

That's Called Ignorant

09.11.2018, Episode 5

A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast, "A Thousand Words." Today's Friday, November 9th.

Are you in a public place right now? If you are, look around. Can you see any signs [1]? Are they just street names and shop names? Or do they inform you about things you can and can't do? Do any warn you that you need to be careful because something is dangerous? Or do they actually tell you things that are new, things that you didn't already know? Are there many of them around you? Do you like having them around?



We sure have a lot of public signs in California. They're everywhere – on streets, on buildings, in parks, on products. Some have words on them, some have pictures, and some have both. Some tell you what you can or can't do: do not enter; keep off the grass; no photos; parking only after 6 pm; no cell phones; no picnics; dogs must be kept on their leash [2]; no swimming; no drones; no skateboards; do not talk to the driver; do not dry your cat in the microwave – some warn you of consequences: smoking kills; trespassers [3] will be shot; contents in this cup might burn you. You probably know the story about the woman who burned herself from the coffee she bought at McDonald's and got over half a million dollars because the cup didn't have a warning on it that it was hot.

It seems that we need all these signs over there. We need them to tell us what to do and what not to do. And if there isn't a sign, we can always say that we didn't know we couldn't do it, or that it was a dangerous thing to do, or that there are consequences if we do them. In this way, our signs do a lot of the thinking for us. But in Switzerland, I learned that, sign or no sign, we're all still expected [4] to think for ourselves.

I was riding into Zürich by train years ago. I was by myself and looking out the window, amazed [5] at how green a country could be, when the conductor [6] entered. My hand searched in my backpack for my ticket, but before he arrived he stopped at the seats in front of me and asked the woman there for her ticket. She giggled [7] nervously, and in English said she didn't understand.

"Your ticket, please," he said.

"Oh. I didn't know I needed a ticket before getting on the train," she told him.

I looked between the space in the seats and saw the conductor's face, a Buster Keaton deadpan expression [8].

"You didn't know you need tickets for trains here?" he asked.

"No," she said.

He raised his thick eyebrows [9]. "So... you got on without knowing what you need to do?"

She giggled again.

He removed a pen from his shirt pocket and started writing in a black book.

"Wait," she said. "You're not giving me a fine [10], are you?"

I moved to my left so I could see her better. She was young and good-looking, and was twisting [11] her long yellow hair around her finger in a flirty way.

"I really didn't know," she said. "Can't I just buy one from you now?"

"Do you also not need tickets for the trains in your country?" he asked.

"No one takes trains where I come from," she said.

That's when he told her the same thing that a neighbor said to me when I first moved to Zürich: "That's called ignorant," and he removed a small sheet [12] of paper and handed it to her. "And being ignorant does not protect [13] you from our laws [14]."

The first year I lived in Zürich, I was renting an apartment on the third floor [15] of a building near the lake. I was coming back home late one evening. I was tired, and my eyes were red. It was winter and dark outside, and the inside of the building had only soft yellow lamps on the wall of every floor. While walking up the stairs [16], I passed one of my neighbors' doors and lost my balance – not much, but enough that I stepped on the mat at the foot of the door. It made a sound under my shoe, and as I continued up to the next floor I heard a door open behind me.

"Losed Si emal!!" a voice called out.

A short, balding [17] man in a dirty T-shirt stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at me. I knew his face but it was the first time I heard his voice. I saw him before a couple of times in front of the building collecting his post, and stood behind him once in the checkout at the local supermarket. But I never had a conversation with him.

"Warum putzed Si eigetli jede Abig ihri Schue a minere Matte ab?" he said.

I quickly looked at the doormat, a thick brown square that said welcome on it.

"Es tut mir Leid," I said.

He looked at me strangely. "You are the American upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Then I ask you, step not on my matte."

My mouth curved into a small smile.

"I say something funny?" he asked.

"No, no. Entschuldigung," I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to step on it. I didn't even know I was doing it."

He shook his head. "You step on my matte and you remark it not?" he said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

He said nothing.

"My wife just had a baby a couple nights ago," I said. "She's still in the hospital. My mind's someplace else [18]."

He blinked at me a couple times.

"She can come back home tomorrow," I said. "Both of them."

He continued looking at me.

"It's a girl," I told him.

He nodded his head.

"And...well, I'm still finding my way [19] around here," I explained. "I still don't really know the building well – how wide [20] the corridors



are... the sharpness of the turns on the stairs. I'm still finding my way with the dimensions."

"You are here two months now?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Das heisst ignorant!" he said.

"Ignorant?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"Well... that may be," I said. "But you can't always know what you need to know... about everything, all the time."

He blinked a few more times. A tram outside passed the building, and the entrance door shook. We looked at each other for a long moment.

"Okay, then," I said. "I wish you a good evening."

"And you," he said. He moved back to the open door of his apartment, went inside, turned to look at me again and hissed like a steaming teapot [21]: "And step not on my matte!"

The door closed and a key turned twice in the lock.

I turned and continued up the stairs, thinking about his doormat and the parameters of personal responsibility.

Thanks for listening.

You can find all our episodes on our brand new website podclub.ch or by downloading our app. You can also download our vocabulary trainer to help you practice the new words you hear, and you can follow me on Instagram using the hashtags #podclubrichard and #athousandwords.

I'll be back on November 23rd for another story, about the end of summer, the beginning of the cooler days, and wasps and bees and other insects.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **signs**: messages in public with pictures and/or words

[2] **leash**: a long cord to control a dog's movement

[3] **trespassers**: people walking on private ground

[4] **are expected to**: people believe that something will happen in that way

[5] **amazed**: wonderfully surprised

[6] **the conductor**: the ticket taker

[7] **giggled**: laughed quietly

[8] **a deadpan expression**: a look with no emotion on his face

[9] **eyebrows**: the hair growing above the eyes

[10] **a fine**: a penalty of money

[11] **twisting**: turning it around and around

[12] **a sheet**: a thin piece

[13] **protect**: stop you from bad consequences

[14] **laws**: the rules of the country

[15] **floor**: a level in a building

[16] **the stairs**: the walkway of steps in the corridor going up and down inside the building

[17] **balding**: losing hair on his head

[18] **someplace else**: in another place

[19] **finding my way**: learning about things

[20] **wide**: the space between one side and the other

[21] **hissed like a steaming teapot**: made the sound when hot water is ready in a water cooker