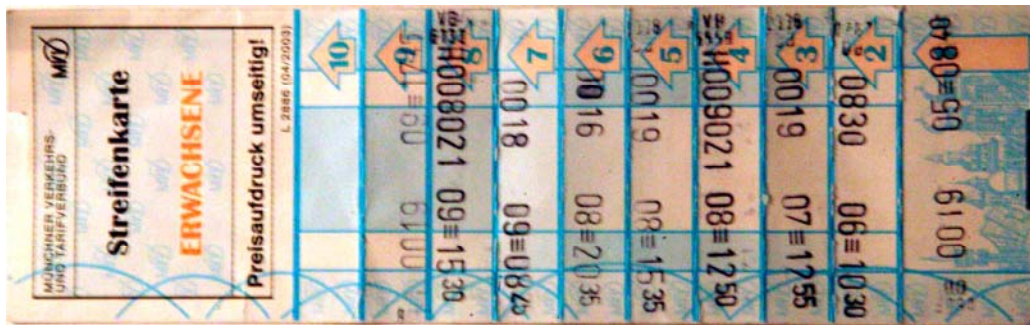


Life in München Captured on the S-Bahn

After six months in Germany (Munich, Eschborn and Frankfurt) as an auslander (foreigner) riding public transportation has been confined to Munich. My office, two mile from the apartment, is easily a thirty-five minute walk. Admittedly, the walk is through Munich's most historic area, but with the arrival of winter snows, alternative means of commuting to work became essential.

My first experiences with the U-Bahn, noted in the earlier newsletter, were tentative, as buying a ticket was an adventure in German. However, Elisabeth, you will remember her as my Relocation Maven, helped me purchase a ten ticket card: Streifenkarte, and demonstrated its use.



Streifenkarte – 10 Ride; 9 Used.

Germans use the card, time-stamped for each trip and multiple times when crossing several zones, to replace tickets and entrance gates. The Bahn runs on the honor system. Except for auslanders (foreigners – if you are not a native German, then you are a foreigner!), which are expected to abuse the system, everyone abides by the rules.

Abuse of the rules is a punishment offense and signs posted in each car read, Schwarz auf Weiss. Literally, the term means black on white, but the English interpretation is "it is as plain as black and white". And, Schwarzfahrer (black rider) is someone not paying the fare. Failing to pay the fare costs €40 and a report of your name and address to the authorities; you are probably mentioned in the Schwarzfahrer section of the S-Bahn newsletter in a manner similar to pictures on milk cartons, but Germans have been remiss in adopting that American custom, as yet.

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Occasionally, I must admit forgetting to stamp my ticket on the S-Bahn and I am in danger of making the newsletter. After all, those time stamp machines are right at the entrance to the S-Bahn, starring you in the face. I know I have been in Germany too long as the guilt, when this occurs, is palatable. However, there is one exception: going to the airport. One trip is €8. The money is not a problem, but purchasing a ticket to the airport using the ticket machine is just too much, particularly at 0530 (Oh dark hundred).

Fare evasion (Schwarzfahrer) is monitored by part-time employees or so I was led to believe. And, I believed that I was relatively safe from being busted by the time of day of my travels; mega early. Most Germans are not out and about at that early hour, much less part-time employees. After all these people supposedly are stay at home moms who go to work after the children are safely in school. That story was more than wrong!

Well, fare cards are reviewed by the S-Bahn police and these people have holstered 9 mm H&K semi-automatic pistols. Now, given German society's conformity, the uniforms would seem to be sufficient to frighten anyone. But, no, there's the gun holstered on a web belt. One look tells me do not make any furtive movements! Oh, one more thing, their uniforms are olive green with all the unit and rank patches topped with a stylish red beret.



The S-Bahn Police
"Wir sind da!" = We are here!

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Anywhere else, the red beret would be worn in a very jaunty manner and differently by person. Not so here, red berets are worn in the same manner by all. Appears there is a ten hour red-beret-wearing class as part of basic S-Bahn police training.

The other day riding the S-Bahn from the airport to Isartor; about a 35-minute trip, I'm in for a surprise. Shortly after leaving the airport the S-Bahn police walk to the front of the train, which is where I'm sitting, and loiter for a couple stops. All my warning signals flag me to get off at the next station and take the following train in twenty minutes. Play it safe, these police are not acting normally! Nah, it's an aberration, they will get off shortly. Nope, they walk to the back of the train and after a couple of stops I regain my comfort; that's false.

About fifteen minutes later, quietly reading, I hear someone say loudly, "fahrkarte, bitte", or "tickets, please". Yikes, I'm caught with nowhere to go; I am not about to run, remembering the gun! Fortunately, my ticket is time stamped at the airport, but that is where my fortune ends. Of course, I have planned for some time to play the "dumb" American. So, when the policeman, a young blonde guy (as expected!), says to me in German, "You have not paid enough", I respond in English, "Excuse, me.", and he immediately shifts to English. He explains I have not paid enough and that eight more blanks are required. He further explains that I will need to pay the fare or pay the fine. He says that if I have another ticket he can mark the fare then and be done with it. Ugh!

Fortunately, I have another ticket and start looking for it. But, in the heat of the moment, I cannot find it. You know how that works; panic overwhelms sight and rational thought. So, I look through every pocket, three times. Do you know how many pockets you have? Well in this case, I found the number to be fourteen counting my pants, suit coat and overcoat pockets. Making matters worse, my panic leads to a thorough backpack search, three times. Absolutely, cannot find this ticket. Meanwhile, the policeman sits on the seat across from me, waiting patiently. How much longer can I drag this drama out?

A couple in the seats across from me is watching this dramatic interaction with great concern. The woman says in English, "Oh, this fare system is so arcane and confusing." She, then, proceeds to look through her purse saying, "I'm trying to find my extra ticket to give to you." But, there's no joy here.

Now, desperate, I take bills from my pocket, turn to the policeman with €70 in my hand and say, "Lock me up, I will just have to pay the fine". Then, he asks me, "When was the last

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time you were in Munich?". Immediately, I respond, "a week ago". Next, he says, "Do you think it was two years ago?". Questioningly, I looked at him and he says, "If it has been that long, I will give you a warning". As he stands up and walks to the front of the train, dumbfounded, I say "Danke".

What a relief. No record; no reports to my employer, no newsletter photo. But, it does highlight the fact that I need to have a spare ticket. And, of course when I unload my pockets at the apartment, the spare ticket is in my wallet pocket. Why I could not find it remains a mystery to me.

My moment of infamy took fifteen minutes once again proving Warhol's law and exempting me from further fame for the remainder of my life. So, my brush with the law, demonstrated German compassion from fellow riders and by the police for a scofflaw and me chagrined. Not bad for a night's adventure.

Post Script. Since this incident I have been asked once for my fahrkarte and had close calls on two other occasions. I now have extra tickets stashed in my wallet.