

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract:

Becky Bernstein Goes Berlin

I was lucky and found work teaching English twice a week at the Volkshochschule in Spandau. My only problem was that my German was far worse than my students' English.

“Entschuldigen Sie, bitte, ich habe eine Frage ...”

My students were continually asking me things I couldn't answer because I hadn't a clue as to what they were saying in German. Right at the beginning of the question, with the word *zwar*, which they never failed to omit, they'd lose me.

“Entschuldigen Sie, bitte, ich habe eine Frage ...”

Zwar? *Zwar* was such a peculiar, puzzling word to me, both elegant and crude. Whenever I heard it, I inevitably envisioned a mean, marauding Cossack in a shiny new uniform swinging a sword: *zwar-sscchht!-zwar-sscchht!* I had the sneaky suspicion that the word was used to stress something in a sentence, but I couldn't figure out what. The only thing it seemed to be stressing was my own brain. My dictionary said *zwar* was an adverb, but what exactly was it modifying? I suspected they probably just called it an adverb for want of knowing how else to categorize it.

Furthermore, it wasn't easy to pronounce. Although monosyllabic, *zwar* was made up of so many sounds it should have long since graduated to at least three syllables. First the 'z' had to be formed, a problem in itself, as it was created in two steps, with a 't' and then an 's,' an

unknown sound for Anglo-Saxons. Asking an American to pronounce a German 'z' was almost as risky as asking a German to give you a clean and smooth English 't'. But let us say you had managed to form the 'ts,' (checking that the tip of your tongue was half resting on the underside of your upper palette, allowing air to pass along the tongue's upper ridge), you were then compelled by the second letter of the word to swiftly shift into a 'w'-mode. You did this by clamping your upper teeth down on the top of your lower lip as fast as you could. And then, to make matters even more difficult, you had to suddenly go and open your mouth and expell air to form an 'a' as in awful. Ts-v-aaar. And imagine: all this trouble for just one lousy syllable! And for a word that meant next to nothing.