

Historical Sketch

The German presence in Canada goes back to the establishment of Halifax as a naval base by Colonel Cornwallis in 1749, but it was not until the American Revolution that German immigrants reached Upper Canada. They were Hessian mercenaries and soldier-farmers from New York State and the German Palatines who received land grants and settled in the Niagara region. It has been estimated that up to one third of United Empire Loyalists arriving in Upper Canada were German-speaking.

Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe invited German immigrants to the province because he was convinced their presence would contribute to the economic stability. He believed, being Protestants, they would make loyal subjects. In 1794 William von Moll-Berczy, a German businessman, responded to Simcoe's offers and organized the settlement of 60 families in Markham township. He was also responsible for the construction of Yonge Street, the first major north-south road in the province.

From the 1780's to the 1830's so-called Plain People, members of German Protestant religious sects such as Mennonites, Amish, Quakers and Dunkers, seeking uncleared, inexpensive land and an opportunity to practise their religion freely, settled in Lincoln, Welland and Haldimand counties. By 1805 social and economic pressures caused the Mennonites to form the first substantial inland settlement within the province: they purchased the "German Company Tract", a bloc of more than 60,000 acres, which was soon to become Waterloo township. From this original settlement a variety of German religious congregations spread into adjoining Perth, Huron and Oxford counties.

As a result of the lifting of restrictions on emigration by various German states in the 1850's, and the efforts of the government of Canada West to solicit immigrants in continental Europe, Germans settled in Renfrew district, northern Frontenac, Parry Sound and further north in Algoma. The Waterloo region also saw the emergence of trade and distribution centres for the agricultural "Plain People", often named after German cities: New Hamburg, Baden, etc.

By Confederation 73% of Germans in Ontario - and 60% nationwide - had come to live near Waterloo County. Berlin, the centre of the region, displayed a remarkable degree of religious diversity and tolerance. Its inhabitants shared an unusually strong sense of local loyalty. German culture and folklore flourished, as was illustrated by the ubiquitous use of the German language in schools and newspapers. The consanguinity of the British and German Royal families further

helped to encourage the retention of German language, customs and traditions.

In the 1870's a large number of so-called Russian Mennonites - with a strong sense of German nationality - settled in the Waterloo area, fleeing from religious persecution.

Between 1870 and 1914 most new German immigrants poured into the Canadian West, gradually lessening Ontario's pre-eminence as a centre for German culture and settlement. By 1914 Ontario contained less than half of Canada's German-speaking population.

With the outbreak of the First World War, German Canadians became vilified as the enemy overnight. The Allies' moralistic struggle against "Germanness" involved the suppression of the public usage of the German language in church services, newspapers and schools. Within a few months Berlin was renamed Kitchener. Immigration from Germany and Austria-Hungary virtually stopped. By the end of the war 8,500 German and Austrian Canadians had been interned.

As a result of the war, the 1921 census demonstrated racial tensions and subsequently an unwillingness by many to admit their German origin: in Ontario the German population decreased by more than 30% while the number of Dutchmen, Austrians and Russians rose significantly.

In 1923 the war-time restrictions on immigration were repealed. Canada did not follow the United States' introduction of a quota system, and thus became many immigrants' preferred destination. The majority of the newly arrived were German-speaking farm labourers from Soviet Russia, most of whom settled in western Canada. This immigration wave was characterized by a close cooperation between the Canadian government, the railway companies, and numerous church organizations, such as the Lutheran Immigration Board, the Canadian Lutheran Immigration Aid Society and the Association of German Canadian Catholics.

Despite the new influx of German-speaking immigrants in this period, there were no attempts to recreate German culture as in the pre-war years. Only a few social clubs survived the war, while public use of the German language and talk of politics were carefully avoided.

The rise of Hitler in the 1930's saw a renewed nervousness in German Canadian communities. The Nazi movement seems to have had but a very limited success with a group of young, economically marginal, recent German immigrants in Ontario. At the beginning of World War II all German Canadians who had

entered the country after 1922 were forced to register as enemy aliens, of whom over 800 were interned. However, with little direct Nazi threat in Canada, the vast majority was released in 1941. Overall, the attitude towards German Canadians was less hostile than during the First World War. The greater majority of Canadians of German origin identified themselves with the Allied cause and many joined the Canadian Armed Forces, or voluntarily suspended their clubs' activities for the duration of the war.

At the end of 1946 the Canadian Society for German Relief was founded in Kitchener. With the support of the International Refugee Organization 50,000 "displaced persons" were admitted into Canada between July 1947 and November 1948. Of these immediate post-war German-speaking immigrants over 40% originated from Poland and other parts of eastern Europe.

Since the end of the Second World War German Canadians have been characterized by a significantly higher level of education than most other groups. Most German-speaking immigrants were skilled or semi-skilled workers and chose to live in the larger urban centres, particularly in Toronto. Due to the German "economic miracle" of the 1950's and 1960's, the 1970's and 1980's saw a significant decline in immigration from West Germany. Since the 1950's there has been virtually no immigration from East Germany.

In the 1981 census, Canadians that identified themselves as being of German ethnic origin constituted Canada's third largest ethnic group. In 1971 more than 475,000 Canadians of German ethnic origin lived in Ontario, representing 36% of German Canadians nationwide. Two centuries of existence in the province, diverse religious backgrounds, intermarriages with members of other groups, integration and accommodation have made German Canadians one of the most completely assimilated ethnic groups in Ontario.