Representing "New Canadians": Competing Narratives about Recent German Immigrants to Manitoba

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In October 2002, the *New York Times* reported on a strange, new phenomenon in a far-away part of the world—far away, at least, to many Americans and even Canadians. The reporter from the metropolis began his story with an observation of the foreign people he had come to visit in the remote countryside: A "barefoot" woman, her hair "tied in a kerchief" and wearing an ankle-long, "homemade flower-print dress," greeted her nine children returning from school. Lidia Tschritter, readers learned, was originally from a "Mennonite village in Kazakhstan" and spoke an "archaic German dialect." Her family now lived in Canada's "hinterland," in a place called Steinbach, Manitoba. Readers of the *New York Times* are said to be well educated, but they would have forgiven themselves for not knowing about Mennonites or finding Kazakhstan—or Manitoba, for that matter—on a map. The reporter temporarily removed the sting of this ignorance by describing in the following paragraph observations that his urban and suburban readers could more likely identify with: Thirty nine year-old Mrs.

Tschritter was married to David, "a carpenter who makes patio doors in a local window factory." The couple owned a six-bedroom house, and their children had a trampoline in the front yard. Having digested this information, readers may have felt better prepared for the next barrage of oddities, namely that the family owned "a sumptuous fruit and vegetable garden" and a "barn full of animals."[1]

The *New York Times* article was among the first stories the North American press wrote about a new—and to many observers quite unlikely—group of immigrants who came to Canada during the first decade of the twenty first century, so-called ethnic Germans from Kazakhstan and Russia, most of whom were devout Christian peasants and workers. With roots stretching back to their eighteenth-century ancestors who had left their German homelands to settle Tsarist Russia, people like the Tschritters had spent much of their lives in the Soviet Union. From the late 1980s onward, they had joined a stream of 2.5 million Soviet Germans who resettled in Germany.[2] Between 1998 and 2009, some 11,300 moved on to Manitoba.[3] Recruited by a Provincial government eager to stem the population decline, by employers, under conditions of a low unemployment rate, eager for presumably hard-working, skilled, and docile labourers,[4] and by immigration agents interested in business,[5] these "New Canadians" settled in south Manitoba's rural towns of Winkler, Morden, Altona, and Steinbach as well as in the rural countryside outside of these small urban centres. Others moved into Winnipeg or to the suburban belt surrounding the province's metropolis. Although the migration of Germans to twentieth-century Canada has generally been well documented,[6] we know as yet little about this most recent German immigration to Canada. Most of what we do know about the immigrants comes from newspaper reports, government statistics, and economic studies, mostly analyses of quantitative data. Statistics Canada and Manitoba Labour and Immigration kept track of their numbers, Brandon University's Rural Development Institute conducted short, policy-relevant community studies of Winkler and Steinbach, and the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies studied rural immigrants' housing problems.[7] Together, this polyphony constituted a discourse about the immigration that shaped public perception.

Immigration discourses are prominent discursive sites on which the boundaries of the nation are imagined, negotiated, and constructed. Such discourses construct the nation, but they also construct the immigrants, most often in categories of inclusion (desirable immigrants) and exclusion (undesirable immigrants). Immigrants participate in such discursive negotiations, albeit not as equal participants, having fewer resources to transform family and community discourses into national public discourses. The polyphony of narratives that constitute

the discourse about recent German migrants in Manitoba thus provides an opportunity to understand early on how a migration is discursively positioned and how a society negotiates the meanings of such migrations.

In this article, I argue that the history of Russian/Kazakh German immigrants in Canada at the beginning of the twenty first century began in both polyphony and silence. During the 2000s, at least three narratives developed about recent Kazakh German immigrants to Canada: press stories, those told by diverse government agencies in Manitoba, and immigrants' stories. Journalists, social workers, government agencies, academics, and migrants themselves clamoured to have their voices heard and their interpretations count. Their stories were told alongside each other and sometimes in competition with or contradiction to each other; at various points, these narratives were also interwoven. At the same time, they were embedded in a silence that echoed from the many stories the media, government officials, and the immigrants never told.

At stake in these narratives were identities of self and nation, of insider and outsider, and of desirable and undesirable immigrant. Separately and together, these narratives represented the migration and the migrants in specific and particular ways. Through telling stories, reporters, government officials, and immigrants made sense of the world around them. As cognitive psychologists like Jerome Bruner and Donald Polkinghorne have argued, narrative is a way of knowing the world. Narrative transforms experiences into memories and identities.[8] By crafting our and others' identities, we order society and position ourselves and others in this social order; in other words, through narrative we construct social relations of power. Therefore, a reading of the diverse narratives will help us understand how the migrants were perceived and represented by the larger society in which they lived, how they themselves identified and positioned themselves in this society and how the diverse narratives played on and with each other to create relations of power that shaped migrants' internal and external identities, i.e. how they saw themselves and how they were seen by others.

After describing first the international and regional press narratives, I move on to the provincial government and local field workers' narratives, and then turn to some of the immigrants' narratives. Throughout I also briefly document all parties' silence about the group's history. I conclude by considering the narrative that is told in and through this article.

Press Stories: Immigrants as Non-Threatening Exotics

The *New York Times* and the *Winnipeg Free Press* were the only newspapers in North America to publish substantial articles about the immigration of Russian and Kazakh Germans to Manitoba. These stories cast the immigrants as non-threatening exotics. The reporters commonly wrote from a pseudo-anthropological perspective, creating the effect of reporting about the unfamiliar for their readership. They focused on characteristics that they assumed to be in discord with the lives of their assumedly modern readers, readers who lived in small, nuclear families in cities and suburbs, holding individualistic values. The immigrants they reported about lived in big, extended families in the countryside, and their values were communal: they were not (yet) modern.[9] The articles highlighted several a-modern characteristics. First, the immigrants had large families. Second, they were Mennonites. Third, despite being so foreign and speaking little English, they were well integrated. As well-integrated migrants, they were cast as non-threatening and even beneficial exotics or "others" that satisfied newspaper writers' and readers' curiosity.

Over the course of a decade, the *New York Times* apparently visited Manitoba twice–twice more often than Canada's two national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*.[10] In both cases, the *New York Times* reported on specific aspects of Canadian immigration policy and painted a glowing portrait of Canada's pro-immigration politics.[11] In October 2002, the *New York Times* reported that several Canadian provinces, led by Manitoba, had embarked on a new program of recruiting one million immigrants in the coming decade in order to stem the tide of rural depopulation. The provincial initiatives were backed by the federal government, which was concerned about an aging population that could not sustain the welfare state. The government was also concerned that the vast majority of immigrants settled in only three cities—Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. The *New York Times* tied this new initiative to Canada's century-old nation-building policy that sought to settle the "hinterland"—"to spread Canada's multiethnic rainbow across the country's vast prairies, tundras and forests." Clifford Krauss, the reporter, depicted all German-speaking immigrants as Mennonites and placed them in a larger context of the concurrent settling of "Argentine Jews, Filipinos, and Bosnians" in Manitoba. These Mennonite immigrants seemed to be the perfect match for the "new immigration policy designed to attract young, preferably large foreign families to rural Canada"; the families were young and had lots of children; even though they spoke little English, German served as the lingua franca in an old-time Mennonite region where a lot of people spoke German or a Low German dialect. The

article emphasized the ease of integration and the complete lack of any conflicts in the newcomers' settlement. While Mrs Tschritter exclaimed that "Canada is wonderful!" 30-year-old Martin Wayngenten from Argentina proclaimed that his new-born son was going to "be a Canadian."[12] The American newspaper participated in long-term Canadian governmental and media discourses about nation-building through immigration and more universal discourses about desirable and undesirable immigrants.

That the *New York Times* represented this as a story of the exotic is not surprising. It is a journalists' job to make a story interesting: "Dog bites man" is not a news story; "man bites dog" is. This was particularly important for the *New York Times*' urban American readership, which would not have had much interest in European migrants or Manitoba. The display of the exotic served not only as a means of reporting about the dry topic of immigration policy, but also as a means of documenting a perceived alternative to American post-9/11 immigration phobia expressed in tightened immigration controls.[13] Considering that Canadian immigration policy in "the post–11 September era restored the traditional discriminatory practice of dividing immigrants into preferred and nonpreferred groups based on country of origin,"[14] this seemed to be wishful thinking. Immigration policies in both countries, however, were not necessarily in line with public opinion. Even though public attitudes to immigration were more favourable in Canada than in the United States, in both countries public opinion was mostly influenced by the state of the economy rather than ideology. Thus, from 1995-2003, the number of Canadians wishing more immigration increased from twenty one to twenty eight percent (42/32 wished less immigration), that of Americans from eight to eleven percent (66/56).[15]

In Canada, and especially in Manitoba, the local readership had a direct interest in their new neighbours. As Tamara Vukov argues, Canadian immigration discourse in that time period juxtaposed undesirable immigrants posing a security threat ("terrorists" and "trafficked human cargo") to desirable immigrants promising to participate in the project of nation building by peopling a country whose society no longer reproduces itself.[16] It is therefore surprising that the Canadian and Manitoba press did not engage in spinning this tale. As thousands of Kazakh and Russian German immigrants settled in southern Manitoba and Winnipeg after 1998, the nation's and the province's press remained largely silent on this new immigration stream. Both local field workers and immigrants themselves concurred that the press showed little interest in this migration.[17] The editor of the *Carillon*, the main newspaper of Steinbach, Manitoba, where many of the newcomers settled, confirmed this lack of reporting.[18] Articles in the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* sporadically mentioned the

Provincial Nominee Program, i.e. the province's immigrant recruitment policy, in articles about immigration policy, but did not report on the German immigrants.[19] This discourse of silence is the larger context in which one must understand the small number and the kinds of stories that were published. In this context, the *Winnipeg Free Press* provided the most extensive coverage of German immigrants to Manitoba.

The articles the *Winnipeg Free Press* published on the topic of "Russian Germans," as the paper quickly termed them, fell into two categories: extensive background articles and short news items. From 2005-10, the *Free Press's* Bill Redekop wrote, to my count, four extensive background articles. At least one dozen small news items reported on domestic tragedies involving recent German immigrants. Whenever *Free Press* reporters wrote about the new immigrants, they emphasized the size of their families: five, ten, and even fifteen children were seen as so uncommon that they were newsworthy. The Winnipeg newspaper reinforced this message with photographs of the families, although this was not always possible, as Redekop reported in 2007: "The newcomers did not wish to be photographed because of their experience with German newspapers. They felt articles when they arrived in that country contributed to public resentment against them."[20]

"Giant Wave of Immigration Hits Southern Manitoba," Redekop entitled his first report from March 2005, making front news. Referring, like Krauss, to the settlement of Western Canada in the first two decades of the twentieth century, he began by claiming that the 3,500 "German people, mostly Russian Germans" that had immigrated in the previous seven years constituted "a wave of immigration unlike any seen in rural Manitoba, perhaps since large blocks of Eastern Europeans arrived 80 years ago." The immigrants were "considered Russian Germans," Redekop explained, "because they have immigrated twice. The first time was in 1988 from Kazakhstan, in the former Soviet Union, to Germany, and then from Germany to Canada a decade later."[21] By 2010 this had been shortened in an even more misleading way: The new immigrants were "loosely called Russian Germans because they first emigrated from Russia and then from Germany."[22]

Redekop, like Krauss, explained the province's new immigration policy, local companies' needs for skilled labour and the problem of depopulation. This new immigration, he insinuated, might be just the beginning, as "[f]amilies of the new settlers are growing rapidly" and "the pipeline between Germany and Manitoba is by no means exhausted. One story making the rounds is that up to tens of thousands more people in Germany would move to Manitoba if there were enough opportunities." Much of this immigration he credited to Adele Dyck, an immigration agent from Winkler, Manitoba, who had "founded the immigration nominee program along with the Manitoba government."

Redekop also developed the theme that the immigrants' main reason for settling in rural southern Manitoba was the availability of property "where they could raise large families and keep a few chickens, a dairy cow and a pig, like they had in Russia." Space meant that Paul and Ina Hofmann could let their six children "outside to play" without worrying, as Paul Hofmann told Redekop, "about anyone abducting them, or about them being run down in the street."

Redekop made two other points: First, "[m]any of the new settlers had money … from selling properties in Germany" which allowed them to buy property. Second, this, in turn, led to "skyrocketing" real estate prices. But there were also benefits, Redekop pointed out, such as "soaring" retail spending, expanding businesses, hundreds of new jobs, a windfall in property taxes, major increases in federal child tax benefits and GST credits, revitalized rural communities, and new cultural offers such as German television, a new orchestra, and stores selling imported food products. Like Krauss, Redekop witnessed a smooth integration process. "'I love it here. I feel at home,' said [Irma] Maier, who runs an immigration consulting business." Unlike in Russia and Germany, in Canada they finally felt "at home," or, in Maier's words, "accepted" and "comfortable." Local politicians agreed. "These people blend in very well with the existing community," one Winkler councillor told the reporter. If immigrants faced any problems, they were negligible and easily overcome. At the end of the article–in journalistic practice the first part to be cut and thus containing the least important information–Redekop mentioned that "[m]any were shocked" by the low wages and high property taxes; learning English was not easy. Some had already moved on to Alberta and British Columbia.[23] In an accompanying article, mostly a defence of immigration agent Adele Dyck against charges that she had sold naïve newcomers overpriced properties, the recent immigrants served only as a barely visible background, although the immigrant with "10 children and ample space for them to run around" was not missing.[24]

Two years later, Redekop returned to Manitoba's south to report on the "Russian-German boom on [the] prairie." Describing the immigrants' new homes, he wrote that each of the lots had a house, "a cow or two, maybe a pig, some chickens, maybe some domestic geese and ducks, a dog and a cat–and a passel of children whose chores include looking after the animals." Families were rebuilding their Russian way of life, for example, "Andreas Gusowski, 46, who resides in a 1,700-square-foot, six-bedroom home with his wife, Nadine, and their 10 children." Adele Dyck served once again as a major informant. For the first time, there was a mention of religion. The families were from a Pentecostal congregation in Germany. And there was further speculation on how many more wished to come. Within two years,

the number had increased dramatically. According to Gusowski, the *Free Press* reported, "one million Russian-Germans" wished to come to Manitoba. The theme of available space was brought up again, as were the ideas that the immigrants had not been accepted in Russia or Germany. New information included that Germans [i.e. in Germany], according to Paul Schmidt, a twenty nine year-old father of five, "don't like children." A local politician was quoted to confirm the sunny side of Manitoba, where there was no antipathy to children. "'I think (the new families) will blend right in and do well," the politician echoed the words of his colleague whom Redekop had interviewed two years before. Problems, again, were relegated to the end of the article, this time focusing on the difficulty of bringing over parents.[25]

Redekop's final article entitled "Prairie Proliferation," and covering almost all of page one of the newspaper's "Arts&Life" section, was dominated by a photograph taking up much of the top half of the page. It depicted the family's children, loosely lined up in order of sex and age. Reporting from Morden, Manitoba, Redekop began his article by stating the number of children: "Raising 14 children doesn't seem so unusual to parents Eduard and Alla Schlak." Of course, raising fourteen children would, he implied, be unusual to all of "us," his readers. The reporter continued: "After all, Eduard came from a family of seven children, Alla from a family of 11. Five of Alla's brothers have more than 10 children. As for grandchildren? Take a deep breath: Alla's mother has 107 grandchildren."[26] Yet, Redekop was not convinced that his readers would grasp the enormity of this exotic lifestyle. The reporter went on to further describe how unusual it was to have fourteen children: "it's like 1910"; it's like "two generations ago"; "it's very *Little House on the Prairie*"; the family's children fill half of the school bus; in the morning, there is a line-up for the showers. These images harked back to a century before, when Clifford Sifton, the federal minister in charge of immigration from 1896 to 1905, described the ideal settler of the prairies as "a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born to the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children."[27] Manitoba seemed to be in a time warp. Most of the articles published in the *Winnipeg Free Press* about the recent German immigrants involved domestic tragedies, often fatal: house fires, drownings, and car accidents. The size of the family and the children's fates, especially if they lost both parents, usually became the focus of the story.[28] Similarly, the immigrants, many of whom were born in Kazakhstan, not Russia, were depicted as Russian Germans and Mennonites.[29] Early articles commented on the economics of this migration: low unemployment rates and a booming economy brought migrant workers to the region, who in turn bought houses and boosted the construction industry.[30]

Much of this reporting was framed by implied notions of the desirability of white, heterosexual, productive, and reproductive immigrants and concerns about security threats posed by undesirable immigrants.[31] The immigrants from Germany were not represented as "social problems" as so many other immigrants were.[32] Instead, their representation rendered them largely unproblematic and, indeed, invisible. Underlying this discourse was the notion that integration in Canada worked, that it was effortless and without pressure, and that it worked better than elsewhere (Russia, Germany). Yet, in Canada, expectations to integrate were not only much higher on the side of the immigrants,[33] but also on the side of the receiving society.[34]

Government Stories: Success Versus Failure

The 2002 *New York Times* article posited its portrayal of the Tschritters as "the snapshot the Canadian government hopes to duplicate thousands of times over." Yet, people like the Tschritters are difficult to find in government publications. While the press focused on the unusual characteristics of the immigrants, the Manitoba government drew attention to its successful recruitment of workers, their successful integration, and the benefits of immigration to the provincial economy. Much of this was expressed in the annual reports published by the Immigration and Multiculturalism Division of the Province's Department of Manitoba Labour and Immigration between 2000 and 2009.[35] In these publications, the government reported on recent immigration to the province. The publications contained three distinct narratives: one statistical, one textual, and one visual narrative.

In the textual narrative in its report from 2000, which was limited to a one-page executive summary, the government highlighted in the section on the new Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), that "with 480 new arrivals (44.1%)" Germany was the major source country.[36] In the statistical narrative, it was reported that of a total of 4,584 immigrants, 520 had come from Germany and 559 reported German as their mother tongue; 1,088 had arrived via the PNP; 480 of those came from Germany, and 475 reported German as their mother tongue. [37]

Over the decade, the reports became more elaborate. No pictures were included in the early reports; from 2002 on, photographs of people were included; from 2006 on, these included colour photographs. The number of pages increased from twenty three in 2000 to thirty six in 2009. The number of photographs increased from four in 2002 to ten in 2003 and twelve from 2005 onward. The basic presentation, i.e. short textual summaries, several tables (twenty six in 2000, eighteen plus thirteen graphs, two maps, and two flow charts in 2009), and

photographs of immigrants remained the same. The 2007 report is typical of the reports.

In 2007, the government reported that of the 29,000 immigrants settling in the province between 2005 and 2007, twenty six percent came from the Philippines, fourteen percent from Germany, nine percent from India, five percent from China, and the rest from dozens of other countries. Through the graphic illustration of many different source countries and mother tongues, the statistical narrative conveyed Canadian values of multiculturalism; through the juxtaposition of government goals and actual immigration numbers, it demonstrated the government's successful policies. In the accompanying textual narrative, the government document drew attention to various characteristics of the immigrants, including their legal status, age, gender, occupation, language skills, and destinations. About ten percent of the text was devoted to the immigrants' national and linguistic background. The government stressed that over half of the immigrants "arrived from Asian and Pacific regions." The government publication also mentioned that Germany was one of the top five "source countries for economic class immigration."[38]

Finally, there was the visual representation, expressed through three colour and nine black-and-white photographs apparently depicting recent immigrants to the province. These photos are strikingly different from the photographs used by the local press. The publication did not include any information about the photographs and there were no photo captions. Thus, it is not clear whether these were produced using immigrants in Manitoba or whether they were internationally available stock photos that could have been shot anywhere. The dominant story expressed through all of these narratives was that of the migrants' successful integration; except in the last photograph, all people depicted are smiling or laughing (in the last picture, two people, apparently an immigrant worker and his Canadian-born boss, look serious while the boss explains and the employees asks questions). All photographs depicted people who were economically and socially integrated; they were employed, they enjoyed their jobs, they could afford high-quality supermarkets and the leisure of going shopping together as a couple, and they were browsing real estate ads for single-family homes.[39]

Here then was the visual representation of the recent immigration of ethnic Germans in the relevant government publication: there were no pictures of Russian German immigrants even though they made up the second largest immigrant group. Reasons for this can only be speculative, but it is evident that the designers of the publication—whoever they were—did not see Russian German immigrant families with a dozen children as representative or visually appropriate of recent immigration to the province. In earlier and later reports, there were

photographs of single white people; the closest any of the reports got to the 2010 *Winnipeg Free Press* photograph (and the images invoked by reports about large families) was a picture on the cover of the 2007 report showing a one-child-family from the back, looking out over a harvested wheat field.[40]

Another success story that the government document told was that of migrants' successful integration through their economic contribution. For the government, immigrants secured the socio-economic wellbeing of the province. Furthermore, the immigrants were proof that the government's policies were a success. With half of all German immigrants settling in regional communities outside of Winnipeg, they helped the government bolster its claim that "[c]ontrary to national trends that see most immigrants settle in large urban centres, many immigrants to Manitoba are settling outside of Winnipeg." The next major source of newcomers settling outside of Winnipeg, however, was a small group of seventy immigrants from El Salvador. Despite this claim of significance, life in rural Manitoba was largely missing from the visual representation of immigration to the province.[41]

The story of successful integration sat in stark contrast with stories told by the field workers directly working with the newcomers. Richard Harder was a Senior Settlement Worker with Eastman Immigrant Services in Steinbach, Manitoba. His verdict about the immigrants' integration was bleak: "On a pass/fail scheme, I would give most immigrants an F." A Mennonite immigrant from Paraguay, Harder had worked with recent immigrants to Steinbach—most of whom were Russian and Kazakh Germans—for almost seven years. He was responsible for immediate settlement services, resources development and public relations. Newcomers "from all cultures" asked him and his colleagues every day to help them find housing and a job, deal with authorities, cope with their children's problems at school, and cope with the many other difficulties new immigrants face. The majority of his clients were Germans.[42]

How exactly had the newcomers failed to integrate? Harder explained:

> The majority of the families that live here right now would on a pass/fail get a fail from me. I am not trying to say something negative, but it's not there. Many of them are sending their kids to their own, private school. Of course the majority of them are sending them to public school. But it's all about keeping their group to themselves, pursuing their own traditions and values. The interest in integration is not there. It would happen only by generation. It will not happen immediately to many families. Not mingling with the Canadians, not going to field

> trips, not participating in soccer. … So, integration for the majority is a fail mark. There is a smaller percentage that is a pass, but again it would be the younger groups and then the occasional more mature group. … But it works both ways. It is not just pointing fingers at them. … In Steinbach, the locals are somewhat afraid of the change.

For Harder, the story was not about exotically large, well-integrated families. Rather, it was about misunderstandings, age, and the failure to integrate. The "misunderstandings and miscommunications," he explained, happened on "both fronts"; the local population was often sceptical of the new immigrants because they believed that the newcomers had received German and Canadian government subsidies, that they took away local jobs and land, and that their own children suffered from overcrowded schools.[43] The new immigrants, on the other hand, "misunderstood" the importance of mingling with the local population and accepting, adapting to, and adopting some of their ways.

Harder's story was remarkably different from the conflict-free pictures painted both by the press and by the official government reports. According to the settlement worker, most of the immigrants were religiously conservative, embracing traditional family values. A much smaller group of immigrants was secular. While the latter integrated more quickly, the former had a more difficult time. They had left Germany because they had not seen an economic future for their children there; because the schools were "chaotic" and "too loose in the area of sexuality." They had come to Manitoba because of available land, similar values, especially in regards to religion, good schools (with curricula amenable to their values, such as, according to Harder, the teaching of sexual abstinence), good properties, and a lot of jobs. While much of the early immigration was based on worker recruitment by immigration consultants and for regional employers, more recent immigration was based on family reunification.

According to Harder, most of the new arrivals were families that tended to withdraw into their church communities, which served as extended families. The main difference within the group was their age: The older immigrant families with many children, Harder explained, tended to be much less willing to integrate than the younger, small families that had spent most of their upbringing in Germany rather than Russia or Kazakhstan. Yet, there were, in Harder's view, no tensions between these two groups. Inter-generational tensions arose, rather, within families, between older parents and their school-age children, especially if they attended public schools. The child attending junior high school or even elementary school was "quite familiar with the way of life, the values of Canada, and is pushing it, and mom and dad are

holding on to their own traditional values. But they also have to rely on the twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year-olds for translation services at the hospital, at the store, at the bank. So there is a power dynamic developing where the youngster has a bit more power than mom or dad might like."

Locating Eastman Immigrant Services at the heart of successful integration was, in part, a story designed to secure the organization's position in the context of a financial crisis and declining immigrant numbers. If the new immigrants had not yet integrated, Harder argued, it was in spite of all the integrative measures and multicultural events his coworkers and he had organized. More intercultural get-togethers were needed.

Immigrants' Stories

Misunderstandings, age differences, or family did not figure prominently in the stories the immigrants told. Their narrative of immigration to Canada was, of course, multi-layered, and one that involved several criss-crossing tales that ran counter to each other. In the multiplicity of voices, it can be asked why the migrants' diverse experiences should be subsumed under or represented as one larger narrative as though all migrants spoke with one voice. There were, however, five recurrent themes or characteristics that make such a unifying representation heuristically meaningful. Thematically, one major aspect all narratives shared and one that was emotionally close to the narrators was the role of religion in their lives and communities. A second theme was the absence of history and collective memory. A third theme was the plot structure: all narratives were told in a western, modern, industrial fashion that placed the individual's will at the centre of the narrative. A fourth theme covered the migrants' lives before coming to Canada–a story completely absent from the media and government narratives. Finally, the theme of the migrants' difficulties of actually getting accepted by Canadian immigration authorities was also absent from the other narratives.

Before exploring these five themes further, let me say a few words about selecting the interviewees. Having no personal contacts among recent ethnic German immigrants, I was referred to Richard Harder, the settlement worker in Steinbach, who referred me to four individuals.[44] He chose them because he knew them well and, having referred them to journalists before, he knew they would likely agree to be interviewed. (A fifth immigrant he had referred did not wish to be interviewed.)

Neither the press nor the government paid much attention to the religious beliefs and practices of the new immigrants. It was, however,

foremost on the minds of the four immigrants that I interviewed, although it figured prominently only in one life story. Even before I turned on the recorder all three secular immigrants emphasized that the "religious immigrants" were unwilling to integrate, echoing Harder's concerns. For the religious interviewee, religion was the dominant force that shaped her view of herself and the world around her. One fault line of separation for the interviewees did not run along age, but rather along secular vs. religious identity.

The initial plan for this paper was conceived before I had conducted the interviews. Expecting stories similar to those of Tin Krueger, told by Sara Carter and Mary Hildebrand at the conference in Omsk,[45] I had planned to write about immigrants' stories of war and displacement. Why did I expect to hear such stories? I have conducted and listened to hundreds of interviews with Germans who immigrated to North America during the 1950s and with their children and grandchildren. The Second World War, flight, and expulsion figured prominently in their narratives. I had assumed that stories of forced resettlement, war, and discrimination as Germans in Russia and as Russians in Germany had been handed down from one generation to the next. I was confirmed in this assumption when travelling in Siberia in June 2010 and visiting several Mennonite villages around Omsk. At every stop, as elders began to tell us stories about their people, they told of suffering for their beliefs in gulags and they stressed that they told these stories frequently because it was important to them that their children and grandchildren would remember. None of my interviewees, however, mentioned these events in their life stories and, when asked, reported that they did not know much about it. A similar absence of historical memory has been reported for the case of ethnic German immigrants in Germany.[46] I have no explanation for this absence of historical memory in the interviewees' life stories. Perhaps, only older immigrants tell such stories—the people I interviewed were between thirty and forty nine years old. Perhaps, my research method—the life story approach—was not suitable to generate such stories.

The life story approach, finally, may also explain, at least in part, the narrative structure of the interviews. The interviewees told their life stories in the form of extended curriculum vitae. This is a western, modern, and industrial narrative that puts the individual with a free will at centre stage. As Mary Chamberlain explains, "We take the concept of 'life story' as a given, but it relies on a very particular concept of the self, one that is rooted in Western modernity, in which, as Anthony Giddens puts it, 'the self … [is] reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.' … This emphasis on the self may be a peculiarly European angst. Who is an individual, a self, is by no means universally understood."[47] In the western, modern genre of the life

story, the teller is also the story's lead character. This lead character, so to speak, holds fate in his or her own hands. In these individualistic stories, society, community, and family play only marginal roles in shaping people's motives and decisions.

Together these narratives acted as a counter narrative to the media and state narratives. The interviewees did not tell stories of traditional family values and large families. In all cases, women worked, the families were small or interviewees were not yet married. The interviewees, regardless of age or religious background, told stories of their own successful integration. Their modern self-concept contradicted the newspapers' narrative plot that cast the immigrants as a-modern.

The immigrants' stories carried two further themes: the long biographical stories before the immigration to Canada and the many personal trials and tribulations in people's lives before coming to Canada. Second, the difficulty of actually getting to Canada.

Alexander and Helene Hofmann immigrated to Manitoba in 2004. Alexander was born in a small village in Kazakhstan in 1970. He grew up in a kolkhoz, where his mother worked in a store and his father as a truck driver. In 1978 the family moved to a nearby town where he went to school and apprenticed as a welder before he was drafted into the work service army. In 1992 the family migrated to Germany. Helene Hofmann, nee Schneider, was born in 1973 in a small town in Kazakhstan. All of these towns, Helene and Alexander reported, were ethnically mixed. Helene loved her hometown. Growing up with a disabled sister and a sick mother, she had to take on many family responsibilities early on. After grade ten, she studied theatre. Although she was happy in Kazakhstan and opposed to her parents' plan to move to Germany, she went along. The majority of the extended families of Alexander and Helene moved to Germany as well. Alexander and Helene met in Germany and married there in 1994. They loved their life in Germany, but finding work continued to be a struggle, even after retraining. Their oldest two children were born in 1996 and 1998. In 2004 they emigrated to Manitoba with the help of the Winkler-based immigration agent Adele Dyck. The beginning, they said, was difficult, even though they found it easier to adapt to Canada than to Germany, where they had faced resentment by the native population. Alexander first worked in basic manufacturing and then made a career as a draftsman, but was laid off after four years because of the world financial crisis of 2008. He went into truck driving, but the family found the long absences too difficult. During that time, their "surprise child"–a second son–arrived. Helene worked as an immigration agent for a company in Steinbach. In this job, she returned to Germany and Kazakhstan several times and was shocked by the deterioration of the villages and towns in Kazakhstan, many of which had been completely

deserted. Helene stopped working after having her third child. Both Hofmanns grew up in Catholic families and attended Steinbach's only Catholic church. Alexander had heard a number of stories from his grandparents, especially his paternal grandmother, about the Second World War, the deportation to Kazakhstan, the deaths of many relatives, the grandfather's forced labour in the Trud Army (work army). He had also heard that his grandfathers had been shot because they were kulaks. Alexander's brother and sister and their families also live in Manitoba. His parents, however, could not accompany the children, but they visit each other. After the interview, and sparked by it, Helene's mother and aunt sent her short life stories they had written down by hand over the previous year.

Natalie Krueger, nee Renz, was born in Russia in 1960. The father was employed in gold mining and as a result the family moved around a lot when Natalie grew up. She said that because of their German names and her father's first name–Adolf–they experienced discrimination and were called "fascists." Like most of her relatives, however, she did not grow up speaking German. After grade ten, she apprenticed as a pastry cook and worked for her father in a company kitchen. When she was twenty one, she married and had her first daughter. The marriage, however, did not last. After her divorce, she moved to Kazakhstan to live with her mother. Natalie's life story was shaped by a string of misfortunes. Her newly-built house burnt down, her new-born son died, her second husband turned out to be an alcoholic, her father deserted her mother, and her mother remarried a man Natalie did not trust. Often, these misfortunes led to long-distance moves between Russia and Kazakhstan. As Natalie pointed out during the interview, she had such a turbulent life that the later migrations to Germany and Canada did not excite her too much, although she was happy in both cases to be able to move away. "Life will go on, despite everything." Indeed, she had a second daughter, they rebuilt the house, eventually sold it, and moved elsewhere in Kazakhstan. Several family members, including her mother, decided in 1990 to move to Germany. Her husband was opposed, so she went on a visit to Germany and decided to stay. The string of misfortunes did not break off in Germany, but rather increased. Her mother was brutally murdered by her husband, they experienced discrimination by the local population, and Natalie became very sick. Although she had divorced her husband, and was angry at her father for deserting her mother, she helped both of them to come to Germany. While she and her husband lived together for a while, Natalie eventually moved away because he had started drinking again. He too was later murdered. But there were also bright sides. She had a good job in a children's home and she met a German man with whom she began a new life in Hannover. Yet, there were several more

deaths in her family, including those of both of her parents and her oldest sister. In the late 1990s, her older sister had visited an uncle in Alberta and they all decided to emigrate to Canada because it was like Russia with open spaces and greater freedom. Her husband shared her dream. He had visited an uncle in Saskatchewan during his youth, but had not been able to convince his parents to immigrate to Canada. Like the Hofmanns, the Kruegers contacted Adele Dueck. But they were rejected by the Canadian immigration authorities, and not just once, but several times over the course of six years. After each rejection, they had to wait six months until they could reapply. During that time, they visited Manitoba and Natalie's younger sister several times and even bought a piece of property. Finally, in 2005, their application was accepted.

Christina Wall was born in Estonia in 1984 and moved to Germany in 1988. Her parents, who had migrated to Estonia from Kirgizstan and the Urals, told her that life had not always been easy, and her grandmother told her about life under Stalin and the food shortages that affected everybody. These were "hard times, especially for Christians" because they were not allowed to take their children to school and the teachers spied on the children. "Lots of them [the parents] had to go to jail for bringing their children to church. I am so happy that it is not that way right now." When the family moved to Germany, all of her father's eleven siblings and their families and all of her mom's six siblings and their families moved as well. In Germany, the family–Christina had five younger brothers–built a house in a quiet rural town. Christina felt integrated in Germany, even though her Mennonite Baptist religious beliefs were sometimes regarded with puzzlement and even hostility. After grade ten, Christina apprenticed in a tax advisory office and then worked in a nursing home for one year. Living religiously in Germany could be difficult because employers would not respect her wishes to attend services on Friday evenings. In 2003, the family moved to Manitoba, where Christina completed high school. In 2006, the family moved to Alberta, where she worked as a health-care aide. In 2008, she moved back to Winnipeg to study nursing at the University of Manitoba. "None of them [my brothers] are married, neither am I, so I don't have any kids," Christina said about her family life. She also emphasized the close relationships she has with her family. Christina's knowledge of her family's distant history came mostly from what she heard from her paternal grandparents; the family owned a DVD with interviews that were conducted with the grandparents. She explained that her ancestors had moved from Prussia to Russia in the 1850s along with many other Germans who had been recruited by Tsarina Catherine. She could not recall hearing about the Second World War or deportations during that time period.

She believed that most Germans in Russia were of Mennonite Baptist background, not Catholic or Lutheran. Much of her world view was shaped by her religion, which saw itself in conflict with evolutionary theory. "Evolution and Christianity does not go together at all. If the government believes in Evolution, then they are against the Christians, right?" This view shaped her historical understanding and everyday life. "I agree with other people that as our moral standards go down and evolution crawls more in, that has a big effect on our society." In Manitoba she attended a small church of only six families who met Fridays and Sundays. Even though she initially had not wanted to leave Germany, she felt comfortable in Canada. In 1998, the family visited Estonia to see the places where they had lived. They talked a lot about Germany and kept in close contact with relatives in Germany.

Harder's choice of mostly secular small families that had successfully integrated undermined his own narrative of the immigrants' failed integration and reinforced the provincial government's official representation. Although Christina Wall belonged to the larger group of, in Harder's words, "conservative" immigrants, the stories of people like Lidia and David Tschritter were missing. So were the stories of those who, at least in the eyes of the field worker, failed to integrate. And yet, these four narratives do not simply depict a diversity of experiences. Together, they also serve as a counter-narrative to the stories told by the media and the government.

Conclusion

A historian who studies the present rather than the distant past feels somewhat like a fish out of water. The distance of time is a historian's greatest tool in evaluating sources. The concept of narrative allows the historian studying the present to recover at least some of the distance and detachment needed to make such evaluations. Even more so than when writing about the distant past, the student of contemporary history must also be self-reflexive of one's own role in weaving this tale about the present. As scholars of narrative point out, next to the narratives that we study, there is our own, in which all of these other narratives are embedded or by which they are framed.[48]

Mine is an academic narrative, driven by theory as well as evidence. It is based not only on the research in Manitoba, but also on informal conversations with others from Manitoba, with scholars working with ethnic German immigrants in Germany and Canada, and with ethnic Germans in Siberia that I met during the conference in Omsk. It is driven by my wish to understand why ethnic Germans in Siberia, in an increasingly more restrictive Russia under Putin, have this immense

urge to talk about the Gulag and why this memory seems to have been completely wiped from the memories of those in Manitoba and, so my colleagues tell me about the *Aussiedler* in Germany, from those in Germany as well. Being left speechless by the evidence so far, I have turned to others' narratives, not to mine them for facts, but rather to understand how others have represented the immigrants.

The immigrants and the fieldworkers strained to have their voices heard under the silencing narratives of the press and the provincial government. After ten years of comparatively massive immigration to a region that has seen little immigration since the 1960s, the immigrants have remained largely obscure and absent from public discourse. That there is no greater interest in these immigrants may have to do with the post-9/11 political climate. In the West, Muslims are construed as the new enemy ("terrorist threat") while Christians, whether fundamentalist or not, are considered not just benign and non-threatening, but a bulwark of western (read Judeo-Christian) values in the West's "war on terror." As white Europeans, furthermore, the immigrants are not members of visible minorities. As such, they are not only not suspicious, but they quell the dominant, white Canadian society's fears of the "browning" of Canadian society.

We know from narrative research that one of these narratives—or a hybrid of several stories—may become hegemonic and define the image of these newcomers for a large part of the population, at least for some time. It is too early to tell, however, which of the competing narratives (or which aspects) in this case will become dominant. Collectively and individually, the narrators looked to the present and the future, but not to the past, in order to make sense of what they saw and experienced. In this case too it is too early to tell whether this silencing of history will continue to shape how ethnic German immigrants in Manitoba are represented and represent themselves in the twenty first century.

Notes

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[39] *Ibid*.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] *Ibid*.

[42] The rest of this section is based on Harder, Interview.

[43] Such fears are echoes of broader trends, but express minority sentiments. In 2003, 62% of Canadians said that "immigrants are generally good for the economy" and 67% believed that "immigrants make the country more open to new ideas and cultures," but 27% also believed that "immigrants take jobs away from people

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