



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

What's a Sister City Really?

by Jakob Lewis

Heinrich Doc Wolf: And um, then he did, [SINGS] "I hear that train is coming, it's rolling down the bend. And I ain't seen no sunshine since I don't know when."

Jakob Lewis: This is a large booming man wearing a leather vest and smoking a pipe. His name is Heinrich Doc Wolf, and he's essentially the Johnny Cash of Germany.

Heinrich Doc Wolf: [SINGS] "But I'm stuck in Folsom Prison, and time keeps dragging along." And so he wrote that here, and his career is quite bound to Germany.

[“RING OF FIRE” BY JOHNNY CASH PERFORMED LIVE AT NASHVILLE DAYS]

Jakob Lewis: I'm at a country music festival called *Nashville Days*. Only, I'm not in Nashville, Tennessee, which is where I'm from. But rather, I'm in a city in Germany called Magdeburg. The theme of Nashville Days this year is Johnny Cash. That means I heard "Ring of Fire" played six times by six different German bands.

[“RING OF FIRE” PLAYING IN THE BACKGROUND]

Jakob Lewis: The festival is in an old Prussian fortress, complete with large brick-vaulted Gothic arches. Outside, Heinrich Doc Wolf shows me his most prized possession: a massive red Cadillac he purchased in an auction from America.

Heinrich Doc Wolf: Sure, you can sit in there.

Jakob Lewis: Alright. Oh man, those big heavy doors.

Heinrich Doc Wolf: This car used to belong to none other than Johnny Cash himself.

Jakob Lewis: Wow, that smell. This is a boat. We call this a boat in America.

Heinrich Doc Wolf: Yeah, it is a boat. We call American cars generally cruisers, yeah – like big ships, you know. Now if you touch that steering wheel, you touch Johnny Cash, [LAUGHS] and your ass is on Johnny Cash's seat. That's rare, but it's not really belonging to me. I'm just the caretaker, that's how I feel.

Jakob Lewis: This exchange in this car is exactly why I'm here. Not specifically to sit in Johnny Cash's seat, but to have a person-to-person cultural exchange with someone from Magdeburg. That's because Magdeburg is one of Nashville's sister cities.

Joel Dark: The concept is to build a local-to-local relationship so that international relations is not reduced to just relationships between governments and their agendas – but can be a relationship really between people.

Jakob Lewis: This is Joel Dark. He's the chair of the Nashville-Magdeburg partnership, at least on the Nashville side. You may have heard of sister cities before, maybe your town has a few. I got to experience what at least one partnership is like and visit Magdeburg as part of an official delegation from Nashville. This whole idea of sister cities – the one that got me sitting in Johnny Cash's car on the other side of the Atlantic – it started over here in Europe in the late 1940s.

Winston Churchill (in 1940): This is your victory, victory of the cause of freedom.

Jakob Lewis: So, Europe right after World War II was in a tricky spot. There were countries who shared a border that were vitriolic enemies one day and then with the flick of a pen the world was suddenly supposed to be at peace again. Countries lay in ruins on both sides. That must have been disorienting. So how were they supposed to move on? Well, one of the ways Europe took up the mammoth task of making peace was by reviving an old tradition known as twinning. One city from one country would pair up – or twin – with another city in another country. In the '50s, Coventry, England twinned with Dresden, Germany. These were cities that lay in rubble because they bombed each other. But as twins, they would exchange students and professionals, send citizen delegations. They intentionally got to know one another and tried their best to be friends. This was a radical act of peace and reconciliation, and the idea caught on well beyond Europe.

[PRESIDENTIAL MARCH MUSIC]

Jakob Lewis: In the mid-'50s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave an address at the White House. This was for a conference on Citizen Diplomacy. He's addressing America's role in the world almost a decade after the end of World War II.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (in 1950): The purpose of this meeting is the most worthwhile purpose there is in the world today: to help build the road to peace. If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together.

Jakob Lewis: Eisenhower's solution was to start an official program to twin towns together. The people-to-people program. It grew and eventually became known as Sister Cities International. You may have seen these partnerships in towns you've lived in before. But what are they really?

Joel Dark: Culture has been – and probably for the most sister cities is – the main point of connection, because that's kind of what's unique about a city.

Jakob Lewis: Culture is where most of these partnerships begin. Sometimes there's just one person in one city that has an affinity or affection for another part of the world, and through friendships suggests a city. These partnerships really are people to people. Volunteers lead committees, plan trips and festivals. And typically, these partnerships fall into four lanes. One: cultural. That's artist

exchange programs, maybe a gallery swap, or a cultural festival. Two: education. This is probably the real bread and butter of sister cities programs. High school and college students spend time in another country, usually staying in host family homes. The third lane is economic: business leaders from similar industries might have a summit to exchange current issues and breakthroughs. Trade partnerships might be fostered and certain types of growth encouraged. And the last typical path for a partnership is political. City officials can go over to learn about how each government functions and get ideas for initiatives to better their cities.

Now, I've lived in Nashville for 10 years. And I can tell you – I had no idea we had a sister city. And in fact, we have seven. Cities in Canada and Ireland, Japan, Argentina. But the Magdeburg partnership is probably their most robust exchange.

Joel Dark: The sister city relationship has existed for 15 years. So in some ways, the timing of your story is really good, because we are kind of at a juncture where we're thinking the last 15 years have been amazing, and what can the next 15 years look like.

Jakob Lewis: Every sister city partnership is different, but I'll tell you the story of how this one developed. Joel says the Magdeburg relationship started because of an interest from a lawyer. A tall, broad-shouldered American fellow with white hair, named Doug Berry.

Doug Berry: Some guys in my fraternity had gone to Germany on an exchange program, told me they had a good time, and I said, "Oh, I want to do that." So that was my impetus, I sort of fell in love with the language and culture.

Jakob Lewis: Doug is the former president of Sister Cities in Nashville. He went on several trips to Germany as a young man.

Doug Berry: Did a tour, and this is sort of how we got to Magdeburg. We did a tour of Germany as a fellow of the John J. McCloy Foundation, where I went for the first time to the former East Germany. Magdeburg, you understand, is in the former East Germany.

Jakob Lewis: Later, in the early 2000s, as Doug became president of Sister Cities in Nashville, he knew he wanted to partner with a German city.

Doug Berry: I thought like a city in former East Germany would be more interesting culturally, every other way, so that's what we did.

Jakob Lewis: Even though the choosing is done through the nonprofit of Sister Cities, to make it official, the Nashville government had to agree. Documents were signed, government officials of Nashville got together with those from Magdeburg. One of those on the Magdeburg side was their vice mayor, a guy named Rüdiger Koch. Doug just calls him Roger.

Rüdiger Koch: And the question, is can we get the people together – not only for the mayors and the politicians, but for the people of both cities.

Jakob Lewis: On the Nashville Sister Cities website, there's a statement: "Sister Cities of Nashville connects the people of Nashville to people of the world, promoting peace through mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation – one person, one community at a time."

Dwight David Eisenhower: That leads directly toward what we all want: a true and lasting peace. Thank you very much.

Doug Berry: Anyway, it's pretty idealistic. I would say the goals of the organization are very idealistic, and I think that's a good thing. I'm over my cynical phase.

[PRESIDENTIAL MUSIC ENDING]

Jakob Lewis: At a time when America's general tone for diplomacy has shifted, what does Sister Cities' idealistic vision of peace look like really? Does it actually make a difference? Is it just a glorified trip club where well-to-do folks can drink wine in another country? Or is it the key to world peace? Well, I went to Magdeburg with my wife to find out. And once over there, we took a train. Germany is full of trains, and just like in New York or Chicago, there are street musicians entertaining passersby [*accordion music*]. Now, these aren't free ride trips – you typically have to pay your way there, which we did. But they try to make sure that your expenses are minimal once you're in the host city, through homestays and just general hospitality. That established network of hospitable friends is one way. Sister Cities is different than just going to another country as a regular tourist.

Joel Dark: There needs to be some substance to it, and I do think this is a problem with some sister city relationships. If a city does it only to have a sister city partnership, or for the mayor and other city officials to have travel opportunities, it can be superficial. I don't think any of Nashville's sister city relationships are superficial at this point, but we have had sister city relationships that at least for a period of time more or less existed on paper.

Jakob Lewis: It's the citizens that are responsible for making these partnerships substantial: the attention given, the creativity of the programs devised, and the fidelity to maintaining ties. That all takes time to develop. My trip over there couldn't have been more perfectly timed. Magdeburg was having a summit of sorts. A few days full of creative programming. They called it their twinning conference. All of Magdeburg's sister cities would be there to discuss various civic issues and exchange ideas.

You said how many sister cities?

Uwe Zachert: Magdeburg has seven sister cities throughout the world.

Jakob Lewis: This is Uwe Zachert. He was basically my fixer while I was over there in Magdeburg.

Uwe Zachert: I am responsible at the mayor's office for all sister cities relationships here in the city of Magdeburg.

Jakob Lewis: What are they?

Uwe Zachert: In Europe, it's Le Havre in France, Radom in Poland, Zaporizhia in Ukraine, and Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Brunswick in Germany. That's kept from the former times when Germany was still divided. And at the end of the '80s, they started to establish sister city partnerships between the two German states, and so Magdeburg became the sister city of Brunswick in December 1987.

Jakob Lewis: The two other sister cities outside of Europe are Nashville, obviously, and Harbin, China. Harbin had a large art exhibition opening during the conference. [CHINESE MUSIC PLAYING] Inside a large concrete Magdeburg TV station, there were Chinese dancers. A photography and painting exhibit lined the tall concrete walls called 'Brücken fremder Flüsse.' That's German for bridges of foreign rivers. During the formal introduction of the exhibit, there was a station with different headsets where you could listen to what people from Germany and China were saying in your own language. I think, the fact that this was even offered highlights one of the best aspects of Sister Cities. All the effort and programming that goes into intentionally getting people from different

backgrounds, cultures, and places talking and listening, sharing art. And there's nothing like Chinese food and German beer to unite a crowd.

Harold (tour guide): And you can call me Harold, if you want. We will start in a minute, throughout the city of Magdeburg, a touristic tour.

Jakob Lewis: I'm on a double-decker bus with delegates from Magdeburg's other sister cities.

[HAROLD TALKING TO CROWD IN BACKGROUND]

Jakob Lewis: It's a mild fall day. Several trains run through the heart of the city. We pass an open-air market in a town square. Cyclists and pedestrians meander along the Elbe River. I noticed that Magdeburg has a different sense of time than Nashville does. You can see the long arc of history here. Ancient cathedrals next to former East German buildings. This tour is important for two reasons. One, in order to understand the people of a place it helps to know their history. And two, one of the real-world things that Magdeburg is gleaned from Nashville is the power of the city brand to attract tourists. Nashville's brand is 'Music City,' a massive and very intentional effort based in our city's history that has worked out quite well. Nashville attracts almost 15 million visitors a year. Magdeburg is thinking about its brand, and one of the city's names is the City of Otto, O-t-t-o. That's because of two very important figures in its history.

Harold: Around the 10th century – from the ninth to the tenth century – we had a very important ruler here called Otto the Great, or Otto the First. He was the first Roman Saxonian Caesar and wanted to make Magdeburg a third Rome. He became Caesar because he defeated the Hungarians. He was crowned Caesar in Rome in 962, and the following years were very prosperous for Magdeburg. It became a very important medieval town.

Jakob Lewis: But Magdeburg's history is one of repeated devastation. It never quite became a third Rome. It was a wealthy medieval city full of merchants at one time. They even built the first Gothic cathedral in the country here. But that cathedral was the center of one of Magdeburg's most important and terrible events. During the Protestant reformation, that Catholic cathedral converted to Protestantism. A century later, the Thirty Years War broke out in Europe. This was a conflict between Catholics and Protestants. And Magdeburg did not fare so well.

Harold: You should not remember, or you need not remember, any other date that I tell you but please remember the date, the 10th of May in 1631. Catholic troops came here to conquer Magdeburg. There was a long siege, about three months. In the end, they managed to invade into the city, set the city on fire, killed about 25,000 people. Only 5,000 people survived in the cathedral, and when they went away, only 250 people were left in the city. So, Magdeburg didn't exist any longer. And it never recovered really from that incident in May 1631.

Jakob Lewis: And it was at this time in history where the second great Otto, O-t-t-o, of Magdeburg's history comes in. A guy named Otto von Guericke. There's a statue of him right outside the hotel where I'm staying. He was an engineer, scientist, inventor, beer brewer. A real renaissance man. Literally. He was the city alderman at the time of this attack. He fled the city and then came back to it in ruins. Amidst a decimated population he was elected mayor. He used his engineering background to rebuild the city, which became repopulated with protestant refugees from Belgium and France. His interest in engineering and science led him to demonstrate a recent scientific understanding he had discovered. This would later become important to the sister cities relationship between Nashville and Magdeburg.

Joel Dark: Well, it's kind of amazing. Otto von Guericke – to demonstrate that the atmosphere wasn't just a void – he removed the air from two metal hemispheres.

Jakob Lewis: Picture two copper halves of a sphere, one of them has a valve on it. Otto uses a pump to suck out all the air. And you have a vacuum. The two halves are stuck together. So, in a dramatic flair to really get his point across, he got a team of draft horses together.

Joel Dark: And demonstrated that horses couldn't pull them apart.

Jakob Lewis: The crowd is amazed, and then Otto simply opens the valve, the air comes rushing back in, and he easily separates the two halves.

Rüdiger Koch: And this experiment – I translocated it to Nashville.

Jakob Lewis: This is Rüdiger Koch again, the former mayor of Magdeburg. He's a short smiley man with grey hair and thick-rimmed glasses.

Rüdiger Koch: We got horses from around Nashville with the Tennessee walk.

Jakob Lewis: If you can't understand what he's saying, he's saying that they got Tennessee Walking horses, this is a certain type of horse trained to step a certain way.

Rüdiger Koch: And we flew the hemispheres – we took the steel hemisphere to Nashville. We took the hemispheres to the city of Nashville.

Jakob Lewis: Did it work?

Rüdiger Koch: It worked, they don't separate – the horses, but they tried.

Joel Dark: The draft horses pulling in both directions couldn't separate these metal hemispheres.

Rüdiger Koch: It was a great performance.

Joel Dark: I mean, it was a festive kind of thing. You know, the Nashville mayor and the Magdeburg mayor remembering the historical Magdeburg mayor, Otto von Guericke.

Jakob Lewis: Another real-world partnership between the towns came about because of the American Civil Rights movement. In order to explain this connection, I think it's helpful to continue our tour of Magdeburg.

Harold (tour guide): Can you hear me ok? Magdeburg finally recovered from their destruction at the time of Otto von Guericke, but it took several hundred years. Really until the early 1900s. Then Magdeburg was a boomtown, making heavy machinery in large plants and processing synthetic oil ... which was really unfortunate for them when World War II came around. Magdeburg was a goal of the allied air bombers because of the heavy machine industry like tanks or other things, and the inner city was destroyed up to 90 percent, up to 90 percent.

Jakob Lewis: After the war, Germany was split between the West and the East, Democratic and Socialist. In the late '80s, the people of East Germany began gathering for massive demonstrations protesting the socialist government, starting in Leipzig and spreading to Magdeburg. It was called 'the Peaceful Revolution,' and it was one of the things that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

Joel Dark: And there really was inspiration that the protesters and demonstrators in – at that time East Germany – drew from the American Civil Rights Movement.

Jakob Lewis: So, Nashville hosted a panel discussion in 2009. It was the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was at the Nashville downtown library, where veterans of the Nashville civil rights movement and veterans of the nonviolent demonstrations in East Germany got together and shared stories.

Joel Dark: To have people of that historical significance on stage and to be translating for them and facilitating a conversation is really ... I would say, that's probably still the high point of the sister cities relationship for me when I think back over it.

Jakob Lewis: Joel told me that hosting people in Nashville has an interesting effect. You start to see your own city through someone else's eyes. What's interesting is that happened to me at Nashville Days, the country music festival with the Johnny Cash of Germany, Heinrich Doc Wolf. When I first got there, I actually didn't have my recorder, so I got out my phone to record my thoughts.

Jakob Lewis [RECORDED]: It's hard to put into words, this place. I'm at the Magdeburg Nashville Days and what I'm noticing are a lot of cowboy hats. There are some confederate flags, which is really strange, but I think – I think innocent, but I'm not totally sure. They have a shooting gallery and that hammer thing where you have to hit the hammer, and it flies up and hits the bell. Um, they've got an American hamburger, and they're selling whisky like Jack Daniels and Bullets and Four Roses and Woodford Reserve. I saw a guy with a straight-up mullet.

Jakob Lewis: I was in a caricature of Nashville. At first, I was a little disappointed, like "Oh, this is what you think of where I'm from?" But then I thought about how two years ago, I went to Oktoberfest in Nashville. Drunk Southerners in Lederhosen yelling 'Prost' while they drink beer out of big gulps. This suddenly seemed quite fair. As for the confederate flags – well, literally the first thing that happened at the festival involves that. You see, the guy in charge of the festival was named Christian. He was my contact. So, when we first got there, we called him and he told us to wait by the ticketing booth, and he would meet us there. A few minutes later, a friendly smiling fellow barrels toward us holding a confederate flag. He says, "Hallo," in the way that most Germans do, introduces himself, and then says, "Excuse me," as he walks past us and hangs up the flag on the ticketing booth. Now, if you're not from the States, the confederate flag is a controversial and divisive symbol. It's a symbol of racism and slavery. For some people, it's exclusively a symbol of American Southern heritage and pride, but many make the darker claim that it means both. So, straightening the top of the flag, Christian turns back toward us and says, "Is this right?" My wife and I had both just gotten off a long train ride and were so shocked and disoriented that I just nod and grunt out an unconfident, "Sure." A little while after Christian showed me around the festival, I emailed Joel, my contact in the U.S., and asked him if I should say anything. He advised me to tell Christian that he should take it down, but that this was a Nashville problem, not a Magdeburg problem. He suggested many ways to make sure Christian didn't feel bad about the misunderstanding. Joel also pointed out that this was indeed a flag that Nashvillians have used in the past, and even the present, as a symbol of their identity. I called Christian and told him what the confederate flag means to many in the U.S. – that it's a symbol of white supremacy and racial oppression. Christian was clearly overwhelmed with all of his responsibilities at the festival and said, "Oh, I never heard of that, I'll take it down." Later, when I got a chance to talk to Christian in person again, he elaborated. One of the vendors at the festival was selling cowboy hats, belt buckles, general country stuff. Christian told the vendor he wanted to buy some southern flags to hang up to decorate the place. The man gave him three: an American flag, a Tennessee state flag, and a confederate flag. Joel pointed out that he's never run across anything like this in 20 years, and that this just shows the importance of the partnership.

Joel Dark: I mean, some of the discussions between people from Magdeburg and people from Nashville naturally have also been about things that are more problematic. And so although the idea of sister cities is idealistic, that doesn't – I think – mean that it's unrealistic.

Jakob Lewis: It was funny how bringing my annoyance at not being able to get a glass of tap water anywhere in the country led to talking about the massive influx of refugees into Germany and the perception of refugees in America. That led to talking about Trump and Merkel, religion, the history of the Third Reich in Germany, and the lingering legacy of slavery in America. These were the real-world things that came up in an honest person-to-person exchange.

Joel Dark: You know, most of sister cities is kind of unproblematically positive. But I think in the context of those connections, there's also the possibility for deeper connection and deeper conversation.

Doug Berry: I know when we had 9/11, shortly after, I remember some of the first calls that I got to check on my well-being were from our friends in Magdeburg. I thought that was a good sign, just a sign that people care about you. There are things that have happened over the years – the Nashville floods, for example. The Magdeburg folks – a jazz band, a rather unruly and funny jazz group over there – raised three or four thousand dollars for the Nashville flood relief. And then we did the same thing, they had a flood, 2012 or 13, and we had a church service and raised money for them as well.

Jakob Lewis: So, do Sister Cities work? I think yes, in small but meaningful ways, person to person. But here's the thing – those interactions, they add up. Nashville has six other sister cities, all full of examples of the power of intentional exchange, and those places most of them have several other sister cities of their own, and a person-to-person exchange suddenly looks bigger in a way that spreads all over the planet. And sometimes even the most basic of stereotypes can be broken down inside Johnny Cash's car.

Heinrich Doc Wolf: Germans think, Americans always have that big hat, the Texan hat, and vice versa, you think everybody has these, uh, Lederhosen [LAUGHS].

["RING OF FIRE" PLAYING]

The Big Pond – A U.S.-German Listening Series is brought to you by the Year of German American Friendship (Deutschlandjahr USA), a comprehensive collaborative initiative funded by the German Federal Office, implemented by the Goethe-Institut, with support from the Federation of German Industries (BDI).

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