

Barbara and Horst Caspers: "Back Again Completely". Back to Germany after almost Thirty Years in the USA

"For me, home is where you're safe, or where you retire to, a place you can snuggle into, and not necessarily bound up with tradition, it's just a place where you feel safe... That's why "home" in the deepest sense is not tied to a certain place, but can always be regained."

Barbara Caspers (born in 1940 in Neumarkt, Upper Palatinate) is convinced of that. She and her husband Horst (born 1925 in Reitsch bei Kronach) emigrated to the USA in 1961, and returned to Bavaria again in 1989. The Caspers thus spent nearly 30 years in the United States, mostly in the north of New York, in New Jersey. Originally, the chemist Horst Caspers had only been planning to spend two years in the USA to gain further professional qualifications. Instead he settled down in various chemical companies, and his wife was given a job in 1964 as an assistant electrotechnician in the famous Bell Laboratories. Barbara Caspers became an American citizen in 1983 because she was politically interested and – as she says – wanted to have a say in how much tax she paid. Horst Caspers has always stayed a German.

Looking back, Barbara Casper's younger years and her already existent linguistic abilities were decisive for the couple's successful integration. These helped her to move in German circles, not only in America, and also helped her make contact with people in the US and quickly form friendships. "My husband," she tells us, "had a lot more trouble getting used to things... He was 16 years older than me, after all...and he'd already... settled down; in fact I think he had his toothpaste sent over for a whole two years... I didn't need that!" To start with they often frequented 86th Street in New York with its German stores and the famous Café Mozart "until we'd somehow transported ourselves, in a series of stages, into American reality".

Barbara Caspers probably felt different about this. She was upset whenever she heard Germans speaking of America in derogatory terms: "It was the country I was now living in... and it was wonderful". Both are very positive about the open, friendly attitude of the people in the States: "What I loved so much about America is that people really do take an interest in each other. There are no problems about being rejected. In Germany I often hear people referring to Americans as superficial – but I'd far prefer a superficial friendly person to a profound but isolated one." In the first few years their contacts with home were relatively few and far between, because telephoning or mutual visits were very expensive. Letters and cassette tapes sent backwards and forwards were a great help. Barbara Caspers was always sure that they would stay in America – but things turned out differently. During a birthday visit to her brother in 1989, the idea of buying a house in Bavaria no longer seemed so far-fetched. After all: "Our mothers were still alive, we have no children, no relatives in the

US, and if something happens to anyone they have the family to fall back on". So they bought a house in Kralling, near Munich. "That wasn't planned, actually," says Barbara Caspers. They just couldn't find any alternatives for retirement in the States, "and here... we were suddenly presented with this opportunity, so we said okay, let's do it." This was no search for roots but a new beginning, which could have happened just as easily in America too.

There were lots of adaptation problems, however. "Life in the US is... a lot simpler, because it's not so regulated. And since I'm such a freedom-loving person", says Barbara Caspers, I had a lot of difficulty getting used to the place again... all these rules and regulations." She mentions the opening and closing times of banks and shops: "If you want to be certain you won't be confronted by a closed door, then everything has to happen between nine a.m. and noon." Barbara Caspers was also unused to queuing up in supermarkets. And there was also the very different mentality of the people. When they moved into their first house in America the neighbours came over to see them immediately: "They rang our bell and even brought us home-made cake. Here (in Germany) the moving van was outside the door, and the woman from next door rang the bell to tell me it was parked in front of her garage - so she couldn't get out if she wanted to. There we have the mentality."

An even more significant fact was that Barbara Caspers had grown up in American society – she went there for the first time at the age of 21 – and now she was worried about losing her identity. "My husband suddenly spoke nothing but German here... I still saw myself as an American, and I was worried I might lose my English." At this stage, the German-American Club came to the rescue: it not only maintains contacts with Americans or people who have spent a long time in the US but also with a circle of interested and open-minded people. "So what I did was work really hard and intensively at building up a new circle of friends," Barbara Caspers tells us, "because it's important that you feel at home wherever you are... And two years later I'd done it... I was back again completely."

Even though Barbara Caspers is now sure she wants to stay on in Germany, she still only has an unlimited residence permit for her home country and no work permit. Looking back over her life experience, Barbara Caspers thinks that a lengthy stay abroad, and immersing oneself in the life of another country, is something important that really shapes a person's character. "It's understanding among nations, and German-American friendship, and that's why I work in the German-American club... it's been sponsoring student exchanges for 50 years." Both the Caspers feel that the lives of people in Germany are over-regulated. The government "claims it knows what's good for people, and doesn't let them make mistakes and learn from them. But making mistakes is actually the only way of learning anything."

In retrospect, the Caspers feel that emigration to America was still the right decision. Horst Caspers puts it this way: "I did two things right in my life... I married the right woman, and I went to America."

Margot Hamm

Based on an interview by Georg Schmidbauer, November 17, 2003