

Passat Possessed

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July - August 1985 Chapel Hill, NC → Heidelberg, Germany

To be a successful University of Maryland lecturer overseas, you had to be adventurous, flexible, and creative. But an absolute requirement was to be mobile. I landed in Heidelberg, Germany, to teach in UM's European Division just two days after submitting my dissertation to complete my doctoral program in psychology at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Among the many administrative hurdles for new lecturers, a priority was to pass the daunting German driver exam and sign test, and then to get a car. Not just any car, but one that could handle long commutes on the Autobahn as well as moves from country to country, carrying everything you owned to set up life in another place—books, clothes, office supplies, kitchen items, household basics.

Fresh out of graduate school, my budget led me to the used car lot at the Heidelberg Shopping Center, where I paid \$1,000 for a 1975 Volkswagen Passat. I was assigned to teach classes at two U.S. military bases in southern Germany, an army base in Neu Ulm and an air force facility in Memmingen, 60 kilometers further south in the Bavarian Alps. Now, with a “POV”—privately owned vehicle, in military parlance—and a license to drive it, all I needed was a place to live to launch my new life. This was my first “real” job—and the beginning of an adventure like no other, thanks in no small part to my little troublemaker of a car.



August - October 1985 Neu Ulm, Germany

A few weeks into that first term, empowered by my USAREUR driver's license and wheels, and enchanted by the proximity of other countries, I made my first weekend trip to visit a friend in Switzerland. The Sunday night of my return, I woke up feverish and drenched in sweat. By morning I crawled out of bed to discover my body was swollen all over...hands, legs, feet... I barely recognized the reflection in the bathroom mirror as my own puffy face with tiny slits for eyes. Stuffing myself into suddenly too-tight clothes and shoes, I jumped in the car and headed downtown in heavy morning traffic to find the office of an allergy specialist that my German landlady had recommended.

As I neared the doctor's office, a shiny, black Mercedes cut sharply in front of me, and I crashed right into it. The driver—a handsome, impeccably dressed German man—jumped out, waving his arms and apologizing profusely, then got into my car to give me his insurance details while I sat behind the wheel of my wrecked Passat, stunned and still puffed up like a blowfish. After all that, the allergy emergency turned out to be a minor inconvenience. But the accident was the first of many trials in my travels with this car.

The engine repairs and body work on the Passat took a couple of weeks and must have left a ghost in the machine, specifically in the electrical system, which set me up for my next adventure. I had signed up for a UM excursion to a Tuscan country inn for a 4-day cooking class. The meeting point for the bus trip to Italy was at McGraw Kaserne in Munich. Running a bit late as was typical for me, I made the 150-kilometer drive from Ulm to Munich in decent time, arrived at the Kaserne, and pulled into the first parking spot I saw. Before I could turn off the engine, a German man leaned out a window, waving and pointing to the big red “X” sign (*Parking Verboten*; of course I knew *that* from the sign test!). I backed out quickly and found another spot nearby. Meanwhile I scanned the lot but did not see the tour bus, and minutes were ticking by. I turned off the ignition but the engine wouldn’t shut off! I jumped out of the car when an MP shouted over to me that I couldn’t exit the vehicle if it was still running. “I can’t turn it off!” I pleaded, so he had me pop the hood and he pulled the coil, an engine part previously unknown to me, which instantly killed the engine.

Miraculously, the local organizer for the bus tour was still in the parking lot and, as he was drawn to the commotion around my car, we met for the first time. He tells me that I have *just* missed the bus, but if I go NOW and *hurry*, I might catch it at the Austrian border. I reattached the coil, hopped back in the car, and it was full speed ahead to the German-Austrian border at Kufstein. What’s another 90 kilometers if I’d be in Italy at the end of the day?

The car indicators suddenly went crazy—gas gauge and speedometer needles were moving up and down wildly, sometimes resting on ‘0.’ I was a nervous wreck, not only as a relative newbie to the high speeds on the Autobahn—and with pedal to the metal to reach the border in time—but wondering *what the heck* was going on with my car and would it make it to Kufstein??

The car *did* make it and, somehow, among the dozen or more buses parked in the rest area, I found the right one. I parked my car, pulled the coil *again* to cut off the engine, grabbed my bag, and boarded the bus. Within minutes, as the adrenaline subsided, we were winding our way deeper into the Alps while I listened to tunes on my Walkman (remember, it’s 1985) and managed to put all thoughts of the car out of my mind.

October 1985 – May 1986

Incirlik Air Base, Turkey

After that first term in Germany, I was assigned to teach at Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey. I put the car in storage in Heidelberg and made the overnight journey on the infamous “milk run”: a C-141 no-frills cargo flight that took off from Germany and made several stops through the night before touching down at Incirlik the next morning. Weeks later, when my assignment in Turkey was extended for the rest of the academic year, I decided I needed my car with me. So I flew back to Germany for the Christmas holidays on a massive C-5 cargo plane and retrieved my car from storage. To be sure it was up to the task of a long road trip, I gave it a test run and drove it across the bleak, frozen landscape from Heidelberg to Berlin, passing through surreal border checkpoints (Alpha and Bravo) manned by East German soldiers in oversized coats and Cossack hats.

On January 7th, I began the road trip to Turkey. It was a roughly 2,500-mile journey through five countries—made longer by the need to detour around Bulgaria, with which we had poor relations at the time—and across Turkey to Adana. I made the trip in tandem with fellow UM math/computer science instructor and dear friend, Tom Saxton—he in his Mazda GLC, and I, in my VW Passat. With so many hours behind the wheel and our ambitious timetable, I found myself performing remarkable tasks while driving: I could peel an orange, study a map, take pictures, realign the

rubber gasket on my window, and make a peanut butter sandwich. Radio reception was inconsistent, so I was glad to have my music tapes. When I tired of those, I pulled a deck of Trivial Pursuit© cards from under my seat to quiz myself.

Toward nightfall on our second travel day in Yugoslavia, we hit a fog so thick we couldn't see the road. We pressed on at a snail's pace until we abruptly landed in a town at the end of the highway. Immersed in the fog and pitch-black darkness, we narrowly escaped dropping both cars into a deep ditch *and* being hit by a bus as we executed three-point turns while backtracking to find a place for the night. It felt as though we had entered the *Twilight Zone* and wouldn't have been at all surprised if Rod Serling had stepped out from the fog in front of us.

I assumed that the Passat's electrical problems had been fixed in Germany, but a new problem developed the next day: The car would suddenly slow to 40 kph. Flooring the gas pedal had absolutely no effect—until it did, and then the car would accelerate rapidly until it lost power again. We made it to Thessaloniki, Greece, where we drove straight to a garage. The diagnosis of a bad valve, which didn't seem right to me based on the symptoms—but what did *I* know about auto mechanics?—meant waiting three days for the repair. Having an unexpected weekend in Greece might sound like a bonus, but not so much in January, and not with days of travel ahead of us and classes starting soon.

Three days later, valve job complete, we were back on the road. But soon after crossing the border into Turkey, my tail pipe fell off. The whole assembly, muffler included. I signaled Tom to stop, drove back, picked it up off the road and threw it in the back seat of the car. We reached Gallipoli (the subject of a favorite Peter Weir film) and hopped a car ferry to cross the Dardanelles Strait. After brief stops in the ancient cities of Troy and Pergamon, we made it to Izmir, found NATO headquarters, called the Ed Center in Adana to alert them of our delay, and picked up the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper to check on the latest exchanges between Gaddafi and Reagan. The U.S. military was fortifying “the Med” and it was a bit nerve-wracking to have all that going on in our backyard.

We zipped down to Ephesus and took time to explore the most extensive Greek/Roman ruins we had ever seen. Saw an impression of John the Baptist's footprints. Turkey is *full* of such history! Awe, soon to be followed by despair. Only hours later in Denizli, the car started choking and lurching badly. I found a garage, where no fewer than nine Turks pored over my engine while a young boy brought us hot çay in delicate little glasses. So civilized, so kind. I had long since dismissed the stereotype of Turks as ruthless people—that had not matched my experience at all. The Passat's “pitted” points were the culprit and, once replaced, we were back on the road—against our better judgment because it was getting dark. Sure enough, we didn't get past the city limits when my car spat and spasmed and died once again on the side of the road.

This time we ended up in the hands of a wild-haired Russian man wearing thick glasses and multiple layers of clothing ending in overalls and a plaid scarf neatly tucked into his collar. While we communicated in my halting German, he plugged my car into his fancy machine to check pump pressure, coil voltage, timing, dwell, and God-knows what else, finally proclaiming that the recently replaced points were *zu gross* (too big)! At one point, the man's young Turkish helper had his hands wrapped around the fan belt and didn't hear the mechanic tell me to crank the engine. A near crisis was averted by the mercy of Allah: The cry of pain was *not* followed by the discovery of missing fingers. Two hours and another set of points later, we found a place for the night, not at all convinced that this lemon of a car would be any more roadworthy in the morning. I felt utterly helpless, hopeless, and cut off. I couldn't call AAA, or ADAC, or the Ed Center in Adana, or my dad.

On the home stretch, we took the coastal road much of the way to Adana, traversing the curvy, steep road that hugged the hillside hundreds of feet above the Mediterranean. The switchbacks were so sharp, I had to look out the *side* window to see what was up *ahead*. Occasionally I'd pull out to pass a VERY SLOW truck on a blind curve, betting my life on the strong probability that there was no car, bus, or truck barreling head-on toward me.

Eleven days after setting off from Germany and the night before classes began, we arrived in Adana only to discover that our apartment had no heat and was freezing cold. Tom and I packed up our class materials and headed to the ER on base. We knew the waiting room there was the only non-smoking public place that would be open late and accommodate a couple of "AmCits" camped out for several hours while we prepared our classes.

Later that week, I spent the afternoon in another greasy garage drinking çay while Turkish mechanics built a custom tail pipe and muffler from scratch to replace the one that had fallen off the week before.

One of my most memorable incidents in Turkey happened very late one night as I was driving home from a friend's birthday party on base. I had enjoyed a few adult beverages but felt okay to drive, knowing there would be little to no traffic at that hour. As I sped along the dark, divided highway toward Adana, I saw flashing blue lights up ahead. I slowed down and started to change lanes when suddenly I was on top of a line of orange traffic cones meant to divert cars into a roadblock. I swerved to avoid hitting the cones but it was too late—one of them got stuck under my car. Dragging the cone beneath the car, I pulled over and got out to free it. As I wrestled the cone back and forth to dislodge it, a small Turkish police vehicle rolled up to my car. Three policemen jumped out, shouting questions and making the universal crossed-wrists gesture for being handcuffed.

I mustered a cheery "Good evening!" in Turkish, which—although not exactly the appropriate greeting for the middle of the night—softened their stance ever so slightly. They asked for identification. I pulled out everything I had: my USAREUR driver's license (not valid in Turkey), an international driver's license (expired), my passport photo page (a faded xerox copy), and TDY orders for Turkey (unintelligible by most anyone outside the U.S. military community). One of the policemen exclaimed, "*Çok alkol, çok alkol!*" ("A lot of alcohol, a lot of alcohol!"). To which I countered, "*Hayir! Biraz alkol, biraz alkol!*" ("No! A little alcohol, a little alcohol!"). Whether it was my polite yet insistent approach and attempt to speak Turkish, or the sheer number of credentials I produced, or the grace of Allah—or all three, we'll never know—they let me go, and I was extremely grateful to miss my one and only chance to see the inside of a Turkish jail.

One weekend morning, a friend and I set off on a day trip to the coast. We were about halfway there, passing through a village, when I stopped behind a small dump truck at a red light. Suddenly, the truck started backing up but I couldn't shift into reverse quickly enough, and it hit me. Grateful that the impact didn't damage the radiator or engine block and that the car was drivable, we would have been fine to go on our merry way. But a witness who spoke some English convinced me to file a report at the local police station and further insisted that the truck driver should pay for the damage to my car. My friend and I spent an interminable time at the police station, the reporting process becoming infinitely more difficult with the language barrier because the witness did not stick around. In spite of our limited Turkish, it eventually became clear to us that the story had evolved into one in which *I* was the responsible party. A few days later, there was a meeting on the side of a highway near the base, in which an envelope full of Turkish lira was handed over, although *to* whom and *by* whom the payment was made, for the life of me, I cannot recall.

September – December 1986

U.S. Naval Station and NATO HQ Southern Europe – Naples, Italy

Being called a “trooper” was the ultimate compliment from Mediterranean area director David Glaser. I remember someone at UM headquarters in Heidelberg suggesting that if I survived Turkey, I could surely handle Naples, so “why not send her there?!” But Naples was not like other cities in Italy I had known and loved. It was one of the craziest, dirtiest, most petty-crime-ridden places I’d ever been, with dense traffic and flagrant disregard for driving conventions such as lanes, zipper merges, and traffic lights. I sometimes was so anxious at the wheel that I bit my nails while driving.

But eventually I fell in love with Naples too, even requesting a repeat assignment months later. At night, the historic buildings bathed in spotlights looked majestic, and you couldn’t see the dirt and grime or notice trash piled up in huge mounds on the street. Naples was bounded by the sea on one side and Mt. Vesuvius on the other, so everywhere I drove in the maze of narrow unmarked streets, they were my ultimate reference points. Living in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius gave me the feeling that the earth was alive, and indeed the mountain was monitored constantly for signs of impending eruption. This reality fueled many of my runs around the track at the NATO base, in full view of Vesuvius, feeling the latent energy of that seething mountain.

On my way home from class one night, I nearly drove over a mattress in the middle of the *Tangenziale*, and another night, someone broke off my antenna as I passed through a toll booth. I had countless near-accidents—which really *don’t* count—so all in all, the Passat was relatively incident-free until I drove it back to Germany in late December for my next assignment.

I broke the long drive to Heidelberg at what had become my favorite stopover on this trek, the Tuscan restaurant and inn that hosted the cooking class during my first term with Maryland. Giovanni, the proprietor, had set a table for one with a sign that read “No. 1 Americana.” When I left the next morning, he sent me off with a hearty *panino* and fruit for the road and—as was his custom—he ran out to my car at the last minute with random gifts: on this occasion, a stack of pottery dinner plates and, another time—after inquiring about my shoe size—several pairs of gently used ladies size 7 shoes.

As I approached the Alps, I heard on the radio that it was snowing hard. I had tire chains in the trunk but no idea how to put them on, and I didn’t want to take time for that at a service station. So after gassing up at the last petrol station in Italy, I drove on, entering the dreaded Gotthard Tunnel. The 17-kilometer single-bore tunnel, with one lane running in each direction, can challenge even the non-claustrophobics among us. The narrow, tubular track and repetitive pattern of lights evoked a tunnel hypnosis that I could manage only by summoning up a Zen-like focus on the moment and reassuring myself—deep below the Gotthard Pass—that “this too shall pass.”

The instant I emerged from the tunnel, the car was buffeted by snow. Dirty slush kicked up from vehicles’ tires made it difficult to see anything, and the windshield fluid nozzles were frozen. I rolled down the window and tried tossing water sideways from my water bottle onto the windshield, but that wasn’t working. Seeing an exit sign, I changed lanes barely in time to take the off ramp when the brakes locked up and I skidded until the curb of the ramp brought me to a full stop. I didn’t know it at the time, but the impact was enough to cause an engine filter to fall off. Driving into the nearest town, the engine started freezing up, so I took a room for the night in a *Gasthaus* conveniently located across the street from a Volkswagen dealership.

January – March 1987
Hahn Air Base, Germany

For my two-month assignment at Hahn, I took a large room in a hotel in the village of Trarbach on the Mosel River. At that time of year, the steep, windy road between the river and the air force base on top of a plateau was often covered with *Glätteis* (“black ice”)—impossible to see and quite treacherous. I slid into the curb several times on my way home from class at 10 o’clock at night, but always landed safely in the cozy restaurant of my hotel with a hot meal and a glass of fine local wine.

I don’t think it rained the entire time I was in Turkey. So imagine my surprise when, driving through a pouring rain in Germany one day, I reached back to grab a tangerine from a bag on the floorboard of the backseat and it was wet! In fact the tangerines were floating in a pool of water, thanks to a rusted-out wheel well. Yet another surprise from my “trusty” Passat.

My contract with Maryland was coming up for renewal at the end of May. As life-changing as the experience had been, I decided to go back to the States. I later returned to Heidelberg as an area director (1989–1992) and spent my last year with Maryland teaching in Korea (1992–1993), where I commuted to classes—from the DMZ in the north to Pusan in the south—via military buses and Korean trains, and I traveled around Asia by air. A different set of logistical challenges to be sure, but none as demanding as the Volkswagen had provided.

Are you wondering what I did with the Passat? I could not, in good conscience, sell that “POS” POV to anyone, so I donated it for parts to MWR. Looking back on it, how could I have anything but gratitude for the car, that magnet for mayhem? In the end, it always got me where I needed to go—eventually—and it gave me a few stories to tell. And, as clichéd as it may sound, it allowed me to discover an inner strength and resilience that I might never have known I had.