

Exodus from Germany:

German Emigration to America



German 269
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submitted by
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In the year 1776 when the United States declared its independence, between 70,000 and 100,000 Germans had already taken up residence in America. By the end of the nineteenth century, over five million Germans had left Europe to start a new life in America. Today, Germans make up the single largest ethnic group in the United States at around 28 percent of the population.¹ Many who only know the Germany of today ask themselves what forces could have acted to bring so many Germans away from their families and homes to the unsettled New World. At the same time many Americans try to piece together the story of why their ancestors decided to emigrate centuries ago.

This paper argues that the mass exodus out of Germany into North America during the last three centuries was the result of "push" and "pull" factors in Germany and America. Push factors were unpleasant conditions present in Germany which encouraged people to leave, for example, religious constraints, conflicts in political ideology, economics, and the weather. The primary push was economical, but also political, particularly the Revolution of 1848. The Pull factors consisted of incentives the Germans had for leaving their homes and families, such as positive testimonies from others who had immigrated previously, promotions from transportation companies, and the longing for adventure and a prosperity.

Although the reasons for German emigration were not always based on a clear line of reasoning, the influx of people out of Germany reflects the internal restlessness of the populace and a desire for revolutionary change. The Germans, in particular, have always been loyal and grave defenders of their "Vaterland," and by divorcing themselves from their homeland, these Germans indicated the severity of the struggles going on at that time in Europe. The massive emigration also shows the high hopes many Germans had for their new life in America.

¹ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 5-6.

In many cases, the push to emigrate was a local one not corresponding to any particular event on the national level. Usually the decision to emigrate was an individual one, based on personal ambitions. At times, the push and pull factors were opposed to each other leaving personal preference to tip the balance between leaving or staying. Although Germany was ravaged by frequent wars and conflicts, the Germans were industrious enough to maintain an adequate standard of living. Unlike Irish emigration during the potato famine in the mid-nineteenth century, in which people were literally pushed out of the country to survive, German emigration was influenced more heavily by pull factors.

Organizations like the "Frankfurt Company" bought land in Pennsylvania in preparation of future colonies of followers in the late 1600's. These colonies were to be refuge for followers from the tribulations of life in Germany. Francis Daniel Pastorius wrote his parents soon after arriving in Pennsylvania, "I behold the woeful judgments of wrath and severe chastisement which, in the irrevocable course of divine justice, will be poured out all over Europe till this abhorrent Babylon is completely perished. Now, dearly beloved parents, if you want to escape the plagues destined for Germany, do not partake of her sins but go and leave her." ² Along with Pastrious, the first emigrants from Germany were seeking "a quite Christian life" away from "European vanities."³



Figure 1 Hang the drunk Germans *

At the other extreme, social "undesirables" were driven out of communities and sent to America for reasons of sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, and chronic laziness, the primary offenses of German integrity. Some puritans in America viewed

² Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 17.

³ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 18.

the Germans as over indulgers as shown in Figure 1, but the Germans as a whole were highly regarded, particularly with their success as farmers and skilled craftsmen. Of course there were exceptions, especially at rowdy German-American beer gardens. For the most part, they had proven themselves to be good citizens during the colonial years. Many Americans welcomed the Germanic mixture in the heavily Celtic population, and were in need of a hard-working source of labor. Friedrich List, the German Philosopher, asserted that there was nothing for the millions of emigrants to fear in leaving a country where their own person as a ware was “of little value, and they are going to a place where it has great value.”⁴ Letters like the one from Weis to his brother in Germany amplified this point. “... 100 times we have wished if only our brothers and sisters were with us, and I advise all who are willing to come they must simply come. They will make a better living here than in Germany.”

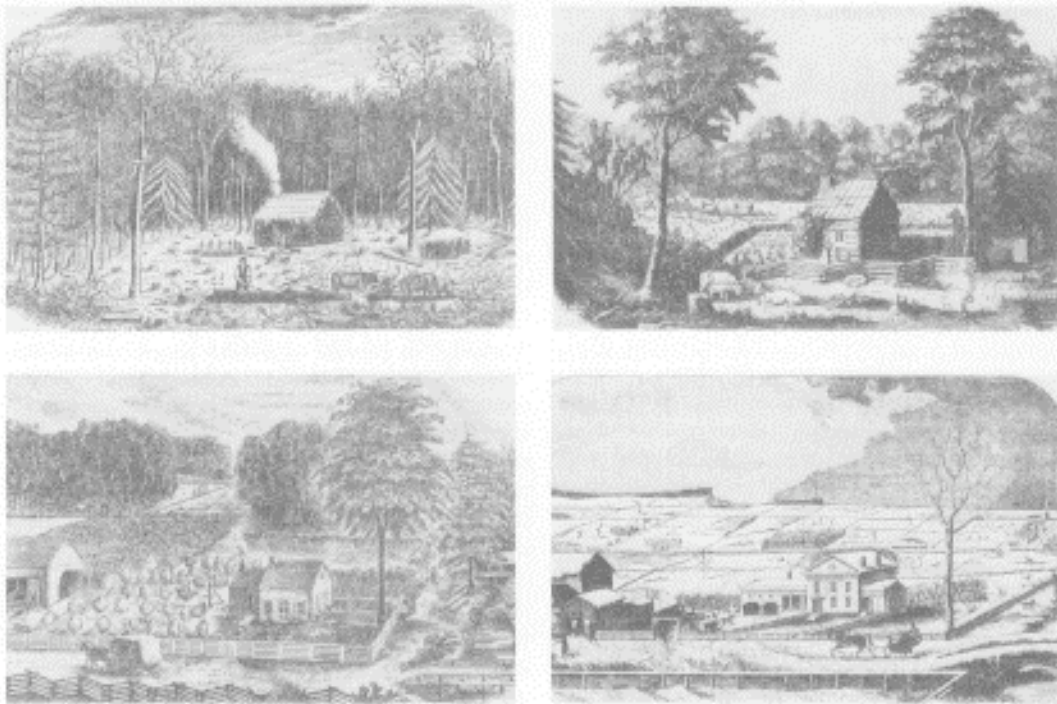


Figure 2 Depictions of establishing a farm in America *

⁴ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 66.

In many cases it was true that Germans had much to gain by coming to America. According to one calculation, around 672,000 family farms were started in the nineteenth century, most of them by Germans. Figure 2 shows just how simple it supposedly was to establish a farm. In reality, it never was so simple. None the less, Germans were also highly successful in beer brewing, conservation and exploitation of natural resources, food processing, and many of the natural and physical sciences, brought directly from leading German universities. These developments are not very surprising, considering the stereotypes attributed to modern Germany. The early successes fueled the pull factors for other Germans causing a snow balling of emigration.

The major limitation on emigration for the average German was the cost of travel. British shipping companies carrying raw materials from American farms dropping their cargo in European ports to be consumed and processed. The otherwise empty ships would take passengers to America on their return trip for low prices, or a contract to pay later. Passengers could enter into a contract, whereby they were transported to North America and upon arrival received a parcel of land. In return, they were to make payments over a set number of years until the terms of the contract had been satisfied. Typical routes were between Rotterdam and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Figure 3 shows the barges carrying emigrants down the Rhine toward the port city, Rotterdam, for their voyage to America. These companies promoted America as a chance for the poor to break out of their designated social class in Germany. Although condition of the contracts were many times skewed in favor of the shipping companies, passengers did not find out until after they had arrived in America. Furthermore, European officials did put much effort into regulating the industry since the emigrants were considered lost citizens or deserters of the state.

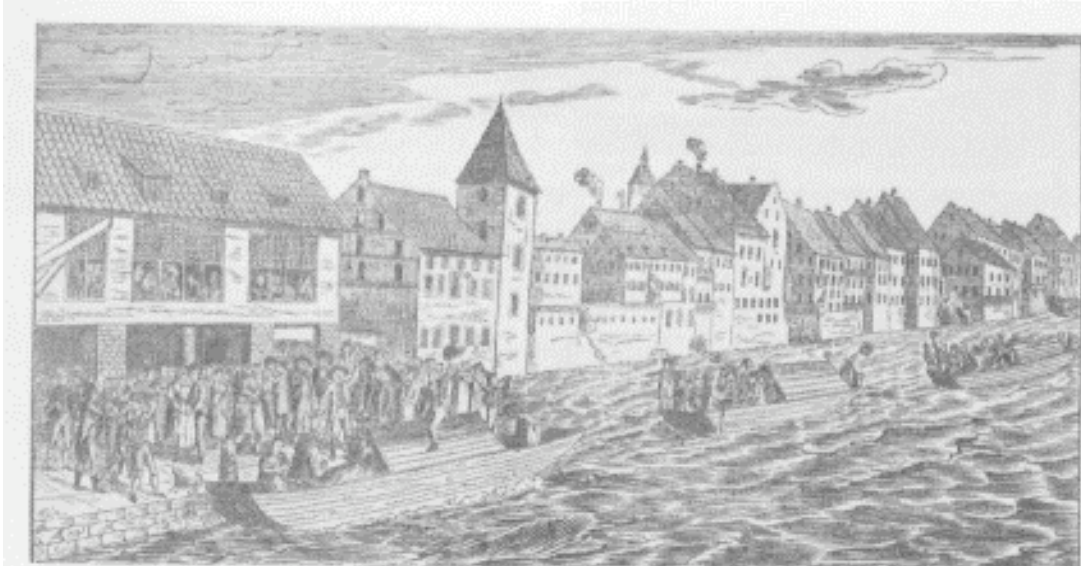


Figure 3 Emigrants board barges on the Rhine headed for Rotterdam *

First in 1819 did the United States Congress regulate immigration. The federal government specified the number of passengers a vessel could carry and organized the registration of arriving immigrants. These activities had previously been carried out by each individual state without much coordination. This change, however, did not set a limit on the number of people admitted, leaving the flow to be set by the free market. Occasionally states would try to direct a stream of emigrants, but most of the promotion and solicitation was undertaken by those expecting to make a profit, i.e. the transportation and manufacturing industries.⁵

Although the feudal structure of European society was quickly disintegrating with the unfolding of the French Revolution, these changes were not happening quickly enough. Many people longed to have their own land, with no questions asked. Letters from friends and relatives spoke of an abundance of land free to new-comers. The young yearned for adventure and excitement they perceived the New World could provide. When asked to state reasons for embarking to America, one girl bound for South Carolina simply said she was "desirous to see more of the world." Another stated, "It is neither

⁵ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 67.

impudence nor pleasure which drives me from the country but poverty and concern for wife and children." ⁶In America even a serf could become a respectable land owner and produce enough to food to feed his family through farming.

Letters from friends and relatives, as well as media coverage, helped to form the perceptions of the Germans about America. General von Steuben, the well-known military leader called to help Washington in Valley Forge, was impressed with America. He wrote a friend in Germany, "What a fortunate, progressive land this is! No kings, no high clergy, no parasitic landlords or idle gentry!"⁷ Another famous emigrant, Gottfried Duden, a graduate of law, settled in the Missouri territory in 1828 and published his "Journey to the Western States of North America." In his timely book, Duden's portrayal of America with its vast open spaces and free democratic life created a stark contrast to social and political pressures in Germany. His accounts were widely read across Germany and served to convince friends and relatives to emigrate.

Weather was also a factor in driving some 50,000 Germans out of the southern Rhine area of Germany in early in the nineteenth century. During the years of 1817 and 1818 the winter was so harsh that even the hearty German folks of the Rhine river area could not longer stand the cold. The vineyards suffered damage from freezing wiping out wine production. Even more devastating was widespread crop failure and famine to the extent that the people turned to America for a friendlier climate.⁸

Perhaps the best know wave of immigrants from Germany came in the nineteenth century stemming from the French Revolution. The French Revolution, also called the Revolution of 1789, shook France between 1787 and 1799. Hence, the conventional term "Revolution of 1789," denoting the end of the antiquated system in France and also

⁶ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 29.

⁷ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 128.

⁸ Krohn, Heinrich: Und Warum Habt Ihr denn Deutschland Verlassen?. Gustav Lübke Verlag, Bergisch Gladbach, 1992. p. 10.

serving to distinguish the event from the later French revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Although there is some variation in opinion on the exact causes of the Revolution, historians generally converge on five basic causal factors. First, France had the largest population in Europe and could not feed it adequately. This led to widespread restlessness among the lower class. Secondly, these peasants were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less inclined to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system. Thirdly, the rich and expanding bourgeoisie was excluded from political power more systematically than in any other country. A fourth factor was the Philosophers, who advocated social and political reform, had been read more widely in France than elsewhere making the public more aware of the problems. Finally, the French participation in the American Revolutionary War had completed the ruin of the state's finances. Furthermore, the French were attuned to the idea of liberty, fraternity, and equality.⁹

⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica Online Edition, 1995. French Revolution



Figure 4 Situation in Europe during the social revolutions *

The French revolution actually influenced similar revolutions broadly across Europe. The events in France gave new hope to the revolutionaries who had been defeated a few years before in the United Provinces, Belgium, and Switzerland. Likewise, all who wanted changes in England, Ireland, the German states, the Austrian lands, or Italy looked upon the Revolution with sympathy. Numbers of the French counterrevolutionaries - nobles, ecclesiastics, and some bourgeois - abandoned the struggle in their own country and emigrated. With much of German territory in ruins, Bonaparte proclaimed the end of the Revolution; he himself actually help to spread it in new forms throughout Europe.¹⁰ Figure 4 shows how the revolutionaries were swept out of Germany into France and then to America.

¹⁰ Encyclopedia Britanica Online Edition, 1995. Influences of French Revolution.

In spite of a relatively long quite period of economic stability in the early nineteenth century, the liberal movement spurred by the French Revolution finally hit Germany in 1848. Like the French Revolution, Germans sought to unify their fatherland on the basis of liberty, fraternity, and equality. The watchwords for the Revolution of 1848 in a broader perspective were national unification, individual freedom, greater economic opportunities and popular self-government.¹¹ The impoverished lower class were no longer willing to support the wealthy lords. These people were tired of living as serfs and supporting a lords through overbearing taxation. Student revolutionaries took the example of the French Revolution and organized themselves against the political structure in Germany. The young Germans were able to see the promise of democracy and liberty in other nations, particularly America, and rejected Germany's traditional social and political structures.

The people of the German states felt the pressure between liberal movement and the repressive government measures. Some of the wealthier Germans left for America at this point fearing social unrest, however the activists remained in Germany to push change. At first there were successes in Berlin, Vienna, and Southwest Germany, but the traditional system of government returned to power. Rather than the desired political reform, perhaps the greatest outcome of the Revolution, was the mass emigration out of Germany. The participants of the revolt, know as "the forty-eighters" were persecuted, forcing them to flee the country or be killed. Many retreated to America with the intention of rallying support and returning to Germany to continue the revolution. Until that time, the prospects of their own tract of land and the freedom to tailor the government to their individual needs seemed appealing for these Germans. Very few Germans actually ever returned to Germany.

¹¹ Wittle, Carl: Refugees of Revolution - The German Forty-Eighters in America. University of Pennsylvania Press: New York, 1952. p. 1.

The actual number of political refugees was very small, around 4000, but the publicity generated from this group was great. Public opinion over America was that of a safe refuge for people of all backgrounds and circumstances. The real emigration of Germans occurred during the subsequent years of the 1850's, in which nearly 1 million people went to America. In 1854 alone, over 200,000 Germans left - more than the sum of all Germans leaving in the previous 50 years.¹² Among the new arrivals to America were men and women of substance, property, social standing, excellent education, liberals and radicals, and many young intellectuals fresh from the universities.¹³

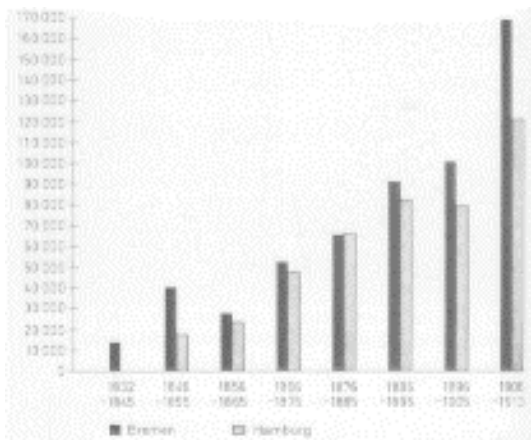


Figure 5 Passengers out of Bremen and Hamburg 1832-1913 *

Emigration grinded to a halt as the civil war commenced in 1861-1864 and the German Wars in 1864 and 1866. In 1872 after Prussia's victory over Austria and the consequent formation of the Reich, the push to America was thought to be dead. Yet, 1872 and 1873 were peak years for emigration mostly from the northern and eastern parts of Germany. Between 1871 and 1885, around

1.5 million Germans emigrated, and of those, 95% chose America. Figure 5 illustrates the number of Germans leaving from the port cities of Bremen and Hamburg to America. Germany was now reaching the peak of its industrialization, and many of the young men preferred the prospect of farming in America to working in the industrial cities of the Ruhr Valley. Also, they could avoid the 3 year mandatory military service imposed by the newly formed Reich.¹⁴

¹² Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 128.

¹³ Wittle, Carl: Refugees of Revolution - The German Forty-Eighters in America. University of Pennsylvania Press: New York, 1952. pp. 42-46.

¹⁴ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, pp. 46-48.

While emigrating Germans were often thought of as deserters by their peers, the emigrants thought of themselves as pioneers.

Some sold all possession they could not carry with them and some radicals even burned their houses before leaving as a symbol of the bridge they were burning in their life. Figure 6 shows a cartoon of a German happy to declare a new fatherland. Some Germans who left for America on business and financial gain who were planning to return at a later date, never returned. Of the 30,000 mercenary soldiers who left for America during the revolutionary war in the late 1700's, 6,000 decided stay in America rather than return to Germany.¹⁵



Figure 6 German glad to find a new fatherland *

From 1890 until the outbreak of World War I, there was a continuing, but decreasing number of Germans to America. Before 1890 most of the emigrants were from Northwestern Europe, whereas the later emigrants originated from Southern and Eastern Europe. It was difficult to get an accurate count of the German emigrants due to the mixture of Polish in each westward-bound ship.

During the post-WW I period very few Germans left Germany. Some were unsatisfied with conditions in Germany and chose the U.S. to start businesses, however stricter immigration quotas in the US. prohibited the mass immigration of the past decades. As WW II approached, many persecuted Germans attempted to enter the U.S., but were again restricted by immigration quotas. During that decade only 129,000 Germans gained entrance.¹⁶ Hitler's restricted emigration for all "Aryans" and instead

¹⁵ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 32.

¹⁶ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 50.

strove to include the foreign emigration destinations into the German territory. The result of this was Germany's expansion throughout Europe.

From the end of WW II until the mid-sixties, Germany filled its quota of 28,000 every year. Today, Germans only account for roughly 5,000 of the yearly immigrants into America. Strong economic opportunities in Germany, reduced transatlantic traveling time, and close business and military ties are factors reducing the need for emigration.¹⁷ Work and student visa make it possible to live in many worlds at the same time. Germans are able to make their yearly vacation crusade to New York and Miami and be back home in time for Oktoberfest. Increasingly, people feel themselves part of an international community, blown around the world by the winds of economic development.

Today, many Americans are quick to say that their ancestors are German, but few even know the year that their forefathers set forth to America. Others who have kept records or have done research on their family tree are proud to announce the German port city from which the ancestor departed and the date of arrival in America. Most likely, the story behind their ancestors' departure from Germany has long been forgotten, especially if it occurred beyond the past three generations. Few Americans are aware of the history in Germany that prompted so many Germans to make the imperiling trip across the Atlantic generations back. The ties between the Americans and their German heritage have been cut with remarkable deliberation. It would be surprising for these descendants to realize that their forefathers were revolutionaries, intellectuals, and ambitious individuals looking to establish a new life in a far off country.

¹⁷ Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983, p. 52.



Figure 7 Departure from Bremen *

Although there were events and periods in German history, or push factors, which led to massive emigration, the pull factors are not as easy to identify on historical grounds. These pull factors, as given in this paper, were a complex mixture of economic, personal, and public factors influencing each individual. The

example of my German forefather, Ferdinand Krause, is typical of the genealogy of many

German-Americans. He left Germany from the port of Bremen in 1882 on a ship bound for Baltimore. Figure 7 shows the port in Bremen he sailed from and Figure 8 shows Baltimore, his point of arrival. Not much is known about him except that he was a Prussian, that is a citizen of northern Germany controlled by the Prussian Empire. He was probably one of the 1.5 million Germans who arrived in the decade



Figure 8 Arrival in Baltimore *

after the American Civil War looking for his own plot of farmland and economic prosperity. The year of 1882 experienced the largest wave of emigration ever, with over 250,000 Germans sailing to America to take advantage of an economic boom.¹⁸ Figure 9 shows where many of those those Germans settled, and not surprisingly, it was where farmland was available and geographic and climatic similarities were similar to Germany.

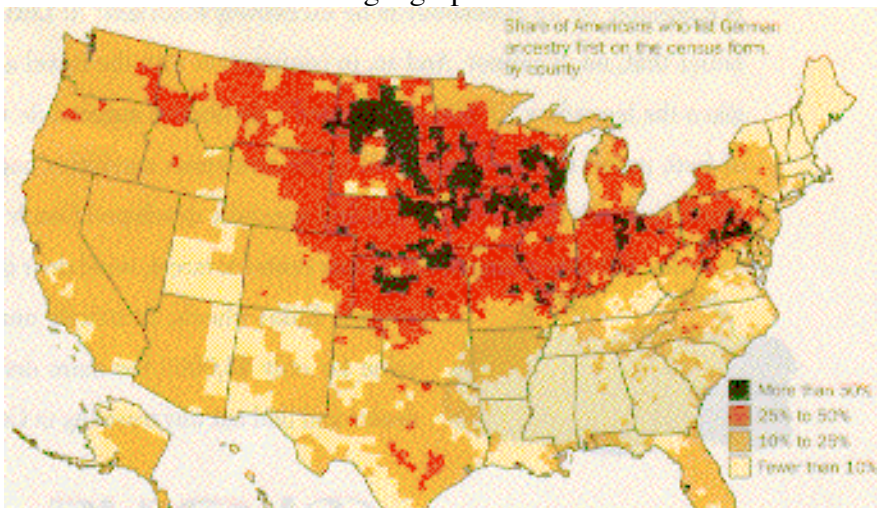


Figure 9 Where the Germans settled¹⁹

My grandmother, Hilda Krause, was born on a small farm in western Pennsylvania in 1921. Ferdinand died shortly before the birth of his granddaughter, and his son, Charles Krause, knew more about the family farm in Pennsylvania than the far away Old Country he had never know. There is not much information from the some 40 years around the turn of the century to account for the Krause family, but it can be inferred that my German forefather did indeed come to America seeking farmland and opportunity. Now, more than a century later, the story is beginning to unfold.

¹⁹ Doyle, Roger: *U.S. News and World Report*, April 1, 1996, p. 16.

Bibliography

* Illustrations are from Moos, Heinz and Wust, Klaus: Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America. "300 Jahre Deutsche in Amerika" Verlags-GmbH: MEnchen, 1983.

Title page picture is a mural titled "Arrival of Emigrants in the USA" by Lithuanian-born American painter, Ben Shahn, in 1937

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