Earlier this year I made a brief visit to my mother’s family homeland in Germany on the edge of the North Sea. Since I was a child I had dreamed of this country but as an adult had resisted making the journey, until a curious yearning swept me back to find places and people left behind - 140 years ago. This was a strange quest. I was travelling back to a place I had never been, to a past that did not exist outside my tangled imaginings, conjured from scraps of family stories and cursory reading. I imagined my arrival, stepping from a train caught hurriedly at the airport into a world that merged family memories of departure with hopes of homecoming. The reality proved quite different.

My more fanciful imaginings of homecoming were abandoned even before I left Australia, casualties of contact with ‘reality’ as I spent long hours travelling the web, trawling through maps, lists of towns, surnames and dates, consulting travel websites to plan my trip. Ironically, while I found few ancestors I was drawn into a network of hundreds of thousands of Australians, Canadians, Americans and South Africans all planning trips to ancestral homelands, all gripped by a yearning for “home” in a world of transience and “non-places”. This drive to return says anthropologist Paul Basu, who runs a web site project on “homecomings” to the Scottish Highlands grows out of cherished memories of imagined homelands, myths of exile and shared pasts filtered through the ever-changing lens of the present.

This quest for the past has spawned a new tourist niche - genealogical, roots or homeland tourism - that sits somewhere between pilgrimage and heritage tourism. The search engines of the world wide web are the departure points for these journeys. The destinations are off the beaten track, places where travellers seek emotional, personal and even spiritual contact with the past, as well as museums and archives where they search for genealogical and historical facts to embellish their memories.

In Germany, genealogical tourists battle language, unprocessed and scattered parish...
records in old German script, wartime archival losses and territorial changes that place ancestors beyond current borders. The present is often discomforting - the lukewarm reception from newly discovered relatives and complex politics. One couple I know found a graveyard full of familiar names but no welcome from the living. Another couple, seeking the whereabouts of relatives in a village in then East Germany, were treated like Stasi spies. Others enjoyed more fortuitous encounters like the friend who, by chance, met a distant relative with a collection of letters and photographs sent home by her grandfather, unbeknown to his Australian family. The challenges do not dampen enthusiasm and as baby-boomers find they have more time and money, the number of genealogical tourists is set to rise.

There was no climactic moment of homecoming for this prodigal daughter. My experiences prompted me to reconsider why I had set out in the first place. Why was I the first member of my family in 140 years to return to Holstein, despite an enduring family sentiment about the place? Why had I waited for so many years?

I found some answers in the history of the German Lutheran community in Australia and in fragmentary stories about my mother’s family. Shared memories of injustice had fostered a binding “culture of remembrance” and, together with pride in religious and cultural roots, forged a community connected by feelings of difference and separation from other settler colonists, with mixed loyalties to new and old homelands. Recent rethinking of the concept of diaspora by cultural studies theorists Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur helped reshape my understanding of this community by replacing the terminology of nation and citizen with more fluid notions of border crossings, shifting identities, transnational connections and lived experience as “process always in change”.

My people were not always treated kindly in their new country: welcomed in the 19th century as farmers, principally by the colonies of South Australia and Queensland, they were ostracised as “the enemy” during the world wars and then, once the alarm over arrivals of thousands of German refugees and displaced persons subsided, they dropped quietly from public view.

Australian national symbols took second place to foundational myths of dissent and flight from religious persecution by the state. The compelling echoes of Christian martyrdom and the trials of Martin Luther were interwoven with biblical themes of exodus, as courageous pastors led whole communities from homes in Prussia to the “land of the Southern Cross”. The forging of a unified Lutheran community out of the waves of migrants was undermined by differences in language and custom and a passion for oppositional church politics that created the plethora of schisms and synods. Influenced by anti-German wartime propaganda and a dour conservatism, their lack of
sympathy for post-war migrants and the shattered Germany they left behind created further divisions with the church.

My father can lay claim to “pilgrim” Lutheran origins. My mother’s family, like the majority of German Lutherans, migrated for more pragmatic reasons. In 1865, Johann and Anna Bruhn left the close-knit village life of the Dithmarsch region of Holstein with their seven children to join the human exodus that followed German industrialisation and nationalism. There were many dangers in the journey of migration, some financial - shipping agents and conmen who preyed on naive travellers in the great ports of Bremen and Hamburg - others physical, in the privations “between decks” in the migrant ships.

Conditions on board the Peter Goddeffroy, owned by the wealthy Goddefroy family shipping company of Hamburg, were such that the Brisbane Courier later claimed that “a worse conducted and worse provisioned ship never arrived at this port”. There were 59 deaths during the four-month journey, including those of Anna Bruhn and her four-year old son, both of gastroenteritis. This catastrophe dashed the family’s dreams of success and happiness in the new colony and marked my family history with an enduring touch of melancholy. Johann Bruhn walked his six surviving children from Brisbane to Toowoomba and, assisted by the newly appointed Lutheran pastor, placed the older ones in service. Then, with his six-year-old son, my great-grandfather, he went to live on a farming block on the open plains of the Darling Downs, which in a good rainy season must have reminded him of the flat country of home. He remained a staunch Lutheran, never remarried and, as far as we know, had no further contact with his homeland. He drew a line in the sand that challenged our right ever to return.

The German Lutherans who migrated to Australia in the 19th century came from rural villages where their families had lived “from time immemorial” within a feudal structure of nobles, pastors and peasants. They brought with them a frugal village mentality, patriarchal families, religious outlook, love of their church and strong bonds to pastor and congregation. They followed Martin Luther in submitting to the religious authority of the Bible and the rule of the state. This encouraged obedience to authority, support for the status quo and neglect of civic involvement. Pride in the German language and love of learning were expressed in the establishment of day schools in many parishes. Sunday services were conducted in German with the old hymns of Luther punctuating the pastors’ “fiery rhetoric” and “emphatic gestures”, which German-Australian author E.O. Schlunke recalled, could suddenly change “entirely” as “gently and soothingly he assured his hearers of grace and forgiveness”.

In Germany, pastors were agents of the state, spiritual leaders and a commanding
presence in village life. In Australia, they were “good shepherds to their flocks” tending to their spiritual and temporal needs while they enfolded them within an inward-looking religious, cultural and political conservatism that distinguished them from their settler-colonist neighbours.

Pastors’ families lived austere lives, surviving on meagre incomes, and produce grown on the farms provided by their congregations. Nevertheless, to have a pastor in the family was a mark of status and considerable pride for his relatives. My siblings and I had first-hand experience of this because our father was a Lutheran pastor of this “old school”.

The German Lutherans’ other great passion was for small farming blocks that they acquired for minimal cost and lovingly cleared and cultivated, recreating the cultural landscapes of home. My great uncle claimed that the family farm carved out of the bush at the base of the Bunya Mountains in the 1890s was unique in the district, designed according to environmental principles dictated by Johann Bruhn. To the German Lutheran farmers this was the “promised land” given to them by God, like Canaan to the children of Israel. But it was, to borrow Ghassan Hage’s term, a “poisoned gift” - Aboriginal land. By accepting this land our families indirectly benefited from the deaths that followed. As a boy in the early 1900s, my great uncle saw only occasional Aboriginal visitors in a district where thousands traditionally met to celebrate the great bunya harvests. I like to think that sorrow for their part in this invasion of Aboriginal lands, and not just cultural arrogance, motivated German missionary endeavours in colonial Queensland. Certainly, in my own life, this has been a major reason for writing indigenous histories and the deep disease I often feel as a settler colonist in the land of my birth.

The Lutheran communities clustered together within the landscape of British settlement, secure in their feelings of cultural equality, even superiority. Official correspondence from Queensland suggests that this suited their neighbours who welcomed them as workers and farmers but did not invite them into their homes. In the spirit of “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”, most were keen to become naturalised subjects of their new country, while they retained their German language and culture. “To remain strong genuine Germans,” wrote the German Consul Hugo Carl Muecke, “means to treasure the richness of the German language, the language of poets and thinkers, as well as German customs and good habits, but at the same time to remain faithful to the English King.” There is no evidence that any members of the Bruhn family were ever naturalised. They retained a strong loyalty to homeland that they expressed by naming the farming settlement they pioneered at the Bunya Mountains Bismarck after the iron-fisted Prussian Chancellor.

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fficial German attitudes to those who left were predictable. Emigrants were stripped of citizenship on departure, removing any future responsibility for their wellbeing, even if they returned. However, German governments energetically lobbied local German businessmen as trade in the Pacific expanded. They pursued a policy of preserving German culture abroad through cultural visits and ceremonial gifts. Cultural ambassadors during the late 19th century included ethnological enthusiast Baron von Bulow who travelled with his wife to Deebing Creek Aboriginal Mission, outside Ipswich, to observe boomerang throwing. Over the years, thousands of German tourists crisscrossed the continent, seized by curiosity and imaginings about the “primitive natives” of Australia.

By the end of the 19th century there were more than 14,000 Lutheran German settlers living in Queensland. Their growing prosperity was evident in the appointment of pastors and proliferation of churches - my great-grandfather built one for his local community, reputedly “single-handedly” - and greater involvement in the political and economic life of the colony. Their success was, however, undermined by a dark vein of resentment spreading in the wake of growing nationalism with the move to federation, mounting opposition to expanding German business interests and the petty antagonisms of small-town society to the entry of successful Germans to their ranks. This culminated in the outburst of racial vilification and harassment of Germans during the First World War and the abyss of misunderstanding and mistrust that continued on through the inter-war years, the Second World War and in response to the mass migrations of the 1950s.

When I asked my father what I should say about those times, he answered immediately, “You must tell them we are not Huns.” Official propaganda during the First World War demonised all Germans as “Huns” - the archetypal barbaric marauding hordes of the Western imagination - whether they were soldiers at the front or respectable British subjects back home. Prime Minister William Hughes told Australians, “No German can be trusted.” Attacking them made the distant war seem real and immediate; Australians could feel they were “fighting the war at home”. There were also economic gains to be made from confiscating German trade interests in the region.

No one was safe in this climate of hysteria. Gerhard Fischer wrote in Enemy Aliens (University of Queensland Press, 1989) that, during the war, German Australians were treated with “violent fanaticism and unrestrained vehemence”. They received this treatment, not from their enemies, but, as one German Australian woman put it at the time, “at the hands of our own men and in our own country”. This occurred despite public pledges of loyalty to the Crown by pastors and other holders of public office. As well as unchecked acts of violence and intimidation including vandalising of Lutheran churches, there were official boycotts of German goods, prohibitions on trade, mass
sackings of German workers and seizures of businesses and properties. German politicians were dumped at the polls and naturalised Germans denied the right to vote in the 1917 federal elections. This sudden and drastic expulsion from mainstream Australia was accompanied by a fanatical determination to erase the German cultural presence as well: Lutheran day schools were closed, speaking German was prohibited, personal letters were screened and German place names were removed by official “nomenclature committees”. In 1915, the postmaster at Bismarck requested a name change, citing the refusal of wharfies in Brisbane to load local butter stamped “Bismarck” and of boycotts by consumers in Britain. He requested that the town be renamed Maclagan in honour of a British commanding officer at Gallipoli where his son was serving. His request was approved and remains the name of the town to this day.

Australian-born and naturalised German Australians suspected of being “disloyal” were interned along with alien nationals. Reasons for some arrests bordered on the surreal but most had the specific agenda of fragmenting communities and destroying German businesses in the region. Community leaders and persons of influence - businessmen, professionals and pastors - were deliberately targeted. In a final punitive act, many of the interned were deported at the end of the war. Some left voluntarily, in disgust. As one potential deportee put it, “If anyone can tell me what country I belong to I will be only too pleased to go to it, as I cannot stand the insults of the public much longer.”

The war years pushed German Lutherans to assimilate. Some families responded by anglicising surnames, leaving the church and moving to the city and most parishes dropped the German language from their services and schools. In Hahndorf, my father was enrolled at the state school and his parents spoke German only when they didn’t want the children to understand. (This must have been a powerful incentive to learn as he still speaks fluent German.) Our synod realigned itself with the church in America, creating the basis for the droning American voices preaching on the Lutheran Hour that filled the Sunday afternoons of my childhood. However, the events of the war years were not forgotten. The many experiences of nervous breakdowns, depression and even suicide are epitomised in Joan Dugdale’s novel Struggle of Memory (Queensland University Press, 1991), which recounts the tragic fall of her father-in-law from prominent Brisbane businessman to internment, deportation and finally to his lonely death by suicide in South Africa. Many years later, in a formal apology for the “shameful discrimination against Australians of German origin fostered during the world wars”, the then governor-general, Sir William Deane, acknowledged the resulting legacy of “emotional scars of injustice” in the German community. Cultural practices were also handed down behind closed doors along with a distrust of the rhetoric of nationalism and a deep
suspicion that to be German was to contain an essence that no amount of self-
transformation and conformity could ever erase.

My parents married during the Second World War. Dad was then pastor for the Dalby
congregation on the Darling Downs, the region where Queensland’s controversial
Lutheran Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen later settled. My father was kept under informal
surveillance for the duration of the war and saw several of his colleagues and
parishioners interned without apparent just cause.

Following the war, we moved south to Wollongong where he worked with Lutheran
refugees and displaced people fleeing the aftermath of the war. Australia now had an
official assimilation policy and in 1950 the then minister for immigration, Harold Holt,
spelt out exactly what this meant: “This is a British community and we want to keep it a
British community living under British standards and by the methods and ideals of
British Parliamentary democracy.” Such pronouncements reinforced feelings of
superiority within the Anglo-Celtic population, who had little sympathy for the
sufferings of their former enemies. Some established Lutherans influenced by wartime
propaganda, shared these views.

In 1949, the Lutheran Church Almanac noted the “staggering task which confronts us”.
With little supporting government infrastructure, apart from migrant hostels and forced
work programs, and given the state role of the church in Europe, migrants inevitably
turned to the church for help. Our home in Wollongong became a “one-stop-help-shop”
with my parents acting as social workers, counsellors, legal advisers, mediators and
translators and negotiating with courts, hospitals, doctors and schools. At baptisms, mar-
rriages and funerals and in times of crisis, they were often the only “family” people had.

The church encouraged assimilation but my father still preached and administered to
people in German as required. The acceptance and respect he offered were particularly
important in a world that was often hostile to German migrants. As children, our time
was taken up with this mission work as we absorbed German language, foods,
personalities and feelings of shame and secrecy over the war that surrounded us.

At the same time, as the Australian pastor’s children, we also felt apart from all this.
We were also different from Lutherans in established congregations who perhaps not
unexpectedly given the wartime propaganda, wanted little to do with these new German
Australians. Our way of life distinguished us from our Australian peers and was often a
source of resentment. While my girlfriends spent their weekends sunning themselves at
the beach, I led a busy “secret” life, attending youth meetings, cleaning the church,
playing the organ for weddings, baptisms and church services in German, Latvian,
Estonian and Finnish and attending German family parties with prodigious quantities of
spirits, beer, sweet strong coffee and multilayered cream cakes.
These were the crosscurrents of experiences, emotions, longings and imaginings I imbibed. Looking back, it is no surprise that I was drawn to connect with Germany. Loaded with this emotional and mental baggage on my “pilgrimage”, I was often left feeling surprised, frustrated and uncomfortable. Like all migrants, I had preconceptions and expectations that were locked in a cultural time warp. My first-generation migrant friends have stories of being applauded “back home” for performing “quaint old-fashioned” folk dances and for speaking dialects no longer used in their parents’ villages. My personal time warp was a powerful sensitivity to mention of the war, absorbed during a childhood caught between Dad’s congregation and wider community antipathies. This outlasted my studies of German public memory and the war, my related writings on analogies with disclosures of the “stolen generation” and history debates in Australia and my admiration for Anselm Kiefer’s revelatory paintings about the war.

As I travelled around Germany, comedian John Cleese’s phrase “don’t mention the war” echoed foolishly in my head. I say foolishly because references to the war were all around me - in the skylines, the bombed-out sites and reconstructed spaces, the abrupt clashes of classical and post-modern architecture, the discrete memorials, even television re-runs of Hogan’s Heroes dubbed in German and a plethora of war documentaries following the D-Day celebrations in which Germany participated for the first time. There was a major exhibition on the First World War and its memorialisation at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. “Not critical enough,” pronounced a German friend. “And there was no mention of the use of chemical warfare.” The horrors of Nazism were exposed in Jewish museums in Frankfurt and Berlin and in sections of the Topographies of Terror outdoor gallery on a surviving section of the Berlin Wall. A small exhibition on the allied bombing of Frankfurt referred intriguingly to “liberation from Nazi Socialism” at the end of the war. A fiery debate was erupting over the installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin’s major contemporary art gallery, of an art collection owned by Friedrich Christian Flick, the wealthy grandson of a notorious Nazi industrialist who had profited from slave labour in his wartime munitions factories and whose support for Hitler had earned him three years in prison. And there were anecdotes. A friend told of how, as a child, she had thought nothing of the eye patches and wooden arms and legs worn by her male teachers and of how she played in bombed ruins and how some children were blown to bits.

But, in the midst of all this, there was a particular silence. I heard no personal stories about what families actually did during the war, a fact dismissed by an expatriate Australian friend with the comment “everyone has secrets from the war”.

As the John Cleese mantra gradually slipped from my mind, it was replaced by a nagging question: could I somehow in some way still be German? This may have been
the legacy of those wartime fears about never being able or allowed to stop being German. As I looked around this possibility led to another question - what was a German? The stereotypes peddled by creators of war movies, television comedies and spy novels like those of Robert Ludlum, who writes in his latest novel of men with “a certain Germanic look about them - the rimless glasses, the Hitler moustaches, the beefy, well-fed arrogance”, are irrelevant to the ethnically diverse Germany of today. A Berlin cultural policy official told me that she dealt with more than 150 different ethnic groups, many of them former Gastarbeiter (guest workers) invited in by German governments in the 1950s and 1960s who had stayed on with their families. Despite an official policy of integration, many appear to live on the margins of German society. The two million Muslim Turks, Germany’s “last, poorest, and most visible” migrants, reportedly live in “virtual Turkey”, receiving ethnic satellite television in their living rooms and sending their children to Turkish schools. At an extravagant artist reception I attended in Berlin we ate Turkish food served by Turkish waiters, but I saw no Turkish guests. With unemployment at over 10 per cent and at least 55 per cent of Germans adamant that there are too many foreigners, authorities are viewing the future of ethnic youth - as many as one third of them “high school drop-outs” - as potentially “explosive”.

"It’s the language not the blood that makes you German,” claimed my trendy Berlin landlady, thereby sidestepping discussion of the country’s earlier “race-based” immigration laws and parroting a pivotal aspect of controversial new laws passed in May 2004. In addition to establishing generous quotas of skilled professional “foreigners” and tightening asylum procedures and security measures, the new immigration laws include the requirement that all foreigners must learn and speak German as part of the integration process. Communities failing to integrate could face the fate of 40,000 Vietnamese workers from the former East Germany sent back to Vietnam under a $150 million negotiated agreement, despite their protests and appeals for asylum. The language clause was disheartening for me personally, given my distressing performance as a German speaker, despite earlier years of familiarisation in church and high school classes. This marked me irrevocably as non-German, despite being “of the blood”.

Another question arose. Could I, a third-generation emigrant, qualify to return to Germany? The Australian Embassy advised that I would have to give up my Australian citizenship, which abruptly stopped this line of questioning. Giving up my citizenship was something I could never do. Perhaps this was how Johann Bruhn felt when he refused to be naturalised. But many others are making such permanent journeys back “home”. This “in-gathering” reflects economic and political changes in Europe - the economic benefits brought by the Economic Union and repercussions of the end of the Cold War. Many older migrants are returning to live out their lives “at home” after
working and raising their families abroad. Overseas-born young professionals are being enticed back by governments like Galicia in Spain, which is endeavouring to balance zero Galician population growth and continuing ethnic immigration by bringing back home first- and second-generation émigrés whose families fled Spanish fascism and poverty. To date, 150,000 have returned, making up 6 per cent of Galicia’s population. Since 1945, Germany’s post-war Aussiedler policy had allowed for the return of people stripped of German citizenship during the war and of the estimated 3 to 4 million ethnic Germans trapped in Soviet Russia, many of them exiled by Stalin to Siberia and Kazakhstan in the early 1940s. The steady trickle of escapees back to Germany was boosted by the fall of the USSR in 1991. Their return has been dogged by unemployment, language problems, and educational and cultural differences that set them off from fellow Germans.

These complex considerations slipped from my mind as I became a true genealogical tourist and began my one-day pilgrimage to Anna Bruhn’s homeland. The tourist brochures described this stretch of coastline as a popular holiday destination, a migratory-bird sanctuary, mudflats, bike paths, picturesque villages, local seafood and handicrafts. It sounded like a host of other places around the world - a global tourist destination for my very personal quest, so I was unprepared for the prettiness of the Dithmarsch and countryside shaped with such care by human hands. In a little village called Wohrden, I walked around the charming Lutheran church where Johann and Anna Bruhn were married in 1851 below a floating golden angel and visited a cemetery of flowering garden plots bursting with colour where I found the tombstone of a distant relative. Later, at the museum in neighbouring Meldorf, I admired the bridal embroidery and handmade lace and simple love tokens exchanged by newlyweds and a beautifully carved wooden chest like the one brought by Johann Bruhn to Australia. I also read of a distant ancestor, Wulf Isebrand, who in 1500 defeated an army of knights and mercenaries by opening the dykes and flooding the fields while his crew of peasants shouted “death rather than slavery”. Amid the museum’s bewilderingly perfect re-assemblages of a 1920s hospital operating theatre, schoolroom, pharmacy, pub and cinema, I glimpsed something more sinister - a wartime crowd scene in which a small blonde girl, looking very much like myself at the same age, raised her arm in the Nazi salute to a carload of passing officials.

I was also unprepared for the total lack of interest in my quest. The woman who opened the church at Wohrden told me, when pressed, that most local people had migrated to North America and that few ever come back. She was not interested in my story. The mayor of nearby Barsfleth, who bore the same name as Anna Bruhn’s father, was astounded that I should be interested in places and people from so long ago. I had assumed that those who remained were the keepers of tradition; his historical
consciousness seemed to stop with his father’s death on the Russian front. Speaking in Platt Deutsch, he emphatically fobbed off my efforts to claim him as kin. After posing uncomfortably for a photograph beneath a flag bearing the family crest, he was rescued by his son who kindly offered to drive me to the museum in Meldorf. As we sped down Barsfleth Deich (actually a road), the place given as Anna Bruhn’s birthplace on her death certificate, he casually pointed to a house that his mother, who had remained in the kitchen during my visit, said would have been Anna’s home. When I pressed him to stop briefly to look at the North Sea, I tried to imagine Anna as a young girl walking along the mudflats or watching the wild storms out to sea, but, spoilt by the beauty of the Australian coastline, I just kept asking myself why anyone would want to come here for a seaside holiday.

On the next day, before leaving for Amsterdam, I visited the Hamburg docks and the nearby Lutheran cathedral that Johann and Anna Bruhn may have visited as they waited to set sail for Moreton Bay. The Sunday morning service was in progress so I sat quietly in a back pew. The congregation was singing a well-known Lutheran hymn to familiar organ harmonies led by a pastor clad in the plain black robes of pastors back home. Suddenly it hit me, that powerful feeling of home that I had been searching for. After all my research and travels I had found “home” in a space and performance duplicated in Lutheran churches all around Australia every Sunday and that I had participated in each week of my life until I left home in my late teens.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. In going away I had come home to somewhere that I had left long ago but that remained buried deep inside me. It was this realisation that determined the next stage of my journey, which took me back home to find out about the diasporic German Lutheran community that had shaped my early life. It seemed ironic that my experiences as a genealogical tourist had dampened my interest in an imagined ancestral homeland and pushed me back to my roots in Australia. I wondered how many of my fellow travellers return home with the same feeling.

1 http://www.btinternet.com/~paulbasu/proposal.html
2 Otto Theile One Hundred Years of the Lutheran Church in Queensland [Brisbane, Publication Committee of the Queensland District United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, 1938].