

[E45 – 100 Years DAAD | A conversation with Russell Berman | Dissertation Fellowship](#)

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Hanni Geist 0:08

Coffee Connections has been a fun side project of my work as the representative of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in the San Francisco office. In the past episodes I interviewed anyone with an interesting connection to Germany. This year, I will focus my interviews on DAAD alumni to celebrate its 100th anniversary. Since 1925, DAAD has supported around 3 million students and academics from Germany, Europe and worldwide. The history of DAAD began in the early 1920s with a vision. Carl Joachim Friedrich, a student from Heidelberg, acquired the first scholarships for young German academics to go to the US. His aim was to overcome Germany's academic isolation through international exchange. The first scholarship holders traveled to the US in 1924. For 100 years, DAAD has been promoting the international exchange of students, teachers and researchers. This episode features Russell Berman, who received DAAD funding twice, first for an exchange year in Munich in 1972 and a dissertation fellowship from 1977 through 1979.

Hanni Geist 1:19

My name is Hanni Geist. Welcome to Coffee. Connections.

Russell Berman is the Walter A. Haas professor in the Humanities appointed in the Departments of German studies and Comparative Literature at Stanford University. In 1997 he was awarded the Bundeswehr Verdienstkreuz (the Federal Service Cross) of the Federal Republic of Germany. He was also the president of the Modern Language Association, and he served as a senior advisor on the policy planning staff on the United States Department of State. He's also the senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he directs the working group on the Middle East and the Islamic world. And now, have a listen.

Russell Berman 1:58

My name is Russell Berman, and I benefited from Da de twice. I had a post BA, DAAD, a year in Munich, and then later, not that much later, but later, I had a Doktorandenstipendium (PhD scholarship) in a city that no longer exists, West Berlin. And that was for a year, but it was extended generously for a second year.

Hanni Geist 2:26

I looked up a little bit of information from you, and it was at the Free University of Berlin, which I also attended. I have a Magister from the Free University of Berlin.

Russell A. Berman 2:35

Well, Guten Tag Kommilitone,

Hanni Geist 2:39

What comes to mind when you think of your experiences?

Russell Berman 2:43

I'm very, very grateful to the DAAD that I benefited from those three years together tremendously. What comes to mind, enjoying being in Germany, benefiting from the academic opportunities, the memory of the different histories when I was there, you think about history and you remember the downside, I arrived in Munich in the post BA year, and this was in the aftermath of the tragedy at the Munich Olympics. So that that was one historical era, if I remember, that was the same year when Brezhnev visited Bonn, and that was a big deal back then. In contrast, five years later, I was arriving as a doctoral candidate at the FU University. And I arrived in the immediate aftermath of, well in the in the context of the Deutscher Herbst¹. So that was another political framing. So I think of those two, but I also think of the very wonderful time that I was able to enjoy in both those cities.

Hanni Geist 3:52

You had an interesting career already, a really accomplished researcher and administrator. So briefly, can you share a little bit about your life and what you've done, and maybe very specific the impact the DAAD scholarship had on your life?

Russell Berman 4:11

¹ Deutscher Herbst - The German Autumn refers to the period and political atmosphere in the Federal Republic of Germany during September and October 1977. This period was marked by a series of attacks by the Red Army Faction, a far-left militant group designated as a terrorist organization by the West German government.

The post BA scholarship, really, it turned me toward German Studies, which is, in fact, a term that only developed somewhat later, still spoke of Germanistik or Language and Literature, and that was a sort of career-deciding moment. I was not sure what I would do. But when I came back to the United States, and I didn't go immediately into graduate school, I found myself as someone who had spent more time in Germany than most Americans, unless you'd been in the military, because at that point, there were still lots of Americans in the military in Germany. And I ended up applying for graduate school and pursued a PhD in Germanic language and literatures at Washington University in St Louis, which was a very, very good experience. I only spent three years in the program. Because then the DAAD kidnapped me and brought me back to Berlin for the time I spent writing my dissertation. Now, without the DAAD, I might have made different career choices, and without the DAAD the second time, I probably would not have been able to write the dissertation I did. So it was all in all, a very, very good experience. It also got me to think about Germany, US - German relations, Europe, more than it would have otherwise, which is to say that when people apply for a DAAD, they must justify its funding. I suppose you focus on the real scholarship, on the *Wissenschaftlichkeit*², and that's obviously crucial. But there's also the consequences of just spending some time in a different *Lebenswelt*, in a different life world, and you develop different networks of friends, you have different kinds of experiences, some wonderful, some not necessarily wonderful, all interesting. And so I came back from my years in Germany as an expert in German Studies. But of course, the idea might be funding a chemist who doesn't come back as an expert in German Studies, but comes back as an expert in German chemistry, either it's been chemistry with some non scholarly familiarity with the nature of living in Europe.

Hanni Geist 6:15

So what was your research about? What was your dissertation about? Your focus?

Russell Berman 6:20

I wrote a dissertation on the development of literary criticism in the mass press in late 19th, early 20th century. So what's at stake is that not until the 1870s do you start having street sales of newspapers. Now we barely have newspapers. You only get the news on your phone, but many will remember that once upon a time, people had these big paper, broad sheets, which they would read, and we call them newspapers, and there's always a part of

² Wissenschaftlichkeit – academic merit

the newspaper that had book reviews, had culture discussions, the Feuilleton, before there was mass distribution of newspapers, news was circulated, especially through subscriptions, so there was a clear understanding of who was receiving the newspaper, who was reading it. But once you start selling it on the street, you have a very different sense of the public. So it was really about the structure of another guy, the structural transformation of the public sphere and its impact on the discourse about literature from the beginning of the Bismarck era through the beginning of the First World War. So very, you know, very niche, but it involved lots of lots of archival research, lots of library research, lots of thinking and lots of writing too. So I'm a big supporter of study abroad, but I think the conditions of study, whether it's college or graduate study, are different today than they were then. One reason, of course, is that back then, if you were abroad, you were really abroad, whereas today, social media keeps you in touch with people back home. That was unthinkable back then. So being abroad is existentially different today than it was then. You're not that far away. I would write letters to my parents, right? And they would say I wouldn't write enough. Today you could be in touch with them by email or Facebook every day. That makes you closer, but it also reduces the alterity of that time abroad. You're not that far away from home in terms of scholarship. Well, I think that students in college today are under much greater pressure to designate their career plans than my generation was in late 1960s early 1970s; the economy has changed, but also the urgency with which people sign up for careers. I don't necessarily envy young people today being asked that pressure, whereas back then, if anything, there was a pressure not to decide and to defer. And beyond that, the answer to your question is that it's going to depend on the field of scholarship, finding successful academic careers has become much more competitive than it was back then. So you have to think through whether it really makes sense career wise, to go abroad. Of course, if your field happens to be German as mine, it makes perfect sense. Still makes perfect sense, yeah, if your field is the natural sciences, well, you've got to decide whether you really want to take a leave from your network here and go overseas. The upside would be, well, you could develop a different network. So it's not necessarily a downside, but you have to be very strategic about career decisions they make.

Hanni Geist 9:55

Are there any other stories or memories that come to mind that you want to share? You had an experience in Munich for a year, I see, and then also at the University of Berlin, was two years. So quite a number of years as a young scholar.

Russell Berman 10:14

Yeah. Thank you very much to the DAAD.

Russell Berman 10:19

Oh, you know, I have very fond memories of both places. At this point. I don't have connections anymore in Munich, but I do have a network of friends in Berlin, with whom I still, whom I visit regularly. And so, you know, you develop friendships too, that you met at the university, some at the university, others, others, just socially. It's also, I also think about the changes in the two cities, obviously, in Berlin, but even in Munich, too. I have, I haven't been back that often, which I regret, because I just remember it as a beautiful city, but I go to the section of the city where I lived, and it's all been urban renewal. I don't recognize the street where I lived anymore. I don't say that as criticism, but things change. Cities change.

Hanni Geist 11:09

So if a young student would approach you and applying to DAAD funding. It's been a while that you applied for a funding, but a lot of the things are still similar when you apply for scholarships, what advice would you have?

Russell Berman 11:25

I would advise, especially undergraduates, if for the kind of post BA situation, I have no hesitation to urge people to do that. That's a great experience. Anybody under pressure to sign up for a career path, should take a deep breath and ask: Are you absolutely sure you want to do that, and if not, try something overseas, especially if you're open to pursuing another year of study? One thing that I wish I had known back then, maybe it wasn't as clear. And what I would urge young people to consider now would be, if you're going to spend a year in Germany at that post BA, stage, can you turn that into an MA, year? Can you walk away with another degree? That's a career building move that you might not have seen. I'm not even sure if that was possible back then. I certainly didn't knock on that door. I'm not mad at you for that. There are ways to combine the freedom that extra year experience, enhancing capacity of that year, with concrete career building, steps that students should think through.

Hanni Geist 12:38

And that was a combination of another question that I had, what advice you have also or wish you had known before going, but you already answered that in the previous answer. But maybe you have an additional thing to say, what you wish, maybe even a practical thing, maybe a research aspect, but maybe also, like a practical, personal thing that you wish you had known.

Russell Berman 12:59

So, you know, figure out how it's going to fit into your career plans. Figure out how that interfaces with the changing landscape of German higher education. I guess maybe I wish maybe DAAD had provided me, or had guided me to getting greater orientation about political, social, economic issues of the of the day. Maybe DAAD could have provided just some background reading about contemporary German politics or current events. You know, I figured it out after a while, but it would have been useful to have some guidance on that. Aside from that, you know, I'm sure the practical concerns of anybody going overseas today can't be that different from what they were then. Even though the institutional structures may have changed, how do you register with the police, going to the *Ausländerbehörde*³, to the university, these kinds of things?

Hanni Geist 13:53

It is important for international exchange. And you mentioned that that it's more than just studying, more than just research. It's the ambassador role you have when you go abroad. But maybe can you summarize why international exchange international relations and that experience also for young students who might not have otherwise the opportunity to engage with others in, maybe they are in states they never had a chance to leave, maybe they don't have a passport. Maybe they've not left their state. What would you say is the impact of that?

Russell Berman 14:29

There are many Americans who are cosmopolitan, but there are many more who aren't. If you're going to spend a year abroad, you're going to learn about the world from another

³ Immigration office

perspective, or perspectives, because you're going to meet more people, and not all Germans think the same things, but you're going to interact one way or another with a different public political discourse. You know, that's all for the good, if anything, you'll gain a perspective on US - German relations, how Germans perceive the US, which can be eye opening. If issues are at stake between the United States and Europe, for some participants in the DAAD program, that may not be important, and maybe just some minimal familiarity with the landscape would be useful. For others like myself, you become a political junkie and pay attention to all this stuff. So I follow the German news, fascinated by the pre-election discussion. But there may be others for whom that's not their cup of tea.

Hanni Geist 15:28

One of the questions I always like to ask in my podcast at the end is, what's your favorite place or places in Germany that are not well known sites that are maybe a little bit more personal, maybe a favorite cafe or something, where would that be for you?

Russell Berman 15:51

Oh man, you know there are several. I mean, I just remember the walks along the Isar river in the springtime, the river in Munich, just idyllic, and hiking in the Alps outside of Munich is wonderful. On the other hand. There's also a Prussian side, I guess I'm a water person. There's a cafe between the Hanse Viertel and Moabit on the Spree river. And they have a wonderful, special kind of *Torte* (cake), not *Turmtorte*, but something like that. I'm forgetting the name, but they have little garden out front, and it's lovely.

Hanni Geist 16:27

Berlin in the summer, you can't beat!

Russell Berman 16:31

Berlin in the spring, you can't beat either, you know, after the misery of the winter, yeah, gray, damp, yeah, not enough snow to be pretty, just enough fog to make it unpleasant, and then, like, overnight, you know, the trees are in blossom throughout the city. I'm very grateful to the DAAD, and I would urge, I'd especially urge a younger sort of college graduate to consider this as a way to find time to get off the prescribed route and maybe to rethink

before you really commit to a career path and for the more advanced potential applicants who are pursuing graduate work. German universities are just great. I mean, there aren't that many countries in the world with great universities and Germany is one of them. It's a very special opportunity. It's my understanding that a whole lot of university life actually is English language friendly, which was not the case when I was there. So don't succumb to language anxiety. Learning German is a good thing to do, but if you don't have it, you can still enter into that academic world successfully.

Hanni Geist 17:47

You just did my work in summarizing what we do and why you need to go to Germany. That's always what we say. So I appreciate that.

This was my first interview this year with DAD alumni to celebrate 100 years of international exchange with the German Academic Exchange service.

If you are an alumnus or alumna and you want to share your story, get in touch with me at geist@daad.de, or find me on LinkedIn.

Thanks for listening. I'll catch you at the next coffee break.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>