A Voice Beyond the Ocean

by Elizabeth Weinzettel

The day Germany came to my house, I was five years old. It did not come by ship or by train. It did not bring suitcases. It arrived hidden in the voice of my mother and the women in my family.

I was very young when I heard her speak in a language that I made my own. They were different words, unlike those I heard as I passed by the village school or those spoken by the other children at the church door. It was another kind of music. The words seemed to come from farther away, as if, before reaching our kitchen, they had had to cross distant seas by ship and a history far too great for a child. In kindergarten, I learned that things had a name, but at home I discovered that some things could have two.

Outside, Spanish was spoken. Inside, often, German dialect. It was simply there: in the conversations of the adults, in the prayers, in some words that had no exact translation, and in the names of the foods that appeared on the table: Kraut pirok, Tinekuchen, Filsen, nudel suppe, lekpreineken, prunspreineken, among others.

I still did not know where Germany was. Nor did I know where the Volga was. But I knew they existed because the adults talked about them, as one talks about someone who had once sat at the table.

There was also a book. It was old, with worn dark-colored covers and yellowed pages. The letters looked like little black drawings, packed tightly together. I would open it carefully, as if not only the paper might break, but also whatever it contained. It was a prayer book. It was written in old German, but I did not understand what it said. Its mystery fascinated me. I thought about the hands that had turned those pages. About the people who had spoken those prayers. About the voices that had repeated those same words when neither my house nor my village nor even I yet existed. Many years later I understood that the book was not merely a book. It was a door. And I had learned to open it long before I knew where it led.

When I was six years old, one day a visitor came to our house. It was someone connected to the family, who had come from northern Germany. She brought chocolates, marzipan, and stories of a country that, until then, had been only a word to me.

For the first time, Germany had a face. It had a voice. It brought things in a suitcase. And then I understood something that would have been insignificant to an adult, but that was enormous to me: that place that lived in my family's conversations really existed. It was far away. Very far away. But it existed. From that day on, I began to imagine it. I did not simply want to know it. I wanted to get there.

At the age of nine, I began studying German. My parents made an effort to pay for the lessons. I knew it, although no one needed to explain it to me. There were things adults said with words and others that were understood through a look. I studied for years. I learned vocabulary, conjugations, little phrases. But in reality, I was learning something more. I was trying to get closer to a place that I felt close to without ever having known it.

At twelve, I joined a girls' choir. We were called Die süssen Weilchen. We dressed in German costumes: headscarves, aprons with lace trim, skirts that made us look as though we had stepped out of an old photograph, like those in my village museum. We sang songs that had traveled to us from long before we were born. One of them was Nun ade, du mein lieb Heimatland. I sang it with an emotion I could not explain. There was a farewell in that song. A sadness. A longing. But I had never left anywhere. So, as I sang, a question began to accompany me: Why does a farewell I have never experienced hurt me? I had no answer. Perhaps no one did. We also sang O Tannenbaum and Großer Gott, wir loben dich. When our voices came together, something strange happened. For a few minutes, we stopped being girls from Entre Ríos. We were the continuation of other voices. The voices of grandparents. Of women and men who had crossed borders, who had lost places, who had learned to begin again. We sang. They remained there.

Before the internet existed, Germany also arrived through the radio. My father and I listened to Deutsche Welle. We had to search for the signal. Turn the dial. Wait. Sometimes the voice came through clearly. Other times it was mixed with interference and noise. I would stay there listening. It seemed incredible to me. A voice spoke from Germany and could enter our home, in that corner of Entre Ríos. Then I thought that perhaps distances were not as great as they seemed. If a voice could cross the ocean, perhaps one day I could do it too.

I began writing letters. I asked for books, materials, anything that could help me learn and understand. Then I waited for the mail carrier. I remember his bicycle and his large bag. And, above

all, I remember the envelopes with foreign stamps. To anyone else, they might have been simply stamps. To me, they were signs. When a letter arrived, my heart beat differently. I had written to Germany. And Germany had answered me.

The years passed. The ocean remained there. I did not cross it. Life took other paths. I studied. I worked. I learned other things. And, without realizing it, what had begun as a child's curiosity began to accompany me in another way. I returned again and again to the places in Entre Ríos where families of Volga German origin had settled. I entered schools. I listened to stories. I saw photographs. I read documents. I found words that still survived in some homes. And I understood something that surprised me: I had spent years searching for a story that, in reality, had been searching for me.

While I was researching how a community preserved its words, its customs, and its memories, I began to recognize my own childhood. That language I had felt was so strange when I was little was not a peculiarity. It was a heritage. Those songs were not merely songs. They were memory. That old book was not merely a book. It was proof that someone had wanted certain words to survive. And then I understood the question that had accompanied me since that song. Why did a farewell I had never experienced hurt me? Because perhaps some longings are not born from our own experience. Some come to us inherited. They travel in a language. In a recipe. In a prayer. In a song that someone teaches to a little girl without explaining why she must learn it.

Recently, I thought again about that book. I imagined my little hands opening it. I imagined those letters that I could not read. And I thought about all the people who had held those same pages before me. For an instant, I understood that the ocean was the name of everything those who came before had had to cross.

Europe.

The Volga.

The departure.

The arrival.

A new land.

A new language.

A new life.

And yet, something had survived: A voice.

The voice of my family.

The voice of a song.

The voice of a prayer.

The voice of a radio that crossed continents.

The voice of a mail carrier who brought an envelope with foreign stamps.

For many years, I thought my great unfinished journey was to cross the ocean. Today I know I was wrong. The ocean had already been crossed. They had crossed it, and through time, with me; It arrived in the language of my home and the hand-painted chicken eggs for Easter, in the foods and little cookies baked in the clay oven. In the pages of a book. In the songs I sang without fully understanding why my heart beat differently. It reached a little girl who still did not know how to read those ancient letters, but who knew how to listen.

Perhaps that is why, when I hear a German song today, I feel that someone is calling me from very far away. And then I understand. It was not I who was searching for Germany. Germany had arrived first.

Image of the German children's choir Die süssen Weilchen. ***Year 1989***

Image of kindergarten with children descended from Volga Germans, where I completed my early education. Sagrado Corazón School. Crespo. E. R. Argentina.

Image of a trunk, blanket, and Bible in German, garden produce, and eggs in a basket from the farms of the Volga Germans in the villages of the area. Background signage featuring

German cuisine, where “die mauldaschen” can be seen. Source: photograph taken at CAAL 2026

Image in which I am with the German musical ensemble from the Province of Santa Fe and my book, authored by me as a result of the research conducted in Colonia Merou, E. R. Argentina.