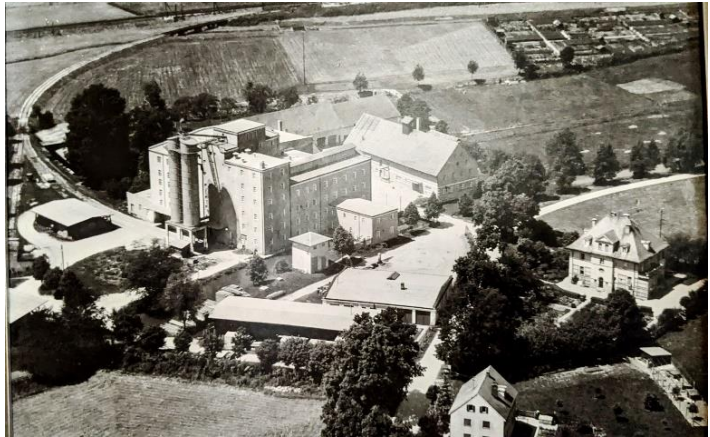


Gregor and Ilona Beck

Gregor and Ilona Beck are great examples of the benefits to Saskatchewan which result from immigration. Both come from German families rooted in agricultural-related businesses in Germany, a perfect fit for Saskatchewan.

Gregor Beck was born in München, but grew up in Aichach, a short distance northwest of München. He grew up with two brothers and one sister. His family operated one of the largest flour mills in Bavaria at the time, employing 60 employees to grind 100 tons of flour daily. Trucks delivering flour were on the road every day. It was a family-owned and managed business for over 200 years. The flour mill had its own rail spur, complete with a train engine to shuttle grain cars from the main line. During World War II, the train engine was appropriated by the government, so grown steers were harnessed to do the job.



The Beck family also owned its own small mixed-farm operation. Six to eight cows were milked every day. But Gregor's memories of his youth revolve around the mill. He clearly remembers carrying and stacking 50-kilo sacks of flour as they came off the conveyer belt.

His home town did not have a Gymnasium, and so Gregor attended a boarding school near Oberammergau in the Bavarian Alps.

Upon completing his Abitur, Gregor served his obligatory fifteen months (Wehrpflicht) in the German Military (Bundeswehr), after which he began to study law for three years. However his heart and interest in agriculture and grain remained. The Beck Mill knew about the great quality of wheat coming from the Canadian prairies. On a regular base they used Canadian wheat known as Manitoba wheat for quality control to blend with regionally sourced grain to increase the protein content of the flour. Therefore, the family purchased some land in the RM of Bratt's Lake close to Rouleau, Saskatchewan that was advertised in German agricultural circles. After three years of law, Gregor changed gears and followed his true interest pursuing agriculture. In 1977 he came to Saskatchewan on a student visa to study Agriculture at the University of Saskatchewan. After earning his Bachelor of Science Degree in Agriculture in 1981, he started working for a neighboring farmer to learn the practical side of the trade from the bottom up. A year later he slowly purchased some used machinery and started farming on his own.

On one of Gregor's return trips to Germany, a mutual friend introduced him to Ilona Stempfle at an event in München. Ilona was a student at the University of München. She was born in



Augsburg but grew up with two younger sisters in the nearby town of Wertingen, about 50 kilometers from Gregor's hometown. Ilona's father owned a dealership which sold agricultural machinery. Ilona looks back fondly on the time when she was growing up. She remembers the freedom she and her friends enjoyed while exploring the meadows and forests on the edge of her town. They swam in the river and biked everywhere. The older simply looked after the

younger ones. Ilona remembers her family's yard as being the center of activity for all the children in their town.

Ilona completed her Master's Degree in Nutritional Science and Dietetics in 1984. She made her first trip to Saskatchewan in July 1984. The wide open space was so impressive and so different! It felt like an adventure. She was excited to be very warmly welcomed by the neighbors and friends which Gregor had come to know. But the farmhouse on the Beck property was old and rundown. And in general, Ilona realized the standard of living on the Saskatchewan plains was completely different from life in Germany.

Nevertheless, after working for a year at the University hospital in Ulm, Ilona and Greg were married in Ilona's hometown in March 1985, and soon after moved to Saskatchewan to begin their new life in Canada. Ilona's first priority was to make a home in the farmhouse which had come with the land. The farm became her life's work. The yard too had been neglected for many years. They planted over 5000 trees, developed a garden, and eventually built a new home. She worked side-by-side with Gregor to build up their farm operation, and considered it a priority to raise their three children at home on the farm. It was important to Ilona and Gregor that their children grow up fluent in both German and English. German has always been, and continues to be, the family language spoken at home. The children spoke only German until they entered kindergarten. Ilona and Gregor had attended private boarding schools, but their children went to public school in nearby Rouleau right through Grade Twelve. It was another priority of Ilona and Gregor's that the children grow up and spend their formative years at home.



“How would you compare your growing-up years in Germany with those of your children in Saskatchewan?” Ilona feels their children enjoyed a similar sense of freedom on the farm, as she did during her younger years of unstructured, unsupervised play in her village and surroundings. Their children had a similar access to nature, exploring and “getting their hands dirty”. A lot of Ilona’s youth was spent outside, and they always encouraged their children to be active outdoors.



Coming to Saskatchewan, Ilona remembers that she quickly had to learn directions and distances in miles, concepts foreign to her back in Germany. Sure enough, she laughs, “if I followed the road allowances five miles to the east, and then one mile to the north, I would find myself exactly where I was supposed to be!”

The year 2018 was their last full year of active farming; they have since rented out the land. However Gregor is still very involved with agricultural organizations on a provincial level. They continue to live on the yard they worked years to develop. Gregor and Ilona cannot imagine living anywhere else.



Theirs has been a life of adventure, change and adaptation, a life to which only an immigrant can relate. Gregor and Ilona have returned to Germany almost every year; Ilona teases that it was one of the conditions in the marriage contract! While they were focused on their new life, these return trips reminded them of the contrasts between their native homeland and their new home in Canada. Gregor really misses the walk to the bakery in the morning to purchase fresh pretzels for breakfast. He also misses the unique Gasthaus atmosphere of Bavaria. Living a more isolated life on their Saskatchewan farm, Gregor is keenly aware of the contrasts in population density and the availability of services which become obvious every trip back to Germany.

Ilona misses the cultural aspect of life in Germany. The German culture is everywhere, so easy to identify in the food, the style of the buildings, the blueprint of the towns and cities and the types of shops. The calendar year revolves around the many cultural festivals enjoyed by German citizens. There are so many events happening all the time in Germany; it is not unusual to attend several concerts in one weekend. The German people can live their culture every day.

Even the occasion of visiting a friend for coffee is different in Germany than it is in Saskatchewan. It is a much more informal event in Saskatchewan where you might be handed

a mug and told to help yourself to the cookie jar on the table. In Germany, if invited for “Kaffee und Kuchen”, the host would bring out the best china, and offer a variety of sweets and baked goods, delicately displayed on a tray. Ilona’s observation is not judgmental; the way of life in Germany is just different. And doing things differently can have its advantages.

When asked if there is such a thing as “Prairie culture”, Ilona has a ready answer. Here in Saskatchewan we live every day with “nature and the wide open spaces”. Both Ilona and Gregor admire the ever-changing spectacles in the sky, the animals passing through the yard, and the birds singing in the morning. They appreciate the freedom which comes with having their “own personal space”. Their home is situated so that they can watch the sun rise in the east, and the sun set in the west, something they marvel at every day. Gregor says they are still amazed as they track the changes in the timing and positioning of the sun from dawn to dusk as the earth moves through the four seasons. Their commitment to their home in Saskatchewan is obvious.

Ilona became involved with the German community soon after she arrived in Canada. She started out as a teacher at the Regina German Language School and stayed with the school as coordinator for 19 years. For Ilona, learning the German language is fundamental in order to appreciate German culture. She worked within various cultural organizations on a local, provincial and Canadian level, always stressing the importance of incorporating more contemporary elements into German cultural communities. Ilona ardently believes that “culture is alive and is changing continuously”. German groups need to be aware of this in order to attract more members and keep German culture alive in Saskatchewan. Over many years she served as President of the Saskatchewan Teachers of German (SATG), Secretary of the Canadian Association of Teachers of German (CATG) and President of the Saskatchewan German Council (SGC). Twelve years ago, Ilona and four other women started the Christmas market (Weihnachtsmarkt) in Regina at the German Club. This successful event draws people from near and far to the Club every year at Christmas time.





The Film Club is another of Ilona's initiatives to incorporate contemporary language and culture into Saskatchewan's German community. Afternoon and evening sessions of the Film Club have also proven to be popular. As well, Gregor and Ilona sing in the German Choir in Regina, and have for many years.

When asked if they distinguish between Bavarian or German culture, both admit "our hearts lay with the Bavarian culture." Gregor comments: "Bavaria is the largest Bundesland in Germany. It has very distinct traditions, food, clothing, music and the landscape is spectacular. However many foreigners, and even international German groups as well, associate Bavarian culture with German culture per se (for example, Oktoberfest). The fact is there are many cultural differences across the various Bundesländer of Germany and each region has its attractions." Even though Bavaria is their first love, they appreciate Germany's many other regions. Germany is a diverse country with much to offer.

Both Gregor and Ilona are Canadian citizens, holding dual citizenship with Germany.