

THOUGHTS ABOUT TRAVELLING

WHICH IS IT?

TRAVEL IS SO BROADENING

OR

“A KEE GEYT TZUM KIEV UN KIMT FUN KIEV UN BLAYBT A KEE”

OR BOTH

In the spring of 1952, soon after Sylvia and I married, we started planning a trip across the country with our friends Sid and Barbara. I wanted to see as much of the world as I could, starting here. When we realized it was unrealistic for the four of us to buy a car and drive cross-country, Sylvia and I hitchhiked.

Was my craving to travel my mother's influence? Maybe. She went by foot (no hitchhiking) across Europe when she was 16, to come to America. In 1926, she made her big trip to Paris to visit her sister. She saw the sights, and even took in London. But that was it. She would have liked to have traveled more, but it was not to be.

It was her expression about the “kee” (cow) that has stayed with me. “A cow goes to Kiev and comes from Kiev, and remains a cow.” It was clearly a dig at the nouveau riche who were always travelling “abroad” in the '20s. To the young, enlightened Eastern European Jews, Kiev was a city of culture, music, art, theatre, politics. They went there, learned and absorbed the culture. The cows that went there learned nothing. The nouveau riche, like the cows, came and left, and remained the same cows. They ate, drank and shopped, but were unaffected by the sights around them.

I have always been fascinated by all the different places and people in the world. Different colors, different languages, different geographies. Perhaps it started when I received a book by Richard Haliburton for my Bar Mitzvah. I loved the travelogues that I saw in the movies. I promised myself that some day I will visit those places.

In 1948, my friend Sol and I planned to hitchhike to Montreal. (A separate story). I did it by way of Toronto. I still remember the thrill of crossing endless miles of New York State, seeing Niagara Falls, driving through Ontario, passing farms and forests and small towns, meeting and talking to people, being awestruck by historic buildings, seeing the sights of Montreal. I was hooked.

Just as my first big trip was in the U.S., in my 20s, my first explorations were in New York in my teens. It was an adventure walking outside my neighborhood. I discovered different worlds, and smelled different smells. In the Bronx, I walked through Irish and Italian neighborhoods, Puerto Rican barrios, and black “ghettos.” (Even as a teen-ager, I

knew that ghettos were originally where the Italian Jews were forced to live. If people want to call black neighborhoods ghettos, it was all right with me.) I walked through these areas, more with fascination than with trepidation. I saw different churches, stores, parks, schools. Kids were playing in the street, mothers were pushing baby carriages, old women were sitting on the stoops. "Better" neighborhoods had more private houses than tenements. I did a lot of walking: to Lincoln Hospital, to St. Mary's Park, to Crotona Park, even to the Yankee Stadium. Looking and learning. No guide books.

In high school and college, I got to know Manhattan. I had already been exposed to the Lower East Side, and Central Park and the Fifth Avenue Bus by my mother. Going to Stuyvesant High School enabled me to get to know other parts of downtown and midtown. I became an expert on the NY Public Library, and all the museums which did not charge admission. I eventually learned about Greenwich Village, Broadway, jazz clubs, restaurants, and the museums which did charge admission. A love affair began which exists to this day.

In 1954, before entering the Army and having Uncle Sam pay for my travelling, Sylvia and I hitchhiked across the southern US from Florida to Arizona. Just as with our trip two years before, we also got a feel for the political climate. As much as we wanted to believe that America would continue on the road laid out by FDR and Truman, we saw movement to the right, to Eisenhower, and to the cold war.

Being drafted, gave me the opportunity to see more of the US: Fort Dix NJ, Camp Rucker Alabama, and Camp Gordon Georgia. It turned out to be a great learning experience. And over the years, I have been fortunate to have jobs which enabled me to see more and more of our great land: "from California to the New York Island." I lucked out when I went to work for the US Civil Rights Commission. As Mid-Atlantic regional director, I got to know Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and North Carolina. I felt I should have paid the agency for the opportunity to visit all the different cities and to get to know all those wonderful people. And then to be transferred to Boston as the New England regional director. How lucky can one guy be? I became a walking "Baedeker."

My friend Sol used to say, "I don't want to die wondering." By that he meant, he did not want to wonder what such-and-such a place was like. He wanted to see it for himself. And the way he travelled, he was not going to see a lot of places, but he would see them in depth. No hotel or motel. He rented an apartment., and spent a couple weeks or more in one place. Depth, not breadth. He became a native. Phil and Martha discovered Italy. Their vacations were spent in one or two towns. The name Monte San Sevino stays in my head. Martha learned to speak Italian. Phil knew everything there was to know about a few Italian artists, like Donatello. Carol went to France for her junior year abroad and it became, to use her word, life-changing.

I remember my friends Bob and Rose visiting me in Washington. I had been living in my new neighborhood near Georgetown for a year or two. They had prepared for the visit with a guidebook, and we took a walk. They proceeded to tell me facts about my neighborhood about which I had no idea. Information about buildings which I passed dozens of times. I have been struggling with this question ever since: guidebook or serendipity.

Fran and I have taken three major trips in the last five years: to Spain and the South of France in 2010, an Alaska Cruise in 2012, and most recently, October 2014, a river cruise from Budapest to Amsterdam. A good friend commented that it is amazing that we still travel, despite our infirmities. Ah, but we are doing it very differently from when we were younger. Walking is kept to a minimum, as is the movement from one place to the other. In Spain we only visited two cities: Madrid and Barcelona. When I was younger, I would have covered half of Spain in the time we spent in M and B. We also visited family, which meant that we again, stayed in one place for several days. We did rent a car and drove through the south of France, but we parked close to wherever we wanted to be. Very little walking. No serendipity. I did say, after Alaska, no more, but this time, I mean it.

From the first trip in 1952, I have been taking photos to record the trip. Why? My first reaction is, how can anyone ask such a question. To keep the memory of the trip. To show to friends and family. Because that is what you do when you go on a trip. A very long time ago, (How is 75 years ago?) my cousin Louis said he stopped taking pictures because he could buy picture post cards with pictures better than the ones I could take. But they won't have him or his family in them, I pointed out. That's OK, he replied. Sorry, I want to take my photos, and to keep and show them as I saw the sights.

Trips with the kids were primarily summer vacations: to Connecticut when we lived in NY; to West Virginia or the Delaware beaches from Washington. After Sylvia and I separated, I made some major trips: to London, to San Juan, and the big one (seven weeks) to Israel and then with a Eurailpass from Italy to southern France, Switzerland, Denmark, Holland and northern France.

How does one retain everything one sees, if not by taking photos and keeping a journal. For some people it is by buying something from the area. In fact, for some people that is the main reason to travel.

Bragging rights: Some people travel in order to be able to say that they have been there. Sometimes, certain places become the places you MUST see. The latest IN places. They are featured in the Travel section of the Sunday Times, the sights to be seen, as well as the recommended restaurants and places to stay. It is your job to visit those sights, eat in those restaurants, and stay in those hotels. Forget it!

For many years, my routine was a combination of guidebook and serendipity. Before taking a trip, I would go to the library and take out every guidebook on the shelf for the

places I would be going. AAA, Fodor, Frommer, Michelin, Rough Guide, Insight, etc. I would compare, make a list of must sees that all the guidebooks agreed upon, then a second list, then places of special interest to me. All guidebooks had sections devoted to restaurants. I would make a list of those, but when we got to the city, we ended up eating at restaurants near the places at which we were staying.

As I travel less, I have become a big fan of Rick Steves TV travels. He covers the world, places I know I will never visit. And it is great when he visits places which I have seen, bringing back memories. He is part of a grand tradition. Some time ago, there was Burton Holmes. Before him, there were stereopticons, and lantern slides featuring photographs of faraway places.

I have been trying to understand how one is broadened by seeing the various wonders of the world. And why seeing them up close is so much better than seeing them reproduced. And why seeing them reproduced is so much better than someone describing them, and why someone describing them is better than reading about them, and why reading about them is better than not reading about them at all.

Of the original Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, only one remains: the Great Pyramid of Giza. I am not sure why this great pyramid is greater than the other pyramids. I understand it is a real challenge to get there, and when you are there, you are hassled by guides and camel drivers, and it is a real pain. Though the other wonders are gone, I hear they were really something: hanging gardens, and really big statues and buildings. More recent wonders include Petra, and Macchu Picchu, and Chichen Itza, and Taj Mahal, and the Great Wall of China and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Natural wonders include the Grand Canyon and Mt. Everest, and more recent wonders are the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge.

Do people who live near these wonders realize that they are the wonders that they are? That people travel thousands of miles to see something that is around the corner? As a kid, I took the wonders of New York for granted. Whether it was the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the bridges like the George Washington or Brooklyn Bridge, and the parks like Central and Bronx Park. Or the art museums like the Metropolitan or the Modern. New York was (and still is) the place for theatre and music.

Friends have observed, and I concur, that sometimes, the best part of traveling is the unanticipated, the chance encounter. Meeting someone from the region you are visiting, or meeting someone who is also sightseeing. The former enables you to learn about the area from a native. The latter results in comparing notes, sharing the experience of discovery together. Ideally in both cases, making a new friend. This is what made hitchhiking so great.

These days, we are bombarded with leaflets, brochures and e-mails from travel agents and cruise lines. Once you inquire, they have your address and never let you go. They

must realize that when you express your intention of going on a trip that summer or fall, and if they have not heard from you, you have chosen someone else. But perhaps they know more than I realize. There must be enough people who did not go on that trip, and who hope to eventually go on that trip. My experience is as follows: We first fantasize about a trip. Do we want to go to Alaska, France, Spain, Italy, Hawaii, Israel, etc. Then, think about how long. Then, focus in on the place we select. Then, find out who offers what. And then select among them.

When thinking about travelling, the AAA always manages to intrude itself into my thoughts. They were there at the start, when I started thinking about travelling across the country in 1952. It was my cousin Louis who offered to utilize his AAA membership as the vehicle to obtain for me road maps and those invaluable Tour Books. To me, before there was Fodor and Frommer, there was the AAA State Tour Book. And they came at no charge if you were an AAA member. The AAA always put a price on the books. but the cost was preceded with the line, "Free to AAA and CAA Members." They were my bible, but unlike the Bible, they were revised every couple years.

I recently took a batch of them down to our condo's book exchange. Even though they were from 2008 and 2009, they will be grabbed up, and they will still have value. Their lists of hotels and motels and restaurants may change, but the information about the area's history and geography remain the same. The Points of Interest seldom change, nor do the Recreation Areas. Their recommendations regarding What to See, and What to Do, and Where to Shop, are usually right on the money. AAA uses diamonds rather than stars to rate lodgings and restaurants.