

New light on the German pork butchers in Britain (1850 – 1950)

As highlighted in a number of publications referring to British immigration during the 19th century, many German immigrants set up as pork butchers¹.

I became interested in these particular butchers, when conducting field research on craftsmen in the Hohenlohe area, a small agricultural based region in the north-eastern corner of Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

At the time, emigration details in local archives not surprisingly show that mainstream emigration was to North America. More surprising though was the discovery that significant numbers of young men and women chose England to be their land of opportunity. Even more unusual was the fact that many of these men were pork butchers by trade.

My interest in local emigration research was further energised after reading Sue Gibbons' book "German pork butchers in Britain" sent to me by a relative in Ireland. In reading the book, I noticed that nearly all mentioned family names and villages were situated in the Hohenlohe area. I realised I had come across a previously undocumented micro-historical fact, that the much-cited German pork butchers in Britain nearly all came from the Hohenlohe region.

Both, the British censuses of the time and scientific studies attest that German pork butchers primarily came from the Württemberg region². A Württembergian genealogist specified this find, when he said that pork butchers who had gone to Britain, can nearly exclusively be found in the emigration records of Hohenlohe³. This area, in fact, is covering not more than 30 miles in radius within the north-eastern part of the former kingdom.

In studying migration, one has to distinguish push-factors and pull-factors. The push-factors in the case of Hohenlohe included population growth, agricultural depression, crop failures and the traditional inheritance practice of primogeniture, excluding all but one sibling from taking over the family land⁴. Thus the lives of farm servants, as well as the offspring of smallholders and depression-suffering craftsmen became less secure.

¹ Gibbons, Sue p. 9, Hatje, Frank p. 3 f., Winder, Robert p. 130.

² Panayi, Panikos, p. 107.

³ Wollmershäuser, Friedrich R. in a phone talk on 27th April 2009.

⁴ compare Moch, Leslie Page, p. 127.

However, these push-factors were widespread and did not, therefore, provide convincing reasons why such a large selection of the local population didn't follow the mainstream and decided to go to England and settle as pork butchers there.

The specific influences must be sought in unique pull-factors including the plausible prospects of getting work and the awareness of finding success in a foreign country. Obviously the emigrants of Hohenlohe possessed excellent skills and abilities that enabled them to make up the majority of pork butchers not only over the whole of the North of England but in many other areas too.

Their pattern of emigration shows three distinct phases of labour-migration at the time.

Initially, German pork butchers settled in Britain in the early 19th century. In Sheffield the number of German pork butcher shops “grew from just one in 1817 to fourteen in 1883 and eighteen in 1914”⁵.

The first of the three groups were professional butchers. Once established they showcased their prosperity and the growing opportunities for success in the fast-expanding cities of England's north. They realised that industrialisation, and rapid population growth during this urban boom was accompanied by an urgent need for cheap and ready-made, basic food. “On all accounts therefore, a pork butcher would have a ready market, even to the extent of serving convenient, hot food after the factory closed...”⁶

By now the demand for pork butchers in Britain had increased noticeably, but the number of qualified Hohenlohe butchers who could follow the call had dwindled considerably. Many young sons of farmers however were ready and able to take up the challenge. During winter times, when farm work slowed down, these bright and determined men attended butchery courses. They were taught the art of slaughtering, butchering and of course the production of tasty German sausages⁷. In addition, when slaughtering at home, “their mothers (...) would have salted, smoked and pickled some of the meat for the winter months”⁸. Well prepared with skills and family recipes, this group of emigrants entered the market in Britain from about the middle of the 19th century. In those years chain-migration was in full swing. Letters were posted home requesting young women for household duties and maybe for

⁵ Newton, Gerald: Notes on Germans in Sheffield, unpublished document, quoted in: Moch, Leslie Page, p. 105.

⁶ Steele, George A., p. 2.

⁷ Megerle, Helmut from Söllbot in an interview on 17th November 2006 and Ziegler, Gerhard from Eckartshausen by oral information on 22nd March 2009.

⁸ Schonhut, Louis in chapter 1.

marriage as well. They, too, were well equipped with food-preparation knowledge and a rich fund of delightful, secret and family-kept recipes.

Hohenlohe butchers moved to all parts of the North of England, and to locations in Scotland and Ireland⁹ as well. They also opened countless butchers' shops in London and having originally come from a close knit community now started to settle further apart.

Nevertheless, as they often didn't speak English very well, many stayed together and married into each other's families, establishing a real and efficient migrant business network. Family and friends would regularly welcome new arrivals to Hull harbour and onwards to new places of work¹⁰.

In order to satisfy the still growing demand for cheap and basic food, the British immigrants summoned a third wave of emigrants from the 1870s onwards. Having left school shortly before, boys of 15 or 16 years old were now apprenticed to butchers in Britain and, as before, the girls served in the households of German families.

In 1897 a newspaper wrote: "The Germans created this business amongst us (...)." "In every town there are many of them, and there is now hardly a village (...) throughout the North of England that has not one or more (...)." "It is a case of making a business, where there was none of it before, of finding occupation amongst a people who never dreamt of the possibility of such an occupation. Englishmen have all along been to blame for neglecting the pig as a subject of human food (...). But the German is the pork man par excellence"¹¹.

Most of the Hohenlohe butchers were very successful in their trade, some even making fortunes. With their skills to make special products like bath chaps, jellied brawn, rissoles or trotters, "they met the demand and the market conditions were ripe for what were, in effect, the first 'take away' products (...)"¹².

The town of Künzelsau was the undisputed centre of pork butcher emigration from Hohenlohe¹³ and two returning pork butchers retiring after twenty five years abroad were able to build impressive English-style residences there. One of them, a former farm servant and orphan left

⁹ Winton, Rosemary p. 1 and Bauer, Derek p. 36.

¹⁰ compare Haffner, Christian (aka Kit), chapter 1, p. 5, Louis Schonhut reports the same for London in chapter 1.

¹¹ Newcastle Daily Journal of 22nd July 1897, quoted in Gibbons, Sue, p. 31.

¹² Gibbons, Sue p. 11.

¹³ Beschreibung des Oberamts Künzelsau. Hrsg. v.d. K. statistisch-topographischen Bureau. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1883. XI, 911 S. (Reprint: Magstadt: Horst Bissinger, 1969).

four houses, one in Germany and the remaining three in England¹⁴. The other had a very successful “wholesale and retail pork butcher” business in Bradford¹⁵.

The success of these individuals encouraged even more young people to take part in the vibrant pork butcher trade in Britain.

I will now briefly discuss how these German immigrants were accepted in their new country. By the end of the 19th century “there was no hatred, dislike or fear of the Germans (...). In those days, Germans were admired rather than disliked”¹⁶. Hohenlohe butchers had good chances of assimilating quickly as there was similarity of outlook with English people and skin colour. However, in terms of social sciences, the first Hohenlohe emigrants were only structurally integrated. They kept together in smaller communities and were closely tied by marriage. They didn’t speak the English language well and kept to their traditions, songs and stories¹⁷. It could be however that they consciously used their detailed knowledge as an element of differentiation and by keeping their German names linked them to the forefront of this thriving business. The German sausage had by now achieved an outstanding reputation for taste and quality and its German origin would have been richly promoted as a trademark of distinction.

These emigrants recognised however that greater integration into the community at large was necessary. After all, the British were their customers and an enterprising businessman would seek to join a sports club, music club, or become active in the local church¹⁸. In two cases referred to in the Meat Trades’ Journal, Mr. Schumm is described as the “energetic President of the Middlesbrough Association”¹⁹ and Mr. Frederick Schuch who was “a member of the Committee of the Incorporated Society of London Meat Trades”²⁰.

After the outbreak of World War I and especially following the sinking of the Lusitania, the situation of the Hohenlohe pork butchers radically changed for the worse. Intolerance gripped the country in those years, and many became victims of widespread riots. Their premises were attacked causing extensive damage and the destruction not only affected property and goods, but coexistence too. Non-naturalised immigrants were sent to internment camps and after experiencing such treatment,

¹⁴ Testament of George Michael Pfeiffer, City Archive Schwäbisch Hall, 18/7133.

¹⁵ Müller, Ingrid, p. 15, referring to the villa of George Schüßler.

¹⁶ Schonhut, Louis in chapter 1.

¹⁷ Winton, Rosemary p. 2, p. 5.

¹⁸ Schonhut, Louis in chapter 1.

¹⁹ Meat Trades’ Journal of 30th April 1914, quoted in Sue Gibbons, p. 37.

²⁰ Meat Trades’ Journal of 28th August 1913, quoted in Sue Gibbons, p. 35.

many returned home. Others on the other hand, anglicised or changed their names completely to avoid further stigmatisation.

The Second World War unsurprisingly reawakened old animosities against Germans and reintroduction of internment added to the downfall of this once thriving business, dominated by the Hohenlohe butchers. The pork butcher business never recovered and the rich but rather short history of Hohenlohe butchers in Britain was diminished forever.

On a more positive note, I will inform you of how an ambitious and determined Hohenlohe butcher could make even bad times seem good. Georg Friedrich Ziegler came to England in 1899 with only a few shillings. He prospered well and did not allow war times to affect his family or business. "Business grew and they branched out and opened new shops." (...) "They gave to charity and helped the poor, they gave soup and bread to the hungry out of work in 1926 ..." ²¹. In 1928, George Frederick Ziegler owned five shops and founded the firm "Farm Stores Ltd." In 1965 he was lauded "as one of Wakefield's most successful businessmen" ²². By then he was senior chairman of "Associated Dairies & Farm Stores Ltd.", a firm that became one of the predecessors of today's ASDA supermarket chain. George Frederick Ziegler was an outstanding example of the energetic, vigorous but always humble and generous Hohenlohe immigrant.

Conclusions:

Emigration from Germany to Britain and Ireland took place throughout the 19th century. At first, numbers were small, but grew steadily and reached their peak during the last two decades. As a result of the industrial revolution England was regarded as a land of opportunity. Many young, ambitious men and women took the chance and went into the pork butcher business. We have learned that most of those came from Hohenlohe, a small area in Württemberg in Germany. These people's skills and qualifications came to the fore not only in slaughtering but in making delicate sausages and other delicious specialities. With their cost effective and tasty food products, they met the basic needs of the industrial society. Many of them prospered, with some even holding office as leading members of pork butchers' associations. Because of their success they formed a close web of transnational dimension. With the help of intensive inter-family connections, they provided interactive feed-back loops ²³. In that way chain migration led into the establishment of a strong business migration network. The chance of getting quickly

²¹ Jones, L.G., p. 11.

²² Wakefield Express, Saturday, July 3rd, 1965.

²³ Andrews, John R. in letters to George A. Steele in 1999

assimilated was greatly damaged by two wars between the two countries. A decline of the German pork butcher business followed. The descendants of the immigrants soon went into other professions. They changed the bloody trade for cleaner occupations. Only a few, like the Haffners in Burnley or the Herterichs in Ireland kept to the business and today there is not much left of the once famous and praised German sausage specialities.

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