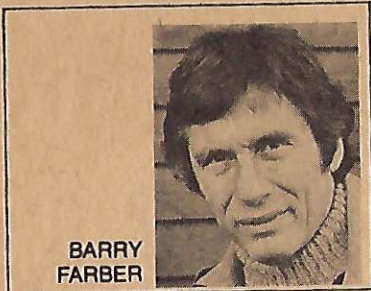


## How to determine if you're a nõk or a ferfiak



BARRY FARBER

**THEY SHOULD QUIT** telling young people to learn foreign languages so they can qualify for better jobs and earn more money. It's true, but I hate to see all those mercenary little twerps muscle in on my beautiful hobby just to make more money. Picasso would not have enjoyed training a younger artist whose real motive was to turn out colored napkins for cocktail parties.

Language study has given me many moments I wouldn't trade

for a million dollars. You can have your bilingual banker's job in Zurich. Give me, as just one example, the time I found the men's room in Hungarian.

Einstein, Edison, Morse, Bell, the Wright Brothers, Salk — their genius enriches us all. My own abilities may never have lit up the world, cured a child, or lifted a heavy machine off the ground. There's no record of any of *them*, however, figuring out which was the men's room and which was the ladies' when they couldn't read the language on the door. That remained for me to do.

**IN LATE 1956** the U.S. Army's Luitpold barracks in

Munich were turned over to the Hungarian refugees who promptly took down all the signs in English and German and put up new ones in Hungarian. Have you ever seen Hungarian? It looks like some squid took LSD and started slapping typewriter keys willy-nilly with all his available arms.

Ultimately I found myself facing two doors side by side. In virtually every other language it's easy to crack the code; I mean, does *Damen* and *Herren* throw you? Or *Senoras* and *Senoras*? Or *Mesdames* and *Messieurs*?

These Hungarian doors said *Nõk* and *Ferfiak*. Try to guess

right now whether you are a *nõk* or a *ferfiak*. That challenge took all my various smatterings of world languages congealed into one warhead.

I instantly figured "k" at the end of each simply made each word plural. By itself, that didn't help much. But after a period of meditation in the corridor I remembered that the Hungarian people did not originate in Europe. They were part of a great transmigration from Asia that also gave us the Estonians and the Finns. Hmmm. Asia!

**IN MY ARSENAL** were a few words of Chinese. The Chinese word for woman or

female is *nõ*, pronounced something like the *ner* sound in "nerve." And that sound would probably be written in Hungarian just like that "Nõ" on the door, after we take away the "k."

Combining the hunch of the scholar and the gambler, I opened the door marked *Ferfiak*.

There were no cheerleaders, no bands, no testimonial speeches by the mayor. There were, however, enough other *ferfiaks* to make me feel like the Sherlock Holmes of Hungarian for the rest of the afternoon and, for that matter, on into the night.