

ADVENTURE in post war Germany

In the summer of 1953, United States and its allies were in a bitter “cold war” with the Soviet Union, even though they were allies in World War II. After being defeated, Germany was divided into four sections, administered by France, Britain, the United States and Soviet Union. Berlin was also divided into four sections, hence a division between East and West Berlin. Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States quickly deteriorated after the end of the war, with each side suspicious of the other’s quest for influence in the rest of the world. The Korean War began in 1950.

For a year, The Soviet Union closed off the East from the West, isolating the City of Berlin. The Soviets blockaded supplies reaching West Berlin by ground, resulting in an airlift, with American supplies flown over the border to the isolated Berliners for over a year. Joseph Stalin was the monstrous dictator of the Soviet Union and there was an increasingly dangerous arms race ongoing, with the Soviet Union testing an atomic bomb in 1949. The United States developed the Hydrogen bomb, and Stalin followed suit. In the summer of 1953, a worker’s uprising in East Germany was crushed by Russian tanks.

I am no history buff, but I explain these things to describe the atmosphere in the summer of 1953, when I and another 17 year old from a small town in Illinois were preparing to spend the summer in Germany as exchange students, with the American Field Service exchange program. Joe was staying with a family in West Berlin and I was headed to Schweinfurt, in southern Germany. Needless to say, Joe was in a more precarious area than I, but my German family related to me that our house was in the “five minute zone,” which meant we were that close to the East German border. As a 17 year old, I was not much concerned about any of this. When we got home, we were supposed to speak to groups about our experiences, which is why we were sent the summer between our junior and senior years in high school. The point of the exchange program was for us to get to know others as human beings. To quote writer Maya Angelou, “It’s very hard to hate someone if you look them in the eye and recognize them as a human being.” Interestingly, by far the most students went to Germany because so many German families offered to be hosts to the American students.

Schweinfurt is on the Main River, a tributary of the Rhine. Second only to Berlin, it was the most bombed city in Germany because a ball bearing factory was located there. While I was living with my German family in 1953, my German father was chief engineer of that ball bearing factory. The city reflected the aftermath of the terrible bombing battles, with damaged buildings and maimed citizens.

But let me tell you how I got there. In contrast to travels of current exchange students, my trip to Schweinfurt took ten days to two weeks. I began my trip accompanied by my older brother, taking the train from Kewanee, Illinois to Union station in Chicago, where we met other students from the Midwest and program

organizers. My brother left me there. We took busses from Chicago to Montreal, where we boarded a World War II troop ship, with the romantic name of S/S Skaubryn. We slept in bunk beds in the bowels of the ship. We had a tumultuous trip across the north Atlantic, and I, who had visions as a child of getting sick with every car trip my family made, did not get sick. We danced on floors that heaved with the waves. There was a small group that spent the entire trip on the top deck, green with sickness.

We landed in South Hampton, England, and proceeded to cross the English Channel to LaHavre, France, where we boarded busses and were driven through France and Belgium to Dusseldorf, the capitol of Germany. After a visit of a few days, a few of us took a train south to Schweinfurt. We were in the American sector of Germany, where there were thousands of American soldiers. On the train, a few of us were talking to some of the soldiers and asked where they were from. "Illinois," they answered, and I got very excited. I asked where in Illinois, and they answered that it was just a little town I wouldn't know. I pressed them more, and incredibly, they were from Kewanee, Illinois, my hometown.

The population of Schweinfurt was 30,000 and in addition, 40,000 American soldiers were stationed there.

In my German household were a mother, father, five children and a 16-year old maid, who was part of the family. One son was grown and lived elsewhere. My German sister was 18 and had spent the previous year in the United States. I was 17, Leni, the maid, was 16, Walter was 15, Klaus was 14 and Werner was 10, a whole passel of teenagers. They had a three-story home surrounded by gardens and fruit trees. My room was on the third floor, where two women rented a room. The family did not own a car, but my German father was transported by a chauffer in a company car.

Marta, my German sister, and I were invited to a military school ball, so she provided me with one of her American prom dresses, and off we went on a train with a change of clothes. We met our dates there. In a large ballroom, all the teachers and parents sat on one side and the students and their dates on the other. We were able to drink wine and beer, rather unheard of in the United States at that age. I had a wonderful time. At one point the students and their dates had to line up outside the ballroom and we were led in to do a dance, with boys on one side, girls on the other, weaving back and forth, in and out. As usual, I was the comic relief, because I didn't know the dance moves, but was laughing along with everyone else. Fortunately, I love to dance and caught on quickly. I danced with a lot of students and pretended to know what they were saying to me, until they asked a question and I had to tell them in German that I didn't speak German and didn't understand. It's amazing what can be understood without the use of speech.

On the way home on the train, Marta and I met two men who were cousins, attending the University of Wurtzburg. They invited me to come visit them there for

a day, so I took the train by myself and went to classes with them. I sat through an anatomy class, which fortunately, doesn't need too much interpretation! That night, I took the train back to Schweinfurt and no one was at the station to meet me. I was 17, and not terribly sure how to get home. I had to walk down a street where American soldiers were standing outside a bar on the sidewalk, drinking, and I was really quite frightened. A few remarks were made to me and I answered in American English and fortunately it really startled them. I knew the village square was the center of the town, and if I could find that, I could find my way home. Somehow I did. Instead of the family being concerned that I had not been met at the train, they all greeted me cheerfully. Considering what they had lived through during the war, I guess I wasn't too surprised that they didn't think my finding my way home alone was a big deal.

I took dance lessons with a tall and gangly German guy who was chosen for me, and I can't do the Tango without counting "Ein, Zwei - Ein Zwei Drei."

Half the family was Catholic and half Lutheran and none of them attended a church. I was led to church one morning by ten-year old Werner, who was leading me along cobble stone streets, while I was in heels, and he kept looking back at me and saying "Schnell! Schnell!" which means "hurry."

I was homesick that summer, but dreaded leaving my German family. On the way home, we spent a few days in Paris and stayed at the Sorbonne at the University of Paris. We saw the Folies Bergere and talked our way into the Moulin Rouge even though we were under age, because we promised we wouldn't drink alcohol. They served us lemonade. There was a transportation workers strike and we had a few hair-raising cab rides around the city.

We traveled home on another WWII troop ship further south on the Atlantic, and the ocean wasn't quite so angry. The memory of coming into New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty still gives me the chills.

We spent a day or so in New York City, seeing a live show of the comedy duo Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin. My mother was in Chicago when our bus from New York arrived and she was laughing through her tears to see her unusually chubby daughter. My German family had served me delicious food and they and I ate all day; breakfast, midmorning snack, large meal at noon, afternoon tea and supper. I gained 24 pounds. We took the train to Kewanee and were met by more family and girl friends from high school.

In History class during my senior year, the teacher showed a film about Black Thursday, October 14, 1943, the day the U.S Air Force suffered its greatest wartime loss, one-fourth of a fleet of 291 Flying Fortress bombers sent from England without fighter protection, in a desperate attempt to wipe out Nazi Germany's ball bearing production in Schweinfurt. In an article in the *Peoria Journal Star* in 1973, a woman

living in Schweinfurt remembers “the terrified men and women screaming outside the closed door of a bunker” while she was safe inside.

All in all, the Americans and British hit Schweinfurt 16 times, returning each time the ball bearing factory pushed aside the rubble and renewed production. According to city archives, they dropped 6,500 tons of bombs on the community, killing over 1,000 people.

As the other students watched the movie with some elation, I wept in the back of the darkened room, thinking of the family I loved.

That year Joe and I spoke to a total of about 40 organizations about our experiences that summer. Getting to know each other as human beings is certainly the path to peace in this world.

It gets personal.