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Überimmigrated

How to appease the cultural Copy Cat?



Do you know how hard it is to find a traditional German garden gnome in Toronto? I have searched up and down to finally get this little old man with the ridiculous jelly bag cap and the moronic facial expression. Sitting in front of my new garden decoration, I was wondering why I bought this German bourgeois epitome. Am I searching for some national affirmation, far away from my home country? Is it possible that I'm developing an awareness for the German tradition I wasn't aware of until now?

When I came to Toronto a year ago, I absorbed everything Canadian and North American, highly aware of starting a new life here, a Canadian life. Everything was exciting, even everyday things like food and household cleaners (especially those you can't get in Germany because they don't meet the strict EU standards), bank transactions and the way co-workers deal with each other. It was different from Germany and Europe - and I embraced it. Let's live the Canadian cliché of friendliness and laid-backness as promoted by the German media!

To experience Toronto's society, one of the world's most multicultural, was one thing, how different nationalities live together and foster their respective heritage and roots was the other. Germans are not like the Chinese or Portuguese, who meet in big groups, Germans seem to prefer their own little social environment within Toronto, without a gathering of the same nationality and language. Germans have been part of the Canadian mosaic for hundreds of years. While many migrated individually to the country, most arrived en masse in large immigrant waves, seeking land and opportunities for economic progress.



Waltraud and Eberhard Hüttenschmidt came to Canada in 1964, because Eberhard, a young German baker by trade, had the opportunity to work in Montreal. Although both planned to live in Canada only for a few years, they have been living here for more than 30 years, their three kids were born Canadian. "Somehow we got stuck here", both recall. Eberhard, tall, blond, with permanent red cheeks, owns a bakery in Toronto's West End. The German bread and cake is famous, but best of all: Eberhard imports a lot of German products, such as "Haribo" gummi bears, or "Löwensenf", a very spicy mustard. "I import all things I like to eat myself", he explains at his selection, still finding it still easier to feel at home with those little things in his everyday life. Seeing Eberhard and Waltraud with their Canadian-born daughter Katharina clearly shows how interwoven their German-Canadian life is: when questioned by her parents in German, Katharina answered in English, finding it easier to respond. One of her childhood experiences is her father always comparing Canadian with German kids: "Germans kids don't do this or that, he always said", Katharina remembers her dad's attempts to convey some German qualities to his Canadian kids.



To my own surprise I discovered some typical German qualities about myself recently: The first is accuracy. Believe it or not, and most of my German friends may testify that, I was tardy my whole life. That changed suddenly when I moved to Toronto. Invited by my Mexican friend, she always laughs when I am the first to show up at her party. Secondly, driving a car: There is nothing that represents Germany more than cars, right? Maybe, but I'm not talking about brands, I'm talking about the *way* people drive their cars. Are there any driving schools in Canada that teach strategic driving? It doesn't seem so to me. As well reliability: I think I am the only pedestrian in the GTA waiting at a red light, ignoring the bewildered glances around me.

Jutta Brendemühl has been living in Toronto since 1999. She arrived in Toronto via a German-Canadian travel exchange program, and soon discovered her love for the Canadian metropolis. She decided to live here and applied for a Canadian visa. In the beginning she didn't recognize big differences between Canada and Germany. "The first year nearly doesn't count", Jutta recalls. "But then you start seeing the differences in manners and everyday life." The Canadian manners and gentleness seeped into Jutta step by step and she discovered that she was becoming a "copy cat" of Canadian culture and lifestyle. The balancing act between being German and Canadian wasn't always easy. Jutta reached the next step after three to four years in Toronto: "It's getting serious now, I told myself. I started thinking about my unborn kids being Canadian and worrying about things like German customs, such as the traditional pre-Christmas "Adventszeit". Will my kids know what it is? I felt like acknowledging all those nice customs, taken for granted before,

more intensely than ever and wanted to protect all those good old German traditions”, she explains. The 36-year-old is working for the German Goethe Institut in Toronto, which makes it her profession to stay in touch with Germany. After seven years in Canada she is living her everyday life in Toronto and discovered a remarkable paradox: “I now have a foreign view on Germany. I realized that I notice things that are extraordinary in Germany, not so much in Canada any more.” Discovering manners and lifestyles, you become aware of those things you love in Canada, like the un-shallow kindness, or things you learn to appreciate about Germans, like their frankness. Maybe it takes time to learn how to appreciate the best of both. “Sometimes wondered whether to feel split or doubled, living my German-Canadian life. Now I don’t have the feeling that I have to decide between one or the other. I decided to feel doubled“, Jutta sums up her thoughts.

Hearing her say that, I recognized that this is the best summary of a life as a German immigrant in Canada I can imagine. It feels great being doubled, I tell myself, taking the garden gnome and putting him in our front garden, visible for everyone.