

**The Memoirs Project:**  
**First Day Teaching for the University of Maryland in Germany (1979)**

Submitted by Dr. Marla Lowenthal      August 10, 2020

I taught English and Communication for Maryland's European Division from 1979-1986 in Southern Germany, Italy, Greece and Bahrain, then Organizational Behavior online for the Asian Division in 2003, and my last foray was in the summer of 2005 back to teaching English face-to-face in Heidelberg. I have a master's degree in English, another in Communication and Media Studies, almost a doctorate in Leadership and Organization, and a doctorate degree in International Multicultural Education. Just as I enjoy traveling and visiting new countries, I enjoy learning and dipping my brain into different subject areas. While I have taught in many institutions, none have been as interesting as the University of Maryland. The experiences I had and the people I encountered and taught with were truly amazing. Let me share with you just one story.

Everyone who has taught for the University of Maryland Overseas has a Maryland story - or many. Here is one of mine. Before I left the States on my first overseas adventure, I'd written Maryland and was told by the English Coordinator, Bob Speckhard, to call Heidelberg when I got to London to ask if there were any classes available to teach. I was thrilled to hear there were. After the usual confusing application and ID processing, I was sent off to Stuttgart to teach in Nellingen/Esslingen and Patch. I was told the information people at the train station or maybe the USO there would help me find my way to the base, and there would be no problem finding lodgings in a BOQ. So my trusty turquoise blue backpack and I grabbed a train using my Eurail pass (Maryland never willingly disclosed they could help with transportation.), got off at the Stuttgart *Hauptbahnhof* under the huge Mercedes logo, and so began my Maryland days.

First, there was no USO at the train station. When I asked the German information woman how to get to Nellingen/Esslingen she kept asking me, "Which one?" Do you mean there was more than one military base in the Stuttgart area? I didn't know. I was told to go to Nellingen/Esslingen. I tried calling the phone number I had for the base, but that proved to be impossible given the WWII phone system which I learned later was nicknamed "Hitler's Revenge". In the end, after a lot of discussion, I set off for Esslingen, the larger of the two cities. There was no base in Esslingen, but we decided maybe from there I could figure out how to get to the little town of Nellingen, where there was a base.

In Esslingen, I had no idea what to do next, so I called the base in Nellingen again. This time as luck would have it, the Maryland representative answered the phone. I was so relieved. I asked her how I could get to Nellingen, thinking I was about to me on my way, but then she told me that she had no idea. She never took public transportation and couldn't pick me up because she was afraid to drive down the hill. She suggested I take a cab, which I did.

I have to stop for a second and let you know that I had virtually no money at this point. I had been traveling around Europe for a few months armed with my backpack, guitar, and rail pass seeing the sights. No particular plan. Sleeping on trains. Waking up in new places. Checking out museums. Eating canned peas. Meeting interesting and not so interesting people. It was my first time abroad, and I was young. I budgeted fairly well, but by the time I got the Maryland job, I was almost broke. Cabs are not cheap, but what could I do? I had to get there.

Nellingen Barracks was the first real military base I'd ever been on outside of Heidelberg. It was old, small, and run down yet located in a beautiful green flat plateau noted for growing cabbages -

“kraut “ – a word often referring to sauerkraut and historically disparaging to Germans. The educational office was rather dingy and crowded. The Maryland rep, however, was young, cute, and energetic. Very sweet. A soldier’s young bride. Later she took classes from me, and we became close over the years. That day, however, she showed me the classroom with desks out of the 1930s, and the ropes, which were a bit frayed. I had a space to put my bag and books, but that was about all. The next day I was to start teaching to 25 GIs study skills, a class I had never taught before. You’d never know by looking at me then that I had any skills at all. I looked rather out of place in a military setting - backpack, long hair, blue jeans, t-shirt, sandals, guitar. But I was and am a good teacher. I might not be ready yet for this class, but I would make it work. A true Marylander!

And as a budding Marylander, I was going with the flow. I didn’t have any choice. This was my first assignment. I was teaching study skills at noon in Nellingen and then an evening English composition class at Patch in Vaihingen close to 20 miles away. Of course, I didn’t know that. All I knew was that I had to get there.

OK, where was Patch? I had been told in Heidelberg that there was transportation between barracks. Not! Luckily a woman who was teaching for a different university showed up while I was at Nellingen. She also taught at Patch. An officer’s wife. Beautiful and kind. She offered to drive me there and show me around. Patch was upscale in comparison to Nellingen – lots of intelligence people, officers, facilities, flowers, glistening white structures. The education office was fairly spacious as was the classroom. The Maryland rep was nice, business-like, and serious. She made it clear that she could not help with transportation or lodgings, and that there was no BOQ housing for Maryland teachers. One more administrative untruth, or perhaps my boss had a fantasy that these things were true. It didn’t and doesn’t matter.

All I could think of was, “Ok, so now what? Where was I going to sleep?” It was getting late in the afternoon, and I had no place to stay. The other faculty member who had befriended me had to get home and left me on my own. I was told by the Maryland rep to go back to the Stuttgart train station and talk with the information people there about lodgings. A trolley ran straight from Vaihingen to the Stuttgart train station. The first easy thing all day. So I did what was suggested.

The German information people found me a hotel room within walking distance of the train station and next to the hill of vineyards flowing down to the center of town. Hotel Mack is still there and has a poor rating now and probably did then, but it was a sanctuary for me. The information woman also gave me a map of the area (There was no GPS.), suggested places to shop and eat, and told me how to take the U-Bahn to Esslingen and then the bus to Nellingen. Thank you, information people! I was confident now that I could get to work on my first day teaching for the University of Maryland in Europe. I’d worry about getting to Patch later.

The next morning, looking professional, dressed in a skirt and top, sporting a suit jacket, carrying my bag of books and other teaching material, I headed out confidently to the U-bahn in the train station. My first day teaching for Maryland. I was thrilled. So happy.

I had never taken German public transportation besides trains and so was unfamiliar with how things worked. I couldn’t figure out how to buy a ticket. The boxes I saw were strange and unfamiliar. No one at Maryland had thought to brief me on how things worked. I was on my own, like getting to Esslingen/Nelligen or finding a place to stay.

I thought a conductor would come along, and I would buy a ticket then, like on the train. I kept practicing in my mind how to ask “How much?” in German - *Wie viel kostet es? Wie viel kostet es?*

*Wie viel kostet es?* My German at this point was non-existent. What I knew, I had learned from “Hogan’s Heroes”. I could count to three and say *Schweinhund* and *Heil Hiter!*, but I didn’t think any of these phrases would do me much good. After a while, two men in gray fedoras and trench coats came by and asked me something. I had no idea what they said, but figured they were asking me to pay for my ticket so I said my line, “*Wie viel kostet es?*”

Then all hell broke loose. The men started screaming at me. The only thing I understood was that they wanted my passport, which I was not going to give them. What was going on? They were furious. All the movie scenes I’d seen about SS men taking people off trains rushed to mind. I’m Jewish and couldn’t help but be reminded of what would be happening if this were 40 years earlier. I was both scared and angry. Finally a young man who was witnessing this scene offered to help. He spoke English and explained to me that the trench-coated men were transportation police cracking down on people who tried to cheat the system by not paying the fare. I explained that I was new to the area and unfamiliar with the operations. It didn’t matter. I was given a ticket, a 50 mark fine, and sent on my way. I was so upset I actually started to cry. I had been so happy, like a kid on their first day of school, and then – Boom! I was also really angry that Maryland had done so little to prepare me for what I would encounter.

I calmed down by the time I got to Esslingen. I focused on getting ready for the class, found the bus to Nellingen, taught the class there and later in Patch, and the rest is history. I sent the 50-mark ticket to Speckhard in Heidelberg, who wanted to split the difference with me. I never paid the fine and I guess he didn’t either. Catch me if you can! That might even be a pretty good slogan for many Marylanders.