

A GERMAN NEWCOMER ON IMMIGRATION

Many Immigrants to the United States came from the German states. Gustave Koerner was one of the many thousands of German Immigrants who arrived in America in the 1830's. He was a lawyer who had taken part in an unsuccessful attempt to set up a more liberal government In the German states. When the effort failed, Koerner had to flee from Frankfort in order to avoid arrest.

After he arrived in the United States, he settled In St. Louis because he had read a very favorable account about Missouri by a German writer, Gottfried Duden. However, since he was opposed to slavery, he soon decided to leave Missouri and move to Illinois. In later years, Koerner served as a judge, was elected lieutenant governor of Illinois, and was appointed United States minister to Spain.

During the fall I received many letters from home and from my friends. Those from my family were full of love and tenderness. All of them more or less spoke of a hope of reunion in America. My brother Charles had serious thoughts of coming over, if he could get rid of his business, and of bringing our mother and sisters. My family were all troubled by the political reaction which had set in. They feared for Charles, whose liberal views were well known, and who was suspected of having some knowledge of our uprising at Frankfort.

I did not encourage their idea of coming to America. For Charles there was no chance of opening up a bookseller's business, either in the East or in the West. I had carefully looked into this, having written to friends in Philadelphia. Many years ago attempts were made in St. Louis by Germans to open bookstores, but they all failed. There was not even an English bookstore in St. Louis at this time. It was not until 20 years after our arrival that there was one there that could be called respectable.

Mother's health was good for her age. But my sister Augusta, who had been

sickly from youth, suffered from stomach trouble, so that the climate might have been very harmful to her. And my sister Pauline had weak lungs.

There was great enthusiasm in Germany at that time for migrating to America. A great many families in and around Frankfort, whom my family knew, were preparing to leave for America, or speaking seriously about it. No wonder my family spoke of coming too. And not only individuals and families decided to come over. Large emigration societies were formed in hopes of founding German settlements in some western state or territory. Some people thought that it might even be possible to form a German state.

One of these societies became rather famous. It was the Giessen Society, which was headed by some very important men. Among them was Frederick Muench, a Protestant minister, known in later times as "Far West." He was a man of great character, very well informed, with an iron will and very strong. A German patriot, he had lost hope in his country and had longed to become a citizen of the United States. Though violently opposed to slavery, he-

along with others-was misguided by Gottfried Duden's book and made the great mistake of settling in Missouri. When the slavery question became a burning one, he had a difficult time with those who favored secession. The German men in Missouri who favored the Union were in constant danger of their lives. "Far West" acted most ably and stood his ground. His young son later died on the battlefield for the Union.

Paul Follenius was another member of this society. He also was a very noble person. Like Muench, he had given up all hopes of a political rebirth for Germany. He was an important lawyer, and when he came to this country, he had to give up a large and profitable law practice. The idea of forming a new state for German immigrants, not a mere colony, won his warm support.

The Giessen Society was the best

organized colonization group that ever left Germany. Its constitution and bylaws were admirable. Its leaders were men of importance and integrity. Yet, like all similar societies, it eventually failed, bringing financial loss and shame to most of its members.

I have never favored such schemes, for many reasons. A bigoted group may follow a religious leader. They look upon him as a sort of prophet and are kept together by religious bonds. But the more intelligent the members of an immigration society are, the less authority can be exercised over them even by the best leaders. Without rule by one authority, settlements in new countries or in countries already fully organized cannot be successfully established. If my family had come over at all, I would have advised it to come entirely by itself or with a few other families or traveling companions.

READING REVIEW

1. What advice did Koerner give his family about immigrating to America? Why?
2. Cite evidence to support the statement that Koerner was opposed to slavery.
3. Why were large emigration societies formed?
4. Why did the Giessen Society fail?
5. Why did Koerner not favor the Giessen Society?

Source: Adapted from Gustave Koerner, Memoirs, 1809-1896, Volume I, edited by Thomas J. McCormack, as presented in Sources in American History: A Book of Readings (Chicago, Illinois: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), pages 126-127.