

About the Author

WHEN I THINK ABOUT Europe and America I call often upon memories. They come from the experiences of growing up in America followed by living in Europe.

I am the eldest son of a professor of medieval history who taught at Stanford University, whose own father had come to America from Sweden in the 1870s. Like many American families in the middle of the twentieth century, my own had close ties to Europe both in the present and in the past. My parents were proud of those ties and kept them alive; they were a constant and normal part of my life.

I was twenty in June 1962 when my brother and I traveled to Europe for the first time. Although I had never been there, I had met many Europeans in America and thought I already knew the Old World. But of course I didn't, as I learned very quickly during that summer. Preoccupied with the excitement of going, I hadn't thought about the consequence of being unable to speak any European language. I was able to say *danke schön* when we arrived in Stuttgart, but I quickly realized that others didn't speak English. As we traveled throughout Germany, I recognized, finally, the importance of foreign languages, because all I could do was observe. As I think about it today it reminds me of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin diary of 1930 in which he wrote, "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording . . ."

Wherever I looked I saw something I had never seen before, and for some unknown reason I still remember the odd shapes of doorknobs. There were also new smells, not only of food, but of wax and wood in the inns where we stayed. It was a mustiness that I was convinced smelled like

time. The rooms themselves were often oddly shaped, with uneven floors and crooked staircases which creaked. As we walked in the villages of southern Germany the houses, like the inns, had the dates of when they were built chiseled into the wood above their doorways. Many of the houses and the inns weren't quite straight either, but leaned and looked down into the narrow, cobble-stoned streets that had been built for people, not for cars. Present, everywhere, was age. I was captivated by it, and made mental comparisons with what I had seen in California. It wasn't that I liked American architecture less; I didn't. But in California the houses I was familiar with were modern, and I hadn't yet seen the picturesque towns of New England or the colonial architecture of the South.

In Germany we visited cities my parents already knew, like Dinkelsbühl, Rothenburg ob der Tauber, and Nürnberg. I remember walking through them in the late afternoon, in and out of the hazy shadows cast by the golden sunlight on the stones of ancient buildings. I saw the spires of country churches and heard their bells, and marveled at the grace and elegance of gothic cathedrals.

On village squares there were flowers, everywhere. They were beautiful and welcoming, but in many of those same squares I also saw a darker side of European history. I was familiar, of course, with our cemeteries for American veterans of foreign wars; but they were wars fought by Americans on foreign soil, and I had never thought much about it. I was unaware that in the squares of hundreds of European towns stood monuments to the memory of those who had died in World War I and in World War II. The Europeans, I thought, didn't seem to pay much attention to them. But I was wrong. The monuments served as daily reminders of death and destruction, and I noticed that flags and flowers were often placed in front of them.

By the beginning of August I had been traveling for almost two months in what I was now calling the "Old World." I thought the phrase had a romantic touch to it, because this old world, completely new to me, was an adventure that gave me a sense of independence I had never felt before. No one knew me, and wherever I went I could be whomever I wanted to be. But, of course, it was really the euphoria of that summer's vacation of freedom without responsibilities.

My brother and I made the most of it when we successfully persuaded our parents to let us hitchhike from Florence to Berlin. It was there, in Berlin, that my romantic image of Europe received a rude jolt, of a kind I had never anticipated.

We knew that West Berlin was protected by American, British, and French soldiers, because the three western sectors had been cut off from communist East Germany the previous year, by the Berlin Wall built in August 1961. But we had no idea what was on the other side of it. So we decided to go to East Berlin. This meant, as Americans, that we had to pass through the Allied border control point in the American Sector of West Berlin, called Checkpoint Charlie. Once on the other side, after the East German soldiers had stamped our passports and let us continue, we decided the best way to see the Soviet Sector was to get on a bus and ride it to the end of the line. So we got on the first bus we found. By the time we reached the last stop we were the only people still on it.

When we got off there wasn't a lot to see except decaying, gray apartment buildings. They had obviously been built before the war, and their facades were crumbling. We began walking across a big empty lot, when suddenly a soldier stood straight up, right in front of us, like a puppet coming out of the ground. He had been in some kind of hole and we hadn't seen him. He pointed his machine gun at us and said, *Halt*. He asked why we were there, and my brother, who spoke German, told him we were American students. The soldier told us it was forbidden to be there. He ordered us to leave, and we agreed that it was a really good idea.

It seemed to us that we waited a long, long time for the next bus to take us back on that Friday afternoon of August 17. When we got to the East Berlin side of the Wall we could hardly wait to get out of what we now knew was a dangerous place. We went into the border control office, and were told to give a soldier our passports. They disappeared through a narrow opening in the wall and we waited. The soldier told us to put our East German coins into a tin can covered in white paper with a red cross on it (we still wonder if that money really went to the Red Cross). After about fifteen minutes our passports reappeared, with no explanation, but with an exit visa stamp that took up an entire page. We were then allowed to leave, and walked out of the other end of the wooden barrack, to find

ourselves looking at Checkpoint Charlie about one hundred yards away. To get there we had to walk through “No Man’s Land”—a huge, empty square covered with asphalt—toward the white line on the pavement that separated east from west.

We were about half way across when, to our left, we heard what sounded like gunshots, and saw people running. A Vopo (the slang term for Volkspolizist; German for “People’s Policeman”) appeared out of nowhere, pointed his machine gun at us, and told us to stop. He kept us standing there for probably a quarter of an hour, then told us to keep on going toward the border. When I put my foot over the white line, I had a feeling of overwhelming relief in my stomach. I still remember it. I was free.

Now on the western side we asked the American soldiers what had happened. They told us that the *Vopos* had fired shots at someone trying to climb over the Wall, and they pointed toward Zimmerstrasse where, about a hundred yards away, a crowd was gathering. So we went there, too. The Wall was so high we couldn’t see over it, and no one dared climb up on top of it. But on the other side we could hear a man’s voice screaming “Hilf mir doch!” (Help me !). No one came to help him, and after about an hour he didn’t scream any more.

The crowd on the West Berlin side, however, had continued to grow and that night thousands of West Berliners marched in protest down the city’s main street, the Kurfürstendamm. The killing at the Berlin Wall that afternoon turned out to be the most callous of what was to be its twenty-eight-year history, from 1961 to 1989. The Vopos had shot an 18-year-old boy, Peter Fechter, because he wanted to flee from one part of Berlin to another, from dictatorship to freedom. They let him bleed to death at the foot of the Wall.

My brother and I stayed in Berlin for several more days to sightsee; that after all was why we had come in the first place. But neither of us could forget that moment in “No Man’s Land.” We started talking about things that had never occurred to us before: Why did people want to get out of East Germany? Why had the East German government built a wall to keep their citizens in? Why was it necessary for American, British and French troops to defend West Berlin? But neither one of us really knew

very much about the history of Berlin and Germany, or even why Europe was divided. The only thing we both recognized was that Peter Fechter knew something about freedom that we didn't, and that he had been murdered trying to get it.

In Berlin I had seen a face of Europe no one had prepared me for. It had nothing to do with the bucolic scenes of the German countryside. But it had everything to do with education, and it had a dramatic impact on mine. That September, when I returned to Stanford University to begin my junior year, I changed my major from drama to European history. The last quarter of my senior year, in the spring of 1964, a course was offered on the postwar history of Berlin by a visiting professor from Germany, Hans Herzfeld, of whom I had never heard. But I took it, and as I listened to Herzfeld talk about Berlin in a heavy German accent I thought, again and again, about Peter Fechter. In January 1966, a year and a half following my graduation, I was offered a fellowship to take my Ph.D. degree at a university of my choice. So I wrote to Professor Herzfeld, and asked him if he would consider taking on a student who hadn't yet learned German, but who did know why he wanted to study at the Freie Universität Berlin. He agreed.

In the early autumn of 1966 I went to the Freie Universität Berlin to earn my doctorate in modern European history under Professor Herzfeld's direction. He was of "the old school," both in terms of erudition and reputation. He was born at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1892, in the town of Halle, in Saxony. Although I had met him two years earlier in California, I didn't yet know that he was one of Germany's most distinguished living historians, together with Hans Rothfels and Percy Schramm. Nor was I familiar enough, then, with the hierarchy of German universities to appreciate fully the compliment of Herzfeld's agreement at the age of 74 to take me on as his student. I was to be, as it turned out, his last.

The first time I called on him it was late afternoon in mid-September, at his home at number 5, Buchsweiler Strasse in the suburb of Dahlem, in the American Sector. On the advice of a new German friend, Peter Rühland, I had brought with me flowers for Professor Herzfeld's wife, hopeful that this would demonstrate a young American's sensitivity to

German customs. Peter had suggested that I memorize something in German, so I could greet Frau Herzfeld properly, and proposed “Diese Blumen habe ich in meinem Garten gepflückt” (I picked these flowers in my garden). I found this just as amusing as he did, and I rehearsed it during the forty-five-minute bus ride to the Herzfeld’s house.

I was nervous and not really confident when I rang the doorbell, but I was ready to greet Frau Herzfeld. It didn’t happen that way, of course, because such things seldom do. When the door opened I found myself, holding my bouquet of roses, facing Professor Herzfeld, and I wasn’t about to tell him that I had picked the flowers in my garden. To make matters worse I was embarrassed, because Professor Herzfeld seemed very amused about something and I didn’t know why. I had never brought flowers to a European lady before, and I thought I had made some sort of disastrous mistake. He turned slightly, and speaking over his shoulder into the house, he said, “Marie! I think Herr Bark has something for you.” It was only later I learned that the red roses I had brought Frau Herzfeld meant a declaration of great affection. And, in fact, we became great friends, and we enjoyed that friendship until her death in 2002.

Marie Herzfeld was a lady of dry wit and sophistication, with a highly refined sense of style. She loved to laugh, and she had tremendous admiration and respect for America. While her husband directed my doctoral work, she presided over my introduction to Germany and to German culture. She taught me that German food is not just sausage, sauerkraut and beer, but is also filet of wild hare with red cabbage and chanterelle mushrooms; and she introduced me to Germany’s rich white wines—when Frau Herzfeld drank red wine it came from Burgundy!—and I taught her that America’s national drink was not Coca-Cola, but ice water found on every restaurant table in America, without charge. I became not only the beneficiary of her love of music and the theater, but she and her husband made me a part of their rich life of art and letters, which included chamber music in their garden and dinners at their home with scholars, journalists, businesspeople, and political figures from throughout Germany. Their kindness was nothing less than a unique and extraordinary education in all manner of things German and European. And so began with my arrival at the Herzfeld’s doorstep, holding a bouquet of red roses,

my European education. From it emerged my friendship with Germany and the Germans, and with Europe and the Europeans. It changed my life, permanently.

As a graduate student at the Freie Univesität I lived in Berlin for four years, in a suburb called Der Grünewald (the Green Forest). During that time I never returned to the United States. My father had explained to me, before I left, that I was going to Germany to earn my Ph.D. degree and to learn about Europe. So he made clear, in no uncertain terms, that if I wanted to return to the United States I would do so at my expense. But he also proposed that if I wanted to further my education by traveling on the continent he would gladly finance it. The result was that I went all over Germany and Europe, and met Europeans. With many of them, over the next three decades, I developed professional and private friendships that continue to this day. And later I became the godfather to the children of four of them, to Victoria Sophie in Berlin, to Liliom Alexander in Bonn, to Sophie Charlotte in Braunschweig, and to Matthew Thomas in Copenhagen.

These travels also had another consequence, which I am sure my father had considered when he made his proposal. I began to learn how Europeans see America and judge Americans. I learned about the other side of the coin, too—about the cultural and historical differences between Europeans and Americans, and why they exist. The differences, likes, and dislikes, weren't nearly as disturbing as they were fascinating. So I listened a lot, and also tried to answer the never ending questions about American democracy, about our culture, about our economic life, about our racial problems, and about a subject of never-ending curiosity, “cowboys, Indians, and the Wild West.”

We also talked about our holidays. When I think of all those I spent in Europe I always remember my first Christmas in Westphalia, walking through the snow on the way to church in a little village on Christmas Eve, then singing carols in German, and finally hearing the church bells on the way home. It was the holidays, more than any other thing, that made a lasting impression on me, because how the Europeans celebrated them taught me so much about how they live. They were private gatherings of family and good friends, but I was included in them all. It was a

compliment that I valued enormously, and it was also an opportunity to talk about our different customs, traditions, and habits of life. So we often had long conversations about Halloween and Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day and the Fourth of July, the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and of course how we celebrated Christmas and Easter in America.

When I came from the New World to study in the Old World, I had not yet thought that I might become part of them both. But that's what had happened by the time I received my Ph.D., and I intended to keep it that way. I also intended to keep my new European friendships, because many Europeans had told me why they considered themselves to be old friends of America, long before I had made their acquaintance of Europe. In West Berlin they explained that it was the Americans, together with the English and French, who had saved the city from communist dictatorship. In Paris they explained that it was the American GI who had come to liberate France from German occupation. And whether they were French or Germans, they all said to me, "We will never forget what America did for us." They shared an appreciation of liberty with Americans that I had just begun to understand. But in fact it was much more than that, and I now know it. They looked at America and saw something of themselves in a distant land, across the ocean, either because they had met American soldiers at the end of the war, or because they had relatives and friends living in America, and had affection for them. And I, just as thousands of other Americans before me, now felt the same way toward them.

Those four years in Germany and in Europe made me think a lot more about America than I ever had before. It wasn't that America was newer or Europe older, or Americans faster and Europeans slower, nor was it a question of who or what was better, richer, or poorer. The differences between life in Europe and America just made both that much more interesting, and invariably prompted me to think about why the differences existed. But something else was also accomplished during those four years. I had discovered that Europeans and Americans had an enormous amount in common, and that both worlds, equally full of life and culture, complemented each other.

When I left Berlin in the early autumn of 1970,¹ the Europeans had a new friend in me, and I had many friends among them. Today it is more than forty years ago that I first arrived in Germany, and since that time my life has been both a European and an American one. From it I have learned that the European-American relationship is much more than that. It is a friendship, built on common interests, shared values, trust, affection, and respect. It is unique, and it is irreplaceable. To let it unravel is unthinkable, and to let it come apart would have disastrous consequences for all of us.

1. The author was granted a Ph.D. degree by the Freie Universität Berlin in January 1970, summa cum laude. His major field of study was Neuere Geschichte and his twin minor was in Mittelalterliche Geschichte und Politische Wissenschaft.