

Emigration as a Way out of Personal Tragedy – The Brothers Hans and Xaver Dodel from Wolfertschwenden in San Francisco

"Man's will is his kingdom of heaven after all.... I, for instance, would have been disappointed had I not come here at all, even though I have had enough bitter experiences. So much for now." The man who wrote these lines to his sister-in-law Wolfertschwenden in 1909 was the doctor Franz Xaver Dodel. He had lived in San Francisco for 25 years and, even though he kept up regular contact with his family in the Lower Allgäu, he had no intention of returning to his native Germany. His brother, the apothecary Johann Baptist Dodel (Hans), had emigrated with him. The two brothers left Germany in 1884/85 and both had very personal reasons for this far-reaching step. Having trained as an apothecary, Hans Dodel (1858–1931) enlisted, but was rejected as unfit to fight because of consumption and a heart problem. After this diagnosis he went to see his brother Xaver, who worked as a general practitioner in Munich. Xaver (1855–1938) recommended a stay in the mild climate of California. This was certainly an unusual suggestion, and Hans probably wanted his brother to accompany him there. Xaver declined at first, because his wife was expecting their first child at the time. After both his wife and child died shortly after each other in the autumn of 1883 – a catastrophe for the young doctor – Xaver Dodel decided he needed a change of scene too, and travelled to California. It is no longer clear whether the brothers were intended to make a protracted stay out of their visit, but they were certainly part of the large wave of emigration that took place between 1880 and 1890. During that time around 1.8 million Germans emigrated to the United States, around 10 percent of them from Bavaria.

The brothers' close relationship also resulted in them marrying a pair of sisters from the Augsburg region. They had probably become acquainted in San Francisco, and the weddings were celebrated in 1895. Xaver Dodel married Mathilde Egger (1870–1937), and Hans married her sister Bertha Egger (died 1905). In San Francisco Hans started work as an assistant in a pharmacy, but soon afterwards rented his own store in the Latin Quarter and opened his own "International Pharmacy, located on Stockton Street "near Broadway" with "cement floor, inlay marble paving... and mirrors." To attract as many customers as he could, Hans Dodel advertised his linguistic abilities: Italian; French, Spanish and of course German. Together with his brother he learnt Chinese in San Francisco as well.

Hans Dodel also attracted customers with a special hobby: he decorated his shop window with miniature sculptures, all depicting events and worlds on a small scale. "He usually makes a different one of them every month. They are popular with children as well as adults," said his brother in a letter home dated 1912. "He spends most on dolls, of which he has around 600 for the scenes in his window. Tomorrow he wants to make an oasis in the Sahara Desert with camels, horses and Arabs, etc. In July he's planning to build a miniature

zeppelin." A further spare-time occupation of the Dodel brothers was music. All four Dodel boys had played a stringed instrument during their youth. Handwritten notes and a cello the brothers brought back still testify to this today.

Xaver Dodel had his doctor's surgery on Ellis Street in San Francisco. Both brother invented various things: Xaver patented a tooth elevator that was offered as a "Dodel Elevator" in dental practices from 1899 onwards. Hans had an American and French patent on "a device that prevents automobiles from smoking and smelling" known as a "Cil heater" in the description. Xaver used the device in his car and was delighted with it. These inventions were not generally successful, however, and their hopes of making a great deal of money out of them were dashed. The brothers were not all that financially successful anyhow: their letters contain numerous references to a German visit being too expensive, and to the danger of loss of earnings during an extended absence. At the start of the 20th century, the cost of living in the USA was quite high – and for the Dodel brothers, the earthquake in San Francisco on April 18, 1906 meant that they had to start again from scratch. Nevertheless, as early as 1909 Xaver Dodel was the proud owner of an automobile: "Business here is very bad at times and everyone is complaining.... Nevertheless we can always set aside small sums for better days. My biggest cause of concern at the moment is my automobile. I've driven it to destruction, and will soon need a new one I intend to buy one in Switzerland." From this letter it seems clear that Xaver Dodel had established himself in San Francisco.

The serious earthquake in 1906 was described by Xaver Dodel in a letter to Wolfertschwenden: "At 5.15 in the morning San Francisco began to shake, and shake very seriously. It lasted for one and a half minutes. My furniture started dancing round the room and the pictures on the walls wobbled and shook... When we came into the street the entire business district of the city, located to the east of us, was in flames." In Hans' pharmacy "all the bottles were smashed, and the boxes, powders, liquids and jars were all in such a state that it looked as if an artillery regiment had used the place as a shooting range... No one knows how many people lost their lives in this catastrophe, and probably never will... [author's note: there were in fact approximately 700 fatalities, and material damage amounting to 350 million dollars] ...I think the area of the city destroyed by fire would easily stretch from Wolfertschwenden and Grünenbach, and from Ittelsburg to Dietratried..."

Despite these catastrophes, Xaver Dodel no longer wanted to live in Germany. His wife Mathilde expressed her regret about this in a letter to her niece in 1909: "This winter we had several major fires, 3 days of bad storms and a few small earthquakes, nothing of significance, according to your uncle Xaver, but I must say I get terrified each time the place starts to tremble, and find it hard to calm down for days afterwards. Nevertheless nothing can persuade your uncle to leave this country, even if he could; all he ever says is "Let it shake".

Later however it was Mathilde who prevented them all from returning to the Allgäu. The Dodel brothers were considering spending their retirement in their homeland, and both went back to Germany in 1923. One year beforehand, her brother Josef and his wife had died shortly after each other in Wolfertschwenden, and Mathilde found it impossible to adapt to small town Allgäu life. She and Xaver Dodel returned to San Francisco, while Hans Dodel remained there and ran a pharmacy in Legau until his death in 1931. The Dodels, who had transferred all their savings to Germany, lost their fortune as a result of inflation and, for the fourth time in their lives, had to start again from scratch.

Hans and Xaver Dodel represent a group of emigrants who, well educated and reasonably well off financially, decided to travel to America in response to personal crises or perhaps out of curiosity and took the daring step of making a new start there – even though they could probably have made their fortune quite easily in Germany too.

Margot Hamm / Max Dodel