Berlin and Prague (April 1993)

My tale of two cities starts on a rainy day in Berlin with my hosts Jean and Carlos, both tireless servants of America's diplomatic machine. Carlos dropped Jean and me off at the famous Brandenburg Gate. Patterned after the entrance to the Acropolis, it was built in 1791 to symbolize peace and a break from the wars of Frederick the Great. Two years later it was crowned by Johann Schadow's *Quadriga*, four horses drawing the chariot of Nike, goddess of Victory. Its new role as a triumphal arch was to be the more significant one in the years to come. Napoleon marched through into the city in 1806, Kaiser Wilhelm I celebrated German unification here, Nazis marched through when Hitler became Chancellor, and the Red Army hoisted the Soviet flag on top in 1945. The West Germans made a copy of the Quadriga to replace the original one, which had been bombed to pieces. Then the East Germans put the whole Gate behind the Berlin Wall and turned the statue around so it would look better from their side.

From the Gate, we walked down the famous Unter den Linden avenue, the flower of Prussian city planning and famous the world over for Nazi troop parades. Jean pointed out the Opernplatz where the Nazis held their first book burning. No books were in evidence, but we did find hundreds of unsmiling police, dozens of police vans, an armored car and some kind of crane truck. A TV crew explained that an anti-Olympics demonstration was expected. Berlin was jockeying for the 2000 Olympics and I thought that the protesters would recall the unfortunate history of previous German Olympics (Hitler's 1936 showcase of acceptance and the massacre of Jewish athletes in Munich 1972).

As the demonstration rolled by, a young black-clad German woman with flame-dyed hair stood next to me reading a list of complaints by the demonstration's organizers. I asked her to translate and, although speaking English was a struggle for her, she patiently did so. (Germans were remarkably patient with my pathetic language skills and assistance was always easy to find.) Number 1: real estate prices will rise and Berlin will become too expensive for the demonstrators. Number 2: traffic will be snarled. Number 3: elite athletes will be surfeited with money leaving less for common people. Almost all of the complaints were practical ones; nothing was said about the past. What impressed me most about the demonstration was the contrast between the rather small and harmless crowd and the massive police presence. It would take a full-scale riot in the US before you'd see that many police with that much equipment. There were literally hundreds of cops carrying riot shields and wearing all kinds of body armor. They ran alongside the demonstrators while dozens of police vans drove in front of the parade; a helicopter circled overhead.[1]

The next day I sallied forth fortified with two indispensable books: the *Berlin Diaries* of Marie Vassiltchikov and the amazing Cadogan Berlin guidebook. Vassiltchikov was a White Russian refugee who worked for the German Foreign Office in Berlin from 1940 onward. Her life at first is a whirl of diplomatic parties and hobnobbing with the vast German nobility. After the heavy bombing of 1943, much of the city's energy is devoted to staying up all night in shelters, clearing rubble during the day, replacing and repairing destroyed essentials, and just getting from one place to another. As enthusiasm for the war dims, some of Vassiltchikov's friends plot to kill Hitler and seize control of the government. As Vassiltchikov relates it, the plotters were yuppies whose primary motivation was to run an independent Germany for themselves and they spent more time planning who would assume what office after Hitler's demise than Hitler's demise itself. Many Germans were executed whose only sin was that they'd been put down on the yuppies' list as a potential deputy assistant foreign minister—they'd never even been consulted about the assassination plan. I was fascinated to see the war from one person's contemporaneous

[1] In September, 1993, the International Olympic Committee voted for Sydney, Australia over Beijing; Berlin had been knocked out in a preliminary ballot.

point of view, rather than the standard omniscient omnipresent historian's perspective. The book also piqued my interest in numerous Berlin sites.

The Cadogan guide is a real book; i.e., one could read it from cover to cover and not get bored. Andrew Gumbel writes in the best tradition of British erudition and scholarly tourism. The book starts with broad overviews of politics, art, and architecture. Walking tours with broad themes include the full and oftentimes bizarre history of every little building and bridge.

In conversations with locals about these books, I quickly discovered that both deal with a part of the past that West Berliners would rather forget. Berliners are genuinely confused when you express interest in the Third Reich aspects of their fair city. They believe that Berlin should be toured like Paris, London, or Rome. This would be a great idea if not for the fact that while the Parisians were building Notre Dame, Berlin was a swamp (the name "Berlin" comes from a Slavic word for "bog"). The other cities collected the artistic riches of vast empires for centuries. It was not until the late 18th century that Frederick the Great had made Prussia into a state of any significance. Furthermore, the Prussians spent so much money on wars that precious little was left over to adorn their capital (Hitler, too, had big architectural plans for Berlin that were shelved for WWII). Thus, Berlin never had the artistic treasures of the other capitals.

Berlin's architectural high points are described well by Christopher Isherwood, whose stories were the basis of the musical *Cabaret*: "[the] self-conscious civic center of buildings round Unter den Linden, carefully arranged. In grand international styles, copies of copies, they assert our dignity as a capital city—a parliament, a couple of museums, a State bank, a cathedral, an opera, a dozen embassies, a triumphal arch; nothing has been forgotten. And they are all so pompous, so very correct ..." Aristophanes's ridiculous city planner (Miton?) would have felt right at home here.

In being an artificially designed imperial capital, Berlin is much like Washington, D.C. Washington, however, was designed by an artistic and original Frenchman whereas Berlin was copied from artistic and original French things. A second difference is that Washington is so far away from Paris, London and Rome that it doesn't suffer by comparison. The final difference is that Washington wasn't visited by the Royal Air Force and the Red Army. (St. Petersburg is another built-from-scratch Baroque capital, but Peter the Great had unfair advantages, e.g. hiring the best artists from all over Europe and giving them 100,000 stonemasons to work to death.)

Even if all the Frederick the Great-era buildings were intact, why would they be interesting to foreign tourists? Frederick mostly conquered little states that nobody has heard of today. Hitler is much more interesting. He conquered big states that are still around, almost conquered even bigger ones, and came close to getting the whole ball of wax. Despite this notoriety, Berliners cannot see the touristic appeal of the Nazis.

This might be because Hitler and Berlin never liked each other. Hitler was Catholic and so were many of his inner circle; Berlin is a Protestant city. Hitler was an Austrian commoner; Berlin was the stomping ground of Prussian aristocracy. Goebbels came here in 1926 to rally Nazi support and described Berlin as a "monster city of stone and asphalt." Berlin consistently voted against the Nazis (Vassiltchikov notes educated Berliners huddled in bomb shelters complaining about the "women of Germany who voted Hitler into power"). Although the regionalism of Germany is difficult for Americans to fully appreciate, try to imagine NY's Ed Koch somehow getting elected Governor of Texas. Texans turn up their noses at first but are elated when Koch rolls over Oklahoma, Louisiana, New Mexico and Kansas. However, as their relatives serving in the Texas Army are cut down by tenacious Minnesotans and their houses are leveled by bombers from California, the honeymoon comes to an end.

I started my first walking tour at the bombed-by-the-British-in-1943 Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The American historian Gerhard Masur described this as "one of the few buildings to be improved by the fall of bombs and the ravage of fire." I'm inclined to agree, for the original 1895 structure looked pretty ponderous and the bombs opened it up intriguingly. Today it is a gathering place for punks and other marginal elements of Berlin society. Southern Germany is almost completely white, working and middle-class and I was a bit surprised to find darker skin, foreign tongues, idleness, and a vaguely threatening atmosphere.

A semisophisticated bum told me in German that he wanted to take a particular bus but didn't have any change. I pleaded ignorance of German and he repeated the complex story in better English than any of the working Germans I'd met! Speaking of English, all Germans are forced to learn it in school and Americans have a strange idea that everyone there speaks English. Well, were you forced to take piano lessons when you were a kid? How well can you play now? Few Germans practice their English after getting out of school. Although Germans watch American movies and TV shows, these are always dubbed except in the very biggest cities. You cannot rent subtitled videos here, only dubbed movies. None of the Germans I know who share a house with a native English speaker take advantage of that person's presence to practice their English. I only met one West German who was drawn to English literature and the culture of English-speaking countries. Christoph, a government worker, was typical: "I only like to practice my English a bit so that I can travel in Asia."

I walked from the Kaiser Wilhelm church up Tauenzientstrasse to the Post Museum. Stamps from the 18th century, stamps from the 19th century, stamps from the 20th century, and ... no stamps from the Nazi period were what I found at the Post Museum. Instead, there was a 16-minute film about Hitler and the Third Reich in Berlin.

Watching a movie in a poorly-understood foreign tongue is a bit like watching TV commercials with the sound off—the real message comes through more clearly because you aren't distracted by commentary. The start was just like American documentaries about Hitler: the Reichstag fire, happy spectators waving Nazi flags at parades down Unter den Linden, the 1936 Olympics. Then the action darkened with a shift to the impressive German armament industry preparing for war. The next big scene is Berlin being bombed by the British. At this point, it occurred to me that here might lurk the German passion for demonstrating against armaments. The German people have suffered during wars that followed great preparations and the stockpiling of arms. Americans, by contrast, have suffered during wars that followed periods of disarmament and lassitude.

After the bombs, the rubble, and dead bodies being carried off, one sees German women working hard in factories and happy Berliners sunning themselves by the waters of the Wannsee (the camera never swung around to the other shore where the Final Solution conference was held). The video ends by showing the Battle of Berlin, in which 50ish housewives with mortars defend the city against the Red Army's howitzers.

I liked the movie because it was so different from all the war documentaries I'd previously seen (mostly American and British). Most movies start by trying to give a balanced view of the war by showing footage from all perspectives; they end up leaving one with no idea how the war might have looked from an individual's perspective. This movie stuck to the war a Berlin civilian might have seen and I began to understand Germany's well-developed culture of victimization. "The Russians oppressed us in the east; the Americans roam around our beloved *Vaterland* speaking English loudly; the Jews are our misfortune with their Holocaust Memorial in Washington; the Israelis dredge up a few German companies' sales of nuclear and chemical weapons to Arabs anxious to finish the Final Solution; the French build nuclear power plants along our border," etc. This is a confusing culture to foreigners raised on a diet of *Mein Kampf*, the siege of Leningrad,

and Blitzkrieg; it became perfectly comprehensible once I'd seen WWII from the "inside Germany" perspective.

As I walked out, I picked up a brochure on collecting German stamps from 1872 through the present (it is at such times that one is struck by just how young Germany is). Until 1933, the stamps are uninspired derivatives of French Art Nouveau or older styles. The Nazi period brings a flowering of artistry. The first stamp shown commemorates Hitler's electoral victory. Next is a beautiful stern portrait of Hitler canceled with a stamp "Berlin, 20. April 1937, Der Führers Geburtstag" revealing the German passion for birthdays and anniversaries. "4 December 1938 Sudetengau" shows a healthy young Aryan couple armed with a pickax overlooking the pastoral additional *Lebensraum* of the newly acquired Sudentenland. Austrians are comforted by two men jointly holding a Nazi flag with the border marked "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer." Czechs have their stamps canceled with a swastika plus the words "Wir sind frei!" (we are free).

As the war progresses, the stamps keep pace. Rommel's North Africa campaign is strikingly remembered with a swastika over a palm tree, bordered by an Arabesque. Lots of good stamps show the German army overrunning enemy positions and hurling grenades. My favorite stamp has a picture of Uncle Joe Stalin in the middle flanked by cryptic "1939 Postage" (with a crown) and "1944 Revenue" (with a hammer and sickle). The stamp reads "This War is a Jewish War" in English and there are stars of David and hammers and sickles. As the Red Army closed in, the stamps got a little darker. "Ein Volk Steht Auf" (a people stands up) shows three civilians, a young man, a middle-aged man, and a young woman, aggressively holding rifles and crouched under an eagle's wings.

Like a lot of things in Germany, stamps got boring after the war. Many stamps just have denominations on them, although pictures of people rebuilding and the Dove of Peace make occasional appearances. Recent times bring inoffensive stamps against drug abuse and for sexual equality.

I stopped for lunch at the KaDeWe, which must be the largest department store in the world. It is best known for its massive food hall where you can stock your kitchen or just your stomach. The prices and presentation say Paris, but the taste says Chicago. As I was munching my $15 salad, I was joined by Beatrix, a confidence-inspiring Frankfurt banker. "I work for Germany's central bank because they paid for my education. Although tuition is free, food and housing can cost $10,000/year for six years. Middle-class families can't afford university education anymore."

Beatrix sells government bonds at "Dutch auctions." I told her that this reform was proposed every year for the U.S. by economists but somehow never adopted so that a few investment banks continue to skim billions of dollars from taxpayers. "We can't understand your banking system at all. How could the U.S. Congress have been so stupid as to deregulate savings & loans' investments without changing their deposit insurance system?" I reminded her that these "stupid" Congressmen managed to pocket millions in campaign contributions from S&L executives and get re-elected by the public whom they stuck with the $300 billion bill.

After lunch, I ambled through the Kurfürstendamm, Berlin's most famous shopping street. It is a real let-down after Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse or Madison Avenue, being crammed with jeans shops and Berlin's seedier citizens. The most remarkable sight was the parking style of five cops busy hassling a couple of young Germans. The police had parked their van 50 meters back to avoid a "no standing" zone in a right-turn lane. These aren't your leave-the-squad-car-in-the-middle-of-the-intersection-if-it-is-in-front-of-the-donut-shop-and-fuck-the-public New York or Boston cops.

Next stop was the Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) museum. This woman cornered the market in depressing art. Her big themes were hunger, disease, war, and death, all expressed with moody charcoal drawings and stark woodcuts. Kollwitz's mission was to bring the sorrows of the

unfortunate to the attention of the contented and she would return to themes periodically for twenty years or more. One of her big problems was the enthusiasm that young people have for marching off to war and of their leaders for sending them there. Kollwitz depicts mothers trying to keep their children safe from war and Death dragging them off. The saddest drawing for me was one of a woman holding a dead 4-year-old boy. She used her own son Peter as a model for this and 15 years later he was killed in the First World War. The only happy pictures were of mothers with young children; Kollwitz seems to have believed this is the only legitimate and possible kind of happiness. Kollwitz was a bit on the liberal side (say, just to the left of Fidel Castro) and the Nazis booted her from her teaching position at the Academy of Arts in 1933 (she would then have been 66). She died just before the war ended.

My guidebook directed me to the Jewish Community Center, which is built on the foundation of what was once the best synagogue in Berlin. On *Reichkristallnacht* (November 9, 1938), however, the synagogue was torched and only a few chunks remained for incorporation in the community center. There is allegedly a sculpture out front that attempts to intimidate passersby into tolerance with a quotation from the Old Testament: "Let there be one law for the people and for the foreigners among you." I never got to see it because all hell broke loose on the street with sirens blaring from all directions and dozens of cops rolling up in vans and on motorcycles, snarling and yelling at traffic. My impulse was to hit the deck, but nearby Germans remained standing and were laughing at the police. Eventually a tiny motorcade of International Olympic Committee members cruised by, checking out the city. I suppose the committee learned that Berlin is perfectly safe if one is surrounded by 50 cops.

The final interesting spot on the tour was the Steinplatz, a perfectly symmetrical grassy park. At opposite ends of the park, also in perfect symmetry, are two memorials. One is to the "victims of National Socialism" and the other to the "victims of Stalinism." The first interesting thing about the Nazi monument is that it is built from a chunk of the torched synagogue I'd just been prevented from seeing. The second thing is that it is right next to the offices of Hoechst, once part of the I.G. Farben group, producers of the Zyklon-B gas made famous at Auschwitz. But to me the most interesting thing is the symmetry with the Stalinism monument. This was to be a recurring theme in Berlin: "We aren't like the Nazis and in any case the Nazis were no worse than a lot of other people, e.g. Stalin, the Russians in Eastern Europe, the Jews in Israel, the English in America, etc."

I hopped the S-Bahn mass transit system back to Jean & Carlos's plush embassy digs. The platforms and trains were filled with "no smoking" signs—and people smoking. Before you tell anyone to put out his cigarette, keep in mind that the trains are unventilated and packed with people who wear twice as much clothes and use half as much soap as Americans. On a warm day, you might want to pack a clothespin for your nose.

I spent the next days with John, an old friend from Boston. A white male graduating from a top school with a Ph.D. in science or engineering has his choice of career opportunities: (1) five years of post-doc purgatory before moving on to greater challenges, such as (2) hands-on optimization of small-scale urban transit systems (driving a cab). John, with a mathematics Ph.D., could only envy those with such vistas. Thousands of brilliant established Russian mathematicians, all with extensive records of publication in international journals, are applying for the same entry-level jobs in American universities as recent American graduates. John came to a German university two years ago and doesn't know when he'll return.

We started our program of megatourism at the Pergamon Museum, whose main treasure is a temple frieze lifted from the city state of Pergamon (currently part of Turkey). This was built around 170 B.C. and celebrates the triumph of the Greek gods over a random assortment of giants. Gods are depicted with calm, cold, collected expressions while they inflict all kinds of horrible injuries upon the giants who wear expressions of agony as they fall helplessly. John was

convinced that a slim 18-year-old blonde in the museum had been following us, but I managed to drag him away to the old Jewish quarter, which is one of the more peaceful spots in the city (it is not on the "old Prussian Berlin" or "wonderful modern Berlin" tours that Germans take, so we saw just a handful of foreign tourists).

Die Neue Synagoge on Oranienburger Strasse had a tired Oriental look and was under restoration. This building demonstrates the power of a single person of conscience. When the Nazis rolled around on *Reichkristallnacht* and set fire to the synagogue, a lone policeman decided that it was a valuable historical building. He got a fire brigade to put the fire out and then arranged an all-night guard for the place. His efforts were ultimately in vain, for the Nazis had learned something from the Turks in Athens: when you want something to be destroyed, e.g. the *Parthenon*, put a lot of explosive stuff inside and wait for an accident. Thus the building was used as an ammo dump and an Allied bomb blew the place to smithereens in 1943.

The nearby Jewish cemetery now contains only one gravestone: that of Moses Mendelssohn. The Nazis were aware that Jews, unlike Christians, preserve old graves indefinitely as sacred ground. They took special care therefore to not only smash all the tombstones, but also to dig up the bones of the 12,000 people buried there. Immediately to the left of the cemetery are two Soviet-sponsored reminders of Nazi days: a sculpture of emaciated concentration camp inmates and a tablet marking the collection point for 55,000 Berlin Jews on their way to labor and death camps. The rest of the quarter was devoid of tourist attractions, unless you count a 10-year-old boy hollering at us for crossing a tiny street against the "don't walk" signal.

We ventured deeper into East Berlin and were struck by the general shabbiness of the place. Every building facade is pock-marked with shell and bullet holes. It was easy to remember that the Red Army lost about as many soldiers in the Battle of Berlin as the U.S. Army lost in all of WWII fighting both the Japanese and Germans. Fighting was at such close range that artillery shells had to be refused to explode after flying only a block or two.

Even if the war damage were repaired, life in East Berlin would be far from sybaritic. The predominant car is the Trabbi, which makes a Volkswagen seem positively luxurious. None of the little shops had a cold drink for sale and it occurred to me that simple tasks can be very time-consuming here. For example, in any *boulangerie* in France one can get a sandwich, cold drink, and napkin. In Germany, buying the same items might involve visiting three stores. John ducked into a big new supermarket looking for limes or lime juice but found neither. He'd been looking all over northern Germany for weeks without success because German supermarkets only carry about 10-20% of the items an American supermarket might have. Ethnic food here is corn chips.

We stopped into the Humboldt University Physics Department so that John could use Internet, the worldwide network linking millions of computer users. East Germany must not have been all bad; hospitality at Humboldt reminded me of New Zealand. Herr Professor Doctor Thiele stopped what he was doing and walked us 100m down a corridor to some associates with a lame old IBM PC-clone. They quit their program, rebooted the machine for us, then waited patiently while John connected to his home computer in Bielefeld and read his mail. As we were walking out, Dr. Thiele showed us a vacuum deposition machine and posters derived from research papers. We were invited for coffee and everyone wanted to know about our touring program so they could recommend things and help us. They were knowledgeable about Nazi and Jewish sites and didn't seem surprised at our interests. A lab technician actually walked down three flights of stairs and across the street to get us to the natural history museum's reconstructed dinosaurs.

Just a block or two from the dinosaurs, we had our first Käthe Kollwitz flashback of the day: the East German monument to early German Communist Karl Liebknecht, whom Kollwitz had

portrayed following his murder by rightist thugs. We strolled past the Bertolt Brecht house and caught a bus to the sterile monumental Alexanderplatz. This ugly East German wasteland has been further despoiled by garish signs advertising Western products: Panasonic, Pioneer, Coca-Cola, etc. For five marks we rode to the top of the 360m high television tower (roughly the height of the World Trade Center, not as high as the towers in Moscow or Toronto). Here one can "sit on it and rotate" in a cafe with that good old surly Communist service: a request for a Coke, a liqueur, and some tapwater was met with refusal on the tapwater score. First our waitress said that they had no tapwater, but when pressed admitted they had some but couldn't serve it "for health reasons." Presumably she was referring to their financial health; they are perfectly happy to serve it to you heated slightly and with a teabag. Despite the shocking prices, indifferent service, and smoking clientele, the view was more than worth it. The difference between East and West Berlin was very evident from this vantage and the day just got sunnier with every hour.

After being whisked down from the tower, we walked up Unter den Linden toward the Brandenburg Gate. We got sidetracked at the Marx-Engels statue where John stuck a 100-mark note in Marx's hand for a photo. Our next Käthe Kollwitz flashback was The Neue Wache (new watch), the famous architect Schinkel's first big commission. It was supposed to celebrate victory over Napoleon and was designed as a guardhouse for the Kaiser's Palace across the street. (You can't see the Kaiser's Palace, which was bombed by the Allies and then pulled down by the anti-Royalist East Germans to make room for some kind of People's palace.) It looks kind of like a Roman Temple, which is perhaps why it became Germany's unknown soldier monument after the First World War. Hitler remade it slightly into a monument glorifying militarism and victorious Russians turned it into a monument to the victims of fascism, i.e., the Nazis.

As soon as the Russians cleared out, people agitated to turn the thing into yet another monument to the victims of Stalin, but eventually settled for a universalist monument to victims of all wars. A Kollwitz statue will be the centerpiece of the monument. Thus will the artist who fought against the government in 1933 posthumously assist today's German government in erasing the memory of the Nazi period.

We resolved to walk until we came to an S-Bahn station, but ended up stuck in the transitless wilderness of the Tiergarten, just past the lovely Soviet memorial to the heroic Red Army. A tough Russian soldier stands atop a semicircular colonnade, flanked by howitzers and two T-32 tanks. It must be pretty irritating to locals who drive by this all the time. Imagine a monument to B29 bombers in the middle of downtown Tokyo.

While we stood at a street corner, cluelessly leafing through various guidebooks, an Aryan goddess stopped on her bicycle and asked (in beautiful English) if she could help us. We explained our problem, and she told us that all S-Bahn stations were a 15-minute walk. She directed us past the Reichstag to the main Friedrichstrasse interchange. Meanwhile, she had utterly charmed us with her smile and friendliness. After she left, John couldn't stop talking about her perfect skin, "intelligent hair," and generally remarkable personality. He mentioned all the things we should have said to her to get her phone number and spend more time with her. I said that if we'd let an opportunity like that pass us by, we deserved to be single and lonely.

It was fixing to be a beautiful sunset on the Reichstag and I set up my tripod in the middle of a vast lawn for a photo.[2] History seemed palpable as I stood in front of the building whose burning provided Hitler with an excuse to declare a state of emergency. This was the beginning of Germany's quick slide from constitutional democracy to dictatorship and I thought about the

[2]The Reichstag contains an exhibit , "Questions on German History," that is very popular for public school trips and famous among the local diplomats for its whitewashing of the Nazi period. It was, closed, however, so we couldn't see for ourselves.

complacency with which Americans have given up so many civil rights in the name of the Drug War.

John and I S-Bahned to the Wannsee the next day and considered a walk down to Heinrich von Kleist's grave. This writer's death was called by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué "one of the most marvelous suicides of all time." In 1861, Max Ring wrote an allegedly superb tribute to Kleist that was placed here on a marble slab. However, we decided to skip the grave because the Nazis ripped up the tribute in 1936 (due to Ring having been Jewish) and replaced it with something boring.

Anxious to rest our flat fleet, we caught a tour boat to Potsdam under blue skies. Our cruise was narrated (in German only) by a man with an enthusiasm for detail. We learned the speed of the boat, the history of villas built by cousins of brother-in-laws of cousins of obscure German princes, the past and present uses of patches of forest and islands, all while breathing that famous refreshing Berlin air. Although the lake doesn't offer the dramatic scenery of, say, Lake Tahoe, it is remarkable to find such a peaceful beautiful place so close to a large city. As we passed the famous Villa am Grossen Wannsee (site of the January 20, 1942 Final Solution conference), our guide's fund of history dried up and it received only passing mention ("on the left is the Villa am Grossen Wannsee, on the right the beautiful sandy Wannsee beach").

The weather turned greyer and colder as we cruised under the famous Glienicker Bridge and learned about all the East-West spy exchanges held here, including that of U2 pilot Gary Powers and dissident Natan Scharansky. We put on more clothing and stayed on deck as we crossed back to former East Germany and its unmistakable air of shabbiness, rubble, and reconstruction. As we lounged on the deck amidst a group of older Germans, John remarked how pathetic it was that, at the ages of 29 and 30, we were living like retired people. I said that we should have brought a shuffleboard set.

We walked through Downtown Potsdam and over to Frederick the Great's *San Souci* (without a care) castle. Fred admired Louis XIV and built his gardens and palace in imitation of Versailles. Although the place offered fountains, serenity, vast lawns, broad avenues, hundreds of sculptures, immense palaces, something was hideously wrong. I was reminded of Rémy de Gourmont: *The copy of a beautiful thing is always an ugly thing. It is an act of cowardice in admiration of an act of energy.*

My favorite spot was the Chinese teahouse, where the ceiling paintings include a monkey bearing Voltaire's features. It seems that Voltaire was a house guest here for three years and he and the king parted on bad terms. A year later, the monkey showed up. People with money did more interesting things in the old days.

John caught a train back home to north-central Germany, and I met Jean and Carlos at the Deutsche Staatsoper (the Communist opera company) for a performance of *La Traviata*. This grand building with crystal-clear acoustics was completed in 1743 and houses only about half as many people as the Met. The Royal Air Force opened up the roof and redecorated the interior during the war then the place was rebuilt in the style and quality of a Marriott banquet room. When the curtain rose, there was nothing but a bare stage and a few sewn-together bedsheets where the Metropolitan Opera would have million dollar sets showing Paris better than it ever was.

The opera was a great window into East Germany. It looked as though they'd mustered up money to rebuild the place, albeit shabbily. Then they managed to get an orchestra to follow the conductor's commands and a group of singers with no obvious technical flaws (although they were the thickest-waisted Parisiennes you ever saw). Out of funds, they had to borrow sets and equipment from an American junior high school. Thus, when the gypsies were rolled out during

Flora's party, the creaking of their dancing platform drowned out their voices at times. Still, an $8 student ticket here beats sitting in the back of the Met for $20 with a telescope.

After a day of rest, I struggled over to Treptower Park's Soviet War Memorial, a dignified square kilometer of sculpture and open space. One enters through an arch ("Eternal fame to the heroes who fell for freedom and the liberation of their socialist homeland") and walks down a tree-lined avenue to a marble statue of Mother Russia. Turn left to two huge stone flags with 4m-high bronze soldiers in front and a football field-size area in back. The football field has white stone slabs on the sides and an 11m-high statue at the far end (a soldier holds a child in one hand and spears a swastika with a sword held in the other hand). Each slab is edged with a quote from Uncle Joe and faced with relief sculptures of various phases of the war. Under the big statue is a mausoleum with a socialist-realist mosaic surmounted with the words "today everyone recognizes that the Soviet people through its sacrificial struggle saved European civilization from the protagonists of the Fascist pogroms."

Although this monument was one of the most striking things I saw in all of Berlin, it was virtually untouristed. In fact, most of the West Berliners I spoke with had never heard of it. My hour at the monument was shared only by four older Russians and an English group, whose leader said "you are lucky to see it now because it will be gone in fifty years."

Anxious to see the German point of view, I stopped next at the Checkpoint Charlie museum, highlighting escape methods from Soviet-ruled East Germany. Newer rooms contain walls devoted to Gandhi in India and the struggle against Communism in the Warsaw Pact countries. At first these displays made sense to me, covering the common theme of "unwelcome guests in various countries." But then I wondered about the parallels that were being drawn. After all, the Czechs and Poles never planned to kill half the Russians and enslave the rest. I felt sorry for the 80 people killed trying to get through the Wall yet couldn't help thinking that it would have gone much harder for the Russians had Germany won the war.

In the evening, I joined a bunch of embassy staff for dinner in Kreuzberg, Berlin's Turkish/hip quarter. One of the diplomats spoke Turkish and had worked in our embassy there. Seen through his eyes, the neighborhood was astonishingly rich and peculiar. Many of the locals are super left-wing Turks or even Communist Kurds. Numerous signs supported Peru's Maoist Shining Path guerrillas. Someone had gotten up on a ladder and done a rather nice portrait of the recently arrested Shining Path leader in his prison stripes, 10m up the side of a building. Every little square was packed with Turkish families enjoying the warm evening. Children played together in the center and adults chatted on benches. Men wore Western suits, but their wives looked exotic in head scarves.

Once we stepped inside the restaurant, the Turks vanished to be replaced by long tables of raucous Germans laughing loudly and a bit drunkenly every 30 seconds or so. The menu was simple: roast chicken, roast chicken, or roast chicken. "Berlin is so interesting, you guys are really lucky to be stationed here, livin' large at taxpayer expense!" I remarked. "I like the city, but even after 15 years and speaking fluent German, I feel barriers with western Germans that I never felt with Italians, British, Turks, French, or Americans. Part of it is the smugness. For example, Germans will give you a long lecture about how much better they are at recycling than Americans. The truth is that their consumers are better but their industry is so much worse that the U.S. is better at recycling overall," noted an economics expert. "I've been having trouble dating here," complained a single fellow, "all the women look as though they just lost their best friend."

On the subway ride home I sat next to a really beautiful young woman with dark features and heavy silver jewelry. "Your English is remarkably good compared to most of the Germans I've met," I offered. "I'm not German. I'm Turkish!" she replied. "I was born here, but I'm not a

German citizen. My passport is Turkish and that's true sometimes even for third-generation immigrants." Why couldn't she get a German passport? "Oh, the laws are Byzantine, but I could get a German passport if I wanted one. I don't. I don't have that much affinity for German culture, to tell you the truth, and even if I did, Germans would never accept me as German."

My last full day in Berlin was a Saturday and it underscored a lot of my previous experiences in Germany. Stores can only legally open during certain hours, mostly coinciding with the hours that people work. Thus, the only time many people can shop is Saturday between nine and one. Imagine midtown Manhattan on the Saturday before Christmas and you'll have a fair idea of how crowded Berlin's main shopping district is every Saturday. Shopping is a special case of a general principle: *Only one way of life is sanctioned way in Germany*. There are prescribed times for shopping, eating, and working. Want to shop for a book after 6:30 at night? Drive to Switzerland. You'd like to have a late dinner? Drive to France. Fancy buying ingredients for ethnic food? Fly to the U.S. People who like the prescribed way of life find that everything is convenient for them. People who don't want to live that way are often unhappy and consider emigrating. I never fully understood why the U.S. has the world's lowest rate of emigration. Italy and France, for example, oftentimes seem like nicer places to live.[3] In Germany, however, the reason nobody leaves the U.S. hit me: it is impossible to be a misfit in America. Each of us can choose a culture, climate, landscape, working hours, shopping hours, etc.

Whilst traveling in third countries, I'd had some difficulty understanding prejudiced anti-American statements I'd heard from so many young West Germans, but spending time here cleared up some of my confusion. First of all, *older* Germans from both East and West like Americans because they compare us to the Russians. For young West Germans, however, history starts when they became ten years old. Among the ones who've never been to America, there is a common laundry list of negative prejudices. America itself is an string of impoverished ghettos separated by vast distances of sometimes attractive scenery punctuated by wasteful, polluting and inefficient factories. Americans are too selfish to help the poor. Americans as people are ignorant of geography, culture, and cuisine. Americans are loud and shallow. We get no credit for never having started a world war, enslaved and plundered our part of conquered Germany, nor rolled over Canada and Mexico and sent their citizens to the gas chambers.

My epiphany came on this crowded Saturday: *prejudiced Germans have only met American tourists in Germany*. American tourists in Germany are in a bad mood because (1) the Germans around them are in a bad mood, (2) the bizarre opening laws leave them without essential items when they need them, (3) they can't get the variety of food they're used to, (4) the country is crowded, and (5) the prices are shocking. New Zealanders love every nationality because even people who are miserable at home catch the contagious national happiness there; Germans dislike many nationalities because even people who are happy at home catch the contagious national tension there.

Some German prejudices can't be explained by my pet theory. I looked up "USA" in a German encyclopedia once to see if that were the source of the German belief that Americans are geography ignoramuses. The first picture was captioned "USA: Morain Lake in Banff National Park in the Rocky Mountains" (for those of you whose geography is as bad as the Germans think, Banff is a good 250 km into Canada). The next night I encountered a well-educated 25ish German woman whose dream was to visit Siberia. I told her about my plans to drive to Alaska and she looked very confused. It turned out that she thought Alaska was an island in the North Atlantic.

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[3] In 29 years I've only met one American who expressed a genuine preference for longterm life overseas and I love his reason. He once read a survey of Americans who lived near airports. More than 80% of the people reported that airplane noise bothered them when they were watching TV but only 10% said that it disturbed them while making love.

Feeling uncommonly proud of myself for having developed so many brilliant insights and for having successfully done a little pre-Prague shopping, I dropped into the Egyptian museum to see the bust of Nefertiti. This is allegedly the finest thing ever to be hauled out of ancient Egypt. It was very fine and beautiful to the modern eye, which is impressive in something that old, but Egyptian stuff looks pretty forlorn when it has been ripped out of context. Back out in front of the Schloss Charlottenburg I noted the huge line of German tour buses—this is where all the people who don't visit the Soviet War Memorial go. Jean and Carlos met me and we joined a guided tour of this palace. It encapsulates official tourist Berlin rather nicely. First, it is a mediocre copy of French styles and concentrates more on quantity than quality. Second, most of its original art, particularly the beautiful ceilings, were destroyed by Allied bombs. Third, the only way to see it was an overlong tour narrated *ad nauseam* only in German. The narration was so boring that we tuned it out and chatted with Vera, a super-German blonde, and Steve, her British boyfriend.

Vera was about to forsake her native land to join Steve in London. As soon as she said this, the drama of the 1993 European unification hit me: one can simply decide to live and work in any country now without having to romance any bureaucracy. I asked Vera if she didn't mind leaving her native country. "I don't really like Germans or Germany. Besides, now is a good time to leave." Because of the economic downturn? "No, because of the political situation. There is so much tension between factions and I don't like the hatred of immigrants."

Vera was about the 50th German I'd met who had mentioned emigration and by then I had decided that the country was divided into two groups: people who could never fit in anywhere that wasn't exactly like Germany, and people who could never fit in anywhere that was too much like Germany. Members of the first group would be appalled to find that most American restaurants don't have special glasses for different kinds of beer. Members of the second group are exemplified by Dr. Anton, my companion from Heathrow to Stuttgart. Anton had worked in hospitals in New Zealand, England and Germany. "I'm emigrating to New Zealand in January because people die happy there. If they're 60 and get cancer, they don't mind dying because they've lived 60 good years. Sixty-year-old Germans struggle bitterly for life because they've never been happy."[4]

We ate dinner at a pricey "Mexican" restaurant, with a choice of two quasi-Mexican dishes and 20 beers. Then we decamped to a party attended by a surprising number of South Americans of German descent. In a perverse twist on the U.S./England situation, they had come back to the Old World seeking economic opportunity. They reminded me of the super-patriot American immigrants of the 1920s who loved the U.S. with their heart and soul (was it Irving Berlin who said he loved to pay income tax?). When they found I was American, they vented their rage on the subject of the U.S.'s new Holocaust Memorial. They vehemently concurred with the prevailing German opinion that it should have been balanced by another memorial to the wondrous achievements of the new democratic Germany. I quipped that they could donate one of their monuments to the victims of Stalinism but nobody laughed.

Despite only having scratched the surface of an enigmatic city, I decided to move on to Prague by train, which is a wonderfully romantic journey. For about an hour one rolls through Eastern German countryside that might best be described as "Midwestern flat." In these first weeks of spring, the fields were green or carpeted with yellow flowers and many trees sported lovely white blossoms. The main difference from the U.S. was the absence of modern cars and farm equipment. Also the houses are rather old, brown, and decrepit. Rolling into Dresden was fascinating. Berlin, especially West Berlin, doesn't have large barren spaces and haphazard

[4]Anton was also notable for his folk wisdom. A reference to a Black Forest girl with a heart of gold brought this response: Ein Mann ein Wort. Eine Frau ein Wörterbuch. ("A man a word; a woman a dictionary.")

redevelopment. It is therefore a bit tough to imagine how thoroughly the city was bombed. Dresden, however, still looks like a wasteland with a few restored or at least remaining houses separated by large empty spaces. Some of those spaces are punctuated by tall plain apartment or office buildings, but the overall effect looks neither charming nor planned.

After bomb-scarred Dresden, the storybook valley of the Elbe was particularly beguiling. Our train traveled down this river for about three hours. The German side is studded with fine old houses and occasional towns nestled into side canyons. The walls of the valley are often quite steep, with sheer rock faces 75m high in some places. Eastern Germans bicycled along the road on the other bank and the river was ever so flat and lazy. Once we got to the Czech Republic, the river became much more industrial and houses lost their charm.

Germany is great preparation for Prague. First, although the Czechs heartily dislike Germans, one often encounters waitresses who speak German but not English (I was glad for once that I hadn't learned German too well; my accent and mistakes were a plus here). Second, the filthy cars and cigarette smoke in Germany toughened up my lungs for the even filthier cars driven by the Czechs. Third, German officialdom takes itself so seriously that the Czechs seem positively Italian by comparison. Fourth, the aggressive German drivers cushioned the blow of arriving in a city where the speed limit is 100 kph on all streets after 11:00 pm.

A quick walk along the Vltava or Moldau (yes, the same river that inspired Smetana) bewitched me with unexpected beauty at every corner. A lot of unmarked buildings here have more grace to them than all of the tourist sights in Berlin combined. Furthermore, the whole atmosphere of the city is light. One sees lovers embracing and people eating on the streets, rare sights indeed in Berlin. London and Paris are wonderful, of course, but 95% of the people one sees in those cities are rushing off to do something productive. It always makes me feel lazy after a few days. In the center of Prague, however, one sees mostly tourists or very relaxed locals.

Upon reaching the famous Karlov Most (Charles Bridge), I knew that I'd reached tourist heaven. Visa cash advances, pizza, guidebooks, sketch artists, schlock artists, money changers, all open for business on a Sunday evening. The medieval bridge is reserved for pedestrians and is thronged with deadbeats from many nations. They strum their guitars and sing Czech and American folk music. Imagine Harvard Square on steroids.

After a couple of hours in Prague, I'd already noticed what every other male tourist had: Czech women are stunning. They tend to be tall, blond, slender, have interesting features, and are a bit proud and aloof. They won't boldly meet your eye like women in France or Italy, but it would be unfair to call them cold. In fact, the unhappiest person in Prague is probably an ambassador who shall remain nameless. He's single. He's got the mansion, he's got the servants, he's got the big car. His misfortune is that the country he represents might be embarrassed if he were seen running around town with any of the locals. Anyway, you won't forget that Paulina Porizikova is Czech; every tenth woman here might be her sister.

All alone in Prague, I really appreciated how easy it was to meet people, especially other tourists. Everyone is relaxed and at his or her best. On my first evening stroll, I met two Czechs, seven Americans, and a smattering of Europeans. This is the world's best city for practicing languages. In just one day, I spoke English to the Dutch tourists, French to the French, German to get food, Italian to the Italians, even a bit of Hebrew to an Israeli and a few words of Japanese to a couple of stunned Osakans.

Despite spending most of my time socializing, I managed to see a lot of Prague's tourist treasures on my very first day. Praguers were early Protestants and prone to hurling Catholic officials out of windows or off of bridges. The Jesuits were sent in to awe and threaten the citizens back to Catholicism and dotted the city with Baroque splendors such as St. Nicholas. This church would

have kept Moses busy for awhile; huge golden idols hover above each chapel and graven images cover the walls.

As I walked up to the renowned Prague Castle, from which Václav Havel continues a centuries-old tradition of Czech governance, the guard was changing with a flourish of brass. The castle is a collection of walled-in buildings on top of a hill, the most notable of which is St. Vitus Cathedral. My second favorite feature of the cathedral is an Art Nouveau stained glass window that was even financed by an insurance company and shows the psalm "Those who Sow in Tears Shall Reap in Joy."

My favorite part of the cathedral was something I'd have missed completely without the Cadogan guide: St. John Nepomuk's tongue. John was hurled into the river in 1383 for appointing an abbot against King Wenceslas IV's wishes. Three centuries later the Jesuits were casting about for a Prague-base saint and invented the following tale: that the King had demanded John relate what the Queen had confessed to him, and that John went to his death rather than betray her confidence. In 1715 a canonization committee exhumed John's body and found that his tongue was "throbbing with life" and still growing; he was canonized in 1729. Although there are numerous parts of dead people that are available for worship around Prague, the tongue was removed in the 1980's after further examination revealed that it was in fact a desiccated brain. John has a 1700 kg (as much as a full-size Chevrolet) solid silver tomb with beautiful Baroque figures of angels surrounding the swooning saint.

One of the biggest draws of the Prague castle is the Golden Lane, lined with tiny colorful houses. They didn't do much for me, not even one where Kafka lived for four months (he spent his whole life in Prague so that practically every other building has some Kafka story). The house was rented by his sister Ottla, who was exempted from wartime anti-Jewish laws because of her German husband. After her sisters and their husbands were hauled off to the Lodz ghetto, she became less sold on Aryan culture and divorced her husband. Ottla was sent first to Theresienstadt, then volunteered to escort a children's train to Auschwitz where she died.

I walked down the hill to the Old Town Square—armed with my Cadogan guide to Prague—and found it rich in history. Here was the balcony from which the communist state was announced and then cheered every year thereafter, there was the place where Protestant nobles were beheaded, along the east edge was the church where Tycho Brahe is entombed. The square looks peaceful today, but it has been the site of numerous bloodbaths. The most recent was May 8, 1945, a week after Hitler's suicide and the same day people in Paris and New York were celebrating V-E day. Prague was actually the last European battlefield of WWII. Three days earlier, Prague had risen against the Nazis and, in part of a battle that left 5000 Czechs dead, the Germans obliterated one wing of the town hall with a tank. It was two more days before the Russians liberated the town (US forces could have gotten there earlier, but stood idle so as not to breach the Yalta agreement).

My next stop was the old Jewish quarter containing a few remains of a community dating back at least to the 10th century. Jews were spread out on both sides of the river originally, but in 1179 the Church announced that Christians should avoid contact with Jews, by either moating or walling them in. Jews were locked in at night and all through Easter/Passover. Despite some pogroms and banishments, the Prague ghetto was a center of mysticism and Jewish thought. In 1784, Emperor Joseph II opened the ghetto and Jews with money or ability moved out (much as middle class blacks abandoned U.S. inner cities in the 1960's, leaving them today with just half their 1960 population). The ghetto became a sparsely-inhabited slum and nearly all the old buildings were razed to make room for broad streets and Art Nouveau buildings. Only six synagogues, the town hall, and a cemetery were spared and these ended up being selected by Hitler for a postwar "Exotic Museum of an Extinct Race."

Everyone had told me how great the cemetery was, with its tombstones practically piled on top of one another. Consequently, it was a disappointment. Not only did it look just as I'd imagined, but it was packed with Italian and French tourists. Unlike the Germans, the Czechs have developed their Jewish quarter into a major tourist attraction and the resulting lack of solitude inhibits quiet reflection.

Within the cemetery is the Pinkasova synagogue. After the war, someone painted the walls with the names, birthdates, and deathdates of the 77,297 Czech Jews killed by the Germans. The Communists didn't take very good care of Hitler's Jewish museum and this synagogue was no exception. After the Yom Kippur War, they ripped out the names and even installed some anti-Israel exhibits in this area. Artists are currently painstaking painting the names back in.

Although I didn't see the museum containing exhibits of children's art from concentration camps (it was closed for "technical reasons"—this is a popular expression in Prague museumdom but I never figured out what it meant), the Nazi collection of Jewish stuff from all over Europe was nothing to write home about. Let's face it: the prohibition on idolatry and the sheer poverty of European Jewry prevented them from ever making anything very interesting.

In the evening, I met Rebecca, Becky, Michelle, and Angela (all Americans flexing their Delta Airlines employee benefits) at a marionette version of Don Giovanni. This combines two big Prague traditions: Don Giovanni, which was premiered here, and puppetry. It was fun if you knew the story well and didn't mind expressions that were, well, wooden. Being in the company of four attractive women wasn't bad either, although Rebecca was just recovering from having her wallet stolen (this is a familiar lament among Prague tourists).

I spent the next day lazily roaming through Prague's innumerable parks and gardens and ended up back at the castle. My favorite part of the castle is the window from which two Catholic officials were hurled by angry noblemen. The Church maintains that the Virgin Mary came down with wings and flew them to safety; eyewitnesses say that they landed in a dungheap. I had a long conversation with a 50ish Czechwoman in the tourist information office. She was sick and tired of people confusing her wonderfully advanced country with such backwaters as Poland. In fact, she maintained that Czechs were better educated in science and technology than Americans. I conceded that their subways and trams were remarkably efficient (and either they are better ventilated than their German counterparts or the Czechs are better showered), but honesty compelled me to note the unfortunate resemblance between Czech cars and American lawnmowers.

My next encounter was with 25 Italian schoolgirls on their senior trip abroad. You don't know the meaning of exuberance until you've met 25 18-year-old girls who are thrilled to discover that an American speaks their language. They surrounded me and my head was spinning from trying to remember my Italian, remember their names, and look at them all at once.

In the evening, I had dinner with Yves, Fanny and Corinne, three refined Bretons. Fanny and Corinne pretended to consider our opinion, but it was clear which sex was going to choose the restaurant. They picked an established place that was actually listed in their guidebook. Such places generally have the rude service the predates the revolution and we were not disappointed. The waiter was so curt that we just had to laugh. Dinner conversation was relaxed and mostly in English. That is something I really like about the French I've met: if there is one English speaker in a crowd they will all speak English, even to each other, out of politesse.

A perfect April morning heralded the day that best typifies my experience in Prague. I sallied forth to the main train station in hopes of retrieving my bike. Taking a bike with you on a German train is very difficult and getting it across an international border is impossible; the bike must be shipped separately. It turned out that I was importing my bike to the Czech Republic,

and that I had to go to the customs office. Of course, the ten people in front of me had stacks of documents for importing cars, radioactive medical isotopes, etc. I stood in line for 45 minutes. It is incredible sometimes to see the two cultures here. One is the usual Western tourist culture, which lubricates a smooth journey from the airport to your downtown hotel, then out to dinner and sightseeing. The other is the old imperial bureaucracy of which Kafka wrote so eloquently. This culture flourished under the Communist regime and is alive and well at the train station: no one thought to separate ordinary tourists with a single bag to claim from businessmen importing tens of thousands of dollars of stuff.

In a country as exotic as the Czech Republic, almost any situation can be educational, and this one proved to be rather fortuitous. Behind me was Arnost, a Czech architect who had applied for foreign travel every year for sixteen years under the Communist regime. Finally, in 1984, he was given permission to travel to Denmark to see buildings. He stayed there and has been working as an architect ever since. Unfortunately, recently the market for architects has gone sour. "My boss told me that there wasn't even enough room for Danish architects these days and that I would have to leave." I told him that I'd always thought of Scandinavians as having such well-ordered societies. "They probably did, but as soon as a lot of Eastern Europeans arrived, prejudice developed quickly." How had he adapted to Danish culture? "I wanted to get married, but most Danish women live only for themselves; they aren't ready to take care of a family. There's isn't much of a Czech community; we tend to melt into the surrounding culture. Most of my friends were actually Polish immigrants."

We also chatted with the friendly medical isotope importer who ducked outside for a cigarette. Attitudes toward smoking here are very different from Germany. First of all, Czechs seem to observe "no smoking" signs. Second, it seems to be rude here to smoke in front of non-smokers. Finally, Germans think cigarette smoke is positively healthful, but this fellow said he never smoked inside his house so as not to expose his children.

When Arnost and I got to the front of the line, we were told that our bikes were on the other side of town at the Holesovice station. I kept my good humor, but Arnost was outraged that his home country could be so inefficient. I said that he'd been spoiled by Denmark and perhaps could not live happily here after all, especially on the $300/month that he was expecting to be paid.

When we got to Holesovice, the baggage office had arbitrarily closed for lunch (people get up at 5:00 and start work at 6:30 so this should have come as no surprise). We toured around the upper floors of the station to find someone in authority, but everyone told us we would just have to wait. By the time we got back downstairs, the office was magically open again and we presented our tickets. The man said that we should have gotten a stamp back at the main station and that we'd have to go back. Arnost pleaded with him in Czech and somehow our bikes were set free. Mine was in a box padded out with excess clothing and weighed about 25 kg. Getting it home on the metro and then up five flights of stairs was enough to make me regret having brought the bike from America in the first place.

After assembling the bike, I headed down Sokolska Street, a one-way four-lane city street that the Czechs somehow regard as a superhighway and over the Nuselsky Most, a large modern bridge about 1 km long spanning a dramatic valley filled with old houses. Just to be spinning along the street with a blue sky overhead and a fine wind in my face made me forget all of the travails associated with schlepping the bike.

The Vysehrad castle would have been a rather hot and tedious excursion on foot, but was marvelous on the bike. In America, someone would have thought to put up a "no bikes" sign, but there aren't many bikes here yet and restrictions seem to be few. I rode down the hill to Plzenska where I bought apples and, I am ashamed to admit it, a meal at McDonald's. This was my first stop at McDonald's during this entire European trip. I justified it by saying that it would

be a cultural experience to see how McDonald's and Czech culture mix. The result is just like one of the drug-money-laundering McDonald's in Miami: prices are low, the food is greasy, and nobody speaks English.

I then rode up to Mozart's villa and the falling-apart stadium complex. The Communists used to have bizarre synchronized gymnastics in the stadium, the world's largest, with 160,000 performers and 220,000 spectators. The stadium shares a hilltop with a model Eiffel tower and a variety of innocent diversions such as a mirror maze. Heading back toward the castle I was distracted by Hanneke and Elske, two Dutch sisters who invited me to join them in a cafe. Weren't they happy to be in a city where everyone is smiling? "We were just saying to each other how unhappy people here look compared to Amsterdam. Your standards are warped after three weeks in Germany," they laughed.

After parting from Elske and Hanneke, which I was indeed loathe to do, I biked downhill to the Karlov Most where I spied the best-looking mountain bike I'd seen in Europe, a superdeluxe aluminum Scott with Rock Shox and XT components. Ivo, the proud owner, makes his living doing commercial art for advertising and lives to mountain bike and paint fine art. I asked him where I could find a bike part and he responded by saying "follow me." Ivo took off down the packed-with-pedestrians bridge at about 15 kph. His if-you-don't-like-the-way-I-drive-get-off-the-sidewalk biking style did not seem to surprise many Czechs. After all, this is the way they drive their cars.

Speaking of cars, I was shocked by the number of brand-new Mercedes on the streets of Prague. It was sickening enough in America to see a doctor drive by in a hunk of sheet metal worth four years salary to the average worker. I wondered how Czechs feel when they see a businessman get so fat from just a few years of the free market that he can afford the same car, worth about 50 times the average annual salary here.

I rode home to shower and then had dinner with Leona, a 19-year-old Czech from the countryside. We'd met on the Karlov Most my first night in Prague where she told me that she'd come here to learn English and work as a secretary. Taking her out to dinner I felt a bit like George Darrow in Edith Wharton's *The Reef*. Darrow is a 35ish American who goes to Paris to meet a woman he loves. He gets a telegram while on the train telling him not to come, but he has arranged time off work and hence decides to go anyway. On the train, he meets Sophy Viner, a beautiful 20-year-old who is going to visit friends. Sophy's friends have left Paris so Darrow puts her up in his hotel and starts to show her around the city. Things that seem uninteresting to his jaded eyes look wondrous to hers and her enthusiasm proves infectious.

Leona had never had Chinese food, so I took her to the nearby Peking restaurant. There were no Chinese in evidence, either as staff or customers, and some of the food was barely recognizable as Chinese (they served rolls, for example). If I'd been alone, it would have been a disappointment, but I had fun teaching Leona to eat with chopsticks and learning about her world. She gets up at 5:00, is working at 6:30, and is ready to swim or run by 2:30. Leona spends her afternoons playing guitar or singing folksongs with her friends. In the evenings she attends English class. Leona didn't have anything nasty to say about anyone or anything, not even about the Russians who made her learn their hellishly complex language for eight years. Yet when I told her how happy I was to be able to speak some German, she said flatly "I don't like Germans." Evidently the numerous German tourists are not doing much to heal old wounds.

Towards the end of the evening, I didn't feel like Darrow anymore. Due to my age and privileged birth I had a wider experience of the world, but Leona had the absolute authority of a beautiful woman. I felt like a *Bonfire of the Vanities* Master of the Universe in the Chinese restaurant, like an equal partner in the hip cafe afterwards, and like a bewildered child at the end of the evening.

"You'll pry my bike from my cold, dead hand"—that's how I felt on my last day in Prague. Not only was I able to ride through 20 miles of "real Prague" neighborhoods and visit an obscure Renaissance palace, but I even biked a downtown walking tour from the Cadogan guide that included the famous *Bambino di Praga*. The *Bambino* is a wax infant Jesus said to perform miracles for those with cash to spare. The infant is pretty well fixed, being particularly venerated throughout the Hispanic world, and has scores of fine costumes from all over the world (even one from Communist North Vietnam).

More tourists would be well-advised to stop and worship the *Bambino*: just outside the church, a Frenchwoman stopped me to ask, in excellent English, directions to her embassy. She'd had her money and papers stolen. I got off my bike and accompanied her for the two blocks.

On the Karlov Most, I met the Italian girls again, which was like getting an extra dose of sunshine. Ariana had found a picture-with-a-python entrepreneur mid-bridge and was posing with a five-meter-long snake around her neck. Knowing that they were all the same age, I was struck by the contrast between Christina, mature and seductive, and some of the others, slight and childlike. They demanded to know why I wasn't married. I said "I'm waiting to meet the right Italian girl."

While attempting to hold two sausage sandwiches, one Coke, and one mountain bike, I was greeted familiarly by two Danish girls. "Do we know each other?" I asked. They said "Of course, you are the German teacher from our hotel!" I laughed "Ich spreche Deutsche aber nicht zehr gut!" They insisted "you aren't a teacher of German, but a teacher from Germany." Only after I took off my helmet were they convinced that I wasn't from Germany. "That's better that you are American anyway; we really don't like Germans very much." I wondered how Europeans could ever truly unite given so many old and new cross-border wounds.

As the red glow of the sunset melted the Baroque palaces along the Moldau, I met Hanneke and Elske at the Czech Philharmonic. Three dollars bought a ticket in the 15th row of the orchestra, in between two friendly attractive Czechwomen who translated the program notes for me. When the orchestra came out, I exclaimed that it was all white males. A retired Czech gentleman sitting behind us smiled with satisfaction: "that is why they are good." Despite their politically incorrect composition, they played a challenging program as well as my own Boston Symphony Orchestra. The acoustics in the elegant hall are marvelous, mostly because is has only half as many seats as the newer American halls and everyone is close to enough to get good sound.

Afterwards, we three went to the main square to sit in a cafe and chat about the concert, culture and American vs. European life. On the way, I mentioned that Dvorak had so loved the New York subway that he refused to ride in his chauffeured limousine. Elske asked me if it was true that only poor people ride the NY subway now. I said "yes, but in New York anyone making less than $100,000/year is considered poor."

Elske is one of those women who drives men to distraction with sheer indifference. Let a woman give a man her heart and soul unreservedly and he'll soon take her for granted. But if a woman holds herself back, a man will go to extreme lengths to bring a sparkle to her eyes. He'll do this day after day because every time he succeeds he gets a feeling of accomplishment.

Elske is a hard-working medical student and hadn't ever been to the U.S. She disarmingly asked "Why would I want to visit the U.S.?" I was nonplused. I'd met people who hated the U.S. I'd met people who loved the U.S. But I'd never met anyone who was simply indifferent to the country that draws more tourists and immigrants than any other. I'm not sure if this reflects my American or my male bias, but my first thought was of size: "Hey, we've got three lakes that are substantially larger than Holland!"

Images of Disneyworld, the canyons of the Southwest, bears in Alaska, vast art museums, Henry James's Boston, Vermont foliage, New York skyscrapers, San Francisco vistas, the Rocky Mountains, and the Oregon Coast flashed before my eyes. It was just like watching a TV station sign off the air except that everything looked unimpressive and deflated under Elske's cold, unwavering gaze. Rather than try to stretch words to describe the beauty and variety I'd just seen inside my eyelids, I moved to an intellectual plane.

I told Elske and Hanneke that Americans are curious about Europe because that is a source of so many of our cultural ideas. By the same token, Europe now gets many ideas from America and they might be curious to see the source. For example, America was the most thoroughly middle class society for parts of the 19th century and a lot of European modernity is modeled after the States. Big city life and problems came first to America and then to Europe.

We also discussed chauvinism and nationalism. They proudly noted that they weren't chauvinistic about things Dutch. I said "So what? I'm not chauvinistic about Massachusetts. You are chauvinistic about Europe, which you see as the center of things and the only really interesting place, but not about your tiny little corner. Americans, if you leave out a few Texans and Californians, are not chauvinistic about their little states, but do feel there is a richness to the entire U.S."

It occurred to me that Europeans don't have a visceral feel for the multiculturalism of the U.S. They can get a tourist's appreciation of authentic cultures quickly, but don't have the day-to-day contact with watered-down cultures that Americans have. I said that seeing my Chinese friends every day and learning what concerns they and their families have teaches me different things about Chinese culture than a tourist trip to China might.

My sales pitch wasn't effective, for Elske would not consider visiting the U.S. Instead, she was going to Tanzania for the summer to play Albert Schweitzer. I was stunned. It is so easy for an American to forget that, in Europe, doctors are paid ordinary salaries and people study medicine because they have a genuine desire to help others.

Feeling that I hadn't sufficiently beaten them up about how small Holland was, I proceeded to question Elske's utopian feminism, which is not quite as unfashionable in Holland as in the U.S. She said that in fifty years there would be no differences between men and women. I said that was absurd and that women were more frequently "feet on the ground" types, content with simple things if they did the job. It was men who were likely to have crazy, risky ideas. "Would a woman have said 'let's take an enormously heavy bridge and just hang it from two steel wires'?" I asked. "A woman might have noted that there were plenty of lower risk bridge designs and that, in any event, one could take a boat across or just stay on one side. Women are right, of course, as illustrated when the Tacoma Narrows suspension bridge collapsed shortly after it was completed. However, society only advances when crazy ideas are refined into better ways of doing things." This kind of sexism would have gotten me knifed back home in Cambridge, but Elske took it all with good humor and we parted in fine spirits.

Between talking past midnight, disassembling my bike, packing, and having to get up at 5:30, I only got a few hours of sleep. Putting the bike on the plane was far easier than in Boston and things went fairly smoothly until I tried to change my crowns back to dollars. One can't do this without the original receipt from the first change. However, as I tried to auction the money off among the departing passengers, the duty free shop manageress took pity on me and opened up. I was the first person in Czech history to buy duty free goods with crowns, as this was the first day that they were accepting Czech currency and the shop did not officially open until 8am. My bag swelled with about 2 kg. of Lindt chocolate.

The two-hour flight to Heathrow blossomed into a six-hour ordeal thanks to fog and running out of gas while circling. Shelly, sitting in the aisle seat, entertained me with his 38-year-old single Jewish New Yorker's perspective: "Eight million people in NY, eight million stories. Eight million people in LA, one story." Shelly quit his job at a big NY law firm because he couldn't stand the people he was meeting, especially the women who'd been reduced to materialism and savagery by having to live the NY yuppie life. "I'm despairing of finding a sane North American Jewish woman, except among the orthodox. The secular ones have been on too many dates with dentists. They become so starved for experience that they run off on wild flings in Italy or into bad marriages."

At Heathrow, I had to dodge crowds of wool-suited executives railing at hapless airline employees for ruining their million-dollar deals. I flew standby on the last flight to JFK and then standby again on the last flight to Boston, arriving at my front door 25 hours after getting into the taxi in Prague.

Epilogue

A couple of weeks after I returned, I showed slides from the trip at my house. My friend Ted brought a couple visiting from Stuttgart and they kept their opinions to themselves until he was driving them home: "We liked the slides, but it would be unthinkable in Germany to speak about the Nazi period except in the most serious terms." Ted said he didn't find the tone inappropriate and a discussion ensued. Frustrated that he wasn't getting his point across, the professor said "Well, what if there had been a Jew present?" When Ted told him that he was Jewish, that at least 20 of the 50 guests were Jewish, and that the host/photographer/narrator was Jewish, the Germans were stunned into silence.

Ted and I had a good laugh about this later, particularly since one of my friends is Orthodox and was wearing a yarmulke. When we stopped laughing, I realized that complete ignorance of Jewish culture would be the natural consequence of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust. (The Jewish population of Germany reached its peak in 1920 at 500,000. By 1937, 365,000 Jews remained and only 17,000 were left at the end of the war.) It struck me then how much Jews and other minorities were The Other in Europe.

In America, a television portrayal of a homeless man in New York City provokes sympathy from 90% of the viewers. "I might be a racist and that guy is black, but he's an American and he sleeps in the street. We should do something to help him," is a typical response. Starving Somalis or the Coast Guard packaging up a bunch of Haitians into a shipping container excites very little sympathy: "There are a lot of wretched people on this planet and we can't help all of them." What's the difference? The Haitians and Somalis aren't part of our family.

Just because we're a family doesn't mean there isn't hatred. In fact, no matter how racist one is, one probably has hated one's sister more than any abstract person of another race. But even if you hated your sister more than anyone else in the world, would you put her in a Concentration Camp?

Minorities in Europe, however, are not protected by any feeling of family. A few times I asked good-natured open-minded Germans whether they thought the woman on the subway was correct, i.e., was it possible for a 2nd or 3rd-generation Turkish immigrant to become "truly German" in any sense? The idea was so absurd to them that they looked bewildered at first. None of them felt the Turks were inferior, but none felt any kind of bond with them either. Nor is this phenomenon restricted to Germany. I met a young Danish university student who deplored the anti-immigrant prejudice of his fellow Danes. "Of course, many of these immigrants make matters worse by not converting to Christianity. I'm not a believer myself, but

that is the religion of our country." Third World countries are no better; Muslim Arab immigrants to Muslim Arab Egypt can expect to wait 125 years to get citizenship.

The most valuable thing I learned visiting Berlin and Prague was an appreciation for what I'd always taken for granted: a person can show up on our shores and expect to become "one of the family" after a few years.

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