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In the Turmoil of the Civil War: Swiss Emigrant Daniel Schmid of the Union Army

by Fabian Braendle

Swiss immigrants to the United States fought in the American Civil War on both sides. About 6,000 fought on the side of the Union, while the number of those who joined the Confederacy is not known.¹ Some even rose to prominence reaching the rank of General. Daniel Schmid, a common soldier, who was born in 1834 in the Swiss town of Buchs, Canton St. Gallen, and joined the Union Army of the North. In his autobiography that he wrote for his numerous brothers in Switzerland, Schmid provided much detail about his war experience. It was quite common at the time to write for the benefit of relatives about one's fate abroad. Daniel Schmid sent his account, titled *Memoriale*, to his brothers in 1893, quite some years after the events.

In his memoir, Schmid not only dealt with his experiences in the war, but also wrote about his economic activities, the host country's political struggles, and about his complex familial circumstances. He was an alert observer and skillful narrator, and offers captivating sketches of battles, features their horrendous dimensions, and highlights the incredible stress that a common soldier had to endure.

As the son of a well-to-do father, Daniel Schmid could attend secondary schools, among them the Industrial School in Winterthur. He

¹ Heinrich L. Wirz and Florian A. Strahm, *Schweizer im Amerikanischen Sezessionskrieg 1861-1865* (Bern, 2012). About 100 Swiss were officers, six reaching the rank of General. Jürg Weibel, *Captain Wirz. Eine Chronik* (Bern, 1991). Charles A. Raeuber, "Ein Schweizerregiment im Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg 1861 bis 1865", in: Burgenverein Untervaz (Hg.), *Untervazer Dorfgeschichten* (Chur, 2011), 2-15.

was skilled in writing and worked in various offices as an accountant, also his last position in the Union Army. He was, therefore, quite well prepared to write his autobiography. Authors of supposedly modest origins have been quite successful in presenting their life stories in a most positive way.²

The manuscript of Daniel Schmid's memoir was owned in the 1970s by the Albert Maurer-Goetz family in Buchs. The historian Othmar Studer of Canton Aargau transcribed large portions of the manuscript and published them in a brochure.³ The text exemplifies Swiss emigration as it evolved in nineteenth century Switzerland, and illustrates Swiss participation in the peopling of the northern Western Hemisphere where the indigenous world was largely annihilated.⁴

As in other centuries, the Swiss in search of economic prosperity were also involved as individuals and as groups in the conquest and resettling of the northern Western Hemisphere. Some succeeded, others returned home, still others experienced failure. Daniel Schmid stayed in the United States, although reintegration into civil society after the war proved difficult. He strove to become economically independent, but failed several times and was unable to succeed in the context of keen competition.

Before Daniel Schmid's experiences in the American Civil War are presented, a note on his childhood and youth will be in order. He was born into a large family of substantial and secure means. As a boy, he could play outdoors in fields as well as forests. He took risks that at times led to harsh punishment by his father. To earn some money, Daniel took on errands such as taking care of the mail of a Müller relative. At age thirteen, he got drunk for the first time due to inexperience, which made him unable to do his duty. In 1847, during the

² James S. Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus: Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, 1998), 38.

³ Othmar Studer, ed. *Erinnerungen eines Amerikaschweizers im 19. Jahrhundert. Heimatkunde Vereinigung Furttal*, 10 (1973), 43 pp.

⁴ Overviews are André Holenstein, Patrick Kury, and Christina Schulz, *Schweizer Migrationsgeschichte. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Baden, 2018). Leo Schelbert, *Switzerland Abroad. Historical Contours of a Nation's People Global Presence* (Swiss American Historical Society, 2019). German edition: *Von der Schweiz anderswo. Historische Skizze der globalen Präsenz einer Nation* (Zürich, 2019).

short civil war between Swiss liberal Protestant and the conservative Catholic cantons of the Swiss Confederacy, the Schmid family sided, of course, with the Liberals, and later he, his father, and a friend visited the battlefield of Gislikon near the city of Luzern. They were shocked by the numerous carcasses of dead cattle killed in the encounter by artillery fire.

After Secondary School, Schmid took a position at a bank in Winterthur and attended the town's industrial high school. He then moved to Zurich to accept a well-paid position in the establishment of the successful businessman J. H. Fäsi. In 1854, the 20-year old Schmid heard that two young men of Buchs with the name of Daniel Pfister and Andreas Gnepf planned to move to the United States. "And since I had felt the urge to travel for a long time already, I got infected with America fever and contacted my future travel companions. But as I had feared, my father did not want to hear anything about it."⁵ He reproached his son, pointing out that his parents had incurred many expenses in furthering his education and that he could not simply run away. Daniel stated, in turn, that Mr. Fäsi had told him "that he was not happy with his performance, and that he had to make a change."⁶

Daniel even considered joining the Foreign Legion that was searching for recruits. He was also afraid that in returning to Buchs, the townspeople might consider him to be a failure. Finally, however, Daniel was able to implement his emigration plans, but almost reconsidered when his mother began to bitterly cry at his departure.

Like other emigrants, Daniel Schmid told of a host of fraudulent people who were surrounding him in New York and hoped to take advantage of the "greenhorn". The letter of recommendation of his previous employer, Mr. Fäsi, proved useless, so finding suitable work was most difficult. Consequently, Daniel moved on to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he began an apprenticeship as a barber. However, he earned very little and finally considered it as progress when he found employment with a Swabian immigrant who owned a restaurant. There

⁵ Studer, ed. *Erinnerungen*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

he had to take care of loads of beer bottles. The work was hard and boring. He became depressed, lost interest in life, and suffered from homesickness. He also witnessed political strife when the so-called Know-Nothings, xenophobes who detested German and Irish immigrants, went on attack. Bloody encounters could hardly be contained. Eventually, the Swiss immigrant was able to find a better position with a Mr. Baenninger, a hotel owner from Zurich. Meanwhile he fell in love with a married woman from northern Germany, and they had an illegitimate child. Luckily, Daniel had become proficient in English and obtained a well-paid position as a bookkeeper in a firm that dealt with fire insurance.

The American Civil War marked by some 600,000 casualties and immense destruction has been widely narrated in numerous publications. Interpretations of the events vary greatly and imputations of guilt remain to this day. Eyewitness and participant Daniel Schmid realized in 1860 that “political strife intensified and that normal business suffered from day to day.”⁷ He labelled slavery as a “*Schandfleck*,”⁸ but realized that it had been the creation of a separate union, the Confederacy, that sparked the outbreak of the war as well as the election of Abraham Lincoln as President.

President Lincoln was a staunch defender of the inviolability of the Union. The North had initially greatly underestimated the number of men needed for the Union Army, and active recruitment proved to be necessary. Daniel Schmid volunteered despite the opposition of his German partner who did not want to lose the family’s main provider. He was assigned to the 9. Sharpshooter Company of Ohio commanded by Colonel Mortimer McCook, in which numerous officers and soldiers were of German or of Swiss descent.

The recruits were trained at Camp Dennison and then sent to the front in June 1861: “thus a quick packing of the field sack, the covers rolled up, rations and ammunition collected, the chief hornist giving the signal, and us thousand men marching with hurrahs to the train station where a long train is waiting for us. It is boarded in or-

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

derly fashion, then the steam-horse carries us toward enemy territory, initially to West Virginia.”⁹

Soon soldier Schmid experienced his baptism of fire at the Battle of Mill Springs, Kentucky. This engagement was won by the Union side. “Often one is asked,” he commented, “how it feels when one moves into the line of fire, and I can only tell of my own experience. Once the attack starts and one knows that the shooting is beginning, one is naturally anxious and wishes that everything will happen quickly. If one hears the shots and as bullets are uncomfortably hissing nearby, cold and hot shudders roll up and down your back. But when one is able to open fire oneself, the excitement grows and quick maneuvering, gun smoke, and the thundering of the artillery guns become exciting.”¹⁰ A battle implies terrific noise that rises and diminishes, and its effects have become part of a historical subtopic, called “sounds history.”

It was not only the battle noise that tested the troops, but also the dirt, the hunger, and the thirst. The rations of fallen enemies were not spurned. So-called foraging, partly a code word for plundering, occurred daily and was to cost many an acting soldier his life. Alcohol consumption was an additional problem. Brandy was part of the iron ration and proved quickly to become addictive. Once, when Schmid’s companions plundered a restaurant, horrible fighting broke out. Soldiers had become “bestially smashed”¹¹ and were rolling on the floor. Some claimed that the alcohol had been purposely poisoned, and drunken men had to be hospitalized. Schmid was merely reporting as an observer of the drunken medly and possibly had stayed sober. Once he met a Texan whom he had gotten to know when he had worked at Baenninger’s Hotel, but they could not stay in contact.

Of course, there were not only active battles to endure, but also life in the trenches and sieges as when Corinth was encircled. At times, the opposing sharpshooters made life hellish for each other. On one occasion, however, the bitter enemies agreed to spare each other, first

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

calling each other by “friendlier words.”¹² Finally, they even met and exchanged goods: “The Southerners had brandy and tobacco, while the Northerners had good coffee.”¹³ (Similar exchanges are reported to have occurred in World War I across the trenches.)

Soldier Schmid did not have to stay in the trenches, however, but instead was serving at Fort Wayne when peace was restored in 1865. After the war, he served in the army as a secretary before he returned to Ohio. There he married his partner, and, thereby, legitimized his children. Occupationally, things did not turn out very well. The time for successful business ventures had not yet arrived, at least for a career-changer.

Schmid later became an independent businessman, started various enterprises among them a business that sold cigars. Capitalist competition was fierce, and although a veteran, he did not enjoy special privileges. These were reserved for the clientele of the new monetary powers, the ex-soldier critically observed. Even a general was accused of being sympathetic to the former rebels, and even the popular General Ulysses S. Grant was not immune from reproach.

Schmid once again became an employee, selling ropes and threads. He tried managing a saloon, until brawling drove peaceful customers away. Finally, Schmid found a good position as an accountant and partner in a new brewery. In 1891, he moved to Monroe, Ohio, where he belatedly received his military pension. His last job was serving as an accountant at a brewery in Philadelphia. Such was the life of this Swiss soldier of the Union Army.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.