

## **A Mile in Their Shoes**

There's an old saying, that you should never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes. Well I've walked that mile, several miles, and my feet are really hurting.

There's an attitude I've encountered in Oshkosh, and not just a few times. A rolling of the eyes, a why-do-I-have-to-put-up-with-these-people, when dealing with – let's just call them what they are – damned foreigners. You know, people who've come to live here, but they don't even speak English. Those people.

But for the last several months here in Germany, that's exactly what I've been: a damned foreigner. I know a couple dozen German words, and a handful of phrases, but that's pretty much it. I walk into a restaurant, or a store, or a medical office, and if they don't speak English, I'm out of luck. Fortunately, more often than not there's someone there who can help this foreigner out, so I've mostly gotten by just fine. But like Blanche Dubois, it's only because I've been able to rely upon the kindness of strangers.

And mostly, they've been kind. There have been a few who have rolled their eyes at this stupid, stupid foreigner who can't even speak the language. Who've only given as little assistance as possible, and that only begrudgingly, or who have outright refused to be helpful. Far more common though has been the apologetic “no English”, as they flagged down a co-worker who could help me out. And perhaps the most common reaction has been an immediate (and very welcome) response in English, a happy readiness to converse with this damned foreigner in his mother tongue.

A few weeks ago my wife commented on how tiring it is to live in a world where you don't understand the common language. Figuring out the name of a product you need to buy, or deciphering the list of ingredients on a grocery store box – these normally easy everyday tasks are now just that much more of a challenge. You can handle them, with a pocket dictionary or Google translator, but they each take just that much more effort. Multiply that effort by a dozen challenges a day, 7 days a week, and yes, it wears on you.

So imagine yourself, moving across the globe to some other place, a place where you are the damned foreigner. Imagine yourself coping with these daily challenges. Imagine the courage it would take, the courage your own ancestors had to muster up, to pick up everything and move to a foreign land. Imagine how bad things would have to be at home before you would reluctantly take that momentous step.

And then take another look at all those damned foreigners you have to put up with. They're probably not someone you'd want to switch places with, someone whose shoes you'd want to have to walk in. And you can probably rejoice in the fact that you don't have to. But maybe, just maybe, they are someone to whom you will want to be kind, be helpful, as they struggle with the daily challenges that you don't have to face. Because after all, whatever you do for them, for these damned foreigners, even the very least of his brothers, you do for him.