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AMERICANIZATION IN OMAHA¹

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Americanization is a large subject and one to be dealt with in a large way. For more than threescore years, before the beginning of the European war, the gates of America had been swinging wide open, admitting daily hundreds and sometimes thousands of European immigrants. No city, town, village, hamlet, or community but received one or more of these people. Many remained in the large seacoast cities or went into the larger interior cities, but each carried with him all his Europeanism.

We, as Americans, paid very little attention to them. They were just foreigners, the "strangers within our gates," and we felt no responsibility for them. We called America the great "melting-pot" and were satisfied that all this raw material was going through the refining process and would come out as good Americans in time. But much of the raw material never got into the "melting-pot" and has remained *raw material* with all its Europeanism. This is represented by thousands who live together in "colonies" in the congested sections of great cities, still holding to the language, customs, and manners they brought with them, and in some cases almost ignorant of the daily life of the so-called native American sections. This is true of all the large industrial cities. Even in our own city we have Russian, Greek, Bohemian, Lithuanian, and Italian sections.

¹ Read before Nebraska Section of the English Council, Omaha, May 10, 1919.

In New York City these sections are distinctly defined, and there are people living in these "colonies" who believe that all of America lies between the East River and Broadway, and the Battery and Fourteenth Street. One authority says that the peculiarly industrial states and cities of the United States today include from 31,000,000 to 35,000,000 people native to Europe or of overseas parentage, who not only reflect European sentiments, but whose bond of sympathy with European elements and conditions is almost stronger than any that may join them with the people of America. Another writer says: "We are also confronted with the significant fact that the man who engineered and carried out the political downfall of Russia did the work with plans which they had drawn and perfected in the United States, and the anarchism that has laid Russia low made its way across the Atlantic in an easterly direction.

"More than 31,000,000 people who enjoy the liberty of America and yet know little or nothing of the individual responsibility of every true American for the *maintenance* of that liberty, who accept the *substance* of liberty without understanding its obligation! Is it any wonder they join in strikes and disturbances only too readily, under leaders as thoroughly European as themselves?"

One writer asks, "What shall be done to bring these millions to know the *real America*, the *idea* as well as the *place*? For the country that could not long endure half free and half slave can hardly endure much longer two-thirds American and one-third European." The answer is given in the word "Americanization"; that is, the use of *one language* and of the *same ideals*.

Secretary Lane says, "Surely without violation of our fundamental law we can find a way by which the nation can know that all of its people can talk and read our own language. I do not suggest federal control, but I would urge federal co-operation with the states toward definite ends." He goes on to say, "There is no one thing so supremely essential in a government such as ours, where decisions of such importance must be made by public opinion, as that every man, woman, and child shall know one tongue, that each may speak to every other and that all may be informed."

Our entrance into the war brought out some startling facts about non-English speaking and illiterate persons residing in the

United States. Of the 1,500,000 drafted men, 386,000 were either wholly illiterate or could not pass the tests. Of the 8,500,000 immigrants and native illiterates over ten years of age, 5,500,000 could not read or write English. Even in our own city, Omaha, they say there are 5,000 people who cannot read or write English, and English is the language of the United States of America! One has said, "To think in English is to think in American. How can a man think in the terms of a country whose language he does not read, write, or speak?" These facts and figures are appalling, but the situation is not hopeless. The remedy is in education.

Is it not true that, until we were brought face to face with these facts, we American-born were as dense to the Europeanism in our midst as the foreign-born were to the meaning of America? The National Committee of Public Defense, however, by its work throughout the country has aroused us, and by the extension and establishment of Americanization schools is trying to bring these two elements together and remove the barriers of ignorance and misunderstanding. Commissioner Lubin, of California, says, "The immigrant comes to us with three handicaps—ignorance of our language, ignorance of our customs, and ignorance of our laws. Unless these handicaps are removed he becomes a menace to society and the state. By removing these handicaps, protecting and helping him, and finally by encouraging the development of latent racial and personal talents, he becomes a useful and valuable citizen." This is what we are trying to do in our free public night schools, or Americanization schools, so called.

Before the European war our schools were constantly supplied by newcomers who had just arrived from overseas. Many of them were only "birds of passage" who stayed a short time and went on; some remained long enough to make a little progress, and others were regular and faithful in attendance and eventually dropped their Europeanism and became quite American. Since the war there has been almost no immigration, and we are now brought face to face with the foreigners who have lived in the country for a number of years but have never become Americanized. They have lived in their little communities, spoken the same language, and followed the same customs that they had in Europe. These are the people we must reach. It is the fathers

and mothers who must be Americanized. The state will take care of the children because they *must* attend school. We find then, that Americanization, like charity, must begin in the homes. But we cannot take the Kingdom of Heaven by violence. When we approach these people we find a great gulf of misunderstanding, because of language. They do not understand us or our motives at first, and we must win their confidence. When once they are made to understand that the schools are for them and that they are just as welcome as the children are, they can hardly believe it.

In a "mothers' room" in our school the past year we had twenty-five mothers. This meant twenty-five different homes touched by the school influence. Many of the women could not speak or read English when they entered the school, but they made wonderful progress. They were as delighted as children over their work and very grateful for the opportunities offered by the school. They all expect to be back in October. They will impart their interest and enthusiasm to their neighbors, and in this way the gulf will gradually be bridged and many more will come over into a broader sense of what America really is. In some communities the mothers are obliged to keep their children out of school to act as interpreters if they have business to attend to or have shopping to do. We need to reach these women. With the coming of universal suffrage they, too, will have the right to vote. We must bring them to the right ideals. For this reason our schools should be equipped so that it will be possible to teach domestic science, the household arts, and all that goes to make better homes, and improve the community. This is but one part, however, of Americanization.

In our schools we have many classes and conditions of men and women, and different nationalities. We classify them as illiterates; those who cannot read or speak English; those who speak a little English but cannot read; those who read a little English but cannot speak; those who speak and read a little English; those who read and speak English fairly well; and those who are able to read and speak with some fluency.

We must remember that the pupils in our evening schools are people who work. They come to us at the end of the day, often

tired and occasionally supperless. They do not expect a finished education in English, but they want a practical working knowledge of English that will help them in their work and business. In order of importance they are taught, first, to speak English, second, to read, and third, to write.

The direct method, if it may be called a method, is used in teaching them. The training of the *ear* is very important, and so the teacher begins first by performing some act, and speaking the accompanying sentence, as, "I open my book." She calls upon several pupils to perform the act and speak the sentence. The sentence is then written on the board and each pupil reads it, performing the act and then reading. After several sentences have been developed and read in this way, the pupils are asked to write them on paper. After this the words are taken separately and used as a spelling lesson. These lessons are kept on paper or in a notebook by the pupils and furnish something tangible for them to work on at home. The lessons given are based on the objects, acts, and experiences of daily life, and are intended to develop a speaking vocabulary as soon as possible. From these first exercises the lessons gradually increase in difficulty, and the pupils begin to read from a textbook, but the object is to help them to *speak* English and to *understand* it when someone else speaks; in other words, to develop a *vocal* and *oral* sense of English. This is the practical side of it, but added to this the teacher begins gradually to teach history, ethics, civics, and American ideals.

As the work advances one can see a definite plan which unfolds step by step from the first simple exercises to the most advanced work, and this plan is the evolution of an American citizen.

For many years there has been a law in Nebraska whereby an alien after taking out his "first papers" was allowed to vote on any question. He had all the privileges of citizenship without being a citizen. A few years ago, during a presidential campaign, I was talking with a young foreigner who had been in our school about a year. He remarked with some condescension that he had not decided which candidate he would vote for as president, but that he intended to vote. And I, an American-born citizen, sat dumb

because I was not allowed a voice in the selection of the president of the United States, but the law gave him, an alien, that privilege. Last fall, be it said to the honor of Nebraska, this law was annulled and no alien can vote now until he has his full naturalization papers. The loss of this privilege has brought many foreigners to a realization of the fact that an alien with his "first papers" is not a citizen, and that he must study and prepare for citizenship before he is granted that privilege. When a man becomes naturalized, his wife also is naturalized by the same act, thus making two new citizens. These are the people we want to bring into the schools, the fathers, mothers, older brothers and sisters, and other relatives. We want them to become American citizens, we are working toward that end; but one can see the wisdom of not dressing them in the clothes of citizenship until, through education and Americanization, they have become large enough for them.

Someone asks, "Is it necessary to understand a foreign language in order to teach these people?" No, it is not necessary, though it is sometimes helpful, but a teacher does need a large supply of that virtue that St. Paul names when he says, "Though I speak with the tongue of men and of angels." She needs boundless charity, broad sympathies, and a clear understanding, and she must be natural and sincere. When a foreigner meets these qualities, he responds at once to their influence and unfolds like a flower. As a rule his gratitude and appreciation know no bounds. You will find almost every night-school teacher an enthusiast over her work, because of the response she gets from the pupils and the appreciation they show. A bright young foreigner in our school once said to me, "I hear you use the word 'appreciate.' Will you tell me what it means?" I explained it to him the best I could. He thought a moment and replied, "Oh, yes, I know. It means you *feel the favor*." And so it is with these people: they "feel the favor," and are not afraid to express their appreciation.

Americanization, even as we see it in Omaha, is a large subject, and in dealing with it we can touch only the high places. But perhaps enough has been said to show you that much is being done to lessen Europeanism and enlarge Americanism in Omaha, and to bring about that condition expressed as "One nation, one language, one flag."