Crystal Leochko recently completed her thesis entitled “Acknowledgement or Avoidance? German-Canadian Immigrant Women's Memories of National Socialism” to graduate with a Master of Arts degree from the Joint Program in History between the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg. She completed her B.A. in History and English in 2002 at the University of Manitoba, and her Pre-Masters degree in History in 2003 at the University of Manitoba. She is currently employed by the Manitoba Civil Service. She lives, together with her fiancé, just outside of Winnipeg. Below is her description of her thesis.

I grew up in Arborg, Manitoba. While attending high school and completing a family history project I became interested in the lives of immigrants in Canada. My ancestors immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s from the Ukraine, and Ukrainian culture has always been part of my life, be it in the form of Ukrainian dancing and polkas, or cabbage rolls and perogies.

While completing my undergraduate degree I became interested in Nazi Germany, and especially in the role that women and girls played. I wanted to focus my thesis on these women. With the assistance of my advisor, Dr. Alexander Freund, I chose to focus on German women after they had immigrated to Canada in order to determine how living in Canada had affected how they dealt with the past.

My thesis examines the oral histories of ten women who experienced National Socialism in Germany during the Second World War and immigrated to Canada between 1947 and 1960. The women in this study were born between 1924 and 1941. The main question of this thesis is whether living in Canadian society affected how they dealt with their German pasts. I examine The League of German Girls (BDJ); anti-Semitism in Germany, encounters with Jews in Canada and multiculturalism; and the women's memories of the Second World War.

Although the search for narrators was difficult at times, the majority of the women who took part in the study appeared to be excited by the project. Some interviews took place over the phone, as some of the narrators lived in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. I was able to visit the remainder of the women interviewed in Manitoba. Although the women appeared to accept me into their homes, many of the women became slightly guarded as soon as I turned on my tape recorder.

I determined that living in Canada provided the women with a way to avoid dealing with the past following immigration. Although the women were able to discuss the topics in this study with me during their interviews, and many have discussed their experiences in Germany with family and friends, in many of these situations the women presented themselves as victims.
German-Canadian Memories of Nazi Past

They also concentrated on the more positive aspects of the Nazi regime, including the camaraderie in the BDM, and made it a point to emphasize that they did not know about the Holocaust while they were girls. Despite these findings, by participating in the study and by discussing their memories and experiences, and in some cases their changing views of the past, the women demonstrated that they are making progress in the process of dealing with their pasts as Germans. I am grateful to the women who chose to take part in this study. Without their participation it could not have been completed, and I am pleased to be able to share some of their life stories.

Immigrants’ High German Influenced by Russian and English

Nikolai Penner is a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo. He received a German Canadian Studies Research Grant in 2008 for his research on the use of High German among different groups of Russian Mennonites in Canada. Below is his report on his completed project.

The main goals of this project were to investigate the High German variety spoken by the second- and third-wave Russian Mennonite immigrants in Canada, to examine the patterns of language use by each group in Russia and how they have changed in Canada, and to determine in how far this High German variety corresponds to the Standard High German.

The results of the study indicate that generally, the patterns of language use by both groups in Russia were very similar but nevertheless showed two important differences. First of all, members of the second wave tended to show their patriotic feelings toward their fatherland in several ways, one of which included instruction in the Russian language in the Mennonite schools. At the same time, although the attitude of the third-wave immigrants to the Russian language was largely positive, they usually learned Russian out of necessity and exhibited no patriotic feelings. Secondly, High German was found to be perceived by the Mennonites as a much more prestigious language than Plautdietsch, and was clearly on the rise as the communal language in the twentieth century. This violated to some extent the stable bilingualism with diglossia, which had existed in the Russian Mennonite colonies since their establishment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The usage of High German for informal communication was found to have further increased in Canada among both groups as a part of a conscious attempt of the Mennonite church to save High German as the language of religion. However, despite of this, High German has been almost completely lost by each of the groups within a three generation period. Further, it has been determined that the variety of High German spoken by the Russian Mennonites significantly departs from Standard High German in a number of respects. While some of the non-standard constructions can be traced back to the influence of the English language, and therefore, entered the Mennonite High German after their immigration to Canada, the other non-standard constructions were most likely present in their speech already in Russia. It has been argued that these constructions were also relatively stable in the group’s High German, and possibly were even considered a part of their Russian Mennonite identity.

Finally, it has been shown that Russian Mennonite High German has been subject to both language-internal as well as language-external processes of language change, and that it is not always possible to determine where the first end and the second begin. Thus, a significant deviation in case assignment as well as a certain reduction in the explicit case/number/ gender markedness found in the speech of most participants, are the results of both convergence with Plautdietsch as well as of the independent development towards a two-case system typical to all Germanic languages. In fact, the combination of both may explain why these developments have been present in Russian Mennonite High German before Standard High German was removed as the roof language, which usually is the major trigger for such changes.

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“German-Canadian Studies at The University of Winnipeg

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“My lifelong dream,” says Michael Miller, “has been to keep alive and enhance the heritage of the Germans from Russia.” Miller is the director of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC), which was established in 1978 at the NDSU Libraries. The GRHC archives have become one of the most comprehensive collections of German-Russian resources globally. Resources include books, family histories, photographs, maps, and oral histories relating to the Germans from Russia in western Canadian prairie provinces, especially Alberta and Saskatchewan. The GRHC has particularly strong collections relating to prairie life, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites.

The GRHC’s mission is to collect, document, preserve, exhibit, translate, publish, promote, and make accessible resources on the culture, history, folklore, textiles and clothing, and foodways of the Germans from Russia. The focus is on Bessarabian, Black Sea, Crimea, Dobrushcha, and Volhynian Germans and their descendants in North Dakota and the Northern Plains, including the Canadian prairie provinces.

The GRHC has expanded its activities and projects to include audio oral history interviews; clothing and textiles; the Dakota Memories Oral History Project; electronic discussion groups; heritage tours to Ukraine and Germany; online resources; outreach programs; photo archives; publications; and translations.

Since the summer of 1996, the GRHC has sponsored fifteen “Journey to the Homeland”-Tours to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany for persons wishing to visit their former homeland Bessarabian, Black Sea and Crimean German villages. In cooperation with Prairie Public Television, the GRHC has helped to produce five award-winning documentaries: 1) The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie; 2) Schmeckfest: Food Traditions of the Germans from Russia; 3) Prairie Crosses, Prairie Roses: Iron Crosses of the Great Plains; 4) A Soulful Sound: Music of the Germans from Russia; 5) Heaven Is Our Homeland.

In production for 2010 is a documentary relating to the assimilation of Germans from Russia in American society. The GRHC launched the Dakota Memories Oral History Project (DMOHP) in 2005. The DMOHP organizers designed this project to document the cultural heritage and preserved the childhood memories of second- and third-generation Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains. From 2005 to 2009, interviews have been completed with more than 200 narrators. In 2006 with a grant from the Embassy of Canada, 28 narrators were interviewed at Regina, Saskatoon, Unity, Trapping Lake, Allan, and Kronau, Saskatchewan. In August, 2009, Dr. Alexander Freund, Chair of the German Canadian Studies Program, University of Winnipeg, visited Fargo to discuss a cooperative oral history project with the GRHC.

The GRHC staff includes: Michael M. Miller, director and bibliographer, at NDSU since 1967 (michael.miller@ndsu.edu); Acacia (Jonas) Stuckle, special collections associate (acacia.stuckle@ndsu.edu); and Jay Gage, curator. Contact information is: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, Dept. 28080, PO Box 6500, Fargo, ND 58108-6500 USA (Tel: 701-231-8416 or 701-231-6596; Website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).