

Barbara Smith is German?

A story about ethnic groups and stereotypes

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It was spring 2005 in a classroom on Milwaukee’s northwest side. Barbara Smith’s social studies teacher was introducing the subject of ethnicity to her students. Mrs. Amato wrote down features of an ethnic group on the board: *Members have: (1) Biological connections (close or distant), (2) ties to a past geographical area, (3) shared practices.* “Now back when I was growing up,” the teacher began, “ethnicity was not celebrated like it is today. My family was Italian and the schools—sometimes even your own family—tried to get you to give up your ethnic ways. Ethnic groups were supposed to ‘assimilate,’ which meant that they were supposed to melt into someone’s idea of American culture.”

“Is that what they meant by the melting pot?” asked Barbara. She had seen the term in her history book.

“Yes,” responded Mrs. Amato. “They called America a melting pot. The idea was that ethnic groups brought their own flavors to America, but these individual flavors were supposed to get lost in the pot—kind of like it is when your parents make soup. You end up with one kind of flavor, not lots of them.”

“What changed?” asked another student.

“Things really started changing with the Civil Rights Movement

that we were just studying. Once some groups began to demand respect for their differences, other groups joined in.”

Barbara had enjoyed studying civil rights. She’d learned about genocide, prejudice, and racism—from the Nazis and the Holocaust in Europe to the Milwaukee fair housing marches for African American rights in the 1960s.

“Today people tend to call America a salad bowl,” Mrs. Amato continued. “Does anyone know how this is different from a melting pot?”

One of Barbara’s classmates raised his hand. “Because when you have a salad, you are supposed to taste all the different ingredients, like tomatoes and onions and stuff.”

“That’s so right,” lauded Mrs. Amato. “The ingredients don’t lose their distinctive flavors. Today ethnic groups with their differences are viewed positively. And that brings us to the subject of our next assignment.”

Mrs. Amato returned to the blackboard and outlined the requirements for their new projects. She asked the students to give presentations on one of their ethnic backgrounds and discuss what this ethnic group had contributed to Milwaukee. She told the class to form four groups to share ideas on presentations—one made up of students that would be presenting on Latin Americans, one on European Americans, one on Asian and Native Americans, and one on African Americans.

Barbara Smith sighed. She watched everyone move their chairs around into groups. She knew that this project might not be her best. And Barbara usually sought to do her best. Not only was she one of the best students in the sixth grade, but she was also a leader. She was a past class president and had shared the lead in their class play this winter. The latter was especially important because she dreamed of a future career in musical theatre.

Now she faced a challenge. Through the process of elimination she eventually found her way to the European group. The students began by discussing what their presentations might look like.



Vicki Kowalski said she'd want a large poster board with photos and would include the Basilica of St. Josaphat as one Polish contribution. "My mom said the Poles built more churches than any other group in Milwaukee."

"That's not fair," complained Gloria Nowicki. "I want to do the Polish churches." Gloria and Vicki decided to ask Mrs. Amato to resolve

the issue.

When Mrs. Amato made her rounds and got to the European group, the two Polish girls received permission to do a joint presentation. She asked the others what thought they'd given to their projects.

Brian Alexander said his father's side was Scottish and he'd like to organize his presentation around the Scottish Highland Games. Dion Mannos said he'd like to do a presentation on all the Greek-run restaurants in Milwaukee. Mrs. Amato offered a few suggestions and encouraged the boys to move ahead.

"And Barbara, what did you have in mind?"

Barbara dropped her head. "I don't even know what we are—or were," she apologized.

"Well, that's not surprising," conceded Mrs. Amato. "Because of the way people in this country used to look at ethnicity, many generations lost track of their backgrounds. Your name is Smith. That should tell us something. Do you know your mother's maiden name?"

"Brown."

"Then I'd suggest both your parents' ancestors may have come from the British Isles at one time. If they are or were Catholics, it's likely they are Irish."

"They don't really have any religion," said Barbara, awkwardly. "But they believe in God."

"Hmm. Then I think the best thing is for you to have a conversation with your parents about this. They surely know something."

Barbara promised to do this at her first opportunity.

"German!" shrieked Barbara Smith at supper that night. "We can't be German!"

"Actually, we are, Barbara," replied her mother. "On both sides."

"You mean Germans like Hitler!"

"Not like Hitler," Mr. Smith stated. "Most Milwaukee German families were here a hundred years before the word *Nazi* was invented. "My

family came in 1849. Your mom's even earlier!"

"Then why don't we have German names?"

Mrs. Smith began. "Names just sort of get altered over the years. Our family name was Braun—B-R-A-U-N—and people just started spelling it Brown. I'm sure it was something similar for your father's family."

Grandpa Smith, who also lived with the family, spoke up. "People forget about the past. It's the way it is. But I'm sure you'll be able to give some presentation on German contributions. After all, this is Milwaukee."



“After all, this is Milwaukee,” snarled Barbara Smith that Saturday as she set out trying to learn about German contributions in her home town. The night before she’d searched the Internet and found some quotes by a local historian named John Gurda on the extensive history of Germans in Milwaukee. She’d learned that Milwaukee was once called the German Athens of the world, because of its impressive artistic, political, and civic culture. Begrudgingly, Barbara made a map of some of the downtown German sites that she could easily photograph in one afternoon.

Barbara’s mother dropped her off on the east end of Wisconsin Avenue, where she walked a block to the Pfister Hotel on Jackson Street. After taking two photographs of the ornate Romanesque Revival building, she jotted a few phrases from her Internet printouts in her notebook: *Photos 1 & 2. Hotel. Built 1893, Guido Pfister. German immigrant with tanning business.*

“I’ll make this the best presentation I can in class, even if I hate doing it,” she muttered to herself. She proceeded to walk a block to Milwaukee Street and turned the corner. Up the block she stopped at Old St. Mary’s Church, took one photograph and jotted down these notes: *Photo 3. Church. Built 1847. German Catholic immigrants.* From there she quickly turned the corner to Broadway Street and took three photos of the Milwaukee School of Engineering campus, adding these notes: *Photos 4, 5, 6. MSOE. Germans built in 1903. City needed technical workforce.*

The MSOE campus was lovely, and Barbara sat down on a bench to review her photos. She briefly wondered what her real surname might be. She so hoped it wasn’t Hitler or Eichmann or Göring or some other Nazi leader whose names she’d seen in her history book. Of course, it might have been Dietrich. Maybe she was a descendant of the great cabaret and film star, Marlene Dietrich. “But no family would have changed their name if they were descended from her,” she sighed. Whatever the truth was about her family, she was quite sure it would have altered her life in some ways.

Barbara got up, reckoning that she was about half done. She walked another block north and took one photo of the Blatz building, noting that it was once the City Brewery built in 1846. *Beer and the Germans, bla, bla, bla,* she wrote in her notebook. From there she headed south to Wells, turned the corner and ran into the Pabst Theater. She took one photo of the outside and went inside and took two more. In her notebook she wrote: *Photos 8, 9, 10. Theater. Built 1895 by another beer big shot, Pabst. Lots of stars performed there.*

Barbara's cell phone rang. It was her father checking up on her. "I'm fine. I'm nearly done. Grandpa can pick me up at that Turner Hall place in a half hour, okay?"

Mr. Smith said that was fine.

"Dad, have you and mom ever been to this Pabst Theater?"

"We have," Mr. Smith replied.

"It's really beautiful," Barbara conceded.



“It was built like those old European opera houses,” said Mr. Smith. “German Renaissance Revival style, I think. The early Germans were into that whole opera house culture.”

Barbara hung up. She thought she might find out more about this opera house culture when she got home. Now she had a few more stops. She walked west on Wells Street to the eight-story Germania building and took one photo. From her Internet printouts she noted: *Photo 11. Built 1896. Statue of Germania as symbol of Germany. Publishing. Name changed 1918.* “How odd,” Barbara muttered. “Why change the name when the statue of Germania is right in front?”

Barbara had one more stop before she met her grandfather at Turner Hall. She walked a ways west and turned north on Old World Third Street. She passed Usinger’s Sausage Factory—another German addition—until she came to the very ornate Maders restaurant. She snapped two photos—one of the outside of the building and one of the menu next to the door. Glancing over the entrees, she wondered how many of these dishes she’d actually eaten. *Rheinischer Sauerbraten, Wiener Schnitzel, Kasseler Rippchen, Rouladen, Ritter Schnitzel.* She was pretty sure she had never eaten any of these things, but the descriptions made her hungry.

On the way to Turner Hall Barbara wondered how many people went to that German restaurant, and would most of these be the contemporary Germans? What were the Germans in Milwaukee like today and why weren’t there all these physical signs of them now, like there were of the earlier Germans?

She took a photo of the exterior of Turner Hall and noted: *Photo 14. Social club. German architect is same for City Hall, Pfister, and here.* As she walked inside the door, she noticed that there was a restaurant on the first floor. She looked in but did not see her grandfather yet. Because it was the middle of the afternoon, Barbara saw few customers and felt comfortable walking around looking for things to photograph. She looked back at her Internet printout and noted that the building was called Turner Hall because of the Milwaukee Turners, a German

organization that stressed, among other things, physical fitness. Moving on, she found a large plaque that discussed the Turners in more detail. She jotted down their official principles in her notebook:

Liberty against all oppression
Reason against all superstition
Tolerance against all fanaticism

Free press

Free assembly for the discussion of all questions

“Barbara,” came a voice from behind.

Startled, Barbara turned and found her grandfather standing there.

“Have you found your little field trip interesting?” he asked.

“More like confusing.”

“Well, should we have a bite to eat and discuss it?”

Barbara said she’d like to try some German food and Grandpa Smith suggested she start with a simple order of potato pancakes.

While eating, Barbara began to describe what she’d learned. “This was supposed to be some kind of German Athens here. They built everything. Then it seems like they didn’t build anything else—but they must have been still here.”

“When did you notice things stopped?”

Barbara paged through her notes and her Internet printouts. “Well, they were pretty tied to the Milwaukee School of Engineering at the start of the 1900s, and then it seems like there was a pause.” She turned to another page. “And then even this Germania building that was supposed to stand for Germany—well, it got a new name. That was in 1918.”

“Barbara, you know your history pretty well for someone your age. What was that year in history?”

“It was the end of World War One.”

“And who was our main enemy in World War One?”

“Oh, of course!” snapped Barbara. “Germany.”

Grandpa Smith began to talk about that time for German families in Milwaukee. At first the United States did not know who they would

back in that war. A lot of German Americans wanted the country to back Germany. “Then once the country decided to back the Allies then the Germans pretty much retracted into themselves.”

“What does that mean?”

“They stopped talking up their ethnic ways because they were Americans first and couldn’t look like they had divided loyalties. So then you saw some of the German language newspapers close and a few people even changed their names. Your mother’s family changed their name from Braun to Brown.”

“And what about your family?”

“Well, Barbara, I was born Christian Jacob Schmidt.”

Hearing the name Schmidt, Barbara sighed in relief.

“But that was 1940. By 1946 I was Chris Smith.”

“Because of World War II and Hitler?” asked Barbara.

“Exactly. This was especially hard for my family. My great, great grandparents came to the United States as Forty-Eighters. Does that word mean anything to you?”

Barbara shook her head.

“Back in Europe in 1848, there were revolutions everywhere. People were fighting for more democracy and human rights. When the revolutions failed a good share of the people came here—where there was more democracy. So many of the Germans that settled in Milwaukee were Forty-Eighters, and they were usually Turners too.”

Barbara’s jaw dropped. She flipped through her notebook. “I saw something. The Turners—the principles—*tolerance against all fanaticism, free speech*—”

“I’m very familiar.”

“But—I don’t understand—”

“I’m sure your teacher will tell you what I’m about to tell you. What is important to realize about ethnic groups is that they are always changing. There’s also much difference *within* the groups. Even in Germany, you had plenty of people opposed to the Nazis. If you look at any ethnic group you will find some examples in history where some



members of the group backed evil leaders and others fought against them.”

Barbara sat silently for several seconds.

“Do you remember what you first said when you found out you were German?”

Barbara remembered. “Germans like Hitler?”

“That’s the stereotype—the negative stereotype. People who believe stereotypes don’t see how ethnic groups change over time or see the differences within ethnic groups.”

Barbara nodded. She said nothing as she envisioned her upcoming

presentation. She didn't yet have a title, but she knew it would be what she'd learned about the Germans today—the internal differences—changes in history—stereotypes and why they can't tell the true story. She really did understand—now learning about the Forty-Eighters and the Turners. She was quite sure there was much else to learn.

“Did you enjoy your potato pancakes?” asked Grandpa Smith.

“Very much,” Barbara said. “I was thinking that I'd like to try a lot more German stuff.”

“Food?”

Barbara smiled. “That too,” she declared.