

German anyone?

By Anne M. Stang

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I grew up in a part of Saskatchewan where most people were German-speaking people who had immigrated to Canada from the Volga area of Russia in the early twentieth century. They all spoke a dialect of German most of the time, even if they had to use English in business, in school and with non-German speakers. German was also the second language taught in the area's schools until the 1970s.

Even before we studied German in high school and learned about casual or familiar use and formal use of titles, the rules were thoroughly drilled into us, by our parents, by the parish priest and especially by Grandma. What were the rules? Certain people, like Grandma, the priest, any official, your parents, aunts and uncles, in fact almost anyone older than you, had to be formally addressed with "Sie", rather like "thou", as opposed to the simple "du" or "you". Woe to you if you said "You" to Grandma, or to anyone else who merited the formal designation, in her hearing.

Naturally, I gave no thought to that rule for as long as we spoke German on a regular basis. But the world and languages change. On my first trip to Germany in the late 1960s, I was often praised for even my scant knowledge of German, especially given the fact that I'd been born in Canada. On another trip in 1994, on a tour of a German school, I was told that my dialect was the same as that of a boy who had recently emigrated from the Volga area of Russia. The subject of using the formal words never came up – until...

In 2005 or so, with the internet of course, some of my Canadian cousins discovered long lost relatives who had stayed in Russia through the Communist period and who had emigrated to Germany in the 1990s. I was able to visit them several times, but did have to speak German all the time, thereby really improving my spoken German, but – you guessed it – my old habit of using the formal forms of address had not completely died. In fact, sometimes it was quite pronounced and I was likely not even aware that I used it. My cousins were very polite, but Igor's curiosity finally got the better of him. As he took me on an outing from Kiel to southern Denmark, he wanted to know why I addressed him, his parents, etc. so formally. After all, they were close to my age and just ordinary people, not priests or presidents.

It only took a moment's thought to find the explanation – I grew up speaking German at a time when formal usage was the norm and the version of the language that we spoke did not keep up with the changes that took place in Germany. Heck, I can still read the old Fraktur font which was phased out in German-speaking countries after World War II.

How do I speak now? On the few occasions when I can use German in Canada, I'm careful to use the familiar form, though I am still frequently exposed to the formal usage in the 1920s letters I'm translating. When I travel, my German is a mixture - mostly high German, but spiced with English and the dialect I spoke as a child. A beer or two have been known to increase my fluency and decrease any aversion to errors.

Needless to say, it's been an interesting journey, and I'm eternally grateful to Catherine the Great for making the rule that Germans could retain their language, as well as to Grandma and the ancestors who maintained it, to the teachers who taught it and for the opportunities I've had to speak and translate it. My life is richer because of all those decisions and actions.



Anne was born in Macklin and raised with nine siblings on a farm near Primate in west central Saskatchewan. All her grandparents were born in Volmer, near Saratov on the Volga. Her father Joseph was born in Argentina and her mother Mary in Battleford, Saskatchewan. Anne attended the Universities of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Western Ontario to complete degrees in Arts, Education and Library Science. She is a retired teacher-librarian. Besides being active in the Calgary Chapter of AHSGR, she sings in her church choir, volunteers for other choirs, gardens, sews, rides her e bike, travels when there's no pandemic, cooks when she has to and spends part of each day translating material from German to English for AHSGR.