Being German in South Africa

Three life stories from the late 19th and early 20th century

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The arrival of Germans in Southern Africa dates back to the middle of the 17th century when, according to Hoge (1945:156-159) approximately 14 000 Germans settled at the Cape during the time of the occupation by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Since many of them were illiterate and because the VOC only permitted Dutch to be spoken as official language, the early Germans were absorbed into the Dutch speaking community very quickly, especially because many married Dutch women (see esp. Schnell 1954:19-21).

The Germans that came to South Africa in the 18th century also mostly arrived in the country on their own or in small groups and have been identified in numerous studies as travellers who documented their journeys through the region. They were teachers, ministers, artists, artisans, researchers and missionaries, some of whom just stayed for a short period, while most of those that remained in the country did not form German communities and were quickly absorbed into the local population (as observed by Lichtenstein), since many also married black women (see Hoge 1957 quoted in Grünewald 1993:15).

It was only in the middle of the 19th century that emigration to South Africa occurred in larger groups and when German communities started to form. The most famous of these were, in chronological order of their arrival:

- The ‘Bergtheil settlers’, a group of 155 adults and 75 children arrived in Natal in 1848, most of whom came from district of Bramsche (near Osnabrück) in northern Germany (Peters 1992, Volker 2006).
- A small group from the Hermannsburg Mission near Hanover settled in Natal in 1854. They were followed by other smaller groups in 1862, 1866, 1867 and 1883 (Dammann 1992).

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- The Kaffraria-Germans arrived in the Eastern Cape Province between 1857 and 1878 following plans by the British Governor of the Cape, Sir George Grey, to settle large numbers of Europeans along the colony's eastern frontier. The first group consisted of 2362 soldiers of a British-German legion that had done duty in the Crimean War. They arrived together with women and children and totalled 2918 persons (Schnell 1954:72). Another group was brought to South Africa by the Hamburg representative of the firm Godeffroy & Son between 1859 and 1862 (Schnell 1954:276), and further smaller groups arrived in East London between 1877 and 1878.
- The Philippi Germans arrived in Cape Town in three groups between 1860 and 1883, and became known for their ability to grow vegetables in the sandy soils of the Cape Flats (Rabe 2003, 2010).

The discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 brought larger numbers of Germans to the interior of the country. These Germans came as adventurers, as missionaries as well as professionals to find work in the emerging industries (Hellberg 1954:22). Many settled on the Witwatersrand, the region between Pretoria, Johannesburg and Rustenburg, while others settled in the Orange Free State (du Plessis 1992), joined existing German settlements or founded new ones such as Kroondal in the Transvaal (1889) and Glückstadt in Natal (1908).

The settlement of Germans in the Western Cape continued following the successes of the Philippi Germans in transforming the sand dunes outside Cape Town into fertile farms. Many settled in Cape Town itself where a German Lutheran congregation was established (1861), and later a German school (1883) both of which are still in existence today. As Germans moved farther into the interior, additional German Lutheran congregations were established in the suburbs such as Wynberg and Philippi, as well as in the rural communities of Paarl, Worcester and Stellenbosch (for details see Hellberg 1954:83-102, 193-211). In Paarl, Philippi and Neu Eisleben German schools were established and in Cape Town and Paarl a German club.

The total number of Germans who arrived in the Cape Colony between 1856 and 1883, which includes Cape Town and Kaffraria, totalled 7878, according to Schnell (1954:278), and this number did not increase substantially within the next few years, as the 1911 census of the newly formed Union of South Africa counted 8360 persons in the country born in Germany. By 1921 this number had grown to almost 13 000 whereas 5 years later in the 1926 census, there were more than 42 000 persons "of German parentage" (Schnell 1954:278).

At the end of the 19th century, Germans living in the larger cities of South Africa experienced a rich social and cultural life, as can be seen from numerous advertisements, news items, discussions and comments in newspapers at the time. Three wars in the first half of the 20th century - the Anglo Boer War, World War I and World War II - had a significant influence on German identity in South Africa, not only in the way Germans in the country saw themselves, but also in the way they identified with Germany. Some voiced their allegiance to the Crown and fought on the side of the British; many were deported or returned to Germany voluntarily to fight for their

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country of origin, while others were interned because of their pro-German stance. This paper will now look in detail at three Germans who spent most of their lives in South Africa between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century and show how their allegiances significantly influenced their lives and the people around them.

The first of the men is the artist Erich Mayer who survived all three wars, was born in Karlsruhe, Germany in 1876 and for health reasons, came to South Africa in 1898 where he died in1960 at the age of eighty-four.

The second, Pastor Georg Wilhelm Wagener, was born in the small town of Waldeck which at the time of his birth in 1857 belonged to the Principality of Waldeck and Pyrmont and today falls within the federal state of Hesse. After completing his theological training, Wagener was sent to Cape Town where he served as minister of the German Lutheran congregation, as school principal and in various other capacities. After suffering from a heart condition most of his life, he died in Cape Town in 1920 at the age of sixty-three.

The third is Pastor Carl Hugo Hahn, the longest living of the three. He was born in Rehoboth in the former South West Africa in 1846. His father was the famous Dr. C.H. Hahn senior who received an honorary doctorate from Leipzig University for his research on the language of the Herero. Carl Hugo Hahn (jnr.) died in Paarl, near Cape Town in 1933 at the age of eighty-seven, after having served as minister of the local German Lutheran congregation for 38 years[1].

Erich Mayer

The life and work of Erich Mayer has been extensively researched, especially in the doctoral dissertation of Eunice Lenore Basson written in Afrikaans which “is a study of the ideas, ideals and contributions of the German-Jewish artist Erich Mayer concerning the establishment of a national art identity in South Africa” (2003:iii). It is interesting that, within a year after his arrival in South Africa, Mayer decided to join the Afrikaners in their fight against the British in the Anglo-Boer War, as did many volunteers who had arrived not only from Germany, but also from the Netherlands, France and Ireland (Nordbruch 1999:126-129). Having found work in the small town of Vrede in the Boer Republic of the Free State as a land surveyor’s assistant (see Basson 2003:25), Meyer must have been, like many of his fellow citizens in Germany, fascinated and inspired by the Afrikaner’s battle to obtain freedom from the British. The German population’s euphoria about the Boer struggle can be seen in many newspaper articles, cartoons, advertisements and books which were published in Germany at the time. German authors, artists and academics such as Ludwig Thoma and Max Liebermann were also involved in publishing volumes with drawings, poems and stories on the war, glamorising the Boers as “Volk, auch von Germanias Blut”[2]. Some German products were even named in honour of the Boers: *Burenkäse* (cheese), *Buren-Erfrischer* (sweets) and *Burenwurst* (sausage) (see Bender 2009:31-35).

Erich Mayer’s involvement in the war was short lived when, while fighting to defend Mafikeng under Commandant Sarel Eloff, he was captured by British forces in 1900

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and sent to the island St. Helena as a prisoner of war where he remained until he was deported to Germany at the end of 1902.

During his captivity on the island, he had the opportunity to get to know Boers of different ages and, according to Basson (2003:26), he took part in their activities, documenting his experiences with them in sketches and painting so that he was later even regarded as one of them. Thus Commandant Eloff supported him in a testimonial as "a national painter for the Afrikaner nation":

> Ik certificeer dat de Heer Erich Mayer voor den Oorlog Asst. Landmeter in Vrede O.V.S. heeft zich als Vrijwilliger bij den storm op Mafeking op de 12de Mei 1900 dapper gedragen en was gedurende de Krijgsgefangenschap te St Helena getrouw en werkzaam voor de Afrikaner zaak: hij verdiend dus mijn inziens ondersteuning in zijn doel: een nationale schilder voor het Afrikanervolk te worden (see Pretorius 2000:14)[3].

When South Africa became a union in 1910, it was possible for Mayer to return to South Africa after he had had the opportunity to further his studies in Germany. After spending short periods in Port Elizabeth and Potchefstroom, Mayer settled in Pretoria where he met many influential artists and writers (cf. *Erich Mayer retrospective catalogue*). He had his first one-man exhibition in Johannesburg in 1914, but then the outbreak of the First World War once again had an influence on his career: He was first left alone to continue his artistic work on a farm, but then was interned in Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg for 21 months. Here he was very much in a German environment and took part in music, theatre and cabaret productions as well as continued with his painting (Basson 2003:45-46). He even delivered lectures on philosophy of art, and Basson mentions one of his papers which has been preserved "Die krygsgevangenes as kultuurgroep" [*The prisoners of war as a cultural group*] (Basson 2003:47).

During his internment, Mayer corresponded with the influential Pretoria artist Pierneef who was a member of the *Broederbond*, and encouraged him to help promote Afrikaans art (see Basson 2003:54). As a result of ill health, both physical and psychological, and following the intercession of Afrikaans friends, Mayer was released on parole after 21 months in detention, but did not succeed in obtaining his complete freedom of movement despite numerous requests and despite the fact that Mayer never became involved in politics.

It appears that Mayer only obtained complete freedom in 1920, and was then able to travel freely, which he did. For instance he held an exhibition in Stellenbosch, which received good publicity and gave a series of lectures at the university, the first of which was reportedly attended by more than 400 people (see Basson 2003:71).

Mayer continued to travel widely, even to Europe, was awarded various commissions, received many positive reviews and published numerous articles mainly in the Afrikaans *Die Burger*, *Huisgenoot* and *Die Brandwag*. He was often critical of artists and academics who disagreed with his views on a national style for South African art. In 1943 Mayer was honoured for his work by being awarded the Medal of Honour for Painting by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns*. After his

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death in 1960, his work was commemorated in various ways: A retrospective exhibition of his work in the Pretoria Art Museum in 1972; to commemorate the artist's 100th birthday a special series of postage stamps was issued by the South African Post Office on 20 April 1976; in 2000 a book of his art from his internment on St. Helena with more than 80 illustrations of his work was published, and his portraits of Boer leaders are used as illustrations in the *New History of South Africa* (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007)[4].

Pastor Georg Wilhelm Wagener

Not much has been published on this man, but most of his working life is documented in minutes of meetings of the *Deutsche St. Martini Kirche* and the *Deutsche St. Martini Schule* in Cape Town where Wagener was minister and school principal between 1883 until his death in 1920. Wagener's thoughts and ideas can, however, also be found in the *Südafrikanisches Gemeindeblatt*, a newspaper for German readers, which he published twice a month from 1899 until the outbreak of the First World War[5], and which serves as a valuable source of information on life in the German community at the Cape early in the 20th century. One monographic publication by Wagener (1917) has been found, a recollection of his imprisonment in South Africa and England during the First World War.

In the centenary *Festschrift* of the St. Martini Lutheran congregation published in 1961, a retired minister (Böker) who knew Wagener personally gives an overview of the man's life, and a summary of achievements during Wagener's term as minister include the following: In a 26 year period, £50 000 were are collected for the church and school; the church was completely renovated; the congregation grew to 2700 members[6]; a German youth and men's association was formed to preserve German music, culture and way of life; the church acquired three bells to have the biggest chimes in Cape Town; a German orphanage and a German seaman's mission were established as well as a charity, the *Deutsche Hilfsverein* to help suffering fellow countrymen; services were held for German Lutherans within a radius of 50 kilometres; the German Lutheran synod of South Africa was established with Pastor Wagener as chairman and, to foster unity in the church, the previously mentioned *Südafrikanisches Gemeindeblatt* was founded.

Böker describes in detail how the Lutheran minister managed to achieve such growth in his community. Each Sunday, Wagener delivered three services[7], within one year, in 1888, he made 2133 house calls, he regularly visited Germans in hospital and those in prison, his parsonage was always open to visitors, he attracted 200-300 visitors to his services, he was principal of the German school where he taught up to 5 periods per day, and was instrumental in founding other German schools in the vicinity. He was widely read, wrote articles, rehearsed and performed German dramas with the youth and every third week delivered a lecture on a literary topic. He unified the church by bringing together six congregations from the western and eastern parts of the Cape, to form the *Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode Südafrikas* which for him was but a first step to create an organisational link for all evangelical Germans in South Africa (Böker 1961:43). The next step, in June 1914, was a meeting in New Hanover, Natal, of

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Germans from all over South Africa who took a decision to cooperate, especially with respect to schools and (Böker 1961:43) teacher training.

In his dissertation on the Lutheran congregations at the Cape, Hellberg (1957:76) tells an interesting anecdote: Wagener personally wrote to the German Kaiser in 1886 requesting him to donate the metal required for three new church bells. When the bells arrived in 1887, they were called the *Kaiserglocken*. As they were regarded as “die schönsten in Kapstadt” [*the most beautiful in Cape Town*] the congregation was asked to ring them when the body of former Boer Republic President Paul Kruger was taken ashore in Cape Town harbour.

During the Anglo-Boer War, Wagener, like Erich Mayer, supported the Boer cause, though not with the sword, but as a clergyman by visiting prisoners of war who were held in the camps near Cape Town. According to Böker, Wagener visited the camp in Green Point once a week to speak to prisoners and hold a service, and it is possible that he met Erich Mayer there who had been brought from Mafikeng to Cape Town before being sent to St. Helena .

Wagener not only visited the prisoners but collected 80 000 Mark to relieve their suffering. Meals, accommodation and financial assistance were provided to Germans in Cape Town affected by the war, but parcels with food, clothing and blankets were even sent to St. Helena. In his obituary in 1920, the Cape Town Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* wrote that there was no one who had supported the Boer cause more than Pastor Wagener. This did not go down well will the British government at the Cape, and it was perhaps not surprising that when great jubilation erupted amongst the Germans in the Cape at the outbreak of World War I, many of the *Reichsdeutsche* (German citizens) who did not leave for Germany to fight for their country were interned. Wagener was not spared. In September 1914 he was brought to Pretoria and placed in solitary confinement for 28 days. He was then sent to a camp in Pietermaritzburg, until, with two of his 9 children, he was repatriated to Germany where he arrived in June 1916.

Hellberg (1957:110-115) reports on how the war affected the congregation and the school: Many men and boys were interned; this caused funds to dry up as families had lost their breadwinners, salaries were cut or could not be paid; to keep a low profile in the community, no fundraising events were held; one year the AGM was cancelled; the church bells were no longer rung following violent actions against German businesses in Cape Town on Ascension Day, 13 May 1915.

Wagener was eventually allowed to return to South Africa in October 1920, but by then he had become a very sick man and died nine days after his arrival. His brother Gottfried, who was minister in the neighbouring congregation of Wynberg and who took over some pastoral duties in Cape Town after the war, discovered “dass sich in der Gemeinde starker Widerstand gegen seinen Bruder regte” [*that in the congregation strong resistance was brewing against his brother*] (Hellberg 1957:115).

Pastor Carl Hugo Hahn (jnr.)

In contrast to Erich Mayer and Georg Wilhelm Wagener, Hahn was not born in Germany but was sent there in1853 at the age of seven for his education and subsequent

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theological studies in Berlin, Erlangen and Munster. After he was ordained on 6 January 1874, he went to Cape Town to assist his father, a missionary of the Rhenish Mission Society, who had been called to be the spiritual leader of the German Lutheran congregation in Cape Town. In 1883 Hahn jnr. was appointed as minister in the Paarl congregation where he worked until his retirement in 1921.

Hahn, like Wagener, also had health problems and had to go to Germany for treatment in 1887, but upon his return he continued his work in Paarl and his achievements recorded by Hellberg are similar to those of Wagener in Cape Town: He obtained funds from Germany to support the congregation which was able to acquire its own cemetery (1891); he built a school (1895), founded a Christian youth and men's club *Jünglings- und Männerverein* (1896), as well as a brass band, *Posaunenchor* (1891).

It is interesting, furthermore, that the congregation, rather than take part in celebrations to mark the 60th year of the reign of Queen Victoria, chose to collect funds for its own church bell, which, according to Hellberg (1976:19), has the following inscription: "…Zur Erinnerung an das 'Grosse Jubiläum' I.M. der Königin Victoria von England 1837-1897". When the bell arrived in Paarl, it was rung for the first time, suspended between two trees, on the death of the queen on 2 February 1901. This was during the Anglo-Boer War, and Hellberg (1957:242-3) relates how Pastor Hahn's pro-British stance created discontent within the congregation, for he did not like members of his congregation to associate with Afrikaners. For the bell tower, Hahn had chosen a plaque with an English text[8] which caused as much discontent in the congregation who then made a plaque with a German text. An extraordinary general meeting of the congregation decided to move Hahn's plaque to a less conspicuous place and to place the German plaque where the English one was. The fact that Hahn had an English mother and a German father-in-law who had served the English in the Eastern Cape, must have played a major role in forming his identity and influenced his strong pro British stance: He told members of the congregation who were born in South Africa or had been naturalised, that they were British subjects who had to support the authorities (Hellberg 1976:20)[9]. Hahn enjoyed attending election meetings and saw it as his duty to advise his congregation, „vor den nächsten Parlamentswahlen seiner Gemeinde ein 'geistiger Berater' zu sein und seine Gemeindeglieder bei der Wahl zu beeinflussen" (quoted in Hellberg 1957:243). He was also critical of his fellow-minister Wagener's writings on Germanness and the latter's criticism of the Cape government which he had expressed in the *Südafrikanisches Gemeindeblatt* and warned that such points of view could bring German Lutheran congregations into disrepute ("in den Ruf der Disloyalität" cf. Hellberg 1957:243).

Hahn who fought very hard to keep the German school in Paarl, was also criticised for teaching confirmation classes in English when children were not fluent in German, but the most serious disapproval was voiced when Hahn's own sons joined the South African forces after the outbreak of the First World War[10]. This caused serious divisions in the Paarl congregation and, according to Hellberg, led to the church committee eventually reducing his salary[11].

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At the age of 72 Pastor Carl Hugo Hahn went into retirement after delivering his farewell sermon on Good Friday 1921. He passed away on 29 October 1933 at the age of 87 and is buried next to his wife Anna in Paarl.

Conclusion

The life experiences of the three men mark the different paths of Germans in South Africa. The first one would be to stay German, to speak and promote the language in church, school and society, keep German citizenship, celebrate German holidays and festivals beyond the religious tradition, sing the German national anthem on special occasions, help Germans in need, whether in Germany or in South Africa. Pastor Georg Wilhelm Wagener is an example of such a person who published a summary of his activities in Cape Town and the story of his internment. He wrote that together with 4000 *Volksgenossen* the "Erinnerung an die Befreiung unseres Volkes vom französischen Joch" [*commemoration of the liberation of our people from the French yoke*] (Wagener 1917:11) was celebrated in Cape Town and for December 1914 a *Deutscher Tag* with 5-6000 participants had been planned. From programme booklets it is apparent that such festivities were concluded with the singing of the German national anthem. Even during his internment in Pretoria, Wagener writes, he would end speeches to his compatriots "mit einem Heilruf auf unsern Kaiser, den Kaiser Franz Joseph und unser altes Vaterland" [*with a hail greeting to our Emperor, the Emperor Franz Joseph and our old Fatherland*] (Wagener 1917:24). Thus it comes as no surprise that the English military placed him into solitary confinement for four weeks during his internment and that, when the First World War broke out, the tide turned against Germans in South Africa.

Erich Mayer's political persuasion caused him similar hardship in his early years when he followed the prevalent mood in Germany to support the Boers in their struggle against the English in South Africa. When Mayer was captured, he was in his early twenties, and the friends he made during his imprisonment, helped him to be recognised as an artist in South Africa during the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the early 20th century. With the training he had received in Germany he was able to transpose and interpret his new experiences in his new found home, immortalizing Afrikaner heroes as well as ordinary men with paint and ink.

Whereas Mayer was drawn towards the Afrikaner, Hahn and his children were loyal to the British. Thus, as a leader within a 'German' religious community, he had to endure the wrath of his congregation, especially during the First World War when it was virtually impossible to be both South African and German. Both Wagener and Hahn had no qualms about whom they supported and had to carry the consequences.

Now, almost a century later, Germans in the country, with very few exceptions, are integrated into the greater South African community. Most 'German' schools, churches or clubs additionally use either English or Afrikaans or both, and most 'Germans' or Germans speakers are fluent in three languages. But, Germanness in South Africa is still very much European.

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Notes

1 A more detailed background to life in Germany and South Africa at the end of the 19th century together with a female perspective of a German living and working on a mission station in the Orange Free State can be found in Birgit Brammer's thesis on the Birgit Adele Steinwender (Brammer 2007).

2 This is from a poem 'An das Burenvolk' by the German author Johannes Trojan (1837-1915), published in: Thoma, Ludwig (ed.) Der Burenkrieg. Albert Langen, Munich 1900.

3 "I hereby certify that Erich Mayer Esq. who, before the war, was an Asst. Land-Surveyor in Vrede O.F.S., conducted himself as a brave Volunteer at the storming of Mafeking on 12 May 1900 and worked loyally for the Afrikaner cause during captivity at St. Helena; in my opinion he thus deserves support in his goal: to become a national painter for the Afrikaner nation."
A photograph of the original document, kept in the Art Archives of the University of Pretoria and which was very precious to Mayer, is reproduced in a beautiful volume of his war art, compiled and written by Celestine Pretorius.

4 The illustrations are of M.T. Steyn, President of the Orange Free State (p.209), General Louis Botha (p.214), and Paul Kruger (p.215).

5 From 1911 it was known as *Evangelischer Volksbote für Südafrika*.

6 This is quite a feat if one considers that, according to Böker, there were approx. 5000 Germans residing in Cape Town and environs in 1884.

7 Hellberg reports that during the Anglo-Boer War, within one year, Wagener had conducted 221 church services in total, 42 of which were held in the POW camp outside Cape Town (Hellberg 1957:99). It is indeed a feat that Wagener even received permission from the authorities to enter the camp and be allowed to preach in German.

8 "To commemorate the Great Jubilee 1837-1897 and the coronation of H.M. Edward VII. Anno pacis 1902."

9 "...unserer unter britischer Krone stehender Landesobrigkeit unter aller Wandlung des staatlichen Lebens, Ehrerbietung, Treue und Gehorsam zu zollen."

10 It could be determined that two of his five sons were killed in action during the First World War, Ernst in 1916 at Deville Wood and Benno in 1917 (Hellberg 1976:21). Hugo, who later became a famous Springbok rugby player and was known as 'Cocky' Hahn in the administration of Ovamboland in Namibia, joined the Imperial Light Horse (Hall 2000:332).

11 "Im Jahre 1917 hatte seine politische Stellung den Pastor seiner Gemeinde so sehr entfremdet, dass der Kirchenvorstand ihm mitteilte, dass man ihm fortan nicht mehr sein volles Gehalt zahlen könne" (Hellberg 1957:252).

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