

## An ethnic German theme for a history project

At a time when the issue of immigration to the United States commands public attention, students can gain a perspective by studying an individual immigrant (or their own family's background) for a project. As they consider what these immigrants had to overcome to succeed and thus understand the challenges they faced, the issue gains reality for them. The details of what immigrants did to become established and how they developed new lives in their community and interacted with their new neighbors give the issue reality and—in case of family research—personal significance.

### I. Introduction

As students research a particular immigrant group they need guidance in connecting the facts they find to the historical period. Major waves of European immigration, for example, were caused by such situations as overpopulation and a stagnating economy, prompting people to search for better opportunities. For German-speaking immigrants, political push factors had often added to economic ones. Special cases, such as the exodus of young intellectuals after the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 or the German version of the potato famine of 1845, marked the nineteenth century. Puzzles can arise in the case of immigrants, mostly after 1945, whose family documents show birthplaces that are not on modern German maps. The teacher needs to help here by locating maps from before 1914 to show how fluid borders in Europe were. That should lift the doubt and confirm the German origin.

Before the evolution of nation states, when America was not yet a land of immigration, the younger sons on Germany's farms and in business were often recruited to settle and

defend threatened areas east of the 1914 borders of Germany, some as far east as the Volga region or the Crimean in Russia. After the dawn of the nineteenth century—and increasingly after the advent of communism in the twentieth—the descendents of these settlers became unwelcome. Something similar happened to citizens of Germany or Austria when the post World War II peace settlement had redrawn the borders, making speakers of German into strangers on the property they had legally inherited. Therefore, there were mass expulsions, and many of the 16 million expellees immigrated to this country in the 1950s<sup>1</sup>.

## II. Junior High

Many ethnic German families in this country are aware of their origins, and quite a few also have documents about their ancestors, but that alone does not make a project topic; students need to study which opportunities probably attracted them to their new home at the particular time and what they made of that. They could also chose an institutional or business context, showing the typical or the special aspects and describe the German connection. Among the five projects recognized with the annual Ernst Ott Prize offered by DANK<sup>2</sup>, the largest German American organization headquartered in Chicago, these topics were the most successful.

The non-metropolitan Midwest is still shaped by the prevalence of German immigration—as a look at any phone book will quickly demonstrate—and it also has institutions they founded, which can document their personal and group contributions to infrastructure and public life.

As a reminder, a project should begin with the general situation, but it should not list just facts; rather the student should become familiar enough with them to tease out a focus before finalizing the project. For that, the writer needs to relate it to its time and context, such as the new community and the person's or group's contribution to its development. Finally the summary should clarify the impact observed and/or the impression the development made on the writer.

The best projects have teased out such threads in the materials. If a person's special achievement is described, this could then be related to the place of origin, a family tradition, or a special experience the ancestor may have had along the way.

Another approach is to pick a particular case in a common business category, such as agriculture, and compare or contrast the specific with the general. In the case of inventions, however, success probably resulted from "thinking outside the box." This tends to be easier for people, who have a wider range of experiences together with the tenacity to see the project to fruition; but it may be hard to find specific hints for inventiveness in the documents.

### III. Senior High

Older students should choose more complex topics. They should familiarize themselves with their material well enough to find a productive focus and to make sure they make the hard choices to summarize or tease out significant parts in order to follow through with a conclusion.

Students could, for example, look into the religious institutions or the social life of German immigrant groups. There are German social clubs of one specialization or another in all larger Illinois towns, and they tend to be

shaped by the interests of their members. Such clubs may well have begun as a group where new immigrants from a particular area socialized and celebrated their special holidays in customary ways. As the next generation came along, interests as well as language use were likely to change. Some clubs have a national organization, such as DANK and continue to simply celebrate their heritage. When groups have a particular purpose, however, such as music, dancing, or the support of a Saturday German language school, they tend to stay together better and remain more consistent.

Such change also seems to be slower in groups from a particular region of the German-speaking area, such as Austria, Switzerland or the German cultural islands outside the borders of Germany mentioned above. The “Danube Swabians,” for example, who had lived in today’s Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Serbia and the “Saxons” from today’s Romania—where even some cities still preserve their German names and architecture—had centuries of experience with actively maintaining their identity. “Saxons” began to settle there as early as 1000 AD when these were border areas of the Turkish Empire. Living in a non-German environment, they organized their own cultural and educational institutions, continued to teach and use their language, and persisted through the centuries. This skill served them well in this country. Their educational and cultural institutions, and their traditional annual celebrations, along with organized assistance for compatriots, are exemplary.

A senior-level project or paper on such a group or one of their institutions can link this cohesion to the special-role concept that grew from their need to organize their lives in a foreign land. None of that means that, once in this country,

they are less American;, instead they have simply refined the ability for two allegiances, one public during the day and now wholeheartedly American, and the other ethnic or cultural and practiced after hours.

Regardless of which developments a student describes or compares, the conclusion should again connect the particulars to their actual situation, such as the time in history, the ethnic community, or the region of the state.

There are not many resources to guide the study of ethnic self-concepts and allegiances. Only recently have the retention of cultural practices and fluency in multiple languages even been publically validated. What was formerly thought to get in the way of becoming American, the cultures and traditions of immigrants—their “invisible immigration baggage” —has now come to be understood as an asset for Americans engaged in this country’s international tasks where a deeper appreciation of foreign cultures has proven so important.

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<sup>1</sup> People from the German speaking areas of Europe were the largest group and almost 60 million Americans identified themselves as ethnic German on the 1990 Census. The ethnicity question is no longer asked on the decennial Census.

<sup>2</sup> The German-American National Congress, founded in 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Czechoslovakia also had a German population, largely in its mountainous border areas.