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Germans in the US

Their economic, cultural achievements and linguistic contributions





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German americans

As German Americans are commonly defined all the Americans having a German ancestry, i. e. all the people whose ancestors moved from Germany to the United States, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. They comprise more than 50 million people thus making them the most significant ancestry group ahead of Irish Americans, African Americans, and even of English Americans (www.wikipedia.org). In Don Heinrich Tolzmann's view, the author of *German–American Experience*, many people are not aware that German is the most significant ancestral group in the US. He maintains that it is an eye–opener, and it is something generally overlooked (www.bloomberg.com).

The same statement was also expressed by Russell A. Kazal, according to whom people of German descent form the largest ethnic group in the US. But he goes on claiming that today there are comparatively few signs of the once formidable political clout, organizational life, and ethnic consciousness of German Americans (Kazal 2004: 1). In Kazal's opinion such an ethnic quiescence is brought into clear focus if compared with local manifestations of Irish identity. Interestingly, the bulk of German and Irish immigrants to the US arrived approximately at the same time, i. e. from 1830 to 1890. Survey research carried out in the mid–1980s in the Albany, New York, area, however, found that while Irish and German ancestries were each claimed by roughly one–third of native–born whites, solely some 20 percent of respondents saw themselves as German, compared with 31 percent who asserted an Irish identity (Kazal 2004: 1).

However, the exact number of Germans currently residing in the United States cannot be precisely ascertained. No one knows how many German Americans there are today. What the melting pot has put together, statisticians can no longer untangle.

In 1909 an attempt to determine the number of people of German ancestry living in the US was made by Albert Bernhardt Faust. In his view the «question of how much German blood exists in the population of the United States has never been satisfactorily answered» (Faust 1909 vol2: 5). The question as to how far the German blood is carried through the entire American people, is one beyond all possibilities of calculation (Faust 1909 vol2: 24). He argues that in 1900 the German stock, (to whom he also includes Dutch, Swiss and Austrian people), is solely two million behind the English one. By adding its large contribution, between 18 and 19 million (or about 27 % of the entire white population of the US) to the 20 million or more from England, it has made the American people a Germanic nation (Faust 1909 vol2: 27). Moreover, his work includes special references to political, moral, social, and educational achievements the Germans realized after their arrival in the New World.

According to more recent estimates, during the 1980 census, when the origin of each individual was asked, i. e. of 226 million Americans, 17.9 million responded «Germany»! In addition, 31.2 million reported to have also had Germans among their forefathers. Altogether, a total of 49.2 million Americans, claimed to have had Germans among their progenitors. (www.maxkade.iupui.edu, chapter 1).

An even more up-to-date US census, conducted in 2000, says that 42.8 million Americans identified themselves as being of German background, representing 15.2 % of the US population. It is estimated that between 1800 and the present over seven million German-speakers emigrated to the U.S., the majority of whom arrived between about 1840 and 1914, with the peak period coming in the early 1880s. In the nineteenth century many of those immigrants settled in the states of the Upper Midwest, an area known to this day as America's "German Belt" (www.mki.wisc.edu). According to the 2010 census there are even 49.8 German-Americans. It is well-known that Americans of German background top the list of U.S. ethnic groups, followed by Irish: 35.8 million, Mexican: 31.8 million, English: 27.4 million, and Italian: 17.6 million, as the census shows (www.bloomberg.com).

But the German American identity has become submerged since the second half of the 20th century. Most German Americans point to the recession of the German language from public and also from private domains as a fundamental example of this submergence, and they generally consider World War I as the end of German America.



Figure 1. German immigrants moving to America.

Anyway, recent scholarship has put into evidence that the weakening of German American identity was not exclusively caused by external pressures (such as an anti-German sentiment during World War I) than to the fact that German Americans, consciously or not, have come to identify themselves according to new categories, like race and class, that cut across ethnic lines (www.mki.wisc.edu).

Commemorating the founding of Germantown, Pa. in 1683, the holiday celebrates America's largest ancestry group, with 9 million people claiming part or full German heritage.

As President Barack Obama proclaimed a few years ago on this occasion, «Our citizens of German descent excel in every discipline and open our minds to the expanses of human possibility. When we drive across a suspension bridge, listen to music played on a Steinway piano, or send a child to kindergarten, their unique traditions and customs surround us».

Today there is a German belt extending from eastern Pennsylvania to Oregon. Bloomberg describes data from the American Community Survey:

A majority of counties in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Mis-



Figure 2. German immigrants in the US (making sauerkraut).

souri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas are predominantly German, and they make up a plurality of Ohio and Indiana counties .

However, it is Pennsylvania having the largest population of German–Americans. In the state reside 3.5 million people who claim German descent. Allegheny county, which also includes Pittsburgh, has 348.979 German–Americans, according to the census (www.bloomberg.com). Thus, I will describe below German–America in Philadelphia/Pennsylvania. It seems to me a particular interesting case in point (see chapter II).

As can be immediately deduced, this statement is in sharp contrast with the geographic map shown above, according to which most part of German immigrants cannot be found in Pennsylvania but in the upper Midwest, i. e. in North and South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, Nebraska, and Wisconsin (30 % and over).

It is obvious that the determination of the exact number of German immigrants in the US and the core areas where they reside are rather irrelevant. What really matters are the economic, political, cultural, and artistic achievements the Germans have undertaken after moving to the New World. They are mostly responsible for the standing

and the prestigiousness the USA nowadays has, making it a leading country all over the world. The significant achievements the Germans have fulfilled following their arrival in the New World will be the argument of the next chapter.