

**A Brief History**  
**of the**  
**German Language School Ottawa**

**from its beginnings to the present**



**compiled by**

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## Foreword

This is an attempt, in a limited format, to record the history of an institution which has enjoyed a long and honourable existence as part of the German community and among the educational institutions in Ottawa. An attempt was made to do justice to all who made this history possible, and to record events as accurately as possible. Wherever this is not seen to be the case, the author takes responsibility.

He is much obliged to those who assisted him in word and deed in this compilation, and he welcomes further information, anecdotes, corrections, etc.



### **Setting the Scene**

The Second World War had seriously interrupted such relations as might still have existed between Germany and Canada. It is, of course well to remember that the First World War had gone before, with discrimination and other difficulties on both sides, and that it had left a great deal more bad blood than did the Second. Earlier German immigrants had gone to ground, emphasized their Canadian citizenship, and toned down their German language, in many cases speaking it brokenly after years of little use, and sent their children to English language schools; the only ones, it should be added, that were available to them. German cultural institutions, German associations, and the outward signs of German community life had been severely pruned back and frequently disappeared.



### **The New Immigrants**

Into this scene of acceptance, assimilation and camouflage burst a new wave of immigrants, starting in 1951, when relationships between the two countries approached a normalization, at least on a diplomatic, if not on an everyday level. This wave consisted of uprooted citizens from a war-torn and prostrate country, largely, but by no means exclusively, from the Eastern provinces, who had lost everything except their lives and the clothes they stood up in, and who now, not seeing any very great chance for themselves and their families in the Western part of Germany, no very good possibility of being accepted by their fellow citizens and being allowed to share in what remained of possessions and opportunity, decided to risk a completely fresh start in a young and undamaged country. As opposed to the members of the older German-Canadian communities, these new arrivals did not speak the language or know the customs, and they made an effort to establish themselves in the



life of the community as Germans, with their own institutions and organizations. Often such efforts were spearheaded by those who came from areas where German culture and language had been threatened in the past by foreign influences and overlay, such as East and West Prussia, Silesia, the Sudeten country, or parts of Austria.



### **Regional Organization in Ottawa**

Along with other Canadian urban centres, Ottawa saw its German population increase apace and beginning to make its presence felt in the business and cultural life of the city. Clubs sprang up and activities increased in importance and numbers, and conflicts arose, naturally, but mainly in respect of scheduling, we are happy to report. In order to ensure that everyone had a chance and every event its place in the sun of public patronage, some kind of regional coordination seemed called for. The impulse to organize came, perhaps typically, from the burgeoning cultural life, where conflicts in scheduling were most prevalent. It was the cultural attachée at the German Embassy, Countess von Finckenstein, who, in 1966, proposed a centralized scheduling of events, so that an orderly progression could be achieved, and this effort in due course led to plans for a roof organization for German clubs and associations. In 1970, these culminated in the foundation of what was at first called *Stadttausschuss*, and, as of 1973, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, familiarly known as ARGE, a regular meeting of presidents and heads of organizations for the purpose of discussing problems of concern to all. Among many other activities, the ARGE undertook to promote the teaching of the German language to interested students. It lobbied for the teaching of German in the schools of the region, and, arising naturally from this, it very soon after became the vehicle for the founding of the German Language School. D. Kiesewalter, currently



President of the German Language School Board, played a role in these events.



### **Immigration and the Origins of the Language Schools**

The first wave of immigration, in the 1950s, brought with it some 300,000 German-speaking immigrants, a larger group than almost any other that had come to these shores. Canadian schools, as may be imagined, were neither ready to offer instruction in their language to the children of these immigrants, nor were they really prepared to make the necessary adjustments. Languages were, in any case, only taught in high school. As a consequence, so-called Saturday-schools - the name explained the circumstances - came into existence in the larger cities, in an effort to fill the educational gap between kindergarten and Grade 10, where no instruction in German was available. Over the life of these schools, the requirements which they had to meet, changed. The first wave of students, who passed through them, had almost uniformly spoken German at home and had received instruction in German. When this wave ebbed in the '60s and '70s, a second generation appeared, which posed a different and more complicated problem for the German language schools - as they prefer to be known. In this second generation of children often born and largely raised in Canada, the first child most likely spoke a passable German and understood all, the second child understood much but spoke haltingly, while the third child might already have difficulty with understanding the language, having learnt to speak in a predominantly English-language environment on the street and in school. From language instruction provided by volunteers without, or largely without, professional qualifications, the language schools had now to develop into second-language schools offering instruction by qualified teachers. The German Language School Ottawa was founded in this transitional period and experienced a little of



both scenarios in its early years, but developed decidedly along the second path in later years, as the numbers of students from non-German backgrounds rose.



### **The German Language Club of Carleton College**

It is perhaps worth noting, in this context, that instruction in the German language did not necessarily begin with the German Language School, although that is perhaps its highest flowering. Already in 1947, a German Language Club of Carleton College, as it then was, had been founded through the efforts of Dr. R. Hoff, who was active in many ways among the earlier immigrants, and who died only recently. While one of the aims of the Club was to help students of German in their studies, it also became a centre for all those in Ottawa, who had an interest in the German language. After doing much important pioneer work, the Club ceased its activities in 1971, when other institutions, such as the Goethe Institute, had sprung up to continue the task.



### **The Founding of the School**

It is impossible now to trace the early movements within the German community in Ottawa which eventually culminated in the actual founding of the School, but by 1971 enough impetus had been built up to lead to action. In order to determine just what the base of interested parents - and, by extension, students - would be, I. Ruthenberg conducted, in March 1971, a survey of the German community in order to determine the desirability of and the support for a German Language School. This survey proved beyond doubt that the School would be able to count on the backing of the community. As a consequence, the German School opened its doors and began its first year of instruction a few months later, on October



2, 1971, in the rooms of the Martin-Luther-Church on Preston Street. Voices of warning, which had been raised earlier ("why would children want to attend school on Saturdays as well as during the week") were clearly proven wrong when thirty-seven students filled the classes of the School that first year. Among the teachers, in this and the following years, were many men and women well-known and active in the German community and, in some cases, still active in the School today (in alphabetical order): E. and V. Barthel, V. Blöda, B. Fernandez, S. Grambart, L. and D. Kiese-walter, A. Koch, B. and W. Layer, M. Maurach, R. Mandoli, H. Moeller, R. and E. Pauk, C. and R. Ratzel, J. and C. Schmitz, to name only a few.

The quarters were cramped, for the Church was still years away from the radical rebuilding which would completely change its appearance and provide much more space in later years. The students were divided into three classes, and the most senior of these, one teacher recalls, "sat in the kitchen between stove and refrigerator." But, with some improvisation and much enthusiasm and good will, a start had very definitely been made, and the future looked promising.

The ARGE entrusted the operation of the School to one of its constituent bodies, the German-Canadian Business and Professional Association, as it was then known (now German-Canadian Business Association). R. Ratzel became the School's administrator, H. Wyslouzil treasurer. Both were to serve the School for many years with skill and engagement. While the Association was responsible to the ARGE for the School's business, the principal - the first one was Johanna Schmitz - was, according to her employment contract, responsible for the course schedule, the course content, and the hiring and performance of the teachers. It is interesting to read today



that the total budget of the School in its first year was \$1570.00, and that each teacher received \$10.00 per day of teaching.



### **Further Development**

The spaces in the Church soon proved too small as well as generally unsuited for a classroom set-up. The School then made its first move; it began its second year of operation with 96 students in 1972/73, in the High School of Commerce on Rochester Street. In this, the School benefited from instructions by the Ministry of Education to local school boards to open their schools for community purposes. These were the early stirrings of what later became the Heritage Language Program. The German School now paid a small amount per student to the OBE. In 1975, the School moved again, this time to Glebe Collegiate, which it shared, over the years, with other heritage programs. It was always important for the School to have a relatively central location, to allow equal access from all parts of the area. While it can be argued that someone will always have the more distant trip, it is important that the School be seen to have a central location, and this consideration has always governed decisions having to do with relocation. 1975 is also the year in which adults were first admitted to the School, largely for conversation classes.

In the year 1977, the long-awaited Heritage Language Program became law, and school boards were enabled by it to offer non-official languages as part of their continuing education programs. At the same time, the federal government made funds available to permit ethnic communities to maintain the program. This funding ceased in 1990, in the course of increasing, and increasingly hurtful, budget cuts.



The number of students in the School climbed steadily, until, in the late '80's and early '90's, it levelled off in the neighbourhood of 300, more or less, depending on the year. The reunification of the two Germanys, in the fall of 1989, with its attendant spotlight on Germany and things German, caused a sudden noticeable increase in the enrolment, after it had been stagnant for a time.



### **The School's Principals.**

The principals of the School, the persons who were chiefly responsible for its operation and the direction it takes, and who at all times worked very hard and responsibly and often well beyond the call of duty, were, over the years: Johanna Schmitz, Christa Renken, Gert Taudien, Christine Fraser, Annegret Koch, Hannelore Moeller, Elke Barthel, Sylvia Grambart, at first conjointly with Christa Selka, then alone. The School owes these dedicated men and women an enormous debt of gratitude.

Among them, perhaps one stands out. This is Elke Barthel, who became principal immediately after the incorporation of the School, and continued in the position until 1992. It was she who gave the School the professional appearance and way of working it has today: the class structure and, in cooperation with the teachers, the German curriculum. She was also called upon by the OBE to help develop a generic curriculum for the elementary classes in heritage language schools. Her interest in her work led her to the Canadian Association of German Language Schools, of which she was president for two years, and where she worked for Canada-wide professional development for teachers in Saturday schools. She returned to Germany with her family.





### **Incorporation of the School**

As the School grew in size and importance, the system under which it was administered underwent changes. In the early years, the School was run largely by individuals and had no formal organization, although it possessed, as mentioned, a principal, an administrator and a treasurer. But there was no formally constituted administrative body, and all decisions were either initiated or approved by the ARGE. In order to give the School independence and the chance to grow, in 1981 the ARGE, under its chairman D. Kiese-walter and vice-chairman G. Bauer, launched a process by which it would cease to be the sponsoring body for the School. This was, in the opinion of many, an important formative step in the development of the School and would give it greater standing in the community and among its peers. But at bottom, the reasons were chiefly of an administrative and financial nature. The ever-increasing difficulties and the uncertainties connected with the operation of the School, registration, for example, could not be handled by a group of private individuals, however dedicated they might be. In most areas of business, particularly in the area of funding and finances, a corporate structure, with representation from all sections of the clientele, is very necessary. The School had, up to that point, received little or no financial support from the Federal Republic of Germany or the Secretary of State, for example, and - successful - efforts would now be made to obtain more of it. The Canadian Association of German Language Schools had always been ready with active support in teacher training and other areas of importance to the School, and it continued this help after the incorporation.

The incorporation was brought to a successful conclusion in February, 1983, and a reception was held to celebrate it and to announce it to the world. A. Koch, a former principal of the School,



became chair of the founding Board of Directors. A constitution was written by R. Pauk, and such other corporate instruments as statements of duties for the principal and the teachers' representative were formulated. The School's business would henceforward be conducted in a more regulated and formal manner. The Board of Directors began regular monthly meetings, and a body of documentation began to be accumulated.

The immediate consequence was that R. Ratzel and J. Wyslouzil, who had served the School honourably from its beginnings, now retired, feeling, as they did, that the demands of the new structure would exceed the time they had to spare. H. E. Schreiber became Secretary-Treasurer, after having already been involved in the affairs of the School for some time. He was to serve faithfully and in varying capacities in the years to come. When he left, he was followed by R. Engfield, who took over as Secretary, while the office of Treasurer passed through several hands. The School's administration, in addition to its educational direction, now became part of the duties of the principal, at that time H. Moeller. A. Koch remained as chair of the Board of Directors until 1984, when she was succeeded by K. Anders, who, along with H. Kelly, had taken care of the legal work of the incorporation, and was to remain in that office until the spring of 1994. A considerate and intelligent administrator, K. Anders made it possible for the School to grow and develop in the very satisfactory way it did. U. Fehr is now one of the longest-serving members of the Board and deserves honourable mention here.



### **Cultural Activities**

The cultural and artistic program has always been important to the School, and it has received as much attention as was possible within



the constraints naturally imposed by the operation. It included performances in word and song, activities such as school choirs, and festivals, such as Christmas, Carnival, and the well-known Sommerfest. The purposes served were at least threefold: to put the students in touch with German customs; to bring variety to the school day; and to promote cohesion and esprit de corps. There may be others. In looking at this aspect of the School's activities, it is unfortunately not possible to do more than to touch on a few high points.

In 1974, the School presented the play *Oliver Twist* in the auditorium of the High School of Commerce. By all accounts, this was not only an ambitious undertaking, but it was executed with considerable skill, not to say panache, and to great applause. The play had been translated and adapted by S. Grambart, and was performed by a large part of the student body of the day. Students, in fact, took over the whole *mise-en-scène*, and Kim Grambart was responsible for the production. Some of the participants are active in the affairs of the School today, and they think back fondly to the performance. One may imagine the work and dedication invested in this production and the excitement everywhere that accompanied the performance.



### The Choirs

In 1980, D. Kiesewalter was persuaded to start a School choir. He was at that time conductor of the (chiefly German) Johannes Brahms Choir and, with his musical and musically active family, well known in music circles in Ottawa. The choir, which practiced in the last class hour of each school day, attracted a number of interested students, all carefully screened for both dedication and ability. The advantages of participation were not only acquaintance with German folk songs and other choral music, but with music and its



performance in general. The choir performed publicly for the first time in December, 1980, only months after its creation, in the German Club, during the Christmas celebrations of the School. It did so again in December, 1981, in Knox Presbyterian Church, and again in May, 1983, in the Unitarian Church, both times together with the Johannes Brahms Choir. Of course, there were other public performances, not all with an equally high profile; it does not need not be stressed that all these performances met with much applause and appreciation. The children sometimes wore costumes patterned after *Trachtenkleidung* and made possible by a donation from R. Herr, one of the many loyal and generous sponsors from the German business community which the German School has found over the years for its various activities.

Perhaps the highest point in the all too brief story of the choir was the presentation of the choral work *Weihnachtsgeschichte* by the German composer Carl Orff, an innovator in music education, in the Martin-Luther-Church on Dec. 22 and 23, 1984. This performance required a great deal of work and preparation and was well received.

For participants and public alike, these were momentous and highly enjoyable events, fondly recalled by both students and parents. The School Choir eventually ceased its activities, when D. Kiesewalter retired from it, but a junior choir of smaller children, under the direction of the capable and very dedicated K. Laframboise, continues the tradition. This choir exists still and performs to general applause at many functions in the School.



### Great Festivals

The great festivals of the year are usually marked by the School with appropriate activities, although not all of them every year, because a great deal of work is involved if they are to be done well. Christmas is invariably celebrated, even if not always in a large way; Carnival sometimes, under the participation of Prince and Princess Carnival and other members of the *Erste Karnivalsgesellschaft Ottawa*, and with the children being encouraged to dress up. Perhaps the most memorable of the Carnival celebrations took place in February 1983, at the German Club .



### The Sommerfest.

It is perhaps unusual to devote so much space, in this brief narrative, to a single activity in the school year, but this is done to show how the School community functions in putting together an event of this sort.

The Sommerfest is the biggest event of the German School calendar. Everyone looks forward to it, and it invariably engages all the School's resources, and for that reason, it is not held every year. The event usually takes place on the last day of school, in late May or early June, and planning begins many months earlier, because all participants meet only at intervals. A theme is chosen: German fairy tales, old children's games, Johann Sebastian Bach, or, for instance in 1991, "Drei-Länder-Fest"; in that year Austria commemorated the 200th anniversary of the death of Mozart, Switzerland the 700th year of its existence as a federation, and for Germany, it was "Old Berlin-New Berlin," in the wake of reunification. Every class chooses an aspect of the theme and prepares a small presentation or event around it, according to ability and preferences. The Embassies of the



three countries in which German is spoken, are usually very helpful in their support of these activities. The place is spacious Vincent-Massey-Park, because it alone can accommodate the multitudes which usually grace the Sommerfest, and in the rare case of inclement weather, it is the school building. The course of events has been fixed by tradition: after a brief official program, which includes the handing-out of diplomas and awards, everyone takes part in the presentations and games and enjoys the food and drink.

Publicity is important, but its most productive aspect is word-of-mouth and letters sent home with the students. Since no sales are allowed in the park itself, all orders are placed and paid for in advance, in the classes and through students and teachers. Announcements in the newspaper or through the radio are used, but sparingly, since the festival can easily become the victim of its own success through overcrowding. In some years, publicity items of a festive nature, but handy and portable, are used: balloons with the School's logo, or a button with the legend: "Das macht Spass - German Language School - Deutsche Sprachschule." These buttons, well remembered among the participants, took quite some time to produce, but they were very popular and some are still to be found.

The work is parcelled out among individuals and groups: preparation of class events to the teachers and students, food and drink to parents, for example. Board members assist with many and miscellaneous tasks. An undertaking such as this depends on the good will and know-how of many, and the School has always been fortunate and successful in finding the willing and able to help with the tasks that need doing. During the monthly Board meetings, progress is checked and further details are hammered out. Invitations, often drawn and lettered by students, go out to a long list of v.i.p.'s from the Embassies, the OBE, and the German



community. When these personages arrive, they are hosted and shown around the grounds by members of the School.

On the chosen morning, activity begins early all over town, as the parts of the puzzle begin to come together. The Bronson Bakery truck, loaded with baked goods and other foods, is on its way to the Park. Tables are picked up at the Martin-Luther-Church and the St. Albertus-Gemeinde. At the Park, the School's banner is raised at the pavillion, tables are decorated, playing fields laid out, the barbecues are being heated, coffee is brewing. For the early workers, it is wise to come in rubber boots because of the dew on the grass.

Partway into the morning, visitors begin to arrive, parents and children, and others, and many are glad to shake off the early chill with a hot cup of coffee, always a popular item. Later on, there will be sausages, prepared by the cooks who toil in the hot sun over hot barbecues, soft drinks, pretzels, cake. All the picnic tables are occupied, and many participants sit on the grass, in a *déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

It does not require much imagination to realize that in spite of careful preparation, all of this does not proceed smoothly, and there is always some running, urgent telephone calls, and last minute improvisation.

The official program begins about 10:00, and at that time the sloping hill-side leading down to the pavilion at the Park, like a Greek amphitheatre, is dotted with onlookers. There will be speeches of welcome, musical and dance performances, varying from one year to the next, diplomas and awards will be presented; one more song, and then the festival is thrown open.



About 1:00 p.m., the crowds start to thin, everyone is packing up and preparing to leave. Clean-up crews - Board members prominent among them, by tradition - swarm out over the park and ensure that it is left in the state in which it was found. Trucks and cars move off, one last look around: is everything neat and clean? And as suddenly as it started, it is over. "Und wieder geht ein schöner Tag zu Ende."



### **Conclusion**

At the end of the school year 1995/96, after 25 very successful years, the School is faced with possibly profound changes. Students, parents, teachers, and, of course, the administration, have to make decisions, which will be of great importance for the future of the School.

Unexpected problems have appeared on the horizon. The OBE, under whose authority the School functions, has subjected it more and more to its bureaucracy. Not only does it supply the class rooms and pay the teachers, it has also instituted its own administration, in addition to the School's administration, which had operated the School successfully up to this point. This is an expensive duplication of effort, the more so, as the OBE is now becoming subject to cuts to its budget, along with all other publicly funded bodies. The result appears to be, in as much as can be seen now, that language teaching, if it does not disappear as an activity of the OBE, will be emptied of all cultural content and reduced to a purely academic instruction in the language, thereby losing much of its value for ethnic groups, such as the German community.

Nonetheless, it is a situation that offers many opportunities, and should the OBE abandon heritage language teaching altogether, the

German School Association, parents and students, and, it is hoped, the German community, must pick up the work and develop their own program. There will be a future for the German School, and it will be bright, if we all work together.

