

# **IT HAPPENED THERE**

**STORIES OF MY LIFE**

**by**

**TIBOR KRANTZ**

**2002**

**To my wife Jana**

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## FOREWORD

*I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be.*

*Douglas Adams*

The following stories portray the most memorable moments of my life - some pleasant, some less so, and a few stressful or even scary - they were my best and worst life experiences. I wanted to record them before my memory begins to fade. My primary objective was to leave these stories as keepsakes for my grandchildren, just in case they ever want to know more about their grandfather, and where he came from. I encountered something unexpected during writing however. I learned that by retelling the events I experienced them again. They came back just as if they had happened yesterday.

Many of the stories relate incidents which took place during travels or during residence in foreign lands. This isn't surprising. Those are usually the most interesting periods in anybody's life, and I had my share of wandering.

While I was growing up, I - like most children - loved the excitement of travel. However, in my childhood such occasions were few and far between. In the 1930s travel was the privilege only of the rich in Hungary. My parents were working class people who could rarely afford occasional short trips out of our city.

Before the Second World War my family went to Mohács, a city on the Danube nearby, for swimming and picnicking every summer. We travelled on a special Sunday train, the 'Filléres' (Pennies). It was a 'non-stop' low price excursion train which covered the distance of 40 km in about two hours. Leaning out of the window of the coach, facing the caressing wind and watching the countryside passing by was the greatest pleasure that I, a child of 6 or 7, could imagine, at least until the inevitable sad moment, when a cinder from the stack of the steam locomotive would become embedded in my eye and make me cry. There followed my mother's reproaches to my father for letting me stand by the window rather than making me sit on the bench, as a well-behaved boy should do.

However, the incident would soon be forgotten. My excitement rose to another crescendo when we crossed the river in a ferryboat on the way to the beach. I loved to stand at the bow, leaning against the chain pulled across the retracted loading ramp, watching the waves as the boat cut its way toward the far shore.

I think these boat trips seeded the dreams of becoming a sea captain who would cruise the great oceans of the globe. This vision was greatly enhanced by adventure books such as Jules Verne's 'Fifteen-year-old Captain'.

The outbreak of World War II changed my real world and my fantasy world too. The excursions stopped for good. Many other pleasures of childhood like chocolates, candies and Xmas oranges disappeared. Later, as the tragic events came closer and closer to our home, life became extremely strenuous. Food was scarce even with ration cards. I spent school vacations on the farm of Uncle Lorenz in order to reduce the number of mouths to be fed at home. As the war went on, the shortage of heating coal in the winter and the abundance of American bombs in the summer aggravated life even more. Eventually, the war arrived at our doorstep. The front passed through our city quickly and caused only limited damage. However, to our misfortune, the front stabilized at 65 km from us for four months. We became a front line city which endured daily bombing raids from the Germans who still resisted strenuously. Russian soldiers occupied our house and stayed with us for months. The food shortages became worse and worse.

At last the war was over. But now it was followed by Russian occupation. The food scarcity and non-availability of industrial products remained a permanent feature of our lives. The hyper-inflation following the war aggravated the situation even more. My outgrown and outworn clothing was impossible to replace. My mother tried her best by tailoring shirts from our camping tent, by re-tailoring a runaway policeman's cape into a winter coat, and by shoeing me with a pair of my grandfather's shoes miraculously saved from WW I. These measures kept me from freezing but could hardly help my self-esteem.

In these years I had lost interest in becoming a sea captain. However, my dreams of visiting distant and exotic lands remained very much alive.

A couple of years after the end of the war life started to improve. I became eager to test my wings and go beyond the confines of my native city. In the following years and decades I would seize every opportunity to travel.

My first trip was a bicycle odyssey to Lake Balaton. It brought more hardship than pleasure but it was an icebreaker. I learned only later that trips which don't go as planned might turn out to be the best.

My really great chance arose in 1950 when I won a scholarship to study in the Soviet Union. In those years this was the only possibility of going abroad. I jumped at the prospect enthusiastically - grabbing more than I expected. The five years spent there were difficult. The cultural shock was tremendous. I suffered from homesickness, especially in the first year. I had an incessant problem with the food. The monotonous diet of kasha (type of porridge), the only staple available and/or affordable to a student at that time, didn't sit well with me. The political/social system was also hard to take, although, as privileged, foreign student, I enjoyed more political freedom in the USSR than if I had stayed home and studied in Hungary.

I studied in Dnepropetrovsk, in the Ukraine. In the first couple of years, we foreign students were not allowed to leave the city. After Stalin's death in 1953, the travel restrictions were loosened, and we could visit some of the touristy places of the Soviet Union in groups. I wanted to take advantage of the new situation right away. Although, I always disliked organizing others, this time I reluctantly became the organizer of a group excursion to Leningrad - a city I had always wanted to see. When the time came for my diploma work, I selected a subject that took me to the Ural Mountains, the farthest point in the eastern USSR that a Hungarian student could get to in those days.

The only trip in my life that I took very reluctantly was leaving Hungary as a political refugee. But there I had little choice.

Although, my coming to Canada was accidental, ending up in Vancouver was a conscientious choice. This city was the farthest possible destination for political refugees entering Canada from Europe, and gave me the chance to cross the whole country before settling in.

In Canada I quenched my thirst for travel gradually, first by visiting the Provinces, then the States and finally, when our finances allowed it, overseas. The chance of working on overseas assignments came later. I loved that later challenge. The thrills of arriving at a strange place, meeting strange people, eating strange food, and the unexpected and many times unwanted but unforgettable adventures became memories to cherish.

My childhood fantasies about travelling and seeing the World have been fulfilled to a good degree:

- My family and I lived in four major Canadian cities - Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal and Toronto - located in four different provinces. I visited all the other provinces.
- During my professional career I worked in nine different countries: Hungary, the Soviet Union, Canada, Algeria, Zambia, Morocco, Mexico, Chile and Peru (in chronological order).
- I visited 45 states of the USA and 52 countries of the world on five continents.



I thoroughly enjoyed doing it.

The following stories depict the most memorable events of my life as they occurred, or at least as they stayed in my memory. All names, characters and places mentioned are true.

December 2002.

## CHRONOLOGY

1.	Born	Pécs, Hungary	1932
2.	Elementary school		1938 - 1942
3.	Highschool		1942 - 1950
4.	University	Dnepropetrovsk, USSR	1950 - 1955
5.	Coke Plant	Sztálinváros, Hungary	1956 - 1957
6.	Hungarian Revolution		1956
7.	Refugee camp	Osijek, Gerovo, Yugoslavia	1957
8.	Immigrated	Vancouver, Canada	1957
9.	Married Irene		1957
10.	Sherritt Gordon Mines	Vancouver	1958 - 1960
11.		Fort Saskatchewan	1960 - 1962
12.	Peter born	Vancouver	1960
13.	Master's Degree	Vancouver	1962 - 1964
14.	Domtar Ltd.	Montreal	1964 - 1973
15.	Andy born	Montreal	1965
16.	Noranda Mines Ltd.	Montreal	1973 - 1977
17.	QIT Ltd.	Sorel	1978 - 1979
18.	Intersteel Ltd.	Blida, Algeria	1979 - 1980
19.		Toronto	1980
20.	Zambian Copper Mines	Kitwe, Zambia	1981 - 1984
21.	Szinduction Ltd	Toronto	1985 - 1988
22.	Remet Ltd.	Mississauga	1988 - 1989
23.	Hatch Assoc.	Mississauga	1989 - 1992
24.	Divorced Irene		1991
25.	RCG/Hagler, Bailly	Rabat, Morocco	1992
26.	Married Jana		1992
27.	ECS International	Oakville	1993 - 1995
28.	Hatch Assoc.	Santiago, Chile	1995
29.		Mississauga	1995 - 1997
30.	Retired		1997
31.	CESO	Lima, Peru	2000

# 1

## PAJTÁS

The earliest, complete memory of my childhood is about our dog, or rather my father's dog, Pajtás, a German shepherd. I grew up with her. She tolerated my rough handling - pulling her tail, hair, and using her ears to raise myself up when I started to walk - without ever snapping at me. My father thought her unique tricks, like shopping at the grocery and butcher shops located



*Pajtás and I at the age of four*

in our neighbourhood. My mother used to write the order on a piece of paper, place it in a basket with the money, and tell the dog where to go. Pajtás could distinguish the two destinations. The dog grabbed the basket by its handle and walked to the correct store. Pajtás waited patiently at the store's door until somebody let her in. If there were customers inside, they usually let the dog be served first. She was the sensation of the neighbourhood. The grocer or the butcher read the order, placed the item in the basket with the change, if required, and let her out to the street. She returned home without ever touching or losing an order or the change.

I must have been four when Pajtás had a litter. The event turned her into a fierce mother. Even my Mom was not allowed to touch the new born puppies. I was apparently fascinated by the puppies but my father forbade me to approach the suckling baby dogs on my own.

One day, a couple of weeks later, my mother went out on a short errand. I stayed in the yard playing. On her way home, when she was still a couple of houses away, she heard the Pajtás' plaintive wailing. She knew that something terrible must have happened. She started to run. When she entered the gate, she saw the whining dog jumping left and right at the top of the

steps leading to the basement. My mother's first thought was that I had fallen down the staircase and hurt myself. She ran toward the stairs until Pajtás stopped her in her tracks. Mom could already see me. I was a few steps down the stairs, obviously unhurt, and very busy dipping the puppies, one by one, in a pot full of water. The pot was there to collect rain from the eaves. The tiny animals, still completely helpless, with their eyes barely open, didn't put up any resistance. Pajtás, despite her severe distress, would not touch me to protect her litter. Mother ordered me to put the puppies on the dry steps, and come up. When I left the staircase, Pajtás took the nearest puppy in her mouth, and carried it to the nursing box in the firewood shed not far away. Then she ran for the second one. She repeated this procedure until all puppies were secure in the box.

Mom demanded an explanation for what she thought was my reckless and cruel action.

"But there was a very good reason to bath them!" I told her.

The day before, I had overheard our neighbour saying that she gave her baby a bath every day. I knew from the adult conversations I'd heard that this woman always took good care of her child. Consequently, I thought that the puppies should have similar treatment - a good bath.

During the following years I heard my mother retell this puppy-bathing story several times. Hence, one might imagine that my recollection of the incident may not have been that of a four year old. However, I can recall even now the blue colour of the cast iron pot that I used for the puppies' bathtub. This item disappeared from our household soon after. In Mom's story, the type of pot used was never mentioned; she considered it an unimportant detail, if she remembered it at all. But when I thought about the event, the vivid blue colour of the vessel came clearly to my mind, confirming the originality of my recollection.

Pajtás didn't remain with us for long after that day. New legislation had been enacted which taxed heavily German shepherd. My father wasn't able to pay it. Pajtás was seized by the city, and, as my father learned later, consigned to the military.

August 1936

## 2

### THE MYSTERIOUS STONE

"Put on your Sunday suit. We are going to see the Jew." My mother said.

I was only five years old but I already knew from recent conversations between my grandparents and my mother that the Jew was the owner of the concrete factory where Grandpa worked. Mother was going to ask him for a job. My presence was to demonstrate her reason for quitting his establishment some years before. She also hoped her chances of getting hired would improve with a little boy in tow.

As we walked from the gate to the plant office, I saw piles of crushed rock, pebbles and beautiful mountains of sand on one side of the driveway. What a place to build castles! On the other side, there was a shed with its side open to the road. Inside, workers, mostly young women, were standing along a long table mixing mud piles of different colours. Others threw the mud into series of wooden boxes, and smoothed them with toy shovels. The plant's major products were cement tiles, and there were no machines in this part of the plant. I watched the workers with awe. It looked like fun. I envied my mother coming to work here. I could do the same. I did not see Grandpa, but my mother told me that he was working on the polishing machine inside the building.

The Jew was an old man all right - as my Grandpa said - but he did not look at all dirty to me. He recognized my mother (Grandpa probably mentioned our coming), and even smiled at me. I would not follow the conversation, because I was too busy watching a display of beautiful coloured tiles on a stand against the wall. I could build all kinds of things if I had a collection like this.

When we left the office, and reached the street, my mother said with a deep sigh:

"A big stone has rolled off my heart. I got the job, although the pay is as miserable as I feared."

I wondered what kind of stone could be on my mother's heart. I didn't ask, but I worried about it for a long time.

The Jew was known to pay the lowest wages in the city. He had been extremely frugal and stingy throughout his life. A few years later he demonstrated his basic character a last time, when he and his people were forced into the city ghetto. He called Grandpa into his rich home, which stood adjacent to the factory. Grandpa had been working for him for nearly thirty years. The old man wanted to say farewell to Grandpa. He probably felt that he would not return. The old man conferred six ties from his large collection on Grandpa as a farewell gift. Grandpa had never had more than one tie at a time. He wore it only to weddings and funerals. Now, he must have felt rich as the result of his employer's generosity. A few weeks later the old Jew was deported to Auschwitz where he perished. The Nazis appropriated all his remaining ties and his rich home, as well as the factory.

With Mommy working, my life changed for the better, at least for most of the time. Since both my parents were away all day, I could spend as much time as I wanted playing on the street.

Except when it rained. Then I had to stay alone inside - we rented a family house in those days - I felt very lonely.

My father had been laid off his skilled work at the porcelain factory at the beginning of the depression, before I was even born. Since then he was often unemployed, or only had casual jobs. Currently, he was working in the coalmine located near us. We lived next to 'Ulman Telep', a mine colony. He hated this job. He had always been an outdoors type. Working underground in semi darkness depressed him. Also, the work was dangerous. Accidents occurred daily. My father had already suffered two mishaps which luckily resulted in only minor injuries. He used to say that he wanted to quit the job before he died in that hellhole. This was the main reason why my mother went to seek employment.

Mother didn't stay long in the cement-tile factory. When she heard about an opening in the tannery, she switched jobs. The new place of employment was twice as far from us as the old one and at the lower edge of the city. We lived on the mountainside. The work was heavier. She was spray-painting large cow hides that she also had to move around, but the pay was better. She hoped that it was only a temporary job. Little did she know! It was 25 years later when she finally retired from those hides.

A year later, in 1938, I started school. My carefree times were over. My father, still working in the mine, left the house at 5.00 a.m. and my mother at 6.00 a.m., while I was still sleeping. I had to get up at 7.00. I usually woke up five-ten minutes early and watched from the warmth of my bed as the small hand of the alarm clock - placed on the night table - pushed toward the hated number seven. The moment the alarm rang - with a frightening din - I jumped, and turned it off. I picked up my clothing, which had been placed carefully on the table by my mother, and moved into the kitchen. It was warmer there because Mother had set fire in the cooking stove before she left. In the process of dressing, I often forgot to wash my face despite Mother's strong commands. I ate the breakfast she had prepared - a piece of buttered bread and a cup of milk. Then I put on my coat, got my rucksack, turned off the light, locked the door, and hid the key under the doormat. Finally, I was on my way.

The school I attended was in the inner city, quite far from us. I had to walk three quarters of an hour to get there. The district school, located much nearer our home, had a very bad reputation (all those miners' kids!). My mother wanted better schooling for me. She registered me as living with my uncle who resided in the inner city.



*Me at the age of four*

Fortunately, the way to the school from our home was downhill. That was very important because when we had snow, I could run and slide, run and slide all the way to the school's doorstep. In those days I arrived at school before anybody else.

After school I walked with my cousin Pali, who was in the same class, to his home - the one in which I was registered. My Aunt Mancie gave us lunch, and at 4.00 p.m. my mother picked me up on her way home from work. We walked home, uphill all the way. But I did not mind, I was with her.

September 1937.

### 3

#### THE FIRST COMMUNION

The big day of the first communion that our religious teacher, Father Dénes, had been talking about since the beginning of the school year, was fast approaching. In the strongly Catholic country that Hungary was before WW II, the first communion was a big event in a young boy's life. We were spiritually drilled for the occasion for months. We studied the catechism by committing to memory page after page the questions and answers related to the Roman Catholic dogma i.e. Holy Trinity and Immaculate Conception. These concepts were beyond the logical grasp of any seven year old boy, or even rational adults, as I learned later.

The ceremonies had also been planned well ahead. We had to have white uniforms that were expensive and suitable only for this occasion. Our fathers - in the case of boys - who were to



*Mother, my brother and I in my First Communion Uniform*

lead us top the altar, had to attend lectures and go to confession. The ceremony was to be followed by a big feast at the school.

However, I, or my mother rather, ran into a serious problem. My father, a conscientious atheist, refused any participation in the event. Mother desperately tried to persuade him to make at least a nominal show. But no way. He said that there was enough hypocrisy in the World without further contributions from him.

Mother went to see my teacher - a very reasonable man. He listened in disbelief to her story. He had never come across a similar problem in his long teaching carrier. He asked my Mother:



"Does Tibor have any living grandfathers?"

"Yes, they are both alive." She answered.

"Then," he responded "one of them should substitute for Tibor's father. It is as simple as that."

Mother went to see her father. Grandpa was reluctant to come along. He used the excuse that he had already had his yearly communion at Easter, just a few weeks earlier. His religious duty had been fulfilled for the year. Upon hearing this, Grandma exploded:

"You old devil! You wouldn't take the sacrament a second time for the sake of your grandson? You have already sinned so much that ten confessions wouldn't clear your soul. I don't want to hear one more excuse from you. You will do it!"

And he did.

Built in the 18th century, the school church had metre-thick walls and small windows, which blocked the weak rays of the spring sunshine. In May it was still a chilly place. We had no overcoats on, only our light, white uniforms with short pants. I was freezing. The religious ceremony was long and tiring, aggravated by a tedious sermon by Father Dénes. We stood in pairs in a column along the aisle. Our fathers, relatives, guests and teachers sat in the pews. When we had to kneel - quite often - we had to go down with our bare knees on the stone floor. It felt icy. The smell of burning incense, which I had always disliked, made my empty stomach queasy.

But finally the preliminaries were over and we strode with the adult companions to the altar barrier and knelt in front of it. At last, the host was placed on my tongue. I swallowed it without chewing it as we had been instructed. The wafer, to my surprise, had no taste at all.

After the ceremony we marched back to the school in formation behind the adults. The guests and relatives were waiting for us. The principle officially congratulated us. Then came the best part: we were served hot chocolate and fresh buns to quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger. We had not been allowed to eat or drink anything since dinner the night before.

I obviously did not know it then, but this was the last hot chocolates for me for a very long time. Soon after this event, all overseas imports into the Axis Countries were stopped by the Allied blockade. Chocolate reappeared only six years later, and at that time I wasn't a chocolate-hungry, small boy anymore.

May 1940.

## 4

### ENTERING HIGH SCHOOL

I was to enter high school in 1942. There were only three gymnasiums - as we called high schools - in our city of 75,000. My mother wanted me to apply to the public gymnasium, rather than one of the two catholic ones, because of its low cost. For the same reason, the public school always had more applicants than places available. To my mother's delight, I was accepted on the basis of my report card, and of the reputation of the elementary school I had attended. Now, only formalities remained to complete my registration.

We lived in a semi-Fascist regime where anti-Jewish laws had been in effect. Its Numerous Clausus Statute was to minimize 'the Jewish influence' among the intelligentsia by restricting the number of Jews entering high school to 6% of the total, their ratio in the population. In order not to exceed this figure, all the other students had to document their Aryan purity by providing the school authorities with birth/baptism certificates of both parents and of the four grandparents. They all had to have been Christians.

Only my father and his father were born in my native city. The others involved were born in various neighbouring villages. My mother spent the summer visiting these places and collecting the required documents. When she went to Hidasd, the birth place of my paternal grandmother, the local pastor could not find her name in the church registry. She was born in 1878, a long time earlier, when reporting of the birth of a girl was not necessarily a compelling responsibility.

My whole family became very upset about the affair. Attending high school was an expensive proposition. There were expenses for registration and tuition fees, and a uniform, gym gear, drawing supplies, text books etc., to purchase. My grand-parents on both sides and one of my aunts had agreed to contribute to the costs. I was the first of the family to attend high school, and the family was proud of the occasion. Now, the effort seemed destined to fail.

My mother went to see the high school principal. He expressed his regret, but stated firmly that my registration could not be arranged without the missing document. However, after some thought, he came up with a possible way out.

"How about trying to find the records of my grandmother's parents, that is, those of the boy's great-grand parents. If they were Christians, their daughter would not be otherwise."

My mother returned to Hidasd. She was not very optimistic. Those ancestors were born in the 1850's, just after the loss of the War of Independence, when things were very chaotic in Hungary.

The pastor was very helpful. Since the years

of their births were not known, he had to go through many pages of the church registry to find the critical entries.

He succeeded.

The school administration accepted the documents, and I was duly registered.

My grandmother died in 1950, at the age of 72. Her younger sister, Kathy, who lived in Berlin, came for the funeral. She had married there before WW I, and had returned to visit Hungary only a couple of times many years earlier.

After the final rites the coffin was closed. The lid traditionally carried a notation of the age of the deceased. When Sister Kathy saw it, she burst out:

“That is nonsense, I am the younger sister, and I am now 74. She lived to 76.”

Everyone was flabbergasted. The family reckoned that grandmother was four years older than my grandfather, which was very unusual when they had married at the beginning of the century. But older by eight years! This was astounding!

No wonder that she had falsified her date of birth and stuck to it to the end of her life. Her pride was stronger than her love for her grandson. Even when she learned that I would not be admitted to high school because her birth could not be confirmed, she didn't reveal her true date of birth. She was already 68 at that time. Vanity never dies.

September 1942.

## 5

### SLAPPING SIMON

"You are a miserable weakling Krancz! Go back into the line!"

My eyes were full of tears. I had failed to do the trapeze roll after trying three times. The bar of the apparatus was set too high for me. I couldn't pull myself up so that my chin was above it, and I didn't have sufficient skill to roll myself over the bar.

Mr. Simon, the gym teacher, looked at me with obvious dislike. This colossus - he weighed perhaps 120kg - loathed small clumsy boys. He had made this abundantly clear by the time it was my turn to demonstrate my gymnastic skills.

Our class of 50 boys was lined up in three rows by height. I stood near the end. Not the smallest - maybe #40 - but definitely at the wrong end of the column. Also, I had entered the high school with the handicap of never having been exposed to gym equipment. My elementary school didn't have a gym. Most of my present classmates had been luckier, and they consequently did better than me in the introductory phys-ed class.

I didn't know it at that time that the mental slot Mr. Simon jammed me into at that moment was to remain my destiny in his mind forever. Even if I became an Olympic champion - in swimming say - I would have remained 'that weakling' in his mind.

Up till this time - I was 10 years old - nobody had ever called me a weakling. I liked playing all kinds of rough outdoor games. I could run fast, climb trees, fight other boys etc., and I could swim better than most guys of my age. I didn't seem to me that I was shorter than average either - that wasn't true. Due to enrolment regulations, I happened to be one of the youngest in the class. The others were 1/2 -1 year older than me, which at that fast growing period meant a 2-4 cm height advantage which was enough to push me to the end of the column.

However, I had to face the fact that I could not do the trapeze. As I learned later, I was also unable to do many other exercises on the various pieces of gym equipment.

I realise today that part of my problem was psychological, derived from my hatred of the despicable Mr. Simon. This gym teacher was so huge that he couldn't even walk normally - he waddled like a duck. He also differed from the rest of my teachers in other respects.

In addition to his love of abusing those students he disliked, he showed strong favouritism toward some boys.

One of my classmates was the son of the District Supervisor of the State Educational Department, a person whose position was several levels above that of a high school teacher. The boy was a mediocre student in every respect - physically also - but Simon promoted him to class-captain despite his evident shortcomings. The boy, a shy individual, did not want or enjoy this honour. No other teacher would have done this to him or to the class.

Also, all the boys of 'important parents', i.e., army officers, policemen etc. received preferential treatment - they were not shouted at or slapped on the face.

This latter mode of disciplining was his favourite. Physical punishment in the classroom was permitted in those days, though few teachers practised it in our high school, and even those who did use it, used it only very occasionally. On the other hand, no gym class ended without at least half a dozen well placed slaps. One got it for moving too fast or not moving fast enough,

or not listening carefully enough, or just being clumsy (my usual fault). No wonder the teacher's nickname was 'Slapping Simon', or just 'The Slapper'.

The huge body of Mr. Simon had powerful muscles in addition to the excess fat. When we had to move one of the gymnastic mats - heavy, stuffed pads covered with leather - foam rubber didn't exist at that time - four of us had to grab it by the straps attached to the corners. Then Simon would single-handedly hang it on the hooks on the wall.

This sadist also demonstrated his strength every time he slapped one of us on the back of our head and made us fall flat on the ground.

I had classmates who dreaded Latin class - the most demanding subject. Others were afraid of math, which was beyond their comprehension. They always seemed to be relieved when those classes were over. For me it was phys-education - the only class that I hated to attend.

After the Russians occupied our city, the school had to operate in a temporary location, which had no gym. Phys-ed classes remained scheduled as before but we weren't allowed to leave the classroom. Even the yard was off-limits because of the Russian anti-aircraft battery nested there.

Slapping Simon decided to teach us the basics of football (soccer) in these hours. He started by copying all the dimensions of the football field, and the goals from a field manual on the board. The dimensions were given in millimetres. They are probably round numbers in the Imperial System but not in the Metric. They appeared to me, and to the rest of the class, as senseless five digit numbers. None of us bothered to even note them down.

In the next class The Slapper decided to test us.

"What is the width of the goal?" He asked the boy sitting in the first row.

He didn't know it. Simon gave him a slap. The slap was powerful enough to leave a red imprint of his fat fingers on the boy's face. It lasted for hours. Then he continued along the row repeating the same question. Since nobody knew the answer, he delivered the same punishment to each boy. He kept up the routine until he slapped all of us. At that time there were about 40 of us in the class. If there was anything to be admired about this man, it was his stamina. He could beat up the whole class. This time even the favourites - those from the 'better families' - didn't escape his wrath. Our faces must have looked funny - carmine-red on one side and winter-pale on the other.

I had to endure this man for three years. At that point, the educational system underwent a drastic change. Instead of four grades of elementary school followed by eight years of high school, the structure was reversed so that it conformed to the Western European patterns. The reorganization meant that many teachers - mostly the second-raters - were transferred from high schools to elementary schools. To my great relief we 'lost' Slapping Simon through the process.

Two years later the famous circus strongman of the day, Kristoff, had come to our town to display his skills on the stage of in the largest movie theatre of the city.

I attended the matinee show. The house was full, mostly with teenagers, apparently high school students. There were only a few adults in the audience. To my surprise, Slapper Simon was among these. He was sitting in the back but his huge mass was easily detected.

After all the exercises - tossing up and catching huge iron balls, bending steel bars and splitting thick wooden boards with his hand - Kristoff asked for two volunteers.

"The two heaviest ones in the audience." He specified.

Nobody stood up. Then one could hear a weak voice from the back:

"Mr. Simon."

A dozen others picked up the call, his recent and past students apparently:

"Simon! Simon!"

In a few moments the whole theatre resonated with hundreds of cries:

“Simon! Simon! We want Simon!”

Probably, the majority of the shouters had no idea who the man was, but the prospect looked like fun, and now they all wanted him.

The Slapper meanwhile remained sitting in his seat. His face was crimson. He seemed to be terribly embarrassed and obviously didn't want to go on the stage.

However, Kristoff, welcoming the turn of events, which seemed to add more spice to his performance, demanded that Mr. Simon present himself in front of the audience. The Slapper had no choice but to comply with his invitation. As he climbed the steps to the stage, I, with hundreds of others, was in euphoria, shouting and tramping my feet on the floor.

Another 'volunteer', a man taller than Simon but not as fat, was also called out. Kristoff made them stand side-by-side with one arm resting on the shoulder of the other. Simon had to stand on tiptoe beside the taller volunteer, and this made him very uncomfortable. Then Kristoff tied the two arms together, pushed his shoulder under their armpits, and lifted the two huge bodies off the ground. The two together must have weighed well over 200kg.

Kristoff started to spin with them. The taller one was hanging in front of him, while Simon - looking like a giant, shapeless sack of potato - was on his back. Simon's face turned crimson again from the painful strain that he must have experienced as his bulky body hung from his shoulder. Watching his agony, my delight had no limits. Finally, after the years of torture I had suffered from him, I saw him tormented.

This was one of the most pleasurable moments of my high school years.

October 1942.

## 6

### I, THE SECRET AGENT

It was the fall of 1943, the second year of Hungary's participation in WW II as Germany's ally. I was eleven, and attended the second grade of the eight-year gymnasium (high school).

One evening a visitor dropped into our home. He was a university student from Budapest and acted as liaison in the antifascist underground. The visitor brought a package of antiwar leaflets for my father to distribute among his co-workers at the porcelain factory. We were sitting in the kitchen of our one room flat. My mother took the package wrapped in brown paper and placed it in the tray of the kitchen balance resting on the top of the cupboard.

After briefly discussing the war situation on the Russian front with my parents, the student appeared to be eager to leave. He wanted to catch the overnight train back to the capital. He asked my father if there was a back exit from our yard. He didn't want to pass in front of the district police station - just two houses down from us - a second time.

My father accompanied him to the small gate in the rear of the garden, and explained to him how to reach a side road by the pathway through the fields. When my father returned, we went to bed.

At 6.00 a.m. there was a loud knock on the door. My mother put on her housecoat and went to see who it was. It was a policeman, Sgt. Kovács from the District Station. He stood on the threshold in an intimidating pose, as if ready to break in. He announced that he had been ordered to check who was staying with us. Not waiting for my mother's answer, he walked through the kitchen into the bedroom where my father, my younger brother and I were still in bed. There was no one else in the flat.

Somewhat flustered, the sergeant explained that the Central Police Station had called, and told him to find and arrest a visitor in our place, and to retain the rest of the family until a detective arrived with a search warrant.

"No one is to leave the flat until he comes!" He ordered.

He could not or would not give any more details. He took a sit in the kitchen. We all got dressed and had breakfast while the Sergeant kept an eye on us from the corner.

At 7.00 a.m. the detective arrived and immediately proceeded to search the place. He ordered my father to accompany him to the bedroom while my mother, my brother, the policeman and I stayed in the kitchen. The door had been left open and I could see what was going on. The detective searched the armoire, the night tables, under the mattresses, under the beds. He collected all the books and papers that he could find and piled them up on the canopy. Then he began to go through them methodically.

A quarter of an hour later my mother approached the detective and asked if he would allow me to leave for school. The detective asked which school I attended. I named the State Gymnasium. He looked at me inquisitively for a few seconds. I was a short boy and apparently didn't look like a criminal - common or political.

He nodded his consent.

My mother prepared a lunch for me at the table in front of the cupboard. I gave her my school bag to place the lunch in. She took a quick glance at Sgt. Kovács sitting in his chair, facing away and watching the goings-on in the bedroom.

My mother quickly reached for the top of the cupboard, grabbed the brown-paper package and buried it into my school bag. I took it, closed the flap, put on my winter coat, kissed my mother 'Goodbye', and left.

On the street I kept on glancing back, expecting the policeman or the detective to call me back, but nobody did.

I entered the school somewhat relaxed, though I had new worries now.

During class breaks all students were supposed to leave the classroom with the teacher. However, there were troublemakers who occasionally snuck back and went through other's school bags looking for tasty morsels. They shamelessly consumed all they found and were rarely denounced.

I worried that if something like that happened today, the rifler would find the strange package in my bag, unwrap it and discover the contents. The possibility frightened me. In order to avert it, I made sure I was the last one to leave the class during breaks, and then remained right beside the door during the break. Fortunately, no problem developed.

When the school day was over, I returned home. I found my mother in tears. She embraced me tighter than usual and said:

"At least you are back safely. They took your father away! Do you still have those damned leaflets?"

I opened my bag and handed the package over to her.

"I am going to burn them right now before they come back a second time!" She said.

"Did the detective find anything bad?" I asked my mother.

"He took only the two volumes of Sholokhov's 'Quiet Flows the Don'. It must be blacklisted though your father bought it in a regular bookstore."

I knew those volumes but hadn't read them. I'd tried but found them too difficult.

In the evening my father returned unexpectedly. My mother rushed to embrace him.

He told us that he had been interrogated twice during his stay of several hours, but not beaten. Apparently a detective had trailed the student from Budapest all the way to our home. The agent, after watching the house until the lights went out, assumed that the suspect had stayed at our place for the night, and reported such to the Central Police Station.

My father denied any such contact or knowledge of the presumed visitor. He must have sounded convincing because following the second interrogation he was released and no charges were pressed. Owning the banned books was not an offence grave enough for an arrest. (The book by the Soviet author was published legally in 1940 by a large publishing house in Budapest. It was put on the blacklist after Hungary entered the war against Russia).

Just before my father left the station, the political investigator expressed his own doubts about the accusation. The official could not believe that someone from the capital would recklessly deliver clandestine material in the vicinity of a suburban police station that had a guard stationed in the front of the door day and night, and where everyone in the street was known to the local police force.

November 1943.



PS.

♦ Some months later there was another search of our home by the police, and my father was detained but released again the same day. Kálmán, my father's cousin, and Gyula, my father's best friend, who belonged to the same leftist underground group, were not that fortunate. They were arrested and sent to the front to serve in the penal 'Labour Battalion'. Neither of them returned.

♦ Sgt. Kovács, who had not been a member of the Fascist Party, was cleared politically after the war. He later became the Captain of the same District Station.

♦ The detective and the police investigator had departed to Austria with the retreating German Army. Neither of them returned to Hungary. They probably emigrated either to the States or Canada.

## 7

### THE FRONT

The Third Ukrainian Front under the command of Marshall Tolbuchin had reached the Hungarian stretch of the Danube, just 35 km from my home city, Pécs, by the end of October, 1944. The Soviet Army stopped there for a few weeks to rebuild their supply lines before attempting to ford the river.

In the meantime, life in our city went on as if had nothing happened. Schools closed in September and October because of the heavy bombing raids by the Allies, especially over Budapest, reopened at the beginning of November. The continuous column of refugees, which had passed in front of our house for weeks, now decreased to scattered individual carriages. These were Hungarian and German minorities fleeing the Soviet Army from the Southern provinces which had been returned to Hungary in 1941. There were German and Hungarian troops in the city but not in large numbers. The Hungarian Arrow Cross (Fascist) Party seized power in the country on October 15 through a military putsch endorsed by the Germans. This group initiated a campaign of terror in the capital, but not in Pécs.

On Sunday, November 26, a rumour started to spread in the city that during the night the Russians crossed the Danube at Apatin, 50 km from our city, and had established a bridgehead. However, the official radio newscast didn't mention any military activity in this part of the country. The only fact supporting the rumours was the appearance of a squadron of German fighter-bombers. They started to make hourly sorties from the city's aerodrome toward the Danube.

At last, the evening broadcast commented on the military situation on the Southern Front:

"Invading Soviet Forces have tried to break through the Danube and establish a bridgehead. They were thrown back after suffering heavy losses. Their bridgehead was annihilated." The announcement said.

Such official claims were not believed anymore. Everyone became worried.

On Monday morning one could hear the reverberation of heavy gunfire in the Southeast. Our neighbour, a disabled ex-soldier, recognised the sound of the Stalin organs (rocket launchers), and estimated that the firing came from a distance of not more than 20-25 km.

Father, like most of the inhabitants of our Gyárváros (Factory Town) district - in the southeast part of the city, nearest the now obviously approaching front - remained home from work. I didn't go to school either. Father began to prepare our home for the upcoming siege. Under his direction my Mother and I shovelled the coal stored in our basement into a corner, covered it with old blankets, and cleaned the place out. We carried down two mattresses, the bed clothes, and all our clothing packed in suitcases. The basement had concrete walls and a concrete ceiling, so Father considered it a safe shelter unless we suffered a direct hit. Next, Father and I visited a storage depot in a neighbouring street. This building was surrounded by a half-collapsed brick wall. We dismantled a few dozen bricks and carried them home. Father bricked in the small basement window facing the street. This access had been used to load coal into the basement. As an additional measure, he piled a wheelbarrow of soil up against this temporary wall. Then we removed all the internal halves of the double windows and stuck them behind the armoires. We stocked up on water. We weren't connected to the city water main, and the public fountain was a block away from our house.

I wondered how my father knew about all these measures since he had never been a soldier and had never seen any combat.

Suddenly, the street sirens began to wail - an air raid was coming. I grabbed my brother's hand and rushed out to the street, as we had been trained. We wanted to reach the public air raid shelter located in an empty lot only 50 m from our house. By this time all the anti-aircraft guns in the city - there were dozens of batteries around the plants of our factory district - had jumped into action and were firing madly at a single plane circling above our heads. The white puffs of exploding shells with the plane advancing through them looked like a blossoming apple tree against the backdrop of grey November sky with a lonely bee buzzing around. Abruptly, the plane seemed to lose altitudes and started to drop straight toward us. I froze as I watched the aircraft becoming larger and larger. At the last moment, just before hitting the ground - and us - it miraculously levelled off and flew over the railroad trench cut through the ridge our house was built upon. The plane was at eye level and only 50-60 m away from us. I could see the pilot and the red star on the fuselage. Obviously it wasn't a fighter/bomber with the evil intention of mowing us down but just a reconnaissance plane taking pictures of the German defences.

The moment the plane disappeared from the sky and flew away at a height of a few dozen metres above the railway tracks, the guns stopped firing. Their crews probably reported the enemy plane destroyed.

That afternoon the highway in front of us became busy. Columns of German trucks began to move away from the front, not toward it. My father was elated, but not for very long. It soon became evident that it was not a general retreat. There were clear indications that the Germans were preparing to hold the city. Mobile army units rushed civilians out from their homes to dig gun emplacements and trenches everywhere - in open areas and on the mountainside. In the meantime, the same five Luftwaffe fighters-bombers were busy flying back and forth to the front in short - half hour - cycles.

We learned later that in that morning the Germans put up a hastily organized defence line at Szederkény, about 20 km from the city. (See sketch on Page 27). The trenches, hurriedly dug in the hillside, were manned by Hungarian troops. These infantry men were supposed to stop the advancing tank column without any artillery support or heavy armament. Tragically, they were massacred. Their clothing and hand arms scattered could be found on the hillside months later.

A few kilometres behind this line the Germans put up a smaller more effective defence. A unit of SS troops dug in a single heavy armour-piercing gun beside the highway. The crew moved its carrying vehicle a kilometre away and ditched it on the side of the road. They must have been fully aware that they wouldn't need the truck again. They camouflaged the gun and waited patiently for the approaching tank column that had massacred all the Hungarian troops on the hills of Szederkény.

This autumn was very wet. It had been raining for weeks, and the fields were flooded or muddy, forcing the heavy armour to proceed on the gravelled highway. The suicidal German artillery crew had nerves of steel. They waited for the first tank to approach and almost pass them at 50 m before they hit it from the side. The blast blew off the tank's tower. They also hit and knocked out the tank immediately behind the first. The third tank had enough time to swerve off the road and to face the gun, but it was destroyed before it could over-run the emplacement. A forth tank was blown out farther away in the field. These were tanks, all of which were completely demolished by that single gun. Their carcasses pushed to the side of the road or lay in the field, and remained there for years. One couldn't tell if there had been other tanks hit that were later towed away and repaired.

When the tanks swerved off the road, they left two-feet deep tracks in the mud which remained visible for years. One could see from the tracks how the attackers had fanned out in the field and tried to encircle the deadly gun. There was one fatal set of tracks, which finally went right over the gun and flattened it. Was the SS crew dead by that time, killed by shells, or were they trampled to death? I could not tell.

I, a boy of 12 years, scrutinised this tank cemetery the following spring. I was deeply impressed with the determination and skill of that SS crew. It was also evident that the tank's armour provided poor protection. I didn't know at that time that six years later I'd be trained as a tank officer in the Soviet military. The memory of this first, although indirect, field experience of a tank attack haunted me during this training.

This bloody encounter between the SS gun and the Russian tank column stopped the advance of the enemy troops for hours; until the road ahead could be reconnoitred for other lurking guns. Through these tragic resistance efforts the Germans gained a whole day for installing a strong defensive line at the edge of the city, just a few kilometres away from our house.

In the evening, the retreat of the German troops intensified on the highway in front of our house. Hundreds of trucks - but no guns or tanks - moved in a continuous column. They must have been coming from farther south, from Croatia perhaps where several German divisions were in danger of being cut off by the Soviet offensive.

The headlights of these vehicles were glaring and their horns blared. I hadn't seen so much light or heard that much noise on the highway for many years. There had been a strictly enforced blackout in effect since the beginning of the war but these drivers apparently didn't care about night bombers.

By Tuesday morning the Russians had closed in on the city. Their artillery had started to shell the main thoroughfares. The power went off. The streets became completely empty. Only the most compliant individuals opted to go to work. Among those few were my grandfather and my Uncle Jani, who lived in the same house a few blocks from us. Grandpa walked to the concrete factory while my uncle cycled to the tannery. They found both places deserted and locked up. As grandfather was hurriedly returning home, he passed the Central Police Station. A crowd of looters had broken into the building evacuated by the police. Someone threw a bunch of new capes through an upper window. Grandpa grabbed one and brought it home with him. That cloak was later tailored into a winter coat for me, and I wore it for several years. Grandpa's futile trip to work paid off - at least for me.

In contrast, Uncle Jani's bicycle ride was a hairy one without providing any bonus points - as he told us about it later. He had to follow the East-West highway which came under artillery bombardment on his way back. There were shells exploding behind him and ahead of him while he pedalled like a maniac. My father, upon hearing this story, could not hide his delight. He always considered my uncle an idiot.

"What else could he be - a player of competitive football, and a member of the Arrow Cross (Fascist) Party!" My father used to say about him contemptuously.

Now, my uncle's reckless outing provided irrefutable additional proof of my father's affirmed opinion.

Our city stretched along the slopes of the Mecsek Mountain. We lived at its eastern edge, on a ridge of a bank facing west, toward the city (See sketch on Page 33). The Southern highway, and a railway line beside it, ran just below our house. We also had an overview of the East-West (Budapest) highway about half a kilometre away. Beside us the Eastern Railroad cut through the ridge in a deep trench. For an enthusiastic observer like me, our windows provided an unsurpassable opportunity to watch the military manoeuvres in and out of the city.

The Russian shelling became quite intensive. They tried to hit anything moving on the roads. The scarce traffic consisted solely of military supply vehicles. The artillery tracer shells arching from the South left dust and smoke columns rising at the points of impact. The accuracy of the hits was quite remarkable. There was little return fire from our side. The German artillery, reinforced with a mobile armoured train, was concentrated close to the front line.

My parents did not let me to indulge in the pleasure of watching the shelling display for very long. I was ordered to descend into the safety of the basement. Only my father went up occasionally to see what was going on.

At around noon the shelling let up. There was a dreary silence. Father went upstairs for a look. He came back to tell us that there was an abandoned army truck on the highway near to us, and people were looting it. He decided to check it out and told me to accompany him. I jumped at the occasion, and despite my mother's desperate protest, we were soon on our way.

The Hungarian military truck was apparently carrying food to a field kitchen. It didn't look like it had been hit. Perhaps, it only broke down and the driver had abandoned it. By the time we got there, the meat and better items had already been carried away. Father grabbed a big sack of flour, and I got hold of a wooden box of jam. Its net weight was 10 kg, almost too heavy for me to carry. When we checked the contents at home, we were disappointed. The flour was 'ersatz', very dark flour mixed with all kinds of ballast, from bran to saw dust, and could be used only for making dark, military bread. The jam was a factory-made solid confiture of poor reputation. This product was said to contain generous portions of cheap additives like pumpkin and potato with only a limited amount of fruit. But it tasted sweet. I didn't know it at that time but this would be the only sweet stuff we would have in our house for the next half year. My father was revolted by the fact that our frontline soldiers were fed with such inferior quality food.

Soon after Father and I came back, there was loud banging on the gate. Two German soldiers wanted to take a look at the interior of the house. Following the inspection they announced that a detachment of soldiers was coming to rest in our place, and that my father ought to start a fire in the stove immediately.

Half an hour later about ten German infantrymen entered the house. Their uniforms were smeared with mud and soaked with rain. They looked completely exhausted. One was wounded. He lay down on the sofa. Another, who also looked sick, spent most of his time in the outhouse. Soon, a military doctor appeared. He examined the wounded soldier. It turned out to be a flesh wound on his bum. After bandaging it the doctor ordered the soldier to remain with his unit.

In the meantime, another soldier, a machine gunner, was busily taking apart and cleaning his gun on the terrace. I watched him with great interest. He replaced the breechblock with a new one and, to my great pleasure, left the old one behind. In the coming years I disassembled and reassembled this piece, a precision-made complex part, dozens of times.

Years later when I was trained to use an equivalent Soviet weapon, I was astonished to see the crudely made but simple Russian breechblock. It fit in place very loosely, and because of its loose fit, hardly needed any cleaning, even under muddy conditions. In this case - and in many others - the superiority of German technology proved to be a disadvantage in the battlefield.

My father was fluent in German and stayed with the soldiers, trying to learn about the situation at the front. At first, they were reluctant to talk in front of him but after a while they revealed that as they were entering the city from the East, they had run into the Russians who had already reached the mountains there, and cut off the Budapest highway. Their unit had to fight its way through.

"Now, after a rest, we will move to reinforce the Southern defence line." The soldier said.

When my father asked how far the Russians were, they all looked at their commanding officer who after some hesitation revealed: "In Üszög." This was the railway freight terminal just outside the city limits, 2 km from us.

Suddenly, the Russian cannonade restarted. As the shells whistled overhead toward the highway, Father was surprised to see how jumpy these seasoned frontline fighters were. He hurriedly left them and joined us in the basement.

A short while later one of the soldiers, an Austrian, came down and told us that the unit had left but he had sneaked back. Would my father give him civilian clothing and hide him? He asked. Father nervously refused his request while pointing at us - boys - sitting on the mattress:

"I cannot risk the lives of my children."

The Austrian left dejected.

During one of the lulls in the shelling my father and I went up to glance through the window. We saw two heavy anti-tank guns installed in the highway ditch about 100m from us. The crew was unloading cases and cases of ammunition from the draw-vehicle while a communication crew were busy installing a phone line to the guns. Obviously, they were preparing a defence strong point right beside us. My father cursed them. I had rarely heard him do that.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang of a gun discharge from quite close. Then another and another. Father pushed me in front of him as we ran for the basement. We didn't make it. As I grabbed the handle of the door to the patio, there was the sharp whistle of an incoming shell followed by a tremendous explosion. One of the glass panes of the door flew into my face, while the house trembled. Through the hole in the door I could see shell fragments, broken tiles and all kinds of debris raining down. Our dog, Betyár whose house was built into the wall of the elevated, concrete patio, and so almost bombproof, jumped out of this safe shelter and literally danced in the rain of solids while whining with terror.

My father grabbed me and pushed me down to the floor. He also had the presence of mind to shout at the dog to make him return to his house. Betyár - surprisingly - obeyed the order. As we lay on the floor, there were several other whining whistles followed by detonations, each more violent than the last. By now all the glass panes in the door had flown in and been crushed to fragments around and over us. I felt sure that the next shell would explode right above us. It came whistling - even shriller than before - but it exploded with a muffled bang across the street, at the foot of the bank. Then the salvo stopped for good.

For a while we continued lying on the floor. Finally we got up and exited into the patio and from there into the summer kitchen on the way to the basement. From the patio I could see the half destroyed roof of our neighbour's house, and a gaping crater in the garden with an upturned tree beside it where the nearest shell exploded. (See sketch on Page 28).

We found Mother and my brother sitting on the mattress in the basement. They were white like chalk and crying.

"I thought you had died up there. What's left of the house?" Mother asked.

Her relief was immense on seeing us unhurt and learning that our house didn't even get a hit. We remained in the basement for the rest of the day.

The following day we learned that a self-propelled German gun had come and stopped two houses down from us. It began to fire from there toward the front. After each shot it retreated into the covered entry of the house to make detection by aerial survey more difficult. But it didn't take long for the Russians to pin the gun down and send their own salvo, which missed the target only by 10m. When the German gun drove hurriedly away, the Russian artillery barrage stopped.

The two anti-tank guns nested on the side of the highway were also pulled out, but not until the Germans had broken into the corner grocery store and looted it, filling their truck with the stolen goods. In exchange, they left all their unspent ammunition behind on the side of the road.

The artillery bombardment of the city raged all evening but I went to sleep peacefully. When I woke up, there was no sound of any more fire. Father wasn't with us. Mother said that there were Russians outside and he went to greet them. He had been waiting for this moment for many years. As an openly anti-Nazi Communist sympathiser who had risked his freedom and perhaps his life by distributing antiwar propaganda, Father believed that liberation had arrived.

He returned very soon with a dejected look. It was still dark when he had gone out and embraced the first Russian soldier he encountered. The man was not impressed. My father was lucky that the soldier didn't take him for a lurking Nazi and shoot him; his leather overcoat could easily be mistaken for a German officer's trench coat in the darkness.

As was customary, Father had his pocket watch in his coat's top pocket with its chain attached quite visibly to a buttonhole. One of the passing Russian soldiers pointed his submachine gun at my father while focussing his eyes on the watch chain and shouted at him:

"Davai chacie!" (Give me the watch!)

Father had no choice but to hand it over. He was morally crushed. Then Father noticed that other soldiers passing by were glancing very appreciably at his leather jacket. Father decided to come home and remove it. He hung the leather jacket in the otherwise completely empty cabinet (all our clothing was packed in suitcases in the basement) and put on an old, badly worn raincoat. Ready to go out again he allowed me to accompany him.

When we stepped out of our gate I looked around and was thrilled. The large, normally empty lot between our street and the highway was now full of war materials: rifles, ammunition, hand-grenades, panzer-fausts, gasmasks in their neat metallic containers, steel helmets, a broken horse wagon full of who knows what, a new Opel automobile with its doors ajar, etc. Apparently, the Germans had used this site as a staging or regrouping area during the night. The order to evacuate the city and retreat behind the mountains apparently came late at night.

Then I saw the Russians, for the first time in my life. Most of them were riding in the open backs of trucks and on the top of tanks. Only a few foot patrols trailed the vehicles on the sidewalks. The troops didn't look impressive. Their grey quilted jackets and pants, and the padded caps with hang-dog ear flaps conferred an unkept or even dirty appearance on them, compared to the smartness of the Germans in their uniforms. On the other hand, the Russian equipment was more impressive. The Germans' standard personal weapon was still the hand rifle, and only an occasional soldier was armed with an automatic. The Russians were all carrying submachine guns with strange looking round magazines. The Russian trucks were also bigger and more impressive. (They were mostly GM trucks supplied by the Americans - my father explained to me). What I found really stunning: their huge tanks with protruding big guns, and also the truck-drawn mine throwers and tractor-drawn, large calibre artillery pieces. They just kept on rolling, hundreds and hundreds of them. The day before I had seen only three small Hungarian tanks passing toward the front with the foolhardy intension of stopping this armoured armada.

After watching the unending flow of vehicles and men for a while, I could no longer resist the temptation of visiting the treasure trove of abandoned military stock in front of our house, and searching for exiting or useful items. My pick included four gas masks, a steel helmet, four personal triangular rain covers which could be buttoned up into a pyramidal tent, empty ammunition boxes, and finally some cans of fish to please my mother. Gopher-like, I carried all this treasure to my lair - an unused pigsty in the rear of our garden. My parents didn't see my endeavour. Later, I joined half a dozen boys to work on the Opel car abandoned in the lot. We busily dismantled anything that could be removed with a screwdriver and a pair of pliers. I ended up with most of the panel gauges, e.g., the speedometer, the oil pressure gauge, etc. Some adults were also busy, mostly under the hood. They removed the battery, the starter, oil pump and gas pump, followed with the seats for their imitation leather upholstery. In no time, the new car was a skeleton stripped of everything. A few days later I removed all four doors and installed them as a roof on my rabbit hatch.

In the meantime, a Russian patrol was checking the houses for hiding 'Nemci' (Germans). After they casually inspected our rooms, the attic and the basement for any hiding enemy, they started a more thorough search for 'tiny fascists' in the cupboards and dressers. They seemed to be quite disappointed to find the drawers and shelves empty. Then they opened the cabinet with the only item of any value - my father's leather jacket - hanging in it. One grabbed it and carried it away despite my mother's protest.

Mother, after hearing about the fate of my father's watch, had removed all her modest jewellery (wedding ring, earrings, and necklace) and hidden them in the firewood crate in the kitchen, quelling any temptation of liberation by these Soviet 'German hunters'.

In a few hours people started to circulate in the streets. Father and I went to see my grandparents to see if they were all right. At the intersection of the two highways lay a dead civilian, a young man in his twenties. He was on his back with frozen blood trailing from his nose to his lips, and his open eyes fixed on the dark sky. He was the first dead person I had seen outside a coffin.

We found my grandparents in good shape but a high-ranking Russian officer (probably a colonel) was quartered in Uncle Jani's flat. The non-stop traffic of subordinates rendered the house a busy place.

My father used this chance to complain to the big shot about his watch being stolen. The Russian sent us over to the house next door where his political officer dwelled. In the kitchen - which had been turned into some kind of an office - I saw an officer sitting behind a table and two very young and frightened looking soldiers kneeling in the corner. When the interpreter translated my father's complaint, the officer pointed at the two in the corner and said that they had torn earrings out of women's ears.

"The Soviet Army does not tolerate criminal elements in its ranks!" The officer said. "All criminals will be arrested and punished. These two (pointing at the kneeling men) will be shot."

Hearing that, the soldiers began to wail. The officer, ignoring them, pulled an army cap full of pocket and wrist watches off a shelf and asked my father if his watch was among them.

Father went through the contents of the cap but didn't see his watch, and instead of just picking out one at random, he told the truth to the Russian. We left without a watch. Later we heard from my grandparents that the two soldiers after having been scared to death by their superior officer, were returned to their units - probably unpunished.

On returning home we found two Russian soldiers lying on the concrete floor of our winter kitchen which was normally used as our living room. They had their submachine guns placed between them and their shoulder bags full of magazines of ammunition, under their heads. Mother said that when they entered, they explained through hand signals that they had been fighting during the night and now they needed a rest. My mother offered them the sofa in the same room to sleep on but they pointed to their muddy clothing and said the floor will do. Their padded uniforms apparently provided enough insulation even on the cold floor. These soldiers, and a few others later, behaved in a very civilized manner, but the majority, especially the support troops, were rude to civilians.

In the evening we got a new group of lodgers from another front-line unit. This became the standard routine for the coming months. Being next to the highway rendered our home a habitual stopover for the moving troops. The soldiers would order us to remain in the basement while they took over the upper floor of the house.

One of them, a scary looking individual with closely cropped hair and Mongol-looking face, pulled out a big slab of bacon from his back-sack and shoved it into my Mother's hands, indicating that she should cook it. The stove in the summer kitchen had to be lit and fired for a couple of hours to cook the huge chunk. When it was done, Mother went to see the scary looking one. He didn't seem to understand what my mother wanted from him. He came reluctantly down into the kitchen and then started to laugh. He pointed his finger at my brother and me and said that the beacon had been cooked not for him but for us. My mother began to cry.

Next morning there were notices from the City Commandant posted on the street corners. They ordered the population - under the pain of death - to deposit all radio receivers in a central storage depot within 24 hours. Since most households had at least one radio, the order resulted in a mass movement of people toward the city centre carrying all kinds of apparatus, ranging from ancient sets to the latest German models. I accompanied my father carrying our old radio.

As we approached downtown, there were increasing signs of the recent fighting everywhere. These had apparently been rearguard actions - without barricades or strong points - and caused only limited damage to the buildings. The German Command's decision to pull out of the city without resistance was the luckiest event of the war for us.



The Russian dead had already been removed from the streets but the Germans hadn't. Bloody corpses, some with their bellies torn open by exploding shells, were lying on the sidewalks and on the pavement. Some were partially squashed by passing tanks. At one major intersection there was the shell of a self-propelled, armoured vehicle with a four-barrel gun mounted on its platform. It was facing east - the direction the enemy had come from. It must have received a direct hit, which blew it apart and killed its whole crew. Some of the dead were hanging on the protruding pieces of the armour like rag-dolls on a clothes line. The macabre spectacle turned my stomach and came back to haunt my sleep for a long time.

On Sunday, our whole family went to see the remnants of the frontline at the edge of the city where the German and Hungarian defenders held up the Russian attack all day Tuesday. By this time the dead had been buried but the hardware, i.e., the guns and mortars in their emplacements, hand arms, ammunition, clothing and the soldiers' personal equipment remained in the trenches and scattered behind them. The battle obviously had ended with a desperate retreat of the survivors when darkness fell, leaving even their arms behind.

We also went to see the Üszög Railway Station. The locomotive repair shop had been taken over by the Russians for repairing and rebuilding their damaged equipment. There were about a dozen heavy tanks pulled up outside waiting for repairs. Inside one of them, which was partially burned out, one could see a scorched helmet with half of the human head still inside it. The rest of the body had been removed. There was also a tank that looked undamaged except for its gun barrel which had coiled up like spaghetti on being pierced by a shell.

A couple of days later my father came down with dysentery. He thought that he had caught it from the German soldier who spent most of his rest-period in our outhouse. Father became very sick. He had to be hospitalized. However, the retreating Germans had taken all the ambulances from the city. Finally, my mother arranged the trip on a flatbed horse wagon, which collected the dead horses from the streets.

The hospital itself was in a dire shape. Half of it had been taken over by the Russians for their wounded, while the local patents, regardless of their problems, were crowded into two large wards, each accommodating perhaps 60 beds. The man lying on one side of my father had had a heart attack. The one on the other side had blood poisoning. There were no medicines, practically no treatment of any kind, no diet food. Since only the most severe cases were admitted, the death rate among the patients was very high. The man with the blood poisoning died during the first night. Father was shaken by all the dead and dying around him. He called the ward a living morgue. However, he was fortunately among the few who fully recovered.

In the meantime my mother struggled alone with the daily influx of Russian soldiers, with the lack of sufficient food, salt, yeast, electricity, matches, etc.

After the Soviet Army occupied the city, they pushed the Germans to the shores of Lake Balaton but a counteroffensive threw them back. The front finally stabilized on the other side of the mountains, about 65km from us, and remained stationary there for months. Pécs became the Russians' major rear supply hub for the front.

In these days our whole block was taken over by a mobile truck repair group. A Diesel generator was set up in our yard and four mechanics were quartered in our house. They were middle-aged men with families back home whom they had not seen for several years and whom they missed terribly. These worker soldiers were busy repairing trucks during the day, but they drank and partied with their comrades from neighbouring units most nights. They kept an unlimited supply of wine - stored in 25 litre gas tanks - in our living room. They were usually friendly, especially with my brother and me. However, there was an exception, a young guy who happened to be a 'Hero of the Soviet Union'. Because of this, the others displayed a certain reverence toward him despite his arrogant and quarrelsome personality which became much worse after drinking.

One night, when this 'Hero' became drunk, he decided to go after my mother. By this time we had already moved up from the basement and were sleeping in the bedroom next to their 'party room'. His comrades, also drunk, tried to hold him back at the door but he was a strong man,

and a struggle ensued. One soldier rushed to the next house where the captain, their commanding officer, was quartered. He came over right away and ordered the troublemaker to surrender. Instead, the 'Hero' broke free and rushed out of the house into the dark night. The captain pulled his revolver and shot after him, probably aiming high in the air.

Next morning the hooligan surrendered. He was sentenced to ten days in jail for disobeying an order rather than for the crime that he had not yet committed. He had to work during the day - his skills were indispensable in the shop - but was locked up during the night in the neighbour's basement. His access to wine was apparently not interrupted because he became drunk and sang for hours every evening to the great annoyance of the neighbours who had to sleep on the floor above his 'jail cell'.

This unit remained with us for about two months.

By the middle of December the City Police Department, most of whose staff retreated with the Germans, was reorganized with fresh, untrained recruits. Their first and most urgent task was to collect the ammunition lying loose everywhere in the city. When a horse drawn carriage accompanied with a young man in a torn police uniform arrived in our neighbourhood, I was outside. I volunteered to show them the various ammunition stocks whose locations I knew by heart. The police recruit was busy picking up and placing the items in the wagon while the driver remained seated on the bench napping.

In addition to the small arms and artillery shells, and armour-piercing bazookas, there were many hand-grenades lying around. One type had a leather strip trigger. Pulling the strip activated the timer for the delayed explosion. While this ammunition had been lying on the ground, there was a lot of rain followed by frost. One grenade had its leather strip solidly frozen to the ground. When the policeman tried to lift it, he had to jerk it free. That tug activated the starter. As the policeman was holding the grenade in his hand - me standing beside him - I saw on his face that he realised that something was wrong. Suddenly, coming to his senses, he threw the grenade over the plank fence beside us. The grenade exploded before it hit the ground. Luckily, the solid board fence protected us from its shrapnel. If he waited only a few more seconds, it would have killed both of us. The explosion startled the horse and made her rear in panic. The coachman, rudely awoken and terrorized, began to scream. I hurriedly quit the scene for home. Although I was badly shaken, I didn't tell Mother what had happened.

In January the electricity returned, and the schools reopened. Our school's building had been taken over by the Swedish Red Cross Hospital. Consequently, the gymnasium was relocated in a temporary facility, a few blocks away from the central railway station. It wasn't a lucky choice as it turned out. The war was still on and we had to live with its hardships.

There was no coal to heat the classrooms. We sat in class in our winter coats. Since the front was only ten minutes flying distance away, there were daily raids by German fighter-bombers attacking the Russian transportation lines, especially the railway station. For the next two months the nine o'clock morning air raids became a routine affair, and we stopped preparing for the class scheduled at that time. As soon as the sirens started to wail, the class jumped up, descended the stairs and crossed the street to the public air raid shelter.

There was a battery of Russian anti-aircraft guns located in the school yard. Sometimes these guns started to fire before the sirens sounded. Their unexpected, window-shattering salvos scared the hell out of us but scared our teachers even more.

One morning, as our class just reached the street on the way to the shelter, one of the raiding planes flying low above and along the street, released a couple of its bombs prematurely, right above our heads. The two whistling and clearly visible black objects increased in size rapidly as they descended, looking like two vultures dropping out of the sky. Fortunately, they hit the ground and exploded a block away from us.

In February the truck repair shop was moved closer to the front. We said goodbye to our drunkard but good-natured lodgers. We were not allowed to stay unattended for long. A new lodger arrived the following day. He was a young fellow called Vladimir who worked as a

pharmacist in their field hospital. Off duty, he used to lie on our sofa reading volumes of poems. He was a very shy soldier. He didn't drink, didn't party, and never talked about his life back home. Except for his first name, we learned nothing else about him during the weeks he stayed with us, but he was no bother either.

At the beginning of March the Germans tried to mount a major counter-offensive designed to throw the Russians back behind the Danube. Divisions from Lake Balaton were to push south while divisions from Croatia were to move north enclosing the Soviet troops in a pincer movement. A couple of German divisions reached the river Drava 30 km south of our city. This was defended by Bulgarian troops that had switched sides only recently, and were no match for their seasoned former allies. The Germans succeeded in fording the river and were pushing toward our city. We could already hear the artillery fire.

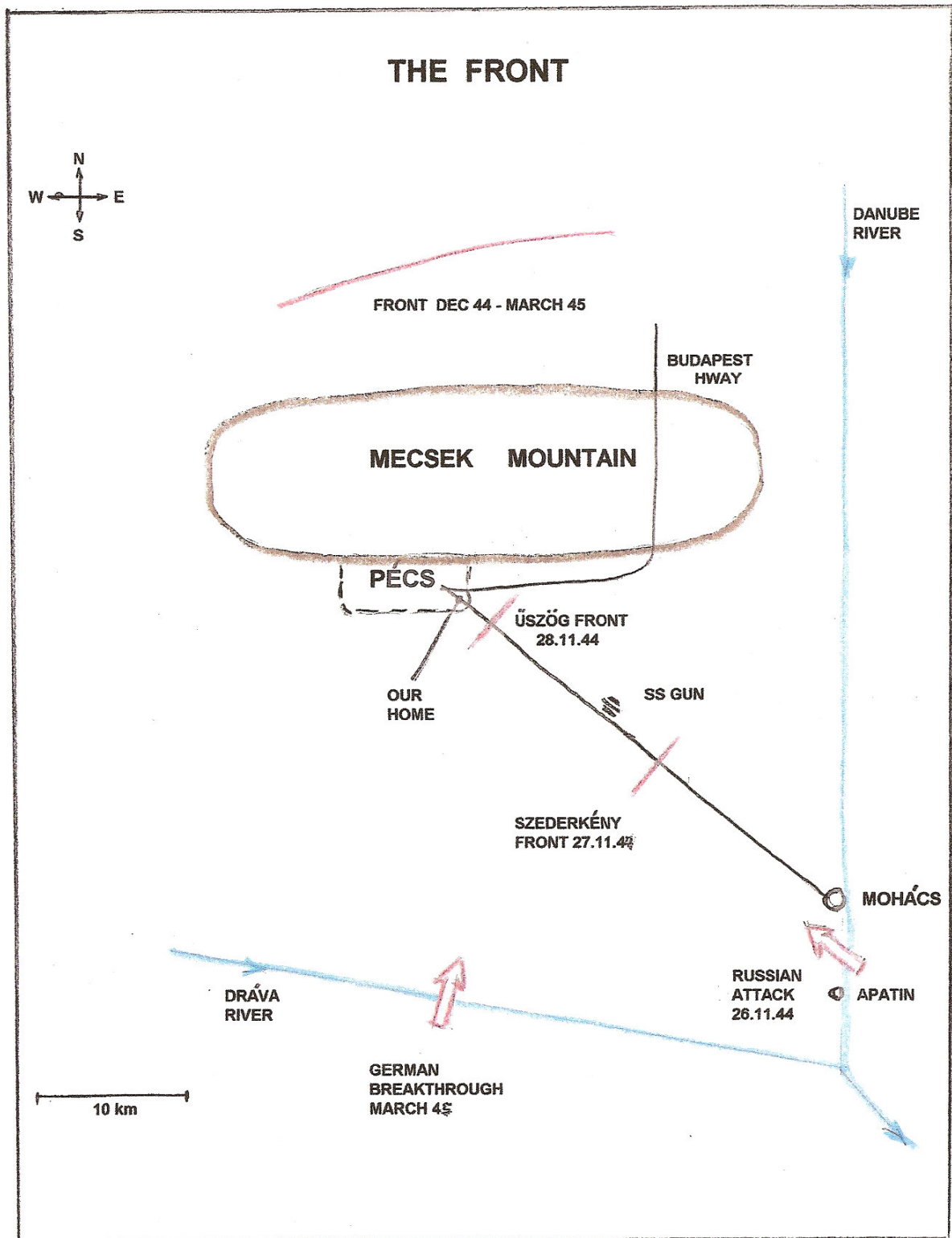
My parents became alarmed. Not only was there the danger of getting involved in the fighting again, but also because it was known that when the Fascists retook a city, they immediately executed all those who sided with the Russians, or formed part of the new administration. Both of my parents had joined the newly organized Communist Party in December and would clearly have been among the condemned.

Father rushed into the city to talk to his brother, Uncle Paul, the district secretary of the Communist Party, about the imminent danger. Uncle Paul convinced him that there was no possibility of the Germans re-occupying the city. Two fresh Russian Divisions had already arrived to reinforce the Bulgarian defenders. Father came home reassured.

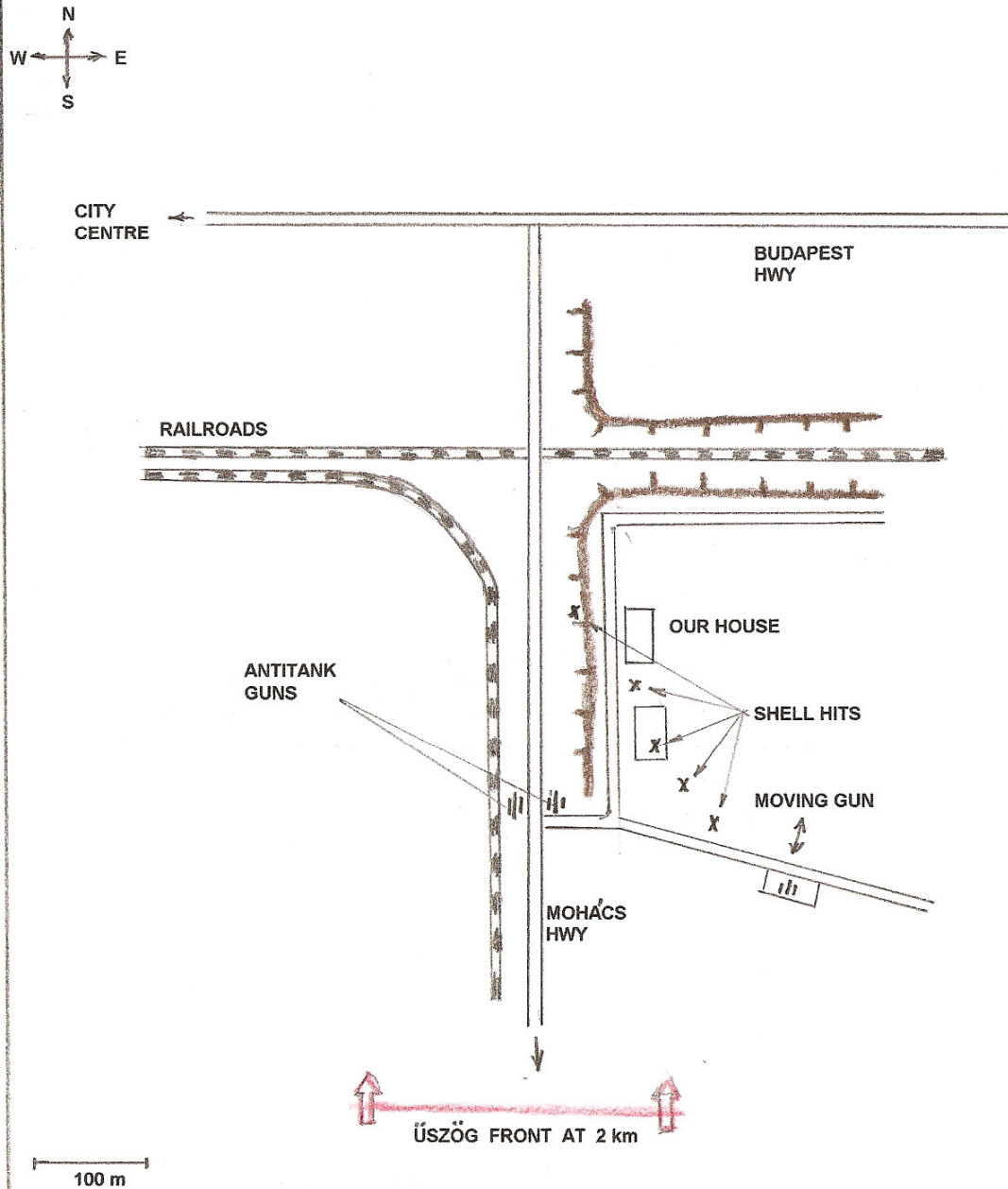
Uncle Paul was right, the offensive fizzled out, and the German troops were pushed back across the river by the Soviet armour. But Uncle Paul didn't tell Father that at the time of their talk he knew nothing about the actual situation on the front. His mention of the fresh Russian divisions was to prevent any panic. In the case of a successful German breakthrough, a car with a driver was parked behind the building to rush Uncle Paul and his family away to safety. Politics took precedence over brotherly love.

In the middle of March a major Soviet offensive pushed the German army out of Hungary and into Austria. Six weeks later the war was over.

November 1944.



## OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD



## 8

### A SPARTAN WEDDING

Sanyi, my mother's younger brother, was my favourite uncle. He was only 12 years older than me, and he retained his youthful attitude toward things important to both of us for many years, though the family usually had a different name for this peculiarity.

He belonged to that unfortunate generation that reached military age (eighteen) at the start of WW II and consequently spent all their youthful years - if they survived at all - in the army. Uncle Sanyi was among the soldiers who marched into Slovakia, Erdély (Transylvania, Rumania) and Bácska (Yugoslavia), fought his way to the Don River in Russia and then retreated back to the Danube River in Hungary between 1938 and 1944.

He brought me wonderful minerals from Erdély and, on his first leave from the Russian front, a radio receiver/transmitter set, which he had dismantled from a destroyed Soviet tank. It obviously didn't work but I could use it play-acting as the spy or partisan, or just take it apart and put it together over and over again.

At the beginning of 1943 Uncle Sanyi was stationed on the Don River, near Voronezh, in an anti-aircraft unit of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army. After months of preparation, which went unnoticed by our side, the Soviet Army mounted a devastating offensive against the sector of the front held by the Hungarians. Our poorly equipped and poorly led troupes, abandoned by their German Allies, were annihilated. Of an initial force of approximately 200,000 strong, the losses exceeded 147,000, with more than 140,000 dead.

Uncle Sanyi was among the lucky ones. His unit had mechanical transport, and after abandoning their guns they succeeded in escaping. As he later recounted, his vehicle was one of the last to break out of the encirclement.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was from our city. When the remnants of the unit returned to the home base, our whole family went to meet Sanyi at the railway station. The emotional reunion occurred at the yard gate. After a long session of embracement and crying, we had to leave him. He had to rejoin his unit in the formation.

At this moment the family noticed that Sanyi carried a heavy pack. He had not only saved his life during the rout but also succeeded in bringing back his regulation wooden army chest, in which soldiers kept their personal belongings.

When his unit began marching in a column from the station toward the city centre, my father took Sanyi's chest and carried it for him. It was very heavy. The family couldn't imagine what he might have brought home? There were soldiers who had returned for leave with all kinds of goods stolen from the local populations but behaviour of that kind was unimaginable for the kind-hearted Sanyi.

After the merry family supper, Uncle Sanyi finally opened his chest and pulled out a 75 mm artillery shell (about 80 cm long) and the matching projectile (perhaps 5 kg). I was delighted to see the shiny pieces. Smiles froze on the rest of the company's' faces.

"What the hell are those for?" My grandfather burst out.

Uncle Sanyi began to happily explain that before the tragic Soviet offensive he had had a lot of time on his hands in the gun emplacement, so he had decided to take that piece of ammunition apart, remove and scrape the explosive charge out of both parts, polish them, and keep the assembly as a souvenir of the front.

His account was received in dead silence, and the topic was dropped, at least for the time being.

Sanyi received a two-week leave of absence. During this period I spent some time with him. He taught me how to set the altitude trigger on the tip of the shell. Then he took the shell apart and showed me what happened inside the shell on firing. He explained the action of the proximity switch at the start and the end of the shell's trajectory. This knowledge came in handy years later in my tank officer's training class.

When Sanyi returned to the front with his unit, I hoped to inherit the shell. However, Grandpa decided otherwise. He said that keeping an up-to-date piece of ammunition at home might cause trouble sooner or later either with the Hungarian or German military, or with the Russians, if they ever reached us. It would be best to get rid of it before it would be too late.

One day, when he was casting a concrete staircase for a multi-story building, Grandpa took the two pieces of the shell, wrapped them in a sack, and sank them in the soft concrete bed of a landing. Then he carefully covered both with an additional layer of concrete and smoothed it over.

At some time in the future, when the building is torn down, the reappearance of these puzzling items in the concrete might make a headline.

In the fall of 1944 Uncle Sanyi's anti-aircraft unit was positioned near our city. The Soviet Forces had already reached the Danube River only 35 km from us. After six uninterrupted years of military service, Sanyi had had enough. The war was obviously lost; the Russians could ford the river and occupy Pécs within weeks. Why risk dying in the last phase of the hopeless war? He changed into civilian clothing and went into hiding with a friendly family. Their house was in a vineyard, and it had a large cellar. The family installed a secret partition there for Sanyi.

He spent a few weeks in hiding, until the Russians occupied the hills around the city at the end of November. At last, the war was over for him; he could come out from his voluntary prison. But he didn't escape scratch-free. The couple that had hidden him, had a daughter the same age as Sanyi, and a romance - or more - developed in the cellar. The two had fallen in love, and wanted to get married at once.

Both set of parents felt that the lovers should wait. The front was 65 km away, and remained there for several more months. The time wasn't considered right for a wedding. However, when the war ended in May, five months later, the lovers couldn't wait any longer.

The wedding was extremely Spartan. Only close relatives were present. There was a limited amount of food, but plenty of wine (home-grown). A plateful of homemade cookies baked without any sugar or sweetener substituted for a wedding cake. They tasted awful. But I had fun. The only child present, I was in charge of a borrowed hand-wound record player and three badly scratched dance music discs. I played them non stop. When someone cried out that they could not take the audio torture any longer, I changed the steel needle for another, equally worn - there were maybe four of them - hoping for the miracle of screech-free music each time.

After dinner there was group singing. The song, 'Hajmási Péter', was performed à la 'Old McDonald Had a Farm'. One had to substitute a new, correct word for each refrain. Those who erred were punished. The punishment was barbaric. The looser had to eat one of the sugarless cookies. Finally, one of the guests, who had lost more often than his fair share, cried out:

"I would rather commit suicide right here, at this moment, than eat one more of those damned cookies!"

The party commiserated with him; everyone understood his desperation.

June 1945.

## 9

### THE HEDGEHOG

It was a funny-looking, tiny creature with a rodent type snout. It fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. When scared, it curled up into a living, harmless pincushion - its bristles were still soft. I got it from a friend of my father who told us that the mother had been kicked to death by a horse in the barn where the hedgehog family made their home.

The little one was probably still nursing. I tried to feed it with milk what was refused. I broke its instinctive resistance by forcing milk into its mouth with an eyedropper. The little creature seemed to like the taste of the milk or was very thirsty because soon it was lapping the liquid from a saucer.

This was not the best moment for me to adopt a pet. Two days later I was to leave and spend the weekend with my grandparents in Pécs. I left the little creature in the care of my mother who promised to look after it very carefully.

I had been looking forward to the two-hour train trip. We had moved to live in Mohács only a couple of months earlier, and this was my first return visit to my hometown. At this time, half a year after the end of the war, travelling, especially on my own, was an adventure. The trains were already running more or less regularly, but the coaches still had no glass panes in their windows, and sometimes they didn't even have doors. The retreating German army took all of the useable rolling stock with them. Only the equipment damaged by bombs or shells remained in Hungary. It took years to repair these items properly.

Now, the travellers, who not long time ago would scream about the draft if more than one window was open in a coach - even on a hot summer day - suffered the cold November wind blowing across the car without complaint. Everybody had a blanket wrapped around them. The carriage looked like a silkworm hatchery full of cocoons.

When I returned home after the weekend, Mother had sad news for me. The baby hedgehog had run away. It just disappeared from the kitchen, though Mother claimed that the door had never been left open. I felt very sad about the loss of that little pet. Not that we didn't have any other animals - actually we had a young dog and a not so young cat - but those were ordinary pets.

A couple of months later we came home from the movies late at night. As my mother turned on the light in the kitchen, a fast moving creature scuttled through the floor and disappeared in the hole under the sink where the wall had been pierced to facilitate the repair of a frozen pipe.

The hole was about 6-8 cm in diameter.

"We have rats in the kitchen!" My mother burst out disgustedly.

"That is surprising - Father wondered. How could any sane rat rummage around in a location inhabited by a dog and a cat? Upon moving in the neighbours had mentioned that the apartment had cockroaches but didn't say anything about rats."

Indeed, in the first few weeks after arriving, we had often encountered those disgusting insects. Lately however they had disappeared. My father guessed that they hibernated for the winter.



More weeks passed before we caught the sight of the 'rat' again. This time the animal had a harder time squeezing through the hole and we got a better look at it. The 'rat' turned out to be a fully grown hedgehog.

The bathroom was on the other side of the wall. Right against the hole was a built-in bathtub. Between the tub and the casing there must have been a lot of space, which served as an ideal refuge for this nocturnal animal.

Now, the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place in my mother's mind:

- The mysterious disappearance of the baby animal from the closed kitchen. (It climbed through the hole to hide under the bathtub).
- The regular appearance of tiny piles of droppings on the kitchen floor. (Mother thought that the cat - although housetrained - had control problems).
- The disappearance of the cockroaches from the apartment. (They didn't go into hibernation; our guest had eaten them).

In addition to the delicious cockroaches, the hedgehog shared the food intended for the cat and dog, so it had plenty to eat. Those two pets obviously knew about the secret room-mate but accepted it with no complaint.

Since the mystery of the hedgehog was solved, we decided to continue to live with our reticent lodger, and let it carry on as before.

Unfortunately, its luck soon ran out. One early morning my father went for a trip. He kept his travelling gear in the built-in cabinet in the bathroom. This space wasn't used for anything else. When my father returned a week later and reopened the cabinet, there was the hedgehog in its last hours of agony - dying of thirst and hunger. Apparently, when my father had packed for his trip, he left the cabinet door open. The poor animal entered the cabinet and became entrapped. Surprisingly, it didn't scratch or make any audible sound during that week. Now, even pouring water down its throat couldn't save it. To my great sorrow it died a few hours later.

November 1945.

## 10

### LAKE BALATON

We, four friends, 15-16 years old, were planning to visit Lake Balaton in the summer. It was not far from our home by today's standards -150 km - but in 1948, shortly after WW II, this was considered long distance travel. We were going on bikes and camping all the way, so we hoped for a great adventure.

The roads, especially those across the Mecsek Mountain, were in miserable condition. Initially, they were gravelled but the passage of thousands of heavy tanks and guns had chewed them up, and created a continuous chain of potholes, some deep enough to swallow a pumpkin. Our bikes were in poor shape, with worn tires and without spare parts. Those were either not available or too expensive for us to afford. Food was rationed in those days. Also, we had very little money to spend. However, we had plenty of enthusiasm, which unfortunately was not shared by our parents.

We planned, or at last talked about the trip, for months. Slowly we wore down our parents' resistance, and they finally - although very reluctantly - consented to our jaunt.

We planned to cover the distance to the Lake in two days. It would take two more days to cross to the North shore, to the town of Almadi, where we would visit our uncle - my and my cousin Laci's - and his family for a week. They lived there permanently in a nice cottage but under poor conditions. To stay any longer would have been considered unfair to them.

The big day of departure finally approached. Two days before our trip was to start, the weather turned sour. It began to rain on and off. On the eve of the departure Feri and Miklos's parents changed their minds and cancelled their son's participation in the adventure. That was a hard blow to our enterprise.

However, Laci and I wouldn't give up. We defiantly decided to leave in the morning as planned. During the night there was a thunderstorm with heavy downpour which rendered the roads muddy and wet. I set out to the rendezvous point in low spirits. My misgivings were justified. Laci wasn't there at the agreed upon hour. I continued to my grandmother's place - Laci lived with her - to see what had happened.

The scene I encountered was dismal. Laci was alternately crying from anger and screaming at Grandma, who refused to let him depart because of the unfriendly weather and other not well-defined reasons.

However, now Laci and I joined forces and started to work on her willpower. It probably took an hour of continuous argument and cajoling before she finally announced:

„All-right stupid boys, you can go!”

There was some feverish packing to do to allow us to depart before grandma changed her mind again. It was almost noon by the time we finally got on our way. We had lost five hours of daylight. As compensation, the roads were almost dry by now.

The ascent to the main ridge of the mountain exhausted us considerably. Our bikes, heavy steel, single speed implements, were loaded with camping gear and food. We spent more time pushing them uphill than riding them. Coasting downhill, to which we looked forward with so much anticipation, was a great disappointment because of the pitiful condition of the road. Some potholes were still filled with water, and one could not guess their depth. We tried to

navigate around them as much as possible, and hence were forced to a crawl, coasting downhill almost as slowly as we had pushed uphill. There was very little traffic on the road - an occasional horse drawn carriage and one or two trucks during the afternoon.

As the sun dropped behind the horizon, we were still struggling up the steep slope of a forested hill. It was a twisting, never-ending climb. We realized that we should camp before it became dark, but the deserted road and the dark forest on both sides of it made us apprehensive.

„Perhaps we are not the brave adventurers we like to think ourselves?“ I wondered.

We kept pushing on.

From the top of the hill down to the valley we rode in near darkness - we had no lights - risking somersaulting if we hit an excessively deep pothole. By now the descent became scarier than the possibility of camping in the gloomy surrounding forest. Our only hope was that we'd find a village in the valley. Obviously, we didn't have a map. The possibility of shelter kept us going.

My guess was right. There was a single-lane village below the hill. It didn't have electricity, and the houses were dark and unfriendly looking. To our great relief, near the end of the row of houses we came upon a farmhouse with a faint light flickering through its window. We knocked on the door. A man opened it a bit, and tried to peek into the darkness. He looked surprised on seeing two strange young persons standing there. We asked him, if he would allow us to sleep in his barn. He looked even more astonished. Travelling was not considered safe in those days, especially at night, and we were only young boys. Apparently, we didn't look very menacing because he finally nodded his agreement. After lighting a kerosene lamp, he took us to the barn at the back of the yard.

In the barn there was fresh hay piled up high. It provided a comfortable berth but sleep escaped me for a long time despite my tiredness. There were many mice around us, and their scurrying and scampering in the hay under my ear, in the stillness of the night, sounded like the rumpling of newspaper pages. On the other side of the thin plank wall there were horses and cows that kept on munching all night. Those animals apparently never sleep.

At dawn we had to get up when the farmer came out to feed his cattle. For him the working day started at sunrise. For us, city boys, it appeared to still be the middle of the night.

Sleepy and tired, we had to face the second day of our adventure. It turned out to be no easier than the day before. The mountains were mostly behind us by now, but a new challenge, a strong head wind blowing from the still distant lake, proved to be as formidable an obstacle to rapid progress as the hills had been the day before.

We reached Lake Balaton in the evening. Greatly relieved, we camped in an acacia grove near the shore. I would have liked to have gone swimming right away but the evening air was becoming cold. The tent we carried with us was my war trophy. It had been discarded close to our house by the retreating German soldiers. The four triangular, waterproof canvas pieces served as raincoats for infantrymen. They buttoned up into a pyramidal shaped tent. It had no floor. Since we had only one blanket per head, we needed something warm to sleep on. There was nothing useful around. We ended up collecting foliage from the acacia trees. The fresh green leaves provided pleasant soft bedding. We learned after laying on them for a short while however that our bedding was as cold as an ice bath. The moisture laden leaves removed our body heat more rapidly than the bare ground would have. We spent the night trembling with cold. No more fresh leaves for our bed - ever - was our hard learned lesson.

We were up early in the morning trying to warm up in the light of the rising sun. An hour later when we were sufficiently revived, we took to the road. We rode slowly - this time willingly - enjoying the ride on the paved road that ran parallel to the shore. Later in the day we had our first swim in the surprisingly warm water of the lake. In the afternoon we passed a meadow, which had been mowed recently. The dry hay was piled up in small stacks. We decided to camp right there and then by setting the tent over a haystack. Since the canvas was of camouflage colours and barely visible from a distance, we didn't have to worry that the owner of the meadow would object to our trespassing, and chase us off. It was cosy and warm inside the tent. This was the first night of the trip that I slept like a log.

Next day we arrived at our uncle's place. Their cottage (owned by the brother of Aunt Hilda) was located in the middle of a vineyard, on the slope of a hill overlooking the lake. They received us very warmly. Uncle George suffered from silicosis acquired by working for many decades in the dusty depths of coal mines. For the last couple of years he had been an invalid, and could barely walk. We didn't realise it at that time, but this was to be his last summer. He was gone by the coming fall.

We had a hot supper. It was the first hot decent meal we'd had since we left home. In the first two days we had consumed all the good food that my mother had prepared for me. During the next two days we ate only dry bread - several days old by this time - and fruit which we picked in the orchards we passed. We brought several kilos of flour with us as a present (flour was rationed) to compensate for the extra mouths at my aunt's table.

We finally enjoyed some carefree days on the beach, swimming in the tepid water, and biking around in the evenings. Our cousin Hilda, who was of our age, was unfortunately out of town all week. She would have made our stay more exciting by introducing us to her teenager friends. We missed having companions of our age group.

One day Uncle George came, or struggled rather, down to the beach with us. There he rested on a bench - breathing labouriously - while watching us frolicking in the water. Aunt Hilda told us later that we reminded him of his healthy years that were gone forever. We, with the usual insensitivity and carelessness of youth, didn't notice the sad nostalgia in his eyes.

The week flew by. We had to head back home. Aunt Hilda prepared a tasty but unfortunately not very voluminous food package for us. We said a thankful goodbye to them in the early morning and rode out of the vineyard.

Our plan was to cycle to Boglar on the South shore of the lake where we intended to spend the upcoming long weekend. A special weekend train of holidayers was to arrive there from Pécs, our home town. A few coaches were reserved for employees of the porcelain factory in which my father had worked. Miklós, our dropout travelling companion, and his father were supposed to be on the train. We hoped to spend the weekend together.

To shorten the return trip, we took the ferry to the South shore at Tihany Peninsula, the narrowest point of the lake. After arriving, we had to push our bikes up a steep ramp. Finally, at the top of the ramp, I tried to mount my bike. There was a loud, snapping noise and I almost fell. The left pedal shaft had broken off at the point where it was screwed into the arm. I was completely stupefied. What bad luck. The shaft could not be fixed, and to get a replacement one needed connections and lot of money - a lot for me - then and there, and I had neither.

I tied the other pedal to my foot, and with Laci's help got on the saddle, and began to propel the bike using only one foot. The paved road lost all its appeal to me. Riding was hard work. Even when I wanted to stop, Laci had to help me off my bike. Our progress was miserably slow. We reached Boglar late in the afternoon, too late to get our bread ration cards validated at the town's office before the long weekend. No bike, no bread (our staple food) - I could have cried.

We found the town campground, one of the few that had been reopened in the country after the war. It set on the shore of a beautiful bay. Other campers advised us where to go for straw for bedding. Laci went along and brought a load, unfortunately not enough to provide sufficient insulation. He refused to return for a second load, because of the pain in his neck where a boil had started to grow.

Next day the special train arrived with Miklós. Our joy didn't last long. He also brought bad weather with him. The temperature dropped. It began to rain and didn't stop for the next two days. We were trapped in our tent. We felt cold and miserable. We wouldn't swim even once in the beautiful bay.

When Miklós' father heard about my bike predicament, he arranged for a free ride for Laci and I back to Pécs in one of the porcelain factory's reserved coaches. That was a great relief. However, it didn't solve all of our problems. The bikes could not be taken in the coaches. We would have to send them by freight, and the cost of freight exhausted all our cash reserve. We had nothing left. We could not even buy anymore fruit.

However, we had a few more of Fortune's smiles. My father's ex-colleagues invited us to a free lunch, and for supper, Miklós surprised us with a huge water melon. This turned out to be a gift of dubious value, however, because after eating the large, juicy fruit, we were forced to get up several times during the cold night to relieve ourselves in the rain.

Laci's boil was getting more swollen and painful. He could not turn his head, and even laying on the straw proved to be agonizing for him. We wanted to break it open, but he wouldn't let us touch it.

The last day we didn't eat at all. We had to satisfy ourselves with dreaming about the supper that we would have after arriving home. I suffered silently, but Laci kept on groaning audibly, both from hunger and from the pain in his neck.

This was our first long distance train trip after the war. Our rambling stomachs didn't let us enjoy it. The trip appeared to be never-ending.

Finally, I was home, several days earlier than expected, starving, and minus my bicycle. My first, independent travel adventure could hardly be called an unqualified success. It was followed later by many other, some more successful, some less, but always interesting experiences.

August 1948

P.S. Grandma had broken and cleaned Laci's boil. After a couple of weeks his neck healed completely.

# 11

## LOSING FAITH

The train had slowed down as it approached the bridge. In the middle of the span it came to a complete stop. We were in no-man's land. The river Tisza that we were crossing had formed the border between Hungary and the Soviet Union since 1945.

Almost all the passengers - 300 perhaps - were Hungarian students going to study at various Soviet universities. About 120 of us were recent high school graduates from different cities, and had been selected for Soviet scholarships based on high academic grades and the correct social/political background of our parents - i.e. workers or peasants in good party standing. The rest were graduates from a special institute, called Oleg Kosevoy College, which had a special mandate for preparing young political cadres for Soviet universities. These boys and girls had no, or only incomplete, high school education. After a year of intensive study at the College they were assumed to be on a par with the regular high school graduates, and their 'special high school diploma' allowed them to enter domestic or foreign universities.

We regular graduates had spent the summer in a camp studying Russian and Marxism. The emphasis was on the latter. Socialism had been declared to be the future for mankind. At eighteen, I completely agreed with this. I was less sure about the path to socialism in Hungary as imposed by the National Communist Party. I also found the official adulation of the Soviet Union - our role model - nauseating and repulsive. The industrial, agricultural and social achievements claimed for the Soviet system seemed highly exaggerated to me. Now, at least I would have a chance to see on first hand the only socialistic country of the world.

The immobilized train was boarded by Russian soldiers. Every doorstep was secured by an armed guard. Other soldiers slid under the wagons, apparently checking for hidden Western spies. Then we started to move again. The meadow on the Hungarian side of the river had no military structures of any kind. On the other shore there was a high barbed wire fence stretching as far as one could see. On the far side of it, a 2-3 metre wide ploughed and freshly harrowed strip ran parallel to the barbed wire. Further away from the fence, tall, wooden observation towers stood at regular intervals. The towers were manned by armed soldiers. Cows grazed peacefully between them. As we silently watched this scene, one of us attempted an explanation:

„The towers are there so the herdsman can watch the cattle.”

His comment was followed by an icy silence. Was he trying to pull our legs, or was this the honest opinion of an idiot from Budapest who had no idea about animal husbandry? I wondered.

The scene called up in my mind a somewhat different border incident in which I had participated a year earlier. Our group of young students was on the way to visit a village near the Yugoslav border. We followed a country road. The truck driver took a wrong turn, and we ended up in Yugoslavia. The border was unmarked, with no armed guards on either side. The driver noticed his mistake when he saw strange milestones beside the road. He was able to turn around and return to the right side of the border before the incident was detected by any guards.

Certainly, nothing like that could happen on this border - I thought. Could this be the 'Iron Curtain' that 'Radio Free Europe' talked about? I wondered.

A few minutes later we arrived at Csap - the Soviet border station. The checking of the documents and valises took ages. What were they looking for? I couldn't imagine. But they were thoroughly searching for it. The officers carrying out the task looked drawn. They normally had to deal with only a few dozen passengers per day, and our numbers clearly overwhelmed them.

Finally, we were allowed to mount the Russian train. It soon pulled out of the station. Less than an hour later we reached the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. A second locomotive was added to the rear end of the train to help push. Until now, the countryside had been studded with familiar looking villages of brick houses with red tiled roofs. This region had belonged to Hungary for a thousand years. It became attached to Czechoslovakia between the two World Wars, and now formed part of Zakarpatskaya Ukraina - one of the administrative regions of Soviet Ukraine. The principal population remained Hungarian.

As we entered the mountain valleys, the villages began to change their character. Here, the houses were built of logs and had wooden shingle roofs. As the train climbed toward the pass the houses looked shabbier and shabbier. They were Ruthenians - a Slavic subgroup unique to this area - I guessed, judging by the women's folk dresses and the men's tall caps.

As the train ascended, passing through an unending number of tunnels and wooden viaducts, the scenery became exceptionally beautiful. The local history however, as told by one of my companions, who was from this part of the world, sounded less cheerful. According to him, in 1944, the Hungarian and German troops assigned to defend this pass against the imminent Russian offensive had been pulled out in a rush to avoid encirclement. They had no time to blow up the steel bridges in their retreat. However, some 'Fascist Partisans' who remained behind completed the task months after the end of the war. It took two years for the Soviets to mop up the resistance. The temporary wooden bridges had not yet been replaced.

After leaving the border, we hadn't stopped anywhere except for the attachment of the second locomotive. I assumed that our train - being an 'express' - stopped only in larger cities. However, our speed was about 20-30 km/hour, and on the steeper sections we barely inched forward. What express train would move at such a speed?

When we had passed through the lowland populated by Hungarians, the local stations were completely empty. In the mountains however, the platforms were crowded with locals - shabbily dressed women and children, who begged from us as we watched them through the open windows. The children were crying 'chlebuszka, chlebuszka', which meant 'bread' in the local dialect; I was told by my companion with the local expertise.

It was shocking. Starving children in the Soviet Union? Impossible! Perhaps they are families of Fascist outlaws and not Soviet citizens? There must be an acceptable and legitimate explanation!

The next day we arrived at Kiev where we had to change trains. The station was very crowded with women and children in worn, grey, or - more likely - discoloured, peasant looking dresses. The men mostly wore old army fatigues. None carried a suitcase, just bags, or packages bundled up in a cloth and tied with a string. There were also some seedy looking younger men loitering about and gaping curiously at us. We could also see a few policemen with long swords hanging from their waists, an anachronistic sight in 1950.

We had a few hours' wait before departure. We were divided into subgroups and told to stay together. Our group wanted to do some sightseeing. We piled up our luggage at the dead end of an underground passageway. Two guys remained as guards, while the rest of the group, including me, went to see the city.

Kiev was almost completely destroyed during WW II. I was surprised to see how many ruins remained five years after the end of the war. In Budapest, which had been one third destroyed, there were not many ruins left now except on Castle Hill.

Only the Krestiyatic, the main street of Kiev, had been beautifully rebuilt with rows of pale yellow stone edifices built in a uniform style. On the streets there were no cars, motorcycles or bicycles; just pedestrians and streetcars. The people looked very drab. The store windows - these were few and far between - were mostly empty. My conclusion was that Kiev didn't compare well with Budapest.

When we returned to the railway station, we heard devastating news. Several of our suitcases had been stolen. Everybody began to search the pile desperately for their own. My suitcases fortunately remained intact.

„But how did it happen?“ We asked our companions who had stayed behind to guard them.

„There was a young guy walking by. Suddenly, he jumped to the pile and grabbed two suitcases and started to run down the corridor with them. We were after him at once. We almost caught up with him when he dropped the suitcases, rushed through a door and disappeared. We returned with the valises to the storage point. There we noticed that several more suitcases were missing. We realized only then that the first thug just wanted to draw us away so that the rest of the gang could operate freely. We talked to a policeman. He just shrugged his shoulders and said:

„Such things happen here every day. You should have been more vigilant.“

Gang of robbers operating openly in a railway station in this socialistic society? I was stunned.

A day later we arrived in Moscow. It was raining heavily. No city makes a good impression in the rain, but Moscow looked especially disagreeable. There were small and large water-filled potholes everywhere - in the bus parking lot, in the street and on the sidewalk. (The Kiev Station is on the Central Ring, - the main boulevard of the city!) The station roof didn't have eaves and the rain was coming down in streams over us while we boarded the bus. I ended up in a small bus-like vehicle - 1920 vintage. It had a very low roof except above the aisle where it was slightly raised. This allowed people to reach the seats stooping down but the ceiling was not high enough to allow one to stand up. Unfortunately, there was no seat for me. I had to stand bent over while trying to avoid banging my head into the roof. This posture was further aggravated by the lack of any kind of railing to hold on to as the bus stumbled through hundreds of potholes. Since the elevated roof had no windows, I couldn't see anything around me. I missed the scenic beauties of the Russian capital on this first trip.

We stayed in a student dormitory - in its gym. The large space was filled with bunk beds. We remained there three days waiting for assignments to various universities. This bureaucratic delay greatly annoyed me. The academic year had begun two weeks earlier. I felt that my language handicap was unduly aggravated by this unreasonable loss of time.

We used the free time for sightseeing despite the intermittent rain. I encountered only one impressive thing - the Metro. The Moscow underground was fast, efficient and had beautiful stations. It had another rarely mentioned advantage also. By using it, one could avoid the gloomy streets with their old, unpainted wooden houses in poor repair, the drunken war amputees begging on the corners, the potholes, and the trucks carelessly cutting through the puddles and spraying mud on pedestrians.

Moscow was not destroyed during the war and so it didn't have to be rebuilt, which was not necessarily to its advantage.

One of our first trips was to Red Square. I found it too large to be attractive. On the square there was a long line-up of people. They were patiently waiting to visit Lenin's mausoleum. We joined the queue. A guard told us to move to the front of the line - foreigners didn't have to wait. Some locals did the same when they arrived. These individuals were evidently more equal, as were we foreigners, than the rest of this supposedly egalitarian society.



The most important historical monument of Moscow - the Kremlin - had never been accessible to the public. During the tsarist regime this was the residence of the monarch. Now Stalin and some other important members of the Soviet Government lived there - strictly separated from the rest of the population. I wondered whether Stalin realized in his isolation what the actual living conditions outside the walls of the Kremlin were like when he talked about socialism having been established in the country.



*Moscow Street Scenery*

After three days, I left for Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukraine to enter a Metallurgical University there. By this time, my belief in the socialistic system - as the future of mankind - was in serious jeopardy. I already knew - for sure - that I would never want to live in the so-called socialism established in the Soviet Union.

September 1950.

## 12

### STARTING FIRST YEAR

The train pulled into the station of Dnepropetrovsk. This city would be my home for the next five years thanks to the ruling of a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Higher Education in Moscow where the decisions about the assignments for foreign students on Soviet scholarships were made. I was one of the eleven Hungarian students assigned to enter the Metallurgical Engineering School in this city. Seven of us were recent high school graduates, the other four were 'Special High School Diploma' holders.

Dnepropetrovsk had been founded by Catherine the Great in the second half of the 18th century and until the Communist revolution carried her Russian name, Ekaterinoslav. Though it is located in the center of Ukraine, on the shore of the Dnieper River, it had remained predominantly Russian. During the decades of rapid industrialization, the city had developed into one of the major heavy industrial centers of the Soviet Union.

The railway station turned out to be a temporary, barracks-like structure. Dnepropetrovsk had endured intense fighting during WW II. Most of its buildings had been damaged or destroyed. The city had been partially restored in the following five years, but its railway station hadn't.

Our group filed out of the coach onto the platform. Each of us carried two suitcases. One was a regulation type issued by the Hungarian Ministry of Education. It contained a new suit and a made to measure fur-lined winter coat. The other suitcase held our personal belongings.

Half a dozen co-patriots were waiting for us at the end of the platform. They had already been studying here for a year. After a short greeting, the old timers led us to the tramway terminal, and we ascended into a shabby looking car, which badly needed a coat of paint.

The long tramway trip from the station to the university district crossed a sizable part of the city including the downtown area. The six-kilometre long boulevard was not impressive, despite the beautiful flowerbeds and large trees along its length. The ruins of the war were still in evidence everywhere, although some of them were cleverly hidden behind huge billboards depicting Stalin, the great leader, smiling at us in various poses. One didn't see many multi-storey buildings, and the few standing looked shabby.

During the ride we were told that the university district, located on a ridge overlooking the river at the far southern edge of the city, had five engineering schools. In the Soviet system only arts, medicine and science schools were called universities. Engineering schools were called institutes. Dnepropetrovsk was rich in higher education. Besides its three main universities it also had metallurgical, mining, chemical, construction and transportation institutes. The Metallurgical Institute was the largest (3,000 students) and the most prestigious one - we were told.

The dormitory of our institute was only a block away from the tramway stop. That sounded like good news because we had to hand-carry our heavy suitcases. We found the building surrounded with scaffolding. Obviously, it had recently been built or rebuilt - I thought. I was right about that, although as I learned later, the presence of scaffolding didn't necessarily mean this. Multi-storey buildings were often surrounded with these heavy wooden structures. They facilitated the more or less continuous repairs required after completion of construction.

After a short welcoming speech from the Secretary of the Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) we were assigned to our rooms. Mine was located on the third floor. There, I met my six future roommates, three Russians, Lyosha, Vovka and Genka, and three Ukrainians, Misha, Pyetr and Victor. As far as the spoken language was concerned, the ethnic origin didn't make much difference because in the dormitory - as well as at the institute - all students were expected to speak Russian.

My new roommates treated me with measured politeness. They didn't seem to be overwhelmed with joy on getting a foreign student, especially a Hungarian, to share the room with them. During WW II, which had ended only five years earlier, the Axis troupes occupying this city had been Hungarians. They were not warmly remembered.

However, my big problem was communication. My spoken Russian was practically nonexistent. In high school I studied French. After matriculation, we Soviet scholarship candidates - about 120 from all over Hungary - spent two months in a summer camp preparing for Soviet universities. But the emphasis was on instructing us in the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism, rather than teaching Russian. I had become familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet but knew only a few hundred words. The majority of these words were of a political nature, and hence, not of much use in everyday student life.

The room had seven beds - army cots - lined up against the walls. The one assigned to me was in front of the window. That was all right until winter arrived. Then it felt like sleeping in front of a refrigerator with its door ajar. I discovered that radiant cold could be as real and nasty as radiant heat, even if the phenomenon had not been scientifically recognized.

The room's furniture - in addition to the beds - consisted of a table with four chairs, one chest and one night table - hardly spacious accommodation for seven people. Consequently, I was never able to unpack my two suitcases. I kept them under my bed.

The first evening we went out with our veteran compatriots to the Pobeda Restaurant. According to them, this was the best in the city. The service turned out to be terribly slow but the meal was good and tasty. The price unfortunately was too steep for my scholarship.

My immediate table partner was Jóska Mészáros, one of the old timers. He told me that he and his companions were worker cadres, who had been selected for Soviet scholarship on political merit alone. A high school education wasn't required. They had arrived without knowing a single word of Russian. Due to this, and also because they couldn't meet the academic requirements, they had not been admitted to the regular university program. A special preparatory class had been organized for them in which they studied the language and some basic science for a year. Now they intended to enter freshman classes along with us - newcomers.

At the beginning, I had eagerly listened to Jóska's words, wanting to learn as much as possible about life in the new country. He made a few rather startling statements like: "He would not study on Sunday because he didn't have to work in the plant on that day either." I soon became disenchanted. He devoured one glass of cognac after another. He poured them down as if it was wine (It was about as expensive). Soon, his talk became incoherent and focused on the description of numerous drunken parties rather than anything in which I was interested. Most of his fellow cadres seemed to be sloshed as well. What a bunch of alcoholics - I thought - the vanguard of the working class selected for their political merit! As an information session the evening turned out to be a complete fiasco.

Next morning, my first in the dormitory, I encountered a most dismal scene in the washroom. The ten rooms on the floor - each as crowded as ours - accommodated a total of 70 students. There was only one washroom with four toilet stalls, two urinals, and four sinks to satisfy our requirements. I found all the toilet bowls completely plugged with piles of human waste which had already risen above their rims. The cement floor was wet with urine. The sight was sickening, and I choked on the putrid smell.

I had already learned in Moscow that in Russia one didn't sit on the toilet but stooped on the bare rim. One wasn't supposed to throw the used piece of newspaper into the bowl either, but

put it into the basket in the cubicle. Now I learned the reasons behind these customs. The stooping action obviously had been derived from hygienic necessity, while the paper segregation allowed the cleaning personnel to hose down the mess in the bowls. In the dormitory - as I later discovered - the toilet cleaning session took place later in the morning, after the students had left for their classes. For a few hours the toilets remained relatively clean. Each cubicle was equipped with a flush system activated by a timer. But neither the flushing frequency nor the amount of water passed was sufficient to prevent the inevitable blockage. There was no manually operated flush mechanism.

During the next five years I accepted, or at least got used to, many unpleasant things in the Soviet Union, but I could never get over the filth and the appalling lack of hygiene in all public washrooms.

After this remarkable experience, Béla, my co-patriot, and I walked over to the Metallurgical Institute to register in the Chemical Engineering Faculty. Although this was a metallurgical school, it had several other, smaller faculties, which provided diverse specialists for the metallurgical industry. Our designated speciality - 'Technology of Refractory Materials' - assigned to us in Moscow - was one of those.

After a short registration formality in the administration bureau, a clerk led us into the classroom occupied by the 'Silikatchik' (Refractory) Group. Here, we met eighteen girls, and seven boys. All the girls and three of the boys were our age, 17-18 years old. The four others were men in their thirties. They were demobilized war veterans.

The reception, at least by the female fraction of the class, was warmer than in the dormitory. But our inability to speak the language remained a handicap.

We attended the first lecture - General Chemistry. The only thing that I understood during the two-hour session was the boiling point of nitrogen,  $-196^{\circ}\text{C}$ , noted on the blackboard by the professor. I remembered this number from high school. After the lecture I felt heartbroken and devastated. I couldn't imagine how I'd be able to cope with the courses without understanding a word of the lectures.

A mathematics class followed the chemistry lecture. This was not bad. First of all, the equations derived on the blackboard by the professor were in Latin characters, and second, the topic, calculus, had been covered in high school. We had twelve years of schooling before entering university while the Russians only had ten years. These extra two years of instruction proved to be a tremendous asset at the time.

For lunch we reunited with some of our fellow countrymen in the student cafeteria. The menu was listed on a blackboard. It comprised about 6-8 items, the most expensive on the top. Since we weren't familiar with the meals, we decided to try them out one by one, starting from the top and then moving down the list daily.

Three days later our plan began to falter. The meals had become atrocious. They were 'kasha' (porridge) based, and tasted and smelled unpleasant. The lower we moved on the menu, the worse they became. I never got to the bottom of the list.

The Russian students normally took three hot meals in the cafeteria. This was the cheapest way of feeding oneself, especially if one stayed in the lower half of the menu. But I found that I could tolerate only one hot meal from the top of the list - at lunchtime - without upsetting my stomach. I skipped breakfast entirely and tried to eat cold meals for supper.

This plan wasn't easy to follow. Although bread was available - a heavy dark type, which was claimed to be nutritious - it included all parts of the grain - but it tasted terrible. Anything else which could go with bread - like cold cuts or jam - was difficult to find. Milk, butter, cheese, and eggs were rarely sold in the dormitory's shop. I had never seen any of those items in the city stores either.

On average I had to spend one hour every day visiting various government stores trying to locate something that was acceptable to my palate and sold at an affordable price. Also, I could never buy more food than that needed for one meal because of the lack of refrigeration and/or storage facilities in my room. Hence, feeding myself turned out to be costly because of my unique taste for food. Also, I - unlike my roommates - couldn't receive food packages from my parents. My Hungarian colleagues were in the same boat. We also had to buy all our clothing. Consequently, our scholarships were barely sufficient despite being twice those received by native students in first year.

I had an additional aggravation. I had always loved fruit. Now, I missed them terribly. Fresh fruit wasn't available from the end of September - when the watermelon season ended - until the end of June - when the first cherries appeared. One could find apples, small and usually wormy, in the Kolkhoz market at ten rubbles per piece, but this amount was twice the cost of a whole meal in the cafeteria. Fruit was way beyond my means.

In the years to come, canned cod preserved in oil and applesauce in glass jars became the principal ingredients of my diet. Fortunately, these two, with the bread, covered my basic caloric and nutritional requirements. On Sundays we Hungarian students usually went to a restaurant downtown. The food was all right, but because of its cost and the hours wasted traveling there, and to the miserably slow service in these places, I could afford such a trip only once a week.

In the meantime we were attending lectures with limited success. Two other foreign groups arrived, about fifteen Rumanians and the same number of Poles. The following week the Institute's administration announced that all foreign students would have to take a qualifying test before continuing the first year. The examination wasn't difficult despite the language problem. All those who had high school diplomas passed it, but only two from the senior group did. Now most of these veterans had to stay in a preparatory class for a second year.

After the test, it was announced that those who had passed would be placed in a special common class for the first year, independent of their specialization. In this class the academic program would start at a moderate rate, and then accelerate as we became more familiar with the language. There would be no mid-term break for us. By June, it was stated, we would have caught up to the Russian students.

Hence, the three nationalities, Hungarian, Rumanian and Polish, in about equal numbers, were joined in a special foreign class. The future brightened somewhat but the day-to-day struggle with the language remained. I desperately needed a working vocabulary. I set out to memorize 20 new words every day, seven days a week. I found that my retention rate was about 85%, so I picked up about 120 additional words per week. About half of these were technical words and the other half were words used in everyday life. In a month's time I started to understand my roommates' conversations. By December I could make myself understood. By June I was talking quite fluently although with a Hungarian accent.

At the end of January we had our first set of examinations. They were oral tests, the standard practice in the Soviet system. The professors were patient with us if we couldn't express ourselves clearly. I got top marks in all subjects, an achievement that I succeeded in maintaining throughout my university years.

But that first September, life was difficult. I found it hard studying the academic subjects in a language that I could barely understand. My isolation in the room, the problems with the food, etc. were often depressing. But the worst was that I was desperately homesick. I missed my mother, her soup, her palacsinta, and the steep streets of my city, my brother, and the friendly atmosphere of my high school.

About a month after our arrival I met Béla Bujtor, an old friend, on the street. He had been my roommate in the summer camp and now attended the Mining Institute not far from us. This was the first time that we had run into each other after arriving in the city. As we began to talk about our life and the common problems we faced, I almost cried. The whole thing looked so hopeless. He felt the same way. This moment was probably the lowest point in my university career.



*My roommates, Pyotr, Victor, I, Misha, Lyosha and Genka*

There were some brighter moments. A week after settling in, the Dormitory Committee ordered that all rooms should be decorated. Vovka went into the city to look for some pictures to hang. He came back with four large posters depicting Lenin, Stalin, Marx and Engels. These were the only ones available in the stores. A heated argument ensued. Where should they be hung? I was excluded from the dispute.

Everyone wanted Lenin. Its destination was finally decided by a draw. The same procedure was followed with the two German classics, although they generated less excitement. However, when it came to Stalin, there were no takers. All six unanimously decided to hang his picture above my bed. I, the bloody foreigner, deserved him.

At about this time I wrote my first letter to my mother. The Russians just shook their heads. They told me that it was a wasted effort. There was no such thing as postal service across the border. They were really shocked when six weeks later (as the mail-return period turned out to be) I received an answer. These Russians had grown up in the Communist regime and apparently never heard of anybody corresponding abroad.

On the second Sunday of September the weather was still sunny and warm. A few of my co-patriots and I rented a couple of rowboats, and went for a day-excursion on the river. The Dnieper is a mighty waterway. It was more than a kilometre wide at this point. After about an hour we reached a chain of islands at the confluence of the Dnieper and Koma rivers. There were twisting, narrow channels between the sandy shores of these islets. Trying to navigate the canals without bogging down was challenging and felt adventurous. After a while we landed under some overhanging willow trees and enjoyed the unspoiled beauty of nature. This enclave provided an ideal hideaway from the problems of the city. It even made me forget my homesickness.

There was a fishing village on one of the larger islands. In the spring when the water level of the river was high, the lanes between the houses became canals and transformed the place into a charming, rustic Venice. The village - hutor in the local dialect - had no store, no school, and just half a dozen tiny houses. Visiting one of them, we could buy milk drawn from a cow right in front of us. This treat alone made the trip worthwhile.

Most of the male students, including four of my roommates, smoked. As long as the weather permitted, we kept the windows open. But by the beginning of October it became too cold, and the windows had to be 'winterized', i.e., the cracks had to be taped over. They would not be opened again until the warm weather of the spring arrived. The fortochka, a characteristic feature of Russian windows, a small window, less than a square foot in area, inset in the upper part of the large one, was an exception. This was not sealed and could be opened any time to provide ventilation. However, its small dimensions made it inadequate in providing fresh air.

This fact became painfully evident in the evenings when a group of students - males only - collected to play dominos, a favourite student entertainment. Girls usually played cards. Russian dominos is an emotional game. The tiles are not placed but slammed down on the table for better effect. Since these games usually lasted well after midnight, the noise and cigarette smoke made sleeping difficult at the beginning. However, after a while I got used to it.

The weeks turned slowly into months, and Xmas eve arrived. Since Russian Xmas is celebrated in January, if it is remembered at all, our December date didn't mean anything there. I dug out a small can of goose liver from my suitcase, which I had carefully saved from the travel food package I received in Budapest. I sat at the edge of my bed and spread the paste on a piece of dark bread. As I slowly devoured it, the memories of happy Xmas from my childhood hunted me. This was the first one away from home, and it was not a happy occasion.

However, as my communication skills improved, so did my relationship with my roommates. After a few weeks we became - with the exception of one - fast friends. Our group continued to live together for four years. In the fifth and last year, all foreign students were moved into a new building where I shared a room with Hungarian students. I missed my Russian friends.

September 1950

## 13

### UNDER SUSPICION

Dr. Kirsanov, the professor of organic chemistry, was Dean of the Chemical Department when I joined the engineering school. He was recognized as a top scientist in his field, and was one of the rare Soviet private citizens who owned a car. Many stories about him circulated among the students. One unique story - maybe characteristic of the regime - described an incident which had occurred two years before my arrival.

Kirsanov lived under a dark political cloud. His father-in-law, the famous Chichibabin - we still used his organic chemistry textbook - had defected from the Soviet Union in the nineteen thirties. Following this 'high crime,' all his family, including his son-in-law, were arrested for collective punishment, and sent to labour camps. This was the standard Stalinist practice at the time.

A few years later, during WW II, Kirsanov was brought back from the Gulag; his services were required for the war effort. After the war was over, he was allowed to rejoin the teaching staff of the metallurgical institute, and was later promoted to Dean. But in the Soviet System nothing was ever forgotten or forgiven.

One morning, a couple of years after the war, a smartly dressed man entered the Bureau of Cadres (Personnel Department) of the university. These bureaus were the field stations of the Secret Police, and had unlimited power within the given organization. The man presented his credentials. He was an NKVD (Ministry of Internal Security) colonel from the Moscow Headquarters, and had been sent to investigate a recent case of industrial sabotage at one of the factories in Dnepropetrovsk. A witness reported - according to the investigator - seeing the professor's car near the plant at the time of the crime. The colonel demanded that the professor and his car be brought to him, the accused for questioning and the car for inspection.

Dr. Kirsanov was summoned to the Personnel Department where the investigator interrogated him for hours. The dean denied any participation in, or knowledge of, the affair and claimed that his car had been in the garage all week, unused. The officer from Moscow checked out the car. Not finding anything incriminating, he decided to take it to the witness for possible identification. Before leaving, he ordered the Head of Personnel to keep the professor locked up, totally incommunicado, until his return.

Kirsanov sat in the empty room for several hours. Finally, he began to pound on the door. He demanded something to drink and eat - it was well past lunchtime. The Bureau's staff was in a dilemma. They had strict orders not to open that door. At the same time, they couldn't disregard the rather humane demands of the Dean, a university VIP. The Head of Personnel called up the District Office of the Secret Police for instructions. Nobody in the office knew anything about the whole affair - including the sabotage - but was reluctant to interfere, saying that:

„In touchy situations Moscow can act directly without advising the local agency. If this is the case, we should not interfere.”

However, the call made the District Chief apprehensive. He must have wondered: What was going on? Why had nobody advised him? Would this be the beginning of a political conspiracy plot which could put his career in jeopardy? He began to worry about his own skin. After working up some courage, he called up Lyublanka, the Moscow Headquarters of the Secret Police. It took several hours for higher authorities there to check out the situation and to reply:



„There has been no report of any sabotage, there is no investigation in progress, and there is no such colonel in the organization. The impersonator must be arrested immediately!”

By the time this message was transmitted to the Personnel Department of the Institute, it was late in the evening. All this time the whole staff of the Bureau stayed nervously behind their desks on vigilant duty, while the professor remained behind the door in solitary confinement without drink, food or provision for other physical needs. So he was finally released, but with a strict warning from the Head of Personnel who told him that because of his sinister political background, he must remain extra careful about possible further provocations from enemies of the state.

The ‘colonel’ has never been found, and neither has the professor’s car.

November 1950.

## 14

### TRAVEL COMPANIONS

„Pali, watch your pocket!” - The warning came in Hungarian from the rear of the queue.

Pali Litkei, a fellow student, was standing in line for soft drinks on the station platform. Upon being put on guard, he quickly reached down and grabbed the hand probing into his pocket. A tumult rapidly followed. The intended victim, still clasping the hand of the pickpocket, was instantly surrounded by several seedy looking characters, accomplices of the failed thief. But simultaneously a second ring began to form around the crooks. It consisted of students who happened to be in the queue or were just standing on the platform. The situation looked ominous. A fist fight or worse could break out in an instant.

At this very moment the shrill whistle of the locomotive blared, and the train jerked into movement. Everyone on the platform - except the half dozen crooks - rushed to the coaches to board. The thugs continued standing leisurely, watching the ascending passengers. As the train began to pick up speed the crooks suddenly rushed toward it. First they ran parallel with the train, and then they jumped - one by one - onto the steps of the rear platform of our coach. They did this with remarkable proficiency, suggesting that it was an old routine for them.

One of our group who stood in the coach's corridor locked the door of the rear vestibule fast and prevented the stowaways from entering. Not that the insiders would be afraid of a bunch of pick-pockets. We, almost one hundred Hungarian students attending five different universities in Dnepropetrovsk, were on our way for summer vacation. Until this moment we had the whole wagon to ourselves, and were not ready to share it with some thugs. The gang continued to knock on the door for a while, then settled down in the vestibule.

This was a long distance train, going from Dnepropetrovsk to Kiev. It stopped at only a few times on the 500-km route. The countryside was unexciting to watch, so everyone tried to keep busy with other activities. Vladimir napped on the upper berth of the last compartment, while his cabin mates played cards in the next. The window was pulled down to provide a cooling breeze for the sleeper.

Suddenly, Vladimir's shrill cry carried through the wagon. His buddies jumped up and ran over to see what had happened. When they opened the door, they saw the torso of a man hanging upside down outside the window. A moment later the body was pulled up and disappeared. The students rushed to the window and looked out but couldn't see anything. Vladimir, trying to compose himself, explained that he had been sleeping on his side facing the wall. Suddenly, he felt something touching his bum. He turned around and saw an upside down ghost-like creature in the window, reaching toward him with both hands. The sight had startled him and he screamed out.

It didn't take long to figure out that the 'ghost' must have been one of the crooks from the vestibule. The group apparently climbed to the roof of the wagon. Then one of them was lowered to the window while the others were holding him by the legs. The thug either wanted to reach into Vladimir's pocket or - more likely - to grab the baggage stored in the luggage rack above the sleeper. The crook lying upside down on the jerky roof must have become disoriented, and unintentionally touched Vlad.

We had an immediate palaver. One thing seemed to be sure. The gang specifically picked us, the rich looking foreigners. They were after our trunks, and any other goods. The boldness of their act suggested that they were armed. Otherwise they would not dare to take on a big group like ours.

After a short discussion we all agreed that any violent act of ours resulting in casualties on either side might delay our trip - by days perhaps. No one was keen on that possibility. A safer approach would be to force the authorities to clear the train of thugs. It was decided that our group leader, Totyi, should go to see the train nachalnik (chief). Every long distance train in the Soviet Union had one. This person was normally found in the wagon behind the locomotive. Luckily, the crooks occupied the downstream vestibule and Totyi could proceed to see the nachalnik without any interference from them.

Totyi found the chief, a woman. He told her what had happened. At first she tried to dismiss the whole affair as an imaginative tale of some students. When Totyi insisted that it was true, and demanded action, she called him a liar. He became very angry with her, and said that he assumes - judging by her attitude - that she must be an accomplice of the gang. Consequently, the whole incident would be duly reported to the Hungarian Embassy in Kiev.

Now, the nachalnik realized that this could be a serious affair. She got scared. Foreign embassies were considered evil nests in the Soviet Union. Any contact with them could bring only calamity to an average Soviet citizen. She didn't know that there was no Hungarian Embassy, or even a Consulate, in Kiev. Also, she had no idea those Hungarian diplomats, being as servile as they were to the communist regime, wouldn't dare raise a public security issue with Soviet authorities.

The nachalnik took Totyi's bluff at face value. She began to beg him to consider her situation. The woman admitted that this given gang had regularly operated on her line, and nothing had been done about them. But she vehemently denied any association with the thugs. As she explained it:

„You, foreigners, will leave the train, and the country as well, very soon, but I must continue to travel back and forth on the same route. If I try to have the gang arrested, they or their cronies will throw me out of the moving train on the next trip. They consider this route their rightful turf.”

Totyi, after having been called liar, had no pity for the official, and said so. At the end she reluctantly and anxiously promised to take action.

Consequently, the train made an unscheduled stop at the next station where the nachalnik got off and entered the station building. She came back half an hour later and we moved on. An hour later we approached another station where this train didn't normally stop. This time, however, it began to slow down a few hundred meters before reaching the station. As we leaned out of the windows, we saw a line of uniformed men standing on the platform while a similar human chain occupied the other side of the tracks.

„They are going to arrest the gang!” - We rejoiced.

However, our delight was premature. Our travelling companions in the vestibule observed the same scene. They reacted quickly by leaving the moving train as nonchalantly as they had jumped onto it earlier. We watched them leaping off, rolling down the grassy embankment, standing up one by one, and moving into the forest that stretched along the tracks. One of them even waved back to us before disappearing into the trees. Since by this time we were very close to the station, the men in uniform must have also seen the escapees, but they didn't try to chase after them.

The train stopped at the station, and a few policemen mounted our coach. The nachalnik joined us too. It took a long time to write up the incident report to everyone's satisfaction. We realized that there was no chance of any positive result to come out of this, and now the train was two hours behind schedule.

As the nachalnik had rightly stated, we - transient foreign students - left with a memory, and she had to remain behind. We would never know what, if anything, happened to her later.

July 1951.

## 15

### MUMMIES

At the end of our first academic year we returned to Hungary for summer vacation. In Kiev, where we had to wait half a day for the Moscow-Budapest train connection, three of us - Béla, Anton and I - decided to go sightseeing in the city. Béla was interested in Egyptology. He had read that there was a museum in Kiev which had mummies on display, he wanted to visit it. Anton and I - having nothing better to do - decided to go along.

There were information kiosks at the main downtown intersections. We approached one to find out where to go. The girl running the one-person booth was apparently new to the job. She looked like a fresh graduate from a country school. When Béla told her his wish - to see mummies - she didn't seem to have the foggiest idea of what he was talking about. His accented, rudimentary Russian didn't facilitate the communication with a girl whose mother tongue was Ukrainian. Unruffled, Béla explained to her that mummies are dead people who died long time ago but remain preserved, and that you can look at them. The girl contemplated this information for a moment, and then her face lit up. She wrote down the name of the place - Pechers'ka Lavra - where we would find such things. She also gave us the number of the streetcar which would take us there.

The tram ran from the city centre through a very poor looking suburb. After a seemingly endless ride, we finally arrived at the terminus at the edge of a forest. The conductor explained to us that the place we were interested in was not very far off in the woods at the cliffs overlooking the Dnieper River.

A paved path led into the forest. Following it, we came to a group of buildings, some of them churches. Only one building was open. It was a museum. The description at its entrance said that the complex had been built in the twelfth century, and used to be a monastery. It had been partially destroyed in WW II. Until the present, only this single building had been rebuilt and opened to the public.

We didn't find the frescos and the few icons of the reconstructed edifice particularly interesting. To Béla's great disappointment there were no mummies to be seen. We turned around and started back toward the tram terminus. The trail was now busy with people - mostly old men and women. At one spot they left the paved path and walked into the forest.

„Where are these people going?” We wondered and decided to find out.

Following the strangers, we soon reached a tiny chapel. We entered it with everybody else. The church was very crowded, hot and smoky. Everyone stood while an Eastern Orthodox priest dressed in full regalia walked around the altar swinging a censer - a smoking incense burner - back and forth.

The fume from the incense and the respiration of the tightly packed crowd made the air stuffy and uncomfortable. We decided to leave right away, and noticing that nobody departed through the main entrance, but stepped out through a small side-door, that was how we also left the church.

Right across from the chapel there was a small nondescript building. The worshippers entered there.

‘It must be some kind of a meeting room.’ I thought.

We became puzzled as we stood there, watching the people, not knowing what to do next.

'How could that little house hold all those people? Nobody seems to come out. Let see what's inside!' We agreed upon this course of action after a short discussion.

As we approached the open door, a young man standing in front of it pushed us aside and declared:

"You are not allowed to enter here!"

We obviously looked strangers - much younger and clothed differently than the other arrivals. Being foreign students in a very dogmatic state, we didn't argue or even ask the reason of the prohibition.

While we were standing there - a few steps from the door - a young couple arrived. Both were stylishly dressed (by Russian standards) and looked and behaved like folks from the big city. When they tried to enter the door, they received the same reception from the young man that we had. Their reaction was quite different however.

"I am a Soviet citizen and have the right to enter any public place!" The man said in an elevated voice. „I am a reporter for (we didn't get the name of the publication) and we've come from Moscow, and we are going in! You better f... off!"

The young doorman disappeared through the door. He returned an instant later with a popa, a bearded middle-aged Pravoslav priest clad in long, black religious garment with the typical tall black hat on his head. Upon his questioning look, the reporter repeated his performance.

The priest didn't say a word, just indicated with a nod for the couple to follow him. We trailed behind them as if we belonged together.

Inside a rather small room, we found - to our surprise - only a few people. They were standing in front of a table loaded with tapers. The candles were brown, pencil thick and maybe 30 cm long. A woman sitting behind the table was selling them - one per person. Each pilgrim - because now I realized that this must be some kind of a shrine - proceeded with the purchased taper to the other side of the room where the candle was lit from an oil lantern hanging from the ceiling. The pilgrims continued to a staircase in the far wall, and descended into the darkness. The priest showed with his head that we should also buy tapers. However, when we approached the lantern to ignite them, he held us back, and instead, gave us a box of matches.

The flame of the lamp was apparently holy, reserved for believers only, and in the priest's mind we didn't belong to that category.



*An Orthodox priest of the shrine*

We slowly descended the stairs in single file. The gleam from our slim candles was too faint to illuminate the steps. However, by the time we reached the bottom, my eyes had begun to get used to the darkness. We entered a narrow corridor - less than a metre wide. Dozens and dozens of little flames were floating away from us along it in the otherwise complete darkness.

We didn't follow them. The priest turned off into an equally narrow, but empty side corridor that lead into a vacant underground chapel. Here he addressed us - for the first time - telling us that these catacombs had served as the final resting place of the monks of the monastery from its establishment in the mid-eleventh century until the nineteen twenties. There had been several saints among them whose remains had been embalmed. It had long been a tradition for believers to visit the deceased saints and pray in front of their coffins.

„I will lead you to one of them.” He said.

We left the chapel and entered a corridor populated with a single file of pilgrims. Each person walked close behind the other. They were so near that I expected the flame of a candle to ignite the clothing of the person in front.

The priest indicated that we should enter the human chain, and move at the pace of the crowd. We progressed slowly. There were series of recesses along the tunnel, staggered on both sides, sufficiently deep and long to hold a single dark coffin parallel to the corridor.

After a while we came to a section where people stopped in front of a coffin, and kneeled there for a short period. This coffin was covered with a glass plate to allow one to peek through. When I reached it, I saw a body inside dressed in a rich garment. The head of the corpse was covered with a splendid looking silvery hood embroidered with gold in an elaborate design. Only the hands of the dead - clasped in prayer - were exposed. They were dark brown, skin and bone, unlike those of a smoky skeleton. There was a plaque on the wall above the head - probably the name of the person. However, I was unable to read it because it was written in O-Cyrillic.

After passing this coffin, our guide veered off into a side corridor. This had the same arrangement of coffins as the previous passageway but there were no pilgrims passing through this one. We crossed several similar corridors. This part of the catacombs was apparently outside the main pilgrimage route. Then, at some distance ahead of us, I saw flickering lights descending from above.

‘It must be the staircase where we entered. Obviously, our guided tour is coming to an end.’ I thought.

I wished to spend more time exploring the catacombs. As we crossed another dark corridor, I suddenly turned into it quickly, followed closely by my friends who guessed my intentions right away. The priest and the couple from Moscow didn't notice our flight.

I was now in the lead. The corridor we followed looked even darker without the flames - no matter how faint - of the pilgrim companions. The coffins, resting silently in their alcoves on both sides as we passed, created a spooky atmosphere. We hurried along. I began to wonder:

‘What happens if we get lost?’

I reassured myself: As long as we followed a straight line, we could always retrace our steps.

Soon after, I saw - to my great relief - some flickering lights crossing the passage some distance ahead. We approached them. As I guessed, it was a file of pilgrims. When we reached them, we merged into the line. Now, we couldn't get lost, and neither would the priest ever find us. In the near darkness, we looked like all the others - dark figures with a faint light in hand.

We moved slowly with the queue in a nearly total silence. From time to time the column stopped as people knelt down in front of a saint's remains. One could hear the murmur of prayers there. This was also the only time when we could move ahead by stepping over the feet of the suplicants. Otherwise, passing was impossible. The labyrinth of narrow corridors and cross corridors seemed endless.

After a while the rows of dark coffins interspersed with the occasional brighter casket of a saint became monotonous, and the snail's pace we were proceeding annoying. By then I realized that we were moving back and forth along parallel corridors that were connected with short dark cross passages. It seemed possible to make shortcuts.

One problem was that we were not allowed to speak - at least nobody talked in the line - hence, I couldn't discuss my thoughts with my friends.

At the next intersection I just turned sideways. My friends followed me without hesitation, which suggested that they had been contemplating the same move for some time too. At the end of the dark passage we rejoined the queue of pilgrims. Our move was justified, we had gained time by the shortcut.

We repeated the manoeuvre a couple of times. Then, suddenly, a staircase appeared ahead of us. We ascended and came into a small room similar to the one we had started from at the entrance to the catacombs.

It felt great to see daylight again. I checked my watch. We had spent about two hours underground. A third of our candles had been consumed. The stubs of the tapers of the other pilgrims exiting from the stairway were only 2-3 cm long. This suggested that the pilgrims spent at least 5-6 hours down there.

We were still in the forest at the bank of the Dnieper river. But where exactly? We didn't know. However, by following the people emerging from the crypt, we got back to the tram terminal without any problem.

Although Béla hadn't found the Egyptian mummies he was looking for, our excursion turned out to be a very interesting and unique experience. We learned at first hand that the militant antireligious propaganda and persecution of the church during 30 years of communism, and 20 years of the most oppressive Stalinism, were unable to eliminate the religious faith of these people. It couldn't even stop them practising their belief in such a remarkable mass pilgrimage.

It was our great luck to encounter the young girl at the tourist information kiosk. She had probably visited the catacombs - perhaps as a child with her grandmother - and sent us there thanks to our difficulties communicating. An additional piece of luck was the accidental arrival of the arrogant Moscow couple which facilitated our entry into the catacombs.

We didn't know if this shrine was open all year around, or if we had arrived just at the right moment in the church calendar. Pechers'ka Lavra wasn't listed among the official tourist sites of the period. We were probably among the very few foreigners who visited the place during Stalin's lifetime. I later talked to Hungarian students who had studied in Kiev at this time, and they had never heard of the catacombs.

July 1951.

## 16

### A SUPPER WITH MY UNCLE

Uncle Paul, my father's younger brother, had been the mayor of our city - the fourth largest in Hungary - since the communist takeover in 1948. Prior to that, he had been the communist deputy for the district in the National Assembly. The relationship between the two brothers wasn't cordial. I had rarely seen my renowned uncle.

Upon returning for my first vacation from the Russian university, my aunt invited me for supper - the first ever with them - to hear about my experiences in the Soviet Union firsthand.

At this time, the summer of 1951, the living conditions in Hungary were very harsh. The rapid industrialization undertaken by the government, the accelerated war reparations extorted by the Russians, the forced collectivization of the agriculture, and the accelerated rearmament of the army along the Soviet model drained the country dry. There wasn't enough food, even with the ration cards that had been reintroduced a few months earlier. There were no industrially produced consumer products - textile, pots and pans, radio tubes, etc. - available either. Wages and salaries dropped as the result of the compulsory subscriptions for government bonds. Production norms for the workers rose continuously. My mother was bursting with complaints.

There was no sign of hardship at my uncle's place. Their spacious apartment was superbly furnished. The cold supper served was astonishingly rich. There was a big chunk of butter on a plate that weighed at least a kilo. My mother hadn't seen a single, standard 100g package in the stores for months. The salami, ham and boiled eggs laid out on the antique dining table contrasted sharply with the boiled potatoes and onions normally offered on the kitchen tables of my less prominent relatives when I visited them.

After a year of half-starvation in Russia, I could not refuse such a splendid supper, and ate heartily. However, as my stomach began to fill up, resentment toward my uncle started to prevail over my appetite and familial respectfulness. Obviously, none of this food could have come from any of the poorly supplied state stores at which my mother shopped. Once, my uncle had been a worker - a plumber in the city's Water Department - but now he was a member of a privileged party cadre enjoying exceptional benefits, like purchasing in special stores in the 'classless' socialistic regime.

After supper when the discussion turned to the topic of interest - the life in the Soviet Union - I was blunt about my opinion of the socialist system and its leadership in Russia. This criticism also applied indirectly to the Hungarian satellite regime. I described the Soviet living conditions as squalid. I recounted everything as I had encountered it in the realm of socialism, without any embellishment or attempt to cover up the misery that I had seen.

My uncle's face became sombre, and then, even more dismal as he listened to me. He was evidently ill at ease. He used to be called a 'linear cadre' behind his back - one who loyally followed all the twists of the party line without demur, like a horse fitted with 'blinkers' to avoid distraction. Now, I disturbed his make-believe political world. He obviously didn't want to hear what I was saying.

Disregarding her husband's mood my aunt probed deeper about Russian housing conditions. I told them that even the miserable situation which existed in Hungary after the war was luxurious compared to that found in the USSR. There, the common standard for a family of four was to live in one room and share the kitchen with two other families, while the bathroom and a toilet served four families.



My uncle couldn't take it any longer. He exploded.

He accused me of being a reactionary who choose to see only negative things in the socialist system.

"You were not sent there to report on the shortcomings but to learn how to build the future. Why don't you concentrate on the great achievements of the Soviet five-year plans, and on such items as the 'Davidov Project'?" He asked me.

This so called Davidov Project referred to the Ob River in Siberia, which flowed north to the Arctic Sea. The river was to be turned around and made to flow in a channel carved by nuclear explosions. When it reached the far South, it was to irrigate the deserts of Kazakhstan. The Hungarian press had reported on the progress of this plan regularly. In the Soviet Union however nobody had ever heard of it. The propaganda department of the Hungarian Communist Party must have concocted the entire story in their slavish efforts to glorify the Soviet Regime.

My uncle believed, or pretended to believe this canard, a component of the Soviet Potemkin complex. I looked at my relative with barely concealed distaste. There was nothing left to talk about any more. I thanked them for the supper and left.

I never saw my uncle again, neither before I escaped from Hungary, nor later when I returned on visits. I even declined attending their son's - my cousin Paul - wedding so I wouldn't have to meet him.

During the following 35 years, my uncle's political career had its ups and downs but he remained a loyal party member. Consequently, upon his death in 1986, he was rewarded with an honour plot in the city cemetery and was granted a state funeral. By that time the Davidov Project had long been forgotten by even the most loyal party cadres.

August 1951.

# 17

## KRIVROY ROG

Lyosha, my roommate, invited me to spend the October Revolution Holiday at his home, in Krivoy Rog, an iron ore-mining town, about 150 km from Dnepropetrovsk.

The proposed outing was tempting but I knew that the police would never give me a travel permit for a private trip. Foreign students were not allowed to leave the city except when the university requested it. I explained the problem to Lyosha.

He kept on insisting:

“Why do you need a police permit? We’ll go for just two days, and travel with a group of students who all know you. I’ll purchase the tickets and give them to the conductor. You stay quiet and nobody will ever know that you’re a foreigner.”

After repeated discussions I consented. I didn’t mention the plan to the other Hungarian students; I was afraid that they might raise the alarm.

On the big day Lyosha and I joined a group of 7-8 students in front of the railway station. Lyosha told them to leave me alone so that my foreign accent wouldn’t draw attention to me. I was nervous. If I were discovered, I would be in big trouble and I knew it.

Despite the relatively short distance of the trip, we had to change trains twice. On the first train we occupied a compartment by ourselves. The second train was already full of people when it pulled into the station. Our group had to disperse. I got a seat beside an old woman. Two of my friends sat on the opposite bench.

The babushka turned to me with curiosity and began to ask a series of questions in one unending drone. Where was I going? Was I a student? Which school did I attend? Etc. Then she stopped the monologue and waited for my answer. I remained silent. She restarted the questioning. I just kept looking straight ahead and pretended I couldn’t hear her. But she wouldn’t give up and continued talking to me.

I was desperate. Dimka, sitting opposite, enjoyed my discomfort tremendously. He looked at me mischievously, and then tapped the old woman’s knee. She turned toward him. Dimka tapped his temple with his index finger and nodded his head in my direction, indicating that I was a mental case. The babushka gave a deep sigh, and nodded understandingly.

“What a pity - she said - he seems like such a nice boy.”

Lyosha could barely control himself from laughing. I could have killed Dimka right then and there for his ‘helpful’ explanation.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. It was raining when we descended from the train. We had to walk a long distance to Lyosha’s home, mostly on the muddy shoulder of the road. The part of the town we crossed looked depressing, like most Russian cities in the rain. Its only distinguishing feature was the prevailing bright red colour of the mud. It originated in the iron oxide dust emitted by the ore processing facilities. We passed big piles of rocks which indicated that there were mine pits within the city limits.

Lyosha’s mother lived in a small, detached house. She was a pensioner. His father had died some time ago. Lyosha was an only child. His mother was pleased to see us, and wanted to hear her son’s news immediately, but we had to spend the first half hour cleaning the mud from ourselves.

Then I could finally look around. The house had a minimum of simple furniture. The lack of sufficient income in the household was in clear evidence. On the windowsill there were a number of plants growing in half rusted tins. Obviously, there wasn't enough canned food purchased in this household to allow replacement of the pots. There was no running water, and only the simplest outdoor facility - a hole in the floor of the wooden shack.

The mother served us lunch - homemade borscht. It was the first one I'd tasted outside a restaurant or student eatery. It was delicious compared to the institutional dishes. We spent the rest of the day in the house. Lyosha told stories about life at the university and his mother listened to him with adoration. She appeared to be very proud of her student son.

By evening I came to realize that my company was a liability to my companion. We could not go to any parties or visit any friends of his because of my clandestine presence. Normally, the greatest fun on a student's visit home was the attendance of parties, and I had deprived him of this entertainment. I had an excuse; it was Lyosha who insisted on my coming with him.

By next morning it had stopped raining. We could go to the city centre to look around. This appeared to be only a little better than the district I had seen earlier. The predominance of the red colour on the pavement and the walls and roofs of the buildings indicated that this must be a very dusty place in dry, windy weather. After lunch we headed back to the railway station. There we met the same gang of students we had come with. They were full of stories of great parties they had attended the night before. My feeling of guilt for spoiling Lyosha's evening returned.

On the next train - this time we had to take only two - one of our travel companions was a tall, blond girl whom I knew at sight. She was a student at the Chemical Engineering Institute located on the same street as our dormitory. I liked her looks, and this would have been an excellent chance to meet her, except my predicament of enforced muteness. I observed that she also cast a wondering glance or two toward me. Our interests were mutual perhaps but at the wrong time and the wrong place. The chance passed. I never saw her again. When we descended from the train and left the station in Dnepropetrovsk I was greatly relieved. My adventure passed without an incident. But when I told my story to the other Hungarians, they all considered me crazy. The consensus was:

"If you had been caught travelling illegally, you would have been expelled and lost your scholarship!"

Considering that I hadn't even had a very good time, I decided not to take risks like this again.

November 1951.

## 18

### I PASSED IT

In the first year all foreign students - Poles, Romanians and Hungarians - were congregated in a special class. We had arrived knowing no Russian, and were not able to keep up with the regular courses. The lectures for the 'Foreign Class' started out at a slow rate and accelerated during the second term. By the end of the academic year we could all understand and speak Russian reasonably well, and were academically at par with the Russian students.

At the beginning of the second year we entered regular classes. I joined - not by choice - the Silikatchik (refractory) Course in the Faculty of Chemical Engineering. This group, in contrast to those in metallurgy, included many girls. Our class had 18 females and 6 males, and hence, we were the envy of the rest of the student population. The metallurgical groups, although far more numerous, had one or maybe two girls if they were 'lucky'.

In the analytical chemistry lab session, which ran for six hours one day per week, I was the only male amid twelve females, thanks to the infinite wisdom of the Faculty Administration. The Russian language has distinctive gender differentiation in both grammar and vocabulary. It happened - at least at the beginning - that after being exposed to female talk for six hours, I was 'talking female' upon returning to my dormitory. Such error always caused great hilarity among my roommates.

Being the odd member of this female lab group was not as exciting as outsiders believed. The general mental level of the group was low. The smarter girls were - unfortunately - in a parallel group. My mates spent most of their time gossiping. While I enjoyed analytical chemistry, they showed little interest in it. Our lecturer and lab supervisor, Assistant Professor Zhurin, a jovial, middle-aged man was a good pedagogue, and made the lab sessions interesting, at least to me. The rest of the group usually seemed to be bored however. They could barely wait for the lab sessions to end.

At the conclusion of the first term we had to take a pass/no-pass test where one had to analyse a solution containing 5-6 unknown elements. The qualitative test, if meticulously completed, wasn't difficult. Nobody had ever failed it. The current test was scheduled for the Thursday before the term break for which everybody was eagerly waiting.

At eight o'clock in the morning Prof. Zhurin reviewed the lab set-up and made sure that everybody had all the necessary equipment and reagents, and had received an individually numbered sample flask. Two lab assistants had prepared these solutions on the preceding day. Zhurin gave a little pep talk mentioning that the full procedure should take 5-6 hours. After leaving now, he would return at noon. If anyone encountered a problem, they could call on the lab assistants in the preparation room.

The work began in silence but the peace didn't last long. After some small talk the girls became involved in an excited conversation about the upcoming two-week vacation. The trips and parties planned were discussed in detail while the analytical procedures received less and less attention.

At nine o'clock Nelly, one of my group mates, decided to ask for a different filter paper. She went across to the prep lab to find the assistants. To her utter surprise there was nobody in the room. The assistants had probably gone out for coffee. Nelly, not a very bright student, was fast to take advantage of the situation. She knew that the examen-sample record book must be

somewhere around. She began to search for it feverishly. In no time she had located the notebook in a drawer. Nelly - electrified - rushed over to the testing lab with the prize. Everybody assembled around her, and noted down their sample's specific composition. I did the same. Upon completion, Nelly replaced the notebook in the drawer before the lab assistants returned.

From this moment on, practically all work stopped in the testing lab. The girls, happy with the God-given short cut in the tedious procedure, gathered in a group and gossiped for hours. I decided to continue my analytical work as if nothing happened. Although this wasn't strictly true, since I knew the composition of my sample, I also knew what to expect at each stage of the analytical procedure. The cascading precipitation/filtering and drying steps were much easier to apply.

Zhurin returned at the specified time. He looked surprised on walking through the lab to find most of the group congregated in one corner and chatting cheerfully. He entered his office but didn't say anything. The girls immediately began to line up in front of his door to report their completed test results. After the second perfect score the professor realized that something fishy had occurred. Still, one by one, he seemed to accept the reports. The girls went home happily.

Only Galya and I continued to remain at our respective work stations. She was a commuter and preferred to stay in the warm lab rather than wait in the cold station for her transport. But she was busy with something other than the analytical test.

At around one o'clock I finished my work. Since my aluminium precipitation looked very weak, I decided not to include this element in my test report despite its recorded presence. Instead, I enclosed an element which - although not on the record - was indicated by my analytical procedure, obviously erroneously. Hence, my report contained four correctly identified elements, one erroneous one, and one omission. Since this examen didn't carry marks, I believed that correctness wasn't important. Zhurin looked at my data and accepted it. I went home.

The next day there was a bulletin on the faculty notice board. All of the students of my group had failed the test. Except me. The others had to repeat the analysis under special supervision in the middle of the term break. This put an end to many beautifully planned trips. Those who were from out of town couldn't return home before the completion of the new test.



*The Metallurgical Institute*

During the next term Zhurin never missed a chance to rub it in that, as far as he was concerned, there was only one honest student in the group, one who preferred diligent work to cheating. These remarks annoyed the girls very much. First, because they reminded them of their spoiled vacation, and because they knew very well that I had also copied the test results.

However, they couldn't and wouldn't tell that to the professor.

December 1951.

## 19

### CORN PICKING

„Saturday, all classes and labs will be cancelled. All students, except females and foreigners, will report to the main entrance of the university at 8.00 a.m. for corn picking at collective farms. Transportation and meals will be provided. You will return Sunday afternoon.” The announcement said.

„You are lucky: You don't have to go.” Vovka, my roommate, exclaimed with obvious envy in his voice:

I shrugged my shoulders.

„But I would like to go and see a real kolkhoz rather than the 'showcase' we visited last spring.” I said.

„If you are so crazy, why don't you come with us? Ivan Petrovich (assistant lecturer) will be in charge of our group. He won't mind your presence.” Vovka suggested.

Saturday morning, Béla, my co-patriot and classmate, and I met my roommates at the designated spot. Ivan Petrovich's eyebrows ran up to the middle of his forehead when he saw us. However, since three Russian students didn't show up, he agreed to take us. Our presence helped to improve the attendance record.

About 20 of us students climbed into the back of an open truck. Ivan Petrovich sat with the driver. Our destination was a collective farm located somewhere on the east side of the Dnieper River about a three-hour drive from the city. Ivan Petrovich told us that our group was the only one going there.

We crossed the makeshift bridge that replaced the one blown up during the war. Now, eight years later, the 'temporary' bridge was in the last stages of disintegration. I hoped that it would survive a few more days. On the other side of the river we entered the Moscow-Simferopol highway. It was the only divided, four-lane highway in the Soviet Union in 1952. It was a copy of Hitler's autobahns. It allowed Stalin easy travel to his Black Sea summer place. It was known that the Generalissimo hated, or was afraid of, flying, and that he had always been driven anywhere in a limousine, even as far as Crimea.

This was the first time that I had ever seen a road like this. I found it very impressive - smoothly paved, furnished with countless over and under-passes. We drove on it for perhaps an hour before turned off onto a side road. The paved exit transformed immediately into a dirt road. Even that didn't last long. The track just petered out. From then on, we moved toward our destination - whose location was known only to our driver - across a featureless plain covered with stubble of the last wheat crop. When the driver encountered the occasional ditch, he ran parallel with it until he found a spot where he could ford it. After crossing, he switched back and returned to the point of the first turn. From there on it was cross-country again until the next ditch. There the driver repeated the same manoeuvre. This type of navigation is simple if the driver has a good sense of distance and direction. Unfortunately, it is not a gift of everyone. After several hours of field hopping and not seeing a single building or human being anywhere, I began to feel uncomfortable about our driver's navigational skills.

„Perhaps the supposedly straight line of our travel is actually an arc of a large circle?” I wondered.

Standing in the bouncing truck for so many hours was exhausting. What made the trip even worse was my hunger. In order to avoid missing the departure I skipped breakfast, and it was now already well beyond lunchtime. We stopped several times for breaks only because the driver had to relieve himself. At the next stop my fellow travellers rushed at him like angry beasts, and accused him of not knowing the way. They were apparently as hungry as I was, and their frustration expressed itself in high decibel cursing. Even after two years in this country, I remained impressed with the richness of Russian curses. The shouting match ended only when the driver jumped back into the cab, ready to leave half of the group stranded behind in the waste steppe. There were no more stops from then on.

Late in the afternoon we finally reached a hutor, a single row of 5-6 houses. After some rapid exchanges between the driver and the inhabitants in Ukrainian - which gave us a chance to quench our thirst at the public well - we took off again. It was the wrong village. Now, we headed in a different direction.

One hour passed, followed by a second. There was nothing but empty fields around. Finally, as the dusk started to settle in, we reached a cultivated region - fields of corn and alfalfa.

'We must be near our destination!' I rejoiced.

No such luck! There were an increasing number of tractor tracks on the ground, but no village. It was getting dark. The truck lights provided the driver barely enough illumination to follow the tracks in the dirt.

At around 8.00 p.m. we entered another hutor, and stopped in front of a large building. There was nobody in the street, and the building was dark and apparently deserted. Our driver went into a nearby house - he seemed to know the place - and came back with a man. He was the president of the kolkhoz.

An angry argument followed between the official and Ivan Petrovich. My Ukrainian was too poor to follow it, or to even understand the substance of the quarrel. However, the loud cursing of my fellow students made it clear that things didn't look good. Finally Vovka explained in Russian:

"This is the right kolkhoz location-wise, but the wrong one organizationally. They don't need our help with the corn harvest. They have already finished it. The management never asked for anyone to come here. The whole business is a bureaucratic blunder."

Ivan Petrovich asked the president to feed us at least. The chief dismissed the request offhandedly.

"The village is asleep. It is too late to organize anything. You are too many extra mouths at such a short notice." He said.

After Ivan Petrovich threatened him with an official charge of sabotaging higher education, the kolkhoz president finally relented, and was willing to compromise.

He began to give curt, military like instructions - orders. He must have been a demilitarised officer.

"You will be allocated to various families for the night. No food will be provided tonight. Tomorrow, you will be driven to the fields where you will get breakfast. You have to strip corn husks during the day. Lunch will be provided. In the afternoon you shall return to the city."

We were divided into three groups and marched off to three different houses. As we entered the one assigned to us, we slumped into total darkness. The hutor had no electricity, although it was located within 100 km the largest Soviet hydroelectric station of that time. The occupants had no kerosene lamps or candles either; at least, nobody was willing to light one. The air in the room felt very stale. We lay down on some carpets on the dirt floor. We kept our winter coats and even our boots on, and squeezed together for extra warmth. Despite the discomfort and hunger I soon fell asleep. I was too tired not to.



In the morning, when the first light began to filter through the room's single, tiny window, our driver came and woke us up. He announced that we had to leave the house at once to allow the inhabitants to rise.

I looked around in the room. In the faint light I could now distinguish a big brick oven with some people laying on it, and a few beds around the walls, occupied with more bodies, mostly children.

We left the house and stood in the yard. The house looked diminutive from the outside. The entrance door, in the middle of the front wall, led into a small vestibule, which had hand tools piled up in its corners. The vestibule had three other doors, one in each wall. The one opposite the entrance opened into a dark room, probably a kitchen. On the left side was the room where we'd spent the night, while on the opposite side was a barn holding some animals, probably a cow or two.

'People and animals under one roof - very progressive - this must be a real kolkhoz.' I thought.

As we were standing there, people started to emerge from the room. One, two....six...eight, all adults; the children didn't come out. The number of persons who had slept in that single room during the night was astonishing: at least eight kolkhozniks, six students, and X number of children. How did we escape suffocation? Compared to this, the barn compartment looked quite airy for a couple of cows.

I had to terminate my idle reflections. The truck had arrived to take us to the fields.

At our designated workstation a huge pile - or a mountain rather - of corn in the cobs was waiting for us. There was no sign of any food however. Our mood became ugly. Nobody had had a bite for at least 24 hours. The decision came unanimously:

„No work until they feed us!”

At around 11.00 a.m. we finally saw a tractor with a trailer heading toward us. In the trailer there were two women and a pot. The pot was full of soup but it looked awfully small to feed 20 students plus Ivan Petrovich and the truck driver, all in an advanced stage of starvation. The women had brought only half as many plates as was required. Béla and I got one wooden bowl for the two of us. It was only slightly bigger than an ordinary plate, and it seemed obvious that there would be no refills from that small pot.

Then came the final blow. One of the women gave me a regular aluminium spoon, while Béla received a small wooden ladle with a holding capacity of perhaps ten regular spoons. I realized that I had lost the war before it even started. Knowing my friend, a glutton at the best of the times, I had no chance for a half decent share of the soup.

Sure enough, when the kolkhoz woman filled our bowl from the pot, Béla rushed to dip his ladle into it. The bowl became half empty. Then he tried to swallow this giant portion in one gulp. He choked! As he was gasping for air and coughing at the same time, he jettisoned the contents of his mouth back into the bowl in a full arc. I looked at him with great disgust and without the slightest compassion. He not only tried to out-eat me, but even spat into our common bowl. However, I realized that this wasn't the time for ordinary sensitivity. I started to spoon out the remainder of the soup as fast as I could before Béla could regain his vigour. When his coughing subsided there was no more soup left for him. Both of us, and all the others of the troop, felt hungrier after the meal than before.

After the repast we just climbed into the truck and headed back toward the city. The hardship of the last 24 hours had apparently improved the homing instinct of our driver. In two hours we reached the autoroute and in another two hours we dismounted in front of the university. We all rushed into the student cafeteria that luckily was still open. Finally, we had a decent size meal. I lost any interest of visiting real collective farms for a long time.

October 1952.

## 20

### SKI CAMP

We were listening to Tonya's account of her ski holiday. She was the athlete of the class - a member of the university's swimming team. The previous winter she had attended a cross-country ski camp with her teammates in Vologda, about 400km north of Moscow.

As Tonya described it, the camp was set in an endless pine forest with no other human habitation around, just snow-covered trees above and knee-deep snow below. The things she remembered most from the two weeks spent there were the eerie silence and the biting cold on the trails.

As she talked about it, I doubted that she had really enjoyed the vacation. However, she said she signed up for the trip again this year. I expressed my envy of her good fortune. She looked at me speculatively and said:

"Why don't you come with us? I think we could squeeze you in."

I wondered. Would the sport club accept me? Would the university administration agree to it? Would the police allow me on a trip like that? The whole thing seemed very farfetched.

However, Tonya insisted that if I really wanted to go she would ask the trainer about taking me on. We left it like that.

A couple of days later Tonya informed me that the sport club had agreed to take me along. That was good news, but I still remained very sceptical about the whole affair, because foreigners required police permits to leave the city, and I hadn't heard of anybody who had received one for a vacation trip.

I went - without much hope - to the Central Police Station to see the officer in charge of foreigners. The man listened to my petition as if I had come from the Moon. He obviously hadn't encountered many requests like mine. This bureaucrat's normal task was collecting the passports of new arrivals, and returning them with newly issued Russian identification documents a few days later. Now, he was faced with this bizarre demand for a travel permit. He was obviously uneasy. But he didn't refuse my petition out of hand. He told me that I had to obtain a letter requesting the travel permit from the university administration.

I returned to the Institute and went right to the top - the rector's office.

"Docent Isayenko, the rector, is out of town but his stand-in, Dr. Starodubov, is in. Are you sure you want to see him?" The secretary asked me with great hesitation in her voice.

It was unusual for a student to ask for an interview with either of these VIPs. Especially with the latter, who was also a member of the Ukrainian Upper Soviet, and as such a much more eminent political personage than the rector.

I assured the secretary that my business was important enough to approach the big man. She was still reluctant but since I was a foreign student she decided to bend the general rule and announce me to the boss.

Dr. Starodubov met me with a friendly smile. He appeared to be a pleasant person. When I presented my case to him, he said there was no problem. I should come back after lunch, and the secretary would give me the letter required by the police.

When I returned at the designated hour, the secretary told me that Dr. Starodubov wanted to have a word with me. I knew that my case was lost. This talk must mean refusal.

Sure enough, the important man began by telling me that Vologda is located in the far North. January is very cold there. The ski camp is isolated. If any accident happened, it would be difficult to reach a hospital. All things considered, he felt that it would be better for my personal safety if I stayed in Dnepropetrovsk, close to the university, during the term vacation. I could go skating daily on the river which is just as good exercise as skiing, he said.

Obviously, he had called the police after I left him, and had been told to refuse my request. A man who held one of the highest offices in the Republic had to follow the instructions of a lowly police bureaucrat.

December 1952.

## 21

### ON THE FROZEN RIVER

In 1952 the winter arrived late in Dnepropetrovsk. When it finally came, it crept in as through the back door. There were no blowing winds, or swirling snow, only the drop in temperature. At first the mercury fell slowly, but after a couple of days, it plunged. Television didn't exist yet, not in Russia, and we had no radio which could have explained where the severe cold front had come from - out of the icy expanses of the North Pole, or from the snowy wastes of Siberia.

From the window of the mechanical drafting room, on the top floor of the university, I watched the Dnieper River form a shiny armour of ice. From this distance the new surface looked like a perfect mirror. It reflected the weak rays of the morning sun right into my eyes. I had never observed this before. I hoped that the still weather would last until the weekend, and that I might be able to skate on this giant - and from a distance - perfect skating rink.

I had always dreamed of skating across the river to the chain of islands where the Koma River joined the Dnieper. In the fall and spring we had often visited those sandy shoals by rowboat. At those times of the year the islands were enveloped in dense green bushes and willow trees. I had always hoped to see the same islands in winter. The ice on the river, however, had usually been too rough and unsuitable for skating. Crossing on foot couldn't be a choice - the islands lay at least two kilometres from our shore. Treading on the bleak and windswept, icy expanse for hours wasn't attractive.

When I got up Sunday morning, there was still no wind, though it felt very nippy. The temperature must have been in the minus twenties. I decided to postpone my departure for the skating expedition until after lunch, hoping that it would warm up somewhat in the meantime.

At noon it still felt quite cold, but I couldn't delay the adventure any longer. I dressed up as warmly as possible without losing my freedom of movement. I walked down to the river bank facing the islands. There were no other skaters around. The few students who preferred to skate on natural ice choose a sheltered lagoon further south.

By the time I had changed my boots for skates and tightened the laces, my bare fingers had become painfully numb. I hurriedly put on my mitts, threw my boots tied by the laces over my shoulder, and stepped out onto the ice. It was crystal-clear. One could see the stones on the river bed through the ice. Judging by the air bubbles entrapped here and there it was 2-3 cm thick, strong enough to support a car, and would certainly not pose any danger of crashing under me.

I skated around in circles a few times to warm up my skating muscles. The ice was very hard - the blades barely scratched its surface. I tied the flaps of my fur cap under my chin, pulled my scarf over my mouth, and was ready to start the jaunt. I headed straight toward the chain of islands looming in the distance.

I moved fast on the smooth surface until - at about a quarter of a kilometre from the shore - an unexpected crack in the ice blocked my way. The gap wasn't very wide, a meter perhaps, but it stretched as far as I could see, running parallel to the shore. The crack must have formed by the contraction of the ice as the temperature plummeted, and the current apparently prevented the formation of new ice in the gap. One could see the greenish water flowing slowly between the rugged edges of the fissure.

What to do now? I wondered. A better skater would probably not have hesitated to leap across the gap, but I had never tried to jump. I didn't feel that the time and place were right for my first attempt. Disappointedly, I began to skate along the crack toward the city, in the distance ahead of me.

I traveled only a few hundred meters when I saw a plank lying across the crack. I stopped to take a closer look. The board was just wide enough to allow one to walk across. It could not have been there very long because it wasn't frozen to the ice. The inhabitants of the fishing village, which lay just across the river, had probably laid the board across in the morning on their way to the city's kolkhoz market. We had visited this island settlement by boat. One could usually buy milk - a delicacy unavailable in the city - there.

The locals having had a lot of experience with winter crossings, probably carried planks with them to bridge fissures encountered on the way.

I gingerly stepped onto the plank and over the crack, and then resumed my trip toward the islands. The ice remained mirror-smooth all the way. I finally reached the first spot of land. Narrow and twisting channels, now frozen, separated the half a dozen small islets. Here and there trees protruded from the ice forming a natural obstacle course.

I circled the first island, and continued sliding through the channels separating the half a dozen small islets. It was sheer delight.

After a while my leg muscles began to ache. This was my first skating session of the year, and my legs weren't accustomed to the exercise yet. I sat down on a frozen log to rest. The air was perfectly still. There was complete silence. My rest period however couldn't last long. It was getting noticeably colder by the minute. After I had stopped moving I immediately sensed the cold creeping over me. Also, it was getting late; the sun was touching the horizon. It was time to return.

I headed straight toward the spot on the bank where I had descended to the river. By the time I reached the crack in the ice, the sun was gone. The water stream looked dark, and sharply contrasted in the twilight with the white edges of the ice cover. I turned toward the city and followed the fissure as I had done earlier on the opposite side of the crack. I carefully stayed a safe distance away from the fissure.

After a while I began to feel uneasy. I surmised with apprehension that I had passed the spot where the plank was supposed to be. I was already too close to the city - its lights were blinking on the bank across the crack.

What could have happened? Had the returning villagers picked up the board and taken it with them? What would I do now? If the idea of jumping the crack was too scary in daylight, now I found it more terrifying. It was almost dark, I was tired, and my legs were aching. I cursed myself for undertaking the whole adventure in cold weather like this, late in the day, and, worst of all, alone. I decided to turn around and retrace my tracks with the faint hope that the plank was still there, but I had somehow missed it on first looking.

This time, I skated slowly while scrutinizing the edge of the ice with painful concentration. I had already covered a good distance, but there was no plank. Then suddenly, I noticed a dark streak across the water. I fixed my sight on it - like a starved hawk at a field mouse - and slowly moved closer. It was my plank bridge. I was ready to scream for joy.

The board was completely enveloped in ice. During the day, vapour from the open channel condensed on it and froze. A short while ago when I was skating in the opposite direction, there was apparently not enough contrast in the dim light to allow me to distinguish the ice-covered plank from the edge of the ice, and I had missed it.

I slowly trotted over the plank. Upon reaching the other side, I sighed with great relief. But there was no time to rest. It was quite late. I restarted skating toward the optimum safety of the shore. I recalled with some irony the advice of the assistant rector a few weeks earlier;

"Skating on the river is much safer than skiing in the northern woods."

A couple of days later a storm came which brought heavy snow. High drifts formed on the ice in the river and rendered further skating impossible. Actually, I never had a second opportunity to skate on the Dnieper. Consequently, my trip to the islands remained a sole and cherished experience despite its stressful ending.

December 1952.

## 22

### THE STAG BEETLE

It was a perfect specimen, a shiny, black, and very much live male stag beetle of the family Lucanidae. It was about ten centimetres long - half of it antlers. I had to hold it by the neck to prevent it pinching my finger or hand in its mandible-like antlers. I knew that if I mishandled the creature, those pincers could inflict a painful pinch. When I was a child of perhaps five, a beetle like this had accidentally grasped my finger. The tongs had penetrated right to the bone, and my father had had hard a time forcing them apart. The painful memory still haunts me.

This Sunday, during our field practice in Chasov Yar, I went for a stroll in the forest not far from our location. I found a stag beetle at the base of a large oak tree. I decided to show the impressive looking insect to my friends. Since I had no box or bag with me, I had to carry it carefully between my fingers so that it couldn't pinch me all the way to my room. There I emptied a dental powder box - Russians preferred tooth powder to tooth paste. It was a metallic container whose lid snapped open when its sides were pressed. The box was slightly undersized for my captive, and I had to push it down flat before I could close the cover. I placed the box on my bed pillow and soon forgot about it.

After supper, three girls, Tonia, Valia and Ducia, fellow students, came over to our place to play cards. We settled around the table, in front of my bed. My roommate, Vanya, wanted to play also. The game was limited to four players, so Tonia volunteered to sit on my bed and wait for her turn in the next match.

Very soon we were so captivated by the cards that we completely forgot about Tonia. She became bored. She looked around to find something to entertain herself, and noticed the box lying on my pillow. Many people, especially girls, stored small jewellery and mementoes in boxes like this because of their attractive appearance. Tonia being inquisitive by nature decided to peek at the contents of my box on the sly. She picked it up, and when nobody was looking in her direction, she snapped its cover open.

The moment its confinement had ceased, the beetle reared up in a flash and took a defensive posture by stretching its huge antlers wide open. The unexpected spectacle terrified Tonia. She let out a scream and with an instinctive flick of her hand sent the box flying across the table. As the box and the beetle flew through the air, they separated into two orbits. The box fell with a loud clatter in the middle of the table while the insect, still in the air, opened its wings - all four of them - which instantly tripled its size. The small, black unidentified flying object transformed itself into a scary vampire, right in front of our eyes and only centimetres from our faces.

For moment we were all equally petrified. Then the two girls, Valia and Ducia, became hysterical. They leapt from their chairs and stampeded out of the room, out of the house, and into the street in wild panic. Tonia - still screaming - followed them closely.

At first, I didn't understand what had happened. I was just as stunned as everybody else in the room. However, seeing the empty box on the table, I was quickly able to reconstruct the sequence of events, although by that time, in the confusion, the insect had disappeared. It probably escaped through the open window.

I tried to explain to Vanya what had happened. The war veteran, who had fought the Nazis in Berlin, didn't take my account with grace. He was probably ashamed that an insect could scare him, the war hero, so much. He gave me a stern lecture on the idiocy of bringing creatures like that into the house.

I walked over to see the girls, and to explain to them what had happened. I found my co-students in a lamentable nervous state. They wouldn't listen or talk to me.

The evening turned out to be a complete disaster for all except the stag beetle which probably flew back into the forest and enjoyed its hard won freedom - hopefully to the end of its natural life.

June 1953.



## 23

### MINERALOGY EXAMINATION

Mineralogy was my weakest subject at university. I had always had great difficulty trying to memorize unrelated, meaningless words, as the names of minerals appeared to me to be. In addition, and even greater, problem was Professor Eremov who taught the course. He was known to be by far the worst lecturer at the engineering school. Since there were no mineralogy textbooks available, taking lecture notes - the standard Soviet teaching method - was the only means of building an information source. But this didn't work with Prof. Eremov. His lectures were completely incomprehensible - not only to me but to all my classmates also. His sentences, if you could call the haphazard collections of words delivered, which often didn't include verbs or even nouns, made no sense. We had all given up taking notes after the first session with him.

When the examen time had approached, I felt that any effort to study mineralogy would be a complete waste of time. Therefore, I didn't attend any of the pre-examination sessions, in which the rest of my class slavishly practiced mineral identification of samples in boxes and boxes of marked rocks. My reasoning for this unusual approach was simple. The oral test consisted of three parts: crystallography - the identification and classification of wooden models of crystals; petrography - the examination of minerals under a microscope; and mineralogy - the identification of unknown pieces of rock.

Crystallography was a matter of good visual inspection and sheer logic. I knew that I would have no problem there. Petrography was iffy, depending on the kind of luck I had drawing the slide. Mineralogy, on the other hand, would surely be a grand zero. I hoped the average of the three marks would pull me through.

The big day arrived. During oral examen three students shared a room with the professor. One was on the rack, answering the questions. The next was listening and trying to discern the professor's examination technique, and the third, the latest entrant, worked on his or her crystal and mineral slide identification.

My turn to enter the examen room arrived. I drew the crystal model and the petrography slide. It took only a few minutes to establish the degree of symmetry of the crystal faces and define the crystal's class from the tables on the wall. The name of the mineral slide didn't look promising. I was not sure if I would be able to describe and identify the specimen properly under the microscope.

In the meantime, I turned my attention to the student who had just begun her examination.

Zoya Nikitina was an average student. But she was in trouble right from the beginning of her test. Her identification of the crystal model turned out to be wrong. It was apparently very much so, because Eremov was peering annoyed at the sweating coed. Discouraged, Zoya moved to the microscope sitting between her and the professor. She tried to install the slide, and to set the illumination. She was extremely clumsy - used the wrong knobs and wasn't able to get the specimen in focus. Eremov reached the limit of his patience. He turned toward me suddenly and told me to set up the microscope for Zoya.

The request came as a surprise. It was very unusual for a professor to involve one student in the examen of another. But Professor Eremov's teaching habits would never be called normal under the best circumstances. I did what he asked me to do.

„What are you supposed to do next?” The professor asked the coed.

Zoya was at loss. She didn't seem to know, or to recall the standard procedure of a routine analysis.

„What is she supposed to do?” Eremov turned again to me.

„Start to check for twining with a gypsum filter.” I answered.

The hint didn't help Zoya. She couldn't do it. Eremov's face became red. He started to shout at her.

„How did you dare to appear for the examination when you don't know the most elementary things about the subject. Get out of here at once!”

The poor girl - crying loudly by now - picked up her examen record booklet and left. I became very tense. After this precedent my chances for a favourable, or at least a tolerable outcome dropped considerably. I moved to the seat next to the professor and handed him the crystal model with the sheet detailing my analysis. He glanced at the paper and moved it to the side. It must have been correct - as I had presumed.

Then I moved to install my slide under the microscope. Eremov stopped me.

„Let's consider petrography completed by helping that idiot colleague of yours. Move to the mineral display.” He told me.

Somewhat relieved by this unexpected turn of events, I walked to the table with a large tray on its top. The tray contained dozens and dozens of minerals. I nervously bit my lips in expectation of the unavoidable fiasco.

„Pick out anthophyllite.” The professor instructed me.

I had no idea what this mineral was, or how to recognize it. But I began to scrutinize the content of the tray carefully as if looking for it. After a proper pause I declared that I couldn't see it. If I picked up something what obviously wasn't anthophyllite, I would display my ignorance of two minerals at the same time.

„Sure, you can't see it because it isn't there.” Eremov said with glee in his voice.

„The bastard is playing one of his dirty tricks on me!” I thought bitterly, but said nothing.

„Pick out sphalerite.” The new instruction came.

I repeated my previous performance. However, his reaction this time was an annoyed shaking of his head.

„Take a better look!” He said.

I scrutinized the box again with the same conclusion. The professor - clearly annoyed by this time - came to the table and peered into the tray. Then, he took a more careful look.

„But I clearly remember placing it in last night.” I heard him murmuring under his breath.

„Pick out limonite!” He said to me menacingly.

Now, limonite, the canary-yellow iron oxide ore, is recognizable even to an idiot. I had already known this mineral before I entered the course. I picked the outstandingly visible chunk of rock triumphantly from the tray.

The professor returned to his desk, wrote something in my examination record book, closed it, handed it to me, and said:

„Have a nice vacation.”

The torture was over. I couldn't believe my luck in this unusual sequence of events. I walked out of the room. In the corridor a group of my classmates stood waiting for their turn. Knowing the sad outcome of Zoya's examination, they were anxious to learn how it went with me. I just handed over my record book to one of them without saying a word. Ivan, the receiver, opened it, and cried out:

„He got an ‘Excellent!’”

His announcement stunned me as much as it did my fellow students. I couldn't believe that I had received the best mark for a subject of which I was completely ignorant. The group around me knew that I hadn't studied for the examination - I hadn't attended a single practice session. They were stupefied. I didn't feel relaxed enough to try to relate the events which had taken place minutes earlier. They could hear all about it from the guy who was tested after me and consequently witnessed my freak luck.

I left, looking smug but happy, if still confused.

April 1954.

## 24

### LIDA

One Sunday morning Béla dropped by my room for no particular reason - I thought. After some general conversation he mentioned that he and Sveta, his current girlfriend, were planning to go to the movies in the evening. Lida, her friend, would also join them. Would I want to come along? The invitation was unexpected. Sveta and Lida were our classmates, and Sveta and I didn't particularly like each other. Lida's name didn't strike a spark either. She was married and had a son. She had not been of interest to me at all.

Béla, seeing my obvious lack of enthusiasm about his proposal, added that Lida had specifically called for my company. That surprised me. Why would she do that? I wondered. Was it worth finding it out? I pondered further. I had nothing planned for the evening. I wouldn't lose anything by going out with them, so I accepted the invitation.

We met an hour before the show and decided to take a walk in an adjacent park to pass the time. Lida and I remained behind the other two. After a few minutes of light chat, she asked me:

"Tibor, do you know that I have a son?"

"Of course." I said.

"And do you know that I have recently had an abortion?"

"No, nobody told me that." But why would it concern me anyway? I wondered.

Then Lida began to complain about her husband, Yuri, who was a student at the Mining Institute. I had met him once or twice but never spoken to him. She continued:

"It was his fault that I got pregnant right at the beginning of our marriage. That made passing exams very difficult. My more recent pregnancy was also due to his carelessness. The abortion was very traumatic. I feel that I have to teach him a lesson."

I wondered where she had been at the time when she got pregnant since she was convinced that it had been totally her husband's fault. But she shocked me out of my contemplative mood quickly by continuing:

"Tibor, I know that you were attracted to me at one time. I recall that in the second year you had liked to seat with Tonia and me in the big lecture hall. Do you still feel that way?"

"What the hell is she talking about?" I wondered.

It was true that two years earlier I had often sought their company. But the object of my attention, which didn't last long, was Tonia, and not her. I had never been interested in her - then or now. How could she have so misinterpreted the situation at the time? But I didn't have the nerve to tell her this. I remained silent.

"In a few weeks we are all going to Krasnogorovka for the two-month field practice. There, if you agree, we could set up common household with Sveta and Béla. I have already discussed the possibility with her. Sveta likes the idea, and she is going to suggest it to Béla. In addition, the two of us - you and me - might have a very cordial relationship. What do you think of that?"

I was taken back by her proposal, which seemed like an invitation to an affair. I was saved from answering by Béla's warning that it was time to enter the theatre. The interruption of our conversation, or rather Lida's monologue, was a great relief.

After the show Lida had to return home immediately, but she asked me to meet her again outside classes in the coming week.

Back in my room I went through her words many times trying to figure out what exactly she was aiming at. It appeared to me that having an affair was the main point of her proposal.

I was intrigued by her revelations of the most intimate details of her private life. Russian girls were generally very shy in touching on such subject. I had talked to Lida on only a few occasions in the past - as far as I remembered - and always about our courses. We had never spoken anything personal.

I refreshed my mental appraisal of her. She wasn't a beauty but she wasn't bad-looking either. She had a good figure that she emphasised with her clothing. She had a better sense for style than most of our classmates. She also apparently had more money to spend on clothes than others did. Consequently, she was one of the better-dressed females in the class.

Lida got average grades. Smart, her marital and family status didn't facilitate spending too much time on her course work.

All these points about her had been irrelevant until now. Her bizarre proposal had changed the picture. The hint of a liaison coming unsolicited from a woman clearly pleased my male ego, though the whole issue felt more like a business deal than a passionate affair. Still, that field practice could turn out to be pleasant and interesting - I thought. On the negative side was the possibility of a scandal or gossip in the department. After rehashing the problem back and forth, I decided to go for it. At our next meeting I told her that I was willing to go along, assuming that the circumstances in Krasnogorovka would allow it.

A few weeks later we arrived in Krasnogorovka. We were lodged in the plant's guesthouse. The arrangement was convenient. Béla, Misha - another male student - and I shared a room on the second floor, while the five girls were lodged at the other end of the same corridor. There was a communal kitchen, dining room and day room that we would all share on the main floor.

Lida, Sveta, Béla, Misha and I formed a meal commune. We placed equal funds in a kitty. The two women went to the local market every second day and bought the produce that they cooked in the evening. Both were sufficiently good cooks to render this stay the best culinary experience of my university years. To make the arrangement more equal, Béla and I offered to do most of the fieldwork for the five of us.

Misha agreed to be absent from the room until nine o'clock every evening, so Béla and I could have it on alternate days. The arrangement worked very conveniently, although Misha complained from time to time about feeling homeless.

During those evening hours - alone with Lida - I learned a lot about her. Most of it was not complementary. I found her a spoiled brat. As an only child of doting parents with a relatively good income, she got everything she wanted, or at least that which was available. This was certainly more than she deserved - I thought.

When she got married, her luck continued. The husband turned out to be a docile partner who adored her as much as her parents did. This wasn't enough for her. Her major complaint about her husband was his occasional loss of control during sex. They had practised coitus interruptus, which failed sometimes, and consequently she became pregnant twice.



*Lida and I in Krasnogorovka*

Her idea of taking revenge for these failures by cheating on him appeared to me to be completely unfair. My judgment of Lida's personality became even more negative when I learned that her husband wasn't to be the only victim of her intended revenge. In planning the affair she had envisaged an additional agenda. She trusted that I would fall in love with her. Then, at one point, she would turn into an angel of vengeance and coolly break up with me. In the next step she would disclose the affair to her husband. Thus, she would make two men suffer at the same time. She told me about this scheming without embarrassment and without any visible guilt or shame.

But why did she pick me as the instrument, and at the same time, the potential victim of her vengeance? For not following up on my assumed affection to her two years earlier? She didn't elaborate on this point.

Obviously, learning all this about Lida didn't endear her to me. I couldn't conceal my lack of compassion. I made it clear to her: take it or leave it. This cool treatment must have been a shock to Lida, the adored female of her family. Oddly, it made me more attractive to her. The relationship which had started out as an act of revenge turned into a passionate love affair after all, but only on her side.

As our field practice was drawing to an end, I made it clear to her that our affair would expire with it, and under no conditions would we resume it back at school in the fall. Lida agreed but with an apparently bleeding heart.

Béla and I had to leave Krasnogorovka a few days earlier than the rest of the group to procure the exit permits for our return to Hungary for the summer vacation. The farewell from Lida was very stressful. She cried and cried. On my side, I was relieved to get on the train and to be free again.

Three days later, I was called down into the hall of the dormitory in the morning. Lida was waiting for me there. She said that she could not take the separation any longer and had decided to leave a day before the official termination of the assignment. Now, she was free for the whole day and wanted to spend some more time with me. She had even brought lunches with her, and begged me to oblige. The desperate expression on her face eroded my resolve, and we went out.

We walked to the river, rented a paddleboat and rowed out to one of the remote islands.

We were the only people on its sandy shore sheltered by the overhanging branches of old willow trees. The peacefulness of this refuge put me in a charitable mood. Consequently, I was probably more attentive to her than I had ever been during our relationship. That was a mistake, as I later realised.

Two days later I left for Hungary.

During the summer I received a letter from Lida, which revealed that instead of trying to forget me, she was dreaming about a joint future. The letter was full of contradictory emotions. In one paragraph she expressed her desperation about my lack of deep feelings. In the other, she felt confident of my love based on the happy time we had spent on the island.

"In September everything will be straightened out for our future happiness!" She wrote.

Obviously, she didn't feel bound by the terms of our agreement to not stretch our liaison into the next academic year. I realised that I was looking toward a troublesome time on my return to the university.

When I arrived there in the fall, a couple of days after the start of the academic year, Lida met me at the door of the lecture hall and asked for a date right away. I refused saying that our affair was over; there was nothing to discuss. She looked devastated as we parted. When we entered the auditorium, I moved several rows away from her. During the lecture she began to send notes begging me to see her again. Her correspondence had to pass through the hands of several classmates. She wasn't only embarrassing me, she was also disturbing the class.

In order to put an end to this sideshow, I agreed to meet her after classes in the university garden. We proceeded to the end of the grounds, which was fortunately deserted. She seemed to be very distressed while divulged that she had confessed everything to Yuri.

"To let him suffer as much as I do." She said.

At least this part of her vendetta had been accomplished. However, the great bombshell was still to come:

"Anyway, I decided to divorce him, and to go with you to Hungary. I would leave my son with my parents."

This announcement shocked me. She was obviously in love with me and wanted to have me without even considering my wishes. As usual, she just disregarded anything that disagreed with her interests. In order to achieve what she wanted, she was willing to abandon a loyal husband, her only son, and her aging parents. How they'd feel didn't seem to concern her.

As I listened to her, I became more and more disgusted. First, I had always believed that the primary bond of any mother ought to be to her child. But Lida would sacrifice that bond for a doubtful liaison. Second, I didn't want to break up any marriage - ever. Furthermore, I believed that if a woman was willing to abandon her man for another, she might do this to the new one too.

There was also a political angle to the issue. Even if I wanted to take her, she, as a divorcee with a dependent child to be left behind, would never receive an exit permit from the Soviet authorities.

But instead of going into these - however important details - I told her that our affair was over and she ought to face reality instead of spreading her misery around to her whole family. With that I left, her tears falling desperately.

Two days later, in the evening, I was called down into the lobby of the dormitory. I found Lida and her husband waiting for me. Yuri told me that they wanted to have a talk with me, and we should take a walk outside for privacy.

My first thought was that he wanted to take revenge and beat me up. That didn't scare me. I was at least as strong as him, and my growing-up in a worker's district provided me with plenty experience in self defence, although I hadn't been involved in a physical fight for years. But what if he had hired a few thugs to do the dirty job? There were plenty of those in Dnepro-

petrovsk. The dormitory was an isolated building, and it was already dark outside - ideal conditions for an assault.

I shrugged my shoulders - I had to face whatever was coming - and stepped out into the street with the couple.

Yuri began to talk. He told me how sad it was to hear what had gone on in Krasnogorovka from Lida, and then to see her present misery. It was as painful to him as to her because he still loved her. He wanted her to be happy even if that meant divorcing her. Therefore, he wanted to ask me what my intentions were.

Yuri's reaction to the whole issue confirmed my mental picture of him based on Lida's off-the-cuff remarks. He was a kind soul. I felt sorry for him. He deserved a better wife.

I didn't want to apologise for what had happened because I didn't feel guilty - not profoundly enough anyway. After all, it was Lida who had conceived and initiated the affair. I just went along for the ride, assuming that it would be limited by time and location to Krasnogorovka. It was opportunistic, yes, but not inherently harmful to anyone. That it had turned into such an ugly incident was the result of her self-centeredness rather than of my intentions, or actions. But I didn't tell this to Yuri.

I told him that the affair was over - forever. I had no intention of marrying her, and I didn't wish them to divorce. I hoped that they could patch it up between the two of them.

All this time Lida didn't say a word.

Then I left them and returned to the dormitory.

In the two semesters remaining I never spoke to Lida again. They didn't divorce while I was there.

April 1954.



## 25

### UNDER ARREST

In 1954 Krasnogorovka was a small, semi-agricultural, semi-industrial town in a remote corner of the Donbass of Soviet Ukraine. Its only industry consisted of a plant producing silicate refractory bricks for the metallurgical industry. A red brick wall fitted with two gates separated the factory from the town. The other three sides of the plant site had no walls. Armed security men guarded the main entrance around the clock. The smaller gate - at the far end of the wall - was unlocked and unguarded. This latter one served a shortcut to the town's railway station.

This important transportation facility was located on the wrong side of the factory due to the unfathomable wisdom of the State Central Planning Bureau. Consequently, one could often see old peasant women lost and wandering among the furnaces of the plant on their return from a shopping trip in the city. They were usually loaded with bags of sugar or cooking oil unavailable in the town's stores.

We were eight students assigned to a two-month field practice at this factory. The arrival of summer students had always constituted an important social occasion for the younger, and especially for the female, segment of the plant's working force. Now, with two foreigners among them, our crew drew more than the usual attention. Béla and I were probably the first non-Soviets at this place since German troops had hastily withdrawn from the region in 1943. We seemed to enjoy more popularity.

We received a friendly welcome from the Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization). Two weeks later we tried to reciprocate the goodwill by agreeing to join a volunteer brigade to dig potato pits in a nearby collective farm. The news of our coming participation spread fast and brought out such large number of volunteers - mostly girls - that the secretary of the Komsomol - beaming with satisfaction - could not find enough digging tools for all the participants.

However, I learned a few days later that not everybody seemed to be pleased with our presence. One morning, when a couple of fellow students and I entered the plant's gate, the sullen looking guard asked for my pass. I didn't have it with me. By this time everybody in the plant, including the security men, knew me by sight. The guard refused to let me in. I told my friends to meet me at Furnace #9, and instead of returning to the dormitory to fetch my pass; I started to walk along the wall to the other gate. As I pushed it open, two armed security men standing inside, grabbed me and detained me for unlawful entry. Either the guard of the main gate had overheard what I said to my friends, or he was smarter than he looked, and guessed my intentions. In any event, a patrol had been sent to nab me.

They took me to the security office where I was given a great sermon about rules and regulations, political vigilance, and the duties of citizens and non-citizens. After being properly chastised, I was sent home to collect my pass. Upon returning, I joined my fellow students at Furnace #9 much later than earlier planned.

Next morning, properly armed with the pass, and seeing the same guard sitting on a bench at the gate, I poked the document under his nose as I entered. His reaction was unexpectedly violent. He jumped up and shouted something that was probably a code word for 'ENEMY INVASION' or 'SABOTEURS ON THE MOVE' because several armed security men instantly rushed out of the building and surrounded me. They unceremoniously took me into a basement prison cell and locked me up.

Now, I could contemplate my action and its consequence in solitude. I realized how foolish it was to provoke a member of the state security apparatus with my arrogant action, but it was too late. The opening of the door interrupted my gloomy thoughts. The secretary of the Komsomol, my pit-digging buddy, entered, grabbed me by the arm, and led me out of the building. Only there, did he explain that my friends seeing me arrested, rushed to him for help. He was stunned by the news and by the possible implications.

I learned from him that a Hungarian agricultural delegation was to pass through the town in a few days' time. The Town Committee planned a reception dinner for them. Béla and I were to be invited too. Now, with my arrest, these plans were in jeopardy. Furthermore, if this delegation of my compatriots learned about my arrest, they might raise the issue with some high authorities upon returning to the capital. It could become a political scandal on an international scale, which would reflect very badly on the political leadership of the plant, including that of the Komsomol.

I didn't believe that there was the slightest probability of such an occurrence. But I maliciously played on the paranoia of the secretary by agreeing with his worries. After a while however I began to feel sorry for him. I promised not to mention my arrest to anyone in the delegation.

Later in the day, after further thought, my worries returned. I must have been a thorn to someone higher up in the security organization than that stupid guard. The timely arrival of the armed patrol at the far gate, and my quick arrest the following day, could have not been accidental. I had gotten off scot-free due a lucky coincidence - the anticipated visit of the Hungarian delegation. Security people were well known to have long memories. After the departure of my compatriots, their hands won't be tied. I decided that my best defence was to counterattack.

I went to the chief engineer's office. In the Soviet plant hierarchy the chief engineer was not only the technical boss of the establishment, but also a major political appointee. Habitually, he did not deal with low rank people, like summer students. Not surprisingly, his secretary became startled when I asked her to take me to see the big boss. Meekly, she led me into his sanctuary. It was the first time that I had met the man but he obviously knew about me.

I reported the two incidents to him, slanted slightly to show me in a more favourable light than I deserved.

Upon hearing the story, the chief engineer became visibly annoyed, most likely by the fact that the events hadn't been reported to him immediately through the regular channels of communication. This hurt his dignity and sense of authority, and could only help me.

I told him that in my four years in the Soviet Union I had never experienced any prejudice because of my nationality (which was true). So, I was surprised to run into such a problem here. I could not explain this harassment by any other reason.

Then, I came out with my big gun. I told him:

"If this matter continues, I will have to report the case to my embassy in Moscow."

This was an obvious bluff on my part but he took it at face value. Embassies, or anything foreign, implied a forbidden and forbidding realm for an ordinary Soviet citizen. In the past, many people had come to grief because they had become associated with foreigners. Just the appearance of one's name on a diplomatic document might carry real danger.

I knew this, and was counting on its effect.

Upon hearing my reference to the embassy, the chief engineer probably immediately imagined himself at the centre of a dark political intrigue, which could easily damage or break his career. He nervously assured me that there would be no more harassment from anyone in his plant.

He kept his promise. From that day on I became an invisible man to the security personnel. They just looked through me as if I didn't exist. No one ever asked for my pass or anything else.

Just as a matter of interest, the Hungarian delegation never did come to the town. Their tour was rerouted at the last moment. Did it have anything to do with the peace of mind of the chief engineer? I wouldn't know.

May 1954.

## 26

### MOSCOW ARRIVAL

The two-month data-finding assignment for our diploma projects had come to an end. We were to leave Satka, a small industrial town in the heart of the Ural Mountains, and return to Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukraine via Moscow. The five of us loaded our suitcases on the back of a pickup truck, and climbed up beside them. It was the end of February, not too cold by local standards, -20°C, but in the back of the open truck the wind bit through my winter coat. The railway station was about an hour's drive.

I enjoyed a last look at the snowy, pine-covered slopes, as our driver struggled on the narrow, madly switching, and slippery road. At the Trans-Siberian Rail Line station, we - half-frozen pariahs - could hardly climb off the truck. We had several hours to thaw out inside the building before the Vladivostok-Moscow train arrived. A shock waited for us at the ticket counter. The train was full; there were no seats to be sold.

In similar situations it was my turn to try an old trick. Accordingly, I went to see the Station Master. I presented him our tickets, which had been issued by the university, and my Hungarian passport. I told him that I had to get to Moscow for an important meeting at the Hungarian Embassy in two days time. It was absolutely necessary that he find seats for us on the next train.

He only shook his head,

„That is impossible. Today's train is completely full!” Then, he smiled. “But there is no problem I can put you on yesterday's train.”

For a moment I thought that my - by now fluent - Russian was playing tricks on me. The Station Master, seeing my confusion, clarified the situation:

„The train, which was due to arrive here yesterday, ran into a bad storm near Omsk (Siberia), and got stuck in snow drifts. It took a day to get it moving again. In the same time, the next Trans-Siberian Express, which is scheduled to arrive here in a short time, was rerouted, and it is now a few hours ahead of yesterday's train. There are seats available on the latter.”

So, we watched the first express pass through the station without stopping. We got on the second train six hours later. We occupied a four-berth sleeper, which had two bunks to seat or sleep on, and two turndown upper bunks for night use. Vasya was the only one of our group who had to sleep with strangers in the next compartment. He spent the rest of his time with us.

The trip to Moscow took more than 30 hours. Thanks to the favourable gender ratio in our group, three girls to two boys, time passed agreeably quickly, except for one unpleasant experience. At a station where we stopped for only a few minutes, I got off to buy some food. The line-up was long and the train had already begun to move when I left the building. I ran to the train without having a chance to put my gloves on. I grabbed the handrail and jumped onto the step. Instantaneously, my exposed palm froze to the bare metal. I succeeded in liberating my hand only with excruciating pain, losing patches of skin in the process. They remained welded to the steel as war trophies won by the arctic cold.

This was my second painful experience with the Russian winter this year. A few weeks earlier I had suffered frostbite on my nose, which had not healed until this trip. Now, I had acquired a second distressing souvenir.

We arrived in Moscow at the Kazanski Station at about midnight. The timing was unfortunate. Moscow was not a friendly city after dark. Long-distance trains were usually scheduled to arrive in the afternoon to allow passengers to reach their city destination before dark. We had been behind schedule from the beginning.

Three of us, Galya, Zoya and myself, were planning to stay in the capital for a week. We had no accommodation. This was difficult to find in day time, and impossible after regular working hours. We had no choice but to spend the night at the station.

Tonya and Vasya wanted to leave on the next scheduled train for Dnepropetrovsk. They asked a policeman for directions to Kievski Station, their departure point. The officer shook his head.

„The station is only a few blocks down from here on the Big Circle (the major avenue of the city), but I don't advise you to walk to it now. Wait until the morning.” He said.

If a policeman suggested do not walk, it was wise to listen. Consequently, we all spent the night at the crowded station where several hundred passengers had already settled down for the night. Some lucky ones lay on the benches. The majority were sleeping on various kinds of cover laid on the concrete floor.

We had no blankets just our winter coats and didn't wish to lie, or even sit, on the muddy, dirty floor. A newspaper kiosk was still open. We decided to buy newspapers to lie on, but they were all sold out. The vendor had large wall maps of the World. We bought half a dozen of those, and spread them on the floor near the wall, where there was a gap between the sleeping bodies.

Our group, tightly bunched together for extra warmth, spent the next hours attempting to sleep. With only a couple of millimetres of paper between the bare concrete and our bodies, the bedding felt cold and hard. We tried to synchronize shifting sides every few minutes, but this didn't allow us much sound sleep.

The discomfort turned to our advantage later on. At five thirty in the morning the janitorial staff began their shift by pouring buckets of water on the floor to be subsequently mopped up. We noticed the coming danger in time, got up and moved out of the way. But many others, who didn't foresee the coming calamity, became drenched. The hall filled with shouts and curses. The cleaning women paid no attention to the screaming; they followed their morning routine undisturbed.

I watched our bedding soak up the dirty water. The World, or at least its flat image, became wet and seemed to float. We moved to the vestibule. Here, Tonya and Vasya bid farewell to us. They considered it safe enough to walk to the next station. The three of us who remained had to wait for the opening of the Metro, the city's subway.

At six o'clock the Metro doors opened, and the escalators began to run. We descended into the pleasantly warm underground, and boarded the first car of the first train. We took the three corner seats. In the relative comfort of the soft seats sleep came to us in no time. The trains of the Big Circle Line were going around and around all day. One remained undisturbed for hours for the price of a ten-kopek fare.



*Galya and Zoya in Moscow*

I woke up after eight o'clock. My companions were still sleeping in their corner nests. It was time to change trains and head to the Institute of Steel, the most prominent engineering school in the Soviet Union. Ours, the Metallurgical Institute of Dnepropetrovsk, was its official sister organization. We were hoping to take advantage of this relationship to get rooms in one of the student dormitories of the Steel Institute.

A short while later we were in front of the imposing building. We entered the busy lobby and wondered how to start our mission. First, we needed a propusk (entry permit) to enable us to pass into the administration section. However, we knew nobody there by name and this was a prerequisite for issuing propusks.

As we deliberated in front of the reception desk, Zoya exclaimed:

„Look! Our rector.”

She was right. Docent Isayenko, the rector of our institute just entered the lobby. We rushed to greet him. He was surprised to find himself surrounded by three happy but unknown faces. Perhaps he recognizes me? I hoped. I had had dealings with him some time before. We introduced ourselves and told him about the reason we were there.

„You just wait here. I will arrange something for you.” He promised.

He entered the restricted building with his permanent propusk. He must have been attending some kind of a meeting or conference there.

What an unbelievably good coincidence, I thought.

Perhaps half an hour later a woman approached us, and handed us a piece of paper.

„Here is the address of one of our dormitories. You have to take such and such tram to get there. In the office they will know about you. I have already called the place. Have a nice stay in Moscow.” The woman said, and left.

February 1955.

## 27

### OLGA

It was to be a small party for six in the home of one of the girls. I arrived late because I had a hard time finding the apartment in the organized chaos of Russian living quarters. By the time I knocked on and entered the right door, all the others had been there - two guys, fellow students, and three girls; a tall, light blond, a dark blond and one with glasses. This was odd because at that time Russian girls rarely wore glasses in public. They were all standing in the corner of the room inspecting something.

As I was introduced, Misha remarked:

„Olga has been anxiously waiting for you, although I tried to modulate her expectations by describing your ugliness in vivid colors of socialistic realism.”

I laughed, not because I found his joke funny, but because I realized that Olga would be my partner for the evening. She was the dark blond girl - my instantaneous choice the moment I entered the room. It was a blind date. I knew the guys but none of the girls. My friends hadn't been able to tell me anything about my date because they hadn't met Olga either.

It didn't take long to learn that she was not only attractive she also had a sweet personality that made the initial awkward moments easier. In Russia one could not begin or keep up a conversation by asking questions, and expect to learn more about the other person. At that time, in 1955, Stalin had already been dead for two years, but the long, oppressive years of his regime, full of terrifying purges, still cast a long shadow on everyday life in the Soviet Union. One consequence of this was that people were reluctant to reveal any information about their families, work place etc. One was not supposed to ask any questions about anything except the weather - a rather silly subject. Personal information had to come voluntarily - in meagre bits - as considered suitable for the person and occasion.

As the party progressed, I slowly learned that the girls weren't students. They worked as technicians in some kind of control lab. All three lived with their parents, two near the core of the city, where we were now, while Olga's home was on the other side of the town near their workplace.

The evening was a great success; we all had a pleasant time. Consequently, the general consensus was that we should meet again in one of the parks near the university on the coming weekend. Then again once more somewhere else. By this time Olga and I began to find the presence of the others tiresome. We preferred to be alone, just the two of us. I was working on my diploma project, and had less time than she did, therefore, we usually met somewhere close to the institute, and mostly on weekends.

Our favourite place was Shevchenko Park, a large wooded stretch on the slopping bank of the Dnieper River. From its remote corner - the highest spot in the park - one had a splendid view over the river and the far bank connected with a multi arched, concrete railway bridge. This strange structure had been hastily built after WW II to replace the one blown up by the retreating Germans. At least, this was the official explanation of why the trains had to slow to a snail's pace while crossing the bridge. I was more inclined to believe that the designers had made a booboo in the stress calculation, so the structure could not take a dynamic load. Regardless, at the beginning we both loved to watch the trains crossing the bridge far below us.

Occasionally, Olga arrived at our date with blue hands; stained, she explained, by the fuel handled at work. It couldn't be washed off. Other times she complained about the painfully loud noise accompanying the testing. By this time, I knew that she was working in a place called the

'Truck Factory'. This was known to be the cover name for the armament plant that, according to prevailing rumours, produced MIG fighter planes. I presumed that she was involved in testing jet engines. I never asked her about her work. If by chance she began to talk about it, I changed the subject immediately. The less I knew about it, the safer it was for both of us

I was actually surprised that she could go out with me, a foreign student. The Russian preoccupation with Western spies, especially in relation to military establishments, had always been paranoid. Our relationship was obviously known to her two friends at work. One day Olga surprised me with tickets to the circus. When we took our seats in the amphitheatre, Olga told me that the whole row was occupied with her co-workers, about twenty people. It was a collective outing. Those who hadn't heard about her boyfriend until now, met me right there. Olga even introduced me to the Party Secretary of her section. This woman was an elderly, very friendly matron. Still, she represented the omnipotent Party Organization whose duty was to discover and stop any development that could endanger the interest of the state, or could lead to potential breaches of security. I expected fireworks in the following days but nothing happened.

The day of defending my diploma thesis was coming up, and my final departure from the Soviet Union was only weeks away. By this time Olga was deeply and hopelessly in love with me. I loved her too, but at a less intense level. The issue of marriage had never been mentioned, much less discussed between us. The possibility was just out of the question. First, I had a strong conviction that marriage between a Hungarian and a Russian would only bring extreme unhappiness, especially to the woman. In my country Russians were disliked by most, and hated by everybody else, and I would not expect this condition to change. Life in Hungary was also quite different, and trying to adapt would have put a tremendous strain on the wife, and consequently, on the marriage

In Olga's case there was also the insurmountable problem of her work in highly classified military research. She could never receive the permission to move abroad.

We stopped visiting our preferred spot in Shevchenko Park and watching the trains cross the bridge. Olga broke in tears at the sight of any train. It reminded her of our approaching separation.

But time could not be stopped. Finally, a train took me away forever. We could not even exchange letters without exposing her to great danger from the attention of the Secret Police.



*Olga*



Many years later, I read a story on the development of the powerful rockets that put the Soviet Sputniks in orbit. The article mentioned that the rockets of the fifties had been developed and built in an armament plant in Dnepropetrovsk. I was stunned. This meant that the 'Truck Factory' had actually built rockets rather than MIG planes, and Olga had been testing rocket engines not jets. This explained the blue stains on her hands, and the pain she suffered from the noise when the engines were fired. How could our relationship blossom under the nose of the Secret Police, which was supposed to keep everyone in such a strategically important plant under surveillance? I would never be able to understand.

April 1955.

## 28

### MARY

„The chief engineer has a new secretary. She is quite good looking. You should go and meet her!” My colleague said to me after returning from the Central Office.

„We are having a meeting there tomorrow. I'll have a chance to see her then.” I assured him.

Mary, the latest addition to the Coke Plant Staff, was as attractive as my colleague had said. She was a vivacious 18 years old blond with blue eyes and a light sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She had an enticing smile, and an excellent figure. A week later we were dating. I learned that she came from a small town, not far from my home city, and she was planning to get married in six months time. However, that event was no obstacle to our nicely unfolding relationship as far as she was concerned. I didn't care either. I didn't know her fiancé, and he was far away. She was staying with her uncle who was the manager of the maintenance shop at our plant. I had regular dealings with him at work, but the subject of Mary never came up.

A couple of weeks later I learned that while I had been in Budapest for two days, Mary had dated Gava, another young engineer. I became upset, but when I reproached her, she didn't seem to perceive any problem.

„You weren't in town at the time.” She justified her act without any apparent guilt.

Other faux pas followed, and I had to face the reality that faithfulness and loyalty were not among Mary's virtues. The issue bothered me enough that I decided to end our relationship. Although she was upset - mainly because she resented being dumped - we remained friends.

Alec, my boss and friend, who was also single, jumped into my tracks, and very soon he and Mary were dating regularly.

At one point Mary's fiancé came to visit. I expected a scandal, but just the opposite occurred. Alec and the fiancé became bosom buddies. The fiancé's visits became frequent. On such occasions the threesome would eat out, go to movies and sport events etc., together. Since the town wasn't very big, everybody knew about the affair between Mary and Alec, except the fiancé. He loved Mary and couldn't or didn't want to, see further than his nose.

In late spring, Alec had his birthday party to which a dozen friends and colleagues were invited.

Among the guests were the chief engineer, myself and - naturally - Mary.

Alec had too much to drink; so at 11:00 p.m. the chief engineer suggested that we close shop. (The following day was a work day). He told me to take Mary home as Alec was obviously incapacitated. I accepted the request without demur, and Mary didn't protest either. She lived only a ten-minute walk from the party site. However, since it was a mild night, we decided to take a little walk on the banks of the Danube. It was after midnight when I gave her a goodbye kiss at the door of the apartment building and went home.

The next morning the chief engineer called me into his office. He was quite angry.

„At what time did you get Mary home last night?” He roared.

„At midnight.” I said, turning the clock back by only a few minutes.

„Her uncle was here this morning complaining that she returned home at three in the morning. He'd heard that I asked you to take her home. Have you no shame? Neither you, nor Alec, have any moral standards. How dare you to get me involved in your shenanigans?“

My first reaction was to protest his 'I asked you' when in reality he'd told me to take Mary home. I realized however that this wasn't the issue. I was puzzled about the timing. I didn't want to say anything until I'd talked to Mary. I could barely wait to see her alone for an explanation. When it came her story was straightforward, and again she told it without the slightest sign of guilt:

„When I entered the hall of the apartment building, Gava (the part-time cavalier) was there waiting for me. He was coming home from the afternoon shift and saw us walking to the river through the bus window. He decided to wait for me inside the door of the building. I wasn't sleepy, so we chatted for a couple of hours.“

I realized that Mary was incorrigible. I shrugged my shoulders. It was, after all, not for me to give her a sermon. I hoped only that she would clear me with Alec. As far as the chief engineer and the uncle were concerned, I remained in their black books.

During the summer, our favourite activity was boating on the Danube. The river - downstream from the city - was quite wild, had no villages or hamlets on its banks for many kilometres. Its course was studded with sandy, wooded islands - ideal for sunbathing and swimming. Alec owned a sleek scull boat. It had two pairs of oars and could seat four. Two experienced rowers were needed to put it in the water and propel it, and I accompanied Alec and Mary from time to time on river excursions.

On one occasion, when the fiancé happened to be in town, I was again asked to join in a boating outing. The four of us had a pleasant day on the river - picnicking on a remote island. Later in the day a heavy thunderstorm developed. We barely reached the boathouse before all hell broke loose. The downpour was accompanied by blinding lightning and deafening thunder and lasted maybe an hour. The boathouse lay at the foot of a high, steep clay bank. To return to the city, one had to climb the now very slippery, muddy footpath.

We climbed in single file, led by the fiancé, followed by Alec, Mary, and me at the tail. Close to the top, the fiancé lost his balance and fell backward with his arms swinging as he spun around. While desperately trying to regain his balance, his outstretched hand slapped Alec's face with full force, and broke his nose. Alec - bleeding badly - had to be supported to reach the top of the bank. From there we headed straight to the hospital emergency room, which was at a good half hour walk.

Mary and I, walking behind Alec and the fiancé, began to see the irony of the situation. Although, it was clearly an accident, the cuckolded fiancé had broken the nose of the boyfriend, in front of the ex-boyfriend. We began to chuckle and could not stop. The fiancé - painfully apologetic about the damage he had done to Alec's face - was very annoyed with our 'infantile behaviour'. Alec was - not surprisingly - really angry with us too. The best what Mary and I could do was to fight the temptation to break out in loud laughter again and again.

In the hospital waiting room I had a chance to talk to Alec alone. I advised him not to tell the truth about the accident under any circumstances because nobody would believe him. He should say that he ran into a tree, or if he wanted to be more dramatic, that I'd had too much to drink and started a fistfight. That would leave Mary and her fiancé completely out of the picture.

Alec didn't take my advice. Next day, with his nose nicely bundled up, he told and retold the story of the accident just as it had happened. There were only knowing smiles on most of the listeners' faces and behind Alec's back they couldn't stop laughing. People seemed to be pleased that he'd finally gotten what - everybody believed - he deserved.

Mary and her fiancé got married at the beginning of fall. The October Revolution exploded before she could return to work. A few weeks after the collapse of the uprising, Mary and her husband turned up at Alec's residence. They wanted to escape to the West, and were looking for help. At that time, I was already under the cloud of imminent arrest and decided not to get involved.

This was the last time that I saw Mary. I don't know if she and her husband reached the West or not. During the six months that our lives criss-crossed, she brought me both pleasure and grief. I couldn't agree with her way of life - she believed in and practised open marriage 20 years ahead of time. Still, I found her total disregard of conventions charming.

January 1956.

## 29

### VISEGRÁD

Upon entering the boathouse I noticed the scull right away among the various watercrafts stored or being repaired there. It was a beautiful object. Its spotless, shiny, varnished surface indicated that it had recently been reconditioned. The boat master, the manager of the place, proudly showed the new planks meshed onto the structure of the skull and told us about the long days of artisanship spent on the reconstruction. I wondered what bribe Gábor had given to him to let us have it for the weekend.

The three of us, my friend Gábor, my brother Béla, and myself, carried the boat down to the river. It was not an easy task. The ramp was steep, the footing was poor, and the boat seemed to weigh a lot. I hoped that the mass would give it better stability in the water.

We were at the Roman Bank of the Danube near the northern outskirts of Budapest. Our plan was to go upstream, to the Great Bend where the river makes a 90-degree turn around the hills of Pillis and changes its direction from easterly to southerly. We planned to visit Visegrád, a small town located about 30km north of the capital. The famous summer residence of one of the greatest Hungarian kings, Mathias, had once been located on the river bank there. He had also built a fort on top of the hill to overlook and protect his palace. While the fort was then in ruins, the palace had completely disappeared. This wasn't surprising, considering the number of bloody, destructive wars during the 500 years since these two structures had been erected.

We expected the upstream-leg of our trip would require hard work. The Danube is normally a fast river. This time it ran even faster than usual because of flooding. On the other hand, coming back would be a piece of cake; we might just float downstream. We had minimum gear with us: a tent, three blankets, a bag of food and two packs with personal items. The weather forecast predicted warm temperatures with no precipitation.

After loading the boat with the gear, we started out. Gábor and I manned the oars while Béla handled the steering. We were both experienced oarsmen though this was our first trip together. On the other hand, Béla was a novice. This was his first time in a scull. After a few minutes of rowing, Gábor and I found our rhythm and the boat began to move at a good speed. We tried to stay close to the riverbank to minimize the braking effect of the current. Very soon we had reached the southern tip of Szentendre Sziget, a long island which stretched almost to Visegrád. We turned into the narrow, western arm of the river where the current - we hopped - was less forceful than in the main stream.

The riverbanks were hedged with willow trees and low bushes. The only wildlife was the occasional angler who looked at us with suspicion. They obviously didn't have fishing permits, and mistrusted us as possible police informers. They also had to pull in their line to let us pass without becoming entangled in them and this annoyed them.

After a couple of hours at the oars, Gábor let Béla to take his pair. Our novice had to learn the moves. The oars in this type of boat are long, and they have to be moved forward with their feather parallel and skimming the surface of the water. At the farthest point of their travel they are rotated ninety degrees, dipped and drawn back just below the surface. At the same time the rower has to roll back, and then forward with his seat. The seat is a carriage on four wheels running on a couple of rails. All these moves have to be of measured duration and in complete synchronization with the partner's, otherwise the oars can inadvertently hit each other, to the great annoyance to both rowers. Learning requires continuous, close attention and a lot of

patience. A fast flowing river is the least desirable location for acquiring these skills. Also, brothers are usually shorter tempered with each other than with non-relatives. Consequently, poor Béla had an arduous apprenticeship, but after a while he became sufficiently skilled in the art.

After covering about three quarters of the distance we noticed a nice clearance at the edge of the forest on the riverbank. We decided to call it a day. Our initial plan was to spend the night under the open sky since no rain was expected. However, after the first wave of a mosquito horde, which moved in and attacked us mercilessly, we changed our minds fast. There was probably a swamp nearby with an unlimited supply of these ferocious beasts.

We set up the tent in a rush and escaped into it. The tent was my war-trophy. It had been left behind by the retreating German Wermacht. It consisted of four triangular pieces of canvas buttoned together. The joints, although supposedly waterproof, turned out to be not completely mosquito-proof. The renewed buzzing of some of the more accomplished invaders circling around our heads until killed by a lucky slap - following many unsuccessful attempts - kept us awake for a long time.

In the morning we got up early, and had a few bites inside the tent before rushing outside. We threw the tent and other belongings into the boat and made a fast escape, to the great disappointment and frustration of the starving insects that had spent the whole night outside the canvas waiting for the great moment of a promising banquet.

A couple of hours later we glimpsed the tower of Salamon, the famous 13th century landmark on the bank of Visegrád. The massive fortification still had a gaping hole on one side, the memento of a failed Austrian attempt to blow it apart after they put down a Hungarian uprising in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The hill, with the picturesque ruins of the fort on its top, rose above the village. Our plan was to climb it. We didn't know what to do with the boat and our belongings however. After a lengthy discussion, we picked an apparently fail-proof solution.

A group of trees rose from the water not far from the jetty where we landed. They were probably part of a park on the riverside of the dike, which was now inundated by the flood. We rowed there and got out of the boat and onto the dike. Béla, after stripping to his swimming trunks, moved the boat from the shore into the thicket, while Gábor and I remained on the shore. Béla tied the boat to one of the trees rising from the water, and then swam back to the dike. Now, there was about ten metres of open water between the shore and the boat; a serious enough obstacle to discourage an occasional thief - we thought.

The hike straight up the hill was strenuous because of the heat, but the view from the top was worth it. Ahead of us stretched the majestic bend of the silvery (definitely not blue) Danube between chains of forested hills. A ferryboat ploughing from one bank to the other was leaving a shiny white trail in its wake. An occasional steeple protruding in the valleys among the hills gave away the presence of hidden villages. This was a very peaceful world after the noisy and polluted turmoil of the capital.

The ruins of the fort themselves were not impressive from close up. The past centuries had not been kind to this once majestic fortress, and there was no sign of any ongoing reconstruction or even a conservation effort.

We descended to the riverbank. Béla stripped and swam to the boat. As he climbed in, he began to shout.

"We've been robbed!"

When he rowed the boat out, we took measure of the loss. Gábor's and my personal bags were gone and so was a package of food. Fortunately the tent and the blankets had not been taken. We just had enough food left for lunch. But I lost my 'sumka', the shoulder bag from my university years, and all the toilette items inside, including my cherished shaving set. We were cursing the thief who must have approached our vessel in a boat from the river and grabbed the most easily removable items before making a fast escape.

"What to do now?" We wondered. "Is it worth reporting the theft to the police?"

After some discussion we decided to follow that course. While Béla stayed with the boat, Gábor and I went to find the police station, which wasn't far. It was locked.

"The sergeant has probably gone home for lunch." A passer-by said.

On the way back to the riverbank we met a policeman coming from the opposite direction. We stopped him and learned that he was the 'Police Department of Visegrád' on his way to his office.

When we reported the crime to him, he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Why did you leave your boat unattended? You actually invited the thief. He must have passed by in his boat en route to another village, and now he is probably miles away. I don't have a boat to try to chase him down!"

He didn't even want to write up a formal report. But we insisted that the crime should at least be recorded. His unconcerned attitude toward his duty made the incident even more annoying.

We left Visegrád in a very sullen mood.

Our return trip followed the main stream of the river. In addition to the helpful current we also had the wind from our rear. We rigged up one of the tent pieces as a sail, and now our progress became really fast and effortless. Our mood improved.

Soon the jail complex of Vác, one of the largest in the country, came into view. Among its hundreds of prisoners were many convicted of political crimes. As we floated by and watched the forbidding walls of the prison, we played the mental game of picking out one of the barred windows where we would have liked to see our thief taking his fair punishment. We obviously didn't realize that even if he were put behind bars that day, his incarceration would have been short lived. In two months time, during the Hungarian anti-Soviet uprising, all prisoners, irrespective of the reason they were jailed, were released. Subsequently, many of these, including some common criminals who smartly declared themselves political refugees, ended up in Canada.

We reached Budapest in good time. Upon delivering the boat to the boathouse, the boat master examined the condition of the hull with a worried look on his face. But soon that turned into a wide grin. There was not a scratch on his masterpiece.

A couple of weeks later as I returned from work, the wife of the building superintendent handed me a postal parcel with an odd look on her face.

"It came this morning. It must contain something important, I had to sign for it." She said.

I was surprised. I wasn't expecting a parcel from anyone. I checked the address of the sender. It was the Ministry of Interior, the dreaded organization that also encompassed the Secret Police. (This was why the woman looked at me so suspiciously!) I tore off the brown wrapping paper. A rancid smell suddenly filled the room. The package held Gábor's stolen bag with a decaying piece of bacon inside. There was no explanatory letter with the package.

Obviously, the thief had been caught and arrested, and the theft report had been matched with the recovered loot. The less valuable (in my opinion) bag, Gábor's, was returned - it may have already smelled bad - while mine was probably retained as a material exhibit for the upcoming trial.

However, no trial followed. A few weeks later the Hungarian revolution erupted. The dream of freedom was crushed, thousands died, and two hundred thousand escaped the country. The reorganized police courts were busy with prosecuting and executing freedom fighters. Cases of small theft were tossed into the garbage bin. I never heard of or saw my 'sumka' and its contents again.

August 1956.

## 30

### COMRADE DACHNOVSKI

The Coke Plant was the newest addition to the Steel Kombinate of Sztálinváros (Stalin City). It was of Soviet design. The refractory bricks of the coke ovens, ten thousand tons of them, and the control and operating equipment all came from the Soviet Union. The package also included a full-time Russian consultant, Comrade Dachnovski, who supervised the construction, installation, commissioning, and start-up of the operations. This 'expert' was in his sixties, and had limited technical knowledge, but this shortcoming was well compensated for by an ample supply of venom, that he spread around generously. Consequently, his popularity among the Coke Plant employees was lower than a frog's ass. They considered him, unfortunately, a typical Russian since he perfectly fit the popular, if strongly distorted, image of the despicable, ignorant Soviet.

Comrade Dachnovski's modus operandi was to distribute a set of written instructions at the weekly technical meetings that described the next phase of work over the following week or two. If any problems arose, he shrugged his shoulders and answered contemptuously:

„Try to read my instructions more carefully! You are engineers, even if from the old school. You should be able to solve technical problems.”

Then, if anything went seriously haywire, he blamed it on his interpreter, an elderly Hungarian woman with fluent Russian but no technical background. The usually unjust accusations resulted in a strained relationship between the two, and her dislike of her boss was widely known. Obviously, his conduct didn't endear him to the technical staff either. But because he was a representative of the 'superior' Soviet Regime, nobody dared to criticize him openly - one might be accused of anticommunist tendencies and punished accordingly.

My arrival on the scene came as a shock to Comrade Dachnovski's nicely established cosmos. I was an engineer educated in a Soviet university, spoke fluent Russian, and worst of all, I happened to have a copy of the Russian textbook on the construction and commissioning of coke plants. This book was Dachnovski's secret bible. He had had it translated into Hungarian somewhere, then distributed, chapter by chapter, at the meetings as though it was the product of his own expertise and wisdom. Not only was his game now uncovered, but I could read ahead of the current chapter and 'see into the future'. The practice of blaming the interpreter for his own ignorance didn't work anymore either.

Technical management tried to benefit from this new situation, and began to rely more and more on my command of Russian. Very soon, despite my junior engineering status, I attended all meetings and plant tours with the 'Consultant' to monitor the interpreter and to take over translation completely when the topic warranted.

To my surprise, the lady interpreter showed no professional jealousy. She actually seemed to enjoy the diminution of her work load and responsibility. On the other hand, I found my new role as an interpreter demeaning. I didn't study engineering to be an interpreter. To my mind it was a subservient position. It was also stressful due to the unpleasant character of the Russian and the omnipresent friction between the parties. Furthermore, all of those meetings and tours consumed much of my time and interfered with my regular work as Assistant Coke Furnace Superintendent.

Very soon the load began to affect my personal life too. Our work week was five and a half days long with only Sunday off. Unfortunately, the Chief Engineers of the Coke Plant and of the Kombinate, and the 'Consultant' did their weekly inspection of the ongoing installations on



Sunday. I was required to join them for these tours because the interpreter lady had this day off. Consequently, I was tied down for seven days a week - not a very attractive proposition to a bachelor and outdoor enthusiast. As the summer approached, I started to become very edgy, and I found Comrade Dachnovski's behaviour harder and harder to bear.

The blowup came unexpectedly. One day, following the very troublesome start-up of the plant, I was carrying out a pressure test in the company of a technician on the lower deck of the ovens' heating gallery. The upper deck, just a few feet above our heads, didn't extend to the wall; a ten centimetre gap rendered any conversation on that floor perfectly audible to a person on the lower level. As we worked together in silence, we heard a group of people walking above us on the upper deck. By coincidence, they stopped right over us to discuss something. I recognized the voice of my immediate boss, the Superintendent. He was talking about the breakdown of a piece of equipment under guaranty that had occurred the previous day and halted coke production for several hours. What he said was translated into Russian by the lady interpreter, so revealing the presence of Comrade Dachnovski.

Then I heard the voice of the Consultant:

„A couple of days ago I noticed this problem coming, and I told Comrade Krantz to get the troublesome part checked and replaced, but he apparently did not pass on my instructions.”

My blood boiled. What he had said was a complete lie. I had not even seen him during the last few days. He was obviously trying to use me as a scapegoat. Boiling inside, I rushed to the staircase and up to the upper deck. By the time the interpreter had finished the translation, I was facing Dachnovski and started to shout at him in Russian. By this time, I realized that, besides my boss, the Chief Engineer and the Chief Technologist of the plant were also present, but I didn't care. I finally gave a piece of my mind to that hated scoundrel at the top of my voice:

„You dishonest ignoramus! Are you not ashamed to tell lies like this?”

Comrade Dachnovski turned beet red. He didn't try to defend himself. His reply was surprisingly subdued:

„You ought to respect my age at least, young man. I could be your grandfather. How dare you shout at me like this?”

I continued in a somewhat lower voice:

„You could never be my grandfather! He was an honest man to the end. You are trying to use your age to excuse your brazen lies! I dare to shout at you because you behaved so dishonestly!”

But his lack of fighting spirit took the wind out of my sails. I looked at the rest of the group and realized the embarrassment I'd caused everyone. I turned around, left the dumbfounded party, and returned to the lower deck. I didn't hear a word from the party above. Nobody asked for a translation of what was said. The group left the building.

The news of my quarrel with the Russian Consultant spread in the plant like wildfire. The lady interpreter finally had her revenge. She told anybody willing to listen - and everyone was more than keen - about the explosion in all its sordid detail. I became an instant hero. One who dared to challenge the hated Russian, and indirectly, the whole national system subservient to Moscow.

I found this turn of events annoying and alarming at the same time. My fight was with Comrade Dachnovski. I disliked the Soviet political regime but not Russians in general. During my studies I had many good Russian friends and I respected most of my professors and the engineers I had met. I certainly did not fancy a reputation as an anti-Russian rabble-rouser. I disliked the regime as much as most Hungarians, but expressing this openly would have been political suicide. I knew that I was in hot water no matter what I said now. I kept quiet, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was sure that I would be dragged in front of a disciplinary committee by Management, or the Communist Party organization, or by both.

However, nothing happened. Apparently, the Consultant didn't feel confident enough in his position to face a possible investigation if a formal complaint were made. Plant management didn't want to stir up a potential political scandal either, if they could help it. It was, after all, the summer of 1956, and a wind of change was in the air.

The only perceptible consequence was that my career as an interpreter came to a sudden end - to my great relief. I still had to attend occasional technical meetings but I tried not to have any confrontation with the Russian and he did the same.

A few months later, in October 1956, the Hungarian Revolution erupted. Comrade Dachnovski disappeared on the first day of fighting. He was probably flown back to Russia.

The Russian occupation forces that were thrown in to support the pro-Soviet regime and to crush the revolution suffered a stunning initial defeat. After the apparent success of the uprising, the newly nominated revolutionary government of Imre Nagy gave in to public demand, and called for the election of Revolutionary Workers' Councils to replace the Stalinist management in every plant of the country. These Workers' Councils, in concurrence with the National Councils (parallel bodies elected by nonindustrial communities), took over the functions of local government. They became the new, basic, political units of the revolutionary administration until the new elections planned for January 1957 - two months hence - produced a national constitutional assembly.

The Coke Ovens were to elect three members to the plant's Workers' Council. The Chief Engineer came down to observe the first election on the day shift. He wanted to see me before the meeting, and asked me - to my great surprise - to run as a candidate.

„Why me?“ I questioned.

„Because we need to have an engineer on the Workers' Council. It may be vital for the future of the plant, and you are the only one who the workers believe is solidly anti-Russian“

It sounded almost like a complement, especially in those days. However, I have always disliked political roles, and these chaotic times didn't make the proposal any more attractive. He insisted that my participation on the Council could be very important. I could thwart any decision which might lead to a technical disaster.

After some more arguments I finally and reluctantly agreed that he would try to nominate me. I was sure that the strong, anti-intellectual sentiment among the workers would result in the rejection of an engineer as their representative on the Council, while the members of the administration would vote against me because of my Russian Diploma.

It didn't happen. My nomination by the Chief Engineer was accepted, and subsequently I was elected unanimously by a show of hands. My remaining hope - that the other two shifts would reject me - didn't materialize either. The spectre of Comrade Dachnovski took its due revenge.

The freshly elected Workers' Councils didn't have a chance to prove themselves. Several days later Russian troops went into a counter-offensive against the Hungarian side, and installed a pro-Moscow government with Kadar as premier and head of the Communist Party. The Soviet Army crushed the armed resistance of the revolutionary forces in a few days of bloody fighting.

Although the revolution failed to achieve its aims, the political fight wasn't yet over. The Workers' Councils now came to new life by becoming the major organizing agents of resistance to the regime. I tried to fulfill the duties expected of me to the best of my abilities despite the fact that I became a member of the Council against my will.

The most effective means of fighting the new counter-revolutionary government was strikes. The whole country came to a stop in a series of general work stoppages that lasted for weeks. Kadar tried desperately to get the country back to 'normal'. His government, having only the Russians on its side, was not able to move openly against the Councils, so they followed the tactic of holding continuous negotiations and making promises which were broken a few days later. At the same time they tried to install a loyal infrastructure by recalling exposed communists and Stalinists from hiding. These individuals moved to the top administrative positions. The

organizational reconstruction was facilitated by the gaps left by the flood of defections of the intelligentsia to the West.

As the strikes went on, the coke plant's participation in the general protest became controversial. Our plant could not be just shut down. Only half a year earlier, it had taken two months to heat the coke ovens from ambient temperature to 1,200 degrees Celsius, because of the unique physical nature of the silicate refractory from which the ovens were constructed. If we wanted to stop operations, it would again take two months of closely controlled decreased heat input to cool the ovens to ambient temperature so that irreparable permanent damage to the structure could be avoided. Even while on strike we had to generate enough gas to keep the furnaces at constant temperature. This fact was well known and accepted by the workers of the coke plant, but not by outsiders. When they saw steam rising from the smokestack, they assumed that we had broken solidarity with the strikers.

We had to explain to the other Workers' Councils that as long as we were not producing gas and coke for external consumption we were actually on strike. The presence of an engineer on the Workers' Council turned out to be crucial to providing the technical background for these arguments.

The Workers' Councils tried to save some of the achievements of the revolution; e.g., forcing the government to recognize the legality and power of the Councils in exchange for returning to work. The government's efforts were directed at isolating the Councils by cutting the communications network between them, and with the masses. Councils were denied any supply of printing paper, and friendly printing presses were seized and closed down. Simultaneously the best-known anti-government leaders were arrested by Soviet Security.

As the reorganized pro-government apparatus consolidated its power, it demanded new elections of the Workers' Councils to weed out 'fascist elements'. We were forced to comply. These elections were held by secret ballot. I was re-elected with a majority of the votes.

During this period of continuous political struggle, we also had sharp encounters with the Commandant of the Russian occupying forces in the city. They tried to force us back to work. In return, we demanded the withdrawal of their troops from the country. They willingly promised to leave but had no intention of fulfilling this vow. During these negotiations I was the translator for the Hungarian side. The Russians brought their own trusted interpreter with them. The arguments in these meetings were very heated, and I often expressed my personal, extreme - according to the Commandant - opinions on some of the hot issues, like our refusal to let the hated, Stalinist General Manager of the Kombinate, who had been expelled during the revolution, reoccupy his old position. At one of these meetings I was warned by the Russian political officer that „we are going to continue this argument under different circumstances.” The meaning of his remark was ominous. I expected to get arrested that night.

As the weeks passed, the government succeeded in reorganizing the police, and the old terror began to return bit by bit. The punishment of the insurgents began. Thousands were arrested and deported to the USSR. The most outspoken critics of the regime were also arrested or simply disappeared. The government claimed that they had escaped to the West but their families attested to the contrary.

At the beginning of January 1957, I clearly saw the hopelessness of our rearguard actions. Our role as representatives of the workers' interests was no longer tenable. Consequently, I resigned. My resignation was not accepted by the plant employees, and I remained a nominal Council member until a few weeks later when the Kadar government felt able and ready to eliminate its bitter opposition by arresting all Council members throughout the country. After being warned about the coming mass arrest, I decided to escape from the country.

Fortunately, I succeeded in escaping, and in due course ended up in Canada. None of this would have happened to me without Comrade Dachnovski. Perhaps I should be thankful to him.

October 1956.

# 31

## NO RETURN

### Diary of T. Krantz

January - June, 1957

## PREFACE

This diary, i.e. its Hungarian original, had been recorded in the Yugoslav camps. Some of the political commentaries were added later - on the boat coming to Canada. It would have been foolhardy to write down anything critical of the regime or of the communist ideology while one was at the mercy of that police state.

Upon arriving in this country, I sent the diary to my mother to make up for all the letters which I had been unable to send from Yugoslavia.

The harassment of relatives of political refugees by the Hungarian Secret Police had reached its peak in 1959. Home searches aimed to find Western anticommunist literature, had become common. Frightened, my mother had decided to burn my diary.

In 1990, after the fall of the communist regime, I had visited an old friend in Hungary. He astounded me by handing over a typed copy of my long lost diary.

My mother apparently had lent the handwritten original to him before she destroyed it. My friend found the story fascinating and copied the whole text. However, he had never mentioned this fact to my mother. He had kept the secret for over 30 years.

I found the rereading of the long forgotten pages quite an experience.

The diary was translated into English in 1998.

## Tuesday, January 22, 1957

On arriving home late from work, I found a small note stuck in the door. It said:

„Come to see us tonight to discuss something important, Imre”

Imre Bozsik is a good friend of mine. He graduated in the same year, 1955, but from the Sverdlovsk Polytechnique where he had married Alla, an attractive vivacious blond.

A short while later I rang the bell at their door. It was opened by Alla. On seeing me, she grabbed my arm, placed the palm of her other hand on my mouth demanding silence, and pulled me into the bathroom off the hall. I was stunned and at the same time excited by her warm proximity.

‘What is going on?’ I wondered.

After drawing the door shut, she burst into rapid Russian, apparently too nervous to try her usual, halting Hungarian.

„The visitor in the living room is an AVO (Secret Police) officer. He inquired about you. Do not say a word about politics!” She said.

It was a strange statement and an even stranger request. The much hated communist secret police force was officially disbanded by the revolutionary Nagy government and the counter-revolutionary Kádár government had repeatedly confirmed their intention to keep the situation this way.

Alla’s warning about not discussing politics was completely unrealistic. During the last few months, before and after the revolution, there could be practically no other topic of conversation. The heated public debates of the summer of 1956, the October uprising, the temporary victory of the revolution, the Russian counter-invasion, the protest strikes, the following arrests and the escape of tens of thousands of refugees were continuously on our minds and were discussed non-stop at home, at work and everywhere else.

After this feverish warning Alla pushed me out of the bathroom and I entered the living room where I found Imre and the visitor - a young man of about our age who was dressed rather shabbily. When I was introduced, he scrutinized me in a way that made it obvious that he knew about me and was trying to measure me up. His name did not register but it was a false name anyway I learned later.

The conversation started rather awkwardly. It was obvious that none of us wanted to reveal any personal opinion on the events of the day. But then unavoidably the sporadic but still on-going strikes were mentioned. The visitor made an off-the-cuff remark:

„After arresting all local Workers’ Council members this coming Monday, the strikes will subside.” He said.

I was stunned. He must have been aware of the fact that I was one of those potential arrestees. I had been a member of the Revolutionary Workers’ council of the Coke Plant ever since October, and my role as an interpreter for the Kombinate’s Central Workers’ Council in negotiations with the Russian military occupiers had a certain notoriety.

Was it a slip of tongue on his part, or was he trying to warn me of what coming? - I wondered.

But no explanation was forthcoming and he left very soon after.

Both Imre and Alla jumped at me:

„Tibor, you have to escape right away. He was asking about you specifically the first time he came. They are after you.”

Then I learned that the visitor, whom Imre knew from school, was an AVO officer in Miskolc, Imre’s home-town. During the revolution he went into hiding and then suddenly, three days ago, reappeared in Imre’s plant as a worker. The next day he came to visit Imre and Alla and revealed to them that all the ex-AVO officers had been reassigned to different cities under cover, and that he was here to break the still strong, partly open and partly underground resistance to the Kádár regime.

He apparently had his contacts because he knew all the names and the roles of those who had taken part in the fighting or formed part of the desperate opposition to the regime that followed. Today he had dropped into Imre's for the second time in two days and by coincidence met me.

„Tibor. You have to escape. These animals are as bloodthirsty as ever.” Imre repeated.

We - friends - know that his sympathies are with the revolution but because of his Russian wife, he has generally kept quiet and stayed in the background during the uprising. His non-participation has apparently been interpreted differently by the supporters of the communist regime and merited him the ex-AVO man's confidence.

I left my friends in a very disturbed mood. The direction of the political changes of the last few weeks do not leave any doubt that the regime is trying to reintroduce total repression and my days of freedom are numbered. Now, I have finally learned that there are only five days left. I have to leave Hungary but how? The Western border with Austria is already sealed. One hears about people escaping to the South, to Yugoslavia but they all seem to have some kind of local contact. I do not. Or maybe?

After the war we lived in a border town, Mohács. My father might still have some friends there. Yes, I will have to get to Yugoslavia on the weekend, I decided. *Alia iacta est.*

By the time I arrived home the plan was ready. I told it to Feri, my friend from childhood with whom I shared a furnished room for the last year. Without a second thought, he decided to join me in the adventure.

### **Wednesday, January 23, 1957**

Before going to work I stopped at the post office and sent a telegram to my father,

„Feri and I going to visit Uncle Lorenz this coming weekend. Verify his address. Arriving Friday evening by bus. Your son.”

Uncle Lorenz, my father's cousin, lived in Yugoslavia. Between 1941 and 1944, when this region was part of Hungary, and I was a boy, I spent several summer vacations on his farm. My father will understand the real message: We want to escape to Yugoslavia and he has to help arrange it immediately.

In the office I tried to concentrate on my work. I had to work out the furnace thermal checklist for the month of February, one of the most challenging recurring tasks at my job. Normally, I enjoy doing it but this time I could not concentrate. I was thinking about the future. Naively, I thought that getting across the border would not be a big deal. But what after? Stay in Yugoslavia? It is also a communist country and the Russians can overrun it any time. And how about home-sickness? I had recurring attacks of it during my university years and it was especially depressing during the first year. But maybe I will only have to stay abroad a few months and when the situation improves here, I can return. Homesickness is still preferable to going to jail and possibly being tortured.

At the office I had to ask for a week's vacation to visit my parents in my home town in order to get my pay and have a pretext for buying a bus ticket. I could see the question marks on the faces of my bosses and colleagues. No wonder I was home at X-mas time, just a few weeks back, and another trip so close to that one could hardly seem normal. But nobody said anything.

### **Thursday, January 24, 1957**

In the evening we had a party with seven or eight friends in the Aranycsillag (Golden Star) restaurant. The reason? We gave no reason but I think everybody there considered it a farewell party. Despite the apparently good atmosphere, deep down I felt sad.

### **Friday, January 25, 1957**

As I closed the door of my office and walked out of the furnace building, I felt that it was for the last time. My first job after graduation had come to an unexpected end.

We did not take anything from our room with us. Since we were supposed to be going only for a week of vacation, we had to act accordingly.

The bus ride was crowded and we sat in silence deeply submerged in our thoughts. My father was waiting for us at the bus station. He described the escape scenario to us in detail.

„The three of us will leave the city in the morning by train for Mohács. The city is almost on the border. There are no police checks on the train; I just came back from there,” he said. „In case we are stopped, we will claim that our purpose is to buy a pig (there was a shortage of meat in the cities). On arriving there, we will walk to my friend, Tassi, who resides beside the market place. Tomorrow is market day. A peasant from a farm located right on the border will come to the market with a sleigh full of manure. You get on the top of it, and because of this you will have to wear some peasant type clothing, the worse it looks, the better. Then he will drive you to his place and you just step across the border. The smelly manure transport is not expected to be checked at potential roadblocks. However, we have to pay the farmer for his services.”

The plan seemed plausible to us, and I assured my father that we had enough cash - my last monthly payment which I had prudently picked up at the plant that day.

### **Saturday, January 26, 1957**

When we got up, it was still dark and cold. Since we were to carry nothing in our hands, I put on two shirts, two pairs of shorts, two pairs of pants, ski-pants and over this a pair of work pants, a pullover and over it all an old, torn, fur lined winter coat of my father.

Then came the heartbreaking farewell with my mother. It was teary on both sides. She is convinced that she will never see me again. I am more optimistic but still very downcast.

The train, a local milk express which was to cover the 40 km distance to Mohács in about two hours, was packed. Our wagon was full of peasants who worked in the city and were now returning to their villages for the weekend.

At the last stop, maybe fifteen minutes from our destination, a detachment of armed soldiers surrounded the train, climbed into the wagons and started to verify documents. Ours were not valid for the frontier zone that we had just entered. The soldier checking my father's papers did not pay any attention to this irregularity and proceeded. But Feri and I were in obvious trouble. As the spokesman of the two, I explained the assumed purpose of our trip. The soldier did not buy it. He collected our documents and left the wagon. We felt devastated.

A short while later he returned accompanied by an officer. I looked at him and realized that I knew this guy from somewhere. There was a spark of recognition in his eyes too. I had to repeat my story. It sounded even more transparent than the first time. The officer returned our papers without a word and left the wagon but the soldier remained at the door. We felt sure that we would be arrested on arrival.

The train pulled into the terminus and to our surprise, the soldiers jumped off, formed a column and marched out of the rail yard. We were safe. We could not believe our good fortune. I never did figure out who the officer that let us pass was.

After a short walk we arrived at Tassi's home. Following the greetings and introductions he and my father left for the market to meet our farmer. They did not come back as soon as we expected. Actually, it was already 2.00 p.m. and there was still no sign of them.

Finally, they returned empty handed. The farmer did not arrive. Either he changed his mind, or was arrested; We were probably not his first clients.

What to do now? Tassi suggested that he gets a fisherman to take us across the river at night, and on the other side where there were no settlements we follow the river bank for maybe 5 km to the border and cross it without further ado. We agreed.

Tassi left, but returned in a couple of hours rather depressed. None of his friends would agree to cross the river full of floating ice during darkness. It would be suicidal, they felt.

It was getting dark. There was nothing else left but to spend the night here and to try to organize some means of escape in the morning. Another problem was Tassi's neighbour, a communist, who would denounce us if he noticed anything. Therefore, we were not to use the outhouse located at the back of the yard but a pail indoors. I found this very degrading in this one room-kitchen apartment occupied by six people. We went to sleep on the floor.

### **Sunday, January 27, 1957**

In the morning our host, the by now rather desperate Tassi, left to search for a guide. His wife went out to buy some milk.

She returned with a very worried look on her face. She had learned that all exits from the city now had roadblocks manned by Hungarian border guards and Russian troops. Also, the roads leading toward the border were patrolled by detachments with police dogs. The government had apparently become ready to seal off the Yugoslav border this weekend as tightly as they had with the Austrian border a few weeks earlier. Things looked rather gloomy for us.

Tassi got back before noon. He was radiant: He had found a guide who knew the forests along the Danube where he worked as a logger.

„We will meet him at his place after dark and with some luck, a couple of hours later you will be across the border.” Tassi said.

The hours passed like eternity, but finally it began to get dark. We went to the guide's house after 5.00 p.m. There we learned to our dismay that he had to leave the city unexpectedly. However, two co-workers of his had agreed to lead us to the border. They would join us in a short while.

In the meantime an older, rather nervous looking man arrived, who turned out to be a fugitive from jail. He would be our third escape companion.

When it became completely dark outside, one of the long-sought guides finally arrived. He was a Gypsy. He told us that his buddy had gone ahead to get fresh information on the route to be followed, and we were to meet him at the edge of the city. From there, we would ascend the river dike and walk along it almost all the way. This road is used by the border guards to access the border, but only in daytime. Before we reached the border we would have to leave the dike, enter the forest of the flood plain and cross the border halfway between the watchtower on the bank of the river and the other on the dike. The distance between the two was too large for the guards to take aim at us even if they noticed us. This did not sound very reassuring but at this point the danger of the border crossing seemed far away and academic.

Our primary concern was how to get out of the city unnoticed after we had learned about the roadblocks and patrols.

Gypsies are not generally considered the most trustworthy people so we agreed that when we reach the border I would tell them a codeword agreed on with my father. Upon return, they would be paid by my father after presenting the codeword.

At about 6.00 p.m. after a fast goodbye to my father and Tassi, the four of us - Feri, I, the fugitive and the Gypsy guide - started out. Only a few of the city lights tried to break the gloomy darkness of the night and there were no people on the streets. As we crossed the central part of the city, we noticed the silhouettes of about half a dozen Russian amphibious troop carriers parked beside the Silk Factory. In the darkness we could see dozens of cigarette butts glowing around the vehicles, indicating that they were waiting for something.



'Why amphibious carriers in the middle of the city?' I wondered.

Soon we reached the Southern part of the city. Here the Gypsy warned us to be quiet and to walk close to the walls and fences, since these streets were frequently patrolled. I was watching our fugitive companion with great concern. He seemed to be startled by every shadow and trembled visibly.

At one of the corners a dark figure appeared from the obscurity of a gate. He was our second guide, also a Gypsy. He had some more bad news. An hour earlier he had seen two border guards and a dog walking on the dyke toward the border, hence, there was the potential danger that we meet them on their way back.

The two Gypsies decided to change the plan. Instead of following the road on the dike, we would walk on the flood plain between the Danube and the dike where there was no road. This would be safe. However, about half a kilometre from the border our route would be blocked by the border guards' barracks. In order to pass around it, we would have to leave the flood plain, cross the dike, and do a semicircle in the forest on the far side, then return to the flood plain and get across the border as planned before. (See sketch on Page 135).

Now the problem was how to get out of the city and on to the flood plain unnoticed. We knew by now that every exit from the city has a roadblock. It seemed that the only way around the problem would be to cross from the riverbank to Ciganyzatony - an island separated from the city by a narrow arm of the river - then to walk South along the riverbank until the roadblock was passed, and then return to the flood plain.

„Crossing the ice over the shallow arm should not be a problem.” The Gypsies said.

This was not the case, at least for our fugitive companion. When his turn came to step on the ice, he panicked. The Gypsies were already on the other side and Feri and I were halfway across, when the fugitive whispered that his nerves could not take it any longer and that he would go back to the city. He immediately disappeared in the darkness. Feri and I did not pay much attention to him but one of the guides ran after him. We waited impatiently in the deep snow under the trees, until finally the Gypsy returned without the fugitive. I felt more relieved than sorry for the poor guy.

We started to walk along the bank of the island. We did not get very far when suddenly a dog started to bark ahead of us and we heard a loud voice calling the dog:

„FOGD MEG!” (Get him!).

We froze for a moment then instinctively started to run back in the deep snow toward the spot where we entered the island. There we stopped to collect our wits and assess the situation.

Somewhat reassured by silence on the dog's part, we proceeded in a more controlled manner to the far side of the island and started to follow the river bank there.

Our eyes were glued to the ground as we concentrated on walking in each other's footsteps in the deep snow. Suddenly an ear-shattering cacophony of bird cries exploded above our heads. It must have been audible for kilometres in the silence of the night. We had apparently disturbed a colony of crows and they gave expression to their annoyance at 100 decibels. Our annoyance was expressed only by mute curses.

Very soon after this we arrived at the end of the island. The crossing of the frozen river at this point was scary. The ice cover was broken somewhere and there was a layer of ankle-deep water on top of it. In the darkness we could not tell where the hole or crevice was, or how to avoid falling into it. But we made it across without any mishap.

On the other bank we encountered a quiet stretch. Here the forest was continuous but not dense, with very little underbrush. The depth of the fresh snow varied from maybe 20 to 50 cm.

For hours, the only sound heard was our steps crushing the snow. I learned that it was completely useless to ask our leaders about the distance remaining or the time required to reach the border; they did not seem to have a sense of time.

„We will be there very soon.” They kept on repeating.

At last, they stopped and told us that the border guard's barrack was just ahead of us and in order to bypass it we would have to get to the other side of the dike. The dike - an earthen construction about five metres high - had a dirt road running on its top and the forest was cleared on both sides of it for a distance of ten metres. Although there was no moon, the starry sky provided enough light reflected from the snow to allow the sight of any moving silhouettes from quite a distance. Since we were supposedly close to the barracks, we crossed the clearing and climbed the dike on our bellies. We did not see any patrols on the road, and apparently nobody saw us either, as we disappeared in the forest on the far side. It was about 10.00 p.m.

The forest in this region was a frozen swamp with a lot of underbrush which rendered progress difficult. After so many hours of walking in the deep snow followed by this struggle through the underbrush, we felt completely exhausted. Fortunately, we stumbled on a logging road which seemed to lead us in the right direction - back to the dike. The Gypsies assured us that, by now, the barracks were well passed, therefore as the road climbed to the top of the dike we followed it boldly. We had not reached the top, when the vicious bark of an apparently large dog shattered the icy silence right in front of us! The alarm was immediately joined by a canine choir.

For the second time this night we turned around in panic and ran off the dike and into the forest. We kept on running until we ran out of breath, then kept on walking at a more sustainable pace in order to put the largest possible distance between the dogs and us.

Meanwhile, the sky had turned cloudy and it had become darker. During our run, one of the Gypsies had lost the string holding up his pants, and now he struggled to keep them up with one hand while pushing the underbrush aside with the other. This slowed our progress considerably. I decided to pull the laces out of my boots and give them to him to fasten his pants. My boots were now held on by the strap forming their upper part. The tight fit at my ankle was lost and snow could squeeze in.

As we kept on walking, it slowly dawned on me that we were not keeping to a straight line, but were probably walking in a curved path. I mentioned my suspicion to the Gypsies. They did not pay any attention to my observation but continued to argue between themselves in their own language. With Feri, who had also become alarmed, I started to watch our surroundings more closely. Suddenly I recognized a crooked tree that we had passed some time ago. We walked around it and, sure enough, could discern our footprints in the snow. We had obviously been walking in a circle.

I was dead tired and Feri was in even worse condition - he could barely drag his feet. Our guides were also seemingly ready to collapse. At this point the Gypsies admitted that we were lost, and they had no inkling in which direction the border lay.

Feri cried out:

„If we keep on going in circles, we will freeze to death. Why don't we just turn back and try it again tomorrow evening?!”

These words seemed to me the most idiotic proposal ever made. If we knew which direction was back, we could proceed forward!

We restarted in a direction chosen blindly, and in a short while we came upon a logging road. We started to follow it without having any idea of which direction it would lead us. It was about midnight.

### **Monday, January 28, 1957**

As we marched along the road, the two guides were trembling from the cold and the physical and nervous exhaustion. They were convinced that the road would lead us into the arms of the border guards. But we had stopped caring. The choice seemed to be narrowed down to freezing to death or finding a shelter, any shelter.

Some time later we arrived at the dike again. At this time the Gypsies were swearing that they recognized the place.

„We are almost at the border. You just have to cross the dike and turn south.” They said.

They also insisted that they did not have to go any further with us since the border was so close. Not believing a word that they said, I only shrugged. By this time they were completely useless to us anyway, more hindrance than help. I gave them the agreed upon piece of paper with the code word for my father and let them disappear back into the forest.

The two of us climbed over the dike and were again in the flood plain. It was 1.00 a.m. Since we had no idea how far the border really was, we walked very carefully, stopped, listened, and then proceeded further. It was our luck that the sky cleared up again, and we could orient ourselves by the stars, trying to walk due South between the Danube and the dike.

One hour passed after another, but there was still no sign of the border. I almost stopped feeling the fatigue and kept lifting my legs like a robot. My feet were getting painfully cold. The snow entering through the top of my boots was melting and my feet were soaking in the near zero degree slush.

Finally, we came upon a row of electric poles which crossed our path and suggested that either the border or a settlement was nearby. Sure enough, a few minutes later we reached a clearing about ten metres wide that stretched as far as we could see in both directions. In the distance toward the river we saw something which could be a guard tower but we did not see anything tall in the other direction. Still, this must be the border. It was such an anticlimax. The time was 2.45 a.m.

We continued to walk through the forest - Yugoslav forest this time - we thought. The pain in my cold feet became agonizing. We decided to return to the dam where our chances of finding an inhabited place were better as we were afraid of freezing to death.

As we continued in the direction we believed the dike to be, we found a building under construction. Beside it was a well equipped with a chain and a pail. We pulled up some water and had a good drink. After all these hours munching only snow, the well water tasted like a heavenly drink.

Behind the building stretched the dike. As we climbed to the top of it, we found a low stone post with MNK (Hungarian People's Republic) on one side, and JFR (Yugoslav Federal Republic) on the other side. These markers seemed to be posted at regular intervals on the dike. We were confused. We thought the border crossed the Danube at right angles. The same had to be true for the dike which was parallel to the river. But these markers indicated otherwise. Here, the dike was obviously the border. After walking nine hours in the cold snow, our brains must have come to a near stop due to the fatigue and the cold. We could not figure out which country was on which side of the posts.

We kept on walking on the dike until a gate barred our route. A few metres behind it there was a single guard booth, and farther in the forest, a tall watch tower stood with a glassed-in cubicle on top. There was no sign of a living soul. We concluded that at this point the border must depart from the dike, but which country were we in and which was on the other side of the gate, we did not know.

I started to shout in Hungarian, then in Russian, toward the guard booth, but there was no answer. After sitting on the gate for maybe ten minutes, we started to feel leaden, a sure sign that our bodies were beginning to freeze up. We decided to restart walking whatever is on the other side.

We crossed the barrier. Nothing happened. We continued on the dike. Maybe a quarter of an hour later as we passed a pile of cut wood there came a shrill cry:

„STOJ!” (Stop!)

My blood froze. I thought we had run into the Russians! But when the first soldier, followed closely by three others, appeared from behind the woodpile we saw that they were Yugos. We were saved!

We tried to communicate. I discovered to my great frustration that I barely understood them. I came to realise that Russian and Serb and even more, Croatian, differ considerably.

The soldiers searched us very thoroughly for weapons. They explained the reason. Due to our very odd behaviour on the border which was reported by telephone from the guard tower, they believed that we were some kind of Russian provocateurs, who were trying to set up a border incident.

We explained our dilemma-of not knowing which country was where. They just shook their heads in disbelief. It was self evident to them, and they did not understand how anybody could be as idiotic as us.

The soldiers led us to the nearby command post, took away our documents, and went inside leaving us outside. It was 5.00 a.m.

After eleven hours of continuous walking we could finally lie down, but only on the snow. At least, with all the soldiers passing around us, we expected somebody to wake us up before we froze to death.

We did not enjoy this pleasure for very long because an officer came out and examined us closely in the light of several matches. (Flashlights were apparently not standard issue for Tito's armed forces). The light rays apparently penetrated right through us and revealed our innocence, because the officer ordered us to get up and start marching to a nearby refugee collection point.

We reached this 'nearby' place in about an hour. It was a rather poor looking collective or state farm where we were installed in an empty barn. At last we could take off our soaking wet boots, but with no hope that either these or our socks would dry out. There were many local people - men, women and children - peeking through the open door. Their faces did not express either compassion or antagonism.

After some time, a middle-aged peasant, who turned out to be kinder, invited us into his home and offered us his single bed to lie down on. The place screamed poverty. The single room which served also as the kitchen had the barest furniture. His several children wore rags. The farm was on rich soil, but this did not seem to help its cultivators. Similar Hungarian farms just a few kilometres across the border, appeared to be much-much richer even after collectivisation.

We had rested maybe two hours when a soldier entered the room and indicated that we had to start moving again. As we understood, our next stop would be Dalyok, a village about six kilometres away. Feri could not walk because a muscle in his leg had become inflamed. The superintendent of the farm came to our help and provided a tractor with a trailer to carry us.

By this time other refugees had started to arrive and very soon the trailer was full of tired, cold and very subdued people of all ages.

In the designated village some 20 more people were waiting. After an officer verified our documents, we continued, this time in the back of an open truck, to Beli Monastir, the administrative centre of the region.

One more session of document checks and paper filling, then came an unexpected question:

„Which country do you want to proceed to from here?“ The officer asked.

For a moment I was taken back. Initially, I had thought of staying in Yugoslavia for maybe a few months until I could return to Hungary. But the few, rather unpleasant hours spent in this country had already changed my mind.

„Sweden!“ I burst out without any due consideration, and now this destination became indelibly engraved on my personal records.

The personal data collection was followed by a general debriefing on the situation across the border in Hungary. The officer, probably a military intelligence man, tried to collect information on Russian troop movements. When I mentioned to him the amphibious troop carriers seen in the centre of Mohács, he became very agitated. The Yugos were apparently scared of a Russian invasion of their country and any sign of that possibility was considered very important.

After the interrogation we were herded into the back of another truck and headed toward Osijek, a major city about an hour's drive from this place. By the time we started out, our number had grown to maybe 40. My still wet clothing and boots rendered the trip terribly cold in the open truck.

In Osijek we were deposited in a building that was called Macska Mama (Cat Mother). If this was a Serb name distorted into Hungarian, or earlier refugees had named it this for unknown reasons, we did not know, but for a refugee camp it sounded original.

Here, the bureaucratic procedure was repeated. They searched us a fourth time, then we had to fill out a new form. We did not know at this time that this procedure would be repeated practically every day for at least a month. Forms were the only items in this regime which were not in short supply.

In the Macska Mama, we finally got something to eat. The first bite in more than 24 hours, and furthermore, a hot meal.

After supper we had to move again, this time to a permanent refugee camp called Ankin Dvor, previously a chicken hatchery. During the total duration of this march, Feri had to be dragged leaning on my shoulder, groaning and grinding his teeth from the pain in his leg.

In the hatchery, our whole group, about 40 young men, was placed in the dining room of the camp. We got blankets, one per two people, and we laid down on the benches for a desperately needed sleep.

## **Tuesday, January 29, 1957**

The camp is made up of two large and two small buildings. The largest one, the original hatchery, has four rooms and a kitchen. The largest room is occupied by families, about 400 persons total. The other, a medium sized room has 200 single men. The third is the dining room and the fourth - the 'washroom'.

Both dormitory rooms are packed solid with rows of two-tier bunks and each army cot is occupied by two people sharing one blanket.

The other large building, originally the granary of the farm, accommodates 500 young, single men in one open area. Here, the living conditions are even worse than in the main building. It has an earthen floor, and the roof leaks in several places. The air is cold and humid and full of smoke from the wood burning stoves and cigarettes smoked. One cannot see one end of the room from the other.

The small buildings accommodate the camp commandant and policemen.

All the refugees, about 1,200 total, eat in the dining room, which feeds about 200 at a time. The meals have to be served non-stop from 7.00 a.m. till 11.00 p.m., or about 20 minutes per meal and per group for the three meals of the day.

For all these people there are only 10 water taps installed in the 'washroom' of the main building, and only four of these are operational. Hot water is not available at all.

It so happened that the dining room became our permanent home. This meant that during meal time, from 7.00 a.m. till 11.00 P.M., we had to stand or sit on the floor along the walls. After the last group left, we could put the benches together and sleep on them, or on top of the tables.

### **Friday, February 1, 1957**

The homeless crowd in the dining room has increased for a few days by a decreasing number of new arrivals. This tapering off indicates that the sealing-off of the border is becoming more and more effective.

There is room for only about 50 people on the benches and tables, but by now we are close to 100. Consequently, at 11.00 p.m. there is always a rush to occupy a place on them, otherwise, one has to sleep on the wet, muddy floor.

Three meagre meals per day and 5 cigarettes per head are all that is provided. No soap, towel, tooth brush or paste, or shaving materials. The cigarettes serve as a barter medium and can be exchanged for 'slightly used' razor blades.

The meals consist of 3 decilitres of coffee for breakfast, 3 dL of bean soup for lunch (with a few beans in it on lucky occasions) and 3 dL of cabbage soup for supper. Luckily, with each meal we also receive a slice of bread which saves us from starvation.

Everyone in the camp seems to have a cold or the flu and coughs. There are no medicines of any kind available.

The buildings are guarded by armed police. After curfew, at the fall of darkness, one cannot leave the buildings for the latrine or for the drinking trough (the water from the inside taps is not potable).

The camp commandant is a sadistic - probably a job requirement - UDBA (Political Police) officer. He hates the refugees from the bottom of his guts, and calls us fascist Cigáns (Gypsies). He makes his rounds with a stick in his hand and uses it regularly. Obviously, the refugees hate him as much as he hates us.

How did this situation - thousands of Hungarian political refugees in Yugoslav camps - arise?

The story - in a nutshell - is as follows:

At the beginning of 1956 the denunciation of Stalin and of Stalinism by Khrushchov and his overtures toward the West reduced 'Cold War' tensions considerably. Consequently, during the summer the Hungarian government removed the most visible components of the dreaded „Iron Curtain” - the barbed wire fences and land mines - on the western and southern borders of Hungary. At the same time the regime eased up on press censorship and on police oppression. There were rising expectations of further reforms. When these hopes remained unfulfilled, the frustration finally led to armed confrontation - a revolution broke out on October 23rd.

The Secret Police forces tried to oppress the uprising but lost control of the situation rapidly. The government called on the occupying Russian troops for help. The following intervention of the Russian tanks in the streets of Budapest widened the anti-government uprising to a national liberation struggle.

During this time the Hungarian Army and the Border Guard Forces which had been under Secret Police command, remained at the fringes of the events. The government did not trust them enough to throw them into the fighting. As the days went by these forces ceased to function as organized troops. The senior officers went into hiding. The troops refused orders and remained in the barracks. Many soldiers joined the freedom fighters as individuals or just walked home.

The borders of the country became unattended. The first wave of refugees started to flow through the unguarded western border to Austria.

After a week of bloody fighting in which the Russian Army lost hundreds of armoured vehicles and thousands of men in the streets of Budapest, the Soviet leadership seemed to yield.

On October 30th the Kremlin recognized the revolutionary government formed under Nagy. Soviet Army headquarters moved the Russian troops out of the capital and promised to pull all their troops out of Hungary at a later date.

The revolution had won! The country was ready to return to normal.

But the victory and the peace did not last long. The Russian troops reinforced with fresh units from the USSR went on a counter-offensive - on November 4th.

Nagy and his close collaborators sought political asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy while the Soviets installed a puppet government under Kádár.

From this day on the flow of refugees to the West became a tide.

At the beginning the puppet government was too busy trying to break the pockets of remaining armed resistance and the country-wide general strike, and was reluctant to face the refugee problem. But by the end of November the regime had disposed of sufficiently loyal troops to start to seal the borders through strict travel control and frequent patrolling in the border zone and through reinstalling the land-mines and barbed wire fences on the border itself.

By Xmas time the flow of refugees to Austria was stemmed. The number of refugees in the West stood at 180,000.

A month later - when our time to flee came - the Iron Curtain on the Austrian border had been tightly closed. We had to turn South to try to escape where the events had taken a different turn.

Until the end of November the Yugoslavs refused entry to any refugee from Hungary. They believed that the revolution had been totally anti-communistic (i.e. Fascist according to them) and any refugee from across the border was a potential danger to the Yugoslav state.

However, the picture changed on November 22nd when the Russians kidnapped Imre Nagy and his close collaborators as they were leaving the Yugoslav Embassy with the agreement of the Soviet government.

Tito was outraged at the perfidy of the Russians and to annoy Khrushchov he ordered the opening of the Yugo border to refugees from Hungary.

Most of the lower echelon communist cadres and especially the members of the political police accepted the order of Tito with great reservation. They continued to look at the escaping Hungarians as the fifth column of the imperialist West and hence a deadly danger to their own regime and even to their own lives. They had not even tried to cover their feelings in the camps.

But we - back in Hungary - were not aware of this situation. We looked at the open Yugo border as the only escape-door from the increasing oppression of the restored communist dictatorship.

After the Iron Curtain had finally descended on the western border, the flow of refugees toward the South increased dramatically. By the beginning of January the number of Hungarian refugees in the Yugo camps reached 15,000.

At this time the Kádár regime started to introduce the same protective measures on the southern border that had proved to be so effective on the Austrian border six weeks earlier. Our escape took place during this transitory stage.

So Feri and I are now two of the thousands of unwelcome and unwanted political refugees locked in makeshift Yugoslav camps at the mercy of Tito's political police.

### **Sunday, February 3, 1957**

We have been in this crowded dining room for 5 days.

We have not been able to obtain any writing paper, envelopes or stamps to notify our families about our whereabouts.

## **Tuesday, February 5, 1957**

This morning I woke up with a high fever. I went to see the camp doctor. He has no instruments or medicines at his disposal.

„Flu” - he said - „Nothing can be done about it. You will get over it in a few days.”

However, when he learned that I am one of the homeless crowd, he arranged a bed for me in the single men's room, but only for the day time. At night I have to return to my home base, the dining room table.

While I was recuperating in the daybed, there were changes taking place around me. Some families had departed from the large room and maybe 20 single, mostly young women arrived. The sharpest ones grabbed the beds vacated by the families, but the more timid ones, maybe a dozen, were sent into the men's room where I was laying, to find accommodation for themselves. They stood at the door and looked at the crowd of eager young men rather desperately. There was not much choice, they had to share the cots with the 'generous ones' who were loudly offering it.

According to the much despised Yugo camp commandant, this measure made sense.

„A man and a woman can certainly be accommodated easier on a narrow army cot than two men, and sharing one blanket can also result in less friction if the genders differ.” He said.

In a few hours, the initial upset of the new arrivals seemed to subside considerably. One could hear some female laughter and other happy sounds. This was even more pronounced after the lights went out.

## **Monday, February 18, 1957**

This was a big day. All the families moved out. The rumours were that they were being transferred to seaside hotels. We could finally exchange our mostly standing-room accommodations in the dining room for a nice separate enclosure in the corner of the big room. We still had to share a cot and a blanket between two of us, and we had to lie on the unwashed bed sheets that our predecessors had used for weeks, but despite this it felt like heaven. We were only 20 people in the enclosure; the windows could be opened; and the floor could be swept.

Among the new inhabitants of the enclosure are two young sisters, Irén and Márta. Márta is the younger one - short, dark, with an attractive face but rather too coquettish for my liking. The older one is taller, a brunette, apparently more serious, but still friendly. They are hoping to go to Canada where they have relatives.

Their escape from Hungary - as they related it to us - is an anticlimax to our Canossa.

Irén had worked as a bookkeeper in a co-operative while her sister was a nurse in the Mohács General Hospital. Neither of them had any real political motive to leave Hungary but - being single - decided to see the world.

One of Márta's co-workers - another nurse - had come from a farm located on the Yugo border not far from the city. When the two sisters asked her help for their intended flight, she agreed.

The given morning - a few days after our escape - the three women walked through the roadblock at the edge of the city without being challenged and reached the friend's home-farm without meeting any patrols. There the friend showed a house a little further down in the field and said:

„That is Yugoslavia. Keep on marching. Good-by and good luck.”

Five minutes later the sisters were in Yugoslavia. In the indicated house they were picked up by a patrol of Yugo border guards and were transported directly to Osijek's „Macska Mama” in an army truck. They made the whole trip from Mohács to Osijek in a few hours without any hold-up or incident.



### **Saturday, February 23, 1957**

The camp has become overcrowded again. No fresh refugees have arrived, just transfers from other camps. The blocks of bunk beds had to be rearranged into larger blocks and now seven refugees are crowded on three cots of each deck. Since space is so limited for sleeping, we have to alternate: head-feet, head-feet, head-feet, head. Anybody trying to move at night would kick or step on his neighbour's face. Tempers flare up rather suddenly in the middle of the night, ending in loud cursing or screaming.

### **Monday, February 25, 1957**

We had to leave the 'comfort' of the corner enclosure after a week. It is to be occupied by families again. This time Irene and I have decided to share a recently vacated cot in the main room. Feri also had to move out and share a cot with a new fellow. However, we will not lose each other, still remain room-mates, as with the 450 others.

Despite the general crowding, Irén and I both rather enjoyed the situation. I began to realize how right the hated camp commandant was in his reasoning about sleeping space requirements.

Irén has started to help out in the kitchen. This gives her the opportunity to smuggle out food, easing my constant hunger. Also, she can wash our underwear in hot water with soap which significantly has improved our olfactory image.

### **Sunday, March 3, 1957**

The camp is guarded by UDBA troops but it is not fenced around. Some of the more enterprising individuals sneak out in the dark hours of the early morning, walk to the city market, exchange or sell clothing and jewellery, and bring back food, hygienic products etc.

Yesterday I decided to try my luck. The escape was successful. I reached the market, but since I had nothing to sell or exchange, it was only a joy-ride. After six weeks in this concentration (like) camp, walking freely on the streets, looking at window displays, and listening to strange people talking, even if in Croatian, were an unimaginable pleasure.

In the marketplace I listened for Hungarian. Sure enough, I found two old ladies selling potatoes and carrots and conversing in my language. I explained myself and asked them if they would buy a postcard with a stamp for me to send to Uncle Lorenz. They helped me out, and I finally sent a note to a relative about my whereabouts.

### **Monday, March 4, 1957**

Encouraged by my easy adventure, Irén decided to sneak out into the city also. She had some trading goods: a necklace, earrings, purse and also my wallet. She successfully sold them, and bought food with the money.

Our lives improved somewhat. The five cigarettes per day per person were also a good help. Every second day we could sell a package and buy stamps, soap, toothbrushes and razor blades.

### **Wednesday, March 6, 1957**

A representative of the UN visited the camp and was advised by the inmates about the inhuman conditions we lived in.

By now the camp's population has grown to 1,500. The barn takes up all the new arrivals.

By this time every refugee has to register their name on a list for the country they hoped to go to. One was allowed to select only one destination. I remained with Sweden, and Irén and her sister put down Canada.

### **Sunday, March 10, 1957**

As we were standing idle along the wall of the main building, a young girl in a bright blue, expensive looking overcoat slowly walked by with pain on her face half leaning on a Gypsy guy. She entered the bathroom while he waited patiently outside.

We already knew their story through the grapevine.

The girl, only about 17 years old, arrived alone in the camp some days after some of her sisters went through the baptism of fire in the single men's dormitory. Until two days ago she shared a cot in the family room with an elderly and apparently not very friendly woman. The girl wanted a change. Two young guys from the barn persuaded her to move down to their building to brighten up the monotony of its exclusively male company.

By the time the first night was over she had had seven partners. Now, a day later, the fallen virgin could only walk with excruciating pain and the only cavalier among her partners who would accompany her in public was the Gypsy.

### **Friday, March 15, 1957**

Since the visit of the UN representative, life in the camp has started to improve: more and better food; a weekly change of bed sheets; and the distribution of incoming letters after only a week's delay rather than the previous 6-8 weeks.

However, we still cannot send out any letters. They have to be smuggled out and mailed in the city.

### **Saturday, March 16, 1957**

The camp laundry is done by women who volunteered for this task in return for an extra food portion. They are supervised by a middle-aged male refugee. He looks after the hot water and the soap used.

Since for six weeks I have been unable to wash my hair, my scalp has become very itchy. I went to see this supervisor to ask for a half pail of hot water and some soap to wash my head. The man became incensed and started to scream:

„I was made responsible for washing the laundry and to prevent anybody from stealing the soap. How dare you to ask for such a thing?"

I was stunned, for this man was serving our oppressors so loyally that he was far above any consideration for his fellow refugees. My hair will have to wait until Irén can volunteer as a washer woman.

### **Monday, March 18, 1957**

Physical violence at the hands of the police is part of our daily life. If any order from an UDBA man, like 'enter the building', or 'move faster' is not carried out at the expected speed, they use their truncheons indiscriminately. Yesterday the general sadism reached a new height.

As it was getting dark, a few refugees tried to sneak out into the city from a remote spot behind the barn. A police guard caught one of them and hammered him with his stick until the refugee collapsed on the ground. His desperate cries aroused a group of youth from the nearby barn

and they started to throw stones at the policeman. The heroic defender of the regime ran back to his quarters where he apparently raised an alarm.

In half an hour, truckloads of riot police arrived from the city. They unloaded outside and then rushed in.

Since it was just before the curfew, there were quite a few people around the latrine, including Irene and me.

Suddenly without any warning, dozens of riot policemen armed with sticks appeared among us and started to beat us. We had no idea why, since we did not know anything about the incident which had taken place at the opposite corner of the large camp.

We all - maybe 100 men and women - tried to find refuge in the building which could only be entered through a single door. Irén luckily slipped in before somebody fell at the door in the stampede and blocked the entrance. Seeing the remaining group of maybe 20 stopping, the police went completely berserk, hitting everybody on the head, shoulders, etc.

I found myself facing the camp commandant. His face was distorted by hatred and he was holding a pistol in one hand and a heavy wooden stick, not a regular rubber truncheon, in the other. As he lifted it to hit me on the head, I raised my arm for protection and the stick landed right above my wrist. I lost the use of the whole arm.

Fortunately for me, his attention was drawn to somebody else and he started to beat that poor fellow until he collapsed on the ground.

By this time the passage through the door had cleared up and I and the rest of the frantic crowd could squeeze through.

It happened that the original cause of the disturbance - the young man who was caught by the UDBA policeman while trying to leave the camp - had come into our room before the police reinforcements arrived. He lives in the barn but expecting the police to search for him there, came to hide in the main building. His head had several egg-sized bumps, some of them bleeding, as the result of the severe beating he had received from his arrestor. He was given a ski cap by somebody that he pulled down to his eyes and then he was made to sit on a bed beside an older woman.

We anxiously waited for the next act of the police drama. Sure enough it came in about half an hour; It had taken them that long to search the barn first.

They announced that everyone was to sit on their own bed, and that nobody could move until further orders. Then a detachment of the police led by the 'victim of the mutiny', passed among the rows of bunk beds and checked every person. Fortunately, like the border guards, they did not have flashlights either, and while searching the barn they had apparently used up all their matches, and thus missed the culprit sitting on a dark, lower cot beside the old woman.

## **Tuesday, March 19, 1957**

The whole camp had to line up outdoors, and the police searched everybody. All pocket knives and dangerous looking objects were confiscated. I succeeded in slipping my pocket knife into my boot where it escaped detection.

In the meantime the rooms were also thoroughly searched. All valuable items hidden in the mattresses or under the pillows disappeared.

We had to stand outside the building all morning in the still chilly weather as collective punishment for the mutiny. Finally, the police randomly picked out 20 young men and took them to the city headquarters for further questioning.

### **Wednesday, March 20, 1957**

A few days ago it was announced that young women could change the countries they had originally selected, and sign up for Norway. This transport will be the first to leave Yugoslavia. Since by this time the primary objective of any refugee is to get out of this country, and worry about the receiving country later, there were many volunteers. Irén and Márta signed up too.

This morning the camp authorities announced that the Norwegian contingent, about 200 people, would leave the camp in the afternoon.

The moment of decision for Irén and I had arrived. Would our relationship only be a camp affair or a longer lasting tie?

We have known each other for about six weeks, but I am still not sure if I love her or not. The idea of marriage does not enter the picture at all. But at this point, when our separation is imminent, I realize that the farewell will be painful, and who knows if I will ever meet anybody like her. She is honest, very practical, not bad looking and she loves me very much.

After some soul searching, I decided that we should try to go to Sweden together, and then and there we will see what happens.

Irén happily got her name removed from the Norwegian list. Her sister did the same.

In the afternoon the whole camp was out to watch the departure of the first contingent for the West.

As the departing ones formed a column, a quite attractive young girl decided to give a last goodbye kiss to the boyfriend already in the column. The policeman standing between the crowd and the transport group, became incensed at such a breach of discipline and started to beat her with his rifle butt until she fell to the ground. All this horrible spectacle played out in front of 1,500 people - we were restrained by the firearms aimed at us by the other policemen.

Those who finally departed had a lasting memory of the basic nature of this police state.

### **Tuesday, April 1, 1957**

The twenty people who had been taken to the police quarters after the 'mutiny', returned. They were badly beaten there then kept in jail for two weeks until the worst visible damage healed. None of them had anything to do with the stone throwing and neither were they aware of the incident.

### **Wednesday, April 3, 1957**

For quite some time, there have been no spoons provided with meals. We have to drink our 3dL soup from the litre army canteen and dig out any solid pieces from its depth with our fingers. The authorities claim that spoons have been stolen by the refugees.

To solve the spoon problem, people started to break branches off the plum trees standing in the yard and carve spoons for themselves. The camp commandant became quite mad, and called us low uncivilized Gypsies for behaving in such a barbaric way.

Our lives are just one degree above that of animals, while the camp loudspeaker reports that the Yugoslav government has approached the UN for additional funds to support the expensive refugee camps.

### **Tuesday, April 9, 1957**

The weather has warmed up. It is possible to sunbathe in the yard and since we have nothing else to do, we spend all daylight hours outside. In no time we have begun to look like real Gypsies, giving credence to the opinion of the UDBA guards about all Hungarians.

The crowding of the camp has eased considerably. A large number of the young men, Feri among them, have been transferred for no obvious reason to Gerovo which is renowned for being a punishment camp.

The under-18 youngsters have also been transferred. Some have been returned to Hungary despite their desperate protests, while the luckier ones have been shipped to a sea-side camp.

A few days ago a new scandal broke out which derives from the „animalistic nature of Gypsy Hungarians“. Some of the single women realize that they are pregnant and asked for abortions. Surprisingly, there was immediate action. The pregnant women were transported to the city hospital, and the medical interventions were duly carried out.

Now, the moral indignation of the camp commandant knows no limits. Today, all the single women whom he called only „dirty whores“ - were relocated in a separate room where no man is allowed to enter.

His earlier theory on sleeping space requirements is not a topic anymore.

### **Monday, April 29, 1957**

It was announced that the Swedish delegation has arrived - in, of all places, Gerovo - and people who are on their list will be transported to that camp today.

Irén is not on the Swedish list, but the camp commandant, contrary to his basic nature, took pity on her, and allowed her to accompany me to Macska Mama, the administrative centre of the camp where the organization of the contingent is to take place.

The farewell of the two sisters was rather perfunctory. (Márta also has a boyfriend, and they are thinking of going to Australia.)

As we walked out of the camp, my last image was of the camp commandant standing at the gate. I promised myself that if I ever see this man again, under different conditions, I will give him a well-deserved kick in the pants. (My arm bone still has the painful bump from his blow.) I decided to forsake the second kick earmarked for him because of his generosity to Irén.

At the gate of the city camp office, the guard refused to let Irén enter the building because she was not on the transport list. Somehow she managed to climb through a second floor window and she cried there for hours until her apparently limitless tears succeeded in convincing a bureaucrat to include her on the list.

### **Tuesday, April 30, 1957**

We travelled in a locked wagon. At both ends armed UDBA guards were stationed on platforms during the trip that lasted a full day.

After leaving the plains of Northern Croatia we entered the Dinarian Alps. The scenery became impressive - narrow gorges, white cliffs, rushing mountain creeks. (See sketch on Page 136).

We were unloaded at a small station, Delnice.

When we left Osijek, it was already warm summer. Here, we re-entered winter. There is snow on the ground and a freezing, cutting wind above it.

Gerovo was about an hour's drive on a narrow, icy mountain road full of hairpin curves and steep grades. The trip in the back of an open truck seemed to never end. If the driver made a single mistake, we would have ended up in the ravine that always seemed to be on one side of the road.

Most of our compatriots wore only light jackets. Their overcoats had been exchanged for food a long time ago. There have been no buyers for my old overcoat. On the other hand, Irén's overcoat is a new, expensive one and she wants to save it for the cold Canadian winter.

Consequently, we were almost the only ones who had not turned into icicles by the time we reached the camp.

Our first sight of the camp shocked us. Although it is located in a pleasant valley, with no settlement nearby, the massive two story buildings are surrounded by a 3 m tall, 2 m deep multi-strand barbed wire fence studded with manned watchtowers at regular intervals. It has the look of a formidable concentration camp.

As we learned later, this is not far from reality. It was built at the beginning of the century as a Austro-Hungarian border guard barracks. The Italian border was nearer at that time. During WW II the Nazis transformed it into a concentration camp for Jews and captured partisans. After 1945 the Tito regime used it for incarcerating fascists and anticommunists. Six months before our arrival it became an escape proof retention camp for Hungarian refugees.

The Yugoslav regime is apparently afraid that we refugees will undermine socialism if allowed to make contact with the natives. Therefore they try to keep us in complete isolation and to get rid of us as soon as possible while gaining the maximum political and financial benefits from the West.

In the camp Irén and I declared ourselves a married couple who had lost their documents. Nobody raised any objection and we were put in a room located on the top of the camp offices - called the „pigeon coop” - where similar young couples had found shelter among many single women. We got an upper cot in the corner farthest from the door.

The overcrowding in this camp is as bad as in the previous one. By now, sharing one army cot seemed to us a normal sleeping arrangement.

We had a reunion with Feri who had been in this camp for some time.

### **Wednesday, May 1, 1957**

During the night a foot of fresh snow fell. This camp has had pioneer inhabitants since November. Six months later some of these wear only rags and wooden sandals on their bare feet. At the same time, it is known that the attics of the buildings are bursting with tons of clothing and shoes sent by the Red Cross, UNRA and other Western charitable organizations. The camp administrators are selling the goods on the black market.

Now, these poor old-timers cannot leave the buildings because of the snow.

I met a middle-aged man who had left the city where I used to work a few months after me. He said that the few remaining members of the Revolutionary Worker's Council had been arrested, tried, and had received seven year jail sentences.

He also said that in the local paper I had been named the person in charge of organizing and running the revolutionary radio station which was in operation from October 30th until the November 7th occupation of the city by Russian troops.

I had absolutely nothing to do with this station except that - just like everyone else - I listened to it. If I had remained there and this charge had stuck, I would have been hanged. Suddenly, being in this refugee camp does not look that bad anymore.

### **Thursday, May 2, 1957**

The food is worse here than in the Osijek camp. What makes it even more so is the fact that the bread baked in the camp is insufficient and barely edible.

The only improvement is in hygiene. Since this facility was originally built for soldiers and not for chickens, it has adequate toilets and showers, though no hot water. We also received soap and a towel, unimaginable luxuries in Osijek.

### **Sunday, May 5, 1957**

Although this camp is considered completely escape proof, there was an exception, we were told.

There were a few ex-army officers among the early refugees who were justifiably afraid that the Yugos would return them to Hungary as deserters and they planned to escape to Italy.

One dark night (months before we arrived) a group of six of these officers succeeded in climbing over the barbed wire fence with the help of a ladder. Although the search lights on the guard towers regularly swept the whole camp perimeter, the six got through without being noticed.

Then the escapees started to trek toward the Italian border which is about 50 km away. They walked only at night and tried to follow windswept ridges where no footprints would remain. During the daytime they hid from the local people who were known to be very antagonistic toward refugees and would certainly turn them in to the police.

On the third day one of the escapees developed pneumonia. His companions had to leave him behind, begging him not to give himself up for at least 24 hours, so the rest could manage to get through the border.

He lay alone in the snow for a day and then stumbled to a nearby farm. The police were called and they transported him back to the camp. Here, in the basement right below our room, he was beaten for hours despite his condition. Upstairs, a roomful of refugees listened to his screams.

The next day he was transported out of the camp and nobody ever heard of him again. The details of the escape and capture came from an interpreter who was also a refugee.

### **Monday, May 6, 1957**

This was a big day. I had an interview with the Swedish consul. He was friendly, and I got the impression that he considered me favourably. I was almost ready to leave his office when he asked whether I had actively participated in the Revolution.

My truthful answer was that I did not participate in any armed fighting, but that I was a member of the Revolutionary Council.

When this was translated to him - as I was leaving the office - the smile on his face seemed to freeze.

### **Wednesday, May 8, 1957**

The list of names approved to go to Sweden was posted. Neither mine nor Irén's appeared on it. We were shocked and completely downcast.

There were a couple of others who did not make it either. Talking to them revealed that during the interview they all admitted some kind of military or political role in the October events. It became clear that the Swedes, although no friends of the Soviets, wanted only law abiding citizens. No matter how sympathetic the freedom fighters looked on the TV screen they could go to hell as far as the Swedes were concerned after the show was over. This was a bitter lesson for us to learn.

### **Tuesday, May 9, 1957**

'What will happen to us now? Where could we go and when?'

These are the questions on our mind day and night, and it is urgent that we find the answers.

France seems to be a possibility. But the political situation there, i.e. the Algerian war, the continuous strikes and a very strong Communist Party on the stage, make the country look very unstable. A military putsch followed maybe by a civil war, seems to be a real possibility, and after the Hungarian events, I do not want to face another uprising.

The West Germans are taking refugees of German origin only. My background qualifies me, even if I do not speak the language, but Irén is completely unacceptable to them.

Irén tries to get me interested in Canada. But that is overseas - too far away. I still hope to return to Hungary in due time, hence, wish to stay in Europe, close to my country.

### **Friday, May 10, 1957**

The longer I consider our chances, the more it looks like we might rot in this camp forever. After a lot of soul searching, I have changed my mind, although very reluctantly, and decided to try to go to Canada.

The next immediate problem is that the Canadian list is full. No new person can sign up anymore.

Irén proved again to be very enterprising. With a false excuse she forced herself into the administration building, searched for the right office, and then with great persuasion got my name added to the list. Her relatives were recorded as my sponsors. (Irén's name had been on the Canadian list from the beginning).

Now, we only have to wait for the interview with the Canadian Consul for approval.

### **Sunday, May 12, 1957**

We were allowed to go to church in the next village. We marched in a column with armed guards around us. The church was not built to accommodate hundreds of visitors, hence, we gladly stayed outside and watched people strolling on the square. They watched us with similar curiosity.

### **Monday, May 13, 1957**

The Canadian Consul arrived, and interviews started. Ours went rather smoothly. He did not ask anything related to politics or revolutionary activities.

Concerning my professional background, there was a little hitch. As he explained it:

„At present Canada has no quota for engineers, but I will include you in the farm labour category. When you arrive in Canada, nobody will care about it, and you can move anywhere and do whatever you want”.

After living in the communist regime for many years, this sounded fantastic.

### **Tuesday, May 14, 1957**

A new transport arrived from Osijek. A man, whom I knew, told us that one day a Yugoslav army officer and an older woman had been looking for me. The loudspeaker had called my name repeatedly, and finally Márta had gone to see them. They told her that they were my relatives. (They were obviously Boshko and Aunt Domilje, the adopted son and the wife of Uncle Lorenz).

They explained that Uncle Lorenz had left Yugoslavia in 1951 to live in West Germany with his brother. He died there two years later. This is apparently why my postcard was never delivered.

They had learned about me from a letter sent by my father asking Uncle Lorenz (not knowing of his death) to try to find me in the refugee camps.



Boshko, who had fortunately received this letter, assumed that I had to be in the camp nearest to Mohács, and went to Osijek to look for me.

They had brought a basket full of food, which Márta graciously accepted and ate in my name.

#### **Thursday, May 16, 1957**

In the evening Feri came to our room to ask Irén to sew a tear in his jacket. When she had finished, we accompanied him back to his building. On returning to ours, we saw a group of policemen leading all the males out of the pigeon coop and into the basement jail.

We learned that the camp commandant decided to improve the reputation of the camp by striking at the easiest target, the 'husbands'.

Obviously I could not return to my bed there so I spent the night in Feri's room, in a bed whose unfortunate owner had happened to visit a woman friend at the time of the raid.

#### **Friday, May 17, 1957**

The imprisoned 'husbands' were released, and most of them - including me - returned to their mates.

#### **Saturday, May 18, 1957**

We had to pass a medical examination before we could finally qualify for Canadian Immigrant Visa. Only completely healthy individuals were accepted.

We had no problem. Feri was also accepted to go to Canada.

On the other hand, a young acquaintance of ours did not make it. He is also an enthusiastic hiker, and on one of the first days, when one could slip through the fence, he went to climb a cliff nearby.

There was still snow among the boulders. He slipped and fell a metre or so. He landed on his feet on the rocks below, but the impact broke some bones in one of his feet.

He stumbled back to the camp and the commandant refused to allow any medical treatment for him as punishment. His bones welded unset and without a cast and now he limps.

The Canadian doctor refused to pass him, even if any orthopaedist could reset his bones in minutes and six weeks in a walking cast would make him as good as new.

He lost his chance for Canada, and Canada lost a young, very able immigrant.

#### **Sunday, May 19, 1957**

There was another raid, but this time after curfew. All the men but two ended up in the jail, most of them for a second time.

I, on the top cot in the far corner lying behind Irén, was not spotted, and a second young man who slipped under the bed was also undetected.

Since the jail is two floors below our room, the 'wives' started to lower cigarettes and food to the boys on strings and they sent back funny written notes. This activity went on for a good part of the night. The whole incident turned out to be a carnival rather than the punishment it was supposed to be.

### **Monday, May 20, 1957**

The second raid indicates that the camp commandant means business in trying to rid the pigeon coop of the men. I decided not to test my luck a third time and moved out. I took up new residence in the 'Stable', the only building in the camp which is not overcrowded.

Under the Monarchy the hussar's horses were boarded in the stable and obviously it is not an ideal place for human habitation. But after the chicken hatchery and the pigeon coop, the stable looked like the right type of dormitory for me.

### **Saturday, June 1, 1957**

One morning this week, the guards disappeared from the towers for good. It did not take long before holes were cut through the barbed wire fence by the refugees, and we started to sneak out into the surrounding forest.

Now, that we know that we will leave the camp very soon and also the country, we feel free and try to enjoy our environment to the fullest extent.

Every morning Irén and I leave the camp after breakfast and return in the evening. Someone from the room picks up our lunch which we take with us the following morning. We hike the hills and valleys in a larger and larger circle.

We discovered a creek forming a pool in a remote part of a wooded plateau. One of its banks is grassy. This clearing has become our oasis.

As the weather has warmed up, we have started to take baths in the pool, especially after longer hikes. We are completely alone, far from the maddening crowd of the camp, and in the midst of nature. It feels like paradise.

### **Wednesday, June 5, 1957**

The visit of a delegation of reporters was expected, and the camp commandant decided to remove the barbed wire fence and watch towers completely. Apparently, it has already caused bad publicity in the Western press. Now, we can openly walk out of the camp any time.

Irén and I have continued our daily hikes, reaching farther and farther into the mountains. On some of the longer hikes we go with another couple.

One day, the four of us decided to climb Risnjak, one of the highest peaks, above 1,500 m, in this part of the country. From its summit we hoped to see the sea.

It took many hours to reach it. We became very thirsty. Since it is a karst mountain, there are no springs, creeks or ponds anywhere. Finally we were high enough to find snow patches. So we munched the snow, after trying unsuccessfully to melt it in our palms.

Above the tree line the ground was covered with knee high, very dense evergreen brush. We followed narrow animal paths through it. At one spot, our friends stepped over a sunbathing, coiled-up viper without seeing it. Irén, who was the next in line, noticed it and not surprisingly became very alarmed. But the snake did not pay any attention to us. We had to bypass it through the dense bush where we could not see our steps and could easily tread on a hidden companion of the sunbathing one.

With the weather we were less lucky. By the time we reached the top, a cloud enveloped us. There was no view of the sea. We could barely find our way down.

### **Friday, June 7, 1957**

We went out on a trade mission. We visited the neighbouring farms and sold my ski pants, Irén's felt boots and some dresses which she had received in the Osijek camp.

We got very little for them. But still it is money, and now we can buy luxuries, like lemon, sugar cubes, razor blades and laces for my boots. (For four months I have walked without them).

### **Saturday, June 15, 1957**

Quite unexpectedly, I received a letter with 300 dinars from Boshko. He wrote that because of the distance he cannot visit me at this time, but probably I can use the money.

Suddenly, I am rich - one day before our departure from Yugoslavia! We had to spend it fast. We went into the village and I bought a present, the first one, for Irén. Underpants. She had only one pair which she used to wear wet after washing.

We also bought a bottle of wine and had a party with Feri in the evening, celebrating Irene's coming birthday and our departure from Yugoslavia the next day.

### **Sunday, June 16, 1957**

The long awaited day of departure has finally arrived. The Canadian contingent is to depart today. Everybody is feverish; both those who are leaving, and those who are remaining. The first group makes up only about one third of the total camp population but through friendship or bare acquaintance, everyone feels involved.

Finally, the buses arrive. It is a pleasure to see them. Until now open trucks have been our only means of transportation. There is a lot of commotion; Roll calls every 10 minutes, checks and rechecks while we are standing in the hot sun waiting to be loaded on.

The Yugos are even now remaining true to themselves and push 60 people into the vehicles sized for 40. The aisles are partially occupied by the baggage of those fortunate to have any, and many of the excess passengers, me included, have to stand often on one foot. The June heat and the 50 km long ride through the mountains with its curvy roads and maddening switchbacks magnify our discomfort. Not surprisingly quite a few are compelled to return their breakfast to Yugoland through the windows.

I have always liked to travel and loved the mountains but this torturous winding road is just too much. As we descend toward the sea, the temperature becomes suffocating in the overcrowded bus. I also start to feel rather uncomfortable. Fortunately, before my stomach's revolt can visibly manifest itself, we reach the seashore highway built for cars and not for mules.

The last 20 km is through the characteristic karst country: barren, rocky cliffs, no trees, little parcels of arable land surrounded by rock walls to protect the soil from being washed away by the rain or blown away by the wind. The complete deforestation of the Dalmatian shores occurred hundreds of years ago when its trees were cut down to build the galleys of the magnificent Venetian fleet, the queen of the Adriatic Sea. Nature has not been able to repair the damage until now.

Nearing Rijeka, our destination, we travel through a picturesque valley. The road is carved in the flank of a sheer white cliff wall, several hundred metres above a rushing white river. Then the valley opens up and we arrive in the city. We are driven straight to the railway station. Our special train is already waiting for us and we are loaded into it immediately. Then, according to the well established Yugo routine, we are guarded by UDBA policemen and kept in isolation, like some kind of black-death carriers, until the train is to leave, several hours later.

However, the zeal of the policemen is not the same as that we were used to in the camps. In a moment Irén, Feri and myself are able to sneak out into the station building and then into the busy street.

Rijeka, or Fiume as it was called for centuries before Yugoslavia was formed, had been the Adriatic port of Hungary. As a boy, I read several books about this supposedly exotic place. I was fascinated by those stories of big ships, sailors from all countries, palm trees and the blue waters of the Adriatic. Now, I would love to roam its streets and harbour but we have to stay within sight of the railway station. To get lost and miss our train would be a real tragedy.

We spend the last dinars sent by Boshko and reluctantly return to the train. For supper we are given food parcels the size of three camp meals. They must have come directly from the Red Cross.

The moment of departure arrives. Various officials, Yugoslav and Western, join us. The guards try to look very busy, cause lots of commotion, and make more roll calls, and then finally, at 8.00 PM, we are on our way.

After a couple of hours we approach the Italian border. The train comes to a quick halt. The UDBA guards, who during the last five months had formed an unwanted and often painful part of our daily life, jump off.

As the train starts to move again, it rolls across the border, and the communist system stays behind for good.

Finally, we are out of the country which had left us with so many unhappy memories and where we went through so many humiliations, were deprived of all our human dignity, and were fleeced of our few possessions while the regime tried to milk the Western charities and the UN for more funds supposedly on our behalf.

Just to think, at the beginning I even considered remaining in this country. But it did not take long to realize that to continue to live in the shadow of the Red Star had no future at all. The so-called 'socialism' which has to rely on the protection of an NKVD, AVO or UDBA will remain a dictatorship forever. A regime where every third person is a policeman or UDBA agent cannot survive without eternal oppression.

In addition to the lack of freedom, the material well-being of the people of these systems is also impossible. According to communist propaganda, socialism - Soviet, Hungarian or Yugoslav - as an economic system is superior to capitalism. But the poverty in these countries has proven it otherwise.

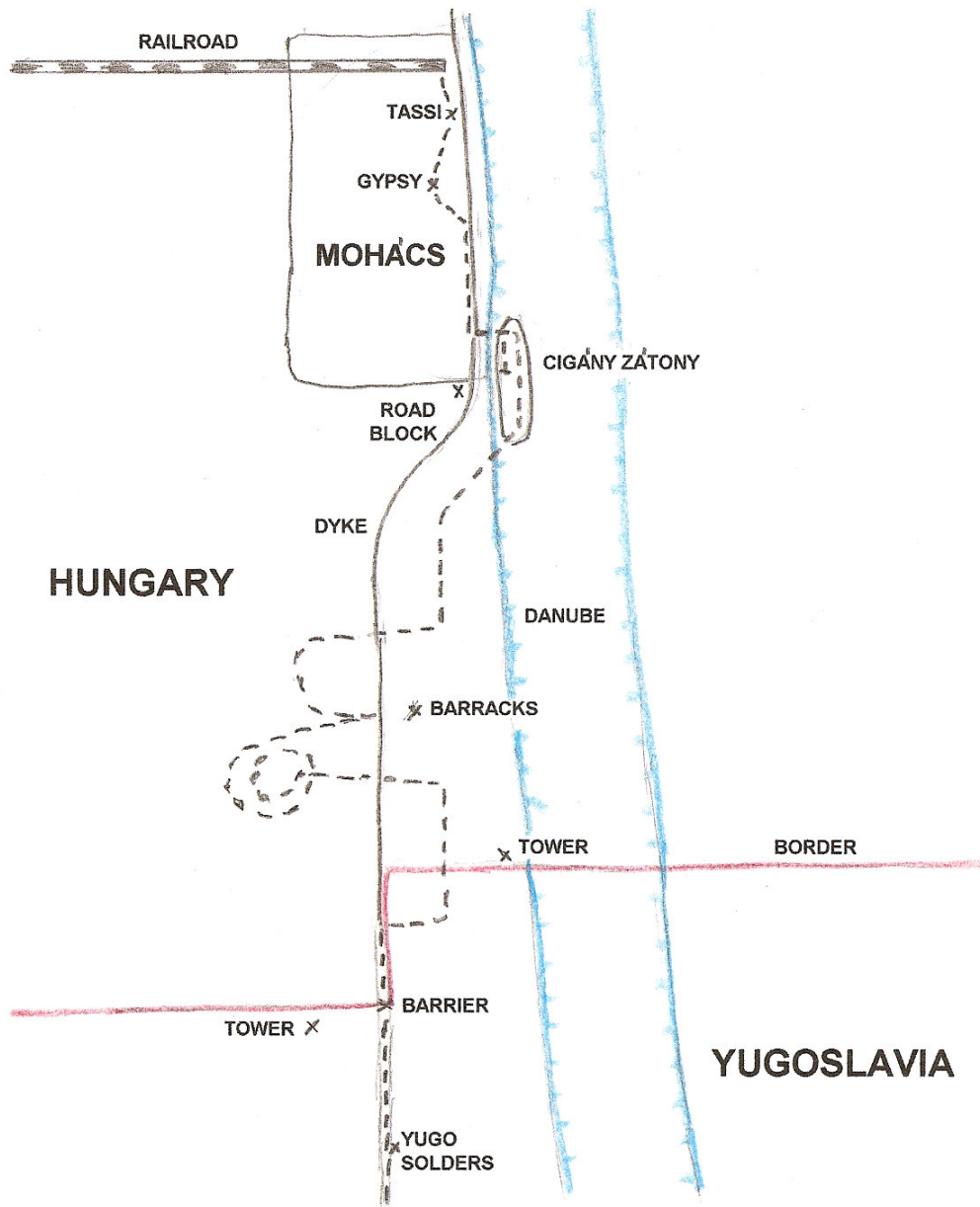
While since the end of the war Hungary has been robbed shamelessly by the Russians, Yugoslavia was not. Nevertheless, the poverty in this country is even greater than in mine. It is so profound that the villagers eagerly grabbed at our torn shirts and underpants. Here, owning a bicycle is already the mark of the privileged class, and even the border guards have no flashlights.

Despite their misery, these poor bastards believe the party-line about the fascist nature of the Hungarian uprising, and hence we, the poor, defenceless refugees were robbed not only by those in any position of power, but were also short-changed by the common people. After this it is not surprising that I feel no compassion for them. Still I do not wish them anything worse than what they have already enjoyed from their regime until the end of their lives.

But luckily all this is behind us. Still, my happiness is not complete. I sense that this train will take us too far away, and there will be no return to my homeland, Hungary.

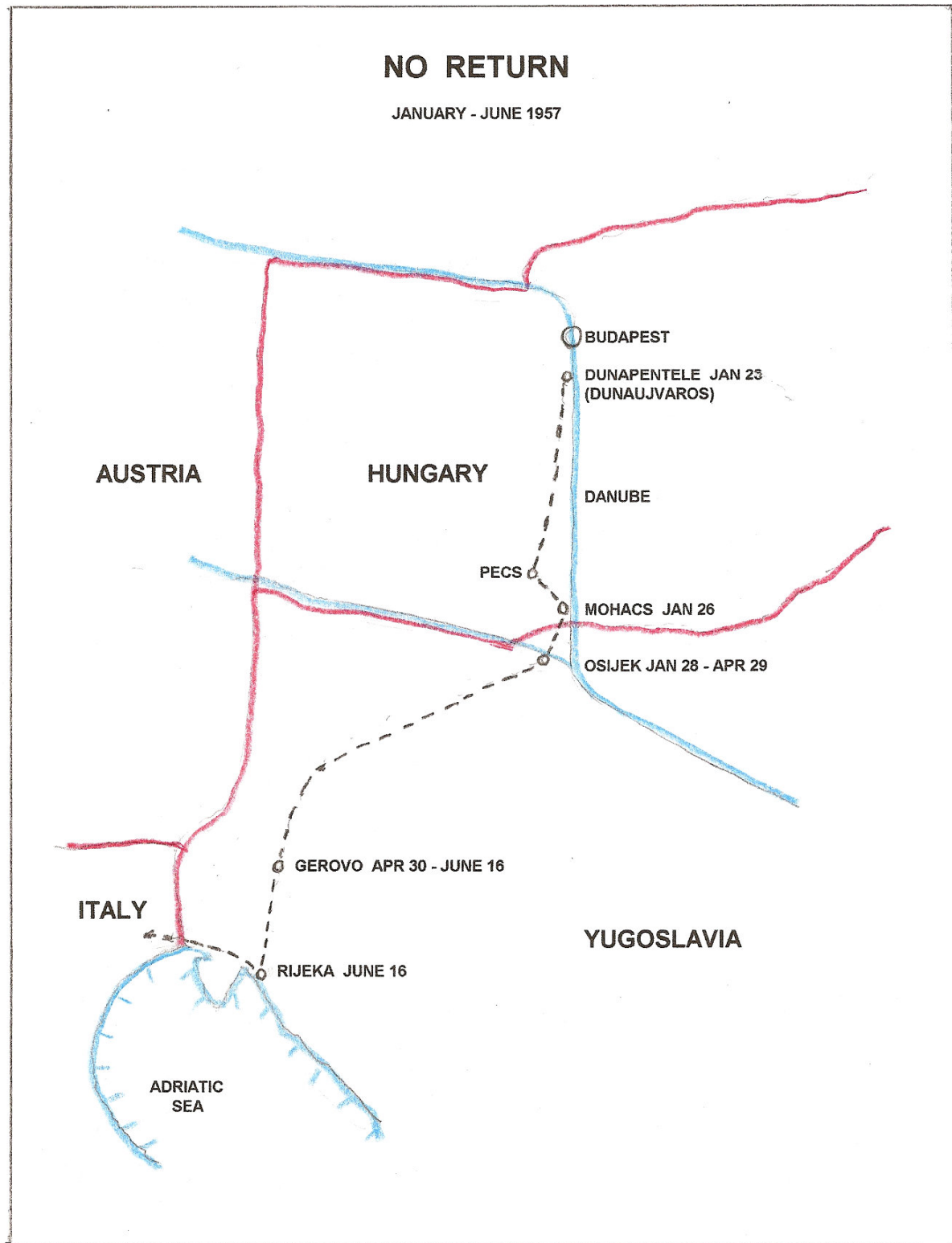
## ESCAPE ROUTE

JAN. 27 - 28



## NO RETURN

JANUARY - JUNE 1957



## 32

### NAPLES OUTING

"Yes. We are married." My reply was firm.

The camp administrator didn't enquire any further or ask for documental proof to support my statement. He assigned a room to Irene and me in one of the barracks. After five months of crowding with hundreds of others in the rabbit hutches of the Yugoslav camps, we now had a room to ourselves. The honeymoon could start without having had a chance to get married.

Our group was a trainload of Hungarian political refugees who just had arrived from Gerovo, Yugoslavia. We were here to be reorganized into a larger transport before continuing to Le Havre, France, on the way to Canada, our final destination. Why did we have to come to Aversa, in Southern Italy, so far off the direct route, to be reorganized? It was a puzzle.

However, we enjoyed the detour tremendously. The train ride was fascinating and comfortable. The meals were copious and tasted heavenly after the semi-starvation in Yugoslavia. This camp, DP Lager as it was called here (DP meaning Displaced Persons), was a paradise compared to those endured in Yugoslavia. It was built at the end of World War II by the American Occupation Forces to accommodate prisoners of war. Later, under Italian administration, it took in refugees of all kinds from all over Europe, e.g., concentration and detention camp survivors, Eastern Europeans escaping the Russian occupation, members of the various fascist armies and organizations in hiding - the tragic and/or despicable human remnants of that woeful time.

Surprisingly, as thousands of its inmates were repatriated, or moved to new countries to start new lives, the total number of residents in the camp had not diminished. Ranks were always refilled with new arrivals; e.g., from the Greek civil war, Tito's Yugoslavia, and various Eastern European countries building the 'road to socialism'. Now, we, refugees of the failed Hungarian uprising against the Soviets, made up the latest human wave that filled up the barracks.

Norea, our neighbour in the building, was a middle-aged Romanian woman. She was bound for the United States. At least that was what she had been hoping for during her six years in the camp. All this time she had remained convinced that one day she would get onto the American quota, and finally be able to emigrate to heaven on this earth.

Norea turned out to be a great benefit to us. Since she understood Hungarian and spoke it at a rudimentary level, she could explain the workings, routines, and various aspects of camp life.

She told us that the camp included a number of long-timers like herself. Many of these, in addition to enjoying the free room and board provided by the UN Refugee Fund and the International Red Cross, were also holding - illegally - part-time jobs in the city which provided them with ample pocket money.

Another piece of information which particularly excited me was that Naples, only 30 km away, could be easily reached by a local electric train at a cost of only 200 liras return. I would have liked to visit this historic city, possibly my first in the West, but we were penniless. Telling this to Norea, she only smiled.

"You have assets that you don't realize." She told us. "Those packages of Yugoslav cigarettes (saved up from our daily ration of five cigarettes per person allowance) and cans of meat (received on the train while traveling through Italy) are saleable items."

There are many men from across the Adriatic in this camp. They are always looking for contraband Yugo cigarettes, which are stronger, and for them tastier, than the local products. Canned meat is desirable for improving the routine pasta dishes produced by the camp kitchen.

Then she volunteered to sell these items for us.

Sure enough, in less than an hour she returned with 520 liras (about \$3! at the time). Our joy was limitless. Now we could start to plan the excursion in earnest: I explained my plans to Irene.

"At supper time we will try to snatch some extra buns for tomorrow. We will also ask our friend, Feri, to pick up our camp lunches and take them to our room, so we'll have something to eat on return."

As I expected, Feri was more than delighted to do this favour; he could have our room to himself for the whole day. Norea even offered to lend him Italian magazines to read in the solitude of the cool room far from the camp crowd.

We left for Naples early in the morning. The 30-minute ride in the half empty train through the hills of the countryside and the outskirts of the city filled us with a sense of real adventure. But when we stepped out of the main station into the square, at the intersection of Corso Garibaldi and Corso Umberto - the two main thoroughfares of Naples - the traffic and the accompanying level of noise left us stupefied. After the scanty number of vehicles encountered on the streets of Eastern European capitals I'd visited, this mass of cars, Vespas, and busses looked completely chaotic, and the noise they made was deafening.

'How can we get to the other side of this river of vehicles alive?' I wondered.

The traffic lights seemed to be there just for decoration. The Neapolitans did not even slow down for red lights; they just blew their horns more forcefully.

Our immediate task was to buy and send a postcard to Hungary to let my mother know that we had finally left Yugoslavia.

There was a newspaper/tobacco kiosk right beside us. After buying the railway tickets we had just enough money left for one card with stamps. We filled it out and started to look for a mail box. We could not see any, but I was sure that one is always to be found in front of a railway station.

I turned to a young Italian standing nearby. I showed him the card and indicated with my hand that I wanted to mail it. He smiled and pointed to a slot in the wall right behind me marked 'Posta Italia' in outstanding letters. Looking for a free standing box, we had missed this slot.

As I dropped the card, the young loafer, our great source of information, extended his palm toward me for a tip. I had heard that in the West, unlike the socialist countries, one had to pay for services, but this was completely unexpected. There I was, in my worn and dirty clothing, unchanged for five months, wearing sockless ski boots - probably the first pair ever on the streets of Naples in June - and this guy wasn't ashamed to try to charge for his rather meagre help. What country had we entered?

Nervously, I pointed at my boots to demonstrate my poor financial status. The man must have misunderstood my sign language because he beat a hasty retreat. My first intercourse in Italian had come to an abrupt end.

'What are we going to do now in this big city? Where shall we go?'

Until now, we had not even discussed this important item. We obviously had no city map, and could not consult any travel guide. On looking around, we discerned a hill not very far, with an old castle rising on its slope.

'That must be the castle King Louis laid siege to!'



This Hungarian king, known as Louis the Great in our history, lived in the middle of the 14th century. His father, Charles Robert, from the royal family of Anjou in France, had been invited to the Hungarian throne. Louis succeeded him. At about the same time Louis' brother married the daughter of the king of Naples and moved there. A few years later the brother was assassinated in a family feud. Louis, in order to avenge his brother's death, brought a Hungarian army across the Adriatic and held the fort of Naples in siege. During the fighting he was wounded by an arrow. The picture of this critical instant in the siege used to hang in my elementary school classroom, and I still recalled it vividly.

'Let's go and see the fort.' I decided.

As we tried to cross the square teeming with traffic, I wondered if the Italian arrows flying toward our heroic king looked any more dangerous than the cars driven by the present descendants of those fickle Italians.

Climbing the hill was not a challenge, though we were sweating profusely on the approach. We could see the fort ahead of us all the time. Unfortunately, when we reached it, we found the gate of Castel S. Elmo locked. Some local people entered it from time to time with their keys. The fort apparently served as a residential building and was not open to trespassers or tourists. We were very disappointed.

From this elevation we had a wonderful view of the beautiful Bay of Naples. Its water was truly azure, as in the song - unlike that in the Danube River. The famous Vesuvius rose in the distance behind the city. Further away the misty shores of the Sorrento Peninsula, and an island, most likely Capri, closed the horizon. The panorama was fantastic.

After enjoying the magnificent view, we decided to descend, not the way we'd come, but toward the sea, straight down the hill. This side of the mountain was the domain of rich people - one fantastic villa after another in a paradise-like setting of palm trees and flowering shrubs. The richest district of Buda, Hungary - Rózsadomb (Hill of Roses) - was a poor man's realm compared to this. At one corner we discovered a leaking fire hydrant. We drank the cool water flowing from it until we almost burst. Then we consumed the two buns we'd brought. They were bone-dry by now but still tasted excellent.

A large sandy beach stretched across the bottom of the hill. The beach unfortunately charged an entrance fee and was therefore inaccessible to moneyless refugee-tourists like us. However, at the far end of the beach there was a rocky jetty that seemed to have open access to the sea. We walked out on it. It was an ancient coral reef with its top worn smooth and flat from centuries of use. The edges of the reef were very rugged. Several young Italians in their teens and twenties were sunbathing on it, and diving from it. The group didn't include any females.

We stripped to our home (camp)-made swimming suits, and I immediately jumped into the crystal clear water. The sea was probably two meters deep at this point. Irene hesitated to follow me. This was her first encounter with any sea. She claimed that she knew how to swim, but now she was afraid to enter the water. After some persuasion from me and the friendly onlookers, she finally dropped off the edge of the reef into the sea, two feet below.

The unfamiliar, bitter saltiness of the water and the sight of all the rocks and seaweed clearly visible underfoot, terrified her. She panicked. With a frantic effort she turned back toward the reef and tried to climb out of the water as fast as she could. The coral reef wall was full of sharp protrusions, and one had to pay close attention while scaling it. Irene, in her panicky state, pulled herself up rapidly, and in the process badly lacerated her knee. The wound started to bleed profusely.

By the time I was able to follow her out - taking much more care in climbing - she was surrounded by the obviously concerned young men. They tried to help her. One of them dove into the sea and brought up some sea-weeds to cover the wound, claiming that it would stop the bleeding. Another wrapped the weed around her knee and tied it down with his handkerchief. A third explained to me, with lavish Italian gestures, that the pay-beach next to us had a first-aid clinic with a doctor in attendance, and that he would swim there to get a boat to ferry Irene to the clinic.

He did it as promised, and returned in less than ten minutes in a lifeboat propelled by a darkly tanned, muscular life-guard. The locals helped us into the boat, and the lifeguard rowed us to a building marked with a red cross located at the center of the beach.

There was such a striking difference between the behaviour of this group of young Italians and the loafer in front of the railway station. My trust in human kindness and helpfulness, Western or otherwise, was restored completely. The lesson - not to judge a country or nationality by the behaviour of a single individual - was etched into my mind forever.

Luckily, the clinic's doctor was in the dispensary, and after freezing the knee, he cleaned and sutured the laceration and applied a tight fitting bandage.

"You are fit to walk." He indicated to Irene.

However, there remained an outstanding item. The doctor had to fill out an accident report. The form asked for various informations. Fortunately, the doctor knew some French, and I was also able to recall enough from my high school years, and we somehow succeeded in completing the task. Obviously, Irene and I could not pay for the services but no compensation was asked for.

Now, we had to walk back to the railway station. This turned out to be a difficult task.

First of all, after the freezing started to wear off, walking became very painful for Irene, but she bore her agony stoically.

Secondly, - we both suffered from intense thirst. The heat of this summer afternoon rendered every street a baking oven, meant to broil alive anyone who senselessly tried to walk them. I was sure that Dante got his inspiration for the 'Inferno' from a similar walking experience in some medieval Italian city. We encountered kiosks selling juice from time to time but had no liras to buy even a glassful.

Thirdly, - we didn't know the way to the railway station. There was no castle hill looming ahead of us to guide us. The labyrinthine layout of the alleys did not facilitate the following of any set route. We ought to ask for directions, but how? I didn't know the Italian word for railway, or station. The only languages in which I could communicate were Hungarian and Russian, neither of them much good in this part of the World.

After some reflection I tried to make up a word for our intended destination. Railway in Hungarian is 'vasút'; 'zeleznaya daroga' in Russian; 'chemin de fer' in French; and 'Eisenbahn' in German. All denote 'iron road', an expression derived through the same linguistic logic. (Fortunately I did not know the English word at that time. That would have confused the issue). I recalled that iron in Latin is ferrum and road is via, therefore railway, following the above logic, should be 'ferrum via'.

I tried out my inventiveness by addressing the first passer-by with a loud "FERRUM VIA" in a questioning accent.

"Oh, ferovia!" he said, turning and pointing toward a side street.

After repeating this orientation exercise several times, we finally arrived at the square with the chaotic traffic facing the railway station. By this time we both were in sorry shape. Irene could barely drag her injured leg. My bare feet in the ski boots burned like embers from walking on the hot asphalt for hours.

At the station, at last, we found free drinking water. After quenching our, by now, agonizing thirst, we came to realize how hungry we were. All day we had shared only two, miserable, dry buns between us. Despite all this suffering we both agreed that the adventure of seeing Naples had been worth it. By the time we returned to the camp, our safe haven for the moment, the day was over and the red disc of the hot Mediterranean sun was descending behind the hills of Aversa.

June 1957.

## 33

### CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

The Ascania, our designated transport to Canada, was a medium sized, 14,000-tonne Italian passenger boat. During WW II it had been enlisted by the Italian Navy to transport Axis troops to Libya until an allied torpedo sent it to the bottom of the sea. It was raised, repaired and put back into service after the war. By the end of 1956 it had reached the end of its useful life. It was scheduled for decommissioning and scrapping. Just before the deadline arrived, the International Red Cross hired the boat to transport several thousand Hungarian refugees from Europe to Canada. In July 1957 we became one of its last cargos. The boat didn't carry regular paying passengers.

Our port of departure was Le Havre, France. The boarding of the trainload of Hungarian refugees was hectic, due mostly to language difficulties. But finally we were all onboard. Families with children and all the women - married or single - were berthed in the cabins above-deck and the men were bunked below deck. Irene and I were separated again. She stayed up top, while I was placed in an eight-person cabin in the belly of the boat. The cabin didn't even have portholes. Still, compared to the brutish overcrowding of the camps during our 'delightful' five-month stay in Yugoslavia, the accommodation was luxuriously spacious.

The first leg of our trip, from Le Havre to Portsmouth, was short. At this port, a few dozen additional refugees joined our ranks, or rather placed themselves above us. They all arrived carrying fat suitcases, and were assigned to first class cabins on the deck irrespective of their family or marital status. However, I envied them mostly for their apparently good command of English. The half year that they had spent in England seemed to have given them a sound footing in the language.

The days on the ship began to pass more slowly. The weather was cool, wet, and windy, and didn't allow us to spend much time on the deck. The highlights of the day were meal times. The dining room, fitted with a dozen long tables which each sat twenty, felt crowded. But the food was plentiful and delicious. Hungarians usually like Italian cuisine, and after the Yugoslav starvation diet, all of the meals tasted wonderful. I encountered bananas for the first time in my life. I have loved the fruit ever since.

We dined in two shifts at designated tables. Our table companions included nine young, single men and a couple with seven kids. A Hungarian family of that size was most unusual. Parents normally had only one or two offspring. The table was served with three large carafes of wine at each meal. Since the rabbit family made up half of the crowd, but - except for the parents - consumed no wine, there was plenty of extra vino left for the young men. They considered it their patriotic duty to empty every carafe before leaving the dining room, and by that time they were usually in a very jolly mood.

On the second day of the crossing an English class was started for the beginners. The teacher was a Hungarian volunteer. Both Irene and I signed up. This was our first exposure to the language.

Upon embarking, each person received 3,000 liras (\$5) of spending money. Most people spent it in the bar on the first day. I preferred to save the money for Canada.

Irene had different ideas. She wished to put her hair in order after five months of neglect. The hairdresser, a striking looking, dark, young Italian was probably an extra incentive. Hence, despite the steep price of a permanent, costing exactly 3,000 liras, she went ahead with her plan.

The Italian artisan, after studying Irene's face for a few seconds, recommended a fru-fru hairstyle. She was tame. My initial reservation melted away when it turned out that the hairdo suited her perfectly. Unfortunately, the chemicals the man used weren't on a par with his artistic knack, because the permanent lasted only as long as we stayed on the ship.

On the fifth day at sea we sailed into a storm. The boat started to sway disturbingly. Some people, Irene among them, became seasick right away. The dining room was less crowded at mealtime. Every table had some empty seats. The English class was discontinued because of the teacher's infirmity.

On the next day the storm became more violent. The boat was tilting left and right, forward and backward like a drunken sailor. Its relatively small size rendered it into a helpless toy thrown on the huge white-crested waves. Even walking in the corridor became problematic. One of the walls seemed always on a collision course. The deck emptied except for its rail studded with people with greenish faces. From time to time, upon a larger than usual pitch of the boat, they retched as on command into the crushing waves below.

I was still able to eat some food although my stomach felt very fidgety. I had to remain lying on the bunk bed in the cabin. I couldn't go on deck. It was too windy and cold there. Soon after supper I finally succumbed to the malaise and passed my last meal to the denizens of the deep.

On the third day, sick as a dog, I was ready to throw up even when I smelled food, and would not enter the dining room for anything. Surprisingly, there were still some individuals in the large dining hall who continued eating. They must have had iron stomachs.

Irene, who hadn't eaten since the beginning of the storm, was still throwing up God knows what. She looked really sick. Even her hairdo didn't cheer her up anymore.

The storm lasted three and a half days. It stopped when we approached Newfoundland. But the trying time wasn't over yet. Now, we entered the zone of the seasonal north-south migration of the polar icebergs. The air temperature dropped significantly. It felt arctic. I didn't have any warm clothes - I had exchanged them for food in the Yugoslavian camp - and now I suffered. I had to stay in bed under a blanket. When I went on deck, I began to freeze after only a few minutes. My cabin mates were in the same predicament.

The hardier ones, or those lucky ones who had warmer clotting, kept vigil on the deck. If an unusually splendid looking iceberg appeared, they rushed down to alert everybody. Then we ran up on the deck to watch the spectacle. Some of the floating ice looked like mediaeval forts with turrets, while others were pierced and displayed beautiful arches. After a few minutes of the requisite ahs-and-ohs we ran back to the relative warmth of the cabin. It was a great pity that I didn't have a camera.

As we entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence, there were no more icebergs, and the temperature turned seasonal.



T/A ASCANIA  
UNGARIA - LE HAVRE - CANADA  
1957

A couple of distinguished looking individuals arrived in a motorboat and boarded the ship. They turned out to be Canadian Immigration Officers. We received our 'Landing Cards' - the most important document for years to come. We also received \$5 per head spending money, my first Canadian income.

The list of our destinations was posted. We learned to our great concern that Irene was assigned to stay in Montreal while I was to go to Vancouver. It seemed that our struggle to stick together was not yet over.

We asked for an appointment with the Immigration Officer. An interpreter told him we intended to get married. The Officer smiled and said:

"There's no problem. Where do you prefer to go? Montreal or Vancouver?"

I was surprised to learn that problems could be solved so easily by Canadians. It was so different from the Eastern-European way of managing things.

The decision was easy. I didn't know anything about either Montreal or Vancouver. I had a preference for learning and speaking French in the new country. But I believed that in Canada, a bilingual country, both French and English would be spoken in all its cities. I chose Vancouver because it was on the West Coast, and on going there we would have to cross the whole country. It turned out to be a lucky choice even if the original assumption was mistaken.

As we moved up the St. Lawrence, the bay started to narrow. The boat passed closer to the shore settlements. The houses looked different from those of Europe. They appeared to be very colourful, especially their roofs. The blue and green shingles looked so vivid compared to the standard dull red tile roofs of the old country.

The crew began to ready the boat for arrival. It had to be shipshape. That meant hosing down the deck, especially the railings, to wash off the residue that all those seasick passengers left carelessly behind.

We arrived in Quebec City - our debarkation point - on the evening of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1957, the tenth day of our voyage.

As we pulled to the dock, I was surprised to see a large number of flags flying and a crowd of onlookers in their Sunday best milling on the well-lit pier.

'How did they learn about my birthday? I wondered. But it is nice that they all came out to celebrate our arrival in Canada.'

June 1957.

## 34

### ARRIVAL IN CANADA

The trainload of Hungarian refugees was divided into several groups on arriving at Central Station in Montreal. One group was herded into buses and taken to a local refugee camp. The largest contingent was transferred to another train for Ontario, while our small group, destined for Western Canada, remained in the big hall waiting for the CNR Trans-Canada train.

There was a fourth, smaller refugee party which stayed apart from us. They were Hungarian Jews waiting to be picked up by members of the local Jewish community. They did not have long to wait. Soon they were all ushered into taxis and driven away. We envied them. While we were in the Osijek (Yugoslavia) camp, Jews were the only ones who received aid from outside - personal 'Care' parcels from the Joint Organization. We, the large majority of refugees, were supposed to get Red Cross parcels but those were never distributed while we were there. The camp's staff stole them. Later, when the scandal surfaced, some refugees received small, leftover items. I got nothing. The thieves hadn't touched the Joint parcels.

Standing in the passengers' pickup area we watched the movement of cars and taxis arriving and leaving the station. These automobiles looked impressive. They were much larger and more luxurious than those that had crowded the streets of Naples, the only Western city that I had seen. The Montreal scene felt very American.

Food vouchers were distributed to us. We could use them in the station's cafeteria. Being unfamiliar with the items on the menu, and not speaking English, we selected things at random. I picked Jell-O. It looked a very intriguing dish that I had never seen before. However, I found its taste - mint - not to my liking.

After a few hours of waiting, we were finally able to board the train. It was already after midnight. Our first, long day in Canada was over. I found the sleeping car beds surprisingly comfortable after the wooden benches encountered in my travels till now, and after almost two weeks of separation, Irene could join me.

When we woke up in the morning, we were crossing Northern Ontario. The landscape was so new to me: unending evergreen forests interrupted only by ponds, swamps and lakes. There were no human habitations. After the busy countryside of Italy and France, this empty wilderness was striking.

After a few hours, the unchanging view turned out to be monotonous and boring. From time to time we stopped at stations with no visible settlements nearby. It was as if they were lost in the woods.

The scenery still looked the same the next day. Monotonous. At regular intervals a vendor passed through the train selling soft drinks, chocolate bars, etc. The three teenagers in our compartment were buying these items eagerly, as if their \$5 per head spending money would last forever. Irene was tempted to follow their example, and when I refused to waste our little capital on sweets and useless drinks, she was upset with me. Her complaint was not unreasonable. All of us were craving sweets after five months of the starvation diet in the Yugo camps.

In the meantime, the young guys kept consuming their cherished Coke in the vestibule of our carriage. They could pull down the window there, and when they finished a bottle, they'd throw it out through the opening. On one occasion a bottle hit a telegraph pole, ricocheted back and

slammed into a window of our compartment. A young woman who happened to be looking through the window saw the missile coming and strike the glass in front of her. She screamed. The sharp clatter of breaking glass - the impact smashed the outside pane of glass while the inner pane resisted the impact - and the terrified scream of the woman frightened all of us. It took some time to figure out what the missile was and where it had come from.

The conductor was called. He made some notes about the damage without reprimanding the now sheepish looking teenagers. The accident had a positive benefit - Irene stopped nagging me about buying soft drinks.

After arriving at Jasper, we entered the high Rockies. We, or at least I, were mesmerized by the breathtaking scenery of snow-covered peaks, robust pine forests, wide valleys - unlike those of the Alps - and clear, fast running streams. Unfortunately, it soon became dark and we passed the best part - the Fraser Valley - during the night.

In the morning we reached Chilliwack, our destination. We descended from the train. Buses were waiting for us. We were transferred to an old Air Force base in Abbotsford. The camp, vacant since WW II, was turned into a refugee camp when the first wave of Hungarians arrived on the West Coast in December, 1956. Those who could find jobs, or had jobs found for them, moved to Vancouver. It was an idle wait for the rest. Our arrival swelled the number lodged in the old barracks to perhaps two hundred.

Wasting no time, Irene and I talked to the camp manager about the possibility of getting married. The next day a Catholic priest, Father Zsigmond, came to meet us. He happened to be Hungarian, and was the parish priest of Port Moody, a small community not far from Abbotsford. He said that there was no problem. He could arrange for a special dispensation from the bishop, and in three-four days he could marry us. We received this news with delight.

During the conversation the priest kept looking at my feet. They were still shod in ski boots. When he was ready to leave, Zsigmond asked me to get into his car, and drove me into the town. He found a shoe store where he purchased a pair of new shoes and a pair of socks for me.

"Please accept them as my wedding present." The priest said.

So after half a year of continuous wear I shed my ski boots. I kept them as souvenirs.

The next day Irene volunteered for kitchen duty (unpaid). I took my chance at earning some dollars picking berries.

That part of the Fraser Valley was, and probably still is, dotted with berry farms. It was raspberry season. Farmers were eager to take advantage of the hands available in the camp. They drove up in the morning in their pick-up trucks to hire people for the day.

I was lucky and was selected from the eager crowd by a jovial Hungarian farmer, Mr. Kiss. I was the youngest in the group he selected. During the ride the farmer explained that some of the young guys he had hired previously inserted rocks in the collecting baskets to augment their earnings.

"But where did they get those stones? In this valley you would not find any!" He said with a depressed voice.

I later learned the real reason he preferred older people working on his farm.

In the first half-hour more juicy raspberries ended up in my stomach than in the little baskets, but after the initial gluttony I made a serious effort to increase my productivity. My earnings for seven hours of sweating and backbreaking work were \$4.50, a rather meagre wage even then.

Next day Irene also joined the berry picking crowd, abandoning her nonpaying kitchen duty. Mr. Kiss took her on readily. His preference for women and older men, as I now learned, was due to the fact that he had a daughter who was about 18 years old. She used to join the pickers for a few hours every day. When she did, the young male crowd, sex-starved for months in the Yugo camp, could hardly control their impulses, and tried to find all kinds of excuses (she spoke Hungarian) to get near the girl and brush against her. Her father was obviously not overwhelmed with joy to witness his daughter's popularity with these penniless machos.

This second day I was luckier with the bushes, and also had more 'experience', consequently, I made \$6.50. This was not a negligible amount for an impoverished refugee, especially as our room-and-board came free.

Three days later, the dispensation had arrived, as promised, and our marriage could proceed. Irene and I collected some wild flowers beside the abandoned runway and decorated the little chapel, secluded modestly at the end of the barracks. We both borrowed some decent looking clothing from more opulent fellow refugees, and readied ourselves for the solemn ceremony



*Our wedding picture*

The chapel could hold perhaps 50 people but the whole camp came to attend this uncommon event. The air was hot and the chapel suffocating. Fortunately, Father Zsigmond didn't extend the ceremony. Of his short sermon I remember only one part well. He said:

"Newlyweds are like two raw diamonds. It might take years of marriage, and the unavoidable friction coming with it, to polish them until their shine duly reflects their inner value. Treasure these gems forever."

Irene, however, didn't follow his advice. After 34 years she discarded her gem - shiny or not.

After the ceremony we changed back into our nondescript camp clothing. Father Zsigmond drove us to his place for lunch. There we met a middle-aged Hungarian refugee couple who lodged with him. The man happened to be an architect. Driven by natural curiosity, he started to inquire about my background. I didn't feel at ease revealing to him that I had graduated from a Russian university. I named a Hungarian school (Veszprém) as my alma mater. Unfortunately for me, he was more familiar with this university than I was, and my deceit was exposed in no time.

The man became contemptuous and the conversation terminated. He obviously placed me among the not so rare 'ship engineers' - those who promoted themselves to the position of engineer on the boat coming to Canada.

The lunch at Father Zsigmond's place was not a wedding feast. There was not even a cake but it was friendly and memorable. His ancient housekeeper gave us a couple of towels, embroidered 'His' and 'Hers', our only wedding present besides my shoes.

After lunch Zsigmond drove us to Burnaby where he had prearranged lodging for us with a Dutch family.

July 1957.



## 35

### DUTCH TREATMENT

The Huttons, Frank and Anne, and their children, Joyce and Roy, 7 and 4 years old, had immigrated to Canada from Holland in the early fifties. They were a strict Dutch Catholic family, hard working and frugal. Frank was a mechanic and worked in a press plant. His dream was to save enough money to open his own machine shop. In order to increase their income they had a lodger - Henk - in a basement room. A young Dutch guy, Henk wasn't related to them.

When they heard at their local church that Hungarian political refugees needed accommodation, the Huttons immediately volunteered to offer their home. They stated unequivocally that they were motivated solely by Christian compassion. The fact that the Immigration Office was paying \$65 per person per month for room and board apparently played no role in their decision.

Through Father Zsigmond, Irene and I ended up as 'guests' of the Huttons in their Burnaby home on the afternoon of our wedding. The reception was cordial. We were given their second bedroom which until then had been occupied by their children. They had refurbished it with a new double bed and dresser for us.

We had to adapt to their way of life: The same formal, frugal meals every day; T.V. for evening entertainment; and mass on Sunday. This latter activity caused aggravation right away. At that time custom required that women cover their heads in Catholic churches. Since Irene didn't have a hat, and Anne owned only one, Irene had to buy a new hat. I found it absurd that our meagre capital had to be wasted on such a useless item - which I had never liked - but we had to comply.

The Hutton's house was located in a new, small suburb of Burnaby, adjacent to the New Westminster highway. Neither our street nor any of the others had sidewalks, and the open fields around us had no pathways. We found the small house confining and there was nowhere to go on foot.

We had problems communicating. We didn't speak any English. Frank insisted that in the evenings we should sit in the living room and watch T.V. to learn the language. They received two - to me identical - channels. The evening programs were nothing but Westerns. After a few days of the cowboys' never-ending gallops, the inept attacks of the Indians, and the despicable treachery of the Spanish locals, I was completely fed up with Hollywood entertainment. For the next 20 years we didn't feel the need to own a television set.

Our puritanical Dutch hosts didn't like us to stay in our room, even though we were supposed to be on our honeymoon. They didn't approve of us talking Hungarian to each other either. They said we should try to communicate in English. Since we couldn't do this, we kept on sitting on the sofa like two unrelated deaf mutes, not even daring to touch each other.

The suppers were unique. Every day, except Sunday, the menu consisted of an unidentifiable soup, and a plate with two small meatballs, two similar-size boiled potatoes, and a small heap of boiled green beans, all followed by instant coffee.

Anne cooked fifteen meatballs. After portioning them out evenly to the seven people around the table, one remained in the pan. At the end of the meal she dutifully asked if someone wanted it. Since there were no volunteers, she ceremoniously placed the lonely ball on her husband's plate as if it were a special award.

I wondered then, and have ever since, what would have happened if I, or someone else, had asked for the lonely meatball. But under the circumstances that event was inconceivable. The rules of social behaviour were rigidly observed in that home.

One Sunday we went picnicking at Cultus Lake. The family got into the cab of the pick-up truck (they had no car) and Irene and I climbed into the back. Fortunately, the weather remained sunny all day. On the way we stopped for ice-cream. Ten cents per cone - a real extravagance on Frank's part. He rarely indulged in small pleasures like this; perhaps it was solely for our benefit.

The lake was beautiful. Clean water with sandy shores fringed with a forest of tall pines. This was the first Canadian lake we had a chance to enjoy. I could swim to my heart's content. There was also a negative side to it however. A couple of motorboat exhibitionists mercilessly gunned their machines up and down the lake all afternoon. They probably believed that everybody was admiring their water skills, but the flock on shore had only curses for them.

Although there were a lot of people on the beach, it wasn't crowded because it was so large. At one point Roy needed to pee. Frank pointed out the bathroom to him. It was about two or three hundred meters away. The boy, only four years old, went there by himself. This was a new experience for me. We were only a few meters from the edge of the pine forest. The normal thing for a boy, or even an adult male, to do in Hungary would have been to step into the trees. Our Dutch hosts' standards of hygiene were obviously at a more elevated level than ours.

Or were they really? We were surprised to watch Anne, in the evenings back in the house, giving Roy a bath in the kitchen sink, even though they had a proper bathroom. Washing her son's bum in the same basin as the dishes was all right with her.

The parish priest called our hosts about a possible job for me. It was a pin-boy position in a bowling alley in a nearby shopping center. I happily signed up for it. The pay was minimum but any income was welcome.

I began to work in the afternoons. The pin-boy's duty was to reset the pins after the balls had knocked them down. (Automatic pin setting machines hadn't been invented yet). Most of the bowling clientele were blue collar workers who stopped in on their way home from the morning shift to have a few beers and fling a few balls. Unfortunately, some had a drink or two more than they could properly handle, which negatively affected their bowling skills.

We, pin-boys, were crouching above the end of the alley counting the balls which arrived. After the third and presumably final ball, because that's the limit for a turn, we jumped in to the alley to reset the pins. Sometimes the half-drunk players, upset with their poor scores, would grab a fourth ball and throw it too. This was against the rules and unexpected. The flippant act also endangered any pin-boy who had already jumped into the alley. If he didn't withdraw quickly enough, the rolling ball could easily break his leg or otherwise hurt him.

Since these fourth-ball incidents occurred quite frequently, I considered the working conditions unsafe, and so after a week I quit my first Canadian job.

We learned about a free English class offered to new Canadians in downtown Vancouver. We happily signed up for it, despite the fact that the school was more than an hour's bus ride from our lodgings, and required two tickets each way, one each for the Burnaby and Vancouver portions of the trip.

The teacher was good and very helpful. Unfortunately, the school program was designed to build a vocabulary and to learn spelling rather than conversation - our main handicap.



*With the Huttons*

In the school we met other Hungarians and learned about their experiences. Our isolation became less pronounced. We learned about job hunting possibilities - information that our hosts could not or would not provide. We went to visit the Unemployment Office. While filling out the questionnaire with the help of a clerk, Irene mentioned her sewing experience (limited to home practice on a foot-pedal driven Singer machine). The clerk generously put down „Stitcher” in her „Skills” column. He also sent Irene to Leckie Shoe Co. on Cambie St. in downtown Vancouver. They were looking for sewing machine operators. Miracle of miracles, she was offered a job - not as a stitcher but as a general helper. The pay was low, \$155 per month, but it was a good start.

Our happiness was not shared by our hosts. They felt that as long as Immigration was paying for the room and board, our major task ought to be learning the language rather than beginning to work.

Irene started her new job. Her wages were paid biweekly. At the end of the first week, not waiting for her paycheck, but using what little capital we had, we went out and purchased some basic items like panties for her and socks for me. Frank and Anne received the news of our shopping expedition with resentment. By Sunday they would not talk to us. We couldn't figure out what the problem was.

On Monday, Anne didn't give us the weekly change of clean linen. The tension increased. By the evening I couldn't stand it anymore, and approached Frank for an explanation. He revealed, with some reluctance, that the issue was that we hadn't paid for our room and board on Friday. Payment had become our responsibility now that Irene had started to work.

This was a gross misunderstanding on his part. We knew that the rule was that Immigration stopped payments for the person who began to work after he or she received their first paycheck. I explained this to Frank. He didn't say anything, but called up the Immigration Office the next day. They confirmed what I had said. It became clear that we were not in arrears. Right away we were given a change of linen and friendly smiles. However, our trust in their friendship was shattered. We realized that they had taken us in for the money and not because of their piously claimed Christian compassion. We didn't owe them any special gratitude.

Now that we had seen the hypocrisy of our hosts, the rigid formalities of living with this Dutch family became even harder to bear. Also, living in Burnaby while Irene was working and I was attending English classes in downtown Vancouver was very inconvenient. It required long hours of commuting and cost a lot of money. We decided to leave them after Irene received her first paycheck.

We started to look for a furnished room to rent in downtown Vancouver. The next day we found one. On Friday, with Irene's first wages in hand, we announced our plan of moving out the following day.

Frank and Anne were stunned and very upset. They had assumed that we were going to stay with them for at least a year, and counted on the forthcoming income. We had short changed them by ten months. They were also apprehensive about our abrupt departure raising eyebrows in their congregation. They tried to dissuade us from our plan but our minds were made up, and besides, our first week's rent for the new place had already been paid. We were ready to leave.

July 1957.

## 36

### STARTING OUT

After leaving the Dutch family, we moved into a furnished flat in the city. It was in the basement of an old family house on West Pender Street, at the edge of downtown. The landlords were an old Italian couple, friendly, but apparently as thrifty as the Dutch family we had just left. The flat contained a small room and an alcove-kitchenette. We shared the bathroom, the fridge, and washing machine in the hallway with our tenant neighbours, a young German couple.

The furnishing of the place - a pull-out sofa, two chairs, a table, a little counter with a sink, a gas stove and an oil furnace - was meagre but adequate. The rent was affordable - \$40 per month. Here we felt free at last. The oppressive crowds of the refugee camps and the frigid confinement of the Dutch household were finally behind us.

To set up shop we required a lot of basic items; e.g. staple foods, dishes, utensils, cleaning supplies, etc. However, we were very short of capital. In Safeway, as we picked and placed items in our shopping cart, I jotted down and added up the prices. When the sum reached the limit of our budget - too soon - I warned Irene:

“That’s it. No more items.”

Irene became very upset and exclaimed:

“That is impossible! I cannot start housekeeping without....!” She started to list the items still missing.

I shrugged my shoulders. It could not be helped.

While Irene was working in the shoe factory, I attended English classes in the mornings, and looked for a job in the afternoons, but without success. There were no openings anywhere. I would have taken anything which provided a wage. My English, which was still very poor, was a serious drawback.

One morning I woke up with a toothache. I went to the Immigration Office with my problem. They sent me to their dentist. The doctor examined my tooth and said that it required a filling, however, since Immigration covered only extraction, the tooth had to go. The price differential between the two treatments was probably negligible, but I lost my first tooth because of a stupid bureaucratic regulation.

A few days before the end of our first month, the landlady advised us that they had sold the house. It was to be demolished, and an office tower built in its place. Consequently, we had to vacate the house.

We were very upset. We had just paid \$10 for a barrel of heating oil, which was supposed to last all winter. Obviously, the deal for the house had been near closing when we rented the flat. Our landlords were trying to squeeze the last penny from their property. These stingy Italians refused to compensate us for our loss. They caused us to waste all that money on oil - a significant amount for us, but a negligible sum for them, in comparison to the sale price of the house.

We began to look for a new place to rent.

We found one on West Hastings Street, right downtown, closer to the shoe factory. It was in an old three-story building which contained eight furnished flats. The one we rented had a large

room, a separate kitchen and a balcony overlooking the harbour. This time the furnishings also included a double bed in addition to a sofa. The bathroom was at the end of the corridor. We shared it with several other tenants. The view, over the harbour toward the snow-covered mountains of North Vancouver, was fantastic, the best we have ever had. The rent for the new place was higher, \$50 per month, but it was more comfortable and more attractive than the previous flat. It was worth the higher price.

We had a second stroke of luck. The janitorial position became vacant in the shoe factory where Irene worked, and with Irene's mediation I got it. My wages were \$135 per month; very low, but still twice as much as the assistance I had been receiving from Immigration.

The work involved removal of all the scrap material from the various machines located on the three floors of the building, sweeping the floors, and cleaning the washrooms. Having an engineering degree, I felt somewhat overqualified for the position, but I gained some real life experience. I learned - to my surprise - how much messier the women's washroom was compared to the men's; Toilet paper, bags, and newspapers were thrown all over the floor, the sinks were spotted with various lotions, the mirror was smeared with lipstick, etc. To my disgust, I had to spend considerable time cleaning the women's washroom, while women came and went as if I wasn't even there.

My tasks did not occupy me for a full eight hours. I had free time, unofficially at least. I collected the daily papers that were thrown around, and moved into the back staircase between the floors where I could sit down without anybody seeing me, and read the papers. If I heard the door open above or below my reading room, I'd grab the broom and pretend to clean the steps. This hour of daily reading helped me improve my English vocabulary, but I still missed the school.

One morning I was surprised to read about the launching of the Soviet Sputnik. The news distressed me. While Canada seemed to be awed by the success of Russian engineering, I was sweeping floors with a Soviet diploma in my pocket.

After a few weeks on the job, rumours started to spread that the company was going to lay off people. My fellow workers assured me that my job was secure.

"The janitor will be the last person to leave the place," they said, "he will be the one who turns off the light and locks the door."

It didn't happen that way. I was the first to go, and after only one month on the job. The janitorial position was eliminated. From this moment on, the operators were responsible for cleaning their own workstations at no cost to the shoe company.

Ironically, the fee for joining the Union and the first monthly dues were deducted from my paycheck simultaneously with receipt of the pink slip. The 'closed shop' rule mandated that everyone had to become a Union member after one month of employment. The Union leadership had obviously known that my job was going to cease to exist but they fleeced me all the same before I was put out on the street.

Irene didn't lose her job, at least not in the first wave of layoffs.

I started to look for employment again. Although by this time my English had improved somewhat, the job market was, if possible, even worse than before. Vancouver had always been a bad place to look for employment. This time there was also a recession, and with the winter just starting, things looked really bleak.

After only a month of employment I was not entitled to unemployment benefits. The Immigration Office declared that no social assistance would be provided either, because my wife was working. However, after several weeks of soliciting, they reversed their position and reinstated my monthly allotment of \$65. (I was actually entitled to it for one year as a landed immigrant).

By this time Irene had also been laid off - the shoe factory had closed its operations for the winter. To our great relief, within days she found employment at the Hudson's Bay Department Store as a dishwasher in the cafeteria.

During this time my only possible source of income was casual work in the port. In the morning I walked to the freight docks north of the Exhibition Grounds and stood in line with 15-20 other hopefuls waiting for the foreman to pass and pick 4-5 casual helpers. If I was lucky - it happened only a few times - I loaded cases, crates, barrels, etc., into trucks or railway cars. We non-unionized workers were not allowed to board the ships.

The hourly wages were good but the job could be very demanding. On one occasion I was to move barrels of chemicals from a pallet raised by a lift-truck to the rear end of a large freight truck. The extremely heavy barrel had to be tipped on its rim, rolled forward, and let drop back on its butt-end at the proper location.

This was easier said than done. One had to brace oneself to budge the barrel, and balance it gingerly while rolling it. If it tipped back too far, one had to start the move all over again. In the worst case, when it tipped on its side, one had to jump away fast to avoid being crushed beneath it. It then required the help of two other guys to straighten up the barrel, and to restart the transfer. The seasoned workers I was working with became very annoyed with my frequent 'accidents'. Only by the end of the day did I become sufficiently skilled to move the barrels without a hitch. To make the day even more memorable however, I was put on the foreman's blacklist, and wasn't picked from the morning line-up for several weeks.

On other occasions the work was much easier, and had its pleasant moments, like on the days when we loaded small crates of Japanese mandarins into railway cars. The boxes were not heavy but they still fell to the ground and broke occasionally. We usually ate the evidence while cleaning up the mess. Strangely, the crates happened to fall most often just before coffee and lunch breaks.

The most depressing moments were the walks home after having failed selection for the crew. Usually, several of us marched together on the long journey. None of us could afford the bus fare. We were all in a gloomy mood, complaining bitterly about the joblessness.

Years later, in a secure job, I heard some of my colleagues, who had never been out of work (due to their luck rather than their talents), complaining about the lazy unemployed living on welfare. I found this common accusation terribly unfair. I recalled those disheartened guys who walked for hours in the rain, day after day, just to find temporary work. None of them seemed to enjoy living on welfare - if they got any - and they were all more than eager to work.

One day in December, when I was at home, I fell sick after lunch. I began to vomit and had a sharp pain in my abdomen. First I thought it was due to the meal that I had just eaten, but I soon realized that it was more serious, most likely appendicitis.

Seven years earlier, three days before my matriculation examination, I had a bout of appendicitis. When I arrived in the hospital, I was prepared for an immediate operation. I mentioned to the surgeon how unfortunate the timing was. He thought for a while then after re-examining my abdomen, said:

"The inflammation doesn't look too bad - we can probably arrest it with ice and antibiotics. I hate to do this, because now you are here, ready to be operated on. Who knows where you'll be when the problem recurs? And it will recur for sure. But I see your immediate problem."

He admitted me to the ward. Two days later I returned home cured - for seven years anyway.

When Irene came home from work, she searched the phone book for a Hungarian doctor. Our English was still very rudimentary, and we would both feel more comfortable with a co-patriot. She came up with the name of a Dr. Kovacs, and called him. The doctor instructed her to take me to the Emergency Department of the Vancouver General Hospital, and tell to the receptionist that I was his patient. He would show up later.

We had no money for a taxi and so took the bus. It was a long and agonizing ride.

The emergency room internist confirmed my guess. I had appendicitis. Now I had to wait for the appearance of my 'family doctor'. One hour passed after another. There was no sign of him. The internist re-examined me and became very worried about the delay but didn't do anything.

At 11:00 p.m. Dr. Kovacs finally showed up. We met. He didn't seem pleased to learn that I was one of Immigration's wards. He claimed that there were usually delays in collecting from that organization, although he admitted that they always paid in the end. His marked concern about immediate payment appeared strange to me. I wondered if all Canadian doctors were like him.

After a short examination he rushed me to the operating room and I was put to sleep. I woke up in a large ward with many beds, all occupied. It was still dark but I had to urinate. I saw a bedpan on the night table beside my bed. I slid off the bed and relieved myself. Climbing back into bed was more painful, but I did it without calling for help.

Dr. Kovacs showed up before noon. He confirmed that the operation went well. He ventured that he didn't like to make statements like this, but in his opinion my appendix was only minutes away from bursting when he removed it.

"Why didn't you come a few hours earlier?" I thought to myself.

He left instructions for the nursing staff. Half of the stitches ought to be removed after three days, and the remainder should come out a day later. Then I could go home.

I never saw the doctor again.

When the time came to remove the first half of the stitches, a nurse rolled a little carriage that had been parked at the end of the room to my bed. It was packed with instruments and bandaging materials. She carried out the treatment while I lay in bed. This practice was very different from that used in Hungary, where all surgical procedures, even minor ones, were done in a sterile room.

The next day a different nurse came to complete the work. She didn't like the look of my scar.

"Perhaps I should leave it alone, she said, tomorrow, Monday, Dr. Kovacs will come and take a look at it."

I was very disappointed. I wanted to go home, and told her so. After some reluctance she removed the remaining stitches but decided to call the doctor before discharging me.

Over the phone Dr. Kovacs reconfirmed his initial instructions that I could go home. I was relieved.

The next morning I had a painful itch in the incision and it looked swollen. Irene used the public phone in the corridor of the rooming house to get in touch with the doctor. He wasn't in his office. She left a message with his receptionist about my problem and said that she would call back later. Our phone allowed only out-calls, so we couldn't receive messages from the doctor.

When Irene called back, the doctor was still not in, and he hadn't left any instructions either.

Next morning the incision exhibited a painful swollen center. After Irene left for work, I decided to walk to the doctor's office, which was only a few blocks away. Walking was very painful but I made it. The receptionist told me that the doctor wasn't in, but that he had told her that my operation had been completed, and that by leaving the hospital I was no longer his patient. If I had further problems, I should see the doctor at the Immigration Office.

I couldn't believe my ears. Or was it my poor grasp of English? Could a doctor do this to a patient? The incision had obviously become infected either during the initial surgery or during the removal of the first half of the sutures, and now the man responsible for the patient's condition refused to treat him. He apparently preferred to collect only the standard fee due for the operation. The extra charges for treating a complication would have been more tedious to claim. He must have hated paper work.



Was this possible in this country? My trust in the Canadian medical system was badly shaken. First, the fact that the incision had become infected in the hospital, then that the doctor refused to treat the infection. Until that moment, I had believed that Medicare in the Communist countries was bad. Things like this would have been very unlikely to happen there.

I walked home in agony and lay down. I didn't know what to do. During the night the lump in the cut - about the size of an egg by now - burst open, and a great quantity of pus drained out. In two days the discharge stopped, and the wound began to heal, leaving me with a wide, ugly scar for the rest of my life.

In the spring my fortunes turned. I got a job at Pacific Press Ltd. where the two Vancouver newspapers, the Sun and the Province, were printed. I started to work for the former. My job - shared with five others - was to stuff the sections of the paper printed on different presses into one bundle.

The printing presses ran for 20 minutes, and then stopped for the next 20 minutes for reloading with new rolls of paper. While the printing continued, the work was very fast and uninterrupted, but during the down period one could do whatever one wanted. My fellow workers - all teenagers - sat down and played cards, cursing all the while. The word 'fuck' made up at least half of their speech. I was not, and didn't want to be, part of that gang.

I usually sat aside and read the paper from the first letter to the last, including all the ads, obituaries, etc. The editor of the Sun was probably not as familiar with the contents of each issue as I. During one of the breaks I happened to read about the trial and execution of Imre Nagy, the prime minister of the Hungarian Revolution. It was very sad news.

A couple of weeks later, the foreman offered me a second job. It was the same sort as the first one, but for the other paper which was printed during the night. I began to work two six-hour shifts with a four-hour break between. During the break I would walk home to eat, and to take a catnap. This busy schedule made up for all those months of idleness.

We began to save money for our planned move to Toronto. I believed that I would never find an engineering position in Vancouver's skimpy job market. We set the date of the departure tentatively for the end of August. I was to travel alone. Irene would follow me after I had landed a job.

In the middle of August, I was recommended through the Papps - Ilus Papp worked with Irene - to the Head of the Metallurgical Department of UBC for an available research position.

I went to see Prof. Frank Forward, an internationally recognized pioneer in hydrometallurgy, I later learned. He received me amicably and seemed to be very interested in my academic background in Soviet engineering. No wonder; this happened just a few months after the Russians launched Sputnik. That technological success shook North America.

Prof. Forward hired me as a technician for a two-month probationary period at \$280 per month.

A year later I became the head of a research group, which had two engineers and two technicians, at a monthly salary of \$360. The arduous starting-out was over.

September 1957.

## 37

### FREDY

„After classes we should go to see the Editor in Chief of the Hungarian Newsletter. Perhaps he can help us in finding jobs.” Gabor suggested.

He was my fellow countryman in the English class for new Canadians which we both attended. Seeing my hesitation, Gabor elaborated:

„They say that this editor is a real hero. He had been a victim of the communist regime, and been in jail for years. Liberated by the revolution, he immediately joined the fighting on the barricades. After the Soviet counterattack, he succeeded in escaping to Austria. The man was on the first plane that brought freedom fighter refugees to Vancouver. He was the one who thanked the welcoming mayor during the airport ceremony. He speaks English fluently what he learned while in jail.”

Then Gabor continued:

“The Hungarian community of the city, swelled substantially by the refugees, was in a dear need of a newspaper. The old-timer Hungarian-Canadians, highly excited by the heroic events that had recently taken place in Hungary, donated the money required. They also asked our hero to become the Editor in Chief of the new paper”.

The story sounded interesting. Obviously, I knew about the paper - I read it regularly - however, I was unfamiliar with the background of its editor. It will be interesting to meet a true freedom fighter - especially a famous one - I thought. In the past I had come across a number of second-hand, self declared heroes in the refugee camps where that species multiplied like weeds. But this will be different, for sure.

The newspaper bureau was not very busy; the editor in chief was willing to receive us immediately. We entered his office. He stood up from behind a huge desk and stretched out his hand to greet us. I just stared at him. The editor, a short, red-haired person with a rather ugly face, was Fredy, my step cousin - Alfred Munster - the ‘black sheep’ of my family.

I only stuttered my name as we introduced ourselves. He didn’t recognize me. That wasn’t surprising, because I was only a boy- of perhaps ten - when he saw me last. At that time, he, as a street scalper, had sold tickets to my father for a Sunday show. However, his unique look rendered my recognition of him unmistakable.

My uncle, Franz, had married a widow with three children before the war. The oldest was Fredy, an uncontrollable teenager. After leaving school, my step-cousin became ‘independent’, living by his wits, i.e. by the lack of the same in others. As a small time crook he became the black sheep of the family. Fredy’s professional horizon had widened considerably with the start of the war. The scarcity of industrial goods, and of food - later - provided unlimited opportunities for people like him. At least until the day when his luck ran out and he was arrested and prosecuted for black marketeering. The fact that he was half-Jew (on his father’s side) was a serious aggravating circumstance in those days. Consequently, instead of receiving a jail term, he was thrown in the infamous forced-labour battalion stuffed with Jews and antifascist political prisoners. The unit’s main task was to pick Russian mines at the front.

The survival rate of the 'worker-solders' of the penal brigade was poor, but Fredy returned at the end of the war alive and apparently in good health. As a surviving victim of the Fascism, he promoted himself into an antifascist hero in no time. He joined the Communist Party, and in a couple of years became an important party functionary.

In 1948, during the forced nationalization of the industry, he was nominated as the Head of the Nationalization Committee of Southern Hungary, a position that provided dictatorial power over all industrial enterprises in one quarter of the country. Some of the smarter capitalist owners tried to save whatever they could from their fortune by offering bribes to the nationalizing authorities. Fredy was not above such temptation, and in a short span of time amassed a fortune in gold and dollars. However, his luck deserted him again. Someone denounced Fredy to the Secret Police, and he was arrested, and later sentenced to a long jail term as a parasite element.

The Revolution of 1956 had found him still behind bars. He was apparently liberated in the first stage of the uprising when the doors of all jails were opened wide to free the political prisoners. The common criminals, who could not be distinguished from the former in those chaotic days, walked out also. Fredy probably had his worries that whatever will be the final outcome of the revolution, he might be returned to jail. Therefore, he must have taken off to Austria right away, leaving the barricades for the others to defend. Otherwise, how could he be on the first refugee plane to Vancouver?

Here, in the new country, Fredy used his chance to become a hero again; this time in the role of a much suffered, anticommunist, freedom fighter.

Our encounter in his office did not last long. The Editor in Chief - alias Fredy, 'the black sheep' - gave us a nice sermon about our national destiny and the need to support each other, without offering any concrete help in our job hunt. We left. But now I faced a real dilemma. Should I reveal the true background of this 'hero'? And to whom? Would anybody believe me? I didn't have any proof except my childhood recollections. I decided to keep my mouth shut, and to avoid his office.

A few months later there was a news item in the Vancouver Sun:

„The Chief Editor of the Hungarian Newsletter disappeared with several thousand dollar cash from the till. The paper ceased to publish and all its financial activities are suspended. A police investigation is in progress.”

A couple of months later another news item in the Vancouver Sun revealed that:

„The ex-Chief Editor of the defunct Hungarian Newsletter was detained in Seattle as an illegal immigrant. The extradition procedure to Canada is in progress. In Vancouver he has to face charges for embezzlement of the newspaper's funds.”

This was the last time I heard about Fredy, alias 'Victim of Fascism', 'Victim of Communism', 'Heroic Freedom Fighter', 'Leader of the Hungarian Community of Vancouver', but for me 'The Black Sheep of the Family' - forever.

September 1957.

## 38

### THIRD BEACH

In the late fifties Stanley Park's Third Beach was a semi-wild area. It wasn't cleaned or patrolled by the Park's personnel and could be reached only via a footpath that ran through the bush, or by walking along the water from Second Beach at low tide.

There were many enthusiasts, mostly nature lovers, who preferred Third Beach to its civilized neighbours. Irene and I were among those.

In 1958 the summer was unusually sunny and warm in Vancouver. We enjoyed the outdoors. We both finished our work shifts at 4 p.m., went home, and 45 minutes later were on our preferred beach. We usually stayed there until sundown.

This day our neighbours on the sand were a Greek couple with a number of kids. After stripping to our swimming suits, Irene and I went into the water, waded to a large rock, and climbed up on the top of it. In the incoming tide the rock would become an island and one could dive from it. This was the spot where Irene had learned to swim a few weeks earlier. There was no other way back to the dry land except swimming.

This time we were just sunbathing on the rock.

When the sun dipped below the horizon we swam ashore. The Greek family had already departed, and my trousers had gone with them. The pair of pants was cheap and its pockets were empty. I had no idea what enticed these people to steal them.

Now I was in a predicament. How to get home? Walk in underpants along a number of city blocks? I didn't have the nerve.

Irene decided to return home and get me a spare pair of pants.

"In one and half hours I will be back." She said. "You will have to stick it out."

There was no one, except me, left on the beach. After sitting for a while in the descending darkness, the fresh breeze from the sea made me shiver. I began to walk along the length of the narrow sand strip of beach not covered by the tide. Back and forth, from one rock wall to the other; the beach was about 100 metres long. Time seemed to stand still. I had no watch. I couldn't tell how long I had been waiting.

A dark figure finally emerged from the trailhead. It was Irene. I rejoiced ecstatically, and put on the pants fast, as if somebody was going to snatch them away from me.

Irene told me how scared she had been while walking on the deserted trail through the bush in almost total darkness.

We began the same trip back. It wasn't that scary. We were two now, and Stanley Park was safe in those days except for cheap pairs of pants.

July 1958.

## 39

### SUNDAY VISITOR

The police officer warned us:

„The burglar must have found the access easy, and he might be tempted to return. This coming Sunday is Regatta Day in Stanley Park. Most people in your neighbourhood will probably be there, since it's walking distance from here. The criminal might try a rerun on that occasion. You should stay home. But change the lock in any case!”

What the officer called 'easy access' was the way a burglar had entered our apartment the day before while we were both at work. There was only one key to our apartment. We used to place it on top of the utility cupboard in the corridor when we left separately. The burglar had apparently found the key and used it to enter the apartment. He took \$50 cash (next month's rent) and my precious electric shaver from the chest drawer. I felt especially sorry about the shaver; I'd bought it second-hand with my first wages. The burglar probably became distracted and left in a hurry, so he didn't take anything else.

We followed the officer's advice. I installed a new lock with two keys. Sunday we stayed home. I placed one key on the top of the cupboard, as before, and locked the door from inside with the other, and pulled it out of the keyhole. We were ready for the uninvited visitor if he decided to call.

This August Sunday was very hot, unusual for Vancouver. While Irene cooked in the kitchenette, I lay on the sofa in my underpants, reading. At around noon, there was a gentle knock on the door, followed by a second similar knock. I froze. I saw the doorknob slowly turning. I gesticulated to Irene to stop making noise and watch the door. I heard a key entering the lock and after a moment the mechanism clicked. The door crept open. A short middle-aged man was standing at the doorstep - ready to enter. He was holding a ring of keys in his hand.

I sat up on the sofa. The man looked at me flabbergasted. He must have been convinced that the apartment was empty.

„What are you doing here?” I yelled at him nervously.

„I am ... looking for the ... building manager.” He stuttered.

I jumped up, rushed to the door, and seized the intruder by the wrist. Irene was right behind me.

„Grab his other hand and don't let him go! I have to put on my pants.” I shouted at Irene in Hungarian.

Irene grabbed the other wrist of the still frozen man while I rushed to the canape and tried to get into my pants. Suddenly, there was a scuffle. Irene let out a scream as the man jumped away and began to run along the corridor. Irene, regaining her agility in an instant, threw herself after him in hot pursuit. Finally, my pants on, I stepped into my shoes, and began to run after them.

The two, the failed burglar with Irene right behind him, rushed through the back door into the parking lot. This was covered with crushed stone, which badly hurt Irene's bare soles. She stopped running but continued limping along. I passed her. The man raced at full speed down the middle of the empty street, and then turned into the first side street. When I got to the corner, there was no sign of him anymore. The deserted street seemed to have swallowed him.

As I stood there, mightily frustrated, Irene, barefoot and limping, caught up with me.

„He kicked me in the shin! That is why I let him go.” She cried more in anger than in pain.

At that moment, our escapee suddenly reappeared from a garage door, perhaps 30 feet ahead of us. Two men dressed in working coveralls followed him.

„Thief! Thief!” Irene screamed as we began to run toward the trio.

The burglar glanced at us and turned again into a rabbit and raced along the street at a speed unusual for a middle-aged man. The two garage employees threw themselves after him, and Irene and I ran a few steps behind them. At last, the fugitive seemed to run out of air or stamina. The distance between us began to diminish.

There was a gas station at the corner. The man turned into it with the apparent intention of making a shortcut to busy Georgia Street. A station employee standing beside the pump blocked his way and tried to grab the escapee, which resulted in a scuffle. It ended only when we - the four pursuers - surrounded them. As the station attendant was holding one of the burglar's arms, I got hold of the other. I had no time even to explain why we were chasing the man when two police cars - their lights flashing and sirens screaming - pulled into the station. Our captive made a desperate, last effort to free himself, and in the struggle kicked me in the shin. The pain was excruciating and made me blind with rage. I slapped him with the edge of my palm on the nape of his neck with such force that he passed out. I would never have believed that I was capable of knocking somebody out with my bare hand.

Two police officers emerged from one of the cars and handcuffed the burglar. Then while one cruiser took him away, the other drove us home, as Irene could barely walk by now.

In our apartment, the policeman reviewed the scene of the crime and drew up the incident report. He advised us to claim that the man was actually inside the door when he kicked Irene.

„That will put him away for good.” The officer said.

The trial took place a couple of months later at the Police Court. One of the garage employees, one of the policemen, and I were called as witnesses. We were waiting in the corridor outside the courtroom. I was called first. There was a crowd of perhaps 20 spectators inside the room. After swearing me in, the judge asked me to identify the accused. There was a crowd sitting in front of me. In being my first time in a courtroom, I didn't know where to locate him. Finally, I recognized the man seating in the front row. Well combed and wearing a jacket and a tie, he had a distinguished look now.

He had no lawyer. The judge conducted the questioning. Upon his question:

„What is your address?”

The accused answered with a tremor in his voice:

„I used to stay with friends but because of the blow that he gave me - pointing his finger at me - I cannot remember their address anymore.”

Some spectators cast appreciative glances at me. The burglar had turned me into a superman.

On the next question:

„Do you have any criminal record?”

His answer was a definite „No”.

The judge nodded toward the court clerk who began to read a long list. According to the police record, our burglar was a professional small-time crook who had served time stretching from a few months to a couple of years in practically every jail in Canada, ranging from Nova Scotia to the Yukon. He had frequently been convicted of theft and burglary. Judging by the number of convictions and sentences, he had either been a very busy criminal, or an unusually inept one.

His current defence was that he'd knocked on our door, looking for the building manager. He never opened it - he said - and this man - pointing his finger again at me - and his woman were the ones who assaulted him.

„And why did you run for several blocks if you didn't do anything wrong?" The judge asked him.

„Because his naked woman jumped at me!"

„At your age (he was 46) one might consider this an over-reaction." The judge remarked with a smile while the public burst out laughing.

The garage employee testified that - because it was Sunday - only he and his brother had been working in the shop when the accused entered - breathing hard. He asked for the shop manager. They told him that he wasn't in. The man turned around to leave. He looked suspicious, so they followed him into the street. Upon hearing Irene's shouts, they tried to take hold of him, and a chase ensued.

The policeman testified that a local resident seeing the chase in the street through her window called the police. That explained the unexpected arrival of the police cruisers at the gas station. The officer also mentioned that after handcuffing the suspect they searched his pockets and found a ring of keys. They returned it to the suspect who replaced the ring in his pocket before they drove him away. When they searched the suspect again at the station, the keys were gone. Apparently, the suspect had succeeded in dropping them en route. The policeman also testified about the visible injury on Irene's leg which she claimed was caused by the suspect.

After the witnesses' testimonies the judge pronounced the verdict. He found the accused guilty of breaking and entering and causing bodily harm to one of the occupants. He sentenced him to a two-year jail term.

August 1958.

## 40

### ALOUETTE LAKE

I descended to 'Pier C' where the Custom's Office was located. The agent looked at the notice I presented him, and fished out the file from a pack of documents which lay on his desk. He glanced at the first page, and then looked up:

„What is this item you came to pick up?“

„A Klepper folding kayak.“

He continued to stare at me as if my explanation was in Chinese, and he was waiting for the English translation. Not getting it, he pulled a booklet out of his desk drawer and began to page through it. He couldn't find the item and asked me again:

„What is a kayak actually?“

I was surprised that he didn't know. The Canadian Inuit had invented the kayak thousands of years ago and used it for hunting ever since. A custom official should know that much. But this was Vancouver, in 1959, decades before the TV Wild Life and Adventure Series made 'kayak' a household word. In those days I found most Vancouverites ignorant of any outdoor sport except baseball, football and golf. Their recreational activities were localized on the flatlands of the Lower Mainland. Neither the towering mountains nor the spectacular waters - salty and fresh - which surround the city had much attraction for them.

I explained to the custom officer that the kayak is a canoe-like boat that it is covered on top.

Now, he checked for 'canoe' in his bible. Apparently, it wasn't listed either. Paging further, he finally found a category, which seemed to satisfy him:

„Pleasure boat! It carries a duty of 35%.“ He declared.

I protested because I was sure that this class was for motorboats, yachts and sailing schooners but not for small, sporting crafts. My objection made him waver, and he returned to his booklet for further perusal.

„Do you use it for fishing?“ He asked me.

„One might.“ I answered.

I didn't tell him that I had never heard of anybody doing it, and I certainly had no intention of fishing from my kayak.

„OK. Let's classify it as a fishing boat. The duty will be 11%.“

It sounded like his final verdict. I found this rating more acceptable than his first quote. I paid the amount specified and picked up the three bags holding the boat. They were only moderately heavy and fitted nicely into the trunk of my small Austin automobile.

In the evening, Irene and I took the boat to a friend's house - our rented flat had no backyard. We began to assemble it. The instruction sheet that came with the boat was in German - not much use to us. Fortunately, the package also included some sketches, which helped.

The assembly took well over an hour. The completed two-seater looked impressively sturdy. I could barely wait for the weekend to try it out.



My plan - over ambitious and even reckless in hindsight - was to launch the kayak on Alouette Lake for an overnight camping trip. This lake, 12 km long, located at the edge of Golden Ears Provincial Park, is the body of fresh water closest to Vancouver. It is actually a twin lake with a narrow passage in the middle which wasn't navigable by motorboats. The 5 km long upper lake had no road access at the time and remained a complete wilderness. As such, it had great appeal to me.

We unloaded the bags containing the kayak at the Southern tip of the twin lake. This time the assembly took less than half an hour. The loading of the food and camping equipment took another half hour due to our lack of experience. Finally we were on the water.

Irene had never been in a kayak, but she quickly learned to paddle. By luck, we had a strong rear wind, which helped us to progress at good speed. As we passed the narrows between the two lakes, the scenery became more impressive. The upper lake was narrower, not more than a kilometre wide. Its wooded banks were very steep - almost vertical cliffs in most places. We were the only people on the lake. In the passage we didn't see any spots suitable for landing, much less for setting up a tent. It didn't bother me at the time because my intention was to camp at the far, northernmost end of the lake, along a creek, which, according to our map, entered through a flat delta.

As we approached the end of the lake, I saw that my plan wouldn't work. The delta was completely blocked by a blanket of logs. This wooden dam extended from one side of the lake to the other, and protruded into the delta for 50-100 metres, which made moving into the creek impossible.

Now, what to do?

Any further progress was completely blocked by the logjam. We were too tired to go back, since we would have to move against the still strong south wind. Furthermore, we hadn't seen a single potential camping spot on our way up to this location.

At closer inspection of our environs, I noticed a small pile of rocks where the log jam met the cliff wall, on the Park side of the lake. These rocks were apparently deposited by the creek and presently dry, but probably full of rushing water - cascading down on the steep mountainside - after a rain.

The stone fill formed a platform just large enough for our little tent. It was a precarious place to camp. In a thunderstorm - not a rare event here - we probably would have been flushed into the lake either by the torrent or by the waves on the lake. The flat spot was only about a foot above the water level. We had no choice. We set up our tent on the pile of rocks.

It was early afternoon. The sun was still high in the sky. In the shelter of the cliff one didn't feel the wind. In order to enjoy the warm weather to its maximum, Irene and I established a mini nudist camp. There was no chance of any tourist or boatman surprising us. I wanted to have a great swim across the lake but Irene refused to enter the water. It was so clean that one could see the sunken logs at its bottom - at a depth of 4-5 metres - lying crisscrossed at odd angles. Due to their dark, bluish-greenish colour and weird shapes, these logs resembled scary underwater monsters - at least in Irene's vivid imagination.

Consequently, I had a solo swim while Irene followed me in the kayak. The other side of the lake didn't form part of the Provincial Park, but the bush was just as wild as on the Park side. This didn't deter us from climbing to the ridge from where we could see Slave Lake in the distance.

In the evening we lit a fire at the edge of our little platform. The reflections of the flames dancing on the surface of the water appeared like playful spirits trying to entice the shadowy ghosts of the sunken logs from below. When the fire burned out, we continued sitting there, under the starry sky. By now the wind had stopped, and the air was calm. The deep silence over the water wasn't disturbed by either human sound or any other.



*The lake is clearing up*

In the morning, as I lifted the flap of the tent, I couldn't believe my eyes. The lake had disappeared, or rather its watery surface had vanished. There was a continuous blanket of logs reaching from shore to shore, as far as one could see, right up to the narrows at the southern tip of our part of the lake. I woke Irene, and now the two of us stared silently at the unbelievable scenery.

„Where did all this wood come from? How did it happen?“ I wondered.

The only logical explanation I could come up with was that some time ago, somewhere up on the mountain above the lake, there had been a logging operation. Many of the logs, intentionally or not, ended up in the lake and remained there. During the years most of them had sunk to the bottom but great many remained afloat. On the day of our arrival, the strong south wind had pushed the floating logs to the northern end of the lake and piled them up in a dense, multilayered blanket, anchored at the lake bottom. This jam prevented us from entering the creek. In the evening the wind stopped, and during the night the current - perhaps helped by a breeze from the north - spread the logs out over the whole surface of the lake.

„OK. That explains what happened but how are we going to get out from here?“ Irene demanded.

The 8-10 metre long and two-foot diameter logs floated in a jigsaw pattern, with no clear, navigable channel among them. There was no way to pass through. The possibility of leaving the boat and the tent behind, and trying to hike out seemed unrealistic because of the steep banks and the distance involved.

We were trapped and stranded on this unsafe ledge, one foot above the water. Trying to think logically in my gloomy mood, a couple of possible rescue scenarios flashed through my mind:

„If I don't show up at work on Monday morning, nobody would pay any attention. On Tuesday, perhaps, one of my colleagues would begin to wonder about my absence. On Wednesday, they would realize that we are missing, and hopefully would notify the police. On Thursday, a helicopter search might discover us. But they could rescue us only if the craft were able to land somewhere, which looked doubtful. Maybe they would be able to pull us up by ropes? I wondered.“

By the other scenario, a ranger would notice our unclaimed car in the parking lot, and would raise the alarm. That might bring help, perhaps a day earlier than the first alternative.

However, in both cases we would have to face three-four days of starvation, unless a rain washed us into the lake before then. Such calamity would make us forget about our stomachs.

We had a leisurely breakfast but after that there was nothing to do. I could not even swim because of the logs. At around 10:00 a.m. the stillness of the air broke. A gentle, southern breeze started to blow. In a short while it became stronger. We noticed that some logs in front of us began to move in the water. Or was it only wishful thinking?

I set a paddle in front of the tent as a fixed point and began to watch a given log. It was definitely moving. We rejoiced. But how long would it take for the lake to clear? Yesterday's pile-up at the end of the lake could have resulted from a week-long drive by the wind.

The progress was noticeable; yet it took several long hours before we started to see some clear patches of water. By 2:00 p.m. the middle of the lake was almost log free - all the way to the southern end of the lake. In front of us, however, and all along the shore, the tree trunks still formed a continuous carpet, although less tightly packed than before.

We dismantled the tent, launched the kayak in the tiny, clear bay enclosed by our camping platform and the shore. We packed everything, and were ready to move. I planned to swim in front of the kayak, and to push the blocking logs aside while Irene paddled the boat.

The plan worked. The manoeuvre proved easier than I expected. The logs were quite mobile and docile. In 5-10 minutes we succeeded in reaching the log-free, choppy part of the lake. I climbed into the boat and we started out toward the southern end. The paddling was hard. Now we were moving against the wind, and right in the middle of the lake where we were most exposed to it. The waves made Irene seasick, and we couldn't even stop and rest anywhere.

It took more than two hours to reach the narrows, the first spot where we could land and rest. The lower lake, used by motorboats, was free of floating logs. The tree trunks of the upper lake apparently could not pass through the narrows, which was too shallow and only a few meters wide.

By the time we reached the parking lot, it was 6:00 p.m. We were dead tired but richer with a few blisters on our palms and a new experience in wilderness camping.

August 1959.

## 41

### HE BLEW IT

Bernie, our summer student, was a pleasant fellow but had a chip on his shoulder. Because of his oversized self-esteem he rarely asked for advice, and liked to do everything his own way.

This was his last week on the job. He was to return to the University Engineering Department for his last academic year. On this day, he seemed to be distracted because of some problem with his latest girlfriend - I guessed.

Bernie's daily work routine involved the sintering of nickel powder compacts. The operation took place in a muffle furnace. This piece of equipment embodied a two-metre long and 15 cm diameter heat resistant alloy tube with a hot zone (1,200°C) in the centre. There were flame curtains at both ends of the muffle to burn the protective hydrogen atmosphere exiting from the tube. The flames also prevented air entering the tube when the sliding doors were open. In these instances one could peek into the glowing hot zone of the muffle through the flame curtain.



*Our research team. Back row (from left to right):  
Bernie, I, Zora, John and Nick  
Front row: Vilie and Janis*

For the sintering itself we loaded the nickel powder compacts into flat Inconel trays filled with alumina powder. The metal compacts were placed on the alumina bed, and the boat was inserted through the flame curtain into the muffle, and pushed into the hot zone with a steel rod. After a required period, the boat was pushed to the other end of the furnace where it cooled down before being retrieved.

In the lab we wore safety glasses all the time, and when performing the furnace operation an additional face shield and pair of asbestos gloves were required.

This day Bernie, in his brooding mood, didn't bother putting on the face shield - in the past three months he hadn't experienced any proof of this item's necessity.

He charged the tray into the furnace as usual. When the time arrived to move the tray into the cool end of the furnace, he lifted the sliding door and began to push the boat with a long stainless steel rod. Clumsily, he jerked the tray, and spilled some of the alumina powder, which remained in the middle of the hot zone as a neat glowing pile.

Bernie decided to erase the evidence of his carelessness in his own way. He picked up a half-inch diameter Pyrex (heat resistant glass) tube, long enough to reach into the hot zone. His original idea was to blow the powder out through the other end of the furnace. However, at the moment when he blew air through the pipe into the muffle, it formed an instant explosive mixture with the hydrogen and detonated an explosion. The hot gas - lifting the hot loose powder - blew out at the open end of the muffle and right into Bernie's face. Fortunately, his eyes were protected with his safety glasses. But the hot gas and the glowing alumina particles scorched the rest of his face.

Normally we used a white alumina powder - as fine grained as table salt - to fill the tray. This time - for his own unfathomable reason - Bernie filled the tray with coarse, 2 mm, black alumina powder.

Now, hundreds of these grains stuck and burned into his face and made the skin look like coarse emery paper. We rushed him to the University Hospital. The doctor at the Emergency Department, disinfected the skin on his face, and began to remove the imbedded material, grain by grain, with a pair of tweezers. He soon had to give up. The tedious operation would have taken hours to complete.

He told Bernie:

"Your whole face is burned but only superficially. When the new skin forms, it will reject the embedded particles. Until then you have to bear with it."

Bernie didn't return to us. I met him a couple of weeks later on the campus. His face looked bizarre, like a giant turkey egg. It contained patches of freshly formed pink skin intermingled with patches of dark areas with shiny, black grains dispersed throughout. The lower part of his face was covered with the sparse, miserly start of a beard.

"I am sorry to see you like this." I told him.

He smiled and then answered:

"Don't be sorry for me. My face had gained certain notoriety on campus. The whole affair has turned out to be a remarkable boon to my social life, fetching lots of sympathy from girls. They all want to date me."

September 1959.

## 42

### SKI ACCIDENT

This was to be the last run of the day - isn't it always? Halfway down the slope I turned too fast and lost my balance. As I was crushed to the ground I felt a sharp, lightning pain shoot from my left leg to the top of my head. The agony lasted minutes, or was it only a few seconds? I tried to lay motionless in the snow, waiting for the pain to subside. In my suffering I chewed the snow. With great effort I undid the ski straps (self-releasing safety bindings didn't exist then). After a while, the throb eased. I tried to rise but the excruciating pain instantly returned and glued me to the snow.

Irene arrived and watched me lying there helplessly. Other skiers began to assemble around us, asking if I needed any assistance. First I only shook my head but after a few attempts at trying to move my leg, I realized that I was unable to stand up even with help. My shin hurt very badly.

A ski patrol arrived. After a short check, the patrol skied away to bring up an emergency sleigh and a helper. When they returned they placed me in the padded toboggan tray. The pad was covered with a blanket while a second one was wrapped around me. The patrols carefully skied with me downhill to the T-bar loading station at the bottom of the slope. The lift was stopped. The staff tied the sleigh to the T-bar, and restarted the lift at a slower than normal speed. The travel was painful. The tray kept bouncing up and down on the uneven track, and I began sliding slowly downhill on the blankets. They forgot or didn't think to fasten me to the sleigh. After an endless number of bounces, the foot of the hurting leg started to push against the edge of the metal pan. The constant vibration of the tray, now transmitted directly to my foot, resulted in new agony. As if that wasn't bad enough, my sliding continued and forced my ski boot over the edge of the tray. My torment reached a new crescendo. I was desperately counting the support columns remaining to the upper station where my torture - I hoped - would end.

I finally made it to the top, and the patrols transferred me to a car. The trip back to the motel was not pleasant but compared to the T-bar trek it was more tolerable.

Irene and I had come to stay for the three-day Xmas holiday. My bad fall occurred on the first day, on Xmas eve. I hoped that by morning I would feel well enough to ski again. But no such luck. After a long night of on-and-off sleep, I still could not put any weight on my leg. The motel manager, who had been told about the accident, advised Irene to call a doctor, an American fellow skier, staying at the lodge.

He came at once, looked at my leg, then ran his hand over it.

"It may or may not be broken. Without an X-ray one cannot tell." He said, and asked \$10 (1959 dollars) for his expert diagnosis.

We were staying in Manning Park Lodge. The nearest X-ray clinic was in Hope, in the Fraser Valley, an hour's drive down the mountain. By this time, I had given up any hope that I would be able to ski again during the trip. I would have preferred to return to Vancouver, which was 200 km - a three hour drive - away. The problem was that Irene couldn't drive. We needed someone to bring our car back. However, everyone we knew was happily skiing on the slopes, and - not surprisingly - wasn't willing to leave on Xmas day. We had no choice but to stay one more day.

The following morning, on Boxing Day, we finally found a volunteer driver, Roger. This young guy was a friend of Janis, my Latvian technician. Roger wasn't very enthusiastic about the proposed mission. Although he claimed to be able to drive a manual shift, he admitted that he hadn't had much experience with one.

I was placed on the rear seat with my legs stretched. As we started out, my injured shin hurt at every bump. I had three hours of torture to look ahead to. I should have taken at least some Aspirin but now it was too late. The road was snow covered and slippery. Roger lacked experience not only with a manual shift, but also with driving under winter conditions. He was a Vancouverite.

A short while later we came to a steep descent where the road was wedged between a vertical cliff on one side and a sheer drop on the other. There was no side rail to spoil the view - at least in summertime. Snow banks piled several feet high by a plough rested on both shoulders.

Roger decided to shift into low gear. He unfortunately released the clutch too fast, and the car began to skid, and then to spin. After a quarter turn, the rear corner of the vehicle hit the snow bank on the cliff side. I was shoved toward the door, and the impact compressed my injured leg. I almost went insane from the sudden, terrible pain. It hurt as badly as the initial snapping but lasted longer.

The car, after being thrown back from the snow bank, continued to spin. In the next instant, the front bumper hit the snow bank on the outer side of the road. Luckily, our Austin - a relatively light, small, British car - didn't have enough momentum to break through the snow pile. This saved our lives, but at that moment fast death would have been a relief for me. The second impact had a repeated and even more painful effect on my leg.

Finally, the car stopped spinning and came to a full stop in the middle of the road, facing downhill - the way it began. There wasn't a word said in the car. Roger and Irene got out to soothe their nerves. Roger had to smoke a cigarette. I remained in the car - not by choice - and contemplated my misfortune. As if it weren't enough that I had probably broken my leg, now, we had had this frightening and torturous close call. What was in stores for us next?

The rest of the trip was uneventful if one disregards the nearly continuous pain caused by the bumps in the road. Upon arriving at the Emergency Department of the Vancouver General Hospital, the staff immediately took an X-ray of my leg. It showed that the tibia, the large shinbone, was broken. The fracture was a two-inch long spiral break, not rare in skiing accidents where severe torsional stresses act on the leg. Although, there was a gap of several millimetres between the two faces of the broken bone, the extended, twisted fracture surface and the unbroken fibula had held my leg straight, and visibly intact - at least to the naked eye.

The intern on duty decided to call an orthopaedist to treat my injury.

It was Boxing Day, and the specialist showed up several hours later. He was a middle-aged man in an obviously bad mood. He started out by denouncing the irresponsible, stupid skiers who unavoidably run into accidents (and provide him with an appreciable income), especially on major holidays. He complained bitterly about being called away from his family supper. It must have been a great feast - going on for a long time - because it took him hours to show up. Since my badly hurting leg had been unattended for more than 48 hours by this time, I wasn't very appreciative of *his* inconvenience. After these preliminaries, he began to work on my leg without giving me any anaesthetic.

"You have chosen to act the hero on the slope, now, you have a chance to prove it. The application of the cast will take only minutes, and you can bear it." He jovially explained.

While he implemented the cast he kept compressing the ends of fractured bones. The manipulation involved plenty of pain. Those minutes seemed to last forever. But I clenched my teeth and showed this sadistic, anti-skiing orthopaedists that:

"Yes, we skiers are made of harder stuff than ordinary people."



*On Mount Seymoure before the accident*

Due to the complexity of the fracture, my leg remained in a full cast from hip to toe for four months, and it took several more weeks after removal of the cast before I could walk normally again. There was no more skiing for me that winter.

December 1959.



## 43

### LONG BEACH

Herman, our friend, came with the news that Macmillan Bloedel, the large paper company, which had huge tracts of forests on Vancouver Island, had opened its cross-island logging road to the public on weekends and holidays, and that it was now possible to drive from Nanaimo to Tofino on the Pacific Coast. We looked up the possible route on the map.

„Wouldn't it be wonderful to make the trip on Victoria Day long weekend?"

I was for it but there was a hitch: Irene was seven months pregnant. Was it advisable to make such a trip through the mountains on a logging road in a small Austin? After a few days of discussion among the three of us it became obvious that we all wanted to go and were ready to disregard any potential problem.

The weather before the long weekend was warm and sunny, and the forecast was for the same during the holidays, a rather unusual phenomenon for Vancouver at this time of the year. We couldn't resist the temptation, and decided to go.

The ferry trip to Nanaimo was pleasant. The sea was as smooth as a mirror. After debarking we drove on a paved road for a while. The gravel continuation of the road was still in good condition. An hour later we entered the logging road. Fortunately, our Austin, which wasn't a great car by any standard, was built with a generous clearance above the road, and could negotiate the rocks and trenches of the logging road relatively easily. Some steep ascents - no great obstacles to heavy logging vehicles - caused her engine to cry painfully, but we made it to the top of the pass without any problem.

The road, or rather the track, on the other side of the watershed was in worse shape. At one point we heard a big bang from underneath the car. The undercarriage had hit a huge rock. Fortunately, it wasn't the oil pan that had taken the punishment. We descended to the Pacific Ocean without any major mishap. There we found only a few houses and encountered just a couple of fishermen on the small wharf next to the settlement. We stopped and I walked over to them to ask for directions to the bed & breakfast whose address we had found in a newspaper ad.

„It's only a couple of miles from here along the beach, but you'll have to hurry because the tide is coming in!" One of the guys advised me.

I looked at him with incomprehension. We were driving, not sailing. Why would we worry about the tide?

He saw that we were green city folks, and explained further.

„There is no road on the coast. You have to ride on the beach. During high tide the water reaches the edge of the bush and you need a boat to continue, unless your car floats and you have paddles with you."

It sounded intriguing. We continued our trip on the beach. The seemingly endless stretch of sand was smooth and hard, and it was a pleasure to ride on. The strip of dry sand between the edge of the water and the Pacific rainforest was still about 50 yards wide, and it stretched many, many miles ahead. The name 'Long Beach' seemed to be very apt - not an exaggeration.

As we continued mile after mile, we began to worry. We didn't see any houses or buildings on the fringes of the beach, although occasionally we noticed tracks entering the bush. We stopped and entered one of the dirt tracks on foot. It led us into an otherwise impenetrable wall of virgin West Coast rainforests. Around Vancouver, even in Stanley Park, I had seen dense forest, but this chaotic disarray of gigantic, centuries old cedar and spruce trees, and the jumbled mass of rotting windfalls interwoven with a confused tangle of underbrush ferns and straggling saplings, appeared so solidly packed that even a rabbit wouldn't be able to enter unless it chewed its way through. The dirt track turned out to be short, after about 30 yards we reached a clearing with a house at its center. A man came out to meet us. In answering our question he told us that we had already passed the address we were looking for.

We walked back to the beach, turned the car around, and drove slowly, searching carefully for any break in the green wall. Soon, we found the 'driveway' described by the local man. It looked more like a tunnel in the underbrush, just high and narrow enough for a car to pass through. No wonder we missed it the first time. The clearing and the house in it were similar to the ones we had earlier stopped at.

The owner, an elderly woman, received us very hospitably. She explained that the cottages on the beach had to be hidden behind a strip of forest because of the very fierce winds during winter storms. An ordinary house exposed to that furor could easily lose its roof and could even be blown apart. She also said that during high tides we would be cut off from the outside world. Although there was a motorboat parked on the ground behind the house for emergencies, it would be difficult to launch it into the wind or drive it through the breakers.

In a couple of hours the incoming tide covered the sandy beach, and not even a walking path remained. The cottage became a virtual island surrounded first by the sea of bush and then by the watery mass of the ocean. I hoped that the baby in Irene's womb would not decide on an early exit.

Next day, with the tide out, we went for a long walk. On this stretch of the beach there were millions of tons of huge, 5-6 ft diameter and 50-60 ft long logs piled up against the rim of the rainforest. This gigantic barricade was several stories high and stretched many miles. The logs, as our host explained, had broken off the rafts pulled by trawlers from the logging sites to the saw and paper mills. Sometimes, during fierce storms, whole rafts broke apart. The prevailing wind and sea current carried the loose logs to this part of the beach and piled them up against the forest. The recovery of the fugitive logs wasn't considered economic; the logging industry preferred cutting additional virgin forest to make up for the loss.

The little back garden of the cottage where we stayed was decorated with dozens of green and red, 6-10 inch diameter glass balls. These were floats from fishing nets, which broke loose and drifted here from as far away as Japan. They usually landed on the beach in the spring, after many months of travel across the stormy Pacific. We tried to find one in the gigantic log pile but without success.

On our third and last day we packed up and started for home. It was Victoria Day and there were many cars on the beach, probably from Tofino. Some drivers were racing along the edge of the water. Since, there was no speed limit or radar trap, the drivers felt free to get the maximum out of their engines. The velocities of some cars easily approached those of true racing cars on this perfectly smooth track.

Even those who didn't take part in the competition were speeding, while swerving in-and-out of the sea, and spraying water 12-15 feet high in the process. It looked impressive. I decided to try the same. It was exhilarating. Herman suggested that he take a picture of me doing it. I stopped the car close to the edge of the water where it was only a couple of inches deep. Herman got out with his camera and I restarted the engine. When I released the clutch, the Austin didn't budge, and the futile effort made the engine die out. I tried again with the same effect.

„Tibor! Hurry up! The car is sinking!” Came Herman's urgent appeal.



*The sinking Austin*

I realized that I was in deep trouble. The wet sand that felt so solid and compact while speeding over it became a sucking trap when one stopped. The small engine of the Austin was unable to turn the wheels which were glued to the sand. I decided to step out to see the complete picture. By this time, the car had stopped sinking. Its bottom was sitting flat on the sand. As I opened the door, a late wave surged out of nowhere, and momentarily filled the interior of the car with half a foot of seawater. I rapidly closed the door, which only succeeded in trapping the water inside. It was a very stupid reaction, since by now the wave was ebbing and would also have drained out of the car. I sheepishly opened the door and let the water out. Most of it exited but the carpets, and our handbags sitting on the floor remained soaked.

A small crowd of spectators began to assemble around us. These locals - knowingly - left their cars near the edge of the forest, and then walked over. One of them said to reassure me:

„You are lucky that the tide is still on its way out. Otherwise, you could say ‘goodbye’ to your car.”

On hearing this I felt tremendously relieved, and was almost ready to cry from joy. I had no idea what we might do now, so far away from civilization. The nearest phone was probably miles away, and anyway, what would I call, a tugboat?

While contemplating our misery, a pickup truck arrived on the scene from out of nowhere. Its elderly driver and a teenager boy sitting beside him must have been on a Sunday drive themselves. The man parked his vehicle at a safe distance then approached us. He had a very scornful look on his face.

„It doesn’t look good but I’ll still try to drag you out. The problem is that I only have a 25-foot cable, and I can’t stop close to you. I’ll drive on dry sand and my son will throw the cable to you while passing. You have to attach it instantly to the car and then hope for the best.” He explained the enchanting scenario.

When the plan was put into action, I succeeded in attaching the cable hook to the front of the car. When the cable tightened, there was a sharp snap, and the mudguard of the car parted happily from the body, dangling on the hook hauled by the truck. The driver came back and showed me where the hook should be attached on the newly exposed front of the car. One learns something every time out.

On the second pass the grip was more effective. As the cable became taut, I swear that I saw the Austin stretch out above her glued-in wheels. I expected the cable to snap at any moment. Instead, the car started to slide on her belly on top of the sand surface. Slowly, as she passed

over to dryer layers of sand, her bottom separated from the sand bed with a loud pop. As she continued to rise, she started to roll on her wheels.

Hurrah! The rescue operation had succeeded. There was a loud applause from the spectators. The truck pulled the car to a safe spot near the forest wall, and we enthusiastically thanked our saviour. He only shook his shoulders - he apparently encountered idiots like us before.

Now, I tried to start up the car. Since that sneaky wave had also drenched the engine, I was afraid that there would be problems with the ignition. But no. After only a couple of turns the engine began to cough and finally revved up. Herman standing beside the car, observed a two-foot long jet of water shooting out of the tail pipe at the moment of the first cough. The exhaust system had obviously been filled with water.

At last we were on our way again. Since we lost nearly two hours with this incident, we had to rush. But not until we reached the pass - I was very careful driving up through that obstacle course. Any accident now would have been unforgivable.

By the time we approached Nanaimo it was dusk. We could see the brilliant lights of our ferryboat in the harbour. We had only minutes left before departure time - the last sailing of the day. I stepped on the gas, and we reached the boat. As we rolled off the ramp and into the deck, the attendants closed the gates behind us. Ours was the last car to board.

May 1960.

## 44

### LESSER SLAVE LAKE COUNTY

The gravel road stretched monotonously - straight like an arrow, with only an occasional bend around a larger body of water. We were in the northern bush country, the boreal forest of pine, spruce and fir with large but scattered tracts of larch, birch and aspen. The woods were regularly interrupted with wetlands, fens, rust-coloured bogs and ponds of various sizes, often dotted with wooded islands. During the long hours of driving we encountered very little traffic - a couple of cars and a similar number of pickup trucks. We were on our way to visit a friend, Joe, in Joussard, a town on Alberta's Lesser Slave Lake. Joe was the gym teacher in the local residential school.

After passing Westlock we drove through the flat muskeg - taiga - an impenetrable bush of dense spruce and pine interrupted only by a multitude of swamps and lakes. We didn't see any human settlement for the next 160 km, until we reached the town of Slave Lake on the lake's shore. From here the road followed the shore of the lake, and we crossed cultivated tracts of land, which lent the landscape a friendlier appearance.

Finally, we reached Joussard. There was no problem finding the school, it was the only outstanding building in the area.

The school and the adjacent dormitories were run by the Quebec Catholic Mission at the behest of the federal government with the aim of providing education to native children. Joe was the only lay teacher there at the time. He introduced us to the Reverend Mother, the Head Nun. She seemed to enjoy meeting visitors and willingly gave us a short tour of the dormitories - military type rows of cots in large rooms with pictures of the Virgin Mary and various other saints staring down from the walls. She also presented her favourite pupil to us, a shy little girl of perhaps eight.

The Mother, one of the few nuns who spoke English, explained that their call was to teach Christian values to the Indian children, i.e. to Christianize the heathen, although she didn't use these words. The instruction was in French - it had to be - since all nuns were from Quebec. She provided the justification:

She told us that the native children were picked up by the Mounties either by boat or by plane, depending on the remoteness of their settlement, and brought to the residential school in September, to be returned to their parents only in the following June. The youngsters were very bewildered in the new and strange environment at the beginning, especially if they didn't have older brothers or sisters in the school, but in due time they became adjusted.

The idea - thought to be quite advanced at the time - was to familiarize native children with Western civilization, especially with the Christian religion, in order to help them assimilate with broader Canadian society. The state authorities took the children from their homes without the parents' consent. The lack of any contact between the parents and children during the ten months of school year was considered beneficial in the adaptation process. The children were discouraged from speaking their mother tongue in the school.

This educational practice went on for decades. At the time no one considered - or at least raised the issue - that tearing the children away from their natural environment was bound to destroy their relationship with their native community, and will render them rootless.

In the case of Joussard Mission School, the absurdity of all instructions being given in French, the language that they would not and could not use for communication unless they moved to Quebec, was not questioned either. The other danger - the frequent sexual exploitation of the children by the Christian Brothers - was not to surface for years to come.

On that day, I didn't realize that we were witnessing one of the long series of injustices inflicted on the natives, all in the name of progress, although the existence of a French Mission School in Alberta struck me as absurd.

We spent the night in our tent on the shore of the lake accompanied by millions of blood-thirsty mosquitoes. These tireless insects didn't stop disturbing the quietness of the night as they zoomed relentlessly toward the canvas hoping to join us in more intimate contact.

In the morning we went to a picnic with Joe's friends. The recreational ground we visited was at the edge of a deciduous forest that happened to be infested with caterpillars. On entering the trees, we were astonished to see zillions of these creatures crawling on the ground, on the tree trunks and branches, and covering every single leaf of every tree. In the otherwise silent forest, there was a low murmur of the worms munching the foliage. Upon reaching the end of the branch, the caterpillars dropped to the ground. The continuous impacts sounded like drizzling rain. From their new position on the ground the worms crawled along until they reached a tree farther ahead - following or leading the front of attack - and mounted it to repeat the process. The devastation from these voracious insects was staggering. There were already huge sections of the forest without a single green leaf.

We were told that the forest, covering hundreds of square miles, had been infested for two years. The locals claimed that if it continued for another year the trees would die.

After the picnic, we decided to head back home without returning to Joussard, and thus we missed the opportunity to fill up the gas tank. At Valleyview we turned onto the Alaska Highway and would follow it to Edmonton. Although this was a longer route home, the road was paved, and allowed faster speed.

The traffic on this major highway was as scarce, and the landscape as monotonous as on the northbound trip. At one point I noticed a dark stripe across the pavement ahead of us, but I paid no particular attention to it. Only when we were on the top of the band did I realize that this was a column of caterpillars, several metres wide, migrating across the road. Instinctively, I released the gas pedal and luckily didn't apply the brakes.

The bodies of the worms crushed under the tires acted as a greasy lubricant, and the car immediately started to fishtail. I desperately tried to keep control and jerked the steering wheel first to one side and to the other.

Irene, who was snoozing beside me in the passenger seat, woke up with a start. Her immediate thought was that I had also fallen asleep and lost control of the vehicle. In emergencies, real or imagined, her usual reaction was to start shouting at me. She did exactly that. I hardly needed that type of encouragement. I was still struggling with steering the car. Finally, I succeeded regaining control of the car. I told Irene what caused the skidding but she didn't believe me.

A couple of kilometres later I noticed a similar dark stripe across the road. This time I stopped before crossing it and we both got out of the car. The closeup view of the migrating armada of worms was astonishing. The caterpillars formed a four-metre wide band reaching from the ditch on one side of the road to the other. The insects marched touching head to tail, side to side, leaving no apparent gap. Irene felt humbled as we got back into the car and slowly rolled over the living carpet.



*Lesser Slave Lake County*

We were low on gas. According to the map there was a settlement nearby, the first one since we left Valleyview, more than 100 km back, where I foolishly hadn't refuelled. This upcoming habitation had a pump for sure - I reassured myself. We passed a bridge over a river, on whose shore, according to the map, the settlement was located. But there was no town, not a single house, or even the ruin of a house in sight. The town, if it had ever existed, had disappeared completely.

Our situation didn't look so good. The next town was Whitecourt, 50 km distant. The needle of my gas gage had already touched the 'E' - the intimidating empty sign. I slowed to thirty miles/hour to try to save gas and kept listening nervously to the engine, expecting it to die out any moment. The minutes passed agonizingly slowly. The countryside remained monotonous bush - uninterrupted by any sign of humanity.

The needle of the gage kept creeping over the letter 'E'. But with every kilometre covered our hopes inched up a notch. Finally, I could discern some buildings in the distance. The first appeared to be a gas station. I happily and foolishly, stepped on the accelerator. The engine coughed, only once, and died off. I switched into neutral, and we continued to coast toward the station, so close and still so far away.

We didn't make it. The car stopped about 50 metres short of the turn-off into the station. I got out and walked over, and sheepishly asked the attendant emerging from the garage if he would help us to push the car to the pump. He laughed at my predicament.

"Hey, you almost made it. Should practice it more often."

June 1961.

## 45

### THE GOLD PANNER

The spring of 1961 was quite wet so the danger of forest fires during the summer was remote. The Forestry Department of Alberta had decided to open the Eastern foothills - next to Jasper Park - to the public. The fire roads, rarely travelled by tourists, and the primitive campsites along them, would provide a good opportunity to see some semi-wilderness. I decided to spend a week exploring the area with my family.

After we had entered the almost virgin forest, we rode for hours on a dirt road before reaching the campsite we'd preselected from a foresters' map. Between the road and the campsite there was a narrow but apparently very deep gorge. Glancing into it while crossing the log bridge I saw something shiny far below.

'It must be snow or ice.' I thought somewhat surprised. It was July and the elevation wasn't that high.

After setting up camp, I decided to climb down into the gorge and try to retrieve some of this natural coolant for our icebox. I walked along the rim of the abyss looking for a way down. After a while I found a spot where the canyon wall appeared negotiable. Armed with an axe and a plastic bag, I began my descent into the chasm. My progress was painful. The rock wall was steep, moist and slippery, but I made it down without any mishap. The gorge was about 15 metres deep and only about 3 metres wide at the bottom. A small creek ran on its floor. The air felt very humid, and it was almost semi dark down there. The sun's rays had apparently never penetrated to this depth.

I walked along the floor in the direction of the log bridge. There was no ice or snow visible anywhere, although the temperature felt definitely chilly. Almost under the log bridge I spotted a dark column several metres high. Behind it a little stream of water cascaded down on the rock face of the chasm. As I got closer, I realized that the column consisted of ice. It was the remnant of a frozen waterfall - dust covered on the canyon side but clean on that facing the trickling water. This must have been the shiny surface I had seen while crossing the bridge above.

I stepped behind the column into the two feet wide gap to access the clean ice. I began to chop chunks of ice and collect them in my bag. It was a slow process - the ice proved to be surprisingly tough to cut. The space was also tight there, and wet, and somewhat noisy from the dripping water.

„Maybe the dust covered outer surface is less resilient?" I wondered." At least there is more room to move around." I thought.

I stepped out from behind the column into the main canyon holding my axe high, ready to break off any protruding chunk. Startlingly, I found myself facing a man not farther than three feet in front of me. I froze. The ghostly figure - an elderly person with a day-pack on his back - froze also. Shocked, I noticed that the man's face was turning ashen, as if ready to pass out. Only in that instant did I realize that I was still holding my axe high in the air. I quickly lowered my arm. Overcoming my initial daze, I greeted him. The stranger didn't answer but slowly sunk to the canyon floor.

'He is having a heart attack!' The painful thought crossed my mind.



I dropped the axe and bent down beside the man. His eyes were closed, and he didn't seem to be breathing. I was lost. What to do now? I just kept staring at him. Minutes must have passed. Then the colour of the stranger's face began to light up. He opened his eyes and took a long look at me. He sat up.

„Who are you? Where did you come from?“ He asked.

I quickly told him about the campsite and my purpose in being down there. It took a few minutes for him to digest my story. Then he began to talk. He told me that he was a professor of geology at the University of Toronto and was spending his summer vacation hiking and camping in the Rockies. His hobby was to pick a creek in the foothills, and if he found specks of gold in the creek bed, he followed the water upstream. He kept on panning at regular intervals, trying to locate the source of gold - the original vein. He had been doing this for years without striking any rich deposit but had always collected enough gold dust to pay for his trip.

The professor wasn't aware of the presence of the campsite just above us. He hadn't even heard about the open tourist season. He felt sure that for miles and miles he was the only human being around. This semi-dark gorge was the last place he expected to meet someone. Stumbling into me, with an axe raised in my hand, frightened him almost to death. He thought that I was after his gold and was going to kill him.

As the professor eased up - he was apparently starved for human contact - he even demonstrated his panning technique. Sure enough, there were some gold specks in the sand he washed. He also showed me that one does not necessarily have to pan to see if there is gold in a creek. When the water cascades down over moss, the heavy gold particles are combed out and remain in the vegetation. One has only to check the moss bed for glistening inclusions.

It was getting dark. The professor had to return to his camp that was somewhere downstream, while I had to climb out of the canyon. We said goodbye, and I wished him success in his prospecting. I also expressed my hope that he wouldn't have anymore scary encounters with ice-hunting tourists.

July 1961.

## 46

### ON THE NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER

„It's Alex. He wants to speak to you.” My wife said as she passed me the receiver.

Alex and Ági, husband and wife, were friends who lived in Edmonton, only half hour drive from us. He asked me if I was game for a kayak excursion that evening. It was a hot summer day, stuffy in their apartment; and he wanted to breathe some fresh air. It was already 5.00 p.m. but with the long northern days we still had plenty of time before darkness fell on the river. I agreed, and immediately began to pack our Klepper kayak, a collapsible two-seater, into the car.

When our friends arrived, we drove down to the river and assembled the boat. I explained my plan:

„The Redwater highway crosses the river at about 12 miles downstream from here, via the ferry. I've passed through it a couple of times, and I know the place. Irene and Ági could pick up us at the ramp. If we paddle at the normal speed of four miles per hour, helped by the current of perhaps two miles per hour, we would easily arrive at the ferry crossing in just two hours. There is daylight until well past nine. By that time we'd be back here.”

The plan sounded reasonable, and everybody agreed. Alex and I waved goodbye to our wives and started out. It was already 6.30 but that gave no reason to worry.

The air was pleasantly fresh on the river. Offshore there were no mosquitoes - the curse of Northern Alberta. Our pace was very leisurely, paddling for a while, then just floating with the current, then paddling again. We remained close to the edge of the water, and watched the bush pass by.

At one point there was a loud splash behind us. Turning around we faced a beaver swimming a mere fifteen feet behind the boat. He followed us for a stretch, occasionally slapping his tail on the surface of the water with a sharp splash. The animal had apparently never seen a kayak before and was intrigued by it. After a final forceful slap the beaver dove and disappeared.

I had never been on this part of the river, and was surprised at how twisting it's course was. I had the impression that we were moving along a never-ending series of 'S' turns. Our highway map didn't show this meandering passage.

As the sun sunk nearer the horizon, the behaviour of the mosquitoes changed for the worse. They flew in from the shore and started to pester us. We moved to the middle of the river to stay outside their range. The manoeuvre worked only for a short while. Soon we were unable to escape the pests. They were everywhere, and were attacking us mercilessly. We found the only way to escape their bites was to paddle non-stop at a sufficiently high speed that mosquitoes couldn't zero in on us.

The sun was ready to set, and I began to worry. By my calculations we should have reached the ferry landing some time ago. Obviously, the river followed a much longer route than the one the crow flies but still! We were now paddling at a steady rate, and at a good speed, still there was no sign of any road crossing. The river passed through bushland; we could not expect to see any farm or settlement, and we didn't.

It was getting dark. We couldn't take any breaks because of the vicious mosquitoes surrounding us. The small can of repellent that we had brought with us had been consumed a

long time ago. I knew that the car ferry stopped to run at dusk, and there would probably be no lights left burning overnight on the ramp. There was the danger that we would miss our rendezvous in the darkness. Consequently, we pulled closer to the edge of the river to enable us to see the contours of the bank. This involved some risk, since in the dark we could not see fallen trees hanging from the shore. Also, near the bush, the mosquitoes swarmed in even denser echelons and despite our speed they succeeded in landing on our necks and heads in kamikaze attacks. They tormented us mercilessly. We stopped talking, and only the rhythmic splashing of our paddles and the nonstop buzz of the mosquitoes broke the silence of the night.

After another never-ending switch in the river's direction we finally noticed a light in the distance. As we got closer, it looked like a reflector beam shining on the water.

„That must come from our car standing on the ferry-ramp.” I cried out excitedly.

We renewed our efforts and soon reached the ferry-ramp with the car parking on it. It was our Austin. We jumped out of the kayak and pulled the craft into the ramp. Irene and Ági got out of the car and embraced us happily. They had given us up for lost, and now they were relieved to see us alive.

Hastily, the four of us took the boat apart into pieces small enough to fit into the trunk of the car. There was no way to pack everything properly under the relentless attack of the millions of bloodthirsty mosquitoes. We finally escaped into the insect-proof interior of the car. What a relief it was! At last, we were able to talk. Our wives told us that they had been sitting on the ramp for more than three hours. During the second half of their wait they began to feel increasingly hopeless - we were overdue - and they didn't know if they should continue to wait or go to the police for help. When it had become completely dark, and the ferry operators left for home, Irene started up the engine and turned on the headlights, envisaging the possible problem of locating the crossing from the river.

Now, luckily, the kayaking adventure was over. Alex never asked for an encore.

August 1961.

## 47

### AN UNINVITED GUEST

The town of Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, was a small, friendly place in the sixties. Most people knew each other, and the doors were never locked. One Saturday night our friends from Edmonton visited us. We had a pleasant time talking and drinking beer until midnight. When they left, we went to bed without clearing the coffee table of the empty bottles and glasses. During the night some noise startled me and I woke up. I couldn't tell what the disturbance was, so I went to check on Peter - our year-old son - sleeping in the next room. I found him resting peacefully in his crib. I returned to bed and went back to sleep.

In the morning Irene got up, picked up Peter, and walked down to the main floor with him in her arms. She was going to feed him in the kitchen. I remained in bed. Suddenly, she rushed back into the bedroom.

„There is a strange man lying on the sofa!" She whispered.

I was stunned.

„Was the man sleeping or awake?" I asked her.

„I noticed him only when I reached the bottom of the staircase. He was awake and watched me with interest." She answered.

The interest on the stranger's part wasn't surprising. Irene was wearing only the top half of her baby doll nightgown.

I didn't know what to do. I was afraid that the man was on the run. The provincial jail was located in our town. Breakouts were rare but they did occur. The phone - if I wanted to call the police - was in the kitchen. To get to it I'd have to walk through the living room where the stranger was laying.

Obviously, some action was required. I got up, dressed, and nervously descended the staircase. Reaching the bottom I saw a young man, probably in his early twenties, still laying on the sofa with his eyes open. When the intruder noticed me, he hastily sat up and cried out:

„Who are you?"

„I live here. Who are you and what are you doing in our living room?" I cried in my turn.

The young man's face turned beet red. He started to apologize - stammering badly - saying that he thought he was at his friend's place. My apprehensions disappeared. The young lad didn't look dangerous but appeared to be miserably confused. I began to feel sorry for him. By this time Irene - now properly dressed - joined us. That increased the intruder's embarrassment even more. Suddenly, he jumped up, rushed to the door, and disappeared. We hadn't even been able to ask for his name.

Next day I told my co-workers about the incident. Bob, my technician, went over to the main lab to inquire from his friends about Saturday's parties in the town. He came back in no time with the complete story:

„Your night guest was such and such. Although recently married, he'd gone to a bachelor friend's party on Saturday evening. When he returned home after midnight, quite tipsy, his wife, who resented his going to the party in the first place, wouldn't let

him in. After this rejection he was reluctant to return to the party and let his friends ridicule him. Instead, he decided to walk to another friend's place - which happened to be in your town-house row, a few doors down from you. Our hero didn't want to wake up his friend, but decided to sneak in, sleep on the sofa, and leave in the morning without ever being seen. He obviously missed the door and also overslept in his refuge.

He woke up seeing an unknown, semi-nude woman coming down the stairs carrying a baby. That didn't ring any bells yet. His friend was a bachelor, and girly incidents like this could apparently happen in his pad. However, when a strange man (you) descended from the bedroom, it finally dawned on our hero that he was in the wrong place. The rest is history."

All these town houses - with their doors usually unlocked - had the same layout, and consequently the same arrangement of the basic furniture. Therefore, our uninvited guest could find the sofa in the darkness despite his inebriety. It remained a puzzle to me how he could get around the coffee table full of bottles and glasses without upsetting anything?

What was the reaction of the frustrated and vengeful wife to this latest misadventure of her errant husband? To my regret I have never learned.

September 1961.

## 48

### DO YOU HAVE INSURANCE?

It was close to midnight. We were on our way home from Edmonton to Fort Saskatchewan. The highway was practically void of traffic. Then I noticed the lights of a car ahead of us, which didn't seem to budge. As we approached it, I saw a man standing in the middle of the road beside the vehicle waving at us to stop.

He must have some trouble with his car, I thought, coming to a halt behind his car. The man walked to our car and said:

"There has been a head-on collision ahead of us. We cannot pass. It would be best for you to pull over to the shoulder and leave your lights on to warn anybody coming. Someone's already gone to a farm to call the police."

He pointed toward the lighted window of a house in the field not very far off the road. I followed his advice. Then I got out of the car and walked to the scene of the accident. In the darkness it was hard to see what had happened. Two badly damaged cars were resting on either side of the road. The impact must have thrown them apart. The car on the other side had some dark figures moving around it - the occupants, or some travellers coming from the opposite direction who'd stopped.

I turned my attention to the car on our side and tried to peek into it. I saw a man, motionless, hugging the steering wheel behind the shuttered windscreen, and a shapeless mass crammed under the dashboard in front of the passenger seat. The heap seemed to quiver from time to time.

In the back seat there was another man sitting and trembling. Beside him on the bench were two children huddled together. At least one of them was sobbing. I couldn't tell their ages or sex in the dark.

I walked over to the driver's side and tried to open the door. At first it didn't budge. After several attempts I was able to force it open. The upper body of the driver, not supported by the door any longer, slid off the steering wheel and hung halfway out over the road. His eyes were open. There was a deep cut visible on his neck but it wasn't bleeding. The man looked very dead to me. I tried to find the pulse in his wrist. I couldn't detect any.

I went back to the passenger side and tried the front door. It wouldn't open. Frustrated, I turned my attention to the passengers on the back seat. The rear door opened effortlessly. The man didn't try to get out. He looked at me incomprehensibly; he seemed to be completely confused. Despite the darkness in the car I could see that his head was covered with blood. I asked him if he could move. He mumbled something. As I bent closer to his face trying to understand what he was saying, I smelt alcohol on his breath. Was his inebriation or his injury that immobilized him and impaired his speech? I couldn't tell.

I gave up on him and turned my attention to the kids. I lifted the first one out of the car. She was a little girl of perhaps six, wearing a flimsy summer dress, and trembling from shock and/or from the coolness of the night. As I held her, she sobbed quietly while hugging my neck with one arm. Her other arm was hanging at an odd angle; either she didn't want to or couldn't move it. It must be injured, maybe broken, I thought. Carefully, I carried her back to our car and asked Irene to try to warm her up somehow.

A police car arrived with its light flashing. I accompanied the emerging officer to the wreck and told him about the dead person and the passenger - probably a woman - crammed under the dashboard. The policeman looked into the car with his flashlight and studied the shapeless pile for a few moments.

"It looks like a woman. She could be badly hurt, and we ought not to move her. The ambulance would be here in a few minutes." He said.

He moved to the other side of the car and cast only a glance at the dead leaning out of the open door. Then he scrutinized the wounded man sitting alone in the back. The driver who had stopped us had taken out the other kid after I moved the little girl.

Then the policeman went over to check the occupants of the other car. They, four of them, were still sitting in the car, injured - as they said - but conscious. The policeman reassured them that they would be taken to a hospital soon; although the ambulance on its way would have to take the most seriously hurt victims - those in the other car - first. But the policeman reassured the young men that he had called for a second ambulance.

Then, he turned to me:

"How about taking the little girl to the hospital in your car?"

I accepted the request. He gave me the name and address of the hospital and explained how to get there. In no time we were on our way; Irene with the girl in her arms in the rear seat. We had almost reached the hospital when the ambulance passed us with its light flashing. When we entered the 'Emergency Room', the injured woman had already been rolled to the operating room. The man with the bleeding head, and the second kid, a boy of about 10, were sitting in the vestibule. The teenagers arrived somewhat later in the second ambulance.

The nurse in charge, with a clipboard in her hand, tried to collect information from each injured person. She encountered no problem with the teenagers, but when she turned to the man with the head wound, he was unable to answer her questions. He just kept mumbling. Apparently, the nurse's main concern was to learn whether he, the woman, and the two children had health insurance (This was before Medicare).

Because the nurse had failed to obtain a satisfactory answer to her crucial question, the family members, except the woman in the operating theatre, had not been treated. The little girl was lying on a bare stretcher, trembling. The boy who seemed to be the least injured, sat sullenly on a chair.

Irene became very agitated.

"Why don't you do something to help that girl? Can't you see that she is suffering? Her arm is broken." She said to the nurse.

"Are you a relative of hers?" The nurse asked Irene in a sharp, annoyed voice. (She had learned earlier that we were just passers-by).

At last she called an orderly to take the girl to the X-ray room. We decided to wait for the results. I called our baby-sitter and told her what happened, and that it might take several more hours before we returned home. She accepted the news with resignation.

In ten minutes the girl was back; the fracture of her arm was confirmed. On returning to the emergency room, she was laid back on the bare, cold, plastic-covered stretcher. Irene exploded.

"There is not even a blanket in this damn hospital? Or you don't care?"

The nurse coldly answered:

"The patient has to be admitted before a bed with blankets can be assigned to her. But until the insurance issue is resolved, no member of the family can be admitted. Those are hospital regulations." They had generously made an exception with the comatose woman, presumably the mother, who was treated immediately.

The nurse continued haughtily:

“I had already asked for a blanket from the second floor! Since you are not relatives, please leave the emergency room. You can wait in the vestibule if you want.”

What could we do? Fuming, we decided to leave the hospital and drive home.

A day later there was a short news item in the Edmonton paper reporting the head-on collision.

‘One car was occupied by an out-of-town family of five, and the other by four local teenagers.’ The paper said.

The article also confirmed the death of the father, and reported that the mother remained in critical condition. The rest of the family and all occupants of the other car were released from the hospital after being treated for minor injuries. The cause of the accident was still under investigation.

October 1961.



## 49

### THE CANADIAN NICKEL

In 1961 the Diefenbaker government decided to repatriate the manufacture of Canadian five-cent coins. Until that time the nickel used for the production of the coins - although mined in Sudbury - had been processed into strips in the U.S., then sent to the U.K. for stamping and edge rolling. The Canadian Mint at Ottawa only performed the final facing of the two sides of the blanks. Now, the ruling politicians decided - as a nationalistic gesture - to render the manufacturing of this currency item a completely Canadian operation.

The three domestic nickel mining companies of the time, Inco, Falconbridge and Sherritt Gordon Mines Ltd. were asked to develop suitable processing technology and submit it for competitive bidding to the Royal Canadian Mint. The Research Director of Sherritt, where I was working at the time, decided to enter the competition with two process proposals. In the first, nickel powder, the company's commercial product, was to be compacted into coins, and sintered and densified. In the other process, the powder would be cold compacted into a "green" strip, then hot rolled, and finally stamped on conventional coining machines.

I was designated to pilot the second process. I would have preferred to work on the first alternative, which I considered more progressive and more efficient. It had an expected metal recovery of 95% plus. On the other hand, the strip method similar to the conventional practice that I was assigned was quite wasteful - it promised only a 65% metal recovery. I, however, had no choice in the matter.

Bob Black, my technician, and I started to work out the details of the assigned process. We had only a couple of weeks available before the bidding deadline. The crucial step was obtaining a set of dies for the stamping operation. The delivery of these item was ten days; leaving very little time for the subsequent steps. While waiting for the dies, we rolled the necessary quantity of nickel strip to the correct thickness tolerance and put together the edge rolling and burnishing set-ups.

Our luck was bad; the die delivery was delayed. We received it only two days before the Royal Mint's deadline. Setting up of the stamping operation, and adjustment of the parameters took a full day. But finally, on Friday noon - the day when the samples had to go out - the hundred plus coins were almost ready. Only the final annealing (softening) step remained. Bob took the batch of blanks to the rolling pilot plant to pass them through one of the annealing furnaces. A few minutes later he rushed back. He was very upset.

„Tibor, all three annealing furnaces have been shut down for the coming long weekend!"

The news was devastating. Those furnaces were normally held on temperature seven days a week. Nobody had advised us about this change in procedure. Softening the coins after cold work was a fundamental step - it just had to be done, but how?

„What about the sintering furnace?" I asked Bob.

„That is still running." He said.

„OK, throw the blanks in for ten minutes. That might do." I told Bob.

The annealing of nickel is normally carried out at 650°C for a couple of hours, but the sintering furnace operated at 1,200°C. I hoped that by using very short retention period we would obtain equivalent stress relief and hardness.

After this unorthodox annealing treatment the material was ready. We measured the hardness of the blanks, packaged 100 pieces and shipped them to Ottawa.

Many months passed with no word from the Canadian Mint. In the day-to-day concerns of our various research projects I had already forgotten about the coins. To my mind they were a hopeless proposition. Then we received a news flash:

„In the Mint's coining tests Sherritt's blanks, processed by 'Alternative B' (our process!), performed best among the alternatives submitted. Consequently, the Mint is inclined to base the future manufacturing of the five cent pieces on this process.”

Sherritt's management was jubilant. They hoped that the coinage business might open an important new venture for the company. The Research Director congratulated us. The next step was to provide a larger batch, 1,000 blanks, to the Mint for further testing.

Bob and I started to prepare the batch - more enthusiastically this time - using the procedure we'd employed previously. At the end of the week the batch was finished but the final testing gave shocking results. The hardness of the coins was ten points higher than that of the initial batch. That would clearly be unacceptable to the Mint. In the meantime, we had learned that the customer's acceptance test consisted of microscopically measuring the length of the whisker of the beaver on one face of the coin. It had to exceed a critical value, but the longer, the better. This formability was a direct function of the softness of the metal. My instructions were that we had to reproduce the hardness of the first batch, not one point less.

Bob and I recommenced piloting. We started with a new batch of nickel powder and closely controlled every process parameter. No luck! We ended up with the same high hardness. Then we tried to double-anneal the material. It lowered the hardness by a couple of points - an inadequate improvement. Our bosses became very annoyed. We repeated the whole pilot run - with the same results. The Research Director was furious.

„What did you do the first time? I want an explanation by tomorrow morning!” He ordered.

I set down with Bob to go through our notes once more. It seemed that we followed our recorded procedure to a T. But Bob suddenly remembered something.

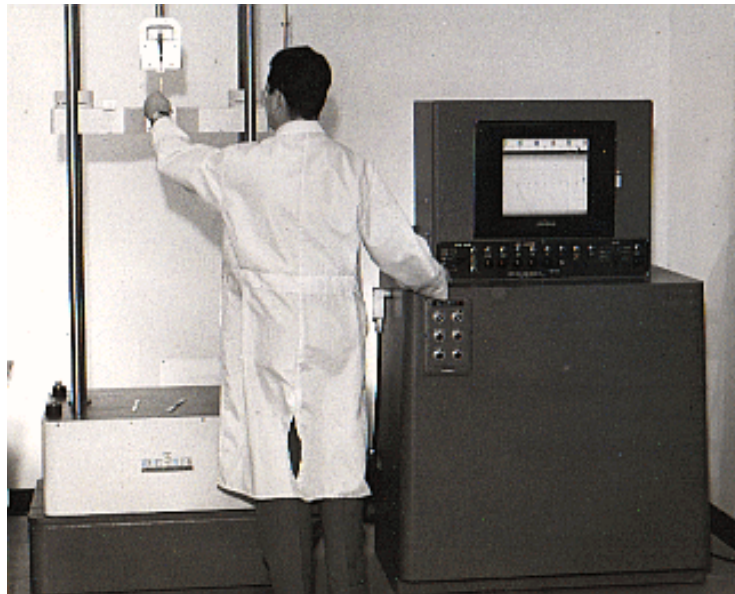
„Do you recall the problem with the shutdown of the annealing furnaces before the long weekend?” He asked me.

A bright light flashed in front of my eyes. On that notable Friday we were in a rush and didn't record this detail, believing to be unimportant at the time. During the months that had passed, I had completely forgotten about it. Until this moment we had used the standard annealing temperature in our attempts to reproduce the earlier batch of soft blanks.

„That must be it. Let's try ten minutes at 1,200 C.” I advised Bob.

Eureka! It worked! The material exiting from the high temperature furnace was as soft as the coins of many months ago. The second batch could be finished and dispatched to the Mint to the great satisfaction of my bosses. Everyone was smiling at us again in the Central Office.

However, now, I was requested to come up with the metallurgical explanation of what had happened to the metal at this, apparently critical temperature? Neither nickel nor other metals of similar crystal structure were known to behave like this. I was a chemical engineer, not a metallurgist I had to consult my metallurgical colleagues. No one in the research organization had an explanation. I began an extensive survey of the accessible literature but drew a blank. Almost at the end of my rope, I found an off-hand remark in an obscure scientific article, which mentioned that nickel, unlike copper and aluminum (metals with similar face centered cubic crystal structures), has a secondary recrystallization temperature.



*Metal Testing*

In a rush, I carried out a series of experiments. These showed that nickel grains grew moderately - as expected - with increasing annealing temperature until about 950°C. But just above that temperature they suddenly began to swell, reaching almost single crystal dimensions. There was a precondition, however. A small, critical amount of residual cold deformation was required prior to annealing. By sheer accident, this precondition had been satisfied by the stamping operation in our process.

The observation of the author of that article proved to be right: nickel underwent a secondary recrystallization. On comparing their structures, the difference in grain size of our soft and hard coins was striking.

The period of grace following the dispatch of the blanks to the Mint didn't last long. The Royal Canadian Mint notified us that under simulated winter conditions - at very low temperatures typical for January in the Yukon - the coins became brittle. If dropped on a cement floor, they shattered like glass.

We were surprised. Nickel is known for its softness. Its crystal structure is not prone to brittleness.

Back to the drawing board. We reproduced the Mint's experiment on some retained blanks and confirmed that the coins, if cooled to sub-zero temperatures, disintegrated upon modest impact. But why? Under the microscope, at very high magnification, I could distinguish a thin layer of deposit on some grain boundaries. That, I thought, was the cause of the brittleness. What could that film be? This all took place years before the invention of the scanning electron microscope, a device that made the analysis of such layers feasible. Comparing various metallographical samples at hand, I concluded that the film must be composed of nickel sulphide, a trace residue that diffused to and concentrated on some of the grain boundaries during recrystallization.

My findings were received with annoyed disbelief by the management.

„Do you realize Tibor - said the Research Director - that our nickel has the reputation of being the purest on the market? This is why it's used in the manufacture of super alloys. Now, you came up with this ridiculous suggestion that the metal contains detrimental impurities. You probably - inadvertently - oxidized the nickel during your processing, and that is what we see.”

I knew that it was not the case but I had to follow the suggestion of the big boss and carry out some tests in which the samples were intentionally oxidized. The structure obtained was quite different from that of the Mint material. After repeated arguments, the director finally agreed to my proposal and ordered the pilot plant to produce a batch of nickel powder with really low

sulphur content for us to test. The method used was too expensive for commercial applications but it provided nickel with no measurable traces of sulphur.

Blanks made from this metal didn't display brittleness at low temperatures. My point was proven. However, this meant that the nickel used in the manufacture of coin blanks had to be desulphurized prior to densification. After extensive further testing Bob and I devised an elevated temperature sintering treatment in hydrogen at a high volume flow rate. It did the trick. The sulphur was removed from the nickel and the coins were no longer brittle.

Within two years all Canadian nickel blanks were produced by Sherritt, and in five years, coin blanks for six other countries including Holland, Hungary and South Africa were also produced. A new plant was constructed for this single product. 'Sherritt's Mint' extra soft nickel coin blanks became well known internationally. However, by that time I wasn't working for Sherritt anymore.

The company duly patented the process - specifically the high temperature desulphurisation and the high temperature annealing - in Canada and in other, major industrialized countries. The co-authors listed on the patent were the Director of Research, his Assistant, the Head of the Pilot Plant and me. Bob Black was not named as a co-author. The company's obligation (required by Canadian law) to pay me one dollar, as nominal compensation for patent authorship, has never been honoured.

December 1961.

P.S. Further coinage development

'Sherritt has supplied blanks to the Royal Canadian Mint for their 5 cent piece since 1961, and the 10, 25 and 50 cent coins that were issued in 1968 to replace the country's silver coins. Pure nickel coin blanks and minted coins are supplied to various overseas costumers as well. The capital investment in the mint facility exceeded \$64 million.'

"Enriching Earths Riches" Sherritt Gordon Publication, 2006.

'The rising price of nickel forced the 5 cent coin to be changed to cupro-nickel in 1982.'

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia., 2005.

'Sherritt Gordon Mines Ltd. Modified its coinage processing facility at its Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, refinery for its contract with the Royal Canadian Mint to produce blanks for the new bronze-coated-nickel \$1 coin.'

Enc. of Chem. Proc. And Design

Edited by John J. Mcketta 1989

'Westaim Corp, a spinoff from Sherritt, processed 3,500 t nickel powder for coinage stripin 1996.'

Metal Powders

Edited by J.M. Capus 2000

'In 2000 all Canadian coins below \$1 were changed to steel with copper (1c) or nickel (5, 10, 25 and 50 cent) plating.'

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, 2005.

## 50

### THE STEAK

We got up late - it was Sunday morning. The temperature outside was still chilly, - 25°C, but that seemed warm after a week of deep-freeze weather, when the thermometer hovered at or below

- 35°C, not an unusual phenomenon in Northern Alberta in February. We had no program for the day except to attend a supper at our friends' in Edmonton.

After lunch, in order to benefit from the 'mild weather', we decided to go skiing - cross country skiing by today's definition - in Elk Island Park. The snow was crispy and we enjoyed the stillness of the open bush-country. This time we didn't see any wildlife, but we found an elk antler, dropped by an eight year old bull at the end of the mating season. I tied a rope to its tips and transported it on my back - rifle like - to the car while Irene carried Peter in a well insulated backpack. Later I mounted the top part of the antler on a plaque, which still decorates the den. The ski excursion took only a few hours allowing plenty time for the planned drive to the city in the evening.

In the meantime, our friends, Alex and Ági, had a similar idea of going out in the afternoon. Their improvised plan was to give us a surprise visit in the country. They packed up the meat bought for supper and drove to our place at around 1.00 p.m. When they found the door of our townhouse apartment unlocked (we never locked it), they entered, trusting that we were nearby. Alex placed the meat they'd brought in the fridge, and they settled down to wait in the living room.

After an hour of boredom (we didn't have a TV), they decided to go for a walk around the block to pass the time. On leaving the apartment, Alex automatically set the doorknob on 'lock' before slamming it shut. They weren't outdoor type and weren't properly dressed for a walk either. In half an hour they were back, cold and annoyed. They wanted to enter the apartment but now the door was locked. We were obviously still not home.

The only thing left for them to do was getting into their car, turn on the engine and try to keep warm while waiting. In no time Alex lost his patience, and at before 3.00 p.m.. they left for home.

We returned soon after. When we tried to enter the apartment, we found the door locked. This was very puzzling. We never locked the doors, and consequently we never carried keys with us. Hopefully, I went around the block to try the other door. To my relief, it wasn't locked. After putting the skis away and undressing, Irene opened the fridge to get milk for Peter. A strange package lay there. It was meat - and not a cheap cut either. It didn't take long to figure out what had happened.

We decided to return the surprise. Irene prepared a salad. We took it and the uncooked meat, and drove to Edmonton without calling Alex and Ági.

At 5.00 p.m.. we were at their place, and having better luck, we found them at home. Alex was in a very morose mood. He considered the Sunday ruined by the useless trip and the loss of his steak diner. He would not have admitted that the whole incident was of his making, though he must have felt this. Ági, on the other hand, was relieved to see us. She had already become resigned to the idea that there would be no Sunday supper for them.

The steak, through the concentrated effort of the two female cooks, turned out to be excellent. All that travelling in the arctic weather made us hungry, and made the meat tastier.

February 1962.

## 51

### STAMPEDE

The Northern Gate of Elk Island Provincial Park wasn't far from Fort Saskatchewan where we lived at the time. Few visitors used the gravel road connecting the town to the park. Tourists and Edmontonians preferred the southern entrance to the park, the one closer to the city, which was paved. Consequently, the wildlife of the fenced-around reserve was concentrated in its northern part of the park where the animals were less disturbed by traffic.

Irene and I liked to go there on Sundays - both summertime and wintertime. We followed the animal tracks, either on foot or on skis, as the season demanded. We often saw bison, moose, and elk, and occasionally coyotes. There were about three hundred buffalo in the park and they were usually dispersed in small groups, 4-6 animals. Although it was said that at certain times of the year the buffalo congregated in larger groups, we never saw one.

One summer afternoon we drove into the park. Not far from the entrance we turned off the gravel road into a dirt lane. The path ended abruptly in a meadow. I stopped and parked the car at the dead end. Irene decided to remain near the vehicle to sunbath, while I put Peter, who was two years old at the time, into a piggyback seat, and began a bush-whacking hike.

The landscape was typical northern grassland: tall grass with few bushes, copses here and there, interspersed with many ponds. These bodies of water varied considerably in size. Some were only 15-20 feet across, while others were half a mile wide. It was captivating country to hike in. The sun was warm, and there was sufficient breeze to keep the mosquitoes away, at least in the more open areas. The black fly season was already over, and there were no other annoying pests around.

Peter liked these excursions. He usually rode quietly on my back. Sometimes I even forgot about his presence while I was busy finding my way through the rough terrain. At about a kilometre from the car I was trying to circumnavigate a medium size pond when I heard a deep rumbling sound in the distance. I couldn't figure out the source of the throbbing noise. It didn't seem to be of mechanical origin, like that made by some kind of vehicle - but it was also unlike any natural noise I knew. As it grew more intense, it became obvious that the racket was coming right toward us!

Instinctively, I hurried into a nearby copse of birch trees located at the edge of a pond to find some kind of refuge. I still couldn't figure out what the cause of the unusual low roar was. Then I saw a row of dark shapes emerging in the distance. It finally clicked. It was a herd of buffalos stampeding straight toward us! I had never seen a herd of any size in the park, much less one stampeding. The animals were running close together, forming a dark wall as they approached us. Something or somebody had spooked them, and now they were fleeing for life, it seemed.

I hurriedly glanced around. The thicket, where I was standing, was small by area. The trees were 4-5" in diameter, large enough to deter any bison with a mind to run through them, I hoped. There was nothing more substantial around, and anyway, there was no time to try to run anywhere, as the herd was rapidly approaching.

It was an awesome feeling to watch these beasts grow larger and larger as they closed in on us. They seemed to aim straight at our grove. Why did they have to pick my small spot in this wide-ranging grassland? It was just not fair!

The gap between the beast and my grove was rapidly diminishing. My heart was pounding. What if the animals just continued and charged through the trees. They would trample us to death, or the broken trees would crush us. I sprang behind the largest tree. It stood near the edge of the pond, and looked the safest spot.

As the herd kept coming, the beasts crushed small brushes like matchsticks. That sharp cracking noise added to the general thumping of the feet and rasping of the dry grass. A few feet away from the edge of the thicket, the solid wall of approaching beasts suddenly broke up and separated into two flanks. One group tried to pass on the far side of the pond a bare 25 feet away where we stood, while the other flank ran around the other side of the thicket some 30 feet away.

I watched them in awe. At such close quarters the most astonishing thing that I saw was that the animals didn't seem to run, but to bounce like rubber balls, without ever touching the ground. Their legs were so thin compared to the large bulk of their bodies that they were practically invisible in the grass.

On our left, some animals were unable to negotiate the turn around the water. They hopped right into the middle of the water with tremendous splashes. The water must have been shallow because they bounced out of it without losing any speed.

It was such a sight, and I didn't have a camera, although I doubt that I would have had the self-presence to use one even if I had.

Then suddenly, everything was over. The herd was gone, and the noise subsided. I was still under the spell of the spectacle. I couldn't budge. I went over the events in my mind. I tried to estimate the size of the herd. I saw at least twenty animals passing only a few feet from us on the left. That was probably less than half of that flank of the herd. A similar number must have passed on the far side of the thicket also. Therefore, the total herd was at least one hundred strong. Whew!

Peter started to stir on my back. In the big excitement I completely forgot about him. But now he came to life.

„Paci, sok paci” (Horsy, many horsy), was his enthusiastic comment.

He must have enjoyed the spectacle. I don't think many two-year olds have been exposed to such a phenomenon.

When I began to feel composed enough, I walked back to the car. The highlight of the day was over.

Irene told me that she also heard the rumbling and took refuge in the car. But she didn't see the buffalos themselves.



*Buffalos in Elk Island Park*

June 1962.



## 52

### HEAVY SAND

The Bodos lived in the townhouse next to us in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. Frank and I both worked for Sherritt Gordon Mines; he in the Engineering Department as a design engineer, and I in the Research Department as a research engineer. Their younger daughter, Judy, was of the same age as our Peter, just over two.

One summer day Frank and I undertook to install a sandbox for the children between the back doors of our townhouses after we had discussed the issue with our respective wives. We made a frame, laid it down, and only had to fill it with sand.



*Judy and Peter at the age of two*

Outside the town - not very far from us - there was a sandy tract of land. We intended to get our fill from there, free of charge. We put two metal garbage cans of standard size in Frank's station wagon, and drove to the place, parking the car right in the field.

We removed the two cans and filled them to the rims with loose sand. Grabbing the handles, we tried to lift the first container into the rear of the wagon. We couldn't budge it. No problem, we decided. We tipped the cans and placed them in the open end of the car. Then we began to shovel sand into them. That was to save us the trouble of lifting the heavier than expected loads.

When the cans were full, we got into the car; Frank started the engine and stepped on the accelerator. The car didn't move. He tried it again. The same thing happened. We got out to check the cause of the problem. We were surprised to see that the rear wheel housings of the car were sitting solidly on the wheels and stopping them from turning.

This was the first time that we began to ponder the task we had undertaken.

The specific weight of silica, the major component of any sand, is 2.3 tons/cubic metre. We both knew that. One garbage can had a volume of about 0.1 m<sup>3</sup>, and loose sand is about 75% dense. Hence, one container must have weighed about 160kg. No wonder we couldn't lift it. It was now easy to see that the two cans weighing 320 kg (700 lbs) were above the load capacity of the wagon's rear springs, and caused the car's body to sag on the wheels.

We looked at each other sheepishly. Two engineers and neither of us had foreseen the problem.

Chastised, we tipped and partially emptied the cans, until the wheels of the station wagon were free to rotate. We could finally move on. One load would suffice two small kids - we decided - and we didn't return for a refill.

The kids greatly enjoyed playing in the sandbox. Unfortunately this wasn't the case with their mothers. Our wives became very sullen about the whole affair after an unforeseen problem surfaced within hours of inaugurating the sandbox. The kids, as they went in and out of the house, carried sand on their clothing and shoes, which then dropped off on the kitchen floor, living room carpet and furniture upholstery. Our wives, for some unfathomable reason, didn't appreciate the sudden increase in their housecleaning requirements. Consequently, we were told - in no uncertain terms - to get rid off the sandbox. Being good husbands, we emptied the box the same day. We spread the sand over the gravelled parking lot. Then we dismantled the frame.

The sandbox adventure wasn't a wasted effort however. It impressed indelibly in me the basic engineering principle: plan first, execute later. That was worth something.

July 1962.

## 53

### SWIMMING IN THE ATHABASCA

On our way to Swan Hills in Northern Alberta we followed an unpaved, dusty, country road, which on the map seemed to be shorter than the provincial highway. The traffic, as on all these northern roads, was extremely scarce.

After lunchtime the blue sky began to cloud over, and a gusty wind came up. A summer thunderstorm was approaching. Soon, heavy raindrops began to sputter on the windshield. In no time the sprinkle turned into heavy downpour. The windshield wipers could barely cope with the celestial water splashing on it. At least, there would be no more dust - I thought.

The rain stopped after a while. By that time the road surface had become quite slippery. I had to drive with extra care. As we descended a hill, the car began to slow down. I stepped on the gas but we continued to decelerate. In no time the engine stalled, and the car came to a halt. I couldn't imagine what had caused the problem, and got out of the vehicle to investigate. I found the four wheelhouses - the gaps between the tires and the fenders - packed solid with mud. I tried to dig the muck out with my hands with little success. The mud was gluey clay, and had the consistency of half-set concrete. I called Irene to help while I got the tire wrench from the trunk to facilitate the digging. It took good half hour to free all the wheels.

To continue on this muddy track looked hopeless. I remembered that about a kilometre back we had crossed a hard-surfaced road. I looked at the map to see where that road went. It seemed that the gravel road might also take us to our destination, although by a big detour.

I turned the car around. We got only halfway up the hill when the engine stalled again. The wheelhouses were packed once more. We had to face the fact that we were stuck there. We would be forced to wait until the road had dried up and become passable again.

I looked around to see where we could camp for the night. We were in the northern bush country of spruce and deciduous trees and thick undergrowth - not an ideal tenting ground.

Unexpectedly, I heard a vehicle approaching. It was a pickup truck with three teenagers in the cab. They stopped to see what our problem was. When I explained our predicament to them, they started to laugh.

„Sir, in this country you need a car, not a British toy.” One of them remarked.

Our vehicle was a British Austin with a 40-HP engine. I reluctantly had to agree with him.

After having their laugh the young men got out of the truck and attached a tow chain to our 'toy car'. We all got into our respective vehicles. The young driver stepped on the gas. His wheels began to spin. The 'toy car' turned out to be too heavy for the pickup truck. Not surprising, considering that he was trying to pull the Austin - with its four wheels locked - uphill, on a slippery road. I started up our engine to add more power. That didn't help. As soon as I released the clutch, my engine stalled.

We had to find another means to augment the horsepower. If technology fails, there is always brute, human force as a last resort. Four of us, two of the young men, Irene and I, started to push the car while the truck pulled it. Finally, the assembly began to move. The progress was very painful. In no time we looked like pigs. We were sweating and covered with mud from head to toe. After a number of stops to allow us to catch our breath, we finally made it to the gravel road.

We stopped and looked at each other. We were almost unrecognizable under the mud cover. I thanked the guys for their help, and they left without saying a word.

Irene and I dug out the mud from around the wheels once more - for the last time I hoped. We cleaned ourselves as well as we could, and were on our way. Driving on solid surface was such a joy that one could properly appreciate it only after such a miserable experience in the mud. A couple of hours later we reached and turned onto the provincial highway that led us in the proper direction. Soon we arrived at the bridge crossing the Athabasca River. I stopped in the middle of the span. One didn't have to worry about the traffic on this deserted highway.

The mighty Athabasca was only about a hundred metres wide at this point. Both its shores were covered with dense bush. A gravel spit started at the foot of the bridge and extended perhaps 150 metres downstream. The river made a U-turn around it like around the lower half of an imaginary letter 'S'. This meant that the water was flowing in opposite directions on the two sides of the spit. Further downstream, along the left loop of the same 'S', the dense shore cover resumed. Farther down, at the top of the 'S', the shore changed into a very steep bank, which stretched as far as one could see. The opposite side of the river was rimmed with unbroken, dense bush.

The shadows of the afternoon were getting longer. We had lost at least two hours in the mud, and two more hours on the gravelled detour, and we, as well as our car, were completely covered with slime. We decided to camp right there, on the spit. I drove down onto it. After a general washing and cleaning session we pitched our tent on the gravel bar.

It was high time for settling in because the sun was ready to go down and the mosquitoes had begun to become fierce. They were coming at us in waves. As a last outdoor activity, before escaping into the shelter of the tent, I wanted to have a quick swim in the river. It had to be a quick dip because the water was cold.

My plan was to swim around the gravel spit. I asked Irene to meet me with a towel at the end of the gravel before the bush began. I stripped completely and stepped into the stream. After a couple of steps the water was still knee-deep but was flowing with such force that it swept me off my feet. Surprised, I began to swim. Before I'd realised what had happened, I was in the middle of the river, and the current, as it swerved around the tip of the spit, was sweeping me toward the opposite bank. I definitely didn't want to end up there. I turned toward the spit and began to swim with all my strength as fast as I could.

It turned out to be not fast enough. I realized that I would be carried beyond the gravel shoal before I could reach the shore. My travelling speed seemed to me that of an express train. Now, even the possibility of landing on the bush-covered section preceding the steep bank became doubtful. Landing there and climbing the steep bank looked utterly hopeless and impossible.

If it came to that, I would be forced to swim across and land on the right, bushy side of the river. However, trying to return from there through the dense bush, in darkness and without any clothing to protect me would be suicidal. The millions of mosquitoes would devour me alive for sure.

The third alternative - to stay in the cold river until I reached a clearer landing spot - wasn't a valid choice either. The next road crossing was the Slave Lake highway, 100 kilometres downstream. Until that point it was continuous bush country with no human settlement.

In desperation, I renewed my efforts toward the left shore. I noticed a big tree ahead of me with a branch hanging low over the water. I succeeded in steering under it, and by concentrating all my strength; I kicked myself up and grabbed at the branch with both hands. The current forced my body up and stretched it out horizontally on the surface of the water and stressed my arm muscles almost to the breaking point. By hanging onto the branch as for dear life, I tried to inch myself closer and closer to the shore. Upon reaching it, I finally dropped into the foot-deep water. I was utterly exhausted from the effort.

My trouble was not over yet. Now I had to fight my way back to the gravel spit. Entering the bush was out of question. I had to remain at the edge of the river and wade upstream. Since the current became strong in two or three feet from the shore, and now I knew how dangerous it could be, I kept grabbing the branches of the bushes for safety, as I walked against the flow. Some of the prickly shrubs hurt my hands but I didn't pay any attention to them.

Finally, I made it to the gravel. Irene was standing there, frightened. She had witnessed my desperate struggle with the stream.

In the tent I contemplated the shocking incidents of the day: getting stuck in the mud, then being swept away by the river. Considering that at that moment I might still be swimming ten miles downstream, if not succumbed to cramps from the cold water, I was really lucky to be in my comfortable sleeping bag.

My former mental picture of the Northern bush country - as a strange but peaceful land - changed drastically.

August 1961.

## 54

### BEAR ENCOUNTERS

In the sixties bear feeding was a favourite tourist pastime in the National and Provincial Parks. The bears were addicted to it, and they spent most of the daylight hours on or near the park roads. Some actually became a dangerous nuisance, which in due time forced the authorities to outlaw the practice. Belatedly, it was also realized that the feeding was harmful to the long term survival of the bears.

#### A Nosy Bear

In the summer of 1961, we travelled from Banff to Jasper on the old highway. On the ridge overlooking the Athabasca Icefield, I pulled into the viewing point to take a picture of the glacier. We were the only car in the parking lot. As I got out of the car, camera in my hand, a brown bear appeared from the bush. It ambled over to our car looking for handouts, completely ignoring me. Irene, sitting inside the Austin, could not satisfy the bear's demands. We kept our food supplies in the trunk. The animal, frustrated by the lack of food, walked around the vehicle and checked each window. None of them yielded any nourishment. Upset by the lack of success, the beast suddenly climbed on top of the hood. Perhaps, it only wanted to have a better look into the car, or maybe it knew from experience that such a move jolted the startled occupants into a more generous frame of mind.

The bear didn't look fully-grown but still must have weighed at least 150 pounds, a rather abnormal load for a car hood. Fortunately, in those years, the steel gauges used in car manufacturing were several points heavier than the minimum required for the duty, and the lid, although buckling a couple of inches under the animal's weight, seemed to be able to support the beast.

After taking a snap picture of the bear on the top of the car, I began to shout and wave my arms, trying to scare it away. The animal cast an ugly look at me, and then reluctantly decided on a temporary retreat. It jumped off the hood, but remained near, on the other side of the car. The lid regained its original shape with a loud click. I tore open the car door and jumped inside.

The bear seeing the irritating person disappear from view, decided to reclaim its position of choice on top of the hood. The sheet metal buckled again. After such repeated strain, I expected the enamel to peel off like sunburned skin. Irene and I tried to scare the beast off by waiving our arms inside the car. The bear was of course smart enough to know that our dumb show behind the glass posed no danger to it. The animal just kept on watching us through the windshield, pushing its not very friendly face right up against the glass. I blasted the horn. This didn't have the slightest effect on the animal. I started the engine. The bear didn't mind it. Then, as a last resort, I began to back out of the parking lot. The bear tried to balance itself on the moving vehicle, which caused the dent in the hood to shift like a painful grimace.

Finally, the animal had enough and jumped off the car, leaving only its muddy paw marks behind on the sheet metal as souvenir.



Upon returning home, I didn't wash off the footprints. They decorated the lid until the fall rains made them to fade away. In the meantime they provided an excellent illustration of our vacation stories.

### **A Busy Bear**

The following summer we were camping in Waterton Lakes National Park. One day we decided to drive up to a glacier lake located well above the tree lines.

While climbing the seemingly never-ending steep grade, our Austin began to display her antipathy to the alpine adventure - the engine began to overheat. It was not an unusual or unexpected event. This product of the superior British car industry suffered from shortcomings in any kind of weather. On cold days the engine didn't start; during hot spells and driving uphill it overheated; on rainy days the windshield frame leaked; and the carburettor could chock up any time. The car would probably have been trouble free if rested permanently in a garage, but in those years we didn't have one, and I couldn't accommodate the natural sensitivity of our capricious toy.

On this trip we still had some more climbing to do; therefore, I choose to improve the car's performance by removing the thermostat from the cooling line. This measure increased the pipe's cross-section, and hence the flow of the cooling water through the system. I had used this remedial solution several times before, and considered myself an accomplished mechanic, easily able to carry out the job.

When I noticed a suitable spot on the side of the road, I pulled over. It was a clearance in a pine grove, pleasantly cool compared to the sun-drenched mountain road. I drove in and stopped in the centre of the grassy spot, which was not bigger than a small house lot. I got out my tools, lifted the hood and began to dismantle the thermostat housing. Peter was peacefully sleeping on the rear seat, while Irene reposed on top of a large roadside rock from which she could enjoy the scenery of the green valley below.

Suddenly, I heard a distressed cry from Irene. I looked up and saw her frantically pointing at something behind my back. I turned around. There was a brown bear at a distance of not more than fifteen feet from me - its flank toward me, and head low in the grass. I froze with apprehension - the beast was too close for comfort. However, the animal didn't seem to be paying any attention to me. It was moving at a deliberate pace, rummaging thoroughly and diligently among the blades of grass for grubs or seeds, I couldn't tell which. After standing motionless watching the beast for a few minutes, my initial alarm began to subside. It became evident that my presence didn't bother the animal, it was too busy foraging. Anxiously, I returned to my own task while keeping a close watch of the bear's movements from the corner of my eye.



At the meantime Irene kept both of us under her surveillance and even took a picture of the bear. Later she said that both man and beast appeared to her to be so totally immersed in their own activities it was as if the rest of the world didn't exist.

By the time I finished working on the engine; the bear had reached the tree line across the clearance and melted into the forest.

### **A Panicky Bear**

In September of the same year we were moving from Edmonton to Vancouver. We had Cila, our cat with us. She was very pregnant, and spent most of the time sleeping peacefully in the car's rear window.

The highway through Yoho National Park was deserted. The tourist season was over, and the easy life for the bears had come to an end. As we proceeded on the desolate road, I noticed a black bear emerging from the forest and running toward us down on a grassy slope. It had probably heard the car coming and wanted desperately to meet the potential food source. I slowed down and then stopped.

The bear, a full size beast, probably a male, approached us. Upon reaching the car it stood up on its hind legs. Pushing its nose against the rear door window, it tried to peek inside.

At this instant Cila, sensing something unusual opened her eyes. She found the brute face of the huge beast that she had never seen before facing her from a mere three feet. The sight must have terrorized the poor cat. Her instinct of self-defence switched into overdrive and made her explode in a violent reaction. All her hairs instantly stood on their tips, which doubled her size. At the same time - her claws fully extended - she threw herself with lightening speed toward the face of the bear. The cat hit the pane of the side window with a loud thump and fell to the floor of the car. The presence of the glass pane between them may have saved the bear's eyes from being clawed out.

However, the bear didn't realize the demise of the attack. The instant at which the ball of sheer fury blasted toward its face, the beast span around and took off, running toward the forest where it disappeared without ever looking back.





Cila, still double her normal size, re-occupied her previous place in the rear window. But she would not sleep anymore. For the rest of the trip she kept an alert watch over the passing landscape, checking for any possible danger. After her heroic and highly effective stand she was probably readier than ever to confront any beast of any size.

September 1962.

## 55

### LAKE OKANAGAN

After a long drive from Montana we reached our planned day-end destination, the Okanagan Lake Provincial Park in British Columbia. Unfortunately, we found the campsite full. This was bad news. There were no other camping facilities between Penticton and Kelowna, and the day was too advanced to proceed any further. Another possibility, crossing the lake in our kayak and camping on the far, uninhabited side, looked unattractive because of the strong wind and the large waves.



*On the Lake Okanagan*

After a lengthy discussion Irene and I opted for crossing and decided to make it in two trips. On the first, I would transfer all the camping gear, and on the second, I would take her and Peter who was three years old at the time. This way the boat wouldn't be too heavy and would ride high on the waves. The lake was only two-three kilometres wide at this spot - not a great distance.

We assembled and loaded the kayak, and I put up the mast and rigged the small jib to aid my solo paddling. The wind was too strong to use a full sail. I didn't have a life jacket. I believed that the kayak was unsinkable due to the buoyancy air-tubes running along both sides. In any case, I considered myself a sufficiently good swimmer to make it to the shore from any point on the lake.

When I reached the open water, I saw that the jib alone would provide sufficient power; no paddling was required. The waves weren't excessively high, although, from time to time, one washed over the deck and the watertight spray cover easily shed it. Despite the gustiness of the wind, the foot-operated rudder kept the loaded boat on course. The crossing turned out to be uneventful.

Reaching the other side, I landed in a sheltered cove protected from the wind and waves by a rocky ridge. I unloaded the boat on the sandy beach, and started back.

When I reached open water, I encountered difficulties right away. The bow of the empty boat was too light and stuck out far above the water. The gusts of wind kept throwing it sideways. In order to hold the kayak on course, I had to keep straightening it with strokes of the paddle. But I could not concurrently hold both the jib rope and the paddle, so, recklessly; I wrapped and tied the control rope around my wrist.

The gustiness of the wind increased. My struggle to keep on course became more intense. I had to pull harder and more frequently with the paddle to readjust the bow. At about one third of the way across the lake I happened to draw the paddle too roughly and it snapped in two with a loud crack. I was dismayed - this was completely unexpected and ominous. I had stupidly left the second paddle on the shore. Now, my safety option, switching from sailing to paddling, disappeared. I had to depend on the jib alone. I stuck one half of the paddle under the spray cover, and continued my steering efforts with the other half.

I was about halfway across when a strong squall lifted the bow too high, and instantaneously - before I could react - overturned the kayak. I found myself underwater, desperately tearing off the kayak spray cover and kicking myself out of the boat. As I was trying to swim to the surface, I was jerked back by the jib rope tied to my wrist. In panic I struggled to free myself. I was running out of air. My lungs felt like bursting. Finally, the string gave way; I popped to the surface and gasped for air.

When I collected my senses, I began to act more reasonably. I dived under several times and dismantled the mast and disconnected the jib. Now, I could tip the kayak upright. Although it was full of water, the buoyancy tubes kept the deck a few centimetres above the surface of the lake. I collected all the loose parts, jib, mast and half paddles, and stuck them in the covered, front end of the boat. Finally, I climbed in. The boat sank some more. It became a submarine with nothing protruding above the water except my upper body - at least most of the time. When a larger wave came, it buried me completely, including my nose and mouth; so I had to synchronize my breathing with the rolling of the waves.

I didn't have a bailer but it wouldn't have helped because each passing wave would have refilled the boat faster than I could have bailed it out. I began to propel my 'submarine' with the help of the broken paddle and by keeping the boat facing the shore. I hoped that the wind would push me in the right direction. I couldn't judge if I were making any progress or not. I didn't know the time - I'd lost my watch when the boat turned over. I began to feel very cold. Sitting in waist-deep water, and getting drenched by the waves from time to time was draining away my body heat faster than it could be regenerated.

A couple of hours must have passed. It was getting dark. The lights of the campsite and the beams of the cars passing on the highway above it helped me to keep headed in the right direction. I was still at a fair distance from the shore although definitely closer than at the moment of the accident. I realized that my general condition was deteriorating. I was exhausted and very cold. Occasionally, an unexpected wave engulfed me when I was inhaling. This choked me, and brought on fits of very painful coughing. I was tempted several times to quit the boat and to try to swim to shore, but that would have meant the loss of the kayak, our treasure. Later on, I had to give up on the idea of swimming - as a last chance. The danger that I would develop cramps in the chilly water, that would have meant certain death in my weakened state, became more acute. I decided to hold out in the boat.

This misery seemed to never end. I kept on paddling with excruciating monotony but my senses began to fail. I was trembling uncontrollably. More hours passed. Then finally, the shore loomed ahead of me in the darkness. There were some figures moving about. One had a flashlight: its beam directed toward me. I collected all my remaining strength and intensified my paddling to reach them. When I was only a few meters from the shore, I dropped out of the boat. The water was shallow but I was unable to stand up. Somebody waded in to help me up

and half-carried me to the shore. A couple of others grabbed the boat and pulled it on shore. Irene was there to hug me.

The man with the flashlight was a ranger. He led me up to his car and drove Irene and me to his nearby home. There I found Peter in the care of the ranger's wife. I was given some dry clothing to change into, and an extra blanket to wrap around me. The woman served me hot tea.

Irene told me how she had watched my sail through the binoculars. The white patch had suddenly disappeared from sight. She couldn't see the boat or me anymore. She rushed to the ranger's house for help. Neither he nor any of the campers had a motorboat. The ranger called the Penticton Police who promised to send a launch to search for me. However, their town was more than 30 km away. It would take a couple of hours for the launch to get here. By that time it would be dark. The chance of finding a capsized boat or person in the stormy water looked slim.

As we were sitting in the ranger's home, he went out from time to time to check for the searchlight of the arriving police boat. Finally, he caught sight of it. He rushed to the shore to signal them with his flashlight, and inform them to stop the search and return to their base. They had made the rough trip for nothing but were probably relieved that they didn't have to spend the night on the stormy lake looking for a dead body.

Meanwhile, I continued shivering and feeling unwell. I just couldn't re-warm myself. But it was time to leave the ranger's house and find a motel to spend the night. I was in no condition to drive. Luckily, in the first town, Peachland, we found a place with a vacancy, and we took the room. I collected all the spare blankets to warm myself up. In vain, I continued to shiver.

Although I didn't know the medical term for it at the time, I obviously had a severe case of hypothermia. After sitting in the chilly water and being washed over by the waves while exposed to the blowing wind for more than four hours, my body temperature dropped to a near-critical point. I think if I had stayed perhaps half an hour longer in that kayak I would have succumbed to hypothermia, lost consciousness and drowned.

After several hours of lying awake and shivering, I finally dropped into a deep slumber. Upon waking up in the morning, I still felt completely spent. I had barely enough strength to get up. Irene drove us back to the campsite. It was now a clear, warm day and the wind had stopped completely. There were no angry waves with fuming white crests anymore. The lake looked as peaceful as a frog pond.

We had to cross to the other side of the lake to collect the camping gear. Since there was only one paddle left, the question of me paddling or not, didn't arise. The kayak with the three of us on board slid across the lake like a docile pet, so different from the jerky beast of the day before.

On the other side, it felt so peaceful and serene in the sandy cove that we decided to stay a few days. I needed the rest. I just lay on the warm sand for many hours, doing nothing. Until this moment I could not have imagined that such idleness would satisfy me.

We used the kayak for many more years after this incident - for about twenty years actually - however, I never did sail it again. The painful memory of that crossing of Lake Okanagan remained a powerful deterrent.

August 1963.

## 56

### BLACK ICE

On Sunday morning the road from Vancouver to Bellingham was almost deserted. It had rained during the night, but now the weather was clear and nippy. It felt freezing. The three of us, Irene, Paul and myself, were on our way to Mt. Baker to ski. Our friend, Paul, was driving his new Datsun. He maintained a moderate speed; the car was still in the running-in stage.

A faster car passed us. Since there was no traffic in the opposite direction coming toward us, the driver remained on the passing side for a while before deciding to return back to the right lane. During this manoeuvre his car started to fishtail. He was several hundred feet ahead of us, and there was no immediate danger that we would hit him. Still, Paul automatically stepped on his brakes.

Instantly, our car also started to skid. Paul came to realize, too late, that this stretch of the road was covered with ice thin enough to be invisible but very treacherous for driving. It was the dreaded 'black ice' of the Lower Mainland.

Paul desperately tried to regain control of the vehicle by jerking the steering wheel left and right but it didn't help. After several fish tail motions the car suddenly swerved sideways and one side lifted off the ground. Then, it continued on two wheels toward the open country. There was no ditch along this section of the road to stop the vehicle - still balanced on two wheels like a bizarre bicycle. We entered the fallow, muddy field. Inside the car, I had the impression that an invisible tread was holding us in this unreal position, and if that broke, we could either land back on four wheels or tip over. In those agonizing seconds, while waiting for fate's decision, I think I aged at least a decade.

Finally, Damocles' sword descended. The car slowly, almost deliberately, rolled over, and amid a cracking and screeching din it came to a halt upside-down. I found myself hanging by my lap belt from what used to be the floor but was now the ceiling. Due to this queer position I became completely disoriented. Paul, not having his safety belt on, got wedged between the steering wheel and the ceiling of the car underneath him. Irene who had been sitting in the back seat behind me - also without a safety belt - rolled over to the other side of the seat, and was now lying on the ceiling behind Paul.

Irene's first reaction was to reach forward to check on me to see if I was still alive. But since it was Paul who was lying in front of her, she began caressing him while asking if I were all right. In the meantime I was busy trying to disengage myself. I came to realize that the engine was still running, and the racket over our heads came from the spinning wheels. I nervously shouted at Paul to turn off the ignition. He tried, but couldn't locate the key because of his disorientation. In an upside-down car normal reflexes - like reaching for an accustomed item - lead nowhere.

I was still hanging from the ceiling. My attempts to find the buckle of the safety belt were unsuccessful because I instinctively reached down to undo it, and I was actually searching for the buckle around my neck. Finally, after I had succeeded mentally reorient myself, I found the buckle and unlocked it. Instantaneously, I fell on my head. My whole body weighing me down aggravated the impact with the uncushioned steel ceiling. The blow momentarily knocked me out, and so, I became the only casualty of the accident.

Meanwhile Paul succeeded in turning off the ignition. The fire hazard diminished and the bewildering noise stopped.

Irene, after giving up on caressing Paul, was the first to get out of the car, accompanied by the back seat. She could never explain how she did it, since pulling the rear seat out of a car is not easy even under normal conditions. Now, she opened the doors from the outside and helped Paul and me to climb out.

All three of us - out in the open - tried to calm down. I was hurting from the big bump on my head. The other two were unharmed. We walked around the vehicle to see the damage.

The car was resting on the ski rack fit with three pairs of skies. How could this contraption remain in place while the car rolled over on top of it? I couldn't imagine. What was even more surprising was that the skis appeared to be undamaged. Due to the springiness of the wooden skies, the car frame hadn't been deformed or stressed during the turn-over. This explained why Irene could open the doors without any problem. There were no dents on the mud-covered side of the car but the windshield was cracked. That was the only visible damage, and a growing pool of oil under the car as the oil drained out from the oil pan through the engine head.

In the meantime, a car stopped on the shoulder of the road. Four young men got out of it and approached us. After they had reassured themselves - with some disappointment - that there were no human casualties, they turned their attention to the car. They decided to start a salvage operation without delay, and without consulting the owner.

Standing on one side of the car, they began to push it with a big heave. The car rolled easily to its side but there it stopped. The young men continued to rock it back and forth while the poor car emitted painful screeching noises. Paul's face turned even paler. It was evident that the rocking was hurting his new vehicle far more than the accident had. But the effort worked. After a final concentrated push from the good Samaritans, the vehicle landed back on its four wheels.

The unsolicited work crew tried to push it toward the road. However, they failed. The car wheels became stuck in the mud. The four helpers gave up on further rescue efforts. They left us visibly pleased with their accomplishment. They promised to call a tow truck from the first gas station.

In about half an hour the truck arrived. By that time, several more cars had stopped, and a little crowd of spectators had assembled around us.

The tow truck was larger than the common half-ton vehicles. The driver attached a cable to the Datsun, and winched it onto the road in no time. After checking under the hood he added a few cans of oil to the engine.

The critical moment arrived: would the car start and continue to run? She did, like a charm.

Now Paul surprised us by suggesting that instead of returning home - the normal course of events after an accident - we should continue to the ski slopes.

"Let's not have this accident spoil the whole day. The insurance will pay for the damage on the car but not for a ruined day. We still can have some fun." He said.

I looked at Irene. She seemed to hesitate. I was definitely tempted by Paul's reasoning. Consequently, despite the cracked windshield, we proceeded to Mt. Baker and had a good day of skiing after all.

December 1963.

## 57

### ODD CAMPSITES

Selecting a camping spot in darkness and setting up a tent without lights are not recommended practices but on long trips they are sometimes unavoidable.

#### **A Sandy Spot**

We had just entered the long causeway when the sun dropped beneath the horizon leaving only a red glow over the calm sea. I was worried that the camp gate we were trying to reach would be closed by the time we got there. The silly rule of locking state parks at sunset was observed only erratically, so one never knew.

Fort Pickers Campsite, where we were heading, was on an island on the Gulf side of Northern Florida. We planned to spend a few days there, so it was important to reach it on time. However, our luck had run out. We found the barrier down and padlocked with nobody around.

I decided to walk in and ask the ranger to do us a favour and let us in. But after walking down the road for a while and still not seeing any light ahead, I changed my mind and returned to the car. It looked more practical to set up the tent on the sandy shore of the causeway, and to return to the gate in the morning. Nobody would travel on the dead-end road and bother us at night.

It was already getting dark when I turned the car around. In the dimness we couldn't see much but I finally found a level area where I could pull off the road without bogging down in the sand. Setting up the tent was another matter. The pegs didn't hold in the loose sand. We walked down to the seashore, which was only a short distance away, to look for a more suitable spot. Halfway down there was some kind of a signpost, which looked a convenient spot to tie one corner of the tent to. At the edge of the water we also found some driftwood which could serve as anchors for the other corners.

We carried our camping equipment down, and without the use of any light, set up the tent. Finally, tired and sleepy, we retired for the night.

In the morning I got up early and stepped out of the tent to look around. The sea was completely calm, the temperature already felt pleasantly warm - idyllic for camping. Then I looked at the sign on the top of the post holding our tent. It said:

**DANGER!**

**QUICK SAND!**

**KEEP OUT!**

My spirits sank. Our footsteps of the night before were all over the sand bar. Was it really that hazardous, or we were just lucky?

We dismantled the tent and tiptoed back to the car in a single file trying to step into our footprints of the night before.

### **A Grassy Spot**

We were in the backcountry of Virginia. We couldn't find the campsite selected from on the map. The country road we were following lacked any signs and any human settlements. It was getting dark. We decided to set up the tent beside the road as soon as we could find a suitable spot. There was practically no traffic on this back lane this time of day. We were planning to continue our trip early in the morning anyway.

There was unbroken forest on both sides of the road delaying the realization of our plan. However, after a while the seemingly never-ending forest disappeared along the right side of the road. In the light of the high-beams one could discern a rather nice, level, grassy stretch. There was no ditch, and I could easily pull into the clearance. We set up our small tent in front of the car and retired to bed. We were quite tired and probably slept like logs.

I was awoken by the sound of a passing vehicle. There was light outside but it felt very early, and I was still half asleep. Irene and Peter continued to slumber undisturbed. A moment later another vehicle passed. The back-lane deserted during the night seemed to be quite busy now. But strangely, the noise came not from the left where the road was supposed to be, but from the right. I felt confused. How could I become so disoriented?

I got up, lifted the flap and looked out. The car was right in front of me and the lane was on the left as it was supposed to be. Sticking my head further out and looking in the opposite direction I was stunned to see the pavement of another road just a few feet from us.

I got out and realized that we camped in the 'V' of two roads meeting: the gravelled lane we arrived on, and a paved, larger highway with the early traffic.

I woke up the family and we moved off as soon as we could, before the highway patrol arrived and started to question our unorthodox camping practice.

May 1964.



## 58

### HOTEL BRUSSELS

At the end of our five-week vacation, whose last stage was a ten-day stay in Hungary, we rejoined our charter flight group at the Vienna airport. We were to fly to Brussels, and after a one-day stopover, on to Montreal. SABINA Airline was to cover the expenses of the stopover.

In 1964 the Communist Government of Hungary had given amnesty to the political refugees of 1956. In the following years very few people trusted the regime enough to take the chance of visiting the country. However, when those few safely returned to the West, and told of no political harassment, the number of overseas visitors increased rapidly. Irene and I also decided to visit our relatives and to see the country after a ten-year exile.

For the purpose of the trip we joined the 'Hungarian Businessmen's Association of Montreal', which we had heard of, but didn't know any of its members. In 1967, charter flights were still new phenomena, and one had to be a de-facto member of the leasing group to qualify. The HBAM was apparently an association created for the sole purpose of facilitating charter trips to Hungary. The primary objective was to provide cheap airfares, and secondly, to provide some kind of official sounding status for the participants - something, it was hoped, that would impress the Hungarian authorities and relatives.

Our traveling companions, whom we first met at the Montreal airport, were a strange collection of 'businessmen'. They were mostly overweight and overdressed, especially the women. The additional weight of the ladies' custom jewellery, tinkling noisily with the slightest movement of their fat arms, made me worried about our chances for a successful takeoff. The group, apparently well acquainted with each other (they were probably supporters of the same soccer team), behaved loudly and arrogantly. They desperately wanted to give the impression of successful people who were on a charity mission to visit their unfortunate relatives behind the Iron Curtain. We left them behind at the Paris stopover with great relief.

On the return flight from Vienna, the same group had a different appearance. The arrogance was mostly gone. The 'businessmen' looked like they really were: lower middle class or working class couples who had to watch their hard earned pennies. By this time the women weren't wearing flashy jewellery. They had either sold it in Hungary or given it away as royal gifts. There were no Liz Taylor hairdos to be seen either. I even wondered if some of the women had combed their hair that morning. The men's Hawaiian ties and loud sport jackets were apparently packed away. They were now in short sleeves, tired looking and short tempered. Playing the rich American uncle for five weeks was apparently exhausting, and now they had hangovers.

On our arrival in Brussels the airline representative told us that one didn't have to check out the baggage if one didn't want to. It would remain in special storage until the next day's connecting flight. He also advised us that due to the recent heat wave it was very muggy in the city; jackets and cardigans weren't called for even in the evening. So, most of our companions boarded the airline bus without even a handbag. I decided to make an exception, so we picked up our suitcases. They would enable us to change after a promising, even if expectedly hot tour of the city - I thought.

The airline bus took us to the Palace Hotel. This was a first class establishment located adjacent to the Jardin Botanique, right in the center of the city. After checking in, Irene, Peter and I dropped off the suitcases and immediately exited for sightseeing. After long hours of

exciting but exhausting walking in the heat, we returned to the hotel for supper. We found a large number of our group crowded in the vestibule, in front of the restaurant door. They looked lost and very irritated. We learned from them that the dress code of the dining hall required jackets; items, which most of our 'businessmen companions' had unfortunately left behind in their baggage at the airport. Now, they weren't allowed to enter the dining room and enjoy the complimentary supper of SABINA.

After expressing our sympathy - as insincere as it was - we ascended to our room, showered, dressed for supper and returned to the restaurant. The crowd in front of the door had diminished somewhat. The few men, who had jackets, generously removed them after supper and passed them to their hungry companions in the vestibule. The generosity allowed 'the poor' to upgrade themselves to the dress code requirements. I could only imagine the hilarity among the restaurant staff when they saw the same small size sport jacket reappear on fatter and fatter individuals as the evening wore on.

We sat down in the nice, cool dining room, and were ready to order. The waiter asked us for our room number. This number instantly gave away our status as SABINA clients. The waiter pointed out the rather limited number of items on the menu available to us. When I asked for a bottle of wine, the waiter politely refused the order saying that the airline didn't cover alcoholic beverages. I reassured him that I would pay for the drink myself. Wine was then so inexpensive in Canadian dollars, and we were flush anyway, unlike so many of our fellow travelers. However, the garcon insisted on not taking any wine order. This time his voice sounded rather haughty. Perhaps, he had already had some unpleasant arguments with my countrymen on the subject. Regardless, I found his attitude demeaning, and became annoyed. I demanded to see the maître d'. This distinguished looking gentleman had been standing near the entrance, but by this time, noticing the problem arising at our table, was on his way toward us. The waiter, to avoid any confrontation with his boss, hurriedly called for the wine waiter and disappeared.

When the soup was served, I noticed that Peter hadn't received a napkin, a serious faux pas in any first class restaurant. I told Irene and Peter not to touch their spoons but to sit still. We just kept looking at our plates. It took no time for the maître d' to reappear beside our table. He apparently kept his eyes on us.

„Y a-t-il un problem, Monsieur?" He asked me.

„Mon fils n'a pas de serviette!" I answered.

The maitre d' apologized and rushed away. A minute later he returned with a napkin. He tied it around Peter's neck and politely said:

„Voila. Maintenant tous sont en ordre. N'est-ce pas?"

Just to make sure, he remained near our table for the rest of the dinner. The waiter, realizing the delicacy of the situation, did his best to provide perfect service, which obviously also included serving the wine.

But that was only fair. A strict observance of the rules of etiquette should apply to both parties, not only to the clients of SABINA.

July 1967.

## 59

### CONEY ISLAND

I checked into the Manhattan hotel before noon. The Standards Committee Session I had come to attend was to start with a dinner at 6.00 P.M. I had the whole afternoon to myself. It was a hot summer day, so I decided to visit Coney Island, where I had never been, and to swim in the ocean.

An hour later I arrived at the subway station. The famous boardwalk stretched for miles in front of me. On one side of the endless platform was a large amusement park. On the other side was a wide, sandy beach. The park was closed at this time of the day, and the beach was also almost deserted. The few sunbathers - mostly families with children - lay on blankets scattered on the freshly combed sand. One couldn't see garbage anywhere - rather surprising in this city. The sea looked calm, not a ripple on its surface - very inviting in the heat of the early afternoon.

'Where could I change?' I wondered.

I noticed two policemen on patrol entering the otherwise empty boardwalk. I walked over to them and inquired about the availability of a changing facility. They told me to go to the far end of the amusement park. I'd find a bathhouse there.

I located the place, paid the entrance fee, and entered the gate. Inside the establishment, there were two rows of cabins, which enclosed a shady garden. A row of open showers stood guard in the rear. The place was completely devoid of people.

I changed, picked up a towel, and walked out to the beach. There I joined a dark-skinned family, probably Puerto Ricans, to whom I could trust my towel when I went swimming. I spent the next few hours alternating between lying on the warm sand and swimming in the equally warm sea.

In the meantime more and more people arrived on the beach. They were all dark-skinned families, their colour ranging from cocoa brown to coffee black. The beach seemed to be a destination for coloured families. My tame, Canadian tan looked unduly white compared to those around me. However, nobody seemed to pay any attention to me.

At four o'clock it was time to leave. As I opened the gate of the bathhouse compound, a scene quite different from that I had left at noontime confronted me. The place was now crowded with dozens and dozens of people - all men - leaning against the cabin doors, or strolling in the garden. All were undressed. Most of them had their towels around their waists, but many were completely naked. The majority were white, with only a few dark or black skinned one here and there.

The idea hit me like lightning: I was amid a gay community.

I began to feel very uncomfortable. As I hurried toward the showers at the far end of the grounds, passing along the row of cabins, I felt all eyes fixed on me.

Only a few showers were occupied, each surrounded with dozens of onlookers. Here, everyone was naked - those who showered and those who were watching them.

I got under a showerhead myself. I had always considered my body average in every respect, therefore had no problem stripping in front of men or women. But now, I became terribly self-conscious. I was reluctant to take off my swimming trunks under the spray, a course I would normally have considered silly.

After spending the shortest possible time washing off the salt, I dried myself in a hurry, and started to walk brusquely toward my cabin. At the curve of the pathway I turned around and glanced back. My suspicion proved to be correct. Three or four men were following me. One, only a few feet behind me, was a big, muscular black guy who looked like a weight-lifter. I started to panic. I almost ran to the cabin and entered as fast as I could. I carefully locked the door behind me.

After dressing hastily, I tried to spy through a crack between the boards of the door. I saw the huge body of the black guy leaning against the post right in front of me. I could see only a vertical strip of his body, with his penis hanging from its bushy nest, its skin even darker than the rest of his body. They say that black males are more generously endowed than whites and in this case it definitely seemed to be true.

I was too unnerved to leave. But after several, anxious minutes, I finally forced myself to open the cabin door and walk out without looking at the black Hercules. As I hurried toward the gate - and only there - I glanced back. He was still leaning nonchalantly against the post, facing the now empty cabin.

On the boardwalk I finally succeeded in composing myself, and began to review the whole episode in my mind. I began to wonder what had been real and what was the product of my over-wrought imagination. No one of that crowd touched me or even said a word to me. Had I really been followed? I wasn't so sure anymore. People moved apparently aimlessly around as I had observed upon entering the place. What had I presume could have happened to me? Getting raped? Now the whole idea seemed absurd and ridiculous. I realized that I had been harbouring all kinds of deeply seated, stupid prejudices, which popped up suddenly, but forcefully, in this unexpected situation. I felt embarrassed by the whole affair and tried to forget about it.

However, the intentions of those two policemen who had directed me to this place bugged me. They must have known the nature of this bathhouse. It was in their beat. Why did they send me there? Did they think that I was one of those? Or hearing my funny accent, they decided to play a joke on a lonely tourist? I would never know.

August 1970.

## 60

### MENU MILANESE

The descent from the Swiss Alps took longer than I expected. We arrived late in Milan, in the middle of the evening rush hour. Our progress to the center of the city was slow but steady as we followed the frequent 'C' (Centrum) signs and moved against the major flow of traffic. From the Duomo, which was the 'Centrum', it was another matter altogether. Right after passing the cathedral we became entrapped in gridlock. Sitting paralyzed amidst hundreds of cars would give us, I hoped, an opportunity to figure out the best route to the hotel we intended to stay at. I asked Irene to try to determine where we were at that moment on the city map held in her lap. She picked it up and studied it with increasing confusion on her face.

The evening temperature was still high; all our car windows were down. As Irene struggled with the map, a motorcyclist on a Vespa scooter, who could navigate with relative ease in the stalled traffic, pulled up beside Irene's window. The driver stuck his head into the car, and said something in a language I didn't recognize. On seeing our puzzlement the man switched to English.

"Sorry! Seeing your license plate I thought that you are from Denmark. Where are you actually from, and where are you heading now?" He asked.

"Oh, we are Canadians. We rented our car from a Danish firm but picked it up in Germany. We have never been to Denmark. Now, we are trying to find Hotel ..." I answered.

"First of all, it helps if you look at the map in the right way."

Saying this he reached in and pulled the map out of Irene's hand and turned it upside down. (No wonder she had problems with locating our whereabouts).

"As soon as the traffic starts to move, try to follow me, I will lead you to the hotel." The new acquaintance offered.

We welcomed his help, and as soon as the gridlock started to disengage, we closed up behind his Vespa. He soon turned into a side street, and a few blocks further along he stopped in front of a large building with an imposing facade.

"This is the hotel you are looking for. If you don't find it to your liking try this address!"

He handed Irene a business card, and took off on his motorcycle before I could even thank him.

We looked at the facade of the hotel across the street. There were marble steps leading from the sidewalk to a wide, glass door. In front of it two attendants in livery stood under a green canopy. The establishment looked very American and expensive, hinting at a price out of our range. Both Irene and I were apprehensive about our selection.

"Let's see the card what the motorcyclist gave you." I said to Irene.

The card carried the name and address of a pension. Searching for it on the map, I soon located the street - not very far away. We drove there and found the pension on the third floor of an apartment building. It contained several, nice, clean rooms, and was run by a pleasant, young English woman. We liked the place, its price was reasonable, so we took a room.

A few minutes later a man entered the apartment - our motorcyclist guide. He, a Dane, was the husband of the English woman. Finally, we had our chance to thank our Good Samaritan for his help.

After settling in, our immediate task was to find a place to eat. It was late; Peter and Andy were starving and loudly complaining. The English lady suggested a trattoria - some kind of eatery - nearby.

"It caters to local families. It is in a back street. Not many tourists find their way to it. But its food is good and inexpensive."

The eatery was much bigger than I expected. It was full of people including a number of noisy children. A helpful waiter found a free table for us and left a menu. The list was in Italian, full of strange local dishes which we didn't recognize.

The waiter, who didn't speak a word of English or French, couldn't help us. He went to look for help, and returned a few minutes later with a generously tall and round middle-aged lady. The waiter introduced her as the proprietress of the establishment. She didn't speak English either but was determined to use alternative resources. She grabbed me by the arm and led me to the kitchen.

I had never been in a restaurant kitchen before. This one was a huge long room crowded with a lengthy row of gas stoves in the center and equally extended rows of preparation/serving tables along the walls. There were many attendants around - chefs, helpers, servers, and dish-washers. Everybody was very busy, or at least became busy when the boss entered the place.

The signora, still holding me triumphantly by the arm as her captive, took me to the line of stoves. Lifting the lids off some of the huge, steaming pots, she spooned out samples with a ladle, and gave them to me to taste while watching the expression on my face. All her selections tasted good but some were better than the others. Upon reaching the end of the row, she gave orders to one of the employees in rapid vernacular. Then, she led me out, back to our table while still holding me by the arm.

The super turned out to be excellent. We obviously had the best dishes the place offered.

July 1971.

## 61

### ZUPPA DI PESCE

We had just visited the slumbering Solfatara crater of bubbling mud pools and steaming fumaroles. It was an interesting but exhausting day.

On the way back to Naples, the view from the Pozzuoli road carved into the side of the costal mountain was magnificent. On our right, far below, stretched the azure water of the Bay of Naples. On the horizon one could see the greyish-green outlines of the Sorrento Peninsula with the island of Capri, while far ahead of us the singular cone of el Vesuvio loomed.

However, we weren't in the mood to enjoy the sight on this return trip. We were trapped in the middle of a multi-kilometre long Italian traffic jam. During the last hour, we had barely inched ahead a kilometre on the congested road. The absence of fresh draft made the air in the car almost intolerably hot. We were toasted alive under the still fierce evening sun. At this snail's pace there was no hope of arriving at our hotel for hours.

I finally reached the limit of my patience, and at the first opportunity turned off the highway. I decided to look for a restaurant in one of the small fishing villages scattered along the shore, hoping that by the time we finished eating the traffic would have picked up. At least our tempers would be more tolerant at full stomach - I thought.

In a short while we found a cosy, little eatery near the edge of the water. Peeking through the open door one could see a few tables, and a few locals congregated around one. The menu chalked on a blackboard outside the entrance listed only half a dozen items. Their prices, running between 500 and 800 liras, appeared to be quite reasonable. We entered the place without taking a closer look at the list.

The owner/waiter wearing a white apron greeted us with overbearing cordiality while talking in rapid Italian. He dusted off a table with his napkin and was anxiously anticipating our order. Tourist families were probably rare birds in this off-the-beaten-track place.

"Do you have Zuppa di pesce (The renowned seafood soup of the region)?" I asked him.

"Si senor, Si!" He answered happily.

We ordered four portions, and in no time we were savouring the delicious, rich dish, which comprised all kinds of shellfish and assorted fish. Eating it with the homemade bread filled our stomachs rapidly. We didn't need any seconds. The only problem we encountered with the soup was trying to pry open certain tasty clams, which remained shut even after boiling.

At the end of the meal the patron placed the bill in front of me. I looked at it, and couldn't believe my eyes. The total was over 6,000 liras, more than twice what I expected. I called the owner. He came to the table looking visibly uncomfortable.

"There must be a mistake." I said to him. "We only had four soups."

"No, no. Este correcto." He called me to look at the menu outside the door.

I stepped out and glanced at the blackboard. The last item in the hand-drawn list was a nicely written 'Zuppa di pesce' followed by a hastily scribbled and partially smeared L 1,450. The lettering of this number was strikingly different from the rest of the neatly calligraphed menu which had been carefully drawn by a scholarly person, probably by the owner's young daughter

who had been watching us with keen interest during the supper. It seemed quite obvious that the owner had hastily 'upgraded' the original price of our soup after he had received our order.

I was upset. Who likes to be taken for a sucker? But I couldn't do anything. The patron kept insisting on the correctness of the bill. I paid the quoted sum with a sour face. I could express my resentment only by not leaving a tip, and by walking out without saying *arrivederci*.

The next evening we went to a fashionable floating restaurant on the historical waterfront of the inner city of Naples. The place looked several classes above the one of the previous evening. I expected that the prices would be accordingly steep. Due to this, or because it was early for an Italian supper, there weren't many people in the establishment.

We wanted to try the fish soup again, but this time I had carefully checked the price before ordering the meal. It wasn't exorbitant. When the aristocratic looking waiter dressed in white shirt and black tie delivered the meal, I asked him if he would demonstrate, without making a mess, the opening of those stubborn clams.

The waiter, in full cognizance of his professional importance, fished out a black clam from Peter's soup with a spoon and proceeded to force the blade of a knife elegantly between the paired shells. Something went wrong - the knife slipped and the shell ricocheted off. It made an impressive arc through the air and landed on the floor right in front of the waiter's foot. The distinguished looking 'garçon' nonchalantly kicked the clam under the table. Then he fished out a new one and proceeded to repeat the operation - this time with success.

I thanked him for the demonstration while we all tried to keep straight faces. Only when he left did the boys burst out laughing. The soup was excellent, a good match for that of the previous evening. The whole dinner, including a nice tip for the deft waiter, actually cost less than that memorable outing the day before.

July 1971.



## 62

### PARKING IN BARI

After entering Bari I pulled into the first gas station. We had just arrived from Naples after crossing the Italian peninsula. As most days on this trip, it was interesting but exhausting. Visiting Castello del Monte, a Norman castle, was especially fascinating. The towering walls of this massive octagonal fortress - in excellent preservation on top of a bleak, treeless hill far from the sea - demonstrated the incredible range of reach of the ancient Vikings.

Now, I needed to fill the gas tank for the last time before leaving Italy. In the evening at 10.00 p.m. we were to board the ferry to Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. We only had time for supper, and perhaps a quick walk in the old city. I gave my remaining tourist gas coupons to the station attendant. During our travels through Italy we had used these coupons which we'd purchased at a preferential rate upon crossing the border from Switzerland. In Italy the regular price of the gas was higher than that charged to tourists, but I hadn't bothered to find out by how much.

I told the attendant - in English - that I wanted the tank filled though I had coupons for only 15 litres of gas. He nodded, took the coupons and disappeared into the office. A couple of minutes later a second attendant came out and filled the tank. When he quoted the amount I owed, it sounded like too much. I protested, explaining that I had given coupons to the other guy and I was only going to pay for the extra litres. The Italian obviously didn't understand English; he kept insisting on payment. The gas station was a busy place, and in no time we were surrounded by a group of spectators. An argument exploding in two languages - in which neither side had the slightest idea what the other was saying - must have been entertaining. To my relief, a new arrival on the scene asked me in good English what the problem was. I explained it to him and he transmitted in rapid Italian to the attendant. The picture cleared up at once. The amount demanded was the true difference; it only seemed excessive to me because the difference between the regular and tourist prices was more than I thought.

I paid the bill, and we drove away. I remained upset for some time, bothered by the incident caused by my ignorance. Meanwhile, we entered the old city. Navigating the narrow, one-way streets of this medieval, walled-in town, where the streets intersected at haphazard intervals and random angles, was difficult. The loud, reverberating noise of the motorcycles speeding in the narrow lanes, pedestrians unexpectedly stepping into the traffic, hundreds of cars parking halfway on the pavement, halfway on the sidewalk made driving a nightmare. Soon I realized that finding a restaurant would be easier on foot, assuming that we could find a parking spot. We kept circulating in the one-way streets for some time before we located a slot large enough to squeeze into.

With great relief, we continued on foot. Upon penetrating further into the labyrinth of narrow streets, we finally located a nice little restaurant hiding in the vaulted interior of a medieval house where we had a pleasant dinner. At the end of the meal my thoughts returned to the car. Only now did I realize that in my agitated state I had forgotten to make a mental note of the parking spot we'd left the car. But we were four; the others would recall it for sure. Upon asking my wife and my two sons however, I learned that they didn't remember the car's location either.

„It has always been your business to find the car. Why are you asking us now?“ My wife protested with the concurrence of my sons.

I paid the bill in a hurry, and we entered the street. By now it was completely dark with only occasional dim streetlights here and there. The narrow lane was jammed with small, white, parked cars (the same color as ours). We began walking in the direction we'd come from - until the first intersection. There we were already at a loss. By which street had we arrived here? None of us remembered. We turned into one haphazardly. After failing to see our car during a walk of several minutes, we turned around and followed the other lane with similar results.

„This won't work - I said - let's go back to the restaurant and renew the search in a more systematic manner. Each of us will follow a different direction and in ten minutes we'll all return to the restaurant. By that time one of us will have located the car for sure.”

Ten minutes later we met - as agreed - but none of us had found our car among the hundreds of similar ones jammed in the dark, narrow streets. The situation looked desperate. In less than an hour we were to embark the ferry but we were still missing our car.

„If we fail to board the boat - for which we had made a reservation months ago - would we be able to get on the next one? I wondered. And what will happen to my mother who was supposed to meet us in Dubrovnik the following morning on arriving from Hungary?”

„Let's try to be logical!” - I told my family. „Each of us should try to think through what we did from the moment we left the car. Was there any landmark or anything else that came to your attention?”

Three blank stares were returned. Then Andy suddenly remembered something:

„When I got out of the car, you told me to find a trash can to dispose of a bag of garbage. There was none around but I found one not far away in a little park. I got rid of the bag there.”

„Eureka! That's it! We have to find that park and from there the rest will be easy!” I exclaimed with enthusiasm.

We began to search for the little park. In the old town of Bari parks were not common, and in a short while we had located the one we were looking for. The place would hardly qualify for the name of 'park'; it looked more like a small, empty lot with a few trees. However, it was a godsend landmark for us. From there, it was child's play (Andy's) to trace our steps back to our car. Finally, motorized again, we made our way to the ferry and left Italy with much relief.

July 1971.

## 63

### RENDEZVOUS IN DUBROVNIK

We rolled off the ramp of the ferryboat and slowly drove along the dock. A small crowd, mostly women, lined both sides of the lane. They were shouting: 'Zimmer-Zimmer' (room in German) and waving pieces of paper in their hands. These entrepreneurs of Tito's realm were trying to rent rooms to the arriving tourists to earn some real money in addition to their - usually miserable - state income. The shreds of paper contained their addresses.

Strictly speaking, theirs was an illegal activity. In the first place, these non-employees were not supposed to be inside the restricted area of the port. They must have bribed the guards. Furthermore, private enterprise wasn't officially sanctioned.

I didn't wish to use their services. Four years earlier we had rented a room in Zagreb from an old couple that spoke only a little German besides their native Croatian. Their dark apartment was cramped with moth-eaten furniture and depressing. Worst, the two ancient hosts were probably partly senile, because they could not fathom that not all foreign tourists were German speaking.

When they said something in German they were satisfied that they had fulfilled their part of the communication, and if the other party didn't understand what they had been said, that was the other party's problem. This attitude led to awkward situations what I didn't want repeated.

However, my determination wouldn't last long. At the port gate we had to stop. When we did, a young blond girl struck her head through the open car window and asked in passable English if we needed a nice place to stay. She had one. She was too pretty to be brushed off. I told her to jump in the back seat beside Andy and Peter. My excuse to Irene was that I wanted to thwart the pushy insistence of the other free agents.

The girl, Zora, turned out to be a college student who lived with her parents in a new apartment block above the bay. They had a comfortable room to rent - she said. Hearing that we were actually looking for two rooms because of the expected arrival of my mother, she assured us:

"You can have my room as well. I will stay with the neighbours."

The price she asked for the two rooms was reasonable. We accepted her offer.

After settling in, we went for a short sightseeing tour of the new city. We had to be at the railway station at noon, where my mother was supposed to arrive from Hungary. The rendezvous had been prearranged by correspondence months earlier.

The Dubrovnik station was the terminus: everybody had to leave the train. My mother wasn't among the descending passengers. We were disappointed. I checked the timetable. The next train from Zagreb was due at four o'clock in the afternoon. This would allow us to visit the municipal beach for a few hours of cooling down - it was a hot July day.

The swimming in the warm waters of the Adriatic Sea was refreshing; the boys especially enjoyed it.

My mother wasn't on the next train either. What could have happened to her? I was very worried. She didn't speak any language but Hungarian. There was a third long distance train that day arriving at 10.00 p.m. We went to meet that one also with similar lack of success.

Next morning I asked Zora to come to the station with us. As we didn't find my mother there, Zora enquired among the station workers if anyone remembered having seen an old woman - apparently lost - on the previous day? Nobody recalled any one. We had to accept the fact that my mother hadn't reached Dubrovnik. I hoped that whatever had happened to her, she would

be able to return to Hungary without problem. She was supposed to buy a return ticket as a safety measure - although the plan called for driving together from here to Pécs, my hometown.

Though very disappointed at not being able to meet my mother, we didn't want to lose any more time. After dropping Zora off at her home, we went sightseeing. We began with driving around the ramparts of the old city.

These massive, several-century old stonewalls encircled the whole ancient town. They were imposing in their excellent condition. At one point along the wall Irene asked me to stop and take a picture of a particularly splendid looking bastion. I - rather reluctantly - parked the car and got out to satisfy her request.

At this point a big tree partially blocked the view, so I walked further along the promenade to look for a better photo spot. Facing the ramparts I suddenly heard a voice behind me calling my name: 'Tibikém!' I turned around, and there was my mother sitting on a bench a few metres away. I rushed and embraced her.

In the car she recounted the tale of her trip.

On the train from Zagreb she had met an older, local gentleman who spoke Hungarian. After a number of hours of travel the train arrived at a large station where, according to her new acquaintance, it was to stop for 20 minutes. The man invited Mother for a drink in the station restaurant. She accepted it, grabbed her bag, descended from the train, and entered the building in the company of her acquaintance.

The man proved to be wrong about the schedule. Only a few minutes after they'd gotten off the train it pulled out of the station. Our two passengers were left stranded in the restaurant.

After the initial shock, Mother decided to continue her trip with the first local train - they were only a couple of hours from Dubrovnik - while the man opted to wait for the next express. When my mother arrived at the Dubrovnik terminus, at around 2.00 p.m., we were at the beach. Now, instead of sitting down and waiting she - inexplicably - left the station and walked into the city.

She returned only at sundown. Even then, she only remained at the station for a short while because she was worried about finding lodging for the night. Not far from the station she found a 'Zimmer' to rent.

Mother had given up hope of meeting us. As the only solution, she decided to return to Hungary with the next train. But this was leaving after lunch, so she took the short walk to the ramparts to pass the time. There we met by sheer coincidence.

So, the planned rendezvous succeeded after all, but I never again asked Mother to meet us outside her hometown.



*The reunited family*

*July 1971*

## 64

### THE VANISHED BUS

On the flight from Mexico City to Guadalajara we had met an American medical student who was returning to his foreign alma mater. He had recommended a small hotel to us, near the university, away from the tourist areas.

„This parador is clean, moderately priced, and your children (Peter 12 and Andy 7) will enjoy its good sized swimming pool.” He said.

The student was right. The hotel was very pleasant and reasonably priced thanks to the scarcity of foreign tourists in that part of the city.

A few days later when we were ready to move on, the hotel receptionist explained to me how to find the bus terminal and to pre-purchase tickets to Puerto Vallarta.

On the morning of our departure we took a local taxi. The driver spoke no English - so the helpful receptionist explained our destination to him. On arriving at the bus terminal we entered the building through the main door while a uniformed porter headed to a side door with our baggage. The place was busy with many busses and large, noisy queues, so it took several minutes before we located a bus marked Puerto Vallarta. There was no sign of the porter or of our baggage. We waited five minutes, ten minutes, nothing happened.

‘Could he be a thief in that uniform, and we were taken in?’ I wondered.

Finally the porter appeared dragging our suitcases. He was quite upset.

„This is the station for the locals!” He burst out. „I took your valises to the tourist terminal in the next building that the air-conditioned gringo buses depart from. Since I couldn’t find you there, I guessed that you ended up in this wrong, campesino station.”

I took a better look at our bus. The porter was right - the bus could hardly pass for an excursion vehicle. All its windows were rolled down or missing, and the passengers already sitting in it didn’t look like they were vacationing either. However, the company’s name on the bus’ side was the same as on our tickets. Obviously we’d gotten the right bus but I’d bought the tickets from the ‘wrong company’.

There was not much we could do at this point. I shrugged my shoulders.

„Look at all the savings we are making by travelling with the natives”. I said to my wife as we boarded the bus.

It was a slow, uneventful trip. The bus stopped in every village and at some points between. Locals were getting off, and even more were getting on. After several hours of watching the impressive moustaches of the men and the colourful dresses of the women, the trip started to lose its novelty. The boys became particularly bored and hungry.

In a larger village, high up in the coastal mountains, we pulled into a station. The driver announced a 15-minute stop - my Spanish seemed to improve with each stop. We got off and entered the building to look for food stalls to buy some tacos.

When we left the building - not more than ten minutes later - we didn’t find our bus at the curb where we left it. We couldn’t see it down the road either. It simply vanished. How could this have happened?

„It is more than obvious!” My wife exploded. „You misunderstood the driver’s announcement.”

She was obviously right. I tried to defend myself:

„But we were the only Norteamericanos on the bus and were sitting right behind the driver. He saw us leaving the vehicle. We also left our loose stuff on the empty seats. Our absence must have been obvious to the people sitting around us.”

„You always sound so logical” retorted my wife „but the fact is that the bus has gone.”

There was a policeman standing at the station’s entrance. I went to talk to him. To my surprise and great relief, he spoke English. After learning of our misfortune, he suggested to take a taxi and try to catch up with the bus. It couldn’t be far ahead, he asserted.

There was only one cab parking nearby - a suspicious looking vehicle of no distinct lineage that had obviously seen better days. The policeman explained the mission to the young and apparently eager driver, Carlos, and we took off leaving a blue cloud of exhaust behind. The vehicle must have been on autopilot because Carlos felt unrestrained and gesticulated wildly with both hands while trying to explain his strategy of the chase - he would cut through back lanes and take a local road straight up to the mountain pass ahead of us.

„The bus has to follow the longer, serpentine highway, and it also moves at a slower speed than my excellent car, so we should arrive at the pass ahead of it.”

If we had any doubts about the performance of his ancient vehicle, we were obliged to reevaluate our scepticism rapidly. We began to move at an astonishing speed over the gutted back lanes. If the car - and we inside - could withstand this torture for only a short while, the runaway bus would have no chance.

We were lucky. Our vehicle, puffing, coughing and smoking profusely, made it to the pass in one piece. However, as we stared down along the ascending highway, we couldn’t see any bus. There was no bus on the descending side of the pass either except perhaps far down on the mountain slope, we could see the roof of a moving object. It seemed to be covered with colourful items - baggage?

„It must be a bus - ours obviously. If only we could catch up with it.”

Carlos saw no problem. Ignoring my hesitance, he just stepped on the gas, and we plunged ahead. The dashboard had no speedometer, therefore I could not ascertain my feeling that we were making at least 200 km per hour. My wife - contrary to her basic nature - turned speechless. Even the children were completely quiet. I could not look at their faces because I was unable to take my eyes off the road ahead of us. The hungry looking ravine along one side of the road was ready to swallow us at any moment. The rock wall on the other side was equally menacing. We held on desperately to our seats - the car of course had no seat belts.

In the hairpin turns we slowed down - to about twice the safe speed - before the engine roared up again. Ear shattering metallic clatter accompanied the screeching of the wheels and bangs from underneath the car as the body - I was sure - began to disintegrate. In TV car chases you never hear noises like that.

After perhaps a dozen such turns, and many more grey hairs on my head, the rear of the bus came into view. In no time we were trailing behind it at a speed that now seemed ridiculously slow. Carlos started to blow his horn while gesticulating wildly with both arms. In Mexican it probably meant to pull to the side and stop. However, the bus driver wasn’t familiar with the local dialect, or he didn’t like to follow orders. He continued driving in the middle of the road.

Carlos repeated this performance several times - with the same result. Finally he lost his patience, and pulled out to the side to pass the bus. If the car had had only vertical dimensions and no width, it would have been easy. But the taxi was wide, at least a metre wider, it seemed to me, than the space available between the rock wall and the side of the bus

How did we make it? I still cannot fathom it. However, at last we were in front of the bus. My relief didn't last long. Carlos stepped on the breaks with full force. There was a tremendous screech emanating either from our car or from the bus - I couldn't tell which. Then we came to a full stop. I was waiting for the unavoidable impact of the bus crashing into our rear. However, a dead silence prevailed - the bus somehow succeeded in stopping without squashing us.

The eerie silence became almost more frightening than all the shouting, horn blasting and engine roaring a minute earlier.

When we recovered a little, we all got out of the taxi and approached the bus. I tried to open its door - it was locked. After some banging the driver finally opened it. His angry face looked completely unfamiliar to me. It dawned on me that this wasn't our bus. The passengers were mostly Norteamericanos - so I deduced that it was an express bus, the kind, according to the porter, we were supposed to take.

After we recounted our predicament, some passengers who were greatly relieved that this was not a holdup by local banditos, persuaded the driver to take my wife on until they caught up with the vanished bus.

I got back into the taxi with the children for an uneventful ride back to the village. I still had to pay Carlos but didn't have enough pesos, only traveller checks that he wouldn't accept.

He wasn't the only one. The village bank also refused to cash any check without the manager's signature, and he had gone home for a siesta. This wasn't a problem for our enterprising driver. He drove us straight to the manager's home to obtain the required signature.

Upon returning to the bank I got the cash. I paid Carlos the total sum that he had asked for and certainly deserved. He was very pleased - he had probably asked for twice the amount he expected to receive. His happiness was due not only to this monetary windfall - which must have exceeded his usual weekly earning - but to the great adventure that he had managed so well and so thoroughly enjoyed.

He drove away with a wide grin on his face leaving us in a cloud of blue smoke that looked less frightening this time.

A few hours later we took a local bus to Puerto Vallarta. Irene was waiting for us at the station. Her smile - the first one that day - showed me that everything had turned out all right.

As she recounted it, the express bus passed the lost one in one of the villages. It stopped to let her transfer. The driver of the runaway bus was surprised to see her dismount from the express bus. He didn't even realize that he'd lost us - which put a serious dent in my self esteem. All our loose stuff was still on the seats. Thieves apparently don't stalk local buses - they make an easier living among the tourists in Puerto Vallarta.

At the end - contrary to my prediction - our bus trip turned out to be expensive. However, we made an enterprising taxi driver rich, even if only temporarily, and gained an unforgettable experience.

As it happened, this was my older son's birthday - probably one of his most memorable.

June 1972.

## 65

### THE LOST WALLET

„Why don't we visit the amusement park instead?" Peter asked. „We've seen enough museums."

I glanced at the two boys. They were looking at me eagerly waiting for a reply. My wife shrugged her shoulders. She didn't seem to mind a change in plans.

It was early afternoon. We were standing at the gates of the National Museum of Anthropology at Chapultepec Park. Right next to the museum garden there was a large fair ground full of the tall steel structures of the various rides that had a magnetic effect on our boys.

„And why not?" I agreed. „Lets go over and take a look."

The grounds behind the park entrance appeared deserted.

„Opens at 19.00 hrs". The sign said on the gate.

A short family council ensued. If we stayed, the evening air would be quite chilly - Mexico City lies at an altitude of over 2,200 m. The boys wore only shorts and shirts. They would definitely need warm cardigans for the rides. Since we were far from our hotel, going back and forth to it would take the whole afternoon and tire the boys. The best solution seemed to be that I go back and pick up the things, while Peter and Andy visit the museum and wait for me there. Irene wanted to use this as a chance to go shopping. She would come back to the hotel with me and do some shopping there.

The boys happily agreed. Irene and I walked briskly to the Metro station. From the subway we took a bus to the hotel. The vehicle was only half full; we found seats in the back. Upon descending in front of the hotel I noticed with bewilderment that my wallet was gone. I distinctly remembered putting it back into my pant's pocket after I had paid the fare to the driver. It either fell out in the aisle, or on the seat, or someone lifted it from my pocket while we moved to the back of the bus.

The wallet contained only about \$20 worth of pesos, not a serious loss, but it also had my driver's licence in it - an indispensable item, since we had already reserved a rental car for the following day. We had planned to visit the Xochimilco Gardens outside the city.

From the hotel I called the bus company. After a long argument I persuaded the person at the end of the line to contact the terminal, the destination of our bus. Unfortunately, there was no report of any wallet found. As a last resort, I could go and find the Office of the Tourist Police, and report the incident. I knew this was hopeless but Irene insisted on it. The affair took hours. The police officer that entered my complaint promised that he would personally deliver the wallet when they caught the thief. He was sure that it had been picked from my pocket while I was walking down the bus aisle. The eager officer is probably still trying to catch the pickpocket - I have never heard from him.

I returned to the hotel at 6.00 p.m. exhausted. Now I had to find the children. By the time I arrived at the museum, it was getting dark. The gates were locked and there were no children or anyone else around. The street was completely deserted.

‘What happened to them? Where could they be?’



I found a cafeteria open in the next block but the owner just shook his head when I asked. He hadn't seen any gringo children. I became desperate. What could I do? There was a phone in the cafeteria and for lack of any better idea I called up our hotel. Irene, luckily, was in the room. She said that the boys were with her. They had shown up very hungry a few minutes earlier. I felt a huge stone lifting from my heart.

When I arrived at the hotel Peter related the afternoon's events:

„The museum closed at half past four. The guard kicked us out of the building and someone else chased us from the grounds. We were on the sidewalk when I saw a police car approaching. I ran to the middle of the street and waived it down. When it stopped, I asked the two policemen in the car to take us to the Metro station. From there I knew the way back to the hotel. The police were nice. They even gave us pesos to use on the subway. Since the stations have picture symbols (intended for illiterates but apparently helpful for tourist kids too) I knew where to get off. From the subway we walked to the hotel.”

Peter was 12 (Andy 7), but he handled the situation better than many adults would. I was very proud of him. What made this feat even more impressive was the sad fact that he had been struggling with diarrhea for a third week.

Due to Peter's medical condition and to the loss of my driver's licence, we decided to terminate our Mexican vacation three days early and return home. The boys didn't mind when they learned that we would fly first class - the only seats available - because it wasn't our scheduled flight.

July 1972.

## 66

### HELSINKI

The Hungarian and the Finnish languages are related according to linguists. During our trip to Finland I didn't find anything recognizable either in spoken or in written Finnish. The extraordinary length of most words in that language made even reading of street signs difficult. Many times it was easier to rely on the Swedish variant, since all signs are bilingual in Helsinki. Swedish has some similarity to English, and I'd also had more exposure to it during my numerous visits to that country.

In contrast to the languages, we found similarities between Helsinki and Budapest, e.g. the badly maintained sidewalks. They were full of potholes, which made a stroll, especially nighttimes, hazardous.

A more annoying likeness was, however, the mental attitude of its denizens toward strangers. The citizens of both countries presume - in contrast to Anglo-Saxon custom - that everyone is guilty until proven innocent. I had several occasions to validate this observation.

In Helsinki, the four of us - Irene, the two boys and I - took up lodging in a university dormitory turned into a hostel for the summer. The building was located in an apparently peaceful, affluent neighbourhood. From the vestibule - supervised by attendants 24 hours - one door opened into a reading room while others ran into short corridors leading to the sleeping quarters, three rooms on each branch. The corridor and the room doors had to be locked all the time, even if one was only passing through the vestibule to the reading room. This imparted a kind of Fort Knox atmosphere to the place. On one occasion when I forgot to lock the corridor door, I was strongly reprimanded by the attendant at the desk. My conduct could abet burglary.

One day we made an excursion to a renowned garden city near the capital. Coming back, we mounted the long-distance bus. I deposited the assumed fare on a tray beside the driver and the four of us moved further down the bus. Suddenly, I heard the shrill voice of the driver. He called me back and in a raised voice demanded more money. Obviously, I'd made a mistake but he, and now the whole bus, assumed that I'd tried to cheat. I paid the missing - trifling - amount with a red face. We hadn't travelled far with the bus when Andy became sick. I had to ask the driver to stop the vehicle and let us off. He didn't offer to return our fare or give us transfers to the next bus. Why would he? I was a presumed cheater.

The most annoying denigration happened weeks after we returned to Montreal. One day I got a message from the manager of the local bank where I had my checking account. He wanted to see me. I was surprised, I had never met him, and I wasn't aware of any problem with my account.

In his office the manager handed me a letter that had arrived from a Helsinki bank and was addressed to the manager of this Canadian bank. The letter stated that on such and such day, while cashing travellers' checks, I was paid the equivalent of US\$200 but I submitted only three \$50 checks, or at least they could not locate the fourth one. Since they didn't have my address but only that of the bank which had issued the checks, they were asking the manager to see to it that I remitted the missing amount.

I looked at the manager. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"A most unusual request." He said. "Our bank certainly doesn't wish to get involved in this problem."

At home I checked my trip records. It showed no extra traveller check on leaving Finland, reassuring me that I'd cashed four at that bank. I was really upset. First of all, if a bank teller cannot count to four, that's a problem between the bank and the employee. Secondly, how could the loss of \$50, a pittance for any bank, warrant the initiation of a recovery procedure in which a foreign tourist is accused of unethical conduct before his bank manager, and has his credit rating endangered.

I decided to disregard the letter and try to forget about it.

Not all our experiences with the Finnish mentality were negative. On one occasion I found the Finish mentality superior to the Hungarian, not to mention Canadian.

One morning, while still in Helsinki, the four of us, alongside with five or six locals, mostly men, were waiting for a city bus on a sidewalk. It was Sunday and the buses had run at long intervals. There was no traffic, neither vehicle nor pedestrian, in the street.

During our wait, a balcony door on the second floor of the building across the narrow street opened, and a completely nude woman stepped out, and started to hang some laundry on a short line. The balcony had an open iron railing allowing a complete view of the naked nymph. She was probably in her thirties, not a beauty and had an attractive enough body.

Everyone in the line-up looked up at her for a moment, and then turned away with obvious indifference. They rather kept their watchful eyes on the end of the street where the bus was supposed to show up. That is everyone, except me. I had a hard time stopping my gaping at her despite the nudging of Irene's elbow in my ribs.

Obviously, the moral standards prevailing in Helsinki concerning nudity - similar to those in the other Scandinavian countries - diverged greatly from those of Budapest, and even more from those of Toronto. In Finland, the sight of a nude female body, even in public view, was considered neither offensive nor shameful. And correctly so - I believe.

July 1974.

## 67

### IN THE FJORD COUNTRY

The side of the mountain above the tiny harbour wasn't as steep, and looked somewhat less formidable than the one towering across the fjord. There was actually a single lane road, typical for this part of the country, forcing its way up the incline. This was the route we had to take to reach Bergen where I was to return the rented car.

The single lane widened into two at certain, strategic intervals, but only for short stretches, to allow the passage of oncoming traffic. We had been told in the car rental office that a climbing vehicle always has the right of way, and a descending one has to stop in the passing loops, scan ahead, and proceed only if the stretch is free of ascending vehicles. By design, or by nature, the view from these spots was usually unobstructed which could not be said about driving on the twisting road itself.

As we ascended in our Volkswagen-bug, we passed a few cars at these loops waiting patiently for their turn to descend. Suddenly, at one switchback of the road, we came head on with a large bus. I stopped at once, but the big monster seemed not to take notice of us and continued straight at us, the driver gesticulating wildly, implying that we should move back, out of his way. Eventually, the bus halted inches from our bumper.

From the forceful gestures of the bus driver I guessed what the locals later confirmed - busses have the right of way in all cases, ascending or descending. Unfortunately, our rental agent hadn't mentioned this detail when I discussed my travel plans with him.

I put the gearshift in reverse and began to back away from the bus. The next bypass loop was couple of hundred metres behind us, and the retreat felt endless. Not being used to driving a Volkswagen I had a hard time staying in the middle of the lane. As I struggled with the steering, the impatient bus driver followed us only a few feet behind. I felt bulldozed by his big vehicle.

In one bend I didn't steer well enough and backed right into the cliff wall edging the road. The car came to a sudden stop with the bus almost pressing on its bumper. Now, we were wedged-in between the rock and the bus. It felt like a nightmare. In order to be able to get away from the rock wall I had to move forward, there was, however, no room left. I got out of the car because I couldn't see the bus driver from inside. With hand signals I asked him to back up a couple of metres to allow me some room to manoeuvre. He just shrugged his shoulders and pointed behind his back. Only then did I notice that there was a column of cars packed solidly behind the bus. Obviously, these were opportunistic drivers who followed the bus, like Montreal drivers who'd tail a screaming ambulance or fire truck to take advantage of its right of way. What made things even worse for me was that Norwegian drivers didn't seem to believe in leaving any gap between stopped vehicles. They were nudged ahead as far as possible. While the bus pinned us, the cars behind pinned the bus. The whole single lane was locked as far up as I could see.

To expect the whole column to back up to let me to manoeuvre was quixotic and impractical. I got back behind the wheel and began to inch back and forth, 10 cm at a time, until finally disengaged from the rock wall. By this time I was sweating like a pig.

I started backing down the road anew, at an even slower rate than before, until I reached the bypass loop where I could back out. This lane was also packed with cars. I succeeded in generating a fjord-wide bottleneck.

As soon as the bus, and the tailing cars, passed by, I had to pull out instantaneously, compelled by the impatient ascending drivers who had been annoyed spectators of my Canossa-drama. Again, I was at the head of a column of vehicles, although this time moving in the opposite direction. I fervently hoped that we wouldn't meet any more buses until we'd dropped off that damned Volkswagen.

July 1974.

## 68

### BRANDED

Nicol was our summer student from the Engineering Department of École Polytechnique. This morning he was in the Pilot Plant to observe an inoculation experiment carried out by Claude and Raymond - my technicians - and myself. The objective of this series of tests was to develop a wear resistant ductile iron.

The procedure employed in the pilot plant was tricky. A charge of 10 kg high carbon pig iron and a predetermined amount of ferro-molybdenum were to be melted down in an open top induction furnace. When the molten metal reached the right temperature, the inoculant - granulated ferro- magnesium placed in a refractory crucible attached to a steel rod - was submerged in the melt. The reaction was usually very violent. A rapid evolution of gases and fumes led to an impressive display of spattering and sparking.



*Casting of inoculated iron*

Occasionally, part of the molten metal was thrown high up into the air where surface tension broke up the mass, and red-hot droplets of liquid metal rained back to the ground.

We were ready for such incidents. The standard safety gear worn by all participants in these experiments consisted of a safety helmet with a face shield, a knee length, long sleeved asbestos coat, and asbestos leggings covering the front of our legs, loose leather boots, and asbestos gloves. The only part of our body not covered with heat resistant material was the back of our legs between the edge of the jacket and the rim of the boots. Our modus operandi called for us to remain motionless during an incident and let any ejected molten metal run off the protective cover.

We had instructed Nicol to behave accordingly while standing close to the furnace.

This day, the test turned out to be more spectacular than ever. The moment when Claude forced the crucible into the molten pool, there was a small detonation and a big chunk of the

molten mass ejected upward from the crucible. The huge globule of red-hot iron shot up a couple of metres into the air while millions of sparks flew in all directions. The three of us stood statuesquely waiting for the hot metal to rain back, around and over us. But not Nicol.

The moment, Nicol saw the molten metal flying up, he panicked. Horrified, he swung around and tried to run away from the hellfire. He wasn't fast enough. Halfway through his sprint, with one of his legs stretched out from under his coat in an angle exposing his unprotected calf, the descending molten metal rain hit him. One medium sized globule, the size of a cherry perhaps, landed right behind his knee. It burned through his pants and sank into his flesh with an audible sizzle. The droplet continued channelling through his flesh of his calf down toward his boot. Here it came to a stop. Nicol's eerie scream filled the room.

There was a stench of burned barbecue or of a blacksmith's shop when the hot horseshoe is first planted on the hoof of a horse. We reacted instantaneously by yanking off Nicol's boot. While Claude and Raymond carried him to the emergency shower, I ran to call the ambulance. After pulling off Nicol's pants, the technicians forced the injured leg under a jet of cold water. They didn't let Nicol move. They kept the chilly water pouring over the damaged area until the paramedics arrived - about ten minutes later. Luckily, the hospital was at the end of our street. By that time Nicol was trembling uncontrollably from cold or shock, or both.

I saw Nicol again a few months later. He had a slight limp. When he pulled up his pant leg to show his wound, the sight was unpleasant. The backside of his lower leg had an ugly, bright red, long and deep scar of the third-degree burn. This scar will endure for the rest of his life. He has been fated to remain branded forever for his momentary cowardice.

August 1974.

## 69

### INKY CAP

The play we were going to see had received a very good review in the local paper. Still, we were surprised to find a large crowd in the vestibule of the theatre when we arrived. It was even more surprising to see everyone with a glass of drink in his or her hand. A hostess approached and also invited us to the bar. She told us that the reception had been organised to honour the author who had come to the Montreal premiere of his play. We joined the crowd and drank to the play's success.

Soon after we were seated, and the show began. About halfway through the first act I began to feel uneasy. The air in the auditorium became hot and stuffy and I started to perspire. I looked at my wife. She was watching the play intently, not displaying any discomfort. I tried to remain calm and not to disturb her. However, I soon felt my face flushing and swelling.

'Is this due to the drink I had? How can that be? A single drink had never had any effect on me before. Was something extra mixed in it?' I wondered.

I glanced around. Everyone seemed to be engaged in watching and listening to the actors. Obviously, I was the only one having trouble. Finally, I decided to get Irene's attention and ask her to check my face, to see if there was anything unusual about it.

She confirmed that my face was red and puffy.

"You definitely look odd, should we get up and leave?" She asked.

I didn't know. I felt pressure in my head and palpitation in my heart, which made me to feel very uncomfortable. The anxiety about my deteriorating condition began to turn into panic.

'What's happening to me?' I wondered. 'I have never felt like this before!'

Suddenly, the idea hit me like a lightning bolt. The mushroom soup did it.

When I was riding home from work on my bike, I noticed some inky caps (*Coprinus Atramentarius*) at the edge of the park that I passed. This mushroom is very tasty, especially in a soup, and I used to collect it regularly. The specimens on the lawn looked very fresh. I couldn't resist the temptation. I stopped, picked some, and brought them home. Since this mushroom has very poor shelf-life even when stored in a fridge, Irene decided to make a soup of it right away.

Soon after dinner we left for the show.

But this particular mushroom doesn't mix with alcohol. When eaten with alcohol, or followed by alcohol within 24 hours, some people experience 'poisoning'. Every mushroom guide warns about this potential problem. I was well aware of this but I hadn't planned or expected to drink anything that evening. The reception, with its free glass of Scotch, was unexpected. The warning bells hadn't rung, and now I was paying for my lapse of memory.

Discovering the cause of my misery, and knowing that it would pass with no consequence, I began to breathe more easily. The persisting symptoms were not painful or severe although they remained definitely unpleasant. I fortunately had no nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, so I decided to stay and wait for the effect to pass.



I found it surprising that Irene who had eaten the same soup, and had the same drink, remained completely unaffected. She was apparently immune to the products of the inky-cap/alcohol reaction.

By the time the first act was over - an hour later - most of the symptoms were gone. During the intermission we stepped out into the courtyard for some fresh air. That swept away the remaining ill effects.

On returning to the show I was able to concentrate again on the play. It required some effort because I didn't have any idea what had happened in the first act while I was completely preoccupied with my own condition.

September 1975.

## 70

### SPEEDING TICKET

The research meeting, the last item on our agenda, was over. My colleague Emile and I were ready to drive back to Cleveland, drop off the rented car, and fly to Montreal. Emile was the designated driver on this trip. This was the first time that we had driven together, although I had once flown with him to a conference in Copenhagen. At that time I had found him a good travel companion. On the current trip, however, my opinion changed. Emile displayed an annoying habit while driving on the highway. He loved to speed up rapidly - far above the legal limit - then slow down just below the speed limit. He repeated the same manoeuvre over and over again. When I asked him why he was doing this his answer was:

“Because it’s fun.”

On our way back to the airport Emile soon fell back into his idiotic driving routine and kept it up for the next hour or so. Our flight was to leave late in the afternoon, so we had hours to spare; there was no need for this senseless rush.

At one point - not too far from the airport - a car swerved out from a side road behind us with lights flashing and siren howling. It was a police cruiser, and it was obviously after us - we were the only car on the road. Emile pulled onto the shoulder. The patrolman approached and told us that according to his radar we were doing 70 mph in a 50 mph zone. We were lucky - I thought - he’d caught us in Emile’s deceleration phase; a few minutes earlier we had probably been doing 85 mph.

“I have to give you a ticket - the patrolman said - but because you are a non-resident of the State of Ohio you will have to appear in front of a judge who will set the fine according to the highway code of the State. Please follow me to the County Seat which is located a ways off this highway.”

Emile meekly trailed the police cruiser through a series of secondary roads, twists and crossings. Upon arriving at the County Seat we were told that the judge was out - we had to wait. I looked at my watch. We had still enough time left to catch our flight if only the judge returned within minutes. He didn’t.

We had been seated in the waiting area for nearly two hours. Time passed monotonously. Finally, the judge showed up. He checked the police report and fined Emil \$110. At least it was over - I thought. But I was wrong. According to Ohio law, non-residents have to pay fines in cash; otherwise their cars are impounded.

Emile could come up with only \$45. I coughed up the rest. The two of us had barely enough cash to cover the fine. After the bureaucratic part was over I asked our policeman - still hanging around - how to get back to the airport road. Emile - not surprisingly - had no idea. He had followed the police car blindly on our way here.

“When is your flight leaving?” The officer asked.

I told him. He looked at his watch and shook his head.

“Not much time left but with a shortcut **we** might be able to make it. Follow me!”

He got into his cruiser, pulled out of the parking lot, and turned on the flashing light and the siren. Emile tried to remain on his tail. The secondary roads we were speeding along were fortunately void of traffic. Still, Emile had a hard time not losing his lead. But he must have been having a field-day - I thought - speeding under police guidance!

When we reached the airport, the police cruiser turned off the road into a service lane which led us directly to the rental office from the rear. We had about 5 minutes left before take-off.

Emile parked the car and we jumped out. Passing fast through the service area, Emil just dropped the key at the desk and shouted at the attendant:

“Send the papers and the bill to Noranda Research in Point Claire, Quebec. Please.”

We ran to the check-in desk next to the loading ramp. We somehow made it onto the plane before the stewardess closed the door.

Two hours later we were in Montreal as scheduled. Fortunately, the cockpit was off-limits to Emile.

Back in the office when we filled out our expense accounts Emile entered the speeding fine and attached the police receipt. To my surprise and utter disgust the research administration duly reimbursed him for his misadventure.

October 1975.

## 71

### HOTEL NAPOLEON

That year the International Powder Metallurgy Conference was held in the Alpexpo Centre, in Grenoble, France. I had preregistered and made a hotel reservation months earlier but received no acknowledgment. Still, I was surprised to learn that there was no accommodation waiting for me when I arrived. My letter might have been lost or misplaced. The situation was aggravated by the fact that all hotels in the city and in its immediate vicinity had been fully booked.

The conference organizers found a solution to my dilemma - but not very comfortable one as it turned out. I was to stay in the 'overflow rooms' of hotels. By French law, every hotel has to leave one room unoccupied every day for emergencies. However, a guest can stay only one night in such a room. So every day I had to move to a new hotel assigned to me each morning by the Tourist Bureau.

I spent the first night in the modern Alpine Centre, while the next one in an older establishment. On the third day I was told that Hotel Napoleon would be my destination for the day. The establishment was located in the old city, near the River Sère.

At lunch break I borrowed a car from one of my colleagues, and headed to the historical quarter of Grenoble. I was only a few blocks away from my goal, according to the city map, when driving became difficult. The streets turned into narrow, one-way passages, half blocked by cars optimistically parked on the two-foot wide sidewalks. The streets intersected at random angles. The search for the hotel was made even more difficult by the necessity of trying to read the map while moving. Driving became a navigational nightmare. At last, I succeeded on turning into Rue Montrose, my target street I was surprised to see no parked cars in it. The explanation came readily on seeing a number of young women clad in hot pants or in 6" long miniskirts and blouses with décolletages below their navels. In 1975 such attire had not yet become a common sight. The girls were standing in doorways, or sitting in the picture windows of the small houses facing the street. I was in the red light district of the city.

I could see the neon signpost of Hotel Napoleon ahead of me in the next block. However, to my frustration, the one-way flow of traffic in that block was in the opposite direction, so I couldn't continue on the street. I decided to park my car right there, at the corner, hoping that I'd be able to check in, and return to my Renault without getting a ticket. I pulled my suitcase out of the trunk and locked the car door. I heard a click in the lock mechanism. When I tried to withdraw the key, half of it remained jammed in the door.

I went to check into the hotel anyway. After dropping off my suitcase I asked the receptionist for a box of matches to facilitate fishing the broken key from the lock.

I returned to the car and began to work on the door. It was noon time. I was apparently the only busy person in the street; and the girls' rush hour hadn't started yet. Soon, the bored young women began to congregate around me. I became an entertainment centre. As they watched my clumsy efforts with the lock, they began to make remarks. Judging by the giggling which followed these wisecracks, they were very funny. With my inadequate French I got only some of it. One was about a certain man who sadly lacked experience with small holes, while another told of an absolute greenhorn who succeeded in putting it in but was unable to pull it out. Sadly I missed the best ones, those that drew the biggest laughs.

After a while, one of the girls took pity on me, and suggested calling a locksmith just a couple of blocks away. I walked there. After I had explained my predicament, a young fellow happily picked up his tool box and returned with me to the car. The girls apparently knew him - not necessarily through his locksmith business - and the atmosphere became less tense for me.

After the locksmith had succeeded in retrieving the broken key piece, he opened the car door. Then, he returned to his shop to cut a new key. I remained with the car. By now, feeling more relaxed; I could carry on a conversation with the girls. Soon I learned some of their names. I found the time passed at that corner far more entertaining than that spent listening to lectures in the conference room.

I returned to Alpexpo a few hours later, to the great relief of the owner of the borrowed car. When during supper I told of my experiences, all of my diner companions volunteered to accompany me to my hotel. To my great disappointment I didn't recognise any of the faces on the street. The friendly acquaintances of the afternoon weren't there anymore. There had been a change of shift sometime earlier. My colleagues left disappointed, but I had never promised them any reduced rates.

I retired to my hotel room. I had the impression that I was the only solo guest in the place, and also, the only one who spent the whole night there. The rest of the clientele rented the rooms by the hour. The traffic in the corridors continued all night long. There was continuous laughing, shouting and then even more sinister noises coming from the adjoining rooms. The building was obviously not constructed according to the best soundproofing standards. I learned also that the French, at least those in Grenoble, are rather noisy love makers.

After that night, I spent two more in two other suburban hotels, which were more comfortable, but of a decidedly less vivacious atmosphere than Hotel Napoleon.

When I returned to Montreal, the letter of acknowledgment for my original hotel reservation request in the Alpine Centre was sitting in my mailbox. I wondered if that room remained unoccupied throughout the conference while they kept me moving from hotel to hotel. But I had no regrets, at least not about Hotel Napoleon.

May 1976.

## 72

### UGINE ACIER

During the conference in Grenoble a participant approached me and introduced himself:

“Daniel Rousseau, from Ugine Acier. I have been delegated to take you to our company after the conference, if it's agreeable to you?”

My agenda included a visit to the research facilities of this company - one of the largest stainless steel manufacturers in France. Initially, I had planned to rent a car and drive there. I couldn't refuse Daniel's offer, although I would have preferred a trip on my own into the foothills of the Alps where the plant was located.

After the last session we met and set out for Ugine. Daniel turned out to be a friendly and pleasant travelling companion, especially after he learned that my French conversation was sufficiently good to relieve him of struggling with his rudimentary English. Our destination was a couple of hours drive away, which gave us time to discuss various topics of mutual interest. He dropped me off in a town before Ugine, prearranged by his bosses, as the hotel was supposedly better here.

At the hotel we parted. Daniel promised to pick me up in the morning. I checked in and decided to rest an hour or so before going out to look for a place to eat. My siesta didn't last long. There was a knock on the door with the message that a call was waiting for me in the lobby. In France in those days only five star hotels had phones in the rooms, and this establishment was obviously not one of those. Who the hell would call me in this god forsaken place whose existence I hadn't even suspected an hour earlier? I wondered while walking down to the reception desk.

It was Daniel. He asked me if I'd had supper. If not, he would like to invite me to eat with him and his wife in their home. He hadn't wanted to tell me about his intention until he had checked it out with the wife. Not having a phone, he had to drive home first.

I gladly accepted the invitation. Fifteen minutes later Daniel arrived at the hotel, and we left for his home. When Daniel introduced me to his young wife, he excused her French. He was afraid that I might not understand her Southern accent. Daniel spoke of all this in front of his wife. I felt more embarrassed than she did apparently. Many times during the dinner conversation the rather untactful husband repeated his wife's sentences in his Parisian French, although such 'translation' wasn't really necessary.

The dinner was surprisingly modest: scrambled eggs with boiled potatoes and bread - a far cry from the fancy 'French cuisine creations' served in restaurants. But I had a good time, and I duly appreciated spending the evening with this friendly couple in their home, rather than sitting alone in a pretentious small town restaurant. Later in the evening Daniel drove me back to the hotel. In the morning he picked me up again as originally planned.

In the company's conference room there was an unexpected number of participants waiting for me. At least that was what I thought. After Daniel had introduced me to everyone, I was told that we would have to wait for an additional visitor, a gentleman from Nippon Steel, before beginning our discussions.

The obviously important Japanese guest arrived a few minutes later. After the introductions the V.I.P. pulled out nicely wrapped presents from his briefcase, and passed one to every person in the room - except me. I was flabbergasted by this generous, Japanese-style preliminary. At the same time I felt like a poor relative intruding at a princely reception. I began to hate the guy.

During the working session I presented the latest results of our molybdenum research. My employer, Noranda, was a major supplier of this important alloying element to Ugine Acier. This was the common link between the two companies. After my talk, Ugine researchers described their work in the same field. During these discussions the glum Japanese said very little but listened carefully and kept writing furiously in his notebook. Occasionally, he asked a sharp question. The Japanese visitor didn't talk much during lunch either. At least he didn't give out any more presents. I appreciated that.

Later in the afternoon we closed shop. The director of research advised the guest of honour and me that the company limousine would take us to Grenoble airport. The car was a Mercedes with a dour looking driver. In Europe they say that Mercedes operators purchase the right of way with their vehicles. The driving habits of our chauffeur strongly supported this assumption. As we entered the main road - a two lane, relatively wide highway, wide for France - which connected France with Italy through the Alps - the driver centred his vehicle on the dividing line and speeded up to 180- 200 km/hr. He didn't leave the divider or change his speed for the rest of the trip.

"Is he mad?" Murmured my companion in English, as he sunk deeper and deeper into his seat.

Our driver didn't budge an inch when we passed cars on our side of the road. He sounded his horn and these ordinary travellers meekly pulled as close to the edge of the pavement as possible to let us pass. The same happened with oncoming traffic. In these cases my companion, an apparently weak specimen of the kamikaze generation, seemed to slump with ashen face even deeper into the upholstery. Although I was also quite nervous, seeing such fear on my fellow traveller's face was compensation for the discomfort he'd caused me in the morning.

We made it to the airport without any incident. As we emerged from the Mercedes I felt greatly relieved for several reasons: the reckless ride was over; my companion didn't give a present to the driver; and it was certain that I would never see this despicable Japanese VIP again in my life.

May 1976.

## 73

### POPPY SEEDS

On Boxing Day the 6:30 morning news was disheartening.

„Kennedy Airport is closed due to heavy snowfall and a wind of 50 miles per hour. All incoming and outgoing flights are delayed indefinitely.” The radio announcer said.

My wife and I had planned to fly to Bogota, Colombia, from Montreal via New York, at noon. Now, the trip looked unlikely. We listened to the news on the half and hour as the storm front moved slowly - annoyingly slowly - toward New England.

At 1.00 p.m. the phone rang. Air Canada advised us that our New York flight had been rescheduled for 3:30 p.m.; we should be at the airport in an hour's time.

The plane took off as advertised, but we circled for about an hour over Kennedy Airport before we could land. We found the terminal in complete chaos. Dozens of flights had been cancelled and hundreds of people were milling aimlessly about while others were running from desk to desk trying to find alternate flights. We hurried to find the Avianca (Colombian Airline) desk to learn what had happened to our connecting flight.

„It has been cancelled,” we were told, „You should stand by for a hotel voucher and return to the terminal early in the morning. You might, however, check your baggage right now.”

We did that. While waiting for the hotel arrangement, we talked to an Avianca hostess. She told us that an Avianca charter flight to Cartagena had been rescheduled to take off in an hour. The plane, after unloading its passengers at the seaside resort, would fly to Bogota, the home base of the airline.

„If the plane isn't full, the pilot might take you on.” The stewardess suggested.

It took some effort to persuade the young woman at the desk to call the pilot, already in the cockpit, with our quest. Finally, she went along. The pilot was contacted, and to our relief and surprise, he agreed to take us on. Minutes later we boarded the plane. We were seated in the first class compartment.

‘What luck!’ Irene and I thought.

In Cartagena, everyone disembarked except the hostesses and us. The plane took off again around midnight, this time for Bogota. It felt strange to sit in an almost completely empty airliner.

When we reached cruising altitude, the stewardesses, all six of them, came into first class and sat down to chat with us. Although they flew regularly to New York and Miami, none of them had ever been to Canada. Their vision of Canada was a friendly but very cold country of mostly snow-covered forests. They considered this imaginary picture attractive and appalling at the same time.

„But you have just been snowed in at Kennedy. You must be quite familiar with the white stuff.” I remarked.

„Oh, during our lay-over we unfortunately never see the countryside, and in the city the snow is just slush.” Was the explanation of one of the stewardesses.



After an hour - ready to descend - the captain's voice came over the intercom calling for the senior stewardess to come into the cockpit. She returned to us with a long face and said:

„Bogota has begun to fog in; consequently we are rerouted to Cali” (A city in the interior - infamous as the capital of the Colombian drug cartel).

After landing at Cali airport an Avianca representative boarded the plane. She offered the staff the choice of going to a hotel or staying on the plane until 7.00 a.m. when the plane would take off for Bogota. The crew unanimously voted for staying. However, we, the only two passengers, were not given a choice. By regulation we had to leave the plane and the terminal for the night.

It was 2.00 a.m. The official, kindly enough, called a taxi for us. She explained to the driver that he must find a hotel to take us in. The woman also told the driver to pick us up at 6:00 a.m. and bring us back to the airport. She assured us and the driver that the fare and the hotel fee would be on Avianca's account, so our lack of local currency ought not to be a problem.

Finding a hotel turned out to be not so simple. There was an international film festival going on in the city, and it appeared that all hotels were fully occupied. After a while the search began to look hopeless. However, the taxi driver relentlessly kept on driving from hotel to hotel until he finally located a sleeping establishment for us. The place would have hardly qualified for any hotel rating. But it was almost 3.00 a.m., so we had no choice. We didn't bother to undress in the room. We just lay down on the bed hoping we wouldn't wake up any bedfellows of the crawly type.

Miracles sometime happen in South America. Our taxi came to pick us up at the prearranged time. A few minutes later we were at the air terminal. We began to inquire about our plane. The Avianca officials listened to our request with apparent suspicion. The officer of the night didn't leave any instruction behind; the story of our arrival was met with doubtful glances. We were led to the airport security office. Here, two officers jumped at us like vultures and started an intensive questioning.

„How did you get into the country? Why is there no entry stamp in your passports? Where is your baggage? The flight number you gave us does not correspond to any scheduled flight. If you took a flight to Cartagena why are you now in Cali? How could you have arrived on an international carrier when Cali is not an international airport? What is the name of the hotel you said you stayed at last night? (We had not bothered to check its name). What is the name of your taxi driver? (We obviously hadn't asked him for introductions).”

After trying to answer and explain our situation to the first officer, the other one took over, repeating the same questions. Neither of them believed our answers, nor the third one whom to we were transferred. By now the chain of events during the night began to look bizarre even to me. I felt sure that our next stop wouldn't be Bogota but the infamous high security jail of Cali.

Then finally, one of the security officers took the trouble to call the airport's traffic department. He was told that an unscheduled plane had indeed spent some hours on the runway during the night. By now it was long gone. Also, at this critical point, the taxi driver luckily showed up in the Avianca office to collect his fares. He substantiated our story.

After some deliberation we were given a temporary landing permit, and were put on the next scheduled domestic flight to Bogota with a strong warning that any infraction of the rules from now on would result either in our arrest, or expulsion, or both.

Upon arriving in Bogota and passing through Immigration, the exhausting procedure started all over again:

„How could you have arrived from overseas with a domestic airline?” Etc.

Our temporary landing permit was looked at with great suspicion. It appeared that they trusted their colleagues who'd issued the document even less than they trusted us.

However, after long and unpleasant arguments the 'Puede permanacer' (Allowed to stay) stamp was duly inserted into our passports and we officially entered the country. We exchanged some currency and could finally call our friends to let them know of our arrival.

„How could you arrive from Cali?“ Was their first question. „That isn't an international airport. We were at the Bogota terminal all evening yesterday waiting for the New York plane.“

It looked that our vacation would be spent in a never-ending clarification of our coming to Colombia.

But we also faced a new problem: the whereabouts of our baggage. When would that arrive? This issue was of great importance to our friends also. Since it was Xmas time, we had agreed to play Santa for the whole family, especially for their 11 and 10 year old daughters. The long shopping list sent to us a month earlier had called for toys - Barbie dolls, various make up items, tools etc., - not available in Colombia, or, only as contraband at hefty prices. All these presents were now in limbo.

Our friend, Laci, knew Senor Léon, the airport manager, so we went to see him. He assured us that as soon as the baggage arrived he would notify us. However, in South America one doesn't rely on phoned messages. Therefore, every day of the following week Laci and I drove to the airport to personally check the situation. Each time we returned in low spirits, which sunk even lower upon seeing the sad faces of the girls for whom we were the Santa that failed.

On the morning of the eighth day there was a phone call from Sr. Léon:

„Your baggage is in my office ready to be picked up.“

We found the two suitcases in sad shape. They looked as if they had gone around the world a couple of times, and dropped from the planes on the tarmac at every stop. Sr. Léon insisted that we open them to see if anything was missing. I thought this superfluous because if anything, we probably had more pieces inside than we started out with. Nevertheless, I opened the first suitcase. When the lid popped up, everything inside was covered with a blackish, powdery stuff, which immediately began to trickle out onto the floor, emanating a strange but remotely familiar odour. It dawned on me: the smell of poppy seeds.

Our friends' shopping list had also called for a pound of this product, a basic ingredient of the traditional Hungarian X-mass cake. Poppy seeds are freely available in delicatessens in Canada but not in Colombia, where, although poppies are grown by the ton - illegally - the seeds are processed into opium/heroin and are never seen by the general public.

The paper bag containing the seeds had apparently burst open in an early impact, and subsequent knocks had spread the seeds throughout the whole interior of the suitcase.

Sr. Léon looked extremely puzzled. Obviously, he also recognized the item but didn't say a word. Laci and I also remained silent. I closed the valise and we carried them out of the office.

I think Sr. Léon is still wondering about the goofy Canadians who fumbled in bringing poppy seeds to Colombia.

December 1976.

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### ON THE AMAZON

The plane began to descend. As we dropped and broke through the clouds, we saw a continuous green carpet stretching below - the Amazonian jungle - interrupted only here and there with silvery, winding streams. A larger river appeared in the distance. It must have been the Amazon. However, before we could get a closer look, the plane made a sweeping turn away from it. As we approached the ground the uniform green matt started to break up into clusters of trees, and at a still lower level, into individual trees. The plane made one more turn, and a runway - a narrow ditch-like cut in the jungle - appeared ahead of us. There were no buildings around it, just a dirt road winding out to it from the bush. The plane landed smoothly and came to a full stop not far from the formidable green wall of jungle at the end of the strip. The craft turned around - as on a dime - and taxied back to the point where the dirt road met the runway. A ladder was rolled to the plane's door, and we climbed out.

The change in the temperature after the cool days of the Bogotan plateau (2,500 m elevation) was brutal. The air wrapped around us as an oppressively hot, humid blanket. On the ground - I noticed it only at this time - there was a 'terminal building': a thatched roof supported by four wooden poles and no walls. 'At least it keeps out the rain.' I thought.

"Mr. and Mrs. Krantz!" A man in a safari outfit called our names.

I was stunned. I couldn't imagine who would know us, or about us, here, at the edge of civilization. We had just landed at the 'airport' of Leticia, the Colombian outpost on the Amazon River. It is so remote that there is no highway connecting it to anywhere else except Tabatinga, its twin town across the Brazilian border, and within walking distance. The nearest cities are Bogota - 1,100 km by air, Iquitos, Peru - 600 km upstream; and Teje, Brazil - 1,200 km downstream.

I approached the young man in the safari outfit. We shook hands, and I waited to hear the reason for his attention. I didn't know if he spoke any English or not. He did. With a wide grin on his face he invited us to get into the car, the only vehicle parked on the side of the airstrip. A driver sat behind the wheel. I was puzzled.

"Why this car? To whom does it belong?" I wondered.

"What about our baggage?" I worriedly queried the man in uniform.

"Oh, it will be unloaded and delivered to your hotel by the bus which is on its way to pick up the rest of the passengers."

"But why are we being treated differently?" I asked at last.

"We received instruction from Avianca (Colombian National Airline) Headquarters in Bogota requesting VIP treatment for you during your stay in Leticia."

I glanced at Irene. She looked as puzzled as I was. The only probable explanation which came to my mind was that the request had been arranged by German, our Colombian friend. We had met him and his wife half a year earlier during the Montreal Olympic Games. They had wished to visit the games but couldn't find accommodation. We offered them our home, and they stayed with us. We had met them again in Bogota. After our arrival in Colombia we spent a great deal of time chasing our baggage which had been lost by Avianca. German was very frustrated that he couldn't help us in our predicament, even though the president of the airline

was a personal friend of his family. It was our bad luck that the big boss happened to be overseas at the time and couldn't be reached. Meanwhile - I guessed - the president returned, and our friend succeeded in procuring this deal for us as compensation for our earlier difficulties.

We decided to go along with the Avianca scheme and see what happened. We got into the car while our host mounted a motorcycle, and we started out with him in the lead. The rest of the passengers stayed behind to wait for the arrival of public transport to take them to town.

It felt funny to be part of a one-car official motorcade led by a uniformed motorcyclist over a jungle road void of any traffic. However, when we reached the inhabited area of Leticia, the advantage of the setup became evident. The road through the town was crowded with locals, mostly children. The roaring motorcycle scattered the crowd, and our car could follow it unhindered.

We stopped in front of a rustic looking lodge, called Parador Ticuna - our apparent destination. An employee who must have known about our imminent arrival took us to a cabin near the swimming pool without the formality of registration.

After checking out the cabin, and finding it well furnished and clean, we stepped out to look around. At the end of the property we could see the mighty Amazon River, although the swampy shore made it inaccessible from the hotel grounds. We settled down beside the pool under palm trees, and waited for our luggage to arrive. The water of the surprisingly large pool seemed to be clean and was very inviting, but our swimming suits were in our valises. These, accompanied by a dozen of our ex-fellow-passengers, arrived by bus half an hour later. The emerging passengers appeared to be hot and were perspiring. The bus obviously wasn't air-conditioned.

The newcomers were surprised to see us looking cool and relaxed in the shade beside the pool. Their discomfort increased further when they were told to line up to register. The desk was set up on the veranda, on the sunny side of the office building. A single clerk was busy with the task, and the procedure took ages. The unfortunate tourists - standing in line and sweating profusely - looked very dejected. We, the privileged VIP couple, felt sorry for them.

Our suitcases were delivered into our cabin, and we began to unpack. A huge cockroach suddenly emerged from Irene's neatly stacked clothing in the valise. The beast - at least eight centimetres long, plus the antennae - was extremely agile. Before either of us could react, it took off and disappeared into the bathroom. I went after it but couldn't find the creature. Irene refused to come near the spot where the varmint had last been seen.

"I will never enter that bathroom, unless you kill the brute!" She declared.

I shook my shoulders.

"Then you will have to attend to your needs behind the building. I hope that you find the flies, mosquitoes, snakes and scorpions swarming there more to your liking than our travel companion."

"But this monster was so huge!"

"That will allow you to detect the creature more easily when it tries to attack while you are sitting on the john."

Irene didn't see any humour in the situation. She remained apprehensive.

A while later, when I re-entered the bathroom, I noticed our fellow traveller and new roommate hiding in the centre hole of the spare toilet paper roll placed on the top of the water tank. Its antennae sticking out gave it away. I grabbed the roll, tipped it into the bowl and flushed the insect away. Irene could now breathe easier.

We decided to take a swim in the nice big pool. While we were putting on our swimming suits it suddenly started to rain. Rain? It was a deluge with bean size droplets coming down like a machine gun salvo. But the cloudburst lasted only a few minutes, and then it tapered off into a more normal shower. After ten minutes of this the sun was back. Since the air hadn't cooled

down at all, we walked to the pool to dip in. We found the previously inviting clean water full of debris, frogs and floating insects. If they hadn't fallen from the sky, they must have been washed off the palm trees or from the lawn around the pool. In either case, they made the pool rather unattractive.

Discouraged and despite the heat we went instead for a walk in the town. We didn't find much to see. In the local church there was a crèche on display (It was Xmas time). Inside it, a dark-skinned, dark-eyed baby Jesus was resting on palm leaves. I had seen dozens and dozens of displays like this in my childhood back in Hungary, but there the setting had been different. The snow-white, blue-eyed infant had always been lying on a white sheet or - in poorer districts - on raw straw. The Columbian set-up, although quaint at first sight, was probably more realistic. In any case, straw would have been hard to come by in the rainforest.

We began to look for an address recommended to us by our friends in Bogota. It was the safari office of Mike Tsalickis. This big game hunter, now a Colombian, had the reputation of an expert of the Amazon's fauna. Back in Canada, we had seen a couple of TV programs showing him collecting jaguars, alligators and anacondas for various zoos. This day, however, he was out of town. We were received by his assistant - our motorcyclist guide.

We discussed the various excursion possibilities for the next day. He suggested a special VIP package for us. To visit the places listed in the package normally required two days but it was offered to us as a one-day condensed trip at half price. We couldn't refuse the offer. The agent said that he would look for other possible participants - and probably charge them double.

From the travel agency we walked down to the river. The mighty Amazon looked as impressive as I had always imagined. It was more than a kilometre wide although we were at 3,200 km from its mouth! Both shores were covered with green walls of vegetation. The slow, brownish flow of the stream carried a lot of floating debris - tree branches and piles of green vegetation. The river water didn't look any more inviting for a dip than that in our swimming pool. We walked out on the wooden wharf. It was the time for the arrival of the passenger boat on its way from Peru to Brazil. This was traditionally the big event of the day in this town. There was already a small crowd of spectators waiting for the boat. We joined them.

Leticia is located at the tip of a narrow panhandle between Peru and Brazil, and it is Colombia's only access to the Amazon. On the South, across the river, and also to the West, a few kilometre's upstream lay Peru. On the East, a couple of kilometres downstream was Brazil. Leticia had been founded only a century earlier by Spaniards. After the wars of independence it became part of Peru. Fifty years ago the town was overrun by Colombia. I couldn't fathom why any country would be willing to go to war over a god-forsaken place like this.

While standing on the jetty I overheard a couple of men next to us speaking French, Quebecois French as a matter of fact! After listening to them for a while, I joined in, trying my best joul. They were startled upon hearing it. It must have been so unexpected to meet an apparent co-patriot speaking their native language with a strong Hungarian accent in this remote corner of the world. But they seemed to be glad to meet us. Both were missionaries from Quebec. The older one lived near Leticia, while the younger one, André, was on his way from Bogota to Iquitos, where his mission was located. During the conversation I learned that he was booked for the same flight as we were two days later.

The passenger boat arrived. It was much smaller than I expected and didn't look exotic at all. Some people, tourists and natives, disembarked while others boarded. Ten minutes later the ship departed and soon disappeared behind the bend of the river - in Brazil. The excitement of the day was over.

The following morning our freshly organized safari group, consisting of six tourists, a local guide and the 'river captain', met at the port, ready for the excursion. Our boat was an open vessel with wooden benches and without a sunroof. Our guide warned us not to dip our hands in the water if we valued our fingers. There were piranhas, and alligators and electric eels below, and they were voracious - he said.

We were going upstream, toward the Peruvian border. As we left the outskirts of Leticia, the shore became desolate, mostly swampy. Here and there we saw huts but few people and no animals, wild or domesticated. Our 'captain' remained standing upright in the rear of the boat while steering his vessel. He had to keep a close lookout for floating obstacles. Hitting one might capsize us. Such misfortune could have fatal consequences in this water.

The first stop-over in our travel agenda was the Island of Santa Sofia, a natural breeding ground for squirrel monkeys. The island wasn't very large. It had several well-trodden natural trails leading into the jungle. These converged on a lodge with a full range of tourist facilities. Our first outing into the rainforest turned out to be quite civilized. The monkeys were numerous and unafraid of people. While we were watching, and the agile animals were running up and down the trees and jumping from branch to branch, it suddenly started to rain. We quickly took refuge under the roof of the lodge veranda; we watched the cloudburst from this safe heaven. It lasted only about ten minutes (Amazonian standard?) but it cut short our monkey watch.

While continuing upstream, we encountered a substantial traffic jam in the form of small dugout canoes. They were very narrow and looked precarious. Their gunwales protruded only a few inches above the surface of the water. Many of the dugouts carried families with small children who were sitting motionless either on the floor or in the laps of the adults. I imagined that the slightest commotion could turn the craft over. Perhaps, in anticipation of such an accident, the boats kept quite close to the shore.

Within an hour we ran into another shower. This time there was no shelter to escape to. In the open boat the ensuing downpour hammered us with the force of a solid stream of water. We had no rain coats. The day before, the guide had advised us that it would be useless to bring one:

"You would be soaked by perspiration, and that is more unpleasant than rainwater. Also, carrying a coat all day is a nuisance, especially when it serves no useful purpose. You may lose or tear it. After getting drenched by the rain - a certainty on any day-trip - the sun will dry you in a surprisingly short time."

He was right. Half an hour later we were dry again. By this time we had reached the Atacuari River, a northern tributary of the Amazon - the natural border between Peru and Colombia. We continued on this waterway for at least an hour. As we progressed, the slow flowing river became more and more twisting. We encountered many fallen trees and low branches which forced us to duck. Now I understood why our craft didn't have a sunroof.

Finally, we reached the intended landing point. We climbed out of the boat and stretched our legs. Our destination, a Yagua settlement, was further inland.

We walked along a footpath in the rainforest. The ground was muddy and sticky like black goo. At each step I had to drag my foot to tear my sandal out of the muck. Before long, the sandal's strap broke. I had to dig my footwear out of the quagmire with my hands. Now, left with no choice, I had to continue the trip barefoot. Luckily, I didn't step into any thorns. To our surprise, there were no mosquitoes, flies, other insects, or leaches to torture us.

After about a quarter of an hour slogging through the mud, we arrived in a clearance in the bush. There were huts and many banana trees around them. It was the village of the Yagua Indians who were still living in their traditional, primitive state. The huts consisted of elevated platforms - raised about two-three feet above the ground - and had thatched roofs. Some had walls on one side, others had none. The dwellings' only furniture was canvas hammocks tied to the corner poles. There were only a few women around but many children. The women and the older girls wore standard-issue red loin clothes - for the sake of the tourists' morals - but were bare above waist, displaying heavy, pendulous breasts - definitely not Playboy types.

Small children - naked toddlers - moved freely on the platform right to its edge without ever falling off. Canadian mothers would have had heart attacks watching their children under similar circumstances. There was a little boy with a pet marmoset - a tiny monkey - in his hair. The animal was clinging firmly while the boy moved around. Both of them seemed to be content with the arrangement.



*The Yaguas*

These Indians were obviously used to tourists, they didn't pay much attention to us. The women were preparing some kind of a communal dish of various fruits and vegetable what had to be peeled, sliced, smashed and mixed. It didn't look an easy chore. After a while some men appeared wearing grass skirts. One of them carried a blow pipe that he was ready to demonstrate to us. After preparing a dart, installing and sealing it in the pipe, he blew it at a target up in a tree. The dart landed right on the spot previously pointed out to us, about 30 feet away. It was impressive.

The native prepared a new charge and asked if one of us wanted to give it a try. Our German companion volunteered. He aimed the pipe carefully, and after a big, deep breath, blew into it with full force. The dart flew out like a lazy hornet, and then dropped like a wounded bird at the toe of the Teutonic warrior. Fortunately, it had not been dipped in poison, and hence, the untimely death of this fellow tourist was avoided.

We arrived at the second and visibly more important stage of our excursion program: the purchasing of souvenirs. This time, the lethargic looking Indian women came to life. The various interesting looking artefacts made of natural materials, shells, nuts, fishbone and insects, collected from the jungle and from the river, changed hands in no time, and to everybody's satisfaction.

After about two hours in the place, we started back on the muddy trail to our boat. We floated down to the mouth of the tributary and followed the shore of the Amazon for a while. In one of the small bays, where a native hut sat on the bank, groups of children happily jumped in the water and swam along beside our boat.

"How come they aren't attacked by piranhas?" We asked our guide with surprise.

"Smart fish. They prefer tourists." Was the instructive answer.

We arrived at the mouth of another small river and turned into it. The landing was not very far. This was Arara, the settlement of the Ticuna Indians. This tribe was in a more advanced stage of development than the Yaguas, our guide said. Both men and women wore city clothing except the smallest children who were naked. This people lived in rows of attached huts. There were chicken and pigs running around. Most of the men earned wages and the families purchased the bulk of their food on the market rather than growing or collecting it themselves.

To us, tourists, they looked 'civilized' therefore were less picturesque and uninteresting to watch. The whole visit felt as an anticlimax after having seen the Yaguas. We didn't stay long.

It was getting late in the afternoon. We just reached the Amazon River when the sun went down. So close to the Equator (four degrees - south), the night is not preceded by dusk. It becomes dark within minutes of sundown. We had to navigate two more hours in very limited

visibility. Our guide was standing at the bow of the boat shouting to the 'captain' if anything floating appeared ahead of us. By the tension in the voices of the two men it became evident that we were in real danger of hitting something and possibly capsizing. Their jokes about tourist-loving piranhas could have become a frightening reality.

However, we made it safely to Leticia. Upon disembarking, the guide remarked that it was ill-conceived of the management to combine these two tours (visiting both Yagua and Tecuna tribes) and compel us to travel on the river after dark. He couldn't imagine what the reason was behind this stupid decision - he said. I didn't reveal that it probably had something to do with our recently acquired VIP status.

The following morning we were driven - by bus this time - across the Brazilian border to Tabatinga to board the Brazilian 'Manuas-Iquitos' flight. There were no border crossing formalities. We didn't even stop at the frontier. On the tarmac we met André, our recent missionary acquaintance. I mentioned to him that in Iquitos we would have to wait eight hours for our Lima connection. He offered us a guided tour of the city, since he had also several hours to wait for his bus.

He told us about his trip to Bogota where he had attended a conference. One morning as he walked the couple of blocks along the main street from his hotel to the meeting place, he was robbed at gunpoint. The bandits took all his money and his watch. He had to borrow some funds for the rest of his stay. Now, he was worried about the financial hardship that this extra expense would bring to his mission. They were obviously not very generously endowed by the Mother Church.

We reached Iquitos after two hours of flying. It is Peru's largest jungle city, and lies in a bend of the Amazon River. Like Leticia, it has no outside roads to link it with the rest of the world. We hired a taxi and André commanded it around. The day was very hot, hotter than those in Leticia. As long as the cab was moving, and there was some breeze, it was bearable but when the car stopped, the air became suffocating.

The first place we went to visit was the fish hatchery. As we walked to its entrance, a tourist bus pulled up and a stream of camera totting Japanese businessmen/professional tourists disembarked. It was very entertaining to watch these middle-aged gentlemen neatly dressed in dark suits emerging from the cool, air-conditioned cocoon of their vehicle. They were blinking under the white glare of the sun, and almost collapsed in the oppressively hot air. But holding heroically to their cameras they followed us into the equally hot interior of the hatchery. There were some large river fish on display, the sight of which revived the photo-obsessed Japanese crowd. However, after the compulsory number of shots they hurriedly escaped back into the bus - their air-conditioned refuge.

We drove to the centre of the city. We looked at the famous 'Iron House' designed by Eiffel (the builder of the tower in Paris), and imported from France - piece by piece - into Iquitos during the opulent days of the rubber boom at the beginning of the century. To me the building looked rather unattractive. On the other hand, some of the mansions of the rubber barons from the same era, decorated with hand-made tiles imported from Portugal, were very impressive.

As we were lingering in the amazing heat, a tourist bus arrived and unloaded - sure enough - our Japanese friends. This time we found it even more hilarious to watch them as they rushed out in kamikaze fashion, took their compulsory pictures and rushed back into the bus. But they all went through the weary routine as good soldiers would.

Our final stop-over was Belen, a floating shanty town. It consisted of scores of huts built on rafts, interspersed with old boats. These had floated on the river most of the year, and rose and fell with its flow. At this time, in the dry season, they rested on the river mud and were dirty and unhealthy looking. The place was very crowded and a colourful and exotic sight. André was somewhat reluctant to take us there since it had a sinister reputation - a criminal hideout. André still vividly remembered his own experience with bandits in Bogota. He advised us to hide my camera and Irene's handbag. He, himself, had nothing of any value to worry about.



We didn't stay long. Exhausted by the heat, we retired to a fashionable fish restaurant up on the river bank. Sitting in the open veranda under a big tree with some breeze from the river, we enjoyed our last, close view of the Amazon, and also had an excellent meal. Even André - our guest now - finally looked relaxed.

After dropping André off at the bus station we returned to the airport. We still had several hours to kill before departure. The terminal building was a big shed, not particularly clean and worst of all, not air-conditioned, therefore hot and humid. The waiting area swarmed with all kinds of crawling insects - the bugs which we didn't see on the jungle trail appeared to be teeming here. We also discovered - to our dismay - that the cafeteria was closed for repairs, and there was no other outlet for drinks. In front of the building we saw a vendor selling lemonade from a beaten-up container, but his make-shift set-up left serious doubts about the purity of the water he had used for making the drink. We didn't dare quench our thirst with his beverage.

After a couple of hours in this steam bath our thirst became agonizing. We were waiting with nervous impatience for our incoming flight. At last, a big plane landed. The first one, while we were there. But it pulled off the runway at a distance from the terminal and remained parked there. We still hoped that it was our flight. No such luck. An attendant told us that it was an American cargo plane, and parked there for unloading.

Irene had a mental flash. She decided to go out and ask the pilots for drinks. Nobody stopped her as she walked to the plane. Its ladder had already been lowered, and Irene climbed up. She reappeared after ten minutes carrying a couple of coke bottles which she passed on to me.

"These are for you. I have already had my share on the plane - she said - the pilots were friendly and generous as Americans should be."

Coke had never been my favourite drink but this time it tasted delicious.

Some time later, the Lima plane arrived and we finally took off. As the aircraft made a sweeping turn toward the Andes Mountains looming in the distance, we had our last glimpse of the mighty Amazon below us.

January 1977.

## 75

### MACHU PICCHU

In 1975 I met a young Canadian couple on Rio's Copacabana beach. They had just finished touring South America on their honeymoon. I asked them what they liked most during their trip.

"Machu Picchu - the lost city of the Incas!" Was their unhesitating answer.

Listening to their enthusiastic description of the famous ruins, I became hooked and decided to visit the site as soon as I had a chance.

That occasion arrived sooner than I expected. Less than a year later I changed jobs and was able to take a long break between the old and new positions. Irene and I decided to tour Columbia and Peru for a month. The second leg of the tour was to include a two-day stay at Machu Picchu.

When we arrived in Cusco, in Central Peru, the usual starting point for the tour, I immediately tried to arrange a hotel reservation for the archaeological site. It wasn't easy. There was only a small, 16 room tourist hotel next to the ruins, and it had a waiting list. At that time there were no tourist facilities in Agues Calientes at the foot of the mountain.

The problem of securing room reservation was aggravated by the lack of a phone line to Machu Picchu. The radio communication that was used was temperamental and unreliable. However, we were lucky. Two days later the Tourist Bureau notified us that a room would be available on the following day.

We took the antiquated tourist train in the early morning. It was pulled - with great effort - by a sad looking, ancient, puffing steam locomotive. At the edge of the town the tracks began to climb in a zigzag fashion up the steep side of the mountain flanking Cusco. Our decrepit wagon was overloaded with anxious day-tourists and locals returning to Ollantaitambo - a major town on the route. Our passage was made frightening by cracking noises from time to time. The locomotive painfully dragged the train to the first switchback where it stopped for a well deserved rest. Then it began to push it to the next switchback. This manoeuvre was repeated four times. An hour later we were still above Cusco but at a bird's view elevation.

Finally we reached the pass. From there the locomotive surged ahead in an apparently happier mood. We were rolling downhill toward the Urubamba River. After following this turbulent stream through the Sacred Valley for a couple of hours, we arrived at Puentes Ruinas - the railway station of Machu Picchu.

Our large group of tourists was transferred to waiting busses. The long climb to the ruins began. The unpaved road continuously switched back and forth for 8 km on the steep mountain side as the railroad left Cusco. The air in the non-air-conditioned bus became very stuffy. Our labouring vehicle moved too slowly to provide sufficient natural ventilation.

At last we reached the hotel located next to the archaeological site. We checked in, and then joined the noisy group of fellow tourists who formed a queue at the entrance to the ruins. When we finally passed through the gate, the beauty of the place took my breadth away. The lost city of the Incas sits on a narrow saddle between two peaks ( Picchus in Spanish). Machu (the old) towered behind us, while Huayana (the young) soared on the far side of the ruins. Both flanks of the saddle slope precipitously to the silvery ribbon of the Urubamba River that makes a hairpin turn around Huayana Picchu. On the other side of the stream looms a series of peaks covered with emerald green forest. Their lush colour strikingly contrasts with the azure blue of the sky.

But the scenery imparted only part of the magnificence of the place. The ruins of the ancient city on the sloping saddle were just as impressive. The perfectly carved stonework temples, palaces and towers separated by numerous long, carved stone staircases, fountains and cascading water channels, the multitude of agricultural terraces cut into the mountain side, and the llamas grazing peacefully here and there provided an unforgettable view.

As a whole, it was one of the most spectacular sights I had ever seen.

We spent the next few hours visiting the various highlights of the ruins listed in our guidebook.

By 2.00 p.m. the crowd thinned out. The day-tourists began to return to the busses and head for the railway station on their way back to Cusco. The two of us, and the few other lucky individuals who were staying overnight, returned to the hotel. After lunch Irene and I resumed our exploration of the site now devoid of people. The ruins had gained an extra dimension: eerie silence. Now I could fully appreciate the advice of my Rio acquaintances who suggested the overnight stay for the full enjoyment of the ancient city in a tourist-free ambiance.

Later in the afternoon we climbed the small peak behind the Temple of the Sun to watch the sunset. While sitting on its top, we heard a whistle blowing but didn't pay any attention to it. When the red disc of the sun had dipped behind the Western ridge we headed back to the entrance. So near to the Equator there is no dusk. It was nearly dark by the time we reached the gate. We found it locked and realized that we were trapped in the ruins.

'How could we get out from here?' I wondered. The gate and the fences flanking it were too high to climb over. One fence ended at the rim of a small canyon with an impenetrable looking jungle at its bottom and the other wall shouldered a vertical rock face. Escape was impossible. The idea of spending the night in the open - at an elevation of 2,250 m - obviously didn't appeal to us.

We mounted a little knoll near the gate from where we could see the hotel. There were several tourists on the well-lit terrace sitting around tables and sipping drinks. Irene and I started to shout and wave our arms. The distance was over one hundred metres, and it was nearly dark. I wasn't sure if they could hear or see us. We continued our signalling. Finally, somebody began to pay attention and turned toward us. Our shouting and gesticulation became more frantic. The person got up and entered the hotel. The rest of the guests continued to ignore us.

An attendant came out of the hotel and headed toward the ruin's gate. 'He must be the one with the key'- we rejoiced. He was. He opened the door for us. We were greatly relieved. But before I could thank our saviour, the man burst into a long litany of reproaches in Spanish. I didn't understand a word of it but guessed the substance. The attendant angrily pointed at the sign on the gate that we had ignored going in and couldn't read now in the darkness. It probably stated that the site closed at sunset. The whistle that we had heard but ignored was likely the last-call.

The other hotel guests didn't reproach us. They just laughed at our misadventure.



*Huayna Picchu, at the rear of the lost city of the Incas*

The following morning, at 6.30, we were at the gate waiting to enter and watch the sunrise from the same knoll we had observed the sunset the night before (the small peak on the left hand side on the photo above). The dour-looking gatekeeper showed up after seven. We missed the sunrise. However, the main point of our program was to climb the majestic sugar cone of Huayna Picchu which dominated the ruins. We wanted to enjoy the excellent view from its top. The climb was claimed to be challenging, and it was recommended that it be done before the day became too hot.

The side of the mountain facing us appeared almost vertical. However, the Incas had cut a chain of steep steps to the top. The stairway didn't have hand rails. This made climbing dangerous and it wasn't recommended for the giddy. We proceeded. It took almost an hour to reach the top. After enjoying the superb view of the ruins in solitude - there were no other tourists in view anywhere - on the mountain or in the ruins below - we investigated the small terraces and nooks of the peak. At one of the terrace floors Irene ran across a large cavity. As she looked into it, she screamed:

"There is a corpse down there!"

As I hurried to her and stared into the hole, we saw two human legs clad in blue jeans lying at the bottom, perhaps two metres below us. The rest of the body was hidden from view by a ledge in the wall. As we kept watching, the 'corpses' legs suddenly pulled out of sight. A few seconds later a woman emerged from under the ledge followed by a little girl. We - stunned - watched them as they laboriously climbed out of the pit. They were wearing badly worn pants and cheap looking blouses - no jackets or anoraks. The pair reached the rim and stood in front of us trembling and looking miserable. The woman uttered in American English:

"It was terribly cold during the night. I thought we'd freeze to death."

She told us that she and her 10 year old daughter were from Boston. They couldn't get a room in the hotel (or perhaps couldn't afford one) but wanted to see the sunrise from Huayna Picchu. They made the climb to the peak in the afternoon and stayed on top overnight. They didn't expect the freezing cold of the early morning hours. At that time, hoping to find some protection, they climbed down into the hollow. They found it equally ice-cold. They couldn't sleep, and had felt too miserable to come up and watch the sunrise - the purpose of their venture.

While talking, the woman held the girl's hand with one hand and her own pants with the other. In explanation she told us that during the climb her belt had snapped and she'd had to throw it away. Now she was forced to hold the pants to prevent them from dropping.

"And how will you descend from here when you need both hands to hold on to the rocks?" I asked her.

She just shrugged her shoulders.

"I will manage somehow." She said.

I felt sorry for her in this predicament. I took off my belt and handed it to her - hoping that my shorts would stay on. Standing in the sunshine the two unlucky adventurers began to warm up. After they stopped trembling, they declared that they were ready to descend. We wished them a good return trip and said goodbye.

We stayed on the top for some time - enjoying the magnificent scenery and taking pictures. When we had enough of the superb view, we started down on the scary Inca stairs. The descent was even harder than the climb. About halfway to the base there was a side trail which lead to a double cave - called the Temple of the Moon - located on the other side of the cone of the mountain. The cave was supposed to have some Inca remnants in its interior.

We followed the trail which soon became a low tunnel in an otherwise impenetrable jungle of vegetation. Our progress slowed to a crawl. Soon we were forced to move on all fours. The bushes were tearing our clothes and scratching our skin. There wasn't any breeze and we were sweating like pigs in the stuffy heat. Finally, not knowing how far ahead the goal was, we gave up and turned back.

At the start of the side trip we passed an oil barrel full of water collected from a thin stream dripping down the rock face. On the way back we stopped by the barrel, stripped and submerged ourselves into the refreshing water. It was very tight inside the barrel for the two of us but we enjoyed the dip enormously.

Back in the hotel my belt and a 'thank you note' attached to it were waiting for us. The woman and her daughter, however, weren't around any longer.

An armada of busses had moved in with a fresh contingent of day-tourists. We didn't join the daily invasion of the site but stayed on the hotel terrace until it was time to return to the railway station. As the busses began their descent, a bunch of local barefoot urchins started to sprint down the mountain on a trail which cut through the hairpins of the road. They met the buses at every turn - banging on the sides of the vehicles each time. Unbelievably, they succeeded in arriving to the bottom station at the same time as we did. Although the running distance was several kilometres shorter than the 8 km distance covered by the bus, still it was a heroic race. Most tourists expressed their appreciation with generous tips. I think these urchins made more money than the bus drivers.

By the evening we were in Cusco. The unforgettable adventure was over.

January 1977.

## 76

### THE HYDRO POLE

It was Friday afternoon. The work week was over. I was on my way to home, driving leisurely on Hwy 20 from Sorel to Montreal. The traffic was very light. I was thinking about the coming weekend what we had planned to spend at our friend, Klára's cottage on a lake in the Eastern Townships.

The sky was mainly blue although some ominous dark clouds were moving in from the South. A thunderstorm was approaching. I wondered if I should get out of its path by taking the tunnel to the North Shore not far ahead. Before I reached the turnoff, however, the first large, lazy droplets began to splash on the windshield. On the hot pavement the drops evaporated instantaneously, on the glass, however, they formed a messy, slimy blur with the dust - invisible until now. The wipers - annoyingly - were unable to clear the film.

Remembering that following a dry spell the rain usually forms a similar slimy film on the pavement, I slowed down to 50 from 70 miles/hr. There were no cars either ahead or behind me, nevertheless, I decided to move into the slower lane.

When I turned the steering wheel, I realized with alarm that the car wasn't responding. Instead, its rear began to skid sideways. I tried to counterattack the slide by turning the front wheels in the opposite direction to no avail. The spin continued. I watched the road and the countryside go past around me in slow motion, as if in a dream. The spinning vehicle was still moving at a considerable speed but now at an angle to the axis of the road. It swerved off the pavement onto the shoulder then into the weedy meadow while continuing to spin.

There was no ditch in this section of the road which would stop the car. But there was something worse in the vehicle's path - a high tension electric pole. It was more robust - larger in diameter and taller - than ordinary light poles; it formed part of a high tension transmission line.

The tail end of the car - the middle of the rear bumper - hit the pole with an ear-shattering din. The pole rammed halfway into the trunk while the vehicle continued its spinning momentum, now pivoting around the pole as a fixed axis.

At the moment of first impact my body was plastered against the back of the seat and my head was nailed to the head rest. The centrifugal force then threw me sideways. As my head slid off the head rest, while still being pressed against it, my scalp tore open. My knee hit something under the control panel which precipitated a sharp pain in the joint. My head banged into the frame of the door with great impact. If it had been the glass pane of the window, the impact would have probably shattered it. I passed out.

When I revived - I don't know how much later - I was still reclining in the car seat. I felt warm blood trickling down my neck. My knee hurt and my head was ready to explode from the pain. By now the rain had stopped, I must have lain unconscious for quite sometime. There were people outside the car. They were talking to me - switching from French to English and back. But I was too dazed to be able to answer in either tongue - I just moaned.

As I was told afterward, these folks - seeing my bleeding head injury - tried to prevent me from falling back into coma. They knew that an ambulance was on its way, so they - wisely - didn't attempt to remove me from the wreck.

Finally, the ambulance pulled up. I was still half comatose as they put me on a stretcher. The vehicle pulled out with sirens wailing. I was lying on my back. The wound on my scalp hurt badly at each bump in the road, and even more on the poorly designed, or maintained driveway of the emergency entrance of Longueuil General Hospital.

The emergency room was crowded with accident victims. Apparently, the storm raised havoc on the roads. But I was taken care of immediately. The staff took some X-ray pictures of my head and of my knee. After some delay, I was rolled into the surgery, and a doctor cleaned the head wound and sewed up the gash.

“Since you have no broken bones, you can go home as soon as your head wound is dressed.” The surgeon said while hurrying to another accident victim.

A few minutes later the nurse completed the bandaging. She told me that I could leave. I slid off the table with apprehension and staggered out of the operating room.

In the corridor, Irene, Andy and André, a friend from our street, met me. The police had called her; André who happened to be visiting, offered to drive them to the hospital.

I was still in shock and felt miserable. I leaned against the wall of the corridor, and then began to slide down to the floor before fainting for good. Irene raised the alarm.

Nurses rushed to me and lifted me onto a stretcher. I rested there for half an hour before I felt ready to get up and leave the hospital supported by Irene.

Next morning my body felt completely numb, as if its every muscle had been spent. My knee still hurt but I had only a minor headache.

Outside, it was a beautiful summer day. Despite my general weakness, I felt that we shouldn't waste such a pleasant weekend at home, but should go to Klára's cottage - as originally planned. I felt that I could take the trip as long as I didn't drive.

On the way we stopped at the wrecking yard where my car had been towed after the accident.

We found the Toyota in a dismal state. Not only was its rear end completely smashed in, but the whole body looked distorted. The doors were jammed either shut or ajar. The car was a total loss. She had been a good car. I had had her for six years. I felt sorry to lose her. I left the yard disheartened.

In the cottage I spent the next two days lying on the swimming deck. I couldn't go into the water because of my head wound, and couldn't walk because of my knee injury. Anyhow, I felt too lethargic for any activity.



*Andy with the wrecked car*

A couple of weeks later, Hydro Quebec notified me that the electric pole that I had hit had to be replaced because of the damage from the accident. The cost, \$200, had been duly paid by my auto insurance company - the note said.

July 1977.



## 77

### THE GRAPES OF WRATH

I slowed the car to have a better look at the gorge below as we crossed the bridge. The sight was splendid: nearly vertical cliff walls, a silvery creek at the rocky bottom, some larger pools farther upstream, one surrounded with flowery bushes. The shady canyon, especially the ponds, looked cool and tempting after several hours of driving up and down the hot, swerving roads of the mountainous Peloponnesus.

„Let's have lunch down there.“ I proposed to Irene and Andy.

There was no objection. I parked the car on the shoulder, retrieved the food, and we walked back to the bridge. It appeared that we weren't the first party to negotiate the way down the gorge. The trace of a footpath led into the canyon. The descent required care, but it was not particularly difficult. We grabbed the arching branches of the bushes, and lowered ourselves from ledge to ledge.

‘It will be trickier to come back when the same branches won't accommodate us.’ I thought.

The bottom of the gorge felt pleasantly cool - as expected - after the sweltering heat of the road. After a quick, refreshing dip in the clear pool we unpacked our sandwiches. We were not particularly hungry. About an hour earlier we had purchased a basket of grapes from a road-side vendor. The fruit was ripe, delicious, and we ate all of it on our way.

After lunch we had another dip in the pool. I didn't feel it was as pleasant as the first time. My stomach began to bother me. As we got dressed - ready to return to the car - I suddenly became violently ill, and returned the contents of my stomach in one pass. At least that's what I thought until an immediate second attack of retching, followed by a third one, and on and on, endlessly. Where was all this stuff coming from? I couldn't fathom. Simultaneously, I developed severe abdominal cramps. The pain came in waves of colic, followed by an onslaught of diarrhea. It was explosive and wouldn't stop. I thought that I was going to die. Actually, I wanted to; the pain was excruciating.

Between attacks Irene told me that Andy had also fallen sick. Although, he was lying next to me, this information barely penetrated my consciousness. The world outside my hurting body almost ceased to exist. Fortunately, Andy was apparently less severely afflicted.

By now, it was evident that we both suffered from food poisoning brought on by those damned grapes. They had obviously been recently sprayed, and we didn't wash them before eating. I must have had a bunch loaded with poisonous pesticide, while Andy's pickings contained fewer toxins. Irene, lucky as always, had eaten only clean fruit.

Many hours passed. The gorge became enwrapped in a permanent shadow. It was getting late in the afternoon. Although the attacks of vomiting and diarrhea were less frequent by now, I still felt dizzy, lethargic and exhausted. Irene began to plead with me to get up, leave the gorge, and drive to Olympia, the next city and our destination for the day. I felt that it was beyond my strength to comply. The idea of climbing the cliff wall made me sick instantly. I begged her to leave me there for the night and to return and pick me up on the following day. By that time, I hoped to recover, or die. I didn't care which. However, she refused to listen to me.

Not being able to stand the barrage of her insistent begging anymore, I finally got onto my feet, and began to walk toward the spot where we had descended. A new attack of vomiting and diarrhea ensued right away. Mortally exhausted, I collapsed back on the rock bed. But Irene would not give up and compelled me to restart and continue on the path up the cliff. The idea of climbing this rock wall looked to me as formidable as attempting to scale the Matterhorn.

We started to ascend; Andy first, followed by me, while Irene closed the rear of the party and acted as pusher. Every move - grabbing and pulling on the rocks and vegetation, stepping onto a higher ledge - was complete agony. Fortunately, no attack of vomiting or discharge at the lower end occurred during those dreary moments. There was probably not enough energy left in my body to support simultaneous activities. From time to time Irene had to push me, otherwise, I would have slid back into the canyon.

After the torture of the seemingly never ending climb, we reached the road. I staggered to the car and collapsed onto the passenger seat. During the hour long drive I had to get out a couple of times. Luckily, there was very little traffic on the road, and I didn't become a public spectacle.

In Olympia Irene found a little hotel to check into, while Andy and I crouched in the car. When everything was arranged, the two of us walked into the foyer and up to the room with as much dignity as we could master, while Irene hauled the luggage behind us. The old man sitting at the reception desk looked at our group with appreciation and obvious envy. This luggage-hauling routine must have recalled to him the golden times of his youth. Alas, in these modern days, the exhibition of such pure machismo is rare, even in Greece.

But this buoyant impression must have been sadly spoiled when the old man saw the same docile woman leaving the two men behind in the room, and going out alone for supper in the darkness of the Greek night.

July 1978.

## 78

### TUNISIA ON \$0 a DAY

The contract between Intersteel Ltd. and the Algerian National Gas and Oil Corp. allowed us, Canadian consultants, to stay and work in the country on tourist visas. This arrangement made possible a quick evacuation of personnel in case of a political emergency. The standard procedure - working visa - required an exit permit from the police prior to leaving the country. Issuing this could take several days, denying the possibility of a fast exit.

The tourist visa, however, had a drawback - to the company, not to the consultants. It had a short, three-month validity. This meant that every three months all Canadians had to leave Algeria for 48 hours to renew their visas abroad in an Algerian embassy or consulate. The expense of the trip was reimbursed by the company, paid into our Canadian bank accounts.

For our first visa trip I choose Tunisia. This was a silly choice according to my Canadian colleagues. They went to 'more civilized places', like Marseilles, Majorca etc., for the renewal. But we wanted to see more of the Arab world.

We, Irene, Andy and myself, planned to stay in Tunisia for three days. Since Algerian regulations didn't allow the passage of Western currency through the country's border, I had asked my bank in Toronto to transfer \$2,000 to a Tunisian bank weeks prior to the trip. We landed in Tunis with only \$500 cash hidden on our bodies. Renting a car at the airport required a \$300 deposit. (Credit cards were not accepted in this part of the world in 1979). We were left with \$200.

We picked a nice hotel on the sea shore, had a good lunch, and then went into the city to find the bank where I had arranged the money transfer. Finding the bank wasn't a problem; receiving the funds, however, was another issue. The bank denied receiving any transfer to my name.

„There is no problem” - the bank manager tried to reassure me - „we will wire your request to your Canadian bank, and if they act immediately, the money should be here in 7 to 10 days.”

„You are not serious. We are only here for three days. I need the money right away!” I exclaimed.

„C'est dommage, Monsieur. En ce cas je ne peux rien faire pour vous.” Was his curt answer.

We faced an emergency situation. We would not be allowed to re-enter Algeria without a visa. This could be issued only 48 hours after we applied for it. This was why we had intended to stay in Tunisia for three days.

Our reluctant solution was to move to a cheaper hotel and try to stretch the \$170 that we still had on hand.

It didn't work out that way. The hotel demanded full payment for the night even if we didn't stay. We were compelled to remain for the night. Consequently, our capital melted to about \$80. This amount had to cover another night in a hotel, the visa fees, gasoline for the rented car, and the remainder, about \$0, for two and a half day's food - a rather difficult proposition. I reviewed our sightseeing plan and reduced it to visiting the ruins of ancient Carthage on the first day, driving to Karouan, the famous pilgrim's site, on the second, and seeing the Medina, Tunis' bazaar, on the last day.

We found Tunisia far more westernized than Algeria. One could see signs here of the French cultural influence, consumer goods and tourists. This was probably due to the fact that Tunisians, unlike Algerians, didn't gain their independence after long years of bloody fighting what rendered anything French repulsive to the Algerians.

The ruins of ancient Carthage were disappointingly few and unimpressive. The Romans did a thorough job destroying everything after they'd conquered the city in 146 B.C. Only the naval port was left intact. It was a basin of the size of an Olympic swimming pool with two three-metre wide channels connecting it to the sea. Considering that at the time it accommodated the fleet of the mightiest Mediterranean power, it looked disappointingly small. No Canadian yachtsman of any reputation would try to enter and dock in a marina of this size.

The ruins of the Roman times were better: beautiful mosaics, impressive municipal baths. These made the visit worthwhile.

The next day we were on our way to Karouan. The road followed a Roman aqueduct for a long stretch. Its structure was still in relatively good condition. Where could the source of water be? - One wondered - the countryside was completely flat as far as one could see.

Karouan is a very important religious destination for the Moslems. Three visits to its holy places are equivalent to one to Mecca. In Tunisia, contrary to Algeria, infidels were allowed to enter mosques, though some sections were restricted to them.

The Grand Mosque's structure is unique. Its ceiling is supported by hundreds of marble columns scavenged from Roman and Byzantine ruins, which were installed unmodified. Since the material, style and size of these columns differed considerably, the hodgepodge was astonishing. The random collection of slim and heavy, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns resting on round, square and multifaceted pedestals of varying heights to compensate for the different lengths of the columns must have been a construction nightmare. But the end result was impressive. It provided an illustrative history of ancient architecture.

We spent the night in a roadside inn that probably was considered substandard by most Moslem pilgrims. Still it was better than sleeping in the car. It cost only \$10. We had no supper.



*The Medina*

In the morning we skipped breakfast. On returning to Tunis we picked up our visas which reduced our cash supply to double zero. Lunch was out. But since upon returning the car, I expected half of our deposit to be refunded, we could look forward to a splendid supper.

Our last sightseeing stop, the Medina - a covered bazaar - was crowded and noisy. What we found most annoying was the presence of food vendors everywhere. The abundance of inviting, aromatic food, and the pushiness of the vendors felt like a direct insult, since our by now completely empty pockets didn't allow any indulgence in the earthly pleasures of eating.

Finally, we were able to return the car to the airport.

„You can pick up the unused part of the deposit after you check into the international departure lounge.” The desk clerk told us.

„Why there?!” I exclaimed.

„Foreign exchange regulations.” He answered.

There was nothing else to do but check in as soon as possible. The money was returned to us as promised - after we passed through the passport-control. However, we discovered - to our extreme chagrin - that there were no eating places or food concessions in the departure lounge. To re-exit into the more civilized section of the air terminal with the departure stamp already in our passports was impossible. The rumbling of my stomach was even louder and more painful with all this non-spendable money burning in my pocket. We waited impatiently for the flight to take off, and the advertised in-flight meal.

That brought another bitter surprise.

„Meals will be served only on the second leg of the flight - after leaving Algiers - when alcoholic restrictions will no longer apply.” The stewardess announced. (This was an Egyptian Airline's Cairo-Tunis-Algiers-Rabat flight).

When we landed in Algiers, we weren't even surprised to find the airport restaurant - the only possible food source in the terminal - closed for renovation. What else could one expect with our luck? Fortunately, our car, left at the airport, was still there, and it even started. The drive from the airport to our home in Blida took an hour through the back country where one wouldn't take a chance on stopping and looking for food during the night.

When we finally arrived home we attacked the refrigerator as a pack of starving wolves.

So after all, my Canadian co-patriots' opinions about wise and less wise choices for visa trips weren't that far off the mark.

April 1979.

## 79

### A GOOD DEED

The thunderstorm, which had been raging over the hills north of the city for sometime, was getting closer. The flash of lighting was followed almost instantly by roaring thunder. Our car was parked at the edge of the beach. We tried to reach it in a hurry, before the rain came upon us. The three of us, Irene, Andy and myself, were visiting Genoa on a day tour from Isolalunga, where we were staying with my cousin. It was already late afternoon, so, we were not particularly upset by the turn in the weather. It only provided a bang-up ending to the day.

A sudden gust of wind arrived, and with it large droplets of rain began to hit the pavement, evaporating instantaneously on the hot asphalt. We luckily reached the car before the sprinkle turned into a deluge. It felt cosy sitting safely inside the Renault while the downpour pounded on the roof like a mad drummer. It would not have been wise to start out in a storm like that, so we had a snack while waiting.

Suddenly, a human figure appeared through the curtain of rain. He was a young man of perhaps twenty. He wore only a white shirt - completely soaked - and equally wet swimming trunks. He was barefoot. His damp, dishevelled, blond hair hanging into his face channelled the copious rainwater running from the top of his bare head. He approached my side of the car, obviously wanting something.

I lowered the window just enough to hear him out without letting too much rain into the car interior.

"Can I help you?" I asked in English.

He answered in fluent English with a faint German accent.

"I was robbed last night, I wonder if you could help me?"

I looked at his miserable appearance - soaking wet and apparently cold - and I impulsively invited him to get into the car. He refused saying that it didn't make any difference to him anymore; he was as wet as one can ever be, and he would only mess up our car if he got in. However, upon Irene's insistence he finally came inside. Then he told his story.

"I have been hitchhiking from Köln, Germany. Last night I slept here, on the beach. In the morning my backpack, shoes and jeans which had been lying beside me were gone. I lost all my money, traveller checks, passport - everything. I would like to phone my parents but have no money for a long distance call. I wonder if you could lend me some cash. I will return it to you when I get some funds from my parents."

His story didn't sound veritable although his open, rather childish face seemed to radiate sincerity.

"Did you see the police? Can't you call your parents collect?" I asked him.

"I reported the theft to the police but they wouldn't help me. One cannot call collect from an Italian public phone. I swear that I am telling you the truth. I will give you my watch as a security deposit - he had an expensive looking, golden-coloured watch on his wrist - until I return the loan."

I still couldn't buy his story. It was late afternoon, what had he been doing all day? That he could not find a way to call his parents didn't sound believable. I looked at Irene. I saw by her expression that this guy reminded her, as he did me, of our son, Peter. He was almost the same age and perhaps as miserable at that moment back in Canada. She nodded to me in approval.

I pulled out ten dollars and gave it to the young man. He promised to return it to me if I gave him my address.

"No, I don't need it back and I don't want your watch either. Send me a greeting card sometime when you return home. That will convince me that your story was true." I said to him.

Thanking me, he left the car and disappeared into the still pouring rain.

That night, back at my cousin's place, I told the story to my cousin, Franz. He burst out laughing.

"Suckers are born every day. Only an American tourist would believe such a simple-minded, common, hippy story. The guy is now happily smoking hash bought with your money and his whole commune is laughing at your gullibility." He said.

I mused over his words and said sheepishly:

"You are probably right but I still feel that it was the right thing to do under the circumstances. Those ten dollars won't make me any poorer, and perhaps some day somebody will help me out at a bad moment."

The next morning Irene, Andy and I left for a day hike in the mountains near Limone. Upon reaching the top of the pass, before the road began to descend toward the town, we swerved off to a twisting side road - more like a mule path. We followed it up the mountain as far as the car would go. From there we continued on foot for a couple of hours, until we reached the ridge. The view from it made the hike worthwhile. On the south side, in the far distance, one saw the haze of the Mediterranean. Nearer, the valley was covered with a thick blanket of white cloud which slowly inched toward us. On the north side, the emerald green valley of Limone bathed in the noon sunshine.

The mountain ridge is the border between France and Italy. It was studded with military fortifications built around the turn of the century and unmanned for many decades. One could easily discern the frontier by drawing an imaginary line from one strong point to the next, above the network of supply roads leading to them. Today there was no sign of any patrol or other military presence on these peaceful mountains.

We explored one of the forts with its metre thick stone and concrete walls, empty gun platforms, and machine gun nests, while keeping a wary eye on the clouds creeping up on the south slope of the mountain.

When the fringe of the approaching white cotton cloud blanket reached the ridge, and the first patch tumbled over - to be dissolved immediately in the warmer air on the other side - we began to descend. We didn't want to be fogged in on the footpath or on the car track further down.

It turned out to be a race against time. The cloud was moving up with ever increasing speed. But we made our way to the car, and succeeded in driving down almost to the highway before the fog began to reduce the visibility to a marginal level.

The road at this spot was squeezed between a rock wall on one side, and a steep drop on the other. Upon driving through this bottleneck I suddenly heard a sharp, short whistling sound coming from the wall side. It was immediately followed by a second similar noise. The car started to tilt toward the rock wall.

'What the hell happened?'

I got out and saw, to my total dismay, that both tires on that side were completely flat. Each displayed a slit about an inch long in the outside wall. I retraced our path a few metres and found the object responsible for the damage. It was a razor sharp rock protrusion on the cliff wall, just a few inches above the road surface. While trying to avoid the precipice on the outside, I had inadvertently grazed against this natural scalpel and consecutively slashed both tires. The chance for something like this to happen was probably one in a million but it happened to me.

What were we going to do now? We had only one spare tire, and we were still on the mountain road, although not too far from the highway.

I drove on the flat tires until I found a wider section of the road in which to change one of the damaged wheels. After a short breathing pause I began to walk toward the highway rolling the flat tire ahead of me. Irene and Andy remained with the car. The going was easy, the wheel rolled downhill. Coming back would be more strenuous but then I could call on Andy to help - I thought.

Luckily, I didn't have to wait long beside the sparsely travelled highway. A Fiat came by and stopped. The driver, like most people in this border region, spoke both Italian and French, so we communicated in the latter. Seeing my predicament, he offered to take me to the next gas station - not far away. There he waited to hear the verdict of the attendant.

The prognosis was not good. The tire could not be fixed, and this gas station didn't carry spares for French cars. (This happened before Common Market standardization.) He suggested driving to Limone to find a tire. My driver offered to take me there even though it was beyond his turn-off point.

After a half hour drive we reached the town and entered a big service station. The mechanic shook his head.

"We and all the other garages here don't carry replacement tires for Renault. French drivers prefer service from their dealers. France is just across the ridge."

I knew that but at that moment it was far beyond my reach. Seeing my desperation, the mechanic offered a temporary solution.

"I can install a liner sleeve and an inner tube in your tubeless tire. It will work if you don't drive at high speeds or for long distances."

I happily accepted his offer. My voluntary driver was still waiting, and when the repair was complete, he offered to drive me back to the pass. My gratefulness was boundless. That man sacrificed several hours of his time to help me out. How troublesome would it have been to hitch-hike back to that forlorn place so late in the day? To the great relief of my family my benefactor delivered me and the wheel right to our car.

I was thinking about what I said to my cousin Franz the night before trying to justify my apparent gullibility.

"A good deed tends to bring a rich harvest."

After the events of that afternoon, the moral of the proverb seemed to be more righteous. It could not be just a coincidence. Or was it?

By the way, we never received a postcard from the young German.

August 1979.



## 80

### THE LAW BREAKER

“Let’s go to an Algerian beach for a change.” I suggested to my wife and son. „I had heard that the one on the other side of Sidi Ferruch is a nice one.”

We were tired of Les Trois Ilots, the favourite beach of Blida’s expatriate community. So this time we headed in the opposite direction, toward Algiers. As we passed Cape Sidi, near our destination, we ran into a parking problem. We finally had to walk a mile to reach the beach. Its strip of sand was much wider and many times longer than the one we were familiar with. Still it was densely crowded. There were black heads everywhere, as if a genie had dusted the shore with masses of poppy seeds. We set up our parasol in a less crowded section at an appreciable distance from the water’s edge.

Although there was only a gentle breeze, the sea was rough. Large waves were breaking amidst white foam at about 50 metres from the shore. There must have been a storm out in the sea during the night. The flagpole, a standard feature of Algerian public beaches, flew a yellow banner indicating: ‘Swimming with caution’. A green flag signified ‘Safe to swim’; while a red flag warned that ‘No swimming is allowed’. Although the shore was packed with people, there were very few waders and even fewer swimmers in the water. The Algerians preferred the stillness of the sea of sand to the angry waters of the Mediterranean.

After five minutes of lying on the sand I’d had enough of it, and decided to swim. I passed the flagpole and the paramilitary in their red trunks sitting around it. These young men acted as law enforcers and lifeguards on beaches. As all Algerians in uniform (even if it was only a skimpy regulation swimming suit), the youngsters were sombre looking - one couldn’t doubt that they took their tasks extremely seriously.

I entered the water and swam out to the breaking surf. I tried to swim through the white, boiling turmoil but the breaking waves threw me back and carried me halfway to the shore. I tried again, and again. Finally, after many frustrating attempts, I made it. I was on the other side of the breakers. Here, the waves rolled in long undulating swells and it felt great to float on top of them.

When I’d had enough, I turned toward the shore and waited for a big wave to carry me in. As I was lifted up by the crests of a smaller wave, I noticed that a red banner was now flying on the pole. I also saw a crowd of Algerians standing at the edge of the water and watching the surf intensely. I began to have an uncomfortable premonition about the scene.

Finally, a large wave approached. I began to swim at full force ahead of it to facilitate riding on it when it reached me. At last, I was upon its crest. As I was propelled through the surf zone, I saw the black heads of three swimmers struggling to break through the breakers. Carried by the wave, I quickly passed the swimmers. A few metres farther I was left behind by the wave in churning, foamy eddies. I looked back. I saw the three swimming heads heading toward me. They had apparently given up their efforts, and were now heading toward shore.

Finally, I reached the shallow water. I waded the last few metres. My premonition grew. I realized that I was the centre of attention of the couple of hundred onlookers crowded around the flagpole. The moment I stepped on dry sand, a paramilitary quickly approached me and said something in Arabic that I didn’t understand. Then the young man indicated with his hand:

„You stay here!”

Before I could question his order, the three swimmers reached the shore behind me and joined us. They were also paramilitary, still breathing hard from the struggle in the surf for who knows how long. Only now did the thought strike me that they were in the water trying to reach and save me. Their swimming performance wasn't that remarkable despite their efforts - I left them behind even coming out. The young men probably felt a loss of face in front of the crowd. No wonder they stared at me in a very unfriendly way. One of them, probably the highest in rank, positioned himself right in front of me, and solemnly declared in French:

„Vous êtes mis aux arrêts, Monsieur! (You are under arrest, Sir!) You violated the law by swimming when it was forbidden. We will escort you to the police station.”

I realized that any argument with these frustrated young men would be futile. The spokesman and one of his subordinates stepped beside me, one on each side, and we began to march. We walked along the edge of the water toward a distant building which was - I assumed - the police station. I also noticed, to my concern, that about two dozen spectators followed a few steps behind us. As we moved along, more and more onlookers joined the procession. It soon became a noisy crowd. Apparently, an argument had arisen between some of them and my escorts about the right to arrest a foreigner over a minor violation of a regulation.

„The foreigners are guests in our country and we are supposed to display hospitality toward them.” One said.

However, another expressed a different viewpoint:

„These foreigners should learn to respect our laws, and if they don't, we have to teach them!” He said.

In no time the crowd divided into two hostile camps of about the same size; those - for, and those - against, as they began to shout at each other. The ruckus brought only more spectators and players to join this mad farce. It became unendurable to me. I stopped walking, sat down on the sand, and told my escorts that I wasn't going to take one step more until they'd dispersed the crowd.

That task was beyond the power of the two guys. By now the crowd was an angry mob. They surrounded us and started to push each other and the paramilitary while shouting and screaming obscenities. Nobody paid any attention to me any more as I was sitting on the ground. I got down on all fours, and just like in a Chaplin movie, crawled among the trampling bare feet until I was out of the crowd. Then I sat down on the sand at a respectable distance and watched the turmoil.

Unexpectedly a uniformed policeman appeared out of nowhere. He blew his whistle a few times, and the melee stopped. The policeman with the help of the two paramilitaries started to disperse the crowd. The men, so belligerent and loud until now, became quiet, and turned meekly around to walk back where they had come from. They'd had their weekend excitement and now apparently were ready to join their spouses or girl friends to tell them about the heroic roles they'd played in this international incident. Nobody paid any attention to me any more until the policeman asked the red-trunked boys about the cause of the disturbance. Then the paramilitary remembered me. Our march toward the police station resumed but this time my escort also included the uniformed policeman.

At the station they led me into an office where an important looking person was sitting at his desk and listening to the live broadcast of a soccer match. The man reluctantly turned off the apparatus, and began to hear out the report of the paramilitary delivered in French. The account was quite objective. My only comment was that when I had entered the water the flag was yellow and I didn't see it change, I was too busy fighting the waves.

The officer pulled a form from the drawer of his desk and began to note my name, age, citizenship, place of work etc. Then he looked up at my three escorts, still standing beside me, and raised his eyebrows. They got the point. They saluted and walked out of the office. The officer put his pen down and invited me to sit across from him at his table. He asked a few questions about the type of work I was doing. Then he stood up, shook hands, and dismissed me.

„Next time you should pay more attention to the colour of the beach flag.” He said in farewell.

I walked out of the station sure that after throwing the report into the waste basket this gentleman eagerly switched the radio back to the soccer match.

When I rejoined my wife and son still resting under the parasol, my wife’s sympathetic comment was:

„That was quite a mess you got yourself into. I kept wondering how you’d get out of it?”

August 1979.

## 81

### THE COLLISION

The Algiers-Oran highway runs parallel with the sea shore on the edge of an escarpment. There are many small and large coves at the foot of the cliffs which often enclose tiny, sandy beaches. These are unfortunately mostly inaccessible from the road above. We had been looking for a possible route down for some time without success. At last, there was a dirt track branching off the highway and curving down the escarpment toward the sea. We swerved onto it and descended to the shore. We ended up in a sandy little bay - ideal for a campsite - right under the sheer cliff.

We set up our tent. In the semi-darkness of the Mediterranean summer night after supper we watched the white fringes of the waves breaking gently on the sand just a few metres from us. It was very peaceful, and, apart from the low murmur of the waves, very quiet. The tranquillity was only occasionally interrupted by the roar of a car engine on the road above us. Then it became calm again.

Once again, we heard the increasing buzz of vehicles. Suddenly, there was a tremendous screeching noise followed by an ear shattering crash. Then it became quiet, deadly quiet. But the silence lasted only seconds before screaming started.

„It must have been a car crush or a head-on collision. Let's climb up and see!" I said to Andy.

We began to ascend the cliff. The rock wall was quite rugged but with many cracks and protrusions and small ledges which rendered the climb easy - even in semi darkness.

At the top of the rock wall we reached the highway. Across the road, there were two cars, or, rather, the wrecks of two cars lying halfway in the ditch. On the bank beside one of the vehicles lay a human body surrounded by three human figures. The three were gesticulating and screaming in Arabic. The tone of their voices suggested rage rather than pain. Occasionally they gave the prone body a kick. It wriggled in reflex and let out a deeply pained animal-like sound.

As we approached, I saw that the prostrate figure was a young man. His face was covered with blood and one of his arms was dangling at an unnatural angle which suggested broken bones. He might have also had some internal injuries. His body had probably been ejected from the car upon impact.

The standing figures were also young men. They looked unhurt - at least physically.

When the group finally noticed us, one of them explained in good French that the dirty dog - pointing at the injured - was driving on the wrong side of the road and now their beautiful car was a complete wreck. For this, they were going to kill the scum. Upon saying this, they closed up again on the lying man as if ready to carry out their threat.

They were stopped short by the screams of Irene stepping out of the darkness. She had apparently climbed the dirt road and arrived at that critical moment. When she saw the three men in a menacing pose above the wounded, she started to shout in English to stop them. The Arabs looked astonished at her - like someone out of this world. In Moslem countries women stay in the background and definitely do not shout at men determined to carry out Allah's justice. Especially not in English.

However, the men's confusion didn't last long. They told us plainly to mind our own business and go back where we came from. They were to stay with the wrecks - they said - until they get help in the morning. Otherwise, all dismantlable parts of the cars would be gone (the usual occurrence in Algeria).

„If the wounded doesn't survive the night, that will be Allah's will.” They said.

We couldn't do anything but to return to our tent. During the night I heard occasional shouting followed by painful screams indicating that Allah's will hasn't yet been fulfilled.

I woke in late morning on hearing the heavy rumbling of an approaching vehicle. I looked out of the tent and saw a truck descending on the dirt road toward us. I woke Andy and Irene and we dressed rapidly. By the time the vehicle had arrived in front of the tent, we were presentable enough to step out and meet it. There were two men in the cab and a couple more in the back. The man sitting beside the driver turned out to be the owner of the truck. He was a housing developer, as we learned later. He regularly used this cove to procure sand for his construction sites. He considered the cove his personal property - although in reality all the sea shore was state owned. He asked us - politely - to strike our tent and vacate 'his pit'.

When I asked about the wrecks and the gents up on the highway, the men said that they hadn't seen anything or anyone there.

The cars, the angry young men and the casualty - either dead or alive - were all gone by this time.

September 1979.

## 82

### IN THE HOGGAR

The New Years Eve party was still in full swing when we left, but we couldn't stay any longer. In the morning we were to take an early, 6:30 a.m.. flight to Tamanrasset, in Southern Algeria, where we were to join a group of Swiss tourists for a week long safari in the Hoggar Mountains. The airport was an hour's drive from us over bad country roads in daylight. How much more would it take in darkness? I had no idea. We planned to rest, and have some sleep before the strenuous drive.

We returned to our apartment and went to bed. Shouting soon started outside. Some female voices called for Andy. I looked out through the window and saw Wendy Gilson and a gang of other teenagers - Andy's friends. They wanted him back at the party.

The shouting wouldn't stop. Annoyed, I told Andy to go out and speak to them and explain why he had to leave, and to return right away. He stepped out. Irene and I fell asleep the moment the shouting stopped.

The sound of the alarm clock startled me. It felt like I had just gotten into bed just a moment ago. We both rose. Irene went over to wake Andy. She returned instantaneously - very disturbed.

"He isn't in his room! He hasn't even slept in his bed!"

I cursed under my breath. Andy knew when we were supposed to leave. We dressed and closed our bags. There was still no sign of our son. It was 5.00 a.m. - time to leave.

"Go back to the Emricks. He must still be partying." I told Irene while I began to carry our baggage to the car.

He wasn't there. The few very sloshed guests who were still hanging around said that they hadn't seen Andy or the other teens for hours.

"What the hell are we going to do? We are already late. Where could the gang be? On the roof of the building? Or in the hills next to us?" I had no idea.

My blood was boiling. We couldn't leave without him but what else could we do?

At that moment of extreme exasperation Andy showed up with a grin on his face. That smirk did it. My frustration and furore exploded. I hit his face with the flat of my hand though he was almost fifteen and had long outgrown such treatment. The violence sapped my outrage but Irene kept shouting at him and scolding him in the car for his reckless disobedience.

Tamanrasset is located 1,000 km south of Algiers, at the edge of the Hoggar region, right in the geographical centre of the Sahara. It lies on a plateau, at an altitude of 1,400 m; therefore it is not excessively hot even in summertime. Now it was winter, and the temperature was definitely chilly. The Hoggar, a mountainous area almost as large as France, is the home of the Tuaregs, who are known as the blue Arabs of the desert. Actually they are not Arabs but Berbers, descendants of the ancient inhabitants of North Africa.

After landing we had our second shock of the day. The Swiss tourist group, the one we were to join, hadn't arrived. Their safari had been cancelled. An airport representative advised us to go to the hotel - the only one in town - and check in, and wait for the Algerian Tourist Bureau's decision about our program.

Bureaucratic decisions used to take lots of time in Algeria. We spent the next two days sightseeing in the town while waiting impatiently for the Bureau's plan.

Tamanrasset is a scenic place. It is known as the 'Red Town' because of the colour of the mud used for constructing the houses. We walked the dusty, narrow streets stretching between the rows of sun baked, red adobe walls of the dwellings. They had no windows facing outside. We watched the veiled men in their blue robes and the colourfully dressed but veil-less women walking on the streets. These latter had big bunches of keys hanging from their belts denoting them as mistresses of their households. The men's domain was the boundless desert.

The following day was market day. The major items of trade were animals: camels, sheep and goats. Dozens and dozens of them. Most of the men attending the fair wore traditional dress, white or blue robes tightly held by a belt at the waist. They wore strange-looking large turbans, also white, blue or black, a characteristic telling of the Tuaregs' tribe. They usually carried a dagger in their belt fastened with a leather buckle, while a second belt studded with leather talismans - was thrown over their shoulders.

On the evening of the second day we were finally notified by the Tourist Office that a safari has been arranged for just the three of us. It would begin in the morning and follow the initial Swiss itinerary.

I received this news with some apprehension. The Hoggar excursion was to be a wilderness trip where we would be cut off from civilization for almost a week. I would have felt more comfortable as part of a larger group. However, this was still better than no trip at all.

In early morning, a shiny Toyota land-cruiser rolled up to the front of our hotel. The driver was a tall, lean Tuareg, dressed completely in black - robe, turban and veil - including his dark, reflecting sun glasses. One couldn't see his face at all. He introduced himself as Mohammed in good French. He would be our guide. I estimated that he was middle-aged, though because I couldn't see his face, this was just a wild guess.

His helper, Yusuf, the cook, was also dressed in black. But he wore no glasses, so we at least could see his eyes. He looked younger and friendlier than his elder. Unfortunately, he spoke only Tamaheq (Berber).

The land-cruiser looked overloaded with all the camping gear, food, water, a propane cylinder, etc. loaded on its top. It was, however, comfortable inside for four of us, but not for Irene. She was indisposed with a gastrointestinal problem.

As soon as we left Tamanrasset, we entered a stony desert. There was not a tree or a bush anywhere in sight, just the barren plateau, covered with millions of loose, baseball sized stones, evenly spread as if they had been salted by a giant.

Irene had an attack of diarrhea. We had to make an urgent stop. There was no roadside bush or even a larger boulder to hide behind. Sternly, in forceful Hungarian (that I translated into French and Mohamed into Berber), she ordered us, including the Tuaregs, to turn and look to the right while she squatted on the left of the vehicle. The all male company meekly followed her instructions. The procedure was repeated several times during the next few hours until she got rid off whatever was bothering her.

In the meantime we had reached higher altitude where the landscape became a tortured confusion of ancient, black lava streams, and dry river beds, interrupted with pinnacles of eroded hills surrounded by collars of crumbled rocks.



*In the Hoggar*

The going became slow on the twisty, sometimes steep, but always rough path. We passed the wreck of a Citroen. Mohammed remarked with noticeable malice that tourists who try to travel on these roads on their own, and in an ordinary car - with no knowledge of the terrain and without four-wheel drive and an extra-heavy suspension system - have a very poor chance of making it.

At one point we turned off the marked road. We continued on a barely visible track in the lava field, until we came upon a guelta. This is a narrow and not very deep canyon which normally carries water only after infrequent downpours. This one, however, had a chain of shiny ponds at its bottom surrounded by verdant vegetation. We happily climbed down the steep embankment, stripped, and enjoyed the refreshing water. In the meantime the Tuaregs prepared lunch beside the land-cruiser. When we returned, Jusuf served us hot tea by pouring it from the pot raised a metre above the cup as desert people usually do. Not one drop of the narrow stream of steaming liquid missed its target. They like their tea hot and very sweet. A spoon would remain standing up in the sugar at the bottom of the small cup.

We were travelling on the so-called Assakrem circuit - a loop off the Algiers-Agadez (Niger) Trans-Sahara highway. At this stretch it traversed a high mountain pass called Assakrem Pass. While ascending to the pass we caught up with another land-cruiser full of tourists and driven by a Tuareg. Both vehicles stopped and the drivers had a friendly chat as did we tourists. The group happened to be Germans headed for Nigeria. Normally, they said, they drove their own vehicle but for this loop they decided to hire a local driver/guide because of the difficult terrain. They might have heard about the Citroen.

We soon reached the 2,600 m high pass - the best-known site in the Hoggar. A hostel - misnamed Refuge of Father Foucault, (actually a very ancient caravan serai) - which sat in the saddle was our destination for the night. The history of the low, rough-stoned building went back many centuries. It had served as an overnight rest spot for slave caravans. All through the Middle-Ages, and up to the nineteenth century, the Tuaregs' main occupation had been the raiding of black African villages in the present Mali, Niger and Nigeria to capture young natives who would be driven to the slave markets at the Mediterranean ports of present-day Algeria and Tunisia. The main caravan route passed through the Hoggar. Most of the captured victims didn't survive the 2,000 km trek across the Sahara, but the number of those who successfully completed the death march was sufficient to make the trade profitable for the slave drivers.

At the turn of the century Father Foucault, a French missionary, took up residence at this spot. He built a chapel and a small shelter (the true Refuge) on the top of the adjoining mountain.



During the First World War the priest was accused of being a spy for the French occupational forces and was murdered by the Tuaregs. After WW II the Refuge became a tourist attraction.

While our Tuaregs prepared supper, the three of us climbed to the top of the mountain (more than 2,700 m). The view was superb. We were surrounded with a breathtaking realm of pinnacles. They were shaped by the relentless action of the extreme temperature fluctuation between day and night. This stone forest was dominated by the apparently unassailable peak of the Tahat, towering above at close to 3,000 m. Despite the icy wind, we remained there until the sun went down, and the landscape became carmine red from its dying rays. Even the ascending full moon had this intense red colour.

The descent from the peak in semi darkness was tricky. Only the excellent supper served by Yusuf in the candle-lit, Spartan dining room, finally relaxed us. By this time about a dozen other tourists had collected in the shelter. We were the only ones served hot supper by a cook. One could see the envy on the faces of the others. Most of them were long distance travellers, in the middle of their trans-Africa trip. They have been away from 'civilization' for many days, or even weeks, and were probably tired of their monotonous diet of canned food.

We retired into the communal dormitory early, hoping for a good night's sleep. It was a vain hope. In the crowd surrounding us there were a couple of heavy snorers. Their racket kept the air vibrating all night.

At one point Andy got up and went to visit the outhouse. On returning, he noted the loss of his Swiss Army knife. He was convinced that it had slipped out of his pocket while he was negotiating his way among the bodies in their sleeping bags laying all over the floor of the dormitory. In the morning he searched for the knife everywhere and asked the tourists if any one had found it but none came forward. Such knife has always been a precious possession of any boy. In Algeria it was an irreplaceable treasure for Andy. I wondered if the finder denied his discovery in order to get even with us for our princely supper the night before.

We got up before the sun, and climbed the mountain once again. This time, to admire the sunrise and also to attend a mass in the Refuge chapel. This was celebrated by the lonely missionary who lived in the Refuge adjoining the chapel.

We were about half a dozen tourists in the tiny church. It was built of rough stones with no mortar. Inside, there was an equally rough stone slab on a rock pedestal which served as altar. The chapel lacked any furniture or decoration. Our tiny group - standing elbow to elbow - filled the room completely. There was only a streak of light coming through the tiny window. The air felt colder inside than out. The priest wearing blue jeans and a white gown entered and began the ceremony. The atmosphere was very solemn. It was the most memorable mass I had ever attended. One didn't have to be a believer to appreciate such a unique occasion.

After a hot breakfast at the Refuge, we headed toward the inner Hoggar which is seldom visited by tourists. This is a more remote, and if possible, a more desolate part of the mountains. Our immediate destination was Hirafok, a desert village, some 50 km's away along a picturesque but much tormented trail. A settlement, which we passed without stopping, stood desolately on the empty plateau. Its dozen houses were built of abode bricks and reeds. The source of these building materials was a mystery to me because there was no sign of any clay pit, swamp or even a tree in the neighbourhood. The village's population, women and legions of children, came out to watch us drive by. There were no males in sight. Mohammed explained that the men were apparently all working in distant cities or were roaming the desert. They come home only occasionally - to beget more children. All inhabitants looked very dark, Negroid. According to Mohammed, they were the descendants of black slave women who had been captured to do the housework and to cultivate the gardens in the oases. In due time they became wives (second, third or fourth) of the master and were obviously more fertile than the Berber women. After a few generations the population of the village had been transmuted.

Near the village we stopped for lunch in the shade of a big boulder. This rock was an archaeological monument. One side of it was covered with prehistoric drawings of herds of gazelles, giraffes and hippopotamuses. Obviously, 10-12,000 years ago (the estimated age of

the drawings), this was a more humid place abounding with wildlife. There couldn't have been many rainy days since then because the unprotected rock surface retained the ancient images with only limited erosion. The most memorable lunch site I had ever been to.

After a few hours of further travel we entered Ideles, another forlorn village. Here, I had an opportunity to take some photos of the locals, in disregard of Mohammed's advice, who, as true Moslem, disapproved of taking pictures of people. The locals - Negroid-like as in the other town - didn't mind. We went to see a metalworking/forge shop set up in the open air in a lane between two houses. Four or five artisans were manufacturing silver jewellery, chains, bracelets etc. These were the first local males we had seen on our trip. Despite the heat radiating from the melting and reheating furnaces, they wore their long robes, large turbans and veils. To my delight, they allowed me to film their activities. Naturally, I felt compelled to buy a bracelet for Irene in compensation for their goodwill. She graciously accepted the gift. The chain had a Tamaheq inscription in unique lettering - different from Arabic or Latin.

In the evening we stopped in a dry gulch which surprisingly had a spring in a remote corner. The tiny stream emerged from a crack in the rock wall, and disappeared in the sand within a couple of metres of the source, not to be seen again. However, its short lifespan gave us a chance to replenish our goatskin containers. It was astonishing that our Tuaregs knew about this almost completely hidden source, and that they could find it so easily in that rock jungle.

We set up the three tents. One for Irene and myself, one for Andy, and the third one for our Tuaregs. Soon after, our companions went to collect firewood. It seemed to me a clearly hopeless enterprise. I didn't see a tree or a bush around for many miles. But again, their knowledge of the desert proved to be impeccable, they returned half an hour later with an armful of wind-gnarled branches of some ancient trees.

After a tasty super of pilaf and salad, the Tuaregs disappeared with their praying mats. They wanted privacy for their session with Allah. When they returned, Mohammed set to make some bread, since we had run out of the baguettes brought from the city. After preparing the dough he formed it into a large pancake measuring a foot in diameter and one inch thick. Then Jusuf raked the still burning wood, red ambers and ashes aside, shaving also an inch of the hot sand off. He placed the pancake on the exposed warm sand, and covered it - in reverse order - with the hot sand, ashes and flaming wood.

"By morning our bread will be ready." Mohammed said.

We continued to sit around the dying fire listened to the deadly silence around us for a long time. The Tuaregs' tent set far away from ours, hence, even if they snored, it wouldn't have bothered us.

Next morning we watched with great interest as our Tuaregs dug up the pancake. It looked stiff and solid like a carriage wheel, and was covered with a layer of adhered sand. Jusuf shaved most of it off with a knife, and then began to wash off the remainder with water. Soon there was not a speck visible. He broke off several chunks for our breakfast. Surprisingly, the pieces were sand free and dry. The pore-free mass of the unleavened dough didn't pick up any water from the bath. The bread - although it didn't taste like a baguette - was edible.

That morning the trail became even worse than the day before. At several steep curves Mohammed asked Jusuf and us to descend while he negotiated the treacherous section alone. I asked him what would happen to us if the vehicle turned over or just broke down? He assured us that if we didn't return to the base at the designated time a search party would be sent out immediately. Based on our previous experience with his outfit, I had my doubts about the chances of the 'prompt' rescue mission reaching us before our meagre water and food supplies ran out.

That day we didn't see any settlement or anything on the track, except a few semi-wild camels in the distance. These animals had been set loose to roam freely all year around. They were corralled only when the owner decided to sell some at the market.

Before lunch we reached a dry river bed. It was at least 100 metres wide and stretched as far as we could see in both directions. Its smooth, sandy surface was interrupted here and there

with bushy plants having large ficus-like leaves. Mohammed explained that this plant has very deep roots and is able to reach water flowing several metres under the sand. They are also poisonous. For this reason the sparse but still existing wildlife leaves them untouched

We began to follow the dry river. After a couple of hours the valley came to a dead end at the foot of a rocky escarpment. There was a tiny stream of water cascading down the face of the rock wall. It was swallowed up almost immediately by the sand at the bottom of the cliff, only to reappear dozens of miles downstream.

The three of us decided to climb the not-too-difficult looking rock wall to follow the oncoming water. The stream - on its way down - formed several, little ponds on the ledges of the rock wall. The freshness of these tiny bodies of water provided a very pleasant contrast to the extremely arid landscape. On the top of the escarpment we found a little swamp, overgrown with tall reeds, and green grass on its edges. This was a treeless oasis. We noticed tracks of antelopes but there was no trace of any human visitors.

On our way down, we encountered our Tuaregs busy washing up. Jusuf had removed not only his veil but also his turban. With his long, curly and flowing hair he looked even more handsome - as Irene affirmed. However, it was Mohammed who provided the real surprise. He had also removed his veil, his sunglasses (for the first time on the trip), although not his turban. He looked middle-aged - as I thought - but what I didn't expect to see was that he had only one eye! We had no idea of his disability. How could he so skilfully negotiate the torturous tracks, and so successfully avoid the rocks lying all over, while having this serious shortcoming - the lack of depth perception? I wondered. His already respectable driving skills were rendered even more admirable.

Still, I was glad that I didn't know about his disability at the beginning of our journey - I would have worried - unnecessarily - about the safety of our trip.

After the pleasant encounter with this refreshing water, we returned into the arid realm of the mountains. Many miles further uphill, we suddenly noticed a human figure running down a slope toward us, waving one arm while holding an apparently empty plastic container in the other. Mohammed stopped to wait for him. The visitor turned out to be a boy perhaps 10 years old.

When he reached us, he couldn't speak for shortness of breath but he had a wide grin on his face. After a short rest he addressed our Tuaregs in rapid Tamaheq. Mohammed asked a few questions then stepped out of the land rover to fill the boy's container with water from one of the goat skins hanging outside the vehicle. In the mean time the boy walked around our vehicle, and eagerly scrutinized us from every angle.

After starting out, and leaving the happy little guy in our wake, Mohammed explained that the tradition commands all Tuaregs not to refuse water to anyone asking for it in the desert. This boy's family was camping near a spring on the plateau above the road, which provided ample water for their needs. But the boy seeing us in good time from the elevation of their camp, wanted to meet us, and used the need of water as a plausible excuse to stop us.

We didn't set up our tents on the last night. We laid the sleeping bags on the ground under the starry sky. We had to depart for Tamanrasset at sunrise in order to reach the morning flight to Algiers. Mohammed didn't want to lose time for dismantling the camp.

Just when we were ready to call it a day, we had a visitor. A nomad passed by on his camel pulling another fully loaded beast behind him. Unfortunately, we could not understand the long conversation of the Tuaregs, and Mohammed wasn't in the mood to translate. Their conversation didn't concern us - the infidel tourists - in his judgment

Our trip despite its hectic beginning turned out to be successful and exciting. We enjoyed the stark beauty of these mountains, the treacherous tracks of the gullies, and the company of our often aloof Tuaregs. It is a pity that so few tourists take the opportunity to see the beauty of the wild Hoggar.

January 1980.

## 83

### PETER'S VISIT

Peter was near nineteen when the rest of our family left for Algeria. We were glad to leave him behind. He was a pain-in-the-ass - very immature in his thinking and behaviour. He precipitated arguments all the time, and caused continuous friction in the family. We hoped that by forcing him to rely on himself he would mature faster.

However, the letters received from him during the ensuing year didn't meet our expectations. He seemed to remain a chronic adolescent who, among other things, was unable to manage his finances responsibly. When he received his monthly allowance from us, he lived like a king for a few days. This was followed by a period of desperate borrowing from friends until the arrival of the next check. His school attendance was sporadic; he skipped exams and lost course credits.

Consequently, a year later, when we wanted him to visit us, I was afraid to send him cash for the airline ticket (we could not buy one from Algeria). As the proposed trip was to take place during the academic year, we didn't want him to lose more than two weeks of school. I ordered his ticket through a Montreal agency with the proviso that I would fix the travel dates with no possibility of alteration. But Peter somehow persuaded the agent to change both the departure and return dates to his preference.

He arrived unexpectedly and unannounced. Nobody waited for him at the airport in Algiers. This didn't bother him in the slightest. He jumped into a taxi to get to Blida, 45 km south of the capital, where we lived. The airport, located east of Algiers, was 50 km from us via the shortest back-country route. However, taxis preferred to drive through the capital, adding an extra 30 km to the distance, and making the trip extraordinarily expensive by Algerian standards. Hence, no Canadian ever took a taxi, but prearranged that a company car or friend pick them up. Not our Peter.

When he unexpectedly showed up at our door, I had to pay for the taxi. I barely scraped together the cash together to cover the fare.

His breaking the news that he had dropped out of CEGEP spoiled the initial moments of the family reunion even more. His plans - to spend two months traveling in Europe despite having no money of his own - added further spice to our first family supper.

Peter had always made friends easily, at least short-term friends. By the first evening he was smoking marihuana with the two young Canadians living in the apartment below us. Until that moment we had been unaware of my co-workers' habit.

A few days after Peter's arrival we took him for a trip in the Sahara Desert. The traffic behind the Atlas Mountains, on the huge desert plateau covered with only stones, was always very light, consequently, I allowed Peter to drive, against regulations, the company car. The road taken by us - although hard surfaced - had a strange peculiarity. When the flat, straight stretch reached a wadi (a dry gulch), it just dipped straight into it, and climbed out of it 10m farther on. From that point on the road continued straight as before. Obviously, one had to slow down - from a cruising speed (80-100 km/hr) to a snail's pace - to cross the 2-3 m deep depression in order to avoid crushing the car's suspension and undercarriage.

When Peter encountered the first wadi, he didn't pay any attention to the visibly and rapidly approaching gap in the road. The car reached the edge of the gulch at full speed, took off into the air, only to land with a tremendous impact at the bottom. I thought the vehicle would break to pieces, as we were all jolted to our bones. But luckily, neither the car nor any of us were hurt in the crash landing.

Peter dismissed the incident by saying:

“What a stupid country! Why don’t they span the gullies with bridges as normal people do?”

Ten minutes later the same thing happened. This time I could barely control my rage. I ordered Peter out from behind the wheel, resolving to never

let him to drive my car again.

But my resolve didn’t last too long. One week later all four of us went to Italy for skiing vacation for a few days. We took the company’s car to the airport. On the way - at Peter’s insistence - I finally passed him the wheel. He loved driving. The back road had no traffic, and we moved at a good speed. There were no un-bridged wadis in this part of the country.

At one point we had to pass through a small town. I warned Peter to slow down. Algerian towns had myriads of children who were usually all on the road, forcing the drivers to slow to a crawl on passing through. But not our Peter. He continued at his cruising speed and forced the young crowd to scatter like a startled flock of chicken while the three of us froze stiff in our seats.

If we had hit one of those urchins, the Arab population might have lynched us. We had been warned of such peril upon arriving in Algeria, and were advised that in the case of an accident one shouldn’t stop; one should rush to the next town’s police station to report the collision and ask for police protection.

This time we were at a hair-breadth from such a disaster. It upset me terribly. I again ordered Peter to stop and get out from behind the wheel. I told him that this was his last chance to drive my car - ever.

Skiing in the mountains of Limone of North-Western Italy turned out to be topnotch despite the rather poor weather conditions. At last Peter could display one of his rare talents. His skiing was superb, even the Italian and French holiday crowd was impressed by his graceful turns on the steep mountain side above the normal runs.

Soon, very soon, the three of us, had to return to Algeria while Peter hoped to continue to France to meet a friend at Mount Blanc. During the ski trip I had to watch my wallet closely. Limone wasn’t a cheap place. On the last evening, at the beginning of our farewell super, I told my family that everyone could order whatever he or she wanted regardless its cost. Irene and Andy and I all selected some of the better dishes, while Peter chose wild boar steak, the most expensive item on the menu. It cost twice as much as any of our dishes. Although my eyebrows rose, I didn’t say anything. Only after the supper did I ask Peter why he picked that extravagant item.



*Peter in the Sahara Desert*

"Because you paid for it." Was Peter's answer.

"You are wrong my son - I corrected him - it actually came from your pocket because I had been planning to give you whatever dollars remained at the end of the evening as a present for your unearned, extended vacation. (It turned out to be about \$500)."

Peter's face fell, he wasted more than 10% of his newly gained capital on a piece of meat that he didn't even enjoy.

February 1980.

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### THE WILD HOG

After a year and a half in Algeria we were tired of eating nothing but mutton and the occasional goat. We craved for pork. So when I heard about the possibility of obtaining a whole wild boar, I became very excited.

In this part of the country - around Blida, a very conservative Moslem town - wild hogs had not been hunted for more than a millennium. According to the Koran, these are impure animals and no true believer in Allah would touch them, dead or alive. Consequently, the nearby Atlas Mountains were teeming with them. One of my co-workers had told me that a certain individual, whom he knew could be contracted to shoot a hog and deliver it to one's house. I happily asked him to arrange a meeting with this entrepreneur, and the man came to visit with us in our apartment. I found him a not very pious Moslem but a shrewd dealer who set his own inflexible conditions:

- He would deliver the hog within three days,
- He would remove the guts but not the skin,
- Delivery would take place during the night,
- Nobody, especially no Algerian, should know about it,
- I would have to dispose the hide in a way that it could never be traced to me,
- Half of the asking price should be prepaid.

All these restrictions and rules for a few kilos of meat seemed superfluous but the end result was still tempting, so I agreed to the deal.

A couple of days later, at around 10.00 p.m., there was a knock on the door. When I opened it, three men rushed in carrying a cargo wrapped in a tarpaulin. They unwrapped the canvas and dropped its contents on the kitchen floor. It was a hog. The men folded up the tarpaulin and rushed out as fast as they had come, except the boss - my contact man - who remained behind to conclude the deal. The whole clandestine operation had been carried out with military precision. Perhaps they were military or police in civilian clothing?

When I paid the man, he revealed that they don't hunt hogs in the forest but shoot them on a road from a truck fitted with a searchlight. They removed the guts themselves because once in the past when a client threw the offal into a garbage can, stray dogs pulled the guts out and dragged them along the street. This almost caused a religious riot. They wanted to make sure that no such incident happened again.

After the entrepreneur poacher left, we took a better look at the carcass. It was a female and probably weighed 60-70 kilos. Only now did I realise that I had no idea what to do with this pile of raw meat. Neither I nor my wife had any experience with skinning and butchering even a rabbit, much less a wild pig. How to skin it? Where to start? We only had ordinary kitchen knives. Our kitchen table looked too flimsy to use as a work surface for the beast, and there was no way to hang the carcass up, so the skinning and butchering had to be done on the tiled floor. I got out the sharpest knife and tried to cut through the skin. It worked as effectively as a broomstick would - the hide was as hard as armour. I got out my small handsaw. I tried to cut off the lower part of one of the legs. The saw probably would have worked with an artificial

wooden leg but not with one of bone and tendons. But at least the saw cut through the outer skin. Now I could force the knife between the hide and the underlying tissue and slit the skin open. Repeating this manoeuvre several times, I was able to remove a narrow strip of skin.

I cut a second piece. The operation worked fairly well. Finally, we were in business. Andy kept busy re-sharpening the knife, and the three of us struggled to turn the carcass from side to side attempting to improve access to all surfaces.

It took a couple of hours just to skin the beast. Then the real butchering began. We had to cut the carcass into manageable pieces. All three of us were sawing, slicing while I cursed all the relatives of the guy who'd suggested this wild-hog idea. We loaded our little fridge until it almost burst at the seams. The rest of the flesh had to go into small polyethylene bags which we hoped to place with our friends and co-patriot colleagues. We were going to give everyone a gift package of the forbidden product to turn them into accomplices so that we could maintain the required secrecy.

But what to do with the multitude of strips of hide, large and smaller bones, head etc. that formed a pile of the size of the Atlas Mountains on the floor slippery with blood? We realized that in the hot Algerian climate, the stuff would start to spoil and smell within hours. We loaded everything into a couple of garbage bags and carried them out to the car. It was near dawn - we had worked all night. Fortunately, there was no one up yet in the apartment building.

As soon as there was sufficient daylight, I drove to the Maintenance Base, where I worked. The sleepy guard at the gate let me in with no questions asked. Inside the Base, I circled the various shops looking for a suitable garbage bin. It had to be large enough to hold the bags, preferably far below the rim. The unit also had to be in a discrete location where I could unload the proof of my criminal act unseen, though I hadn't spied anybody around at this early hour. I was nervous. If someone discovered the blasphemous contents of the bags and then connected them to me, I could lose my contract or worse.

A couple of hours later Andy left for school, and Irene began her rounds, visiting expat colleagues and distributing the meat packages.

The news of the clandestine operation didn't leak out. In consequence, we began to eat, and then kept on eating pork for weeks until we became as tired of it as we had of the mutton.

April 1980.



## 85

### ALONG THE NILE

Working and living in Algeria required that we leave the country every three months to renew our visas before returning for the next work session. We, Irene, Andy and I, plus another Canadian family, Bob, Joan and Brooke, their 12 year old daughter, decided to go to Cairo for the next scheduled exit/entrance. We wanted to use the occasion to tour Egypt for a week.

There was, however, a major problem with our plan. Sadat, the president of Egypt, had recently signed a peace treaty with Israel. Algeria, outraged by this breach of Arab solidarity, had broken its diplomatic ties with Egypt. This event rendered the possibility of visa renewal in that country problematic.

After some enquiries we learned that there was an Algerian Charger d'Affair at the Indian Embassy in Cairo who could authorise the issuing of Algerian entry visas in justified cases. We hoped that he would accept us as such if we turned up in front of him one day. Getting there was also a problem since the normal air connection between the two countries had also been discontinued. However, we also learned that foreigners were allowed to board Morocco's Rabat-Cairo flight at its refuelling stopover in Algiers.

We began to look for tourist information on Egypt. We soon discovered - to our dismay - that no such info was available in Algeria. After the diplomatic break the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had purged all bookstores and public libraries of materials dealing with Egypt. Now, instead of careful planning of the details of our tour we would have to rely on improvisation after arrival.

We flew to Cairo. Our tentative travel plan was to hire a car at the airport and drive immediately to the Indian Embassy to apply for visas. If we encountered no problems, we would continue to Luxor along the Nile in our rented car. After visiting the sights we would return to Cairo for a few final days, and pick up the visas.

When we described this plan at the airport tourist information desk, the agent shook his head in disbelief.

"You cannot do that. The road to Luxor is not passable by ordinary cars but only by those with four-wheel drive. It is also unsafe; there is banditism in certain sections. Only military convoys occasionally pass through. No rental agency would rent you a vehicle for such a trip. Why don't you take the comfortable, air conditioned overnight train to Luxor, as most tourists do?"

He offered us a package which included train tickets, hotel reservation and a two-day guided tour of Luxor. We accepted his proposal. The tour was to start in two days.

We took taxis to the Indian Embassy. Going through the city we began to appreciate the advice of the travel agent about not renting a car. The traffic was unbelievably heavy for a third world city and completely chaotic, with a matching level of air pollution. We entered the embassy with apprehension. To our pleasant surprise, the secretary didn't raise any objection in issuing the visas and promised to have them ready in 48 hrs. Now, we were free to proceed with our sightseeing.

Before anything else, we had to find a hotel: comfortable but not too pricy. We located such - we thought. Upon checking into the room it had no pillow cases or towels. I called the desk. The clerk apologized and promised to send up the missing items. The two chambermaids who delivered them obviously had to be tipped - separately - for the service. This was the first case in the long series of incidents where we were nipped by almost every person with whom we came in contact during our stay in Cairo. The chiselling was sometimes only annoying - like the missing pillow cases or double charging for a taxi trip - at other times it was more serious and that hurt.

The following day we visited a tour company located in the hotel vestibule and hired two taxis - including guides - to visit Memphis, Saqqara, the Sphinx and the Giza pyramids. We had to prepay for the package. At the gate of Memphis - our first stop - the guides advised us that they had no licence to enter archaeological sites. We were now supposed to hire local guides at each spot, at a significant extra cost. Cheated again. We ended up visiting the sights with no guides although we had paid for the service.

Memphis the ancient capital of the Old and later of the New Kingdoms was the largest and most important city of the ancient world. There is very little left of the city today - at least which can be seen. The colossus of Ramses II and the alabaster sphinx located in a lovely garden were the main attractions.

The Saqqara necropolis is close to Memphis. It was an important burial ground for the lesser royalty for more than 3000 years. Its most famous structure is the Zozer Step Pyramid, the first pharaonic tomb in Egypt (2800 B.C.) built entirely of stone. We couldn't enter the pyramid itself. We visited some of the mastaba tombs and the mortuary complex which had been embedded in sand for millenniums and consequently were superbly preserved - with both their structures and lavish internal decorations intact.

After Saqqara we headed toward the great pyramids of El Giza. On the way we stopped in an outdoor restaurant with big shady trees where we had a nice lunch. Since my companions didn't show any great hurry to leave at the end of the meal, I went for a photo excursion alone along the canal branching off the Nile. Here I encountered three young women carrying water in large tin cans balanced on their heads. I stopped them; it was a perfect photo opportunity. The girls posed happily, and then asked for baksheesh. I didn't have money with me but the instant movie stars didn't believe this. They surrounded me and carried out a close body search for a wallet or hidden money belt. The commotion could easily be construed as sexual assault but I didn't complain to the police. After returning to my companions I could substantiate my story with the dirty hand prints all over my white shirt.

It was getting late - in my opinion - but our drivers and 'guides' didn't want to budge. I became very impatient with them and with good reason as it turned out. When we finally reached the entrance gate of the Cheops pyramid, it had closed 10 minutes earlier. We couldn't enter and missed the tour of the monument.

It was obvious: Our Egyptians had delayed the trip to pocket the entrance fees, which was a non-negligible part of the tour package. I fumed all the way on our return to the hotel. Next morning I went to the tour office and demanded our money back. At first the staff didn't want to talk to me. But when I threatened to go immediately to the police - and I was ready to do so - they reluctantly returned the entrance fees.

Later that day we visited Cairo's Citadel, including Mohammed Ali's mosque and Joseph's well. We had heard that in the old days one could see the pyramids on the far side of the city from the high elevation of the Citadel but today only a heavy blanket of smog spread around us.



*With the Emricks at Luxor Temple*

On the way down from the hill we visited the Sultan Hassan mosque. Interestingly, in Algeria no infidel was allowed to enter a mosque, in Tunisia we could only step into a restricted area, but in Egypt one was free to wander in the interior after donning slippers. Obviously Moslem religious customs vary widely from country to country.

In the evening we took the famed express train to Luxor. It was hell on rails. The train's air conditioning system had broken down and after standing for hours at the station prior departure under the baking afternoon sun, the temperature was probably 40-50 °C inside the wagon what we entered. The windows were sealed shut and the doors automatically closed when the train was in motion. We had three sleeping compartments, one for each couple and one for the two kids. We stripped completely and hoped that the air would cool the moving train. But the wagons were too well insulated to allow that. We sweated all night on our berths. Only in the morning hours, just before arrival, did the temperature become tolerable enough to allow some sleep.

Things improved considerably in Luxor. The hotel was pleasant. Our guide was excellent: knowledgeable and helpful. Nobody tried to cheat us. It was like in a different country.

In the morning we visited Karnak temple. It was extraordinary. I found its rows of gigantic columns far more impressive than those of the Parthenon on the Acropolis.

At lunch time, rather than taking a siesta, we rented a sail boat to cruise on the Nile. Andy and I had a swim in the middle of the river where bilharzias, the destructive infectious disease carried by water snails wasn't supposed to pose a danger.

Later in the afternoon we visited the Luxor Temple. We approached it on a causeway lined with statues of sphinx. At the entrance there was a lonely pink granite obelisk. Its matching twin is now in Paris in the middle of Place de Concord. By the time of the Arab conquest the temple had been almost completely buried in sand. The Moslems built their compulsory mosque atop the columns of the pharaonic temple. Now, after excavations, it still perches there, and its doorway leads surrealistically out into the thin air some 8 meters above ground.

Next day we took a ferry and a bus to the Valley of the Kings, the final resting place of pharaohs for centuries. We visited three tombs. That of Ramses VI with its miles of vivid wall paintings was the most impressive. Tutankhamen's tomb, on the other hand, was anti-climatic: small and crowded with articles.

On our way back we stopped at Hatshepsut's temple on the river side of the mountain. This queen had been the only female pharaoh. She certainly knew how to choose an architect - he proved to be as successful in her bed as in his profession. The impressive, huge, three-tier temple lies in complete harmony with the cliff backdrop.

Back in Cairo we parted from our Canadian friends. Bob had a shorter vacation than I. Irene, Andy and I returned to the Cheops pyramid; without guides this time. It was as impressive - both outside and inside - as expected. The light and sound show at the Sphinx in the evening was also something not easy to forget. The Cairo museum with its rich collection, including the mummies of pharaohs, Ramses II among them, was superb. We didn't see Tutankhamen's golden mask, it was away at the time on a traveling tour in America.

On our last day we again hired a taxi with a guide but from a different outfit. We went to see the famous, or infamous, Suez Canal which had been in the news so many times during the past decades. We couldn't walk along its shore - it was still a restricted military area. Going back to Cairo our guide dutifully tried to cheat us with the exchange rate. It didn't even upset me anymore. After all we were in Cairo.

May 1980.

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### MADAME DOCALI

The Docalis were an Arab family with their four children who lived on the floor above ours in the apartment building. He was the manager of the Machine Shop, the largest unit at the maintenance base where I worked as Head of the Process Planning Department. I found him unfriendly and inflexible in my dealings with him. We had no social contact.

The wife was a good looking dark woman in her late twenties who dressed a la Francaise, though in other aspects the Docalis kept their Moslem traditions, e.g. when he was out of town his brother moved in to guard the family morals.

Their oldest son, still in his preschool years, was a spoiled brat who caused all kinds of havoc in the yard, in the common staircase and on the flat roof of the building where Arab and Canadian women socially mingled while doing the laundry. Irene had several spats with Mme Docali over the son's misdeeds.

I stayed apart from these skirmishes. I also disregarded my wife's occasional grumbling after I exchanged words with our neighbour beyond the obligatory 'Bonjour Mme Docali' upon meeting her in the stairway or the parking lot.

"I don't like the way you look at each other" - Irene said crisply.

I didn't deny that I found our neighbour attractive, but I could sincerely assure my wife that the social/political barrier existing between this particular Algerian family and ourselves would make anything beyond friendly smiles inconceivable.

One evening there was a knock on the door. I opened it and found Mme Docali at the doorstep. She wanted to talk to Irene - she said. I asked her in. When she noticed that I was ready to leave them alone, the young neighbour hurriedly asked me to stay. She needed me to translate her French - she said. I was surprised. When the two women had their spats they didn't need me to interpret. I remained.

Mme Docali began to sob before could say anything. After a short time she composed herself and told us in a tormented voice that she was pregnant - again. Four small children were already too many. She wouldn't be able to cope with a new baby - she said with tears running down her cheeks. She wanted an abortion. She knew that Canadians look at abortion differently from Algerians. (It was a criminal offense there). She also knew that we were friends of Dr. Sass. Would Irene ask him to help her?

Dr. Sass, the Head of the Surgical Department of the Regional Hospital of Blida, the city where we lived, was a surgeon from Hungary on a government contract. We had met early in our stay and became friends. We had exchanged visits regularly and this obviously was public knowledge among our neighbours.

This unexpected, emotional plea from our visitor took us aback. I felt disturbed by her openness in exposing her personal, female problem. Especially, when she revealed that her husband didn't know yet about her pregnancy and about her wish to terminate it. He wouldn't allow it if he knew - she said.

I didn't need to discuss the plea with Irene. Our possible course of action had been preset by our status in Algeria. I was a Canadian foreign worker in a strict Moslem country. I had to stay far away of local dilemmas, independent of my personal views on the subject. I wouldn't want to

contact our doctor friend and put him in a difficult position either. He obviously couldn't risk his professional career by committing an illegal act. Furthermore, Mme Docali's particular marital condition would have possibly rendered abortion disastrous for all participants.

However, both Irene and I felt sorry for her, and wanted to help as much as we could - safely. Irene gave her the name and address of her Arab gynaecologist - educated in France - who could verify the pregnancy. What would happen after between the doctor and the patient wasn't our business? Our neighbour left desolate but with some hope however faint.

A few weeks later we left Algeria for good. Whether Mme Docali succeeded in finding an abortionist or gave birth to her fifth child we never learned.

June 1980.

## 87

### WITHOUT PAPERS

I threw my handbag into the narrow slot between the back of the passenger seat and the tiny fridge as we entered our VW camper. The seat itself was occupied by our guide, a licensed employee of the L'Agence de Tourisme de Fes.

We were sightseeing in the city, the jewel of Morocco. On this memorable, if exhausting day - our second and last one there - we toured the picturesque tannery. It provided an excellent filming opportunity if one could tolerate the suffocating smell of rotting hides.

The day was very hot. We sweated non-stop. It felt even worse inside the camper - like being in an annealing furnace - because the windows were left closed all day for security reasons - a necessity even in a guarded parking lot.

We dropped off the guide at his office, and drove to the walled-in, municipal campsite. I hoped for a good night's sleep since our itinerary called for an early morning start for Marrakech - a full day's drive away. One had to cross the mountains and desert behind them to reach it.

The night proved to be as unbearably hot as the day. We left all the camper windows open and prayed for a soothing breeze while lying completely stripped on the bed sheets. Despite my exhaustion I lay awake for some time. Fatigue finally won over the discomfort, and I fell asleep.

Suddenly, something startled me. I could not tell what it was. I sat up, and looked around. I didn't see anything unusual in the semi-darkness of the camper. The dark, uncovered body of my wife lay beside me on the white sheet without stirring. Andy, our teenaged son, also slept undisturbed on the platform above us. This two-story sleeping arrangement was a unique feature of Volkswagen campers.

'If anything, it must be even hotter up there!' I thought with compassion and relief at the same time that it wasn't me who had to sleep up there. 'Since I am already awake, I might as well visit the loo' - I decided.

I pulled on my shorts and walked the short distance to the public facility. It was a traditional Arab squat toilet where one had to stoop over a hole in the ground and use water from a tap at knee level - instead of tissue paper - for hygienic purposes. Since the distance between the concrete foot-rests cast in the floor and the strategic hole was fixed, and would not necessarily accommodate the body dimensions of every user, there was lasting proof that missing the target was common. The place smelled bad, almost as rank as the tannery. The unpleasantness of a night visit to the loo would wake up Sleeping Beauty herself.

Hence, I was fully awake by the time I returned to our camper. I threw off my shorts, and tried to go back to sleep but succeeded only after some time.

At dawn, I got up, ready to start out. I wanted to put on my shorts but could not find them.

'I am sure that I put them on the backrest of the front seat! Where did they go?'

They weren't there nor was the handbag. My shock was profound. The handbag contained three passports, three airline tickets from Amsterdam to Montreal, ferry tickets from Ceuta (Morocco) to Spain, two driver's licences, the car registration, auto insurance papers, my Master Card, and DM 400 cash.

Now, I realized what had startled me during the night. It was the thief entering the camper! When he saw me sitting up, he must have stepped back and hid behind the vehicle where he patiently waited for me to fall asleep after returning from the loo. Then he took the handbag he'd come for, and my shorts as well for a souvenir (no Arab would wear them).

How would he know about the bag and its hiding place? He couldn't have rummaged in the darkness! Was the tourist guide his accomplice? During the two days this gentleman travelled with us he could certainly have learned my habits. Or was that slot a logical place for an experienced thief to find valuables?

However, these questions were academic, as were my wife's reproaches: „I told you so!”

She had previously asked me „What will we do if you lose that handbag?”

I had no answer; neither could I think of a better place to hide our documents.

In the morning I went to the police to report the theft. In front of the station there was a long line-up of enraged people - both Arabs and non-Arabs - with predicaments similar to ours. Theft was a major industry in Fes. The police officer wasn't sympathetic. For him, mine was an additional problem with no chance of solution. I didn't expect much from him either, but I needed the police report to apply for replacement passports which would allow us to leave Morocco and return to Canada.

We drove to Rabat, the capital of Morocco, to report the loss of passports at the Canadian Embassy. The young Quebecois clerk who received us was as unsympathetic as the Moroccan policeman.

„How would I know that you didn't sell your passports for drugs?” He asked me officiously.

I could have killed him right there and then. He apparently sensed this imminent danger because he stopped his 'friendly questioning' and accepted my description of the theft.

We had to wait three days for the new passports to arrive. During this period most of our time was spent discussing: „What will we do now? How would we travel from here on?”

The possibility of replacing the driver's licences and car registration seemed unrealistic. As far as the green card (car insurance) was concerned, I called an acquaintance in Amsterdam (the only person whose number I had with me) and asked him, or rather begged him, to try to get a duplicate card for me. I didn't remember the name of the company I was insured with but I could describe the location of their office.

The Dutch acquaintance was reluctant at first - „How would my expenses be reimbursed?” He wondered. However, after some persuasion he gave in and promised to get the duplicate and send it to my cousin in Italy. If only we could get that far.

„As far as our travel route was concerned, we obviously would have to forget about Marrakech and the rest of Morocco, and head directly for Spain. Then we would have to somehow get back to Amsterdam where I had purchased the van, and the only place where I could legally resell it.” I explained to Irene.

There were four international borders between Rabat and Amsterdam via the shortest route and eight borders if we tried to follow our original itinerary which included visiting my cousin in Italy and our families in Hungary. 'Should we forget about these visits now?' I wondered.

The first hurdle was the ferry crossing from Morocco to Spain. At the port, Ceuta, I entered the shipping company's office and explained my predicament to the clerk. It was the first time in our misfortune that I'd encountered a sympathetic official. He got into our van and directed me to the boat which was ready to leave. He arranged our boarding without a ticket.

On the Spanish side we rolled off the ramp at a terminal which looked completely unfamiliar. Only then I did realize that I'd approached the wrong company for the return fare, and got a free ride from the competitor.



Now, we had to pass Customs. This was an anxious moment. However, the Custom's officer just glanced at our Canadian passports and at the Dutch licence plate and let us through.

In Madrid we drove to the KLM office to arrange the reissuing of our airline tickets. We learned - to our dismay - that the initial rerouting of our Air Algerie tickets from Algiers-Paris-Montreal to Algiers-Paris with a switch-over to KLM's Amsterdam-Montreal flight had not been legitimate. Since the lost tickets were not valid to start with, they could not be reissued. We kept insisting on our innocence in the matter. After several hours, and many faxes between Madrid and Amsterdam, somebody in the bureaucracy reconsidered our case and authorized issuance of the three tickets but with a catch. The tickets couldn't be changed to any flight other than the one specified on them. From this moment on, our time frame was cast in concrete.

We came up to our next trial: crossing the Spanish-French border. It turned out to be as easy as the previous. This raised our spirits considerably.

The major danger remaining was having a road accident. We were told that in case of even a mishap - in any country of the Continent - a driver without a licence would be arrested and a vehicle without registration and insurance papers would be impounded. This peril remained hanging above us like the sword of Damocles. There was one more aggravating factor. Due to the large distance we were to cover daily, we had to alternate the driving among the three of us including Andy. He was already a seasoned, though illegal, driver at 15.

Despite these dangers, we decided - perhaps foolishly - to follow the original itinerary, and head toward Italy. We found this border equally easy to cross. Unquestionably, a Canadian passport worked magic travelling in Western Europe.

A short while later we arrived at my cousin's place. When I related our predicament, he just shook his head:

„You will never make it to Holland without an incident! I am speaking from experience.”

However, I knew that his 'incidents' were usually due to speeding in his Alfa-Romeo. With our VW camper we were hardly tempted in that respect.

The bad news was that the replacement insurance card hadn't arrived from Amsterdam. I phoned our acquaintance again. He apologized, and promised to send it to Hungary, our next fixed address. I had little faith left in this respect.

The Yugoslav border was also a piece of cake. However, the atmosphere encountered at the Hungarian border was something else. The Custom's officer, a very stern woman, declared that our camper had to be searched for drugs, since we'd started our trip in Morocco. Two mechanics went through every nook of the van with utmost care. The results - as we expected - turned out to be negative. Then the woman, obviously frustrated that her suspicion didn't pan out, told us to enter the office to complete the paperwork.

„Since you were born in Hungary, you are still considered a citizen of our country; unless you can document that you have officially denounced your citizenship.” She declared.

I was taken aback. I had visited my country of birth several times with my Canadian passport, and no official had ever raised an objection. Looking at my blank face, the woman said:

„OK, your Canadian passport will do this time. How about your car insurance? Do you realize that your green card (what I didn't have) doesn't provide full coverage in our country?”

Another blank look on my face.

„However, you can buy a temporary Hungarian insurance policy for your stay at \$2 per day.” She continued.

This time I became more enthusiastic. I actually jumped at her offer. At least, we will have a piece of valid paper.

The reunion with our families was a happy one. On the other hand, the news that they hadn't received anything from Holland was disappointing, if not unexpected. We spent a few, too few, days with our dear ones, and then headed for Budapest where we planned to stay two days in a relative's vacant apartment.

In the evening before our departure for Vienna someone knocked on the door. It was my mother. We had said goodbye to her in Pécs, so I didn't expect to see her again. But she followed our tracks with a letter received the previous day from Holland. It contained the long sought duplicate green card. After travelling 2,500 km through five countries, we finally had one critical piece of the necessary international travel documents package

We crossed into Austria, then into Germany, and, finally, into Holland without any mishap. In Amsterdam the first thing was to look up our worried acquaintance to thank him for his help, and to reimburse his expenses.

Our time was running out. We had to sell the car in three days, before our flight was due to leave. But to sell the vehicle we needed the registration, or at least a duplicate. That could only be obtained at Groningen, a city in Northern Holland. After a mad rush there and back - at the loss of a full day - we could finally park our camper in the infamous street which served as Amsterdam's used car market.



*On the shore of the Danube in Austria*

Our luck - perhaps to compensate for the Moroccan misfortune - remained faithful to us to the end. On the second day of offering - the day before our irrevocable departure - a Canadian family bought the camper. We got \$500 less than what we had paid for it two months earlier. After covering more than 10,000 km it was not a bad deal. It turned out to be much, much cheaper than renting a vehicle would have been.

We advised the new owners to get photocopies of all their documents before they begin to travel. If we'd had those, it would have saved a lot of headaches and sleepless nights.

August 1980.

## 88

### SOMEONE ON THE ROOF

„You have to be especially careful the first week. This is when they may try to break into your house. New arrivals are unfamiliar with the local conditions, have no connections, and their belongings are still nicely packed, ready to be carried away by the thieves.”

This friendly warning was given to us by our new acquaintances whom we met on the plane from Rome to Lusaka. Irene and I were travelling to Kitwe, Zambia, to start a three-year contract with National Copper Mines.

According to the stories of these fellow travellers which sounded authentic enough, Zambia was a rather unsafe country. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, no such problems were mentioned in the company's publicity brochures, or during my interview back in Canada.

At the Kitwe airport we were met by a young black woman - the company's representative. She drove us to our future home at the edge of the city. There were a couple of other houses further down the street before the bush began. It was only 6:30 p.m. but it was getting dark already, and very rapidly - typical for equatorial countries. The house, in the middle of a large garden, small jungle, seemed to be completely abandoned. There were weeds - a metre high - all around, and vines ran up the walls, partially covering the entrance. All the windows had metal bars. Fortunately, the glass panes were unbroken. The house had a flat, corrugated iron roof.

„The last tenant moved out about half a year ago.” Our guide said. „Here the vegetation pushes up very fast. One wet season, and the whole place is overgrown.”

She tried to turn on the lights inside the house. They didn't work. She tried the outside lights (There were luminescent light fixtures installed under the eaves all around the house for security reasons, she had explained earlier, noticing the wonder on my face.)

They did not work either. There was a phone in the house, but it was disconnected.

„Both the lights and the phone will be fixed tomorrow.” She said reassuringly.

She warned us to lock the door for the night, handed over her box of matches, and left us alone in the pitch dark house. I cursed myself for leaving my flashlight in the baggage at the airport instead of carrying it in my day pack. But the representative had assured us at the airport:

„You don't really need anything; the house is fully furnished, including bedding, and is ready for occupation.”

It was not, not by our standards at any rate, thus we learned Zambian lesson No 1 to be followed later by many more.

Having nothing better to do, we went to bed, but couldn't sleep. It was only 8:00 P.M. Suddenly we heard a noise coming from the far corner of the house, followed by steps on the roof. The steps moved from the corner diagonally to the opposite side of the house. We both froze.

‘The thief has arrived!’ was my first thought.

A minute later a second set of steps followed in the same direction.

‘There are at least two people up there! - And we have no weapons, and no means to call for help. We don't even know if the next house is occupied, and if so, by whom. Where is the police station? We forgot to ask.’

We couldn't consider running away - we had no car, and "Walking at nighttime is not advisable!" - Our air plane acquaintances had warned us strictly. We were obviously trapped!

Then the steps reversed on the roof.

'They are trying to find a weak spot to break into the house!' Was our alarming conclusion.

Some more steps - this time in a different direction.

'There must be a whole gang of them up there, but why aren't they talking?' I wondered.

I got up, went to the main door (where most of the steps seemed to originate) and peeked through the glass window. The vines covered my view. Suddenly, I heard steps approaching above, and then my eyes caught sight of some downward movement in the vines. At first, I didn't believe what I saw.

'Can it be a rat?' I wondered, flabbergasted.

Then, a few minutes later, a second creature appeared - a rat, clearly visible this time - and my initial guess was confirmed. I let out a deep sigh and relaxed. I could even smile at Irene. I would never have imagined that the sight of a couple of rats could bring such a peace to my tormented mind. Why did the noise of moving rats resemble human steps? Now I was able to explain. The rats did not follow the ups and downs of the corrugations of the roof. They jumped from ridge to ridge and generated a series of intermittent thumps as they went along. Our imagination, overwrought because of the frightening stories told by our travel companions, aggravated by the unrelieved darkness and the travel fatigue, interpreted these small impacts as human steps.

September 1981.

## 89

### NEWFIES IN ZAMBIA

Soon after our arrival in Kitwe, Zambia, Irene and I had to register with the police to obtain our identity cards. At the station we met a dozen other new arrivals. They were mostly blacks, Zaireans, (Kitwe is near the Zairean border) with only a few white faces in the group: a middle-aged couple and their two children. We couldn't approach them right away because the clerk urged us to precede with the registration formalities.

After the completion of the numerous questionnaires, the only task remaining was to get our photographs taken for the identity cards. The clerk told us to form two rows - seven people in each - facing the camera. The second row was to stand behind the first on a foot high platform. Then the clerk took a single Polaroid shot of the group, cut the postcard size print into fourteen pieces, trimmed out the faces, and glued them, one by one, on the proper documents. A very economical practice, especially in a Third World country.

During the labourious shearing, cropping and pasting stage we had the opportunity to approach and talk to the other expatriates. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that they were also Canadians and from Newfoundland. Joe was a Pentecostal missionary who had come to Kitwe to oversee an existing Bible School. They planned to stay for two years.

During the coming months we got together several times to talk about our experiences in the new country. We learned that this was their first trip overseas; actually, their first excursion outside Newfoundland. Not surprisingly, they were quite naive and ignorant of alien customs. They seemed unable to grasp many of the peculiarities of this semi-tropical land and of its people. Often I couldn't help discerning a striking resemblance between Joe's behaviour and that of the dumb butt of Newfie jokes.

We had arrived at the end of the dry season. We found the houses, ours and theirs, and practically all the others in the town, surrounded with a three-foot wide concrete channel laid tight against the walls. It slopped from both sides to a six-inch depth in the centre. The canal was spanned with flat concrete slabs in front of the doors. I assumed that this set-up was there for a good, though not yet evident reason. Our Newfie friends, however, thought otherwise. He considered the arrangement an unnecessary eyesore and a nuisance, even more so after I told him that I had discovered a poisonous snake domiciling under one of our slabs. When Joe's native gardener mentioned that he was building a house and could happily use those concrete blocks in the construction, Joe generously let him have them.

A couple of months later the rainy season arrived. After an easy start, the daily downpours became diluvial. The rainwater running off the roof (there were no eaves) and gushing from the surrounding yard filled the canal to its rim in minutes. It then took a long time, sometimes hours, for the water to drain completely away. During these periods, Joe's house became his castle surrounded with a formidable moat. In order to exit one had to jump across the three-foot wide canal. Although this exercise required only moderate physical fitness, entering the house was a different matter. One had to first reach across the water to unlock and open the door, then lean back to try to jump across the channel onto the raised threshold. This manoeuvre was further complicated by the edge of the ditch being wet and slippery, and one could easily lose his balance. From time to time the attempt led to an accident, in which the unfortunate member of their family found himself, or more often herself, sitting in the middle of the canal as a drenched, aquaphobic cat.

Joe desperately searched for replacement slabs - eyesores or otherwise - or for plain boards. But in Zambia nothing was available when needed. After a while, however, he succeeded in his enterprise, and they could again enter their house like normal people did.

Another, more devastating, adventure occurred later in the rainy season. One evening Joe was interviewing potential candidates for his downtown school. It was pouring as usual. After the last student left, Joe got into his car ready to drive home. On the first street corner he noticed a young man standing in the rain. He was the just interviewed student - Joe thought. Joe decided to offer him a ride home. As the man got into the car Joe realized - too late - that he had picked up a complete stranger.

The stranger turned out to be a criminal who wasted no time in pulling a knife, sticking it in Joe's ribs and demanding Joe to drive where he commanded. Joe - terrified - obeyed meekly. They crossed town and headed toward Chingola, a nearby city. At the edge of Kitwe there was a permanent police checkpoint. Upon reaching it, the criminal forced the point of his knife even more menacingly into Joe's ribs. Our poor friend, petrified, stopped in front of the police inspector and rolled down the window without saying a word. The policeman - recognising him as an expatriate - waved him through.

They continued driving in the rain. A while later Joe was ordered to turn into a side road leading into the bush. The lane became muddier and muddier as they progressed. Finally, the car got stuck. The criminal nonchalantly searched Joe's pockets, took his valet, got out of the car and immediately disappeared into the darkness.

Now, our hero, instead of relaxing in the relative safety and comfort of his car, grabbed his briefcase, which contained all his documents and school papers, and stepped out into the rain. He had no rain coat. He began to walk in the direction he had been driving, i.e., away from the main road. He soon became soaking wet but he kept on walking.

Freezing and disoriented, he finally reached a native settlement comprising about half a dozen huts on either side of the dirt lane. The huts were unlit. There was no one outside. Reaching the centre of the village, Joe started to shout for help. There was no response. He raised his voice an octave. People slowly began to emerge from the huts, staring but shying away from him. As more people collected outside, there was a sudden scream in Bantu, upon which everybody rushed to him, jumped on him, and started to beat him with their fists or sticks picked up from beneath their feet. Joe, frightened to death and in great agony, fought desperately to tear himself free. Luckily, he succeeded, and ran away from his attackers. Nobody pursued him.

What happened after his escape has remained a mystery. Joe suffered complete amnesia from the clobbering received. In the morning, he was found on the outskirts of Kitwe, still delirious and shivering from cold. He carried no briefcase.

He was led to the nearest police station. The policemen took him to the hospital where his wounds were treated. The officer didn't know what to make out of his muddled account and was reluctant to start an investigation.

When the Mission Elders heard about the incident, they put pressure on the authorities to follow up on the case.

His abandoned car was found, and the settlement in the bush was located. After searching the huts, Joe's briefcase, still containing the documents, reappeared. Upon interrogation, the natives admitted attacking an intruder that night thinking that he was a marauding bandit. They could hardly be persecuted. The hijacker has never been found.

I asked Joe later why he didn't jam on the break at the police roadblock to throw the criminal off balance and then jump out of the car. Joe said that the idea hadn't occurred to him.

Joe's final adventure, a few months later, was also a woeful one. A black youth approached Joe in the market and demanded a job what Joe had allegedly promised him. Joe denied any such promise. The frustrated black felt cheated and vowed vengeance on the now hated bwana (boss). He went to the police and denounced Joe for soliciting sex from him. Homosexuality

was considered to be a serious crime in Zambia at the time, and a person committing it was prosecuted and penalized.

On learning about the charge against Joe, the Church Elders were anxious to avert a public scandal and save Joe from the menacing consequences of the fabricated charge. They put him on the first plane to Kenya. His family followed him a week later. They never returned to Zambia. I presume that they were not only the first but perhaps the last Newfies there.

September 1981.

## 90

### PUTZI FLIES

Two weeks after our arrival in Zambia I developed swellings on my leg that looked like boils. The red, painful lumps, about a dozen of them, spread from my ankles to above my knees. They grew in size by the day. I went to see the company doctor. He was an East Indian, a man of few words. He looked at my legs and said:

„Putzi flies. Nothing serious.”

I looked at him with incomprehension. I had never heard of such flies and I didn't recall any bites in the past few days.

„What can be done about it?” I asked.

„Nothing. When the maggots mature and turn into flies, they climb out and flee. The cavities usually heal without infection.”

„What? Do you mean I have maggots in my flesh? And nothing can be done about it? How did they get there in the first place?” I cried out in despair.

„You are obviously a newcomer” - said the doctor - „Putzi flies are of the size of common houseflies. They fly nighttimes and on cloudy days. They shun sunshine. They deposit their eggs on something moist, like drying laundry. When the eggs come in contact with human skin, they hatch right away. The minuscule worms penetrate the skin, burrow into the flesh, begin to grow, and develop into flies in about a week.

Do not block their breathing holes with Vaseline as some ignorant persons might recommend. If the worm dies inside, it will cause infection. In the future, your wife should dry the laundry only in sunshine or kill the eggs by using a hot iron.”

It seemed to be sound advice, if only somebody had told me earlier. I left the doctor's office in a disturbed state. If I followed his advice and waited for nature to solve my problem, I would have to suffer for several more days. The idea of worms eating me from the inside out was revolting, and the boils looked disgusting.

I went home and tried to squeeze one of the inflamed lumps despite the sharp pain. It worked. A white maggot of about 6-8 mm long and 2-3 mm thick popped out and wriggled frantically. Despite my general life philosophy of 'Live and let live' toward most creatures of nature, I squashed this invader to death with unabashed pleasure. Then, I proceeded to the next lump, and the next, until all of the maggots were annihilated. By this time I was completely exhausted from the pain.

The following morning all of the lumps except one had subsided and were only slightly painful. They looked less inflamed and obviously were not infected. One lump looked worse than the day before. So I squeezed it. Sure enough, a white maggot popped out of it. Twins had apparently occupied the same hole, and on the first day I got rid only one of them.

During the three years of our stay in Zambia I had no further personal encounter with these pests. Our newborn rabbits were infected with them occasionally however. If left untreated, the rabbits perished from these parasites.



The following summer, Andy, back for school vacation, left his swimming trunks outside on the line over night. Sure enough, he was afflicted in the most sensitive place. He never made the same mistake again.

October 1981.

## 91

### FREDRICK

The mining company had provided 24-hour guard service for new arrivals during their first months. The guards, one per twelve-hour shift, were armed with baseball bats.

The night guard assigned to us was an older man. His English was limited to 'I see' no matter what we asked or told him. Consequently, we gave him the nickname 'Icy'. He spent the nights peacefully sleeping in the covered part of the patio. I often wondered if I discovered a thief in the house, would I be warranted to disturb Icy's sleep?

Life soon took a nasty turn for Icy. Our Ndola acquaintances - whom we had met on the plane to Zambia - gave us two puppies. We kept them outside in an enclosure. Their occasional yelping during the night bothered Icy noticeably, but I - rather heartlessly - considered this inconvenience part of a guard's stressful life.

Our daytime guard, Fredrick, was a young man - in his mid-twenties. He was lean and unusually tall for a Zambian. He understood English well but had difficulties expressing himself. His mother tongue was Bemba, the local native dialect.

Irene began her settling in by trying to eradicate the jungle around the house. Her first task was to remove the vines from the side and roof of the building and to free the door and the windows from their permanent shade. When Fredrick saw Irene struggling with the lush vegetation, he came to her help without being asked. The following day he brought a machete, which rendered cutting the vines much easier than the kitchen knife Irene had been using. The cleaning of the overgrowth took a week. The next task was to prepare a garden plot before the rainy season arrived. Fredrick helped my wife with this task also.

„You cannot exploit a guard like this, even if he is paid for his time here. I will have a talk to him.” I said to Irene.

Fredrick told me that he was paid 65 Kwachas per month (about C\$65) by the security firm. I offered him the same amount if he continued to work full time for my wife as a gardener while still carrying out his guard duties. He was extremely happy to hear that his income would double. He accepted the deal, and the arrangement worked pretty nicely.

We learned that Fredrick had come from a remote village in the bush, found the guard job, got married and had a child. A year later his wife ('a *no-good-woman*') left him for someone else, and took their child with her. He missed them. He didn't like to live alone, and was hoping to remarry.

He told us that he had paid 80 Kw for that 'no-good city wife'. Now, with his salary doubled, he would be able to save enough money to get a good wife from his village in a few months time. He had already sent a message to his relatives to select a bride for him.

After four months, the mining company advised me that the guard service was to be terminated. I was now considered capable of looking after my own security. The agreement with Fredrick reached a critical point. I asked him, if he would prefer to become our full time gardener or to continue his guard career. In either case his income would be halved, a blow for anybody.

If he wanted to stay with us, I offered to raise his monthly salary to 70 Kw. Paying more would have looked stupid and irresponsible according to the expatriate community. The going rate for live-in gardeners was 45 Kw plus a bag of mealy-meal (cornflour, worth about 8 Kw). I also offered Fredrick the guest house - a detached building behind the main residence - rent free. The guesthouse comprised a living room, bedroom, kitchen and a shower with a flush toilet. I also promised him that if he got married, we would provide him with the customary monthly bag of mealy-meal.

He jumped at my offer. He was ready to move in at once. I think the major incentive was the hot/cold running water (he loved to take hot showers) and the spacious living quarter - in that order. A one-room hut with no running water was the standard accommodation for live-in gardeners.

Now, he wanted to get married as soon as possible. He wanted an expensive wife superior to his 'cheap' ex-wife. We hoped that he would be lucky. Fredrick asked for time off to return to his village. I gave him a week's paid-leave as a wedding present.

When the week was over, we eagerly waited for his return. We were anxious to see his precious new wife.

On the set day Fredrick arrived alone. We wondered what had happened.

Oh, he said, he had given away his money to his relatives, and there wasn't enough cash left for a full ticket for his wife. (When he had left for his village he had several hundred Kwacha which would have been a fortune in the village). He hoped now to borrow 20 Kw from me and return to the midway railway station where he had left his bride.

I lent him the money and he departed. A day later he was back accompanied by a little girl.

„My wife, Catherine.” He introduced her.

We were taken back. The girl didn't reach to his armpit, was thin, and looked scared, like a wild kitten.

„How old is she?” I asked Fredrick.

„I do not know, B'wana (Sir).” He answered.

„Then ask her.” I prompted him.

She was twelve - a child, even by African standards.

As we learned later from Fredrick, the girl had been chosen by his grandmother (his parents were not alive), but the whole village collaborated in arranging the affair. Fredrick was pleased with the choice. The wedding took place according to local customs - whatever those were. He paid 140 Kw to the girl's parents. She was expensive - a virgin.

We were apparently the first white people she had ever seen - a dubious honour, I think.

After a few days of ignoring her hiding from us we tried to get closer to her. Irene called her into the house to show her the kitchen, the electric stove, the fridge, the washing machine, etc. She didn't display any curiosity or interest. We told Fredrick that if his wife agreed to work in the garden - weeding, planting, or whatever was needed - we would pay for her efforts. She was, however, reluctant to do anything.

Weeks passed; Catherine didn't learn a single word of English. What I found most annoying was her habit of looking through us as if we didn't exist. I had strong words with Fredrick, demanding that he should teach his wife to say 'good morning' at least, since she lived under our roof. It worked - from time to time.

Meanwhile we learned to rely on Fredrick more and more. He was a hard worker and very honest - we could trust him with anything, anytime. At the beginning there were occasional small frictions but we learned about his ways of thinking and could adjust to them.



*Fredrick*

We lived at the edge of the town, far from the market and stores. Food shopping without a car would have been a chore for Fredrick and his wife. Irene began to buy the needed food items for them, the cost of which she noted down. At the end of the month she deducted the total spent from his salary.

Fredrick became very upset. When I asked the reason, he claimed that he hadn't been paid the agreed salary. Both Irene and I tried to explain the situation to him. He remained unconvinced. Finally, we cut the Gordian knot: I placed his monthly salary, 70 Kw cash, in his hand, and then gave him the list of expenses, and he happily repaid the sum he owed. This was repeated every payday for the rest of his stay with us.

Within a few months we realized that by the third day after payday Fredrick didn't have a cent left. We changed the monthly payments to bi-weekly which doubled the happy period. He, like most of his people, lived from day to day, and hadn't the slightest care or worry about planning for tomorrow.

Catherine still remained a problem. We actually had to give up on her completely. She seemed to be very stupid - at least as far as learning new things were concerned, though she was smart enough to control her husband. She did what she wanted, and that big man could not order her to do anything else. Except, on one occasion, when she refused to let her husband into the house after his rare outing to a local tavern. Fredrick beat her up. We didn't interfere as she screamed in the night. Our opinion was that she deserved punishment for all her passed sins.

We noticed a few months later that Catherine's dress was becoming too tight in front. She was pregnant. She wasn't such a little girl after all. At least, she would be busy with the baby - we thought. Until now she had spent most of her time sitting outside and looking at the wall in front of her - nonstop - for hours. In the afternoons she cooked the mealy-meal on a charcoal fire in the unused carport, and with that her daily-duty was over.

We expected Andy's return from school for the summer vacation. He was to arrive at the airport of Ndola, the provincial capital, 50 km from us. Fredrick had never seen an aeroplane, or a city other than Kitwe. I offered to take him with us, if Catherine would remain home - the house could never be left unattended. However, she had other plans for that day. She wanted to visit her relatives who lived on the other side of the town. She could visit them any time, but Catherine wanted to do it then. She remained adamant. Her husband missed the chance to widen his horizons.

Fredrick always dreamed of having a radio but they were too expensive for his income. When we returned from a vacation from South Africa, we bought a transistor radio for him as a present. The apparatus ran on three 'C' size batteries. From the first moment Fredrick never turned his radio off, even when he was far away from it. My warning about the limited life of batteries had no effect. At last, after a couple of months of continuous use, the batteries died. They could not be replaced - 'C' batteries weren't available in Zambia. Fredrick was desperate, but nothing could be done - I thought. I was wrong however. He got three, locally made, 'D' size batteries. The dimensions of this product were too big to fit into the radio case. Fredrick - to my utter surprise - extended the wires outside the case, made the correct connections, and taped the whole package together into one working unit. Obviously, someone had explained the procedure to him. The fact that he could correctly follow technical instructions amazed me.

In another area, animal husbandry, his performance was not so brilliant.

I raised rabbits as a hobby. I liked to look after and feed them. I had built several hatches what I cleaned daily. Fredrick was only a bystander. When the rabbits multiplied above a reasonable number, I asked him to take a few to the market. We never killed and ate even one. Fredrick was always rewarded for his efforts. To him the raising of rabbits seemed very easy and profitable. Seeing his eagerness, I decided to give him a breeding female with the condition that he would look after her and her future clutch.

„No problem, B'wana.” He said with a wide grin.

In following days Fredrick was very conscientious about his animal. He fed her well; checked on her each time he passed in the vicinity of the hatch. On the following Sunday afternoon I noticed that the usually serene rabbit was jumping up and down in her cage. A couple of hours later the animal's movements became frantic. I went closer to investigate. There was neither water nor food in the cage. I asked Fredrick for an explanation.

„But, B'wana, I do not work on Sundays.” He said.

November 1981.

## 92

### MILOU

I put the tiny white ball of fur on the seat of the chair.

„She comes from a long line of rat killers according to my co-worker, her donor.” I announced proudly to my wife.

The little kitten certainly didn't look like a killer. She had just been weaned, and felt miserable. Her thin whining meows came from a broken heart. Losing her mother and sisters at the same time, and arriving in a completely alien environment was a terrible experience for this tiny creature.

But Milou, as we decided to name her, grew up fast. She befriended our puppies, especially Nyafi, a dog of undefined ancestry, who turned out to be a silly unheroic dog but an excellent stepbrother for the kitten.

Milou wasn't able to start killing rats yet, but we stopped seeing the rodents soon after the kitten had began to roam outside. She honed her hunting instinct in a less orthodox way and was ready to demonstrate it every evening if I had the time.

There were strings of luminescent lights mounted on the exterior walls of our house. They were turned on at dusk and remained on all night for security reasons. As soon as the lights came on, a large number of flying insects of the African night, moths, beetles, locusts etc. started to buzz around them. Many insects settled on the walls, under the lights. Some of these creatures were 6-10cm long.

After supper I would call out for the cat:

„Milou, let's go hunting!”

I marched out of the house with the cat at my heels and with a long bamboo stick I began to poke the larger insects resting around the light fixtures. The bugs normally fell, but not to the ground. They became airborne a few feet above the ground. At that instant Milou jumped into the air - up to three-feet - and caught the luckless creature. Then, with great delight, she crunched and devoured the insect.

When Milou reached maturity and came into heat, she had a very hard time. There were no other cats - much less eager tomcats - within calling distance. She meowed for days without any cavalier appearing to rescue her from her misery. She kept on rubbing against Nyafi's legs while crying nonstop. The sex hormones probably smell similar for both species, because the dog became aroused and began a vigorous copulation motion. But he was twice as tall as Milou, so his belly was far above her back as she crouched between his legs. The act remained highly stylized, without any physical contact. It was obviously unsatisfactory for the cat who continued meowing even more pitifully. Finally, the dog grabbed the cat by the neck and began to drag her aimlessly around the yard. As male cats often behave roughly toward females during copulation, Milou, by instinct, took this torture from the surrogate partner in a stride, and didn't try to escape or fight back. Both animals seemed to be clearly lost concerning nature's proper procedure in such case.

At about this time we obtained two more dogs, Tisza, a German shepherd and Jimmy, a Corgi. Milou didn't consider the latter, with its ridiculously short legs and affectionate nature, a threat. She just ignored him. On the other hand, the sight of Tisza brought sheer terror upon her, and

compelled her to flee on sight. From then on she never crossed the fenced off area where the dogs were kept. She never got used to this big dog although Tisza displayed no hostility toward her; the dog simply ignored Milou, just as she ignored Jimmy.

A few months later Milou became restless again. She was in heat for a second time. But after staying away from home for a night she calmed down. We guessed she had found a tomcat this time. Nyafi was saved from a recurring embarrassment. Sure enough, Milou very soon became heavy with kittens.

We kept two newborns - Snowball, a completely white male, and Ginger, a female. As the young ones grew and became active, running around the house and playing mischief, Milou felt the time was ready to start to teach them proper cat behaviour.

The floor of our living room was two steps lower than the rest of the house. Two continuous steps ran around it which rendered the room into a perfect arena. On one side of the room there was a glass wall, in which I had installed a cat window. Through it the mother cat could freely leave and enter, day and night.

One morning we found a dead rat on the living room floor. The kittens tried to play with it, but the dead rat - not surprisingly - remained unresponsive. Milou finally ate it while the kittens watched.

A couple of days later Milou entered the house with a half-dead rat in her mouth. She deposited her captive in the middle of the living room. This time the young cats had a heck of a time trying to keep the victim from moving. From then on, we found a rat in the living room almost every morning. The prey arrived in a friskier condition every day, and the chase became wilder and faster. While the poor victim was running around the foot of the step surrounding the sunken floor, the kittens pursued it closely, jumping on it from time to time. During this activity the mother cat lay in the centre of the room and kept a close eye on the show. When the rat, exhausted by the chase, stopped, the kittens pawed its face until the poor creature restarted its hopeless attempt to escape. Finally, Milou killed the completely worn-out animal with one bite, and then the whole family set down to dine.

We didn't enjoy the sight of this macabre spectacle on the floor of our living room every day. But it definitely served a very useful purpose: training the next generation of rat killers. With the army of rodents living in our neighbourhood, we could only appreciate this training.

Finally, in a week or so, Milou seemed to be satisfied with the progress of her progeny's hunting skills. She stopped bringing any more victims - to the great relief of the rat colony for sure.



*Milou, Ginger and Snowball*

As soon as the kittens began to exit from the house, they followed their mother to 'Uncle Nyafi' who was kept on a chain on the driveway side of the house. The other dogs were held in the fenced off yard behind the building. But Nyafi could not be enclosed. I believed that he was really a cat trapped in a dog's body. He could, and liked to climb gates and fences in an un-dog-like fashion.

Nyafi seemed to enjoy the company of the three cats and didn't mind that they all shared his leftover food. The dog's station was close to the chain link fence across from the house of our neighbour, George, a native Zambian. Every time George stepped out of his home, the dog started to bark at him. This annoyed George very much. He complained to us, but I couldn't, or didn't care to do anything about it.

In the summer of '83 we went away for a two-month vacation. When we had returned, Fredrick brought us the sad news that Nyafi and the three cats had died a week after our departure. As he described their deaths, it became clear that they had all died of poisoning. One could derive - by logic alone - the events leading to this tragedy. George was getting married during the summer, and he wanted to eliminate the barking dog. He must have thrown across some poisoned food. The other dogs, isolated from this area, were not affected. But the cats, sharing Nyafi's food regularly, had to die with him.

December 1981.



## 93

### SNAKES, ALL KINDS

Our house in Kitwe, Zambia, was encircled with open rain-drains, a network of cemented channels, about a metre wide and slopping from both edges to an approximate depth of 20 cm in the centre. In front of the house doors there were cement slates laid to bridge the trench.

My colleagues had suggested that I clean out the drainage system before the coming rainy season which was to arrive in a few weeks. While I was removing the leaves, branches and other debris from under one of the 'bridges' with the help of a short pole ending in a hook, I inadvertently also pulled out a snake. It was a dark, almost black, 80 cm long and relatively thick creature with a rhombic head. The serpent was wriggling only a couple of feet from me as I stood near the bridge. Startled as I was, in reflex I hit it on the head with my stick, and then finished killing it off.

I had no idea if it was poisonous. The snake didn't rear up or otherwise threaten me, but we were in Africa, and the sight of a serpent had instantly triggered a self-defence reaction in me. Later, I felt uneasy about the unjustified killing of this wild creature, and decided to act more deliberately in the future; to avoid any killing unless there was a clear danger of getting hurt.



A chance to test my resolve arrived soon. I ran across another snake, this time a slender, greenish serpent which was only half as long as the previous one. This little snake put up an impressive threat display by drawing its head back in a striking coil, hissing and gaping its jaws. I forced its neck to the ground with a stick and so succeeded in capturing it alive. I placed the snake in a glass jar with a screw top. Later I asked Fredrick, our gardener, to identify it. Casting a glance at the jar holding the snake, the colour of Fredrick's face became several tones lighter as he stuttered:

„A black mamba, Bwana! - Very dangerous.”

The black mamba was considered the most deadly poisonous snake in that part of Africa, and was tremendously feared. I knew that my snake could be anything but a black mamba. It was green. This was the first but not the last display of native ignorance about their environment. To an average Zambian every snake was a dreaded black mamba and had to be killed on the spot.

The next morning I took the jar containing the live serpent to work in an attempt to have it identified by my colleagues. My office was on the second floor of the building. I placed the jar on the windowsill. At coffee time the 'tea boy' (a relic from the British colonial times) - actually an elderly Zambian on this occasion - rolled in the service trolley and began to prepare my usual cup of tea. I picked up the jar and showed it to him. The sudden movement of the container made the snake to wriggle inside. The sight of the live snake terrified the 'tea boy' so much that he ran out of the office leaving his equipment behind. I had to push his trolley out to the corridor so that he could continue his work. For the rest of the day nobody would enter my room, even the British and Indian expatriates. That put an end to my 'show and tell' inquiry.

During the next three years I captured 15 more snakes in our garden. Our house was at the edge of the town, at the border of the bush which reached down to the river. We happened to be on the biannual migration route of these creatures. The lush vegetation of our garden which contained more than 100 banana trees, three huge clumps of bamboo trees, and extensive flower and vegetable beds, provided excellent hiding places and hunting grounds for the wandering snakes.

We had to adjust our life accordingly. Irene did her weeding in the company of our cat, Milou. She was not only an extraordinary rat killer, but was also good in spotting even an immobile snake hiding in the greenery. When that happened, she froze, and the hair on her back stood straight up. Observing this alarm signal, Irene would retreat. I, after arriving home from work, would try to find and capture the intruder. If successful, I handed the jar to Fredrick with strict instructions to take it to the bush and release its contents - unharmed. In the back of my mind, however, the suspicion persisted that the last part of my command wasn't necessarily obeyed.

I liked to jog in the grassy part of the large garden before going to bed. It was normally dark and was the prime hunting time for nocturnal snakes. In order to reduce the danger of stepping on and getting bitten by one, I trained Tisza, our German shepherd, to run in front of me through the first lap. I presumed that her senses were acute enough to detect a snake and her reflexes were fast enough to evade a strike. By the subsequent laps any snake would have moved out of my path for sure. I met no bad incident through the years.

While vacationing in South Africa, I finally had the chance to buy a snake identification manual. From it I learned that my first show-and-tell snake and a few others afterwards, were Herald snakes. Although poisonous, this is a relatively harmless, back-fanged type serpent. It could sink its fangs, located in the back of its mouth, only into small objects, like a man's finger but not into his leg, and even then, despite its painfulness, a bite had no debilitating consequences.

Another visitor of ours posed a potentially far more serious threat. One evening Irene rushed into the house to tell me that there was a snake in the driveway with a head like a tennis ball. This sounded interesting. I went out to see. Truly, there was at the edge of the gravel - a snake with a completely spherical head. Due to the semi-darkness under the hedge we leaned closer to get a better look. Suddenly, the snake's head separated from the body and began to roll away. Only then did we realize that what we'd believed to be the head of this large snake was a frog or a toad. It had inflated itself upon being grabbed by the snake. This self-defence mechanism acts to prevent the predator from swallowing its prey. The event normally has a limited value because sooner or later the snake's fangs deflate the victim, but it worked for this fellow.

Solving the riddle of the tennis ball head, we left the snake alone, and entered the house. An hour later Fredrick returned from the town. We heard his steps on the gravel in the driveway when he suddenly started to shout and curse. There was the sound of several thumps, then everything became quiet and we heard him entering his quarters.

In the morning I noticed the large snake of the evening before lying in the driveway. It was still alive, although its back was broken. When I approached within a couple of metres, the snake tried to rear and spread its hood. It was a cobra. Suddenly, the animal tilted its head back and expelled two jets of venom from its fangs toward my face. It was a spitting cobra. Fortunately, at this time, the range of its spit, or spray, was much shorter than normal due to the snake's grave injury. The expelled toxin fell harmlessly on the ground in front of me.

Under normal circumstances, this type of cobra accurately spits its venom up to two metres, aiming into the face of the victim. If the poison gets in a person's eye, it causes a very painful reaction, and if untreated would permanently blind the victim. The night before, when the frightened snake released the inflated toad, we were clearly within striking range. Luckily, it didn't use its dreadful defence. The cobra had still been hunting in the same area when Fredrick returned. He instinctively tried to kill it with his stick. Now, I had to call him out to finish the grim business and to end the cobra's misery.

During our three years in Kitwe I encountered 18 snakes in our garden, most of them poisonous. I didn't see, even one, anywhere else in Zambia. We did a lot of hiking in the bush close to the city, visited several National Parks in the lowland (a more typical snake country), and made a week-long walking safari beside the Luangwa River, but we didn't see any snakes, dead or alive. If by chance we stayed in an apartment building rather than a house in Kitwe, I would have sworn that Zambia, like Ireland, is a snake-free country.

February 1982.

## 94

### FLAT TIRE

The four of us - Irene, Andy, Ida (a friend of a friend), and I - were on our way to Luangwa Valley National Park in a Fiat. The first day we had reached Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. On the second day we started out early in the morning. We hoped to reach our destination in the North Country in the afternoon. This part of Zambia was sparsely inhabited. The countryside was unending bush with only occasional cultivated strips. The monotony was infrequently broken by road side way-stations which were usually comprised of an eatery, a general store and perhaps a petrol pump. The native villages lay mostly off the road. One could rarely see them. Unlike the day before, when traffic on the highway was moderately heavy, at this time we only met occasional lorries coming from or going to Malawi, the neighbouring backwater country.

At around noon I noticed that one of the wheels of our car was dragging. We had a flat tire. I pulled to the side of the road and with the help of Andy unloaded the trunk, removed the spare wheel and installed it.

When the car was lowered back on the pavement, the newly installed tire bulged out. Its air pressure was too low.

The car was from the company's car pool. In the morning of our departure I had wanted to be on my way as soon as possible. I checked the oil and cooling water levels and the tire pressures except that of the spare tire. From this moment on the consequence of my oversight hung around my neck like a tonne of stone. I had no choice than to continue the trip on a low tire and hope that we could reach a garage before it failed completely.

It was a far too optimistic expectation. Only a few kilometres farther, as we crossed a wooden bridge, a loose plank jumped up, hit and pinched the soft tire and punctured the inner tube. The tire went flat instantly. After removing the wheel, the four of us sat down on the bank of the ditch and waited for a passing vehicle that would give me a lift to the next gas station, wherever it might be.

Waiting for something to happen is a way of life in Africa, so we weren't unduly worried. Sure enough, in less than an hour a pickup truck approached on the road. The driver slowed down, and then stopped in front of us. He was a white missionary. When I told him about our predicament, he shook his head in disbelief.

„How can you travel in this part of the country without a foot pump and a repair kit and with only one spare tire?“ He chastised me.

I morosely accepted his criticism but it was too late for remorse. I was glad that I hadn't mentioned to him that I had started out without even checking the pressure in the spare tire. The missionary's vehicle was well fitted for back-country travel. It had a vulcanizing kit and a portable compressor in the back. The man of God turned out to be an expert repairman. He dismounted the wheel, removed the tire and fixed the pinch-hole in the inner tube almost single handily, all in no time flat. He obviously travelled a lot and had plenty of chances to practice his skill. I could barely thank him before he hurriedly took off. He was already late for somewhere.

Andy and I reinstalled the wheel with the repaired tire. As we started out on the road it began to pull. In a quarter of an hour the tire was flat again. The loose plank of the bridge had apparently pinched and punctured the tube in more than one location. We, actually our missionary

benefactor, had repaired only the most evident hole. In his hurry he hadn't checked for further leaks before leaving. I hadn't thought about it either.

After removing the wheel we were back on the bank of the road waiting for a second chance.

It arrived in the form of a heavily loaded lorry pulling a similarly charged trailer. I stepped to the centre of the road and flagged the transport down. It came to a stop. The chauffeur, a black guy this time, looked at me with great annoyance.

„How would I start uphill with this load now? You should have had enough sense to walk to the top of the hill before trying to stop somebody!“ He scolded me.

The hill on which we were standing was not a steep one, at least not for a car. However, for a heavy lorry with a worn clutch it might be a challenge. I realized this too late.

Despite his fuming he agreed to take me and my wheel. I climbed up beside him. He tried to start his transport. It didn't budge. The clutch smelt like a scorched pig. Finally, after a couple of agonizing attempts, the vehicle began to move. About 20 km farther we arrived at a way-station with petrol pump in front of it. To my great relief I saw a 'Repair Garage' sign on the wall beside the door marked 'General Store'. I got out of the cab and thanked the driver. By now he was in a friendlier mood and when we parted he waved to me - his face beaming with a wide grin.

I walked to the 'Repair Garage' behind the building. It was a lean-to with the roof attached to the wall of the 'General Store' and the other three sides were open. A small crowd of locals were standing around it. When I pushed forward, I spied a lonely mechanic working on the engine of a pickup truck. On the back of the vehicle was a coffin. Several, gloomy looking East Indian men stood around the truck. I asked one of the onlookers what was going on.

The man explained that the previous night a fatal accident had occurred on the road near the Malawi border. Two people were killed. One of the two was the young brother of these sombre looking Indians. The brothers were taking the body back to Lusaka for burial when their truck broke down.

„You have to wait, Bwana, for your turn before the mechanic can get to your tire.“ The man advised me.

I reassured him that I realized my problem was secondary to that of these sad brothers. I sat down for what turned out to be a long wait. Finally, the engine of the truck roared up and the Indians were on their way. I could now approach the mechanic. He looked at me without enthusiasm and asked me:

„Do you have any rubber glue with you? Because I have only one tube left, and it's old.“

I had no choice but to ask him to use whatever he had. While he was fixing the tire, a lorry on its way to Lusaka stopped for petrol. I persuaded the driver to wait for me and give me a lift back to my car. As soon as the repair was completed and the tire was filled with air, we started out.

I found my companions still sitting on the side of the road with long faces. During the many hours following my departure, no cars or trucks passed by, and they had no idea when would I show up, if ever.

Ten minutes later we were on the road again. By now it was late afternoon, the sun was sinking toward the horizon. There were still at least 3-4 hours of driving ahead of us.

'How will we find the camp in the dark?' I wondered.

In less than an hour I realized that I had a more imminent problem. The damn tire had begun to lose air again. This time it was a slow leak. The glue used by the mechanic must have been ancient, and the patch begun to peel off.

I continued to drive but stopped occasionally to check the bulge. It became more and more pronounced by every stop. It was very discouraging. Our spirits sank even more when we looked at the bush stretching out on both sides of the road. It seemed to be becoming denser and denser as the darkness rapidly descended on us.

In a short while I could not drive any longer on the - by now - airless tire. I pulled to the side. At this point the road descended to cross a valley. A couple of hundred metres ahead of us I could see the outline of a bridge. On the other side, on the uphill slope, a big dark mass with a bright light in the middle loomed. After scrutinizing the strange looking object for a while we guessed that it was two big trucks parked, one close behind the other, and that the lights of the second truck were on.

We were not alone in this forlorn country - I sighed with relief. I hoped that the trucks had repair kits and air compressors. Andy and I removed the flat wheel and began to roll it toward the trucks. Before leaving, I told our two women to stay in the car, and if there was any problem, to blink the lights and sound the horn. The trucks were less than half a kilometre away.

When we reached the trucks, we found the two drivers and a couple of helpers busy repairing their own tires. They were working in the gap between the two trucks. The beams of the second vehicle provided illumination. They kept the engine of this truck running to generate power.

What luck! I sighed. They had broken down at the right spot and also had the necessary tools, glue and even an air compressor, to do the work. When I asked for their help, the two drivers agreed to fix our tire as soon as they had finished repairing theirs. Andy and I sat down to wait. It took the crew nearly an hour to finish their job. Finally our turn came. The repair didn't take long, and looked a slipshod job to me. The men were hungry and eager to sit down for their meal. They invited us to join them but I said that we'd rather head back to our women folk.

On the road it was now pitch dark. At the bridge, about halfway to the car, a dark shadow emerged in front of us out of nowhere. It was an older, native man, as far as we could tell in the darkness. He appeared to be very agitated as he was mumbling about something, half in English, and half in Bemba. I understood only a few words, e.g. knife, wife, supper, but couldn't figure out what he was trying to say. We restarted walking again. The man followed us, still muttering excitedly.

We found the two women inside the vehicle with all doors locked. They were completely hysterical. Irene was holding a strange machete, a two-foot long naked blade, in her hand. I realized that the situation had something to do with our old man. But the story presented by the two, now screaming, women, wasn't any more comprehensible than the muttering of the old man. It took a while for the tempers to cool enough so that I could piece the events together:

The old man had been working in his field in the bush, weeding with his machete. When darkness fell, he was ready to return home carrying his tool in his hand. He noticed the dark, abandoned car on the road. He approached it to investigate. Irene and Ida sitting in the car saw him walking around with this scary weapon in hand. They believed that he came to kill and rob them. They started to shout at him and demanded that he give up his machete. He meekly handed it over to Irene without understanding what the fuss was about. Then the women locked the car doors and tried to call for help by flicking the lights and blasting the horn. This only frightened the old man even more.

All this time, Andy and I were between the two trucks with the engine and the compressor running, and could not see or hear the alarm signals.

The old man wanted to return home desperately, but could not leave without his machete. Irene told him to find me down the road where the light was shining. So he headed toward the lorries to ask for help and we met.

By now both parties quietened down. After I returned the knife to his rightful owner with an apology, the old man disappeared into the darkness. Andy and I mounted the wheel and we started to move once more. As we passed the two trucks, we waved to our latest saviours, and continued our trip along the dark road.

Travelling at night on Zambian roads was not recommended, and expatriates rarely attempted it. The poor condition of the roads - requiring close attention in daytime - presented a far graver danger in the darkness. The lack of public security was also a great deterrent. There were stories of holdups - armed bandits setting up roadblocks and stripping travellers of all of their

valuables, including their clothing. These crimes were never reported in the press or admitted by the authorities; consequently, their actual frequency and severity could be widely exaggerated. However, the possibility was always there. This time we had no choice. There were no hotels or other shelters in this part of the country. We had to continue our trip.

Our progress proved to be of short duration. The wheel started to wobble again, and the tire was soon completely flat. This time I accepted our fate with total apathy. I had no strength left even to curse. I pulled to the side of the road and decided to spend the night in the car and try to look for help in the morning.

I'd always wondered why the nights in the African bush are noisier than the days. Or did it only seem so? The four of us listened to the various sounds around us, whose sources none of us could identify. Sleeping was impossible. It was too uncomfortable in the small Fiat. At least we didn't have to worry about bandits in this sparsely inhabited corner of the country. If there were any, they were not likely to be within walking distance.

The hours passed very slowly. Later during the night, the temperature dropped. We began to shiver. We closed the windows tight. They steamed up in no time, rendering the interior pitch dark. It felt very claustrophobic.

Finally, the first rays of the sun began to warm us up. We got out of the car and removed the wheel, that bloody nuisance of the last 24 hours. We didn't have to wait too long before a pickup truck appeared. I flagged it down. There were half a dozen natives standing in the back of the vehicle, and two in the cabin: the black driver and a very distinguished looking black gentleman. I climbed in to sit beside them after passing the wheel up to the passengers. I didn't even have to explain my problem; it was obvious.

It turned out that the well-dressed man was a major landowner locally. All the surrounding bush country, and the cultivated land beyond, including several villages, belonged to him. He was a member of the Zambian Parliament, and must have been a VIP in the ruling party because he had visited Canada as a member of a Commonwealth delegation. Now, he was on his way to a farm, off the highway, that he wanted to inspect. He reassured me that the driver, after dropping him and his workers off at the site, would take me to a town near the Malawi border, which had an automobile repair shop. The facility was run by a very able East Indian - he said.

„That man will help you for sure, especially if he learns that I sent you to him.” Said the VIP with great dignity.

A couple of hours later I was in the shop, which was surprisingly large and busy with many employees. It seemed to be well equipped, and even had an automotive spare parts depot. The shop apparently served the whole eastern part of the country including the estate of our gentleman benefactor.

The East Indian owner found a new inner tube for my tire, and he got the old one properly patched also. For the first time the tire was tested in water for any possible leak before it was declared repaired. I got a ride back in a tow truck, whose driver installed the tire on our car - greatly impressing the women-folk.

We started out with the conviction that nothing bad could ever happen to us again. Two hours later we arrived at Chibembe Camp, our destination. It was 3.00 in the afternoon. We were exactly a day late. We learned with sinking hearts that the walking safari we were to join had left in the morning, and that it was too late to try to catch up with them. So it seemed that we had travelled 500 km, suffered five consecutive flat tires, and spent a wretched night in the car on the highway, for nothing. When I told all this to the lodge manager, he commiserated with us and said that he would try to come up with something. Meanwhile, we should enjoy the swimming pool.

The water was nice but it was not what we'd come for. I felt miserable because our predicament was initiated by my carelessness. However, the manager proved to be true to his word. He organized a new walking safari for us. It was to include the four of us, plus the owner's son and a British naturalist and his wife who were staying in the lodge. We were to leave the camp the

following morning. This small party would be far better for wildlife viewing than the fifteen member group that had left in the morning. As compensation for the lost day, we were offered a night tour in the bush to observe nocturnal animals from the safety of a Landrover fitted with a searchlight.

So, as they say: every dark cloud has a silver lining.

August 1982.



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### WALKING SAFARI

Chibembe Lodge, a private tourist camp run by an expatriate family, sits on the east side of the Luangwa River. The Luangwa Valley National Park, the biggest and richest game reserve in Zambia, stretches across the water. We had arrived here for an eco-tour.

In the eighties, eco-tourism was still in its infancy. It had not reached Africa yet. Game-viewing safaris everywhere, from the Equator to the Cape, traveled by Land Rover, or motorboat, or, occasionally, one's own car, with a strict warning to stay inside the vehicle throughout the trip. We took some of these tours in Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. They were interesting, but the smelly, noisy and fast-moving vehicles made us painfully aware of the fact that we were only rude intruders in the natural environment. So when we learned that one was allowed to explore the wildlife on foot in Luangwa Park, we were fascinated. We signed up for a five-day tour.

Our little party of eight consisted of our core group: Irene, Andy, Ida - a friend of a friend - and I, plus David, a British naturalist and scientific advisor to the group, his wife visiting from England, Harry, our native game guard and tour leader, and lastly, the 'Tea Boy', a vestige of British colonial times.

We crossed the river in a tiny boat. On the far side, we formed a single file. Harry with his 'elephant gun' on his shoulder led the way, while the 'Tea Boy' closed the ranks. He carried a big box on his head. This contained our supply of tea, tea-kettle, cups and utensils.

The trail led through a thick copse of trees on the river's edge. As we rounded a clump of bushes, our guide signalled us to stop and stand still. Just in front of us a female elephant was feeding on fallen fruit under a tree. Her grey, massive hind looked very impressive - we were standing only 25 meters from her. The animal must have sensed our presence because she raised her trunk and swung it around, probing the air for a scent. We moved quietly away - down wind. The animal seemed to become reassured because she lowered her trunk and resumed feeding. This was our first encounter with the largest animal of the park. It was followed later by many more.

We swerved away from the river and soon entered an open savannah-type country with full of many different kinds of grazing animals: dozens of waterbucks, wildebeests, pukus and impalas across a dry creek. They were all grazing peacefully on the dry grass, not paying any apparent attention to us. We stopped to have a better view and to take pictures. After a while we tried to approach them by crossing the creek bed. They just moved to the side. On the far end of the grassy plane there was a group of zebras. This group proved to be less tolerant of our presence. They watched us cautiously, and as soon as we began to close in on them, they beat a hasty retreat and were swallowed up by the nearest copse of trees.

Our walk continued along the bank of a seasonally dry riverbed dotted with perennial pools at intervals. In one of the ponds there was a resident hippo. These animals normally stand their ground against any intruder, but when this one saw us approaching, it climbed the bank and melted into the bush.

We reached a pond full of all kinds of wading birds. Harry declared tea-time and we settled down under a shady tree. The tea boy disappeared carrying his empty water container. He was back in less than five minutes with the jug filled with fresh water - at least that's what he claimed. He made a fire, and in fifteen minutes we were served boiling tea with biscuits - English colonial style.

We rested for half an hour, taking a zillion pictures of the birds. They are excellent photo subjects. We counted some 20 different species. A few hippos also shared the pond. Two males put on an impressive territorial fight for our entertainment - I thought. The noisy encounter involved a lot of snorting, gaping mouths, and occasional stabbing at each other with their formidable tusks. While this went on, the animals' digestive systems continued to discharge. The beasts' short tails rotating like propellers dispersed the manure over the surface of the water in an even layer.

Half an hour later we restarted our leisurely walk. By lunchtime we reached the bush camp, our destination for the day. It consisted of half a dozen round two-person grass huts placed in a semi-circle under large trees. The only furniture in the huts consisted of two army cots with mosquito nets above them. Outside, on a little stand, a washbasin stood with a mirror attached to the straw wall above it. This was the only luxury item. There were similar grass enclosures for a shower, toilet and kitchen a short distance away. The camp was attended by two natives: a cook and a cleaning attendant.

We found our individual bags inside the huts. They had been brought there by porters following a different route.

After the lunch and a short siesta, we set off for another walk, and returned only just before sunset. There were many wild animals around, mostly wildebeests, impalas, zebras and elephants. The latter, easily visible even from a distance, were the most conspicuous and impressive inhabitants of the park.

Camp tables were set up under a big tree on the bank of a dry creek. As we relaxed after the meal, some visitors unexpectedly arrived - a big female elephant accompanied by two younger ones. They walked out of a nearby bush and headed straight to our table - we thought. We all froze. Harry didn't show any alarm - he just indicated with his hand to remain quiet and calm.

The elephants stopped about five meters from our table and began to pick fruit from a big tree. Only then I did realize that our camp was set up - not unintentionally - in a wild orchard. The elephants continued munching for about a quarter of an hour while we watched them with great fascination. Then the beasts calmly withdrew.

We didn't know that their departure was only temporary. After dark the elephants returned to spend the night around our huts, picking fallen fruit. Not surprisingly, none of us visited the outhouse during those hours.

After the quiet of the day, the night turned out to be quite noisy. Eerie and unfamiliar sounds surrounded us until daybreak. I could distinguish the roaring of the lions and the guffaws of the hippos in the distance - both species kept at it all night - but the origins of other noises remained a mystery.

Next morning two new arrivals, a photographer and his native helper, joined us. The former was a tall, husky guy, in his twenties - the son of the owner of Chibembe Lodge. He was to cover only one leg of the trip with the intention of making a publicity video. His equipment was very ancient looking, the first model on the market from perhaps a decade earlier. The camera was unwieldy - as large and heavy as a commercial movie camera. It needed a tripod to support it during shooting, and a suitcase size battery to drive it. These items were carried by the porter. The photographer and his porter were always struggling to catch up with the group because of the equipment's weight and the electrical cable connecting the operator to the power source. We didn't see them taking a single worthy shot.

They seemed to miss a lot. There were many interesting sights. We encountered a herd of perhaps fifty cape buffalos. A single buffalo is considered one of the most dangerous animals in the park - it would attack most of the time without any provocation. On the other hand a herd of these animals is no more menacing than a herd of cattle. As we approached them, they started to run away from us, but only for a short distance, perhaps 50 m. Then they suddenly stopped - as on command - turned around and faced us. When we continued walking toward them, they repeated the same retreating-facing manoeuvre until we got tired and moved off.

We reached a stream that had to be forded. There was a fallen log ahead of us conveniently spanning the gulch, though only a couple of feet above the surface of the water. On the opposite bank, right in our path, a troop of baboons was camped. They didn't like being disturbed and gave expression to their annoyance with loud shouts as we began to cross. Their screaming only added to the nervous tension of some of the female members of our party who had found the triple menace - the unsteady footpath on the log, the possibility of crocks lurking below it, and the aggressive behaviour of the baboons on the other side - just too much. Harry gallantly held their hands and led them over one by one.

We reached the Luangwa River again. From the high bank at this point we could safely watch a large group of hippos with many calves among them - perhaps thirty animals - on the other, sandy shore. They became alarmed seeing us. Rushed to the river, dove in, and submerged. The troop disappeared completely, as if it had never been there.

Our second bush camp was located on the bank of a pond, a lonely remnant of a dried-up river branch. The bank on our side was high and steep. It had only one ditch-like path leading down to the water, carved by a resident hippo bull for exiting to his feeding grounds. Harry warned us not to go near this path or down to the pond. Hippos are extremely territorial and will attack intruders.

Our cameraman, who had probably grown up around here, and should have known better, disregarded the warning, and climbed down the bank to take a closer look at the bull resting on the far side of the pond. The hippo became infuriated and reacted with astonishing rapidity. It darted into the water and moved across it like a speedboat. The intruder, now scared out of his wits, climbed the bank as fast as a monkey. Fortunately he didn't slip, and made it before the hippo shot out of the water just a couple of meters below him. It was a close call. Nobody said a word.

As dusk began to descend, the resident hippo climbed up through his personal trench - just wide enough to accommodate his huge body - cast an ugly look at us seated at the picnic table five meters away, and continued on his well-worn track into the bush. He would have to walk several kilometres to his grazing ground. We saw him returning in the morning, still in a gloomy mood.

When it became dark, our cameraman decided on a new adventure. He went for a stroll on the riverbank. He was however back in no time - very agitated.

"There is a leopard right beside the camp!" He shouted. "I got away before it could attack."

"How could you tell that it was a leopard in the darkness?" David asked.

"By the green reflection in its eyes!"

Harry picked up his rifle and a flashlight, and we all proceeded toward the spot indicated. Sure enough, we saw a pair of shiny, perhaps green eyes, but they belonged to a peacefully grazing dik-dik, a tiny antelope not bigger than a dog.

We all started to laugh. Our fallen hero retreated to his hut.

Next morning he said good-bye to us. He was to return to the lodge with the daily porters. We all felt relieved.

We preceded by following well-trodden elephant tracks. At one point Harry noticed a flock of vultures circulating in the air not far from our trail. He commanded the tea boy to climb a nearby tree to see what had attracted the birds. There was no clear view even from that elevation however. We began to move with caution in the general direction of the vultures. Harry expected to find a dead animal laying there. There was a potential danger: the carcass could have already been attended by lions, hyenas, and other dangerous scavengers.

When we finally reached the spot of the birds' interest, we found a dead lioness lying in the grass. There were no scavenger animals or birds on the ground. The carcass could have been there for only a few hours since its belly wasn't yet torn open, but it had already started to smell. Upon examining it, Harry opined that the lioness was old and looked half starved. In

despair, it had probably tried to snatch a baby elephant. The mother had succeeded in trampling her young's attacker.

David asked Harry if he could have one of the beast's claws as a souvenir. The guide obliged, took his knife and carved the item out of a paw. Then he removed a second one and presented it to Andy. When we returned home from the safari it took several hours of boiling in water before the smell disappeared. The claw was mounted in a necklace and Andy still wears it.

Our third bush camp, similar to the previous, was under the canopy of huge fruit trees, right on the bank of the Luangwa River. Fresh elephant dung and gnaw marks in the tree bark suggested that we wouldn't be the sole occupants of the camp that night.

The river was relatively narrow at this point and flowed slowly. Harry invited us to take a bath in the warm water.

"There are no crocs in this section." He reassured us.

The water was only waist-deep and we had a great time frolicking in it.

As expected, we were joined by a sizable group of elephants right after super. They remained around our huts all night, rendering any trip to the washroom inadvisable.

We also had another group of neighbours for the night. A large troop of monkeys had moved into the canopy above us. Harry said that they like to bivouac above elephants because the presence of these large beasts keeps leopards away. But not this night.

Sometime after midnight a painful scream exploded above us. In the next moment the canopy became a pandemonium of horrified uproar. The whole troop of monkeys was howling and shrieking at the top of its lungs. One still could distinguish the painful scream of the victim fading in the distance as the leopard carried it away. The elephants also became annoyed by all the noise, and began to trumpet. We were too scared to look out, not wanting to provoke the huge beast any further.

It took a good half an hour before everything became peaceful and relatively silent again.

At sunrise I had to get up. I glanced out to see if the elephants were still around. To my relief, they had gone. After visiting the loo I went to the river bank to look at the water. There I froze. In the stream - about 8 m from me - a huge croc was swimming upstream. Harry's credibility suffered a serious blow - this section of the river was no safer from crocks than the rest.

Next day we came into the path of a group of rushing elephants. They must have been startled by something because they were running with their tails raised horizontally, a clear sign of distress in this species. We were downwind so the animals had not detected our presence. Seeing them coming, we hid behind big trees and watched them passing at a distance of perhaps 10m. As they levelled with us, I got out my movie camera, stepped out from behind the tree and began to film them. Suddenly, I heard Harry's warning whistle. I turned around and saw a second group of elephants following the first and running straight at me. I jumped back behind the tree. The beasts passed me by about 5-6 meters. It was scary. The most surprising thing was that one couldn't hear these huge animals when they moved. The elephant's feet have very soft elastic soles which make a barely audible noise when running.

As we approached the next bush camp, our last one, Harry signalled us to stop. Between us and the already visible camp there was a small thicket. Our guide noticed something suspicious among the trees. After scanning them carefully I also saw the dark shadow of a larger animal, a kudu or a buffalo, or something that size. We were waiting for the animal to move away but it remained motionless. Harry said that no healthy animal would stay so close to a camp. There was something wrong with this one. He decided to lead us around the thicket in a big semicircular path.



*Examining the old remnants of an elephant killed by poachers*

In the camp we settled down but Harry cocked his gun and went out with Dave to check if the animal was still there. A short while later there was the sound of a shot. Soon the two returned. Harry explained that it was a wounded buffalo shot through the throat by, most likely, a poacher. The animal probably couldn't graze because of the wound. The buffalo - desperate in its pain and hunger - might attack anybody approaching it. The beast had to be destroyed.

The following morning we went to see the dead animal. During the night scavengers had already torn its belly open and eaten the inner organs, but the neck wound and the hole in its chest from Harry's shot were still clearly visible.

This day we were walking near the border of the park, in an area easily accessible to poachers. At one point the smell of rotting flesh lingered in the air. As we moved on, the nauseating stench became stronger. We were approaching an elephant graveyard - a man-made one. Half a dozen partially eaten, half rotten carcasses lay at the bank of a dry creek. Their trunks and ivories were missing. They had been killed for their tusks by poachers with submachine guns.

It was a sad last impression of the park. We were now heading toward Chibembe lodge. But first we had to cross the Luangwa River - this time on foot. The stream was shallow but quite wide and barely moving. Harry reassured us that there were no crocs here. I took his comforting words with a grain of salt.

We removed our boots, tied them together and threw them over our shoulders. The group began to march in a single file behind Harry across the muddy stream. Ida, however, froze after a few steps. She found treading on the soft, muddy river bottom frightening. Harry returned to her, lifted her on his shoulder, and carried her all the way to the far shore. We didn't see any crocs, though they were probably lurking somewhere not far from us.

On the other bank we found a dirt road - the first after had been walking on animal paths for five days. A short while later we reached the lodge.

This walking safari remained a very memorable experience for me. I had finally encountered African wildlife on more equal terms.

August 1982

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### IDA

Steve, a lean, dark man in his fifties, was one of the two resident Hungarians in Kitwe in the eighties. We saw him only occasionally. He had a dried-meat (biltong) production facility and a store in which he sold the product. He despised his black employees. This attitude provided him with the moral licence to exploit them with no remorse. A few years earlier Steve had had a bout with throat cancer. It had been surgically removed - apparently successfully - but he had also lost a good part of his throat in the operation. Consequently, he had follow-up surgery which enabled him to eat through a little pipe inserted in his throat that had one end open to the outside. After the surgery he had had to learn to talk by controlling the air flow to his larynx with his stomach muscles. His voice sounded somewhat strange but his speech, both Hungarian and English, was understandable. During this difficult time he had also lost his wife under tragic circumstances. We never learned the details of the sad event. Steve has obviously not been the luckiest man around.

One day I got a call from Steve. He told me that he had a visitor, a young woman from Hungary, staying with him for two months. Since he had learned from a common friend in Ndola that we were planning to take a walking safari in Luangwa Valley National Park, Steve wondered if we would take his visitor along. He couldn't leave the business at this time but would happily cover all her costs.

We had an extra seat in our car and the travel agency expressed no objection to the late registration. The following evening Steve brought Ida, his guest, to meet us. She was a short, shapely woman in her early forties, with an average face and long, dark hair. Ida seemed to have a pleasant enough personality though she didn't leave the impression of being particularly smart. She didn't speak any English. We discussed the details of the trip plan, and Steve gave us a check for her expected expenses.

During the three-day drive to the National Park we learned some details about their relationship. Steve, after the death of his wife, had spent a couple of summers at his mother's place in a small town near Budapest. Ida, a single working woman, lived with her mother in the house next door. They invited Steve over several times during his stays. This year, according to Ida, he had offered her a free vacation trip to Zambia as compensation for the free suppers.

This business of delayed compensation for free meals didn't sound like Steve at all. Knowing him, I couldn't imagine him visiting anybody without bringing lavish gifts. He liked to play the extravagant gentry.

When I asked Ida directly if she had or was planning to return the favour, she became indignant and said that although Steve tried to bed her couple of times, she had refused 'that old cripple'. According to her, he had offered this vacation to her with no strings attached, so she didn't feel she owed him any thanks. This view of her actions seemed unreal to me. Could a single woman accept a very expensive trip from a single man, stay two months at his home in a remote corner of Africa without feeling any obligation or without expecting an intimate relationship?

However, this was none of my business - I thought. I was quite wrong about this, as it turned out.

A couple of weeks after we had returned from the safari we got a frantic call from Ida. She sobbed on the phone while trying to relate a confusing story. As far as we could make out, she

had been raped by the friend in Ndola, and now Steve had kicked her out. All this happened three days before her scheduled return to Hungary. At the moment she had nowhere to stay. She asked Irene if we would take her in until the planned departure.

I was in a dilemma. It wasn't clear to me what had really happened. Had she really been raped or there was something going on between the 'rapist' and Ida behind Steve's back? I didn't particularly like the woman; she was only an acquaintance. Now she'd got herself into hot water probably through her own stupidity. I knew that if I tried to interfere in this - apparently dirty - affair my relations with both Steve and the Ndola friend could be irreparably damaged. I believed that Ida should move into a hotel for the remaining three days. The expenses could be settled at a later, more convenient, date. But Irene, overwhelmed by female solidarity, didn't want to hear about any hotel. She felt that Ida needed our moral support in a tragic time like this.

"Since the woman doesn't speak English, she might even suffer a nervous breakdown if unable to talk to somebody" - Irene said.

Reluctantly, I gave in. Irene went to pick her up and brought her to our place. Ida was evidently in shock. Now, she told us in more detail what had happened.

That tragic morning, Steve and Ida drove to Ndola where he had some business to attend. Steve dropped her off at his friend's place promising to pick her up a few hours later. The friend's wife was away in Europe for the summer; he was alone in the house. He had already had a few drinks before the arrival of Steve and Ida. Now, he continued to have some more with her. Very soon they were skinny-dipping in his pool. Then the host had some further ideas. When Ida refused to cooperate, he started to chase her around the pool, both of them running in the nude. After catching her, he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her into the bedroom and raped her.

When Steve returned, he was in a rush. He got Ida into the car and they drove off immediately. She told him what had happened only after they had reached home. He refused to believe her story, saying that his friend was a gentleman and Ida was a cheap and easy whore (she was apparently neither, to Steve's chagrin). A screaming match ensued in which all kinds of accusations and counter accusations were made. Steve finally declared that he'd enough of her and she ought to clear out of his house at once.

After telling her story, Ida quietened down. Irene called Steve. In no time their conversation turned into a heated argument about the duties and responsibilities of a host, and the two were shouting and cursing at each other. I realized that our relationship with Steve was over for good.

Ida left for Hungary three days later as scheduled. Following her departure we received neither a phone call nor a letter from her. Obviously she didn't feel any obligation to let us know whether she had arrived home safely, and even less to thank us. However, before Xmas, many months later, she sent us a short note. She asked us to try to recover and return a pullover that she had left at Steve's place.

This request made me angry. She was not only a stupid and ungrateful brat, but in her narrow-minded way she couldn't even reconcile herself to the loss of a pullover. It would have not occurred to her to consider this small loss a part of the price she'd had to pay for her 'free vacation'. Now, brazenly, she wanted us to approach Steve and beg for her piece of rag.

Although I didn't have any reason to doubt her sincerity concerning the basic events of that ill-fated day, as her perception of reality was sometimes quite bizarre, I kept wondering about the actual circumstances leading to the ignominious ending of her saga in Zambia. We have never heard the other side's version because we have never talked to Steve again.

September 1982.

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### ARMY ANTS

The peacefulness of the night was rudely interrupted by the loud angry barking of Nyafi, one of our four dogs we had at the time. Nyafi had to be kept on a chain because he was a born escape artist who couldn't be confined by a chain link fence and a wooden gate. Now the dog was mad at something and kept on barking furiously. Its problem must have been of a personal nature because the other three dogs didn't join in the concert.

A short while later Nyafi's bark turned into whine which began to sound more and more painful. Irene and I went out to see what was bothering the dog. In the semi-darkness we saw only the animal's outline as it desperately jumped up and down and trying to tear off its chain. We stopped a couple of metres from the dog and tried to figure out what the cause of this frantic behaviour was but couldn't see anything.

It was a warm night; I wore shorts and was barefoot. As I was standing there undecided, I felt something crawling up on my foot followed by more of the same. I suddenly felt a fiery bite, then a second, and a third. I started to jump - not unlike our dog. Irene looked at me puzzled but not for long; the same thing happened to her. I grabbed Nyafi's chain and released him. He took off like an arrow toward the gate where he began to scratch himself madly against the post. I tried to brush off whatever kept biting me, and then ran into the house. Only there did I recognize my torturers; they were medium size, reddish ants - army ants, or 'drivers' as they were known by the local population. Such columns of raiders, which may contain more than a million individuals, are greatly feared by the natives. These marauders consume everything edible lying in their path - grass, vegetable, grains. They kill animals - insects, nesting birds, tethered animals - with their bites, then cut them to pieces and consume them. We could have been their casual victim.

Irene was already inside the house, busy washing the bites on her feet and legs with soap. A few minutes later we went out again with a flashlight. Now I could discern the column of ants, perhaps three or four foot wide, emerging steadily from our neighbour's garden and heading straight toward our house. By this time, Fredrick, our gardener, was also out and busy pouring corn flour on his doorstep. He anxiously explained that this dam of flour would save his quarters from the ants' invasion. When the insects reached the doorstep, they would begin to consume the flour but wouldn't cross over it. We sheepishly followed his example.

To my relief, the column changed direction for no apparent reason, and was now heading between our building and the guesthouse - where Fredrick lived - toward the fence on the other side of our property. However, the new route meant another menace. Straight ahead of the column were the rabbit hatches, a couple of multilevel cages holding about twenty rabbits at that time. I raised rabbits as a hobby. In despair, I asked Fredrick if we could stop the column by pouring hot water or petrol over them.

He just shook his head.

„The column will pass for hours, it is impossible to stop or kill them all. They will just go around the doused section and keep on marching in the same general direction.”

I wondered. The length of the ant column visible in our garden had already reached perhaps twenty metres, but it was only about one metre wide. Not a big deal, I taught. However, I realized that Fredrick's knowledge of local pests must be more credible than my 'common



sense'. But I had to do something to save those rabbits. I couldn't release them like I did with Nyafi. Two females had litters in their nests; they would not leave them. The others would run away. What to do?

Considering all kinds of possibilities, I recalled a war story of one of my high school teachers. He had been in a POW camp in Russia. As he described it, the camp was a miserable site. The men were infested with lice and their cots with bedbugs. Periodic cleaning of their body and clothing, and killing the bugs in the straw mattresses provided only temporary relief because in no time they became re-infested with fresh insects moving from other parts of the barracks. The prisoners tried to stop the migration by placing the legs of the cots in containers filled with water. But the bedbugs could not be outwitted; during the night they climbed to the ceiling and dropped on the beds, or so the story went.

However, that logic could perhaps work here? The rabbit hatches had legs similar to those of army cots and there was no ceiling here to worry about. It was worth a try. Irene and I rushed into the kitchen for some pots. Then Fredrick and I lifted the hatches, corner by corner, while Irene placed a pot under each leg. After completing the operation we filled the pots with water. By the time we finished the head of the menacing column was just a few feet away.

Staying at a safe distance to the side, we anxiously watched the ants in the beam of the flashlight. We saw the scouts reach the first pot in their path. They climbed its wall and ran around the rim. The ants must have smelled the water because they didn't descend on the inside pot wall. Meanwhile, the column itself, not receiving any inviting signals from the scouts, just went around the pot and continued its march. The idea worked!

We stayed mesmerized by watching, for perhaps half an hour, this creeping army of insects treading silently and apparently endlessly through our grounds. Tired, we finally went to bed.

The relatively dry and moderately hot highlands of Zambia - as we had learned - are an ant's paradise. In our garden we had at least half a dozen different types: small ones, large ones, red ones, brown ones and black ones, not to mention the termites, ant-like insects of a different species. We didn't normally see them but their passageways overlaid with mud, were visible everywhere on the trunks of our eucalyptus trees. In the house, the kitchen floor and counters had to be kept immaculately clean, and all food had to be stored in hermetically sealed containers, otherwise the place swarmed with ants overnight. The countryside teemed with small and large anthills. Some of them had century-old trees growing on top of them. On the side of the road natives occasionally sold mushrooms, 50-80 cm diameters - the largest in the world - which grew out of the sides of active ant hills.

The ants occasionally provided interesting entertainment. One evening we watched an army of these small insects drag a dead lizard - about 15 cm long - through the patio, up a step and finally up into an elevated flowerbed where their nest was located. This Herculean task, covering a 7-8 metre track, and a difference in elevation of about 30 cm, took less than an hour.

In the morning no migrating ants were seen. Only a metre wide path, devoid of any grass or other vegetation, ostensibly clean-swept, and stretching from one fence to the other, showed that last night's events weren't merely a bad dream. The rabbits were as lively as any other morning. They obviously didn't realize the danger what they had escaped. They would have only been skeletons by now if the ants hadn't attacked Nyafi first, causing him to raise the alarm.

October 1982.

## 98

### NIGHT ACQUAINTANCES

The movie was over. As Irene and I left the theatre we bumped into George, our neighbour, and he invited us for a beer at the foyer bar. When we exited the bar to the parking lot some time later we found the place practically empty except for our car and a Mercedes in the far corner of the lot. Two dark human figures lingered around it. As we headed toward our car, the gent and his lady from the Mercedes hastily approached us. They were a middle aged white couple. The man addressed me with a pronounced British accent:

“It’s jolly good to run into you. Our car wouldn’t start. Would you be so kind as to give us a lift to our home?” He asked.

One could hardly refuse such request under the circumstances. I invited the man to sit beside me to facilitate navigation while the lady took place beside Irene in the back seat. We headed North, opposite direction from our home. Soon we left the somberly lit and once paved streets of the city and continued in the dark on dirt country-roads. There were no human settlements around, just bush. I became uneasy. How would I find my way back at night? I had never been in this part of the country. There was no conversation in the car. My passengers obviously believed that driving required my undivided attention.

Finally, we came to a dead end at the edge of a swamp overgrown with tall reeds. A single, strange looking building stood beside the road at the edge of the water. It had two stories but was too small and atypical to be a home. Our guest finally uttered a few full sentences rather than the skimpy words he had communicated with me until now.

“Would you join us for a tea?” He asked. ‘In the meantime I will summon my mechanic who will lead you back to the city. The man will also fix our car and bring it home.”

I hesitantly nodded - his words didn’t completely reassured me - and we followed the couple to the building. He unlocked the door and switched on the light as we entered. The room contained only a wooden staircase attached to one of the walls; there was no furniture. We ascended the steps to the second floor - a roofed terrace with one side open. A strange contraption sat in the middle of the floor - a wooden crate with foot-high side walls. It had four steel corner posts supporting a rectangular frame above the box which was attached to a steel cable stretched under the ceiling. The box enclosed two bench seats which faced each other. The contraption was the humble gondola of an aerial tramway. At the invitation of the gent we took seats in it. The benches accommodated all four of us. The man pressed a button at the adjacent console, and our ship noiselessly slid off the terrace and began to glide above the reeds. The driving mechanism must have been located at the far end of the line. After about ten meters of travel we were over open water partially covered by rising mist.

“What is this body of water? A lake or a river?” I wondered aloud.

“It’s the Kafue River.” Our companion said without elaborating further.

The Kafue River was the source of the domestic and industrial water of Kitwe. I always thought of it as a major river but had never seen it close up. The swamps stretching along its shore rendered the waterway inaccessible from the town. At this point the stream was only about 100 m wide. When we reached the far, swamp-free shore - a knoll - our gondola landed at ground level. A young black man, who must have been the couple’s houseboy, was waiting for us. The boss gave him fast instruction in Bemba, the native tongue - this was unusual for an ex-pat -

and the boy disappeared. We entered the house built on the same knoll. It was spacious and richly furnished with plush furniture and carpets. Many trophies - stuffed animal heads, skins and ivory tusks, along with native wood carvings - were mounted on the walls. We sat down around a richly carved coffee table which had obviously come from India.

A few minutes later the houseboy reappeared carrying hot tea. In the meantime both Irene and I attempted to start conversation - with no success. We and our hosts soon became enmeshed in an embarrassing silence. I felt like an intruder - a bloody Canadian with a funny accent - in this proper English home. Such attitude wasn't rare among the old, ex-colonial British stock of Kitwe. The fact that we had helped the couple in a bad moment was of no benefit to us, and obviously wasn't sufficient to break down the ethnic and social prejudices so strongly embedded in our hosts.

Finally, an older black man carrying a small tool box appeared - the mechanic we were waiting for. Now we could be - and were - dismissed by our hosts with the skimpiest thanks.

Irene, the mechanic and I mounted the gondola. It was after midnight and the air already felt cool over the water. Above us the southern stars were sparkling in the dark sky, while under us a mystic mist, thickened to several meters by now, brushed the underside of the gondola as it silently glided along like Sinbad's magic carpet. The exotic ride partially compensated for the awkward moments of the 'tea party'.

At the far terminus we learned from the mechanic that the rear section of the building was a garage. This was the only information we got from him. For the rest of the trip he remained as uncommunicative as his bosses. After dropping him off at the cinema parking lot we finally drove home and arrived there four hours later than initially envisaged.

The following morning Irene went to her aerobic class at the Italian Club. She told her companions about our experience of the previous night. Some of the woman knew, or at least new of, the couple. They told Irene that the man had been a settler in colonial times. His estate was large and rich. Then one of the gossipers dropped the bombshell: Several years ago our man had murdered his wife - at least he had been accused of killing her. The woman we'd met had been his mistress. On trial he had been acquitted. The general consensus among the know-it-alls was that the judge had been paid off. Since the trial the couple lived a very secluded life, and only rarely came into the city.

So the frigidity and silence displayed by our acquaintances of the night might not have been completely due to us being Canadians of inferior stock.

May 1983.

## 99

### MY LAST THOUGHT

Three of us were getting ready to dive. The New Zealander, a professional underwater photographer, was first to enter the water. The sea was rough. One had to be careful that the waves didn't throw the floating diver against the boat. I had expected that the crew, or someone from the crew, would give us a hand, or would at least supervise the launch. However, they didn't pay any attention to us. They were busy with the other passengers, about a dozen, who were to be transferred to a nearby reef for snorkelling.

The New Zealander dropped into the sea. After he resurfaced, we handed him his photographic equipment. He submerged, and I never saw him again. My British companion was next. He wasn't an experienced driver but had more dives behind him than I did. He went in without any problem, popped up, adjusted his mask, and submerged for good.

This diving practice was very different from that I was trained for. Back at our diving club in Zambia we operated as a team. Nobody submerged until the whole group was in the water, and each had tested his or her equipment. Here, on this Australian dive boat, everyone was left to his own devices. This practice seemed ominous for an inexperienced driver like me. I was still in training. However, I had to proceed; I was the third and last in line.

I dropped into the water and refloated. A wave at once moved me away from the boat. I drained and adjusted my mask while continuing to breathe from my tank. I felt that something was wrong; there wasn't enough air reaching my lungs. I hesitated to submerge. I removed the mouthpiece to allow breathing fresh air and to stabilize my respiration rate. This proved difficult because of the choppy sea. I had to reinstate the mouthpiece without any relief. Realizing that I was in trouble, I decided to swim back to the boat.

Normally I am a good swimmer, and the distance to the boat was only perhaps 6-8 metres. However, I began to feel dizzy and was desperately short of air. My efforts to approach the boat were ineffectual. I couldn't fight the waves in my evidently deteriorating condition. I tried again to spit out the mouth piece and breathe fresh air - with devastating consequence. A choppy wave hit me in the face. I inhaled some water and began to choke. My thinking became cloudy.

I tried to concentrate on saving myself. The dinghy tied to the dive boat was popping closer to me than the boat itself. In desperation I tried to make my way to it with the intention of hanging onto its side until I felt better. The distance between me and the dinghy decreased slowly. Only a couple of metres left. I was still fighting the lack of air and the dizziness. Then I saw that my object of salvation had started to move away at a fast rate - the dinghy was being pulled up to the boat. I realized that this was the end for me. I quit struggling, began to sink and inhale water. A black, suffocating blanket wrapped around me. I passed out.

When I regained consciousness, I was laying on my back on the deck of the boat. I felt a crushing pain in my chest. My breathing was labourious because of the excruciating pain when I inhaled. I tried to turn on my side but somebody held me back. A strange female face was looking down at me telling me that I had a heart attack and to remain motionless on my back. The devastating agony made me groan. Then, I saw Irene's face above me. I begged her to help me turn on my side. A heated exchange ensued between the first woman (a nurse who happened to be a tourist on the boat and took over my resuscitation efforts) and my wife. Irene finally ignored the nurse, knelt beside me and helped me to shift my position. Now, lying on my side, I started to vomit tons of sea water.

The pain in my chest subsided at once, but I felt terribly weak. I must have remained semi-comatose because I do not recall the arrival of a doctor by helicopter and receiving an injection. Neither do I remember my transfer to the reef, where the helicopter had landed. However, I remember part of the flight - sitting strapped-in - with the door beside me missing.

At the hospital they put me in the intensive care unit and connected me to various apparatus. I remained numbed and dizzy.

Next morning I woke up fully alert. I felt no pain, just weakness. The events of the previous day appeared only a fuzzy dream. A nurse took my blood sample, and then a doctor examined me.

„You apparently suffered a heart attack” He said to me. „But you will survive.”

A couple of hours later he was back looking puzzled.

„Your blood test results show no sign of a heart attack. Yesterday we couldn’t test your blood because of the interference from the shot you received on the boat. Can you tell me what happened at sea?” He asked.

I told him my story. Then I retold it to the next doctor. Later, I had to repeat it to a third doctor and to two nurses from another ward. They all shook their heads. The hospital at Cairns being near the Great Barrier Reef - the Mecca of scuba divers - had frequently treated victims of diving accidents. So the medical staffs were quite familiar with usual occurrences. Mine didn’t seem to fit into any of the general categories. That was why all these doctors and nurses came to find out more about it. This interest was only partly due to professional curiosity, there was more personal interest because many of the medical staff was recreational divers.

They put me through all kinds of tests. The only positive result was my chest X-ray which indicated inhaled and retained sea water in both lungs, but this was the consequence of the accident. The presence of this water wasn’t apparently life threatening; still, it posed a danger of potential infection and pneumonia. The cause of the attack itself remained elusive.

My family was allowed to visit me. Irene, Andy, my brother in-law and sister in-law, all came in as a group. I had not seen my in-laws for 26 years. They flew up from Adelaide to meet us. They arrived that morning and found me in intensive care. I was glad to see them but the encounter was very tiring.

The family group appeared cheerful (just to raise my spirits - as they explained later). However, what I needed then was peace and some sympathy from my wife to alleviate my worries and misery. I didn’t feel sick anymore, but was exhausted and distressed. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, and was worried about my future.

The relatives left as they came, in one cheerful group. I had no chance to exchange a private word with my wife. The same thing happened the following day.

That day they transferred me from the intensive care unit to a regular ward. I was obviously off the danger list. This ward was a large, multi bed unit, but it was almost empty. The hospital was built to accommodate the sick of the tens of thousands of visitors to this coast. However, in July, in the middle of the Australian winter, there were few tourists and apparently not many sick ones.

In the afternoon I had other visitors. My British diving companion, whom I had only met on the boat, came first. He seemed to be worried and anxious for my health. I could hardly refrain from telling him that it would have been far more helpful if he had stayed with me at the beginning of the dive, and helped me when his presence could have made a difference. Still, his compassion felt good.

The second set of visitors was a family - father, mother and a daughter of perhaps 18.

I remembered the girl from the boat for her striking beauty. However, I hadn’t changed a word with any of them during the trip. I was relieved that they didn’t ask me to relate the details of the accident, or of the treatment received. Instead, the man queried me:

„What was your last thought before you passed out and lingered between life and death?”

The question surprised me, but my answer was simple and unequivocal:

„How could I get one more gasp of air?“

I saw that my answer greatly disappointed the trio. Only then did they reveal that they belonged to a Christian revival group. According to them, my accident was a clear indication of divine interference to lead me back to God. They had come to help me to find the path to salvation. Now, they were disappointed that I hadn't seen the light.

I couldn't help them, and was greatly relieved when they got up to leave. Before departing they asked me to allow them to pray for me. I had no objection. Then, to my utter astonishment the trio knelt down beside my bed, and started to pray in clear, loud voices:

“Dear Lord! We beg You to forgive our friend, Tibor, for not seeing the sign of Your magnanimity and not starting on the glorious path leading to You. We hope that he will find his way in the future through Your generosity. Please help him Lord. Amen.”

By the end of this spectacle, the few patients of the ward were all sitting up in their beds, and listening avidly. There were also a few staff members standing at the door.

The show wasn't over yet. The family, remaining on their knees, began to sing a hymn. The older woman had a pleasant, clear, strong voice that carried far, far out into the corridor and the other wards. Everyone on the floor able to move rushed to the door of my ward. My face flamed with embarrassment. Finally, the spiritual saviours stopped singing and left, clearly pleased with the attention received. A couple of nurses approached me and asked:

„Who were they? Are they your friends, or are you one of them?“

When the excitement died down, I pondered my near-death experience two days earlier which my 'friends' called 'my missed chance'. I wondered if there would be a 'second chance'. I hoped not.

July 1983.

# 100

## AN ONTARIO DRIVER

It was a dark stormy night. The rain was a tropical downpour. The headlight beams penetrated the sheet of rain for a few metres at best. We were driving on a seemingly endless stretch of highway under construction. The road bed had been gravelled and compacted but hadn't been paved yet. From time to time one of the front wheels would hit a giant pothole. The splash instantly covered the windshield with a layer of mud which reduced visibility to zero. The wipers had to work overtime to try to cut a peephole through the sticky deposit. Until that occurred, we continued to move blindly. Luckily there was no traffic. Any sane person, except crazy tourists like us, stayed off the road in such storms. Due to the scarcity of traffic, Andy, the designated driver, tired and tense, kept to the middle of the road. I, also exhausted and nervous, tried to navigate. According to our map, we were near the turnoff to the campsite where we intended to spend the night. The problem was that we could have missed the exit during one of the frequent periods of zero visibility.

Suddenly a mud-sprayed sign came into view. I couldn't decipher it in time, and we had passed the side road when I snapped:

„Stop! Go back a few metres and turn left!”

Andy - annoyed - jammed on the breaks, stopped, shifted into reverse and began to back up at an unreasonably high speed. By the time he noticed the headlights of a vehicle behind us, it was too late. The other driver swerved to the left in trying to pass us, but our reversing vehicle smashed into his side.

Our car was a rental. Andy, 18 at the time, wasn't licensed to drive it. The minimum age limit set by the rental firm, or by Australian law, was 21. Disregarding the rule Andy had taken his turn at the wheel because of the large distance we had to cover that day. We agreed beforehand that in case of an accident, we would switch responsibilities. Both Andy and I would get out of the car at the same time and walk around the vehicle a few times in opposite directions. This - we knew from experience - confuses the other party and I could present myself as the actual driver.

This was what we did at this time. The darkness and the rain made the deception easier. While walking around the pileup, I had a chance to size up the damage. Our car's rear lights were smashed but there was no other visible harm. The driver's door of other vehicle, a pickup truck, was badly dented. The driver of the truck - a woman - didn't get out of the cab - because of the rain I thought. Her companion, an elderly man, joined us.

I had assumed that we were fully responsible for the accident though I couldn't understand why she tried to pass us on the left. (In Australia one drives on the left thus passing is on the right.) We stayed in the middle of the road and there was enough room to pass on either side.

I suggested to the man that we walk to the nearby campsite to call the police. He felt that it wasn't necessary.

„Let's agree that each of us pay for his own damage.” The man suggested instead.

His generosity surprised me and raised my suspicion. I approached the woman and asked for her driver's licence. She reluctantly pulled it out from a handbag which lay beside her on the seat. It was an Ontario permit - a strange coincidence in this remote part of Down-Under. This explained why she had tried to pass on the wrong side.

When I attempted to talk to her, she was barely able to speak. She was completely drunk. This explained her partner's willingness to share the repair expenses. If we called the police, they would have taken away her driver's licence and fined her. Furthermore, the insurance company would have made her liable for all damages irrespective of the circumstances of the accident. Since I needed only to have our rear lights fixed - or at least make them to work - there would be minimum hustle. So I accepted the offer and we parted from our fellow countrymen in a friendly manner. The woman was still behind the wheel as they drove away.

Two months later, back in Zambia, I got a letter from the Australian car rental agency. It contained an accident claim submitted by a Canadian woman. The statement described a collision caused by a rental car. (In Australia rentals have distinguishing licence plates). The report described the collision and the subsequent damage as solely caused by the driver of the rental vehicle. It also claimed that the guilty party left the scene of the accident without identifying himself. The statement gave the place and time of the accident, the make of the car and its licence number. There was also a bill enclosed which listed the details of the repairs done.

Most of the items in the statement were correct. However, the claim that we left the scene was untrue. We left after them, and only after we had reached an agreement. She obviously didn't mention that she was so drunk at the time that couldn't get out of her vehicle. The damages described in the repair bill and the costs of repair were exorbitant. It listed heavy damages to the steering mechanism and undercarriage in addition to the replacement of the door panel and of the lock mechanism, which was the only damage suffered in our collision. Where did that other damage come from? Had she subsequently ended up in a ditch or hit a tree?

The woman broke our agreement, lied about us leaving the scene of the accident and attempted to make us pay for damages which apparently occurred in another accident. She was obviously dishonest and hence not worth any consideration. In my answer to the rental agency I denied any knowledge of the case. I have not heard anything further of the issue.

July 1983.



# 101

## TAJ MAHAL

Irene and I arrived in Delhi, India, in the middle of the monsoon season. From the airport we took a taxi to the hotel we'd selected from our guide book. We had no reservations. The hotel turned out to be a nice Victorian building set in an attractive street with large trees. The building's interior was, however, far less impressive. The vestibule was dark and unfriendly. The room the attendant took us to, had the same ambiance. Its furnishings, apparently as old as the building itself, were decrepit and uncomfortable. Since we planned to spend only five days there, we resignedly accepted the situation.

It was early in the afternoon, and we didn't want to lose any time. After dropping off our suitcases we immediately went out to look for a city sight-seeing tour. During the tour the friendly bus driver asked us about the hotel we were staying in. When I told him its name, he just shook his head.

"That place is expensive for the quality it offers." He said.

I had to agree with him.

"I could recommend you a better place to stay. This hotel is relatively new and charges only half as much as the other one for a better room. We will pass by the building on the tour."

The hotel he pointed out was next to the City Zoo. On the way back from the tour the driver dropped us off there. He was right. This place was far superior to the other one. We booked a room in it right away.

We returned to the first hotel. When I told the receptionist about our decision to leave the establishment, he called the manager. The boss demanded payment for the full five days we had initially intended to stay and refused to return our passports unless we paid. This sounded like highway robbery to me. I counter-offered a half day's fee since we had used the room only for depositing our suitcases.

"No way!" He said.

I also refused to budge. The heated argument went on and on until I finally threatened to call the police. The manager relented and haughtily returned our passports in exchange for our nominal payment.

The next hurdle was to organize a trip to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal. We took a three-wheeled auto rickshaw - the most common vehicle in the city - to the Agra railway station.

The driver warned us not to stick our elbow out of the side of the vehicle - it would be unsafe. Upon approaching the station I could see why. The traffic became extremely chaotic. The lanes lost their meaning. There were columns and columns of tightly packed vehicles - mostly auto tricycles - tail gating dangerously and with only inches between their flanks. We were greatly relieved when we finally arrived at the station in one piece.

At the ticket window we learned that locals were supposed to buy tickets to Agra weeks in advance while foreign tourists could obtain tickets from the Ministry of Transportation on shorter notice, four-five days, if they applied in person. Having had dealings with the Indian bureaucracy before, I considered this avenue a non issue.

The only alternative was to join an organised bus tour. We purchased tickets from a tour company running express, air-conditioned buses, and boarded one the following morning.

The bus was full and we were the only Western tourists on it. The temperature in the 'air conditioned' vehicle was tolerable. We settled in for the long but hopefully interesting trip.

Very soon it began to rain - it was the monsoon season - and the morning downpour flooded everything in no time. Our express bus wasn't up to the challenge; its roof began to leak like a sieve. One couldn't even see the driver through the interior drizzle. Our fellow passengers - seasoned native citizens - nonchalantly opened the umbrellas carried by all during the wet season and relaxed beneath them as if nothing happened. Irene and I didn't have umbrellas. Our predicament became progressively worse. The share of the rain of the passengers sitting in front of us also began to drip into our laps from their umbrellas. I tapped on the umbrella in front of me and pointed out my plight. The respectable gentleman only shook his shoulders, probably thinking 'though luck - foreigner'. During this trip I came to understand the discomfort of infants in wet diapers.

At last, we arrived in front of the Taj entrance. By this time the rain had fortunately stopped. The massive red stone gateway to the monument is a remarkable construction in itself. But we just rushed through it. We were anxious to see the main attraction - the world famous mausoleum. Upon exiting into the garden on the inside of the gate we had our breathtaking first impression of the pearl white marble monument. The whiteness of the huge dome of the tomb seemed extraordinarily luminescent. As we proceeded farther, the four delicate looking minarets at each corner of the temple square also came into view.

We passed the long reflection pool set among beautiful flower beds. The pool stretched to the platform wall at the front of the shrine's entrance. We mounted its top. As in any holy Moslem place, one had to remove his or her shoes and deposit them among hundreds of others guarded by turbaned attendants before entering the building.

We stepped into the shrine and saw how the magnificent overall design of the building was matched with immaculately executed intricate inner details. The marble columns and walls were inlaid with semiprecious stones in delightful floral patterns. There were delicately carved marble curtains to keep the pious at a safe distance from the crypt of Shah Jagan and his beloved wife Mahal.



*The Taj Mahal*

One couldn't have enough of this unforgettable sight. However I was soon aroused from my trance by the guide who requested us to leave. Our allotted time was up. I realised that I hadn't taken any pictures yet. I told the guide that I needed five more minutes, and would catch up

with the group at the gate. They all left - including Irene - while I rushed around to find the best vantage points to take pictures.

When I exited to the platform, the group had gone. I faced the multitude of shoes laying in endless multiple rows and had no idea where mine were. The situation looked hopeless. There was no time for searching - I had to catch up with my group. One of the attendants standing behind the sea of shoes came to my rescue. He pointed out my pair further down the row. How did he know? Did he remember every tourist and every pair of shoes?

My relief was boundless. I succeeded in catching up with the group at the gate as promised.

The next stop on our tour was the Red Fort which lies further downstream along the Yamuna River. The high outside walls of the Fort are faced with red sandstone which gives the fort its name. The magnificent palace inside the fortress had served as residence to the Great Moguls for one hundred and fifty years. It comprises various pavilions, apartments and a throne room constructed in white marble magnificently decorated with Islamic-Persian features. The buildings are set among beautiful gardens with pools and fountains. We also visited the octagonal tower at the outer wall where Shah Jagan had been imprisoned by his son. The old man could gaze from the pavilion overlooking the river at the white Taj in the distance. He was detained there for six years, until his death, at which time he finally rejoined his beloved wife in the mausoleum.

Again I could not admire the beauty of the sight and take pictures at the same time. When the guide called us to leave for the last stop of the tour - a visit to a jeweller shop - I refused to go. There was still an hour left before the departure of the bus, and I wanted to spend it in the Fort rather than in a souvenir shop. My plan greatly upset the guide - he obviously received commissions from the shop, and Irene and I were the only sought after Western tourist in the group. I remained adamant.

Half an hour and many pictures later I hired a man-propelled rickshaw and arrived at the station as our group began to mount the bus. The magnificent visit was over. I felt that all this beauty was too much for one day.

July 1983.

## 102

### GRASSHOPPERS

The floor of the cobalt tank house was busy with the usual activities: groups of workers were removing electrodes from tanks, others were preparing and lowering starting sheets, and the maintenance crew was engaged in replacing an electrolyte feed control valve. Suddenly, all activities stopped as if an invisible arctic wind had blown through the building and frozen everybody in their tracks. This unreal tension lasted only a few seconds. At the next moment, everyone started to run toward the door on one side of the building. There had been no bang or an explosion, no smoke indicating neither fire, nor other sign of an emergency but still, within minutes, the work floor was empty.

Not understanding what had happened, I jumped up from behind my desk, rushed through the glass door of the office, and followed the workers.

Outside I found them standing on the steps or the landings of the staircase descending to the yard. Their sights were fixed on the West. I turned in that direction but couldn't see anything unusual. It was near the end of the dry season and the sky was as blue and cloudless as it had been for months. Afar, near the horizon, I saw some dark dots in the air, birds perhaps, nothing unusual.

„What had happened? Why did you stop working? What are you watching?“ I asked the man next to me.

„Grasshoppers, B'wana! - his answer was - They are on their way.“

I was still at loss but decided to wait with the rest of them.

The dark dots in the air were moving closer. Now, I could definitely identify them as birds. They seemed to circle at a constant height, swooping occasionally toward the ground, then rising and circling again. There was nothing else to see.

After minutes what felt more like hours to me, I discerned a dark cloud-like layer, a dozen-metres thick, above the ground under the hawks - the birds I could now clearly identify. Soon, I saw the first few big insects flying over the plant yard in an easterly direction. Then, more and more insects, and in no time we were surrounded by a swarming horde of tens or hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions of them.

The workers around me started to grab them from the air and then turned to collect those which landed around us on the steps, hand rails and other obtrusion. I picked up one insect myself to get a closer look. It was a big, greenish-grey grasshopper, smaller than a locust that I was familiar with from museum displays. The men were feverishly stuffing their pickings into plastic bags. The collecting activity became more and more frenzied. They were shouting with delight in high-pitched voices.

In ten minutes the cloud of insects began to thin out. Hundreds of them remained on the ground around us. The workers continued to pick them diligently until not one remained in sight.

In the middle of the plant yard there was a transformer station surrounded by an eight-foot high chain link fence with a locked gate. The top of the transformer cage was covered with a thick layer of insects. The smell of the oil inside, or perhaps the electric charge, must have had a magnetic effect on the creatures. A couple of workers started to climb the fence with the clear intention of collecting this until now untouched bounty. I became alarmed that they might touch

the 6,000 volt high tension electrodes and kill themselves. As production superintendent, I wouldn't want to be held responsible for such an accident. I had to prevent it. I rushed down the stairs and started to run toward the station shouting:

„Stop it! Come down at once!”

The two men were already on the top of the fence ready to descend on the other side. They looked at me, and then turned toward the grasshopper covered transformer. I could sense the struggle going on in their minds: to follow the ancient hunting/collecting instinct or to follow the orders of their superior. I won - barely. They climbed back.

Ordinary Zambians live on a protein-deficient diet limited to mealy-meal (corn flour) with an occasional dried fish added. They do not eat, as a rule, neither meat, eggs, or milk. For them, the once-a-year gift of grasshoppers from the sky must feel like a real bonanza. A bagful of these fat insects when fried would probably provide a tasty garnish to the corn porridge for the whole family for days. They knew the approximate time when the migrating insects would pass through our neighbourhood. The men carried bags in their pockets and, unknown to me, probably set sentinels outside the building to watch for the telltale sign of raptors in the sky.

The plant came to a complete halt for 30-45 minutes but I never raised the question of the lost production. We were in Africa where people, despite the advancing industrialization, were still close to nature, and I hoped that they remain this way for some time to come.

September 1983.

## 103

### RAFTING ON THE ZAMBEZI

The deep narrow canyon of the Zambezi River turns 90 degrees below Victoria Falls. On the Zambian side the nearly vertical wall of the gorge is disrupted by a side canyon. The raft launching site, a narrow ledge on the face of the main gorge, could be reached by climbing out and up from the side canyon. The shelf itself was about four metres above the water and was just wide and long enough to hold five rubber rafts. From this spot one couldn't see the falls hiding behind the river bend. Still, the water - rushing just below our feet - was very turbulent and full of eddies.

The rafts had been carried down, inflated and prepared for us by the native staff. When we reached the ledge we placed our cameras, sunglasses, etc., in waterproof containers tied to the craft, and donned our life jackets. The rafts were lowered one by one into the water with ropes. Six tourists plus a guide climbed down the rock wall into each boat. I got into the third craft. I was apprehensive. During the preliminary briefing session we had been told that on this daytrip we would run ten rapids. Some would be easy, some less so. Since the degree of difficulty depended on the day-to-day water level, even the guides didn't know for sure what to expect at each stage.

The ropes holding our raft were unhooked, and we shot out into the current. Almost instantaneously, without even allowing time to accommodate myself to the exotic environment, the raft entered into a cascade leading to the Boiling Pot, a very turbulent section of the river.

The walls of the gorge, which towered several hundred feet on either side of us, would have provided no refuge after the raft had been released from the retaining ropes. Going down the cascade felt like travelling on a speed boat in a very rough tunnel of love. Our guide worked hard to keep the raft at a safe distance from the rugged canyon walls. There was only a narrow strip of blue sky above us. We didn't see the sun. Unlike the scorching heat on the plateau above us, it felt pleasantly cool in the gorge.

After a few minutes of rush the river seemed to quieten down. It was still running at an awesome pace but its surface was not boiling with eddies any more. We settled down, and I had my first chance to glance at our guide and companions. The guide was a girl, called Kathy, in her late twenties. She was sitting in the centre of the boat on a low platform while handling the two long wooden oars fastened to the sides of the raft. There wasn't much femininity in her appearance. Her face wasn't attractive, and her body was solid muscle. But she was pleasant and friendly. Kathy told us that she had been in white water rafting for eight years, and had led parties on a number of great rivers, from Turkey to Chile. This was her second season on the Zambezi. She appeared to know her business and radiated confidence.

"This course compares favourably (in excitement) to any other I have encountered."  
Kathy said.

My raft companions were young English expatriates, all male. The parent group, 35 people, were mostly young men in their twenties. A few were accompanied by their wives/girlfriends. The men worked in the mining industry and were members of the Kitwe Cricket Club which organized this trip on the Zambezi. I knew only one person, Andy, my co-worker. I was, at fifty two, by far the oldest person in our crew, and in the whole group for that matter, but had at least a minimum of rafting experience - one trip on the Ottawa River - while the rest of the crew claimed none.

Our relaxation didn't last long. We approached the first rapids. I braced my feet under the bulging side tube and gripped the rope stretched along its top. The run through the cascade lasted only a few minutes, and we were out. It was an easy ride.

The same thing happened at the second and the third rapids.

I began to become disappointed. These rapids weren't any more difficult - though longer - than those on the Ottawa River. In the meantime the canyon had also become wider and less claustrophobic. This wasn't the wild adventure that I'd expected.

I was wrong. Rapids #4 turned out to be spectacular. Boulders as big as panel trucks randomly planted in the cascade as if by an evil spirit forced the streaming water to change its course repeatedly and haphazardly. As we descended, the turbulence tossed the raft around like a champagne cork. We took on tons of water, but we made it through without any mishap. In the following quieter section of the river Kathy ordered us to bail out all the water before we reached the next rapids. We worked in a hurry as there was only limited time available.

Prior to reaching Rapids #5 all rafts pulled to a shore made by of piles of fallen rocks at the foot of the vertical canyon wall. We pulled our cameras out of the watertight container and stomped along above the cascade. It looked impressive. The cataract was longer than the previous ones. Huge boulders restricted the water flow into a series of foaming passages. The guides scrutinized the view to decide on the best route to follow.

We anxiously watched the launching and descent of the first raft from the safety of the bank. It ran the rapids well. Below the cascade the craft pulled to the shore and waited. Now, it was the second raft's turn. About halfway through the cascade it unexpectedly spun around. The guide lost control. The raft hit a boulder, reared up and tipped over. There were several bodies tossed around and rapidly carried away by the current.

As prearranged, the crew of the raft next in line - us - rushed to and jumped into the vessel as fast as we could. Our task was to pick up the floaters from the overturned raft assuming that we would be luckier and able to run the rapids.

I nervously grabbed the rope stretched beside me. We seemed to navigate successfully through the most promising channel. But suddenly, the raft made an unexpected turn. Instantly, a solid wall of water hit us. I couldn't breathe or see. However, Kathy remained in control, realigned the craft, and we made it through. The blood chilling excitement was over. We began to rapidly bail out while Kathy paddled as fast as she could to catch up with the cast-aways of the preceding raft.

The first raft had already been busy pulling the overturned craft to shore with a couple of guys still clinging to its side. Our task was to reach and pick up the drifters.

During the briefing session we were told that although the Zambezi has a very lively population of large crocodiles, these beasts do not like turbulent water and so constitute no danger to swimmers from an accidental tip-over. Now I realised that this was baloney. The victims of a tip-over would be carried away by the river very quickly, and the only place where they could be reached and picked up is in a quieter stretch down-river where crocks might be expected.

Two of the cast-aways had succeeded in landing on the rocks of the shore not far downstream but the remaining three were drifting far ahead of us. Kathy was paddling the raft with superhuman effort. We soon reached the first floater, grabbed him by the life jacket, and dragged him into the raft. In no time we also got the second guy. But the third one, carried by the fastest current, was still far ahead of us. Finally, after many nervous minutes, we reached him.



*Shooting the rapids*

He didn't need any help to get in. Actually, he shot out of the water like a submerged cork and landed on the side tube of the raft by his own desperate efforts. His eyes were full of fright. He had been in the water for what seemed to him a long, long time. He was too scared to swim toward the shore. The poor guy had been expecting a crock attack at any moment.

My co-worker, Andy, was also in the capsized raft. He was one of the two who clung to the boat and got to safety rapidly. However, his camera, which was wrapped in a polyethylene bag rather than enclosed in the waterproof container, got soaked. Both the camera and the film in it were ruined.

After Rapids #6 we had our lunch break in a quiet little bay. Surprisingly, there were no crocks on this sandy stretch - at least during the period we spent there.

After lunch the guides began to nudge one of the participants, a middle-aged woman, asking her to tell her story. She was evidently - like me - an outsider in the group, travelling alone. She happened to be in the raft which had turned over. She was one of the two persons who climbed out on the shore after the mishap. The story sought didn't concern this trip.

After some hesitation she began her tale.

She was single, and worked as a clerk in a London firm. She had ran across an ad in a magazines offering an exotic vacation cruising in a sailboat on Lake Kariba, an artificial reservoir formed by the Zambezi at about 175 km downstream from Victoria Falls. She found the excursion tempting, and signed up for it. She had never been in a foreign country before except for a short trip to France.

Upon landing in Zambia she learned - to her horror - that the trip she had enrolled in was a week-long rafting expedition down the Zambezi River from Victoria Falls to Lake Kariba. After hours of painful brooding, she decided to go rafting rather than cancel the trip and return to London where she would become the laughing stock of her office.

The trip had taken place the week before the present one. The first day was agonizing - she said. They successfully ran the same ten rapids that we were trying to cover on this day-trip. In the evening they set up their tents in a small cove in a narrow stretch of the canyon and the guides cooked supper. She went directly to bed - she was too exhausted and stressed out to eat. During the night she was woken up by the moaning of her tent companion. The girl seemed to be very sick. Our hero got up to call for help. She discovered - to her utter terror - that all her partners, staying in the other two tents were equally sick. The whole company, guides included, except her, had been struck by food poisoning. They all suffered from severe intestinal pain, cramps, vomiting and diarrhea.



In the morning the whole gang, except her, was unable to move, and their condition was becoming even worse as the hours passed. The guides told her that they desperately needed medical help. The only way to get it was for her to climb out of the gorge and reach the town of Victoria Falls which was within walking distance - a guide said. (They were camping on the Zimbabwe side of the river).

At first she refused even to listen to them. She was not a rock climber. There might be poisonous snakes on the cliffs. Even if she could make it to the top, how would she find her way to the town through the bush full of dangerous wildlife?

After some painful deliberation she came to the conclusion that if the group succumbed to the illness and died, she would not be able to survive alone. She asked for more detailed instructions, and then set out to climb the rock wall while the 'dying' and 'half dead' companions urged her on.

She didn't remember how she made it to the top - she was dazzled by fright. Luckily she encountered a stretch of cultivated land on the canyon rim instead of a scary jungle and the native women attending the field understood English. They led her through the field to a road, and then continued with her to the town's police station.

The police chief turned out to be helpful and unusually effective. He immediately started to organize a rescue party, including a doctor, to descend into the gorge.

One of the native women who stayed behind led the mobilized party back to the point of ascent. The group climbed down on ropes and provided first aid treatment to the sick. Then later in the day they pulled them up, one by one, and drove them to the hospital, where they remained for a few days. All survived the ordeal.

Obviously, the rest of her trip was cancelled. The travel outfit offered her this day trip in consolation - to fill out her vacation time. She reluctantly accepted it. This was rather surprising to me since she had already covered the section during her ill-fated trip.

She said in conclusion that when she returned to London she might not tell the story to anyone. A mousy spinster, nobody would believe a word of it anyway.

It was a captivating account. However, her raft mates were not thrilled by it. They listened to her with apprehension; she was thought to be marked by an unlucky star - on the present trip her raft was the only one which had tipped over, and the most difficult rapids were still ahead us.

By this time the sun was directly above our heads, and the canyon floor was heating up rapidly. We had to get back to the river. The next two rapids turned out to be of only medium difficulty. However, before Rapids #9 we pulled to shore again, which meant trouble ahead. There was a path around the rapids. We all walked along it. I was awed by the sight waiting for us. The rapids consisted of a sequence of waterfalls, each several metres high. The last one roared down over a huge boulder into a foaming, roaring inferno and created several awesome standing waves. The guides just shook their heads.

"This looks murderous. We are not going to run it. We will portage around it." Was their unanimous decision.

I, and probably everybody else, was greatly relieved.

The rafts were dragged to the shore and carried, one by one, on the shoulders of its crew, bypassing the falls. The path was rough, and the porters could not even see the ground under their feet. The temperature by that time must have been close to 40 °C if not more. Everyone was sweating like a horse.

We got back in the rafts with great relief. Our relaxation didn't last long. We were approaching the next and last rapids. This one, #10, was also a difficult one but all rafts ran it successfully. The following peaceful stretch in the wider gorge led to the landing spot. I couldn't enjoy the scenery however. It was now late afternoon and too hot even on the water.

The landing area was not much bigger than the one we'd started out from. Native helpers were waiting for us. They deflated and carried up the rafts. The path leading from the river to the rim through dozens and dozens of switchbacks faced west, and consequently received the full blast of the late afternoon sun. The rock wall which had eagerly swallowed the heat all day now mercilessly radiated all of it back. It felt like climbing in a baking oven where merely touching the wall might inflict blisters.

I was slow in putting on my hiking shoes and was the last tourist to leave the landing area. That turned out to be a big mistake because I was commandeered to carry up our waterproof army ammunition box which had held the cameras during the trip.

That burden was harder than I expected. In this extreme heat the climbing of the steep path with a five-kilo load in my hand was almost beyond my endurance. There was nobody to help me because I was at the tail end of the group snaking up the trail. Halfway up, I ran out of drinking water and so suffered from a burning thirst. This was the hottest and longest half-hour of my life.

When, trembling from exhaustion, I finally reached the top, my raft mates were already standing in the back of a pickup truck impatiently waiting for me. None of them - all 'sportsmen' and half my age - had the decency to come back even a few steps to help me with my load.

It was sad that such a great adventure had to end on such a sour note.

October 1983.

## 104

### TISZA

After we arrived in Kitwe we soon realized that would need a guard dog. The location of our house - at the edge of the city, in the middle of a large wooded lot with no proper fences - presented a serious security problem. We didn't yet know how one obtains a good dog in Zambia.

A few weeks later our acquaintances in Ndola surprised us with two recently weaned puppies, and we were delighted. We named the two small dogs Butus (Silly) and Nyafi (Whiner) based on the first impressions they made. They were of mixed ancestry. We had no idea what kind of dogs they would turn into when they grew up. Unfortunately, the names proved to be apt. As time went by they became medium sized, friendly canines, not very intelligent and without, sadly, any aptitude for guard duties. Nyafi was shamefully timid; he would hide upon encountering strangers. Butus would just ignore them. They would have made excellent playmates for small kids if we'd had any. One outstanding attribute shared by both dogs was the love of running - fast and far, a trait they obviously inherited from a hunting dog ancestor. Unfortunately, this skill was of no benefit to us.

A year later we decided to look for a larger, more serious dog. We knew a girl in the local SPCA by now and asked for her help. There were always expats returning home who had to leave their dogs behind. This time we wanted a grown-up animal with good credentials.

A couple of weeks later the girl called us to let us know they had a dog, a German shepherd which she thought would be suitable to us. We visited the compound and met the dog. It was a seven-year-old pure bred female with intelligent, though sad eyes, lying in the cage with a friendly looking Corgi. As we learned, the previous owner had requested that both dogs would go to the same new owner. The man had set this condition because the dogs had grown up together.

Not having much respect for the British royal family, I never appreciated their beloved Corgis either. To me this species of dog - with its ridiculously short legs - looked like a mutilated German shepherd. However, in order to get the preferred one we decided to take both animals.

The Corgi, called Jimmy, turned out to be extremely affectionate but otherwise completely useless dog, similar to Butus and Nyafi.

The German shepherd, initially called Kissy - in my opinion a rather denigrating name for a middle-aged dog - we renamed Tisza, for a dog of the same species we had had in Montreal. Tisza got used to her new home relatively quickly and full heartedly accepted me as her new master. The dog and I shared one pleasure: we both loved swimming. She wouldn't pass a body of water without jumping in for a dip.

Tisza had another conspicuous attribute, not shared by me. She was a racist. She hated blacks, especially men. From this time on no native could enter our property if the dog was loose. I trained her to tolerate the presence of our gardener Fredrick and his wife, Catherine, only with difficulty. Even so Tisza would not let our blacks out of her sight as they moved around the yard and this made them very nervous.

The dog's attitude toward white visitors was just the opposite. They could enter unmolested, and could probably have cleared out the house without one bark of protest from her.

From time to time I took Butus and Nyafi for a run. While I drove on a deserted country road, I let them run beside the car. They could easily keep a steady 40 km/hr pace. On the first outing which included Tisza, she was anxious to join the other two dogs in this exercise. However, within a distance of a few hundred metres she already lagged a block behind. I had to stop and pick her up. She was definitely not a racing dog.

In the evenings I used to take the dogs for a walk on the bush trail beginning at the end of the road, two houses down from us. At the start Jimmy also accompanied us but its appearance made the natives we encountered on the trail laugh uncontrollably. Young boys, especially, kept shouting that the dog had worn off his legs and soon would begin to slide on his belly. To escape these remarks I stopped taking the Corgi with us.

The last house on the street was enclosed with a chain fence. Inside this enclosure two medium-sized dogs would run up and down along the fence and bark madly at us each time we passed. Butus and Nyafi answered them in a similar manner, creating a dog cacophony. Tisza in her dignified manner ignored the dogs behind the fence and didn't join the barking concert.

One Sunday morning I took out the dogs as usual. As we passed the last house, the two local dogs opened up their usual pandemonium. This time, however, the fence gate was not completely closed. Tisza walked to it and then with a sudden spurt charged inside. She grabbed one of the surprised dogs by its neck while the other dog, its tail between its legs, ran whining back to the house. Then Tisza gave a mighty twist to her captive before releasing her bite. The dog dropped to the ground, dead with a broken neck. Tisza, as if nothing had happened, walked out into the street.

I was so stunned by her latent hatred toward these two dogs, and then by her sudden murderous revenge that I couldn't say a word. I wasn't the only one. Across the street was a Baptist Church with its usual black attendance. The Sunday service must have just terminated because the congregation was standing and chatting in front of the building inside the chain-link fence, ready to leave. They had all been watching me, the only white in the street, and the dogs as we passed by. They also saw what had happened behind the fence. The deadly outcome seemed to terrorize them. Not one left the church ground until I returned and entered our place and locked the gate behind me and the dogs.

By the fall of 83, our last in Zambia, Tisza remained our only dog. Jimmy had died of renal failure, Butus had been hit by a car, and Nyafi had been poisoned by our neighbour.

One week, Tisza barked like mad for hours, three nights in a row. I went out a couple of times to investigate but couldn't see anything unusual. On the fourth night we came home late from a show and went to bed tired. An hour later Tisza started her, now habitual, mad barking. She was running from the front of the house to the rear, and back. I woke up tired and annoyed and shouted at her in Hungarian to stop making such a racket but she didn't listen to me.

I got up and stepped out into the corridor with the intent of silencing her. I found the door from the corridor to the vestibule locked although we always kept it open. The key wasn't in the lock. Irritated even more, I went through the living room and the kitchen to reach the outside door. Upon entering the kitchen I was taken aback. The window looked blankly at me; its steel grate and glass pane were missing. The outside door also stood ajar. All the kitchen cabinets were wide open and empty. The equally empty drawers were scattered on the floor. The reality stunned me: We had been robbed blind.

I hurriedly let Tisza out of the security dog corridor which ran around the entire house except the car port. This passage, built in the previous year, had a chain link fence along its outer perimeter. Released, Tisza shot out and raced into the banana grove behind the guest house. Being stopped by the concrete wall, also recently built at the end of our property, the dog started to bark ferociously. I couldn't see anybody when I reached the fence after running to her. I struggled up on top of the six-foot concrete wall but it was too dark to discern anything beyond. There was no way to get Tisza across this obstacle and allow her to catch up with the thieves.



*My dog Tisza and I*

I went back to the house. By this time Irene had already been in the kitchen assessing the damage. We lost all our dishes, china, utensils, most of the food from the fridge, including two loaves of freshly baked home-made bread, and also a big bowl of dog food. Shopping bags brought by Andy from Switzerland were also missing; the crooks probably used them to carry away the loot. A pair of shoes Irene dropped off in the vestibule after coming home from the theatre was also gone.

We tried to recreate the chain of events. The thieves had apparently kept our house under observation from the neighbour's trees for several nights. Tisza heard them or smelled them; and this had provoked her to bark madly for hours. In the meantime, the thieves learned that the kitchen window and the back door opening to the carport were beyond the reach of the dog, so they could break into the house through them unimpeded.

When we had come home that night, the gang must have been watching us. The crooks waited an hour or so, to let us to fall in deep sleep, before they climbed the fence behind the banana grove. The thieves pried off the window bars and lifted out the glass pane. The slimmest of the group climbed through the narrow window, unlocked the back door, and at the same time locked the door connecting the bedroom corridor and the vestibule to cut us off. They didn't know the inner layout of the house and didn't realize that one could get from the bedroom to the kitchen - their operating theatre - through the living room. The volume of the loot carried away indicated a large size gang. Fortunately, they were apparently not armed.

In the meantime, Tisza had almost gone berserk with rage by being only a few feet away from the intruders, and still not being able to get at them. I could also imagine the fright of the thieves, even if they were professionals - which they obviously had been - working so close to a mad, vicious beast which if able to break out from her enclosure would tear them to pieces. When I had started to shout in Hungarian, they lost their nerve and ran away before I reached the kitchen.

We learned our lesson. From that day on we let Tisza into the house for the night. No thief would have been able to break in while she was inside. Soon I learned from the dog's behaviour that she had been trained for internal guard duty. From this time on we kept all the inside doors ajar to let the dog have access to all the windows. She could sleep anywhere, but she lay down only in the corridor. This was the central point of the house. From time to time she made the tour of the house, including the bedrooms where she stopped to nuzzle us, as though to reassure us and herself that everything was all right.

The dog's basic temperament hardened following the break-in incident. She now hated blacks even more than before. Fredrick couldn't enter the dog's enclosure any more. Irene was compelled to clean up Tisza's droppings.

In the spring of 84 my contract terminated and we prepared to leave Zambia. We could not take Tisza with us because of our plan of renting an apartment in Toronto. Pets - especially large dogs - were rarely allowed those residences. In any case, I firmly believed that a confining city apartment wasn't suitable for a German shepherd used to open spaces.

Fortunately, we found a good home for Tisza in Kitwe. A British settler family agreed to take her on. They had a large farming estate and their house stood right on the shore of the Kafue River. There was plenty free space around it and a river to swim in. Furthermore, the new masters loved animals. They also took our rabbits.

Unfortunately, at the time of our departure the family was away on vacation. Tisza had to be left in care of the SPCA for a week before the new owners could claim her. My heart bled on looking into Tisza's sad eyes when I had to leave her behind. This was the second time that she had to go through such agony.

I hoped that her remaining few years were happy. At the time of our departure she was already 10 years old, a mature age for a German shepherd.

April 1984.

## 105

### A PASSING MARTIAN

Kashiba Lake was one of my favourite diving spots in Zambia. The lake's surface wasn't very large, but its depth was considerable. The 70 m plumb, tried once, had not reached its bottom. The crystal-clear water and the presence of numerous short caves in the vertical cliff walls rendered the lake ideal for diving. The spot had only one major shortcoming - its remoteness. We had to drive hours through the bush to reach it. An outing there had to be a weekend or preferably a long weekend trip. The place was also inaccessible during the rainy season. The dirt road leading to it turned into an impenetrable quagmire after the first downpour.

Halfway through the trip one passed through a settlement; a traditional Bantu village unaffected by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It consisted of a dozen round native huts. These were windowless, one-room dwellings with walls made of vertical, split sticks, plastered over with clay which supported a roof of hatched palm sheaves tied with vines. The 'street' of the settlement, a continuation of the bush 'highway', was an earthen pathway between the two rows of huts.



*Preparing for the dive*

Since the village was so far off the paved road, vehicles rarely passed through it. When they did, they became major entertainment for the multitude of local children. They all rushed out of the huts, or from the bush, to the path upon hearing the sound of an engine. The urchins were unaware of the danger of getting hit by a vehicle, so wouldn't even step out of its way. The drivers had to inch nervously through the excited crowd.

On this long weekend, when we arrived at the lake, we rushed to set up our tents despite the heat. We were eager to have a dive before supper. We geared up right at the edge of the water where the heat was less oppressive. Entering the nice cool water was a real pleasure.

The dive - as always at this location - was superb. When it was over, we had still a lot to do: service the gear, set up and start the portable air compressor, refill the depleted tanks and last but not least, cook the communal supper. Relaxation came only after the meal.

Dave, one of our members, had been encumbered with extreme short-sightedness. The lenses of his regular spectacles were a half inch thick. He had glued two spare lenses inside his mask to enable him able to see during dives. When he'd donned his mask, he looked like a Martian with four eyes.

After the dive Dave carried his day garments from the edge of the water to his tent with the intention of changing there. He was still wearing his mask. On his way, his pair of his regular glasses slipped out of his shirt pocket into the deep grass. He noticed the loss only inside the tent. He had no spare spectacles with him. Dave desperately began to look for the missing pair but couldn't find them. He called for everybody's help. The whole gang was soon raking the dense undergrowth, but with no success. The glasses had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them up.

During super and for the rest of the evening Dave had to wear his diving mask around the camp to the great hilarity of the group. He was the butt of all kinds of jokes and smart-alec remarks. During this unfair treatment Dave remained very subdued, contrary to his normally snappy temperament.

Though the group had come for three days, Dave had to return to the city to attend some pressing business the next day. As he was unable to drive without glasses, he had no choice but wear his mask in the car.

Dave told as later that he was very tense reaching the native settlement. Passing through the village was nerve racking even under normal conditions. Now, he was alone and his situation was aggravated by the vision problem. When he approached the first hut Dave slowed down to snail's pace and stuck his head out of the open car window to improve his view. As usual, all the kids, from toddlers up, were already out between the rows of huts. When the first child noticed Dave's face covered with the mask and those scary looking double eyes behind it, the child became terrified. He ran screaming into the bush. His panic was contagious and in no time the rest of the flock had flown away in a mass stampede.

Women - hearing the bedlam - rushed out of their huts. One look at Dave terrified them as much as it had the kids. They also ran. In a minute the village became a ghost town. It was unlikely that these natives had ever heard of Martians, but they certainly considered this lone driver an out-of-this-world ET.

Dave - the first driver ever - was able to pass through the village at his leisure. He had at least some satisfaction to compensate for the loss of his glasses.

March 1984.



## 106

### KASABA BAY

We planned to visit Lake Tanganyika, of the Great African Rift, the longest freshwater lake in the world, before we left Zambia. At the termination of my employment contract we signed up for a five-day package tour to Sumbu National Park in Kasaba Bay. The park is located at the southern tip of the lake just south of the Zairean border. Tanzania stretches along the opposite shore.

The Zambian Air's two-engine plane landed outside the park on a dirt strip. At the end of the runway the wreckage of a similar aircraft laid wedged into the edge of the bush. Several years earlier the overloaded plane hadn't been able to lift off in time and crashed into the trees. In the years following that accident the pilots of the National Airline had gained more experience - I hopped.

Upon disembarking from the aircraft we met the two park employees who were to take us to the lodge which is located at a fair distance inside the park. The cabin of the pickup truck accommodated only three people. The attendants insisted that they had to share the driving duty, and consequently there was room only for one passenger - Irene - to sit inside. I had to ride in the back of the vehicle with the luggage.

It was a most annoying ride. The road was rough. The vehicle bounced up and down. I tried to sit on the suitcases but this was like riding a rodeo bull. I found it easier to stand even though there was nothing to hold on to. I kept swivelling left and right, back and forth, expecting to fall out of the vehicle at any moment.

What made the trip even worse were the tsetse flies, which we encountered here for the first time. The tsetse, the carrier of sleeping sickness, is the scourge of central and southern Africa. It is endemic only to this part of Zambia. The insect is about the size of a horsefly, and generates a distinctive high-pitched buzz on flying. Being a relatively poor aviator, its range is confined to narrow strips of favourable, wet areas. It doesn't like to rise high in the air; it prefers hovering near the ground. Its bite is extremely painful, and perhaps due to this, the fly's body has chitin armour. It protects the insect against slaps from its human and animal victims.

Our truck must have crossed the fly's domain, and several of them got into the rear. They buzzed constantly around the confined space without ever rising above the two-foot high side panels, so the wind couldn't blow them away. From time to time, one of the pests landed on my bare leg for a snack. The unexpected, sharp pain of the bite made me jump and slap at my tormentor with a forceful whack. This usually knocked the fly to the floor; however, its protective hard shell prevented any serious harm. If I didn't crush the tsetse with my foot, a minute later it was back in the air attacking me.

At last, we arrived at Nkamba Lodge - our destination - located on a ridge overlooking the bay. My torment was finally over.

The camp consisted of about half a dozen thatched-roofed adobe huts and a similar but larger central building which contained the kitchen and the dining room. There were also a number of intriguing chimney-like free-standing structures beside the central hut. Each of these contained two exposed oil drums installed horizontally and connected by a number of pipes.

A pathway led down to a jetty flanked by a modest sandy beach on one side, and the bush extending right to the edge of the water on the other.

The hut assigned to us was cool and comfortable, and even had undamaged mosquito nets on the windows (not a common commodity in Zambia). After settling down, we went to investigate the rest of the camp. We learned that we were the only guests. Despite this the staff received us very casually. We were apparently an intermittent nuisance for them.

The regulations posted on the door of the dining room read:

- \* Breakfast at 8 a.m..

- \* Lunch at 12, sharp.

- \* Dinner at 6 p.m.

- \* Hot water is provided only in the morning. (The strange structures were boilers, with a drum for each cabin).

- \* Swimming is permitted only on the designated beach due to the presence of crocodiles on the far side of the jetty. (These beasts must have been very stupid or too lazy to swim around the jetty - I thought).

In the following days we learned that neither the kitchen staff nor the crocodiles felt bound by the regulations. The meal times were anything but sharp, and the crocks didn't observe their assigned boundaries either. In order to avoid involving ourselves in a territorial dispute with these usually unfriendly creatures of many pointed teeth, we decided to relinquish the pleasure of swimming during our stay. But I had to give credit to the lodge personnel on one point; we had hot water every morning.

Our friend in Ndola, a long time resident of Zambia, told us that the safest way to swim in Lake Tanganyika is to dive from a boat at least a hundred metres offshore. Crocks don't swim that far out.

The first morning in the camp I got up at 6 A.M. to see the sunrise. I walked to the edge of the ridge overlooking the lake. Across the water I saw a huge crock in the middle of the bay which was perhaps a kilometre wide. The beast was leisurely propelling itself toward the far shore. One more item of folk wisdom shredded to pieces.

After breakfast we took a wildlife safari in a jeep. We saw almost no animals. Either it was the wrong time of the year - as the guide explained - or the animals were completely poached out, which was more probable.

I hoped that the boat tour to Kasakalawe Lodge planned for the following day would turn out to be more exciting. The lodge, located outside the park, had been a well-attended holiday destination in colonial times. It was also famous for a regular visitor, a bull elephant, a veteran of the neighbouring bush.

Upon arrival, after an uneventful hour of boat ride, we found the lodge unimpressive. It had a run-down look with only a few guests around. We learned that the legendary elephant had been killed a couple of years earlier by poachers. Another disappointing day.

The whole Kasaba Bay tour, our last outing in Zambia, left a bitter aftertaste. The ongoing decimation of the wildlife and the persistent deterioration of the few achievements of the Colonial past were clearly in evidence even in this remote part of the country.



*Kasaba Bay*

At the end of our three-year sojourn we had mixed feelings about Zambia. On one hand, we had admired many of its natural wonders. We enjoyed many memorable moments in Kitwe, and while travelling around the country. On the other hand, during the same period we had witnessed the unrelenting deterioration of the daily life for most of its inhabitants, both natives and expatriates. Public security, healthcare, schooling, public services, availability of consumer goods - all had been decaying. The total spectrum conferred a depressing picture, and the future looked even gloomier.

Consequently, I had declined to renew my contract although the plant management begged me to stay. A few days after our Kasaba Bay trip we left Zambia for good.

March 1984.

## 107

### THE KEY DEPOSIT

When we arrived in Kitwe, a city of 100,000, we were surprised to learn that it had no mail delivery. One had to rent a postal box, or pick up the mail from the 'Poste Restante' window, at the only post office. This latter procedure was very cumbersome and a waste of time due to the usually long queue. Renting a box wasn't any easier. Boxes were in short supply and there was a long waiting list to procure one. We had to enjoy the poste restante service for a while.

After a few weeks I was notified that a box had become available. I hurried to the post office where the clerk told me that this box came with only one key instead of the usual two.

„Would you take it?“ He asked.

I accepted it happily; signed the necessary forms and paid the required \$10 deposit.

While in a store two years later a thief helped himself to my ring of keys. With no key to my postal box remaining, I had to get the lock replaced. The lock mechanism was drilled out and a new one installed. I had to pay for the cost of replacement and make another deposit payment for the keys. This fee was still ten dollars but at least it covered two keys.

On our last day in Kitwe, at the end of my contract, I emptied the mail box and then went to return the keys to the service desk and claim my deposit. The Zambian in charge went to the box and verified that the keys worked in the lock, and then entered a rear office to collect my file. He brought it out and opened it. The file contained four or five pages that I guessed were the initial contract, the key deposit note, the report of the lost key, the repair bill, and the second key deposit note. The clerk only glanced at the first sheet (the contract), read the first deposit note, and compared the number noted on it with the number on the key. They didn't match. He looked at me with surprise. I helpfully explained to him what had happened and suggested that he should page further to the more recent note. I told him I wanted the deposit for the second set of keys and not for the first one. The clerk looked at me with suspicion.

„Let's follow order and clear up this page first.“ He said. “You want the key deposit but you say that you lost the key shown here. Why would the deposit then be returned to you?“

I patiently went through the story again. No effect. He repeated his initial question. I lost my patience and asked him to call his supervisor. In a few minutes he was back with his boss. The supervisor, a distinguished looking middle-aged Zambian gentleman wearing a jacket and tie, had apparently been briefed on the affair because he already had a suspicious look on his face. I explained my case and gently suggested he turn to the last page in my file. A big mistake. His suspicions were now validated.

„Sir, don't tell me how to carry out my duties!“ He said.

Then, meticulously, he started to read the file from the first page on. Finding the initial deposit note, he repeated the verification of the numbers then asked the same question as his subordinate. My answer was also the same, retelling the story of the keys, the lost and the existing ones. He listened carefully, or at least pretended to listen, because his answer only stonewalled:

„Sir, you are wilfully trying to claim money for keys whose number does not correspond to that in this document. Do you realize that unlawfully taking funds from the Zambian state constitute a crime in this country?”

I realised that I had lost my case. I decided to pull out before I had to explain myself to the police on my last day in Zambia. I left the keys, and walked out.

When I retold the story to friends back in Canada, they were of the opinion that the two postal employees just wanted to pocket the deposit, and played this farce on me. After three years in Zambia, I doubted that this was the case. The two bureaucrats were only conscientiously carrying out their duty as they perceived it.

I learned in those years that the logic in Zambian thinking is not necessarily the same as ours. I liked to view theirs as a linear process while ours built on return loops. When a Zambian wanting to go from A to B in a rush encounters an obstacle, he becomes confused, stops and tries to eliminate the problem before proceeding further. It does not occur to him to bypass it and then return to it later when he is not pressed for time. It is just not his way of doing things.

Fredrick, our gardener had to be fully paid, in cash, before he would pay back his debts. Those could not be deducted directly from his wages. The Mines Corp., when questioned a \$5.00 registration fee on a \$1,500.00 school bill, did not pay a cent of it for two years until they finally accepted that the five-dollar charge was legitimate. Then they paid the total bill at the exchange rate of two years earlier. The stupid affair cost me several hundred dollars, not to mention the strained relationship with the school during those years the bill was outstanding. In this case, the company gained financially but if the opposite occurred, it would not have made any difference.

No rule could be legitimately bent in the Zambian bureaucracy.

April, 1984.

## 108

### A HUNGRY BEAR

The campsite at which we were so lucky to find a vacancy was a pleasant place at the edge of Jasper Townsite, on the wooded shore of the Athabasca River. The mighty river of the North was only a medium size creek at this point, at least at this time of the year. Our log cabin was of a certain age, but it had a friendly ambience and smelled of pine wood. Béla and Margit, my brother and his wife, visiting from Hungary, were impressed with it. To them the whole setup was so Canadian, straight out of a Grey Owl story.

We had a day hike behind us. It had started from the top station of the Whistlers gondola, ran on to a nearby glacier, and ended in the parking lot at the bottom station. We were exhausted but most of all hungry. On our way down we had come across a forest clearing which was carpeted with mushrooms, *Boletus Edulis* and *Lactarius Deliciosus*. We filled a backpack with them, and now the two wives and Béla were diligently cleaning the bounty for a stew while I walked back to the camp office to register.

The office was full of impatient campers. The single officer on duty was apparently not very skilled in administrative duties. He tried hard but it still took ages before I had my turn and could head back toward our cabin. In order to save time I took a shortcut through the woods and arrived at the rear of our log cabin. As I was cornering the building to reach the front door, I suddenly found myself face to face with a bear. It was standing on its hind legs in front of our door maybe two metres from me. I became immobilized as if I had been struck by lightning.

The bear was about as tall as I am. Our eyes met on a horizontal level. We stared at each other - motionless - for an eternity it seemed to me. Finally my reflexes revived and I began to back away slowly while still staring into the face of the beast. The animal closely watched my moves and dropped to all fours, ready to rush me - I thought. Now, at the corner of the building, I backed out of the bear's sight. I turned rapidly around and sped away. From time to time I looked back if the bear was following me. It wasn't - to my great relief.

After I calmed down, I decided to retrace my route by the main camp road. As I approached our cabin, from the front now, I noticed a crowd of a dozen campers standing across the road from our hut. Almost everyone had a camera in his or her hand. They had probably been there, and watched and filmed my great face-to-face with the beast, and my subsequent, less than graceful, retreat from the scene. At the time I hadn't been aware of their presence.

The bear was still aimlessly ambling around while moving slowly away from our cabin. When I judged the distance safe enough, I rushed into the cabin. I found my party in various degrees of panic. They told me that the bear had repeatedly tried to break into the hut for at least half an hour. It kept on clawing alternately on the small windows in the bedrooms, the large one in the sitting-kitchen area, and on the door. Apparently the odour of the Hungarian stew - still boiling on the stove - was an irresistible bear magnet. My group was afraid that the beast's attempts might succeed, considering the age and condition of the building structure. This thought obliterated the charms of the rustic log cabin in their minds for good. Then they saw the bear leave unexpectedly. They didn't realize that their salvation was my appearance on the scene and subsequent face to face confrontation with the brute.

I wished to investigate the continuing adventures of the bear. My brother and I, cameras in hand, joined the crowd of spectators outside. The bear was two cabins down from us. Suddenly, the beast seemed to get a fresh idea. It headed back to our cabin and began to

climb the outside wall. The animal did this with such incredible ease that it took my breath away. When the bear reached the roof, it headed toward the chimney. The beast's apparent intent was to follow the path of the heavenly aroma into the house. But the heat of the exiting fumes stopped the animal's progress, and instead, it began to circle the stack.

I wondered if the roof had been designed to hold a moving load like this one. Even so, had the passing years weakened the structure to a point that the bear would crush through, and land inside where it so desperately wanted to be?

At this moment, our attention was drawn away by the arrival on the scene of a Land Rover pulling a trailer with a cylindrical cage mounted on it. This was the Park's Bear Patrol that had finally reached the scene of crime and was now ready to remove the nuisance beast.

It was a vain hope. As one of the rangers explained it, as long as the bear was on the roof, it was out of range. Even if the animal could be hit with a dart of anaesthetic, the victim might collapse there, where its removal would be very difficult, or it could fall to the ground and be seriously injured. The rangers had to wait until the beast decided to come down. I hoped that the roof would stand up in the mean time.

After a never-ending wait, our friend finally had enough and started to descend. It carried out this act as skilfully and quickly as it had earlier mounted the cabin. Now, the great hunters of the Wildlife Service finally had their chance to display their skills. One of the rangers carried a high powered rifle ready for self defence, and the other had the dart gun in hand. They followed the wandering bear while the crowd trailed behind them at a distance. The dart-man turned out to be a dilettante just like the ranger in the reception office. He fired and missed several times. Then he had a hit but on the bear's hind leg where the sedative had no apparent effect. Instead of falling asleep, the bear seemed to become more and more annoyed and agitated by the relentless pursuit. I began to worry that the beast would turn on the rangers or on the spectators.

At last an effective hit landed the syringe in the rump of the animal. The bear began to slow down. Then it turned to face its torturers. But by now it was too weak, and fell to the ground with a big sigh. The two rangers approached the prone animal very carefully. The hunter-ranger pulled a long bamboo pole from their vehicle and used it to poke the recumbent beast. It didn't respond. It was obviously unconscious and ready to be loaded onto the vehicle. The rangers backed the trailer to the body, laid a couple of inclined planks between the door of the cage and the ground, tied a rope to the hind legs of the bear, treaded it through the cage, and began to winch the body into the cage. The rangers declined the help offered by the spectators. Either they followed regulations or were unjustifiably proud of their work.

When the operation was completed, they locked the cage and drove away. The unlucky, hungry bear was still sleeping, probably dreaming about the enticing Hungarian mushroom stew.

August 1987.

## 109

### CUAJONE

The long awaited answer from Southern Peru Copper Corporation finally arrived. I had applied to them for a job five months earlier. Their letter said that they had found my application of interest, and asked my wife and me to come for an interview. The company's headquarters was in Phoenix, Arizona, but the particular position, Molybdenum Plant Superintendent, was at Cuajone (pronounced Kwahone), a mining town located in the Andes Mountains in southern-most Peru. The site management wanted to meet us, and we would also spend a few days at the ore processing facility before the final decision was made. The letter said that all travel expenses were to be covered by the corporation.

We were eager to go, but there was a catch. I had started to work for Remet Processing Corp. in Mississauga three months earlier. I couldn't tell them about my interest in another job, even though I'd applied for it before I had joined Remet. Furthermore, I had no vacation days accumulated that I could use for travelling. I decided on a subterfuge.

The following day I showed up at work with a very sad face and told my co-workers that my father had passed away in Hungary. (He had actually died two years earlier). I went to see the company's owner and director, Peggy Witty, and asked her for a week of unpaid leave to attend my father's funeral. She was very sympathetic and approved my leave of absence.

After the long flight to Lima we were met at the airport by a company representative. He took us to a hotel, as our trip to southern Peru was to continue on the following day. The ride from the airport led us through a rather seedy part of the capital. Fortunately our designated hotel was located in Miraflores, the more affluent and friendlier looking twin city of Lima.

Next morning, the same rep returned us to the airport to catch a flight to Tacna, a small town on the Pacific Coast of Peru, right on the Chilean border. When we debarked from the plane in Tacna there was nobody waiting for us. We entered the completely empty waiting room and sat down on a bench, hoping that someone would show up. Time passed monotonously. After an hour of waiting I ran out of patience and walked over to the administration wing of the terminal to try to find somebody who could help us. The building seemed to be completely deserted. This was not so surprising since it was Sunday. I continued to knock on one door after another, until finally there was a response. Upon entering the office I encountered two clerks. Neither of them spoke any English. At that time my Spanish consisted of only a dozen - in the given situation completely useless - tourist expressions.

After staring at me with blank faces, at last one of the clerks got up from his desk and led me to the rear of the building. There we came to a tiny office marked 'Southern Copper Corp.'; whose single occupant was sitting behind a desk, reading a newspaper. When I addressed him, he answered - to my great relief - in passable English. But when I disclosed my problem, the man had only an annoyed look on his face.

"No visitor has been expected today." He said with displeasure.

I obviously upset his Sunday siesta. He picked up the phone with great reluctance and tried to call the mine's office. After several unsuccessful attempts, there was eventually an answer. A lengthy conversation followed in rapid Spanish with a lot of 'Si senor' interjected by my contact. When he hung up, I detected a faint smile on his face. There was apparently a way to get rid of us.



"I am calling a taxi to take you to the mine." He declared magnanimously.

Half an hour later we were on our way. The taxi driver, in contrast to the airport employee, was a jolly fellow who wouldn't stop talking. The fact that we didn't speak Spanish didn't bother him - after all he didn't speak English either. He explained through many words and even more hand gestures that he had been told to take us to Toquepala, the main mining town of Southern Copper Corp. I remembered this name from studying the map sent to us by the company. It was on the near side of the Atlas mountain range, while Cuajone, our intended destination, was across it. Cuajone was apparently too far for a taxi ride.

I had anticipated further problems upon arriving on Sunday evening in a place where one wasn't expected.

"But we have to face the situation as it comes" - I assured Irene, and myself.

At the beginning of the ride, we followed the Pan-American Highway which runs here on a narrow flat stretch between the ocean and the Andes range. The beautiful bluish-green colour of the ocean on our left contrasted sharply with the reddish-brown hue of the mountain slopes on the right. The landscape was completely desolate - no trees, bushes or even a blade of grass, except for two narrow, 6-10" wide green strips fringing the pavement. The driver explained that in this part of the country it rains only once in every ten years. However, the temperature drops drastically during the nights, and consequently, thick clouds of fog move in from the ocean. Some of the mist condenses on the asphalt. This meagre moisture dripping off the pavement is sufficient to keep the two narrow strips of grass alive.

Why is there no condensation on the rock cliffs? I wondered. But to ask would have been too complicated with my vocabulary.

Very soon we swerved off the paved highway and followed a gravel road into the mountains. The track began to climb. We passed one switchback after another for hours. We had two other companions now beside our driver. One was a mountain creek, which played hide and seek with the road. Sometimes it cascaded along side, and then disappeared for a while, only to resurface on the other side. The colour of the water, varying from blue to green to red, clearly showed that the creek carried mine runoff rich in heavy metals. I wondered whether the stream successfully reached the sea where it could unload its toxic charge into the coastal waters rich in sea life, or if it died a slow death through evaporation as it passed through the coastal desert. In this case it might deposit its piggy-backed mineral content more harmlessly.

The other mysterious travel companion was a railroad which connected the mine to a refinery on the coast further north. The track ran mostly through tunnels and hence it was hidden from the road. We could see it only from time to time when the track reappeared from a tunnel to span a canyon only to disappear again into the next tunnel.

The sun was disappearing behind a ridge, and it was getting dark. Finally, we turned into a valley with a brightly lit township in its middle. Before entering the settlement we passed a military checkpoint where our passports and faces were minutely scrutinized. The town's streets were deserted; no cars or pedestrians were seen anywhere. We pulled to a stop in front of an office building which the driver entered while we remained in the car.

After a long wait he finally reappeared accompanied by an older man - an American. He introduced himself as the township superintendent and explained - what we already knew - that we had come to the wrong place.

"But don't worry" - he said - "I will put you up for the night, and tomorrow transport will be arranged to take you to Cuajone. Now, let's go to the mine canteen. If it's still open you can grab something that you certainly deserve after your long journey. In the morning you will have breakfast in the same place."

Neither the supper, nor the guest room, in which we ended up for the night, was of high quality, but acceptable, especially considering our unexpected arrival.

Following super, Irene and I decided to take a walk. We followed the deserted street which climbed the side of the valley. We stopped beyond the last house to enjoy the view of the brightly lit township stretching below.

Suddenly, two soldiers in camouflage uniforms, armed with submachine guns, appeared from nowhere. They must have been watching us from the deep shadow of a boulder beside the road. They greeted us politely but didn't say anything else. They remained with us until we decided to walk back.

This was at the time when the 'Sendero Luminoso' (Shining Path), leftist guerrillas, were engaged in extensive and protracted warfare with government forces. The rebels, in their efforts to crush, or at least weaken, the regime, regularly attacked government posts, especially in the central, mountainous region of the country. Although Southern Copper operated in the southern extremity of Peru, far beyond the usual war zone still, as an American company, it was considered a potential target and so tightly guarded by the military.

In the morning I was unexpectedly invited to meet the General Manager in charge of all operations in Southern Peru. He apologized for the problem we had encountered, and reassured me that this was not the usual way his company conducted its business. He was pleased to hear that the elevation (3,600 m) didn't adversely affect us and we'd had no problem sleeping.

"In a short while you will be driven to Cuajone, 25 km away, through a 4,300 m pass. I hope that this won't cause any problem either."

After this unscheduled interview, we got into a Land Rover and started to climb up on the side of the valley. We passed another military checkpoint.

Sitting in the vehicle we breathed with no difficulty. Upon reaching the pass we got out of the car. I wanted to take some photos of the llamas grazing by the road (at this elevation there was more vegetation than we had seen until now). This limited physical exercise increased our respiration rate to those of track sprinters.

When we reached the perimeter of Cuajone, we could again breathe normally. We were taken to Villa Cuajone at 2,700 m elevation where the management - mostly Americans - lived. The local workers resided in Villa Botiflaca, 500 m higher up in the valley. The ore treatment plant and the mine were located even higher, at 3,400 and 3,500 m respectively.

We found Villa Cuajone a beautiful place. The township sat on a narrow plateau whose banks dropped precipitously into the valley far below. Across the narrow canyon on one side there was an Inca water duct stretching for miles as if glued to the sheer cliff wall. At this point, already at a great distance from the source, it still carried water. We were told that farther down in the valley a landslide had disrupted the canal's continuity, and the water now escapes via a dazzling waterfall.

The 3-4 bedroom modern cottages, nicely furnished by the company, nested in verdant gardens full of flowers. The whole place looked like a lovely oasis in the bleak, stony desert. This artificial paradise could only exist because of the unlimited supply of irrigation water pumped from the mine.

Another impressive feature of the place was the presence of a large hospital, claimed to be the most modern in Latin America. It was located between the two townships. We were told a curious story about it. The effluent generated by the hospital had originally been discharged over the cliffs below the settlement. The procedure seemed to present no health hazard, and it worked for a couple of years with no problem. The nearest local town, Moquega, was dozens of km away in the valley with no other human habitation between. After a while, this continuous water discharge rendered the steep slopes below the town quite verdant. The rich vegetation began to attract the native shepherds with their flocks of goats.

As time went by, the grazing animals and their human attendants moved higher and higher and very soon approached the town's limit. The security of the mine site which derived from its isolation was in jeopardy. Until this time the settlement could only be reached through a single, easily patrolled road ascending from the valley.

In order to remove the security risk, the effluent discharge was rerouted - pumped up to the top of a steep, nearby peak, inaccessible even to llamas. At the time of our visit the peak was already covered with a green crown of trees and bushes in striking contrast to the other nearby peaks.

Upon arrival we were received by the General Manager of Cuajone who after a curt, perfunctory apology for the failure to meet us in Tacna introduced us to the staff. We spent the next two days visiting the ore processing plant, the open pit mine, the various town facilities, and living quarters. In the evenings we were his, or alternately, the Concentrator Manager's guests. Each time, the supper turned into a social gathering of about a dozen people, couples and singles from the technical and administrative staff. They were all very friendly to us.

On the last day we discussed the conditions of the proposed contract. The package, especially its financial part, seemed very attractive. It actually was too good to believe. In five years we would have been able to save enough money to allow me to retire. Irene and I were enthusiastic. Our various meetings, both professional and social, had gone without a hitch despite our problematic arrival. The final offer appeared sure, and it was to be ready in two-three weeks - we were told.

On our return trip to Canada we had to stop in Lima to settle the expense account at the company's Peruvian head office. We also wanted to do a couple of days of sightseeing in the city.

The Mine Head Office was located at the western edge of Miraflores, and it occupied a whole city block. The multi-storey building sat in the middle of a park, surrounded with an eight-foot high concrete fence topped with barbed wire. The wall was patrolled outside and inside by guards armed with submachine guns. To enter the premises, one had to submit his documents through a lock in the wall, and state via intercom the purpose of the visit and the name of the person to be seen. Then one had to wait outside the gate for a permit to enter.

After the necessary verification of the business with the person specified, I was allowed to step between two doors locked alternately. From here, I was led by an armed guard to the locked door of the office building itself, and passed to another inside guard, also armed, who ascended in the elevator with me. At each floor, in front of the elevator there was an enclosed glass partition (obviously of bullet proof glass) whose exit door was locked. The person to be visited was then called to the cubicle to inspect the visitor through the glass panel before opening the door from inside.

After completing the business I had to go through the same elaborate security procedure of passing from guard to guard before being able to leave the premises. I was really glad that my prospective employment wasn't in this environment.

Upon returning to Toronto I had the distasteful task of recounting my father's imaginary funeral to Peggy and my colleagues.

Six weeks passed without any news from Peru. Finally, a letter arrived from the Phoenix headquarters. It advised me that due to a recent reorganization of the Cuajone management structure, the position I'd applied for had been eliminated. My job application would unfortunately not be pursued.

Irene and I were heartbroken.

October 1988.

## 110

### A DESERTING HUSBAND

Irene and I had reluctantly decided to look for outside help for our marital problem. Our relationship had been strained for sometime and it seemed to keep deteriorating. We made an appointment through Social Services and met the designated marriage counsellor - a woman.

During the introduction the counsellor explained that she considered her major task helping Irene find herself. If this objective could be achieved within the present marriage so much the better but that was not necessary.

My expectations of receiving any help from this counsellor instantly evaporated.

'She must be single and a Women's Lib's advocate!' I thought dejectedly.

Her statement had made me lose all faith in the procedure. I remained at the session with reluctance.

The counsellor asked Irene to describe our marriage and the problems encountered in it. Irene began her laments of late. The tirade listed every fault of mine - real and imaginary - and went on and on. Finally, Irene said that our marital problems had started far in the past.

"My husband deserted me soon after our first son was born!" She said.

I listened to this nonsense in disbelief. What is she talking about? No such thing had ever happened!

Irene went into details. According to her, when she was in the hospital after labour with Peter, our first son, I abandoned her and the newborn. I had gone away for a vacation with a friend of mine.

Noticing the incredulity on my face, the counsellor asked me if I had anything to add at this point.

I related the same events as I had perceived them:

"We expected - according to the gynaecologist's calculation, based on information provided by Irene - that the baby would be born in the middle of July. According to this date Irene and I had made plans for the Dominion Day (July 1st) long weekend. We intended to go camping in the Okanagan. This lake is at four hour drive from Vancouver. Our friend, Jóska, was to accompany us on the trip.

During the night of Wednesday, June 28, Irene's labour unexpectedly began. I rushed her to the hospital. Twenty four hours later her doctor's call woke me up at 2 a.m.. with the news that our son had been born.

I drove to the hospital at once and visited Irene and the newborn.

In the morning I called Jóska with the news. I told him that the planned trip - unfortunately for him - was off. In the afternoon, while visiting Irene and the baby, I told her about my conversation with our friend. I mentioned how upset Jóska was. He complained that it was too close to the weekend to make any alternative plans, and he would now be stuck in their hot apartment for three days. His wife, a nurse, was scheduled to be on duty at the hospital all this time.

Irene laughed at Jóska's predicament. But after some thought she came up with a surprising suggestion:

"Why don't you go with him to the Okanagan? I will remain in the hospital for five more days (standard stay in 1960) anyways. This way you would have a rest too."

My first reaction was a complete rejection of the crazy idea. But after further talk Irene began to convince me about the practicability of her suggestion. In discussing the possible details we agreed that Jóska and I would set out in the following morning. On our way we would stop and see her and the baby. Next day, Sunday, I would call her from a public phone, and on Monday we would stop again at the hospital on our way back.

This was what actually happened. I didn't see Irene and Peter on Sunday but we talked on the phone that day. In any event the whole thing was her idea and now she absurdly and unfairly accused me of abandoning her and the child."

The counsellor asked Irene if what I said was true. She assented.

"Then we should disregard this incident. It doesn't fit the definition of desertion." The counsellor said.

By now I had lost interest in the whole procedure. I asked the two women to terminate the session and walked out. I never saw a marriage counsellor - this one or any other - again. Irene left me some years later. At that time she didn't feel it necessary to specify her reasons.

June 1989.

# 111

## LIANCY

It was the end of October. Irene had left me two months earlier. Until now I had been hopping, against my better judgement, that the distance and the time would change her mind, and at least she would call or write. But there was no communication of any kind after her short phone message from the airport saying that she was on her way to Australia to start a new life.

One day Garth, my old friend from the Spanish class, who sensed my gloomy state of mind, called me to see if I wanted to join him on a diving vacation in Cuba in early December.

"You can leave your problems behind and enjoy the sea and the sun for two weeks." He said.

After brief consideration, and checking the time window with my boss, I accepted the invitation. Why not? I had nothing to lose except a few dollars.

We, a plane-load of Canadian tourists, arrived at Ancón, located not far from Trinidad, on the central south shore of Cuba, on a Saturday. The hotel lay near the tip of a long peninsula. A pristine sandy beach stretched along its whole span. There were no other habitations for many miles around.

No dives were planned until Monday, but there was a horseback ride advertised for Sunday morning. I signed up for it. A couple of years earlier, on my first trip to Cuba, I had found riding on the mountain trails of Marea del Portillo delightful. There were no mountains adjacent to Ancón, but I thought I might still enjoy the exercise.

I found only two companions on the minibus going to the horse ranch: Veronica, a young, dark girl, and Liancy, fair complexioned and equally young - both Cubans. They were from the graduating class of the foreign language school of Cienfuegos where they had been trained as interpreters for tourists, Veronica in English, and Liancy in French. They were performing their pre-graduation field practice at the hotel. To Liancy's great disappointment the current group of tourists didn't include any French speaking Quebecois who might require her services.

When I told her that I spoke French, she became excited, and offered to become my personal guide during my stay. She needed to practice her French she said. She was right about that. While Veronica's English was almost fluent and grammatically correct, I found Liancy's French atrocious. She didn't speak any English either. I was not overenthusiastic about her offer of speaking French for two weeks. One of my objectives on this trip was to practice my rather rudimentary Spanish.

At the ranch we met José, a black Cuban, who was in charge of horseback riding. He knew the girls. They all stayed in the same workers' dormitory off the peninsula. Jose actually fancied Veronica. Therefore it came naturally that while he was riding and being kept busy by Veronica, I remained with Liancy. My companion turned out to be a novice rider. She needed continuous coaxing to make her try the more demanding stretches of the trail. She came on this trip only because she wanted to have some riding experience, in case one day she would have to accompany French tourists on a ride.

By the end of the two-hour ride Liancy and I were good friends. She appreciated my help, and I enjoyed her company despite her poor French. My first impressions of her were very positive, and these were only reinforced with time. She had many admirable qualities: she was pretty,

and had a friendly, trusting nature, sincerity, charming smile etc. It was unfortunate that a talent for languages wasn't among her attributes. On trying to talk French she struggled with both the vocabulary and the grammar. Her strong Spanish accent further aggravated the problem.

At the end of the afternoon I introduced the girls to Garth, and from this moment on, the four of us spent a lot of pleasant time together.

We, just the four of us, went on a couple of day-trips, first to Trinidad, then to Cienfuegos. In both places we visited the historical sites and enjoyed the countryside. On our way to Cienfuegos we stopped at Liancy's parents' house. They lived in a villa at the edge of the city. At one time it must have been a luxurious home, but three decades of neglect and lack of maintenance had given the place a run-down look. Its dreary facade of crumbling plaster, peeling paint, and rusting iron railings was typical of all housing in Cuba. Liancy's mother treated us with great hospitality and served us tea.

During the last two days of our stay Liancy didn't come to work at the hotel. She had to prepare for her final exam. But she had promised to drop by on the morning of our departure.

The time had arrived. Garth and I packed our suitcases and waited for the bus to take us to the airport. I was anxiously watching the road for Liancy but there was no sign of her. Wouldn't she come? I thought pensively. That wasn't like her. Then, just a few minutes before we had to board the bus, she jumped off the back of a motorcycle.

"There was no bus, I had to hitchhike." She said, beaming happily.

I was delighted by her arrival. We walked into the garden behind the building to have some privacy. Not much time left. I took one more picture of her, and we said goodbye. When I kissed her there were large tears running down her usually smiling face. Those liquid pearls expressed her sentiments more profoundly than the hesitant words of her halting French - she was obviously sorry to see me to leave.

She gave me a farewell present. A book, 'La solidaridad de America Latina' by Garcia Márquez, with the inscription:

"Para sus prácticas de Español, con todo afecto y respeto, Liancy"

"This present is to compensate you for the missed opportunity of practicing Spanish. Also, while reading it, you would remember me." She said.



*Liancy*

This Cuban trip came at a nadir in my life. After 34 years my marriage had come to a sad end. My sons were far away, Peter lived in Montreal, and Andy worked in Japan. I felt age creeping up on me. I worried about my future prospects.

Now, after a dozen successful and enjoyable dives I saw that I was still in good physical shape. The unexpected and very pleasant encounter with Liancy revealed that despite our large age difference, and the relatively short time spent together, she had become attached to me. That gave me hope that back in Canada there might also be a woman who would appreciate me, and who might fill the gap that Irene had left. I just had to look and find that person.

December 1991.



## 112

### MOROCCO

In the late 1980s there was a growing concern in Morocco that the rapid growth of the country's population, the accelerated urbanization and the fast growth of the economy, especially its industry, were critically straining the environment of the country. There were numerous indications of serious environmental flaws, which if not dealt with soon, it was believed, could pose grave danger to public health and to the economy itself. The government turned to the World Bank and US Foreign Aid Organization (USAID) for funds to help overcome the problem. The two organizations decided on an objective, a systematic evaluation of the relative gravity of the various environmental problems before taking any action. A joint project, titled 'Review of Major Environmental Problems Facing the Moroccan Economy' was launched. The team assigned to it consisted of two American experts, a Moroccan assistant and me. We spent two months travelling around the country studying the various environmental issues in consultation with local Moroccan authorities.

Our major liaison was Mme Layashi, the head of the 'Directorat de l'Environnement' at Rabat. She was a well educated, conscientious, able French woman, and the wife of a prominent Moroccan politician. She ran the department and tried to achieve results with all the odds stacked against her: She was born in France, a woman in a Moslem country, and her department was part of the Ministry of Interior. This sinister ministry was also comprised of the Department of Internal Security, the feared and hated secret police of King Hassan II, the autocratic monarch.

It became obvious right from the beginning in our study that the most critical environmental issue in the country was the depletion of water resources. The annual precipitation in Morocco is very low and most of it evaporates or is discharged into the sea by short rivers. During the past 30 years the extensive construction of retention dams and reservoirs had been undertaken to improve the utilization of the limited resources. The water retention capacity of these dams, however, began to drop alarmingly during the 1980-s due to silt-up of the reservoirs. Land erosion in the watershed caused by overgrazing of pastoral lands and extensive deforestation resulted in large quantities of topsoil washing into the artificial lakes and feed streams. Construction of additional dams, reservoirs and water transfer installations aimed at reversing the trend didn't solve the basic problem. By the 1990-s, the scarcity of suitable new sites, the enormous capital cost of new construction, and the usual negative effects of such installations on other areas of the environment had rendered this remedial strategy completely counterproductive.

Another similarly grave national problem we encountered was the degradation of the quality of the already diminishing water supply by chemical contamination. The primary culprits were pesticide and artificial fertilizer runoff from the irrigated lands. Discharge of industrial wastes and raw municipal sewage further aggravated the problem. An infrastructure of waste water treatment plants was sorely missing in Morocco.

The third major concern was solid waste disposal, especially of hazardous waste. The rapid urbanization of the country, the increasing consumption of prepackaged consumer items, and the prevalence of non-biodegradable plastic wrappings rendered traditional collection and disposal of household garbage inadequate, and lead to build-up of unsightly rubbish piles in public areas which were potential health hazards. Upon approaching any populated area in the

countryside the first sign of civilization encountered was the multitude of multicoloured plastic bags captured by the goat-devastated branches of the scarce bushes. These bags flapped in the wind as the banners of an invading alien army. Solid garbage, if collected at all, was usually deposited without any treatment or recycling in poorly selected unmanaged landfill sites located within urban or town perimeters and near river banks. The landfills weren't covered with blankets of earth. The practice led to uncontrolled fires, air-born pollution, and wash-offs during the rainy season.

Air pollution was found to be a smaller problem in the country except in the two largest cities, Casablanca and Rabat, where it had already reached levels of concern. The urban pollution was mainly derived from vehicle exhausts. Emissions of the few industrial plants had a lesser role to play.

In addition to these pollution problems - unfortunately common in every industrialized or developing country - we encountered some problems more unique to Morocco.

The gravest one was the accumulation of unused, dated and highly toxic pesticides in certain areas of the country. Locust infestation, a bane of Sub-Sahara, occurs in regular multi-year cycles. Hordes of insects, hatched in Eastern Africa - Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia - usually migrate with the prevailing wind toward the west, devastating the land along the way. These clouds of voracious crop-destroying insects reach Morocco only occasionally. Still, as a precaution, in case of potential infestation, the U.N. had supplied and stockpiled large quantities of pesticide along the likely invasion route. Over several decades the accumulation of unused - and by now outdated - chemicals grew enormously at various sites in the country. These were highly toxic multichlorinated hydrocarbons, i.e. benzene hexachloride (BHC), dicchlorvos (DDVP) fenitrothion, malathion, solvents, etc. Some of them, e.g. BHC, are no longer recommended for insect control, while others had degraded and became dangerously toxic. The continued storage of these materials was expensive and any occasional spill also presented an increased risk to human health and the environment. At the time of our study there were 1,800 tons of pesticides at half a dozen remote locations which would require immediate destruction while a further 3,000 tons were on the potential danger list. The whole issue was considered explosive and required an urgent solution. The only technology which had ever been employed for the destruction of pesticides on a large scale is incineration at high temperatures in cement kilns or in dedicated combusting facilities. The off-gases from these aggregates carry dangerous traces of very toxic dioxin and furan. The installation of an elaborate and expensive exit gas purification system for such facilities is mandatory. An additional problem with the combustion technique is that the insecticides would have to be shipped considerable distances to a central incineration facility. This would require complete and safe repackaging prior to risk-free transportation, not easily achievable in a Third World country.

Another problem we observed was more localised. Morocco is a major fishing nation. Safi is the centre of the industry. The fish crop - mostly sardines - is canned and sold to the European market, mainly England. The British demand high quality standards. Consequently, a small but still significant percentage of the cans - more than four million per year - are rejected before shipment. There is also a large tonnage of spoiled fish by-product which requires safe disposal. At the time of our study these materials were periodically incinerated in open fires outside the city limits. This operation attracted numerous human and animal scavengers and consequently created a serious health hazard to the population and to the local fauna (mostly stray dogs!). The installation of a dedicated sanitary incineration plant might effectively solve this problem.

The city of Safi also has several fishmeal plants where fish residues from the canning plants are processed into fish flour and fish oil. The process involves the cooking and drying of fish residue, and results in the emission of large volumes of hot combustion gases loaded with odorous vapours.



*Emissions from a fishmeal plant in Safi*

These emissions have conferred a characteristic fishy smell to the whole industrial district and to the adjacent residential areas. The smell was not only a nuisance to the inhabitants but it also penetrated, became adsorbed by, and hence degraded other commercial commodities manufactured in Safi, especially textiles. The unattractive odour rendered these products unsaleable to external markets.

Industrial exhaust odours are generally controlled by the installation of active-carbon filters in the exhaust stream. Unfortunately, the equipment is expensive to install and to operate. The technologically primitive plants of Safi are unlikely candidates for such modern technology.

The most enjoyable part of our mission was our sojourn in Agadir. The location of this resort with its beautiful mile-long sandy beach is considered to be one of the nicest, if not the nicest in Morocco. We had come here to review the eco-tourism potential of the Souss-Massa National Park. This maritime park had been recently created to provide a protection shelter for migrating birds and safe habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife species (e.g. Moroccan bald ibis), and to protect the unique argan forests and aurophorb flora of the coastal ecosystem.

The new park's regulations have permitted grazing twice a year by sheep and goats owned by the neighbouring community. (The 300 families living in the affected zone of the park owned more than 10,000 sheep and 1,600 goats). The grazing frequency wasn't monitored or enforced due to the lack of funds. We toured the park with Mr. Ribi, the Park Director and had first hand observation of how destructive such a number of grazing animals are to the environment.

Adjacent to the park, on the Agadir side, there is a Royal Reserve with a royal palace (one of many in Morocco) amid a large, wooded sea shore estate. A few years earlier the king had decided to reintroduce gazelles to this reserve. As a first step, he had the whole estate encircled with a six-foot chain-link fence to contain the wild animals and to keep the domesticated ones out. With a special permit we were allowed to enter this refuge and ride along its fence for several kilometres. At the time of our visit the size of the gazelle herd was still only about a dozen, and we didn't encounter any of them. However, we saw the striking difference in the density and variety of vegetation on the two sides of the fence. The National Park side of the coastal forest consisted of yellow/brown sand dunes sparsely covered with large evergreen trees and prickly bushes. On the royal side the same hills were green. The slopes under the trees were covered with grass and large-leaf creepers displaying a multitude of melon like fruit, and with abundant broad-leafed bushes. This differentiation in vegetation on the two sides of the fence occurred naturally in a period of 3-4 years after grazing had stopped on the royal side. The regeneration of the vegetation was facilitated by the relatively abundant precipitation in these coastal areas.

In my stay and travels throughout Algeria a few years earlier I had become convinced that the bleakness of the Sahara desert and of the Atlas Mountains derived to a large degree from the destructive grazing by the sheep and goats of the locals. The goat is the more harmful of the two due to its voracious appetite, skill in reaching the most precarious vegetation and ability to climb trees. In addition to the destructive eating habits, the sharp hoofs of these animals also devastate the sensitive desert soil. The trip to Agadir only strengthened this earlier impression.

In Morocco the overgrazing had reached catastrophic levels. The increasing standard of living enriched the diet of many. More and more people could now afford to eat meat, i.e. mouton, and consume goat milk products. Raising these animals for the market had become very profitable, and the number of animals had increased multifold. The situation has been aggravated by the large number of Moroccans who work in France and Spain. Their regular remittances to their families have been "wisely invested" in animal husbandry, adding hundreds of thousands of grazing animals to the local flocks.

Whether the World Bank and the USAID could or would do anything to solve the problems presented in our report will have to be seen.

July 1992.

# 113

## COUP D'ETAT

"There has been a military putsch! State emergency has been declared! There is fighting in Caracas! The Maiquetia International Airport is closed. We aren't allowed to leave the hotel premises!" Jana and I heard the news as we descended into the lobby in the morning.

We were in the middle of our one-week vacation in Macuto at the Caribbean seashore of Venezuela. Our hotel, Melia Caribe, is part of a hotel-crescent on a small peninsula. Until now we had spent our vacation time swimming - in the sea and in the pool - and in taking various day trips: to the capital and along the sea shore. We also made a day hike up the mountain which separated us from Caracas. I had plans to fly to Angel Falls, the highest falls in the world, on the following day. Jana was undecided about coming along or not.

Two days earlier the management had drained the hotel's swimming pool - to our great annoyance - because of the imminent arrival of the 'Guns and Roses' rock group. During their last visit here the partying crowd had apparently caused a silly incident in the pool. This time the hotel management took the precaution of emptying the pool. The hotel's private beach, however, was open for swimming.

The hotel lobby looked like a beehive with guests moving nervously around. People exchanged the latest rumours, e.g. the air force had bombed downtown Caracas. Nobody knew anything for sure. It was recalled that nine months earlier there had been an abortive coup in Venezuela by a group of disgruntled army officers who were promoting an anti-corruption and anti-poverty platform. The putsch failed, and its leaders were jailed\*. Now, nine months later there is a second coup. What a country. Why are we here?

In the afternoon an attachment of government soldiers arrived and took up a defensive position with machine guns on the hotel terrace overlooking the sea. Swimming was forbidden. Did they expect a rebel landing? Nobody knew.

In the evening the restaurant began to run out of food. Everyone discussed the possibility - on a strictly theoretical basis - of escaping the country via American emergency flights. The Caracas International Airport, now closed, was only a half hour drive from us.

The following morning the situation was still muddled. Although the government radio broadcasts claimed complete victory over the rebels, road travel remained forbidden. The soldiers, however, allowed us to exit from the hotel to nearby restaurants. In the afternoon the neighbouring luxury hotel opened its swimming pool to the less fortunate guests of our hotel. At last we could eat and do something enjoyable.

On the third day of the coup attempt we were still restricted to our hotel, the neighbouring pool and the nearest restaurants. The soldiers had disappeared from the terrace. Finally, news arrived that the airport was to restart its international operations the following day - the day we were originally scheduled to fly out. The bad news was that Jana had become sick with diarrhea, cramps and fever, probably from the make-shift meals.

In the morning we were transferred to the airport by bus. We found the place in complete chaos. Hundreds of distraught passengers rushed around in the waiting areas in complete disorder. Many of this crowd had been stranded in the terminal for days. A larger number, who had just arrived, were supposed to leave on scheduled flights during the preceding days. A

third, smaller but noisier, group had their flight scheduled for sometime in the future but wanted to leave immediately to escape the politically unstable country. We, passengers scheduled to fly out that day, were a small minority. The airline personnel were overwhelmed by the crowd. No law-enforcement personnel were in sight. There were no announcements over the public system. Chaos reigned.

We heard from other passengers that scheduled travellers were to be given priority for boarding incoming flights. We fought to reach the airline desk to obtain boarding passes and then pushed our way to the departure gate. We were sweating like pigs - the building's air-conditioner was out of service. The gate to the tarmac was guarded by armed personnel, the only ones around. After checking our papers they wouldn't allow us to leave the restricted area even to visit the washroom. The undue wait became agonizing torture for Jana still struggling with diarrhea. There were many times when she thought that she was going to lose the battle of control of her cramps and rumblings.

Finally, we were on the tarmac heading up the stairs to the aircraft as Jacob toward heaven. For Jana, who rushed straight to the washroom in the back of the aircraft, it was real Shangri-la. Soon the plane took off, and we left the coup plagued country behind with great relief.

November 1992.

\* P.S. As we learned later, one of the primary objectives of the present coup was liberation of the leaders of the previous coup, among them Hugo Chavez, an Army Lieutenant Colonel. The attempt failed; but the jailed officers were pardoned two years later. In 1998 Chavez was elected President of Venezuela in a landslide victory. He was re-elected in 2000 and 2006 with increased pluralities.

# 114

## SALTILLO

Saltillo is the capital of the state of Coahuila in Northern Mexico. We, the five partners of ECS International Consultants, hoped to obtain a contract from its Municipal Government. Porfirio, our Mexican representative, Chuck, my interpreter - born in Canada, raised in Venezuela - and I drove from Monterrey to Saltillo to discuss the proposed project with the local authorities and to survey the site.

In Saltillo we met Lic. Gonzales, the Director de Ecologia Municipal. After introductions and a short preliminary discussion, the Director took us for a ride through the city to show their main concern: the kilns of the brick-manufacturing district. The sector we entered is located near the center of the city. It comprises countless, small and large clay pits with numerous family shacks and furnaces studded at their rims. Some of the furnaces were fired. The beehive-like structures emitted huge clouds of black fumes, which billowed from the top of the structures and through their porous walls. When we passed near one of these smoke generators the acrid smog almost suffocated us inside the car.

The Director told us that brick-making had been a local tradition at this spot for centuries, and had provided living for hundreds of families. Each family has its own pit, and they live in shacks beside them. The members of the family, including children, dig and process the clay, shape the bricks by hand, and then pile them into beehive stacks. Gaps set at regular intervals in the pile are filled with fuel which in the past had been coal dust. When the construction of the beehive is complete it is set on fire. After a proper time interval the fire burns out and the pile is let to cool. As soon as the bricks are cold enough to handle, the family takes the beehive apart and sells the finished product.

This part of the town had always been smoky but in the past the pollution had been limited to the vicinity of the pits. A few years earlier the brick makers had discovered a new, cheaper source of fuel for their furnaces - used tires. They could collect these items from garages practically free of charge, and after hand grinding the tires into gravel sized granules; the material could be used to fire up the beehives. The new fuel had made brick manufacturing more economical, and also had an unexpected benefit. The flames of the burning rubber conferred a slight and variable permanent tint to the hand-shaped bricks. No two bricks were identical in shape or color.

Soon after Californian developers discovered these 'objets d'art'. They introduced Saltillo bricks to the construction of custom built mansions for the rich. The lucrative export market soon became the mainstay of the brick makers, and, at the same time, an important item in Saltillo's economy.

The drawback to the new process is the terrible smoke evolved during burning of the sulphur loaded rubber. These fumes are heavier and smellier than those formed from burning coal. The dense fumes were often blown over the more affluent part of the city and caused outcries among its eminent citizens. The Director wondered if we could recommend a solution to control this pollution.

Unfortunately, I was of no help. The present beehive furnaces could not be refitted with any gas cleaning device except at horrendous expense. The only practical solution, the replacement of the primitive manufacturing process with a modern brick-making facility with kilns equipped with up-to-date pollution control equipment could not be considered. Such a plant would require

large capital outlay, and would employ relatively few workers. It would eliminate the livelihood of hundreds of families. It would also produce uniformly colour and shaped red bricks which would have no export potential.

The Director listened to my answer with a long face. Obviously, I was not the first expert consulted on this matter that came up with this verdict.

From the brick-making district, we drove to the slaughterhouse, our primary interest. This establishment - owned by the city - was built in the nineteen thirties. It is located at a good distance from the city on a lonely plateau, at an elevation of 1,700 m. For decades it had never been modernized although these days it processed 150 cows and 100 pigs a day, twice as many as the plant had been designed for.

The effluent from the slaughterhouse, which contains a substantial quantity of animal blood, hair, pieces of meat and fat, is discharged by gravity - untreated - through a pipe cut into the bank at the edge of the plateau. There is no human habitation on the arid plateau and valley.

A couple of hundred meters below the discharge point, at the bottom of the valley, is a creek in which water flows intermittently. The stream crosses the main highway under a bridge at about half a kilometre farther downstream. During the dry season the flow of the plant effluent doesn't reach the dry creek bed. It evaporates as it trickles down the bank side. Its organic load is deposited and serves as a smorgasbord for local wildlife: rats, foxes and all kinds of birds - mostly crows and vultures.

After a rare heavy rain, however, the bloody discharge might reach the creek and continue to flow to the highway bridge. On one such occasion the governor of the state - driving over the bridge - noticed the red colour of the water below. He ordered his driver to stop and descend to the creek to investigate. The driver confirmed the governor's suspicion: the water seemed to carry blood. The slaughterhouse wasn't visible from the road, and its presence was unknown to the governor or his driver. The surrounding countryside had no evidence of human habitation. The governor suspected foul play and ordered a police investigation.

The ensuing police report revealed the connection between the blood in the stream and the effluent from the municipal slaughterhouse. It was obviously not a criminal case. But the press learned about the investigation and the issue became an embarrassing political liability to the governor. Action to solve the problem was called for.

This is where we came in. Our consulting firm was asked to submit a proposal for the cleanup of the effluent.

At the slaughterhouse we met the Plant Superintendent who showed us the site, explained the operation and provided the process information required for preparing a proposal. After the technical discussions he invited us for lunch in the plant's dining room.

We were all waited on. The 'plat de jour': bowls of tripe. My Latino companions, Chuck, Porfirio and the Director of Ecology, all declined even to taste it. Only the Plant Superintendent and I - the 'Gringo' - ate the heavy, greasy, but tasty slaughterhouse speciality. There was no alternative dish available. The empty stomachs of my companions made our return to the city a hasty one.

A couple of weeks later, we submitted our proposal to the municipality. Alas, the timing was unfortunate. Just that week a state election was held in Coahuila and the governor's party lost. Political and budget priorities changed overnight, and the funds for the effluent treatment facility were withdrawn. Our proposal was shelved, and we never heard from Saltillo again.

June 1993.



## 115

### HOLA

This was my second and supposedly last Sunday in Santiago, Chile. So it was my last chance to hike in the Andes surrounding the city. The mountains looked so beautiful on postcards. Unfortunately, one could see them only in prints because they were hidden by the heavy smog that enwrapped the metropolis day and night.

I purchased a map to figure out a way to get into the mountains without a car. I asked my Chilean colleagues for help. To my regret, none of them was a hiker and they didn't know anything about hiking trails. The only suggestion I got was:

„Try to go to San José de Maipo, a resort town in the Maipo Valley. You might be able to find some walking trails there.”

So, on Sunday morning I took a bus to San José. I told the bus driver my intentions in a few carefully preconstructed Spanish phrases. He only nodded and indicated that I should take a sit right behind him.

The bus ride took a couple of hours. First we skirted the Eastern suburbs of Santiago, Macul and la Florida. We passed through a few nice, posh sections but most of the two districts consisted of monotonous, shabby dwellings. Later we entered and began to follow the valley of the Maipo River. We were now in the hills. The view became very pleasant - orchards and vineyards stretched in an uninterrupted chain. Finally, we arrived at San José's main square. The last passengers left the bus. I alone remained on board. I looked at my driver uneasily.

‘Did he forget about me, or didn't understand what I tried to tell him?’ I wondered while remaining seated.

We left the main square and continued our trip. Behind the town we crossed a bridge over a side canyon of the Maipo and then the bus came to a stop. The driver turned around and gave me a little info-talk. I understood only that this was the terminus, and that I had to get off. He also told something about a bridge, a river and a path, but I didn't get the gist of it.

I thanked him anyway and got off the bus. It made a U-turn and departed. The only bridge I could see on this stretch of the road was the one we had just crossed. I walked back to it. The bridge spanned a gorge ten-metre deep. At its bottom a medium sized creek tried to find its way toward the Maipo River. I noticed - with excitement - that there was a well-trodden path running along the creek. I hoped that this was the ‘river’ the bus driver had talked about. Looking further up along the valley I saw some medium sized hills but not the magic snow-covered mountains depicted on the postcards. The air - even this far out of the city - was still opaque from pollution and curtailed the view.

I descended to the trail and began to follow it upstream. There was rich vegetation on both sides of the creek, and along the edges of the many pools formed by the stream. Higher up the slopes were barren. The air was hot; no breeze reached the bottom of the gorge. I began to encounter locals along the creek, usually families with children, picnicking under the larger trees, while the kids played in the ponds. By this time I was sweating and would have liked to take my shirt off. However, no bare-chested adult could be seen anywhere, and I didn't want to become a spectacle.

I kept on walking along the creek. A couple of kilometres upstream the comfortable gorge narrowed to a crevasse. The path came to a dead end. Between the dark, towering rock walls - only a few metres apart - there was no room for a path anymore. The only way to progress further upstream was to jump from rock to rock in the creek bed. That's what I did. The chasm was surprisingly cool; the sun's rays had probably never reached its bottom. Ferns and mosses nested in the cracks of the rock wall. This was the first time that I had seen these moisture loving plants in Chile.

The chasm didn't stretch very far. It suddenly opened up into another sunny gorge, and surprisingly, the trail also resumed. Continuing on the path I met no more people. This section would be difficult for picnickers to reach. So I was surprised when I unexpectedly ran into a couple and their dog at the edge of a deep rock pool. The man was probably in his twenties, while the muchacha, a pretty one with long black hair, looked younger. As I passed them, I nodded to the girl, and she nodded back. The man didn't pay any attention to me. This could have been due more to his embarrassment than impoliteness - he was swimming nude in the pool. Their dog didn't notice me either; it was sleeping on a sunny rock.

At the upstream end of the swimming hole there was a big boulder. It almost blocked the incoming stream. There was just enough room for the creek to rush through on one side of the rock while the trail threaded through on the other. The cascading water made this otherwise idyllic spot somewhat noisy for my liking but the couple didn't seem to be bothered by it.

I passed the boulder. The pathway, which was now more a track than a trail, began to climb up the side of the gorge. I followed the path. It was the first time that I had walked the treacherous slopes of the Andes Mountains. The steep mountainside was almost completely void of vegetation and was covered with thick layers of loose shale and rocks. These started to cascade down at the slightest disturbance. One had to watch one's steps very carefully to avoid inducing rock slides that could easily carry off the climber too.

Halfway up the slope, the track levelled off and began to run parallel with the creek below. The walking became easier although still requiring attention. The rocks paving the path looked and were very unstable. Feet had to be set with care, never trusting any single stone until it proved solid enough to carry one's weight.

A few hundred metres farther the path ended - to my regret - at the edge of a precipice. The gorge below also came to a dead end. It was blocked by a massive cliff. On the other side of the abyss there was a high waterfall. It looked impressive despite the relatively low volume of water cascading down on the rock wall. This was a natural view point. I took a photo. Then I decided to climb down to the bottom of the falls disregarding the danger of an accident. If I were able to make it down, the climb back would be easier, I reassured myself.

It worked. Soon I was at the bottom of the canyon. The view of the falls from here made the effort worthwhile. I took pictures and rested in the cool spray for a while.

The return trip was uneventful. When I reached the big boulder, about two hours later, I wondered if the young couple would still be there. Upon stepping out from behind the huge rock, the picture encountered took my breath away.

The young ones were still there all right. The girl, completely nude, lay on the top of her equally naked partner. The white hemispheres of her shapely buttocks moved vigorously. The two were engaged in feverish love making just a few metres in front of me. Their heads faced toward me but their vision, even if they'd had their eyes open, was blocked by the loose, cascading curtain of her long hair undulating from her rhythmic motion. The noisy creek suppressed the sound of my approaching steps.

I stepped back behind the rock and let the picture sink in. I wondered what to do. I couldn't continue my route without exposing myself - they lay right beside the trail. Bypassing the place was impossible; the walls of the gorge were too steep. If I continued to walk and one of them happened to look up, it would have been terribly embarrassing not only for them but also for me.

What right did I have to disturb their idyll anyway? I decided to wait until they finished their business.

The air was still but full of noise from the rushing creek. I remained behind the boulder and peeked out only from time to time. The stamina of the couple was astonishing - at least to me, at my age - they kept on and on. Finally, when I took the next glance, I saw them getting dressed. Luckily, they were turned away and didn't see me. I waited five more minutes and then walked nonchalantly out from behind the rock.

The boy and the girl were seated side by side on a rock, fully dressed. I greeted them with a loud „Hola” ('Hi' in Spanish). They answered similarly, with friendly but rather smug smiles on their faces - I thought. The dog was still sleeping but this time in the shade of the rock.

April 1995.

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### EL INDIO

The El Indio copper/gold mine and associated ore concentrator, treatment, and roasting plants are located in a remote corner of Northern Chile. Barrick, a Canadian mining corporation, which had recently acquired the property, decided to increase the production capacity. The engineering of the extension was done by Kilborn of Toronto in their Santiago office. Hatch, my previous employer who had laid me off three years earlier, was a process subcontractor on the project. Hatch called me back as environmental consultant on the project for an intermediate stage of the design. The initial two-week assignment in Santiago was soon extended. In the fourth week I was sent to visit the El Indio facility for the first time.

Yves, my young colleague from Hatch, and I flew to La Serena on the Pacific Coast of Chile, 470 km north of the capital. At the airport a company driver picked us up, and we started out in a Landrover on the lengthy overland trip to the site.

The driver, although speaking some English, was the silent type. Conversation remained short and sporadic. Yves and I sat in our seats and watched the scenery.

In the first hour we crossed the lowland plains studded with vineyards and orchards. When we reached the foot of the Andes, the long climb began. The green irrigated agricultural land changed into the typical mountainous landscape. The loose-shale-covered slopes had varied colours, ranging from dark brown to yellow and to red, with an occasional green or blue hue added, depending on the predominant metal oxide content of the mineral.

The steeply rising gravel road switched back and forth through hairpin curves. Our speed was moderate - by Latin American standards, as I realised later - only because of the steep gradient.

After four hours of driving we arrived at the gate of the mine property. Our identities were scrutinized by armed guards. This security checks wasn't necessarily to catch trespassers - we were told - but to stop smugglers since El Indio lay only a few kilometres from the Argentinean border.

Soon we reached and passed the mining camp at an altitude of 3,400 m. The camp comprised half a dozen buildings - dormitories and recreational facilities. We continued climbing. Finally at 4,100 metres we entered the valley where we had our first glance at the plant. It was enveloped in a white cloud of dust at the upper end of the valley.

"Arsenic trioxide" Yves said jokingly, looking at the white cloud.

This highly toxic white arsenic compound is a byproduct of the roasting/refining process. Yves's quip turned out to be no joke at all. As we learned on arrival at the plant an hour later, the exhaust fan of the gas purification line of the smelter had broken down, and the untreated gas had been vented into the atmosphere for an uncertain length of time. The major part of the escaping visible dust was arsenic trioxide. Although the white cloud had disappeared by the time our car reached the plant, we felt uneasy. The obvious nonchalance of our hosts when we asked about the incident only added to our discomfort. Malfunctions like this ought not to be rare here, I concluded. We were given an empty office for our stay. We found the desks, shelves and filing cabinets covered with a thin layer of white dust.

"Oh don't worry!" - Our host, the chief engineer, said. "The office building is sealed and the fresh air entering the ventilation system is filtered."

That didn't seem to explain the origin of the dust. I shrugged my shoulders. If these people working here for years had survived such pollution without apparent damage, we should be able to take it for two days. But to be on the safe side, Yves and I wiped off everything with wet paper towels before settling down.

We had limited time, so after an hour of rest and preliminary discussions we began the plant visit. Having donned coveralls and dust masks we took the elevator to the top floor of the plant building and began to descend from there. The elevation would have made stair climbing impossible for us unacclimatized newcomers.

Even this way, the tour, which lasted about an hour, rendered us dead tired. This was at least partially due to wearing and breathing through dust masks which we weren't accustomed. Yves and I were more than ready to retire for a rest. But we had to wait until the end of the shift when someone would drive us back to the camp for the night.

Neither the mine/plant workers nor the staff personnel lived permanently at the work site. They worked two weeks while staying in the camp overnight, and then returned to their families for one week in the low-land. In the camp, as all staff members, we had separate rooms while the workers stayed in multi-person dormitories in the adjacent buildings. There was a large dining room where good food was served, at least while we stayed there. The camp also comprised a huge recreational building with all kinds of ball courts, a theatre stage, etc. An indoor swimming pool was located in a separate building. Life in the camp didn't seem boring despite the isolation of the place.

The Environmental Engineer, a female, entertained us in the evening. Since she was young and pretty and spoke reasonable English, the hours passed fast and pleasantly.

Neither I, nor Yves had any problem with sleeping despite the altitude. In the early morning we were driven to the plant to begin the data collection task. Upon entering our designated office we found a dust layer similar to that of the day before covering all horizontal surfaces. Filtering of the air sucked into the building obviously existed only in theory.

We - fitted with dust masks - observed the plant operation for several hours. There were obvious signs of inadequate pollution control. We saw piles or thick cushions of dust, most of it seemingly arsenic trioxide, in remote corners of the floors and under some major equipment. Some but not all the workers and maintenance personnel wore dust masks. However, I doubted their effectiveness after seeing the dust deposition in the office from 'filtered air'.

In the afternoon we packed our things, had a short meeting with the technical staff to clarify some questions, and were on our way back to La Serena.



*The El Indio Plant*

We had the same driver and vehicle going down as coming up. But now we were going downhill most of the way, and what a difference that made. Our driver turned out to be a raving maniac. He shot down on the steep straight sections like a plane on take-off and negotiated the hairpin turns at the ends at double the safe speed. In these turns, and there were dozens and dozens of them, the outer tires of the Landrover were not more than a couple of inches from the edge of the road. The prospect of skidding off the rail-less road and falling hundreds of metres into the chasm below haunted me. One loose, rolling piece of gravel under a tire could easily precipitate such an accident.

I am usually fatalistically passive in vehicles driven by others but this time I was grabbing the back of the seat in front of me as a drowning man would grab that legendary straw. When I asked the driver why he went at such speed, he said that I should not worry; he had been driving on this road for years without accident.

He must have been extraordinary lucky but how long would that last? What if his luck ran out on this trip? I wondered.

During the whole downhill trip there was only one short pause when my tension eased. At one point we caught up with a large flock of sheep crossing and blocking the road. Our driver had to slow down and inch through the troupe. I hoped for many more flocks but in vain.

However, we made it to the lowland plains without incident. Here, the driver turned into the ordinary speeder universally encountered on the roads of Chile. I could finally relax.

April 1995.

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## LAND OF THE INCA

In 1997 Jana and I spent three exiting weeks in Peru visiting Cusco and the Sacred Valley and trekking the Salkantay and Inca Trails, and ending up at Machu Picchu. Our group of 12 hikers came from various parts of Canada and the U.S. The trip was organized by Willard's Adventure of Barrie, Ontario, and led by Ron Urquhart, an experienced Canadian guide. Some of the highlights of the trip were as follows.

### Cusco

Our flight from Lima landed at Cusco, the ancient capital of the Inca Empire, in the morning. We had only a couple of hours to unpack and regain our breath from the stress of being at the 3,300 m altitude before the tour of the city began. We met our local guide, a graduate of the History Department of the local university, who was to stay with us for the rest of the trip. We visited the Temples of the Sun and the Moon built in typical Inca clean-linear design, so different from the Spanish baroque colonial edifices which rose after the conquest. The trapezoidal structure of the Inca buildings rendered them surprisingly earthquake resistant.

I found the guide's presentation somewhat disappointing. His description of the history of the temples wasn't as definitive as I had expected, but conjectural, advanced as only one of many possibilities. Later I realized that he was an intensely patriotic Quetchua (Inca descendent) who didn't consider the Spanish version of Peruvian history authoritative. It was the conqueror's story and not necessarily correct - he stated. Unfortunately, he couldn't or wouldn't present a more credible alternative. Later, I became used to his style of description and learned to appreciate the depth of his knowledge of the subject.

### Pisac

The Peruvian Sacred Valley was the bread basket of the Inca Empire. The rich alluvial soil of the valley of the Urubamba River and the myriad irrigated terraces carved into the cliffs on both sides of the valley fed a population of ten million. The Spaniards, and their diseases, soon reduced the native population to a fraction of the original size. Later it increased somewhat, but by 1900 it was still only one million. The conquerors had also terminated the intensive cultivation of the terraces by introducing 'modern agriculture' based on growing grain instead of corn and potatoes and employing horses. These animals were completely unsuitable for ploughing terraces. So the major part of the cultivable land became unusable and remains so even now. These days the valley can barely feed its current population despite the use of artificial fertilizers.

In Pisac we explored the beautiful ridge-top temple site. We climbed to it along a spectacular, cliff-hanging footpath. On the way up we passed massive stone doorways, and at one point we went through a tunnel carved through the rock wall. This was so astonishing because the Inca didn't have metal tools. At the top of the trail we explored the beautiful ridge-top temple. From here the view was most spectacular: the peaceful valley far below with the Urubamba River snaking through its midst and the myriad terraces studded on the towering cliffs on both sides of the valley. At the crest of the terraces lay irrigation canals carrying water from faraway sources. Some of these ditches carved into the rock walls still transported water to beds where cultivation had stopped hundreds of years ago.

At the trail head a little native girl of perhaps 10 had joined our group. She carried a backpack full of soft drinks that she hoped to sell to us. We didn't need her supplies; we had been issued bottled water upon disembarking from the bus. But the girl wouldn't give up. She doggedly followed a few steps behind us up the steep trail without ever trying to push her merchandise on us. When we set down at the top to regain our breath and to enjoy the view, everyone fished out his or her drink from the backpacks. The little girl just watched us with sad eyes without saying a word. Jana and I couldn't stand this silent suffering. We bought two bottles of coke from her that we didn't even intend to drink. A happy smile flashed through the girl's slightly soiled face. Our fellow companions unfortunately remained impassive to her fate. She carried the rest of her heavy load back without a word of complaint.

## **Chincheró**

Chincheró is an Andean Indian village on the high rolling plateau of Central Peru. It comprises a colourful native settlement and an Inca ruin. We visited it on Sunday, the market day in the town. The town square was crowded with native sellers - women wearing colourful, wide brimmed hats and equally multicoloured, wide and surprisingly short skirts. In contrast, the few local men wore blue jeans and baseball caps. Vendors displayed their products on blankets laid out on the ground: food, drinks, clothing and other necessities, plus souvenirs for the busloads of tourist who were inevitably also present.

We were harassed by some - male - vendors but it wasn't difficult to shake them off. However, when a young girl - of maybe 12 - approached me with her little selection of bracelets, necklaces and statuettes, I felt a change of heart. I explained to her in my limited Spanish that I didn't want her souvenirs but I could use a guide. How about leading me to the nearby Inca ruins and showing me its most interesting details? Her face lit up. There are no female tourist guides in Peru. But this girl had been hanging around the visitors and their guides long enough to learn what was there of interest. She happily led me to the ruins and pointed out some unique, beautifully cut, multifaceted building stones and perfectly carved and fitted door lintels. She described and explained these features in her hesitant Spanish which was only slightly better than mine. I enjoyed the rather elementary 'sightseeing tour'. At the end, I gave the girl a reward - the going rate for official tourist guides - that was probably more than she could expect to make in a month by selling souvenirs.

Later, we met a group of Quetchua weavers who demonstrated the art of Andean weaving for us in the open air. Jana felt tempted to switch her profession for this more peaceful métier. After a brave but not very successful attempt on the loom she decided to give up her dream and continue practicing medicine.

## **Maras**

After a long bus trip through the high plateau we stopped and hiked to the unique open-air salt mining complex of Maras. The operation is based on extraction of salt from the brackish water of a rivulet which emerges from a small cave in the side of a hill. The water is distributed through a series of ditches to numerous terraced shallow pools. After the water evaporates, salt is deposited at the bottom of the basin. The salt is scraped into bags and transported on human backs to local markets. The pools belong to families in the neighbouring villages - one pool per family - who have extracted salt since Incan times.

Lately, the operation has run into problems. A new Peruvian law requires all salt used for human consumption to be iodized. This doesn't pose a problem for industrial producers but creates an economically insurmountable problem for the traditional saline operators of Maras. The future of this traditional operation is imperilled.





*Jana and a Native Woman Changing Professions*

### **Vilcanota River**

A raft ride on the white waters of the Vilcanota River was a unique experience of our Sacred Valley tour. Six persons per raft, outfitted with life jackets and safety helmets and accompanied by a native guide, had happily started out in the tranquil current. The peaceful floating didn't last long. Soon we reached the white water of the first rapids. The serene river became a surging cascade rushing through narrow channels among stark boulders, making sudden, 90 degree turns and leaving behind twirling powerful eddies.

In the first tight spot Jana didn't hook her feet under the cross tube of the raft. The centrifugal force from a strong eddy threw her out of the vessel. She was instantly sucked under by the turbulent water. Our river guide - paddling like mad - stopped the raft from running with the current and shifted it toward Jana who had just popped up from below. Now the rushing water threatened to pin her between the raft and the rock wall. At the last moment we succeeded grabbing her by the life jacket and with some efforts pulling her in. Jana still had her paddle in her hands - as instructed. The accident ended as suddenly as it started with no damage done except for the quantity of river water she'd swallowed. The Vilcanota River isn't clean. All the animal and human waste from the numerous settlements along its shores is directly discharged into it. Even the locals wouldn't drink its water. Jana, the extremely careful traveler, who used bottled water for washing her teeth to avoid possible infection, had swallowed liters of this brew. Miraculously she didn't develop even a minor digestive system infection.

At the end of our boat trip we had a chance to swim, or rather float, down a milder cascade which had no protruding boulders. I tried my luck. In the bumpy current of the cascade a swimmer should control his breathing and inhale only during the moments when riding on the crests of the waves. I knew that. But I soon realized that at this elevation - over 3000 m - the thinness of the air forces one to breath without pausing. It required unexpectedly strong effort to hold off breathing for any length of time to avoid swallowing water. Jana's earlier predicament became easier to understand.

### **Ollantaytambo**

This site, a massive hilltop fortress guarded by row upon row of steeply rising terraces, is spectacular. The Spanish conquistadors led by Pizarro were unable to take the fort in their first siege. After visiting the terraces and the ruins of the temple complex on the top, we were served lunch in the yard of a local family. The main meal was traditional roasted guinea pig which some of our fellow hikers couldn't tolerate. Jana and I found it tasty until we toured the kitchen and saw the cute little creatures - delicacies of future meals - happily running around on the floor and picking up pieces of vegetable fallen from the table.

## **The Salkantay Trail**

The trek began at Mollepata at an elevation of 3,200 m, where guides, cooks, a team of packing horses, and their attendants were waiting for us. By this time we had spent five days in Cusco and the Sacred Valley and had become moderately acclimatized to such elevations.

Salkantay (Savage Mountain) is the highest mountain of Central Peru. During the following several days we trekked around it, proceeding through varying altitudes while the peak, covered with a permanent snow cap, loomed above us.

The first day we walked in a pretty, dry valley along an ancient Inca canal which still carried irrigation water to some fields far away. Later we climbed along a ridge high above the Rio Blanco, which drains the mountain's main glacier. We camped at 3,800 m where we had our first view of the massive south face of Salkantay.

The following morning we began our real climb alongside an enormous glacial moraine. The trail became more and more strenuous as it led through a series of brutal switchbacks. The air thinned with each step, and members of our group began to stagger and pause while trying to catch their breaths. Soon Darrell, a physician from St. Catherines and one of the youngest of the group, came down with altitude sickness. He suffered from splitting headache and vomited. The guides decided - after a short discussion - to mount him on a horse and continue the trek. Jana was alarmed by this unorthodox way of treating edema. The standard approach is to move the patient to a lower altitude as quickly as possible. Moving to still higher ground could easily kill a patient. But Darrell survived, and a couple of days later was able to continue the trek on his own feet.

At the end of the day, we reached our highest campground at 4,200 m, directly below Salkantay's South Face.

The following day we passed the base camp of the Japanese mountaineering expedition who a few years earlier were the first to climb the Salkantay peak (6,275 m) by scaling the knife-like ridge linking the camp to the summit. Later in the day, most of our group, including Jana, reached the highest pass of the trek at 5,000 m. Four of us, accompanied by the guide and the chief cook, elected to take an alternative route over a glacier which twisted around the mountain at a somewhat lower altitude. This route was said to be more strenuous than the direct path through the pass. After a short time on the glacier I understood why. The ice river's surface was covered with 10-15 cm of fresh snow. We were not roped together but had to walk in the footsteps of the guide who tested each foothold with a ski pole. Soon we encountered the first crevice crossing our path. It was only perhaps a foot wide but seemed bottomless. We had to hop over the gap without stepping too close to the rim on either side. At that altitude, near 5,000 m, jumping even two feet is a real effort. We had to repeat this feat several times. By the time we met our group - on the trail proper on the other side of the pass - I was completely exhausted. We camped again at more than 4,000 m, this time beneath Salkantay's east face.

At the end of the next day and at an elevation 900 m lower, we camped at the edge of a tiny mountain village called Paucarcancha. The supper - traditional roast sheep - was prepared by the friendly locals. This was the first time on our trek we'd had a chance to properly wash up - there was a creek running through the village. A few of the braver ones even took a dip in the glacial water. Its temperature felt below freezing.

## **The Inca Trail**

The following morning, after four days of strenuous hike on the Salkantay, we reached the Inca Trail at a lowly 2,900 m. By this time we were well acclimatized to higher altitudes. From this point on human porters were used to carry our tents, food etc.; horses are not allowed to enter the national park. The Inca Trail's trailhead is a railway stop which was just a couple of hundred metres below us. We had a little rest at the intersection of the two trails. We sat on the grass beside the path, and watched the tourists who had recently disembarked from the train and were still in full vigour, passing us.

There was a small macho group of Argentinean backpackers who derisively laughed at us thinking that we were from the same trainload of trekkers as they, and already needed a desperate rest while they moved brusquely and self-assuredly. A few hours later we caught up with them. They were breathing hard and looked exhausted and discouraged. They were stunned to see us nonchalantly overtaking their group. Although the trail climbed continuously we were still at about 3,500 m, an anthill elevation for us - the veterans of Salkantay Trail.

The campsite we settled in for the night was at 3,800 m. The Argentineans arrived in the camp after we had finished our super. They moved like slow motion film actors, except one who apparently couldn't even make it this far. Later their guide and the most resilient member of the group traced their steps back to find and help the struggler. They returned to the camp just before darkness supporting the agonized hiker. The guide carried the man's backpack.

The next morning we left the camp before the Argentineans got up. We never saw them again. We struggled up above the tree line to reach Huarmiwanusca (Dead Woman) Pass at 4,200 m - the highest point on the Inca Trail. The ascent was a heart pounder but the view from it into the valley and the snow capped mountains in the distance was stunning. When Jana reached the pass - puffing, sweating and looking miserable - I wanted to take a picture of her. She protested vigorously.

"Don't dare snap me! Unless you want it for my obituary."

A long stretch of ups and downs followed as we passed the impressive ruins of Suncuacay, where the dirt path we had trod until now changed to a cobblestone paved trail which then continued to our final destination. That this road remained serviceable after 500 years without any maintenance is an engineering miracle. Our second campsite on the trail was at 3,800 m. We found the spot rather chilly during the night.

On the third day we passed the last high pass at close to 4,000 m. The climb offered some of the wildest, rugged scenery imaginable. In the last camp we celebrated with a little fiesta where we passed out our presents - used clothing brought from Canada for this occasion - to our guide, cook and porters. From a nearby crest above the camp we took a last glance at the majestic Salkantay. Then we commenced our long descent from 3,650 m to 2,250 m at Machu Picchu. The first stage of the descent was by an unbelievably long series of winding stone steps many cut into the living rock. A short side trip took us to the Winay Wayna ruins. This lovely site is flanked by a waterfall. The sweeping amphitheatre of agricultural terraces, and an upper ceremonial section connected with a lower living section by a long set of steps paralleling a beautiful series of ten fountains, was nearly as impressive as Machu Picchu.

On the fourth and last day of the trek we made a long descent through an astonishing high elevation jungle. In the mid-afternoon we reached Intipunku, the Gateway of the Sun from where we had our first glance at the lost city of the Incas. After crossing the Sun Gate we descended into the unforgettable ruins of Machu Picchu and checked into Hotel Turistas for the night.

October 1995.

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### THE GHOST

As we rode into the campsite, our third, we were pleasantly surprised. It differed from the previous ones which were just clearings in the wilderness, though one had the remnants of a ranger cabin and a barn. The present campsite was located on the top of a grassy knoll with a lake stretching away at its foot. It had a stone shelter, beyond it a privy amid a small grove, and farther away, a sturdy corral for horses. It had even a picnic table to render mealtime more relaxed.

Our party consisted of Dean - a seasoned rancher-guide; Sandy, his 18-year daughter and assistant cook; George - a half Indian, general helper; Steve - a paying guest, a city man with practically no riding experience; Stephanie - his nine-year-old daughter; Jana - on her first horseback trip; and me.

By this time, we were a coherent group.

Dean was a well-organized leader who handled the horses, the packing-unpacking, the setting up the camp and the cooking with equal efficiency. We tried to help as much as we could, but he did most of the work.

The person we admired most, however, was Stephanie. This little girl of limited riding experience took all discomfort and fatigue that are inherent parts of such trip in stride. She had a very pleasant personality, never complained, even when we rode through rain - although that was not fun at all. Her parents were divorced, and the father - on impulse - offered this trip to his daughter as a birthday present with the hope - I guessed - of having a chance to bind with her. She loved the adventure, and we all loved her.

Our party of seven riders and three pack horses, had started out on the North rim of Riding Mountain National Park, located northwest of Winnipeg, and we crossed the park in a southeast direction. The path we followed, or at least that Dean followed, because to us it was mostly an indiscernible track, was travelled only twice a year: by the Park Warden in the spring and by Dean's party in the summer. For the rest of the year it served only as wildlife corridor through the dense bush.

We expected to see a lot of the rich wildlife: moose, elk, deer, bear, wolves and coyotes, so vividly depicted in park brochures. No such luck. The clatter from our ten horses obviously gave enough warning to the beasts to move off the trail and to hide in the bush that stretched, impenetrable to humans, on both sides of the track. We saw plenty of animal droppings, trampled grass - still warm from the body which had lain there minutes earlier - but no living creatures, not even birds in the trees.

"Now, we've reached the 'edge of civilization' - Dean said. From this point on we would travel on trails frequented by day groups. This camp is the favourite destination of many such groups but it appears - luckily - that we are the only occupants this time."

Steve and Stephanie, Jana and I set up our tents close to the shelter. Surprisingly, Dean moved theirs farther away, nearer the corral.

After supper we sat and enjoyed our coffee around the picnic table in the twilight of the mild Manitoba summer evening. A couple of swallows who apparently had their nest in the stone shelter next to us were busily passing over our heads, insects in their beaks. They flew into the shelter through a large gap in the door.

Dean was unusually quiet during the meal, apparently lost in his thoughts. We missed his vivid hunting and safari stories that had become our usual evening entertainment.

The silence was suddenly and rudely broken by loud crushing noise coming from the empty shelter. We froze for a moment and looked at Dean for possible explanation. He was ashen white and appeared to have shrunk several inches. For some time he didn't utter a sound, then finally said:

„The ghost.”

I began to smile at what I assumed was a joke but he remained deadly serious.

I got up to investigate the cause of the noise, and opened the door to the shelter. I stopped at the doorstep to let my eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness inside. After a few seconds I noticed the crushed remnants of the swallow's nest on the floor. Upon closer inspection I distinguished three motionless, little, naked bodies among the fragments. The young birds were obviously killed by the fall on impact. A fourth one was still wriggling. I carefully placed it in my palm and carried it out to show to the group.

As I approached Dean, the nearest to me at the table, he shied away from me.

„Take it back. I don't want to see it!” He screamed at me in a strange voice.

I was stunned by his reaction. He, the big hunter of bears, moose and of other dangerous beasts, became a sissy on seeing a little bird? But I followed his request, re-entered the shelter and placed the bird among the dead siblings. Then I returned to the table.

We were all eagerly waiting for some kind of explanation but Dean remained enveloped in his silence. At last, he began to talk.

„Fred and I had been good buddies in school. Later, we both joined the rodeo circuit, riding horses and bulls, and lassoing calves. Years later I dropped out and became a rancher in order to start a family. Fred continued in the rodeo until, a couple of years ago, he was killed in an accident. His last will was to be cremated, and his ashes to be spread over this campsite which had been his favourite spot for many years.

Now his ghost is hunting the place. Last year, during a similar trip, a mirror hanging on the wall of the shelter dropped and broke to pieces while we were all outside, just as happened to the nest today. During the night the door of the privy kept on opening and closing although no one went near it. One could hear it screeching all night.

Fred has been after me!” - Dean said in an eerie voice, as if in conclusion.

I glanced at Sandy, his daughter. She looked grave and nodded her head.

„Father still has the pieces of the broken mirror at home. He dreads this place. This was the main reason I joined you on this trip. He wouldn't want to be alone in the tent with the ghost around.”

This degree of superstition astonished me.

In this age are there still adults who truly believe in ghosts? Or had something happened between Dean and his friend that brought these pangs of conscience? Is it misplaced guilt?

Whatever it was, it sounded sincere. I glanced at Stephanie. How did she receive this weird bedtime story at her impressionable age?

Stephanie's eyes were wide open but her face didn't show any sign of fear or even uneasiness. Maybe she perceived the story as one of those she must have seen many times on TV - scary but not real.



*Dean, Jana, Stephanie and George*

No one said anything. We retired to our tents. I listened to the muffled croaks of the frogs coming from the lake and the chirping of the crickets around our tent, but I heard no screeching noise coming from the privy.

'Why would the ghost of a nature-loving person pick such an unattractive place for his abode anyway?' I mused.

The next morning when I glanced out of the tent, I saw Dean busily feeding the horses. I was relieved.

'What if his cruel ghost-friend had scared him to death during the night? We needed him to lead us back to the real world. Could his daughter do that?' I had been wondering during the night.

August 1996.

## 119

### BAJA CALIFORNIA

"OK. Let's go to Baja." I reluctantly consented.

Jana has always loved Mexico, its historical ruins, its people, and especially its stark, bleak, desert countryside. She had tried to entice me to go there for years. I was reluctant because I had already visited Mexico once as a tourist, and had recently worked there on and off for a year and a half. I would have preferred to see a new country. But alas, I finally gave in.

We signed up with Natural Outing Ltd. for a week-long camping trip, and became busy with preparations. We purchased our airline tickets, bought a guide book, made arrangements for the vacation with Jana's office, and I contacted our friends in Palo Alto where we planned to stop on our way.

Two weeks before departure time, Keith, the trip leader, advised us that the trip had been cancelled due to insufficient participants.

It was a letdown after all the preparations made and money spent. After some discussion Jana and I decided to go on our own following the itinerary of the initial plan.

We flew to San Diego, where we intended to rent a car to drive to Baja. We encountered our first surprise. No car-rental company at the airport would rent a vehicle to cross the Mexican border. After some search we finally found an outfit in the city which would provide a vehicle.

We picked up the car with great relief, drove to the border and entered Mexico at Tijuana. We continued driving to Ensenada, enjoying the sea shore views. It was late in the day and there was no time to look for a campsite. We stopped at a hotel for the night.

In the morning the sky looked sombre with dark rain clouds. This was the year of El Nino which brought an unusual amount of rainfall to the West Coast. As we progressed into the country marked 'desert' on the map, we were surprised to encounter fresh green grass and bushes, and blossoming wild flowers everywhere along the road. Even the numerous cacti half hidden in the verdant vegetation, were displaying multitude of yellow and pink flowers. Occasionally, as the road dipped into normally dry river beds, we cut through streams of water rushing across the pavement.

The picturesque desert of Baja that Jana had admired so much a few years earlier, wasn't there this time. Even this day, although the sun was shining, the forecast called for rain, fog and cool temperatures. We decided to give up the idea of camping and stay in motels instead. But our initial budget was based on sharing a minibus and camping, so the motels had to be cheap.

We headed for Guerrero Negro, about halfway down the peninsula. South of Rosario we ran into a military road block - the first in a series we soon learned. It was manned by young soldiers searching for arms and drugs, things we usually don't carry.

"Where are you going?" The officer asked us.

When we named our destination for the day, the commandant began to tell us something in mixed English and Spanish - mostly Spanish. We deciphered that he wanted us to take two of his comrades to Guerrero Negro - where they were going on home-leave.

It would have been inadvisable to refuse the request of a military authority, and we - although not very pleased - let the guys enter the car. They were two young recruits who didn't speak any English. They proved their usefulness very soon, however, when we arrived at the second road block. The guards on duty seeing the uniforms inside the car just waved us through.



By the time we reached Guerrero it was dark. As I was driving into the unlit town our charges suddenly exclaimed:

“Despacio!” - slow down.

I stepped on the break just in time. We passed over an unmarked ‘topes’, a speed bump - railway ties laid across the road - which might have easily crushed the undercarriage of the car at the speed I drove.

My initial misgivings about our hitch-hikers decreased appreciably. They provided further help assisting us in locating a suitably low-price hotel before they said adios. We checked in for two nights.

We woke up to a supposedly exciting day planned for whale watching, one of the main objectives of our trip. After discussing the topic with the hotel receptionist, and receiving helpful instructions about the road to take, we headed toward the noted Laguna Ojo de Liebre (Hare’s Ear Lagoon), the protected mating and breeding ground of California grey whales.

The weather didn’t look particularly good. A brusque wind was chasing ominous dark clouds across the sky. While crossing the extensive salt plains, which contain the world’s largest evaporative salt works, I was glad for the lack of sunshine. I recalled the time when I had traversed similar terrain in Algeria. The brilliant white salt beds mercilessly reflected the rays of the sun which made driving uncomfortably hot and hard on the eyes despite sunglasses. This day we didn’t have to face this problem.

Upon arriving at the boat launching centre we got some bad news: Whale watching tours had been cancelled due to the stormy weather. The person in charge - seeing our long faces - consoled us; if the weather improved by noon, they still might launch a boat.

Having nothing else to do we parked the car and went for a stroll in the desert. This part of the country wasn’t as verdant as the stretch travelled the day before. In this bay we could enjoy the wide variety of cacti and similar desert plants in their more typical milieu. We were at some distance from the Centre when a very dark cloud moved in from the sea. It was accompanied with frequent lightning and thunder. We began to hurry back toward the Centre. The storm progressed faster than we did over the rough terrain. The wind strengthened and it started to rain. But before the real deluge began we were able to reach the protection of a roof. It was lucky that the storm didn’t catch us in an open boat.

The storm passed in half an hour, and the wind also died down somewhat. The sea, however, remained rough. Other tourist groups began to arrive. We didn’t know what our chances for a tour were. Finally, the long awaited announcement came. Several boats, each taking 6-7 passengers, would be launched in an hour’s time.

We embarked. The sea was still rough. When we reached open water we saw only crests of waves around us. Then the guide spotted and pointed out the back of a whale at a distance. There was another and some more. One emerged quite close and headed straight at us to dive and disappear under the boat. Unfortunately, the unsteadiness of the boat and the foam blowing from the waves’ crests made for poor photographic conditions. Still it was a great day.

The following morning we headed north to Bahia de Los Angeles, a fishing village, considered one of Baja’s beauty spots. It lay in an inlet of the Gulf of California, on the Eastern side of the peninsula. ‘Geco Camping’, our chosen destination, was further down from the village, on a lonely, sandy beach. The camp appeared deserted except for a number of pelicans sitting on boulders at the edge of the sea. The rustic, ramshackle cabins strewn haphazardly over the beach, looked quite picturesque. The low price, US\$10 per night (double), advertised on a hand-written sign at the gate, rendered the place even more attractive. The proprietor appeared from somewhere. The wide grin on his face showed that he was pleased to see us - rather rare guests. He led us to one of the cabins, which had a nice red tiled roof, and a thatch-roofed open veranda. The bamboo curtain which served as door wasn’t necessarily an optimum arrangement for these cool windy days. Fortunately we had down-filled sleeping bags - handy for the occasion. At some distance from the cabin was an outdoor communal privy and a hand



operated pump which produced drinking and rinsing water. Not five-star hotel conveniences but acceptable for the price. We learned that there was another guest in the camp who happened to be away for the day. While showing the cabin the proprietor swept the wind-blown accumulation of sand off the floor, and we settled in.

It was early afternoon. There was still enough time to make a short hike up on the side of the mountain which towered behind the camp. It invited us to climb to the top, but we had neither a map nor enough daylight hours left for such a trek. We hiked high enough to have a good view over the bay. From here we could map out our kayak route planned for the following day.

Back in the camp I had a quick dip in the chilly sea. Later we met the lonely other guest. He was a Canadian hippy, a long-term resident of the camp. He gave us some advice on kayaking these waters. According to him, the weather usually was very still here in the morning, but by noon strong winds could suddenly appear and churn the water into a nasty mess. Less experienced paddlers might be surprised and frightened.

The following morning we rented two kayaks. They were what're called recreational kayaks in Canada. These crafts - unlike proper sea kayaks - have heavy plastic bodies with two flotation enclosures but no spray covers or rudder. Although considered unsinkable, they handled clumsily - especially in wind. The bay, at this point, was about 5-6 km wide. Crossing it would require at least an hour continuous paddling with no wind.

There wasn't even a breeze as we started out. The sea was mirrorlike. Jana, who was not used to paddling a single kayak, had an unstressed opportunity to become acquainted with propelling such a boat.

We landed on the other side of the bay between two rocky promontories, on an uninhabited, pristine, sandy beach. We were alone, probably for miles. We investigated an old boat wreck, half buried in the sand. After a short rest, we began our return trip on a sea still calm. At about halfway to the camp a strong gust arose and the water instantly became choppy. The waves became larger and larger by the minute and white foam appeared on their crests. We tried to ride on the flanks of the waves. The strong, gusty side-wind was pushing us off-course. We had to work hard to stay in line and not to take in too much water. Jana with her limited experience in rough water had a scary time. But we made it to the camp without capsizing.

We rested only for a short time before decamping and heading north through the grim Desierto Central of the peninsula. We arrived at Catavina about noon. There was only one room available in the moderately priced motel. It was normally used for paint storage and smelled accordingly.

We used the afternoon for hiking into the picturesque and rough boulder country along a creek - probably a dry gulch in normal times. We climbed to a cave which contained prehistoric, native wall-paintings. The view from the cave over the stone desert below was spectacular. During the night we had a less pleasant time. The strong smell emanating from the paint cans made sleeping difficult.

The last day of our Baja trip was spent mostly on the highway. For the last time we enjoyed the striking and ever-changing scenery of the peninsula: stark mountains and deep, craggy arroyos in the interior, beautiful bays dotted with primitive fishing camps on the coast, and rich cacti flora everywhere. Before leaving Baja, we made a small detour to the spectacular Bufadora, off Ensenada, where a tidal blowhole spewed water and foam dozens of metres high through a V-shaped notch in the headlands.

In the afternoon we crossed the border, and a couple of hours later returned the car to the rental agency. It was in surprisingly good shape considering the sometimes despicable road conditions encountered on the peninsula.

March 1998.

## 120

### CLIMBING KILIMANJARO - AFRICAN SAFARI

In the spring of 1998, five of us - Magali, Francis, Dagmar, Jana and I - from the Halton Cross Country Ski Club enlisted for a trip to climb Kilimanjaro with Willard's Adventure Club. This mountain - just shy of 6,000 metres - is the highest in Africa. The climbing adventure was to be followed by a two-week safari in the five most famous wildlife parks in Tanzania and Kenya.

We had been preparing for the trip for months by trying to assemble the correct clothing and accessories, reading on the subject, training strenuously on local hiking trails, and last, but not least, paying the ever increasing instalments for the trip. The initial cost of the package - C\$ 5,500 per person - kept on climbing due to the addition of a day of acclimatization at Kilimanjaro, the sudden imposition of a 20% value-added tax by the Tanzanian government which affected all Tanzanian costs, and the continuous deterioration of the Canadian dollar. The package cost increased to C\$ 7,700. (The final total cost of the trip came to C\$ 9,000).

Following a busy summer, the Willard's Adventure Group finally landed at the Kilimanjaro airport in Tanzania on September 22. The hiking adventure began the following afternoon from Marangu Gate, at an elevation of 1,800 m. Our party - 25 avid climbers accompanied by 53 porters, cooks, waiters and guides - resembled a small invasion army more than a hiking group.

The first-day's trek took us through the lush vegetation of the mountain rain forest. There were bearded lichen and mosses hanging from tree limbs. We also made a short side trip to Maundi crater. To our disappointment we didn't see any wild life. In the evening we arrived at Mandara Hut, located at 2800 m. The camp had one large and several smaller buildings for the hikers and staff. We lodged in the large, two-story structure. It had a dining room downstairs and a dormitory on the upper floor. The latter was fitted with two long rows of bunk beds accommodating well over 100 tourists. All the beds were occupied that night - a number of them with loud snorers. Although during the day we had had clear weather, it began to rain at supper time and the rain continued all night. The path to the outhouse became slippery and muddy. A trip to it in the darkness of the night and pouring rain was a mini adventure.

The second day we passed from the forest belt to the grasslands. Again, we encountered no wild life. We spent two nights at Horombo Hut, at an elevation of 3,800 metres. Accommodations here were more comfortable with 6-8 people per cabin. The extra day added to our itinerary at the request of several participants hoping for a more effective acclimatization to the altitude was much appreciated. But it wasn't a rest day. We hiked up to Zebra point - an interesting rock formation. The flora was unique - tree ferns and tree like giant lobelias, weird prehistoric looking Afro-alpine vegetation. We returned to Horombo a few hours later. This is standard mountaineering practice: climb high and sleep low. In the evening two women from our group declared that they had had enough. They decided to remain in the camp until the rest of the group returned from the big trek. They were the first dropouts but not the last.

On the fourth day we crossed alpine desert zones with thin vegetation; predominantly heath, followed by moors land of tussock grasses, 'everlasting' flowers, moss balls and lichens. Here the progress became a more strenuous matter because of the increasing elevation. In the afternoon we reached the 'last' water source - a small creek - where we filled up our containers for the last time for the next two days. From here the path led through barren, windswept terrain ending when we reached the last hut, Kibo. It was located at an altitude of 4,800 m and served as the base camp for the final ascent. By this time the group was stretched out in a long line.

Some individuals trailed an hour behind the first arrivals. Everyone needed a good rest but first we celebrated the dual birthdays of our leader, Willard - 79 years old - and Gerard, one of the hikers - 60. The festivities took place after supper. The contrast between the stern coldness of this stone alpine hut and the warmth of the candle lit faces of the porters as they sang 'Happy Birthday to You' in Swahili, while Willard heroically tried to blow out the candles in the rarefied atmosphere, remains a very special memory.

Finally, after all this excitement we lay down to sleep for a few hours. The lack of oxygen and the bitter cold immediately began to have a pronounced effect on those unlucky individuals who had a genetic sensitivity to altitude. An hour later Jana woke me up. She had become sick - she had a splitting headache and nausea. These were the typical symptoms of acute mountain sickness - cerebral oedema (fluid filling the brain and swelling it) - due to the low air pressure and to the low level of oxygen associated with it. Jana told me that she felt she was going to die. I reassured her that this was not the case. As long as major exercise is avoided and no further altitude is gained, life threatening illness will not usually occur. Jana had to abandon her plan to continue the climb. In the morning she returned to the Horombo Hut in the company of three ailing companions. I learned later that another climber - a black girl - had become so sick during the night that she had to be evacuated immediately on a stretcher mounted on two wheels.

At midnight, when the temperature had already dropped well below zero, we, the remaining nineteen climbers, and the three guides, began the ascent to the summit. The trek had to be done during the cold of the night when the scree - an accumulation of small stones and volcanic ash covering the mountainside - was frozen solid. The climbers were supposed to reach the rim of the crater by sunrise. The tropical sun - we were only four degrees from the Equator - quickly melts the frozen scree and would make the ascent all the more difficult during the day. We followed the guides on the seemingly never ending zigzag path. The trail was poorly lit by the miner's lights mounted on the heads of every third person in the file. Walking on the path of frozen but still loose scree in the semi-darkness was difficult. We slowly trudged uphill. Our progress soon became even slower because the guides tried to keep the group together despite the pronounced illness of some of the participants who suffered from debilitating nausea and threw up from time to time. During these forced stoppages I could sense that my body was losing heat rapidly. I had thought that I was warmly dressed in my thermal underwear, dawn-filled ski jacket, mitts and toque. But I was trembling from the bitter cold. A few years earlier I had downhill skied in the same outfit in Banff in -25 °C cold without any problem. But the rarefied air at this altitude of Kilimanjaro made a big difference.

We stopped again, this time in the Hans Meyer Cave, about halfway up. Everybody needed a rest, and the group had to be reorganized. I dropped to the rock floor of the cave completely exhausted and trembling from cold. I had never been so cold in my life.

Four sick people (our Magali was among them) finally had to give up. They were sent back to the base camp with one of the guides. For an instant I was also tempted to return with the sick ones. But the idea of following the treacherous trail downhill in the darkness appeared even more formidable than the continuation of the climb. The remaining trekkers were divided into a 'fast' and a 'slow' group, each having its own guide. I volunteered for the fast 'gazelles' because I desperately wanted to warm up. Our group included Willard, Francis, Gerard, Sheila, the two Americans and I. The 'turtles' group was composed of the remaining eight tourists.

The original plan called for reaching the rim in six hours - just before sunrise. But we had already lost an hour due to the slow start. The going became harder and harder as we approached the rim. The effort, and the lack of oxygen, drained our strength badly and we slowed considerably. The 'gazelle' nickname began to seem ludicrous. We were not far from the top when the sun came up. I considered removing my camera from the backpack in order to snap a shot of the sun rising behind the Mawenzi Peak - the smaller sister of Kilimanjaro - but it seemed too much of an effort and I let the opportunity pass.

The last one hundred metres of the path led over boulders. These were only two to three feet high but at this altitude, where every step demanded great willpower, climbing over the boulders presented an almost superhuman challenge. I felt deadly tired. This last section seemed to never end.

At one point, perhaps 20 metres from the rim, a guide carrying a young woman on his back passed me. They were from another group. She had collapsed in her last effort but still wouldn't quit so close to the goal. The idea that I should take a picture of this odd scene crossed my mind, but again I didn't have the strength to fish out my camera from the backpack.

Finally, after seven gruelling hours, with Willard leading the last assault, we reached the rim. We were at Gillman's Point, at the top of Africa, at an altitude of 5,685 m.

The two Americans and Antoine, the guide, continued immediately toward Kibo peak on the far side of the rim which was still 200 m higher. The other five, including myself, decided not precede any farther because of the heavy snow cover from this point on. We had already reached our goal. We needed some rest.

Surprisingly, in about 10-15 minutes we all came back to life. Only then did I begin to feel a sense of accomplishment on reaching this altitude. I realized that climbing Kilimanjaro would be one of the highlights of my life.

The scenery wasn't what I expected. There was the snow covered crater ahead of us, all right, but that was all. We had been told that on a clear day one could see the Indian Ocean in the East and the Serengeti Plains in the West from the rim. Now we saw only a sea of cloud stretching into the far distance way below us, with only the Mawenzi and a third lower peak poking out above. It was as if the rest of Africa had disappeared. However, my sense of achievement couldn't be spoiled by this detail.

I had another problem which marred my happiness however. I had started out with two one-litre containers of liquid. I had consumed the first, filled with Gatorade, on the way up. When I finally removed the second container filled with pure water from my backpack, it was frozen solid. I couldn't drink it. I tried to quench my thirst by eating snow.

An hour later the second - 'slow' - group arrived. They all made it. Altogether, fifteen out of twenty five (60%) reached the rim. This was better than the historical average of 50% recorded for climbing Kilimanjaro. Now it was Kodak time. We took the required group pictures and those of the scenery - scenes worth recording, precious mementoes.

At 10.00 A.M. we started our descent from the rim. It turned out to be very easy. By now the scree had melted. It felt like soft snow. Francis and I were practically skiing down on the mountainside in it with big strides. We reached the cave in no time. From there our progress slowed somewhat. Upon arriving at Kibo Hut, I had a chance to catch up on my sleep while waiting for the less adventurous members of the group. They arrived an hour later. We had a quick lunch and continued immediately to Horombo Hut.

Halfway down, Jana came to meet us. She was now in much better shape; her altitude sickness had disappeared during the morning descent.

Two days later, after receiving our Kilimanjaro-climbing certificate, we walked out of the National Park.

After leaving the park's gate, we had one more climb to make - into the three minibuses, which were to take us on the safari leg of the trip. Subsequently, we visited five game parks and reserves: Lake Manyara and Ngorongoro in Tanzania, and Mount Kenya National Park, Samburu and Lake Nakuru in Kenya. We also visited the Olduvai Gorge - in Tanzania - where the Leakeys had discovered the skulls of *Homo habilis* and the first human footsteps. We also paid a call on a Massai village. Additional highlights in Kenya included traversing the Equator, then the Great Rift Valley, and visiting the Samburu dancers in their village.

In the game parks we saw the expected variety and impressive number of wildlife. Each park had its own specific fauna. With the large cats - cheetahs, lions and leopard - we were especially lucky; we were able to watch and photograph them from a distance of 4-5 m. Another close encounter was with a large bull elephant that passed us on a narrow road in the bush and nearly touched the side of the minibus. We also encountered a huge puff adder - or 'puff eater' as Francis preferred to call it. The snake was basking on the trail, apparently a very rare sight on safaris.



*Francis, Dagmar and I at the rim of Kilimanjaro Crater*

In a travel group of our size there is always at least one individual who tries to make the trip more exciting than called for by the itinerary. This time the individual was me.

Returning from the Kilimanjaro trek I succeeded in losing the canvas handbag containing my passport, airline ticket, Visa card, all my traveller checks and cash to an alert hotel porter thief. The consequence was a solo trip from Ngorongoro Park, Tanzania, to Nairobi, Kenya, where I would be able to apply for passport and ticket replacements. The adventure of obtaining a police report in a Third World Country, crossing an international border without a passport, arriving in Kenya with \$20 in my pocket, and knowing not a soul in the country, were definitely not the most enjoyable highlights of the trip, but still memorable experiences. I later rejoined the group in Nairobi for the final leg of the safari.

On the last day of the trip - a scant few hours before departure time - I received the replacement documents and was allowed to return - greatly relieved - to Canada.

September 1998.

# 121

## ON THE EQUATOR

I had crossed the Equator umpteen times, more than twenty times by a rough count, but always in a plane flying high in the sky at elevations more than 10,000 metres. This was to be the first time that I approached this landmark on the ground. I always associated the Equator with a humid jungle. But here, at the Northern Highlands of Kenya, at 2,000 m elevation, the red, weathered, lateritic soil of the countryside was very dry, and the vegetation was sparse.

At the exact point where the road crossed the imaginary circle surrounding the Earth stood a large billboard denoting the fact. It recorded the elevation as 6389 feet (1,947m). Beside the road there was a parking lot surrounded by a row of the inescapable souvenir shops which were jammed with 'native artefacts', mostly animal wood carvings, made in Hong Kong.



*Jana and I on the Equator*

An enterprising young native man had set up some paraphernalia under the billboard. He was ready to demonstrate the unique nature of the line dividing the globe into Northern and Southern Hemispheres. His scientific equipment consisted of two plastic jugs - one empty, the other filled with water - a plastic funnel with a pencil sized outlet, a cup, and a box of wooden matches.

As we, a busload of tourists, disembarked and formed queue ready to enthusiastically photograph each other under the illustrious sign, the young man desperately tried to interest us in his experiment for only a nominal fee - he said. Finally someone gave in to his sales pitch and handed the young man the small change.

The demonstration began. The entrepreneur moved his equipment into the Northern Hemisphere about two metres from the Equator sign. He filled the funnel with water while plugging its outlet with his thumb, threw some matches on the surface of the water, and then removed his thumb. As the water began to flow out of the funnel, a counter-clockwise vortex formed in the funnel's cone. The phenomenon was nicely demonstrated by the matches spinning on the surface of the water.

After the water drained out, the 'laboratory' was moved about the same distance to the other side of the Equator sign. He was now standing in the Southern Hemisphere. When he repeated the experiment, the vortex rotated in the opposite direction - clockwise. For better effect, the young man began to steer the outflowing water in reverse direction with his finger. As long as he stirred the water, the matches moved that way, but when he stopped stirring, the vortex regained its original direction within seconds.

For a final demonstration the young man moved his tools to a position right under the Equator sign. When the water began to flow out of the funnel no vortex formed; the matches rested still on the surface of the water, and the exiting stream, about a foot long, was continuous and perfectly cylindrical - a phenomenon that I had never seen before.

I found this primitive set-up the most astonishing. I had learned in high school the basic principle that the action of coriolis forces induced by the rotation of the Earth would affect the direction of vortex formation in outflowing fluid differently in the Northern and Southern hemisphere. However, I had never imagined that the phenomenon could be demonstrated in a most convincing way at this desolate location in Africa by a native who probably had only a couple of years of elementary schooling, if any. Unless the demonstration was a very clever manipulation of the apparatus as Jana thinks. In either case the demonstrator deserved a nice tip.

September 1998.

## 122

### HIGH IN THE ANDES

Cemento Andino, the second largest cement manufacturing plant in Peru, is located at an elevation of 4,000 metres. This makes it the highest such facility in the country if not in the world.

I was a Volunteer Advisor from CESO-CIDA (Canadian Foreign Aid Org.) to the Peruvian Ombudsman's Office on air pollution problems. My work plan called for a visit to Cemento Andino.

A few days before the planned visit a message waited for me at the hotel desk. It asked me to call a certain Dr. Sanchez, a medical practitioner, who wanted to talk to me. I wondered what it was about. I had never heard her name, and my health seemed to be all right - at least to me. The conversation was short. She asked me if I had ever been to high altitudes. Many times, with no adverse reaction - was my reassuring reply. Someone in the CESO office obviously had reservations about my upcoming trip.

The visit to the plant started out from Miraflores, the twin city of Lima located at sea level. Dante, the Assistant Ombudsman, drove his own Nissan four-wheel-drive SUV. Carmen, Ana and I accompanied him. Carmen was in charge of environmental issues in Dante's office, Ana was my interpreter. Both women were in their mid twenties, while Dante was about 10 years their senior. I, at 68, was the ancient one of the group.

After crossing a good part of Lima with its congested and polluted streets, we entered the foothills of the Andes. The well-paved road began to climb along the picturesque Rimac River. A railroad ran parallel on the other side of the stream.

As we climbed higher and higher the pleasant fertile valley narrowed into a canyon with steep cliffs rising on both sides. This geological bottleneck had resulted in feverish competition for space between the constructors of the highway and the railway, forcing both lines to cross desperately back and forth from one side of the gorge to the other to find a more manageable slope, while the river cascaded triumphantly in the middle. When there was no more room left for manoeuvring, the railway escaped into a tunnel to unexpectedly return a hundred metres higher. The highway kept ascending by switching back and forth through a series of hairpin turns carved into the rock wall.

The barrier-less turns presented a deadly danger to drivers descending on wet pavement, or with weak breaks. There were numerous miniature wooden chapels erected at the edge of the road. These commemorated the human toll where vehicles had gone over the edge and their occupants killed in the abyss below.

At 3,000 m elevation the air began to thin out. While sitting in the car, this wasn't so noticeable. However, when I got out a few times to take pictures, my shortness of breath became more and more perceptible.

Finally, after a couple of hours driving we reached the top of the pass. It was covered with a blanket of snow. We all got out of the vehicle to stretch ourselves and have our photos taken under the sign erected on a little knoll. It denoted the highest railway crossing in the World at an elevation of 4,818 m.

As we were waiting for Dante to snap our picture, Ana, standing between Carmen and I, suddenly slid down and remained lying on the snow like a rag-doll. Taken by surprise, Carmen and I tried to lift her up. I held her upright with my arm around her waist while she struggled to



regain consciousness. But her valiant effort lasted only a few of seconds and then her body went limp in my arm as she collapsed again.

Fearful that her trouble could be serious, I dragged her inert body down to the bottom of the snow covered knoll. There Dante picked her up in his arms, carried her to the car, and placed her in the back seat. Fortunately, Ana was of small stature and the distance to the car was short. Still, this rescue - at that elevation - required tremendous effort. I admired Dante's strength and stamina.

We all jumped into the car and began to descend on the other side of the pass as fast as Dante dared to drive.

About ten minutes later, and several hundred metres lower, Ana began to revive. She was terribly embarrassed about the incident. She was the youngest of us and was - she believed - in good physical condition. I tried to cheer her up by recounting an anecdote regarding our climb of Kilimanjaro where only half the participants reached the top. The other half became incapacitated by the altitude even though they were all relatively young and definitely fit.

We descended to Tarma, a small, picturesque town located among colourful flower gardens at a benign 3,600 m. We were to stay there, in an attractive, rustic hotel. After checking in and having a short rest, the manager of the cement factory picked us up and drove us to the plant. The latter part of the road, as we climbed through a pass at 4,200 m, was rough. By the time we arrived at our destination, at 4,000 m, both girls were sick. In the plant office they were put on oxygen which helped them somewhat but they didn't participate in the plant tour.

Cemento Andino had been a notorious air polluter for years. Although the plant manager claimed great improvements, the emission of dust from the plant remained a concern according to recurring complaints from people living in the area. The Ombudsman's Office had asked for Canadian assistance to review the problem.

The plant tour began at the top of the multi-story building to which we ascended by elevator. Tours like this usually follow the process flow and one has to move up and down through the various levels of the production facility. But at this elevation the physical effort required would have been too strenuous if not impossible for visitors.

From the plant roof the view was superb. The plant, and the pit mine beside it, lay in a saddle between two mountain ranges whose bleak and treeless slopes loomed against the cloudy sky. On one side of the plant, in the saddle, stretched Condorcocha, a settlement where most of the workers lived. On the other side of the plant the flat plateau dropped sharply toward Tarma, the town of our temporary residence, which lurked far down in the valley.



*Ana had just collapsed*

The slope immediately below the plant was covered with a pine tree plantation which stretched a few hundred metres down the mountain side. This green oasis was quite in contrast to the brownish-grey and totally bare neighbouring slopes. Below this bright heaven the mountain again became desolate. Only far down the valley one could see bright flower gardens and patches of green woodland around Tarma.

The plant's smoke stack - right beside us - emitted a whitish smoke. One could not tell if the colour was due to the dust or the water vapour content of the exhaust. When I inquired about it, the plant manager called the control room to momentarily shut off the spray to the electrostatic filters rendering them ineffective. The whitish smoke became instantly a dense, dark grey plume.

This demonstration proved unquestionably the efficacy of the exhaust cleaning system.

A review of the process equipment and of the computerized control station indicated sufficiently high level of emission control ability, if the operation was properly ran. However, the manager was proudest of their forestation effort. This 'antipollution remedy' had been recommended by a consulting firm from California several years earlier. The plant religiously carried out their recommendations at great expense. At this altitude, above the endemic tree line, to grow any tree requires costly installations (soil preparation and an irrigation system) and tender care of the saplings.

"We even hired a full time forest engineer to supervise the effort." The manager stated proudly.

After the tour there was a meeting in the plant office with the participation of the local town council and the mayor. They expressed complete satisfaction with the management's efforts aimed at controlling the dust emissions. I accepted their statements with a grain of salt after learning that they were all; including the mayor, full time employees of Cemento Andino.

The next day we drove up to the town again on our own, and stayed in Condorcocha to interview people, not plant employees, about the dust problem. It had just rained. The unpaved main street, where the heavy traffic of mostly large trucks delivering raw materials to the plant and carting away the product passed through, was covered with ankle deep greyish mud. One could imagine the profusion of dust levitated by all those trucks in dry weather.

A general picture seemed to emerge. The main problem here was not the lack of effort on the part of the plant management but the misdirection of their effort, aggravated by a lack of a dialogue between the management and the population concerned.

Tree planting (forestation rather than reforestation in the case of Cemento Andino) is a very important tool in reducing soil erosion, flooding, protecting the flora and the fauna, and creating a pleasanter human environment. It had been reported in the scientific literature that broad leaves of deciduous trees absorb a certain (rather limited) amount of superfine dust particles from the atmosphere. The leaves, falling to the ground in the autumn re-circulate the dust into the soil. However, a small number of conifers - with needles characterized by small surface area which are shed irregularly - would have only limited value, if any, in controlling particulate emission. Spending appreciable resources on planting trees in an environment where they wouldn't normally grow, is a waste of capital and efforts. The funds should be directed instead to control the source of emission, the primary task of effective dust containment.

The hiring of a full time forestry engineer when the plant wouldn't employ an environmental engineer - the normal practice in similar facilities - was another misjudgement in my opinion. (When we met this forestry person, a pretty young woman, I wondered if her employment resulted solely from technological considerations).

In my opinion the first step necessary was the installation of permanent air quality testing stations just outside the plant and also in the neighbouring towns to document the actual amount of dust carried over and serve notice to the management of the malfunctioning of dust cleaning equipment

The plant also needed a truck-wheel wash station using high pressure water jets to prevent the transfer of dust and mud from the plant to the town.

Finally, hard surfacing of the main street of the town would be advisable. This could easily turn out to be a great public relationship coup at limited cost. (The cement could be donated by the plant).

If these recommendations, or any included in my report, were accepted or even considered by the management, I would never know.

On our way back from Condorcocha to Tarma we again crossed the 4,200m pass. At the highest point I asked Dante to stop. I wanted to pick a couple of wild flowers blooming at the edge of the road. I carefully placed the tiny, white, daisy-like flowers in my notebook to press and dry them. Upon my return to Canada I intended to present them to Jana as memento of my trip.

The following day we drove back to Lima. Our two female companions were still sick. Neither of them had eaten a full meal since we'd left the capital two days earlier. Dante and I remained unaffected by the altitude. One couldn't avoid wondering whether the outdated notion of the 'weaker sex' has some truth to it.

The day before my departure from Peru I submitted my report to the Ombudsman's office and to Saco, and cleaned out my desk. I took Ana out for lunch to a nice but very pricy restaurant (recommended by an ignorant Canadian). In the evening Carmen, Ana, Maria-Carmen (Dante's office manger), Lisa (Dante's wife), Dante and I went out for a farewell diner at Lima's Regata Club - an exclusive club of the Peruvian elite - as Dante's guests.

During the supper Maria-Carmen began to rummage through her handbag and pulled out a notebook. It was mine.

"You forgot this in your desk drawer after removing your stuff this morning." She said.

"Your wife would be very disappointed if she didn't receive those beautiful alpine flowers."

She knew about them. Carmen had probably recounted what had happened to everyone in the office. Maria-Carmen continued:

"Our female staffs were impressed. They found your action genuinely romantic, something that every Latin woman appreciates full heartedly. Please convey our warm greetings to your wife."

Her words were a pleasant culmination of my trip.

March 2000.

# 123

## FURNACE EXPERIENCE

'Nobody is a prophet in his own country.' The maxim says. Still, one hopes to get some recognition occasionally, if only from one's wife.

After the September 11 tragedy the question on everybody's mind was: 'What's next?' I believe that the most vulnerable point of the North American industrial/economic superstructure is its electric network. A simultaneous disruption of a couple of dozen major transmission lines (blowing up just one high tension tower in each line) might shut down the whole electric generating and transmission system because of their close interdependence. This would lead to a total blackout over the entire continent. Bringing the generators back on line - one by one - and reactivating the transmission system - area by area - would easily take a week or more.

What would a total blackout mean? In the winter tens of thousands would freeze to death, while in the summer even more would die from eating spoiled food due to the absence of refrigeration. In the past when limited area blackouts occurred - on the Eastern Seaboard in 1967, and in Quebec in 1998 - people could still drive to, or could be taken to, shelters in unaffected areas. Also, food and water could be brought in from neighbouring unaffected areas. Each of those instances lasted only three days. During a continental wide total blackout which would last much longer such remedial measures would not exist.

Considering such a scenario, I finally agreed with Jana that we should install a wood-burning stove in the house for emergencies. We drew up the plans together and purchased the hardware. The stove was to be located in the basement and a black stove pipe was to take the smoke out through a window.

When all the parts arrived, I installed the system. There was nothing to it. Jana had a different opinion.

"Before we test-fire it, we should get it checked for safety by a local tradesman." She said.

This request really floored me. My entire professional life turned around furnaces and off-gas cleaning systems. But all that experience clearly wouldn't match the knowhow of an Oakville tradesman.

What was my actual experience in heat and furnace technology - in a nutshell?

- Until I left home, at the age of 18, I lived in flats heated by coal burning stoves, and ate meals cooked on such stoves. As a child I watched my mother starting the daily fire, and my father periodically relining the stove hearth with clay. In later years I rekindled the fire myself on innumerable occasions.

- In engineering school my specialty became: 'The technology of refractory brick making.' These materials require prolonged firing at elevated temperatures (1,100-1,800 °C). We had courses on furnace design, thermal technology, instrumentation etc. My diploma project was the design of a 160 m long tunnel furnace for firing magnesite bricks at 1,650 °C.

- My first job as an engineer involved the supervision of the final stage of construction, start up and operation of a metallurgical coke oven battery. This is by far the largest type of industrial furnace in existence; there are 10,000 tons of refractory bricks built into it. When the furnace was put in operation, I was in charge of maintaining the thermal balance of the battery.

- In Canada my first job involved metallurgical research and development. Here, I designed a prototype of a rotary heart sintering furnace which became the workhorse of a new branch of the powder metallurgy industry.

- My Master's thesis involved the development of a new technique for the infiltration of iron with molten copper. I designed, built and operated the required furnace system.

- In my next job my colleague and I started up and ran a metallurgical pilot plant comprising two types of melting furnaces, two high temperature gas generators and a muffle furnace. I also built a laboratory muffle furnace of my own design.

- In Sorel my development projects included a molten steel holding furnace and several large sintering and annealing furnaces.

- In Zambia, as commissioning superintendent, I was in charge of putting into operation a large fluidized bed ore roaster and the off-gas purifying train.

- In the following one and half decades, I worked as a consultant on the design of off-gas purification systems of a lead smelter, various steel and copper melting and smelting furnaces, and of a gold ore roaster.

The list above provides only the major items of my experience with furnaces and combustion technology during my fifty years of professional activity. During all these years none of the furnaces in my charge exploded or melted down; nobody was killed or even injured as far as I know, although not one of my designs was checked by an Oakville tradesman. Was this due to sheer luck? One never knows but I hope not.

November 2001.

# 124

## IN CHINA

### Travel Diary

The time had arrived to realise my old dream of visiting China.

After a detailed search of the Internet Jana and I signed up for a three-week adventure vacation called 'Tour of Southern China' with iExplore Travel. Their association with National Geographic bolstered our confidence in the outfit. However, a few weeks before the start of the tour, Imaginative Traveller, the tour organiser, advised us that due to a lack of American interest in the trip they had farmed us out to a British tour organisation. The program would be identical to that advertised by iExplore. We were apprehensive but it was too late to do anything about the situation.

Jana and I decided to spend three days in Hong Kong on our own before joining the group. After the long, 18 hr flight, on which we had lost a full day on crossing the international dateline, we arrived at the new, recently opened Hong Kong International Airport. The facility is built on an artificial and permanently sinking island. The terminal's flexible support structure is designed to compensate for the inevitable and substantial sagging of the ground.

Ramada Hotel in Kowloon, where we stayed and later met our fellow travellers, pleasantly surprised us by upgrading our accommodation for a more spacious corner room at no extra charge. The two exterior glass walls provided a splendid view of the harbour. The location of the city, built around a number of blue marine bays surrounded by steep green mountains, is one of the most picturesque in the world.

According to the American Press, Hong Kong began an inevitable downfall after it returned to Chinese domination. The city was already supposed to be in the middle of a depression at the time of our visit. However, the sight of dozens and dozens of 30-40 floor high-rises under construction, excavations in every second street for new underpasses, water mains and sewage lines didn't give much support to the opinion.

The city, though crowded with zillions of humans, didn't feel overcrowded. People were polite to each other and to us, and behaved very orderly in all public places and on all kinds of public transport. We visited the major sights. Among them was the impressive Wong Tai Sin Temple, my first traditional Chinese wooden temple, set in an extensive garden amid towering skyscrapers. When we arrived, a peaceful demonstration by the supporters of Falun-Gong (a religious sect) against the persecution of the sect on the Mainland was going on outside the temple. The freedom of expression hadn't disappeared in Hong Kong yet.

The Flower Market and the Bird Market looked exotic in their splendid colours. After touring the latter, we sat down to rest in a tiny park adjacent to the market. Two elderly local citizens joined us on the next bench. One of them was holding a little cage, apparently recently purchased, with a colourful, tiny bird inside. Suddenly, a similar small bird swooped down from a tree, landed on the top of the cage and desperately tried to get into it. The old men, as surprised as we were, tried to catch the bird without success. The flying visitor had apparently escaped from the market, but it wasn't enjoying its freedom. It still considered a cage its real home. Was this symbolic?

The second day we made an excursion, taking the Star Ferry and a funicular to Victoria Peak. The walk on the path around the peak (550m) with its spectacular views, and then on the path down to the harbour through the Zoological Garden, was well worth the time.

On our last day we took a ferry to the sparsely populated Lantau Island where we boarded a bus to the Po Lin Monastery on the plateau. The world's largest bronze Buddha statue is outside the Monastery. One could only climb up to its pedestal, though even that turned out to be an appreciable exercise in the heat. On the way back to the ferry we visited an old, picturesque fishing village. The heat of the afternoon sun was unfortunately too excessive to make the stroll enjoyable. Upon returning to the ferry terminal we delightedly spent an hour cooling ourselves in the pleasant waves on the adjoining beach before boarding the boat.

On the eve of our departure for Mainland China we met our trip leader. He was an Australian with a very pronounced, hard to understand accent. He collected the whole group, 14 people, and led us out into the park next to the hotel for a briefing session. We sat on some steps, while the passing locals - zillions of them - cast curious glances at us. Here we were the odd visible minority acting strangely. During the next few weeks we experienced that feeling again and again.

We learned that most of our travel companions were from Great Britain: Wales, Scotland and other remote parts of the kingdom where English is spoken with a special - for me difficult to understand - accent. The remaining four were Australians with their equally incomprehensible tongue. No wonder that for the rest of the trip Jana - to a lesser degree - and I were looked on as the dumb, difficult to communicate with, Canadians.

The following day we took an afternoon flight with the Chinese Airlines to Guilin in Guangxi province. A local guide met us at the airport. The young man spoke clear, easily understandable, good English. On the bus to the city he entertained us with his vivid descriptions of the local scenery and history. We were impressed and became hopeful about our coming trip. We didn't know that among our many future guides he was the exception. Two of the later guides also spoke good English, another two were only so-so, while two guides were so poor that I couldn't tell when they spoke English and when Chinese.

The Guilin hotel - like the others encountered later - was new, clean and comfortable. After dark we went out for supper. We were not alone. The whole city, some five million people, seemed to have the same idea and congregated on the same street. In Southern China eating-out is part of the everyday life. The meals for our group were chosen and ordered by Theo, the Australian guide, who though didn't speak Chinese - or English - could point out his favourite spicy dishes to the waiter on the English side of the menu. I cannot eat spicy food. Out of the 6-8 dishes placed on the rotating tray in front of us, I was limited to one or two - the least tasty ones. This eating experience became routine for the rest of the tour.

During the walk back to the hotel at around midnight we witnessed another culinary oddity of the South: the selection and beheading of a large snake for a prospective customer in front of a restaurant. Theo fortunately didn't fancy this delicacy.

Next morning, the visit to the Red Flute Caves, the city's most important sight, was cancelled by our tour organisers as being 'tourist invaded'. In the afternoon we embarked on a river boat for Yangshuo. The seven hour cruise on the Li River passed among dozens and dozens of stunning Karst peaks which rise sheer from the paddy fields and flat farmlands. I recognised the scenery as that often seen in the background of traditional Chinese landscape art. On the boat we were offered a local delicacy: snake wine. The wine in the clear glass carafe had a snake - fortunately dead - swimming, or rather floating, around in it. Some of our fellow travellers tasted the wine and survived. The snake was apparently non-poisonous.

Yangshuo was a beautiful city not spoiled yet by high-rise construction, or by too many tourists. The first evening we were offered a free Chinese language class. I unfortunately missed the departure from the lobby. I was desperate in trying to rejoin the group. The hotel manager obliged by calling a motorcycle taxi. I got behind the driver and off we went through the chaotic

traffic in the narrow lanes. The experience was worth the loss of half an hour of class although my fluency in the language suffered significantly because of it.

Next morning we started out on one of the highlights of the tour: a day long ride on rented trail bikes to Moon Peak, one of the sugar-cone mountains. The riding on back country roads among fields and rice paddies and through small villages was thrilling. We were apparently not the first tourists on the trail because the local population was out in force trying to peddle all kinds of souvenirs. They posed for our cameras for a fee. I was even charged for taking an unauthorised picture of a water buffalo. This was a long way along the capitalist road from communist puritanism.

Upon reaching the foot of Moon Peak we dismounted and began to hike to the top. Some uninvited locals - one per a couple of tourists - joined us carrying coolers filled with bottles of mineral water. We could not shake them off. Halfway up we began to realise the usefulness of their company. By that time we were perspiring like race horses. The bottled water became appreciated. Our 'guide,' an old lady, also offered to fan Jana's face to keep her cool while climbing. My spouse didn't refuse the service.

The view from the top of the peak - the purpose of our trip - was unfortunately not good. The mist - or more likely smog - drastically reduced the visibility.

After descending from the mountain, we rode our bikes to a 'rustic modern' restaurant on the shore of a dammed section of a small river. After the well deserved lunch we had an hour frolicking in the pleasantly cool stream of water coming through the sluiceway. All except Jana, who, being afraid of bilharzias infection, refused to join us. All my arguments based on my ample experience in swimming and scuba diving in bilharzias infested waters in Zambia was to no avail. While the rest of the group refreshed and cooled down, Jana wasn't.

On our return trip to the hotel, Sheila, a young Scottish woman, Jana, and I took the highway. We were lagging behind the group. Jana didn't feel well. After a while she became sick with an excruciating headache. She repeatedly threw up, forcing us to stop and rest several times. She suffered from heat stroke. On the outskirts of Yangshuo Jana couldn't continue any longer. She sat down on the side of the road ready to die.

I went to look for some kind of transportation. I found - with some luck - a motorized tricycle taxi not very far away. After some discussion - in sign language - the driver, an elderly woman, agreed to take Jana and her bicycle. I returned with the taxi to Jana and Sheila. The three of us - the driver, Sheila and I - helped Jana into the vehicle and loaded and fastened the bike to its rear. A new problem immediately arose. We didn't know either the Chinese name or the address of our hotel. Fortunately, I knew the way back to it. The night before I had taken a long walk in the neighbourhood. The taxi had to follow Sheila and me on our bikes. The little caravan passed without incident. In the air-conditioned hotel room Jana recuperated rapidly, and next morning she was fit for the next stage of our trip - the flight to Kunming, the capital of the South Western province of Yunnan.

The location of this city, at near 2000 m elevation, made its ambient very pleasant. After visiting the Bamboo Temple with its more than 500 life sized clay figures, we proceeded to the area's main attraction: the Shi Lin stone forest. This is a large maze of sharp grey 10-20 m tall limestone peaks. They had been split and eroded into their present fanciful forms by the wind and the rain through eons. The guides were Yi tribe-people; mostly girls who looked very attractive in their colourful picturesque national costumes.

After the formal tour, Sheila and I decided to get away from the main tourist area and follow some secluded walks in the outlining expanse. Being in China, even on such trails, you are bound to rub into people. Among those encountered was an interesting young couple. The woman, an announcer on Kunming's English TV channel, spoke clear excellent English that she obviously didn't learn in Edinburgh or Cardiff.

The next stopover was in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, renowned for its spicy food. I was delighted with the prospect of shunning these - even spicier - dishes at supper. We



arrived in this city after a long and beautiful overnight train ride through hundreds of tunnels and viaducts in the Eastern foothills of the Himalayas. In the four person compartment our companions were Carol and Kay, a lesbian couple. Theo decided that the odd couple would go nicely with the odd Canadians. He was right.

After visiting the Panda Research Centre displaying half a dozen young and very playful animals in simulated natural habitat, and a couple of newborns in incubators, we had a free day. Jana and I made an extensive walking tour of the city with its many temples and parks. We encountered many friendly people who tried their best English on us. It normally consisted of three questions: "Where are you from?", "Where are you heading?" And "How do you like China?" After this brave effort the conversation usually died off.

During our walk we crossed a big square with a large statue of Mao standing in its centre. This was the only monument to the 'Great Helmsman' that we encountered on our journey. Sheila, who also walked the city that day by herself, wanted to take a picture of the statue after she had discovered it. As she walked around the monument looking for the best angle in her viewfinder, she was arrested by two military officers. They confiscated her camera, and led her into a large building at the edge of the square. An English speaking officer interrogated her. He wanted to know her motive for taking pictures. Sheila found the situation more challenging than frightening, and being quite verbal - she was a nurse in Edinburg - was able to explain her 'motives'.

It turned out that the large building was the province's military headquarters, and the guards believed that the presumed western Mata Hari was taking pictures of this military object. In the meantime they had developed her film which supported her claim to being an ordinary tourist who photographed only monuments. They didn't release her however until the manager of the hotel where we stayed sent someone to accompany Sheila back to her room.

The next stop on our itinerary was Leshan, a city not very far from Chengdu. Near Leshan is the giant statue of Buddha - the largest in the world - carved into the rock face of a cliff at the confluence of two unruly rivers. In order to get a better view of this impressive monument we went for a boat trip to look at the statue from the river. On the approach to the gangway our group was held back by an aggressive female port official so that another group, made up of some kind of Chinese VIPs, could enter the boat first. These people filled up the interior of the small vessel and compelled us to crowd onto the open top deck. It was a hot day, and being on the deck without shade wasn't pleasant. A big argument ensued between Theo and the official. It lasted perhaps ten minutes and delayed the departure of the boat. The woman behaved like a typical old-time Maoist apparatchik. She must have been a Red Guard in her youth. Theo lost. We remained outside. On our whole China trip this was the only unpleasant encounter with a Chinese person.

After ten minutes of sailing we arrived in front of the statue, and everyone crowded out onto the top deck to take pictures. The whole issue and the ensuing argument about priority rights to sunshade looked rather pointless. The huge statue was decorated along its height with ribbons, balloons and banners because of some kind of Buddhist anniversary. I would have preferred photographing an unembellished statue.

We stopped for the night at an exquisite hotel on the outskirts of the city, on the banks of the river. There was an expensive looking private club attached to the hotel. The club had a swimming pool. Hotel guests could enter it on paying a fee. This turned out to be so outrageously pricy that we all declined the privilege.

In the evening there was a big celebration of Buddha on the other side of the river. We walked down to the bank to await some promised fireworks. Apparently there was a better spot to watch the display farther along the shore. Hundreds of locals on bikes and motorcycles moved along the road that way. All the later arrivals had medium size motos with three people sitting on them - the third rider was accommodated on the gas tank. Several motorcycles carried four, and one was crowded with five people. In the twilight I couldn't see how they were able to manage that.

From Leshan we travelled by bus to Chongqing where we were to start our three-day Yangtze cruise. On the way we stopped in Dazu to visit the unique Buddhist cave art. The sculptures were splendid and most varied, depicting fables and moral tales.

In Chongqing we embarked on a cruise boat and then went out into the city for supper. We filled several taxis. Theo gave each group a card to show the driver where we wanted to go. Our taxi was the last; the others had already gone. The driver looked at the card and shook his head. He got out of the vehicle and showed the address to other people around. They all seemed to be puzzled. Then someone in our group had a bright idea. He took the card back and turned it over. The taxi driver's face brightened. He had been looking on the side showing the return address.

Jana, Sheila and I went to a restaurant on our own after a short walk in the city centre. Finally, I had a tasty meal of my own selection and it wasn't even too spicy.

The river cruise on the comfortable, half empty boat, along one of the most picturesque parts of the river was less impressive than I expected. The constant smog restricted the view of the famous Three Gorges. It wasn't worth taking photographs of the scenery. The best parts of the cruise were the stopover in the 'ghost city of Fengdu' and a side trip to the Little Three Gorges along the Daning River in a smaller boat. This canyon was much narrower than the Yangtze Gorge and its air less polluted; consequently we enjoyed the dramatic scenery more keenly. In ancient times the canyon served as an important highway. A pathway had been hung from the face of the cliff walls. Its remnants were impressive proofs of the engineering skills of the ancient Chinese.

Along the main gorge we saw the feverish efforts of resettling the more than one million people who would be forced out by the coming inundation by the hydroelectric dam. The reservoir's water would rise to 175 m above the current level. New cities and towns, and all kinds of infrastructures i.e. roads, bridges etc. were under construction at higher levels while the old settlements were being demolished.

After three nights and two days on the boat we reached the famous dam which was still under construction. It looked smaller than I expected. We sailed through its open end and disembarked in Yichang, not far downstream. The next day we returned to the dam by bus. From the higher ground the dam and the locks looked more impressive. We visited the site's museum where archaeological treasures unearthed during the construction were displayed. The museum director tried to sell Jana and me a Ming vase - illegally. She promised attaching a certificate of authenticity to it. Later we saw similar 'original' vases in the open market selling for considerably less. The director tried to fleece us off.

The next stop, following a long train ride, was Luoyang, the ancient Buddhist centre. We visited the White Horse Temple, the first Buddhist temple in the country. It was built in the first century of our era. The name of the temple derives from the legend which claims that the religious scripts had been brought from India on white horses.

The Longmen Caves, the other amazing site we visited, were from a later age. Thousands of Buddhas, small and large, were carved into a rock face between the sixth to eight centuries. A large number of the statues have unfortunately disappeared due either to erosion or looting. In the last 80 years a significant number of them have been smuggled to the West.

One more train ride took us to Xian which had been China's capital for eleven centuries. These days, it is a medium sized city (6.6 million), and is famed for the Army of Terracotta Warriors. These thousands of life-size statues of men, horses and chariots had been created and hidden in underground sheds to protect the first emperor of China, Qin (first century B.C.), in his next life. One heard and read so much about this site that I was afraid that seeing it would be an anticlimax. It wasn't. The scale of the excavation, the richness of the display and the fine details of the figures were beyond credible.

The archaeological treasure was discovered by peasants of a local commune while digging a well in 1974. One of the discoverers, an old man by now, autographed books in the gift shop at the time of our visit. Jana eagerly sought out his signature, and I - as eagerly - recorded the interaction in a photo.

We had a free day in Xian that we fruitfully used to discover other treasures in the city. Since we stayed just a few minutes walk from the ancient and impressive Bell Tower, Drum Tower, and the Moslem quarter with its Great Mosque and Bazaar, we had an easy task. After having lived in two Moslem countries and having visited a couple more, I found the mosque built in Chinese style - in which the minaret is a pagoda - rather striking.

In the Bell Tower there was a small concert performed on various age-old unique percussion instruments - such as suspended slabs of slate. The music was singular in register, timbre, tone and rhythm. It was beautiful. Jana and I had the added pleasure of being the only foreigners in the small audience.

The Big Goose Pagoda, that we naturally climbed, was of solid brick and stone construction, similar to the two previously visited Towers. Such stone structures are rare among Chinese monuments. The city walls - only a few survived in China - were equally solid. They were so massive that a multilane highway could easily be accommodated on their tops. During WW II air-raid shelters were hollowed out of their sides to serve as safe refuges from Japanese bombers. Some of the city gates also survived. The water filled moat is now part of the municipal park system.

Of our China tour cities, Xian was the one we liked most.

From Xian we took an overnight train to Beijing. We again shared a compartment with the lesbian pair. Beijing was the last stop on our tour.

Beijing is a metropolis of twelve million. It had many 4-6 lane modern freeways bounded with strips of freshly planted trees. Tree planting - probably for the projected Olympic Games - was ongoing everywhere. The roads and the various canals were clean but the air seemed to be even more polluted than in the other cities we had visited. A mass of 30-40 story buildings of pleasing shapes and colours, still under construction, gave the impression of a rich, modern western city, except for the millions of bicycles in the streets.

We visited the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace and the Tiananmen Square. Our group, except Jana, stood in line for two hours to see the mummified Mao in his mausoleum. Jana declined the spectacle saying that she would not pay homage to a murderous dictator. I didn't see her point. In the past I had faced the mummified remnants of Ramses II, Tutankhamen, Lenin, then Stalin and Lenin side by side, all bloody dictators in their times, but now harmlessly dead in their sarcophagi. Homage? No! Just morbid curiosity. So why not Mao?

Apparently, many others in the queue had deeper feelings toward the dead despot. Some spectators brought wreaths while standing in line and deposited them in front of the open coffin. Interestingly, from time to time, these wreaths were collected, taken out, and resold to the waiting crowd by the attendants. Right under our eyes. I would hardly consider this - though perhaps sensible economy - very respectful to the Chairman.

The couple of hours spent in front of the mausoleum unfortunately robbed us of precious time for The Forbidden City. The tour of this monument was short and unsatisfactory.

The following day our group took a bus to the Great Wall, to its Northernmost Simatai section. Upon arriving in the parking lot, we instantly became surrounded by a herd of souvenir pedlars and volunteer guides. They stayed with us until we reached the first tower at the end of the reconstructed section. There, by regulation, the locals had to leave the tourists. We were relieved. But not for long. At the second tower a smaller number of locals climbed back over the wall and rejoined us. We had to live with them for the rest of the day. They were local Mongols, who turned out to be good companions after all. They helped the female tourists through some of the difficult steep sections. We felt obliged to compensate them by buying some souvenirs. Jana and I ended up with a nice pair of Great Wall T-shirts and some trinkets.

The 19 km section of the Wall we hiked was built during the Ming dynasty (15th century A.D.). Some of its bricks denoted the date of manufacture. As the structure snaked through the beautiful, bushy and uncultivated hilly terrain, it mostly remained in pristine crumbling condition. Because of its relative remoteness, and the steepness of some of its sections, the casual

Sunday tourists usually shun this section. This day, our companions and we were the only day hikers on it. The view was fantastic all along the wall. This was probably the best day of our China trip. At the end of the section there was a cable ride. Harnessed into a sky diving type contraption, one could slide down from the tower over a reservoir into the parking area; a good 500 m away. Some of the more timid companions (Jana) choose to walk down, which took a good half hour at the end of a trying day.

This was our last day in Beijing. We had a few hours of free time before departure. Jana and I decided to revisit the Forbidden City. We walked through the Tiananmen Gate into the enclosed courtyard and brought the admission tickets to the inner sanctuary. We had no guide and there were no English signs around.

As we proceeded toward the internal entrance we were told that the tickets we'd bought admitted us to the upstairs portion of the Tiananmen Gate Tower, and not to the Imperial City. This being so, we changed our plans and joined the long queue on the side of the courtyard for the Gate. We had to deposit our cameras and even our half-empty mineral water bottles before passing through airport type security gates - separate ones for men and women. Only when we reached the upper floor of the tower did we realise that this place had a special significance for the regime. This was where Mao announced the creation of the New Republic. This was where foreign dignitaries and Communist leaders paid their respect to the regime. The walls of the reception hall were covered with historical photographs and the furnishings were museum pieces. We were the only Westerners among the hundreds of visitors in the tower.

Mao's huge picture was still hanging on the outside wall overlooking Tiananmen Square. The access to the balcony above the picture was restricted. Every 4-5 metres along its length there were secret agents dressed in dark shirts and baseball caps standing and watching us, the crowd of visitors.

After returning to the square between the gate and the entrance to the Forbidden City, we were approached by a young man. He introduced himself as an art-student who wished to practice his English on us and would like to show us a painting exhibition of his and his fellow students. It was already too late to enter the imperial complex, so we decided to accept his invitation and followed him.



Jana and I on the Great Wall I

We proceeded to one of the walls bordering the square. There were no boutiques or any other open doors in the wall except this so called art gallery. The walls of the little room were covered with ink and oil paintings in the traditional style. There were no other attendants or visitors present. The guy asked us the usual polite questions: what country were we from, what places did we visit in China, what were our further plans etc. After that he told us about his studies. He also offered but didn't press us to buy one of the pictures.

Both Jana and I left him and his studio with the impression that he was a secret policeman who wanted to check us out. We were Western tourists walking alone off the main circuit, and intruding into a politically sensitive area (The upper floor of the gate). His English was too good to need any practice, the presence of a student picture gallery was too unseemly at such a spot; and there were no other 'students' or visitors present in the exhibition room. All these facts strongly suggested that the whole set-up was to provide a private place to learn about the 'intentions' of specific individuals, and to take action if it was judged necessary. Fortunately, it wasn't in our case.

We took a taxi back to the hotel. The driver upon learning that we were Canadians pulled out an English language textbook. He told us that all drivers would have to pass an English language test before being allowed to operate taxis during the coming 2008 Olympic Games! He studied his book between fares. Considering the status of his current language skills he would need a lot of those instances.

A few hours later we left Beijing and flew back to Canada.

Our Chinese tour was very interesting and educational. From the American press one had usually learned only negative things about China: the Tibetan problem, the persecution of religious groups, the controversy of the Three Gorge Dam project, the SARS epidemic, etc.; but practically nothing about the economic and social changes which undramatically, but continuously, had been taking place in the country.

Tourists can get only a superficial impression of the life in any country. This applied to us too. Our personal contacts were almost totally limited to our assigned interpreters. They usually repeated the official government propaganda. Occasionally, one went beyond and expressed his or her opinion which only mildly differed from that of the party-line.

We had seen only a small part of the huge country. During the tour our general impression was that people in the cities lived comfortably. Everybody, including the teenagers, was cleanly dressed. In front of some temples, popular with Western tourists, there were beggars, but we saw no beggars anywhere else in the cities. All stores were well stocked with food and industrial products and packed with costumers, except a few deluxe shops where the prices exceeded those in Canada. We saw very few children, and those were always accompanied by adults. In public parks Western style playgrounds were common but the children were absent. The public transportation system: airports, planes, railways, trains, freeways, buses and ships were of Western standard or even better. With the exception of a small section, all railroads we travelled on were electrified. In Chengdu the traffic lights displayed digital countdowns which indicated the time remaining until the next change. This had a predictably calming effect on drivers. (Why don't we have these in America?) The new high-rises, both office and apartment buildings, were attractive in shape and colour. How their interiors looked we had no idea. The street traffic was incredibly heavy everywhere. Still, the pedestrians, cyclists and drivers seemed to be very patient (no sign of road rage). We saw only one minor traffic accident.

On the negative side, the worst thing was the air pollution. There were no birds visible anywhere: not in the cities, or in the countryside. Obviously we didn't see any trace of wildlife. Another factor which concerned us, tourists, was the multitude of pushy street vendors at the touristy spots who surrounded visitors and could not be shaken off.

These were my observations - mostly positive - about the cities. The countryside was something else.

We travelled nearly 4,000 km on land and on river but we didn't see a single tractor or piece of agricultural machinery. The tiny strips of lands were all meticulously cultivated (they were harvesting rice at the time). For ploughing they used water buffalos in the South, and cows, rarely horses, in the North. All other tasks - harvesting, threshing, transporting - were done manually. The houses were traditional-rural. We saw many cave dwellings, perhaps used only for storage as the guides maintained. TV antennas on the roofs were the only signs of modern times.

The backwardness of the countryside was most likely the result of intentional government policy. Mechanization of farm labour would have liberated hundreds of millions of peasants who would have flooded the already overpopulated cities. The regime wanted to prevent this or at least delay its occurrence.

Presently the Chinese government tries to avoid any confrontation, or military competition, with America and the West. All their efforts are concentrated on internal development. If China is able to maintain this trend for a decade or two, in my opinion it might technologically and economically surpass the USA. The Pax Americana, the domination of the World by the States sought by the Bush doctrine, might prove to be as short lived as the realm of the Third Reich.

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The End