

# Die *Sproch*mühle

“Die **Sproch**mühle” is a permanent and interactive exhibition located in the heart of the open air museum of Alsace “Ecomusée d’Alsace”.

The men, women and children who lived, worked, sang and prayed in the houses you see in this open air museum left us a precious heritage, including our language. Our language has two inseparable forms:

- one which is, above all, oral - the German dialects of Alsace
- one which is, above all, written - standard German

Both standard German and dialects are also the language of several other European regions: Germany, Austria, Luxembourg and Switzerland as well as parts of Belgium and Italy. Without this language, our Alsace would finally lose its originality, its wealth and its role in Europe. Below is a brief summary of the history of our languages.

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## **-500 — 800**

For 500 years, the Celts were masters of a large part of Europe. They were replaced or assimilated, on the one hand by the Romans and on the other by the Germans (Alemans and Franks). Through conquests and migrations a linguistic frontier was marked out. On the peaks of the Vosges, it has separated until today the Germanic language regions in the east from the Latin language regions in the west. Nevertheless, these two languages have a common ancestor: Indo-European.

## **700 — 1400**

Charlemagne reigned over an empire which straddled the Roman and Germanic worlds.

He took care to preserve the Latin language while ensuring the promotion of popular languages.

He and his successors used Latin for official acts, but recommended to priests that they should speak to the people in their native tongues. Since there was no unified German language as yet, the catechism was translated into various local forms of speech.

Gradually, poems and love stories were also produced in these popular languages: Frankish, Aleman and Yiddish.

## **1400 — 1648**

The invention of printing transformed the language. To ensure that printing a book would be profitable, it had to be diffused in quantity throughout the German speaking world. 15<sup>th</sup> century printers thus abandoned local or regional dialects. Gradually, the written language became more standardised throughout the German speaking regions.

Alsatian writers stood out in this new written language and published tales, farces and pamphlets as well as history or science books. The dialects were maintained as spoken versions of the language alongside the new standard written language.



### **1648 — 1788**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, French became prestigious throughout Europe and took the place of Latin as the new diplomatic language. In Alsace also, knowledge of French spread. But the German dialect for oral use and standard German for oral and written use were still the daily language of the immense majority of Alsatians. Royal administration was generally expressed in French, but it agreed to translate texts intended for public consumption into German.

### **1789 — 1815**

Alsatians accepted the revolutionary ideas enthusiastically. Revolutionary slogans were naturally produced in German. Even the French National anthem was translated into German. But from 1792, the war declared on the Austrian Empire and Prussia created a tense atmosphere. The Alsatian language became suspect for two reasons:

- it was counter to the new "one Nation, one language" principle
- it was considered to be the "language of the enemy".

Later, during the reign of Napoleon 1<sup>st</sup>, the population gradually began to learn French, but without losing the original language.

### **1815 — 1860**

The regional language (German) and the national language (French) seemed to have found a balance. German dialects were spoken in the family, on the street, in the fields and factories. French was used by the administration and spread throughout the population via military service and secondary school. Standard German dominated largely in written texts, at primary school and for religious purposes. But, because of the rising nationalisms, this language balance was called into question.

### **1860—1890**

The slogan adopted by French nationalists was "One nation, one language". A new school policy made French the only language used in schools. This policy was designed to eliminate German dialects and standard German in order to prove that Alsace belonged to France.

German nationalists in turn declared "One language, one nation" and prepared to conquer Alsace under the pretext that it was German in language and culture.

Napoleon III declared war on Prussia and this was a disaster for France. In May 1871, the French parliament voted to cede Alsace and Moselle (the German-speaking part of Lorraine) to the new German empire. German then became the official language but French was largely tolerated for several years.

### **Circa 1900**

Standard German literary tradition grew in importance. French literature also developed. The province gave rise to a new generation of bilingual, humanist and pacifist intellectuals. A rich and autonomous culture spread in Alsace. The main new thing was that authors, educated at school in standard German, also began to write - mainly plays and poems - in dialect.

### **1920 — 1930**

After the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, the Alsatian population hoped to obtain respect for "Alsatian freedom" within the framework of the French Republic, forming a synthesis between French and German culture and a peaceful bilingual society. But the authorities did not support this ideal. In private life, the regional language was still used as a rule. But the government gradually imposed French as the single language in public life. As was the case elsewhere in Europe at that time, intellectuals collected songs, legends and objects typical of popular tradition.

### **1940 — 1945**

Alsace was annexed to Nazi Germany and suffered the same terror as the German citizens after 1933. The totalitarian power organised propaganda campaigns and enrolled the youth in brigades to eliminate all traces of French culture. The German dialects were also targeted. Speaking in dialect therefore became an identity symbol for Alsatians. The original culture and speech used by Jewish and gypsy minorities were eliminated by deportation and extermination.

### **After 1945**

The post-war governments aimed to eradicate the regional language in the long term. Young people were the main targets of their policy. German was no longer taught in schools, children were punished for speaking in dialect in the street or the schoolyard. Posters proclaimed "It's cool to speak French".

But, after 1968, a new generation took up the struggle to maintain their Alsatian difference. The success of dialect songs and theatre and the creation of bilingual classes (French-standard German) illustrate the strong feeling and awareness of their difference.

### **Today**

The dialects spoken today are still Alemanic and Frankish, two families of German dialects. These dialects and standard German are still used in certain privileged areas of social life. But use of both the dialects and standard German has regressed dramatically and with them, the traditional cultural and economic openness of the Region. This regression has a high social and economic cost.

### **A future in families**

Aware and motivated families can maintain or rebuild a balanced (French-dialect) bilingualism. Bilingual education from Kindergarten (French-standard German) is the best support for this family bilingualism. Bilingual education also enables non-dialect speaking families to successfully integrate into the regional culture and economy.

### **A future in professional life**

Chambers of commerce work to develop bilingual teaching. Mastering a dialect and standard German enables thousands of Alsations to obtain work. The regional bilingualism is an asset in many sectors of activity; it drives exports and tourism, it clarifies the identification of regional products and it promotes the learning of other languages.

### **A future in public and cultural life**

To survive, the regional language must also have its place in the public arena: road signs, posters, administrative communications, personnel training.

Use of the language can be encouraged in the theatre, songs, literature, public readings, extra-curricular and sports activities. The development of an audiovisual sector in the regional language would help develop local industry for the production of wealth.