

URSULA LEHMKUHL

Universität Trier

JOHANN HEINRICH CARL – THE REVOLUTIONARY: THE HISTORY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF A GERMAN- AMERICAN FAMILY, 1852-2004¹

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the North America Letter Collection (Nordamerika-Briefsammlung)² received an extraordinary letter series consisting of 202 letters written by 19 different authors, all members of a large transatlantic family network.³ They wrote to each other beginning in the mid-19th century after four out of five children had immigrated to the United States. Letters were written to family members in Germany and between family members in the United States settling in different places in Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Florida, to name just a few. Thus, the letter series does not only contain homeland letters, i.e. letters written to the relatives who stayed at home in Germany, but also letters written between family members in the United States, so-called America letters.

The core letter writers of this letter series were for one the “pater familias” Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn, in short Heinrich, of whom nine letters, written between 1856 and 1883, have been preserved. In addition we have letters from his oldest son Carl Heinrich, or Charles (23 letters written between 1861-1878), his two youngest sons William (23 letters, 1905-1967) and Frank (26 letters,

¹ This article was written during my time as Senior Fellow at the Martin Buber Society of Fellows, Hebrew University Jerusalem. I would like to thank David Shulman, the director of the Martin Buber Society, for the invitation and the fellows for contributing to an exceptionally inspiring and welcoming atmosphere.

² For information about NABS see www.auswandererbriefe.de. The letters were collected with financial support of the German Research Foundation (DFG research grant LE 853/6-1).

³ NABS, Z. Nr. 2004/005.949, Letter Series Wehrmann/Bohn, Research Library Gotha, Germany.

1907-1967). Furthermore the family branch called Kuchenbecker, descendants of Johann Heinrich Carl's only sister who remained in Germany, wrote numerous letters between 1891 and 1960. Finally there is the current owner of the letter collection and amateur family historian Roland Wehrmann who participated with 19 letters written between 1957 and 1968 in this transatlantic letter exchange.

Beyond the letters we have a two volume family history compiled by the American amateur family historian in 1982, with texts added in 1986. We conducted oral history interviews with family members in 2004 and 2006. And we conducted archival research in the local archives in Germany, the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., the Tamiment Library in New York and the Cuyahoga County Archives in Ohio. We were thus able to contextualize the letters on a rather broad basis of information gathered from different sources and different locations.⁴

In the following I will present a "reading" and analysis of the collective life story of the Bohn family based on the intersected stories told by four closely linked layers of documents produced by different members of the family at different times: (1) the letters written by the immigrant in the 1850s and 1860s, (2) the childhood memories of the two youngest sons in the form of short essays written in the 1950s on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Johann Heinrich Carl's immigration which are now part of the two volume "Nus Meisgeier History and Genealogy" compiled in 1982, (3) historical accounts about the family and the village written by Roland Wehrmann in the late 1950s and 1960s and translated by Duane Manson, the American family historian in the late 1980s, and (4) short summaries and excerpts of the letters clipped to the original letters written by the owner of the letter collection, Roland Wehrmann, in the 1990s as part of his efforts and interest in reconstructing and writing the family history.

The letters, the family history and the reading summaries are elements of a multi-layered temporally and spatially interwoven collective family history based on memories of the political active and engaged "pater familias". This family history constructs the image of a political active family with strong liberal and social democratic political orientations, covering a time period of almost 150 years. The three layers of historical documents allow the reconstruction of the diachronicity and multi-locality of self-representation and identity construction through shared memories. Furthermore, on the basis of these documents it is possible to show how memory influenced the narrative structure of the stories told and thus to demonstrate how the past is dealt with in the everyday life.

⁴ Archival research was financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG research grant LE 853/6-2).

Two iconographic events serve as reference points for the stories and memories presented by these different layers of historical tradition: the 1848 revolution and the American Civil War. These two events stand out from the rest and have a strong structuring effect on the narratives depicting our immigrant's life as well as the history of the place where he was born and raised – Remptendorf in South-Eastern Thuringia. The pre-1848 history of Remptendorf is told with a focus on the Peasants' War, the farmers' emancipation struggle, and the Reformation. Thus, Remptendorf is depicted as the historical hotspot of the historical struggle for emancipation and a new liberal political order. Furthermore, the immigrant's participation in the 1848 revolution is echoed in the specific individual life stories of the core storytellers thus creating a multi-generational narrative of the family's fight against autocratic structures and for a liberal and social democratic order. Remembering, recollecting and narrating the family history also serves as an instrument of the self-positioning of the core storytellers as political active social democrats in different time periods and different places. The collective life story, the memories and the echoes of "1848" subconsciously construct a narrative trope that I call the "Revolutionsnarrativ". This narrative had a strong structuring effect on the collective family memory. My analysis will focus on the way this narrative trope was established, how it was reinforced through written accounts telling the story from the hindsight by recollecting childhood memories, and how it developed into a core element of the collective family memory.

In theoretical and methodological perspective the analysis will shed light on how history and memory are intertwined. The four interconnected layers of documents demonstrate in a very vivid and lively manner how historical narratives as the content of collective memory and collective memory as the framework in which historical remembering occurs do interact and reinforce each other.⁵ They point at the presence of history in everyday life and give examples of how the present gives voice to the past through recollections and memories.⁶ Moreover, the narrative repetition of the family's connection to core historical events and the slight variants in the historical accounts given by the different storytellers elucidate how collective memory and collective identity are varieties of lived historical experiences and their narrative representation in historical texts.

⁵ For this differentiation see: S. A. Crane (1997), *Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory*, The "American Historical Review", Vol. 102, Issue 5, pp. 1372-1385, here p. 1373.

⁶ *Geschichtsbewusstsein: Psychologische Grundlagen, Entwicklungskonzepte, empirische Befunde* (2001), Rüsen, J. (ed.), Köln: Böhlau; *Meaning and Representation in History* (2006), Rüsen, J. (ed.), New York: Berghahn Books; *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (2004), Rüsen, J. (ed.) New York: Berghahn Books .

The following analysis contributes to the field of “Erinnerungsgeschichte” – the history of memory – by using historical material that is usually exclusively read by migration historians. My analysis broadens the existing approaches in the field of history and memory by going beyond the focus on the collective memories of nations, specific ethnic, religious or generational groups. Instead this article reconstructs the memory of a transatlantic family, spanning the life experience of seven generations, written by amateur historians for private use.

HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF MEMORY – “ERINNERUNGSGESCHICHTE”

“Perhaps the most banal thing that could be said about history, in general, is that ‘it happened’, or something happened. But of course, history is not only the past or pasts that ‘happened’ or continue to happen, it is also what is written or produced about those pasts both then and now.”⁷

With this observation Susan Crane introduces her contribution to the AHR Forum “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory” published in 1997. This AHR Forum looked back at and discussed the almost exploding interest of the history profession in the connection between history and memory, memory and identity, the function of historical consciousness and of the presence of history and the past in everyday life that emerged in the 1980s with publications by Charles Maier, Pierre Nora, Yosef Yerushalmi, Jan and Aleida Assmann, and many others. The 1990s saw indeed – to borrow the words of Anna Green – “a memory boom”⁸ that was not restricted to the history profession but expressed itself in “myriad ways from the building of memorials and expansion of museums, to retro fashions and popular representations of the past in film and television”.⁹ One reason for this growing interest was the raising awareness that the last generation of individuals that actually could remember the Holocaust as part of their lived experience was slowly but steadily dying out. Concomitantly historians observed that the history of the two World Wars and of postwar Europe was remembered, represented and narrated in historical exhibitions, TV documentaries and scholarly historical texts in quite different ways and with distinct foci depending on the individual national contexts. Thus historians

⁷ S. A. Crane, *Writing...*, p. 1372.

⁸ A. Green (2004), *Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates*, “Oral History”, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 35-44, here p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*

became interested in the “collective memory” of European nations and its social and political function.¹⁰

Pierre Nora’s “Lieux de mémoire” series published in the mid-1980s¹¹ focused on collective historical memory stored in and evoked by locations and sites. This spatial aspect of collective memory triggered historical research concentrating on specific places, specific events or years as fixed, externalized locations of what was once an internalized, social collective memory.¹² Jan and Aleida Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” – “kulturelles Gedächtnis” – as opposed to “collective memory” – “kollektive Erinnerung”¹³ –, raised the awareness of historians for the preservation of memories in different media.¹⁴ The Assmanns argued that “cultural memory” is not only stored in written documents but also in rites, dances, ornaments, pictures, mile stones, landscapes, etc. All

¹⁰ Ch. S. Maier (1988), *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; P. Reichel (1995), *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die Nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit*, München: Hanser; H. Rousso (1991), *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; J. E. Young (1993), *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Y. H. Yerushalmi (1982), *Zakhor, Jewish history and Jewish memory*, Seattle: University of Washington Press; Y. H. Yerushalmi (1988), *Usages de l’oubli*, Paris: Seuil.

¹¹ *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984), Nora, P. (ed.), Paris: Gallimard; P. Nora (1990), *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis: Die Gedächtnisorte*, in: Nora, P. (ed.), *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, pp. 11-33; *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (1996), Nora, P., Kritzman, L. D. (eds.), New York: Columbia University Press.

¹² *1968 - Ein europäisches Jahr?* (1997), François, E. (ed.), Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag; *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (2001), François, E., Schulze, H. (eds.), München: Beck; *Erinnerungstage: Wendepunkte der Geschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (2010), François, E., Puschner, U. (eds.), München: Beck; *War memories: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Modern European Culture* (2012), Forrest, A. I., François, E., Hagemann, K. (eds.), Houndmills, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ It is not easy to clarify the difference in the German language between “Erinnerung” and “Gedächtnis”. Wolfgang Müller-Funk suggests that “Erinnerung means the spontaneous, involuntary non-rational recall of personal events, painful and shameful matters, whereas Gedächtnis means the rational voluntary effort to employ all our mental capacities including knowledge, information and cultural techniques”. W. Müller-Funk (2003), *On a Narratology of Cultural and Collective Memory*, “Journal of Narrative Theory”, Vol. 33, Issue 2, pp. 207-227, here p. 217. In my analysis I use “memory” when I refer to the recall of personal events – which does not necessarily have to be spontaneous – and “history” when I refer to the texts resulting from archival research written by our two amateur historians.

¹⁴ See e.g. W. Kansteiner (2006), *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press; *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (2006), Lebow, R. N., Kansteiner, W., Fogu, C. (eds.), Durham: Duke University Press.

these cultural expressions transport a certain meaning and establish a common identity by evoking the past.¹⁵

The historical phenomena that the focus on memory brought to a fore are described by Jan Assmann as a “Komplex an symbolisch vermittelter Gemeinsamkeit” – a complex system of symbolically transmitted shared meanings.¹⁶ Assmann explains:

“Im Unterschied zur Geschichte im eigentlichen Sinne geht es der Gedächtnisgeschichte nicht um die Vergangenheit als solche, sondern nur um die Vergangenheit, wie sie erinnert wird. Sie untersucht die Pfade der Überlieferung, die Netze der Intertextualität, die diachronen Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten in der Lektüre der Vergangenheit. Gedächtnisgeschichte steht nicht im Gegensatz zur Geschichtswissenschaft, sondern bildet einen ihrer Zweige wie auch Ideengeschichte, Sozialgeschichte, Mentalitätsgeschichte oder Alltagsgeschichte.”¹⁷

Almost all scholarly contributions to the research field of history and memory utilized Maurice Halbwachs theoretical contributions as a conceptual reference point. In his book “*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*” published in 1925 Halbwachs advanced the thesis that not only individual human beings have the capacity to memorize but that also societies are able to develop a “collective memory”.¹⁸ Halbwachs argued that this memory is dependent upon the ‘cadre’ or framework within which a group is situated in a society.

¹⁵ *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (1988), Assmann, J., Hölscher, T. (eds.), Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp; *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (1983), Assmann, A., Assmann, J., Hardmeier, Ch. (eds.), München: W. Fink; A. Assmann (1993), *Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis: Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee*, Frankfurt u.a.: Campus; J. Assmann (1992), *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München: C.H. Beck. For a review and critique of collective memory studies see W. Kansteiner (2002), *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies*, “History and Theory”, Vol. 41, Issue 2, pp. 179-197.

¹⁶ J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle...*, p.139.

¹⁷ J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle...*, p. 139. Paraphrase: The History of Memory is not concerned with the past as such, but with the past as it is remembered. It explores the various paths of transmission and other aspects of reading the past. It is not opposed to the discipline of history, but constitutes one of its branches, like intellectual history or social history.

¹⁸ Vgl. M. Halbwachs (1925), *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris: F. Alcan; M. Halbwachs (1980), *The Collective Memory*, New York: Harper & Row; N. Russell (2006), *Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs*, “The French Review”, Vol. 79, Issue 4, pp. 792-804. As an introduction to the field see: C. Wischermann (1996), *Geschichte als Wissen, Gedächtnis oder Erinnerung? Bedeutsamkeit und Sinnlosigkeit in den Vergangenheitskonzeptionen der Wissenschaften vom Menschen*, in: Wischermann, C. (eds.), *Die Legitimität der Erinnerung und die Geschichtswissenschaft*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 55-86.

Consequently, an individual's understanding of the past is strongly linked to this group consciousness. Collective memory can be shared, passed on and constructed by groups both small and large, for example a whole nation. The „collective memory“ preserves experiences of a society. Historical experiences are crucial for collective identity construction especially in the context of nation states, as Benedict Anderson and his concept of “imagined communities” has aptly demonstrated.¹⁹ Historical experiences, however, are not fixed but they are permanently transformed and filtered by the changing contemporary social perceptions and need for meaning.

Halbwachs distinguishes (collective) memory from (historical) recollection. The latter being the act of recovering that which has been forgotten. Collective memory, however, maintains the lived experience of individuals within groups. Halbwachs argues that individual experience is never remembered without reference to a shared context and that all remembering relies on the dynamics of groups such as families, social classes, and religious communities. Hence, memory is socially embedded. Individual memories are actually produced and formed in a social context. Likewise, collective memory is sustained through a continuous production of representational forms, generating second hand memories.²⁰ And, as Wolfgang Müller-Funk has argued, “all forms of memory are explicitly or implicitly based on retrospective narratives that seek to cross the unbridgeable gap between the time of narrating and the time of the events that will be narrated.”²¹

It is this perspective on the social embeddedness of memories and their reproduction in retrospective narratives that will guide the following analysis of the life history and collective identity of the Bohn family. My analysis will demonstrate that this family's history and identity is the outcome of the interplay of the social construction of individual memories and its continuous reproduction in the form of stories told and histories written as a means of creating family cohesiveness in a very diverse and spatially scattered and thus separated social environment.

¹⁹ B. R. Anderson (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

²⁰ See e.g. J. E. Young, *The Texture...*

²¹ W. Müller-Funk, *On a Narratology...*, p. 207.

WHOSE HISTORY AND WHOSE MEMORY ARE AT STAKE?
WHO REPRESENTS AND EXPERIENCED IT?

As already mentioned in the introduction the story of this extended German-American family has been told predominantly by five “historians”/storytellers: the immigrant himself, Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn, his two youngest sons, William E. and Frank Bohn, and the two amateur historians, Duane Manson and Roland Wehrmann. In the following I will introduce these five storytellers/“historians”.

Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn was born in Remptendorf, Thuringia in 1816. He was one of four children of Johann Heinrich Gottlieb Bohn and his only son. Heinrich’s father was a wealthy farmer and Schultheiß (mayor) of Remptendorf who is remembered as a tyrant who not only repressed the inhabitants of the villages for which he was responsible but also his wife and probably his daughters. Heinrich’s father is described as an ill-tempered man of iron hand.²² Frank Bohn remembers his father telling the story of his grandfather arresting “anyone at will, bringing them home to his prison, which was the cellar of his country house. There, his family ... must listen, day and night, to the weeping and wailing wretches below the stairs.”²³ And William Bohn historically contextualizes the same story by beginning his account with a reference to Nazi Germany: “It will help Americans to understand Hitler if they get the idea of the tyrannical forms of government that went way back. Grandfather was mayor, policeman, judge, jailer: the whole government. If he thought someone had done something wrong he simply beat him with a whip. Often, this ceremony took place in the cellar of his house.”²⁴

Heinrich had two elder and two younger sisters: Johanna Christiane (born 1812), Johanne Heinrike Christiane (born 1814), Maria Christiane Caroline (born 1827) and Heinrieke Christiane (born 1831). Except Johanne Heinrike Christiane (the second eldest sister) all children immigrated to the United States. Emigration started in 1845 with Marie Christiane Karoline, followed by her sister Christiane Heinrike in 1849, both leaving the Thuringian village to settle in Warrensville, Ohio, today part of the larger Cleveland area.

Johann Heinrich Carl and Johanne Christiane left Germany in 1852 via Hamburg accompanied by their families consisting of six children each. Three children did not survive the transatlantic journey. They died of scarlet fever which

²² *Nus-Meisgeier History and Genealogy*, comp. by D. Manson (1982), Vol. II, Handwritten Family History by H. J. Bohn (1900), p. 709-714, here p. 714.

²³ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, History – Remptendorf and the U.S., by Dr. F. Bohn, p. 193.

²⁴ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, p. 203.

had broken out onboard of the ship. Johanne Christiane's husband died three days after they arrived in Ohio. They first lived with their sisters in Warrensville but very soon moved to a small farm in Orange, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, also near Cleveland. Two years later their mother also left Germany and lived the rest of her life with her children and grandchildren in Ohio. After the death of his first wife, Johann Heinrich Carl married again, two times, and finally fathered 19 children of which 16 grew up to adulthood.

Heinrich had been a very successful and wealthy farmer in Germany, inheriting his father's land and "Ämter" (posts or positions). Heinrich played an active part in the 1848 revolution. In 1848 he was elected to the Constitutional Convention as the representative of the twelve townships belonging to the Duchy of Reuss (jüngere Linie). Moreover, he even was a member of a committee of three selected to write and present the new constitution to the Duke of Reuss for his signature. He was heavily disappointed with the political outcome of the revolution, so that he – "the Revolutionary" – decided to immigrate to the "land of the free".²⁵

Heinrich sold his property in Remptendorf and took the equivalent of 2.500 \$ "in gold sewed up in his belt"²⁶ with him when he emigrated. Hence, he was not a poor peasant when he came to the United States. The 1860 census lists \$3.600 as immobile property and an additional \$1.500 as personal property. He assimilated to the new situation very quickly. Already in the 1860's census he called himself "Henry". All of his children are also listed with American names: Karl Heinrich became Charles, Gustav Eduard – Christopher, Heinrich Richard – Richard, Ida Pauline – Ida; Louis Robert – Robert, Maria Albine – Elena, Johann Heinrich – Henry etc. etc. Johann Heinrich Carl was able to secure a good education for all of his 16 children. Johann Heinrich Carl was 80 years old, when he died in 1896.

His two eldest sons – Charles and Christopher – fought in the American Civil War. The two youngest sons went to college and university and earned doctoral degrees, William in English and Frank in Economics, both from the University of Michigan. Both were active members of the American Socialist Movement. Frank was a lecturer at Columbia University and a state organizer of the Socialist Party of New York. He was a founding member of the „Industrial Workers of the World“, National Secretary of the „Socialist Labor Party of America“ and later of the „Socialist Party of America“, participated in the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International in 1907 and served as editor of the „International Socialist Review“. According to the family history, William taught at the University of

²⁵ See R. Wehrmann's summary of Johann Heinrich Carl's first letter written in 1856.

²⁶ *Nus-Meisgeier...* Vol. I, pp. 192-200, here p. 196.

Michigan and at Ohio State University. He lectured on International Affairs in Canada and throughout the United States, was Director of the Rand School of Social Studies and editor of "The New Leader".²⁷ William was dismissed from his position at the University of Michigan because he "became entranced with the gospel of socialism".²⁸ The Board of Trustees of the University of Michigan was afraid to lose support from its donors if the University kept professors who were involved in such "un-American" activity.

Roland Wehrmann – the owner of the originals of this letter collection – is married to Erna Kuchenbecker, the great great granddaughter of Johanne Heinrike Christiane Bohn, the second eldest sister of our emigrant and the only one of the four siblings who stayed in Germany. Roland Wehrmann continued the family tradition and also served as mayor of Remptendorf in the immediate aftermath of World War II and again in the 1970s. He was a member of the SPD (Social Democratic Party). Shortly after the foundation of the GDR the new political leaders asked him – or rather demanded – that he become a party member of the SED. But he refused to succumb to the new totalitarian order and remained true to his social-democratic position. As a result he was arrested. On the occasion of a visit in Remptendorf in 2004 he told us the story of his arrest and imprisonment, backed by his wife who added important details.

Roland and Erna remember that one night, in the early years of the new "German Democratic Republic" at about 11:00 o'clock p.m. the state policy came to their house, arrested Roland and took him to the local police station where he was questioned the whole night. Again a party official tried to persuade him to become a member of the new unitary party of the GDR. But he again refused. He was eventually released from prison but dismissed from his position as mayor and forced to work on the fields for the newly founded collective farm system of the GDR, the LPG – Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft of Remptendorf.

Roland Wehrmann had no experience whatsoever with farm work and he and his family very much suffered from his decision not to become a member of the SED Party. To compensate for the loss of his administrative and political position, duties and responsibilities Roland Wehrmann, who was – as he told us – an office worker through and through, developed an interest in family history. In his leisure time he went to the local archives, gathered material about the history of the village Remptendorf and of the Bohn family, and wrote little pieces that he compiled in a book. Parts of his history of Remptendorf are translated

²⁷ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. II, Excerpts from the Book W. E. Bohn (1962), *I Remember America*, New York: Macmillan, p. 698.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

into English and printed in the two volume “Nus Meisgeier Family History and Genealogy” compiled by Duane Manson in 1982.

Duane Manson was born in 1932 in Independence, Iowa and died in 2009. His father, Arthur F. Manson was the nephew of Charles and Hilda Nus, descendants from the Nus family of Röppisch who also immigrated to the United States in 1852. The Nus family was related to the Meisgeier family. Andreas Meisgeier was the husband of Johann Heinrich Carl’s sister Johanne Christiane. “Kaufmann Nus” was also a prominent figure in the 1848 revolution in the Fürstentum Reuss (jüngere Linie). Together with Heinrich he was a member of the committee who wrote the constitution for the Duchy of Reuss. In addition to the Bohns and the Kuchenbeckers, the Nus and Meisgeier families became part of the large family network developing in the United States during the second half of the 19th century.

Duane Manson was a Minister of the Lutheran Church and in this function he participated in the Martin Luther celebration in Germany by contributing to the English Worship and Ministry Program of Lutherstadt Wittenberg in 2006. We met him on that occasion and talked with him about his work as family historian. He shared with us his texts and recollections of the family history. Duane Manson started visiting Germany in 1972. There were three visits to both West and East Germany in the 1970s, in 1972, 1973 und 1974, and three more in the 1980s, in 1984, 1984 und 1985. It was during these visits that Manson developed a close friendship with Roland Wehrmann.

Manson’s visits to Remptendorf were always used for collaborative archival research in the local archives. Together, these two amateur historians searched the local archives for information about the history of the Bohn family, thereby not only focusing on the reconstruction of genealogical data but also on the political role the Bohn family played in the history of Remptendorf. Roland Wehrmann’s reading and summarizing of the letters in the early 1990s probably has been influenced by a close exchange with the American family historian and vice versa. Duane Manson’s contributions to the family history reflect the intellectual exchange with Roland Wehrmann and their collaborative work in the local archives.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LIBERAL, SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC FAMILY IMAGE

Johann Heinrich Carl’s political position and his rejection of the authoritarian German system is expressed in the first letter of our letter collection, written to his relatives back home four years after his emigration in 1856. In this long

four-page letter Heinrich not only writes about the family news, health, economic development etc., but he extensively comments on the political conditions in Germany and the United States and describes the new and better life of the family in the New World. He asserts that the decision to leave the old country was the best thing that ever could have happened to him and his family. In rather drastic terms he deplores the political phlegm of the Germans which for him was one of the main reasons for the failure of the 1848 revolution:

„... Überhaupt richten wir uns je länger wir hier sind immer besser nach amerikanischen Sitten und Gebräuchen. Obgleich wir zu manchen Zeiten auch hart arbeiten so gibt es doch wieder eher eine freie Stunde, wo man das Joch bei Seite legen und sich als Mensch erholen kann, so wie draußen nur die vornehme Welt zu tun pflegt. Aber der gutmütige Deutsche erträgt alles mit Geduld, zieht am Staatskarren wie ein Stier, trägt das Unglaubliche wie ein Esel, lässt auf sich losfahren wie auf einen Bär, und sich zuletzt schlagen wie einen Hund. --- Es ist uns bekannt das sich die Regierungen Deutschlands alle Mühe geben um die abschreckende Beispiele über Amerika zu verbreiten; wir dürfen aber nicht im geringsten über unsere Umgebung klagen, es kommt das immer auf das Verhalten einer Familie selbst an, meine Nachbarn sind wenigstens 99 Prozent besser als in Remptendorf, --- wir können weiter nichts als danken, danken unserm Schöpfer danken, der uns hierher geleitet hat.“²⁹

This particular passage referring to the political conditions in Germany and the political attitude of the “Germans” during and after the 1848 revolution is reprinted and translated in the two volume family history. In that very rough and with regard to core concepts misleading English translation the passage reads as follows:

“The good natured German bears everything with patience. He bears the unbelievable burdens like an ass & at the end is beaten like a dog. People [*in the German original: governments*] in Germany try hard to spread [*in the German original: forbidding rumors*] rumors about the U.S., but we have no reason to complain about our surroundings. It all depends upon the attitude of the family. My neighbors here are at least 99% better than in Remptendorf. We can do nothing but be very grateful to our Creator Who has lead us to this place.”³⁰

²⁹ Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn an Schwager Christian Heinrich Werner, Orange den 6. März 1856, NABS, Z. Nr.2004/005.949, Letter Series Wehrmann/Bohn, Research Library Gotha.

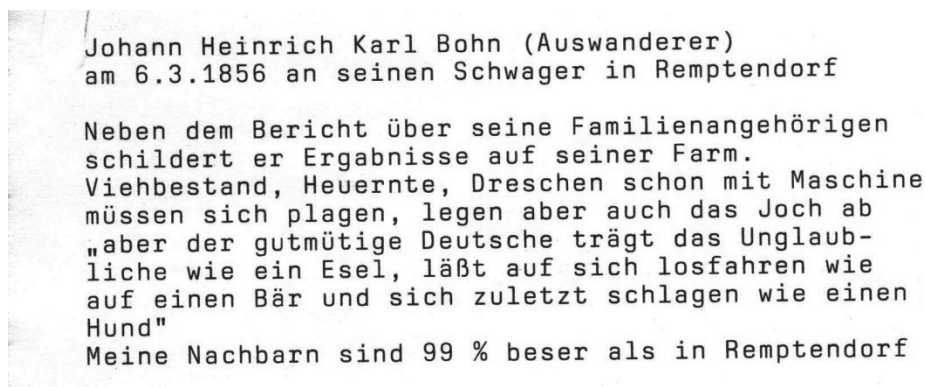
³⁰ Johann Carl Heinrich Bohn an Schwager Christian Heinrich Werner, 6.3.1856, translated and reprinted in *Nus-Meisgeier*..., Vol. II, p. 602.

The passage is again repeated as a quote in the summary of this letter that Roland Wehrmann wrote in the early 1990s.

In this rather short text Wehrmann pinpoints three aspects: (1) The fact that Heinrich had to work hard to bring in his harvest but that he was already able to use new farm technology, like the threshing machine.³¹ (2) The fact that Heinrich although working hard did so without the “yoke of the old feudal regime”, whereas the Germans continued to carry the unbelievable situation in Germany, thereby quoting directly from Heinrich’s letter. (3) Heinrich’s comments about his new neighbors in the United States which were 99% better than his old neighbors in Remptendorf.

Picture 1.

Summary of Johann Heinrich Carl’s first letter by Roland Wehrmann



Johann Heinrich Karl Bohn (Auswanderer)
am 6.3.1856 an seinen Schwager in Remptendorf

Neben dem Bericht über seine Familienangehörigen schildert er Ergebnisse auf seiner Farm. Viehbestand, Heuernte, Dreschen schon mit Maschine müssen sich plagen, legen aber auch das Joch ab „aber der gutmütige Deutsche trägt das Unglaubliche wie ein Esel, läßt auf sich losfahren wie auf einen Bär und sich zuletzt schlagen wie einen Hund“
Meine Nachbarn sind 99 % beser als in Remptendorf

The technological superiority of the United States is mentioned again in the second letter that has been preserved, written after the American Civil War in January 1866. And again Heinrich’s description of the new technology that he is using on his farm – the mechanical reaper, the harrow, the work with horse, water or steam power – is accompanied by comments about the political and economic backwardness in Germany. Again Heinrich deplores the fact that German farmers still harvest exclusively by hand. He criticizes the autocratic power of the aristocracy, the guilds and the clergy who suppress any kind of liberal political attitude and safeguard the old system by prohibiting any changes of the existing economic, social and political order.

³¹ The introduction of the threshing machine had produced farmers’ riots and uprisings in Great Britain in the 1820s and 1830s and was regarded as a socially controversial new technology on the continent.

„... ich besitze jetzt eine verbesserte neue Mähmaschine, mit welcher ein Mann, der sie zu dirigieren versteht (was ich aber selbst bin) in der Zeit von 8 höchstens 10 Stunden eine Wiese reichlich so groß wie meine ehemalige Gemeindefeld abmäh, die Pferde werden in gutem Schritt gehalten und ziehen nicht schwerer wie ungefähr ein starkes Stoppelfeld umzupflügen erfordert. Sie schneidet 6 Fuß 6 Zoll breit, und kein Mann mit der Hand ist im Stande die Arbeit so vollkommen auszuführen. Obenauf ist ein Federspringsitz angebracht, daher wird man ganz sanft ohne alle Anstrengung mit über die Wiese hingezogen. Hingegen bei Euch die schon zu ermüdeten Beine Wochen lang so grimmig zu traktieren, und noch bei magerer Kost und schlechten Lohn. --- Die Arbeit zu verrichten, so werden auch neuerdings Rechen hinter den Wagen angebunden, welche das Heu sogleich aufladen und beim Abladen hat man Pferdegabeln in Gebrauch wo das Pferd alles und der Mann ganz wenig dabei zu tun hat. Ich könnte noch lange so fortfahren, da fast ohne Ausnahme alle Gerätschaften hier besser konstruiert und wo nur irgend [möglich] Pferde, Wasser, oder Dampfkraft anzuwenden sofort Gebrauch davon gemacht, und Muskelkraft gespart wird. Ich kann jene armen viel geplagten Menschen nur bedauern, helfen kann ich nicht. Leider ist noch keine Aussicht vorhanden, wo jenes Volk durch geistig freier Entwicklung einen höheren Standpunkt der Zivilisation, (der ihm eigentlich angewiesen) einnehmen [würde]. Aber durch des Standes, Zunft, [---], und Pfaffen Herrschaft wird ja jede freie [Regung] niedergehalten dieses [ist] der gründlichste Beweis dass ja Altes recht schön bei Altem bleibt so wie es Groß- und Ur Urgroßeltern getrieben haben ...”³²

In his letters, Heinrich does not write about his role in the 1848 revolution. But from his son William we learn that Heinrich must have told the story about his participation in the political events in 1848 and 1849 over and over again. William explains “the most interesting and important story which Father used to tell concerned the Revolution of 1848 and the following Constitutional Convention.”³³ William points out that his father’s story very much influenced his own image and his understanding of the 1848 revolution.

“My picture of the events of ‘48 has nothing to do with the high drama of Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, or Frankfurt. Father’s part - & it had quite a heroism - was played in Remptendorf, a tiny feudal village deep in the Saechsische Vogtland. ... Father’s little episode in the great Revolution that stretched from Vienna to Berlin began to roll in the narrow street before the stoutly build house that had sheltered

³² Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn an Schwager Christian Heinrich Werner und Familie, Orange Jan 26th 1866, NABS, Z. Nr.2004/005.949, Letter Series Wehrmann/Bohn, Research Library Gotha.

³³ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, p. 204.

my ancestors for five generations. I heard the story many times & while I will not guarantee the historicity of the narrative, I will swear that my reproduction of it is practically perfect. For this story, like other folk talks, had been rehearsed so often that it had taken on a final & perfect polish.”³⁴

According to Williams’s recollections of the stories told by his father, the events of 1848 unfolded in the following manner:

“... One night father had gone to bed. In fact, he was sound asleep when he was roused by a great disturbance in the street before his house. Pulling on some clothes he took up a position on the step before his door and asked his fellow citizens what was up. His neighbors cried out: ‘In the cities there is a revolution. We want to have a revolution too. Come, Henry, be our leader. We will go and break the preacher’s windows.’ The Herr Pfarrer, of course, was the only representative of the royal government. It was only through him that the villagers thought they could reach the king. Then, Father had his great opportunity. He used to tell this story very solemnly while my brother Frank and I listened with bated breath. He said to the assembled people: ‘Dear friends! If you want to establish a republic, you must begin in a different way. Democratic government requires intelligence. Citizens of a republic must be above violence. They must study government and adopt a constitution. You had better go quietly home and consider these matters.’ The crowd disbursed and in the course of time Father and Kauffmann Nuss were elected members of the constitutional convention which drew up a constitution for the little Duchy. Kauffmann Nuss, or store keeper Nuss, was, of course, the ancestor of all of the Nusses who now contribute to the prosperity of Iowa.”³⁵

And William adds:

“Father would tell us how hard he worked at the business of perfecting a democratic constitution for the tiny country. My brother and I would ask him: ‘What did you do? What did you study?’ And, Father would answer: ‘I studied the constitution of the United States and the writings of Thomas Jefferson.’ At that Frank and I would almost explode with pride.”³⁶

In his “analysis” of the 1848 revolution, William comments on the political attitude of the German people in a way that very much resembles the observations

³⁴ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. II, Excerpts from the Book W. E. Bohn (1962), *I Remember America*, New York: Macmillan, p. 702.

³⁵ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, p. 204 f. The Nusses are related to the Meisgeier family, i.e. the family of his older sister, with whom Heinrich immigrated to the United States in 1852.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

put forward by Heinrich in his first letters. Thus the image of Germany and the German people lacking the political awareness and intellectual capacity necessary to carry a large social movement leading to political change is repeated and reinforced. William remembers his father explaining to him that the Germans in Remptendorf as well as in other parts of Germany where the National Convention met were poor politicians. And he adds that “when we asked father why the Revolution failed and why he came to America he would say sadly ‘one thing after another they took from us at last we have nothing left and there was nothing left but emigration’”.³⁷ Both from Heinrich’s first letter and from the memories of his sons we thus learn that Heinrich’s decision to immigrate to the United States was based on political considerations. For Heinrich the political situation in Germany was unbearable and he was very skeptical as to the political capacity and will of the German people to change their plight.

The story about Heinrich’s participation in the 1848 revolution appears in the family history in different variations and with different narrative styles. In the short history of Remptendorf that we find in the two volume “Nus Meisgeier History and Genealogy” the story of the 1848 revolution and Heinrich’s involvement in it, is told in a matter-of-fact tone, suggesting historical accuracy and objectivity. Here we learn that Heinrich Bohn was the leader of the Remptendorf revolutionaries.

“In 1848 the people of Remptendorf, under the leadership of von Lobenstein, came together and founded a militia. They regularly practiced with arms: guns and other weapons. In the dominion of Burgk, Remptendorf was the center of the revolutionary movement. In meetings on the 14th and 15th of March, 1848, a delegation conveyed their demands to the lord in Greiz. The meeting took place in house number 125. However, it was betrayed, in that men, faithful to the lord, listened to the meeting through a hold in the ceiling of the house. ... later ... the revolution was thrown down. It brought an incomplete success. ... However, the old oppressors took revenge after they had thrown down the revolution. The leaders were punished. Often they had to flee the area. The leader of the Remptendorfer, Heinrich Bohn ... had to leave. He immigrated to North America. His family still lives there”.³⁸

The critical role that Heinrich played in the revolution as the “leader” of the revolutionaries of Remptendorf and the connection between Heinrich’s political activism and his decision to immigrate to the United States is also corroborated by Duane Manson who writes in a different context of the family history:

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. II, p. 573.

“Of course, the political problems of the old feudal system with the duke caused the rebellion of 1848, led in Remptendorf by Johann Heinrich Carl Bohn, brother of Johanna Bohn Meisgeier. This, in turn, brought him and other family members to America”.³⁹

In his reproduction of the story of the 1848 revolution in Remptendorf, Frank, Heinrich’s youngest son, stresses the political attitude and the political perseverance of his father facing the representatives of the old aristocratic political order. From a narrative point of view, Frank’s memory of his father’s political commitment and political fortitude resembles very much the account given by Roland Wehrmann about his refusal to become a member of the SED Party.

“Father was elected as the representative of the twelve townships previously mentioned to the constitutional Convention at Greiz. The position Father assumed in his work for the convention is indicated by the fact that he was a member of a committee of three selected to present the constitution to the Duke of Reuss for his signature. When the committee arrived at the ducal palace the Duke assumed a challenging attitude towards Father. He said: ‘Your Father was a most loyal and devoted Untertan (subject) of mine. How does it come that you have turned against me and support the revolution?’ ‘I am seeking to become a free man,’ replied my Father. ‘This Constitution will make us all free citizens.’ From that time onward his difficulties increased. ... a general reaction soon set in. He said to me once: ‘One after another, the bill of rights guaranteed by the Constitution were rescinded by the Duke.’ This is, as the reaction triumphed throughout Germany, it had wiped out the gains made in the revolution.”⁴⁰

In Frank’s memory his father developed his liberal, anti-aristocratic political attitudes because of his first-hand experience with a representative of that order, namely his own father. The father of our immigrant was not only a “Gros-Bauer” but also “Bürgermeister” of Remptendorf, an office vested in him by the Duke of Reuss. As “Bürgermeister” and Judge he held court in the Hall of his house – the largest ground floor room – and he arrested and imprisoned people in his cellar at his will. The whole family thus became witness of political arbitrariness and cruel punishment methods. Frank writes: “My Father’s memory of the sessions held by my Grandfather’s court, as he related them to us children in Ohio were numerous and interesting.”⁴¹ For Frank his father’s intimate knowledge about the way the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 594.

⁴⁰ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, here p. 194-195.

⁴¹ Ibid., here p. 193.

old system worked and how the autocratic structure and attitudes influenced their family life provoked his father's resistance against the old regime and his interest in a more liberal political and social order. According to Frank his father's first act of rebellion against the ancient regime was to speak up to his own father on his twenty-first birthday, by telling him:

“Things have to change in this house. ... Hence forth, you will treat my Mother with respect and the people you rule with justice and decency. I am prepared to act. Either you change your way of life or I shall take my Mother and sisters to the United States of America. You shall have to change at once or we shall soon be gone.”⁴²

And Frank continues the story with a rather dramatic end:

“My Grandfather, too astounded to reply, held his peace. Yet, the shock was more than he could bear. His health soon failed and he died within the year, at the age of only forty-eight. Whereupon my Father, at the age of twenty-two years, assumed full charge of the estate.”⁴³

In Frank's narrative the personal experience and individual concern with an unjust and intolerable order kindled his father's revolutionary sparks and in turn led to his father's prominent involvement in the 1848 revolution and his immigration to the United States.

FROM THE 1848 REVOLUTION TO THE CIVIL WAR: CONTINUITIES AND AMBIGUITIES OF THE POLITICAL FAMILY IMAGE

The stories about Heinrich's involvement in the 1848 revolution are not only related to his decision to immigrate to the United States. In a similar manner the storytellers construct a direct connection between the history of Heinrich's political involvement in the 1848 revolution and the family's participation in the American Civil War. Indeed, the fight against slavery is coined in terms of the continuation of the struggle for a liberal and just political order. And again, this tale of continuity is constructed from the hindsight by the memories of the two youngest sons and the summaries of the letters by Roland Wehrmann. Heinrich himself does not mention slavery in his letters, nor does he discuss his political position regarding the abolitionist movement or abolitionism in general. The

⁴² Ibid., p. 194.

⁴³ *Nus-Meisgeier* ..., Vol. I, here p. 194.

tale of continuity between 1848 and the American Civil War is again presented in different narrative styles. Roland Wehrmann writes in a matter-of-fact tone whereas the two sons try to tell a “good story” thereby, however, also revealing interesting details pointing at ambiguities and differences between memory and the actual historical experience. I will start again with Wehrmann’s summary of the only letter preserved written by Christopher Bohn, the second eldest son of Heinrich, in 1862. In this letter Christopher writes about his experiences as a soldier in the American Civil War. Although the letter itself has no references to the 1848 revolution, Roland Wehrmann begins his summary by mentioning the active participation of Heinrich Bohn in the Revolution of 1848 and the subsequent reprisals of the Prince, which contributed to Bohn’s decision to emigrate:

“Heinrich Bohn hatte von Remptendorf aus aktiv an der bürgerlichen Revolution teilgenommen. Er überbrachte die Forderungen der Untergebenen an den Fürst in Burgk. Jahre danach litt er deshalb unter Repressalien durch den Fürsten. Heinrich Bohn entschloß sich 1852 mit seiner Familie (Frau und 6 kleine Kinder) nach USA auszuwandern – In Amerika fühlte er sich in einem freien Land ohne Frohnarbeit usw.”

Wehrmann then jumps directly to the American Civil War and the struggle against slavery suggesting that this is a natural continuation of Heinrich’s revolutionary political attitude.

“Als dann aber in USA die Sklavenunterdrückung immer schlimmer wurde und es schließlich zum Bürgerkrieg kam, stand Heinrich auf Seiten der Schwarzen Bevölkerung. Er sagte zu seinen Söhnen: Wir sind hierher in ein freies Land gegangen und müssen jetzt die Freiheit mit verdeitigen (sic!) – Daraufhin meldeten sich seine beiden ältesten Söhne Gustav und Carl freiwillig als Kämpfer.”⁴⁴

In a similar way Frank Bohn draws a direct connection between the 1848 revolution and the struggle for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Frank’s hint at the “family tradition” is one of the core sentences in the following quote because it again points to the prominent role storytelling, remembering and memory played in the construction of the collective family identity.

⁴⁴ Paraphrase: In the Civil War, Heinrich stood on the side of the black population. He told his sons: we have come to a free country and must defend its freedom. Thereupon his two eldest sons volunteered.

“The nine years intervening between the family’s arrival in Ohio and the outbreak of the Civil War were marked by some memorable experiences. One of these has come to be a matter of family tradition and should remain so. It occurred soon after his arrival. That decade before the outbreak of the Civil War saw thousands of Negro slaves escape to a life of freedom in Canada. Ohio saw more of these escaping Negroes than any other state.”⁴⁵

Picture 2:

Annotation of Roland Wehrmann of a letter from
Gustav Bohn to Carl Bohn, 19. June 1862

Gustav Bohn von Mt. Jackson am 19.10.1862
(Teilnehmer am amerik. Freiheitskampf)
an seinen Bruder Carl Bohn, ebenfalls in USA
Er gibt einen umfangreichen interessanten Bericht
von seinem Erleben im Krieg

Der Auswanderer Johann Heinrich Karl Bohn ist der
Vater von Gustav Bohn (s.o.)
Heinrich Bohn hatte 1848 von Remptendorf aus aktiv
an der an der Bürgerlichen Revolution teilgenommen.
Er überbrachte die Forderungen der Untergebenen
an den Fürst in Burgk. Jahre danach litt er deshalb
unter Repressalien durch den Fürsten.
Heinrich Bohn entschloß sich 1852 mit seiner Familie
(Frau und 6 kleine Kinder) nach USA auszuwandern-
In Amerika fühlte er sich in einem freien Land ohne
Frohnarbeit usw.

Als dann aber in USA die Sklavenunterdrückung immer
schlimmer wurde und es schließlich zum Bürgerkrieg
kam, stand Heinrich auf Seiten der Schwarzen Bevöl-
kerung. Er sagte zu seinen Söhnen: Wir sind hierher
in ein freies Land gegangen und müssen jetzt die
Freiheit mit verdeitigen-
Daraufhin meldeten sich seine beiden ältesten Söhne
Gustav und Carl freiwillig als Kämpfer.

Both sons recall their father’s involvement in the struggle against slavery and the American Civil War with reference to two events: (1) the family conference that was invoked when the Civil War broke out to discuss the family’s contribution to the Union Army and (2) the story of the runaway slave that was rescued by their father. William remembers:

“Father often told the story of the family conference about enlistment. The family had been in this country nine years when these things happened. Father used to say that when Lincoln sent out his first call for volunteers he (father) called

⁴⁵ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, pp. 192-200, here p. 197.

the two boys to him and said to them: ‘We crossed the ocean and came to this land in order to find freedom, not a slave country. I am a little old for soldiering, but if you don’t feel like enlisting, I will go. One of us must go to help in the fight against slavery.’ Charles immediately volunteered and Chris went soon afterward.”⁴⁶

Frank reconstructs the story about the family conference in the following way:

“When President Lincoln’s first call for volunteers was heard in the Ohio farmhouse, my Father at once conferred with his two eldest sons. ‘One of us must volunteer,’ he said to them. ‘Though I am rather old for service in the ranks (his age was forty-five) I am willing to go. In that case you must remain at home and work the farm to provide a livelihood for the family.’ Christopher replied that he would enlist at once. He joined the 6th Ohio Cavalry. Charles enlisted in the 107th Ohio Infantry. Both of them served for three years in the Army of the Potomac.”⁴⁷

In addition to William, Frank contextualizes the family decision to fight in the Civil War for one by pointing out that “the history of the family during the Civil War shows nothing extraordinary” and secondly by again drawing a strong historical connection between the involvement in the fight against slavery and the decision to emigrate, coined in this account as a flight and escape from the tyranny of Europe.

“At least a half-million immigrant lads served in the forces defending the Union. Of these nearly two hundred thousand were Germans and one hundred forty-five thousand were Irish. Both the Germans and the Irish had fled from tyranny in Europe to find freedom in America. How quickly they were invited to bear their part in the defense of liberty on the battlefields in America. It may be said of both groups that they served with honor for themselves.”⁴⁸

Furthermore Frank recalls the fact that his father profited from the Civil War economically. While the two eldest sons fought in the Army of the Potomac our immigrant earned a lot of money allowing him to build a large and obviously very elegant house:

“Father, remaining at home with the younger children, found the four years of the War, with prices constantly rising, a time of extraordinary prosperity. Directly

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 198.

⁴⁸ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, pp. 192-200, here p. 198.

after the War he built a farmhouse that was large and well constructed. Now, more than a century afterwards, it is used as a clubhouse by a Cleveland organization.”⁴⁹

Whereas the memories of Heinrich’s role in the 1848 revolution are clear and unequivocal in their political message, the memories of the political attitude towards the question of slavery are more ambiguous. Not only Frank’s rather passing reference to the economic gains his father made during the Civil War reflects a certain lack of confidence with regard to his father’s abolitionist position. But also and even more so William’s comments on the story about his father’s contribution to the rescue of a runaway slave point at inconsistencies in the collective life story of the Bohn family. In Frank’s memory the story of the runaway slave unfolded the following way:

“Reference has been made to the fact that a fine team of horses was soon added to the farm equipment. Driving that team to Cleveland one day, Father heard a shout for help. Turning in his seat he saw a Negro running for dear life, closely pursued by two men in a buggy. Father pulled up his horses and the Negro leaped up to a seat beside him. Then his horses were put to a gallop. Fortunately for him his conveyance was a light spring-wagon. If the pursuers stopped, the pursued would gain distance. However, they kept close behind. So, down through those streets the race went on. Police surveillance at that time was not as strict as it later became.

Father galloped his team straight for the city dock where, he hoped, he would find a boat for Detroit. On his arrival he was again fortunate; the Detroit boat was there and all ready to take off. Moreover, the sailors and the longshoremen, quickly sensing the situation, gave ample protection to both him and the Negro. The erstwhile slave, once aboard the ship, was as safe as though already in Canada.

Father usually ended the story with this remark: ‘At that time I could not speak a sentence of English. But, I turned upon the pursuers and had a good laugh at them that they could probably understand.’ So, soon after their arrival in America was this immigrant family introduced to the crucial problem which, unsolved, led on to the Civil War. They had been plunged into the sea of troubles in which their adopted country was in such danger of being engulfed. From their day of arrival until the end of the Civil War, it must have seemed to them that they had leaped from the German frying pan into the American fire”.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *us-Meisgeier*..., Vol. I, p. 192-200, here p. 197.

William recalls the story in a more or less identical way but his narrative does not end by contextualizing the story in the broader perspective of 19th century American and European history. He instead refers to his father's rather apolitical interests and motivation that, according to his memory, triggered his father's support of the runaway slave. William claims:

“Father's story about the runaway slave was more to the glory of his pair of horses than anything else. ... In Germany in his day no farmers had horses. They did their work with oxen. ... The point to all of this is the fact that Father was interested in horses. And, of all the horses which he owned, the ones which were most precious to him were a pair called Bill and Jen. They could do everything. They could pull and they could run. They were wonderful.”⁵¹

As we have learned above, the two eldest sons, Charles and Richard, served in different regiments and Charles remained in Florida when the war ended. He became a postmaster and worked also for the freedman's bureau. In one of his letters written in 1867, he reflects about the outcome of the war on the basis of his experiences in Florida. And in this letter the extent of the ambiguous position the Bohn family might have had on the issue of slavery and abolitionism becomes obvious. Charles writes to his father that he opposes unlimited voting rights for the former slaves because he is convinced that they are not capable of understanding the political responsibility connected with voting. The same holds true with regard to their economic situation. The “Negroes” are not committed to work hard for their well-being. Instead they still rely on their former ‘Master’ to feed them.

“... ich bin gegen das unumschränkte Wahlrecht der Neger, denn dieselben sind nicht fähig es zu würdigen, es sollten eine Qualifikation unterscheiden wer wählen kann oder nicht, fast jeder nördliche Staat tut dies, da es aber einmal durchgesetzt ist, macht es wenig Aufsehen oder Störung. Ich fürchte, dass die Mehrheit gegen die Republikanische Partei stimmen wird, hauptsächlich machen die nördlichen Staatsredner großen Schaden denn sie hetzen den Schwarzen gegen den Weißen auf, schwätzen ihnen vor, dass sie alle Land bekommen (durch Konfiszierung oder einen anderen Weg). Der Schwarze macht daher keine eigene Anstrengung, und wartet auf gute Zeiten, bis er sieht das dies eben nur Politik ist, geht herum und stimmt mit seinem früheren Master der ihn füttert, denn etwas zu essen ist besser als Stimmrecht, davon kann er nicht leben ...”⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 201-205, here p. 201.

⁵² Charles Bohn to his Father, St. Augustine Florida, June 15th 1867, NABS, Z. Nr.2004/005.949, Letter Series Wehrmann/Bohn, Research Library Gotha.

REMEMBERING GERMANY AND THE IMMIGRANT

There are many more examples I could give in order to demonstrate how in the case of the Bohn family memory and history reinforced each other and contributed to the image of a politically active transatlantic family. I will close my observations with two passages written at the beginning of the 20th century, in 1907, and shortly before the end of the Cold War and German reunification, in 1986. Both passages remember visits to Germany. But whereas in 1907 Henry J. Bohn, Heinrich's eighth son (born in 1855), once again evokes the present of the past, in 1986 Duane Manson looks into the future and wonders what this future might look like.

Henry J. Bohn in 1907: "We left Frankfurt a.m. yesterday morning and went to Heidelberg where we put in two hours going up on the mountain and seeing the wonderful ruins of the wonderful Schloss (castle), built in 1400+ and ruined by the French in 1500+. All these amazing castles of the 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th centuries are wonderful, but to me their stones cry out with blood of humanity that has been crushed out and flown like a flood down in the ages in these old lands."⁵³

Duane Manson in 1986: "We spend a long evening sitting and visiting with Roland and Erna, Raimund and Stephanie. We talk about the world, politics, weather, America, work, crops, family, the church and many other topics. The Geneva Summit is in the news and Roland and Erna have been to Moscow on a trip as a special reward for production the Genossenschaft or communal farm. We talked about our trips to Russia as well. We wonder what success Reagan and Gorbachev will have in their deliberations. We talk about South Africa and Apartheid. ..."⁵⁴

Our immigrant was certainly an extraordinary man who lived in two worlds and was in the end not able to overcome the old regime in his personal behavior and the treatment of his family. As Henry remembers,

"his presence ... called aloud defiance to all; a willed, self-reliant attitude that no man could dispute. ... In recalling childhood days we involuntarily think of our father as a man of iron hand and misforgiving spirit; indomitable will and fierce passions directed mainly toward the humiliation and subjugation of his family. In

⁵³ Letter – Henry Bohn to his brother, John Bohn, Gasthaus zur Lamm, Langenburg, Württemberg, Ger., June 27, 1907, *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. II, p. 661.

⁵⁴ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. II, Remptendorf Re-visited, by Duane Manson (1986), p. 595.

short, an incarnation of ability and forever wrongly directed. We can best temper judgement with mercy ...”⁵⁵

This mercy very much characterizes Frank’s effort to come to terms with his father’s life. By revoking again the image of a political active and engaged man, Frank closes his memory of the life of his father by suggesting that Heinrich was obviously struggling his whole life with the fact that also the United States did not live up to the political promises of the American constitution and that this enlightened republic was also characterized by dishonest politicians and politically irresponsible average citizens.

“There was a happy ending to a long life of that rather extraordinary person. Down to his final three months he was healthy and joyously alive with his numerous interests. He read widely and devoted time to reflection upon the social problems of that period. Sometimes he commented critically and bitterly upon the enfeeblement of the government, the dishonesty of the politicians and the political irresponsibility of the average citizen. He wished his beloved adopted country to be what he had dreamed it was when he decided to transfer his home and his allegiance from the old land to the new.”⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

The immigrant himself by telling his life story to his children laid the foundation for what later became the collective memory and identity of an extended transatlantic family. Heinrich himself established the narrative trope of “Johann Heinrich Carl the Revolutionary” by telling the story of his role and contribution to the 1848 revolution. The children and relatives reproduced and consolidated the trope that in the process of memorialization turned into a strong discursive bonding instrument for a large transatlantic family network. This discursive bonding instrument served its purpose for more than 150 years, bridging time and space. The permanently evoked present of the past and the repetitiveness with which the events of “1848” are told in the context of the family history reinforced and consolidated the political family identity also by reconciling ambiguities and inconsistencies in the personal behavior and the political attitudes of our immigrant. The discursive power that this trope developed resulted above all from the way the emigrants’ revolutionary attitude

⁵⁵ Ibid., The original is in the possession of Joann Griffin, Spartanburg, S.C. Reprinted on p. 714.

⁵⁶ *Nus-Meisgeier...*, Vol. I, pp. 192-200, here p. 199.

was memorialized first through stories told by his two youngest sons recollecting childhood memories and secondly through the selective reading of the letters by the owner of the letter series Roland Wehrmann as part of his efforts to reconstruct the family history from the information provided in the letters. These different layers of storytelling reinforced each other thereby creating a liberal, social-democratic family tradition.

Furthermore, in the case of the two youngest sons the “Revolutionsnarrativ” served as a mechanism to distance the family from the “old” autocratic political system of the “Altes Reich” which through the personal attitude and behavior of their father was still very present in their everyday life. The autocratic German system appears as a negative foil against which William and Frank’s own social-democratic political position was legitimized as crucial for saving the “land of the free” from dishonest politicians and irresponsible governments. Roland Wehrmann’s reading and storytelling, however, can be interpreted as a coping mechanism which helped him to come to terms with his own political career and fate in the autocratic GDR regime. His resistance to become a member of the unitary socialist party, the SED, cost him his position as mayor of Remptendorf in the early 1950s but is remembered by him and his family as an expression of political sincerity and resistance of a traditional social-democratic family against the illiberal practices of the GDR. Thus the “Revolutionsnarrativ” was both part of the construction of a new social-democratic American identity during the 19th and early 20th century and an anti-fascist and anti-autocratic liberal East-German identity after World War II.