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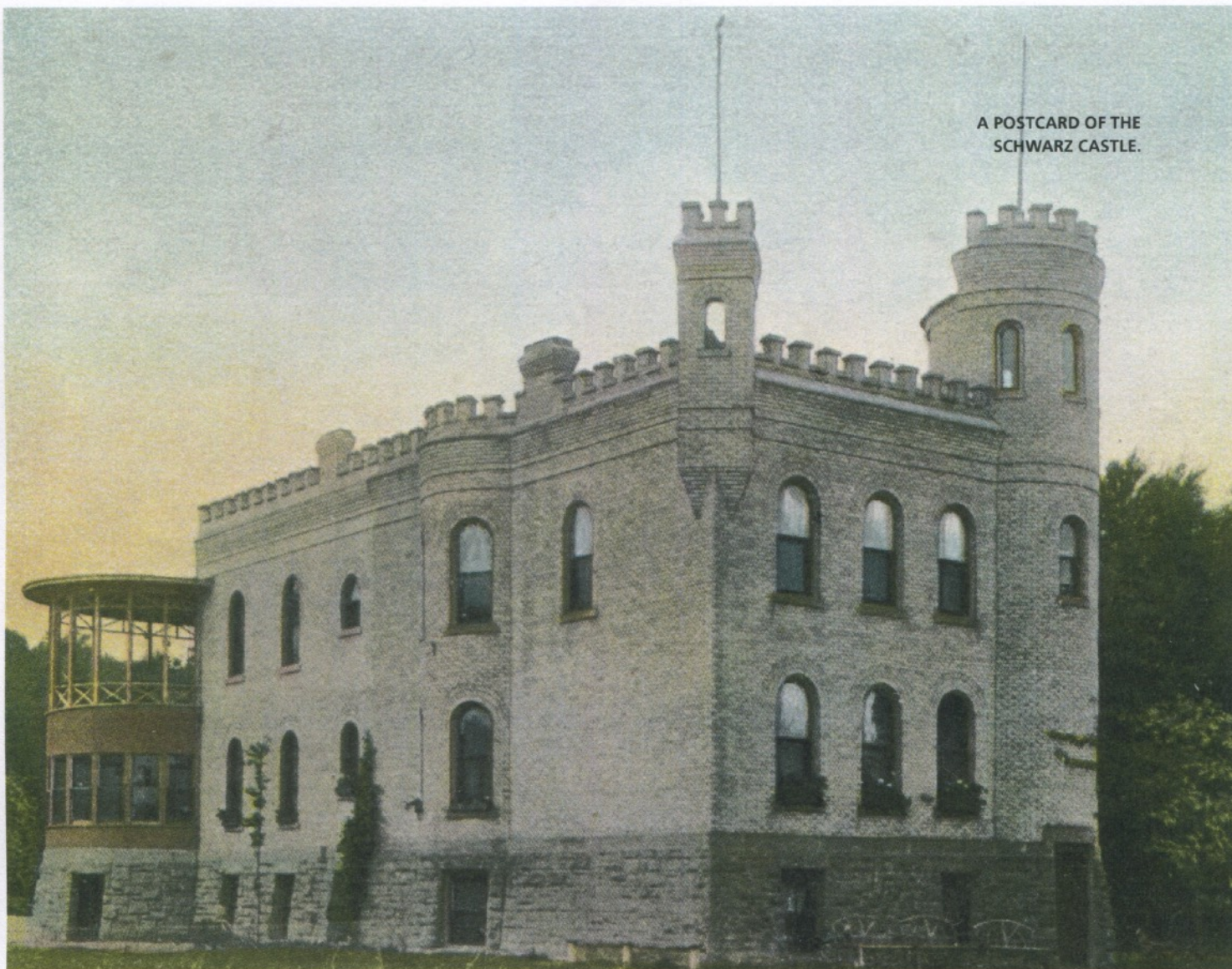
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A POSTCARD OF THE
SCHWARZ CASTLE.



Georg Michael Schwarz, His Castle, and the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*

BY ROBERT A. SELIG • PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY SALLY NYE

“We’re off to see the Wizard...” Surely most of our readers can at least hum if not sing this unforgettable tune made famous by Judy Garland as “Dorothy” in the 1939 musical fantasy film about *The Wizard of Oz*. Most can just as easily complete the line, which tells us why Dorothy wants to see the wizard: “because of the wonderful things he does!” Looking for the wizard, Dorothy and her entourage of the Scarecrow, the Tinman and the Lion, set out on the Yellow Brick Road that will lead them to the wizard’s castle. And where does that “wonderful wizard” live? In his castle in the Emerald City in the Land of Oz, of course! Everybody knows that, and some readers

may even know that it was Lyman Frederick Baum (1856-1919) who dreamed up this beloved children’s story, first published in May 1900. Literary historians have argued for years about Baum’s real-life inspiration for that castle and located it in places such as Chicago, San Diego and even in far-away Australia, all the while scorning the most likely explanation. “Local legend”, proclaims the entry in Wikipedia, “has it that Oz, also known as the Emerald City, was inspired by a prominent castle-like building in the community of Castle Park near Holland, Michigan, where Baum lived during the summer.” That legend may just be true. Since 1891 Baum was living in Chicago and habitually spent his usual summer

A POSTCARD DATED 1906 OF "EIGHTH ST. LOOKING EAST, HOLLAND, MICHIGAN".



vacations near Holland on the shores of Lake Michigan not far from where German immigrant Georg Michael Schwarz was building himself a "castle-like" structure which most likely did indeed serve as the model for Baum's castle in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Georg Michael Schwarz was born on 17 October 1845 in Urfersheim, a tiny community near Ansbach in northern Bavaria (population fewer than 200 in 2020), to a family that could trace its ancestry back into the earliest surviving church records of the surrounding villages all the way to the 1520s. His grandfather Johann Michael (1755-1830), a citizen of nearby Markt Burgbernheim, had rented, or possibly owned, a smithy in Urfersheim when he died in 1830. Georg Michael's father Johann Georg, born 1802, may have taken over the smithy upon the death of Johann Michael in 1830, but he is also listed as a gardener and vintner in surviving records. Georg Michael was the fifth child and second son of the six children of the marriage Johann Michael concluded with Eva Kunigunda Reuter from nearby Marktbergel on 3 May 1835, five years after his father's

death. Georg Michael was not quite eleven years old when his father died on 16 December 1856.



A few years later, Georg Michael was apprenticed for the customary term of three years to a tailor either in his hometown or some neighboring village. In mid-19th century Germany, and for decades thereafter, an apprentice did not receive a salary but rather had to pay a *Lehrgeld*, a teaching fee, to the master who taught him the trade. An apprenticeship to a proverbially poor tailor and the correspondingly low *Lehrgeld* points to the financially distressed economic situation in the Schwarz household. His apprenticeship over, the newly-minted *Geselle* or journeyman embarked on the traditional *Walz*, meaning he took to the road to work for short periods of time for different master tailors to expand and fine-tune his skills beyond what he had learned at home. Places of employment of the traveling journeyman during his *Walz* were recorded in a *Wanderbuch* along with character references and evaluations of the quality of his work. The *Walz* traditionally took three years and a day, but since it constituted a requirement



THE CASTLE AS DEPICTED IN L. FRANK BAUM'S BOOK *THE WIZARD OF OZ* IS HELD BY A BRONZE MUNCHKIN SCULPTURE. COURTESY HOLLAND SENTINEL.

to moving on to the level of Master Tailor (or to becoming a *Meister* in any trade), Georg Michael had no choice but to set out as well. (See my "German Craftsmen from *Zunft* to *Handwerksinnung*" in *GL* Oct/Nov 2010)

No documentary evidence of Georg Michael's *Walz* has come down to us, but when his widowed mother Eva Kunigunda in March 1866 decided to divide her inheritance—house, land, tools—and to sell it for the lump sum of 5,000 Bavarian guilders, 20-year-old Georg Michael was listed as "a journeyman tailor who is traveling" in the court records. A break-down of the property listed in the sales document of 1866 confirms the impoverished situation of the family. Besides the no longer standing house, the widow Schwarz owned roughly eight acres of meadows and arable land—a little more than one acre for each of the four adult children Johann Wolfgang, Margaretha, Anna Magdalena, Ernestine Henriette, and the two children who are not yet 21 and thus under age, i.e. Georg Michael Schwarz, and a sister Maria Magdalena. The fact that all adult children are still single provides another clue to the economic situation of the family: they were single most likely not because they could not find a mate but because they could not post the bond required for a marriage permit. Neither were all of the 5,000 guilders purchasing price available for distribution among the children and the widow: there was still a mortgage and debts to be paid.

When Georg Michael returned to Urfersheim sometime during the year 1866, following the end of his three-year *Walz*, strangers lived in the house he had grown up in. His parental home sold he most likely began his compulsory military service. Based on the Bavarian military service law of 15 August 1828, young men became subject to the draft on 1 January of the year they turned 21, in the case of Georg Michael that was in 1866. We don't know whether he had the misfortune of having been drawn by lot, the procedure mandated in the law, or volunteered, potentially already with the view of eventually immigrating to the US, in which

case he would have needed governmental permission to emigrate, which was impossible to gain without the fulfillment of the required military service. Or he may have been drafted outright: on 9 June 1866, Prussia had invaded Holstein; a week later, on 15 June, Hanover, Saxony and the Electorate of Hesse suffered the same fate. In the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Bavaria fought on the losing side of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, and Georg Michael may have had his first whiff of gunpowder during the battles of early July 1866 fought near Würzburg, just a few miles from his hometown.

Military records for the time period no longer exist, but a photograph taken during his military service shows him in the uniform of a Chevauleger, a light Cavalryman. Based on the 1828 law, a recruit, once he had put on the uniform of the Royal Bavarian Army, would wear it for the next six years. Military reforms following the Bavarian defeat of 1866 changed the time of service in the law of 1868, stipulating in Article 87 that members of the mounted troops born between 1845 and 1847 had to serve only four years. In the case of Georg Michael that meant into the summer of 1870, and it also meant, of course, that with a bit of (bad) luck, Georg Michael would fight not just in one but two wars during his tenure. In July 1870, France declared war on Prussia, and Bavaria rushed to the aid of her erstwhile enemy, and Georg Michael's discharge was most likely delayed until the spring of 1871, when a defeated France signed the Peace of Frankfurt on 10 May. His military service obligations fulfilled but no home to return to and little hope of economic advancement in a village he had not lived in since he had set out on his *Walz* some eight years earlier, 26-year-old Georg Michael, like millions of Germans before and after him, turned his sights westward, across the ocean to the United States of America. Hoping for a better life in the New World, he boarded the 2,800-ton *Vandalia* in Hamburg on 4 May 1872 for New York.

Sixteen days later, on 20 May 1872, he stepped ashore in Castle Garden and was processed in the Emigrant Landing



THE FAMILY OF GEORG MICHAEL SCHWARZ STAND BY THE NEW GRAVESTONE PLACED IN PILGRIM HOME CEMETERY THAT BEARS AN ETCHING OF THE SCHWARZ CASTLE. COURTESY HOLLAND SENTINEL.

Depot. Family lore has it that Georg Michael looked at a map of the United States and saw Chicago as the Crossroads of America. And he must have seen opportunities there as well: the Chicago Fire of 8-10 October 1871 had destroyed some 17,500 buildings covering more than 2,100 acres and caused the 2020 equivalent of almost 5 billion dollars in damages. A massive reconstruction effort was under way and Georg Michael would have his share of it. Once established in Chicago he opened his own tailor shop, and when a young girl walked into his shop in 1874 or 1875, he fell in love. Johanna Mehde, born 14 September 1858 near Lauenburg in Pomerania, and 13 years his junior, was looking for a position as buttonholer, and found herself a husband. On 31 October 1875, Johanna had just turned 17, the two were married by Pastor Scholz in Zion Lutheran Church which stood at the intersection of Hastings and Ashland Avenues. From then on Georg Michael's biography reads like an American success story: by the time he purchased the land for his "castle" on 12 October 1889 just off Lake Michigan in Laketown Township south of Holland and about 150 miles from the center of Chicago, he and his wife were the parents of six girls (their first child, also a daughter born 18 August 1876, died on her first birthday in 1877).

Financially Georg Michael had been successful as well. His tailor shop had prospered, family lore says in part through a contract to make uniforms for the Chicago Police Department. Using the profits Georg Michael invested in real estate in South Chicago, which he sold to the steel companies that rose along the southern coast of Lake Michigan in places



such as East Chicago, New Chicago, Hammond and Gary, he paid \$ 850 in cash for the 40 acres of land for his castle, more than an annual salary for a freight conductor on one of the railroad lines in Chicago which stood at \$ 802, when young men working as retail shop clerks in Chicago earned on average \$ 642 per year and young women took home on average all of \$ 7.61 per week or about \$ 395 annually when on official report pointed out "that board and lodging is not



JOHANNA MEHDE, SCHWARZ' WIFE.



SCHWARZ CASTLE PARK, SUMMER 2019. COURTESY DAVID NYE.

readily obtained in the better localities in Chicago for even \$6 a week." Given Schwarz' economic success it would not have been unusual for a successful businessman to build himself a summer cottage, but that was not what Schwarz had in mind: he apparently wanted a castle-like mansion like the nobility in Europe to retire to and live in. But why? The answer lies in the changing economic and social environment of the late 1880s and 1890s.

Changing modes of production and the ever-increasing availability of ready-made clothing one could purchase off a rack in a store increased competition and reduced profit margins, but more importantly, the city was convulsed ever more frequently with labor unrest. In 1867 and July 1877, workers in Chicago had already gone on strike demanding better working conditions and higher wages, but by the mid-1880s, not only did the nature of strikes change but Chicago became a national center of labor unrest. In 1886 almost 90,000 workers in 307 separate strikes demanded the eight hour work day that year. Demonstrations on 1 May 1886 and the Haymarket Affair of 4 May when someone threw a bomb at police and at least eight people died in the ensuing violence triggered widespread antilabor repression. As politicians sought to garner the labor vote and unions became better organized, craft unions spread into skilled trades, particularly the building trades, but remained strongest in the railroad industry. On 11 May 1894, the workers went on strike against the Pullman Railroad Car Company; by mid-July the strike was broken. One month later, by mid-August, Schwarz had moved his family, including their six daughters (another 17 month old girl, Emma, had died in August 1893) and his mother-in-law Charlotte Perlick Mehde, into the castle he had built in the wilderness of West Michigan.

The building had been planned by the architects Titus Maximilian Diethelm, a recent immigrant from Switzerland, and Franz Roy, of Chicago, and once the plans had been finalized construction began in late February 1892. *The Holland City News* reported on 20 February that "M. Schwartz [sic] of Chicago has arranged with Ja[me]s. Huntley [a local contrac-

tor] for the construction of a residence which for its quaint architecture will be unique in this region. The style will be that of a castle, with tower and port holes. It will be built of brick and stone, 28x36 feet, and very substantial, the contract price being about \$4000. The site for this picturesque structure is on a forty-acre tract owned by Mr. Schwartz [sic], lying between Kelly's Lake and Lake Michigan in Laketown about one mile south of Macatawa Park." It did not take long before Schwarz found himself in financial difficulties. Cost overruns in construction projects are not uncommon and seem to have hit Schwarz as well. By November 1892, Huntley took out a lien on the building, but then matters went from bad to worse. In February 1893, the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad went into receivership, nervous Americans began to withdraw massive amounts of funds from the banks, the subsequent credit crunch rippled through the economy just as foreign investors sold their American stocks to obtain American funds backed by gold. As the stock market collapsed, 500 banks failed, and some 15,000 businesses closed their doors, unemployment rose across the country, eventually reaching 43% in Michigan. The Panic of 1893 initiated an economic depression that would not end until 1897. Hit with the loss of their life savings from accounts in failed banks, many members of the middle-class could not meet their financial obligations. That included walking away from unpaid homes. Was Schwarz one of them?

When he decided to build himself a full-fledged home and not just a summer cottage on Lake Michigan in 1889, 44-year-old Schwarz must have felt financially secure enough to consider retiring. Financial over-extension and the severe economic depression ended that dream. Sometime during the winter of 1894/95, barely six months after the family had moved into the "castle", they moved out again, and into nearby Holland, taking along a little boy named George, born 15 October 1894, two days before his father's 49th birthday. Yet Georg Michael was luckier than many: in the summer of 1895, John H. Parr of Chicago discovered the abandoned building and contacted Georg Michael in the Spring of 1896. Parr wanted



THE SCHWARZ HOME AT 689 CENTRAL AVENUE, HOLLAND, MICHIGAN.

to develop the site into a resort property, and negotiations moved forward quickly—on 1 June Hantley's lien was paid off, and on 25 June the site was sold for \$ 3000 on land contract at 6% interest to be paid off by 1 November 1901. We do not know whether the 50-something Schwarz ever started working again, but he was debt-free, and an annual income of \$ 500 plus interest may just have been enough to retire in Holland where life was much cheaper than in Chicago. By the time the mortgage was paid off, both his mother-in-law as well as his wife were dead: Johanna, who had given birth to her tenth child in 20 years of marriage on 1 July 1896, died 39 years old only eleven days after her mother on 10 June 1898 of exhaustion and heart failure. Georg Michael died 63 years old on 22 August 1909.

Could the castle have served as an inspiration for Baum and *The Wizard of Oz*? Where else would he, could he, have seen a building that looked like it came straight out of a fairy tale? Surely Baum, who spent his summers at his family's cottage "The Sign of the Goose" on the southern end of the Macatawa peninsula on Lake Michigan, knew about the building just to the south of his cottage, gone to look at it wondering about "its quaint architecture...unique in this region", most likely visited it even before it opened as a resort. As he was developing the plot for his beloved children's story, Schwarz' "medieval" castle complete "with tower and port holes", emerging most unexpectedly at the end of a road in the middle of a forest, looking completely out of place along the shores of west Michigan, was just what Baum needed to give wings to his imagination. It was not just any castle: just like Schwarz' castle, Baum's castle was a Yellow Castle too: "The Winkies lifted him [i.e. the Tinman] tenderly in their arms, and carried him back to the yellow castle again, [...] Now they were reunited, Dorothy and her friends spent a few happy days at the Yellow Castle, where they found everything they needed to make them comfortable." And there is more. Schwarz knew Thomas Hall, the father of Dorothy Hall who became Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and his family which lived right across the street from Baum in Macatawa



THE SCHWARZ HOME IN URFERSHEIM #10.

Park. Hall and Schwarz were life-long friends, both traded in real estate in Chicago and both purchased land along the shores of Lake Michigan not far from each other, and their children were probably playmates.

We do not know why Schwarz built himself a castle—maybe he wanted to build a legacy for himself? If that was his plan, he succeeded, at least in the long run. For many years the Munchkins held their reunions in the castle, and in 2019, the Holland Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, in partnership with the City of Holland, Holland in Bloom, and Herrick District Library launched the "Holland Oz Project" to celebrate and commemorate the city's most famous visitor and his book. A series of life-sized bronze sculptures of Dorothy and Toto, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion, as well as a 12½ foot "Fighting Tree" with a Flying Monkey perched on one of the branches, lined up along—what else? a yellow brick road from Centennial Park in the heart of the city to Herrick Public Library. And Schwarz and his castle were not forgotten either: the book held by a little Munchkin is open to an image of the castle that Schwarz built.

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