



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN
LISTENING SERIES

Milwaukee's German Heritage

by Carole Zimmer

Carole Zimmer: I'm Carole Zimmer, a reporter from New York, and I'm on my way to WUWM, the public radio station in Milwaukee. It's my first visit to the city.

Mitch Teich: This is Lake Effect. I'm Mitch Teich.

Bonnie North: And I'm Bonnie North.

Carole Zimmer: Bonnie North has lived in Milwaukee for 12 years. She also lived in Germany and she's agreed to help me find my way around the German community here.

Bonnie North: Milwaukee is, historically, such a German city. It was founded by German businessmen and people doing import and export. I'm not from here. So, I came to it not knowing the history other than knowing that there were a lot of beer makers here, and those were German.

Carole Zimmer: I ask North if she notices a difference in the way people now relate to German culture and the way they connected to it when she first came to live in Milwaukee.

Bonnie North: Milwaukee was such a strong German Lutheran community where friends of mine who are my age – I'm 60 – grew up speaking German at home, going to Lutheran services in German ... and then starting in the '60s as demographics changed, other people moved in, and the congregation fell away. We're much more multicultural now. It's a much more diverse place than it used to be.

Carole Zimmer: There are still fish fries on Fridays. And Milwaukee is still known for the brewing traditions that began with German immigrants, who started arriving here in the mid-1800s. Now, all the big breweries like Pabst, Miller, and Blatz are either gone or owned by other companies, but beer still does play a part in the life of Milwaukee.

[LAKEFRONT AMBIANCE]

Carole Zimmer: I'm at the Lakefront Brewery, one of 31 craft breweries in Milwaukee, eating my first fried cheese curd, one of the city's celebrated comfort foods. Bonnie North has introduced me to historian John Gurda, who's been studying the city for 46 years. Gurda points out that in the 1840s, more than a thousand German immigrants arrived in Milwaukee every week, and by the 1850s over a third of the city's population was German.

John Gurda: The simple answer to why Germans arrived here is that it was a matter of timing, pure and simple. Milwaukee and Wisconsin opened to settlement at precisely the time mass immigration from Europe was getting into high gear. This was the urban opportunity, and the people who were coming were German.

Carole Zimmer: But Gurda says despite the fact that Milwaukee is known for the brewing traditions that began with German immigrants, beer was not the product that fueled Milwaukee's economy.

John Gurda: There's only one year, and that was 1890, when beer was Milwaukee's most important product. That's it. So ever since till the more recent past it was durable goods, especially metal bending. Everything from farm tractors to Harley Davidsons to mining equipment.

[WALKING AMBIANCE]

Carole Zimmer: After paying the check, Gurda and I head for a neighborhood famous in the history of the German community in Milwaukee.

John Gurda: We're in Brewers Hill. It's a neighborhood just north of downtown. It's one of the oldest in Milwaukee, and a lot of the houses here go back to as early as the 1860s. So Brewers Hill is the area where the first Germans settled in large numbers. Early on it was always on the west side of the Milwaukee River, which is where we are, and they lived here to be close to work and the shops along the Milwaukee River, the manufacturing shops and the retail shops over here on 3rd St. And 3rd St was the most German commercial district in the most German neighborhood in the most German city in America.

Carole Zimmer: Then I head to Milwaukee's Lower East Side.

Carole Zimmer: So how many floors is this?

Carl Mueller: Three.

Carole Zimmer: Three floors of this beautiful old stone mansion.

Carole Zimmer: 74-year-old Carl Mueller is showing me around the 19th-century stone mansion that's the home of Mueller Communications, the public relations agency he founded that represents the Milwaukee Brewers and other high-profile clients. Mueller's parents, who were German immigrants, spoke German at home and raised Carl and his four siblings on the north side of the city. Mueller says it wasn't always easy growing up in Milwaukee in the 1940s.

Carl Mueller: Being called names, like 'you little Nazi.' There was also just a huge influx of immigrants from Europe so, being called a 'DP,' a displaced person. I remember being called that because I still struggled with English when I was in grade school.

Carole Zimmer: But Mueller also says he's proud of his family.

Carl Mueller: My dad was Labor Socialist. Part of the movement that elected mayors, city councilmen, congressmen – and the Socialist Party had strong roots in Milwaukee and Wisconsin for well over 50 years.

Carole Zimmer: Mueller points out his father’s political alliance helped Milwaukee become the first and only major U.S. city to elect three socialist mayors. And he says he’s glad that Milwaukee is now a more diverse city. Mueller’s 38-year-old daughter Kiersten, who works at her father’s firm, also appreciates Milwaukee’s diversity, but Kiersten says she’s glad her dad sent her to a German school when she was growing up.

Kiersten Mueller: I had choir. I had dance group. We have a cabin at a park that’s all German families, and so it was normal for me to speak German not just at school but at home and with my best friend. You know, running around in the parks.

Carole Zimmer: And Kiersten says she still cooks her grandmother’s recipes.

Kiersten Mueller: Spaetzle. I love spaetzle. We have her sauerkraut recipe. Her pickles. That’s just sort of part of the family now.

Carole Zimmer: And when it comes to the arts, work that was created in Germany has been highlighted in Milwaukee.

[EXCERPT FROM GERMAN MOVIE WESTERN]

Carole Zimmer: This year the Milwaukee Film Festival featured films like this production called *Western*, about a group of German construction workers. It appeared in a special section called ‘Das Kino,’ a celebration of new German cinema. Jonathan Jackson is the artistic director of the Festival.

Jonathan Jackson: Milwaukee is known as a city of festivals, and that comes from the idea of Oktoberfest and the history of summer festivals throughout Germany. That’s made an imprint in the culture of Milwaukee, where all summer long you’ll have festivals of many different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities. And the film festival, which was just created 10 years ago, was definitely inspired by that history, and we try to leverage that. Beyond that, German cinema today is incredibly strong. There’s a lot of investment, a lot of government investment in supporting emerging and new voices in German cinema.

Carole Zimmer: After Jackson shows me around the ornate Oriental Theater, where the Film Festival is underway, I get in my rented Volkswagen Jetta, plug in Google Maps, and drive to Menomonee Falls to meet Frank Schmitz and sit in on a rehearsal of the Milwaukee *Liederkrantz*, which was founded more than a hundred years ago. It’s one of a declining number of German zither societies, cultural clubs, and singing groups.

Frank Schmitz: [IN GERMAN] Zum Wohl!

Carole Zimmer: Schmitz is raising a cup of Jägermeister before rehearsals begin for an upcoming singing competition. He says he’s very aware of his heritage.

Frank Schmitz: Grandpa came from Bittelbrunn. It’s a very little village, a *Dorf* we call it in German. In Baden-Württemberg. That’s the apple state of Germany. It’s right next to Bavaria. We’re right next to the Black Forest. Most people have heard of the Black Forest because of the cuckoo clocks. I’ve got about 23 cuckoo clocks at my house.

Carole Zimmer: Schmitz, a retired teacher and school principal, says his German identity plays a big part in his life.

Frank Schmitz: Right now, that's almost my whole life. It's the German community.

Carole Zimmer: Schmitz says many Germans here still identify with the regions their families came from, like Pomerania and Swabia. The 84-year-old Schmitz says his identity is bigger than that.

Frank Schmitz: I'm proud of my heritage. I'm proud to be an American, but I'm proud of my roots. I told my undertaker already when I die on one side of me you'll lay the Austrian flag, on the other side the German flag, and over the body the American flag, because I am an American. But I'm proud of where I came from.

Carole Zimmer: So is 92-year-old Walter Greis, the oldest member of the chorus. Schmitz introduces me to Greis when we walk back into the room where the men continue to gather for rehearsal. Greis's parents emigrated from Germany and raised their four sons in Milwaukee. But like Carl Mueller, whom you heard from earlier, Greis has memories of World War II that he will never forget, like the night of December 9, 1941.

Walter Greis: There was a knock on the door at one o'clock in the morning. My brother was up. He was a student. A college student, doing homework. And he answered the door. And, "We want to see your father." So he woke up my mother and my dad, and they came up and they said, "We want your dad to come with us downtown." "Who are you?" – "Well, we're FBI agents." And the war was on.

Carole Zimmer: Greis says his father was detained in Bismarck, North Dakota for more than three years, leaving his mother to support Greis and his brothers. Greis, who enrolled in the Merchant Marines, says he and his siblings often felt helpless.

Walter Greis: What could I do? I went to visit him. Internment Lodge in Bismarck, North Dakota. 3,000 guys were all locked up, and the worst part was that these were all technical people. They were engineers. And they were artists for the backgrounds for movies, you know. There were tons of those guys.

Carole Zimmer: Greis says even today, many people don't know that Germans, like Japanese residents of the U.S., were sent to internment camps. He says his family doesn't want reparations, but it would like an apology, though you do have to let bygones be bygones. The members of the chorus take their seats and open the pages of their song books. Conductor Steve Joval raises his hand and rehearsal begins.

[SINGING "AMAZING GRACE"]

Carole Zimmer: This is Carole Zimmer, a reporter from New York, visiting Milwaukee for THE BIG POND.

The Big Pond – A U.S.-German Listening Series is brought to you by the Year of German American Friendship (Deutschlandjahr USA), a comprehensive collaborative initiative funded by

the German Federal Office, implemented by the Goethe-Institut, with support from the Federation of German Industries (BDI).

Wunderbar together | Germany and the U.S.

funded by



implemented by



supported by

