

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Transylvanians in Youngstown

Personal Experiences

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WILLIAM THEIS

Interviewed

by

Frithjof Reinhardt

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM THEIS

INTERVIEWER: Frithjof Reinhardt

SUBJECT: life style of immigrants, immigrations, economic conditions, politics, Saxon Club, prohibition

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R: This is an interview with William Theis for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the forming of the Saxon Club, by Frithjof Reinhardt at Youngstown on February 7, 1974, at 11:00 a.m.

Mr. Theis, you came here from Transylvania. Please tell us something about that.

T: I came to this country because in Europe where we lived under the Transylvanians, we worked for three dollars and fifty cents a week. Some of our people were over here and they were making nice money and that lured people to come to this country. I only got three dollars and a half a week as wages so I got the money from my father in 1907 and I came to this country. I landed in Youngstown on May the 7th, 1907. A month later I got a job working at the furniture company where my brother-in-law also worked. That's how I made my living. That's who I stayed with. I got a job there and I worked there from June until about the middle of September. Then the Depression set in and I got laid off. I didn't work that whole year and in the Spring of the year I got a job and I went to Farrell, Pennsylvania. I worked in a tin mill. But that wasn't very good because I was making tin plates then and I had a fellow who was always drunk and he always made a lot of scrap, and I worked for three weeks and I got a dollar and a half pay, for three weeks' work. Then I worked there for about two months. The highest I would draw was seven or eight dollars in two weeks' pay, over in Farrell, Pennsylvania. Well, then I stayed there until the next Spring. The next Spring my brother-in-law called me to come back to the store, and I got my job back. In the Fall of 1907, it was kind of a Depression, and the next Spring when I came over I got the job back, and things were

picking up again because that was election year that year. We were electing Taft. Taft was elected president in 1908 and all the people who worked in the factories had to march up and down Federal Street to advertise the presidency and Taft got elected that year. After that year, after he got in, then things started to work. I was making six dollars a week! We had to work from five o'clock in the morning sometime until seven, eight, nine at night for that one dollar, and we were glad to have a job. But in 1907 that year, I was out of a job. I didn't have anything to eat, so my brother-in-law had a shoe shop on Federal Street and he took in sometimes a dollar or two, sometimes thirty-five cents and then the time came when we went to the saloon on the elephant bridge.

A big, German fellow had a big place there, and for a nickel we bought a great, big Schooner beer, about a quart, about a quart or more. Then he had lunches on the bar. You could eat all you wanted for that nickel. That was during the Depression of 1907. But in 1908 when I came back, I got the job back at the furniture factory where I worked for my brother-in-law and I got six dollars a week again; but it wasn't very long until they raised me to nine dollars after things got better because I was doing better and that was 1908 and 1909. Then in 1910, I got ten dollars a week for working at the factory. So that's the way things went.

Now when I stayed with my brother-in-law, then the Saxons had the club on Franklin and Flint Hill. There they had some doings sometimes. We lived way out on Oak Street, close to Early Road, 1554 Oak Street. From there we had no way to go to come to the streetcar, and the streetcar only came as far as Watt Street. Then at Watt Street we had to get off of the streetcar, and walk over the South Avenue Bridge to the club. There we stayed until about ten, eleven o'clock in the evening. Then we had to walk home. They had five children; I carried one; my sister carried one; my brother-in-law carried one, and the rest of them had to walk. Until we got home [it] was about one, two o'clock. It took us about two hours to walk home. But still, that was the only enjoyment we had. We couldn't go anyplace else; we couldn't talk the English language very well, but we always were glad to get together at the Saxon Club to have enjoyment for ourselves. Then in 1908, I joined the club. George Telmont was president at that time; he was a boss at the Canadian Mill. He was a very nice fellow and a lot of us liked him and he stayed on for several years. But then we came to the club. Once a month we had a meeting, and we enjoyed coming to the club because that was the only place we had to go.

We came to this country because in Europe our pay was very small. We worked for three and a half dollars a week and here we made money and we all just came over to stay here just a year or two in order to make a little money and then go back because we liked

our home.

Under Kaiser Franz Josef, the Saxons had it very nice in that country. Things were going pretty well. But most of us came for two years; some of us went back when we made a few hundred dollars, which over there was several thousand, to buy a home or to pay for the old home the people had. Some of us stayed here; some of us went back, but most of us just came for two years and all of us are still here and a lot of us died here, because this was the land of opportunity, the land where you could make something if you were ambitious to work for your money.

A lot of our Saxon people worked at this Canadian Mill; some worked at the Brier Hill Steel. At the Brier Hill Steel, Mike Minnie was a boss, a German Saxon fellow; he gave quite a few jobs. I went there for one whole winter. I walked from Oak Street down to Brier Hill to get a job because I wanted to get a job as a blacksmith, but there wasn't any job to have so I stayed at the furniture store.

Then in 1913, my brother-in-law and I, we opened a business for ourselves, which was very enjoyable. We made it pretty good. At that time we bought second-hand furniture from people and sold it, and that was our main business. But then later on in the 1930's we still had the business, but we had two stores, one on East Federal Street and one on West Federal Street. We made out pretty good.

Then in 1913, I got married. I married the girl that lived right next to us, but she couldn't speak any German; she speaks just English, but her mother was German.

Now about the Saxon Club. The Saxon Club was built in 1907. In 1907 the Saxon Club was built and we had attendance at that time of about one hundred and fifty members. When the club was organized in 1901 we had about thirty-five members. Then between 1930 and 1940 we had up to three hundred members at the Saxon Club.

In the 1930's we got an awful hard Depression here in this country again. Most of the people were out of work. Lots of them didn't make enough to eat, and between 1930 and 1931 we had to give the people credit for the year's dues in order to keep them in the Club because they couldn't pay the dues. The dues were only fifty cents, but they didn't have the fifty cents to pay the dues, so we gave the people one year credit in order to keep them coming to the Club, to help keep the Club together. In 1931, we did the same thing, but then in 1932, Roosevelt got elected and things got a little big better after Roosevelt got in there because he started the WPA. Most of the fellows that had a job, they paid them sixty dollars a month so they could eat. After that things started to go

pretty good. But a lot of us lived all over town; a lot of us had big mortgages and the government lent most of the fellows the money on three and one half percent. We had to pay six percent at the bank. The government loosened our payment, and that way most of us kept our home; a few of them lost it, but not very many of them.

R: But most kept their homes?

T: Most kept their homes.

R: Did the Saxons live in any particular part of the city?

T: No, the Saxons lived all over the city. They lived in Brier Hill; they lived on the east side, but most of them lived on the north side, close to General Fireproofing. That's where most of them worked. Lots of them worked at the General Fireproofing, and they bought their homes around there because in those days we had to walk to work. Lots of them always bought the place close to where they worked so they didn't have to walk so far. And that's why we didn't make a colony to get together because some lived out on the west side, and some lived on the east side; some lived on the south side. On the south side we had a fellow by the name of Schmidt who had a flower store, flower shop over there, a greenhouse. He was a very wealthy man. Later on he went to Florida. Then we had some other fellows in Youngstown, Martin Alsner was a president of the Saxon Club; Simon Maldt was president of the Saxon Club; Fritz Eberhardt was a president of the Saxon Club; Micheal Minnie was a president of the Saxon Club and John Laith, he was very, very active in the church; he was president for one year at the Saxon Club, but he spent most of his time at the church because he was interested more in the church than anything else, to keep the church together.

R: When did the Saxons form their own church?

T: The Saxons formed their own church in 1907. The first church they held was in the Saxon Club and the Reverend Schuster was the preacher at that time, for several years until Fritz came over. When Fritz came over they elected Fritz because Fritz was a highly recommended preacher and he made very well on it here.

R: Did he also come from Transylvania?

T: Yes, Fritz also came from Transylvania, but Fritz was an officer in the Army, that is, during the First World War. After the war he came over. Of course our church was organized; Schuster organized the church, Reverend Schuster. When Fritz came the church was already in pretty good shape. They had

had the church already on Walnut Street. Then they had a German school. Most of the Saxon people took their children to the church and Fritz gave them German lessons for a good many years. They all got confirmed, at that time in the German language. They thought in order to keep the German [language] going they gave the catechism all in German. Fritz was pretty good with it; of course he had several helpers; several of the ladies and men helped him out. They had quite a few children already by that time. So the church did very well.

R: Did the people speak German at home?

T: Oh yes. Most of the people spoke German at home and all the churches were in German. All the children, their classes were in German.

R: There was no English at all?

T: Well, there was no English at that time. Not at that time.

R: How about marriage? Did the Saxon people mostly marry Saxons or Germans?

T: Well, that was a rare thing which is also rare today. They went to school and got acquainted with some of the boys they went to school with. More than half of them married outside of the Saxons because they got acquainted with fellows they went to school with. They lived in the territory where they lived and they got together; they married. Half of them didn't marry Saxons; some did. Some didn't and some also are doing that today,

They kept it [the church] pretty well, but they lived too far apart and they lived too far away so they were dissatisfied with the church on Lincoln Avenue. They sold the church and bought a place on Wick Avenue, a mansion. They had a church there for several years, but most of them didn't like that territory, the location, because it was more of a They sold that home and bought the lot on Glenwood Avenue where the beautiful church is standing today. They built that church on Glenwood Avenue and ever since they built that church the Saxon church has done very well. Most of them are going there together, but lots of them are not going there yet, like myself. I lived on the east side; my wife couldn't speak one word of German. I got married in St. Paul's Church. At that time Reverend Silber was at the church and we got married there. Our children got christened there. I myself still belong to St. Paul's Church and all my children go there because it was all English and here my children couldn't speak German because my wife couldn't speak German. So they didn't have a chance to learn the German language. That's how the church was organized.

Now coming back to the club. In 1940, when I was president of the club, we made an approach to buy the ground to build the club outside of the city someplace because it was too crowded in the city. People couldn't get there; they didn't like the place anymore. So we bought this place where the Saxon Club is standing now.

R: Where was it before?

T: Before the club was on Commerce Street . . . It was built in 1907 and it was there until 1960. In 1960 we sold the Saxon Club.

R: The old one?

T: The old one. The freeway going through there, the government bought the ground so we had to get out. That was in 1960. In 1961 then, they sold the place and they got \$40,000 from the government for the old club. Then for one year we had our meeting at the German Maennerchor. We met there once a month, every second Sunday, same as it is today; we met every second Sunday in the Maennerchor. They didn't charge us any rent; they did it in order to help the Saxons along.

R: Tell me when the Saxon Club was founded in the German minutes; it was called a benefit society.

T: The German Benefit Club, a benefit society, it was at that time. Why they all came and joined the club was because we had insurance; we had insurance for life and we had insurance for sick. Every member who paid fifty cents a month got seven dollars a week sick benefits in case he got sick. At that time it was for twenty-six weeks. But it's less now. They got seven dollars a week for their fifty cents. We all had insurance. We had to send delegates; every year we have a convention in some city. We had a convention, and for every fifty members that we had in each club, you could send a delegate to the convention. We had about three hundred members and we were allowed to send six delegates. But now the club has improved since we sold the old club; in 1962 we built the new club which we have now, which is in a very nice place and we all enjoy going there. The present Saxon Club was built in 1962.

R: I noticed that at the present club there are many, many members who are not Saxon, and who do not speak German, so things have changed, haven't they?

T: That's what I personally don't like. I mention it, but the younger fellows don't seem to agree with me. I thought we organized the Saxon Club to keep only Saxons together. But today we have 500 members, and out of the 500 members I think half of them are not Saxon. But some of the Saxon girls married fellows that were not Saxon; I agree with that. Some of the boys married other girls who were not Saxons; I agreed with that.

But the way it is now, I do not agree with the younger fellows about a fellow not having to be a Saxon. His grandfather can be a German, or his grandmother can be a German two or three generations back and they still take him up. And I'm afraid some day that we will have that many members that the Saxon Club is going to lose out because they took too many in.

R: Now in former days when you came over in 1907, 1908, were there any strangers here at the Saxon?

T: Until 1950 there was nobody but Saxons that belonged to the Saxon Club. They could not belong to it unless they were a Saxon.

R: So there was no mixing in there?

T: No mixing then, until the 1940's. We elected a younger member. When William Hartman was elected and Martin Kid was elected we started to mix. Even the minutes were all in German until that time. But after some of the younger fellows got to be elected president, they couldn't speak German, so they made the change in the club that we elected fellows that could speak and write the American language and we all kept the minutes after that in the English language.

When we built the building we had the \$40,000 that we got from the club, and then all the Saxons donated \$50, \$100, \$200, \$300, and made up a kitty and built the new, present club. But that wasn't enough money coming together, so they borrowed \$125,000 from the Home Savings and Loan with six percent interest. They paid that off in a very short time because after we got the new club, things were going very good. We got more members. Then we got the social club that is affiliated with the Saxon Club; it's helping. Then they were renting out this new club and it took them about seven years to pay off the loan. Right at present, the loan is paid off and they're doing very well.

R: Mr. Theis, you mentioned that most of your people were farmers in the old country, is there any farming here now?

T: There are three or four that I know of that had farms here, but they've never been successful. The one that worked on a farm, he couldn't make it go because the ones that worked in the mill made more money, so they all quit the farming and all went back to the mill. There were very few that were farmers here. There was only one fellow that I knew that was a really good farmer. He had nice stocks and we all used to go down and picnic at his place. He did very well.

R: Most of them were industrial workers?



- T: Industrial workers. But in the old country, most of the fellows had come from the farms, from the villages. In our town there was more business, all business places; no farmers in our town. But the villages around our town were most of the people who came to this country; that is after 1910 until 1913. Then in 1913, the war started, the First World War started, and none of the them could come in anymore and that was until 1918; November 11th was when they stopped the First World War. Then not until in the 1920's were the fellows starting to come back in again. But most of them came from the villages and most of them were farmers.
- R: How about their education?
- T: The education in our town, we had eight classes. We had to go six years in the school; that is the government compelled us to go six. The ones who were better off could go to the seventh and the eighth grade. Then after the eighth grade, they went to the gymnasium. Some of them went there to get higher education, but very few of them. But in the villages, I think they only had four or five classes. But all over, all Saxons in all of Transylvania, they all had to go to school because the government at that time, under Kaiser Fredrick, gave everybody the opportunity. You had to read and write. There were very few of us, the older, that were not able to write and read.
- R: Boys and girls?
- T: Boys and girls. We had eight classes. The boys and girls, we went all to one. The ones who were born in one year went together, boys and girls.
- R: What language did you speak in the school?
- T: In Transylvania we had nothing but the German language. We had to learn the German language; that was our main thing. But when we were under the Hungarian rule, we had to learn Hungarian. One hour in the week we had to learn Hungarian in order to count in Hungarian, so we could speak the Hungarian language.
- R: Now I notice that many Saxons here sent their children to universities, or it appears that they made out quite well.
- T: Here in this country, we all have to go to higher schools. Now the German children all have to go until they go through high school, all of them. My girl went to high school and she got a pretty good job at the courthouse. But now, the way it is today, the one that wants more education can get it because they go to colleges. Like here, the government has the big school here in town, so the children don't have to go to Cleveland or Pittsburgh; they can all stay here in town and

- get the education right here in town.
- R: Now the Saxon Club also furthers education and culture. They had language classes at one time, didn't they, and singing?
- T: Yes, we had what they called the Saxon Maennerchor and the ladies' choir. We used to go sing as far as Chicago, as far as St. Louis; that is in conventions. We had as high as sixty men in the Maennerchor and we had very good singers. I, myself, was singing tenor and then Bill Brender was singing tenor and Mike Minnie was singing bass. Some fellows were signing first bass, some second bass, so with the ladies. We went to St. Louis and we got the first prize. Our director was a real good director. He was here a good many years, and he enjoyed being with us. He didn't just teach in Youngtown, he went to Salem; he went to New Castle; he had all the Saxon choirs around here, teaching to go to the singing fest.
- R: This competition was a competition of German singing choirs?
- T: That's what it was. I call it prize singing; it was competition. We all got first prize, second prize, and third prize. Then the one that got the first prize always got the American flag to take home
- R: It started out, I believe, as a benefit society, wasn't it?
- T: Yes, well the benefit society and it was from the Saxons that we have the German Beneficial Union. The German Beneficial Union, you can pay in so much a month and after ten years you get a thousand dollars back. I was president of the German Beneficial Union for a good many years. I also was president of the Saxon Maennerchor in Youngstown here for a good many years. I always tried to be with the fellows to keep them together and help out as much as I could in order to keep the Saxons together.
- R: When the Saxons got together at the Saxon Club, what are some of the main events during the year?
- T: The main events of the year? When the children grew up, we had the basketball season. Now, when my boy and my girl belonged to the Junior Saxon Club, my boy was president and my girl was secretary at the junior club. My boy, I furnished him a car every year because he went from here to Homestead; he went to Sharon; he went to New Castle; he went to Chicago; he went to Alliance and he always took the singers along. He always took eight of them in the car and hauled them to the singing fest.

R: What did the Saxons do for entertainment?

T: Entertainment? Well, that was the Saxon entertainment because then they made the concert and then there was singing at the concert, the same as they have it here now. They still have their choirs here now. At one time it was almost down to nothing, but I see right now there are quite a few there again. It's getting better.

R: You mentioned before that during the First World War all immigration from the old country stopped.

T: Yes.

R: Now after the war, people started coming again?

T: That is, the war stopped in 1918 and in the 1920's, in 1921, 1922, up until about 1928, 1929, there were quite a few of them that came in at that time. In 1922 we had a little Depression but anyhow there were people coming in. That was under Coolidge. Under Coolidge we had the small Depression in 1923. It didn't last very long, but we had pretty good times until the 1930's came. In 1929, in the Fall, was when the [crash] came, at that time a lot of the Saxon people, a lot of other people lost a lot of money in that Depression. Everything went down to nothing.

R: But in the 1920's they still came, and they joined the Saxon Club?

T: That was our main thing because that was the only enjoyment we had here, going to the Saxon Club. They even organized the Saxon Bank. Do you know about that?

R: A bank?

T: There was a Saxon fellow. At one time he was a teller at the Dollar Bank. During the war a lot of fellows sent money over to their people. They sent it through the Dollar Bank. They sent it through him, and a lot of money was never sent over. After the war was over, they all wanted to find out where their money went to. No money was ever sent and then he was fired from the bank. Then after he started a bank himself. George Schuler had a lot of money in there. He lost lots of money. They wanted me to invest money in there; I can't invest any money in that bank; I have a business here and if I have any money, I have to invest in my business here where I know I can make some money. So one day he disappeared from the Saxon Bank, took all the money, and nobody knows where he went.

R: That was in the 1920's?

T: That was in the 1920's, yes.

R: Going back to the Saxon Club, when these fellows came over after the First World War, after 1918, pretty soon there was prohibition in this country, wasn't there?

T: Yes, the prohibition came right after the war. During the prohibition we couldn't buy any beer, couldn't buy anything. They had so many prohibition officers to go around if you had anything. Lots of them made moonshine at that time. Lots of them made home-made whiskey and were selling that. Then they had the prohibition officer go and catch them and fine them. At the Saxon Club, we were pretty well-known in town by the city; I was a member of the executive branch of the Republican Party for thirty years and I had quite an influence in this town. We weren't bothered. We had a fellow who was making home brew in the club and selling home brew for twenty-five cents a bottle, but only to members. Then if you had a friend, you could take them in because that was the only beer you could get; you couldn't get anything else. One day he had a pretty good stock on hand, and the prohibition officers came here from Cleveland and raided the club. They took all the beer away from the club and took it all to the police station. They took him to Cleveland to the high court. I had to go there and take him out on bond and I had to put a \$25,000 bond up to get him out. He came from the same city I did. I knew he wouldn't disappear. I knew the bond was only for him to go back on trial. That was only what the bond was for, in order to get the fellow to come back to trial. Two months later we had the trial in Cleveland. We all went back to Cleveland and as soon as I got there, I got my bond back and we had the trial; the Saxon Club was fined \$800. We had to pay the fine. When we came back here in town, the police department from the city of Youngstown called us back to come and get back our bottles if we wanted them because they didn't have any place to keep them at the police station.

R: Mr. Theis, you lived and saw quite a number of Presidents of the United States. What do you think of them? Which were the outstanding ones; which ones were not so good?

T: Well in my time, when I came to this country, we had elections four times. In 1908, we elected Taft and by electing Taft they made a big breakthrough in Youngstown propaganda. All the steel men had to march all in uniform. Under Taft we had two good terms until in 1914 when the war started. Things were pretty good, but then after that in 1916 we elected Wilson. Wilson was President; things were pretty good then. He was a Democrat. Taft was a Republican. It was pretty good on account of the war. He's the one who made the treaty for the United States in Versailles; he and Stalin gave away the country to Russia, and ever since that time the United States and Russia, in my opinion, have always been friendly. They have to be friendly because they are the two biggest powers and they have to get along, one with the other, and we still have that today.

But in 1922 we elected Harding as President of the United States; Harding only served a year and a half and he got chopped in the theatre. Then Coolidge served; he was Vice-president. Then he served the rest of the term for Harding and he got one term for himself after the term was out, until 1928. Then in 1928 we elected Hoover. Under Hoover we only had one or two good years and the Depression came. It was a big Depression. In 1929, in the Fall, the Depression started and in 1930 and 1931 during the big Depression, nobody had a nickel. Nobody had anything; everybody was really, really bad; nobody could get anything to eat, and they didn't have any money to buy anything to eat. Roosevelt got elected and he's the one that started the WPA, that work on the roads, and he gave every loafer--I call it--\$60 a month in order to live. Otherwise, he wouldn't have anything to live on. They worked on the road, but none of them did very much. They put the time in so they could get their pay, so they could live.

R: Did things get better then?

T: Oh yes. On the Roosevelt thing, when we started the WPA and all these things, things got going pretty good and Roosevelt got elected, I think, four times. Then after Roosevelt died, things got pretty darn dim again; that was in the 1940's. He served three or four terms, from 1932 into the 1940's. In the 1940's Roosevelt died, and then the Vice-president took over the job to run the country until his time was over. After Roosevelt's time was up, Truman got elected as president. Things went along fairly good because the Democrats always claimed that they would be better for the country. I never voted a Democratic ticket; I always voted Republican. I always thought the people should vote with the people that are the most able to run the country, because Harry Truman was a small businessman in Missouri and he didn't do very good in the business. Then, of course, after he got in there as president, things were better because he had a lot of people under him. Then under Truman we had the war in the Phillipines, with Japan in the Second World War and MacArthur was the big man in the Japanese fight. Truman fired MacArthur later in Korea because he promised he would end the war at Christmas if they would let him go [into China] and after that Harry Truman fired MacArthur, replaced him, and the war kept on going.

R: Do you remember Eisenhower? He was a general too.

T: Oh yes, General Eisenhower, he was a general in the Second World War in Europe and he got elected president and we brought him over from the front. Under Eisenhower, things ran pretty good. After Eisenhower came in and all the presidents that came in after him, everything ran pretty good. The country has been running very well the last twenty, thirty years. We haven't had a depression. Everybody had enough bread to eat. They didn't get as much pay as they do now. Now, the way the

country runs, I myself don't think it's going to go very far, because the labor unions are too strong and they're running the country instead of the government. They run it too much. Most of these fellows that work in the mill, in eight hours they make from twenty-five to forty dollars in eight hours. That way, the country cannot exist. Things are going too far. It's up to the younger generation now to correct this country because the way it's running now, something has to be done to correct it so we can get back in line again. There's too much money between the people, in my opinion. Money is the evil of everything. Money makes things; money breaks things. That's my opinion.

END OF INTERVIEW