

DR. FRANK L. DOUGLAS

*Defining Moments  
of a Free Man  
from a Black Stream*



In January I returned to Frankfurt and everyone who encountered me said something in German and I had absolutely no clue about what was said to me. I discussed it with my German teacher who recommended my taking an intensive 3-week immersion course in German and she recommended S&W School in Meersburg. She said I had to be someplace where people could not bring work to me and the distance of Meersburg from Hoechst would achieve that. I could only afford two weeks in February so Liane signed me up for the course. In the meantime, it was recognized that I had only learned how to read a text but could not converse in German. So, I no longer had to go through the embarrassment of not being able to respond in German. Everyone reverted to English when speaking to me.

Niehls, one of the owners of the S&W (Sprachen und Wirtschaft) School, met me at the train station at Fredricksburg

and took me to the home of Frau Baerbel Trautwein. Frau Trautwein had a large house with a great rose garden on the side of the hill that sloped down towards the main road below. Beyond this road, the center of the city stretched towards the east bank of the Bodensee Lake. There was a wonderful view of the calm waters of this lake as one enjoyed 'Breakfast at Trautwein'. Frau Trautwein would have 2-3 students in residence and Breakfast consisted of freshly baked dark and light-colored rolls, at least three types of cheese, marmalade, slices of ham, tea and coffee. There was always a small bouquet of flowers in the middle of the table. Frau Trautwein provided breakfast each morning from Monday to Friday. The first floor of her house consisted of the kitchen, breakfast area, and living room, which also had a wonderful view of the lake.

The entrance hall held a guest bathroom and, to the left opened onto the living room, and on the right were the stairs to the second and third floors, as well as entrance to the breakfast area through the kitchen. On the left of this living room were Frau Trautwein's private quarters. The students had large rooms on the second floor. These very large rooms each contained a bed, desk and chair, two easy chairs, and an incredible view of the Bodensee Lake. The early morning view of this lake from my bedroom window produced the calm I needed to face the day's barrage of German words that never coalesced into comprehensible sentences. The view of the gentle sunsets over the Lake slowly drained my head of the feeling that the day's jumbled vocabulary had not yet found the right networks for storage in my fevered brain, before I had to embark on my evening class. A kitchen and a common full bathroom were across the hallway and a public coin-operated phone was on the wall in the hallway, on the second floor. A full apartment was on the third floor.

After Fruehstueck with Frau Trautwein, we would walk down the hill, cross the main street and traverse the cobbled-stoned streets of the small, town center. The school occupied the second floor of a small building in the middle of this town center.

Niehls' session consisted of explaining the structure of business, unions and the economy in Germany. He covered the role of the Vorstand (Board of Management), Aufsichtsrat (Board of Directors or Supervisory Board) and the important Mitbestimmungsrecht des Betriebsrats (co-determination right of the Work Councils). (This last, where the unions have a seat on the Board of Directors and give input to major strategic

changes in the company, is a major difference compared to the USA).

As I sat listening to Niehls everything was so clear that I finally raised my hand and asked, "Niehls, are you speaking to me in English or German."

A smile came over his face and he said, "Sie haben begonnen auf Deutsch zu Denken." (You have begun to think in German). Of course, everything he had said was in German.

The following morning, I could understand Angelika and to everybody's relief I began to respond in German. The previous week I had sat impassively, listening to everything but without ever uttering a word in response. I had had the breakthrough and I was not late for any of my remaining sessions with Angelika.

I could also see that my sessions with Doris and Iris were more enjoyable for them because I was conversing. Sprechen und Hoeren (Speaking and Listening) is how one learns a language, they would remind me.

On the morning that I returned to my office, I greeted Liane in German. She responded in German. I then asked her in German why she had responded to me in German because before that morning she had always spoken to me in English. She said that it was clear from my diction that I could speak and understand German. Prior to that morning, I had a little ritual with Liane. I would write out a sentence in German, practice pronouncing it, then go out to her desk and ask her my question in German. She would always respond in English.

Liane suggested that I should conduct my daily staff meeting auf Deutsch whenever only German speaking staff members were in attendance. I suggested that I would initially try it one to two days a week.

Shortly thereafter, I was conducting all of my staff meetings auf Deutsch. I requested my staff and others to correct my inaccurate translations from English to German, and not to refrain from laughing when they found a misstatement hilarious. I needed them to instruct me on the correct usage of the words or phrase. This was very important to me because I wanted to avoid repetition of an incident that had occurred in one of the Hoechst Board meetings. My colleague, Frau

Dr. Lapps, and I were invited to give a progress report on the merger activities of our departments, Development and Research, respectively. The meeting was conducted in English as I was the only one who could not speak German. My colleague had a very bad cold and after a fit of coughing, I turned to her and said, "Gute Aufbesserung." I quickly corrected it to, "Gute Besserung", when I observed the smiles on the faces of several of the Board members. To my relief, my self-correction, was greeted with much broader smiles from the Board members and Frau Dr. Lapps. Gute Besserung, refers to improvement in one's health. One would never say Gute Aufbesserung, Aufbesserung would be used, for example, to improve one's income. And to make it even more complicated, for improvement in one's capabilities, for example, one would use Verbesserung. (I love the specificity in the use of German words).

## **Was Nicht Ist, Ja Kann Das Noch Werden**

During this initial difficult 18-month period, I had found two sources of support. One was Liane and her husband Dieter and the other was the group at S&W. I would periodically call up Anka or Niehls and schedule a weekend for private German lessons. I would stay at Frau Trautwein's 'Bed and Breakfast' and enjoy an evening at one of the restaurants with one of the S&W teachers and Frau Trautwein. By now we were using the German familial form 'Du', in addressing each other.

(This was one of the things that I really liked about Germany. They make a clear distinction between an acquaintance and a friend. Once they consider you a friend and have offered the 'DU' form form of address, you are like a member of the family).

In my first weekend back to S&W, they expressed great surprise at my German capabilities. They told me that usually when executives came to them, they had been sent by their companies and were really not interested in learning German. So, these executives would spend three weeks at S&W and one year later they would return and have to start learning German, all over again. Anka continued, "Then one day, Frank Douglas came to us. We had great concern because the first week he worked very hard but was just not getting it. Suddenly, in the second week he was fluent. Now, several weeks later he is speaking and writing German at the level of a German first year University Student!"

Meersburg, teachers at S&W, such as Niehls, Anka and Iris, and Frau Trautwein (Baerbel) became my friendly places and faces away from Frankfurt.

Liane and Dieter and Manuela Blume at TExT (my German Teacher in Frankfurt) were my friendly faces in Frankfurt and Hoechst.

My unexpected rapid success in learning German was also captured in the Frankfurt newspaper. In a profile written about me in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the following comment was made (Seite 56/Samstag, 18 Juli 1998. Nr.164):

‘Um das besser zu koennen, hat Douglas Deutsch gelernt. Kein Wort habe er gesprochen oder verstanden, als er Ende 1995 aus den Vereinigten Staaten zuerst nach Frankreich, dann bald nach Deutschland gekommen sei. Nun spricht er die Sprache des Ursprungslandes perfekt.’

Translation: In order to be able to do this better (the persuading of others), Douglas learned German. He neither spoke nor understood a word (of German), when, at the end of 1995 he left the USA, first to France and shortly thereafter to Germany. Now he speaks the language of the Country of origin, (i.e. Germany), perfectly.

Of course, this was slight exaggeration. By end of 1995, I had learned many German words, but understood absolutely nothing when they were used in conversation. However, at the end of my two weeks at S&W in February, 1996, they considered me to be fluent.

September, 1996, I called a large meeting to present the organizational changes I planned to implement in the Research Department. I asked to have a Dolmetscher (translator) to translate the questions after my presentation because I wanted to be sure that I understood each question before responding auf Deutsch. At the beginning of the Question and Answer period, as I stepped away from the podium the ear piece fell and I was disconnected from the Dolmetscher. I ignored the ear piece, stepped to the center of the stage and conducted the Q&A auf Deutsch.

A few years later Hildegard Nimmesgern told me that that was the turning point. The Associates knew that I could read a prepared text, but the debate performance had been somewhat overlooked. However, answering questions in that setting convinced the associates that I was fluent in German and that signaled to them, that I had had enough respect for them and their culture that I had exerted myself to learn their language. I was not the arrogant American who had come to tell them to do things the American Way.