



## Seven Immigrants from One European Village and a Purdue Tradition That Has Lasted Over 75 Years

by

Michael Schmidt III, Richard Schicht, and Jane Ehardt Moore

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 S. S. *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 1600 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.



Deutschbentschek (Bencecu de Sus) today

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 II** 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 S. S. *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 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. Recalls author Richard Schicht, “I think the Bentschekers got together almost every Saturday night. There was usually a pinochle game and lots of good food.”



A 1936 gathering of the Deutschbentschekers at Lake Como, Wisconsin  
(Note the Purdue flag.)

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.



Chicago friends Henry Becker (left) and John Ehardt Jr., ca. 1926

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. Authors Michael Schmidt III and Richard Schicht were the last Boilermakers of that generation and credit their attending Purdue to the friendships among the Deutschbentschekers. Richard Schicht remembers immigrant Peter Becker saying, “Get as much education as you can, Richard. They can’t take that away from you.” And it was Walter Becker (ME’40) who drove Richard on his first visit to Purdue during Richard’s senior year in high school.

More recent generations of the immigrants’ families have lost contact, but the ties to Purdue within each family live on. Recent graduate Devon Ehardt Shelton, great-granddaughter of Agatha Scheirich Ehardt, recalls choosing to go to Purdue for several reasons, among them: "I loved that it was an unofficial family tradition. I never felt pressure to go to Purdue, but rather I liked that this great institution had taught and been considered home by so many of my family members."

The Purdue tradition that began over 75 years ago includes four generations so far.

	IMMIGRANTS
<i>Children of immigrants:</i> Henry Becker ChE’34 John Ehardt Jr. CE’34 Walter Becker ME’40 Steven Zimmermann EE’41 Michael Schmidt III EE’51, MS EE’52 Richard Schicht AgE’53	Eva Andor & Peter Becker Agatha Scheirich Ehardt Eva Andor & Peter Becker Eva Weiß Zimmermann Michael Schmidt II Johann Schicht
<i>Grandchildren of immigrants:</i> Donna Gelsey Ingold S’59 Roy Becker S’61 John Ehardt III ESE’63, MS IA’64 Roberta Becker Monger EDU’66 Thomas Ehardt ESE’69, MS IA’70 Marilyn Becker Barton student 1967-69 Jennifer Zimmermann Poehler student 1967-69 Jane Ehardt Moore S’71, MS M’76 Margaret Hulka S’83	Anna Andor & Johann Schicht Eva Andor & Peter Becker Agatha Scheirich Ehardt Eva Andor & Peter Becker Agatha Scheirich Ehardt Eva Andor & Peter Becker Eva Weiß Zimmermann Agatha Scheirich Ehardt Johann Schicht
<i>Great-grandchildren of immigrants:</i> Rita Becker A’83 E. Christopher Tinkle ME’92 Danielle Ehardt Robinson AAE’97 Wendy Tinkle Boatman CFS’97 Devon Ehardt Shelton LA’04, MS EDU’08	Eva Andor & Peter Becker Eva Weiß Zimmermann Agatha Scheirich Ehardt Eva Weiß Zimmermann Agatha Scheirich Ehardt
<i>Great-great-grandchildren of immigrants:</i> Mallory Schaus CE’10	Eva Andor & Peter Becker



**Henry Becker** took a job with U.S. Steel Corporation after graduation and worked up to Head Metallurgist, the position he held when he retired from its Waukegan, Illinois, Wire Mill in 1963. He consulted for several years after his retirement. Henry was also a founding member of the American Society for Quality Control and served as its Chicago Section President, National Vice President, and Director and Vice Chairman of its Midwest Conference Board. In 1965, he received ASQC's Joe Lisy Award for his outstanding service. Henry was a Life Member of the Purdue Alumni Association.



**John Ehardt Jr.** spent eight years with the American Creosoting Company and was promoted to Assistant Chief Engineer of its Middle Southwest Territory in 1942. Turned down by the Army because of flat feet, he then took a job with Swift & Company in Chicago to make a bigger contribution to the war effort. He designed meat processing plants at Swift and was Assistant Manager of Planning of its Globe Engineering subsidiary when he retired in 1975. John was President of the Purdue Club of Chicago, 1967-68, and an annually paying member of the Alumni Association.



**Walter Becker** founded Becker Engineering & Supply Company (later known as Becker Precision Equipment). The company grew to approximately 30 employees and occupied a 30,000-square-foot facility in Elk Grove Village, Illinois. During his tenure as CEO and President, he invented a valve regulator that controls the flow of natural gas through a pipeline and eliminates the possibility of explosion. Today, this regulator is sold worldwide. Walter was a Life Member of the Alumni Association, and his legacy lives on through a scholarship in perpetuity at the School of Mechanical Engineering.



**Steven Zimmermann** worked a short time at Westinghouse Electric Company before taking a job with General Electric Company in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. He managed GE's Ft. Wayne Sound Lab until his retirement in the mid-1980s. Early in his career, Steven obtained a deferment from military service to help design an engine that allowed military planes to fly over the Himalayas and, in 1950, received a patent for a system to protect electric meters from heat and mechanical damage. Steven was an annually paying member of the Purdue Alumni Association.



**Michael Schmidt III** served in the Army Signal Corps during the Korean War. Next at Bell Laboratories, he worked on the Nike Anti-Aircraft System and participated in WSPG missile tests. Then at General Dynamics Convair for 35 years, he developed radars and classifiers, published and presented 19 papers at technical symposia, and worked on NASA's Lunar Excursion Module and Manned Space Station. He was Research Specialist when he retired in 1992. Michael served on the board of the Purdue Club of San Diego and was its President 1979-80. He is a Life Member of the Alumni Association.



**Richard Schicht** spent three years in the Navy, the last two as a meteorologist in Norfolk, Virginia. In 1957, he was hired as Ground Water Hydrologist by the Illinois State Water Survey in Champaign, Illinois, and worked up to Acting Chief. His work included hydrologic budgets for watersheds, ground water studies, and Supreme Court testimony on availability of water resources in the Chicago region. Retiring as Principal Scientist Emeritus in 1989, Richard continued researching for several years. He is a member of Purdue's President's Council and Griffin Society and a Life Member of the Alumni Association.

~

The career achievements and alumni contributions continue down the generations. The seven immigrants—beginning their lives in America as four maid servants, an agricultural laborer, and two barbers, each armed with six years of schooling and high hopes—are honored by the accomplishments of their children and grandchildren.

*The authors are grateful to the families for the information and assistance they provided.*