

G-SIG FORUM #86

From the German Special Interest Group: G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (www.stlgs.org) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. (check the site at www.gahs-stlouis.org). This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

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German Fondness for 'Migration' By Gerald Perschbacher, LL.D.

(What you are about to read is the likely course your ancestors followed! If so, they this is part of YOUR history and you are today's living example.)

In the main, Germans have been two things above all: people who migrate and people who stay put once they arrive.

Study the ancient past and Germanic tribes tended to stick with their territories. Around the year 50 A.D. the Goths were in the Baltic area, the Hesses (Hessians) were along the Rhein River, the Saxons were in the eastern stretches of Germanic territory, and other Germanic tribes were settled in various areas nearby. Very few entered the Roman-held areas west of the Rhein, and those that did were often forced to abide by Roman ways. Generally, entire tribes did not enter Roman territory until the Empire grew weaker by the year 250 and finally could not stop the encroachment of tribes by the year 400.

More than a few tribes wanted to be in Roman territory due to the riches that abounded and the safety that the Empire offered. Indeed, there were wars between German tribes, much as the wars between African and American Indian tribes that you may have read about in the 1800s. It was often safer to avoid than engage.

Once migrated tribes settled in their new areas, they tended to stay put. That is, with some exceptions. One notable deviation from the norm was the Goths. Evidently superb wanderers once the thrill of migration tempted their souls, Goths moved along the edge of the Saxons to the East (between what is now Germany and the former Eastern Block countries, notably Ukraine). Likely pressed by Slavs further east and blocked by Saxons on their western flank, the Goths kept on the move. This may have been generated by famine, the movement of other tribes, or the feel for wanderlust.

The Goths split into Visigoths (western Goths) and Ostrogoths (eastern Goths) (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visigoths> and also increase your wisdom at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostrogoths>).

Track their advance and you will see that Goths made it to Rome and headed along the Mediterranean into Spain and even beyond (evidence exists for their migration into northern Africa).

What caused migrations? I mentioned a couple potentials already, but I will add more: fear of enemies and an impossible future if they stayed put. I suppose you could add another: once migratory tribes got the habit in their blood, they just could not stop -- it was easier to conquer a city and enjoy its spoils rather than settling down. Attila the Hun followed that course by 450 A.D., so it was not unique to German tribes by any stretch of imagination!

Between the years 400 and 600 A.D. there was a terrific amount of tribal movement thus giving historians the idea of calling it the Age of the Great Migrations. The imprint those tribes put on Western Europe remains to this day. Their imprint also impacted American society since a huge number of Americans who came to our shores in the 1800s were from Western Europe.

When the Great Migrations slowed, Germanic tribes took to their new land like ducks to water. They were stiffly territorial, determined to defend their land come what may, and willing to sacrifice the blood of themselves and their kin to do it. Let's understand a simple precept: members of a tribe WERE blood relatives. The farthest extent of that was in varying degrees of cousins. The larger the tribe, the greater the separation of genes, but they were still related. In effect, the same holds true today. If you are Saxon by ancestry, you share in the blood-history of other Saxons. Thus, tribal groups carried physical features in common. Some researchers can tell Bavarians from Hessians at a glance.

As families settled in, trade opened among other nearby groups, and tribal borders softened. Sometimes by reason of war or skirmish, women from a defeated (or sacked) clan would be taken by the victors, thus adding more to the gene pool. The rims of tribal land thus had more such sharing than further inland to the heart of the tribal territory.

While there was movement of mercenary German troops to America during the War of Independence in the late 1700s, most of those soldiers returned to their Fatherland. The remnant that remained here numbered in the low thousands and

integrated with early German settlers. Commonality of morals, language, culture, and societal preferences attracted them. But that really was not a migration.

However, the emigration movement by 1830 until 1849 could be the next best example of a migration since the same reasons that motivated the tribes to move around in the Great Migration were kicking into play as Western Europe became a cauldron of discontent.

"For many years prior to 1848 there had been, in various parts of Germany, more or less secret agitation, and a few instances of overt manifestations, indicating the existence of a movement in the direction of political reform," noted M.J. Becker in a speech delivered on March 14, 1887, to the Monday Club of Columbus, Ohio (<http://archive.org/details/GermansOf1849InAmerica>). "Their grievances complained of were mostly of local application, and the remedies proposed consequently lacked uniformity of purpose and concentration of effort, and they failed as a matter of course."

The movement wasn't a migration in the old sense. It did not involve huge groups of common bloodlines that *en mass* moved to America. But it was a trickle that became a stream and eventually opened like a river, rushing toward the new Promised Land in the New World. That trickle consisted of small families. The trickle came as others in the family decided to join their loved ones in the Great Experiment of Freedom called America.

What brought about the desire to leave ancestral lands?

Becker continued: "For nine centuries, prior to its final dissolution in 1806, the various principalities composing the German Empire had been governed, more or less independently, by the princes, dukes, counts, bishops, and barons, who, by fair means or foul, by inheritance or conquest, by purchase or exchange, by gambling or by robbery, became possessed of the territories, which, for the time being they called their own." He added that trying to keep up with border changes at a given time was like trying to track "the ever-shifting clouds in the sky."

The demands of military servitude, increased taxation, and other pressures from noble families made the present uncomfortable and the future bleak. Germans felt they needed to DO something. If they were oppressed, they wanted to rebel or otherwise change their circumstances. If they were in the top echelon of ruling nobility, they wanted to preserve their status and retain their holdings at any cost. If they were in between, they were torn by loyalty to the governing line while wishing matters could improve for the lower rung of society.

With such polarization of the extremes, social unrest was brewing.

Revolt Takes Hold

Napoleon stepped briskly into German history when France "provoked another war in 1803" (according to Becker) "and once more defeated not only the German Emperor but also his allies -- England and Russia -- in the disastrous battle of Ulm, followed by the overwhelming defeat of Austerlitz."

Until 1813, conquered German states were "humiliated, oppressed, insulted; ...rulers dethroned, exiled, imprisoned...male populations dragged into the armies of the conqueror and placed in the front rank of his battles against their own kindred and countrymen." Cities and fortresses were garrisoned by the "insolent foe, or razed to the ground by treaty, stipulations... houses of its citizens turned into barracks, the farms devastated and the crops destroyed by the marches, battles, and example of contending armies...years of gloom, misery, and mourning."

After Waterloo, Napoleon became relegated to the pages of history as a former conqueror. In 1815 Germans formed a confederation called the *Bundesrath*. "There were, exclusive of the free cities, still 36 distinct sovereigns left to rule...." But the land was thoroughly exhausted. So were the people. The poor turned toward hopes of regaining a degree of material advancement.

We won't delve deeply into the politics, but Austria took the upper hand in the Bund. Territories wished to offer free practice to Christian religion with tendencies for a form of Protestantism or for Catholicism, much to the preference of former noble ruling families. Constitutionally, there seemed to be more flexibility even for Jewish worship practices.

Then came 1830. King Charles X of France was exiled. Widespread fears resurged in Germany that France was "at it again" and would treat German territories with contempt. University students in Frankfurt-on-the-Main began an insurrection but it was quickly suppressed. A hard hand by the military stuck in the minds of Germans, a good number opting to set off for America. If your family came to our shores between 1830 and 1840, this was the climate from which they longed for escape! Thus began the trickle that soon led to a stream.

In February of 1848, there was still another change in French leadership. Revolution brewed, arousing "the entire continent, and stirred even the souls of the phlegmatic Germans into action, culminating during the early Spring in sudden

flashes of open revolt in Berlin, in Vienna, and along the southern borders of the Duchy of Baden."

Leaders promised concessions, even future redress. It appeared a national congress would be formed and begin the initial function of an entirely new government. But the time was still not right for Germany!

Military engagements erupted between Germans. Rebels were crushed on the battlefields. Insurrectionists were gathered up. Many were shot after the barest of trials, if any. Forces from Prussia, Hessen-Darmstadt, and Nassau forced peace on their lands.

A Bunch of Those Rebels Came to America

Becker lists 14 key rebels who fled for safety to the New World. He headed the list with Frederick Hecker "first in point of time, and foremost in prominence and distinction...."

Between three "leading factions there were many intermediate shades of political creeds, but the extremist member of the extreme republican left was...Hecker," Becker forced. Hecker was among the first to reject the German National Congress and gather men to arms. They formed with ancient guns and very old swords dating to the Crusades; armed with pikes and pistols of indeterminate age, even with battle-axes. By May of 1848, the rebellion was in check and Hecker's life was in jeopardy. He took refuge with "a few of his immediate friends, near Belleville in Illinois."

Soon after he settled, he rushed back to Germany on the news that a wave of new rebellion had arisen. But upon his arrival, that, too, had been put down. He set off for America for good. He turned his parliamentary ability toward his new land. There he sided with the views of Abraham Lincoln and the Union, staunchly supporting that cause to the point of early enlistment in the army in order to stabilize the Midwest. Soon he was head of his own unit that saw serious battles in the Civil War. His health was affected forever after, limiting his ability to be a successful farmer or anything else.

Others listed by Becker include Carl Schurz who went on to serve in the President's Cabinet and was a key communicator with his ability to write and publish in English. Others who came to America in the aftermath of the failed rebellion included Alexander Schimmelpfennig who was known in Germany by

Becker himself. Schimmelpfennig drilled recruits. Empowered by the Provisional (rebel) Government of Trans-Rhenish Bavaria, he attracted numerous troops. Upon defeat, he passed into Switzerland then to America where he also served under Franz Sigel in the Union Army of the Potomac.

Becker mentions Frederick Kapp of Westphalia, who had studied law in Heidelberg. He tried to support the German cause for freedom while working out of Paris. When that cause failed, Becker found Kapp in Switzerland, departing for America. Interestingly, Kapp returned to Germany around the time of the Franco-German War, being elected to the Imperial Parliament soon after -- an example of a "migrator" who returned home.

Others mentioned by Becker included Christian Essellen of Westphalia; Franz Sigel of the Duchy of Baden; August Willich, a dismissed Prussian officer of noble birth; Frederick Anneke, a Westphalian artilleryist; Carl Heinzen, not a fighter but a distinguished journalist and intellectual whose pen "had kept the German censors busy for many years" (he went to England, on to New York, then to Boston where he continued in publishing); and Oswald Ottendorfer of the Academic Legion of the University of Vienna who lived his later years in New York state, publishing the virtues of freedom and Germanic principles.

Also mentioned is a man simply named Blenker, a soldier of fortune with his early years as an anti-Turk fighter in Greece who continued his escapades in Worms and northward in the cause of rebellion -- later becoming a dairy farmer in New York. Also mentioned are Joseph Weydemeyer (formerly of the Prussian military and the Cologne-Minden Railroad, enlisting with Fremont in St. Louis in 1861) and Lorenz Brentano (president of the Provisional Government in 1849, before settling in Chicago). Rounding out the list by Becker was Max Weber, army lieutenant in Baden, later fighting at Fredericksburg and Antietam.

These men and many others began a migratory influx of Germans to America, tempted by freedom and opportunity, which their descendants enjoy to this day.

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