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Being German Canadian: History, Memory, Generations

Alexander Freund’s edited volume, *Being German Canadian*, is a welcome contribution to the existing literature on immigration, ethnocultural identity, and intergenerational memory in Canada. In using a comparative, thematic, and chronological approach spanning several decades, Freund and his fellow contributors explore what it meant to be German Canadian throughout the twentieth century—with a focus on how intergenerational families and groups interacted and ultimately shaped each other’s migration, integration, and adaptation in Canada. At the outset, Freund points out that previous Canadian immigration historiography focused on policies and public responses, and therefore, paid less attention to migrants’ lives. In his introductory chapter, Freund uses the concept of “baggage” to demonstrate that immigrants bring with them measurable “sociological categories” such as skills, memories, traditions, language, religion, networks, and ethnocultural institutions to their country of resettlement. Of particular importance to this edited collection is memory and its role in a migrant’s baggage. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, 3.3 million Canadians claim full or partial German ancestry. [1] *Being German Canadian* presents a history of the German Canadian experience through the lens of memory and generation as it pertains to immigration and ethnicity. Freund and his fellow authors pay particular attention to addressing how German immigrants to Canada and their descendants dealt with the national histories and personal memories of war, genocide, dislocation, expulsion, flight, deportation, safe haven, and trauma, and how they are inextricably linked to what Christian Gerlach refers to as “extremely violent societies” (p. 16).[2] Freund suggests that throughout the twentieth century, several generations of German migrants carried “heavy baggage” that included “collective memories” of two world wars, two dictatorships, two revolutions, the Holocaust, and a multigenerational ethnic community in their new homeland. These memories often included personal and national histories of violence, perpetration, complicity, victimization, and profiteering, among others.

As an edited volume, *Being German Canadian* is organized into eight chapters with an introduction and an afterword. In chapter 1, “A Flying Piano and Then–Silence,” Freund seeks to expand on Canada’s history of the First World War by studying German Canadian memories of this peri-
od to “explore the fragility and the costs of maintaining a dominant national narrative of a unified nation” when German Canadians experienced the conflict as a demonized, discriminated, unemployed, and even interned population of “enemy aliens” (p. 37). In search of answers, Freund analyzes a largely unknown collection of sixty-five oral history interviews conducted around 1971-72, in which a story of a flying piano was shared by multiple interviewees. For two days in January 1919, returning soldiers and local delinquents, dismayed by postwar unemployment, damaged German homes, businesses, and organizations, including the German-Hungarian club in Winnipeg where a piano was thrown out of the second-floor window (p. 47). Freund suggests that the story of the flying piano serves as a powerful allegory for the larger experience of German Canadians in Winnipeg. According to Freund, successive generations of German-speaking immigrants found it difficult to adopt a dominant societal narrative around the First World War as a national turning point. However, many German Canadians also failed to construct a counternarrative that would provide meaning to their wartime experiences. Freund concludes that this was not the result of forgetting, but rather of silence in which German Canadians found it difficult to feel as though they belonged in Canadian society.

In the chapter “One Führer, Two Kings,” Robert Teigrob critically examines Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s 1938 visit with Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany and the issue of fascist apologetics. He points out that previous scholarship evaded and reframed Mackenzie King’s visit to Nazi Germany and therefore should be “appraised in the context of this collective ‘sanitization’” (p. 63). In examining the tactic of evasion, for example, Teigrob suggests that willful forgetting has “deeper roots and wider implications: the nation itself is on trial here.” Teigrob goes on to argue that Mackenzie King’s fascist apologetics were purged primarily by those responsible for keeping the nation’s historical record, and those who sought to protect Mackenzie King’s record from “the taint of Nazi sympathies” (pp. 63-64). Teigrob suggests that “determined forgetting” helped to promote certain mythologies, such as that of the birth of Canada at the Battle of Vimy Ridge and Canadians’ rather positive recollection of the Second World War by forgetting existing divisions and exclusions of wartime “enemy aliens,” pacifists, labor groups, visible minority communities, and women’s organizations, all of whom found themselves outside of Canada’s national identity. While Teigrob refers to Mackenzie King as a “one-time devotee” of Hitler who sought to preserve an Anglo-Saxon Canada, German-speaking populations, who had struggled for full acceptance as Canadians during and after the First World War, again found themselves having to prove their loyalty to Canada during the Second World War.

In “A Transnational Yekkish Identity?” Patrick Farges explores how migrants from German-speaking countries or regions composed a global diaspora in which “Germanness” was “transplanted and (re)produced” (p. 86). Farges delves into how diasporic and sociocultural distinctions created subgroups of Germans. These distinctions included geographical origins, date of immigration, cultural and religious backgrounds, and dialects. His chapter focuses on the German-speaking Jews who were forced to flee Germany and Austria for Canada and Mandatory Palestine (later Israel) due to widespread anti-Semitism and the emergence of fascism in both countries during the 1930s. Farges explains that the term was derived from the German Jacke and Yiddish yekke for “Jacket” and was linked to the Yekkes’ inadequate clothing “as a trace of their bourgeois past.” The term later evolved into a “positive marker of ‘ethnic’ cultural difference” (p. 87). As the Yekkes experienced various forms of discrimination including anti-Semitism and cultural denigration in Canada and a rejection of their “Germanness” in Mandatory Palestine/Israel, they were able to reconstruct their individual identities and transmit their distinct collective memory within a larger
context of a restructured postwar Jewish diaspora. Nevertheless, this sociopolitical reality generated problems with Jewish acculturation in Canada.

In her chapter, “The Roots of Ethnic Fundamentalism in German-Canadian Studies,” Karen Brglez explores Gottlieb Leibbrandt’s personal background and his contribution to the field of German Canadian studies. Leibbrandt, an ethnic German from the Ukraine who immigrated to Canada in 1952 and became active in various German Canadian organizations, could be referred to as the “dean” of German Canadian studies. However, Brglez shows that Liebbrandt remained silent about his fascist sympathies and support of the Nazi cause and its goals for Eastern Europe. As a member of a “transnational network of Russian-German émigrés,” Leibbrandt provided administrative support for the Third Reich’s plans to occupy Eastern Europe by publishing racist and propagandist academic scholarship (p. 113). Brglez’s argument reiterates those of Pascal Maeder, who postulated that postwar expellees did not discard their ethno-national ideals after arriving in their countries of permanent resettlement.[3] Instead, individuals like Leibbrandt recreated their national identities to fit in with their new sociopolitical surroundings. Brglez concludes that the primary reason for Leibbrandt’s writing was “ethnic preservation” (p. 115). As she demonstrates convincingly, Leibbrandt reproduced his ethno-national ideals in a postwar Canadian context by focusing on German Canadian historiography and the important contributions that German Canadians had made to build up Canada, and according to Leibbrandt, their privileged place in a multicultural Canada.

In his essay, “Gatekeeping in the Lutheran Church: Ethnicity, Generation, and Religion in 1960s Toronto,” Elliot Worsfold builds on the scholarship of Franca Iacovetta and the idea of postwar “gatekeeping” on the part of Anglo-Canadians (i.e., health professionals, social workers, educators, journalists, etc.) to assimilate newcomers into a “hegemonic Canadian culture” based on British and middle-class values (p. 141). [4] Worsfold examines the Canada Synod’s 1966 internship program in which young German Canadian Lutheran students sought to promote the values of assimilation to their congregations. Yet many recent immigrants preferred to align themselves with their pastors, who were often immigrants themselves, and who rejected the students’ push for assimilation. While Worsfold notes that biological age separated the students and the pastors, he points to the work of Karl Mannheim and his theory of generational identity to explain why students chose to act as gatekeepers and why the pastors opposed them.[5] The pastors’ participation in the same historical and social circumstances proved to be more important than date of birth when it came to connecting with their congregations. As Worsfold demonstrates, the pastors shared memories and experiences of migration that helped to shape a generational identity that ultimately prevented the student interns from successfully implementing their assimilationist ideals. As a result, these Lutheran parishes remained as “sites of ethnic maintenance” where German-speaking immigrants could retain their ethnocultural identities (p. 142).

In “Migration Trajectories and the Construction of Generational Discourses among Contemporary German Immigrants in Ottawa in the 2000s,” Anke Patzelt addresses a research gap in German Canadian studies by focusing on German immigration to Canada after 1989, with a particular emphasis on German immigrants who settled in Ottawa between 1990 and 2007. Patzelt pays particular attention to the “explicit and implicit differentiation” between her interviewees and the immigrants who came to Canada in the postwar period to identify how recent German immigrants constructed generational discourses (pp. 164-165). Patzelt’s research is informed by Sofia Aboim’s and Pedro Vasconcelos’s concept of “social generations” in which generations are shaped by their shared historical locations, but also by discourses
to which individuals can relate in order to establish self-identification (p. 165). Patzelt points out that recent German newcomers referred to the postwar generation as “Kofferdeutsche” (suitcase Germans) having fled hunger and unemployment in Germany for the prospect of economic opportunity and a better quality of life in Canada. Meanwhile, the recent generation referred to itself as “modern immigrants” who as a result of technological advances in communication and transportation were able to view themselves as “Kontainerdeutsche” (container Germans). As result, Patzelt concludes that this “internal self-construction” on the part of the interviewees was a major reason for their “generational understanding” as modern immigrants (pp. 167, 179).

In “We Never Really Talked About It,” Sara Frankenberger, a first-generation Canadian and fourth-generation postwar German, explores how the descendants of German immigrants in the twenty-first century remembered their parents’ and grandparents’ lived experiences in the form of stories that dealt with the Second World War and in particular, family memories of the Holocaust. Frankenberger uses intergenerational memory as a theoretical framework to underpin this chapter. Frankenberger goes on to argue that seventy years after the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, second- and third-generation German Canadians continued to struggle to come to terms with this collective past. Frankenberger challenges the argument that the question of guilt could be applied to subsequent generations of Germans and German Canadians. As she points out, the assertion ignores the ongoing intergenerational effects of the Holocaust and the “continued responsibility to remember the suffering it caused” (p. 187). Frankenberger demonstrates that “patterns of silence and avoidance” were present when German Canadian families discussed or shared wartime memories and involvement in the Holocaust despite migration and increased historical education, concluding that successive generations continued to struggle with how to integrate difficult parts of their heritage into their German Canadian identity (pp. 204-205).

In “Creating Family Legacies,” Christine Ensslen examines how descendants of German women immigrants commemorated their ancestors through a public memorialization project. Ensslen focuses on the personal accounts and biographies found in Celeste Rider’s Women Pioneers of Saskatchewan (2019), which documented the lives of female settlers in Saskatchewan. In analyzing the accounts that were specific to German settlers, Ensslen notes that in many cases the memories of women pioneers had been forgotten. She goes on to question how various biographies were constructed when information “failed to be transmitted through intergenerational memory” (p. 210). She discovered that biographers often filled missing information with family lore, “imagined possible histories,” while others lamented the loss of information. Ensslen goes on to argue that the biographical accounts can be read as versions of individuals’ lives constructed for a particular purpose (Rider’s book) and within a public context of bringing attention to ancestors and entire families. As such, biographers, who were often descendants of those they were writing about, sought to convey their deep love for their relative and used emotive history to establish how the ancestor’s desirable qualities (e.g., character, hard work, participation in sociocultural citizenship, etc.) were passed down to successive generations. These descendants chose to include discussions about identity and culture without being guided or prompted. This meant that language, foodways, and religion, for example, were “specifically linked” with a German ethnic identity in the biographies of their German ancestors (p. 212).

In his reflection “What Does It Mean to be ‘German Canadian?’” Roger Frie explores his own family history as the son of postwar German immigrants to Canada to suggest that being “German Canadian” has changed over time. With the widespread immigration of postwar Germans to
Canada in the 1950s and 1960s in search of refuge and economic opportunity, many Germans sought to “blend in” to the Canadian mosaic only to find themselves forced to carry stigma due to mainstream Canadian society’s focus on Germany’s role as a wartime enemy and perpetrator of the Holocaust. Yet Frie notes that by the end of the twentieth century, that stigma had largely disappeared and "German Canadian" had become “a label-conferred on a minority group by the majority to a means of self-identification” (p. 239). This identification would permit successive generations of German Canadians to acknowledge their family’s ethnocultural background, language, and nationality. Frie considers to what extent German immigrants and their descendants in Canada have acknowledged and remembered Germany’s difficult past. German families were able to assimilate into Canadian society by forgetting the Nazi past and the Holocaust. However, the “process of denial and dissociation” in many of these families later affected their descendants’ own self-understanding of what it meant to be German Canadian (p. 241). Frie notes that this often led to feelings of confusion and shame related to their family heritage. While Frie acknowledges that the most recent generations of German Canadians are free of responsibility for the Nazi past and the Holocaust, he argues that they do hold an obligation to “know and remember” the acts of violence committed during the Holocaust (p. 249).

**Being German Canadian** is based on a large array of archival documents, oral history interviews, personal papers, and published sources. Alexander Freund’s edited volume on a particular ethnocultural group in Canada successfully provides scholars of migration, intergenerational memory, and ethnocultural identity a way forward in critically examining issues surrounding how identity is built and shared, and which collective memory markers of identity are celebrated or ignored.

**Notes**


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