

# SOME GERMAN WORDS AND HOW I LEARNED THEM

HOW I LEARNED GERMAN WHILE LIVING IN GERMANY:

BY SOCIALIZING CLOSE TO BEER

VIA TV & OTHER LIGHT MEDIA

BY HANGING OUT WITH A STRANGE AUSTRIAN

THROUGH UPSETTING EVENTS

IN THE CLASSROOM

## KRÄUTER (herbs)

This word fits the classic, maddening pattern: I see it everywhere and I wait for the meaning to crack magically open. I'm in Krautland, so I figure this is bound to happen organically.

It never happens. *Kräuter* just telegraphs itself more and more aggressively and opaquely. It seasons every menu. *Apotheke*s swear it will cure you, of everything. Pants come *Kräuter*-colored. I feel like a large man transformed overnight into an insect.

One night some friends at a bar near Zionskirche order Bionades, the "it" soda of the moment. There are two flavors, *Holunder* (elderberry) and *Kräuter*, and I see my chance....

## ROTE BETE (beets)

We're making borscht with the Russians (see *Raupe*), but we can't find fresh beets. I ask all around town and encounter a fundamental German phobia: fear of raw vegetables. It's as if I want to grow the cotton for my own T-shirts. I feel disturbingly crunchy until I see a big basket of *Rote Bete* in Düsseldorf and fill up my backpack in a flood of enthusiasm.

## RAUPE (caterpillar)

Tatiana is a big, ruddy, elegant girl from the easternmost tip of Russia, near Japan. She's in Germany on the same language-learning grant as my husband Seth. One night in Bonn she tells the same story four times in a row, as more and more *Stipendiaten* from his grant group pour into the bar and demand to hear it.

Here's the story: a rich Russian blow-hard visits a restaurant in Japan and demands the choicest delicacy. They escort him to a silk-curtained back room, usher in ten drummer-boys, and swing forth a silver platter bearing a dirty-gray caterpillar on a leaf. The boys clear out, the waiter bows and scrapes in reverse, and the man is left alone

with *die Raupe*—a tiny, animate, used gym sock.

What should the Russian do? (Here Tatiana gives good eyebrow- and shoulder-action, the picture of confusion.) Gingerly, he rolls the leaf around the Maydaying *Raupe* and bites down. It's incredibly bitter! He shoves the rest in, downs the bottle of mountain-water beside him, and the waiter returns trumpeting inarticulate Japanese sounds. Clearly, the guy is pissed.

With napkin as sketch-pad (the story goes), the truth comes out: the *Raupe*, one of five in the whole world, crawls across the leaf, leaving a delicate trail of effluvia, which perfumes the leaf straight into Fantasticon. (Here I imagine something like high-rent Nutella: it makes even leaves taste good.)

### NATURE WORDS

## SCHIMMEL (mildew)

I taught my Austrian friend Niki the English term "el train" as we were ascending the train platform to Nollendorfplatz. The vocab word I got in trade was *Schimmel*.

*Schimmel* calls to mind a useful cheating maneuver I recommend to all language students: learn a few C-list words like "mildew" and use them metaphorically, e.g., "Isn't that argument rather *mildewed*?" By doing this you will crown yourself Idiot Savant. This is better than Idiot, your other option.

I saw *Schimmel* in at least ten different household-cleaner ads at the gym and glowed with smugness each time.

At the Turkish baths in Schöneberg—an oasis stuffed in a parking garage—Niki and I laid for hours on marble and sweated, watching a spiderweb of mold spread on the plaster. It was the perfect middle-class irony. This was my slogan-idea: *Überlegen Sie den Schimmel im Himmel*. Contemplate the Mildew in Heaven.

Right now, I checked *Schimmel*'s gender—masculine—and realized something else: it also means "white horse."

## EINSIEDLER (hermit)

Germans overdupe everything. They even use the same voice-over actors consistently for big Hollywood stars. There's the German Tom Cruise, the German Whoopi Goldberg, and the German Margaret Cho. Joe Pesci and Robert DeNiro are voiced by the same actor, so watching *Raging Bull* is like watching an existential farce.

We see *Kriegen der Welten* (War of the Worlds) in a dinky old-time theater in Bonn. Tim Robbins plays a hermit who holes up with Tom Cruise and his

young, flattening-worthy daughter, Dakota Fanning. (Her annoyingness is universal: who asks *Was ist passiert?* every time something obvious, horrible, and unexplainable happens? Sic her, honey, *bittel!*) Tim Robbins's hysteria as he digs frantically away from the aliens is also stand-out: *Nicht mein Blut! Nicht mein Blut!* (Not my blood.)

I have to write an essay about it in my German class the next day, which makes the word stick: *Einsiedler*. My theory that *Vögelscheiß* (bird shit) is what weakened the aliens is met with skepticism.

## AUSRÜSTUNG (equipment)

We're slogging through a news item in German class about Iran's new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who's all for *Aufrüstung* (armament). Our cardigan-wearing teacher Cordula notes sagely that it would be nicer if he liked *Abrüstung* (disarmament) or just *Ausrüstung* (equipment).

Later that week I see an ad for a hiking goods store and the word *Ausrüstung* sticks. I'm still afraid to talk about armament, though, lest I accidentally *Auf-* when I mean to *Ab-*. I resolve never to discuss the subject. It will be all peace and flower-sniffing and hiking equipment in my German world.

### SEX WORDS

## FEUCHTIGKEIT (moisture)

Got this one off a shampoo bottle. *Feuchtigkeit*: a great, slow, strangely majestic word. It sounds more cellular than moist; you can practically hear the juice locking within a structure. German engineering, indeed.

I feel as if I always know the humid words first. My first intact Japanese phrase was *Mooshi atsui, desu nee?* (It's hot and humid out, isn't it?) *Feuchtigkeit* is a big save for me whenever I talk about the weather, because the words for humid—*schwül*—and gay—*schwul*—are impossible to get straight.

## JUNGFRAU (virgin)

One late afternoon, I'm watching a German talk show in our billowy-magnificent hotel bed in Bonn. An apparently normal guy walks onstage with the subtitle *Stefan, 27—immer noch Jungfrau*. Here I am, waiting for the guy to whip off his pants for a sudden biological airing, or quick-change into a skirt. I wait two commercial breaks before I resort to the *Wörterbuch* (dictionary). *Wörterbücher* are for pussies.

## GEHORSAM (obedience)

It's impossible to be fired from my husband's grant—the grant that brought us to Germany—so we must endure all sorts of guilt-inducing herd events designed to goad us into a semblance of responsibility.

At a highly strained moment, my friend Niki whispers the magic word-phrase of the week: *unbedingter Gehorsam*. (Unquestioning obedience.) I had a hard time remembering it, so I kept repeating it all the way to our next appointment—a process that filled the air with unexpected spook.

## FLEISCHWOLF (meat grinder)

Our friend Dave—whose life is lit like Edward Hopper paintings and Jim Jarmusch movies—sits down to breakfast. I assume this means cigarettes. His eyes fall on a tiny article in *Die Bild*, a tragedy in miniature:

"*FLEISCHWOLF MURDERER TAKES PAINS*. 'I took care he didn't suffer,' says Peter H., 22 years old. After using an ax and various knives to kill his 40-year-old lover, he employed poultry scissors to cut up the 130 kilo body, which he stored in his basement in many small plastic bags. 'Every day, then, I put the contents of a bag through the *Fleischwolf* so that I could flush it down the toilet,' Peter continues, sighing. '*Sisyphus-Arbeit*.' He had only 40 kilos remaining when apprehended."

## STÄNDER (hard-on or kickstand)

Back when I still spoke German to Niki, my Austrian friend, I noted her cute red kickstand on her bike and, as was the thinness of my charm back then, asked what that thing was called. "Great," I went on. "You know, I really dig your hard-on." This is how I learned that *Ständer* means both.

## VERHÜTUNGSMITTEL (contraceptive)

A grinding, unsuccessful odyssey turns into earthy cocktail chat: I alarm *Apotheke* pharmacists throughout Berlin with blunt descriptions of Vaginal Contraceptive Film, an item they just don't sell in Germany. I repeat my description over and over: *It looks like a piece of plastic paper. One crumbles it and sticks it in the body of the woman*. In return, I'm plied with female condoms and those stinging little white suppositories. Friends start calling me *der Körper der Frau* (the Body of the Woman).

For Christmas, my no-nonsense friend Inna hooks me up with four packages from a Duane Reade pharmacy in Brooklyn.

This situation is also how I learned the word *auflösen* (to dissolve), a uniquely unmime-able word. If I'd had this one handy, I might have saved some time.

## LEIDENSCHAFT (passion)

One day our friend Lexy was chockablock with news of a television show she saw on Arte, Germany's arts channel, the previous night. (Arte is full of food. Every midnight we watch *Bernd das Brot*, which is about a depressive, *Weltschmerz*-ful puppet shaped like a loaf of bread.)

Lexy's show was all about making butter. At one point, her *Doppelgänger* turns full-on to the camera, big forearms working up a froth, and states with German frankness: *Buttern ist meine Leidenschaft*. Love, faint sexiness, and a stern kind of work: the particles of every passion in Deutschland.

### OFF-CIOUSNESS WORD

## ARMUT (poverty) GEWALT (violence)

I learned these from a poster in the Alien Immigration office, a sweating industrial hulk as far as possible from Bonn's sparkling city center. It's the first week of German class, and our teachers have been hoodwinked into taking us here to get our residence visas. They flutter around, passing out misinformation like pastel mints, ushering one or another of us into a room with a bureaucrat. Everything is in German, which properly enrages the newbies and gives the semi-able the uncomfortable burden of translation.

The day is about these two words. I'm learning words with such basic force. It has to happen sometime, right?

*Armut* has a hollow, swallowed sound, even more lost than knife-sharp *poverty*. I get out of the day with a brilliantly pink official permit and another great word: *heikel*, awkward or delicate.

## PARTITUR (musical score)

One of the very first German words I learned. My dude keeps our bathroom well-stocked with *Partituren*, little books with citrus-colored bindings. Thanks to these books I acquire an instant, formidable vocabulary of homely instrument names: *Streiche* (strings), *Fagott* (bassoon), *Geige* (violin), *Bratsche* (viola).

## MUSIKWISSENSCHAFT (musicology)

My husband Seth is a musicologist. When he came to Berlin on a language-learning grant, it was everything he pictured: student-ruled and casually anarchic, with full opera and concert houses every night. He skims the streets near dawn on his bike and knows these are his people.

He opens the newspaper one morning to a band of students striding forth behind a bedsheet painted with the words *Musikwissenschaft muss bleiben*. Of course: musicology *must* stay! It must endure in the hearts of the young, who are taking to the streets for musicology! Inchoate, rainbow-bright shreds cloud his vision: musicology love-ins. Musicology drinking games. Musicology Burning Man....

Reality is scaled back: university cuts are threatening another department. The revolution might be postponed.

### SOCIAL ILLNESS WORDS

### ART WORDS