

Julius Fröbel, Letters from Exile (1849–1857)

Abstract

The letters of Julius Fröbel (1805–1893) offer some insight into the circumstances of the radicals of the Revolution of 1848–49 as they contemplated certain pressing questions after the collapse of the revolution: where to go into exile; how to settle into their new homes; and whether and when to return to Germany in the 1850s and after. Fröbel's letters—to a female relative, to his radical friend the author Fanny Lewald, and to his fellow exile, the banker and future Reichstag deputy [Ludwig Bamberger](#)—also offer a sense of his changing attitudes, not only towards Europe but also towards his eventual adopted home in the United States and the other German Americans who lived there. Fröbel had a background as a geologist, publisher, and proto-socialist political thinker from his years as a political exile in Switzerland during the Vormärz period, but he achieved his greatest fame as a publicist and member of the Frankfurt National Assembly in 1848. From Frankfurt, he accompanied the radical leader [Robert Blum](#) (1807–1848) to Vienna, where they fought on the barricades against the Habsburg counterrevolution. Whereas Blum was executed, Fröbel survived and, after the revolution, he went into exile again. He settled, to some extent, in New York but also traveled extensively throughout the American West and Central America.

Source

Julius Fröbel to Fanny Piaget,[\[1\]](#) Zurich, July 5, 1849

Dear friend,

The enclosed letter to your brother,[\[2\]](#) which I ask you to pass on, tells you all that I do not need to repeat in these lines. I have been free for a few days now,[\[3\]](#) and yesterday my wife,[\[4\]](#) whom I had left behind in a corner of the woods, followed me. We are where we are now because of the incompetence and wickedness of our party. I do not despair of Germany and Europe, but as much as I would like to persist and share the fate of all, I *cannot* do it, for it cannot help anyone or our cause if I sit idle in Switzerland to suffer hunger and allow my family to suffer. And I know of no country in Europe where I could hope to secure a livelihood. England and Norway may be the only ones, but I must give America precedence to both. If my plan succeeds, I will be at sea in 4 weeks. Naturally I will write you again beforehand. I feel in advance the pain that I will overcome across the sea, for my *whole* heart was in our struggles. But it *must* be.

Yours,

Julius Fröbel

Julius Fröbel to Fanny Lewald, New York, April 30, 1850

My esteemed friend!

If people claim, as you say, that I am one of those who never long for distant friends, they are correct to the degree that my friendship never assumes the form of longing, but it is no less faithful and reliable for all that. And so it is with you and our mutual friend Stahr. And as much as I have experienced since our farewells on the beach of Helgoland,[\[5\]](#) the days I spent with you and Stahr on that small rock in the North Sea are still very much alive in my soul,[\[6\]](#) and I reciprocate the feeling of love that you two showed me, now as then. I have not written you nonetheless because my inner and outer life here has

not yet gained the firm ground one needs in order to look around. The present moment has something of a caesura to the degree that I completed a series of six lectures on the conditions and consequences of the European Revolution,[7] and tomorrow I embark on a little journey to Washington and Virginia. You recall our conversations in Helgoland, and the news that I had become a soap maker, which gave our unfortunate newspaper journalists material to entertain their readers,[8] will have shown you that my decision to jump afresh into practical life was meant seriously. I set all my ambitions upon becoming the Treu and Nuglich[9] of the New World. However, I had set my sights too high. The soap factory of Fröbel & Co in NY [New York] is no more! And, after this failed attempt, I abandon my intention to cleanse humanity of its dirt. If you ask the reasons for this tragic end of a promising enterprise, I must blame those who, under the pretense of Californian gold nuggets, have lured me away from that cultural project (you know that Professor [Justus v.] Liebig measures culture by soap consumption).[10] There is no denying that we are demoralized here, and I may sink so low as to make my way to San Francisco. For the moment I am going to Washington tomorrow, with urgent recommendations to the president and the most influential members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, and from there to Virginia.[11] I intend to be back here in 3 or 4 weeks, and in June I will wander around Wisconsin and Iowa.[12]

I have almost forgotten to answer your literary question. The German public in the United States does not read, or the segment that does read is composed of a small number of persons who occasionally dip into patriotic literature. The rich Germans have largely abandoned the German language and send their children to schools where the instruction is in English. In fact, I believe they are right to do so. My son, who has been here for fourteen days, has been going to an English school for eight days already. Since I arrived, Stahr's *Republikaner*[13] and your *Prinz L[ouis] Ferdinand*[14] have been circulating among the German ladies of my acquaintance. I have made an effort to get the *Republikaner* translated, which would not bring Stahr anything but honor, but I have not managed thus far to sufficiently interest any publisher. I believe, however, that I will at length succeed. Many novels are being written here, but I have not yet had the time to learn what they are like. On the whole, I must tell you that the German book trade is nonexistent here, just as the German public lags behind the Anglo-American one. The entire "higher education" of our compatriots consists of claiming the right to engage in music and theater on Sundays, which the Anglo-Americans do not appreciate.

[...]

Overall, though, German literature here is so hopeless that I decided some time ago to use the English language in my own notes, and should I try my hand at literature it will likely only be in English.

I would like to enclose a few lines especially for Stahr, but I do not have another quarter hour, and I know that my words to you will easily reach him, if you believe that they are worth the effort of forwarding them. I will write him occasionally during my travels, and will have more interesting things to say than today. Farewell.

Yours,

Julius Fröbel

[a contact address follows]

Make sure that *nothing* from this letter ends up in a newspaper. I have had some unpleasant experiences.[15]

Julius Fröbel to Ludwig Bamberger, Frankfurt am Main, September 9, 1857

Dear Bamberger,

Ever since my path led me through Paris, where I, alas, did not find you and thus indeed missed meeting the European friend with whom I *most* wanted to converse, I have now found some peace here for the first time, and as short as the time is that I can dedicate to completing volume 2 of my *Erfahrungen etc.*,^[16] I must nonetheless be able to find an hour to reopen relations with you. The greater proximity and the commonality of a certain intellectual atmosphere that characterizes European life challenges me, even when I tell myself that I shall never again feel wholly comfortable and at home in this atmosphere. The political conditions in both parts of the world have nothing to do with this assertion, at least not directly: European life confronts me with more general moral differences, the same ones that already raised a certain intellectual barrier between myself and my German friends in New York. All of them yearn for European life, while I have always been an enemy of that which constitutes the specific spirit of *European* civilization in the modern sense, and my return after eight years of wandering abroad is not calculated to lessen this hostility. I would have liked to speak of these things with you, as I know from the past that your attitude towards life was akin to my own, and since the position you have now assumed in the world identifies you with interests that belong to the areas of *useful activity* and not bodily and *mental gluttony* and gourmandise,^[17] which not just mindless windbags but also many people close to us dare to call “idealism.” I for my part do not know what beer and tobacco have to do with ideals, even if they are enjoyed with music or sunsets; I do not know how one can call American life more materialistic than European life, simply because the former is productive and the latter consumptive—the former *creates* realities while the latter *devours and drowns* them.

But I have said more than I meant to. My intention was simply to tell you that I dislike Europe more since my return than I did upon leaving, and that I feel quite alien here. I do not believe we will stay here, for my wife, glad as she was to see her mother again,^[18] who will also spend the winter here with us, thinks and feels as I do, and prefers American to European life, despite all the hardships she suffered there to an unusual degree.

Unless the police, for example, disturb my peaceful existence, we will spend the winter here. I will be working on volume 2 of my book until the end of this month, followed by a volume entitled *America, Europe and World Politics*,^[19] which I no longer have anything to do with on this side of the ocean. My son,^[20] who is studying metallurgy in Freiberg but visiting us at the moment, will be finished with his studies by then, and well prepared to pursue a metallurgical profession in California, Mexico or Central America. Our return journey will take us through Paris, and if I do not see you elsewhere before that I hope to find you at home.

In the meantime, I would indeed be pleased to remain at least in epistolary contact, and a few lines from you will be a welcome gift.

Your friend,

Julius Fröbel

NOTES

[1] Fanny Piaget, née Siegmund (ca. 1819–1899), the younger sister of Emma Herwegh, was married from 1838 to Jean-Jacques Jules Piaget from a respected Neuchâtel family, who, as legation secretary at the Prussian Interior Ministry was responsible for the Neuchâtel Department. Her sister Emma was also in love with him. After her husband’s early death (1840), Fanny Piaget lived as a single mother.

[2] The only brother of Fanny Piaget and Emma Herwegh, Gustav August Siegmund (ca.1816–1902).

[3] After the dispersal of the rump parliament in Stuttgart on June 18, 1849, Fröbel offered his services to the revolutionary government in Baden, which placed him alongside the commander of the fortress of Rastatt, Ludwig v. Mieroslawski, as a “civilian commissioner.” Since the Prussian and

imperial troops had the town completely surrounded, however, Fröbel was no longer able to take up this post. With great luck he thus managed a second time (after Vienna in October of the previous year) to avoid the fate of the insurgents: penitentiary or even drumhead court-martial. In early July Fröbel fled to Switzerland.

[4] Kleopha Fröbel, née Zeller, Julius Fröbel's wife, who died a short while later.

[5] Soon after his arrival in Switzerland, Fröbel set off again with Ludwig Bamberger, visiting Alexander Herzen and Georg Herwegh in Geneva, and then embarked on a boat from Le Havre to Hamburg in order to take up Theodor Olshausen's March offer to join the editorial staff of the *Norddeutsche Freie Presse* newspaper. However, since Prussian troops were now also stationed in Hamburg and Fröbel was being sought as one of the most prominent democrats, he fled to the British island of Helgoland.

[6] In late August and early September, Lewald, Stahr, Fröbel, Dingelstedt and others had spent a holiday together in Helgoland before Fröbel left for England and embarked from there to the USA in September.

[7] In his memoirs, Fröbel described these lectures "before a numerous and select audience of both sexes" as a "turning point in my political efforts," and as his "divorce" from the "refugee circles" of the 48ers and their wholly unrealistic harping about principles: "I expressed my conviction that [...] while revolutions can under some circumstances be necessary and salutary upheavals, they are not themselves capable of creating new orders—an achievement possible only for a recognized state power endowed with the necessary authority,—that the next great movements in Europe must proceed from such powers [...], that it is foolish to engage in preparing new revolutionary movements in Germany from America, and that the task of political refugees is instead to participate in American life."

[8] The communist Adolf Cluß, who had also emigrated to the USA, reported on this to Marx's collaborator Wilhelm Wolff: "Julius Fröbel has a soap and candle-making factory in New York; but in order that there may be light within as well, he writes articles about "politics and cosmopolitanism" in the *N. Y. Schnellpost*, which, however, nobody wants to read."

[9] "Treu, Nuglisch & Co., imperial and royal court perfume factory, as well as purveyors to His Majesty the King of Prussia" in Vienna with branches in Berlin and other capitals was the best known "perfumery" in the German Confederation in the mid-nineteenth century.

[10] In his autobiography (J. Fröbel 1890, vol. I, pp. 87–88), Fröbel recounts this episode somewhat differently: After arriving in New York, he had grasped "certainly not the best but the first opportunity for the transformation [of a professor] into a human being," namely, as the "business partner of two German soap makers, both of them, like me, without means and simple journeyman artisans by training. Our workshop was a small, dark room on the ground floor. We purchased a worn-out old trypot from a whaling ship anchored in the harbor. We bought bricks, lime and an iron rod and set to work at our furnace. [...] The small credit we needed to buy the necessary materials was provided, upon personal introductions from a German merchant, by American merchant houses with an obligingness beyond praise. That is how our business began. We had, however, attempted the salto mortale from German idealism to American realism with too little understanding for it to be successful. Neither the miniature enterprise with which we were forced to begin nor the inadequate technical abilities of my two business partners, who had in mind a small trade enterprise in a German country town, allowed for the possibility of success under the conditions of American business life. We muddled along for about half a year with the manufacture of specialty items with limited sales until we had to stop."

[11] On this, see the vivid and readable descriptions in J. Fröbel, 1890, vol. I; and *Aus Amerika. Erfahrungen, Reisen und Studien*, 2 vols (Leipzig 1857–1858). In vol. I, pp. 47–48, for example, Fröbel recounts an evening reception with President Zachary Taylor (1784–1850), the relaxed atmosphere

of which greatly impressed him: “The entire, numerous company moved in the freest imaginable manner, conversing quite casually through the halls, which represented a public promenade.” Fröbel found many admirers of Robert Blum among members of the administration in Washington, and when he was personally introduced to Taylor, the president bowed to him to express his respect.

[12] In a letter to Georg Herwegh written a short while later (Fröbel to Herwegh, New York, September 24, 1850; RGASPI Moscow, holding 175, no. 18/23), Fröbel spoke in more detail about his state of mind: “Moreover, the revolution and its aftermath left me in a state of mind that made me crave outward motion and *ex[c]itement* [in English in the original]. I require the inspiration of the unusual and the dangerous in order to exist. Whether this will make an adventurer of me altogether or whether I will somewhere find the peace of which I have some anticipation, I do not know.”

[13] *Die Republikaner in Neapel*, historical novel, 3 volumes (Berlin, 1849).

[14] Fanny Lewald, *Prinz Louis Ferdinand*, novel, 3 volumes (Breslau, 1849).

[15] Perhaps this was in the wake of the publication of his letter no. 35 in the *Zeitung für Norddeutschland*. It was impossible to discover what these experiences might have been. See also Fröbel’s remarks at the beginning of the letter that people made fun of him because of his soapmaking.

[16] Julius Fröbel, *Aus Amerika. Erfahrungen, Reisen und Studien*, 2 volumes (Leipzig, 1857/1858).

[17] Fröbel alludes here to Bamberger’s successful activities as a banker.

[18] In 1856, Fröbel married Countess Karolina von Armansperg, widowed Mördes (1821–1888), the daughter of Count Joseph Ludwig v. Armansperg (1787–1853), who from 1826–1831 served as Bavarian minister of the interior, foreign minister, and minister of finance.

[19] Julius Fröbel, *Amerika, Europa und die politischen Gesichtspunkte der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1859).

[20] Karl Fröbel (1839–1886) later became a professor of chemistry and pharmacy at New York University.

Source: Julius Fröbel to Fanny Piaget, Zurich, July 5, 1849 (Brandenburg. LHA, Pr. Br. Rep. 90C Berlin, 9811, Bl.17); Julius Fröbel to Fanny Lewald, New York, April 30, 1850 (BA Koblenz, FSg. 1/310, Bl. 8f); and Julius Fröbel to Ludwig Bamberger, Frankfurt am Main, September 9, 1857 (BA Berlin, N 2008 [NL Bamberger; previously 90 Ba 3]/61, Bl. 2f); reprinted Christian Jansen, ed., *Nach der Revolution 1848/49: Verfolgung, Realpolitik, Nationsbildung. Politische Briefe deutscher Liberaler und Demokraten 1849–1861*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 2004, pp. 6; 106–9; 448–49.

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