Kelli Garvey

Professor Rex

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Ein Besseres Leben

*Bong. Bong. Bong. Bong.* I rolled over, tugging the covers with me. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up. I crawled out of bed, careful not to wake my sleeping wife, Anja, and went to get ready for work. The town clock has been waking me up for work for months now. Light filtered in through the drapes on the window as I thought about how much better my life has become since leaving Germany. Arriving on the shore of the Detroit River two years ago, our lives seemed destined for great things. However, it didn’t start out that way, as I spent my first months as a German American begging for spare change on the streets. My first job in this ‘land of the free’ was simply to clear horse manure from the roadways. After months of that *schießen*, I finally got my opportunity with Ford Motor Company. When walking home from work one day, I noticed a crowd gathering outside the Ford gates. I fought my way to the front of the pack and managed to squeeze through the doors, where Ford’s men were hiring people on the spot. One looked me in the eye, shook my hand, and promised me $5 a day for serving Ford’s company.[[1]](#footnote-1) I would do whatever it took to become a part of what would be known as one of the first automobile cities, no matter how many hoops I had to jump through.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Some things were easier said than done, which I quickly learned when things didn’t immediately fall into place for us. Living in an automobile city was a stark contrast from the farms I was used to back home. My family’s farm in Erfurt was struggling to survive with my large family living off its small profits. We had also just found out Anja was pregnant, which gave us the last push we needed to start afresh in this new home.[[3]](#footnote-3) Our home in America was nothing like my parent’s home in Erfurt. Working for Ford, we were made to have an immaculate house that was also well lit and had plenty of space.[[4]](#footnote-4) This contrasted greatly with our living in Germany, where it was three people to a room, as we had no need for excess personal space. There was a very thick string attached in working for Ford; he controlled nearly every aspect of our lives.[[5]](#footnote-5) While it was unnerving for me to hand over that much control of my life, I was comforted by talking to coworkers who had the same uneasiness as me. We often would chatter on during work breaks about Ford’s obsession with health and cleanliness. Ford knew what he wanted from us though, and he knew how to get it. My home was searched and reviewed at least once a month by inspectors. We became nervous in our own home, I was always worried I was going to lose my job simply because my son had left his *Spielzeugen* out on the floor.[[6]](#footnote-6) I never felt that my son could roam freely around our home. He, Heinz, was expected to behave a certain way at all times and could never muss up the living space.[[7]](#footnote-7) Ford’s rules seemed to be stricter on our child than our actual parenting of the boy. Ford liked to keep all of his workers on an extremely tight leash.

The work Ford gave me was actually rather similar to the work I experienced back home in Erfurt. However, on the farm I simply sat on a plow for 10 hours a day, while at Ford Motor Company I spun a bolt on the left rear tire of each car that came by, over and over, for 10 hours a day.[[8]](#footnote-8) Eventually people got tired of Ford’s constant vigilance and watching of his workers. Looking back, I can almost remember the day that my section of the factory revolted. I worked with many other German-Americans and we were responsible for many of the same tasks. Our coworkers often slurred us at for our ties to Germany, as there seemed to be mounting tensions against Germany.[[9]](#footnote-9) Also, many of us were on edge that day, after yet another fellow worker had gotten hurt along the assembly line. At the end of the day, we all met up and decided to make a change to our American Dream. As German-Americans, we would lead a labor movement; we needed to bring change to the way Ford was running things.[[10]](#footnote-10) As workers, we wanted to live in peace in the safety of our homes; we didn’t want our lives to revolve around Ford and the assembly line. We fought for a separation of home and work, for freedom from Ford and his ‘vision’ of all of his employees. I wanted my son to grow up in a country where he could be home with his family and not have to worry about inspectors coming to make sure that his life is up to par with his boss’s standards.[[11]](#footnote-11) I was fighting for a different world for my son to live in.

The struggles we face now will lead to a stronger future for the generations to come. As last week’s newspaper read, “Raise their voice in protest – not as German-Americans, but as citizens of this great republic.”[[12]](#footnote-12) We get nowhere if we do not stand together, regardless of backgrounds. When everyone in the labor force united, we managed to overpower Ford, which led to better working conditions for all.[[13]](#footnote-13) With working conditions resolved, America had so much more to offer, a great deal of which was hard to see before; from better immigrant conditions, to a more stable economy, to a higher sense of political freedom.[[14]](#footnote-14) On my walks home after work, I would see newspapers about political groups, often from Germany, and flyers for Ford Motor Company.[[15]](#footnote-15) The city seemed to revolve around immigrants and automobiles. Getting home everyday, I could rely on my wife to have *Bratwürst* cooking, my son in bed, and beer on the table. We were not a religious family, but we did say Grace before each meal. We would finish the prayer and recite the word’s my father had said to me when we left Erfurt. “*Du gehen für einen besseres Leben*,” he had said. In English, it loosely meant, ‘you go for a better life,’ which he was insistent on me remembering. We stayed in touch with our families as well as our German roots through the letters and the German-American community in our neighborhood. We also tried reaching out to other nationalities and groups through work and through parties. Assimilating is never easy, but having such a big company like Ford made it easier since so many people had at least that in common. When I lay down at night with Anja next to me, and Heinz a room over, I know that I have made good choices and set my family on the right path, regardless of who we know or what it took to get here.

Looking back now, I am proud of how my family and I came here to learn new things and give ourselves more opportunities. I could have made more of an effort in the beginning to really search out the Ford Motor Company, but I did not plan well enough until I was face to face with his gates. While I may not have “stitched myself to the flag” in a sense of community, I believe my family and I made this country work for us and fought for ourselves when we needed to, as with the labor unions. I had such grand ideas when we came here, but sometimes things aren’t all they’re cracked up to be; change is never an easy thing to do, but all of our hard work truly did pay off. We are still greatly in touch with our past, and are actually trying to pull some more of our family over from Erfurt to join us in Detroit. I will never lose my German roots, and I am grateful that I have just begun to settle into this beautiful place called America, which I can now call my home.

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