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Babes in Bondage—Parental Selling of Children to Finance Family Migration: The Case of German Migration to North America, 1720-1820*

The existence and extent of intra-family debt shifting via selling children into bondage among German immigrant families to North America is documented using quantitative ship manifest and servant auction data. This evidence is at odds with the standard description presented in the literature based on literary sources. Market competition created the opening and colonial welfare laws drove German immigrant parents into selling their children into bondage to finance their own (the parents') migration, but only for children within a particular and narrow age range. German immigrant parents did not callously treat their children as investment goods.

European migration to colonial America was expensive, easily exceeding half a year's, and frequently a whole year's, income for many adult migrants (Grubb 1985a, p. 316). Unattached individuals had to bear the entire burden of financing their own migration. During the colonial period roughly half entered servant labor contracts to do so—selling their future labor in America to finance their passage expense (Galenson 1981; Grubb 1985a, 1985b, 1988). Individuals migrating as part of a family, however, might have been able to shift the cost of their own migration onto other family members. In particular, migrants using servitude to finance their passage could shift passage debts within the family by having some family members enter servant contracts that sold for more than that member's share of the family's passage debt. For example, parents could sell their children into bondage for a long enough term of service to sell for prices that would not only cover the children's passage debts, but also that of the parents—thus freeing the parents from any obligation to enter servitude themselves. Alternatively, a parent could take the debts of other family members upon him or herself, freeing these other members from servitude obligations.

Among European migrants to colonial America, German parents have been singled out by the contemporary literature for selling their children into servitude to pay for their own passage debts, thus allowing the parents to avoid servitude and enter America free (Diffenderffer 1899, pp. 191-93, 266, 302-03; Geiser 1901, pp. 52-53, 73-74; Herrick 1926, pp. 187, 191; Morris 1981, pp. 321-22; Smith 1947, p. 22; Wokeck 1999, pp. 157, 160-63). The implication is that these German parents were callous and selfish, regarding children as purely an investment good with no consumption-good utility or emotional familial value.

However, the kinds of debt shifting strategies that were actually adopted within families to finance migration and why such strategies were used are neither well documented nor well explained in the current literature. In this paper, I will present and evaluate the current evidence for and against the existence of intra-family debt shifting among German immigrants to early America. I will then present new evidence that establishes the existence of intra-family debt shifting, but only of a limited scope. Finally, I will explain how market competition provided the opportunity and colonial welfare law constrained the choices in such a way that German parents were driven into this particular intra-family debt-shifting strategy. In conclusion, German parents are found not to be callous users of their children's labor or unfeeling parents who saw their children purely as investment goods, but caring parents trapped by legal institutions into selling particular children into servitude, thus benefiting the rest of the family. Background information on German immigration and servitude to early America is provided first.

Background Information on German Migration

Germans comprised the largest non-British European migration to British colonial America. Between 1720 and 1775, over 100,000 Germans migrated to British America, primarily Pennsylvania (Wokeck 1999, pp. 45-46). The key demographic characteristic distinguishing German and British migrants was the relatively high proportion of families among the Germans. For example, under 10 percent of English migrants to Pennsylvania between 1774 and 1776 were either married persons or dependent children, whereas between 52 and 72 percent of German migrants to Pennsylvania between 1727 and 1820 were either married persons or dependent children (Bailyn 1986, pp. 210-11; Grubb 1990, p. 421). These German immigrants were also relatively educated and literate—80 percent of the adult males could sign their names—and so can be considered about as well informed regarding the likely choices they would face as could be expected of eighteenth-century transatlantic migrants (Grubb 1987c; 1990 pp. 428-31).

Among both British and German immigrants roughly half entered servitude to pay for their migration costs to the New World. Given the differing demographic characteristics cited above, there were virtually no English and Irish immigrant servants who were married persons or dependent children, whereas a substantial number of German immigrant servants were married persons and dependent children (Grubb 1985a, 1986; McCusker and Menard 1985, p. 243; Smith 1947, pp. 20-22). For example, between 1785 and 1804, where records are complete enough to identify the family status of all German immigrants who entered servitude, among the 7837 German immigrants arriving in Pennsylvania 35 percent and 40 percent of married persons and dependent children, respectively, entered servitude to pay for their passage debts. Parents and dependent children comprised 51 percent of German immigrants and 44 percent of German immigrant servants. Out of 927 married couples over one third had 3 or more children (Grubb 1985a, pp. 320, 322). This evidence indicates that family migration strategies that potentially entailed intra-family debt shifting was almost exclusively a German, rather than a British, phenomenon, and that considerable scope existed for intra-family debt shifting given the number and size of German families in the migration stream. As such, the following evidence focuses exclusively on German migration.

German migrants exclusively used the redemption method to finance migration for those who could not pay cash up-front. This method entailed contracting a debt for passage at embarkation with the promise that this debt would be paid shortly after arrival in the New World. How the debt was paid was up to the emigrant. Most negotiated servant contracts with American employers while docked at their New World destination to repay their migration debt before being allowed to debark. For Germans migrating to North America, the redemption method was used for at least a century—from 1720 to 1820 (Geiser 1901; Grubb 1986, 1987b, 1988, 1992a, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1998; McCusker and Menard 1985, p. 243; Strassburger 1934, vol. 3, pp. 112-14, 131-32, 137-38; Tepper 1978, pp. 257-60).

The redemption method allowed German parents the flexibility to observe the servant market in America and decide after arrival how to best redistribute the family's total passage debt among its individual members in terms of who in the family might generate servant prices in excess of their portion of the family's total passage debt (Galenson 1981, p. 14; Grubb 1986, pp. 407-11). In addition, signing fixed-length servant contracts designed to sell for an expected sum, before embarkation, as British migrants typically did, would have been difficult for families that wanted to engage in debt shifting within the family due to the 'lemons' problem (Grubb 2003). Because Germans typically incurred pre-embarkation debts of variable amounts that shippers added to the cost of passage, total passage debts could vary across German immigrants. As such, German immigrant servant contract lengths could vary both because of differences in servant productivity and because of differences in passage debts. If contract lengths were fixed before embarkation, buyers in America would not know which reason caused a given servant's contract length to be shorter or longer. Risk-adverse buyers would interpret longer contracts as a sign of low servant productivity rather than a sign of higher debt and so offer too low a price per contract length. The redemption method solved this 'lemons' problem by revealing the debt and the physical condition of the servant simultaneously to buyers in the American auction. As such, the institution of redemption servitude was a necessary prerequisite, and ideally suited, for a family migration strategy that entailed intra-family debt shifting. But did German immigrant families actually take advantage of this opportunity for intra-family debt shifting provided by the market?

The Evidence Indicating that German Parents Really Did Sell Their Children Like Cattle

The original evidence that comprises the extent of what supports the indictment in the modern literature that German parents callously sold their children into bondage for their own benefit solely so the parents could escape bondage consists of four seemingly independent primary literary sources. These sources also describe how and why this was done, as well as describe how the servant market in America worked. Elder Johannes Naas, shortly after arriving in Pennsylvania in 1733, wrote a letter to his son in Switzerland (Diffenderffer 1899, pp. 300-03) in which he described how German immigrants used servitude to pay for their passage to America as follows:

> [...] What I heard concerning the people who do not have money for the passage, surprised me greatly, how it goes with the young, strong people and artisans, how quickly all were gone, bricklayers, carpenters, and whatever trades they might have. Also old people who have grown children and who understand nothing but farm labor, then the child takes two freights (fare for two) upon itself, its own and that of the father or of the mother four years, during that time it has all the clothing that is needed and in the end an entirely new outfit from head to foot, a horse or cow with a calf. Small children often pay one freight and a half until they are twenty-one years old.
>
> [...] The matter is made legal at the city hall with great earnestness. ...[A]nd for many young people it is very good that they cannot pay their own freight. These will sooner be provided for than those who have paid theirs and they can have their bread with others and soon learn the ways of the country.

In 1756 Gottlieb Mittelberger (1898, pp. 26-28; 1960, pp. 17-18) wrote a polemic against German emigration in which he described how German emigrants used servitude to pay for their passage as follows:

> This is how the commerce in human beings on board ship takes place. Every day Englishmen, Dutchmen, and High Germans come from Philadelphia and other places...and go on board the newly arrived vessel that has brought people from Europe and offers them for sale. From among the healthy they pick out those suitable for the purposes for which they require them. Then they negotiate with them as to the length of the period for which they will go into service in order to pay off their passage, the whole amount of which they generally still owe. When an agreement has been reached, adult persons by written contract bind themselves to serve for three, four, five, or six years, according to their health and age. The very young, between the ages of ten and fifteen, have to serve until they are twenty-one, however.
>
> Many parents in order to pay their fares in this way and get off the ship must barter and sell their children as if they were cattle*; for if their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained;* (italics added)[1] [...]
>
> People who arrive without the funds to pay their way and who have children under the age of five, cannot settle their debts by selling them. They must give away these children for nothing to be brought up by strangers; and in return these children must stay in service until they are twenty-one years old. Children between five and ten who owe half-fare...must also go

> into service in return until they are twenty-one years old, and can neither set free their parents nor take their debts upon themselves. On the other hand, the sale of children older than ten can help to settle a part of their parents' passage charges.

In 1756 Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to Sir Everard Fawkner (Labaree 1963, p. 474) in which he presented reasons why a recent act of Parliament would ruin the servant trade. This act authorized military officers to enlist servants in America in exchange for paying the servant's master the prime cost of a servant minus a sum equal to the proportion of time already served. Franklin argued that this price was too low. Among the reasons he offered to justify his conclusion was that,

> Many of our Servants are purchased young of their Parents, who coming with large Families, bind some of their Children to Tradesmen and Farmers, in order to raise a Sum to pay the Freights of the whole, and keep themselves free…"

Finally, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, head of the Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania, sent a letter to a friend in Germany in 1763 (Diffenderffer 1899, pp. 191-93) where he described how German immigrants used servitude to pay for their passage to America as follow:

> [...] Children under six are gratuitously disposed of. [...]
>
> Finally the ship reaches Philadelphia.... Those having means to pay are allowed to leave the vessel. To the less fortunate--*unbemittelte*--without means, the ship is a mart. Purchasers make their selection, agree afterwards with their preempted servants for a stipulated period of service. Young and unmarried persons of both sexes are sold first.... Married people, widows, and the infirm are dull sale. If they have children these are sold, and the parents' fare charged to the children's account, and the children are consequently obliged to serve a longer time. Children are in this way not infrequently separated forever from their parents. [...] By having their children sold, parents are allowed to leave the ship. Still, their condition is unenviable; they are destitute, poorly clad, the infirmities of age often weighing them down, making them appear as if they had emerged from a sepulchre.
>
> [...] Little did the parents anticipate such things.
>
> [...] The children of poor parents, if kept in hardship, learning that because of the non-sale of father or mother they have to serve the longer, often became incensed, yea even embittered against their own parents.

Mittelberger's commentary was openly intended as a polemic to dissuade Germans from migrating to America thereby ingratiating Mittelberger to the Duke of Wurttemberg, and Franklin's account was intended as rhetorical persuasion in order to justify altering an act of parliament. As such, the veracity of Mittelberger's commentary and Franklin's account is suspect. The accounts of Naas and Muhlenberg, however, appear to be unimpeachable. They were written in personal letters with no ulterior motive other than to inform friends and relatives in Germany of what they thought was happening in America.

Naas, Mittelberger, Franklin, and Muhlenberg did not directly participate in the German servant trade, and may have known little about the actual process. None appear to have directly observed the auctions of German servants over any extended period of time or in any detail. Naas even opens his description with the words, “What I have heard…” To what extent their accounts are based on hear-say rather than direct observation is unknown.

The Evidence Indicating that Such Behavior May Never Have Happened

The only eyewitness description of German immigrant servant sales by a German immigrant servant, Johann Carl Buettner (1828; 1971, pp. 26-28), says nothing regarding the selling of children by parents. Christopher Sauer, the German printer who migrated to Pennsylvania in 1724 and became an advocate for German immigrants regarding troublesome aspects of the trade, also says nothing about the selling of children by parents (Diffenderffer 1899).

Of greater relevance, however, is the recent quantitative analysis of German servant auction records (Grubb 1985a, 1986, 1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1994b, 1994c, 1998). There are four bodies of servant auction records on German immigrant arrivals in Pennsylvania that contain individual sale prices for 5,796 German servant sales, i.e., 1745, 1771-1773, 1785-1804, and 1817-1831 (Neible 1906-1908; “Record of Indentures”; “Book of Redemptioners”; Grubb 1994b). In this evidence, no one is sold for two times the typical single adult passage cost. In fact, almost no one is sold for what could be deduced as a price above the price range for single non-family adult servants. For example, Johann Carl Buettner, age 19, traveled to Philadelphia from Rotterdam in 1773 with no other family members, arriving in debt for his passage. His passage debt, and thus his servant contract price in Philadelphia, was 30 Pennsylvania pounds (Buettner 1828, 1971; Pfaelzer de Ortiz 1999, pp. 281-83). No one in the 1771-1773 servant auction records, out of 1,287 German servants, sold for twice that sum, less than 3 percent sold for more than that sum, and only 2 individuals sold for an amount 25 percent above that sum (“Record of Indentures”).

In the 1785-1804 records, adult males migrating alone sold for 81 dollars on average. No one in this body of data sold for twice that amount (“Book of Redemptioners”; Grubb 1994c, pp. 818-19). In addition, the average prices of dependent children are equal to, or less than, this amount (Grubb 1992a, p. 171). The same pattern is found in the 1745 and the 1817-1831 data (Neible 1906-1908; Grubb 1994b). As such, the quantitative auction evidence gives no clear indication that any family member took two full adult passage debts onto him/herself—their own and another family member’s full freight cost. Finally, across all four bodies of auction records, almost no German immigrant servants were recorded as being sold for a zero price, i.e. being gratuitously given away. Intra-family debt shifting along the lines described by Naas, Mittelberger, Franklin, and Muhlenberg cannot be found in this evidence.[2]

The timing of servant sales indicates that children were sold before their parents. This pattern would be consist with parents trying to sell their children for sums above their children's passage debts in hopes of raising enough excess cash to defray some of their own (the parents') passage debt. However, the sale prices of parents are not below the range of prices for adults who migrated alone. This timing of child sales would appear, instead, to be designed to maximize parental oversight regarding the formation of their children's servant contracts. For example, parents negotiated complex master-provided education clauses into their children's contracts (Grubb 1992b).

The auction evidence for 1785-1804 can be organized by family structure (Grubb 1985a). Figure 1 shows the probability that a dependent child would enter servitude conditional on the number of siblings migrating with the family, and on whether the child's parents entered servitude. While children clearly went into servitude while their parents remained free, the probability of this event was relatively low. In addition, the probability of entering servitude increased with the number of siblings, which suggests that large families did not have the resources to pay for the passage of all members. Some members would have to pay their own passage through entering servitude—which typically were the oldest children who were already at, or past, the age of entering apprenticeship.

[Place Figure 1 Here]

While children were more likely to enter servitude if their parents entered servitude, the probability of this event was far from 100 percent, see Figure 1. One reason for this was that many parents entering servitude negotiated contracts whereby very young children, typically those under age 4 who were charged zero freight cost, were allowed to stay with the parents and be free when the parents were free. For example, the contract registration for the married couple Samuel and Barbara Burckhart included the clause "The[ir] child to be fed and clothed gratis and to be free with the parent[s]." (Grubb 1994b, p. 11) Other children may have avoided servitude by being placed with American relatives outside the formal auction market, or by having resources shifted to them if they were already at the age of maturity (grown children) but still migrating with the family group. These patterns of behavior indicate that German parents, far from being callous or selfish, were concerned about their children's welfare and future.

New and Unique Evidence: The Ship *Britannia*

In the quantitative evidence cited above, there is one caveat that Grubb (1992a, p. 171) missed in his analysis of auction price data that opens the door to a particular kind of intra-family debt shifting. In the 1785-1804 evidence, children ages 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 were sold for the same price as people over age 14. Surviving ship contracts, however, indicate that passengers over age 3 but under age 13, and on some ships under age 15, were charged half fare (Strassburger 1934, vol. 3, p. 131; Tepper 1978, p. 257). Thus, children under age 15—who were most likely charged half-freight—appear to have been sold for full-freight passage fares by their parents. Parents may have been able to extract a sum equal to half an adult passage fare from the sale of each child between the ages of 9 and 14 that could then be used to defray the passage debts of other family members. Children over age 15 were charged a full adult passage fare and appear to have been typically sold for that full fare passage cost and no more, thus yielding no excess sum that parent's could extract to help defray the debts of other family members. However, to confirm that this form of intra-family debt shifting was what was really going on, direct evidence is needed.

Fortunately, such evidence can be constructed. The surviving manifest for the Ship *Britannia* itemized charges by individual name and family group. Some of these names can be linked to the surviving servant auction records and the oaths of allegiance administered in Philadelphia ("Munstering Book"; "Record of Indentures"; Strassburger 1934, vol. 1, pp. 749-51). This is a unique record. No other ship record has survived with this kind of information and record linkage potential.[3]

The Ship *Britannia*, captained by James Peters, left Rotterdam on an unknown date, cleared customs in Cowes, England on 13 August 1773, and arrived in Philadelphia on 18 September 1773. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported that Captain Peter had 246 Germans with him. The surviving oath of allegiance administered to the passengers in Philadelphia upon debarkation reported "150 in the list" and "250 freights." The oath of allegiance was only administered to non-British males over age 15. It recorded 118 signatures. Joshua Fisher and Sons, to whom the passengers were consigned, placed an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 22 September stating, "Just arrived…A number of healthy German passengers whose freights are to be paid to Joshua Fisher and Sons or to the master on board…" (*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 22 September 1773; Strassburger 1934, vol. 1, pp. 749-51).

The mustering book for the *Britannia* lists 260 individuals, 210 whole freights, 45 half-freights, and 5 quarter-freights, including 6 adults who died on the voyage ("Munstering Book").[4] Interpreting and quantifying this information is difficult because of poor penmanship, cryptic terminology used for particular charges, and the fact that charges are not always priced in the same currency (see the reprint of a page of this record in Herrick 1926, p. 186-87).[5] Itemized charges for each passenger included "freight", "head money", "proportion in the bed place", "cash advanced", "interest", "sea stores", "clothes at sea", and "baggage"—some being priced in florins, some in Pennsylvania pounds, and some in pounds sterling. Remarks recorded in the mustering book are suggestive of intra-family debt shifting. For example, next to some passengers' debts were recorded the phrases "paid by his brother" or "paid by his children." However, this information does not indicate exactly how the debts were paid—whether by entering servitude, by the sale of goods brought by the family, by gifts from friends and relatives in America, or by some other method. While some entries list the names of persons who paid the passengers' debts, why these people paid the debts and what they received in exchange is not recorded in the mustering book.

What makes this record invaluable for investigating intra-family debt shifting is that it overlaps with one of the surviving servant auction records. The 1771-1773 servant auction record ends on October 5, 1773 ("Record of Indentures"). The 17 days between the *Britannia's* arrival and the end of this servant auction record was enough time for 96 individuals, including several entire families, to complete their sale into servitude to pay their passage debts. The auction price of each individual family member can be matched to that member's passage debt in the ship's mustering book. The difference between the auction price and the passage debt, when organized and totaled by family, indicates both the existence and the magnitude of intra-family debt shifting. The evidence for five families from the *Britannia* that had completed their sale into servitude by 5 October is presented in Table 1.[6]

[Place Table 1 Here]

In Table 1, the passage debt is the freight charge, and the total debt is the freight charge plus any additional charges or pre-embarkation debts added to the freight charge. The sale price is the price paid for that individual's servant contract and, along with the sale date and contract length, comes from the servant auction record. With the exception of one child, age was not recorded. Ages, however, can be estimated for children in several ways. In the mustering book, children were listed in descending order by age for each family, and children under age 15 were charged half-fare. Children who signed the oath of allegiance must have been over age 15, as required by the oath. Finally, given the relationship between age and contract length for children, contract length can be used as a proxy for age (Grubb 1992a, p. 171). The estimated ages of children are included in Table 1.

The pattern of debt shifting within these families in Table 1 is clear. Children above age 14 who were charged full-freight passage fares rarely generated excess value when sold into servitude. Older children typically paid their own way, no more no less. The exceptions among older children would appear to be children age 14-15 who had just barely crossed the full-freight passage fare threshold, see Hans Peter Schott and Salomea Reinhard in Table 1. The required contract length to take them to the age of maturity, five and one-half years, was long enough to still generate some excess value over and above their full-freight passage debt, but only in the 50 percent mark-up range. For children above age 15, the shorter contract length needed to take them to the age of maturity, 3.8 years on average, reduced the excess value that could be extracted to zero. For these children, parents did not force them to serve longer than they had to in order to pay for their own individual cost of passage. Only when the contract length did not take them to the age of maturity was it extended to the age of maturity with the parents extracting the excess value that these longer contracts generated over and above the child's passage debt.

Children under age 15 who were charged half–freight were the key to intra-family debt shifting. They were sold into servitude for an amount well in excess of their passage debt—an average mark-up of 100 percent. It was in the narrow age range of 9 to 13 that children were old enough to have high net labor value between that age and the age of maturity but who were only charged half-freight passage fares. This is where the lion's share of excess value, and hence intra-family debt shifting, existed. These excess sums were used to pay for the debts of the youngest children and of the parents, thus allowing them to escape servitude.

Why did parents choose this particular form of debt shifting? Did they simply not like their children who were between the ages of 9 and 15, or like their children who were older than 15 and younger than 9 relatively more? Why didn't shippers capture the excess value generated by these children by charging higher passage fares?

How Colonial Welfare Poor-Relief Law Constrained Parental Choice

Because society did not want children to die of exposure and starvation or commit mischief, some adult parent or employer with means and authority was always required to look after them. For children, poor-relief was largely privatized in early America. Over-seers of the poor would place orphaned children and children of indigent parents in the homes of private citizens to be raised. This was similar to modern-day foster care, except that the master was to teach the child a skill, like in an apprenticeship—though the skill could simply be farming—and the child was expected to work for his master to pay for his keep (Heffner 1913; Herrick 1926, pp. 106-12; Morris 1981, pp. 384-85; Murray and Herndon 2002; Quimby 1985, pp. 99-117). The poor relief laws for Pennsylvania are quite clear on this power. The Act passed in 1705 (*Statutes at Large* 1896, vol. 2, p. 253) states,

> …it shall and may be lawful for the said Over-seers of the poor…to set on work the children of all such, whose parents can not be by the said justice thought able to maintain them, and also to put such children out apprentices, for such terms as they in their discretion see fit."

This law did not fundamentally change for the rest of the eighteenth century (Heffner 1913; *Statutes at Large* vol. 4, 1897, pp. 266-67; vol. 5, 1898, pp. 278-80; vol. 6, 1899, pp. 246-47, 432-38; vol. 8, 1902, pp. 75-79).

But did this poor-relief law apply to foreign immigrants? Immigrants who entered servitude were clearly destitute in that they had exhausted all their resources and still could not pay for their passage debts. It would appear that the over-seers of the poor could legally take the children of arriving immigrant parents who had entered servitude and give these children away to employers as pauper apprentices to serve until the age of maturity with no upfront compensation given to the parents or child. In 1756 the Pennsylvania legislature formally recognize the de facto application of the poor-relief law to non-British immigrants in "An Act for Binding Out and Settling Such of the Inhabitants of Nova Scotia Imported into This Providence as are Under Age…" This Act states,

> …as there are numbers of children among them whose real advantage and interest it would undoubtedly prove to be brought up in industry and frugality and bound out to learn husbandry or some other profitable art whereby they might become reputable inhabitants entitled to the rights of the British subjects, and their parents thereby eased of the charge of their maintenance, as well as the public, which by proper care, may be in a good degree relieved from the present heavy expense:
>
> Therefore be it enacted…That the overseers of the poor…bind out such of the children of the said inhabitants of Nova Scotia, whose parents or friends are incapable to maintain or neglect otherwise to provide for, to kind masters or mistresses on the best terms they can obtain, upon condition with the said masters or mistresses in their respective indentures that the said children shall be taught to read and write the English language and such reputable and profitable occupations as may enable them to support themselves at the expiration of their respective indentures, the male children until they attain the age of twenty-one years and the female children until they attain the age of eighteen years respectively and no longer…. (*Statutes at Large* 1898, vol. 5, pp. 278-80).

The Pennsylvania legislature also formally recognized the de facto application of the basic tenets of the poor-relief law to German immigrant children in the supplement to the 1750 Act entitled "An Act for the Prohibiting the Importation of Germans or Other Passengers in Too Great Numbers in Any One Vessel" which was passed in 1765. This act recognized the past practice of not allowing German immigrant children who entered servitude to be freed before the age of maturity and, if necessary, forced them to work past that age. The act states,

> …if any child or minor shall at the time of his or her said importation be such an advanced age that his or her service until he or she arrives to the age of twenty-[one] years shall not be equal and sufficient to pay and discharge the money due for his or her own freight or passage, then and in such case he or she shall and may be bound to serve for the same until the age of twenty-four years and no longer, unless the said money can be raised by his or her service for a shorter time…" (*Statutues at Large* vol. 6, pp. 437-38)

Indigent immigrant parents faced a stark choice. They could either sell their own children into servitude—supervising their child's contractual arrangements—for whatever the market would pay, or have their children given away into servitude by the over-seers of the poor for no upfront compensation to the parents or child. In addition, if parents sold a child into servitude for a term that expired before the child reach maturity, the over-seers of the poor could potentially extend that child's servitude to the age of maturity again with no upfront compensation to the parents or child. Given the same outcome for the child—service at least until the age of maturity—the choice was clear: parents should take the money from selling their own children into bondage rather than let someone else capture that value.

This explains the particular debts shifting within the families observed above. Children above age 14 were charged full passage fares. Selling these children into servitude until the age of maturity typically generated labor market prices equal to that child's passage fare. If it generated less, then that child might be sold for a term that extended past age 21 (*Statutes at Large* vol. 6, pp. 437-38). Children ages 4 to 14 were charged half an adult passage fare. The net labor value of a 9 to 14 year old that served until maturity was typically greater than that child's passage cost. The sale of these children generated money in excess of their passage cost that could be used by the family to defray the passage cost of other family members. For most children under age 9, however, the net labor value of serving until maturity did not generate market prices above their passage debts, and so parents had little extra to gain from selling very young children into bondage.

Why did shippers fail to capture this excess value? They could have charged 9 to 14 year-olds full-freight and thereby have captured this market value instead of letting parents or the over-seers of the poor get it. Shippers were prevented from doing so by competition (Grubb 1987b). Passage fares were based on freight space (Grubb 1986). Children under age 15 were small enough to use only half the allotted space given to an adult, and could be fed half the rations given to an adult. Thus, children under age 15 were charged half fare. If a shipper tried to charge these children more, families would have canvassed for competing shippers who would charge the pro-rated space and provisions cost for a half-ling. Shippers competing for cargo would readily offer such half-fare prices for children under age 15 to fill their cargo holds with family groups. In the end, parents were the ones determining that children under age 15 could eat half the adult rations and travel in half the adult space. Parents could have always paid full freight for young children. Parents sought to minimize the total family cost of passage, and competition among shippers allowed them to do this.

Conclusions

While Naas, Mittleberger, Franklin, and Muhlenberg were correct in claiming that intra-family debt shifting among German immigrants existed, they were wrong about its extent, nature, and causes. Young children do not appear to have been "gratuitously disposed of", children above age 15 do not appear to have been sold into bondage for more than their own passage debts, and no children appear to have been sold into bondage for their own passage debts plus that of another adult. Intra-family debt shifting appears to have been narrowly concentrated among children between the ages of 9 and 14. The shipping market created the opportunity for such debt shifting by only charging half-freight passage fares to these children. It was colonial welfare law, however, that forced immigrant parents into this debt shifting. Parents who entered servitude to pay for the family's passage debts risked being considered indigent by the authorities and thereby having their children taken away from them by the over-seers of the poor to be bound out as pauper apprentices until the age of maturity for no upfront cash compensation to the parents or child. As a result, immigrant parents chose to supervise the sale of their own children into servitude for whatever cash price the market would bear. A servant contract that sold for half-fare and set the child free before the age of maturity was not possible. The law would force that child back into servitude. If the sale of such a child until the age of maturity generated cash in excess of the child's passage debt, it was better that the family get use of it to free the parents or other children in the family, than for it to profit that child's master.

Because German immigrant parents didn't force their younger children, those under age 16, into contracts that required them to serve beyond the age of maturity, and didn't force their older children, those over age 15, into contracts long enough to generate excess value above their passage cost, it is hard to conclude that parents were exploiting their own children for their own benefit. As such, parents did not callously and selfishly sell their children into bondage for their own (the parent's) benefit. Children were not a pure investment good to these parents. That some parents went free via selling their children into bondage was an unintended outcome of the institutional constraints imposed on them by markets and law.

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Figure 1. Servitude Among German Immigrant Children, 1785-1804

Source: “Book of Redemptioners”; Grubb (1985a, p. 324); Strassburger (1934, vol. 3).

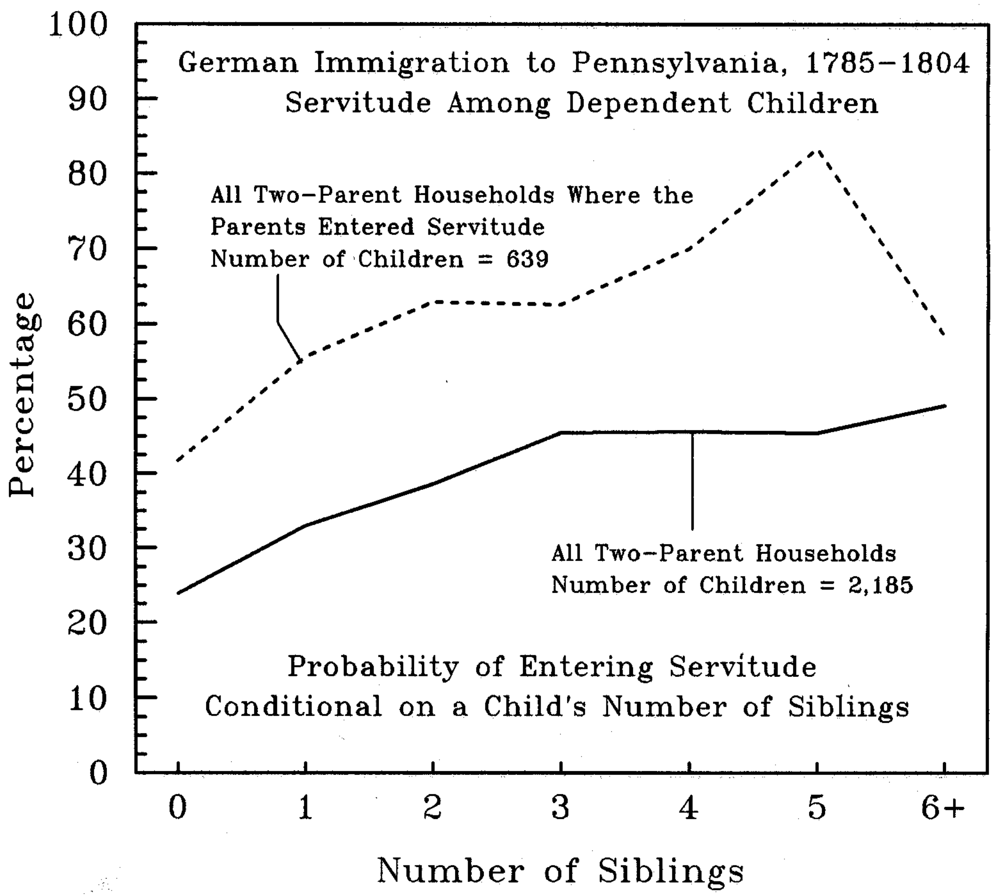

Table 1. Five Families on the Ship *Britannia* Arriving From Rotterdam at Philadelphia Sept. 18, 1773.

Families	Passage Debt	Total Debt	Sale Price	Sale Date	Contract Length
JUNG family:					
Parents: Wilhem	16.50	17.68	"paid by children"		
Anna Maria	16.50	17.68	"paid by children"		
Son: Nicholas Adam (estimated age = 16-17)	16.50	17.68	20.00	9/24	4.00 years
Son: Anthony (estimated age = 12-13)	8.25	8.93	20.00	9/23	6.00 years
Son: John Hendrick (estimated age = 10-11)	8.25	8.93	25.00	9/20	9.00 years
Son: Carel	8.25	8.93	25.00	?	?
Daughter: Maria	8.25	8.93	0.00		
Family Total:	82.50	88.76	90.00		
SCHOTT family:					
Parents: Lawrence	16.50	19.49	18.15	9/22	3.00 years
Anna	16.50	17.68	0.00		
Son: Hans Peter (estimated age = 14-15)	16.50	17.68	26.85	9/21	5.50 years
Son: Jacob (known age = 11)	8.25	9.43	21.00	9/20	10.00 years
Family Total:	57.75	64.28	66.00		
LINCK family:					
Parent: Johan Simon	16.50	21.31	22.10	9/21	3.00 years
Son: Johan Jurgen (estimated age = 18-19)	16.50	21.34	22.10	9/20	3.75 years
Son: Johan Phillip (estimated age = 20+)	16.50	21.34	22.10	9/21	3.00 years
Family Total:	49.50	63.99	66.30		
REINHARD family:					
Parents: Hans	16.50	17.68	12.20	"paid by himself"	
Salomea	16.50	17.68	0.00	"paid by children"	
Daughter: Salomea (estimated age = 14-15)	16.50	19.86	29.03	9/21	5.50 years
Son: Hans Jurgen (estimated age = 11)	8.25	8.93	18.50	9/21	8.50 years

Son: Jocchem (estimated age = 10)	8.25	8.93	24.00	9/23	11.00 years
Son: Hans	8.25	8.93	0.00	"paid by other children"	
Family Total:	74.25	82.01	83.73		
KUNKELE family:					
Parents: Philip	16.50	22.98	24.00	9/22	4.50 years
Barabara	16.50	23.15	24.00	9/22	4.50 years
Son: Michael (estimated age = 16-17)	16.50	20.96	21.00	9/24	4.50 years
Family Total:	49.50	67.09	69.00		

1. Average Excess Gained By Parents on Children Sold: (Sale Price - Total Debt)

Children Charged Full Freight (*N* = 6): (23.51 - 19.81 - [0.14]) = 3.56 Pennsylvania Pounds

Children Charged Half Freight (*N* = 5): (21.70 - 9.03 - [0.14]) = 12.53 Pennsylvania Pounds

2. Average Percentage Mark-up Gained By Parents on Children Sold: [(Sale Price - Total Debt)/ Total Debt]

Children Charged Full Freight (*N* = 6): (23.51 - 19.81)/19.81 = 18.7% [-2.5%] = 16.2%

Children Charged Half Freight (*N* = 5): (21.70 - 9.03)/ 9.03 = 140.3% [-2.5%] = 101.8%

Notes: The [0.14] and [-2.5%] adjustments above are the average absolute and percentage difference, respectively, between Sale Price and Total Debt for the Family Total. This number represents either an exchange rate error adjustment or an additional fee not listed. A question mark in the Table above means that the data was not recorded in the "Record of Indentures". All prices were converted to Pennsylvania pounds following the conversion rates in McCusker (1978, pp. 9, 186).

Sources: "Munstering Book" for Families, Passage Debt and Total Debt; "Record of Indentures" for Sale Price, Sale Date, and Contract Length; Strassburger (1934, vol. 1, pp. 749-51) for Families and estimated age; Grubb (1992a, p. 171) for estimated age based on contract length.

Footnotes:

[1] The phrase indicated by italics in the quoted passage is missing in the Oscar Handlin and John Clive translation (Mittelberger 1960), which is also the most commonly used translation in current scholarship. This phrase, however, appears in the translation by Carl Eben (Mittelberger 1898) and in the original German version (Mittelberger 1756).

[2] Mittelberger's and Muhlenberg's claim that young children were given away may simply reflect their confusion over these children being charged zero freight for passage as opposed to being sold for a zero price in the servant auction, and/or confusion over actual practice versus what potentially could happen given colonial welfare law.

[3] Other scholars have noted this ship manifest (Herrrick 1926, pp. 186-87; Wokeck 1999, pp. 153-57), but they have not linked the names from this ship to the servant auction records or quantitatively analyzed its information.

[4] The voyage death rate and time at sea for the *Britannia* is slightly lower and shorter than average, respectively, for German transatlantic voyages in this period (Grubb 1987a). What accounts for the difference between the 246 passengers reported by the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and the 260 passengers (minus the 6 dead) listed in the mustering book is unclear. The discrepancy, however, might simply reflect passengers discharged from the ship between when it docked on 18 September and when the *Gazette* was published on 22 September. The four passengers listed in the mustering book as being charged only one-quarter freight are not children. They were charged adult "head money", and were able to sign their names. Why these four were charged one-quarter freight, an unusual amount, is unknown. It could, however, have been compensation for other service rendered. For example, Traugott Leberecht Buhze, who was charged one-quarter freight, was also the only person on the ship listed at a physician. The mustering book listed no "zero freight" passengers, i.e. no children under age 4. Considering that some children under age 4 were likely to be on the *Britannia*, it is likely that more than the mustering book's 260 passengers had embarked at Rotterdam.

[5] The copy of the "Munstering Book" in Tepper (1978, pp. 236-38) is neither complete nor a direct transcription.

[6] There are 23 family groups on the *Britannia* (two-parent households with children). Some, however, consisted only of a father, mother, and one young child, and some families had no family members enter servitude. These reasons, and the fact that the surviving servant auction record ends on 5 October, accounts for why complete

evidence on intra-family debt shifting can be reconstructed only for 5 of the 23 families.