

The first time I took a German class, I was between two and seven decades younger than my classmates. I was 14 and had decided that I wanted to learn German badly enough that I would sacrifice 2 hours every Saturday morning to attend the German School of Connecticut. My classmates and I were all there for different reasons; some had married native German speakers, some had plans to move abroad, others just wanted to challenge themselves a bit. Regardless of what brought us to the class, we all had the same goal: to communicate effectively *auf Deutsch*.

Originally, I had wanted to learn German purely for the challenge of learning a new language. And believe me, it was a challenge. Between all the different case endings and past participles to memorize, there was more than one occasion where I thought to myself "I'm choosing to spend my Saturdays doing this, I could simply choose to do something else." But at the same time that German was difficult, it was also incredibly rewarding. It was fun to be able to look at an unfamiliar and terrifyingly long word and realize that I could understand its definition just by recognizing all of the word's component parts. Formerly daunting words like *die Krankenversicherungskarte* suddenly made sense when you broke down the word into sick-insurance-card.

It became an even more rewarding experience, when I started to look at German as more than just a language; it was a gateway to new cultures. After one year at the German School of Connecticut, my family hosted a German exchange student named Sarah for the school year. During class on Saturdays, I would hear about life in Austria from my German teacher, Bob Kibel, and then throughout the week Sarah would tell me about her hometown in Germany. The more I heard, the more I knew that I wanted to experience those places for myself, so I stuck with the language.

In college, I continued taking German classes. I went to a very small college so there was only one German professor. Her name was Professor Toegel, she was originally from Vienna, Austria, and she expected nothing short of perfection from her students. I was intimidated by her at first, but soon that intimidation gave way to enormous amounts of respect. She was like a coach. She would push us to the very limits of what we thought we could do (read all of Thomas Bernhard's *Alte Meister* in 48 hours!) and once we'd done it she'd turn around and say "*Das war also relativ einfach, oder?*"

By the time I got to my senior year of college I had fallen absolutely in love with the German language. I talked to my former exchange student Sarah all the time, I had studied abroad for a semester in Munich, and I'd even written a 55 page thesis entirely *auf Deutsch*. The next obvious thing to do would be to find my way back to a German speaking country.

After several rounds of applications to post-graduate fellowships and grants, I was faced with a delightfully difficult decision. I could either spend my first year post-grad in Bavaria, Germany or Vorarlberg, Austria. It was a great position to be in, but also a very tough choice to make. On the one hand, I knew that I liked Bavaria, because I'd already spent a semester there. On the

other hand, I didn't really know much about Austria, and even less about Vorarlberg, so maybe it would be interesting to discover a new place.

So I did what anyone does when faced with a difficult decision: I googled it.

When I looked at the google image results for Vorarlberg I saw something I recognized: the Lake Constance. Several years before, in my first year in that adult beginner's course at the German School of Connecticut, our textbook had a chapter on the Lake Constance, or as it's known in German *der Bodensee*. I remembered being in that class and learning about the lake with a shore in three German-speaking countries and being totally fascinated by it. After we covered that chapter in class, I added the Bodensee to my unofficial bucket list. One way or another I wanted to see it and now I had a chance to.

I thought about the decision a little more and realized that the two people most responsible for my love of (and ability to communicate in) the German language were both from Austria. Bob Kibel, my teacher at German School of Connecticut and Professor Toegel from Hamilton College. Both had been instrumental in my love of German and my appreciation for the cultures that speak it. I knew embarrassingly little about their home country, so I decided to move to Vorarlberg, Austria.

My year in Vorarlberg was incredible. I met new people, climbed new mountains (literally) and yes, even swam in the Bodensee. When the year was over I wasn't ready to leave so I requested to stay for another year in Austria, but this time in the hometown of both of my favorite German teachers, Vienna.

Had I not gone to that adult beginner's course at the German School of Connecticut nearly a decade ago, it is impossible to guess what I would be up to now, because my present life has been so profoundly shaped by the experience of learning and speaking German. My nearly decade-long journey with the German language, from that adult beginner's course at the German School of Connecticut to recently filling out an Austrian visa application, is only possible because of the language instructors and German-speakers who pushed me to work harder and keep practicing (no matter how many times I mix up adjective endings). There's nothing really I can say in return except *Danke schön!*