

Lost history is revealed through German translations

Dorothea Ziegler translates letters and church records

By Linda Sailer

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Dorothea Ziegler uncovers bits and pieces of people's lives through the translation of letters, obituaries and secretary's reports written in German.

Ziegler's ability to translate German dialects into English has enabled families to discover lost recipes or churches to complete centennial books.

Retired Richardton farmers Theresa and Frank Messer recently gave Ziegler two notebooks filled with entries written by Frank's mother, Rose Messer.

"Frank's mother lived in a nursing home and when she died, nobody wanted the pictures and books," said Theresa Messer.

The notebooks were filed away until Messer learned they could be translated.

One notebook was filled with recipes, all written in German, said Ziegler.

Rose had recipes for "medlof", desserts and salads. The abbreviation for 1 cup was 1K.

"This is German-Russian," said Ziegler.

The other notebook was like a diary, filled with notes of happenings important to her.

"Like in 1952, they bought a house in town," said Ziegler.

Other entries read, "Johan Messer went to war in 1942" and "We bought a new car Aug. 24, 1955."

Rose apparently jotted down events in her life having special meaning. One entry referred to the family getting a "plastic thing" for the tank in her bathroom.

She also wrote down names and birthdays of family and friends, all valuable to a genealogist.

Learning about the recipes, Messer said, "She had such good honey cookies. There's a honey cookie recipe in there."

"The thing that surprised me is her writing. She used English ABC's and sounded out the German words. It's comical," she said.

"I'm sure glad I saved them now," Messer said.

Ziegler grew up in the German-Russian community of Ashley. Her father, the Rev. Dietrich Bergstedt, came directly from Germany, while her mother was an American-born German who could speak both German and English.

"My dad taught me very good phonics," she said. "We spoke German at home. I was through the eighth grade and we hardly talked anything in English."

As a Lutheran pastor, her father also had parishes in Dunn Center and Dodge. After high school graduation, Ziegler attended two years of Bible school at Fargo and then studied nursing for two years. She practiced nursing for 23 years at Fargo, Waterloo, Iowa, and Dickinson.

Being able to understand the German-speaking patients, Ziegler said, "I could get a lot of patients to do things that nobody else could. I could understand what they said," she said.

While at home on vacation from Iowa, she met Herbert Ziegler. They were married and started farming 18 miles north of Richardton.

"We got hailed out and we moved to Dickinson," she said.

She babysat and practiced nursing at Dickinson's St. Luke's Home and St. Benedict's Health Care Center.

When Dickinson's St. John Lutheran Church celebrated its 100th anniversary, Ziegler was asked to transcribe the church minutes from 1903-1914.

"Nobody could read the history of St. John's. I didn't volunteer, somebody found me. You should see the pack of minutes I got," she said.

Ziegler read the minutes one

line at a time and translated them into English by long hand. The dialect was "high German."

"They gave me three months. Once I got started, I couldn't quit," she said.

Ziegler also understands the German-Hungarian dialect, which is slightly different.

"I can read High German and was around German-Russian people, plus German-Hungarian," she said.

If she can't translate a word, it's likely slang in one of the dialects, she said.

Ziegler also has transcribed church minutes for churches at Ashley, Wishek and Napoleon.

"My father had five country churches at Ashley. All the little churches are dissolved," she said.

When added together, she transcribed histories for 13-14 of those little churches in the vicinity.

Letters and obituaries published in German are Ziegler's most requested projects. Many of the obituaries were printed in the Nord Dakota Herold and the Stadt Anzeiger.

"Many people bring letters from Germany and Russia during the war. Those are really interesting letters. They were hard times, people didn't have enough to eat," she said.

"I've learned a lot of history through the letters, especially the 1940s. That's when so many letters were sent here," she said.



Press Photo by Linda Sailer

Dorothea Ziegler holds up the St. John Lutheran Church secretary's minutes written in High German dialect. Sometimes, she uses a magnifying glass to decipher the faded script.

Ziegler, age 87½, lives in Dickinson's Benedict Court. She has three living children, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

She has no intention of quitting the volunteer translation service.

"I'll do it as long as my eyes and mind allows," she said.

"I've learned a lot of history through letters, especially the 1940s."

Dorothea Ziegler, Translator