

THE DARK SIDE OF IMMIGRATION: POVERTY AND POVERTY RELIEF AMONG GERMAN IMMIGRANTS

Despite numerous hardships and occasional disasters, the story of German immigration to the United States is generally an optimistic one. Finally, the great majority of German immigrants benefited from the move. Indeed, most Americans living today would not be here if their ancestors had not immigrated successfully and flourished at least modestly since. That large numbers of immigrants from German-speaking countries did settle in the United States and ultimately make significant contributions to American life is, of course, an indisputable fact as well, one confirmed by many a scholarly and popular article or book. But there is another side to immigration which receives comparatively little attention. Published accounts tend to chronicle the lives of successful people: those who left their mark, became famous, or were at least pillars of the community. The discussion which follows here, however, will examine another side of immigration—desperate poverty. It focuses on those people who left only a barely perceptible mark and who might have left no trace at all had it not been for the accurate bookkeeping of one charitable organization.

Since the mid-eighteenth century the need to assist inexperienced newcomers in the task of settling in after immigration had become obvious. In fact, the "Mayflower" expedition itself, which for many is the key event associated with the beginning of organized European immigration, was only possible because of an act of charity. Not a single one of the Pilgrim Fathers, who, it must be said, had planned their adventure with singular ineptitude, would have survived the first winter if the local Indians had

not taken pity on them and provided them with food. Because of the generosity of the indigenous people the "Mayflower" set sail for home in April 1621 with fifty-four individuals. Remarkably, about half the original number was still alive.¹ In later centuries charitable assistance to immigrants was usually done on an ethnic basis. Older Italian immigrants helped more recent ones, the Irish-Americans helped their compatriots from the old country, the Portuguese helped the Portuguese, and so on. Of course, the Germans had their immigrant-aid societies as well. The oldest organization which had as its objective the support of immigrants from German-speaking countries is the German Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, which traces its history back to 1764. Philadelphia at that time was the largest city in the country and its political center.

In what might be considered confirmation of the stereotypical German love of order and official documentation, the records of the German Society of Pennsylvania are remarkably complete. The Society has virtually complete documentation of its charitable activities on behalf of German immigrants from 1869 to 1914, including ledgers which document daily contacts with the poor and indigent. Prior to the First World War the files were complete back to 1800 and even earlier. The older records were apparently lost or misplaced in storage at some point during the period of intense anti-German sentiment which marked America's entrance into World War I and extended into the years between the two world wars.² The present discussion will focus on the time from 1869 to 1875. The

amount of extant material is sizeable. The surviving records begin on 28 September 1869. Between that time and 31 December 1875, close to 12,000 cases are documented, 11,955 to be exact. Some of the cases refer to "repeat customers," which would lower the number of individual cases to about 8,000. On the other hand many of them involve families, frequently large families. In all, the files detail the fate of more than 20,000 persons of German extraction who were in need of support during the six years and three months under scrutiny.

The entries in the ledgers typically provide the name, age, and occupation of the client, the time the person has spent in the country (sometimes with exact date of arrival and the name of the ship), his or her home in Germany (town, state, province), and "action taken," the result. They provide a rich, almost inexhaustible source for general history, social history, immigration history, etc. and constitute a mine for genealogists. For now, however, the focus will be on the individual human stories which emerge from the other rather laconic ledger-entries.

The stories themselves need to be understood against the background of urban society in the second half of the nineteenth century. The urban landscape provided many opportunities indeed for charitable activities. Most major cities underwent population explosions with all the concomitant problems. A large percentage of immigrants, mostly people from a rural background, ended in one of the large cities on the Eastern seaboard, where they formed an urban underclass. In the 1860s in New York, where the situation has been researched best, a full three-quarters of the population, 1.2 million human beings, were living in just 37,000 tenements.³ At the end of the

century, the population density of the Lower East Side was higher than in the slums of Bombay. The results were not surprising. One example among many is the fact that one-third of all newborn babies in the Italian quarter died within the first year.⁴

Given the sad lot of the urban immigrant in general, it is not surprising to find that the Philadelphia records deal only with the problem cases, the less attractive side of society. The very existence of these records, on the other hand, is evidence of prosperity, for it was well-to-do ethnic Germans who organized to help their fellow countrymen, often helping them to help themselves. Nonetheless, the records make for pretty depressing reading. They give witness to human lives subjected to various kinds of misery—some of their own making, some through no fault of their own. There are incredible stories, mostly sad and poignant, but occasionally hilarious, although the hilarity is usually unintentional.

Some people needed assistance on a very basic level. There's the woman from Bavaria, twenty-five years old and in the country for six months, who had boarded a train in Pittsburgh for New York and got off in Philadelphia, believing she had already reached her destination. The German Society did get her to New York without further incident. Or the farmhand from Württemberg, twenty-four years old and just arrived from Germany, who reported on April 6, 1870, that he was unable to find the house where he had left his belongings. The agent of the Society assigned to the case subsequently noted in the file: "We couldn't find him."⁵ Not only had the young man lost his no doubt meager possessions, it seems he had also managed to get himself lost as well, which makes one wonder what happened to him and how he fared later. Yet in

a way, the young immigrant faced a situation which confronted many immigrants. He had probably never left his small village in Swabia before, and a large urban center must have been thoroughly confusing and disorienting to him.

Most cases were far more serious. The Society had to deal with basically two groups. The first group consisted of the transients, many of whom arrived from New York, where they had just landed. While the majority of immigrants seem to have planned their adventure reasonably well, others trusted to luck, only to encounter very bad luck. They needed support to speed them on their way, usually in a generally westward direction. Other transients constituted something akin to a seminomadic tribe. They moved around, from New York to Baltimore, from Baltimore back to New York, then on maybe to Cincinnati, Chicago or St. Louis, in search of work, often based on the vaguest of rumors about possibilities there. The grass was always greener somewhere else. The New York Philadelphia Baltimore route seems to have been a veritable interstate of misery along which moved a continuous stream of displaced humans. Some were cripples who moved around because they had no better prospects, relying on the handouts of various charities.

As a group the transients were comparatively easy to deal with. Fifty cents or a dollar would support one of them for the moment. Since many of them had covered the distance from, for example, New York City or Buffalo on foot, a new pair of boots, that is, a new pair of used boots, would constitute a significant improvement in their situation. Some approached the Society for small things to improve their chances on the job market. One entry reads simply: "Asks

for a little support to buy a comb and soap." Others could be sent to the so-called House of Industry, where they were given a bed and a meal in exchange for chopping firewood. If they were acutely ill, they could be sent to the Poor Hospital. Or, of course, they could be denied support if they were considered undeserving. The officials of the German Society had strong views and took a dim view of lying, for instance. If an individual smelled of alcohol while pleading his or her case, there was little likelihood of support.

The second large group of immigrants who sought the aid of the German Society consisted of residents of the Philadelphia area. For a variety of reasons most were long-term welfare cases. Many of their stories read as if they could be extended into novels or, indeed, as if they were five-line abstracts of a novel: "6 children, 18, 16, 15, 13, 11, 9 years old, no parents. Their father died 4 years ago, their mother 2 years ago. The three oldest earn \$9.50 per week. The only girl, 15 years old, does the housework" (7 April 1870). The tragedy of six children and teenagers staying together while struggling to maintain a semblance of family-life beggars the imagination. The three oldest boys were 16, 14, and 11 years old when the second parent died and they were left to provide the only financial support, the sole female in the group taking over the role of the housewife. No support is mentioned in the ledger, and the case does not show up later. Yet theirs was clearly a deserving case. One can only surmise that assistance was eventually rendered outside the normal channels. Their situation may also serve as an example of the resilience frequently exhibited by common people in the face of great adversity.

The individuals requiring support came from all levels of society, albeit in different proportions. From the upper strata and the intellectual walks of life there are students, teachers, lawyers, physicians, architects, former military officers, and even former priests. Some doubtlessly had dark spots in their past, others may have been motivated by a desire for adventure. In immigration they faced downward mobility. Not infrequently one encounters entries like "formerly teacher, now laborer." Some examples of downward mobility are particularly striking: On 3 December 1869, an eighty-four-year-old man who had injured himself in a fall petitioned the Society for help. He claimed to be a former president of the German Society. Historical sources confirm the truth of his claim. He had indeed been president just one generation earlier, but from the entry in the ledger it is obvious that the agent had no clue about who he was. It was good for him that one of the directors of the Society had preserved some institutional memory and initiated more discreet support. The 'better classes,' however, made up only a minority. In the middle, socially as well as numerically, ranked the tradespeople, butchers, blacksmiths, brewers, carpenters, etc. who had left the overflowing pool of the unemployed in Germany and did not find themselves better off in America. The majority of the poor was made up of members of the underclass and of lower-class occupations like basketmakers, daylaborers, farmhands, and weavers from Saxony and Silesia.

Although the parallel might seem a bit far-fetched to some, it is instructive here to recall a piece of modern literature to illustrate the situation many poverty-stricken immigrants faced. Those familiar with Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*⁶ may rec-

ognize in the detail of that autobiographic novel the same phenomena as reflected in the laconic ledger entries preserved at the German Society of Pennsylvania. The ethnic background is, of course, different, namely Irish. The time and place are different as well. The social and economic backdrop is depression-era New York City and the economically depressed Ireland of the 1930s and 40s rather than Philadelphia and the German states in the latter third of the nineteenth century. But the human face of suffering among immigrants is very much the same. As in the novel, the records of the Society tell a tale of grinding poverty: unsanitary, unhealthy, and disastrous living conditions, and poverty-induced infant and child mortality. As with their Irish counterparts later, the German immigrants who had not yet made it in the new environment, indeed those who might never make it, faced poverty-induced illnesses, alcoholism, and an uneasy relationship between welfare recipients and welfare providers who let their clients know who was calling the shots, while at least some of the latter desperately tried to maintain their dignity.

Severe illnesses were frequent. The atrocious, crowded living conditions were a fertile breeding ground for every kind of germ. Particularly in an age unaware of antibiotics disease found many victims. Tuberculosis was widespread, as were non-specific but debilitating health problems: fever (in most cases probably malaria) and rheumatism. The German Society had a roster of physicians who provided *pro bono* health care for the poor and a list of pharmacists who helped out with medicine at cost, but they could only do so much. And matters were often exacerbated by epidemics. The winter of 1869/1870 saw an outbreak of scarlet fever. Entries from that

period tell a horrifying story: "Both parents sick and within 10 days 6 children died." A woman reports: "Husband sick. Has 3 children, 1 died. Asks for a contribution to the funeral cost." Another entry reads: "6 children, of which 2 will be buried this morning. 2 other children still sick." Then, after only a brief respite, in the fall of 1871 one year later, a smallpox epidemic broke out, lasting until the spring and ravaging many families. One entry of many reads: "Sugar factory worker, from Westphalia, 56 years old, 12 years in the country, 5 children, wife died of smallpox, he himself ill."

Many of those who applied to the German Society for aid were older people, some of whom had moved to the United States surprisingly late in life, especially considering the life expectancy in those days. Some came in their sixties, and prospects for them looked very dim. Many supplicants were widows, widows with children, and widowers with children trying to keep the family together. If they were healthy, women relied on traditional methods to make a living. "Supports herself and her children by washing" is a frequent entry. Illness, of course, made a woman in particular a welfare case at a moment's notice. Single men with disabilities, "cripples" no euphemisms in those days tried to eke out a living as peddlers, selling pencils or matches on the street. The Society would buy matches wholesale and provide them with a modest stock.

Alcoholism, the traditional bane of the working class, was also present. Two examples may suffice: "The husband is a drunkard and does not provide for his family;" "X is recommended as an acceptable person, but occasionally he drinks too much." But men had no monopoly here. There was a woman who could "not be recommended

[because s]he sold her husband's clothes in order to buy liquor." Alcohol was also responsible for downward social mobility. A certain individual asked for assistance claiming that he used to be the editor of a German newspaper in Erie, Pennsylvania. The record of his case notes that he "drinks heavily and is in very bad shape." A check of the gentleman's name in Arndt/Olson's authoritative bibliography of German newspapers in America,⁷ confirms that an individual by that name had indeed been the editor of a newspaper in Erie. If the assessment of the Society's case worker is accurate, then the former newspaper man had very much come down in the world.

At times the agent handling a case would make rather cryptic entries. On the surface, for instance, an entry like "from Baltimore, has been oyster catching," or simply "worked in oystercatching" does not seem to indicate any grounds for seeking aid from the German Society. One has the feeling that there must be more to the story. Then come slightly more expansive entries: "Back from oystercatching, lost 3 fingers on his right hand to the cold" or "Back from oystercatching, suffers from severe frostbite." Another former oystercatcher reports that he did not understand what he was supposed to do and was consequently severely beaten by fellow oystermen. The context for the events which the case worker likely knew but omitted in the official files is that oystercatching in the Chesapeake Bay was a notoriously vicious business. It was quite common that oyster boat captains refused to pay their seasonal workers or put them simply ashore on some remote beach in the middle of the night. Naturally Germans were not the only victims of this exploitation; inexperienced immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds were innocent victims of the

caprice of oyster boat captains and the brutality of their crews. The German immigrants can, however, lay claim to one small victory against the unfair practices of the oyster dredging industry in the late nineteenth century. While many responsible and forward-looking people saw that something had to be done, it was a German-American who spearheaded the efforts which were ultimately undertaken. Louis (Ludwig) Henninghausen, who was born in Fulda, served as an officer in the 46th New York Regiment, a German regiment, during the American Civil War. He later became a lawyer and was for many years president of the German Society of Maryland. He made it his mission in life to improve the lot of the oystermen and succeeded to a large extent. The oyster-catching interests, of course, adamantly opposed government oversight of the industry. They held that any impediment to free enterprise was un-American and brought forward arguments which sound curiously familiar: Limiting the freedom of the oyster industry to cheat their workers out of their wages would make oysters too expensive and thus uncompetitive; it would reduce consumer choice; and the American public would finally be unable to afford oysters.

There were, of course, those who didn't belong to any of the groups mentioned thus far, among them some who might be called "deportees." The deportees were social misfits, effectively cast out by their home communities. A large number of this kind of immigrant came from Switzerland, where the welfare system was villagebased and those who did not fit in were easily identified and ostracized. One agent makes the following statement about a twenty-two-year-old man from Switzerland: "Mad! Was sent to America by his village!" What did

the Philadelphia folks do? "Sent to New York!" In this case the circumstances are stated expressly, and it is clear that the man's home village had indeed insisted that he emigrate. In other instances the specifics are less obvious, but there were groups of immigrants from Switzerland and other German-speaking territories as well whose town or village had forceably uprooted them in this age-old way of ridding taxpayers of troublemakers and other burdens on the public treasury. In fact, such tactics probably lie at the base of the emigration of many deafmutes and others with birth defects. There were, of course, laws against bringing individuals into the country who were from the start likely to become welfare cases, but there has always been a gap between the laws and the enforcement of the laws.

As if abject poverty were not enough of a burden to bear, many of those already living in circumstances dire enough that they had sought aid from the German Society of Pennsylvania also had to deal with other catastrophes. On Christmas morning 1870, a large fire in one of the poorest areas destroyed a whole block and sent many German families to the German Society for succor. The reverberations of catastrophes elsewhere also made themselves felt in Philadelphia. In the aftermath of the big Chicago fire of October 1871, refugees came east. They had lost everything. Or had they? Major catastrophes and calamities attract their own kind of vultures and, while most were probably genuine, some of the stories of alleged victims of the Chicago fire read as if they had been made up to cash in on a wellknown and widely publicized event.

Which brings one to the question of welfare cheats. The German Society tried its best to weed them out, but its members were

philosophical about the matter. In its printed annual reports the Society notes that invariably some undeserving applicants would slip through. They were very concerned, however, about those who were legitimately in need of help but too proud to ask for aid or reluctant to ask because they did not want anybody to know about their situation. In this respect the weeding-out efforts, the checks of the German Society to eliminate the less desirable elements seem to have been counterproductive on occasion. There are many cases where the agent noted that a given address was false. While many fictitious addresses quite obviously were part of an individual's attempt to defraud, many other cases seem genuine enough. One is drawn to the conclusion that the applicants in question lied about where they lived once they realized that the agent would check with neighbors etc., thus revealing the extent of their neediness and the secret which they so wanted to conceal. A few even straightforwardly refused to provide an address.

A large portion of the Society's charitable efforts was directed towards invalids. A broken leg or arm, badly healed under the treatment available then, might cripple a person for life. That individual would then be unable to work or properly provide for his family. The concept of occupational safety and health was largely absent. The number of workrelated accidents as reflected in the records is truly horrifying, and a number are particularly gruesome. On 17 April 1873, for instance, Louise Braun, only seven months in the country and probably still quite young, had to face the consequences of a terrible accident. Louise was the "widow of Wilhelm Braun since 1 April, on which day the latter [the language used in the original has a distinctly bureaucratic

character] worked in the sugar factory Front & Bainbridge Street and fell into a vat with hot molasses and died immediately. Has a girl of 4 weeks." Two days later, Louise Braun "goes into service." The Society had found her a position as a domestic servant, a job which was always in demand. The record goes on to say that the "child will be taken care of," likely in an orphanage. Yet the child was only four weeks old at the time; the mother had become a widow when the infant was just one week old. Under the circumstances, Louise Braun could, in fact, count herself lucky because the Society had provided her with a job within a few days of the catastrophe. In industrial accidents there was little if any compensation. As a rule, the company could put the blame a coworker. The pertinent legal doctrine at the time was "presumption of agreement." It was assumed that anyone accepting a job automatically agreed to any dangerous and hazardous working conditions. That most felt compelled to take the job regardless of the dangers in order to feed the family did not enter into the equation.

Among the most dangerous jobs of all were those with the railroad. Stories abound of workers losing arms and legs. If a worker actually lost his life, the railway company typically tried to renege on what little compensation it was obligated to pay. In such cases, the German Society provided German-speaking lawyers. One realizes rather quickly that the railway companies, at least in the United States, laid out the network of tracks literally in the pools of blood left behind by the cheap, largely immigrant labor force. It is sobering to think that the same railway barons who reaped the profits of railway construction used their wealth to fund museums, libraries, colleges, and universities,⁸ while those who did the actual

work and lost life, limb, or eyesight in the process have as their epitaph a three-line entry in a ledger of a private poverty-relief agency.

When a new century dawned in 1900, the stream of immigrants had fallen off considerably. German immigration had peaked in the 1880s, and the economy was generally in good shape. In contrast to the thousands of applicants per year it saw twenty years earlier, in 1900 the German Society only had to deal with 815 cases, an indication that conditions had improved. There are fewer horror stories than in the past. Most cases are relatively unremarkable support cases: widows getting a supply of coal for the winter, a family asking for a used stove, a woman receiving \$1.43 for children's shoes. The technological progress since the 1870s is obvious as well. Now there are bicycle mechanics and electricians rather than unskilled laborers. The situation seems to have "normalized" in the sense that administration and bureaucracy play a greater role. There is extensive communication and correspondence with government agencies in Germany about property and inheritance matters. Inevitably, of course, there are still a number of oddball cases. On 21 February 1900, attention is drawn to a woman who had been supported repeatedly: This woman is, despite the fact that her hus-

band currently resides in the Eastern Penitentiary, pregnant. On 7 June her husband writes a letter to the German Society asking how this could have happened. Later that year an anonymous letter demands support for a poor family in Germantown, but "[t]he investigation revealed that this is an Irish family of drunkards."

As a whole the Philadelphia records illuminate the historic reality of immigrant life in the United States from an angle only rarely seen. In providing a detailed view of the nineteenth-century reality without idealization and mythologization, they provide insights into the circumstances of a segment of the German immigrant population which is frequently forgotten. The tale which unfolds is often astonishing. The traditional image of the huddled, downtrodden masses coming from Europe destined to make their fortune in God's own country is so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness that embracing an historic reality which includes failure, poverty, and suffering is difficult. But the complete spectrum of the emigration and immigration experience will become clear only if the historical records include the less successful as well as those who prospered. The huge number of support and welfare cases of just one urban center brings home the fact that failure, too, was a constantly present possibility.

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NOTES

- 1 Kate Caffrey, *The Mayflower* (London: Stein & Day, 1975), 141.
- 2 See my "Quellen zur deutschen Einwanderungsgeschichte in der Bibliothek der German Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 34 (1999): 133-140.
- 3 Marvin Gelfand, "Welcome to America," *American Heritage* 43,2 (April 1992): 62.
- 4 Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America: A People's History of the Post-Reconstruction Era* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 366.
- 5 The translations from the original German entries are my own.
- 6 Frank MacCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner's, 1996).
- 7 Karl J. R. Arndt & May E. Olson, *The German Language Press of the Americas* (München: Verlag Dokumentation, 1973).
- 8 In the wake of recent corporate scandals, the ethics of accepting "dirty money" have come to haunt third-level educational institutions; cf. John L. Pulley, "Tainted Gifts," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* XLIX, 17 (January 3, 2003): A32-A34.



**Oil painting of St. John's Lutheran,
the first German-language church in Charleston
by Francis Hill**