



Welcome to democratic Germany

by

Herbert Kolb

Traveling to Germany

The grandfather of my wife Laure had survived the war in old peoples' homes in France. He now had a chance to be accepted in the newly established Jewish old peoples' home in Heidelberg. He applied for it and moved there in July 1951. As he was already 84 years old and the only surviving older relative of the family, Laure wanted to visit him. Finally we could financially manage and therefore took a leave of absence from our jobs in September 1953.

My father came especially from Vineland, New Jersey to New York to bring us to the ship. On September 4th, 1953 we drove to the United States Line Pier and went on board the SS United States. Laure's long time friend Ria came, along with my friend Warren Kramer and his girlfriend Elsbeth. They were permitted to come on board with us. At the announced time the non-passengers had to leave and the ship slowly was piloted out of the harbor exactly at 12:00 o'clock noon.

We arrived in Le Havre on September 9th, and for the next two days, as it was the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, we stayed in Paris. On Saturday evening, September 12th, we took the overnight train to Germany. For the first time in our lives we traveled second class, because we did not want to travel into Germany sitting together with the German mob. In Karlsruhe we had to change trains and arrived in Heidelberg around 9:00 a.m.

German customs

Our suitcases had not arrived yet. We were told they would come with the next train. Laure was very anxious to see her grandfather, therefore we went immediately to the old peoples' home, which was a short walk from the railroad station. An hour later we knew the next train from Karlsruhe would arrive and we figured our two suitcases might be on it. We went back to the railroad station just as the train arrived. The suitcases were on it. We now had to take them to the customs office right on the train station.

The officer asked us to open them and if I had cigarettes. I said yes, I did, and I had a box of cigars, too. The officer told me that I have to pay customs duty of 10 Pfennig for each cigarette and 50 Pfennig for each cigar.

The following conversation took place:

“I do not have to pay any customs duty, as I am a United States citizen and therefore am permitted to bring one carton of cigarettes, and as we are two people, a box of cigars into the country.”

“You still have to pay the duty!”

“I will not!”

“Then I cannot let you take the cigarettes and cigars!” They were taken out of the suitcase.

“I will see about that!”

We left with the suitcases, and as we had in the meantime already rented a car, went to the headquarters of the United States occupation forces. I was asked in and explained to a major what happened. He said: “Don’t worry, I’ll call that customs office right now!” While we were there he spoke on the telephone. After he hung up he said: “Go back, you will get them now.”

We drove back to the railroad station. The same officer was still there.

“OK, I want to have the cigarettes and the cigars now!”

“After you pay 10 Pfennig duty for each cigarette and 50 Pfennig for each cigar.”

“You must not be serious! I explained to you, that I am a citizen of the United States of America and am permitted to bring these articles into Germany! Besides, the American officer just called you and he was told that I will get them back!”

“Yes, I know, but these items have to be in your handbags for your convenience to smoke on the train!”

“You must be kidding! Do you believe I could smoke 50 cigars and my wife 200 cigarettes on the night train from Paris to here?!”

“I am sorry, you have to pay the customs duty!”

“I told you before, I will not!”

We went back again to the headquarters, the same major saw us and we explained to him what happened. He now called his superiors in Frankfurt and again told us, it is settled, we should go back and will get them now.

By the time we were back at the railroad station which obviously was a couple of hours later, we were told that the cigarettes and cigars are not there any more, but in the custom station in town.

We drove there.

I now explained to a different customs officer that I want to pick up my cigarettes and cigars. The cigars, by the way, we brought especially for Laure's grandfather.

He said the same as the one on the railroad station:

"Yes, if you pay 10 Pfennig for each cigarette and 50 Pfennig for each cigar."

"I am sick and tired of driving back and forth, what other alternative do I have, I will not pay one Pfennig of customs!"

"Then we have to burn them."

"OK, burn them, in front of my eyes, because I don't trust you!"

"Is that not a shame to burn all of them?"

"I don't care, as you heard, I will not pay one Pfennig customs for it! Burn them!"

After a small pause the official said: "You can mail them back to the United States."

"Fine, do it, here is my address!"

This ended the affair with the cigarettes and cigars. But our fight with German bureaucracy had just begun.

To err is human, but not German

My father asked me to go to a Jewish office in Munich for him. In the morning of September 21st, we left Heidelberg, drove first through Bruchsal, where Laure explained to me where she went to school and where the synagogue which they burned on November 9th, 1938 had stood.

Then we continued to Karlsruhe.

Driving south, I had to make a left turn into Kaiserstraße. I signaled with the direction signals. At that time these were like little arms on the outside behind the front door. A policeman stopped me and told me it is not permitted to make a left turn from Kaiserstraße. I told him I did not want to make one.

"Why do you have the direction signals out on the left side?"

"Oh, I am sorry, I just had forgotten to turn the signals off!"

One had to switch them off manually. It did not matter, Germany doesn't permit any errors. I got a fine anyway and had to pay, I believe 2 Marks, right on the spot.

It was still “Bomben auf Engeland”

Probably on October 14th we drove to Nuremberg again, as on October 16th, 1953 the next court hearing for compensation claims for my parents was scheduled. This time we stayed in Nuremberg in the Hotel Victoria, which is located in Königstraße, in the old part of the city. In the hotel we were told that it was announced that an unexploded bomb was found in this part of the city, and it would be extricated the next morning. Everybody in the surrounding area had to go to the air-raid shelters at 9:00 a.m. or leave the vicinity of this part of town before.

We had no intention to be crowded together with the Germans into one of these shelters, because just a couple of years ago we were not permitted to be in the shelter with the members of the “master race”. We left the hotel even before breakfast and drove towards Fürth. On the way, someplace on Fürther Straße we went to a small cafe for breakfast. Everybody there was excitedly talking about this bomb. The proprietor, a woman, came up with the following statement to prove her Nazi thinking had not changed: “I would pick up that bomb with a helicopter and drop it on London!”

We asked her if she knew who started the bombing of cities like Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry or London and many others?

Restitution - after 43 years

On the 16th I had to give a detailed testimony of all the items which were in my parents’ apartment. I was not prepared and even forgot the grandfather clock in the living room and probably a lot of other things. It had been a traumatic ten years since I had been in our last apartment.

On October 19th, there was another court session. Like the one before it was in the same courthouse where the war criminals were tried. This time it came up about the silver and gold the Jews had to bring to a special municipal pawn-bureau, as they were not permitted to keep any.

For some unexplained reason, the old silver cup I got as a Bar Mitzvah present from Siegfried Mezger, a cousin of my mother, was separately listed under my name. The silver weight was marked as being worth 50 Marks. But I was told, the German Mark was devaluated 10 to 1, I would get 5 Marks for this item. I complained that this was completely ridiculous, as it was not a clump of silver, but an antique piece. This did not matter.

The judge told me that in the basement of "Germanisches Nationalmuseum" (Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg) were some pieces from that robbed silver and gold, and I could look if I see anything that belonged to me. I got a letter which recommended that the museum let me look at the stolen items they received from the Jews in March 1939. It read like this:

"Confirmation!

Mr. Herbert Kolb, born February 27th, 1922 in Nuremberg, cabinet maker, living South Orchard Road, in Vineland, N.J., USA is in possession of the power of attorney for the compensation case of Bernhard Kolb against the German Reich and the City of Nuremberg, in the county court Nuremberg-Fürth, # III WKv 420/52. He was already at the hearing in this matter a couple of times. It would be beneficial to the continuity of the case if Mr. Kolb could see the art, jewelry and cult-pieces in the 'Germanisches Nationalmuseum', which had to be handed over. The court herewith asks for him to be granted permission to look at these pieces.

Fürth / Bavaria October 19th, 1953

The head of the compensation court
at the county court Nuremberg-Fürth
signed

for (Dr. Trabert) Dr. Klier

County Court Director - District County Court Magistrate"

B e s t ä t i g u n g !

Herr Herbert K o l b, geb. 27. Februar 1922 in Nürnberg,
Schreiner, wohnhaft South Orchard Road, Vineland, N.J. USA
führt laut vorgelegter Vollmacht das bei der Wiedergutmachungs-
kammer bei dem Landgericht Nürnberg-Fürth anhängige Rücker-
stattungsverfahren Kolb Bernhard gegen Deutsches Reich u.
Stadt Nürnberg, Akt.Z.: III WKv 420/52. Er hat bereits mehr-
fach Termine in dieser Sache wahrgenommen. Es ist dem Fort-
schritt des Verfahrens dienlich, wenn Herrn Kolb die ebenfalls
abgelieferten Kunst-, Schmuck- und Kultgegenstände im Germa-
nischen Nationalmuseum zugänglich gemacht werden; die Kammer
befürwortet hiermit die Bitte um Gestattung der Ansicht.



Fürth/Bay., den 19. Oktober 1953

Der Vorsitzende der Wiedergutmachungskammer
bei dem Landgericht Nürnberg-Fürth:

Dr. Klier
für (Dr. Trabert) i. V. Dr. Klier
Landgerichtsdirektor - Amtgerichtsrat

German original of the letter of recommendation

(photo: Herbert Kolb)

Right after that court session I drove to the museum, showed them my paper and a man went with me down to the basement. There on shelves was a large collection of silver articles, which I was told were stolen from Jews. It did not take long until I saw a silver cup which looked exactly like mine. I asked the man if I could photograph it. Luckily I had my camera with me. He had no objection.



The Bar Mitzvah cup at “Germanisches Nationalmuseum” in 1953
(photo: Herbert Kolb)

I told about my find in the office, but was told, that I have to prove that this was really my cup. I should bring a witness and sales bills. I said I will bring a certificate from a witness, my father, but there is no sales slip, as I got this cup from a relative as a present and besides this is an old cup which was in his family for perhaps a hundred years. They did not give me the silver cup and after the film was developed I mailed the two pictures to my father in the U.S.A. By the time my father answered with a statement, we were not even in Europe anymore.

This silver cup situation was finally solved and I got it back 43 years later in 1996, after I found a photograph of my Bar Mitzvah table with the cup on it. It was in a photo album of my uncle and aunt, which I got after they had died. I could not identify any of the other items which were on these shelves, but it is very possible, that there might have been others which belonged to us. As we were in Nuremberg again in 1984, I took the two pictures along, brought them to the museum and got a letter from the president saying that this silver cup is not in the museum.

Nobody asked for papers, the Simons just waved at the border guards and we were brought across the border. We spent a pleasant evening and night in the Simons' house and were smuggled back into France the next morning, the same way we came into Luxembourg.

My parents had written to the Simons and my father wrote, as we are that close, we should pass Verdun and see if we can find the grave of his brother August who was killed at Fort Vaux in World War I. November 11th, back in France, we drove to Verdun. There are very many cemeteries, French and German, but we did not find the grave. Before we had telephoned Opa Neuburger, that we would be in Heidelberg in the evening that day.

Another unforgivable crime, this time committed in Kaiserslautern

As we had spent quite a bit of time in Verdun, visiting the battlefields, the memorials and the cemeteries, it got later than we had anticipated. On the way to Kaiserslautern it became night and we looked for a post office to call Opa to tell him he should not wait up for us. By now it was 9:00 p.m. Laure called and we went out of the post office again.

It was pitch dark, as there were no streetlights. A woman just passed by and I asked her which was the way to the Autobahn. She said she did not know, but down on the end of the plaza there were two policemen standing and they could tell us.

We went into our car, drove to the policemen and there was following conversation:

“Excuse me, can you tell us which way we should take to the Autobahn?”

“Were you parked up there?”

“Yes.”

“Did you not know it is forbidden to park there?”

“No, we did not know.”

“There is a sign there!”

“How can you see a sign in that darkness, there is not any light around there!”

“The fine for parking on a place where it is forbidden is ten Marks, you have to pay!”

“You must be kidding!”

“You have to pay right now!”

“Give us a summons and let us go!”

“You have to pay now, we will not let you go before you have paid!”

As it happened, we just had one twenty Mark bill, because we only had come to Germany a short while ago. They could not give us any change. One of them took the money and walked to an inn to have it changed, while the other one stayed with us. I am sure, he did not expect

what Laure told him now: “You damned Nazis, you are still the same, you did not learn anything in the last eight years. One has to tell everybody who wants to come to this damned country, how the people here still are!” Laure kept telling him off, until his partner came back and gave us our ten Marks.

I don’t remember if they showed us the way, but we found it and finally, in the middle of the night, we came to our hotel. We had previously made arrangements for our return. In the morning we visited Opa again.

Breaching public peace without public (besides one Nuremberg policeman)

Hans Hermann used to be the deputy in my uncle’s company of Hessdörfer & Kolb. He was one of the decent Germans who were not Nazis. When the Jewish stores and companies had to be “aryanized”, he, together with a former client of the company managed to buy the “Herrenkleiderfabrik” (men’s clothing factory) and its sister company “Ernüda”. During the war he was drafted and ended up as a Russian prisoner of war. He had come back sometimes before and had started the factory again in a very small way. I had met him before and we had planned that on one certain evening we would come to the premises of the little factory.

He gave us the address and we drove to the particular building, somewhere on the south side of the city. He had fixed up a little room where he and his wife could stay overnight. Actually this was forbidden, as the building was considered as commercial.

He said: “When you come, blow your horn and I will come down and open the door. The bells don’t work and nobody else is in the building. We only have build up this floor a little and there I have a couple of machines. You will see all the other floors are still unusable.” Also he said that his spring collection of ladies’ coats was ready but he would need somebody to photograph them. As I had bought a camera on one of my earlier stays in Nuremberg, I had offered that I could take the pictures. “But we don’t have any models”, he said. “Then your and my wife could model the coats.” “That would be fine”, Hermann said. We arranged that we would come in the evening around 9:00 o’clock.

We came. The street, actually the whole neighborhood was pitch dark. All the houses on both sides were completely burned out shells. The only light was up on the 3rd or 4th floor of the building where Hermann’s business was. The rest of the building looked just like all the other houses in the neighborhood.

We stopped the car in front of the building and gave a short signal with the horn. A window opened, Hermann called down that he will be right there.

That moment out of dark came a policeman and said:

“Did you just blow your horn?”

“Yes, I did. I had to tell my friends that I am here!”

“You know it is forbidden to blow the horn to signal somebody!”

“No, I did not, but there is no other way to tell these people that we are here, the bells don’t work!”

“It is after 9:00 p.m., you woke up all the people in the neighborhood!”

I laughed: “Whom could I wake up? Do you see any place where anybody could live besides the people I am trying to visit?”

“That’s not the point. Show me your driver license and registration papers!”

I had my old German driver license along which never gets outdated and showed him the registration papers for the car. I knew they had to be renewed and had told the lending place they should mail it to me in Nuremberg to a certain address.

The policeman looked at the papers with his flashlight and said:

“These papers are outdated, you can not drive that car!”

At that point we had it. Laure got out of the right door and I out of the left door and I said: “OK, you can have the car, tomorrow I rent another one! I knew these papers have to be renewed and I am supposed to get them sent to me here. But I don’t care. Take the car and let that renting place pick it up from here!”

Laure told him also a couple of things similar to what she has told the policemen in Kaiserlautern a couple of days ago.

Now the guy suddenly got very friendly: “Ah, you are a Deutsch-Amerikaner (German-American)?”

“No, no Deutsch-Amerikaner we are American, we don’t want to have anything to do with Germans or Germany!”

He now said: “Oh, I don’t want your car.”

He gave me my papers back and left. Hermann came down, opened the door, and we went up with him. I shot a lot of pictures and then we went back to our hotel.

This was our first return to the city of my birth.



Laure modeling for “Ernüda”
(photo: Herbert Kolb)



Mrs. Hermann and Laure
(photo: Herbert Kolb)

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