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**The Letters They Sent Home:
The Subjective Perspective of German Immigrants
in the Nineteenth Century**

I

Two hundred eighty million letters were sent from the United States to Germany between 1820 and 1914; or, to make the estimate less precise yet more reliable, a minimum of 250 million and a maximum of 300 million.¹ The hard core of the somewhat recondite calculations behind those figures is the 164 million letters received in the *Reichspostgebiet* (the German Empire of 1871 without Bavaria and Württemberg) from the United States 1870-1908. The totals given above, arrived at by adding likely figures for the two kingdoms with independent mail services and fairly safe projections forward as well as shakier ones backward, would seem to demonstrate impressively that the flood of German immigration to the United States brought in its wake a steady stream of letters to the old country. But most of all in our context, it is a chastening reminder that the 5,000 letters collected by the *Bochumer Auswandererbrief-Sammlung* (BABS) at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum are but a minute fraction of the volume actually written—.0018 percent, to be painfully exact.²

But it might be worthwhile to take another look at those gigantic figures—at least the officially confirmed ones. Starting from the commonsense assumptions that there would be some correlation between the number of German immigrants and the total of German-born persons in the United States in any given year, and the number of letters written to Germany at that time, and that immigrants are more likely to write frequently during the first years after their arrival, whereas their correspondence would tend to taper off after a while, the graph presented here does not lend itself to an obvious interpretation. For the period up to 1883, there appears to be a clear positive correlation between the number of immigrants on the one hand (although to a lesser degree for the German-born) and the volume of letters on the other. Between 1884 and 1895, there is at least no flat contradiction between the

two. But from 1897 on, there is a definite and rapidly growing discrepancy between a dwindling or stagnating immigration and a gradually diminishing German-born population on the one hand and the volume of letters on the other, which more than doubled from 1897 to 1908.³

This seemingly contradictory development cannot be explained by an increase in literacy, by the greater speed of mail across the ocean, or by lower postage rates. Even if the Dillingham Commission's figures are to be believed (illiteracy rate of immigrants, 1899-1910: from Germany, 5.2%; from England, 1.0%; from Poland, 35.4%),⁴ it is out of the question that a possible gain in a couple of percentage points could account for even part of the increase. There were faster ships and lower postage, but the big steps in both fields were taken between 1850 and 1875, not in the 1890s or early 1900s.⁵

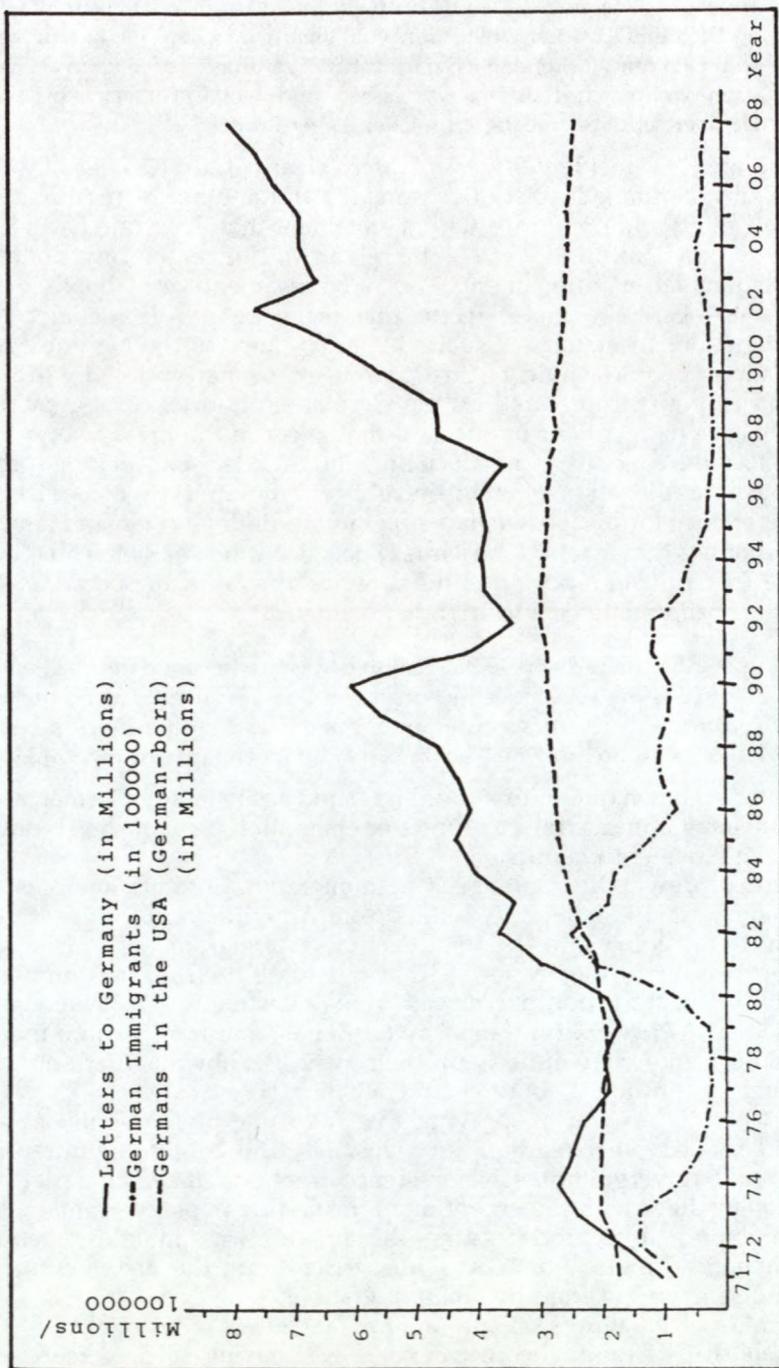
The only plausible explanation is the increase in the volume of business mail. This must not be understood as a phenomenon that suddenly appeared out of nowhere.⁶ Assuming that some business mail was expedited even before the Civil War, that the period of a high correlation between immigration and letters may be used as a measuring device indicating a "normal level" of letter-writing activity, that commercial communication tends to increase with industrialization, and that the results of a contemporary study on business and private mail are valid,⁷ one may arrive at the conclusion that private letters comprised 80% of the volume of mail through 1870, but then gradually lost in importance, reaching 50% around 1880, 30% by 1890, and finally dropped to 20% around 1900. By this calculation, the number of private letters written from the United States to Germany would be 100 million.⁸

The sheer volume of this flow of letters would seem to emphasize the importance of the correspondence to writers and recipients. One has to consider what a great effort it was for a person of little formal education—some 90 percent of the emigrants—and no tradition or habit of written communication to compose a comprehensible letter. Family ties, the sense of support by a word from home, and the wish to stay in touch with the former environment must have been very strong even during the strenuous and absorbing period of basic adaptation.

At the same time, these letters from America may well be considered detailed direct and indirect answers to the question of family members or friends in Germany whether they, too, should emigrate. What a miner in the Saarbrücken area wrote to his brother in California in 1858 must have been asked virtually millions of times:

Lieber Peter ich muß dier auch zu wißen thun daß wir fest gesonnen waren für zu dir zu kommen, aber dan hörten man überall sehr schlechte Nachrichten, aus Amerika, daß alles Still Liegen thät und wäre kein verdienst vorhanden, Ich und meine Frau wier sind noch immer gesonnen nach Americcka aber du muß mir eine genaue nachricht schreiben ob wir nach kommen, wie es jetzt zufällig ist.⁹

Or, in a similar vein:



Graph: Annette Haubold

Eine große Bitte habe ich an Dich, lieber Anton, schreibe mir einmal wieder auf Post und diesen Brief und beantworte mir, ich habe schon viel an Dich gedacht, ich wollte mir wohl auch wünschen, bei Dir zu sein, wenn ich nur wüßte, daß ich das Brot dort geruhiger essen kann als hier, dann wollte ich hier alles verlassen und wollte Dir nachkommen. Darüber schreibe mir diesen wieder, lieber Bruder.¹⁰

The answer, incidentally, was rarely clear-cut. It was usually rather lengthy, contained a list of reasons for and another of reasons against emigrating and ended up with a statement that everyone had to make up his own mind. Even so, there can no longer be any doubt that emigrant letters—not agents, not advertisements, not books or periodicals—were the major factor that made people decide in favor of emigration. In matters of such vital importance as leaving one's home, common people would not trust strangers or mere printed words.

Historians, captivated by the German authorities' exaggerating the influence of agents or by ideas of the power of the press, were slow to realize the decisive role of letters in the decision-making process. Theodore Blegen seems to have been the first to recognize their importance for his Norwegian emigrants.¹¹ Both German and American authorities had reached the same conclusion much earlier. Thus, in 1852 the Trier *Landrat* reported to his superior, the *Regierungspräsident*, about letters from relatives and friends in America:

Es werden Reisen von 10 bis 12 Stunden gemacht, um den Inhalt eines solchen Briefes, besonders, wenn er von einer als zuverlässig bekannten Person geschrieben ist, zu erfahren, und vorzugsweise jüngere Leute lassen sich durch solche Nachrichten bestimmen [auszuwandern].¹²

Dozens of such quotations could be found easily in any German archive containing administrative reports or emigration files for the second half of the nineteenth century.

According to the United States Immigration Commission in its study of immigration, 1899-1910, letters from America were the most important factor going into the final decision to emigrate.¹³ The Dillingham Commission further reported that out of all the German immigrants questioned at the port of entry about their destination, 77% were joining relatives; 17% were on their way to friends; and hardly more than one out of twenty were entirely on their own. It is obvious that only letters could have brought about such a situation.¹⁴

There is no way of proving that the same phenomenon obtained thirty or sixty years earlier, but plausibility and admittedly unrepresentative, but very impressive evidence from the *BABS* material argue strongly that—with the exception of the first wave of emigrants, who by definition had no predecessors—the situation was similar or even more pronounced in 1880 or 1850. Thus, letters form the decisive link both producing and explaining chain migration.

Most of the things said about emigrant letters so far could have been established without the researcher's ever having seen or read such a document. Information such as that provided above is of varying

degrees of interest to historians, but obtaining it would not require the collection of a large number of letters. When we went about soliciting material from the public,¹⁵ there were different questions on our minds, questions that concerned the content of immigrant letters.

The salient point is the fact that such letters constitute the one and—apart from an occasional diary—only source for learning about the personal, subjective aspects of emigration and assimilation as perceived at the time of writing, not embellished or otherwise distorted by the passing of thirty or fifty years, as in the case of autobiographies. The individual perspective encompasses the factual reporting on everyday life and American society as well as the expression of hopes and fears, sympathies and antipathies, value judgments and emotions in the new environment and in the turmoil of “uprooting.” (There is even a fairly good chance that the letters will put an end to the debate whether such an “uprooting” actually took place.)

The value of this testimony is enhanced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of letter writers were no scholars, journalists, or otherwise “trained observers.” They were neither trying to meet standards nor catering to a wider audience, but just reporting about themselves to people who knew them very well. In many ways, what we learn here is more spontaneous and less guarded, more immediate than what learned authors or bright traveling correspondents have to offer.

The fact that more than nine out of ten emigrants from Germany were lower or lower middle class and had at best an elementary education, and that despite a tendency of the educated to write more, the bulk of the emigrant letters have been written by “common people,” may cause intellectuals to condescendingly rejoice in the virtues of naive or ignorant testimony. But there is more to it. At the latest when one notices once again that a writer’s letters improve in facility of expression and clarity over the years—when in view of the foreign-language environment one ought to expect the contrary—one comes to realize that the great majority of our letter writers would never in their lives have put pen to paper if they had stayed in Germany. In fact, *Alltagsgeschichte* before 1900—afterwards, oral history helps out—is severely handicapped by the dearth of personal written material from lower-class persons that might provide the subjective and emotional angle, and what seems at first sight very out-of-the-way material for Germany history—the letters of those who left the country—may in fact provide some insights hard to gain or to corroborate by purely German sources alone. What will be said below about “equality” is a fairly good example.

II

With regard to the content of the emigrant letters, insights may be gained on a great variety of aspects of immigrant life as seen “from below.” Walter Kamphoefner is presently working on the contribution of the letters to our understanding of the German-Americans’ position

in American political life—nativism, slavery, the election of Lincoln, the Civil War, Blue Laws, Prohibition, World War I, etc. Practically everything that has been written on those themes so far, whatever its intrinsic value, is based on statistics and the testimony of people of some prominence. We have good reason to believe that the emigrant letters will add significant features to our present knowledge and may possibly bring about important revisions.

The particular impact of emigration and assimilation on women and their role in it within the family or as single immigrants will become much clearer on the basis of the letters. A project researcher has published some preliminary findings.¹⁶ A master's thesis on female immigrants, based on the BABS holdings, will be completed by the spring of 1988. And three German doctoral candidates are presently working on dissertations dealing with women and emigration, all using our letters intensively. This list could be continued, but let us turn to some examples of the kind of information one may glean from the immigrant letters. One topic has been mentioned briefly above: "equality."

The Declaration of Independence held that "all men are created equal." The Age of the Common Man, the rise of the humble to high honors, the rags-to-riches or Horatio Alger myth, and the ideal of the classless society dominated the social philosophy of nineteenth-century America, Social Darwinism notwithstanding; equality versus aristocracy was one of the major themes on the ideological battleground of the Civil War.

Yet there is fairly solid consensus among historians, based on hard evidence, that despite slogans and some appearances, American society was very far from equality—economic, social, or otherwise.¹⁷ How did German immigrants in their letters see this question? There are many, of course, who do not touch upon it at all; but those who do are virtually unanimous: everyone in America, whether the president or the pastor, is addressed by *du*; one does not have to doff one's hat or cap to anyone; people who do the dirtiest work, like street cleaners, are fully respected; everyone is equal, from the lowliest to the president; the farmer and his servants eat at the same table; no one can order about anyone else, one person is worth as much as the next; there are no privileges and no titles; the poorest man from Germany is respected just as much as the richest American; after duty hours the general ranks no higher than the private—he eats with him, plays with him, smokes and snuffs with him from the same snuffbox.¹⁸

Some of them may be careful in their wording—"Every worker here believes himself to be equal to his employer," or "everybody considers himself just as good as if he belonged to the oldest nobility"¹⁹—but all agree that American equality means a major improvement over the situation in Germany for them, that it is one of the reasons for their staying in America and a major enticement for their German correspondents to follow them across the Atlantic.

A number of conclusions seem plausible from the above. For one thing, whatever historians may claim about actual inequality, and

whatever reality may have been like, the letter-writing immigrants, mostly members of a group generally considered to occupy the lowest rungs on the social ladder, happily scribbled about being treated as equals. They may have embellished their own observations; American or German-American popularizations of the ideology of the common man may have influenced them; or the striking difference between Germany and America may have blinded them to the more subtle distinctions of rank and caste in the United States. Yet the fact remains that they were massively, and most favorably, impressed, and most likely took the seeming equality at face value.

If one looks more closely at their examples or illustrations, one may discern that what they really mean and enjoy is the absence of the constant, visible everyday humiliations of the lower orders they had been used to in the old country, and here historians will not contradict. It seems permissible to conclude from this relief felt about the end to personal humiliation that the lower classes in Germany did not take the outward signs of their submission for granted, but actually suffered from them; and one may interpret the prominent role of such remarks in the letters as an indication that the writers expected considerable interest in the question on the part of their correspondents in Germany.²⁰

Another idea that commands much attention of immigrant letter writers is the claim that in America hard work almost infallibly pays, that is, an endorsement of the work ethic. It is very rare indeed that someone believes in being able to amass riches; but comfort and even a certain affluence are seen to be within the reach of everyone who tries hard enough. Generally such statements are followed by comparisons with the old country, sometimes in the sense that lazy people had better stay in Germany, since in the United States they would be worse off than at home, but mostly to the effect that the writer (and people in general) never had a similar opportunity in Germany: there they could work as hard as they might without ever getting anywhere. ". . . denn hier in diesem Lande ist es noch gut vor den Arbeitsamen Mann, vor den Faullenzer aber ist es in Deutschland besser . . ." (1854),²¹ or "den es ist das Land wo milch und honig flist und wo jeder Arbeiter wenn er will sich etwas verdienen kann, wenn man nur will aber die meisten ergeben sich dem Trunke und vergeuden das Geld wie sie es verdienen . . ." (1883),²² or an almost classical statement:

Wer hier fleißig, brav, eingezogen, sittsam und sparsam ist, kommt bald zu Vermögen. Versteht sich von selbst, daß man sich . . . mit Schnapssaufen und liederlichen Vagabunden nicht abgeben darf. . . . Hätte ich das Letztere getan, so wäre ich nicht der Mann, der ich jetzt bin (1860).²³

The last quotation can serve as a bridge between the type of statements proclaiming in the abstract that hard work results in affluence, and those that delineate with a lot of concrete detail how the writer started with nothing, or even in debt, and climbed step by step to a

respectable social and economic position.²⁴ Occasionally, even one or the other of the subtler aspects of the Protestant ethic is voiced by an immigrant; so a farmer writes to Germany in 1906 that he now had enough time for a visit there, but not enough money, ". . . und Geld vor eine Plesierreise zu Borgen das darf ein Man der Vorwärts strebt nicht thun."²⁵

The frequent expression of the belief in a real chance to move up by hard work raises several questions. Did the writers describe reality, or were they blinded by their wishful thinking? Or maybe both? Were these statements based on their own—possibly biased—observations, or had they been indoctrinated, and if the latter, in Germany, in America, and by whom—by German-Americans or by Americans? Only a few tentative answers can be given here, but they might narrow down the range in which more precise and more definitive interpretations are to be found.

As to turning to the Protestant ethic on the basis of one's own experience, there are the two letters already cited,²⁶ dozens of others that tell similar success stories experienced by the letter writers, and there are about as many others that report about comparably enviable careers of others. Though these accounts might be embellished as to details and somewhat exaggerated as to the affluence achieved, there is no good reason for doubting the basic veracity of such reports.

Even if the gospel of work and opportunity had not been preached incessantly across America, both the man who had made good and the one still trying would eagerly embrace a doctrine so comfortable and flattering to the successful; it makes one feel better to believe that not luck and circumstance, but one's own qualities and merits account for what one has achieved. Moreover, the competitors who fall by the wayside were thus not the victims of one's own rapacity, or even of an unfair social order, but simply of their own vices. Few such success stories or more abstract statements of the Protestant ethic fail to point to the other side of the coin: the neighbor—or occasionally even a younger brother—who failed miserably because of laziness, liquor, or bad company, or the presence of ne'er-do-wells who will end up badly because of their vices.

But does not the great majority of studies on social mobility in nineteenth-century America conclude that the rags-to-riches myth was nothing but that, that there was far less mobility than ideology and impressionistic views of Europeans assumed, and that it was very hard and rare indeed to climb into the upper class?²⁷ Does not the authoritative comparative study of social mobility in the United States and Western Europe arrive at the rather surprising conclusion that "it is still not clear if workers in nineteenth-century Europe had worse chances of upward mobility than those in America," on the basis of dozens of local mobility studies on both sides of the Atlantic?²⁸

There is not necessarily a contradiction between what the letters claim and what historians have found. For one thing, it is striking that none of the success stories in the letters collected in Bochum and almost none of the more general statements of the work ethic go so far as to take

the rags-to-riches image literally. In some cases it is a decent starting capital that is expanded into a sizeable industrial or agricultural enterprise, but in most there is little or nothing at the beginning, and independence or substantial property at the end, but not wealth. Moreover, Stephan Thernstrom in *Poverty and Progress*, speaks not only for his own study, but for many others as well when he mitigates his disillusioning findings by stating: "The 'dream of success' certainly affected those laboring families, but the personal measure of success was modest. By this measure, the great majority of them had indeed 'gotten ahead.'" The Newburyport study deals with people "whose aspirations and expectations were shaped in the Irish village or the New England subsistence farm."²⁹ The letters, which were all written by people in a position to make direct comparisons, at least on a local level, make abundantly clear that the village or small-town background of very many German immigrants also made for a modest measure of success.

Moreover, one ought to recall that the works on mobility are all statistical studies. By claiming that the overwhelming majority made no great strides, they still establish that a few people did, and that far more made at least some noticeable economic and social progress, even if they did not jump from blue collar to white collar or from farmer to industrialist. Social mobility, whether intra-generational or inter-generational, is usually measured by occupation and by such tangible evidence as home ownership. Factors that are statistically more elusive like standard of living—whether changes of it within America or the differential between Europe and the United States—are almost never taken into consideration.

It is a fairly complicated undertaking to determine how much the average German immigrant—or rather the average practitioner of a given occupation or range of skills—improved his real income when employed regularly; the calculations become far more difficult and the results shakier when one takes into account the effects of periodic unemployment, a perennial and ubiquitous phenomenon in the United States, far more so than in European economies after the middle of the nineteenth century.

But it is fairly safe to make the following statements: (1) Outside the South, industrial nominal wages could be up to 300 percent higher than in Europe in the highly skilled occupations, but tended to be at best 100 percent higher for unskilled labor. (2) The differential in real wages tended to be lower, especially in view of the higher cost of lodging in America. (3) As to food and clothing, moving to America meant a definite improvement in almost every single instance. Unemployment, even in skilled occupations, could easily reduce and in rare instances even wipe out the differential in standard of living. Thus, an improvement in the amenities of daily living took place for almost every individual once the Atlantic had been crossed, and this may very well have contributed strongly to the belief in just reward for honest, hard work.³⁰

But of course, experience and observation are not the only explanation for a large number of German immigrants voicing the tenets of the

Protestant ethic. Almost from the moment the immigrants stepped off the ship in New York or New Orleans, they like everyone else in the United States all through the nineteenth century were exposed to the fervid preaching of the gospel of work and its rewards. There were changes over time, shades of emphasis, regional and religious and class differences as well as varieties of sophistication, but the basic creed was pervasive, and while an individual might refuse to believe in it, and many failed to live by it, he or she could not possibly be ignorant of it; it was a major element present in every public channel of communication, from school and church to newspapers (native or ethnic), magazines, popular literature and political oratory.³¹

It is most unlikely that even the widest publicity would have gained adherents to a doctrine that finds no support in real life. But if experience—as in the case of many of our letter writers—and ideology match, they may reinforce each other and create true believers. Would this combination of American reality and American creed then be the explanation for our letter writers' commitment to the work ethic and upward mobility, or does one have to take a third element into account: the possibility that these ideas already were part of the cultural baggage they brought across the Atlantic?

The question is difficult, not simply because it has not been studied sufficiently, but because the answer appears to be largely negative. For one thing, the letter writers themselves generally describe the creed and its implementation as something specifically American, standing in stark contrast to Germany. For another, we know that the overwhelming majority of them left their home country for economic reasons, which means very simply that they saw little chance of sufficient betterment for themselves at home. As to the extent of adherence to the idea that hard work is justly rewarded by an improvement of one's economic and social position, every generalization will suffer from the great differences in industrial development, political outlook, and other factors between the various German regions and principalities. But there is considerable evidence to support the impression that throughout the nineteenth century one of the aspects of the general socio-political retardation of Germany vis-à-vis the West was the fact that the belief that one could and should rise socially by working hard was rarely if ever propagated among the lower and lower middle classes. On the contrary, the school system rather tended to discourage any ideas of leaving one's estate and rising in the world.³²

But this may not be the whole answer. An individual need not be indoctrinated in order to feel an intense desire to better his or her lot. As is pointed out in the sociological study cited above, even in the Middle Ages, long before the rise of the modern idea of social mobility, there was no *Sozialfatalismus*: "Schon die großen Wanderungsbewegungen (Ostkolonisation) zeigen deutlich, daß z. B. die Chance, vom nicht erbberechtigten Sohn zum freien Bauern aufzusteigen, durchaus wahrgenommen wurde, wenn sie sich bot."³³ This example, obviously given without a thought about the nineteenth-century transatlantic migration, seems quite intriguing in our context, not only because the

two population movements out of Germany have a number of aspects in common, but also because emigration is here taken to be an indication of a tendency toward some form of social mobility. Could it be that this observation points toward at least a partial answer—there cannot be an absolute or complete one—to a central question in emigration research that does not become less pertinent because utterly unsatisfactory answers have been offered? I mean the question arising from the observation that if poverty was the major motive for emigration, but only one out of ten poor people went to America: How did the one differ from the other nine?

Perhaps what I imply here as a possible explanation for a truly puzzling problem can never be verified—or falsified. With the present tools of the historians it seems very difficult indeed. But one may safely state that such a thesis—emigration of the most success-oriented—would not only fit perfectly into the picture sketched above, but also command considerable plausibility: The people who emigrated were those who suffered most from their poverty and the lack of realistic prospects to rise out of it; they were even willing to leave home and community for the expectation of betterment, and they were self-confident enough to risk living in an entirely novel environment.

Discussing class differences in the degree of acceptance of the work ethic, historian Daniel Rodgers states, when passing from employers to workers: "The men and women who worked within the factories left no such permanent or conspicuous record of their feelings about time and labor."³⁴ He finds that labor history deals with unions, parties, and radical newspapers, but rarely with the genuine reactions and attitudes of the rank and file—primarily because of the dearth of firsthand information. On one point, there is almost unanimous agreement among the letter writers:

... den hier müssen die Leute mehr Arbeiten wie bei Euch ... (a shoemaker, 1860).³⁵

Die Arbeit hier ist grundverschieden von der deutschen. Von 7 Uhr früh bis 12 U. Mittags. Esszeit 1/2 Stunde. Von 1/2 1 Uhr bis 1/2 6 U. stets mit ungeschwächter Kraft. Da giebt es nicht Schnupfen noch Rauchen weder Frühstück noch Vesper. Das ist eben für langsame Deutsche nicht recht passend (a miller, 1871).³⁶

... ich war doch gewiß kein langsamer Arbeiter, aber hier war ich ein reiner Stümper. . . . Es wird alles sehr schnell gearbeitet, Frühstück und Vesper ist nicht. Von früh 7 Uhr bis Mittag 12 und von 1 bis 6 Uhr ohne umzusehen, nicht mal austreten kann man . . . (a bricklayer, 1881).³⁷

It seems fairly safe to assume that the trend visible in the three quotations (and more than two dozen letters not quoted here) is based more on fact than fancy for two reasons. The letter writers seem to have few incentives for exaggeration; and most of them were craftsmen and skilled workers who not only had worked on the same type of job on both sides of the Atlantic, so that they were really in a position to

compare, but also frequently describe the different working techniques employed in Germany and America in such meticulous detail that it would be most surprising if they were less careful observers when it comes to the pace of work.

Whereas the claims made as to the intensity of work and lack of breaks may and perhaps ought to be checked by studies relying on less subjective sources, the reactions to the different quality of work belong to the category of "feelings" referred to by Rodgers, for which we have little else besides letters, diaries and, with some reservations, autobiographies and the minutes of a couple of hearings on labor problems. It would seem to be a normal reaction for wage earners to complain bitterly when a speedup is imposed or the rate of work is raised; the twentieth century offers many examples. Surprisingly enough, our letter writers seem to be favorably impressed, or to simply take the difference for granted; it is very hard indeed to find a word of criticism. Our first letter writer quoted (note 35) continues matter-of-factly that whoever does not feel like working harder will not get along in America. The second one (note 36) continues by saying with obvious satisfaction and approval—and probably exaggeration: "Hingegen hat man aber auch in 9 Stunden mehr verdient als dort die ganze Woche." And the third one (note 37), though generally somewhat skeptical about things American, adds with guarded approval: "Man verdient zwar schönes Geld, aber man muß auch was für leisten, unser Lohn steht 3½ Dollar (15½ Mark) . . ." These three stand for ten times that number, who not only emphasize that one must work harder, but also either appear to be quite happy with that or say so explicitly—generally arguing that the higher pay makes a greater effort worthwhile; at any rate, they express no longing for the easier work at lower pay back in the old country. And in several instances one can sense considerable satisfaction not only with the higher standard of living thus gained, but also about one's ability to keep up with that gruelling pace that would destroy or drive away a weaker or less steadfast man.

Here as well as in the other instances we have been dealing with the tip of the iceberg as far as the evidence of the letters is concerned. A systematic analysis of the material will yield far more information on the themes outlined above. Even then, it should have become clear, a great amount of research will be needed to make the message of the letters intelligible, to sort fact from fiction and description from attitude, and to find a place for the insights gained in the body of knowledge we already possess about the adaptation process of German immigrants in America.

After dealing with a number of aspects of immigrant and ethnic history on which the letters shed some light—and promise to yield more insights—at some length, I would like to touch upon some others very briefly, so as to give an idea of the wide scope of questions to which the letters might provide answers.

In viewing the immigration and adaptation process, the terms "uprootedness" and "marginal man" may be outmoded, but our letters make quite clear that we need those concepts, even though they do not

seem to apply in any acute sense to the majority of German immigrants. What we have learned about the buffering or decompression-chamber function of ethnic neighborhoods and of personal networks (of which chain migration is only one variety), is fully supported by the letters, which frequently give a very clear picture of the concentric circles of family, friends, others from one's home town, vicinity, general part of Germany, and finally, the entire local German-American community (with all its divisions and rivalries) forming a multiple protective shield from Americans and other ethnics that does, however, permit forays into alien territory if desired.

In fact, only the letters let us know the amazing real weight of the "personal network." Occasionally one gets the feeling that emigrants live in a social world made up of the folks from back home—and very little besides. Very careful studies must be made of this phenomenon; but even now one can say that in many cases common language and even common religion were of less importance than common region, sub-region, or neighborhood.

Even when the buffering is not too effective, the strains of assimilation usually do not appear as particularly dramatic; especially for the common people, there is little to get excited about: one has to learn English to find a decent job—this is frequently accepted with as much of a shrug as the fact that it gets hotter in the summer than in Germany. What may help is the apparent general acceptance of German immigrants (at least of those respectable enough to write letters home) by the host society; I was startled to learn from Kerby Miller that many Irish immigrants wrote home bitterly about persecution, humiliation, suffering and longing for home,³⁸ for I had never encountered such intensity of feeling with Germans; at most, there was a sense of annoyance about being called "damn Dutchman" or about some *Englischer* being treated better at work. On the other hand, one encounters many a disparaging remark not only about Blacks and Indians, but also—very drastically, if not venomously—about the Irish and, in a multi-faceted way too complex to be discussed here, about Americans. A feeling of superiority vis-à-vis the Anglo-Americans is expressed quite frequently: they do not keep their front yards in good order; they work only to the point where they can get enough to drink; they do not plan for the future—in short, they do not meet the demands of the work ethic as the Germans do.

Loyalty or rather identification with one's own ethnic group seems to be widespread, and it is difficult to decide whether from a defensive posture, from a feeling of superiority, or both. The reactions to major events in Germany, whether reason for pride or for shame, are strong enough, and most massive, of course, in World War I; but more pervasive and persistent is the identificational pride in German-American achievements, whether on the Civil War battlefields or in a turner parade, a German engineer being preferred to an American or a successful *Sängerfest*—whatever impresses Americans and evokes their respect (or envy).

It is a very strange complex that has to be explored further, but what is quite clear already is the "German-American centeredness" of much

of this thinking and feeling. Anything that elevates the value of the label "German" is positive, and the contrary negative. The fate of Germany is important for its reflection and impact on German-Americans and their ethnic reputation. Germany did not have to win the World War to prosper or avoid humiliation—but because a German defeat would do immeasurable damage to the German-Americans. "You must win because of us" is spelled out in many letters.

III

We are pursuing such lines of inquiry further, but we are also working on another, maybe more ambitious, and certainly more difficult project. Rather than looking at certain aspects or clusters of aspects of assimilation, we are trying to analyze the process of assimilation as a whole. We know that it did take place and what the results are; we do not really know how it took place, and why.

We are trying to dissect the "anatomy of assimilation," to disentangle the web of a complex development, to isolate the steps, and determine their sequence, in the process of adaptation. Especially if one considers feelings equally important as facts, and personal reactions as much as the experience of daily life, the approach to the phenomenon of assimilation on the individual rather than on the group level must rely primarily on letters.

We have tried to adapt categories of assimilation developed by Milton Gordon³⁹ and Hartmut Esser⁴⁰ for the group process to the individual level. On that basis, we are establishing a year-by-year "assimilation profile" for each of the some 320 individuals who wrote our approximately 260 letter series (defined as numbering five or more letters from the same person or family). One sample profile is appended to this article (see Appendix). The method is not yet perfected, even at this first stage out of three. For one thing, the four categories (cognitive, identificational, social and structural assimilation) permit too much overlapping and must be refined further; for another, the considerable unevenness in the amount and the precision of the information for every individual will pose major problems when we have to go about measuring in order to approach stage two. Perhaps the analogy of a one hundred-item questionnaire will illustrate this particular problem. Really solid work could be done only on the basis of complete answers to all one hundred questions. Our respondents may answer fifteen more or less completely, others maybe ten—but entirely different ones. Fortunately, that is an exaggeration. In many cases, we get close to the equivalent of fifty answers, and there are about a dozen key concepts that most letter writers touch upon sooner or later.

I do not believe much would come out of this if we confined ourselves to the letters alone. Actually, far more time is being spent on research in "hard" sources than on working with the "soft" letters. We are trying to learn as much as possible about the letter writers, both on their background in Germany and on their American existence outside the letters. Our forthcoming edition of the letters will demonstrate for

twenty letter writers how much can in fact be learned about persons of no prominence whatsoever; certainly it is far more than we expected when we started out.

The second stage will consist of an attempt to compare the data as objectively as possible, and then to establish a typology of assimilation. We have reason to believe that the profiles will not result in an entirely random distribution of profiles on some sort of infinite continuum, but rather form clusters and, if all goes well, allow us to point out five or perhaps seven basic types of assimilative behavior. Once we have gotten to that point, we can either stop or continue. We could stop because the results might be quite respectable. If that is not the case, we would like to take the inquiry to its logical conclusion in stage three. Knowing by then that a number of different assimilation types exist, we would ask what makes one person assimilate according to one specific pattern, and the next individual according to a different one. Obviously, a wide array of factors—personal, social, economic, regional, etc.—from a variety of disciplines will have to be taken into account. Meanwhile, we will also continue working on less all-encompassing issues, such as some of the concepts dealt with in part two of this article, most of which deserve further inquiry. Whatever the Bochum project team is doing or trying to do: All our material is open to researchers and has been from the beginning of the project. We have already had many visitors, and we like having them; among other things, we have learned a lot from them.

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Appendix

Adaptation Profile: Martin Weitz (1823-1869; weaver from Schotten/Hessen; emigrated, single, 1854, to New York; began working in textile mill, Rockville, CT, 1855).

1. Cognitive Assimilation

One year after arrival, he has declared his intention of taking music lessons, most likely in a German-American context. He has become painfully aware of the economic and emotional drawbacks of not knowing English. He shows a fair degree of orientation concerning practical matters.

At the end of the second year, his English has improved but, still considering it insufficient (as well he might), he is taking English lessons. He also revels in the American values of freedom and equality—though those, of course, may have been in his cultural baggage (there are references to German forty-eighters); but in any case, this part of American ideology is now shared by him. And he wants economic independence so much that he hopes to learn the barber's trade.

From then to the end of the five-year period covered by the letters, the belief in equality is confirmed and repeated; his orientation is improving further and expanding into the realms of politics and economics. His English is still rather weak, at least when written, but he seems to be able to get along. He adopts the American custom of having his daughter baptized at a later date (rather than immediately after birth), and when the daughter's name appears for the first

time in the available documents, in her marriage certificate, it is in the English form of "Amelia" rather than the German "Amalie." When she gets married, at age twenty in 1880, it is to a first-generation immigrant, but he is from England.

Taking everything together—American values, ideology, and customs, general orientation and the English language, Weitz conveys the general impression that he does not assimilate breathtakingly fast or particularly slowly, but at the even pace of someone fairly sure of himself, fairly at ease and knowing quite well what he wants.

2. Identificational Assimilation

Here Weitz presents a crazy quilt of partly contradictory pronouncements that require careful interpretation. During the first year after arrival, he utters relief and happiness about being in America, and expresses pity for those suffering from poverty in Germany; but a few lines after saying he feels like crying about the misery of his family in Germany (one month after arrival), he wishes them to have fun at an annual fair and remarks rather bitterly that this sort of fun and amusement does not exist in America. With similar ambiguity, he says after a year that America is fine if one has got work; out of work, however, he had felt like killing himself.

But there is no ambiguity about his wholehearted identification with German-Americans, whether in reporting about bloody fights between Germans and Know-Nothings in Cincinnati (in this context, he also seems to side with the proponents of beer and liquor) or about the *two* German *Gesangvereine* in Rockville (with about 300 Germans in a population of about 2,000) and his opinion that German singing promotes the reputation of the Germans with the Americans tremendously. Also quite undivided is his praise for the food in his (German) boarding house.

Before his second year is over, he has found that as far as temptation and bad company are concerned, America is far worse than Germany. But he suggests that a friend of his should emigrate and come to Rockville, since he would be much better off there than in their German hometown of Schotten. His radicalism as to despots slaughtering the innocent by the thousands senselessly in the Crimean War extends to America as well: here, things are no better. He continues elaborating on American hypocrisy: they go to church six times a week, but rob the shirt off your back whenever given a chance.

Interestingly enough, he equates—at one point at least—Americans and Know-Nothings, and emphasizes one must not be scared of them. Apart from that, he continues, things are fine: we are free men, earn good money when healthy, and live quite happily.

By the end of the fifth year he has reported in a balanced way on lower pay from time to time, but at the same time thanked God and his family for having come to America instead of being mired in misery like so many of his friends in Schotten. In September 1856 (slightly more than two years after arrival), he took out his first papers. He shudders at the thought of still being in Germany, but hastens to point out that this is no paradise, that there are thousands of unemployed, and that their fate is far worse than it would have been in Germany, "for here no one cares about anyone else—everyone has to take care of himself."

His radical loyalties from Germany are transferred to the Republicans, all the more so since a prominent forty-eighter from his hometown has done the same. This is where his loyalty to German-Americans draws the line: those who side with the Democrats he takes to be misled and stupid. Frémont's defeat is explained by Democratic fraud; otherwise, "we" would have won. But there is a remedy for such things: since we have freedom of the press, every such crime

will be discovered and made public. He also sees an important contribution for the immigrants to make for the cause of freedom.

He proudly reports that "we" (this time meaning, no doubt, the Germans in Rockville) have organized a *Turnverein* that is well liked by the Americans, and that a German church and school are to be founded, for which purpose he gladly contributes much money. He casually mentions he could support a wife better in America than in Germany, and he expresses contentment about the life they lead.

Thus he identifies with some American ideals, but not with Americans; on the contrary, they, or at least Democrats, are the foil against which he identifies with Republican-oriented German-Americans and, on a local level, all German-Americans. Whenever German-Americans' impressing Anglo-Americans is mentioned, there seems to be a certain tacit recognition of the latter's factual domination. In sum, he has more critical than favorable comments to make on Americans; most of this criticism, incidentally, is of a rather conventional kind, to be picked up in any German-American publication. He is happy with his living conditions, by and large, and would seem to be developing quickly into a rather successful German-American with reservations towards Americans, but general acceptance of the host society. At the beginning, he may have felt somewhat insecure, perhaps even threatened, by the Know-Nothings, but not for long, or so it seems.

3. Social Assimilation

With one exception, and that long after the letters end (in 1859), we do not learn of the slightest social contact with Americans; the exception is his membership in the (ethnically integrated) Hockanum Fire Brigade mentioned in an obituary in 1869—apart from contacts with the postmaster or officials, of course.

During his first year, all the contacts we hear about are not just German-Americans, but people from his hometown; he even expresses the importance of such a network clearly when he says, woe to anyone who comes here and has no friends and acquaintances—obviously meaning people known from back home. A year after arrival, he mentions that he could get married any day; that many German fellows marry American or Irish girls, but he wants to wait; after five months of waiting, he considers getting married to a girl from a different area of Germany, whom he has met in America, but he becomes quite serious toward the end of the second year: his family should find out if a girl he had known before he left, from a neighboring town, were still "healthy and unmarried"—and whether she would like to join and marry him. She does indeed, they exchange letters, he sends the passage money, and they get married the day after they arrive in Rockville. Godmothers for their daughter are a relative in his hometown in Germany and two German-American married women in Rockville, of whom at least one is from Schotten.

It would seem that the moment he seriously thought about marriage he felt safe and secure enough in the new country; certainly, the general impression he gives in his letters contradicts the idea that he might have looked for wifely solace as a way out of some misery. But secure and self-confident as he may have felt—Americans he apparently saw only from afar. His social integration seems to have been with the Rockville German-Americans—with a heavy (though probably diminishing) reliance on people from his hometown, a couple of them also in Rockville, more of them in other parts of Connecticut and in New York, with whom he stays in touch by visits, word of mouth, or letters.

4. Structural Assimilation

During the first year, there are ups and downs in his money-earning activities. The first time he can send any money home—ten dollars—was more than a year after his arrival. Constantly, the professional way of reporting about his jobs to his weaver father betrays his technical competence as well as a certain pride and interest in his craft. From now on, his financial sorrows seem to be over. He sends more money home after 2 years (\$20), another \$15 after 2½, \$35 for his bride's passage after 3½ years—though far more often money is promised for the future or apologies are made for not sending any because of necessary purchases or low earnings.

But there is no doubt in his mind that he is doing far better than he could have hoped for at home. And the wages he reports seem to indicate that even for American standards he is doing quite well. The information on his death certificate shows that he has made at least one important step on the advancement ladder: from weaver to loom fixer or from skilled to highly skilled or, in money terms, 50% higher pay (according to the U.S. Census for 1880).

All in all, Weitz seems to be a well-adapted immigrant. There are no obvious strains, emotional disturbances, or psychic difficulties mentioned or to be suspected from anything he writes. His ties to home remain strong, and so do those to the hometowners in America. But he seemed to be well on his way to being a respectable and respected citizen when he died of typhoid fever at age forty-six.

Notes

¹ Expanded version of keynote address delivered at the Eleventh Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 23-25 April 1987.

² Deutsche Reichspostverwaltung, *Statistik der Deutschen Postverwaltung* (Berlin, 1871-76), and *Statistik der Deutschen Reichs-Post und Telegraphenverwaltung* (Berlin, 1877-1913). Based on Bavarian statistics for one year ("Übersicht über die Post- und Telegraphen-Betriebsverhältnisse in Bayern für das Kalenderjahr 1883," Staatsarchiv München, ehem. Akten der Oberpostdirektion, Verz. 2, Sch. Nr. 203-5) and the percentage of the number of letters sent there from the U.S.A., of the total for the *Reichspostgebiet*, plus an estimate of Württemberg solely on the grounds of the volume of mail from there to the *Reichspostgebiet*, 46 million was added to the 164 million; for the years 1909-13, about 10 million a year for the entire German empire should be fairly close; and for the period 1820-69, anything between a total of 20 million and 30 million seems possible.

³ Both positive and negative correlation become even more pronounced when one compares the letter curve with one based on plausible estimates of the incidence of letter writing, like two letters per year for every immigrant during five years, and one each for the following five.

⁴ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 41 vols. (Washington, DC, 1911), 1:99.

⁵ Postage from the U.S. for a half-ounce letter was 30 cents (1852), 15 cents (1857), 6 cents (1875). George E. Hargest, *History of Letter Communication Between the United States and Europe, 1845-1875* (Washington, DC, 1971), 16, 111, 199-224.

⁶ Kristian Hvidt, the Danish historian who was the first to look at the actual volume of mail between the country of emigration and that of immigration and to whom I am indebted for the idea of looking into the German situation, seems to assume that after three decades of exclusively private letter writing (at the rate of 3.5 letters per Danish-born person in the U.S.), suddenly, from 1905 on, there was a doubling of the volume of mail due to the appearance of commercial communication. *Flugten til Amerika eller Driokraefter i masseutvandringen fra Danmark, 1868-1914* (Aarhus, 1971), 339-45. Obviously, commercial

letter writing develops gradually. And the figure of 3.5 letters per man, woman, and child seems much too high. It is hard to see why Germans should have written fewer letters than Danes, but even adding 30% for the Bavarians and Württembergers not included in the *Reichspost* figures, the German-born in the United States (if one considers all letters private ones) wrote no more than 1.6 (1875), 2 (1885), or 1.8 (1895) letters per person.

⁷ "Der Briefverkehr des deutschen Reichs-Postgebiets mit dem Auslande im Jahre 1879," *Archiv für Post und Telegraphie* 10 (May 1880): 299-300.

⁸ One may add that while from the late 1890s on, the letter curve runs clearly counter to the immigration one, it shows a growing and very clear similarity to the import-export curve.

⁹ Copy in *Bochumer Auswandererbrief-Sammlung* (BABS).

¹⁰ Wolfgang Helbich, ed., "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .": *Auswanderer schreiben nach Deutschland* (Darmstadt, 1985), 27.

¹¹ Theodore C. Blegen, "The 'America Letters,'" in *Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse* (1928) (Oslo, 1929), 2:7, 17, and Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Emigration to America, 1825-1860* (Northfield, MN, 1931), 196, 212-13.

¹² 10 April 1852, Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz, Best. 442, Nr. 6808, 53-54.

¹³ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 4:56-60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:360-65.

¹⁵ The other members of the project team were Bettina Goldberg, Walter Kamphoefner, and Ulrike Sommer.

German archives hold very few emigrant letters, and almost none written by people who were not in some way prominent. I thus turned to the public by a long article in *Die Zeit* ("Doch zur Heimat wirds wohl nicht," no. 7, 11 Feb. 1983, 64) and a shorter one in *Hör zu* (E. Einhäuser, "Dann ging's in den Wilden Westen . . .," no. 5, 27 Jan. 1984, 26-27), and a standard text sent to some 130 dailies all over the country, and printed in about 50, as well as one offered to some 150 local historical or genealogical periodicals, published by about 145. Several radio interviews did not yield a single letter. The other appeals, however, netted some 5,000 or, in the way of counting we have come to consider more meaningful, about 260 "series" plus about 1,350 single letters.

More than 85% of the material is now available both in the original (generally, copies) and in typewritten transcriptions. The difficult and time-consuming chore of transcription was funded by a generous *Stiftung Volkswagenwerk* grant, which also paid for the researcher and the student assistants who did the cataloging, the collecting of data on the letter writers and especially the massive work of content indexing on the basis of about 30 categories of information (e.g., "German-language schools"; "upward mobility"; "political activities and office-holding"; etc.) touched upon in the letters. After a paperback intended for the general public (see note 10), a 600-page scholarly edition of 20 letter series, *Briefe aus Amerika* (ed. by Helbich, Kamphoefner, Sommer) will be published in the fall of 1988, with an English translation scheduled to appear two years later.

¹⁶ Ulrike Sommer, "Letters of German Immigrant Women: Attempting a Case Study," in *The Press of Labor Migrants in Europe and North America, 1880s to 1930s*, ed. Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder (Bremen, 1985), 48-58.

¹⁷ E. Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, IL, 1969), 44-58.

¹⁸ Helbich, "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .," 112-22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

²⁰ What is indicated here seems to complement and support the findings of Günter Moltmann, "Auswanderung als Revolutionsersatz," in *Die Deutschen und die Revolution*, ed. M. Salewski (Göttingen, 1984), 272-97. One might even speculate that particular discontent with these humiliations was one of the motives of emigration.

²¹ Helbich, "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .," 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103, 107-8.

²⁷ A good introduction and survey of the types of work done in the 1960s and 1970s is given by a collection of essays: E. Pessen, ed., *Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America* (Lexington, MA, Toronto, London, 1974).

²⁸ H. Kaelble, *Historische Mobilitätsforschung: Westeuropa und die USA im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt, 1978), 70.

²⁹ S. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 165.

³⁰ I have tried to unravel some of the knots in the problem of comparative standards of living in my introduction to the "worker" series in our forthcoming edition of immigrant letters (see n. 15). Meanwhile, the information provided by two books is very helpful: Peter R. Shergold, *The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective, 1899-1913* (Pittsburgh, 1982); Werner Sombart, *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?*, ed. C. T. Husbands, transl. P. M. Hocking (London, 1976).

³¹ D. T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, London, 1974).

³² D. K. Müller, *Sozialstruktur und Schulsystem: Aspekte zum Strukturwandel des Schulwesens im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1977), 179-89, 264-68, 279-87; H. Titze, *Die Politisierung der Erziehung: Untersuchungen über die soziale und politische Funktion der Erziehung von der Aufklärung bis zum Hochkapitalismus* (Frankfurt a. M., 1973), 129-30, 138-44, 262-73; F. Fürstenberg, *Das Aufstiegsproblem in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1962), 13-33.

³³ Fürstenberg, 15.

³⁴ Rodgers, *The Work Ethic*, 154.

³⁵ Helbich, "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .," 88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁸ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985).

³⁹ Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York, 1964); Milton M. Gordon, *Human Nature, Class, and Ethnicity* (New York, 1978).

⁴⁰ Hartmut Esser, *Aspekte der Wanderungssoziologie: Assimilation und Integration von Wanderern, ethnischen Gruppen und Minderheiten: Eine handlungstheoretische Analyse* (Darmstadt, 1980).