



Resilience

A thick, gray fog blanketed the bleak German countryside on that Fall day in 1962. I was on my way to one of the two military libraries that I would manage over the next two years. Eventually, a shadow emerged from the mist enshrouded Transylvanian landscape. It took the shape of a huge gate. Then it was joined by vague forms architecturally reminiscent of WW2 Nazi concentration camp barracks. But for the absence of the German phrase, Arbeit Macht Frei ("work sets you free".) on the gated entrance, the scene would have had all of the ambience of Auschwitz.

After we entered the camp, home to a U. S. armored tank unit, the driver stopped the jeep and turned to me saying: "Welcome to little Chicago!" Apparently the violence of the Chicago Mafia had taken root in this overcrowded, racial melting pot of human beings. Reinforcing this reality were tanks, strategically positioned around the barracks and parade grounds, for the purpose of discouraging the regular physical violence that occurred among the GIs housed here.

The driver led me to my office in the camp library. As I stood before a window looking out over an adjacent field, it seemed as if the field was moving. But a closer look revealed that the illusion was created by an army of rodents carpeting the field. As I gazed on this scene, incredulous, the guide casually mentioned: "Oh, by the way if the Russians attack, you and your staff should jump into the ditch – over there by the field". He was referring to the field of the moving rodents. And so began my 2 year Library Special Services assignment in Germany – in a military environment and culture light years away from my previous life.

On my first Christmas in Germany I developed severe laryngitis. Despite the loss of my voice, management expected me to work on the holiday and offer Christmas programs for the GIs. On that fateful day, the water pipes in the library burst, flooding the entire facility. The Army Engineers, who would normally have taken care of the problem, were unavailable. As the building superintendent, the ball was in my corner. So there I was giving a holiday presentation in a croaking voice, dealing with a flooding library, and a cleanup of the subsequent mess.

During one of the bone-freezing German winters the Army Engineers decided to replace the front door of the library with one that was not flush with the floor. The rodent population in the neighborhood immediately took advantage of the gap at the base of the door to enter a warm, comfortable building. The Engineers handled the subsequent rodent problem by distributing poison throughout the library in hard to access locations - like behind book cases braced to walls. Unfortunately, the rodents died in place. The disgusting smell of their rotting bodies sent one of my staff – a woman who was several months pregnant – into a state of hysteria. Subsequently, I found myself dealing with a staff rebellion on the one hand, and a military indifferent to the problem on the other.

At the time I was accepted into the Special Services program, I was assured that the military would take care of all of my work-related transportation needs. When I arrived, I found that both of my libraries were in remote areas not served by public transportation. I would have to depend on the military to keep its promise. It turned out that the drivers who were assigned to pick me up at night were often taking care of a medley of other needs. As a result, they usually arrived around 2 or 3 AM ... ***in the morning***. That made for a long work day, little sleep, and an unpredictable schedule.

In this, my first management position, I had a heterogeneous staff of German nationals, off duty noncommissioned officers, enlisted men and military wives – with widely varying work ethics, norms, and values. Getting this diverse group of people to work together effectively and efficiently was a challenge. It gave new meaning to the expression: “different strokes for different folks”.

The experience in Germany was like taking an intensive course in Life 101. I discovered that I could deal with the unexpected, the bizarre, the outrageous, the unreasonable – and survive long enough to enjoy another day.