Freemasonry in Germany

Introduction
The first part of this paper is needed to convey a better understanding of the circumstances and the environment prevailing at the time of forming the first lodge in Frankfurt. It was produced with the intention of giving a rather general and informative picture of first Masonic development in Germany.

The writer is aware of other partly conflicting sources of information on the subject. However, in order to retain a certain degree of simplicity and straightforwardness, non relevant side developments were ignored. References to further sources of information are given at the end of the paper. Frankfurt was chosen as an important political and cultural centre in Europe for the last 250 or more years. Post war developments to start Freemasonry again in Germany were initiated here, along with the first movements to set up the Federal Republic of Germany in 1947.

Masonic Development in early Germany.
The earliest transcripts available concerning stone-masons and the organisation of the building trade are from the Roman writers Livius and Plutarch. They speak about the Roman 'Collegia Fabrorum' - building schools which controlled construction work of importance throughout the vast Roman Empire until the reign of Constantine the Great (337 - 306 B.C.).

In the Frankonian and later German Empire the monasteries with their own building schools took over the task of cultivating, improving and passing on knowledge on building work of any nature. During the same period, i.e. at the turn of the first millennium of the present era into the second, tradesmen from the north Italian building academy in Como wandered right across Europe up to Sweden in the search for suitable building projects. These Como masters were united in brotherhood under the symbol of the Quatuor Coronati - the Four Crowned Ones.

This movement strongly influenced the customs and traditions of subsequently developing Gothic Lodges. The word Lodge, being of Italian origin, here in particular signifies "building shop", encompassing the sheltering structures as well as the workmen united under them. In the Gothic lodges architects, artists, stonemasons and other tradesmen came together to develop for that time incredibly complex and complicated structures and buildings. Knowledge and experience thus pooled was passed on from one generation to another and was subject to a continuous closed shop secrecy. However, sometimes non operative persons representing the client's side were granted access to the lodge based on secret signs of recognition particularly to each building site.

During the construction of larger buildings such as the big cathedrals which were developed over a time span of a hundred years or more, the lodge was also the centre of family life, schooling of children and further education of all persons belonging to it. Once a project was completed all members of a lodge moved on to the next place of activity.

Unlike the medieval guilds, the lodges were free and independent of the local sovereign's authority. Thus they could not be prevented from moving across local boundaries, whereas other citizens at that time had only very limited rights.
The elected master of a building lodge was in charge of the lower grades. The members called each other "Brother" and the common shelter set up next to the building site served various purposes - as a workplace, living quarters and recreation area for all. Master, Fellowcrafts and apprentices lived together on a confined space and thus without any barriers of rank and distinction. Tolerance and mutual education must therefore have been early priorities.

The building trade in its described form experienced its heyday during the 15th century. Protected by Imperial privileges and under strict control through the central Lodge in Strasbourg, lodges throughout the whole Holy Roman Empire of the German nation prospered and actively exchanged communications. Lodge regulations at that time contained, in addition to other rules, the duty of secrecy in all the internal affairs of the lodge.

Main principles among members were love, fidelity and assistance of brethren. With the decline of Gothic architecture and as a consequence of the Reformation and the religious wars throughout central Europe which followed it everything changed. The whole German lodge system lost its base and during the 16th and 17th centuries gradually disappeared. Lack of building work and fundamental religious differences within lodges contributed to this. We have to understand that for centuries before the Reformation all lodges were Church oriented and to some degree Church controlled.

Many of the German stonemasons and tradesmen left the country in search of work and went to Belgium, Holland and mainly across the Channel to England. Here, during the 17th century lodges were also subject to changes but more in the sense of evolution. Attracted by their good reputation in appreciation of professionally based isolation and secrecy, more and more outsiders joined these lodges as accepted masons. Finally with the completion of the reconstruction of London following the Great Fire in 1666 many stonemasons left town in search of other work. "Accepted Masons" in lodges became dominant. Operative lodges now changed over into amalgamations of speculative or intellectually working freemasons. The symbol of stone masonry were transferred to the intellectual level of work at the Temple of Humanity - as Schroeder would have put it.

In 1717 four of the London Lodges formed a Grand Lodge. The official history of Freemasonry begins. From London the idea of this humanitarian union spread all over Europe. In 1737 the first German Lodge, "Absalom" was formed in Hamburg. In 1738 a Hamburg delegation initiated the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich into freemasonry in Braunschweig. Other members of noble families followed his example. This caused a rapid expansion of freemasonry in Prussia and other parts of Germany.

**Formation of the First Lodge in Frankfurt**

In Frankfurt on Main a diplomatic and political event of some magnitude led to the eventual introduction of freemasonry. It was the election and coronation of Emperor Karl VII in 1742. After the death of Karl V in 1740 the succession to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire in Germany turned into a controversial subject. Karl VI had died without male descendants. Thus the succession became a long standing conflict. Both the royal families Wittelsbacher and Hapsburg registered their claims and were irreconcilable. Two years of diplomatic struggle were accompanied by acts of war between Friedrich II of Prussia (Frederick the Great) and the Bohemian/Hungarian Queen Maria Theresa over the control of Silesia.
Frankfurt became the central place for the diplomatic negotiations between the German Electors and also the representatives of the European Powers. The delegations of the diplomatic representatives included a large number of freemasons, in particular from England and France, but also from the first German lodges. As the negotiations in Frankfurt dragged on for a long time these circles expressed a growing interest in also continuing with their Masonic work.

In March 1742 a successful election finally took place, followed by the formal coronation of the Bavarian Elector Karl Albrecht as Emperor Karl VII. For this event a further number of high ranking diplomats arrived in Frankfurt.

In June 1742, brethren from the delegations of France, Prussia, Poland and Saxonia formed the Lodge L'Union or Unity, the official German name being Zur Einigkeit. Thus freemasonry was imported into Frankfurt.

The special circumstances prevailing at the formation of the Lodge Zur Einigkeit, accompanying as they did events at the election of the German Emperor led to the fact that many lodge members were from noble families. The election of the Emperor Franz I in 1745, he himself being a freemason, strengthened this trend.

In 1745 the Lodge had 130 members, 60 of whom were noble. For the bourgeois town of Frankfurt this was a totally unusual development which would soon show disastrous consequences. With the departure of the Emperor, the diplomatic corps also took its leave and many Lodge members went with it. The Lodge was about to lose its base and found itself in a critical situation. Between 1746 and 1752 Masonic activities of the Lodge ceased and no initiations took place. However, the Masonic light was not entirely extinguished. From 1752 the Lodge steadily developed out of Frankfurt society, without registering any noble fluctuations. Members mainly belonged to the body of merchants, but other trades and professions were also represented. Physicians, architects, lawyers, pharmacists as well as servants, wigmakers, public servants, actors, musicians, paperhangers, teachers and even a master builder and a stonemason were entered into the register of the Lodge during the next decades.

Further General Historical Aspects

Not only in Frankfurt but also throughout Germany and parts of Europe freemasonry experienced a wide influx after its formation. Reasons were the beginning of the oppressive opposition by the Catholic Church against freemasonry as well as the remaining resistance of the existing royal authorities against free and progressive thinking. Here lodges offered a safe haven for free spirits by retaining the protective principle of secrecy. Consequently freemasonry was often blamed as a source of mystery mongers or secret societies. Masonic lodges became the birthplace of the age of enlightenment. The isolation of a lodge as such helped its members to overcome obstacles of class distinction, race and religious differences.

At that time widespread religious intolerance was disregarded by avoiding any discussions on religious denomination or personal belief. This was and still is based on the elementary Masonic understanding that all religions share a common belief in a creation as such. Lodges purposely placed themselves outside existing political and religious structures and authority, thus also refusing the protective function
offered by the State and the Church. The obligation of secrecy rather served them as a protection against these traditional authorities. Demands for freedom of the individual, equal chances independent of birth and class and brotherly relations became a reality inside Masonic lodges. Members considered themselves workmen at the Temple of Humanity. The outside world took over these demands and developed them into a political programme ultimately leading to a social revolution. Here it needs to be clarified that the slogans of the French Revolution - Freedom, Equality, Fraternity - were not of Masonic origin.

The Constitutions of 1723 bound lodge members to be law abiding and loyal to the State. However, within the framework of existing laws and constitutions there was enough opportunity for reformation and a number of influential freemasons became well known for their achievements. Examples are some of the Prussian reformers - Baron von Stein, von Hardenburg, von Scharnhorst and Count Neidhart von Gneisenau.

In Frankfurt Prince Karl von Dalberg was installed by Napoleon as Grand Duke of Frankfurt. As a committed freemason Dalberg was also an important reformer. All these politicians share the conviction that justifiable demands of citizens against their sovereign could only be realised by means of reforms. The horrors resulting from the revolutionary changes in France were very much in their minds.

German freemasonry of the 18th century could be described as a federation of poets and thinkers. Masons like Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Christom Martin Wieland, Mathias Claudius, Johann Gottfied Herder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Fichte were inspired by the Craft. In return they created works of a permanent nature and inspiration for freemasonry. The age of German enlightenment was heavily influenced by these writers and their works. Thus progressive thought was spread across the barriers of class or religion and contributed in a decisive way to the realisation of a bourgeois society.

In 1766 Lodge Zur Einigkeit was upgraded into a Provincial Lodge of Frankfurt. In 1783 a group of Lodges under the leadership of Einigkeit formed the Eclectic Federation as an instrument against the alienation of freemasonry from the original concept of enlightenment. This preserved Frankfurt from splitting up into various systems of lodges.

Contrary to the old constitutions Lodge Zur Einigkeit did not adhere strictly to the required religious and racial tolerance. Non Christians and in particular Jews were not accepted as members in those days. In 1808 under the French occupation the French Grand Lodge formed Lodge Aurora which accepted a large number of Jewish members. Also in 1832 the pure Jewish Lodge To The Frankfurt Eagle was founded. These events influenced a change of thinking in other Lodges. The rules and regulations of the Eclectic Federation were revised, barring religious dogmatism and intolerance. In 1873 and 1888 respectively Aurora and To the Frankfurt Eagle joined the Eclectic Federation. The problem of religious intolerance in German freemasonry in Frankfurt was overcome.

It might be of interest to note that Emperor Wilhelm I as an active freemason and protector of the three Prussian Grand Lodges was made an honorary member of the Eclectic Federation in Frankfurt. Likewise his son, Emperor Friedrich III became an honorary member of the Federation. The grandson, Emperor Wilhelm II did not join freemasonry.

The huge St. Paul's Cathedral in Frankfurt was finished by the prominent architect and freemason Friedrich Hess who died in 1845.
Three years later, in 1848, this building became the seat of the provisional German Parliament. It later served the elected representatives of the National Assembly as an assembly hall. Among leading politicians of the various political directions were a number of well known freemasons.

Liberty and unity were the political slogans of that time, subject to heated debates between the developing factions of the St. Paul's Cathedral Parliament. The National Assembly united representatives from all parts of Germany, elected because of their experience in local administration or because of their commitment against suppression of human rights. This social-political engagement gained them the confidence and support of their fellow citizens. As an example, the Leipzig bookseller, Robert Blum, served the democrats, lawyer Johann Hermann Detmold from Hanover was a member of the Conservatives and expert in constitutional law, Sylvester Jodan, from Frankfurt, supported the Liberal party. The fraternal ribbon of freemasonry united them all in spite of fundamental differences in their political views and loyalties.

Lodges in Frankfurt served all freemasons of the National Assembly as a place of common Masonic visits and activities. Two Austrian representatives, von Scheuchenstuel and Pattay, used their stay in Frankfurt to become members of lodge Zur Einigkeit.

The Legend of Conspiracy

As old as freemasonry are the attempts of various parties to bring the craft into discredit and to accuse it of evil machinations. The starting point of these hostile attitudes towards freemasonry can be found in the absolutist feudal systems during the early years. Even nowadays, the Catholic Church, Islamic fundamentalism, extreme nationalism, communism and left and right dictatorships go along in vehemently fighting freemasonry.

In Germany also the history of freemasonry is marked by discrediting, defamation and persecution. It is particularly sad to know that at the end of the 20th century the German Catholic Conference of Bishops deems membership in a Masonic lodge irreconcilable with the catholic faith. The threat of excommunication was still used in 1992.

Freemasonry was politically seriously endangered at the beginning of the 20th century. Based mainly on political prejudices certain German-National circles produced rumours of a Masonic world conspiracy. Freemasonry was blamed for the murder of the Austrian successor to the throne of Archduke Ferdinand I in Sarajevo. The beginning of the first World War was said to be a consequence. Finally, international treason was given as the cause of Germany losing the war and entering into the "Masonic" peace Treaty of Versailles. A leader in this regular campaign of defamation against freemasonry was the former general, Fieldmarshal Erich Ludendorff, with his wife Mathilde. Numerous books and pamphlets were produced and distributed throughout Germany.

Gustav Stresemann, German Chancellor in 1923 and later Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Weimar Republic used to be a popular target for those charges because of his membership of the Berlin Lodge Frederick the Great.

Stresemann was one of the pioneers of a "Europe Policy", trying to create a more balanced relation between formerly hostile European nations. The fact that his main negotiating partner, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Aristide Briand, was also a freemason helped to create those rumours.
Thus in 1933 the National Socialists found a ready climate for their field campaign against German Lodges. This led to looting of lodge buildings, official confiscations, arrests and discrediting on a large scale. Finally in 1935 freemasonry in Germany was generally forbidden.

The Rebirth of Freemasonry after 1945

After 8th May 1945 - the war finally being over, and the German cities in ruins and ashes - the priority for the survivors was individually securing one's existence and stocktaking of one's personal situation. Under the control of the Allied Forces the Germans reorganized their system of order and values, establishing the base for a newly awakening social and political life.

Stocktaking for German freemasons was frightening; 60 of the brethren, imprisoned in concentration camps only for belonging to a lodge, did not survive. The overall membership of lodges had already gone down before 1933 because of the defamation campaign. Twelve years of prohibition and heavy losses through warfare meant a further substantial reduction. Out of approximately 100,000 members in 1933, just about 20,000 were still registered as being alive after 1945.

Frankfurt lodges in 1927 had 1,645 brethren on their membership list. In 1959 only 453 were left. Further to this thinking out of numbers there were material losses through looting, confiscation and destruction. But apart from all this, freemasonry in Germany was confronted with a totally different question; why did this humanitarian organisation not act more efficiently and more determinedly against the National Socialist system of injustice? The dissension among German freemasons had weakened the organisation critically at that time of testing. A collective resistance remained unthinkable. Thus only individuals such as freemasons Kurt Tucholsky, Carl von Ossietzky and Wilhelm Leuschner offered intellectual and active resistance. Lessons derived from those years helped freemasons to come to terms with the past. The unification of freemasonry in Germany was the work of a group of brethren round Theodor Vogel.

St. Paul's Cathedral - Workshop of German Freemasonry

Frankfurt being the centre point of the three Western Occupation Zones offered itself for geographic and strategic reasons as the place for a new beginning of Masonic negotiations. On 14/15 June 1947 21 members of former Grand Lodges met for a convention. During its course the Frankfurt Study Group of Masonic Lodges was formed. This study group as chaired by the Wiesbaden lawyer August Pauls and the Schweinfurt industrialist Theodore Vogel was the central contact for all newly formed or reconstituted lodges. An overall base for an organised combination of all lodges was established.

In May 1948 the St. Paul's Cathedral reopened in a festive and solemn ceremony, an inspiration for the newborn German democracy. The Frankfurt Study Group met again. All lodges had contributed heavily to the reconstruction of the building in memory of the life and work of so many former freemasons as members of the National Assembly 100 years ago. The experience of the festive hour in St. Paul's Cathedral and the desire for German unity created the idea of accomplishing here also the unification of the German lodges. On 19 June 1949 700 representatives of 147 German lodges joined in the festive ceremony of forming the United Grand Lodge of Germany.
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