

August Becker, Excerpts from *The Palatinate and the Palatines* (1858)

Abstract

In this excerpt from *The Palatinate and the Palatines* (1858), novelist and journalist August Becker (1826–1891) describes the geographic and sociohistorical features of this region in southwestern Germany. The region was infused with Republican ideas during the French Revolution; after the fall of Napoleon, it became part of Bavaria in 1816. Contrasting with Riehl's national conservatism, Becker's account sympathizes with a liberal form of German nationalism as advocated by many Palatines.

Source

[...]

And now let us consider the inhabitants themselves of this beautiful country, which in its mild climate forms a transition to the more southern areas. Like country, like inhabitants, which are, as it were, merely the spiritual expressions of a country's character. Only cheerful, joyous, and richly blessed people can live in the merry, cheerful, and rich Palatinate. Even in their build, the Rhenish-Franconian mold of the Palatines can be counted as one of the most preferred: thin, upright, and yet still strong figures generally predominate. The Palatines are on average the tallest southern Germans, and they supply the handsomest contingent to the Bavarian cuirassiers. Their smart appearance testifies as to their strength, but even more so as to their elegance and natural decency. It expresses the excitability, activeness, and alertness of the spirit that distinguishes these people. Their activity, their tireless diligence, their skill and elegance, coupled with natural intelligence and freshness of intellect, have long been recognized. And the Prussian officer who, during the war years 1793–94, wrote the letters about the Rhenish Palatinate was certainly correct when, astonished by the “flood of remarks of the cultivated intellect” made by a Palatine farmer, opined that a north German farmer does not bring as many thoughts and words to light in the course of a year as this farmer did in half an hour. The Palatines' love of property is joined by an entrepreneurial spirit; their particularly great love of cleanliness and order is accompanied by an appreciation for cheerful community living and for enjoying one's time. Palatinate hospitality has become almost proverbial, and the most touching examples could demonstrate its extent. For all their tolerance in religious matters, they think in strongly moral terms and, through the storms of past and present, they preserve a certain strength of conviction and a sturdy independence that clearly distinguishes Palatines from other peoples. All of these good qualities are admittedly accompanied by a number of less praiseworthy ones. Their love of possessions is sometimes overbearing, their ego is often more strongly developed than called for by modesty, and they often show off their cleverness. As a consequence, their eloquence, in itself unobjectionable, turns into a “screeching” which the big-mouth uses to attack everything, which knows everything, can do everything better, and screeches to death everything that did not originate in the head of this petty little lord of a screecher. The easily excitable character of these people then causes them to go too far and they no longer see reason, until they at last recoil from the consequences of their own actions and not seldom go back again in completely the opposite direction before coming to their senses.

These are general features to which there are of course numerous individual exceptions. Moreover, looking at the inhabitants of the individual regions modifies this judgment.

The marvelously resplendent wine- and fruit-rich Vorderpfalz in its splendid, scenic beauty, and the

rawer, hilly Westrich, with its quiet valleys and wooded mountains whose depths conceal mineral treasures, both form appropriate opposites in the character of the inhabitants, as well.

Just as one usually thinks only of the Vorderpfalz when one thinks of the Palatinate, the typical Palatine character is found in its inhabitants, and here, especially among those living in the marvelous wine country of the Haardt and the Vosges, the character is found in its purest and most developed form. Here one finds the good side, as well as the dark side, magnified. There are no people more hospitable, more noble-minded, or more generous than the people of the Palatine wine country, but also no people where such excess cleverness accompanies genuine intellect, so much screeching accompanies eloquence and sound judgment. The merriment and trusting nature, the open and honest essence, and the affability of the people of the wine country nevertheless make them very charming. At the same time, the conceit and big heads of the district farmers who inhabit the “rich plain,” their constant tapping on their purses, produces a farmer arrogance that can be not at all charming. While up in the mountains everyone still greets strangers on the street, the district farmers do this seldom or not at all. The district farmers are more obstinate, harder-headed, and stingier than all other Palatines. Of course, this varies from place to place, and the residents of the lower Wasgau beyond the Queich and the uplands close to Alsace are noticeably different from the farmers in the Frankenthal plain or in the idyllic countryside of Grünstadt. On the other side of the Queich one finds Alsatian or rather Alemannic elements; there, more of the folk traditions are preserved than in the Vorderpfalz, and the old traditional costumes still persist in part. In the rich, city-like villages of the Haardt and in the *Gau*, city customs, city clothing, and city style have long predominated. The “cuff-link peasantry,” the transition to a completely urban person, is particularly developed here. Such Palatine “cuff-link peasants” could today count as embodying Palatinate traditions. They are the real Palatines. Their houses receive the city touch, their parlors are painted and are hung with copper engravings, and the whitewash and the brown beams in between on the street gables are gradually disappearing. What pertains to the whole of the Vorderpfalz, though, is the smart appearance of all the villages. The Palatines want to live comfortably and in beauty. Every family father has his own house with a courtyard and outbuildings. Even if the house were spacious and had enough room in its two stories, no person of the Vorderpfalz would make a casual decision to share his house, not even with his married son. The position of women is reflective of a higher culture in these wine regions, indeed in all of the Palatinate, though in Westrich, women more frequently do men’s work. Women do not casually take up the whip and certainly not the flail, as they would in Old Bavaria. One never sees a woman in a wheelbarrow, or for that matter in a pub, as one would, again, especially see in Old Bavaria. The Palatine women in general let the men take care of the men’s duties by eagerly applying themselves to their own work, and they have long been known as capable housewives. They also leave the drinking to the men, who admittedly then sometimes drink twice as much. Wine may also have the biggest influence on the character of these people. Because of wine, the men of the Palatine wine country have a short temper, and their pride and sense of honor are easily wounded. To correct numerous claims to the contrary, they are as quick with their fists as they are with their mouths. Added to this though is their inherent sense of decency and good manners, the bounds of which are much less frequently crossed than in other places. From the edge of the mountains to deep into the plains, the Palatine husbandman drinks wine at work and at meals, and he does this year round. The daily wage laborers would not do this type of work if they did not get their glasses or at least half glasses of wine (big Palatine glasses!) with every snack, and that on hot summer days. Especially the workers in the vineyards themselves drain many cartloads of Palatine wine every year. For this reason, they eat less, and truly contradict the famous saying that beer nourishes and wine depletes. There is no one they pity more than those farmers down on the Rhine where wine must be bought, and even more so the potato farmers of Westrich. The wine farmers very seldom drink spirits, but to offer them beer would be truly insulting. They don’t like beer and think it is something for the Old Bavarian to drink or the rich gentlemen who don’t work and simply follow a fashionable beer culture. Indeed, if not for the town and county notables and the Jews who drink beer, the few beer taverns that exist in the wine country would have to close up shop. In the plains and cities they drink more beer, but the district farmers are said to have different

stomachs from those of the people of the Palatine wine country, and are supposed to be hearty eaters, which their rich land supports.

Much is different in Westrich, though, where the land is not as attractive or as fruitful and the climate not as mild. The people of the Vorderpfalz always get a chill when they think of Westrich, or at least they pretend to. They should not forget though that there are also people living beyond the mountains, respectable people. The thick, wooded highland of the Haardt can now be quickly traveled by train, thus there is enough of an opportunity to get to know this land and people better than through mere hearsay. But the people of the Vorderpfalz still think of Westrich as an ancient land full of ancient people and a sad mix of forests, moors and rocks; one judges it by areas close to the Vorderpfalz, such as the forest valleys in Speyerbach where, in the single farms of Elmstein, the people actually die of typhus, or one judges it by the highlands of the Gossersweiler and Dahner valleys in Wasgau and their somber, poor inhabitants. Hard work and stamina characterize the people of Westrich as well, and their talent in farming is as uniquely developed as that of the people of the Vorderpfalz. The Westrich farmers have even turned certain areas of this hilly country into models of agriculture and cattle breeding. All in all, the Westricher admittedly does not have the elasticity of mind and body of a Vorderpfalz native; he is neither as quick-tongued nor as witty, neither as noisy in his merriment nor as passionate. Even his physique takes second place to that of the people of the Vorderpfalz, and one frequently finds that the Westrich native's posture communicates his more depressed nature. The quiet Westricher is more introverted and more contemplative, and he doesn't like to display his wit. Even his mischievousness has a good-natured streak of endearing naiveté, whereas the Vorderpfalz native can be satirical, even sarcastic. Teasing, making snide remarks, and pulling someone's leg is far less common with the Westricher than with the Vorderpfalz resident, who was born with these qualities and who would not feel well at all if he didn't have someone to joke about and tease. Without Swabians or Old Bavarians to make jokes about, the Westrich native is usually the one who gets teased and who usually manages to take it in a good way. But he also has his own strong opinions about the "uncouth Palatine farmers" and the "squawkers" in the Palatine wine country. Admittedly, one can generally describe Westrich as potato country in contrast to the fruit and wine country of the Vorderpfalz. It is poorer, and its inhabitants cannot afford to refresh themselves with wine, but instead they often drink too much schnapps. This lowers their standing in the eyes of the Vorderpfalz inhabitant, although he too drinks more wine than is needed to quench his thirst, and he still gives a certain meaning to the old phrase "drinking like a Palatine." In Westrich, one can still frequently find straw roofs on the houses, something that disappeared from the Vorderpfalz centuries ago. Under these straw roofs, one will sometimes find much poverty and misery, but more often, one will find a calm, contented frame of mind and an honesty and depth of soul that grace us more than any glittering, superficial features, just as the quiet valleys found in Westrich with their unassuming idylls are more appealing than the rich open fields in the flatland district or in the wine country. Out there in the Palatinate with its dazzling external appearance there is often some superficiality, but here in Westrich there is a good core under a tough shell. Like country, like inhabitants.

[...]

People outside of the Palatinate were quite right when they spoke of the "French heads" who had lost all memory of and sympathy for Germany. But they forgot that Germany itself was completely to blame. It is indeed remarkable that Germanness was preserved in the Palatinate, and that it already is very strong now that the customs barriers are down and with them the dividing line separating the land from the rest of Germany. The events of 1832 and 1849 were anyway entirely about the idea of Germanness. That in these years the events that rocked Germany again found the loudest echo in the land where the tremors in Europe's political world have always been felt most acutely can be explained by the easily excitable character of the people. Political agitations receive such quick and willing attention because purely intellectual stimuli are lacking due to the absence of a large city, and the lively mind of the people must after all receive nourishment. The Palatinate has shown that royalist movements too can be aroused, for

example, when they received their old name from Bavaria, and when the young Count of the Palatinate took the granddaughter of the Hohenzollern as his bride.

It is true that the people of the Palatinate now have more specific Palatine pride than German pride. But unfortunately, it is like this all over Germany, and has always been so. Today every Palatine would surely sacrifice his local patriotism for a common German patriotism if it came to a single, unified Germany. However, as long as he sees that the Austrian feels like an Austrian and the Brandenburger feels like a Brandenburger, he will not be able to stop thinking, why should the old Rhenish Palatinate not preserve its political equality along with the others, why should it be the one to be carved up and divided? [...]

We do not want to linger with these same kinds of political intentions and illusions any longer, so we will include just a few words about the relationship between the Palatinate and Bavaria. The mutual jealousy has not yet been extinguished. Nourished for centuries, it is anyway based too much upon the dissimilarities of tribes. The Bavarians think they made a bad catch with the Palatinate, where no one lives but Frenchmen and beggars. Indeed, in Old Bavaria, they actually still talk about the “poor Palatinate” and how much it costs them, which, of course, betrays a terrible ignorance of the real state of things. “The Palatines have nothing except their big mouths!” is what was said then, whereas the Palatines say, “Bavarians have nothing but their belly; as long as you don’t step on it, they don’t move.” The act of becoming a soldier is still called in the Palatinate “to have to go to the Bavarians,” and on top of this, there is the Palatine’s dislike of the barracks life. The Palatine would rather go to France or America, and in the Algerian and Mexican war campaigns, thousands of Palatines fought against the Berbers and the Spaniards. This should adequately dispel any talk about them not having a warrior spirit. When Old Bavarian troops occupied the Palatinate in 1849, they asked when they might arrive in a village as they marched through the large, rich places of the flatlands. When they were told they were marching through the villages already, they said, “Damn democrats! They always have to have it better!” This adequately characterizes the mutual feeling that Palatines and Old Bavarians seldom go together, just like wine and beer. The Old Bavarian bureaucrat will find many differences in the Palatinate as compared with his home country. The Palatine farmer does not accept being spoken to in the informal manner and does not allow himself to be abused; he knows exactly how far the bureaucrat’s power and authority reaches. He would perhaps rather accept a hard word from his local bureaucrats than from an Old Bavarian. The Palatine above all wants to be treated with friendliness and respect, and bureaucratic impoliteness does not impress him. What the Bavarian official who comes to the Palatinate will also notice is the lack of class differences and titles, the complete equality of people’s standing. There has not been any nobility here for a long time, and whatever remains of the country nobility makes no use of its privileges. In the cities, one does not address people with their official title but rather simply with their normal name, and the obsession with and lust for titles of the rest of Germany is still unknown in the Palatinate. (This appears to be slowly changing.) Even the difference between burgher and farmer does not exist in a land where every farmer feels like a person of the middle class and is so regarded. There are no longer any privileges reserved for the cities, in the Palatinate there are only “communities,” and anyway most villages are comparable to the small Palatine cities in terms of numbers of inhabitants, wealth, and outward appearances. If one wanted to conclude that the status of bureaucrats is ignored here, one would be far from the mark. On the contrary, the Palatine native gladly pays honor to those who deserve it, just never in gross subservience. In general, one would wish that Bavaria and the Palatinate would one day realize that they are not competitors and that there are competent, worthy people on both sides.

It is remarkable that for all their intelligence, the Palatine people have little interest in spiritual pursuits in the realm of art. Here the lack of a larger city, where the forces of this land could concentrate themselves, is very tangible. A Palatine who chooses art as his profession has the most difficult position right from the beginning. He must fight the low regard of his own countrymen for such “unprofitable” things, even their scorn and derision, while fighting the prejudices of the world outside, which has not

heard much about the artistic abilities of the Rhenish Palatine and is not inclined to credit the Palatine people with any. The Rhenish Palatine who does follow the path of art will, with his love of independence, with his direct and open nature, have to fight the hardest against the clique and coterie that awaits his like in the world. People at home and abroad will make sure that his chosen path will not be too easy. It would be very desirable that the warm, gentle sun of the Palatinate finally shines for art, too, though may God deliver this beautiful land from hothouses of art!

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Source: August Becker, *Die Pfalz und die Pfälzer*. Leipzig: Verlagsbuchhandlung von J. J. Weber, 1858, pp. 16–20, 37–41. Available online at:

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