# Excerpts from ***Losing My Voice and Finding Another***

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## Prologue

# An Unexpected Journey

I never thought I would live in Germany. I had dreamed of living in France, or Spain, or Italy. I spoke some French and Spanish, and I wanted to learn Italian. I could picture the sun, the food, the land. I could hear the melody in these languages. It seemed so romantic.

But Germany? Never. The image I had in my mind, based on old stereotypes I had picked up as a child, was a flat, grey industrial landscape where people spoke a guttural language that sounded harsh. During several trips to Europe as an adult, I had avoided Germany. And I had avoided challenging the stereotypes I carried with me into adulthood.

Unfortunately, I fell in love with a German woman—not the French or Spanish or Italian lover I had fantasized about. A few years later, she asked *me* to marry *her*. I initially said, “No,” but with coaching from friends and a few sessions with a therapist, I came to my senses and said “yes.” We got married in 2003.

I had planned to live out my life in the country where I was born and had always lived—the United States—in a house that I had renovated, where I had family and friends, work that I found meaningful, people who valued what I did. But my wife and I decided to live in Germany. At the age of 53, I was suddenly faced with the challenge of beginning a new life in a new culture using a new language.

Starting over was not new for me. As an adult, I had already done that three times in different parts of the U.S. But never with a new language in a new country. The emotional pain I felt took me by surprise, and I felt alone in my pain. When I tried to explain my feelings, no one seemed to understand. And in truth, I didn’t yet have the words to explain what was happening to me.

I had learned French and some Spanish when I was younger, and I enjoyed using these languages. But I didn’t want to learn German. I didn’t believe that I could learn it.

Still, I made the decision to learn German. I fought with the language, and I fought with the culture. It was a constant struggle.

Many things contributed to making this difficult for me:  the curriculum and teaching style in the classes I took, prejudices I had about Germany, what my parents taught me about language when I was as a child, the fact that I am an older, white middle class man, and simply not knowing about the process of learning another language.

The teaching of German (and probably most foreign languages) focuses almost exclusively on words:  what they mean, how they are used, how they are modified, how they are connected to each other in a sentence.  But in my experience, learning another language as an adult has a lot to do with who we are, our conditioning, our social context, and how we actually communicate with each other.  These things were not addressed in any of the classes I took.

There were times when I didn't want to hear German—it seemed too overwhelming—and times when I could listen to German but didn't understand and certainly wasn't ready to produce my own sentences.  When children are first learning to talk, they seem to choose when they will practice, as if they need to trust the people around them to listen and take them seriously. Or maybe they are too shy, or it's just too hard to talk, or maybe they have nothing to say.

I felt all of these things.  I was constantly confronted with what I didn't know and didn't understand.  I couldn't communicate what I was feeling and thinking.  I lost my sense of who I was. I lost my voice.

When I was a boy, my mother described me as a very sensitive child.  It was not a compliment.  As an adult, I am proud of my ability to express my feelings, and I have used that skill professionally.  But because I had such strong emotional reactions to learning German, I thought something was really wrong with me.

One of my coping strategies was to keep a journal.  It was a way to make sense of my experience.  I also searched for information about the process of language learning. Eventually I found a few memoirs written by other people who had learned a second language, and later, I discovered that there was research about second language learning.

The memoirs helped me know that I was not alone in my feelings, and the research confirmed my suspicions that learning another language is a complex process. Although the research is written in an academic style, and contradictory—experts disagree on how people learn a second language and on the best ways to do it—I found

out that there were names and concepts for what I was going through, and that my experience was not unusual. Other people have the same difficulties.

In addition to the memoirs and research I found, I drew on resources that I had used in other parts of my life: a daily meditation practice, training in psychology, and an understanding of cultural differences and the dynamics of oppression.

And there were people who supported me: my wife's family, who spoke German with me in a way I could understand; a few German friends, who made the effort to communicate with me; and even strangers, like the cashier at the hardware store. One day she asked me where I came from and told me about her travels to the U.S. to visit a relative. After our first brief conversation, I always went to her register to pay, so that I could practice making small talk and remember that someone in this foreign country recognized me.

My desire to speak more than one language, in a part of the world where it is common for people to be multi-lingual, kept me going. It is still a mystery to me that people speak very different languages, using radically different sounds and structures, and yet are able to communicate about the same things that we all experience in life: weather, food, work, family, love. I wanted to be able to do that in German.

Now, in 2010, I consider Germany my home and plan to stay here. I live in the city of Nürnberg, in the state of Bavaria, where I have a full life and a circle of friends and acquaintances that includes Germans and other immigrants. I have been elected to a newly formed council of immigrants to help Nürnberg become a city where native Germans and immigrants from 165 countries can successfully live together.

I am still married—I have no regrets about that decision. I'm renovating a small weekend house in a village north of Nürnberg, where my neighbors and local craftsmen are friendly and generous. I have survived culture shock that seemed to last for years. I think I understand some things about German culture that I previously criticized, and I am slowly learning to accept what I can't change.

I haven't fallen in love with this language, and I now know that I will always be learning German. I will always have an accent and sound like someone whose native language is English. I will always make mistakes. That used to bother me, but not any more. It's who I am, and I'm doing the best I can.

This book is a seven year journey as I lose my voice and find another. It’s not exactly a direct route. There are starts and stops, and sometimes I go over the same ground again and again.

And although it seems obvious to me now, I realized along the way that learning German was more than just learning a language. It was, and still is, an opportunity for me to learn about life, and about myself.

Chapter 1

# Regression

October 1, 2003

This morning my wife and I were married in the Standesamt, a municipal office on the main square in Nürnberg. It was a simple, formal process. We went back to our apartment for lunch with my new in-laws.

At 2 pm, instead of going on a honeymoon, I walked across town and started a German course: Grundstufe 2, one level above absolute beginner, but still at the beginner level. I was in a class with fifteen other students. I didn't see anyone who looked like me.

I didn't understand what the teacher was saying. I didn't have the words to say what I was feeling and thinking. Although I was the oldest person in the class— I could be the father or even grandfather of another student, I felt like a child again, as if I was just starting kindergarten in the United States. I was lost and wanted to go home.

Why would I want to go through the pain of learning to do something I already mastered? I learned how to speak once in my life. Why would I want to do that again, even if it was another language?

I guess it had to be this way—that as I learned this strange new language that didn't fit in my mouth, I became a child again. But I didn't like it. When I tried to communicate in German, I had very few words I could use, not the rich variety I had in English. It was as if I had lost my voice.

In the U.S., I wrote books and articles, I gave speeches, I led workshops. My life for almost thirty years focused on challenging various forms of oppression, like sexism, homophobia, racism, and xenophobia. I was absorbed in this work, and it affected how I thought about myself and everything I did, including the words I used. I learned to be cautious in my language and to look for subtleties in communication. But in German, I didn't know many words, and I certainly didn't understand nuances in the meanings of words.

What I did understand was my emotional reaction to hearing German. I didn't like the sound of it. It sounded flat and staccato, unlike French, which had melody and was soft in my ear. When I spoke French, I loved hearing the sound of it.

It wasn’t just the sound of German that bothered me, it was the association I had with German. When I stood on the subway platform in Nürnberg and heard German men speak, I heard voices I first heard as a teenager in the mid-1960s. In world history class, we watched documentaries of Adolf Hitler speaking at the annual Nazi Party rallies in the 1930s. The films we saw were probably excerpts from *Triumph of the Will*, a propaganda film made by Leni Riefenstahl. I heard the power in Hitler’s voice and watched people mesmerized by his presence, but I also knew the horror that this man would bring to the world. His voice represented evil to me.

I believe that hearing the voice of Hitler was my first contact with the German language. I didn’t study German in high school. I took French.

Four decades later, I had chosen to live in the city where the Nazi Party rallies were held and where the Nürnberg laws were passed, laws that dictated the inferior status of Jews. A few years before I moved here, I had learned that some of my ancestors were German Jews who emigrated to the U.S. almost a century before the Holocaust. Nürnberg had changed; there was a biennial celebration of human rights, there were large demonstrations against neo-Nazis, there was a culture of remembering so that the Holocaust would never be repeated. Still….

A Jewish woman from the U.S. who had lived in Germany for several years told me, “I don’t want to learn German. I can’t get past the fact that this is the language that was spoken by the Nazis.”

No wonder I didn’t want to learn German.

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It was because of Anna, my mother-in-law, that I decided to learn German.

Anna* was sad that her daughter decided to marry a man from the U.S. who couldn’t speak German. How would she be able to talk to her son-in-law? Anna loves to meet new people, ask questions, and through them learn about life outside of the small village where she lives, in the same farmhouse where my wife was born and grew up.

When my wife told me about her mother’s reaction, I also felt sad. I wanted to be able to talk with her, too.

A few months before I moved to Germany, I decided to find a private tutor in Boston, where I lived at the time. I didn’t tell my wife. I wanted to surprise her on my

next trip over to see her. I only had a month before I'd be getting on the airplane, and I imagined arriving at the airport and being able to greet her and tell her about my flight, all in German. It turned out to be pure fantasy on my part.

I had heard of a man who claimed he could teach someone ten languages simultaneously. I wasn't sure if I believed that, but I was intrigued, so I called him. I

* many of the names I use, especially those of family members, friends, and acquaintances in Germany, are pseudonyms

explained how I didn't like the sound of German, that I didn't think it was possible for me to learn German, but that I wanted to be able to talk with Anna. He listened to me, seemed to understand, and was convinced that he could teach me German. We made an appointment to begin my lessons.

Although I couldn't have a conversation with Anna or my wife after ten private lessons, I did learn that my mouth was capable of making some of these strange sounds. And I had fun, but it was the last time that I would enjoy a language lesson for the next six years.

My private lessons gave me enough confidence to sign up for classes in Nürnberg. I didn't yet believe that I could actually learn German. But I was willing to try.

Trouble is, signing up for a class to learn a language is not the same as learning a language. I sensed that this was one of the rare times in my life, at least as an adult, that I consistently heard a voice saying "You are not able to do this." For most of my adult life, I have had tremendous confidence in my ability to accomplish things. I have always believed that I could do something I hadn't done before, even though I didn't know exactly how. I knew I would figure it out. But with learning German, I constantly told myself, "I can't do this."

My desire to talk with Anna got me to take the first step, but in reality, I didn't have enough contact with her to sustain my motivation. I visited her once or twice a year and rarely talked with her on the phone. Eventually, I would find other motivations: to make friends with Germans, to be able to participate in the cultural life of the city, to be able to attend workshops and groups, to feel comfortable living here. At this point, I had to find the energy each day to go to class. I had to make myself go.

I wondered if my resistance to going to class had something to do with being a student again. It had been a long time since I was in school, and when I finished my master's degree thirty years earlier, I decided it was the last time I would go to school. It just didn't fit my way of learning. I learned much more when I finally got out of school, and so I told myself "no more schooling." Now I was back in school, and I didn't see any other way to learn German. There were other ways, but I didn't know that yet.

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The other students in my class were between sixteen and thirty. I was fifty-three—clearly the oldest—and one of the few men. Most of the students were young women from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South America, or Asia, taking this class so they could attend university, become qualified for employment, or reach a level of fluency required for citizenship. A few of them had children and were learning German so that they would be able to help their kids with school work. The two men in the class were learning German to improve their job chances. No one had registered for this class to improve their relationship with their mother-in-law.

There was a sixteen-year-old from China, who looked even younger than that. She had been in Germany for just a few weeks. I couldn't imagine myself at sixteen having the courage to live in a different country where I didn't speak the language. But here she was, learning German, a language vastly different from Chinese, and appearing to be learning faster than me.

One day, she and I were sitting next to each other; and that meant that we were going to be conversation partners when the teacher assigned an activity: talking about our everyday lives. In German there is a formal *you* and an informal *you*. We used the informal *you* in class, but from the little I knew about Chinese culture, I imagined that she was supposed to use a formal form of *you* with someone like me who could be her grandfather. If that was true, then she was breaking a cultural rule to be chatting with me as if we were peers. It was definitely awkward for me.

In this class, as in many language classes around the world, German was taught to us as if it was simply a body of knowledge that needs to be mastered. We studied grammar and learned vocabulary. There was a written curriculum that teachers were expected to follow. Although some teachers offered a variety of activities for different learning styles, this class seemed more designed for students who wanted to pass a standard test to demonstrate their fluency.

The teachers in these classes had a tough job. Students came with different needs, different learning styles, different educational backgrounds, different expectations of what a teacher does and what happens in a classroom. There was no common language for explaining concepts and giving instructions, so everything had to be communicated in German.

In this setting, I didn't expect that my needs would be completely met. But I was not interested in learning German so that I could pass a test. I was only interested in learning this language for social use. And in any case, my emotional response to learning German was so strong that I sometimes spent more energy dealing with that than with learning German.

My age was not just a social factor in this class; it was also a biological reality that set me apart from the younger students. My brain was not as flexible as it had been when I was younger. I heard a new word, learned the definition, heard the same word the next day, and couldn't remember what the word meant. I needed lots of repetition; and even with that, six months later I might forget the word.

And I seemed to need extra time to process what I heard in conversation before I could understand and respond. Sometimes it was only a split second and sometimes a few minutes before I understood what was being said to me. This gap between hearing and comprehending didn't exist for me in English, or at least I wasn't aware of it. It was embarrassing, especially if I didn't know the people I was talking with. To account for this time lag, I would tell people, "Sometimes I'm a little slow in German. I need a bit more time to understand." It was self-deprecating, a way for me to make light of the situation. This became one of my German survival phrases that I created and used frequently.

One day, as I rushed to class, I ran into an older immigrant from Rumania who worked for a plumbing contractor in my neighborhood. He and I had greeted each other on occasion. We didn't say much, but I felt a warmth between us.

"Where are you going?" he asked me.

(Dialogue in this book originally was in German, unless noted; all dialogue with my wife was in English.)

"My German class. But it's hard."

"German was hard for me, too."

"But I have to learn German. And I'm late."

He paused, looked at me like a grandfather who loved me, and said, slowly, "Langsam junger Mann, langsam."

His words become a mantra for me when I felt frustrated: “Slow down, young man, slow down.”

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Learning a new language involves making lots of mistakes. But as a child, when I made a mistake in speaking English, my father would correct me. He didn’t do it gently.

He was tougher with my older sister; looking back, I would now say that he was abusive. It was worse if he had been drinking, which happened every day when he came home from work. Cocktail hour began promptly at 5 pm, earlier on weekends.

I remember my father sitting with my sister at the kitchen table one evening, “helping” her with her math homework. She was maybe nine years old, and I was about six. She didn’t understand what he was explaining. She got scared and began to cry. Then he got angry with her for crying and told her she was stupid. I don’t know how often this happened, but it was not a one-time event.

I can easily imagine my six-year-old brain deciding “If I don’t understand things, I’ll get into big trouble.” So I learned how to listen and observe very carefully, and I decided to try to understand everything and act like I was smart. If I could do that, then I would avoid his wrath and feel safe in the house.

Sometimes as I sat in German class, I felt an old fear, as if my father was standing right behind me. And I thought, “I have to understand.” Of course, the purpose of my being here was to learn what I didn’t yet know. It was not possible for me to completely understand this language, not yet, maybe never. But sometimes I couldn’t think clearly because my emotional reaction was so strong.

In class one day, I was in a practice conversation with a man from the Ukraine who knew more German than I did. We were roleplaying. He was the guest and I was the manager at a hotel. He was complaining that the Fahrstuhl wasn’t working. I did not know this word, and I would have sworn that I had never heard it.

I asked him what Fahrstuhl meant, and I heard him say something that sounded like “leaf.” I didn’t know that word either. He had a look on his face that I interpreted as, “What’s wrong with you that you don’t understand what I’m saying?” It wasn’t exactly a mean or angry or judgmental look, but it wasn’t a loving and kind and seeking to reassure me look, either.

Suddenly I felt my face get hot, and I had a sensation of being temporarily lost. I stopped thinking, and I was overwhelmed by fear. It only lasted about five seconds, and then I had the presence of mind to ask the teacher what Fahrstuhl meant. She gave me a synonym that I understood: Aufzug. Elevator.

As soon as I understood what Fahrstuhl and “leaf” meant, I was able to come back to the role-play and actually have fun. He and I created a dramatic scene for the class: he was complaining about everything, and I was telling him he was crazy. We were over the top in our acting, and by the end of the role-play we were laughing together.

A week or so later, as I wrote about this experience in my journal, I realized that the heat I had felt in my face had something to do with shame. It was what I felt as a boy when my father got angry with me for not knowing something that I couldn’t have known. Although that happened a long time ago, the sense that I am “stupid” persisted, as a quasi-belief in my head and as a physical sensation in my body.

And I also realized that my fellow student probably wasn’t mad at me when I didn’t understand him. The expression on his face, which I interpreted as judgmental and angry, could have been puzzlement at why I didn’t understand. Or maybe he thought there was something wrong with how he was pronouncing Fahrstuhl, or that he had the wrong word.

It is years later, as I am writing this, that I think I understand why he used the word “leaf” as a synonym for elevator. He was trying to use English, and the word he knew for elevator was the British word for elevator: lift.

* * * * *

I got to know a few Germans. I wasn’t ready to call them friends. We didn’t have a shared history, and it didn’t feel easy or supportive. It felt like work to be with them. I got nervous before we would get together; and when we did meet, I worked hard to understand what they were saying and worked hard to make myself understood.

I was a little paranoid that they didn’t really want to talk with me and were simply doing this as a favor. Or maybe they were interested in me because I was somehow exotic. And yet there were moments when I enjoyed getting together; it was definitely filling my need for social contact. I was lonely.

Berndt, for example. I met him when my wife and I had dinner with some of her friends. We met a couple of times at Café Fatal, a quiet coffeehouse around the corner from where I lived. Berndt and I had a lot in common: we were about the same age, we had some of the same interests, he had thought about what it means to be a man, and he was serious and self-reflective like me. He asked questions and paid attention to what I was saying. Being with him eased some of the loneliness I felt.

I was glad to be meeting with Berndt; he reminded me of male friends I had in the U.S. But I was also aware of a fundamental inequality in our relationship based on language difference. It seemed to me that I had to work much harder than he did to stay in the conversation. When I did say something, I was less able to explain things, to express my thoughts, to share my feelings. It was easy for me to think he didn't understand me when I said something. As a result, I asked a lot of questions and listened, rather than talking.

So I was reluctant to ask him to get together with me. As much as I wanted friends here, I felt like the shy, insecure boy that I once was: not knowing how to make friends, not feeling confident in my friendships, wondering if other people really wanted to have me as a friend.

I also felt this in my German classes. I noticed that I was not as social as the other students. They went to the café together for coffee; I stayed in class and studied. They went out to bars at night together; I stayed home. I was older and different. School was a place where I felt alienated. I felt the same way when I was a boy.

The content and activities in our curriculum were based on life in Germany and sometimes our home countries. The topics were school, nightlife, fashion, and popular culture: topics that were interesting for the young students in my class. But not for me. I was interested in other things.

So I didn't feel motivated to participate in class. I asked myself: do I have anything to say? This sounds strangely similar to something I experienced as a child—wondering if it's worth speaking.

And I also asked myself: How am I going to learn this language if, in the process of trying to learn it, I keep feeling like I don't belong? Why would I pick up a German newspaper if I could barely read German? Why would I try to have conversations with

my German neighbors if we couldn't communicate? Why would I go to class if I felt "stupid"?

If other adult immigrants were having a similar experience, then I can easily understand why they might want to stay within their own community, where they can speak their native language.  I assume that they don't want to feel ashamed, either, of not being able to do basic, everyday things that they can do in their native language.

My own experience of feeling ashamed would occasionally return over the next few years. Even after I became reasonably comfortable using German, and was able to express myself in German, there were moments when I felt ashamed that my German was not good enough.

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I didn't have peer models or friends of my age to support me in the learning process. I didn't have people who could tell me that my experience was normal. I felt stuck in the role of being a student and believed I had to go to class.  I didn't know that I had choices for how I could learn this language.

Years later, I met Madeline Ehrman, an expert on second language learning difficulties. She suggested to me that I could have negotiated with my German teachers for what I wanted. It seemed so obvious. I had done this many times in my life in other areas, yet it had never occurred to me to do it there.

Looking back, I realize how powerless I felt. I was scared, my self-esteem plummeted, and I didn't see options for solving this problem. But I wasn't conscious of being powerless, in the sense of being able to talk about it and name it. I just felt it, and I reacted as if I really were helpless.

What I needed was an approach to language learning that would allow me to take on this complex task of language learning in the same way that children do. They listen and mimic and eventually create their own words, phrases, and sentences. They play with the language. They don't think about being powerful; they simply act like they are. And they don't think about their mistakes, until they get to school and teachers begin to criticize them.

I needed an adult version of this. I needed opportunities to experiment with the sounds of German, to move my body while I was trying to speak German, to use the

language as best I could, without worrying if was right or not. I needed a minimum of correction and lots of repetition and lots of freedom to say whatever I wanted to say, at my own pace.

In class one day, the teacher asked us to talk about some cultural differences between our home countries and Germany. A Japanese woman told the class about an unwritten cultural rule against nose blowing in public, and how she had changed her behavior to accommodate German culture, where nose blowing is acceptable.

I interrupted her and started talking about the health implications of nose blowing. I had recently read an article that suggested that blowing your nose tends to increase ear infections. As I was rambling on and trying to figure how to say this in German, I was aware that the teacher looked impatient. If I had put words to her facial expression, she might have said, “Cooper, that isn’t relevant to what we’re talking about.” But I just kept talking until I was satisfied that I had explained the danger of nose blowing. I doubt that anyone understood me.

After class, I thought, why in the world did I talk about snot and bacteria? And why did I ignore the teacher’s subtle attempt to quiet me? It wasn’t so awful what I did—I didn’t hurt anyone’s feelings, or cause a major problem for the class, or violate a cultural taboo—but I felt embarrassed about it.

My behavior was similar to what happens during sharing time in kindergarten, when kids will say some really random things that have no connection to what other kids have shared. Maybe I just wanted to hear my own voice, to show off that I could say something. My German teachers always told us, “Practice, practice, practice.”

When I told a friend about this—his daughter was five—he laughed, knowing exactly what I meant. She did this all the time, and he had found himself doing the same thing when he was learning Italian. Whenever he could, he’d try to use his Italian, even if it was out of context or inappropriate. Showing off and making random comments for the sake of practice is a learning strategy that I would continue to use as I learned German.

Several years later, I was talking with Elzbieta, a friend who is originally from Poland and has lived in Germany for many years. She was telling me about an event she organized for her job, and how pleased she was that the mayor was able to attend at the last minute because of a cancellation in his schedule.

“Ich habe Schwein gehabt,” she exclaimed.

I must not have heard her correctly, so I interrupted her. “What was that you just said about a Schwein?

“Ich habe Schwein gehabt.” I quickly translated this in my head. I had heard her right. She did say, “I have had pig.”

“What does that mean?”

“That I was lucky. You don’t know this expression?”

I laughed and acted outraged. “No, I never heard this. And it’s crazy. What does luck have to do with pigs?”

“I don’t know. I’m not German. It’s just a German expression.”

Despite how ridiculous it sounded to me, I decided to incorporate this phrase into my vocabulary because it was kind of cool. Or so I thought. Over the next few days I found many occasions to use it. Unfortunately, my wife overheard me using it, and most of the time told me that the way I was using it made no sense.

After about a week of hearing about the pig I have had, my wife gave me a look when I again told someone, “Ich habe Schwein gehabt.” I have stopped using the expression, but I haven’t forgotten it.