

## *Across an Ocean*

I was trying to calm myself down as I walked through an unfamiliar part of campus. The dry, cold morning air whipped against my face. “You know what you’re doing, you’ve worked hard to get here,” I told myself as I looked at my feet to avoid the relentless wind, “Just listen and you’ll understand.” I glanced up long enough to read—*Pfaffenwaldring 41*—a little further. I lowered my head and pressed on through the endless rows of buildings at the *Universität Stuttgart* in Germany.

The rush of warm air when I pulled open the door to the mechanical engineering building quickly made me forget about the outside world. I strolled over to the directory while I stowed my hat and gloves in my bag and found the room for fluid mechanics. It was just on the other side of the atrium. I walked across the gleaming tile floor and through the open door into the cavernous hall. My eyes followed the stadium seating as it sloped endlessly down to the front of the sparsely decorated room. Eight huge chalkboards hung on the front wall, suspended at all different heights on electric tracks. Some were high enough for me to be able to make out—nothing. That certainly didn’t help my nerves; I prayed my professor wrote clearly. “Does God speak German?” I mulled it over. “I may need him soon.”

My eyes instinctively flitted towards my wrist—twenty minutes early. A bit much, but I wasn’t about to be late to my first lecture. I found a seat—not too difficult in an empty airplane hanger—three rows from the front and about a quarter of the way in from the edge. It was close enough to hear everything, but not front and center so the professor might look at me too much. In ten minutes or so when more students started to file in I realized that my seating choice clearly identified me as the token exchange

student. All the Germans were sitting at least halfway up and chatting calmly with one another. I was sitting by myself in silence. I didn't recognize anyone in the room—not that I expected to, but unnerving nonetheless. I tried in vain to figure out how to shut off that neon sign above my head proclaiming my American heritage.

The professor finally arrived through a side door as two younger looking graduate students scampered along behind him overloaded with papers. The two immediately put down their loads and rushed to the board to erase about an acre of real estate as the professor prepared his notes. I stared at the board as the equations of a previous class slowly disappeared at the hand of a wet sponge and a squeegee—a clean slate, a fresh start. I tried to take comfort in more clichéd analogies about renewal and rebirth as I quietly wondered if professors could smell fear.

At precisely 8:00 am he spoke. The dull, academic voice gradually overtook that of the students. It was then that I got my first major shock: I didn't understand what the professor was saying. It sounded familiar, but something was off. I waited for something to change—nothing did. He talked. I tried to follow the bits and pieces I could catch along with the notes he was scrawling on the board. I managed not to run out of the room screaming, but I couldn't manage much more.

The professor spoke a southern dialect of German called *Schwäbische Deutsch* (Swabian German). In school they teach *Hoch Deutsch* (Standard German). This is a major problem for non-Native speakers because they are never exposed to other dialects. In the United States we're familiar with accents from different regions of the US or other countries (England, Ireland, Australia, etc.), but we don't hear anything like dialects in

English. Comparing the two is like comparing Michael Jackson to Mike Tyson; similarities exist, but not many.

I left the building and hit the familiar wall of cold while I was trying to figure out which Mike had been punching me in there. I tried to sort out what I'd gotten myself into while I trudged listlessly back home. I was beyond anger or panic, beyond any emotion really. I had just sat for an hour and a half listening to a lecture that I only understood about enough to know how deep I was in. All I wanted was a hole that deep to crawl into.

I'd lived in Germany at that point for about a month and a half, studying German and getting ready for the semester. Anyone who wanted to study engineering at the *Universität Stuttgart*—and was a non-Native speaker—was required to take a six-week intensive language class. The class lasted six hours per day, five days a week, plus (as the name suggests) an intense amount of homework. That class had just ended and now the semester was beginning. I'd also studied German since high school, and been immersed in the culture since I arrived—I thought I was ready. I was beginning to see why studying abroad wasn't very popular among engineers.

I finally stumbled into my apartment, immediately laid down and stared at the ceiling—stunned. I didn't have any answers. I was in a foreign city, in another country, on another continent. I was half a world away from my family, my girlfriend, all my friends, and my home. So much separated me from everything I wanted and needed, a language, so many miles (er—kilometers), and an unknown, seemingly unforgiving University.

*Strömungsmechanik? Auf Deutsch?* What was I thinking? I knew the answer: I wanted a challenge, I wanted to become fluent. Why didn't I just go to a University with an English speaking program? Why was I so stubborn? It was so easy to make these decisions, and so much harder to stick with them. "There's only one way to go," I decided. "Here was the challenge I asked for."

I wasn't sure what to expect from my next class. I went into Fluids expecting the worst and that's what I got. I had no choice but to try to be optimistic. I walked to my next class with a friend of mine, Sebastian. He tried to convince me that those professors were rare; I shouldn't worry. At least the sun had come out, the day had started to get warmer and brighter.

Eccentric doesn't even begin to describe the man who burst into our small Reactor Theory class about a minute late—very unusual for a German professor. All nine students in the room had similar looks of amusement as we watched while he took his place at the front of the class. His hair looked a lot like Einstein's, except that it was sticking up only on one side. It stayed that way the whole semester. We eventually concluded that he slept solely on his right side.

A pair of horn rimmed glasses was perched precariously above a mustache that needed to be trimmed with a hedge clipper. He dropped his overcoat on a chair, revealing a brown plaid sport coat over a pinstriped shirt and loosely knotted tie. His khakis struggled to reach his shiny leather shoes, but a brilliantly white pair of socks picked up where they left off. He surveyed the class while we waited (and I tried hard not to crack a smile) for him to address us. When he finally did, it was in perfectly clear

German that I understood. I sighed somewhat audibly and relaxed in my chair. Then I realized all I had to do was learn Reactor Theory, a piece of cake.

The rest of my classes came and went that first week—though none had quite the impact of the first two. *Composites with a Polymeric Matrix*, *Manufacturing Design*, *Heat Transfer*, and a German language course all passed by uneventfully. At weeks end the feedback from the other exchange students was pretty universal: at least they had good beer to make the situation a little better.

Even when the professors speak clearly, a class taught in a foreign language is not easy. That may go without saying, but it tended to hit you a little differently when you were sitting in the classroom. On the other side of the coin, when they didn't speak or write clearly, then you had to use the book as your sole source of information. I got in the habit very quickly of exhausting the library of all the books I could get on the subject—English and German—to get as much of a handle on the information as I could.

After the initial shock, everything became more and more manageable. I balanced studying with leisure while I found time to enjoy the greener grass and warmer weather. I put less emphasis on lecture and more on learning the material myself. I had to get used to a much different time management strategy. My grades were based solely on exams, a format typical of German engineering schools. There were fewer classes to go to and no assignments to do, but in the end there was at least as much material to learn. It was easy to put things off, but it didn't take long to realize how important it was not to.

This format lent itself nicely to an exponentially increasing stress curve as the semester approached its end. When there were three months until you were accountable

for anything, it was much easier to swing by the pub than the library. This mindset changed remarkably quickly when people saw that it was no longer a problem to be dealt with “at the end of the semester;” it was a problem to be dealt with next month—or even sooner.

When the end of the semester arrived—yet no grades were on the books to show for all the work—it was scary. How could one exam equal an entire semester? Were they out of their minds? I don’t think it’s possible to design a more stressful system to evaluate one’s knowledge of a subject. All of my exams followed a similar format. I sat down at a table with the professor and one or two evaluators. The evaluators were unbiased observers from the university to make sure that the professor was making a fair judgment of the student’s knowledge. Not only did I have to answer whatever questions the professor asked, but I had to do it as these officials stared at me and wrote notes the entire time. Then the professor would ask me to go to the board and diagram things or give me paper to write out equations or solve problems. Once the professor was satisfied, he or she told me to leave and they discussed my performance until they called me back and gave me the result. Our conspiracy theory was that they would sit and chat for a while after they decided the grade—just to make us sweat.

Despite all the chaos and stress going in, the professors were reasonable and the exams went well for me. It was the greatest feeling of accomplishment following a semester that I had ever experienced. On top of that, I had even more fun redefining all my stress levels during the final week. I promise I will never gripe again about finals in Madison—I’ll take the written (and English) format any day.

I spent my last beautiful summer weekend in Germany packing up my things, wrapping up last minute details, and getting ready to fly back to the life I'd put on hold for half a year. I also spent much of my remaining time saying goodbye to my friends and to the local breweries I'd come to regard as family. It was during this time I was able to reflect back on my experience. The first thing that struck me was how lucky I was to have gotten the opportunity to study in another country and gain that perspective. I knew then that I didn't put any life on hold; the experience had only strengthened the one I had; that was why it was so valuable.