7.1 The role of the rural elementary school in the Canadianization of immigrant children

> *1918: English is the only language either taught or used for instruction in any school of the inspectorate. There is no bilingual problem in this part of the province.*[1]

> *1931: The language spoken by the people of a country has a distinct bearing upon its problems of nationality and assimilation. With the exception of religion, no individual right is more highly prized or more jealously guarded.*[2]

Between about 1885 and 1930, Alberta's population increased from about 15,500 to more than 700,000, with a large percentage of the immigrants arriving from countries where a language other than English was spoken, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Because of their background, most of the immigrants settled in the rural areas (in 1901, about 70% of Alberta's population was rural). Many knew little or no English, had little education and virtually no knowledge of the history and the social values of their new homeland, and if they did, they did not necessarily approve of them. With their culture they brought along their old ways of thinking and behaving and sometimes their old prejudices as well, and many retained a strong emotional allegiance to the "old country."

The Territorial Government and, later, the Provincial Government of Alberta faced the formidable task of helping the immigrants become New Canadians who would eventually be fluent in English and acceptant and supportive of the rights and responsibilities associated with the "British way of life."[3] There was general consensus among the politicians and the population at large that the newcomers must abandon their linguistic and cultural heritage in favour of the language and the social values of their new homeland. Permitting the immigrants to retain their identity openly was politically unacceptable. Instead, their Canadianization was to be achieved by teaching them the English language–and only English!—so that they could participate in the affairs of the country, and by teaching them to think and behave like Canadians. It was decided to let the schools—in particular the elementary schools, for it was deemed easier to Canadianize the children than the adults so that they would become interpreters and "messengers" for English culture[4]—handle the process of linguistic and cultural adaptation. Consequently, as most of the population resided in rural Alberta, the rural elementary school in Alberta and in the other western provinces assumed the role of linguistic and cultural change agent.[5]

According to the 1931 Census, the government's efforts had succeeded admirably. Among the immigrants from Austro-Hungary, for instance, 46% of the females and 26% of the males had been unable to speak English in 1916. By 1931, a mere fraction of one percent of the same population group spoke only their mother tongue; according to census data, even among the foreign-born Albertans of Austro-Hungarian origin, only 20% of the women and 10% of the men could not speak English.

How had this remarkable feat of linguistic assimilation been accomplished? It should be noted that the Canadianization policy was not unique to Alberta; other provinces faced similar problems, and employed similar solutions.

The government's policy was characterized by two main thrusts: immigrant children, rather than adults, were to be the target of the Canadianization process; after all,

> "[a]dults cannot be expected to become other than superficial Canadians. But children still in the formative period, under teachers of the right calibre in non-English-speaking communities, readily acquire the language and are quick to adopt Canadian ways and custom."[6]

Secondly, the English language was to be used as the sole language of instruction, and the use of the students' own language in school would be discouraged as much as possible. The Department of Education did not permit any form of bilingualism in school or any form of "multiculturalism."

> "This is an English-speaking province," said Mr. Boyle [the Minister of Education], "and every Alberta boy and girl should receive a sound English education in the public schools of the province."[7]

To be sure, the problems which confronted the province at that time were enormous: It was not unusual for a school inspector to report that "one half of the rural districts in this inspectorate are in foreign settlements, the nationalities of which are French, German, Norwegian, Swedish and Galician."[8] Small wonder that teaching in a one-room rural elementary school around the turn of the 20th century was sometimes compared to having been dropped in a foreign land, and schools were frequently regarded as "human mixing bowls." Yet the schools had been chosen quite deliberately as the instrument for the assimilation of the immigrant. As early as 1903, a school inspector for northern Alberta wrote in a report to his supervisor:

> The quickest and surest method of assimilating the foreign elements in our population is through our schools. Here is seen the ready adoption of dress, language, manners and customs ... The best teachers—better for not using the language of the locality—should be secured for these foreign schools.[9]

But if the pupils could not speak English when they entered school, should not the teacher have been able to speak their language? The Department's attitude is reflected in the reports submitted by several inspectors to the Minister of Education:

> With so many languages and nationalities in the country it would be impossible to provide each district with a teacher of its own kind. I find also that it is by no means necessary for the teacher to know and use the language of the foreign speaking children. Indeed, it is oftentimes a hindrance.[10]

This attitude was taken by school officials in the towns as well as the rural areas:

> It is very encouraging to observe the success attained in teaching reading to the foreign children by teachers who knew only the English language. It has been my experience that, not only in reading, but in all departments of the school work, the greatest advancement is made under teachers who use English only and who encourage the use of English on the playground as well as in the school during the school sessions.[11]

> While it may be an advantage to a teacher to know the foreign language, I believe it should never be used in the presence of the children. The progress of the class will necessarily be slow at first, but the teacher will accomplish more in the end by using the English language exclusively. One of the great hindrances in these foreign districts is the fact that the children hear no English except in their recitation.[12]

This approach seems to have been very effective because local histories contain innumerable references to the effect that the children "attended school and soon learned English." More than one teacher had to face the fact that her children, on the first day of class, knew not one word of English, but

> ... it would surprise you how fast they learned "bat, ball, base, 1, 2, 3, run, stop, strike." In the classroom, they got "stand" and "sit" immediately. In two or three weeks they could understand much of what was said to them. In six or eight weeks they were speaking English very well except for a tight jaw which I overcame by taking hold of it with my hand and waggling, raising and lowering. They had trouble with the "th"-sound and all of us went around poking out our tongues in this sound.[13]

By the end of World War I, school inspectors all over the province were able to report that good progress was being made in the teaching of English. It was noted that although "English, French, Scandinavian, Russian and German were spoken in the home, the population as a whole, realizing common interests and responsibilities, showed a keen desire to make English the common language."[14] The Annual Report of the Department of Education for 1922 made repeated references to an improving situation in rural schools; apparently, parents were not only willing but anxious to have the school open for the full school year, and more well-trained teachers also seemed to have become available for these areas.[15] After 1925, there are only sporadic references in the Annual Reports to the teaching of English to foreigners. By about 1930 the "language problem" was solved. As a consequence of the overall assimilation effort the percentage of the Alberta population unable to speak English declined from 20% in 1901 to 2% in 1931. The Census observed[16] that those Canadians speaking one of the Germanic languages were the most likely to give one

or the other official language as their mother tongue. By 1941, a miniscule .8% of Albertans of German origin could not speak English or German. The teaching of the ancestral language was left to the home and to the churches.

Acquiring proficiency in English represented only one component of learning to be a "true" Canadian. H. R. Parker, Inspector of Schools, wrote his minister in 1917:

> During my visits to [these] schools I have endeavoured to impress teachers with the view that the first aim of the school should be to teach thoroughly the English language and make good citizens of the growing generation.[17]

"Good citizenship" meant adoption of the values of the new country, in particular the acquisition of the "principles of democracy through the agency of our public schools among the non-English settlers of our Province who have been brought up under the influence of autocratic forms of government."[18] It also meant "the taking in of our social heredity,"[19] the acquisition of the "British sense of freedom,"[20] "knowledge of the contributions made by Canadian pioneers," "helping and sharing with the community," and "taking responsibility for the community in which the immigrants lived."

The desire to become a true Canadian was not uniformly spread among all immigrants. While there were great numbers of parents who indeed wanted their children to gain all the benefits that Canadian citizenship could bring, there were others who were indifferent to this noble ideal. Even worse—in the Department of Education's eyes—there were some who made a determined effort to follow old traditions instead of aspiring to the Canadian ideals of British-Canadian nationalism, citizenship, individualism and the work ethic.

> While one can sympathize with the desire of foreign-born parents to secure for their children a knowledge of their mother tongue, yet steps ought to be taken to insist that such a desire shall not result in depriving any child of his right to a full share in the educational benefits offered by our Province, particularly the benefit of an inspiration to become a loyal Canadian citizen. [21]

The Annual Reports of the Department of Education contain many references to instances where the inspector in charge of certain districts had to use "both paternal and democratic methods in handling the affairs of school districts in non-English settlements." In cases where the affairs of a school were not handled to the satisfaction of the Department (e.g., the establishment of a school district, erecting a school, collecting taxes, hiring a "suitable" teacher and insisting on the use of English in the classroom), an official trustee was appointed with or without the consent of the ratepayers, and he was given the full powers of a school board and its officers. Subsequently, under the democratic method, a board of trustees was elected by ratepayers in the ordinary way.[22] Such methods were required in some Ruthenian districts where community and religious leaders imbued by nascent nationalist self-consciousness wanted to hire Ukrainian teachers who could give bilingual instruction; they sometimes refused to pay taxes and set up their own schools.[23]

No major "difficulties" of this kind were encountered in German-speaking districts. Judging from the comments made by school inspectors in the Annual Reports of the Department of Education, the German-speaking immigrants caused few problems for the school officials who seemed pleased with the attitude displayed by the two large, rurally based German-speaking groups—the Mennonites and Hutterites—who immigrated in the first 20 years of the 20th century (see???).

On occasion, the Department of Education did not hesitate to apply the full force of the law if a school did not conform with regulations. Most of these fights over the implementation of the school law occurred in Ukrainian school districts, but there is one account of the Department dealing harshly with several private schools operated by the Lutheran Church in Stony Plain[24] (see ???).

World War One, understandably, increased the sensitivities of the Anglophone population. In 1918, for example, the inspector of schools from Foremost reported that settlers from Russia, Germany, Finland and other European countries were impressed with the necessity of keeping their children at school and

with the idea that they must learn the English language *if they were to remain in Canada* (emphasis added).[25] More strongly than ever before the Department of Education pursued the objective of Canadianizing the immigrant:

> The present is an important period for the non-English schools and more than ever an aggressive policy should be pursued with respect to them ... The result that we are aiming at is the Canadianizing of these non-English people—the mastery of our language and the taking in of our social heredity. The task is a great one and nothing but the most efficient schools can accomplish it.[26]

In 1920, there were still a few critical voices to be heard from officials of the Department who worried about the success of coping with the problem of assimilating the ethnics who had immigrated during the first twenty years of the century and those who would come to Canada in the 1920's.

> The instinctive aversion to naturalization evinced by a number of our cosmopolitan immigrants, the tardy acceptance of others who are prompted ultimately by purely business motives, the non-appeal of Canadianism to the rising generation who still cherish the traditions and sympathies of their parents, and the anticipated increased immigration in 1921 challenge the schools which are the fountainhead of all national ideals to recognize the need for an increased and immediate vigorous effort to inculcate a real and positive affection in these people for the land of their adoption.[27]

Inspector Thibodeau was quoted above asserting proudly in his report to the Alberta Department of Education in 1918, "There is no bilingual problem in this part of the province."[28] What did he mean by that? The issue of whether the schools should make provision for teaching not only in English but also in another language has affected—for more than half a century—almost exclusively the teaching of French in Alberta until the 1970s when the province began to permit, and support, so-called "bilingual programs" in other languages, including German. It will be shown below that the Northwest-Territories and later Alberta wanted to prevent at all costs the establishment of schools where the language of instruction could be another one than English. The educational situation in Manitoba with the difficulties purportedly caused by "bilingual teaching" was abhorrent to Alberta. School legislation did make a certain concession—at least in theory—to which the leaders of the German-speaking community frequently referred who wanted to have German taught in public schools in German-speaking areas. The following section describes the teaching of second languages as subjects of instruction or as languages of instruction, and the legal framework governing the teaching in a language other than English.

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[1] H. Thibodeau, "Report," *Annual Report of the Alberta Department of Education* [henceforth *Annual Report*], 1918, 38.
[2] *1931 Census*, Vol. I, 46.
[3] For an excellent discussion of the methods employed to turn immigrant children into citizens see Amy von Heyking, *Creating citizens: History and identity in Alberta's schools, 1905–1980* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006).
[4] Robert England, *The Central European immigrant in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), 169.
[5] See Manfred Prokop, "The Canadianization of immigrant children: The role of the rural elementary school in Alberta between 1900 and 1930," *Alberta History*, 37 (2), 1989, 1–10.
[6] K. A. Foster, *Our Canadian mosaic* (Toronto: The Dominion Council Y. W. CA., 1926), 80.
[7] "Control of Ruthenian Schools in Alberta must be firmly maintained," *Edmonton Bulletin*, Aug. 20, 1913, quoted in J. Skwarok, *The Ukrainian settlers in Canada and their schools 1891–1921* (Toronto: Basilian Press, 1959), 97.
[8] J. Ross, "Report of Inspector Ross, "*Annual Report*, 1906, 49.
[9] T. F. Perren, "Report for Division No. 7," *Annual Report*, 1903, 57–58.
[10] T. E. Perren, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1903, 57–58.
[11] J. A. Fife, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1909, 44.
[12] G. E. Ellis, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1906, 53.
[13] E. Turnbull (ed.), *The pathfinders* (Winnipeg: InterCollegiate Press, 1978), 48.
[14] E. S. Farr, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1918, 65.

[15] J. Morgan, "Report of Supervisor of Consolidated Schools," *Annual Report*, 1922, 22.
[16] *1931 Census*, Vol. XIII, 551.
[17] H. R. Parker, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1917, 57.
[18] R. Fletcher, "Education in Foreign Settlements, "*Annual Report*, 1914, 66.
[19] G. S. Lord, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1918, 91.
[20] J. C. Miller, "Report, "*Annual Report*, 1913. 51.
[21] E. L. Hill, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1910, 47–48.
[22] R. Fletcher, "Education in Foreign Settlements, "*Annual Report*, 1914, 66.
[23] From the Ukrainian point of view, the situation looked quite different. Teachers who had been certified in Manitoba and who came to Alberta to teach in the Ruthenian communities, in the opinion of the Alberta Department of Education, were insufficiently qualified to offer "efficient" instruction – a policy decision to which the teachers and the community objected vigorously. In 1909, for example, at a Ukrainian Teachers' Convention in Winnipeg, the teachers present condemned "any attempt to deprive them or the Ukrainian children in the schools of the right to their own language as an instrument of education." The following resolution was accepted by them: "We believe that to defend our mother tongue, for which our forefathers shed their blood centuries ago is our divine duty, and that we would use all our political influence to retain the present bilingual system [in Manitoba]. We value very highly the British flag, and we are willing to defend it at any time or occasion whatever, but we would like to see respect for our native tongue. ("Ukrainians urge bi-lingual schools," *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 17, 1909). Quoted in J. Skwarok, *The Ukrainian settlers in Canada and their schools 1891–1921* (Toronto: Basilian Press, 1959), 101.
[24] The *Annual Report* in 1914 (153–154) provided a list of educational institutions not directly under the control of the Department. The following schools were organized by the Lutheran churches (not necessarily all German-language churches): United Lutheran Church in Chauvin; St. Matthew's in Stony Plain (65 pupils), Immanuel in Calgary (60 pupils), Zion Parochial in Wetaskiwin (18 pupils), St. Paul's in Golden Spike (36) and St. John's in Trochu Valley (15 students). There may have been more such schools.
[25] J. C. Butchart, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1918, 45.
[26] G. S. Lord, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1918, 91.
[27] D. H. Mackenzie, "Report," *Annual Report*, 1920, 106.
[28] H. Thibodeau, "Report," *Annual Report,* 1918, 38.