

Culture and community in the melting pot

Marc Ensich

When Europeans first became aware of the territory that is now called United States of America, it was a scarcely populated place. The vast spaces of the North American continent were home to natives, which many Westerners would brand as primitive. After the colonial settlers of the newly founded United States had gained independence from the United Kingdom, news spread around the old continent about the opportunities waiting in the New World, and promises of fortune and the start of a better life attracted many Europeans across the Atlantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It was not long until the Luxembourgers followed suit. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the small country experienced an emigration wave, with an estimated 75 000 leaving Europe behind for North America.¹ What distinguishes the history of emigration from Luxembourg is the fact that the country boasted one of the highest emigration rates in all of Europe. During peak times, the percentage of those who left was as high as 10 %.² Such a high number is especially significant when one considers the small size of the Grand Duchy.

Furthermore, the newly arrived settlers were distinguished by their strong sense of community, which was a remarkable achievement if one was to juxtapose this to the state of the Grand Duchy and its inhabitants during the peak times of emigration. Independence had only been gained in 1839 and thus nationalist feelings were very weak. Moreover,

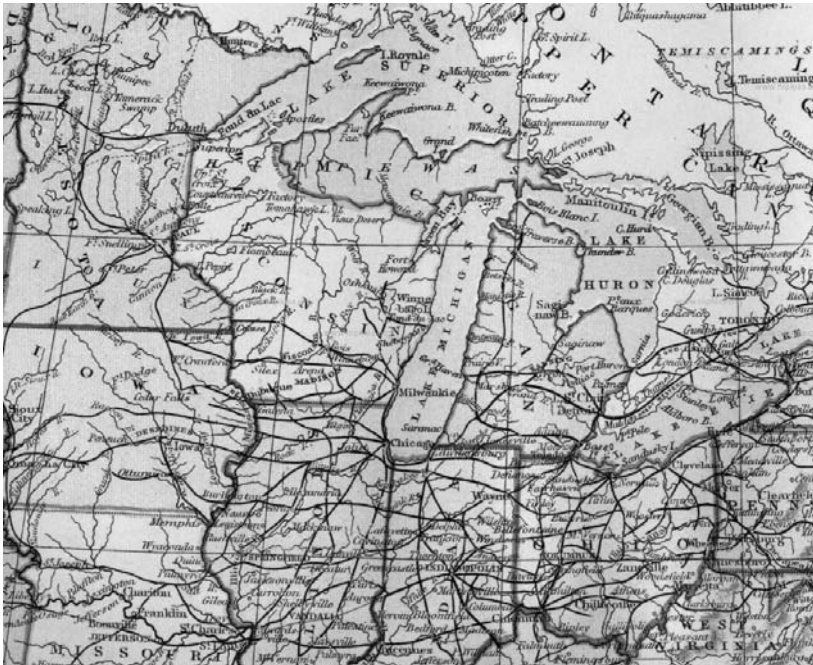
the country had always been the apple of discord between the bigger European powers. Nationalist feelings and signs of patriotism were weak, especially since many of the recently immigrated stated Germany as their country of origin.³ All these things considered, it is thus even more surprising that those citizens who turned their back on the home country, were able to establish a strong social and cultural heritage overseas, especially due to the lack of national feelings.

With time, the settlers became proud of their heritage, branded as truly Luxembourgish by them, which helped them gain a strong sense of unity. It was in the vast spaces of the United States that the settlers of a small country managed to establish national pride and heritage. Amidst a melting pot of many different nations, a community established itself – a community so closely-knit as one would never have been able to find in the home country.

One person who played a big role in creating a close-knit Luxembourgish community in the American Midwest was Nic(h)olas Gonner. The author of *Luxemburger in der Neuen Welt* left his home country for the United States in 1865 where he first settled in Missouri until he established himself as well-known author in Dubuque, Iowa. He took over as the editor of the newspaper *Luxemburger Gazette*, which allowed him to become a well-known personality in the Luxembourg-American community. As was the case with many of Gonner's compatriots, strongly religious character traits were some of the key ingredients towards making life in the New World a success. Devout and conservative Catholics, they praised hard work and despised life in luxury. Gonner described them as follows: "Der Luxemburger ist conservativer Natur. Er hängt stark am Alten und

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bewahrt, wie seinen Glauben, auch die Sitten und Gebräuche der Väter gut.”⁴

The memoirs of Father William Jacoby illustrate the general state of mind of the Luxembourgers, as well as their aims in life. Hard and honest work, together with a strong faith in God lead to a happy and fulfilling life. Jacoby’s work as a missionary priest often forced him to undertake long and dangerous journeys in order to assist the ill and those in need. Throughout his life he was hard-working, yet he never claimed a fortune his own. A humble churchman, he provided his services to the community, which provided him with enough fulfillment to lead a happy life.⁵

The previously mentioned *Luxemburger Gazette*, played an important role in creating a community feeling. It was published under the slogan “Für Recht und Wahrheit. Im Dienste der hl. Kirche.” This emphasised its aims, but was also reminiscent of the *Luxemburger Wort*, which is published under the similar slogan “Für Wahrheit und Recht”. In the first edition, the editors wrote that the paper should be understood as an organ for the Luxembourgish immigrants, who they felt were receiving too little attention in America, including in the Catholic press.⁶ The paper enjoyed high readership during its heyday and helped bring together members of a widely scattered community.⁷

The choice of destination was also a contributing factor towards the creation of a strong community

feeling. Most of the newly immigrated would settle in the Midwest region, around the Great Lakes. These areas were ideal for agriculture and farming, and provided both an environment and climate that was similar to the one at home. With time, small Luxembourgish colonies were created in these regions. This was partly due to the fact that during migration peak times many travelled across the Atlantic with compatriots. After all, they had left all their possessions behind, so familiar faces on their journey were highly appreciated and made the trip more enjoyable. As sea travel became subject to more and more health and safety regulation, the move to the New World became for many a more and more well-organised endeavour which lead them to places where they would settle down with earlier immigrants. Once arrived, they would then go on to find village communities, often in the wilderness, which were modelled on architecture and lifestyles they had known from home.^{8,9}

One of the advantages of settling down in more or less vast and empty spaces with fellow expats, was that the immigrants could continue practising their old lifestyles and customs, without too much interference from the American surroundings. As a result, small language colonies were created which helped to keep the Luxembourgish language alive. For Nic(h)olas Gonner, language was a crucial part of one’s identity. He recalls that settlers would only use the English language in everyday life if necessary. A big population density of Luxembourgers meant that the chances of American influences on the language were small to none. Language thus became a big part of the heritage many tried to preserve in the New World. “Wer sich seiner Mundart schämt, den lässt man gehen; er verleugnet die Stammesangehörigkeit und verliert damit alle Achtung der Landsleute.”¹⁰ In the initial stages of migration, the newly created settlements were thus exclusively Luxembourgish-speaking and would shield themselves off against any influences of the English language, creating strongly-knit communities within linguistic “bubbles” as a result. Yet eventually, through the process of Americanisation, even those who refused to make use of the local language, picked it up eventually. This became a more and more common process by the time second-generation immigrants had taken over. The offspring of the original settlers would learn English at school and gradually substituted it for Luxembourgish. Even though it played an important role in creating communities and maintaining traditional values, the importance of the language eventually faded, despite Gonner’s predictions. The idea of an exclusively Luxembourgish language community turned out to be a utopia. It was impossible to cut oneself

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off from external influences. Settlements were too small and too far away from each other in order to keep up a strong language community, especially after the start of west-ward migration.¹¹ The language itself is often referred to as a Luxembourgish-German one as it contained strong Germanic elements. Nic(h)olas Gonner, also a poet, illustrates this point in his anthology *Prairieblummen*. Gonner was very protective of the language's German elements: "Ons spröch, dë stämt fum deitschen hier"¹² he asserts in *Ons spröch* and describes his fellow men as "lëtzebùrger menner, Sën deitsch fu stâm a blutt". in *Deitsch si mer an deitsch bleiwe mer*.¹³

All things considered, most Luxembourgers chose of settle in the vast empty space of the Great Lakes, which proved ideal for agriculture. They became part of a melting pot of various cultures and nationalities, in which they represented a Catholic minority. As a result they formed settlements to stand strong amidst a Protestant majority.¹⁴ This is one of the main reasons why the Luxembourgish formed such strong communities. This seems an even more unusual development, if one bears in mind the fact that in the first half of the nineteenth century, most Luxembourgers would hardly have any patriotic or nationalist feelings. On a social and cultural level, however, they identified very strongly with their country. In order to make their transition into a new life as smooth as possible, most stuck together during their travels and settled in the same regions as their compatriots, where they would be able to continue practising their customs. The celebration of the *Oktave* in Carey, Ohio and of the *Schobermesse* in Chicago are good examples which help to illustrate how determined the emigrants were not to lose any of their heritage. Moreover, a life devoted to Catholicism was an inherent part of the settlers. The *Luxemburger Gazette* served the needs of the Luxembourgish Catholic community and reminded them that the goal to a happy life is a good combination between God, work and satisfaction. The stabilising elements of conservative and Catholic background, ensured that strong communities could thrive.¹⁵ Finally, as mentioned above, language was another strong bonding factor. Having never been exposed to the English language, most Luxembourgish settlers were thus more than happy when they could start their new life in an environment where they would be understood and be able to communicate. ♦



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3 Roger Krieps, *Luxemburger in Amerika*, (Luxembourg: Bourg-Bourger, 1962), p. VII + 41

4 Nic(h)olas Gonner, *Die Luxemburger in der Neuen Welt*, ed. by J. Ensich, C. Hury and J.-C. Muller, 2 vols, (Esch-sur-Alzette: Editions-Reliures Schortgen, 1986), p. 269

5 William Jacoby, "Memoiren eines Pioniers (1866-1924)", *Letzebuerger Sonndesblad*, no. 31-37, 1997

6 Krieps, *Luxemburger in Amerika*, p. 179

7 Sister Mary De Paul Faber, *The Luxemburger Gazette*, (unpublished Master dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington D.C., 1948)

8 Gonner, *Luxemburger in der Neuen Welt*, p. 414

9 Krieps, *Luxemburger in Amerika*, p. 43

10 Gonner, *Luxemburger in der Neuen Welt*, p. 236-37

11 *Ibid.*, p. 241

12 Nic(h)olas Gonner, "Ons spröch", in *Prairieblummen*, introduced and commented by Sandra Schmit, (Mersch: Centre national de littérature, 2008), p. 133-34

13 Nic(h)olas Gonner, "Deitsch si mer an deitsch bleiwe mer", in Gonner, *Prairieblummen*, p. 134

14 Krieps, *Luxemburger in Amerika*, p. 46

15 *Ibid.*, p. 45

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1 Jean-Claude Muller, "Es ist ein anderes Leben in Amerika, Luxemburger Einwanderer im Melting Pot (19. und 20. Jahrhundert)", *Tageblatt*, 6 May 1995 (no. 99), p. 15

2 *Ibid.*