

Translating chance into career

It never fails to amaze me how apparently insignificant events can have such a far-reaching impact on people's lives. In my case, three chance occurrences led me to move from England to three other countries and become a professional translator.

It all started at a rock festival. Towards the end of the final night, with the rain drizzling down as usual, a group of us were approached by three somewhat bedraggled fellow festival-goers, one of whom asked us in faltering English how to get to the station. It emerged that they were from Germany and had been travelling around Europe. My German was fairly basic, and the station was a long way away, so I offered to show them at the end of the show. To cut a long story short, we stayed in touch and I opted to study German at university.

By the time I graduated I had become so fascinated by all things German that I wanted to go and live there. Teaching was the obvious job for me and, only one month after obtaining my degree, I found myself living in Essen, teaching English and translation to students of all ages and backgrounds. It so happened that my boss was Italian, and he had long cherished an ambition to open a language school in his own country. When, two years later, he offered me the chance to go to Pisa as his Head of Languages, it seemed that another adventure was beckoning.

So, off I went, armed with a smattering of Italian and a belief that what I'd done once I could do again. I went on to spend three years teaching English and German in Italy, taking on more and more translation work as my Italian improved.

And this is where the third combination of events came into play. One of the friends who had been at the festival with me was now working in Denmark. He came across an advertisement in the paper - the Internet was a thing of science fiction in those days - for a competition organised by the European Commission for translators with at least two EU languages. I had never thought about becoming a full-time translator before, but now, with my German and Italian, I decided to give it a go.

With few expectations I applied and duly sat the competition in Rome. Much to my surprise, I was subsequently invited to Brussels for the oral test. I passed that as well, and two years later became a fully-fledged translator for the Commission in Brussels.

That was twenty years ago, and I've never looked back. Oh, apart from to thank my lucky stars that three Germans asked me for directions!