

A Child of the EU, or Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl

Togetherness is another concept the Germans have all the best words for. At 14, precocious and very invested in learning German as a way to escape my dreary, dark town, I announced Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl to be my favourite word. “A feeling of togetherness and belonging”, what a phrase to put in to one word that goes on forever. A particularly poor supply teacher didn’t believe that my word existed, but as far as I remember I stubbornly worked it in to my poorly formatted, grammar-less German essays anyway. It’s certainly what I believed we had in Europe, back before the Brexit vote made European-ness political in my little slice of the world.

A product of pro-EU, co-operation focused schooling, I had shown Belgian teachers around my school, participated in Comenius exchanges as a teenager and made Europe my home through my peers. When the Belgians had told me that their country was small, I replied that in Britain, we have an inflated sense of our own size and importance. I remember their laughter as they informed me that Belgian was really, truly, much smaller. I must have heard that phrase said somewhere- maybe my socialist grandad with Scottish-Italian family? Yet back then, I’d still never stepped outside of the UK and was completely lacking the knowledge of that particular feeling of smaller nations you can drive across in a few hours. As teenagers on these programmes we made friends across countries, stumbling through misunderstandings and language barriers. The Brits and the Swedes learnt the Walz from the Poles and Germans in a big hall at the Deutsches Bergbau-Museum in Bochum while the museum guards glared on at us from the doorway, and the German teenagers expressed their complete displeasure the UK’s higher drinking age a few months later. Was there solidarity in the older kids sneaking them radlers? We thought so.

Eventually I learnt more than the Walz from my peers. In the end, some of the most important things you learn about your own country come from abroad. Are there really frames of reference without experiencing the faults of some other place, a not-home? On a summer school in Germany, finally conquering the language, I learnt that Germany had a long way to go on equality and racism. “Woher kommen Sie wirklich?”, where are you really from?, the old people at a pro-EU demonstration asked my Mancunian friend with Bangladeshi roots. She was used to those questions whenever she spoke her English-accented German in the country. “You ape”, hissed a check-out assistant at the Ghanian I was translating for in a Münster phone shop. Germany was my role model, this mythical way-out of post-Brexit small mindedness, wasn’t it? As you truly grow up, the sad realisation is that nowhere is perfect. At home, our diversity made the place stronger. Fundraising efforts jointly with the local mosque and the Catholic church, with henna painting and Irish dancing next to one another, evoking no contradiction in any of our minds. When met with those who hark back to the glory days of monocultures, which of course never really existed to start with, that becomes precious.

In my early twenties, in the unpredictable years where the clouds of Brexit hung over my passport, I had an idea about enjoying my last chance to soak up Europe’s most cultured corners. My German was kept up over homemade brandy with elderly locals in Slovenian mountains, taxi drivers far past retirement age in southern Poland and once a particularly curious, kind Austrian-Spanish family on long distance trains. It was then used to scream, loudly, when sexually assaulted on a train near Weimar, in the pursuit of Goethe and Schiller land. I had an Italy phase, too, spending a sweltering summer in Verona. I worked long hours and escaped in very fleeting moments of freedom to Romeo and Juliet’s city, full of romance and opera festivals. I was quite miserable, though, stuck between Italian bureaucracy and a quite insane Swedish boss. She seemed disappointed we shared the same languages so she couldn’t talk behind my back. I made good friends with a Dutchie, completing an internship in Florence while studying at a London university. Through all of this you learn, and work better with one another, understanding the reality rather than the surface of societies as diverse as

our cuisines and terrains. Somehow, we're nevertheless united by little nuggets of shared backgrounds, often made stark suddenly when presented with an American on a gap year or an Australian trying to drink themselves around the Old World.

My university boyfriend who is now my husband decided to study French one summer, in a romantic pursuit of his grandparents, who had met in Paris's Danish church while living in the city of love. I wasn't particularly keen on this madness; everyone I knew in France longed to escape the city's heat in the summer. Also, I had never mastered the language as I had with the Germanic ones which come so easily to my Scottish mouth. Nevertheless, we learnt and loved in Paris, in a tiny apartment he had somehow obtained for half of the actual rent. He's cheeky and lucky like that. We pursued Moroccan food in markets, went to parties with his Brazilian and Algerian classmates and devoured Carfour's bulging dairy aisle. Actually, we met very few French-French people, but maybe that's the beauty of Paris?

A year later we repeated the experience in Denmark, with me attending school this time. In the Danish countryside, there were many adonis-like blond Danes, keen to teach me of my inferiority. "Did you know, Brits are so ugly because we stole all the beautiful ones on Viking raids?" they would parrot. I'm still unsure of quite how they thought this was acceptable to say to my face, but some of them certainly believed the pseudo-science of centuries of myths. After a few short weeks, I was able to tell them how wrong they were in their own language. My class of dedicated mouth-contortionists graduated on Sankt Hans, midsummer, where Danes light bonfires, sing songs, as I've learnt that Protestants so love to do, and send witches to Germany. I found that I still had my *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, my belonging in Europe, so far from my teenage German classes and years after the Brexit vote. Who would know, changing the colour on a passport doesn't actually create borderlines in the North Sea? We're still all swimming together.