

# THE BIG PONDER

## My Pen Pal

By Jakob Lewis

**Jakob Lewis:** This is a story about humans, humans being humanly. And it starts when one day I got an email. Okay. Knock, knock neighbors, winky face emoji. Every time I am in the situation to refresh my English language. It's not my really mother tongue. This is German.

I got this email one day through the website for my podcast.

It's called neighbors. It was a man from Magdeburg, Germany, reaching out to find someone in Nashville to practice English with. Why Nashville? Well, Nashville is one of Magdeburg's sister cities. It's like an international program to exchange ideas and even people between two cities. And I live in Nashville.

So this German stranger Googled Nashville and somehow found my podcast and wrote this email. This came at a time when I was feeling both swamped with work and lonely. The idealism and "we're going to make it"-gumption that I started the pandemic off with, you know, sourdough bread and all that, was losing its luster.

By early September, 2020, I was really starting to feel unmoored. This person asked me if they could write me a letter to practice their English. It felt bold and foreign. Even a little bit creepy, but something deep inside me answered on my behalf. Absolutely ...

But first to my childhood. Sometime in grade school, I acquired a pen pal.

I'm not sure how or exactly when. It's jumbled up in my mind with filling out those gossamer thin Scholastic book fair order forms. So I'm guessing second grade. When I think about it, I can see my seventies style open concept elementary school. It was in Missouri. I can smell this sawdust stuff, the janitor used to sprinkle on the carpet when someone vomited. My pen pal's name was Hans. He was from Canada. We pretty much just wrote about basketball and the weather. But to get those letters or postcards was such a special feeling. Though we didn't know each other in any real sense, we knew something of each other by these pieces of paper. What postcard he would choose, the slant of his letters, the frequency at which they came.

One time, I opened up one of his letters and inside was an autograph photo of Beakman from the nineties kids' science show, *Beakman's World*. Beakman was like a kookier Bill Nye, the science guy who had a sidekick dressed as a rat. Getting that felt like Willy Wonka himself had sent me a golden ticket personally, so I could go tour his factory along with the other suckers that had to randomly discover an invite on their own. In a trunk in my attic is Beakman's signature. I think having particular physical

artifacts from someone is incredibly intimate. I don't know how long we wrote, several back-and-forths, but a photo of Hans, a postcard and Beakman is all I have left.

And I'm pretty sure if memory serves me correctly, that he's out there somewhere with an Allen Iverson basketball card.

All right. So this is, uh, Ingo's first actual letter to me. My current day pen pal, or rather 'pen friend' as he refers to it, is named Ingo Elman. He's 43 and a police officer. So here's what the letter says. Hi Jakob, a real letter from the other side of the 'big pond,' in quotes. You wrote your address. And so I will use the postal service.

Also. We can see in reality how long it takes time to hand over a letter from Magdeburg to Nashville. Apparently so far, it takes about two weeks, which both seems like a really long time and simultaneously like a miracle. Now let me start with the short overview about my life. I was born in August, 1977 in Magdeburg, in the area of the former GDR.

We're talking East Germany, the communist country that was separated from West Germany by the Berlin wall. He has three older brothers and one younger sister. After school, he became a heating and air conditioning technician. He went into the military.

I went the typical way of an officer career, 12 years in the branch type engineer in different towns in Germany.

The explanation for better understanding engineer equals building and destroying bridges.

After building and destroying bridges, he started up at the police Academy in his state.

Light and shadow, like in every life.

I just love this transition. I've read this a couple of times now. He just like ends a paragraph and he starts this next one. I don't know if it's like a language translation or if this is just like, it just, it seems really beautiful to me, I guess, is what I'm saying. He says light and shadows, like in every life. I'm separated, divorced is the better word and father of two children. In the envelope, you will find two things.

I talked to my children that I'm writing a letter to my pen friend in Nashville. My son said that he will give you the Pokemon card as a gift. With the same intention, my daughter painted a picture for you.

The picture is drawn in pastel markers. There's a drawing of a plate of candy and the date. She wrote: I am happy. I am happy. I am happy. I am happy. Four times then signed it. Heidi. I'm glad she's happy. Then there was the Pokemon card. Eiscue was the name of this Pokemon card an ice type that looks like a penguin. Um, and then here, it just says, paper ends. Period. Now, you know my life in short sentences. And then he did like a little fat cheeked smiley face.

I wonder if that's a German thing or if that's just an Ingo thing. I know you're married. Have you children? I will give you my phone number to have it always better to need. Perhaps you will visit Magdeburg so you can call me or write on messenger. The name, the same case when I am in Nashville, best greetings from the other side of the big pond, Ingo.

So now, um, I'm going to write him a letter. And I actually gave the Pokemon card to my backyard neighbor, Eli he's seven or eight, super into Pokemon. Like as soon as I got it, I was like, Oh, I'll give this to Eli. And I did. And the little sweet guy immediately is like, Oh, I have one I can, uh, give to, to this kid.

So there's a little Pokemon trade going on between Nashville and Magdeburg. Eli ended up sending him Grookey and Thwackey. Gotta catch 'em all. Now it was my turn.

Okay, so I just wrote a letter to Ingo and I hand-wrote it, hand wrote it. Yeah. It's three pages long, in cursive. So I God, I hope he can read it. I feel like through the language barrier and cursive, it's going to be tough, but I also ... [LAUGH] writing letters is interesting because I feel like, like, I know who I am ... But when I write specific things down about like what I like and what I've done.

And, um, it feels weird. It feels both true and foreign. And because I'm like writing it to somebody whose English – English as a second language – and doesn't know me at all. I'm like being very, you know, plain, I should say, but yet, saying pretty intimate things. Like how I love being a father, some stuff about my raising and that I love Irish music, which feels like admitting which nerdy podcast you listen to.

And then I think the thing that, I mean, I told them like my favorite beer, uh, and my favorite bourbon, which I thought was just funny. I told him about my grandpa's restaurant and all sorts of things. And then I went really intense with the questions I said, are you religious? Do you like beer? Why did you get divorced?

What is it like being a police officer? Do German police officers have guns? What was it like growing up in East Germany? What did your parents do? That's plenty for now. I'm glad you wrote, talk soon, Jakob. All right. I'm going to mail this off with the Pokemon card and a sticker and a few other things.

And. And wait.

I was excited. It felt electric and strange. Christmas came and went. Then the New Year. I had almost forgotten about the whole thing. And then one day, a letter from Ingo.

So we've got. A letter from Magdeburg, Magdeburg. However you say it in Germany. A really cool stamp, that's hard to describe, but just know that it's really cool. And it's clear that either his son or daughter has drawn little stars on the envelope, and inside is a little card with three wise men on it.

And it says, dear Jakob, nowadays, we have the last month, this year. A lot of things happened. You see? Yeah. Tell me about it. The biggest thing is Corona. It has a lot of influence in our lifestyle. Not only for the adults, also for our children. Last week, I saw ... I saw a written letter from my daughter.

She wrote her wishes for Santa Claus in the school time, wishes for health, family, and friends that the schools stay open and the Corona go away! Exclamation point. A seven year old girl, with these thoughts. The problem is that the figures of infected people increase not only in Magdeburg, the government decided to lock down from.

Oh, okay. The 16th of December until the 10th of January, the schools will be closed, and the pupils will be taught by the parents. I'm responsible for the survival training. Then he wrote a little smiley face. Not

really. Before I forget it, please hand over the other Christmas card to your neighbor Eli. Peter wrote him.

Thank you neighbor for your uncomplicated friendship. Best greetings from the other side of the pond, Ingo.

What's up, man? How are ya? That's my backyard neighbor, Eli and his dad Walsh. We're standing next to their chicken coop. Yeah, I'll just hand it to you. And then you can stand like right there and I'll just kind of point it at you.

Okay. This is a Christmas card from Germany. From that guy's son, what's his name? I forget, Peter. Um, so here, so he, in the envelope, he had a card for me, and then there was a card for you, which is that? Why don't you open up?

**Eli:** Pokemon cards? Cool. Some, wow. Thank you.

**Jakob Lewis:** I recognized this response. Eli just got his version of a signed photo of Beakman. Do you mind reading the card out loud?

**Eli:** Hello? Eli. Jam Oh, I am Peter.

**Jakob Lewis:** Eli's. Dad helps them get through the profoundly neat cursive handwriting of an 11 year old.

**Eli:** I wish you Merry Christmas, Peter.

**Jakob Lewis:** And the neatest thing of all these Pokemon cards were in German.

**Eli:** Cool.

**Jakob Lewis:** Well we had written a couple of letters and that was really fun and we will continue to do so, but this is 2021. We'd also emailed several times. Ingo would ask me about things that were happening in the U. S. a lot. Particularly things like the election or the insurrection on the Capitol, you would ask me who my candidate was.

I would answer the best I could, but I started to feel this feeling of fear or unsureness really. It started when I saw an article online about how German police departments are having a real problem with right-wing officers, accounts of racism, racial profiling, neo-Nazi groups were surfacing. Just, what was I getting myself into? Was Ingo a neo-Nazi? Or would we end up being bosom buddies?

There was only one way to find out we were going to do that most 2021 thing. Zoom.

**Ingo:** Can you hear me?

**Jakob Lewis:** I can. Yes.

**Ingo:** Sounds good.

**Jakob Lewis:** Well, hello. Thank you so much for talking to me.

**Ingo:** Yes, fine. Uh, I am very happy about it. And, uh, yes, it's time for me to train my, uh, English language. Yes.

**Jakob Lewis:** This is Ingo Elman. It was 7:00 PM where he was, it was noon where I was. He said it was dark, and he could see the snow falling out his window. Ingo wasted, no time and got right down to the important stuff.

**Ingo:** Um, and my first question is, um, have you ever seen Miley Cyrus?

**Jakob Lewis:** No, [LAUGH] I have never seen Miley Cyrus either in person or a concert. I've never seen her. Don't let this opening move fool you. This was going to be a robust, deep dive into one another's lives. First, ordinary things, Ingo has a dog.

**Ingo:** A German ... a *Deutscher Pinscher*, a German Pinscher.

**Jakob Lewis:** I told him about my mutt with a big head, Bagheera. When I told him about Kentucky bourbon, we found out that we both had a bad experience with tequila when we were young adults.

**Ingo:** Too much tequila.

Yeah. And then dancing in a disco.

**Jakob Lewis:** Okay. I didn't do that part. I told him about owning a podcast production company. And he told me about his career path to ultimately becoming a police officer. His rank is comparable to a Lieutenant in the U.S. so he leads people. He told me one of the main differences between a police officer in the U.S. and one Germany is the training.

**Ingo:** The difference is the time. The middle service you need, uh, three years. And for the higher service for three years on the university.

**Jakob Lewis:** That's at least two and a half years to three years of study. In America, the longest it really takes is about six months before you're in a police car. Ingo thinks that makes a big difference in giving officers some genuine time to intellectually tackle issues of race and politics.

Did ... do, uh, German police officers carry guns?

**Ingo:** Yes.

**Jakob Lewis:** Yes.

**Ingo:** We, we have guns and, uh, but, uh, in my opinion, the biggest gun, which we have as our word, talking to the people, uh, this is the best weapon, which we have. Yeah.

**Jakob Lewis:** Have, have you ever had to use your gun?

**Ingo:** Um, only in, only in the training on, uh, *Schießstand*, uh, shooting, shooting range.

**Jakob Lewis:** We talked extensively about race and policing. He acknowledged that it was a problem in Germany, but not one that he's seen very often firsthand. I started to see that my prejudices were unfounded.

**Ingo:** All the people have the same rights.

**Jakob Lewis:** So with a baseline of dogs, tequila, and equal rights, I felt like I could turn to some more intimate questions.

So, um, are your parents still alive?

**Ingo:** Um, my, my father was dead when I was, uh, uh, it's a complicated story.

**Jakob Lewis:** What he told me next, I was not expecting.

**Ingo:** And, uh, ah, complicated childhood.

**Jakob Lewis:** When Ingo was a younger teenager, he lived with his mom and stepdad in an apartment.

**Ingo:** We don't really, uh, talk to each other.

**Jakob Lewis:** He said every day he would go to school and when he got home, they would just fight, argue. So his mom and stepdad gave him an ultimatum one day at age 14.

**Ingo:** If you are not, um, agree with our, our, uh, opinion, then you can leave the home.

**Jakob Lewis:** Basically, if you don't like it here, then leave. They kicked him out. And with nowhere to go.

**Ingo:** I, uh, grows up in a, *Kinderheim*, chil... children's home.

**Jakob Lewis:** It took me a second to understand exactly what he was saying. Basically because his dad left a long time ago, and his mom and stepdad didn't want him around. A *Kinderheim* took him in. An orphanage.

**Ingo:** At the moment. Yes, I was shocked, but I arrived the children's home, it was a friend friendly people, friendly, uh, members.

And, uh, I was welcome. It was, uh, it was a good solution,

**Jakob Lewis:** But shortly after he entered the orphanage, the unthinkable happened.

**Ingo:** I wasn't the children's home. And, uh, one children's of my group as the children's home, there are a lot of, uh, groups, I think four or five groups. I was in the group monkeys, the monkeys.

Okay. Every group had a name and our group was called monkeys. The group member talk to me and said here in the newspaper from Magdeburg, uh, the death announces *Todesanzeige*. And I read it and said, yes, this, this is my father.

**Jakob Lewis:** In other words, a little boy in the monkeys group at an orphanage learned his father had died by reading it in the paper.

**Ingo:** It's, it's, uh, not good when the children grows up without the parents, but, uh, it's life. You see, nowadays. I, I have a job. I have children, uh, and, uh, I'm under, on the right way.

**Jakob Lewis:** Yeah. You seem like, like being a dad or being a father is important to you?

**Ingo:** Yes.

**Jakob Lewis:** Yes. Well, not of course for everybody. Unfortunately, I'm glad that you take that seriously. You know, I I've been a dad for 19 months now. It's just been amazing.

I knew it was going to be really, um, wonderful and hard also, but it's just like, way more amazing than I thought.

**Ingo:** Uh, children are a wonder I think so.at first the baby can't, uh, can't speak or talk to you. Years later, your children can talk to you and can say it's okay. Or it's not. Okay.

**Jakob Lewis:** And here we were, just two dads across the ocean from each other. Whether it's no, or *nein*, we had solidarity with one another about the joy of our children advocating for themselves, and the sorrow of when that advocating comes just the worst. I tried to tell Ingo about what my wife and I were going through with potty training right now, this was the only real time there seemed to be a real language barrier, toilet trained uh, do you know that word?

I felt weird talking about my son's poop. So I just moved on after a couple of attempts. But I think he got that I was sharing a struggle. So he shared one of his own

**Ingo:** Heidi.

**Jakob Lewis:** Like many places in the world, school is closed and Ingo is playing the role of teacher. Teaching his kids from his home office, even though he often works the night shift as a police officer, he still teaches them. Here he's asking Heidi and Peter if they know any good jokes to share with me.

**Ingo:** Child tells a joke in German about two mice sitting on a bench. One sees a 'flying mouse' and says, "Look, it's an angel."

**Jakob Lewis:** This one's about a mouse and a bat or *Maus* in German M-A-U-S and *Fledermaus*, which is flying mouse, which is a bat. It only really makes sense in German, but I learned something. This last letter, I think, had a note from, well, they, they both have had notes from Peter.

And I thought Peter's English and handwriting was very impressive. I was like, wow, he's, he's great at English. And then the neighbor behind me, his, his name is Eli.

**Ingo:** Yes.

**Jakob Lewis:** He, he like, totally was so excited about the last Pokemon cards because they were in German. I gave them to him and he was just like, Oh, he was so excited to get those Pokemon cards and then not be in English.

He really, really liked that.

**Ingo:** It was the same thing here, uh, in Magdeburg, Peter, uh, did not have the Pokemon card, which you sent, uh, to me.

**Jakob Lewis:** Oh, nice.

**Ingo:** Yes. He said, Oh, uh, in English, uh, as an English language Pokemon card. Yeah. He had never had that kind of Pokemon card. And, uh, this was also the reason why Peter said, uh, it's a good idea, you, uh, writing to Jakob and I will writing to Eli.

**Jakob Lewis:** That's cool. Yeah. So is that something ... when Ingo was younger in the GDR, he had a Russian pen pal. For Ingo, this opened up new perspectives and abilities to be able to talk to different types of people. He wants the same for his kids. He asked me if there were any more pen pals his kids could have.

I connected him to the person in charge of the Nashville-Magdeburg Sister Cities relationship. He also asked if there was a Nashville police officer he could write. Sister Cities found him another police officer in Nashville with children about the same age. Ingo's already written them.

Here's his latest email:

Today, I start the week with a late shift and tomorrow are my children with me. (I dunno, Ingo. Are they?) I am in the role of the teacher. Best greetings from the other side of the big pond, Ingo.

I've always loved my job, getting to know people, finding out their story. But my takeaway from Ingo was quite personal as the constant drip of the pandemic has slowly eroded away my soul, I started to worry. Maybe I'm losing my humanness, my ability to just connect. I mean, I used to talk to people at restaurants, stores, parks.

Like every once in a while, amazing things would happen just by going outside. But lately, like for a long time now, nothing. But just when I thought I was turning into some emotionally atrophied zombie, Ingo said, Hey, neighbor, wanna just talk? That connected me back to Magdeburg, a place I had once visited. To his two children and their corny jokes. To my backyard neighbor and his obsession with Pokemon. But ultimately, back to myself. And it gave me that spark I once had to curiously connect with others, and that has made all the difference. Recently I brought Beakman down from the attic, and I put him up on the magnetic board in my office next to my new pen friend's letters.

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THE BIG PONDER is a transatlantic podcast by the Goethe-Institut that explores abstract concepts and phenomena through personal radio essays. Every other week, one of our producers transforms a broad topic into a captivating story told from a US-German perspective.

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