

Some of the Bridges of My Life

By Chris Hirschhorn

Languages were my life's best bridges. They enabled me to get from my culture into another – if only for a few weeks.

In 1952, my students and I boarded a ship and crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Montreal, Canada to London, England, where we bussed to Brighton, as guests of the families of Brighton College students. This college is a prep school for Oxford. After a month of 'homestay,' we and our British compadres, rode on a private bus and camped through the UK. It was just after World War II. Sugar rationing was still in force in Great Britain.

We even camped in Scotland because there was a new actor everyone was raving about. We had tickets to Richard Burton's Shakespearian performance. Since I wanted time off from my group, I sold my ticket to the Burton performance and lined up to chat with Brits and purchase my ticket to the performance with them. We found Burton before Liz Taylor did.

In 1953, my premed students boarded a Holland America ship from Hoboken, New Jersey to Hamburg, Germany. Once there, we boarded buses to Stuttgart and met our German premeds. German was the language of the trip.

Since it was a Sunday, we did what the Germans do on Sundays, we walked and enjoyed afternoon coffee and cakes at a dance hall by the bay. I, the American group leader, was dancing with Herbert when Helga, the German Group leader, came up to us and stopped our dancing. Helga said, "Herbert you can't dance with Chris. We are engaged to marry and I am the only woman you can dance with." That's telling it like it is. So, I walked off the dance floor trying to control my laughter.

In the first month in Dusseldorf, we attended classes and a surgery. In the second month, although meat was rationed after the war in Germany, since Helga's dad was a butcher, we had meat for cookouts. We bussed and camped around the country.

When attending a professor's class, instead of clapping after professors spoke, German students stomped their feet. We Americans followed suit.

Our international group also camped through Switzerland, since it was German speaking, but couldn't travel to German-speaking Austria. The US didn't have diplomatic relationship with Austria after WWII as yet.

My next memory is personal: Manfred, whose family I met in their Stuttgart home, cared for me especially. I had no idea. The day before we Americans left Germany for home, Manfred explained that he told his parents about my family and my lawyer parents and asked their permission to marry me. They gave it. So as we Americans were leaving Germany, he proposed marriage. What a shock!

My parents were attorneys and my father's family were German. Manfred's father came to the US frequently during WWII representing Germany's Steel Industry – a marriage made in heaven – except that I was completely unaware of 'love.' I liked but never loved until I met Howard, and

then I understood love.