The day after Christmas 1849, the German Society of Pennsylvania convened its anniversary meeting as usual and with little debate decided to exclude women from membership in the organization. The minutes of the meeting make no mention of the discussion of the topic that had taken place at its previous meeting in September, nor do they offer any details of the vote to deny membership to women. The secretary noted merely, “It was moved and seconded that Ladies descendants of Germans be admitted as members of the Society, which was negated.”

Almost exactly a century later, in February 1949, GSP president Ernst Jockers reported that the charitable contributions made by the society’s Women’s Auxiliary would henceforth be recorded in the GSP’s financial accounts. In exchange, one member of the Women’s Auxiliary would be given a seat on the GSP’s board. The accounting change allowed the GSP to reclaim the tax-exempt status it had lost four years earlier shortly before the end of the Second World War. This chapter explains how women, who had been deliberately excluded from the GSP in the mid-nineteenth century, came to found an organization of their own that ended up literally saving the GSP in the mid-twentieth century.

Nineteenth-Century Women and Charity

It is not surprising that women would have sought to become members of the GSP in the late 1840s. Involvement in charitable organizations and reform movements had by then become a badge of middle-class identity for white women. Moreover, there were precedents of women of German descent in Philadelphia and elsewhere in the nation organizing for good causes. The Ladies Aid Society had been founded in 1804; the widow Anna Cruse established the first German Sunday school in 1809; the women of Philadelphia’s German St. Michael’s and Zion Evangelical Church had formed a charitable organization of their own in late 1834. And it was not only German-American women who were engaged in philanthropic work in Philadelphia at mid-century. In 1847, for example, a group of women founded the Rosine Association, which sought to alleviate the poverty and degradation suffered by so many women in the city. The widespread support for such engagement by middle-class women rested on the assumption of women’s superior moral character; the popular Ledger was just one of many newspapers and magazines published in Philadelphia that espoused this view of women during the 1840s. That women wanted to become active in the GSP was thus by no
means unusual. That the proposal to admit them was rejected was, given the conservatism of most members, hardly surprising.⁵

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the GSP dealt with women primarily as recipients of relief or as beneficiaries of its social services. Most of the women who entered its hall were indigent widows who, accompanied by their children, benefited from the annual Christmas Bescherung (gift-giving). Some women and girls took advantage of the GSP’s language classes, but they accounted for less than 10 percent of the 21,000 students who had enrolled by 1903.⁶ Working-class women sometimes made use of the GSP’s employment agency. In the late 1880s, as many as a third of the individuals who found jobs through the agency were women.⁷

To the wives and daughters of members, the GSP was of interest above all for its library. Indirect evidence suggests many female readers made use of the library. In 1851, the board passed a resolution to grant library privileges “to adult unmarried daughters of deceased members who leave no widows.”⁸ Eight years later, the library rules stipulated that “widows of deceased members or unmarried daughters who are of adult age, can if they continue to pay the regular quarterly contributions, make use of the Library in the usual manner.”⁹ One indication that women may have constituted the majority of the library’s users was the fact that more than 80 percent of the books loaned were novels, novellas, and poetry—the standard reading fare of Victorian middle-class women. After the Women’s Auxiliary of the German Society was founded in 1900, one of its first acts was to ensure that its members would have access to the GSP library.¹⁰

Middle-class women were not entirely excluded from participation in the charitable activities of the GSP and other German associations in the years before the founding of the Women’s Auxiliary. The GSP granted the women’s branch of the Cannstatter Volksverein and the Ladies’ Aid Society of the German Hospital use of its hall for their meetings in 1889.¹¹ A year later, it offered members’ wives the use of two rooms on the second floor of its building to encourage them “to participate in the humanitarian efforts of the Society.”¹² Members’ wives had by then already been long active in the society’s annual Christmas Bescherung. Yet they rarely received any recognition beyond the occasional mention in the minutes of GSP meetings and thus had to rest content with the satisfaction of knowing that they had made the holidays a little brighter for some poor Germans.

**German Gender Norms and the Women’s Auxiliary**

Philadelphia’s middle-class women of German descent found themselves in an awkward position in the late nineteenth century. Their ethnic iden-
tity carried one set of expectations and their class status another. Much like their colonial-era forebears, German-American women of the Gilded Age were expected to live by gender rules that differed from those applied to their Anglo-American counterparts. During the eighteenth century, German-speaking women on New World farms were expected to work in the fields side by side with their husbands, a custom their English neighbors found appalling. A variety of contemporary observers contrasted the frugality of hard-working rural and urban German women with the penchant for luxury typical of the beautiful but lazy English women in the New World.\textsuperscript{13} Even if few middle-class Philadelphians still spoke in those terms a century later, gender expectations and behavior were still differentiated by ethnicity. Middle-class Anglo-American women who participated in Philadelphia charitable organizations would, for instance, more likely than not be supporters of the temperance movement; for obvious cultural reasons, middle-class German-American women with ties to the GSP and other German groups were usually opposed. As many GSP women were Lutherans, who were known for their general conservatism, they may have also been reluctant to become involved in the politics of Progressivism.

A comment by Georg von Bosse, a Lutheran pastor and prominent GSP member, illustrates the differing perceptions of German-American and Anglo-American women. Married to an American-born woman of German descent, von Bosse insisted that “in my house, I am Herr, and there does not rule some ‘New Woman’ or the will of the child.”\textsuperscript{14} While this statement seems to limit German women’s role in Philadelphia severely, Germans also surprised and perhaps shocked their Anglo neighbors by bringing their wives and children to beer gardens, Verein picnics, and other public celebrations. This kind of public family togetherness stood in contrast to Anglo organizations, which regularly excluded wives from social occasions. Moreover, not all German husbands had the time, energy, and inclination that von Bosse seems to have spent on supervising the proper Germanness of his household.

It was widely recognized that in all ethnic groups women had an important role to play in preserving ethnic identity. German women seem to have used this responsibility as an opportunity to range beyond their domestic duties. They founded their own secular charitable associations and auxiliaries to their husbands’ Vereine. There was also a long tradition of church-affiliated organizations for German women, which usually had twice or even three times as many members as their counterparts for men. Focusing on turn-of-the-century nineteenth-century Philadelphia, Russell Kazal has set the success of German women’s organizations in contrast to what he describes as a crisis in the male Vereinswesen.\textsuperscript{15}
Kazal’s assertion that female-led German Vereine thrived is certainly valid for the Women’s Auxiliary of the GSP. It was established in May 1900 with 100 members; within a year, its membership stood at 400 and at 610 by the end of the decade.\(^\text{16}\) [Chart 1] The middle-class women who belonged to the Women’s Auxiliary tread cautiously as they sought to fulfill their responsibility in cultivating German ethnic identity. They eagerly took up the appeal from the all-male GSP for assistance in matters “more suitable [to women] in their character and essence than to men,” but they could not and would not follow their working-class ethnic sisters or their middle-class Anglo-American counterparts in calling for women’s suffrage. For one, the suffrage movement was closely associated with the temperance movement.\(^\text{17}\) But middle-class German-American women also had a different understanding of the special maternal qualities women were purported to possess. Whereas the suffragettes argued that women’s inherent maternalism would make the world a better place once they were fully enfranchised, middle-class German Americans opposed the vote for women because they feared it would degrade women by threatening “to take wife and mother from her proper place and make her a contestant in the political arena.”\(^\text{18}\)

It was in their capacity as family caretakers and nurturers that members of the Women’s Auxiliary, in one of the group’s first initiatives, purchased 38 tables and tablecloths for the German Society in the hope that they would be used for gemütlich gatherings. The same evening that their donation was announced, the women introduced a new style of sociability when they served cake and beverages to GSP members on the new tables.\(^\text{19}\) This was an unprecedented innovation: early GSP rules had insisted that eating and drinking had no place in the serious business of

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**GSP Membership by Type: 1901–1940.**
helping newly arrived immigrants. Since 1901—and to this day—the Women’s Auxiliary has been visible within the GSP above all by providing food and drink at society events and tending to the clean-up afterward. In other words, a century’s worth of change in the position of women in American society notwithstanding, the members of the Women’s Auxiliary have still not left the kitchen. Indeed, it has long been the Auxiliary members’ domestic skills, manifested in homemade goods that are offered for sale, that have underwritten the group’s charitable activities.

The existence of the Women’s Auxiliary changed the way the GSP conducted its poor relief. With the Auxiliary’s assistance, the society created a sewing room in its headquarters in 1905: rather than handing out cash, which it had always done reluctantly, it now gave indigent women the chance to earn money by producing garments for the society’s Christmas Bescherung. Each week, Auxiliary leaders noted carefully how many skeins of yarn and how many yards of cloth each worker received and how many pieces of clothing she produced. Ironically, the women who were paid pennies to sew clothes were also the women who would receive gifts of clothing from the GSP at Christmastime.20

Important as the sewing room was, the major focus of the Auxiliary’s charitable work was providing assistance to the needy on a case-by-case basis. At each of its meetings, the situations of several individuals or families were discussed in detail, and the board would then assign members responsibility for individual cases. The members were expected to provide progress reports on their cases at subsequent meetings. Because many Auxiliary members were also involved in the Ladies’ Aid Society of the German Hospital or other charitable organizations, they could often turn cases over to other organizations or arrange for joint assistance with them.

Women’s Auxiliary Charitable Work

The Women’s Auxiliary, as noted in the previous chapter, was instrumental in organizing the relief effort for the widows and children of fallen German soldiers during World War I. This work continued in much the same fashion after the U.S. declared war on Germany as it had before, but now donations were collected for the American Red Cross. The war relief effort expanded the role of women in German institutions on account of their fund-raising know-how. Perhaps more importantly, caring for widows and children was also seen as being compatible with their maternal duties. Tellingly, the Auxiliary did not experience the decline in membership the GSP did during the war. Although at least half of Auxiliary members were the wives, daughters, or sisters of GSP members, the
Auxiliary’s membership, in marked contrast to the GSP’s, grew during the early years of the war and declined only slightly during the years of direct U.S. involvement. (See chart 1).

Women’s work on behalf of Germans might not have been considered as threatening as men’s. During periods of harassment, as historians have suggested in other contexts, women sometimes become “ambassadors” of their ethnic groups. Unlike the GSP, the Women’s Auxiliary also steered clear of politics during the war years and concentrated entirely on charitable work. Since women in the U.S. would not be enfranchised until 1920, Women’s Auxiliary members may also not have seemed to constitute a serious threat to the nation during the war.

When the GSP decided in the summer of 1919 to organize relief for Central Europe, the Women’s Auxiliary again played a major role. The men of the GSP raised nearly $3,000 in cash; the Women’s Auxiliary contributed clothing, shoes, blankets, and wool worth $10,000. Even before the relief effort was formally launched, the GSP’s sewing room was being used to help supply garments for those in need in Germany. Members of the Women’s Auxiliary gathered there once a week to knit and prepare packages of donated clothing. They continued to collect contributions for Germany’s poor up through 1924.

Although the Auxiliary’s relief efforts and the GSP’s complemented one another, relations between the two groups were not always smooth. The husbands of Auxiliary members, for instance, enjoyed library privileges at the GSP, which prompted some disgruntled GSP officials to suggest that those men be urged to join the GSP. No doubt that suggestion was spurred by the fact that the GSP’s membership was very slow to recover from the steep decline the organization experienced during World War I. The women also had reason to complain. In 1921, Women’s Auxiliary president Antonie Ehrlich protested that the society’s agent treated the women with disrespect and denied them the services of the janitor, which had led the Auxiliary members to conclude that “they are no longer wanted here, that the Directors take no interest in their affairs.” The dispute was not resolved until after the agent was replaced two years later. The relationship between the GSP and the Women’s Auxiliary also improved when Louis H. Schmidt became president in 1923. Schmidt, who led the organization until 1943, seems to have been able to please everyone at least for a while.

The so-called Roaring Twenties were not necessarily a decade of prosperity for working-class Philadelphians. As the records of the Women’s Auxiliary indicate, expenditures for poor relief increased even before the stock market crash of 1929. A comparison of the GSP’s gifts to the needy and those of the Women’s Auxiliary shows that the women took over much of the poor relief work [Chart 2]. Just as in the nineteenth
century, the GSP limited itself to giving small amounts of cash and vouchers for meals, transportation, and/or accommodations mainly to men. Business agent Henry Hoffmann, a meticulous man hired in 1923, also kept record of those seeking legal and medical advice. Looking at Hoffmann in his office, which is now the former Schlaraffia room in the basement, one can only imagine how this stern-looking man must have intimidated poor Germans seeking assistance. His careful records show that he noted each and every literal penny he gave out. [Figure 3]

The Great Depression

Philadelphia’s public and private resources to assist those in need were stretched thin in the wake of the crash of 1929. By the end of the year, more than 10 percent of the city’s wage earners were without jobs. The unemployment rate rose to 15 percent during the first five months of 1930, and by the end of that year it was clear the Depression had come to Philadelphia. Over a nineteenth-month period stretching from late 1930 through the summer of 1932, Philadelphia’s wealthy elite contributed $14 million toward alleviating the hardship many of their fellow citizens were suffering, but the funds were quickly exhausted. Tens of thousands of destitute people relied on family, friends, and neighbors to survive. Local merchants and landlords extended credit even when it became evident the debts would likely never be paid. In 1933, unemployment skyrocketed when 11.5 percent of white, 16.2 percent of black and 19.2 percent of foreign-born Philadelphians were out of work. Mayor J. Hampton Moore, refusing to acknowledge the scale of the crisis, exacerbated the city’s
economic troubles by firing thousands of workers during his term of office (1932–35) and rejecting federal funds for public works projects because it would have required spending city money. His Republican successor Davis Wilson also did little toward relieving poverty among his constituents. It was only because of Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot that Philadelphians could turn to the County Relief Board for food, fuel, and other necessities.

The Women’s Auxiliary concentrated its poor relief efforts on widows with children and elderly couples unable to work. It tried to provide them with financial assistance on a monthly basis. The directors who decided how much each family was to receive learned the details of their particular stories of hardship, thereby gaining special insight into who should be invited to the GSP’s annual ChristmasBescherung. Initially dozens and later hundreds of women, children, and elderly people received baskets of food, clothing, shoes, and toys, along with money to cover their streetcar fare home, at the Bescherung, which usually took place a few days before or after Christmas. In 1933, with no end in sight to working-class Philadelphians hardship, the Women’s Auxiliary doubled its expenditures for poor relief and expanded the Christmas Bescherung.

Fortuitously, the Women’s Auxiliary had taken steps during the boom years before the crash to professionalize its work in poor relief. In 1927, it joined the Philadelphia Social Service Exchange, which described itself as “a private coordinating and registration center for social service
organizations.” For an annual fee of $5, the Exchange kept records of referrals and services provided to the poor by social workers as well as private charity organizations. The Women’s Auxiliary submitted the names and, in many cases, the addresses of individuals who were seeking its assistance to the Exchange, which would in turn send brief reports summarizing the dealings they had had with other charitable and relief organizations. The Exchange provided a means for monitoring and coordinating poor relief efforts in the period before organized public welfare assistance.

Some of the surviving Exchange reports tell stories of families who had been in trouble long before the onset of the Great Depression. Rose and Joe C. and their eight children are a revealing example. Between 1894 and 1930, the family came into contact with no fewer than 23 social service providers, including the Jewish Welfare Society, the Home Missionary Society, the Family Society, the Juvenile Aid Society, the Big Sister Association, and the Mother’s Assistance Fund. They also received medical assistance from the University Hospital and the Pennsylvania Hospital. Domestic troubles and perhaps even violence might have been part of the family’s story: there are entries in the Exchange’s report of dealings with the Society to Protect Children from Cruelty and the Domestic Relations Division of the Municipal Court. In 1930, the Jewish Welfare Society attempted to transfer the C.’s case to the Women’s Auxiliary on the grounds that Joe C. had been born in Germany. The family’s long history of receiving charitable assistance and the allegation that the couple had refused a job offer prompted the Women’s Auxiliary to refer the family back to the Jewish Welfare Society.

Before the introduction of Social Security numbers in the mid-1930s, it was often difficult to verify an individual’s identity. The Women’s Auxiliary submitted the names, for example, of Helen and Alexander H. to the Exchange. The referral sheet the Women’s Auxiliary received in response to its inquiry listed three families with the same or a similar last name, but it made no mention of Helen and Alexander.

The Exchange offered well over 350 charity organizations in Philadelphia the opportunity to refer cases to one another according to their particular mission or target group. Thus, the Women’s Auxiliary received letters from other organizations concerning German-born applicants for assistance. Many needed only temporary help. Just days before the “Black Friday” crash of 1929, for instance, the case of Catherine and Nicholas M. was referred to the Women’s Auxiliary. Catherine had been born in Germany, and Nicholas was the son of German immigrants. They had seven children, and another was on the way. At the time of their application, Nicholas had been hospitalized with a heart problem for over a month and the family had to make do on the oldest son’s weekly paycheck of $7.
The M.’s said they would need help only until Nicholas was able to work again; the surviving records do not indicate whether Nicholas recovered or was able to find a job after the crash.29

Others clearly needed long-term financial assistance. Elderly widows in particular stood at risk of homelessness and starvation. In 1930, 70-year-old Carolina S. was referred to the Women’s Auxiliary. An immigrant from Germany, Carolina had twice been widowed and was dependent upon a former neighbor for food and shelter. Her age and poor health prevented her from earning a living, and her four adult stepchildren refused to contribute toward her support.30 Even married couples could end up needing help. Franz and Marie J. had emigrated from Berlin to the U.S. as a young married couple. They had both long been employed, he as a gardener, she as a cook, and for many years they had been able to send money to relatives in Germany. In 1930, they were compelled to seek assistance. Franz’s heart problems and Marie’s varicose veins had forced them to stop working, and they had exhausted their savings. To avoid having to move to a home for the indigent, they sought financial assistance.31 The County Relief Board apparently provided assistance until Marie began to receive a state pension, which was not enough, however, to cover the couple’s expenses. The Women’s Auxiliary stepped in and helped the couple pay for food and rent until Franz began to receive a government pension in July 1937. The Women’s Auxiliary’s records suggest that the couple also participated in the annual Christmas Bescherung. A letter written by a social worker in 1936 relayed Mr. J.’s concern that he and his wife might not receive an invitation to the event since their former landlady refused to forward their mail.32

Some people were too embarrassed to ask for assistance themselves. The Women’s Auxiliary was sometimes approached by friends of those in need or even by public officials. In April 1933, for example, Margarete O. wrote the Women’s Auxiliary pleading for help for her sister’s good friend, a Miss H. According to O.’s letter, Miss H. lived with her elderly mother and, despite exerting great effort, was not able to find employment, leaving her in a “very distressed situation.” The writer repeatedly emphasized that Miss H. was a very decent and deserving person who was ready to do any kind of work, except sewing.33 Perhaps Miss H. had heard about the Women’s Auxiliary’s previous practice of employing poor women as seamstresses and wanted to avoid that.

Equally deserving and probably even more mortified by the prospect of needing charity was the family of Kathryn K. Her case came to the attention of the Women’s Auxiliary via the Director of Teacher Training of Philadelphia’s public school district. Young Kathryn was eight months short of graduating, but her family was in dire straights because her father’s employer had all but gone out of business. Bill collectors had
taken most of the family’s furnishings and the rent was long overdue. The school was giving Kathryn a little money, and the family received $2 a week from a city welfare program, but these forms of assistance did not come close to covering the K. family’s basic needs. The concerned school official cautioned that Kathryn’s father was “not sympathetic” to his daughter’s ambition to finish school and was likely to blame her for drawing attention to the family’s plight. It is not clear how the Women’s Auxiliary reacted to the letter. About a week after the initial request, the caring teacher wrote again with the happy news that, as a result of the improved employment status of the father and the generous contributions of the school, the assistance of the Women’s Auxiliary would not be necessary after all.

Private charitable initiatives like the Women’s Auxiliary’s were by no means rendered superfluous by the myriad relief programs launched under the aegis of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Through a referral via the Social Service Exchange, the Women’s Auxiliary learned about John and Theresa S., both of German descent and their three young children. John S. was lucky to be one of about 40,000 Philadelphians employed as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) laborer, but his wages were too meager to provide his family with anything more than the bare necessities of life. The S. family was thus deemed eligible for the annual Christmas Bescherung. For such families, private charity was an invaluable supplement to governmental assistance.

Some people, perhaps encouraged by the glowing accounts of the Bescherung published in Philadelphia newspapers, asked directly to be included in the GSP’s Christmas season charity effort. Louis S.’s handwritten letter in faulty German offers a good example. Louis introduced himself as the father of four children, all under age 14, and described the chronic illness that prevented him from obtaining work. Deeply embarrassed, he appealed to the good hearts of the members of the Women’s Auxiliary and asked their help for his children, who were “living with pain and hopelessness” as the “holy days” approached. Mr. S. concluded his letter by listing the names and ages of all family members, which suggests the distraught father had some idea of the information the Women’s Auxiliary usually requested.

The hardship created by the Depression put great strain on many families. It was not uncommon for hard-pressed parents to move in with their adult children or, conversely, for adults to move back in with their parents. Three generations of the S. family had been living under the same roof for seven years when Family Services contacted the Women’s Auxiliary to ask for a contribution of basic household goods so that Mr. and Mrs. S. could move out of the home of their oldest daughter,
Margaret. The S.’s had five children between the ages of 9 and 22 in addition to Margaret, who had three children of her own.

The S. family’s story reveals some interesting facts about reproductive realities before reliable methods of birth control became easily available and about notions of individual space and sexual privacy before the Second World War. Mr. S., who was 69 at the time the Women’s Auxiliary was informed of his family’s circumstances, was 16 years his wife’s senior. Mrs. S. had given birth to their youngest child at age 44, only three years before her oldest daughter Margaret had her first child. All three of Margaret’s children were conceived while her parents and siblings were living with her and her husband. With twelve people under one roof, the quarters must have been quite cramped by the time Family Services turned to the Women’s Auxiliary for assistance in helping the family.39

The birth of a child could create great financial difficulties for working-class families during the Depression. In 1936, the Social Service Exchange informed the Women’s Auxiliary of the plight of the M. family. Mr. M. was away when his wife gave birth to their second child. Mrs. M., the Exchange reported, could barely take care of her five-year-old daughter and was “rather upset and discouraged about her situation.” The Exchange hoped that Mrs. M., a past beneficiary of GSP assistance, would once again be invited to the Women’s Auxiliary Christmas Bescherung.40 The case of Madeline B., which was also referred to the Women’s Auxiliary in 1936, was similar. Over a period of eight years, she and her husband Charles had had four children. For the previous three years, the family had been surviving on public relief because illness had left Charles unable to walk.41

These stories gleaned from write-ups of the Social Service Exchange share two characteristics: the German birth or descent of the applicant and the deserving nature of the case. Auxiliary member Miss Weidemann wrote a memo to the Exchange in October 1931 to outline the types of people eligible for the annual Christmas Bescherung. She indicated that people’s ethnic background and problems needed to “appeal to volunteers and members of the Club.”42 The cases detailed here show that only people of German descent or birth, and only those who had distinguished themselves through honesty, hard work, and efforts to cope on their own were considered worthy. Sometimes applicants had to provide very detailed information to move the Auxiliary to give them aid. There are stories of families sending teenaged children to work, disabled adults peddling homemade toys at street corners, and older, sick women renting rooms to boarders and cooking and cleaning for them. In general, professional social workers were opposed to the benevolent work of private charities. In their judgment, such work was “more beneficial to the egos of the givers than responsive to the real needs of the recipients.”43 In the

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case of charitable assistance provided by the Women’s Auxiliary, the help
was real and in direct response to applicants’ needs. The women who
contributed to this work of benevolence did single out members of their
own ethnic group as beneficiaries and did favor those with verifiable tales
of hardship, which indeed may have made Auxiliary members feel good
about themselves. Nevertheless, judging from the few surviving thank-
you letters written by the recipients of Auxiliary charity, the actual aid
they received was more important than having to present themselves as
deserving poor and in the process perhaps gratifying some donors’ sense
of self-worth.

In almost all cases of the Women’s Auxiliary, the records do not tell
the complete story. It is not clear how long a particular family received
assistance or whether the goods and money offered by the Auxiliary
helped them regain self-sufficiency. I have found only one case that tells
the story from beginning to end. Five letters from Clara U. to Bertha
Schweizer dated between May 1933 and December 1936 recount the tale
of one German immigrant family’s path toward moderate success.

The story began in 1933 when a severe but undiagnosed illness in-
capacitated Clara. She spent three weeks at home and then six weeks at
a hospital. When she complained of difficulty walking and pain in the
entire left side of her body, doctors inexplicably extracted five of her teeth
and planned to take out her appendix to alleviate the pain. In a woeful
letter to Schweizer in May 1933, Clara expressed her understandable
dissatisfaction with her treatment. Although Clara had primarily writte
n to thank the Women’s Auxiliary for its financial support, she also pointed
out that her husband Josef was still looking for work and that she had not
been able to be a caring mother for her daughter Hilde. This additional
information might have been intended to remind Auxiliary members that
they could help with these problems as well.

A little over a year later, in July 1934, Schweizer tried to visit the
family but found no one at home. In response, Clara sent a typed letter in
which she explained that her family’s fortunes had changed for the better.
Her husband was working as an electrician’s assistant earning $18 per
week. Although the job was beneath Josef’s qualifications, he felt lucky to
have it. Moreover, the family was now merely two months behind in their
rent payments and had just splurged on a one-day excursion with neigh-
bors to River View Beach, New Jersey. This was the first time they had left
the city since they had arrived in the United States five years earlier.
Perhaps a day at the beach had whetted her appetite for more because
Clara asked in her letter whether the Women’s Auxiliary might finance a
vacation for her and her daughter. Surprisingly, Clara’s dream came true.
In a subsequent letter from August of that year, Clara thanked Schweizer
and her husband for making two trips possible for her family; Hilde had
gone on a trip to a children’s camp, and Clara had spent a week in Cape May. Both Hilde and her mother seem to have thrived as a result of the vacation.

Schweizer and the family continued to be in touch. In December 1935, Clara wrote that her family’s situation had not changed. Her husband was still only earning $18 per week, and so it continued to be difficult for them to make ends meet. Yet Clara realized that they had endured worse times and that others had less than her family. Perhaps she was aware that many women in Philadelphia’s garment industry worked for less than $7 a week. For that reason, Clara asked Schweizer to take her family off the list for the Christmas Bescherung. However, Schweizer apparently did not comply with the request because Clara restated more emphatically in a letter the following year that her family should no longer be included. By 1936, due to a $6 increase in Josef’s weekly wages and some additional income from weekend work, the family had managed to obtain a mortgage for the home on Reese Street that they had rented for years. Located in a narrow alley in south Philadelphia close to the Italian Market and Front Street, their house on Reese Street was probably very modest. But home ownership ended their worries over increasing rent. In good health, the family was, in Clara’s own words, “happy and content, that we can see the path before us again.”

This moderate success story, however, does not belie the fact that the Great Depression brought hardship to countless Philadelphians. Even members of the Women’s Auxiliary and the GSP seem to have been affected. Women’s Auxiliary membership declined steadily after 1929: at least 285 members gave up their GSP membership between 1929 and 1938, not counting those who died. In 1935, the Auxiliary had to remind its members for the first time to pay their $2 annual dues in its annual report. While some members may have simply forgotten, those who were wives of local shopkeepers and craftsmen perhaps could not afford to pay. By 1936, the Women’s Auxiliary had to make an appeal for new members for the first time; the GSP had a long history of such appeals. Of course, declining Auxiliary and GSP membership may have been caused by other factors as well. As discussed in the next chapter, the GSP had some outspoken Nazi sympathizers, who might have led some other members to distance themselves from the organization. In 1937, the Women’s Auxiliary felt compelled to point out that it offered assistance to those in need regardless of religious affiliation or “political views.”

In the early years of the Great Depression, Auxiliary members had already grown concerned that the Christmas bazaar would suffer from the economic crisis. Expenses were rising due to the increasing numbers of needy applicants, so Auxiliary members were worried about their biggest fund-raising event. However, the women were able to report
record level proceeds in 1930 and 1931 of about $2,300 each year. Yet after 1932, Auxiliary income from the Christmas bazaar declined steadily. By 1940, when records ceased to be published regularly, proceeds had declined by over 30 percent. During these lean years other German women’s organizations contributed to the poor relief fund. In 1933, for example, the women of the Turngemeinde and the singing society Harmonie organized entertainment events to benefit the Auxiliary. In the fall of the following year, Bertha Schweizer, head of the poor relief effort, was a little more optimistic about sufficient funding when a few Auxiliary support recipients reportedly found work and no longer required assistance. Yet this optimism did not last long. In 1938, the Women’s Auxiliary complained of losing members (and therefore funds) because return emigration to Germany had begun “due to the pressure of world events and unemployment in the U.S.” The Poor Relief Committee’s meeting records stop abruptly in late 1939.

**World War II and Beyond**

When war broke out in Europe, the women of the Auxiliary tried hard to continue their charitable efforts in the face of a catastrophe beyond their control. Not much is known about the work of the Auxiliary during the war years, however, since the GSP decided not to publish its annual reports after 1941, and Auxiliary meeting minutes for the 1940s seem to be lost. Yet in the fall of 1943, the GSP began publishing a newsletter under the name *Postilion*, from which some information can be gleaned. The Auxiliary’s and the GSP’s expenditures for charity showed that the Auxiliary again had spent two and a half times as much as the GSP, and that the women had donated a flag with a large number 120 embossed to symbolize the number of GSP relatives fighting in the war abroad. The newsletter also made clear that membership was a problem for both organizations. German Americans’ were reluctant to become involved in any German ethnic organizations during the war, but especially in the GSP because it had gained the reputation that it “lacked life and energy and that the very conservative Board of Directors was opposed to letting young and more active members with new ideas enter its ranks.”

This dire situation did not change until after the war ended. By then, the GSP had lost its tax-exempt status, in part because investigators of the Internal Revenue Service determined that the German Society was not spending enough money on poor relief to qualify as a charitable organization. To alleviate the situation, the GSP and the Women’s Auxiliary held an unprecedented combined meeting in September 1945. The boards of both organizations agreed to “unite in order to make a better showing in our Charity work, [and] also to be in a better working shape to face the
ever changing future.” They expected the increased cooperation between men and women to help in the planned assistance for Central Europe to be organized by the Quaker Relief Fund as well.\textsuperscript{55} Although each organization intended to continue its work as before, some Auxiliary members apparently were not too happy about the situation. In its annual report, the Auxiliary leadership reminded its members that they “must overcome any animosity or pettiness that may have crept unwittingly into [the] organization.”\textsuperscript{56}

Nevertheless, the GSP came to rely even more on the Auxiliary for charitable contributions. By the spring of 1946, more than sixty Auxiliary members met weekly at the GSP to sew clothing and to mend donated items.\textsuperscript{57} [Figure 4] Then in February 1948, Auxiliary charitable contributions were officially recorded as part of the GSP’s benevolent work. In exchange, Marion Linke became the Auxiliary representative to sit on the GSP board.\textsuperscript{58} Finally, in 1949 the GSP amended its bylaws and appointed a special women’s committee. For the first time in the society’s history, German birth or descent were no longer prerequisites for membership. U.S. citizenship, however, was required for all board members.

In addition to the war relief sent to Germany, the charitable work of the Women’s Auxiliary continued with newly arrived Germans. Some were German war brides who were isolated from their family networks in Philadelphia. For example, a twenty-year-old German woman married to an American sailor found herself in “dire need” when her husband was

Women’s Auxiliary Members at Work in the Sewing Room, May 1946
hospitalized for mental problems. She had nine-month-old twins and no one to turn to. The Auxiliary approved an immediate payment of $25 and regular monthly contributions of $15.59 During the 1950s, the Women’s Auxiliary regularly supported around a dozen individuals or families with cash and in-kind donations. Yet toward the end of the decade, the bulk of welfare contributions were made to organizations rather than to individuals.

Although women were now officially allowed to be GSP members, the minutes of the Women’s Auxiliary meetings through the 1950s clearly show that they continued to view the GSP as a male organization. Again and again, the Auxiliary referred to “the men” when dealing with the German Society. Both organizations, however, shared one tremendous problem: drastically reduced membership. The GSP only had an estimated 350 members in 1946, while the Women’s Auxiliary membership had shrunk to 150 by the mid-1950s. Although a few members resigned, the death of old members and few newcomers were primarily to blame.

In the GSP, women generally continued to be relegated to the kitchen for decades after the war ended. For example, it took the organization until late 1972 to rename its decades-old Herrenabend tradition with the more gender-neutral term, Gesellschaftsabend, and also to at last allow women to take part in the occasional political or literary lectures. The snide comment “women’s Lib strikes again” was added to the otherwise quite unremarkable board minutes. Ironically, women continued to serve food and beverages at both all-male gatherings and the new mixed events.60

Two decades later in 1991, the GSP’s charitable work was limited to handing four needy families from the Spring Garden apartments checks for $75 right before Christmas and the end of the tax year 1991.51 The following year, the total charitable contribution was reduced to $225 and distributed to three families living in the federal housing project next to the German Society. Thereafter, charitable contributions of this and all other kinds essentially ceased.62

The Women’s Auxiliary’s record of charitable work for the past thirty years is more impressive. Traditionally, it has given one third of its donations to German-language scholarships, one third to a local German-affiliated charitable institution, and one third to the GSP. Individual charity work essentially ended after a few extraordinary cases in the 1980s and early ’90s taxed the patience, management abilities, and financial resources of Auxiliary members. Perhaps since Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty of the 1960s instituted Medicare and Medicaid, poor relief by small private charity organizations is no longer considered necessary.

By the late 1990s, the GSP and the Women’s Auxiliary had also drifted apart as partner organizations. A new executive director hired in
June 1999 claimed the two rooms that had been used by the women for over a century as her office space. Intent on raising much-needed funds and ignoring the close relationship between the two organizations, this executive director also demanded rent payment from the Women’s Auxiliary for the use of the GSP hall during the traditional Christmas bazaar. In another attempt to generate money for the GSP, the board of directors decided to sell a first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, which was opposed by members of the Women’s Auxiliary and resulted in a lawsuit between the two entities. While the GSP prevailed in selling the book at auction, the unfortunate dispute only widened the rift between the Women’s Auxiliary and the German Society. As the purpose of both organizations—helping Germans in need with money and advice and offering a lending library to its members and the German-American community at large—has essentially ceased to exist, it is perhaps not surprising that the men and women who had worked together toward particular charitable goals are less likely to find common ground. It remains up to the current membership to find ways to continue both organizations in a changed and changing world.

**Conclusion**

The Women’s Auxiliary was founded rather late in comparison to other benevolent organizations for women in the German-American community and, generally, in Philadelphia’s middle class. Women of German descent faced different gender norms than their Anglo-American sisters, and so they opposed both Prohibition and women’s suffrage. The Women’s Auxiliary quickly took over much of the poor relief work of the German Society and has led the GSP in assistance to Germany during and after the First and Second World Wars as well as during the Great Depression. When the GSP lost its tax-exempt status in 1944, the charitable contributions of the Women’s Auxiliary were temporarily recorded jointly with the society’s donations. Despite this substantial assistance to the GSP, the women of the Auxiliary were only grudgingly admitted to all of the society’s events in the early 1970s. Personality clashes and perhaps conflicting perceptions of the Auxiliary’s continued charitable work led to a rift between the two organizations that is slowly healing. While this chapter has shown how extensive the work of benevolence of the Women’s Auxiliary was during the Great Depression, the next chapter places the history of the German Society from the 1930s to ’60s in a larger, geo-political context.

**Notes**

1 Protocol der Incorportierten Deutschen Gesellschaft, 1808, December 26, 1849.


5 The exclusion of women from the GSP membership was not complete, however, since society records show that at least one unmarried woman was admitted as a member in 1872. See GSP Minutes, December 19, 1872.

6 GSP Annual Report 1903.

7 Among the 288 successful job referrals for the first quarter of 1889, 69 pertained to women. The following quarter, 63 women out of 546 unemployed Germans sought job referrals. See GSP Minutes, April 18, 1889, and July 19, 1889.

8 GSP Minutes, December 26, 1851.

9 GSP Minutes, October 18, 1900.

10 For the request that Women’s Auxiliary members be permitted access to the library, see GSP Minutes, October 18, 1900.

11 GSP Minutes, January 17, 1889.

12 GSP Minutes, January 16, 1890. The two rooms are today used as GSP offices.

13 For a discussion of these observations, see Birte Pfleger, “Between Subject and Citizen: German-speakers in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania” (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2003).


16 All numbers based on the annual reports published in conjunction with GSP annual reports from 1901 to 1920.

17 GSP Annual Report 1901.


19 GSP Minutes, April 18, 1901.

20 GSP Annual Report 1905.


22 GSP Annual Report 1920.

23 GSP Minutes, November 28, 1921, and September 25, 1922.


25 The agency was founded in 1921 and ended its work in 1970. For the records of the Philadelphia-Camden Social Service Exchange, see Temple University Urban Archives, Records 1911–1970, URB 21.
The last names of all recipients of Women’s Auxiliary assistance have been omitted to protect the privacy of their families.

Philadelphia Social Service Exchange, December 3, 1930, C. family. There is also the possibility that anti-Semitism played a role in the Auxiliary’s denial of the request.

Philadelphia Social Service Exchange, date illegible, H. family.

Rosemary Reynolds to Miss Wiedemann, Family Society of Philadelphia, October 1929.

Mr. Miller to Miss Wiedemann, Family Society of Philadelphia, June 9, 1930.

J. family case sheet, no date, probably December 20, 1930.

Miss Parkhurst to Miss Wiedemann, December 8, 1936. The poor relief committee meeting book includes a notation about the J. case in July 1937. Women’s Auxiliary records, uncataloged.

Margarete O. to Henry Hoffmann, April 4, 1933.

Florence A. Doyle to Mrs. Keller, June 22, 1933.

Florence A. Doyle to Mrs. J. O. S., July 1, 1933.

Number from Tinkom, 613.


Louis S. to Women’s Auxiliary, December 5, 1930.

Miss Parkhurst to Miss Wiedemann, December 8, 1936.

Miss Mildred Frank to Miss Wiedemann, December 10, 1936.

M. Davies to Miss Emma Wiedemann, December 8, 1936.

Miss Wiedemann to District Superintendents, October 22, 1931.


All letters from Clara U. to Bertha Schweizer dated May 17, 1933; July 17, 1934; August 17, 1934; December 13, 1935; December 18, 1936.

This number is based on the membership records kept by GSP agent Henry Hoffmann. See Membership Register 1923.

GSP Annual Report 1935.

GSP Annual Report 1936.

GSP Annual Report 1937.

GSP Annual Report 1933.

GSP Annual Report 1934.

GSP Annual Report 1938.

While the Auxiliary spent $1,109.41 on the Christmas Bescherung and $1,400 for poor relief, the GSP merely gave $350 for poor relief and a total of $900 for charity in 1942, Postilion 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1943) (no call #, basement). The following year the Women’s Auxiliary spent a total of $2,032.40 on charity because “demands for poor relief grew less since work was plentiful.” Postilion 1, no. 4 (July 1944).

The announcement that the GSP had lost its tax-exempt status was made at the meeting on April 13, 1944. GSP Minutes, April 13, 1944.

Combined special meeting of the Members of the Board of Directors of the German Society and Members of the Board of Directors of the Women’s Auxiliary of the German Society, GSP Minutes, September 27, 1945.

Women’s Auxiliary Annual Report 1946, Box 460 “Diverses”.

GSP Minutes, April 18, 1946.
Marion and her husband Conrad Linke had been active in the GSP community for years. Both wrote countless letters to each member of Congress replete with anti-British rhetoric in an effort to keep the U.S. out of the war before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The couple was also at the forefront of the successful battle to re-establish postal service between the U.S. and Germany. In addition, Conrad Linke became an activist on behalf of Eastern-European Germans seeking entry into the U.S. as refugees.

Women’s Auxiliary Minutes, April 26, 1954.

GSP Minutes, December 18, 1972.
