

Please Read This... If you are raising MKs

In some ways I have a unique perspective on MKs. I am an MK, but now I'm also the mom of MKs. Missionary life is very different on the adult side of things. I have MK friends, now grown and living in the States. Some made the transition well years ago, some more recently, some – at 20 years back in the States – still don't feel at home in the land of their passport. I spent the years between age 4 and 18 in Germany. The next almost 18 years I was in the States. Now I'm back in Germany (and believe me, no one was more surprised than me to land here! But that's a story for another time.) So I have effectively lived half my life in one country and half in another. I have been perfectly happy in Germany. I have been perfectly happy in the States. This is my advice for those of you (and me!) who are raising MKs now.

This article is not in any way a comprehensive study on what makes for good and healthy transitions for MKs. What it is, however, is my conclusions on why my transition to the States from Germany wasn't the trauma it is for so many, and why I love both the country of my birth and the home of my childhood. Now the weight is on me to pass that dual love on to my kids.

I moved to Germany at the age of four, and although I have vague memories of America, most of my childhood memories were made in Germany. Still, I have a deep love for America that came out of the stories and lore my parents told me.

I grew up learning the Pledge of Allegiance and the words to the US anthem, God Bless America, and America the Beautiful. I knew about Kate Smith years before hearing a recording of her iconic rendition. I knew the all-importance of American Football years before I ever saw my first set of downs – to say NOTHING of understanding what on earth they were doing on that big green field. I knew which pro-sports teams to unwaveringly hold to (Philadelphia teams, if you want to know) and wore their gear. I dreamed about being asked to homecoming and getting my yearbook signed long before I had ever seen a high school. I wanted to go to a State Fair decades before I had even tasted a funnel cake.

Although my parents lived and ministered in Germany, loved the people deeply, and became as much of the culture as foreigners could, they also instilled a love in us for the heritage we had by nationality, not first-hand experience.

My mom would tell me about Friday night football games at her high school, when the Galloping Ghost (the school mascot) would ride onto the field to the cheers of the assembled crowd wearing school colors, whipped into an excited frenzy by cheerleaders (whatever they were), waving their school-spirit-inducing pom-poms.

My dad told stories of growing up in a city, next to his school's baseball field and playing pickup games of baseball after school every day until it was too dark to see the ball. Later, when his family had moved to the country, he raised giant lop-eared rabbits for the State Fair and played 1st chair trombone in his high school marching

band (yes, and they won State his senior year). He told about summer vacations with his parents, driving west to the Grand Canyon, dragging the obligatory (and for me, mystique-filled) silver Airstream camper.

By the time I moved to the States at age 18, I understood references like “read my lips”, knew about the Miracle on Ice, knew where my parents were when Kennedy was assassinated (I wasn’t alive yet to have that memory), and understood idioms and references out of every day American life – “Now you see it; Now you don’t”. I knew who Archie and Edith Bunker were, and could quote Bill Cosby’s stand-up routines.

I had a huge advantage entering American life.

Now, before you start getting your hackles up about all sorts of issues... let me point out: I also knew the German National Anthem. I loved (LOVED) German soccer; I do until today. (I still cry when they win in any World Cup game – even qualifiers.) I get defensive when people run Germans and/or Germany down. Some of my closest and longest-held friendships are with Germans. There are some hymns I prefer to sing in German. There are some Bible verses that roll off my tongue better in German. I also love Germany.

So why are these seemingly trivial bits of Americana so important to us who do not grow up in the States? You have kids. I’m targeting you, the adult missionary with kids. Give your kids a heritage to go with their navy blue passport. Create for them an imagined community with other Americans.

Imagined communities, a term originally coined by Benedict Anderson in his eponymous book in 1981, are communities that are different from actual communities in that they are “not (and, for practical reasons, cannot be) based on everyday face-to-face interaction between its members” (Wikipedia). Although originally this term referred mainly to building nationalism, it occurs on the microcosmic level as well. Student or worker revolutions often rise up because of imagined communities. It is the sense of being a part of a larger organism and feeling a sense of belonging in that community.

It’s extremely powerful stuff.

Oftentimes when MKs return to the US for college, they go to “re-entry” seminars. Many college campuses (especially Christian ones) have MK groups, such as MuKappa, and other, less organized ones. Let me make it clear that I do NOT vilify these groups. They definitely have their place. Having a group of people just as out-of-water and out-of-touch and homesick as you to dump on, to draw strength from, is very important.

However.

If the *only* community MKs can connect with are the other MKs, they may never fully integrate into the US, either. It may take years for them to feel at home – years where they sit on the fringes wondering what everyone meant by the “game-changing safety”, and why no one was talking about the “real” game – the friendly match-up between Argentina and Brazil.

Feeling like an outsider in everything they may be more likely to rebel against everything – America, their faith, their parents, etc. If, however, there has always been the imagined community of “America” as created for them by their parents, made up in part of extremely mundane Americana, they can draw on this and blend into American life more easily.

“Imagined America” doesn’t guarantee easy “Actual America”. No amount of anecdotes can compare with actually having grown up somewhere. I grew up thinking that “barbeque” was the same word in English as in German, defined as “grilling stuff”. In my first summer in South Carolina I was invited to a barbeque at a lake. Someone brought me a Carolina-style BBQ sandwich – pulled pork in a mustard-based sauce. My first thought was, “How on EARTH do they keep these shredded bits of meat from falling through the grate into the coals??”

My imagined America is shinier and more idealistic than the real America ever was. I know that. I know there are all sorts of problems with America – both historically and now. But I also have a deep, abiding love for my countries: both my birth country and the country that raised me.

As you raise your kids abroad, remember: Your kids don’t need assistance in loving the only country they have ever known. You need that, as an American entering a new culture. Help them now love the country they will return to some day, the country of their birth. You can’t start too soon.