

Skip the meekness, blow your horn!

A new year leads our thoughts to getting a hold of our life. If we find something lacking we make changes. But there must be more to life than striving to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe, and entertained! Those of us who have grown up German have an answer with a little more substance: proving that it is good to be German; as long as we still remember what that means!

Why do we hurry so to do our business in English, installing officers, such as: Zekrrateri, Prrezident, and Trrescherer? Instead of „Präsident(in)“, „Sekretär(in)“ and „Schatzmeister(in)“? Is it because we feel rushed more than most to become “Americans?” Or is it because we want to confirm that there are no Germans in America? We all know what surprise we cause when we show up in great numbers and also the incredulity in Germany when we identify ourselves as having a bit of a German cultural life among “average” Americans! We don't need to keep it that way!

Everyone else knows that we are a special breed, but do we?

Survey after survey shows that Americans know and respect “Germans” for being industrious, honest, inventive, frugal, community-oriented and, yes, a little meek. Many travelers who return from Germany also report on cleanliness and order. If that is so, then regions of this country with the largest proportion of German immigrants should make us fellow industrious inventive, frugal, community-oriented and recycling Americans feel at home. Such regions should be clean to the point where we visitors with a few German threads in us feel obliged to stoop for a discarded paper napkin, public services should work, roads should be smooth and without gaudy advertising on their sides and no power lines should dangle for the wind and ice to catch. Am I dreaming?

There is another characteristic of German immigrants to this country, tenacity. An analysis of farmsteads in Missouri and Southern Illinois has found that farms still owned by the families that settled them had overwhelmingly a German heritage. Until recently, this had contributed greatly to stability in agriculture. The same parts of the country recorded people of German descent as the largest group in the 2000 census. Do they still sport German qualities?

I found that I was not dreaming when I recently visited southern Wisconsin. That is where, in spite of Garrison Kiellor's stories, the 1990 census found the highest percentage in the nation of citizens of German heritage, 53%. I found not only

spotlessness and order but also--to my surprise--wonderfully nostalgic German food in every grocery store, the kind for which the rest of us have to go far out of our way, if we manage to find it at all. And some of these people may not even know, how German they are!

There have of course been immigrants of other ethnic backgrounds who lived the code and were equally industrious, honest, inventive, frugal, and community-oriented as the Germans, and maybe even a little meek. And they also like dark bread, blood sausage and stinky cheese. I am talking about northern and eastern Europeans, such as Austrians, Hungarians, Dutch, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Poles, Russians and probably even a few Englishmen.

Certainly there have also been some German immigrants who made themselves unpopular. One group that comes to mind settled in New York in the 1850s and became known as “those awful Germans.” They gained this reputation by rummaging for bones and boiling them for soap, a highly stinky affair. They also collected and reused rags and they involved their entire families in these disgusting enterprises. But what did they really do wrong? Weren’t they inventive, industrious, frugal, and a little meek? Maybe a little too meek, because they lacked understanding for their new community. New York quickly became intolerant of their recycling and drove them out. Any reader who finds this story hard to believe, can read it in the New York newspapers of the time and in Richard O’ Connor’s book *German-Americans: an Informal History*. (1968).

So, of what in particular should Germans in 2007 become prouder? To be sure, American history is full of industrious and frugal people who were motivated by their lowly beginnings and achieved success and high honors, that is not so special. But in some cases, people with high achievements act as if that went to their heads, resulting in apparent dishonesty and disrespect for the rest of the world. And that makes the difference. Overwhelming numbers of Germans in this country continue to feel obliged to their community. They have been successful in farming and small business exactly because they remained part of their community using its resources and serving it.

How could this happen? Don’t ever let anybody tell you that being watched over more closely by uncles, aunts, neighbors, neighbors’ friends and neighbors’ dogs than by parents was bad for you! When you grew up with neighbors watching your behavior, did you dare to misbehave? You see, growing up in a functioning community fosters understanding of and concern for the common good. That’s

how you learned that it cannot possibly end up well when you do things that don't fit the code! Doesn't everybody immediately find out about it and start talking? Yes, gossip is a very powerful means of control!

Of course, there have been Germans--both here and in the old country--who got away with being lazy, deceitful, in a rut, wasteful, anti-social and domineering. Some of them may have succeeded instead in the arts, some in Hollywood. And, yes, there have also been some highly unethical political leaders, well maybe they were Austrian! So, let's ask what might make the difference!

The unshakable code of behavior that has formed those life-long compulsions admired by everyone has served us well and should be our source of pride, with one exception, that wretched meekness! Let's resolve in the New Year to take our light out from under the bushel, to start lots of programs proudly blowing our horn about German achievements, telling the world about all the wonderful things Germans have contributed to this country. Please join me in this New Year's resolution and now go and have a wonderful PR campaign!

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