

The Student Prince
By James A. Shapiro
December 14, 2020

I first visited Heidelberg in 1974, when my father took me there as part of a Central European “grand tour.” I was immediately smitten with the gothic architecture and what I misapprehended at the time as being the oldest university in Europe, the Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg. It was merely the oldest in Germany.

We stayed at the gothic *Zum Ritter* Hotel, literally, at “the knight’s place” and it was magnificent. We dined on fine Rhein wine and *Bachforelle*,¹ brook trout sautéed in butter and a rich cream sauce. My father said it was the best meal he had ever had.

Heidelberg inspired me so much on that trip with my dad that I decided to study German there on my own two years later. The only problem was that I was still in high school, and Heidelberg was a university. But I applied anyway to their *Ferienkurs für Ausländer*, their vacation course for foreigners. Somewhat surprisingly, they accepted me despite my age. So two years after my “grand tour,” my own personal Odyssey began.

It was a brutally long bus ride from the Luxembourg Airport to Mannheim, then-West Germany, especially after the overnight Icelandic Airlines flight, but thankfully it was a mercifully short train ride from Mannheim to Heidelberg. I arrived at the *Hauptbahnhof*, the main train station in Heidelberg, and took the *Strassenbahn*(streetcar,) down *Hauptstrasse* (Main Street) toward the Ruprecht Karl University, where I had hoped to find my accommodations.

From the *Strassenbahn*, I could see there was an odd collection of characters who seemed to be leering at me as I passed by. I was young, baby-faced, and naive to the reality of the world. Yes, I had been to the Red-Light District in Amsterdam two years earlier on my grand tour, where a woman from Surinam had made an obscene sexual gesture and comment to me. But it was here, from my streetcar with a view, where I believe I saw my first transgendered individual, sitting on a retaining wall. He had short black hair, and a muscular build, but with breasts. He (or she) was staring at me, which was a bit unnerving. But I was staring at him (or her) too, so why shouldn’t he (or she) stare back?

When I finally got to the University, it was late in the day, and the gates were locked. Ironic, since the University’s motto is *semper apertus* (always open). I started asking around in my high school German whether anyone knew about my *Ferienkurs für Ausländer*. The Germans were typically congenial, *gemütlich*, if you will, but no one knew about my summer program. It was getting dark, and I started to panic. That’s when I made my way to the only hotel with which I was familiar, the closest thing I had to a home away from home, the Zum Ritter, where I had stayed with my father two years earlier. Maybe I could catch my bearings after a good night’s sleep and start afresh in the morning.

¹ All German nouns, both proper and improper, are capitalized; thus, when a German noun appears in italics in this paper (indicating the original German), it is capitalized.

Problem was, it was one of the most expensive hotels in Heidelberg at 150 Deutsche Marks a night, the equivalent of about \$70, a pretty penny for a high school student in our bicentennial summer of '76. A night spent there consumed about ten per cent of my total budget for the summer. These were the days before credit cards were widely used, and I didn't have one. They were the days when traveler's checks were still the coin of the traveler's realm, and I had to travel all the way to the Chase Bank at a nearby army base to cash them.

That first night at the Zum Ritter was one of the most frightening of my young, 17-year-old life. I had traveled to Europe twice before, but both times with family, once even at the very same hotel. Now I found myself overseas on my own for the first time, completely jet lagged, having wandered around town with a heavy suitcase all day with no one who knew anything whatsoever about my summer program.

Yes, I sweated. Yes, I cried. And yes, I actually thought about "chickening-out" and returning home the very next day. But I somehow managed to get some kind of sleep in the angled, attic-like room the hotel clerk assigned me, perhaps the cheapest she had available. And in the morning I begged the clerk to help me find a more affordable room for the next few nights until I could find the more permanent accommodations I had booked with my summer sublet. If I had made this request in my native New York, the clerk would have laughed and told me where I could stick it. But the Germans were more "höflich," (polite) than most New Yorkers, and she immediately started calling around to some of her less expensive colleagues in the Heidelberg hospitality industry. That's when she sent me trudging across the Neckar River to one of the most humiliating experiences of my young life.

I rode the *Strassenbahn* back down *Hauptstrasse* to Bismarckplatz, Heidelberg's main plaza, and then across the Neckar to the newer part of town. I found the address the lady at the Ritter had given me, and dragged my heavy suitcase up several flights of stairs to what appeared to be a woman's apartment. Though I was sweating profusely and panting from lugging my suitcase up those stairs, the woman sat me down in an empty room and proceeded to interview me, apparently to see if I was an appropriate boarder.

"What do you feel in *zis* room?" she asked me. I was positively languid after lugging that suitcase up four flights of stairs to meet her. I told her, "I feel a room."

"Yes, but what do you *feel* in *zis* room?"

I simply couldn't answer her. I surmised she must have been wanting me to feel the "vibes" of all the brilliant Marxist literature she had birthed in her room, but I couldn't lie. Jet lag, thirst, and exhaustion from wandering around Heidelberg for two days in the early July heat had made me numb to the spirituality she sought in me.

"You are too *met-realistic*," the Marxist hausfrau told me.

"I'm not meta-realistic!" I protested, not understanding at the time what she was accusing me of in her German-accented English. "I'm very *realistic*!" It was my own father who, upon my arrival home, helped me realize she was calling me "materialistic" in her thick German accent.

Perhaps the plaid canvass suitcase was a dead giveaway. Maybe if I had had a backpack like all the hyper-cool Heidelberg hippies she would have relented and rented me the room. I felt mortified. Here I was carrying a heavy suitcase clear across town trying to find a cheap place to stay for a few nights, and this socialist woman refused to rent me the room.

Although I was too bourgeois for the Marxist hausfrau, she took enough pity on me to call a presumably less leftist friend of hers back downtown on the other side of the river. So I lugged my bourgeois suitcase back across the river. I realized I was getting tired from its sheer weight. After all, I had brought some heavy pots and pans to cook for myself and save some money. I started searching for a luggage store to find some wheels for it. Now mind you, this is the mid-70s, before “wheelies,” and even those old suitcases on leashes, the kind that were barking at each other in the movie “Airplane.” But I couldn’t come up with the German word for what I was looking for. I knew that a suitcase was called a *Koffer*, but I had no idea what the Germans would call a contraption on which suitcases could roll. Eventually, I managed to describe what I was looking for *auf Deutsch*—in German—to the clerk at a luggage store. Finally, the clerk had an epiphany and realized it was a *Kofferroller* I was looking for, literally “a suitcase roller.” Leave it to the Germans to have a cognate to the English word right under my nose. They apparently had a word for it, but they didn’t have the *Kofferroller* itself in stock. I would be stuck lugging around my heavy bourgeois suitcase by hand for the rest of the summer. I suppose that’s why we call it “luggage.”

Suitcase in tow, I arrived at the address the Marxist hausfrau had given me. It was a “garden” unit downstairs, and I had to share it with a college professor from the University of Buffalo. But the price was right, the equivalent of about \$10/night, which I could handle for a few days.

Now that the financial pressure was off, I could set about trying to find my *Ferienkurs für Ausländer* with a bit less panic, and maybe even enjoy Heidelberg a bit before I started my classes in German language and literature. It was not only Fourth of July weekend, but the *bicentennial* Fourth of July, and there happened to be a big American army base nearby. GIs flooded into Heidelberg for the 4th, and I quaffed a huge stein of strong German beer to celebrate with them on *Hauptstrasse*. I have never done hard drugs in my life, but stumbling down *Hauptstrasse*, Heidelberg’s Main Street, after chugging that strong beer was the closest I ever imagined to tripping on acid. I was so “*betrunken*,” (drunk), that I felt as though I was floating down the street with the troops.

I should have known better. My dad had let me drink a stein of that strong German beer at the Hofbräuhaus in Munich two years earlier at the tender age of 15. I got so drunk he literally had to carry me out of the place. I was singing some kind of German drinking song I had learned in my German class that year. “*Ein Prosse, ein Prosse, dein Gemütlichkeit . . .*” You may know the rest from Oktoberfest at Lincoln Square.

But two years later I was on my own, with no one to carry me down *Hauptstrasse*. I had to make it on my own. I had to make it through the entire summer on my own.

So what was a nice Jewish boy from New York doing in West Germany anyway during the mid-‘70s? Was it some kind of weird Stockholm Syndrome? Through studying German in high school had I come to identify with the people who had systematically enslaved and exterminated my people? Had my German teacher back home, Dr. Rosenstein, brainwashed me? Why had I even convinced my father two years earlier to take me there, despite his rather typical Jewish reluctance to visit the land that started World War II and the Holocaust?

As best I can recall, it was something of a rather naive, adolescent curiosity as to why so many Jews stayed so long after they surely must have seen the writing on the wall throughout the 1930s. Did they not see that writing before *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass pogrom in 1938 that turned out to be the beginning of the end for European Jews? Did they not see it with the passage of the racial purity laws even earlier than that? What was it about Germany that made them stay for what seemed like so long? I know it was their home, but couldn’t they see they weren’t wanted there?

The long bus ride from the Luxembourg airport to Mannheim began to answer my questions. The sublime countryside captivated me. It was almost perfectly manicured, with squared and rectangular plots of forest and spring greens, pristine meadows, and amber fields of hops used to brew their vaunted beer. The cities and towns featured spectacular gothic architecture along with quaint bridges across picturesque rivers.

“That’s why they stayed,” I thought. They were attached to this beautiful country.

After a few days in the “garden unit” with the Buffalo professor, the folks from the summer program finally decided to set up something of an orientation center at the train station. I tracked them down and lo and behold they had the keys to my summer sublet across the river. Back across the river I traipsed yet again lugging my heavy suitcase, without the *Kofferroller*. I easily found the address for my summer sublet, and yet again lugged the suitcase up several flights of stairs to get to my flat. It was a small, one-room unit with a twin bed and a sink for washing up (and washing dishes, it would turn out). My landlord (a student himself) left me a lovely welcome note touting the previously opened, half-eaten bag of some kind of German snack food he left me, which I promptly eschewed and tossed in the garbage.

There were no shower facilities anywhere in or near my little flat, so all bathing that summer would take place at the Heidelberg public swimming pool, the *Schwimmbad*, where mercifully there were showers. The first time I hopped in I have to admit I briefly thought about the Xyklon B gas that came out of similar shower heads elsewhere in Germany for my Jewish forbearers little more than three decades earlier. But I quickly put those macabre thoughts out of my mind for the rest of the summer. At least I could bathe periodically, even if I did have to take public transit clear across town to do it.

Classes started a couple days later. They originally placed me in *Mittelstufe II*, the more advanced of the two intermediate German language classes. The only thing I recall learning in *Mittelstufe II* was the southern German and Austrian greeting “*Griß Gott*,” literally “greet God” or “God’s greetings.” But my *Mittelstufe II* professor made clear that if you greeted someone like that in a northern city like Hamburg, they would think you’re a priest or something.

Unfortunately, during our opening conversation I had some obvious difficulty describing in German my own little pre-term Odyssey to the professor and the class. He promptly dropped me down to *Mittelstufe I*, which turned out to be more my speed. In fact, nothing should have been my speed, since I was a mere high school student who had talked his way into a college-level program. I really didn't belong in Heidelberg that summer.

Belong or not, my *Mittelstufe I* professor turned out to be a kindly old confirmed bachelor who later that summer invited me over to his home to watch the '76 Olympic Games in Montreal. They featured then Bruce—now Caitlyn—Jenner become the greatest athlete in the world as the gold medalist in the decathlon. I don't remember learning a lick of additional German from him, but my German did improve that summer simply by speaking it as often as possible.

"As often as possible" was something of a challenge, because English had truly become the "lingua franca" of the world by that time—if you'll pardon the irony. It was difficult to get any of the *Ausländer*, the foreigners, not to break into only slightly accented English when my (or their) German failed them.

About the only *Ausländer* I could reliably count on to converse exclusively in German were the Chinese students, who were still under the thumb of Chairman Mao at the time. Consequently, they were extremely formal, deeply repressed, and spoke no English. They always wore white shirts, dark ties, and dark slacks every day to class and between classes. Jeans, the official uniform of the "Me Generation" in the '70s, were clearly verboten in China. Too western and bourgeois for them and Mao. But with Nixon having gone to China merely four years earlier and the country having recently opened up to some extent, these Chinese German students positively riveted me. I tried to engage them in meaningful German conversation, but I could never get anything more than mere pleasantries and polite smiles and nods out of them.

In addition to my *Mittelstufe I* German language class, I also had a German literature class called "*Goethe, Schiller, und Lessing*." Unfortunately, the class was way beyond my meager high school German comprehension abilities, and I missed out on an opportunity to learn about Germany's three greatest literary figures. The only thing I recall from the class is the professor's question, "*Bin ich verständlich?*" (Am I understandable?), and the cute girl next to me nodding "yes," which left me feeling like a buffoon for not understanding a word of it. I was out of my league—perhaps literally as a high school student trying to compete in college level classes.

Eventually, my life in Heidelberg began to settle into a routine. I would stop every morning for coffee on *Bismarckplatz* on the way into classes from my little one room flat across the Neckar. I would stand in line with the locals and listen to the coffee lady ask each customer in her high pitched, sing-songy voice, "*Milch und Zucker?*" Her repetitiveness annoyed me, so I would always try to interrupt her before she could get it out by saying, "*Ja, bitte*"—"yes, please."

German cognates like *Milch und Zucker* often helped me navigate the language barrier. But sometimes those cognates could get a little tricky. I ran into this problem at the Coke machine in the University of Heidelberg cafeteria. The lettering on the machine read, "*Köstlich und*

Erfrischung.” The “*erfrischung*” was an easy enough cognate to figure out, especially from the context of a Coke machine. It meant “refreshing.” It was the “*köstlich*” I was having a hard time with. It sounded like “costly,” but why would the Coca-Cola Company advertise its product being “costly and refreshing,” even in then West Germany?

It would take me years to learn that “*köstlich*” is simply not a cognate. It bore no etymological relationship to its English meaning, which is “delicious.” But “Delicious and Refreshing” made a lot more sense than “Costly and Refreshing” on the side of a Coke machine.

During the mid-‘70s, left-wing terror groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army, the group that kidnapped and then brainwashed Patty Hearst, were prevalent throughout the world. The German analogue to the SLA was the Baader Meinhof Gang, also known as the Red Army Faction. Posters warning of the Baader Meinhof Gang were ubiquitous throughout Heidelberg in 1976. As a 17-year-old naive to the ways of the world, this terrorist group succeeded in terrorizing me. I thought, “What a prize an innocent young Jewish American boy would be to a group like this.” So when I was alone I would carry myself as though the dreaded Baader Meinhof Gang were stalking and otherwise pursuing me. I would sneak around by placing my back against a building’s wall, peering around the corner to make sure the coast was clear. Apparently it always was, because I’m here, and I was never kidnapped that summer.

On *Hauptstrasse*, Main Street, I made friends with a caricature artist from what was then Ceylon and what is now Sri Lanka. I couldn’t afford to buy a caricature of myself, so he drew one for me for free. We would speak at length about what life was like in Ceylon and America. He still had family in Ceylon and wished to bring them to the West. That was the first time I can recall wishing I had money so I could give some of it to help nice people like my Ceylonese friend.

That coming of age summer of ‘76 also contained some of the earliest romantic interests I can recall. Shortly after classes began, many of the students took a river cruise down the Neckar, the *Flüss* that separated the new and old parts of Heidelberg. At some point I became acquainted with a young Yugoslav woman who called herself “Lala.” To this day, I don’t know whether that was some kind of diminutive sobriquet, or a genuine Yugoslav name. Unfortunately, I did not find Lala quite as attractive as she apparently found me. She smiled, batted her eyes, and tilted her head at me quite coquettishly. At one point she put her hand on my knee. Her flirtatiousness was a little too overt for my tastes, and her name sounded like that of a trollop. I took a pass.

Instead, the object of my fancy was a beautiful, young Italian girl who kept throwing back her thick shock of dishwater blonde hair. I imagined she was some kind of starlet back in Italy. She hung around with the other Italian students studying German, one of whom was a guy I befriended named Giancarlo. Perhaps he would be my entree to the starlet.

Instead, he rather humiliated me in front of her.

Until that summer, I had never become aware of the distinctiveness of an American accent. But Giancarlo made sure I would never forget how we apparently elongated our syllables.

“Yooooou awwll tawwk liike thiiiis,” he intoned, in his barely perceptible Italian accent. The starlet tittered at Giancarlo’s impression of the ugly American. She was not interested in me.

So instead I focused on my crush from back home. Amy was two classes behind me, and cute as a button. I imagined us in romantic Heidelberg, so we could sit on park benches together, hold hands, and kiss in the moonlight. How I longed to be with her as I hiked up the famous *Philosophenweg*, the Philosopher’s Walk, on the other side of the Neckar.

The Philosopher’s Walk was my very favorite feature of Heidelberg. The view of Heidelberg’s “Old City” from the heights of the Philosopher’s Walk was truly breathtaking. From there one can look down on the *Alte Brücke*, the old bridge over the Neckar, the *Heiliggeistkirche*, the Church of the Holy Ghost, and the ruins of the famous *Schloss*, or castle. Rumor had it that one of Martin Heidegger’s former students used to roam the Philosopher’s Walk from time to time, and it was not hard to imagine philosophic inspiration springing from every step along the way. It was this famous walk that inspired me to major in Philosophy in college.

Once I decided to wander deep into the forest after the end of the Philosopher’s Walk instead of taking the long flights of stairs down the mountainside, as I usually did. There were strange critters in that forest seeming to resemble our chipmunks and squirrels, but with very different colorations, shapes, and sizes. Their exoticism spooked me a bit and reminded me that I was still very much alone in a foreign country. I became somewhat concerned with getting lost in those woods, but my innate sense of direction I still had in those days (long before I lost it due to GPS devices like Waze and Google Maps) prevailed, and I eventually found my way back to town.

By this point in the summer I was finally developing a tolerance for the strong German beer, so I would stop at the famed *Zum Roten Ochsen*, or “Red Ox”, for a stein or two. The Red Ox was featured in “The Student Prince,” the famous operetta about a young royal studying and romancing in Heidelberg. The beer in Germany was actually cheaper than the soft drinks, so if you were thirsty after a long hike in the woods and the Philosopher’s Walk, that’s what you drank.

And I found the more I drank, the better my German became. I don’t think I ever became fully “*fließend*” (fluent) by the end of that summer, but I at least became conversant. I could carry on a creditable conversation *auf Deutsch* with fellow students, and even with strangers I met.

Some of the younger profs took us on outings. One such outing was to a rather authentic German inn in the forests outside Heidelberg. One of the profs brought his guitar and decided to regale the *Ausländer* with some bawdy German drinking songs. “*Scheisse in der Badehose, hey lade lade lo . . . Scheisse in den Kirchentom . . .*” I will not dignify it with a translation.

We also took cultural bus trips to medieval Rothenburg and the spa town of Baden-Baden. I bonded with my fellow *Ausländer* on these outings, in both German and English, first learning what the baccalaureate exam, or “bac,” was.

By mid-August, the end of my *Ferienkurs für Ausländer* had finally arrived. I received a certificate stating I had passed the course with a grade of *Befriedigend*, the German equivalent of a “Gentleman C,” about the only grade less than an A I had ever received in high school. No matter. I had not taken the course for either high school or college credit, so it would not count for anything other than my pride, which was admittedly a bit wounded. It did let me know how much more German I had to learn, and did somewhat foreshadow the B- I would get in the only German class I took in college.

More importantly than my German skills, however, I realized I had survived on my own in a foreign country despite the challenges of a too-early arrival. Even my own father later told me he knew I could take care of myself in life based on my survival alone that summer. There would be many more coming of age challenges ahead for me in college, but at least I had the confidence of knowing I could survive on my own in a foreign environment. I had become my very own Student Prince.