

Boring into Germany

by Steve Huynh

After teary hugs and promises to stay in touch I said goodbye to my loving host family. With three months in the German city of Stuttgart under my belt, I took a chic high-speed train to the nearest international hub, Frankfurt, to fly back to the States. I used the time on the train to record the events of the past months in my journal. However, I couldn't help but overhear a loud phone conversation occurring behind me in the cabin.

"If the world is a fruit basket then Germans are coconuts." I almost never heard English with an American accent during my exchange (mostly in brief phone calls home) so the phrase lodged itself in my head, and I could no longer get my thoughts out on the page. I looked up and saw a portly, aging man in a pinstripe suit yammering on his cell phone. After his phone call I approached him and introduced myself.

"I couldn't help overhearing your fruit basket comment. What did you mean?" I said.

"I do some public speaking sometimes in a corporate setting. When I start talking about Germans, I compare them to coconuts." Roger was a retired businessman turned international corporate trainer. He taught new hires the nuances of international business communication. He was headed to Mannheim, a city between Stuttgart and Frankfurt, to give a presentation to a group of trainees about doing business with Americans.

As Roger and I talked about the differences between the two countries and continents, the ultramodern ICE train emitted a faint buzz as it hit 250 km/h on a special section of precision track towards Mannheim. I glanced out of the window and saw the German countryside blur as the subtleties of the landscape disappeared.

Three months prior, in the summer of 2000, I found myself in the city of Stuttgart, the capital of the provincial state of Baden-Wurttemberg. Jumping at the chance to go on non-academic cultural exchange a week after my high school graduation, I was excited at the opportunity to break out of the sleepy town I grew up in. I hoped desperately that my host family, the Krapfs, would like me.

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My train entered the world-famous station designed by Paul Bonatz during the early part of the twentieth century. All trains must first pass through the eastern tunnel that cuts through the sandstone hills that box in the city. Because of this geographical difficulty the tracks leading to the main station are a veritable mess of interweaving rail lines, winding back and forth, requiring a certain German attention-to-detail to decipher. The station itself, known as Stuttgart's architectural gem, is a grand structure with an austere façade that leads to the city's heart and soul, the Konnigstrasse. Its stone walls enclose not only the rail for trains traveling inter-city, but also house the crux of Stuttgart's comprehensive subway system.

These walls were the first thing I noticed as I stepped off my train and awaited my host parents. The file I was given supplied only their name, address and a grainy Polaroid of the family. After 15 minutes of anxious waiting I was still alone. After an hour, I decided to call them. The dial tone for the pay phone was in a different frequency and I was scared that I would not know how to operate it.

"Hallo"

"Hi, this is Steve. I'm at the train station."

"Bitte? Ich kann nicht verstehen." I can't understand.

"Hi, this is Steve."

"O, Steve! Jetzt mucks' dich aber ja nicht!" Stay put!

I took it that they were coming. They arrived shortly thereafter and I was relieved and excited. I shook hands with the man of the household, Winfried, an aging bald man with and a serious disposition. His wife, Kornelia, looked 10 years younger and had medium length straight auburn hair.

"Wir dachten, dass dein Angang am morgen war," Winfried said. When I stared back blankly he said rather indignantly, "We thought your arrival was tomorrow."

I thanked them for welcoming me into their home. He replied with a curt nod. After loading my baggage into their green Audi station wagon we departed to my new home.

The car ride was uncomfortably silent. I would ask a question and they would reply with a short response, making conversation all but impossible. I did gather that their only son, Tim, was away on some sort of school trip and would be back the next day. Like every shallow American exchange student I hoped that my host parents were stinking rich and would shower me with gifts. I was disappointed that their apartment was small and cramped. I called my mother in America to tell her that I was ok. Afterwards, to break the ice, I gave them some gifts. Among other things I brought a nice bottle of cognac.

"We do not drink," Winfried said after he opened the gifts.

Tim, my new brother, came back home the next day. I was happy to discover he was only two years my junior. My fear was that he was significantly older or younger than I was, enlarging the already significant cultural gap. Tim had a bulky stature and short brown hair. His voice was high pitched, however, and not appropriate for his build. His English was very good, though with a slight British tinge that sometimes threw me off. Tim listened politely when I flipped through my high school yearbook and attempted to reminisce about my recent high school graduation.

“Here is a picture of me on the tennis team at school,” I said. “Do you play on a sports team at school?” I asked, trying to lighten things up.

“No!” he said. “We do not have sports activities at school. Have you any further questions?”

“No,” I said. He got up and went to the bathroom. I closed my yearbook.

I was Tim’s new sidekick. If he and his friends went to the movies, I would tag along. I accompanied him to school every day. They never seemed to mind my presence.

I initially tried my hardest to understand what was being said in class, but it soon dawned upon me that my poor German would not allow me to comprehend any sort of lessons. Tim picked up on this after a while and so afterwards I would only attend classes with him a couple times a week. My host mother, Kornelia, took me on little trips around the city on days I didn’t attend classes. One such trip was to der Friedhof to plant flowers at the family site. German cemeteries are a sight to behold and I was transfixed by the ancient tombstones, some dating back more than 500 years. Some were so old and worn by time the stone simply marked a place for an anonymous person. In America most graveyards are covered in a sea of grass and kept up by maintenance men. In the old country each site is covered with colorful flowers planted by loved ones in remembrance, until the rememberers themselves eventually die and their eternal resting sites go fallow as the deceased are forgotten.

It was here, while inspecting ancient markers, that my host mother had a seizure. I heard a knock and turned around. The knock, as it turned out, was her head striking the tombstone behind her. She lay shaking violently, a trickle of blood oozing from her head. I was terrified at the sight and I froze for a couple of seconds, the scene before me surreal. I snapped back into reality and noticed we were alone the cemetery. I started running. I ran past countless graves for what seemed like an eternity. Finally I notice a building, ran inside and got a funeral director to call the paramedics.

When I got back to Kornelia, with the funeral director in tow, she was being helped by a stranger. She was conscious now and we asked her questions like “What is your name?” and “How old are you?” She could manage nothing more than a weak smile. We kept her awake and conscious until the paramedics arrived.

The paramedics came and loaded her into the ambulance. They talked to the funeral director and prepared to depart and I started to panic. Kornelia was my lifeline. I had no idea where the cemetery was or how to contact the other members of the family. I didn't know how to say "host-mother" or "her exchange student" in German, and because I am of Asian descent it was not obvious that I belonged with her.

I stood in the way of the driver as he attempted to board the ambulance. He attempted to remove me from his path. I frantically attempted to construct a sentence that would get the point across. I yelled "Ich bin ihren Sohn! I am her son!" until a bystander finally stepped in and translated for me. I rode in the passenger seat, as the sirens blared, on the way to the hospital.

She received quite a knock on her kopf and would have to stay at the hospital another day. Winfried was notified and came to pick me up. After he left the offices of the doctor he came to me in the waiting room. Kornelia would be alright. This very thing happened while the family was skiing a couple years back and they conducted rigorous tests then found nothing abnormal. Now, after another round of tests the doctors came to the same conclusion. Their advice was simply "Do not travel alone."

"You did the right thing Steve. You were quick to react and for that I am grateful," he said.

"You know, I did what any other..." I didn't finish my thought, as it was interrupted by an unexpected man hug. I paused for a moment and hugged him back.

The dinners at the Krapf household usually consisted of the three of them speaking German that was too complex for me to comprehend. Tonight Herr Krapf and Tim spoke in English and attempted to explain things that were confusing for me. Winfried's English, I discovered, was impeccable. Up to this point I assumed his English was rudimentary because of how infrequently he used it. I learned he worked for the military and when he was younger he worked with many Americans and Britons supporting NATO air units. During and after dinner became a time to compare cultures, to pour over German and English dictionaries, and to attempt to find a common ground.

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"Germans are coconuts because on the outside they seem unfriendly and very serious. It takes a long time to get through their hard shells and really get to know them. But once you have they field no other defenses. You are friends for life. There are no secrets, there's no real chance you can alienate them any longer," Roger said. "Only a select few make it through and they're fine with that. Acquaintances and colleagues and the like expect to have a certain level of distance."

"Let's go to a smoking cabin," Roger said with almost a panic. I acquiesced.

After all, who didn't pick up smoking while living in Europe? After we resituated ourselves we lit our cigarettes and he relaxed slightly. He seemed to be getting into his public speaking mode.

"So if Germans are coconuts," I said with a measure of incredulity, "what are Americans?"

He took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled slowly, seemingly expecting the question. He said "That's easy, we're peaches."

When I wasn't at school with Tim or hanging out with friends I was out exploring the city. The Krapfs provided an unlimited U-Bahn (subway) pass for me so that I could travel with freedom. I became comfortable with Stuttgart. I explored the surrounding neighborhoods in Germany's second largest conurbation. I explored streets, not laid out in orthogonal grids like in America, but in meandering, meshed paths dreamt up centuries ago. I was happy to discover a Vietnamese restaurant and even shopped at a Chinese grocery store, their storefronts mixed in unassumingly with the other buildings in the urban setting.

Tim and I became good friends. English, among other languages, is taught at an early age and Tim's vocabulary is immense. Miscommunication occurred only when I attempted to speak German. He and his friends loosened up as time went on. I now greeted his guy friends with high-fives and his female friends with a kiss. Nights were usually spent at the local pub carrying on and chain smoking. Sometimes there would be a party at a local church (a common spot for raging birthday parties and other social gatherings on non-Sabbath days). We even saw some German hip-hop concerts together (it's surprisingly fresh) and I introduced him to the music I listened to. Tim became my brother.

Housing in Germany is perpetually in demand, driving prices for land through the roof. Less than half of the population lives in a house. The Krapfs weren't in the poor house like I had assumed. Their flat became more and more cozy. Near the end of my exchange it struck me that I was sleeping in Tim's room and he was sleeping in the basement. Under the train set. He was there for three months so I could have his room.

I was getting acquainted with the language. The German I learned in school was very harsh and guttural. Each region of Germany has a spin on the standard German language. Eventually I could make out the nuances in speech that the Stuttgarter's accent contained. Owing to the fact that the city is close to the French border, their dialect, Schwabisch, is especially pleasing to the ear with few harsh guttural sounds associated with their countrymen to the North and East. Kornelia spoke excellent French and English, and her voice flowed with lyric clarity in every language, even when she said mundane things like "I will wash your clothes for you, do not worry."

Winfried and Tim's hobby is model train collecting. Before I left, as a treat, they sparked up their track and my host father put on his authentic conductor's hat. The train rounded a loop and entered a tunnel bore through model hills and arrived safely into the miniature Stuttgart train station. I could not stop smiling when I saw Winfried and Tim transfixed by the sight of the train rounding its track.

The Krapfs made sure I saw the country in all of its beauty. The weekends were filled with trips to the surrounding regions. The palace at Ludwigsberg, the world famous castle at Heidelberg, a trip to the lake of Constanz, not to mention the numerous museums and Roman ruins. I figured out there are a million castles spread out everywhere, as if they were some ancient fast food chain. Apparently in feudal times castles protected every village from danger. When an unfriendly group attacked a village, they would scurry inside the high castle walls for protection, sometimes staying within the massive structures for months.

Tim and I would sometimes work out at the gym. Afterwards we would use the Sauna. Stark naked is the conventional procedure, the small steamy room used simultaneously by both men and women. Initially I was hesitant at the proposition.

"No one cares. It's weird if you come in with clothes or a towel." Tim said.

I unwrapped the towel around me and put it on one of the hangers outside of the sauna. Attempting desperately not to stare at people I tried to relax during ten minutes of hot and steamy air. I was sweating like a pig when we got out. Tim shot some ice cold water from the shower at me. I shivered, shriveled and yelped.

"Good for your heart," he said, chuckling to himself as he generously doused himself in turn with freezing water.

My eighteenth birthday occurred near the end of my stay and the Krapf family insisted on taking me to a swank restaurant. When Kornelia ordered a carafe of wine I said "But I thought you all didn't drink!"

"A glass of wine with dinner is not drinking" Kornelia said with a soft glissando and a smile. When the food arrived offered she offered a toast to my birthday. The menu contained a nice steak option—my usual choice for birthday dinners—but I decided that I would try a local specialty. My entrée was Maultaschen, a sort of German ravioli with a mixture of reduced leafy greens and meat in the center accompanied with a creamy sauce. The dish is quintessentially Swabisch and has been made for centuries. Back when the area was primarily Catholic—before Martin Luther and the Great Schism divided the spiritual inclination of the area—meat was frowned upon on Fridays. To get around this problem some crafty chef created Maultaschen, vegetarian in look with the meat conveniently tucked inside, hidden from God himself.

After dinner they gave me a present. It was a new designer leather

wallet, with a picture inside of my host family that I had taken when we were in the castle of Heidelberg . “Now you can take us wherever you go,” Kornelia said.

A week later I was plucked from the home I had known for the summer and was in America again.

“We’re peaches?”

“Peaches,” Roger stated.

The train slowly decelerated as we approached the intermediary city of Mannheim, a stop in my trip to Frankfurt .

“The fact that we’re even talking to each other right now is a testament to that fact. Most Americans are polite, cordial even to total strangers. You’re my friend,” he pointed at me and then to random passengers, “you’re my friend, every one here is my friend. But the sweet friendly flesh goes only so far. At the center we are strong individuals and we rarely, if ever, let anybody really get inside our hard pits.”

“This is my stop,” he said without pomp. The train came to a halt and Roger got up, secured his bag and headed towards the exit. I called after him.

He turned around and said, “What do you want kid, a hug?”