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Wandergesellen

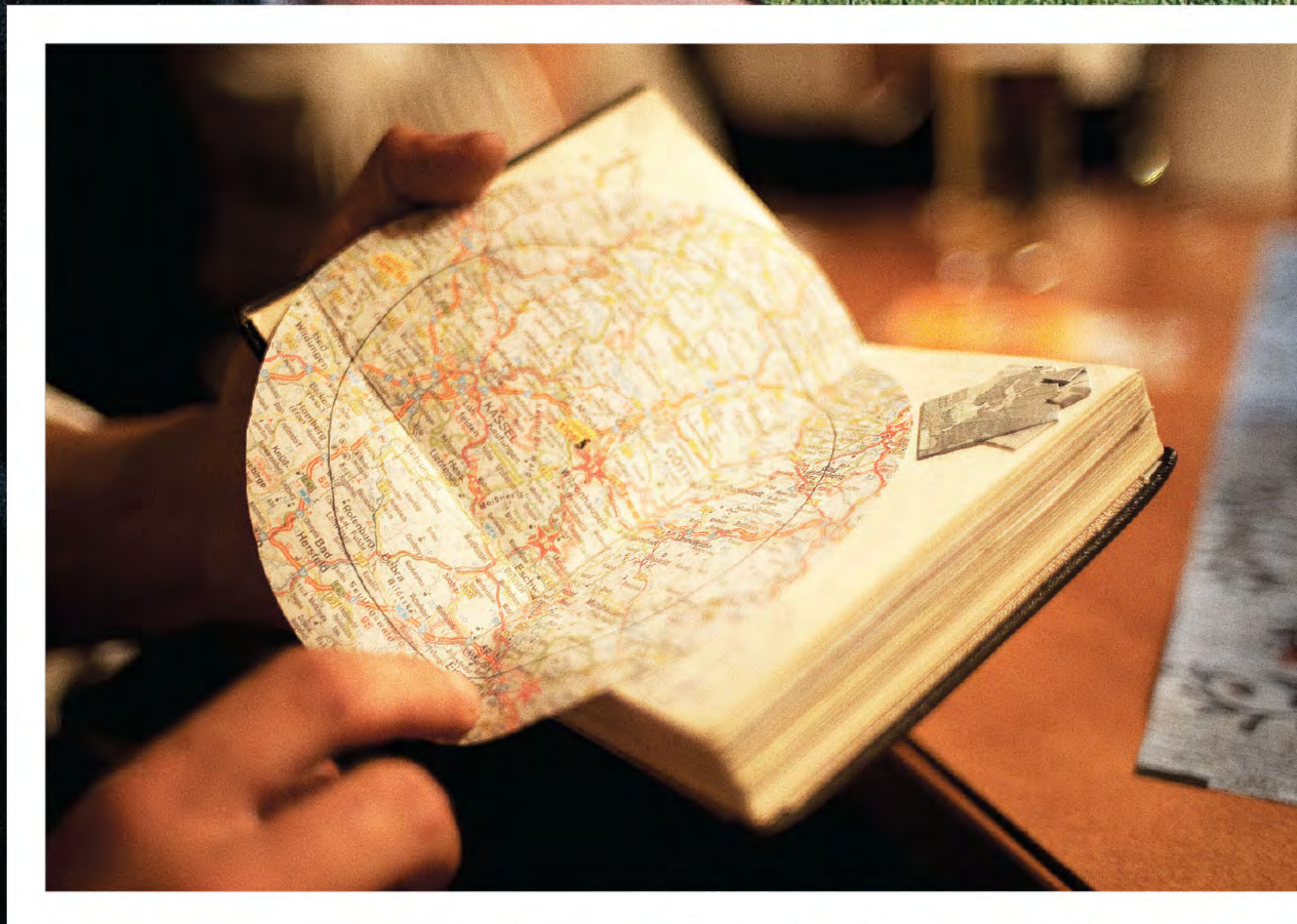


Waltz On

by Liisa Silander



IT'S A WAY OF LIFE THAT POINTS to the distant past—to medieval artisans traveling from village to village to practice and perfect their craft, bringing their skills where they were needed most. But for Eugene Gladun, the world of *wandergesellen*—or German journeymen—is more relevant than ever.





“**S**OURNEYMEN ARE VERY PASSIONATE ABOUT the work they do and the traditions they carry on, but they’re also young people just traveling on their own and having fun discovering what life is about,” says **Eugene (Yevgeny) Gladun** 00 GD.

Though he lived in Germany for eight years after graduation, the Brooklyn-based designer didn’t return to pursue his long-held dream of finding out more about *wandergesellen* until a couple of years ago.

“Even in Germany where people have at least heard of or seen them in person, almost nothing is known about their subculture,” he says. Now that he has traveled with them and photographed their journeys, he says he has “fallen in love with their ideals” and feels they’ve got their finger on the pulse of what really matters.

No one knows precisely how many *wandergesellen* are currently traveling the world, but what Gladun does know is that they’re craftsmen (and a few women) under 30 who have finished an apprenticeship in a profession like carpentry, cabinetry, jewelry making, saddlemaking, stone carving and so on, and who choose to leave the comfort of home to travel, work and learn. The word *geselle* actually refers to the level of education achieved—in this case, a “bachelor” who has finished vocational school and the required years of apprenticeship.

Wandergesellen commit to going on what’s rather poetically called a *waltz*, a gypsy-like rite of passage with very precise parameters and codes of conduct, yet with wide open opportunities to chart one’s own course.



left: A group of friends and comrades celebrate Jonathan's *heimgehereis* (homecoming trip), which usually lasts about a week. Camaraderie is a hugely important part of the *gesellen* lifestyle. Food and drink, cigarettes and other items are often shared among the group. below: Patricia, a skilled saddlemaker and carpenter, is one of the few women in the group.



“Even in Germany where people have at least heard of or seen them in person, almost nothing is known about their subculture.”



previous spread: Celebrating the last few hundred yards before crossing the border to his hometown and officially ending his *waltz*, Jonathan and his fellow travelers walk in the final *Gänsemarsch* and sing traditional songs. § The *wanderbuch* (travel log) is treated with great care since it records all places visited and all jobs completed. A map at the beginning usually depicts the *bannmeile*, a circled area around each traveler's hometown that's prohibited to enter for the duration of his or her travels.

far left: The travelers take an afternoon break near a castle in Eschwegen before moving on. Regardless of the temperature, they wear clothing made of moleskin and heavy corduroy, and the main colors indicate the materials they've mastered—grey for stone, red for leather, black for wood. *Gesellen* speak German but also use words from an otherwise defunct street language known as *Rotwelsch*.

above: “Getting nailed”—with an earring in the left ear—is one of several initiation rituals still in practice. § Tommy and Nico crash right on the street after a night of partying. Journeymen don't spend money on lodging, relying instead on the kindness of strangers to stay in their homes for a night or two. In the summer, they often sleep outdoors in villages, in the woods or wherever they find a comfortable spot.

right: A group of 15 *gesellen* stops for a cigarette break while figuring out where to spend the night. § Everything a journeyman travels with is wrapped in scarves referred to as *Charlies* and decorated with travel motifs. The name originates from the Charlottenburg area of Berlin where these scarves were originally printed.



below: A stonemason at work on a lettering project. *Gesellen* rely on word of mouth and a strong referral network to find out where their services are needed. In the summer they often organize special projects for a good cause, donating their time and skills to build a community center or playground, or renovate a church or museum. § One of the strong traditions still in practice is singing old travel songs accompanied by complex hand-clapping routines.





“*Gesellen* can’t be tied down in any way: no spouse, no children, no house, no car – and they’re required to leave their cell phones home.”



Custom stipulates that each journeyman *waltzes* for a minimum of three years and one day—just one of several unquestioned rituals. In addition, “*gesellen* can’t be tied down in any way: no spouse, no children, no house, no car—and no criminal record.” They commit to wearing the quaint and markedly noticeable style of clothing journeymen have worn for centuries, including the ever-important hat. They agree to hitchhike or walk from town to town as their preferred mode of travel and to sleep wherever they can at no cost. They’re also “required to leave their cell phones” and all other electronic devices home.

Smoking and drinking *are* allowed but “anything you do on the road reflects on the brotherhood,” Gladun points out, so *gesellen* tend to treat themselves and others with respect.

“Their clothing and street language seem so antiquated in today’s world, but they really do adhere to a shared code of ethics,” he says, adding that there’s nothing religious, cult-like or right wing about the “brotherhood.” In fact, though not overtly political, they tend to be egalitarian and open-minded, and historically fought for workers’ rights against the all-powerful guilds.

On the verge of returning to Germany at the end of May to travel with his friend Tommy as he completes his *waltz*, Gladun says, “I’m amazed by everything about *gesellen*. They have this great respect for tradition and a real support system. But they don’t force each other to do anything. You’re free to follow your own path and travel together or alone—or both—anywhere in the world.” ■