

A Writer Abroad

by Foster Trecost

I've asked Foster Trecost to write a guestblog for me while I work on my book. I knew he'd moved countries and wanted to know if this had affected his writing. I wondered if moving to a completely different culture and then learning a new language had added an extra dimension to his work or if it had derailed it — and was surprised with what he said.

Here's an obvious fact: I live in Germany, but don't speak much German. Okay, I speak very little German. Truth be told, hardly any.

Here's another fact, less obvious: I'm a writer, but don't write many stories. Believe it or not, these things, these seemingly unconnected things, are very related.

When I moved here, I thought everyone spoke English. This might be closer to the truth in bigger cities, in Berlin, where English is common, but where I live, it's not true at all. I live in a village so small it doesn't even have stores. No grocery, no café, not even a post office or bank. Just a bunch of houses. We've got a mayor, but I don't think he gets paid. And he certainly doesn't speak English. Nor does anyone else.

Don't get me wrong, I want to learn the language. I've no desire to be *that guy*, that American who expects everyone in the world to speak English. I've no interest in being him. So what did I do? I enrolled in a language course, four hours a day, five days a week. Great, right? For learning German, yes. But entwine these studies with literary output and both come up short, especially the writing.

I've never been all that prolific, so I won't spend too much time on what it means to be a writer. My simple definition: "A writer is someone who writes." But lately even this standard doesn't apply, at least not with any regularity. These days I feel more like a quilt maker. I jot down patterns and when I have enough, I sew them together, even if they don't match. When I'm done, I've got a blanket, sure, but does it cover anything? Not really.

It wasn't always like this and since I need to place blame on something, I'll blame the local language and my failing attempts to learn it. Several years ago I lived in Italy and learned Italian while writing some decent stories. Or I wrote some decent stories while learning Italian. Either way, when I left Italy (of course I didn't completely leave, no one completely leaves Italy) I took with me a wonderful souvenir that I didn't have to pack (the language), and a stash of stories, most of which I'd go on to publish.

So why's it different now? Well, I'm older and the older you get, the harder it becomes to learn a language, but can I really rely on that? Can I really dump my troubles on my age? Some troubles, yes, but not these. I learned Spanish in my 20's, Italian in my 30's and I'll find a way to learn German in my 40's. The language is difficult, yes, but the real challenge, it seems, is how to learn it without blocking myself in the process. The age-old adages, you know them: read, read, read or write through it, they don't seem to help. As soon as I type a few words, my mind tries to translate them and for a second, I'm impressed if I know the German equivalent, but then I realize I've completely derailed my thought, giving myself little chance to finish the sentence, much less write the next one.

So for now, I'll continue with my studies and continue with my quilts, and hope someone mistakes my incoherence for cutting edge literature. But I doubt it, editors are smarter than that...unfortunately.

