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Burt, the New-Wave Diplomat

Rocking the Staid West Germans, the Young U.S. Ambassador Launches a Charm Offensive

By William Drozdiak
Washington Post Foreign Service

BONN—In the Bohemian quarter of West Berlin known as Kreuzberg, where avant-garde artists and Turkish migrant workers enjoy cheap rents and free-spirited life styles flush against the Wall, a local band called the Subtones was belting out a few tunes from the 1960s when an American fan asked if he could sit in.

Seizing the microphone in the recording studio with relish, the United States ambassador to West Germany, Richard R. Burt, let down his premature gray hair and wailed some favorite oldies such as "Teenager in Love" and "Tell Me" with backup help from group singer Tommy Lamour.

Later, after a round of beer and reminiscences about the music of the Doors and Jimi Hendrix, Burt was presented by his hosts with a tape of the impromptu jam session. "I'm going to play this to my wife all day long," the envoy gushed with a touch of pride.

Said Gahl Hodges Burt with a grimace: "I'll buy myself some earplugs."

The foray into Berlin's rock scene was not atypical for the brash young arms control expert, whose enthusiasm for heavy metal sounds is well known to his Washington friends, with whom he used to frequent Club Soda, the rock revival spot in Cleveland Park.

And once, while attending a Dire Straits concert in the divided city, Burt was whisked backstage to meet guitarist Mark Knopfler, one of his musical idols. After a friendly chat, the young ambassador gave the rock star a copy of "Deadly Gambits," the book by Time magazine's Washington bureau chief Strobe Talbott that describes the nuclear policy battles in President Reagan's first term waged primarily between Burt and his Pentagon rival Richard Perle.

West Germany's staid diplomatic circuit rarely has endured such a generation shock as occurred last September, when the septuagenarian Arthur Burns was replaced by Burt, still in his thirties, to run what is considered America's largest and most important embassy in continental Western Europe.

Burns was revered by his peers and the Germans alike as a modern-day Nestor who exuded sagacity and discretion. His fondest passions were economics, classical music and his own oil paintings, which decorated the sprawling ambassadorial residence on the banks of the Rhine.

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While acting as her husband's unofficial adviser, and occasionally curbing his rock fantasies, Gahl also gets to share in some of the more rewarding aspects of diplomatic life. Both of them count the release of Soviet dissident Anatoly Shcharansky on Feb. 11 as one of the most moving events in which they have participated.

Burt was a pivotal figure in early soundings about negotiating Shcharansky's freedom as assistant secretary for European affairs, and when he became ambassador in Bonn he became intimately involved in the delicate dealings among Washington, Bonn and East Berlin that culminated in the dramatic events on Berlin's Glienicke Bridge.

Burt recalled being struck by Shcharansky's remarkable good humor and open-minded view of life as he escorted him off the bridge and into a limousine. When they arrived at Tempelhof military airport, where Shcharansky would depart on a plane to meet his wife whom he had not seen since the day after their wedding in 1974, Gahl Burt offered the freed dissident a gift of wine and fruit. He tore open the package and began devouring the strawberries, expressing astonishment over their size and freshness. Later, when their plane was halted on takeoff because of frozen brakes, Shcharansky turned to Burt and said with a twinkle in his eye: "American technology? I thought this only happened in the Soviet Union."

The job as United States ambassador to West Germany has been described as one of the most elaborate postings in diplomacy. In addition to duties as envoy to Bonn, he acts as the chief American representative in West Berlin, where the United States shares ultimate governing authority as one of three western allied powers responsible for the city. The Bonn ambassador also serves as ranking civilian leader for more than 200,000 American troops stationed in West Germany and Berlin.

"If you are not careful the job will run you," Burt says when asked what is the most difficult part of the ambassador's post. "You have to depend on people to give you good advice on how to spend your time."

RICHARD BURT

His route to the ambassadorship was sometimes circuitous. In 1977, Burt was assistant director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and started to write newspaper "think pieces." By 1979, he was the New York Times' national security affairs reporter and well on his way to becoming controversial. He infuriated U.S. intelligence sources when he wrote a story in June 1979 about a Norwegian site under consideration to replace Iranian listening posts and U2 flights over Turkey as one means of verifying Soviet compliance with the SALT II treaty.

"You don't have to read anything less juvenile than Richard Burt to see Zbigniew Brzezinski's lips move while Burt writes," State Department spokesman Hodding Carter told The Boston Globe in July 1980. (Carter said recently his opinion of Burt has changed since then. "He's in a different world now, on the operating side. He's obviously performing very well now," Carter said.)

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