

Waxing Nostalgic

Charles J. Krumbein
July 2026

As I ponder my long career of over forty years as a university/college educator, my fondest memories seem to be those connected with my eight-year stint as an English teacher with the University of Maryland's Overseas Division. That part of my career spanned from 1968-1975 while on the circuit with the European Division and it allowed me to teach various courses in composition and literature on three separate continents. In fact, during the course of two of those academic years, I actually managed to teach on all three of those continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, the logistics of which now seem to me to be almost mind boggling. But at the time, it was just part of the life of an itinerant Maryland educator. Only looking back on those years makes it seem to be something completely out of the ordinary. I plan to explain those occasions in more detail as this memoir document goes along. I propose to highlight outstanding memories from the major stops made on this roughly twenty percent of my early academic career, focusing on the various military bases where I was assigned, some of the memorable students that I had, and, of course, the many unusual "characters" who were part of the Maryland faculty that I had the pleasure of calling my colleagues.

By way of providing some contextual contrast, the typical academic year on a stateside campus, four of which I did eventually teach on, ran from late August to late May, with an optional summer session usually going from June through July. (As the old joke goes, what is the best thing about teaching? Answer: "June, July and August.") The only time that I taught a few summer sessions while living in Wisconsin happened when I ran Elderhostel classes for retired seniors at both UW-Platteville and then later at Clinton Community College. At Platteville, the classes were ones on Shakespeare which I did in conjunction with that campus's Wisconsin Shakespeare Festival. I would teach one of the plays that the festival was performing and the "students" would study it and then see the production to highlight that experience. At the community college, I ran a course associated with a program called "The Mississippi River in Our Lives," culminating in my showing of the W. C. Fields' comedy entitled Mississippi. But during my eight years with UMUC, I usually taught during the summer sessions of June and July simply because I needed the money. I went wherever Dr. Robert Speckhard sent me, glad to be gainfully employed while I was starting my family and career. Also, fortunately for me, he often sent me back down to Kagnev Station during those summer terms where I could reunite with my young family that stayed safely ensconced there with my wife's parents while I gallivanted across Europe and Asia from September to May.

Kagnev Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, is where I began my academic teaching career. Before I even started working for Maryland's European Division, I actually did a couple of terms volunteer teaching for the local University of Asmara where I taught

courses in Shakespeare and Modern Drama. The highlight of those sessions was their culmination in the commencement ceremony during which Ethiopia's Emperor, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, made it a point to distribute diplomas in person to all of the graduating students for that year of 1967-1968. The emperor also shook hands with all of the students and with the faculty that had taught them. It is not often in life that one gets to meet an emperor. And while I taught those courses, I was also taking classes in Italian with the UMUC local faculty person who was teaching there at Kagnaw. That connection brought me into close contact with the Kagnaw Education Director, one Fran Sullinger, who made the suggestion that I apply to teach for UMUC. I did so and was accepted onto the faculty in September of 1968. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. I continued to teach every term until after my four-year hitch with the U. S. Army ended in September of 1970. For any of the roaming faculty who happened to be fortunate enough to be assigned to Kagnaw Station, life in Asmara's famed "13 Months of Sunshine" touted on their tourist posters was a haven of isolated life adjacent to an exotic ancient culture bar none.

By way of accounting Fran Sullinger as one of my UMUC "characters," I would like to recount an incident that happened in early September of 1970. By that date, I had been at Kagnaw Station for over thirty-nine months, so I was pretty well known all over the base. I had arrived as an SP4, which meant that I had privileges at the lowly enlisted men's Oasis Club where food was available, and also live music on weekends. When I was promoted to SP5, I had to join the Top-5 Club. It was more reserved and a lot less lively, to say the least. But my final day of army service happened on September 5, 1970. As a continuing UMUC instructor, I was automatically promoted to GS12 civilian status, just for billeting and transportation purposes mainly. However, that new rank also gave me the privilege of joining the base Officers' Club, which drew lots of nasty stares from some in attendance who knew me very well. In fact, I was even asked to leave on one occasion, which I refused to do. The complaints then went up the chain of command and soon involved the base commander, who went directly to the Education Center and confronted Fran Sullinger. He asked, "Who made Krumbein a GS12?" Without hesitating, she replied, "The Department of the Army." At that, the base commander spun on his heels and left the building. I still drew the ire of some of the officers whenever I ate dinner at their club, but I now had the blessing of Uncle Sam and there was little that they could do about it. I still communicate via email with the now 90-year-old Fran Sullinger on a fairly regular basis. Thanks, Fran, for everything you did for me.

While I found myself immersed in that culture, I also met up with a goodly number of the Maryland faculty who came there to teach. The first one after the Italian teacher was none other than Fran Sullinger's husband Ted. He taught a course in sociology that centered on the Ethiopian culture and I ended up taking that course. To say that Ted Sullinger was a "character" would be a real understatement. In his white shorts, with a ruddy tan and sporting a full red beard, he looked like a figure out of a Hemingway novel, rugged and full of mischief. He was really hard to pin down, as he seemed to be on the go to and from Kagnaw constantly. (There were even some rumors afloat about him that he was working for the C.I.A. unit on that base, although I hesitated to believe them.) I will let my fellow Maryland colleague Fran give her own more detailed account of her adventures with her husband Ted, both in Ethiopia and

elsewhere. Another Maryland faculty member “character” who made a couple of tours to Kagnew during my time there was none other than Dr. Julian Jones. We hit it off almost instantly as he was interested in learning about the Ethiopian culture and because I had lived there for several years at the time of his arrival, he used me as a handy guide both to the city of Asmara and to its surrounding provinces. What made Julian stand out the most was his being a practitioner of the elaborate practical joke played on an international scale. I have been witness to several of his best ones, most often played on other fellow Maryland faculty in both Ethiopia and Turkey. (I really wish that he would do a memoir of his own giving a more thorough accounting of the hilarious details.) Overall, I consider myself very fortunate to have spent several tours on and off at Kagnew Station, thanks mostly to the co-operation of Dr. Robert Speckhard who directed the English faculty. My final tour to Kagnew ended in May of 1973, just weeks before that fabled security base closed its Education Center on July 1 for the very last time. However, the memories of my five years total there, most of them also as a Marylander, will be cherished forever.

My very first teaching assignment outside of Ethiopia happened from September to December of 1971 when Dr. Speckhard sent me to do the “splits” in Germany between Pirmasens army base and Sembach air force base. I have many great memories of those four months, among which are the easy weekend access out of nearby Kaiserslautern on the Thursday night train up to Paris and the fun breaks to other world capitals such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen. It was also at Pirmasens one Friday night that I had a chance to hear Roy Orbison sing “Pretty Woman” and other great hits at the officers’ club there. As for the “characters” I encountered during that short autumn assignment, I would have to rank at the top my fellow English teacher colleague Robin Schorr. He actually taught his classes at “K-town” as there were never two English instructors together at the same base on any occasion. But on weekends, we would commiserate together when he would drive himself and his wife up to Pirmasens in his VW minibus and we would head off together across the border into France for lunch and shopping excursions. He also drove the three of us once to Munich for Oktoberfest, so we got to know one another very well. (I still wonder whatever happened to him. If anyone knows of him or his whereabouts, I would be very interested in re-establishing possible contact after all these years.) That was one problem with the vast scale of the European Division. I was next sent off to Adana AFB in Turkey and I never heard from him again. But my memory of Robin Schorr is re-enforced for me every day because my youngest son Christopher carries as his middle name “Robin” (and yes Chris does get kidded about that all the time). Life goes on, and its memories linger fondly forever.

I spent my next tour in Adana, Turkey, the air force base from which the U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers flew on his ill-fated mission over Russia in 1960. From January to early May of 1972, I called Turkey home for the first of several UMUC teaching assignments. As it transpired, I returned to Adana a couple more times during my Maryland career. On this occasion, my most memorable “character” encounters with Maryland colleagues came about in two instances. The first was my renewed meeting with the dynamic teaching team of Drs. Mike and Holly Reiter, who had earlier been sent down to Kagnew Station in September of 1970, where they became one of the key targets of some of Dr. Julian Jones’s best and most infamous pranks. As they both

taught for UMUC in disciplines other than my own, such renewed acquaintances were occasional but always pleasant, like seeing some old friends in strange and unexpected settings. One memorable moment occurred when I happened to be checking in at the MAC terminal in Adana for free outbound weekend flights at the same time as the Reiters were doing so. They had been assigned to Adana for just the single eight-week Term III. When told that we were allowed only four flights during our stay there, I happened to overhear how, in typical Mike Reiter fashion, he asked the desk sergeant, "Does that mean four for me and then four more for my wife?" He was politely informed that they could not piggyback on those MAC travel opportunities, thereby trying to do eight flights together. He was just a bit crestfallen. In some ways, that kind of summed up Mike Reiter for me.

My other "character" encounter at Adana AFB during this four months happened to be with none other than the inimitable Dr. Joe Arden. Although not a "colleague" per se, since he was the Director of the European Division at the time, he managed to bail me out of an uncomfortable encounter with the Adana base commander. I was called into that commander's office one day and told, in no uncertain terms, that I should report immediately to the base barber shop for a haircut. Having done four years in the military under those demands, I politely refused and did so under my status as a GS-12 civilian employee of the U. S. government. He was not pleased with my stubbornness and requested the name of my supervisor up in Heidelberg. I gave him Dr. Arden's name and left his office, fully intending to keep my hair. A few days later, I was called back into his office and was again given the command to see the barber, which I again refused. He then informed me that he had called Dr. Arden and that "your boss" would be coming down to Adana next week, when this matter would be settled "once and for all". On the designated date, I was requested to join the base commander at the MAC terminal where we would meet Dr. Arden together. To his absolute shock and dismay, when Dr. Arden stepped off the C-141, Joe's hair was far longer than mine was, with rolling curls well down the back of his neck. At that point, the base commander just threw up his hands, turned on his heels, and I never heard another order to have my hair cut there again. Thanks, Dr. Joe! A further note: as recounted in another memoir, Dr. Arden was also the person who knocked on my door at the Pera Palas Hotel at three a. m. on Saturday, June 23, 1973, to inform me that my father had passed away back in Wisconsin on the previous day. I was on a weekend break from teaching at Karamursel Naval Air Station at the time. He facilitated my emergency leave paperwork, and I made it home in time for my father's funeral in Davenport. Thanks again, Dr. Joe! Memories such as those cannot ever fade away.

I had gone down to Adana from Germany on behalf of Dr. Speckhard, from whom I extracted the promise that if I did two terms in Turkey from January to May 1972, that he would authorize my return to my beloved Kagnaw Station. When he followed through on that promise, it led to my first instance of teaching on three separate continents during the course of one regular academic year. (I also managed to do that one more time during my UMUC tenure.) The logistics of that to me today are just mind-boggling! However, the University of Maryland's Overseas Program at the time was so far-flung that I imagine several other faculty members managed to accomplish that feat as well. I stayed teaching in Asmara until after Christmas that year, which also

allowed me to be present at the birth of my second son Christopher on December 7 at the Kagnev base hospital. He is now 53 years old, and wherever does the time go?

Practically every duty station at which I served for eight years as the resident English teacher in the European Division brings back a flood of memories, some more pleasant than others. That includes not only the stations themselves, but also some very memorable students encountered along the way. At the very start, in Asmara, I had to teach students who were also my military peers. The first one that stands out was Mike Stoffers, who actually worked on the same desk and during the same daytime shift as I did. My Company B cohorts all called him "Starch" because of his habit of donning fresh fatigues daily, thereby "breaking starch". He came up to me one day after a few English Comp I classes and said, "Could you please stop pacing back and forth so much? It's driving me crazy." In my nervousness at teaching a few of my work colleagues, I had not even realized that I was doing that. Thanks to him, this early bad habit was corrected and I became aware of my presence and how it affected my classes from there forward. Many years later, when I was teaching at Clinton Community College, I recalled that he had been born in Bettendorf, Iowa, a mere half hour from where I was then teaching. So I went to our school library and looked up his family name in that city's phone book. I called the number and his mother answered. I explained who I was and how I knew her son. When I asked what he had been doing after his army stint, she told me that he had gone to work for Big Blue down in Dallas. Unfortunately, my call was also too late as she then went on to say that Mike had passed away from heart failure on August 23, 2001, at age 53. How I wish that I had called his family earlier!

Another memorable early student from Asmara was Darrell Dee Standley. The reason I mention his middle name has to do with an incident while we were on duty together when a master sergeant stood looming over him and kept demanding that he tell him his middle name. When Darrell said "Dee," it just enraged that sergeant all the more until he became red in the face. When Darrell finally explained that his middle name was his maternal grandmother's maiden name and that it was spelled "D-E-E," the sergeant walked away embarrassed and the whole room erupted in laughter. I was sitting in my Iowa office one afternoon when the phone rang and a voice asked, "Are you the Charles Krumbein that was stationed at Kagnev and taught English?" When I answered "yes", he identified himself and said that he was calling from Portland, Oregon. We conversed happily for over twenty minutes when he finally said, "You know, everyone at Kagnev thought that my fellow linguist Gene (surname withheld here) was gay. It turns out that it was really me. I have been in a loving relationship with my partner for over thirty years." He next told me that he had AIDS. That statement made me catch my breath. He said that he was calling old friends just to say goodbye. Darrell passed away on July 12, 2008. I am so glad that he thought of me as one of his "friends" before he was gone.

Other Kagnev students whose memories have saddened me would include the E7 sergeant who was in my composition class and who passed me on his way out the door at my duty station, noticed that I was a mere SP5, and proceeded to drop the class. I guess that rank does have its privileges! There was also a student, who shall go unnamed, who was taking a seminar class in Shakespeare to complete a two-year

degree program. I gave him some books from the base library and assigned a final paper. When I read the paper, I realized immediately that he had just plagiarized from the very books that I suppose he had the audacity to think that I had not read myself. I confronted him and he shamefully admitted what he had done. So I assigned a new topic, told him that it had to be his original thinking, and that he had to document any borrowings that he used. His final grade was a “C” which I thought was generous under the circumstances. However, the one that still lingers forever in my mind was MP Rich Echandia. He was not my student, but he was taking a class in Russian with me from another military teacher. He had attended every class as study in that language was difficult. We had also had private study sessions with a small group from that class. One night he failed to show up when attendance was taken. We all discovered the next day that while delivering mail to the Massawa R&R center on June 11, 1970, that he had been shot and killed by the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front)!

Among the other more memorable bases that I had the honor of teaching at, I would have to number Friedberg, Germany. I was a huge Elvis fan as a teenager and so when I got to see his photograph at the officers’ club, posing with some army brass, it brought a thrill to realize that I was standing in a place where the King had been, and had also most likely entertained. Even more so, on my way to my “splits” at Butzbach, I passed through Bad Nauheim, and there on the hill above that resort town was Elvis Presley’s house that he used while stationed at Friedberg from late 1958 to early 1960. Another favorite German post that I enjoyed was at Bad Kreuznach army base with the “splits” to Baumholder tank base. In the heart of German wine country during the fall, I often found myself on small roads behind huge wagons overloaded with grapes. Once, in an effort to make up for being a bit late going up to Baumholder, I made the mistake of not stopping at a tank crossing when I saw a tank approaching from my right. The driver hit his brakes and I made it through, but in my rear-view mirror I could see him shaking his fist at me as he just missed. In my tiny VW bug, I would have been crushed like a bug had he not made his emergency maneuver. That scary incident has stuck with me for all these years later. On the plus side, however, it was while I was at Bad Kreuznach that I was able to attend a Frank Zappa concert on a snowy Sunday night in December at Frankfurt’s Jahrhunderthalle. This event happened during his “200 Motels” period, so Flo and Eddie were also back-up singers. Truly a magical evening for me. It was, however, less so for the Porsche that sped by me on the autobahn while I was going back to the base, only for him to end up in a fiery crash about five minutes later. I slowed way down the rest of the trip back to Bad Kreuznach.

My other favorite teaching post has to be Karamursel, Turkey. Of course, the weekends taking the ferry boat from nearby Yalova into Istanbul put me in the heart of one of the most exotic cities in the world. I have fond memories of exploring Topkapi and seeing the fabled emerald-encrusted dagger from the film of the same name. I also loved wandering around the Kapali Carsi, the famed Grand Bazaar, where I bought quite a few meerschaum pipes and other Turkish souvenirs. At the Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque, I even found the rug gifted to that six-minaret edifice by none other than Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie I. On my weekends that I did not go over to “The Bull,” I got to explore the western part of Turkey. On one memorable occasion, I went down to Izmir at a time when the now late Dr. Bill Berglof and his lovely wife Atsuko allowed me to stay over on a weekend and reconnect with another set of UMUC

“characters” that I had met earlier when they came down to Kagnew Station. I used that opportunity to visit and explore the biblical ruins of Ephesus, one of the highlights of my many months spent in Turkey. As for memorable students there, I had one sailor who was caught by the U. S. MP’s with a huge stash of hashish and was bundled up and shipped out of the country before the Turkish authorities could get their hands on him. He thus escaped the fate of one Billy Hayes that was brought to life in the brutal and memorable film Midnight Express. As a final note on Karamursel, it was the place where my youngest son Christopher took his very first steps at just ten months old. Unforgettable.

As I come to the end of this memoir, I wish to mention that my last “hurrah” as a Marylander came about when I went to the 50th Anniversary celebration at College Park, Maryland, in the summer of 1996. While there, I was able to renew personal acquaintances with old friends like Dr. Julian Jones, who was also my best man when I was married over 55 years ago in Asmara. I also got to revisit with both Dr. Bill and Atsuko Berglof while at dinner one night. But above all came the moment when Dr. Joe Arden made me feel extra special as one of the very few late-night guests in his private room. He even invited me to rejoin the UMUC faculty in the Far East Division where he was then serving as area director. Although the offer was very tempting, given that I had never been to the Far East, I had to decline because at the time I already had a steady job with long-term security at Clinton Community College in Iowa. Not only that, but with my wife Antonietta living in Madison with my two sons Donato and Christopher, it would have been somewhat reckless to venture back into the peripatetic life of a UMUC English teacher. But the offer was there for the taking. It served as the capstone to the UMUC chapter of my academic career. I could not have wished for a better or more memorable start. Thanks to all of my former UMUC colleagues who supported me from the get-go. I shall never forget a single one of you, nor the bases where I had the pleasure to meet you.