

Liedolsheim Evangelical Church –History of the Bells

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The history of the Liedolsheim church bells is linked very often to acts of war. Therefore I am happy to write this article on an occasion, where not war, but normal wear makes reconditioning of the bells necessary. This need for reconditioning inspired the following summary of my research on the bells' history.



Figure 1: The big and the middle sized bell in February 2015 before reconditioning

The bells were mentioned first in 1485 [1], when two church bells for Liedolsheim were founded in Gottesau (a place which is today part of Karlsruhe). Martin Weber, a Liedolsheim citizen, served as godfather of one of those bells. The next information on the bells is after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701 – 1714). The village people had buried the bells in one of their numerous lakes, hiding them from foreign troops, which crossed the village often on their march to the nearby fortress of Philippsburg. However, they had hidden the bells so perfectly, that they were unable to locate them after the war. Therefore the community paid for two new bells, even they were convinced that the Margrave of Baden would have been liable to pay.

These new bells were destroyed already a few years later in 1734, when the church burned down in the night of May 6 to 7. The fire, caused by French marauders in the War of Polish Succession, was so intense, that the church was completely destroyed. The bells fell down from the tower and were broken in pieces. The bronze metal was collected and brought to Speyer, where the bell and cannon founder Paul Strobel created two new bells with a weight of 1179 and 770 pounds, respectively. The big-

ger bell was decorated with the names of the village officers, like the bailiff and the village mayor [2]. Bell-founding took place on November 9 or 10, 1737 in presence of the village mayor (Schultheiß) Hannß Michael Oberlin and the village accountant Conrad Herbst. Two daughters of the founder decorated the bells with collars before they were brought to Liedolsheim. Transport was carried out by horse and cart and the river Rhine was crossed by the ferry in Rheinhausen [3, 4, 5].

The bigger bell obviously had a quality problem and cracked already 7 years later in 1744. Using the bronze metal, a new bell was founded close to the church building at the Liedolsheim cemetery. On-site founding of bells was a tradition for a long time, although it seems surprising that a bronze melting furnace was built for using it only a single time. The 1744 bell was specified with a weight of 1376 pounds. In 1846, a weight of 1300 pounds was reported [6]. The difference may be due to a change in units in Baden in 1810 and deviances between the balances used.

In 1898, an additional 5 meter story was added to the Liedolsheim church tower for the reason, that the church bells could not be heard in parts of the growing village. The tower roof was already taken off, when the demand for a third bell came up. Pastor Wurth stated that all neighbor villages, even smaller ones, had three bells. After a first negative reply on his application, the village council decided in April 1898 to install a third bell and share the costs between the village and the so called "Almosenfonds" (charity fund) [7, 8]. Costs for the bell were estimated to 2.800 Mark, for the new steel belfry to 900 Mark. This belfry with its riveted structure is on duty still today.

Two decades later the First World War resulted in loss of two of the church bells. In March 1917, the Ministry of War in Berlin ordered to register and to confiscate all bronze bells in Germany. The bells were classified into three categories, according to their cultural significance. Class "A" bells had to be delivered at once, Class "C" bells should be conserved under any circumstances, and class "B" bells should be confiscated later, if necessary. Within Karlsruhe County, 55 % of the bells were delivered. The county had only two bells founded before the mid of the 18th century: a church bell from 1521 in our neighbor village Rußheim and the 1698 bell of the Liedolsheim town hall. Both were delivered to the ministry, an inexplicable fact to the Freiburg prelate Josef Sauer, who was responsible for the main part of the classification work [9]. The Liedolsheim church delivered its biggest bell (from 1898) and the smallest one (probably the one founded 1737 in Speyer). Johannes Weisser, pastor in Liedolsheim from 1915 to 1927 prayed, that "the bells may contribute to the victory of our country" [10], which probably reflects the position of most of the people in our village at that time. In April 1917, the United States entered the war against Germany, which lasted another one and a half year until November 1918.

After the end of the war, pastor Weisser committed himself to bring new bells to the Liedolsheim church tower. He initiated collections of money and natural produce in his parish. He also remembered the Liedolsheim emigrant community in Cleveland, OH. There were still contacts between some emigrant families and the Liedolsheim parsonage. Karl Euler, Weisser's predecessor, was author and editor of the parish newsletter "Evangelischer Gemeindebote", printed from 1908 to 1913. Copies of this newsletter were also sent to Cleveland. Donations of Cleveland families like Julius Tropf and E. (Emil or Ernst) Tropf were regularly reported in the paper.



Figure 2: The parish newsletter, printed 1908 – 1913, brought news from Liedolsheim also to families in Cleveland, OH

Already in 1920, Weisser asked Carl Ludwig Wächter in Cleveland to contact other Liedolsheim emigrants there for financial help for new church bells. Two letters from Carl Ludwig Wächter, conserved in our parish archives, convey an impressive insight in the situation on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in those years. Wächter, born in 1848 in Liedolsheim, emigrated around 1880. He uses a letterhead of WAECHTER CANDY CO. which must be his or his son's company. In his hand written letters he gives a detailed description of the situation in Cleveland. The hand writing of the 72 year old man is clear and readable, while his German makes it obvious, that he had left his mother country long ago. In his first letter dated August 8, 1920, he tries to explain the pastor of his small former home village the circumstances in a big American city like Cleveland. He states, that the city extends over more than 8 miles in diameter and that the German emigrants are scattered over all districts of the town. He mentions that German emigrants could no longer be activated by German newspapers as it was possible prior to America's entry into the war. He hopes that the political situation gets better and interprets an upcoming German Sängerbund in Cleveland as indicator. One can also feel his doubt on the real situation in Germany. Too much different news came over from there, are the people really suffering or is it not so bad? Finally he describes the economic situation in US as still good, but on the way to get worse with increasing unemployment, probably signs of the 1920 depression. However, Carl Ludwig Wächter promises in his letter to contact Liedolsheim emigrants with respect to a collection for new church bells for Liedolsheim.

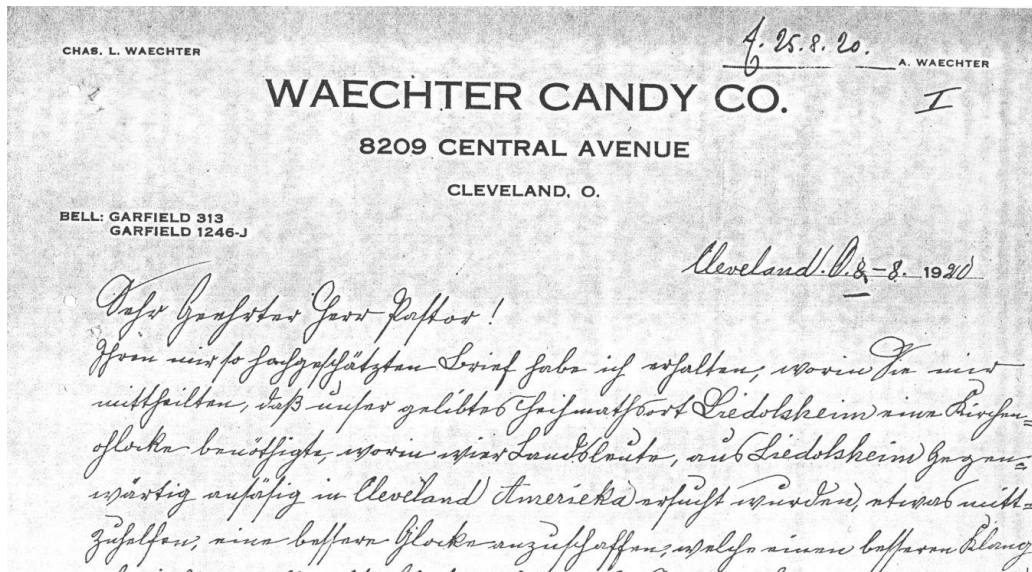


Figure 3: The first letter of Carl Ludwig Waechter, who had emigrated about 1880 to the US

It seems that this collection was not an easy undertaking. But on December 6, 1922, he could send a second letter. He informed pastor Weisser, that he had been able to collect 190.000 Mark as a contribution to the costs of the church bells. He states, that the times were not good for collecting money, as the emigrants already support some of their relatives, but that he was satisfied with the result of his collection and glad, to send it to the pastor's hand. It is not easy to tax the value of that money in this time of hyperinflation in Germany. In October 1922, 1 US\$ was equivalent to about 4.000 Mark [11], which leads to a sum of about 50 US\$ of the collection in 1922, equivalent to about 700 US\$ in 2014 [12]. Three month ago, on August 28, 1922, the bell with a weight of 400 kg had been offered for 100.000 Mark by the bell founder Bachert GmbH. Probably the collection was a substantial contribution, at least it helped to solve the problems of the parish caused by the inflation.

The significance of the donation can also be derived from the fact, that pastor Weisser wrote letters of thanks on January 9, 1923 to all of the 15 donators. They are mentioned in a list enclosed to Wächter's letters. Their names were: Ludwig Waechter, August Waechter, August Goebelbecker, August Kammerer, Fritz Hummel, Wilhelm Kubach, August Wilhelm Seith, Wilhelm Wiederkehr, Frau Louis Roth, Louis Kubach, Louis Oberlin, Henry Kubach, Frau Gundman geb. Kubach, Frau Sophie Gohrenflow geb. Kubach, Friedrich Zimmermann. Also the Cleveland Tropf family had donated 25.000 Mark in 1922 [13].

It seems an irony of fate that only two decades later two bells had to be delivered to the arms industry again, including the one co-financed by the "Liedolsheim Americans". Already in 1940 all bronze bells had to be registered. On November 14, 1941, the mayor's office confirmed the registration of three bells [14]. Two of them were finally delivered after saying farewell in the New Year's church service of 1942. Again

years of war followed, where Liedolsheim cousins from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean fought against each other. Contacts between Liedolsheim and Cleveland Liedolsheimers still existed. American soldiers with relations to the emigrants came to Liedolsheim after the end of the war, a story, which has to be told separately. Efforts for new bells were made already in 1946. The two missing bells could then be replaced and sanctified in May 1949 [15].



Figure 4: Pastor Oest (most right) and the presbytery with the demounted bells in 1942

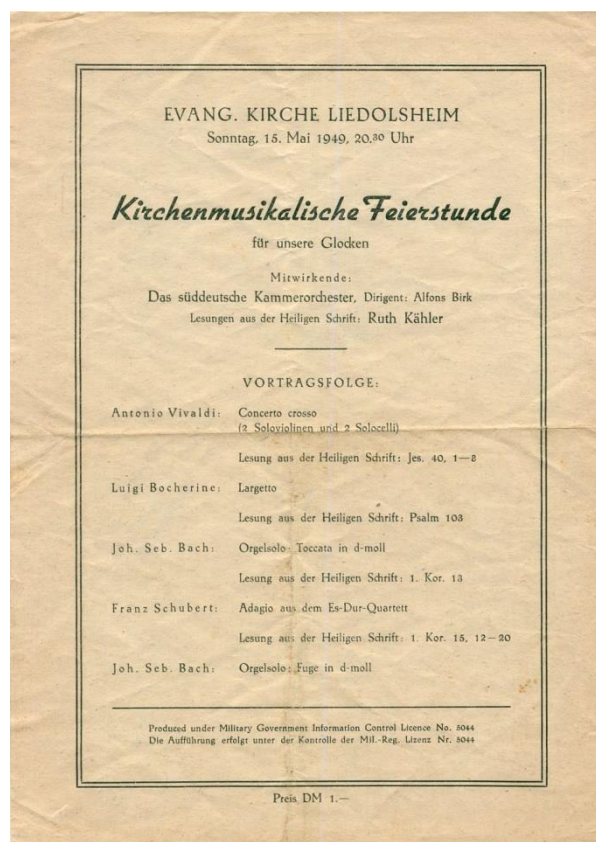


Figure 5: The ceremony for the new bells in 1949 had still to be licenced by the military government

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GAL = Gemeindearchiv Liedolsheim

PAL = Pfarrarchiv Liedolsheim

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