

Schweighofen in the Time of the French Revolution

To bring the little village in connection with the major world events is certainly something audacious. The “new ideas” of this time had not especially excited the community and its residents. However, the years between 1789 and 1795 did leave their footprints.

The village already belonged to the French sphere of influence before the alteration of the states. They hung together, not least, because the bishop of Speyer, to which the village originally belonged, was the provost of Wissembourg at the same time. About 400 inhabitants lived there, all of them Catholic except the Mennonite tenant of the Haftelhof. Although to mention the denomination of the inhabitants might not be necessary today, it played an important and sometimes decisive role at that time for the weal and woe of the people.

The storming of the Bastille in July 14, 1789 was an event that showed its effect in the distant province late if overwhelming.

Whether the Schweighofeners were enthusiastic about revolution or not, they could not escape the consequences of the French state's upheaval.

There was, on the one hand, the war between the revolutionary troops and Prussians, which took place in the Palatinate and under which the Palatinates had to suffer. And on the other hand, even the smallest village was affected by the expropriation of the Catholic church, the nobility, and all those who were alleged opponents of the revolution and had fled from it.

Explaining in detail in this local chronicle how these expropriations were carried out would go too far. But much can be said in a nutshell: To cover the huge debt of the defunct kingdom, the National Assembly had to find new sources of money. The idea of disposing of the Church had existed before the revolution, but it had never been realized. Now that the Church was declared the enemy of the revolution, the idea offered itself anew: first of all as a source of money, and secondly, with the noble ulterior motive, to create as many landowners as possible through a large-scale nationalization of church property—and thus to create more followers of the revolution. As convincing as this idea was, it was also unrealistic. Although one had at the beginning of the auctions in 1791 dispossessed the owners of their possessions (the estates were auctioned off to the highest bidder), the revolutionary war brought new financial crises. They could only be solved by which the state auctioned the church wares as large units, thus excluding the lower and middle class from the outset.

The nobility was treated like the church. Its goods were confiscated, nationalized, and auctioned.

Another group was affected by this nationalization. They were the emigrants. Not just the rich (mainly nobles who fled the kingdom) fell under the numerous laws governing nationalization, but, especially in our region, they were simply citizens and villagers. More than 3,000 southern Palatinates fled, especially in the winter of 1793/94, escaping the invading revolutionary troops across the Rhine. Most of them were Catholic, who fled from the anti-religious new rulers, often under the guidance of the local clergy. Of course Catholic Schweighofen was no exception.

There were also emigrants who resisted. Take, for example, the son of Hastelhof farmer, Johann Holler. His father told the French authorities that his son had been arrested under threat

of force by the Prussian troops on their retreat. The 15-year-old hid in the straw but was discovered. Only weeks later did the boy escape and return to the village.

At this point it should be noted that the village population suffered not only under French troops, but were also harassed by the Prussian soldiers. As late as the year 1802, the landlord Jakob Dietrich demanded from the municipal administration a replacement for the food and drink which he had to supply to the passing Prussian soldiers in November 1793.

Following are listed the Schweighofener emigrants, of which nearly all departed the village on December 26, 1793.

Dietrich, Jakob (landlord)

Fern, Jakob (farmer)

Frey, Jakob (farmer)

Fritz, Karl (miller) with his wife Marie, nee Welcker and the children, Joseph, George, and Regina

Getto, David (carriage maker)

Holler, Johann (tenant of Hastelhof)

Holler, Michel

Kiefer, Andreas (farmer) and Magdalena, nee Scholly, Michel, Elisabeth, Annemaie, Christiane

Kiefer, Barbara (Magd)

Kiefer, Johannes (weaver) and Margarethe, Elisabeth, Annemarie, Christiane

Kiefer, Martin (day-laborer)

Liedrich, Jakob

Oleyer, Johann (weaver)

Pfund, Kaspar (gardener)

Vetter, Michel (farmer) and Elisabeth, nee Burk, Jakob, Joseph, Michel, Katharina, Magdalena, Marie-Magdalena, Annemarie

Scholl, Barbara (maid)

Scholl, Eva (maid)

Scholl, Georg Adam (farmer)

Stierheim, Kaspar (carpenter)

Wolf, George (weaver)

Wolf, Michel (weaver)

Wollenschneider, Philipp (day-laborer) and Margarethe, nee Bernier

Four of these emigrants lost their possessions through auctions:

Dietrich, Jakob, whose name no longer appears on the land registry of 1842 (one house and 13 acres and meadows)

Holler, Michel (one house and four acres and meadows)

Kiefer, Andreas (one half acre) and

Vetter, Michel (one house and eight acres and meadows) (this surname is also no longer in the land registry of 1842)

Their estates were auctioned on November 11, 1794. Usually it was in secret but Weissenburger citizens also bought some sections. Also, the auction of half of Hastelhof took place (the other half was owned privately).

On August 1, 1765, the forementioned half of Hastelhof belonged to General Frederic Michel Francois de Lajolais, born in Weissenburg. Lajolais sat since 1804 in the famous prison chateau d'If (before the Count of Monte Cristo) for his involvement in a conspiracy against Napoleon. He died one day before his scheduled release on September 28, 1808. One month earlier on August 29 his estate was auctioned off as emigrant property. Over 182 acres of land (in parts of Altstadt, Oberotterbach, and Rechtenbach) passed into the hands of the wholesale merchant, Georg Friedrich Teutsch from Strassburg. Teutsch had been active throughout the whole of the southern Palatinate and had purchased more than 320 acres of land in the course of the auctions. He was the most influential buyer in our region and in the Nordelsass. His speculative affairs did not end until 1815 when he was forced into bankruptcy.

What became of the other buyers of the real estate is difficult to understand. The only reliable source is the registry map of 1842 created by the Bavarian government to end the turmoil in the land traffic of the French Revolution and its aftermath. But since the individual properties were not always priced during their auction, it is difficult to understand the owner changes. In Schweighofen the difficulty is added that until 1794, the village was part of the district of Altstadt. Thereafter, the village received 2/5 of the total estate.

As far as the buyers are concerned, after the 50 years between 1791 and 1842 only limited statements can be made. It is certain that the national sales auctions and the devision of the large estates increased the number of landowners in the whole Palatinate. A total of 123 owners with houses leads the master registry of 1842.

Especially the huge territories of the bishop of Speyer, which were auctioned as a whole on October 1, 1795, could certainly prove this increase in ownership, if the search of sources were not so expensive. After all, 557 acres of fields and meadows were auctioned off at that time. They went to a group of foreigners for one million francs including a lawyer from Strasbourg named Guillaume Apfel. He had already purchased a large 13.5 acre estate on December 16, 1791 which had belonged to the ecclesiastical chapter of Wissembourg. One can be certain that the property was not purchased for self-management, but instead for speculation. Occasionally the notarial files contain references to resale or to further leases.

Thus the French Revolutionary period in the village is reduced to undisputed economic changes, without the basic character as a unified Catholic village being changed. The deep persistence of traditions clearly shows itself in the care of the church. In 1790 church banners were purchased, an organ was purchased in 1792/93, and the church roof was retiled in 1803. These are all purchases that were impossible in truly revolutionary communities.