

THE FRAULEIN CHOOSES BACKWOODS IOWA



Auguste von Schwartz (courtesy Wartburg College)

by
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It was more than the promise of adventure that lured a titled Russian lady to backwoods Iowa in 1862. Although Fraulein Auguste von Schwartz came from an aristocratic German family living in Russia, her early life was hard. This, perhaps, strengthened the religious commitment that would one day draw her to Iowa.

As a child, she was often ill and her family grew to think of her as "delicate." Her health caused her mother more care and trouble than her six sisters together. A year after Auguste's confirmation at age 20, her mother died, and the delicate young woman took over management of the house, including the care of her nine-year-old sister.

Then her father died. And the family broke up. The strain of both parents' deaths and the household responsibilities prompted Auguste's doctors and friends to urge a change of scenery. She decided to visit the woman who had been her closest childhood friend and who was now wife of the Governor of a Russian province called Tambov.

Auguste fit so easily into the von Gamaleya household that, as her visit extended into years, she began to act as her friend's lady-in-waiting. When the Governor was promoted to Imperial Minister, the von Gamaleyas moved to Petersburg, Auguste accompanying them. Here Auguste heard about Iowa through Dr. Sigmund Fritschel, who was on the faculty of a fledgling school called "Die Wartburg" in northeast Iowa. He was touring Europe to raise funds for the school, and in 1861 he visited German Lutherans living in Russia. By the time Professor Fritschel called at the von Gamaleya household, the Minister had died. Dr. Fritschel told his widow and

her friend Auguste that the school urgently needed a housemother: "someone to take over the direction of the housekeeping. The students need someone who expresses a motherly concern for them."

After Dr. Fritschel explained further, Frau von Gamaleya exclaimed: "Auguste, that would be just the position for you!" Dr. Fritschel took the comment as a joke.

"Oh, yes, Fraulein von Schwartz, if you were ten years younger, I'd immediately ask you to come along!" Auguste was now 53.

In fact, everyone laughed — and heartily, because Fritschel had described backwoods Wartburg in honest detail. Conditions were primitive, the surroundings deficient in civilized comforts and, compared with what a Russian noble woman was accustomed to, almost shabby. Auguste laughed too, but with a seriousness behind her laughter.

A few days later, she went to see Dr. Fritschel and announced that she would return with him to America and become the housemother of "Die Wartburg." Dr. Fritschel thought her unrealistic, reiterating the particulars of life at the backwoods mission college. Politely, at first, he attempted to talk her out of her idea.

"You're being fanatical," he said finally. "The housemother's job is difficult and earthy. It won't work, Fraulein von Schwartz; it won't work. I cannot accept your offer."

She answered seriously, "I have not offered myself to you, but to the Lord Jesus. You have no right to refuse me. The call you told me about I understand as the call of the Lord Jesus."

With a half year of his European tour remaining, Dr. Fritschel urged Auguste to reconsider her decision prayerfully.



Wartburg College at St. Sebald, near Strawberry Point, Iowa, ca. 1870 (courtesy Wartburg College)

Die Wartburg” was located at St. Sebald near Strawberry Point. The college hadn’t been there long. Founded in Saginaw, Michigan in 1852 by Rev. Wilhelm Loehe, a German minister, it was to supply teachers and ministers for the influx of German Lutheran immigrants to America. After only one year, the college left Michigan because of doctrinal differences. It spent four years in Dubuque supported by the Lutheran Church’s Iowa Synod, but because the school was too expensive for Iowa pioneers and settlers to maintain, they suggested it move to a rural location, where students and teachers could contribute to their own support by growing food. So “Die Wartburg” became part of the small settlement a few miles northwest of Strawberry Point. On the “college farm” students and faculty shared chores such as drawing water, planting, and caring for cattle.

Dr. Fritschel had been realistic about

the unglamorous life in the New World. Upon his return to Neuendettelsau in Bavaria, he was astonished to learn that “a Russian lady” had preceded his arrival. It was Auguste — still determined to accompany him to America. He resigned himself to the belief that God was leading her to “Die Wartburg.”

But she also had to convince her friends that her emigration to America was wise. Even her Christian friends considered her decision mad. Her family, unable to understand her decision, despaired and tried at any cost to prevent her departure. Her sister traveled with her as far as Berlin, still hoping to dissuade her. Nevertheless, Auguste remained faithful to her plan and the long trip to Iowa began. The traveling party included Dr. Fritschel, Fraulein von Schwartz, and three young women intended as brides for clergymen already in America. Auguste began her mothering by chaperoning the three.

There was adventure even before the ship reached America. The five were sitting out on deck one evening when the cold night air forced them inside. They made their way through the engine room along a dark, narrow gangway. Suddenly, one of the young women shrieked: "Fraulein von Schwartz fell through!"

In the darkness, the rest of the group hadn't missed Auguste. Dr. Fritschel looked for her at the nearby stairs, but she was not there. He rushed to the upper deck to tell the first officer what they feared had happened. The man laughed, but hurried toward the stairs leading to the engine room.

The sight they found at the top of the stairs was a shock. The ship's doctor leaned over a figure lying on the floor. It was Auguste, unconscious.

With the doctor's help, she revived and explained what happened. As the party walked the gangway in the engine room, the ship suddenly lurched. Fraulein von Schwartz lost her grip and slid over the iron railing that separated the engine room from the boiler room's air vent. She fell into the vent, a distance of 45 feet, through three narrow overlapping hatches. She had not lost consciousness during her fall and remembered crying to Jesus for help.

Her cry was answered. Jesus, she said, commanded that she not strike the floor and, miraculously, she landed between two mattresses. Men working nearby hurried to help her. They picked her up, but she climbed up the iron ladder herself. It was only then, safe at the top, that she lapsed into unconsciousness.

The doctor pronounced her not seriously hurt, although rather badly scraped.

"If I had fallen to the right," she said, "I would be dead. Only the Savior preserved me. My life is not mine, but I'm placing it in

the service of Him who spared me."

When the ship at last arrived in New York, the five boarded a train for the first leg of their overland journey. Sleep was out of the question in the 50-seat coach occupied by Bohemian immigrants fresh from steerage. The injuries caused by her fall also began to give Auguste considerable pain. "I cannot tolerate standing or sitting stooped very long without severe pain in the back and chest," she wrote to a Russian friend. "I'm convinced, however, that the pain is superficial, possibly in the bones."

The party ate their first American dinner during a stopover, waiting for an express train. Auguste was surprised to find that soup did not precede the main course, since soup was the mainstay of European meals. She thought that Americans wasted meat broth.

The next meal was also a surprise. The ladies stayed with a family while Dr. Fritschel attended to errands, and the hostess and her younger sister prepared supper for the unexpected guests in less than an hour. "And they have no real kitchen," Auguste reported. "There is only an iron cookstove, smaller than a lady's desk, with a couple of burners and a lower oven for baking bread." The little band had not eaten all day and eagerly consumed coffee, cooked cereal, bread, butter, and apple and peach compote.

Their hostess was a picture of friendliness and industry. She prepared beds for the guests in the bedroom, cheerfully sleeping with her little one in the main room of the house. The next morning she baked bread, matter-of-factly scrubbed the floor, and periodically — even with the baby at her breast — checked the bread in the oven and the coffee on the stove. Dr.

Fritschel's errands delayed the party for two days. By the time they left, the family had become their close friends.

The three young women in the party grew more excited as the company approached the Midwest and their future husbands. The group traveled all night to reach Galena, an Illinois town near the Iowa border. Here two of the brides were met by the grooms-to-be. The rest of the party stopped overnight but could not stay long enough to attend the double wedding the following day.

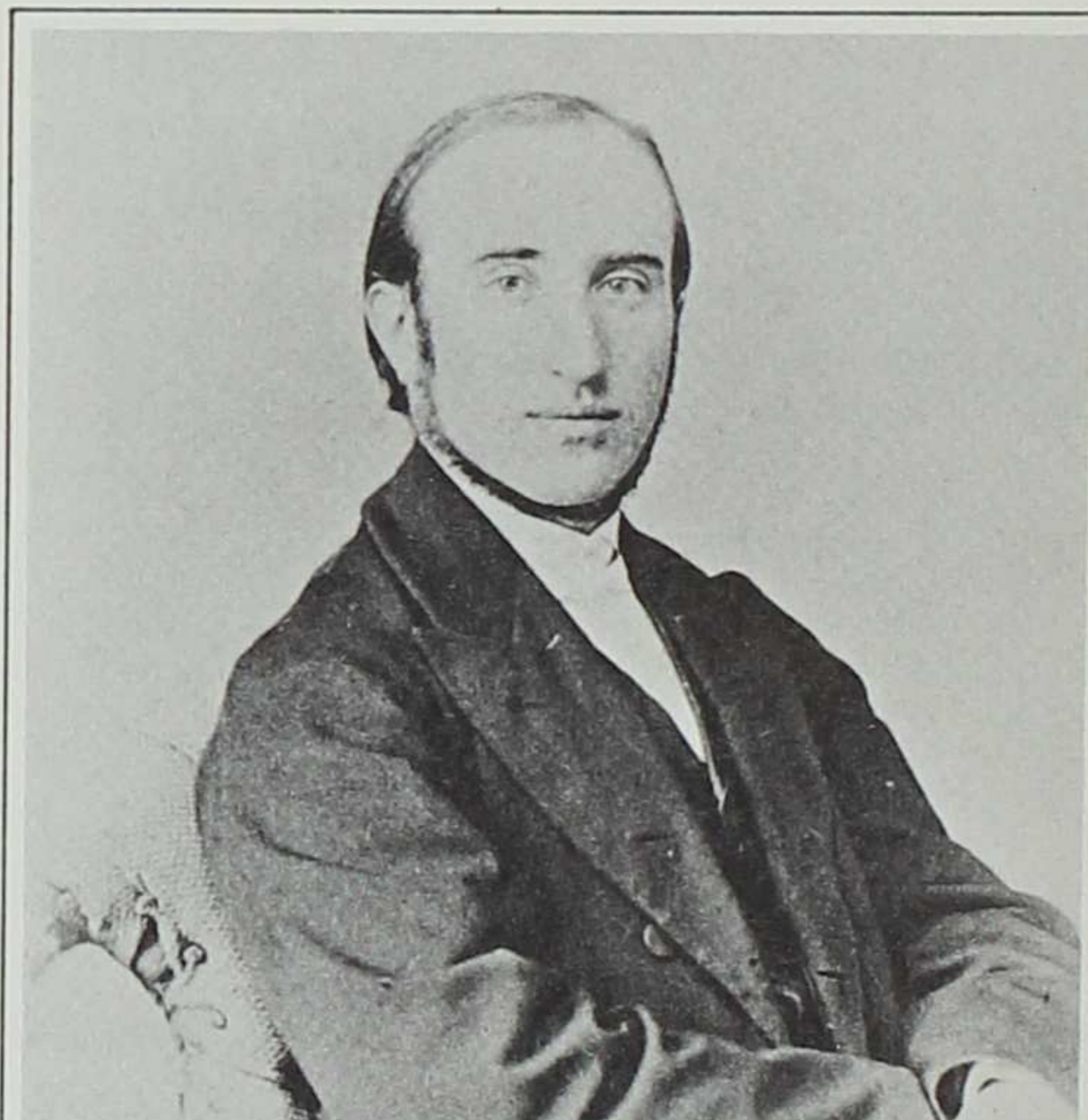
When the group was within a few hours of "Die Wartburg," two familiar faces greeted Dr. Fritschel: first, his brother Gottfried Fritschel, and then Rev. Georg Grossmann, director of "Die Wartburg." Then Fritschel disappeared into a building by the station.

He emerged with his wife and three children—whom he had wanted to greet privately, away from the station crowd.

"Come, dear Auguste," he called, "so that I can introduce you to my family." Mrs. Fritschel welcomed the Russian lady with great warmth. Soon both she and her husband were calling her "Tante Auguste."

The final leg of the trip was made by wagon. Tante Auguste said the wagon was like a little chair vehicle, quite different from European carriages. On the rear seat Dr. Fritschel's wife sat holding little Sigmund. Tante Auguste was beside her with Marie between her feet. The roads were so bad the passengers were in danger of bouncing out of the wagon, and Tante Auguste had to hold on to Mrs. Fritschel tightly. Gottfried Fritschel drove, and Dr. Fritschel sat in front with his brother's young namesake between his knees. Again and again he turned back to look at his dear wife.

That wagon, poor as it seemed to a Euro-



Dr. Sigmund Fritschel, aged 28, about the time he solicited support for "Die Wartburg" from German Lutherans living in Russia (courtesy Wartburg College)

pean lady, was luxurious compared to the other college vehicle, which Auguste likened to the long spring wagons used to transport beer bottles in Europe. For seats, boards were placed across the top of the wagon — three, four, or five, as many as were needed. "If you want luxury," Tante Auguste reported, "you cover them with an old robe."

Later, that is how she went to church or to a wedding.

As the group traveled through northeast Iowa, they were met by delegations from the college. The third groom came on horseback, and a student brought horses for Rev. Grossmann and Gottfried Fritschel.

The weather was warm, a gorgeous moon lighting the prairie. They saw moving lights in the distance and soon found themselves surrounded by 20 riders bearing torches. The young people, students from "Die Wartburg," sang with gusto. It was a greeting to their returning professor especially written for the occasion.

At Strawberry Point, people gathered

outside their homes and shouted welcomes to Dr. Fritschel. The group drove on, and soon the lights of Wartburg could be seen, more numerous and brighter than usual.

"Why are there so many lights?" Fritschel asked. "Are they going to burn down Die Wartburg for me?"

"Oh, we're just illuminating!" the students replied.

The torch parade halted in front of the college. It was adorned with hundreds of colored lanterns. The bell clanged, and the group was greeted with the hymn, "Now thank we all our God."

After the singing, Gottfried Fritschel ascended the college building's upper balcony to greet his brother with a poem — 41 verses long! He further surprised Tante Auguste by thanking the Lord that she had come to help them.

Die Wartburg" and its agricultural enterprise were isolated. Indeed, the distance between it and "the world" was so great that life there was nearly monastic. The college was at the edge of a woods, overlooking endless and uncultivated prairie. If anyone strayed to "Die Wartburg" it was indeed an unusual event. The college building was a simple two-and-a-half-story structure. The students and faculty sat on homemade benches at homemade tables. Meals were basic. Cof-

fee, tea, and other such "luxuries" were unknown. Students and faculty alike drank wheat "coffee" and ate fresh meat only once a year when hogs were butchered and salted.

Because it was the closest place to shop, Tante Auguste returned to Strawberry Point within the week. She reported a limited supply of merchandise, especially soup bowls. The lack of utensils hindered Tante Auguste's kitchen work. It was autumn—harvest time—and very busy. "The kitchen is almost without equipment," she said, "not *one* kitchen knife."

The Petersburg lady adapted to this primitive life. She and a maid took care of housekeeping, meals, washing, and gardening. During the day she often worked to the point of exhaustion. Yet at night she washed and mended clothes, and also engaged in correspondence. Letters she wrote to her Russian friends were as helpful to the college as her manual labors. She wrote convincingly, and her reports brought more financial support for the college.

Tante Auguste returned to Russia twice. Both times, relatives and friends tried to persuade her not to return to Iowa. Both times the housemother came back.

When Auguste was 60, after six years at "Die Wartburg," the college outgrew St. Sebald and moved to Galena, Illinois. Tante Auguste continued her work there. After seven more years, the college moved to Mendota, another Illinois city, where it was combined for a time with Wartburg Seminary. Because of her advancing age, Tante Auguste decided she could no longer serve as housemother, and—reluctantly—she turned in the keys to the house. But she continued to serve the college as best she could until her death two years later at 69. □

Note on Sources

Fraulein von Schwartz's tale is compiled from correspondence recorded in early Lutheran publications. A letter by Dr. Sigmund Fritschel is in "The History of the Iowa Synod," *Wartburg Kalendar 1893* (Waverly, Iowa: Wartburg Publishing Company, 1893) 35-43. A letter by Gottfried Fritschel is published in *Kirchen-Blatt*, Sept. 15, 1877, and is entitled "Fraulein Auguste Sophia von Schwartz." Dr. William Rodemann, a member of the history faculty at Wartburg College, translated both articles from German.

A lengthy letter written by Fraulein von Schwartz is preserved in the archives of the American Lutheran Church in Dubuque and was located by the archivist, Rev. Robert Wiederaenders. It was translated by Rev. J. T. Meyer of Waverly.