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Johann Grob

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I.

A LETTER OF JOHANN GROB OF ST. IMIER

TO HIS PARENTS, WRITTEN IN

JERSEY CITY ON JUNE 10, 1866

Ms. Elisabeth Fowler of Oak Park, Illinois, found Johann Grob's letter among her family papers. "I have never heard how we got the copy over here," she wrote, "but we did have a cousin (in my father's generation or maybe a bit older) who used to go back and forth to Switzerland." Although it is not known who has translated the document nor where the original might be, the letter sounds authentic and reports valuable details about Grob's ocean crossing and his first weeks in the United States.

Dear Parents:

It is now nine weeks since I left St. Imier (Switzerland) and it is just three days that I have found work in New York with a book-binder, a Jew. Today I am at Abraham's and have a good chance to write. I will tell you a little in detail about our completed voyage, as you asked me to, and how I find it here.

Our trip until Le Havre (France) I have described to you from there. We had three days of rest until we went on board the two-masted ship from which I wrote you. Exactly forty days passed from the day on which we boarded the ship to the day of our landing in New York. Although it was rather long we can speak of a happily survived passage. We never had any storms and no contagious diseases on the ship, only a great deal of contrary winds, which caused the slow passage. During the first fourteen days there was a great deal of seasickness, mostly the females suffered. Very few escaped being seasick. There were families when all were lying sick and none could help the other, and some who could not stand the sea life, from the first until the last day on account of such weak constitutions. I

myself noticed only the least of any seasickness. I was always well, excepting that for a few days I had a swollen head on account of a toothache, which I had from the first day when I left St. Imier for Basel (Switzerland), because late at night I lost my way and slept in a wagon. Many ships have come in lately that came from North Germany by way of Liverpool, whose passengers got the cholera. Many died on the way and the sick ones now must stay outside the harbor until they are well again. On our sailing ship were 230 emigrants and many thousands more are also coming over. We were well cared for with food.

In Le Havre everyone supplied themselves with a ham, rice, flour, sugar, coffee, beans, salt, butter, poncho, and then our straw mattress, woolen blanket, a dish with fork and spoon, water can, bread pan and cooking pot. Whoever had no room for his provisions had to buy himself a chest in Le Havre for 6½ francs, but most of those broke during the trip. On the ship they issued every eight days potatoes and zweibach, the latter I liked real well instead of bread. It is unsalted in four cornered tablets four inches square and half inch thick and very hard. When they are soaked in salt water and then fried with pork it was real good. Our butter which we had secured was very bad. We were told it was horse fat. It was very strongly salted. The butter we have here is very strongly salted too, but it is better.

The cooking -- that was the greatest problem we had on the ship. The kitchen was so small. There were always quarrels and altercations. Everyone wanted to be first. The kitchen or the cooking hearth was an iron grate on which hard coals were poured and over this was an iron hook on which one hung the pots with an iron wire. Many had already in the first few days no more dishes to cook with. If there was not enough water in the pots then they would come apart, because right around the middle they were soldered, or if the wind was strong and the ship rolled, then the kettles swung against each other. It was the same way with the water cans. Very few lasted until the trip was over. In general the sea trip is an uncomfortable time,

particularly for men that have a family with them. The best thing to take along on the ocean is something to drink. In Havre I bought myself two bottles of rum. They went good. The first few days I did not eat much, but once in a while I would take a drink. That is the best remedy against seasickness. It would be best to lay in a supply of food and to leave room in your trunks for it. Then it would not be necessary to spend money for it in Havre, and you would have a good box with a good lock on it, because nothing is safe on the ship that is not locked up. On Saturday we arrived in the harbor of New York and stayed there until Monday evening. I gave my woolen blanket and straw sack to my bed fellow for which I took his remaining rice and coffee. There were about two pounds of each left. We had made coffee only about three times, for it was very seldom we had warm coffee on the ship, and our coffee cans were ruined the first day.

In New York all the emigrants were unloaded in Castle Garden, where they had free sleeping quarters if they wanted them, but no beds, only on benches or on the floor. On the next day I looked up Abraham. One rides for 5¢ across on the steamboat. Abraham could not meet me because I had not written him the name of the ship from Basel. Castle Garden is the round building in the foreground which you can see on the picture. Jersey City lies on the left side. I have worked the last three days in New York. Board and lodging is furnished by the boss with \$2.00 wages per week. Laundry is included. That is not very much for here but one must be satisfied with that at the beginning. The work here is done in a different manner from that at home and as soon as I have worked myself in a little I can ask for more; otherwise, I am satisfied. The hours are from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. After 6:00 o'clock we go for a walk. I find the life more pleasant in New York than in Paris. In the mornings I have black coffee with boiled eggs, bread and butter; at noon, meat, salad, bread. In the evening, tea, eggs like in the morning, and at night beer, bread and cheese. Abraham is in good health. Dorothea and the boys too. They send you many greetings, also George and Joseph and the sisters. I will give you the address of Abraham so you can write to him.