

Causes for Emigration From the German Counties of Wittgenstein

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Editor's note: Karl-Ernst Riedesel (1934-1996) grew up in Wunderthausen and was educated at Marburg University. He lived in Bad Berleburg, the seat of the northern county of Wittgenstein, where he taught English and history at the Gymnasium (college preparatory school) there. This address was prepared for presentation to the Womelsdorf Family Association which visited Wittgenstein in 1985. It is reproduced here with the permission of his family.

The Early Sixteenth Century

The early 16th century was the transition period from the Middle Ages to the modern times. If you look at a map of Germany presenting this period, you will be very surprised; it seems to be a piece of patchwork, not a map with clear outlines of political developments. This colorful pattern, however, signifies that Germany had been partitioned into a great number of medium-sized, small or even tiny territories, which all claimed a high degree of independence. Contrary to the kings of England and France, the German Emperors had been unable during the late Middle Ages to develop their domain into a modern nation.

Among the many small territories were also the two counties of Wittgenstein. The original Wittgenstein County had been divided between two branches of the Wittgenstein Counts. The castle and town of Laasphe remained the center of South Wittgenstein, and Berleburg became the center of a new county in the northerly region of Wittgenstein. Prior to this division, other important social changes had evolved in Wittgenstein.

The medieval society had consisted of several clearly distinct classes of people. The Count and his family held the top rank. Next to him were 3 to 5 families of noble origin, so-called knights of which one lived in Diedenshausen, and another in Girkhausen. Below them was the farming population, itself divided into three groups.

Firstly, there was a small number of free farmers or yeoman as they are called in English. Below them was the largest group: Bondsmen on farms, who were dependent either on the Counts of Wittgenstein, the Church, or on one of the knights. The last groups were serfs, who did not hold any land, neither as free property nor by investiture. They lived as plowboys, shepherds, maids, etc.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Counts of Wittgenstein had succeeded in ousting the other noble families from their territory. At the same time, they had made the small group of local free farmers dependent on them by offering them positions in the administration of the counties. That meant that at the beginning of Modern Times there were no free people left in Wittgenstein who could put a free and independent will against the political power of the Counts of Wittgenstein. The Counts were practically no longer restricted by the Emperor above them, nor by free men who had lived in their territory.

An additional development in legislative procedures helped the Counts to strengthen their position in Wittgenstein at the end of the Middle Ages. All over Germany, Roman Law began to take the place of Germanic Law, which had settled the right and duties of the people according to old traditions and conventions. The Sovereign had been bound by the Germanic Law as much as the lowest serf. In any conflict, the people had to be asked for consent. Vehmic courts, also known as the secret courts of the Feme, were late examples of Germanic Law and jurisdiction. One of such courts existed near Girkhausen.

Roman Law, however, bestowed both the legislation and the execution of law onto the Sovereigns, and excluded the people from both jurisdictions. The Counts of Berleburg and Laasphe naturally accepted Roman Law for their territories. During the 16th century they published a collection of laws under the title of "WITTGENSTEINER LANDRECHT", which defined and regulated political, social, legal and economic conditions in Wittgenstein exclusively to the will of the Counts. As far as their subjects were concerned, the Counts could decide whatever taxes had to be paid, whatever services had to be rendered, and whatever tribute had to be offered to them.

The Reformation was a third element to strengthen the position of the sovereign princes and counts in Germany. Wherever reformation was introduced, including the Counties of Wittgenstein, the sovereigns became the highest authorities of the church in their territory. Accordingly, they claimed ownership of any and all ecclesiastical possessions--bondsmen and serfs included.

The Late Sixteenth Century

In the second half of the 16th century a new society had come into existence in Wittgenstein, a society which was rather uniform in its political, legal and social dependence on the sovereign Counts of Wittgenstein. The farmers had to pay taxes, and give the tenth part of their crops and cattle. They had to cultivate the fields of the Counts beside their own, and they had to provide households of their sovereigns with wood and timber from the forests. Every young man and woman had to serve their Count for a period of three years without any wages. Young people who wanted to marry had to ask for their Count's consent. If they wanted to live outside of Wittgenstein, they had to purchase their freedom with approximately one third of their possessions.

Uniform as the legal and social positions of the subjects were, there were still remarkable differences in personal wealth. Documents from the late 16th century inform as about farmers who could offer considerable loans to the Counts and Magistrates of Berleburg and Laasphe.

The Seventeenth and Eighteen Centuries

Two events would annihilate all wealth in Wittgenstein during the 17th and 18th centuries: The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and later the introduction of absolutistic government. Wittgenstein did not see military action during the Thirty Years' War, but it saw many armies marching through the counties and demanding high contributions, with soldiers looting and raping as they saw fit. Worst of all were the diseases, which accompanied the armies, and above everything was the plague, which afflicted Wittgenstein more than once during this period. At the end of this war, the two Wittgenstein Counties were completely ruined. Their population was

reduced to one third of what it had been thirty years before, and the war had destroyed whatever wealth had existed in Wittgenstein. Many families had been exterminated by violence, famine, or disease; complete villages had been deserted.

The Counts tried to obtain the same taxes from their two Wittgenstein counties, as they had done before the war. This could only be achieved by substantial increases of taxation and services, which the reduced number of subjects had to deliver. Had the hard-working farmers been provided with a helpful and understanding government, they might have managed to overcome the disastrous consequences of the Thirty Years' War. But the Counts of Wittgenstein, later the Princes of Wittgenstein, adopted the philosophy of absolutistic rule, which strained the farming population beyond any reasonable measure. *Editor's note: The titles of Graf (Count) and later Prince were awarded by the German Emperor. The Counts of Wittgenstein were dubbed Princes in the early 1800s at which time the Empire was a shell and the titles almost meaningless. Their descendants are still called Prinz or Fürst.*

The Early Nineteenth Century

When the two Wittgenstein counties lost their sovereignty at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and were annexed to Prussia in 1816, the Prussian authorities listed up to 39 different forms of taxes, contributions and personal service which Wittgenstein farmers had been obliged to render to their princes.

It has to be emphasized that the Prussian authorities tried to help and reform the unbearable social and economic conditions which had characterized the final period of sovereign rule in Wittgenstein. Bondsmanship and serfdom were abolished, but Prussia herself was still a state organized on the principle of semi-feudal government, respecting the titles which princes held on the land of their subjects. Year after year, the farmers had to pay one tenth of their annual income on redeeming these old titles. It took 60 more years until every farmer in Wittgenstein could claim both personal freedom and property rights to his land.

How could people bear such conditions? Our ancestors in Wittgenstein were a tough and hard-working breed, not easily discouraged. They tried to defend what they considered to be their rights. Numerous lawsuits were filed against the princes of Wittgenstein at the Imperial courts of Speyer and Wetzlar. There was much passive resistance, and farmers even rose in arms against their lords when oppression became intolerable. But the Imperial courts of Germany would not protect the rights of *disobedient* and *riotous* farmers, as they were seen at that time. The inhabitants of the villages did not have the slightest chance of success if they rose against oppression, since the princes could call on the Imperial troops to suppress any attempt of armed resistance; and they did.

America Opened Its Doors

An outlet from oppression and serfdom opened up gradually in the 18th century for the people of Wittgenstein. In the beginning it was predominantly for religious reasons that small groups of people left their homeland to better themselves in Pennsylvania. Their letters often gave witness to fair success in the new world, and induces others to follow them. The news that a relative or friend, after a few years of hard work, had gained a farm of several hundred acres, free of contributions and services (like the land of a nobleman back in Germany), was a powerful

incentive for many Wittgenstein farmers and craftsmen to follow his relatives and friends to America.

The end of the 18th century saw the climax of oppression in Wittgenstein, when emigration to America increased considerably in 1797 alone, almost five percent of Wittgenstein's population left for the United States.

The dwindling hope for a fast and thorough change of social and economic conditions, after the integration of the two Wittgenstein counties into Prussia, caused widespread disappointment among many people of Wittgenstein. This led to another wave of emigration during the period from 1840 to 1880.

Improvement in the Homeland

The emigration continued into the early 20th century, but it gradually declined. Economic conditions had improved in Wittgenstein. The county was no longer isolated by its mountains and narrow valleys from the outside. Better roads and railways had connected and integrated Wittgenstein with the rest of Germany. Farming became more productive by the introduction of new fertilizers and new techniques of cultivation. Small industries grew, especially those which processed the hardwoods of the Wittgenstein forests. And for those who could not make a good living in Wittgenstein, the new industrial centers of Germany offered plenty of opportunities.

In Conclusion

The men and women of Wittgenstein who left their homeland to escape hardship and oppression, with hope and determination for a better start in the new world, were among the best this tiny part of Germany has ever brought forth. Their efforts and initiatives contributed to the establishment of a flourishing, powerful and democratic nation. We, as their descendants and relatives in the old and new world, can be proud.