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I started to learn German around the age of 13, and today I wish it had been earlier. I'm still trying to explain to myself why it was love at first sound.

I had a wise first teacher. In a school not famed for its gentleness in those days, *Mr King* was that rare thing: a kindly and intelligent man who still determinedly loved his own Germany. We were at war with Germany at the time, so it was easy to hate everything about Germans.

But Mr King wouldn't allow that. He preferred, doggedly, to inspire us with the beauty of the language, and of its literature and culture. One day, he used to say, the real Germany will come back.

And he was right, because now it has.

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Why was it love at first sound for me? Well, in those days, not many language teachers played gramophone records to their class, but Mr King did. They were old records, and very precious to him and us, and he kept them in brown paper bags, in a satchel that he put in his bicycle basket when he rode to school.

What did they contain, these precious records? The voices of classical German actors, reading early romantic German poetry. The records were a bit cracked, but that was part of their beauty:

Du bist wie eine Blume - CRACK

So hold und schön und - CRACK - *rein*. [Heine]

or

Bei Nacht im

Dorf der Wächter rief... - CRACK [Mörrike Elfenlied]

And I loved them.

And learned to imitate, then recite them.

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And I loved the idea that these poems, and this language, were *mine*, and almost no one else's, because German wasn't a popular subject, and very few of my schoolmates knew a word of it, beyond the *Achtung!* and *Hände hoch!* that they learned from propaganda war movies. But thanks to Mr King, I knew better.

And when I decided I couldn't stand my English school for another day, and needed to bolt, it was the German language that provided me with my bolt-hole. It was just after the war, and Germany itself was in an awful state, so I went to Switzerland and studied German there, as hard as I could.

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And in Switzerland, instead of Mr King, I had *Frau Karsten*, a stern North German lady with grey hair in a pony tail, and she, like Mr King, rode a bicycle, sitting very upright, with her grey hair bobbing along behind her.

And it's no wonder any more to me that when later I went into the army for my national service I was posted to Austria as a German speaker, and that after the army I went on to study German at Oxford, and later to teach it.

And when I joined the Foreign Office, and interpreted at the meetings of great men - British Prime Ministers, important German statesmen who, in those days, unlike today, didn't by any means all speak English - I knew I wasn't just translating *words* from one language to another, but mindsets too.

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But I don't think I was ever a very *good* interpreter, partly because I'd never trained for the job, but partly also because somehow I always seemed to get stuck on the bridge between the two languages.

And even these days, when just occasionally I'm asked to interpret, or translate something, I *still* get stuck on the bridge.

Why? Well, for one thing as every decent interpreter and every translator knows, there is no such thing as a *perfect* translation. Throughout history, the earnest, dedicated translators from German into English, or English into German, have argued themselves sick about the shades of meaning in great poetry, drama, novels - not to mention international treaties.

And the reasons why they argue so endlessly are two.

In the first place, they *know*: they know that great lines of poetry or prose that are beautiful and profound in their original language can only ever be, in translation, a compromise, a second best. So even the greatest of translators is filled with a sense of loss, as well as triumph, at the end of the day's work.

But there's a second reason. It is that people who are lucky enough to have two languages in their heads do not naturally translate. When they are listening in one language, and speaking in it, they're also *thinking* in it. They're not mentally *translating* at all. They're inhabiting a different skin, using a different pair of ears, and a different tongue, and probably different gestures and facial expressions too - even, in the aggregate, a different identity.

So for them - for the *real* linguists that I'm sure you will one day become - there *is* no bridge between two languages. There's just a kind of peaceful coexistence between two compatible cultures and identities.

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And you can have *fun* with German as we all know. You can tease it, play with it, send it up. You can invent huge words of your own, but real words, just for the hell of it.

My Google gave me:

Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän.

You've probably heard the Mark Twain gag:

'Some German words are so long they have a perspective.'

You can make up crazy adjectives too, like: 'my-recently-by-my-parents-thrown-out-of-the-window Play Station.'

And when you're tired of floundering with impossible nouns and adjectives all strung together, you can turn for relief to the pristine poems of a Hölderlin or a Goethe or a Heine, and remind yourself that the German language can also ascend to heights of simplicity and beauty that make it, for many of us in this room, a language of the gods.

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Now let's talk about you prizewinners, you Olympians, because it's your achievement that we're celebrating, your day, your future, your fun.

The first thing to say is, this is a *great* competition that you've won: innovative, creative, inspiring. So congratulations, not just to you, but to your teachers, parents and all the clever, hardworking people behind the scenes today who made it happen.

And you're the *first* Olympians. There'll never be other *first* winners again, however many German Olympiads there are in the future. So you are pioneers. You made the first ascent, and that's something never to be forgotten.

With your linguistic gifts, you will discover a Germany that surprisingly few Britons know anything about. You'll be able to separate regions by voice and character. You'll *hear* and *feel* the difference between North and South. You'll

discover that Germans, like Brits, are branded on the tongue. You'll be able to spot a Rheinlander, or a Bavarian, or a Prussian.

You will have privileged access to Europe's most powerful, most exciting and - for Brits - least explored nation. You'll meet some of the best Europeans there are, the most idealistic, the most informed, the most liberal, and the most cultivated. And you'll never let anyone tell you that Germans have no sense of humour.

And if you're really lucky, you'll make friends with German literature, and discover that a lot of writers who at the moment may look like unscaleable mountains are actually quite easy climbs, and the climb is worth it.

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And what are you going to give German in return? For one thing, your human curiosity in a nation that sometimes thinks it has lived for too long without friends.

For you, the war of '39-'45 will be as remote as the Battle of Waterloo is for me. The last echo of the anti-German voices that have lingered for so long in our British newspapers and media will have faded away for good. And you will be the inheritors, and the enjoyers - the *Geniesser* - of our two inseparably intertwined - *unserer untrennbar miteinander verbundenen* - cultures.

So from all of us in this room - *von uns allen* - *unsere herzlichsten Glückwünsche!* - and well done.