



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

Welcome to Motherland

By Melissa Gerr

[Music]

Luise Lampe: I feel like it's more common here in the States, at least for working mothers, to hand off your child to somebody else quite soon. Which is something that, in Germany, mothers are not so comfortable with and not something that society expects of you.

Kate Brenner: I don't know if I'm a more American mom or a more German mom. So I feel really lucky to be able to offer my kids two worlds to choose from, and I also am able to offer them the feeling or the knowledge that there isn't one way, and there isn't one culture.

Sibylle Salewski: On the one hand, you have the US where there is very little support and clearly too little support for time off, at least in the weeks before and after birth. But you have all these subsidies in Germany, but still, the working mother is a very complicated thing and not something that is easily accepted.

Melissa Gerr: Three women, two countries, one shared experience: motherhood. This is by no means an exhaustive look at what life is like for mothers in the US and Germany, but these personal anecdotes address some of the mixed messages and high expectations for women in the role of "mother." Oh, and full disclosure: I'm not a mom, so I'm no expert. But these women? I guarantee you they are.

Luise Lampe: My name is Luise, I'm German. I'm from East Germany, actually, and came here to the States four years ago to be with my American husband. We met at University of Heidelberg and my children are Arthur and Rosa. Rosa is three and a half. Arthur is almost three months old. And I've only experienced having kids here in the States as a German woman, which is an interesting situation.

Kate Brenner: My name is Kate Brenner and I grew up in Minnesota, but I've been living the past 25 years here in Germany with my husband and three sons. Oliver who is 18 and Bennett who is 16 and Christopher who is nine and my husband Axel.

Sibylle Salewski: My name is Sibylle Salewski. I was born in Germany, in West Germany, in Bonn. I now live in Berlin with my husband who is from the US. We have four children; the oldest one is 15 years old, the youngest one is seven years old. My first child was born in Berlin, my second child was born in the US, the other two children were born in Berlin, again.

Melissa Gerr: What is your definition of motherhood?

Luise Lampe: In some way, it's the most natural thing that just happens and that almost doesn't need to be defined. You know, it's wonderful, it's a beautiful, beautiful experience, it's very rewarding, it's very hard, too. My husband and I really are super exhausted at the moment, and sometimes, quite honestly, I wish I could just have no kids... For just a couple of hours and then, you know, go back to having kids. Sometimes I envy people without kids. Sometimes I feel the load of responsibility on my shoulders and feel like I'm not a good mother and, you know, all those things.

Kate Brenner: When I go to teach at the beginning of a school year and I'm meeting my new students, I always tell them that I am first a mother, and that that's the hardest job in the world, that I'm second a teacher and that teaching is like a fun hobby for me, that I'm so glad to get out of the house and come teach them because that's the easy thing. You know, that's easy in life. And mothering is a continual challenge. There's an expression in German, and I think it's really true, it's: "*Kleine Kinder machen kleine Sorgen und große Kinder machen große Sorgen.*" And it's like: "Little kids you have little worries and big kids make big worries." You know, so you think when you have an 18-year-old son that you're finished, and that you don't have to worry anymore because he's done, he's like a finished product - not true. And then you realize that the things you worried about when they were little are just like nothing compared to these big existential worries that you're suddenly having.

Sibylle Salewski: When you came and asked me whether I would do an interview about motherhood in the US and Germany, I was thinking about how I would translate motherhood into German. And I think the obvious translation, and the one you get in the dictionary, is *Mutterschaft*. But *Mutterschaft* is a very technical term; you would never use this in everyday life.

Melissa Gerr: What does *Mutterschaft*... Does it translate to anything in English?

Sibylle Salewski: Well, you would translate it into motherhood, but a piece that, in the US, you would title "The Difference between Motherhood in the US and in Germany," in German, you would give it a title like "*Die Unterschiede der Mutterrolle in den USA und in Deutschland*". In that case, it's "the role of the mother." So that is a more common word, *Mutterrolle*. And for me, that already has all of these implications - that puts you, as a mother, as the person who has a role in society and a responsibility for the well-being of the child, that lies with you as the mother. It's not a private thing. You, the mother, are sort of part of society, and you have a responsibility to do the best

thing for your child. It's not what is best for you as a family or for you as a mother and child team, it's what is best for the child. So cook your own baby food, do lots of organic food, breast feed for a long time, do all these things – you have the day care, but in practice, my experience, the time that the children spend in the daycare in Berlin, it's not like the mothers are working most of this time. They're working part of the daycare time. The other time is spent cooking, doing all the best things, getting the organic clothes or whatever for the child.

[Music]

Melissa Gerr: Tell me about that experience, about giving birth in Germany compared to what you knew about giving birth in the US.

Kate Brenner: I didn't know really anything about giving birth in any country so there wasn't really a comparative thing, but I do know that the words were really funny in German – the words for different body parts. And when I heard the word for placenta, which is “mother cake,” I would laugh every time. I had to ask my doctor to please use the Latin terms because they know them, too, you know – he could say placenta, which is the English word and the Latin word, but he normally would say *Mutterkuchen*. And then when it got down to business you know on the day of the birth, I found out that the opening where the baby comes out of is actually called the “mother mouth.” Like, “Your mother mouth is now eight centimeters dilated,” and I'm like, “My what?!” *[Laughs]* Oh my God, I wasn't really in a laughing mood because he was a giant baby, and the birth took like 26 hours, but I think maybe the German language lightened up the mood a little bit for me when they kept talking about my mother mouth. And I was really happy, actually, I found out afterwards how lucky I was to have my babies here because there is such involvement with midwives. They come check on you every single day when you're back home again. The first week they come every day, and they check on you and the baby. But it's really mostly about you. They're there, you know, they're making sure the connection is okay, and that breastfeeding is going okay, but they also check what's going on down there with your mother mouth. *[Laughs]* I don't know if it's still called the mother mouth after the baby's out of it. Actually, to tell you the truth. I think they stop calling it that after the birth. Isn't that weird?

Melissa Gerr: What was your bill, I mean is that all-inclusive?

Kate Brenner: Yeah that was all-inclusive, you don't get a bill for a birth, oh my gosh.

[Music]

Sibylle Salewski: My first child was born here in Berlin and, like many anxious parents, we did a lot of research where the best place would be to give birth, and we decided to go to a hospital that had a neonatal intensive care unit – that was important to me in case something went wrong. And the hospital at the same time, which is standard in Germany, the birth unit is basically run by midwives. Of course there are doctors there, but the person mainly who's mainly responsible for the birth is the midwife. And we arrived there and, even though it's a hospital setting, you get a chance to basically set your own pace with giving birth. Like if you want to walk around when you're in labor,

they encourage you to walk around. They simply let you choose whatever position you want to be in when you give birth.

Melissa Gerr: What are those... I guess I just thought there was kinda one.

Sibylle Salewski: They have all the equipment there, if you want to be on all fours while you're pushing, that's easier for some women, or if you want to be standing, if you want to be lying down. Simple things like they go down to the floor with you. The doctors, the midwives, if you want to be on the floor there, they go down to the floor with you. They have ropes hanging from the ceiling if you want to sort of hang in the rope because you can support yourself better in a squatting position, that's how I ended up giving birth. Then, that's fine.

Melissa Gerr: And that sounds like it's something you kind of figure out when you're in the midst of it. You might not have known that was your preferred position because it was the first time you were giving birth, right? You just tried it?

Sibylle Salewski: I had no idea, I had no clue what was coming of course. I needed professionals who guided me along and that worked well, and my husband was part of the process the whole time, there was never an issue of being separated from him, so all in all that was a very good experience. Because what it was, it made a birth possible that was as natural as possible given my circumstances but still in a setting where you had all the medical emergency equipment in the background in case something goes wrong. So that was for me an ideal setting to give birth.

Melissa Gerr: So how did that compare with giving birth to your second child in Chicago?

Sibylle Salewski: Yeah, I was in Chicago, and our insurance only allowed us to go to one particular hospital for the birth. And my plan was - I had a very good experience with a hospital here in Berlin - of course I'll go to the hospital again. It's important to me to have the neonatal intensive care unit there. That's sort of the kind of person I am. But then, lots of people started telling me stories about how terrible it is to give birth at that hospital. And that they're highly interventionist. It's a hospital that I think is very good if you have a very complicated birth or lots of difficulties, that's probably the place you want to go to. I started the whole process there. I was registered there, I had planned to give birth there, and then my obstetrician told me, "Well, once you arrive and you're in labor, the first thing we do is we'll put you in triage, and you'll be separated from your husband for that time." And I was like, "Wait a second. When I'm in labor, I need my husband around." And she said, "Well, we are very sorry. There are other women in triage there, so your husband cannot be there for that part." So I said, "Well, what happens in triage, how long will I be there?" She said, "Well, usually you'll get a drip to enhance your labor and an episiotomy." And I was like, "I don't want this... Not necessarily, I might want this, but I don't really want this..." And she was like, "Well, you can tell him that you don't want this." And I felt very intimidated having already had the experience how difficult it is to be in labor, and then to be on my own to argue for what I want. So I found that very off-putting, and then we visited the hospital and they showed us the rooms where I could give birth. It was very tiny, and I was like, "Well, can I walk around during labor?" And she was like, "Well, you may be allowed to walk around, but there isn't really much space for you to walk around here, is there?"

And I was like, “Wait, and how can I give birth? Can I be wherever I want to?” And she was like, “No, the doctor has to see you, you should be in bed. You should be lying on your back in bed. And then someone else told me, “Yes, they’ll have this videotaped for liability reasons.” And it just freaked me out. And we tried to change insurances and that didn’t work and we ended up doing a home birth with a very professional midwife, which was a very good choice.

Melissa Gerr: Was that covered by your insurance or did you have to pay out of pocket for the midwife at home?

Sibylle Salewski: We paid out of pocket for the midwife at home, yes.

Melissa Gerr: And how did that go?

Sibylle Salewski: It all went very well and it was a very good experience because I really enjoyed the comfort of being at home and then just lying down in your bed after giving birth.

Melissa Gerr: And not being on camera!

Sibylle Salewski: Yes, and not being on camera was a big plus.

Melissa Gerr: After the birth experience, another big difference is the law and expectations surrounding parental leave. In the US, the Family and Medical Leave Act allows 12 weeks off after childbirth or adoption, and a mother is required to use existing vacation or sick time first, and then the remaining time can be taken as leave. It’s the employer’s discretion whether or not she is paid and the actual job held prior to the leave is not guaranteed. In Germany, there is an optional six weeks off before giving birth and a mandatory eight weeks after – with pay. Mothers can also opt to stay home with a newborn for up to a year and receive a percentage of their pay and are guaranteed their job will be waiting for them. German mothers also receive *Kindergeld* from the government – about 200 Euros on average, or 225 US Dollars per child – up to age 18, and to age 25 under certain circumstances. Here’s Luise again, a German mother living in the US with a newborn at home. In a couple of weeks, she’ll return to work.

Luise Lampe: There is a word in German, *Rabenmutter*, “raven mother,” which means you’re a bad mother, and that is being used for all kinds of scenarios and one could be that you go back to work very early. Or, you know, that you don’t take care of your child enough. But I also see that mothers here in the US kind of do it differently because they have to, but it also works out. It’s fine, their kids are fine and they are fine. And yeah, sometimes I almost feel like I have to defend myself, you know, for going back to work after three months, but I don’t have a choice, and I also trust that things will be fine. I just hope that all the pumping, you know, works out.

Melissa Gerr: For breast milk?

Luise Lampe: Yeah, for breast milk. It’s really quite a challenge. We’ll see how that goes, but I know that others have done it before me, so it’ll be fine.

Melissa Gerr: And your friends in Germany, when you tell them about having to pump breast milk in advance and store it, what are their reactions?

Luise Lampe: I mean, they feel for me, you know. They are very sweet and compassionate, but for them it's really hard to imagine that a state does that to mothers, you know like... *[Laughs]* Yeah, oh well.

[Child speaking in German]

Kate Brenner: So my kids got home a little bit earlier than I did from work, and that's pretty "raven mother" of me to let that happen.

Melissa Gerr: And did you feel guilty about that? Or did you hear from other moms? I mean, did you catch any attitude from anyone?

Kate Brenner: Not attitude, I guess, but surprise maybe? You know, I felt like it maybe is my own thing, and nobody called me a *Rabenmutter* for that. And I think among my mom friends here that we joke about it. You know, it's more of a joking thing where we say, "Oh, I'm such a raven mother for getting McDonald's after work today," or, "Yeah, I didn't make my own *Spätzle*, I just bought the pre-packaged *Spätzle* and only put them in boiling water." You know, putting them in boiling water is actually pretty good too, you know. In America, we'd probably be putting them in the microwave. So it's more of a joking thing, and I don't feel like moms are calling each other that, or even behind their back. I've never heard my friends say, "Oh, she is such a raven's mother," or using it in that way. I think it's just kind of this unspoken concept that we're all afraid of being. That's what it is for me.

Melissa Gerr: Is there a term for the opposite of that? For a mom who's like always there for their kid and who has just really done this amazing job of raising their kid?

Kate Brenner: I don't think there's a term that's just like "Supermom." There's not really a positive term.

Melissa Gerr: Wow, which is interesting. And that makes me think of - there's a phrase in German - of "not hearing a complaint is compliment enough."

Kate Brenner: *Nicht geschimpft ist Lob genug.* Like, if nobody's complaining, then that's enough of a compliment, one doesn't need more than that. Yeah, and that definitely applies to motherhood.

[Family talking in background]

Sibylle Salewski: In Germany, it still strikes me as a big contradiction and mystery to some extent because there are all these benefits. There's the subsidized daycare and the daycare has a high quality, it's not the kind of daycare where you think, "Oh, I don't wanna send my child there." It's daycare where you can say with a good conscience, "My child will actually profit from this." So that's a big incentive to not stay home with your child. There are also lots of financial benefits. And even though all of the support is there, and all of the support is not there in the US, working mothers are less

accepted here. And especially full-time working mothers. The standard in Germany is now you take time off after the birth, like six months or a year, and then you go back to work part-time. So, the part-time work model is very, very accepted and sort of expected almost. It's not the case that - oh, the full-time stay-at-home mom is definitely not the ideal in German society anymore. But the idea that you work full-time - and that you do get explicitly - as in the comment, "Well, what's the point of having children if you go back to work full time? You don't have enough time with your children, why do you have them?" That is still a question that you might explicitly get. So on the one hand, you have the US where there is very little support and clearly too little support both for time off, at least in the weeks before and after birth. There are not enough daycare centers; it costs you a lot of money to take care of the child. But you have all these subsidies in Germany, but still, the working mother is a very complicated thing and not something that is easily accepted.

Melissa Gerr: Do you feel like you have absorbed anything from what American motherhood means and brought it back with you to Germany? I mean, do you feel like you're kind of an American and German mother? Or all German or, you know, have you ever thought about it in that way?

Sibylle Salewski: I do have a feeling that I've absorbed some aspects of both cultures. I have lived in Germany for a longer time and I am German, so I'm sure the German part is sort of larger than the American part, but I did find it very liberating to have, at least for a short time, raised children in the US. And, for me, it really, the crucial thing is that I had the feeling that it's a different feeling, it's a lighter feeling. I didn't feel as much pressure as a mother. I didn't feel like I was defined by being a mother. But as, yes, a woman who has children and not "the mother." I know that there are these "working mother"- "non-working mother" wars in the US and I'm aware of this. And even though they are there, I do have the feeling that there's much - it's this heavy burden of being a mother that you somehow get in Germany.

[Male singing Brahms' Lullaby in German]

Kate Brenner: I don't know if I'm a more American mom or a more German mom. I certainly do bring many American things from my mother and my childhood was in America so I feel really lucky to be able to offer my kids two worlds to choose from. And I also am able to offer them the feeling or the knowledge that there isn't one way, and there isn't one culture. And they sort of have this awareness that this is language but also culture. Yes, Mama calls that a chair and Papa calls it a *Stuhl* and other people call it other things. And it's not that this one is right and other people are saying it wrong, it's just that everybody has their own way to call that. And you can put that idea on culture as well. You know, it kind of makes their world bigger already from childhood time.

[Male singing Brahms Lullaby in German]

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