

Sean Workman

# Nanaimo to Bremen and Back, with Love



The author with the Bremen Town Musicians

Sean is the son of Nanaimo Notary Tiah Workman.

**O**n the way home from a soccer game with my mom Tiah, we stopped at a Starbucks' drive-thru.

While we were in line, I made an off-hand comment that it would be fun to go on a student exchange somewhere. Those words set off a chain reaction of phone calls and paperwork that would reach Kenneth Hegler and the British Columbia Heritage Language Association in Vancouver.

A year later in August, I found myself at Nanaimo's Cassidy Airport waiting to meet my exchange partner from Germany. I knew we shared a passion for soccer—football, for you international readers—but other than a few short conversations over the Internet, I didn't know much about him.



The Main Square in Bremen

Eventually Björn Schubert came through the doors. As awkward as the first few minutes were, our 10-week visit was filled with fun. I took pride in teaching him about my country, our diverse culture, and our rich history.

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Björn's time in Canada came and went quickly. The following March, I was to take the long flight over the Atlantic to Germany. First, I flew to Vancouver and finally met Ken Hegler, who was to become a close friend. He escorted our group of exchange students overseas and back.

During the flight, I spoke with the other exchange students. The general consensus was that we were all nervous. We would be living in a strange new country with families we had never met. With our elementary grasp of the German language, I knew this was going to be interesting.

My new family—the Schuberts—drove me through the town of Bremen to their home. I couldn't check the goofy grin that crept across my face while I was looking at the amazing buildings. They were only the beginning of myriad differences I was to experience during my stay in Germany.

Here in Canada, one person may grab a quick bite of food and head out the door while another family member may eat later or we might find ourselves sitting down to eat in front of the TV. In Germany, the entire family—including Oma, Grandma—sits down together to have dinner.

In Germany, yardwork includes family, too. I don't mean mowing the lawn or raking leaves. When it came time to cultivate the garden where the Schubert's were growing their potatoes—we ate a *lot* of potatoes—and other vegetables, the entire extended family came out, including aunts, uncles, and cousins.



With Björn and Miroslav Klose (Top Scorer World Cup 2006)



Sean's school in Germany: Hermann Boese Gymnasium



Bremen Town Hall

School in Germany is also atypical. To begin, I had to take a train to get there and the building looked quite a bit like a castle. At home, I take a 5-minute walk to a generic, tan-coloured cement-block building. It also took a while to adjust to the seemingly endless class changes in Germany's linear school system.

My first day of school, it was a serious shock to my system to find my classes were conducted in German. They sure weren't studying the past tense of verbs. Turns out they were beginning to cover the German equivalent of William Shakespeare.

My first week there was filled with new experiences. I had a constant headache because my mind could not comprehend the German that was flying around; the words simply became noise. Thankfully, over time, I was able to understand more and more and by the end of my 10-week trip, I understood a great deal. My crowning achievement was following the plot of a German movie with no help whatsoever!

I was pretty proud. My German certainly improved enormously during my stay and when I returned to Canada, I was able to freely converse with the German exchange students in Nanaimo.

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My new-found grasp of the German language wasn't the only thing I had brought back with me. Not that when I departed, I was timid boy with no social skills. But I was far more confident than I had ever been before. Meeting new people and going new places no longer generated butterflies of any sort. I could stand up in front of hundreds of people and do or say anything without a second thought.

I also had new appreciation for the diverse and, more important,



The Roland

integrated society in which we live. That isn't to say in Germany there aren't people of all different races or religions, but they don't mix. Each group more or less keeps to itself.

I began to realize how beautiful it is that Canada can have a society where a Muslim with parents from India or Pakistan could be best friends with a guy from Korea. The amount of cultural diversity and acceptance in Canada amazes me *more* now than it ever had before.

Funny that I had to fly halfway around the world to truly and deeply appreciate my own country. ▲



Dinner with Björn's parents

Left: With friends from school