Americans Are Natural Teachers of National Pride

By Andrea Witt

I was in a tailor shop in New York, talking to an old man, when I first saw it. The sleeve of his shirt exposed a thin forearm. Barely visible after all those years, covered by graying hair, there was the tattoo. The number, forever imprinted by the Nazis to mark him as an outcast, an inferior, a prisoner of the death camps.

The old man smiled and asked me, "So, what country are you from?"

I remember the heat, the sweat breaking out on my hands and the thoughts flying through my head: Holocaust, I am German, genocide, Germany, death, extinction, responsibility, German. And in the end there was only the feeling of guilt, and the silence. I stared helplessly at the old man, then turned around and left the shop. I couldn't speak to him.

That was my first encounter with a Holocaust survivor. One way for a German to meet her country's history.

Today, I think it was more than a mere coincidence that I met that old man during my first visit to the United States, five years ago.

Visiting America always has meant more to me than simply experiencing a different country and lifestyle. It has also been a kind of mirror, a way of reflecting on my own culture, history and what the words "being German" mean.

Americans celebrate and even embrace their nationality in ways that would never occur in Germany. Growing up, I learned to relate words such as "nation," "fatherland," "patriotism" and "flag" to the terrible nationalism and destruction that Germany brought to the world. Although I consider Germany today a healthy democracy like other Western countries, it's still hard for me to say out loud, "I'm proud to be German." I sometimes envy Americans who say so easily, "I'm proud to be an American."

Simple things still strike me in the States. The willingness, or better yet, the happiness that most Americans show when they jump up to sing their national anthem.

We have qualms about singing our full national anthem, the words written by August von Fallersleben in 1841. It's almost a crime to sing the first verse, which is strongly associated with Nazi ideology.

Every time I am abroad and hear the first tones of my country's anthem, I fear they will start singing that first verse: "Germany, Germany above all others, above all others in the entire world."

The other night I went to a nightclub in downtown Atlanta. I saw a woman on the dance floor. Her dress was made from the American flag. I was dumbstruck. What an outrageous idea. Back in Berlin, even close friends would stare at me in bewilderment were I ever to show up like that, draped in the German flag. They might ask me whether I had joined some right-wing movement. It's not that I despise the German flag. I believe in the things it stands for now: a democracy that has grown for 50 years, a constitution that applies to a reunited Germany. I honor those beliefs, but I'd rather not deal with the national symbols of them, such as the flag and the anthem. Everything patriotic gives me a shudder.

But living in the United States not only taught me more about how I feel about Germany. I have also learned how Americans view my country. And I feel sad when I realize how little people in this country know about Germany. There is more to Germany than Nazism, the autobahn, and Oktoberfest.

I find myself telling Americans about the strong political system in Germany and the social network that is provided for the poor. And about the rich cultural life I enjoy so much in Berlin.

The other day, an American friend mentioned casually, "You sure are proud to be German." I guess I have come a long way, because I admitted to him that, yes, I am proud of my country's achievements.

Americans Are Natural Teachers of National Pride

The time I have spent in the United States has changed me. It has helped me develop a better, healthier attitude toward being German.

I realized that last month in Atlanta, when I met Benjamin Hirsch, the architect, another Holocaust survivor. Hirsch sat across from me and said angrily: "I'm sick and tired of Germans begging for my forgiveness. I can't forgive them. Only the real victims could do that and they are dead."

I found myself thinking about the old man I had met in New York five years ago. The heat, the embarrassment and the silence. This time I was able to speak.

"I believe that all Germans share responsibility for the Holocaust," I said as Hirsch nodded in agreement. "But the guilt, the guilt belongs to the real offenders."

Not to the next generations.

Andrea Witt, 26, is a reporter for Märkische Oderzeitung in Frankfurt/Oder, Germany, on a two month fellowship at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution