

Axel W.-O. Schmidt. *Der Rothe Doktor von Chicago: Ein Deutsch-Amerikanisches Auswandererschicksal: Biographie des Doktor Ernst Schmidt, 1830-1900, Arzt und Sozialrevolutionaer.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 602 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-631-39635-3.

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Published on H-GAGCS (August, 2004)



## A Labor of Love, or More than You Ever Wanted to Know about Dr. Schmidt

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In his every-day life, Axel W.-O. Schmidt works as a lawyer while every now and then publishing something in the field of German-American emigration history. Many lawyers have become nationally known, both in Germany and the United States, by dedicating their spare time to historical research. While doing this, some manage to turn into historians. Some do not. Axel Schmidt is among the latter.

*Der Rothe Doktor von Chicago* is a lengthy biography about a man who deserves attention but whose life is not as uncommon among German forty-eighters as Axel Schmidt wants us to believe. Whether Axel and Ernst Schmidt are related remains a mystery, but the reader cannot help but think they are. No one but a dedicated relative would have taken on the massive task of turning every stone in Ernst Schmidt's life, both in Germany and the United States.

From the first page, the reader is confronted with a very structured book: part 1 focuses on Ernst Schmidt's time in Germany, 1830 to 1856, while part 2 relates his life in the United States, 1857 to 1900. Dr. Ernst Schmidt, born in 1830 in the Bavarian town of Ebern and trained as a medical doctor at the University of Wuerzburg, immigrated to Chicago in June of 1857. His activities during the revolution of 1848 include membership in the *Palladia* fraternity, authorship of a number of pamphlets, and a leading role in organizing public rallies in the Ebern

region. In June 1849, Schmidt fled to Switzerland and remained there until January 1850. Even though he did not seem to have been prosecuted in Bavaria, he started traveling to Switzerland, Italy, and Sicily in 1851. In 1853 he went to Austria only to return to Italy in 1854. In 1856-57 we find him working as a doctor in London's Guy Hospital. Ernst Schmidt married Therese Weikard in Ebern and immigrated with her on board the ship *Washington* to the United States. The "German portion" of Schmidt's life was shared by dozens of more prominent German forty-eighters, such as Carl Schurz and Friedrich Hecker. They, too, escaped to France, England, and Switzerland before making the United States their second home.

As a politically interested man, Ernst Schmidt engaged in politics and lined up with the Germans of Chicago by supporting Lincoln's election campaign for the U.S. senate in 1858. At the same time he decided to become an abolitionist, joined the Underground Railroad in 1859 and befriended John Brown. On December 2, 1859, the night of Brown's death, Schmidt gave a speech in his honor at Kinzie Hall in Chicago. We learn, however, very little about the quality of their friendship due to the lack of surviving documents. In the final days of 1859, Schmidt moved to St. Louis, where he remained until September 1861, teaching at the Humboldt Institute, among other activities. During the Civil War, Schmidt enlisted as Lieutenant-Colonel with the 2nd Missouri Infantry Volunteer Regiment, originally a three-month-regiment composed almost exclusively of Germans, where he served for roughly four months in

1861. The Second Regiment had as its colonel one of the most controversial figures in the St. Louis German community, Henry (Heinrich) Boernstein. As the editor of the *Anzeiger des Westens*, Boernstein was anti-Semitic as well as anti-Catholic and used the newspaper columns to assault all organized religion as well as to urge St. Louis Germans to abandon the Democratic Party and join the new Republicans. As the St. Louis correspondent of the *New York Times* pointed out, there were soldiers of the Second Missouri who refused to stay in the regiment under Boernstein when it was reorganized as a regular three-year regiment. Boernstein then left the regiment to become an American consul in Bremen. This appointment removed a political embarrassment because Boernstein had been involved in the unseemly feud between John Fremont and Francis T. Blair, Colonel of the First Missouri, over Fremont's military administration in Missouri. Needless to say, Schmidt was supportive of John Fremont's political stand and German-born General Franz Sigel's military conduct—again, totally in line with most Germans from the state of Missouri.

Axel Schmidt has absolutely nothing to say about the relationship between Boernstein and Schmidt, and concludes: "Gemeinsam haben Boernstein und Schmidt Dienst in diesem 2. Freiwilligen-Regiment gemacht" ("Boernstein and Schmidt served together in the 2nd Missouri Volunteer Regiment," p. 229). Axel Schmidt argues that Schmidt, who served as a surgeon, left the regiment for health reasons—with details unknown. The possibility that Schmidt may have found Boernstein as controversial as did many of his contemporaries is not considered. As a regular three-year regiment, the Second Missouri was commanded by Col. Friedrich Schaefer who fell at the Battle of Mufreesboro in 1862.

By 1879, we find Ernst Schmidt, now a father of five boys, running unsuccessfully for mayor of Chicago on a Socialist ticket. In 1886-87 Schmidt became famous one more time as a member of a defense committee during the Haymarket Riot trial in Chicago. This was the most decisive event in nineteenth-century American labor history and took place the year in which Samuel Gompers started the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Gompers is described as a "close friend of Schmidt," but no further information is given on the nature of that friendship. On May 4, 1886, a bomb blew up at Chicago's Haymarket, where approximately one thousand workers had gathered to protest the treatment of McCormick's workers a day before. During the riot, over seventy policemen and an unidentified number of workers were injured. Of the eight men who were put on trial in 1886, six were

German-born. Of these six, three were hung—Georg Engel, Adolph Fischer and August Spies. According to P. S. Foner, in *The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs* (1969), Louis Lingg, who had been sentenced to death, decided to take his own life on November 10, 1887, a day before he was scheduled to hang, by exploding a bomb in his mouth. Axel Schmidt does not mention this incident. He does, however, assert, based on 1935 correspondence, that a man named Rudolph Schnaubelt was most likely to have thrown the Haymarket bomb (pp. 342). Ernst Schmidt's role in the trial is a little exaggerated. If he had been as influential a dyed-in-the-wool-socialist as portrayed by the author, he would have been mentioned in the 1986 publication on the Haymarket Riot by Svetlana Askoldova of the Moscow State Institute for International Relations.[1] At the age of seventy, or rather after 571 pages and 1,011 footnotes, Ernst Schmidt died on August 26, 1900.

A major and annoying weakness of Axel Schmidt's biography is his practice of extensively quoting newspaper articles of the time, often exceeding nine to ten full pages.[2] He often renders the texts of historical documents in full including such unimportant testimonies as Schmidt's birth certificate. About 75 percent of the textual material is made up of quotations, and, therefore, shows a severe lack of historical analysis. On the few occasions when the reader is provided with background information, the author uses the personal pronoun "we" in a very condescending way, as in lecturing to undergraduate students. In addition, the reader is distracted numerous times when Axel Schmidt feels it necessary to convey information not necessarily pertinent to Ernst Schmidt's life—thus, he gives lengthy biographical sketches of various German officers commanding the 3rd, 5th, and 12th Missouri Infantry Regiments and dedicates over sixty pages to the lives of Ernst Schmidt's four sons (leaving out Richard Schmidt, who died at age three in October 1864).

The second portion of the book, again divided into two parts, is dedicated to Ernst Schmidt's literary works and translations. As did many other forty-eighters, Schmidt wrote poems and songs, as well as newspaper articles. Among his translations into German are Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe" and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. Schmidt also translated Ernst Moritz Arndt's *Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?* into English.

Looking at the scholarly apparatus, apart from the shocking number of 1,011 footnotes, which in many cases are irrelevant, and an appendix of 60 pages, the reader

will detect a certain sloppiness as to citing sources in full. Axel Schmidt does not bother to provide the publisher's name for any of the sources listed in his bibliography, but renders in full the contents of Ernst Schmidt's scrapbook that is held at the Chicago Historical Society (pp. 561-571). As has been the case with many other books published by Peter Lang, it seems that Axel Schmidt was fully responsible for editing his manuscript. In fact, it is doubtful whether a professional editor ever glanced at his material. In that case, I salute Axel Schmidt for his diligence.

From a scholarly viewpoint, *Der Rothe Doktor* is a disappointment as it gets close to being an unreadable

narrative. A genealogy buff, however, will consider himself in the possession of a mind-boggling and wonderful compilation of family records (dating back to the mid-1700s), cemetery maps, newspaper clippings, and twelve portraits, all related to Ernst Schmidt and his five sons. Those of you related to the doctor, enjoy!

#### Notes

[1]. Svetlana Askoldova, *Ueber die Ereignisse in Chicago 1886* (Moscow: APN Publisher, 1986).

[2]. See e. g. Schmidt's article "Eine grausige Jugenderinnerung?" *Die Fackel*, Chicago, Nov. 29, 1896 from page 36 to page 45 of the work under review.

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**Citation:** Andrea Mehrländer. Review of Schmidt, Axel W.-O., *Der Rothe Doktor von Chicago: Ein Deutsch-Amerikanisches Auswandererschicksal: Biographie des Doktor Ernst Schmidt, 1830-1900, Arzt und Sozialrevolutionaer*. H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

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