

FOREWORD TO THE VIGNETTES

When I was a teen ager, Eastern European folkloric music took me by storm, instead of the Beatles, Iron Butterfly and other such groups. Why was it important to me? There must have been a family tradition of an Eastern European “je ne sais quoi” which later determined a sort of “Drang nach Osten” but not at all in the sense of German expansionism towards the East, but rather a fascination with these unknown places which seemed so alien and different (particularly during the times of the Eastern Bloc when we thought of those countries and their people as pure unadulterated evil.) Spending time in these areas made one realise that the people had two legs and and arms, could smile, could get angry and also had secrets, their loved ones and the ones they didn’t particularly love. Outside of the politcal and ideological sphere, these people seemed to be people. But then we were told that they were “pretending” and were only waiting to pounce on us. It is true that they had to hide things, as the regimes in Eastern Europe were very controlled and people had to really mind their t’s and i’s, otherwise they could pay a high price. While this concerned Eastern Europe, visiting the Balkans and further South in the Balkans and towards Greece and Turkey one was immediately fascinated by the differences and great hospitality that one encountered.

What I am really saying is that these early ‘discoveries’ of differences, ways of being, different ways of hiding things to protect oneself from politics, and more - caused these people to be ‘different’ yet in other ways they were so similar to us, even though they expressed their emotions more subtly at times and/or differently. In Kindergarden, I was learning French because classes were in French, and was also learning Dutch as my Gran only spoke to me in Dutch (and my English suffered as a result!), we were taught a little song that was meant to make sure that one knew how “we plant cabbage, in our own way...” It was only much later that it struck me as bizarre and constraining, as finding other ways of ‘planting cabbage became exciting, a challenge and a quest!

Bridging differences, trying to understand the other side of the story, or the person’s perception of a similar experience being viewed in completely different terms can be quite challenging at times. Hence the need to find, understand and see the other point of view, so that miscommunication and gross misunderstandings are not the norm or the desired result.

This idea of ‘bridging’ has always been with me, probably because my parents split up, and in my head as a 3 or 4 year old, I must have felt that I was responsible for my pa pushing me ‘out’ while both my parents were responsible for their misunderstandings and incomprehension...

My travels brought me extraordinary moments, wonderful sights, delightful people who shared genuinely and long lasting friendships, historical facts, viewed from other angles. Without being immodest, I think i learned a lot from these travels and shared moments. I relish them. Learning other languages forces another ‘Weltanschauung’ i.e. another world view (a poor translation). Bringing this concept of ‘Weltanschauung’ is opening a great can of worms, as a number of great German philosphers of the 19th century have battled this concept while others defended it. I merely use it to show the ‘bridging’ and being able to get out of one’s shoes and see the other side of things. When speaking another language, one learns (hopefully!) to see the world in a different way, from one’s own, as the descriptions of things, actions etc. often do not have the same semantic overlap that exist in one’s own.

To my mind, the Silk Roads of Old, were an amazing network of roads, routes, seaways (depending on the epoch) and brought considerable wealth, immaterial and material due to the massive exchanges between peoples, regions and countries. A few historians familiar with these Silk Roads have stated that without them, the Renaissance in Europe would not have emerged out of the Middle Ages. Again, this is only to highlight the fact that exchanges of ideas can result in amazing discoveries.

VIGNETTE - APRIL 1967 - APRIL 2022

FROM A CAR TRIP FROM LAUSANNE TO GREECE AND BACK. Spring of 1967

1. Stopping in Prishtina, Kosovo. April 1967

As we arrived in Prishtina, in the evening, everything was dark in the capital of Kosovo. It was a very small place then. We found the only major hotel quite easily. It was a smallish and pleasant country type hotel. We got our rooms (one for the two ladies, and one for myself).

We took our bags up to our rooms, and returned downstairs to go to the dining room for dinner. I can't remember what was on the menu, but it must have been tasty enough. In the dining room, a young fellow was having dinner too, right next to us or rather we were directed to the table next to his. A kindness linked to the sense of hospitality prevalent in those parts. We engaged in polite conversation. At the end of the meal, the ladies wanted to rest, so I accompanied them upstairs with the thought of going back to the dining room and meet this chap whose name was Gençi Nimani.

I engaged in conversation with him and his English turned out to be rather good and after the polite pleasantries, we started talking about other things. After a while, Genti asked whether I wanted to see some Prishtina night life! I immediately agreed, as it was my purpose to get a better feel of the place despite the language barrier, as I didn't speak Albanian nor Serbo-Croat which was the lingua franca of the then Yugoslav Federation.

We walked for a while and arrived at a rather darkish place, which was a bar cum disco as I understood. It was mostly deserted. It must have been around 9 or 10 PM. One chap at the bar if my memory serves me right. As time passed, some young men arrived, friends and or family maybe? Some drink was offered, and later a number of tables would be joined to form a good surface. I wasn't sure why that was happening. Suddenly, some traditional local music was blaring out of some speakers hidden somewhere, and the group of young men decided to climb on the tables and have a ball of a time (sorry for the pun!) and dance in the traditional form. I was dumbfounded and found it fabulous at the same time, as I had never seen such spontaneous dancing on tables! In Switzerland one was not prone to see such scenes in the late 60's!! Sadly, the next day, we had to depart, but luckily had exchanged addresses with Gençi. We corresponded after I had returned to Switzerland as he had moved to the UK to improve (his already pretty good English). At first rather friendly and the more time he spent in the UK he became more distant. After a while we lost contact.



Tirana April 2022

In Tirana I had the privilege of meeting a young and very prominent architect and urbanist among his many skills and specialisms, thanks to an introduction by a mutual friend. He originally is from Kosovo, and travels back and forth regularly between the two countries. It was during an evening meal (it was the second time we met) that we spoke about various items connected to the arts, the gallery I had in Penang from 2015 till 2019, architecture some ideas that John Berger expounded in his “Ways of Seeing” first published in 1972 after his BBC TV series on art.

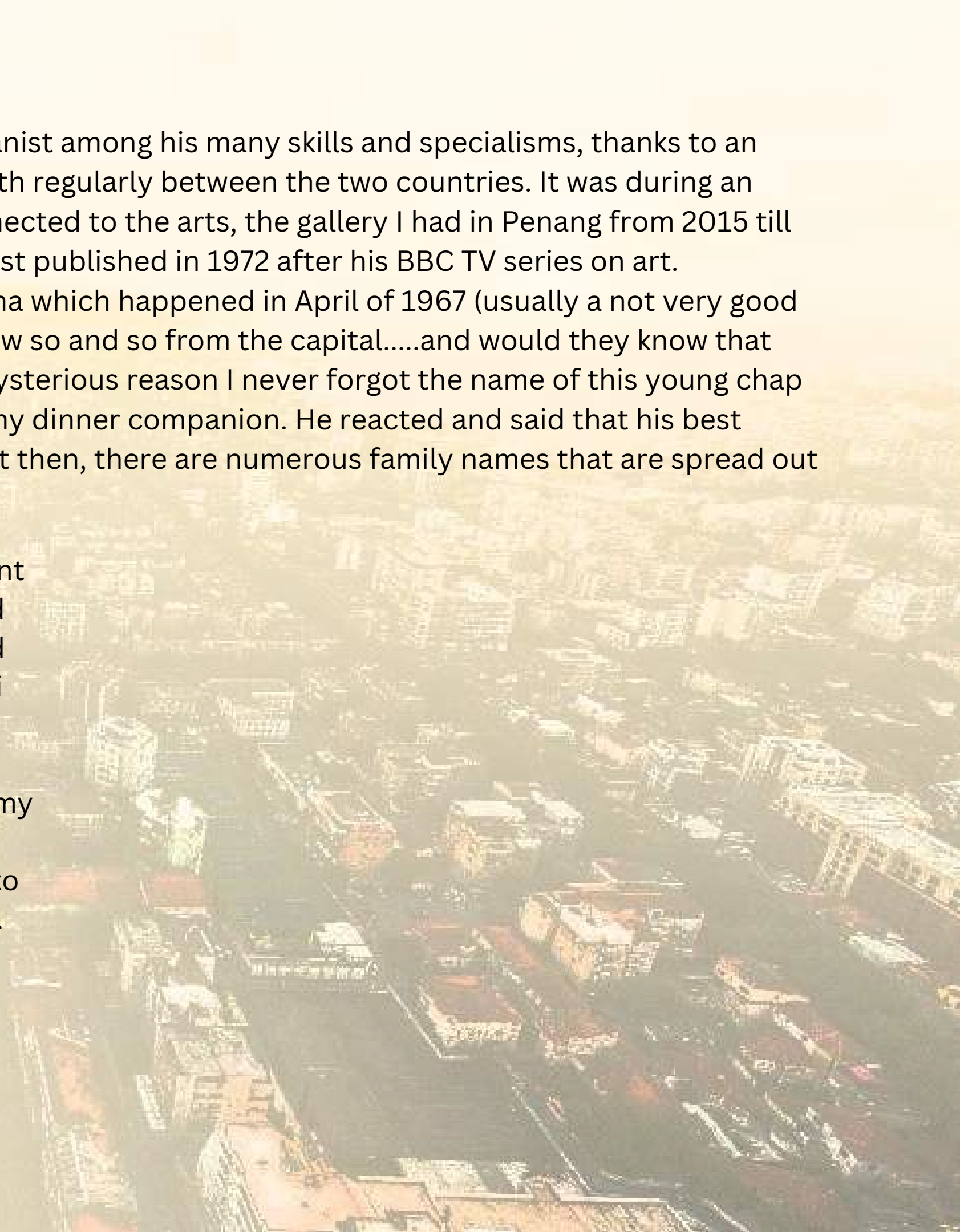
Talking with a prominent Kosovo art figure, I trotted out my little adventure in Prishtina which happened in April of 1967 (usually a not very good idea, sort of meeting somebody from a large country and informing them that you know so and so from the capital....and would they know that person??!! A bit of a waste of time, but here we are!). Strangely, given that for some mysterious reason I never forgot the name of this young chap who introduced me to some of the local customs in Prishtina, I shared his name with my dinner companion. He reacted and said that his best friend’s family name was the same as the one I had just pronounced! I was amazed, but then, there are numerous family names that are spread out far and wide, so didn’t think much of it.

The next day I was going to be shown an area of the Albanian capital by the young architect, and meet a gallery owner. The expected phone call didn’t materialise, so went about my errands as usual. A few days later, I got an apologetic call stating that he had gone back to Prishtina and met with his best friend. After some conversation, it turned out that Gençi Nimani was the uncle of my dinner companion’s best friend! And Gençi Nimani had passed away a few years ago sadly. I would have loved to meet him again and tell him what an impression his invitation to this evening of drinks and table dancing had left on my young mind. We could maybe have become friends again. To my mind this was a great loop, how things at times turn out in life, where connections somehow fortuitously or not, happen at very unexpected junctures This only serves to remind me how fascinated I am by the Balkans and its rich history, culture and people.

* This story is real, as all the others, and have recounted to the best of my memory.

** The name of my dinner companion, architect and much more has been omitted to protect his privacy.

15th February 2023, Tirana



Vignette end April 1967

1. Crossing into Greece late at night and finding a hotel in Thessaloniki at 1 or 2 AM.

As we approached the Macedonian confines to cross the Greek border, we had some trepidations, as all along our trip in Yugoslavia we were hearing stories about some political problems and upheavals in Greece. We thought they were ideological constructs or desires, hence didn't think them too serious, yet we wondered... Upheaval is certainly what we met when we finally made it to the Greek border post (cannot remember which crossing we took): we duly stopped and waited for the officers to come to us and check our passports. In fact, we waited for over an hour, and as it was about 10 PM or thereabouts, we weren't particularly happy being made to wait. The reason for our overlong wait was that the two officers were having a gigantic argument. What about? We couldn't be sure. When the hour passed, one of the chaps came out and asked us to show our passports, as if nothing had transpired, nor did he apologise for the delay.

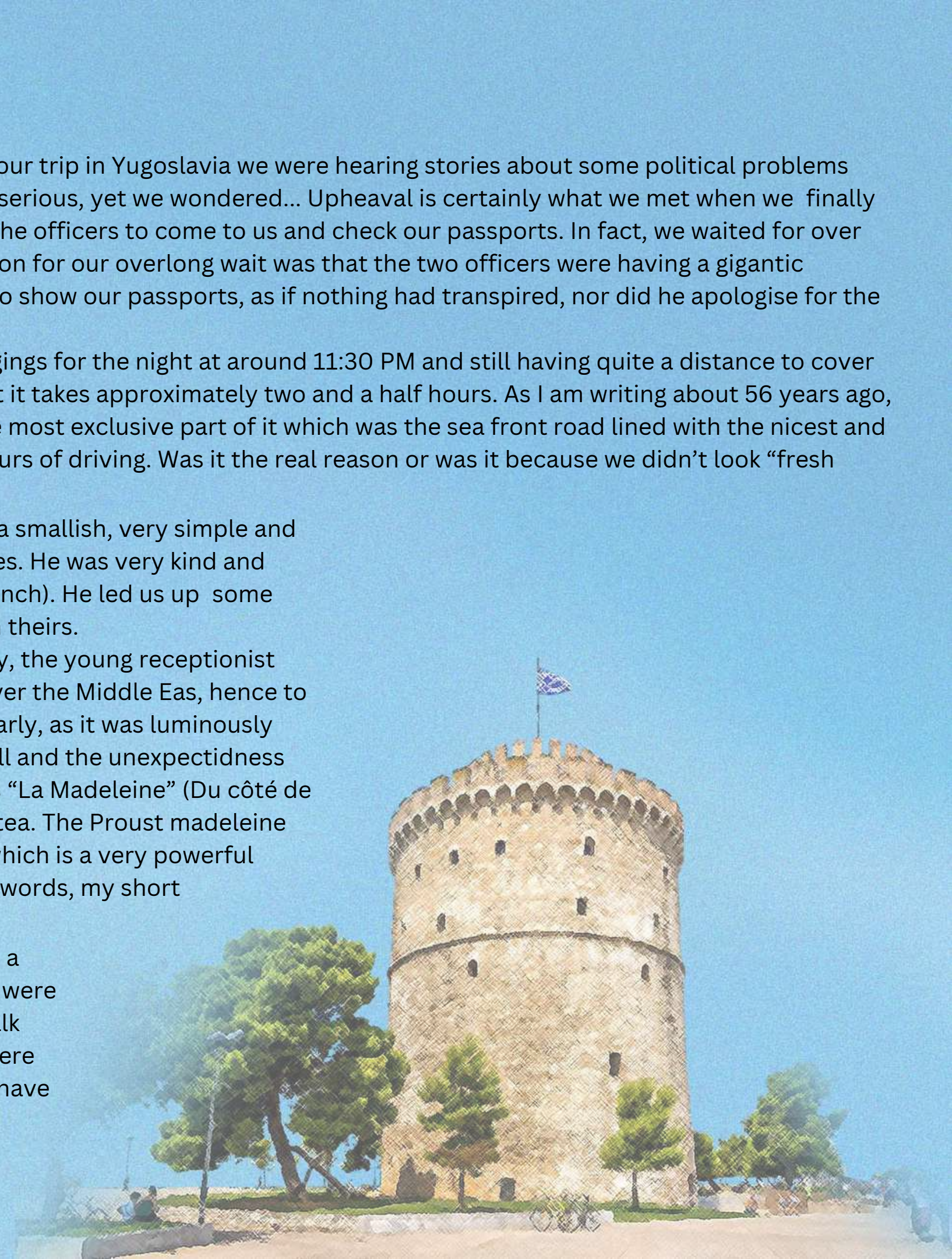
We thus entered Greece an hour later than planned (from the border that is!) for we worried about finding lodgings for the night at around 11:30 PM and still having quite a distance to cover before reaching the city. Checking on the time needed to complete the trip (with today's roads) it is stated that it takes approximately two and a half hours. As I am writing about 56 years ago, I am no longer sure the amount of time it took us to make it to Thessaloniki. We did make it, and even found the most exclusive part of it which was the sea front road lined with the nicest and most impressive looking hotels! We stopped and asked for rooms, looking somewhat disheveled after many hours of driving. Was it the real reason or was it because we didn't look "fresh enough" that we were denied rooms? I will never know.

We were advised to go back to the center of the city to find a place. It didn't take us too long before we found a smallish, very simple and clean looking hotel. The fellow at the reception was clearly a student making some pennies to pay for his studies. He was very kind and helpful, despite the late hour (to my mind it was about 2 AM, but again, after so many years I could be out of synch). He led us up some very narrow winding stairs, and I was shown my room first, and the ladies had to walk up another floor to reach theirs.

I remember the room, small, very white with a wash basin, a hospital bed, and a high window. At 6 AM precisely, the young receptionist knocked on my door and brought some wonderfully nice smelling Greek (not Turkish! The coffee one gets all over the Middle East, hence to my mind it is Turkish coffee, but will respect the local denomination!) morning coffee! I remember the time clearly, as it was luminously sunny, and the coffee smell was totally delicious. It had the right amount of sugar - medium I suspect. The smell and the unexpectedness of this "breakfast" made such an impression that I will never forget it. Somehow, it brings memories of Proust's "La Madeleine" (Du côté de chez Swann - tome 1 where he describes the memory mechanisms of tasting the madeleine he was having for tea. The Proust madeleine has been used in psychology, as his description is so precise and clear: a sudden memory evoked by a smell, which is a very powerful mechanism, has to be "unexpected and involuntary". It certainly fits my recollection of the moment!). In other words, my short Thessaloniki stay was immortalised by the morning coffee and the kind receptionist knocking on my door.

A few days after having returned to Lausanne, we read an analysis in the newspapers detailing the reasons that a military coup had established a military dictatorship in Greece on 21st April 1967, one month before elections were to be held by the caretaker government, and the left-wing G. Papandreou was favoured to win. The Yugoslav talk about upcoming upheavals in Greece was correct, but we had not read nor heard anything about it while we were still in Yugoslavia. I surmise that the two officers at the border were having a political argument, thus we must have entered the country just after it had happened and we were blissfully ignorant of the whole thing.

7th March 2023, Penang



Vignette May 1967

FROM A CAR TRIP FROM LAUSANNE TO GREECE AND BACK .Spring 1967

1. Driving through orange groves from Delphi to Igoumenitsa, Greece. May 1967 (and a second orange grove experience in Spain 10 years later!)

On the way back towards Switzerland, after travelling through Greece from Thesaloniki to Athens and from thence towards the coast to get to the ferry to Bari/Brindisi (not sure where we landed after all these years!), we drove through orange groves after visiting Delphi's ruins and oracles. The location was rather stunning to say the least. My memory has mere impressions that remain, but the view as I recall was stunning,

It would appear that in ancient times, the area around Igoumenitsa was known as the Kingdom of Thesprotis and had its heyday in the 4th century BC (just after the high cultural period of the 5th century BC). It was annexed by the Romans and later became part of the Byzantine Empire, and even later part of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. It was annexed by Greece in 1913 at the very beginning of the Balkan Wars which lasted about 8 years in all. Today, Igoumenitsa is the capital of the regional unit called Thesprotia. It has a rich history linked to ancient Greece, Roman times and the subsequent kingdoms and empires, and as a result has numerous ancient monuments and artefacts. Igoumenitsa is proud of its archeological museum which houses numerous treasures. (Some of the information was taken from Matt Barrett's Greece Travel.com - and my thanks go to his website).

It was mid-afternoon when we drove through the orange groves which must have just been blossoming. It was stunning: it lasted for about 10-15 minutes as we drove slowly, and the smell was heady and totally wonderful. It was as though one was drunk with the overwhelming scent of the orange blossoms. Heavenly, something I will never forget! Only experienced this olfactory nirvana twice so far (have had other olfactory joys, but this was the most intense I can recall!). I suspect the link to the orange blossom smell linked with the names Delphi and Igoumenitsa was created in my mind thanks to this emotional experience. Without the orange blossoms, suspect I would have forgot both names, although Delphi's location and view also stuck in my mind, but the images are vague, merely leaving a beautiful panorama, even though could not describe it in detail.

My second orange blossom experience was in Spain, on the Costa Brava in 1977 if not mistaken. A similar joy overcame me when driving through the orange grove along the Mediterranean on my way to Valencia, not far from Tossa de Mar. (had been there at the very young age of 5, in 1954 in Franco's Spain! Quite a different situation 23 years later!)

7th March 2023, Penang.





Vignette June 1968

1. An unusual encounter in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia while visiting Tine Stanovnik.

At the 'tender' age of 19, driving was a joy, almost a necessity! Was it to prove one's virility, manliness, coming of age? Maybe! The sense of freedom and space (of which I needed much as I do today, was paramount!). Having or driving a motor then, was possibly also a way of attracting attention from people in the streets, showing off and probably lots more...

Somehow, I had convinced my family that I wanted to drive to Ljubljana to visit a friend from the International School at Geneva which I had attended from 1967 till 1968 (a remarkable year to say the least, with the Prague Spring and the student rebellion in France, which ultimately caused the General De Gaulle to leave Paris and retire in Collombey-les-Deux Eglises). Be it as it may, the trip was pleasant enough - even though I can't remember much of the route between Lausanne and Ljubljana. Suffice it to say that I put the car on the train when I reached Brig in Valais, to avoid driving up the Simplon Pass into Italy.

Arriving in Gallarate (Varese) and the Milan region was quite nightmarish to say the least, as in Switzerland in these days, traffic was much tamer and more civilised! The first stretch of motorway in Switzerland was opened between Lausanne and Geneva for the 1964 Swiss Exhibition. Not sure when autostradas were opened in Italy, but suspect the sixties, or possibly in the late fifties. But, Italian drivers were fast, pretty good, but at times frightening for a young driver used to a more staid approach to affirming one's machismo on the road!

Proceeding in Northern Italy towards Venice and the Yugoslav border near Fiume/Rijeka was exciting, as it was my second time in Yugoslavia (the first time was in 1967) and the aura of the country that was ideologically between West and East given Marshall Tito's policies gave an added 'je ne sais quoi' to this adventure!

Arriving in Ljubljana was as I remember exciting. A sense of anticipation filled me, as finding one's way with maps, asking friendly people to help (at times they offered help when it was apparent that you were lost!) made one meet people of a different culture and ways. If we look back at history, Ljubljana's story is rich and starts early. The Romans called it Emona, and it was close to the actual location of the modern city. A trade route linking the Northern Adriatic and the Danubian region passed through the town, thus enhancing its importance. In the Middle Ages, the location was either referred to as Laibach and Ljubljana. Given its location, many different groups controlled the region over the years, thus giving it a rich heritage, albeit many battles are included in its history. Last but not least, according to some, the name Ljubljana derives from the Slavic word love "ljub" meaning to love, like. Another opinion is that the name derives from the name of the river "Ljubljanica" which flows through the city, derived from the male name "Ljubovid" meaning the one with a lovely appearance. Be as it may, the city remains in my memory as a beautiful and interesting place! (source Wikipedia).



I was looking for the Hotel Slon (literally “The Elephant Hotel”) - which was supposedly one of the better hotels in Ljubljana at the time. Never figured out the root of the name which I found intriguing.

After settling in, I went about to meet my friend who was preparing for some important exams, so his girlfriend took me around while Tine was busy studying. In the evenings I would return to the hotel. One evening, I met an amazing lady on a wheelchair, who was accompanied with a person I assumed to be her nurse. We must have met in the lift and the confined space made us strike up a conversation. The first thing which struck me was that this lady had a very thick accent, which to my ear sounded sort of Germanic.

We spoke about various things, and after a while, she mentioned the Second World War, and how Yugoslavia suffered, and how the partisans fought against the Nazis. As our conversation developed, it became clear that the partisans who were led by Tito (am sure there were others, but apparently he was the best organised and most lethal in fighting the Germans, as I understood), and that the British were pumping money and weapons to help Tito get rid of the Germans. By the end of the conversation, it became clear that this lady was the wife of a prominent British general, who had since died, and who had played quite a role in helping the Yugoslavs. By inference, it became clear that the Yugoslav government had decorated her husband, who might have decided to remain in Yugoslavia after the war, rather than returning to the UK. What was also clear was that her husband was no longer there, and that the government were taking care of her, putting her up in the Slon Hotel with this kind nurse or aide.

I had never heard such a thick accent which I took to be Germanic! How wrong I was, as I came to realise that this lady was from a rather Northern part of Scotland, somewhere in Ross and Cromarty (also known as Ross-shire and Cromartyshire) where gaelic is or was still probably spoken, hence her extremely thick accent! Clearly, the Viking or Scandinavian influences still have root in those parts. One only needs to look at place names!

Again, the encounter stuck in my mind, as in the beginning I didn't believe the story, and thought she was delusional given her pronunciation. Tine was so busy studying that I didn't meet him at all, only his girlfriend. Sadly, I never returned to Ljubljana after that, albeit I found it a very pleasant and interesting place.

* Tine Stanovnik was a friend I met at the International School in Geneva. His father was a diplomat at the UN and also a member of the Federal parliament of Yugoslavia.

8th March, 2023, Penang.

Vignette Easter 1978. (In memory of my friend Lee)
Going to Valencia.

At the time, I was teaching at a famous boarding school, along Lake Geneva, between Lausanne and Geneva. Easter hols were about to descend upon us, and being young and thinking myself adventurous, thought of visiting a dear American friend (we were students together at Hartford University 5-6 years previously, not to be confused with Harvard!!! Still a very decent uni in Connecticut!) who had found himself a location and job in Spain: Valencia.

So, with my powerful motor, (!) a wonderful beige Citroen 2 CV, with a total of 650 cc engine developing a massive 26 horse power, decided that I was going to drive myself through France towards the Languedoc Roussillon (CHECK) and once on the Spanish side in Girona, towards Sitjes where I thought it would be good to stop for a meal. Not far from Sitjes (where I had been as a small child aged 5 in 1954 - and can assure you that in those times there were hardly any tourists, to my family's delight! Very few and far in between cars, mostly SEAT - the Spanish version of the FIAT and the Spanish acronym clearly indicating it was the Spanish part of the Italian car group: Sociedad Espanola Automoviles Torino which is now owned by Volkswagen and produces excellent cars) and sort of home made open little beach buggies, local precursors to the Mini Moke of the 60's (CHECK). We were told that Franco, the Spanish Caudillo cum dictator, didn't want many cars on the roads, nor did he like coffee apparently.

My little 2CV (in French: deux chevaux - meaning two horses - which was the taxation size of the engine, consuming very little petrol and had originally been made for French farmers. (It was originally designed in 1936 in France - more or less contemporary to the VW Beetle designed in Germany by the Nazi regime.) It had hydropneumatic suspension, drove wonderfully over bad roads, and had a very soft textile cum plastic re-enforced roll that was the roof! When hot or sunny, you just unhooked the clips that fastened the rolling roof to the top of the windshield/pillar, rolled the whole thing back, and fastened it and off you went, in the people's "décapotable"/soft top! It had these cute lights that you could manually adjust depending on the load in the car. If you needed cooling, you had a knob, which opened a sort of long valve along the windshield. You opened the windows by pushing them up, and they clicked with a rubber holder. Even though the motor was totally underpowered, you learned how to use the engine and gears intelligently and I remember I was able to overtake much more powerful cars while going uphill to mountain stations in summer and winter. The gearshift was on the dashboard! Another French novelty! The older models hand hand powered windshield wipers!!

So, left Rolle on the first day of the holiday which most likely started a week or so before Easter Sunday which fell on the 26th of March in 1978. The winter term was held in Gstaad, a mountain resort made famous by the school, particularly during WW 1, as the parents of the students flocked to see their children, an appropriate hotel had to be built to accommodate them. So, people departed from Gstaad to rejoin their families in various parts of the world. At the end of March, the weather in the Bernese Oberland as the region is called, tended to be pretty bleak, with snow patches here and there melting by the roadside mixed with sand and dust, not making a beautifully white attractive mountain region...Most probably drove down to Lausanne via Bulle in the Fribourg Canton, then along the Lac Léman as Lake Geneva is called in French (from the Latin Lemanus) from Lausanne towards Geneva, then Lyon, Valence, Orange, Montpellier, Béziers, Narbonne, Perpignan and then rather than going over the beautiful Pyrenees with my powerful motor, I used the sea route motorway to enter Spain: Portbou, Girona, Tossa de Mar where I stopped after many hours of driving (and where I had been as a young child). It must have been around 6 PM or so and must have slept overnight in France and driven quite a while during the day with my speedy Gonzalez 2CV Citroen (wonderful on most roads, but terrible on inclined motorways... no power to get up there! Never going more than 60-70 kph if the incline is not too steep!). Stopped in the place which I could of course not recognise at all after all these years. Decided that the sea front restaurants, bars and cafés were the best place to get some well earned food, hence found a pleasant looking place, quite packed but where i could sit at the bar. The lady behind the bar had a rather unspanish shock of light blond hair, and when I asked her in my best Spanish (had spent a year in Mexico from 1967 to 1968) was shocked to be answered in Dutch!!! I do look Northern, but could have been a Frenchie possibly????!! It annoyed me, as it became clear from the lady's talk that Tossa had become a Dutch colony in the mid-seventies. Had my meal and left and continued driving till very late at night and making it to Valencia where my friend was living. It was rather late, but was welcomed by Lee when I finally found his neighbourhood.



Some snacks and beer and some chatter before getting some well deserved rest! The week before Easter, in Valencia (like many places in Spain, has some wonderful and spectacular moments as festivities announcing Easter are rolled out for the delight of all). In Valencia, there are a few notable (were in the 70's I should say and will check if still current at present) highlights to focus on: The Cathedral with its Corte de las Aguas (CHECK), streets filled with joyous if not almost riotous people dancing, singing, joking and inviting their friends for meals, drinks and if you were an outsider, it was well nigh impossible to return the favour of hospitality which was showered on you, as neighbourhoods are the structures that organise the Fallas, hence accounts are locally centralised. Food and drinks outlets are dependent on this system, so no physical money was exchanged. The Valencianos in those days were famous for their fireworks, so the 6-7 nights before Easter would be punctuated by 30 minutes of wonderous fireworks each night that one wished would continue till morning. The Barrio Chino ("Chinese quarter" - but really the quarter of the ladies of the night, originally, but a most lively, friendly and fun area where all sorts of good music, dancing and drinking took place, and immediately fell for this neighbourhood, that I seriously thought of renting a little room there, and spend my hols in Valencia whenever possible, even with my slow moving 2CV, unfortunately, it didn't materialise.)

The Corte de la Aguas, a most respected and ancient institution, would hold its session in front of the Cathedral to deal with water problems (water theft, as the region is extremely dry: its areas are divided into "secanias" meaning dry areas where farmers are given a fixed amount of water for a certain period for their orchards or olive groves). In the 70's, this Water Court was recognised by the European Court of Justice, even though none of their judgements were written down, all oral. (I suspect there were "notes" taken for reference, but as a record only). The judge was flanked by two guards, who looked like the Swiss guards at the Vatican, with rather medieaval military garb, and the judge, dressed in his Sunday dress (the local farmers/growers would dress like that: black "Canotier", black jacket and trousers). Let us say that two neighbours have a water dispute, they then decide to go to the Water Court, explain their problem/point of view, and the Judge makes his decision final and immediately after having listened to the two stories. When I went there, it was impressive, quite a large crowd was waiting to observe the session, and waiting in the hot sun for the procedure to commence, at around 10 AM if my memory serves me right. I found it very impressive and solemn. Usually, if one farmer/grower had stolen water (ie. used the available water for longer than allotted, as there were these little waterways that one could open and close with wooden dams, as the areas were like a human body traversed by veins bringing life in the form of water for the orange groves and /or the olive trees mainly.

The Fallas

Not sure anymore what my friend Lee had told me about Valencia and the Fallas before I drove to his new home. Very possibly he did, and that was the motivating factor for me to meet him and have him take me around and meet his friends.

It must have been pretty late when I arrived in Valencia, as I had a meal on the Costa Brava on the way, and even though there was a rather good road system, along the coast, my 2CV was no Speedy Gonzalez! When there was no incline (and some wind from behind, the little machine could make it to about 90 KPH or so!). The Fallas as indicated in references start on the 19th of March normally, and I suspect that it happened at that same date (was told that normally it lasted for 5 days, and about 2 weeks before Easter, but given that Easter's dates never fall on the same days, am not sure). Be as it may, after a good night's rest, we must have got into the swing of things rather rapidly, as my memory brings up a sort of maelstrom of events, people, dancing, drinking and having a total ball! Lee was very good at that. What I do remember, is that at night around midnight, there would be about 30 minutes of fireworks, as the Valencianos are famous for their firework making skills.

When describing the Fallas, Wikipedia states that "fax" (accusative "facem") meaning "torch" which then becomes "facula" (diminutive) and in the accusative "faculam". All this to come to the Latin Vulgate "faclam" and in Valenciano "FALLA".



The Vulgate was spoken in the Middle Ages, and was often referred to as “kitchen Latin” (also found in certain passages of the Bible when in Latin, and the loss of loss of “pure” Latin was due to a regression of literacy after the invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries in Europe, and the disruptions of learning and education in the institutions)

The Fallas commemorate Saint Joseph of the city of Valencia. The evening fireworks are referred to as the “Mascletà” when people detonate firecrackers and the fireworks display is enjoyed by all the people. The Fallas are the festivities that last the 5 days and also refer to the monuments created (over months) before the festivities, that are made of wood, papier maché, and other polystyrene foam. They can reach a height of 2 stories, and require enormous amounts of work and finance. The “ninots” (Valenciano for puppet) and the “falles/fallas” are built according to a particular theme for a given year, usually it is a satirical construction to mock particular politicians and/or famous people. Such “ninots” are also built for the young public, figures out of popular stories, or even taken from Walt Disney. Each neighbourhood has an organisation that deals with the financing and construction of said monuments. All sorts of artists and craftsmen participate in these creations. The financing is of course very important, as these monuments/puppets are very costly, thus various ways are found to finance these creations.



I remember in a particular neighbourhood, there was a large float that had a politician atop, with a notice stating that ‘the Catalan region’ was basically Northern Valencia! The reason for that comment was that a Catalan politician had stated a while before that Valencia was basically ‘Southern Catalonia’! The Valencianos were furious...and they are a proud lot too!

The Apotheosis happened on the last night, and I do not mention the food parties, drinking parties, dancing in the streets that took place during those wonderful 5 days, as we moved out of central Valencia, and found some friends who lived in a higher building so that we could spend the last hours watching the last night of the Fallas: at a specific time, every falla, in each neighbourhood (supposedly today there are 400!) was put alight, so you saw Valencia literally burning all over! An amazing sight, after which the last night’s fireworks are launched, and it lasted much more than the 30 minutes of previous nights. Totally amazing and wonderful.

All the dancing, drinking and partying of course had some effect on the work schedules of the people (not quite sure how they did it!) and the fatigue and realisation that the party was over, and that all the mess in the whole city had to be cleaned up (in those days it was supposed to take 3 days). New committees elected, themes found for the next year and financing of course.. Was told that in those years people became heavily indebted because of this.

When not partying and drinking, we decided to travel around Valencia, going to Gandia which is a bit further South, and in the 70’s it was a small village where there was a most excellent beach, as Valencia’s beaches were not brilliant, which saved it at the time of the hordes of tourists who populated the whole coast. Spain in the 1978 was quite an experience for me, as we had the images of a restrictive Spain, still suffering from the hangover of the Franco government, and what struck me and really pleased me was that instead of being austere, coy and shy, Spanish young ladies were quite forward, smiling and had no fear of attracting young guys’ attention, and directly introducing themselves, even though one thought it was the “macho” guy who was supposed to do the “work”! The reason I was sort of amazed was that at that time, in the Netherlands, there were these young and “liberated” ladies, who called themselves the “Dolle Minas” (Crazy Minas/ladies) and who would go around in the streets pinching young male’s bottoms, to mock that standard “macho” male behaviors in these days and reversing the gender roles....I found the Spanish ladies more liberated than the Dutch ones, which seemed totally bizarre given the climate of opinion about Spain in those days! It was at that time that the wonderful film directed by Geraldine Chaplin’s husband (at that time) Carlos Saura entitled ‘Cria Cuervos’ (Raise ravens). It is an allegorical drama about an eight year old girl dealing with loss. It received the Special Jury Prize Award at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival. The reason I mention the film, was that it had a theme song that was haunting as it never left one’s mind.

“The film stresses the disparity between Ana’s inner world of private traumas and the outer world of political realities and the Francoist State. Anna will cope with her guilt in both arenas.” (Wikipedia). Franco died in 1975, thus it won the prize just a year after he passed away. Thus arriving in 1978 Valencia, Franco’s legacy was still very strong. I clearly recall that the main square in Valencia (downtown) was called Plaza del Caudillo or Plaza del Generalismo Franco (which shocked me!) Hence my astonishment, when driving around in the Valencia region, meeting young guys and ladies who seemed so free and liberated that I couldn’t quite ‘compute’ it!

Besides Gandia, we drove in the back country, finding little inns, staying with Lee’s friends who lived further afield and having a wonderful time. Dinner parties with mountains of paella, being invited to corridas (people were extremely generous, and pay was not high in those days) and you were the friend of a friend, you would be invited to stay overnight, invited to the corrida and then served an amazing meal at their house. I believe that the Spanish traditions of hospitality, had been strongly influenced by the Umayyad presence which lasted approximately 7 centuries before the Reconquista. The last vestiges of the Arabic and Berber presence were ended in 1492 with the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada, by Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabelle of Castille.

The memories are a bit hazy, as so much happened in those 2 weeks I spent in Valencia being shown around by Lee. Thanks to him I discovered Spain (after 1954, as a young kid of 5 when I discovered Tosa de Mar and Sitges, which had become totally invaded by Northern European tourists, and who didn’t always behave very well!) There was a telling joke told about Dutch tourists who descended on these parts with their cars or caravans, and the international sign to indicate the country of origin was and still is NL. The Dutch can be economical (good Protestant grooming! I say this in jest and no evil intent, as my own mum was Dutch born! And certainly not ‘economical’ nor stingy!). The NL symbol was translated to indicate “Nur Limonade” (in German....) meaning that they brought everything they needed, tents, food, sun creams and more, and only purchased lemonade....I suspect it was the Spaniards who concocted this definition or translation. Given their generosity and traditions of hospitality, they must have been pretty well shocked at times. All these good times and connection with Spain were thanks to Lee I reconnected with my ‘Spanish culture and language background’ as I had lived one year in Mexico in 1967-1968 visiting my uncle and aunt and cousins Wendel and Monica. Lee passed away from a nasty illness in 1991 while I was living in Canada. I remember those times with him with great fondness and thank him for it.

17th April 2023, Penang.



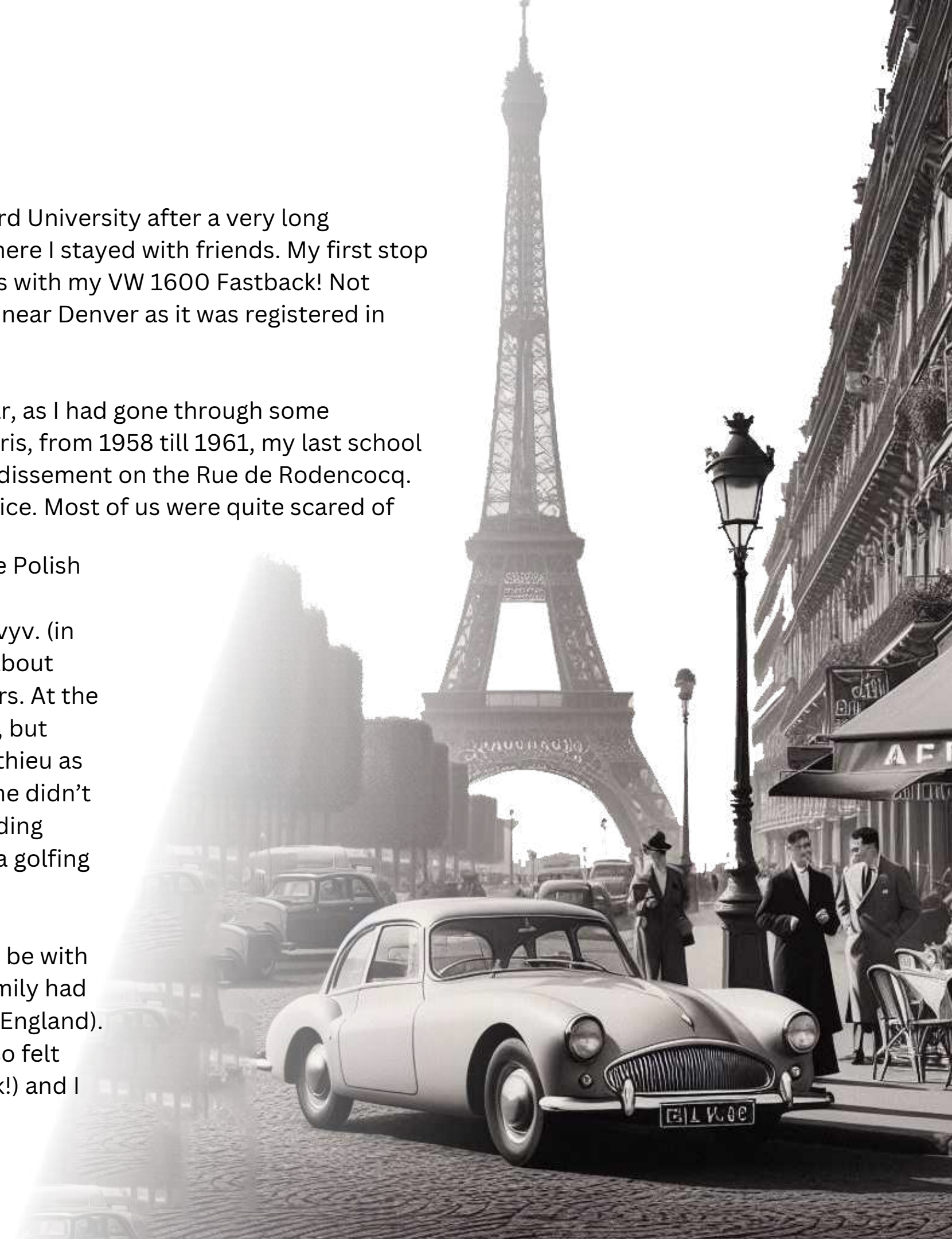
Vignette 1961

My Polish friend in Paris. (1961)

This story starts while I was studying at the University of Hartford in Connecticut in the US. Enrolled at Hartford University after a very long motoring trip which took me from Mexico City all the way to Hartford, stopping in various important places where I stayed with friends. My first stop in the US was in Texas, after having traversed the Northern part of Mexico, as I had some mechanical problems with my VW 1600 Fastback! Not quite the rocket it might sound like, but a good machine that served me well since I had bought it in Colorado, near Denver as it was registered in Arapahoe County, a year previously in the autumn of 1967.

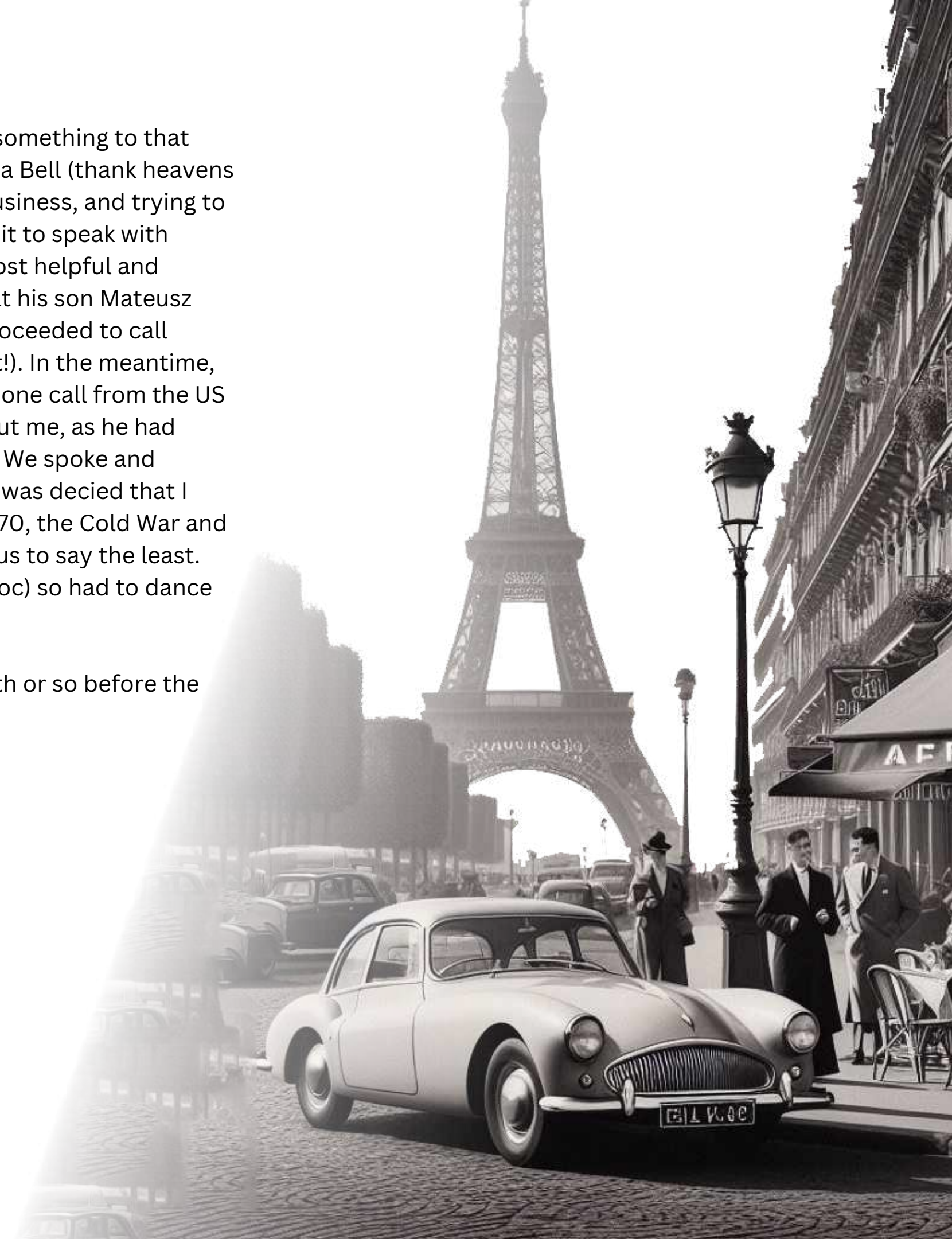
Life at the University of Hartford was good, had its ups and downs (at least for me), and 1971 was a pivotal year, as I had gone through some emotional upheavals and decided that I wanted to 'get back to some roots'. As it happened, when I lived in Paris, from 1958 till 1961, my last school year was spent at the Cours de la Muette, near the Bois de Boulogne and Place de la Muette, in the 16th arrondissement on the Rue de Rodencocq. The headmistress was a Mrs Rastorgueff, quite strict with a "chignon" and specs, very red nails and quite a voice. Most of us were quite scared of her. She was a wonderful teacher, I realised much later, and also realised that I much loved her. My best chum in my class, was a Polish fellow, of my age, which would have been 12 in 1961. His father was the Polish cultural attaché at the embassy. He was a writer and not a communist party hack. He was a socialist, who had pretended to work with the Germans during WWII occupation, but in fact was the head of the Resistance in Lvyy. (in those days that part of present day Ukraine was part of Poland). We were very good friends and used to talk about cars and mechanical things and share comics such as Tintin and Spirou and exchange Dinky Toys miniature cars. At the end of June 1961 was the time to leave Paris and find other horizons. I was really glad to leave Paris, I thought, but when I saw the moving vans, I burst out in tears! Also very sad to be separated from my friend Mateusz, or Mathieu as he was called in French. We lost touch, which happens often. My mum was going to India to start a new life (she didn't know that at that time! As she would also find herself married to a Sikh gentleman!) and I was going to a boarding school in the canton Valais, in Blûche sur Sierre, which is just under Montana/Crans, a ski resort in winter and a golfing and mountaineering resort in summer.

Much later, in Hartford, after deeply feeling the absence of my best friend (who decided to move to Boston to be with his girl-friend) and going through some difficult times as I didn't have any real solid friends beside him. His family had been awfully good to me, taking me in as their last child (they had 9 children!, so it was my home while in New England). The US was not easy for me, social mores and ways of doing things were far ahead of our old European ways, so felt disconnected in some ways. One day, thought, 'bloody hell, I had a great friend while in Paris (some years back!) and I am going to look him up, but first must find him.'



Well, the most obvious thing to do was to call up the Embassy of Poland (of the Polish People's Republic or something to that effect) and speak to the Cultural Attaché and ask where Mr. Zulawski was posted. In those days it was still Ma Bell (thank heavens for that, efficient and easy to use, contrarily to later when dozens of phone companies competed for your business, and trying to call Europe from a pay phone was indeed complicated!). After juggling with my quarters to have enough credit to speak with Washington D.C. from Hartford, I was on line and was able to speak to the Polish representative, who was most helpful and efficient, after I explained the reason for calling him and wondering where Mr. Zulawski was, as I assumed that his son Mateusz would not be far away. He gave me the phone number at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, which I proceeded to call immediately afterwards (and more juggling with quarters that I had had to collect to have much more credit!). In the meantime, the Cultural Attaché had spoken with Warsaw and warned his correspondent that he would be receiving a phone call from the US from a certain Adrian. I got to know that when I spoke to Mateusz's father who was most kind and knew about me, as he had spoken with his son Mateusz. Finally, I made contact with Mateusz, and it felt strange after exactly ten years! We spoke and immediately clicked and decided we should meet. As it was difficult for him to make it over to Switzerland, it was decided that I would go to Poland. After agreeing to this I wondered how on earth I was going to go to Poland.... This was 1970, the Cold War and all the related issues were very real and alive. Somehow, a plan emerged in my head, and it was sort of devious to say the least. My family were very worried about anything linked to the Eastern Bloc (i.e. the Socialist camp/Communist Bloc) so had to dance around certain things.

I had made the exciting phone call to Washington in the month of May I believe, and there was another month or so before the term ended and I would be flying back to Europe for the summer hols at that time.



Vignette Summer 1970.
Visiting Poland.

When younger, I had had a passion for Eastern European Folkloric music, and listened to a radio programme that had its weekly slot on Saturdays at around 1 PM, on Radio Suisse Romande. The programme was rich and the person doing it was a Swiss industrialist who had worked in Rumania for many years and became interested in their musical folklore, which is indeed very rich. To cut a long story short, I was lucky enough to have had a friend at the University of Hartford who knew about my passion and proposed I take a one hour programme on a weekly basis at the University of Hartford FM station (WWUH). Jumped on the occasion as I had quite a collection of records from all over Eastern Europe which I could then play to my heart's content while trying to bring what I thought was a musical treasure to the residents of Hartford and West Hartford!

My family were aware of this crazy fondness I had for this type of music, and suspect that my family unwittingly brainwashed me with their memories and records of Hungarian gypsy music which was in fashion before WW II! I just took it much further, and it would come in handy for my Polish travel plans...

In the previous year, i.e. in the summer of 1969, my family had rented a large house in Ramatuelle, not far from St. Tropez on the Côte d'Azur (literally "blue coast") and after swimming and doing the shopping in the village, we would at times go to St. Tropez. One day, not far from the main road going through the village along the beach, near the famous cafés and restaurants, there was a man playing a guitar and singing what appeared to be Czech or Slovak folk songs. We approached and listened and waited till the song was over to speak to the young man. After a while, it became clear this chap was travelling with his girlfriend, and they were sleeping on the beach as their finances were minimal. (I should add, that in 1968 there was the "Prague Spring", and the leader of Czechoslovakia at the time was a man called Dubcek who was highly popular in his country, as he wanted to create "socialism with a human face" which was more than revolutionary. It was at the same time that the students rebelled in France in 1968 (in May) but in Czechoslovakia, they were not so lucky, as the Warsaw Pact troops entered the country on 20th August to repress and stop this movement, as Alexander Dubcek had spoken about wanting to remove the CSSR from the Warsaw Pact. A new government had been installed at the end of the autumn in 1968, and at its head a rather dour man Gustav Husak who was going to maintain socialist "orthodoxy".) All this to explain that it was quite amazing that two young theatre students Pavel and his girlfriend were able to travel to the West in 1969, i.e. one year after the 1968 invasion by the troops of the Warsaw Pact. They had to travel via Yugoslavia and from there they could go Westwards, which they did.)

We promptly invited them to stay in our rented house, as there was plenty of space. They stayed with us for about 4-5 days. We chatted a lot, ate a lot, and they sang traditional folk songs for us! And they told that they wanted to leave their country, We exchanged addresses and promised to stay in touch.



During that year, 1969 to 1970, the idea had grown that we should visit Pavel and his girlfriend in the vicinity of Prague. We came in two cars, my mum from Austria and myself from Switzerland. The devious plan I had cooked up was to pretend that I was going to go to the International Folkloric Music Festival in Dubrovnik after having linked up in Prague. The Festival was slated to happen in the 2nd half of July of 1970.

After spending about a week in and around Prague, being shown various delightful places, notably where Pavel and his other half were living, in the country, taking care of a place which bred horses, which gave them free lodgings and a desired country life. We met their parents who treated us to all sorts of delicious meals. Time passed quickly, so the white Alfa Romeo was going to go back to Switzerland with Keeni driving back, and myself driving the rented Renault 16 to Dubrovnik, later...

I remained another 3 days or so, and then proceeded to drive East towards Poland. Before embarking on my deceptive eastern trip, I had asked Pavel to send a telegram to Switzerland stating that I had changed my mind, and was going to Warsaw to meet my old school friend Mateusz. No sound from Lausanne, but there were great fears I heard about upon my return over a month later.

The drive from Prague towards Warsaw was no simple matter, as the roads were not as they are today. Even if and when there were bits and pieces that were more like motorways, it was generally good old fashioned roads, generally in good shape, but at times it was very frustrating when one was stuck behind a large lorry without even being able to overtake it. I remember sleeping over in Czechoslovakia, before crossing into Poland, and arriving at the centre of Warsaw (what excitement!) near the main railway station called "Centralna Warszawa". I could not believe that I was in the heart of the "other side" the much feared Eastern Block. It must have been about 5 or 6 PM in the afternoon, the sun had a lovely colour, and there I was, parked and not knowing how to find Mateusz's address which read as "Ulica Marszalkowska" a main thoroughfare in Warsaw.

Addressing some passing by pedestrians at first resulted in no response at all. It was as though I were a piece of transparent glass. Of course, a rather alien looking metallic blue Renault 16 with Swiss registration plates indicating the Vaud canton with its green and white symbol must have appeared threatening to most. I suspect the operative word was fear of being seen with a foreigner, a Westerner. Finally, a kind soul, an older gentleman, who spoke German helped me and even gave me a coin and dialed Mateusz's phone number for me, so that I could speak with him. Shortly after the call, Mateusz and his best friend Lutek, came to where I was in the square and Lutek came with me to direct me in case I lost sight of the car Mateusz was driving. This was the beginning of a month trip in Poland.

