The German Lutheran Aid Society of 1790

During the critical period from 1760 to 1790 there was founded at Philadelphia and in other “cities in the wilderness” a great variety of societies. Some were interested in the progress of science; others promoted municipal improvements. Also there were other types of organizations, such as the fire companies, the library companies, and the benevolent societies, which concealed beneath a sociable exterior a purpose that contributed greatly to the well-being of these young and virile communities. It was only natural for those from foreign lands to form immigrant aid societies. In Philadelphia, for example, the Irish established the Hibernian Society; the Scots, the St. Andrew’s Society; and the Germans, under the leadership of Peter Muhlenberg—a general of the Revolution and friend of Washington—a German Society. In the newly appointed capital of the Republic, these organizations, with their dinners and dances, added much to the gaiety of the city.¹

Care of the sick and the aged became a serious concern among some of these groups; especially among the Germans, who, for several generations past, had come in large numbers to Philadelphia. True, the town provided an almshouse, but public relief did not appeal to men and women who had made their way for long years without assistance. The German element in Philadelphia through its church and society was closely knit; in consequence only a proper means was needed to solve what by 1790 had become a peculiarly grave problem. In that year Dr. Henry Helmuth, revered pastor of the Lutheran Church, took the lead in founding what became popularly known as the German Lutheran Aid Society. It bore the formal name of “Society for the support of the needy poor people of the community in the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Philadelphia in the

State of Pennsylvania, in North America. According to the printed regulations or Grundregeln the purpose of the Society was "to take care of the poor and the sick, to provide them, according to their needs, with food, and to grant them all necessary aid." Where there was misfortune, no matter whether the sufferers were of their own denomination or not, those truly worthy should receive support. In a creed where all believers were the same before the Lord; in a Church which had cast its lot with the doubtful cause of the Revolution; and amid an environment steeped in the newly-won principles of equality and democracy, these public spirited Lutherans proceeded to adopt wholeheartedly the social implications of the "general welfare" doctrine. Not only were members of the "sects"—Moravians, Mennonites, and Dunkers—aided, but the Cassabuch of the Society contains the names of English speaking beneficiaries, who like the others, received a monthly dole of money and fuel.

The church of St. Michael and Zion, on Fourth Street between Market and Race, had in 1790 a large, well-to-do congregation that numbered 500 heads of families. Dr. Helmuth's flock numbered about 2,000 in a population of perhaps 40,000. It was the largest congregation and the largest church in the city. The church was used on numerous occasions for public functions. Here in 1791 an anniversary memorial service was held by the American Philosophical Society in honor of Benjamin Franklin, who had died the year before; here, too, in 1799 Congress convened to hear a funeral service for George Washington. Dr. Helmuth preached to his congregation in German; service, hymns and Bible reading were in the same language. Dr. Helmuth, for eighteen years professor of German at the University of Pennsylvania, was a worthy representative of the best in the German tradition. He had been a student of Augustus Franke at the Pietist University of Halle. As was the custom in the Old Country, Dr. Helmuth's parishioners resided within the sight of their church tower. The majority of the congregation lived between the Delaware and Sixth Street and from Chestnut to Vine. Another group, however, lived in the Northern Liberties, outlying lands along the Schuylkill


above the city. All were thrifty, frugal and industrious. Without hesitation they had united to build a large church; without hesitation, also, the congregation entered loyally into a plan to assist the destitute. On the rolls of the Cassabuch are listed the names of 225 heads of families—perhaps all who could afford to make contributions.

The regulations of the Society were printed by Melchior Steiner, whose workshop at the time was on Race Street near Third, close by St. Michael's. Steiner was the successor of Heinrich Miller, whose paper, the *Wöchentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote*, was to a large degree responsible for winning the German element to the American Revolution. The Saur family with its pietist Dunker tradition against force, had lost caste with the anti-Tory Germans. Steiner, formerly Miller's apprentice, in 1790 was publishing the *Neue Philadelphische Correspondenz*, a semi-weekly paper.\(^4\)

Steiner printed 388 copies of the *Grundregeln* for the Society. Consonant with the serious purpose of the Society, its regulations were rigidly drawn and strictly enforced. Following good Lutheran usage, "all business, orally or in writing, must be transacted in the German language." Each member was expected to be familiar with the regulations. The meetings were opened with song and prayer and the president was empowered to rebuke publicly any member who raised matters of extraneous interest during a business session. These meetings were held in private homes. A small sum was charged for light collations, which were occasionally served, or more often to defray the cost of the candles that were lighted. The initiation fee was 3s 9d and the stated monthly dues were an eighth of a dollar. If a member failed to pay his dues for a whole year, he was automatically dropped from the Society, after due warning by a delegated fellow member. Each member received a set of white and black balls, to be used in the election of new members. Provision was made for the amendment of the rules by a two-thirds vote, on condition that no proposal should be voted upon at the same meeting it was submitted to the Society. In case of dissolution the *Grundregeln* provided that all unexpended funds should be given to a school for the poor.

In addition to the dues collected from members gifts for the poor were solicited and "every extra charity should be gratefully acknowledged." Indeed many such gifts were made by non-members. On the

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organization of the group, on February 1, 1790, the rich grocer, Peter Lex, contributed 5s 3d. But most of the gift-giving was owing to the tireless efforts of the pastor, Dr. Helmuth. On one occasion he received a gift of £15; on another occasion there was a bequest of £4.15s for his poor. After one particularly inspiring appeal delivered at an evening service, Dr. Helmuth found in the collection plate a gift of 100 Thalers of £37.10s. Accompanying the anonymous gift were verses, condemning niggardliness in a true Christian. These are faithfully recorded in the Cassabuch. The largest donation was made by Dr. Helmuth himself who in the year 1794 transferred to the Society the entire proceeds from the sale of his books *Betrachtung der Evangelischen Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift und Taufe*, and *Kurze Nachricht von dem Sogenannten gelben Fieber in Philadelph*ia. This book, after its publication in English by Charles Erdmann under the title *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia for the Reflecting Christian*, must have enjoyed a great popularity, judging from the size of Dr. Helmuth's gift of £112.10s.

The Cassabuch is the account book of the Society through the period February 1, 1790 to January 16, 1795. It is a sturdy book of solid water-proof sheets and well-preserved leather binding, for which the Society paid £11s. The titles and principal entries are in elegant Gothic lettering, and the records were meticulously kept. Although principally an account book of 237 pages, it includes a number of revealing notations which make exciting reading for the social historian. Through its membership lists, one gains an intimate view of the substantial German group, which must be taken into account in any full statement of early Philadelphia.

The Society prospered and grew rapidly. At the end of its first

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5 Cassabuch, 216.

Was bad mich Mammon nach dem Tod
zu Dienen mit zur Zeit der Noth,
ist besser dann den Schatz begraben
und dann dort nichts haben,
der Herr woll alles so bestellen,
dem Armen stets an Nothdurftsfällen,
zu schaffen Hülff auf seiner Reiss,
O Jesu Leben, Kraft und Nahm,
das ich nicht hatte Eh er kam.

6 Dr. Helmuth also wrote *Todten Liste von den Monaten August, September u. October in Philadelphia, 1793*. Both this and the *Kurze Nachricht* were printed by Steiner.

7 In the possession of the H. S. P.
year it showed a balance of £16, although 32 poor families had been aided. In January, 1795 there was a similar cash balance, but in addition £300 had been loaned out at 6% interest. About 120 families had received aid during the previous year. The officers of the Society received nothing for their services and, as there were no other expenses to speak of, all the funds of the Society were available for the relief of the poor. The regulations provided that no person should receive more than 10s a month. On the average, about 7s a month was the amount granted. It the main the recipients were widows with dependents or old men no longer able to work. Although only 32 people were aided during the first year, during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 the number increased four-fold. Cash was handed the indigent outright, for food or for fuel.

A last aid provided by the Society was that of a Christian burial. The Grundregeln specified that “not less than three pounds should be in the treasury of the Society for this purpose if an improverished member of the society or of his family should die; and should the wardens see that his descendants were unable to pay for the burial, the bereft was entitled to not more than fifty shillings for the payment of an honorable and Christian funeral.” In the terrible year when Dr. Helmuth lost 625 members of his congregation, eight of 125 members of the Society died of the yellow fever. This plague, according to Dr. Benjamin Rush, broke out early in August on Water Street, near Race and by November 9 had carried off 4,044 persons—more than a tenth of the population of Philadelphia. Yet the Society was, during the years of which we have record, never embarrassed for lack of funds. Indeed its funds were zealously husbanded, and surpluses were lent out to reliable firms at 6% interest. In 1791, for example, Peter Schreier borrowed £40 from the Society and in the fall of the following year he paid interest of £2.8s. On the very day that Dr. Helmuth’s royalties were received from his distributors, the Library Company, June 28, 1794, a loan of £262.10s was negotiated by Wilhelm Schöff, for a period of forty five days. Each year the Cassabuch was audited by three non-members familiar with bookkeeping.

The members of the Society were moderately well-to-do. Monthly

9 Rush, Account of the... Yellow Fever (Phila., 1794), 128; Alexander Biddle, ed., Old Family Letters (Series B), 3.
dues were rather high and as a rule they were regularly paid. It was regarded as an honor and a privilege to be a member. "When one or several church members wished to join, it was decided by a majority of votes whether to accept them or not." General Peter Muhlenberg, Congressman, and his cousin, Frederick Muhlenberg, speaker of the Federal House, were members in good standing. Dr. Frederick Schmidt, colleague of Dr. Helmuth, and like him and the Muhlenbergs, former students at the University of Halle, was a zealous member. Hilarius Becker, the first professor of the Germantown Academy, and another teacher, Henrich Dickhaut, were also members. A number were well educated since they belonged to the Library Company of Philadelphia, which demanded of its members unquestionable social standing. In the membership list of the Library Company for 1807 the following German Aid Society members are listed: Hilarius Becker, Johannes Greiner, John Helmuth, Michael Keppele, Wilhelm Lehman and Johannes Steinmetz. The treasurer of the Society was Peter Lex, owner of a large grocery store. For the most part, however, the members belonged to the trade or craft groups. Among them there were shopkeepers, skinners, tailors, curriers, breechmakers, barbers and bleeders, tallow chandlers, watchmakers, blacksmiths, grocers, bakers, sugarbakers, innkeepers, shoemakers, ropemakers, house carpenters, bookbinders, brewers, scriveners, general merchants, wire cage makers, plasterers, wine merchants, paper sellers, wagoners, flutemakers, mariners, saddlers, and painters. In all they comprised a cross section of the economic life of the young commercial city.

During the five years covered by the Cassabuch, when the membership grew from 65 to 225, only five members were dropped from the rolls for non-payment of dues. There was no repudiation of responsibility, once that responsibility was clear. In one sense the German Aid Society was the means by which one church solved its most critical problem by a direct appeal; in a larger sense it represents the successful effort of a community of people to maintain, in trying times, the spirit of charity and unselfishness that has ever characterized the American communities.

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