

My Notes About the Germany Transatlantic Exchange

Friday May 9th

Part 1: Neglected (hi)stories in Culture Remembrance

On May 10th, I started journaling, having arrived on May 9th at the Gustav Stresemann Institut in Bad Bevensen Germany, just outside of Hamburg, the second largest city in Germany. The flights from Atlanta to Paris to Hamburg was my first time in Europe. Before departing Atlanta I connected with 4 other members of our group enroute to participate in this Transatlantic Exchange entitled “**Neglected Stories**”: **Elevating marginalized stories in the U.S. and Germany.**

Before departing Atlanta-Hartsfield, 4 other team members boarded the plane. One was a student who had worked with me on my UM Black Families of Yalobusha oral history project back in 2019.

The flight was packed, which for me, made it difficult to sleep. I watched a movie and walked around. When we deplaned after an 8-hour flight we were shuttled to our next gate and discovered the escalator was not working. We got help from a nice navy vet who had sat with one of our group members. We did not get to enjoy the Charles De Galle Airport as we hurried through customs to make our connection to Hamburg. The Paris airport was challenging indeed, several different wings which required ground transportation from one terminal to the next.

The flight to Hamburg was only a couple of hours. When we arrived and retrieved our bags, we were transported via bus to Bad Bevensen, just outside Hamburg. Even as we flew into Germany we could see the beautiful countryside, fields of yellow and green. We arrived at the Gustav Stresemann Institut (GSI), where we were welcomed by the director, Martin. We got registered and were assigned rooms and roommates on the fourth floor of the residence hall with no elevator. I was reminded of my freshman college dormitory many years ago. Small twin beds with a nice view of the front of the building. The shower was quite small and only hand and bath towels provided. I missed in the guidelines that we should bring wash cloths. I did see the line about bringing adapters but thought surely they would provide a few. I was wrong, so much for using my flat iron. I joined those who borrowed from others as our phones and laptops died. I was eventually able to purchase one days later in Berlin.

We assembled for a Friday evening welcoming dinner, a chance to get to know each other, info included mealtimes, photo agreement and logistics. It was good to see yet another UM graduate, who worked on my oral history project, would be one of the facilitators. Still exhausted most of us clamored to bed and tried to adjust to the quietness of no tv and being 6 hours ahead of the USA. It did not take us long to notice that the sun was going down late in the evening and rising around 4am in the mornings. Several took to sitting out on the lawn passed 9pm or hanging out in the pub.

Saturday Morning – May 10th – Our focus was on **Personal Narratives between Politics and Biography**. It was action packed with introductions to the program's aims and objectives, participatory photo documentation, Living Library, GSI and the concept of Civic Education in Germany. There was the introduction of the other cooperation partners, where we learned that our Jackson Mississippi sponsor Alluvial Collective had lost their funding thanks to the Trump Administration.

The rest of the day was spent with information sharing and exercises designed to get better acquainted. We formed our first *story circle* with *guideposts* for *trust building*. We were assigned to share important events in our families on a timeline which we did in small groups. I shared about my brother and three first cousins being in the Vietnam War at the same time.

I was shocked when a 30 something UM graduate shared that she did not learn any black history until she went to Ole Miss. I was in shock! Then I realized that the integration of the schools in the early seventies created a void. There was a lack of black teachers and restricted curriculum. Now I understand the mindset of some of our younger generation. In contrast a history teacher in our group did teach black history in her Mississippi high school classroom.

Sunday – May 11

Our theme was **Part 1 Narratives (not written) in history books**

We started in Story Circle where we discussed:

What our teachers told us: Mainstream narratives of history.

What our teachers didn't tell us: Neglected Stories in mainstream narratives.

Our first presenter was via zoom, a journalist who was a participant in last year's program. Pedro Rodriguez from Philadelphia gave us an overview of the Living Library experience. He encouraged us to tell our stories with confidence and clarity. Organizing for social change

is his work and mission.

Part II Community & Civic Education

Our next presenter was in person. Adama Logosu-Teko talked to us about the limits of political participation in Germany without a German passport. He told us about his political involvement in German politics. Originally from Togos, West Africa he has been in Germany 40 years, a product of a French based education system. He studied at an American Cultural Center in New York and also in Canada and on a scholarship in Germany. He was the second person from Africa to study as an engineer in Germany.

Adama continues to work toward being a naturalized German citizen. One is expected to renounce their original home or birthplace. Nor can you own any property in another country. His family in Africa is active in politics, and he has been arrested for his activism in Germany. Adama is a member of the Green Party and active with the African Committee. They are engaged in discussions with representatives, senators and corporations about citizenship barriers. Due to the war in Syria more immigrants are coming to Germany making it even more difficult to get a passport. He explained that as of 2024 you can have dual citizenship if you come from a country with dual citizenship options.

We ended the day with a wonderful barbeque at GSI park. Adama joined us for food and fellowship.

Monday May 12

Narratives of anti-racist Activism & Education (excursion to Hamburg)

We walked to the Bad Bevensen Train Station to travel to Hamburg. Germany has an extensive train or subway system which is the main transportation for the locals, and it is free for them. Biking is the secondary line of transportation – one has to be careful not to walk in the bike lanes – they have the right of way. We saw folks on bikes everywhere we went.

Our first tour in Hamburg was a Postcolonial walking tour focusing on Global Disparities.

We were able to enter the 800 million dollar Performing Arts Center and see the beautiful sites of Hamburg. We had lunch at Table.dot.com where Avraham Rosenblum spoke with us about *hummustopia* – a storytelling project implemented when sharing food.

After lunch we split into two groups where the theme was **Narratives of anti-racist activism – Storytelling for social change in Germany**. One group went to talk with the

editors of the magazine “kohero” about migrants’ narratives in an immigration society. I chose an Initiative in *Remembrance of Semra Ertan*, an activist who committed suicide in protest of the treatment of immigrants. We talked with the staff who showed us a video and discussed their organizing and counter-hegemonic culture of dialogue. We walked to where she set herself on fire on the corner of a main thoroughfare. There is a small sign there and then we walked to a separate location where their goal is to establish a permanent memorial.

We had some free time in Hamburg. It was noticeable that there were no benches in downtown Hamburg. It appears they were removed to discourage the homeless. We took the train back to Bevensen and started to learn the train system. The people were not very friendly. The weather was never above 65 degrees. That was a 10-miles walking day.

Tuesday May 13

Our focus for today was **Addressing Multiperspectivity and Solidarity**.

Members of the Germany Group shared from Kazakhstan/Russia to Germany and from Syria to Germany.

Reflection Groups was our time to share what we had heard.

In the afternoon, “**The Germany I have known From Benin to the German Democratic Republic to unified Germany**” was the topic presented by Maxime Quenum, an African from Benin, fluent in German and English who came to East Germany on a college scholarship and stayed. He had to insist and protest to be put on an academic track. One of the first classes he took was German – two years of German classes. He shared a great story about how he and another African student owning and operating a disco back in the 80’s. They called it the Benin Disco, and the townspeople and students came. He said they were famous. The local radio station played western music, so they were able to buy music in West Germany and play it in the disco. He could go to any disco, but he said if he went back now he would not feel as comfortable. Maybe they did not regard us as black he said. We felt accepted, in East Germany they were not as accepting. The disco enabled them to avoid working in the mines or farms which was required of all students.

He gave a few examples of the discrimination he encountered and how he was able to travel unrestricted between east and west Germany, which regular German citizens could not do. The East Germans were limited to their borders, and they could not travel.

He said in the 80's they mostly saw Nazis in the West – they could have been in the East as well. When the wall came down the racism showed its face – must have been hidden. He said after living in Germany 45 years - has a PhD – lived in Berlin for 23 years. He stated that the hostility has grown. Keeping Germany for the Germans is stronger since the unification. He spoke in German and English and Martin translated as needed.

To end the day, our director, Martin Kaiser shared what he called his limited western perspective of the Wall and German division.

We spent the rest of our evening preparing for the Living Library storytelling. The majority of us had agreed to present.

Wednesday May 14

Part III: Going Public: Sharing Narratives and Addressing Politics

Our focus was **Marginalizing Narratives in Local Communities & Politics**

Bus ride to Luneburg for the Living Library

The Living Library at Luneburg. The library and college campus were beautiful. We were given four rooms to use. They set up a hospitality room upstairs with snacks and beverages. Someone who remains nameless found a coke machine. I guess I mentioned that the standard beverage was room temperature water, no ice. This made me wonder if we are doing something wrong in this country with sweet tea and ice.

The attendance was just okay, but it allowed our group to also rotate and hear the stories of other members. We met some individuals who had attended last year.

Thursday May 15

The focus was **Neglected stories – first insights on Civil Society in Berlin**

We rose early to head to Berlin. We had to check out of the conference center residence, turn in keys and grab breakfast and pack a lunch if we so desired. We were served lots of fruits, yogurts, salads and vegetables. Lots of bread, scrambled and boiled eggs, cheese and processed meats were served in the conference center dining room every day. We had choices of one of two hot menu items.

The ride to Berlin featured a beautiful view of the countryside, small towns, quaint shops and cozy homes. Everything was quiet and clean. I was surprised to see close up the green and yellow fields of wheat and granola that I had seen from the airplane. There were strawberry and asparagus fields. I did not taste a bitter strawberry in Germany –all were so sweet. We were told that farm workers from Poland come in to do all of the farm work-work that the Germans prefer not to do.

Berlin is the capital city, Hamburg second largest city is followed by Munich, Frankfurt and Cologne.

The country roads were very narrow, no yellow lines. There were times when other large vehicles passed by, one or the other had to veer towards the edges of the road. Some folks, including me, were excited to finally get on the autobahn which we had heard so much about. It is their interstate or expressway with unlimited speed in designated sections.

We stopped at a truck and bus stop which featured a hot bar, souvenirs, pay bathrooms and a McDonald's.

When we arrived in Berlin we were scheduled for a Tour of the Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strabe, focusing on Mainstream history and the narrative of the Wall. Of course, we had seen Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen and Porsche office buildings but to see all the shiny, clean vehicles navigating the streets of downtown Berlin was impressive. There were no Japanese, Chinese or American made cars - no dented or used cars. We saw Mercedes, Porsche, BMW, Volkswagen with Germany names, of course. As we had seen in Hamburg, bikes were everywhere.

The tour of the remainder of the Wall was very interesting, the wind and weather was extremely chilly. There was an exhibit on the wall with pictures of several people including children who lost their lives in various ways trying to cross from the West to the East or vice versa. We saw the lines in the ground that showed where the wall existed as well as a church that was destroyed during the building of the wall.

From there we checked into our hotel and had dinner at the hotel. Our last session of the evening featured **Limited Perspective II – The story of the Wall and German division** told from an Eastern perspective with Heidi Brang. She spoke in German and Martin translated. She was six years old when the wall was built. As had been said many times previously, there was no warning. They woke up and there was a wall. Heidi studied romance languages and worked in publishing when she observed censorship in East Germany. There was a paper shortage for making books, but more paper was provided to the Soviet

Union. Writers were under paid, and the publishing houses were closed down. She and all employees in the East were laid off, no jobs in the West either. She made some money as a ghost translator but eventually ended up working in the medical field.

Hiedi mentioned that there was no opportunity for higher education. There were no left-handed students in Germany – all were converted. She lived close to the Wall and the check points near the embassy in Bonhomme 8. She said when the wall came down all the cars, bikes and vehicles were left sitting still and folks had gone to find and visit their family and friends that they had not seen in years. She turned the TV on to hear the news. She had to retire at 60 in 2022 when she reached the mandatory retirement age. She was not happy.

Aidi and Lidi's were staples, based in Germany, of course and we saw a store called T G or Q Maxx. It was in a food court in a mall in Berlin that we learned how to pay to use the restroom. There was a KFC, Burger King and McDonald's among the familiar fast foods that we saw. We found the best food were gyros served with beef or lamb.

Friday May 16

Part 4: Dialogue Concepts for the Future – Controversies and Silenced Topics

We started the morning by Debriefing the Living Library Experience.

Our second tour in Berlin was a Walk and Talk through Grolitzer Park, Maybachufer to Sonnenallee – addressing gentrification, racism & resistance with Beyza Yavuz-Radas. This was the best and most interesting tour. We saw more of the remnants of the Berlin Wall. We learned that the government has allowed privatization of the housing, which has created problems. Beyza showed us where she lived in an apartment that her grandparents rented for over sixty years. They were never given an opportunity for ownership. Now these unknown private owners are not taking care of the properties. She said that they allow the homeless to sleep in the lobby during the winter months. Housing is an issue especially for blacks and immigrants. When we got to the park she told us that it is safe in the daytime but no longer at night. Police brutality is an isolating issue especially for blacks. We saw a black man sleeping on a brick barrier. When we left the park there were police cars everywhere. We walked to a business district where she mentioned the influence of black music in the area. We thanked her and went in different directions to find lunch.

A group of us ended up at a restaurant owned by one of our German participant's cousins. They cleared a table for us upstairs and served us delicious food very quickly since we

were on a tight schedule. While we were eating there was a hailstorm. Lucky for us it ended, and the sun came out as we were leaving to join the rest of the group.

Next, we headed to public transportation to the German Islam Academy for **A Muslim Narrative on Dialogue and Civic Education. Conversation with the team of the Academy with Sumeyye Kilicasian-Khan & Pinar Cetin.** The presenters spoke about discrimination that the Islamic children and immigrants are experience in school and in the community. They also talked about the difficulties immigrants, especially Muslims experience getting visas.

In our group were Germans of Russian (Kazakhstan) and Turkish heritage, and persons from Nigeria and Cameroon. The GSI staffer from Cameroon who was participating in the program was great – fluent in German, French and English. He was very helpful and accompanied us on shopping and free time excursions. When I asked him if he had experienced racism or discrimination during his stay in Germany, he assured me he had. He told me one evening when he was walking home two older ladies called him a monkey and told him to go home. He lives in Hamburg but describes having trouble finding housing in another Germany city. He came to German to study languages and has two master's degrees.

Saturday May 17

Narratives for the Future – We had free time in Berlin on the morning of our last day in Germany. We gathered in the afternoon to reflect on our experience. We used all the tools that we had learned or used earlier, story circle, reflection group, written evaluations, an appreciation exercise and then we closed the circle. The German portion ended with a fabulous farewell dinner at a local restaurant. Our goodbyes were emotional and tearful.

Sunday May 18

Departure was early from Hamburg to Paris – Paris to Atlanta – to Mississippi or Philadelphia, PA. Everyone arrived home safely. We are all looking forward to meeting again in September for Part II in Jackson, MS and Philadelphia, PA.

My young seat mate on the flight from Hamburg to Paris was so nice that I told him he was going to change my mind about German people. He responded that Germany was not the best place to be right now. He works for Posche, has a PhD in AI – really? Headed to South Carolina for his first time in the US. Look out for a new electric car called Scout and a pickup truck also rolling out in 2028.

Thanks for your support and taking time to read this personal account! Let me know if you have any questions. I am attaching some of the pictures I took...the group took many, pictures.