



# BREZEL-NEWS

Third Edition, December 2012

## Newsletter of the German Saturday Schools Islington and Hackney Wick

Dear Saturday School Friends,

the 3rd edition of our Brezel News just in time for the end of year. I am currently in my small German hometown, almost immediately behind the North Sea dike. It is not all that easy to remember the reminder email for the Arsenal Match and to organise supply teachers and Christmas parties in faraway pulsating London. In a way, this also reflects the cultural balancing act that we want to make a little bit easier for our children through their Saturday School attendance.

In January I will have been running our Saturday School/s for 14 years – longer than I went to school myself. I would have never dreamt this when I “took over” the small troupe of just 30 children. Today we teach 150 children and 20 adults in Islington and 50 children in Hackney. Altogether 18 classes, and every Saturday 20 teachers and 4 assistants are in action. Everything is supposed to run smoothly without hiccups, and it should also be fun on a Saturday morning.

Most of the time I enjoy doing it, even after all these years. The two lantern walks in November were absolute highlights – when from a distance I spotted the glowing lanterns in dusky Victoria Park, and when the children sang their lantern songs so fervently in the darkened Islington school hall. I am very happy about the thriving school communities, the many voluntary helpers and the incredibly positive memories of our former Saturday School students, which Martina has collected for this edition.

But sometimes it can be a little frustrating and occasionally I lose my patience, despite my best intentions. Sorry, but I am not just Saturday School. You won’t get rid of me that easily but at some point in the near future we have to start thinking about a “changing of the guard” or a better distribution of responsibilities.

I wish you all a wonderful Christmas and all the best for the New Year!

Yours, Cathrin xx

Cathrin Cordes, School Director

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Martina leads the lantern procession

# I'm Walking with my Lantern

## Lantern walks in Islington and Hackney Wick

November was the time for our seasonal lantern walk. As darkness fell, we trekked through Islington's autumnal streets and Hackney's rambling Victoria Park, our lanterns colourful and glowing and our children singing cheerfully. Both processions were accompanied by Martina Schwarz with her accordion, and she once again created the right mood with a repertoire of lantern and autumnal songs. At school on Saturday, the children with their teachers had made the beautifully painted and decorated lanterns that were now our guiding lights.

On November 10th, the Saturday School Hackney Wick held their second annual lantern walk. Everyone met at 4 pm at the Queens Gate, near the Britannia Pub, and we wandered through the dusky park with our children. The combination of colourful autumnal leaves and lanterns created a great atmosphere. For a cosy finale to the evening, Hackney parents had booked several tables at the pub.

In Islington we met at the playground in Highbury Fields; the Sunday even fell on St. Martin's Day on November 11th. However, we had to rearrange one of our chocolate stops at very short notice which meant we had to choose a slightly different route. Thanks to "iPhone Maps" that wasn't much of a problem, and our two stops for singing were - as always - rewarded with chocolate. Actually, we liked the new route even better than the old one and our new chocolate "donor" put in such a slick performance that we immediately "booked" her for next year.

Stephanie, our established chocolate fairy for almost 10 years, comments: "The whole neighbourhood enjoys your annual lantern walk." Many residents along our route are very happy to see our luminous, singing procession move past their house. Passers-by – including two rather cool-looking teenagers on mountain bikes this year - stop and want to find out what exactly we are doing. And why?

Lantern walks traditionally take place on St. Martin's Day, named after the saint who was born in 316 in a territory that is now Hungary but was then occupied by the Romans. Martin became an officer in the Roman legionary army. In 334 he was riding through the Roman province of Gaul when he encountered a freezing beggar, clad in rags. Martin used his sword to divide his coat and gave one half to the beggar. Later, Martin was ordained a priest and, eventually, Bishop of Tours in France. He continued to live in poverty as a monk and died on November 8th, 397. On top of his grave, a simple church was built which was later replaced by Tours Cathedral.



Shining bright at one of our lantern stops

In memory of St. Martin as a symbol of charity the St. Martin's parades have been taking place in Germany since the 19th century. They usually feature children who walk with home-made lanterns and sing traditional lantern songs. The largest St. Martin's parades, with between 4,000 and 6,000 participants, take place in North Rhine-Westphalia. Our lantern walks are on a somewhat smaller scale but no less beautiful. In our opinion, anyway.

To conclude the evening, everyone in Islington enjoyed pizzas in the hall at Drayton Park School. The Islington kids actually think that this is part of the tradition. With all other lights switched off, the children showed off their shining works of art and Martina played on the accordion once again. This year the children joined in the singing with particularly strong voices – the magnificent high point of the evening.

# Our Former Saturday School Students

## Or: Why it's worth sticking with it

"Do we have to go there today?" It's Saturday morning and there's a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Another early start and yet another appointment. Everyone is tired, and there are so many other activities on offer. Is it really worth it?

You better believe it! Quite apart from the fact the children (mostly) enjoy Saturday School and often – sometimes unnoticed by their own parents - develop very good friendships, the educational success of the German Saturday School is not to be scoffed at. Fewer and fewer Secondary Schools in Britain offer German lessons and our Islington Saturday School has impressed with remarkable academic achievements. Since 2004 we have had 50 successful GCSE and more than 20 AS and A2 students.

Even if our children moan once in a while, the German Saturday School is an important and valued part of their childhood. That, in any case, is how some of our former students described it when we asked them about their Saturday School memories. We also wanted to know whether they are still using their German today.

### Our former students have their say

"To be quite honest, there was nothing in Saturday School that I didn't like", says Emiliano Ventura, 19. "The best thing about Saturday School was that I had so many good friends. Learning German was fun because the lessons were interesting and interactive. During the break we played football and every week the German baker was there. That was delicious."

Emiliano did his German GCSE and A-level with us and is currently studying "International Business". He also works as a bartender in a Mexican restaurant where "my knowledge of German is very useful when I'm serving German customers. I use my German almost

every day, either at home with my mother or at work. I think because of the competitiveness of today's employment market it is very important to know a second language."

"I had a wonderful class and a great teacher, Diane," raves Kelly Baker, 21. "Some people are perhaps unhappy about giving up their Saturday mornings but I think it has taught me an invaluable lesson in commitment and dedication. I have nothing but fond memories and there are days when I still miss it. I did my German GCSE preparation at Saturday School and took the actual exam at my English school in Year 9. I then went on to take German as one of my A-level options at Sixth Form. This summer I graduated with a degree in English Literature from the University of Royal Holloway. German is always spoken at home and I use it when we visit our family in South Tyrol."

One of our ex-students who has been using her German a lot is Manon Burnett, 23. She joined us at the age of three, took her GCSE and A-level exams and went on to study German in London. "I have fond memories of all the nice friends I made at Saturday School, and of our superb teacher, Diane. I wasn't that keen on the grammar, but then again it couldn't be avoided at university either. I graduated from King's College in London with a BA in German Language and Literature. As part of my course I spent a year in Fürth, near Nuremberg, where I worked as a teaching assistant at a local primary school as well as a grammar school. I really enjoyed that."

Three of our former students have now taken on supportive roles in our Saturday Schools in Islington and Hackney. Kai Dawson, 17, attended the Saturday School in Islington between 2007 and 2011. After his GCSE exam Kai decided to study for a German A-level at his Sixth Form College. Now Kai helps out at the Saturday School in Hackney Wick and is very popular with the children. "I really enjoy



working with young children,” says Kai, who is planning to train as a primary school teacher.



Photo: Imran Rehman

Kai in Frauke's class in Hackney Wick

Helene Schulze, 18, is studying Geography at University College London and is also employed as a classroom assistant at Hackney Wick. “I was at the German Saturday School Islington for nearly ten years and took my GCSE, AS- and A-levels there. Over the years I developed many good friendships, and the relaxed atmosphere made learning easier and much more fun. Obviously I didn’t always like getting up early on a Saturday morning. But it was really a good thing as it “dragged” me out of bed. I use my German to stay in touch with my German family and I use it in my Saturday School job. And I am quite certain that I will use it professionally later on.”

In preparation for her university studies Laura Achrafie, 19, is enjoying work experience at the Saturday School Islington: “Of course it was difficult to get up early every Saturday morning. But as soon as I’d left my house I was looking forward to seeing my German friends. I think we all got on well together because we had similar backgrounds: We had German parents, were growing up in London and attending English schools. I took my German GCSE and AS-level exams at the Saturday School Islington and the school definitely helped me to get my good grades (A\*

and A). Now I help out in Charlotte’s class and I really enjoy it. I am happy to come to German School again on Saturdays and to see the children – it reminds me of my own time here. My plans for the future: I would like to study European Studies and German.”

Calvin Falco Cordes, 16, also has positive views of his language skills. “Of course my German is useful when I visit Germany or meet Germans abroad,” he says. “In future I would like to have a job where I can use all my languages.” Like many of our Saturday School students, Calvin and Emiliano have grown up trilingual in London.



Photo: Imran Rehman

Helene with Regina's class in Hackney Wick.

The Barnfather brothers, Lukas and Daniel, also think back to their Saturday School days with pleasure. “I liked the baker’s many delicious cakes,” says Lukas, 22. “But it was always good fun to meet with people of my own age and to play football with them. What I didn’t like so much was getting up early. Now I can be as lazy as I like on a Saturday. After leaving German School in 2008 with GCSE, AS- and A-levels I completed a three-year apprenticeship as a cook. At the moment I am studying Hospitality Business Management in Leeds and hope to open my own gastro pub at some point in the future. I speak German with my mother or just for fun with my friends. Coincidentally, in Leeds I met another former

Saturday School student from my class. In January I plan to fly to Berlin with some friends. I'll definitely be speaking German then."

His brother Daniel, 19, also left the school in 2008, after his GCSE exam. He went on to take his German A-level at his English school in Brighton. "I enjoyed the lessons at Saturday School. It was always really relaxed. I always looked forward to meeting my friends every week. Recently I worked for a company where I had to speak to a lot of German clients on the telephone. I got that job because I speak German."



Our A-level cohort of summer 2012: Laura, Daniela, Calvin and Gaia with our "star teacher", Diane.

Sarah Falkenberg-Hassan is also benefiting from her knowledge of German. The 20-year-old art student is participating in a four-month student exchange in Switzerland. Unlike her English fellow students Sarah has no trouble following the German lectures. Of her time at the German Saturday School (until 2009) she particularly remembers the various teaching methods: "We used films, videos, quizzes etc."

As every year, a cohort from the German Saturday School took their GCSEs, AS- and A-levels in 2012 – with great results, as always. Following the furore this year regarding the stricter marking of English GCSEs, the more

stringent assessment of German exams has also been criticised by many German teachers.

"I have been teaching at an English Secondary School for the past ten years and it has been very difficult to get really good results because the specifications are very vague as to what is an A\* or an A... and the way examiners mark papers varies widely," says Melanie Dietze, who also teaches at the German Saturday School Islington. "At my school everyone agrees. There are students who have handed in the same essay in French and in German and got an A\* in French and only a B in German. That can't be right, can it? I think that Germans generally mark more strictly and as the specifications are so vague and German is very grammar-oriented we tend to suffer."

Add to that the fact that German is regarded as a relatively difficult language then it is hardly surprising that German as a foreign language is becoming less popular. Applications for GCSE German were 5.5% lower this year than in 2011. The drop was even bigger in 2011 with 13.2% fewer applicants than in the previous year. Ten years ago there were about 130.000 candidates for GCSE German, while in 2012 there were only 57.547. The situation for A-levels is similar. In 2012 there were 4.478 candidates for German, 8% fewer than in the previous year. Still, five of those A-level candidates were our Saturday School students and that is more than 0.1% of all German A-level exams in the whole of Great Britain. Small but formidable!

By Martina Köpcke



# Viva La Musica!

“The only thing better than singing is more singing,” Ella Fitzgerald famously said – and our very own Islington Meistersingers would agree. “There are many benefits to singing,” explains Hildegard Maier, the choir’s MD. “First and foremost, singing is fun, it cheers the soul and improves brain function. The social benefits of choral singing cannot be ignored either.”

Currently between 10 and 12 Meistersingers meet for rehearsal every Saturday morning from 11.30 until 12.15 while their children are in class. New members are always very welcome. There are no auditions and most important is a love of singing.

The name of the choir, by the way, is a reference to the Meistersingers of the Middle Ages. Our choir was founded in 2004 by Saturday School parent Annette Birkholz who then moved to Berlin soon after. That was when Hildegard took over as musical director. A native of Bavaria, Hildegard studied music in Austria and brings a wealth of choral experience – both singing and conducting - to the Meistersingers. Other choir members help with organisation and occasionally lead rehearsals. Special mentions should go to Sabine Schildknecht, Sebastian Borger, Dirk Vetter and Jochen Wittmann.

Over the past six years, the Meistersingers have built up an impressive repertoire. It ranges from traditional choral music to more modern material. Particularly popular are the legendary Comedian Harmonists from Berlin (“Mein kleiner grüner Kaktus”, “Badewasser”) and even the Spider Murphy Gang’s “Das Leben iss wie a Traum”. The choir adds a special flavour to our Saturday School events.

Just now we are looking forward to hearing our favourite Christmas carols. We can’t imagine our Carnival, summer party and lantern walk without the choir. It’s also very enjoyable when the choir performs together with some of our Saturday School children.



Photo: Alexander Hug

The Meistersingers in action.

On top of the regular Saturday morning get-togethers, extra so-called “evening-rehearsals” take place once a month at a chorister’s home. “The first time it seemed like a miracle,” raves choir member Maren Meinhardt. “There was an actual choir in my front room. On an ordinary Thursday evening! The choir is definitely one of the highlights of my week!”

The choir also regularly performs outside of Saturday School, for example at the German Lutheran Church of St. Marien. Anyone interested in seeing the Meistersingers live can do so on December 8th at the Anglo-German History Society and on December 15th at our Christmas Party in Islington. Or catch them in the New Year at their next “Musical Stammtisch” at the “Bierschenke” (Bierkeller) in Westminster.

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## Is it a good idea for a partner to learn German? In my opinion – definitely yes!

For more than five years I have been teaching adult courses at the German Saturday School in Islington and I really enjoy it. Initially I taught the advanced group and then in September 2010 I took over the beginners' group. These adult courses are very important, and not just for my students, but for the whole family. They enrich the lives of everyone, the “nuclear family” here in England and also the contact with relatives and acquaintances in Germany. Perhaps some of you have had a similar experience: Initially everyone makes a real effort with the “exotic” woman or the “exotic” man and he or she does, too. Over the years, however, the really rather negligible difference in mentality and especially the language barrier become an obstacle. The initial openness later turns to frustration. And can you ever really understand someone if you don't speak their language?

The first group for adults has existed at the Saturday School Islington for about the past 10 years and was initially a kind of club. The adult courses were the initiative of two fathers who wanted to use their Saturday mornings to improve their own German language skills. They found their own teacher and shared the cost between them.

“In those days everything was very relaxed,” says Alan Perks, a student from the advanced group, who has been involved since the early days. “In the beginning we just found ourselves a table somewhere and sat down together. Quite often we sat in a corner of the staircase. Back then we usually were four adults. It was very relaxed and “laissez-faire”. Over the years, the group grew and three years ago we were fully integrated into the Saturday School. Until then we were autonomous and I was the one collecting the money off everyone, usually weekly. Now that we are a “proper” part of Saturday School we can concentrate more on our lessons and on learning German.”

In September 2007 the then group of six adults was looking for a new teacher. I realised that many of the students were keen to learn the language in a more systematic way. In the beginning, the abilities of students in both groups were quite varied – from complete beginners to advanced. Over time they have evened out somewhat. Our advanced students can now all converse in German, and even our “beginners” have made a lot of progress and cannot really be called beginners anymore. And everyone seems to be having fun.



Photo: Alexander Hug

Carola and her colleague Klaus-Dieter (middle, standing) with their students.

For me the German Saturday School has been a very good experience. Every week I notice how happy the students are to see each other again and to be speaking German. And they are keen to learn more, although it can sometimes be a little frustrating and slow. German is a slightly tricky language, but I think it will all come off in the end. You just have to stick with it. And when one of my students, who previously attempted a number of German courses, says “this is my best shot ever”, and I feel that this time he is really going to make it, then that is very promising.

More than ten years ago when the father of my children and I took our eldest son to Saturday School he simply said “This is all too German for me, what do I do?” I didn't know what to answer him – it really was very German. It is



important for all members of an organisation to develop a sense of belonging and that is perhaps especially difficult for all “Non-Germans” at Saturday School. Therefore, the adult courses are very important. And learning German is also an opportunity for parents to make good use of the time their children spend in lessons and to further their personal development. It is a positive step towards understanding each other better.



Father Christmas visits Carola's adult class, December 2008.

As parents we are role models for our children, and not just through what we achieve, but mostly through what we do. At the beginning of break time, it is lovely to see some of the children waiting for their father or mother outside the classroom – or even inside the classroom – where their parents are doing exactly what the children are doing: studying German. Moreover it really helps at home when a partner understands more and more German as nobody feels excluded and speaking German becomes more “normal”.

“In my opinion the adult course is an essential part of the German Saturday School,” says G.P. from the beginners’ group. His classmate Stephen agrees: “Learning German at the Saturday School has encouraged and motivated me. In the beginning I knew very little German (or none, to be precise). And now that I can say more than my name it is also good fun.” Dan advocates German as a family

experience: “My children find it encouraging that their father is also learning German.” Richard adds: “I started to attend the adult class because my children came. I have struggled for most of their lives to learn some German and since attending the school I feel I have made some actual progress.”

When the parents are learning German it is very motivating for the children. When everyone is happy to go to Saturday School, then the Saturday becomes less of a chore. My children are now 15 and 17. For years, the Saturday School was what we did together as a family on a Saturday – without discussion. Nowadays only the two of us come but my elder son Kai also continues to go to Saturday School. For the past six months he has been helping at the Saturday School in Hackney as a teaching assistant for the younger children.

Speaking of young children. As one of my students who has two small children remarked, “As we are in for the long haul, we might as well try our best”.

Carola Kornfeld, Teacher Adult Course Saturday School Islington

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## Saturday School - Upcoming Dates

### December 8th

Christmas party and last day of school Hackney Wick

### December 15th

Christmas party and last day of school Islington

### December 16th

Christmas party for our teachers from Islington and Hackney Wick

### January 5th

Teacher training/Association of German Saturday Schools

### January 12th

First day of school Islington and Hackney Wick