

Emigration from the County of Bentheim to the USA 1847 bis 2022

Welcome everybody. My name is Gerrit Jan Beuker, I'm nearly 70 years old, born in Vorwald north of Emlichheim and for forty years, I was a Pastor for the Old Reformed Church and for ten years also for the Reformed one in the places of Uelsen, Hoogstede and Laar, for five years in Neuenhaus.

(So I am one of the first pastors who has preached for the Reformed as well as the Old Reformed Church because there have been some differences of opinion between the two churches from the start)

The reason why I speak to you today is to talk about the emigration of people from the County of Bentheim to the USA, especially to Michigan and the region around Holland, Michigan, a city, by the way, famous for its Tulip festival.

I lived there personally for some time as a student, I keep busy with my work for the American-German "Bentheimers International Society" and I have had personal connections there for nearly 50 years up to the present.

In order to get started, let tell me: Around 1830/1850, 1880 everybody in this County of Bentheim was a member of the Reformed Church. There was only one church, the Reformed – and that's it. Still today nearly every second inhabitant of this county is Reformed, about a quarter is katholik and about 20 percent luthern.

So let me ask you:

Who belongs to the Reformed Church? (Please show up your hands)

Who of you is Altreformiert / Old Reformed or Koksch?

Who belongs to a Lutheran or Catholic church.

And of course some are Muslim or of no religion

(There are about 100 students in the auditorium).

That is as expected. / This is quite unusual.

(What do you think? What is the difference between Old Reformed and the Reformed Church?)

And can you explain what means the term "Koksch" and why people use it?)

I am "kocksch" – that means of Old Reformed religion. In 1838, a Dutch reverend, pastor Hendrik de Cock founded a new congregation and a new church near Groningen in the Netherlands. He and his people were unhappy in the old Reformed (hervormd) Church of the Netherlands. There were different reasons for the split

De Cock and his folks did not want to sing the newer songs – they only sang biblical psalms as it always had been in the church services in earlier times.

De Cock and his people wanted to be reformed Christians as the old ones had been –

Their teaching was different,

their preaching was different,

their life was different

and they wanted to be Christians with heart and soul, inside and outside, in word and deed.

In the Netherlands police and army tried to stop this movement for about four years from 1834-1838 Soldiers e.g. had to live in the houses of the Seceders (Abgefallene, Abtrünnige, Separatisten). Some of the Seceders were imprisoned and they had to pay high fines (Bußgelder). In 1838 this changed, people got more freedom over there.

But – exactly in this year 1838 this movement came across the border into Germany, at that time the Kingdom of Hanover, in to the County of Bentheim. 1838 the Oldreformed Church of Uelsen was founded by Albertus van Raalte, in 1840 the local church of Bentheim was founded by Hendrik de Cock, who died already in 1841. In 1845 the oldreformed communities of Emlichheim and Hoogstede were founded, in 1849 the ones in Wilsum and Veldhausen.

Finally – that is the way it still is today – about 20/25 percent of the people of the northern part of the County, in the Samtgemeinde Emlichheim 20/25 % belong to the ORC. In the middle part of this County, in the Samtgemeinden Uelsen and Neuenhaus there were and there are and were in the average about five percent of the inhabitants Oldreformed. And in the southern part of this County, that means in Nordhorn, Bentheim, Schüttorf there were and are less than one percent of the people Oldreformed.

These free-reformed, old-reformed – reformed as the old ones had been had connections with the Old reformed Church in den NL, with the Free Church of Scotland or with the Free Church of Silesia (Schlesien) and other ones.

BUT:

Those oldreformed people had no freedom of religion till 1848. Ten years, 1838 till 1848 they have been persecuted and imprisoned. Their church services were forbidden. If they gathered with more than their own relatives, they had to pay heavy penalties. The police was everywhere to stop services and to persecute the visitors of free church services during the week and on Sundays.

The judges at the Court e.g. over here in Neuenhaus, and the mayors (Bürgermeister) of cities and villages at that time were near relatives of the pastors, they often were a brother or a uncle of different reformed ministers in this County of Bentheim.

This means, church and state tried together to stop these separatists. This was, what they were named the Oldreformed people: Separatists. (Separatisten!)

Separatist is not a word of the church, it is a word of the state, of politics.

Von Separatisten spricht man ja bis heute in der Ukraine und in anderen Ländern. Separatisten gelten als Abgespaltene, als Getrennte – und eigentlich auch als Verräter an der gemeinsamen Sache! Sie wurden und werden verachtet und gemieden.

Die offizielle Bezeichnung für Altreformierte in Kirche und Staat lautete „Separatisten“ und nicht Ketzer, Irrlehrer oder Falschgläubige.

Altreformierte ließen ihre Kinder nicht mehr taufen in der offiziellen reformierten Kirche, sondern in ihrer eigenen Gemeinde. Das schuf sofort Probleme. Denn es gab nur die eine reformierte Kirche der Grafschaft. Praktisch alle Grafschafter gehörten dazu. Die ganze Grafschaft war reformiert und sonst praktisch nichts – seit 1588.

Diese Kirche stellte auch das staatliche Standesamt. Standesämter gibt es erst seit 1873. Bis dahin waren die Pastoren der staatlich anerkannten damals Reformierten Kirche auch Standesbeamte. Sie mussten jede Geburt eintragen und jede standesamtliche Trauung vollziehen.

Besides: The Reformed Church of this County of Bentheim stood totally on its own, till it became part of the newly formed Reformed Church, as we know her today in 1882. At that time: The Reformed Church of the Kingdom of Hannover.

(Die heutige Reformierte Kirche wurde 1882 gegründet. Bis dahin bildete die Reformierte Kirche der Grafschaft eine eigene, eigenständige Kirche, die ursprünglich 1544 (luth) bzw. 1588 (ref.) vom Fürsten von Bentheim gegründet wurde, der sie über Jahrhunderte leitete und unterstützte. Erst seit 1882 gibt es den größeren Kirchenverband, etwa auch mit staatlicher Kirchensteuer in der Grafschaft.)

Harm-Hindrik Schoemaker, a farmer from Haftenkamp, lived from 1800 till 1881. He was not only a farmer. Besides that he taught catechism classes and bible lessons in his house in Haftenkamp and surrounding houses. More men gathered people around them. They read sermons in public or even preached themselves in farmhouses or schools.

Harm Hindrik became their leader. They did not go anymore to the public Reformed Church in Uelsen, because they did not find “food for their soul” “food for the heart” over there, as they said.

Schoemaker was imprisoned several times and he had to pay huge fines of money – it was forbidden to come together with your neighbor or other people to pray, to read the Bible or a sermon or to preach even yourself.

Two of his sons and four of his grandsons became leading ministers in the churches of Germany, the Netherlands and the US.

There was a prison in Uelser Tor here in Neuenhaus, which stood at the corner of Lager Straße and Hauptstraße. There Schomaker was imprisoned.

The later oldreformed pastor Jan Berend Sundag from Samern next to Schüttorf, was imprisoned between 1838 and 1848 more than thirty times, for some days, some weeks or even some months.

He also preached at the farms in Haftenkamp and surrounding places since 183 and he was imprisoned at this Uelsener Tor here in Neuenhaus. He lived from 1810 till 1893. He was the pastor of the Oldreformed Church of Bentheim from 1840 till 1893!

Many more people had to pay heavy fines – and wanted to have freedom of religion.

And not only that: The living conditions were very poor, extremely poor. People literally had nothing. Still in 1950 (!) the north-eastern part of the County of Bentheim had the name of **“poorhouse” of Germany.** (Noch 1950 nannte man die nordwestliche Grafschaft und das anschl. Emsland **das Armenhaus von Deutschland!**)

In the 19th century the oldest son became a farmer and got the farm. Their younger brothers and sisters had no income, no job. They often lived as unmarried uncles or aunts on the farms. Or they became a farmhand or a maid on another farm. (Sie wurden Knechte oder Mägde auf anderen Höfen.)

Many, many people emigrated – not only from over here – but from many different countries in Europe. They emigrated to the PROMISED LAND (in their eyes, where milk and honey would flow), **to the LAND OF THE FREE** –the United States of America.

Millions of people went by sailboat across the Atlantic. **Their journey lasted from two till four months or even half a year** from their former home in Europe to their place of destination in the US: They came from the Netherlands, from Poland, Italy, France, Belgium and of course also from Germany.

And from the County of Bentheim. The people of this County of Bentheim mostly went to Western Michigan – They settled there together with Dutch people at the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.

From the northern part of the County of Bentheim, aus der Niedergrafschaft, which had at that time probably about 10.000 inhabitants between 1850 and 1900, emigrated to the US the highest numbers of people in three waves:

The first wave went off in **1847/48 – just earlier before people over here got more freedom of religion**

the second wave went around **1866:**

That year the **Kingdom of Hannover became part of Prussia,**

and people over here expected nothing good from Prussia.

E.g. they did absolutely not want to become a soldier for Prussia.

The **third wave emigrated in the 1880s.**

The Reformed Church of Bentheim became in these years part of the much bigger **“Reformed Church in the Province of Hannover” in 1882.**

The king of Hannover now became the head of this new built Reformed Church.

Structures and laws had changed in this new church -

Oldreformed and also many Reformed people now said: **It became a State – Church!**

And The County of Bentheim was founded in 1885

The former Departments (Ämter) of Neuenhaus and Bentheim now became one!

ZAHLEN AUF PPP

The 1845 newly founded local Oldreformed congregation of Hoogstede emigrated in 1847 nearly completely with 70 people.

The consistory of the 1845 foundet Oldref. Church of Emlichheim emigrated also completely in 1847.

About 25% of the inhabitants of the little village of Tinholt, next to Hoogstede, emigrated to the US between 1847 and 1900.

Farmers sold their farms in these years, and the government forced the one who bought such a form, to take over the name of (family of) that farm! Government wanted to stop the emigration!

On the other hand you have to say, local officers more or less forced people. living in the local poorhouses, to emigrate. It was cheaper to pay their trip overseas emigration to the US, than to pay all their life for these poor people. The villages had to pay themselves for their poor people. These more or less forced immigrations happened in several places of the Niedergrafschaft!

2. Crossing the Atlantic, on the way to Michigan.

How did people get to the US between 1845 and 1900?

Emigrating people In the 1850s sold nearly everything they had. They had to have food for themselves for about two or three months of the journey. Dried Meat, dried Beans, or both in salt, potatoes, corn, and so on.

You said Farewell to your loved ones, to brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents. You knew, you never would see them again! **It was a farewell and a departure for ever!**

Besides: First pictures of persons were made around 1850 in Amsterdam, by the 1880s also in Lingen. People emigrating and the ones staying home in the old country, wanted to have so badly a picture of left or leaving ones.

And almost all the letters written over the Atlantic from Bentheim to Michigan and backwards from MI to Bentheim, often written in the Dutch language, they all end with one sentence: **Schrijf spoedig terug. Write back soon. Schreib bald wieder** (SHOW BOOK TITLE). Some did not get a letter for many, many years, maybe never. There were people, who hardly could read or write. Some never wrote back a letter.

You could go by ship to Rotterdam or Amsterdam, over the Vechte and the IJsselmeer to Amsterdam or Rotterdam and from there by big Sailboats across the Atlantic. But nearly nobody went by ship over Vechte and Isselmeer. Often you had to wait for good weather. In stormy times no ships would leave the harbor.

Already in 1858 a regular steamship-line started between Bremen and New-York. In 1862 you could go already to Bremerhaven by train to the ship. In 1871 the Norddeutsche Lloyd opened the first waiting room in Bremerhaven. So since 1871 the emigrants did not have to wait for hours and hours anymore in the open air before entering their ship. This means, emigration was a big business – you could make money, by helping people to emigrate. Agents of different companies were travelling around – and seeking people for their company willing to emigrate

Till 1854 Le Havre in France was the mostly used harbor for emigration, afterwards it was Bremerhaven. In 1854 about 77.000 people left Europe via Bremerhaven. 77.000 people every year – only this one harbor. That is more than half of the inhabitants the County of Bentheim has today! And there were many more harbours: Hamburg, Amsterdam, Antwerpen. I mentioned already Rotterdam and Le Havre.

Poor people still had to go by sailboat till about 1885– it took much more time, but was less expensive. About 1880 / 1890 (nearly) everybody went by steamboat – the journey took only about 14 days instead of being on the Atlantic for about two months

Very, very few came back – to visit the Old Country since about 1900. There were many more men emigrating than women – so some single men – came back between 1920 and 1935 – to marry over here - and go back to Michigan with their wives.

You know already of the health check at Ellis Iland (Folie). Some people were sent back across the Atlantic. If you were sick or blind or mentally ill – you were not allowed to immigrate to the US. I told you of the oldreformed consistory and congregations of Hoogstede – all of them emigrated – except the family of the nearly blind elder: They had to stay at their place in Tinholt.

And the religious reasons you had only in the Netherlands and in the Niedergrafschaft. Oldreformed and may be even Reformed people in the Obergrafschaft said: God hast brought us into this situation of no freedom of religion. We are not allowed to fly, to emigrate. We have to stay and to fight over here.

Mostly the sons and daughters of farmers and leaseholder (Colonen und Heuerleute/Pächter) emigrated, through the years as many from the reformed as from the oldreformed confession. I guess 1847 till 1866 you have more oldreformed people. (Folie).

They went to and founded places like Graafschap (1847), Bentheim, Holland (1847), Zeeland, Drenthe, Overijssel,

POWER POINT

3. Life in the US (pull factors)

Very often the people, who emigrated first – pulled their relatives and their siblings over the Atlantic. They wrote home letters and telling:

We eat white bread every day. Over here in those years white bread was the high end of luxury. At a high feast day you might get one time white bread. – Over here Blackbread (Brownbread, Schwarzbrot) was usual. Weißes Auszugsmehl und weißes Brot war Luxus.

Or they wrote back: We eat meat nearly every day. Over here – still in my youth in the 1950s there was one day a year, where you could eat as much meat as you wanted: That was New Year's Eve, the last day of the Old Year.

Emigrants wrote back: We bought and we are in possession of our own land. That was the top: To become a farmer on your own. To have your own cows and pigs and sheep, your own horse or even more horses than one.

They wrote **stories** of the big city of Holland Mi, also when there existed at that time only a few houses. So people coming over there from Europe after a long trip – often were disappointed.

Emigrants did not write back, how difficult it was, to start living over there in Michigan. They did not write back the difficulties of cutting down the big trees and clearing the farmland.

They did not write back, that many of them first worked at American farms or in a furniture factory, to earn some money.

They did not write back, how difficult it was for many of them, to learn the English language or how difficult it was, when you did not understand, what Americans said.

Some of the emigrants did not learn English till after 1900. They lived in their own group, in the Dutch “colony”. And even people from this County of Bentheim emigrating in the 1950s had problems with good English all their lives – just the way I have too!

So emigrants did not write back about the poor primitive conditions of their life in Grafschap or Holland or what other place let us say till 1900. This changed around 1900.

E.g. you see picture around 1910 with immigrated people from the County of Bentheim – **driving their own car in Michigan!** Much earlier than in Europe having a car was a sign of richness in the US. I read that in the 1930s already 15 percent of Americans / (American households (?) owned a car. Farmers and workers in factories – could have a car. You could only dream of it in the County of Bentheim between 1920 and 1940.

I guess in the 1960s, may be even earlier, the people of Holland, MI wrote back, their main street was heated, was warmed up in the winter – so it would not become icy. Eine Straße mit Fußbodenheizung –war in den 1960ern in der Grafschaft unvorstellbar!

Emigrants did not write back **in the 1850s**, 100 years earlier, that all of them had become **members of the Dutch Reformed Church of America**. There was no Oldreformed Church in Michigan – till 1858. And then in 1858 – it were the people, mainly the people of Graafschap – who founded their own Oldreformed Church in Graafschap MI – starting with very few people and less than five congregations. Afterwards this became the CRC, the Christian Reformed Church – Today well known all over the US! Christian Reformed is the American word for Oldreformed over here.

Besides: In the US, In MI there were and are so many Christian denominations– you can not imagine how many. All the people of all the different countries in Europa coming to the US founded their own church communities. So all the German Churches you may know – are also in the US: German Reformed, German Luthern, German Katholik, German Oldreformed and many others.

But also the Polish Churches, the Italian, the British, the Irish and so on and so on. These churches are different than the ones we know over here!

You have probably heard or seen already, how often American politicians are praying in public or talking about Gods help and blessings. “In God we trust” says the rim of the American Dollar coin!
The idea of God and money are more closely connected with each other over there than over here.

Having a health assurance by law for everybody – is in many American eyes communistic. I have heard so often: Everybody has to care for him- or herself. The public state has to do as few things as possible, as few laws as possible, as low social security from the state as possible.

Universities, schools or churches often are funded in the US by private people and groups. Studying at Calvin College or University in Grand Rapids will cost you at least 25.000 Dollar a year, I guess much more these days.

People pay incredible much money for good schools and universities. Of course you have to have a scholarship. Man braucht Stipendien und Stiftungen, die einen unterstützen.

Till today about half, nearly half of the American people go to church every Sunday! And in this church they may have a gym and a bookshop and a museum, may be even a garage (das ist eine Autowerkstatt!). Often this is a part of a local church. The community of the members of the local churches is much stronger than in Germany.

And there are local churches with 50.000 or 100.000 members – with their own TV – station, their own newspaper and neighbor help.

From our point of view – many Americans are Christian Fundamentalists or Evangelicals. It is not strange for them, seeing former president Trump with a bible in front of a church.

Coming back to the immigrants from our County of Bentheim.

Parts of them had Dutch church services till WWI. They had Dutch newspapers and churchpapers. In the County of Bentheim till about 1900 nearly everybody spoke Dutch and no German. There were many schools all over the country in which German or Dutch were spoken as the main language. The church songs and sermons over here were held in the Dutch language – this lasted longest in the ORC, in my native church of Emlichheim even till the 1960s.

This stopped at the time of World War I. Now it was not allowed any more to speak German in schools outside of German class. German newspapers and the German language. You could be a spy (ein Spion) of the German War Party. Germany now was the enemy – and you were ashamed to be a German in the US at that time.

A problem of identity: **The sons and grandsons of the first Bentheimer immigrants became American soldiers in both World Wars.** Would they have to fight against their own cousins and relatives? Older

people had much pain and sorrows with these questions. Some of these German-American soldiers tried to become part of a medical care unit –

And in the US – the Bentheimers were happy, that Americans often mixed up “Deutsch” and “Dutch”. The emigrants themselves declared to be Dutch and not Deutsch. Their descendants named themselves also “Dutch” – this happens till today. Many people over there even do not know today, their forefathers and -mothers came from Germany, from the County of Bentheim because they think, they are Dutch.

On the other hand:

Having relatives in America was a good help after WW II. There are many letters written after WW II across the Atlantic – asking for help and care packages and giving thanks. A care package could bring you clothes or conserves with meat or other things you needed between 1945 and 1947 over here.

Local churches and churchleaders in the CRC in MI organized gatherings of food and clothes for people in Bentheim. The way we e.g. help people in Rumania is related to the care packages from the US after WW II. Einige von euch kennen vielleicht heute die reformierte oder altreformierte Rumänienhilfe – Ähnlich verlief das mit den Carepaketen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Many German Children at the end of the 1940s got their first chocolate by American soldiers or by a care package from the US. The packages also send shoes, socks, dresses and other useful things.

4. This way I have come to the time after WW II.

It took till the 1980s till relatives visited each other across the Atlantic. After WW II again young adult men and young couples tried to find luck in the US or in Canada. Mostly former emigrated relatives stood surety for them. (Frühere verwandte Auswanderer sagten meistens Bürge für sie. Ein Bürge musste garantieren, dass die neuen Einwanderer dem amerikanischen oder kanadischen Staat nicht zur Last fallen würden.)

I know many couples, today already grandparents, who often died in the meantime, who went from the northern part of this County of Bentheim to the US or Canada in the early 1950s. Families like Voogd, Nieboer, Segger, ten Brink, Harger, Meier, Klompmaker, Schippers, Wanink, and many others.

The first official invitation reached Holland MI with the 650 Jubilee of the city of Nordhorn in 1979. A group of descendants of former immigrants was invited to be part of the jubilee. Already in 1980 a group from this county went to MI for a reverse visit.

As I told you in the beginning: I have lived in Grand Rapids MI in 1978 and guided different tourgroups afterwards till about 2000. Students from Calvin University in Grand Rapids are visiting every years since 1978 our places over here.

Students from this Lise-Meitner-School visited Holland MI different times, between 2000 and 2005. In this summer 2022 a group with students from this school went on a trip to the US, but they did not visit Michigan.

We expect a group of MI tourists over here next year, and it is planned that a group from this side will visit Edmonton and Vancouver in Canada also 2023.

In 2003 the Bentheimers International Society was founded, the BIS. At their homepage you can find the names and some stories of the about 5.000 immigrants – from this County of Bentheim to the US and Canada between 1847 and 2000. They have a quarterly newsletter – which I am still translating for some people over here, who can not speak or read English.

Did the immigrants became happy in the Promised Land? Yes, they did. But they are missing their brothers and sisters and relatives living over here. Some of them told me, if I had known in the beginning of the 1950s, that the County of Bentheim would come in such a good situation, that life would become so good in Germany – I never would have emigrated.

And they told me: We can not go back to Bentheim, because our children and grandchildren are living over here. They will be good Americans – we are in between both continents.

I guess, this is the situation of every refugee and every immigrant in every country and continent of the World.

And at the end: I moved different times in my life with my family, also with little children. In 1988 we moved from Uelsen to Hoogstede. And one of my children, at that time about 9 years said: Daddy, I guess going there is like going on vacation. But – we never will go home again – right?

And I said: Yes, that's right. But we will find and create at the new place a new home and a new homestead. The place where we live is our homeplace, our home village or city, our home country. It depends on what we make of it and how we see it.

Gerrit Jan Beuker, 14.11.2022