

Two Hundred Years: The German Society of Maryland

-From Aid to Indentured Servants to Scholarship Awards for Maryland Students-

(This article was originally written in 1983 by Dr. Armin Mruck. The mission of the GSM remains the same.)

1983 was a year of significant anniversaries. It is half a millennium ago that Martin Luther was born, three centuries ago that the ship "Concord" brought German settlers to the shores of North America, two hundred years ago that The German Society of Maryland was founded. Hope, help, salvation, the beginning of a new way of life were common or similar goals relating the three anniversaries. Martin Luther sought what he believed to be the true God-ordained biblical way toward salvation. German immigrants on the "Concord" wanted to be free of the narrow confines and restrictions of their homeland. The German Society of Maryland was created to protect those who were searching for a new and better life, to aid Germans or Swiss who soon were to discover that this was a difficult task. One of the hardships confronting early settlers in Maryland – and in other states as well – was the indentured servant system wherein captains of vessels filled with human cargo facilitated the Atlantic crossing by selling immigrants' labor to employers of varied trades and occupations. For all practical considerations, the newly arrived found himself exploited in the chosen land of great expectations. Maryland Germans and Swiss citizens of means, of education, of professions and crafts and most of all of human compassion for the less fortunate and a strong dedication to justice and fairness, decided to associate themselves in the German Society to become, as Klaus Wust so fittingly coined the term, "Pioneers in Service." Not only was financial and personal aid provided whenever necessary and within the possibilities of the Society, but it also was soon realized that legislation was called for to set a stop to blatant exploitation. The fruition of this awareness coincides with the first banquet held by The Society at The Kaminsky Hotel on the 26th of December, 1817. It was at this occasion that "President Mayer could report that the draft of the charter for the Society and the carefully prepared text for a redemptioner law had been submitted to the legislature at Annapolis." (Klaus Wust, Pioneers in Service. The German Society of Maryland. 1783-1981, Baltimore, 1981, p. 11). One year later in 1818, The Maryland General Assembly granted a charter incorporating the Society and soon thereafter passed a law regulating the redemptioner system. (Klaus Wust, *ibid.*) From this time onward festive banquets were held annually to look at past achievements and to plan for the future. Quite logically, the activities of the Society fluctuated with the numbers and the changing needs of the new immigrants. At times immigration dwindled, at other times it assumed giant proportions, depending on the political and economic situation in Europe, and eventually, also on the U.S. immigration laws.

Thus, during the presidency of the late Otto Franke, the Board of Directors decided to direct the fundamental aid mission of the Society into a new avenue, not closing its concerns for people seeking help for many reasons. Otto Franke, who throughout his life had shown dedication to cultural and educational matters, together with the assistance of like-minded members of the Society, resolved to "establish a Scholarship Fund of \$50,000 – to be used to grant scholarships to students of German ancestry at universities or colleges in Maryland, especially such students as major in the German language." (Klaus Wust, op. cit., p. 37). Until today, exactly a quarter of the century after establishing the fund, the Society through its Scholarship Committee under the leadership of the dedicated chairpersons, such as the late Professor Cloos of the Johns Hopkins University and Dr. C.M. Kurrelmeyer Zintl and with the faithful and reliable cooperation of members of the committee, the above charge has been implemented. Every year the process of application, examination, decision making, and eventually granting the scholarship extends over approximately a two month period. After the secretary's careful preparation of the applicants' files, the dossiers are distributed to the individual members of the committee who judge the applications as to the student's economic need and academic merit. Prerequisites for eligibility were also proof of German/Swiss/Austrian ancestry, Maryland residence and enrollment in a university or college in the State of Maryland. Towards the end of May the committee traditionally met in the pleasant surroundings of the Johns Hopkins University Club to deliberate and to make the decision as to who is to become the grantee of the Society and the amount of the award. Often the committee was honored by the presence of the President of the Society. Remarkably, the scholarship committee has experienced many years, a quarter of a century, of mostly smooth operation. \$101,420.00 have been awarded to students of the following universities and colleges: Johns Hopkins, Mt. St. Agnes, U. of Maryland, Loyola, Western Maryland, Goucher College, St. Johns, Mt. St. Mary's, Washington College, Maryland Institute, Towson University, Frostburg State University, Hood College, Zion College, U. of Baltimore, Salisbury State University. While these figures are impressive, they do not reveal what they mean to the individual grantee. Reading their applications shows how many of the young scholars are struggling hard to achieve their personal and academic goals. At one time the leaders of the society had to resolve their differences of opinion as to the relative importance of academic standing and financial need and the question of eligibility of graduate students. Through the latter years, the committee very much agreed on the importance of scholarship and the significance of need as well as the eligibility of graduate students, however, few they may be.

A happy occasion for the scholarship fund of the Society was the addition of the Julius Hofmann Memorial Fund Award which since 1977 has been administered by the scholarship committee. The death of Otto Franke moved members of the Society to make a special contribution in the founder's honor.

It was fortunate that with growing economic distress of young academicians, the Society was able to increase its funding of the project. Thus, in October 1981, one Hans Peter Soeder of St. John's College in Annapolis wrote "Once again I would like to express my gratitude to the scholarship committee and also to all the members of the Society who made this scholarship possible. I am sure that not many of the members can truly assess just how much their contribution is aiding the financial aid student. In my case, the support of the society has given me the chance, by providing a little security in my senior year, to choose between options and thus has enabled me to do some volunteer work for the college community which otherwise would have been spent working in the private sector to raise the needed funds." Timothy A. Bennett in June 1982, thanked the Society for a generous stipend and stated, "I can assure you that the money will be a great help to me as I pursue my studies at Johns Hopkins." In 1956, the total amount granted to one student was \$300, in 1983 the amount was \$10,000.

Perhaps the significance of the Scholarship Project of the German Society of Maryland initiated during the forward looking tenure of Otto Franke and continued through many presidencies with the wholehearted support of President Fred Wehrenberg and the untiring chairladyship of Carrie May Kurrelmeyer Zintl can best be summed up by quoting William H. McClain of the Department of German of Johns Hopkins University, who on June 18, 1981 wrote in a letter to President Fred Wehrenberg, "The Committee on Scholarships of the German Society has done admirable work over the years. Its work is indeed one of the reasons I am proud to be a member of the German Society. I hope that it can continue in the future to assist students of German background..." Judging by the many years of financing the awards, the members of the Society have shown how much the spirit of 1783 is alive in 1983. For more than two hundred years it has remained faithful to its original goal, to assist those who are in need, at first the indentured servants of German, Swiss origin, then the immigrants of the 19th and 20th century, now the descendants of those who came to this country in search of a better life.

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Dr. Armin E. Mruck
Professor of History, emeritus
Towson University
Towson, Maryland
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