

AGRICULTURE AS MOVABLE WORLD

PART TWO: THE MIDDLE MUDDLE

Land in Frankfurt on a plane, and a few steps take you to an escalator descending into the lower levels of railroad stations. Paris, Prague, London, Marseille, Milano, Munich are but a train ride or two from Frankfurt Airport. The trains are fast, very fast. Once they've moved past the clackity-clack of station switches they seem to float along – they're electric trains. The electricity, so DB (Deutsche Bahn, "German Rail") claims, flows exclusively from renewable sources. German public transportation is terribly efficient.

For Lena Lentz Hardt of Lentz Spelt Farms on the Columbia Plateau it's the first time in the Old Country. She's here to find out about her forebears, how they lived before they emigrated to Russia. How they farmed and how they built: the German word for "farmer" is *Bauer*, the related verb, *bauen*, means "to build." That her people in Germany were farmers was decreed by Catherine the Great, she specifically asked for agrarians to settle in the Volga borderlands of Russia, that was her strategy of frontier securement.

To start her journey of understanding central Europe, Lentz learns about the Limes (pronounced *Lee-mess*), the great wall the Romans erected across Germanic tribes' territories. For better and, mostly, for worse, the Roman Empire shapes Europe to this day.

For five centuries the Imperium Romanum ruled large regions of central and western Europe, putting the yoke on the peoples they'd conquered; this imperialist process also spread civilization as per Roman definition, consisting of an efficient infrastructure supporting farms and vineyards, towns, temples, forts; trade flourished in spices and oils, salt, gold, amber; hot springs were turned into bathing resorts, the *Therme*. Many of the conquered tribes actually came to like, or at least accept, the Roman sort of law and order and segregation by class structure; in effect these tribes became Romanized.

The year 9 AD was a watershed year for Europe. By then tens of thousands of soldiers were Rome's enforcers, and it was conceivable that all of Europe would come under Rome's rule as the empire's legions marched ever forward. Alas, a loose confederation of Germanic tribes outwitted the Roman advance; having lured three whole legions into the Teutonic Forest, the Germanic warriors slaughtered them. Losing some 30,000 legionnaires in just one battle was too much for even the Roman empire; psychologically the Teutonic impact was the knowledge, on both sides, that the Romans could indeed be stopped. Thanks to that 9 AD Germanic victory the Vikings would stay a free people left to develop their own culture, Scandinavia never succumbing to Romanization. As for the Germanic tribes, a split picture: south and

west of the Limes (and the Rhine) Romanization takes hold, whereas beyond the Limes dwell the “Belligerent,” as the Romans called them. What we know of the free Germanic tribes comes to us mostly through Roman writings. If life beyond the Limes was really as widespread barbaric as the Romans would have us believe, is put in question by the fact that after the collapse of the (western) Roman Empire in the late 5th century, the formally Romanized Germanic tribes quickly revert to the culture of their free counterparts. Traditional historians’ bias is to speak of the Dark Ages, in their prejudice that story-telling transference of culture is inferior to the written word.

On the Inter-City Express (ICE) zooming quietly at over 120 miles per hour, Lentz doesn’t feel particularly close to the Dark Ages that mark the begin of medieval Europe. As she sips espresso in the bistro car, towns flit by, and villages, so many villages. The scenery conveys a sense of nestling, the villages recumbent in gentle folds of land that reveals itself as fields and farm woods. Eventually a pattern emerges in the placement of the villages, drawing us back to the search for agrarian roots in the medieval era.

And so Lentz comes to think of these villages as *Dörfer*, because in design and function a *Dorf* is a very specific type of village, especially in the context of the Early Middle Ages. Germanic agriculture begins around 700 AD. Farms had existed long before then, as far back as in the Stone Age, but those farms had been impermanent, opportunistic in that they took advantage of naturally open ground along rivers and in clearings. Different the 8th century and thereafter: now farms-to-last were carved from the huge forests. Until the 1100s the stone ax was the tool used, which made clearing woods a heavy chore (the climate too wet for much tree burning).

It took an extensive communal effort to establish a *Dorf*. A group of men from a dozen or so families would throw up some huts and go to work clearing forest. Together they would wrest from the woods three large fields on contiguous ground; the fields were to be rotated, one for winter grain, one for spring crops, the third left fallow for grazing. A three-field development like that was called a *Gewann*, “won land.”

Only after four to five of such *Gewann* had been cleared were the *Höfe* built – the farmsteads that define the *Dorf*. Since the *Gewann* typically formed roughly a half-circle, *Dorf* communities often show up in old documents as *Hufen* (literally: hooves). The *Dorf* was located in the middle of the horseshoe of fields. At this point each field in every *Gewann* was divided into strips that were allotted to the individual families, in accordance with their participation in the land clearing. Thus each farmer had for his own family around 15 strips spread out over the about 15 fields of the *Dorf*.

The *Dorf* design distinguishes itself by farmsteads being built onto one another. The

purpose is starkly obviously from the street – no doors nor low windows face the street. Each *Hof* has a heavy gate; when the gates were closed the farmsteads of the *Dorf* were effectively sealed off from the street by a continuous wall-cum-gates parapet. This hard-to-penetrate *Dorf* design kept the farmsteads fairly safe from frequent marauders.

House and barns, stalls and hay lofts, smoke shacks, granary and threshing shed were grouped around the yard from where the buildings were accessed. Just beyond the outbuildings grew fruit trees; a continuous hedge of berry brambles often encircled the *Dorf* as protection against wild beasts. Street-side, meanwhile, the manure was piled against the walls of barn and house, this was for easy transport to the fields, and also to keep the worst smells outside the inner yard. The street-side manure piles leaked steady streams of liquid refuse that ran down the gullies on the street edge. Such manure-bordered village streets were a common sight – and smell – in some German regions up to the 1950s.

In the later Middle Ages the larger *Dörfer* would build a church with a wall around it. In case of bigger threats, as when small armies scoured the countryside, the villagers would gather inside the church for protection.

A common configuration of *Dörfer* was to group around a castle, which fortification would offer safe haven in case of war. It's this aspect of the villages that you can discern from the speeding train, even though the 21st-century function of Germany's *Dörfer* is no longer primarily agrarian. Of the castles, remnant towers and walls about hilltops; occasionally an intact castle frames the elevated horizon.

The ICE arrives in Nürnberg. Lentz gets off the train and joins the hurrying masses scurrying about the big train station. Elevators descend to an underground passage that disgorges hordes of travelers and commuters into downtown, right at what once was one of the big city gates. Tilt your head way back so your eyes reach the top of the massive tower of massive stone that attests to overbearingly impregnable empire might – Nürnberg was an important *Kaiserstadt des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation*, an “Imperial City of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation.” Until 1806.

But that's farther up the roots of Lentz's family tree, our story hasn't got to the Kaiser yet. Lentz will take a Regio train and then, the next day, a Mercedes sedan to Heinrich Hauser's *Dorf* of Weinsbach. Six generations lie between Lentz and this Heinrich Hauser.

We see castles on the way. Early castles were simple bulwarks, almost always built on a rise so that the nobles – armed thugs, really – could see who approached. The

so-called nobles lived by war and raid, and they preyed on traveling traders, exacting toll or worse.

If early castles look small by later standards, even their construction required enormous effort. Just for the walls and the stone towers, our forebears moved mountains of stones, literally. From quarry to hilltop, then onto the scaffolding, stone by stone. And of course a well had to be dug through layers of rock, deep, deep down.

Real estate property as we know the concept did not yet exist. For the most part, a farmer didn't so much own land as he had a claim on land, within the system of *Grundherrschaft*, *Grund* meaning "Ground," *Herrschaft* implying that one lorded it over people as subjects. Ground ownership without *Herrschaft* was too abstract for medieval thinking. Thus the lords had farmers as subjects, and defined their own holdings by what land claims their subjects had established. The lords, in turn, had above them the higher nobility, the count and Herzog and King who made up the ruling hierarchy. In effect, control of lands was by social structure.

What further made land possession a shadowy affair were the lands held in common by the *Dorf*, in particular the pastures for grazing that typically lay between the more fertile ground of the fields and the forest. The woods were of equally great importance as commons, not only for timber and firewood, for edible herbs, forbs, roots, but these woods also provided hog forage with their mast of beech, oak, and chestnut trees that made up most of the forest. Records exist of tens of thousands domesticated hogs feeding in just one forest at certain times of year. For horses, too, the woods were the primary feeding grounds. Because the forests were still vast and wild, many herders guarded the livestock.

Sometimes farmers asked a *Grundherr* – a "landlord" – permission to establish a *Dorf*, other times a landlord asked farmers to come and develop some of the land for agriculture. Two types of *Grundherrschaft* formed over time: *Salland* and *Hufenland*. The *Salland* (from Latin "terra salica") was usually developed outward from the landlord's castle on his behalf; the *Hufenland* consisted of farmer-initiated development of *Hufen*.

In the very early Middle Ages the relationship between the farmer and his nobleman could be fairly straight-forward and beneficial to both – the farmer would grow some of the crops for the count, and obligate himself to render services; in turn, the count vowed to protect the farmer. Many of the lower nobility had fortified buildings constructed adjacent to the *Dorf* and lived right there. The farmer's service to his nobleman was called *Fronarbeit* (today that word is slang for drudgery), and was initially restricted to 12 days a year.

The nobility's various strata, from barons to king, was established by force and ruthless leverage, by treaty and treachery. Much of what went on can be compared to the mechanisms of mafia gangs. Every time alliances shifted they'd battle it out.

As time went on, a count would have subjects in a *Dorf* here and a *Dorf* there, his subjects and thereby his holdings spread out all over the place, as was the case with the next count and the next. The result was the irregularly interspersed, almost random patchwork of holdings that typifies feudalism. It was not unheard of that farmers in one *Dorf* had as many as four lords.

When the lord lived far away, the *Dorf* was left to administer to its own needs, the community independently voting for its judges and decision-makers who oversaw the just distribution of farming strips, and made sure of fair division of tithes and taxes the *Dorf* had to render. This degree of successful self-government became ingrained in the farmer's psyche, as we shall see.

Meanwhile, the nobility took the right to make the law. Without a constitution, the law as it concerned the farmer was more or less common law, the farmers typically resorting to "custom" in their legal arguments. But a case based on "custom" was often difficult to argue vis-a-vis the counts and princes who, mostly, governed by their own volition and made up the laws as they went along. Thus law and rule in one place would differ from that in other places, and how rule was applied could vary from one generation to the next.

Much of rule and law had to do with the lords' rights to collect tax, toll, tithe. What other means did a count have for income at this time of almost exclusively agrarian economy? It's no wonder that the burdens on farmers grew and grew as the nobility built ever bigger castles and competed in accumulation of wealth. They became insatiable while proudly proclaiming the parasitic nature of their class – work, they insisted, was beneath them.

And what of virtue? Oh, the nobles had virtue all right, namely *die Tugend der Vergeudung*, "the Virtue of Squander." As incredible as it may seem today, all through the Middle Ages the nobles measured one another by how much wealth they could waste frivolously. The more heedless, the better respected their long feasts and drinking bouts. No expense was spared for the jousting tournaments. If it was a matter of prestige to demonstrate complete disregard for something like a budget, the nobles treated with contempt those who managed their wealth carefully, the traders and merchants. As for the castle's administrator, when he came to the count and reported that stores were running low, it was time to raise the farmers' taxes, wasn't it.

The nobles' psychology is so foreign to us today because of its dichotomy: on one hand they strove to increase their wealth, but they had no esteem for wealth itself.

Wealth was simply the means to instill respect for one's social status, precisely by *Vergeudung* of that wealth. The practical aspect of incessant partying and games was of course to keep one's entourage – the knights and other vassals – entertained when there was neither war nor raiding. The impractical aspect was that *Vergeudung* precluded any kind of investment of nobles' wealth for economic purposes; only by increasing their exploitation of the lower classes could the nobles grow their wealth in the long run, a policy that was sure to backfire eventually (short-term profit they derived from the sacking of other counts' villages, and various kinds of extortion among themselves).

The contrast's clear: over here you have the farmer family who with blood and sweat and tears produces food and drink, lumber and cloth for the nobility, while having to manage crops and livestock most judiciously to assure their own survival; over there you have the nobles who most brashly disdain the prudence of their subjects.

Not to say that the nobles didn't have their own version of public relations – the minstrels. Curiously, the early medieval minstrels are best known for lyrics they performed about heroic peoples and kings that had been dead for hundreds of years, such as the Nibelungen and their dragon-slayer Siegfried. Later in the Middle Ages the nobles, copying the French troubadour, would entertain as Minnesingers.

Meanwhile, the landlords with Salland at first had rent-agreements with tenant farmers, but before long the horrific system of "unmeasured" forced labor by *Leibeigene* (literally: "Body-Owned") was implemented. Many of these *Leibeigene* serfs differed from slaves only in that they couldn't be sold. Before long the landlords of *Hufenland* also owned *Leibeigene* serfs, until there were more *Leibeigene* serfs than farmers in many *Dörfer*.

Some regions put into practice a rule concerning illegitimate children, by which each such child was assigned to a woman of the cloister. The relatives of the child then had opportunity to pay 5 Pfennige to the *Chuntmeister* who kept track of these matters, which payment bought the child his/her rights. If the parents failed to pay the 5 Pfennige, the child him/herself could buy his/her own rights when of age, at a price of 24 Pfennige.

It must be noted that the degree of serfdom varied. Most *Leibeigene* were bound to life-long forced labor, "unmeasured labor;" however, they were sometimes given generous leeway to raise their own crops and livestock; a few of the more successful serf-farmers even owned *Leibeigene* serfs themselves. As for such a serf buying his freedom, that could run as high as 200 Gulden (by 1500 one Gulden had the buying power for 10 geese, or five bushels of rye, or 35 gallons of wine).

Then there was the type of serf who became *Leibeigener* voluntarily, for a time, until he could inherit a farm or be granted some land to farm.

Some records even list persons who declined to be freed from serfdom – they'd rather live as serf than be exposed to the tax and tithe pressures that nobles heaped on farmers.

The worst tax on farmers was the death tax. In some areas a farmer's whole property was appropriated by the lord after death; other regions had the death tax at 50 percent of one's property, which also crippled a farm operation. The lords in still other places only demanded the deceased's best cow and best piece of clothing – that's the least death tax we find in the books. The structure of the higher death tax types meant that a free-farmer family was often turned into *Leibeigene* serfs when the head of household died.

Another problem for farmers were marriage rules the lords made up. Not that marriage existed as we define it today, the church wouldn't make a sacrament of marriage until much later, so marriage in the early Middle Ages was a strictly civil affair, a common-law one. In general, folks simply lived together periodically as couples, if that's what appealed to them. The exception were free farmers; since farm economics made it less than feasible for a single man to work the land and raise livestock, marriage to a hard-working woman was a must. It would be centuries before the concept of the stay-at-home-mom, the housewife, would be realized (and what a coup for women that was at the time!). Due to the hefty workload in medieval times, it really took a village to raise a child. Children started work at about six years of age, doing light work such as herding. At 14 they had the right to marry.

The only actual marriages were of nobles, in the form of a contract between two aristocrat families. Often those contracts were hammered out when the marriage couple were still small children. The wedding ceremony had its highlight when the couple's relatives led them to the groom's room, there to undress them and watch them get into bed. The groom's father then enunciated the blessing of the two families' union. Only the next morning did the wedding festivities start, typically a three-day party.

The custom of ceremoniously recording the fulfilled marriage contract, supplemented by a lengthy explanation of how various personages were as of now related to one another, was in effect the beginning of genealogy as we know it.

If the noble wife did not bear children within a reasonable period, the marriage had to be annulled, the wife sent away to her family or to a convent, and the noble was expected to marry again in short order. But in general the ideal of marriage as a lifelong institution did not exist; in fact, some medieval texts praise second marriages as superior, citing the biblical Esther.

But even among nobles marriages were rare affairs. To avoid inheritance splintering

an aristocratic holding too much, many members of noble families were not allowed to enter into marriage. For the young women this usually meant banishment to a convent; the most famous such convent was that of Saint Hildegard who allowed only women of noble birth to become nuns in her abbey. Mixing common folk and nobility in a convent would be as unthinkable as putting up different kinds of livestock in the same barn, Hildegard decreed after another abbess, Textwind of the Sisters of Andernach, had criticized Hildegard's convent policies that also included the nuns dressing in brightly white finery, their hair long and loose.

As for the noblemen who weren't allowed to marry, they had their fun with *Leibeigene* girls; the practical fall-out of this was that the illegitimate children, who were from birth *Leibeigene*, could be trained for specific tasks from a very early age.

Further complicating the marriage situation for farmers and serfs was that many lords did not allow them to marry outside their *Dorf*, because then they'd become subject of another landlord. Cases are documented where marriage restrictions for villagers were so tight that they couldn't marry at all because their whole *Dorf* consisted of close blood relations.

Reading about the big picture, we find a large mix of *Dorf* conditions; *Leibeigene* serfs on one end of the spectrum leading an existence literally downtrodden, their toil brutal, while in the next *Dorf* over dwelled many free farmers with a high degree of self-determination, paying taxes low enough to where the farm could be economically secure while they enjoyed freedom of marriage and mobility. In fact, in such a *Dorf* an enterprising farmer, one who could afford to purchase weapons and armor and a war horse, could turn himself into a knight and thus become a noble himself.

In most *Dörfer* the populace was a mix of folks with several types of rights, free farmers and tenant farmers, *Leibeigene* serfs, day-laborers, the *Knechte*.

And in the forests, outlaws.

Lentz on the Autobahn, no speed limit. We're looking for the exit to Öhringen, of which Weinsbach is a satellite *Dorf*. Weinsbach is listed as a birthplace on the Lentz genealogy, here lived the Hauser branch.

As in most German towns and cities, much of the Öhringen *Altstadt* (old town) is a pedestrian zone, the cobblestone streets and lanes curving and crossing at irregular angles. Wrought-iron shop signs, protruding second-stories, town-wall remnants, clock towers, fountain – one does well to memorize landmarks, or one may wander for hours on the way back looking for the parked Mercedes.

City center is searched for easily, as in most towns it's where the tallest spires rise from church, town hall, count's palace, all of which group around the market square.

Lentz finds the square. Lunch at a traditional *Gasthaus*. The waitress brings the menu. Recommends the *Spätzle* as a local specialty. *Spätzle* are hand-made noodles, small and thickish, somewhat worm-like, an antidote to the elegance of Italian pasta in how they give a robust mouth feel, hearty in a whole-grain-flour way. The *Spätzle* come with thick sauce, and fresh vegetables fried.

How old is the *Gasthaus*? It was built in 1600. Ah, wouldn't it be great to imagine that some of her Hausers came in here, after trading spuds and fruit in the market square, maybe, to drink a beer before heading back to Weinsbach? Lentz might even be sitting on the very same bench where 300 years ago a great-great-great-great-great-grandparent lifted his stein. As for that beer, its brewing formula is of 500 years standing, so the label states – "*der 500jährigen Tradition verpflichtet.*"

Öhringen (today about 20,000 residents) has an interesting history. The surrounding plain, Hohenlohe, was popular in the Stone Age, lots of banded-ceramic artifacts have been unearthed here; strangely, the plain held no appeal for folks during the Bronze and Iron Ages, finds from those eras are very sparse. In Roman times *Vicus Aurelianus* ("*Aurelianus*" the root of "Öhringen") was a frontier town by the Limes, with two Roman forts that were staffed by 1000 legionnaires. In the 3rd century the Alamannes overran the fortifications, ending the Roman occupation but leaving behind a deserted Hohenlohe once again. Settlement began slowly in the 700s (a grave evidence of that). It took awhile for the settlements to be well-established, first documentary mention of Öhringen ("Oringowe") dates 1037. Continuous farming since then.

Did the Hausers farm for 30-some generations by Öhringen? Medieval rural folk seldom ventured beyond a 25-kilometer radius from their *Dorf*, so it's a distinct possibility that the Hausers were here that long. In which case Lentz can think herself as part Franconian, because even though Öhringen today lies in the state of Baden-Württemberg, analysis of local dialects clearly indicates east-Franconian heredity.

It's the first time Lentz regards herself as Franconian. Where will that lead her?

On the two-mile way to Weinsbach we climb up a little hill to traverse a small plain, then a side road dips into another hollow in the land. *Haus und Hof*: Lentz arrived.

(Here we must digress to explain what happened to the German *Dorf* since the 1960s. Up to then farmers and farm workers lived in the *Dörfer*, quite predominantly.)

The Green Revolution affected a big change; while we mostly think of the Green Revolution as occurring in Third-World countries, that same thrust of agricultural industrialization also changed Europe. In 1960s Germany the government organized *Flurbereinigung*, a “cleaning-up the ground” that consolidated smaller fields into larger acreages, more contiguous farmland. The result, predictably, was big reduction in farmer numbers. Concurrently, much industry, especially light manufacturing, moved from the cities into rural areas, thereby creating convenient workplaces for the farmers who were forced out of business. Also concurrently, the post-Second-World-War economic rise of the German *Wirtschaftswunder* made for a more mobile society; because real estate was considerably cheaper in a *Dorf* than in a city, as were property taxes and insurance payments, a whole social strata of Germans moved out of the city and built new houses in a *Dorf*. The result is that today most *Dörfer* are bedroom communities with little rural character left, farmers now a very small *Dorf* minority.)

First impression of Weinsbach: Lentz is pleased that this *Dorf* has retained an agricultural sheen. A few dozen newer houses do line the streets, but not enough to unbalance the rural character; at the core some *Höfe* are obviously still viable farmsteads, while several former farmsteads were renovated in such ways that bucolic semblance was preserved. We see no church, Weinsbach apparently never grew so large as to warrant one; it’s a nice place!

Set your foot on the street, Lentz. Heinrich Hauser saw the same *Höfe*, they’re clearly older than three centuries. Heinrich toddled along these streets on the hand of his cousin, wide-eyed. He trotted along here, making goofy, running and skipping. He trod along here when he was old enough for chores, tired from a long day of haying, the wooden pitchfork over his shoulder.

Take a photo of the stone walls, Lentz, of the brickwork between wood beams rising. Note the heavy gates still in place at one *Hof*. Smell the milk cows in that barn, hear the piglets scurrying in a stall over there. A cat slinks through a garden. An old lady with a hoe. Boys play in farmyard, kicking ball. Bark of dog in the distance.

The farm houses are large, built for three generations to live together. Wooden shutters frame windows small by today’s standard. Thick clay tiles, flat tiles of the *Biberschwanz* (“beaver tail”) type, protect the roofs. At least two chimneys rise from every farmhouse.

Set back a little a small house that must have been the bunkhouse for the *Knechte*, back when.

Which of the *Höfe* would have been the Hausers’? No Hausers live here today, the postman says.

Not exactly a grand place this Weinsbach *Dorf*, is it. Not legendary nor uplifting, but neither depressive nor ugly. Inspiring, actually, is the small *Dorf* huddle in its shallow vale, it's inspiring in a quiet, almost demure manner, with a charm not sugary but primrose sweet on calm days imaginable.

What if Catherine the Great hadn't lured farmers with her manifesto? Would Lentz be a farmwife in Weinsbach today, stoking her cookstove with chopped beech from the cordwood pile in the yard, would she be puréeing yellow potatoes, getting purple sauerkraut from the barrel in the larder, answering her *Handy* (cell phone) when the grandkids need a ride back from the football pitch? Would Lentz pick gooseberries for jam while her husband milks the cows of an evening? That there'd be small milk production – a dozen or so cows in the barn – is a given, to this day most Franconian farmers grow crops *and* raise livestock, the two go hand-in-hand. Lentz would spend some idle time knitting, that's still custom even among the younger-generation women. She'd also watch American TV flicks dubbed in German – one notes a satellite dish on almost every house, be that 1000 years old. Lentz would drive a shining car – vehicles over 10 years old are very rare in today's Germany. She'd check things out on the Internet, maybe track the weather report. For breakfast she'd make filter coffee for drinking from tiny cups, she'd set out *Semmeln* (rolls), *Butter* and *Marmelade* and *Wurst*, and she'd boil eggs that would sit in a hand-carved little egg-cups on the table, each with its cute little knitted cozy for keeping the egg warm until, shelled only at the top, it gets eaten with a small silver spoon. She'd turn the kitchen radio to the *Nachrichten Sender* (news channel); and after the meal she'd send her husband off on his John Deere tractor manufactured in Mannheim...

Or...

We drive along one of the curving Weinsbach streets, after a couple of blocks it turns into a country lane climbing a slight rise of about a half mile. The pasture and hay ground here are interspersed with *Streuobst* – fruit trees that grow semi-wild, spaced in irregular pattern as if “strewn.” Whereas the fruit trees by the farmsteads are pruned and picked for dessert apples and pears, *Streuobst* is allowed to reach for the sky, the fruit shaken and beaten off when ripe, for use in cider, sauce and other preserves, wine, and, importantly, for Schnapps.

On top of the short, gentle rise the lane levels. We're at a crossroads marked by an ancient tree. To the left and to the right, lanes continue on, flanked by fields. A pleasant overlook: this would have been one *Gewann*, that another *Gewann*, back in the three-field-system days. So this is the soil the Hausers and other Weinsbach farmers plowed, here they sowed and reaped. There must have been peaceful times, when the rhythm of the seasons gave assurance, made the world whole.

Today of course every field is much larger than an original *Gewann* that would have been divided into a dozen or more strips of as many farmers; still, compared to acreages in the New World, this is rather small-scale. Nevertheless, to this day Kreis Hohenlohe is agriculturally important.

Along one lane shade trees grow. They're not old trees; apparently the custom of shading the lanes is continued – for aesthetic and/or practical (bird perches) reasons –, even though the shade no longer pleases horse and wagon driver.

Past the *Dorf* we see tall beech and oak, mistletoe orbs in the higher branches. In the other direction, not far, a wooded swell. Right here, under this ancient crossroads tree, we imagine a last rest stop for the horse before he'll pull our cart loaded heavy with timber the rest of the way. We can – almost – hear him neighing.

Driving on from Weinsbach and Öhringen, Lentz notices Waldenburg Castle on the forest range south of the Autobahn.

That's no small castle. That's a fortified palace.

And so, in the timeline of our story, we come to the era of the Middle Ages when burgs got big.

Let's define the medieval by the three milestones protruding:

Summer 1525.

Autumn 1347.

Christmas Day 800.

Our days of wresting *Gewann* from wild forest, and building tower and keep for counts, changed when a French king called Charles conquered most of western and central Europe, scooping all the different fiefdoms, counties, kingdoms into one large empire that was to pay him fealty. Then our Charles and his troops went south of the Alps where a banged-up pope needed rescuing. After reinstating the pope in Rome, Charles had the man crown him as *Emperor and Augustus*, on Christmas Day 800, in the old St Peter's Basilica. Thus Charles, now known as Charlemagne, set precedent for a long succession of Kaiser. And the Vatican, even though popes ranked but minor princes at the time, got a boost of its influence.

Charlemagne's grandsons would split their inheritance; in dividing the French empire in the mid-800s, after King Louis of Bavaria had ousted his half-brother with a Slavic

army and conquered Alemannia, the eastern portion of Francia became one large empire where the peasants all spoke German dialects. Thus the reign of this King Louis – Ludwig - is generally accepted as the first point at which one can speak of a Germany.

But. Had you asked anyone within this “Germany,” they’d hardly have spoken of themselves as “Germans.” People related to count, prince, king, and to a region such as Thuringia, Hesse, or Swabia, Franconia, etc. The nobility wouldn’t speak German except to give orders to their subjects, conversing at court in French for another 1000 years. Not until the 18th century was King Louis given the nickname Ludwig der Deutsche (Louis the German). Not until the 1800s would Germany as a nation become a cohesive idea, Konrad Duden publishing his dictionary that at last created the German language from scores of dialects, in 1872.

Until the 1500s the German kings continued to make the cumbersome sojourn to Rome for the crowning by the pope, which elevated them to Kaiser. This did not sit well with the neighbors: John of Salisbury (*Johannes Parvus*, an Anglo-Saxon who was bishop of Chartres in the 1100s) expressed his outrage – “What gives them the right?” –, and Herbert of Bosham (top scholar in Thomas Becket’s household) went so far as to refute the Kaiser title – “rex Alemannorum” will have to suffice, the German king no better than Europe’s other kings. (Ironically, some of the Brits’ pub talk about Chancellor Merkel today sounds a lot like what Salisbury and Bosham wrote 900 years ago...)

After the crowning in Rome, the German Kaiser typically messed around northern Italy before returning to the German regions he currently held. There he lived in a *Pfalz*, a Palatinate, which he had nobles built for him. Since there was a *Pfalz* in every region, the Kaiser governed on horseback, riding from *Pfalz* to *Pfalz*. Whereas this type of reign left Germany with lots of castles and palaces for tourists to visit, it set the realm further back in terms of culture. By establishing a central government, other European kingdoms put themselves onto the world stage, Paris and London becoming global-reach cities while the Kaiser rode around endlessly with his entourage, from one *Pfalz* to the other.

Having a Kaiser changed the land. All those different classes of nobility now had a superior who based his rights on old Roman law. It was a sort of Romanization without the Romans. It helped to cement the standing and numbers of nobles more than in any other country in Europe, Germans the most obedient subjects of all, often even enthusiastically obedient to their Kaiser.

The Kaiser created a new class of aristocracy, namely nobles who paid tribute to the Kaiser alone. And the Kaiser elevated some farmers who now also were exclusively beholden to his majesty. Later the Kaiser awarded towns special rights, making them *Kaiserstädte*, thus we have a new class distinction between cities.

Kaiserstadt Dinkelsbühl, “Free Imperial City of the Holy Roman Empire.” Lentz stands in the moat, well, in the park where the moat used to be, staring up the immense stone tower, then gazing along the big wall that to this day completely surrounds the *Altstadt*. Let the German tourists express their awe of this Kaiser and that Kaiser, Lentz knows that for the farmers, imperialism by Kaiser meant more suppression, more extortion, more forced labor as the castles and palaces and fortification grew in size and scope.

What about her relatives, back in 1130 when the first Staufer-dynasty Kaiser fortification went up here at Dinkelsbühl? We arrive at no clear picture at all. Odds are that some of Lentz’s forebears then were free farmers, some were tenant farmers, others were *Leibeigene* serfs, still others outlaws. It’s also conceivable that Lentz has a great-times-40 great-aunt who was the illegitimate child of a prince.

The bottom line is that we must think of All those kinds of lives lived back then in the *Dörfer*, our heritage like deep tree roots growing into a shifting swamp bottom.

Put another way: the Middle Ages were a Middle Muddle.

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* Sources: Franken by Franz Kurowski; Das Mittelalter, Becksche Reihe: Friedrich Prinz/Massimo Montanari/Hans-Werner Goetz/Aaron J. Gurjewitsch/Peter Moraw/Philippe Ariés/Philippe Dollinger *