WSU prof teaches Germans about emotional differences

OGDEN — “There are only two kinds of people who smile all the time: fools and Americans.”

“It’s a great, old Russian saying,” said Susan Matt, Weber State University history department chairwoman and professor. “Americans tend to seem happy all the time, even if they are not, underneath.”
Matt just returned from an Organization of American Historians fellowship that took her to Germany to teach a university course about emotions in United States history.

And although most of her students at the University of Tübingen were fluent in English, Matt did encounter the occasional cultural divide.

“I would say something and pause for a laugh, and there would be deafening silence,” Matt recalled with a laugh. “I would realize that a joke didn’t translate. So I suggested someone write a paper on American humor, and the differences between German and American humor.”

Matt will teach her new class on the history of emotions this fall at WSU. She also teaches courses on urban history, American ideals and culture, and American social history. Her books include tomes on homesickness and America’s competitive consumerism, and she has written essays and articles on the history of emotions.

One topic of high interest this summer, in the southwestern German town of Tübingen, was why Americans feel so compelled to smile.

“Some historians have suggested that, in American society, where we focus so much on success being the result of individual effort, cheerfulness is a way of showing you are in control and optimistic about the future. Smiling became a requirement for broadcasting your aspirations, even if you didn’t have a reason to be cheerful yet. It was a social signal that you were on your way to success.”

Sadness was not seen as broadcasting success or mastery of one’s own destiny, so mournful expressions were, well, frowned upon.

“This is at sharp contrast with some of the patterns in German culture,” Matt said. “In one class, we were talking about the emotional labor people do in our economy, and how cheerfulness has a role in interactions with waiters and cashiers. In Germany, that is not the expectation. There is no ‘Hi, I’m Carly and I will be your server tonight, and don’t you love this weather?’ That emotional style hasn’t caught on in Germany. Its history has shaped it in different ways than America’s history has shaped us.”

America’s belief that happiness should be the norm also has fueled the widespread prescription of anti-depressants.

“It’s been said that if you are not happy all the time, there’s something wrong with you,” Matt said. “Pharmaceutical companies have made fortunes off of that.”

Matt said she doesn’t know enough about German culture to generalize on emotions there, but her students started the course “more terse” than students in her WSU classes. The group did loosen up in time, she said, adding that she really liked her students.
“I did get a fascinating look at German higher education, where students don’t have to pay for an education if they get admitted,” Matt said. “They don’t have a lot of the time and financial pressures that face our students. They can really afford to be full-time students.”

Another topic of interest was love, American style.

“We talked about how love became increasingly central to marriage,” Matt said. “Love was not the prime reason for (marriage) before, necessarily, but by the 20th and 21st centuries, it became the only reason to get married. In colonial America, Puritans worried if they loved their spouses too much they would anger God. If they grieved too much for a dead spouse, it was a sign you loved them too much, maybe more than you loved God.”

The course also covered America’s culture of fear, greatly enhanced by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. People were hesitant to fly for a long time after the attacks, whereas people in other countries where bombings are common, such as England, Spain and Israel, tend to resume their normal flight habits more quickly.

“There’s a theory, by Peter Stearns, that it’s because from the 1950s on, American parents have tried to shield their kids from fearful things, which perhaps made them less able to deal with truly frightening things that really do happen,” Matt said.

As visitors without a car, Matt and husband Luke Fernandez, WSU technology development program manager, spent lots of time exploring on foot or on bicycles.

“I had a wonderful time there and thought it had a really beautiful countryside,” Matt said of her time in Tübingen. “Now I’m just excited to teach the class to my students at Weber State.”