

A District Administrator Warns Against Emigration to Prussian Poland (Neuenbürg 1803)

*District Administrator Seeger in Neuenbürg, Württemberg
(Translated by Dwayne Janke)*

Around the turn of the last century, it had become customary to emigrate to Prussian "Eastern Territories," which had been newly acquired in the late 18th century due to the division of Poland. Prussian advertisers also traversed in the Württemberg region and, with exaggerated promises, invited the poor to move to Prussian Poland. Since quite a few did so, the then District Administrator Seeger, was forced to issue a printed warning to "my subordinates," as he writes:

4. April 1803

At first I watched the emigration to Prussian Poland quite indifferently. I was amazed at the foolishness of the emigrants and felt sorry for them, but I still believed that it is good for Württemberg—this country, which is obviously too populated with people—if the population diminishes somewhat due to emigration. I was convinced, and still am, that few good citizens are emigrating, and that in the case of most of them, the country is even lucky if it is liberated from them—and furthermore the largely insignificant sums of money that go out of the country as a result cause little damage, and that it is even more advantageous than disadvantageous if the previous, apparently inflated prices of the goods decrease somewhat. As certain as these considerations make the friend of the fatherland indifferent to the welfare of the country in the course of emigration, it is certain that the philanthropist, and especially a public official, must not remain a silent spectator when he sees a considerable number of his fellow citizens be seduced by carelessness, unjustifiable dissatisfaction and an unfortunate addiction to something new, to plunge themselves and their families into ruin—it is a high duty to keep the unfortunate from their ruin. . . .

This conviction prompts me to publicize my view of the emigration and the fate that the emigrant is facing. But I declare publicly and with my honor that only the welfare of those unfortunate are leading me at this moment and that I have not been asked to do so by anyone—and therefore not by the highest rulers. The deep silence observed by the government in the current emigration makes it likely that it has the same view for the welfare of the state as I do, that I do not want to hinder.

But the poor beggars themselves should check more thoroughly before entrusting the happiness of themselves, their wives, children and infants, to a foreign country—unknown to them—not even known by hearsay; you should see that country with your own eyes before you undertake such a large venture. You don't buy a goat without seeing it, and these fools want to entrust their entire happiness to the danger—they want to expose themselves to the danger of being troubled by their own adversity—poverty, misery and illness—pressed by accusations of the wife and their own conscience, and by curses from their children, which will certainly send them into the ground to be tormented and have hell in this world! There are truly considerations that must be understood to convince with common sense that this praised Poland is not the pleasant stay that the people in love with it imagine.

Württemberg was almost completely destroyed and depopulated by the Thirty Years' War. The previous wars were equally oppressive and differed from that one mostly only in their shorter duration; at the same time, Württemberg is only too densely populated—while Poland, in relation to Württemberg, suffered far less from wars and still needs foreign immigrants in order not to remain half uninhabited. Saxony is a neighboring country of Poland—it is not as good a country as Württemberg, but is populated as much with people, and yet no Saxon thinks about going to Poland because this praised country is better known there than among the weak, gullible and easy-to-seduce Swabians.

One of the pillars who wanted to emigrate replied to this idea: "Perhaps one would not want Saxons." The simple-minded forget that Prussia only asked for people, and that this state should not care whether they were Swabians, Saxons, Franconia or Bavaria—and then: the Saxon is truly also as active, hard-working and intelligent a worker as the Swabian—he may even deserve preference over the latter. . . .

The printed notes that go around to the audience say that "those who bring 300 or more fl. [300 or more Gulden] come to empty or uninhabited farms." Don't the blinded people lose the scales from their eyes at this point? There are no uninhabited farms in Württemberg, and surely such uninhabited places are not delicacies, otherwise their previous owners would not have left them. In Württemberg you don't stop anyone who wants to

emigrate; but do you let the inhabitants of Poland leave? If the country were good, you would not have to be forced. These general considerations, the correctness of which must be obvious to everyone who is not completely blind, correspond to the special circumstances of Poland, which are known to everyone and the history of all emigration. The Prussian government must of course use all means to populate a deserted country; to attract the people required for this. . . . Reliable evidence should be in letters that real emigrants write back the Reich, and in which they should present their situation as advantageous and inviting to counter the truth; but I must say I haven't seen any of these letters yet. Also, paid there are fraudsters back from Poland who make a favorable but false description of this country. Notes about people's comments are sent out, which are written in such a way as to seduce commoners, but which the more sensible immediately sees as unreliable.

Poland, as I can safely say, is a country full of morasses and swamps, with unhealthy, bad water and humid air. These enemies of human life, so often destroying the health of the elderly inhabitants and spreading diseases there every minute, are all the more dangerous for the Swabian, since he is used to clean and healthy mountain air, excellent water and dry areas; their deprivation of health in Poland must be all the more destructive, because there he lacks wine and lives in a climate that, without comparison, is rougher and colder than the roughest and coldest area of Swabia. How foolish the idea of some emigrants in these circumstances that they take vines with them and want to plant wine in this cold and rough country. . . . This may serve as proof of how much these poor unfortunates are deceived. Indeed, having to go without wine deserves far more consideration than some might think at first, especially when you look at days of sickness and weakness where a glass of wine is so refreshing.

Poland cannot be called a fertile country; there is, as far as I know, no spelt there, and the rest of the fruit growing there is poor. Fertility is an issue because I know from reliable people who travel through this country that the soil hardly yields one sixth or one eighth of that in Swabia; in fact, the number of Morgens of fields so seductively offered to the poor, beguiled immigrants is nothing but a lure.

By calculating what the seducers have promised in their Morgens of land with a similar amount of land in fat and fertile Württemberg, they [the would-be colonists] already foresee themselves as rich and wealthy people, and completely forget that the difference between Württemberg and Poland is greater than that between the Oberamt Leonberg and the Alb, than between the Unterland and the Black Forest; they also completely forget that they are not assigned already cultivated fields, but mostly completely desolate areas, with bushes and hedges, which they can only clear with hard work and with the nourishment of a crude diet. Drains and trenches must be constructed with immense effort, and that, as it is well known, requires one generation . . . There is no comparison with that of Swabia, but even if they have overcome all these obstacles, they only have their miserable food—and not any of the infinitely many needs that the soft, comfortable Swabian are completely used to; and it is not foreseeable how such needs should be satisfied, because poverty in Poland is beyond belief; that is why all the things that the farmer can sell are not sold; they are sold so cheap that the proceeds are not worth the effort; on the other hand, many other things are expensive, partly because partly the trade in Poland is not good at all, partly because things have to be brought in to remote cities that are 10, 12 hours away and are therefore very expensive due to this long transport.

I can say that the poor betrayed emigrants will soon forget the well-known ability of the Swabians to clean themselves, and that in 2 or 3 years at the most this will go hand in hand with them being seen wrapped in rags, in which they would never find themselves here on the street at night; because truly, they will lack clothes and the thousand other necessities that a farmer here has to buy, once they find themselves paying all their money to the king in Poland.

Well do I know that the betrayed have been given the bait of 5 or 6 tax-free years—and are also promised that they will only be asked to pay 1 fl.-- but forget completely that their field, I just want to say, yields 4 times less than ours, so that if each Morgen here was assessed to pay 4 fl. (which is—except in times of war—never the case even when we add taxes and all other duties together and apply them to each Morgen), the local tax would still be lower here than that in Poland. And then I have to tell them that here they have every other need (the salt, the bread, the meat, even if you bake it yourself and produce it yourself by slaughtering your own cattle)—in short everything without a large and pressing sales and excise tax.

In general, it is known—and the emigrants can hear it from every handyman who has been to Prussia—that the Prussian government is one of the toughest in Germany, that the taxes there are the largest and most pressing in Germany, that every resident soldier there is punished for many offenses—often only for an offense because of the mood of the official—and that the subjects there have no privileges, no freedoms, no state constitution but the will of the king, without being allowed to grumble. How all of this stands out against the happy constitution of Württemberg!!

In addition to these considerations, there are some very important ones with which the emigrants should give vivid attention, for their own sake. It is a known fact that every experienced and educated man will attest to me that colonists—even if they immigrate to the most fertile countries—have to struggle with distress, want and misery for many years until they have overcome the thousand obstacles that have arisen and stand in the way of the establishment of agriculture. What were the Reformed people in Palmbach, Mutschelbach and Großvillars only 20 years ago? What were your fields then? How poor are most of the residents of Pinache, Perouse, Neuhengstett and Nordhausen??—and yet they came to Württemberg, this fertile country, which is a paradise compared to Poland!

Every institution for rest, comfort, health and teaching in Württemberg has partly grown to a high degree of perfection or is still being perfected, while all of these same institutions in Poland are missing or imperfect. How will the emigrants feel if they are completely without a doctor, a surgeon, a barber, a pharmacy, or if they have to search for these for 6-8 hours? What will they say if their children have to walk half or almost all of the way to get to school and when they have to go to a priest or a church within the same distance?

The laws, the customs are different in that country than in their homeland; the precautionary rules that they have to observe in trade and change are different; nobody is there to give them advice, help and support; they have been torn from their old connections and their new situation is as unknown to them as if they were abandoned—they do not know the language of the old residents, and they are hated and despised by them. But among all of this, the most tormenting thing for me would be: they are torn from the arms of their loving friends and relatives. These, often the support and consolation in the days of suffering, are far from them—they have no prospect of ever seeing them again, all ties of the heart and the blood have broken off, and the poor abandoned are left with nothing but the agonizing reproach that they have deprived themselves of these sweet connections.

Most of them are apparently not really lacking, not really impoverished, as the cause of their emigration. No! Most of the time, the reasons are all faulty: the poor economy up to now and the resulting decline in prosperity. The enemies that drive them out of their homeland, the bosom!, are a tendency toward idleness and well-being, a dissatisfaction with one's condition, an addiction to something new, incompatibility with the neighbors or the authorities, as well as envy. Would you like to be called back by my admonitions from the path . . . which will have terrible remorse in its wake!! - Truly, those who want to work, who are not afraid of work, who live moderately, soberly and economically, still find their bread—a bread for which the emigrant will one day envy his former fellow citizens; and those who cannot find their bread in Württemberg will have to suffer even more miserably in Poland than their lot could ever have been in Württemberg.

Source: District Archives Calw, Facharbeit-Coll. District history

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