About the Writer

Thanh Nichols is a certified Vietnamese tour guide and teacher with over a decade of professional experience in legal, cultural, and educational settings. Born in Vietnam, her family profoundly influenced her identity and sparked a lifelong love for the German language and culture. In 2024, she immigrated to the United States, bringing with her a wealth of cross-cultural insight and a deep passion for connecting people through language.

Thanh's multilingual path—from Vietnamese to German to English—has given her a nuanced understanding of the power of communication in bridging cultures and building trust. Beyond her interpreting and teaching work, she has a strong background in customer service, administration, and legal assistance. Her lived experience, combined with professional training and cultural sensitivity, makes her a compassionate and effective advocate for individuals navigating complex systems in unfamiliar environments.

Now preparing to move to Huntsville, Alabama, Thanh is eager to continue her work in interpretation, education, or project management. She's seeking a role where she can apply her multilingual skills, cross-cultural insight, and strong organizational abilities to support diverse communities. With Huntsville's growing international presence, Thanh looks forward to making a meaningful impact and building new connections in her next chapter.



"The First Wave: From Chicken Dances to Haribo Smiles"

The wheels touched the runway with a jolt, and as the plane slowed down, I pressed my forehead against the tiny cold window, staring at the unfamiliar gray sky of Frankfurt. It was my first breath in a new world, and somewhere deep inside, I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

The loudspeakers crackled in a language I had understood for years — a mix of sharp syllables and soft vowels — yet it still made me realize just how far I was from home. Passengers stood up quickly, reaching for their bags, their movements urgent and practiced. I clutched my backpack like it was the only thing I knew, and tried to follow the first man in a suit who caught my eye.

The first rule in my dad's old, worn-out book echoed in my mind: *"If you want to get out of Frankfurt Airport quickly, find a businessman in a suit and follow him."* And there he was, as if Dad himself had sent him.

As I stepped into the jet bridge, the air smelled different — colder, cleaner, touched by something metallic. My heart raced with every step, torn between the excitement of possibility and the ache of everything I had left behind.

Those moments lived inside me like a secret clue, one I would later share with my students whenever I told them about the first magical thing that could happen once they mastered German: the feeling of belonging in a place that once seemed like a distant dream.

But before Frankfurt, before cold windows and foreign skies, how I went down this path — let's bring us back to where it all starts, with my parents.

Based on what I've known - There are 185,000 residents in Germany with a 'migrant background' connected to Vietnam, according to official 2018 micro-census data. Dresden, Leipzig, Magdeburg and Berlin are among the main centres for the community. The majority of Vietnamese were recruited as guest workers by East Germany from the 1950s in cooperation with the North Vietnamese government and, from 1975, when the country was reunited under Communism, the Vietnamese government.

From our family memories, being able to get on a plane and reach out to the other side of the world was the proudest thing a young Vietnamese could ever dream of. Following the waves before us, they landed in Germany with one single hope — to make their families proud of them and of who they could become.

Personally, traveling without knowing the language would have scared me to death, but somehow, my parents were brave enough to start everything from scratch.
Just like that — no language, no culture, no friends; only hope.

I remember asking my father once how he had survived in Germany, especially while I was still struggling so much with the language myself.
He smiled and said, *"When you need to eat, you'll do whatever it takes — even with body language."*

I was young and confused, not understanding.
He laughed softly and continued:
"Let me tell you how I got eggs at the supermarket for the first time..."

Quick reminder for the other side of the world, for those already familiar with the convenience of supermarkets — clean, air-conditioned, everything neatly organized — our experience with shopping was completely opposite.

Usually, it included battling the heat, around 80 degrees Fahrenheit, walking through long, narrow alleys where your future meals lay on the side of the street, barely protected by a plastic mat.
And that was just the beginning.
You had to fight for a single spot in front of a stall, elbow to elbow with others.
Normally, you didn't dare ask the seller for help — unless you wanted to end up with the bruised, almost-rotten carrots. If you wanted the good stuff, you had to squat down right next to her and pick through everything yourself.
And bargaining? It wasn't just expected — it was survival.
As long as you managed to cut at least 30% off the original price, you would never, ever give up.

Sometimes, I like to think about it and smile.
How determined my people are.
How stubbornly, beautifully determined.

And my dad sighed after his first line.
"I was too confident walking into the supermarket," he said, shaking his head with a half-smile.
"I thought I could grab everything quickly, just by looking closely enough. But after ten minutes, I started to doubt myself. The place was built like a maze, and every German word on the signs tortured me as I wandered the endless hallways."

He paused for a moment, lost in the memory.
"I had to find eggs — everyone was waiting for me at home. They were making homemade Vietnamese soup, and eggs were irreplaceable. I didn't want to show them that I couldn't even manage to bring back something as simple as eggs."

"So I bit the bullet," he said, *"and scanned the store, searching for someone — anyone — who looked patient and kind enough to help me."*
And then he smiled wider, his eyes crinkling at the corners.
"And there she was..."

Be brave. Don't panic. You'll be fine," he told himself, his own voice trying to calm the fear bubbling inside him as he walked toward her.

"I gathered all of the German I knew," he said with a little laugh, *"and spoke my very first word — 'Entschuldigung' — to catch her attention."*

To his relief, she turned around, facing him with the kindest smile, and answered with the softest sound a German could possibly make:
"Ja?"

"And then... I froze," he said, laughing at himself.
"That was all I knew. Just 'Entschuldigung.'"

"Don't panic," I whispered to myself again.

“So I started moving my hands, shaping a little circle in the air with my fingers, trying to form the shape of an egg. Then, with all the hope in the world, I mimed putting the invisible egg into my mouth — praying that somehow, somehow, she would understand the ridiculous performance I was putting on in the middle of the supermarket.”

She obviously didn’t understand what I just did," he said, shaking his head.
"She said something — gosh, if only I’d understood her, I would never have used that ridiculous trick."

He paused, then let out a long sigh.
"All right. Final move. It wouldn’t be pretty, but it would work. This time, it had to, because I was about to pull off the craziest stunt anyone with a clear mind would avoid in public. But those eggs were coming home with me TODAY."

With that, he took a deep breath.

"So, I did it. Same egg-shape with my fingers, but instead of bringing it to my mouth, I lowered it down — to... well, to my bottom. And then... I made the loudest chicken noise I could, clucking like a madman in the middle of the supermarket."

He laughs as he recalls the next part.
"Without hesitation, I flapped my arms, trying to look like a chicken, repeating it — not just twice, but three times, just to make sure she really understood. I thought to myself, ‘Lady, please. I desperately need those eggs.’”

“And finally, she got what I meant — and didn’t forget to laugh real hard. I wasn’t sure if it was a pity laugh or if she was just amused by the sight of a random Asian stranger doing the silliest chicken dance she’d ever seen in her life. But honestly, at that point, I didn’t care. Not after the embarrassment I’d just put myself through for the sake of those eggs.

With my head held high, I walked out of the supermarket, eggs in hand, mixed feelings swirling in my chest — a strange blend of joy, embarrassment, and pride.”

Right there, I remembered my dad’s conclusion.
That’s apparently how I felt back then too, when I was studying the language — probably the hardest one I could ever think of. Joy. Pride. And doubt.

What began as doubt turned into one of the best decisions of his life when he met my mom. The idea of returning to Vietnam with the family he had found grew stronger with time—especially after he witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall. While the Germans were celebrating their freedom in 1989, my dad was quietly celebrating the beginning of a new chapter. And then, in 1992, I arrived—his firstborn—two years after they made their way back to Vietnam.

My childhood wasn't about running through alleyways with the neighborhood kids. Instead, it began each day with *Daddy Cool* blasting from my dad's prized cassette tapes—the ones he had carefully brought back from Germany. For the first eight years of my life, the soundtrack was *You're My Heart, You're My Soul* by Modern Talking. Then came Disney, which defined my pre-teen years. I found myself diving headfirst into a new language, craving more—not just through animation, but through music, movies, and everything that world had to offer.

By the time I reached high school, my dad's hope that I would one day "join the clan" had become more persistent—almost like an itch that wouldn't go away. I used to joke with Germans that the real reason I started learning their language was because my dad had been whispering it into my ear for years. For as long as I can remember, he'd return from his business trips to Germany twice a year, always bringing back Haribo gummies and Lindt chocolate—spoiling me in the sweetest way. For at least a decade, those treats were a constant. And I would never use any body lotion except Nivea—as if it were my personal symbol of loyalty to Germany, a country I was already falling in love with, even from afar.

So there she went—a girl studying German at one of the top five universities in the country. It was an honor, not just for me, but for my whole family. Everyone was excited, imagining that the language would treat me like chocolate and gummy bears. But instead, it turned out to be more like dark, bitter chocolate—layered with strange and sometimes unbearable flavors. I was drowning in grammar. And seriously, what was the deal with all those articles? Waking up every day just to decide between *der*, *die*, or *das* drained me faster than I could keep up. The battlefield of my university life thinned quickly—what began as a class of 100 students in the first year had dwindled to just 50 survivors by the second.

So many times, it was his story—about the eggs and his courage—that kept me going, holding me back from the edge of giving up. I couldn't give up. Seeing how I was struggling with the language, my dad stepped in once again. This time, he decided to throw me into the real world—far away from those gray, greasy, hopeless days. Suddenly, touring with him and a group of Germans brought back the flavor of my favorite chocolate.

From those memories, I recall the beauty of my hometown blending with the freedom of speech—the power to tell stories—and the inspired looks on the Germans' faces as my dad spoke. The laughter, the jokes, the shared experiences—they became my strength. For the first time, German didn't feel like a monster I had to fight. It became a friend—one I wanted to understand better. Because I wanted to know your country, your people. I wanted to know *you*.

"As you wish," said the German genie. My dad handed me my very first tour assignment. It was just a short trip—from downtown to the beach—to say goodbye. To whom? Forty Germans. **Forty?!** What was I supposed to say to **forty Germans** for **five hours**?

Every inch of my brain was on fire—or worse, screaming for ideas. And of course, my dad, always full of *useful* wisdom, said:
"When you need to eat, you'll do whatever it takes—even with body language."

Thanks, Dad. Very helpful. But not exactly what I needed at that moment.

Then he added,
"Just tell them about your experience with the language. Then go with the flow."

Go with the flow?
At university, I learned that "going with the flow" was the *worst* strategy for a presentation. You needed full notes, structured points, and perfect transitions. Not vague vibes. So naturally, I assumed the worst:
Okay, I'm going to die. In shame. In front of forty Germans.

It doesn't matter how many presentations you've given to your professors, or how many scripted notes you've confidently memorized—when you're a 21-year-old girl standing in front of forty strangers, with eighty eyes fixed on you, all waiting—you don't feel 21 anymore. You feel like a five-year-old on the first day of kindergarten, looking around for something familiar. But there's no Dad, no Mom—and you quickly realize that crying won't help you get out of this. Not this time.

Alrighty—let's do this.

I took a deep breath, put on my brightest smile, and began:
„Guten Tag, mein Name ist Thanh und ich bin heute Ihre Reiseleiterin zum Strand. Die Fahrt wird ungefähr fünf Stunden dauern."

("Good day, my name is Thanh, and I will be your tour guide to the beach today. The trip will take approximately five hours.")

After the short briefing, which went surprisingly smoothly, I decided to add a little extra—just in case things didn't go as planned. I smiled again and said:
"Ich bin nur ein Mädchen, das Deutsch seit einiger Zeit lernt und versucht, damit zu leben. Wenn Sie mich nicht verstehen, sagen Sie mir bitte Bescheid – ich gebe mein Bestes, es Ihnen zu erklären."

("I'm just a girl who has been learning German for some time and is trying to live with it. If you don't understand me, please let me know – I'll do my best to explain it to you.")

Just like that, I bought myself some grace—with honesty, vulnerability, and a bit of humor.

And then… silence. For a second, I thought I messed it all up. But suddenly, the silence broke—with warm smiles, a few nods, and even a light chuckle from someone in the back. One older gentleman gave me a thumbs-up. That was it. The ice cracked. And in that moment, the fear I had been carrying all morning started to melt.

The five-hour journey I had dreaded turned into something entirely different. We shared stories, exchanged laughter, and even sang along to songs they played on the bus—songs I had grown up with, thanks to my dad. Someone even offered me a Haribo, and I couldn't help but smile at the full-circle moment. They weren't judging me for every grammar slip. They were listening. They were *with* me.

That day, I realized something powerful: language is so much more than perfect grammar or flawless pronunciation. It's connection. It's the courage to show up. It's the willingness to be understood, even when you're still figuring it out yourself.

I guess that’s how most language journeys begin—a little doubt, a little shame. But once you start getting better and people show you they're willing to understand you, something shifts. You feel like you’ve become part of something bigger—something beyond yourself. Like a wave that keeps coming back—each time different, stronger, and deeper.

As long as you don’t give up, the wave carries you forward.

But my journey was only just beginning. The first wave came with laughter and joy when I was 21. But if I’m honest, I think everything truly started after I turned 24.

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Written by Thanh Nguyen Nichols