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**Against Good Advice:
Reflections on conducting research in a country
where you don't speak the language**

If one of my students had come to me with a proposal for this very same project, asking for my feedback, I would have looked at her and asked where she had been for all those class discussions on the complex nature of in-depth interviews. I would have told her that it is hard enough for one person ever to understand another, even if they are of the same gender, class, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and all the other categories that a good professor of sociology would alert her students to. Just how did she think she was going to be able to communicate with her interviewees, let alone pick up any nuances of speech, if they did not share a language? I would ask this student these questions and many more, trying to steer her project gently into the domain of the do-able.

Fortunately, no one said these things to me, and I refused to say them to myself. I have taught a number of courses on qualitative methodology in a range of institutions, and could recite in my sleep the standard do's and don'ts of what constitutes sound methodology. Why then didn't I follow what would have been my own advice if I had allowed myself to ask me? The answer is simple. I didn't because had I done so I would not have been able to pursue this piece of research, which viscerally I knew I must do. Let me take you back a bit.

In the spring of 1990 I was finishing writing a book on some work I had been doing in England during the previous five years. The project was an in-depth study of fifteen British men and

women who had been politically active on the left for fifty years or longer. This project had captivated my heart and soul for what seemed like an eternity. Although I had no doubt that some of the people who I had met through this work would remain good friends for a long time to come, it was nonetheless an inescapable truth that this particular research project was winding down. What, I wondered, would ever take its place? And yet I knew, too, that had I really wanted to, I could have always decided to expand this original piece of work. (For instance, I quite seriously considered doing a cross-cultural comparison on the topic.) Had I done so, it would have meant that my beloved subject would not have left me, but then neither would there have been room to explore an entirely new area.

These were the thoughts that were in my head that spring. It was, of course, an interesting time to be writing about lifetime commitment to socialist principles, what with Eastern Europe collapsing all around. And then one day I happened to be at a talk given by Jens Reich, one of the founding members of Neues Forum, the largest of the many opposition groups which had mushroomed in East Germany in the previous autumn. I had heard about Neues Forum (who hadn't?) and had even seen Reich on the television several times as East Germany seemed to move inevitably towards its final days. But Reich was not talking about what had become known as the "bloodless revolution", he was not talking about the bottles of champagne at the opening of the Berlin Wall on the anniversary of Kristal Nacht, nor did he mention New Year's Eve at the Brandenburg Gate. Rather, he drew our attention to somewhere very far from all of that, separated - unbelievably - in time by only a few months, but nonetheless, very far away. Reich was there talking about the March elections, which were coming up in only a few weeks' time. These would be the first and only free elections in the history of the German Democratic Republic. Reich predicted that the first time the East Germans would take to the polls they would do so to vote for the dissolution of their country. He described the glossy, Western-style

campaign of CDU, and compared it to the inexperienced and, most importantly, impoverished campaign of Alliance '90, the umbrella organization which groups like Neues Forum had banded together to create. Though the outcome of the elections had seemed predictable, when the results came out, the margin of difference was staggering, nevertheless. The CDU alone captured 40.8% of the vote, and the Alliance for Germany (of which the CDU was but one part) had 48% of the votes. In comparison, only 2.9% of the votes cast on March 18, 1990 were in support of Alliance '90. How could this be? Neues Forum, founded in the beginning of September, had mushroomed from its original thirty members to more than half a million signatories in only two and a half months. This was a popular group. This was a popular group.

I knew as I listened to Jens Reich, that the story he was telling was an important one. When the election results came out only a few weeks later, I was sad to learn how right he had been. But what had changed in the six months since Neues Forum had been founded? It was not a casual interest of mine, but, like the story goes, something which burned inside of me. I knew then that I had identified my next area of research.

Immediately, I set about applying for grants, writing to institutions large and small which might just possibly make a contribution towards my project. Although I knew that I was no "Germanist" (a term I had never even heard until I began looking for funding), neither was I claiming to have any specialization in German affairs. That was not what my project was about. Rather I was somebody who had done a considerable amount of research on the intersection between politics and social psychology. While my previous work had focussed on long-term political commitment, here I wanted to examine the effect of acute social/political change on political actors. I knew that I was well-qualified for what I wanted to do. The problem, of course, was to convince others that this was the case. In one instance I was even a finalist for a generous and

prestigious grant, but ultimately I was not successful. Why? The resounding answer from virtually every application I made was identical: I didn't know the language, how did I expect to do the research?

But I was determined. I wrote to nearly every place I could think of, and spoke with anyone who would listen to me. Finally I was able to scrape together in bits and pieces a way to do what I wanted to do. One group agreed to pay for my plane fare, another offered office space, and most importantly a research institute in Berlin was willing to support the project in a number of small but significant ways. I was thrilled. And so it happened that nearly two years to the day after I had heard Jens Reich deliver his compelling speech in the large Cambridge lecture hall, I arrived in Berlin, tape recorder in hand.

But there was one problem. I couldn't speak the language. Now, this was not my first trip to Germany. I had been there many times, and had even visited East Germany in the days when it was East Germany. I could buy bread, and could even find my way around Berlin without great trauma - but this is not akin to speaking the language. While I cannot claim that it was a surprise to me that I did not speak German, I hadn't fully anticipated the ways in which this would impact upon the research. Perhaps that was lucky, for had I known in advance what awaited me, I probably wouldn't have persevered. And then I would have missed out on one of the most critical experiences of my life. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

One important word about the language. It was not that I did not want to study German, that I felt myself to be above such mundane work and wanted instead to do only the interesting bits of the research -- rushing for the desert without having eaten my green beans, as it were. But I simply didn't know German. Ironically, had I been successful in my grant applications, I would

have been able to study German intensively, because I would have been able to afford the time. As it was, the money available to me could only stretch over a very limited period of time; therefore, I plunged into the heart of the research earlier than I otherwise would have done. And German is not an easy language to just "pick up" as Mark Twain so eloquently writes in his essay "The Awful German Language."

A person who has not studied German can form no idea of what a perplexing language it is. Surely there is not another language that is so slipshod and systemless, and so slippery and elusive to the grasp. One is washed about in it, hither and thither, in the most helpless way; and when at last he thinks he has captured a rule which offers firm ground to take a rest on amid the general rage and turmoil of the ten parts of speech, he turns over the page and reads, "Let the pupil make careful note of the following exceptions."

Twain laments that the ten parts of speech are "all troublesome", and offers the observation that "to learn to read and understand a German newspaper is a thing which must always remain an impossibility to a foreigner." Somehow I would make do, of this I was certain. But the likelihood of me just "picking up German" did not seem all that probable.

I was operating on a shoestring budget. German friends who were more generous than anyone ever should be had offered me floor space for as long as I needed it. And I ended up needing it much longer than I ever had thought I would. In addition, one of them had agreed to act as translator for the project. As I had not been successful in any of my grant applications, this meant putting in very long and hard hours; the payment was exceedingly rich in terms of life experience and non-existent in terms of money. In addition, this woman also acted as secretary for the project; because of my lack of German, the burden of arranging all of the interviews fell completely to her. It was perhaps here more than in any other domain that my inability to

communicate was most difficult to endure. Because, in truth, the interviews were interesting. That she acted as (unpaid) translator in this setting was far from ideal, but just tolerable, simply because it was something which she wanted to do. But it is never anything other than tedious and nerve-wracking to call stranger after stranger, trying to convince them that you are different from other researchers, that your project is more thoughtful, that they might even enjoy talking to you. And if they do agree to meet, then starts the business of trying to find a mutually convenient time. The interview itself is the prize you get for putting in so many hours of often unrewarding, and never stimulating, work. It's not easy to allow someone else to do this preparation for you.

I remember once reading a review of a book which had been translated into English from the original German, which began: "A salute, first of all, to the translator. To turn German into English is a punishment in hell: to be accurate is to be unreadable and to be readable is to be sacked for inaccuracy" (The European 12-18 March 1992, p. 32). This was the task that my friend had been set up for. Translating is difficult in the best of situations, and this was not one of those. Murphey's Law of Methodology assured me that in the few instances when she did fumble, she had missed the critical moment of the interview. It was no consolation to think that I could have the interviewee's words translated later, because my response in the interview would be colored by what I had understood the speaker to have said. And then there were other moments, when my good friend, my translator, would, heaven forbid, act like a human being and simply ask her own questions. She was very engaged with the work, and could not be blamed for having her own interests. When this did occur (which was, admittedly, very seldom) I am ashamed to say that there is no manner of crime which did not cross my mind, as I sat trying to tame my transparent expression.

I had never had to use a translator in any of my previous research (though when I first moved to

Britain from the States, I did need to learn the difference in meaning between British and American "knickers" "suspenders" "braces" and the like). What I found most difficult in the interview settings was perhaps not so much the formal format - I would pose the question, the translator would translate it, the interviewee would respond, and the translator would translate the response - as much as the inability to make small talk. If the translator needed to excuse herself momentarily, the interviewee and I would often begin by trying to communicate in one or the other's language. This attempt would be so frustrated that it usually succeeded in silencing us both, and we would wait in awkward stillness for the reappearance of our linguistic savior.

Interestingly, however, the language barrier was not wholly negative. I was very surprised that in a number of meetings, interviewees commented at the end of the session that the communication lag time had given them an extra moment to consider their responses. The first time I heard this, I thought the person was just being nice. But hearing it as many times as I did, I later thought that perhaps there was something to it. The kind of questions which we were interested in were indeed very difficult, and the conversations were invariably intense. Considering this, it makes sense that respondents might welcome the momentary pause offered by the unusual situation in which we found ourselves. From my point of view, the translation allowed me a cushion of time to take in what I had been listening to, and to recompose my thoughts for the next question. In addition, as the translator would speak to the respondent, I could more fully focus on the respondents' facial expressions, body language, and other nonverbal forms of communication registering their initial reactions to my words than I would have been able to do in a more ordinary setting. (After the interview, I made notes to myself regarding this aspect of the encounter). In most cases, the interviewees and I shared a cursory knowledge of each other's language. Therefore, when I would pose the question in English, they would have already started to think about it before they heard it in its German version. Similarly, I could understand much

of their responses before they had been translated for me. Thus, in some cases - though certainly not in all - the customary eye contact, nodding, and non-verbal cues that comprise a vital part of any interview setting were almost as fully present as they would have been had all parties spoken the same language. There were only a very few interviewees whose command of the English language was sufficient to be able to conduct a conversation. In such cases, the interview took place in the respondent's language of choice. Of the English speakers who chose to interview in German, nearly all commented on the advantage of having the lag time in which to contemplate more deeply answers to a given question.

In addition to the interviews, my translator and I attended a number of meetings which we thought were relevant to our interests. Thus we found ourselves at neighborhood meetings of Neues Forum, "victim/victimizer" confrontations at the former House at Check Point Charlie (now a museum), and invited to a series of very special discussions organized by the East German writer Christa Wolf. All of these, of course, were in German. I can honestly say that never once was I bored in any of them; rather I had the impression that I was watching a very powerful, and sometimes painful, painting or photograph come to life. The expression on the faces of those who spoke, who listened, who tried to speak but could not, were enough to engage fully anyone's humanity. One never complains of not understanding the words that one knows must be being exchanged by the parties in a work of art. Similarly, these experiences were not at all empty for me, although understandably from the point of view of someone who had access to the content of discussion, my presence there might have seemed rather curious. Of course after these meetings, and sometimes if possible even during them, my translator would relate to me what was being said. In these situations, would I have preferred to be conversant in the language which was being used? Of course. But given that I was not, would I have instead preferred not to have been there at all? No. I felt then, as I know now, that what I was witnessing was a very

special moment in history, and as imperfect as my ability to interact in this setting may have been, my minimal participation was more than most people had.

As I became more and more engrossed in the research, it was clear that I was going to have to return to Berlin; already I had stayed far longer than I had intended. I left Berlin, and when I returned about a month later, my friend and now trusted translator was no longer there. I had the good fortune to have been offered an empty flat, in the heart of Prenzlauer Berg, the very "trendy" part of East Berlin. Now I would be living on my own in Germany. My German had significantly advanced beyond the stage of only being able to buy bread: now, words like Vergangenheitsbewältigung ("working through the past") and Bürgerbewegung (citizens' movements) rolled off my tongue, but still I had not championed Twain's "troublesome ten parts of speech." This time I had to hire a professional translator to assist me in my interviews. Although it is true that my second translator never once interjected her own questions into the interview, and her English was more lucid than that of my friend, I found that I missed the very helpful debriefing sessions that I had grown accustomed to during my first batch of interviews. I had never worked in collaboration with anyone before on any project, and my return trip to Berlin made me realize what a positive aspect this had been in the earlier days of the research. Moreover, one of the most difficult consequences of my friend's absence was that I no longer had anyone who could help me set up my interviews. Professional translators do not expect to have to do that (nor do they do your laundry for that matter). Still, somehow I was able to manage.

The saga about the translation continued long after the interviews were completed. There was then the problem of finding someone who could both transcribe and double-check the translation of the interview tapes. Transcription is a tricky business, as anyone who has ever done it will know. Exactly what and how you transcribe is never straightforward, but rather requires

thoughtful interpretation; in this sense, transcription can be said to be a form of translation between the spoken and the written word. How much more difficult to do this, then, or even to find someone to do it for you, when you do not speak the language of the interviewee. The choice of transcriber/translator is absolutely critical, for ultimately that person is being entrusted with a central role in the interpretive process. (The financing of this aspect of the project is again another issue; it is extraordinarily difficult to find someone who is as gifted as the task demands, and who will not charge a year's salary for her services.) Writing to the respondents, sending them copies of their transcripts and asking for any feedback, is the next linguistic bridge to cross. And then, what do you do when you receive communication from them? Who do you find to translate for you? Ah yes, those starving students studying in the German Department come to mind. As with other aspects of this research, by necessity I had to resort to imperfect measures, and several times I reflected how much easier the whole process would have been had the East German "bloodless revolution" happened in an English-speaking country. In the end, all of the communication I received in German found its way to translators, as did a good portion of the documents and articles I had brought with me upon my return from the field work. I came to learn new things about friends and colleagues I had known for many years, for instance that they had studied German for four years in high school; my world became full of potential translators. The solution was piece-meal, but it worked.

Every single step of this research project has demanded compromises. And while this is true of all research, it is particularly so for a design which has built into it so integrally the most basic obstacle of communication. Reader, I am not saying that the grant awarding bodies were right in their decision not to fund me for this work. What I am saying, however, is that they do have a point: it's nice to speak the language of the country where you are doing research. But while each of these steps was difficult, in fact far more difficult than I had anticipated, the fact is I was able

to overcome them. Ultimately, the research proved to be as rewarding as any I have ever done. The data that I was able to gather was exceptional. The precise timing of my arrival in Berlin, weeks after the opening of the Stasi files, contributed to people's willingness to explore difficult and sometimes painful subjects. Because of this very particular setting of the research, it was not uniformly against me that I was an outsider, and marked as such by not being able to speak the language. Many respondents told me (not directly, but through the translator, of course) that the interview had provided them with an important opportunity to sit and reflect on the frenzy of activity that had been their lives in the past few years. These days as I write up my results, I am struck by the richness of the data, and I am surprised that it all went so well despite the obvious problems.

Would I do it again? Probably not. In fact, the other day in the Museum of the Resistance in Grenoble, France, I found myself in a conversation with an old man who had been part of the French resistance during the Second World War. Being situated in the heart of the Alps, this area was the center of the resistance, as young men and women hid in the mountains. As I spoke with this man, I thought to myself, he is old now. He and the people with whom he fought will not be here forever. Wouldn't it be wonderful to interview them? After the Germans had gone home, what was it like to run into the neighbor who had supported the Vichy government? The research light was turning on. But then I thought, no, not again. And though I have studied French for more than ten years and even live here now, French is not my native tongue. Never again will I conduct research in a place where I have no possibility of catching the subtle innuendo of language.

But I am glad, very very glad, that I did it just that once. Had I been more cautious, had I taken the cues consistently delivered to me from grant awarding bodies, had I been my own student and

asked me my professional advice, I would have missed out on a unique experience.

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