Musings about the poet, writing, life… (1)

A fellow poet recently asked me, "I'm fascinated by multilingual poets like you. If you 'hear' a line in one of your other languages, do you write the poem in that language, or do you translate it into English?"

I suppose my first reaction was a bit like the beetle and the caterpillar. You know that one? It's almost as old as I am:

Caterpillar and beetle live each on their own leaves. Caterpillar on the one above, beetle on the one below. Beetle woke up before caterpillar and was bored. After a while beetle can't bear it any longer and gently pulls on the leave above.
--Hey, caterpillar, wake up.
After what seems a long while, a rather bad-tempered face bends down to beetle,
--Beetle, don't be a pain. What are you waking me up for?
--Caterpillar, I have a question. When you wake up, with which foot do you start walking?
Caterpillar never walked again.

They call it 'analysis paralysis'.

When my friend and fellow poet asked this question, I really had to think hard. But, no. I don't think 'multilingual'. One language is dominant. And my language now is English. I eat, sleep, drink, dream, write and make music in English. Well, not quite. The music is another story. I maintain that the German approach to sight reading, for example, is so much more logical. Crotchets, Quavers, Minims indeed. Never got into that.

But back to English, or any other lead language. I don't know how others function, but I think and write the poem in English. But — there's always a but, isn't there? — there are certain words, untranslatable words. It's not as though there isn't a translation, but it doesn't quite fit the mood, or what this word tries to express. And those sometimes come to me in their language where I 'met' them first. I'll have to find a way to express what this one word is so finetuned to describe or write my way around it.

Then there are moments when a word I want to use comes to me only in one of the languages at my disposal, and I actually have to go to Google (once upon a time I would have opened a dictionary) to find out what this means in English. And then it still might not 'hit the spot'.
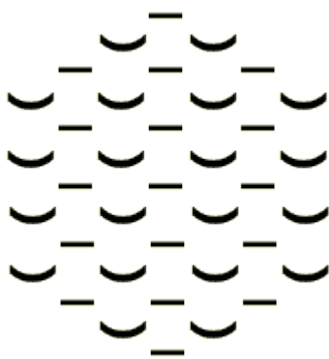
Here comes confession time, and there is no avoiding it. Especially as a writer (or a poet). Because no matter what, if you want to write effectively you must write with honesty and leaving yourself vulnerable. And how can I possibly write about my youth (or childhood) without mentioning 'the War' or Elvis, or black telephones with dialling disks, even the times before TV.

A friend's kid asked— taken aback when she heard that her mum grew up with a radio instead of TV—Mum, what on earth did you do, watch the radio? Yes, well, we did, in a way. Nobody today can possibly (oh, here comes one of those words… in my head it's '*nachvollziehen*'. Let me Google it and see what they suggest in English. They say 'comprehend', that gets close but not quite close enough. *Nachvollziehen* is more subtle, it actually describes the act of putting yourself in the other's shoes and in your mind be there and live it and understand it from their POV, but, ok. Enough finesse.) Back to the sentence I started: Nobody today can possible comprehend how we ran back from school, for example, because our favourite programme was on the radio. How we huddled around it and laughed (or cried) together.

And with that back to age. I was born in 1938, just one year before we were thrown into WWII. 'Wollt Ihr den totalen Krieg?' = 'Do you want total war?' And far too many hoarse voices shouted back 'Yeeesss'. I wasn't there, that is, I was so little I might as well not have been there. But I saw the footage later and shudder to this day. And when I see the news today… But let's not go there. Yet.

So I grew up in a somewhat dysfunctional Germany. Still, because we had no TV, no cell phones, no video games, not even much of a radio at that time, I read books. And because there were no new books—there was this War that stopped everything, even the production of new books (well, there were some war-time editions, poorly produced, full of boring stuff, mostly political)—I read what there was. So I devoured riches without knowing that I'd found treasure.

I fell in love with a poet called Christian Morgenstern who had a terrific sense of humour. At least I often laughed with him, not out loud, just quietly, gently. He's the guy who wrote 'Der Fische Nachtgesang' = 'Fish's Lullaby'. You find it in his collection 'Die Galgenlieder' = 'Gallows Songs'. These are the lyrics:

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This opened a world. A world of everything. If this was possible, then anything was possible, I didn't need anyone to push me into 'thinking out of the box'. This was the prototype of 'out of the box'.

Later I grew with Berthold Brecht, Kurt Tucholsky, Erich Kästner, Eugen Roth, Gottfried Benn, Rainer Maria Rilke (of course), Hermann Hesse and that ilk. My mother had a leather-bound collection of romantic poems by Eduard Möricke, not quite my thing. And my first poems were trying to imitate (also of course) my favourites.

At that time, though, writing was in second or even third place. The fact that it came easy helped me in school, of course. My classmates were quite pissed off with me when I wrote my essays during the lesson, while taking into consideration all the comments our teacher made about everybody's essays read out loud. Our teacher thought he'd 'surprise' us every time by calling us in reverse order, starting with 'Z' for Zellweger. Being 'Boehm' it took a while to get to me and gave me time.

I was studying the piano seriously, and—almost as seriously—began to sketch and paint. My mother wanted me to be a (famous) pianist, my father wanted me to be a painter. For him 'fame' was not the operative word. Occasionally I wrote a poem. Still have some. Handwritten, in German, not for sharing!