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An Inquiry into Post-War Ethnic German Migration and Resettlement in Canada

Roland Weisbrot

Post-Second World War ethnic German migration to Canada is a history marked by hardships, challenges, and a seemingly endless number of hurdles that people faced in the Old World, in transit, and upon arrival to Canada. Having been displaced by the war, many ethnic Germans made their way to Canada for a chance at a fresh start, far away from the devastation and suffering in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe. Before diving into the oral history material collected by Ambrose University History department's project, "Refugee Stories: The Immigration and Resettlement of Germans in Western Canada, 1947-1960," a brief look at one important organization is necessary.

Canadian Lutheran World Relief

Although there were many religious organizations that helped ethnic Germans come to Canada after the Second World War, the most important one was the Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR). As Ronald Schmalz claimed, the CLWR was "arguably the most active, best funded and well connected."¹ Schmalz goes on to detail that:

from 1951 to 1957, it assisted in the movement to Canada of some 18,500, overwhelmingly German Lutherans. This figure surpassed the achievements of all other Canadian agencies in this period. In fact, from 1952 to 1954, the CLWR settled more migrants abroad than any other voluntary agency in the world. The CLWR's resettlement program peaked in 1952-55, accounting for 13% of Canada's total intake of Germans.²

¹ Ronald E. Schmalz, "Former Enemies Come to Canada: Ottawa and the Postwar German Immigration Boom, 1951-57" (University of Ottawa (Canada), 2000), 206-07, <http://www.ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/9430>.

² Schmalz, 206-07.

These statistics make clear just how influential CLWR was on the post-war ethnic German immigration landscape. Much of what was accomplished would have been impossible without the work of CLWR, and many of the stories explored in the following section would have not come to pass.

In Their Own Words: Ethnic German Oral History

Using collected oral history material, this paper will now take a brief look at ethnic German immigrants' experiences of their first days, followed by an in-depth examination of three core themes in the immigrant experience: education, work, and faith.

First Days

The German immigrants who settled in southern Alberta and other parts of Western Canada generally found the first days to be among the hardest. Often overwhelmed, they struggled to adapt to a new language, a new culture, a new climate, and a new landscape. Before immigrants even had the chance to become adjusted to the reality of being in Canada, they were shipped to a new location where they would start a new life. This left little time for any adjustment, socialization, or rudimentary acculturation prior to the immigrant's final destination. This fact is highlighted by a humorous story Erwin Cornelsen shares:

There were uh, uh, immigration officers taking care of us and um, uh, seeing that we would end up at the right time at the train there. And they were sitting in the opposite corner there. I always heard them say, 'Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ!' And I turned to my wife I said, 'Look this is God's country, just listen.' We don't understand much English but (laughs) the name Jesus Christ we understood. And we were very, very attached. And it took us only another week on, on the job site here Vancouver as a carpenter and (laughs) you're faced with the reality.³

³ Erwin Cornelsen, Transcribed Oral History with Erwin Cornelsen, interview by Emily Burton, Digital Video, February 20, 2014, 16, Pier 21.

Although the first days had their own challenges, forging a life in Canada did not always become easier as time went on. But one thing that many of the immigrants used to try to improve their situation was education, which itself had mixed results.

Education

For many ethnic German immigrants, education was the primary entry point into Canadian culture. Although many had some degree of education in Europe, others used education to enrich their experience once they arrived in Canada. It was common for the immigrants to have had some schooling back in Europe, but the amount and quality of it varied depending on location, war-time, and post-war-time circumstances.

Based on the oral history material, educational experiences by ethnic German immigrants in Canada could rightly be divided into two loose categories: those who experienced at least some school as children, and those who only experienced school in Canada as adults. Across this spectrum there are also many emotions, some remember school fondly, whereas others had bad experiences and resented school. For some, school was the chance to learn, become socialized, and eventually generally accepted as a Canadian, for others it solidified their alien status.

Erwin Leitz came to Canada with his family as a teenager and he describes how schooling was initially not an option for him:

We settled when I first came to Canada, and then you know schools, arranged for my brother and my—and I wanted to go to school really bad, I told Mom and Dad ‘Please let me go back to school,’ Mom and Dad said, ‘No you can’t go back to school, you got to go to work. You got to bring some money in,’ ‘cause we wanted to work hard and get our own existence again.⁴

⁴ Erwin Leitz, Transcribed Oral History with Erwin Leitz, interview by Kyle Jantzen, Digital Video, November 27, 2016, 14, Ambrose University.

Whether it was because of necessity or pride, Leitz's family saw him as old enough to help contribute to the household, to help build the family's life in Canada and give them much desired financial security. This had an impact on Leitz and the choices he made, as he duly notes: "Then I thought I was going to be—I wanted to learn a trade, that was my ambition. Whatever I wanted to actually go to school, I always had a dream of being an engineer or an architect, that was my dream. But I didn't have the education."⁵ Leitz's options were limited, and he was acutely aware of this reality.

Elke Harinck's experience of school began miserably. What changed was that she finally made a Canadian friend, even if, at the time, she could not understand most of what she was saying; as Harinck recalls:

There's one girl—she didn't know I couldn't—didn't understand her, I was in the bathroom combing my hair and she was telling me a funny story and she was laughing, and so I laughed too because I wanted to be part of it right? And she to this day is still my girlfriend. She's actually god-mother to my daughter, and she's the one—we'd walk home from school—she's the one that took me to her home. That's the first time I'd been in the Canadian home. And learnt some of the Canadian customs and things.⁶

In many ways, making a Canadian friend was a watershed moment for immigrants like Harinck. It was a step towards becoming a properly socialized and accepted member of their new country. Like Harinck said, it allowed her to learn what being a Canadian meant and what kind of customs and expectations governed a person's actions.

Serving as an entry point into the language and culture and as an opportunity for personal advancement, schooling shaped many immigrants lives – young and old. Although some immigrants reported a dislike for school because of bullying, language difficulties, or bad

⁵ Leitz, 15.

⁶ Elke Harinck, Transcribed Oral History with Elke Harinck, interview by Kyle Jantzen, Digital, December 1, 2016, 12, Ambrose University.

teachers, other immigrants proclaimed their love for school and their appreciation for friends and teachers who were kind to them and helped them adjust to their new lives. Overall, for ethnic German immigrants fortunate enough to experience education in Canada, the time spent in the classroom can be viewed as being generally positive, empowering, and enabling flourishing.

Work

For many ethnic German immigrants, especially adults, the workplace, rather than the schoolyard, was their influential entry point into Canadian culture and the English language. Among the collected oral history sources, work is a common theme that connects them all. All the immigrants recall the various effects of work in their lives, and all of them have pride in their work and what they have accomplished during their working years. Many immigrants shared stories about trying to find jobs, what their work looked like once they were employed, and how they put in a lot of time and effort to acquire pay raises and promotions. For the majority of ethnic German immigrants to Canada, the workplace was a point of pride, their source of income and stability, and their primary socialization into the country and the culture. However, not every immigrant chose the job they started with as many were sponsored to immigrate through labour-schemes and, as a result, had to pay off their debts to either private sponsors or the government.

Peter Penner describes the difficulties his family faced with paying off their debts for travel and immigration expenses: “We had only a thousand six-hundred dollars debt on our journeys for nine people and had worked three years and hadn't finished paying it off. It was almost like I walked with God on a path where I said, ‘You know, it’s kind of hard, isn’t it?’ We worked hard three years and haven’t been able to pay off our debt.”⁷ However, Penner and his

⁷ Peter Penner, Transcribed Oral History with Peter Penner, interview by Steven Schwingamer, Minidisc, July 29, 2007, 28, Pier 21.

family were hardly the only immigrants to have to endure a sizable debt load and labour to pay it back.

Fred Ritter, who came to Canada with his family as an infant in the early 1950s, recalls how his parents worked to pay off their travel debt: “They ended up in Lethbridge and assigned to work in the sugar beets. They had to work two years—two summers—sugar beets. That was their commitment. In fact, I found that there was a requirement to repay a certain amount.”⁸ Ritter’s parents, like so many others, were contracted into sugar beet production as part of their immigration and repayment agreements. During his interview, Ritter shared a copy of the contract which detailed exactly how much money needed to be paid to the creditor, which in this case was CLWR: “It was to the tune of 675 dollars to be paid one year later from May 27th of 1952, ‘To pay to the order of the Canadian Lutheran World Relief at 617 McIntyre Boulevard, Winnipeg, Manitoba.’—that was the deal.”⁹ To be certain, many other ethnic German immigrants had contracts very similar to the one Ritter’s parents were given.

Faith

For many ethnic German immigrants, faith was the anchor which enabled them to endure hardships in Canada. Often, faith communities would be essential in helping new immigrants integrate, find employment, and meet other people. Sigi Hermann, who came with his family to Canada in the 1950s, describes the role faith played for his entire family once they immigrated to Canada:

Yes, religion played a major role in Canada because my uncle John and aunt Anna were the ones that paid for our fare, they were religious and my dad and my mother also picked up on that, more so mother than dad. And I went to youth

⁸ Fred Ritter, Transcribed Oral History with Fred Ritter, interview by Kyle Jantzen, Digital, December 15, 2016, 6, Ambrose University.

⁹ Ritter, 7.

gatherings and we were quite faithful in our, yes, in our religion. And then we were members of the St. Matthews Lutheran Church for a number of years. And we were married already, 33 years our children were baptized, confirmed. We were wed there so we had everything here in Calgary from the St. Matthews Lutheran Church, yes. That's where we worshipped.¹⁰

Hermann's family were the benefactors of the CLWR through the generous support of family they already had in Canada, so faith also played a role in the immigration process itself.

However, for many immigrants like Hermann, faith played a central role not only in the various stages of immigration, but in the rest of their lives as well. Hermann's story makes it clear just how important faith was to him as revealed by his decades of faithful attendance.

In summary, faith played an enormous role in the lives of many ethnic German immigrants. Faith communities served as an important entry point into Canadian life and an invaluable resource for struggling immigrants. Moreover, faith communities were a place where immigrants could meet fellow language speakers and socialize in a comfortable and safe environment. Beyond the socializing aspect of faith communities, they also served as fountains of hope, encouragement, and peace for the immigrants, many of whom struggled with wartime memories or the hardships of moving countries. Thus, examining the faith of ethnic German immigrants, along with their experiences in education and work, allows for a more holistic understanding of what being an immigrant to Canada between 1947-1960 was truly like.

Conclusion

What the oral history sources have taught us, through the thematic division of education, work, and faith, is that the ethnic German immigrant experience is multi-faceted and contains many different narratives, some positive and some negative. Although there are as many

¹⁰ Sigi Hermann, Transcribed Oral History with Sigi Hermann, interview by Nolan Ens, Digital, December 5, 2016, 12, Ambrose University.

opinions and experiences as there are interviewees, several common themes may be extracted from the collective experience of these immigrants: First, that, overall, immigration was a very difficult experience; second, there were a variety of factors that improved the experience of each immigrant; and finally, most of the immigrants eventually found success and happiness in Canada.

In conclusion, the story of ethnic German immigrants to Canada is an inspiring one. It is a story of struggle, hardship, and triumph. It is also very revealing and helps to fill in the gaps of Canada's immigration history by challenging the taboo of ethnic German suffering in the post-Second World War era. The information this paper uncovers can help give scholars a better understanding of what the lived experience of immigration was really like between 1947-1960 for ethnic Germans. But most of all, this paper teaches us about the tenacity of the human spirit, what can be endured, and what can be achieved, even when people are thrust into brand new, and at times hostile, environments.

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