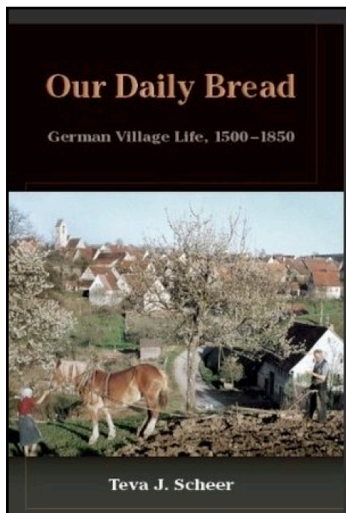


BOOK REVIEW

Contributed by Mary Ferm

Our Daily Bread: German Village Life, 1500-1850

by Teva J. Scheer (2010) Adventis Press: Saanich, B.C., Canada



Katherina Bibelhausen (1835-1915) of Valwig. Clemens Wenceslaus Corneli (1785-1816) of Valwig. Waldburg Bauer (1786-1847) of Offenburg. After mining German church records on microfilm, all I had for the German branches of our families were names and dates and places. Awesome names at that, but still, this makes for pretty dry genealogy. Then, I found Teva Scheer's wonderful book at a genealogy conference, and it filled in the picture of the world they lived in and the social structure which dictated their choices.

Scheer had encountered the same problem I had in researching her German family, so she did the research and wrote a book that, as she says, she would like to read herself. She created a composite German family from southwest Germany that would illustrate all the facets of life that she needed, and structured her topics around the story of this family. Topics include status, religion, war, governance, law and order, marriage and inheritance, work, the village year, and emigration. The story-arc makes the book entirely readable while at the same time the book gives authoritative and accurate background information. There are 20 pages of notes with citations, and 15 pages of bibliography, in which she emphasizes books and articles written in English.

This book answered many questions for me. For example: Why did Katherina Bibelhausen's parents not marry until relatively late? (Her father was age 31 and her mother was age 35.) One possible reason for this that Scheer describes is partible inheritance, which was common in southwest Germany. This meant that heirs down through the generations had smaller and smaller portions of property. Some governments or village officials began to place restrictions on the formation of new households. The poor were forced to postpone weddings until they could demonstrate they had sufficient resources and income. Likely Katherina Bibelhausen's parents were not very well off.

Then there were answers to questions I had not even known to ask. The list of rules pertaining to outsiders ("foreigners") from other villages who might want to live in a village was eye-opening. For example, applicants who wished to practice a trade in a village would be denied if the village administration determined he would injure the livelihood of any village burger. No inhabitant could sell or renovate his property without advanced permission. Any foreigner who bought or lived in a house who did not intend to become a burger had to offer his property for sale to a village burger within a year. The helpful glossary explains that a burger is a citizen, the status of which could be inherited or purchased, and could not be transferred to another locality.

This is only a tiny sample of the gems to be found in "Our Daily Bread". If you are wanting to know more about those German names and dates in your family, this is the book for you. I see on her website that this author has now published a book on two Irish families-- "The Harp and the Hand" (2016)-- one family in the south, and one in the north. You can be sure I will order a copy of that book, too.