

2 Brothers ... 2 Pastors ... 2 Worlds

by Vic Berecz



Pastors Johannes Lilje and son-in-law
Louis Reibelung ministered in Natal.

This is the story of two German brothers, both Lutheran pastors, and their families who served their Lord Jesus Christ in two very different worlds.

Johann Heinrich Christoph Lilje (1833-1920) and Johann Christoph Lilje (1839-1912) were sons of Joachim Heinrich Lilje and Anna Margarethe Carstens.



Pastors Christoph Lilje and son Otto Lilje
ministered in Ohio.

The brothers were orphaned as youngsters and brought up by neighbors in their hometown of Gerdau, on the Luneburg Heath of Hannover. We'll refer to them as Johannes and Christoph, the names they used throughout their ministries in Natal and Ohio. Johannes and Christoph had an opportunity normally open only to the sons of the elite, largely because they lived near the town of Hermannsburg and its ...

1. Hermannsburg Mission Society

In mid-19th century Germany, the Lutheran ministry was almost the exclusive province of the younger sons of the wealthy and powerful, or was passed down from father-to-son. Georg Ludwig (Louis) Harms was the parish pastor of the Lutheran church in the small town of Hermannsburg. He "inherited" the congregation from his father, but felt strongly that sons of the peasantry could be trained to effectively serve as pastors in overseas missions. And, he had the faith, charisma, fortitude, and fund-raising ability to make it happen.^{1, 19f, 19g} Through his efforts, Hermannsburg became known as the "Bauernmission."

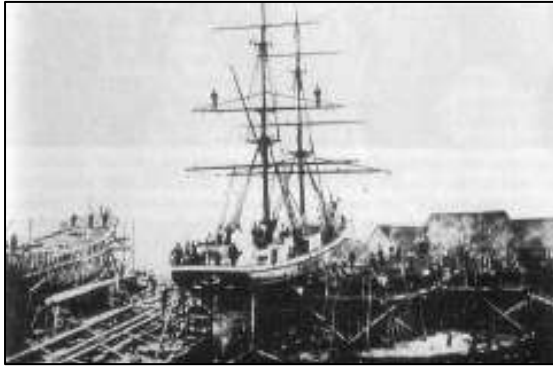


Louis and his brother Theodor Harms began a seminary for missionaries in 1849 with a very symbolic 12 students, which Theodor later described:

*"The course of instruction was to extend over four years, and embraced the study of the Old and New Testaments, history of the Church, history of missions, and other subjects pertaining to it; the study hours alternating with work upon the land for the benefit of their health, and also to help make the mission self-supporting. The only foreign language they were instructed in was the English, that being necessary knowledge for missionaries."*¹

Daily life at the seminary was strictly regimented from prayers at 6AM to the final lesson of the day ending at 10PM. In addition to 28 hours of lessons per week, the candidates had to perform much physical labor in the fields, under conditions of strict regimentation and absolute celibacy. Louis Harms' authoritative nature and the very disciplined daily rhythm at the seminary may have stifled independent and critical thought ... and soon led to a crisis in discipline and several defections.

Yet, eight of the initial twelve completed the program. The Consistory of Hannover refused to ordain them because they lacked a proper education in the classical languages, theology, and science. After some delays, the Consistory at Stade agreed to examine the candidates. All passed and were ordained ... but only as "missionaries to the heathen."¹ By 1853 two other significant decisions had been made. Colonists would be sent along with the missionaries and would provide additional skills and manpower to facilitate the construction and operation of the missions, which were envisioned to be based upon communal living. Also a ship was built, the *Kandaze* a 212 ton brig, which would transport missionaries, colonists, supplies, etc. Louis Harms' faith and fund-raising acumen was key to this latter project. The Harms brothers planned to focus their first missionary endeavor on the *Gallas* tribe of Ethiopia in east Africa, partially due to their abhorrence of slavery.^{19g}



Their ship was launched at Harburg on the Elbe on September 27, 1853 amidst much prayer, hymn-singing, preaching and fanfare. She went to Hamburg to take on freight and supplies, and on October 28 set sail for Africa with eight missionaries and eight colonists aboard.¹ The *Kandaze* arrived at Zanzibar only to find that the Muslim sultan who controlled the east African coast refused them entry. They returned to Port Natal in southern Africa, being aware that some German missionaries were at work in the area. The British authorities gave them permission to buy 4000 acres of land and set up a mission just to the south of the Zulu Kingdom.^{19f, 19g} This place became known as *Neu*

Hermannsburg. They later established a string of mission stations throughout Natal.

Initially, the missionaries were not paid and everything was owned by the Mission Society. It meant that all expenses had to be reported and recouped from Germany. This led to extreme economy on the part of the missionaries, because each expenditure had to be defended and explained. It was only after twenty years of mission activity in Natal that this system which amounted to “beggar monks” was replaced with regular, though meager, wages for the missionaries.^{19f}

One part of the program that wasn’t working out in Natal was the idea of integrating colonists into communal mission stations. Most of the colonists wanted greater freedom, and to work their own farms. So, by the 1870s the Society stopped sending colonists.^{19f} That did not deter the many Germans who chose to emigrate independently. A significant German presence developed in Natal including two colonists, Friedrich Rencken and his betrothed Margarethe Gesche Beckröge, who settled in *Neu Hermannsburg* in 1866.

Pastor Louis Harms died in 1865 and his brother Theodor continued the work until his 1885 death. Both Harms brothers adhered to a narrow Lutheran confessionalism, and supported the Hannoverian royal family. These leanings left Theodor Harms and his Mission Society in poor standing after Prussia annexed Hannover and deposed the royal family in 1866. The schism within the Lutheran church of Hannover that resulted from Prussian “unionism” was led by Pastor Theodor Harms ... but, that is a story for another place and time.^{19g}

New graduates were sent out on missions in 1857, 1861 and 1865. A second concurrent class was started at the seminary to produce a new group of missionaries every two years.¹ Therefore, the 5th class took leave of Hermannsburg and set sail for Africa aboard the *Kandaze* on September 12, 1867. Among the missionaries aboard were one of our brothers, Johannes Lilje, as well as classmate Johannes Reibeling. The younger Lilje brother, Christoph, enrolled with the 8th class at the Hermannsburg seminary in 1870, but did not complete his studies there. Rather he emigrated to the United States to continue his studies in Ohio.

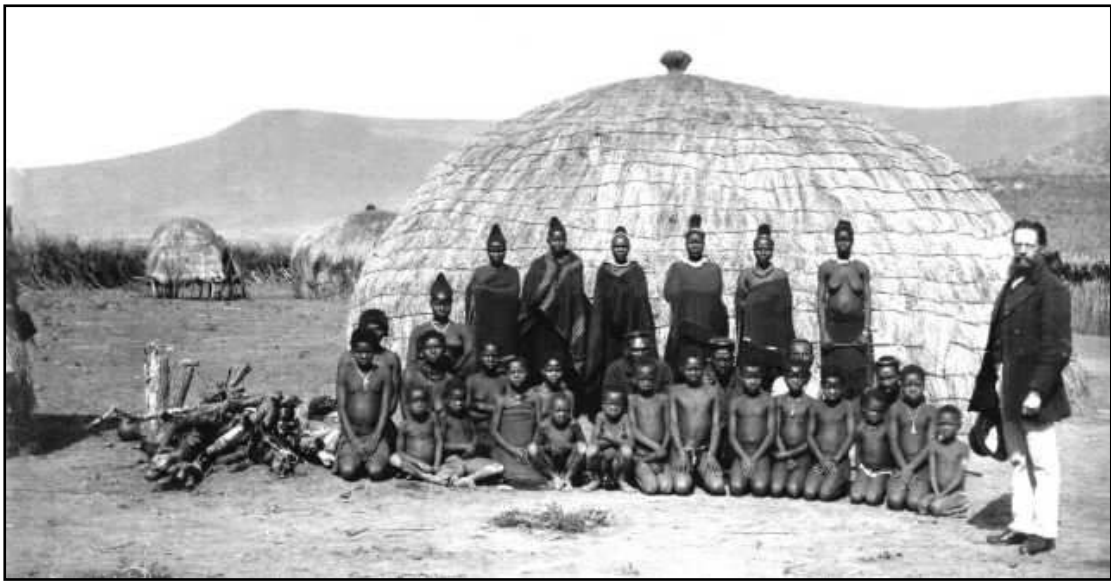
2. Natal and Ohio – Very Different Places in the mid-19th Century.

The tribal peoples of **Natal** in southeast Africa were brought together during the first two decades of the 19th century by a dynamic leader called Shaka Zulu who implemented many reforms which resulted in a well-organized Zulu Kingdom.^{19e} Yet, this remained a culture based on violence and superstition.

From 1843 until the arrival of Johannes Lilje in Natal in 1867, the area south of the Tugela river was controlled by the British, though largely inhabited by native peoples, mostly Zulus. There was a generally peaceful relationship between the British and the Zulu Kingdom north of the Tugela. In the mid-1800s some agricultural development of the temperate interior of Natal began, but most development was along the sub-tropical coast where many East Indian laborers were imported to work the sugar plantations.^{19e}

In the mid-1850s, Cetshawayo kaMpande (shown here in 1875) killed his brother and began to usurp his father’s authority ... though he didn’t officially become King until his father’s death in 1872. He was exiled following the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.



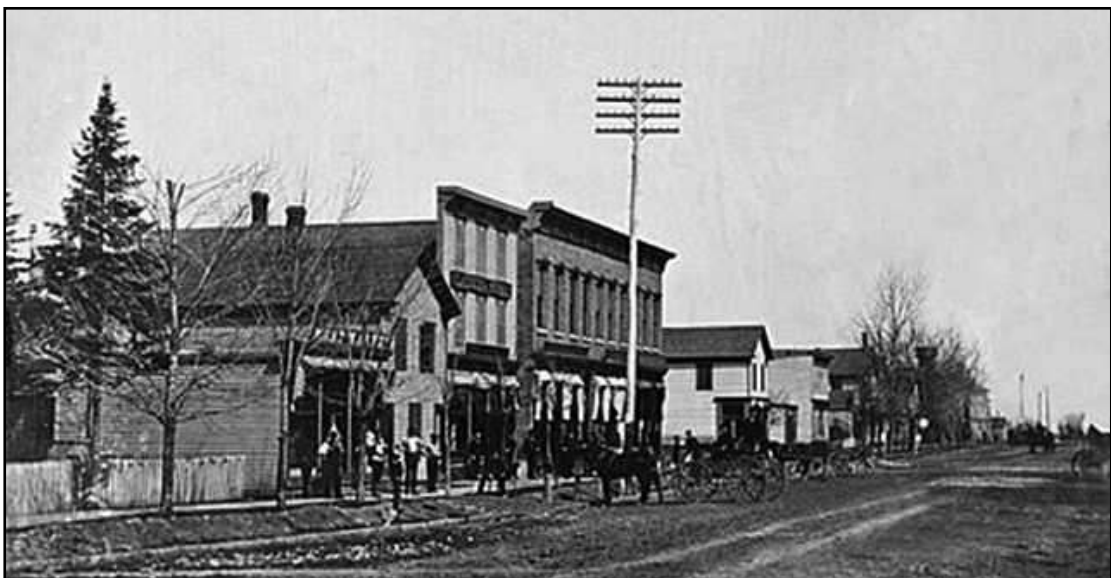


Above is a photo of chief Mavele's *kraal* (fortified Zulu village of domed huts) showing six of the chief's wives and many of his children with missionary Johannes Reibeling (photo provided by Enid Brown).

Settlement of the **Ohio** country began shortly after the American Revolution, with many land grants being available to war veterans. Since Ohio was designated as a non-slave area, most of the settlers came from New England and the mid-Atlantic states. In 1803 Ohio achieved statehood. By then most of the native tribes had been pushed west, and by the middle of the 19th century, a Native American in Ohio was a rare sight.

Among the settlers coming to Ohio to establish farms were many Lutherans, virtually all of them either Germans or of German descent. They were made up largely of two groups: Pennsylvanians who had been in America for generations and were largely English-speaking, and recent immigrants from Germany. These two groups made for a language issue in the Lutheran church of Ohio that festered until the World War I era, refueled by the continuing flow of German immigrants.

Northwest Ohio was where the Lilje's, father and son, ministered to their flocks. When Christoph Lilje came to Ohio in 1872, it was fully settled, with a thriving agricultural economy that was rapidly being augmented by industrial growth. Port Clinton was established in 1828 on the shores of Lake Erie, at the mouth of the Portage River. The town remained relatively small, with a population of only 1,600 in 1880. In 1886, Port Clinton contained three newspaper offices, four churches (one of them being Christoph's *St. John Lutheran Church*), and one bank. Seen here is a view of Port Clinton's main street in 1878 with the telegraph clearly in evidence.¹⁹ⁱ



3. Education and Early Ministry

Their mother died in 1844 and their father in 1845, leaving a teen-aged daughter and four young boys (aged 3 to 12) as orphans. The family was poor and without resources. So, the children were thrown on the mercy of the community. Neighbors took them in and saw to their care and Christian up-bringing. The only definitive records we have of their early years is the personal record (c.v.) that each prospective Hermannsburg student was required to provide for admission to the seminary. Keeping in mind the purpose of these writings, let's listen to the stories of their early years largely in their own words.

Johannes wrote: *"God had taken my parents but did not forsake me ... [He] provided a place for me to live with a farmer who took care of me ... at the required age I was confirmed ... Then I entered the wild life of a youth ... I went to church regularly ... but I started 'walking the streets' and visited pubs ... when I was 18 (1851) I no longer wanted to live with my foster father."* He tells of an initial calling to Hermannsburg, but when he went there, *"I worked as a servant for a distiller ... but could not make the decision to become a committed Christian."* Johannes was called up for the local militia, but, *"The training corps only had to go into action when there was a war ... I received a certificate of discharge."* After that he *"became half-hearted and lethargic"* until *"my siblings begged me to come back to them and I obeyed ... I lived a very 'natural' life for 4 years."*³ That brings him to 1858.

Johannes then wrote the following concerning his calling and conversion: *"On the one Sunday I went to the pub in the evening but the following Sunday I was full of remorse and repentance and I came to the decision to renounce the world and accept Christ completely. Without reservations I left for Hermannsburg ... I had decided that I would like to serve the Lord with body and soul and thought the best way to do this would be to commit myself to missionary service. I went to see Pastor Harms ... He explained that I would not be admitted for two years, as there had been too many applicants."* Johannes then went to work for a local merchant.. In 1862 he again *"consulted Pastor Harms, and he thought it would be very good if I learnt carpentry. So I went to a master carpenter [who] needed an apprentice ... At this carpenter's shop I have been until today."*³ Johannes Lilje enrolled with the 5th Class at the Hermannsburg seminary at age 30 in November 1863. He completed his studies in September 1867, was examined before the Consistory in Hannover. He was ordained by Dr. Niemann as a missionary, and set sail aboard the *Kandize* for service to the Zulu people of Natal.

After a brief initial stay in Neu Hermannsburg to get his bearings, 35-year old Missionary Johannes Lilje was assigned to the Marburg mission station in the south of Natal, near present-day Port Shepstone. It was up to missionaries Stoppel and Lilje to build the station, quite literally in two ways ... construct the necessary buildings and establish a congregation of the faithful. Soon thereafter, Missionary Leisenburg founded a mission at nearby Elim. Johannes' carpentry skills were critical to constructing that station also.

While doing all this carpentry, Johannes worked diligently to learn the Zulu language and visited the *kraals* of the local peoples, where he invited the heathen to attend the church service on Sunday and where he had an opportunity to first bring them into contact with God's Word. Here are some of Johannes' own words regarding his time in Marburg from his September 1869 report to Mission Director Theodor Harms. *"As far as I am concerned, thank God, I am healthy and well and I can do my work and continue to study the Zulu language. Since Easter I have been blessed and been found worthy to preach peace and salvation to these unfortunate people, i.e. Br. Stoppel and I take turns preaching. May the Lord give his Grace and Blessing to our sermons so that the poor people here will soon receive peace and will want to know what they need to do to find salvation."*⁶

After Johannes Lilje had been the second missionary at Marburg for a couple of years and had mastered the language of the natives sufficiently, he had the wish to establish his own mission station. The Superintendent granted this wish. But, only after many obstacles and difficulties could he establish the *Ebenezer Mission Station*.

Christoph wrote briefly about his early life: *"The Lord took my parents from me early and I was accepted and cared for by the people of my village. At the appropriate age I was confirmed ... Later I took lodgings in Eimke [a nearby village] and there earned my daily bread doing menial work."*³

His military experience was different than his brother's in that the 1860s was a time of war in northern Germany: *"In the year 1860, I was conscripted as a Private into the 2nd Infantry Regiment of Celle. [In 1863]*

When the war began in Schleswig-Holstein, I was immediately mobilized and sent to East Friesland, to protect the Fatherland. [There in church] I could not even understand the word 'Jesus' because Dutch was preached. ... When the war between Prussia and Hanover began [1866], I was ready to fight for the Fatherland. ... [As I came near the front lines] I met many soldiers who had been thrown back by the Prussians; I returned home with a sad heart ... I traveled to Hamburg intending to enlist myself there, but my wishes were frustrated. The Lord denied me despite all my efforts.”³ In total, Christoph served only 18 months of active duty and missed the battlefield experience in support of his King that he seemingly craved.

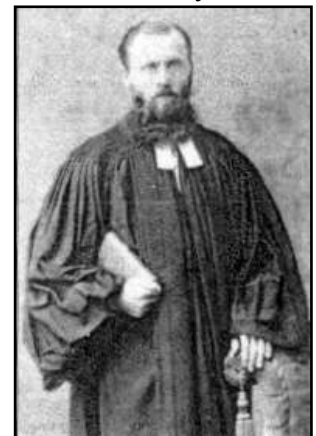
Christoph also wrote concerning his calling and conversion: *“I was a chosen one who the Lord called to another service. The Lord had many times sent messages through my brother [Johannes] in Hermannsburg that I should repent, but that was in vain ... finally the word 'Jesus' which was buried within me in East Friesland again broke out from my heart. This experience alone would be healing for the soul. Then I heard this acclamation: 'Man ... today you live, repent today, tomorrow you may already be a changed person.' I received the loving Lord and followed his counsel and will. In 1868 I came to Hermannsburg to strengthen my weak faith in God's Word and Sacraments.”³* Christoph spent two years augmenting his basic education at the Hermannsburg preparatory school. In December 1870, he enrolled with the 8th Class at the Hermannsburg seminary at age 31. He did not complete the program at Hermannsburg, but rather decided to undertake a full traditional theological education.

In August of 1872 Christoph visited his hometown of Gerdau for the last time, and on the 21st of that month set off for America on the maiden voyage of the *SS Frisia* ... the last of the old-style iron steamships with mast and rigging for travel under sail.^{19a} He arrived in New York on September 5 and immediately left by railway for Columbus and Capital University. Because Capital had a full theological program, including classical languages, it became a magnet for Hermannsburg students. In fact, the university even maintained a *Hermannsburg Room*, so the recent immigrants could meet and socialize and study together.¹³

Lutheranism in 19th century America was in a constant state of schism and union, based on geography, ethnicity, language, and theology. While several Lutheran groups got footholds in Ohio, we will focus on the so-called *Joint Synod of Ohio* in which our American Lilje pastors served. During the 1800s, this synod moved in an increasingly conservative theological direction, and emphasized its German roots, while becoming the largest organization of Lutheran congregations in the state.¹² Recognizing the need for theological education west of the Allegheny mountains, in the early 1830's the *Joint Synod* established a seminary. After a slow beginning, the formal incorporation of *Capital University* took place in 1850 with grand plans, but only about a dozen college students, a few faculty members, and the handful of seminary students. Shown above is *Lehmann Hall*, which was built to be the principal college building at the time Christoph Lilje attended the seminary.¹³ Because of his studies in Hermannsburg, Christoph was able to complete what was normally a three-year program by the summer of 1874. As was normal at the time, ministerial candidates were expected to get a year's experience – what we today call a vicarage – before being awarded the A.M. degree by Capital University.



So in the summer of 1874, 35-year-old Christoph Lilje was called to Galion in Crawford County, Ohio to serve as an assistant to Rev. Carl Wernle, the new pastor of Peace Lutheran Church which was about to build a new sanctuary. There he was ordained and installed by Rev. Belser, president of the Northern District of the Ohio Synod. Pastor Wernle soon became seriously ill and later died, leaving the young vicar with the Peace congregation as well as the nearby Olentangy congregation to shepherd, while overseeing the construction of the new edifice.¹⁴ He obviously did a very credible job, because in the summer of 1875, after receiving his degree officially, Rev. Belser requested that he go to Port Clinton to establish a German Lutheran mission congregation.¹⁸ The photo of Christoph here is from the 150th anniversary booklet of the Galion congregation.



Two area pastors had already begun discussions with Lutherans in Port Clinton, and the first baptism was performed in January of 1875, and the first

marriage was performed in May of that year. For the next three years Christoph worked with the German population of Port Clinton, holding services in homes or renting the United Brethren church building for services. On April 16, 1876 Christoph held the first Lutheran Confirmation service in Port Clinton. Also in 1876, a lot for a church building was purchased for \$450. Construction of the first sanctuary began.^{15, 18}

The frame building was completed in 1878. In April of 1878, the congregation was legally incorporated as St. John Lutheran Church of Port Clinton, and on May 19 of that year a regular call was extended to Rev. Christoph Lilje. The early years were days of struggle and hardship.. The pastor's salary was only \$300 per year, and the janitor earned all of \$10 per year for his services. While serving in Port Clinton, Christoph also ministered to the Lutheran congregation in Muskegon, near Sandusky. Pastor Lilje submitted his resignation to St. John on May 1, 1886 and accepted a call to the St. Paul's congregation in rural Salem Township near the town of Oak Harbor.^{15, 18} There he served the remainder of his life.

4. Marriage and Family

One aspect of **Johannes'** early years in Natal not mentioned above is his loneliness for female company. We get a glimmer of the situation from his correspondence with the Mission Director, Theodor Harms (who he called "father"). It seems Johannes had found a "fiancée" in his hometown of Gerdau before leaving Hermannsburg. She had promised to later join him in Africa. In November 1868 he writes Harms: "*you wrote me a while ago with regard to the situation of my fiancée ... I was still waiting for a reply to my letter [to her] ... I found it necessary to write to her again imploring her to do me a favor and write a few lines informing me how she was and what her intentions were. Finally I received a reply from her, saying that she was not in a position to follow me and that I should not wait for her*"⁶ – she apparently got cold feet about going to Africa. Then he goes on: "*You write that if I have resolved matters with my fiancée, I could get married to Luise [surname withheld]. Now I hear from others that she had also written to the former colonist Hinze at the same time or earlier, that she is willing to be his wife ... with regard to Luise, I can only say that I acted according to your fatherly caution ... She had written that there was nothing to delay an engagement or a marriage. She asked me to simply decide ... I replied that this was all too soon ... I don't know how she took this, as she has not written to me again.*"⁶ It sounds like, from Johannes' perspective, she was a bit too eager to go to Africa.

The next year Johannes again wrote to Harms: "*Since being here I have felt quite content with my situation and have sometimes thought that I should not seek to have a relationship with any girl again. Yet during my three weeks stay at Flygare's station recently, I felt really lonely.*" With this letter he enclosed another letter which he told Harms was addressed to a "*deaconess in the Henrietten Home in Hannover... I know her from the past as we worked [together] ... I was a servant and she was a maid. In the letter I simply proposed marriage to her and asked her to think about it carefully before taking any steps. I also told her that if she accepted she should hand in her notice to her employer immediately.*" Now, Johannes seemed rather anxious to find a wife. He further wrote: "*Therefore I beg you, dear Father, to consider this matter and judge whether my decision to write to this girl is a sensible one. Should you disapprove, don't send the letter.*"⁶ We don't know if the letter was sent, or if his proposal was again rejected. But, she was not the one.

The next thing we know definitively is the fact of his marriage to Anna Caroline Beckröge on September 25, 1871 in Marburg solemnized by his fellow missionary Peter Stoppel. We have no documented information about how Johannes and Caroline came to know each other, but can only surmise that Johannes somewhere along the line came to know the colonist Friedrich Rencken and his wife Gesche. I suspect that Johannes' openness about his loneliness and rejections led Gesche at some point to say: "I have a sister that you might like." ... and after a couple of letters, it seems Caroline was on a ship headed for Natal. In all probability they first met upon her arrival in Neu Hermannsburg, at the *Freudenhöhe* – the hill of happiness – where missionaries traditionally met their imported brides.⁸

Johannes and Caroline had ten children, nine born at the remote mission station they called Ebenezer; all lived to adulthood. Four of the five sons established farms in Natal; the oldest, Johannes, never married and simply helped where needed. The daughters all married, two of them to sons of missionaries, and one, Auguste, married a missionary Louis Reibeling.⁶ We shall hear more of them later. The families of these ten children are now spread across the world. The Lilje-Beckröge family is shown here about 1902, when all the children were young adults.



Anna Caroline Beckröge was born in 1847 in Langwedel, Hannover. She went to Africa in 1871 to marry Johannes Lilje. At the time of his death in 1920, they were living with her daughter Auguste and son-in-law missionary Louis Reibeling at the Elanzeni Mission Station. After Auguste's death she lived with her son Heinrich and finally with her son Karl. She died in Glückstadt, Natal on September 10, 1935. Her obituary describes her as *"a hard working, quiet, content and God fearing person, she was loved and respected by all who knew her. Nearing her end on this earth she was looking forward to going Home."*⁶ At the time of her death she had eight living children, 57 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. Johannes and Caroline's granddaughter Gertrud Reibeling Fricke wrote: *"Grandfather and grandmother Lilje were short and small. Grandfather was very quiet but Grandmother could be very firm. Irmgard recalled that grandmother could still recognize dust patches even when she could not see so well anymore."*⁹ Remembering my mother-in-law, that must be a German trait!

The story of **Christoph's** marriage is much more ordinary, and could even be considered "modern" when compared to the arranged marriages of the missionaries in Natal. During his first ministerial assignment as an assistant to Rev. Wernle, there was a young maiden lady in the congregation. Her name was Katharina Eva Bühner. Eva was a recent arrival from Germany and was living in Galion. Apparently they got to know each other and opted for a future together. Shortly after Christoph moved to Port Clinton and began his efforts to establish a congregation there, he returned to Galion to marry Eva on December 9, 1875. They had three children all born in Port Clinton and baptized by their father, as recorded in the register of his St. John Lutheran Church. They were John Philip Otto, who became a Lutheran pastor like his father. He was always known as Otto or Otto John, and we shall hear more about him later. Next was daughter Marie who married Emery Bebow. Before her marriage, Molly was a music teacher and organist at her father's church. Finally there was son Arnold.¹⁶ The Lilje-Bühner family photo shown here is dated about 1900, when the children were young adults.



Eva Bühner was born in 1854 in Welzheim, Württemberg and emigrated to the U.S. in 1873. Her parents and three siblings preceded her to Ohio. At first she lived with her parents in Bucyrus, but soon moved in with her sister in Galion, where

she met Christoph. As with most Pastors' wives of that era, in addition to managing the household and being the primary care-giver for the children, she organized and led the Ladies' Aid society at her husband's churches, directed the church choir, taught Bible classes and assisted with the Sunday School. After her husband's death in 1912, she moved to the house they owned in the village of Oak Harbor. In 1924, she was unable to recover from a major surgery. Her obituary tells us that "*Bible passages and hymns learned in childhood proved a source of great comfort to her in her illness.*" She died on the 9th of July at age 70. Sadly, she lived to see the deaths of both her daughters-in-law and two grandchildren.

5. Ministering to the "Heathen"

Here we'll focus on the almost two decades that Johannes labored at his remote Ebenezer Mission Station that he established with his wife, some 30 miles west of Marburg. Hopefully we will get a sense of the difficulties these missionaries faced in dealing with the cultural baggage of the "heathen" people they were trying to bring to salvation. From the 19th century missionary's perspective, everything needed to be changed in these peoples lives ... their lack of concern for the sanctity of human life, their continued dependence upon their *old religion*; their tendency toward violence, polygamy, and alcoholism, and even down to the clothing they wore ... or didn't wear. I'll describe these efforts primarily using the words of Johannes' reports to the Mission Director in Hermannsburg and the reminiscences of Paulina Dlamini (1858-1942). Her story began as a 14-year-old member of King Cetschwayo's *isiGodlo* -- the girls and women given to the king as tribute to do his bidding -- and ended as a Christian evangelist. Her words give us an *insider's* view of life in the Zulu *kraals*.

From a western perspective, the Zulu's seemed to have a low regard for human life. For example, the norm for royal succession was killing one's brother to usurp the throne. The standard preventative measure was for the king to kill all his able-bodied brothers to preserve his throne.^{19e} But, low regard for human life was more than just a matter of gaining or keeping power. Concerning King Mpande's natural death in 1872, Paulina writes: "*The burial of a Zulu king was a harrowing affair. Not only would the artifacts last used by the deceased ... be interred with him, but his man-servant, one or two wives and some 'isiGodlo' girls had to follow him into the grave as well.*"⁷ While Paulina notes that Cetschewayo "*was not rash in condemning people to death*" his paranoia and superstitious bent was evidenced by executing a young girl who had the misfortune that: "*One of the king's beer ladles broke in her hand ... from that [he] surmised that she was a witch who planned to kill him ... He consulted the diviners [and] She was taken to the place of execution forthwith!*"⁷ This casual approach to violence and death extended down to the common man in the Zulu culture. Johannes tells us about an 1885 incident nearby his Mission: "*The imbibing of beer continues this year as always. Last Saturday there was a big beer drinking party close by and the incident ended in a brawl as always. One was beaten to death, some are badly wounded and others lightly wounded. May God take pity on these unfortunate people!*"⁶

The Zulu religion was based upon a belief in ancestor spirits who could intervene in the lives of people ... for both good and evil. Paulina tells us: "*The spirits of the ancestors were invoked by making animal sacrifices.*" and that "*The [ancestral] male spirit was represented by a snake, the female spirit by a lizard. The population showed due respect towards the ancestral spirits, the 'amadlozi'*" She notes that when several large snakes appeared at the royal residence .. the *umuzi* in Zulu: "*The people covered themselves from head to toe and passed [in front of] the snakes crouching low or even crawling past them on their knees, while calling out the royal salutation.*"⁷ Johannes on many occasions was faced with converts returning to some aspect of their traditional beliefs. He notes: "*If I chase them off the mission farm they may fall back completely into their old heathen beliefs and truly I cannot take responsibility for that.*"⁶ In 1882, he wrote: "*Sometimes they come to church so drunk that we have to chase them out. May God take pity on these unfortunate people who are still so firmly rooted in heathenism.*"⁶ Today, we are told, when most Zulus profess Christianity, "*many Zulus retain their traditional pre-Christian belief system of ancestor worship in parallel with their Christianity.*"^{19e}

The Zulu's were a male-dominated society. The number of his wives and children, like the number of "beasts" he owned, was tangible evidence of a man's status and wealth. Johannes repeatedly writes: "*If it had not been for the beer drinking and polygamy amongst the [native peoples], I think many more would be converted.*"⁶ And in 1883 wrote: "*The devil has great power and many cunning ways to mislead people. One*

[tribal member] was seduced to take another young wife in addition to his old one. I had to take action against this. He became defiant and left ... A woman was enticed by Satan to become a prostitute at the canteen. I forgave her three times and she promised not to do it again, but she has gone there again and I will have no choice but to chase her away.”⁶ The most repeated litany in Johannes’ reports can be summed up by: “They are not all that scared of starving to death, but if there is no rain, there is no beer, and they do not think they can live without that. Beer is their god whom they adore with body and soul.”⁶

During Johannes Lilje’s years at Ebenezer the Anglo-Zulu War and the First Boer War took place. In one of his 1879 reports, he wrote: “The past half-year has been a time of unrest, fear and alarm, war and war cries all around us. Admittedly the English Zulu War affected us only indirectly here in Alfredia as we live [far] away from the battle scene, but we were often very alarmed and afraid. Many of our brothers live near the Tugela and thus very close to the wild Zulu heathen that threatened to invade Natal every minute.”⁶ Among those “brothers” of course were the Reibeling family living at Ehlanzeni, quite close to the Tugela River and the hostilities.

Briefly, here’s the story of Paulina’s conversion. She wrote: “Any girl or young woman who was taken into the ‘isiGodlo’ lost her freedom forever; there was no escape”⁷ With true Victorian properness, she writes: “About the king’s nightlife with his ‘isiGodlo’ girls I must remain silent; because as a Christian, who has now learnt to kneel before the King of all Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, I can no longer speak about such things.”⁷ But, seven years after being given to Cetschwayo by her father, she did escape. Following the king’s defeat and exile as a result of the Anglo-Zulu War, Paulina and some other *isiGodlo* girls ran away to go home. She spent some time there and later went into service for a Boer farmer, where she experienced a “visitation by the Lord, which then led to my conversion to Christianity.”⁷ After revealing this multiple-dream experience to her master, she was taken by him to Ehlanzeni to live and study under Johannes Reibeling. Three months later, in December 1887, Paulina was baptized during the visit of Mission Society co-directors Egmont Harms (the son of the late Theodor) and Georg Haccius who were there for the dedication of the new mission church. Her baptism was followed by a few more months study under the Reibeling’s – father and son. Then Paulina went on to five decades of preaching and evangelizing which led to her being called “the Apostle of northern Zululand.” Seen below left is the building used to teach Zulu evangelists and the church at Ehlanzeni ... both constructed by Johannes Reibeling and his student evangelists, and used throughout his and his son’s ministries. Paulina was taught in that building, and was baptized in that church.

Progress at Ebenezer was very slow for Johannes, and the station was closed in 1888. Johannes Lilje spent the next several years in Neu Hermannsburg ministering to both the Zulu and the German congregations, and was elected to the Mission Advisory Board.⁶ There he lived in the Hermannsburg Mission House, built in 1862, and which now is the museum seen below right. Johannes continued to express his concerns about the relapses and beer drinking among the converts, and to chastise the “sinners.” Let me end this section with his words from his mid-year 1889 report: “Usually the earthly advantages are still the reason the people seek out the missionary. When will that time come that they come to the missionary in search of salvation?”⁶ and from his final report at the end of 1905: “I have great reason to thank our Lord and Savior for his gifts, grace and great deeds that he has bestowed upon me and my beloved ones throughout the year. He was my protector and I experienced his help in many cases.”⁶ Johannes Lilje retired in January 1906 ... but not for long.





6. The Next Generation

Our next generation focus is again on two pastors: Christoph's son Otto and Johannes' son-in-law Louis Reibeling. Otto's 1901 marriage to Doretta Wodrich is seen at left, and Louis' 1905 marriage to Auguste Lilje is seen at the right. This look forward will bring us through World War I to the 1920s and permit us to explore an issue faced by all four pastors, the German language.



Otto Lilje attended the local public high school in Oak Harbor. He walked the seven miles to school each day, but in the winter he skated to school on the frozen river, according to his daughter Marie. He attended Capital University, as did his father. By this time, it had a full-fledged college program in addition to the Lutheran seminary, though there were still fewer than 100 students in total. He received his undergraduate degree in 1897 and completed his seminary work in 1900. He was ordained by his father and took up his first call at a small rural church in Fredonia Township, Michigan ... near Battle Creek. In 1901 he married Doretta Wodrich, a lifelong member of his father's congregation. They were the parents of eleven children, including one son who died young. In 1906, he accepted a call to Zion Lutheran Church of Latcha in Lake Township, near Perrysburg, Ohio. He served there until his retirement in 1953. He then was appointed chaplain at the *Luther Home of Mercy* in Williston, Ohio where he lived and worked until his death. The photo below left shows the Lilje-Wodrich family in 1923 at the time of the baptism of their youngest child, Dorothy.

Louis Reibeling was the son of missionary Johannes Reibeling who came to Natal in 1867. He was brought up at a series of mission stations in Natal, ending with the Ehlanzeni Mission Station, near Inadi. He attended the German School in Neu Hermannsburg and after his confirmation returned home to assist his father in the seminary for Zulu evangelists. Here he mastered the Zulu language, and helped teach Paulina Dlamini, the well-known future evangelist, who was then living with the Reibeling's. Like his father, he chose to attend the Mission Seminary in Hermannsburg, Germany. Therefore, he too had to prepare a c.v. for admission. This document tells us that he had a "*desire to follow my father in his profession*" but alluded to the fact that his true love was to "*serve the mission as a teacher and translator of documents into Zulu.*"³ He returned to Natal in 1900 after completing his studies, and initially supported the Mission Superintendent in Müden. In 1905 he married Auguste Lilje, a daughter of fellow missionary Johannes Lilje and Caroline Beckröge. The Reibelings were the parents of eight children, including two sons who died very young. Louis was soon assigned to assist his father at the Ehlanzeni Mission Station, which he "inherited" following his father's death in 1911. He served there the remainder of his life, devoting much of his time to "his books" and the translation tasks he loved. He was part of a team that was translating the entirety of the Bible to Zulu.⁹ The photo below right shows the Reibeling-Lilje family in 1928, on the wedding day of their oldest daughter, Irmgard to Bernhard Dedekind.



7. The German Language Issue

The last two decades of the 19th and first decade of the 20th century were years of conflict in Natal and South Africa. First came the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 that deposed King Cetschawayo and incorporated the Zulu Kingdom into Natal; and then two Boer Wars that left the previously independent Boer republics under British domination. They were also years of displacement caused by the discovery of gold and diamonds, and the subsequent rush to the mines. Only in 1910 when the Union of South Africa was established as a self-governing member of the British Commonwealth did things finally settle down ... briefly. In contrast, these three decades were an era of peace and great prosperity in Ohio and throughout most of the United States.

In both Ohio and Natal, our four pastors continued to use the German language for preaching and teaching ... the big exception being the use of the Zulu language in Natal for the native congregations. One issue that was important to the continued use of German in both countries was the belief among conservative Lutheran clergy that the principal reformation treatises (the *Book of Concord*, etc.) were penned in German and had not been adequately translated to English.¹³ This meant that, in their minds, theological education was necessarily done in German ... a given in Hermannsburg, but surprisingly the same was true of the seminary at Capital University in Ohio until World War I. It followed that most preaching and teaching was best done in German as well, with significant numbers of German Lutherans believing that "*preservation of their faith depended on maintaining German language and culture.*"^{19j}

In Natal, it was obvious that the Zulus weren't going to learn German, so the Hermannsburg missionaries adapted their preaching to the local language of the peoples they evangelized. But, largely through self-imposed isolation, the German immigrants to South Africa themselves continued to use the German language in all their worship services. This was not the case in Ohio. As already noted, many of the Ohio Lutherans were transplanted Pennsylvania Germans who long since had become primarily English-speaking. The large influx of new German immigrants between 1835 and 1855 obviously favored preaching in their native tongue. The continuing arrival of immigrants ... especially after the Prussian "unification" of Germany ... meant the pool of German-speaking Ohioans didn't diminish. In fact, it grew.

The Ohio Synod employed the approach of establishing an "English District" to accommodate the congregations preferring exclusive use of English in services. On more than one occasion, the *English District* seceded from the Synod ... or was expelled depending on your perspective. Soon a new district of the same name was established as congregations became Americanized.^{12, 13} By way of example, about ten years after his departure, Christoph Lilje's St. John Lutheran Church in Port Clinton experienced a break-up. Two issues caused it ... preaching in English and membership in Masonic lodges. The group that separated formed Peach Lutheran Church and opted for German-only services; St. John continued its bi-lingual services and didn't expel members who joined lodges. We believe Christoph had some role in this split, but are not sure of the details. In 1900, the pastor of Peace church assisted Christoph in the ordination of his son.

In 1890, Kaiser Wilhelm II and his government embarked on an aggressive foreign policy which brought them in conflict with American interests in both South America and the Pacific. This was coupled with America's friendlier relations with Great Britain and a significant surge in "Anglo-Saxonism" in the U.S. By-and-large, German-Americans were hostile toward the Prussian leadership of Germany. But, a significant number of Americans developed a distaste of all who failed to meet their stringent definition of "American" – and "*were having trouble understanding why German-Americans would not willingly give up their German culture.*"^{19j} The result was increasing anti-German feelings across the U.S.

And then World War I began. The Boer-dominated government of South Africa was hesitant to actively join in the war in defense of the British who they were fighting only a decade earlier. With pressure from London, the decision was made to join the war effort. South African troops acquitted themselves very well both in European operations, and in Germany's African colonies. By 1914, many of the Hermannsburg missionaries had become South African citizens or were of the younger generation of native-born citizens like Louis Reibeling. But, that was not the case for all. "*When the First World War broke out, [Mission Director] Egmont Harms and many missionaries were taken into custody and were imprisoned for several weeks or months. In December 1916, the missionaries were dealt a hard blow. Egmont Harms died. Since his imprisonment in the Boer War he had been a sick man.*"¹⁰ During the war Louis Reibeling continued his work at Ehlanzeni. It should be noted here that South Africans studying at Hermannsburg Seminary also were interned in Germany for the duration of the war.^{19g}

At the beginning of the war, the Mission Society property was seized by the South African government, which soon took over its administration directly, including collecting all the income from the mission stations and their lands and paying the salaries of pastors and the pensions of widows.¹⁰ [Reibeling's salary during this period was £11 per month, according to his daughter Gertrud.] This status continued until 1920 when the mission properties were put under a Board of Trustees in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles. A South African senator, who was a British subject and member of the Hermannsburg Synod, was appointed to lead that Board. In 1924, the property was returned to the Mission Society in Germany. A recent travel magazine wrote that *"Hermannsburg today gives the impression that, despite almost 150 years, it hasn't evolved much. It remains a close community with the church at the center of social, spiritual and cultural identity. Nowhere else in South Africa will you hear German spoken before English or Zulu, or where the family sauerkraut recipe is as sacred."*^{19k}

As America's eventual entry into the war against Germany became evident, *"Superpatriotism reached ridiculous levels."*^{19j} The names of German foods were purged from menus ... sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage." The music of classic German composers ... Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart ... was removed from orchestral programs. Several states banned the teaching of German in public and private schools alike. South Dakota went so far as to ban the use of German over the telephone or in public gatherings of three or more people. Harassment of German-Americans became commonplace, though many of them had come to America specifically to avoid living under the militaristic Prussian regime.^{19j} In this environment there was a rapid shift away from the use of German in churches across the country.

While his father continued the use of German throughout his career, Otto Lilje initiated a program of English-language services as soon as he came to Zion in Latcha in 1905. Initially, *"an English service was held every third Sunday. The next year the English service was changed to every other Sunday, but German services were to be held as long as five voting members so desired. In 1928 it was decided that an English service was to be held on the German Sundays also ... The English language continued to grow in importance until in 1937, when German services were discontinued."*¹⁷ This evolutionary progression was typical of German Lutheran churches across the U.S., and of other ethnicities as well. Today only a tiny percentage of Lutheran churches in the U.S. maintain any German services.

8. The End of an Era

This is the story of four men of great faith and lifelong service. Christoph died in 1912, the 26th year of his service to St. Paul's in Salem Township. In all his years in the ministry in Ohio, he never preached a sermon or taught a class in any language but German.¹⁸ His wife Eva lived another twelve years continuing to contribute to her congregation. Johannes retired from the ministry in 1906, but soon returned to the German community in Neu Hermannsburg to assist by preaching and teaching until his 80th birthday. He died in 1920 in the Reibeling home in Ehlanzeni, the revered elder statesman of the Hermannsburg missionaries.⁶ His beloved Caroline lived another fifteen years bringing joy to her dozens of grandchildren.

Louis Reibeling died in 1932, a bit more than two years after the loss of his wife Auguste to the devastating malaria epidemic of 1930-31.⁹ He left to others the completion of the Zulu translation of the Bible, a project that was so dear to him. Otto Lilje lost his wife Doretta in 1924 ... far too early. His daughter Marie Katharine took on the burden of managing the pastoral household and raising her many younger siblings. Otto lived and worked for another three-and-a-half decades serving his congregation and his Lord. Here is a photo of Otto and his ten surviving children in 1949.

Without a doubt, the Lilje's were and are a truly remarkable family!





Enid Brown



Dieter Lilje



Carol Lilje



Gertrud Fricke



Paulina Dlamini



Marie Lilje

First, I must thank the eight people who did the most to make this story come to life. Enid Brown of Great Britain, who brought to my attention the family connection between my wife and the South African Lilje's, and also introduced me to the writings of her aunt Gertrud and of Paula Dlamini;. Rev. Dieter Reinhard Lilje of South Africa, whose magnificent e-book *Lilje – 140 Years in South Africa* was the inspiration for this little essay; Carol Lilje of the United States, who gathered and made available so much of the materials concerning the American Lilje's. Also, Rebecca Pachasa (who is related to “10% of the people in northwest Ohio”) whose *RootsWeb* site gave me initial clues about the Lilje's in the United States; and Walter Volker the pre-eminent historian of the German missionaries in Natal who provided key inputs and advice. Then there are the three ladies who have passed on to be with their Lord, but whose reminiscences are so important to our story. They are Gertrud Reibelung Fricke (1913-2008), Paulina Nomguqo Dlamini (1858-1945), and Marie Katharine Lilje (1904-1989). Many thanks to all.

Sources

- 1) **Life Work of Pastor Louis Harms** by Theodor Harms, translated by Mary E. Ireland; published by Lutheran Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1900.
- 2) **Geschichte der Hermannsburg Mission** from 1865-1914 by Georg Haccius; published by Missionhandlung Hermannsburg.
- 3) **Curricula Vitae** – submitted to Hermannsburg Seminary for admission by Johannes Lilje (1863), Christoph Lilje (1870) and Louis Reibelung (1897).
- 4) **Die vergessenen Söhne Hermannsburgs in Nordamerika** by Reinhard Müller; brief biographies of Hermannsburg students who emigrated to the US 1864-1912; published by Missionhandlung Hermannsburg.
- 5) **Genealogy of the Lilje Family of Germany** by Walter Lillie; unpublished manuscript of the 2000s.
- 6) **Lilje ... 140 Years in South Africa** an e-book by Rev. Dieter Reinhard Lilje; privately published; 2008.
- 7) **Paulina Dlamini ... Servant of Two Kings** reminiscences of a Zulu woman compiled by H. Filter; translated and edited by S. Bourquin; published by University of Natal Press; 1986.
- 8) **Johannes Reibelung, unser Missionar in den Dornen von Ehlanzeni ...** Mission Notes #74 by W. Wendebourg and published by Missionhandlung Hermannsburg, translated by Reibelung's great-granddaughter Veroni Wood.
- 9) **Memories of Gertrud Fricke born Reibelung ...** reminiscences of Reibelung family life, unpublished 2005 monograph recorded and translated by her daughter, Gudrun.
- 10) **Vision: Global Congregation. The Task in Southern Africa** by Heinrich Voges, published 2000.
- 11) **Genealogy of the Lilje Family of Ohio** by Marie K. Lilje; unpublished notes and manuscript of the 1980s.
- 12) **A Short History of the Lutheran Church in Ohio** by Rev. John O. Lang, 1969 monograph published by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.
- 13) **These Hundred Years** the centennial history of Capital University by David B. Owens; published by Capital University, 1950.
- 14) **150th Anniversary of Peace Lutheran Church, Galion, OH** booklet published by the congregation, 1997.
- 15) **History of St. John Lutheran Church, Port Clinton, OH** – 125th anniversary booklet published by the congregation, 2000.
- 16) **Register of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials** of St. John's LC, Port Clinton, OH 1875-1977; FHL film #0940117.
- 17) **Seventy-fifth Anniversary 1883-1958** – anniversary booklet published by Zion Lutheran Church, Latchie, Ohio.
- 18) **Minutes of the Northern District** of the Lutheran Church - Ohio Synod; Annual Meeting; October 1912.
- 19) **Internet Websites** as available in 2013, including the following:
 - a) **FamilySearch.org** ... the website of the LDS Church's *Family History Library*.
 - b) **Ancestry.com** ... a commercial genealogy website.
 - c) **EllisIslandRecords.org** ... the website of the *Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island Foundation*.
 - d) **Google.com** ... a commercial search engine website also used for maps and translation.
 - e) **Wikipedia.org** ... an on-line encyclopedia website.
 - f) **SAfrika.org** ... German South African resource page
 - g) **Missionaries.Griffith.edu.au** ... research on Hermannsburg Missionary Society.
 - h) **Lilje.awardspace.com/FamHist/lilje.html** ... the Lilje's of Australia (Perth) the website of Kevin Lilje.
 - i) **Port Clinton and Oak Harbor** ... municipal websites and **Ottawa County Museum Facebook** page.
 - j) **AuthenticHistory.com/1914-1920** ... article on war hysteria and the persecution of German-Americans.
 - k) **Magazine.Getaway.co.za/archive** ... Nov 2002 article titled “The Village that Almost Wasn't – Hermannsburg” by Robyn Daly.