

*“Teaching and Learning German at the Beginning and End of the 20th Century”*

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My first contact with German was at my great-aunt Elsie’s house. Both she and her housemate of many years, Elsie Lautner, were first-generation Americans and spoke German at home as children. They were also both teachers in Traverse City for over thirty years. In their bookshelves were many old books, including books in German. I remember looking at them with a sense of frustrated fascination: fascination because I love nearly anything printed in book form, and frustration because I couldn’t figure out what was written there.

My frustration lessened and my fascination increased when I began taking German in high school. A brief trip abroad after my junior year was another catalyst in my German journey, exposing me to German and Germany as they “really” are, not just as they are presented in textbooks. This growing fascination with all things German, along with my long-held desire to become a teacher, led to my decision to enter secondary education.

As a new teacher, I quickly realized that my own German skills would be put to the test. Many of the books in my collection are books that I have used in my teaching, or in my own personal hunt for “German answers”. These books focus on teaching methods, grammar, and vocabulary. The German Orthography Reform of 1996 also forced German teachers around the world to re-learn and re-teach many spelling rules and is represented in my collection.

In the fall of 1999, I began my doctoral studies here at Michigan State University. After spending a year teaching in Germany, I wanted to actively pursue learning German in order to be able to teach at the college level. This current phase of my life is reflected in the literary history books and college level textbooks in my collection.

The older books in my collection all come from Elsie and Elsie’s bookshelf. They are fascinating time capsules, reflecting the social thought and teaching methods of their day. Many of them are also printed in Fraktur, the old German script, which further underscores their sense of history. For me they have great personal value because they were used by family members and close family friends. They are a part of my German heritage, which I feel I am keeping alive by studying and teaching German.

The books in my collection reflect the field of teaching and learning German at the beginning and end of the twentieth century. I find it intriguing that some of the teaching methods used in 1900 were being used (again) in 2000. The field of foreign language teaching has undergone dramatic changes in the past hundred years, but some aspects seem to have come full circle: the use of “literature” to teach language, the systematic teaching of grammar, etc. Some differences are obvious – color pictures, political developments, use of technology – but the common language and history hold the collection together.