

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

## An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture



**A**s its citizens are proud to tell you, Bavaria is a “free state”, one of the oldest in Europe, and “Bavarians first, Germans second” describes the sentiment. However this once rural kingdom has transformed itself into one of Germany’s most dynamic high-tech centers, making it a curious combination of “laptops and Lederhosen.”

The need to be different — and apart — goes back millennia; a Roman writer called the Bavarians “a stubborn mountain folk”, a portrait expounded on by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. That stubbornness has generated a strong creative pulse, perhaps best exemplified by King Ludwig II, the reclusive and eccentric monarch who provided the world with the splendid, fairy-tale Neuschwanstein castle. Ludwig was also one of the first who saw Richard Wagner’s genius, supporting him lavishly and sponsoring Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus. For music lovers, Bavaria remains the land of Wagner.

The Bavarian attitude is still alive and kicking today and a good example is Dr. Sylvia Schroll-Machl, one of the most original thinkers to have come onto the intercultural scene in years. Born and raised in Lower Bavaria, she went on to study religion, history and psychology in Munich and Regensburg.

Her widely-acclaimed book “Die Deutschen--Wir Deutsche” (published in English as “Doing Business with Germans —

Their Perception, Our Perception”) is an audacious attempt to understand the German mindset. Deeply intuitive, but strictly adhering to empirical research, she amazes the reader by really explaining what it means to be German. Her direct, personal style makes for a book that’s different from anything you have ever read. Her intercultural training sessions are like that too — very personal and authentically German.

### **Perhaps you can start by talking about the turning points in your life that led you to become an interculturalist.**

I was born in Deggendorf and have lived here all my life; my family has been here since the early 1600s, which makes me very proud. I feel attached to my town and comfortable with my surroundings. For this reason, when I list the five things that led me to become an interculturalist, my upbringing takes on the least importance.

Nonetheless, during my youth, my family and I visited relatives in the former German Democratic Republic every year. And because Deggendorf is near the Czech border, I developed a relationship with being on the periphery, curious and fascinated about who lived on the other side.

When the Wall fell in 1989, it was a liberation for me: finally I could get to know these people! This is when I started to do a large research project on cultural comparisons in post-Communist countries at the Economic University of Vienna.

<b>Editorial</b>	2
Sylvia Schroll-Machl <i>An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture</i>	3
Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams	9
I’m the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You!	11
Of gays and lesbians...	15
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	21

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

— *continued*

*Deggendorf, the home town of Sylvia Schroll-Machl, lies in the southern eastern part of Germany, near the Czech border.*



The second factor is that I'm deeply Christian, which means I have a strong wish to do something worthwhile in life. After my *Abitur*, I studied Catholic theology in Munich, then began work as a counselor in a Catholic youth center in Passau. I was very involved with the German-Israeli youth exchange and visited Israel several times. I now realize my theological studies not only helped me understand my own culture, but allowed me access to other cultures in a beautiful way. For example, when I tell people of the Muslim faith that I'm a Catholic theologian, their respect for me increases enormously. This is because their culture teaches them that any religious person is a decent person.

The third factor is my tremendous interest in psychology. Issues like managing inter-group relations or how values, standards and norms come into being fascinate me. They go with my philosophy of trying to understand people, how to get access to a person. I thought it would be fascinating to do basic research in the social-psychological aspects that make people tick. Psychology represents no great ideology and allows you to live with the principles of humanism. So after six years of working with young people, I went back to do study psychology, and later specialized with Professor Alexander Thomas at the University of Regensburg.

Now, if I were to arrange the pillars in the order that led to my profession, first would be psychology, second religion, and

third Alexander Thomas, a great and lovable man, a human being. Although I did parallel work in clinical psychology and passed my exams to become a psychotherapist, I chose to go the route of intercultural psychology because of Professor Thomas. He introduced me to the research of cultural standards theory, which I did my dissertation on. It's about perception, thinking, values, actions, a typology which means so much to me. Everything that I've done up to now revolves almost exclusively around the cultural standard approach.

I've observed how often these cultural standards as well as Thomas are unfairly criticized. I think it is everyone's right to make critical points but many of those who criticize don't possess the background in psychology necessary to understand the concepts. Furthermore, I believe it is counterproductive to play one intercultural approach against another and to make an ideology out of it. Each one has his or her epistemological and legitimate approach with its strengths and weaknesses. Everyone is struggling to generate the best possible work. It hurts me to read again and again the prejudices others have against 'culture standards'. All models have advantages and disadvantages.

The fourth pillar was my husband, Reinhold. When I finished studies in intercultural communications in 1992, there was no general awareness of the field, let alone the importance of training. So, when I went for a job interview at companies like BMW, they would say "intercultural what?"

## Editorial 2

Sylvia Schroll-Machl 3  
*An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture*

Problem-solving in Joint 9  
German-American Teams

I'm the Creator and Destroyer of 11  
Worlds — and so are You!

Of gays and lesbians... 15

Book Reviews 18

Events, workshops, 21  
congresses

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

— *continued*

*Using religious, historical and psychological perspectives, the book “Doing Business with Germans” examines their mindset, providing the reader with original insights.*



Although I knew my subject well, I wasn't at all skilled at persuading companies of its importance. So my husband, also a psychologist in therapeutic practice, said, "If you can't find a permanent position, why don't you become freelance? I'll sponsor you." That's how I launched my career.

My husband, who has since passed away, took care of everything, the home, garden and household, so that I could devote myself fully to my profession. It took almost three years until I began to earn a living. I am very grateful to him. Without his support my career would have never taken off. But looking back now, this difficult time had less to do with my inexperience than the fact that the field of intercultural training was in its pioneer period.

***When I speak to you or read your books and articles, you somehow perfectly incarnate the German soul. Could you explain how you do this so well?***

Here, I have to say two things. First, I feel very "rooted" in my Bavarian and German culture, which allows me to be acutely aware of the German reality. My German customers who have not lived abroad and have to be sensitive to international markets feel I understand them. And if I do a Germany seminar for non-Germans, I always get feedback about being "authentic" and witty. This is what I call positive self-confidence and it's important for intercultural competence. It includes learning to be alone and being satisfied with yourself, your roots.

Second, my love for cultural and historical references is based on my studies of history and religion, which are important in understanding mentality imprinting. When long historic causes are explained, people feel they understand others better. They realize that a value that's 500 years old won't change in two months and this makes them open to other solutions. Participants often say, "Our foreign partners have to see our way." I answer, "Your partners have been using this method for 500 years and they think their way's okay." It's then they say, "Oh yeah, you're right."

***Are there other aspects of your training that make your seminars so popular?***

Well, in every seminar, I try to do a lot of coaching. That is, work with the issues and questions of the participants, and that's when I really feel I'm in my element. My training as a psychologist comes into play, I ask in what kind of situations they have difficulties, where they have inhibitions, when they're uncomfortable. I then ask them to explain the reasons why in detail and have them adopt their behavior accordingly. That's what I love to do and I have the feeling that people appreciate it.

For example, I had a seminar recently where I had a couple of people adjust their role-play so they could appreciate the German way better. The participants were deeply moved by this mind-shifting and said, "My God, I understand them now."

## Editorial 2

Sylvia Schroll-Machl 3  
*An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture*

Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams 9

I'm the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You! 11

Of gays and lesbians... 15

Book Reviews 18

Events, workshops, congresses 21

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

— *continued*

*Professor Dr. Alexander Thomas was the most influential person in Sylvia Schroll-Machl's decision to become an interculturalist.*



I've always felt that people benefit from this sort of coaching and also feel more comfortable. It's the sort of learning that doesn't go through the head but through the heart. This is far more effective than having participants do a couple of games, which only leads to a small transfer.

### ***Are there situations that you find difficult in training?***

Yes, ethical issues. I should point out that in 80% of the seminars I conduct, there are no ethical problems; it's just those other 20% related to globalization that put me in an awkward position. I can't ignore the fact that we are living in a globalized world. On one hand, it's beautiful; on the other hand, parts of it can be cruel.

This is where dilemmas present themselves: bribery, discrimination, wage-dumping, prostitution, human rights violations. Take child labor. People say, "The state must make sure that children don't work" but when subcontractors use child labor, we look the other way and pay for the goods. I often sit and think to myself, "Careful, careful, Sylvia, you wanted to do something meaningful in your life. What are you supporting now?"

I often can sense when a person who is being forced by management to do something unethical and is telling me indirectly: "How can I look at myself in the mirror?" I'm ready to talk with those people, acknowledge their feelings, and encourage them to give critical feedback to top management.

If, however, I sense the person sitting in front of me wants to learn tricks to exploit counterparts in an elegant intercultural way — or be involved in a process of transferring jobs abroad, whereby the local people have to give away their know-how to others, which eventually leads to their unemployment. The question I always must ask myself is: "How is the dignity of these people maintained? How is the local management dealing with these people?"

### ***Does it work?***

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And if not, I try to help people to think about and question unethical practices. Sometimes I get into trouble with the client. But if a seminar is to be fruitful for both sides, it must be based on mutual respect. This is the principle in my seminars, to create esteem not only for other cultures but also for oneself.

There are, of course, companies that have developed good guidelines regarding the moral dilemmas. I find this to be more often the case with mid-size companies than your large corporations, which are more anonymous. And when I read the literature and intercultural management concepts, I often have the feeling that it doesn't at all reflect ethical behavior. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against globalization, I see and understand the problems. But there are times when I say to management, "Wait a minute here. I'm not sure this is the right way."

## Contents

*(for quick navigation, click on the desired article)*

<b>Editorial</b>	2
Sylvia Schroll-Machl <i>An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture</i>	3
Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams	9
I'm the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You!	11
Of gays and lesbians...	15
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	21

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

— continued



*In some trainings, ethical issues can at times put the facilitator in an awkward position.*

***In your book “Die Deutschen--Wir Deutsche”, you point out the cultural standard of separation of personal and public domain. Everyone in the world makes this distinction but it seems Germany is where it's carried to the extreme, resulting in Germans being seen as too formal and serious. Could you give the historical reasons why this is so?***

This separation of the personal and public domains, I would think, is due to two historical events. First, in the centuries of German territorial fragmentation, restrictions and confinement were everyday experiences. Boundaries of daily reality increasingly became “boundaries of the mind” as well. By the middle of the 18th century, there were approximately 1600 different territories on German soil, and even at the beginning of the 19th century some 1000 still existed, the boundaries of which could not be easily crossed.

Additionally, the separation of internal and external areas provided important protection against falling into the clutches of the reigning absolute ruler. People learned to lead a confined life-style in a small circle of close friends as a natural reaction to the adverse political circumstances.

The second point to remember is the teachings of Martin Luther. He preached that the church needed to remove emotional and irrational elements from religious ceremonies – feelings were not a necessary part of faith. An intellectual, rational connection

to God was far more solid. And, if you look closely, Protestantism lacks a cultish aspect in the form of worship or spiritual sacrifice. As a result people related less passionately to religion and became more intellectual. Catholicism is simply more emotional, exemplified by festivals, processions, theater, carnival.

Over generations, the Protestant approach led to a clear emphasis on objectivity and rationality. In fact, you could say modern Germany was largely molded by Protestant theology. Furthermore, the Lutheran faith emphasizes a separation of life-spheres, which eventually led to task-orientation (concentration on the task at hand) and toward a richness of spirit (the individual inner life).

***Then why don't Lutheran countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark make a strong distinction between public and private?***

Because they didn't suffer from all the wars. Germany has the misfortune of being “Das Land der Mitte”; pan-European conflicts often took place on German territory, such as the Thirty Years War, followed by many others and ending with WWII. The separation between public and private can be seen as a protective mechanism.

After WWII, Germans had to learn how to deal with their feelings of sorrow, guilt and disaster and they did this by separating their feelings from the awful reality. Otherwise, they would

## Editorial 2

Sylvia Schroll-Machl 3  
*An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture*

Problem-solving in Joint 9  
German-American Teams

I'm the Creator and Destroyer of 11  
Worlds — and so are You!

Of gays and lesbians... 15

Book Reviews 18

Events, workshops, 21  
congresses

# Sylvia Schroll-Machl

— *continued*



*The teachings of Martin Luther have had a strong influence on the German desire to separate the public from the private.*

have all had to commit collective suicide. Redemption was found in perfectionist behavior, absolute correctness to counteract their feelings of worthlessness in an environment of total chaos.

Another point to consider is the relative lack of social mobility of Germans. During the lengthy period in which small German states predominated, citizens had a stable social fabric and relative immobility. It also implied relationships didn't have to be re-negotiated. Consequently, it was much easier to concentrate on common objectives or tasks. Take me, I know all the people in my town from birth, I don't need to develop behavior for contact with strangers. This is different from people in Holland or the city-state Hamburg. Their commercial tradition forced them to talk to foreigners. Something quite different from a town in Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg where you almost always found your relationships in the local tavern.

What I have just told you is known as the history of mentalities, generated from historical research. It's based on extreme hypothetical thinking that seems very logical and consistent but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the absolute truth. If a real historian were to question me, he could tear my points apart. What I want to say is that they are meaningful and useful and we use them to help people in accepting cultural differences more easily.

***Fascinating. Now, to end this interview, what would be your advice for a successful international cooperation?***

You need to, above all, accept diversity and work with it. Of course, there's no "one and only" strategy for handling all international cooperation — the appropriate strategy depends mainly upon three factors, what I describe as a triangle. First there's the situation, that is the task at hand or the context of the intercultural interaction. Then there's the people involved and lastly their culture. Furthermore, if an intercultural exchange is to be fruitful for both sides, it must be based on mutual respect, even — and especially — when the other person does not live up to our own expectations and values.

In my seminars, I always strive to supply the participants with the tools for understanding why Germans behave the way they do, but also to give them an insight into how this is seen by an outsider to the culture, whose definition of what is normal and expected behavior is different. The easiest response to intercultural misunderstandings is avoidance; the most dangerous is to dominate the intercultural situation through, for example, economic power. The most challenging is to understand the differences and their causes. Without a doubt, this last option is slow, strenuous and difficult. But it is the only one that guarantees continuous, mutually satisfying relations between citizens of different nations.

*Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt*

<b>Editorial</b>	2
Sylvia Schroll-Machl <i>An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture</i>	3
Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams	9
I'm the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You!	11
Of gays and lesbians...	15
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	21