

EASTERN EUROPE AT AGE 96

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Dear Friends at Cardiac-Rehab: It has been my custom to write open letters to you on my birthdays. This one was for my 96th, on Nov. 10. But you got the jump on me and celebrated on Nov. 9 with a “Happy Birthday”, a birthday card signed by many of you, and a plate of cookies. I thank you all, and will treasure the remembrance. I understand that Robin made the cookies. They are good. So special thanks to Robin.

This time I would like to write about a trip just-completed (Oct. 17-Nov. 1) to the cities of eastern Europe, some of which were inaccessible during the Communist control there: Prague, Leipzig, Berlin, Göttingen, and Weimar, with shorter stops at Dresden, Halle, Potsdam, and Erfurt. My son, David, made it possible, more specifically he organized and conducted our tour. We flew to Prague, rented a car, and traveled on our own without benefit of tour guides. This region is rich in its tradition of scientific, literary, and artistic work, much of it done at a time when we in this country were exploring the wilderness and fighting off Indians. I am a professor; so this is what interested me most. David was more interested in seeing what they were doing to Berlin, where he was stationed during the Viet Nam war.

Prague. Prague is swarming with tourists in spite of the absence of Americans since September 11. These included many swarthy south Europeans assembled with their tour guides who addressed them in what I supposed was their language. I could not make it out, but it was easy for a veteran tourist to perceive what was going on. The guide was prattling on about this great literary figure, who had once spent a night in this place. Close-up and listening to every word were several serious tourists, holding their guidebooks open with their fingers marking the place. And off to the side there is always this guy with a skeptical air. About that great literary figure he is saying to himself: “Never heard of him, but for the money I paid for this trip, he’d better be famous.” Individual tourists come and go, but tourism is invariant.

In all the European cities they want to show you their local antiquities, especially their castles and cathedrals. If you are a good tourist you pay respectful attention to this, and pretend to be edified. But in Prague, especially, you are more interested in mingling with the crowd, drinking Czech beer at a table in The Old Square, where you can look up at the antique astronomical clock that keeps track of the seasons as well as the time of day, and puts on a puppet show on the hour. Or you will want to just stroll about and take in this extraordinarily beautiful city, with its richly varied and characteristic architecture. As you walk, especially on the medieval Charles Bridge, you will be accosted, not only by the usual souvenir hawkers, but also by earnest young people who want to sell you tickets to their classical music concert that evening.

If you are a good tourist you will buy one of these, and attend the performance. For there is nothing more characteristic of Prague than these many simultaneous classical music concerts every evening. There seems to be one in every church or auditorium. They are strong on Mozart, and it seems to be traditional to include some work of his in every recital. Mozart spent some years here, composing some of his best music, and allegedly fooling around with the countess who supported him. In fact we saw the great

auditorium where he conducted the first performance of his *Don Giovanni*. And do you know the lovely “Prague” symphony, K 504?

At our concert they played *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* first, but then waded mercilessly through all four of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. We didn’t go back next night.

The guides all want to tell you the history too, all that stuff about governments, kings, and wars. But let me give you my real history and future of this place. The Czech people, with their outrageous language, have lived in and farmed the rich agricultural provinces of Bohemia and Moravia for many centuries. It is the main granary of Europe. This life has given them a separate identity and culture, but they have been taken over by a succession of military powers with hungry armies to feed. I see nothing that can change this. Europe just keeps getting more mouths to feed. The Czech people, of course, want to be free, and they are grateful to America for our role in setting up the first of the Czechoslovak republic after World War I. That collapsed because Hitler had hungry storm troopers to feed. They are now in the third republic since then, I believe, with support from liberal governments of Europe and America. I like the Czechs and wish them well, but their future will be determined by the hungry mouths of Europe. There is only one thing new in all this: Praha, as they spell it, is getting rich on tourists.

Leipzig. Leipzig is a treasure. Let us go first to the Thomaskirche, the church where Johann Sebastian Bach was based for the greater part of his life, 1685-1750. Inside, there are no babbling tour guides with their flocks. Bach’s organ is long gone, but its modern replacement plays his music softly. Visitors in singles and couples say little. I looked into their faces and saw awe. They must have been musicians, and this was their shrine. Felix Mendelssohn, 1800-1847, spent the last part of his life here, working to make sure that Bach was not forgotten. Also Robert and Clara Schumann lived in Leipzig; and Richard Wagner was born here.

On the scientific side, Leipzig is the birthplace of the great philosopher and mathematician, Leibnitz, 1646-1716, who was the co-inventor, with Newton, of the calculus. In fact, if you studied calculus, you learned it in the notation of Leibnitz. In more recent times Leipzig has been an important center. Such names as: Felix Klein, Sophus Lie, Carl Neumann, and Paul Koebe will mean nothing to most of you, but to mathematicians they are world famous. Mathematics has now moved to a new location. But, with the aid of directions from my mathematician son, Peter, who spent some time there, we found the entrance to the old “Mathematisches Institut”, with its name still embossed above the door. These are just a few of the treasures of Leipzig.

Berlin. I would like to go back to Berlin when they have finished rebuilding it, that is, if both Berlin and I still exist then. Right now it is a mess, with every street that you have to use blocked by a huge building crane. As a parking lot Berlin is completely full. I learned that there are only two ways of dealing with the parking problem. The accepted way is to inherit, buy, or otherwise acquire a parking space, and guard it with your life until you can get a car to park in it. Then, if you have to go anywhere, you ride your bicycle, or walk, so as not to lose your parking space. The other way can’t be recommended. It is to buy the car first and drive around until you find a parking space; then buy a house next to it. But it requires two drivers so that one can sleep while the other drives. This can go on for months; and with gas at 92 cents a liter, it can run into

money Nevertheless I am sure I saw people using this method. I felt sorry for them, but they had nobody to blame but themselves.

Recall how all this came about. At the end of World War I, they reorganized what was left of Germany in a conference at Weimar. See below. This Weimar Republic lasted until Hitler took over and dissolved it. Then in the peace treaty of World War II Germany was split into two parts, a democratic West Germany, and a communist East Germany. Berlin was deep inside East Germany, but it also was divided into parts: the communist East Berlin and the democratic West Berlin, which was connected to the main body of West Germany by a long, vulnerable corridor. To maintain this obviously unstable situation required an American garrison, which was how David got there instead of Vietnam. A capital of West Germany had been set up in Bonn, a safe distance west of the border.

Meanwhile, to secure their border, the communists built THE WALL. It was not clear whether its purpose was to keep out western capitalism, or keep in eastern communists. Anyway, the Wall had several gates, notably the stone-arched Brandenburg Gate and, for the GI's, Checkpoint Charley, as well as the Glienecke Bridge, made famous by the spy novels of John Le Carre, all now heavily touristed. I am not sure about the precise timing, but along with the collapse of Russian communism the Wall was torn down and sold in pieces to American souvenir hunters. This left West Germany free to take over the East and reunite the country. The trouble was that the communists had left the East bankrupt in public buildings and services. But the government of the West decided to bite the bullet and move the capital of a unified Germany back to Berlin anyway. Actually the new capital's center is in former East Berlin. This rebuilding is what is going on now.

What's left, after the Allied bombing, of the old public buildings they convert into museums and cram into them all the old stuff that they have saved. New Berlin is full of them. We saw the only one of these that I really wanted to see; the Pergamum Museum, which contains the precious artifacts that the German archeologists removed from their ancient settings in Pergamum, Assyria, and Babylon. We also made a quick run through Berlin's museum of great painting of the 14th to 19th centuries, but that stuff leaves me cold. I know I am an uncultured ignoramus, but for me art has to be either pre-Christian or strictly modern.

Besides these things, we hunted down the building from whose gallery John F. Kennedy made his "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech; then we found David's old army barracks, now a run-down housing project; and the 1936 Olympic Stadium where Jesse Owens so dominated the sprints that Hitler named a street running around the stadium *Jesse Owens Strasse*. I guess the idea was that if he should ever come back they would let him run on his street, and save the track inside so that Aryans would have a chance.

Meditations on the Autoban. We took the Autoban to Gottingen. This gave us some time to think about the traffic problems in Berlin; and what they meant about the future of getting people around in our country. On the Autoban we left the Mercedes lane clear, while with our little econocar we limped along at the speed limit of 75 miles an hour, or maybe a little slower. Even so a Mercedes, or a Porsche, would come roaring up from the past, and disappear into our future in a matter of seconds.

Nothing beats the private car for flexibility in intercity travel, provided it is free of traffic jams and provided it can be parked at your destination. The Autoban solves at least the first of these problems. On the other hand domestic air travel had developed so many problems of delay, complication, cost, and safety, that it had become untenable, even before September 11. In our country we will have to give the Interstates over to trucks. They have practically taken them over already! Then we must build new American Autobans for our private cars so they, supplemented by Metro-rail around big cities, can take over intercity travel. Also in our cities, as in Berlin, the parking problem is making the private car less and less viable. But David and I arrived in Gottingen without getting this problem solved.

Gottingen. This small city in former West Germany justifiably calls itself the City of Learning. It names its streets for men who made great contributions to the intellectual culture. There is a Gauss Strassa, named for its own Karl Friedrich Gauss, 1777-1855, one of the greatest mathematicians and astronomers of all time, whose influence persists to this day. A visit to the observatory where he lived and worked is the high point of a visit to Gottingen. It is not open to tourists, but the door was not locked, so we went in. There in the lobby were the instruments he built: a telescope and other angle-measuring devices. And a stairway led up to the telescope in its dome. Unfortunately there is no way his mathematical work can be appreciated in public display. Often creative geniuses are recognized only after their death, but Gauss was recognized in his lifetime. Scientists from all over came to Gottingen to consult him.

And, following Gauss, the best mathematicians came to work at Gottingen. One of these was David Hilbert, arguably the foremost mathematician in the world in his time, 1862-1947. So of course I had to drive on *David Hilbert Strasse* too. Cars were not allowed in the main university grounds; and apparently neither were bicycles. Before the entrance there was a veritable sea of parked bicycles. It looked like thousands.

Along the way. Before we come to Weimar, our last major visit, let me make brief mention of some intermediate stops along the way. The first of these is Dresden, on the way from Prague to Leipzig. It had been almost totally destroyed by Allied bombing near the end of the war with Hitler's Germany. And I wanted to see how it had been rebuilt. Other German cities had salvaged the best of the old, but had extended this with modern. The approach Dresden had taken was to rebuild it exactly as it had been. I thought it looked like a reproduction.

Halle, an hour's drive west of Leipzig, is a 1,000-year-old city originally built on the salt trade. It is interesting to me for its university, which can claim to be the first modern university, free to pursue independent scholarship and research, without control by its supporting state, church, or government. It was surpassed by Gottingen, which emerged a little later; and presumably lost its independent status during the communist regime when its name was changed to Karl Marx University.

Potsdam is virtually a suburb of Berlin, where the palaces of the Prussian kings were located. *Sans Souci*, the ornate castle of Frederick the Great (1712-1780) is here. The city retains its imperial character; and it was here that the leaders of the victorious Allied Nations met in 1945 to settle the fate of defeated Germany.

Erfurt, on our route from Gottingen to Weimar, is a large city whose cathedral really is distinguished. It is enormous, and its bell is reputed to be the biggest free swinging one in the world. But I am a gardener, and Erfurt's industry is as Germany's largest producer of flower and vegetable seeds. That is what interested me. All around the edge of the city are fields and greenhouses growing plants to produce seeds. But, unlike a gardener's mixed flower beds, here one sees a whole field in which just one color of one variety of flower is blooming.

Weimar. For several reasons we were interested in Weimar, population 63,000, in former communist East Germany near Leipzig. It was the place where they organized the Weimar Republic, which was all that was left of Germany after World War I, up until it collapsed when Hitler took over. During the Hitler era it was the site of the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp just out of town to the north. After Hitler's defeat the communists razed the site, leaving only a grassy sod. Later, Jewish people have erected memorials there.

But its greatest claim to fame is as a center of humanistic culture. The great German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749-1832, lived here from 1775 until his death. My German is too weak ever to have read Goethe, so to me as a tourist he is just that famous poet and one of the most important figures in modern intellectual history. We visited his home to gawk at the elegant office in which he worked. Bach also spent some time in Weimar to play the organ in the local cathedral. The composers von Weber and Liszt worked here. In fact Liszt composed his *Lowengren* here.

It was of more interest to me that Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus movement of modern design in Weimar. We visited the Bauhaus Museum, exhibiting the movement's influence on the design of everything we use, from desks and chairs to stainless steel "silverware", to say nothing of their modern style buildings.