



Gottlieb Mittelberger's Journey to Pennsylvania, 1754

Gottlieb Mittelberger's Journey to Pennsylvania in the year 1750 and Return to Germany in the year 1754, Containing not only a Description of the Country According to its Present Condition ... Translated from the German by Carl Theo. Eben, member of the German Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: John Jos. McVey, 1898.

In the month of May, 1750, I departed from Enzweihingen, Vaihingen County, my native place, for Heilbronn, where an organ stood ready to be shipped and sent to Pennsylvania. With this organ, I sailed the usual way, down the Neckar and Rhine to Rotterdam in Holland. From Rotterdam I sailed with a transport of about 400 souls, Würtembergers, Durlachers, Palatines and Swiss, etc., across the North Sea to Kaupp [Cowes] in England, and after a sojourn of 9 days there, across the great ocean, until I landed in Philadelphia, the capital of Pennsylvania, Oct. 10, 1750.* From home to Rotterdam, including my sojourn there, I spent 7 weeks, caused by the many stoppages down the Rhine and in Holland, whereas this journey could otherwise be made swifter; but from Rotterdam to Philadelphia the voyage lasted 15 weeks. I was nearly 4 years in that country, engaged, as my testimonials show, as organist and schoolmaster with the German St. Augustine's Church in Providence, having besides given private instruction in music and in the German language, as the following certificate will show, at the house of Captain Diemer.

Whereas the Bearer, Mr. Mittelberger, Music Master, has resolved to return from this Province, to his native Land, which is in the Dukedom of Würternberg in High Germany; I have at his Request granted these Lines to certify that ye above nam'd Mr. Mittelberger has behaved himself honestly, diligently, and faithfully in ye Offices of Schoolmaster and Organist, during ye Space of three Years; in ye Township of New-Providence, County of Philadelphia and Province of Pennsylvania, etc. So that I and all his Employers were entirely satisfied, and would willingly have him to remain with us. But as his Call obliges him to proceed on his long Journey; we would recommend ye s'd Mr. Mittelberger to all Persons of Dignity and Character; and beg their Assistance, so that he may pass and repass untill he arrives at his Respective Abode; which may God grant, and may ye Benediction of Heaven accompany him in his Journey. Deus benedicat susceptis ejus & ferat eum ad amicos suos maxima prosperitate.

Dabam, Providentiae Philadelphiae

Comitatu Pennsylvania in America, die 25. Apr. A. D. 1754.

John Diemer, Cap. Henery Pawling, Esqr. T. Sam. Kennedy, M. D.

Henry Marsteller Matthias Gmelin.

* In the list of names of Foreigners arriving in the ship "Osgood," William Wilkie, Captain, from Rotterdam, and taking the oath of allegiance Sept. 2 1750 [O.S.], is that of Gottlieb Mittelberger.—Penna. Archives, 2nd Series, Vol. XVII., p. 324.

I have carefully inquired into the condition of the country; and what I describe here, I have partly experienced myself, and partly heard from trustworthy people who were familiar with the circumstances. I might possibly be able to relate a great deal more, if I had thought that I should ever publish something about Pennsylvania. For I always considered myself far too weak for such an undertaking. But the fatalities which I suffered on my journey to and fro (for in the country itself I fared well, because I immediately found good support and could get along well), and the evil tricks of the newlanders, which they intended to play me and my family, as I shall relate hereafter, have awakened the first impulse in me not to keep concealed what I knew. But the most important occasion for publishing this little book was the wretched and grievous condition of those who travel from Germany to this new land, and the outrageous and merciless proceeding of the Dutch man-dealers and their man-stealing emissaries; I mean the so-called newlanders, for they steal, as it were, German people under all manner of false pretenses, and deliver them into the hands of the great Dutch traffickers in human souls. These derive a large, and the newlanders a smaller profit from this traffic. This, I say, is the main cause why I publish this book. I had to bind myself even by a vow to do so. For before I left Pennsylvania, when it became known that I was about to return to Würtemberg, many Würtembergers, Durlachers and Palatines, of whom there are a great number there who repent and regret it while they live that they left their native country, implored me with tears and uplifted hands, and even in the name of God, to make this misery and sorrow known in Germany, so that not only the common people, but even princes and lords, might learn how they had fared, to prevent other innocent souls from leaving their fatherland, persuaded thereto by the newlanders, and from being sold into a like slavery. And so I vowed to the great God, and promised those people, to reveal to the people of Germany the pure truth about it, to the best of my knowledge and ability. I hope, therefore, that my beloved countrymen and all Germany will care no less to obtain accurate information as to how far it is to Pennsylvania, how long it takes to get there; what the journey costs, and besides, what hardships and dangers one has to pass through; what takes place when the people arrive well or ill in the country; how they are sold and dispersed; and finally, the nature and condition of the whole land. I relate both what is good and what is evil, and I hope, therefore, to be considered impartial and truthful by an honoring world.

When all this will have been read, I do not doubt that those who may still desire to go there, will remain in their fatherland, and care fully avoid this long and tedious journey and the fatalities connected with it; as such a journey involves with most a loss of their property, liberty and peace; with not a few even a loss of life, and I may well say, of the salvation of their souls.

From Würtemberg or Durlach to Holland and the open sea we count about 200 hours; from there across the sea to Old England as far as Kaupp, [Cowes] where the ships generally cast anchor before they start on the great sea-voyage, 150 hours; from there, till England is entirely lost sight of, above 100 hours; and then across the great ocean, that is from land to land, 1200 hours according to the statements of mariners; at length from the first land in Pennsylvania to Philadelphia over 40 hours. Which makes together a journey of 1700 hours or 1700 French miles.

This journey lasts from the beginning of May to the end of October, fully half a year, amid such hardships as no one is able to describe adequately with their misery.

The cause is because the Rhine-boats from Heilbronn to Holland have to pass by 36 custom-houses, at all of which the ships are examined, which is done when it suits the convenience of the custom-house officials. In the meantime the ships with the people are detained long, so that the passengers have to spend much money. The trip down the Rhine alone lasts therefore 4, 5 and even 6 weeks.

When the ships with the people come to Holland, they are detained there likewise or 6 weeks. Because things are very dear there, the poor people have to spend nearly all they have during that time. Not to mention many sad accidents which occur here; having seen with my own eyes how a man, as he was about to board the ship near Rotterdam, lost two children at once by drowning.

Both in Rotterdam and in Amsterdam the people are packed densely, like herrings so to say, in the large sea-vessels. One person receives a place of scarcely 2 feet width and 6 feet length in the bedstead, while many a ship carries four to six hundred souls; not to mention the innumerable implements, tools, provisions, water-barrels and other things which like wise occupy much space.

On account of contrary winds it takes the ships sometimes 2, 3 and 4 weeks to make the trip from Holland to Kaupp [Coves] in England. But when the wind is good, they get there in 8 days or even sooner. Everything is examined there and the custom-duties paid, whence it comes that the ships ride there 8, 10 to 14 days and even longer at anchor, till they have taken in their full cargoes. During that time every one is compelled to spend his last remaining money and to consume his little stock of provisions which had been reserved for the sea; so that most passengers, finding them selves on the ocean where they would be in greater need of them, must greatly suffer from hunger and want. Many suffer want already on the water between Holland and Old England.

When the ships have for the last time weighed their anchors near the city of Kaupp [Coves] in Old England, the real misery begins with the long voyage. For from there the ships, unless they have good wind, must often sail 8, 9, 10 to 12 weeks before they reach Philadelphia. But even with the best wind the voyage lasts 7 weeks.

But during the voyage there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, many kinds of sea-sickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water, so that many die miserably.

Add to this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions and lamentations, together with other trouble, as c. v. the lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches the climax when a gale rages for 2 or 3 nights and days, so that every one believes that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously.

When in such a gale the sea rages and surges, so that the waves rise often like high mountains one above the other, and often tumble over the ship, so that one fears to go down with the ship; when the ship is constantly tossed from side to side by the storm and waves, so that no one can either walk, or sit, or lie, and the closely packed people in the berths are thereby tumbled over each other, both the sick and

the well—it will be readily understood that many of these people, none of whom had been prepared for hardships, suffer so terribly from them that they do not survive it.

I myself had to pass through a severe illness at sea, and I best know how I felt at the time. These poor people often long for consolation, and I often entertained and comforted them with singing, praying and exhorting; and whenever it was possible and the winds and waves permitted it, I kept daily prayer-meetings with them on deck. Besides, I baptized five children in distress, because we had no ordained minister on board. I also held divine service every Sun day by reading sermons to the people; and when the dead were sunk in the water, I com mended them and our souls to the mercy of God.

Among the healthy, impatience sometimes grows so great and cruel that one curses the other, or himself and the day of his birth, and sometimes come near killing each other. Misery and malice join each other, so that they cheat and rob one another. One always reproaches the other with having persuaded him to undertake the journey. Frequently children cry out against their parents, husbands against their wives and wives against their husbands, brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances against each other. But most against the soul-traffickers.

Many sigh and cry: "Oh, that I were at home again, and if I had to lie in my pig-sty !" Or they say: "O God, if I only had a piece of good bread, or a good fresh drop of water." Many people whimper, sigh and cry piteously for their homes; most of them get home-sick. Many hundred people necessarily die and perish in such misery, and must be cast into the sea, which drives their relatives, or those who persuaded them to undertake the journey, to such despair that it is almost impossible to pacify and console them. In a word, the sighing and crying and lamenting on board the ship continues night and day, so as to cause the hearts even of the most hardened to bleed when they hear it.

No one can have an idea of the sufferings which women in confinement have to bear with their innocent children on board these ships. Few of this class escape with their lives; many a mother is cast into the water with her child as soon as she is dead. One day, just as we had a heavy gale, a woman in our ship, who was to give birth and could not give birth under the circumstances, was pushed through a loop-hole [port-hole] in the ship and dropped into the sea, because she was far in the rear of the ship and could not be brought forward.

Children from 1 to 7 years rarely survive the voyage; and many a time parents are compelled to see their children miserably suffer and die from hunger, thirst and sickness, and then to see them cast into the water. I witnessed such misery in no less than 32 children in our ship, all of whom were thrown into the sea. The parents grieve all the more since their children find no resting-place in the earth, but are devoured by the monsters of the sea. It is a notable fact that children, who have not yet had the measles or small-pocks, generally get them on board the ship, and mostly die of them.

Often a father is separated by death from his wife and children, or mothers from their little children, or even both parents from their children; and sometimes whole families die in quick succession; so that often many dead persons lie in the berths beside the living Ones, especially when contagious diseases have broken out on board the ship.

Many other accidents happen on board these ships, especially by falling, whereby people are often made cripples and can never be set right again. Some have also fallen into the ocean.

That most of the people get sick is not surprising, because, in addition to all other trials and hardships, warm food is served only three times a week, the rations being very poor and very little. Such meals can hardly be eaten, on account of being so unclean. The water which is served out on the ships is often very black, thick and full of worms, so that one cannot drink it without loathing, even with the greatest thirst. O surely, one would often give much money at sea for a piece of good bread, or a drink of good water, not to say a drink of good wine, if it were only to be had. I myself experienced that sufficiently, I am sorry to say. Toward the end we were compelled to eat the ship's biscuit which had been spoiled long ago; though in a whole biscuit there was scarcely a piece the size of a dollar that had not been full of red worms and spiders' nests. Great hunger and thirst force us to eat and drink everything; but many a one does so at the risk of his life. The sea-water cannot be drunk, because it is salt and bitter as gall. If this were not so, such a voyage could be made with less expense and without so many hardships.

At length, when, after a long and tedious voyage, the ships come in sight of land, so that the promontories can be seen, which the people were so eager and anxious to see, all creep from below on deck to see the land from afar, and they weep for joy, and pray and sing, thanking and praising God. The sight of the land makes the people on board the ship, especially the sick and the half dead, alive again, so that their hearts leap within them; they shout and rejoice, and are content to bear their misery in patience, in the hope that they may soon reach the land in safety. But alas!

When the ships have landed at Philadelphia after their long voyage, no one is permitted to leave them except those who pay for their passage or can give good security; the others, who cannot pay, must remain on board the ships till they are purchased, and are released from the ships by their purchasers. The sick always fare the worst, for the healthy are naturally preferred and purchased first; and so the sick and wretched must often remain on board in front of the city for 2 or 3 weeks, and frequently die, whereas many a one, if he could pay his debt and were permitted to leave the ship immediately, might recover and remain alive.

Before I describe how this traffic in human flesh is conducted, I must mention how much the journey to Philadelphia or Pennsylvania costs.

A person over 10 years pays for the passage from Rotterdam to Philadelphia 10 pounds, or 60 florins. Children from 5 to 10 years pay half price, 5 pounds or 30 florins. All children under 5 years are free. For these prices the pas are conveyed to Philadelphia, and, as long as they are at sea, provided with food, though with very poor, as has been shown above.

But this is only the sea-passage; the other costs on land, from home to Rotterdam, including the passage on the Rhine, are at least 40 forms, no matter how economically one may live. No account is here taken of extraordinary contingencies. I may safely assert that, with the greatest economy, many passengers have spent 200 forms from home to Philadelphia.

The sale of human beings in the market on board the ship is carried on thus: Every day Englishmen, Dutchmen and High-German people come from the city of Philadelphia and other places, in part from a great distance, say 20, 30, or 40 hours away, and go on board the newly arrived ship that has brought and offers for sale passengers from Europe, and select among the healthy persons such as they deem suitable for their business, and bargain with them how long they will serve for their passage-money, which most of them are still in debt for. When they have come to an agreement, it happens that adult persons bind themselves in writing to serve 3, 4, 5 or 6 years for the amount due by them, according to their age and strength. But very young people, from 10 to 15 years, must serve till they are 21 years old.

Many parents must sell and trade away their children like so many head of cattle; for if their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained; but as the parents often do not know where and to what people their children are going, it often happens that such parents and children, after leaving the ship, do not see each other again for many years, perhaps no more in all their lives.

When people arrive who cannot make themselves free, but have children under 5 years, the parents can not free themselves by them; for such children must be given to somebody without compensation to be brought up, and they must serve for their bringing up till they are 21 years old. Children from 5 to 10 years, who pay half price for their passage, viz. 30 florins, must likewise serve for it till they are 21 years of age; they cannot, therefore, redeem their parents by taking the debt of the latter upon themselves. But children above 10 years can take part of their parents' debt upon themselves.

A woman must stand for her husband if he arrives sick, and in like manner a man for his sick wife, and take the debt upon herself or himself, and thus serve 5 to 6 years not alone for his or her own debt, but also for that of the sick husband or wife. But if both are sick, such persons are sent from the ship to the sick-house [hospital] but not until it appears probable that they will find no purchasers. As soon as they are well again they must serve for their passage, or pay if they have means.

It often happens that whole families, husband, wife, and children, are separated by being sold to different purchasers, especially when they have not paid any part of their passage money.

When a husband or wife has died at sea, when the ship has made more than half of her trip, the survivor must pay or serve not only for himself or herself, but also for the deceased.

When both parents have died over half-way at sea, their children, especially when they are young and have nothing to pawn or to pay, must stand for their own and their parents' passage, and serve till they are 21 years old. When one has served his or her term, he or she is entitled to a new suit of clothes at parting and if it has been so stipulated, a man gets in addition a horse, a woman, a cow.

When a serf has an opportunity to marry in this country, he or she must pay for each year which he or she would have yet to serve, 5 to 6 pounds. But many a one who has thus purchased and paid for his bride, has subsequently repented his bargain, so that he would gladly have returned his exorbitantly dear ware, and lost the money besides.

If some one in this country runs away from his master, who has treated him harshly, he cannot get far. Good provision has been made for such cases, so that a runaway is soon recovered. He who detains or returns a deserter receives a good reward.

If such a runaway has been away from his master one day, he must serve for it as a punishment a week, for a week a month, and for a month half a year. But if the master will not keep the runaway after he has got him back, he may sell him for so many years as he would have to serve him yet.