

A Life Dismembered

5. Hamburg 1972-73

In the summer of 1972 my MSc course in Algebra at Sussex ended, and I was faced again with the question: what to do with my life now? This time round, I did actually apply for a few jobs. Including one for a Lecturer in Mathematics at the exotic-sounding University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland – but I heard nothing back. As well as watching cricket when I should have been studying, I had been taking trains to Germany to visit my girlfriend Heide, whom I had met at an Esperanto youth camp. While at school I had taught myself Esperanto out of sheer boredom – it's a very easy language – and discovered that it provided great opportunities for travel and socialising with other cultures (and girls). Now Heide was starting university in Hamburg; wouldn't it be great to join her?

This was a time long before Britain joined the European Community. To live in West Germany I would need a residence permit, and for that I would need a job offer. But to take up a job I would need a work permit – and I couldn't get a work permit without a residence permit. I somehow negotiated this German bureaucratic Catch-22, by writing to the Maths Dept of Universität Hamburg and landing employment for a few hours a week running seminars and marking exercises on a module of mathematical analysis for engineering students. Analysis is the bedrock of undergraduate maths degrees, involving logical deduction, rigorous definition and proof – not something which engineers are troubled with in the English-speaking world. I gave myself a crash course in German in the language laboratory at Sussex, and signed a contract for the Autumn semester (15 October to 15 February) as a seminar leader: an Übungsführer, which I thought would look pretty cool on my CV.

In 1972 Germany was tense, with bombings, bank raids and assassinations by the Red Army Faction, a.k.a. the Baader-Meinhof Gang. Tommy mentions the 'RAF bombing campaign', to Hugh's confusion, in *Conjecture*.

At the university there were strikes and protest meetings about 'numerus clausus', a government measure to restrict the perceived human right of every school-leaver, however low their grades, to enrol at a university and receive a grant for year after year, repeating modules until they finally passed or gave up (we knew someone who had been doing this for seven years). But my own life was idyllic – living like a student but with no exams. We rented a large room on the top floor of an apartment building opposite the Mensa (canteen).

I developed my own style of seminar-leading:

"Now, tutorial question 2. Who has an idea how to solve this?" I then waited, looking expectantly at the class. Finally one student would suggest something.

"Right, let's try that." I'd write their idea on the board. Sometimes it proved to be right, sometimes it was a blind alley. Most of the time I was suffering a tremendous hangover and had failed to prepare the answer myself. If it failed to work: "Right, we need to try another approach. Any ideas?" and I'd wait expectantly again. Eventually we got the problem solved,

and I think the students benefited more from this approach than if I'd just explained the correct solution, as I was supposed to do.

Our social life was a round of parties and post-party coffee-drinking. You know the large old-style iron radiators with a row of metre-tall vertical flanges? For grog parties, bottles of rum could be laid horizontally between each flange to heat up. Back in our own room we drank Ballantine's and Jamieson's, bought for a pittance in Kaufhof. We listened to the British Forces Broadcasting Service, or heavy metal on the East German radio.

We soon gave up Esperanto. It can be a frustrating language, because of its artificial simplicity. All interrogative words (where? why? when? how?) are similar (kie? kial? kiam? kiel?) and when you're both hung over you're constantly mishearing each other and answering the wrong question. It's not helped because every word has the emphasis on the penultimate syllable (KI-e? KI-al? etc) – it must be the only language in which 'radio' is pronounced ra-DI-o. There's a very funny play by Vaclav Havel, 'The Memorandum', where the Ministry introduces an artificial bureaucratic language, Ptydepe, with similar confusion.

As well as my brain, my stomach was in a constant state of turmoil from the diet of beer and Currywurst from the mobile van parked in the park nearby.

In Britain, Hamburg was mainly famous for the Reeperbahn, the red-light district. We finally went there, though in early evening when the street was chilly and deserted, very unerotic. We sat in a scrofulous pub. Opposite us a dishevelled man was slurping his beer, dribbling and with glazed eyes. In even the most basic Kneipe I'd visited elsewhere, even the most pitiful drunk wore a jacket and clean white polo-neck jumper. When this lout belched loudly Heide expressed a 'Pschui' of disgust. The man looked up and stared coldly at her. I tried to ignore this and suggest we go for a Currywurst, but the man lurched over to our table and started swearing at Heide, still dribbling. He balled his fists and raised his arm. I finally realised I had no option. I stood up. I was going to get punched unconscious. I hadn't experienced violence before, I'd even avoided being caned at school. But now I had no option. I spread my hands and stammered something like "Entschuldigung Sie, wir meinten nicht..."

He turned his blurred gaze to me. I waited for the blow.

"Englisch? Bist Englisch?" Now I remembered that Hamburg had been devastated by an RAF bombing campaign in World War II. Oh God...

He smiled. "Ach, sitz mal, Englisch. Willkommen."

We both sat down, and I ordered more beers. There was backslapping, incoherent toasts and more belching, which we smiled indulgently at. Once he was insensible we scurried out.

When my contract ended, I returned to Bournemouth. My parents pretended not to be surprised to see me. Now what would I do? Luckily there was one job readily available

locally, which I was qualified for: TEFL (Teacher of English as a Foreign Language). But that's another story.