

OTTO BENZING

STORIES FROM THOSE WHO CAME  
FROM AROUND THE NECKAR AREA

Second volume

36 miniatures starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until establishment  
of the city in 1907

First edition

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## Chapter 31

1847

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The Emigrants

The community sends the hungry ones to America

The first rays of the April sun greeted those who departed. 200 men, women and children stood around the four horse drawn covered wagons. Between the beds and the household belongings, they packed grandmothers and infants. Before the main gate, the column stopped and the people of Villingen witnessed a heart-rending scene. A throng of family and friends accompanied the eight wagons thus far. Now there were last embraces, a final handshake, a tearful "God be with you" and "Don't forget to write us!". Then the conductor from Reutling, who was to take the emigrants to Mainz, reminded them "Forward people, in the name of God!" and the long train was set into motion. Up the Brigachtal, over the Sommerau they planned to descend the Kinzigtal to Offenburg.

The conductor had, as far as possible, assigned each wagon two dozen people in such a way as to make sure that each family stayed together. Assigned to the first coachman, Johannes Benzing, were the "Andreslis" brother Jakob and Mathias Link with their wives and five children, in addition to both "Christiaans" families with 12 children. While the women were still crying quietly, the men were soon occupied, because the higher they climbed up the Black Forest, the more frequent one could find remnants of snow and ice in the streets. They had stopped cursing the long winter some time ago. Only one urge remained - to get away from hunger and sorrow as if their lives depended on it. In Gutachtal where normally at this time of the year the first potato sprouts would appear, the land was still barren and small ponds had formed in the meadows.

The inn keeper's wife, in whose barn they could stay overnight, complained that food already had run out before Easter. However when she met "caravan girl Christine, who would take care of her brother christiaan in the new world, she had pity on her. Despite the fact that she did not even harvest a

crateful of potatoes in the fall, and they were half rotten, she nevertheless brought out a big loaf of bread with a box full of apples for the kids.

For a whole week, the people from Schweningen had time to discuss their wagon journey and whether they did the right thing to leave their homeland. Several families withdrew at the last moment. At that time in October when the famine struck, more than 250 people were ready to come along. But the closer the day of departure got, the greater became the fear for the unknown.

Oh, how difficult were the negotiations with several agents. The notary public, Mr Stahlen from Heilbronn was first to declare that he was ready to undertake the drive. The trans oceanic journey and the care of the adults would cost 84 guilders. But he also had advised at the time to travel to New York in the spring. It would be crowded there otherwise and it would be impossible to obtain room or transportation into the interior. Elias Held from Rottwell, on the other hand, wanted to leave in March, but the 90 guilders which he asked, were too much for the town council. Alderwirt Ruffli from Sissin in Aargau did his utmost to get the order, but his travel route through Le Havre and the French officials would not allow emigrants through who could not prove their net worth. A commission of the town council went the extra mile and went to Mannheim and Stressburg to obtain fake association documents as protection for the emigrants to Texas.

But finally they came to terms with the agency of Jacob Beck in Reutlingen. He would take 97 adults, 83 children 12 and ten infants to Mainz. From there he would take them with a steam ship to London and then below deck a mail carrying ship to New York. The community paid him 91 guilders for each person over 12 years, 55 guilders for each child and the infants went free. On board of ship there awaited each a place to sleep and cook in addition to sufficient drinking water, wood, coal and light. For provision each adult received 40 pounds of biscuit, 14 pounds of beef jerkey, 55 pounds of flour, 5 pounds rice, 2 pounds salt, 2 liter vinegar and a quantity of potatoes. The children proportionally received less. The provisions had to last six to eight weeks because that was how long the journey would take.

The women could hardly believe that so much supply had to be stored for their family. The Painter Jakob Jauch calculated for his wife that she, together with their seven children, needed to acquire a whole bushel of potatoes, 150 kilogram of biscuits and so much meat, which they normally would not have eaten in an entire year. They all looked forward to the steam boat journey, because starting from Mainz they would get coffee and bread for breakfast, soup, meat and vegetables for lunch and in the evening they had sandwiches and tea. In comparison with the soup for the poor, the carrots and dried mushroom on which they lived the past few months, a plush life was awaiting them on this journey.

The community's accountant calculated that it would still be cheaper for the community to pay the trip for the poor than it would be to feed them until the end of the famine. The soup for the 200 poor alone would cost more than 1000 guilders per year. To pay for this, the community had confiscated all inheritances, which would normally accrue to the emigrants at time of death of one of their relatives. Another saving was assured by collecting the wood and peat supply of these emigrating citizens and these could then be sold. In one year alone, the sum of 15,000 guilders which the town had to raise, was amortized this way.

Johannes Burk, the young industrialist, even had written six weeks earlier in the Stuttgart Observer, that the almighty would guard each community to be protected from the temporary assistance of these needy people, to be the mediator, yes, that He even be the author of the destruction and sorrow of these citizens who were sent abroad. But Johannes could easily say this- he did not have to beg for soup abroad. They all hoped to find compatriots abroad, who would help them on their way. Since the last famine of 1817, hundreds of people from Schweningen emigrated to America.

In Mainz, Mr Beck was already awaiting them. He told them that it was necessary to separate the party in two groups. With 65 people he immediately left for London. The others he left behind under the stewardship of his conductors. After one week, Beck returned and announced that the first group was already underway to New York on the mail carrying ship "Hendrik Hudson". Unfortunately there was not enough room for all. With the rest he reached Rotterdam in three days and in another day

he arrived in London. There he was told that the ship still had to be equipped for passengers. By coincidence they found out that its destination was not New York, but Quebec.

The adults were gripped by unspeakable fear. They would likely not see their compatriots again, those who sailed off earlier. They would arrive in an unknown area where there would probably be no Germans at all/ How could they get from there to the interior of the United States? They threatened Beck with serious consequences. He acknowledged that there would not be a ship going to New York in the foreseeable future. They advised them to sue Beck so that the community could lay claim on his collateral. But they were far from home and had already used up their cash. Without Beck's assistance they neither would have board nor room. It would be better to come to an agreement with him than to wait for news from home.

At last they believed Beck's assurance that the journey from Quebec to the interior was not much farther than from New York. They also saw that he was in trouble himself because he used a lot of money while they were waiting in Mainz and in London for more than two weeks. But by taking the short route to Quebec, he would save so much that he would recuperate from his losses. So on May 26, exactly one month after their departure from home, they set sail from London.

The journey by sea progressed well, without appreciable storms and without serious illnesses. Beck showed himself to be very concerned about the well being of his people. He financially assisted those who did not get much support from the community. He made sure that there was sufficient vegetables, dried fruit, biscuits and medication. He assisted them in Quebec with transportation to the United States.

Subsequently, upon arrival in Wapakoneta, Ohio, the weaver Johannes Rapp and the laborer Jakob Weiler, could write to the town council in Schwenningen, that they arrived safely and that they could recommend agent Beck to every emigrant. Mainly, however, they wanted to thank the community for providing them the opportunity to start anew in the new world.

Note:

The documents of this enterprise and a copy of the cited letters are being kept in the Schwenningen archives. The farewell scene was painted in the citizens newspaper in Villingen. Johannes Burk's comments in the paper is printed in the book belonging to F.L. Neher, entitled "Johannes Burk."