

OUR 1974 FORD PINTO STATION WAGON

Although my wife and I are both native born Americans, we lived 38 years in Austria. Two of our three children were born there and one married an Austrian girl and gave us four Austrian grandchildren. We served with an international mission, operating a print shop that produced tons of literature that was smuggled through the Iron Curtain. I later helped to establish an international youth organization.

Every four years, we returned to America to visit family and friends for a few months. Because cars were expensive in Austria and 30% sales tax was added, I decided that we should attempt to buy a small car to take back with us. I was careful to study Austrian laws regarding imports. We would have to be out of the country for at least one year and have owned and driven the vehicle for at least six months prior to reentry. We would not be permitted to sell the vehicle in Austria for two years from the date of entry unless we paid all the taxes and duty.

Our normal stay in the USA was a few months, but in 1973-74, we stayed an entire year in our homeland because of our children's schooling. This would be our only opportunity to import a car, so I started researching prospects. With the high cost of gasoline in Europe, a "muscle car" was of course out of the question, but General Motors had come out with an economical Vega and Ford countered with the Pinto. Both had station wagon models.

In December of 1973, we bought a 1974 Pinto Station Wagon. The new price was only \$2,782 with tinted glass. Following the 1974 Arab oil embargo, demand for economical cars increased and prices shot up accordingly. It had the economical German 2-liter motor and standard transmission.





We actually had two Ford wagons while in the USA. I drove the '68 LTD more because we didn't want to pile up mileage on the Pinto and you couldn't ask for a better ride than the LTD! It was the only time we ever drove across the country and back.



When it was time to return to Europe, I added a trailer hitch, a roof rack from an Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser, an after market wind deflector to keep the back window clean and a set of aluminum wheels with wider tires.

The SS France was to make its final Atlantic crossing before being sold to Norway. We stood on the deck of the ship watching dock workers load containers, crates, cars, boats and campers into the hold of the largest passenger liner afloat. After fifteen minutes, we still hadn't seen our car, so I asked a lady standing next to us if she had seen them load a metallic bronze station wagon.

"Oh no!" she responded, "Was that your car?" She then told us that a cable had snapped during loading and the car fell four decks down to the bottom of the ship! It was totally demolished! Our heats sank. "Are you sure it was a metallic bronze-colored station wagon -- was it a Ford Pinto?" She said that she didn't know what make the car was, but it was definitely a metallic bronze station wagon!

I ran down to the purser's office and tried to get information, but there had been no report of a damaged car. It wasn't until we were several hours out to sea that we received word on the car. The wrecked car was indeed a bronze station wagon; but it was an American Motors "Ambassador," registered in Canada. Our car was not damaged. When we arrived in France, we saw the wrecked vehicle lying on the pier. We

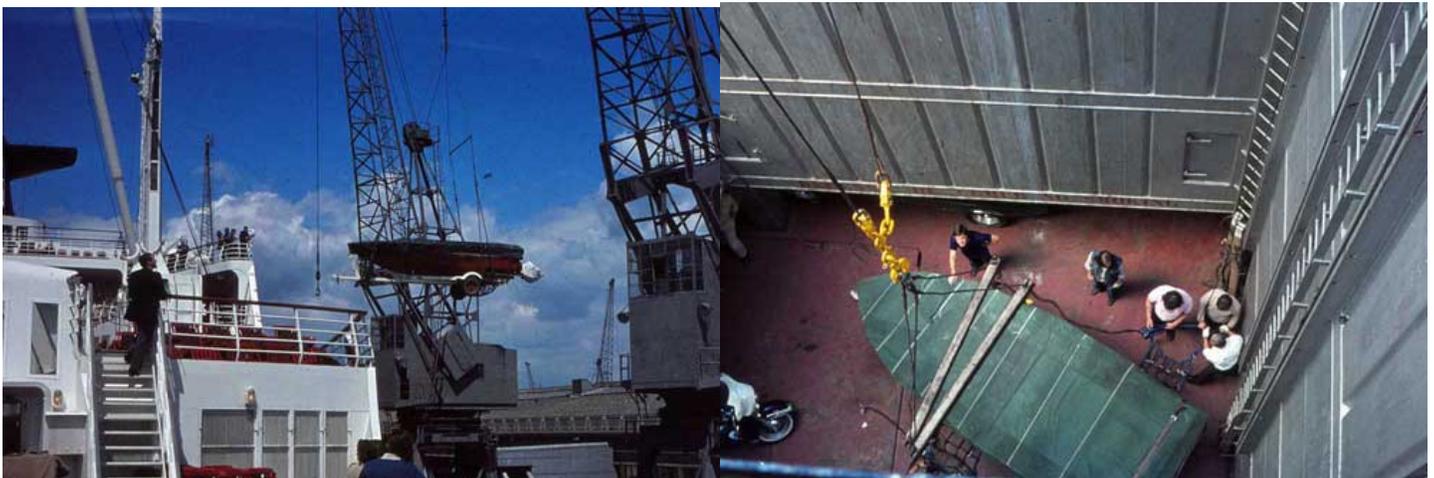
also watched a dock worker drive another luxury car over a large wooden block. The car got jammed and would move neither forward nor backward. The worker kept gunning the motor in an attempt to free the car until the automatic transmission housing was punctured and oil gushed out onto the pier. We thanked God for His protection.



Our Pinto, camper and truckload of printing equipment



Our car and camper in the center - a Vega wagon on the right



FUN WITH USA LICENSE PLATES

After returning to Austria, we had three months to get the car registered. We drove with New Jersey tags for a while and had several memorable experiences.

A friend accompanied me to visit an elderly lady in Steyr. I parked the car in what is called a “short park zone.” There are no parking meters in Austria, but drivers place a plastic or cardboard clock in the windshield showing the time of arrival. If a policeman sees that the hour-and-a-half time limit has expired or that the clock was set wrong (some try cheating), the owner gets a ticket. I had not yet gotten a “parking clock” but since we were only stopping for a minute or two and had New Jersey plates, I thought it wouldn’t matter. When we returned to the car, a policeman had just placed a ticket under the windshield wiper. While the policeman watched from across the street, I reached for the ticket, studied it for a minute, and asked my friend in English if he could read it. He shrugged. I took the ticket and speared it onto the radio antenna and drove away. I often wonder if the officer sent our ticket to “Garden State NJ” to collect the \$2 fine!



We visited the Austrian equivalent of a county fair, but every parking space within a mile of the fair grounds was filled. There were a few open spaces right next to the entrance, but a sign declared that those spaces were reserved for dignitaries such as important politicians. A policeman was standing next to them to make certain that no one else used them. I drove right into one of the empty spots, greeted the policeman with a friendly smile, and asked in English if I was allowed to park there. He smiled back and wished me a good day in English. After several hours, we returned to our car. As I unlocked the door, I again exchanged greetings with the friendly policeman guarding our car.

The city of Linz was in the midst of several ambitious building projects and planning several more. Because these cost a lot of tax money, there are always a good number of critics who argue against the necessity of such ventures. City officials decided to display models of future projects and invite the public to view them, ask questions and express their opinions. The exhibit was on Sunday and we were all dressed in our Sunday best for church when we drove up to the main entrance at opening time.

Several Mercedes and BMW limousines were already parked at the curb and a group of distinguished-looking gentlemen stood near them, chatting and smoking. I parked our Pinto, got out and opened the door for my wife and the children. We were the focal point of attention as we marched into the building.

An important looking man greeted us and gave us a royal tour of the displays sharing detailed explanations and asking if we had any questions. Unknown to me, the first half hour was for special dignitaries, the press and politicians. Looking at my watch, I said that we really didn't have much time, and that I was actually interested in the new highway and cloverleaf projects planned for the city. He

graciously obliged and began elaborating on the necessity, cost and other details of the projects. Much to Verna's chagrin, I examined the model of a cloverleaf and asked where the bicycle path was. He studied the model and then looked at the plans on paper. With embarrassment, he admitted that this aspect had apparently been overlooked. He hastily thanked me for my insight and added that he would make note of this for the engineers. When we walked back to the car, I could feel eyes following us and knew what those men were asking each other: "Who on earth are they?" Whenever I drove on that cloverleaf and saw the bicycle path, I was reminded of that Sunday!

Not every experience we had was enjoyable. My wife and I drove into the city one hot day to pick up an item. I ran into the shop while Verna waited in the car. A man of about fifty walked by, stopped, looked at the license plates and muttered, "USA - [expletive deleted]!" Then he took a few steps backward and spit on my wife through the open car window!

GETTING AUSTRIAN TAGS

After all the trouble I had been through getting our daughter's birth certificate, I did my homework well before importing a car. I studied every law relating to imported vehicles and made certain that I had all the necessary papers, translations and documents in my briefcase before driving to the customs office. The car needed to clear customs before I could get it registered.

When it was my turn, I greeted the official using his proper title and explained my errand briefly. I then said that I realized this was a very complicated process and that I was very likely missing some piece of paper, a stamp or permit. Then I laid one document after another on his desk, quoting the laws, rulings and stipulations pertaining to that particular item. When everything was lying in order, I again apologized that I was not experienced at this sort of thing and asked him to let me know what was missing. He was obviously not accustomed to that kind of efficiency and studied everything carefully. Finally, he said that all was in order and stamped "duty free" on my car title.

The next step was to get the car through inspection. At the inspection station, an official saw that all my papers were in order and sent me to a bay where the car was examined in detail. I had already changed the headlights and taillights to conform to Austrian standards. Using a special paint, I painted the inside of the backup light lenses amber and wired the bulbs as signal lights. I then mounted a back-up light on the bumper. Sealed beam headlights were actually better than the simple lamps used in Europe, but they had to be exchanged anyway. A mechanic got in the car to start it, but nothing happened. I explained that he needed to hook up the seat belt before it would start. He muttered something under his breath and obliged. When he unbelted himself with the motor running, a buzzer sounded and he wanted to know what that was for. He shook his head in disbelief when I told him how safety conscious Americans were. After shoving a rod up the exhaust pipe, he checked the emissions gauge on his machine. It didn't move. He pressed down on the gas, but the needle just barely moved. Angrily, he cursed and gave the machine a kick with his foot. I had to explain that Americans were very concerned about their environment. This car had no catalytic converter, but it had pollution controls!

Once the car passed inspection, I headed for home, elated that everything had gone so well. It was only noon, but the Motor Vehicle Agency was only open mornings. I had to wait until the following day to get tags and registration.



I was one of the first in line at the motor vehicle agency. When I got to the window, I placed my pile of documents on the counter and explained what I was after in as friendly a tone as possible. The agent leafed through the papers carefully, stopping to study some of them more carefully. Finally satisfied that everything was in order, he pulled out a pair of tags and started to type. I realized that he was going to give me temporary tags, which are normally only given to migrant laborers. I said, "Excuse me Sir, but I live permanently in Austria. I have always been issued regular Austrian plates." He must have had a spat with his spouse that morning, because he was really gruff. "You are a foreigner!" he said, "You get temporary tags!" I knew what this would mean. I would be stopped repeatedly by the police to see if my papers were in order. The tags cost nearly double and had to be renewed each year. I attempted again to convince the agent, "If you check your file, Sir, you will see that my last car had regular tags. I have lived here for many years." He was not about to change his mind and let me know in no uncertain terms. Having no recourse, I said nothing more and accepted the tags.

We had also brought a used Apache fold-out tent camper. Because we hadn't owned it more than six months before our arrival in Austria, I knew that we would have to pay import duty. The trailer was twelve years old and only cost \$125 dollars, so I wasn't too concerned about this. I went through the same process with the trailer as with the car. The customs officer recognized me right away and took care of the matter in short order. Looking in a big book, he wrote down the distance between America and Austria, multiplying this by a sum of Austrian money. Then he calculated the exchange rate for what I had paid and added this to his other figure. I wound up paying \$200, but didn't complain. We had saved that much in shipping costs by hauling our own baggage and printing equipment from the ship.

At the inspection station, the same man who checked out the Pinto, took care of the trailer. I had changed the lights already, but he said that I would have to remove the four jacks from the corners of the trailer. No sharp edges were permitted in Austria! I got out my tools and unbolted the scissor jacks. While I was doing so, the inspector said, "You can remount them when you get home. No one is going to check on it."

The following day I was at the Motor Vehicle Agency again. The same man at the counter took one look at my papers and asked for my car registration - the one he had just issued two days earlier. He glanced at the document and said with a harsh tone, "I can't issue you tags for the trailer." I wanted to know what papers were missing. He said that nothing was missing. Austrian law requires that a trailer have the same type of tags as the vehicle towing it. There were no temporary tags for trailers. I argued, "But I paid duty for this and it also cost money to get inspected; I must certainly be able to get tags for it!" He assured me that this was not possible. After considering for a moment, I said, "Well then, you will have to give me regular tags for both vehicles." With a note of finality in his voice, he let me know that no amount of argumentation would be of any benefit. I didn't really need the trailer at that time, so decided to return at a later date.

I checked with the Austrian Touring Club and a lawyer, but they said there was nothing I could do unless the official changed his mind. I understood. If I bribed him, he would likely change his mind. Austrian called this "a grease job." An Austrian Pastor once told me that he paid a bribe to get his marriage license and always feared God would not bless his family! In some third world countries, foreigners must bribe postal workers to get their mail! Knowing that these poor people were paid far less, they consider it a tip. I was not about to bribe an agent who received a good salary, however!

When summer arrived, we wanted to use the trailer for our vacation, so I returned to the Agency and courteously requested regular tags for the car and trailer. The agent recognized me and refused to give me the tags. I was prepared for his response and argued that many other foreigners in Linz had regular tags. Why did he give them preference over me? He answered, "The gods were with them!" I pulled a list of names and addresses from my briefcase (important Austrians always carry briefcases), I raised my voice so that others could hear and said, "All the people on this list are foreigners like me, and you have issued them regular tags. Some of them have a Doctor's title in front of their name and others are high ranking officials who work in the VOEST Steel Mill. I don't know and don't care how they got regular tags - perhaps they paid an extra fee. But I promise you that either I get normal tags, or these people will be issued temporary ones like mine. I am prepared to take this to court if necessary."

The agent glanced at my list and saw that I was not bluffing. He said, "Just a moment while I make a phone call." I was familiar with that trick and knew I had won! He picked up the phone and talked briefly with a fictitious person on the other end. After he hung up, he returned and said that he had gotten permission to make an exception in my case.

Months later, I accompanied Verna to the same office to pick up her driver's license. We had to walk by the window of the same agent and he spotted me from a distance. He said, "Good morning, Mr. Harvey, is there anything I can do for you today?"

GOOD DEAL

We were able to import our Ford Pinto duty free under the condition that we not sell it for two years. The Pinto was only a four passenger vehicle and our three children were growing. Soon we faced a battle every time we took a longer trip. "I don't want to sit on the hump again!" The Pinto is a pony and our daughter loved to ride horses, she hated that "saddle" over the driveshaft tunnel! Taking turns was not a solution, for the boys were both so tall that they blocked my rear view mirror. We were all anxiously awaiting November 1, 1976, the day when we could sell our Pinto without paying import duty and sales tax.

In October already, I started scanning newspaper ads for a five passenger station wagon. Having already owned at many Fords, this was my preference. Near the end of the month, on a Monday morning, I saw a small advertisement for a German Ford Taunus station wagon. Although the ad claimed that the car was a 1976 model, it was listed for only half the new price. I assumed that there was a printing error or that it had been in an accident. I called the number given and reached a BMW dealership. The car was indeed a 1976 model and only ten months old. Upon questioning, the salesman said that it had not been in an accident, had only 6,000 miles (10,000 kilometers) on the odometer and was still under the new-car warranty. The price given in the newspaper was also correct. The dealer had taken it in trade on a new vehicle, but the present owner was still driving it until his new car was ready for delivery. The person on the phone said, "If you come by Wednesday morning, we will have the car cleaned and ready for a test drive."

I decided to check out the car. Tuesday was a rainy day, and in the afternoon I had to run some errands in town. It was about 4:00 PM when I was finished, so I decided to make a detour to the BMW agency fifteen miles away. Shortly before I drove into town, I spotted a Ford station wagon traveling several cars ahead, that matched the description of the one advertised. Sure enough, it turned into the dealership and I pulled up right behind it. I politely asked the driver if he was trading the car in for a new one, and he replied affirmatively. I asked if there was anything wrong with the car and he said "no." A salesman approached and led him to his new car. After a few minutes, he returned to take the tags off. He saw me looking at the car and asked if I would like to take a test drive.

After a short drive, the salesman asked if I liked the car. I said that I wanted the car but had no money with me. He replied that it wouldn't matter; I could pay for the vehicle when I picked it up. I probably never bought a car as fast as I bought that one!

When I got home, I told Verna that I had seen the car and that it was everything the dealer had promised. She was excited and asked how soon we could get it. I tried to look dejected and replied, "The car is already sold." Now she looked like she was ready to cry, so I quickly added, "...to us!" I pulled out the sales contract and shoved it under her nose. "The salesman said we don't have to pay for it until we pick it up," I stated elatedly.

A businessman of our acquaintance had recently purchased a car just like this one, except for the color. I called him and told him about my lucky find. He responded in unbelief at first, but when I assured him that I was not joking, he asked, "Did you read the small print on the back?" He continued, "If no down payment has been made, the dealer often reserves the right to sell the car to another paying customer." We quickly examined the contract and found this to be the case. When I told him, he surprised me by saying, "Come to my shop first thing tomorrow. I will stop by the bank and get the money so you can pay for it before someone else gets it. That way, you can take your time and try to get the best price for your other car."



The following morning, I picked up the money and drove to the dealership. The wife of the dealer met me and when I explained my business, she said, "You know you got a good deal, don't you?" I nodded with a smile. She then told me that after I left, at least ten prospective customers came to look at that car. One of them was so angry when he heard that it was sold, that he put a large sign on the side of his car and picketed the agency for unfair business practices! He was convinced that the ad was only a trick to entice people to come to the agency. She said that her husband got out his "blue book" which gives the normal selling prices of used cars. He almost fell over when he saw how cheaply he had sold the car. After the paper work was completed and the title was in my hand, I mentioned the small print on the back of the sales contract, saying that I was afraid they would sell to someone else. She answered that they had never done such a thing... but then added, "If you had not come by this morning, we might have been tempted!"

I polished our 3-year-old Pinto and parked it along a busy highway near our home. We got \$1,200 more for it than we had paid for it new! In fact, it was enough to completely pay for our "almost new" 1976 Ford Taunus wagon!

When driving the Taunus home, I noticed a vibration and determined to have the wheels balanced. I took the car to the Ford dealership the following day. The mechanic discovered that the driveshaft was causing the vibrations. It had apparently been out-of-round from the factory. Because the car was under new-car warranty, it cost us nothing to repair. I wondered if that had anything to do with the original owner's decision to trade it!

Ralph V Harvey