

Touching the Untouchable

Fuerth, Germany Fall 1965

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July 2021

In 1965, I was living in Nurnberg, next to the massive medieval walls which encircled the central old city. My landlady, an elderly widow, insisted on cleaning my flat while I was at work. She concluded a young bachelor was incapable of making a bed, doing laundry or washing dishes. Every weekend in front of the house I cleaned and waxed my VW Beetle, wearing the requisite dress shirt and tie, but that did not deter her efforts to clean up after me. I worked at the



European Exchange System HQ in Fuerth, editing and publishing two monthly newspapers, in English and French. The EES offices were in the Palace of Justice complex where the 1946 Nurnberg War Crimes trials were held. Stories and people involved in the trials were daily fodder in the Kantine where the food was nourishing and cheap. The afternoon cake and coffee break was the best part of the day.

The workday began at 0800 and by 1100, I and my German assistant finished our daily tasks. I continued to pound on my manual typewriter sounding very productive but after lunch I was completing a correspondence course with the US Department of State. A friend suggested I teach History for Maryland and introduced me to the Education Officer at William O'Darby Kaserne in Fuerth. I was scheduled to teach an evening section of Western Civilization I, with 18 active military and dependents.

Two memorable events evolved from this class in Ancient and Medieval History. After three years of trips to castles, churches and museums, I knew the historic sites in and around Nurnberg. I encouraged the class to make history come alive by visiting Nurnberg's central square where the annual Christmas market occurs. A German relative owned a company which made the oversized gingerbread cookies, called Lebkuchen, sold in the ornate tin containers during the Advent holidays.

I scheduled a class trip to the Albrecht Durer House in Nurnberg but it was difficult for everyone to join during duty hours. I thought an evening field trip would work better but museums were closed by 1700 hours. A colleague's mother worked at the National Museum and I asked if she could arrange an after-hours visit. Her answer was yes and no. Yes, the class could see an exhibition in preparation but no they couldn't wander through the museum.

The class assembled in the darkness outside the museum entrance. Our host greeted us warmly with Gruess Gott (Greetings from God) and guided us into the work area where an exhibition was being assembled. It was a collection of medieval carvings, reliquaries and religious items used in the sale of indulgences to shorten time in purgatory.

The guide walked us from table to table explaining the history and significance of the gem encrusted, gold inlaid silver relics. He invited us to examine and touch the relics without wearing any gloves. Some students were worried they would damage the objects, but the guide assured them the relics had been touched by tens of thousands of believers, supplicants and pilgrims.

On last table there was a massive open book. It was an original Gutenberg Bible printed by Johann Gutenberg in Mainz in the 1450s. It was stunning and comprised of 300 pages (leaves) of block printed content with vivid color illustrations and decorative gold leaf illuminations on parchment (vellum). Gutenberg printed 150 original Bibles on paper and parchment. To date only 49 have been identified, and none of them is for sale because they are national treasures.

The guide invited us to turn the pages in the Gutenberg Bible, which I and a few others did with great hesitation, an unthinkable act in today's super protective museum environment. The class didn't realize it at the time, but we were "touching the untouchable."