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Life of intrigue for Monterey writer Jack Erickson

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MONTEREY >> An American tourist stood inside one of the largest train stations in Italy, Stazione Centrale in Milan, snapping last-minute photos of the cavernous, ornate architecture during the final minutes of a three-hour layover in the city. His wife waited for him just outside on a soon-to-depart train bound for Paris.

"You know those moments when a lightning bolt strikes and an epiphany comes to you?" Jack Erickson asks rhetorically. "It suddenly occurred to me that my wife, my luggage and my passport were on that train. What if something happened and I got whisked away? That's how the idea for 'Thirteen Days' originated."

Erickson is a 70-year-old Monterey resident whose recent novel, "Thirteen Days in Milan," takes readers through the suspenseful nightmare of American tourist "Sylvia de Matteo," a single mom who is randomly taken hostage by terrorists during the chaos that follows a political assassination.

Sylvia is seized at gunpoint, rushed out of Stazione Centrale, blindfolded and thrown into a van — all while the train carrying her 10-year-old daughter and fiance leaves for Paris without her.

The 331-page novel — Erickson's fourth — was recently translated into Italian, and the author expects to have a sequel ready for publication by 2015.

Before then, he'll return to Milan with his wife, Marilyn, for an extended stay and more research.

"When the whole Milan thing came up, I said to myself 'Where else would I want to go to spend long periods of time, meet interesting people, eat great food, take in all the history, culture and art?' " he says. "I mean, given the choice between writing a novel about Siberia, or one set in Milan, guess which one I'm going to choose?"

Erickson writes for two or three hours most mornings at his hilltop home overlooking Laguna Seca. Afterward, he takes a swim and works on his tan. If the whim strikes, he'll head into town for a movie. During the early evenings, he'll return to his novel for a fresh look at whatever he composed earlier in the day.

The Ericksons travel frequently to visit their adult children and grandchildren (his daughter is in Arizona, her son is in England). His writer's curiosity and their mutual lust for tourism has taken them not only around the U.S. and Europe, but also to Australia, New Zealand and Canada since 2010.

"We spent Christmas that year with a German family and had such a great time," he recounts. "On the plane ride back, I turned to my wife and said, 'Do you think you might like to do more of this stuff? When we get home I could retire, sell the house, give the cars away . . . I'll write fiction and we'll just travel.'"

For Erickson, retirement in May 2011 was the final chapter of an eclectic employment history that included incarnations as a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, a speechwriter for three U.S. senators (Robert Byrd, Floyd Haskell and Pete Williams, all Democrats), a freelancer for the Washington Post, and the author of five early books (three travel guides, a cookbook and a history of U.S. micro breweries.)

The expertise he developed on the micro brewing industry led to speaking engagements sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute, Disney World, Sunset Magazine, resorts, publishing conventions and libraries.

In 1993 he relocated from Washington, D.C., to Sonoma to be closer to the hub of the exploding micro brewery industry, publishing a newsletter that led to consulting work for Smith-Barney and Silicon Valley tech firms.

"I had known Marilyn in D.C., where our kids had gone to the same high school a few years apart," he says. "She and her son came to California in 1995 when he decided he might want to enroll at UC Berkeley. I showed them around."

When Marilyn McMorran saw Monterey, it was love at first sight, he says. She sold her house and moved west, found a good job with the Maritime Museum, and maintained her friendship with Jack, who still lived in Sonoma. They spent most weekends together, either in Monterey or Sonoma.

"Our kids were grown, we each had our own lives, and we just kind of discovered that we got along great and like to do the same things," Erickson says. They were married in 2001 and have been living in the hills above Highway 68 since the spring of 2012.

Marilyn nowadays is heavily involved with the American Association of University Women as project director for Tech Trek at Stanford University, a science and math camp designed to develop interest, excitement and self-confidence in girls entering the eighth grade.

They'll leave soon for their third visit to Milan, and are planning a fall visit to Washington, Oregon, and probably Denver, where Jack hopes to have book signings.

"I like to tell people that my wife and I probably should be arrested for having this much fun," Erickson says.

Information about his books can be found at www.jackerickson.com.