

Foreign studies

by [Steven Peterson](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

Twenty-six jet-lagged college students
arrive in Freiburg, Germany,
starting their semester abroad.
On their first day they tour the *Altstadt*
under a low, cold winter sun.
Around a great Gothic cathedral
is a wide cobbled *Münsterplatz*
where they try out their classroom German—
Ich möchte Mittagessen kaufen—
for bratwurst from a food-truck grill.

Revived by lunch and winter's chill,
they enter the cathedral, finding
its stony darkness colder still.
For here their guide, a local woman,
once a girl who had witnessed it,
tells them about the War—*der Krieg*—
when nearly every Freiburg building
was burned one night by Allied planes.
She says those planes spared this cathedral;
the bombers used its cross—*“ihr Kreuz,*
what God could see if looking down”—
as a reference point to drop their loads
around a cross soon ringed with fire.
Four years before this, she then adds,
all of the Jews in town were seized
and later murdered in the camps.

She looks at them with such deep sorrow
none of them knows quite what to say.
What these students may say, someday,
is what they now begin to learn.