Adventures in Education UMUC Style

By

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European Division, 1974-75

It was the fall of 1974 in the European Division. I had just finished Term 1, teaching a split between Schwäbisch Gmünd and Göppingen, and living in a picturesque village, Hohenstaufen, nestled snuggly in the hills between the two towns that hosted US military installations. My wife and I rented a room with a German family, the Muehlhausers. We learned quickly from our hosts that most things fell into two categories: too expensive or too dangerous. Food, gas, and utilities—as in the heat we never experienced during late fall-- fell into the former, while overeating, driving on ice, and drinking cold beer on a hot day fit into the latter. Herr Muehlhauser, like so many Germans of his age, fought in World War II---on the Russian front, of course. Finding someone who, say, tried to repel the D-Day invasion in Normandy, or fought Between the Hedges, or at the Battle of the Bulge was more difficult.

It was an uneventful term, as Maryland assignments go. Well, mostly. I did have an incident involving the ESO at Goppingen. A smart guy, he had ambitions to move up to a GS-13 rating, and that was not likely to happen unless enrolments at the base increased. And he must be credited with shaking the trees to sign up students. The problem is that he routinely pushed soldiers to sign up for Maryland courses when they were ill-equipped to handle the coursework. They simply were not able to tackle a college course that required some level of

synthesis and integration skills, and an ability to put pen to paper to demonstrate a reasonable mastery of the subject matter. The first red flag was that class discussions never took off as they usually did for a course in criminology. The results of the first quiz offered a second and unmistakable red flag. Many of the students were utterly lost. In going through the papers, some should not have earned more than a few points. After a few hours of trying to figure out what to do, I decided to write, "Please see me after class" on several papers. In the following class, I methodically worked through more than half of those attending. Some had already dropped the class. I wanted to understand their motivation to enroll in the course, as well as what they expected or wanted out of the time they were going to invest. To a person, they were leaned on heavily by the ESO to sign up—It's good for your career. You won't get promoted without an education. You need to start now, or you will fall behind the guy competing with you.

The sentiments expressed by the ESO were not necessarily wrong. But they were entirely misplaced in his attempt to encourage—coerce is not too strong a term—soldiers utterly unprepared for college-level courses to sign up for them. Well, after a spate of withdrawals—I had encouraged them to work with the Educational Services Office to bone up on their reading and writing skills—the ESO blew a gasket. He made his displeasure known about my counseling the students to complete some remedial work before enrolling in UMUC courses. He took the matter one step further and called Ben Massey, then the Director of the European Division, and later the President of UMUC. Ben called me and asked me to drop by his office in Heidelberg when I had a chance. I did and explained the situation as I thought it had unfolded. I returned to the base and the ESO appeared to have a change of heart. I learned that Ben had, in his

usual diplomatic fashion, stood behind me 100 percent. It was then that I began to fully grasp the commitment of the University to its students and its expectations for its faculty. That early experience profoundly shaped my perspective on my work and UMUC. I later thanked Ben for his support. But I couldn't resist throwing in, "Any way we can make it a little easier to get a few sheets of typing paper?" In Ben's inimitable ability to deflect anything he wasn't going to offer a positive response on, he broke into his sly, thin smile, offering "We'll see what we can do, Jim." The mentoring tip was taken and tucked away for future use. Years later when I was at Berkeley, I reminded Ben of the incident at the base—which he remembered, including my pressing him for some typing paper. We had a good laugh about it and those glory days in the European Division.

A final comment on ESOs. I found that almost without exception that the ESOs throughout the European Division, and as I learned later, the Asian Division, had the interests of service members and their families at heart. And while I could generally find a decision or policy that I might have taken issue with, I never had reason to believe that they were not committed to improving the lives of the military community.

As the term drew to a close, I learned that the next assignment would be in Izmir, Turkey. We were delighted at the news that at least a slice of winter would be spent in a warmer clime. So, after final exams and stuffing our worldly possessions into our car, we were off to Turkey via Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the tiniest sliver of Greece before reaching Edirne, the first city we encountered after reaching the Turkish border.

The trip had its moments. Recall that the Cold War was still hot, with the Soviet incursion into Czechoslovakia having taken place only six years earlier. Border crossings, even between the Soviet satellite states, were ominous-looking, with high fences, barbed wire, road barriers, guard dogs, and more soldiers than seemed necessary everywhere in evidence. And into the bleak scenario at each border, there we were: two Americans, wearing fire-red ski jackets, driving a yellow 1973 Fiat 128, with green license plates stamped only with the three large letters, USA. So much for melding into the landscape.

The entry into Czechoslovakia was a lengthy process, and we quickly concluded that if all our border crossings took as long, our schedule needed a serious recalculation. The guards took particular interest in the boxes of books stashed in the trunk. Sex and Crime arrested their attention and they gave the book a thorough examination. So did the other titles that had words like “crime” or “violence.” The experience taught me to place all such books in one box so future inspectors didn’t have to work as hard in getting to the good stuff. I suspect they were a little disappointed that there were no pictures, only boring text with chapter headings like “Recent Research,” and Sex Crimes and Sentencing.”

For the most part, the guards at each crossing were stern but professional—if that means speaking as little as possible, and increasingly louder if we didn’t appear to understand what was expected of us. Occasionally our minds wandered into the realm of “what if” and that included being arrested as Imperialist Yankee spies and tossed in some dank forlorn prison, never to be heard from again. But with each crossing, we became more comfortable that those flights of fearful fantasy were just that. By the time we reached the Romanian-Bulgarian

border, we felt as though we had mastered the art of the Great Eastern European Border Crossing and gave it little thought.

We were stopped at the Hungarian border for a thorough inspection. Once again, our boxes of books became the focus of interest. The guards didn't have to dig for the Sex and Crime volume as it was prominently displayed on top for all to see. An hour or so later we were waved into Hungary by guards who looked as though they would have preferred that we had selected another border crossing to enter. We pushed on to Budapest, where we had one of our more curious experiences. I'm not clear on how it happened, but somehow, we ended up in a kind of restaurant dancehall located near the water. Something seemed different, and we could not quite figure it out until it became obvious: the event was an evening of dinner and dance for the deaf. It was the quiet that tipped us off, slow as we were to get it. After a waltz or two, without speaking, we nodded "good evening," to our dinner and ballroom companions and quietly bowed out. We wondered for the longest time what the people thought about two uninvited guests tentatively walking in, and self-consciously easing toward the exit. Perhaps nothing. I suspect we remembered the evening long after it became a distant memory for everyone else.

We pushed onward in a few days, through Romania, taking time to visit the intriguing region of Moldavia, where the landscape is dotted with small, elaborately frescoed monasteries, and to Transylvania where, of course, we visited Count Dracula's mint house. While my memory of Romania remains surprisingly fresh, Bulgaria, not so much. About the only thing that registered was how incredibly quiet the trolly cars in Sophia were, and the streets, for that matter. In fact,

in many of the cities, we stopped on our journey southward, what I would have thought of as normal chatter in public places was most notable primarily by its absence. Prague and Pilsen were especially barren of noise, color, and laughter-- a function, we learned, of the presence of an overwhelming number of plain-clothes Soviet soldiers and spies. We were given the number of 700,000 by a student, who felt mildly comfortable speaking with us, but only then while walking. He seemed the coffee shop where we had met in downtown Prague as too risky for a conversation.

Time was becoming a factor on our trip, and we needed to get on our way to Izmir. But first things first. My wife, as much as anything, looked forward to feasting on the small delicate Turkish lamb chops that she had heard so much about. So, after bidding Bulgaria sayonara, we drove through a little sliver of Greece, then entered Turkey. After an hour or so stopped in an innocuous roadside restaurant outside of Edirne. Everything on the menu was, of course, in Turkish, a language in which we had no facility. But my wife was set on those tender little lamb chops and it was clear we were not leaving until we had them. She motioned to the waiter as if she wanted to go into the kitchen so she could point out what we wished to order. No dice. We looked around at other diners and saw nothing remotely resembling a lamb chop. Finally, all alternatives exhausted, my wife sighed and bleated out a bit too loudly “Baaaaaaaaa. Baaaaaaaaa.” The waiter picked up on it immediately, flashing a wide grin, as did our fellow diners who would have an interesting story to tell the family about a couple of strange foreigners making sheep sounds in a restaurant.

The waiter scampered into the kitchen and returned shortly with---voila—fresh tender lamb chops. A few minutes later we were chewing on arguably the most anticipated lamb chops in modern Turkish history. They were, as I recall, worth the wait.

Arriving in Izmir the following day, we settled in at the Kordon Hotel, a perfect location on the bay. Our room was several floors up which rendered an agreeable panoramic view of the city and sea. We were to soon learn just how convenient the hotel was for us to savor the many delights of Izmir at our doorstep.

I had a mix of students in my classes from different services stationed at the NATO base there. The experience level and interests varied as on most installations. Most spoke and wrote with commendable proficiency. I recall clearly, that while I did not closely monitor attendance, there was rarely an empty desk. It was my experience that military personnel assigned to NATO installations were likely selected with care, as they invariably seemed to be bright, ambitious, and eager to learn.

The two things that stand out from our term there, however, were experiences outside the classroom. The first was that one of the houseboys, as they were known then, wanted to practice his English. And that we did. During one of our conversations, he mentioned something that I thought sounded like boar hunting. I heard correctly. He would go boar hunting from time to time in the wooded areas outside of Izmir. One day, as he was trying to describe the experience, I asked if I might not join him. Whatever his true feelings were, he appeared delighted at the prospect.

A few weeks later, we were walking in dense brush, each carrying a single shot, 16-gauge shotgun. My first reaction was that one shot was not, well, very many. What if I shot a boar and managed only to piss him off? Would I actually have time, and the presence of mind, to calmly eject the shell, reach into my pouch, pull out another round, slip it into the chamber, close the breach, then aim and fire at a fast-moving target? That was not a serious question.

While I did hunt a fair amount as a kid in rural north-central Florida, it was for dove or quail. Neither has tusks nor can they hurt you. The worst thing a quail can do is to startle you when flushed from the bush.

Combat is often described as 99 percent boredom and 1 percent terror. I came to appreciate that description more than I would have preferred. As we were making our way through the brush, shotguns held overhead, it was virtually impossible to see anything other than the bush in front of you or your boots as they touched down one after another. Then without warning---wild boars I learned are not sold on issuing warnings---it was bedlam. The ground rumbled all around us. A runaway freight train came to mind. I saw a tusk here, a tail there, a hairy body running this way, then another headed that way. My companion was screaming something in Turkish. I hoped it was not, “Oh my God, we’re going to die!”

The entire episode could not have lasted more than 30 seconds, but seemed like an eternity, with the whole thing ending, as it had started, with two men, walking through the brush. No shots fired. No idea of how many wild boars there were. I know only that one came closer to me than was probably necessary. He could have just as easily run through me or have given me a ride on his tusks. To his credit, he did not, and I was spared and thankful. On the way back,

my companion bagged a crow that was, until a single shot, perched lazily on a branch. As so concluded the adventure of the great boar hunt.

The second thing I remembered about my time in Izmir is that that the same houseboy washed my car weekly, sometimes daily if he could arrange it. One day, he had apparently referred to me as Dr. Cramer. I thought nothing of it, but a few days later, when going to pick up my car, I noticed a small line of people next to my car. They seemed to be interested in my every movement, so I asked my friend what they were doing. He answered that they wanted me to help them. Help them? I asked. What kind of help were they looking for? Shortly, it was revealed. The people in line had various ailments, a burn here, a gash there, a rash that had become infected, perhaps a cough they couldn't shake. They were there for treatment. Good Lord. I tried to explain that I wasn't that kind of a doctor. It was to no avail.

For years I had always carried a complete first-aid kit in my car. That habit was borne out of a course I took when I needed one additional semester hour to graduate years ago. So I enrolled in an instructor's first aid course. I'd kept my certification over the years for reasons that I can't entirely explain. In any event, against my better judgment, but ready to engage, I opened the trunk and pulled out my portable ER, with multiple drawers, stuffed to the brim with bandages, ointments, tape, lotions, cotton swabs, butterfly bandages, scissors, tweezers, scalpels (fortunately for my "patients" I didn't use them), antibacterial creams, burn solutions, splints—the works. Soon I began to administer what first aid I could. The issues I attended were not terribly serious nor were they challenging to address. I cleaned and bandaged and

taped and applied soothing creams. After an hour or so I had attended to the last of those waiting. Some had offered a gift—some fruit, or a Turkish dessert, or a small wood carving.

Afterward, I tried to explain to my friend that I really couldn't do that again as I was not a medical doctor. I explained that people needed to see a "real" doctor for their injuries and medical problems. I also reminded him that the police would not look kindly on a foreigner impersonating a doctor. He replied that the man with the cut on his leg was a police officer. So much for my defense.

I recall him looking downcast and saying something to the effect that I would probably be the only doctor most of them would ever see. You didn't go to the hospital, he explained, unless you were dying or had been in a bad accident.

The term finished a few weeks later. By then the lines had grown considerably. I confess some level of paranoia and a slight twinge of guilt that I had perpetrated a fraud. But perhaps, I told myself, that I did a little good. I was careful to urge people to get to a hospital if they had a serious infection or something that called for immediate professional care. I probably shouldn't mention this but one of my students was in the medical corps. One evening after class I related the situation about my new line of work, and he laughed. He already knew about it and offered that I was probably going to provide the best medical care that some of the people would get for their everyday problems. From time to time over the remainder of the term, he would carry a bag to class and leave it by my desk. I would wait until after the class when the last student departed before opening it. I put those bandages, gauze pads, tape, and antibacterial cream to good use for the rest of my time in Izmir.

I thought about my experience in Izmir sometime after the term was over. I wondered where I had the most impact or done the most good while in Izmir: in the classroom? Or outside that freshly washed canary yellow 1973 Fiat 128?