

Seven immigrants from one European village and a Purdue tradition that has lasted over 75 years



Early in 1906, in the Eastern European village of Deutschbentschek (today called Bencecu de Sus), widow Magdalena Scheirich sold the family cow so her daughter Agatha could secure passage to America. Nineteen-year-old Agatha Scheirich boarded the SS *Ultonia* at the Adriatic port of Fiume on February 22, 1906, and arrived at the Port of New York on March 16.

A rural community of some 1,600 ethnic Germans, Deutschbentschek was founded in 1794 as an outlying settlement of the Habsburg Empire in southern Hungary. Since 1920, it has been part of Romania and known as Bencecu de Sus.

In the early 1900s, more than 300 men, women, and families left Deutschbentschek for the hope of a better life in the New World. Among those who followed Agatha Scheirich were six more of particular interest. Fifteen-year-old Peter Becker arrived at the Port of New York just 11 days after Agatha in 1906. Sixteen-year-old Johann Schicht and sisters Anna Andor and Eva Andor, ages 14 and 16, went through Ellis Island in 1907. In 1914, Eva Weiß was 16 when she disembarked with her mother in Baltimore.

The last to reach America was Michael Schmidt III on October 2, 1923. He was 21 years old when his father died earlier that year, and he left for New York on board the SS *Manchuria* from Portugal. A barber since he was 14, Michael paid for his passage by barbering across the Atlantic.

The seven immigrants arrived with sixth-grade educations. For six years in Deutschbentschek, they had shared a schoolroom with 60 to 80 others, sometimes sitting on the floor when there was not space on the benches. Beginning in 1897 — even though they spoke only German — the immigrants had been instructed exclusively in Hungarian and had finished school unable to fluently read or write either Hungarian or German. Concerned villagers organized a “repetition school” for the boys and girls who had completed their six years at the village school. Instruction in repetition school was in German, and the seven had attended six hours every week for three years to catch up on reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, and agriculture.

After their classroom education, many boys completed apprenticeships. Like Michael Schmidt, Johann Schicht was a barber by trade. The

A 1936 gathering of the Deutschbentschekers at Lake Como, Wisconsin.

other five who left for the New World gave “maid servant” or “agricultural laborer” to migration officials as their occupation. All found jobs in America, married other immigrants, and chose Chicago to live and raise their children. The families got together often, and their children grew up together.

First-generation Americans Henry Becker (son of immigrants Eva Andor and Peter Becker) and John Ehardt Jr. (son of immigrant Agatha Scheirich Ehardt) attended grade school, high school, and junior college together in Chicago. In 1931, they signed up for classes at Purdue and, in 1934, earned degrees in chemical and civil engineering. It had not been easy to get to West Lafayette — John rode his bicycle the 125 miles from Chicago, and Henry sometimes hitched a ride on a train — but they chose Purdue anyway for its excellent engineering programs.

Over the next 15 years, as word of Purdue spread among the immigrant families, four more first-generation American sons left Chicago for West Lafayette to study engineering: Walter Becker (ME’40); Steven Zimmermann (EE’41); Michael Schmidt IV (EE’51, MS EE’52); and Richard Schicht (AgE’53).

More recent generations of the immigrants’ families have lost contact, but the ties to Purdue within each family live on. The Purdue tradition that began over 75 years ago includes four generations and 21 alumni so far.

Michael Schmidt IV (EE’51, MS EE’52), Richard Schicht (AgE’53), and Jane Ehardt Moore (S’71, MS M’76)

