

A Letter From Bavaria

1846

Bavarian-born Herman Kahn (1828–1897), whose sons founded the Cone textile empire in North Carolina during the 1890's, was only seventeen when he left Germany for the United States in 1846. Arriving in America, he joined his sister, Elise Kahn Hirsch, and her husband in Richmond, Virginia, where he changed his name to Cone and became a peddler. A few years later, he began a wholesale grocery business in Jonesboro, Tennessee, and in 1856 Herman married Helen Guggenheimer, of Lynchburg, Virginia. Some four decades later, his sons founded the first Cone Mill in Asheville, North Carolina, and the Proximity Manufacturing Company at Greensboro.

Though in 1846 the immigrant teen-ager brought with him to America little of material value, he did not arrive on these shores empty-handed, for — as one of his sons, probably Julius W. Cone, was to write proudly of him — Herman Cone did include among his baggage the “intangible possession” of a “vitalizing heritage.” That heritage was eloquently embodied in a letter written to young Herman by his brother-in-law, Joseph Rosengart, and reprinted below in an English translation.

Rosengart's letter, observed Selma Stern-Taeubler, the distinguished historian of German Jewry and Archivist-Emeritus of the American Jewish Archives, is “reminiscent of the moralistic tracts and ethical wills of medieval sages, but written in a language that borrowed its pathos from [the German poet and dramatist, Friedrich von] Schiller and its solemnity from [the poet, Friedrich Gottlieb] Klopstock.” It is strikingly illustrative both of the hopes that America could engender in the breast of a mid-nineteenth-century Bavarian Schutzzjude and of the spiritual discipline with which Judaism could infuse those hopes.

THE LETTER

Place your full trust and confidence in God who will send his angels to guard you. So, do not be discouraged, and do not be afraid of leaving or of the voyage, but consider your fate a good fortune, designed for you by God.

You may shed tears, because you are leaving your parents' house, your father, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends and your native land, but dry your tears, because you may have the sweet hope of finding a second home abroad and a new country where you will not be deprived of all political and civil rights and where the Jew is not excluded from the society of all other men and subject to the severest restriction, but you will find a real home land where you as a human being may claim all human rights and human dignity.

Be careful of your voyage and pay attention to your health as well as your belongings. Avoid the company of all but respectable and educated people. Be modest and polite to everybody. Thus you may surely expect good treatment for yourself.

Every evening and every morning turn to God with sincere prayers; do not be afraid of anybody and do not let anybody disturb your devotions. Even if some people should make fun of you at first, they will understand later and show their respect.

I recommend to you the faith of your fathers as the most sacred and the most noble. Try to follow all the Commandments most painstakingly and thereby attain actual happiness. Do not sacrifice your faith for worldly goods. They will disappear like dust and must be left behind in due time.

Remember particularly the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, for it is one of the most important pillars on which our Faith is established. Do not disregard this day and do not let gold or silver make you blind and do not let any business however tempting induce you to violate the Sabbath, but at least on this day think seriously about your existence and your work.

It is not man's destiny to accumulate worldly goods just to be wealthy, but to acquire them to be used as means for the attainment of eternal happiness. I am, therefore, giving you as a keepsake an excellent religious book for your instruction. Make it your sacred

duty to read one chapter on each Sabbath and holy day with serious devotion and meditation. Do not lay it aside when you have read it through, but keep it and read it again from time to time.

You will thereby learn your religion thoroughly, act accordingly and thus be honored by God and men. It will be your counsel in good times and bad, and will preserve you from all evil.

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged. Even in that distant country you can show your respect and love towards your father by always remembering his good advice and by frequently writing him loving letters, thus giving expression to your devotion to him and your brothers and sisters.

Although your sainted mother is now in Heaven and although you never knew her, you can show her your greatest respect and love by following the Faith as she did. You will thus be able to know her and be with her in heaven.

Your sister and brother-in-law in America will surely receive you in their home with loving care. Consider their home as your father's house and be respectful and modest toward them, show them your filial devotion and be attached and faithful to them, as you have always been toward us. Follow their advice and their suggestions and, whatever you may undertake, first ask them for their counsel. They will always give you the best advice and you will derive benefit therefrom, I am sure.

If you should be lucky enough to become wealthy in that distant land, do not let it make you proud and overbearing. Do not think that your energy and knowledge accumulated that wealth, but that God gave it to you to use it for the best purpose and for charity. Do not forget that you are also under obligation to assist your relatives and to help them to get ahead.

However, if you should not become wealthy, be satisfied with what you do have and try to be as comfortable and happy as if you had the greatest treasures.

Follow the middle way between avarice and waste. Do not be stingy, but live according to your position and your finances and be particularly liberal toward the poor, and charitable to the needy. Be glad to help and give part of your bread and give assistance to the distressed.

Do not let anybody call you a miser, but be known as a philanthropist. On the other hand, do not be extravagant or a spendthrift. Even if the necessity should occasionally arise to spend more than usual, never feel obliged to squander. It is of utmost importance that you keep account of your expenditures and live within your income.

I am closing with the quotation:

“Do right, trust in God, and fear no man.”

(Signed) JOSEPH ROSENGART.

Buttenhausen, April 16th, 1846.

WANTED:

CONGREGATIONAL minute books, board meeting minutes, financial records, cemetery records, charters, constitutional revisions, temple dedication and anniversary booklets, and other data tracing the religious life of American Jewry.

FAMILY correspondence, diaries, memoirs, scrapbooks, photograph albums, naturalization papers, military medals, and personal souvenirs.

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL minute books and transaction records: fraternal, cultural, social, and philanthropic.

FILES of American Jewish periodicals, magazines, and journals.



These and other similar manuscript materials will be gratefully accepted as: gifts; permanent loans in the name of the owner; or temporary loans to be examined, photostated, annotated, and returned to the owner.

The American Jewish Archives

CINCINNATI 20, OHIO