

Heidelberg:



Where Mark Twain Overcame Writer's Block

by Lucy Gordan

This famed city along the Neckar River cast a spell over Mark Twain and forever held a special place in his heart

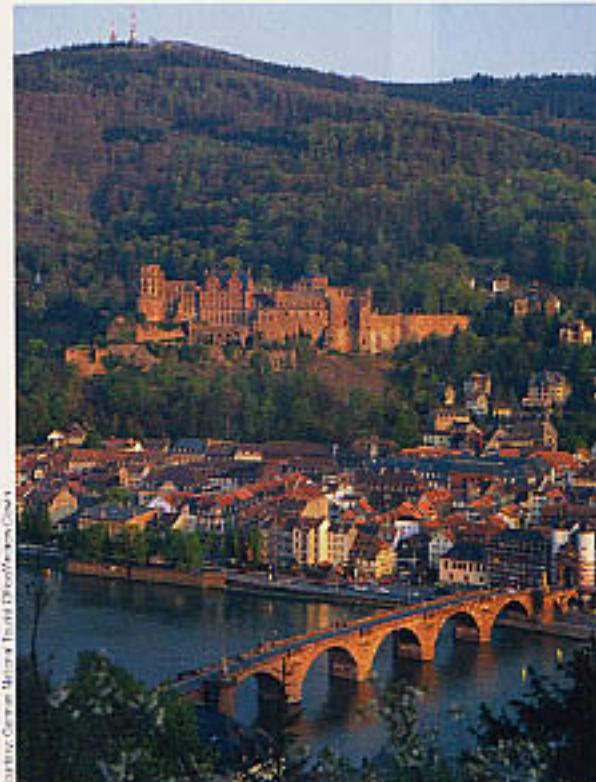
Mark Twain suffered from frequent bouts of writer's block. His method of writing was to start several books at the same time. Customarily, he ran out of inspiration before he could finish any of them. When *Tom Sawyer* (1876) was not the success Twain had counted on, he developed a particularly severe blockage. Nothing helped; not his beloved wife, Olivia Langdon; not her considerable wealth; not even their adorable daughters, Clara and Susy.

In extremis, in March 1878, Twain decided to embark on a second trip to Europe. His goal was to write a second travelogue and to finish his several pending novels, among them *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Prince and the Pauper*. In the opening paragraph of his amusingly self-illustrated *A Tramp Abroad*, he explains:

"One day it occurred to me that it had been many years since the world had been afforded the spectacle of a man adventurous enough to undertake a journey

through Europe on foot. After much thought, I decided that I was a person fitted to furnish to mankind this spectacle. So I determined to do it."

After all, written during a steamship cruise, *Innocents Abroad* (1869), an autobiographical satire of Mediterranean culture, had put Twain's name on the map as America's first travel writer. In fact, a decade later it was still America's most popular travel book. Twain hoped that his intended "tramp" or walk across Germany, Switzerland,



OPPOSITE: Heidelberg's Schloss (castle) is the centerpiece of all the views in the city. Here the castle is even more picturesque in evening light. ABOVE LEFT: Heidelberg along the Neckar River with a view of the old quarter. ABOVE RIGHT: Steingasse and the Bridge Gate.

and northern Italy — places he had never seen — would be its sequel. In a note "To The Reader" he explains his choice of title:

"Perhaps you were about to say that formerly I went Abroad as an Innocent, but that this time, fortified with experience and guile, I went Abroad as a Tramp... When I chose my book's title, I only intended to describe the nature of my journey, which was a walk, through foreign lands, — that is a tramp... I had a couple of light minor purposes, also, to acquire the German language and to perfect myself in Art."

Supposedly looking for a quiet village, where people did not know him, neither of which fit Heidelberg, he arrived with his family on May 6 for the day and stayed three months. His biographer, Justin Kaplan, asserts Twain was aware that Heidelberg derived from "Heidelbeerenberg," meaning "Huckleberry Mountain," which may explain his affinity.

"Nobody really knows," writes Werner Pieper in his updated *Mark*

Twain's Guide to Heidelberg, "what made Mark Twain stay in Heidelberg for such a long time. Maybe he was prompted by old dreams from the times he was passing Heidelberg, Mississippi, while working on the steamships? Did he plan to stay here or did he and his family just fall in love with this city?"

If so, Mark Twain would not be the only one. Today more than two million five hundred thousand visitors crowd its streets every year. Sigmund Romberg set his operetta *The Student Prince* in the city; Carl Maria von Weber wrote his lushly Romantic opera *Der Freischütz* here. Composer Robert Schumann was a student at the university. Queen Victoria, Turner, Longfellow, and Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson were all guests at the luxurious Hotel Prinz Karl, no longer in existence, on the Kornmarkt. Crossing the Neckar, Goethe called the view from the Alte Brücke or Old Bridge the most beautiful he had ever encountered, while Alan

Ginsburg wrote a poem about the view of Old Heidelberg from the Philosophweg or "Philosopher's Walk." Goethe preferred to write in the Castle garden. Indeed, in 1816, he composed some of his finest verses, *West-östliche Divan*, there.

I recently followed "In the Footsteps of Mark Twain" set up by Heidelberg's Convention and Visitors Bureau last year to celebrate the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of his sojourn here. About half of *A Tramp Abroad* concerns Heidelberg and the Neckar River Valley.

Like Twain, I stayed at the Hotel Schriener, today the Crowne Plaza. Chapter II of *A Tramp Abroad* opens with a witty account of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Baden's state visit to Heidelberg with the Empress of Germany. Twain watched the meticulous preparations and train arrival from his hotel window on his first morning here.

Because of the heat, the next day Twain switched to the Schloss Hotel,





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Heidelberg's Marktplatz. "Student Kisses" in the window of the Cafe Knösel, founded in 1863. Heidelberger Studentenküsse or "Student Kisses" are bittersweet chocolate cookies, a local specialty. Supposedly, in the past, when women were more tightly chaperoned, they accepted these chocolate confectioneries as a substitute for the real kisses they would rather have received. A view of the Altstadt.

one of the most beautifully located hotels in Germany then, which he lauds for pages and pages. (Sadly in the 1960s it was turned into a youth hostel and is now up for sale, so visible but not visitable). He then goes on to marvel at the ruins of the huge Gothic and Baroque castle just below the Schloss Hotel and a magnificent fireworks display — now put on three times a summer — which, like me, he watched in a downpour. He enjoyed his visits to the castle and he was especially impressed with "the great Heidelberg Tun...a wine-cask as big as a cottage" which, although empty, "holds eighteen hundred thousand bottles" or two hundred twenty-one thousand, seven hundred twenty-six liters. Today it is possible to book a castle tour guided by English-speaking impersonators of Twain and Olivia at www.cvb-heidelberg.de.

Founded in 1387, Heidelberg is Germany's oldest university. Twain attended lectures here and



describes the freedom of student life, their informal, almost upper-handed, relationship with professors, and the much-coveted stay in the "Student Prison" for Town vs. Gown offenses, such as disturbing the peace, womanizing, unruly drunkenness, and setting the townspeople's ubiquitous pigs free. In use from 1712 to 1914 for sentences up to four weeks, it is now a crowded tourist venue. Twain was particularly fascinated with the students' obsession for dueling and their inevitable scars. Although no longer practiced

by today's thirty-two thousand students, it is possible to visit the dueling grounds at the Gasthaus zur Hirschgasse, today a bijou hotel.

On a typical day he tried to write from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in a rented "work-den" at an isolated, long-gone Wirtschaft or inn at the top of Königsstuhl Mountain, Heidelberg's highest peak, but Twain also took day trips nearby. By train to Mannheim, with Olivia he attended *King Lear* in German and "a shivaree — otherwise an opera — the one called 'Lohegrin.'" With his friend

Twichell, he boated down the River Neckar to several medieval castles: Hirschorn, Dilsherg, Horenberg, and Bad Wimpfen.

These boat trips, still popular today, triggered Twain's fantasy. He imagined them as a mythical raft voyage like that of Huck and Jim on the Mississippi. Back in Heidelberg, his inspiration became Chapter 16 of slymied *Huckleberry Finn*, ending Twain's three-year writer's block. Thank you, Heidelberg, for one of the greatest novels in American literature, published in 1885 after a ten-year struggle!

As for *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain wrote several versions. When he finished the final manuscript in Munich on November 11, 1879, he had deleted one thousand four hundred of his four thousand handwritten pages. It was published in the United States on March 13th, 1880, and shortly afterwards, in Germany.

Today, the Mark Twain Project on the fourth floor of the annex to the Doe Library at the University of California at Berkeley is the custodian of "the original pages or copies of just about every handwritten word that made its way into *A Tramp Abroad*," says Dave Eggers in his introduction to the *Modern Library's* 2003 edition. The pages are kept by chapter in manila envelopes stored in large orange boxes. Twain wrote almost exclusively in black or purple ink, fitting about eighty words on each five-by-eight inch page. "When reading these," continues Eggers, the editor of *McSweeney's* and author of several novels,

"we find out that Clemens was not a frequent reviser of his text. It is clear that most of the pages...are first drafts, and it is terrifying to know that he made only a few corrections here and there, each page or so, and he rarely crosses out any passage. That is, most of the sentences in this book were formed in his head, transferred to paper, and unaltered all the way through to the final text."

So much for writer's block! GL

Lucy Gordan is a regular contributor to Bookbinder, Renaissance, Epicurean Traveller, Food & Beverage International, and La Madia, an Italian food and travel monthly.

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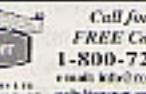


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