

A Somewhat Shocking Arrival in Bitburg, Germany

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I would be less than honest if I did not admit to some mild trepidations about coming to Germany. I am Jewish. Although I am not “very religious”, I do come from an orthodox family with its roots in a small town in Ukraine (part of Poland Prior to WWII). According to what I have been able to find out, most of the Jewish population in that city was wiped out.

To heighten my concerns about being in Germany, my brother-in-law, whose parents were born in East Germany had told me about a rather unpleasant experience he had being detained by the Stasi on his visit to East Germany in the 70’s and he expressed concern about my destination.

My first assignment upon arrival in Germany was at Bitburg Air base. I knew something about the more familiar names of German cities like, Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Munich, Nuremberg, and a few others. I knew only one thing about Bitburg. It was the home of an SS cemetery and Ronald Reagan had caused a bit of a stir when he had visited the site.

Taking the advice of the more experienced Maryland faculty members regarding locating a place to stay, Soonja and I went to the base housing office for assistance. After completing an information sheet, we were introduced to a German man who appeared to be about 60 years old. Given this was in 1987, he would have been a young boy of about 10-15 years old in the late 30’s and early 40’s.

We sat down and he read the form I had filled out and while I do cannot recall his exact words, with somewhat of a smile on his face, he said the following first in German. “Ah. Gevirtz ist ein deutscher Name, nicht wahr?” Gevirtz is a German name isn’t it? I said yes and he then said...again, in German first, “Aber Aaron ist ein jüdischer Name.” But Aaron is a Jewish name.

My first thought was Oh, oh here it comes!

But, to my relief, the man then put his pen down, looked me in the eye and proceeded to tell me that as a child he had a few Jewish friends. He joked about the fact that “they always had more candy than we did”. He then told me how they slowly began to disappear.

I think the man was about to cry and I believe this was his way of apologizing for what had taken place in his country.

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Asian Division – 1985-1987

European Division – 1987- 2013