

Doing “The Splits” in a VW

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During my eight-year career with UMUC, I enjoyed a goodly amount of that time teaching English composition and literature courses in a few of the European Division’s exotic outposts, among which I would number Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, Adana AFB in Adana, Turkey, and wonderful little Karamursel Air Station on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, about two-hours ride on a ferry boat south of Istanbul. But like all vagabond Marylanders, I could not get away from doing my fair share of time in the very heart of the division located in Germany. While teaching at any one of the three previously listed bases, I had the luxury of staying put in one location, living in a military BOQ, and walking to the base Ed Center to teach my various classes. But once Dr. Robert Speckhard put in a call that I had to serve my time as well among the dozens of bases in Germany, that particular luxury went right out the window. As all of my fellow Marylanders know from direct experience, to be a full-timer in Germany meant owning an automobile and doing the dreaded “splits”.

When I first came to Heidelberg in the late summer of 1971, accompanied by my new wife Toni, I had to find a vehicle quite quickly as I was being assigned to teach in just a few days with splits at Pirmasens Army Base and Sembach AFB. On a short walk along the Neckar, I came across an old yellow 1962 VW Beetle parked in front of a small dealership with a for sale sign attached. The price was right for someone with scant funds available, about \$350 worth of German Deutsche marks. With nary a test drive, I bought the car and we headed off to Pirmasens near the border with France. To say that this German-made auto was always reliable would surely be a gross overstatement. We got to the town of Pirmasens alright, but on a little hill about two miles from the base, my car’s engine sputtered and died. With Toni steering the wheel from the passenger seat, I pushed us to the crest of the hill, jumped back in, popped the clutch, and made it to the base. Let’s just say that my confidence in my little Bug that did not even have seat belts was not all that high.

Perhaps it was the lemon color that sapped away most of my enthusiasm on that first week’s drives to Sembach, about sixty-five kilometers due north. But to my surprise, I made it. I will grant that driving back at night after three hours in the classroom did keep my nerves on edge. After the first two-month term, I decided to stay on for a second term. That now took me into the beginning of the colder months at which point my luck ran out one afternoon in late November. I had to take the VW in for repairs on a Wednesday afternoon and it would not be fixed until Friday. So to get to Sembach for my Thursday night class, I left Toni in the BOQ and stuck my thumb out to hitch a ride. I somehow made it to class on time by leaving at 2pm for my 6pm class. Fortunately, one of my generous Sembach students offered to take me back “home”. Whatever gods watch over vagabond Marylanders got me through that second eight-week hitch and when Christmas rolled around, Dr. Speckhard took pity on me and Toni and shipped us off to Adana AFB. So I stowed my little VW Beetle in Heidelberg and said goodbye to doing the splits for a while.

In Adana, Toni became pregnant with my second son Christopher. So between terms there I used an USAF MAC flight to take her back down to Asmara where her parents were. I managed to stay on at Adana through the fifth term, ending in early August. Then I flew MAC back down to Asmara for a month, where I begged my ESO there Fran Sullinger, to get me back to Ethiopia for the birth of my son. But first I was called back up to Germany for another set of splits. During my extended time

away from Germany, I had received more than one urgent communication from Vida Bandis, I believe, that I had to come back and get my lemon-colored VW out of storage. So off I went to Bad Kreuznach and Baumholder for my second taste of the autobahn and sundry other German roads. My time on this go-around was far less eventful in terms of disasters. One problem did arise with my timing of making the drive however. It was Term I again, and because Bad Kreuznach was in the heart of German Riesling wine production, if I left too late in the afternoon, I ran the risk of being forced to follow huge wagons filled with grapes that crept along the narrow roads at a snail's pace. If I had owned a Porsche, getting around these overloaded wagons would have been no problem. (But then if I had such a high-powered auto, I would also not have been a true Marylander.) One other incident of note did occur during my two-month stay back in Germany, in part due to my getting a late start for the seventy-kilometer drive. Baumholder is a US tank base and on this late afternoon I got careless and neglected to yield the right of way to some tanks out on maneuvers. I shot across the tank path and could have easily been pancaked had not its driver managed to slow his armored vehicle down in time. I can still see his raised and angry fist as it shook at me while reflected in my little VW's driver's-side mirror.

Even with close calls such as that one, I still would not have traded any one of my days on the UMUC circuit for one in a less-exciting stateside classroom. My two years on and off in Germany afforded me contacts with the culture that my own grandparents came from. So while the most prominent contact with the outside world while at Kagnew Station, Adana AFB and Karamursel came in the form of the base movie theater or some amateur GI bands slogging out pale imitations of 1960's American rock & roll, life in Germany presented a wider range of opportunity of which I took advantage. One memorable event took place on September 5, 1972, when Palestinian militants affiliated with the group Black September attacked and killed Israeli athletes in their Olympic village quarters, so I was able to witness first hand the harrowing hours that unfolded live on German television. In addition, many of my long weekends from Thursday night to the following Sunday were spent taking the overnight train out of K'town to Paris. For variety's sake, the destination would occasionally be Amsterdam or maybe Brussels. On two late September breaks, Munich and its Oktoberfest celebration beckoned. On the longer breaks between terms, I could even get up to Copenhagen or London. Pure joy for a young man from Wisconsin, hungry for adventure and a taste of the best that Europe had to offer.

Germany also attracted an amazing number of musical acts on their world tours. For example, Roy Orbison came to the army base at Pirmasens, so Toni and I got to hear him sing "Oh, Pretty Woman" up close and personal in 1971. That same year, my little lemon VW transported just me along the autobahn from Pirmasens to Frankfurt during a snowstorm to see Frank Zappa and his Mothers of Invention, along with Turtles' members Flo and Eddie, play in a memorable concert at the Jahrhunderthalle on November 28 as part of their "200 Motels Tour". I even bought the double album after the concert. Two years later, wearing a bright pink silk suit, Rod Stewart and the Small Faces entertained me in Nuremberg, so I enjoyed "Maggie May" and "You Wear It Well" while sitting at the foot of the stage. Perhaps the biggest such event was a veritable "Battle of the Bands" in Stuttgart where for over eight hours I was treated to loud rock music from six groups like Babe Ruth, Uriah Heep and Black Oak Arkansas. My eardrums were still ringing as I left the venue.

To wrap up this memoir, I have one further incident involving the splits that took place on my way out of Heidelberg and on the road east to my assignment for classes in Vilseck and Hohenfels. While navigating German roads, especially the autobahn, I always drove my little lemon VW as far to the right as was possible. I got well used to heavy local traffic consisting of huge trucks and vans, or

high-powered autos like Porsches or Mercedes-Benz gullwings, zooming past me at break-neck speed and splashing my windshield with all manner of road debris. So imagine my utter bewilderment when I was heading into a completely unfamiliar part of Germany, while facing into a bright Monday morning sunrise; I blithely followed an exit sign pointing to Nuremberg and pulled onto an autobahn stretch that looked brand new and was also completely deserted. I drove on, and not finding any other exit, spent the next fifteen curious minutes not seeing any vehicles either roaring up from behind me or rushing towards me on the west-bound side of that empty road. I swear that I could almost hear Rod Serling whispering in my ear, "You're traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. Your next stop, the Twilight Zone!" Apparently, I had inadvertently stumbled upon a freshly opened part of the autobahn, so new that no one in the area had yet thought to use it. Finally, one lone auto did come towards me heading west back toward Heidelberg. When another one finally overtook me going in my direction, I took a deep breath and felt that this stretch of autobahn was not leading me into some unknown world.

When I finally left UMUC for good in May of 1975, I sold that little yellow Beetle to a GI. I later heard that he abandoned it and that it ended up parked on a street where it was cannibalized for parts. What a lot of fond memories were left on that stick shift and tiny front seat. It was surely the most cantankerous car I ever owned, definitely no "Herbie the Love Bug". But it got me through "doing the splits" in Germany with UMUC for over two years all told. For that reason, all of its many sins are hereby forgiven.