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A Report on Leading a Group to Germany, 1973

katharine E. Hill

School for International Training

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A REPORT ON LEADING A GROUP
TO GERMANY, 1973

KATHARINE E. HILL

Submitting in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts
in Teaching Degree at the School for International
Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

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This report by Katharine E. Hill is accepted in its present form.

Date July 18, 1974 Principal Advisor James B. Buey

Project Advisors:

Mr. Raymond C. Clark

Miss Manjula M. Bhaskaran

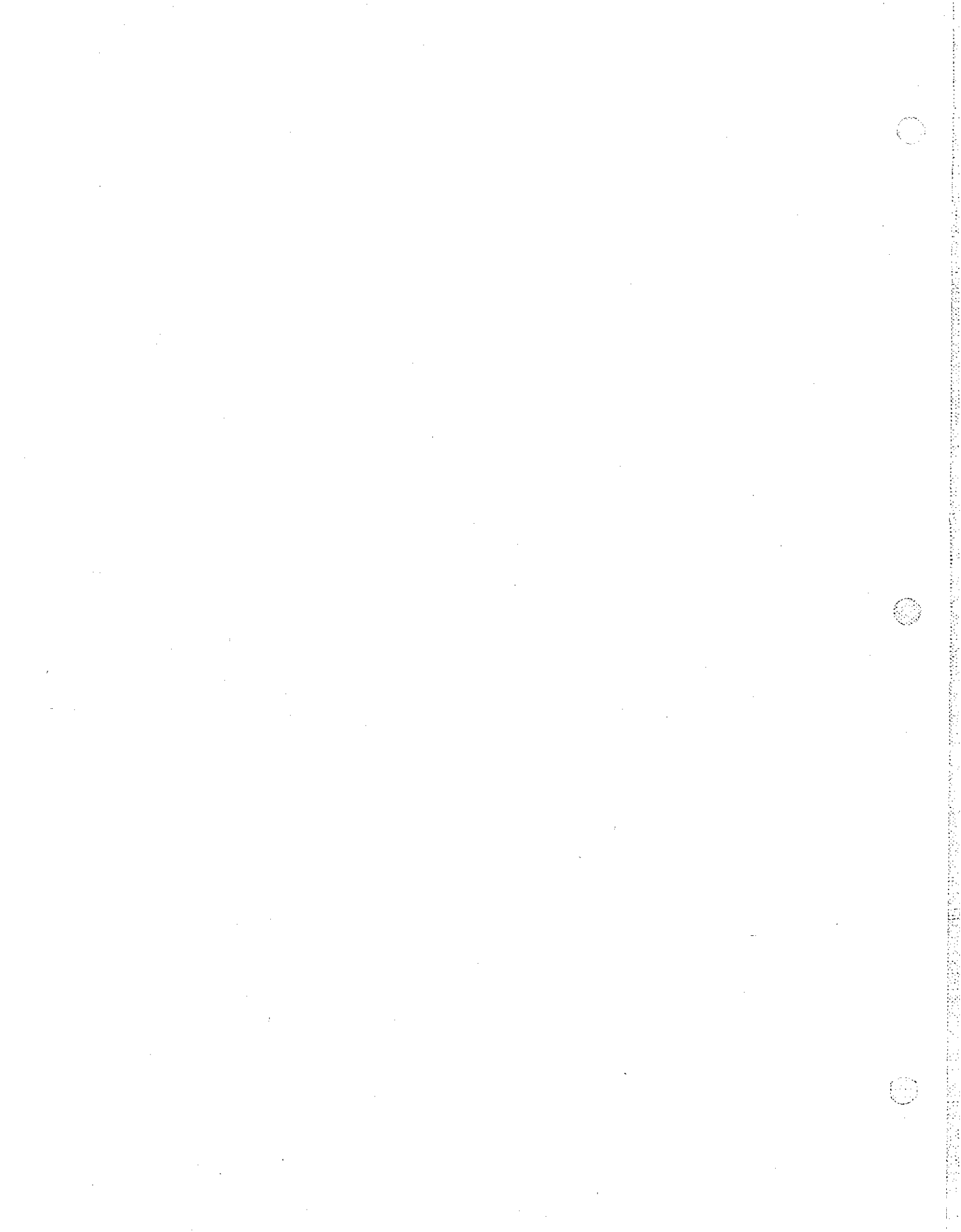


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THE GROUP AND ORIENTATION AT WINDHAM

The group consisted of three boys and eight girls, much to the latters' disappointment. Their ages ranged from 15 to 17, and they came from anywhere between California and Long Island. Half lived in metropolitan areas and the others lived in small towns or out in the country. Except for four, they were all Community Ambassadors. They were all kind, friendly, intelligent, open-minded, and had good senses of humor, managing to get to know each other at orientation before I had a chance to use the paired interview trick.

The bag of tricks for orientation I had with me flopped hopelessly because I wasn't very comfortable using them. Fortunately there were many common orientation activities at Windham, prepared and run by the on-site orientation committee, to compensate for my lack in the art.

Most of the group knew very little about Germany, and except for four, three of which were language learners, knew even less about her language. We did some language exercises for those who couldn't say "guten morgen" and to refresh the others' minds.

One of the group members commonly known as the "walking dictionary" because he had read it uninterruptedly, became in charge of this facet of orientation. He soon began to quiz the group on words from the dictionary, so we changed activities to talk about European history, concentrating on Germany.

As usually happens when talking about German history, we came to the topic of Hitler and anti-semitism. A Jewish girl in the group began to wonder at how Jews were treated there today. Was it in the genes of the Germanic race to hate Jews? Of course not, but many people tend to

believe that. Discussing the conditions of the German people between the World Wars, they began to understand why the elimination of the Jews by Hitler came about and realized that similar phenomena have occurred too often since with other peoples in other countries. Placing themselves in the shoes of a German, they tried to imagine how they could feel towards a Jew thirty years later. Asking them later on how they felt as young people towards Russians and Japanese, the girl realized she had little to worry about. From Hitler we jumped to Nixon, developing a heated discussion over Watergate.

I did have problems during orientation. One very spoiled "sophisticated" young fifteen year old in my group could not handle the lack of constant attention given to her. During language training she would never go to meals, becoming as a consequence very frail. No one could console or communicate with her, except some boys in their friendly way. Finally, the day I arrived she decided to take an overdose of Contac pills for some attention. She got it, and probably more than she bargained for. The trip to the hospital and then to the doctor's house, was not quite pleasing to her.

Being her new leader, even though I hardly knew her, it was up to me to decide her fate as far as going to Germany. Asking for opinions and information about her behaviour during language training, I accumulated a great quantity of conflicting stories. I felt very deserted in having to make such a decision alone, when I wasn't the one who had accepted her, knowing that she was too young for the program. I finally made a deal with her, by which I would not tolerate any nonsense or childish behavior from her, and where she could only demand one eleventh of my attention, if I let her go. It was easier on my conscience to have her be a pain all

summer than not knowing what had become of her once she got home. Apparently there were problems at home and her parents wanted her out of the way. During the summer she was not much of a problem, but no asset to the group either.

BERLIN

The trip overseas was uneventful aside from Miss Absentminded who left her coat at Windham and Mr. Webster who read the dictionary non-stop, driving me up the wall. Later on he either became confident enough not to need its company, or he lost it.

In Amsterdam I was given air tickets for Berlin, much to our astonishment and disappointment, where we would spend four days. We were prepared and looking forward to going straight to our homestays. We had understood that our stay in Berlin was at the end of the trip.

In Brussels our tickets were exchanged for train fares since the German airports were on strike. Not knowing the exact distance to Berlin, I prepared the group for a two day train ride, making it sound like the most exciting adventure to come our way. We would be traveling through a communist country! How Lucky! The sounds of this adventure were beyond their imagination, and homestay disappointments soon became part of history. The ride only lasted ten hours, but they did see the border police doing a thorough check up and even got a glimpse of Russian soldiers off in the distance. The watch towers they saw provided food for thought in preparation for Berlin.

We had no orientation for Berlin and very little money. - \$80 for the group. As the Experiment would have it, its representative there came to our rescue. She set us up at the Red Cross hostel, by the wall, where the food tasted more like low British cuisine than German. During the

day she took us all over Berlin on tours. She was a very nice lady, but outdid us all as far as energy was concerned. The group was silently shocked by some of the monuments and the wall. East Berlin they found bizarre and tiring, mostly due to the lack of sleep, humidity, and long hours waiting to get through.

Much to my disgust I had taken on the role of mother to these teenagers who couldn't do much without being led by the hand. I spent my time running around after them. I dropped the role as soon as I realized that it was impossible, wrong and inappropriate. If their mothers had done a correct job in their time, there was little for me to fear, and if they hadn't, there wasn't much I could do. I planned to worry only once something happened. Once something did happen, however, there was no time to worry.

We left Berlin the morning after some people had been shot at the wall. The train left from East Berlin and the station was crowded by uniformed guards in riding boots, holding machine guns. The scene was like one out of a Second World War movie, which gave us an eerie feeling. Slowly we began to understand the meaning of the Cold War.

THE HOST COMMUNITY

On the train right before arriving at our destination, the group underwent a miraculous transformation, with the help of the bathroom. Off came dirty jeans and shirts and out came suits, dresses and make up, which they donned with a certain degree of taste, in order to meet their anxiously awaiting families at the train station. We managed to scramble off the train with all our luggage. After a few awkward moments we all assembled

to have our picture taken by the local newspaper, and then everybody disappeared with their respective families into cars and taxis.

The town has about thirteen thousand inhabitants and lies next to the River Weser. It is very picturesque with its old city hall, churches, and city wall. The wall, which surrounds the inner city on three sides, leaving one open to the river, has been turned into a park. On Sundays the whole town takes walks around it. An open air market is held at one of the towers by the wall twice a week, where the farmers come to sell their goods. Some rolling hills serve as backdrop to the town, where families go for hikes and sausage fries on weekends.

The town has a couple of supermarkets, department stores, take-out restaurants and discoteques, but they are all nicely concealed by its medieval architecture. There are also two olympic-size swimming pools, one indoor and one outdoor, where the young people spend most of their free time during the day. At night they spend it at one of the popular discoteques.

The families, except for one, were very well chosen. They belonged to all walks of life and their incomes ranged from very wealthy to lower middle class. In most cases the German counterparts were matched according to age, sex, and interests. The majority were in the same grade and attended the same school, which made group activities easy to organize.

Three families lived in nearby villages. In two cases it was no problem; we only subsidized their transportation to and from town. In one case, however, we had a problem. The German sister was fourteen years old, did not get along with the other Germans and refused to go swimming or dancing with them. She had very few friends and preferred to keep to herself. The American girl was very enthusiastic and didn't particularly

want to miss out on all the fun. The German parents began showing their problems; the father was not well and one young brother was very ill. The strain of having a visitor with them was too much at that time, so we moved her to another family who wanted an Experimenter but could not have one for six weeks. The girl got on very well with her new sister and family, which settled the only problem we had.

CULTURE SHOCK

Before the informal trip, which took place a week after we arrived at our homestays, the group members felt the need to get together and exchange ideas. They asked each other about their families, how many members spoke English and what they ate for dinner. Their greatest disappointment was that of not having suffered culture shock for which they had been so well prepared by the "Albatross". Aside from the language, food and bathing habits, Germany seemed to them very much like America. True, among the recent cultural transformations one can count the influence of the American AID after World War II, the presence of NATO, with its American influence, and the numerous big American companies prospering there. Superficially Germany is very much like the United States. The young people wear jeans, have long hair and play the same type of pop music, while the middle-aged shop at supermarkets, buy packaged Kraft cheese and have wall-to-wall carpeting at home.

In later discussions, they realized that culture shock begins in superficially similar cultures when they react as Americans would in the situation, and find themselves at a loss.

One boy found that his German brother was like any American and that

they could communicate marvellously. Since both were very interested in hiking, the brother scheduled some hikes in the neighborhood. The American thought this was wonderful. Little did he know that by neighborhood, his brother meant the whole county. After a week of walking from one town to the other, they gave it up. The American realized that his brother was more complex than he had taken for granted and often had misunderstandings.

In another case an American girl told her sister's friend that she was very pretty. The German girls were shocked and began to say that the American was queer. The poor girl didn't know what to do, and made it worse by saying that she wasn't queer, and repeating that she only meant that the girl was pretty. Remembering that I had been a bit surprised when American girls would tell me I was pretty in college, I explained to all three that they were experiencing a cultural misunderstanding. In the U.S. it is very common for women to compliment each other, but in Europe it is not.

THE INFORMAL TRIP

The informal trip began as I suppose they usually do - Americans sitting with Americans, Germans with Germans. Each group would make jokes which only they would understand. At the beginning it was tolerable, but after driving south for three days, with a stop in Heidelberg, they began to get on each other's nerves. By now they had experienced all the culture shock they wanted and were ready to give up trying to communicate. Fortunately we arrived at the Alps where they all forgot their differences in the excitement of spending three days in a hut and going hiking. We took a lift up a mountain just in time to see a beautiful rainbow arch over

the whole valley. It was cold and raining, and since weather doesn't discriminate between cultures, we all managed to get soaking wet and communicate our discomfort without misunderstandings. The hut was run by some people intolerant of lively youngsters, who made the worst food in the world and who again did not discriminate between cultures. Many jokes developed mostly in English so that the ogres could not understand. There were no showers, no hot water, and cold water was only for washing hands and faces, not for washing clothing. Those who became rebellious would sneak down at night, and keep each other company while washing their muddy socks in sin.

We spent our days hiking in the mountains, and found that slippery slimy mud and weariness - not known to be culturally discriminatory factors - forced us to form a very harmonious bi-cultural hiking group. When a situation provides common needs and enemies, groups tend to unite very quickly.

Our Italian bus driver took on the role of umpire. He did not quite understand Germans, and Americans to him seemed very similar, so he treated everyone alike. He taught us all an easy German round, which no one had ever heard, about laughing. Whenever the atmosphere in the bus became thick, he would make us sing it. Later we sang it all the time.

After the informal trip, there was little, if any, dissent among the groups.

THE CO-LEADER

Her name is Gisela, she is married and has an eight year old daughter. She is the best co-leader anybody could wish for. She was very jolly,

absentminded and never of time, but always knew exactly what she was up to. The Germans loved her and after getting over some false impressions, so did the Americans. We complemented each other very well, for she was strong where I was weak and vice-versa. Whenever problems arose between the groups, we would discuss them and then she would solve them with the Germans and I with the Americans. She took everything with a grain of salt, making problems we had seem like figments of our imagination.

She managed to get a 3000^{DM} grant from the county of Hoxter and the state of Westfalen for the cultural education of both groups. Unfortunately the grant did not come through until after the informal trip, when we had only three weeks to go. The last three weeks we spent like madmen, trying to get in as many "cultural" experiences as possible, among which we counted a visit to an Argentinian steak house and the Chinese National Circus.

THE FAREWELL PARTY

After the informal trip, school opened, so we met regularly. The group would attend classes and sometimes we would have meetings in a room specially assigned to us, with the idea of preparing the farewell party.

We planned it for the night before departure, which was a mistake. Three days before departure would have been better. The school lent us their huge kitchen for us to cook in that day. The main course consisted of Bar-B-Q chicken, twice baked potatoes, corn on the cob, devilled eggs and tossed green salad, accompanied by biscuits and corn bread. As hors d'oeuvre there were different dips and all that goes with it plus egg, tuna, and chicken salad sandwiches. For desert we baked pies of all sorts and shapes, brownies and chocolate chip cookies. To drink there was ice tea, but most people preferred wine.

Preparing all this food was a very hard task, but we managed. A simpler menu would have been easier to undertake. The Americans did the cooking and the Germans kindly did the cleaning up. The party itself was a success. Our Italian bus driver belonged to a rock band, and he and his band played for us to dance, after we had eaten our fill. Everybody danced together, even the old grandparents danced. We played games, gave speeches and presented gifts until 1:00 a.m., when we said goodbye. We got home at 3:00 a.m. exhausted, with our packing still ahead of us. We left at 8:00 a.m. that day.

EVALUATION AND REORIENTATION

During our regular meetings at school, we spent a great deal of time talking about how they felt about living in Hoxter, and about going home. Most of them felt as if they had always lived there, could not imagine leaving and had mixed feelings about going home.

The closer departure time came, the more they realized, with a sinking heart, that they only wanted to go home for three days and come back right away. They anticipated all the questions they would be asked, i.e., what did you buy? Where did you go? What did you see? and felt apprehensive, for they had very little to answer. How could they tell their friends and family that they went shopping with their German mother, sat by the river and talked, or had headaches at night from thinking. They wondered about their close friends; maybe they would understand the change that had come over them, but were a bit skeptical.

They asked me how I felt the first time I went home after spending a year abroad at their age. I explained that I had trouble adjusting and felt alienated for a long time. Nobody quite understood that during my absence I was actually alive, that I led a regular life with a totally dif-

ferent group of people, speaking a different language. Nobody acknowledged the change I had undergone. What impressed them the most were my few imported worn out clothes.

Leaving Hoxter was very hard for everybody; they cried until we had to change trains an hour later. They decided to take full advantage of the last hours with each other and began to enjoy themselves again. Parting in New York was again as hard as leaving Hoxter.

THOUGHTS ON REORIENTATION

When talking about alienated feelings upon returning home, with the group, I couldn't tell them why this happens, because I did not know. Since then I have developed some thoughts on the subject.

The group members arrived in Germany, in most cases, unable to do anything on their own. Their parents always controlled or made decisions for them. Their peer groups and society in general, through mass media, would control their thoughts. There was little or no question of what was right or wrong.

In Germany, they were put in a situation, which Erich Fromm calls a "vacuum" in his book The Forgotten Language. They could not understand the "noise of the world" which, subtly tells you what to think, nor could they understand their "mother", who straightforwardly announced what was right. I did not provide the answers to many of their questions and encouraged them to take on leadership roles by stepping into second place and not leading. It was their experiment and they had to make it their own. I was always around to encourage and advise when they were having trouble. Going from step one, where they asked for permission to go to the bathroom, they had to develop their own sense of what was right and suitable.

For the first time in their lives they had to consult themselves to find answers. Their relationships with people were void of prejudice and their judgement depended solely on their perception. During their six weeks abroad, they changed from children to adults, a transformation which their parents would find hard to accept, if not disturbing. The young adult can be very easily frustrated depending on the treatment received from the parents.

My second thought on the subject is basically existentialist. Jean is sent on the Experiment to Europe. Jean writes faithfully and sends postcards. At home in Tenafly she lives in her absence through her parents' last image of her, through numerous conversations about Jean in Europe, and Jean's letters.

Jean has arrived in Europe, has acquired a new set of parents, and has to live and deal with them. The country and family fill her day from morning till night. For the time being they are her life. America has been forgotten, for there is no way she can live in Europe and America at the same time. She depends on her new family for survival. If she were to become ill, only her Mutti could help. Her mother steps into second place and is nothing but a memory to whom one must write.

After the excitement of being reunited at J.F.K., she is asked by her parents to step into her old shoes that have been waiting for her return. They prove to be very uncomfortable and tight. Sitting with a knot in her throat, a pain in her feet and a vacuum in her lungs, she wonders why those people she learned to love and on whom her existence depended, exist only as memories in her mind.

Will they remain only as memories and eventually become part of a dream? How can Jean share her experience with her friends and family in

the U.S.? What will prevent her from giving up once she becomes frustrated because no one understands? A better understanding of the limbo she is in and of her own culture? How can this be achieved?

Maybe during reorientation overseas, the Experimenter should be made aware of the difficulties he/she will encounter upon returning. He/she should be helped to understand the position his/her family will be in, and why they will react the way they do. This could be achieved by role playing, since they all know their parents fairly well. One Experimenter can be himself, and others be parents and friends with expectations.

The same care should be given to the second part of the Experiment - the return home - as to the first part - the homestay and trip abroad. This intelligent, understanding young adult should be able to give his/her own country the same kind of awareness and tolerance he/she gave the host country. How else will this person be able to continue to "foster international and intercultural communication on a person to person level and thereby promote peace" (MAT Handbook), if he/she feels alienated from his/her own.

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