
In 1961 Ziehm began the long labor of clarifying and explicating the San Pedro Nahua texts, which had been collected in 1906-1907 by her former teacher Konrad Theodor Preuß. The project provided the occasion for repeated trips to the Western Sierra Madre of Mexico, to the little village of San Pedro Jicora—a northern outpost of Nahua, or latter-day Aztec, tradition in the state of Durango—where Preuß had amassed what would come to be recognized as the largest compilation of Nahuatl myth, song, and prayer since the sixteenth-century work of the great Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagún.

Born March 23, 1911, to non-Jewish parents, as Elsa Harmening, the future editor of the Nahua-Texte was adopted by a family of Jewish background and given the family's surname, Wertheim. In 1934, during her third year at the University of Berlin, encountering aggressive anti-semitism in the linguistic department (where, as she recalled, the study of Sanskrit had come to be regarded as an "Aryan science"), she switched her major and went on to take her doctorate in ethnomusicology. Accordingly,

* Photograph taken August 1992
in 1939, she began her professional career as an assistant curator in the Lautarchiv (i. e., the ethnomusicological collection) at the old University, supervised by Dr. Fritz Bose. But with the outbreak of the war in September of that year, her work came to a halt.

A year earlier she had married Hans-Jürgen Ziehm, a musician and teacher, and she now embarked on a twenty-year respite from ethnological pursuits and reared three children. The opportunity to resume her chosen career came after the providential rediscovery of Preuß's Nahuatl manuscripts, which had been presumed lost in the war (along with his Huichol materials, which were in fact destroyed). Ziehm's son, Jürn, accompanied his mother on one of her field trips to Mexico, in 1968.

As the last in the line of the first generation of Berlin Nahuatl scholars that began with Eduard Seler and included Walter Lehmann, Ernst Mengin, and Gerdt Kutscher, to mention only a few, Ziehm was acutely aware of her position as a woman in a man's environment. As she would later recall, "I wanted my doctorate in order to show the world and myself that women, too, are able to do something." At an early age she had been conscious of discrimination against women and had deliberately completed her pre-university schooling in the time of twelve years. Even at the end of her life she would hasten to respond to a query from a female colleague, noting, "I must help her if for no other reason than that she is a woman."

In 1985 Ziehm assumed duties as a lecturer, teaching Nahuatl, in the Alt-Amerikanistik curriculum of the Latin America Institute of the (new) Free University of Berlin. The division's director, who at the time was Berthold Riese, issued the invitation and thus reanimated the Berlin tradition of Nahuatl instruction that had been broken off some years earlier with the death of Kutscher. The Nahuatl course was popular with students but was discontinued after only a year, owing to Elsa Ziehm's reluctance to further accept the stress of teaching in the difficult situation of an institute which was disrupted by political strife.

In their 1980-81 catalog the publishers of the Nahua-Texte, Gebrüder Mann Verlag, had announced Ziehm's Grammatik und Vokabular der Nahuasprache von San Pedro Jicora in Durango as a forthcoming title. The work was never quite finished, however. The grammar, in typescript, nearly complete, is in my possession (to be transferred eventually to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia or the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin) and a handwritten copy of the unfinished vocabulary is in the hands of Ziehm's daughter, Irmela Stroh, in Berlin. I also have a presentation copy of volume 1 of the Nahua-Texte with typographical errors corrected in Ziehm's hand. Volumes 2 and 3 are virtually free of such errata. A Spanish-language edition of Nahua-Texte, vol. 1, appeared in Mexico in 1982, titled Mitos y cuentos nahuas de la Sierra Madre Occidental (see Bibliography below).

Colleagues and acquaintances in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Mexico remember Elsa Ziehm with much affection. We treasured her sense of humor,
her sharp wit, and, above all, her loyal and generous friendship. In addition to her husband and her son, she is survived by two daughters and seven grandchildren.*

John Bierhorst
West Shokan, New York

Publications
(compiled by Berthold Riese and Ingo Mamet)


* Additional data were kindly supplied by Irmela Stroh (Berlin), Berthold Riese (Bonn) and Margarita Castro (Cologne).