

## Breyer the Researcher

Albert Breyer's life and work is closely connected to the fate of the Germans of Central Poland and to the historic events between the two World Wars.

This article wants to cover some of the circumstances which had influence on Albert Breyer's life and work.

### **Research for the *Heimat***

As a teacher Albert Breyer belonged to the intellectuals among the German minority in Poland. Already during his stay at St. Petersburg (1913-1918) Breyer got in contact with the publication *Geistiges Leben*, a monthly periodical for the Germans in Russia. This periodical was initiated by two idealistic teachers from the Dobriner Land and was published in Łódź by Adolf Eichler and Ludwig Wolff. Its subject were the hardships of teachers who had been sent to backward colonies. It supported in a somewhat idealistic way their striving for intellectual challenge, informed about recent teaching methods and also covered the latest developments in questions of the German and Lutheran minorities in Łódź, Poland and Russia.

This publication must have had great impact on the young teacher Albert Breyer. He could easily identify himself and his situation in most of the raised questions and issues.

Returned to Łódź, Albert Breyer got in touch with Adolf Eichler.

Adolf Eichler, who lived in Łódź, was one of the leading characters within the movement of the ethnic Germans in Łódź. He published the daily newspaper *Lodzer Rundschau* and published during World War I the *Deutsche Post* and the monthly periodical *Geistiges Leben*. Adolf Eichler was also the founder of the *Deutsch-Evangelischer Landesschulverband* and the *Deutsch-Katholischer Landesschulverband*, he was a member of the board of trustees of the *Deutsches Lehrerseminar*, founder of the *Deutscher Verein für Lodz und Umgebung*, chairman of the board of the *Deutsche Selbsthilfe* and manager of the *Deutsche Genossenschaftsbank* (German Cooperative Bank) at Łódź. In 1917 Adolf Eichler caused the summoning of the *Lodzer Synode*, which was meant to replace the old Russian church law of 1849 by a new law that would consolidate the German character of the Augsburgian church in Poland. The plan did not succeed and raised the argument within the Augsburgian church, later known as *Kirchenkampf* (church conflict).

Adolf Eichlers activities were sponsored by the industry of the German *Reich*<sup>1</sup>.

The goal of the German movement in Łódź which had been initiated by Adolf Eichler was to 'awaken and strengthen the feeling of national identity among the Lutheran Germans in Congress Poland'<sup>2</sup>. To do so, the awareness of German culture, German language and the Lutheran faith - considered to be a German characteristic - was supported. These measures were completed by the research of local history, which should show the roots and the development of the Germans in Central Poland.

In Albert Breyer Adolf Eichler found a devoted follower. Eichler made good use of Breyer's commitment and motivation.

In 1919 Adolf Eichler left Łódź for political reasons. After that the movement of the Germans in Łódź was continued by a group of intellectuals. Among them Albert Breyer and his friend and fellow teacher Julian Will.

The organs of the Łódź movement at the time of Albert Breyer were the *Lodzer freie Presse* and the *Volksfreund-Kalender*. Most of Breyer's early political and historic articles were published there.

Albert Breyer's commitment for the conflict within the Augsburgian church resulted in his participation in the attempt of some German Pastors to found a Lutheran Free Church in Poland. Albert Breyer and Julian Will contacted Adolf Eichler, who was at that time operating in East Prussia. They asked him to support this project. Eichler found them a private sponsor in East Prussia. After first contacts to the Lutheran church in America, two German Pastors traveled for six months through America to

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<sup>1</sup> In his biography (Eichler, 1942) Adolf Eichler mentions in connection with the German company Badische Anilin und Sodafabrik (BASF) 'their signs of exceptional goodwill', a 'never straining relationship' as well as 'proves of their absolute confidence and generosity'. Eichler was allowed to represent the company in Poland under his own company name. A rather unusual agreement, which looks more like camouflage than like supporting the marketing interests of the German company.

Eichler's function as representative of a company trading chemicals granted him the right of free travel within Poland and obviously left enough time for his activities for the German interest groups. Even greater investments, like buying a new rotary press for the printing of the *Lodzer Rundschau*, did not seem to strain his budget too much.

<sup>2</sup> Kneifel, Eduard: Bischof Bursche, p. 170, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

rise more funds. Julian Will was trained in Berlin as a Free Church Pastor. After this the activities were suddenly stopped<sup>3</sup>.

### **Research for the *Volk*, research for the *Reich*?**

Albert Breyer's political commitment decreased significantly after he lost his post at the school in Zgierz in 1925. After all he had to consider his family. Nevertheless during the following time at Sompolno, employed at a school that was known as a center of the German movement, Breyer's contacts to the German activists from Poznań intensified. He came in closer contact with Alfred Lattermann and Dr. Kurt Lück from Poznań as well as Viktor Kauder from Katowice.

Already in 1934 this group of Poznań activists was completely controlled by the *Reich*.

As recent publications show<sup>4</sup>, these German groups at Poznań and Katowice were financed by the *Reich* using cover organizations<sup>5</sup>. Ideological and scientific support was provided by the *Nordostdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaften* (NOFG), which were financed by the *Reichsministerium des Inneren* (Interior Ministry) and the *Auswärtiges Amt* (Foreign Office). The goal of the NOFG, founded in 1933 and concentrating on Poland, the Baltic countries, Bohemia and Scandinavia, was to 'systematically develop opposite standpoints to the Polish scholarship, to guide German scholars in foreign countries in their research and to raise their awareness for the German interests and territorial demands.'<sup>6</sup>

Secret key contacts of the NOFG in Poland were Alfred Lattermann in Poznań and Viktor Kauder in Katowice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kneifel, Eduard: Bischof Bursche, p. 113 and Eichler (1942), p. 535 ff

<sup>4</sup> See the publications by: Michal Burleigh (1988), Mechtild Rössler (1990), Karen Schönwälder (1992), Michael Fahlbusch (1999). Older GDR Researches, like the one by Felix-Heinrich Gentzen (1967) came to similar results.

<sup>5</sup> Frequently mentioned in this context are the Ossa GmbH, the Ostsee GmbH and the Vereinigte Finanzkontore. Source: Gentzen, 1967. Money transfer was also performed through the German consulates at Poznań and Katowice; Burleigh, Michael (1988), p. 102

<sup>6</sup> Schönwälder, Karen (1992), p. 50, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

<sup>7</sup> Burleigh, Michael (1988), p. 102

As Viktor Kauder writes, the *Historische Gesellschaft für die Provinz Posen* (Historical Society for the Province of Poznań) which existed since the second half of the 19th century, could be 'transformed from being assigned to locally narrowed tasks to becoming the scientific headquarters for guiding the Germans in Poland'.<sup>8</sup>

The contacts to reach the unorganized Germans throughout Poland were established by German teachers, German minded Pastors, the local groups of the *Deutsche Vereinigung* and through the German cooperative societies. Main organs of the Poznań activists were among many other publications the periodicals *Deutsche Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Polen* and *Deutsche Monatshefte in Polen*. Both periodicals were financed by the NOFG.<sup>9</sup>

Objective and task of these periodicals was to influence and censor the content of publications about the Germans in Poland and to sponsor the creation and circulation of articles that were in conformity with the group's and the *Reich's* interests. At the same time differing opinions and results were torn to pieces in sharp reviews of these publications.

For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned, that the German endeavors in the East, also known as *Ostforschung* (East Research), soon found their spitting image in the Polish *Westforschung* (West Research). Also established immediately after World War I, scholarship was used to prove a temporary character of the Polish western border and the necessity of a correction of the borderline - this time in favor of Poland. The selected measures of the Polish *Westforschung* were also the encouragement of feelings of Polish national identity in the areas in question, the sponsoring of Polish education, Polish culture and Polish industry. Besides the newly founded university at Poznań which figured as a scientific headquarter, the Polish activities were supported by the *Związek Obrony Kresów Zachodnich, ZOKZ* (Association for the defense of the Polish Western territories), later renamed to *Polski Związek Zachodni, PZZ* (Polish West Association)<sup>10</sup>.

The German *Ostforschung* as well as the Polish *Westforschung* were characterized by a significant lack of the ability to distinguish between politically motivated wishful thinking and plain scientific research.

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<sup>8</sup> Kauder, Viktor. Kurt Lück, in: Weigelt (1963), translation by Jutta Dennerlein

<sup>9</sup> Fahlbusch, Michael (1999), p. 805

<sup>10</sup> Brier, Robert (2002)

In 1937 the Polish school authorities withdrew Albert Breyer's permission for teaching. This meant that he lost his job as the headmaster of the Sompolno school and the family income. After several months of unsuccessful fighting to get back into his job, the chance to work at the *Deutschen Büchereiverei* at Poznań, since 1934 headed by Dr. Kurt Lück, had been the only option for him. The occupation at Poznań meant for the idealist Albert Breyer not only financial dependency but also the complete involvement in the organizational structure, the tasks and the goals of these scientific headquarters influenced and financed by the *Reich*.

It is hard to determine, if it would have been possible for Albert Breyer or other local historians at an earlier time to look through the secret entanglements of the Łódź or Poznań activists with the German sponsors. However after 1934 the ideological orientation of the group around Viktor Kauder, Alfred Lattermann and Dr. Kurt Lück could not have been a secret for someone who worked in close contact with them.

The role of the *Deutscher Büchereiverein* located at Poznań which became Breyers employer, as well as the *Verein deutscher Büchereien in Polen* located at Katowice, was described by Viktor Kauder: 'Then the German libraries (in Poland) had the task to bring the ideas of National Socialism, as they were presented in the works of the leading men and in narrative books, to the areas where they had no radio.'<sup>11</sup>

According to Kauder all available channels were used in the Poznań area and in Silesia for the distribution of these books: Libraries were installed at the Lutheran vicarages, at the German private schools, at the local groups of the *Deutsche Vereinigung* and at the cooperative societies. In Central Poland, outside of Łódź, things were more difficult. Here the concept of mobile libraries was used to reach the remote settlements.

Kauder's description gives a hint of the perfect organization of the activists and also of the close involvement of churches, schools, homeland associations and cooperative societies.

Albert Breyer's productivity and number of publications increased significantly during his time at Poznań. Besides his works about local history there were also book reviews and conference proceedings published by him. His book reviews show

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<sup>11</sup> Kauder, Viktor (1939), p. 223, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

a remarkable fairness towards the authors. In contrast to many other book reviews written by the Poznań group Breyer refrains from any polemics.

### **Research for victory?**

During his time at Poznań Albert Breyer also worked on the big 'Map of German Settlements in Central Poland - 1:500 000'. In his talk on the occasion of posthumously granting the Copernicus award to Albert Breyer in 1940, Walter Kuhn said: 'This map gave for the first time, village by village, a detailed presentation of Germandom in an area that had not yet been recognized by the mother country. Therefore the map was politically significant and came ready to lead the German army as they invaded Poland.'<sup>12</sup> Walter Kuhn certainly overestimated the military significance of the map. Would military divisions have expected to be welcomed in all the villages marked as German settlements? What military importance can be expected from the information, that in 1919 there was a German school in a special village?

The posthumous overrating of the military significance of the map as well as the Copernicus award, the inauguration of an *Albert-Breyer Haus* at Warszawa and the renaming of a street at Sompolno was part of the advantage the propaganda machine took of Albert Breyer's tragic death.

The true political significance of the map was the fact that it documented German settlements for an area that - except for some short episodes - never really had been under German government. This documentation of German settlements gave the reason for claiming the area to be German *Kulturboden* and thereby German *Volksboden*, the scientific basis for occupation.

Other maps of ethnic structures, which might have been based on Albert Breyer's map, were used since 1940 as planning material for the expulsion and resettlement activities of the German occupation regime in Poland.

### **Research to gain knowledge, research to spread knowledge**

In 1928 the researcher Walter Kuhn visited Albert Breyer at Sompolno. Till then Walter Kuhn had concentrated his research on the Germandom in Volhynia, how-

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<sup>12</sup>Talk by Walter Kuhn during the ceremony of giving the Copernicus award to Albert Breyer in 1940; printed in: Zimmermann, Jan (2000), p. 523, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

ever the origin of the Germans in Volhynia was still a mystery to him. The exchange of the two researchers and Albert Breyer's results for Congress Poland suddenly made clear, that the settlements were connected and that there had been a movement from Central Poland to Volhynia.

Walter Kuhn wrote: 'The indispensable information about the settlement history of the Germans in Congress Poland had been almost unknown at that time, at least it had never been available in printing. I first heard about it when, after a hike in the area of Łódź, I visited principal Albert Breyer in the small Kujawian town of Sompolno, whose life's work was the research of the settlement history of Germans in Congress Poland. Since these settlements predominantly were private settlements by Polish aristocrats, each one a small and limited undertaking, they lacked a big central source, like the ones produced by the great governmental colonization realized by the Habsburger or the Hohenzollern. Breyer had to go through all the separate church books and *Schulzenladen* of every little village. Gradually he got the idea of three big settlement streams, which moved since the 16th century from West Prussia, Pommerania, the Neumark and Lower Silesia through Poland further to the East. ... It became clear, that the Volhynians were only the last tip of expansion in the East ...

This picture revealed itself to Breyer and me during the exchange of our experience. ... Breyer wrote a lot of separate detailed studies, but the extensiveness and the local fragmentation of his subject slowed down his progress very much<sup>13</sup>

The exchange between the two researchers is clearly visible in their works. Walter Kuhn had just got his degree as an engineer when he started to study *Volkskunde* and history in 1927. When he met the elder Albert Breyer in 1928 he was only at the beginning of his studies. Breyer's methods of research partially found their way into the book *Deutsche Sprachinselforschung* (Research of German Linguistic Islands) published in 1934 by Walter Kuhn. On the other hand Breyer's *Deutsche Gaue in Mittelpolen* published in 1935 and later works showed the usage of methods described in Kuhn's systematic approach to research linguistic islands.

So the merits of Albert Breyer's works should be seen in the fact that he created and published the first comprehensive account of the multi-layered history of Germans in Central Poland. Without his systematic research the origin of our ancestors

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<sup>13</sup> Kuhn, Walter: *Meine Forschungsarbeiten in Wolhynien*; p. 5f, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

would have stayed in the dark. Most researchers would have shrunk back from the first step into the jungle of church books, settlement contracts and court records written in four different languages.

This chapter of history of Central Poland would certainly have stayed undiscovered without the unflagging researcher Albert Breyer and his reliable attention to detail.

### **The doubts of the researcher?**

In March 1939 Albert Breyer wrote in a letter to Adolf Eichler that 'his farewell of Sompolno and his profession as a teacher had been very hard for him ... He (also) reported about his new secure sphere of activity at Poznań, where he could concentrate on his ethnic and historic studies.'<sup>14</sup>

Was Albert Breyer's retirement from any active and exposed political work and his concentration on his studies a withdrawal to privacy, that had already showed since his move to Sompolno? This retirement would be understandable for the meanwhile 50 years old Albert Breyer, who had lost his profession as a teacher, for which he had fought most of his life. Or were there also fundamental doubts that caused his retirement?

The growing and immense influence that the politics of the *Reich* gained over the German movement in Poland, the growing feeling of being remote controlled obviously caused serious doubts and controversies within the groups of the German movement.

Albert Breyer's early death spared him the experience of the developments after the German occupation of Poland. How would the sensitive researcher have reacted upon the inhumane measures of the Nazis in Poland? His likewise sensitive friend Julian Will committed suicide in 1941.

Certainly Albert Breyer's life's work, the research of the subtle ethnic structures and origins of Germans in Central Poland, would have been ceased by the Nazi measures of resettlement, which ignored and destroyed ethnic structures that had developed over centuries.

Jutta Dennerlein, April 2007

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<sup>14</sup> Eichler, Adolf (1942), p. 401, translation by Jutta Dennerlein

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