

## “Mon Alsace”

### A fading childhood dream of a unique Franco-German experience

by Patrick Schmidt

When I was ten, I spent the summer with my French grandparents in Alsace. I was from suburban Los Angeles and didn't speak French. Nobody in Leimbach, a village on the edge of the Vosges Mountains, spoke English. Culture shock is a mild way to describe my first few weeks!

But those weeks stretched into 15 months. I attended the local *École des garçons*, became fluent in French and far less American in my ideas. Unfortunately, this didn't help during recess when all the kids automatically switched to the Alsatian German dialect they spoke at home. That was, as Mark Twain would say, “too many for me.”

I was having enough trouble learning one language, Alsatian was out of the question. Nonetheless, strains of it — words and phrases, sound and rhythm — made their way into my ears. And the charm of that unique pocket of Franco-German culture stayed with me.

A decade later I returned to the region for a year as a student at *l'Université de Strasbourg*. And after graduating from the California State University, I went back to Europe, learned German and began working in Stuttgart. I didn't know it but I was well on my way to becoming an interculturalist.

Which came first, chicken or egg? Was it 15 months in Alsace as a child that gave me the wanderlust to spend my adult



life in Germany, Austria, French Canada and Malaysia? Or was there already something inside me which made those 15 months take such hold? Is it “in ourselves or in our stars?”

Shakespeare says it's the former but I think it's a combination of the two. What is certain is that the cultures we come to be part of, no matter how marginally, become part of us. And so, when my wife and I sat down to discuss the next part of our lives, I remembered Alsace.

Settling down in Strasbourg gave us the best of both worlds. For my wife, who was born and raised in nearby Besançon, it was to return to *la douce France*. But the bridge across the Rhine to Kehl means as much to her as to me. Our years in Germany and Austria--the language and culture we gained there--have left their mark of adopted homeland.

Settling down in Strasbourg I was also, as a friend of mine likes to say, looking forward to the past. Wondering how much would remain of that year at the university when I was 20. Not just in the changing architecture of stores and cafés and but in the feel of the place--the “vibe”, as people from California say.

I remembered that the kids from *l'École des garçons*, thanks to their Alsatian dialect, had gone on to learn German. And that the university itself had a bicultural history: classes were in German when Goethe got his law degree in 1771.

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*In 1940, the Nazi authorities initiated a policy of eliminating anything French in Alsace. In 1945, the French government copied the idea, sweeping away not only Nazism, but all that was German.*

To sum up two millenia briefly, Alsace was home to Germanic tribes from before the Roman Invasion and was later part of the Austrian Empire. When France took possession with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Louis XIV repeatedly stated “Don’t touch the affairs of Alsace.” Commerce and government continued to be conducted in German and, in fact, customs stations excluded Alsatians from official French territory. It was only in 1860, with compulsory schooling, that French language and culture began to influence the populace.



*The statue of Goethe at the University of Strasbourg, where he studied law in German during the 1770s’.*

But then it was back to German a decade later, after the Franco-Prussian War. Ironically enough, although most Alsatians didn’t speak French, they resented being forced to change their nationality. By 1914, however, Alsace had regained a thoroughly Germanic identity based on both language and geography.

When Paris regained control of the region in 1918, the government attempted to institute unilingually-French schools. Alsatians were horrified at losing their cultural identity and a political movement emerged (*Heimatbund*) that was heading to-



German poster in 1940



French poster in 1945

ward popular revolt when the French government accepted a de facto bilingual system.

Twenty-two years later, when the Nazis annexed Alsace, a famous poster depicted the future of anyone who refused to reject Gallic culture. Likewise, in 1945, French authorities used the same poster to initiate a campaign to eradicate all traces of Germanic culture in the province. Any child who spoke Alsatian in the schoolyard, much less in the classroom, was severely punished and the parents were suspected of a lack of national loyalty.

This policy is the key to understanding the Alsace of today: denigrating German and the dialect did incalculable damage to the self-esteem of young Alsatians. Research in socialization tells us that children learn culture by internalizing their parents’ and teachers’ behavior and re-enacting these subjective experiences through role-playing. This is how culture is transmitted. When small children are told in no uncertain terms that their mother tongue is bad, it doesn’t take long before the culture disappears. And that is exactly what has happened.

Still, that’s the thing about redrawn borders: it takes a toll on the people living there. After the Nazis, there were very few Alsatians who wanted anything to do with Germany. In any case, they were French again but continued to speak a form of German at home. And the essential things—cooking, music, jokes—were Germanic, not Latin. But the future was quite obviously French.

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*In the 1750s, the British deported French-speaking Acadians who refused to pledge allegiance to the king of England. Atlantic Canada was to be an English-speaking region.*



In 1970 Strasbourg was a unique pocket of Franco-German culture but when I returned 40 years later all that had changed. Young Alsatians no longer learn German, they study English instead. Just as with any linguistic culture in the process of disappearing, few understand their grandparents' dialect and even fewer speak it. Two generations of official institutions and media and a culture can all but disappear.

And culture is a big word, a jumble of actions and attitudes. Behavior. These days I drive across to Kehl just for the peace of organized traffic, clean sidewalks and quiet cafés. Then I plunge back across the bridge and, even though I live there, I feel my blood pressure rise in the emotional clamor of Parisian-style driving.

At the end of it all, languages are disappearing in the Global World at an increasing rate. And when the words cease to be spoken, an entire and distinct culture disappears. At the same time, once political movements have more or less homogenized society, they can go back and repair some of the damage. Walking through the campus I once attended, depressed at the extent to which the Alsatians have lost their roots, I thought of the Acadian people I learned about while living in Canada.

The British defeated the French in far-flung Atlantic Canada in 1755. Acadians who refused to pledge allegiance to the king of England were deported to Louisiana (where Acadien became Cajun). For those who remained, life was in English from then on.

Two centuries later a quarter of a million people had managed to keep something of their language and culture alive. It went without saying that most spoke better English, or at least they wrote it better, because there were no French schools. There was no service in French anywhere—not in hospitals or at the Post Office, not in stores or restaurants.

But then, just as the last generation of francophone Acadians was in sight, the federal government finally gave in to local demands. There would be French-language schools, bilingual service in government offices, even in stores and restaurants. The politicians voted the laws, then spent money on programs designed to make the idea behind those laws come true.

It took less than a generation! Acadian music, theatre and literature exploded. A French-language university opened its doors to a few hundred students and a quarter-century later there were five thousand. Francophone businesses sprung up, just in time to replace the dying traditional trades of farming, fishing and forestry.

This is what I hope for here in Alsace. That both Strasbourg and Paris recognize there's still time to save a language and culture which was once vibrant and could be again. All it takes is a plan; all it takes is the political will to act. As for the Alsatians, they're both willing and able to meet the challenge, I'm sure. After 40 years as an interculturalist, I'm willing to stake my reputation on it...

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