As you may know, the German Language Village was founded in 1961 in the same week the Berlin Wall was built. That wall fell in 1989, but our program continues to thrive, thanks to you and your children.

Over the years thousands of young people, families, adult learners and staff have experienced the magic of Waldsee’s unique brand of experiential education. The Village’s splendid location in the Minnesota North Woods evokes its name, which can be translated as “Forest Lake” or “Lake of the Woods.” As the first Language Village, the Waldsee name was the inspiration for the name of almost all of the other 14 Language Villages.

It has recently come to our attention that the name Waldsee is associated with a dark period of German history. We have addressed this letter to you, and leave to your parental discretion the degree to which you would like to inform or discuss this issue with your children. The issue is likely to come up during our summer sessions, so we would like to tell you about it and to tell you what we plan to do about it.

The “Waldsee” Deception:
During World War II, from early 1942 until late 1944, in order to achieve the Nazi goal of Jewish annihilation, killing centers were established in areas where there were large populations of Jews. German trains delivered Jews from all over German-occupied Europe to these killing centers, of which Auschwitz was one.

Most of those transported to Auschwitz were unaware of their ultimate destination. In the novel Fatelessness, written by Nobel Prize-winning Hungarian author Imre Kertész, the book’s young narrator describes how the Jews crowded onto trains were told of their supposedly idyllic destination: Waldsee.

"I am completely ignorant how (but some adults did discover it) we learned that our journey’s end was a place named Waldsee. When I was thirsty or hot, the promise contained in that name immediately invigorated me."

Before they were led to the Auschwitz gas chambers, Hungarian, Greek and most likely other Jews at the camp were told to fill out a postcard telling friends and family at home that they were well. The postcards were postmarked “Waldsee” to deceive those receiving the postcards into believing that the sender was enjoying time in a picturesque location. “I am in good health and I am doing fine,” the cards read. “I am working,” or “I have arrived safely. I have got work in my occupation,” “Wish you were here” or “Follow us here!”

A brief description of “Waldsee postcards” from the website of ALMA, a foundation for the liberal arts in Brooklyn, NY, continues the story:
" … a member of Budapest’s Jewish Council, which had been charged with delivering these postcards, noticed that the “Waldsee” postmark appeared superimposed over the name of someplace ending in “-witz.” Later, he discerned “Auschwitz” on a card sent to him by two acquaintances who had signed themselves with Hebrew words for “hungry” and “unclothed” to indicate their true circumstances. In fact, the SS dictated such postcards to concentration camp prisoners, often en route to the gas chamber."

Although historians, the Jewish community, and many members of the informed public have known this historical episode, we were unaware of it until this spring. We are stunned and shocked. However, we are also committed to address the many issues and questions associated with this period of German history and its implications for our Village name and the community it has represented over six decades.

We seek to address this issue
reflectively, respectfully, meaningfully and inclusively;
appropriately for the ages we serve;
in ways that ensure remembrance;
in ways that strengthen our learning community;
in ways that are emblematic of our mission;
and in ways that offer learning opportunities for a wider audience.

Beginning immediately, we are undertaking the following steps.

- We are sending you this note informing you of our belated awareness of this issue, and inviting interested members of our community to engage with us on our journey of exploration.
- We are forming an advisory committee composed of leading scholars of German history and Jewish and Holocaust Studies, and K-12 Holocaust education, teachers of German, members of the National Advisory Council, as well as Waldsee supporters, parents and alumni. The Advisory Committee will meet at the German Language Village this summer to learn from each other about the historical record and about the history of our program, village, and community within the context of Concordia Language Villages. At the end of the summer, the advisory committee will recommend appropriate ways we may address the implications arising from deeper knowledge of this issue.
- We are reaching out to the towns of Bad Waldsee and Waldsee in Germany to understand how they have dealt with this issue.
- We will train and equip a leadership team among our staff to facilitate discussions that may arise this summer with fellow staff, villagers, parents and visitors.
- During the afternoon of each of our two International Days — July 6 and August 10 — we will host an open public discussion of these issues at the German Language Village.
- On opening and closing days, the Village Dean will be available to discuss with parents and visitors any questions or concerns they may have resulting from this issue.
- In September, we will recommend appropriate steps we can take to address the legacy of this issue and its meaning for our program in future.

The mission of Concordia Language Villages is to inspire courageous global citizens. That starts with the courage we want to muster to address this issue, and we thank those who have brought it to our attention.

We look forward to another magical summer with our many villagers in the Minnesota North Woods, and we thank you for your support of our program.

*Originally sent as an email message on May 29, 2018.*