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The Split: How the American Nature Friends Fell Apart in the 1940s and 1950s

The following text is hardly more than a sketch of what happened when the American Nature Friends fell apart. For a more comprehensive approach, access should have been possible to the documents and data stored at various locations across the USA. Even at Tamiment Library, New York University, which hosts a bulk of records connected with the case, material is still waiting to even be catalogued. In addition, private sources made accessible in recent years invite more systematic analysis to shed new light on the intricate effects of McCarthyism in the context of the “split.” This paper hopes to lay some groundwork for further inquiry.¹

The network of Nature Friends in the USA was originally built by German-speaking immigrants early in the 20th century—the New York local was founded in 1910, San Francisco in 1913. Due to their working-class background, the *Naturfreunde* emerged mainly in industrialized areas, and branches extended, sometimes only for a short time, as far as Philadelphia (1913), Seattle (1914), Chicago (1925),² and Salt Lake City (1938). As a rule, it was a requirement for a Nature Friend to join a union, and members addressed each other with the socialist greeting phrase “Genosse” (comrade). Membership peaked in the 1940s, with 16 locals running 15 clubhouses, camps, and mountain retreats, but even then never got close the two thousand mark.

First the “Gau” (districts) in the East/Midwest and the West developed in pretty much a parallel way.³ The members’ magazines, up to the 1930s predominantly in German, covered activities from coast to coast and created an utter sense of cohesion; Nature Friends moving elsewhere would be welcomed by comrades at their new destinations.⁴ The pace was set by Alexander Wiederseder, who in 1910 was the first Secretary (“Schriftführer”) of the New York local and presided over the San Francisco local from 1917 to 1921.

¹ New York University’s Tamiment Library holds unsorted materials, including FBI files; for additional detail it might also be helpful to scrutinize other collections, including the sources the Communist Party of the USA donated to Tamiment Library in 2007. Exemplarily, many of the private sources used here come from the “Camp Midvale Originals” collection (cf. footnote 8).

² Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “Elements of a Pictorial History of the Nature Friends in Chicago.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.2 (2014).

³ Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “The Nature Friends of America: A Historical Sketch.”

http://www.highlandsnaturalpool.org/History_of_Nature_Friends_of_America.pdf; for a more comprehensive survey (in German) see my “‘Berg frei’ jenseits des Atlantiks? Die Nature Friends of America,” *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 42.1 (März 2006): 60-87.

⁴ Cf. Hrvoje Galić. “Lonely Grave in the Sierra.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.2 (2014).

Then came the “split,” the complete organizational separation of Eastern and Western districts. From the late 1950s onwards, in the East and Midwest no regional Nature Friends did exist any more, and most locals had vanished.

So why did the three Californian clubs survive? Why did the Western clubs fall out with those of the East and Midwest? Why did the “national headquarters” in New York never become the coordinating body it was conceived for? Why did the thirteen Eastern and Midwestern locals, including strongholds such as New York and Camp Midvale, and their respective Nature Friends Homes dissolve (almost) into a void?

Situation in the East

From the start the *Naturfreunde* were part of a comprehensive infrastructure of German-language labor organizations. Sports (mostly hiking, skiing, and mountaineering), ecological, and recreational activities were combined with social and political projects. Presenting the club’s green banners at May Day Parades was usual. Solidarity and equality defined its ethics. When public opinion in the USA turned towards liberal, even left-wing values in the 1930s, also the Nature Friends were involved in controversies about the role of the American working class movement. In particular, Philadelphia and Chicago were critical of the capitalist system in the USA, emphasizing class-conscious political action to be realized through cultural and educational activities; others, like Rochester, preferred a less “revolutionary” approach. Yet even the most politically aware groups never considered themselves as anything like a political party, and none was homogeneous ideologically. On the one hand, activities included collecting money in support of striking workers or the victims of political oppression (like in the Rosenberg case, for the Scottsboro Boys, or in the Spanish Civil War) (Fig. 1)⁵; on the other hand practical interests, whatever the political fashions of the day, focussed on hiking and other recreational purposes plus running the clubhouses and camps.

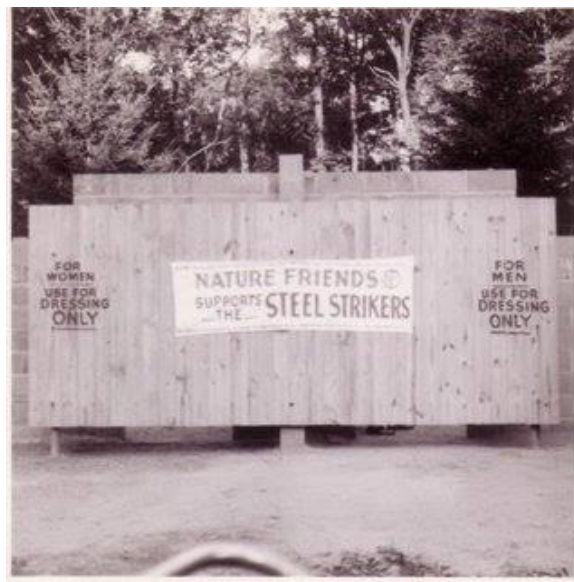


Fig. 1

⁵ Poster on the wall of a dressing room by the swimming pool at Camp Midvale, N.J.; from “Camp Midvale Originals” collection.

Liberal as the mainstream of the 1930s and 1940s appeared to have been, the situation was deceptive. Without the clubs knowing about it, from 1935 on the Attorney General had cited the “NATURE FRIENDS OF AMERICA [...] as a subversive and Communist organization.”⁶ It is not clear what they were accused of, but the destructive effect was there all the same. Desegregated camps, support for “radical” causes, a proximity to the New Deal programs, and then support for 1948 Progressive Party presidential candidate Wallace made the organization an anti-communist target.

The late New Deal era was the heyday of the CPUSA, which in 1939 had almost 100,000 members.⁷ Lacking political alternatives, quite a few Nature Friends gravitated towards the party, and some joined it. Yet according to interviews with contemporary Nature Friends, in the clubs and at the camps the party never was a predominant force.⁸ Its number of CP members is easily overestimated,⁹ and in the early 1950s most of them had again left the party.

Staunch anti-Communist Roman Catholic priest John F. Cronin, in “A Confidential Study for Private Circulation” (1945), makes clear why McCarthyism and its predecessors so much concentrated on New York. With more than 27,000 members, the party there was by far the biggest of the communist communities in the USA, and it was its organizational center. According to one observer, “about 50% of Communist organizations and 85% of Communist leadership are concentrated in New York City.”¹⁰ So more than elsewhere, also communist or fellow-travelling Nature Friends in the area were under scrutiny. Among them were Georg Schmidt, the president of the Nature Friends of America, Inc., and his wife Ellen, who took no heed in hiding that they were CP members. Schmidt indeed is mentioned in Cronin’s memo as the New York leader of the Nature Friends in 1945,¹¹ but its comprehensive survey of CP functionaries and delegates (108-113) never proves he played a leading role in the party.

⁶ Attorney General Tom Clark, letters to Loyalty Review Board, released December 4, 1947, and September 21, 1948.

⁷ Cf. Harvey Klehr. “Communist Party—USA.” *The Oxford Companion to United States History*. Oxford/New York: OUP, 2001. 149.

⁸ In the late 1980s, Andy Lanset and Chris Idzik undertook a radio project to preserve the memories of Camp Midvale; the Lanset/Idzik interviews were given to Tamiment Library, and are also available at Ringwood, N.J. Public Library - see Mary Caldwell-Kane. “Ringwood Library: Camp Midvale Grant Project.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 1.1 (2013).

⁹ There is an informal list based on the *tabula gratulatoria* in the number of *The Nature Friend* celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the international Nature Friends (October 1945). Handmarked probably at Camp Midvale in the 1980s, these entries suggest that of the almost 800 Eastern Nature Friends in the list about one hundred, i.e. roughly 13 per cent, were somehow close to the CP; percentages for Newark are 20%, for New York/Brooklyn 19%, Philadelphia 14%, for Midvale, Syracuse, and Chicago 14%, and for Rochester 3%; in four locals no CP members are mentioned at all.

¹⁰ Peter Cacchione, quoted in John F. Cronin “The Problem of American Communism in 1945: Facts and Recommendations.” 18; repr. <http://mdhistory.net/hiss/cronin-report.pdf> (April 30, 2015).

¹¹ Cronin. “The Problem of American Communism.” 135. In the category “Miscellaneous Front Organizations: Mainly Foreign-Language” the entries on “Georg Schmidt” run: “**German-American League for Culture**, 799 Broadway, N.Y.C. Press Otto Sattler; Sec: Georg Schmidt. - **German-American Emergency Conference**, 305

In some locals, newly arriving refugees from Europe radicalized parts of the organization, like a group of Austrians escaping from the Nazi regime did at Camp Midvale; the newcomers concentrated on anti-fascist activities rather than running the camps, which created tensions with older members, who occasionally even lived on the properties. Such controversies were intensified when the FBI began to question camp neighbors and put down the licence tags of cars visiting, and when the KuKluxKlan attacked the camp for the non-segregated racial politics of its swimming pool.¹²

So internal disagreement about the general character of the Nature Friends, a changing membership structure, and generational conflicts joined external factors to disrupt the unity of the movement. Creating the National Executive Board in New York City rather intensified the problem, as the Californian Nature Friends had already come up with a different interpretation of what the Nature Friends were standing for.

Situation in the West

The early experiences of the *Naturfreunde* in the East and West had been rather similar. Had “super-patriots” burned down the first New York boathouse on the Hudson during the First World War, similarly San Francisco Nature Friends drew the suspicion of both governmental authorities and an anti-German public and found their first Nature Friends Home in flames. This could not halt the expansion of branches to Oakland and Los Angeles, though.

Up to the 1930s, also the Californians considered themselves part of the progressive camp, as is summed up in the programmatic statement on the title page of a 1922 brochure celebrating the 10th anniversary of the San Francisco local (Fig. 2 a, b).¹³

Broadway, N.Y.C. Chairman: Felix Boenheim; Sec: Walter Mueller, Tres: Albert Schoenherr; Executive Board: Hans Diabele; Rudolph Kohler; Karl Meyer; Otto Sattler; Georg Schmidt; Paul Sturm. - **Nature Friends of America, Inc.**, 27 East 17th St; N.Y.C, Pres: Georg Schmidt; V. Pres: Julia Jarius and Oscar Friedman; Sec: Charlotte Bleicher; Tres: Gertrude Juretschke; Ed: Louis Sutherland; Ed. Direct: Gertrude Sherman; Bus. Mgr: Lottie Eransler; Circ. Mgr: Else Thiellman.”

¹² Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “New York’s Nature Friends: Their History, their Camps.”

NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory 2.1 (2014). - This is how Solveig Leslie (as rendered by Karin Adamietz) remembered the situation: “The East Coast Nature Friends had a ‘communist streak.’ The NFA president George Schmidt and his wife Ellen Schmidt were active members of the Communist Party, USA. So even though there were a variety of political opinions in the Nature Friends, this caused the group to get labeled as Communist. This was the era after the war when the FBI was watching Camp Midvale. There was an Austrian Youth Group which was also very leftist, and certain members used to sell copies of the Daily Worker outside the dining hall on the weekends. - Solveig and her husband Nat had been members in the New York/Camp Midvale region, and later moved to California; Nat had been an editor of the NF magazine for a while. He became the chairman of the Nature Friends mountain house outside of Los Angeles. They did a lot of trail work and hiking in California, and all over the western states.” - Louis Merkel, interviewed at age 84 by Lanset and Idzik (July 10, 1987), recalls how he was called to appear at a district court to be questioned about Georg[e] Schmidt, his brother in law; in the interview Merkel describes himself as “communistic.”

¹³ From a collage album on the history of the San Francisco local compiled in the 1970s (thanks to Phil Greer).

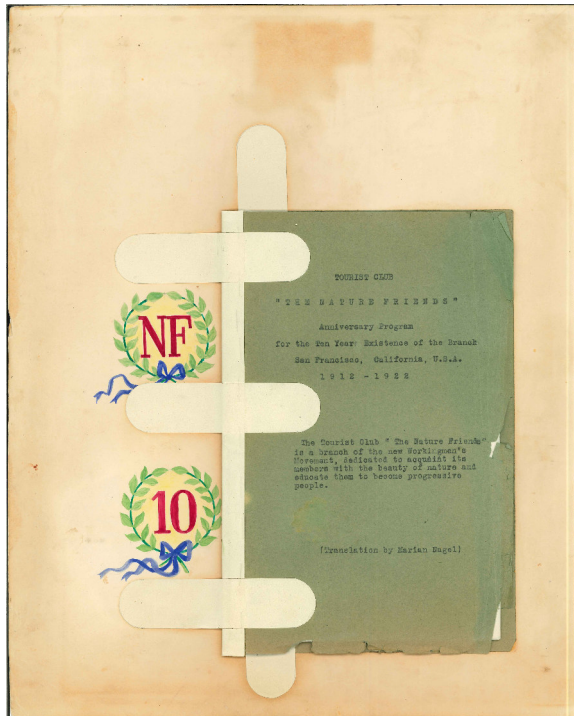


Fig. 2a

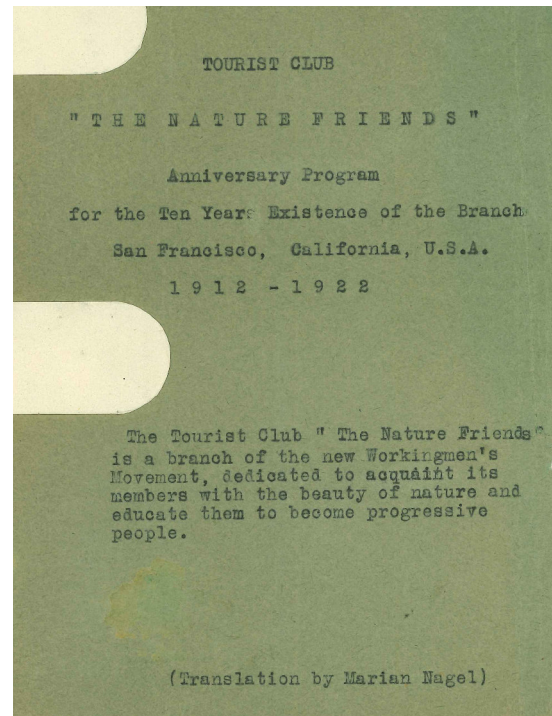


Fig. 2b

The clubs supported the unions and the working-class press and cooperated with other German Labor organizations, such as the workers' glee clubs ("Arbeitersängerbund"). In 1929 the San Francisco local invited the "Werden Genossen" ("dear comrades") to an entertainment the revenues of which were donated to the "good cause" of the International Labor Defense; a three-day bazaar was held in support of striking textile workers and their "Gastonia Defense and Relief Committee."

For practical reasons, in 1922 San Francisco and Oakland created an umbrella structure whose president became William Heidelmann, an Austrian immigrant later to gain immense importance for the Californians. In 1927, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles "formed a corporation [...] under the laws of the state of California," the *West-Gau* (Western district).¹⁴ Although this would be the starting point for the American branches drifting apart, at the time major differences were not yet visible. As late as in 1937, in a beautifully compiled brochure on the first quarter-century of the San Francisco local, Paul Schnier sums up its progressive values (Fig. 3 a, b):



Fig. 3a

¹⁴ Erich Fink. *California Nature Friends: Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles*. 1986. Non-paginated; quote from section "Los Angeles Branch of the Nature Friends."

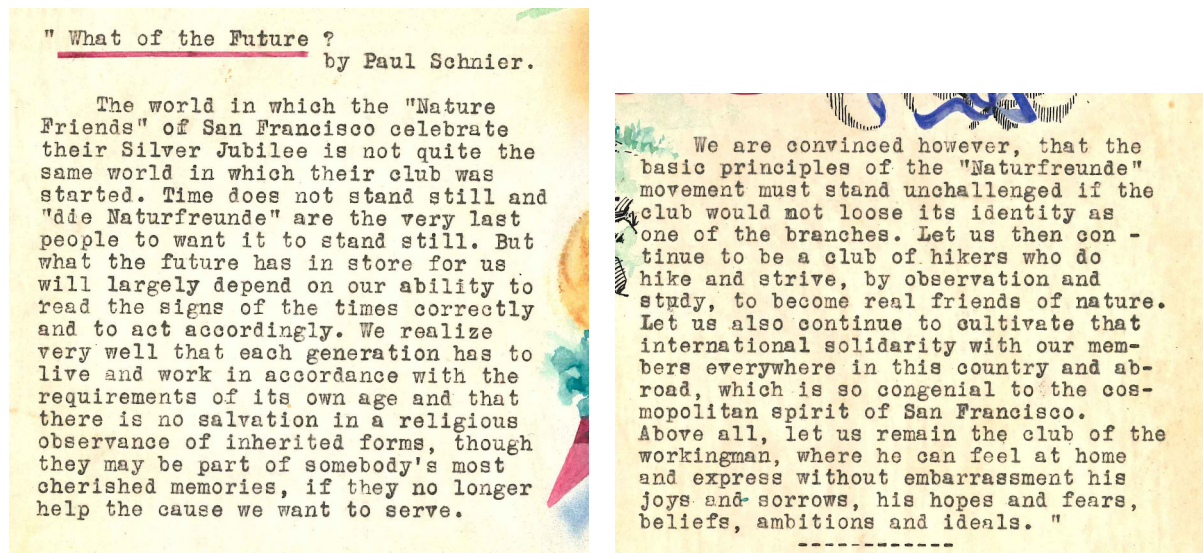


Fig. 3b

After the Attorney General's first subversive list of 1935, also the Californians were targetted, with the political aspect subdued: "Both Oakland and San Francisco had some minor difficulties with the government regarding the ownership of their properties."¹⁵ Whereas by the end of the 1930s in the East ideological debates were underway, such discussions were becoming more muted in the West. Proletarian references and traditional working-class rhetoric were reduced to allusions to the old cooperative spirit, like in this San Francisco invitation to a work hike: "Carpenters, woodworkers, plumbers, electricians, members handy with tools, are requested to bring their own tools, as not enough of the same is available at the Sierra House. [...] We appeal in good comradeship to all members [...]"¹⁶ In 1941 the corporate name was changed to "Nature Friends" and the first American-born president, Robert Wyler (from 1942 to 1952), was elected. The term "Tourist Club"—which had been part of the original European name "Touristen-Verein Die Naturfreunde"—was used more regularly. The connection with the national monthly *The Nature Friend*, which had linked districts since 1920, was skipped in 1948.¹⁷

During the Second World War, the New York national office was actively supporting the American military, and also Californian clubs collected money for anti-fascist purposes. But unlike the national and Eastern publications, Western sources were less outspoken about the War and the situation in Europe. Similarly, anti-racism seems to have played a less prominent role. The Californian Nature

¹⁵ Erich Fink (ed.) *50 Years The Nature Friends Branch Oakland. 1921-1971*. Oakland, 1971, non-paginated.

¹⁶ Tourist Club "The Nature Friends" Western District of America. "A Personal Appeal to Our Fellow Members in the Branches." August 1940; rept. in: Erich Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch of the Naturfreunde*. San Francisco [2008]. 18.

¹⁷ Erich Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch of the Naturfreunde*. 23 and 37.

Friends were about to find the profile that characterizes them today: German-Austrian folk traditions, apolitical sociability, outstanding sports opportunities, and Nature Friends Homes.¹⁸

A national organization?

So by then on a very general level one could say Westerners were more traditional and folksy, whereas the Easterners took their ideological contexts more seriously. Eastern and nationwide members' magazines emphasized the role of politics for the club's public image (Fig. 4)¹⁹, although in practical terms its scope of activities was much more diversified (Fig. 5)²⁰. Public perception included ecological and communitarian projects like the system of Trail Conferences (which up to the present lays out hiking trails) and New Deal projects like the Civil Conservation Corps (CCC; Fig. 6).²¹

In spite of a nationwide infrastructure in the form of *The Nature Friend* monthly, there was no legal body to represent the organization nationally. Obviously the American districts were not represented in the Nature Friends International (NFI) as one coherent institution, as is remembered by old-timer Solveig Leslie in an unpublished letter to Chris Idzik in the 1980s: The Eastern Nature Friends (*Nature Friends of America, Inc.*) paid their dues to the international headquarters in Vienna (later Zurich, Switzerland); the Western district, she thinks, belonged to the NFI separately.²² One consequence of such an internal construction was that when confronted with McCarthyism, the Californians could claim they had never been part of the *Nature Friends of America, Inc.* Their legal framework, *The Nature Friends, Inc.*, had been independent since 1927 and consequently could not be held responsible for what was happening in the East.

In the first decades, for historical and practical purposes the New York office had provided a nationwide infrastructure, including *The Nature Friend*, which also the Californians had benefitted from. But during the 1930s distances were growing, and Westerners were beginning to seek their distance both in an administrative and political respect, including New York's National Executive Board (NEB).

¹⁸ In 2010 longtime Californian international liaison officer Susi Raub, Oakland, described present-day practices: "Today the clubs continue to foster and preserve European Alpine social activities and cultural heritage. We have a Folkdance-Group that wears traditional Tracht [...] and some of us sing in Bavarian and Austrian dialect. We have a Heimatabend and we have a Kinderfest and Oktoberfest. We also have annual (members only) events such as Saint Patrick's Day, Old-Timer's and Christmas Dinner. [...] our clubs [...] therefore have more a cultural atmosphere with emphasis on hiking, skiing and dancing." *Naturfreund* (Switzerland) 2 (2010): 31.

¹⁹ Title page of *The Nature Friend*. May 1939.

²⁰ *The Nature Friend*. October 1945: 9.

²¹ *New York Evening Post*, March 17, 1938 (accessed through fultonhistory.com, April 7, 2015)

²² Solveig Leslie to Chris Idzik, non-dated (late 1980s), p. 5. - In its early years, there had been no national organizations of the *Naturfreunde* (these only came in the 1920s and the 1950s); locals were directly associated with the *Naturfreunde*-*"Weltverein"* (world club) and its successors in Vienna.

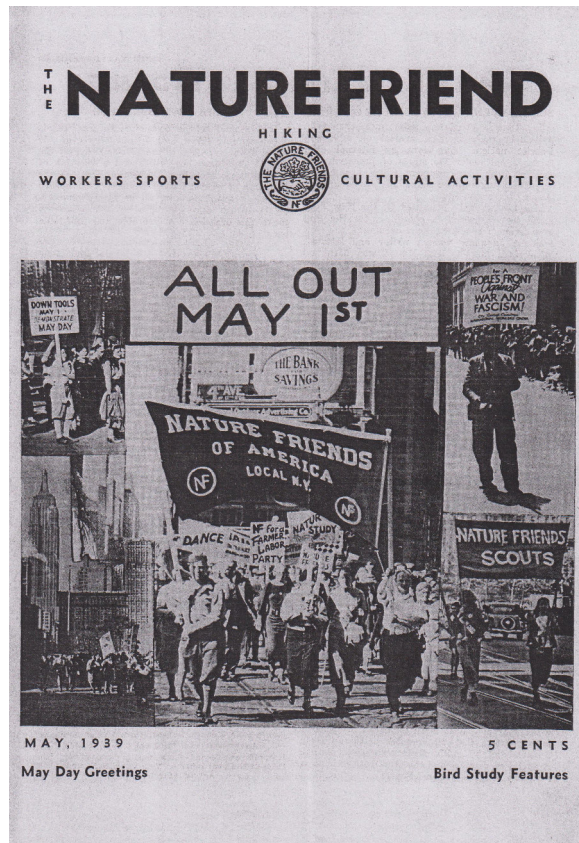


Fig. 4

OCTOBER, 1946

9

OUR AIMS

The Nature Friends is an organization of workers. Its main objective is to help further the interests of its members and the working class as a whole. This objective it seeks to accomplish through the means of outdoor sports—through hiking, camping, skiing and related outdoor activities; and the development of cultural interests, such as appreciation of the beauty of nature, a knowledge of natural science; to support those associations which sponsor the conservation of natural resources, historical monuments and wild life; and to assist in the upkeep and building of trails.

It also is a staunch supporter of all progressive causes, with a vigorous and lively hatred for reaction and all brands of fascism.

Our activities can be summarized as follows:

- Arranging hikes, trips, outdoor meets and camping trips.
- Supporting the program for the maintenance of National Parks, forests, monuments, bird and other wild life, and conservation of national resources.
- Building and marking trails, fostering the building, maintenance and management of shelters, huts, camps, playgrounds and other places of recreation.
- Aiding and supporting the development and growth of the workers' sports movement which foster the aims and purposes of trade unionism. Arranging and participating in sport activities and sports meets.
- Cooperating with related institutions and movements.
- Aiding and assisting in the propagation of culture and thought consistent

with the aims, purposes and welfare of this association.

(g) Establishing nature study museums and collections, creating small libraries with literature dealing with our aims, and issuing publications in connection with the purposes herein mentioned.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in our organization is open to persons irrespective of sex, race, creed, color, or nationality.

No person with fascist convictions shall be eligible for membership.

Applicants for membership are urged to become members of their respective trade unions, provided there is a trade union in their field of endeavor.

Our organization is definitely against people who are anti-union, engage in anti-union activities, or have anti-union tendencies. No member may be guilty of the above.

WITH BEST WISHES
for
FUTURE SUCCESS

Victory Committee of

German-American
Trade Unionists

144 Bleeker Street
New York City

Fig. 5

Long Brown Path

By RAYMOND H. TORREY

Further information on the circular trail system in the Catskill Mountains, proposed by the Nature Friends of America, by Hans Wittich, to link up State and Nature Friends shelters, has come to us from Georg Schmidt, chairman of the eastern district board of that organization. Following my first publication in December, the project reached the attention of William G. Howard, director of lands and forests, Conservation Department, who was interested and who wrote to Nature Friends for further details.

Nature Friends Catskill Trails

The subject reached Mr. Schmidt, who wrote to Mr. Howard, saying that nothing would be done until Mr. Wittich and other hike leaders surveyed the proposed trails and forwarded maps and other information to Mr. Howard for his approval. Mr. Schmidt pointed out that while the Nature Friends have shelters open for use or soon to be at Platte Clove, Bunka and Mount Pisgan, it seeks to develop circuit trails using its own or the State to link up the system in a continuous route.

"Up to the present time," wrote Mr. Schmidt to Mr. Howard, "the Catskills have had only section trail systems, and it is possible only under difficulties to get from one trail section to another by foot. The proposed circular string of trails will eliminate these difficulties, and in the future it will be a pleasure to hike continuously all around the Catskill Mountains. The plan will also open many new territories hitherto not known to ramblers of our 'Land of the Sky.' Not only would the Nature Friends benefit by such a circular trail project, but the entire body of hikers would benefit from it as well, as mountaineers from near and far will be attracted by these trails. In our opinion it will make the Catskills a hikers' paradise."

Evidently in reply to Mr. Howard's inquiry as to whether such trails, located and maintained by the Nature Friends, would be continuously kept up, partly over private lands and partly within the State forest preserve, Mr. Schmidt wrote to Mr. Howard:

"We wish to assure you that any trails we plan to build will be maintained by the members of the Nature Friends. In order to prove that we are capable of such work, we refer you to the string of trails in the New Jersey Wyandott Plateau, which we built and maintained for more than ten years. Furthermore, the excellent trails around the Nature Friends Platte Clove Camp in the Catskills are additional proof that the Nature Friends are capable of building and maintaining trails. The latter trails were even marked in accordance with the color scheme used on State trails in the Catskills."

"The Nature Friends of America are active members of the New York and New Jersey Trail Conference and our name is symbolic of our sincerity in regard to the building and maintaining of trails. Truly we are friends of nature. We also refer you to Raymond Torrey for additional information as to the trail work done by Nature Friends. We think that your suggestion to have some of the proposed trails built by the CCC labor is a good one. We want to reassure you that before any trail is started we will consult your department."

Mr. Schmidt has also written to us directly, offering information from time to time for the Long Brown Path on trail developments among members of eleven locals of Nature Friends, especially those in the Northeastern States, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, for mutual benefit on hiking problems, which we shall be happy to receive.

Fig. 6

The 1940 National Convention

With the districts floating apart ideologically and organizationally, leading members from the East and the West made an attempt at (re-)unification. On July 9, 1940, 85 delegates and guests from fifteen locals conferred in a Rocky Mountains resort at the “First National Convention of the Nature Friends of America,” which as the *first national* meeting gives proof to the fact that there had not been any prior *formal* institution of the kind.

The location was picked for its symbolic and its recreational value. Geographical distances for Easterners and Westerners were roughly equal, and one was on neutral ground. Although the formal convention was a one-day meeting, to provide time for social and sports opportunities the whole event lasted from July 8 to 14. Excellent hikes, campfires, songs, and collective memories were to create a mood for ending tensions.

With no Nature Friends camps in the region, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp was chosen at Estes Park, CO, on the southern end of Rocky Mountains National Park.²³ The CCC was a popular New Deal program to reduce youth unemployment through conservationist projects and reforestation²⁴ and had already been a partner to the Nature Friends’ hiking and ecological efforts before and elsewhere (see Fig. 6).

In social terms the Convention was a success, in most other respects it failed. Even drafting a “National Constitution” did not have the effect hoped for. Over a year later, in October 1941, to advance the unification process National Executive Board President Georg Schmidt wrote a letter to all American locals. Interestingly Schmidt, a representative of the more ideologically minded East, suggested amendments which apparently softened political requirements for membership. Only on the matter of one national organization and New York’s claim to represent it he remained tough (Fig. 7).²⁵ The European central office obviously knew about these debates on an American constitutional framework (see below), but its internal records do not provide reliable details of the conflict and its further development. The NFI seems to have sided with the Californians, who obviously had long made up their minds about a complete break with their, now former, comrades in the East.

²³ See http://ccclegacy.org/CCC_Camps_Colorado.html (April 30, 2015).

²⁴ Cf. John A. Salmond. “Civilian Conservation Corps.” *Oxford Companion to United States History*. 122; see also John A. Salmond. *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1967, available at http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/ccc/salmond/index.htm (April 30, 2015).

²⁵ “Camp Midvale Originals” collection; I have not had access to the draft of the constitution.

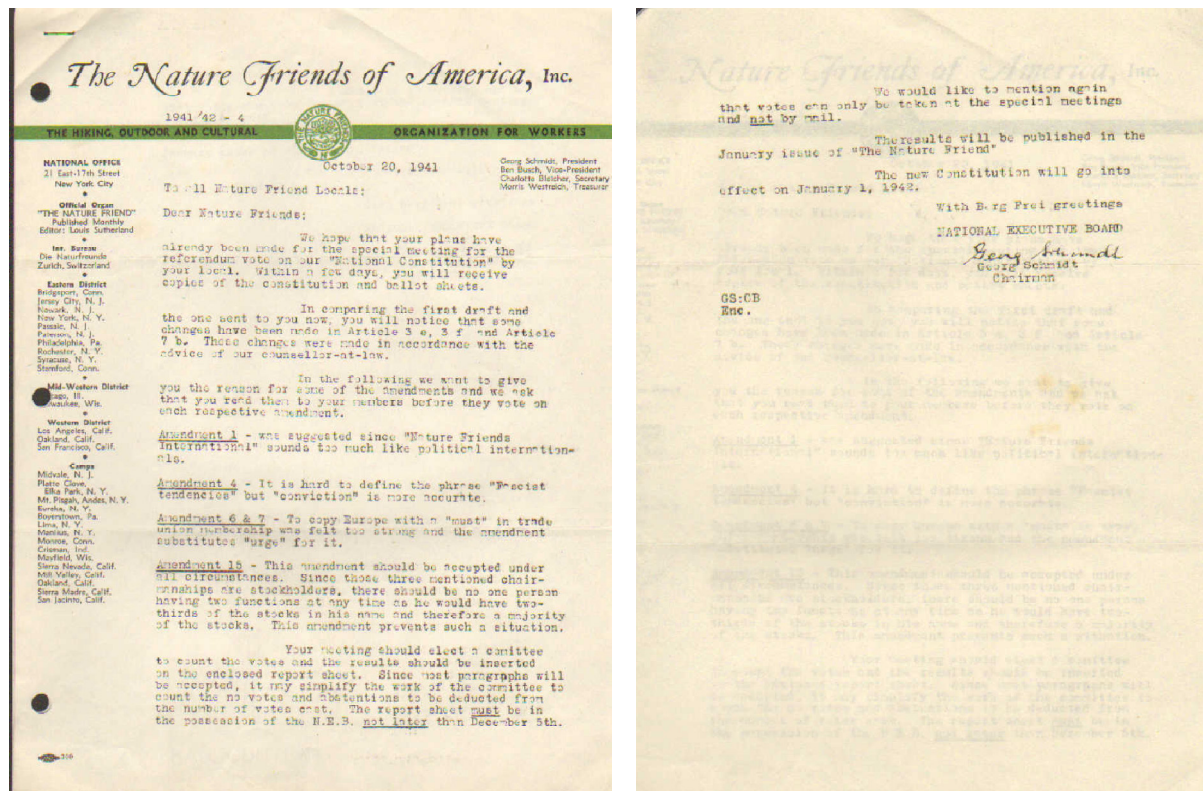


Fig. 7

1947: Grand Teton Conference

What mainly held the continental network of Nature Friends together after 1940 were old personal contacts, and, until 1947, *The Nature Friend* as a platform to exchange information among the members. The national members' magazine also provides a glance into how there was disagreement even within the West. Its October 1945 number celebrated the first half-century of the international Nature Friends (Fig. 8); Los Angeles, the most Americanized, least folksy, and smallest Californian local was not only prominently present on the title page but in the articles as well. In this brochure of almost one hundred pages, Oakland is simply absent, and San Francisco is only represented by a short introductory entry.

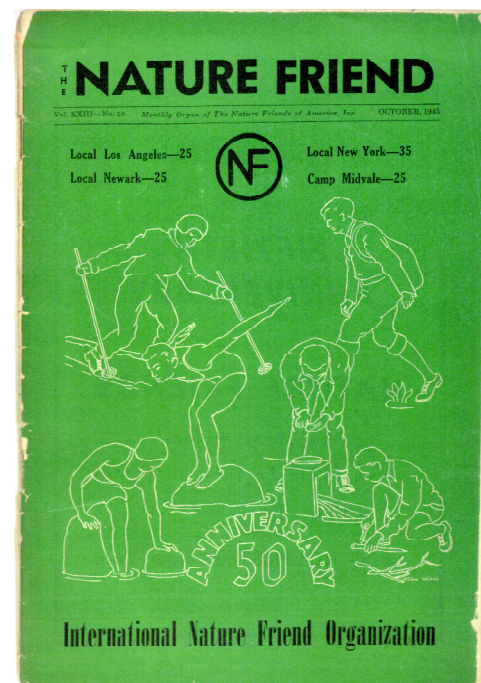


Fig. 8

The Los Angeles link also helped to organize a final attempt at mending the conflicts between East and West. Fred Zahn, who had been a member in Chicago before moving on to San Francisco and then Los Angeles, and Hans Wittich, of Camp Midvale, N.J., joined hands to organize another convention.²⁶ Already in the 1920s Wittich had made outstanding climbs in the Grand Teton area; together with fellow New York Nature Friend Otto Stegmeier he was the first to ascend what today is called the Wittich Crack.²⁷ In preparation for another national meeting, Wittich again scouted the region in 1946. Again, like in 1940, they tried a combination of programmatic and recreational events, a concept which resembled more a holiday than a formal meeting. Most people attending stayed longer to enjoy the company and the landscape, and some used the opportunity for a full three-week vacation.

According to Wittich, of the Western locals only Los Angeles and San Francisco attended the Grand Teton Conference, and all of the Eastern clubs except for Syracuse and Rochester were present. Once more, in a social respect things ran perfectly, but the split could not any more be healed.

How far Western self-distancing from the East had advanced is highlighted in a text California Nature Friends historian Erich Fink wrote as late as 2008. In order to justify the breach between East and West, Fink uses exemplary “extremist” quotations from members’ magazines of the 1930s (“Foreward, comrades”; “The banner of the class-struggle is red, - the banner of the Nature Friends is the - green of the mountainside [...] - Workers of the world unite. BERG FREI”). To him “it was of no surprise” the Nature Friends of America were included in the subversive list. Fink’s choice of words suggests the Californians clearly knew what they were doing, and how Los Angeles was isolated in the West:

In 1947 the SF and Oakland branches voted to “disaffiliate” themselves from the National NF Executive Board. The Eastern NF in no uncertain terms condemned such a move as “cowardly.” After a fiery meeting presided over by Bob Wyler, the SF local with a vote of 98 to 17 disconnected themselves completely from the more politically inclined Eastern clubs. Bob Wyler at the 1947 National NF Convention held in Grand Teton National Forest (after a climb of the Tetons) voiced his and his club's sentiment that “SF is of the opinion that under democratic principles, people should not be forced to contribute funds to anything they do not agree with in principle and as the Western district is incorporated under the Laws of the State of California, which makes it an autonomous organization, the will of a majority of the members will decide the course of action

In April, 1948 the break between the two Nature Friend sections became official. President Wyler in a lengthy letter to all members explained our position (copies of this letter are available). In the letter President Wyler explained that the Easterns clubs had been infiltrated

²⁶ Sources here are Solveig Leslie’s letter to Chris Idzik and the interview Lanset and Idzik made with Hans Wittich (December 28, 1987).

²⁷ <http://www.mountainproject.com/v/wittich-crack/106224520> (April 30, 2015).

by active members of the American Communist Party. Later dozens of Eastern clubs dissolved and severed their connection with the International Nature Friends.

Needless to say, many of our local members resigned from our club during these years of political turmoil as some members had difficulties with their employers because of the matter, even though our California Corporation was never on the subversive list. Our membership today has little first hand experience with this episode and is largely “apolitical” in nature, emphasizing our social and recreational activities at nearly total exclusion of political matters.²⁸

In the letter referred to by Fink, Bob Wyler clearly outlines the legal borderline between *The Nature Friends, Inc.* (for California) and *The Nature Friends of America* (for the East and Midwest, including the New York headquarters) (Fig. 9)²⁹. He explicitly invokes the subversive list as the major reason for the separation, and in the final paragraphs even calls for the support of those in the East taking legal action against the National Executive Board. The tone picked is surprising. After all, in the Rockies and Grand Teton both sides had met on what seems to have been good terms, enjoying nature, and trying to create a common future. It can certainly be assumed that the style of this letter was a way of publicly distancing oneself from McCarthyite attacks.

Wyler’s immediate opponent was Georg Schmidt. Having come from Berlin in 1926, Schmidt was also crucial in reestablishing the *Naturfreunde* in the American occupation zone in Southern Germany after the War and keeping up contacts with East German *Naturfreunde*. To Wyler’s letter Schmidt responded by pointing out the absurd parallel between the American Nature Friends’ internal debates and the Cold War:

The fight between East and West [worldwide] has also been transferred to the American Nature Friends, when the Western district split away from us. [...] We stick to the international statutes, which are on our side and clearly express that on leaving the national organization a district or local loses membership rights in all branches of the organization. If they want to remain Nature Friends they must come back and the door is open [...]. We exert pressure on Zurich, but they have not decided yet. [...] The Western district [cannot] leave us and then be an independent member of the International.³⁰

²⁸ Erich Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch of the Naturfreunde*. [2008]. 37 and 38. Fink was an arts teacher at a Berkeley school; some of the paintings at San Francisco/Oakland clubhouses were painted by him. During a visit a few years ago, members of both the San Francisco and the Oakland locals suggested to me Fink’s anti-communism may have been fed by fear of losing his job through being publicly associated with the Eastern Nature Friends.

²⁹ Provided by Phil Greer.

³⁰ Letter Georg Schmidt to Hans Frank, Feb. 28, 1949, reprinted in Joachim Schindler. “Zur Arbeit touristischer Organisationen Dresdens sowie zur Entwicklung von Wandern und Bergsteigen in der Sächsischen Schweiz von 1945 bis etwa 1953 unter besonderer Beachtung des “Touristenvereins ‘Die Naturfreunde’” - Teil 2.”

NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory 2.1 (2014): 30. The passages translated are: “Der Kampf zwischen Osten und Westen hat sich ja auch auf die amerikanischen Naturfreunde übertragen, als sich der

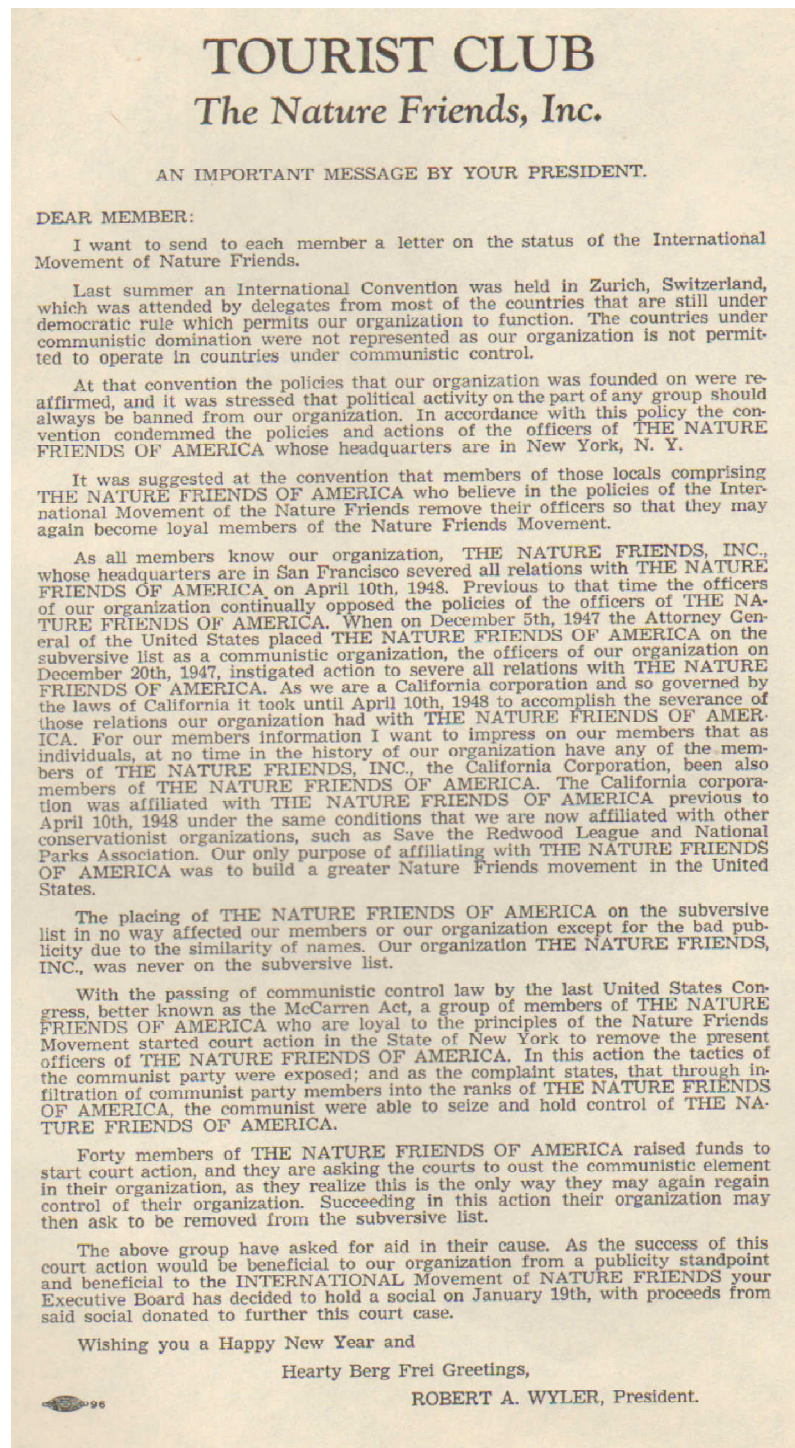


Fig. 9

Westgau von uns loslöste. [...] Wir stellen uns auf den Boden der internationalen Statuten, die auf unserer Seite stehen und klipp und klar zum Ausdruck bringen, daß wenn ein Gau oder Ortsgruppe aus der Landesorganisation austritt, auch gleichzeitig die Mitgliedschaft in allen Gliederungen des Vereins erlöscht. Wenn sie als Naturfreunde bleiben wollen, müssen sie zu uns zurückkommen und die Tür ist offen [...]. - Wir üben Druck auf Zürich aus, aber sie haben bis jetzt noch keine Entscheidung getroffen [...]. - Der Westgau aber [ist] nicht bei uns austreten um dann als selbständiger Gau Mitglied in der Internationale sein."

The role of the Nature Friends International

Already in the 1930s the Central Board of the Nature Friends International (*Zentralausschuss*, Z.A.) had been aware of the problems between the Eastern and the Western districts—and had sided with the Californians from the start. To the NFI and its Central Board the key problem at the time was that the American *Naturfreunde* were members of the *Rote Sport Internationale* (RSI; Red Sports International), which had been founded by the Communist Parties to oppose the social-democratic mainstream within the workers' sports movement. Particular criticism is shed on that membership fees to the RSI were higher than to the NFI. All Board members agreed on that mistakes had been made by the Z.A. and that the Americans should leave the RSI, but there was disagreement on whether mending the conflict is still possible.³¹

At a meeting two years later, in 1937, NFI-President Moser only reported how the international conference at Brünn/Brno (Czechoslovakia)³² had dealt with the status of the provisional New York National Executive Board (*Landesleitung*, L.L.). The NFI had asked the districts for statements on the matter; an Eastern answer was still due, although the West's statement had already been forwarded to the New York office—without a response so far. As the Z.A. and the Western district had fulfilled requirements, and the NEB in New York had not, fault lay with the New Yorkers.³³

Problems were aggravated by the fact that the *Landesleitung* had detached one of the leading officers, Comrade Geier, to work for a committee for the fight against fascism, binding both financial means and manpower. Pessimistically, the report concludes: "Now the work for the Nature Friends will suffer from this. A connection between East and West is very difficult because of the great distances. Successful work will not be possible."³⁴

³¹ Protokoll Hauptausschuss. August 31, 1935 [p. 13]. The term "amerikanische Naturfreunde" is used without distinguishing between districts; the *Gau-West* (i.e. California) is a separate entity; calling the New York National Executive Board "*provisorische Landesleitung*" (provisional national office) marks the as yet undefined status of the New York central administration.

³² The conference took place on August 7-9, 1936; the German and Austrian *Naturfreunde* had already been illegalized by their governments and were not represented; cf. Bruno Klaus Lampasiak, Leo Gruber, Manfred Pils. *Berg frei – Mensch frei – Welt frei! Eine Chronik der internationalen Naturfreunde-bewegung von den Anfängen der Arbeiterbewegung bis zum Zeitalter der Globalisierung (1895-2005)*. Wien: Naturfreunde Internationale, 2nd. ed. 2009, 49.

³³ Karl Poster adds varying attitudes on the Hitler-Stalin-Pact as a main point of divergence; cf. Karl Poster. "Die Naturfreunde-Internationale von 1934 bis zum Kongress 1950." *Zentralausschuß der Naturfreunde-Internationale (NFI) (Hrsg.). Denkschrift zum sechzigjährigen Bestehen 1895-1955*. Zürich: NFI, 1955. 38-44. 43.

³⁴ Protokoll Hauptausschuss, October 9, 1937 [7-8]: "Nun wird die Naturfreundearbeit darunter leiden. Eine Verbindung zwischen Osten und Westen ist sehr schwer, da große Distanzen bestehen. Eine erfolgreiche Arbeit wird daher nicht möglich sein."

Between 1940 and 1947, during and shortly after the war and with most European Nature Friends associations illegalized or still in disarray, NFI Central Board discussions hardly ever dealt with American matters. Trans-Atlantic communication, both by mail (letters, members' magazines) and for financial interactions (membership fees, donations), was extremely complicated and slow. With little reliable information, up to 1947 the NFI seems to have adopted a somewhat more neutral position in the conflict than before, like in these excerpts from the proceedings of the *Zentralausschuss*:³⁵

Jan 1, 1940: Comrade [“Genosse“] Schmitt [Georg Schmidt] asks why the Z.A. has not given consent to the establishment of a new national leadership; the Z.A. notes that it has.

June 17, 1940: Schmidt regrets there is little contact with the Z.A.; Z.A. sends congratulations on the successful Convention.

July 15, 1940: Heidelmann [America West] notes in a letter that due to the war membership is falling.

Jan 13, 1941: the American National Office [i.e. New York] sends a report on the Convention [in the Rockies]: It was not fully successful, as the Western District refused to discuss politics; the only motions passed concerned matters of youth and unions.³⁶

Nov 2, 1942: (sent on June 29) Schmidt reports on falling membership and internal elections [nor further information]; the new statutes have not yet been printed; the American headquarters cannot send any money, as warbonds will be bought in support of anti-Nazi efforts. - In the discussion of the report “it is remarked” that the organization constantly loses members. “This probably is a consequence of the political persuasion especially in the Eastern district. Yet a reaction to this is postponed until the end of the war.”³⁷

It is surprising to find that in January 1940 the Central Board had given consent to a national administration in the USA—no details are known, though; the Rockies convention is acknowledged, including some of its problems. In the final entry for 1942, sympathies go back to the West, although the NFI Board itself does not see options for getting involved. Then American matters vanish from the proceedings, until the end of the war in 1945:

April 4, 1945: Report on the situation in the USA: War efforts reduce club activities; warbonds bought worth \$175.000; presently 16 American locals running 16 [?] clubhouses and camps; the question of whether the new American book of statutes is valid remains open.

³⁵ My thanks to Florian Rosenberg, of the NFI central office, for providing me with copies of the proceedings. It is a pity some relevant documents were not even available to him.

³⁶ “Die Arbeit war nicht in allen Teilen fruchtbringend, weil die Vertreter von [!] Westen sich weigerten, über verschiedene Anträge zu diskutieren. Es konnte nur über Jugendfragen, über die gewerkschaftliche Organisation Beschlüsse gefasst werden.” Protokoll der 59. Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, January 13, 1941 [p. 19].

³⁷ “In der Diskussion wird bemerkt, dass der Verband an Mitgliederzahlen ständig zurückgeht. Es ist wohl eine Folge der politischen Einstellung besonders des Ostgaus. Mit einer Bemerkung deswegen soll bis nach Kriegsende zugewartet werden.” Protokoll der 69. Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, November 2, 1941 [p. 39].

Oct 15, 1945: On October 7, Schmidt writes that the national office wants to transfer money to Zurich; as a consequence of the war effort membership is falling and activities are reduced. - In a second letter, the New York office seeks the support of the Z.A. to rebuild the German *Naturfreunde*. - And in a third letter, of August 1, the Western district claims that in California only few members leave the clubs, although the war effort impedes activities among the young: "The relationship with the New York headquarters is still difficult."³⁸

Dec 23, 1946: Heidelmann [California] reports that his district wants the Z.A. to go on sending the international members' magazine and prefers the Z.A. to remain in Zurich [instead of going back to Vienna]. The [New York] office welcomes the positive reception of their delegate.³⁹

[Probably the following session:] New York informs the Z.A. that it is difficult to make proposals for revising the statutes; it promises to pay dues as soon as it can be sure the treasurer actually gets them; it refuses to agree with a programmatic statement "that the Nature Friends are independent of political parties," as Comrade Winterer [of the Austrian NF and a Social Democrat] "declares (beanspruchen) the Nature Friends in Austria a socialist [i.e. social democratic] organization."⁴⁰

March 21, 1947: Schmidt informs the Z.A. that the national office has sent money. He criticizes a claim by *Amerika-West* that it was a district of its own and "demands that an organizational union be made." The comrades in the West are invited to explain their own position on a unified American organization.⁴¹

July 15, 1947: American support action for German *Naturfreunde*; a National Convention [Grand Teton] has been held in June 1947, and a report is under way. The Z.A. decides to stop reacting to criticism of the first Convention made in the *Naturfreund* magazine.⁴²

[Probably the following session:] On October 31, New York reports that the relationship between East and West is a good one; the Convention proceedings have been published.⁴³

If this sounds relatively neutral in tone, a long letter written by the *Zentralausschuss* (in German!) to American Nature Friends members early in May 1949 is much more outspoken (Fig. 10).⁴⁴ Although a bit confusing in places, its message is clear and follows three argumentative patterns:

³⁸ "Zur L.L. [Landesleitung] in New York besteht noch immer ein schwieriges Verhältnis." Protokoll der 88. Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, October 15, 1945 [p. 78].

³⁹ This meeting probably is the First International Conference in Zurich, September 3-4, 1946.

⁴⁰ The copy I used is undated (probably early 1947); quote from p. 107: "Sie ist einverstanden, dass die Naturfreunde parteipolitisch unabhängig sein sollen. Gen. Winterer habe aber erklärt, dass die Naturfreunde in Oesterreich eine sozialistische Organisation sei. Sie nimmt gegen diese Erklärung Stellung."

⁴¹ "[Schmidt] verlangt, dass der Z.A. sich dafür einsetze, dass die organisatorische Einheit geschaffen werde. [...] Die Genossen vom Westen werden über die Vorwürfe informiert. Sie sollen sich äussern. Sie werden auch um eine Stellungnahme zur einheitlichen Landesgruppe ersucht." Protokoll der 102. Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, March 21, 1947 [p. 111].

⁴² "Der Z.A. beschließt, auf die Kritik über das Protokoll der ersten Konferenz im 'Naturfreund' nicht mehr einzugehen." Protokoll der 106. Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, July 15, 1947 [p. 11].

⁴³ The copy used is undated; quotes from pp. 126 and 128; the NFI-Vienna office does not hold a copy of this crucial document.

⁴⁴ Provided by the NFI; thanks to Florian Rosenberg.

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Zürich, anfangs Mai 1949.

An die amerikanischen Naturfreunde I

Seit längerer Zeit schon ist der Zentrallausschuss beunruhigt über die Verhältnisse in der amerikanischen Naturfreunde-Bewegung. Die letzten Ereignisse wie Anklagen gegen Sektionen und die Gefahr der Spaltung machten es für den ZA nun unumgänglich, sich eingehend mit den Verhältnissen der Naturfreunde in den USA zu befassen, und sich die nötigen Informationen zu beschaffen, die ein objektives Urteil ermöglichen: die Lage ist alarmierend!

Die Naturfreunde stehen voll auf dem Boden der Arbeiterbewegung; Tourismus und die einschlägigen Naturwissenschaften sind aber unsere speziellen Tätigkeitsgebiete. Die Politik muss den Parteien überlassen werden, wo ja jeder mitmachen kann. Unsere Bewegung muss vor ihr bewahrt werden, denn sonst erhalten wir in unseren Reihen zwecklose Diskussionen und Gruppenbildungen. Die Arbeiterschaft denkt politisch nicht nur nicht homogen, sondern diametral. Wenn dieses loyale Grundgesetz, das jedem Arbeiter eine Mitgliedschaft bei uns ermöglicht, verlassen wird, kommt es zur Zerstörung des Gemeinschaftssinnes, unseres "Naturfreundegeistes", ohne dass die machtpolitischen Verhältnisse nur im geringsten verändert würden. Was wir heute in Amerika sehen, ist nur die Tatsache dieser Zersetzung, die nur schon allzu lange dauerte. Statt dies einzusehen, harret man bewusst bei dem Fehler; es ist dies eine gefährliche Abweichung von den seit vielen Jahren erfolgreich verfolgten Grundsätzen unserer Bewegung.

Während des Krieges, um nicht schon früher zu beginnen, wurde der grosse Fehler gemacht, dass man sich 1939 fanatisch gegen jede Intervention Amerikas in diesem "kapitalistischen Krieg" wandte, um ein paar Monate später plötzlich zum ebenso begeisterten Kriegsorganisator zu werden, und dann andere als naziversteht zu beschimpfen. Auf unsere wahre Aufgabe wurde immer mehr verzichtet. Diese eindeutig politisch-opportunistische Stellungnahme als Vereinsleitung hatte das Resultat, dass nach unheilvoller Desorientierung die Reihen der Naturfreunde immer lichter wurden, statt dass sie sich, wenn auch nicht übermässig, so doch stets vergrössert hätten. Der grosse Flüchtlingsstrom aus Europa mit den vielen überzeugten Naturfreunden hinterliess zahlenmässig keine Spuren.

Eine ganze Reihe von Beispielen zeigt, dass die Leitung der amerikanischen Naturfreunde das Schwergewicht nicht auf touristische, sondern auf politische Tätigkeit legt. Eine "Kurzgeschichte der Naturfreunde Amerikas", die in Deutschland zirkuliert und von G. Schmidt verfasst ist, zeigt das klar. Wir lesen da, ohne uns auf eine politische Diskussion einlassen zu wollen: Entgegen der Anschauung unseres Naturfreunde-Zentrallausschusses glauben wir nicht, unpolitisch sein zu können ... Nur ein Krieg der Vereinten Nationen konnte Hitler und Faschismus aufhalten und die Unterstützung eines solchen Krieges fand die Zustimmung unserer Naturfreunde. Wir können sogar sagen, dass unsere Naturfreundeaufgaben an zweiter Stelle standen ... Der Skisport hat in den letzten Jahren enorm zugenommen. Aber wie gesagt, wenn wir politisch neutral wären, könnten wir leicht wachsen, aber als progressive Arbeiterorganisation sind uns Hemmschuhe angelegt ...

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Ist es nicht eine typische Abirrung, wenn man weiter schreibt: Entweder wir vergessen unsere marxistische Anschauungen und sinken zu einer bürgerlichen Organisation herab und könnten auf solcher Basis eine grössere Organisation werden, oder wir bleiben den Ideen unseres Gründers Schmidt treu und bekennen uns zur Arbeiterklasse und bleiben klein ... Schmidt hat nie verlangt, die Naturfreunde hätten Politik zu treiben und klein zubleiben. Weiter: Alle fortschrittlichen Arbeiter unterstützen die Partei, die von Henri Wallace geführt wird, trotzdem sie auch nicht am kapitalistischen System rüttelt... Noch eine Stelle sei angeführt, die Imperialismus von der Wallstreet geht auf der ganzen Front zur Generaloffensive vor, innen- und aussenpolitisch. Was Hitler mit seinem Blitzkrieg nicht geglückt war, nämlich die Weltmacht zu werden, wird jetzt von Amerika durch den Dollar versucht. Da die europäischen Arbeiter nicht Kapitalismus, sondern Sozialismus wollen, so werden eben Kapitalismus und Faschisten unterstützt, siehe Griechenland und Türkei. Auch Generalissimo Franco erhält Hilfe von Amerika. "Man schreibt Ländern vor, keine Kommunisten in ihrer Regierung zu dulden, auch wenn diese eine starke Partei sind. Man verbietet, die Ruhr zu sozialisieren und verbietet den Engländern, ihre Stahlindustrie zu nationalisieren. Der Hauptfeind ist Russland, wo die Sozialisierung durchgeführt wurde. Zu Gunsten dieser Politik wird auch Deutschland gespalten und die Nazis wieder in Funktionen gesetzt um es zum Aufmarschgebiet gegen Russland auszubauen..."

Die ganze "Kurzgeschichte", von der wir nur wenige Stellen zitieren, ist in diesem Stile gehalten. Ist es nicht wieder eine Verirrung, zu glauben, dass man solche Auslassungen nicht als kommunistisch taxiert? Wir können nicht glauben, dass man nicht wesentlich immer "Boden der Arbeiterschaft" mit "Boden der kommunistischen Partei" verwechselt. Ist man sich sodann klar, welchen Dienst man im Zeitalter der Zensur und unter den heutigen Verhältnissen der deutschen Bewegung leistet?

Immer und immer haben sich amerikanische Naturfreunde gegen den kommunistischen Kurs gewehrt; auch der Zentrallausschuss hat schon 1945 vor den Folgen gewarnt. Umsonst! Die Unduldsamkeit ging so weit, dass man die Opposition als bürgerlich anprangerte und sie nazistisch beeinflusst darstellte. In diesem Sinne hat die Ortsgruppe Los Angeles gegen San Francisco beim ZA Beschwerde geführt. Der ZA drang auf Abklärung. In einer gemeinsamen Sitzung des Westdistriktes, deren Protokoll auch von den Anklägern unterschrieben wurde, brachen die Anschuldigungen in sich zusammen, so dass San Francisco rehabilitiert ist. Wir konnten feststellen, dass die Gruppe San Francisco auf dem Boden unserer Grundsätze steht, nicht aber auf dem der kommunistischen Partei. Die "Kurzgeschichte" stellt nun völlig deplaciert fest: "Bedauerlicher Weise hat der Gau Westen die Attacke des Oberstaatsanwaltes zum Anlass genommen, sich von der Landesleitung loszulösen, mit der Beteuerung, dass sie nichts mit Politik zu tun hätten. Gerade in einer Krise, wo die Organisation Einheit zur Abwehr braucht, verlassen sie dieselbe!... Wer sich bis heute gegen den kommunistischen Kurs wehrte, ist für die Folgen nicht verantwortlich, kann also moralisch nicht inhaftet werden, diese mitzutragen. Das ist nicht Feigheit und nicht Desertion!"

Das oben angeführte Protokoll zwischen Los Angeles und San Francisco wurde am 23. Oktober 1948 unterzeichnet. Gen. Schmidt setzte aber noch am 28. März 1949 die Diffamierung in einem Brief an den Zentrallausschuss fort, in welchem er schrieb: "Wenn Ihr von Beschuldigungen unsererseits gegen den Westen spricht, so war es nicht Absicht, den Westen zu beschuldigen, sondern Tatsachen zu berichten, die aufzeigen, dass es in San Francisco an proletarischem Gefühl und Klassenbewusstsein mangelt,

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welches der Hauptanlass zur Trennung ist." Das Protokoll zeigt nun, dass es ja keine solchen Tatsachen gibt, bleibt nur die Beschuldigung!

Der Zentrallausschuss legt Wert darauf, alle Naturfreunde in den USA darauf aufmerksam zu machen, dass ein solches Treiben absolut nichts mehr mit wirklicher Naturfreundetätigkeit zu tun hat und dass er jede Verantwortung für die jetzigen und weiter möglichen Folgen ablehnen muss. Diese Folgen werden ihr selbst wohl besser kennen. Die Subversivverklärung ist erst der Anfang, wir erinnern nur an Steuerfreiheit, Lizenzen, Untersuchungen und andere Erschwerungen, die Euch für Monate ja gar Jahre von Eurer wirklichen Aufgabe abhalten werden. Dieser Appell hat vor allem den Zweck, alle amerikanischen Naturfreunde auf die unzulässige Haltung resp. Verhinderung unserer Aufgaben mit Politik aufmerksam zu machen. Die heutige Situation verlangt, dass alle die ernste Lage erkennen. Es ist notwendig, dass die Bewegung wieder auf den Boden unserer Prinzipien zurückgeführt wird durch sichtbare radikale Änderung des Kurses. Wie weit dabei ein Rücktritt und Ersatz belasteter Führer von Vorteil ist, wird sich zeigen. Das muss aber geschehen, bevor die ohnehin schwache Bewegung völlig ruiniert ist. Wir glauben, dass es so sogar auch möglich ist, die Gefahr einer Spaltung zu umgehen. Wir erachten diesen Wechsel für die Bewegung als unerlässlich schon von uns aus. Zugleich wird aber auch der Regierung der Grund für ihr Vorgehen entzogen. Das ist keine Kapitulation, da ja die ganze internationale Naturfreunde-Bewegung nicht auf kommunistischem Boden steht und auch in den USA nicht kommunistisch sein darf. Hat unsere Empfehlung positiven Erfolg, so wird es überflüssig sein, dass eine der nächsten internationalen Konferenzen sich mit den amerikanischen Naturfreunden wird befassen müssen.

Mit herzlichem Berg frei

Touristenverein
DIE NATURFREUNDE
Der Zentrallausschuss

Fig. 10

1. *The American Nature Friends misinterpret the club's original tasks.* Instead of promoting touristic activities and scientific education they have turned it into a political institution ("political" meaning "communist," as opposed to the "non-political," social-democratic stand of the Z.A.). As workers are not ideologically homogeneous, any attempt at emphasizing one ideology over others creates factions and disunity and weakens the movement. Over the years, the NEB has thus all but destroyed the organization in the USA.

2. *The political concepts of the Landesleitung are inconsistent.* The letter quotes from a version of Georg Schmidt's "Short History of the American Nature Friends" circulating among German *Naturfreunde*.⁴⁵ The "History" is accused of explicitly demanding that even at the cost of losing members promoting progressive causes is more important than recreational and sports activities; of setting Marxist and bourgeois values against each other undialectically and ahistorically; of lacking logic in its U-turn from an exceptionalist "keep out of the war"-position towards an outspoken support for military action against fascism [a shift reflecting a turn within the communist world movement]; and misunderstanding the complexity of World War II as merely an "imperialist" or "capitalist war."

3. *Georg Schmidt himself is a major part of the problem.* His tactics are based on insinuation rather than facts, as exemplified in the case of a conflict between (left-wing) Los Angeles and (conservative) San Francisco already solved on October 23, 1948, but then arbitrarily brought up by him as late as March 28, 1949. Schmidt should be replaced: "It is necessary that the movement is returned to our basic principles through a visible radical change of course. In how far a demission and replacement of a heavily burdened leadership is of advantage will show. But that must happen before the already weak movement is ruined completely. We believe that it is still possible to avoid the danger of a split. From our own perspective, we consider this change to be inevitable for the movement. Thus the government would find the reason for its action [against the NF] unsubstantiated. This is not an act of capitulation, as the international Nature Friends movement as a whole is not grounded on communist principles and also in the USA must not be communist. If our recommendation is successful, it will be unnecessary for the coming international conferences to deal with the American Nature Friends."

In the near future, the NFI would stick to such an argumentative line. NFI functionary Karl Polster, in a 1952 report to the *Hauptausschuss* (its International Board), stated that in October 1951 a letter from the USA again mentioned that both the administrative status of the New York NEB and the situation as a whole were unresolved: "There is a provisional *Landesleitung*. The American Nature Friends strive to get off the subversive list. The Eastern district has only eight locals with 767 members. The statutes of the national organization have not yet been conformed by the [Zurich] Board. [...] We propose the Board should wait for the results of the American endeavors."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The "Kurze Geschichte der Naturfreunde Amerikas" has not been available to me yet would deserve special analysis.

⁴⁶ "Protokoll Hauptausschuss." January 5, 1952: "Der ZA war lange ohne Nachricht aus Amerika. Erst im Oktober 1951 erhielten wir nähere Informationen. In den USA besteht eine provisorische Landesleitung. Es ist das Bestreben der amerikanischen Naturfreunde, von der Subversivliste wegzukommen. Amerika-Ost hat nur mehr 8 OG mit 767 Mitgliedern. Die Statuten des Landesverbandes Amerika müssen seinerzeit vom

Later that year, Hans Welti describes the turmoil from a bottom-up perspective:

It seems that at present even the Eastern District is about to leave the *Landesleitung* in New York; while one local is dissolving, others try to find accommodation in the Western District (San Francisco). Even individual members who left the Eastern District want to join the Western District. People see the NEB in New York as a burden for the organization. [...] We as the *Hauptausschuss* are of the opinion the American *Naturfreunde* should solve this matter by themselves.⁴⁷

In the same document NFI President Moser asks to support those who want to change the confusing circumstances “in our sense.”

The ultimate appearance of the New York Central Executive Board in an international context seems to have been the “First Congress of the NFI“ in Celerina (Switzerland), from June 3 to 5, 1950, where the NFI was reorganized as a federal institution of rather independent national clubs. Not any more physically present, in a written statement the Eastern district rejected a "Declaration on Democracy and Socialism" (“Erklärung zu Demokratie und Sozialismus“)⁴⁸ which basically reconfirmed a social-democratic interpretation of the Nature Friends’ set of values. From 1953 onwards the NFI stopped publishing data on membership in the Eastern district.

By the mid-1950s, NFI commentators unanimously began to use the past tense when dealing with the American Nature Friends in the East and Midwest, such as in this 1954 report: “The destruction of the locals in America-East now is a fact. It is in no way surprising; the subversive activities of the left-wing extremist elements have achieved their aim.”⁴⁹ And for 1955, Albert Georgi-Valtin sums up how the problem had been there from the start: Within the working-class movement, the task of the Nature Friends was to concentrate on culture, sports, and education (“kulturelle, sportliche und erzieherische Aufgaben“). So when the East moved into the sphere of politics, it left the common ground of Nature Friends both in the USA and world-wide. Consequently, not only the Western district, but also some locals in the East separated from the *Landesleitung* and developed into different

Hauptausschuss noch genehmigt werden. [...] Wir empfehlen dem HA abzuwarten und das Ergebnis der Bemühungen in Amerika selbst abzuwarten."

⁴⁷ Protokoll Hauptausschuss. December 6, 1952: "Es hat den Anschein, also ob sich heute selbst der Gau Ost von der Landesleitung in New York lossagt; während sich eine OG auflöst, versuchen andere, beim Gau West (San Francisco) unterzukommen. Selbst Einzelmitglieder, die aus OG des Gau Ost ausgetreten sind, wollen sich dem Gau West anschliessen. Man betrachtet die Landesleitung in New York als eine Belastung für die Organisation. [...] Wir im ZA sind der Meinung, dass die amerikanischen Naturfreunde diese Angelegenheit allein erledigen sollen."

⁴⁸ Jochen Zimmer. *Kleine internationale Chronik der Naturfreundejugend seit 1943*. Oer-Erkenschwick: Archiv der Arbeiterjugendbewegung, 2nd. ed. 1997. 28.

⁴⁹ Gerald Schügerl. *80 Jahre Naturfreunde Österreich*. Wien: Naturfreunde Österreich [1975]. 164. ("Der endgültige Zerfall der Ortsgruppen Amerika-Ost ist nun Tatsache. Er überrascht keineswegs; die politische Wühlarbeit der linksextremistischen Elemente hat ihr Ziel erreicht [...]").

directions. Even though the 1940s meeting in the Rockies had tried to lay a foundation stone for future cooperation, the split could not be mended, not even by the NFI.⁵⁰

All of these statements were written by people who watched American developments from a distance and often felt helpless as to what to do. All things considered, the Nature Friends International in itself was not a determining force in the processes driving the American districts and locals apart. What it did, though, was to exacerbate the situation by weakening the status of the “provisional *Landesleitung*” and its president Georg Schmidt. Thus as a moderating force it failed. All things considered, it was a complex set of inner-American reasons which led to the demise of the Nature Friends in the East. Causes ranged from large-scale political and geographical factors (such as vast distances; aggressive anti-communism; the subversive list; governmental oppression; etc.) to small-scale, occasionally local developments (including disagreement on the core values of the clubs; differences on the role of traditions and the German-Austrian background; conflicts within and about the camps; etc.).

Most of these causes would not any more hold today, but a future reemergence of the Nature Friends beyond California is hardly more than a vague vision. This is why members and activists, wherever they are, welcome the fledgling reappearance of the Nature Friends idea at former Camp Midvale as at least a reminder of the former Eastern branch of the American Nature Friends.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Albert Georgi-Valtin. “Die Naturfreundebewegung in Amerika: Naturfreunde im Osten Amerikas.” Zentralausschuß der Naturfreunde-Internationale. *Denkschrift*. 86-87.

⁵¹ See <http://www.highlandsnaturefriends.org> (April 30, 2015).