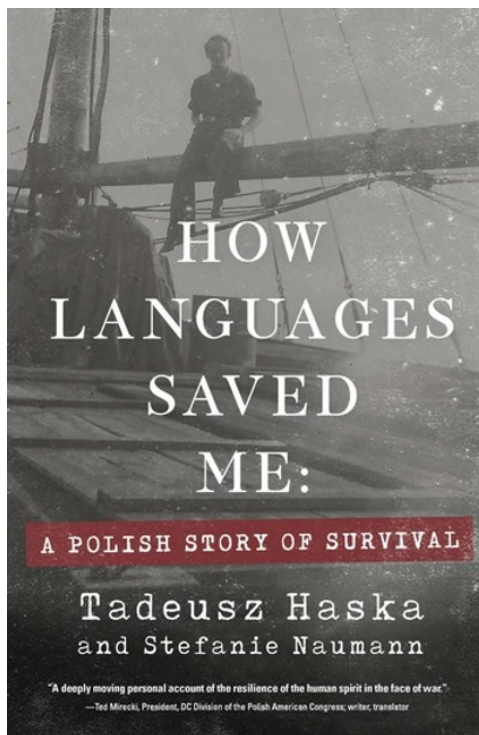


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THE POWER OF MULTILINGUALISM WITHOUT FLUENCY ~ IN REVIEW: "HOW LANGUAGES SAVED ME"

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[How Languages Saved Me](#), by Tadeusz Haska and Stefanie Naumann tells the story of Tadeusz Haska and how he used his knowledge of nine languages to survive the violent and tumultuous arc of the 20th century—the German atrocities of World War II, life under Soviet rule, and the new border bureaucracies that emerged in the post-war era.

The book opens with a rare glimpse of pre-world war Europe, when borders were less defined and people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds lived side by side. These encounters were either by choice, as was the case with Tadeusz's Polish mother, and father who attended a dairy farm school in the Netherlands, or by force when Tadeusz's father was compelled to serve in the German army. Part of what is modern-day Poland, at the time, was a German possession. The other part of Poland was a Russian possession.

In this world of empires, shifting borders, ever-changing allegiances, a person could not help but to be exposed to many languages—Polish, German, Russian, Dutch, French, to name a few. What set Tadeusz apart from everyone else was his ability to make profound and meaningful use of each language he was learning, even when he was only at a novice level.

as a Polish to German interpreter. With only a passing understanding of German that he picked up through the sheer happenstance of being raised near the German border, Tadeusz quickly created a crash course in German by using the **Comprehensible Input Method**. At night, when he had time to study, he would collect all the German language newspapers that he could get his hands on and read them front to back. He searched for patterns in the texts to learn the grammar in context. He noticed the plethora of international and loan words, as well as the names of countries, to be able to piece together the messages in the articles. In this way he was able to infer the meaning of the words he did not know to build his vocabulary. His dedication and consistency in his studies helped to make him a proficient German speaker. This convinced his German captors that he was a capable interpreter. Through this method, Tadeusz acquired the German language and ultimately bought himself more time to survive the war.



Tadeusz Haska

Tadeusz and Naumann's slim volume is filled with harrowing stories like this. Tadeusz's pragmatic approach to language learning may come across as superhuman, however, the methods he used are tried and true and have worked for language learners in many contexts. For example, after the Second World War, Tadeusz fled to Sweden where he hatched a plan to sneak his wife out of Soviet-occupied Poland. His plan was to smuggle her aboard a Swedish merchant ship and sail back to Sweden. However, in order to become a sailor in Sweden, one needed to be fluent in Swedish. So, like he did with the German language, Tadeusz read Swedish newspapers, immersed himself in the language, and studied audio recordings of simple Swedish conversation of which he listened to hundreds of times. Again, the comprehensible input method came through for Tadeusz. He learned Swedish grammar, and vocabulary in context with compelling content.



Tadeusz Haska working as a sailor in Sweden on the ship Kisa so that he could smuggle his wife out of Poland, 1947.

For you beginners out there studying Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, or any language, don't underestimate the power of your multilingualism without fluency. Tadeusz Haska's story demonstrates that with some creativity, and courage, you have the power to do great things with your new language. As we see in Tadeusz's case, multilingualism at any level of proficiency isn't just an asset that you need to get ahead in this world, it's an asset that the world needs from each and every one of us.



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