

European Division: Class Visits

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June 2022

Special Agent Christine Leche pushed open a rear door to the near empty classroom. Minutes earlier Dr. Scott's students had drizzled out into the autumn night air, and now only Dr. Scott remained behind. Standing beside a ramshackle wooden lectern, Scott felt beads of sweat form on his forehead. This is how Leche liked to see the guilty, struggling to remain calm, even though they knew they were in for a major bust.

"So punk," Leche hissed, "you call yourself a faculty member for the European Division. You appear before your students without preparation, and then in your dusty monotone you read page after page from the class textbook for an entire three-hour session. You aren't an instructor; you are scum." Leche's face displayed stone coldness, but her eyes glowed hatred beneath the shadow of her low-drawn Fedora.

"Hey, no, you got it wrong," whined Scott. "On Tuesdays I present well-researched lectures followed by probing question sessions and student-to-student discussions. It's only on Thursdays that I read from the text." It was a lie. Rumors about the textbook-reading instructor had filtered back to Heidelberg headquarters weeks earlier. And now the little putz thought he could bluff his way out of trouble. Another psychologist instructor, thought Leche. Why is it they give us the biggest problems. He is probably a Freudian.

"You can claim to be misunderstood." Leche said coolly, "but the reality is you are a disgrace to your job." She stared at Scott, her contempt notching upwards. "We're taking you down to the Im Bosseldorn dungeon for interrogation. After you sign a confession your contract will be terminated and you will be liable for German back taxes and deportation. Okay, boys, cuff him."

Two backup agents strode into the room and slapped a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs onto the whimpering culprit, pushing him outside towards a waiting van. As Scott passed, Agent Leche resisted an urge to pistol whip him. She let him walk by and then slowly pulled out an unlit cigarette to roll between her index finger and thumb, a trick she had learned when she was with the NYPD; it eased the tension. These perps, she thought, will all be purged no matter what. The Class Visitation Division has its work cut out for itself, and I intend to help pull out every last piece of rot.

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The above is a dramatic re-creation of a routine UMUC class visit, mostly dreamed up by this author after a night of cheap bourbon and little sleep. The real European class visitation record proved less exacting but nonetheless important to the program.

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Many members of the faculty had only a vague understanding of Heidelberg's class visitation policy. They knew an administrator could sit in on a class session, but only after the instructor received advance notice. A minority of faculty members complained the policy undermined academic freedom, another small group saw it as administrative intimidation, and a handful believed the policy derived from lonely Heidelberg administrators seeking companionship outside the confines of Im Bosseldorn. The vast majority of faculty didn't care what it was about but thought it was at worst a nuisance or, at best, a beneficial strategy to weed out the incompetent instructor who occasionally filtered into faculty ranks.

The official reason for the policy was indeed a hazy notion, something administration did not discuss much other than to claim the policy earned points on the military contract bids UMUC made every ten years. Maryland won points by offering various "bonus" services to the military classroom, and the class visitation policy pulled the total point score upward when the military judged numerous competing schools. A few resentful Maryland instructors proposed faculty visitation for Im Bosseldorn administrators in order to win additional contract points. These semi-mutinuous grumblings were not registered in Heidelberg.

For former Maryland faculty today, it is difficult to get a handle on how well the class visitation policy worked. No massive groundswell of discontent or outrage swelled through faculty ranks, so faculty representatives never attempted to survey faculty on the merits and demerits of the program. Until tight-lipped former administrators open up, ex-faculty can only provide anecdotal musings. That is what I intend to furnish here.

The Workhorse

Numerous observers plopped themselves into student desks during several of my class sessions I conducted through the years. The one who entered my class most often was my Area Director, Elizabeth Trousdell. Her *modus operandi* consisted of sitting through half of the class, offering a few comments during the break, and then hustling down the hallway to another instructor for a second observation. Of all the administrators that tumbled through my courses, Elizabeth worked the most efficiently and unobtrusively. She clearly saw that I did not disgrace my profession and she left me alone. We had a relationship of mutual understanding and mutual respect. She told me she thought the classes went well. I was happy enough with that assessment, but I worried that she might kill herself as she raced around Wuerzburg's several bases, racking up class observations with her busy schedule of lunchtime, teatime, and evening courses. I did not know how administrative visitors could keep up such schedules without snapping under the stress.

The Reformer

While most observers didn't step on my toes concerning my teaching techniques, there was one exception: Fabian Schupper, a former Maryland instructor rehired by Heidelberg to serve

as a faculty observer. Several years ago Fabian arrived for an evening class I conducted in Schweinfurt. He followed the usual routine, sitting amongst the students as I taught. After the students departed, Fabian asked about the lecture format I used for the class.

"Have you ever thought of rounding the student desks and conducting student-to-student learning sessions?"

"No," I said, "I never did."

"You should try it," he continued, "it is a pedagogical reform that is used increasingly in the states."

Actually, it was a style developed in the nation's secondary schools during the preceding 40 years, much to the detriment of the nation's high school children. Rather than enter a conflict over the matter with Fabian, I responded by saying, "I'm not going to change my teaching approach; where are we going for dinner?"

Fabian dropped the topic and he drove us to a nearby Italian restaurant where he proceeded to set a memorable evening into motion. He was a fabulous conversationalist. Through the dinner he discussed, among other things, Maryland-related gossip, as I suppose one might expect, but then he recounted his earlier travels through Italy while adding his opinions on Italian art, music, and cuisine. His expertise on the latter subject led him to conclude that our evening meal had nothing to do with real Italian cooking; he felt the scaloppini was probably taken from flesh of a local ally cat. Fabian was a genuinely witty and charming raconteur.

The summer sun had long set by the time we finished dinner, and to my alarm I learned that Fabian suffered from poor night vision. We careened down Landstrasse 19 in his rental, and I sat with a white-knuckle grip on the dashboard. Fabian did not notice my terror, so he took the opportunity to tell me where I could find the best Tiramisu in Naples. The episode did not end in our deaths, I am happy to report, and as Fabian dropped me off he brightened the evening's conclusion. He invited me to look him up if I should ever visit Charleston, South Carolina. Before I could respond he pressed the accelerator and zigged-zagged his way down the street. I am sorry I never had the opportunity to take Fabian up on his invitation. I think he was the kind of person one could spend hours with and enjoy every moment of his intelligent conversation.

The Teacher

John Golembe, had no criticism of my classroom performance. His appraisal focused on the fact that my students were engaged in the class, busily taking notes rather than staring off into space. John offered a few other observations as well, which made this instructor feel the job performance was successful. However, the best part of John's visit was the after-class lunch we enjoyed in the gritty farm town of Giebelstadt. We fell into a discussion on Expressionist art, of which John was a huge fan. He had recently attended an Expressionist exhibit and he recounted the experience with enthusiasm.

The Expressionist movement had never appealed to me. I disliked blue horses, orange gazelles, green elks, and all the other assorted figures that inhabit Expressionist paintings. I didn't get it. Yet, John's interest in Expressionism motivated me to take a deeper look. Ultimately through the years I made pilgrimages to the Schlossmuseum in Murnau, the Franz Marc Museum, and the Buchheim Museum der Phantasie, and I have gone out of my way to visit any other occasional Expressionist showings that came my way. Thanks for the tip and your enthusiasm over Expressionism, John. In your case and with many other visitors as well, the visitation policy amounted to much more than commentaries concerning teaching techniques.

The Corrector

Fabian was the only visitor who suggested I should change my teaching style. All other observers were positive about my presentation. I did, though, have one class visitor who corrected a portion of my teaching content. John Nolan attended one of my American history classes in Ansbach, and after the session we followed the usual process of a post-class wrap up over dinner. I knew a nearby Gasthaus and gave directions to John, who had to remain a few minutes behind in order to photocopy a letter in the Field Rep's office.

After reaching the Gasthaus, I did not have to wait long. John sauntered through the door five minutes after I sat down at a corner table. The evening was set, and after ordering our dinner, John gave a rather broad assessment of the class performance. He presented a favorable account of how the course was structured and taught.

And then he whisked a verbal slap at my head. "By the way," he said, "I need to correct one of the points you made in class. The British did not voluntarily abandon Boston during the early Revolution. They were pushed out by George Washington after his forces dragged cannons from Canada and made the British position untenable."

I stared at John, my right trigger finger twitching uncontrollably. What the hell, I knew I couldn't be wrong. After approximately twenty seconds of further finger twitches, I excused myself from the table for a visit to the men's room. Inside the restroom I heisted a quart of hand wash soap, slipped out the window above the left urinal, found John's black VW Golf car parked next to mine, and then poured the soap into his gas tank.

When I returned to the table, John asked me about my prolonged absence. In a cunning display of fast-wittedness I told him that I was born with an inordinately large bladder that took no less than ten minutes to empty. He believed me, and we both settled down to enjoy a gratis meal subsidized by Maryland.

My after-dinner plan was to spring into my car and drive off while John's car faltered in the parking lot. As we left the restaurant I gave him a gratuitous smile and said good night. John provided a slight wave and strode past his car in the direction of a black Golf parked across the street. In a Stan Laurelish moment, I realized I had poisoned the wrong car. John apparently

had a smooth ride home. I remained only momentarily in the parking lot, not wanting to encounter an enraged German suffering from unexpected motor problems.

An additional footnote to the story: Later that evening I arrived home, cracked open my copy of *1,001 Handy Facts about the American Revolution*, and indignantly discovered that John was correct about George Washington and Boston. I decided not ever to mention the topic to John and just let sleeping Bostonians lie. Why confess to humiliation?

It was a fortunate strategy. In the following years John and I hit it off rather well and our paths crossed often, usually at Maryland meetings. One particularly memorable post-faculty conference evening occurred in England, when we were joined by Heidelberg's librarian in residence, Denise Sokolowski, for an intense session of whisky tasting. Happily, Denise's enthusiasm for whisky consumption registered at a lesser level than the intake tempo followed by John and me. The next morning she was able to pierce our fogged minds and tell all that had transpired the previous evening. I will always treasure Denise's memory of the event.

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When I was a ten-year old kid, my older brother claimed I was prone to exaggerate. I called him a liar, punched him in the face, and then set fire to his bedroom. Today, thinking back on my brother's accusation, perhaps he was right. Maybe I do have a propensity to manufacture exaggerated narratives of daily events. And on further and more honest reflection, I think it was my brother who actually punched me. Mercifully, he did not torch my bedroom.

My above commentary on the European Division visitation policy is spiced by some embellishments, and I'll let readers decide what those overstatements might be. Overall, I think the class visits worked fairly smoothly. In addition, the post-visit meals were collegial and usually memorable. I usually enjoyed the company of those Heidelberg visitors. The class observers had an ability to treat lecturers respectfully, as colleagues who had normally acquired teaching proficiency and even expertise during years of undergraduate, graduate, and classroom experience. The Heidelbergers did not view faculty as malleable workers, a circumstance that Adelphi's current bulldozing administrative managers have not successfully considered.

In Europe, the classroom visitors had the grace and intelligence to leave successful classroom instructors alone. There were certainly some faculty members who benefitted from teaching tips that the visitors provided, and it should be noted that a few incompetent faculty members were weeded out. Altogether, I think this was a rather successful outcome to the class visitation program.

End Note: Chris Leche never pistol whipped any Marylander that I know, and Chris never landed in my class as an observer. She and I were good friends and teaching colleagues before she ascended into Heidelberg's administerial ranks. Chris is one of those many Marylanders who left the European scene and unfortunately has faded from sight altogether. I have had no

contact with her for the last fifteen years. I'm hoping she will read my alarming fictional rendition of her class visitation style and then drop me a line. She is one of the many Marylanders I would like to see once more.

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