

The Memorials



by [Peter Glassman](#) (March 2022)

Doctor Michael Waxman decided to tour the town of Landstuhl, Germany. He had been deployed for eight weeks of Army Reserve duty at Landstuhl Army General Hospital in 1985. It was an emergency assignment. Landstuhl's Chief of Anesthesia had to leave due to an urgent domestic crisis. Michael was his replacement. The Army Hospital at Landstuhl was the main medical receiving facility for all military activity in Europe and the Middle East. After two weeks of providing anesthesia support, Michael struck out on a day off. His first stop was Special Services serving both Ramstein Air Force base and the Hospital.

An Air Force Sergeant handed Michael some local landmark literature. "Although there's a lot of military support in Landstuhl Major Waxman, casual attire is usual wear for tourist excursions. Your best bet would be a guided tour."

Michael thumbed the pamphlets, "I'd like to get the feel of the land by myself."

"Do you know the language?"

"Not really, why?" Michael looked in a mirror at his appearance. He had just had his Class A uniform cleaned and he looked like a recruitment poster for the Army.

"Tour guides double as interpreters. You might be at a disadvantage on your own."

"I'd like to try anyway. I can always do the Rhine River tour to Koblenz with the bus tour back to Landstuhl before my service in Landstuhl ends."

The walking tour was an organized step-by-step landmark approach and appealed to Michael. He took a downtown Air Force Bus to his first stop. It was a memorial to German soldiers, citizens, and "workers" at a former aluminum factory. Only the main entrance facade remained. There was no one at the site to formerly advise visitors as to its nature. A sizable bronze plaque detailed condensed information in three languages—German, English, and French. Michael read it softly to himself.

"The Landstuhl Metal Works manufactured aluminum parts for V-2 rockets during World War II. The worker entrance is preserved as it looked after the massive 1943 bombing raids by American and British Forces. Loss of life was extensive on all 24 hour shifts. Military, civilian, and impressed volunteer workers and their families suffered extensive casualties." Michael reread the words and thought, 'they're a whitewash. The V-2s killed thousands in England and Belgium. And 'impressed' labor was slave labor.' He stopped a middle-age woman walking toward him.

He smiled and got her attention, "Sprechen zie English, bitte?"

The woman was his height at about six-foot. Her dark hair was cut short. She stared at his uniform and at the memorial plaque. "Ein little," she answered in a wary voice.

"This says a bombing occurred in 1943. Was the factory ever restored? Germany used most of the V-2s in 1944 and 1945. And there's no mention of slave labor." Michael saw her expression change from inquisitive to anger.

The lady side-stepped around Michael and walked quickly away. Michael read more about the place in his brochure. "Repeated bombings throughout 1943 forced the factory to relocate and an underground facility near the launch sites was developed. Thousands of Jews, political prisoners, and perceived enemies of the Reich from concentration camps were sacrificed as a major component of the workforce."

He looked around and decided to move to the next landmark. It was another immortalized ruin—a shell of what was once one of the larger churches in Landstuhl. A bronze plaque in the same three languages as the one for the metalworks began with a similar note. Michael whispered the frescoed wording, "This church was indiscriminately bombed during the 1943 raids on Landstuhl." He spoke to the plaque, "What about the cathedral in Coventry that was deliberately bombed to a shell in 1940 with hundreds of bomb shelter victims inside?" He felt his bowels gurgle. He was hungry and headed for a restaurant suggested on his tour brochure.

"Hello, Major, welcome to our Wursthau Biergarten Restaurant." The hostess was dressed in black with blond hair and striking blue eyes.

"Yes, just a table for one, bitte." He watched her look at the table layout on her tiny podium.

"I am sorry Herr Major, it is too late for lunch and..." She looked at her watch. "...We reopen for dinner at five o'clock but reservations they are complete."

Michael tried several more shops and another eating place with similar cold-shoulder treatment. He took the Air Force bus back to the Landstuhl Special Services office. The same attendant as in the morning was there.

"How was your experience Major?" The Air Force Sergeant folded his arms.

Michael described his time as totally unsatisfactory and why.

"Sir, there are two sides to today's Germany. In towns and cities which have memorials and scars from the war, the citizens shun any uniform represented by the Allied Forces who invaded their country." He gave Michael a large colorful brochure. "Next time let us book you on this boat and bus tour. It starts at the Rhine River and stops at Koblenz. At Koblenz the bus trip back to Landstuhl is a wonderful, picturesque tour. However, to get the most out of it, do not wear your uniform. Blend in with the civilian tourists."

A week later Michael spent a half day on a river cruise making several stops at old castles and operational wineries. At Koblenz he found a major cuckoo clock store for his wife's gift. The bus ride back was especially pleasant although a college professor who sat next to him observed that most of the souvenir items were overpriced. Michael remembered that the same beer steins he was going to purchase were only one-third the cost back at the Ramstein Post Exchange. The Professor was from Austria on vacation and was full of detailed history which added to the satisfaction of his trip.

Ten years later, Michael attended an Alzheimer Disease Symposium in Dresden. He did not represent the military. Most of the city was pristine and new-looking in pastel colors. Older structures, including one museum, that had survived the devastating bombing of WWII, were spotted and smeared with black dust but still conveyed what pre-war Dresden might have looked like. He took a bus tour which contained mostly

physicians and scientists attending the Alzheimer Conference.

A comely 20-something woman positioned herself next to the bus driver and spoke into a microphone. "Most of what I am describing today are replacement areas of Dresden which was almost totally destroyed by the American, Canadian, British, and Polish fliers in WW ll. Also many civilians were killed in the massive fire bombing."

Michael looked out the window at the beautiful "replacement" city. A disturbing thought flashed, 'Why doesn't she mention the war was started by Nazi Germany trying to enslave all other countries?'

The speaker continued the tour with the same technique of taking the focus from the causality of WW II and the Dresden wartime bombings. Michael looked at the other passengers. They also seemed stunned but mute in their reaction to the tour verbiage. At the end of the tour many passed by the guide without comment or placing money in the tip container.

Michael stopped and produced a slight smile. 'I have to say something', he thought. He placed a five-euro note in the tip box and stopped. "It was a wonderful tour Fraulein. It makes me grateful that the United States, Canada, England, Poland and the rest of the world are now at peace with Germany."

The woman smiled and shook his offered hand, "It is good, yes."

At home Michael talked to his wife Barbara about the Dresden sightseeing tour. "The tour lady is a product of the 1990s Germany. The young adults are taught about what happened to their country by the allies as if the death and destruction on them was unprovoked."

His wife responded, "But she did acknowledge gratitude for peaceful coexistence, didn't she?"

“Yes, peaceful coexistence, however, it still makes me wonder if their current attitude could foster a latent feeling of one day rising up from the ashes to fight again.” He touched her hand, “It’s well known that if you ignore the past, you’re doomed to repeat it.”

“That war is over dear. Forget about it.” She kissed his cheek. “Thanks for another cuckoo clock. I love it.”

Michael’s final journey to Germany was in 2009. He was to visit the main center for production and development of biological agents used for autoimmune diseases and cancer therapy. The site was over a hundred miles from Stuttgart (home to Porsche), in the town of Biberach. Monoclonal antibodies were researched and produced for over a dozen global pharmaceutical companies. The protein agents are seen profusely on TV for diseases such as psoriasis, gastrointestinal digestive problems, rheumatoid arthritis, and many other illnesses. Michael was a chief investigator based in Connecticut for two such monoclonal antibodies for severe cancer pathologies.

He stopped in Stuttgart for a tour and found only one small memorial to WW II. It was on top of a hill and received only a sentence in his guidebook. Indeed, his guided tour was mainly focused on industry. He truly marveled at Porsche’s home base and the amazing automobiles. In Biberach itself, he found two main industries other than the pharmaceutical giant Boehringer Ingelheim. A button factory with an attached unusual hotel in which he stayed was a popular landmark. The barstools in the lounge of its restaurant were giant pedestaled buttons. The other major employer was a crane manufacturer. The cranes were those used to erect tall buildings like skyscrapers or tall apartment complexes. The company supplied construction cranes to global orders.

While touring with a crane public observation group, he asked the guide if there were any WW II memorials. He asked the man,

“I didn’t see any landmarks dedicated to WW II history here in Biberach?”

The guide responded quickly, “WW II is just that in Germany. It is history. It is in history books.” Members of the tour group nodded in agreement

Michael brought back a few gifts and souvenirs from Stuttgart and Biberach. Barbara welcomed him home with a hug. “So what was it like. It’s been over 24-years since your last visit to Germany?”

He watched her open one of her gifts from Biberach. “I think I now understand what happens when major cataclysmic wars come and go. I mean, Germany’s so different now. No one dwells on WW II. All survivors are old or dead. Life goes on. I don’t think of Germany as I did when I wore my Army uniform.”

She stopped unwrapping the box, “Most people want to forget war. The military lingers as a reminder. Politicians celebrate landmark dates like Pearl Harbor Day or D-Day to justify huge defense budgets. Civilians live life, and that’s what you’re seeing.”

Michael smiled, “You’re right. I didn’t really see it until this last visit. Japan and Germany have emerged as prime examples of democracy and industrial giants.”

Suddenly Barbara shouted, “Oh, my God!”

“What?” He watched as she opened the large box.

“Buttons, there must be thousands of buttons here. Where did you get them?”

“In Biberach, it’s one of the largest button makers on the planet.”

She hugged him, “I guess I’ll never run out of buttons now. What other things are biggest in Germany today?”

“Cars, you know Volkswagen, Mercedes, Audi. I toured the Porsche factory in Stuttgart. Those cars are fantastic.”

She pushed away from him. “Porsche, and all you brought me back was a lifetime supply of buttons.” She placed her hands on her hips, “Where’s my Porsche?”

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