

They speak my language

We moved to Holland from Germany on a warm summer day. Our daughter Stephanie, who had been born in Munich, was only four at the time, so when the removal men came into the flat after breakfast she was very excited. She ran around and generally made a nuisance of herself; it was fun, but after a while the excitement changed to confusion and she ran to her mother, wanting to be picked up and hugged.

Her parents had told her what was going to happen - told her she could stay and watch, but she had to be good, and even though Papa would be home all day he wouldn't be able to take her to the park and feed the ducks.

At first Stephanie thought that "moving" was a bigger version of going on holiday, which was something she understood. That was when all her clothes and fluffy animals would disappear, and then reappear as if by magic in another place. That had happened twice in her short life. But this time everything was disappearing. First into boxes, and then, on the actual moving day, even her bed went downstairs and into a lorry.

It was very confusing.

Stephanie's mother was Dutch and had always talked and read to her in that language. They were going, she was told, to Mama's country, to the Netherlands, where Mama had been born and where everyone spoke Nederlands.

"Nederlands is the way I'm talking to you," her mother explained, "and the way you talk to me and Papa."

Her parents thought she would be able to understand the concept of moving to a different country when it was explained that

way. But Stephanie did not understand; she could not make that link because Mama was the only one who talked to her like that, in Nederlands. Papa spoke differently, in something that was called English, and her parents also spoke to each other in English. It was the common language of the family, a way of communicating that she could understand but chose not to speak. And it was the same with Papa. Papa didn't speak any Nederlands but he understood it, so he talked to her in his language and she to him in hers.

To make things even more difficult for a little girl of almost four, there was another way of talking in Stephanie's life; it was called German and mostly it went on outside the house. It was the way children and their mothers talked in the playground, the way people spoke in the shops. Most visitors to the house talked in German, and some others spoke English, but nobody else spoke Nederlands - only Mama.

Stephanie had grasped the important principles of the German language early on and knew when she was being offered an ice cream, a sweetie, or a drink. But unlike Papa, those other people did not understand when she spoke back to them. The grown ups would smile and look at her mother, and Mama would then explain what she'd said. The children would make a face, and sometimes giggle in a stupid way.

After a while Stephanie decided not to speak to those people. It was much simpler that way. She would join in the play of other children but never talk to them, and she would whisper softly in her mother's ear when she wanted to communicate, not wishing to be overheard. She only spoke aloud in the house, and she only spoke Nederlands because she was bonded to her mother in that language, because it was the way she thought and expressed herself. Apart from that the practical uses of Nederlands

appeared to be severely restricted, and the value of moving to Mama's country was decidedly unclear.

English stood for home and the family, more specifically her father and his friends. German was for the world outside the front door. Nederlands was nothing more than a private language, a set of sounds used by her mother, herself and nobody else. No wonder then that Stephanie was confused about the business of moving.

First there had been the usual long and boring car journey that signalled the start of a holiday, but this time they slept in something called a hotel, all of them in the same room. That was fun. The next day there was another boring drive, and at the end she discovered that they were not on holiday at all, because there was no sea or sand.

However, there was no time to be disappointed and start to cry. She had got out of the car expecting to see the big white birds flying over the beach and hear their shrill cries, but instead Stephanie heard other people speaking the same way as Mama. She could hear that same set of sounds, in the street when people walked past, and across the gardens from invisible sources.

Nederlands sounds were everywhere, all around her.

It was amazing.

And then the lorry and the men came with all their furniture, and they started carrying it into someone else's house. But when she asked, Mama said it was their new house. And wasn't it a nice house because they weren't living on a busy street anymore. Instead there was a play area in front, with swings and two horses that she could rock on. Mama called it a plantsoen. And then Mama showed her the garden at the back. It had a gate that she could open and come out into another place that was safe for children.

At first she played on one of the horses. She really wanted to go on the swing but Papa said he was too busy and couldn't push her. Then she ran through the house and into the garden. She was free to do whatever she wanted, but it was the sounds that excited her the most, not the freedom; she had to track them down.

Mama had left the gate open so she looked out, wondering what she would find. Other gates were open and she chose the nearest. The day was warm and two grown ups were out in the garden. They sat around a white table, under a red and blue parasol. Stephanie recognised the table immediately; when you sat down at tables like these on warm days then somebody in a white coat would bring you an ice cream. That was what happened on holiday. There was a spare chair, so Stephanie took her place and waited.

At first the people spoke to her in German, the language of the new neighbour's number plates, but there was no reaction from the child. German was the language of outdoors, so it came as no great surprise to hear it again, and as usual Stephanie remained silent. Then they tried Dutch, followed by English. Still nothing. The child continued to sit at their table as if she were perfectly at home. But secretly she was delighted to have located some other Dutch speakers.

"Would you like an ice cream?" the lady asked in English.

Stephanie made a small movement of the head that indicated acceptance. She'd been right about the table and the parasol.

"Lust je echt een ijsje?" The man repeated the question in Dutch.

Stephanie nodded again, and this time added a fleeting smile.

She ate her ice cream in silence and then left, looking for other open garden gates and more adventure.

Almost immediately she found a garden in which three children of her own age were playing. She started to run up the path towards them, but stopped as soon as they turned and looked in her direction. Their faces carried the hard look of rejection that small children reserve for strangers. It was the look she was used to in Germany.

The three children stood and went on staring at her for a minute or more, and then the woman of the house came out of the kitchen and crossed the lawn towards her. She spoke Nederlands just as well as the ice cream people, but Stephanie was certain that it could only be done by grown-ups. The children would surely speak in that other language, the language of the playground.

"Come here Hans," the woman said, and a boy left the group with great reluctance and came forward. The woman had spoken to the other child in Nederlands and must be his mother. But before she had time to realise what that meant Stephanie heard her own name being called.

"Is that you?" the woman asked, "are you Stephanie?"

Stephanie gave the smallest of nods to indicate that she was. The woman took her hand and led the child through the gate.

"Stephanie is over here," she shouted out, and almost immediately her own mother appeared.

Hurried introductions were made, plus an offer to look after Stephanie until later, when the removal men had finished and the furniture was in place.

"Come over for coffee," Hans's mother offered, a cup of coffee being the standard

way to break the social ice in Holland. "And bring your husband."

Stephanie and the woman returned to the garden and Hans was summoned once again.

"Tell Stephanie what your game is and make sure she's allowed to play it," she told him. "If you don't," and now she spoke to the rest of the group, "then there's no lemonade or sweeties later on. Is that clear? And I'll be watching you from the kitchen."

The children returned to their game in complete silence, totally ignoring the instructions. Stephanie went over to the sand pit. There had been a sand pit just like this one at home in Germany. After a few minutes the children began to talk between themselves, in whispers, still ignoring her, but that didn't matter, in fact it didn't bother Stephanie at all, because she could hear that they were talking Nederlands. So children could speak like that as well, it wasn't just Mama and the other grown-ups.

That was a revelation.

Soon curiosity overcame their natural shyness, and one by one the other children came across to the sand pit. At first they just stood at the edge and looked at her. They had all played in the pit many times, but now that small step over the side and into the sand that Stephanie now occupied was a move they were reluctant to take.

Stephanie went on digging and ignored them. She was used to it.

"Where do you come from?" the little girl asked after a while.

"Rathelbeckstrasse Drei Drei Drei," Stephanie replied. It was an automatic answer, the German words her mother had taught her to say if she was ever lost.

"Can't you speak Nederlands?" Hans asked. Surely everybody spoke Nederlands,

he thought. How else could you play or watch the TV if you didn't speak Nederlands.

The other two children giggled with a mixture of embarrassment and contempt; embarrassment because they did not know what to do or say, contempt because the very idea of not speaking Nederlands seemed so ludicrous. Then all three went back to what they did best. Staring.

Hans's mother had been watching and listening from the kitchen, and came outside again.

"You do speak Nederlands, don't you Stephanie?" she asked.

This time Stephanie nodded enthusiastically. Then she frowned and looked very serious. Had the time had come to break that resolution about not speaking out of doors? It had.

"Yes," she replied. "Of course I speak Nederlands. Doesn't everyone?"

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