

John Schrag Espionage Case

By James C. Juhnke

THE JOHN SCHRAG espionage case was the dramatic climax to the dilemma of Kansas Mennonites in World War I. For John Schrag was chosen to be the symbol and the bearer of the American community's mistrust and hatred of German-speaking pacifists in the tense days of 1918.

John Schrag was a believer in those simple and durable virtues which made Mennonites highly prized citizens on the Kansas frontier. He was thirteen years old when his family emigrated from Volhynia, Russia, to central Kansas in 1874 and he was in his teens when he helped his father build a grain mill on the banks of the Little Arkansas River in Harvey County.¹ From his father he learned the value of hard work, the love of the soil, and the wisdom of careful investment. From the Mennonite faith and tradition he knew that God generously rewards his faithful laboring servants. Schrag's rise as a prosperous farmer with a large family and extensive landholdings was as natural as the economic and social success of the Mennonite community in the first decades after arrival in the new country.

The Mennonite role as outstanding and valuable citizen received an unforgettable jolt when the United States entered the World War in 1917. It suddenly became a requirement of acceptable American citizenship to support the war and to hate Germany. The Mennonites failed on both counts. They could not support the war because their religious faith taught them nonresistance, a doctrine whose practical expression was a claim for exemption from military service. And they could not hate Germany because Mennonites themselves were of German background who loved the German language and culture as preserved in their homes, schools, and churches. Their sympathies in the European war had been demonstrated in their collections of money for the German Red Cross.² Mennonites could not be acceptable citizens in America during the World War unless they gave up their German culture and their doctrine of nonresistance.

The War Bond drives became the test of loyal citizenship in the local community. Faced with alternative persuasion and intimidation by local Loyalty Leagues, many Mennonites reconciled their nonresistance with the purchase of the bonds. After all, reasoned Henry Peter Krehbiel, member of the Western District Com-

mittee on Exemptions, a war bond is a kind of tax and Jesus told us to pay our taxes.³ But John Schrag was not convinced. To buy bonds was to support the war and he would not support the war. That was that.

On November 11, 1918, a group of patriotic citizens in Burrton, Kansas, decided that the time was ripe for a showdown. "We was out to convert these slackers into patriots," said one of them later.⁴ Five carloads of men drove eleven miles to the Schrag farm near the Alta Mill to get Schrag to join the Armistice Day festivities in Burrton. Schrag's boys, sensing trouble, refused to say where their father was, but the Burrton men found him after ransacking the farmstead and forcing their way into the house. Schrag offered neither argument nor resistance. He went along in the hope that a measure of cooperation would help avoid physical violence.⁵

In Burrton a crowd quickly gathered as the citizens confronted Schrag with their real reason for bringing him to town. He must buy war bonds now or face the consequences. Schrag offered to contribute two hundred dollars to the Red Cross and the Salvation Army,⁶ but this was not sufficient. They demanded that he salute the American flag and carry the flag at the head of a parade through the town. But Schrag quietly and firmly refused to cooperate. The flag thrust into his hand fell to the ground. Someone shouted, "He stepped on the flag!" The crowd suddenly became an enraged mob.

They sprinkled and poured yellow paint on their victim, rubbing it into his scalp and beard until he resembled "a big cheese or yellow squash or pumpkin after the autumnal ripening."⁷ They led him to the city jail. Someone ran for a rope to hang him, but Tom Roberts, the head of the local Anti-Horse-Thief Association, courageously stood before the jail door brandishing a gun and saying, "If you take this man out of jail, you take him over my dead body." Temporarily frustrated, the indignant citizens made plans to return that night, force the jail open, and hang this so-called traitor. Meanwhile Schrag was placed in a chair on a raised platform in the jail so passers-by could view the humiliated man through the window in the jail door. One repentant member of the mob later testified to Schrag's calmness throughout the ordeal, "If ever a man looked like Christ—he did."⁸

Schrag was finally rescued from the Burrton crusaders-for-American-democracy by the Harvey County sheriff who came that evening to take him to the county jail in Newton for cleaning and safe-keeping. Before he was released, Schrag was informed that he was to be tried in court for violation of the Espionage Act. It was against the law to desecrate the flag of the United States.

Local newspaper accounts of the incident failed to defend the rights of the victim. The weekly Burrton Graphic on November 14 saw in the event "a pungent and durable reminder that loyalty is a necessary prerequisite to life in this community. We must be all Americans."⁸ The Hutchinson News article said that "a petition is being circulated to have him (Schrag) deported to Germany, his native land. This country is fast becoming an unhealthy place for 'slackers' of any kind."⁹ The Newton Evening Kansan-Republican suggested that if a federal court would find Schrag guilty, "it would undoubtedly mean the confiscation of his property and his deportation."¹⁰ On the week of the hearing of the Schrag case in Wichita, the editor of the Burrton Graphic listed "Some Things Residents of Burrton Should Be Thankful For." In the list was "That we as a people are more tolerant of others' foibles."¹²

The case against Schrag was heard in the Wichita federal court rooms by U.S. Commissioner C. Shearman on December 9. Five Burrton citizens presented fifty typewritten pages of evidence to prove Schrag's disloyalty and desecration of the flag. Schrag retained the services of a Jewish lawyer named Schulz for his defense. Commissioner Shearman took the case under advisement and promised the decision would be made shortly.

The decision, handed down on December 24, was that Schrag was not guilty and should not be bound over for federal trial. But Commissioner Shearman did say that "Schrag could not have gone closer to a violation of the espionage act if he had had a hundred lawyers at his side to advise him."¹² Schrag in fact had not wilfully desecrated the flag. Nothing in the Espionage Act required one to salute the flag, and Schrag's words which supposedly slandered the flag had been spoken in German so that none of the monolingual plandiffs could prove any guilt.

The Newton Evening Kansan-Republican, frustrated by the acquittal of this "bull-headed" man, suggested that the case "should certainly make plain to any thinking person the viciousness that exists in the encouragement of the German language as a means of communication in America. . . . The melting pot cannot exercise its proper functions when such things are allowed. . . ."¹⁴

The Mennonite newspapers in central Kansas, intimidated into silence, did not come to Schrag's defense nor did they so much as mention the incident

or the hearing as an item of news. After the commissioner's decision, however, Editor C. E. Krehbiel of the Herald (Newton) wrote an editorial, "Mob Power," which clearly referred to the Schrag case although it mentioned no specific names or events. In cases of mob violence, wrote Krehbiel, either the mob or the abused person is guilty. If the court of justice decides that the victim is innocent, the only conclusion is that the mob is guilty. Readers were to make their own applications.¹⁵

Schrag's attorney encouraged him to bring charges against his persecutors, but Schrag declined. Such an action would have violated the Mennonite principles of nonresistance. But the nonresistant German-Mennonites had no scruples against clamping an economic boycott on the town of Burrton in the months after the Schrag affair.¹⁶ The boycott was not organized systematically but it was effective in disrupting the trade of Burrton businessmen who were dependent upon the commerce of German-Mennonite farmers. The legacy of tension and hatred generated by the event would be remembered for decades to come.

The experience of the Mennonites in World War I hardly had a salutary effect on the processes of the American melting pot. The Mennonites were driven to a defensive retrenchment, to a renewed awareness of their distinctiveness as Mennonites, in the years after the war. Although they gradually abandoned their German language and some German cultural traits, the war experiences forced them to a reconsideration and reaffirmation of the doctrine of nonresistance. And as long as Mennonites held to that doctrine, they would be a thorn in the flesh of American nationalists. The witness of John Schrag, and of other Mennonites who refused to compromise their doctrine of nonresistance during wartime, could serve as a reminder of the Anabaptist heritage of steadfastness in the face of persecution.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peter Schrag, son of John Schrag, personal interview with the author, McPherson Co., Kansas, Oct. 23, 1966.
2. *Foranets*, Nov. 27, Dec. 13, 1914; *Herald*, Nov. 19, 1914.
3. H. P. Krehbiel, "Die Stellung der Gemeinde Jesu Christi zum Modernen Staat," *Herald*, April 25, 1919.
4. Charles Gordon, Hutchinson, Kansas, interview with the author, April 23, 1967. Gordon was a member of the Burrton mob and confirmed details reported in this article.
5. Peter Schrag, interview, Oct. 23, 1966.
6. *Ibid.* Peter Schrag says his father gave a thousand dollars to the Red Cross and Salvation Army. The Burrton Graphic gives the figure of \$200 for the day of Nov. 11.
7. Burrton Graphic, Nov. 14, 1918.
8. Charles Gordon interview.
9. Burrton Graphic, Nov. 14, 1918.
10. Hutchinson News, Nov. 16, 1918.
11. Newton Evening Kansan-Republican, quoted in Burrton Graphic, Nov. 28, 1918.
12. Burrton Graphic, Dec. 12, 1918.
13. Newton Evening Kansan-Republican, Dec. 27, 1918. See also Wichita Eagle, Dec. 27, 1918.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Der Herald*, Jan. 1, 1919.
16. Gerhard Zetter, personal interview with the author, Moundridge, Kansas, Dec. 6, 1966. Fred B. Unruh, personal interview with the author, Burrton, Kansas, Jan. 29, 1967. Charles Gordon interview.