

Emigration in the Problematic Years between the Two World Wars: the Zeilinhofer Family

The years between the two world wars were marked by a heightened readiness to emigrate, and Bavaria was no exception. World War I had left many families without their breadwinners, and soldiers returning home often found it hard to re-adjust to everyday life. Furthermore, emigration was extremely weak during the war years, and this led to a marked increase in it. This was compounded by the problematic economic situation, which caused a dramatic rise in state debt during the 1920s. In Germany, hyper-inflation left people who had not invested their money in property totally impoverished. Fifty thousand marks saved before World War I were only worth 5,000 in 1920, 500 in the middle of 1922, 20 goldmarks at the beginning of 1923 and eventually, just before the introduction of the currency reform on November 15, 1923, a mere 0.00005 pfennigs. Between 50,000 and 60,000 people tried to improve their circumstances by emigrating from Germany, and almost three-quarters of them chose the United States of America as their destination. However, in 1921, 1924 and 1927 the USA implemented quotas for some countries of origin, and also steadily reduced them. This, combined with the weak US economy, made many migrants head for South America instead. During this period (1926–1928) four members of the Munich working-class family Zeilinhofer left their home country, planning to make a new start in the United States. At that time Munich had approximately 685,000 inhabitants. Michael Zeilinhofer, the oldest member of the large family, worked as a carpenter in the artillery workshops of the Bavarian army. As was often the case, a family member had already emigrated and paved the way for the rest to follow. Dominican nun Albertina was the aunt of Rosa Maria Fleck, who had married Eduard Zeilinhofer in August 1924. Albertina had come to St. Bonifac Church in Newark in the state of New Jersey in 1890, where she worked as a teacher at the monastery school. Sister Albertina had been granted American citizenship in 1921, and could thus act as guarantor for arriving members of her family. Emigrants arriving without any money needed a guarantor to ensure they would not remain penniless and thus need help from the United States. In April 1926, Sister Albertina guaranteed the USA that she would pay for the upkeep of the electrician Eduard Zeilinhofer, resident at Zieblandstrasse 41 in Munich, Bavaria, Germany, with her weekly income of 35 dollars. Furthermore, Eduard Zeilinhofer had to make it past the quota system of the immigration authorities which, since 1921, authorized only a certain number of people to immigrate. In 1926 Eduard (1899–1986) was allowed to leave for New Jersey. He decided to find out the lie of the land before asking his wife to join him. He found work as a caretaker and electrician in the monastery of St. Bonifac. When his wife Rosa (1898–1967) arrived to join him in 1928, the couple settled in Belivare, New York. In 1932 – after the obligatory five-year period had expired – Eduard Zeilinhofer successfully

applied for US citizenship, since he did not intend to return to Germany permanently. In 1928, Eduard's sister Maria (1908-1969) had also come over to America.

Maria was still a minor when she emigrated and therefore needed her parents' permission. To her, the travelling and the crossing were very adventurous, and it was she who brought the other members of the family to America: her brother Michael (died 1958), and eventually her father Michael Zeilnhöfer senior (1873–1959) after the death of his wife in 1948. It must have been difficult for him to decide to take an aeroplane for the first time in his life at the age of 75 and spend the rest of his life in America.

Michael Zeilnhöfer junior met his wife Jean in New York. She was a Jewish woman from Breslau. Michael worked for the New York municipal authorities, firstly as a garbage collector, then as a park-keeper in Central Park. One of the sons from his marriage with Jean was stationed in Darmstadt as a GI from 1965 to 1967, and thus saw his parents' home country for the first time as an American soldier.

In New York, Maria Zeilnhöfer fell in love with Frank Benz (1909-1997) from Munich. They got married and created the basis of their livelihood, the "Linden House", a Bavarian-style restaurant in Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, which remained part of the family property until 1981. Frank, a qualified businessman, had worked mainly as a musician in Munich: in the 1929/30 season, for instance, he had played trumpet and violin in the "Erste Tölzer Schützenkapelle" band. He continued this occupation in America as bandleader and violinist in the "Sunrise Bavarian Village" in Bellmore, New Jersey as well as the "Union City Hofbrauhaus" in Union City, New Jersey. The center of the family's activities, however, was the "Linden House" – it meant financial security in the United States, maintained contact with Germany, and generously supported the family members who stayed there – especially the parents. A special event in the family's existence was certainly the mother's visit in 1937. Maria Zeilnhöfer (1872–1948) stayed with her children and grandchildren in the United States for one year. Today, only two of the nine immediate descendants of the Zeilnhöfers can speak German. The entire "Zeilnhöfer clan" consists of 28 people who regularly meet up in the United States and maintain intensive contact with Bavaria.

Heinz Zeilnhöfer / Margot Hamm