



## Never a dull moment — or pencil

I took *zwei Jahre* (two years) of German in high school. From Day One our teacher, Frau Kutsko, made us learn two phrases in German: “May I go to the bathroom” and “May I sharpen my pencil.” If you couldn’t ask in German, she wouldn’t let you.

She told the possibly apocryphal story of the student who, while taking his final exam, broke his pencil tip but couldn’t remember the right phrase. Despite his pleas, she would not allow him to use the sharpener. With tears of frustration and anger he had to sit there and pick away at it until he could expose enough lead to write.

Years later, I remembered very little of my German — how to count to 100, a few stray words and how to ask for permission to sharpen my pencil. I can’t remember how to ask for permission to use the bathroom. I guess I never had to go during class.

A few years ago, we planned a trip to Switzerland and Germany, and I was teaching my children the one very important phrase I could remember (which would, no doubt, come in very handy should we experience a highly distressing emergency where someone’s writing implement failed).

In the couple of months leading up to our trip, my children finally mastered the phrase: “*Du bist ein bleistiften spitzen*” — the pronunciation of which had all the nuance of a car motor refusing to turn over

in the cold. German, however utilitarian, is not a pretty language.

Anyway, we arrived in Switzerland and related the story to a family friend who speaks wonderful German and helped us during our stay there.

Our German-speaking friend promptly explained that the phrase embedded in the nether reaches of my brain had slowly transformed (either that, or my German teacher had a wicked sense of humor). “*Du bist ein bleistiften spitzen*” actually means “You are a sharpened pencil.”

Fortunately, we learned of the mistranslation early on and avoided an international incident. I shudder to think what would have happened if I’d uttered that phrase to a bitter former East German.

Needless to say, my wife and children have never let me live that down.

I learned a great many things in school, German clearly being an exception. But like so many times in life, it is the unintended lessons that stick with us:

- ▶ If you don’t maintain your skills, you will lose them. I stopped studying German after two years. We already know the results there.
- ▶ Don’t trust your memory. If it’s important, write it down and refer to it often.
- ▶ Whenever you’re in a foreign country, never pretend to be a master of their language. There’s a caveat here, though: While most people around the world speak at least passing English, we found that a sincere attempt to use the native language was a gateway to guidance and good service.

And perhaps most important of all, never, ever make a mistake in front of your children that will allow them to make fun of you. OK, that’s not going to happen — but a guy can dream, can’t he? Actually with two teenagers at home, it’s more a question of what *don’t* I do wrong. But that’s for another column.

And finally, with apologies to Frau Kutsko, I leave you with this thought — thanks to the help of an Internet translator: *Mai bleiben alle Ihre Bleistifte scharf*, or “May all your pencils remain sharp.”

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