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Off To Carolina- No News From There

Konrad Basler

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Off To Carolina—No News From There

THE INCENTIVE

“In January 1743 the whole family emigrated to Carolina. Thereafter no more news came to Dorlikon.” With this footnote the entries to Rudolf Eprecht’s line in the Epprecht family chronicle end.¹ It touched me when, three decades ago, I received Reverend Robert Epprecht’s research work on the Epprecht family as a gift. According to Reverend Epprecht’s findings, other villagers from Dorlikon had also left for Carolina, among whom a certain Conrad Basler with his family. Did they ever reach the other side of the Ocean? If so, where did they settle? And do these families still exist today?

DORLIKON—LOST IN OUR PAST

The Dorlikon emigrants have always interested me, for after all, Dorlikon—designated as Thalheim today—is my native village (see fig. 1).² Teased and derided as fools—the name Dorlikon is soundwise close to the German word ‘Tor’, fool—the people from Dorlikon changed the name of their village in 1878 to Thalheim an der Thur. It is a village representative of Zurich’s agricultural environs. Always a small and clearly defined community, its cultural history can be traced back to the Middle Ages. The lives of those Dorlikon emigrants I investigated point back to many a great-grandparent—people, that is, who left their imprints on us but with whom we are unfamiliar, unless one traces them, too.

¹ Robert Epprecht, Die Familie Epprecht 1360-1960. Zurich 1961. This is a comprehensive documentation including all the Eprechts from their origins in Wädenswil (Zurich) up to 1960.
Figure 1: A section from the ‘Dufour map’, (1850 edition; reproduced June 9, 1989, with the permission of the Swiss Federal Office of Topography). In the middle of the picture one recognizes Dorlikon (today Thalheim on the Thur); west of it Güttikhausen (which belongs to the district of Thalheim); and east of it Altikon.
Why did some of these farmers, known for their sedentary ways of life, leave their homelands? And was their bold venture successful? Like so many other communities in Europe at that time, these people must have experienced the limits of their world. There were no more woods for them to clear, no marshes to drain and for many, inheritance decided over life and death, while marriage was a matter of permissions or prohibitions. Under such circumstances one wonders why it was only some families who risked emigrating, while others preferred to stay home. This question shall later be addressed in more detail.

PREPARATIONS

In the fall of 1992 my wife and I traveled to New York, in order to visit our granddaughters. Our stay there enabled me to continue my research on the Dorlikon emigrants. I knew, however, that finding out more about them was as unlikely as finding a pin in a haystack, for these people had departed even before the emergence of the United States, when the East Coast was still under British rule. To find out more before our visit, I turned to Dr. Otto Sigg, head of Zurich’s State Archive. Dr. Sigg himself a native of Ossingen (a neighboring village of Dorlikon) in turn consulted his assistant Dr. Hans Ulrich Pfister (native of Andelfingen), who then informed me he had evidence that my ancestor Conrad Basler had arrived in Philadelphia, together with Hans Nüssli and Christoph Weidmann from Dorlikon. Moreover, according to Dr. Pfister, five years later Rudolph Epprecht and Hans Ulrich Muller also departed from their Swiss homelands, leaving, however, no signs of whether or where they landed. (Apart from providing me with these two crucial hints, Dr. Pfister, in his doctoral thesis, also drew my attention to the works of Dr. Andreas Blocher and Dr. Leo Schelbert on Swiss emigrants.) Any researcher trying for years to get hold of some important piece of information knows what this news meant to me....

REVEREND ULRICH’S NOTE

Thus inspired, I began to decipher old parish records at Zurich’s State Archive—an undertaking showing me that, between 1734 and 1743, Zurich experienced a veritable exodus. As a result, in spring 1744 Zurich’s concerned authorities asked its parishes to report to them those citizens who had departed in the past decade. Reverend Caspar Ulrich from Altikon—whose parish extended to Dorlikon—followed suit on April 15, 1744.6 (The entries concerning the above-mentioned Dorliker emigrants are displayed in figure 2.)

AN EXPERT IN CHICAGO

As a further preparatory step I turned to Professor Leo Schelbert, who currently teaches at the University of Illinois in Chicago, asking him if he would be willing to meet me during our stay on the East Coast. Fortunately, Prof. Schelbert, a specialist in migration history, has always retained a lively interest in his old home country. During Switzerland’s 700th anniversary in 1991, for example, he figured as the guest speaker at the congress for expatriate Swiss in Lucerne. To my surprise, his reply to my letter was spontaneous and cordial—indeed typically American. In simple words, he invited us to his home in Evanston, an offer my wife and I gladly accepted.

Figure 2: Between 1734 and 1743 the following people departed from the parish of Altikon:

Von Dorliken
A[nn]o 1738

[From Dorlikon] [In the year] of
1738 [age: 42 years] [37 years]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1872</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalena</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Petrus</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothea</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthias</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caspar</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1873</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalena</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
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<td>Petrus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dorothea</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthias</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caspar</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Angelica Meyer [married couple]
Kinder: [children:]
Elisabeth, aet[atis]: 14 Jahr [age: 14 years]
Barbara, 12 Jahr [12 years]
Angelica, 10 Jahr [10 years]
Verena, 7 Jahr [7 years]
Anna, 5 Jahr [5 years]
Heinrich, 3 Jahr [3 years]

2. Conrad Basler, aet[atis]: 33 Jahr, [age: 33 years]
[married couple]
Anna Baumer, [child:]

3. Christoph Weidmann, u[nd] 35 Jahr [Eheleute] [35 years; married couple]
Elsbeth Schmid, [children:]
Heinrich, aet[atis]: 11 Jahr [age: 11 years]
Ulrich, 6 Jahr [6 years]
Hans Caspar, 1/2 Jahr [½ year]

A[nn]o 1743 [In the year of 1743]

4. Hans Ulrich Muller, aet[atis]: 41 Jahr [age: 41 years]
[married couple]
Verena Bölssterli, [children:]
Dorothea, aet[atis]: 11 Jahr [age: 11 years]
Anna, 4 Jahr [4 years]
Hans Ulrich, 1 Jahr [1 year]

5. Rudolph Epprecht, aet[atis]: 44 Jahr [age: 44 years]
[married couple]
Anna Geügis, [children:]
Jacob, aet[atis]: 21 Jahr [21 years]
Rudolph, 18 Jahr [18 years]
Anna, 14 Jahr [14 years]
Margreth, 12 Jahr [12 years]
Elisabeth, 8 Jahr [8 years]
Verena, 5 Jahr [5 years]
Figure 3: This heraldic church window from Thalheim displays the coats of arms of all the local council members of 1685. Among the families represented are four whose descendants later emigrated: ‘Hans Basler, mason, juror’ (left, second bottom row); ‘Jacob Epprächt, member of the church council’ (right, third bottom row); ‘Josias Weidmann, juror’ (right, second bottom row); and the two prefects of Dorlikon and ‘Guetigkhusen’ - ‘Klyhans Müller’ and ‘Felix Müller’ (right, first bottom row). Gütikhausen - today forming part of the Thalheim community - was then also included in the parish of Dorlikon. (photograph: A. Waldis, Seuzach)
Extending our trip to the Midwest, my wife and I felt we should also look for traces of Julia Huber, another Dorlikon ancestor. Since such traces were most likely to be found Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we decided to contact one of Julia’s granddaughters, who still lives there. The Hubers had once been an influential and respected family, and their descendants sponsored many a young person in Thalheim, among whom my mother. Julia’s father, an esteemed civil servant, stood out particularly through his wise guidance of Dorlikon and its surrounding district. It was due to his influence, for example, that Dorlikon’s derided name was altered to Thalheim.

Julia, born 1857, was the eldest child in a family of fourteen. When her mother died after her sixth child, the gifted Julia helped out in her stepmother’s household. At seventeen, however, she was sent to French Switzerland to learn French; and at eighteen she had to take care of her own life—and that of her baby. I had come to know and sympathize with Julia’s fate when I was a youngster, for then, people would still—though cautiously—talk about her, her illegitimate child, and his father, said to have disappeared. In Spurensicherungen, contrasting today’s civil law and social security regulations with the conditions in Dorlikon at that time, I realized how pitiable a woman’s lot must have been. Moreover, I recognized why Julia’s father, concerned about a fresh beginning for his eighteen-year old, sent her across the ocean, while taking care of her little Julius. Poor Julia, what happened to you there?

7 In Spurensicherung in der Zürcher Weinlandgemeinde Thalheim. Ein persönlich gefärbter Bericht. Stäfa 1991. I have dedicated a separate chapter to the Hubers.