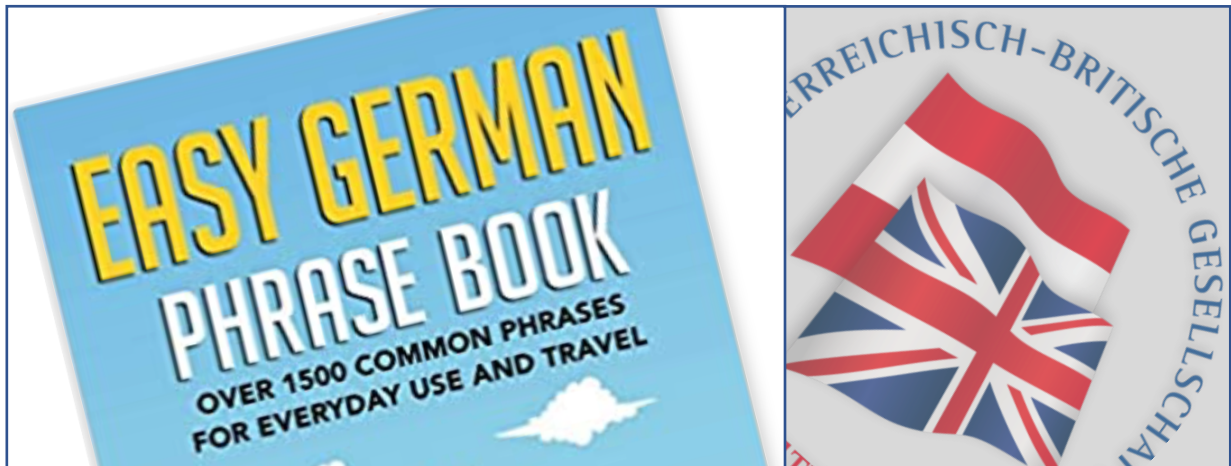


The German Phrase Book (disaster)

by Melanie Sully



After reading the amusing contributions by Ambassador Christiani and Jochen Ressel on some awkward language situations I decided to relate my first encounter with Austria in 1970.

Having decided Vienna, the city of music, would be the next place I should visit 'abroad' I bought a German phrase book. We learnt French and Latin at school but alas no German. Anyway with the aid of this book I managed to scribble a letter and reserved a room at the student hostel in the Ninth Vienna district in the Porzellangasse. To my joy I received a written confirmation by post. So I set off on the 27 hour train journey from Bristol Temple Meads via London, no sleeper, just an ordinary compartment with five others. Tired but hopeful I arrived at the Westbahnhof and managed to find the way to the student hostel.

Seeing the porter I ventured to ask for 'Mr Hochachtungsvoll' and was a little taken aback by his reaction. Anyway not to be deterred I reckoned I had not pronounced this long word at all correctly so I proudly showed him the letter. He smiled politely and showed me the room which cost ten shillings a night. At that time there were 60 Schillings to the Pound.

I wondered why it was he looked so bemused so decided to look up the meaning of the curious word Hochachtungsvoll and to my embarrassment discovered it was not a name of the person who wrote the letter but a bit like Yours sincerely so I had stupidly asked to see 'Mr Yours sincerely'. Today this would not happen. Noone writes letters and they sign off with LG or MfG or whatever.

Straight afterwards the next mini shock in Austria came. Tired and hungry on a Saturday afternoon I forlornly walked looking for somewhere to eat puzzled to find everything closed. The phrase book was used once again to ask where I could find some food but the replies didn't sound much like German. There must be a shop on the corner I muttered optimistically to myself, maybe one run by an Asian like at home. Hunger can make you homesick. Finally I arrived at the Singerstrasse where joy of joys there was a Selbstbedienungs-Restaurant. Welcome to Austria!

PS: For more fun check out the Monty Python sketch on the Hungarian phrase book.

Have you experienced something comparable? Please let us know! We are looking forward to your comments!



About the author

Melanie Sully (Prof. Dr.) is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, editor, writer and consultant, who was for many years professor of political science at the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna. Formerly Voice of America radio correspondent, Dr. Sully acts as a consultant on good governance projects for the Cultural Department of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria. Further she has worked as a consultant for the OSCE on projects such as parliamentary standards, comparative legislatures, as well as women's political participation. She gave presentations on parliaments and ethics and legislative standards for parliamentarians in Tbilisi and for the Council of Europe, gave Guest Professorial Lecture, for politics at the University of London, and has given expert evidence to the House of Commons.

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