

# The Accompanying Spouse

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In the 1970s, we “accompanying spouses” of faculty members for the UMUC—European Division experienced some aspects of a 50s style supporting role, but at least we weren’t called dependents. That would have been a misnomer, anyway, as my husband, Carson Davis, a full-time teacher for the UMUC from 1975 to 1979, was at least as dependent on me as I was on him, in spite of the name on the paycheck

The tone for me was set in the orientation of 1975. We accompanying spouses (nearly all of whom were women) were included in many parts of the orientation, most particularly in the cram session preparing for the German drivers’ exam. As I recall, all of the accompanying spouses passed the test the first time. I certainly was motivated to ensure that I wouldn’t be seen as a dumb blond.

Most memorable in that orientation was a trip for all the accompanying spouses (except, as I recall, the male one, who passed up this opportunity to join the women) to Schwetzingen, the mini-Versailles near Heidelberg. That was a wonderful introduction to the possibilities of European travel, though what I remember most vividly was the exhibition of beautifully preserved fossils from Holzmaden, which I just had to tell Carson about afterwards, because he was a vertebrate paleontologist. Actually, he already knew about Holzmaden ichthyosaurs, and we went to Holzmaden later, but, thanks to the UMUC, I saw those amazing fossils first. Also memorable was the lunch, *spargel* toast, my first taste of white German asparagus, and a dish that is one of my favorites to this day. Such a cultural experience showed that UMUC recognized that we accompanying spouses might enjoy something a little more intellectually stimulating than a shopping trip, though those are fun, too, if they are authentic experiences of a different culture.

During our UMUC-European Division years, Carson and I did many things together, but I will focus my “accompanying spouse” experiences, as they differed from his. I will first consider the ways Carson was dependent on me in Europe, and then, finally, what I did for fun while he was toiling away at a paying job.

First, Carson depended on me as a translator. I had studied German, French, and ancient Greek in college and enjoyed playing with languages. Carson had been required to enroll in and pass German, but he had entirely too much dignity to struggle with speaking in a foreign language. I didn’t mind fumbling around like a little child, and so I managed to learn languages faster. German was, of course, helpful every day for most of our assignments. It took a very long time before I met a German whose English was not better than my Deutsch, but eventually, border policemen would ask Carson about his German wife, until, as I kept talking, I made an unforgivable grammatical blunder that clarified my national origin. We were never stationed in France, but French was helpful with the owner of our apartment in Alcala de Henares, near the Torrejon Air Base in

Spain. Our landlord spoke fluent French because of his job in a foreign service office. He and I would sit together, with Carson and his wife on the outside seats. He and I would speak in French (he much better than I) and then turn and translate for our spouses--he in Castilian and I in Arkansas English. My ancient Greek was of limited value in communicating in modern Greek, though I did have a head start in reading the alphabet. Still, I spent a good deal of time working with a phrase book and trying to communicate in pidgen Greek--hello, good-bye, please, thank you, and all the numbers. In the days before GPS guidance, I also worked hard at speedreading Greek road signs. Carson and I generally traveled together, and I was the one to make a fool of myself babbling away while he kept his dignity, the strong, silent type. However, he did take one solo trip to Santorini to see the huge caldera from the great volcanic eruption that may have formed the basis for the legend of Atlantis. When his ferry passed the first port on Santorini, the one with the steps and the donkey rides to the top, he thought that somehow the ship had missed Santorini, after all, and the only Greek words he knew were *karpouzi* (watermelon) and *efcharisto* (thank you). Fortunately, the huge ferry did eventually stop at the big new ferry port further down the coast, and he did not have to say, "Please let me off back there," without the help and support of the woman he loved.

I also had a specific task to find living quarters when there weren't quarters on a base near his teaching assignment. Having an assignment anywhere near Munich was great, because there were gorgeous apartments available in Perlacher Forst. Even with a split between Darmstadt and Stuttgart, Carson's first assignment, there was the silver lining, an apartment on base in Heidelberg near the University of Maryland headquarters. But there were assignments for which not even a BOQ room was available, and I thought my "accompanying spouse" role was to park myself in the base housing office, hoping that an offer to rent might come in, and I could snap it up. It could be tough, especially to find living quarters for two months, the usual length of a UMUC faculty assignment. At one farmhouse near Morbach, as I tried to communicate in German, I got a very nice *hausfrau* to feel sorry for me about how much we were paying per night at a hotel, and she agreed to rent to us. Her husband was really upset when he got home, because the last tenants (American soldiers) had left the place in poor shape, not airing the rooms daily as needed in a German house and the like. He had to clean and repaint and didn't want to have to do that again for a two-month tenant. Of course, we were meticulous about airing that place and left it in exactly the same spotless condition in which we found it.

At Fulda, we were told it was impossible for an American to find an apartment, even for longer than two months. We put an ad in the local newspaper, about a University of Maryland *dozent* and his wife, and we actually got a few replies. But before those arrived, we had already found an apartment in the beautiful spa city of Bad Brückenau. After a couple of years with the UMUC, we finally discovered the best way to find a short-term lease was to go to some scenic resort area near the assigned base and look for a sign for a *ferienwohnung*, a vacation apartment, which would be booked solid for the summers, but free during the school semesters. So we had a great place to stay in Bad Brückenau, with forests and mountains just outside. Near Bitburg, we stayed twice in another apartment fully furnished down to the flowered china serving plates, in

Echternacherbrück, right along the border with Luxembourg, with a view of the Sûre River from our balcony. We never stayed at the famous apartment on the Mosel that many Marylanders speak of, but Germany actually did have comfortable dwellings in lovely settings, if you just knew to drive around looking for the *ferienwohnung* sign.

There were also the mundane tasks of shopping and dealing with unfamiliar appliances. Shopping in a commissary was something like shopping in an American supermarket today (2020) during the Covid era. The store could be out of certain essential supplies, and once the shipment of peanut butter and brown sugar came in, the shelves emptied as fast as Walmart shelves empty today of toilet paper and Lysol wipes. I always wanted to try shopping with a string bag in a market, but never managed to master the technique. We tended to be traveling on market days. Finally, it was always a challenge to deal with European appliances, the water heaters that heat only a gallon at a time, but do it fast. They work great only for a very, very quick shower. For the water heater over the rustic kitchen sink in Sefferweich, near Bitburg, the bottle was to be filled and left to heat while we ate, and then we could have some hot water to wash a few dishes. There were also the radiators which heated only at night, or only during the day, but never all day and all night. It was a humbling and instructive experience to see the reality of German conservation of energy, so unlike our 60-gallon tanks of perpetually hot water and our profligate central heating.

Besides supporting Carson by translating, finding an apartment, shopping, and dealing with appliances, I had lots of opportunities to enjoy myself. I am an organist, and, especially in Germany, the rich tradition of organ music was wonderful, from being allowed to myself play on delightful tracker action organs in resonant churches made of stone and glass, to hearing Helmut Walcha play in the *Dreikonigskirche* in Frankfurt. (He's an organist/composer famous in organist circles.) I also just gorged myself on musical performances. Carson refused to go to any such thing after he was subjected to four hours of Wagner's *Parsifal* without dinner, but I heard *Cinderella* in Athens, *The Magic Flute* in Heidelberg, *Die Meistersinger* in Stuttgart. I heard Daniel Barenboim play, and enjoyed an absolutely splendid production of one of the Bach passions. That performance in a hall full of Germans in snowboots who braved the blizzard to hear Bach is one of my treasured memories. My heritage is German (my grandmother was a Klumpp from the Black Forest), but I never felt so at home in Germany as I did that evening in snow-covered Munich.

Some of the accompanying spouses took on a different identity by teaching part-time for the UMUC-European Division, as I did eventually in our final year in Europe, teaching Composition I at Pirmasens and Wildflecken. For me, that was something of a transitional experience back to a world in which both Carson and I eventually became professors at Southern Arkansas University. But that idyllic time as an "accompanying spouse" is a wonderful memory for me. When we have traveled in Europe in later years, perhaps staying in a room with a hotplate and small refrigerator, we look around and say, "We could have lived here back in the 70s." When we finally traveled to eastern Germany in 2000, an area *verboten* in the 1970s, it fulfilled a promise of my earlier experiences with German organs in the 70s to finally hear the instruments (now newly

refurbished since 1989) that Bach had played in Eisenach, Arnstadt, and Leipzig. That time as an “accompanying spouse” in the 70s was a golden age that continues to enrich my life.