



"IM AUSWANDERUNGSBÜRO"
(IN THE EMIGRATION OFFICE)
BY FELIX SCHLESINGER (1833-1910).
PUBLIC DOMAIN

GERMAN IMMIGRATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

BY DON HEINRICH TOLZMANN

A novel helps tell the story.

Historical novels can help tell the story of immigration to America. Scandinavian-Americans are fortunate in having two authors who have done an exemplary job on this topic: Ole Rølvaag (1876-1931) and Vilhelm Moberg (1898-1973). Rølvaag was a Norwegian-American whose novel *Giants in the Earth* deals with Norwegian pioneers in the Dakota Territory, and Moberg was a Swedish novelist who published a multi-volume series on the Swedish immigration titled *The Emigrants*.

A similar focus can be found with the German novelist Bernd Kessens (b. 1948). He was born in Lönningen, Landkreis Cloppenburg in Lower Saxony. This region contributed greatly to the German immigration to America, Cincinnati in

particular. Currently, the author lives in Damme, Landkreis Vechta, which is also in Lower Saxony. Kessens writes about the region he is from, and where he lives.

None of his works have been translated as yet, but if you understand German, you will definitely gain insight into the immigration experience by reading his novels. Foremost among them is: *Freiheit und gebratener Speck*. (Damme: Taurino-Verlag, 1997). The title translates as "Freedom and fried bacon," and makes a statement about what German immigrants were seeking in America: freedom and good food on the table for their families

This book is about an immigrant from the Osnabrück area in what is today Lower Saxony but was then part of the King-

dom of Hannover. From 1832 to 1866, more than sixty thousand Germans immigrated to America from that area. The novel describes the experiences of an 1824 immigrant headed for Cincinnati, Ohio.

Although it is a novel, many descriptions ring true regarding the socio-economic and political conditions of the time. My translations follow of a few passages that show how the author has described life in the Old and the New Worlds. The contrasts are strikingly drawn.

Old World conditions: "In Germany life was like a grave, without mobility between vocations, without change between rich and poor, between farmers and tenants. In Germany there was no prospect, or hope of improvement. Work and diligence led nowhere."

Farm life: "It was impossible for a tenant farmer to escape poverty. It took hold in a village like the claw of a crow, holding everyone in its grip, so no one could become presumptuous enough to think they deserved a better place in society than what they had now."

Life in the New World: "In America one could become what one wanted to become. No guild stood in one's way of becoming a tailor, saddle-maker, or merchant. One could worship as one wanted to, or not. Land was cheap, and even if one did not get wealthy, one was better off, and could enjoy a carefree future."

Freiheit und gebratener Speck

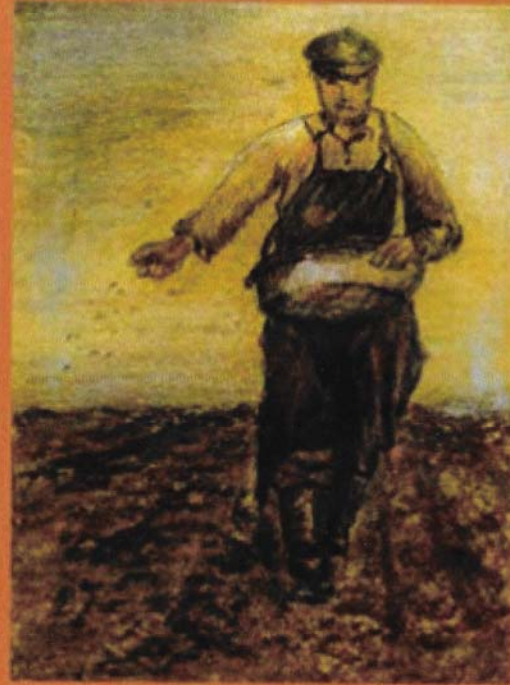
Roman über die erste
Auswanderung nach Amerika

Bernd Kessens

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BERND KESSENS Ein Stück Land

ROMAN



taurino verlag

Are all the descriptions and characterizations historically accurate? Like the novels of the Scandinavian authors, this is a work of fiction, and not a historical study with statistics and footnotes. However, the author knows the region he is writing about and the history of the conditions there, as well as in America. So, it is a literary account within a historical framework.

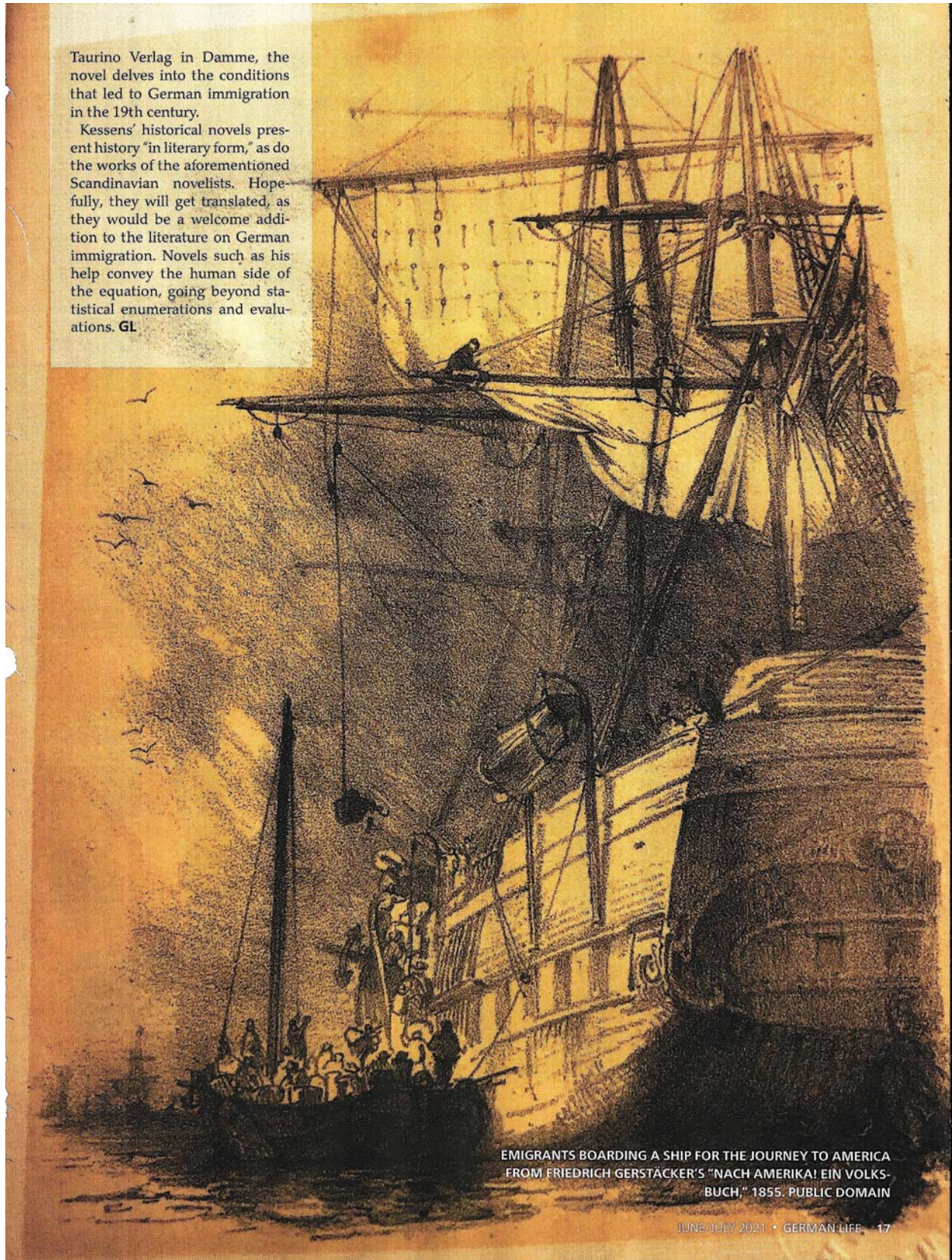
There are many kinds of novels, mysteries and adventure stories, but Kessens shows that a historical novel can be an informative as well as an enjoyable read that contributes to our understanding of the German immigration experience. He focuses on specific areas in Germany and America, following the immigration pattern known as chain-migration.

Another related novel by Kessen is: *Ein Stück Land* (A Piece of Land), which focuses on the importance of land for the German farmer. Farms in Germany are small, and are appropriately called "a piece of land," but in America they are much larger. The novel has a lengthy subtitle: "Sozialpsychologische Situation der Bauern und Heuerleute in literarischer Form," or: "Socio-psychological Situation of the Farmers and Tenant Farmers in Literary Form."

The subtitle sounds academic, but lets the reader know that the author has done his research. Published by the

Taurino Verlag in Damme, the novel delves into the conditions that led to German immigration in the 19th century.

Kessens' historical novels present history "in literary form," as do the works of the aforementioned Scandinavian novelists. Hopefully, they will get translated, as they would be a welcome addition to the literature on German immigration. Novels such as his help convey the human side of the equation, going beyond statistical enumerations and evaluations. **GL**



EMIGRANTS BOARDING A SHIP FOR THE JOURNEY TO AMERICA
FROM FRIEDRICH GERSTÄCKER'S "NACH AMERIKA! EIN VOLKS-
BUCH," 1855. PUBLIC DOMAIN