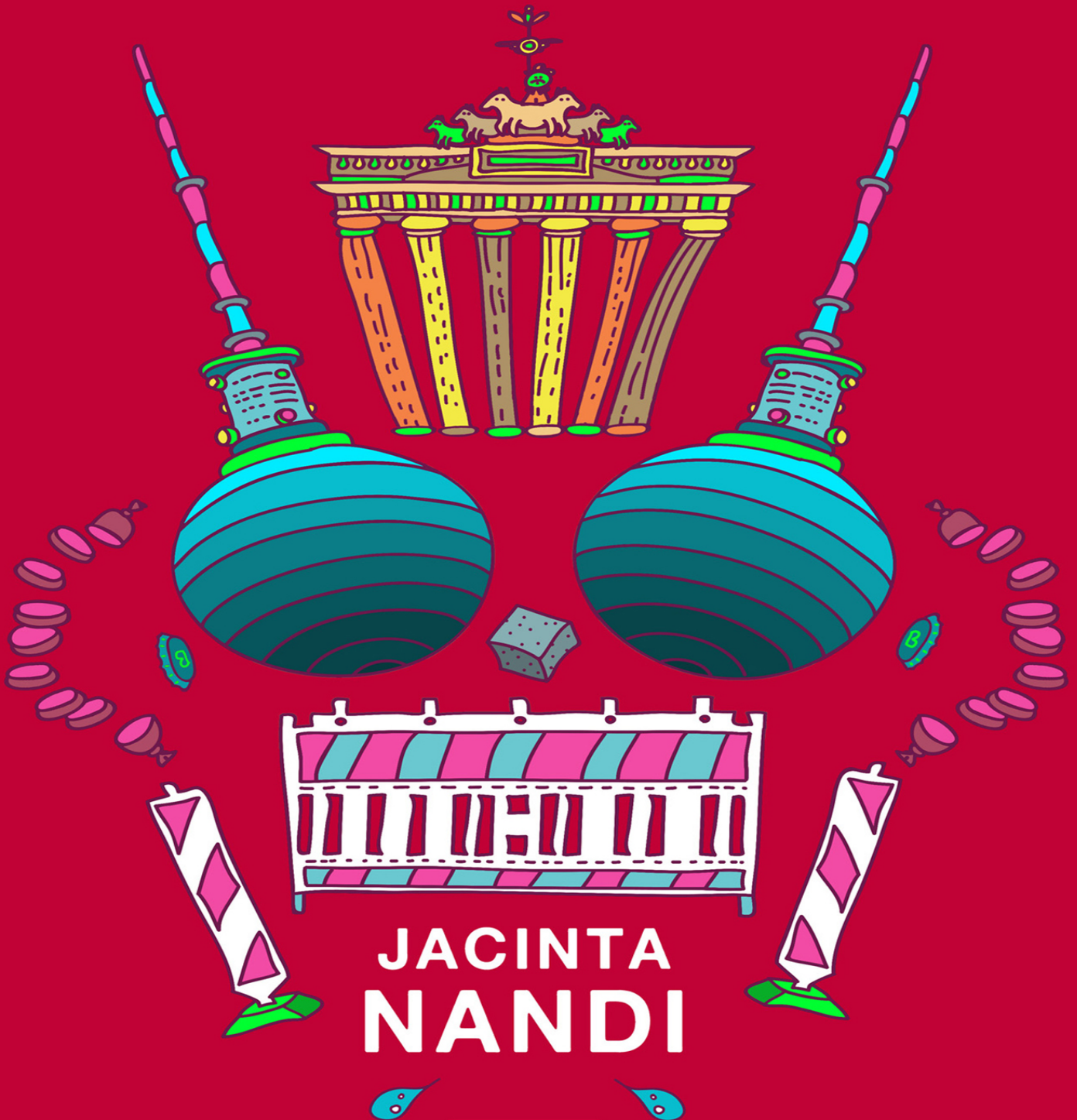


WTF BERLIN

EXPATSPAINING THE GERMAN CAPITAL



JACINTA
NANDI

SATYR

Jacinta Nandi

**WTF
BERLIN**

**EXPATSPLAINING THE GERMAN
CAPITAL**

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Introduction: Learn German or Die Trying

My friend Tanja and I are out in Neukölln, eating dinner with an American friend of hers who has a PhD from a renowned American university. We know he has a PhD because he mentions this fact every 7.4 seconds, and we know the uni he went to is well-renowned because he mentions that fact every 23.5 seconds. Approximately. Tanya and I both went to bog-standard comprehensives and then studied German at non-renowned British universities. Modern languages are taught at such a basic level in Britain that I sometimes feel my Bachelor's degree is almost of as much value as a *Seepferdchen* certificate.

"I like your girlfriend, Paul," I tell him. He has a younger Polish girlfriend who is funnier and sexier than him. At the very least he should be aware, right?

"Yeah?" he says.

"Yeah," I say. "She's great, articulate, smart ..."

"She's not that articulate," he says. "Her English isn't that great, to be honest. My cousin was over from the States the other week and he said he couldn't understand everything she was saying." I take a breath. "I wouldn't know," I say icily. "I speak to her in German."

Maybe I am too petty for words, but I sit there fuming. The arrogance of English speakers in general - and Americans in particular! It drives me mad! Shortly afterwards the waitress arrives and Paul, of course, orders in English. Why wouldn't he? We're in Neukölln, after all.

"How long have you lived here, Paul?" I ask him innocently.

"Seven years," he says.

"Maybe in another seven you'll be able to order your drinks in German," I say.

"Oh, I could order in German if I wanted to," he answers. "It's just easier to be understood in English."

Look, I get it. You couldn't have much more German-speaking privilege than me: eleven years old when I started learning the language (*Und wie geht's Ihnen, Frau Singh?*), twelve when I visited Limburg for the first time (I saw *Pretty Woman* dubbed into German and understood everything because I knew it off by heart), and twenty when I moved here.

"Are you going to pack your Oxford Duden dictionary?" my mum asked worriedly.

"Mum, I'm practically fluent!" I yelled confidently. Then I arrived here and tried to order a Currywurst - "Ich spreche kein Englisch!" the guy screamed in my face. I was crestfallen - that wasn't English but practically fluent German, right? What was wrong with him? At Warschauer Straße I bought a *Motz* off a homeless guy and he wished me a nice day like an American. "Even the homeless speak English," I whispered to myself forlornly as I suddenly realised that I wasn't brilliant at German. I wasn't even that good at it - I could just speak a tiny, basic bit of it. (*Entschuldigung, Frau Singh!*) So, I'm not about to judge anyone for not being able to speak this horrifically difficult language. And I know how judgy Germans can be: after

twenty years here I basically *am* fluent – but because of my non-white appearance and terrible accent, there’s a certain type of German (racist) who doesn’t even notice.

But not being able to speak German isn’t, in my eyes, something to be smug about. It makes life harder – sometimes it can even be dangerous. I remember after giving birth in 2004 in Urban Krankenhaus. It was the first time I had to pee after having my catheter out, and it felt like I was being sliced open by a blade.

“Mein Pinkel, mein Pinkel!” I called.

“What’s wrong, what’s wrong?” gasped the nurses.

“Mein Pinkel ist ein Messer!” I announced as they burst out laughing.

“Wir wissen genau, was Sie meinen,” they said, and reassured me it was normal.

But the last time I went to my family doctor in Neukölln, the doctor got me to speak to the receptionist, showing me off like I was a dog who’d learnt to curtsy or do a *Hitlergruß*.

“Listen to this,” the doctor said. “It’s amazing. She can say anything she wants to. She’s talking in full sentences,” he went on.

“I’ve been here twenty years,” I protested weakly.

I think it’s okay to live here for twenty years and still not know your adjectival endings – in fact I think it’s a bit *unsolidarisch* with people who work in Dönerläden to get too good at German grammar. And I think it’s absolutely okay to watch all your Netflix shows in English. I also think it’s okay to become demotivated and lazy when speaking to those German friends whose English is practically perfect and who, let’s face it, just want to use you as a free English teacher (hello, Cornelius!).

But it’s not okay to judge non-native speakers whose English isn’t perfect when you’ve been living in the country

for seven years and still can't order yourself a fucking *Orangensaft*. Come on, man. And now that everyone's streaming all their favourite shows in English, you're not going to teach yourself German through daytime TV or by watching the same episode of *Friends* dubbed into German one million times. The only thing you can do is get yourself back to school - and I don't mean an Ivy League one. The Volkshochschule will do.

Chapter One:

A is for ...

Abendbrot: *Abend means evening and Brot means bread, but if you put them together and look up the word Abendbrot in the dictionary, you might get a bit confused. They'll try to tell you it's dinner - or supper. But in British English, at least, it's more like tea - AbendESSEN is dinner whereas AbendBROT is a light evening meal, normally cold, made up of bread and cheese and salami.*

And when I say light, I really mean LIGHT. There are anorexic fruit flies heavier than German Abendbrot. It is, quite literally, the Perfect German Housewife's best kept secret.

Abendbrot: The German Housewife's Best-Kept Secret

I am a bad housewife in more ways than I can count: I hate Hoovering, I can't mop, I don't even know how to iron. When I iron something it looks more creased afterwards and has these funny black marks which I don't think are supposed to be there. I once stacked the dishwasher so

badly that my ex-boyfriend cried actual tears of actual frustration and true grief. And I think if Marie Kondo watched me folding laundry it would possibly break her.

But when it comes to German *Abendbrot*, I am the Perfect German Housewife. I have that shit *down*.

So, I'm babysitting my lovely friend Florence's kid when my equally lovely little friend Lola comes over. Lockdown has been lifted, but I still want her to sit on the balcony. I know she's been partying loads. Lola is so tiny and perfect - I swear, she is the only person on the planet who actually lost weight over lockdown - and now she looks so perfect and petite and tiny, like a tiny miniature porcelain chimney sweep.

"They change the rules every day," she says mournfully, placing two bottles of Sekt on the table. "It's cold on your balcony, let's just open the balcony doors, then your kitchen is kind of part of the balcony. Oh, I am so confused about the Corona stuff. Are you confused? It's so confusing!"

"It is confusing, isn't it," I say.

"It's exhausting and confusing!" she says. "I don't even know what is allowed or not anymore! Are we allowed to shake strangers' hands? Have sex with our old pre-Corona fuck buddies? Smoke crack together if we disinfect the pipe first? What about ketamine? Is ketamine illegal now?"

"I think, even in non-Corona times, ketamine is not strictly speaking legal. But yeah, it's all so confusing! I think they need to make up some simple rules and let us know what they are and then we can stick to them. I'm not even sure if I should have let you come over when I'm babysitting. Listen, I'm gonna make the kids some *Abendbrot*, you open the Sekt, okay?"

Abendbrot is probably the greatest trick the Perfect German Housewife ever played on German men/ausländische women, I think, as I get the kids' tea

ready. That is, I place two slices of grey bread, one slice of cheese and one slice of salami on the plate. Lola looks over my shoulder.

“Has that kid you’re babysitting’s mum fucked your ex-boyfriend or something?” she asks, looking at the plate of food I have prepared.

“What?” I say.

“You obviously really hate this woman? You’re giving her kid the cheapest, stingiest, most miserable excuse for dinner known to man.”

I look at Lola in surprise.

“Lola!” I say. “This is *Abendbrot*! This is German *Abendbrot*! This is good, normal, German *Abendbrot*. This is how you German.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, you are so mean about the Germans sometimes.”

“No, honestly, this is what German kids get for dinner.”

“This is what people in the Bastille got for dinner, more like! At the very fucking least put the two slices of bread on top of each other and call it a fucking sandwich.”

“Lola, I am a perfect German housewife, and I would never do anything as outrageously and horrifically un-German as give my kids a sandwich for dinner. Well ... not when we have guests over.”

Yep, *Abendbrot* is probably the greatest trick the Perfect German Housewife ever played on German men/ausländische women. If you grab a slice of bread, but actually go to the trouble of chopping up an onion, frying some bacon, getting some turkey ham involved. Or even smearing said bread with something vaguely healthy and interesting like hummus or peanut butter. YOU SLUT YOU LAZY SLUT YOU DISGUSTING WHORE YOU FUCKING ... *AUSSLÄNDERIN*.

The brilliance of *Abendbrot* is, the less effort you put in, the more German and perfect it becomes.

Now, for example, in my home country, England, a country famously famous for being bad at cooking, we think the mums who make easy dinners - bangers and mash, say, or beans on toast - we think THEY are the lazy housewives! Whereas the women who actually make complicated, tasty, delicious meals like lasagne or quiche are the good mothers - and proper housewives.

But Germany is like opposite world and everyone (except Lola) knows that the Perfect German Housewife makes a perfect Abendbrot: two slices of bread, two slices of tired, slightly wilted cucumber (you should try to buy your cucumbers at the supermarket already on the verge of exhaustion to get the real Abendbrot feeling), one slice of cheese, one slice of salami.

One thing I'd like to see: a Nigella Lawson German Abendbrot reaction video. Or how about if we forced Nigella Lawson to make a German Abendbrot herself? I think this would be literally torture for her. I reckon at the last moment she'd go crazy and start smearing the bread with organic goose fat, smashing up avocados and throwing smarties at all the kids.

* * *

Abtreibung: *So, Treiben is a super weird German word. It means something like drive, but not in a car, right. The drive in what's driving you. But sometimes it just means do. The complicated thing is when you übertreiben, you're overdoing things, but you might be exaggerating - when you untertreiben, you're kind of playing things down - and*

when you abtreiben, you're having an abortion. It sounds really dark and cruel, like you can imagine DDR doctors using old-fashioned knives and stuff.

A kind of euphemism for abortion is Abbruch. The way I always think of it is: abortion is Abtreibung and Abbruch is termination.

Abortions are hugely taboo in Germany, even in Berlin - slightly less taboo in East Germany and East Berlin than in the West, but still super taboo. The thing is, Germans, like the perverted weirdo weird perverts that they are, don't actually look down on women who have abortions because they think they are sluts or that sex is dirty and disgusting and shameful and stuff. Germans actually just seem to think sex is this thing you do sometimes, kind of by accident. But the thought of a woman being enough of a disorganised hot mess to forget to take a pill at the exact same time each day horrifies them.

Don't forget that abortions are actually officially illegal in Germany, and it's only just been made legal to "advertise" - i.e. inform people - of the fact that you carry out abortions if you are a gynaecologist.

Now, while it's true that they don't actually prosecute women who have an abortion before the twelfth week (which I find a super early date to decide by, by the way) it being officially a crime means that it is really hard to get one, or talk about it openly.

We spend a lot of time in Germany worrying about how fucked-up other countries are, and sometimes it means we don't notice the ways in which Germany is a fucked-up place to live. The abortion stuff is super fucked-up over here. White German men assume it's easy to get one, but they don't want to hear any details.

Abortion, Abortion!

I'm super pregnant and at a new gynaecologist on the Schönhauser Allee. People make jokes about how you can't be a "little bit" pregnant, but it's not true, huh? Loads of people who get a faint line on their pregnancy test end up miscarrying. And I, right now, here, right now, I AM A LOT PREGNANT.

I look like a whale. I feel like a hippo. People treat me like a walrus. I waddle around like a penguin.

My ankles are swollen up like soft, fleshy balloons. I feel like my bones have melted inside me.

In the form the lady has given me I have to tick which pregnancy this is. This is my third pregnancy. I had two abortions before I came to Germany. I feel like lying on the form, but I worry the doctor will be able to somehow "tell" – possibly by looking at my AOK medical records, and, slightly less possibly, but even more horrifically, by looking at my vagina? So I tick third on the box, hand my forms in and go back to my seat in the waiting room. The waiting room is full of pregnant women, expectant mothers. There's pink carpet, beige walls, and sepia pictures of mums breastfeeding their babies everywhere. It's expectant mummy hour at the gyno.

The doctor's receptionist comes into the waiting room and says to me, loudly and clearly: "These two pregnancies here, how did they end?"

"Pardon?" I say.

"Did your two previous pregnancies end in miscarriage, abortion or birth?" she asks.

"Abortion," I whisper through the side of my mouth.

She shouts loudly: "TWO ABORTIONS!" *Zwei Abbrüche!*
I nod.

The receptionist leaves the waiting room, and it's just me, fat like a whale, a load of pregnant German women, and the sepia pictures. I start studying *Bild der Frau* like I'm really into it. Maybe I should change my name to Jacinta Two Abortions Nandi, I think. It has a nice ring to it.

* * *

Annie-Way: *Annie-Way is the way Germans in the early 2000s (the Nullerjahre, as they would put it) pronounced anyway. As with almost all the best Denglisch terms, the way they used it was slightly, ever-so-slightly, wrong.*

Denglisch is Like Bindweed

Denglisch - I personally think the most annoying thing about Denglisch is not the way it crowds out and destroys Proper German like some kind of disgustingly destructively violently vandalistic *Unkraut* (Denglisch is like the grey, violent, American-style "squirrels" which invaded Britain after World War II and Proper German is like the sweet, innocent, totally cute, actually-look-like-squirrels-and-not-bastard-rats-with-fluffy-tails-type squirrels which died out in Britain, but still, gorgeously, live here. Every time I see a cute orange squirrel I say to my son, darkly, all the squirrels I grew up with were ugly, I only saw this kind in books, look how cute it is.) Denglisch starves Proper German out. I once sat in *Tropical Islands* for two hours, trying desperately to remember what the Proper German for lifeguard was. In the end, I went to my locker, took out

my phone, and googled it. (It's *Bademeister*, or *Rettungsschwimmer*, by the way.) I once asked everyone in a hotel in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern what they said for *einchecken* and *auschecken* in the DDR. Honestly, the Denglisch terms take up the space in your brain where the Proper German should go, that was some serious Mandela Effect shit, yeah, like as if the aliens had been wiping everyone's memories most effectively. A lot of people said, 100 per cent certain, "It was always *ein-* and *auschecken!*" But some people whispered vaguely: "I ... don't ... know. It couldn't have been *auschecken* ... could it? Could it? What did we used to say? We must have said something ... I think I knew it once."

DENGLISCH literally KILLING the Proper German in your head is very, very, very annoying - but it's not the most annoying thing.

The most annoying thing about Denglisch is, without a doubt, when Germans throw a Denglisch word into a German sentence for no reason whatsoever - and you have no idea if they are doing it especially for you because they know you are a native speaker, or if this is A New Thing People Say.

There's a poetry slammer organiser who always says to me: "Du bist so *charming* auf der Bühne!" - have checked with others, this is just for me. It's not A Thing. But how the fuck are you meant to know? "Das ist ja irgendwie doch super *niiiiiiice!*" THIS IS A THING. "I know, I know," inexplicably plonked into the sentence: THIS IS ALSO A THING.

And *Annie-Way*? This isn't, and don't ask me why, a thing anymore. But it was for ages - right up until, like 2009, I'd say - and it was really fucking annoying. In the middle of a sentence, for no reason whatsofuckingevery, out of nowhere, "*Annie-way!*"

* * *

Anmeldung: *Anmeldung means registration, and Abmeldung means deregistration. But Germans register for things more than English speakers do - you have to register with the library, register at the gym, register at the nursery. And they definitely deregister more. I feel like in other countries you can just stop doing something, and then it's over, but in Germany you always have to abmelden. But one of the weirdest things about Germany is undoubtedly that everyone in the entire country has to anmelden with the government - and nobody seems to mind!*

Achtung, Achtung, Anmeldung, Anmeldung!

Germans love privacy and stuff, but weirdly don't mind the government having a huge database of where everyone in the country lives.

"Are you still sleeping with that old boy? The one who didn't know that Wales wasn't part of England?" I ask my tiny friend Lola, who can sometimes have really bad taste in men, especially old men.

"Of course not!" she says, outraged. "I've been socially distancing! I'm only having casual sex with people I actually like!"

I nod.

It's the first time I've seen her since the half-hearted German lockdown ended. We're sitting by the Paul-Linke-Ufer and not sharing two separate bottles of cider. I keep thinking I see Prof. Dr. Christian Drosten walk past, so I

smile. But it's just a vaguely sexy, fairly sad German guy walking with a bike. I have to admit, it's great to be out. I always thought I was a hermit, but after six weeks stuck inside, I actually truly enjoy going out again.

It's a great feeling.

The constant, slight boredom - a constant, slight panic I wasn't having fun and would rather be at home on Facebook - has disappeared. I now know I *do* want to go out sometimes.

"He really is old," she says. "He's an old man. He smells old. He feels old. He feels wrinkly. His waist seems like it has arthritis."

"I was surprised by how old he was," I say, diplomatically.

"You know how you notice how old he is?" she says. "He still says *polizeiliche Anmeldung*. Have you ever noticed that? Old people are always saying *polizeiliche Anmeldung*?"

"What?" I say.

"You never noticed? Old people think it's called *polizeiliche Anmeldung*. I guess in the olden days - like in the sixties and stuff - you had to go and *anmelden* at the police station? You never noticed?"

I stare at Lola, horrified. I had, in fact, not noticed that. I had *very much not* noticed that. And I'll tell you something else I hadn't noticed. I had not noticed that young people don't call it a *polizeiliche Anmeldung* anymore.

And I will tell you another thing I hadn't noticed: that I am an old person now, my skin wrinkled, my vagina crumpled and crinkly like the pages of an old, dusty bible. My body is so old and ancient that when Germany's top euthanasia-ist talks about letting old fogies die of Corona to reduce overpopulation, it is, basically, me she is talking