

# Eduard Pelz and German Emigration

HILDEGARD BINDER JOHNSON

"MY INTENTION is not to write as much as possible in order to make money but in order to tell would-be emigrants what they need most to know and to tell it as concisely as possible."<sup>1</sup> With these words Eduard Pelz began his first pamphlet on immigration to America, and he lived up to them. His writings are brief, and he never derived much profit from advertising Minnesota—his promised land.

Pelz, who was born on September 9, 1800, at Penig, Saxony, was a forty-eighter of colorful personality. He was well educated, widely traveled, good-hearted to the degree of ill-advised generosity, sharp-witted, and fearless in his literary efforts. And it was his unshakable conviction that German emigrants should go to Minnesota and Minnesota only.

As a German republican of 1848, Pelz believed that only emigration could relieve the pressure of population and the resulting misery of workers in his fatherland. As a cosmopolitan he thought it the duty of civilized man to spread culture in the world's undeveloped areas. He did not want to see German emigrants scattered uselessly as the "humus of culture" all over the globe, but wanted to direct them instead to one area. As a geographer he was convinced that, because of its climate and fertility, the northwestern part of the United States, and especially Minnesota, was the ideal location for German settlers. In campaigning for settlement in Minnesota, he did not advocate emigration, but endeavored only to spread information about suitable homes in America for those who had already decided to seek their fortunes in a new land. He appears honestly to have believed that, due to its location and natural resources, Minnesota was destined to become the greatest state in the Union, the true center of North America. Pelz devoted the last twenty years of his life to the propagation of these convictions, which were based at least in part on personal experience.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pelz, *Kompass für Auswanderer nach den Vereinigten Staaten Nordamerikas*, 1 (Cassel, 1853).

<sup>2</sup> For biographical data on Pelz, see "Vater Pelz" and Friedrich Münch, "Eduard Pelz," in *Der Deutsche Pionier* (Cincinnati), 8:213-227, 282 (August, September, 1876); Beit Valentin, *Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution*, 1:54, 343 (Berlin, 1930); and Hans Mattson, report on "Immigration" addressed to George L. Becker, in the Minnesota Governors' Archives, 1866, File 169. Pelz includes many personal references in his publications, ten of which are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as

Pelz's literary career began early. As a youth he was apprenticed to a publishing concern in Halle, where he also attended the local university as an auditor. Then after three years with a publishing house in Copenhagen, he established himself as a bookseller and publisher in Breslau—a politically active and intellectually stimulating city in Silesia. He specialized in geography and education, and maintained his own lithographic department. Eventually, the publication of a pamphlet opposing secret organizations and fraternal orders made it desirable for the young liberal to leave Silesia. Three years as the representative of a publishing firm in Petersburg, Russia, with travels through the four Scandinavian countries, followed. In 1839 Pelz was back in Silesia, where he settled on a country estate near Seifendorf in the Sudeten Mountains. There he wrote some widely read books about Petersburg and northern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

His first clash with German authorities came when he refused to send his daughter to a state-supervised public school—an audacity which led his poor rural neighbors to believe that the former antagonist of secret societies at Breslau would now be their spokesman. The oppressive services that the feudal system imposed upon peasants had in many cases been abolished on paper only, and Pelz, though not a trained lawyer, now took it upon himself to represent in court the peasants of his district against their rural overlords.

Moreover, under the pen name of Treumund Welp—a surname derived from the initials of his full name, Wilhelm Ludwig Eduard Pelz—he published two of the most stirring revolutionary pamphlets of the 1840's depicting the miserable poverty of the weavers in Silesia. When his papers were confiscated by the police in 1844, the manuscript of a well-known weavers' ballad was found among them. A period of arrests, hearings, and imprisonment followed the publication of these pamphlets, and Pelz was alleged to have been the "intellectual cause of the weavers' revolts." After his release he became a footloose revolutionary living at various times in Leipzig, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, and Altenburg. He participated in the revolts in Karlsruhe, and in March, 1848, he represented Silesia in the German *Parlament* at Frankfurt. As a result he was exiled first from Prussia, and later from Saxony. Since he wanted to go to a country where he might expect German cultural life to have a future,

in a letter of April 14, 1872, to Baron von Gerolt. The latter is in a collection of letters, bound in five volumes, written by "Foreign Agents" of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and now among the archives of its land department in the Como Shops, St. Paul.

<sup>3</sup> Pelz's *Petersburger Skizzen* appeared first in 1841 as a series of articles in *Ausland*, and in the following year it was published as a separate work in three volumes. His *Wanderungen im Norden* appeared in 1843.

he decided to turn to America. He went as a steerage passenger, using what money he had to pay not only his own fare but that of other refugees who were penniless. His experiences in crossing on the "Gaston" in 1850 gave rise to a lifelong interest in the protection of immigrants against exploitation by steamship companies.

While in New York Pelz lost a good deal of money by supporting the tottering business of a needy countryman and by publishing a monthly literary journal, *Die Hummel*. His daughter arrived just in time to help support her father by doing needlework and teaching. Pelz derived some income by writing for a German journal and by making a connection with the Pennsylvania Central Railroad Company, which paid him subsidies for promoting emigration in his *Compass for Emigrants*, a pamphlet which appeared in five editions. It contained a list, filling sixty pages and arranged alphabetically, in which Pelz described the prospects for various types of trained workers in the United States. He included everything from the piano teacher, who "must be fashionable in a country where drumming the piano has become a fad," to the *Schornsteinfeger*, "who cannot expect to make a living in a country where Negroes do this work in cities and people in the country sweep their chimneys themselves."

After spending some years in New York, Pelz became interested in the West in 1856, when a friend, Hermann Trott, decided to go to Chengwatana, in Pine County, Minnesota. Pelz studied Lorin Blodget's *Climatology of the United States* and J. Wesley Bond's *Minnesota and Its Resources*; and he received a good deal of information about Minnesota — always favorable, of course — from Colonel Daniel A. Robertson of St. Paul and Judge Charles P. Daly of New York. Trott, Robertson, and Daly were anxious to attract settlers, particularly Germans, to Chengwatana, and they also had plans for a road between St. Paul and Superior, which they believed would become the great port of Lake Superior.<sup>4</sup> These were the men who induced Pelz to emphasize in his writings the agricultural advantages of Pine County, the great future of Superior, and the commercially strategic location of Chengwatana between St. Paul and Superior. As a result, Pelz published in Germany in 1858 his first *News about Minnesota*, a booklet which passed through three editions and sold about a hundred and fifty thousand copies.

<sup>4</sup>Livia Appel and Theodore C. Blegen, "Official Encouragement of Immigration to Minnesota during the Territorial Period," in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 5:167-203 (August, 1923); letters of Daly, Robertson, and Trott to Pelz in the latter's *Nachrichten über Minnesota*, 15-19 (Bamberg, 1858); obituary of Trott in *Minneapolis Times*, December 30, 1903; Trott to Robertson, August 11, 1858, Robertson Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

It was in August of 1858 that Pelz went to Minnesota "so as to follow up literary opinions by personal impressions." They were most favorable. He hoped that he might obtain a position as immigration commissioner for Minnesota in New York. In this he was disappointed, for the post, which had existed from 1855 to 1857, was not immediately revived after the territory became a state.<sup>5</sup> After traveling in the Mississippi Valley for a time, Pelz returned to the East. His wife and son joined him in America, and Mrs. Pelz found a home in Washington with her daughter and son-in-law, also a Forty-eighter. Pelz continued to publish his articles and pamphlets on emigration in Germany, and since his writings were no longer suppressed, he began to think of returning to his homeland.

In time Minnesota received a substantial share of the German immigrants who reached America, and state agents as well as private promoters wished to see the proportion increase. In 1865 Senator George Becker, land commissioner of the first division of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, and Colonel Hans Mattson, its Minnesota agent, met Pelz. They soon became convinced that he would be the best man to promote immigration from Germany to Minnesota. Writing in 1866, Mattson announced that his company had "been fortunate in securing . . . the services of Mr. Edward Pelz of New York, who is personally acquainted with our state, and who brings to this subject of Emigration more experience, interest and enthusiasm than any other person with whom I am acquainted. . . . He is . . . sending broadcast over the land week after week information about Minnesota, correcting misrepresentations, and smoothing down prejudices, and doing this too not as a state agent, or the agent of a company, but in his well known character as a literary man, interesting himself in matters of great interest to masses of his countrymen. . . . The articles thus published are over his own signature, not advertisements but communications, and hence have a degree of authenticity not common to such publications." Mattson went so far as to suggest that the state of Minnesota, in co-operation with various interested firms, should "employ Mr. Pelz to take the general direction of the agitation in Europe: authorizing him to select his own agents in each country."<sup>6</sup> Pelz went to Germany in 1866 as a visitor, and agreed to promote immigration to Minnesota, particularly to the lands owned by the St. Paul and Pacific road, which in 1870 became part of the Northern Pacific.

<sup>5</sup> For the post of immigration commissioner, Pelz not only had recommendations from New York but the support of the governor, according to the *Minnesota Staatszeitung*, August 28, 1858.

<sup>6</sup> Mattson to Becker, in Governors' Archives, 1866, File 169.

Mattson followed the line of action considered best by state officials after the Minnesota legislature passed an act to promote immigration in 1867. It was agreed that "the most effective means of promoting immigration, are the publication . . . of information setting forth the advantages of the state as a home for immigrants," and that agencies in America have little influence, as only "adventurers land in America without destination." The need for a representative in Germany was thus recognized, and Minnesota's most distinguished Forty-eighter, Albert Wolff of St. Paul, was appointed to that post. In 1869 he went to Bremen, where he was stationed for two years. Wolff was a personal friend of Pelz, and both men, in the words of Wolff, were making a "humanistic and public minded effort to *concentrate German emigration to Minnesota.*"<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after Pelz returned to Germany in 1866, his *Minnesota in seinen Hauptverhältnissen* ("Minnesota's Chief Features") appeared. In it he drew upon an essay by Wolff dealing with pioneer life in the Northwest, which had been published in 1859. Pelz recommended to prospective emigrants all Minnesota, rather than only the regions which the St. Paul and Pacific road planned to settle. His publication, which went through four editions in two years and was sold rather than distributed free, did contain a statement advertising the lands of the St. Paul and Pacific. Becker and Trott, who were working as land agents for the railroad, supplied Pelz with communications and statistical data. All his publications issued after 1867 contained advertisements of the company's land department, which guaranteed to refund any loss he might incur through his publications. The inexpensive tracts of the former Treumund Welp, however, found an eager reading public. As a result, his enthusiastic advertisements of Minnesota cost neither the state nor the railroad company much money during the five years following 1866.

Pelz's wife died in America shortly after her husband returned to Germany, and in 1868 he married a well-to-do widow. She shared his literary interests and provided a comfortable home for the aging author. Pelz insisted that he did not live on his salary as an agent—an assertion that is supported by the circumstances of his life and the character of his writings before 1871.<sup>8</sup> No ordinary emigration pamphlets, they described in laudatory terms Minnesota, the United States, the Mississippi Valley, and certain communities.

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota, *Executive Documents*, 1867, p. 21; Wolff to Governor Horace Austin, September 7, 1870, in Governors' Archives, File 608.

<sup>8</sup> Pelz denied that he was a paid agent of the Northern Pacific. See, for example, *Der Pfadfinder*, February, 1872, p. 41, and Pelz to Von Gerolt, April 14, 1872, in "Foreign Agents." Four booklets issued from 1866 to 1871 were not guides to railroad lands. They differ in content and approach from the usual immigration pamphlet.

After 1870 the Northern Pacific intensified its campaign for settlers, and then Pelz co-operated by establishing a monthly journal, *Der Pfadfinder* ("The Pathfinder"). Its subtitle, "A Monthly for the Evaluation of German Emigration and Immigration," does not reveal its real purposes, which were to advertise Minnesota and to promote settlement on the lands of the Northern Pacific. Since there was much agitation in Germany favoring emigration to South America, Pelz had to compete with that as well as with the bids for settlers broadcast by other states in the Union. The issues of *The Pathfinder* published from January to June, 1872, contain a series on "The Main Regions of North America," including every state. Although it covers only sixty-nine pages, an entire installment of twenty-nine pages is devoted to Minnesota alone.<sup>9</sup>

Pelz promoted Minnesota too by mentioning it favorably in almost every article, as well as in book reviews, and by publishing letters from friends who warned against emigration to Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. In a report on rattlesnakes in California, he found a reason for going to Minnesota. When a book about Oregon left little to criticize, he could still add, "Why go to Oregon when Minnesota is so much closer?" A correspondent from Washington, D. C., was told that the climate there was not healthful for German settlers. Short news items about "the greatest dairy in the United States" at Wells in Minnesota, about Breckenridge, which was beginning to assume the appearance of a city in 1871, about a nursery in Duluth which was to deliver a hundred thousand evergreens for reforestation in the Red River Valley, and about similar subjects appear on almost every page of *The Pathfinder* to help guide the reader to Minnesota. A standard advertisement and occasional notices of the Northern Pacific also appear in each issue. No wonder "Father Pelz," as the septuagenarian was known among old-timers, was accused of having a "hobby," an "obsession," and of being a "runner for Minnesota."<sup>10</sup>

If one may judge from the addresses of its correspondents, *The Pathfinder* was read throughout Germany. Pelz refused a request from readers to lecture on Minnesota because of poor health and old age. At the age of seventy-two, he was more than ever convinced that he exerted great influence in directing German emigrants to Minnesota. But the hostility

<sup>9</sup> Volume 1 of *Der Pfadfinder*, which is paged consecutively and covers the months from January to December, 1872, was published at Gotha. The Minnesota Historical Society has a bound copy inscribed by Pelz to Governor Ramsey.

<sup>10</sup> *Der Pfadfinder*, 1:20, 24, 94, 135, 214, 221, 334, 335; Münch, *Der Deutsche Pionier*, 8:282; Thomas Rawlings, *Die Auswanderung, mit besonderer Beziehung auf Minnesota*, 17 (Hamburg, 1866). The latter work was translated into German by Pelz, who also wrote the preface.

of other Northern Pacific agents made him feel that his missionary work was not sufficiently appreciated. Emigration from northern Germany was increasing, thus making a central agency desirable for that region. Pelz offered to serve the railroad company as the head of such an agency, but his terms, a three-year contract at an annual salary of five thousand dollars, were considered absurd. George Sheppard, the general European agent of the Northern Pacific in London, reported that he could not question the venerable gentleman's integrity and did not want to arouse his hostility, but that such a contract would be unreasonable. Senility, failing health, and the fact that Pelz was no longer in need of financial support may explain his attitude in 1872, which was so different from that of earlier years.<sup>11</sup>

Pelz was too seriously interested in immigration as a phenomenon in the history of mankind to be classified merely as an "agent." To him, "man's urge to move was founded in a natural law." To praise Minnesota was for Pelz a mission, not a job. He felt it was "Germany's duty to contribute its contingent to the development of the fourth continent" if that country "wished to consider herself a member of the family of mankind." He was convinced that the decrease that marked German emigration about 1870 would not continue, and he was correct. He disapproved of German emigration to South America, because it appeared to be promoted by German merchants at home and abroad who were seeking markets for their products. He opposed the idea of a German state in the United States, although he favored group settlements where German cultural habits and customs could be continued. On the other hand, he favored a mixture of nationalities such as he had observed in St. Paul. He was impressed by the friendly attitude shown toward newcomers in Minnesota, where the foreign-born could vote after a year's residence. To him Minnesota was the state of the "melting process."<sup>12</sup>

Pelz wanted to spread information rather than advertise specific projects. He had firsthand knowledge of Minnesota only. He made up in enthusiasm what he lacked in experience, and he presented his case convincingly. In 1862 he entered an essay contest sponsored by the Society of Friends of Geography in Leipzig which invited answers to the ques-

<sup>11</sup>In 1872 a temporary agent in Berlin was receiving twenty-five pounds a month, and another in Switzerland was paid twenty pounds plus two pounds for each of two hundred lectures he was expected to give. The company paid for printing and postage. Sheppard reveals his serious interest in Pelz in his letters to F. Billings, April 30, May 16, 23, 24, July 12, 1872, in "Foreign Agents." See also Harold F. Peterson, "Early Minnesota Railroads and the Quest for Settlers," in *Minnesota History*, 13:25-44 (March, 1932).

<sup>12</sup>Rawlings, *Die Auswanderung*, 12; *Der Pfadfinder*, 1:44, 93, 297; *Ueber Auswanderung*, 17, 19 (Bremen, 1864).

tion, "Which countries are most desirable for well-organized German colonization?"

He was loud in his praise of Minnesota's climate, a point on which opinions frequently differed. He used the device of first defending the climate of "America's Siberia" and then praising it as particularly healthful. In comparing the Minnesota climate with that of other states, Pelz used annual mean averages, which fail to reveal the extremes of summer and winter. He admitted temperatures of four to twenty degrees below zero, but mentioned the low humidity and absence of winds as moderating the "occasional cold of winter." The illusion that Minnesota was less windy than other parts of the Northwest was common in climatological descriptions of the period. He began early to praise Minnesota as "particularly quiet," as "combining southern summers with the advantages of an invigorating winter." He wondered why the Northwest had not been settled earlier and faster since "the good climate there had long been known." He knew of no state or country in the world which was better watered, and no climate that was more healthful. Since "much in the preservation of German culture depended on the climate and only the temperate zones were suitable for Germans," in his opinion the central part of North America was the region to which they should go.<sup>13</sup>

Pelz's speculations on the economic future and relative location of Minnesota are intriguing. Like some of his contemporaries, he expected a great future for the hinterland of Duluth, which he believed would develop as the result of an ocean route from Europe to the Head of the Lakes. He predicted that the growth of Duluth would equal that of Chicago. At the same time he realized that natural conditions favored a railroad from St. Paul to Superior. But by August, 1870, unforeseen and unpredictable political factors, rather than sound regional planning, had given the railroad to Duluth.<sup>14</sup> That city was to grow into the larger of the twin ports at the Head of the Lakes, with a population of 104,060 in 1950; while Superior, several times larger than Duluth in 1870, has approximately 35,000 inhabitants. Pelz's vision of an inland port for ocean-going vessels and an improved St. Lawrence River system has a familiar ring.

<sup>13</sup> *Der Pfadfinder*, 1:8, 237, 279, 316; Rawlings, *Die Auswanderung*, 14; *Ueber Auswanderung*, 9. For an interesting discussion of "Fact and Fancy in Early Accounts of Minnesota's Climate," see Ralph H. Brown, in *Minnesota History*, 17:243-261 (September, 1936).

<sup>14</sup> George H. Primmer, "Railways at the Head of Lake Superior," in *Economic Geography*, 13:267-280 (July, 1937); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3: 60 (St. Paul, 1926). Dr. Primmer discusses the routing of the railroad to Duluth from the geographic angle.



The reader can also appreciate Pelz's reasoning that Minnesota and the Twin Cities are located in the center of North America. Pelz did not foresee the air age, nor the development of Alaska, but he did understand the possibilities of Canadian trade and the significance of the discovery of iron in the North. He continued to emphasize Minnesota's central location despite objections, particularly those of Friedrich Münch of Missouri, who envisioned the all-American center in St. Louis. Both men stressed central location for the same purpose—to attract German settlers to their chosen states.

Pelz had only a slight knowledge of regional geography. Although the title of his *Mississippi Basin* suggests a geographic treatment, it contains little regional information. His speculations about the origin of caves along the river and the hilly appearance of the prairies, for example, are worthless. As a cartographer, Pelz was even weaker. A map of North America, made "according to directions from Eduard Pelz," appears both in his *Mississippi Basin* and in an early issue of *The Pathfinder*. In Minnesota he located, sometimes inaccurately, "Du Luth," St. Paul, Watab, Fort Wadsworth, Winnebago, Fort Charlotte, and "St. Peters." Why the firm of C. Hellfurth in Gotha should publish this map in 1871, while including a very accurate map of Minnesota in another publication by Pelz is puzzling.

How many Germans went to Minnesota as a result of Pelz's efforts cannot be ascertained. Sheppard believed that without doubt Pelz had great influence on the emigrating class but lacked influence in higher "quarters."<sup>15</sup> Since he had participated in the revolution of 1848, Pelz never enjoyed popularity with the German authorities. The officials at Gotha were exceptions, since they believed that Pelz's publications were of service to emigrants whom they could not and would not hold back. Pelz never wavered in his efforts to promote emigration. Probably nothing could have induced him to curtail his program. He is a unique figure in the history of German immigration to the United States.

Although Pelz's knowledge of Minnesota was only superficial, no other German wrote more about the state or recommended it more enthusiastically and persistently to his countrymen. Once when Pelz was asked if he meant to suggest that all Germans should emigrate, he replied, "By no means! But if somebody for one reason or another wants to change countries I say without hesitation *nach Minnesotal!*" And he said it again and again over a period of twenty years.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sheppard to Billings, May 24, 1872, in "Foreign Agents."

<sup>16</sup> *Der Pfadfinder*, 1:321.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).