

OVER THE BRIDGE

“I really do not think I can take this paper to the Dean, let alone the Faculty.”

I stared out of the window onto the Senate Square with my hands behind my back, and studied the statue of Czar Alexander I. A seagull sat on the venerable man’s head and added its contribution to the white crust. I turned to face the man who had inherited my chair and office when I retired from the University. He looked uneasy when I stared him in the eye and asked:

“It’s just a little research application. What seems to be the problem?”

Dr Söderlund said, “First, you’re retired. Second, we’re already short of funds and it is only June. Third, the last Faculty meeting before the Summer break is in two days – there’s no time for due processing of this application. And a few other reasons, not the least of which is the current political situation in Europe – travelling is not safe anymore.”

I made a dismissive gesture with my hand. “Hitler is fine now that he has acquired what he wants. The Sudetenland was all he was after, I’m quite convinced of that. I see no reason not to travel as planned in my application.”

I could see Dr Söderlund was trying to find a way to deter me. “The Faculty would be very sorry if you left on a field trip and came to grief. You’ve given so much to the Department of History, not only here and in Finnish universities, but Europe-wide. Even worldwide, come to think of it. The Dean would not forgive himself if something happened on a field trip he authorised.”

I was not going to give up. “Listen, old boy, I have independent means. But I want authentic documents, and authorisation. Not that I think I will need them, but better safe than sorry.”

Dr Söderlund stood up and blew imaginary dust off the bust of our common colleague, who’d held the chair a hundred years ago. “Like a letter of recommendation? To whom it may concern and all that?”

“Exactly. Something to the effect ‘Authorized by the University of Helsinki, Dr Wikstrand is performing important research into late Roman period archway bridges and aqueducts, etc etc etc.’ that will impress any eager border and customs officials.” I went to the heavy leather armchair in the corner and sat down.

“I’d be very happy to see a border control officer with an eye for aqueducts. But anyway, the fact of the matter is, I am going on this trip – damn politics, damn funds, damn everything. I’ve not been out in the field in years.”

Dr Söderlund walked round his desk. “I’ll see if I can be of help to you, it’s the least I can do. But you need to tell me something. Does this trip have something to do with what happened six months ago? I mean, you seem to have recovered well enough from the crash, but believe me, I know what it’s like to lose a wife. I also know the devil-may-care feeling that

comes after you get a bit better, and I'd hate to think you're going out to satisfy that craving. It's like a death wish, but you must resist it."

I smiled at my friend. "No, Julius, this is not a death wish. It's just that I've cleaned out my closets, sorted out my books and notes, and donated them to the Library. I am free of burdens, I have no obligations, but I want to go on this last trip. I promise you I'll come back and fade into the annals of history where I belong." I stood up, took my cane and walked the few steps to the door. With my hand on the doorknob I stopped.

"Oh, one more thing: I collected all my lithographs and paintings of aqueducts, and donated the whole to the Department, on the condition it be called the Irma Wikstrand Collection."

My colleague stood up. "Really? That's more than... maybe five hundred images? How very generous of you!"

"Six hundred and twelve. I am keeping only one, and you'll get even that upon my return. It's the only image I have not been able to place yet, but on this trip I will find out which bridge it is." I opened the door and stepped out. My "Cheerio!" echoed in the cavernous corridor for a long while.

After the Faculty meeting a messenger brought me a sealed letter. I opened it and found another envelope inside it, and in that one, the letter of recommendation I had asked for. It was written in the most appropriate academic jargon, and the whole paper must have been translated by the German Department. The Faculty seal was imprinted on scarlet wax. This document would enable me to demand fast and prompt service at every border I'd encounter.

I called the travel agency and confirmed my tickets for the following day, then called the janitor and arranged for the housekeeping of my apartment. The furniture I had already covered in bed sheets. I had no idea how many bed sheets we had, as Irma had always taken care of all that. I had packed basic essentials, and it only came to two suitcases. I was planning to buy what I needed along the way. Travelling light was to be my watchword.

When I boarded the "*Gdynia*" at nine the next morning, there was no one to see me off. This was perfect, as I hate goodbyes. When the boat had left the Helsinki harbour and greeted the open sea with a blast from the foghorn, I was at the bow, watching the expanse of the Baltic and feeling fifty years younger. I was able to recreate the exhilaration of the first field trip I ever made, and it felt so good, so invigorating.

Danzig – Warsaw - Berlin – Prague – Vienna – Krakow – Budapest. So what if it wasn't the most direct route, since it took me to all the cities I had worked in. I stayed a few days or a week at each and visited old friends, those who had not retired yet, or died. Quite a few had done both. Nevertheless, I enjoyed life to the full, ate well, saw some shows, visited art exhibitions and museums, and stayed in good hotels. No tents on this trip, that was the one thing I promised myself before leaving.

At the Royal in Budapest, I took out my well-travelled, leather-bound document folder and opened it. There was only one paper in it, a stark contrast to my previous trips. It was a watercolour painting of a bridge, eight huge arches, two levels, built of rough-hewn stone. The

bridge spanned a wide river, which had been painted almost black. In the swirling waters there were no boats. The far end of the bridge was covered in darkness, and one could not see where the bridge went. On the bridge were a few people, quickly sketched, but apparently all walking down to the other side of the river. A boulevard was on the left side of the image, running under the bridge. Finally it had a cafe with three tables, and a vertical sign on the side of the building: BIS Hotel Café.

I had bought this painting from a street peddler in Paris in 1902. He'd seen me carry my lithograph findings from the antique shops of the Rive Gauche, and he stopped me when I walked by. Then he leafed through his own stack of paintings and lithographs, and finally pulled out a watercolour. With a triumphant "*Voilà!*" he handed it to me. I studied the bridge in it and could see at a glance it was not one I'd seen yet. Unfortunately I knew next to nothing of French, and he knew no German, English, or Russian, so our conversation was very limited.

I could only ask him "*Où?*", and he whispered as if telling me a state secret, "*Autriche-Hongrie*".

I signalled him for the price, and he held up five fingers. I put up one, he went down one, and we agreed at three hundred francs. Never mind if I thought that it wasn't a real bridge, it was a very evocative painting; the dark and brooding colours were striking in appearance, and whoever painted it was a very skilful artist indeed. Under the watercolour was an ink drawing. I could not make out anything of the signature. Still, I was already at that time acquiring all bridge images I could for my collection.

This 1902 field trip was all the more memorable when I reached Berlin. At the University of Berlin I met the most charming research assistant ever, and within a few weeks, we were engaged. Irma was her name, Irma Klein, and she promised to follow me to Finland. She did, and she was my heart's delight up until New Year's Eve, 1938. When I lost control of the car I'd borrowed to go to a party, it was not just a wife I lost; it was almost my entire life too. I myself escaped with minor injuries and soon recovered, but the void she left was unbearable.

And now, when I sat in the empty hotel room, staring at the painting, I felt my loss keener than ever. All through the years I travelled with Irma, in search of the bridge in the painting, she'd assured me we would find it yet, and pin a name on it. Now, I was on a wild goose chase if there ever was one, with silver hair, a walking stick, waning strength, and no idea where to go. Oh, but I had one: *Autriche-Hongrie*...

The summer flew past; soon enough it was August. I had thought long and hard where in the modern world this bridge would be, and my educated guess was Croatia, Yugoslavia. I boarded a train from Budapest to Sarajevo on the 24th, and settled down for a pleasant night trip. I have always liked sleeping in trains, and the *tchaka-tchak* of the railway lulled me into easy and deep sleep. The railways in that region have always been very punctual and effective, and therefore I was very surprised to be roused in the middle of the night by the porter. "*Zug kaputt... Zug kaputt...*" he chanted as he knocked on every cabin door down the car. They must have changed train personnel at the border, as this porter knew no German and could not tell us what had happened.

We were given ten minutes to collect our luggage and personal effects before we were herded out of the train. As we walked down onto the gravel road running by the tracks, I could see the locomotive had given up the ghost, and it was exiting the carcass in huge plumes of white steam. The porter arranged us accidental nomads into a trail, and led us away from the train.

Half an hour later I was very, very tired, hoping we'd soon get to a town. As an answer to my silent prayer, our porter led us down a sloping road. We crossed the tracks, and walked past a tiny station, and then we saw the lights of the town. It was situated by a riverbank, and our downhill descent turned into a pleasant, gaslit boulevard. I was among the first group of exhausted travellers, and as such, I was led to the hotel that appeared on our left. The remaining passengers were ushered forward to other lodgings, and I saw them no more.

I signed in with no communication. Apparently the night concierge had no command of any of my languages, so I just passed him my wallet and watched him extract fifteen Reichsmarks from it. He flashed a gold-teeth smile, and hit the bell. The grandfather of all bellhops emerged from the woodwork, grabbed my luggage, and led me up the stairs to my room. I was so tired and happy to be here that I tipped him a fiver as he left. I slapped myself on the bed, and knew no more.

I came to when a ray of sunlight tickled my nose, and heard the door click shut. It must have been forty years since I'd slept in my clothes, and I felt as crumpled as my trousers. Room service had brought fresh flowers into my room, as well as a tray of food, which I consumed with eagerness. A hearty breakfast and a wash fixed my body and soul, and within an hour I was ready to step outside. As soon as I did so, entering the boulevard, I was struck by something more than just a dazzling bright sunlight.

My hotel was a hundred yards away from the very bridge aqueduct in my painting. I stood there for a long while, not believing what had happened. Fate, it seemed, had disrupted my journey to bring me to the one place in all of Europe I wanted to go. I ran inside to find out where I was, but the day concierge was as limited in his languages as his nocturnal twin. So, I hauled out my Baedeker, dug up Yugoslavia and handed the book to the concierge. He leafed forward and found Croatia, sticking his thick forefinger an inch north of Sarajevo. I could not understand what he said as he did so. I asked him in Russian for the name of the town. He said something like "Zmerzno". He wrote it down for me.

I returned to the boulevard, and only now understood the name in the picture. I had stayed at ANUBIS Hotel Café, as it said in the sign on the wall. The Egyptian jackal figure on top of the sign was particularly well-crafted. Still, I could not pull my eyes off the magnificent bridge crossing the river. It had many features of the Alatri aqueduct bridge in Italy, and yet, it also reminded me of the massive and long double-layer aqueduct of Segovia. As I looked at it, it began to show itself to me as a singular design, one which I'd never seen during my travels. This was well in accordance with my picture – I'd never found anything like that depicted in bridge art. An unusual feature was that there were balconies on it, five in total on each side.

This discovery was something to celebrate. Returning to the cafe, I ordered a cup of coffee with cognac. When I had my glass, I toasted the bridge, and enjoyed the drink. Afterward I returned to my room and picked up my field measurement kit.

Measuring the bridge proved harder than I thought. It must have been the sun which made my thinking slow, and I paused often just to gather my thoughts and commit to paper the notes I wanted to take. Somehow I wasn't my usual meticulous self this day; having taken the base width of the bridge, I tried to calculate its length, but even though I'd done that before for a million structures, I arrived at a different result every time. Climbing up to the bridge via a steep hill street was of course another option, and measuring the length would then be easy. But merely looking at the street which led up the hill made me sweat profusely.

I retired to the cafe for refreshments and a snack. I bought a cup of coffee and a sandwich, and had a bite. The bridge looked like an old friend to me, I had looked at my picture so many times and wondered about it. Still, after a while, I felt very determined. I had conquered bridges and aqueducts in six European countries, damn it, and I would prevail here. I decided to attack the bridge on the top, and set out up the steep hill.

The streets were narrow; the town plan must have dated from medieval times. I took the first turn to the right and walked down it for a while, until another opened uphill. I turned on it and dragged myself up. Yet another street joined it, leading to the right, which was where I wanted to go. It turned out to be a cul-de-sac. Upon returning to the crossroads, I could no longer find the uphill street, but turned left instead to find another.

Within fifteen minutes I was completely lost among the high whitewashed buildings on the narrow streets. I decided to abort the search for the bridge and took streets that led me down, and I found the boulevard. I cursed myself – in the past, it'd have been no problem, but I was not half the intrepid researcher I used to be. I wanted a cool beer to drown the embarrassment. Upon finding Anubis, I was hungry too.

I sat there at the cafe all day, watching the people pass me by. By dusk I became aware of a curious thing: during the day, there were people on the aqueduct walking up and down, but I could not see anyone actually crossing the bridge. Now, at dusk, it seemed to me all those walking on the bridge were crossing it slowly and deliberately. When I watched it in the daylight, the far end of the bridge seemed to merge into the proliferous bushes and trees and I could not make out where it went; now, in the dimming evening light, the whole far bank of the river appeared to be one soft, undulating mass of deep green vegetation.

But when I finished my meal by the boulevard, I glanced at my watch. Already it was six pm. I bet my mouth looked silly when it fell open, and I had to collect my jaw from the table. The weather had also changed from bright sunny to overcast, and soon a drizzle began to fall. I retired to my room, and when I hit the bed, I fell in a slumber, and slept like Tutankhamen.

A renewed attempt to get onto the bridge failed just as massively the next morning. I was very confused about what was happening to me. Early dementia, I thought, and then remembered my age. Maybe a snack lunch would help? I returned to Anubis. While munching on my excellent stuffed croissant, I saw a familiar face walking down the boulevard, in a hurry with a forward crouch.

"Goldblum? Hey – Ishmael! Over here!" I shouted. The man heard his name called and turned to the cafe to find me. As he turned I saw his overcoat with the bright yellow star. That hurt me, to see one of the premier experts of Roman history labelled like that.

“Johannes? Is that really you? How can this be possible?” He joined me at my table.
“What are you doing here?”

I pointed at the bridge. “I came, I saw, I conquered. That was the last bridge I wanted to find and describe, and that’s what I am doing here. Actually I haven’t conquered it yet, as I am still measuring it.”

“Nice to hear someone is still able to work. The last couple of years have been absolute hell in Berlin. Our department was purged, one by one, and Kaufmann and myself were the last to leave. He’s at the train station, trying to see when we can continue south.”

“Kaufmann’s here too? Where are you going?”

“America if possible, England at least. We are trying to get to Sarajevo, then Athens, and see if we can find a ship bound for Portugal. These are dire times, my friend, and even if you are not in direct danger yourself, I suggest you leave at once for Finland. It is much, much safer than any place down here.”

“I will, don’t worry, as soon as I have described that bridge. But let me go and reserve a table for tonight. We must have dinner together, to celebrate this chance encounter!” And I made a move to rise.

Goldblum looked around and said, “I’m afraid we can’t stay until the night. We must carry on. Nowhere is safe for us anymore... and I am afraid to take off this star even. I will cut it off as soon as we cross into Greece.” He stood up. “Godspeed, Wikstrand. May we meet again in more prosperous times.” He picked up his felt hat and left.

Somehow it was already almost dusk. This I was unable to comprehend, as I felt it was only moments ago since I had entered the boulevard in the sunlight of bright morning. My mind was going soft; that was the only explanation for the rush of time. The bridge was again shrouded by the descending darkness, and a man ignited the few gaslights on it. As I looked, I thought I caught a glimpse of Goldblum and Kaufmann walking onto the bridge. They entered one of the balconies. Goldblum looked for me, found me, and waved, as did Kaufmann. I responded, and then they walked into the darkness.

I decided it was time to go in. I had a bit of dinner at the restaurant, then retired. My room had been immaculately made over, but I was surprised to see the flowers all wilted, as if they’d been in the heat of the day without water for a week. I picked them up and put them in the bin. I managed to undress before collapsing on the bed again.

The next morning was more or less the same as the previous one. Armed with my field measuring kit I attempted to chart the bridge, but trying to make meaningful notes was beyond my capabilities. My thinking was bogged down and I found it hard to concentrate. I decided to take a break and walk to the station to ask for trains back north. That was an hour’s worth of hard work, but I did make it.

Puffing and wheezing, I queued among a multitude of people and waited. When I got to the teller, he spoke Russian with such a heavy accent as to be virtually incomprehensible. I did pick up enough to hear that the train wreck that landed me here also broke the tracks, and no trains northbound were forthcoming.

Coming down the hill back to my hotel, I was again struck by the speed with which daylight waned in this region. By the time I reached Hotel Anubis, it was almost dark, and there were many people crossing the aqueduct, grey shadows in the yellow gaslight. I shivered as if a cold wind had blown past me, but the surface of the dark river was serene except for small eddies close to the riverbank and bridge.

In the dining room were newspapers for guests to read. Quite surprisingly and much to my dismay, the only recent one was *El País*. I had no command of Spanish, but I could see the date was September 2nd. This was a shock. Surely I had arrived on August 24th? I picked it up and tried to read it, but I only could understand two words: HITLER and POLONIA. The map below the massive headline removed any doubt.

It suddenly seemed a good idea to embark on a return voyage. I went out to smoke a cigar in the cafe and glanced up the bridge. It was crowded with shadowy human figures, walking slowly across the murky river on the right-hand side of the bridge. I was wondering why no one came back to this side? The thought nagged me until I fell in a fitful sleep of little rest.

By the next morning I was already somewhat resolved to fail again at measuring the bridge. To add insult to injury, the toilet didn't refill, so I reported it at the concierge: "Toilet kaputt". After a half-hearted attempt with the field kit below the bridge, I decided to have a look at the other side of the bridge, which I deemed to be the north side. As I set out to do this, I understood the traffic in a flash. Surely there was a lane system in use! And any return traffic would use the other lane. Oh, how simple mistakes one can make when tired. I chugged on, a happy fellow this time. When I was out of the shadow of the bridge, I glanced up to confirm my theory.

There were eight people on this side of the bridge. All of them walked slowly down to the other side of the river. So much for my problem solving capabilities. I had to think this over, and Cafe Anubis rescued me with a coffee and a cognac. I loosened my collar and sat down on a wicker chair. I dabbed sweat off my forehead with a handkerchief when I caught sight of a boy with a hoop and a stick, running among the slowly walking people on the bridge. He was dressed in a sailor suit and a cap. He entered a balcony on the bridge and waved.

Seeing him made me think of my Max. He'd had a hoop like that, and his favourite summer outfit was a worn sailor suit. I smiled at the memory of him. He'd have been a man by now, thirty-five, had he not fallen victim to the post-war diphtheria epidemic. But the memories... this boy brought them all up. Though Max had worn eyeglasses, the likeness was good enough for me to reminisce and feel that stinging spike of pain once more.

Acting on instinct, I grabbed my binoculars and focused them on him. He stopped waving and faced me, and for a fraction of a second, I stared my son in the face, eyeglasses and all. Just as quickly he sprinted away with his hoop and stick, and by the time I was even on my feet, he was lost in the crowd. I fell back on my chair, heart racing, blood rushing in my ears. I was going mad from exposure to the fierce sun, I deduced, and retired to my room. The fresh flowers of the morning had withered into a dry and drooping bouquet already, but I wasn't thinking of them. I sat on the settee until it was time for dinner and then I retired to bed.

The next morning I was sure the previous days were all temporary lapses of reason brought about by travelling. I felt well enough to go and find the post office, where I was able to negotiate the sending of a telegram to Dr Söderlund. It read: "AM IN ZMERZNO YUGOSLAVIA. FOUND MY BRIDGE. WILL MEASURE AND DESCRIBE TODAY. WILL RETURN SOON." By the time I'd walked back to the hotel, I was already tired and feeling addle-minded. Though cognac would not help, I sat down at the boulevard cafe and ordered one with coffee. I was hoping to see that boy with a hoop again.

I happened to glance at my pocket watch when my coffee arrived. It was 12.30. By the time I'd finished the last drop of the excellent Renault, I had another glance and was aghast to see it was already 5.45pm. Staggering to my feet I went in, and the concierge gave me my room key. He told me in a multitude of languages and torrential outpour of speech that my room had been changed and that they were sorry but I was now on the seventh floor, all the way up the stairs. I gave him a meek smile and dragged myself up the stairwell. The view from the top of the building was splendid; from here I could see the boulevard, and for the first time, the top of the bridge. It was too dark to see much more than the isolated cold-yellow gas light lampposts, and shadows below them.

I prepared myself for the night, and left the window open. Once again my sleep arrived like a battering ram, knocking me semiconscious, and gave me undefined dreams to experience. But at the hour of the wolf I was awakened by the sound of a mass of people on the move; furthermore, when I opened my eyes I saw light dancing and shadows flickering on the walls and for a moment I thought my room was on fire. I grabbed my robe and went to the window.

As I looked out I saw the bridge was no longer illuminated by the feeble gaslights. Instead there were huge flares and torches lining both sides of the bridge, and on the other side of the river, a massive pyre which sent out sparks to the high heavens. I stood and watched as a multitude of people trundled down the bridge, a dozen abreast, nay, twenty abreast, some in step, most out of step. I could make out the glimmer of the torches on rank insignia of an endless column of soldiers marching on the left side of the bridge.

I picked up my field glasses, because something caught my eye on the first balcony of the bridge. With trembling hands, I focused my gaze on the balcony. Irma was standing there, waving at me, with Max by her side. She pointed out my room to him, and Max waved too.

It took me less than three minutes to get dressed. Then, leaving everything behind, I stormed down the stairs and past the surprised concierge. On the boulevard I turned left, then left to go up, then right to reach the bridge street. Everything went smooth as glass, and then I stood on the corner of the street that led down to the bridge. People pushed me around, but I was oblivious to them. I saw only Irma and Max, who turned to walk down the bridge, glancing back every once in a while to see if I was following.

Of course I was. I couldn't wait to get to the other side.