An Intentional Tourist

Ohio University’s first foreign-exchange student to post-World War II Germany: Frederick Schwartzman, 1954/1955

Born in 1934 in New York City, Frederick Schwartzman is a 1956 graduate of Ohio University’s College of Arts & Sciences. In 1954, just nine years after VE Day marking the end of the war in Europe, he became OHIO’s first post-World War II foreign exchange student to Germany, attending the Westfälische-Wilhelms University in Münster during his junior year. He later earned his juris doctorate in 1959 from the Law School of the University of Virginia.

Today, Schwartzman is a lawyer in New York City specializing in international motion picture and television legal matters. His clients have included major European and Japanese private and public television networks, international film and television producers and distributors as well as buyers and sellers of films and television programs, in Italy, Germany, France, Japan and in Latin America. Schwartzman is an arbitrator on the New York City panel of arbitrators maintained by the Independent Film & Television Alliance for resolution of industry disputes.

What follows are excerpts from a discussion with Schwartzman about his experiences at OHIO and in Germany in 1954/1955.
It came out of the blue. In those days it was not common for students to go off to Europe, particularly not to Germany. Nevertheless, my first instinct was to say ‘of course!’ At this point she has to consider my background. My parents, mother and father, were Jewish and both had emigrated from Eastern Europe before the war. During the war my mother’s family was wiped out in Poland and my father’s family in what is now Belarus. This was definitely not the thing to present to my parents simply by saying ‘I’m going to Germany.’ I spoke with them at length saying it was a unique opportunity and that I really thought I should go. After managing to persuade them I responded to Dr. Krauss by saying “yes, I’ll go.”

Dr. Krauss had arranged with a German academic agency for a direct exchange whereby a German student would come in my place, and I would go over in his place. They recommended the university in Münster, a historic city in Westphalia in northwest Germany in what was then the British zone of occupation. It was particularly appealing to Dr. Krauss because it was not heavily populated by Americans. He correctly reasoned that it would be better to go to a school where one was not among other Americans because the exchange student would have a more genuine experience with German and other foreign students.

A German chemistry student from Münster was chosen to come to Ohio University for the academic year 1945/1946 and I was to go to the Westfälische-Wilhelms University in Münster in his place. The university was founded in 1780 and is now one of the major universities in Germany with almost 40,000 students and 250 fields of study.

I sailed to Europe in mid-October of 1954. It took 11 days, from Hoboken, New Jersey to Rotterdam in the Netherlands and I was planning to arrive in Münster in time for the November 1st start of the fall semester.

OHIO: While in Germany, what were your interactions with the other students like?

SCHWARTZMAN: My first concern before I went was “what kind of reception would I receive?” I wrote to the United States Department – because those were times when one had to be concerned about what to expect when going to Germany. I asked, “what kind of reception could a Jewish-American student expect in a German university?”

My inquiry was channeled to the German desk and then forwarded to a rabbi who had just returned from Germany with a study on exactly that subject. The response was that I would not encounter any problems over and above what would be encountered at an American university. Nevertheless, I never mentioned that I was Jewish and the issue never came up while I was in Germany.

I did so because I believed that it would be impossible for German students, with whom I would be living for one year, to maintain a normal cordial relationship with me given the history of Nazi horrors only nine years earlier, particularly since some of them had probably been in the Hitler Youth. I also did not want this deeply personal issue to affect my being there as the representative of Ohio University. In retrospect, I believe that I made the right decision at the time.

OHIO: Were the students in Germany friendly toward you?

SCHWARTZMAN: I was very pleasantly surprised by my accommodations in the Aaseehaus-Kolleg, a practically brand new student residence built with US funding and beautifully set at the edge of the Aasee lake within comfortable walking distance from the center of Münster and all University buildings. It was superior to dorms at Ohio U, which still had WWII barracks as temporary housing on East Green. It is now the budget Agora Hotel, and you can find it by Googling the name.

It had three stories, with a center entry and two wings, each with a row of single and double rooms and housed about 150 male student admitted as members of the house. In fact, it was an honor to be admitted. My roommate was German and our relationship was very good, never any problems. To some degree, Americans were a curiosity. That was only the second year of the Fulbright program and the two other Americans in the house were Fulbrighters so that there were not many of us.

I never encountered any anti-American sentiments other than periodic reminders that America had no history or culture because it was so new! Nevertheless there was an embarrassing experience when a bus load of fellow students on an excursion, singing to pass the time, broke out with a wartime patriotic song, ‘Fighting against England. The treads are rutting, the motor is drooping, Tanks are rolling forwards in Africa’, oblivious to the presence of foreign students. They stopped abruptly when they realized that we were there and several of them later personally apologized to me and to other foreigners saying that they had meant no harm.

Each wing had a communal bathroom with hot water showers available upon deposit of coins. As I recall, although the cost was modest, many students could afford only cold showers. Each wing also had a tea-kitchen with a heating burner and individual cabinets for storing food for each student but no refrigerator. There was a house library, which also contained copies of past course papers and tests available for reference when needed.

There was also a dining room with tables for four where lunch and dinner were brought to the center of each table, family style, by waitresses who also cleaned our rooms on a daily basis. House members were expected to be punctual at meal times and to take seats at different tables thereby meeting all other house members. Meals cost 2 marks per day, 1.20 for meat and 0.80 for supper, which was often cold cuts and salad. At the then rate of 4.20 marks to the dollar it cost less than 50 cents a day. The dining room also served as the ballroom for the semi-formal, semi-annual house balls.

On the other hand, relationships with other Americans and with most other foreign students, primarily those from English speaking countries, were almost immediately on a first name basis.

My German roommate became a lifelong friend and I continued to visit with him and his family in Germany every year for about 25 years until his untimely death about 15 years ago. We maintained a close friendship and through him I met other former Münster law students with whom I also maintained long-term close and continuing friendships.

LEFT: This document from the Rector of the University in Münster certifies that Schwartzman was a duly matriculated student for the summer, 1955 semester.
OHIO: What was it like to study in post World War II Germany?

SCHWARTZMAN: When I arrived there in 1954, there was no structured foreign student’s program as there would be today where foreign students are placed in a special school only for foreign students and offered a quick course in the native culture and language. Münster didn’t have that and I don’t believe any of the other German universities had that at that time. In fact, when I arrived I registered as an ordinary student, the same as any German student.

I went through the catalog looking for classes. I thought I’d be interested in it. Unfortunately, there wasn’t all that much. This was my junior year of pre-law studies and I was therefore theoretically in the law school at Münster, there being no pre-law program as in American schools. It was way over my head, as it would have been had I suddenly been dropped in an American law school after my second year of college pre-law. So, I didn’t really attend too many law classes.

What I really wanted to attend were modern history courses. I wanted to hear what they had to say in the classroom about the Second World War. I didn’t find any courses on that subject. Why? Possibly because they had not yet decided on how they were going to teach it. They’d barely come to grips with it at that time and there were no classes on the Nazi period. I took some German language courses, speech, pronunciation and the like, but other than that my classroom attendance was very limited.

OHIO: Did you have time to explore and travel?

SCHWARTZMAN: Very much. In my view, the real value of the program was that I was in Europe, in Germany, living among Germans, speaking the language on a daily basis because there was no English being spoken, thereby becoming fluent, and the opportunity to explore Europe.

I traveled extensively. I spent almost two weeks in Paris during Christmas in 1954. But, my real travels started at the end of the semester in February when I left for Italy, traveled across Greece and some Greek islands, up through Yugoslavia, again to Italy, Switzerland, and finally back to Münster in mid-May. While I traveled extensively throughout Europe I did not feel it appropriate for me to act as a tourist in Germany so soon after the war. Nevertheless, I stopped in Munich on my way to Italy for a pilgrimage to Dachau because I felt the need to be there to remember and to honor the victims.

This need to recall the Second World War was shared with other foreign students. As an example, several of us briefly absented ourselves from our German friends during a university trip to the Netherlands to pay homage to the fallen allied troops buried in the Arnhem military cemetery.

The new semester had already begun and I stayed for a while in Münster. In June, I traveled to Denmark, Sweden, and Norway and then to Holland, Belgium, and England in early July. There was also a July trip to Berlin, including East Berlin then in the Russian zone. Much of my traveling was by hitchhiking alone through Europe, (which was far less dangerous at the time) staying in student dorms and hostels and eating at communal restaurants. That, coupled with the extremely favorable exchange rate for the dollar, enabled me to do all of my traveling at very low cost. It was quite an experience.

When I came back home in August, I felt that I had really traveled the world. And I spoke really good German.

Upon returning to Ohio for my senior year, Dr. Krauss asked, “Well, where are your report cards?”

I responded, “Umm, I have none.”

He replied, “Well, how is the university going to give you credit for that?” Then Dean Rush Elliott of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Krauss and I had a meeting. They put on their thinking caps and under the circumstances decided to give me 32 hours of blanket credit.

Their reasoning, as later explained to me, was that I had achieved a fluency in German, which entitled me to a certain number of language credits. I was now also a veritable “man of the world” at age 21 because of my extensive travels during which I had absorbed a great deal of European history and culture, all of which deserved academic credits. All in all it added up to 32 hours, which meant I was given a whole year’s credit. In retrospect, I think that was a fair resolution because earning the equivalent number of classroom credits at Ohio University could not have given me what I had absorbed during my year abroad.

OHIO: Can you tell me about the importance of your study abroad experience and about study abroad opportunities in general?

SCHWARTZMAN: That year was certainly the most significant year of my academic life, because it really changed my life, and I think it would have had the same effect on anybody who had experienced significant time overseas at that age and at that time.

I should digress for a moment. I think students going for three months or for a quarter or even for a semester don’t really have the same experience. It takes a while before you become acclimated and to realize that you are somewhere else. For me it came when I instinctively responded in German when there was a knock on the door or when you were jostled on the street. That’s when you are really living the language.

As a result of that – and as result of having had these experiences – you come back as a different and much more confident person, as was the case for me.

When I start talking about that year, I can go on for a very long time because it was such a significant experience. Therefore, if anyone asks me about the value of exchange programs, I tell them about my own experiences and how they have proven to be pivotal in my personal and professional life including my international law practice where speaking a foreign language and familiarity with European ways always stand out in contrast with other American lawyers who lack those attributes.

OHIO: Did your study abroad experience impact OHIO’s German language program in any way? Did other students do an exchange program in Germany after you?

SCHWARTZMAN: Yes. After I came back they realized that they had to create a structured academic German exchange program, which they proceeded to do. Dr. Krauss next worked out an exchange with the university in Hamburg, and I recall that Louis Andre Colatch went there for his junior year in 1956/1957 as the second OU exchange student to post WWII Germany.