

Chapter Twelve – Working abroad – 26 years old



Arsenal had been playing a European away game in Germany and I was now on the homeward leg of the journey. I had just boarded a train to Liverpool street (from Stansted airport) when I found a discarded Evening Standard paper. When I read newspapers I tend to view the sports section first and then quickly scan through the general news before tackling the crossword. This passes the time as much as anything else. With the Evening Standard I also used to check out the job section. I was happily employed at Cannon Bridge (LIFFE) but viewing other jobs became a habit. One advertisement in particular caught my eye as an English company was looking to recruit electricians to work in Germany. The country was fresh in my mind as I had only been there a few hours before. This could be an opportunity to return and spend more time. I had given serious consideration to working abroad because I love to travel and see new places.

I had recently applied to work on the Hong Kong airport project but my application met without success. The fact that this opportunity was in Germany appealed to me most of all though. I had not that long ago travelled around the country on a three week trip. With just a back pack, under twenty six railcard and a friend in tow we visited the following cities:

- Frankfurt
- Munich
- Heidelberg
- Leipzig
- Dresden
- Berlin
- Hamburg
- Cologne
- Mainz
- Rudesheim

I decided to apply for the position and made the call. It was a Thursday and I had a brief telephone conversation but I forgot to leave my contact details. This oversight didn't seem to make a difference as when I rang back on the Saturday the Director thought I appeared quite keen. He offered me a job and wanted me to fly over the following week. Not a lot of time to relocate to another country but as I live with my parents there were few loose ends to tie up.

Work was the first consideration so I resigned on the Monday morning. I informed my LIFFE manager (Malcolm Mahoney) of my plans to leave. We both spoke to the engineering Manager (Keith Hussey) and within the hour I was gone. Keith and Malcolm both promised me a reference as they were happy with my contribution over the last eighteen months. I was a subcontractor at the time and I had no issues leaving with little notice. LIFFE were a good employer but I had seen them let people go on a Friday afternoon. I was also young and my sense of responsibility had yet to kick in.

The three days off gave me some time to make final arrangements. I booked my flight, sorted out my tools and packed my things. At this stage I kept an open mind, I didn't know how long I would be gone for. I would give it a go and see where it took me. I was looking forward to learning a new language and experiencing a new way of life. Being on holiday is a little different to actually living in the country. I flew to Berlin in October when the weather was starting to turn cold. I was a little paranoid at customs and wanted to avoid any unnecessary questions. As I had a toolbox in one hand and a suitcase in the other I was unsure if I needed any work permits, tax forms etc. It was easier to avoid the situation altogether.

As I observed the queue I noticed that every third person was being stopped and questioned. I joined the queue at the appropriate moment and went through unchecked. I now had to wait as I was to be picked up by the company labourer. After an hour I realised he wasn't coming so I made a call, it seemed they had forgotten all about me. When I look back this was the beginning of my worries about the person I was working for. He lacked the professionalism I was used to. The van pulled up and we drove to the owners flat. When we arrived the door was opened by a man with a towel around his waist, just out of the shower. He introduced himself as the Director and owner of the company and asked if I fancy coming out for a beer with the boys. Of course I accepted and thought I was off to a good start.

One of the problems with accepting a position abroad is not being sure who it is you are being employed by until you meet them. It could be a reasonably sized organisation or just a one man band, this person was the latter. Being young though has its advantages, I had very little to lose. If things went really wrong I could always go home. I was to stay in his flat with five other employees and travel to site every day. The owner did have other sites further afield which took up most of his time.



After Thursday nights' excursion we went back to the flat. I was lucky I had one of the beds as some of the others just had sleeping bags on the floor. The next morning I was introduced to my new workplace, a building site in East Berlin. We started every day at 07:00 and got picked up at 19:00, it was only a thirty minute drive each way but that made it a thirteen hour day. The building itself was a new build, a mere shell at this stage.

We were tasked with wiring the flats to meet German standards which I was unfamiliar with. In England we wire separate circuits for lighting and power, here we were to wire the circuits on a room by room basis. We would start with a radial for the power and end at the light switch, where a three plate arrangement would complete the circuit. Each room was bare concrete with a roof, floor and three walls. There was a horizontal acro prop at the end (health and safety?) where the remaining windows / wall were missing. The most memorable part was the temperature...it was freezing. The wind would whistle down the corridors and the rooms offered little or no shelter. The only way to keep warm was to work non-stop. I paired up with an electrician at the start but I soon got into the swing of it and tackled my own rooms. Once the room was wired I then had to drill holes in the slab.

A wrap round rawl plug then enveloped the cable before I pushed it into the hole. We had a tea break at 10:00 which consisted of a coffee and a schnitzel whilst standing outside a Turkish kiosk. We didn't even get to sit down as there were no chairs and the concrete steps were too cold. Lunch was a little more civilised however as we walked to the local bistro. Turkish owned once more and it quickly became apparent that my German lessons were going to suffer. The Turkish immigrants were numerous in this part of town. At the end of the first day I was still enjoying the experience as everything was so new.

We arrived back at the flat and the Director started to talk about work. I decided to go out for a beer, after a twelve hour shift the last thing I wanted was to sit and talk shop. One of the older electricians came with me and he was the unofficial site foreman due to his experience in working abroad. We found a pool table, grabbed some beers and relaxed. After a while I said "do you follow a football team" he replied "I used to follow Arsenal in the early 1970s and then Derby when Brian Clough was manager" then he paused before saying "people are always asking me what's going on inside my head. I thought we were playing pool" I responded "sorry I was just creating conversation".

I thought this was a little bizarre but I put it down to him being tired. He was older than I was and I was also bashing him up on the pool table and he was a very poor loser. I chose my moments to chat further, avoiding times when he was about to take a shot. Things were always friendly enough but he was a strange character. I discovered later that most people just left him alone. But I needed a drinking buddy to get out of the flat so I was stuck with him for now. We stayed a couple of hours and had an early night as we had work the next day.

On Monday we had a team of Germans working in the same building. They worked 4 x 12 hour shifts Monday to Thursday and although they were friendly enough I sensed they were uncomfortable with our presence. I thought this may be good for my German lessons but we hardly ever crossed paths as they were assigned to other areas.

My second odd conversation with the foreman happened one morning when the rest of the team failed to show up for work. The owner was on holiday and left him with some brief instructions. We were in direct competition with the Germans and if they saw something untoward we were fairly sure they would report it to the building owners. I started work as usual trying to keep warm when I heard someone shouting.

I listened carefully and then left my flat to investigate, although I had a good idea who it was. I found the foreman marching up and down the corridor shouting the names of the other team members. He was repeatedly and sequentially rattling off their names without waiting for an answer. I asked him what he was doing and he snapped "where are they?" I replied "they are not here, you know that so why are you calling for them?" He was angry and replied "we are here...the Germans are here...why aren't they here?"

We knew one of the team was on holiday and the labourer was sorting out the van as he had locked the keys inside. What we didn't know at the time was that two electricians had been caught on the tube, fair dodging. They were being held by transport police as they did not have the on the spot fine. Another had met a girl on the other side of town the night before and was running late. A string of coincidences I know but still, this behaviour wasn't solving anything and I told him so. If the Germans heard him I don't know what they would have thought. Maybe the pressure of responsibility was getting to him or maybe he was just an idiot, probably the latter. I left him to continue his tirade and carried on working, he was getting a lot warmer than I was.

It took me a few days to realise there were times when the others would occasionally disappear. When I stopped drilling there would be an eerie silence instead of the usual background activity. I found them one day on the upper floors, avoiding the foreman and keeping warm smoking weed. I joined them sometimes but smoking really isn't my thing. Even back then I would rather have a beer than take recreational drugs.

After a couple of weeks I was in the owners flat when I overheard a telephone conversation. It seemed another site was in trouble and he instructed the foreman not to pay the individuals. They had not worked hard enough and had caused the situation. He later changed his mind but it was a little unsettling. He smoked pot all the time, had big mood swings and generally I began to mistrust him. I asked him one day about a form for my tax and he seemed unfamiliar with the document. I needed it so I would pay 25% tax in England and not the 40% tax in Germany. He went through the motions of looking into it but it never materialised. One day the labourer appeared with a forgery which we could show the authorities on the site if we were ever asked. It seemed I would have to sort mine out myself, it was still early days and I had time. I wasn't over-impressed by this development.

After two and a half weeks there was a problem with my site, the owners had to put a halt to the work for a few weeks. This was not a great problem as we were told we could relocate to another site which had fallen behind and then return. However this did mean moving to a motel near the new site and sharing a room with the foreman. Not the best situation, but I think everyone else was happy with the arrangement. I was to discover a little about his parents which I believe went some way to explaining some of his odd behaviour. He was the result of the union between a Jehovahs' witness and a Scottish Catholic man. His Father had been locked up in a mental hospital for years, so it appeared he was a chip off the old block.

My third strange conversation with him took place in our room after work one day. I was laying down watching a James Bond film when he asked me if I knew about the Jacobites. His voice was at a normal level to start with and I replied that I did not. I was getting used to him spouting rubbish and I just ignored him generally. Quite frankly he had been getting on my nerves for quite a while now. I got the feeling more nonsense was about to follow and I was not to be disappointed. He revealed to me that there were bad people in the world and the Jacobites were responsible.

More rubbish followed and his voice was slowly starting to grow louder. He ended by almost shouting "I seek them, I hunt them". He had got my attention now and I managed to calm him down. I have told this story a few times and people have told me what they would do in the same situation. I think I would have reacted differently now but then, my only thoughts were focussing on trying to calm him down. I still had to go to sleep at some stage and if I upset the lunatic I thought I might not wake up the next day.

The uncertainty about the work, the doubts about the owner and living with a madman made my mind up about my situation. The next morning I rang the owner and told him in no uncertain terms to bring my wages to site as I was leaving. The problem was we were to be paid every three weeks (when his invoice was paid by the German employers) and he didn't have the money till then. I had only been there two and a half weeks so he offered to accommodate me in his flat once more (rent free) and suggested I do some sightseeing for a couple of days. I didn't have much of a choice so I agreed, I left site and waited for him in my motel.

It was just before lunch when the foreman unexpectedly returned to our room. Apparently he had twisted his ankle and couldn't work for the rest of the day, I don't think he liked the new site.

I told him of my plans and the reason I was leaving was mainly because I didn't trust the man we were working for. Work was looking uncertain and I had more opportunities at home. After listening to what I had to say he gave it some thought and announced I was right and he would leave too! I wish the idiot had made up his own mind sooner. I think today I would have fed his paranoia and he would have left earlier. I got most but not all of the money owed and my three week foreign adventure drew to a close.

Weighing up the pros & cons I had a lot more going for me at home than I did in Germany. I would have liked to have learned the language but it was not to be. It is difficult living abroad and not having anyone you can trust. Maybe it would have been better to travel with someone but at the time that wasn't an option. When I arrived home I had a couple of weeks off but I needed to find some work. Before I contacted an agency I decided to call LIFFE and ask for my references which I hadn't received. I gave a brief overview of my adventure and explained my concerns. Instead of a reference I was offered my old job back which was fortunate. I would go on to work there for another one and a half years before leaving to start my maintenance career. So ended my working abroad experience, I think I will stay home now.