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The Problem of German-Canadian Identity

The notion of a German-Canadian identity has come under attack from various quarters recently. One critic dismisses it as an artificial political construct invented to claim special political status. He maintains that German-speaking immigrants acculturate directly into Canada's multicultural mainstream.¹ Another critic elevates Austrian-Canadians to the level of an ethnicity separate and distinct from German-Canadians.² A third critique is derived from the observation that different immigrant generations are separated by their socialization in the homeland and by different notions of what it means to be a German in the German-Canadian mosaic.³

No doubt, the 2.8 million Canadians reporting German ethnic origin in 1991 appear to have a questionable identity. Canadians of German-speaking background are arguably one of Canada's most assimilated immigrant peoples. They have always been divided by heterogeneity of origin, religious and linguistic diversity, secondary migrations, generational differences, and spatial dispersion. Factors such as these, not to speak of the post-nationalist mentality in the Federal Republic of Germany and postwar Austria's exertions to erase pro-German leanings among its citizens, would seem to militate against any kind of common identity. It is therefore not surprising that cursory surveyors of the German-Canadian scene would be tempted to question the existence of a German-Canadian identity.

Most of these critiques focus on the present and the seemingly irreconcilable diversity and heterogeneity of the German-speaking immigrants's origins—geographical, cultural, linguistic, political, and generational. They assume a notion of identity that is transplanted, fixed, and one-dimensional. They ignore the historical, albeit mostly transitory, formations of German-Canadian identity in the process of adaptation. However, as this essay submits, any study of the historical patterns of adaptation exhibited by German-speaking

immigrants in Canada should reveal the existence of a German-Canadian identity.

Generally speaking, identity in the context of this essay refers to the historically observable attributes and behavior patterns shared by immigrants of German-speaking background. It is dynamic—it has changed over time and has regional variants. Also, it is neither the sole nor always the dominant ethnic identity in a hierarchy of a German-speaking immigrant's multiple identities. German-Canadian identity in this sense may be observed in patterns of settlement, adaptation, socialization, and interaction among groups of the German-Canadian mosaic. In other words, it is a verifiable historical phenomenon.

The available evidence indicates that from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century German-speakers from different geographic and cultural backgrounds, while maintaining emotional allegiances to these, tended to experience a process of identity homogenization wherever and whenever settlement and/or external pressures were conducive to it. In these situations the German-speaking immigrants realized that they were united by almost as much as what divided them. It appears that their cultural baggage contained enough common ingredients to enable them to identify as German-Canadians and be identified as such in a shared process of adaptation. Not specific to German-Canadians, this kind of identity homogenization has also been observed among Italian,⁴ Jewish, Ukrainian, and British immigrants in Canada and among Germans in the United States,⁵ Russia,⁶ and other countries.

For example, the American model study by David A. Gerber is also applicable to Canada. He retraces how German, Alsatian, Swiss, and Austrian immigrants in mid-nineteenth-century Buffalo developed common interests and identities. This situation occurred because for language reasons they initially chose to concentrate in the same neighborhood. Gerber argued that the anglophone host society tended to identify German-speaking immigrants of various backgrounds as Germans because of their common language although they did not at first share such a common identity. Gradually, however, this ascribed identity became a reality as new intra-ethnic groupings emerged from residential and workplace intermingling, social interaction in churches, clubs, and schools, intermarriage, and a shared German-language press.⁷

Among German-speaking Canadians, manifestations of a common identity may be traced to the very beginnings of settlement in Canada. Canada's first documented German-speakers in seventeenth-century New France gave as their origins such dispersed places as Erfurt, Lucerne, Speyer, Cologne, Mainz, Breisach, Danzig, and Vienna. Although the emergence of a national consciousness in sixteenth-century Germany is documented among the upper

and educated classes,⁸ one would be surprised if these settlers identified as Germans. Yet in 1674 the Viennese-born Hans Daigle acknowledged "Vienna in Lower Germany" as his origin. In the contemporary Quebec society numbering some 8,000 francophones and about twenty families of German-speaking background, this Austrian is known to have sought the company of Swiss-born Georg Staims from Lucerne and of natives of Germany. Daigle, like other German-born immigrants, was labelled "l'allemand" or "the German" in Quebec, a label that francophones continued to attach to his assimilated grandchildren.⁹

In eighteenth-century English Canada (today's Nova Scotia and Ontario), the existence of a German identity has been obscured by the English habit of attaching to German-speaking settlers of various origins the labels "Dutch," "Palatines," or "Hessians." In Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, the settlers appeared at first unable to develop a common identity. Adhering to various Protestant faiths, they comprised a randomly constituted mosaic of 1,300 southwest Germans, 233 north Germans, 316 Swiss, 413 French, and 125 others. Linguists have shown how the various German dialects of the settlers soon amalgamated into a new kind of hybrid German idiom similar to Pennsylvania Dutch. Even French names were Germanized.¹⁰ Common challenges helped them realize that they were bound by a certain kind of common identity. In Lunenburg County the foreign Protestants fused into a flourishing community with German churches, schools, and enduring new maritime industries. Although isolated from the centers of German-speaking immigration in Canada, the Lunenburg Germans adapted amazingly well while passing on Germanic customs for generations.¹¹

Similar to the Lunenburg case were the German Loyalist pioneer settlements started on Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River in 1783. Their Loyalist German-speaking farmers and artisans from small frontier communities in New York and other American states were labelled "Palatines," in part because many descended from natives of the Palatinate and the German-speaking lands adjoining it. In their new Upper Canadian environment they stubbornly stuck to their mother tongue, in some instances until the late 1830s.¹² Considering the odds against the viability of a small German community in an anglophone environment, the surprising observation is not that the German cultural identity of these pioneer communities was doomed but that it survived so long.¹³

Among Mennonites, too, a distinct German-Canadian identity manifested itself, although this was not their primary identity. Cases in point are the Pennsylvania (or Swiss) German Mennonites from 1800 to 1850 (or even 1914) and the so-called *Russländer* from 1920 to 1940. Coming to Pennsylvania from

the Palatinate where their Mennonite ancestors persecuted in Switzerland had found refuge since 1650, the Swiss Mennonites brought to Canada a distinctive German dialect and culture known as "Pennsylvania Dutch." This localized German culture and dialect, itself the product of a culturally pluralistic community,¹⁴ facilitated interaction with other southwest German and Swiss immigrants in Pennsylvania and Ontario.

One of the motives triggering the Pennsylvania Mennonites's migration and their acquisition of a huge tract of land in Waterloo County was concern for the fate of their German culture in America's melting pot. For this reason they preferred German-speakers over non-Germans as co-settlers and farm workers in Ontario. As a result, they attracted waves of immigrating South German Catholics and North German Protestants, Amish, Swiss, and German-Americans. By the end of the nineteenth century, these formed the largest German-Canadian community. Their center was the city of Berlin (called Kitchener since 1916). Mennonite Bishop Eby himself played a crucial role in this development by selling land to German immigrants, changing the name of Ebytown to Berlin in 1833, and helping to launch Ontario's first German-language newspaper (*Canada Museum*) in 1835.¹⁵

Berlin was a model German-Canadian community in more than one sense. German-language schools, meeting houses, cemeteries, and resources were shared by the Mennonites with German-speaking settlers of all denominations. The German immigrants's transplantation of such features of urban culture as the German choir, the *Turnverein*, *Sängerfest*, German-language theater, German clubs, and schools confirmed Berlin's claim as Canada's "German" capital. By 1914 Berlin's German-Canadian identity embraced several generations and all social classes of German-speaking immigrants—including forty-eighters, veterans of Bismarck's wars of unification, and contemporaries of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The endurance of Berlin's strong sense of community was noted by numerous outside observers who before 1914 used to pay homage to its exemplary German-Canadian character and values.¹⁶

Arriving between the world wars, the 20,000 *Russländer* Mennonites exhibited a different but equally distinct German-Canadian identity. Their experiences of war and revolution in Russia made them search for orientation from Germany and seek the inspiration of German culture. High levels of education and urbanization, combined with their desire to identify with the wider German-Canadian community, predestined them to play a leading cultural role in that community in the 1930s. Their contributions to German-Canadian literature as well as their defense of German-Canadian cultural interests were crucial in the reconstruction of a post-World War I German-Canadian identity.¹⁷ Today only a minority of Canadian Mennonites continue to speak German at

home and in church¹⁸ but, as one researcher discovered as late as 1990, 60 percent of Waterloo County Mennonites still acknowledge German ethnic origin.¹⁹

Of the most heterogeneous origin were western Canada's German-speaking colonizers who arrived between 1874 and 1914. More than half came from ethnic German enclaves in the Russian Empire (especially the Black Sea coast, the Volga, and Volhynia), 18 percent from the Habsburg Empire, 18 percent from the United States, 6 percent from the Romanian Dobrudja, and 2 percent from Ontario, Switzerland, Chile, Brazil, and other places. Despite the diverse origins of the settlers, the manifestation of a German-Canadian identity in the process of immigration and settlement is clearly evident. In all the prairie provinces, communities with such mixed origins as the United States, Austria, Germany, Alsace, Hungary, Galicia, and Russia formed the predominant patterns of German colonization. In Saskatchewan's German Catholic block settlements of St. Peter's and St. Joseph's, for example, first and second-generation immigrants from Germany and Russia to Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Kansas formed a new German-speaking community with immigrants from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Banat, South Russia, and the Volga.²⁰

At the time, numerous witnesses attested to the ubiquity of a common identity among German-speaking immigrants. For example, a 1905 memorandum of the German consulate in Montreal observed that "here in Canada German Americans are considered as Germans, and mostly they also identify themselves as such, just as is the case with German Russians and German Austrians."²¹ Frank Oliver, Canadian Minister of the Interior, in 1911 ascribed to each German-speaking settler the "typical" traits of a German, "whether he comes from Germany, from Galicia or anywhere else."²² In 1912 the *Winnipeg Free Press* noted that Canada's Germans were like the British. "They come from many countries and yet they are all Germans." And the editor of Canada's leading German-language paper *Der Nordwesten* reaffirmed that, although only a minority of western Canada's German farmers hailed from Germany, they all "nevertheless call[ed] themselves Germans It is with them more a matter of sentiment than of geographical boundaries."²³

Between the world wars, German-Canadian identity manifested itself in the continued preference for closed German-speaking settlement, the proliferation of regional associations, and the wide appeal of such rallies as "German Day." Generally speaking, in the formation and maintenance of German-Canadian communities, national origin was rarely a rallying cause. Rather, as indicated above, Austrians, German Swiss, and Alsatians sought community with people of their German mother tongue.

Until 1914, most German-speaking immigrants from Germany and Austria arrived with a weaker allegiance to their country than to their region of origin:

they preferred to identify as Bavarian, Prussian, Burgenländer, Tyrolean, etc. Indeed, self-identification as German—a common practice among ethnic Germans from eastern Europe, *Russländer* Mennonites, and Austrians in the 1920s and 1930s—meant ethno-cultural and not national identity.

The weakness or absence of nationalism facilitated the assumption of German-Canadian identity by immigrants, regardless of their diverse German-speaking backgrounds. This identity formation was part of the adjustment-integration process that manifested itself in patterns of rural settlement and urban neighborhoods; in shared institutions such as local and national associations, churches, language schools, and the German-language press; and in the celebration of such symbolic events as Christmas Eve, *Oktoberfest*, German Day, and *Karneval*. It was within these more or less institutionally complete colonies, neighborhoods, ethnic institutions, and activities that the majority of pre-World War II German-speaking immigrants became socialized and integrated into Canadian society. No instances of a deviating uniquely Bavarian, Saxon, Hanoverian, Alsatian, Austrian, German Swiss, Baltic German, or other ethnic German-type adaptation and acculturation have become known.

After World War II, economic reasons no longer drew German-speaking immigrants to fellow-ethnic rural settlements and urban neighborhoods. Moreover, the increased urbanization of the sending and receiving societies had programmed these immigrants to adapt rapidly. Better educated, economically more successful and hence more upwardly mobile than their precursors,²⁴ they dispersed in the expanding suburbs where they exhibited the lowest degree of residential clustering among major immigrant groups. Indeed, in urbanized Canada's achievement-oriented society the retention of ethnic identity was seen as a hindrance to economic success and social mobility.²⁵

The immigrants of the 1950s and 1960s seemed eager to discard their identity maligned by the Nazi stigma. Perceived as "untroublesome" and "almost painfully unassertive" by *Maclean's* in 1964,²⁶ they adapted smoothly to economic and social life in Canada. Surveys of how these immigrants viewed their identity, however, have not supported the conclusions drawn from the observed objective behavior. In 1990 Andrea Koch-Kraft explored the self-identification of a random sample of postwar German-speaking immigrants living in Edmonton. Of its 246 respondents, 85 percent claimed German or German-Canadian identity, 10 percent identified themselves as ethnic Germans, and only 5 percent Canadian.²⁷

Koch-Kraft's findings are confirmed by other observations. For example, after World War II ethnic clubs and associations rebounded from 200 in 1957 to over 600 by 1994. Regardless of whether they claim an Austrian or any other focus, their individual membership lists reveal immigrants of diverse German-

speaking geographical origins. In addition, post-World War II German-Canadian national umbrella organizations like the Trans-Canada Alliance of German-Canadians (1952-1980s) and the German-Canadian Congress (1984-present) have enjoyed unprecedented longevity. The German-Canadian Congress, for example, managed to rally under its umbrella some 550 ethnic organizations by 1994, including Austrians, Swiss, Mennonites, and Hutterites. These represent an estimated thirty to fifty thousand members in a national population of 477,000 Canadians reporting German as their mother tongue.

To conclude, patterns of adaptation and settlement among German-speaking immigrants in Canada since the seventeenth century attest to the existence of a broadly encompassing, albeit frequently short-lived German-Canadian identity. The contradictory post-World War II identity, however, needs further exploration. Research so far has been scanty.

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Notes

¹ Dirk Hoerder, "German-Speaking Immigrants: Co-Founders or Mosaic?: A Research Note on Politics and Statistics in Scholarship," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 14,2 (1994): 51-65; and "German-Speaking Immigrant of Many Backgrounds and the 1990s Canadian Identity," F.A.J. Szabo, ed., *Austrian Immigration to Canada: Selected Essays* (Ottawa, 1996), 11-31.

² Franz A.J. Szabo, "The Austrian Immigrant and the Canadian Multicultural Spectrum," in F.A.J. Szabo, ed., *Austrian Immigration to Canada*, 1-10.

³ Matthias Zimmer, "Deutsche Identität in Kanada—ein Rückblick aus dem Jahre 2020," unpublished paper given at the German-Canadian Studies conference in Montreal, May 1995; and "Culture, Technology, and the Social Construction of Identity: The Case of the German Canadians," unpublished paper given at the CESA conference, Gimli, October 1995.

⁴ John E. Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988), has shown that pre-World War II Italians arriving in Canada with only a regional identity developed an Italian identity in the process of adjustment and integration. For them, the identifying force was discrimination and stereotyping.

⁵ The impact of settlement patterns and adaptive strategies on the evolution of a German-American cultural identity have been sketched in the classical studies of John A. Hawgood and Kathleen Neils Conzen. See John A. Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America: The Germans in the United States of America During the Nineteenth Century—and After* (New York, 1940) and Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Patterns of German-American History," in R. M. Miller, ed., *Germans in America: Retrospect and Prospect* (Philadelphia, 1984), 14-56.

⁶ Margarete Busch, *Deutsche in St. Petersburg 1856-1914: Identität und Integration* (Essen, 1995), attributes the formation of a collective German-Russian identity that bridged social, religious, cultural, and national divisions among the mosaic of immigrants to the increasing pressures of government Russification policy.

⁷ David A. Gerber, "Language Maintenance, Ethnic Group Formation, and Public Schools: Changing Patterns of German Concern, Buffalo, 1837-1874," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 4,1 (1984): 31-61.

⁸ As evident in the name "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" (since 1486) and in Martin Luther's address *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520). See also Johannes Haller, *Epochen der deutschen Geschichte* (Munich, 1959), 113-31, and Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Origins of Modern Germany* (Guildford and London, 1946, 1988), 367-71.

⁹ H. W. Debor, *1664-1964: Die Deutschen in der Provinz Quebec* (Montreal, 1963), 4f.; Rudolf A. Helling, *A Socio-Economic History of German-Canadians: They, Too, Founded Canada* (Wiesbaden, 1984), *Historiques* 61,2 (1955): 57ff.

¹⁰ For example, *Payzant* became *Beifang*, *Pernette* became *Bernet*, and *LaHave* became *Leehöff*. See Manfred Richter, "Die deutsche Mundart von Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia: Ein Überblick," *Annalen 2, Deutschkanadische Studien* (Montreal, 1978), 19-30.

¹¹ See W. P. Bell, *The "Foreign Protestants"*; Hellen Creighton, *Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1950, 1976); and M. B. DesBrisay, *History of the County of Lunenburg* (Toronto, 1895).

¹² In the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, their representatives were ridiculed for their unrefined manners and "ofttimes ludicrous pronunciation of the English language." James Croil, *Dundas* (Montreal, 1861), 127f., 279.

¹³ The survival to this day of Lutheran congregations in both Lunenburg (NS) and Williamsburg (ON) commemorating their origins attests to the forging of an early German-Canadian identity among these German-speaking settlers of diverse backgrounds. See Werner Bausenhart, *German Immigration and Assimilation in Ontario, 1783-1918* (New York, Ottawa, Toronto, 1989); and Heinz Lehmann, *The German Canadians: Immigration, Settlement, and Culture, 1759-1937*, ed. G. P. Bassler (St. John's, NF, 1986).

¹⁴ See Don Yoder, "The Palatine Connection: The Pennsylvania German Culture and its European Roots," R. M. Miller, ed., *Germans in America*, 92-109.

¹⁵ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto, 1975), 54f.; and Lehmann, *The German Canadians*, 70f.

¹⁶ Gottlieb Leibbrandt, *Little Paradise: The Saga of the German Canadians of Waterloo County, Ontario, 1800-1975* (Kitchener, 1981), 23-244. John English and Kenneth McLaughlin, *Kitchener: An Illustrated History* (Waterloo, 1983), 9-105.

¹⁷ Benjamin Redekop, "German Nationalism Among Canadian Mennonites During the Early 1930s," *Mennonite Historian* 19,3 (1993): 1-2, 8-10.

¹⁸ Leo Driedger and Peter Hengstenberg, "Non-Official Multilingualism: Factors Affecting German Language Competence, Use and Maintenance in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 18,3 (1986): 90-109.

¹⁹ Alfred Hecht, "Mennonites and the Canadian Society: A Financial Well-Being Comparison," paper given at Conrad Grebel College, 26 May 1990, as quoted in *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 15 April 1992.

²⁰ See Lehmann, *The German Canadians*, 198-239.

²¹ Bundesarchiv Abteilungen Potsdam, 09.01, AA, Rechtsabteilung VF II, vol. 21, Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat Montreal an Reichskanzler Fürst von Bülow, Re: deutsche Ansiedlung im Saskatchewanale, 13 December 1905.

²² Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, 1911, vol. 54, p. 2934.

²³ Gotthard L. Maron, *Facts About Germans in Canada* (Winnipeg, 1912), 13.

²⁴ Still, the 1981 Census found the German ethnic origin cohort twice as likely as the Canadian population overall to have less than grade 9 education and one half as likely to have university or other post-secondary training. That is, the educational level of 40 percent of Germans 15 years and older indicated less than grade 9, another 40 percent grade 9 to 13, and less than one-fifth indicated university-level training. In 1981, the occupational breakdown of the German-origin population was: 20 percent clerical, 15 percent processing, 10 percent service, 9 percent each in sales, managerial, administrative, farming, and construction, and 20 percent in teaching, scientific, engineering, health, and other professions. See Canada, Multiculturalism, *Socio-Economic Profiles of Selected Ethnic/Visible Minority Groups: 1981 Census* (Ottawa, 1986), 35-38.

²⁵ See Warren E. Kalbach, "Ethnic-Connectedness: How Binding is the 'Tie'?" in T. Yedlin, ed., *Central and East European Ethnicity in Canada: Adaptation and Preservation* (Edmonton, 1985), 99-109.

²⁶ Ralph Allen, "The Untroublesome Canadians," *Maclean's*, 7 March 1964.

²⁷ Andrea Koch-Kraft, *Deutsche in Kanada: Einwanderung und Adaption* (Bochum, 1990), 234.

