“German Submarine Warfare and the Making of an Accidental American Immigrant”

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[If I had a student number, I would place it here]
HISTORY 111 – US Since 1877

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While taking my first course on European history in college in 1980, I became curious about how my ancestors of European roots lived in earlier times, how they experienced the events I was studying, and really who were my ancestors. My parents told me that some of my ancestors had migrated to North America as early as 1620 on the *Mayflower*, the vessel that brought the first Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock. I became especially interested in my mother’s father, Gustav Horand (1893-1959). Born in Sissach, Switzerland, in 1893, he was the last person in my direct ancestry to migrate to America, arriving in 1917.¹ Exactly when and how Gustav migrated to America and what were the exact circumstances of that migration were not known to my mother, her siblings, or even their mother. The only thing my grandmother knew was that her husband had worked as a cook on a ship that had sailed from Europe long ago.² Gustav died before I was born, so it was impossible for me to ask him.

When and why did my Swiss grandfather come to America? Finding the answer to this question was especially frustrating because my grandfather was so near to me in time – our lives had almost overlapped, and when I began my quest, there were still people living who could have asked him when he was alive. I did have some tidbits to go by – his passport, some other of his papers, and a large Horand family tree that my grandfather’s cousin Jakob Horand (1895-1955), who had also grown up in Sissach, compiled in 1935. It traced the family back into the early 1500s. On it was information that before Gustav had come to America, he had lived in Amsterdam and had been married there to a Dutch woman.³

So many pieces of information, but so much missing! It took me some thirty years to find the answer to my question. A major part of the answer came while I was researching at the federal archives in Bern, Switzerland, on a cool and rainy day in April 2013. There I found a letter Gustav wrote from Portland, Oregon, in 1918, to the Swiss Army, explaining why he had
been unable to report for duty when he was required to do so. Subsequent research in the United States revealed that Gustav had become an accidental immigrant to America as a result of forces well beyond his control: German submarine warfare during World War I. This short essay will demonstrate that German submarine warfare in 1917, and larger circumstances of World War I, made Gustav an accidental immigrant to America. The threat of arrest in Switzerland for deserting his military duties likely made it impossible for him to return there and thus he stayed in the U.S. The essay will first review basic information on World War I and specifically how Germany came to utilize the submarine when it did. It will then the effects World War I had on Switzerland and Gustav’s family that actually started Gustav on his road out of Switzerland and eventually to America. In doing so, it will detail the role Gustav’s military service played in his life and his quest for work. It will detail the specifics of how this ship Gustav found work on became stranded in the U.S. in early 1917 due to submarine warfare. It will also explain, along the way, certain aspects of the war’s effects elsewhere on America and on my family history.

War broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914. The two major military alliances were the “Central Powers” of the German, Austria-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires, and “the Allies,” as Americans would come to know them, of Great Britain, France, Russia, and later Italy. At first the U.S., under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson, remained officially neutral in the conflict, though ideologically and, as far as continued trade with the belligerents went, it favored the Allies. As Nancy A. Hewitt and Steven F. Lawson explain in Exploring American Histories, Great Britain made it difficult for Germany to carry out trade during the war through a naval blockade that violated international law. The U.S. did little to protest this violation, since most of its trade was with Great Britain anyhow. To counter Britain’s blockade, Germany began employing the submarine or U-Boat (Unterseeboot in German) early in the war. This was a
frightening new weapon and the Germans used it to sink or threaten ships bringing supplies and trade goods to Great Britain, including American ships and British passenger ships, both of which American neutrality and international law would otherwise protect from attack. Tensions between the U.S. and Germany over the latter’s use of the submarine rose to a boiling point in the spring of 1915 when a German submarine sunk the British passenger ship Lusitania on which also traveled American citizens. The Germans knew that the Lusitania also carried war material from the U.S. that was headed to the Allies. As a result of this sinking, the U.S. threatened war against Germany. To avoid such a catastrophe, Germany agreed to refrain from further attacks on passenger ships, but did so at its own peril as the less-than-neutral trade between the U.S. and Britain continued basically unhampered.6

In the meantime, in Switzerland, life became difficult. It was a small country and also, like the U.S., tried to follow a policy of neutrality. Sharing borders with four of the major warring nations – France, Italy, Germany, and Austria-Hungary – placed the small country in a difficult situation. Exacerbating this was that Switzerland was a nation composed of French, Italian, and German speaking people who found it difficult to remain neutral in sentiment. Feelings were so strong that at times riots broke out and violence occurred. Some Swiss of Italian and French cultural background actually fought for the Allies.7 Gustav Horand was from the German-speaking part of Switzerland. We do not know what his and his family’s feelings were toward the belligerent countries. We do know, however, that his older sister Emilie, a nurse, did serve in Italy during the war for the Red Cross, a neutral and international organization that aided people affected by war.8

Wartime pressures in Switzerland did affect Gustav’s family in negative ways. As a small country, Switzerland depended for survival on imports and tourism, but with war raging,
traditional trade ended and tourism dropped considerably. The Swiss needed to expand their military in order to protect their borders. The cost was borne by the people with increased taxes and the loss of their breadwinners who had to serve in the low-paying military. This was the situation for Gustav and his family; he had to join the army and lost his regular employment.

“Since the outbreak of the war,” Gustav explained in his 1918 letter to Swiss officials, “my parents struggled with the worst circumstances. In evidence, my parents during and since my military school and my service in 1915 and 1916 have been dependent on support from the city of Basel.” After almost two years in the service, Gustav asked and received a leave in order to help his desperate family. He received permission to travel to the Netherlands, another neutral country, to look for work.

Gustav left Switzerland sometime in 1916, making his way to the Netherlands. The route he took will probably forever remain a mystery, but it is likely he traveled behind German lines. Not long after arriving in Amsterdam, he met his soon-to-be-wife, Josina Koch. They married on August 24, 1916. But life remained difficult and employment hard to find. Gustav received other extensions on his leave from the Swiss Army, eventually to November 16, 1916, at which time he was required to return to Switzerland. But a month prior to that date, Gustav secured employment on a Dutch ship that would soon sail to the Dutch West Indies (in the Caribbean).

What ship that was, however, was not such a simple matter to determine. Gustav Horand’s passport and other documents related to his arrival in the U.S. explain that the ship he had sailed on was the “Comerwayne,” which turned out to be a misspelling, complicating research. His passport, however, also explained that he landed in New York City in January 1917. A search through the daily shipping news carried in the January 1917 New York Times, revealed that a Dutch ship by the name of Commerwijne arrived at the New York harbor from
Haiti on January 25, 1917. Other research showed that it had visited the West Indies before Haiti and had sailed from Amsterdam on October 6, 1917. This was no doubt Gustav’s ship.

By the beginning of 1917, just when the Commerwijne was making its way to the Americas, Germany’s position in the war had grown desperate, in part because of Britain’s near complete naval blockade. As a result, on February 1, 1917, Germany made the fateful decision to resume submarine warfare. The historians Nancy A. Hewitt and Steven F. Lawson explain that the German leaders knew that this would finally draw America into the war against them. They gambled on the hope, however, that through the use of the submarine, they could end the war before the U.S. became a significant threat. That was not to be. The U.S. soon entered the war and the federal government established the draft. It eventually conscripted 3 million American men. Some 50,000 of these would die in the war and another 230,000 wounded.

As an aside, among those drafted was a young man named Wallace Boag, the younger brother of my other grandfather. The Boags lived in Portland, Oregon, and they threw a farewell party for Wallace on Monday, June 25, 1918, the night before he headed off to war. Wallace served in France. He survived the war. Upon returning, he married and soon became a father. His first child he named Wally. Wally Boag would later go to work for Walt Disney, performing a vaudeville routine at the Golden Horseshoe Review in Disneyland for many years. In the 1950s and 1970s, Wally also guest starred on the Mickey Mouse Club and the Muppet Show. His comedic style became an inspiration for the well-known American actor and comedian, Steve Martin.

But back on the other side of the North American continent and more than a year before Wallace Boag headed to France, on the day that Germany declared it would once again use its submarines, the Dutch ship Commerwijne, on which Gustav Horand was employed, lay idle in
the New York City harbor. At the time, the New York Times carried various news items about the disruption to peaceable shipping that the German decision made and that while some European and American ships did head eastward across the Atlantic, a number changed plans and stayed on the west side of the ocean for protection. Among those that remained in the Americas was Gustav’s Commerwijne. On February 4th, it headed back to Haiti and would sail back and forth between there and New York, not returning to Europe until 1919.20

With his ship not returning to Europe, and German submarine warfare raging, Gustav became marooned in America. He missed his deadline for returning to the Swiss Army and became a fugitive in the eyes of the Swiss government. The military court determined that should he return to Switzerland, he would face a fine and a jail sentence.21 He never did return, possibly because of the warrant for his arrest, though we do not know this for sure.

Gustav’s association with a war that so changed his and his family’s lives had not ended upon his entry into the U.S. Although not a U.S. citizen, the American government compelled him to register for the draft anyway and he soon found himself in the army again, but this time in America. By means of the Army, he would end up in California. Learning that one of its citizens was in the U.S. Army, and working hard to maintain neutrality during the war, the Swiss Embassy demanded that the U.S. Army release Gustav, which it did.22 Gustav then made his way to Portland, Oregon, where he lived when he wrote to the Swiss Military Court in 1918, explaining why he had been unable to return to Switzerland to continue his service. (Gustav obtained a divorce from his Dutch wife while in Oregon in 1922.23) And so, Gustav became an accidental immigrant in America. He never became a U.S. citizen, however.

After 33 years of looking for the reasons why and the means by which Gustav Horand came to America from Switzerland, I found much of that answer back in Gustav’s home country
where the story really began: a letter written by him in his native language, but from Portland, Oregon, and tucked away in long forgotten file in the Swiss national archives. In this letter, Gustav described the circumstances of the war that led him to leave Switzerland for the Netherlands, where he eventually found work on a Dutch ship that sailed to the Americas. Additional information gleaned especially from the New York Times’ column on ship arrivals and departures that regularly appeared in the early 20th century, showed that ship remained on the west side of the Atlantic. Other research filled out the rest of the story – principally that the ship Gustav had come to America on did not return to Europe as a result of German submarine warfare that broke out just as it intended to leave New York, possibly with Gustav Horand on it. There are, of course, many more pieces of this story yet to discover, but to me, the major question I set out with years ago has been answered.
NOTES:


2 Peter Boag, Oral History Interview with Elizabeth Horand Johnson, December 18, 1980.


5 The literature on World War I and American neutrality is vast. For a good summary, see Nancy A. Hewitt and Steven F. Lawson, Exploring American Histories: A Survey, 2d edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017), 492-95.

6 Hewitt and Lawson, 493.


8 Boag interview with Johnson.

9 Church and Head, 198-99.


11 Horand, “Horand Familie Stammbaum.”

12 “Gustav Horand an den Territorialgericht” and “Materials in Horand Gustav 1893, Dienstverweigerung.”
13 Gustav Horand’s passport and some other documents related to his arrival in the United States are in the possession of the author. These are noted in the bibliography as part of “Horand, Gustav. Papers.”


16 Hewitt and Lawson, 494.

17 Ibid, 495.

18 Portland, Oregonian, June 26, 1918, 11.


21 See, “Materials in Horand Gustav 1893, Dienstverweigerung.”


23 Horand, “Horand Familie Stammbaum.”
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Boag, Peter. Oral History Interview with Elizabeth Horand Johnson. December 18, 1980. This was the first of several oral histories I conducted with Johnson over the next four years. In this one, I was particularly interested in recording what she could remember about her parents and ancestors and her husband. We also examined the Horand Family Tree (Horand, Jakob. “Horand Familie Stammbaum,” below) and discussed discoveries there, including Gustav Horand’s first wife in the Netherlands and the possibility of him having children there.

Horand, Gustav 1893. Dienstverweigerung, E5330-01#1000/894#8339*. Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern, CH. The various documents contained in this dossier located in the Swiss federal archives is a gold mine. It contains multiple pages of information about Gustav Horand’s military service in Switzerland during World War I, his applications for leave from service, papers related to the military process against him, and his letter of defense written from Portland, Oregon, in 1918. That letter, in his own hand, provided his firsthand account of the circumstances that led him to the Netherlands and then to America.

Horand, Gustav. Papers. These are materials handed down through my family related to Gustav Horand. They include his Swiss passport and papers related to his time in, and discharge from the U.S. Army. These documents give the month and year of his arrival in America, the name of the ship he arrived on (though it was misspelled), and where he was discharged from the U.S. Army.

Horand, Jakob. “Horand Familie Stammbaum.” Sissach, Switzerland, 1935. This was a major source of information on the basics of the Horand family’s history in Switzerland. Horand compiled it in 1935 from years of research at local archives in Switzerland. The tree contained a summary of the origins of the family, a discussion of different lineages in the family, and some discussion of outmigration. Additionally, this tree contained basic birth, death, marriage, divorce materials for most of the descendants of the original Horand in Sissach, Switzerland, down to 1935. A close American relative of mine (an uncle) had visited Switzerland in the 1970s and was presented with a copy of this tree, which is how it made it into my hands.

New York Times, various issues. This source was tremendously helpful to me in reconstructing the sailing schedule of the Dutch ship Commerwijne, which Gustav Horand was on when he came to New York in January 1917, just before unrestricted German submarine warfare commences. It also carried articles after February 1\textsuperscript{st} of the disruptions to shipping as a result of the German decision to employ its submarines.
Portland, Oregonian, June 26, 1918. This newspaper article was very short, but described a send-off party for Wallace Boag as he headed off to war with some other boys related to the family.

U.S. Selective Service System. World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, “World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918.” Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, M105. Available at Ancestry.com, https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/993905/person/-2019213055/facts. Accessed August 24, 2017. There is limited information contained here, but it does show that Gustav Horand registered for the draft while living in New York State shortly after his arrival from Europe. The name on the card is actually Kristof Horand, but it is clearly signed Gustav Horand and other information, for example his birthdate, matched family records.

Sissach, Switzerland, Volkstimme. This is the local newspaper for the town in which Gustav Horand was born and raised. It began publishing in the 1880s and is still in circulation today. On page 3 of the 10 January 1934 issue appears the obituary of Friedrich Horand-Wirz, father of Gustav Horand. The obituary provides a fairly detailed summary of Friedrich’s life including the hard times he and his family experienced early in the 20th century and then moving to the city of Basel where they sought relief.

**Secondary Sources:**

Church, Clive H. and Randolph C. Head. A Concise History of Switzerland. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013. This is an excellent history of Switzerland from Medieval times to about 2010. While the section on Switzerland during World War I is short, it helped me understand the social, cultural, and economic tensions that the country and its people navigated at that difficult time. Especially useful to me was information it provided on Swiss soldiers, their pay and other employment circumstances, and how this affected family economy. Since this was all central to understanding Gustav Horand and his kin, this was essential for me to reconstruct the reasons why he left Switzerland after a couple years of service in the Swiss Army, seeking “fortune” elsewhere.

dordtenAZOEKer Dortse historische gegevens en meer. Accessed January 8, 2015. http://www.dordtenazoeker.nl/inhouddordtenazoeker/passagierslijsten westindie/1/COMMEWIJNE%n1. This website, in the Dutch language, provides information on the history of various Dutch ships. From it, I was able to learn about the voyages of the Commerwijne, that Gustav Horand sailed on from Amsterdam to the West Indies, to Haiti, and then to New York City in 1916-1917, as well as subsequent voyages of that ship back to Europe.

This is basically a length obituary for Wally Boag. While my essay only briefly touches on his life, this provided more than the basic facts.

Hewitt, Nancy A., and Steven F. Lawton. *Exploring American Histories: A Survey*. 2d edition, value edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017. This is a good, basic textbook and American history. From it, I was able to glean a good deal of information what was useful for constructing the background to my story. Hewitt and Lawton summarize U.S. diplomacy during World War I, outline the German use of the submarine at various points, provide figures on the number of American troops, as well as give additional information about the mood on the home front, which was not directly relevant to my essay.

Personenlexikon des Kanton Basel-Landschaft. “Jakob Horand.” Accessed August 24, 2017. [https://personenlexikon.bl.ch/Jakob_Horand](https://personenlexikon.bl.ch/Jakob_Horand). This site provides a brief biography of Jakob Horand, including his local history research and publications and is work for the local government in Basel-Landschaft. It is in the German language.