

## *Our Daily Bread*

The church bell rang just once that cold, rainy morning. The villagers knew why it rang. They had been expecting it; there was no need to summon them with a second pealing. Silently, they congregated at the church for the procession to the graveyard. Johann Adam Mann was burying his youngest daughter. In the space of a month, he had already buried his wife and three other children. As he fell into step behind the pastor, beside him walked his last surviving child, ten-year-old Johann Jacob. Four men led the procession carrying the body, which lay on a bier covered with a white cloth. There was no coffin, just as there was no funeral sermon, because Johann Adam lacked the money to pay for them. Nevertheless, despite his poverty, the community considered Johann Adam an honorable man, and his daughter would receive a respectful Christian burial with all the citizens in town in sympathetic attendance.<sup>1</sup>

While the villagers walked, the schoolmaster led his students in a slow and mournful hymn: *"Mitten wir im Leben sind, Mit dem Tod umpfangen"*: "Though in midst of life we be, Snares of death surround us."<sup>2</sup> Johann Adam Mann focused on the distant fields, jaw clenched, as he clasped the shoulder of Johann Jacob. Arriving at the graveyard, the bearers gently lowered the body into a tiny grave next to her mother and the pastor began to pray. Jacob flinched as the first clumps of clay struck his sister's shroud-covered body.

The pastor asked the villagers to recite with him the Lord's Prayer, *Vater Unser*: *"Unser tägliches Brot gib uns heute,"* they prayed. "Give us this day our daily bread." But for Johann Adam's family the prayer went unanswered. It was late December 1816, remembered in history books as the Year Without a Summer, when cold and damp destroyed crops and people rioted for food across Europe. In Hochfeld, the church bells rang for many other villagers that season. Following a string of bad or failed harvest years, the poor yield of 1816 drove the people to slaughter their cattle because there was no fodder to feed them. Swarms of mice, driven by hunger and flooded fields, overran the village. Compounding the series of poor harvests, troops from the recently ended Napoleonic wars had, over the last several years, been confiscating what little food the villagers had been able to grow. To pay for the wars, the villagers were forced to give more than half of their harvests in taxes, in addition to their usual burden of rents, tithes, and fees. The meager supply and increased demand for food had resulted in a doubling of prices

since 1810. By the end of the winter, Johann Adam's neighbors from Hochfeld and nearby villages streamed out of the area, bound for what they hoped would be better lives in America. Officials in Württemberg issued 3,000 passes that winter to emigrants, while the Grand Duchy of Baden—Johann Adam's country since 1806—issued passes for 18,000, or 2 percent of the duchy's population.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1. Villagers return from a funeral.**

Although his land holdings were small, Johann Adam had thus far been able to support his family, supplementing his income by growing vegetables in the family plot and hiring himself out as a day laborer. That year, however, his crops failed, and he could not earn enough to feed his family and warm his hearth. When influenza struck the village, his vulnerable family was among the many to be struck down.<sup>4</sup>

A grim dichotomy existed in the villages of early modern Germany. For those who owned, rented, or controlled enough land to feed their families, or who were prosperous merchants, innkeepers, or millers, life could be pleasant. But for those who had no land, or not enough, life was an uncertain, even desperate struggle for survival.<sup>5</sup> "Give us this day our daily bread" signified far more than simple words in a prayer; they were a fearful entreaty, a harsh reminder that the majority of villagers were just one bad

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harvest or one major illness away from potential malnutrition, homelessness, or even death.

Johann Adam Mann is an imagined character. Although he did not actually exist, the circumstances of his fictional life and of his family's deaths played out in villages throughout the kingdoms, duchies, and independent principalities that comprised the territory now known as Germany. In many cases in this book, the experiences of Johann Adam and his fellow villagers were drawn directly from historical individuals, as noted in the book's endnotes. In all cases, the history and sociology of their lives are as historically accurate as existing sources permit. Johann Adam's given name and surname, for example, were typical of his location and time period; Mann is among the 300 most common surnames in Germany today, and it appears more frequently in his geographic locale of present-day Baden-Württemberg than in any other part of the country.<sup>6</sup>

This book presents the lives of Johann Adam's family, his neighbors, and their ancestors in a hypothetical village called Hochfeld am Neckar. The purpose for the invention of the fictitious villagers is to bring to life the historical and cultural elements of German village life, as opposed to the often dry and lifeless factual presentations that characterize many academic works. What was family life like? What about courtship? How important was religion to the villagers? How did their village function? What were their occupations? What about their schooling, their social life, their customs and superstitions? The villagers of Hochfeld illustrate these most important aspects of life in the German lands in a period that began with the Reformation in the early sixteenth century and extended until the great waves of German migration to North America in the mid-nineteenth century. The book's time frame is roughly equivalent to the European early modern period, which is defined by some historians as running from the late fifteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The book's first chapters cover three topics that form the essential scaffolding for the lives of the villagers: peasant status, religion, and war. It is impossible to understand why these people thought, acted, and reacted in the ways they did, and why their culture and worldview acquired such unique features, if one does not have a general understanding of the impact of the important issues of the times. Some of these issues were the relationship of the people with their lords; the repercussions of the Reformation on Germany; and the scars left by war, particularly the Thirty Years' War. Once these foundations are established, the book moves on to the daily aspects of villagers' lives: their families, livelihoods, inheritance customs, self-governance practices, and village institutions such as the school. Finally, the book closes with an examination of the reasons that millions of Germans left their homeland for North America; what they

experienced on their journeys; and how they created new lives for themselves in a German diaspora.

A query on the word “Genealogy” on the Google search engine in 2010 resulted in almost 51 million hits; while accurate statistics about the popularity of genealogy are impossible to find, the topic is generally rated among the top five most popular subjects on the World Wide Web. In the U.S. census of 2000, almost 43 million Americans, or 1 in 6 individuals, identified themselves as descendants of German immigrants—the largest ethnic affiliation in the nation. The total dwarfed all other ethnic groups, including African-American (24.9 million), English (24.5 million), Mexican (18.4 million), and even the Irish (30.5 million). In Canada, over 3.5 million persons—more than 10 percent of the total Canadian population as of 2005—claim German descent.<sup>8</sup> This book was written primarily for the tens of thousands of North American genealogists and the millions of German descendants in the United States and Canada who are curious about the lives of their German ancestors.

I am one of those descendants, as is my husband. After I identified several of the home villages for our German ancestors, which were scattered over the breadth of the German territories, and after I had traced our family trees as far back as the records permitted, I said . . . “So what? Now I know where they came from, and what their names were. But how did they live?” I headed to the library to check out books on everyday German life, but I found not one. I found dozens of books on German history, religion, economy, anthropology, and law, most of which were written for the academic audience, but I found nothing that told me how my ancestors lived their daily lives. So I decided to write this book.

This is not an academic work; however, it *is* densely footnoted to allow interested readers to seek out additional information on many topics relating to the lives of these people: war, religion, agriculture, economics, anthropology, sociology as related to the book’s time period. Whenever possible, I chose to cite English-language sources so that those of you who are not fluent in German could nevertheless learn more about the topics that most interest you. I also made liberal use of German terms, since as a genealogist, I found I often ran into these terms when I was researching my own family (you’ll find a glossary at the back of the book). I would have liked to have known what they meant, so I thought you might, as well.

For the most part, the Germans in the time period covered by this book, both the villagers and their noble lords, lived out their lives in small, rural, and isolated worlds. By the time that Johann Adam’s wife and children died in 1816, his imagined village of Hochfeld am Neckar had been incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Baden in Southwest Germany. However, when our fictitious protagonist was born in 1784, Hochfeld was part of a tiny independent entity owned by the family of an imperial knight, a member of the minor nobility of the German Holy Roman Empire, or in German, *das*



relevant to almost all of Germany. In addition, the book explains several significant differences between southwestern Germany and the other German lands—for example inheritance customs and peasant status—so that even if your ancestors came from another part of Germany, you will gain a greater understanding of their lives.

I am confident that *Our Daily Bread* is true to the general experience of early modern villages from southwest Germany, and that it will help German genealogists to better understand the lives of their ancestors. Nevertheless, I know that readers who have already studied aspects of village daily life may well question some of the facts cited in this book because they are not consistent with the readers' own research. It is critical that you keep in mind how much the specifics of life in early modern Germany varied from region to region and even from village to village. Terminology, customs, and institutions were unique to each small area. Therefore, all I could do was to document the sources for each fact, custom, and scene pictured in this book. I encourage readers with questions to study the relevant endnotes and to use the citations listed there as a starting point for additional research.

I hope you find this book useful and informative.

## Notes to Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> See Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, 96-100, concerning burial practices in early modern Germany.

<sup>2</sup> The first through third verses of this hymn were written by Martin Luther in 1524.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, *Germany and the Emigration, 1816-1885*, 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Sieglerschmidt, in "Social and Economic Landscapes," 6-7 and 30, notes that most early modern Germans spent the majority of their lives undernourished, which increased their susceptibility to illness and infection. Their vulnerability was increased by their damp houses, inadequate fuel supplies, and quality or quantity of clothing. The result was an extremely short life expectancy.

<sup>6</sup> A handy website for genealogists is Geogen Surname Mapping, which allows a user to query on a German surname to determine its frequency of usage, its relative distribution across the country, and its percentage distribution among the German states. See <http://christoph.stoepel.net/geogen/en/Default.aspx>. (web site address current as of 2010)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Benecke, *Society and Politics in Germany*, 4, and Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Brittingham and de la Cruz, *Ancestry: 2000: Census 2000 Brief*, 2-4. Statistics on Canadians come from the Canadian Embassy in Germany and Statistics Canada.

<sup>9</sup> Robisheaux, *Rural Society and the Search for Order in Early Modern Germany*, 4. Duggan, *Bishop and Chapter: The Governance of the Bishopric of Speyer to 1552*, 3. Blickle, "The Economic, Social and Political Background of the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants of 1525," 72. Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany*, 8.