



# Waldsee: Courageously Learning from History

BY DANIEL S. HAMILTON

Preserving an identity in light of the horrors of WWII  
through education and a vow to never forget.

“The coolest language school in the world.” That’s how Germany’s popular television show *Galileo* describes *Waldsee*, the oldest and largest residential immersion program in German language and Austrian, German and Swiss cultures in North America, sponsored by Concordia Language Villages (CLV), a program of Concordia College in Minnesota.

For almost 60 years thousands of young people, families and adults have come to Waldsee for whimsical adventures in the German language. From the first “*Guten Morgen!*” until the last “*Gute Nacht!*”, our villagers build an impressive foundation of German skills and cultural knowledge by participating in small language learning groups, joining cultural activities, expressing themselves through the arts, playing games and sports, dancing, singing, eating, cooking and most of all, having fun with friends old and new. It’s all part of our mission to inspire courageous global citizens.

*Waldsee*—“Forest Lake”—evokes the German Language Village’s idyllic location in the Minnesota North Woods. It was the impetus for what are now 15 different Language Villages, including French, Italian, Chinese, Norwegian, Russian and Korean.

In May 2018, however, we were shocked to learn that the name *Waldsee* is associated with a dark period of German history.

During World War II German trains delivered Jews from all over German-occupied Europe to killing centers that were established to achieve the Nazi goal of Jewish annihilation. Auschwitz was one of those centers.

Most of those transported to Auschwitz were unaware of their ultimate destination. In the novel *Fatelessness*, Nobel Prize-winning Hungarian author Imre Kertész writes that when the Jews crowded onto trains asked where they were headed, they were promised a supposedly idyllic

destination: “Waldsee.” “When I was thirsty or hot,” the book’s young narrator exclaims, “the promise contained in that name immediately invigorated me.”

To maintain this deception, Nazi guards told Hungarian, Greek and most likely other Jews who had arrived at Auschwitz to fill out a postcard telling friends and family at home that they were well. The postcards were postmarked “Waldsee” to deceive those receiving the postcards into believing that the sender was enjoying time in a picturesque location. “I am in good health and I am doing fine,” the cards read. “I am working,” or “I have arrived safely. I have got work in my occupation,” “wish you were here” or “Follow us here!”

Soon after writing these words, the inmates were led to the Auschwitz gas chambers. *My dearest ones, I feel fine. Hopefully you are all healthy. Please send an answer by postcard. When I’m healthy, I think of you a lot. I send many kisses to you. Your Agi,*” wrote 33-year-old Agnes Bamberger before she was put to death.

Although this historical episode has been known to historians, the Jewish community, and members of the informed public, we were unaware of it until a member of the Language Villages community told us of it this past spring.

We were stunned, shocked and embarrassed. The name our entire community associated with friendship, laughter and learning was a name indelibly linked to deception and death.

What to do? We immediately committed to address the many issues and questions associated with this period of German history and its implications for our Village name and the community it has represented over six decades.

We formed an advisory committee of scholars, parents, museum directors and experts on the Shoah and the Jewish community. We worked with Hebrew Union College to



arrange a loan of their art exhibit entitled “Waldsee Postcards 1944,” which features artistic renderings of this horrible history. We held forums with parents, villagers and alumni. We received over 50 pages of written comments.

We reached out to the towns of Bad Waldsee and Waldsee in Germany to understand how they have dealt with this topic. While the current mayors were unaware of the historical issue, they tasked their respective city archivists to do some research and to report back to us on their discoveries. The Center for Holocaust Studies of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC have helped us find archival materials relevant to this episode.

All of these activities helped us to formulate a series of recommendations going forward.

The first question we had to address was whether the Nazi deception obliged us to change our name. As our discussions progressed, we found guidance in an additional question: how may we best honor the victims?

“Initially I was incensed, and really wanted Concordia to change the name,” said Alex Treitler, one of the advisory committee members and the parent who first brought the issue to our attention. “But the better point is to use it as a learning opportunity, to keep it as a reminder.”

By abandoning the *Waldsee* name we would clearly disassociate ourselves from this horrible history. But we would also be abandoning an opportunity for remembrance. As the number of Holocaust survivors and those with personal memories of World War II dwindle, the topic is in danger of fading from consciousness, especially among young people.

We are first and foremost a learning community. That is why we recommend that we both maintain the name *Waldsee* and accept a moral responsibility for its history. Knowing that the Nazis used the name to hide the realities of the Shoah means our decision to keep the name carries with it an obligation to expose the horrors of the Shoah. It imposes upon us an obligation to keep the memory of the victims alive.

As one member of our community noted, “As Germanists in particular, we can never take a break from history. We need to be allies for its victims, and educators for the future.”

This has implications for our programming, our Village space, our training of staff, our resources and our engagement with individuals inside and outside our community. “It’s not entirely about changing the name,” notes Leslie Morris, professor of German and director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Minnesota. “We need to have an ongoing conversation. We need to address the larger trajectory of history in other aspects of the camp.”

When it comes to programming related to this issue, our efforts will be informed by the contemporary German concept of *Erinnerungskultur*, which characterizes how individuals and society at large incorporate historical



**OPPOSITE PAGE: CONCORDIA LANGUAGE VILLAGE’S WALDSEE IS THE OLDEST AND LARGEST RESIDENTIAL GERMAN LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM IN NORTH AMERICA. COURTESY CONCORDIA LANGUAGE VILLAGE.**

**ABOVE: INSTALLATION VIEW INCLUDING WALDSEE POSTCARDS FROM AN EXHIBITION AT THE DONAUSCHWABISCHES ZENTRAL-MUSEUM, ULM, GERMANY. COURTESY ALMA ON DOBBIN.**

remembrance and awareness into modern life.

We will also seek to convey the rich diversity of modern German society, which includes Jewish as well as many other influences.

Much of this is bound to evolve in organic ways, given the experiential nature of our program.

As an example, however, we will no longer sell postcards in the Waldsee store. Instead, next to an empty postcard holder we plan to hang a plaque describing the WWII postcard story under the title “*Warum verkaufen wir keine Postkarten?*” (“Why do we not sell postcards?”)

We will invite Shoah survivors and their families to tell their stories. We will offer experiential learning opportunities about the larger trajectory of German-Jewish history and culture, for instance through music, food, stories, language and other mores. We will develop training modules to help staff members address the topic appropriately and sensitively and navigate language, stories and emotions.

For our younger learners, we can both continue and enhance learning sessions and our own modeling as individuals and as a community on themes related to peace, justice, conflict resolution, community building, empathy, acceptance and courageous global citizenship.

We will also consider how to create an appropriate place in the Village for remembrance, reflection and conversation.

We are intent on making greater knowledge and awareness of these issues unavoidable for those who choose to learn with us. We can—and will—honor the victims in ways that respect our own traditions, our mandate as a learning community and our mission to inspire courageous global citizens.

We have been humbled by this experience and impressed by the thoughtfulness of our villagers, and grateful to those who have engaged with us on a difficult trek. We are committed to continue our learning journey. **GL**

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