

**‘I GOT YOUR LETTER TODAY’
A GERMAN-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP AND A GLIMPSE
INTO THE LATE 1950s**

Dutch writer and editor Ian Buruma has written a number of books. Many concern themselves with Asia, but at least two of his works deal with Germany and World War II. Of particular relevance here is *Their Promised Land: My Grandparents in Love and War* (2016)¹, in which Buruma relates the story of the loving and long-lasting marriage of his maternal grandparents as it plays itself out between the two world wars. Buruma draws on thousands of letters written by his grandparents to create an intimate biographical narrative set against the larger issues of class and race as well as national and cultural identity which emerge when countries go to war.

There are, of course, many personal stories behind the large events of history, but it is relatively rare that they can be told in a meaningful way. The essay which follows here is the product of a serendipitous coincidence which permits some insight into the life of two young women, one German and one American, growing up amidst the often tumultuous and frequently momentous events of the second half of the twentieth century.

The story to be told here is drawn from the many letters which Donna Goodwine in rural Indiana and Ursula Spann in Bremen exchanged between 1956 and 1998. Written from the limited and sometimes naïve perspective of two young women who were high school students when they “met” in 1956, the letters are full of youthful enthusiasm and energy, curiosity, and a willingness to understand one another’s culture. They nevertheless also convey interesting insights into cultural developments on both sides of the Atlantic, race relations, technology, and Cold War politics.²

Taken together the letters between Donna and Ursula offer a unique testament to a German-American friendship which would eventually outlive the initial protagonists. Following Buruma’s approach of interweaving information from his documents with the historical events, this essay explores Donna’s and Ursula’s early letters written between June 9, 1956 and January 24, 1958. and personal experiences and recollections, this essay explores Donna’s and Ursula’s early letters written between June 9, 1956 and January 24, 1958.

Donna Kay Goodwine (married Orr) was born September 13, 1938, and spent almost her entire life in Ambia, a small settlement in rural southwest Indiana. As she coyly admitted in her first letter, “I live in a small town of about 65 people, if that many. . . . We raise chickens and turkeys.”³ Her German pen friend, Ursula Ingeborg Spann, was born on June 9, 1939, in Stettin (today: Szczecin, Poland) located in Pomerania near the Baltic Sea coast and came to Bremen at the end of World War II. Bremen is an old Hanseatic League city and famous for the Brothers Grimm’s fairytale of the “Bremen Town Musicians.” One of the first pictures Ursula sent of her city was of the statue of the Town Musicians. Since 1945 Bremen has been both a city and, together with its port of Bremerhaven, a federal state located in northwestern Germany. Coincidentally it was also the port of departure for many German immigrants to the United States and the port of entry for many American GIs stationed in Germany after 1945. One of those soldiers was Donna’s cousin, whose wife could not read German and erroneously took a train from Bremerhaven to the East German border rather than taking the one to meet her husband at his base in southern Germany.⁴ The most prominent GI to enter Germany via Bremen, however, was none other than Elvis Presley in late 1958.

In the 1950s lists of potential pen friends were a rather common sight at American high schools and West German *Oberschulen* (literally: high schools) and *Gymnasien* (the upper tier of the three-part German school system which qualifies students for university studies). High school students on both sides of the Atlantic learning about each other and becoming friends on an individual and personal level thus paralleled and complemented the western integration of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) after the onset of the Cold War, the founding of the new West German Army and acceptance into NATO. In 1956, seventeen-year-old Donna was finishing her junior year in high school when she decided to write to a German girl of approximately the same age at the *Oberschule* an der Helgolander Strasse in Bremen. Initially, she had no idea whether Ursula would even respond or that ultimately she would eagerly await every one of Ursula’s letters for the rest of her life.

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE FRIENDSHIP

Donna's and Ursula's letters from 1956 to 1958 document a period of "getting to know each other" in which both ask, answer, and sometimes ignore, questions about a variety of topics. Both girls loved to travel and see the sights. Donna took her senior trip to Washington D.C. and New York City and later also visited the same cities as well as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh on a trip sponsored by a meatpacking company. Of all the exciting things she saw, Donna was most impressed with the Statue of Liberty. Ursula learned about the Statue of Liberty from her English teacher who spent several years in the United States. "He thought that he would be rich in America, that he would find the \$ in the street. But then he saw that a man who wanted to be rich have to work hardly [sic] in each country."⁵ Donna agreed that one has to work hard in every country and then took the issue of making a living and being a productive citizen a step further. "America has a lot of slums, just because people come over here and think that they do not have to work, and their fore have to learn the hard way that you have to work to make a living. ... Most of the people who live in the slums drink a lot of beer and wine etc. Most of them do not go to church either. Do you have slums in Germany too."⁶

Ursula left that question unanswered, but she certainly also liked to travel. She would even put off marriage in favor of travel: "For the first 5 years I do not think of marriage, in the time I will travel. Than if I have married I cannot do it."⁷ She usually visited relatives in Hannover, Berlin, Frankfurt, and East Germany. One of her postcards is from Amsterdam, which she liked so much that she vowed to return soon.⁸

As with most teenagers, both girls enjoyed life, leisure, and parties. On her senior trip to New York City, Donna "took a crose on the river and dined and danced in the moonlight. We also stopped at an amusement park and I took my first ride on a roll-a-coster."⁹ Back at home, Donna's friends surprised her with an impromptu outing after Sunday school. "They took their cars out and picked up members of the class, just the way they were. I had been washing windows and had spilled cleaner all over me. Then I went in and took off my shoes. They wouldn't let me change at all. So I went dirty shirt and face and just one shoe. We really had fun."¹⁰

Ursula did not have ready access to cars because the German rise of a car culture with the unprecedented ascendancy of the Volkswagen Beetle had not quite yet begun,¹¹ but she got around by bicycle, train, and ferryboat and knew how to have fun too. “We drove with a steamer to Vegesack (a suburb of Bremen) and there we danced the whole night till 3 o’clock in the morning.”¹² And by November she was already preparing her ball dress for the New Years’ Eve celebrations.¹³

Of course, the biggest celebration in both Germany and the United States is Christmas. In their letters from late 1956 Donna and Ursula described a mix of pagan and Christian traditions and customs practiced in their respective countries. Donna gave her German friend an impression of a traditional American Christmas still free of today’s consumerism and focused on the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, going to church, one present for each family member, and turkey dinner.¹⁴

For Ursula, too, the joy of Christmastime is exemplified by families getting together, sharing of food, and preparing for the arrival of Jesus. She explained that Christmas season in Germany begins with the lighting of the first candle of Advent four weeks before Christmas and truly kicks into high gear with the festival of St. Nicholas, the German model for the American Santa Claus, on December 6 and 7. Ursula then shared a unique Bremen tradition:

The 6th December is an especially day for the Bremen children. They disguise themselves like old men, women, angels, robbers, hunters, clowns and so on, than they fetch a little sack and a very thick stick. In this disguise they walk to each shop singing their little songs and knocking with their sticks on the floor till the shop owner has given them a biscuit, an apple, some nuts or another thing for eating.

This walking to each shop was for many, many years only the right of the poor Bremen fishing children. But today all children do it.¹⁵

The “Nikolauslaufen” (St. Nicholas Walk) goes back to a medieval practice when on the day of St. Nicholas, a figure most likely based on a fourth-century bishop and the patron saint of mariners, merchants, and children, students of the Bremen Cathedral school collected food and small presents for the poor. Over time a city like Bremen, whose livelihood depended largely on its port, developed the custom into a sharing of

food items between those who profited most from the port's trade, the rich merchants, and the less fortunate fishermen. Today it has not only become another welcome opportunity for children to collect candy, it is also encouraged by the Bremen Tourism Bureau.¹⁶

The following day, December 7, Bremen citizens left their shoes outside of their doors so St. Nicholas could fill them with nuts and sweets. "But," Ursula warned, "Saint Nicholas puts this things only in shoes which are cleaned." Moreover, "On his back he carries a big sack filled with presents, and in his hand is a very big rod for children who are not good."¹⁷

While the "Nikolauslaufen" is only practiced in Bremen, St. Nicholas filling people's shoes, rewarding the good, and punishing the wicked is a tradition celebrated in most other northern German cities on December 6. In many Westphalian towns, St. Nicholas and his assistant *Knecht Ruprecht* (Farm Hand Ruprecht) usually ride to the market square when it is getting dark. St. Nicholas carries a large bag of candy and other goodies and a big book. His helper is usually dressed in rags and menacingly wields a bundle of twigs or *Rute*. Both men take center stage and St. Nicholas holds a speech extolling the virtues of sharing, good behavior, and following the rules. His speech commences with a consultation of the big book and the reading of the names of those children who have behaved in an exemplary fashion. They are rewarded with presents from his sack. The final chapter of the book, however, contains the names of those who have misbehaved. Their names are also read aloud before they are handed over to *Knecht Ruprecht* for a symbolic beating with the *Rute*. After the ceremony, everyone goes home to find the shoes which had been left outside filled with chocolates, nuts, fruit, or other treats.

The high point of the Christmas season for most Germans, including Ursula, is on Christmas Eve. Ursula described her family tradition:

On 24th December we have Christmas. Mother trims the fir tree with candles, lametta, fir cones and glass balls. . . . After the fir tree has been trimmed and the little crib [cradle] is standing below it, she puts on the table presents for each of us. After this she calls us and we enter the living room with a promising heart every year again. Each of us is happy about his presents and those which we have given another and are full of joy when we see that they pleased them.¹⁸

It seems that giving gifts was as important as receiving them in Ursula's family. But she also explained other German practices. "Other families trim the fir-tree with sugar things and nuts. We do not make it again. We also have done it but we returned soon to our old system of paper plates filled with this things," because "when we had trimmed our tree with sugar things my mother, sister, and I did not get our part because my father and my brother have for such things a larger stomach."¹⁹ The latter statement not only proves Ursula's fine sense of humor, it perhaps also reflects the Bremen citizens' attitude toward sharing and community.

Life for Donna and Ursula, however, was not all fun, travel, games, and celebrations. As Donna realized after throwing a New Years' Eve Party, where some drank alcohol and all stayed up to "see the sun raise for the first time in the new year, as a farm girl there are chores to be done no matter what you did the night before."²⁰ Those labors included hoeing the family garden, an activity that gave her "sore hands and a tired back."²¹ Indeed, her daily routines were rather grueling, and, of course, confirmed her belief that people had to work hard to make a living and not end up in the slums:

I get up about 6:00 A.M. and do my chores. My chores are feeding my calves. One of them is really good. His grandfather won the international breeding show two years ago. I raise calves to show in livestock shows. I hope to win a nice price. I'm really proud of him. Then, I go to the house and eat breakfast and get ready for school. The school bus picks me up and I ride for almost an hour. I attend school from 8 to 3:30 I get home about 4:30. You see, I live 12 miles from school. A school bus goes around and picks up the kids and takes them to school. It takes a little time to go to all of them. When I get home I again do my chores. Then I go to work. I do the cooking and house cleaning and ironing for a neighbor. I work till about 8:30. If I want to go someplace at night, I just do my work ahead. When I get home I do my homework or watch Television.²²

Apart from the differences between rural Indiana and urban Bremen, German students would not recognize much of Donna's schedule. German students often had to rely on public transportation and the few available school buses usually picked up and dropped off students at a few central locations rather than ferrying them all the way from their homes to school and back. This author's own experience is likely typical: I walked about a mile to the train station in my hometown where I caught

the school bus to the train station in the town with the *Gymnasium*, then I walked another half mile to the school, doing the reverse in the afternoon. If I missed the school bus, or the bus was full, I could hop on the public bus following within a few minutes. Until recently, when lunch and afterschool programs became mandatory, German schools ended around one o'clock in the afternoon, if not earlier. With a few exceptions, German students would not work when school was in session but made extra money working during spring and summer vacations. German students thus had most of their afternoons and evenings for homework and leisure activities.

Donna graduated from high school on May 22, 1957. Only two weeks later she began working in a nearby factory to put herself through college. Ever the serious and responsible person, she noted, "My folks could pay but, they have three other children at home and I believe that I can earn enough to pay my own way, any way I hope so."²³

Ursula's early letters, on the other hand, did not reveal much about her school or work. She was well aware that she had a lot more time to write because she "did not have to help at home. Well at evenings I have some courses but it is always voluntary."²⁴ She is likely referring to evening classes she took at adult evening school (*Volkshochschule*), a municipal-run educational system somewhat comparable to community education or university extension classes in the United States. The curriculum typically included a wide variety of offerings from English and music lessons to typing and chess.

In the fall of 1957 Donna began her studies at Indiana State Teachers College majoring in Home Economics.²⁵ In an October letter proudly written on Indiana State stationery, Donna gave her German friend a glimpse into American college life:

At 6:30 I get up, dress & eat breakfast. 7:30 I go to school. 8:00 I have a government class. 9:00 I have a Home Economics one on marriage and one on career. At 10:00 I have Physical Education. In this class we play sports. At 11:00 to 12:00 I work at a drugstore for spending money. 1:00 I study, 2:00 I have an English class, and at 3:00 I have a mathematics class. From 4 to 5 I also study. At 5:30 I ride home and eat supper. Then from 6:00 to 8:00 I work doing housework etc. From 8:00 on I can do as I please, I usually study. My parents didn't want me to work quite as hard, but I believe it is worth it for an education.²⁶

Donna was not only keeping very busy, she also had a dedication to her studies one rarely finds in modern college students. From her schedule it is evident that Donna was taking her general education courses. In Germany, college students would have taken most of their general education courses already in their thirteenth year at the Gymnasium and would specialize in their major a lot earlier in their university studies.²⁷

As one would expect from a farm girl like Donna, she had “a soft place in her heart for pets.”²⁸ In addition to the thousands of chickens and turkeys on their farm, Donna personally raised two calves and her family owned five cats and two dogs. Ursula, too, liked animals and had a dog of her own.²⁹ While on vacation in East Germany, she had disappointing shopping experiences, but she enjoyed animals and the outdoors, “The woods and the seas it was an experience. Each day I walked with *Strolch* (a dog) [the name translates to “Tramp”] and my brother through the woods or I went with my cousin hunting.”³⁰

Of course, letters written by two teenage girls would inevitably turn to dating, engagement, and marriage. Once again Donna was more forthcoming. “I am just like any teen ager, I want to know all about how the teen-agers date in Germany. Where you go and what you do? What do you think is an ideal boy, or what kind of boy do you want?”³¹ Although she never described her own boyfriend, David Orr, with whom she had been going steady for two years, or revealed why she liked him, she certainly had some ideals. Among the gifts she received for Christmas 1956 was “the beginning of my pan set for my hope-chest. That is a chest that the girls have and put things in for there future home.”³² She ultimately expected to share that future home with her David, but not until she finished college. “I think there is plenty of time to get married after I get out of school. Don’t you think,”³³ she asked her pen friend. She changed her mind, however, in late 1957, when David asked her to marry her and offered a beautiful homestead, “I got engaged the 27th of December. I hope to be married the 7th of September. My fiancé has rented a farm. It has a lovely house on it. It is white with green shutters, a large green lawn with pine trees bordering it on one side and behind the house. It sits back off of a high way. Of course I can hardly wait until September.”³⁴

Being shy may be somewhat of a German trait, but Ursula was a lot more reluctant to divulge any information about her love life. She com-

pletely ignored Donna's initial questions about dating. Only once did she state that she would rather travel than get married in the near future. She also engages Donna in a long legal discussion of marriage laws in their respective countries. Only when Donna directly asked her if she had a boyfriend, she casually dismissed the idea. "Yes, I also have my girl and boy friends like you, but if some-body would ask me to marry him I would laugh about him."³⁵

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Donna began her college studies in the fall of 1957, another American teenager, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, was just as excited about starting her classes at Little Rock Central High School. As she remembered, "I rode the bus to school, I felt that I was being transported to a whole new world. With each inch that I moved closer, my dreams soared higher. Little did I know that I would soon be entering a cauldron of fire."³⁶ She, and the other eight members of the "Little Rock Nine," were African American students selected by the school district to attend the all-white Central High School to comply with the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional. But the students were turned away by the Arkansas National Guard on orders of Democratic Governor Orval Faubus allegedly to prevent violence and disorder. President Dwight D. Eisenhower responded by sending in the 101st Airborne Division and federalizing the National Guard to uphold the law and protect the "Nine," who finally began their first day of classes on September 25, 1957. They finished the school year despite ongoing physical and verbal harassment from fellow students and indifference at best from most school staff. Governor Faubus kept Little Rock schools closed to avoid desegregation in 1958.

The turbulent times in Little Rock were preceded by Martin Luther King Jr.'s rise to prominence in the Civil Rights Movement during the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of 1955/56 and the demonstrations and sit-ins in American cities that made national and international headlines. Thus Ursula candidly queried her new friend for first-hand information and opinions. "Donna, will you write me how do you think about the black man problem?"³⁷ Donna's answer promptly arrived in her next letter:

I just got back from a week at Purdue and there was a negroe in my class. She was just part of the group. Right in this part of this country

we live with the negroes just like we do with part of our family. In parts of the country, however, they don't like the negroes. In Indiana a all negro team won the state championship. We of Indiana are very proud of them. My self I like the negroes. However, I wouldn't marry one. Some people think the negroes are bad, but I know a lot of negroes that are a lot better people than people of my own race.³⁸

Donna is honest about her feelings about African Americans, but living in the Indiana countryside where, according to the 2000 census, still almost 90 percent of the population identified as white,³⁹ she was probably not as exposed to African Americans as she wanted her friend to believe. Her admiration for the all black basketball team, however, conceals a darker side of Indiana history. The Crispus Attucks High School Tigers featuring future Hall of Famer Oscar Robertson and two other players who would later join the Harlem Globetrotters indeed won back-to-back state championships in 1955 and 1956 and became an attraction in the basketball-crazy state. But founding Crispus Attucks High School, a segregated all-black institution in Indianapolis, was the brainchild of Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson and other Klan members who dominated Indiana politics in the 1920s. The Tigers were prevented from competing against other Indianapolis high schools until 1933 and thereafter played only road games because their own, "separate but equal," gym was too small. They thus became a traveling circus act, a regional, junior varsity version of the Harlem Globetrotters, yet the prejudice and racism they must have encountered on a daily basis is unimaginable. The uniforms of Oscar Robertson and his ground-breaking teammates at Crispus Attucks were retired only in 2009.⁴⁰

Having stated her opinion about African Americans and inclusion, Donna put the ball right back into Ursula's court, to stay with the basketball metaphor. "Now I am looking forward to see what you think of the problem."⁴¹ Ursula did not pick up that ball, but she must have been aware of Germany's own problems of integration. As a citizen of Bremen, she must have noticed the black GIs coming through Bremerhaven on their way to American bases in southern Germany where the local population often looked with suspicion and contempt at German women who dated, married, or worse, had children with them, while the mixed offspring of such relations faced considerable obstacles in an almost all-white society. Dating back to its colonial history in the late nineteenth

century, Germany continued to harbor prejudice against “darker” people which often manifested itself in apparently harmless and inconspicuous games, children’s songs, or popular candy. There was, for example, a children’s game called “Who Is Afraid of the Black Man?,” where the players would have to run away from the “bad” player, the black man, who was supposed to scare and catch them. Then there was “10 kleine Negerlein (10 Little Negros),” the German version of America’s “10 Little Injuns” in which all ten characters would eventually be killed or otherwise disappeared, a song which kindergarten and elementary school children sang on a regular basis into the 1980s. And for sure no child growing up in Germany between the 1950s and 1980s would forget the delicious chocolate-covered marshmallows known as “Negro Kisses”.

As a refugee from Pomerania, Ursula certainly knew about West Germany’s problems with the integration of the approximately twelve million Germans who fled or were expelled from central and eastern Europe at the end of World War II or shortly thereafter. While some West Germans welcomed these refugees as an additional workforce to rebuild the country, others were suspicious of these Easterners and saw them as competitors for food, housing, and other scarce resources in an utterly devastated economy. To compound the problems, many of these “foreigners” and their interest groups loudly demanded revenge, the return of their homelands, and restitution for the injustices and suffering they had endured at the hands of Poles, Russians, Romanians, Czechs, and other eastern European people. Their irreconcilable attitude often jeopardized western integration of the Federal Republic of Germany, continued to undermine efforts at reconciliation and normalization between East and West, and generally stoked the animosities of the Cold War and thereafter.

Ursula’s letters give voice to her strong opinions about leaving Pomerania and the loss of other German territories lost after World War II. When Donna asked about the divided Germany she was studying in her Government class,⁴¹ Ursula willingly obliged:

After the kapitulation 1945 the representatives of U.S.A., Great Britain, Russia chosed to divide Germany. In operation of the ‘Potsdammer Agreement’ tears today two boundaries lines in my country. First the ‘Oder-Neisse Line’ and second the ‘Iron Curtain’ which divide the ‘Sowjet-Zone’ from the “Western Germany.’ In opposition to the ‘Potsdammer Agreement’ that put the regions east-

ern of the Oder and Neisse only for management [double underlined in the original] to the Sowjet Union or Poland, millions of German people had to leave Ostpreussen, Pommern, Ostbrandenburg and Schlesien [Eastern Prussia, Pomerania, Eastern Brandenburg, and Silesia]. I come from Pommern. I also had to leave my home in Stettin. Two months ago a cousin was with her husband in the Sowjet-Union at the Oder-Neisse Line. They could see our house but they could not go to it. ... We had a sewing machine in Berlin and wanted to have it sent to Bremen. So my father drove to Berlin and took it away. But at the limit [border] he had to run with it like a common thief though it was our own. ... My Grandmother who lived in Berlin wanted to move to Hannover to one of her daughters. But she did not get the approval of the Sowjet Union. So she took an aeroplane one day and moved to Hannover. In the end she never may enter the Sowjet Union though it is German land. Now I hope you can understand me when I write you that we shall not rest till our fatherland is united.⁴³

Ursula's history lesson is essentially correct but requires explanation. By 1949, the two boundaries, Churchill's Iron Curtain along the Elbe River in the West and the line along the Oder and Neisse Rivers in the East had become the borders of the newly founded German Democratic Republic (East Germany) that emerged from the former Soviet occupation zone. In the meantime, the western Allies had unified their occupation zones and allowed for the founding of West Germany. The city of Berlin under a special statute remained divided into four Allied occupation sectors with the Soviet sector becoming the capital of East Germany. Travel between the different sectors of Berlin and the two German states was still possible until the building of the wall in 1961 but discouraged and often hindered by the Soviet and East German authorities, as Ursula reported in the letter cited above and several other letters.

According to the agreement reached between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union at the Potsdam Conference of 1945, the former German territories east of the Oder-Neisse Line had indeed gone to Poland and the Soviet Union for administrative purposes. The verbiage was chosen to indicate that a permanent settlement of the border issues was subject to a formal peace treaty, but German refugees from these territories (like Ursula and her family) and their interest groups continued to interpret the decision as temporary and reversible. They certainly didn't acknowledge any relinquishment of their legal claims to

property they had left behind at the end of the war. While West and East Germany would eventually recognize the status quo in a basic treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) signed in 1973, refugee organizations continued to oppose any agreement. The issue would ultimately be settled only by the so-called 4 + 2 Agreement of 1990, whereby the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France (the 4) allowed the reunification of the two Germanys (the 2) with Berlin as the capital in exchange for recognition of the Oder-Neisse Line as the newly created country's eastern border. A united Germany renounced all claims to former German territories east of the new eastern border and paid the disintegrating Soviet Union a considerable amount of money in compensation for the lost territories.

Despite the increasing division between the two German states and the chicaneries of the Communist government in the 1950s, West Germans continued to visit their relatives in East Germany. In a letter dated June 25, 1957, Ursula informed her friend that she and her brother would spend three weeks with a cousin in East Germany. She even provided a detailed, hand-drawn map of her upcoming trip from Bremen to a small place called Demming located approximately half way between Berlin and the Baltic Sea.⁴⁴ Ursula's announcement prompted a logical question from Donna. "What are the differences between living in East Germany and West Germany? I have heard there is quite a difference in your freedoms."⁴⁵ Having gained some first-hand experience in East Germany, Ursula explained the differences in another long letter:

I only can say that is a difference like day and night. Here I shall give you a little report of going shopping in West and East Germany. In West Germany I enter a shop and can say to the seller, '100 envelopes, please!' then he would ask me, 'what kind do you want to have? Those or those!' And then he shows me many sets of envelopes and I can choose the envelopes which I like.

My experience by going shopping envelopes in East Germany: Well I went into a shop and said to the seller, '10 envelopes, please!'

The seller gave me five. I said to him, 'I want to have 10 envelopes, not 5.' He looked up to me and then he said, 'Should be glad that you have received 5, the other shops of the town have nothing. The last delivery doesn't arrive.' I left the shop with 5 envelopes.

When I told my Cousine, she laughed and said, 'don't mind, this you will have often,' and it was really so. If I wanted to buy sausage, or

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fruits, or tomatos or only a thimble. Mostly the sellers said, ‘Sorry, but the last delivery doesn’t arrive.’ I only thought poor, poor people who have to spend their life in a land in which nobody can buy the things he likes.⁴⁶

Many who had fled to the West but returned to visit relatives in this time period, including this author, recall similar experiences. Decades later scholars would point out that the lack of consumer goods and the failure to respond to the basic needs of the population significantly contributed to the fall of Communism and the end of East Germany and the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

Ursula clearly explained the economic disparity between the two political systems, but not what it was like to live under a government that did not believe in individual rights and personal freedoms, spied on its own population, and uncritically followed all directives from the Soviet Union. By 1956, however, the people in another Soviet-controlled satellite country, Hungary, dared to rise against their puppet government and demand a series of democratic reforms that would have essentially dismantled the entire Communist system. According to Donna, “America is praying for them [the Hungarians]”⁴⁸ to succeed, but the Hungarian people’s hopes for direct Western intervention quickly vanished when their uprising was suppressed by Soviet military power, causing many of the brightest and most ambitious Hungarians to flee to the West. The ambition and work ethic of the Hungarian refugees was not lost on Donna. On January 2, 1957, she wrote:

I had quite a thrill last week. I know some people that are bringing some Hungarians into their homes. The father of the family will work as a hired hand on the farm until he can get a better job somewhere. The churches are bringing so many families into there community. The members of the community take them into their homes. A lot of people say there are enough people in the USA. However I believe that they have as much right to be here as we do. After all, all white Americans have foreign heritage.⁴⁹

With Communist orthodoxy forcibly restored in Hungary in 1956, the following year opened a new frontier in the Cold War, space. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union successfully launched the world’s first satellite, Sputnik, into orbit around the Earth. News of the event surprised Americans and their Allies because it demonstrated the Soviet capability in

using space not only to gather intelligence but also to deliver nuclear warheads to the United States. Ursula and Donna, nonetheless, saw the launch of the Sputniks not as a military threat or “shock” but as an exciting and curious scientific achievement, as the following conversation indicates:

How do you think about the ‘Soviet Sputniks.’ In each New-Paper you will find a report. I find it very interesting though & nobody has seen them. Some people mean the Sputniks are chimeras like the ‘Flying saucers.’ And what is the meaning about the Sputniks in America and your College? Please write me about it.⁵⁰

Donna’s opinion followed promptly:

You ask about the ‘Sputniks.’ Well, in the town in which I now live the Sputniks passed over every 24 hrs. I saw what I believe was the Sputnik. The United States now is working on one. They hope to have it completed before long. When Russia sent the dog up we listened to the heart beat of the dog over radio. So the Sputniks are real. On the college campus the students talk a lot about it.⁵¹

Donna is referring to Laika, the dog launched with Sputnik 2 on November 3, 1957, as proof for the existence of the Sputniks. Laika’s heartbeat was indeed monitored by medical sensors and transmitted via radio, but the dog lovers Donna and Ursula might have been disappointed if they had learned that Laika actually only lived for five to seven hours, as post-Cold War Russian scientists would reveal much later.⁵² Donna also asserted that the United States was developing its own satellite. That was Explorer I launched in 1958. It had been designed by Wernher von Braun, the German immigrant engineer who had been in charge of the German V2 missile program in World War II. In the same year President Eisenhower signed legislation to create NASA and other programs that would eventually bring American ascendancy in the space race.

Donna was listening to Laika’s heartbeat on the dominant information technology of the time on both sides of the Atlantic, radio. She was especially proud of a clock radio her boyfriend David gave her for Christmas 1956. “It turns off at night automatically and it comes on in the morning to wake me up. There is a clock on the front and I can see what time it is any time in the night.”⁵³ In the 1950s, however, television exploded onto the American scene and by 1957 there were about forty

million households in the United States tuning their new television sets to CBS, ABC, and NBC. Donna explained, “You see, Television has taken over the country. Do you have much Television in your country. About ever body has Television in America.” Donna not only believed that TV had a positive impact on society, “Now the people are staying home and having more family life together,” she also pointed out another welcome side effect, “We watch Television and they act out a lot of good books over it, so I learn whats in books the lazy way.”⁵⁴ Donna even became a TV star herself when the local station broadcast her high school cheer-leading routine.⁵⁵

At the same time German television was still in its infancy. Therefore it is no surprise that Ursula never mentioned it in her letters. Although regional German networks had been established under the auspices of the occupation powers in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a coordinated national schedule was first established only in 1954. That year there were 11,658 registered TV owners, but by 1958 the number of registered viewers had skyrocketed to over 1.2 million, and a second national channel was started in April 1963.⁵⁶ But up to the proliferation of private television in the late 1980s, there were still only the two main national channels plus one, and on days with especially good reception, two regional channels broadcasting from early afternoon to little after midnight.

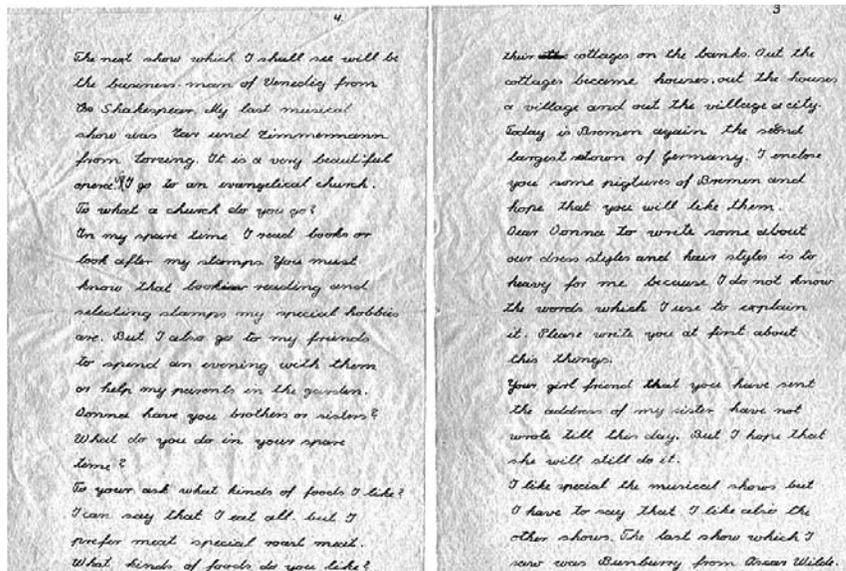
THE FRIENDSHIP BLOSSOMS

On June 25, 1957, Ursula asked a question which elevated the fledgling friendship to another level. “Have you not any vacation to come to Germany for 2 to 3 months in the next year?”⁵⁷ Donna declined the invitation because she had to go to college, but in turn she invited Ursula, “I would love for you to come over and visit me. . . . We could take a car and go on sight-seeing journeys.”⁵⁸ This time it was Ursula who declined because she did not have the money, but she remained hopeful, “Surely you visit me later if you have finished your study.”⁵⁹

Donna Kay Goodwine and Ursula Ingeborg Spann would make increasingly concrete plans to visit each other throughout their subsequent correspondence. Ursula even dreamed about emigration to the United States. But it was not until 1988 that they finally met in person

when Ursula visited Donna in Indiana. Unfortunately, they could only enjoy their increasingly close friendship for another decade, as Donna passed away in 1998. But Donna's husband, David, and his second wife continued to write to Ursula until their deaths in the second decade of the current century. In the meantime, all three passed the torch to their children and grandchildren, who continue to write and visit each other. Ursula, who has collected all of their letters in three thick German document folders, still lives in Bremen. Her daughter has made Ursula's dream of living in the United States a reality for herself, and it is through her that the letters which document the remarkable friendship of two young women on opposite sides of the Atlantic have been made available and enabled this essay.

— Helmut Langerbein
Southern Arkansas University



TWO PAGES OF A LETTER FROM URSULA TO DONNA
JUNE 9, 1956



DONNA
COURTESY HER DAUGHTER
DIANA SCHROEDER

FIRST FACE-TO-FACE MEETING
BEEF HOUSE RESTAURANT
COVINGTON, INDIANA
1988
COURTESY URSULA'S DAUGHTER
BEATE SCHUEPPEL



URSULA
COURTESY
URSULA SPANN ANDERS

NOTES

1. Ian Buruma, *Their Promised Land: My Grandparents in Love and War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).
2. I obtained scanned copies of the letters by coincidence when one of my colleagues at Southern Arkansas University met Ursula Spann's daughter at a horse show in the United States.
3. Donna's letter dated June 9, 1956. I will use the writer's first name and abbreviated dates in all future references.
According to the US Census of 2010, Ambia's population had mushroomed to 239.
4. Donna, 06/07/57.
5. Ursula, 07/06/56. All quotes are as they appear in the letters. For the sake of authenticity, I have largely refrained from pointing out errors and mistakes with the customary [sic].
6. Donna, 07/30/56.
7. Ursula, 06/25/57.
8. Ursula, 10/07/56.
9. Donna, 06/09/56.
10. Donna, 09/30/57.
11. See Bernhard Rieger, *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
12. Ursula, 07/06/56.
13. Ursula, 11/10/57.
14. Donna, 12/10/56.
15. Ursula, 12/28/56
16. Kaya Leimann, "Nikolauslaufen durch die Stadtteile," *Weserkurier*, December, 5, 2011. https://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/stadtteile_artikel,-Nikolauslaufen-durch-die-Stadtteile-_arid,414810.html. Accessed February 12, 2018.
17. Ursula, 12/28/56.
18. *ibid.*
19. *ibid.*
20. Donna, 01/02/57.
21. Donna, 06/09/56.
22. Donna, 02/25/57.
23. Donna, 06/07/57.
24. Ursula, 11/10/57.
25. Currently Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana. Indiana State University was named Indiana State Teachers College from 1929 to 1961.
26. Donna, 10/10/57.
27. Recent reforms in most German states have reduced Gymnasium education to twelve years although some are already contemplating a return to the old system. German universities have eliminated their traditional Magister programs of study (roughly equivalent to a combined American bachelor's and master's degree) and fully adopted the American bachelor's and master's system.
28. Donna, 09/30/56.
29. Ursula, 10/14/56.
30. Ursula, 08/23/57.
31. Donna, 07/30/56.
32. Donna, 01/02/57.
33. Donna, 06/07/57.
34. Donna, 01/24/58.
35. Ursula, 06/25/57.
36. Quoted in Cynthia Howell, "Eckford returns to '57 in book," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, January 10, 2018, B 1.
37. Ursula, 07/06/56.

I GOT YOUR LETTER, NOTES

38. Donna, 07/30/56.
39. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambia,_Indiana. Accessed December 20, 2017.
40. Wayne Drehs, "The Forgotten Hoosiers," ESPN.com, February 26, 2009.
<http://www.espn.com/espn/blackhistory2009/news/story?id=3932017>. Accessed January 15, 2018.
41. Donna, 07/30/56.
42. *ibid.*
43. Ursula, 10/14/56.
44. Ursula, 06/25/57.
45. Donna, 07/16/57.
46. Ursula, 08/23/57.
47. See for example Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2011). In Chapter 5, he identifies the "Jeans Genie" and consumption as important factors in the victory of the West in the Cold War.
48. Donna, 11/27/56.
49. Donna, 01/02/57.
50. Ursula, 11/10/57.
51. Donna, 01/24/58.
52. David Whitehouse, "First Dog in Space Died Within Hours," *BBC News World Edition*, October 28, 2002.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2367681.stm>. Accessed January 27, 2018.
53. Donna, 01/02/57.
54. Donna, 07/30/56.
55. Donna, 09/30/56.
56. Under a controversial media law, Germans still have to register and pay for public television and radio even if they do not own radios or televisions. The following article summarizes the law and points out the few legal exceptions to the rule. Jasmin Pospiech, "So befreien Sie sich legal von der Rundfunkgebühr [How to legally free yourself from Radio and TV Fees]," *Merkur.de*.
<https://www.merkur.de/leben/geld/befreien-sich-legal-rundfunkgebuehr-zr-8124475.html>. Accessed March 31, 2018.
- The information about the origins of West German television is from Knut Hickethier, *Geschichte des deutschen Fernsehens* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1998), Chapters 4, 6.
57. Ursula, 06/25/57.
58. Donna, 07/16/57.
59. Ursula, 08/23/57.