

An Interview with Frances Ferris
What Life was like in Germany in the 1980's

By Amy Ferris

HIST 201

My Mom, The Interviewee

My name is Amy Ferris, and I wanted to choose an interviewee who had a colorful background, unique experiences, and was willing and able to answer questions and elaborate on their personal experiences in the past. I selected my mother, Frances Ferris (Fran), as she exceeds these qualifications and, in my opinion, has led a life full of interesting happenings. This interview with Fran is focused on a portion of her adult life when she lived in Germany during the 1980's. During this time, the internet did not exist, the Soviet Union was still intact, the Berlin Wall was still standing, and even though it had been around 35 years since its end- the second world war was still fresh in the minds of the German citizens and America's militaries. In essence, my American mother was allowed to live in Germany on three separate occasions because of war. I believe that gaining a positive outlook and having so many beautiful days spent in Germany is ironic because of that and makes for an engaging topic of discussion.

Leaving America for the First Time

Fran had just turned nineteen years old and had been recently married to my father. My father was new to the U.S. Army, and shortly after his initial training, he was stationed at an Army base in a place called Baumholder. April 1982 rolled around, and it was time for my mother to follow her husband to Germany. In my interview with her, I asked her, "Mom, did you know anything about Germany before you went?" To that she replied, "Not at all. The only thing I knew about Germany was where it was on the map."¹ You see, back in the 1980's, there was no such thing as "The Internet", and no one had cell phones to use it on anyway. If you have never gone without the assistance of the internet in a new place, imagine how scary and challenging that could be. Going all the way to Germany by yourself is certainly no small event, especially

¹ Frances Ferris (Entrepreneur) in discussion with author, February 2019.

when you've got no way to contact anyone or be guided by an online map. So, the day comes for my mom to fly out of Orlando, Florida. She told me that saying her goodbyes and taking care of all the things she had to do before she left (including finding a new home for her longtime pet cat, Mittens) made for an emotional time for everyone. Finally, she sat in her seat on the plane and looked out her small rounded window at her mother and her in-laws in the terminal, then looking back at her plane. As her plane started taxiing toward the runway, Fran saw her mother go faint and hit the floor.

Hello, Germany

Eleven hours later and seven time zones away, Fran landed in Frankfurt, Germany. Instead of taking in the new sights and smells, Fran had to find out what happened to her Mom. The only thing was, she had American money that she had to trade for Deutsch Marks, had to find a payphone to use, had to figure out how to use it, and had to factor in the time difference. With much effort and good timing, Fran finally got in touch with the family in Florida, and her mom was fine. With a weight off her chest, a couple of weeks later, she found herself in her rented basement apartment in Idar-Oberstein, Germany. Her husband was training and working, so he wasn't around to help her get accommodated. Fran didn't know any German, was still figuring out how to buy food and use German appliances, and the only people she knew were her German landlords and another American couple who rented in the same house. I asked my mom about those Americans, and she told me that "They stayed to themselves a lot and didn't go anywhere except work. My landlords, Fritz and Kayda called the husband "The Ox" because they didn't like him."² Despite Fritz' nickname for that American man, Fritz and Kayda ended up loving my mom, and took care of her like their own. So with the help of Fritz and Kayda, and

² Frances Ferris (Entrepreneur) in discussion with author, February 2019.

a woman named Annie who worked down the street, my mom started learning German and felt very welcome in Germany. Fran told me that the Germans called themselves “Our Host”, because we were there to help them, and they loved us Americans.

Political Climate In 1980’s Germany

Getting into the more official side of things, I asked my mom about the reason she was in Germany. Of course, since my father was a soldier, my mom had the choice to follow him to Germany while he worked. Since the end of World War II, the Army had stationed American soldiers there to prevent more war from breaking out from Germany, the surrounding countries, and the Soviet Union. Fran told me that during her walks around Idar-Oberstein, she saw scars from the war on the buildings in the form of bullet holes, and also saw “The Reichsadler”, (the eagle symbol of the Third Reich) made of stone with its face and swastika taken off. She told me that the Germans kept those marks there to show the Nazi Army’s defeat, and to never let repeat what happened.³ The Communist threat was still alive back then though, so I felt compelled to ask my mom what it felt like to be so close to the Soviet Union’s borders, knowing her husband would have to respond. She said, “I knew that at any given time, something could break out.”⁴ Luckily, the Soviet Union was soon to collapse, so things for the Americans and Germans alike were about to change.

And the Wall Came Down

It’s 1989 now, and my mom, dad and I are now living in another city in Germany called Stuttgart. Fran told me that for weeks before the wall fell, everyone was “gearing up” and getting ready to make a quick move if anything happened. No one was sure whether or not the Berlin Wall was going to be opened peacefully without a hitch, or if riots would break out and everyone

³ Frances Ferris (Entrepreneur) in discussion with author, February 2019.

⁴ Frances Ferris (Entrepreneur) in discussion with author, February 2019.

was going to go crazy. The Wall had been separating East and West Germany for almost 30 years, so it was difficult to predict how people would react. My mom told me that the Americans were looking forward to the new freedom for the Germans with the border opening, so the Air Force(s) threw an airshow in celebration. Unfortunately, this celebration became known as “The Ramstein Air Show Disaster” when a few planes crashed and landed on spectators, killing them and diverting attention away from the upcoming East/West border opening. Fran told me that it took away a lot of manpower as well, in taking care of the families affected, so staff and support were spread thin. Not even recouped from this tragedy yet, it was time for the opening of the border a couple weeks later. Ronald Reagan was the President at the time and had flown to Germany to appear on television for the event. I asked my mom what her and the other Americans she knew at the time were doing that day when it happened. She told me, “We were all mostly at home, watching our TV’s as it happened. When President Reagan said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”, all of us at the house went woah, he called him *mister!*”⁵ For the Germans and Americans, the wall opening was a slap in the face to the now-crumbling Soviet Union, and a new era in Germany had just been ushered in. Surprisingly to me, when my mom told me that when the wall opened up, the people there were walking calmly across, greeting each other and happily experiencing new freedom. In my life learning about that event, the media and the history books I learned from always made it seem like a chaotic and dangerous event to be at, but it wasn’t.

The Happiest of Days

All in all, after my family’s third time being stationed in Germany, my mom ended up leaving a big part of her heart there. Fran experienced a lot of intriguing aspects of Germany as

⁵ Frances Ferris (Entrepreneur) in discussion with author, February 2019.

the 80's passed into the 90's, especially since life in Germany seemed to move a lot slower than it did in America back then. Even though the reason she lived there wasn't necessarily a happy one, Germany became her home away from home. As she recalled to me her memories and experiences, her tone about Germany and its people was always a bright one. Much like many other Americans who were stationed there in the 1980's, Fran looks back on a sometimes turbulent but always vibrant past in the country.