

A Nineteenth-Century Immigration Story

Growing old brings with it more than physical changes in the body, it jogs a person to remember beginnings as well as endings. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to prompt the search for one's forbearers. Once the process begins, there is need for haste to uncover the genealogy which has led to one's own genesis. Who were those whose genes became the substance of one's own being? Where were they from and what was their history to keep the line of heritage alive?

As I began this venture I realized the way family heritage is mingled with the stuff of history. The solitary life and the family web make up the events by which the story of history is told. This became evident this past year as I was responding to a relative who suddenly came into focus after fifty years of silence. He had stumbled upon a recent letter I had written to his sister which made him aware of my existence. We had corresponded a half century ago when he was on track to discover how we were related and what the family tree revealed of our connections.

He had not lost his train of thought in those fifty years, so his questions again aimed at family history. He had become seriously engaged in a heritage web site and was filling in the vacancies on the paternal side of his family. This opened the door on my own recent explorations into genealogy, so I picked up the strains of our fifty-year-old conversation.

I had spent the past twenty-five years seriously engaged in uncovering family roots, so there would be some substance to our conversation. Since most of our family was of German heritage, my explorations had centered in the migration movements of family members from Germany. What I had discovered was the close relationship between family emigration and the turn of human events within Europe. This was true, I was to discover, of the migration of my wife Eunice's family as well. Her mother's family roots revealed that her grandfather's German antecedents had arrived in colonial America in the 1740s. They had come at the time of religious conflicts in the Palatinate in Germany. All four of my grandparents' emigrations were within the political turmoil within the Germany of the 1880s.

The Europe of the nineteenth century was a continent in flux. The break-up of the Holy Roman Empire had left a conglomeration of competitive royal lines in the duchies and the principalities of Europe. In central Europe, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had come under pressure from the disparate ethnic groups within its realm. Forces were underway both within the confederation of German states and on the

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Italian peninsula to unify their various independent states into one Germany and one Italy. Under these pressures there was a welling up of political, economic and social movements which spoke of freedom and justice with a new vigor.

It was within these every day events that people began assessing their futures in their homelands and making choices about new personal ventures. This I discovered was the story of my grandparents, as it was for immigrants from other countries. As I began my search into family history, I soon discovered that most relatives had few clues about any of their progenitors. By the third generation, and sometimes even the second generation, there is little attention to forefathers and foremothers, just intense concern for one's own survival in their generation. One is fortunate to find at least one relative who has kept some memories alive and some family artifacts from the past.

In my case, Helen Poethig Wagner was the lone member of the Poethig clan who had any interest in my quest. She was the youngest of the seven children born in the United States to Alwin Richard and Pauline Roch Poethig. She was also the lone sibling, who at age four, had made a visit back to Germany to Dresden with her mother Pauline in 1910. Both grandfather and grandmother Poethig were from Sachsen (Saxony), in the southeast region of Germany. This would be one of the places I would visit on my journey of research and recollection.

Aunt Helen, intent on keeping her own family memories alive, was the repository of the pictures and artifacts of both the Poethig and Roch relatives. Johann August Poethig, the father of my grandfather Alwin Richard, was a "fabrikarbeiter" – a factory worker in the industrial town of Bishchofswerda, twenty-five miles east of Dresden. He had married Auguste Karoline Gottloeber of Weickersdorf, Sachsen, in the Lutheran Church in Goldbach on January 22, 1854. On one of my trips to the Sachsen region of southeast Germany, I discovered Auguste's confirmation record in the year 1839 in the Lutheran Church in Goldbach. From that marriage my grandfather Alwin Richard Poethig was born in Bischofswerda, Sachsen (Saxony), on August 5, 1858.

Of their seven Poethig children, three sons and four daughters, only Alwin Richard Poethig emigrated to the United States. The other members of the Poethig family lived in Bishchofswerda, their home town, or in their lifetimes moved on to Meissen, Zittau, and Leipzig – all towns within southeast Germany. Alwin Richard made the journey to New York City in 1882 at twenty-four years of age. Pauline Roch, at age nineteen, soon followed in 1882 to live in New York City. Pauline had been born in Schoenbrunn, a farming area outside of Bischofswerda.

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Her father lost the farm gambling and the family moved into the larger city of Dresden. Of the seven children in her Roch family, again three sons and four daughters, only her sister Augusta also emigrated to the United States.

The Germany of which my grandfather Richard and his family were a part was undergoing rapid industrialization and unification at the same time. The Germany of the 19th century was a loose Confederation of twenty-five separate states. Otto von Bismarck, the Imperial Chancellor of Prussia (1862 -1890), was working to bring these states together under Prussia, and at the same time was challenging the movement of the social democrats who were organizing to bring justice within an industrializing Germany. Grandfather Poethig was a cigarmaker and as such was among those in the working class who were the voices for greater reform within the economic system. As a member of the Social Democrats, a political party, he challenged the new united German State to provide better working conditions, security in old age, and more just wages for the laboring class. Bismarck acted to blunt the socialist's efforts both on the ground and in the Reichstag.

Organized in 1875, the Social Democratic Party won nearly a half million votes in the 1877 imperial election and sent twelve members to the imperial Reichstag. Bismarck responded by initiating the Anti-Socialist laws in 1878, which forbade the meeting of socialist groups or the distribution of their literature. The political climate heated up further in 1878 with two assassination attempts on the life of Kaiser William I. Even though the Social Democrats had no connection to these acts, the socialists became targets for arrest and imprisonment. Against this oppression, the socialists continued to gain strength and even to win seats in the Reichstag, often as independent candidates. In an effort to steal the socialist's thunder and also under pressure from concerned industrialists, Bismarck, shrewd politician that he was, began responding to the need for social change. In 1884 he had accident insurance passed in the Reichstag. The accident insurance was covered by contributions by employers to a welfare fund with any deficits to be covered by the imperial government. In 1889 his major social insurance act was passed which covered old age and disabilities. Old age pensions were paid to workers, including farm laborers as well as mine workers, after age 70. But for many German workers, Alwin Richard Poethig included, the early years of struggle had convinced them to take their leave of Germany and seek their welfare elsewhere.

Along with the collection of pictures taken in Germany of both the Poethig and Roch families, I have hanging on our study wall in Chicago the large gold embossed 1883 marriage certificate of Alwin Richard Poethig and Pauline Roch.

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The marriage was performed at the St. Paul's German Methodist Episcopal Church on New York City's 53rd St. on June 16, 1883. This is the beginning of our Poethig family line in the United States. The marriage ceremony certificate represents an anomaly. Alwin Richard Poethig was a non-believer, so to have a Christian church wedding was outside his belief system. Undoubtedly, the Christian ceremony was for the benefit of my grandmother Pauline.

Among the other Poethig artifacts I have in my possession is a carved bone pipe in the form of a man's head. This was the pipe in which my grandfather smoked the end of his cigars. His occupation as a cigarmaker laid the foundation for his strong political and trade union associations. He arrived in New York in the 1880s at the height of labor union activity across the nation in the post-Civil War era. In 1882, the year of his arrival, the first major labor march took place in New York City. In Chicago, the movement for an eight-hour day had stirred up workers in industry and in the trades to street gatherings. One of these gatherings became the center of a major confrontation between the gathered workers and the police. The Haymarket Affair of 1886 in Chicago laid the foundation for the recognition of working class rights, which are celebrated globally on May First.

In New York City the cigarmakers had strong local unions among the German and Bohemian workers. In the 1880s one of the most active cigar maker unions was the Cigarmakers Progressive Union, which had a large German membership of which Alwin Richard Poethig was a member. Since it had a strong socialist voice it ran into conflict with the traditional cigarmakers union in a struggle which lasted four years from 1882 - 1886. The two cigarmakers unions were reunited in 1886 and in 1887 they became part of the American Federation of Labor.

In the 1891 the Poethig family moved from East 88th St. in Yorkville, a predominantly German neighborhood in the East Side of New York City to 232 East 84th St. between Second and Third Avenues. The Third Avenue Elevated Train line bordered 84th Street on the West and the Second Avenue Elevated Train line bordered it on the East. The year 1891 also saw the birth of twin boys, Ernest and Richard, into the Poethig family. Ernest, my father, and his brother Richard grew up in a tenement directly across from the Labor Temple. The Labor Temple housed the various German and Bohemian trade union locals, among them the Cigarmakers Union. Growing up in the Yorkville of the 1890s my father remembered a still undeveloped neighborhood. He told stories of goats grazing on a hill beyond the 84th Street Elevated Train station.

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The Labor Temple had a prominent place in the late 1890s and early 1900s in Yorkville. It was the meeting place for the German and Bohemian trade union locals and was a center for the union member's family social events. One visualizes the growing Poethig family taking their Saturday night supper amidst the worker families gathering at the Labor Temple restaurant. Grandfather Alwin Richard Poethig continued as a cigarmaker throughout his life and maintained his membership within the worker's socialist community. He died at 75 years on February 19th, 1935, in Yorkville. Pauline Roch Poethig died 21 years later on October 27, 1956, at 95 years of age.

Alwin Richard Poethig, who emigrated in 1882 from Sachsen (Saxony), sought to escape both the anti-Socialist campaign of Otto von Bismarck as well as conscription into the army of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The cigarmakers, of which Alwin Richard Poethig was a part, were the intellectuals in the trade union movement. They had developed the practice of choosing one of their number to read to the other cigarmakers from the crucial political literature of the day. One can imagine the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels being read as common fare during those times. The reader would be paid with cigars from the listener audience equivalent to the number made if he had been working. Thus they became the activists in the socialist movement. Many of them, like Alwin Richard Poethig, also had anti-military leanings and believed that the men of the working class were the human fodder in the wars of the monarchs and the aspiring industrialists.

Even as the Poethig family had kept close contact with their relatives in Sachsen, the onset of World War in 1914 - with the assassination of the Arch-Duke Ferdinand in Sarajevo - created a great deal of unease in the Yorkville community. A postcard arrived from Dresden in December of 1914. On the front of the card was a picture of cousin Erich Schirmer, nephew of Pauline Roch Poethig, dressed in full uniform of the Germany army, pointed helmet and rifle at his side. When the U.S. declared war on Germany in 1917, both Ernest and his younger brother Albert were inducted into the U.S. Expeditionary forces bound for the war in Europe.

So it was that working class cousins would fight one another in the First World War. Ernest Poethig, originally assigned to New York's 69th regiment, which took heavy casualties on the front lines, was moved to the cavalry unit when he arrived in France. His occupation in New York had been with delivery wagon horses, so he qualified for work with the cavalry. His younger brother Albert was sent to the front lines and fortunately survived the conflict. When the war ended both were mustered out of the U.S. Army and returned to New York City in 1918.

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My father Ernest Poethig, born as a twin of Richard Poethig in 1891, was one of seven children. There were three sons - Ernest and twin Richard and Albert - and four daughters, Eva, Elizabeth, and Helen, and one daughter lost in childbirth. On his return New York City in 1918, following the end of the war, Ernest returned to his work at the Loose-Wiles Corporation, the maker of Sunshine Biscuits, in Long Island City. Though before the war he had tended to the horses which pulled the delivery carts used by the company, on his return, modernization had come and he became a garage man whose skills were now centered on servicing the trucks used to make the deliveries.

Somewhere in the social activities of post-war Yorkville life, Ernest Poethig met Henrietta Schoelzel. Henrietta or Henny, as she was called by her Rehling cousins, enjoyed the social life of her neighborhood. She and cousin Liesel Rehling made many of the dress-up parties that kept life active in Yorkville.

Henny, however, was not in robust health. Drafty tenement living left her with tuberculosis. Even with her tubercular condition, Ernest Poethig stayed by her side. To help in her treatment, he financially supported her convalescence at the Saranac Lake Tuberculosis Sanitarium during her residence from 1922 into 1923. Against the strong opinions of the elder Poethig family, Ernest Poethig married Henrietta Schoelzel on June 30, 1923.

Henrietta Schoelzel was the daughter of Paul Schoelzel and Alwine Seyfarth. Paul Schoelzel had arrived in New York City from the town of Ober-Langenbielau in Silesia in 1888. Henrietta's mother, Alwine Seyfarth, emigrated to New York City from Bremen-Vegesack in 1889. Paul and Alwine were married in New York City on July 14, 1895. The marriage brought together people from two different regions of Germany.

Paul Schoelzel was born in Silesia in the eastern region of Germany – the crossroads of many cultural heritages and political struggles. Silesia was a region set between Prussia on the north and Sachsen to the southeast. Over its history, geographical Silesia had been under the rule of Poland in medieval times, then in the late Middle Ages under Bohemia, then in the last three centuries in the realms successively of Austria, Prussia, and Germany. After the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, in exchange for sections of Poland which had been occupied by Soviet Russia, the larger part of Silesia was given to Poland. With this exchange in national identity over the years, the peoples of Silesia lived in constant uncertainty.

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Paul Schoelzel's parents, Gottlieb Schoelzel and Maria Elizabeth Muenster were married in the Lutheran Church in Ober-Langenbielau, Silesia in 1858. In Carl Schlegel's book on "American Families of German Ancestry" the Schoelzel family is listed and given a place in the history of Ober-Langenbielau. The father of Gottlieb Schoelzel is one of the first families on which Carl Schlegel had any authentic information. The Schoelzel patriarch took his training as a linen weaver, which was the trade indigenous to the region. Gottlieb, who was the youngest among the five Schoelzel siblings, was born on February 13, 1830. He followed his father in the linen weaving trade and became engaged as a worker in the linen ware manufacturing business. In 1858, Gottlieb married Elizabeth Muenster from the province of Posen in Prussia.

The town of Ober-Langenbielau, in which the Schoelzel family lived, had an important place in German labor history. It was one of the earliest locations of labor unrest in the provinces of an industrializing Germany. The weaving industry was a major employer in the region. Within the structure of the weaving industry relations between the manufacturers and the weavers were fractious. When economic conditions broke down and wages were cut for already families in poverty, the weavers revolted in June 1844. The Prussian military was called into the region to put down the revolt which became known as "The Weaver's Uprising." The incident was, in the 1890s, depicted in a play "The Weavers" by the German playwright, Gerhart Hauptmann. "The Weavers" created a stir among the German public and became the subject of woodcuts by the woman artist, Kathe Kollwitz. Her effectiveness in drawing attention to the oppressive conditions of the working class through the example of the weavers and their families became a cause celebre in Germany.

It was in this Silesian region of Germany that five children were born into the Gottlieb and Elizabeth Munster Schoelzel family: Georg, Hermann, Elizabeth, Edmund, and Paul. Three of the Schoelzel children emigrated to the New York/New Jersey area of the United States.

Elizabeth Schoelzel was the first to leave for the United States in 1882 at age seventeen. Her brother Paul Schoelzel followed in 1888 at sixteen years and Hermann in 1890 at twenty-one years of age. Elizabeth settled in New York City and in 1887 married Wilhelm Rehling.

Wilhelm Christian Rehling, from Stolzenau, Hannover, arrived in New York City following the Civil War in late 1865. Wilhelm was a member of the Cobblers Guild, his specialty – the making of artificial limbs and prosthetic devices.

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Wilhelm Rehling as a member of the guild was a journeyman in his profession and made journeys for work within Germany and on to Zurich in Switzerland. Somewhere in his travels in Germany he had met the Muenster family, whose two daughters had married Gottlieb Schoelzel and the other, Christian Klimpel.

Wilhelm Muenster, 23 years of age, brother of Elizabeth Muenster Schoelzel, arrived in the United States on January 8, 1867 from Hamburg aboard the Geestemunde. Soon after, Christian Klimpel's daughter Ernestine arrived in the United States under the sponsorship of her uncle Wilhelm and married Wilhelm Rehling in 1871. Their childless marriage lasted fourteen years when Ernestine died of tuberculosis in 1885. In 1885 Gottlieb Schoelzel's daughter Elizabeth arrived in New York and in 1887 Wilhelm Rehling married Elizabeth, a cousin of the now deceased Ernestine. At the time Wilhelm Rehling was 48 years of age and Elizabeth 21.

The Schoelzel/Rehling family began their existence on the West Side of New York City at 625 West 51st St. Wilhelm continued in the prosthetic limb occupation until the late 1890s when he used his savings to enter the restaurant/tavern business. In the 1900 census Wilhelm Rehling's occupation was listed as saloon-keeper. In the tradition of German families I assume this was a family bar and restaurant. He also invested in real estate and purchased two four-story tenements on East 79th Street in the Yorkville area. During this marriage seven children are born. The children born to the family were William in 1888, Ernestina in 1890, Emma in 1892, Elizabeth in 1895, Charles in 1901 and Oscar in 1905. George, another son, died in childbirth or soon thereafter.

By the turn of the century, the Rehling, the Schoelzel, the Seyfarth, and the Poethig families all lived in Yorkville or Mid-town on New York's East Side. The Rehling family moved from their 51st residence to one of their East 79th Street tenements early in the 1900s. This was also the area in which Elizabeth Schoelzel Rehling's brother Paul Schoelzel had settled when he arrived in 1888 in the U.S. The Poethig family, Alwin Richard and Pauline Roch Poethig, had also settled in Yorkville soon after they arrived in the United States. The Seyfarth family also found a home in Yorkville when they arrived in the late 1880s.

The Seyfarth family, whose base in Germany was Bremen-Vegesack, in the northwest port area of Germany, originally from the forest area of Thuringia, had become a sea-faring family. Heinrich Friedrich Wilhelm Albin Seyfarth had been born in the principality of Sondershausen, Thuringia, on February 5, 1834, to Johann Guenther Seyfarth and Caroline Wilhelmine Boettner. Thuringia was the

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major forest region of North Central Germany. His father, Johann Guenther was a forester in the employ of Guenther Friedrich Karl I, the Prince of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen. With the restlessness of youth, Albin Seyfarth moved north from his home in Bebra to the port city of Bremen on the coast of Northwest Germany.

At twenty-three years of age Albin Seyfarth began his seafaring career in January 1857 as a seaman aboard the Rebecca bound for the Caribbean and Mexico. By his third journey he was promoted to the post of assistant helmsman in March 1860 on the New Orleans bound for New Orleans. On his eighth voyage in November 1866 he signed onto the Lesmona as chief helmsman on a journey bound for the Orient and Hong Kong. It was on this voyage of the Lesmona that the ship was over-powered by Chinese pirates off of Hainan Island in the South China Sea. The Lesmona was lost and the crew set loose in lifeboats. The crew landed on the beach of Hainan Island and were stripped of their remaining belongings by local inhabitants. Finally through the help of a local Mandarin they made their way back to Hong Kong by a Chinese gunboat. They were assigned to another ship bound for Bremen and returned to bring their case before the Bremen Senate. Captain Steinike of the Lesmona brought before the Bremen Senate the right to arm Bremen merchant ships bound for Asia or to seek the protection of the Imperial German Navy for German merchant ships. Albin ended his sailing career in 1874 on his fourteenth journey sailing to New York City on the Auguste and returning to Hamburg in November 1874. It was on these sailing ships that the German and other European immigrants made their way to the United States.

So it was that Albin Seyfarth's son Charles Seyfarth emigrated to New York City in 1888. Having established himself in New York, his sister Alwine Elizabeth Caroline made the journey under his tutelage from Bremen-Vegesack in 1889. Within the German community in Yorkville, Alwine Seyfarth and Paul Schoelzel met and married in July 1895 with her brother Charles and his fiance Katie Levy standing as sponsors. So it was that the five streams of our Schoelzel/Poethig family ancestors came together in the Yorkville section of New York City in the late nineteenth century. Three of the streams came from the eastern section of Germany – the Roch and the Poethig branches from Saxony, and the Schoelzel branch from Silesia. The Rehling family came from the far eastern corner of Bavaria. The Seyfarth branch came from central and northwest Germany – from the Thuringian forests and the seaport area of Bremen.

Thus the Schoelzel family and the Poethig family came together on June 30, 1923, with the marriage of Henrietta Schoelzel, the daughter of Paul and Alwine Seyfarth Schoelzel, to Ernest Poethig, the son of Alwin Richard and Pauline Roch Poethig.

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On July 13, 1925, Richard Paul Poethig was born into this heritage as the son of Ernest and Henrietta Schoelzel Poethig and also became a son of Yorkville. On April 3, 1934, Erna Carol Poethig joined brother Richard, as the daughter of Ernest and Henrietta Poethig, being born into the same Yorkville tenement as was her mother thirty-three years before.

Richard Paul Poethig
December 31, 2014