had been paid enough.” He sued, and was awarded additional compensation. The company moved for an

⁸ Ibid., April 20, 1917, 8. The county in question was, of course, Hudson County.

⁹ Ibid., April 26, 1917, 7.

arrest in judgment on the grounds that Meisser as a registered ‘enemy alien’ “could not recover.” In denying the motion, the court held that when aliens in the United States “shall conduct themselves in accordance with the law, they shall be undisturbed in the peaceful pursuit of their lives and occupations and be accorded the consideration due to all peaceful and law abiding persons....”¹⁰

But Hoboken was not immune to anti German sentiment, all the more after the American declaration of war. Thus a German immigrant, seeking to become a citizen, was employed by a company contracted to repair a number of German liners which had been seized by the military. Anticipating that the United States would impound these vessels, in the weeks before Wilson's war message to Congress their crews had damaged the engines, seeking to make them inoperable. He was overheard to say “what in the hell is the use of fixing up all these ships? They will be blown up before they get far from the coast.” The *Observer* reported that Adam Schroer, 22 years old, “was being held without bail for the Federal Grand Jury.”¹¹

On July 2, an editorial warned that “the worst is yet to come.” We must be prepared “for the serious phase of war,” with thousands to be added “to the long roll of heroes who met death in the noblest way a man can die--fighting for his country.... When the transports carry home the dead and wounded the horror of war will be realized....” Moreover, foes of our government within our border should not “gloat over the remains of our brave American boys...for summary punishment will be certain and without due process of law.” The editorial concluded by reporting that in Boston, “socialists and pro-Germans who condemned the United States Government were

¹⁰ Ibid., May 21, 1917, 12.

¹¹ *Hudson Observer*, June 13, 1917. I could find no further reference to this defendant.

made to kiss the American flag.” The editorial did not endorse such action, but simply stated that “we must all be Americans now.”¹²

On January 31, 1918 the *Observer* headlined a report that “enemy aliens do not salute flag.” Aliens were required to report to the police headquarters in order to “secure their questionnaires....” Right by the side of the desk “is a large American flag, which...faces the entrance and no one going into the place, provided he has the use of his eyes, can avoid seeing the national emblem.” But the vast majority of enemy aliens who enter the building “never remove their hats...Other people present at the time and who have a reverence for the flag and its meaning feel that something should be done in the matter. Perhaps the desk sergeants, in spite of the fact that they have a great deal to do, might find time to inform other ‘forgetful’ enemy aliens of the respect due to the flag under whose protection they are living.”¹³

In Jersey City, when an Austrian enemy alien declined to answer a question “are you willing to fight for the United States,” he was “severely condemned by the Commissioner who ordered him to jail in default of \$5,000 bail.” The Commissioner further observed that “you fellows who come to the United States have got to understand that you have to obey our laws and not do as you damn please.” Apparently Carl Beidner hemmed and hawed for several minutes and finally said “No, I would rather be in Austria fighting against the United States. All my relatives are there and my heart is there.”¹⁴

One week later, Hoboken Recorder Carsten considered the case of Joseph Reik who, while standing on a street corner while troops were passing, presumably on their way to the Embarkation point, stated that “I hope every one of them gets drowned. They are dirty bums and

¹² Ibid., July 2, 1917, 8.

¹³ Ibid., January 31, 1918, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., March 22, 1818, 1. The headline ran “Would rather fight against Uncle Sam.” I was unable to locate further information on Beidner’s case.

I hope they never come back.” A Hoboken resident, Mrs. Neil Severs, overheard Reik's comment and asked him what he meant. Reik responded by “using abusive language to the woman, telling her to mind her own business and by calling her vile names.” At this point a crowd formed, someone yelled “lynch him,” and Reik fled, pursued by Mrs. Severs, who called for police assistance. When Reik ducked into the building wherein he worked, police arrested him. Upon arraignment, Reik claimed no knowledge of the incident. Other witness, however, corroborated Mrs. Sever’s account, and Recorder Carsten sentenced Reik to a year in prison, after which “he will be handed over to the Federal Authorities.” In passing sentence, Carsten said to Reik that “you should be tarred and feathered and hung out to dry as an example to others of your kind. My only regret is that I am not able to punish you more severely.”¹⁵

Sometimes, or so it would seem, dissidents courted a response from governmental authorities. Thus in 1918, Ernest Hertel took the opportunity at a July 4th picnic (of all places) to observe that “Kaiser Wilhelm was a better man than President Wilson.” He was promptly arrested.¹⁶ A Newark resident who worked at the Submarine Boat Corporation was alleged to have stated that “before the American people knew it, the Kaiser will rule America, and there will be no more democracy.” His utterance resulted in an indictment for sedition, and a three-month jail sentence.¹⁷

One week before this report, the *Observer* had run a short editorial calling for the United States to be present at the forthcoming peace talks. But such presence should not include the president. Indeed, “it is time to spike the ill advised suggestion put forth from time to time that President Wilson should personally attend that conference. It is neither necessary nor desirable from any point of view. He will not lack spokesmen there amply able to interpret his wishes and

¹⁵ Ibid., March 28, 1918, 1.

¹⁶ See Ziegler-McPherson, 118.

¹⁷ Reported in the *Hudson Observer*, October 22, 1918, 1.

carry out his directions.” Representatives “picked by him and confirmed by the Senate will be there to safeguard all that this country has taken up arms to achieve. His place is in Washington, while the arrangement of the minor details...can safely be left to others.”¹⁸

Occasionally, expressions of patriotism in Hoboken had to give way to military practicality. In March 1918, its mayor called for the residents and merchants along First Street, the route down to the piers, “to decorate their homes and places of business to the fullest extent of their ability with suitable decorations in which the Stars and Stripes and the portrait of [the] President...will predominate.” Thus, “the men of the nation on their way to France may be cheered by the knowledge that the people of the city are heart and soul with them, honor and praise them, and pray with all fervor of their hearts, for their safe and speedy return crowned with triumph and victory.”¹⁹

But Mayor Griffin’s plea fell on deaf ears. The Chief of the military police praised the plan as “in every way a worthy and admirable one,” which “reflected the greatest credit both on its originators and the city itself.” However, it was the policy of the War Department “not to encourage any scenes in connection with the departure of the men.” By decorating First Street, a great many people “may be attracted to witness [both the departure and] arrival of the troops.” Thus the military authorities believe that “it would be best that the decoration plans be cancelled altogether. It would prevent a whole lot of possible trouble in the future and will also save the city from going to this expense.” Apparently the municipal officials acquiesced, albeit unwillingly.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., October 15, 1918, 8. Wilson not only insisted on going himself to the Peace Conference, but also stayed away from the United States for almost a six-month period, the longest time in American history for a president to be absent from the United States. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the results of his absence as well as the treaty that emerged from the Paris Peace Conference were tragic for Wilson and the United States.

¹⁹ Ibid., March 14, 1918, 3.

²⁰ Ibid., March 16, 1918, 3.

One is struck by the matter of fact tone in which the *Observer* reported the various anti-German incidents such as the ones described above. As far as I can tell, it never endorsed the penalties levied. On the other hand, as previously noted, the paper had urged its readers to keep their mouths shut, warning of unfavorable consequences if they did not. Further, it was quick to open its pages for matters favorable to Hoboken. Two such examples may be cited here: a) the appeals for supporting the Liberty loan in 1918, and b) the rather clever response of one Hoboken draft board to the call for such support.

Faced with the need to raise more than \$8,000,000 in barely one week, the *Observer* ran a broadside, noting that Hoboken “will have to raise almost a million a day for the remainder of the drive. Some say it cannot be done. They are enemies to Hoboken....Only the quitters will lay down, only the weak will quit. The brave, the valiant will keep going. In which class are YOU? Decide NOW! Hoboken needs YOUR help.... **Save Hoboken From Disgrace and Humiliation.**²¹ NOW, get busy. Get that Liberty Bond and do your share for your country...Buy your Liberty Bond in Hoboken.”

On April 8, 1918, the *Observer* reported about the efforts of one local Draft Board concerning an appeal to those whom it had exempted from military service. The Board sent a letter to each such individual, reminding him that “some other man was put in your place.” The letter referred to the Third Liberty Loan “to which you should cheerfully subscribe to the limit of your ability and at some sacrifice if necessary.” In truth, “a man was put in your place on the firing line: will you help feed, arm and clothe him while he offers his life?” The recipient was urged “to come to your local board and enter your subscription for one or more bonds....” Thus

²¹ Emphasis in the original.

he could place his name on the roll among those who, though kept at home, are doing their share as patriots.”²²

Finally, attention is called to a story that appeared on March 2, 1918, entitled “Startling News in German Newspaper.” Even in the dark days of war, the *Observer* demonstrated a sense of humor. The story involved a report allegedly in the *Cologne Gazette*. “It is reported from New York that a barbed wire fence of over 1,000 kilometers in length has been drawn around the docks and piers of New York. This gigantic fence encircles the whole of New York and also the adjoining cities of Brooklyn, Hoboken and Jersey City. No one is allowed to pass through the fence without permission, especially enemy aliens.

Fifty thousand soldiers have been detailed to guard the port terminals. Any person found loitering in the vicinity of the barbed wire fence is immediately shot. All Germans who either reside or work within the barbed wire fence must evacuate the district immediately.

In Chicago alone, 23,000 Germans have been forced to move out of the harbor district. These rigorous regulations have caused great excitement among the business men of the entire country because they are compelled to do without their German employees if their places of business are near the docks...

The Germans whom in Hoboken, had built up a colony resembling a little piece of Germany, have all been forced to leave, and that port, which already had suffered heavily from the war, is now absolutely deserted.”²³ Residents of that city who read the *Observer* of course knew better, and those AEF members who had found themselves destined neither for heaven nor for hell, upon their return saw Hoboken in a very different light.

²² Ibid., April 8, 1918.

²³ Ibid., March 2, 1918, 3.

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