

Photography, Mobility, and Transatlantic Migration around 1900

Weil's Photo Studio in Germany and New Jersey

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Abstract: The steam vessel Bohemia left the Port of Hamburg on August 7, 1887. On board this emigrant ship was the 28-year-old photographer Anton Weil. The passage on the Hamburg American Line took about two weeks. Right after his arrival in New York, he married a young widow of German origin. They settled down in Jersey City Heights, where they founded a photography studio. The family lived and operated their business there for about a decade. After their return to Germany, they ran studios in different places in Altona (near Hamburg), but then left the city and decided to establish themselves in the same trade in the rural town of Hagenow, Mecklenburg.

Their story draws attention to two topics: the increased mobility of business people providing a rather modern service in the late 19th and early 20th century, and the role of photography in transatlantic migration. Beyond the search for traces of the life and work of a German photographer on both sides of the Atlantic, this essay deals also with issues of mobility and return migration, a subject often neglected in the study of regional history.¹

¹ This paper is a revised and extended version of a recently published article by the author, see “Lichtbild(n)er in Bewegung. Das Fotoatelier Weil in Hagenow, Altona und der Neuen Welt”, in *Dinge. Bilder. Menschen. Beiträge zur Volkskunde, Geschichte und Museumsarbeit in Hagenow, Mecklenburg und darüber hinaus. Festschrift für Henry Gawlick*, ed. Thomas Kühn (Wismar: callidus, 2023), 101–120. The author is indebted to Gary Saretzky for numerous examples, helpful information, and his shared knowledge on the history of photography in New Jersey. The author would also like to thank the reviewers for their competent and constructive comments as well as Keith Melville for assistance with translation details.

From Southwest and Northeast Germany to the United States

Anton Weil was born on July 21, 1859, in Speyer, Palatinate, in the southwest of Germany. The son of a lathe operator, he was baptized on August 12, 1859.² Nothing is known about his childhood, youth, or education. A single photograph (carte de visite) suggests that he temporarily worked as a photographer on Prinzenstrasse in Staßfurt, Province of Saxony, in the 1880s.³ His profession gave him the opportunity to offer his services as a mobile trade; itinerant daguerreo- and ferrotypists as well as photographers operating glass plate cameras were common in Germany up until the end of the 19th century.⁴ Even the multiple relocation of a stationary business to distant places was possible, as the example of Weil's Photo Studio vividly illustrates.

Emigration to the United States was an option for a young man with a decent education, technical skills, and an entrepreneurial spirit. Biographies like these challenge the idea of a sedentary society in the 19th century⁵ and the myth that only poor people sought their fortune on the other side of the world. According to the records, Anton Weil was 28 years old when he entered the *Bohemia* on August 7, 1887. The steamship served regularly the route from the Port of Hamburg to New York; it was owned by the Hamburg-American Packetfahrt-Aktien-Gesellschaft (HAPAG), often described as Hamburg America Line. Weil was registered as a

2 Stadtarchiv Speyer, Zivilstandsregister, 1798–1875, Eintrag Nr. 218. (www.ancestry.de, accessed October 10, 2021); Vereinigte Protestantisch-Evangelisch-Christliche Kirche der Pfalz, Speyer, Taufregister, 1859–1868, Bd. 17, Eintrag Nr. 139 (www.ancestry.de, accessed July 30, 2021).

3 The photography is part of the private collection of Rico Schäfer (Staßfurter Geschichtsverein). I would like to thank him and Birgit Dreke (Archiv der Stadt Staßfurt) for their kind information.

4 See Ludwig Hoerner, *Das photographische Gewerbe in Deutschland 1839–1914* (Düsseldorf: GFW-Verlag 1989, 28–31).

5 For a recent perspective on the mobility of rural societies see Katrin Lehnert, “Kritik des methodischen Residentialismus. Die ländliche Gesellschaft und die Produktion von Sesshaftigkeit im 19. Jahrhundert”, in *movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 7 (1), 61–76 (<https://movements-journal.org/issues/10.mobility-regime/03.lehnert--kritik-des-methodischen-residentialismus.html>, accessed July 2, 2023).

photographer on the passenger list.⁶ Right after his arrival he married Elise Bösche, a young widow of German origin.

Elise Sophie Weil was born on October 12, 1856, in Neubukow, a small town in the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, in the northeast of Germany. She was the fourth of eight children of town musician Ferdinand Harz and baptized on November 9th.⁷ As a daughter of a large family she, like many people from this area, left her homeland in expectation of a promising future in the United States. According to the passenger list, 16-year-old Elise boarded the *Thuringia* on September 11, 1872. She was accompanied by Wilh[elmin]e Malchow, who was six years older and came from Neubukow as well. Another transatlantic passage was recorded five years later. Elise, now officially a New York resident, crossed the ocean from Hamburg to North America on the *Suevia*.⁸ These repeated voyages suggest that Elise Harz met her first husband at sea: On August 9, 1879, the sailor Friedrich Albert Bösche reported to the registry office that his wife Elise née Harz, who lived with him in Hamburg, had given birth to a son named Wilhelm Ferdinand on July 13, 1879.⁹ The child's father died in the following years, and the young widow returned to New York with her son in August 1887 on the steamship *Wieland*.¹⁰ Two days after her arrival, she married the photographer Anton Weil, who had also recently arrived in the metropolis at the mouth of the Hudson River.¹¹

6 Staatsarchiv Hamburg (StAHH), Hamburger Passagierlisten, Bd. 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 059 A, S. 138 f., Mikrofilmnr. K_1736 (www.ancestry.de, accessed May 11, 2021); National Archives, Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820–1897, Bd. 40, Listennr. 1065, Mikrofilmnr. M237 (www.ancestry.de, accessed July 30, 2021).

7 Landeshauptarchiv Schwerin (LHAS), Großherzogtum Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Volkszählung 1867, Zählbezirk: Neu Bukow, Haushaltungsliste Nr. 320 (www.ancestry.de, accessed September 9, 2022); StAHH, Sig. 332-5_9939, Standesämter, Personenstandsregister, Sterberegister, 1876–1950, 1943, Bd. 2, Eintrag Nr. 740 (www.ancestry.de, accessed July 30, 2021).

8 StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten, Bd. 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 034 A, S. 19, Mikrofilmnr. K_1722 (www.ancestry.de, accessed December 1, 2021).

9 StAHH, Sig. 332-5_1957, Standesämter, Personenstandsregister, Sterberegister, 1876–1950, 1879, Bd. 8, Eintrag 3661 (www.ancestry.de, accessed December 1, 2021).

10 StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten, Bd. 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 059 A, S. 149–151, Mikrofilmnr. K_1736 (www.ancestry.de, accessed December 1, 2021); National Archives, Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820–1897, Bd. 6, Listennr. 1057, Mikrofilmnr. M237 (www.ancestry.de, accessed December 1, 2021).

11 StAHH, Sig. 332-5_5421, Standesämter, Personenstandsregister, Sterberegister, 1876–1950, 1940, Bd. 2, Eintrag Nr. 672 (www.ancestry.de, accessed May 11, 2021).

Weil's Photo Studio in New Jersey

The couple had their roots in two German regions from whence an above-average number of emigrants took part in the transatlantic exodus from Europe during the 19th century. Since the late 17th and early 18th centuries, many people left the Palatinate in search of better living conditions on the continent and overseas. These emigrants from areas in the southwest were later increasingly joined by Germans from the northwest; the third prominent area of origin was the northeast, including regions such as Mecklenburg. Among the first German immigrants to New Jersey were many farmers who arrived there via various migration routes, including secondary migration from neighboring regions such as New York and Pennsylvania.¹² Craftsmen and entrepreneurs from Germany had a significant impact on New Jersey's industrial development, particularly in sectors such as glass and textile manufacturing, metalworking, and brewing.¹³ In total more than 5.5 million people emigrated from German territories to the United States between 1816 and 1914: with a share of around 30 percent, they were the second largest group of immigrants after Irish migrants in the first half of the 19th century, and from 1861 to 1890 the largest.¹⁴

12 See Mark Häberlein, "Pfälzer in Europa seit dem 17. Jahrhundert", in *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Klaus J. Bade et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2007), 846–850. For early migration from this area to New Jersey, see Rudolph J. Vecoli, *The People of New Jersey* (Princeton: D. van Nostrand Company 1965), 53–55.

13 Vecoli, *The People of New Jersey*, 88–96.

14 See Jochen Oltmer, *Migration im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte, Bd. 86 (München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2010), 9–15.



Anton Weil, Jersey City Heights. Full length portrait of a young man, standing. Cabinet card, ca. 1890. Author's collection.

Many of these migrants began their voyage in Hamburg or Bremerhaven and reached New York via Ellis Island. The Weil family settled down close to the place of their arrival: From 1889/1890 Anton Weil can be traced as a photographer at the address “394 Palisade Avenue, Jersey City Heights” in New Jersey.¹⁵ On October 25, 1890, their daughter Elisabeth was born. Around 1892 the family moved their studio a few houses down the street. The store was relocated to “384 Palisade Avenue” and renamed Weil’s Photos. respectively Weil’s Photo Studio at this time.¹⁶ The exclusive use of the family name suggests that the photographer already employed staff or that his wife Elise (and possibly his stepson) were increasingly involved in the business. The company names used later also support this assumption, since the terms *Studio* or *Atelier* replaced the photographer’s first name, which was still listed at first, as was the case with most contemporary colleagues.

¹⁵ *Gopsill’s Jersey City, Hoboken, West Hoboken, Union Hill and Weehawken Directory 1889–1890*, 581 and 662; *ibid. 1890–1891*, 545 and 616. The Jersey City etc. directories used here and below are available online as digitized copies from the Hoboken Public Library (www.digifind-it.com/hoboken/home.php, accessed September 20, 2022).

¹⁶ *Jersey City and Hoboken Directory 1893–’94*, 679 and 758.



Weil's Photo Studio, Jersey City Heights. Reverse sides of Cabinet cards with elaborately designed imprints, ca. 1895. Author's collection.

The Weil family came to live and work in an urban environment shaped by immigration and the different cultural background of its inhabitants. According to the United States Census in 1880, almost 65,000 persons living in New Jersey indicated Germany as their country of origin. Among the immigrant groups, the Irish were first with 42 percent, but native Germans were second with 29.3 percent.¹⁷ Particularly urban areas like Jersey City and Hoboken had large and influential German communities; the latter was nicknamed “Little Bremen” for a good reason. Alongside the British and the Irish, German immigrants created a distinctive cultural life with sports and singing clubs, restaurants, German-language schools, and newspapers in certain towns and neighborhoods in New Jersey.¹⁸ Photographic services became an important part of this cultural self-assertion as a result of their migratory experience.

17 In 1920, Germany still is the country with the second most immigrants living in New Jersey: a total number of 92,382 people corresponds to 12.5 percent; most immigrants at that time came from Italy. In the 1950s, Germany provided the largest number of immigrants, but by 1980 their share became insignificant. See Douglas V. Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*. New Jersey History Series 4. (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission 1994), 38 (table 3) and 64 (table 4).

18 See Vecoli, *The People of New Jersey*, 116–126.

Photographs, Photographers, and Migration

The emergence, stabilization, and influence of transnational social networks is seen as a key to the understanding of continuous migration processes. This view has even prevailed in the analysis of historical migration in recent decades.¹⁹ Letters are regarded as the most important source of personal information for those at home and those willing to emigrate: they were passed on, copied, read aloud by pastors and teachers, and sometimes published as reports from the New World. Mecklenburg, a region particularly affected by emigration, had the densest transatlantic communication in the northeast of Germany at the end of the 19th century.²⁰ Unfortunately, the importance of photographs for these processes is rarely considered. As early as 1983, Peter Assion pointed out the increasing demand for portraits in times of mass migration. They were sent around the world and served—even more than written testimonies—as credible evidence of well-being and success. In addition, they strengthened social ties: As lifelike images, photographs could represent an absent person and enable a “dialogue” between separated people.²¹

This article picks up this thread. An early local example for the importance of pictures in combination with written reports is a letter dated August 13, 1857: Johann Schneider, who had been in Cincinnati since 1851, sent a family portrait to his father in Hagenow, Mecklenburg. In the letter he explains that through the portrait, everyone could see them as if they were there

19 For basic information on this concept see Thomas Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000); for an overview of the historical dimension see Klaus J. Bade, “Historische Migrationsforschung”, in *Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien. Zehn Jahre IMIS*, ed. by Jochen Oltmer. IMIS-Schriften 11 (Osnabrück: Universitätsverlag Rasch 2002), 55–74.

20 Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung. Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck 2002), 156.

21 Peter Assion, “Amerika-Auswanderung und Fotografie 1860 bis 1930”, in *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 7 (1983), 3–18, 5.

in person. In fact, this was the first time the old innkeeper was able to see his American-born grandson Heinrich.²²

Photographers like Anton Weil had experienced migration at first hand; at the same time, they became part of the business. They knew the needs of other immigrants, perpetuated transatlantic communication by their services, and encouraged further emigrants. Weil's professional qualifications enabled him to establish a livelihood in Jersey City, although there was no lack of competition. The photographic trade had a strong presence in the second largest city in New Jersey. Archivist and photo historian Gary Saretzky has identified at least 175 photographers and related professionals in the city on the Hudson River for the period before 1900.²³ Among the numerous photographers in the state of New Jersey—in the years 1861 to 1865 235 studios opened here—are many immigrants and descendants of emigrants from different areas in Germany: One of the pioneers in North American photography is Charlotte Prosch, who was the first female daguerreotypist to work in Newark as early as 1847, and thus the first woman in this profession in New Jersey. She was born in Pennsylvania, but her parents were German immigrants.²⁴ Theodore Gubelman was born in Constance in 1841 and emigrated with his parents in 1854. After working in Trenton and Tennessee, he lived in Jersey City from 1864 to 1906 and is considered an ambitious and successful photographer.²⁵ Louis Nagel, also of German descent, maintained a studio in Hoboken between 1868 and 1887. Charles A. Henkel had been photographing here since 1893; but before that, the son of a German immigrant had

22 Henry Gawlick, *Als Fotos noch kleine Sensationen waren. Frühe fotografische Zeugnisse aus Hagenow. Ein Beitrag zum 160. Geburtstag der Fotografie*. Blätter zur Kulturgeschichte und Volkskunde Südwestmecklenburgs 4 (Hagenow: Eichenverlag 1999), 1.

23 Gary Saretzky, *Nineteenth Century New Jersey Photographers. Revision of illustrated article in New Jersey History, Fall/Winter 2004* (http://www.gary.saretzky.com/photohistory/resources/photo_in_nj_July_2021.pdf, accessed November 11, 2021).

24 Gary Saretzky, "Charlotte Prosch. New Jersey's First Female Daguerreotypist," in *GardenStateLegacy* 31, March 2016 (www.GardenStateLegacy.com, accessed November 11, 2021).

25 Gary Saretzky, "Photographers of the Civil War Era. Theodore Gubelman of Jersey City," in *New Jersey Studies* 7, Winter 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.228>).

been working in the immediate neighborhood of the Weil family on Palisade Avenue in Jersey City Heights.²⁶

Like other salesmen and service providers, German-speaking photographers were patronized by their countrymen. The newly married Weils reached Jersey City at a time when the German communities in the United States were well developed. The foundation of social, cultural, and religious institutions; clubs; and media linked to the immigrants' origins provided numerous opportunities in urban society and a low demand for assimilation. According to James M. Bergquist, the German communities and their infrastructures faced a period of transition by the end of the 19th century; the diversity among their members became eminent and the number of German immigrants subsided.²⁷ Family photos as a medium of self-assurance and self-location, however, played an important role in the formation of a German American identity in general and individual family identities in particular.²⁸



Weil's Photo Studio, Jersey City Heights. Full length portrait of a young girl, wearing a sash and an American flag. Cabinet card, ca. 1895. Author's collection.

26 Saretzky, *Nineteenth Century New Jersey Photographers*

27 James M. Bergquist, "German Communities in American Cities. An Interpretation of the Nineteenth-Century Experience," in *Journal of American Ethnic History* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1984), 9–30.

28 See Petra Götte, "Die deutsche Auswanderung in die USA. Familiäre Identitätsarbeit im Spiegel privater Fotografie," in *Kulturelle Differenzen und Globalisierung. Herausforderungen für Erziehung und Bildung*, ed. Johannes Bilstein et al. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag 2011), 235–254.

Examples show how connections of professional photographers to fellow Germans and the ties to their home country mattered on institutional as well as personal levels even many years after the crossing of the Atlantic. Sarah Greenough describes the growing number of camera clubs and societies in the United States and their social, economic, and cultural functions in the late 19th century.²⁹ She highlights the European influence on the emancipation of photography as an art form in its own right, while emphasizing American conditions and outcomes. Around 1880, there were less than ten organizations, mainly consisting of commercial photographers and other professionals linked to this trade. The German Photographic Society of New York was established in 1867 and met twice a month at 62 East Fourth Street, New York City; this association is among the oldest of its kind and the only one referring to the origin of its members.³⁰ According to a journal, Theodore Gubelman was president in 1889, and Louis Nagel was among the trustees.³¹

Gubelman became a member of a German singing society and was married to a German-born woman. But his ongoing contact to Europe was not limited to the local immigrant community. He and his wife traveled to Germany and Austria on several occasions. Their son Leopold, who became a successful photographer as well, completed his studies and additional training in Vienna.³² Another important example of transatlantic education is the famous photographer and artist Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), who was born in Hoboken to German Jewish immigrants. He received his schooling, studies, and practical experience during a temporary family sojourn in Germany.³³

29 Sarah Greenough, "Of Charming Glens, Graceful Glades, and Frowning Cliffs. The Economic Incentives, Social Inducements, and Aesthetic Issues and American Pictorial Photography, 1880–1902," in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. by Martha A. Sandweiss (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers 1991), 258–281.

30 Ibid.; see also *The British Journal Photographic Almanac, and Photographer's Daily Companion* 1896, 558; here the year of foundation is indicated with 1868.

31 *The British Journal Photographic Almanac, and Photographer's Daily Companion* 1889, 348

32 Saretzky, "Theodore Gubelman," 215–222.

33 See Richard Whelan, *Alfred Stieglitz, a biography* (Boston et al.: Little, Brown and Company 1995).

It becomes clear that emigrants did not necessarily buy a one-way ticket in European ports; neither was migration to North America a one-way street. In fact, at least one-third of the people who came to New Jersey between 1900 and 1920 eventually left the country; but a remarkable percentage returned.³⁴ Seasonal migration became a viable way of earning one's livelihood. Success or failure may have been equally decisive for a return. Pleasure trips, visits to relatives, and repeated trips for educational purposes were also common. All traveling people, their local communities, and their letters and photographs helped to establish and maintain transnational social networks.

By the end of the nineteenth century, processes of assimilation among German immigrants in the United States had intensified. In *The Great Disappearing Act*, Christina Ziegler-McPherson demonstrates how a large, well-organized, confident, and publicly visible immigrant group like the Germans in an urban setting like New York integrated into American society until the first quarter of the 20th century through forms of strategic and enforced ethnic invisibility.³⁵ German immigrant photographers in the United States were able to play ambivalent roles during this transition period. Their studios initially served as places of self-affirmation where German migrants could present themselves as respectable, united, culturally independent, and successful. With increasing social mobility and the rise of anti-German sentiment during World War I, photographic images gradually avoided explicit national markers and depicted their subjects as unmarked or even consciously American individuals.

34 Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity*, 50–51. For more information on the rarely considered topic of return migration see publications like Winfried Folz, *Pfälzer Rückwanderer aus Nordamerika. Schicksale, Motive, Reintegration*. Studien zur Volkskultur in Rheinland-Pfalz 11 (Mainz: Gesellschaft für Volkskunde in Rheinland-Pfalz 1992); Mark Wyman, *Round-trip to America. The Immigrants Return to Europe 1880–1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1993); Karen Schniedewind, “Return Migration to an Urban Center. The Example of Bremen, 1850–1914,” in *People in Transit. German Migrations in Comparative Perspective, 1820–1930*. Ed. by Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 329–346.

35 Christina Ziegler-McPherson, *The Great Disappearing Act. Germans in New York City, 1880–1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2022). For an early account on this topic in the case of New Jersey, see Vecoli, *The People of New Jersey*, 131–172.

Portraits from photographic studios preserved many faces of known and anonymous people from the past, but the operators behind the camera usually remain invisible. Ironically it is an administrative form filled in by hand that gives at least a rudimentary impression of the photographer's appearance. Anton Weil applied for a passport on September 12, 1895, at the age of 36.³⁶ Since passport photos were not common at the time, representatives had to identify the document holder by a brief description of his or her external features. According to the report, the applicant had a stature of 5 feet and 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, a high forehead, brown eyes, a "stout" nose, a medium-sized mouth, and a split chin. His reddish-blond hair corresponded to his red complexion; his face was beardless. Furthermore, the application reveals that Weil had lived in the United States of America continuously for eight years and had been naturalized on October 13, 1892. The form assumes the intention of a temporary stay abroad and asks for the date of the planned return. The fact that Weil did not fill in this line indicates that he was considering or even planning a permanent return to Germany.

The family was recorded in the New Jersey State Census 1895 for Hudson County. While the parents are listed as "foreign born" and originating from Germany, the children are considered as "native born."³⁷ Their last appearance in the city directory dates 1895/96. The following issue names photographer Franz Niemeier under the same address. Preserved cabinet cards reveal Niemeier as proprietor of Weil's Studio.³⁸ Apparently, he had taken over the business and kept the established name for advertising purposes.

36 National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D. C., Passport Applications, 1795–1925, October 1895, Microfilm No. 455 (www.ancestry.de, accessed September 11, 2022).

37 New Jersey Department of State State Census of New Jersey, Hudson County, Jersey City Ward 11, 1895, p. 80/81, Mikrofilmnr. V227_82 (www.ancestry.de, accessed September 11, 2022).

38 Vintage Collection of Gary Saretzky, Lawrence, New Jersey.



Weil, Franz Niemeier, proprietor, Jersey City Heights. Full length portrait of a girl, standing. Cabinet card, ca. 1896/97. Gary Saretzky's collection.

Return to Germany: Weil's Studios in Altona

Without any doubt, the Weil family returned to Germany with valuable life and work experiences. It can be assumed that they also brought reasonable savings as seed capital in their luggage. They settled down in the city of Altona, very close to the border with Hamburg.³⁹ With recourse to the only available archival records, an exact localization for the five years before the turn of the century is not possible; their daily life and work activities seem to be spread over several places.⁴⁰

Around 1896 Anton Weil took over the photographic business of Wilhelm Lange, which was based at "Ecke der kl. Bergstrasse/Rathausmarkt 38" in Altona. Imprints on the backs of carte de visits reveal the process of acquisition: First "A. Weil" was added as proprietor to the original

³⁹ Altona was under the administration of the Danish Crown from 1649 to 1864, became a part of Prussia, in 1871 an independent town in the German Empire, and was merged with Hamburg in 1938.

⁴⁰ The address details listed below are based on the directories of Altona and Hamburg from 1880 to 1940, which are available online as digitized copies from Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg (<https://agora.sub.uni-hamburg.de/subhh-adress/digbib/start>, accessed September 24, 2022); see also Kai Deecke, *Fotografen und ihre Ateliers in Hamburg von 1885 bis 1915. Erwähnungen in den Ausgaben der Hamburger Adressbücher* (Hamburg: self-published 2012).

cards of the previous owner. Individual cards of the “Atelier Weil” followed, mentioning Weil as Lange's successor; this addition was omitted later. However, the stay at this address was short-lived. Since around 1898/99 a photographer named Hugo Schlünsen is listed here.

At the same time, Niemeier, Weil's successor in Jersey City, handed over the photo studio around 1896/97 to Frederick Kamrath, a former neighbor of the Weil family at 384 Palisade Avenue according to the New Jersey State Census of 1895. Kamrath does not appear as a photographer. According to the directories, Anton Weil returned briefly to Jersey City in 1898, presumably to liquidate the business; there are no later traces of Weil's Studio in the United States.



Atelier Weil, Altona. Full length portrait of a young boy in a sailor suit, standing; imprint on reverse side. Carte de visit, ca. 1900. Author's collection.

From 1899 onward, the photographic workshop of Anton Weil was located at Reichenstraße 22 in Altona, before moving to Reichenstraße 1 in 1903. For a short time, the company also operated under the name “Atelier Photofix/(A. Weil.)” at this address. The studio produced mainly albumen prints mounted on cardboard in the carte de visite and cabinet card formats. The lithographed imprints advertised their specialization on group and children's portraits; enlargements, reproductions, and painted portraits were offered as well. The appearance of

studio backgrounds and props as well as the use of common techniques like retouching, vignetting, templates, and stencils corresponds to the photographic aesthetics of the late 19th century.

Anton Weil joined the Photographische Gesellschaft zu Hamburg-Altona in April 30, 1900.⁴¹ This association of professional photographers was founded in 1873. The published protocols of their regular club meetings reveal the topics that were discussed by the members at this time: In addition to technical issues, the establishment of a guild, the position and wages of assistants, and the increasing economic pressure caused by photographic services offered at department stores were on the agenda.⁴² This tense competitive situation may have prompted Anton Weil to look for a new location.

Photographer and Houseowner in Hagenow, Mecklenburg

It is hard to say why he chose Hagenow, a small rural town about 100 km east of the urban cities of Altona and Hamburg. Family reasons may have influenced his decision to settle down in this region: Elise Weil's mother originally came from Ludwigslust and spent her last years in Schwerin.⁴³ The good transport connection was an advantage. The small town in western Mecklenburg was situated by the Berlin–Hamburg Railway since 1846 and had two train stations. Another factor was the low number of competitors offering photographic services.

The project planning and construction files indicates that Anton Weil started to plan the erection of his own residential and commercial building in Hagenow in 1905.⁴⁴ The property was located at Bismarckstraße 37 (today's Poststraße) right within sight of one of the railway stations and still exists today. The buildings erected in this area in the late 19th century combine

41 *Photographische Chronik. Beiblatt zum Atelier des Photographen und zur Zeitschrift für Reproduktionstechnik* 52 (Juni 24, 1900), 339.

42 Ibid., see issues from 1895 to 1910.

43 LHAS, Kirchenbuchabschriften evangelischer und katholischer Gemeinden Mecklenburgs 1740–1918, Dom Schwerin, 1884–1911 (www.ancestry.de, accessed September 28, 2022); StAHH, Sig. 332-5_9939, Nr. 740.

44 Bauaktenarchiv Stadt Hagenow, Bauakte Bismarckstraße 37, Flurbuch-Nr. 357.

different architectural styles and are characterized by the historicism and eclecticism of the period. Weil's small-town mansion is one of the characteristic buildings that still shape the townscape today. Construction drawings of the house give an impression of the family's way of living and working: the kitchen, a reception room, the salon, and an unspecified room were located on the first floor. Apart from two bedrooms, the upper floor was dominated by the photo studio measuring about 45 square meters. The large panoramic windows were about 2.70 m high and facing north; this orientation was common to avoid strong shadows cast by direct sunlight. A small darkroom was located in the semi-basement, along with cellars and a pantry. The newly erected building had large and bright rooms, but the level of comfort was rather modest; the house did not have running water until 1916, and electricity was introduced in Hagenow only in 1921.

An exact date for the opening of the studio cannot be determined, but Anton Weil was registered in the trade register of the city administration as photographer on September 7, 1906.⁴⁵ One month later, on October 10, the weekly journal *Photographische Chronik* announced that Anton Weil from Altona was to open a modern studio in a newly built villa in Hagenow. His successor is named in the same issue: Franz Heldberg, who was managing a studio for another photographer before, bought Weil's shop in Altona and continued the business under the name *Hansa-Atelier*.⁴⁶ Weil apparently left parts of his equipment like a painted backdrop and other props behind; these things (or similar objects) appear on some of Heldberg's later works.

The directory of Altona 1907 lists Weil and Heldberg under the same address. A temporary dual residency is likely—a period of construction and relocation while maintaining the business required the involvement of both partners. Another entry in the local business

45 Archiv des Museums Hagenow, Gewerberegister der Stadt Hagenow 1869–1958, pag. 35, Nr. 657.

46 *Photographische Chronik. Beiblatt zum Atelier des Photographen und zur Zeitschrift für Reproduktionstechnik* 83 (October 10, 1906), 513.

register supports the assumption that Weil's Studio was a family business: his wife Elise enrolled also with a photographic shop on August 15, 1920. By extending the trade and offering cameras, lenses, and the supply of consumables and services like reproductions and prints, professionals were able to turn the rising number of amateur photographers into clients.⁴⁷ They advertised their range of services and products through various promotional activities: a big sign on the house, a display case on a street corner, adverts in local newspapers, listings in directories, and by spreading the business information on the cardboard backs of their photographs.



Atelier Weil, Hagenow. Full length portrait of a young woman in conformation dress, standing; imprint on reverse side. Carte de visit, ca. 1910. Author's collection.

Anton Weil seems to be the one who worked in Hagenow exclusively and without any secondary activities. The pioneer of local photography was Theodor Kotzold (1827–1897). He

47 For information on rise of amateur photography in Germany and Austria see Timm Starl, *Knipser. Eine Bildgeschichte der privaten Fotografie in Deutschland und Österreich von 1880 bis 1980* (München: Koehler & Amelang 1995).

came from Silesia, operated initially as an itinerant photographer, settled down in Hagenow in 1863, and earned his living as a printer, publisher, and newspaper editor. His photographs were produced mainly as albumen prints.⁴⁸ Clockmaker Wilhelm Busecke (1844–1891) offered his services as photographer from 1882 onward in Hagenow and cooperated temporarily with Emil Hartmann, a colleague from the neighboring town of Wittenburg. After Busecke's death his widow Maria Busecke (1851–1904) took over his business for a short while and then left for Hamburg.⁴⁹ Examples from private collections and museum archives prove that two other photographers tried to establish branch offices in Hagenow around 1900: Hermann Schröder opened a studio here while he was simultaneously working in Schwerin, Havelberg, and/or Lüneburg. Robert Schmidt's studio can be traced at two different locations in Hagenow. The demand for images seemed to be growing, and so was the rivalry among photographers. In 1910 Weil and Schmidt carried out a dispute about a store by placing accusations and justifications in display boxes and newspaper ads.⁵⁰ There is some evidence that all of them tried to add picture postcards to the range of their services, but the market was apparently saturated: Preserved examples from their studios are, in comparison with other local publishers from this period, extremely rare and mainly contract works for homeowners and commercial customers. These examples demonstrate that around 1900, migration and multilocality were not only a business model for Anton Weil and his family to establish and practice the craft of photography.

48 Henry Gawlick, *Als Fotos noch kleine Sensationen waren*, 2–7; Wolfgang Baier, *Welch herrliches Helldunkel! Die Frühzeit der Photographie in Mecklenburg* (Schwerin: Thomas Helms Verlag 2006), 33 and 141–149; LHAS, 5.12-3/20 Statistisches Landesamt (1851–1945), Volkszählung am 3. Dezember 1867 (www.ancestry.de, accessed January 29, 2023). For further information on the early history of photography in Mecklenburg see Sandra Schwede: *Mit Licht und Tücke. Die Frühzeit der Photographie im Großherzogtum Mecklenburg-Schwerin, 1839–1880* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag 2006).

49 Gawlick, *Als Fotos noch kleine Sensationen waren*, 7–8; photographs in the archive of the Museum Hagenow and in private collections; Landeskirchliches Archiv Schwerin (LKAS), Kirchenbuch Hagenow, Filmmr. 69203, S. 274 f. (www.ancestry.de, Stand: 19.8.2021); StAHH, Sig. 332-5_7974, Personenstandsregister, Sterberegister, 1876–1950, 1904, Bd. 3, Eintrag Nr. 1454 (www.ancestry.de, accessed Januar 29, 2023).

50 See *Hagenower Kreisblatt. Oeffentlicher Anzeiger und Unterhaltungsblatt für Stadt und Land* 11 (February 9, 1910), unpag.

Second Return to Altona and Retirement

After the outbreak of World War I the Weil Family returned to Altona. The directory of 1915 reports Weil as the only photographer in Hagenow,⁵¹ so economic reasons seem quite unlikely. He sold his house in the following year to another photographer.⁵² Anton Weil is registered with his private and business address at Eidelstedterweg 1 in Altona in the directory of 1917/1918, but his time as photographer was coming to an end. After the war and at the beginning of the Weimar Republic, portraits as carte de visite and cabinet cards went out of fashion; studio photographs on cardboard in these formats, which had been an essential part of his professional life, became a thing of the past. From 1918/19 he and his wife lived at Dohnstraße 4 in Altona. The couple had apparently retired at the age of 60 and 63. They spent their twilight years together here; the studio can no longer be found in the trade directories. On April 4, 1940, the 80-year-old photographer died of pneumonia in a hospital in Altona.⁵³ Three years later, on May 14, 1943, Elise Weil passed away at the age of 86 in Hamburg.⁵⁴ The death register asserts that she was without a profession. However, it has become clear that Weil's Photo Studio was only able to cope with the parallel locations, the changes of place, and all the different branches of the trade as a family business. This conclusion coincides with Ludwig Hoerner's remarks on the underestimated role of women in photography. Next to professional operators there were many wives, daughters, and female assistants who served the customers, retouched, or colored

51 *Mecklenburgisches Adreßbuch umfassend die Großherzogtümer Mecklenburg-Schwerin und Mecklenburg-Strelitz 1915. Zum 1. Hauptbande gehöriger Sonderband 1. Schweriner Adreßbuch mit den umliegenden Städten Boizenburg, Crivitz, Gadebusch, Hagenow, Wittenburg [...]. Zweiter Jahrgang* (Schwerin: Eduard Herbergers Hofbuchdruckerei und Verlagshandlung 1914), 17–20.

52 Bauaktenarchiv Stadt Hagenow, Nr. 357. Weil's successor as photographer and house owner has also an eventful and mobile biography, which leads from Central Germany to South India under British colonial rule for three decades, and finally to the small town of Hagenow, see Thomas Kühn, *Von Bangalore nach Hagenow. Der Fotograf, Schrittsteller und Jäger Hermann Wiele (1860–1924)*. Blätter zur Kulturgeschichte und Volkskunde Südwestmecklenburgs 11 [publication in preparation].

53 StAHH, Sig. 332-5_5421, Nr. 672.

54 StAHH, Sig. 332-5_9939, Nr. 740.

negatives and prints since the 1860s.⁵⁵ In addition, Elise Weil was able to look back on a wider transmigration experience through her various crossings of the Atlantic from a young age.

Mobile Pictures: Lives in Motion

As the profession of photographer was still relatively new in the second half of the 19th century, photographers were able to move easily, even across national borders, to offer their services in areas where demand exceeded supply. However, the nature of their mobility had changed: itinerant daguerreotypists introduced the new medium from the 1840s even in remote regions, but this kind of trade lasted only for a few decades. In Mecklenburg, for example, traveling photographers appeared in 1841, but this business model ceased to exist there around 1864.⁵⁶ The remaining photographers, who still traveled around in the United States in the late 1870s and early 1880s, were addressed as “third-class operators” or “cheap johns,” in contrast to groundbreaking top-class photographers located in exclusive areas.⁵⁷ Anton Weil and his studio rank somewhere in between. His photographic work reflects the increasing professionalization and popularization of middle-class photography. The number and quality of the surviving portraits illustrates the combination of artistic, technical, and entrepreneurial skills that Britt Salvesen, using a contemporary phrase, aptly described as “first-class work” done by “second-class operators.”⁵⁸

The aim of this paper is to highlight the significance of photographs in the transatlantic migration around 1900 by following the paths of a photographer and his family from Germany

55 Hoerner, *Das photographische Gewerbe*, 57–59. For a comprehensive study on the emergence of professional female photographers in Germany, see Nathalie Dimic, *Beruf, Blick und Bild. Eine Professionsgeschichte der Fotografin 1890–1940* [to be published in 2026].

56 Schwede, *Mit Licht und Tücke*, 339–340; travelling ferrotypists with tents and carriages, offering tintypes on fairs and festivals, were still to be found in Germany around 1900, see Hoerner, *Das photographische Gewerbe*, 28–30.

57 Britt Salvesen, “Second Class Operators, First Class Work. The Business of Cabinet-Card Photography, in *Acting Out. Cabinet Cards and the Making of Modern Photography*. Ed. By John Rohrbach (Oakland: University of California Press 2020), 52–62, quote 53.

58 Ibid.

to New Jersey and back. Their biography illustrates the interdependence of spatial and social mobility.⁵⁹ Anton Weil and his wife came from rather humble backgrounds but were able to build up a middle-class existence with their own photo studio and real estate.⁶⁰ They arrived in an area with a well-established German community. With their services, they themselves contributed to the migration process and participated in the formation of German American identities.

In an era of increased mobility, not only people but also goods and commodities traveled around the world. In general, the focus in the analysis of photographs lies on the image; their materiality is often underappreciated.⁶¹ Katherine Mintie reminds us that “photographs are composite objects made from materials and tools often sourced from distant locations. We overlook these complex networks of labor and commerce that enable the creation of a photograph when we classify prints on the basis of the national identity or location of the photographer.”⁶² She has verified that European and North American photographic history are closely connected by the transatlantic transportation of goods, based on the photographic materials used in the United States before 1900, such as photographic paper and camera lenses: Every photograph from this period is a transnational artifact simply because of its material composition and the techniques used, in addition to the fashions and aesthetic interactions.⁶³ If

59 The historian Valeska Huber rightly advocates the use of the plural form “mobilities” and the investigation of the differentiation of various forms of mobility in an accelerated world, and the attempts to regulate them, see Valeska Huber, “Multiple Mobilities. Über den Umgang mit verschiedenen Mobilitätsformen um 1900,” in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36 (2010), 317–341.

60 For further regional biographies of photographers in which spatial and social mobility coincide, see Kühn, *Lichtbild(n)er in Bewegung*, 115.

61 An exception worth mentioning is a recent exhibition, shown in Hamburg, Vienna and Winterthur, which brings the (history of) photography, raw materials and climate change together, see the exhibition catalog *Mining Photography. The Ecological Footprint of Image Production*. Ed. by Boaz Levin, Esther Ruelfs, and Tulga Beyerle (Spector Books: Leipzig 2022).

62 Katherine Mintie, “Material Matters. The Transatlantic Trade in Photographic Materials during the Nineteenth Century,” in *Panorama. Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), 1–12, quote 1, doi:10.24926/24716839.10597.

63 Ibid. For an additional perspective on the international trade in photography supplies such as painted backdrops, see Philipp Freytag, “New York schwelgt jetzt in Hintergründen... Zur Industrialisierung und Globalisierung des Handels mit fotografischem Zubehör,” in *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 170 (2023), 13–21.

we add the mobility of people and images, it becomes clear that photography around 1900 was embedded in complex cultural, social, and economic networks.

The story of Weil's Photo Studio exemplifies the mobility of people, goods, skills, and images in the late 19th and early 20th century. As visual media and physical objects, the photographs taken in Hagenow, Altona, and Jersey City were an important part of everyday life. Within just a few decades, studio photography developed from an extraordinary and luxurious item to an omnipresent mass product that was able to connect even small places over great distances and thus became a rarely noticed piece of the puzzle in the history of migration.⁶⁴ Like the photographs of migrants, Anton and Elise Weil moved between and within small and medium-sized towns in the Palatinate and Mecklenburg as well as large cities on both sides of the Atlantic. It is therefore evident that increased attention should be paid to the mobility of images as well as ongoing movement patterns such as return migration.

The traces of their children are lost in the 20th century, but the desire to travel was obviously passed on: Wilhelm Bösche, Elise Weil's son from her first marriage, took over the profession of his natural father. As a sailor he worked on voyages to New York and other places. He died in Hamburg-Altona, the town of his birth, in 1953.⁶⁵ His half-sister Elisabeth Weil, who was born in Jersey City, probably learnt her profession in the family business. Even after the death of her parents, corresponding entries in passenger lists of port of Hamburg indicate that she worked as a laboratory or technical assistant. According to these sources, she traveled the world constantly: there are records of a journey to Trondheim (1924) and a tour of the Mediterranean Sea (1928).⁶⁶

64 The provenance of Weil's photographs in the author's collection reveal the mobility of historical images even today: They come from Germany, USA, Scotland, France and Belgium, and were acquired in antique stores and at online auctions.

65 StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten, 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 092 A, S. 71, Mikrofilmnr. K_1754. (www.ancestry.de, accessed December 1, 2021); StAHH, Sig. 332-5_1957, Nr. 3661.

66 StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten, 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 359, S. 356, Mikrofilmnr. K_1971 (www.ancestry.de, accessed May 11, 2021); StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten, 373-7 I, VIII A 1, Bd. 317, S. 41, Mikrofilmnr. K_1856 (www.ancestry.de, accessed October 25, 2021).

The family business came to an end, but the legacy of Weil's Photo Studio remains in family albums, archives, and private and public collections. The carte de visite and cabinet cards originating from their studio are not solely individual images; they also bear witness of a family's life in motion and their studio, which found its way from Speyer and Neubukow to New Jersey and returned to Germany. This case study corroborates that it is worthwhile to think of regional history globally and to further explore the research field between photography, migration, and mobility as well as the relations of circulating images and moving material culture in this context.

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