

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1505

My Immigrant Family

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In the 1800s the various German States experienced great social turbulence as they transitioned into a unified Germany. Convinced that peace would never be restored, many citizens chose to leave their homeland¹.

During the late 1840s, a group of landholders in the Hunter Valley petitioned the British Government to grant assisted passage for a selection of European skilled workers. In particular the local wine industry was in need of the services of vintners, and reluctantly Britain finally agreed to allow suitable married migrants with their families to be recruited, providing that the skills involved could not be supplied by British citizens².

In 1848, Karl Ludwig (William) Kirchner³, Immigration Agent for the NSW Government, travelled to Frankfurt, Germany from where in 1848-49 he contracted a large number of Germans vineyard workers with their families to accept assisted passage to the Colony, travelling on three vessels, the *Beulah*, *Parland* and *Harmony*⁴. Passengers on board the third vessel included a small contingent of vintners and families, together with an unlisted group of 44 German citizens who paid their own passage. This last group included my great-grandfather, **George Peter Engel**, a carpenter by trade, whose arrival on the *Harmony* in September 1849 was later recorded by him on his application for naturalisation in December 1858⁵.

George Peter (1820-1900) was a member of the family of Johann Ludwig Engel (1783-1851), a spice merchant, his wife Anna Clara Kissner (Kißner) (1792-1861) and their eight children, the eldest of whom died as an infant. The family resided in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany where Johann Ludwig had established his business.

About six months after George Peter's arrival, three of his siblings, with others, sailed on the *Midlothian* from the Port of London in March 1850, terminating in Port Adelaide in June 1850⁶. The group then continued their journey on to Sydney at a later date. The party included George Peter's brother, Johann Alexander, his two sisters, Anna Catherina and Dorothea Catharin, the husband of Anna, William Richardson Miller, and a young lady, Josephine Louise Diehl, who hailed from Strasbourg, France. The circumstances which prompted this large family migration are not recorded. Possibly the death of their father, less than a year after their departure, may have been a contributing economic factor.

The new arrivals moved quickly into local life. Johann Alexander set up a printing business, Dorothea opened a Fancy Goods store, with Josephine as an assistant, and Anna Catherina with her husband commenced farming in the Smithfield region.

In January 1852, George Peter married Josephine Diehl in the German Evangelical Church, Goulburn Street, Sydney. The ceremony was conducted in German by Matthias Goethe. The couple lived in a house in The Rocks end of Harrington Street, Sydney, where their first son was born in March 1853. George was working as a carpenter for the Colony, building bridges and all went well until all his assistants abandoned him during the 1852 gold rush. Unable to

continue the heavy work alone, not many years passed before their funds were exhausted and he was declared bankrupt, the sequestration order being issued on 11 September 1855^{7 8}.

Faced with this dilemma, the family decided to leave Sydney and settle on a small land holding located on the east bank of the Myall River, Port Stephens, NSW, on land which had been released from the original land grant of the Australian Agricultural Company (A.A. Co.). In the absence of any land transport, it is presumed that the family chose this isolated locality because it was accessible via the A.A. Co. ships which plied regularly between Sydney, Newcastle and the Port Stephens Estate. George Peter built a family home, *The Fens*, and attempted to be self-sufficient with locally grown produce in very poor sandy soil, totally unsuited to such a venture.

In the ensuing years, the family increased to five boys, all of whom initially lived on the property in accommodation built by their father. To provide an income the family turned to raising cattle which they processed in their own abattoir on the banks of the Myall River. From there they delivered meat to the inhabitants of the Myall Lakes, Myall River and Port Stephens areas using rowing boats as the only means of transport over long distances.

As the boys married and began their own families, the income proved to be too small to support them all. Four of the boys relocated to other areas where they took up a variety of different occupations. Only one son remained at the parents' home until he moved his family to nearby Tea Gardens where he operated a very successful butchery and later a Universal General Store. The core service of this business consisted of a series of 'floating shops' or storeboats which regularly plied the waterways of the Myall and Port Stephens regions providing a regular, twice-weekly lifeline for the widely scattered inhabitants.

George Peter and Josephine Louise continued to live at *The Fens* after their family departed. Josephine died in October 1883 and was buried in the small cemetery located mid-way between Carrington and Tahlee House on A.A. Co. land. George Peter remained alone at the family home until ill-health forced him to move in with one of his sons in Hawks Nest. He died at the age of 80 years in February 1900 and was buried alongside his wife's remains⁹.

Johann Alexander Engel (1818-1883) settled in Sydney where in 1854 he married Maria Catharina Wingender (1831?-1902) in St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney. Maria migrated from Fachingen, Nassau, Germany in August 1852¹⁰.

Johann (John) established a lithographic printing and publishing office called Gutenberg Printing Office at 109 York Street, Sydney (later 103 York St). His lithographic work was highly acclaimed in the community. John, in collaboration with his partner, commenced publishing a weekly German newspaper, *Die Sydney Deutsche Presse* in July 1856. By 1875 he was operating three printing presses, two lithographic presses and one copperplate press, all of which were smashed to pieces when a wall of the adjacent building collapsed on his shop¹¹.

In other ways, John was very active in the community, strongly supporting the German Evangelical Church for which he published the hymn books¹². He died in Gladesville in 1883 of a stroke, following deteriorating health possibly caused by lead poisoning, ingested from the use of hot metal type.

Anna Catherina Engel married William Richardson Miller in the brief interval between the group's arrival in the Port of London and their departure from England. On arrival in Sydney, the couple settled in Smithfield where William took up farming. The family grew with the arrival of five children before they moved back to the city where William became a publican in the renamed, Parker's Family Hotel^{13 14}. Being overly generous, he was declared insolvent in February 1861 and left the hotel business to operate a boarding house at 174 Cumberland Street¹⁵. He died in June 1869 after which Anna moved in with her married daughter before she died in May 1899. One of their children was Gustave (Gus) Miller who served as the Cooma representative in the NSW Legislative Assembly for 29 years.

While bankruptcies seem to have stalked the Engel family, **Dorothea** suffered a series of misfortunes far more serious than any of her siblings. On her arrival in Sydney, she opened a fancy goods business at 22 Hunter Street which she named the *Berlin Wool and Ladies' Outfitting Establishment*, reflecting a large assortment of imported goods. At 33 years of age she married a widower, John Wenzel, who was born in Hesse Darmstadt, Germany. The marriage was conducted by Rev. Dr Lang in the Scots Presbyterian Church, following which she closed down the shop to take up married life in Enfield/Burwood^{16 17}.

The couple established a family of four daughters of whom two died as teenagers and a third died later as a small child. John was not a capable manager of his business and was soon declared bankrupt. As a result, before the fourth daughter was born, he had a mental breakdown and spent a year in a NSW Asylum before relocating to Brisbane, Queensland.

Left almost destitute, Dorothea placed her two youngest daughters, aged 4 and 6 years, in the *Institute for Destitute Children* in Randwick. In 1867 this was the site of a whooping cough epidemic which resulted in the death of 63 children, including Dorothea's youngest daughter. She quickly withdrew her remaining daughter who was to be the only member of this Wenzel family to survive¹⁸.

In Brisbane, John again established a gardening business with the same inevitable outcome. In 1876 he was employed near Townsville where he was involved in a dispute with his co-workers, one of whom he killed by stabbing. On the basis of the victim's statement John was tried for murder in 1876 and was hanged in Brisbane Gaol on 29 August 1876^{19 20 21}.

References:

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Endnotes:

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- ² Nadel, George 1953-54. Letters from German immigrants in New South Wales. Royal Australian Historical Society, *Journal & Proceedings*, Vol. 39, pp. 253-266
- ³ Kirchner, Karl Ludwig Wilhelm, Immigration Agent for Sydney.
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- ⁴ Paterson, Jenny: German Immigrant Ships to Eastern Australia - Resources and Problems: Burwood & District Family History Group's journal 'Ancestry'. Part 1: *Beulah* 1849, vol.16 no.1 Mar 2003; Part 2: *Parland* 1849, vol.16 no.2 Jul 2003.; Part 3: *Harmony* 1849 and *Balmoral* 1850, vol.16 no.3 Nov 2003. (London to Sydney).
- ⁵ Naturalisation: George Peter Engel, Native Place: Frankfort on the Main, Date of Certificate: 14 Dec 1858, Register 2, page 501, Item [4/1201], Reel 129.
- ⁶ Arrival of Johann Alexander, Anna Catharina, Dorothea Engel and Josephine Louise Diehl in London: Alien Arrivals The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) Class HO 2 Home Office: Aliens Act 1836: Certificates of Arrival of Aliens.
- ⁷ First Insolvency – George Engel, Harrington St, Sydney; Occupation Builder; Sequestration Order dated 11/09/1855. State Records Insolvency Index, Film No. 03395.
- ⁸ Second Insolvency – George Engel, Occupation Carpenter; Sequestration Order dated 31/10/1863.; Certificate Issued on 05/07/1864 at Raymond Terrace. NSW State Records Insolvency Index, Film No. 06353.
- ⁹ Carrington Tahlee Cemetery Headstone Transcriptions. *Maitland Family History Circle Inc.* 2002, pp.1-3.
- ¹⁰ Passenger List for Maria Catharina Wingender leaving Hamburg, Germany in 1852: Staatsarchiv Hamburg; Hamburg, Deutschland; *Hamburger Passagierlisten*; Volume: 373-7 I, VIII A 1 Band 004; Page: 175; Microfilm No: K_1702.
- ¹¹ Damage to Engel premises. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 5 August 1875
- ¹² Publication of German Church's Hymn Book: By A. L. Heyde, the current preacher of the congregation 1866 Printing and Publishing Johann Alexander Engel" - Gutenberg Printing Office, 109 York St Sydney].
- ¹³ Parker's Family Hotel Licence Issued 21 May 1858 : State Records Publican Licence No. 1413, NRS 14403 [7/1511]; Reel 1241.
- ¹⁴ William Miller Insolvency 1860: NSW State Records Insolvency 05055; *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 Feb 1861
- ¹⁵ William Richardson Miller, boarding house: *Sands Directory*, 1863 p 217.
- ¹⁶ Clearance Sale of Fancy Goods and Berlin Work, at reduced prices.-Miss ENGEL, intending to give up business, invites her friends and the public to inspect her remaining stock of most select goods in the above line. 22 Hunter-street. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW: 1842-1954), Saturday, 18 August 1860, p.3
- ¹⁷ Wenzel-Engel - At the Scots Church, by the Rev. Dr Lang, M.P., on Monday, the 13th August. *Empire (Sydney, NSW : 1850 - 1875)* Wednesday, 15 August 1860, p.1
- ¹⁸ Randwick Destitute Children's Asylum – Deaths & Burials 1853-1916. Compiled by Beverley Smith, 1995. *Cape Banks Family History Society Inc.* pp. 1-23.
- ¹⁹ Lengthy Report of Stabbing -Toowoomba. *The Queenslander*, Saturday, 18 March 1876. p.7
- ²⁰ Report on Hanging - *The Capricornian* (Rockhampton, Qld) – Saturday, 9 September 1876, p.578
- ²¹ The Case of Wenzel. To the Editor of the *Telegraph*. *The Darling Downs Gazette and General Advertiser* (Toowoomba, Qld. : 1858 – 1880), Wednesday, 23 August 1876, p.3