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## Festival allows everyone to be German for the day

### 112th annual German Festival encourages everyone to enjoy the wurst

By [Chris Kaltenbach](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Amid all the beer and sauerkraut, all the wurst and schnitzel and strudel of every kind, 6-year-old E.J. Johnson was the clear hit of the 112th German Festival on Sunday.

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That's what happens when you don a brand-new Tyrolean hat and lederhosen and dance nonstop to a steady succession of polkas and oom-pah tunes.

In fact, when you're that busy, there's not much time to talk, or to contemplate. Asked what he liked best about the festival, E.J. flashed a gap-toothed grin, said simply, "dancing," and continued clapping and swaying to the rhythm.

"Oh, he loves it," said E.J.'s granddad, Walter Johnson. "We came up here yesterday, and we just had to come back today."

Unlike some of the 3,000 or so people who made their way to the state fairgrounds in Timonium over the weekend for one of the Baltimore area's oldest ethnic festivals, E.J. actually has some German in him. Two sets of great-grandparents, the Vogts and the Reinhardts, both hailed from Deutschland, said his father, Ed Johnson.

"I think it's important he experience a little bit of our family's German heritage," he said as E.J. continued to dance away with a series of partners.

In fact, it would have been hard not to feel at least a little German at the festival, even for those whose knowledge of the language begins and ends with "gesundheit." No one demanded that you know a German "W" is pronounced like a "V" — order a "wurst" but pronounce it "worst" and you'd still get a delicious German sausage on a hard roll (add a dollar and they'd throw on sauerkraut). Plenty of Jagermeister and Spaten beer was available to wash it down. For dessert, one could choose from apple, cherry or cheese strudel — or, of course, German chocolate cake.

"I'm pretending to be German," said Terri Ball of Hampden, who took to the dance floor, beer in hand (her first, she swore), to learn some German folk dancing on the fly.

Jim Schaub, past president of the German Society of Maryland, said a festival like this is important not only to celebrate people's German heritage, but Baltimore's as well. Much of South Baltimore was settled by German immigrants in the 19th century, and reminders of that heritage are scattered throughout the city, in names such as the Otterbein community, Hanover Street, even Berger cookies.

"It's important that people be reminded that you're part of something bigger than your family," said Schaub, whose organization was one of the festival's sponsors. "It's important to be reminded of Germany's importance to Maryland and to the nation."

Among those looking to preserve some of that heritage was Brenda Miller. She had come from her home in Myerstown, Pa., to sell her own intricate German paper cuttings, examples of a craft known as scherenschnitte that she says is in danger of dying out. She said she knows of few other artisans still practicing the craft.

"I would hate to see it die," said Miller, whose creations included Lincoln profiles, which take about 10 minutes of cutting, and Noah's Ark, complete with animals, that requires about 10 hours. "I'm hoping someone else will take it up and make it their passion."

Not everyone, however, came to the festival out of any sense of obligation. A lack of German in her bloodline didn't stop Priscilla Wainwright from coming down from Philadelphia for the day, clad in a traditional German dirndl. True, she learned a little German in high school, but that's about as much of a connection as she can claim. Not that it mattered.

"Everybody's German today!" Wainwright extolled as she began another stroll around the floor of the exhibition hall, where about two dozen vendors, equally split between sellers of food and goods, were prepared to help everyone have a guten tag. "It's just like St. Patrick's Day, when everybody's Irish!"

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