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THE BIG PONDER

Encounters

By Monika Müller-Kroll and Susannah Edelbaum

Man's Voice: [IN GERMAN] Also als Gastronom habe ich glaube ich schon viele Leute getroffen. Ein paar tausende schon, ja.

Man's Voice: [ENGLISH VOICEOVER] As the owner of a restaurant, I think I've met a lot of people. About a few thousand.

Woman's Voice: I mean, well, I met a lot. More than 300.

Second Woman's Voice: I am sure it's only hundreds. I don't think, yeah, thousands of people, no.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Have you ever wondered how many people you've met in your life?

[COLLAGE OF VOICES SAYING THEIR GUESSES: 2,500 / 45,000 / 800 / I'M GONNA SAY 50,000 PEOPLE]

Monika Müller-Kroll: My guess is 20,000, maybe. Just because I am over 50, and I lived in a couple of big cities. That's my guess. What about you, Susannah?

Susannah Edelbaum: Hmm. I really have no idea, but I do love the question. So, how many people have I met in my life? How many people do we meet over a lifetime on average? We're going to find out. I'm Susannah Edelbaum.

Monika Müller-Kroll: I'm Monika Müller-Kroll.

Susannah Edelbaum: And on this episode of THE BIG PONDER, we share stories about encounters.

Christian Hesse: I was always interested in randomness and how random is random, actually.

Monika Müller-Kroll: First, we do the math. And for that, we got a professional.

Christian Hesse: My name is Christian Hesse. I've been working at the University of Stuttgart for, wow, almost 30 years now as a mathematician and especially on mathematical statistics. And I teach and do research. *Ja*, that's basically what I do professionally.

Monika Müller-Kroll: We wanted to find out how many people Susannah has met so far. So, we passed along some information about Susannah's life to Christian Hesse. Things like:

Susannah Edelbaum: [READING HER BIOGRAPHY] I have two half-sisters and four first cousins. I lived in New York, where I went to preschool, until I was four.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Of course, it isn't possible to pinpoint exactly how many people Susannah has encountered in her life so far.

Susannah Edelbaum: What the professor did instead was use statistical 'guesstimation.' He came up with his estimate through educated guessing and calculations based on 20th-century studies by the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar.

Christian Hesse: And what he discovered was that typically we have five intimate friends; we have 15 friends, including casual friends, medium-level friends; we have, on the average, 50 good acquaintances; 150 acquaintances in general, and this is sort of the type of people we would invite if we would make a big party. Now, that's sort of our activity network where we have active interactions on a regular basis, say monthly. And then, there are 1,500 people we recognize on sight; 5,000 people we can allocate in a way. And then, there's a factor of 20 more, so that would be 100,000 encounters that we have over a lifetime of, say 80 years.

Susannah Edelbaum: 100,000. And that's the average number. That's a lot!

Christian Hesse: And now to you Susannah: you are 36 years old, and when I looked at the details that you gave about your biography that you shared, that tells me that you have probably an above average number of meeting people and having encounters with people. I would say this is probably six would be a good estimate, six new encounters per day, and that would then add up to 70,000 encounters, 70,000 people that you have had some kind of interaction with over your lifetime. And by encounter, I mean not just any casual encounter, for example, if you see someone on the opposite side of the street, but encounter I would define as an interaction that you have or had with someone that is a little meaningful in the sense that there is a small, lasting impression. For example, that you would remember this interaction for at least a week.

Susannah Edelbaum: Before I even start trying to remember them, I can't even get over how many I've met in the first place.

Christian Hesse: Yeah, that's a very large number, and it's also a sign of the times. For example, there have been studies about the encounters in the Middle Ages, and typically, people were confronted with about 100 people in their life in the Middle Ages, typically. Now, in these days, it's 100,000.

Susannah Edelbaum: These are obviously averages, but there's a ratio explaining why some of us happen to be meeting more people than others. The principle was first defined in the late 19th century by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto.

Christian Hesse: And he found the so-called 80-20 Principle to be valid for these very lopsided distributions. And one actually finds it in many, many different contexts. For example, this 20-80 Principle is valid in the distribution of wealth. The 20 percent of the most wealthy people own 80 percent of the country's wealth. 20 percent of car drivers cause 80 percent of car accidents, and in general, 80 percent of consequences come from only 20 percent of causes. And for example, in the corona pandemic at the moment, one can also say that 20 percent of infected people cause 80 percent of new infections, and they are the super-spreaders. Now in terms of encounters, there's an analogy. We have the super-connectors. And they have a large degree of what is called 'relationship intelligence,' and they manage to turn casual encounters into encounters, and encounters into casual acquaintances, casual acquaintances into acquaintances, and then loose friends, friends, and so forth.

[MUSIC]

Susannah Edelbaum: Even though Christian Hesse's estimate for how many people I've met makes sense to me, I don't think I'm much of a super-connector. I rarely turn encounters into new friends, and I'm also not really that into talking to strangers. But for these two artists we met in Berlin, new encounters are integral to their most recent project.

Boris Jöns: I'm Boris Jöns. I'm a partly visual artist, but also make music. And I'm from Berlin.

[MUSIC STOPS; LIGHT STREET NOISES AND BIRDS CHIRPING]

Alexander Callsen: I'm Alexander Callsen. I'm a visual artist living in Berlin near Alexanderplatz.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Alexander and Boris approach strangers on a regular basis. Their project:

Boris Jöns: *Der Igel der Begegnung*, like it's the 'hedgehog of encounter,' it's a street survey, basically. And we built like a little portable sculpture that has a map of this area on the back, and then, we ask people about their like favorite spots of encounter, where do they like to meet, and then we talk a bit about the space. Like we have a little power tool, and then, they drill into the body of this hedgehog, and they place a little wooden stick into it, and we attach like a little protocol on it.

Monika Müller-Kroll: The map on their sculpture shows the area around Berlin Alexanderplatz, once the heart of East Berlin.

Alexander Callsen: So everything's changed from an inner-city main boulevard to quite unattended now. Like many shops went away, bars. Or they got a new character? Like more of this commercial character.

Boris Jöns: Yeah, we were walking around here a lot, and we also had the impression it's a little ... dead. [GIGGLES]

Monika Müller-Kroll: What's still there but rather dilapidated is Das Haus der Statistik, the House of Statistics: a 46,000-square-meter building complex.

Boris Jöns: The Haus der Statistik was the former GDR center for statistics. It's like a data center for all the GDR life, and based on these data, they made their like seven-year plans. So, it was a very important institution for the GDR. And yeah, it ended in 1989.

Monika Müller-Kroll: After the fall of the Wall, the federal government used the House of Statistics until 2008. It then sat completely empty for a decade. City officials wanted to tear it down, and developers wanted to build luxury housing in its place, but activists, including Alexander and Boris, saved it. Now different players, among them the Berlin Senate, have plans for a community-spirited overhaul of the building complex. Until the remodeling starts, parts of the House of Statistics are used by different groups: environmentalists, NGOs, and artists.

Boris Jöns: We're all like called pioneers, and that's really true. It's kind of like an empty building with no infrastructure, and then, there's this range of people having to manage somehow.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Right now, new apartments, a tax office, and spaces for artists and activists are planned for the new House of Statistics. The *Igel der Begegnung* is trying to find out what the neighbors think of this transformation.

Alexander Callsen: How can the neighborhood here – which is already there – can find also a place inside the new area. And also we got the impression that the neighborhood was scared.

Boris Jöns: And so, we asked the question: so what are the places of encounter here? And what kind of encounter do you expect from the Haus of Statistik? That's how we got interested in this quality of encounter in this area. Also because it seemed like a very important thing for survival, somehow. We learned that, as an artist, it's kind of not enough to just be in your studio space, you have to offer something for the common good.

[STREET NOISES; SOME FAR-OFF GERMAN CONVERSATION]

Monika Müller-Kroll: On a walk through the neighborhood, we stop to look at some of the 50 places of encounter, which the *Igel der Begegnung* has documented so far.

Boris Jöns: We're standing in front of the former Sternchen, which was like a communal beer garden, where people could just swing by and have a beer, but you could also rent the rooms – like in the GDR times, right. You could rent the rooms for your birthday, for any kind of party.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Now, it's just a supermarket on the ground floor of an apartment complex. The beer garden is gone.

Boris Jöns: It's really interesting, I think like the whole area was like a big area that was completely planned by city planners and architects of the GDR, and they had it all sorted out. There's like these apartment blocks, then there's like a children care, washhouses, and all these like ... they had a plan where the socialist human lives, where they go shopping, where they find this and that. So they had like this idea of 'Versorgung,' like what does one need? And they had it all sorted out, so they had this beer garden was like one planned thing. And of course all of this, when capitalism came in the '90s [GIGGLES], it all disappeared from one day to the other. And some people tell us, if the Haus of Statistik could have like a couple of rooms where you can celebrate your birthday, that would be great, for example.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Something that remains a popular place in the neighborhood is the Imbiss Oase, a tiny fast-food kiosk. It's located right in front of the House of Statistics. It used to be a German snack bar in GDR times, and now, it serves Vietnamese food.

Alexander Callsen: We see that still now, there are many people are, like neighbors coming there, having a beer. They know very much about the owner when he's there because sometimes he has to collect his children from the kindergarten, and then, he's like 15 minutes closed. And

they are very used to it. They know it. And okay, I have to wait 15 minutes, then he's back, and then they wait or come back and have then the beer later. It's also important because now where the whole area is changing, the question is if this Imbiss can stay there or if it has to move.

Monika Müller-Kroll: How the area will evolve is still uncertain. Boris and Alexander imagine keeping the *Igel der Begegnung* going as a guide through the ongoing transformation. They like approaching strangers around the neighborhood. One of their most memorable encounters happened next to a vanished bench.

Boris Jöns: We were in front of a supermarket not far away from here, and we talked about a sitting area in front of the supermarket that had been torn away because it was like also very popular for alcoholics hanging out there, and I think that was the reason why it was taken away. This person, like an older man, he also remembered that area, and he thought, ah it's a shame that this place is not anymore. But he could understand, yeah, how the alcoholics were kind of a problem. It was kind of interesting how he tried to solve it. He said, I don't deny them to stay there, but maybe they could have special days. [GIGGLES] And he envisioned like all these signs, and he had this sense of organizing the stay of this encounter, and he struggled to tolerate them, but also he didn't really wanna get involved. And so, that kind of epitomized this like messiness of encounter, and I really liked this talk. Like encounter is not always nice. It's messy.

[MUSIC]

Susannah Edelbaum: Encounters in real life are one thing, but these days it seems like the real Wild West is online. We talked with a psychologist trying to make internet encounters as substantial as those that happen face to face.

Lara Otte: Our definitions of what is a real encounter are shifting.

Susannah Edelbaum: Lara Otte is a psychologist and executive coach in Washington state. She's also an advisor for an app called Friended, which connects users one on one after they take a kindness pledge. The idea is to provoke spontaneous but authentic encounters.

Lara Otte: Two people were connected, and one of them was struggling. It was a younger man, and he was struggling with coming out as gay to his parents. He had a very conservative family. And the other person kind of talked him through, you know, what he wanted to have happen. They came up with – this is all over text, you know, this is direct messaging – they came up with a plan of, he could share it with his family physician because that's somebody he felt close to,

and he could kind of give it a trial run and see how that went and get feedback, and then, strategize about how to bring it to his family. Like that, that's a one-time connection but so deep and meaningful and something that I'm sure he'll remember for the rest of his life, even if he never talks to that other person again.

Susannah Edelbaum: So, real encounters have shifted: not only can they happen online, they can even be a one-time experience. But either way, Lara Otte says certain components are indispensable.

Lara Otte: Yeah, I mean, I think about this as kind of like, you know, what are the main ingredients of online connection, which I think are the main ingredients of in-person connection. They're the same, but we have to learn different ways of conveying them online because we don't have all of the same cues that we have when we're in person with somebody. But psychological safety would be one, you know, at the top of the list. If we don't have to fear being judged by another person, we're automatically more comfortable expressing ourselves.

Susannah Edelbaum She also lists warmth, openness, and curiosity as part of the recipe for successful online encounters. And on top of that, we just have to be ready to adapt.

Lara Otte: Neurobiology is, you know, when we're not in person, we don't have the cues. Our mirror neurons are not firing with the visuals of seeing each other, and that puts us at a deficit. And so, we have to rely on other senses, right? Like tone of voice right now is extremely important as we talk to each other. And think about when we move to e-mail. Like that is even a different skill. How do you convey, you know, that warmth and sincerity over e-mail? And you have to be careful about formality, informality, you know, like your tone comes through in punctuation. It's all, it's like a new set of skills that we are learning to develop and navigate real time.

Susannah Edelbaum: I wanted to know how many substantial online encounters the psychologist and coach has had herself.

Lara Otte: First off, I don't really use social media, so I think I'm a bit of an outlier that way. I'm not on Facebook, I don't even have a Twitter account. I do use Instagram, but it's pretty limited. But what's unique about my situation is that my work sets me up to have a fair number of online-only connections, so that's where the numbers start to add up for me. So, as I was thinking about this, I was trying to ballpark it, and I came up with, you know, maybe 80, 85 online connections that I would consider deeply substantive because I'm talking to clients, and they're sharing their fears, their dreams, their really authentic selves with me.

Susannah Edelbaum: Lara Otte avoids social media because it's not a great use of her time. She also points out that it has its pitfalls, no matter your online skill set.

Lara Otte: You know, with social media and meeting in more public ways, there's a tendency to compare ourselves. And that can be particularly damaging when we're getting, you know, the so-called 'highlight reel,' as one of my friends likes to say, like this highly polished and these posed moments, and we come away from those experiences feeling less than. You know, in the worst cases, there's certain social media that kind of promotes anti-connection, the bullying or ghosting or trolling behaviors that are so painful for people.

Susannah Edelbaum: During the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting over the internet became more common than ever, but there are also concerns that connecting online more and more is actually making us more lonely.

Lara Otte: So yeah, when I think about like, you know, what moves us toward good connection and what gets us off track or creates loneliness, a lot of it has to do with how we're showing up. So, if we're a person who feels generally pretty good about ourselves or we have pretty robust social skills, then we'll show up for online connection in an open way, in a more generous way, or even offer support for another person. But if we don't feel connected or we might be lacking in social skills or the confidence about who we are, then we might try really hard to act in a way that we think is gonna deliver that sense of belonging that we all crave.

[MUSIC]

Susannah Edelbaum: So, given that how we meet online can be so dependent on who we are offline, do you think online spaces are ultimately bringing us together or are they driving us apart?

Lara Otte: The big answer is like we sort of still don't know. I think it's both, honestly. I think it helps people connect, and it has the potential to make us feel more disconnected. But you know, we're social animals. You know, we're wired for connection and for belonging, and I think it's easy to see how that can lead both toward and away from more pro-social behavior.

Susannah Edelbaum: You can spend hours online without having a single real encounter or five minutes with a stranger in real life and remember them for decades.

Jacques Morcos: I'm Jacques Morcos. I'm a professor and co-chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at the University of Miami in Miami, Florida.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Jacques Morcos grew up in Lebanon in the Middle East. From the age of 16, he wanted to become a neurosurgeon.

[MUSIC FADES]

Jacques Morcos: So, I was a medical student at the American University in Beirut where I was doing my medical studies. And it was the middle of the civil war. It was 1983, the war in Lebanon really lasted from 1975 to 1990. There was a U.S. peacekeeping force stationed near the airport in Beirut.

Monika Müller-Kroll: On October 23rd, 1983, amidst the civil war, Jacques Morcos encountered someone he would never forget.

Jacques Morcos: On that Sunday morning, a suicide bomber essentially destroyed that barrack of U.S. Marines, and there were more than 200 dead and several wounded. And many of them, most of them, came to our medical center, and of course, everybody who was available – students, nurses, anybody – it was a mass casualty situation.

Monika Müller-Kroll: He remembers there was no more space inside for the injured and dead.

Jacques Morcos: So, the chief resident was struggling to keep up with the wounded and just, you know, pointed me to go in the direction of one specific Marine who was alive and awake, was bleeding from the left side of his head in the temple area, and I was extremely nervous. Of course I was. I was terrified.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Jacques Morcos had witnessed mass casualties during Lebanon's civil war, but this was shocking to him. He was just a medical student, now faced with a bombing victim: a young black Marine with a serious head injury.

Jacques Morcos: I look at him, and I'm trying to figure out what do I do, how do I stop the bleeding. And then, I kind of glance at my chief resident who's helping two or three other people, and he points to me to put my hand on the wound, and I did it. Clearly, I was trembling. And then, he looks at me, this Marine, looks at me and say: You will be fine, doc.

[MUSIC]

Jacques Morcos: So, this is a patient who's looking at his supposed doctor and reassuring him that you, the doctor, you look nervous, and you look like you actually don't know what you're doing, but you're going to be fine.

Monika Müller-Kroll: He only spent five to ten minutes with the injured American.

[MUSIC FADES]

Jacques Morcos: We didn't talk much, just I'm putting my hand on his temple that was bleeding and waiting for him to go inside to make it to the operating room. I don't even remember if we've exchanged other words because I'm looking – after he told me this – I'm looking at him and imagining what a great individual this is.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Almost four decades later, in the middle of the protests following George Floyd's murder, the 60-year-old wrote an article about his experience with the injured Black Marine for the *Journal of Neurosurgery*. He titled it "Brief Encounters that Last a Lifetime."

Jacques Morcos: You beat racism by giving personal stories, by reaching every other person, one heart at a time. And I just felt it was the right time for me to say that story in the middle of the racism upheaval that continues to be going on, in the U.S. at least.

Monika Müller-Kroll: To this day, the neurosurgeon can recall the Marine's grace in the immediate aftermath of the bombing.

Jacques Morcos: This Marine should have been cursing me for being – he doesn't know which factions came and killed more than 200 people. He should be cursing, he should be angry, he should not trust me. I'm just another Lebanese face. And yet, he's absolutely accepting his fate. So, it just was an immensely impactful experience.

[MUSIC]

Jacques Morcos: It's part of the thing that affects me, how I honestly deal with patients, how I myself appreciate what stoic behavior is. I mean, many times I'll be operating, I'm in a tough part

of the surgery, and I'm trying to look for some serene moments in my life, you know, to keep me going, and many times this encounter comes into my mind.

Monika Müller-Kroll: He still doesn't know the Marine's name. He doesn't even know if he's alive. For years, he's been looking for him, but requests to the military have turned up nothing. There's one more hope: Jacques Morcos plans to attend an upcoming gathering of the 1983 Beirut bombing survivors.

[MUSIC FADES]

Jacques Morcos: I just want to hug him and thank him and hope he's alive and that he's had a meaningful, successful, healthy life. Because through him, I believe I have helped many patients, because of his inspiration, and he needs to hear it.

[MUSIC]

Susannah Edelbaum: Thanks for listening to this episode of THE BIG PONDER. The music was composed by Jonathan Kroll. We'd like to thank Jacques Morcos, Lara Otte, Alexander Callsen, Boris Jöns, and Christian Hesse for their participation. This episode was produced by me, Susannah Edelbaum, and Monika Müller-Kroll.

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