

MY SUMMER VACATION BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

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Twenty-five years ago, I had the opportunity to work for a month in Warsaw, Poland, and extended that to include a month of hitch-hiking and generally meandering around on my own “behind the iron curtain”. It was the chance of a lifetime, and indeed the trip changed my life forever. It was an amazing experience for someone raised with a cold-warrior father in a middle American small town paranoid about Communists.

I took the job because I have a policy: If someone will pay me to go someplace, I go. If I haven't seen it, all the better. Better yet if I don't know anything about it. All I knew about Warsaw was that it had something to do with a concerto, a pact, and a convention.

It is true, that since 1990, that part of Europe has opened up considerably, and Poland, The Czech Republic, Hungary, and the others are now acknowledged as being in the center of Europe. But back then, there was a clear line that separated the east from the west, and I was crossing it.

For that reason, this is the story of my trip to “Eastern Europe”.

WARSAW - SPRING

In the autumn of 1972, I got a job with New York University which involved my being in charge of a computer program called “The Management Game”. This was a simulation that allowed graduate business students to pretend they were running multi-million dollar corporations. It seems that even then, Poland was interested in decentralizing its economy, but their managers needed training in how to deal with a market economy. For this reason, a management training institute there, the Instytut Doskonalenia Kadr Kierowniczych (or, simply, IDKK) made a deal to have NYU provide this program to them. I spent the winter in New York working with Andrzej Kisiel, a Polish fellow, and then in the Spring and Summer I traveled to Warsaw, in the heart of Eastern Europe.

So, in the Spring of 1973, at the ripe old age of 26, I made my first trip to Warsaw for one week.

When I arrived in the Warsaw airport I found myself in a large room where the baggage arrived. It was actually a very communal room, with Polish citizens on the balconies above and around us, looking down and waving at



returning friends and relatives.

When I had gathered my bags, though, I had to squeeze through a formidable-looking passage with a window on one side, behind which was a glowering passport clerk. This was a little intimidating.

But there was no problem. My passport was stamped and I moved off into the waiting area.

Here I was greeted by Andrzej and his adorable six-year old daughter, who offered me a bouquet of flowers. Flowers from a small child. I was going to like this place.

The only hotel room available that week was in a very modest but elegant facility behind the Russian Embassy. Apparently the Hotel Klonowa was where visiting diplomats stayed. It was not exactly posh, but it was very comfortable and very pleasant.

For this trip I had brought with me a magnetic tape containing the program I was to test on Polish computers. The program only ran on IBM 360 and 370 machines. In Warsaw at that time, thanks to the embargo on American technology, there were exactly two (2) very under-powered 360's. It seems that American companies were not allowed to ship their newest and best products to the East. I was given time on one of the machines — to the tune of exactly one hour per day for five days. Which wouldn't have been so bad, except that apparently the alignment on the tape drive of the one I was using was just a teensy bit different from that of my machine back home.

It couldn't read the tape.

And there was nothing we could do about it.

So basically I had a one-week, all expenses paid, vacation in Warsaw.

Which turned out to be wonderful.

Everywhere I went I met people who were incredibly friendly. I met quite a few young people who had chosen English as their third language. (Everyone learned Polish and Russian.) Indeed, one of my new friends spoke eight languages. I met one young woman on the tram, and we had some lovely times together. And there were the two girls from the States. A young Canadian fellow showed me some of the sights. By the end of the week, my various friends assembled a party in my honor. Where I learned the glories of vodka. Oh, boy.

The architecture was an interesting combination of things. The entire city had been erased by the Nazis at the end of the Second World War, so everything I saw was less than thirty years old. Much of the city was stone buildings, reproducing what you would find elsewhere in Europe — some attractive and some less so. There was also a lot of dreary modern architecture, especially as you got further from the city center — although there were bits of the latter that were quite interesting. On an outside wall of one of the university buildings, for example, was a periodic table of elements formed from concrete — several stories tall.

The most prominent structure in the city was Palac Kultury i Nauki. The “Palace of Culture and Science” is a thirty-something storey tall collection of theaters, cinemas, a concert hall, and tv stations. It also has space for a variety of cultural events, including

art exhibitions, fairs, and shows of all kinds. While it is clearly a major cultural center for the city, its architecture is, well, distinctive. Decorated like a giant wedding cake, it was a gift from Josef Stalin in the early fifties. (Well, ok, it was built with Polish labor and materials, but Joe had the idea, you see.) It was the eighth in a series of buildings, the first seven of which surround Moscow. The symbolism was not lost on the Poles, who viewed it with considerable derision. The standing joke was “Where is the best view in Warsaw?” “The Palace of Culture, of course.” “And why is that?” “Because it’s the only place in the city where you *can t see* the Palace of Culture.”



(This is not my picture. It is by Edward Hartwig, from the book *Warsaw*, published by “Sport i Turystyka” Publishers in Warsaw.)

The square it stood in the middle of seemed to my American sensibilities like a giant parking lot. In fact the square was the site of May Day parades and other public occasions. While the Palace of Culture was taller than other Warsaw structures, starting at about the time I was there, they were beginning to build other tall buildings around it. (They wanted to camouflage it.) A new hotel was being built by a Scandinavian company, for example, that was quite attractive.

The most impressive part of the city is Stare Miasto — Old Town. This has been completely recreated since the war, in all its Renaissance splendor. This was a labor of love, with people consulting old paintings and notes to try to reproduce exactly what was there before. These paintings and notes had been carefully hidden away from the Nazis to preserve them.



Old Town’s centerpiece is a square surrounded by restaurants, arts and crafts stores, and on one corner, the Museum of the History of Warsaw. The neighborhood then extends for quite a few blocks from there in every direction. Old town is unique in one respect: In most European cities, their old towns

are, well, old. Here, it's new and in good condition. This is the only one that really looks as it probably did in the Renaissance during its heyday.

There is an exquisite park in Warsaw, named Łazienki Park (pronounced "Wyzhenki"), with lush woods and meadows, several small palaces, and a beautiful lake decorated with swans.

In an open area near the main street is a wonderful Monument to Chopin. He's sitting under a willow tree, with the wind pulling it in horizontal lines. His long hair is being pulled by the wind in complementary lines. The sculpture has an energy and passion about it that powerfully invokes the feeling of a man consulting his muse — to help him create what has been simply the world's most beautiful music.



For a country I had known nothing about, it turned out that Poland has quite an interesting history. In the seventeenth century it was one of the most powerful countries in Europe. Its people have always been noted for being a bit cantankerous, though, which they demonstrated by always hiring kings temporarily from abroad, rather than having permanent native ones that might get too comfortable. Everyone in the gentry was a member of parliament, and each of them had veto power. This meant that it was hard to get anything done, and the country's power waned dramatically over the succeeding years.

But it was Poland that produced Copernicus, Fryderyk Szopen (better known by the French spelling of his name, Frederik Chopin), Mme Skłodowska Curie, and Joseph Conrad, to name a few. (The picture above is of Maria Skłodowska's house, before she became Marie Curie.)

I discovered that Poles had roughly the same kind of



apathy towards politics that Americans do. They found politicians annoyingly incompetent, and delight in saying so. This, contrary to the American image of the place, they have always done quite freely. They have nothing against Americans, and welcomed the opportunity to get to know me. They think American foreign policy is singularly stupid a lot of the time, but then I was hard-pressed to disagree with them. In 1973 we were just finishing up proving this point in Viet Nam. (Of course in subsequent years they became politically active indeed.)

They recognized that the Soviet Union was very large and very much there, but to many Poles I met the Soviets were nearly as alien as they were to us. It was the Germans, however, who received the greatest antipathy, at least from the older people. The predominant thing you saw was not a reaction to the presence of the Soviets, but a reaction to memory of the presence of the Germans during the war. After what they had experienced during the Nazi occupation, the Soviets were simply annoying.

Except for Old Town — and the individuals I met — there was a kind of gloominess about the place, both in the buildings and in the faces of the people. The people were friendly to me, and could certainly have a good time in a pub, but life here was clearly difficult, and there was a definite undercurrent of sorrow. This didn't really affect me, since I was on an adventure, but it was sad to see.

It was interesting to see a place which had been industrialized without American influence. They made many decisions about their way of life that were not what we would have done in America. The aesthetic was quite different. In other cases, though, modern industrialization took its course without regard for politics, and there were many elements common to our version.

(One interesting bit of irony: they were just beginning to build their first freeway. I was wandering around across the river near where it would cross and found one of the streets to be eliminated by the project: Aleja Stanow Zjednoczonych — United States Avenue.)

One night when I was out late, I got disoriented. After wandering around lost for a bit, I looked up and saw on the corner of a building what I would swear was a relief sculpture of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet! Beneath the figures was the inscription "Ulica Kubusia Puchatka" The next day I inquired about that and was told, oh, yes — that's Winnie the Pooh Street! Not exactly what I expected to find in bad old Eastern Europe.



So, during my first week in Warsaw, I didn't meet a single goblin or anyone who ate children for breakfast.

I returned home by way of Berlin. From Warsaw, I flew to the East Berlin airport and took a bus to West Berlin. I didn't get to see much of East Berlin because the airport is near the gate we went through. Before crossing through the wall, the bus was stopped for close to half an hour as the young guard scrutinized each passport and looked each of us in the eye. I was struck by how young and fragile he looked. It was hard to be afraid of him. The route through the wall started with a slow zigzag path through a set of brick baffles.



As we were crossing no-man's land, I could see from the distance that on the western side was what looked like a large billboard facing west. I was curious as to what it was advertising, and if it had any political significance. It was a bit of a let-down when we finally arrived in West Berlin and I discovered that it was the back of a drive-in movie theater!

As I looked at the wall, I had to wonder: What was stranger? That I should be able to smash all my psychological walls to travel east – or that my new friends were prevented by real walls from traveling west?

COPENHAGEN

By summer we were ready for the big trip. This would be a full month, where we would put some Polish students through the program to see how well it worked and how appropriate it was for them. My boss and two of my colleagues went with me and this time we brought two different tapes, a mountable disk drive, and four cartons of punched cards. One way or another we would get that damn program in the computer!

I stopped in Copenhagen for a few days on the way there. (The nice thing about flying back and fourth to Warsaw was that each way I could visit another European city.) This is a wonderful place. I rented a bicycle, which was the perfect way to get around. There are beautiful parks, quaint streets, the Tivoli amusement park, and interesting museums.

At one point I met an elderly lady from Wyoming. Her husband had died some ten years before and she had been grieving since then. This year, though, she decided that the time had come to stop feeling sorry for herself and get out to see the world. So here she was, a sprightly, delightful lady. Among other places, we saw a museum specializing solely in representations of the human figure. This turned out to be fascinating. They have sculptures from ancient Greece through Rodin. I was startled to find that the most attractive female statue there was not a nude, but a Victorian woman in a long dress simply sitting in a chair, with her body turned in a particularly fetching way. There was something about her posture and grace that was absolutely captivating!



Speaking of beautiful women, the next day, I was lying on the grass in the park next to the Christiansborg Palace. Not too far from me were three young women sunning themselves. There isn't much sun during the year in Denmark, so they set out to do this efficiently. They were certainly much more efficient about absorbing sun than is common in the United States.

Much more efficient. Sun was seeing a lot more of their bodies than I was used to seeing. (They were not wearing long Victorian dresses.) Did I mention that they were quite lovely? They had magnificent, er, tans.

I was being very careful not to look at them, of course. It wouldn't be polite. So I didn't look at them a lot.

I thought that it might be fun to talk to them, but I was quite tongue-tied. I was accustomed to speaking to a clothed woman in the interest of perhaps getting her to remove her clothes. What do you say when there isn't much to remove? Imagine my amazement when one of them then came up to me and asked, "Do you by any chance have a bottle opener?"

Now I am nothing if not prepared when I travel. My Swiss Army Knife certainly earned its keep that day. The four of us wound up spending the evening together (after they got dressed) and I got a delightful tour of the city and its night life. This was Midsummer Night, as it happens, so fireworks and a party were going on throughout the city. The sun finally set around midnight.

BACK TO WARSAW

After four days in Copenhagen, I returned to Warsaw. It was strange to be in a position of “returning” to a place as exotic as Warsaw. This time my colleagues from New York were there, and the experience was different. Now, instead of me being a lone cowboy, we were a group.

Still, after my experience in the Spring, I made it a point to go out on my own as much as I could. I met more new people and had lovely experiences too numerous to count.

Krakow

The first week I thought it might be fun on the weekend to see Krakow, the ancient Polish capital. It is about a hundred and fifty miles south of Warsaw, and I didn’t really have enough money for the train, so I asked a friend in the American Embassy what the attitude in Poland was towards hitch-hiking.

“Oh, no. You wouldn’t want to do that,” he said. He was wearing his regulation blue suit and white shirt.

“I know, I know, you have to say that, but what’s the *real* scoop?”

It took quite a bit of leaning on him, but eventually he relented and finally confessed that his colleague, the Press Attaché, had read in — get this! — *Parade* Magazine (remember, these are *your* representatives in Poland) that not only was it ok to hitch-hike in Poland, but it was encouraged! After all, a car is expensive, and if I have a spare seat and you are willing to help with the cost of gasoline, why not? Indeed, there was even a program you could participate in whereby the hitch-hiker would give his driver coupons to enter him into a contest.

So, on Saturday morning I parked my naked (psychologically, that is) self out on the road south of Warsaw, with my thumb out. I must confess I did find myself wondering what in the world could have brought me from Grand Junction, Colorado to the point where I was standing there (what *would* my parents say) — but I never wonder about such things very long.

My first ride was on an eighteen wheeler, and down the road we picked up a young woman about eighteen years old or so. It turns out the truck was only going as far as Kielce, about two-thirds of the way to Krakow. My fellow traveler lived there, so she proceeded to walk with me through the town and waited with me for my next ride. The car that finally stopped was kind of posh, but the driver was old and somewhat surly. He grumbled something to us, whereupon my new friend proceeded to lay into him and bawl him out! I of course have no idea what she really said, but based on what I later learned

about the culture, I have to assume that he demanded payment and she told him that I was a guest in this country and he was jolly well going to take me!

So he shrugged his shoulders and let me aboard. (When we got to Krakow, I in fact gave him a few dollars, which he seemed to appreciate.)

By the time we got to Krakow a couple of other hitch-hikers had joined us, one of whom lived there. When we arrived, this fellow took it upon himself to show me around.

Among other things, we saw Wawel (pronounced “vavel”), the Krakow castle, where there is a cast iron dragon guarding his lair beneath it. (Every fifteen minutes or so he spits fire quite convincingly.) Wawel has wonderful architecture: It was built over perhaps five hundred years, with completely different styles of architecture tacked onto each other.



We had dinner in a restaurant that was *under* the town square, and then we retired to a night club, where we met a couple of young ladies and danced into the wee hours of the morning.

The next morning I had a breakfast of fresh cucumbers and yogurt and got a single ride back to Warsaw.

Now understand, during this weekend I met no one who spoke a language I had ever heard before. But it didn't matter. I had a ball! The only thing I felt self-conscious about was the fact that my Krakovian friend could dance like Fred Astaire. And I . . . uh . . . can't. Also discouraging was the realization that in this situation where I could not talk to the girl, I was being more successful than I often am when I can talk – and do.

Work

Daily work was in the offices of IDKK. It was a spacious, well-lighted building that was not unpleasant. Working in an office there was a lot like working in an office in New York. You had the same assortment of interesting people and twits. Again, I had relatively little time in the computer center, but the tape did load this time, and we were able to get things set up during our two-week preparation period.

Among other things, the institute had an ancient (from the 1960's) ICL computer, that still ran on vacuum tubes. With its one (1) kilobit of drum storage, it was truly a historical artifact.

Punching cards was kind of a challenge, since the only key-punch they had required you to manually hold down, for example, the 1 and 12 keys while pushing the punch button, in order to create an “A”. After the cards were punched, you then took them to another

machine to “interpret” them — adding text to the top margin. Then you could see which ones you had mis-typed, and repeat the process.

It wasn't until I got to Poland that I realized (by comparison to Polish) how much French, Spanish and German I had picked up over the years. This was a Slavic language. There are *no* cognates. Each word had to be learned completely from scratch. Over the month I did learn some. I at least learned what I needed:

By the time I left I could count, order beer and coffee, and say “you are a pretty girl” and “I love you”.

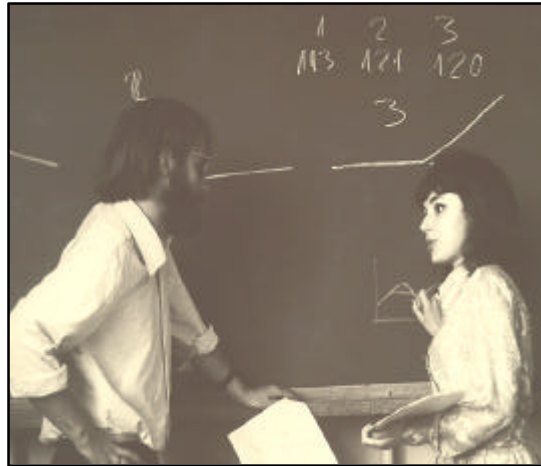


ROMANCE

On Monday of the third week we were there, I went into one of the rooms where a group of our students was working. Sitting at the head of the table was simply the most heart-stoppingly beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was incredible. She had dark hair, spectacular eyes, and a soft, lovely face. It was one of those situations that arise occasionally where you simply thank the fates for the opportunity to witness such beauty. You certainly don't hold out for any more.

Then she smiled at me. At *me!* I was dumbfounded. I sort of wobbled out of the room and tried to resume my work. Since I was travelling, and generally felt much braver than I ever did at home, I did entertain the thought that it *might* be possible to speak to her, but I really had no idea how to approach her. At one meeting I did get up enough courage to ask if she spoke English, which she did.

But then what was I to do? What could I say to her?



Finally, on Tuesday, *she* invited *me* to her office for tea.

(“She’ll feed you tea and oranges, that come all the way from China . . .)

Whoah! Ok. Sure. Let’s see what happens.

What happened was that she turned out to be not only beautiful, but also smart, funny, sophisticated, well-traveled and generally wonderful. And, wonder of wonders, she seemed interested in me!

Her name was Jolanta (pronounced “Yolanta”), like Yolanda in Spanish or Iolanthe in Greek. To me she became simply Jola (“Yola”).

After tea, we went out to dinner in Old Town. We then launched into a couple of weeks right out of a trashy romantic novel. Thanks to a lack of western decadence (read, “crime”), we could walk through the parks and along the river in the moonlight. There was the carriage ride through Old Town. And dancing to Hungarian Gypsy music. Oh yes, quite wonderful.

One weekend the project organized an excursion to the town of Kazimierz, named after the 14th century king who, among other things, replaced wooden buildings in the towns and villages with brick ones. Something about making them less easy to burn by invading armies.

We walked through the ancient town and talked while peacefully lying in the grass on the hillside overlooking the river.

The day before I left we went by train to Torun, the birthplace of Copernicus (or “Kopernik” as he was known locally), where we saw his manuscripts and meandered through yet another interesting city.

That evening, after we returned, a party was held for us Americans on the project at the residence of the American Ambassador. Jola and I went together.

Ok, Hay, let's get this straight.

Here you are hobnobbing with the

U.S. Ambassador to Poland, accompanied by the most incredibly beautiful and wonderful woman you have ever met. Is this really how things turn out?



Of course it can't be how things turn out. I kept thinking about how impossible the whole situation was. Forgetting for a moment that she was a goddess and I was a complete doofus, there was the small problem that she lived in Poland and I lived in the U.S. There was a cold war going on. There was absolutely no way anything could come of all this. All I could do was to be grateful for these two weeks (everyone should have two weeks such as this!), and get on with my life. It was with great sadness that I left Warsaw.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

As it happened, getting on with my life meant heading out into the depths of Eastern Europe. I had a ticket for a flight from Athens to London and home in a month. All I had to do was to figure out how to get to Athens in that time. I planned to go to Prague, Budapest, Vienna and various parts of Yugoslavia. Maybe I'd cruise some of the Greek Islands.

So, once again I was on the road south from Warsaw with my thumb out. The trip to Krakow this time was less eventful than the first time, although it was made interesting by the fact that this was the twenty-second of July, the national holiday. That was the anniversary of the founding of the Polish People's Republic. (For some reason it's not being celebrated any more . . .) It felt funny being in on the celebration of a socialist holiday, but I had to admit these folks *did* know how to throw a party. In every village and town there were huge flags and other decorations. It was all totally uninhibited.

And Krakow was unbelievable. I don't remember the details as much as I remember the effect: I was surrounded by color. Huge multi-storey red and white banners (the Polish flag is red and white) were everywhere. There was a parade through the middle of the town square with stirring music and, most effectively, hundreds of people carrying candles.

I decided to take the train to Prague. I bought my ticket and then carefully spent all of my Polish money before trying to board the train. Except that apparently there was an extra ten zloty fee for boarding. This only amounted to about a dollar and a half — except that I didn't have ten zloties. And the conductor wouldn't accept dollars. Now you should understand that there was a vigorous black market in western currency in Poland at that time. A dollar could buy you a lot more zloties on the street than it ever could in the bank. It was also seriously illegal and could get you in all kinds of trouble if you chose to participate.

But I didn't want a thousand zloties for my dollar. I only wanted ten. So I took my chances with the young fellow sitting next to me on the bench. It turned out ok. I got my ten zloties and he got a dollar.

Prague/train tickets

I had to change trains in Katowice at 3:00 am. This involved waiting for about an hour in a dimly lit, cavernous, and mostly empty train station deep in the heart of an industrial city — in the middle of the night. It was truly spooky, but it was fun too for the same reason. Not for the first or last time did I sit there wondering just how I came to be in this place at this time in my life.

On the train that actually took me to Prague I shared a compartment with a young mother and her 10 year old son, along with another woman. I'm a sucker for kids, so I found some paper and folded a bird for the lad, which he loved. The ride was long enough so he got a few other items as well.

The other woman in the compartment was also interested in what I was doing — and she spoke English! We had an engaging conversation which ultimately resulted in her

inviting me to her home town of Plzen, about sixty miles or so east of Prague. One of the nice things about being footloose and fancy free was that I could up and do such a thing. So, we agreed that after my four days in Prague I would go to Plzen.

Arriving in Prague after a month in Poland was interesting. I remember once reading a science fiction story about a man who traveled back in time and changed the tiniest thing. When he returned he discovered that things were different. Not in major ways, but in lots of little ways. The language was ever so slightly different, and there were different sorts of aesthetic touches all over.

I felt that way in Prague. Czech is a Slavic language, like Polish, and the words have similar structures. Many words in signs looked similar. Many of the letters aren't quite like Polish, though, with different diacritical marks. And it sounds different.

When I arrived I needed something in the train station so I started with the dozen or so Polish words I had learned. I quickly exhausted my vocabulary there, so I tried German, which I had taken ever so long ago in college. I got a little further, but still ultimately failed. Finally the nice lady looked at me sympathetically and said "May I help you?"

Ah, well.

I don't think I am the only person who considers Prague to be simply the most beautiful city in Europe. It was used for the movie *Slaughterhouse Five* and many other movies as well. It is one of the few European cities that was not heavily damaged during World War II, so the accumulated beauty of several centuries is available for all to see, and it is chockablock with exquisite architecture. In the town square is a wonderful animated clock from the sixteenth century.



(Unfortunately, I didn't have any film when I was in Prague, and it was prohibitively expensive. This picture is by Jaroslav Friedl from the book, *Zlata Praha*, by the Olympia Press of Prague.)

But Prague had also been invaded by the Russians five years earlier. While I would not exactly call Warsaw care-free, it was much more animated than Prague. I did meet up with two friendly young women who showed me many of the sights and who seemed to enjoy themselves. But they told me that people were much more cautious than they had been before 1968.

Unfortunately one of my four days was spent in the train station. At best buying a ticket anywhere in Eastern Europe was always a major production. First you waited in line to order your ticket. Then you waited in line to pay for it. Then you waited in line to pick it up. That is, if everything went well. Not counting the time the fellow decided to go on break just as you arrived at his window. Or the time when you spent an hour waiting, only to discover that you are in the wrong line.

Foolishly, I wanted to do something complicated. You see, I was planning to stay with the relatives of some New York friends of mine in Vodnany, perhaps a hundred miles south of Prague. But I also wanted to visit Plzen as well. And I had to know when I was getting to Vodnany so I could call the people there and tell them when I would arrive. Of course you had to make an appointment to use the telephone. So I planned that for 1:00 pm. That gave me a few hours to find out the train schedules. Which I did, called, and we made our arrangements.

But I still had to buy tickets. As it happens, there are lots of rail lines in Czechoslovakia, so on paper it looked like a simple matter to go from Prague to Plzen to Vodnany. On one day I would go from Prague to Plzen. Two days later I would go from Plzen to Vodnany.

Apparently this was too complicated. It required many hours of drawing pictures in my journal, gesticulating and grunting to finally get my tickets. As luck would have it, however, when later I met up with my two new friends, they looked at what I had purchased and told me that after all that I in fact had the wrong things. The coupons I had wouldn't get me where I wanted to go.

Oh, dear.

(Or words to that effect.)

So, I rushed back to the station with my friends in tow and we went to the information booth. *This time* there was a woman there who spoke English. She went to the front of the line at one of the windows and in less than half an hour took care of everything for me.

Now why didn't I do that the first time?

Plzen

So, after four days in the most beautiful city on Earth I found myself in Plzen one evening. My Pilsner friend met my train and set me up in a dorm room at the local university. The next morning we saw the town. It is a charming town with its own beer museum. (It seems that this is the home of Pilsner beer. They invented it.)

After a morning of wandering around in a delightful little city, she invited me home to meet her family. Now, in Czech homes it is customary to remove your shoes before entering. The problem was that when I removed my shoes (remember, I had been on the road for over a month by now), I had holes in my socks! I was horribly embarrassed. My friend's mother, however, proceeded to swoop down upon me, and fifteen minutes later I no longer had holes in my socks! She had repaired them.

So much for the bad guys that lived behind the iron curtain.

At any rate, the afternoon was as lovely as the morning, but I was on my own in the evening. It seems that my friend's husband wasn't that keen on her going out with me in the evening. For that matter, I was never actually told whether he knew about our daytime adventures, either. Ah well. I will always wonder . . .

Vodnany

The next morning I took the train to a larger town where I had to change for the glorified trolley that would take me to Vodnany. Unfortunately on this trip, while I had my camera, film was prohibitively expensive, so I don't have pictures of Czechoslovakia. (The picture of Prague above is from a book.) I was very sorry I couldn't photograph this small waiting room where I spent half an hour. It was priceless. On one side was a giant deli counter, behind which was a round man and his equally round wife. On the other side of the room, two or three people were waiting, and each had a look of the local country that was priceless. The clothing, the caps — they were all so appropriate to the scene, and quite unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was right out of a movie.

My friends' relatives put me up in Vodnany, another small Czech town. By now I had seen several and it was funny how they looked alike. Each Eastern European town I had seen so far was built around a town square with streets spreading out from there. The apartment where I was staying was just a block off the square, so I could watch the town go about its business from the front window.

I wasn't terribly ambitious by now. I was, frankly, a bit tired from travelling, so I spent a week there just recuperating. They played Dvorak on the stereo and there were usually children playing just outside the window. There was something incredibly peaceful about listening to that music and watching those children. I happily spent hours at it, without even noticing the time. The kids were playing a kind of futile stickball, where the pitcher would throw the ball, the batter would swing and miss, and they would both go running after the ball. A few moments later they would bring it back and repeat the procedure all over again. The script never changed, but they played that way for hour after hour.

If Vodnany was a town, the place where Grandmother lived, high up in the mountains, was clearly a village. We went to see her and I got to see an amazing way of life. Her house was quite primitive, but the setting in which she lived was nothing short of spectacular. And this from someone who grew up in Colorado! She and her dwelling were literally part of the mountain.

The family included a couple of young men and one night we walked a mile or so to go to a night club, where I learned the real joys of Czech beer. From that night, I will always be a fan of Pilsner Urquel.

One day we toured the local castle in Czeske Budejovice (home of the original Budweiser — this is truly beer country.) It wasn't renovated, so it was a little dusty in the corners, but it was fun to see.

On to Brno

My hosts assured me that hitch-hiking was ok in Czechoslovakia, so one day I set out on the road to Brno. I didn't know anything about Brno, but it was the next big city over, so

it seemed like the place to go. (Later I learned that this was where Mendel had done his famous experiments in fruit-fly genetics, thus learning about dominant and recessive genes)

As I waited, I was joined by a couple of young Czech hippies. They couldn't have been more than eighteen years old, but they were fully in uniform. She had long straight blonde hair and looked just like Mary Travers. He had medium length curly hair. They both wore jeans and t-shirts. Unfortunately, they spoke no English. The woman was decidedly cool to me, but the young man was friendly.

Getting rides was tough this time. We got a few short ones, but none that really took us very far. I finally got discouraged and left them to go look for a bus. I found one that took me maybe halfway there, but when I returned to the road, whom should I see but my traveling friends!

In the evening, we finally got the ride that took us all the way into Brno. This was, shall we say, an interesting ride. The fellow and I were gentlemen so we took the back seat. That way, the lady could sit in front. This turned out to be wise.

This part of Czechoslovakia is *very* mountainous. The roads are narrow and winding. Our driver may not have understood this. He didn't do any of it at less than 100 km (60 mi) per hour. When we arrived in Brno, the lady was white. The guy and I were fine. We were able to hunch down behind the front seat so we didn't have to see what was going on around us.

In Brno, it turned out that my young friends were quite helpless: They had never been away from home before. I on the other hand, knew exactly what to do: You go to the best hotel in town (where there will be someone who speaks English), and ask there for the nearest student hotel. We did that and very shortly we were ensconced in one of the better student hotels I've been in.

Alas, I have no pictures of Brno. It looked a lot like this one from Prague, though. (This is also by Jaroslav Friedl from *Zlata Praha*.)



... and Bratislava

The next morning I should have left early, to get the best inter-city traffic. But as I was walking down the streets of Brno, who should I see but the same two young ladies with whom I had toured Prague! This was cool!

So, of course we had to have breakfast together and I didn't get out of town until nearly noon. Which meant that for the day, I didn't get further than Bratislava, which was maybe a hundred miles south.

As it happened this was ok, though, because Bratislava turns out to be a very interesting town. It is now the capital of the new Republic of Slovakia, but even then it was a major city.

Outside Brno I met Koji, a Japanese fellow with whom I would spend several days. In Bratislava, as we wandered around in the evening together, we stumbled onto an amazing bridge across the Danube. Unlike a suspension bridge, it had only one tower, which tilted back, away from the riverbank. Heavy stays cantilevered the deck, extending out to it all the way across. The lines of that structure were wonderfully exhilarating! A flying saucer appeared to have landed on top of the tower. I suppose that could have been a restaurant, but it was too far away to tell for sure.

HUNGARY

Since Bratislava is basically a big, industrial city, it took us a while the next morning to get far enough out of town to get rides. So, again, we were on the road a little too late in the day for inter-city traffic. We wound up getting many small rides.

I had wanted to go to Vienna, but apparently there was a disease rampant on one side of the border with Austria or the other (I never could find out which) so crossing was more than usually complicated. So, I opted for Budapest and turned out to be the better for it.

One ride took us to within a quarter mile of the Hungarian border, so we wound up walking that distance and through passport control. It felt funny to walk up to the border station, but it turned out to be no big deal. (Hungary did not require a visa, unlike Poland or Czechoslovakia.) Another ride got us maybe another twenty or thirty miles into the country.

Where we waited. And waited. Come on now. *Our* car had to come along soon. The sun went down. It got dark.

At one point Koji decided to go to the farmhouse across the road to get a glass of water. Apparently, for all their apparent hospitality to him, they were suspicious, because about twenty minutes later a motor scooter put-putted up to us, stopped, and a portly equivalent to a Tijuana cop walked up to us.

Uh, oh.

Oh, dear.

(Or words to that effect.)

Ok, Hay, now you've *really* done it!

(After all, we had not inquired about hitch-hiking in Hungary.)

Suddenly I was asking myself again just how exactly I found myself in this place at this time. All my father's paranoia about the Communist world and all those spy movies immediately leapt forward in my consciousness. I had visions of never being heard from again.

After the longest silence with us simply staring at each other, Koji finally came forth with the obvious: "Ich bin Japonish". (This should not have been hard to guess. Beside his appearance there was the small fact that in the darkness we had been using a Japanese flag to try to stop motorists.)

This was sufficient to break the ice, so the cop grumbled "passport!" and we complied. Each of us had listed our occupation as "student", so after scrutinizing them for a few minutes, he handed them back to us, grunted, shook his head, and wandered back to his scooter, whereupon he took off.

I believe the expression is "whew!"

But this didn't solve our predicament. It was still dark. We were still standing there like idiots on the side of a Hungarian road, thousands of miles from home.

Excuse me, God. I don't have a sleeping bag. I can't sleep under a tree, you must understand.

To which God says, "So?"

So — we slept under a tree.

Koji actually had a sleeping bag, so I borrowed his youth hostel sleeping sack (two sheets sewn together), put my youth hostel sleeping sack inside it, and stuffed the space between with clothes. Not exactly the Waldorf, but it worked.

Sort of.

Budapest - first day and night

I did not have a good night's sleep. Fortunately, this meant that we were up with the sun. At this hour there is plenty of inter-city traffic and we were in Budapest by 7:00 am.

Budapest (pronounced "Budapesht" by the locals) is a marvelous city. While Prague is pretty, Budapest is fun. It is certainly attractive in its own way, and there is a robustness about the place that you could feel just walking down the street. The Danube (the "Duna" to them) runs through the center of the city (separating the ancient cities of Buda and Pest), providing for lots of



interesting bridges. Buda sits high on a cliff, overlooking the river and the more level Pest. The Parliament Building is a magnificent structure along the river in Pest, not unlike the Parliament in London.

Many of the buildings still had bullet holes from the 1956 uprising.

From a combination of general fatigue and my less than ideal night's sleep, I wasn't exactly running on all cylinders that day. We met a couple of Americans and went out to dinner, but with the first sip of wine I suddenly was not well at all. I had to excuse myself to go pray to the ceramic god.



I had a perfectly awful night.

The next morning, Koji moved on in his journey, and I staggered down to the front desk of our student hotel, trying to figure out how to ask for bicarbonate in Hungarian. Apparently my plight showed in my face, because the fellow took one look at me and beckoned me to follow him.

The lady in the check room

The luggage check room was run by a lady who seemed to be the house mother for the hotel. She proceeded to spend the day plying me with tea and carbon tablets (a secret Eastern European remedy for bad stomach — quite effective, by the way). We each spoke bad German, which was sufficient for us to communicate. By the end of the day I felt better, and



she proceeded to take me out on the town. She showed me some of the neighborhoods, and we had dinner in a restaurant in Buda, high above the Danube. It had a spectacular view of the bridges and Pest across the way! She even gave me a souvenir mug!

The Next Two Days . . .

On day three, I felt much better, and was finally ready to see the city. Unfortunately, the only guide book I was able to find was written in French. Fortunately, however, it was held by two very pleasant French girls. The three of us spent two marvelous days seeing everything there was to see in Budapest. This was truly a lovely time. We saw ancient Roman ruins. We saw the parliament buildings. We saw numerous quaint little back streets.

Yes. An altogether satisfactory two days.



VARNA

I had planned to go to Vienna and Yugoslavia, but back in Warsaw, my friend Izabella suggested that I check out Varna on the Black Sea. Apparently it is a popular summer vacation spot in the East and she said it was great fun. That's where she was going to be.

To me this was unthinkable. The Black Sea? That was way past the place on my map marked "Here be Dragons". I remember it from my days of reading about the Roman Empire. I couldn't imagine that a real person could really go there. Wasn't The Crimea there?

No problem, she said. In Budapest you just buy a train ticket.

It can't be that easy.

It turned out that it was that easy. Well, by Eastern European standards it was easy. It only took a couple of hours. In socialist lands, it is never "easy" to buy an international train ticket. But I bought one to Varna. First class, at that. (It wasn't even expensive.)

The train to Varna

The ride took the day to get through Hungary, the night through Romania, and the next morning I was toodling through Bulgaria. It was fascinating to look out the window to the back of the train as it rounded a curve. The train (called the "South Orient Express") seemed to extend back forever, all of it absolutely jammed with young vacationers. I was very grateful for that first class ticket.

The villages in Bulgaria haven't changed significantly since the middle ages. Each was in scenic valley – a collection of small houses with thatched roofs, the odd cow, and people dressed like the characters in fairy tales. I will always hold in my head a picture of one scene: a plump, older woman was sitting in the yard in front of her house. Her long dress was spread on the ground around her, and she was wearing an apron and a scarf over her head. Not too far from her was a cow, with a piece of rope around its neck, dragging along behind, completely unattached. She was just sitting there, quietly. The cow was peacefully munching on the grass. If ever there was a picture of tranquility, that was it.

Speaking of tranquility, apparently there isn't a lot to do in these villages. The train's rolling through town was apparently the big event of the day, and the villagers all came out to greet it. So, there I was, thousands of miles from home, rolling through Bulgaria, standing at the open window of the train — and all of the citizenry was waving at me in welcome to their country. This was quite all right, thank you. Breathtaking is what it was.

In general, when I met people who spoke English, they spoke with varying degrees of Slavic accents. Those who were better at the language spoke with a touch of a British accent, since that was the kind of English they were taught. I was quite surprised, therefore when, on the train, I heard a distinctly American phrase from a couple of compartments down. I took the opportunity to follow it, and met a most unusual young woman. It turns out that she had set out to learn American English, and had been

successful — sort of. The problem, which I learned as I listened to her further, was that she got the pronunciation from one part of the country, the phrasing from another, and the rhythm and melody from a third. It was truly a bizarre effect. I had never realized that a regional dialect is composed of so many elements. Mix and match them and the effect is truly awful.

Arrival

Things took a decided turn for the worse when I got to Varna. Izabella was to meet me at the train, but when I arrived, she was nowhere to be found. At this point I realized that I had just graduated from Introductory Survival to the Intermediate Course. You see, in all the other countries where I had been, I could at least read the signs! Bulgaria, however, uses the Cyrillic (what we know as the Russian) alphabet.

Oh, dear!

(Or words to that effect.)

Ok, Hay, now you've really, *really* done it!

Now Izabella had provided for this eventuality by writing directions in my journal. She actually wrote two sets of directions. The first were instructions for taking the bus to the neighborhood where she would be, and the second was the address in Varna of a lady who would know exactly where she was.

The problem was that the two sets of instructions were next to each other and I had forgotten that they constituted two things. I thought it was one set of instructions. So I would show the book to someone who would point in a direction. I would then wander off in that direction until I showed it to someone else who directed me in the opposite direction. This silliness progressed for an hour or so, until I found a fellow who actually spoke English. He clarified my problem and took me to the address in question.

Of course this year, Izabella's friend decided not to vacation in Varna.

Oh.

So, the fellow directed me to the bus. The instructions were that I should take the bus up the coast until I saw a sign that looked like the chicken scratches she had written.

Well, I missed it.

So, after a while I gave up and got off the bus, looking for some kind of tourist center. Or help of any kind. I was told that a tourist center was a couple of stops back on the bus. Apparently it wasn't quite as many stops as I took. So I then had to take the bus back forward again. I thus proceeded heuristically (that means "back and forth") for several hours, until I finally found it.

When I walked through the door, my ears were greeted with a distinctly New York accent: "Do you know where I could find a room?"

Hello.

It turns out the fellow worked three floors above me at NYU!

First, the Hotel

This guy was smarter than I was. He'd hired a taxi. The lady at the tourist center suggested that we continue up the coast to Albena, a new town that was built specifically to accommodate tourists. We did so, found the hotel center, and asked for a room.

As it happened, one of the hotels had just been completed and a room was available, but only for two nights. A group was expected on Friday.

Sounded ok to us, so we took it.

For the princely sum of \$5.00 per night, we were in a brand new room, literally on the beach. That is, you could jump over the balcony railing and be standing on the beach. Not too shabby.

(Late that night, when the beach was empty, I went skinny-dipping in the Black Sea. It was wonderfully warm and, well, black. I think that everybody should go skinny-dipping in the Black Sea once in his life.)

This arrangement meant that for the entire next day I did not have to cope. This was good, since by now, my cope was pretty well broken. I lay on the beach, flirted with some German girls (it was made abundantly clear to me that Bulgarian girls were *not* available to strangers), and at one point was even ambitious enough to wander back down the coast to Varna.

Varna is an incredible city. I had never heard of it before. (It was actually kind of embarrassing the number of quite significant places I had never heard of before this trip.)

It seems that this was where Perseus stopped on his way to find the Golden Fleece. This was the home of the Phoenicians. I remember reading about them, but it never occurred to me that they were from a real place. We're talking seriously *old*!

The city sits in a natural harbor formed by a piece of land that juts out in a spectacularly beautiful curve. If you studied geography and tried to imagine what a natural harbor should look like, this was it. The city in its setting is quite beautiful, as is the coastline to the north.

In general, Bulgarians (in metropolitan Varna, at least) were not nearly as friendly as their northern neighbors. In fairness, this was a tourist area, and they were clearly tired of tourists, but the Bulgarian temperament in general didn't strike me as being all that warm to begin with.

I did meet a nice young woman on the bus who was quite friendly, and we arranged to meet on the beach later in the day. But when the time came, she was with her family and it was clear that she was *not* available for a date.

Second, the Bungalow

The next day my New York friend took off for parts unknown. Now I had to figure out what to do next. I didn't actually know.

I wanted to go to Istanbul, which wasn't that far down the coast. I thought it would be a kick to get a deck chair on a freighter, but upon checking I learned that the only boat going my way in the next week or so was a Russian cruise ship. That would cost me

\$70.00, which was about a week's allowance for me. Moreover, it wasn't entirely clear that by coming from Bulgaria I would be allowed to stay in Istanbul. In general, if you came to Istanbul from Bulgaria, you were required to go back.

The building that held the ticket offices for the trains in Varna was a not very large box which was wall to wall sweaty people. Given my experiences buying train tickets in Eastern Europe, I couldn't really face that.

Besides, I kind of wanted to stay a little longer.

Now realize that this was the place where *everyone* in Eastern Europe came for vacation. In principle, if you hadn't booked a room last March, there were no rooms available.

No problem.

Well, actually problem. First of all, the hotel office was manned by one little old lady who only spoke Bulgarian. Not even French or German! At one point I got to talking to a German fellow who had a Czech girlfriend who spoke Russian. She was actually able to find out something! Unfortunately, what she found out was that – there were no rooms available.

Like I said, no problem.

In retrospect I find it difficult to believe I actually pulled off what I did. My U.S. self would never have had the chutzpah to do this: I met up with two men and a woman from East Berlin who were in the process of renting two bungalows up on the nearby hillside. Even though they didn't really speak English very well, I managed to con them into letting me rent the fourth bed. It did require me to sign up for a week, but the prospect of not having to go anywhere for that long appealed to me greatly.

I'll cruise the Greek islands next time.

So, I lay on the beach, wandered around Varna, and finally met a Polish family who kind of took me in.

(It was funny. By now, whenever I met Polish people I said "Yes! People from home!")

The family included a seventeen-year old girl, who had an interesting attitude towards Russians. Bulgaria was psychologically much closer to the Soviet Union than any of the other countries I had been in. At one place on the beach was a "Soviet-Bulgarian Friendship Club". She found it as exotic as I did to see real Russians, and would point to them conspiratorially. "Those are *Russians* over there!"

Even though I had the room for a week, the aggravation of my arrival and the fact that I'd now been away from home for a *very* long time, left me not really appreciative of Bulgaria. I was tired and fed up and I just wanted to go home!

This was a pity, since the Bulgarian coast is incredibly beautiful. There's the sea, the beach and the rocky cliffs. The cliffs are not as precipitous as Big Sur, but they are as lovely in their own way. The coast road is cut into the cliffs, so it provides a great view of the water.

At one point I was walking along the coast highway and I came across a large sign consisting of a red circle with a white bar across it. It looked familiar, but since it had no

text on it, I took a minute to decode it as a “Do not enter” sign. Just as I did, however, a white Mercedes came up the road and zipped right in.

Hmm. This must be an interesting road, I surmised. So I wandered down it towards the sea. Not surprisingly, a bit further down I came across a guard house and a gate across the road. I decided I had now been brave enough and would look for Cincinnati elsewhere.

Eventually I learned that this was the summer home of the Chairman of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Oh, well. Maybe I’ll call on him another time.

Learning the Cyrillic alphabet was a lot of fun. It was created by the monk Cyril in the middle ages from a combination of Roman, Greek, and some miscellaneous (Hebrew? Armenian?) other alphabets. One evening I was particularly hungry, and while there were a number of establishments labeled “PECTOPAH”, I couldn’t find any restaurants. Only later did I learn that the “P” in Cyrillic is really from the Greek rho, or “R”. “C” takes the “S” pronunciation from the west, and “H” is, for reasons I never discovered, the letter “N”. My “PECTOPAH” was really “RESTORAN”. I had been standing next to restaurants all along.

Later in the week I decided to try once again to find Izabella. I found a sign that looked sort of like what she wrote and got off the bus. There wasn’t much there, but I did find a place that looked like a kind of residential hotel. I asked after her and finally found someone who pointed me to her cabin. As it happens, she wasn’t there, so I went down to the beach to see if perhaps she was there.

Now this was a continuation of my two month trip, so when I saw her walking up the beach, I didn’t think anything of it. She, on the other hand, was a thousand miles from home and on vacation, so to see someone she last saw in Warsaw was a bit of a shock. This was amusing.

It turns out that she had indeed waited for my train. It was, however, some three hours late, and of course no one in the station could tell her exactly when it would arrive. Finally she got hungry and went for a bite to eat. Then it arrived. When she returned, she saw it — but I was nowhere to be seen. She went to her friend’s house but she got there just after I had been there.

This was not to be.

(Parenthetical comment: You should know that when you are in foreign lands for as long as I was, Coca Cola is a truly wonderful thing. It is a link to sanity.)

Sofia and Out.

After my week, I was again confronted with the problem of what to do next. On one of my visits to Varna, I had noticed an airline ticket office across the street from the train station. I had been doing pretty well on my budget, so I decided to give it a try. There was a bit of a line, but the setting was not unpleasant, so I took my place.

When I got to the ticket agent I told her that I would like to buy a ticket.

“Where to?”

“I don’t really care. What have you got?”

As it happens the only place you could fly to was Sofia, the Bulgarian capital. It was not terribly expensive, so I ordered up a ticket.

It was fun trying to memorize what the sign on the bus to the airport would look like. But I got there without incident. The plane was a Soviet version of a DC-6, and the boarding process consisted of a large mass of people at the bottom of the stair elbowing each other to get on.

The flight wasn't too bad, although I really don't like flying in airplanes that rattle.

From Sofia I intended to take the train to Istanbul. So, from the airport I took the bus into the "Centrum" and looked for the train station. Except that it wasn't there. Asking directions in Sophia is a challenge, because I found *no one* who spoke English. How do you say "train station" in sign language? Things were made more complicated by the fact that in Bulgaria nodding of the head means "no", and shaking the head means "yes".

I finally found a kiosk where I could buy a map and discovered that the train station was in fact some blocks over *that* way. So, I made my way there.

For a change, buying a ticket turned out to be remarkably easy. The first line I got into turned out to be the line for buying tickets to Istanbul. The fellow behind me who wanted to go to Yugoslavia was out of luck, but I got my ticket in less than an hour. An hour after that I was on a train heading out of the East.

Please understand that I had a very rich set of experiences in the socialist lands — ones that I will always treasure. But you should also be aware that traveling there was *very hard* work. Especially doing it on the cheap as I was. From the lines for train tickets to the lack of familiar food, after a month and a half, I was getting really hungry for a Big Mac. When I was on the train heading out, I felt very good indeed.

I was ready.

ISTANBUL

The train was another overnigher, and we arrived in Istanbul late the following morning. On the train, I met Jurgen, a young German fellow from Nuremberg, and we wound up traveling together for the next several days.

My life has been a succession of living in progressively more exotic places. From my home town in Western Colorado I moved to the Los Angeles area for college, and from there to New York City. After those experiences, when I first saw Western Europe, I was actually a little disappointed. It's not really all that exotic. It is a very civilized place. Not shocking at all! Eastern Europe turned out to be more exotic, but even before I went I knew I had to see Istanbul. I imagined that to see Istanbul would be to experience exotic the way I had when I first saw New York City.

It turned out that Istanbul was exotic like New York. Actually, it turned out that Istanbul was simply *like* New York. It is a big, crowded city, with people coming through from all corners of the world. Moreover, after my time in socialist lands, it seemed remarkably western in many ways.

Coming from the Socialist world, Istanbul was wonderful: people wanted to *sell* me stuff! In one way the press accounts of the countries I just came from had been accurate: the stores were pretty empty. Fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowers were plentiful, but many were the basic items I had been used to having available in any drug store — that simply weren't.

(Poland did have wonderful souvenirs, though. Cepelia is a chain of stores selling Polish folk art and they had some lovely items. Also, Poland makes great tapestries. And great posters. I wound up carrying home a lot of stuff.)

Like New York City, Istanbul has incredible beauty, right next to incredible squalor. We saw Hagia Sophia, the former cathedral, now a mosque, which had the largest enclosed space in the world. Jurgen made the wry observation that when this was built in the sixth century, our ancestors were still running around wearing bearskins in the forests of Northern Europe.

Because of its similarities to New York City, Istanbul wasn't as formidable as I had expected. Whether I should have or not, I felt quite comfortable exploring the back streets, the museums, and the waterfront. The bazaar, which takes up a large part of the center of the city, had all kinds of nifty things for sale, but I didn't really have any more room to take anything home.

And like in New York, you can meet people from all over the world.

I met one couple that had bicycled from London. I met another fellow who had hitchhiked from Australia via Nepal, the Khyber Pass, and many adventures. He had some interesting stories to tell!

Jurgen and I took the ferry across the Bosphorus so we could say we had been to Asia. There, we met up with some Turks who had worked in Germany, and who were delighted to have someone to speak that language to. They took us in and showed us a

great time. We went swimming, played cards together, and ate some local food. (I didn't think it was prudent to ask what was in it.)

The swimming was fun. I got the opportunity to shoot a spear gun at some fish. (Worry not. The fish were in no danger from me.) At one point, after we had been swimming, and our Turkish friends were somewhere else, Jurgen and I were sitting on a stoop near the dock. A boat landed and a collection of Japanese ladies disembarked. They saw us and rushed up to us. "Hey, Turks!" it seemed they were saying.



Now, both Jurgen and I were over six feet tall, with light brown hair. We didn't exactly look Turkish. But we were good enough for the Japanese ladies, so they clustered around us, took each other's pictures with us, and took home stories of hanging out with the Turks. I have visions of our faces showing up on home movie screens all over Japan as representatives of the Middle East.

We enjoyed the villages on the Asian side. At one point some children collected around us, and we enjoyed playing with them. As usual, I made lots of origami birds and other critters.



One incident I would have sworn I imagined, but Jurgen confirmed that he saw it too. We were walking down a main street in one of the villages. I looked up at the second storey of one of the buildings, and noticed a lovely young woman sitting in the window. She was giving us a radiant smile. In the time it took me to look away, glance at something else on the square, and look back, she had been replaced by a very dour — and much older — woman. The young woman was clearly not to be exposed to the likes of us.

On the other hand, later in the day, one of the Turks took us home to meet his family. He had a singularly attractive daughter, and I made a compliment to that effect to him. His immediate reaction was, "Would you like to marry her?"

Thanks anyway . . .

The society's organization was interesting: The men were pretty much free to spend the afternoon drinking tea, entertaining us, and generally enjoying themselves. The women were doing the work behind the scenes.

ATHENS

Time for my flight from Athens was approaching, and I did want to see that city. So, after four days, it was time to leave Istanbul. It happened that you could buy a student train ticket for about \$7.00. For a trip of nearly a thousand miles, that seemed like a bargain.

Boy did I get what I paid for!

This was *not* first class. This was steerage in a *very* crowded train. Finding a place to sit, let alone lie down, was a real challenge.

And it took *forever!* This was two nights and three days. On one train. That is, you had the first afternoon on the train. With no place to sit or lie down. Then you had the night. A long night! Four hours of which were spent motionless at the Turkish/Greek border. Then you had a very long day. With no place to sit or lie down. And, lo, another night! This was as much fun as the first night. Only it seemed even longer! With no place to sit or lie down. That is a *very* long time to spend on a crowded train when you can't stretch out.

At one point I did manage to score some horizontal space in a luggage rack, and I borrowed Jurgen's sleeping bag to lie down on. I felt lucky! Then I thought about it. If I thought I was lucky because I got to lie down in a luggage rack — I had been travelling *way* too long!

Eventually, after what seemed like weeks, we did get to Athens. The most distinctive characteristic of that city is its whiteness. Everything is painted brilliant white. Oh, it has its dumpy buildings (one of which was my hotel), but this isn't apparent to the casual observer.

It was wonderful to wander around the Parthenon. Since then I understand much of it has been fenced off, but at that time I was able to go anywhere I wanted around the ancient structures. I communed with the ancient Greeks in the main temple and some smaller ones. There was also an amphitheater, and — most significantly — an incredible view of the city.

This city, which once I would have considered incredibly exotic, was even more familiar and Americanized than Istanbul. At one point I was in the American Express office, wondering if perhaps someone had written to me. (No one had.) The large mail room was crowded with young Americans (it was strange to see that many Americans again), and I was absent-mindedly looking around it. Then I heard, at the top of his lungs from across the room: "*OH, FUCK!*"

I was home again.



London and home

After this trip, flying to London was like flying home. I have always felt very comfortable in that city, and never more than this time. I have friends there I hung out with, and enjoyed more than one pub beer.

After traveling for two months, however, the real culture shock happened when I returned to New York. A friend of mine thought it was time to take a vacation, so he met me at the airport, and spirited me off directly to Lake George in upstate New York. We had planned two days of camping and relaxing in the woods. After my two months on the road, I was looking forward to it.

Now, understand that for two months, all my worldly possessions had been contained in a modest sized canvas suitcase and a Pan Am travel bag. I had a polyester sport coat and a pair of slacks that got me into dress situations, and a pair of jeans and four sport shirts for everything else. Moreover, none of the lands I traveled through was particularly wealthy.

So, when I got back to America, I didn't think about what "roughing it" might mean. I was not prepared for what I saw when my friend took me to the car: It was *full!* Not only the trunk, but the back seat was also bursting with camping equipment and groceries. It took two canoe trips each in two canoes to cart all the *stuff* from the parking lot to the island where we were camping. This was obscene.



But the worst part was the fact that we weren't even the worst offenders! As I wandered around the island, I found "campers" in tents bigger than my apartment in New York. And several even had generators, so they wouldn't have to be deprived of their favorite television sitcoms.

This was more bizarre than *anything* I saw on my trip.

EPILOGUE

On Monday, I had to go to work, as though life was normal. I'm sorry, but after the two months I had just spent, life wasn't normal. My whole world had been turned upside down by the things I had seen and experienced.

Meanwhile my New York studio apartment felt like just another hotel room. Somehow coming back to a box in Manhattan isn't quite what I imagined coming "home" should be like. But I had no other home, and I was quite lost. What does "home" mean, anyway? Both the homes I saw during the trip and the one I remembered from my childhood seemed very far away indeed.

And then there was this girl . . . I couldn't get her out of my mind. I went into a major funk for most of the Autumn. I developed the pictures I had taken in Warsaw and was reminded yet again of how incredibly beautiful her smile was. I had some dates in New York, but it just wasn't the same. Jola and I wrote to each other a lot.

I got a chance to go back to Warsaw in January. And she was still there! And she was still beautiful and smart and charming and sophisticated and . . . You get the idea. This was getting very difficult. I asked my friend at the American Embassy if by any chance there was a way that she could come to America so we could get better acquainted.

"Well, you could marry her," he said.

Oh, no. No, no. That's not what I had in mind. I'd already done it once and had no interest whatsoever in doing *that* again.

But then I went home and went back into my funk. About a month later I was writing a long chain-of-consciousness letter to a friend in California and by the end of the letter I realized what I was saying.

So I called her up and proposed. We were married in June.

It was an interesting sensation, being in the frame of mind that says: "You know? The absolutely most logical, most reasonable thing for me to do with my life right now would be to take a month's salary, go to the opposite side of the planet, and marry a girl I've known for three weeks. I mean, what else can I do? I certainly can't live without her."

It was also interesting to be able to witness a Polish wedding – until I realized that *I* was the groom!

As it happens, it wasn't until she came to America that we discovered that we were completely incompatible.



To anyone considering marrying someone you've only known for three weeks, I can only recommend that you pick someone from a completely different culture. You will *never* be bored with each other.

It has been challenging and fascinating to live with someone who makes me check all of the assumptions I've been making about life. I have learned a tremendous amount about both the world and myself. Marriage doesn't get more exciting than this.

A couple of years into the marriage, I was talking to a friend of mine who grew up in Brooklyn. I said to him that, you know, it's really challenging to be married to someone whose upbringing, experiences and way of looking at things are completely different from mine.

He sighed and said, yes, he knew exactly what I meant.

He had married a girl from upstate New York.

But for all of it Jola and I seem to have found something in common. It turns out that a lot of those things we see differently that I thought were really important – aren't that important after all. We've been married for almost 24 years now, raising two children from diapers to college, and living everywhere from a New York apartment to a house in Houston. It looks like this marriage thing may actually work.

It's still hard to believe that the person I couldn't imagine even speaking to is the one who greets me with a smile every time I come home from work. Indeed, she has turned out to be the very definition of that "home" I was looking for.

And I'm still crazy about her.

