

The following is a copy of a letter written by Jakob Wilhelm Dechant to his Mother, Brothers, and Sisters on his arrival in America.

Baltimore, MD June 26th, 1807

Dear and Beloved Mother, Brothers and Sisters:

I feel as if risen from the dead, now that I am able to give you some report of myself. No doubt you have already mourned me as dead, but I still live. The waves of the sea were not destined to be my resting place. Frightfully the foaming waves of the stormy ocean raged, but after two months we landed here. How I escaped death on this sea voyage I cannot explain to you as I do not understand it myself. Hunger, thirst and distress of mind I suffered on this sea voyage. Often, my dearly beloved, I thought of my awful fate and as often I wished (forgive me for this thought) that a wave might bury me. But no, Providence had destined me to more cruel suffering -- it let me bear misery to its fullest extent. As a slave (think of it -- the lowest class of people) was I traded by a treacherous and most feelingless man. What I suffered here I need not and cannot describe to you. Despair overpowered me and surely, my dearly beloved, I would have gone to my grave where Rest laughs at Misery. Surely I would have cut off the thread of my life, had not an angel in human form ordered me back from the portals of death. The Creator be praised that even tigers beget gentle Lambs. My tyrant had eight children -- five girls and three boys. Among these eight [children] were two angels innocent of the tyranny of their merciless father. They had noticed my silent grief and misery and advised me to give my awful resolve to forestall [meaning preempt] the Almighty. But still I was their slave. I was forced to do the most ignominious tasks, and I was obliged to serve his bad boys merely for their amusement. You can imagine that this nearly set me crazy. At last, with patience, I sought HIM whom I had forgotten, whom I had offended and who alone could give me rest, and HE did so. He brought me help when I least expected it. I had gone so [long] that I had no hope of ever being saved, but it came.

My friend Schneider, to whom I had written, came and redeemed me from slavery. With his assistance I was placed in a condition to start a little business. It was very hard to get along and even Schneider did not succeed. When he fell into misfortune I thought, "Oh God, is there no rest for me? Have you destined me to perish beneath the burden of such a cruel fate?" Well, so be it. My melancholy overcame me and I certainly would have gone wrong again had I not found an honest old man who helped me with his good advice. He was German, and what surprised me most was when I discovered that he had come over with our uncle from Landenbach. He received

me into his house, cared for me as a child, and taught me a few days. "You have some good qualities", he said to me one morning. "The Americans say "du" [meaning the familiar] to everything and your Father, Uncle and Grandfathers were preachers -- "do" the same. You need not bother [worry] yourself so much if you only get some money -- the preachers here will be only too glad to receive you because there are so many congregations here that have [need of preachers]. You need not study so much with the Americans. In one year you are ready [to preach] and can make enough money for yourself. And when you have become a genuine preacher, I will not hesitate to give you my best horse for the honor of having helped you along." (He only had twelve horses, the old man.)

You can easily imagine that I seized this opportunity. With the assistance of the old man, (whose name was Miller), I became acquainted with a preacher whose name was Pauli from Magdeburg and who presented me to the synod. (This is a Union of all American Reformed Preachers). They received me very willingly and decided that for this year I should study with Dr. Becker of Baltimore. All expenses were paid by these gentlemen. Dr. Becker is also a German from Bremen and is a Doctor of Theology. He is really an honest and elderly man and his wife is a mother to us all. I am not alone, Dr. Becker has a son and then there are three other young men in the house with us. We all study together.

Next year I will be done and then I must preach in six or eight congregations every four weeks, and my income will amount to about 1600 to 1800 fr. If I only had this money in my possession now my greatest pleasure would be to divide it with you. Have patience, however, only a short time and then I will not forget that grief I caused you and especially our dear Mother. If someone wants to come over he is cordially welcome, but no one but an intimate friend, a brother or sister. For these I will do all I can, and can assure them that it will be all right for them here -- but if people come who imagine that they will fall into fortune they will experience what I did and soon regret their folly. Compared with the many thousands of my countrymen who remain in slavery for years, I was fortunate indeed. For me there is no more stress, but you cannot depend on this. In my case it was more chance, and a lucky one at that -- thanks be to God who has so disposed.

Whoever of you, my dearly beloved, should decide to come over here, he would be doubly to me. Would to God that Mother and Sister Philippina could come, even brother Fred would be dear to me. I could help him with a little I have, and you, dear Mother, could live with Sister and me. Even our unfortunate brother Louis, if he still

lives, and I could hardly offer him anything that would satisfy him. He would have to begin to study theology. Cramer and Lizzie would probably not find a fortune here, but if I had them [you] all, with my good friend Brahl in your midst, I would be happy. In a couple years I can do a great deal for you all, even if I had to take you all to my parish. From your answer I will see what I have to hope or fear, still you must not take me too quick at my word. But this I beg of you, first write precisely what you intend to do and then I will give you advice and assistance.

The books of my father, deceased, were all there before my departure. Write me in passing what kind of books they are. I would probably make good use of them now. If I must buy them they will cost me about 300 fr. which I will send you.

Over and above all, I hope for an early answer and give you my good wishes a thousand times. Remember me to all who meet you, not only friends and relatives, but to all you can. Relate to every one the events of your brother and restrain them by this from going out on adventure.

I will also greet you heartily and wish nothing more that I could embrace you all, especially you, dear Mother.

Fare and well, and forget not,

Your son,

Jakob Wilhelm DeChant
c/o Dr. Becker
Second Street
Baltimore, Md

NOTES:

This letter was written about two and a half years after he arrived. He was so discouraged (as per letter) that he was ashamed to write. The Mother and friend in Germany had the Union of German-American Reformed Preachers locate him and pay his bondage off.

His good intentions of bringing his family over here are unsure, but as listed in a Reformed Church Bulletin as soon as he got a church he was married and started raising 12 children.

Jakob's father was a preacher in Appenheim, Germany. Jakob's 2 sons, George Benson Dechant and Ludwig Dechant became preachers.