

4 Native Americans in Germany

Presenter: Welcome to today's podcast about Native Americans in Germany. I'm James Fowler and I'll be talking to Gemma who has been living in Germany for quite some time. Gemma, when did you actually come to Germany?

Gemma: I came here when my dad got stationed in Frankfurt about 45 years ago. He was a soldier in the US Army, and as you know there were thousands of American soldiers stationed in West Germany from 1945 to the 1990s.

Presenter: And that means that Native Americans who were serving in the US Army also came to Germany.

Gemma: That's right. But most Germans didn't really know about that. Because the meetings and get-togethers they had, the pow-wows, all took place inside the barracks, inside the army camps.

Presenter: But it didn't stay that way?

Gemma: No. You see, many in Germany had always had an interest in what they called the "Indianer", Indians. However, there have been quite a few false and strange ideas around. A lot of them have come from the books written by Karl May in the 19th century. In fact, Karl May created something like a fantasy Native American culture, a Wild West of his own, which often didn't have much to do with actual Native American life. Sometimes May just made things up because he thought that his readers would like them.

Presenter: I see. So, what kind of false ideas about Native Americans are there in Germany?

Gemma: Let me start with the word "Indianerehrenwort", which by the way was not used by Karl May. In German, if you promise to do something and then say that you give your "Indianerehrenwort", that means that you will do that thing, no matter what. Now, as nice as that may sound, but there is no expression like that in Native American culture. Germans invented it. Another thing is that, at least when I was a kid, we would play "cowboys and Indians", and when German kids played Native Americans, they did something they called "Kriegsgeheul". The English translation could be "war cry". The German kids would clap their hands on their mouths very quickly and make a howling sound. Like this. Really, all these kids grew up with the idea that when Native Americans went to war, they made these strange sounds, when in fact, we never did anything like it. But these hand-over-mouth cries are still thought to be part of our culture. And to me that's not acceptable.

Presenter: Now all of that happened when you were a child. What I would like to know is: Have things improved?

Gemma: Thanks for that question. Yes, things have improved. People in Germany know more about our culture now than they did when I was young. It seems to me that they are more careful and respectful. Native Americans living in Germany have been organizing guest talks, events and workshops about our culture. Many people have attended these events. However, even today some Europeans still expect us to wear some sort of animal costume and feathers in our hair. This makes communication a bit difficult sometimes. But I feel that things are going the right way.

Presenter: That's good to hear. Thanks for being with us, Gemma. Enjoy the rest of the day.