

The Plowman From Good Earth

by Frank W. Klein and Suzanne L. Bunkers (Winona: St. Mary's College Press, 1981).

*It is October 10, 1777.
In a field near the small village of Niederfeulen,
along the stream Feul, in the heart of
Luxembourg, a farmer is walking in the furrow
of a wooden plow drawn by his horse. The
farmer's name is Bernard. (Sketch by Sister
Tresa Klein, OSF)*

Chapter 1 The Plowman

"Mir woelle bleiwe wat mir sin," "We want to remain what we are", is the national motto of Luxembourg, not only carved above the porticoes of town halls or painted in houses, but also written in the hearts of the populace as a whole, as their story demonstrates. But what is it they want to remain? What makes them so ardently insist upon an identity apart from their more powerful neighbors? --E. Fodor, *Belgium and Luxembourg*

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Bernard does not know who first asked these questions, but he does know the answers. Luxembourgers want to be an independent people as they have been for 800 years, a people free to live their deep desires: to live close to their land, close to their families, and close to their Faith. Other peoples are still struggling to be free, to live their hopes and dreams; and, I suppose, Bernard thinks, this is the history of the human race. Always and everywhere this desire and drive is deep in the hearts of people; and always and everywhere people struggle, and sometimes even fight, that they might be free, free to be "wat mir sin."

Just look at the colonists in that new land of America. A year ago on July 4, 1776, their leaders--Bernard does not know them all, just certain ones like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams--signed a Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal and have the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." With that, the colonists rebelled against British rule. Now they are fighting to become a free and independent nation as Luxembourg is.

Bernard wonders how the American colonists can win this war. After all, the British are

professional soldiers, and they have experienced generals. The colonists, on the other hand, are just shopkeepers, woodsmen and farmers. In fact, the story is that the Commander-in-Chief picked by the Continental Congress to lead the Colonial Army is a farmer. True, thinks Bernard, he has more acres than I do; he is a "gros bauer," and on the Potomac River in Virginia he has a "gut," what they in America call a plantation. Yet, how can he lead an army, and how can he win a war?

But Bernard does not know that at this very time, during this first week of October in 1777, near a small town northwest of Benjamin Franklin's city of Philadelphia, George Washington's army is locked in a fierce battle with the British. By the time it is over, one thousand men will be wounded and killed. Later it will be known as the Battle of Germantown. Neither does Bernard know that after a few more skirmishes, Washington will lead his men to an area of low rolling hills twenty miles west of Philadelphia where there is an old forge on Valley Creek that meanders through the hills. People in the area call it Valley Forge. In December, cold and snowy, Washington's soldiers will trudge along the Schuylkill River until they come to Valley Creek. There these men, wounded, beaten, cold and hungry--yet still soldiers--will stop to spend the winter. Washington will later write, "You might have tracked the army to Valley Forge by the blood of their feet."

This is what is happening in America in 1777; But how can a farmer living in a valley in the heart of Luxembourg know what is going on in a valley in America? America is a new land with a history ahead of itself; Luxembourg an old land, rich in history. Fifty years before the time of Christ, when the land was known as Gaul, Roman Legions, led by Julius Caesar, marched into this land and conquered the Gallic-Germanic tribes living here. The Romans ruled this land for five hundred years.

Then, another conqueror, Attila the Hun, marched his hordes across this land on his way to Chalons. They rode their horses right through this valley and across these fields. It is interesting that a street in Niederfeulen is named Ettelbruck, "Attila's Bridge." Luxembourgers are fortunate that the Huns rode right on through and that instead, the Franks, who had come here first, settled in this land. The Franks mixed their blood with that of the Gallic-Germanic tribes who lived here, and in time they built a great rural culture and life. Above all, the time of the Franks was an age when the Christian faith, first planted by the Romans after the conversion of Constantine the Great, became deeply rooted. From the conversion to Christianity of the first Frankish king, Clovis, to the reign of their greatest of all kings, Charlemagne, in the 800s, the Gospel was made known, monasteries were built, and Christian practice flourished. The Faith became deeply embedded in the hearts of the people; and, through the ages, Luxembourgers have remained loyal and true to that Faith.

ABOVE, The Church of St. John the Baptist, standing in the midst of the villagers' fields, is the church of our ancestors. Its bell tower, erected in 1314 and restored in 1730, has called generation after generation to worship; and within the church proper, built in 1725, our ancestors have gathered. Outside its walls they lie buried. (Photograph by Suzanne Bunkers, 1980)

Yet another important event occurred in the history of this land and its people. On April 12, 963, when Otto the Great was king of Germany, the Abbey of St. Maximin at Trier gave certain lands to a feudal lord, Count Siegfried of the Ardennes, including a small ruined fortress on a rocky height overlooking the Alzette River. The fortress, said to have been built by the Romans after their conquest of Gaul, was called "Lutzelburg"—"Little Burg" by Count Siegfried. He rebuilt the fortress and in time gave its name to the town and the lands over which he and his successors ruled.

This was the beginning of Luxembourg. Through the centuries it has not grown very much. It is still "Little Burg," just a little piece of land sandwiched between mighty neighbors. Little Burg has been stepped on by this neighbor or that, sometimes easy, sometimes hard. But through the ages, Luxembourgers have fought to be free and independent, free to be what they want to be. It is this deep desire that is written in the hearts of the people: "Mir woelle bleiwe wat mir sin."

ABOVE, August 1980, ripened fields of grain and rolling countryside in Luxembourg, "a beautiful land of forested hills, deep valleys and fertile plains." (Photograph by Suzanne Bunkers)

Something else which fills the heart of the Luxembourger is love of the land. To plow a field and plant the seed, to smell new-mown hay, to watch golden grain wave with the breeze, to harvest a crop and with it to feed cattle--all this and everything that comes from living on the land lifts the spirits of the people. Land is good for the heart. Luxembourgers call their land "Good Earth." And so it is--a beautiful land of forested hills, deep valleys and fertile plains; a land where grain grows tall, alfalfa thick and cattle fat; a land where barley becomes a good beer and the grape a choice wine.

"I am glad to be on the land," Bernard thinks. "This is where my ancestors have been, and this is my life. I have only a few acres, but I will be able to grow enough to have feed for my cows and my horse, and wheat for bread on the table. We do not have much land here in Luxembourg, so we do not waste it. We work the fence lines and the roadways; and we live, not separate from one another, as they do in America where land is plentiful, but together in

small villages. We go out to our fields each day and return to the life of our village in the evening. We have always done so. Perhaps this is what makes us who we are, a neighborly and friendly people who welcome the stranger and the newcomer.

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But this is 1777, and how can Bernard predict what lies ahead? He cannot foresee what will happen to their family--that in two years a daughter will be born and named Catherine, after her mother; and that in another three years, on April 15, 1782, a son will be born and given his grandfather's name, Nick. Surely, Bernard cannot know that just two years after Nick's birth, on November 21, 1784, Catherine will die, leaving him to care for this young family. Nor can he realize that only seven years after Catherine's death, he himself will walk his last furrow. On November 30, 1791, he will leave this Good Earth and go to another land. Then the three children of Bernard and Catherine Klein will walk a furrow through a long life.

If Bernard could only know. But this is October 10, 1777, and how can he? Here, in the heart of Luxembourg, near a small village in a fertile valley, these few acres are to be the livelihood for himself, his wife, and their family. If only he could know that one hundred years down the furrow, on October 10, 1877, a descendant of his is receiving the deed to an 160-acre farm upon which he and his wife intend to settle their young family. This farm is not here in Luxembourg, but in far-away America, not on America's coast where today colonists are fighting the British, but away in the wilderness, in the heart of that land, in the great Midwest, in Sioux County, Iowa. And this descendent is Bernard's great-grandson, and his name, Nicholas.

But this is 1777, and how can Bernard realize what is ahead in the furrow? He is plowing his field with a wooden plow. He has only twenty acres, but this is a fertile valley. As the wooden moldboard turns the soil, he marvels at its richness, and he understands why Luxembourgers call this "Good Earth." If only he could drive his horse one hundred years down the furrow, he would come upon another of his descendants, who is not in a valley in Luxembourg but on a vast prairie in America. This descendant is walking in the furrow of a steel plow. As the steel moldboard of the breaking plow turns the prairie sod, he marvels at the richness of the soil. In time, he and the other settlers on this prairie will call this "Black Soil." This descendant is another great-grandson, and his name, Jacob.

But this is 1777, and how can Bernard see beyond the horizon? He is plowing his field so that in the spring he might plant oats for feed for his cows and his horse, and wheat for bread on the table. He has heard that over in America, the Colonists have a crop called maize. But because they got it from the Indians, who say that they have had it for centuries, the colonists are calling it Indian corn. "But," Bernard asks, "how can Indian corn be a crop upon which a family can live?" If only he could see just one hundred years down this furrow, he would find another descendant plowing his field so

that in the spring he might plant his crop. And the seed he plants is corn. Although he has some oats for his horses and hogs, corn is his main crop. For, after all, his farm is in the heart of corn country; and his corn, like that of his neighbors, stands tall, higher than a man, and in rows a quarter of a mile, a half mile, even a mile long. This descendant planting the Indian corn is another greatgrandson, and his name, Theodore.

But this is 1777, and how can Bernard envision the future? Here he is, a farmer plowing a field near a small village in Luxembourg. His ancestors had lived at the foot of this valley where the Wark River flows into the Alzette.* Bernard was the first of his people to walk deep into the valley to the place where the Feul empties into the Wark. Here in a village settled on a rise and nestled against the hillsides, Bernard dug in his roots. But how can he realize that some day his descendants--and they will be many--will look upon him as their patriarch, as the beginning of Klein life in this part of the valley and in this village?

Yes, how can Bernard imagine that two hundred years ahead, in the fall of 1977, in a village settled in a valley surrounded by beautiful forested hills, his great-great-great-grandson is reading Roots? As he enters into the spirit of this great story, he wonders about his own roots. He knows that his ancestors were Luxembourgers; but, he wonders, "Who were they? What sort of villages did they live in? What kind of people were they? What happened in their lives?" At the same time, in a library at a university, a great-great-great-granddaughter says to herself, "What is my background? Who were my ancestors? Why did they come to America? What happened to them when they came here?" Bernard cannot know that his two descendants will get together, that they will begin to dig and to search, to dig and to search some more; that, finally, with the help of relatives, all of them descendants of this farmer, they will write a story, a simple but beautiful and great story, the story of three brothers.

This story begins in a field near the small village of Niederfeulen, along the stream Feul, in the heart of Luxembourg. A farmer is walking in the furrow of a wooden plow drawn by his horse, and the farmer's name, Bernard Klein.

*Note: The writers of the Klein history recognize that, even though evidence seems to point to the Wark Valley as the place of origin of the Klein family, this is not a proven fact. In this history, however, the authors place the Klein origin in the Wark Valley to create a setting for the story. Furthermore, although details concerning the exact time when the Klein family moved to Feulen are unknown, the authors present Bernard Klein as moving to Feulen in 1777.

This drawing of the Wark Valley, made in 1776, is a significant map in the Klein family history. The Wark River is shown in the lower right corner of the map. The villages are Niederfeulen, right center; Oberfeulen, below Niederfeulen; Niedermertzig, lower center. The village of Obermertzig, not shown here, is adjacent to Niedermertzig, in the valley to the left. The four streams flowing from the valleys into the Wark River are the Feul at Niederfeulen, the Michelbach at Oberfeulen, the Turrelbach at Niedermertzig and the Latterbach at Obermertzig.

Of the villages, Obermertzig was the birthplace of Peter Muller and the village of his ancestors. Peter's parents, Nicholas Muller and Antonetta Faber, married in 1775, so that at the time this map was drawn, they were living in Obermertzig.

In the Klein history, Bernard and Catherine Klein are seen as coming into the Wark Valley and settling at Niederfeulen in 1777. In time, Nick and Charlotte Klein lived at Oberfeulen, and Peter and Maria Muller at Niederfeulen.