

# Life and Love in Berlin during the *Coronazeit* by Tyler Burns

**I studied abroad** at Stanford BOSP Berlin program in the fall of 2006. I returned to Berlin in the summer of 2007 to do a Krupp Internship at the Charité Hospital. This internship led to my decision to pursue a PhD. It was my familiarity with Berlin and my connection to the Charité that led me to return in 2017 to live here as an expat, working at the German Rheumatism Research



Center Berlin, a Leibniz Institute (DRFZ) as a bioinformatics postdoc, before taking my methods into the private sector and founding a German business: Burns Life Sciences Consulting GmbH.

My local friends from the summer of 2007 helped me get settled in. Through my work I met my wife. My strong connections to Stanford and my time studying abroad served as roots upon which I have built my adult life. Below, I detail how during these challenging times, these roots (along with a little luck) have been central to helping me get through every day.

## Getting married during the pandemic

I was very fortunate to have found the love of my life, Marie, shortly after moving to Berlin in 2017. During that time, I was a recent graduate from Stanford's Cancer Biology PhD program, having met my new employer at a conference a few months prior primarily by the fortunate happenstance of having the right conversations, connections, and drive at the right time. Marie is a native German, born and raised in the town of Erkner just to the east of Berlin. Marie and I were both working at the Charité, myself a postdoc and Marie a PhD student. I proposed to her in the summer of 2019, and we had a wedding planned for April 2020 at the Schloßcafé Köpenick in east Berlin that included my whole fam-

ily flying out for a week. As an aside, if you really want to improve your German, try asking your non-English-speaking significant other's parents for permission to marry their daughter.

In March, with the disturbing news coming from our neighbor Italy to the south and with Germany's first cases, it became clear that a wedding ceremony was not going to happen. Marie and I managed to book an appointment at the *Standesamt* (similar to city hall in the US) on March 19, during its final few days of operation and just before the most stringent *Ausgangsbeschränkungen* (shelter-in-place orders) were implemented. Three guests were allowed in the building. Two were Marie's closest friends, and one was my "best man" Udo, a Berlin native who I lived with over a decade ago in Wannsee when I was doing my Krupp Internship. There were no handshakes allowed but I was allowed to kiss the bride. The "reception" was a late lunch at our neighborhood mom-and-pop Italian restaurant, the kind of place where the server brings me my glass of cognac before I order it. We were perhaps the last sit-down customers before the restaurants were ordered to close. I



was disappointed that my family could not be here for this, but what mattered to me was that Marie and I would be able to ride out the coming storm, whatever that looked like, as husband and wife. The Germans wear the wedding band on the right hand, and that is where mine sits. The ceremony at the Schloßcafé Köpenick will still happen when it is safe for my family to travel again.

## A semblance of stability, wearing masks, and a reading list

There was a lockdown starting in March and lasting through the spring, which of course included panic buying – the Germans call this *Hamsterkauf*; picture a hamster stuffing its cheeks with food. Marie and I managed to avoid most of the chaos because I saw the panic buying happening in the US before it hit Germany. The shortages of largely toilet paper, frozen foods, and pasta only lasted a few weeks, as Germany managed to quickly adjust the supply and impose buying limits of "hot" items.

Fortunately, Germany managed to get the pandemic under control in time for summer. Every two weeks the **Robert Koch Institute** (Germany's CDC) would provide its recommendations to the government, based on the case counts and future projections. This usually meant that a handful of restrictions would be lifted every two weeks. The *Maskenpflicht* (mask-wearing rule) was introduced along with the slow and careful opening of non-essential businesses in different sectors. For me, the most important of these was being able to go to the gym again. My wife had been heavily entertained (and perhaps annoyed) as I spent the first wave of the virus deadlifting the heaviest pieces of furniture in our apartment. Overall, I was impressed and happy with how scientific the German government was in handling the first wave, which was a major morale boost for everyone here. We had a nice cause and effect story: we all but locked down the whole country, case numbers and deaths went down, and we (carefully) opened up again. Since June, I have been able to eat at restaurants (mainly outside, but not restricted to it), go to the gym, get my hair cut, and do most activities that don't involve crowds. We wear a mask any time we go into an enclosed space. We have a handful of "anti-maskers" just as there are in the US, but most Germans are following the rules so far.

From here, my wife and I are just trying to focus on what we can control. What that looks like for a US expat in Germany is as follows. I'm on the phone with my family every weekend and we are spending a lot of socially-distanced time with Marie's family in her hometown of Erkner. We just moved to a larger apartment, and our choice of living farther outside the ring (Zehlendorf, a 15min bike ride from the Stanford center in Dahlem) was motivated in part by the assumption of a virus-catalyzed domestic lifestyle and a few bouts of civil unrest happening closer to the city center (mainly anti-mask anti-lockdown protests). For my consulting business, I'm opting for fewer clients with longer contracts for the sake of income stability.

Finally, since the start of the pandemic I have been reading voraciously. I have chosen my books based on what "phase" of the pandemic we're in. I get my books from a very large bookstore (Dussman) in the middle of town that has a large English section. Stephen King's "The Stand" got me through the first wave, about a pandemic far worse than this one which paradoxically allowed me to sleep better at night. Seneca's "Letters from a Stoic" provided a roadmap for adapting to the new normal and preparing for the next wave and eventual second-order effects of these times. Tolstoy's "War and Peace" is keeping me company at the time of writing this (and at 1400 pages, it will for a while), which de-

picts in vivid detail what an unstable time in history is like as history is being written. I'm at peace with the realization that these current times are messy because history is messy and the human condition is messy.

## Conclusions

When I was at the BOSP Berlin program in 2006, I took Karen Kramer's "Culture and Politics in Germany" class, where she introduced us to the concept and rich history of the "rule-abiding German." Accordingly, a lot of the control of the virus boils down to following simple rules, like social distancing and wearing masks. It doesn't surprise me in this regard that Germany handled the first wave of the pandemic relatively well in comparison to some of our European neighbors.

With regards to my day-to-day life, a lot of the good luck I have experienced so far in Berlin during these times comes from connections to the past. I managed to avoid a lot of the panic buying in Berlin because I saw it brewing in the US. I made this connection because I had seen it before over a decade ago when I studied abroad here and did my Krupp Internship. I did these programs because Stanford and generous alumni donors brought together the right people at the right place at the right time to produce an amazing experience for generations of undergraduates. We've learned from this pandemic that history is messy as it's being written; but it is history, both personal and worldwide, that lights the path forward. ■

**Tyler Burns (Biology)** studied in Berlin in autumn 2006 and interned with the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin in summer 2007. Information about his consulting business can be found at: <https://www.tylerjburns.com>



Distant socializing at a rainy Corona party in the garden of the Villa, l-r: Konrad Riedel,

Facility & Technology Coordinator, Wolf-D. Junghanns, Krupp Internship Coordinator, Caitlin

Kraemer. long-term student aid from the TU Berlin.

