

NO SECTION

## Concordia Language Villages confronts an ugly truth head-on as a step toward healing

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By Cynthia Dickison

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Since 1961, thousands of children have soaked up German language and culture at Waldsee village, now located on Turtle River Lake near Bemidji. (The Minnesota Star Tribune)

In 1960, an educator named Gerhard Haukebo returned to Minnesota from a stint overseas with a vision. Could the language immersion methods he'd seen on German playgrounds be married to the summer camp experience he so loved?

After brainstorming the idea during a fishing trip on Lake of the Woods with friend and colleague Erhard Friedrichsmeyer, Haukebo took the dream to his employer, Concordia College. Friedrichsmeyer proposed the name "Lager Waldsee" – Camp Forest Lake – the better to evoke the idyllic landscape where the new camp might nestle. And in 1961, the first of the International Language Villages was born, a place where children could learn the German language not in a classroom, but while at play.

Buoyed by the success of Lager Waldsee, the villages eventually swelled to 15 language concentrations, where thousands upon thousands of children have been steeped in other cultures including French, Norwegian, Russian and Japanese. The reputation of the camps, eventually rechristened Concordia Language Villages (CLV), only became more burnished over time.

Then, earlier this year, nearly 60 years after Haukebo's vision became reality, Concordia faced a shocking truth:

There was another Waldsee. But this Waldsee was not a peaceful place of rest. It wasn't even a real place.

Steve Hunegs, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas (JCRC), put it starkly.

"It was," he says, "a horrible euphemism for Auschwitz."

In Nazi-occupied Hungary during WWII, Concordia camp leaders would soon learn, Jews were herded onto trains with the promise of a lovely and tranquil destination. "We learned that our journey's end was a place named Waldsee," says the young narrator of Imre Kertész's Nobel Prize-winning novel, "Fatelessness."

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"When I was thirsty or hot, the promise contained in that name immediately invigorated me."

To keep up this sinister ruse, new arrivals to the notorious death camp were forced to write cards to loved ones, postmarked "Waldsee." The cards were meant to assure family that all was well and, even, encourage them to make the journey to this paradise themselves – albeit often with carefully coded caveats. "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.

## **Fascination and horror**

For decades, the connection went undetected, as throngs of campers ate, slept and breathed German at Waldsee village ("Lager" was eventually dropped), located since the early 1980s on Turtle River Lake near Bemidji.

Last spring, the curiosity of one man led to the shocking discovery.

"I put two terms – 'Waldsee' and 'Nazi' – in the search bar," said Alex Treitler, president of Life Language, a family and personal history business. His daughters had attended the Swedish village, and he became curious about the German village when family friends spent a weekend there in 2017.

As a man whose grandparents likely died at Auschwitz, "I'm sensitive to the topic," he said. He began to read about the phony Waldsee with a sense of fascination and horror. What did Concordia know about this?

Treitler contacted Christine Schulze, executive director of Concordia Language Villages, expressing his concern and dismay.

"Your heart sinks," said Schulze. "To be perfectly frank, it was news to us. We were incredibly surprised – this was a program that had been connected to the German government, towns and researchers. We weren't hiding under a rock, if you will."

"Frankly, we were just not aware," said Dan Hamilton, dean of the Waldsee village. "I'm a professor of international relations, so we were a bit embarrassed."

Almost immediately, that embarrassment was channeled into action. A message was sent in May to the CLV community documenting the discovery and outlining steps toward possible solutions. The feeling of CLV leadership, Hamilton said, was "we had a choice to make. Would we step forward to face the issue frontally, inclusively, openly, or sweep it under the rug? The only responsible response was to engage the whole community."

Engage they did. An advisory committee was recruited, comprising 21 people with a mix of insights including scholars, museum directors and experts on the Holocaust and the Jewish community. Forums also were held with parents, students and alumni; results from those sessions, and a separate call for input, resulted in 40 pages of responses, adding perspective that helped shape the ensuing discussion.

"I have to underscore how impressed I was by [Concordia's] response," said advisory group member Leslie Morris, professor of German and director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Minnesota.



"Initially I was incensed, and really wanted Concordia to change the name," said Treitler, one of the advisory committee members.

"But the better point is to use it as a learning opportunity, to keep it as a reminder."

Hunegs, of the JCRC, said he went into the process "fairly open-minded" but was persuaded the name should stay after speaking to camp counselors. Most had come up through the camp as students and were deeply invested in its legacy.

"The consensus really did become, if you bend on the name, you dissociate from the history," Waldsee dean Hamilton said, "but you lose an opportunity, an obligation that others can learn."

So Waldsee would remain Waldsee, but that was just the start of the debate. "By choosing to retain [the name], we have a moral and ethical responsibility to do justice to the history, the victims and survivors," Schulze said.

"It's not entirely about changing the name," advisory group member Morris agreed. "We need to have an ongoing conversation. We need to address the larger trajectory of history in other aspects of the camp."

**Fading from memory**

Continuing the conversation meant tackling a most sensitive topic.

"I think it's accurate to say there is reluctance to bring up the Holocaust," Treitler said. "Some kids are attending [the camp] for college credit, so it's perfectly appropriate, but from what I heard, I don't think it has been accurately addressed."

Sonja Wentling, another advisory committee member, teaches a "History and Memory" course at Concordia, with special focus on the Holocaust. The topic, she says, is in danger of fading from consciousness because of the dwindling number of survivors and a growing disconnect from the events of WWII, especially among young people.

"Holocaust remembrance has become universalized, abstract, a mere metaphor for the ultimate evil," she said, "while awareness and knowledge about the Holocaust have significantly decreased."

Thus in the resolutions reached by the committee (see accompanying sidebar) the emphasis is on more education, adapted for different ages, about German-Jewish history.

"We already do quite a bit of what we are recommending, but we will be more intentional," Hamilton said. He said the gathering of resources for staff, including assistance from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., has begun.

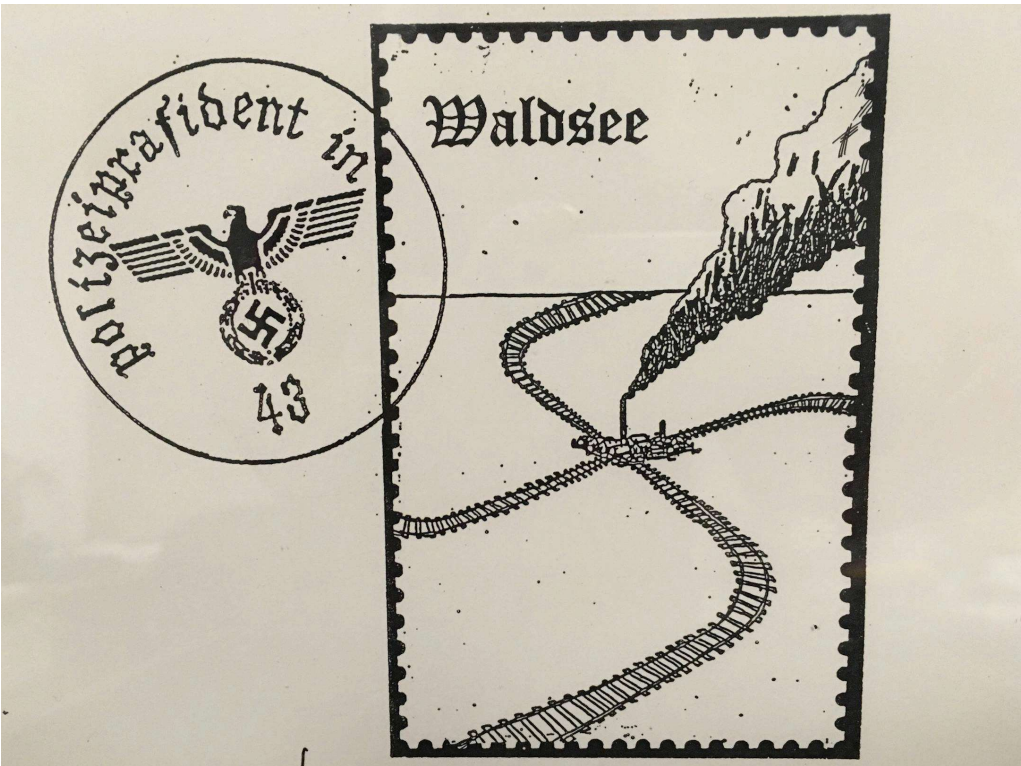
The physical surroundings of the camp will also come under consideration. A space for reflection will be created, and building names re-evaluated.

All agree that healing this painful chapter will be ongoing. "We need to make sure that this is not the end of the story – not just at Concordia Language Villages, but everywhere," Morris said.

Schulze added that one principle guided Concordia's actions. "Our mission is to inspire courageous global citizenship. Dan [Hamilton] said, 'This is what it means to be courageous.'"

"This was it – this is how we looked at it from the get-go."

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Artist's representation of postcards sent from Auschwitz, from "Waldsee 1944" exhibit at Hebrew Union College. (The Minnesota Star Tribune)