

NINA FRANOSZEK in GERMAN AMERICANS



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German Americans – Deutsche in Amerika

The protagonists of this work were raised in Germany and immigrated to the United States for various reasons. As they are familiar with the German as well as the American society, they have a wealth of experience, which can add to better understand societal processes within Germany. So far, six exhibits were held in the US and Germany. Additional exhibits are scheduled for 2008.

Online-Version:

<http://www.deutsche-in-amerika.net/>



Nina Franoszek
Actor
Venice Beach, CA
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Where are you from originally and when did you move to the US?

I was born in Western Berlin, and have lived in Vienna and several other cities. Since 1991, I've commuted between NYC, LA and Berlin. Los Angeles has been the center of my life since 1997.

What were the reasons for you to move to the US?

Los Angeles is an important station in my life, eventually the most important one. From the beginning I had an inner certainty that I belong here. And, I feel at home here. The discussions with German-Jewish immigrants and dealing with my own family history took place here. Friends and colleagues from American Co-productions I took place in persuaded me. The movie industry's Mecca is here and I saw the chances to follow my profession. This probably affirmed my decision even more.

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Is your German background important to you?

Yes, it makes who I am; this is where I am from. I owe Germany a lot: my good education, my carrier, my culture-political and social sense of responsibility, my environmental awareness and the best friends in the world.

How would you characterize your relationship with your family? My brother lives in Miami, he therefore kind of represents my family on the east coast and my mother is an artist traveling the world who just had an exhibition in LA. Her children broadened her world and horizon even more. After my father's death my brother and I emigrated. It feels good to me that he is sort of just around the corner.

How important are factors like work, residence, relationship, and family?

Work = creativity and expression of my soul. Apartment = island for relaxation, playground, room for meditation, shelter. Relationship = completion, balance, to give and to take, good sex. Family = roots, happiness, friends, home. I love my acting work very much and perceive it as a huge privilege to earn money with my passion! This acting work and my unstable income situation make me live relatively moderately but nevertheless quite intensively. The ocean is only five minutes away. I keep my artistic freedom by this. My apartment is flooded with light and my point of rest in an otherwise exciting life that's characterized by lots of traveling. Relationships, family and friends are the most important bases of my life.

What do you value most about the German society, what not at all?

I appreciate our quality of life, education, health system, social security, environmental awareness, culture, music, literature, and fine arts. I don't understand why we now start making education, culture and national health with costs and start copying the negative aspects of American society. Americans show an expression of ecstatic incomprehension when being told about a treatment in a health resort, which is part of the German national health system, and how many Germans use this chance every year. I appreciate the depth and diversity, a land full of potential that didn't realize this yet. I appreciate less that the right-wing national party (NPD) moved into the Saxonian parliament. In Germany the idea prevails that the cake is small and everybody has to fight for his bit of which nothing is to be shared. In comparison, in America there is opulence, a mentality of The Wishing Table. Germany often seems narrow like a doll's house. Endlessly rich, but deeply unhappy. Often concerned, living in the past, romantic, sentimental and loving our scapegoat role. I hope we will leave this behind soon, realize and appreciate what we can give to the world despite or right because of our history.

What's typically German?

Envy, laziness, but not being caught. Not really wanting to work, but to demand a great deal. Schadenfreude and stinginess. Prohibitive bureaucracy, finickiness and perpetual nagging. Being in a bad mood, If we don't have it, we cannot make it-attitude. Being happy or in a good mood is considered as superficial. Talking about the weather, making excuses with ones history, being racist against oneself and each other, search for meaning, spiritual search, knowing-it-all, tidiness, dutifulness, Vereinsmeier, using elbows all the time, big dreams, small reality, living in the good old times, changing between megalomania and sense of inferiority, egocentricity, talking oneself very serious and important, but being meanwhile able to laugh about oneself, pathetic, stressed out, distraught, problem oriented, fearful, feelings are being controlled, only anger is officially allowed as a feeling, but pain is not, cynicism, an unhappy `yes, but...'-society, thinking about ones image all the time, it's important what others think about you: be like everybody else. Be careful. Make everything like you have been told. Penalize yourself when you make mistakes! You have to have permission for everything, fear of judgment, the idea that German culture is superior, who isn't German is automatically wrong. Still a society that rejects its fathers. Women always wear the pants. Beer. Romantics. From Karl May to Wagner. Heine, Rilke, Hölderlin, Fassbinder, Red Army Fraction (RAF), Heino and so much more.

My inner picture: Germany is green, clear sea landscapes, where during summer we dive into the water naked and where during winter we skate melancholically...

It's indeed unfair that my cultural heritage contains all these characteristics with which I identify and am happy with. Luckily I don't need to write down here all the Polish or Jewish

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characteristics that are also part of me...

As a Berliner I also perceive myself differently: All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words ›Ich bin ein Berliner.« (‘I am a Berliner.’ President John F. Kennedy, June 26, 1963).

Adolf Hitler’s party bulletin »Völkischer Beobachter« (“People’s Observer”) denounced the German capital city: ‘a melting-pot of all evil – prostitutes, bars, cinemas, Marxism, Jews, strippers, dancing Negroes and all bad influences of modern art.’
By the way, an American President said the same about Hollywood and Los Angeles.

What comes to mind when you hear the term Heimat?

Where I feel at home. Where I am welcome. In my heart.

Do you consider yourself German?

Yes, this is where I am from. Like a tree my roots are there, but my arms meanwhile reach into the world.

How and where do you see Germany’s influence on the US?

Hardly any in general society apart from October fests, beer, sauerkraut, wurst and the wish for a Mercedes, BMW or a new Beetle from VW. Old Nazi pictures are still prevailing in most parts of the society and are even further confirmed by movies about WWII. Last year (2003) we invested \$ 137 billions in the States. German movie funds finance Hollywood movies with German taxes (i.e. “Chicago”) while at the same time film funding in Germany is being cut (e.g. Hamburg). In this case one should better talk about cash flow instead of influence as in American media Germany has hardly any presence. I still believe in German Movies. They can and will help that people get a new picture of Germany. Movies like “Run Lola Run”, “The Women of Rosenstrasse”, “The Miracle of Bern” and “Good bye Lenin”, to name just a few make a huge impression. A lot of work is left to do for responsible and culture-political people.

What do you value most about the US society, what not at all?

I have to mention here that I am an Angelina, a person living in Los Angeles. Most of my friends here and elsewhere are artists, intellectuals, writers, musicians, theater workers, filmmakers, healers and spiritual-oriented people. The George-W.-Bush-loving America and the Midwest feel strange to me. I move around between urban, cosmopolitical centers like LA, NYC and Berlin, which I don’t perceive as typically American or German in terms of their individualistic characters. Though, don’t these centers constitute Germany and America?

I love California: flip flops, casual clothing, friendliness and of course the ocean. I appreciate the liberalism, informality, and individual freedom on the West coast—its diversity, multiculturalism, equal rights, openness, enthusiasm, optimism, innovation, constant changing and progress, looking toward the future, focus on solutions, the youthful, spiritual, groundbreaking, reassuring think-out-of-the-box-attitude. The belief that people can change and learn and that everybody gets a second chance if necessary.

And, it actually is the nation of endless opportunities, where everybody can make it. LA is my platform, my touch down field, my widened horizon, my enlarged playing field, my multicultural microcosm, my Hollywood myth, my Sodom and Gomorra, my biggest aversion, the love of my life, my big unknown, my intoxication, my sobriety, my canvas, my projection screen, my illusion, my reality, my city of angels, my spiritual retreat, my homoeopathic treatment, my catharsis, my Venice, my home, my non-definition.

I appreciate less: The inclination to elect actors for senator or even president. American politicians’ egos and their love of colonization and bombardment of other countries. Love of weapons and fear; fear of neighbors, fear to lose your belongings. This sole orientation towards profits in American disposable society that lacks any environmental conscience. This clear uninterest in rising poverty and many national drawbacks (for example, conditions in American prisons or Native American reservations, the warming global atmosphere, personal debts and Americans’ dependency on credit cards. The ignorance of the American media; it is not informative (or only selectively) and therefore add fuels to anxiety (e.g., the politics of Bush, reality TV, Jerry Springer.)

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Silicon tits, the uniformly surgically-enhanced nose, and the never ending Botox smile with lip service.

Politics and patriotism is being mixed in America right now and it's very important that we don't lose what we have... Americans love primitive solutions for complex problems that you can use as a bumper sticker slogan without having to think too much.

As an artist I feel responsible and I believe it to be my duty to distinguish between these "black-and-white-", "good-versus-evil-issues", to make nuances visible and dogmas transparent, to encourage debate and personal reflection.

What would you see as typically American?

God is permanently defined anew, as God saves America. Superiority complex, Big-Brother-syndrome, hyper criticism, capitalism and globalization. It's not about nations anymore but about corporate groups worldwide.

Love of the gun and being the world's biggest supplier of weapons. Since American society is influenced by so many values and beliefs from every part of the world, I find it difficult to define what typical American values are.

Generally speaking one could say that Americans are pretenders who are sentimental, omnipotent, megalomaniac, ignorant, looking away from national calamities, renouncing their own history, feeling superior and egocentric. Generalizations of this kind are dangerous, though. It's for sure that we are a nation of immigrants, multicultural, but also ethnocentric and contradictory at present. We are freedom-loving individualists.

From very early age, Americans are encouraged to be brave and independent and to fulfill their own goals in life. The more Americans make an effort to reach these goals, the more they are rewarded. It's all about personal achievement, success and money, not so much about personal relations. Everyone is responsible for his or her own life and progress. Everyone can make it. Competitiveness and the right opportunities count. A better future is promised to everyone who works hard enough. Obsession with mass media, consumerism, body image and love for the fallen son who gets up again—all this leaves a mark on American society. With capitalism comes a bombardment of consumer products and advertising. For example, an unreachable, idealistic image of women is created to market thousands of beauty products and surgical operations, etc.

The Midwest is white, religious, Christian, Protestant, prudish, and family focused: men and women are defined according to their respective gender roles.

Baseball and football. Sport gives me a deeper understanding of society. Individualism is important, but you also have to be a team player. It's all about the collective game; the individual can't take himself too seriously otherwise he's kicked out. Arrogant behavior quickly creates a problem here, whereas in Germany, the same attitude would be interpreted as managing quality.

What were your expectations when you first came to the US?

I expected the biggest challenge of my life, professionally, privately, mentally, and spiritually. I wasn't disappointed. Do you identify yourself with the US and also with the place you live at? No, but I like living in Los Angeles and am a true Berliner—this defines me.

What defines the American Dream? Do you pursue your own American Dream?

Everyone can make it', says the American Dream even if this means having three jobs at a time. And, who isn't a millionaire yet, at least strives to become his own boss, have two children, a dog, a house with a garden and a white wooden fence, and to be happy until the end of his days. I personally more and more question material and individual success. In a global world a dream cannot be valid anymore that's aiming for personal, individual improvement of life. If the whole world would live according to the American Dream, it would destroy itself. I follow my dreams that not necessarily are American. But I love the optimism.

What is the relevance of being in touch with fellow Germans in the US?

We are expatriates, often like-minded people, brace, taking risks, often people who not only

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talk but also act. We are self-made men and women, autodidacts, but also professionals and stars. Those who like each other, support each other. Often we are connected by the same mentality, sometimes even the same immigration lawyer. Living in the unknown makes you love your heimat; this at least is the case with me. But heimat is often a picture of Germany in your mind before immigration. My West and East Berlin doesn't exist anymore. The Berlin of today is a new city, where I am out over and over again if I don't orientate myself anew every time. We mentally conserve the Germany of our immigration and continue living it abroad. I think it's very interesting how diverse and sometimes even worldly innocent the picture of Germany is of German immigrants. This can lead to quite some misunderstandings. The other day I met someone who immigrated 20 years ago when he was 18 and he still didn't know that there exists a German-Turkish generation of our age in Germany that's meanwhile received several awards of the German movie industry. Naturally the Eastern German immigrant meets the American world differently than the Western German immigrant, even the reasons for immigration may have been different ones. But this questionnaire will probably answer this. As a German engaged in the cultural sector the distance to my homeland is very inspiring, revealing and over and over again motivating. It led to a fruitful examination of my own identity, and the ability to see some things better from a distance.

Do you travel often between Germany and the US?

Yes, I always come back to Germany for filming.

What did you feel were major changes after 9/11, if any at all?

Directly afterwards we were all united, there for each other, looking for each others well being, peaceful, reflecting, full of love, spiritual, and concentrated on the true values in life. Today fear dominates. There is more helplessness, distrust aggression and anger in the air. Adverseness and bad temper, fear of loosing control, more controversy, but also confusion, America's fear to loose face because of the war in Iraq, as well as blind anger at the evil rest of the world. Unpleasant.

How and where do you see America's influence on Germany?

An unbelievable big one. From Oscar to the Reagan funeral, we follow American events live without the big brother even knowing it. By being liberated by the Americans and their occupation of West Germany, Americans left a huge imprint on us and still do. 15 Million American soldiers have been stationed in Germany since the end of WWII. After 9/11 this identification went so far that we even believed to be Americans ourselves. This could be seen in the media as well as in movies. Some Germans showed their affiliation with t-shirts saying, >Ich bin ein Amerikaner< instead of calling for 'Solidarity with the Americans.'

American actors and musicians have a significantly higher position than German artists. They are viewed as role models. German stars are brought down with an incomparable passion. The French, also the British and Spanish have a completely different self-esteem than us and value their artists respectively. It seems to me that we are still afraid of German heroes, and therefore better adopt a Bruce Willis. History catches up with us. I wish we had more self-respect and love of our identity. Sometimes I have the feeling that we blue-eyed prefer to take the complete American nonsense rather than learn from our own mistakes and follow our own innovative ways. But this is starting mainly in the Eastern German states.

In daily life on a language-pathological level we develop something like Denglish that intrudes colloquial speech and advertising banners. This new form of language doesn't have anything to do with American colloquial language, but this seems to disturb nobody. Another interesting linguistic addition emerges from a constant affusion with German dubbings of American movies and TV serials. (>Als First Mover sollte ich eigentlich mit der Fantasie-Talke ne verdammt coole, amusing Comedy Action anpowern.<) Sooner or later this will develop a new American language, a German American language, and we, we ill declare ourselves to be the better Americans. Then we have finally found an identity, we can be proud of.

Would you consider going back to Germany for good? If so, why?

Germany is my home village, familiar but also a bit narrow. I can always come back and discover it anew, because much is moving there and I can bring in myself into the new. But I don't know if I'll ever go back permanently. I first think of Italy, Paris, Tahiti... well, I won't even start with this here...