

## **Chapter 12: The wedding (1980)**

When Heidi was seven months pregnant she resigned from her job in Jerusalem and returned home to Schaffhausen where she wanted to deliver our child. But first we had to be married. The plan was for me to finish the internship, get the MD diploma and only then join her in Switzerland. I had to return to Switzerland Heidi's Swiss-licensed car; to do so I intended to sail from Haifa to Ancona, Italy and then drive to Schaffhausen. The boat would arrive in Ancona on April 10, 1980; the wedding was arranged for the 11<sup>th</sup>.

It was a medium size Greek Ferry that rocked violently in the choppy early spring sea. The human cargo, mainly Italians returning after pilgrimage in the Holy Land, was continuously sea sick. The food in the cafeteria was appalling; I survived on bread, *feta* cheese sprinkled with olive oil, lettuce and black olives, washed down with cheap bitter *Retsina*. In the bar I came across a bespectacled German archeology student— Bettina was her name —who proved herself a pleasant companion. I mean a social-intellectual companion, nothing else. First she wasn't exactly my type: petite and swarthy; second, I was on my way to get married.

After two and half days, late morning on April 7, the ship arrived at the Port of Piraeus, dropping anchor for the day. Bettina disembarked to continue to Athens and I joined her for a day trip. The ship was to sail off towards Italy that night at 11 PM. We took the train to Athens where, after the days of bread and cheese on board, we feasted on *Tzayziki* and lamb *kabab* and lots of *ouzo*. Slightly tipsy, we climbed together the steep path towards the Acropolis. The light was turning violet, cold wind was blowing from the sea; the city lights were gleaming far below. Finally the Acropolis— deserted. Not a human in sight. We stood there wordless, shivering in the breeze. Below us, the sea of lights was astounding.

We ran down to Athens, said goodbye and I rushed to the train heading back to Piraeus. I looked at my watch—9 am; time for a last good supper before the ship parts. Near the gates to the port I saw a decent looking *taverna*. I entered: a few locals drinking *ouzo*, nibbling on pickles

and fried *calamari*. At the corner, in a large glass tank, I noted giant lobsters swimming. I had never tasted a lobster before. *Let me try it once, why not? I have to celebrate my new M.D and the imminent wedding.* The waiter addressed me in Greek.

“A lobster please, and a liter of *Retsina*.” I replied.

“What size lobster?”

“The biggest, this one,” I pointed towards a monster at the bottom of the tank.

“OK, Sir.” The waiter looked at me questionably, probably thinking: would he be able to pay? I did not have any idea how much would it be. I had a few notes of *drachmas* in my pocket and a bunch of 100-dollar notes. *It should be enough.*

I labored through the giant: white tough meat—nothing special—not the taste of heaven I thought it would be. The *Retsina* however was good, better than that served on the ship. 10 am. “Waiter, the bill please.” I do not remember how much the bill was but then it seemed to me astronomic—at least 125 US dollars. Was the giant imported from Maine?

“Sorry, no dollars, only *drachmas*,” objected the waiter.

“No *drachmas*, only dollars, ship leaving just now,” I hoped that he’d understand basic English. I handed him two 100-dollar bills and asked for change, “in dollars...” My watch showed 10.25 pm. I must go now. Another waiter rushed to a neighboring store to get me the change—in *drachmas*.

Only when I stood up I noticed how drunk I was —the liter of mild *Retsina* tasted like spiced juice but it was all gone now. I stumbled toward the gate of the port, presented to the sentry my ship permit and passport and rushed towards the pier. It was dark and deserted. My watch indicated 10.45. “Fucking Greeks” I shouted to the black sea and starless night. *Don’t these idiots count their passengers?*

I wandered through the deserted port looking for an open office; they were all closed. My mind was foggy but I had my passport and a few

hundred dollars. And I knew that my best bet is Athens' airport. *Heidi's car and luggage is gone but I have to arrive on time to the wedding.*

Back in Piraeus's train station I noticed the clock on the wall: 00.15. My own watch indicated however 11.15. *Fuck, this is a different time zone.*

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April 8, 1980. It was early morning when I arrived into Athens' international airport.

All flights to Rome or Milan for that day were sold out, forcing me to purchase, consuming most of the money I had, an expensive Swissair flight to Rome via Zurich. After an uncomfortable day in that congested and scruffy airport the departure of my flight was announced. More troubles at the security check: "Sir, where's your luggage?"

"I don't have any."

"Not even hand luggage?"

"No, it is all on the ship."

"Which ship?" And so on until I almost missed that flight too.

Remember, these were the days when airliners were almost routinely bombed by the Palestinians, especially the ones taking off from Athens.

Changing fights in Zurich was frustrating: here I was only 40 km' away from Schaffhausen —the site of the looming wedding. We landed at Fiumicino, Rome late at evening. Passport control: now suddenly I remembered the discord with the Italian Police in Modena seven years ago —*do they have any record of it?* But the unshaven *poliziotto* gazed at me without interest and motioned me through: *va bene*.

A bus to Rome's railway station, arriving 1 am April 9 —just when the station closed down until 4 am. I counted my money: \$ 200. Hotel—out of question: I still had to take a train to Ancona, pick up my car, drive to Switzerland, eat, fill the tank, and pay toll on the expensive Italian *autostrada*. Credit cards? Did they exist then?

Where to bivouac for the night? One option: join the ranks of the homeless, scattered on the pavement around the station—Albanians, Libyans,

Africans and the obligatory bunch of hobos, drunk and drug addicted. Second option: an all night café-bar; I chose the later. Here I spent the next three hours and ten bucks worth of *lire* on red wine and a reasonable pizza –saying a definitive nay to the friendly hookers and transvestites who stopped for a *vermouth* between the action.

Four a.m, back to the station, gates still closed. I knocked on the window of a parked taxi, waking up the driver and receiving the usual reply of “*Madonna di maiale*”, and “don’t you know, there’s a *sciopero generale*?” Now, anyone who has lived a while in Italy knows the meaning of this term, which so often inflicts this charming country: “a general strike.”

“But are the busses running?”

“Some... *bussi privati* , may run.”

“OK, take me to the central bus station.”

Rainy, smoggy morning in Rome. The bus station would not open until 6 am. What followed, to cut the story short, was a tortuous journey of about 230 km, on multiple *bussi privati*, across the Italian Peninsula. From Rome, near the Tyrraenian Sea, to Ancona on the Adriatic Sea. All I recall are busses, small towns, hills, gray wet fields, changing busses and waiting for them—some wine, more café— in larger towns called Terni, Foligno, Macerata and others which I remember no more.

On April 10, 3 am, when I arrived at the ancient port of Ancona, the rain stopped. The night was clear and I could see my lost ship tied to the pier just off a long seaside avenue. With the passengers already disembarked, and driven away, the tired crew was unloading some cargo. I climbed on the jetty and approached the first officer who started a rapid verbal barrage: “*signore*, where did you disappear? Greek police’s looking for you, Italian police as well, you luggage is in the police station. The car? We didn’t have the keys, we had to break a window, the battery is flat, and we dragged it to the police station. Anyway good to see you alive.”

I waited until the *mechanico* opened his garage, fixed a flat tire, re-charged the battery, the window would have to wait —when they hear you are a foreigner they charge double. A drive of seven hundreds km. to

Schaffhausen; around Lake Como I picked up a disheveled Dutch hitchhiker; after mid-night we crossed the St. Bernardino Pass, the moonshine reflecting off the snow walls on both sides. At the outskirts of Zurich, the hitchhiker requested to be dropped off and asked for a loan of a few dollars. When I handed him \$ 30 —it was all that was left—he promised, “I will return it as soon as I reach home. Just let me have your address”. *Oh sure*, I thought. Ten days later a thank you card with a postal money order arrived from the Netherlands. I learned: never refuse a plea for modest financial help that you can afford.

It was still dark when I parked the Opel near Heidi’s parents’ house in Ungerbühlstrasse 61, finding everybody sleepless and tense: where did the groom disappear? A bath, shave, breakfast and then we rushed to town to get me a dark suit (the first suit I ever had). The trousers were too long but a few in-folding pins had to do the job for immediately later we had to attend our civil wedding at the City Hall. This was conducted in Swiss German by the *Stadt* Secretary, Herr Uelinger, who lectured us for 45 minutes. I did not understand much what he preached in his local dialect; I only thought: after all this saga this better be a good marriage—as it turned out to be.

Should I be including such banal snap shots of our wedding, and how I arrived at it, in a memoir? Isn’t it like forcing on the readers Bar Mitzvah pictures or a slide show of one’s last vacation in Vegas? But be it as it may, the wedding party, lasting from early afternoon until after midnight, was a typical German-Swiss affair: a cruise on the Rhein River under a pale and cool pre-spring sun; champagne and small sandwiches with air cured, thinly cut Alpine beef; a stop at a river side church for a non religious ceremony to satisfy the Swiss relatives—but were they satisfied to watch a Swiss girl in her last month of pregnancy marrying a foreigner and a Jew? More white wine and more sandwiches and sausages. Finally a dinner at a *landstube*: wooden walls, long wooden tables, and flowers. The food: mixed salad, creamed fresh mushroom soup, roast of veal with potato croquettes and

fresh asparagus, fruit salad and ice cream, cookies. One-liter carafes of Schaffhausen red *landwine*, coffee, *kirschwasser* and *Williams pear schnapps*.

This is perhaps the point where a tribute should be paid to Heidi's parents, my in-laws, Berta and Karl. Both are dead now. Berta died ten years ago of Alzheimer disease at the age of 79, Karl passed away just recently at the age of 92, from old age. Both were hard working and modest Swiss citizens, of the older generation but accepting changes, conservative but liberal at the same time. They, small town people who almost never traveled abroad, had warmly and immediately accepted me—a foreigner and a Jew—into their family as if I was one of them. One could have not wished for better in-laws!

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“That fall the snow came very late. We lived in a brown wooden house in the pine trees on the side of the mountain and at night there was frost so that there was thin ice over the water in the two pitchers on the dresser in the morning...the pine wood crackled and sparked and then the fire roared in the stove...we could see the lake and the mountain across the lake on the French side. There was snow on the tops of the mountains and the lake was a gray steel-blue.” These are Hemingway's words from “*A farewell to arms*”. This is when Lieutenant Henry, an American volunteer ambulance driver and his pregnant lover Catherine Barkley, a British nurse, desert WW-I Italy to the calm Swiss Alps. Here, in a farmhouse above Montreux, the young couple awaited the arrival of their baby while enjoying the rustic Alpine atmosphere.

In our case it was spring, and after the wedding we did like Henry and Catherine. Not expecting the birth to take place within a month we retired to Adelboden, a village in the Bernese Alps, where Heidi's family had used to spend summer vacations at the Berci's family farmhouse. The two-storied wooden house was glued to the slopes high above the village, just below the upper forest line. The wood paneled guest flat of two tiny bedrooms, a kitchen, and a lounge, was plain: low ceiling, no phone, no TV, but a large

porcelain wood burning stove. Herr and Frau Berci, and their minimally retarded son Goeddel, lived below, next to the barn with its hogs.

Even at these heights the snow started to melt, turning heavy, wet and dirty; yet, the almost 3000 meter *Albishorn*, behind the house, and the majestic *Wildstrubel* and its glacier, in front — mountains we used to climb during the summers with Heidi's father Karl — stood white as ever, glistening in the sun. At night we slept on hard straw filled mattresses under soft eider downs with the windows wide opened. And through the windows the moonlit, and the white Alps were invading the room with the smell of fresh pine, rotting grass, wood fire, all mixed with the aroma emitted by the fermenting hay and hogs down in the barn. During the days we did what we always did in the Alps, the same thing everyone does— hike and rest in the inns, which were dark inside, warm and smoky, with their peculiar Alpine inn aroma consisting of fresh cheese, spilled wine, evaporating schnapps and *stumpen*, the cheap cigars smoked by the mountain people. Afterwards, when we went out, the cold air came sharply into the lungs and the rush of mountain streams to the ears.

Back to *A farewell to arms*, to let Hemingway describe what happened one night, a week into *our* stay in the mountains: "One morning I woke about three o'clock hearing Catherine stirring in the bed.

"Are you all right, Cat?"

"I've been having some pains, darling."

"Regularly?"

"No, not very."

"If you have them regularly we'll go to the hospital."

This is exactly how it was with us, but with two differences: first, Heidi never called me "darling", second, I asked her: "aren't these just *Braxton Hicks contractions*, a false alarm?" Yet, Hemingway's couple and we acted immediately. They called for a taxi and drove down to Montreux; we decided to drive back to Schaffhausen, 4 hours away. It snowed heavily that night;

together with Herr Berci we needed an hour to clear the steep path from the farmstead to the main road.

While Hemingway's Catherine lost her son at birth and later died of postpartal hemorrhage, our story had a happier end. When we reached the foot of the Alps around the Thuner Lake, Heidi's pains subsided; it was indeed a false alarm. Omri, our first son, was to be born two weeks later, exactly 30 days after the wedding. The morning after he was born—aren't all births taking place at night? —I returned to my in-laws home to sleep. But Lieutenant Henry did not go to sleep after his Catherine lost their son; he went into a café, had ham and eggs served in a round dish and, to "cool his mouth... drank several beers." And then after having yet another beer Lieutenant Henry walked back to the hospital to learn that Catherine had a lethal hemorrhage.

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With Heidi and friends at our wedding, Schaffhausen, 1980

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The "in laws": Karl and Berta Faas



Berci's house; Adelboden, Bernese Alps, 1980