

Zweibrücken

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I rarely lived on a base during my assignments teaching for UMUC in Europe in the 1970's. I got to teach at remote sites, since I taught the intro courses in two basic areas, history and English.

Once I asked to be sent to a base in Germany. I was assigned three courses on two bases, the installations at Pirmassens and at Zweibrücken, near the French border. Here a car would have been handy. Many people told me of cheap buys. I had a ten-month contract for \$400 a month, though, and it seemed that any price, plus gas, was out of reach. I cadged rides for myself. I did ride the bus from the base into the town of Zweibrücken from time to time, but my sense of where I was living, in southwest Germany, was limited. Even the name of the town did not really catch my attention.

The decades passed thereafter, and eventually I embarked upon my research for a biography of a married royal couple, Tsar Alexander I and his wife Elisabeth, via her letters to her mother. Elisabeth grew up in the minor royal family of Baden, whose castle was in Karlsruhe, south of Heidelberg. Elisabeth's letters home asked longingly about her relatives living in Deux Ponts. Finally I realized that these relatives lived in Zweibrücken, and that both names referred to the two bridges that cross the Schwarzbach River.

I went to a reunion of faculty in 2015, at the headquarters in Heidelberg. I rented a car and made my way to Elisabeth's family palace at Bruchsal – all carefully reconstructed during the 1970s and '80's, having been reduced to rubble during the Allied bombing in World War II.

The family portraits had been re-hung: there was Elisabeth's mother, Amelie, on the wall, the woman who preserved her daughter's thousand letters. Alongside the portraits was an exhibit showing the turn of Karlsruhe toward Nazism, the burning of a synagogue – and blown-up before-and-after photographs taken from the bomb bay of an American B-52 in late 1944. I have hardly ever seen an exhibit as dramatic and searing as that. I had read that Heidelberg was deliberately spared, and only Heidelberg in that whole area, so I conclude that Zweibrücken also was being rebuilt when I was living near there in 1972.

My sense of the area had been transformed while translating Elisabeth's nostalgic words about the rolling fields and early springs. It was strange to think of the imposition of the Nazis and the war onto the era when Elisabeth lived in Karlsruhe, in the late 1700s. While visiting Heidelberg, I went to a huge edifice housing a "local history" museum. Their local history not only encompassed Roman statuary, but actually Heidelberg man, really Heidelberg family – several skeletons have been dated from half a million years ago, prior to the Neanderthals, and they came from the area of Mauer, in the direction of Karlsruhe and Zweibrücken. I actually felt dizzy from history.