

## **The Berlin write up**

### **Friday 7/6/24**

I land at BER, I'm not anxious or worried I've done this sort of thing before, I have been somewhat less organised than I was for Paris a year ago but I think that is down to things outside my control. The journey into Berlin was uneventful, taking a bombardier talent2 to Friedrichstraße station, I was in the heart of the city. It felt a little daunting but exciting, I had made it to Berlin! The hostel was rather lacklustre I stayed in a dorm of 21 other people and there was a deafeningly large amount of snoring, thank god for ear plugs. I met an American who had just finished a year abroad in Bradford of all places he seemed to like it, we got Donner kebabs and talked of the differences in English and American culture, he was shocked that we drink so much, his college in America has a 100% ban on alcohol, I couldn't think of anything worse! We went back to the hostel and got a couple beers and met a German who had just moved here in hopes of escaping the very rule heavy German society, he explained that when speaking English he felt far freer and liberal but when he spoke German he felt overwhelmed by all the rules. A definite idea that had been passed to me was that Berlin is a far freer city than the rest of Germany, and I certainly felt that it was more liberal than Manchester which I was surprised at. I head to bed the beds are particularly squeaky.

### **Saturday 8/6/24**

When I woke I decided I would begin the day reading in Tempelhof Feld an old Airport that had closed and is now a park and community garden it is a really cool space, incredibly flat. As if one had been spawned into a super flat Minecraft seed. I went over to a covered pavilion like area and sat and began to eat my lunch of bread and garlic and herb spread (very nutritious) with a bottle of dragon fruit and pineapple soda.

A slight aside but I just want to mention the Pfand, it is basically the gamification of recycling drink ware, when you buy a drink in a bottle or can there is a Pfand Levy added onto the price, then when you finish the drink you put it on a machine and get a receipt that gives you money off next time you purchase something it is truly very fun and I do hope it catches on over here.

Anyway, I was approached by a German woman who asked if I was here for the community gardening afternoon, she was very lovely making comment about the songbirds around us trying to get the crumbs from my bread.

I found a section of the community garden that had seating and began reading, I couldn't quite concentrate for whatever reason, it was strikingly sunny and so I tried to find somewhere with a drop more shade, as I was wondering round I saw two folk whom I assumed were fellow travellers like myself, the man said "you're doing great sweetie" to his friend as they did an impromptu photo shoot. I don't quite know what drew me to do so but I told the woman I really love your shoes" they were platform docs with very cool laces, I asked where she was from and she asked me if I wanted to sit with them, I said yes. They were called Frederick and Matilde, he was from Australia and she was from Poland, they had lived in Berlin since about 2018, so they were certainly not travellers like I. We got talking about all sorts of politics, life in Germany, jobs and more, I felt it very interesting to talk to these people that were in the next stage of life, where I hope to be in a few years from now. We got onto the topic of sex where Matilde said she

recently realised she was bisexual, and had been on a date with a girl she met on hinge and had been asked if she wanted to have a threesome with a 20 year old, she showed Frederick and I pictures and the words “ I want to split you in two” were squarely messaged by this man, he had a very large member like 2 coke cans stacked on top each other! I was quite shocked but its Berlin and this I suppose is what happens here. The afternoon continued and Frederick said he was going to an Andy Warhol exhibition opening at the Neuer Nationalgalerie that evening, I asked if it were free and he said it was and asked if I wanted to come, I was excited an excuse to dress as an art student and wear my leather trousers.

I wont lie I looked good turning up to the gallery all black with leather trousers and a red neckerchief, I was really feeling myself. I meet Frederick and the two friends he was with, the nurse from new York and the software engineer from Poland, all of them looked very artsy I felt very at home there, I intend to go to more gallery openings they seem to attract very interesting folk. Frederick and I got in first we just wondered around, I was in awe.

After the gallery we went to get dinner in Schöneberger a part of Berlin known for being where the older queer folk reside, I did prefer it to the gay village of Manchester, it felt much more real and there was a sense of community one got when walking into the bars there, in Manchester it feels like you are only wanted for your money not the story you bring with you. There are a few places one can emulate Schöneberger in Manchester but nothing is ever as good as the original.

We ended up at Viktoria bar a nouveau Weimar era bar, it was packed the atmosphere was divine, shockingly enough one can still smoke inside in many places in Germany, I felt like I had walked into a scene from Cabaret, as if Sally Bowles herself was just around the corner. We moved to another bar it was a nautical themed gay men’s pub, it was very fun, Frederick and I talked for ages about what brought him to Berlin and what I wish to do with my future, I told him of my plan to study in Paris and potentially move there. He told me about how he came to Vienna for 6 months and then to Berlin to become an architect. It was wonderful. We all finished our drinks and took the Ubahn home, the nurse and software engineer went in one direction Frederick and I in another, we were on the same train for a while, my stop before his, I was half hoping he might ask me back to his but alas.

### **Sunday 9/6/24**

I woke quite late on Sunday but things always move far slower on a Sunday, especially in Europe, I didn’t drink a whole lot the night prior so I felt fine, just a little tired, at least the hostel had free coffee. I was to go to the touristy things today, Brandenburg tor, checkpoint Charlie and the east side gallery. The Brandenburg tor was particularly striking this huge gateway looming over the square. Going through it I found a park although much of it had been closed to prepare for the euros as Germany is hosting this year, a large led matrix screen was being constructed in front of the tor. I found a bench, sat and began to read, this time not getting distracted. I was reading Christopher Isherwood’s Goodbye to Berlin, its part diary part fiction, it is what inspired the musical Cabaret, which inspired me to visit Berlin. I felt it fitting to read whilst there. The park was lovely, sunny day and birds singing, it felt very odd to think I was in the middle of Germany’s capital, people watching was also particularly entertaining, seeing how people interact with each other and exist here was nice, to quote Isherwood, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.”

I texted Frederick asking if he wanted to grab drinks before I left, I was hopeful but would understand if it didn't happen as after all he is 27 And I am but 19. But he said yes and I was very excited.

I next went to checkpoint Charlie I was very struck by the little hut and sandbags in this now busy artery in the centre of the city, I was half expecting to be able to tell the difference between the American and communist sides by the architecture and vibe but in the last 30 years or so they have very much integrated with each other, there was however a McDonald's on the American side facing the checkpoint itself, I don't particularly like McDonald's but felt that it was an experience to go in and eat there, its potentially one of the most political McDonald's in the world, it felt like a shrine to capitalism and a reminder of who had won the cold war. Sinister is how I would describe it.

The east side gallery was particularly interesting wandering along this seemingly endless pavement with this large looming wall almost suffocating you was a different experience, the art however on the wall did bring a sense of hope at times and other times a sense of the human spirit, art is important it can convey so much meaning to so many different people making it accessible is particularly important. I sat briefly in the park and called my dad, not wanting to let onto everything that I had done thus far but wanted to check-in.

Unknowingly I was very close to Frederick's apartment, I was wondering just taking everything all in. The style of architecture was noticeably different from the western part of Berlin, it felt like there was more of a sense of community among the inhabitants. Being by the waterfront was lovely sitting and watching time pass. I felt free, no one knew me there I could be anyone, do anything, there was a time I forgot which day but I was looking for the entrance to a U Bahn station and I asked some folk that looked around my age, I used an American accent, not for any particular reason other than I could and it would have no affect on anything. When in Manchester I do feel this kind of freedom but to a lesser extent, I try to push myself a little bit each day, but more so when I go on these trips.

### **Monday 10/6/24**

Rising around 11 I headed to Bismarckstr to go to an army surplus store in search of a pair of Austrian military trousers, a friend recommended to me , alas they didn't seem to have them, but I found something almost as good, a vintage German military tracksuit The Bundeswehr. Its quite iconic and rather fun. Whimsical one may even say.

Anyway the next item on the agenda was Muji, for me its more of a pilgrimage than just a shop, the experience it has on ones sense really cannot be emulated no matter how hard I've tried. I wish there was one in Manchester. Its just such a peaceful and serene environment like one has just stepped into a village shop in rural japan But with all sorts of fabulous pens pencils and clothing attire.

Today was very much to be a day of missions, I had been entrusted to acquire Alpen Kräuter tea, I ended up in the mall of Berlin, and it had a surprisingly wonderful atmosphere although being bit of a maze to navigate it was nothing compared to the Arndale in Manchester. I ended up finding the tea in an Edeka, I didn't quite realise how many different types of tea the Germans drink I think there was well over 50 types in the midsize city supermarket. I sat down at one of

the tables in the mall attempted to charge my phone from the outlet but it didn't seem to work so ended up using my Power bank, a Danish man sat opposite me trying to charge his phone, I tried to explain in very broken German that the plug was broken "Das ist kaput", he had no idea what I was saying and honestly neither did I, he replied in perfect English, he was here for the day on a business meeting and his phone had died, I offered my Power bank for a few minutes as I sat. He had flown in for a meeting, he was here buying cosmetics for his daughters, he looked slightly out of place in the mall of Berlin, like an explorer scouting out new lands, moving slowly with his wheeled suitcase as to take in his surroundings and not miss anything. We parted ways as I went to explore the upper floors of the mall, as I left I saw him try and hail a taxi, I hope he's doing well. I left and went to find the boxers, a sculpture by Keith Haring, Haring is my favourite artist the things he stood for and the legacy he left behind after his death truly changed the world. It was quite a striking piece it felt to me as if it was the guard to the art and queer district of the city, I had walked past it on Saturday when I was walking to the Warhol exhibition. I headed back to the hostel I needed to get ready for drinks with Frederick!

I was on the S-Bahn to Ostbahnhof, it was packed I'd seem to have hit rush hour. In a way it was quite refreshing I was merely a dot on this train with probably hundreds of people on, all of us going to different places and seeing different people. I was anonymous, I was anyone. As I got off the train it began to rain, not too hard but enough for me to duck for cover under a bridge and pull my cagoule on over my head. The rain now coming down a little stronger I briskly walked following my trusty Google maps until finding Holzmarkt25. It felt very rustic but in a grungy Berlin way, I was standing under an awning to shelter from the rain best I could. I was slightly anxious my mind started to think what if he didn't come or couldn't make it. I quelled my mind "que sera, sera" he was wearing a long navy coat looking for me, I caught his eye and walked over. We got beers and sat under the trees to try and avoid the rain, we talked of the European elections that had happened the days prior, things had gone very right wing across Europe, completely against what I had predicted so confidently a few days ago, I felt a little like a Priestley character, my confident naivety was like that of Arthur Birling. We talked mostly of politics particularly those of Germany, Australia and the UK, I didn't know all that much of the former two so it was interesting to learn the opinions of an inhabitant. Frederick being an architect explained the style of the bar and the housing cooperative it was adjoined to, the idea was to make them not striking or permanent structures so that they could adapt to the changing needs of the people living there. The bar closed and we finished up and returned out Pfand Tokens, we left and began walking toward the station, he lived close to the station. He pointed out his Apartment, it was in this huge tower block, I believe built when this part of the city was still occupied by the USSR, surrounded by modernised commie blocks. It was very awe inspiring, all these people living their lives, all going down different paths and there I was with Frederick. He asked if I wanted to see his apartment, I said yes and followed him up to the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of this huge building, he lives alone and it was a lovely place, the perfect size for one person. He showed me the balcony the view was magnificent you could see all of Berlin, I wanted to stay and take it all in for ever.

We headed back inside and sat down on his sofa, I was conscious my proximity to him, I didn't want to come on too strong but also wanted to seem open. We talked for ages about where we came from, he was from the city that H2O just add water was filmed. There was a moment

where we stopped talking and everything in my was telling me to kiss him but I froze up and looked in his eyes for a bit then apologised for the British awkwardness, we moved on and continued talking, it was getting late and he said he had to be up in the morning, but then he kissed me and it was divine, we were on top of each other and then under each other, it was lovely. It was getting late, he had work in the morning and I had a city to explore! He went to the bathroom I started getting dressed again. I took a look in his mirror, I looked healthy, I felt really happy. It was another thing I had put my mind to and began to achieve it.

Frederick was in the next phase of life to me, It made my plan seem achievable like it wasn't this far off pipe dream that would never happen, if he can move across the world then I can absolutely move to Paris for a masters and then maybe Berlin or anywhere, I can let life take me.

I left Frederick's apartment gave him a kiss goodbye and wished him well life's journey, I took the elevator down and out of his building, the noticeboard with all the names of the residents caught my eye, there he was surrounded by all these Germanic names, "Caverndish 14<sup>th</sup> floor".

I was walking toward the train station to get home, I really couldn't believe myself I really am a free agent, I can do anything and I can be happy. I'm not scared anymore I know that things are going to be ok I just have to trust and work for it. I get back to the hostel and fall asleep.

## **Tuesday 11/6/24**

I had planned on going to the Funkturm tower and the schwules Museum but they were both closed, I think had I been a little more organised I would have managed to visit but I suppose that means I'll have to go back someday. I only found out they were closed after I had taken the Sbahn to the Funkturm and saw it was shut. There was a very weird retro futurist exhibition centre that loomed over me, it was unsettling, it was also in the middle of a highway intersection so I felt out of place there as a human. This concrete and steel oasis. I found a wall to sit on and rang Freya back, she rang me on the train and I didn't want to cause an annoyance, I gave her the debrief of the night before and she gave me the run down of her recent European adventures she is a lot of fun and incredibly talented. I decided I would checkout Alexanderplatz, it was an odd mix of old and new the TV tower right in front of you as you exit the station was quite astounding, it makes its mark on the city. I remember seeing it as I landed I felt a wave of excitement when I saw it. I wondered around trying to find a library or third space I could sit and read in, eventually finding a library. The architecture of it was beautiful far better than any library I've ever entered before, I sat in the large bright airy reading room they had the same desks as Frederick had, it was divine. I spent about 2 hours there just reading.

I left as I was beginning to get hungry, I decided to wander back to the hostel and find something to eat on my way there, I sat down and lit a cigarette, a bee landed on my leg, I became exhausted it dawned on me that I had barely eaten all day, I got very sad and in that moment I wanted to go home and say goodbye right there and then, it was a weird feeling suddenly everything felt grey and uninspiring, it was quickly solved as I got to Rewe and got some food, when I was back at the hostel I decided to have a nap before the concert, I was debating if I really wanted to go, I'm glad I did, it is always fun to see an artist alone, I can just enjoy the music and not worry if the people I'm with are having a good time, its really liberating. I ended up taking the tram there, I wish I had used the tram more its a lovely way to see the city without

walking. I managed to get there just as girli was getting on, I was right at the back but I am blessed with being tall so I still had a good view. I grabbed a drink at the hostel bar, forest Gump was playing, it was a good time to reflect on the last few days. I had seen the city and met her inhabitants, I'd learnt a lot, the path I'm on is a little clearer I know where I want to be in 5 or so years.

### **Wednesday 12/6/24**

I packed up my stuff from the hostel and checked out, the guy at the desk was cute. I walked out the door and it hit me it was just me and my backpack against the world I wandered for a little, pondering where to get breakfast, I found a nice cafe near to a tram stop and got a latte and pain au raisin (very German I know!), it was so peaceful everyone going about their lives, there was a sense of community there and I was merely passing through.

I headed to a park and read, watching the Berliners with dogs play fetch and teach them tricks, it was refreshing and real, I found that people didn't hassle each other and everyone was in their own world as it were. It began to rain so I decided to head for shelter and find a U Bahn Station to head to the airport. Just as I got to the street before the station the heavens opened and I sort shelter under a shop awning. It was oddly pretty seeing this residential area in the rain.

I took the U Bahn till the end of the line to Berlin Hauptbahnhof it is a huge beautiful station with 3 floors of trains, truly a marvel of engineering. I had about an hour and a half until my train to the airport departed, so I went trainspotting, I love trains. I got a call from Freya she was debating whether to leave Vienna and head to Prague or stay another night, for me it felt meaningful to walk around the station talking to her it gave me a sense of purpose whilst I saw people take journeys going all around Europe and beyond. She got on the bus and didn't regret it when she arrived. I continued walking for a bit seeing trains fast and slow, some coming from as far as the Balkans.

I headed to the platform for my train I was nervous to head back to Manchester, a part of me wanted to stay but I had to go back, there were some loose ends I had to tie off and some goodbyes to say before I moved out.

I texted Frederick for the final time, " Hey thank you so much for showing me around Berlin! It was so lovely to meet you. You gave me a much clearer path of how I hope to live my life. I hope we cross paths again." I hit send and boarded my train, I was feeling an overwhelming sense of sadness mixed with hope. I was leaving this city, it had only been 5 days but I really had in moments seen myself here, but when I'm older, I need to do more before returning. I need to let my garden grow in Manchester. I wept a little on the train but I suppose Sufjan Stevens does that to a person.

The airport was modern and efficient, the flight uneventful I was slightly adrift when I got to the airport. I arrived in Manchester and it hit me that I was home again, things were more expensive and often late. But its the people I know here that make it for me. I had lived a different life these past few days and now its back to reality. I suppose I had said "goodbye to Berlin" for now at least.