

Reliving the past: Notes on Sternberger project

By Kristen L. Reifsnyder

In 1850, a young man named Jakob Sternberger left Europe in search of a new home in a foreign land. Coming from a prominent family in Kaaden, Bohemia, he had been a student at the Charles University in Prague, where he had been involved in the revolutionary movement spreading across the German states. Fleeing political persecution after 1848, Jacob emigrated to America, journeyed across the country, and eventually settled in Wisconsin. This is where the story begins for the Sternberger family in America. The Max Kade Institute is very fortunate to have in its collection a cache of about two hundred letters of Jakob Sternberger's correspondence, including his first letter home to his family and friends.

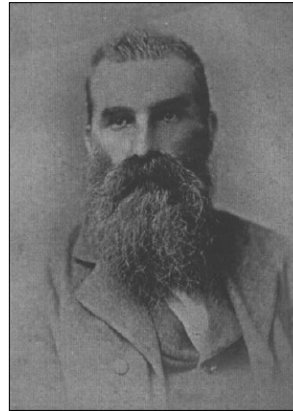
This twenty-two page letter, written in November of 1850, details Jacob's travels through Wisconsin, his eventual purchase of land, and his encounter with other inhabitants, both immigrant and indigenous. With his traveling companion Paul von Schwarzenfeld, Jakob Sternberger bought a plot of land together with a farmhouse on the Wisconsin River. The following excerpt taken from page eight of the letter describes his newly acquired property.

To the south the *Wisconsin River* marks the boundary of our property (...) From there heading north, the land in its breadth (from east to west), about 70-80 paces across, consists of an *opening* of oak trees (very good firewood and also some lumber) and further down this *opening* changes to *prairie* and marsh land.

This expanse will soon without much effort be turned into the best fields for cultivation. [p. 8]

Jakob supplemented this text with a sketch of his land showing the river, farmhouse, fields, and various foliage.

After describing his new home, Jakob Sternberger continued his letter by describing the flora and fauna of the area, mentioning in particular those plants and animals not found in Europe. He also told of encounters with certain individuals during his journey. On page fifteen, Jakob recounted an incident involving a Native American and a



Jakob Sternberger



Franziska Sternberger

bottle of whiskey.

We had the chance to see only one inhabited *Indian* hut on our journey along the *Fox River* (...) The man, a short but well built character with steely muscles (...) invited us with grinning friendliness to enter his hut, (...) While we were visiting the hut and played with the boys, our schnapps-drinking companion offered a shot to the native, who eagerly gulped down all of it (easily $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mug of whiskey) with incredible *virtuosity*. A few minutes later, the poor devil was completely drunk, he was foaming from the mouth like a rabid dog, and in his state of drunkenness moved closer and closer to me, until I started to feel uncomfortable, and I left the hut. (...)

Indeed, this anecdote of a Native American becoming intoxicated evokes the negative images many white settlers held of their indigenous neighbors. In addition to his encounter with a Native American, Jakob also related his views on typical characteristics of Americans of European descent, such as those of the Yankee.

In general, the *Yankee* differs from the more recent immigrant in positive ways. He is direct without beating around the bush, wherever he goes he appears with self-confidence, as is appropriate for a man and a Republican. (...) With straight posture, a hat on his head (he bares his head only when under oath or sitting at the table) he enters the room, waving a

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friendly *good morning* or *good day* and without further ado proceeds to sit down on the next best chair. [p. 16]

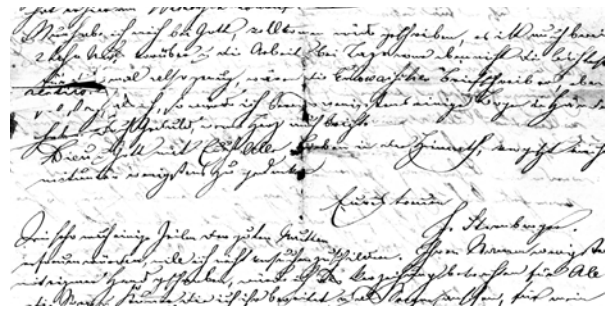
It is interesting to note that this description of a stereotypical Yankee is perhaps not unlike the images many have of Americans today.

The scores of letters in the Sternberger file that were written after Jakob's first letter home indicate that several of Jakob's friends and family eventually joined him in his new home. For example, Jakob's brother Kajetan sent his eight-year-old son Ferdinand (who was born out of wedlock) to join Jakob on the farm. Kajetan's many letters to his son and to Jakob, in which he expresses concern about the boy's well-being in Wisconsin, offer a glimpse of the extraordinary circumstances of a child emigrating without his parents. Additional correspondence addressed to Jakob came from his good friend, Anton Klenert. Klenert eventually immigrated to America to help Jakob after the untimely death of Paul von Schwarzenfeld.

The Sternberger Collection, which contains quite a few letters from several generations, provides a wealth of historically, socially, linguistically, and even politically relevant information. As a linguist, I was particularly interested in the English vocabulary items used in the letters, especially in descriptions of the countryside and people. Examples from the excerpts shown above include *opening*, *prairie*, and *yankee*. Gradually, the use of English in the collection's letters increases to the point at which a few of the twentieth-century letters are written entirely in English, even when addressed to other German speakers.

As briefly indicated by the above-mentioned letters, the Sternberger collection contains a great deal of information on German immigrants in the United States. Piecing together this historical information can, however, be a long and arduous process. Occasionally, background documentation for specific material in the letters no longer exists. For example, one text contained four recipes for medications to heal wounds. Certain ingredients for the medications are no longer used and had to be researched in greater detail. Undated correspon-

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Letter excerpt and translation

Here is the end of a letter written by Jakob Sternberger to his family in Bohemia. (Wisc., Nov. 1850)

Nun habe ich mich bei Gott, vollkommen müde geschrieben, es ist auch bereits 2 Uhr Nachts vorüber u[nd] die Arbeit bei Tage war eben nicht die leichteste. für dießmal also genug, wären die Europäischen Briefschreiber, aber so eifrig, als ich, so würde ich bereits wenigstens einige Bogen in Händen haben. doch Geduld, wenns Herz auch bricht.

Adieu u[nd] Gott mit Euch, Alle Lieben in der Heimath, vergeßt nicht mitunter wenigstens zu gedenken.

Eures treuen
J. Sternberger.

Wie sehr mich einige Zeilen der guten Mutter erfreuen würden, will ich nicht versuchen zu schildern. Ihren Namen wenigstens mit eigener Hand geschrieben, würde ich als Verzeihung betrachten für All die Sorgen Kummer, die ich ihr bereitet u[nd] als Segen ansehen, für mein künftiges Leben.



Now, by God, I completely tired myself writing, it is also past 2 a.m. and work during the day was not exactly the easiest. Enough for now. If the European correspondents were as diligent as I, I would hold at least a few letter pages in my hand by now. But patience, even when the heart is breaking.

Adieu and may God be with you, all you dear ones at home, don't forget once in a while to remember.

your devoted
J. Sternberger

How much a few lines from our good mother would delight me, I do not want to try to describe. At least her name, written in her own hand, would be a sign of forgiveness for all the sorrow and pain that I have caused her, and I would consider it a blessing for my future life.

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dence is another problem that I frequently encountered while transcribing the Sternberger letters. After having worked on the project for a few months, though, I became familiar enough with the people and places to date some undated correspondence.

As scholars continue to work on this project, further details on the Sternberger family and on German Americans in general will be revealed. Thus, the overall value of the Sternberger project has yet to be fully tapped.

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collected from a wide variety of sources, most importantly Pennsylvania German speakers themselves in interviews. Of special importance here is the fact that the data have been collected from members of all major Pennsylvania German subgroups, the sectarians (speakers of mainly Mennonite and Amish background) as well as nonsectarians (typically Lutheran or German Reformed). Also, the consultants for the project hail from far-flung regions where Pennsylvania German is spoken including New York, Illinois, and Ontario. Consider the entry for *Kalenner* “almanac”: *Sell hen die Leit geduh in de alde Zeite. Sie hen en neier Kalenner kaaft, wann sie en nei baby ghat hen. No hen sie seller weck. Wann eppes dich gwunnert hot wehich em Yaahr wu du gebore waarscht, no hoscht sell graad ghat datt im Kalenner. Des hot alli Haushalding ghat.* “That the folks did in former days. They purchased a new almanac when a baby was born. Then they put that almanac away. If you were interested in anything that happened in the year you were born, then you had everything in there in the almanac. Every household did this.”

If you’re interested in learning more about the work of the Center for Pennsylvania German Studies (they also put out an excellent newsletter), contact Prof. Beam at 406 Spring Drive, Millersville, PA 17551.

From the Treasury Vaults

**By Bob Luening,
MKI Friends Treasurer**

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