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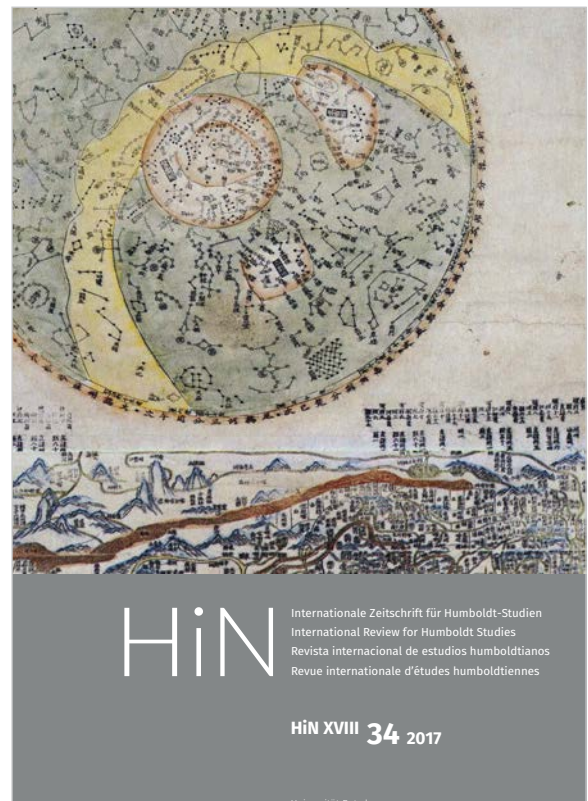
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Ingo Schwarz

**„Any American will always be welcome
to the study of Alexander von Humboldt“.**

**Ein Besucher aus den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika
bei Alexander von Humboldt 1836**

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Jahr 1836 traf der US-amerikanische Geistliche und Sammler historischer Dokumente William B. Sprague (1795–1876) während seines zweiten Europabesuches auch mit Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin zusammen. Im Verlaufe des Gespräches zeigte sich Humboldt mit den politischen Entwicklungen in den Vereinigten Staaten bestens vertraut. Er kritisierte das Sklavensystem, räumte aber auch ein, dass er viele Aspekte der amerikanischen Demokratie bewunderte.

ABSTRACT

During his second visit to Europe in 1836, the American clergyman and collector of historical documents William B. Sprague (1795–1876) met with Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin. In their

conversation Humboldt showed himself to be very familiar with American political developments. He criticized slavery in the United States but also conceded that he admired many aspects of American democracy.

RESUMEN

El erudito estadounidense y coleccionista de documentos históricos William B. Sprague (1795–1876) se reunió con Alexander von Humboldt en Berlín durante su segunda visita a Europa en el año 1836. Durante su conversación, Humboldt se mostró muy bien informado de las corrientes políticas actuales de los EEUU. Criticó al sistema esclavista, pero también mostró admiración para muchos aspectos de la democracia norteamericana.



Alexander von Humboldt nannte sich gelegentlich „half an American“ und spielte damit auf sein verzweigtes Beziehungsnetz in die Vereinigten Staaten an. Die Begegnungen mit Präsident Thomas Jefferson, Finanzminister Albert Gallatin und Außenminister James Madison 1804 markieren den Beginn vieler persönlicher Bekanntschaften mit US-Amerikanern, darunter nicht wenigen zumindest in ihrer Zeit Prominenten. Wir erinnern hier nur an den Reisenden, Diplomaten und Schriftsteller Bayard Taylor, den Chemiker Benjamin Silliman, den 13. Präsidenten der USA Millard Fillmore, den Bankier und Kunstmäzen William Wilson Corcoran, den Linguisten George Ticknor, den Staatsmann Edward Everett, mit denen Humboldt in Berlin oder Potsdam zusammentraf.

Der Diplomat und Humboldt-Kenner Peter Schoenwaldt hat bereits in dem von dem sehr verdienstvollen langjährigen Generalsekretär der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung Heinrich Pfeiffer¹ publizierten Band *Alexander von Humboldt. Werk und Weltgeltung* viele der Humboldt'schen US-Kontakte dokumentiert und beschrieben. Schoenwaldt schrieb (Schoenwaldt 1969, S. 431):

Die beste Quelle für die Darstellung der Beziehungen Alexander von Humboldts zu den Vereinigten Staaten und der Wertschätzung, die man Humboldt in den USA entgegenbrachte, sind die zahlreichen zeitgenössischen Schilderungen der amerikanischen Besucher, die Humboldt im Laufe seines langen Lebens in Europa begegnet sind.

Einer dieser Gäste war der Geistliche und Sammler historischer Dokumente William Buell Sprague (16.10.1795 bis 7.5.1876), der Humboldt 1836 in Berlin aufsuchte. Sprague, dessen Bericht von der neueren Humboldt-Forschung bislang übersehen wurde, bereiste Europa, um Berühmtheiten zu treffen. Im Jahr 1855 publizierte er einen Bericht über diese Begegnungen in dem Buch *Visits to European Celebrities* (Sprague 1855). Ein Abschnitt über Alexander von Humboldt findet sich hier auf den Seiten 138 bis 141. Humboldt wohnte 1836 „Hinter dem Neuen Packhofe Nr. 4“. Das Haus befand sich auf der heutigen Museumsinsel, etwa dort, wo das Reiterstandbild Friedrich Wilhelms IV. vor der Alten Nationalgalerie steht.

Sprague erwähnt in seinem Bericht Henry Wheaton. Dieser bedeutende amerikanische Jurist und Diplomat diente seinem Land von 1835 bis 1846 als Gesandter am preußischen Hof und pflegte mit Humboldt persönliche Kontakte. Um wen es sich bei „General Jackson“ handelt, konnte nicht zweifelsfrei ermittelt werden; der 7. Präsident der USA Andrew Jackson (Präsident von 1829 bis 1837) wird wahrscheinlich nicht gemeint sein. Hier nun der ungekürzte Bericht Spragues:

From the time that I determined to visit Berlin, it was one important object with me to see ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT; and as I knew that he passed a good deal of his time abroad – at Paris and elsewhere, I was glad to find, on my arrival at | 139 | Berlin, that he was at home, and in his usual health. Several of his personal friends were ready to give me an introduction to him, but my experience had already taught me that General Jackson's letter was not only worth more than any French or German letters I could obtain, however good, but that it actually superseded the necessity of any others; and I preferred to use it as an introduction to Humboldt, rather even than to take a note from our own accomplished and respectable ambassador, Mr. Wheaton. I accordingly enclosed to the Baron my card and the General's letter, signifying, at the same time, by a note, that I should feel

1 Heinrich Pfeiffer verstarb am 22.12.2016 kurz vor Vollendung seines 90. Lebensjahrs.

honoured by the opportunity of paying my respects to him; and begging that, in case he should consent to my proposal, he would let me know at what time it would be convenient for him to receive me. He immediately called at my hotel, and as I was out, he left his card. I then returned his call, but, unfortunately, he was not at home. On his return, he addressed a note to me, requesting that I would call without delay and see him; and he added – ‘Any American, especially any one belonging to the State of New York, *which has abolished slavery*, will always be welcome to the study of Alexander Von Humboldt.’

I called at his lodgings some time in the forenoon, and found him at home, disengaged, and ready to receive me. He approached me with great simplicity and apparent cordiality, and had nothing | 140 | of the air even of a stranger. He had the appearance of a man of sixty-five; and if I mistake not, this was actually about his age; but he was rapid in his movements, and seemed scarcely to have lost the vigour and elasticity of youth. He had a benignant, genial sort of look, and a winning and courteous manner, which would have made you wish to know more of him, if you had met him as a stranger in a stage-coach. He was one of the most rapid and earnest talkers I ever heard. It was wonderful the rapidity with which he passed from one subject to another. There were various matters concerning which he wished to inquire; but he manifested a degree of familiarity with everything American, that would have led me to suppose that he had spent no small part of his life in this country. He talked about slavery, in common with everybody else whom I saw, but he seemed to take a calm and reasonable view of the subject; and, contrary to my expectations, after the hint contained in his note to me, reprobated the violent denunciations in which many were prone to indulge. He seemed to be aware of our national infirmities, while yet he was not at all disposed to magnify them; and he did not hesitate to say that there was very much in our form of government that he admired, and that he could not doubt that Providence had designed that we should work out for ourselves a glorious destiny. He remarked that he had had a pleasant acquaintance with several of | 141 | my distinguished countrymen, and especially with Mr. Everett, of whose talents and attainments he spoke in no measured terms of praise. The time that I was with him passed so pleasantly that I made a longer call than I was aware of; and the servant at length came and notified him that the hour had arrived when he had another engagement. He told me that he was engaged to dine that day with the King, and, as the King’s dinner-hour was early, he was under the necessity of excusing himself. He took leave of me with many expressions of good will, and assured me that he should be glad to do anything in his power, during my stay in Berlin, that would contribute to my gratification.

I learned, from the best authority, that Humboldt was on the most intimate terms with the King; that he was accustomed to dine with him as often as once or twice a week; and that he was, probably more than any other person, his counsellor and confidant. I was assured, moreover, that his habits were at once most studious and most active; and that most of his time was spent in his study, and very few hours out of the twenty-four were spent in sleep. His brother William, who had died a short time before, was commonly regarded, at Berlin, as the greater man of the two. I heard it said that the King placed such unlimited confidence in his judgment, that he scarcely ever thought of appealing from it.

Während seines Berlinaufenthalts traf William B. Sprague nicht nur Alexander von Humboldt. Henry Wheaton und andere Bekannte vermittelten auch Begegnungen mit dem Geographen Carl Ritter, den beiden Rechtsgelehrten Friedrich Carl von Savigny und Eduard Gans, dem Historiker Friedrich von Raumer sowie dem Sternwarten-Direktor Johann Franz Encke. Letzteren Kontakt hat möglicherweise Humboldt selbst vermittelt. Der amerikanische Reisende wurde in

Berlin freundlich aufgenommen. Dabei scheint das Gespräch mit Humboldt, der seiner Kritik an der Sklaverei Ausdruck verlieh, dabei aber positive Entwicklungen in den Vereinigten Staaten ausdrücklich begrüßte, das für den Gast ergiebigste gewesen zu sein.

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