

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

THE REALITIES OF LIFE AND LABOR

Steinway & Sons: Struggling to Succeed

What regrets and misgivings did Charles Steinway have about coming to America?

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Ask students why they think immigrants leave their home countries and come to the United States. Write the students' responses on the board. Invariably, one of the students will say something like "they are looking for a better life." Explain to the class that this unit will investigate the extent to which life in the United States has fit the dream.

DOCUMENTS

- A: The Steinways: The Great Migration
- B: A Steinway Family Tree
- C. Charles Steinweg to C.F. Theodor Steinweg in Seesen, 1852

AIM

To learn what regrets and misgivings Charles Steinway had about coming to America.

I. Introductory activity

Ask students if the name "Steinway" means anything to them. Students from Queens might identify Steinway Street. Tell students that for millions worldwide the name Steinway means a piano.

Introduce the Steinwegs, using Documents A and B. Some student will ask about the name change, which was Anglicized to better market their pianos.

Tell students that Steinway pianos are considered to be among the greatest in North America. But in 1852, Charles Steinweg was a new immigrant and feeling blue. What advice did he have for his family back in Germany?

II. Independent activity

Read letter excerpts and answer questions that accompany Document D.

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The Steinways: The Great Migration

The Steinway (originally Steinweg) family was part of a “Great Migration” of immigrants who left their homelands and moved to the United States during the mid-19th century. From around 1820 onwards, the growth of shipping companies and cheaper fares made it possible for more and more immigrants to cross the Atlantic Ocean. New York City was the primary entry port for these newly arriving peoples. Their spirit and hard work shaped the growth of New York City and the United States.



Charles G. Steinweg

During the years 1840 to 1860, more than 3,000,000 immigrants arrived in this City. Over 70% of these men, women and children came from Ireland and Germany. Why would so many people want to leave their homes and travel across the ocean to a new country? In 1845, a disease destroyed the potato crop in Ireland, a main source of food for the Irish. The potato disease also attacked crops in Germany. Agricultural depression, combined with political unrest and other economic problems, compelled many Germans to leave their homeland, hoping to find more opportunity and a better life in America. The Steinwegs were one such family. They lived in Seesen, a village in Germany. Heinrich E. Steinweg, the father of the family, had a small business making pianos and other musical instruments. Facing a weak economy and many regulations on trade, the Steinwegs found it harder and harder to do business.



C.F. Theodor Steinweg, 1875

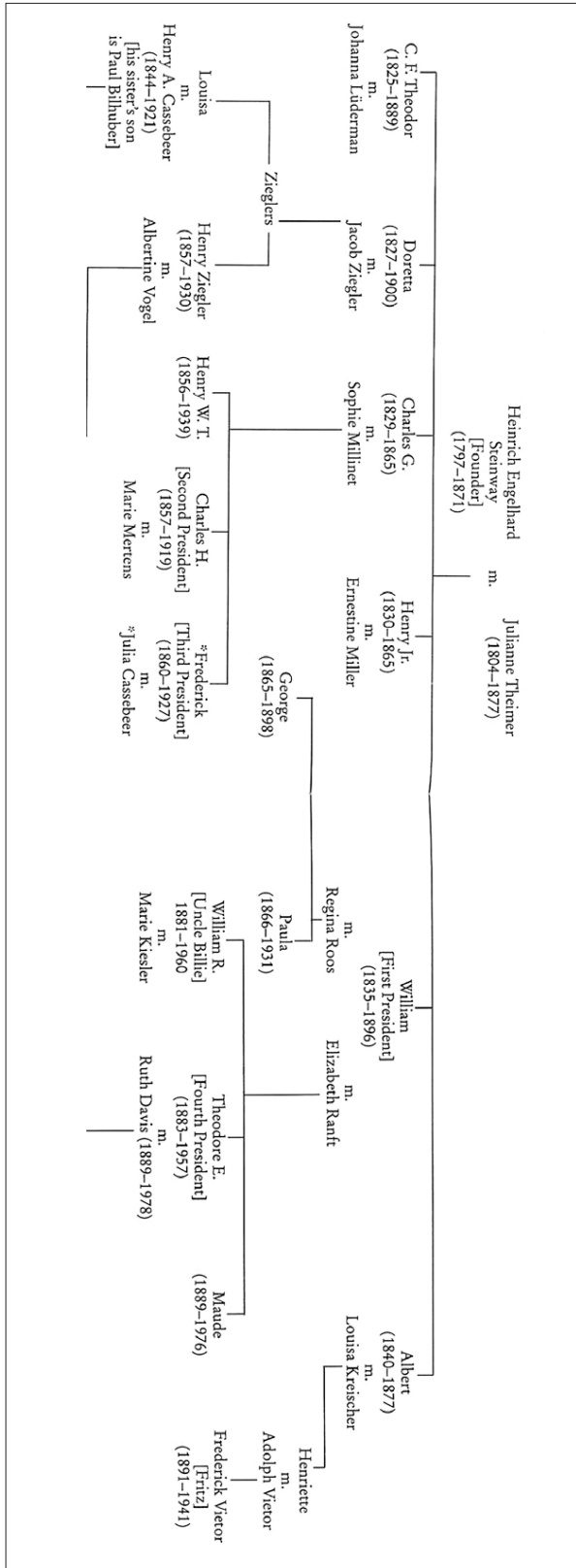
In 1849, Charles, one of the Steinweg sons, decided to leave for America. Charles had supported the failed Revolution of 1848 and thought it best to leave Germany. He went to New York, already a leading cultural and manufacturing center of the nation, and one of the major centers of piano production. He reported back to his family that chances of finding work were good.

The Steinwegs, with the exception of the oldest brother, C.F. Theodor, decided to follow Charles to New York. In June, 1850, they sailed on the ship Helene Sloman from Hamburg, Germany, to New York City. The journey took almost five weeks. When they arrived, they got jobs working in various piano factories in the city.

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A Steinway Family Tree

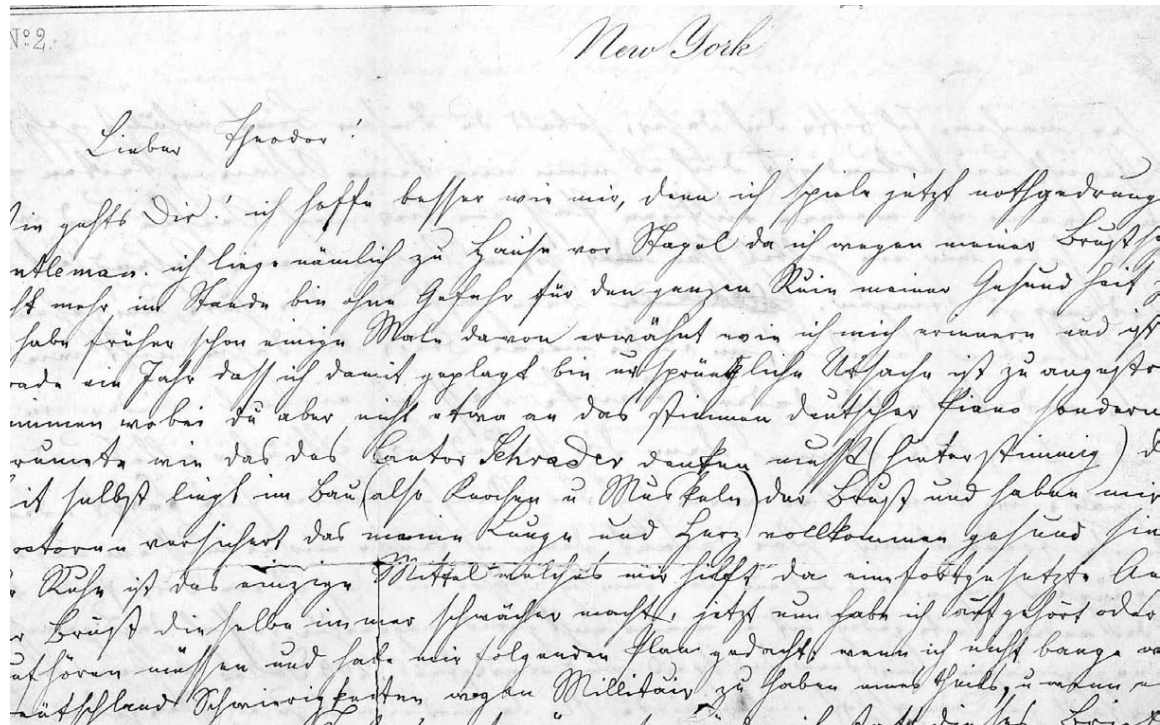


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Original Letter from Charles Steinweg to C.F. Theodor Steinweg in German, Fall 1852



Excerpt 1

Charles' letter is typical of a letter home by an immigrant after he or she has arrived and found out that the myth of America does not match the reality. Like most immigrants, he chose to stay in the United States to make a new life. Unlike many other immigrants, he and his family would become very successful economically. This letter is similar to the emails and phone conversations that many immigrants use to communicate with their families today.

It has now already been almost three years since I left there [Germany] . . . I do not advise you to come here, if you are able to make an honest living with diligence and thrift [in Germany]. And I advise the same to everyone, whoever it may be. Because one does have to work here, more than outside and we get so much used to the better life here that in the end we believe that the German potato soup tasted better in Germany than the daily roast here. Of course America offers a home for those who want to work and had no work in Germany and who generally had to struggle against want and sorrow. But nothing is perfect and so it is with the fortunes of people in America.

1. Why does Charles advise his brother not to come to America? What are some of the drawbacks might be find here?
2. What do you think Charles means by the phrase “The German potato soup tasted better in Germany than the daily roast here”?

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Excerpt II

Tell people who do not know a trade to avoid coming here as much as possible, and if they can't help it, they should try to come at the beginning of September or May. There is also no way that a man over 21 and without a trade or money can make his fortune here since nobody takes him to learn a trade. If Fritz Behrends had not had us, he would not have a penny left, since nobody can live here for under 2 1/2 to three dollars a week.

1. Who should avoid coming to America, according to Charles? Why?
2. What does he mean by saying no one should come who doesn't know a trade?
3. What are some trades immigrants might have brought with them from Germany?
4. Why might it be best for people to come at the beginning of September or May?
5. What are some of the reasons Charles advises Germans not to immigrate to the United States?

Final Activity: Students should ask a family member or friend who is an immigrant about how the reality of the United States differed from what he or she thought it would be like. How did this person feel about the decision to immigrate?

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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES

1. Collect three articles from The New York Times that relate the successes of individuals who came to America as immigrants to better themselves, but also made significant contributions to American life. Some of the contributions might seem minor, but required hard work and courage. Research Web sites that reveal the struggle of immigrants who overcame hardships to become valued members of our nation. The obituary section of the Times, as well as the arts, business and sports sections often contains articles detailing the achievements of immigrants who have become United States citizens. Prepare a chart on the individuals you read about, their contributions and native country. Are there trends in specific areas of achievements? Is there evidence of “push-pull” forces in their coming to America, as discussed in previous lessons? For an example of an immigrant who has given much to the world of sports, review the article on Pedro Martinez:

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/pedro_martinez/index.html

2. Immigrants sometimes regret their decision to leave their native country. A document in this lesson which you received on one immigrant family, the Steinways, reveals some of the difficulties in adapting to the American way of life. Go to www.tenement.org/about.html and learn about the difficulties of immigrants as they began their lives in America. Comment on the difficulties you would encounter moving to a country where the language, the customs and the food are different from those in your native country.