

Brot und Käse

by Matt Potter

They sat at the other end of the long bench, confident in their surroundings, standing up to scrape their backpacks off their backs, looking down the track, talking to each other.

I glanced down at the timetable I had taken from the Deutsche Bahn office inside the station building. The black and red numbers and names were ordered in neat columns and rows, as I had come to expect, but the train routes with different names and symbols were not so simple for me. I wanted to get to Göttingen — about a thirty-minute trip — where I planned to spend the day shopping and wandering like a tourist.

Looking at the timetable in my lap, I kept reassuring myself that yes, the train would arrive soon. But already dark blue local trains had arrived that were not on the timetable. Not red or silver or grey national and international trains which, of course, would have no reason for having their numbers and destinations featured on a timetable for local services in the greater Göttingen area. But dark blue local trains, two carriages long, that *did* service the area. Yes, I was sitting on the right platform, in the right section, according to the timetable. But still, things can change, and by then I'd had enough experience living in Germany to know you're only given the right answer when you know the right question.

Sitting there in the chilly morning, wearing shorts as I am always hopeful it will turn sunny, I hoped I did not look as panicked as I tried not to feel.

I turned to watch the two at the other end of the bench, a brother and sister, she about twelve and he about ten, tall and blond in that way we think is German and is, but also isn't. He was unzipping his backpack, despite his sister's vocal protests, and pulling out a plastic bag. Opening the ziplock, he dipped his hand inside and gently pulled out a sandwich.

The sister told him — *auf Deutsch* — that he shouldn't eat it. But like so many younger brothers, he turned away from her, looked at his sandwich, and bit into it.

It was a very German sandwich, just cheese (very yellow cheese - *sehr gelber Käse*) between slices of dark bread (*dunkeles Brot*). We often think German bread is far too dense, too much, too thick, the kind that, when it grows stale, you can take an electric knife to and carve up for doorstops.

But actually, the bread is sliced quite thinly, far thinner than we realise, so it's easy to manage and not too much at all. We visitors from the Anglo world get it wrong.

I could see two other sandwiches still inside the ziplock bag. Exactly the same *gelber Käse*. Exactly the same *dunkeles Brot*. Zipping the bag up again, he gently munched on the one he had taken out, while talking to his sister with his mouth full.

I wasn't really listening to what they said. I was just watching this blond German kid eating a very German sandwich prepared probably by his Mutti or Vati or Oma.

I don't know if they knew I was watching them, and I don't know if they would have cared. It was just the three of us waiting for the train to Göttingen, and him eating the sandwich now at 11:15 a.m. probably because he was bored. Perhaps, under her breath, his sister was telling him again not to eat it - as big sisters can nag - but he ignored her and went on munching regardless. He had two more for later anyway.

The moment was probably lost on them. But it wasn't lost on me.

