

# A three- month sentence

In Switzerland, it's possible to get hired in one language and fired in another. I should know, because it happened to me.

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By Chantal Panozzo | As my recently appointed German- (and German only) speaking boss shut his office door, gesturing at me to sit on his couch and pulling his chair closer than any American-sized personal space concept would ever allow, I knew what was coming. After my three-year stint as the Zurich advertising agency's only native English-speaking copywriter, I was about to become the next victim in a long line of worldwide economic tragedies.

I was losing my job. And the only word I could say was, *danke*.

"*Danke?*" my boss laughed, after he told me the advertising agency decided to let me go because of money problems – and language issues. In a way, it was a relief. Because the combination of my bad German and his bad English made our communications a series of linguistic nightmares that only seemed bearable due to my constant smile and nod technique.

## Fired, with care

For the last four months, I'd attempted to communicate with my new boss using all the tools that my two years of German lessons would allow. I spoke in short sen-

tences, limiting myself to either past or present, and made sure that every possible *der, die, das, den, dem, denen* or *des* was properly disguised as a "duh".

But it was no use. Working as an English-speaking copywriter in a German-speaking environment wasn't going to work without someone like my first boss: a linguistically talented Swiss creative director who could take one look at my English copy and ideas, and automatically understand them.

As I sat through my new, but soon to be former boss' layoff speech, his German passed through me in two categories – what I understood, and what I didn't. I heard I did things well – just in the wrong language. I heard that he would try to help me find another job – but with people who understood English better than he. And I heard he would write me a *Zeugnis* – whatever the heck that was. And then he hugged me – something, after watching too many *Apprentice* episodes with a sneering Donald Trump yelling, "you're fired!" before shoving his victim out the door – I didn't know a firing involved.

The next part was even stranger. I had to go back to my desk.

## What? Witty? Now?

Staring at my layoff letter, which I myself had to sign in order to be officially fired, I read the German paragraphs. May 31, said the letter. My last day at the agency. I stared out the window at the snow. It was February 26. And I wasn't sure how I should act from now on, let alone find the motivation to create ideas. Luckily the co-worker I shared an office with was out to lunch. So I had at least an hour to figure it out.

Three months to work. Three months to unemployment. Three months to pretend everything was still normal.

Trying to continue like nothing out of the ordinary had happened after being officially laid off was a new experience for me. In the United States, I had witnessed people getting kicked out of the office the moment they were fired. Frantic, these former colleagues would ask those of us still with jobs to save their files before their computers and last few years of their lives were snatched away. Sometimes they'd sneak in at night to print a resume or some portfolio pieces to help them get their next job.

And here I was, back at my desk, with full access to a colour printer and compa-



my email, trying to figure out how the heck I could possibly write another witty headline at a time like this.

### A dignified exit

So maybe my *danke*, for lack of anything better to say, was appropriate after all. I was thankful. Not to lose my job, but for the fact that I had more than three months to collect my work, print my portfolio, and look for a job – all while still employed. After all, it is not in an American's upbringing to think getting fired means anything other than a sneering boss shoving you, ashamed and humiliated, immediately out the door.

In Switzerland, I needed those three months. Because before I could comfortably head to the Swiss unemployment office with my official "firing" letter bearing my signature, I had to learn an entirely new vocabulary. One that included words like "jobless" and "unemployment check". But luckily I already knew the one word that is getting me through it all – *Mut* – courage.

*A version of this story first appeared in radio format on World Radio Switzerland.*

## All things Swiss

### Switzerland through the ages

**1754:** French writer and philosopher François Marie Arouet – most widely known as Voltaire – began his Swiss exile in Geneva at the age of 60. Prior to establishing his Les Délices country residence outside of the city, he was welcomed as a short-term houseguest at the Château de Prangins, home to western Switzerland's branch of the Swiss National Museum since 1998.

**1973:** His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet visited Switzerland for the first time. One of his Alpine destinations was the Tibet Institute Rikon in Canton Zurich – a Buddhist monastery founded in the 1960s according to His Holiness' wishes. Today, the Institute is home to nine Tibetan monks, and one of the world's largest libraries of Tibetology with more than 12,000 titles. Since his first visit in 1973, His Holiness has journeyed to the Rikon Institute 11 additional times, most recently in 2005.

### Expat Encyclopaedia

**Freistellung von der Arbeit:** an agreement where the employer lets the employee go earlier than the stated notice period but still pays the employee's entire salary during that period.

**Lunches:** breaks that get longer and longer as one's notice period winds down.

**RAV:** the Swiss unemployment agency where one must register before their first day of official unemployment. The RAV gives job-searching advice, organises unemployment benefits and requires the one thing Switzerland loves most – piles and piles of paperwork. But before one can go to the RAV (as I learned the hard way), they must first go to their city hall to get yet another piece of paper stating their sorry unemployment status.

**Seventy per cent:** typically the percentage of income an unemployed person without children will receive, based on their previous salary, and depending on whether they've followed all of the RAV's hundreds of rules, filled out the hundreds of required forms in the local language and have first worked in Switzerland for a specific period of time.

**Three-month notice:** one of the most common periods of notice included in a standard Swiss work contract, which generally states employees must give three months notice upon quitting and employers must give fired/laid off people three months notice before they're shown the door. The result – an office filled with a bunch of unmotivated employees.

**Whispering:** something most employees do behind a laid-off person's back after the gossip gets around the office.

**Zeugnis:** a reference letter filled with lots of adverbs like "very," "extremely," and "to our highest of high expectations" one receives upon leaving or being laid off. Usually when translated to English, these reference letters (when positive) sound extremely and utterly ridiculous due to the use of superlatives.