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The Quest of the Historical Jürnjakob: A Centennial Evaluation of an Immigrant Novel and the Real-Life Figure Behind It¹

The year 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the appearance in Germany of the immigrant novel or *Briefroman*, Johann Gillhoff's *Jürnjakob Swehn, der Amerikafahrer*, which had been serialized in a Berlin newspaper the year before. It told the story of a poor day-laborer's son from Mecklenburg who sought and found his fortune in America, or more precisely on an Iowa farm, ostensibly in his own words from letters to his old schoolmaster. For Germans of the interwar period, Jürnjakob was a household name, and he would have been the most famous Iowan in Germany had it not been for Herbert Hoover's famine relief efforts. This book sold over 100,000 copies in its first two years and is still in print a century later, with more than a million total sales.²

A few excerpts convey the flavor of the book, its sardonic humor, and its folksy appeal. Talking about his experience as a naïve greenhorn working on farms somewhere outside of New York City, Jürnjakob says: "That turned out to be one of the longest months of my life, but finally I got hold of its short end. . . . I got robbed twice and was fooled out of some money. It seemed to me that all the crooks in America had gathered there and were lying in wait for me. It was about like the territory between Jerusalem and Jericho. . . . I said to myself, . . . You have to relearn in this country, Jürnjakob. . . . Otherwise you'll be back in the village in a year . . . and the children will point the finger at you: [(Plattdeutsch): lookie there, that's Jürnjakob Swehn. Jürnjakob was too dumb for America.]"³

But in the long run he proved to be smart enough after all, as he relates to his schoolmaster in later years:

“Half a year back you asked me if Jürnjakob ever got homesick here. . . . There’s nothing here for old folks, all the less so for weak folks. For them the American air is too sharp. Here you have to have iron in your blood. Here you can’t hang your harp on a willow tree, if you have one. . . . No, I’m at home here. Here most everybody is Low German and from Mecklenburg. Of course I came over here in my young years. Got married here. Raised a good family. I have built here. I have sown and harvested. I’ve left a lot of sweat behind on the fields here, and sweat does its job here just as well as over there. [(Plattdeutsch): No, that’s not the case. Over here it’s done me a lot more good than it would have over there.] Back there no matter how much I worked I would have remained a day laborer, or at most a cottager, and my children would have been day laborers again. Here we really had to go at it, much harder than in the Old Country. That is God’s truth. But for all that, I made a lot more out of it. That is also God’s truth. Here I made myself free. Here I stand on my own two feet on my own ground, and don’t labor for some big shot. To be free is well worth a few buckets of sweat.”⁴

The novel was written by schoolteacher Johannes Gillhoff, who followed in his father’s footsteps in Mecklenburg, the poorest, most rural, and most emigration-prone region of Germany. Allegedly it was based on letters that a real immigrant wrote to his old schoolmaster, Gillhoff’s father. But Gillhoff reportedly destroyed the letters after he finished his work, so there is no sure way of reconstructing how much he directly adopted, how much he invented, or to what extent his hero was based on one individual or a composite. After all, it was said that 350 of his father’s former pupils had emigrated to America, and he stayed in contact with half of them, often drafting the answering letters for their semi-literate relatives back home.⁵

I was one of many readers and scholars who wondered how much of the book reflected the Mecklenburg schoolteacher as opposed to the Iowa German farmer. This essay presents the tortuous path toward tracking down the historical Jürnjakob and the insights, both specific to the novel and more generally into German ethnicity, which this discovery offers. As a social historian of U.S. immigration rather than a cultural historian, I had less interest in German images of the American immigration experience reflected in a fictional account than in the lived experiences and perceptions of immigrants themselves in the United States, as is manifested in my work with their letters.⁶ The only way the German image would be of much relevance to this perspective would be in understanding the cultural baggage and expectations that Germans took with them when emigrating. But obviously a book published as late as 1917 would have colored the perceptions of only a very small segment of total German immigration. So it was important to me to try to

discern how much of Swehn reflected or represented the historical Jürnjakob, whoever he might be, as opposed to author Gillhoff.

As it turned out, although neither of us knew about the other, I was not the only person interested in tracking down the historical Jürnjakob, an undeclared contest that I ultimately lost. Interestingly, my friendly competitor Eldon Knuth and I had quite a bit in common.⁷ Both of us were Midwestern farm boys of German ethnic background, first-generation college students who managed to wedge our way into academia. Through scholarly exchanges financed by the Humboldt Foundation and DAAD, we spent the same academic year of 1975–76 in Germany, following our respective academic pursuits, he as a guest professor and I researching my dissertation. We almost could have met at a German-American party in Göttingen that February. The two of us were introduced to the book in much the same way, by Germans who thought it would interest a German-American farm boy. In my case, my girlfriend at the time gave me an abbreviated paperback edition for my birthday in March 1976. Her parents knew and loved the book from their youth and had the complete original hardback edition which they lent me. I devoured the book and found its main character to be quite compelling. However, I only cited it once in my dissertation because of its uncertain authenticity. Three months later in June 1976 at the end of his Humboldt year, Eldon Knuth was introduced to Jürnjakob by some chance acquaintances he met on a serendipitous overnight trip across the East German border into his ancestral Mecklenburg just before he returned to the states. He was equally captivated, and even found that his “subconscious mind had retained” from his youth much of the Mecklenburger Plattdeutsch dialect that crops up to add flavor to the book.⁸

In some ways it would appear that I had the better cards for tracking down the historical Jürnjakob. Though Knuth and I were both academics, he was a professor of aeronautics at UCLA far removed from his Iowa roots, and any progress he made in this field would be purely for his own satisfaction. I, on the other hand, was a historian of German immigration with roots in nearby Missouri, although I had hardly set foot in Iowa. But I did spend a considerable amount of time in Germany: four full years between fall 1975 and fall 1987, plus summer visits in all but one of the years I spent state-side. Looking through old correspondence, I see that already in 1979 I had requested and received a script from a North German Radio program commemorating author Johannes Gillhoff’s one hundredth birthday, but all it had to offer was the following: “Ja, that way and no other was how Jürnjakob Swehn wrote to his old teacher in Mecklenburg. Or did Johannes Gillhoff write and think that way? Who can still know that for sure today?”⁹ That is essentially the question I was trying to get at on and off for a couple of decades.

A 1940 publication that I discovered early on included the memories of Gillhoff's brother about the origins of the book: "The point of departure were the letters of Jürnjakob to his old teacher, our father." The newspaper editor who originally serialized the book writes, "Certainly, the letters of Jürnjakob Swehn are not his [i.e., Gillhoff's] work. They were in reality what flew into the schoolmaster's house in thick bundles every winter. But whoever knows how great the creative and formative task it was for the one who shaped this literary raw material in order to make it ready for publication, will not overlook the large portion done by Gillhoff himself."¹⁰ We get some hint of this from what Gillhoff wrote in his foreword: "Repetitions and banalities had to be cut. Pieces from the letters were taken out of their context and inserted elsewhere. Numerous unclaritys and contradictions darkened the author's portraits; the piecemeal origins of the letters stood out too much in broken off narratives and gaps. With a cautious hand I attempted here to fill in holes, there to wipe out the shadows. The careful safeguarding of the original letters kept the changes within measure and moderation; the letters were worked through with the task of letting a life portrait shine through clearly and truly: Jürnjakob Swehn, the man and his work." But Gillhoff goes on to concede that "return migrants who came through Bremen provided supplementary information, along with correspondence that other immigrants sent."¹¹

One further clue to the historicity of Jürnjakob is a second immigrant novel, *Möne Markow, der neue Amerikafahrer*, which was begun by Johannes Gillhoff but completed by his brother Theodore and published in 1957.¹² As East German Gillhoff expert Hartmut Brun charitably put it, that work "can in no way stand comparison to 'Jürnjakob,' neither with respect to language nor content." In fact, despite its bestseller predecessor, it had sold only 16,000 copies in thirty years. Brun thought that the transition in authorship was apparent in the content, but I found it too uninspiring even to read the book that closely.¹³ Still, we are left with the question, was the historical Jürnjakob simply a much more interesting person and better storyteller than the historical Möne Markow, a blacksmith's son who became a pastor, or was Theodore Gillhoff just a much poorer ghostwriter than his brother Johannes?

I had always suspected that Gillhoff had changed names to protect the innocent—and not so innocent. His hero was supposed to have lived in Springfield, a generic American town name if there ever was one. Springfield is the second most common town name in the nation according to Knuth. Written in the back of my book is a notation of a Springfield in Washington Township, Keokuk County, which turned out not to be the right one. One glimmer of hope was the fact that Gillhoff's eldest niece had spent a couple years teaching in the United States and reportedly visited the real Jürnjakob before she returned in 1912. In fact, according to the novel she even taught

one term in his community. But I now know from the passenger list that she arrived in New York on April 21, 1910, just a week after the census was taken, too late to reveal an American location. However, it does confirm that she is portrayed in the book with her real first name, Magdalena. She probably did not teach in Jürnjakob's community anyhow, just traveled there for a visit at the end of her stay, in which case it would not have mattered.¹⁴ I also learned that there were Gillhoff descendants in Bremen, where the author's brother had long served as a pastor. But that angle too proved futile.

I had lectured in the DDR, in the Mecklenburg city of Rostock no less, while on a Fulbright professorship in 1987, arranged by my Bremen host who had some contacts to migration researchers in the East. I took up the Jürnjakob quest with the Rostock colleagues right away, though as I put it in a letter, I'd been schlepping the idea along with me for a decade.¹⁵ As Knuth also discovered, even though the book had never been republished in the DDR lest it give people ideas about emigration, or suggest that capitalist America was the land of unlimited opportunities, it remained in the consciousness of many Mecklenburgers of a certain age. Finally in 1988 in the unwitting twilight of the DDR, an anthology of Gillhoff's work was authorized, including some selections from *Jürnjakob*, and my Rostock contacts immediately sent me a copy.¹⁶ I had hoped to meet the author Hartmut Brun, a hobby researcher and Gillhoff enthusiast from the author's home area, but a planned second DDR visit in 1988 was cancelled because I got a new job in Texas and spent the summer moving instead. By my next visit in summer 1989 the Rostockers passed along Brun's address, and I immediately took up correspondence with him a few months before the fall of the wall. In the very different atmosphere of summer 1990, he generously invited me to his home, put me up for a couple days and showed me around the Gillhoff sites in the community, especially the schoolhouse where Gillhoff's father had taught and the one where he drafted the book.¹⁷

Brun had identified two potential surnames for the person behind Jürnjakob that I tried to pursue in American records: Wiedow or Jalass (also the title of an article he published in an obscure DDR venue in 1986).¹⁸ Both of these names had the disadvantage that they practically invited misspelling by American census takers, and could have ended up in several different phonetic Soundex codes with which the censuses had been indexed, depending on how they were pronounced and spelled.¹⁹ Jalass was spelled with an initial J but might instead be up spelled with Y, and American often have the talent to turn an Sß into a B. In the case of Wiedow, Germans are notorious for confusing an English W and V; one young woman we published in our first immigrant letter anthology showed off her linguistic progress to a friend back home: "I speak wery well Englisch."²⁰ Moreover, the ending "ow" might

leave the “W” silent and dropped, or it could get pronounced more like “of.” In fact, Knuth found three families in the 1870 census of his home county, two spelling the name like a presidential “Veto” and another recorded as “Wetor.” So I looked instead at other names of neighbors and traveling companions that Swehn mentioned, and again concluded they were probably pseudonyms. And even if they were not, his in-laws were named Schroeder, the Low German equivalent of Schneider or tailor: number eight on the German surname frequency list. Before the days of Ancestry.com in the microfilm and Soundex era, it would have required a number of weeks to check out all the Schroeders in Iowa. Nowadays with Ancestry, a search reveals that there were 1,837 people in Iowa with the name Schroeder or one of its Soundex phonetic equivalents in 1880. Swehn lists a number of other neighbors who accompanied him to Iowa: Schuldt, Timmermann, Düde, Saß, Wiedow, Völß and Brüning, plus Schneider whom he mentions as a neighbor. All either very short names that would be grouped with many others in Soundex, or rather common ones. Timmermann, the Low German equivalent of Zimmermann or carpenter, is not quite as common as Schroeder but again not exactly a rarity, with 168 of them in Iowa in 1880. I must have followed one of them in Iowa, and as I found out later, I got pretty close, even to the right county, Clayton, a veritable Mecklenburger nest, but I was in the wrong township. I did find both a Wiedow and a Jalass, but neither fit the book’s description of someone who arrived unmarried at age 20 in 1868. So I was beginning to think the historical Jürnjakob was a composite. But as Kunth writes about me, “He had no idea how close he was to ‘cracking the case.’”²¹

Despite my historical training and my experience working with manuscript census sources ever since the transatlantic tracing done in my dissertation, my unknown competitor Knuth had other advantages that proved to be crucial. Most decisive was the fact that he himself had Iowa and Mecklenburg roots, and actually knew some Mecklenburger Platt, which required some deciphering on my part. In fact, one could almost say that Knuth and the historical Jürnjakob had been neighbors, or at least from the same county. What sounded to me like fictional or generic German family names sounded to Knuth like neighbors and acquaintances from his youth. There was even a Springfield which he remembered, now listed on Iowa Ghost Towns as having been plotted in 1869.²² As I learned only a decade later when he went public with his findings, Knuth had made his first breakthrough already in 1988 before I had ventured very deeply into my research, and followed up in a big way when he returned to Iowa for his 50-year high school reunion in 1993. Knuth proved beyond a doubt that the historical Jürnjakob was one Carl Wiedow, who had immigrated in the same year at the same age as the book’s main character. His wife’s name, Wieschen Schroeder in the book, which I

took as a diminutive for Louise, was actually Lieschen instead, a nickname for Elisabeth. The book only names three of his children, but the names and ages fit pretty well with the real family, and a daughter-in-law also bears her real name of Cora.²³ In a way it's fortunate that Knuth cracked the case rather than I. His Iowa connections were much better, and he did a remarkable job of following up on clues and tracking down descendants and neighbors and some of their correspondence. He was able to verify a number of the often odd incidents that show up in the book. Some of them document elements of the book that were based on Wiedow's experience; others are rather clearly based on someone else or simply invented.²⁴

Once he established that Wiedow was the historical Jürnjakob, Knuth set about the task of tracking down descendants and their stories. While there are no letters of the old teacher to Wiedow that have survived, Knuth did find a couple to Wiedow's sister-in-law, one in 1890 and another in 1907, the latter actually mentioning that "perhaps you have heard already from Wiedow" about the death of the teacher's wife two years earlier.²⁵ Author Gillhoff's brother Theodore came to Massachusetts in the 1920s and wrote three letters to Wiedow's pastor in Victor, Iowa, inquiring about the Wiedow family. The first is worth citing in detail, not least for the fact that it kept totally silent about the novel: "Our father . . . was for many years in correspondence with a Wiedow in Victor, Iowa. This Wiedow emigrated as a young man to America. A long-time faithful devotion to my father, who was his teacher, and great love for his home village, Glaisin . . . is expressed in his letters . . . my brothers in Germany and I . . . would very much like to know, if the elderly Wiedow is alive. . . . Through his letters, which attest to his honest character and his sincere Christianity, and which, even when in earnest, still always were full of simple golden humor, he has become ever more dear." Theodore wrote two more letters by 1924, sending his greetings to Mother Jalass and Mother Wiedow, the historical Jürnjakob's wife who lived till 1930. He also mentions that his brother publishes a periodical called *Mecklenburger Monatshefte*, but he does not breathe a word about the novel Johannes authored. One of Knuth's astonishing findings is that not a single Iowa descendant was aware that their ancestor was the basis for a German bestseller.²⁶

The Jalass family, which was related by marriage to Wiedows, also has an interesting connection to the novel. As Knuth relates, a German graduate student discovered the factual basis of one tragic immigrant death in the book, when a cart traveling along a train track got hit by a locomotive and one Jochen Jalass was killed, only a few months after arriving in America. This was actually recorded in an 1895 Iowa newspaper, and Knuth found the death record in the parish records of the church where Wiedows belonged. Gillhoff used the victim's real name, but he seems not to have grasped that the

accident involved a railroad handcart used by sections crews rather than an ordinary farm cart: “You’re probably amazed that they drove on the tracks and that the cart was built to the right track width, so that it fit. Dear Friend, I can inform you, from such things you notice that this land lies on the other side of the world.” From here the account digresses to the point that in America much more attention was paid to the degree of property damage than to the loss of life, a very common refrain in both immigrant letters and the German American press, although it also was or became a widespread perception on the German side as well.²⁷

Either Wiedow or his ghostwriter was well informed about the agricultural potential farther west, and was not taken in by the illusion that “rain follows the plow.” After some anecdotes about land scarcity and neighbors moving to the Dakotas comes this quip: “Whatever lies beyond the 100th parallel, that’s beyond the rain line. They should keep their nose out of that. Otherwise it can easily happen that they live to regret it.” It is highly unlikely that a German schoolteacher arrived at this insight on his own, fifteen years before Walter Prescott Webb published his book defining the boundaries of the Great Plains, so this is definitely attributable to a well-read German American farmer.²⁸

The chapter on corn harvesting provides more evidence of a mixture of what Wiedow got right and what Gillhoff failed to understand, since that far north in Germany, corn (what the Germans call *Mais*) was virtually unknown a century ago. Ten years after Jürnjakob left for America, there were not even 100 acres in all of Mecklenburg planted in corn, or about 1 acre for every thousand planted to small grains.²⁹ The chapter starts off quite plausibly with an explanation of the different number of pounds to a bushel: 60 for wheat, 70 for ear corn, 56 for shelled corn, although the conversion from an American pound is slightly off regardless of whether the reference was to the old Mecklenburg pound or the metric half-kilo commonly called a pound. But then the ghost writer takes over: “Corn was a lot of work. In the early years we did it backwards. We gathered it together in the field. There we shelled and hulled and rubbed out the grains” (he uses the same verb as that for hulling peas). Even city folks know how tough that is until the grain has dried: what the letter writer was talking about was “shocking corn”: cutting off the cornstalks and putting them up with their ears in shocks, and later shucking or husking it there. But Gillhoff misunderstood that. Thus he also confused a husking bee with a corn shelling bee, which to the best of my knowledge never existed: “Two ears were rubbed against one another, and the grains sprang out.” I can feel the blisters on my hand just reading that! Nobody in their right mind would shell more than one ear of corn by hand, and there were hand-cranked machines that shelled one ear at a time even before the

Civil War. Burning corncobs in the stove Gillhoff got right, but he was confused in thinking they also burned corn stalks, or that stalks got so hard they had to be chopped up with an axe.³⁰

In the chapter on farming, Jürnjakob makes a rather pungent observation: “With the manure, over here it’s not so honored like over there, where they pay attention to every forkful and children gather it up from the road.” Then he tells of a neighbor who had who had manure lying all around the place and behind the fence, whereupon Jürnjakob made him an offer: “I’ll haul your manure away. I’ll do it all for free. I’ll do it just to be neighborly.” So Jürnjakob hauled away 100 loads, and of course his crops showed it. And the next year his neighbor wised up and hauled it himself. Although in this rare case Jürnjakob does not identify the ethnicity of the neighbor, this is a common stereotype that German-Americans had of Anglos, one that I also heard from my grandpa in my youth. In fact, it is so widespread it’s hard to say whether it’s drawn from a letter or is part of Gillhoff’s larger image of America. But the rest of the paragraph does reflect experience on the ground: the observation that freshly cleared land doesn’t need manure and is so rich that small grain grown on such land falls down and lodges in the first few years after clearing, though it doesn’t mention that corn is immune to these problems.³¹ This is immediately followed by an amusing story of how the collapse of hog prices led Swehn to feed excess piglets to the chickens, only to be followed by disastrous prices for eggs, which he then fed to his calves. Anyone who understands the least bit about feed conversions ratios will find this totally implausible (although chickens will eat virtually anything). Whether it originated from Jürnjakob or his ghostwriter, we can safely assume it is a shaggy dog story meant only to entertain, and perhaps to illustrate the farmer’s plight.³²

Some themes in the book could very plausibly have come from the historical Jürnjakob, but occur quite frequently in other immigrant letters as well. The scarcity, high expectations, and minimal performance of hired girls is one of them. Another is the advantages and practicality of American farm machinery and the minimal amount of hired labor used or needed. Women and rocking chairs elicit frequent comment from immigrants, normally as part of the stereotype of lazy, impractical American women. But Jürnjakob indicates that his wife was fond of her rocker as well: “Wieschen is sitting in her rocking chair and gazing at the sky. The rocking chair, that’s a regular passion with the women over here. It’s like the kids over there playing see-saw. Here every house has to have one. Wieschen has also learned that here already.”³³

Other aspects of the book line up very poorly with the Wiedows’ experience. Take for example the baptism of their first child. Jürnjakob tells about

a Methodist revivalist who came to the house: “He got himself all heated up preaching. But all the while his eyes kept going from the ham to the sausage and from the sausage to the ham.” Jürnjakob rebuffed him, telling him that the spiritual and the worldly didn’t mix. Not wanting their first child to be baptized by “one of this sort,” he and his wife set out on a two-day journey through swamps and bush to find a Lutheran pastor. But the terrain he describes does not sound the least bit like Iowa; more like the cutover of Michigan or northern Minnesota.³⁴ Beyond this circumstantial evidence, local records show that already upon arrival, the historical Jürnjakob found not only a thriving settlement of Mecklenburgers but also St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Garnavillo, which was twenty years old by the time the first Wiedow child was baptized there in 1873, records that provided the “smoking gun” for Knuth. The original St. Paul’s church building burned in 1878, with the result that the third Wiedow child was baptized at nearby Zion Lutheran in Clayton Center. So the swamp trek was either pure fiction or based on someone else entirely.³⁵

Even though he did not have to struggle through swamps to obtain a Lutheran baptism, that does not negate the importance of the Lutheran church in Wiedow’s life. In the book, the hero appears as a strong supporter of church construction, and he gives an amusing rendition of the various strategies of flattery and cajolery he used to persuade various neighbors and congregation members to contribute to their building project. First he convinced them they needed a bell, then that they needed a tower to put it in, and then a church so the tower didn’t look so odd standing alone on the hill. As it turns out, Knuth found a photo passed down in the Wiedow family of the church when the construction job almost finished: not their first church as in the novel but in their second community of Victor, Iowa, in 1895, replacing an older church at a congregation established already in 1868, the year Jürnjakob arrived in America. And who should be one of the workers up on the steeple scaffolding? Sure enough, as his descendants related, the historical Jürnjakob. According to the novel, he sent his teacher a photo of their church at some point; it may have been this very one. But in the novel the church got too small and had to be replaced by a bigger stone church, and the old one was turned into a schoolhouse; in fact the church is still in use to the present. Recent photos show no steeple, which got blown away by a windstorm in 1950 and replaced by a shorter one, but the window arrangement is the same as the 1895 photo in the Knuth book.³⁶

Apropos windows, Jürnjakob tells about building a new house and arranging to have an extra big window, 3 x 5 feet, on the south side. Although the Wiedow house is no longer standing, the descendants Knuth tracked down had photos of it, with the south window exactly like that in the book.³⁷ On

the other hand, there is a chapter about Jürnjakob's visit to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. But as Knuth discovered, descendants are unanimous in denying that Jürnjakob attended. So this must be based on another Mecklenburger, or perhaps simply created from what German and German-American newspapers wrote about the fair, which was a worldwide sensation.³⁸

It is apparent that, just as in the book, Wiedow accomplished an agile climb up the agricultural ladder from farmhand to renter to owner by age thirty-three, or to put it another way, after thirteen years in the country. For the most part, his youth was probably as poor as portrayed in the book. Gillhoff invented the name "Swehn" allegedly because Jürnjakob had been a swineherd. He was indeed an agricultural laborer as in the book, but apparently on a large estate fifty miles farther east rather than in his home village. And rather than herding swine, he was tending sheep as a *Schäferknecht*, i.e., shepherd's helper.³⁹ Both the book and Wiedow's descendants agree that he came over on a sailing ship, a fact that has only recently been confirmed, whereas by 1868 over 80 percent of immigrants—all but the very poorest—traveled by steamship. A "Carl Weedor," a 20-year-old laborer from Germany, arrived from Liverpool at New York on September 9, 1868, aboard the *James Foster, Jr.*, a three-masted packet ship that sailed this route regularly. It carried 422 passengers, more than 300 of whom were Irish or English and only 30 of whom were German. On its very next voyage arriving in New York on March 11, 1869, this ship under the same captain Armstrong was the subject of an inquiry because of inadequate cooking facilities and other abuses that sound very much like those related in the novel. Just 36 days later after what Swehn called one of the longest months of his life, another group of Mecklenburgers from his home village arrived in New York, among them his future in-laws Schroeders, who lent him the money to travel to Iowa.⁴⁰

Considering that he had arrived with nothing, Wiedow was not doing badly. According to the novel, he had enough money to get married after two and a half years; in fact it took four. But the scene of his courtship rings true: he sat down with his Wieschen and they counted up their money, coming up with a total of \$550. All across Germany, especially with the landowning peasant class, financial considerations continued to play a major role in marriage decisions throughout the nineteenth century and even beyond.⁴¹

Knuth concluded, and the manuscript agricultural census confirms, that Wiedow only rented a farm where he first settled in Clayton County down to 1880. Eight years after his marriage, when he had presumably moved up from farmhand status, the historical Jürnjakob was renting 90 acres of cropland which he worked with three horses. His 24 acres of corn yielded fifty bushels per acre; modest by today's standards, but only one of his neighbors did better. His 40 acres of wheat did poorly, less than ten bushels per acre, but his 16

acres of barley came in at fifteen. He, or probably his wife Elizabeth, milked five cows and brought in \$300 selling butter, one fourth the total value of farm products.⁴² But in Clayton County, bordering on the Mississippi, land was no longer very affordable by 1880. So the next year, the family moved to Victor in Iowa County, about 100 miles west of the river.

The ethnic makeup of the two counties provides some insight into Wiedow's priorities. The book portrays him as a German nationalist if not chauvinist, and very proud of his Mecklenburger heritage. Clayton County was the leading destination for Mecklenburgers in all Iowa, with more than a quarter of the statewide total in 1870. In 1880 shortly before Wiedows left, it was home to over 250 Mecklenburgers, nearly 600 including the second generation, among nearly 4,000 German natives. Including the second generation, one fourth of the county population was of German birth or parentage. Compared to Clayton County, Iowa County had barely half as many Mecklenburgers. They and Germans generally constituted a smaller presence both in absolute numbers and in percentage of total population.⁴³ Also present in Iowa County, just thirty miles from Wiedows' farm as the crow flies, was the German colony of Amana, but there is not a hint of it in the book, another indication that the historical Jürnjakob did not share the German nationalism of his ghostwriter.

Table 1.—Population Makeup of Carl Wiedow's Counties of Residence, 1880 Census

	Clayton County		Iowa County	
Total Population	28,829	100.0%	19,221	100.0%
Mecklenburgers	251	0.9%	128	0.7%
Mecklenburg Parentage	563	2.0%	238	1.2%
Total Germans	3,910	13.6%	2,124	11.1%
German Parentage	7,160	24.8%	3,467	18.0%

More important than German neighbors, it seems, was land that Wiedows could afford. They purchased first 80 acres and then another 80 making 160 acres, but so far as could be determined, they never farmed 320 acres as stated at one point in the book, unless they rented additional land. The 1885 Iowa census records a quarter section of land, i.e., 160 acres, the same

acreage shown in plat books from 1886, 1900, and 1917, the latter after son Charlie had taken over.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the 1900 and 1910 censuses do not give property values, but both list Wiedow's holding as O.F.F. (Owns Farm Free): owns as opposed to rents, farm as opposed to house, free as opposed to mortgaged. At one point in the book it's stated that his farm's value runs in the five figures. At 160 acres, a value of \$75 per acre would come out to \$12,000, a very plausible figure.⁴⁵ Wiedow's commodious barn was still standing for Knuth to photograph it in the early 1990s. According to oral accounts, it was the biggest in the neighborhood, so that was where the community got together for hog butchering. So those buckets of sweat that Jürnjakob writes about in the book did in fact pay off.⁴⁶ However, it is unlikely that this sweat was expended on clearing land. Much of Clayton County was originally woodland, but it is highly improbable that a farm renter would clear land that he did not own. If Wiedow started out in a log cabin clearing land, it was probably in Iowa County, where there are still a couple of patches of woods in the creek bottoms of his farm today, but in fact most of his farm was originally virgin prairie grassland.⁴⁷

The book includes one letter each from Jürnjakob's two youngest children.⁴⁸ They provide further evidence of authenticity, containing numerous elements that someone in Germany could hardly know. The son's description of putting up loose hay, and a hay barn with 7 x 10 foot doors on rollers, and a hay fork rig with a track suspended from the center of the roof peak, sounds just like what I witnessed as a very small child.⁴⁹ Even more convincing for me was kids taking lunch to school in a syrup bucket, a custom that survived down into my lifetime (all that was omitted was the Karo brand name). But Jürnjakob's son also mentions a hog cholera epidemic in which one half of Iowa's swine died. The only similar epidemic was in 1913, well after the letters were written judging by internal evidence, so it is likely that Gillhoff obtained this information from other letters or simply from the press, perhaps inserting it to refute overly optimistic images of America.⁵⁰

The section on Indians at the beginning of this chapter also reveals much about Gillhoff's literary techniques. Jürnjakob writes of a visit to a friend, "Heinrich Fründt's youngest son," now a pastor and teacher at an Indian school in Minnesota. There was indeed a Mecklenburger Heinrich Fründt directly in Wiedow's neighborhood, but all of his four sons remained farmers, and none of them moved to Minnesota. Nor was there a Lutheran Indian mission in Minnesota for more than a brief period much earlier. But the description of the Indian school has a ring of authenticity, in all likelihood based on the Missouri Synod Lutheran mission to Stockbridge Indians in Shawano County, Wisconsin. It was founded in 1898 by pastor Theodore Nickel—indeed a Mecklenburger who immigrated in 1885 at age 20. But he

was from Güstrow, more than sixty miles from where Wiedow and Gillhoff originated. Most likely this story came to Gillhoff via his brother, who was also a pastor and may have known Nickel from his seminary studies, or when he returned to Germany temporarily in the 1890s. The attribution to the Iowa letter writer was almost certainly fictional.⁵¹

Since the year 2000 there is an English translation of the novel, done by a retired Lutheran pastor with Mecklenburg roots, Richard Trost.⁵² Unfortunately, it is further removed from the historical Jürnjakob not just in language but also in content, so readers with sufficient language ability are recommended to stick with the German version. Admittedly, the language and style of the book makes it challenging to translate even if written by a peasant farmer. Moreover, Swehn makes some of his most pithy observations in Low German—Mecklenburger Platt—even if it constitutes merely 5 percent of the text. Although the Platt sections could easily have been marked by some print convention such as italics, there is no indication of what was Platt- and what was Hochdeutsch in the English version, except for an occasional, almost random High or Low German phrase thrown in for flavor. Much of the original has been cut from the translation, without any indication of where cuts took place, and with selections that do not correspond with cuts in the most common abridged paperback German edition.⁵³

Although Trost probably served rural parishioners, his agricultural history is somewhat weak. What he translated as a corn picker was no doubt a grain reaper and binder. The compound German word translates literally to “corn-mowing-machine,” but “corn” back in Mecklenburg meant small grain, and the mechanical corn picker only came into widespread use in the 1930s if not the 1940s, whereas McCormick’s reaper was in common use by the Civil War.⁵⁴ “*Saemaschine*,” which is translated as a “cornplanter,” is probably a grain drill; in English one sows wheat and plants corn, and a little further down Jürnjakob says he has a corn planter on order. Another description of machinery is totally off: “We have one disc with plates, and then we have a regular disc.” What Swehn actually wrote was: “one disk harrow and an ordinary harrow.”⁵⁵ This error reflects a linguistic development somewhat like the term “manual typewriter.” Early farmers started out with a simple harrow, what was later called a tooth- or spike-harrow, the next step up from dragging a thorn bush across a plowed field. Then came the invention of the disk harrow or its literal counterpart, *Scheiben-Egge* in German. But in the course of time the old spike harrow became so overshadowed that it was hardly mentioned. However, in English, the “disk” part of the compound word took over in common speech, whereas in German, the “harrow” or *Egge* part, to where the old tooth harrow definition was practically forgotten, also by lexicographers. But these are minor issues of translation except for historians of

agricultural or technology; there are also broader and more serious concerns with the translation.

Earlier Gillhoff scholars such as Hartmut Brun had already argued that the chapter, "At My Mother's Deathbed," was actually based on Gillhoff's mother and her death. Trost still thought it was based on the real immigrant, but in fact Gillhoff told a friend shortly before his death that it was based on his own mother, and the evidence unearthed by Knuth strongly confirms this. He had hoped to work back from the month and date of the mother's death and her age in order to find her real name in the death records in Iowa or the village baptismal records in Mecklenburg, but to no avail. Knuth later discovered that Wiedow's mother apparently died much earlier than it appears in the novel, and was not widowed at the time as the narrative would have it. Hers was not the proverbial problem cited in the book, "You can't transplant an old tree." In fact, both of Wiedow's parents and two younger siblings followed their son Carl two years later in 1870, possibly financed by him. The last record Knuth finds of the mother was in 1874. What really nails the case down is the weekday and date of death in the novel which allowed Knuth to identify the probable year as 1905, which corresponded exactly with the life dates of Gillhoff's mother, and an age which is only two years off.⁵⁶

One contribution that Trost does make beyond translation is to check on the hymn numbers that Jürnjakob cites. Our hero was happy to see posted the number of a familiar anthem which he knew from the Mecklenburg hymnal in his youth, and cut loose with "A Mighty Fortress," only to get a poke in the ribs from his wife and realize they were singing something altogether different, "You are Mine and Will be Mine Forever." Trost was able to verify that the hymn numbers and titles Jürnjakob cited corresponded exactly with the 1890 German hymnal published by Missouri Synod Lutherans.⁵⁷

Trost's translation was reviewed by my longtime collaborator Wolfgang Helbich, himself a professional translator of some 25 works, among them Schlessinger's *A Thousand Days*. He raised some serious issues, the most important of which is this: "It is hard to decide whether [the translator] applies the red pencil of a rather extreme version of Political Correctness or whether he tries to expurgate everything but everything that might present the German immigrant in an unfavorable light."⁵⁸ Among the examples Helbich points out, the translation substitutes "Some people" for the original "Womenfolk" who "turn and run when an angleworm crosses their path."⁵⁹ A prominent theme noticeable throughout the book is the incomprehensibility of the female sex: "Dear friend, let me tell you, that's a totally different nation that buttons on the left." Or to put it another way, "That's a totally different nationality that wears its hair long."⁶⁰ So who is speaking here, the patriarchal peasant who, nonetheless, often admits that he has underestimated his wife

Wieschen, and both in the book and in the memories of descendants, sounds like a very indulgent father toward his daughters? Or is it the reclusive, confirmed bachelor German schoolteacher? I suspect the latter.⁶¹ In fact, one of Wiedow's daughters died unexpectedly in 1913, and within four months the historical Jürnjakob was dead at age 66, from a broken heart according to family tradition, and confirmed by his obituary: "Last summer his daughter, Elizabeth, was taken from him by the cold hand of death. This filled his heart with deep sorrow."⁶²

Helbich cites various instances where much of Jürnjakob's ethnocentrism was silently suppressed in the translation. One example is Jürnjakob's praise of black folks' fried chicken recipe, as related by his daughter: "The people who make a recipe that good are not among the least of God's nations." But in the next sentence his daughter reports, but Trost omits, "Otherwise he doesn't think much of the Negroes, because they're descended from Ham."⁶³ His reservations toward Indians also get considerably watered down, though Trost does retain this gem: "One of those Indians found a horseshoe that accidentally was still nailed to a horse's hoof."⁶⁴ Then there is a notoriously unhygienic neighbor: "His house is a real pigsty. In my life, I've never seen such a dirty place . . . Regiments of bugs were exercising on the walls. Only they couldn't move—they were in dirt up to their belly buttons." What Trost dropped from the original is the characterization of the person as a "Polack" by the name of "Scharwenski"; in the English version he is transformed to "Schwenske" with no ethnic attribution, a name that could just as well be German.⁶⁵ Helbich also mentions the "malice" toward the Irish on the voyage over, something that always struck me as implausible because it portrayed the two nationalities engaged in verbal combat without explaining how they came up with a common language.⁶⁶ One could also add the neighbor he reportedly cured of drinking, allegedly with a good beating. Naturally the drunkard was an "Englander" named Smith: "My Englishman understood three arts: keeping his nose up in the air, being lazy, and drinking."⁶⁷

With all the ethnic prejudices that show up, one that was conspicuous by its absence is anti-Semitism. In fact, a search of the digitized German text confirms that Jews are mentioned only twice in the whole volume, and then only in passing, with a fairly neutral tone. Jürnjakob talks about the voyage over where his food was stolen from his tin pot on the cookstove and he was forced to resort to eating his portion of meat raw or stealing from others: "One time I also ate up a Polish Jew's pork ration raw, because I figured, That's against his religion. Of course I was also hungry." Much later he mentions various travelers who sat around in the evening telling tales, including: "the guy who had all the nice stories about Polish Jews." In real life, one

would surely think there were some Jewish peddlers who showed up at the farm, but for Jürnjakob that was apparently no occasion for comment.⁶⁸

It is possible, however, that the translator's "improvements" and expurgations inadvertently get closer to the Iowa farmer by toning down the ideology of a provincial schoolteacher, a calling notorious for its nationalistic chauvinism (think, for example, of the schoolmaster Kantorek in *All Quiet on the Western Front*).⁶⁹ Although I found the novel's Jürnjakob a generally compelling and sympathetic character, the final chapter, entitled "Of the War and the German Awakening in the States," left me with more than a few qualms. A German commentator calls it the book's Achilles heel, the unlucky thirteenth chapter.⁷⁰ It was silently dropped from the Trost translation, as it was from most postwar German editions when it was apparent where extreme German nationalism could lead.⁷¹ But thanks to Knuth's work we know that the historic Jürnjakob died already in 1913, so this chapter is all Mecklenburg schoolmaster rather than Iowa farmer, unless it was based on immigrant correspondence from someone altogether different (which is unlikely because correspondence dropped off sharply as soon as the war began).⁷² There are suggestions that this chapter was tacked on at the last minute to improve sales and perhaps to get it printed at all despite wartime scarcity. Indeed, the previous chapter ends with a tone of finality that functions quite well as an ending.

One aspect of the book had always struck me as rather implausible, almost too good to be true: that the son of the poorest day laborer in the village had prospered in the New World to such an extent that he could send his son back to Germany to study medicine. That, however, proved to be largely true, although the son, Henry, remained on the farm till age 20 when he began high school, and probably financed much of his own education. He did, however, receive a gold watch from his father that was passed down in the family, something also related in the book.⁷³ Henry and his wife traveled to Germany three times, first in 1902 when he took a six month course in surgery, and again in 1911 and 1913. Despite the German nationalism that shines through in many passages of the book (whether from his father or from Gillhoff), Henry married an Anglo-American neighbor, Cora Simpson, and adopted her Presbyterian religion even before moving to California where Lutherans were relatively scarce. Henry's eldest sister married physician Dr. Cary Sheppard, a Pennsylvania native of obviously British origins. Two other widow children, Elizabeth and Hans/Charley, married into the Anglo-American Forney family. A fifth child, Bertha or Berti in the novel, stayed closest to Germanic cultural circles, marrying Dutch immigrant Henry Nywiede. But with respect to German spouses for his children, the historical Jürnjakob was batting zero for five.⁷⁴

Knuth also located two letters by the adoptive daughter of Wiedow's eldest son Henry to Iowa relatives, written fifty years apart from California, where her father had moved around 1922 for his health. The letter from 1990 includes a fascinating and revealing tidbit about the historical Jürnjakob's wife: "Grossmutter, as we called her, lived with Aunt Bertha until her death. She always seemed to love me when she visited us in California or when we went to see her at Aunt Bertha's. She spoke very broken English and Bertha talked to her almost entirely in German. My Dad could not speak much German . . ." She goes on to wonder whether the historical Jürnjakob was born in the U.S. because none of the family that she could remember, such as the aunt and uncle she visited on the farm, had the least bit of an accent in English.⁷⁵ (In fact, that uncle wrote in a letter included in the novel, "I want to write to you in German. But I do better in English. Father has to help me when I do German. All summer long I went to German school." His sister "Berti"/Aunt Bertha may have done better with her German letter, but she says it took her seven weeks to write.)⁷⁶ About her father, Jürnjakob's first-born, the granddaughter goes on to say, "One of the reasons that I know his German was very limited was because of the stories he used to tell of trying to explain to a policeman that he was lost and needed directions."⁷⁷ So the historical Wieschen was never much at home in the English language, but apparently had the means and the courage for train trips to California. And her eldest son, despite his father's German nationalism (at least as portrayed by Gillhoff) and his time spent in Germany, did not have a good command of its language.

Even with Knuth's discoveries and those I have built upon them, there is still much that remains ambiguous as to what parts of the book we can attribute to the historical Jürnjakob, a real Iowa immigrant farmer, and how much is attributable to his ghostwriter Gillhoff. But perhaps the strongest conclusion we can draw from the historical Jürnjakob is the evidence his example brings of the openness and assimilative pull of American society for European immigrants and their children, even in German enclaves of rural Iowa.

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Notes

¹ This piece originated as a lecture given at the symposium, "German Iowa and the Global Midwest," University of Iowa, October 6–8, 2016. My thanks to the organizers for their invitation, and to the participants for their feedback.

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² All citations are from this illustrated edition, set in Roman type: Johannes Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn der Amerikafahrer* (Berlin: Steiniger-Verlage, im Dom-Verlag, 1939). The original edition set in Fraktur type (Berlin: Verlag der Täglichen Rundschau, 1920) is available on Google books with full-text search capacity, with a title page indicating the print run from 111,000 to 120,000. Several new editions of the book have been published in the twenty-first century, including an audio book and a large print edition.

³ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 42-45. All translations are my own.

⁴ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 48-50.

⁵ H.K.A. Krüger, "Aus Johannes Gillhoffs letztem Jahr," *Mecklenburgische Monatshefte* 6 (1930), 130-33. Much research and speculation could have been spared if this article had been more widely known or its title more descriptive.

⁶ *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, ed. with Wolfgang Helbich and Ulrike Sommer, (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991); *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters they Wrote Home*, ed. with Wolfgang Helbich, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006); both originally published in German language versions and translated by Susan Carter Vogel.

⁷ Eldon L. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters? In Search of Jürnjakob Swehn* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2005).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-6.

⁹ Letter of December 7, 1979 from NDR to WDK, including ms. "Jürnjakob Swehn, der Amerikafahrer": Johannes Gillhoff zu seinem 100. Geburtstag," first broadcast on 25 May, 1961; quote on p. 20.

¹⁰ Friedrich Griese, ed., *Johannes Gillhoff: Ein Lebensbild* (Rostock: C. Hinstorff, 1940), 12, 17.

¹¹ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 13-14. For more on his methodology see Krüger, "Aus Johannes Gillhoffs letztem Jahr," 131-32.

¹² Johannes Gillhoff and Theodor Gillhoff, *Möne Markow: Der neue Amerikafahrer* (Berlin: Gebr. Weiss, 1957).

¹³ Hartmut Brun, "Nachwort," in Brun, ed., *Johannes Gillhoff: Ein Lesebuch* (Rostock: Hinstorff Verlag, 1988), 373.

¹⁴ Magdalena Gillhoff, age 20, arrived in New York from Bremen on the ship *Zieten*. Passenger Arrival Lists, New York, New York; Microfilm Serial: T715; Microfilm Roll 1458; Line: 15; Page: 2. Accessed via Ancestry.com. The records of Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, show no indication that Magdalena ever taught at Wiedow's parish, St. James Lutheran in Victor, Iowa.

¹⁵ WDK, letter to Dr. Rainer Mühle, Rostock, July 10, 1987. These contacts grew into a productive collaboration with Mühle and two other young DDR scholars. I informally advised Axel Lubinski's dissertation, *Entlassen aus dem Untertanenverband: Die Amerika-Auswanderung aus Meklenburg-Strelitz im 19. Jahrhundert* (Osnabrück: Rasch Verlag, 1997), the standard work on this group from a European perspective. I served on the doctoral committee of Uwe Reich, who wrote an ambitious transatlantic dissertation, *Aus Cottbus und Arnswalde in die Neue Welt: Amerika-Auswanderung aus Ostelbien am 19. Jahrhundert* (Osnabrück: Rasch Verlag, 1997). English-language contributions of all three scholars are included in Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagler, eds., *People in Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Letter of Rainer Mühle, Rostock, to WDK, Sept. 9, 1988, announcing the sending of Brun, ed., *Johannes Gillhoff: Ein Lesebuch*.

¹⁷ WDK to Hartmut Brun, Polz, August 3, 1989. In my initial letter I wrote (auf Deutsch), "I am still convinced that much is based on one or more (but probably one) historical person. There are many Anglicisms that a normal German would hardly know; the weights and measures, acreages, and wage figures also correspond exactly to the historical reality."

¹⁸ Hartmut Brun, "Wiedow oder Jalass? Zum 125. Geburtstag von Johannes Gillhoff am 24. Mai," *Mecklenburgische Kirchenzeitung*, May 25, 1986.

¹⁹ With the rationale that people might need to document their age to prove their Social Security eligibility, the 1880 and 1900 U.S. manuscript censuses had been indexed in a WPA project, converting all names to phonetically equivalent consonant groups in a system known as Soundex, based on the initial letter and up to three consonants. For details see https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/soundex_1.html.

²⁰ Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer, *News from the Land of Freedom*, 597.

²¹ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 14.

²² *Ibid.*, 15-16. [Http://www.iowaghosttowns.com/stowns3.html](http://www.iowaghosttowns.com/stowns3.html). The Springfield in Clayton County is one of five in Iowa alone.

²³ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 12, 17-28.

²⁴ For these contributions, Eldon Knuth was awarded an honorary membership in the Johannes Gillhoff Society in 1999; in 2002 he was awarded the Fritz-Reuter Medal, named after Mecklenburg's most famous writer; and he was named the first honorary citizen of Jürnjakob's home village of Glaisin. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-65. Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 82-84.

²⁸ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 81. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931). "Rainfall Follows the Plow," <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ii.049>.

²⁹ *Zeitschrift des Preussischen Statistischen Bureaus* 22 (1878) 108.

³⁰ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 223-25. The person generally credited with inventing the first successful hand-cranked corn sheller was Lester E. Denison of Middlesex County, CT, who was issued a patent in 1839.

³¹ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 55-56. Terry G. Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 18, 34. Russel L. Gerlach, *Immigrants in the Ozarks: A Study of Ethnic Geography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 107-8, 130-31.

³² Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 56-60.

³³ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 73-74; see also 65, 68-71 on the unsuitability of Americans as servant girls.

³⁴ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 193-94. There is not even an index entry for "swamp" in the entire book by Jean C. Prior, *Landforms of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), and much of Clayton County is a karst landscape where surface water quickly disappears underground.

³⁵ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 49, 52-53.

³⁶ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 168, 204-10. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 90. A profile of this congregation is included in James C. Dinwiddie, *History of Iowa County, Iowa, and Its People*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1915), 178-80, including photographs of the church and its interior. However, Wiedow was not listed among the members of the building committee for the new church completed in 1895.

³⁷ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 51. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 21, 37-38, 90.

³⁸ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 142-57. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 66. For one example of the interest the World's Fair generated in immigrant correspondence, see Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer, *News from the Land of Freedom*, 244, 246-49.

³⁹ Mecklenburg is one of the few German states for which individual-level census returns have survived. The 1867 returns show a Carl Wiedow, born 1848, one of 30 members of a household on a large estate in Retzow, Ritteramt Stavenhagen, just south of Plau.

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⁴⁰ Ray Cohn, "The Transition from Sail to Steam in Immigration to the United States," *Journal of Economic History* 65 (2005), 469-495, here Table 1. Another scholar and I both independently from one another discovered the same very probable match in the passenger lists: Rolf Gödecke und Eldon L. Knuth, "Jürnjakob Swehns Segelschiff;" *Johannes-Gillhoff-Jahrbuch* 10 (2013), 25-26. *Report of Special Committee Appointed by the Commissioners of Emigration of the State of New York to Investigate into Complaints of Passengers of Ship James Foster, Jr.* (New York, D. Taylor, book and job printer, 1869). Online at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100585299/Home>. Schroeders arrived on the steamship *Germania* on October 15, 1868.

⁴¹ Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer, *News from the Land of Freedom*, 250, presents one example of a rural emigrant traumatized before he left by his sister's forced marriage, "all for nothing but Mammon." This also brings to mind a story I heard from a Westfalian friend and immigration historian, Heinz-Ulrich Kammeier, whose grandmother was of landowning peasant stock. In that region, farms were numbered by size, the biggest farm being Number 1 and so on down. When she came of courting age, she was told: "You can marry for love all right, but above number 10 is out of the question." Mecklenburg was not that far away, geographically or in its mentality; Swehn's courtship is portrayed in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 46-47.

⁴² 1880 Census, Agricultural Schedule: Read Twp., Clayton Co., Iowa; Archive Collection Number: T1156; Roll: 19; Page: 12; Line: 3; accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁴³ The 1880 total and German born population figures for Clayton and Iowa County are from published census data accessed through the Great American History Machine. The other figures on Mecklenburgers and second-generation Germans were obtained through exact-match searches on the Ancestry.com 1880 Census database. The second generation includes all persons with either or both parents born in Germany or Mecklenburg.

⁴⁴ *Plat Book of Iowa County, Iowa* (Warner & Foote, 1886), 12. The Wiedow farm was located in the NW quarter of Section 20, Twp. 79 W, R 12 N. *Atlas of Iowa County, Iowa* (Huebinger Survey and Map Publishing Co., 1900), 17. *Atlas of Iowa County, Iowa* (Mason City: Anderson Publishing Co., 1917), Lincoln Twp. Currently, 250th St. and B Ave. form the north and west boundaries of the farm.

⁴⁵ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 53. 1900 Census: Lincoln Twp., Iowa Co., Iowa; Roll: 438; Page: 4B; Enumeration District: 0045; FHL microfilm: 1240438. 1910 Census: Lincoln Twp., Iowa Co., Iowa; Roll: T624_407; Page: 7A; Enumeration District: 0048; FHL microfilm: 1374420; accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁴⁶ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 31, 56.

⁴⁷ Ironically, there is more tree growth to be seen on the farm on Google Earth than there was on the *A.T. Andreas' Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* ([Chicago: Andreas Atlas Co.], 1875), 52, where the nearest woods were half a mile away. After settlement when prairie fires were suppressed, trees often established themselves on what was originally grassland. My thanks to Marilyn Rogers of the Iowa County Historical Society for this information.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-76. Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 125-41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139-40. Cf. the section on loose hay in Steven R. Hoffbeck, *The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), pp. 83-94.

⁵⁰ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 140. The hog cholera epidemic peaked in 1913: statewide losses in Iowa were 1.8 million, only somewhat over one quarter, but losses in some counties did exceed one half. USDA Farmers Bulletin #590 (1914), 1-2. "Hans"/Charly was born in 1884 and married in 1911, so his letter was written well before 1913.

⁵¹ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 121-30. Nickel's wife, Lydia, was also the daughter of a Lutheran minister, Charles F. Ebert. But there is no indication from the birthplaces of her siblings or children that she had ever lived in Iowa. Their son, also named Theodore (1894-1986), is listed as having been born in Germany to an American citizen.

⁵² Richard Lorenz August Trost, trans., *Letters of a German American Farmer: Jürnjakob Swehn Travels to America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000).

⁵³ Johannes Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn: Briefe des Amerikafahrers* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1965), Taschenbuch Bd. 91.

⁵⁴ Harold C. Livesay, *American Made: Shapers of the American Economy*, 3rd ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012), chap. 3. Thomas Burnell Colbert, "Iowa Farmers and Mechanical Corn Pickers, 1900–1952," *Agricultural History* 74:2 (Spring, 2000), 530-544.

⁵⁵ Trost's error is perhaps excusable; another translator tried to put a disk way out in Fredericksburg, Texas in 1846, two decades before they were invented. James C. Kearney, trans., *Friedrichsburg: A Novel*, reviewed in *Journal of Southern History* 79:4 (2013), 946.

⁵⁶ Trost, *Letters*, xii. Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 67-68, 171-72.

⁵⁷ Trost, *Letters*, ix, 108-9. Original in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 197-98. The hymn numbers are still the same in the German hymnal my father received at his confirmation in 1927.

⁵⁸ Review in *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 47.1 (2002): 145-47.

⁵⁹ Trost, *Letters*, 66. Original in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 123.

⁶⁰ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 95, 120.

⁶¹ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 131-34.

⁶² Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 69-70.

⁶³ Trost, *Letters*, 70-71. Original in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 132.

⁶⁴ Trost, *Letters*, 66. Original in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 121-25, quote 123.

⁶⁵ Trost, *Letters*, 117. Original in Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob Swehn*, 210-11.

⁶⁶ However, it may be worth noting what was related to me in 1975 at the Goethe Institute in Lüneburg just west of Mecklenburg: during the postwar occupation the local Plattdeutsch speakers on the Lüneburger Heide could make themselves understood with the Scottish Highlander troops, each speaking their own respective dialects.

⁶⁷ Oral tradition passed down in the family to Knuth revealed that it was through a less violent but much more pungent technique, leaving the passed out drunkard with the impression that he had soiled his own pants. That was omitted from the book, but Knuth related it to me in a phone conversation.

⁶⁸ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob*, 25, 226. There were 28 Poles, all or most of them Jewish judging by the names, with Wiedow aboard the *James Foster Jr.* On the ubiquity of Jewish peddlers, also in Iowa, see Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 101, 190-91, 196.

⁶⁹ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, A. W. Wheen, trans., (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929). Siegfried Weichlein, *Nation und Region: Integrationsprozesse im Bismarckreich* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2004), chap. 5, describes this process in the eastern state of Saxony. This was not a purely German phenomenon; a parallel process is described by Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

⁷⁰ Gerd Lüpke, *Jürnjakobs Vater: Leben und Werk des mecklenburgischen Dichters Johannes Gillhoff* (Bremen: Giebel Verlag, 1974), cited in Brun, *Johannes Gillhoff*, 371.

⁷¹ Trost nowhere indicates which German edition he worked from, but it should be noted that the paperback "ungekurzte Ausgabe" (Munich: DTV, 1978), besides dropping the final chapter, also silently omits some of the ethnic slurs of the original.

⁷² A study of transatlantic correspondence of the war era, drawing upon the largest German immigrant letter collection extant, analyzed 274 letters from 79 different writers. In this collection, there were 31 letters sent to Germany in 1915, down to 23 in 1916, just 4 in 1917 and only a single one in 1918. Antje Kreipe, "Wir wedern mit Euch bekriegt von unseren eigenen Mitbürgern': Die Deutschamerikaner und der Erste Weltkrieg," (Staatsexamen thesis, Ruhr Universität Bochum, 1999), 115-21.

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⁷³ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob*, 88-94, relates some tensions between father and son over the latter's self-importance when he studied medicine, but this appears somewhat dubious given that the son earned his own way through college. Moreover, the story Jürnjakob told his son of his own father's early death contradicts the historical evidence.

⁷⁴ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 72-76, 148. The census reveals that both of Cora Simpson's parents were Ohio natives; they lived on the farm right across the road, just a couple hundred yards away. Dr. Cary Shepherd and both his parents were born in Pennsylvania. Two generations of Forneys had been born in Iowa, but their earlier roots went back to Ohio. Nywiede had immigrated as an infant with his parents in 1883.

⁷⁵ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 152-58, quote 155.

⁷⁶ Gillhoff, *Jürnjakob*, 135, 141.

⁷⁷ Knuth, *Who Wrote These Letters*, 155.

