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Marian Roth and Beverly Bekker, May 10, 1952, Berchtes Garden, Germany.

Courtesy of Beverly Bekker.

# An Encounter with David O. McKay

*Beverly Bekker*

*Beverly Bekker is a retired employee of LDS Social Services.*

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With high school graduation just behind us in June 1951, two very close friends and I were planning for careers as airline hostesses. We had to wait until we were twenty-one before we could make this a reality. In the meantime, we were going to work a year and then go to college for a couple of years to meet the airline requirements.

Six months after graduation, the father of one of my friends was recalled to active duty as an officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserves and was sent to Weisbaden, Germany. The United States was one of the occupying forces following World War II. The headquarters of the United States Air Force in Europe (USAFE) was Weisbaden. As soon as government housing was available, his family was to follow him. This was a shock to us three girls. Marian, their daughter, had no desire to go to Germany. She asked her parents if she might be able to remain in California, but her parents thought it best that she go with them.

Rather than break up our threesome, Marian began talking my other friend, Carlene, and me into the possibility of our joining her in Germany. Marian's parents approved of the idea and said that we could live with them and that we could undoubtedly get work with the U.S. Department of Civil Service. Carlene and I dismissed this idea as impossible for we felt we did not have enough money saved to even begin to get us to Germany. We all went to a travel agency to find out what the fare would be. To our surprise, the tourist class fare was within our means, and we figured that if we could work two more months, we could have enough money to go.

I will never forget the incident that proved to be a turning point in my life. I was at home eating dinner with my family when I popped the question, “Mom, what would you have done if you had had the opportunity to go to Germany at my age?” She answered, “I would have gone.” I said, “Well, I have the opportunity!” I excitedly went on to explain the details. Mother, I believe, was as excited as I was. But my stepfather, with a chorus from my brothers, said, “You aren’t going to let her go, are you?”

Mother replied, “Why not? I think it’s a wonderful opportunity!” Mother and I won out; Carlene also had the consent of her parents.

Carlene and I began to add more of our weekly checks to savings. We went to San Francisco with Marian, her mother, and her brother to apply for our passports. After we got our passports, we again went to San Francisco to the German Consulate office to apply for a German visa. In the meantime, we worked with the travel agency to make our reservations from Oakland, California, to Munich, Germany.

Our itinerary was to leave March 28, 1952, by United Airlines, with stops in Denver and Chicago and arrival at Idlewild Airport in New York. We planned to stay in New York City five days and depart from Hoboken, New Jersey, aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam* of the Holland American Lines. The trip to Rotterdam, Holland, would be eight days. We had train reservations from Rotterdam to Munich.

Marian and her mother and brother left Alameda on March 8 in their new Studebaker to drive to their port of exit. Their car would be shipped to Germany with their household goods. They were sent to remote housing in Starnberg, near Munich, until housing was available in Weisbaden.

Carlene and I and our families gathered at the Oakland Airport on the afternoon of March 28. With tears in our eyes, we said good-byes to our family and friends. Our plane left on schedule. There was enough light as the sun set to see the Sierra Nevadas covered with snow.

We arrived at Idlewild Airport about noon the next day. Carlene’s aunt and uncle from Long Island met us. We had reservations at the Times Square Hotel, but Mr. Simmons, Carlene’s uncle, told us that hotel was in the wrong part of town. They took us by cab to the Abbey Hotel near Rockefeller Square. Carlene’s uncle took us all out to dinner. Afterward, we walked down Fifth Avenue and Broadway and saw Times Square at night. It was quite an experience for us!

The next four days were packed with seeing Central Park, Rockefeller Plaza, the Statue of Liberty, and the Empire State Building. We

ate lunch at Sardi's and saw two live NBC radio and TV programs: *Winner Take All* and *Break the Bank*. We went to the Radio City Music Hall and saw *Singing in the Rain* and a good stage show.

On April 3 we packed and went to the pier at Hoboken. We were informed the ship would not be leaving until Monday, April 7, because of engine problems. They told us they were sorry but they had sent notices to our agents. We told them we were short on money. We walked out and started crying. Each of us put a skirt and blouse in my overnight bag and checked our suitcases with Holland America Lines. We met a nice German woman who had similar bad luck. She offered to show us an inexpensive way back to Manhattan. Then we took a bus to Long Island. Carlene's aunt, on hearing our situation, said that we could stay there until the departure of our ship. They were very good to us.

On April 7 the Simmonses took us by subway to Manhattan. Carlene and I went to the Port Authority Bus Terminal and got a bus to Hoboken. Then we bought some soda crackers and went to the pier. We showed our tickets and passports and went aboard. We explored the whole ship. We were two impressed teenagers! To quote my diary: "We were really thrilled with the first and cabin classes. They have carpeting all over and beautiful furniture, elevators and the whole works. Our room (tourist class) is pretty nice, but we share it with another lady. We had lunch at 12 noon when we left [the pier], and such food and service!"

Carlene needed the soda crackers on the third day out, as did our roommate. However, I did not get seasick. We had a wonderful voyage and wonderful food and met some wonderful people. We got acquainted with two Dutch crew members who taught us some Dutch. I guess I was worried about getting our train tickets at the railroad station. I had them teach me, "Have you tickets for us to Munich?" I still remember this question in Dutch.

On April 15 we docked at Rotterdam, Holland. We got off the ship and went through customs. We then went out front to hail a cab to the railroad station to check our baggage. The cab drivers could not understand English and kept passing us by. We had decided to wait until the crowd thinned out when we heard: "Do you girls want a taxi?" Surprised, we exclaimed: "You speak English!" We happily explained that we wanted to go to the Maas Railroad Station to check our baggage and to confirm our 7:00 p.m. reservations to Munich, Germany.

On the way to the railroad station, he explained that he had

learned to speak English while working with American soldiers during the war. When we arrived, he showed us where to confirm our reservations and he checked our luggage for us. Since it was still early in the day, he asked if we wanted to go downtown. We asked him if he knew of a restaurant that served American hamburgers. We had delightful meals on board the ship, but now we just wanted a hamburger. He drove us to a nice clean restaurant near the center of town. He went in with us to help us order our food. We were very grateful for all of his help. About fifteen minutes later, while we were eating our lunch, the waiter motioned to us that we were wanted on the phone.

To my surprise it was the taxi driver, who said that I had left my camera in the taxi and that he would be right back with it.

Upon his return, he asked if we would be interested in seeing the tulips. He went on to explain that the tulip fields were not far from Rotterdam and that we had arrived at the most beautiful time of the year. He went on to explain that he and his wife wanted to go and that if we would be willing to pay eight dollars to cover the gas, he thought he could arrange to take the afternoon off. We accepted with enthusiasm. What followed was a wonderful afternoon spent with the Kramers enjoying the beauty of Holland in the springtime. They took us to the Keukenhof (almost to Amsterdam), a wonderful flower exposition. On the way, there were canals and fields of tulips. At the end of the trip they took us to their apartment to freshen up and offered us some food. They played American records for us. They took us to the railroad station and stopped on the way and bought us some sandwiches to take with us on the train. They saw that we got on the train okay and stayed and waved good-bye. All this was done in kindness and friendship. This was the beginning of a long friendship.

On Wednesday, April 16, 1952, at 10:30 a.m. we arrived in Munich, Germany. Were we ever happy to see Mrs. Roth and Marian waiting for us! We had so much to share; we couldn't stop talking. We had lunch and changed some dollars to German marks. After some trouble getting our luggage, we succeeded in getting a train to Starnberg. Starnberg is a beautiful town out in the country next to a beautiful lake. During the occupation of Germany by the Allied Forces, homes were requisitioned for military personnel. Remote housing was furnished to dependents until housing could be obtained closer to the base or headquarters where the military person was serving. Not only was housing provided but also a maid was provided as well. Furstenfelbrook Airbase was about a forty-five-minute drive from Starnberg. At the airbase there was a commissary, post exchange, bowling alley, and

movie theater available to military dependents.

Colonel Roth came to Starnberg for the weekend. On Sunday he returned to Weisbaden with the three of us to interview for jobs and take the Civil Service tests. We were interviewed on Monday and tested on Tuesday. None of us passed the typing test because we were so nervous. Marian took her driver's test and license to drive in Germany. Colonel Roth turned the keys to the car over to Marian and showed her the way out of town and to the autobahn. We did get back to Starnberg but not by the straight route; Marian made some wrong turns.

Life in Starnberg was good. We learned to love this part of the country. We practiced our typing and shorthand every day. We gave each other timed practice tests. Carlene and Marian were tested again May 15 in Weisbaden. I did not go, as I had sprained my finger playing catch with Richard. Carlene passed; Marian was not so lucky. I attended Protestant church services with Mrs. Roth at Furstenfelbrook. Then I happened to see a notice at the post exchange of LDS Services in Munich. On Sunday, June 15, we drove to Munich and attended services at the German chapel. LDS missionaries greeted us. The first part of the services was all in German, and then we separated for classes. The Americans met together in a downstairs classroom. We introduced ourselves, and there were a lot of people from California and Utah. It felt so good to be among the Saints again. The following Sunday, Mrs. Roth attended with me.

On June 23 we found out we were all moving to Weisbaden to permanent housing. We found out that we had become quite attached to Starnberg. My diary stated: "Carlene and I took our last walk down by the canal and river and across the fields. We discussed how we were going to miss Starnberg . . . and everything." We completed our packing and the next day departed for Weisbaden in the Studebaker. Diary: "Richard and I sat on top of suitcases in the back seat almost all of the way to Weisbaden, and it wasn't very comfortable. We arrived about 7:00 p.m. and loaded all the stuff in the apartment."

On June 25 Carlene had a job interview and started work the next day. In the meantime, Marian and I practiced to retake the tests and checked out other sources for employment at other military facilities in the area. On June 30 Marian and I retook the Civil Service tests at USAFE and both of us passed. We were then told by the personnel office that we would be put on a waiting list for job interviews.

After attending LDS Church services in Munich, I wanted to make contact with the Weisbaden group. Colonel Roth had seen a poster at

the American Arms Hotel, where he lived during our stay in remote housing. I got the information and finally was able to make contact on July 1 with the group leader, Captain Savage. He indicated that he and his family lived across the street in the same apartment complex. He invited me to come over that evening to get information about the LDS Servicemen's Group. Carlene and I went over and we were told about the conference to be held the next day in Frankfurt. President David O. McKay would be presiding with President Cannon of the West German Mission. We were invited to go.

July 2, 1952, stands out as a pivotal experience in my life. In my diary I wrote: "I went (to Frankfurt) with Capt. Savage and wife, two missionaries from California and another nice guy (serviceman) named Jerry. . . . We went to the mission home and met some more people. Then . . . a guy named Bob Smith came with us and we went to Palmers Gardens, where the conference was held. It was a combined meeting of Germans and Americans. The speakers were President McKay's son and daughter-in-law, his wife, and then President McKay. President McKay gave us a wonderful message."

On July 2, 1952, I wrote a letter to my mother that summarized my feelings:

Hello there. I just came home from a wonderful conference at Frankfurt. Pres. McKay was there, and I have never met such a wonderful man in all my life. . . . Then we . . . had dinner and had a meeting for servicemen, dependents, American personnel, and missionaries at the German chapel. I have never been to such a wonderful meeting and never heard anyone so wonderful as Pres. McKay. Mom, it was inspiring and he had so much feeling. After the meeting I went up and said hello to him, and he shook my hand and he held it while he asked what I was doing in Germany. . . . My words wouldn't come out right. He kept a hold of my hand and looked me straight in the eyes, and I could feel the strength within him. He asked about me . . . and if I was getting on all right, and tears came to my eyes the Spirit was so forthcoming [strong]. Then I met Mrs. McKay, and she is a wonderful woman also. Mother, if I never knew it before, I know it now, that the Latter Day Saints is the true Church of Jesus Christ and I have a testimony to that; I feel it way down deep in my heart. Even as I write this now, I have tears in my eyes; the Spirit is so overwhelming in me. I just pray that I may be worthy of the many blessings that have been bestowed on me.

It has been so wonderful to be among these people today, and I am so very happy that they have such wonderful groups of service people and organized Mormon services all over . . . in Germany. Captain Savage is really a wonderful man, and the other boys are really wonderful guys!

As I look back to my experience as a nineteen-year-old traveling with my eighteen-year-old friend, I am grateful that we had the Simmonses in New York and the Kramers in Holland that looked after us. The Roths in Starnberg and Weisbaden were like substitute parents to us. I am ever so grateful for their kindness and example. I am so thankful the Lord looked over me and guided me. I felt a need to be with members of my faith. Having the opportunity to hear and meet President McKay became my conversion experience. I had a witness by the Holy Ghost that the Church was true and that David O. McKay was a prophet! I was blessed in my young life to have this testimony and to be nurtured, taught, and strengthened by so many members of the Church while I was there. **RE**