

A Study in Adaptation and Identity: German Immigration to Southern Manitoba since 1997

Joel Penner, filmmaker

My website, www.winklerinitiative.ca, features interviews on a range of subjects with recent German immigrants to Winkler, Manitoba, Canada. I became interested in the topic after completing my [German Studies B.A. at the University of Winnipeg](#). A friend told me about the immigration trend, and because of my interests in history, filmmaking, and German I thought it would be a great project for the [Spletzer Family Foundation German-Canadian Studies Research Grant!](#) Another reason I wanted to do this project was to help people understand the incredibly complex, nuanced, and fascinating nature of our multicultural society. It was also interesting to see how the life stories of my interviewees provide personalized windows into big topics such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the cultural and religious climates in Germany and Canada, and the traits that characterize immigration trends.

Many Manitobans would be surprised to learn that places like Winkler and Altona are amongst the fastest growing places in the province, largely buoyed by German immigrants. This recent wave began in 1997 when businesses in the Winkler area needed more labour to continue expanding their operations. This led the [Winkler District Chamber of Commerce](#) to approach the Province with their concerns. As part of a pilot program for the Province's fledgling Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) dubbed the "Winkler Initiative," 50 families from Germany immigrated to Southern Manitoba. The pilot program was quite successful, and made Manitoba into a PNP pioneer, leading many other Canadian jurisdictions to replicate the program. Despite this success, in 2010 the federal government capped Manitoba's yearly quota at 5000 individuals.

Something I learned at the beginning of the project was to never assume that things will work out as planned! At the outset, I had assumed that the contact I had in a Winkler school would be easily able to get me in touch with recent immigrant students, and from them I would be able to interview their families. Simple! As it always happens, reality turned out differently. The contact I had ended up being very busy during the 2013-2014 school year, as Winkler had just constructed a new technical high school. Between dealing with the unexpected chaos and the fact that my contact had found it difficult to find students, I realized that I needed to find interviewees elsewhere. After help from Laurie Sawatzky at the settlement agency [Regional Connections](#) in Winkler and [Kevin Rollason at the Winnipeg Free Press](#) who had written an article on this immigration trend, I found six interviewees! After the difficulty of that process it was very enjoyable to

finally drive out to Winkler on two occasions to do interviews and take photos of the city for the website.



Eugene Klassen. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)



Laurie Sawatzky. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)



Christian Kandt. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)



Olesja Kraft. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)



Harry Zahn. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)



Christine Froese. (Photo by Joel Penner, <http://winklerinitiative.ca/profiles.php>)

The incredible range of experiences I encountered in my interviews surprised me! For instance, one person ended up immigrating because he volunteered on a Canadian farm in the 1980s through the [Mennonite Central Committee](#) to learn English, and ended up liking the experience so much that he ended up immigrating. Three people were from countries in the former Soviet Union whose families came to Canada as they were discriminated against as foreigners after they immigrated to Germany and didn't feel at home there. Another was part of an orchestra in Germany and moved to Winkler with his family because they preferred its more conservative religious culture, which contrasts starkly with the culture of the northern German city of Hannover where he lived. Learn more about their stories at www.winklerinitiative.ca!

I believe that the best part about the World Wide Web is how it allows the free and open sharing of information regardless of the publisher's size. I wanted to do a project that uses this potential and thus chose to do it in an easy to access and aesthetically-pleasing format as opposed to a formal academic paper. I also wanted the website and video subtitles to be in English and German so that family members of the interviewees and other recent immigrants would be able to best benefit from it. Overall it was a rewarding project and I hope people derive benefit from it.