



Learning German at Bradford Grammar School (1956 to 1962)

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“In the 1950s Bradford Grammar School (BGS), a Direct Grant School, demanded stark choices from its – as they were then called – pupils unless they were consigned to a lower stream. This was the equivalent of ‘outer darkness’ in that these boys were no longer able to take Latin and were thus excluded from the search for what for the school represented the Holy Grail, namely a place at an Oxbridge college. One league table published in the ‘Times Educational Supplement’ (yes, they existed in those days) was all that counted: the number of Oxbridge scholarships a school gained.

The kind of choice imposed by the school had lasting consequences because of the specialisation that followed, something that was not easy to change subsequently. The first decision had to be made at the end of the first year: whether to opt for Classics. This meant starting Ancient Greek and no sciences except Biology. Latin and Biology went together because a good knowledge of Latin was seen as necessary for a career in medicine. Despite propaganda for the classical stream (‘You will be in the top form.’) I eschewed that path. The choice I then had to make at the end of the second year (Fourth Form) in 1956 was between ‘Science’ and ‘Modern’. Modern meant dropping Physics and chemistry and starting German. After an unfortunate encounter with some acid in the chemistry laboratory, I opted for the mysteries of German and, what is more six forty-five minute periods, as the aim was to reach O Level standard in two years, although nobody took the examination at that point.

German meant making the acquaintance of the principal teacher of the subject Dr Krips, who had already taken my scientist brother in the Sixth Form for scientific German, deemed necessary because German was still considered a valuable asset, especially for chemists. He had begun by telling the class that there were only three important phrases in German: ‘Ich liebe Dich’, ‘Herr Ober, noch ein helles Bier’ and ‘Herr Ober, noch ein dunkles Bier.’ (in order: I love you. Waiter, another light beer. Waiter, another dark beer.) As innocent thirteen year-olds, we were not given this information but presented with the textbook ‘Aufenthalt in Deutschland’, the two parts of which accompanied us over the first two years learning the language.

That this was preferred to the much more common ‘Deutsches Leben’ may have been for reasons of local patriotism: its author was a lecturer at Bradford Technical College. After a few introductory chapters, the first featuring ‘Was ist das?’ and such answers as ‘Das ist der Bleistift, das ist die Tinte’ (This is the pencil. This is the ink.), it followed, as the title suggests, a stay in Germany, that of a young man called Robert. When this stay took place remained unclear; there were certainly no references to politics or recent history. The nearest the book came to such questions was in relation to money. An exchange rate was quoted, which, if I recall correctly, was even more favourable to sterling than the blissful rate that prevailed at the time: £1 = 12DM.

From the beginning, however, Dr Krips loomed larger than the textbook. He was an Austrian by birth, who had left at the time of the 1938 Anschluss. By training he was a lawyer, his doctorate being in the area of jurisprudence. Despite or perhaps because of this unconventional background, his methods were equally unconventional. They reflected his love of music, which was perhaps not surprising since his brother was the conductor Josef Krips. What he offered us was what might be termed rhythmic grammar. Using the window pole as a kind of drumstick and the much indented floor as the drum, he beat out a rhythm to which we chanted ‘ich bin, du bist, er/sie/es ist’ etc.. When it came to

the declension of nouns, especially masculine and neuter ones, he assumed his brother's profession and conducted us through, for example, 'der Mann, den Mann...'. The highlight was the dative plural form (den Männern) when he held out his hand and moved it slowly from left to right to make us continue the 'n' ending for several seconds until he abruptly raised his index finger. There was little excuse for anyone to omit this 'n' subsequently, as the declension concert was unforgettable.

There was arguably more excuse for forgetting adjective endings. These were pinned up on the classroom wall or rather they were not. In an example of virtual reality 'avant la lettre' we had to imagine they were written there. A mistake in this area provoked the response 'Can't even read' spoken in stentorian tones which, especially through the 'r' sound, revealed quite clearly that Dr Krips was not a native speaker of English. Equally, there were problems with vowels. His exhortations to work harder came over as 'You must learn more.' It was not that he overused English in preference to the language spoken in his native city. The request for quiet 'Darf ich mal um Ruhe bitten?' (May I ask for silence?) and his calling pupils 'Herr von X' were, unbeknown to us at the time, very Viennese.

Dr Krips's personality and presence, which fitted in with his big frame, made learning the fundamentals of learning German fun. Whether teaching it to us and other year groups was fun to him is more open to doubt. During our second year of learning German, he developed an ulcer which required him, no doubt on doctor's orders, on occasions to interrupt the lesson, take out a thermos flask and pour himself a hot drink. Needless to say, we enjoyed this break in normal proceedings.

I would prefer to think that it was having to plough through the adventures, if that is the right word, of Robert year on year that caused the health problem. What adventures befell him during his sojourn away from home? He suffered a stormy sea crossing when various fellow-passengers were sick. He swam in the Rhine despite the strong current (there was no reference to pollution) and attended a hockey match between England and Germany, which Mr Anderson contrived to end in a diplomatic 2 to 2 draw. If I remember correctly, the English were more skilful but the Germans 'stark und zäh' (strong and tough). Maybe it was the other way round; what I do remember correctly is that the draw came about because of a penalty given for illegal use of the foot. The choice of hockey for this particular passage was no doubt because it was a sport known to both girls and boys.

Even cricket got a mention on one occasion thanks to Dr Krips. One chapter spoke of Robert reading lots of German literature, specifically Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Heine. A fast bowler by the name of Heine had played for South Africa in England in 1955. That Dr Krips knew this and referred to it increased his standing and underlined his Anglophile attitudes, which became clearer when we were in the sixth form and politics was no longer a taboo subject.

Finally, in one chapter, one of Robert's adventures or, in this case, misadventures was meant to be a source of humour. In a café he was impressed by some cakes, the name of which he did not know. We of course were not in a position to know that in Germany one usually goes to the counter and chooses one's piece of cake on the basis of information provided. Be that as it may, Robert, wishing to know the name, asked the waitress, inevitably young and pretty, 'Wie heißen sie?' (What are they called?) only for her to understand 'Wie heißen Sie?' (What are you called?) and to reply 'Ich heiße Paula Klein.' This was the opportunity to introduce the verb 'sich blamieren' (to disgrace oneself), which Dr Krips, unsurprisingly for a native of the city of Freud, thought was exaggerated in relation to such a trivial faux pas nobody found very funny.

The first two years of German were, of course, more than reading about Robert and chanting inflexions. There were numerous dictations, whilst each chapter in the two textbooks contained numerous exercises. The hardest were those when we had to fill in the missing inflexions in a sentence like the following: 'D_ jung_ Frau (fahren) mit d_ Straßenbahn in d_ Stadt'. We went through these in class and had to write down the correct answers in our exercise books. Some light relief was provided when Dr Krips read out loud from the famous book for children 'Emil und die Detektive'.

Whether or not he was disappointed by our reactions, in the following year it was the turn of 'Tarzan und die Affen'.

Such were the ways in which we were supposed to reach O Level standard in two years, although, as mentioned above, this was not put to the test by having to sit the examination. Instead a further choice was required. Because Bradford Grammar School pupils sat their A Levels after six years, the fifth year, called Remove, had a dual function: as an O Level year and as a Lower Sixth year in the subjects chosen for A Level, which were not taken at O Level. The choice I and others had to make was between German with a view to progressing to A Level in Sixth Modern and History, the choice of which as an 'A'-Level subject led to Sixth History. The subject not chosen for A Level was taken at O Level. The system allowed for no flexibility, such as taking German and History at A Level.

The result of this was that the German class in the Remove year was made up of those who, like myself, intended to continue the subject into the sixth form and those who were to bow out after 'O'-Level. Preparing those in the second category for the examination meant lots of translation and the introduction of the 'Nacherzählung'. A brief story was read out twice by Dr Krips which we then had to reproduce, obviously at not the same length. The only one that remains in my mind is of an old lady who kept a parrot whose previous owner had taught it to swear. Because of this, she covered its cage with a cloth when she received a weekly visit from her priest. On one occasion he left something behind and came back to retrieve it. When the old lady realised the situation, she hastily re-covered the cage prompting the parrot to cry out: 'Das war eine verflucht kurze Woche.' (That was a damned short week.) As few of us understood this mild expletive, it was generally omitted. Thus our version of the story, as Dr Krips pointed out, had omitted the main point of the tale.

The linguistic exercises practised for those sitting O Level no doubt benefited the whole class. Whether having to read the first A Level set book benefited those giving up German is another question, since the text to be studied was 'Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag' (Mozart en route for Prague) by Mörike. Certainly much of the language was anything but contemporary. This was underlined when one lesson was devoted to writing a letter to a hotel in Austria, according to Dr Krips because a colleague had asked him to do this on his behalf. When it came to addressing the hotelier, someone piped up 'Gnädigster Herr' (Kind sir), an expression plucked from the set text. Unusually impatient, Dr Krips castigated him for suggesting something so archaic. I thought this was unfair, as we were hardly in a position to know this. At other times Dr Krips, who had possibly been attracted by the Mozart connection, did admit that Mörike was difficult but that it was necessary to study such works for our future good.

As for the O Level candidates, little harm was done as they all passed, whilst the rest of us moved on into the Sixth Form and more intense preparations for A Level. We were even able to celebrate the end of term by learning a drinking song, through which Dr Krips revealed another manifestation of his musical tastes. It tells the story of a young man leaving a pub ('Gerade aus dem Wirtshaus komm'ich heraus) only to notice that the world is in a state of unstable equilibrium; the streetlights, for example, 'wackeln und fackeln die kreuz und die quer' (wobble and wave all around). Faced with this dilemma, he wisely sees no choice but to return into the pub: 'da geh ich lieber ins Wirtshaus zurück.' Internet entries, which in one case even suggest an English title 'Stewed and pickled', reveal that the song dates from 1840 and was written by a certain Heinrich von Mühler.

The teacher of German we encountered in the Sixth Form for the first time would have asked in his pedantic manner at this point 'Was wissen Sie über den Verfasser?' (What do you know about the author?) At the same time, it was inconceivable that he would have brought such a song to our attention. Like Dr Krips, Mr Somers had also come to Britain as a refugee but that seemed about all they had in common. We knew little about him except that his father had been a judge at the Leipzig 'Reichsgericht' (High Court). He mainly taught French to lower forms but in what was known as 'first-year sixth' he took us for five of the eight German periods. He was probably the most unpopular teacher in the School, as his pedantry included the strict application of every rule in the school book.

As a result nobody had much patience with his insistence on establishing etymological links or with his propensity to use foreign words, for example 'das Interview', the existence of which some of us, in our ignorance, doubted. One boy even looked up 'pidgin German' in a dictionary and came up with 'das in chinesischen Seestädten gesprochene und gebrochene Deutsch' (literally: the German spoken and broken in Chinese ports), which amused us and confirmed our prejudices. We studied two set books with Mr Somers, 'Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte' and 'Maria Stuart'. We also did prose translation from the book we knew as Kolisko and Yuill. On two occasions Mr Somers revealed that he had written to people connected with the volume, Kolisko herself, and Harold Nicholson, whose writings were frequently used for prose translation at that time into both German and French. When he read their replies, most of us, unappreciative of his efforts, were unimpressed.

Our final set book for A Level was Hebbel's 'Herodes und Mariamne' taught by Dr Krips. This led him into political territory for the first time. Speaking of 'six poor little children', he compared the main characters' inability to compromise with the poisoning of his children shortly before the end of the war by Dr Goebbels. He also suggested that the ability to compromise was a strength in the British character.

For most of my year group, A Levels were not the end of their school career. The next step on the way to Higher Education was entry into the Upper Sixth and studying for Scholarship Level. In the area of language or at least translation, if I remember correctly, there was no difference from 'A'-Level, the examination papers being labelled as 'AS'-Level. The difference was that there were no set books at 'S'-Level but the requirement to know a lot more about German literature. To this end, we now had five periods per week with Dr Krips. The books we were required to read, mainly in the form of annotated editions such as Blackwell's German Texts, were to the best of my memory:

Lessing: Emilia Galotti, Minna von Barnhelm, Nathan der Weise
Goethe: Götz von Berlichingen, Die Leiden des jungen Werthers, Egmont, Iphigenie auf Tauris, FaustI, Poetry
Schiller: Kabale und Liebe, Die Braut von Messina, Wilhelm Tell, Wallensteins Tod
Tieck: Der blonde Eckbert
Hoffmann: Der goldene Topf
Brentano: Die Geschichte vom braven Kasperl und vom schönen Annerl
Eichendorff: Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts
Keller: Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe, Kleider machen Leute
C.F. Meyer, Gustav Adolfs Page, Das Amulett
Storm: Immensee, Der Schimmelreiter
Hebbel: Maria Magdalena, Agnes Bernauer
Hauptmann: Vor Sonnenaufgang
Th. Mann, Tonio Kröger

In addition, we read poetry from a volume entitled 'A Book of German Verse from Luther to Liliencron' (ed. H.G. Fiedler). Dr Krips was very much enamoured of Liliencron's 'Dorfkirche im Sommer' (Village Church in Summer) which juxtaposes a boring church service with the bounty of nature outside the church door. He particularly liked the line about the priest silently praying for his enemies, the irony of which escaped me at the time. Equally memorable is his reaction to the first poem in the Blackwell's collection of Goethe's poetry, the lines to his grandparents. For him Goethe at the age of eight must have been the kind of child whose neck you want to wring. Finally we were required to read the background book 'Deutschland und die Deutschen' by Professor Baier of the University of Hull which took our knowledge of Germany far beyond the adventures of Robert.

Obviously all the texts listed above could not be read in detail in class. We did read a number of the plays, including 'Agnes Bernauer'. Dr Krips announced that I would have the major part of Emeran Nusberger zu Kalmberg. Whenever his name appears in the text, it is of course followed by the stage direction 'schweigt'. I did not mind either the silence or the joke. In addition to the texts, we were given

some overview of the history of German literature with the aid of the, at the time, canonical book 'A History of German Literature' by J.G. Robertson. We were also introduced to the 'Wellentheorie' about German literature, namely that German literature had been marked by peaks and troughs. This theory, according to the Internet, was the work of Wilhelm Scherer in the nineteenth century. His peaks were apparently 600, 1200 and 1800. In the version we received, the cycles were every three hundred years, which made the times of greatness 1200, 1500 and 1800. According to the theory 1950 was a nadir, something which I, in my ignorance, was prepared to believe. Perhaps I can ask for forgiveness, given that the texts I was confronted with tended to reinforce such a theory.

There was one other activity during the Scholarship Level year: textual analysis, which we undertook in one of the three periods taken by Mr Somers. We had to comment on a short text, often a poem, presented without the name of the author. The last part of the exercise was to suggest a possible author. One such text was Brecht's 'Wenn die Haifische Menschen wären'. I had been tipped off that one of the texts during the year would be by Brecht and I chose the right one, a rare if somewhat dishonest triumph. I should add that, despite the bias towards the nineteenth century, the name of Brecht was mentioned a few times. In fact two trips were arranged to see performances of works by him. One to York to see the first English language production of what was known at that time as *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and another to Wakefield to see in German 'Die Ausnahme und die Regel'. (The Exception and the Rule)

I do not recall how all this literature was tested in the S Level. I have also forgotten how in the following year (Third Year Sixth) I and one other boy were prepared for Oxbridge Scholarship examinations. There is, however, one other thing to mention that was facilitated by the school: visits to Germany. In the summer of 1959 I undertook an exchange with a young man from Stuttgart, the fiftieth anniversary of which we marked with a reunion in the presence of a reporter from the 'Stuttgarter Zeitung'. I no longer know who organised the exchange but the group travel was organised by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges.

My second visit to Germany, to Berlin in April 1961, was under the auspices of the Council for Education in World Citizenship. That, to the best of my knowledge, neither of these two institutions exists today in the form of that time may say something, not just about the decline of languages but also about social attitudes in Britain. However, a discussion of these topics in the present context would be, in the words of the English translation of Günter Grass's novel 'Ein weites Feld', 'too far afield'. My aim has solely been to write down my recollections of learning German whilst at school. I am certainly not suggesting that such an experience would be possible or sensible sixty years later."