

“Could You Not Turn Your Back on This Hunger Country?”: Food in the Migration Process of German Emigrants, 1816-1856

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the role that food played in all stages of the migration process of German immigrants to the United States between 1816 and 1856. Extracting information from letters, travel journals, and memoirs, I suggest that lack of food was a great motivation to consider emigration from Germany. Moreover, it was a central topic while the emigrants crossed the Atlantic on sailboats—a journey that often turned out to be a struggle for survival. In the United States, however, food was plentiful. I examine the ways in which German immigrants described this abundance to their relatives at home and how they utilized food and the food industry to establish their identity in the United States. In a larger sense, this paper seeks to relativize the importance of religious and political motivations for emigration and to point out that the desire to have access to food was instead at the center. It is, furthermore, an effort to describe the beginnings of the food culture of the largest distinct ethnic group of the United States: German Americans.

When thousands of Germans left their homes to cross the Atlantic between 1816 and 1856 with very little prospect of ever returning, few sought greater religious or political freedom. The common perception that Europeans ‘voted with their feet,’ i.e., that they signaled their political discontent and desire for democracy by leaving, is an appealing yet somewhat romanticized myth. In the past few decades, historians have been working to dismantle it. One of the main tendencies in this scholarship is to put forth more economic explanations (cf. Hoerder, *Labor*; Daniels; Friedman). Immigrants came to the United States to find jobs and earn a living, from which overpopulation in Europe hindered them. In this paper, I will argue along the same lines but add to the equation a commonly overlooked variable: food.

Food has entered the scholarly discourse only fairly recently as a topic of historical migration studies, most notably in the form of historian Hasia R. Diner's monograph *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* published in 2006. Although it received its share of criticism, her work on the food-related aspects of migration is paramount for the scholarly debate on this topic. Diner compares and contrasts the food habits in the immigrants' home countries with the situation in the New World, while leaving out the Atlantic passage entirely.

My approach differs from Diner's in two ways: First, while she chooses a comparative perspective, I will focus exclusively on German emigrants.¹ The second main difference is that I will examine the entire migration process. The issue of food was a constant in all its stages, albeit in different ways: Starvation was one of the main motives for emigration. It was a physical manifestation of scarcity that became an urgent reason to no longer postpone emigration. Descriptions of plenitude in the United States reached the emigrants through several channels, promising more than a full stomach; implicitly, the idea of a safe food supply was tightly linked to economic security.

Let me begin by explaining why food constitutes a topic for historical research in the first place and for migration scholarship in particular. The consumption of food is vital for human beings at any given time. However, the associations one has with food—and the kinds of symbolic connotations one constructs—are subject to change: Who eats what and how much reflects culture, living conditions, and social hierarchies distinctly. Established social structures and food habits are, however, prone to change when people decide to leave their home and settle someplace else. It is for this reason that I will examine the role of food in the process of migration. It is an element of that “basic subsistence” that is the “first goal” of all migration (Hoerder, *Cultures* 15-16). Because of its vital nature, humans are willing to go to great lengths to secure their food supply. If necessary, they will even cross oceans.

The interdisciplinary nature of this topic is methodologically both intriguing and demanding. The spectrum of potentially linked disciplines extends from literary and folklore studies, anthropology, and food science to art history—and beyond. What distinguishes a historical approach is, of course, its methodology. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the analysis and interpretation of contemporary primary sources.

1 Germany at that time differed from the Federal Republic of Germany we know today. In its place, there was the German Confederation, a more loosely organized conglomerate of kingdoms and duchies. In addition to those entities that would later become the states of the Federal Republic, it included the Austrian Empire and large parts of today's Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Although, technically, people from all those areas were ‘German,’ I restrict my sources to those who also spoke (and wrote in) German.

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This study also draws attention to a vast pool of sources so far largely untapped by international scholars of German emigration to the United States.² Letters to family and friends at home or travel journals published in Germany were intended to reach a German-speaking audience. Somewhat surprisingly, very few of these sources have been translated into English. With the notable exception of Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer’s *News from the Land of Freedom*,³ the numerous original-language editions of letters published in Germany have gone largely unnoticed in other countries.⁴ The sources I use were first printed in such editions.

While these sources reveal feelings and immediate experiences of individuals to the historian, they come with their own set of difficulties. In addition to the fact that hardly any historical source is entirely objective, self-testimonials carry a particular risk of being idiosyncratic. Therefore, I will point out tendencies I found in several letters but will not shy away from presenting contradicting voices. An additional limit to the representativeness of the findings of this paper is the fact that the letters printed in the aforementioned editions were chosen by historians informed by a strong tradition of social history. Oftentimes, for example, passages on food were left out, because, perhaps, they did not seem relevant to the reconstruction of emigrant living conditions. In order to substantiate my findings, a great deal of further archival research is very much desirable.

The structure of this paper will roughly mirror that of the migration process, focusing in particular on the era before the implementation of steam ships in 1856. We will, therefore, start our journey in Germany and examine how significant a factor starvation really was for the decision to emigrate. To this end, I will discuss Diner’s findings and subsequently apply them to the famine of 1816/1817 in Southwestern Germany. Afterward, we will board the ship alongside the emigrants and sail across the Atlantic. Estimating the food supply on board was a logistical challenge, which often led to continued starvation during the Atlantic passage. Other complications further exacerbated the living conditions of the emigrants. The journey will be completed when emigrants turn into immigrants after disembarking the ship and arriving in the United States. I argue that food was a constant factor for the emigrants and would-be

2 The most comprehensive collection of emigrant letters in Germany is the Nordamerika-Briefsammlung (NABS; Collection of Letters from North America) initiated by emigrant scholar Wolfgang Helbich. He and his team collected around ten thousand letters which are now stored in the Gotha Research Library. For further information, cf. *Auswandererbriefe aus Nordamerika*. For the most recent overview of German emigration research, cf. Helbich, “German Research.”

3 The quotes used in this paper, however, will be taken from the original German edition.

4 For this reason, all quotes from contemporary sources will be given in my own translation. The only exception to this rule is the published autobiography of Jacob Klee, who wrote in English himself. In this text, I quote from the English original and not the German translation also included in the book.

immigrants throughout their journey across the Atlantic. They left Germany in order to feed themselves as well as their families. In the United States, food became a yardstick against which to measure the relative improvement of their living conditions.

HUNGERING IN THE HOMELAND

Contrary, perhaps, to conventional wisdom, food scarcity outweighs political or religious reasons for migration. I will first discuss Diner's findings and apply these to the experience of German emigrants during the 1816/1817 famine in Southern Germany. Specifically, it is my goal to firmly establish the link between the experience of starvation and migration. The 1816/1817 famine is particularly noteworthy because it marked the beginning of German mass emigration—made possible only by the reinstatement of Atlantic trade after the Napoleonic Wars. It merely serves as an example, however, for dynamics at work throughout the early nineteenth century.

Diner contributed one of the landmark publications to the field of historical migration studies regarding food habits. In *Hungering for America*, she compares and contrasts Irish, Jewish,⁵ and Italian immigrant foodways at home and in the United States. She claims that an unsatisfactory food supply was indeed a widespread reason to emigrate to the United States: "Immigrants never believed that the streets of America were paved with gold. Instead, they expected that its tables were covered with food" (Diner xvii). The quest for adequate nourishment outweighed abstract notions of potential prosperity, even though both are, of course, economic in nature. Diner goes on to analyze the extent to which the emigrants' respective culinary heritages became part of their respective ethnic identities in American society. The scope of this paper, unfortunately, does not allow for a full summary of her findings. Suffice it to say that she claims that Italian immigrants followed the most representative pattern of the three (226):⁶ The prospect of abundance motivated them to leave their country. In the United States, they were able to eat meals on a daily basis that in Italy had been

5 In her analysis, Diner focuses primarily on Jews from Eastern Europe who immigrated to the United States beginning in the 1880s. While some of the people I quote may have been Jewish, I do not account for religious differences as I feel they are secondary to the dynamics I would like to emphasize.

6 The Irish and Jewish cases "were too laden with inner conflict, too fraught with problems to be paradigmatic" (Diner 226). According to Diner, Irish immigrants did not develop a distinctly Irish American cuisine for reasons idiosyncratic to their own history of suppression by the British (106-12). The food Jewish immigrants ate, on the other hand, was determined by religious laws as to what was kosher and what was not. This led to debates about food unique to the Jewish immigrant community (218-19).

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reserved for holidays and for members of higher social strata (83). The historians Ronald Bayor and Harvey Levenstein have voiced their discontent with Diner’s neglect of political and religious motivations as well as property ownership as reasons for migration. If Diner’s assertions were true, they ask, why is it that the poorest, i.e., hungriest, often did not emigrate (Levenstein 204; Bayor 266-67)? Nevertheless, both Levenstein and Bayor acknowledge the relevance of Diner’s perspective and praise the scrutiny of her work. I will elaborate on my strongest criticism—her failure to cover the passage—at a later point.

There were probably as many reasons for emigration, or sets thereof, as there were individual emigrants, as the heated scholarly debate—which is far from being resolved—shows. In the German case, the prominent migration historian Wolfgang Helbich estimates that economic and social considerations motivated around ninety percent of all German emigrants. They far outweighed the ten percent of emigrants who listed political or religious reasons as their main motivation. Helbich claims that the largest part of the ninety-percent majority left because of an overpopulation that local agriculture could not yet manage to feed, i.e., actual or projected starvation. Proper nourishment, hence, was a topic on the emigrants’ minds (*“Alle Menschen”* 37-38). Rather abstract ideas of greater political freedom and equality as a motive for emigration were arguably fabricated in the American collective memory and have lost their momentum in historical scholarship. In the United States, immigrants generally sought a higher income, lower taxes, and a secure food supply (Friedman 560, 567-68). As both Friedman and Helbich (*“Alle Menschen”*) show, the idea that economic factors trigger emigration is not new. In addition, I propose that rather abstract ideas of economic betterment frequently manifested themselves in eating regularly and eating well.

From today’s perspective, it may seem strange that Europeans left their home continent because of starvation. While famine still constitutes a problem in some parts of the world, modern agriculture is able to compensate for crop failures, whereas two hundred years ago, irregularities in climate threw off the fragile balance between food production and population growth. Even in years with high agricultural yield, however, the continuously strong population increase was a challenge. It hardly seems like a coincidence that waves of emigration from Germany have been found to correlate with waves of famine (Neutsch 62; Hansen 202).

A CASE IN POINT: THE 1816/1817 FAMINE IN SOUTHERN GERMANY

Continuously low temperatures and excessive rainfall in the summer of 1816 resulted in extensive crop failure and famine the following fall, which, in turn, drove Germans to emigrate. In the German Confederation, the famine particularly affected the kingdoms of Bavaria and Württemberg as well as the grand duchy of Baden. The shortage of food and the resulting price increase led to a famine that marks the beginning of German mass emigration to the United States (Brunner 55; Moltmann 27). In consequence, for example, chronicles from this period report that the inhabitants of the Württembergian town of Reutlingen resorted to selling beds and other pieces of furniture in order to buy bread, slaughtering pets and livestock, and cooking hay soup (Moltmann 47-48). Efforts of contemporary social policy, such as the establishment of soup kitchens, did not yield the intended result of discouraging emigration.

Unfortunately, official emigration statistics of the time are not entirely reliable. In addition, they do not account for illegal emigrants. For both Baden and Württemberg, the recorded numbers amounted to around fifteen thousand to twenty thousand emigrants per year (Moltmann 22). This does not mean, of course, that emigrants automatically chose the United States as their destination. In Württemberg only about a third crossed the Atlantic to the New World, while the overwhelming majority took the river route to Eastern Europe. Regardless of the actual numbers, politicians regarded this to be a problem of such severity that they drastically restricted emigration in the summer of 1817 (Moltmann 88).

The poor harvest, however, was only one of the factors that played into the famine; another was the population increase and its dire ramifications. Between 1810 and 1850, the population of the German Confederation rose from 25.5 to 34.5 million (Hansen 201). Not only did this lead to a general oversupply of trained workers but also to an increase in the number of farmers who inherited no land at all or only small, unprofitable pieces. Not surprisingly, contemporary agriculture could not catch up immediately, causing shortages of food. Prices for food increased significantly, resulting in an overall insufficient nourishment of the lower and middle classes (Günther 51-52; Cohn 59). Beyond the 1816/1817 crisis, this holds true for most parts of the German Confederation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Prices for rye, potatoes, and clothing doubled nationwide, while wages increased only slightly (Brunner 55-57).

In order to shed light on the reasons for emigration and the role of social policy in this matter, the king of Württemberg instructed the accountant Friedrich List to

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survey people from those areas where emigration was most pronounced.⁷ List was supposed to inquire as to what specifically motivated these people to leave their country. Although he became politically active later in his life, the immediate nature of his transcripts suggests that they are very close to what the emigrants actually told him. They repeatedly listed unemployment, increasing food prices, and high taxes among their complaints. The carpenter Jakob Strähle from Egolsheim, who emigrated with his wife and child, poignantly uses a metaphor to connect food with his economic discontent. According to List, Strähle claimed that a local official would “snatch away the citizens’ bread before they could eat it” (qtd. in Moltmann 132).⁸ Another remarkable tendency in the protocols is the refusal to accept financial or material aid from the state. The interviewees declined charity in favor of earning money and food with their work (cf. Moltmann 134, 147). The word was that trained professionals were needed in the United States and that those who had emigrated previously had done well for themselves (cf. Moltmann 135, 145, 149). In the 1816/1817 case, the sources paint a picture of acute famine that motivated the inhabitants of the affected areas to leave their homes and move to an environment more favorable to their physical needs.

LURING THE HUNGRY

For those considering emigration, letters from friends or relatives who had already emigrated to the United States were a source of information that is not to be underestimated in its impact. These letters were often shared, therefore reaching a much larger audience than just the one they were actually addressed to. They were handed around in the community or even read out loud (Friedman 560). In a remarkable number of letters in which the recently migrated describe their new environment, they contrast its plentiful food supply with the scarcity they remember from home. They associate food with the fertility of the land and, on a larger scale, with economic security. It is a powerful metaphor for their improved living conditions—a table covered with food is visualized much more easily than abstract future earnings. The immigrant Jacob Klee distinctly remembers that colorful descriptions of food were a popular way to mirror the newfound plenitude: “[L]etters had arrived written by some person living in America setting forth in glowing terms the glories of

7 Although parts of the report had previously been published in an edition of List’s collected works, Moltmann was the first to publish the entire report and point out its significance for research on German emigration and its causes.

8 “Bei der Zehendverleihung und bei Strassen- und andern Akkorden ist der Schultheiß immer der Unternehmer, und nimmt den Bürgern das Brod vor dem Munde weg.”

that country, demonstrating itself in a special manner at meal, such rich and bountiful dinners, meat three times a day and cakes and pies” (Klee 99). Beyond the time frame I analyze, this motif seems to prevail. In a letter from 1883, Franz Joseph Löwen instructs his family back home to leave Germany and follow his lead. He poignantly reduces his opinion on Germany to the ubiquitous scarcity: “Could you not turn your back on this hunger country and come over[?]” (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 195),⁹ epitomizing the perceived contrast between the two countries.

From the “hunger country” the emigrant would come to a land of plenty, or so the letter writers claimed. Authors sometimes even went so far as to compare their new home to *Schlaraffenland*, the German version of Cockaigne, the utopian land of plenty and leisure, a famous popular myth in Europe since the sixteenth century (Voltmer 764). Openly associating this place, where, lore has it, all the animals wander around fried and ready to be eaten, with America had been commonplace in Europe since at least the 1830s, albeit with the occasional satirical undertone (Friedman 565). In the circulating myth, Cockaigne was not just the land of plenty but also the land of leisure. List’s interviewees, however, did not transfer this notion automatically to their image of the United States. Instead, they asserted that they did not expect fried pigeons to fly into their mouths but that they would have to work to earn their living (Moltmann 154). In contrast to Germany, they expected—quite reasonably and just like emigrants from other countries—that the United States would have greater capacities to accommodate them and the crafts that they had learned (Diner xvii). This shows that the idea of an American Cockaigne goes beyond a naive hope for an entirely carefree life.

ON BOARD: PACKED LIKE SARDINES

A significant weakness of Diner’s work, in my opinion, is her failure to address the passage across the Atlantic and to include it in the food-centered journey. Focusing on the before and the after only paints a partial picture. The passage, the in-between state after emigration and before immigration, is, indeed, a crucial part of the migration process (Günther 8). It is also the point where the time frame I chose becomes important, as it only covers the time when Europeans crossed the Atlantic on a sailboat. This is important for two reasons: Firstly, the boats were not yet built to accommodate passengers, which resulted in terrible conditions on board that were potentially life-threatening. Secondly, the traveling time was still much longer than after

9 “könnt ihr denn dießem Hunger Lande nicht den Rücken kehren und kommt herüber[?]”

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the introduction of steam ships, posing a logistical challenge for the feeding of the passengers.

During the time I examine, shipping people from the ports of Europe to those of North America developed from a way to earn extra money for the captains into a professional undertaking. England was the first to introduce a regular schedule, while the big German port cities started similar efforts some years later (Günther 56, 74). When the numbers of emigrants continued to increase, trade companies began to see a potential for great profit and sought ways to further increase the amount of people they could transport. In 1856, one of the biggest German shipping companies, the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft (Hapag), introduced the first two steam ships into service (Brinckmann 102). However, it was not an immediate success because the cost of developing the technology and building the ships translated into higher ticket prices, which is why many emigrants still preferred to travel by sail (Günther 83, 89; Brinckmann 102). Nevertheless, I chose this year, 1856, to mark the end point of my analysis. Once steam ships started to pay off for the shipping companies, a new age of emigration began. The time spent on board could be cut from at least five weeks (more in unfavorable weather conditions) to only two weeks (Just 10, 19-20, 23). Aside from the comfort of having to spend less time out at sea, this led to much better food conditions on board. Although a steam ship could transport more people at once, it was easier to feed many for a shorter period of time. While, on sail boats, passengers were allowed to bring their own provisions as long as they could fit it into their storage cubicles, it likely was a daunting task to estimate the amount of food needed for five weeks or more.

The overwhelming majority of emigrants traveled across the ocean in steerage. Their ‘beds’ were planks only loosely screwed to the wall in this storage area. Passengers had to bring their own dishes, cutlery, linens, and mattresses. On some ships, passengers even had to feed themselves for the entire trip while all the captain offered was a fire to cook on (Brunner 44-45). In the first half of the nineteenth century, the shipping companies still transported the emigrants in ships that were built to transport material goods—freight—not people. It is not far-fetched to think of them as human freight, as this is how they were referred to in a contract for passage dated from 1816: “Saturdays, half a pound of bacon, three soups for five freights” (qtd. in Moltmann 262).¹⁰ Children counted as half a freight, and their food consumption was accordingly calculated to be half of that of an adult. The conditions in steerage suggest that this choice of words was not accidental. The place was narrow, crowded, and stuffy. The ceiling height was rarely over six feet, and sleeping quarters

10 “Samstags, ein halb Pf. Speck mit Erbsen, drey Suppen für 5 Frachten.”

were reminiscent of a sardine can (Günther 151). In addition to those cramped living conditions, the food situation was also a cause for concern.

(NOT) EATING ON BOARD

Because of the aforementioned logistical challenge that the passage posed in questions of food storage and the dangers of spoiling, it seems plausible that food scarcity was commonplace on board. Regardless of whether food was provided by the crew or whether passengers had to bring their own, the necessary supplies had to be estimated in advance and then acquired. Ideally, these would have to last as long and be as filling as possible. If the estimates were off, shortages were immediate because there was no way to replenish at sea. Indeed, problems with the food on board are a recurring topic in letters and journals: Margaretha Schuler, for example, reports a spoiled piece of ham that was infested with worms (Herder 381). Especially toward the end of the journey, the issue often became pressing as stocks depleted rapidly. One week before the ship arrived in an American port, after almost three months, Schuler laments in her journal that hardly any of the food that people had packed prior to departure was left. The biscuits handed out by the crew were moldy. They had also run out of vinegar, whose acidity overpowered the putrid taste and smell of the drinking water (Herder 394).

Positive comments are less frequent, but they do exist. Wilhelmine Dunker followed her husband Louis in steerage across the Atlantic in 1854/1855. Although she also mentions certain shortages, she generally praises the food on board and emphasizes the fact that meat was served every day. She does believe it to be her duty, however, to inform her relatives that her experience was an exception rather than the rule: “I must say, such ships are rare: we never went hungry” (qtd. in Kammeier 23).¹¹ Whether this perception of hers was representative is not clear. It is possible that a few cases of extreme starvation on board overshadowed many experiences that were satisfying for all passengers.

This is precisely the issue that historians face when trying to evaluate the credibility and representativeness of historical sources. Thus, all the sources in this paper are to be taken with a grain of salt. People tend to record the extraordinary, and it is up to the historian to work conscientiously with the available material to arrive at an approximation of how events unfolded. One way to substantiate (or debunk) insights from a certain kind of source is to double-check with a different kind of source. Can, for example, statistics corroborate what the emigrants claim in their letters? Estimates

11 “Ich muß bemerken, solche Schiffe gebens selten: wir haben keinen Hunger gelitten.”

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based on mortality analyses of different emigrant ships do seem to verify dire conditions on board. Once on board of the ship, emigrants were around three times more likely to die than those who had chosen to stay at home (Cohn 141).

What we do know is that all passengers, once on board, were at the mercy of captain and crew. Only then would it become apparent whether the crew had estimated the necessary supplies correctly and whether they allocated the agreed-upon rations as promised. After all, they did inhabit a monopoly position on board as soon as the passengers had depleted their own supplies—a potentially profitable opportunity to hold back supplies and sell them to the highest bidder for personal gain. In a time before vacations and tourism, this trip to America was the first traveling experience for many—and a sizable one at that. Many emigrants gullibly accepted contracts that favored the captain’s profit seeking over their own well-being, or they simply did not have the financial resources to accommodate their families any longer in the expensive port cities. They were thus forced to accept any offer. One needs to keep in mind that no regular shipping schedules existed in German cities until the 1830s. Weeks could pass until a captain had filled up his ship with (human and nonhuman) freight to make the trip profitable (Cohn 62).

The inspector Moritz von Fürstenwärther, who was ordered to examine and evaluate the traveling conditions for the emigrants, characterized the contracts as unfair to the travelers. Even if the terms were favorable to both parties, the passengers had no way of escaping their fate once they had boarded the ship. If it turned out that the captain did not provide the agreed-upon rations, the emigrants had no way of holding him legally responsible. Von Fürstenwärther criticized that the crew reduced rations without pressing need.¹² Granted, a pressing need that was apparent to the captain may not have been obvious to the passengers. In order to make the supplies last longer, captains sometimes reduced individual rations when they ran into complications along the trip (Günther 177).

Another factor that restrained passengers from eating was sea sickness. While strong winds were beneficial for a speedy trip, they also shook the ship in a way that incapacitated passengers for days at a time. As the emigrant S. W. Haupt remembers

12 It remains unclear whether von Fürstenwärther was able to remain entirely objective in his descriptions, considering that his trip had been organized and financed by Baron Hans Christoph Ernst von Gagern, a liberal politician from the grand duchy of Luxemburg, which was then a part of the German Confederation but ruled by the king of the Netherlands. Dutch port cities were suffering under the influx of German emigrants, who often ran out of money during their trip because ships departed later than expected, because they had miscalculated, or because they had been taken advantage of. The Dutch king had thus instructed von Gagern to inquire as to what measures could be taken on the part of the German Confederation to perhaps regulate or support emigrants.

poignantly: “It became night, the wind got stronger, and so did the vomiting” (qtd. in *Briefe von Deutschen* 6).¹³ He goes on to describe that even the sight of food began to disgust him, especially that of the salted meats (*Briefe von Deutschen* 11, 16-17).

The insufficient nourishment from home continued on board or was even exacerbated by a number of factors. Storage and cooling facilities on board were scarce, and cooking utensils were limited to what the passengers had brought on board with them or what they could borrow from others. Fights over access to fire places or food theft were frequent in steerage (Günther 187). These circumstances led to a very simple and repetitive diet on board: beans, potatoes, salted meats, flour soup, an occasional dried plum. For most emigrants, however, this did not mark a significant break with their premigration eating habits. Issues of representativeness regarding the sources cannot be resolved entirely. Still, considering the circumstances, it seems as if different degrees of hunger on board were relatively common. These precarious conditions no doubt influenced the emigrants’ perceptions once they set foot on solid ground in the United States.

METAPHORS OF PLENTY

This chapter marks the beginning of my analysis of the last part of the migration process, the arrival in the United States. Emigrants became immigrants, and their hopes and expectations could now be measured against reality. It is important to note that in my analysis of contemporary sources, I will examine primarily those that originated in the time relatively close to arrival. The dominant first impression that immigrants express in their letters to family and friends back home is that of plenitude. Even though they might relativize that view somewhat at a later point, the general impression remains that they arrived in a country with fertile land and bountiful resources.

Before going into further detail, it is necessary to note that the medium of letters goes beyond a mere presentation of facts, which makes it a challenging source for any historian. It is equally important to consider the situations the recently arrived immigrants were facing and what may have been their intentions when writing letters to friends and families at home. David Gerber claims that emigrants wrote to their friends and families primarily to establish a continuity within their lives and personal narratives. Sometimes, an exaggeration of the literal truth served this purpose in a

13 “Es wurde Nacht, der Wind immer heftiger, das Erbrechen ebenfalls.”

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more convenient way than recounting the actual circumstances (97).¹⁴ For the purposes of this analysis, this means that the letter writers may have felt compelled to justify their decision to emigrate to their families and themselves by pointing out their improved status. Their descriptions may have been true—or slightly embellished. The problem for the historian is that oftentimes there is no way of finding out—an aftertaste of uncertainty remains. But even if the actual food supply did not live up to the descriptions in letters, it is safe to assume a greater stability in regard to eating well and eating regularly (Diner 14-15).

A letter by Haupt can serve as a particularly poignant example of this dynamic: He recorded his first impression of the new home even before he had set foot on American soil. Presumably standing on the deck, he describes the American coast as a fertile New World: “All around there seems to be good land, judging by the luxuriant tree growth. You can see a few clearings from which the most beautiful farms smile upon us, the fields of corn and potatoes. All this you can see very clearly from the ship, how it sits there in abundance” (qtd. in *Briefe von Deutschen* 32).¹⁵ Taking into consideration the traveling conditions outlined in the previous chapters, relief about the near end of the journey may well have distorted his impressions and shed a very positive light on what he saw. Some immigrants revealed that they even skipped a few meals once land was in sight, so as to sate their hunger in a more agreeable manner after their arrival (*Briefe von Deutschen* 35).

In order to capture the abundance in words and to describe it to the people at home, immigrants often chose to mention their increased meat consumption in particular. In his memoirs, Klee recalls the time after his arrival in 1844, when he could hardly restrain himself: “[T]he way we walked into that delicious boiled or roasted beef twice a day was a caution, sometimes we would feel ashamed over ourselves” (Klee 111). Klee was apparently not even as lucky as many other immigrants, who reported that meat was a part of all three main meals (cf. Pallaske 65-66; Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 226; Klee 99; Brunner 102). These reports may have been generalized and exaggerated, but they do reflect the immigrants’ fascination with plenty. At home, this kind of luxury had been reserved for people of higher social strata, who could afford meat. As in many other parts of Europe, the countries of the German Confederation increasingly raised potatoes because, compared to meat, they

14 Although Gerber bases his study on British immigrants, there is no reason to assume that the motivation to write letters to friends and family at home would be significantly different for German immigrants.

15 “Ueberall scheint hier guter Boden zu sein, nach dem üppigen Baumwuchs zu urtheilen, einige gelichtete Stellen sieht man, wo uns die schönsten Farmen entgegen lachen, die Felder mit Welschkorn und Kartoffeln, dies Alles sieht man von dem Schiffe aus sehr deutlich, wie es in Fülle da steht.”

had a higher yield and fed more people (Diner 86). Farmers converted pastures into grain and potato fields, thus producing less meat and considerably driving up prices (Abel 67). In 1816, the average annual meat consumption was 16.3 kg in the countries of the German Confederation, the equivalent of 36 lb. This was about a fifth of today's consumption and one seventh of the late middle ages' (Hirschfelder 137). In contrast, an average American ate around 80 kg (176 lb) of meat per year (McIntosh 82).

German immigrants associated higher meat consumption with higher social status, just as Diner concludes for Italian immigrants: By eating meat, they emulated the food habits of elites (Diner 49-50). This impression was also reflected in the letters. The immigrant Franz Anton Weis reports to his relatives that he eats "as well as noblemen at home" (qtd. in Moltmann 279).¹⁶ Not only eating for sheer physical necessity anymore, they could now choose and enjoy certain foods and thus gained some degree of freedom and self-determination. The letter of Wilhelm Stille, written in 1836, similarly reveals a close link between freedom and food:

But once they have been here for a while and have felt the freedom and seen the good crops that grow here, [...] then other thoughts may come, then they pity their friends who are in Germany still, and every day from morning to night have to make sure to earn their taxes, and have to eat such bad food, meat not even once a day and here three times, in addition to all kinds of meals I can't even begin to describe. (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 71)¹⁷

While only few immigrants addressed the scarcity back home this explicitly, it usually becomes apparent in their fascination with the bountiful offerings of their new home, which is generally described as superior to the food in Germany. The letter writers ate more meat and fewer potatoes, and they were able to invest in a higher standard of living (Helbich, "Alle Menschen" 45). Immigrant Angela Heck writes from New York in 1854, approximately two months after her arrival: "The worst bread that they eat here is better than the finest cake at home" (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 356).¹⁸ The immigrants' nourishment may not even have been as good as

16 "Essen und Trinken haben mir schon so gut als Herrenleut bey euch."

17 "Aber wen sie hier erst ein wenig gewesen sind, und spühen die Freiheit, und sehn die guthen Früchte hir wachsen [...] dan wollen wohl andere Gedanken kommen, dan bedauern sie schohn ihre Freunde die dan noch in Deutsland sind, und alle Thage früh und späth darauf bedacht sein müssen, um ihre Abgaben zu gewinnen, und so schlechte Kost essen müssen, jeden Thag nicht mahl einmahl Fleisch und hier doch drey mahl, und dazu [a]llerhand Gerichter, das ich Euch nicht guth schreiben kan" (second set of brackets in original).

18 "Das schlechteste Brot, was hier gegessen wird, ist besser. als der feinste Kuchen zu Hause."

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that of Americans, but relative to what they had experienced in Germany, it seemed extraordinary (Diner 80).¹⁹

A safe food supply is closely linked to the greater economic security that many immigrants felt. Germans continue to use the metaphorical phrase of ‘seine Familie ernähren’ (‘feeding one’s family’) to describe a steady income. In the previously mentioned interviews that Friedrich List conducted with emigrants, one finds this phrase repeatedly. One source, for example, reports that “people can no longer feed themselves because [...] prices have gone up so much” (qtd. in Moltmann 162).²⁰ Another interviewee states that he can “no longer earn bread” (qtd. in Moltmann 162).²¹ This metaphorical link can also be found in the letters. Johannes Carl Wilhelm Pritzlaff tells his brother, who was presumably considering emigration as well, not to worry about earning a living in the United States:

You wanted to know in your letter: How could you feed yourself here if it were the case that you would come here. I cannot tell you exactly. Many people feed themselves here, so you would be able to feed yourself as well, and if there was still money left over from your trip to buy yourself a piece of land, you could feed yourself amply. (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 298)²²

The relevance of Pritzlaff’s quote for this analysis is threefold: It shows, first, that those potentially interested in emigrating took the economic opportunities abroad into consideration and asked the previously emigrated for advice. Second, the latter evaluated the prospects to be good, at least compared to those in Germany. Third, this conclusion was closely tied to the amount of food they ate, which is mirrored in the kinds of metaphors they chose to express those opinions.

19 This did not change immediately after the time frame of my analysis, 1816-1856. In 1879, immigrant Franz Joseph Löwen wrote poignantly to his siblings: “There is more fat in the dishwater here than in the soups in Germany” ‘hier rinnt mehr Fett auf dem Spülwasser, als in Deutschland auf der Suppe’ (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 190). This clearly shows the arbitrary nature of such periodization. Historical developments rarely have a clear beginning or a clear ending. I chose the time frame for this paper based on developments in maritime technology, i.e., the introduction of steam ships. Food shortages persisted in Germany long after the end point of my analysis.

20 “Man kann sich eben nicht mehr nähren, weil das Handwerk nicht mehr geht, und die Theuerung zu groß ist.”

21 “Ich kann das Brod nicht mehr erwerben und möchte gerne meine Kinder in eine bessere Lage versetzen.”

22 “In Deinem Briefe willst du wissen: – Auf welche Weise Du Dich hier ernähren könntest, wenn es der Fall wäre, daß Du hier noch her kämest. Darüber kann ich Dir keine genaue Auskunft geben. Es ernähren sich ja hier viele, würdest Du Dich ja auch ernähren können, und wenn Du noch so viel Geld übrig hättest von Deiner Reise, daß du ein Stück Land könntest kaufen, so könntest Du Dich ja recht reichlich ernähren.”

ENCOUNTERING AMERICAN FOODWAYS

Immigrants initially had very little control over their lives: What kind of jobs they would find, where they would settle eventually, whether they could communicate with the few scraps of English that they spoke—those are just a few of the factors that often created a sense of insecurity. Once they arrived, the immigrants could at least control what and when they ate. The historian Donna Gabaccia suggests that it was for this reason that many immigrants were not necessarily keen on adopting American foodways in the beginning. Instead, they preferred eating plenty of those foods they were already familiar with in order to maintain ties with their family and home country (Gabaccia 54; Diner 9). While it may have been difficult to uphold such habits in a city, farmers had a greater degree of choice in their planting (Gabaccia 48).

American agriculture at the time had the capacities to feed many, but this did not necessarily result in a very diversified diet. The immigration waves of the nineteenth century introduced new foods to the still English-dominated American cuisine.²³ Most Americans ate pork, bread with butter, and the native plants: corn and potatoes. Only few cooling systems had been developed; therefore, fresh fruits and vegetables were available only in summer and fall (McIntosh 79-83).

Although immigrants' positive comments on the quality and quantity of the food outweigh the negative ones by far, some critical statements stand out. Some of the recurring complaints revolve around, for example, the high consumption of candy and the low quality of beer (Pallaske 55; cf. *Briefe von Deutschen* 128, 183). Another issue were American table manners, which seemed overly rushed to many Germans.²⁴ One German immigrant, whom we only know by the initials W. W., complains that Americans would devour their meals "with truly animalistic voracity" and immediately leave the table after finishing (qtd. in *Briefe von Deutschen* 179; cf. also *Briefe von Deutschen* 127-28).²⁵

23 I assume in this paper that there was some kind of local cuisine that German immigrants probably perceived as 'American.' This is, of course, a simplified view as, presumably, other immigrant communities still adhered to the cuisines of their home countries and neither national grocery stores nor today's industrialized food production existed yet. For more information on the development of American food habits in particular, cf. McIntosh.

24 The immigrants do not explain what exactly seems so foreign or inappropriate to them; therefore, their judgments must remain inconclusive. One possibility is that these observations were made at lunch time and that the Americans they saw were factory workers whose lunch break was strictly limited. Industrialization, if at all, had only reached bigger cities in Germany at that time, and most immigrants came from rural areas (Hirschfelder 173). It is only a tentative guess at this point but perhaps restaurant guests in rural parts of the United States took their time finishing a meal as well.

25 "mit einer wahrhaft thierischen Gefräßigkeit."

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However, German immigrants showed no collective pattern of embracing or rejecting American food habits and meals. It is outside the scope of this paper to determine whether they aspired to adopt local habits or whether it was more important to them to emulate German elites. I will only be able to present a selection of anecdotal examples from immigrant letters, which covers the whole gamut of reactions. The immigrant W. W. laments the fact that many fellow German immigrants were adopting this “American nonsense” in their homes (qtd. in *Briefe von Deutschen* 183).²⁶ Young immigrant August Hölscher preferred restaurants that cooked “in a more German way,” because the food in American restaurants served a sweeter palate (qtd. in Pallaske 55).²⁷ Hölscher, however, wrote a letter to his sister just one day later, encouraging her to cook with an explicitly American recipe at home. He tells her that she should plant corn, boil it, cover it in salt and butter, gnaw off the kernels, and let him know as soon as possible whether she and the cousins enjoyed it (58). From the way he writes his instructions, I find it hard to tell whether there is a hint of mockery in them. Another example is that of the immigrant with the initials F. A. S., who explicitly recommends American restaurants and warns against German ones, whose proprietors he thinks are deceitful (*Briefe von Deutschen* 233-34). Even if these examples show that there was no homogenous attitude of German immigrants toward American food habits, they illustrate once again that there were probably as many different immigrant experiences as there were immigrants. Regardless of this variety of experiences, however, the discussion of food was important to a great number of them.

FOOD AS AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PILLAR

Besides providing daily nourishment, food played another prominent role in many immigrants’ lives: Along the entire production chain, it was a source of employment. Most German immigrants had been born into the middle and lower classes in Germany. Many of them were trained craftspeople, and those who were unskilled were usually eager to work hard—why else would they have invested all this time and money into emigrating in the first place? Between 1815 and 1860, the percentage of craftsmen and farmers among all male immigrants was constantly above eighty percent, while unskilled laborers, factory workers, and more highly educated people accounted for the remainder (Cohn 109). Due to high birth rates, there was an oversupply of young

26 “leider sieht man nur zu häufig schon in den ersten Jahren den amerikanischen Unsinn in deutschen Haushaltungen eingeführt.”

27 “Es gefällt mir [in deutschen Gasthäusern] besser weil da mehr auf deutsche Art gekocht wird.”

adults with just these qualifications in Germany. In some areas, even trained craftspeople could hope to establish little more than a “pity existence” (Helbich, *“Alle Menschen”* 38).²⁸ In the agricultural sector, inheritance regulations obstructed a profitable cultivation of family property. In most of Southern Germany, properties had to be split among all sons of the family, making the pieces ever smaller. In Bavaria and Northern Germany, on the other hand, the entire property was transferred to the eldest son, leaving the remaining sons empty-handed (Günther 52; Helbich, *“Alle Menschen”* 38-39).

Many immigrants in the United States sought the upward mobility that German social structures had denied them. There was a high demand for trained professionals and plenty of land to cultivate. Contemporaries were quite aware of this dynamic. Von Fürstenwärther concludes in his report on German emigration that all such “professionals and craftsmen” are sought after whose “products are of immediate necessity and cannot be imported as manufactured goods” (qtd. in Moltmann 301).²⁹

The craftspeople involved in food production—bakers, butchers, or brewers, for instance—created just such products. The most famous and successful businesses were probably the German breweries. Even today, companies founded by German emigrants in the nineteenth century (e.g. Yuengling, Anheuser-Busch) dominate the American brewing industry. In the 1840s, German immigrants founded over forty breweries in Philadelphia alone (Ogle 3-14; Gabaccia 97). German immigrants also dominated most small businesses in the Midwest that produced, processed, or sold food (Schmahl 120). What Diner concludes for Italian immigrants also holds true for those from Germany: Businesses and occupations dealing with food in some way were a popular choice immediately after arrival (Diner 50, 63).

Beyond economic aspects, German saloons, bakeries, or grocery stores were vital for German communities. Especially toward the end of the nineteenth century, when they had become more firmly established, they became places for immigrants to mingle informally, look for jobs, establish contacts, speak German, and enjoy meals they remembered from home in like-minded company (Gabaccia 78-79). What had been Palatian, Württembergian, or Saxonian specialties fused over time into a distinct German American cuisine. Diner observes the same dynamic among the Italian American community and draws parallels to the emergence of an Italian American

28 “Kümmerexistenz.”

29 “Und da zeigt sich, daß alle Professionisten und Handwerker der gröbern oder einfachen Art, deren Arbeits-Produkte von unmittelbarer Nothwendigkeit sind, und nicht als Manufactur-Waaren eingeführt werden können, in vorzüglichem Ansehen stehen, und leichter Gelegenheit zu Verdienst und Arbeit finden.”

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ethnic identity (Diner 54, 70). I leave it up to other studies to establish this link for the German American community.

It was convenient for immigrants of all ethnic identities to work in businesses where they could communicate in their native language. They could start working without having to learn English right away. In some cases, they had special knowledge of how to prepare German specialties (e.g., beer or baked goods) and were thus a preferable choice for employers. Working with other Germans possibly also provided them with a sense of comfort in an environment that was already foreign in many aspects. I found no evidence of such considerations in letters, except for Germans who established themselves very successfully by providing a niche product that appealed to other German Americans. The immigrant Chrisostimus Weis, for example, opened a bakery in Baltimore that specialized in German-style ginger bread and Swabian pastries (Moltmann 271). Another such product was German lager beer, which was initially produced in local breweries before those expanded into companies selling nationwide. Recently immigrated, young German brewers did not necessarily welcome the idea of working for a fellow German, however. August Hölcher, for example, reports that wages in German breweries are comparatively low (Pallaske 51).

The way German immigrants reacted to American foodways can be characterized as ambivalent at best. Although fascinated by the seemingly endless amount of available food, they were not necessarily ready to adopt what they perceived to be American eating habits. Neither did they fully prefer German American employers in the food sector nor did they always choose German saloons over American ones. The German American experience was as varied and diverse as that of any other ethnic group.

CONCLUSION

An empty stomach pushed many Germans to the point where they decided to leave and pulled them to the plenitude that previous emigrants had promised them in their letters. I enhanced Diner's otherwise sound approach by adding the transatlantic passage to my analysis. The remarks in letters and journals suggest that the food supply on board often was disastrously inadequate. After setting foot on American soil, the economic and agrarian circumstances were such that recent German immigrants were impressed, sometimes even slightly overwhelmed with the available goods. Some were taken aback by foreign food habits, but overall, German immigrants had access to more food and drink to satisfy their needs. The food sector became, in addition, a source of employment and ethnic identity.

This paper situates itself in a tradition of historical scholarship that has been working to tip the balance from religious and political reasons for emigration in favor of more economic explanations. Although the United States welcomed the religiously and politically persecuted, they were a minority among the millions of immigrating Europeans. It was instead property ownership, the need for qualified workers on the American labor market, and the comparatively inexpensive and plentiful food that elevated the standard of living. It was not my main objective to produce a comprehensive study of German emigrants but to point out that for most immigrants in the given time frame, economic considerations were most pressing and were usually tied to the desire to feed their families in a sufficient manner. Questions of, for instance, gender and class differences as well as of regional variety among German emigrants remain promising areas for further research.³⁰

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³⁰ Not in all parts of the German Confederation, for example, was there a distinct lack of animal protein. In coastal regions, fresh seafood was available at all times, granting a more diversified diet. Emigration from Mecklenburg, a state on the Baltic coast, did, in fact, not begin until later in the nineteenth century (Hirschfelder 178).

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