

George Schramm – an American Pioneer from Upper Franconia

Dedicated to his great-granddaughter Carol Thomason

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“There is probably no more impoverished region than this one where people strive so hard just to earn their daily bread under such bitter conditions”, declared Evangelical Lutheran Pastor Wolfgang Ludwig Munzert of the Upper Franconian market-town of Plech in 1833. At the same time he expressed “the wish that the young people of the region consider traveling to other areas to profit by associating with educated and religious people, and that many would even consider emigrating entirely in order that the population, and with it the poverty, should not get out of hand and thereby adversely affect morality.”

Only a few years before, Munzert had given Latin and Greek instruction to six boys including two of his own sons and an intelligent, alert boy from Plech, Georg Schramm. Georg was born on February 12, 1816, the fourth of ten children who grew to adulthood of Johann Christoph Schramm and his wife Margaretha Barbara, nee Kießling, from Plech. Georg was a boy of many varied talents. His mother taught him to read when he was five. As the offspring of a musical family he played the “clarionett” and flute and was a soloist in the children’s choir where the director compared his voice to a “silver bell”. It is therefore not surprising that the boy, who from childhood was called “the little parson”, had a heartfelt desire to continue his education at the “gymnasium” in Bayreuth and eventually to study theology. However, a catastrophe took place in the winter of 1829/30 just as this goal was within reach. Fourteen-year-old Georg and some of his fellow Munzert Latin scholars were out and about. In a spirit of “boyish bravado”, Georg jumped over a small barrier at the shore of a pond, stumbled, fell, hit the back of his head hard on the ice and lost consciousness. He suffered a fractured skull which was not treated medically and, as a result, was robbed of his splendid memory. This ultimately forced him to abandon his beloved studies. Not long after this serious accident Georg began a five-year apprenticeship as a merchant with a tradesman of Kulmbach named Gummi, where the oldest brother, Johann Georg, worked. Johann Friedrich Gummi was

also the Mayor of Kulmbach. Georg traded his Latin exercises for French lessons, which now would be of greater practical benefit to him.

Everything changed when in 1835 Georg's father decided to take his entire family, turn his back on Plech, and try his luck in the New World. Plech was a small market-town, which belonged to the Franconian principality of Kulmbach-Bayreuth from 1402 to 1791, then fell to the Prussians and finally, in 1810, was annexed to the Kingdom of Bavaria. The main reasons for his departure were certainly the oppressive poverty and the gloomy prospects for the future. Also, the regimentation and constrictions in the old homeland must have been unbearable in the long run for the well educated and cultured Johann Christoph Schramm. Besides, this "general merchant" born on May 10, 1782 — whose ancestors came to Plech from Alsace after the Thirty Years' War, who served as Mayor of Plech several times, and who fought with the Prussians against Napoleon at Jena on October 14, 1806 — harbored a basic antipathy for the ruling Bavarian King. Georg at first was firmly opposed to emigration and only changed his mind after a conversation with a business friend of his father's in Nuremberg. In May of 1837 his father sent him by post coach to Bremen to book a ship for the crossing for his own and a few other families. It took almost two years until the carefully planned emigration of Johann Christoph Schramm was approved, because the Kingdom of Bavaria was reluctant to let him leave. The two-story dwelling with its store — today Hauptstraße 16 in Plech — had already been sold on January 13, 1837 to the merchant Johann Meyer for 1,875 florins.

On Monday, July 10, 1837, nearly everyone in Plech who could walk accompanied the Schramms to the edge of Veldensteiner Forest where the final, tearful farewell took place. The Schramms traveled in a wagon especially designed for the long journey in order that from town to town only the coachman and the draught animals had to be changed. The first stops on the trip, which Georg Schramm meticulously noted down in his diary, were Pegnitz (July 10) and Kulmbach (July 11 and 12 at his brother's home). Then the journey continued over Lichtenfels-Karolinenhöhe to Coburg-Ketschendorf (July 13 and 14), over Hildburghausen and Schleusingen to St. Kilian-Erlau (July 15), over Suhl, Zella-Mehlis, Oberhof, Schwarzwald and Ohrdruf to Schwabhausen (July 16), over Gotha, Westhausen and Bad Langensalza to Mühlhausen-Ammern (July 17), over Dingelstädt, Leinefelde, Breitenbach, Worbis, Wintzingerode and Teistungen to Duderstadt (July 18)

and over Katlenburg-Lindau, Hammenstedt and Northeim to Einbeck-Salzderhelden (July 19). Thus followed one stopover after the other — the last stretch from Bremen on the Weser River — until the emigrants finally arrived in Cuxhaven on August 10. There on August 14, 1837, when towards nine o'clock in the morning a favorable wind arose, the “Caecilie & Sophie” put out to sea. She was a Danish ship more than 30 years old with two masts instead of the originally promised year-and-a-half old three-master. The brig was commanded by Captain Thomsen, whose crew of ten included a first and a second mate. According to the entry in Georg Schramm’s travel journal, the captain, though “yet a young man [of] about 36 years of age”, seemed “to be a very experienced seaman”. On board, according to the passenger list handed down to us, were 98 German emigrants. Among them was Friedrich Messerer from Plech, whose daughter was born at 4 a.m. on September 17 during a heavy storm. Also in the group were Georg Herzog and Vitus Tauber as well as Johann Kemmater from “Attenhof” (Ottenhof, a section of Plech, is meant), and a citizen of the neighboring town of Betzenstein named Köchel, all with their families and — like the Schramms — all had stated their travel destination as Missouri. Johann Georg Albrecht Köchel evidently took the first name of his infant son who had died in 1832, as he is listed as “Bernhard Koekel” on the passenger list. The crossing bestowed upon these people not only many severe storms and barely edible food which was spoiled due to the putrid or sour (acidic) water, but also, once the seasickness finally subsided, there was hardly a day without quarreling among the passengers. The crew’s nerves were likewise on edge: Georg documented in his reminiscences that on October 10 the “second mate, of brutal appearance and bestial acting, commenced a quarrel with the cook (an innocent looking and feeble young fellow) and, after striking him several times in the face, knocked him down. This happened on the forepart of the deck. The Captain, standing in the door of his cabin, noticed this scene and, without waiting for an explanation, took hold of a cable (called a Brambrass) and mercilessly belabored the poor, no doubt innocent cook. What was our surprise, though, to see an old tar of small stature, about fifty years old, run to the scene, tear the rope from the hand of the Captain, and tell him to go to his cabin, and then to see the Captain do as ordered by the old sailor. This sailor’s name was Nöls (or was it Nels?). He was an uncompromising enemy to the ruffian second mate who, though almost twice the size of Nöls, seemed to

be mortally afraid of him, Nöls having once threatened to knife him for some of his brutalities.”

To crown it all about noon on October 16 a fire broke out. From the chimney of the passenger’s kitchen a flame had already shot up man-high: “Many of the male passengers began to rush up to aid in extinguishing the flames but the ship’s crew forbade them, as they would only be in the way. Although the fire had made considerable progress, it was extinguished without doing much harm, after causing much alarm among the passengers.”

At last on Friday, October 20, 1837, a relieved Georg could write: “Early morning land sighted, the pilot arrived. ... After several gentlemen had been on our ship we reached New York before evening, this fine city with its many sea-going vessels, steamboats, towers and beautiful buildings.” Only three days following their landing the Schramms left New York where they had lodged with a German and where one of Georg’s trunks was stolen: “The Germans are the greatest swindlers; Kranz a landlord, one of the same.”

On their way up the Hudson River and then through the Erie Canal the family traveled over Albany (October 23), Schenectady (October 26), Utica (October 27), Rochester (October 30) and Blackwood (October 31) to Buffalo where, after about a two-week stay, they continued their journey by steamer across Lake Erie to Cleveland. From there they were to go via the Ohio Canal to Portsmouth and on to St. Louis, but because of the frost and snow the master of the boat had to break off the trip for the winter in Circleville, Ohio. George, as he now called himself, settled for the time being in Circleville. It was almost eight years later that he responded to the call of his brother Siegmund who was a merchant in Burlington. He arrived in Burlington by Mississippi steamer on July 19, 1845 with his wife and daughter Pauline. On May 4, 1843 he had married Isabella Christ(y), who was a descendant of Pennsylvania Germans (Pennsylvania “Dutch”) and who bore him eight children.

George decided to establish a general store in Farmington, Iowa, first in a rented store but already in 1848 in his own three-story brick building. George Schramm was a successful and an assertive businessman. For example, he earned additional money by pork packing, railroad and bridge building, stone quarrying and even by oil prospecting. But something else filled him with great and life-long pride: In the fall of 1852 he was a candidate of the

Whig Party for the Iowa State Senate. He was elected for a five-year term and was one of the Senators who in 1856 voted for Des Moines to become the new capital of Iowa. He moved to Des Moines on 1867, October 18. From 1862 to 1864 he served in the Iowa House of Representatives, elected as a candidate of the Republicans. His opinion of America was expressed in an impressive speech which he gave at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the “Pioneer Lawmakers Association of Iowa” which took place on February 12-13, 1902: “Before leaving the fatherland I made to myself a vow that I would retain everything that was laudable or praiseworthy in the German character, and that I would receive and adopt everything I found laudable or praiseworthy in the American character.” His closing words were like a personal testament: “The German fatherland is ever dear to my heart, but the remains of my parents of blessed memory being safely imbedded in the sacred soil of Iowa, I feel a pleasant satisfaction in calling America my true fatherland: — the more so that I love it, its people and its institutions.” As one of the famous and highly regarded pioneers of the State of Iowa, George Schramm, who was known everywhere simply as “Father Schramm”, died at the blessed age of 90 years on July 26, 1906 in his summer home on Lake Okoboji. That he always carried his German homeland in his heart and also never forgot the well-rounded education which he enjoyed in his youth, is evidenced by his naming two of his sons after two great German poets and thinkers: “Schiller” and “Herder”.

Literature

Quoted according to Stark, Heinz: “Zur Geschichte des Marktes Plech”, Simmelsdorf 1994, p. 26. The further account essentially follows the four-volume “Autobiographical Reminiscences” of George Schramm, handwritten in English and begun on January 19, 1901, and his 1837 “Diary” written partly in German and partly in English during his journey to America (both in possession of his great-granddaughter Carol Thomason, Des Moines, Iowa), further, the travel journal of his brother Johann Siegmund Schramm, “A Short Description of my Voyage from Plech to Bremen and America 1837”, translated into English by Erich Funke, published in: “The Palatine Immigrant”, Part 1: Volume XXVI, Number 4, September 2001, and Part 2: Volume XXVII, Number 1, December 2001 (Original in German: University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, Manuscript Ms S3768), the “Funeral Sermon of Father George Schramm” by The Reverend John A. Wirt, as well as Brigham, Johnson: “Iowa – Its History and Its Foremost Citizens”, Volume 1, Chicago 1915, p. 238 and 239, and Schramm, Frank H.: “The Schramm Family”, Burlington 1973.