

## **From Schiefweg to Chicago: Emerenz Meier a poetess from the Bavarian forest**

Emerenz Meier, who was born the daughter of an innkeeper on October 3, 1874 in the village of Schiefweg bei Waldkirchen in the Bavarian Forest, and died on February 28, 1928 in Chicago, can be regarded as the most important Bavarian popular poetess alongside Lena Christ. From 1893 onwards her mostly dramatic short stories, with their farming motifs, were published in newspapers, magazines and calendars. She also wrote several folk-song-like poems, and also the magnificent dialect ballad "Wödaschwüln". Her poems, which today are unique sources of information in their own right, were much enjoyed by the reading public at that time, and two of her stories were dramatized and successfully performed in the civic theatre in Passau. She herself, highly popular and universally admired, was considered to be a "natural talent". Her photograph was sold at fairs as a miniature attachment for fob-watch chains, and in 1898 royal photographer Alphons Adolph, inventor of the photographic picture-postcard, brought out a card showing the young "authoress" in Bavarian folk dress and also her birthplace. Tourism was just beginning at that time, and this postcard – "Greetings from Waldkirchen" – was sent all over the world.

In the autumn of 1896, far away in Königsberg, East Prussia, Emerenz Meier's only book – "From the Bavarian Forest" – was published by Karl Weiss-Schrattenthal, a professor of literature in Pressburg. The volume with its four stories received critical acclaim yet sold poorly, but it did prompt a young medical student and future poet named Hans Carossa (1878-1956) to go on a long hike to visit Emerenz Meier in Waldkirchen in the autumn of 1898. Over 40 years later he described this and a further visit in his atmospheric book of recollections entitled "The Year of Beautiful Illusions" (1941). He created a monument of poetry and truth for Emerenz Meier, the "gentle rebel", whom he recognized as a "person with a double nature", and also her friend and patron Auguste Unertl (1864–1941), wife of the Waldkirchen market secretary: "Whenever she walked among forest and barley in her folk dress, she almost seemed to be a spiritual concentration of her homeland..."

Emerenz Meier was only able to attend the three-year Mary Ward primary school in Waldkirchen. Although she was the best student in her year, she apparently experienced injustices there that had an effect on her critical faculties. She read a great deal as a young girl, and very much enjoyed writing "verses and stories". From 1893 onwards her greatest supporter was Auguste Unertl, who introduced her work to newspapers and magazines. In the autumn of 1900 the poetess made use of a three-month stay in Würzburg to attend a private school of trade, where she learnt the Gabelsberger stenographic technique in record time – something she was to use a great deal later on.

In 1890 her parents had made their inn over to a sister of Emerenz and her husband, and settled on a farm in nearby Oberndorf. Here Emerenz had to work just as hard as in Schiefweg, but even though her spare time was limited, a visitor noticed that she was finally in her own "home of the muses". Her father, a farmer and cattle dealer who liked to drink, soon began to lose money, however; the Meiers had to move out of their house, and soon saw no alternative to emigration to Chicago, where several relatives were already living. K.W. Kempf, a shipping agent and banker there, organized the Atlantic crossing and the railway journey from New York to Chicago. The father travelled there first with two daughters. In March 1906, after several failed attempts to run an inn in Passau and to begin a writer's career in Munich, Emerenz also set off for the USA together with her 71-year-old mother. The "Waldkirchner Zeitung" devoted just three lines to the poetess's departure: "Emerenz Meier, our dialect authoress, recently emigrated to America. A great deal of interest in emigration is currently being shown in our region." The two of them travelled on the Red Star Line ship "Finland" from Antwerp – and not "between decks" but in a second-class cabin, thereby avoiding the embarrassing body searches and queuing at Ellis Island.

All the formalities took place quietly and discreetly on board the ship. Chicago, with its thriving grain business, huge slaughterhouses and skyscrapers, and also its unscrupulous speculators and its notorious underworld, became the new home of the poetess from the Bavarian Forest. There were German and Bavarian quarters of the city too, however, with Bavarian shops and inns, Bavarian beer, marching bands, and folkwear societies. The Meiers had to make a living as manual labourers, and initially led a hand-to-mouth existence. In 1907 Emerenz Meier married a compatriot from the Bavarian Forest, Franz Schmöller, and in 1908 she bore him a son (who would never learn German properly). After Schmöller's premature death, Emerenz married an intelligent Swede named John Lindgren, who devoted more attention and understanding to her than her first husband. The family lived far away from the city centre, in the north, on Wellington Avenue near Lake Michigan, where her son loved to go fishing. Ever eager to learn new things, Emerenz – whose circle of friends in Chicago included the poet Martin Drescher (1863-1920), began by writing short stories and poems for German-language magazines in the States, and gave several lectures for German societies – but her voice soon fell silent because, as she wrote in an unpublished letter to Auguste Unertl on October 30, 1924, "the many years of struggling to make a living in a strange land, under the worst of conditions, have worn away my creative powers." Her connection with her home country broke off when World War I broke out, but was re-established in 1919. In 56 letters and picture postcards to her friend in Waldkirchen and also two letters to Hans Carossa, Emerenz Lindgren provides a detailed account of life in the metropolis of Chicago, "this Babylon of greed, cynicism, impudence and selfishness, this city of diesel fumes and noise, this hell for anyone who still possesses ideals" (March 15, 1920).

Her relationship with her new homeland was ambivalent: although she disapproved strongly of the Americans' faith in the power of commerce and capitalism, she also prized American freedom – indeed, in 1923 she even tried to get the Unertls to emigrate to Chicago too, saying the city was a "grandiose" place where "milk and honey flowed", and that everything was better and cheaper than in inflation-racked Germany.

For years Emerenz Lindgren tried to improve living conditions in her German homeland by sending money and packages there – even though she herself was not wealthy. She had become a committed pacifist and Marxist, "terribly radical", and she believed that socialism would free humanity. Her letters also bear witness to her powerful yearning for the forest of her homeland. She would never see it again: Emerenz Lindgren died just before her 54th birthday of a kidney inflammation, in the apartment of her son Joseph Schmöller at 1243, Draper Street. According to her sister, the beer that she brewed and drank herself during the Prohibition era – and was also happy to sell – could have contributed to her premature death. Her body was cremated according to her wishes, and her son's ashes were strewn over his parents' grave at the Graceland Cemetery. Emerenz Lindgren, widow Schmöller, née Meier, was an unusual and unique woman, who suffered not only from the effects of economic hardship and lack of educational opportunity in the Bavarian Forest around the turn of the century, but also from a lack of understanding in those around her. She also lived through the tragedy of the wanderer whose hopes remain unfulfilled. Her homeland never forgot her. Her birthplace in Schiefweg was restored recently and has been turned into an inn again; an emigration museum and an Emerenz Meier memorial room will soon occupy the upper storey.

*Paul Praxl*

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