

"A Red Man in the White House?"

by Frank Geerk

Basler Magazin (29), 19/9/80, p. 1-3,15

(Translation from German by Ro Barker (1/98))

[Preface]

While official American foreign policy made worldwide headlines in past weeks, another event passed unnoticed that for America's future may have far-reaching consequences. For the first time in America's history, medicine men, chiefs, and artists from almost all the Indian tribes met in order to share their interests. For a hundred years these tribes probably fought each other; now their goal is mutual survival. While the official media hit upon the voting battle, the united Indians in the McDowell Indian Reservation in Arizona aimed for silent agreement: a red man belongs in the White House.

Documentary histories, to which I dedicate the largest part of my life to write, usually cultivate more displeasure than fear. Except in America. I owe to a reading of my story in Austin, Texas, an invitation to a poetry festival of America's natives, a festival whose meaning was to become clear to me first much later. Dean Ortega, a young Chicano poet, had heard my story. Its tone pleased him, and he thought that I, as a man of words, must come without hesitation to his festival. To my question if people would accept me, he thought that for the Indians being a "medicine man," "priest," "chief," or "poet" are synonymous [and that] I should therefore have no worry: people would recognize me as the "medicine man from Europe." The fact that I had already spent half a year in America, without anything else to discover than an enormous, horrid caricature of Europe, [made me] very curious, from this white [man's] view of another America, the America that belongs to the natives.

Originally, the Poetry Festival, the "Canto al Pueblo," had been dedicated to the Chicano culture. "Chicano" is what one derisively calls those Mexicans born in America who, because of their Mexican origin in the USA, have suffered similarly to the Blacks. For some years they were as good as kept away from every social progression. Certain restaurants and often swimming pools were closed to them. They were, because of their "race," a kind of "guest worker" in their own country--born American, but because of their spit-upon, despised appearance, [only] good enough to do dirty work. Because of the traits of their consciousness and their own cultural traditions, these yearly festivals became traditional, and I was supposed to visit the fourth of them. Dr. Arnoldo Carlos Vento, head of the Department [sic] of Chicano Literature at the University of Austin, Texas [sic], explained to me that the Chicano movement in the last year has experienced a re-evaluation that points out their fundamental goals.

"The Chicano movement," he said, "has two cultures: Mexico and the USA. And

from that it is a neutral ground so to speak, upon which the Mexican Indians and the Indians of the USA can come meet each other. Chicanos now play the role of mediator between the different Indian tribes--out of which has grown a historical meaning that concerns the whole continent. Through it this festival was made possible, where, for the first time in history, chiefs and medicine men from all the American groups would meet."

"And then," said my companion, Dean Ortega, smiling, "the Mexican and American Indians will unite and, supported by their newly maturing [artwork in oil], go back to conquer Mexico[.]" As a joke [he clarified that it would be] a public place, about which I later would think often: entirely and no longer half joking at all.

First before us was a 4-day trip from Texas to Arizona, through the southern USA. [As we were] in route, I got an impression of this countryside in which Comanches, Apaches, Navajos, and other Indian tribes had [once] freely moved about. All this countryside had a sort of common lack of boundary, which is hard for one to get used to. The plains seem to be endless, and when one travels hours longer and comes to the mountains, they seem equally endless. In this countryside, to live--that is to say, without the artificial trappings of civilization--requires an enormous discipline of the native people. I believe that people have to have lived with the heat, endless dust, and lack of shadows, for many of the Indians' initiation rites place such hard demands on them. It is not done with fear of cruelty but with the mercilessness of the land. To live here requires the natives to have heart and discipline that we can scarcely understand. I understood here how almost all the rituals, dances, songs, and conjuring of the Indians come from a single goal: stark survival.

Drunken shadows in small towns

I have asked myself over and over again what in the Indian must have had priority, when the whites "subjugated" this land that had appeared to him as a divine, untouchable necessity. And what did take priority for Indians, [when] they were still performing slave work, digging into mountains, bridging valleys, drying up swamps, fortifying{?} deserts to smooth the way for the white man's highways and superhighways?

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