



Culture shock – a Personal View by Candy Fresacher

“Love conquers all” it is said, but is that really true when love brings a Californian to Austria? After 30 years in Vienna, it’s a question I still ask myself, especially in the grey days of winter when “California Dreamin’” is whirling around inside my brain and snow is whirling around outside the house.

My Austrian husband says that in marrying me he gave up his freedom. My reply: I not only gave up my freedom, I gave up warm weather (blue sunny skies and lush green gardens), my language, my family and friends, my common memories of things past, my culture. In fact, I even have to fight with everyone I meet to explain that as an American I do possess culture and that I didn’t vote for George Bush and that I am not solely responsible for what is happening in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and all American political decisions of the last 30 years.

However, there is an up side. As a Californian I can re-create myself. I can be different and eccentric and blame it on my nationality. There is a certain “mystique” in being from a place near glamorous Hollywood, and from a state where Austria’s own Arnold Schwarzenegger has found fame. On the language scene, I can say Du, or the informal you, to anyone I like and if improperly used it will be blamed on my nationality and not necessarily my manners (especially because I still don’t know when to use the one or the other). I can be joyous and child-like at Christmas and believe in Santa Claus, instead of besinnlich, reflective and contemplative, the proper mood of Weihnachten in Austria. I can also watch as Austrians slowly adopt American holidays (like Halloween) or clothing (jeans) or lifestyles (Sex in the City, Nip and Tuck). It seems that Austrians today, instead of enjoying their *gemutlichkeit* or laid back attitude towards life, are striving to achieve the Puritan work-ethic attitude that I have been trying just as hard to discard.

On the other hand, there is a down side to this

business of being a foreigner. I will forever be the outsider because my German will always have that accent. Having lived 23 years in California, I can never acquire the youthful memories of my Austrian friends. When they speak of their times at school, they do not realise how different are my memories that include football games, high school prom queens and a graduating class of 600. I can never have the same memories of music, art, films or TV that my friends have. Not only do I not have their memories, my own memories fade quickly with no one to talk to about them. I am different and it shows. I can’t hide it and can never really belong.

My job possibilities are limited. I can’t vote, though I must pay taxes and live by the rules given to me by others. I am lucky, though, that I do not look so different and that coming from the US I receive better treatment than if I had come from some other country where differences are more visible. So I take time to count my blessings.

I swore I would wear black for a year when I had lived in Vienna longer than I had lived in California. I only managed to wear black for a week. But it did remind me of one of the earliest comments my mother made to me when she came over. She asked me if the Austrians did not realise there were other colors besides dark green, blue and black. Austria was a shock to her. But she didn’t have to live here. I did. Let me tell you some of my other shocks.

I remember most vividly the problem with chickens.

I came from California. When we were going to have chicken for dinner, we bought our chickens all cut into pieces to disguise the fact that this food had once been a living animal. Those pieces weren’t really those cute little chickens that lay eggs; they were just a form of food. Then I came to Austria. Here there were no supermarkets (mid-1970s Vienna) and the only chickens I saw looked like very real chickens, but they were very whole and very dead chickens. They still had their heads and claws. I was told the claws were left on the bird



to show you how fresh the chicken was, the head was to be added to the soup. So...I didn't buy any chicken at all. Dealing with pulling out heart, liver, stomach and the other parts of the chicken reminded me all too well of the living animal. This is only the tip of the iceberg on variations in food culture: lard bread (schmalzbrot) eaten with delight, a plum jam that is sour (powidl), or people who actually like to eat brain, kidneys, heart and liver are just some of the stumbling blocks on the way to my cultural integration. I am from a country with such wonders as fast food and peanut butter.

However, it wasn't long before I learned the proper German words that would get the poultry man to take the insides out of the chicken and cut off the claws and head and give me the bird in such a way that I could actually use it. This, then, became a meal we had every weekend for years, for another simple reason. All the stores closed on Saturday at noon and did not open until Monday morning. What was an American to do? All my life I was used to stores that were open late at night and on every day of the week. It took years for me to be so well organized that I had all the ingredients I needed for my weekend meals. Even in the twenty-first century, stores in Austria must stay closed on Sunday. We don't eat much chicken these days and it is not because of the dreaded bird flu.

It took me 20 years to get over being cold (and it is not only the weather that is cold in Austria). Now, when the Austrians complain about the weather, I am surprised. Most of them have lived here much longer than I have, don't they KNOW that it's cold in winter and rainy in summer? Austria is green because of all that rain. I yearn for the golden hills of California (that some people call dry and brown). I have become adept, though, at putting up shelters for the inevitable rain on the day of a planned barbeque in the summer. And I now cannot understand my Californian family who insist on sitting indoors when the weather outside is so lovely.

Austrians seem to be in love with the past. And Austrians have a past, as a country, of which they

are renowned. They have Schönbrunn and the Hofburg, St. Stephens and the biggest (and oldest) Ferris wheel in the world. They have the beautiful buildings along the Ringstrasse as continual reminders of their grand history. They have famous musicians, famous literary stars, famous painters of whom they are justly proud. They are bound by traditions and customs that go back centuries.

This love of the past is wonderful. Unfortunately, as a Californian, it's one I hardly share.

I am interested in the future. As many Austrians have told me, America doesn't have much of a past, and California, as a part of the cowboy frontier, even less. We are not known for our fine old buildings or our customs and traditions. In fact, Austrians have told me we Americans have no manners at all as we often eat with our fingers. My own interest is more in breaking traditions, or starting new ones, rather than maintaining the old ones. So, this is another difference that leads to culture shock.

It seems clear to me now, 30 years later, that neither I (the American), nor they (the Austrians) are absolutely right or wrong. The advantage of experiencing culture shock is the realisation that, in fact, different cultures mean different values and that everyone and no one is right or wrong. I think it is great that the EU is opening borders and encouraging young people to travel from one country to another. This paves the way to greater understanding. It helps people to be flexible, adaptable and caring of others.

On the other hand, and it seems there always is another hand, I have an example of just the opposite, so as always there is a need to be careful with generalities.

Recently my husband and I went to Bali, Indonesia. This is yet another wonderful country with its own traditions and culture. In fact, it was amazing for my husband and I to see how religion, for example, plays such an important part in the daily lives of the Balinese. Travel broadens the mind. Or does it? We met another couple there, from Austria. When the husband heard I was American, the first thing he



said to me was: “Americans have no culture.” Ah, something I had heard before. I tried to convince him differently, but not very successfully I thought. However, meeting him a week later, after he had explored much of the island and we were all at the airport ready to leave, he came up to me. He was very excited. He had changed his mind. Indeed, he said: “Americans do have culture!” Unfortunately, he continued: “But these Balinese – they have NONE! They charge too much for everything and you always had to fight to get a good deal, they robbed you if you didn’t negotiate prices.” He felt this was absurd, and so, for him, these island people had no culture. He was very happy to be going back home, to his country that had so much culture as well as prices that were in writing and could not be changed.

And I live here now.

The openness of the American has led to lots of Austrians’ commenting: “Americans are superficial.” The Americans do, truly, wish that everyone will have a nice day and most of the time do not mean it. Austrians prefer a serious existence. Attitudes towards life are reflected the Viennese aphorism: “life is hard, and then we die.” Austrians do not wish each other a nice day when going out the door, it is only important that they be sure to say “good-bye” on leaving and shake everyone’s hand. If one watches the expressions on the faces of the public on public transport, existence is indeed a serious matter. Since humor is so important to me, this was another cultural shock of major proportions. And of course knowledge of language plays a big part in humorous exchange. I am happy that, after 30 years, my knowledge of German permits me to share humor with my friends now, but to begin with, it was very difficult. When I left America, my world was full of humorous language, puns and jokes and more puns. I changed countries without learning the language first and for many years I was happy just to be able to hold a simple conversation in the strange new German language. It was impossible for me to inject any humour into what I had to say. It was impossible for me to understand any more

sophisticated humour. Astonishingly enough, my whole personality was different. And now, I have two children who speak German better than English. I find it hard to believe that this can be true. I have lived in Austria more years than they have, so why is their German so much better than mine?

So, after 30 years here and with a family of my own, where exactly is home? If home is indeed where the heart is, then I must have a big heart, since it seems to stretch from Austria to California and back. And I have friends in many other countries of the world too, so I spend a lot of time saying “hello” and “goodbye”. The wonderful advantage of living in the heart of Europe is the opportunities it provides a person to get to know so many people in the global community. Expanding horizons is important. One possibility to expand horizons is my way: fall in love and marry someone from a different country. And see where it leads.

Professional profile:



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