

Chapter 21: A try in Bern (1987)

1987. Life was good but I remained unsettled. We knew that sooner or later we would have to leave this place —it could never become a permanent home for us; not under the white minority regime, and even less under a black leadership. The winds of political instability were gathering and it seemed that changes were imminent. One day, after attending a funeral in Johannesburg's Jewish cemetery, I came home and told Heidi: "I really don't feel like being buried in this African soil, I hate the idea of lying under these foreign skies, we should leave as long as the boys are young."

The USA? I was not keen to repeat residency, which was, and still is, required for foreign surgeons relocating to the US. I tried another route: I wrote to Dr. Hiram Polk, then the Chairperson in Louisville, and a leader in surgical infections, asking for a position in his laboratory. If you can't enter a system from the front door, try the back door; get into the lab of a surgical leader, prove yourself useful, and hope that he'll provide you with a ticket to clinical surgery—a known tactic. Three months later I received a polite reply from Dr. Polk: sorry, all positions are occupied. I was surprised; by then I had a significant number of independent publications on surgical infections—wouldn't he prefer to have a qualified and published surgeon rather than one of those young postgraduate students from Japan or China, who typically occupy such positions? Only a few years later, when I broke into my personal file in Myburgh's office, I found the correspondence between Dr. Polk and Myburgh. The former had shown a keen interest in my application, the later discouraged him: "his research is immature" and so forth.

"But why don't you try in Switzerland," Heidi kept nagging. "After all, you are married to a Swiss, a working permit and citizenship won't be a problem ". Why not? By then I had worked as a student and subsequently had visited surgical departments in the German-speaking world; I was familiar with the ruthless Teutonic surgical system, where the *Chefartz* is also the *Herr Gott* —I knew that a non conformist would not last long within such a system.

But then some one brought to my attention the news that Professor Leslie Blumgart of London has been selected the next Director of Surgery at the famed Inslespital in Bern, the Swiss capital city. Every academic surgeon had heard about Blumgart, the young dentist from Durban who over the years rose meteorically to become a guru of liver surgery in the United Kingdom. I wrote Blumgart, we spoke on the phone and a month later I was on my way for an interview in Bern.

It was late February but the ancient city at the feet of the Alps was still immersed in snow. From the railway station I trudged my way in dirty slush, wetting my thin shoe soles, to the nearby Inslespital. *Allgemeine Chirurgie, Secteriat*, the sign directed me to Professor Blumgart's offices where his secretary, a spinster-looking Frau Hauptli received me enthusiastically: "Ach, Herr Doktor Schein, *Wilkomen*, the Professor is awaiting you in the operating *saal*."

In scrubs, I was led into the room where the professor was operating. "He's fixing a recurrent biliary stricture", someone whispered in my ears. I stood there watching Blumgart rapidly inserting a clamp after clamp into the depth of the right upper abdomen—"Kelly, another Kelly, another Kelly," he kept asking. Then, at one point, he commanded his first assistant: "Hans, tie them all, will you? And do close please. Thank you everybody." He turned around, removed his mask, and while busy discarding his soiled gloves he smiled at me: "Oh, very well, so this is our Moshe? Welcome to Bern." He was in his mid or late fifties, about my height, i.e. on the short side, a slightly hooked nose under a pair of shrewd small dark eyes. And he moved fast.

With his arm around my shoulders he guided me to a small lounge, shared by nurses and doctors busy smearing thick layers of butter on thickly cut slices of fresh dark bread. After five minutes of small talk a younger surgeon joined us—"please meet my deputy, he'll show you around while I do a few more cases, you know, in the few months since I've arrived we have already become *the* referral center for complex hepatobiliary surgery

for the whole continent. Only the continent? Nay, patients are coming from everywhere.” He spoke enthusiastically in an acquired British accent; my ear could however detect the South African Jew of Lithuanian origin. So Blumgart continued to hop from one operating room to another: the assistants opening the abdomen and exposing what needed exposure. Then he would join, to perform the crucial step, leave the abdomen full of Kelly clamps— like a porcupine— to be ligated by the assistants. They would close up; he would have a coffee, and then scrub again and yet again. Like the two late great Theodors— Kocher of Bern or Billroth of Vienna —in the good old days.

Now I was left in the company of the deputy, imported recently by Blumgart from the French part of Switzerland, who immediately, in correct but Frankonic English, started to examine me: how do you treat acute diverticulitis? How do you approach gastric bleeding? How do you—and on and on. Then: “I want you to assist one of our senior residents with a cholecystectomy, OK?” I scrubbed in but typically, like most immature surgeons, and many mature ones, I did not like how “he did it” because “he didn’t do it like us.” I kept quiet until the end, when the Swiss guy—or was he a German? — inserted a drain into the gallbladder bed. *Why?* And yet another drain into the fat under the skin —*is he crazy?* I could not restrain myself and said: “Why? You don’t need these silly drains.” Two big blue Aryan eyes were looking at me above their masks: “*ach ya Herr Kollega...but we believe in drains.*”

“Well, believe in it or not but they are useless,” I stupidly replied.

Back to the deputy who showed me around the hospital and departments: patients’ rooms, medical ICU, surgical ICU, cardiac ICU, ER, library. “So how did Heinz do the cholecystectomy?” asked the handsome, blond deputy, “he’s our top senior resident.”

“Not too well, I believe, I didn’t like the two silly drains he left.” The *Stellvertreter* did not reply. *Mistake.*

Late afternoon. Time for the “evening report”—under the old European system a morning and evening “reports” were being conducted each day —to

update the Boss about recent developments in his sprawling surgical kingdom. A large meeting room: all surgeons are present, everybody in white shirts, trousers, gowns and shoes—almost a hundred doctors. Blumgart, the only one clad in a three piece dark suit—a British surgeon forever—presides, but the event is conducted by the deputy, purely in English—everybody is now required to force his tongue to talk the foreign language; until the Boss acquires some German. On his turn, each of the section heads stands up and reports: “Her Professor, my section performed today two cholecystectomies, three resections of the sigma, five hernias...everything went well...all patients on the floor are in good shape, no new complications. For tomorrow we have...” –a long list followed— “ I’d like to bring for discussion the case of Herr X with the question of what to do...”. *Like in the Vermacht*, I thought.

Next we moved to Blumgart’s private office. “Come Moshe, you can’t walk around this hospital in this funny jacket” –*why didn’t I buy a blue blazer for this occasion?*—“take it off, let’s hang it...here, take my white coat, yes, put it on, now you look better. Join me please, I’ll round on my private patients.” Patients from Iran, from India, from the Netherlands—they all came to be operated by the maestro. After leaving a room where a French patient was recovering following a hepatectomy, Blumgart commented proudly: “you see, with all of their big French hepatic surgeons, she came to me.” Last room: a bloated young girl. “She’s from Tel Aviv, a recurrent hepatoma, caudate lobe—no one would touch her. I did, you speak Hebrew? So talk to her Mom, tell her this—.” As he was walking around he touched everybody—the patients and their families—holding their hands, hugging their shoulders. A trait I recognized from home—definitely not British.

Back in the professor’s office, on his black leather couch, Blumgart unlocked a wooden cabinet and presented a bottle. “Glenmorganie, 18 years old” he proudly declared, “you like single Malt, don’t you?” he uncorked the bottle and poured two generous portions. “*L’chaim!*” Blumgart retrieved a large brown pipe from his pocket and fed it gently with tobacco from a small square tin. I took out my own pipe, “May I?”

“Please help yourself,” he pushed the tin towards me. We lit up, filling the room with blue smoke and the specific aroma of Latakia based English tobacco. Now, in the warm room, snowflakes falling outside the dark windows, malt in the veins, came the time for a soul-searching discourse —or monologue. The overall message was simple: he’s the best, had enough of Britain; here in Bern he was going to develop the best surgical center in Europe. He needed to inject some fresh blood into this stagnant Swiss environment, a wink—well, they want him to learn German—a chuckle. He needed somebody trustworthy who could look after the department when he or the deputy was away —“yes, you seem the guy I need, but I have to sell you to *them*, you see, for many locals it is hard to swallow the idea of me running this Inslespital Department, and you can only guess what they’ll be saying...*a foreign Jew brining in another foreign Jew*” —he did not say so but I completed his sentence in my mind. “But leave politics to me...tomorrow I want you to operate and walk around. I would’ve loved to have you for dinner, but my wife is still in London and tonight I have to continue with the private German lessons”. A wink. “Another small drop of the Glen? Like it? The best, huh? Don’t forget your jacket. Cheerio now, take your bag, my deputy will drive you to the hotel. All is paid, eat as much as you wish and wherever you want, bring all receipts to Frau Hauptli, please don’t order Glenmorganie, stick to local wine”. Wink.

The hotel was a block away, across the hospital. The deputy dropped me off: “Sorry Moshe, we’d love to have you for dinner, but my wife is in Geneva and I have to give a lecture to the local physicians. We need their business, you know,”—a deep sigh. “Just walk into the reception, your room is booked.” I dropped off my bag in the room —12 feet by 9 feet, a narrow single bed, a wash basin, a mirror, a few shelves; toilets and shower at the end of the corridor —and started wondering the frozen and deserted streets of the medieval city, looking for a place to eat. A lonely pizzeria, a rude Yugoslavian waiter: some pasta, half a bottle of Chianti —toasting myself. *Nine p.m.* Back in the hotel —did you ever see a hotel without a lobby? There

was no TV in my prison room but there was a phone and I dialed Johannesburg and spoke with Heidi for 45 minutes. “Blumgart’s impressive, I like him, it’s a great opportunity, I think that the job is mine.” I slept badly: trains vibrating on the nearby railway tracks, constant noises—doors slamming, laughter, beds squeaking above my ceiling. *I should’ve brought some sleeping pills.*

Next morning, 7 a.m. The “morning report” on an empty stomach—the hotel doesn’t serve food, the department doesn’t provide free coffee. The almost hundred white coated foot soldiers are gathered in front of their new British professor, who tries to alleviate the military atmosphere with sporadic comments: a surgeon in charge from the recent night reports that there was yet another suicide attempt from the tall Bern’s railway bridge—number so and so this year—Blumgart comments about suicide attempts in general and appoints the surgeon to conduct a retrospective study on “suicides from the Bern Bridge.”

On the way to the OR I manage to stop at the fancy cafeteria: a coffee and a croissant—five Swiss *Francs*—like in a regular coffee house. At the OR I am told to do the lower end of an abdominal perineal resection (APR) for a low lying rectal cancer—it goes well but I have a small argument with the senior guy who is doing the top side—he refuses to understand that by folding the divided rectum, and letting me grasp the proximal edge from below, he’ll be able to rapidly finish peeling the rectum off the prostate in the front.

Lunch time but no lunch—are they all gobbling sandwiches in their private rooms? Instead we gather at the spacious radiology amphitheatre. They watch images presented by multiple white haired professors of radiology; a professor of ultrasound, another for CT, yet another showing the angiographies. Again, the language spoken is English and we see the most bizarre liver cases. I sit near Blumgart who whispers in my ear: “See the pathology!?” Afternoon, semi starved, I am led yet again to see the various ICU’s; then they deposit me in the departmental library to busy myself.

Six o'clock. I wonder into Blumgart's *Secteriat*. "The Herr Professor is busy with the *Spitaldirektor*, he'll see you at eight o'clock."

Blumgart looks tired. "Lots of politics with the Swiss, lots. You did well today with the APR—so I was told. I'm trying to sell you to *them*, some resistance," a wink—the magician can solve everything. "Be patient and enjoy yourself, there are good restaurants in this town. Don't forget the receipts." Another lonely dinner, tonight I drink much more, to help sleep. But at 2 o'clock I wake up to a loud concert of lovemaking behind the wall —*is this a whorehouse?* I can't sleep. *Should I get one for myself?* But I am too poor.

Day 3, Morning report. I'm bored. No one pays attention to me—I try to converse with a few young surgeons, asking many questions —no one asks me anything. I join them on rounds but they seem impatient, albeit polite—*what does he want here?* So I leave the hospital and wonder in the streets, under the metallic sky and chilly wind; snow is falling down; I visit a museum, a palace, and an art gallery. A coffee, a beer. Finally I have enough. I walk back to the hospital and storm into Blumgart's office —he looks surprised: "Having good time in Bern, Moshe?"

I still remember exactly what I told him because it was one of the major errors in my life. "Professor, look, you brought me here, you asked me all the questions, your deputy asked me all the questions, you saw me operating, I've seen your department and I like it. So instead of roaming the empty cold streets of Bern, please permit me to catch the train back to Schaffhausen where I have a family, and some friends, and you'll let me know about the final decision, whatever it is."

Blumgart produced a weak cold smile. "I see. I see. Well, let's do it this way. Go and have the best dinner money can buy and come and see me tomorrow at 6.45 —just before the report. OK? Don't forget to bring the receipts. Good night then."

6.45 a.m, before Blumgart's desk. "Moshe. Last night I spoke to my wife in London. I always consult her before taking any major decision. I told her about you. She said that I have to take you. But I have this angst." He

repeated the word *angst* a few times. "Here I'm trying to arrange things and you walk like this into my office with an ultimatum. I must think about it. I'll let you know. Before you leave, please hand all receipts to my secretary. Cheerio." A brief handshake. Passing by his secretary desk I said "*Auf Wiedersehen* Frau Hauptli."

"*Herr Doktor*, please let me have your receipts, we'll have to reimburse you".

"Thank you very much but I pay for my own food." And I stormed out. I knew that I lost this opportunity. I returned to the hotel, took my bag and walked across the reception towards the revolving doors. "*Herr Doktor*, are you leaving today? The elderly receptionist asked. *Is she the part time Madame from the night?*

"*Ya, Auf Wiedersehen...*"

"But *Herr Doktor*, you have to pay first!"

"My bill is paid by the hospital, *Chirurgie*, OK!"

"Ach ja, ja, but the phone bill. You have to pay for the phone. Three hundred *Francs*. *Shit*."

Why did I go into such details, recounting what appears a banal event: a young surgeon botching up an interview? Because as the years went by I understood that this was the most significant *opportunity* I ever had to reach the surgical summit. Most of Blumgart's protégés, along his career, continued to become imminent hepatobiliary surgeons. He could have been the mentoring surgical guru I craved for; a few years under him would have opened large doors. So why did I fail? Young and provincial, lacking any previous exposure to the European surgical world, my innate impatience? I should have researched the war zone in advance, should have dressed appropriately and instructed myself to limit my comments to the agreeable and pleasing—but this applies to interviews anywhere. When I returned to South Africa, Heidi said: "I should've come with you". She was right.

About eleven years later I visited Blumgart in New York City where – after almost a decade in Bern— he became the director of hepatobiliary surgery at a renowned New York cancer institute. When I entered his smallish and crowded office at the end of the corridor, he emerged from behind his desk—aged and stooped somehow but the same vitality and the shrewd dark eyes. He puffed continuously on his pipe, filling the room with dense smoke, illuminated by the light of Manhattan peering through the windows. Smoking in a New York Hospital?! Only Blumgart would dare it. We had a few minutes before going to the OR. I asked a few surgical questions and decided to avoid the past but suddenly he said: “Moshe, I did you a favor by not letting you come to Bern. Those Swiss, those anti-Semites, would have made your life hard, as they did mine.” His Fellow entered the room: “Professor, the patient is on the table.” In the USA of course no doctor is called “professor” by his colleagues but later that day the Fellow told me: “For all of us here he is *The professor.*” Then I saw him operating; now in his late sixties, he was still unbelievable—the magician.

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Leslie Blumgart