

A History of The German Language School

The month is October. The year is 1978. Couples waltz around the dance floor at The Pinewood Lake Club House. They're enjoying dancing to the music of a big band just as much as they'd loved listening to a string quartet before dinner while sipping champagne. This is The Viennese Benefit Ball –the festive first fundraiser for the newly opened German Language School. The cost of each ticket: \$12.50.

Another event takes place the following June. This one, "A Little Bit of Bavaria," is a German beer dance and sing-along. For entertainment, Schuhplattler dancers perform traditional Bavarian dances. These tickets cost \$6.00 each.

The Vision of a German School

A few German- American parents living in Stamford, CT shared their concerns about how their children will learn to maintain, speak and write German and absorb the rich culture of their homeland. They shared their thoughts of opening a German school that would meet on Saturday mornings during the school year, thus becoming what is known as "a Saturday school."

They were not alone with their anxiety about the importance of languages in an international world. It was underscored in April 1978 when President Jimmy Carter established a Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies.

Opening a German Saturday school was an ambitious goal. The parents understood the need for serious financial backing, professional teachers and strong and dedicated leadership to establish a workable structure and create a challenging curriculum.

One member of this group was Dr. Renate Ludanyi, a college professor of German at Western Connecticut University in Danbury, CT. As an educator, she knew that the ability to learn a new language is highest when children are young. As if she needed further convincing, her daughter kept telling her, "I want to learn German with a "real teacher."

A Steering Committee is Formed

Members of the steering committee were Dr. Ludanyi, Mrs. Bronder, Mrs. Dautel, Mrs. Lust, Mrs. Sigrist, Mrs. Yeager and Mr. Klostemann. They established the guidelines: the school would provide professional instruction in the German language for children and adults, be in session for 30 Saturdays during the school year from mid-September to early June and have an enrollment of at least thirty students with a minimum of ten in each class. It would be affiliated with the German Language School Conference, Inc.

Before going further, this committee needed to know if there was enough interest. They sent a questionnaire to members of the Stamford community. The response was enthusiastic. "It's an idea long overdue," a German mother wrote. "Will you have classes for adults?" a Hungarian-German engineer asked.

The committee was further encouraged to learn the results from a recent study of 260 German companies in the United States. About half of those who responded replied that "they were hoping to hire German-speaking professionals in the near future."

Dr. Ludanyi is quoted in the local newspaper as saying: "Because of a recent influx of German industries into Fairfield County, a new and urgent interest in the German language and culture has developed in this area."

A Building Is Found; Teachers are Hired

On May 22, 1978, a school with the name of The Independent German Language School of Southern Connecticut was incorporated. That summer was spent in finding a school willing to rent them space on Saturday mornings. It needed to be centrally located for the majority of families, accessible in all weather to the Merritt Parkway and CT Turnpike, have adequate parking and a pleasant atmosphere in which the children could work. A private K-8 school, Unquowa School, in Fairfield, CT was chosen.

College educated teachers who spoke fluent German needed to be hired. Most of the applicants were native-born Germans with advanced degrees. Understandably, the organizers were most concerned about having a large enough enrollment. Not content to rely on solely word of mouth, they hung informational posters in libraries, supermarkets, and local businesses. They needn't have worried.

A Second Campus

Mr. Karl H. Jacob, Executive Vice President of Trumpf America Inc. (sellers of sheet metal and plate fabricating machine tools), had relocated from Germany to the West Hartford area with his wife and seven-year-old son. He realized that the eighty-mile distance between the Unquowa School campus in Fairfield and West Hartford would be too far a distance to travel for his son to attend that Saturday school. Although it was not in the original plan, a second campus was created at the

Northwest Catholic High School in West Hartford in the fall of 1978. Mr. and Mrs. Jacob along with Mrs. Alam became the first officers.

"It's terribly important for Germans and Americans to be able to communicate well," Mr. Jacob stated, "as Germany is one of the major trade partners of the United States. We're very excited about this school and expect that even more people will begin classes."

Two Campuses Open

Sixty-nine students attended the opening day in West Hartford, and over one hundred students walked through the front doors of the Fairfield school. There were six grades and six teachers, each of whom was paid \$45 a week.

The tuition in 1979 was \$60 a semester. Today, forty years later, it's \$540 each semester for the first student and reduced rates for other family members. This moderate fee covers the professional staff, building rental, insurance, and instructional and professional supplies. Tuition covers the majority of the operating costs. The German Auslandsschulwesen (Central Agency for German School Abroad), via the German Consulate General in New York City, provides some support as do generous contributions from parents and members of the community.

Over the years, both schools have moved various times. The Stamford school is now located at the Rippowam Middle School, and the one in West Hartford is at the First Baptist Church. The name was officially changed to The German School of Connecticut rather than the Southern School of Connecticut.

Committed and Enthusiastic Volunteers

From the beginning, both schools had parents and community members helping to handle the administrative duties, special events, and weekly management. Saturday mornings find Moms and Dads welcoming visitors, answering questions, taking teaching supplies and materials from the locked storeroom to the classrooms and returning them when school is over. Chairs need to be placed back on desks in the classrooms and whiteboards erased. In Stamford, the parents organize Pausentisch, (Recess Tale), for mid-morning recess; classes take turns providing these snacks.

A library at the Stamford School started with a small selection of books, magazines, games, movies, and documents. Today, this library has expanded to include hundreds of books from board books for toddlers to novels and historical books for adults, CD's, games, puzzles, with a volunteer librarian.

Forty Years Later

Today both campuses are thriving. The one in Stamford has the larger enrollment as they draw from the metropolitan area while students attending the one in West Hartford come from a more geographically spread-out area. The total enrollment for both schools is about 350 students; most children begin at a young age. Thirty-three adults are registered at the West Hartford campus, some of whom don't have children attending.

These schools are proud to be international as they welcome students with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. A good number of children who also attend have no ties to Germany. "Kids come from all slices of life," a parent explains. "We are now seeing kids from the second generation."

Both schools continue to have two parallel tracks. One is for non-native speakers who are learning German as a foreign language. The other one is for those who come to the school with almost native-sounding language skills they'd acquired in their bilingual and many times multilingual homes. Classes are based on age and ability.

Students commit to spending every Saturday morning throughout the school year. There are tests, report cards, homework, and parent-teacher conferences.

Honor students are invited to join Delta Epsilon Phi, the German National Honor Society for high school students. This organization seeks to recognize excellence in the study of German and to provide an incentive for higher scholarship.

Why Do Parents Enroll Their Children?

One reason is to strengthen their childrens' academic portfolios. A bill (Public Act 0801380) passed in CT in 2008 allows students who study foreign language privately to receive up to four high school credits in world languages.

Another is preparation for the Standard Achievement Tests (SAT) or Advanced Placement (AP) exams for college entrance. Three subject tests, one of which is German, are required for students taking these tests.

Students fulfill the language requirement if they're planning to study at a German university.

Many parents, however, enroll their children just for the enriching experience of having them learn a new language and culture that may not be their own.

Celebrating German Heritage

During the school year, German culture is enriched. In September, students from the Stamford school ride on a float they've designed at NYC's Steuben Day Parade. In November, both schools celebrate St. Martin's Day. Weihnachtsfeier in December is followed by the Fasching Carnival in February. West Hartford students celebrate Reimfest in March and end the year with Maifair with all classes performing German skits and songs.



Every student at the Stamford school writes a paragraph or a few sentences to be included in their yearbook. Each year a different theme is chosen. One year it was German fairy tales, another, German countries of music. West Hartford students participate in The Connecticut Organization of Language Teachers (C.O.L.T) and join students from other language schools in reciting poetry or singing a song in their native language.

The School is Successful

Dr. Ludanyi, Principal and President, is most pleased with the success of the school. She credits this to a motivated and highly professional faculty, a well-planned curriculum, and relaxed and congenial classrooms. "All these factors contribute to the growth of these campuses making particular use of the young to learn a

language," she says. "German is still one of the world's major scientific and commercial languages. We desire to have our children learn this language, not only to remember their roots but also to be more competitive on the international scene when their professional lives start."



The German Language School Conference

Frau Dr. Ludanyi is also a co-founder of the German Language School Conference, (GLSC), an organization originally created for German Language School in the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania areas. Under her leadership, GLSC has become a nationwide professional organization supporting private German language schools in pedagogical and administrative areas. It receives grants from the German government.

At the 1989 Teacher Development Conference and Networking Forum held at the Liederkrantz Club of New York, Dr. Ludanyi was awarded The Cross of the Order of Merit by H.E. Richard Weizsacker, President of the Federal Republic of Germany. It was presented to her by Dr. Thomas Fischer-Dieskau, the German Consul General, in recognition of "her outstanding efforts and contributions to the promotion of the German language in the United States."

The Sprachdiplom Examinations (DSD1 and 2)

Another one of Dr. Ludanyi's achievements was the introduction of Deutsches Sprachdiplom der Kultusministerkonferenz, (DSD 1 and 2) into the United States and the German Saturday schools.



These are official German language examinations. They certify C1/B2 and B1/A2 levels of knowledge of German worldwide and are the highest and most difficult examinations for students who have studied German abroad for ten to twelve years. These tests include a written essay, knowledge of German history and culture and an oral examination. They are administered at the German International School in nearby White Plains, NY. Before taking these tests, students are coached extensively to help them understand their format and linguistic requirements.

These exams have two levels. Level one must be passed before progressing to level two. Passing them fulfills the language prerequisite for tuition-free entrance to a German, Swiss or Austrian university.

"I brought Sprachdiplom into the country," Dr. Ludanyi says with satisfaction. "Some of the Germans didn't appreciate our Saturday schools sufficiently until we proved that our students could pass these most demanding tests. This was a turning point."

While she was confident that students at the German Language School could pass these tests, she needed to convince the Zentralstelle für das Auslandsschulwesen, (ZFA), the Central Agency for German Schools in Cologne, Germany. Her first letter requesting permission was sent to them in March 1981, three years after the opening of these Saturday schools. The first response she received was negative, saying in part, "This exam can only be given by full-schools who have grades up to 10 or 12 and who have teachers sent to them by Germany." Not to be deterred, Dr. Ludanyi approached Wolfgang Schmidt, ZFA President during the November 1981 GSLC conference. He replied, "Sie haben mich überzeugt," (you convinced me).

The next step was to request the Kultusministerkonferenz, (KMK), Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Lander in the Federal Republic to give permission. The answer came quickly: "The decision will be made shortly."

At the end of the month, Dr. Ludanyi received a handwritten note from Wolfgang Schmidt. It read: "Sie sind zum Vorreiter in USA geworden" (you are the avant-garde of the USA).

It was decided that the Connecticut school in Fairfield and one in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, would be allowed to take the DSD. If the results were positive, the permission would be expanded to other schools.

On April 16th and 23rd, 1983, six students took Sprachdiplom 1 exams at the Unqowa School in Fairfield, CT. All of them passed. A year later Sprachdiplom 2 was given. Again, all students passed.

From the earliest years, the schools' curriculum also prepares students for these exams. However, it's unrealistic to expect three hours a week on a Saturday morning

to be adequate training for the students. One mother explains it this way: “We encourage them at home, by reading books to them when they’re tots, speaking German at home, making independent study available and for many, visiting relatives in the home country. It takes a community,” she says with a smile.

Another Achievement

Thousands of students worldwide take the Sprachdiplom 1 and 2 exams which are then sent to Germany to be graded blindly, so the German teachers who score them are unaware of their origin be it Chile, Japan or Australia.

Students have a long wait for their results. “Why can’t they be scored here in the United States?” many asked. This request obviously was heard. A training course for teachers living the northeastern United States was conducted since the beginning of this year. The last seminar will take place during the weekend May 12th and 13th at the GSC in Stamford, which is where everything started.

The Importance of the German Language

The mission of the German School of Connecticut is for its students to become educated citizens who speak German and are knowledgeable and sympathetic towards Germany and its culture wherever their lives may lead them in the future.

It also helps their students prepare to enter the world of art, education, politics, international business, etc. of a country with the largest European economy and a world leader in industry and science. It improves their prospects of entering the best American and German universities. For others, it offers a comfort zone to

understand enough German to order off a menu, read a map or communicate with relatives.

Celebrating Forty Years of Success

In recognition of this forty-year milestone of outstanding and expanding success, a celebratory luncheon will be held on May 12, 2018, to honor the first group of teachers who've finished the seminars of learning how to evaluate the DSD 1 tests in the United States. The following week, on May 19, 2018, there will be another celebration starting with an awards ceremony, the performance of a fairy tale and an exhibition of student products. Food and good cheer will abound. West Hartford will have a similar event on December 15, 2018.