

Playing a Memory: My Grandmother Explains German Whist

“We played plenty of card games!” Ida Zeigler seemed positively overwhelmed at the sudden reminder of her days in a British boarding school for girls – far away from her family in Uhingen, Germany. “I remember we played with an old, ratty set of cards - they were flimsy and falling apart because we played so much. That made cheating easier because we had gotten so familiar with them we could recognize the folds. No one said anything, though, because playing those card games was one of the only times we had to ourselves.” With a strict lights-out policy at 8:30, no one could blame these restless teens for keeping their unscrupulous play to themselves in order to salvage the recreational nature of the games they so looked forward to.

Out of the endless games each girl presented to the group from the various lands where they resided, a form the popular Whist card game, called German Whist, remains Ida’s timeless favorite. Ironically, this particular type of Whist originated in Britain and has no actual German premise. However, when the dormitory lights were turned out and it came time to pick a game, Ida was quick to suggest “my whist,” as she put it.

To learn the game, I proposed we play it as she had played it so long ago. I began by shuffling the cards. I did so devoid of fervor so as to not seem patronizing out of respect – it seems my older German relatives carry a gene for being unnecessarily proud and easily insulted. My sister politely asked to participate as the second player – partly because she was interested in learning the game, and partly because Ida’s arthritis made her hands very frail, but she would never have said so. Now, with Ida the ringleader, we began to learn German Whist.

German Whist is for 2 players. The game involves a standard international deck where aces are ranked high. One player begins by dealing 13 cards each. In the center of the table you place the undealt cards face down. On top of this stock you turn over only the topmost card. This visible card designates the trump suit for the hand. This means that during game play, if the opponent does not carry the lead card's suit, they can play the trump suit, if at all possible, to automatically win that hand.

The game is played for tricks, but this is not relevant to the score until the second half of the game. The first half consists of one full game (13 tricks) that is played where there are no point consequences and the object is to win high cards from the stock. Beginning with the dealer's opponent, a card is placed on the table, followed by one in rebuttal from the dealer. The second card placed must match the first in terms of suit if at all possible. When two of the same suits are laid down, the highest ranking one wins the showing stock card. However, if the opponent puts down another suit, the player who led gets the trick. This is unless that different suit was the trump suit revealed on the present stock card in which case the trump wins. The winning hand then takes the trump card from the stock and adds it directly to their hand while the loser takes the next facedown stock card and places it in their hand. In this way all players maintain 13 cards. After each trick, the used cards are placed face down off to the side. Then the top card of the remaining stock is turned face-up. The winner of the previous trick leads a card for the next one. This continues until the stock cards run out, and, as a result, the second half begins. Players maintain their order so that the winner of the final trick in the first half leads the second half. This part of the game is played without the replenishment of stock cards ultimately leading to a final winner. Tricks won in this round are kept in front of each player like

daunting trophies and who ever wins the majority of the remaining 13 tricks wins the second stage as well as the hand.

As we played on, my sister and I agreed that the game was well paced and easily understood for beginners such as ourselves. The more difficult part, however, was deciphering universal tactics for winning. Ida was less than helpful believing that we could stand on our own and learn from trial and error like she did. After continuing our play with Ida's judgmental eyes ever watchful, we discovered that, because the goal of the first stage is to collect cards that will assist towards your success in stage two, you need to use your judgment as to whether the exposed card on the stock is likely to be better than the unknown card underneath it in order to determine if and when you should try to win a trick. We found that even if there is an average card, like a Jack, available on the stock, it is still not worth losing a high card for it. In the end it comes down to trial and error, which, in my opinion, adds a certain amount of excitement and chance to the game play. It is because of this perfect combination of control and luck that the game provides not only meaningful play, but also hours of enjoyment.

As is told throughout card gaming history, Whist became the most popular international game during this time, only to be replaced by Bridge. Whist even gave birth to a variety of card games played all over the world, including Hearts, Spades, and Poker. Today, mainly in Britain, you can find tournaments for the classical game proving that the game's success surpasses time and age limitations. The most meaningful part of this game for me, however, was the window it provided into my grandmother's past. Much like the resilience of Ida's memory, the resilience of this timeless international pastime should not be forgotten.