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Phone Phobia

When my phone rings in Switzerland...I get scared.

By Chantal Panozzo | Once I got settled in after moving to Switzerland, and the Swiss authorities finally deemed I was worthy of purchasing a cell phone and installing a landline, I started realizing the communication tools that were supposed to make my life abroad easier actually began to have the opposite effect.

They gave German-speakers a way to contact me.

I tried to keep my new Swiss phone numbers under wraps, but somehow, they got out. So there I'd be, casually picking up a call, thinking it was going to be my husband or mother only to realize it was Frau Zo-and-Zo from who-

knows-where telling me something that sounded so threatening that I even lost the ability to ask if she spoke English.

My first phone call in German scared me so much that I started hanging up on any caller who dared to speak a word of it. The first year I lived in Switzerland, I hung up on at least 50 people.

Later, after I had been educated in both Swiss phone etiquette and the German language, things got more complicated because there were more options to consider. Gone were the days when I could just say a casual American "hello" and be done with it. Now I had to also consider the Swiss way, and try to say "Frau Panozzo", in a monotone that just wasn't me.

Usually, despite my best efforts to match a greeting to a caller, I'd end up with silence on the other end while the Swiss caller got over their initial "greeting shock" and tried to figure out how to talk to a confused person like me.

More often than not, they'd say something like "Frau Moser" to which I'd reply "Nein, ich bin Frau Panozzo". And then there'd be even more confusion because they hadn't been asking my name, they had been stating theirs.

While I was trying to remember their name so I could say "Auf Wiedersehen Frau Moser", at the end of the call, my mind would also be trying so hard to at least get the topic of conversation, that the name of the caller would just get lost along with everything else. When the caller would bid me "Auf Wiedersehen, Frau Panozzo," I could only say a pathetic and plain "Auf Wiedersehen"

back. I would then hang up in shame, having committed the cardinal sin of Swiss phone etiquette – forgetting the caller’s name.

In the process of learning language skills and cultural curiosities, I lost any sense of how to talk. The whole phone trauma got so overwhelming that sometimes I pretended not to even hear it ring.

“Was that your phone that was ringing?” asked Tom, a Swiss colleague I shared an office with in Zurich.

“Phone? What phone?” I’d say, pretending to be deaf.

Finally, I learned to turn the ringer down as low as possible and only answer calls from people within the company. Outside callers were forced to leave voice mails since then I had the option of “repeat message”, which sometimes helped, not that I had much intention of calling anyone back.

Phone fear turned into email addiction. Over time, I learned to conduct any and every foreign communication possible through email since it put two things on my side that a phone didn’t – time and Google Translate.

Finally, two years after moving to Switzerland, if a caller spoke in German, I’d do my best to listen, since I figured otherwise I would be throwing 5,000 francs of language lessons down the drain. So I’d say a few “jas” and “genaus” as they babbled and then I would say good-bye, usually not having a clue about what had just transpired because I had been so focused on not forgetting their name.

One day at work, the secretary called me, saying Herr Schmidt was here to see me. I panicked, wondering if he was the same guy who called yesterday wanting to show his hexyskajf and have a biengkdalge. After pacing my office, I grabbed a business card and went down to greet the Herr, trying to act like I was in control and knew exactly who he was and what he was doing here.

“Hallo, Herr Schmidt,” I said in my best Deutsch, shaking his hand.

“Hallo, Frau Panozzo,” he said, “Based on our talk yesterday, I brought my aiemdng so we can wokdnanb about the ieknbdg.”

Just then my cell phone rang. I didn’t know who it was, but this time, I didn’t care.

“I’m sorry,” I said pointing to my phone, “but I have to take this call.”

“No problem,” said Herr Schmidt, sitting at the table while the secretary came in to ask him if he’d like his water with or without gas.

I ran out of the room and back to my office, telling my colleague that I had a call and he should go down and deal with Herr Schmidt. Just as I was about to press talk, my call went into voice mail.

I smiled. Maybe my Swiss phone was a fabulous thing after all.