



**OTTOMAN
BEACHCOMBING:
EXPLORATIONS IN THE
BALKANS, TURKEY,
ISRAEL, AND EGYPT,
1983
PART 2**

**BY
STEPHEN M. BERER**



CONTENTS

VII. ANOTHER MEETING WITH THE GODDESS

Edirne, Late April 1

VIII. FURTHER SKETCHES

Summer '83, on the road in Turkey and elsewhere. 5

IX. TURKISH VALLEYS AND YELLOW BRICK ROADS

May, '83, "Riding a trail to who-knows-where" (Maverick's theme song) 6

X. LIKE A CALL TO PRAYER

Some poetics from Istanbul. 8

XI. COME TO BEIRUT!

A letter from Istanbul 9



VII. ANOTHER MEETING WITH THE GODDESS

Edirne, Late April

I took the train, 12 hours, from western Greece to Orestias (OR es DEE es) on the eastern border, about 10 kilometers and an international border away from Edirne (eh DEER neh), where Nancy and I planned to make our rendezvous. I had thought to stop at any of a number of cities along the way. Since the train takes an inland route, well off the tourist beat, I expected the cities to be largely 18th or 19th century in their architecture and character. A young Greek woman who chose to join me in my compartment, warned me that all the towns I was thinking about visiting were hopelessly boring. Indeed, she was critical of all things Greek: the government, the culture, the mores, the people. She aspired to being a free spirit, but Greece was a country of strong customs and restraints: sexual, religious, political. Her English was good, and she told me she was off to visit a lover for whom she had left her husband. Her story was a pastiche of sex, rebellion, and guilt. She fantasized: if only they could run away to America! I thought to de-mythologize her, but reconsidered. Who was I to rob her of her dreams?

From all appearances, she was right about the inland Greek cities. Compressed into the narrow channel of the railroad bed, all I could see were long rows of poured concrete tombs: houses, apartments, and office buildings. The landscape turned oppressive: sweaty valleys; dry, rocky fields; mountains to the north, in a long dull chain. As evening came and went, I grew jumpy. I worried that I was missing my stop. No one understood my pronunciation of Orestias. My belly growled relentlessly. I had no idea where I was. Twenty-four hours previously all of these feelings would have been music, sweet assurances that my demons were far behind.

25 Orestias rolled up to my traincar, and somehow I knew to get off. A young travelling salesman in a white shirt and pressed slacks told me to follow him to the cheapest hotel in town. I wondered if this was some sort of set-up. I felt my money-belt, tight around my waist, invisible under my shirt. I followed. We passed a disco, red lights pulsing, electric music pulsing, a few people at the door, already gripped by the music, being shaken. We passed walls thick with movie posters of desperate men and helpless women, ruthless men and seductresses. Music echoed down every street in jarring reverberations. But with two quick turns it faded. My anxiety drained out of my feet into the concrete. It left a mark, like the outline of a dead body painted by the police for some subterranean report. I changed bodies. The hotel was half-way down the next block. We both went in and got rooms. It was clean, relatively new, not cheap (by my standards); it was about \$8.00. I was new-born and very tired. I slept a long time.

I spent two days wandering outside the limits of Orestias, in the vast and newly sprouting wheatland. Poplars, willows, and cypresses turned the rich plain into a mosaic of



wide fields. An occasional shepherd led his flock down the narrow tractor roads, whacking his sheep with a switch whenever they strayed into the fields to grab a nibble. His sheep dog, growling, would drift to the opposite side of the road from me. He was as curious as his master of this strange-smelling human. There was hardly anyone out in the fields. At one point I was turned back by two farmers in baggy old pants and shirts. From their gesticulations I gathered I was near the river, the boundary between Greece and Turkey. There were soldiers up ahead and I would be very unwelcome. Almost in a trance, I turned off at a right angle and continued my drift. The silence was profound. A stork standing on one leg peered tirelessly in a flooded ditch for a trace of life. Another, gliding in the motionless air was the last vestige of a sense of time.

50

There were no demons out there. As I realized later, the demons had headed home, disgusted. I had stopped running and I had stopped staying, and they had no damned idea how to find me! Something else was just now crossing up above my horizon. I kept turning away from it, thinking nothing was changing, but a new sun was casting off morning stars as if they were so many diversions. I was ten kilometers from Edirne, and I could almost hear the song of the muezzin (mu EZ in), him who chants the call to prayer.

That evening in Orestias I sat alone in a local bar and drank coffee. It was not like an American bar, dark, smelly, and oppressive. Rather, it was a patio with two rows of tables, each with 4-6 chairs around it. I sat staring at the uninitiated portion of my notebook, but it was not long before curiosity overcame a few of the older men that were sitting around me. We somehow made conversation using all our resources: English, German, Turkish, Greek; hands, body-English, sketches. I was careful not to talk of going to Turkey, or to express my opinions about Ronald Reagan. I was positive about all things. Suddenly a policeman with a submachine gun pushed into our midst, demanding my passport, my hotel name, my purpose for being in Orestias, my destination. Immediately, the men around me indignantly rose up and brow-beat my interrogator. Within 30 seconds he was obsequiously buying me a cup of coffee and apologizing. He explained that there were political rabble-rousers from Italy in town and he thought I was one of them. An American, though; well that's a different story! He loved Americans, and was deeply sorry if he offended me. I, on the other hand, was entirely unruffled. Tomorrow I was crossing the border. An intense concentration had descended upon me.

75

I had hardly seen my wife for the last year. Without formalities, we had separated. In April I had gone to Provincetown, first to write, and then to rebuild my parent's cottage. She had accepted a Fulbright to go to Turkey later in the year, and in the meantime was studying for her orals in Philadelphia (the grad school variety). We occasionally got together over a weekend, but I decided not to go to Turkey with her, and after she left, I was convinced that it was the appropriate time to make a permanent break. After I declined to meet her in London over Christmas, it seemed certain we were moving down an irreversible path.

Then it was February. As I often did, one dusk I hiked out into the beech forest. Atop the highest dune in the Provincelands, watching the sun set in the west and the moon rise in the east, I had a profound psychological experience. All my anger, resentment, and unhappiness dissolved, and I realized they were not inherent in our relationship. This moment of clarity lasted only a few hours, but I resolved to go to Turkey to see if it was really true. I called my wife and told her my intentions. Her voice was distant, as were her ensuing letters, but she allowed as I could do what I wanted. It took almost two months to complete all my obligations, and they were months of relapse, anxiety, and self-doubt. Still I held to my resolution, believing my "vision" more than my feelings. I told myself: if it worked out, we would travel in Turkey and the Middle East for five months; if not, I would make my own adventure, and either way, all was well. Like platitudes, easy to say, but hard to live.

In late March I packed up and hitch-hiked slowly towards Kennedy Airport. I noticed demons in the cottage as I locked up; it was then that my entourage joined me. Now they were gone, and in twelve hours I would be riding the three k's to the border. I am normally not Mr. Kool, but strangely, my easily-overheated brain was now very very calm.

Nine a.m. and the day was brilliantly clear, and already warm. I found the bus to the border, though I forget how. On the Greek side, the guards harassed me a bit, then let me go. I love walking across borders, and this is both a beautiful, and a very intense one, with Greek-Turkish relations being what they are. Crossing the long, empty bridge, I could hear the sparrows and crows, the frogs and insects, the river bubbling. The banks are marshy and lined with poplars, willows, and dense reed beds. They trembled in the slight breeze. Behind me a Greek soldier glowered. At the other end of the bridge, as I passed, Turkish soldiers saluted playfully. I was laughing, dancing inside. Freude, Freude!

Turkish customs welcomed me. How could they not! Stamp, stamp, and I was thru. I was told that Edirne is seven kilometers, there was no bus, but by my good fortune there was a taxi. The driver smiled and informed me that the fare was 700 lira (\$3.50). Not being aware that in the six years since I was last in Turkey, taxis had all gotten meters and had ceased to be major bargaining events, I assumed this was a swindle. Actually, it was of no consequence. I had already decided to walk, to savor every moment and every image of the beauty around me. I set out, wrapping a turban around my head to be all the more outrageous.

The land was deep green and fertile, and as silent as on the other side of the river. I passed a few groups of women in the fields. In the Turkish manner, they worked together in a line, all bent over, legs straight and spread wide, picking weeds, or planting seeds. They wore baggy pantalons, baggy blouses, and head scarfs, all in bright mismatched floral prints, and they slowly moved in unison down the rows.

After I had walked about two k's in complete silence, a car passed. The driver



stopped and opened the door for me. I shrugged and got in. My Turkish was very rough, but I understood that he worked at customs and was driving back to Edirne. Perhaps he was going for lunch, or perhaps he was curious about the crazy American who didn't mind walking all morning. I tried to explain to him that I was looking for my wife who was somewhere in Edirne. No, I didn't know the hotel. No, I had never been to Edirne before. Actually, no, I wasn't even sure if she was there. For the sake of my self-respect I hoped he assumed I simply could not express myself clearly. Surely no one would travel halfway around the world to meet someone they claimed was their wife, in a town of over 100,000, relying on nothing more than a chance encounter on the street. Until I tried to explain my intentions to this man, my plan hadn't struck me as being utterly absurd!

125

In no time we had entered the confines of Edirne's narrow cobblestone streets. I had no idea where my driver was going, or where he intended to drop me off, but in short order it was clear that he planned to drive around until we found my wife. Thinking back on it, the man must have been utterly fascinated by my madness. We passed over a muddy river lined with trees and parks. Ignoring my mounting excitement, he played the tour guide, explaining that this was the site of the famous Turkish mud-wrestling contest, a yearly event that determined the best wrestler in Turkey. Indeed, the contest was due to begin in less than two weeks, so I gathered. I, on the other hand, was more interested in the bridge we drove over, a beautiful series of stone arches hundreds of years old. He then turned down a narrow street crowded with pedestrians and little shops, and as if it were meant to be (and perhaps it was) I SAW HER! She was thinner, prouder, more aloof than I remembered. I shouted "There she is!" forgetting my driver knew no English, but I think he understood. He quickly stopped and I burst out of the little car like a meteor, shouting "Nancy, Nancy!" She turned, and with a smile like Mona Lisa's (I swear that's how I remember it) we embraced briefly.

How can years of resentment, anger, suspicion, unhappiness, and all the things that can make marriage hell, how could they dissolve so effortlessly, so utterly? We went back to her hotel. I could still hardly believe that she had actually decided to come to Edirne to meet me after all. We made love, quickly, intensely, surprised, then went out to explore this gorgeous town, once the capitol of the Ottoman empire. (We have been back since, and it really is a little pearl.)

In the following weeks I kept waiting for the ax to fall, but it never did. After two days in Edirne we returned to her apartment in Istanbul. Day by day, being together got easier, not harder, and we began to believe what we were feeling: restored love. Somehow, between the polarity of a setting sun and a rising full moon a world of negativity had been reversed, and I can explain no more today than I could when it happened.

150

So we prepared to travel together. Again.





VIII. FURTHER SKETCHES

Summer '83, on the road in Turkey and elsewhere.

I remember:

There is a man walking the roads of Yugoslavia. He has a shovel over his shoulder. As he sees a pothole he digs dirt from the side of the road, fills it, tamps it down, and walks on. He is the road crew, strolling the roads near his home, happily at work.

Or the ditchdigger in Bergama, digging in the rain: he had a partner who held two large open umbrellas, one for each of them. Both of them were tall and thin, wearing high black boots outside their pants, sports jackets, grey golfers hats. The digger had a long dark mustache curving around his mouth. Like some latter day janissary, he looked noble and proud. His horse must have been tied on the other side of the wall that lined the street. For a moment he dug in the mud, recovering some treasure he had hidden.

There is a farm hand in Greece. He is sleeping under a tractor-drawn cart that was, not long ago, a horse-drawn cart. The afternoon sun is hot and the land is peaceful as far as the eye can see or the ear can hear.

I pass a Greek herder and his dog. He is slowly leading his 30 goats down the dirt roads that divide the farmland. His grandparents were Turks and there is now an uneasy truce in his veins. He eyes me up and down. What am I doing out in this farmland where tourists never come? His dog suspiciously but timidly passes me, then lingers till all the goats are past and his master calls.

It is warm and raining. Though it is the rainy season, the vegetation on the hillsides looks sparse. A Turkish herder is wearing a heavy felt kaftan with a hood. It is the traditional rain gear of his people. He pulls a budding branch of a tree down to where his favorite goats can nibble it.

Later, I see another shepherd with a white felt kaftan. It is open, draped over his shoulders, and a turban is on his head. He has a stick in hand and drives a small herd ahead of him. Ten paces behind, two women carry large bundles of wood on their backs, bent over, faces to the ground.

Months later in a church in Jerusalem, the children sing to each other in choruses across the altar. Their high voices and white robes innocently implore, a call for faith. Meanwhile, like Death, a man in black robes preaches to them, somberly walking back and forth, or reading from a heavy book. The children follow him, their father, their priest.

To all my friends and acquaintances, these facts may be relevant:

I am once again united with my long lost wife, immersed in the joys of domestic turmoil.

The cigarettes here are harsh and coat your mouth. The cognac (spelled konyak)



makes you wince and shudder. The raki (like Greek ouzo) turns milky with water and makes your mind hazy and your thoughts wander back down the road that you've just come up.

And to Beachcombers in Provincetown, Wellfleet, Beach Point, and places far flung and far fetched, you wanderers, outcasts, mindless laborers, sailors who have taken one too many voyages, and you who stare in wonder or terror at the changes that swirl around you:

Hail! As you eat your steak and potatoes, and smoke your various plant-stuffs, and imbibe your murky liquors and your clear ones, consider us in foreign lands, wandering on strange and rocky beaches; following muddy alleys till they end in ruins or in ancient monuments; no more at home here than anywhere, and no more lost, either; sharing our meals with hobos who know no English. Remember: a cup of liquor is only a cup of liquor, and a moment of pleasure is always a moment of pleasure.

200



IX. TURKISH VALLEYS AND YELLOW BRICK ROADS

May, '83, "Riding a trail to who-knows-where" (Maverick's theme song)

The time passes too quickly, and the changing vistas are too compelling, and the pleasures of love too alluring. I have already enjoyed and forgotten village after village, person after person. Along the narrow roads the white-washed villages, built of orange clay block and stucco, disperse into the straggling hovels of mud brick, mortared with mud and hay. Beyond, the lone cottages of herders, built of flat stone with thatched roofs and fences of thatch and sticks, are all that are able to rise from the rocky hillsides. Yet, somehow, wildflowers are blooming everywhere. Spring comes briefly, and for that moment the dry earth turns sexual. There are yellow, pale violet, and white flowers speckling the dusty green and rocky hills. Sometimes a whole meadow opens into bloom. But especially striking are the crimson poppies, singly, in clusters, or by the thousands densely interspersed in wheat fields. There was never a red more perfect and brilliant and ephemeral. There was never a more wonderful and seductive flower, and never one more delicate. I have picked the blossoms and pressed them in my notebook, and the next day they are already black. You painters, your vermillions and your lakes look wan and weak before these! That your colors endure is the bargain they have struck with nature: to endure but to be less than perfect. I have lain among them in the fields, dizzy with their raptures, and then left them with many a backwards glance. This is surely "the Soul of sweet Delight," to quote a



friend.

225

In the plains and valleys and little glens and hollows the land is divided into fields, and all are planted with grains and vegetables and fruit trees. In the poorer areas the fields are small. A single horse and man will plow them, and often a whole family can be seen planting, weeding, and tending the crops. Where there is more water or more money, the motorized tractors gnash their gears and the fields expand, but still, men and women in groups of five or ten work by hand. The women dress in puffy pantalones, multi-colored paisleys and florals. On their heads scarfs and shawls trail in the breeze. They stand with their legs stiff and spread wide, and they bend from the waist, planting sprouts and plucking weeds. The men, when they work in the fields at all, are drably dressed, with lazily wrapped turbans around their heads that drift down to their shoulders and wrap into scarfs around their necks. They use digging tools, and never seem to work as concertedly as the women.

Sometimes the fields and hills are planted with olive trees, ten or twenty together, or thousands as far as the eye can see, like at Zeytindag (ZAY-tin-DAH, which means Olive Mountain), near Bergama. Sometimes the olive groves are weedy and wild. In other places the land between the trees is roughly plowed. Neither is it uncommon to see secondary crops of wheat planted among the gnarled trunks so that no space is wasted. Most unusual and beautiful though, was the grove on the steep hillside near Selcuk (SEL-juk). On the down-hill side of each tree, a small stone retaining wall had been built in a semi-circle, each one constructed of thin flat stones, without mortar, and in impeccable condition.

250

As the plains slant imperceptibly into lowland, the thirsty vegetation grows greener. The fields are divided by narrow paths or winding gullies. Though the creeks are dried or are barely trickling, deep green reeds crowd the banks. Poplars and cypresses line the roads and are scattered in ones and twos elsewhere, like proud and stately sentinels. Or, you pass over a rounded ridge and see lone cypresses marking the corners of fields, deep green spires against dry soil and grey green crops. This is the epitome of a Turkish valley.

And then there are the other spires, the minarets of ruined mosques and new ones. Where their tops are flat, by choice or by decay, the giant nests of storks can be seen. You see one and you will want to see more. Scan the roofs. Each village has a few storks as residents. Lucky the family that is chosen by a stork to build its nest on their roof, for they are believed to be omens of prosperity and happiness. And I am sure it is true! These birds are truly lovely, and yet awkward in their elegance. Sometimes they can be seen standing on one leg in their nests. Other times they appear, gliding lazily with their legs stretched behind them and their long wings extended casually, black in front and white behind. Or else they are wading in the marshes and stream beds, picking for food with their pointed beaks. You stop. You watch, as if savoring good news. And it will happen to you as it did to me: you will forget what you meant to do. I meant to speak of mosques!



It's all so different and all so familiar. The same types of oaks, the same species of sparrows, the same tractor manufacturers, the same irrigation methods. But sometimes the nearness of home comes back all too abruptly and harshly. The TV here is becoming king. Even from shepherd's hovels and in the gececondos (GEH-jeh-KON-do, ie., slums) antennas rise, gathering photon impulses and converting them into violent movies and manipulative suggestions. The long distance buses have video that makes US TV seem quite refined and intelligent. The commuter train stations in Istanbul all have TV's hanging over the crowds, capturing first the eyes, then the souls. Still, I have to laugh sometimes. Yesterday a Popeye cartoon was blaring on the commuter train platform, and not long ago I saw The Wizard of Oz beaming into a little corner store. Strange to think of "Follow the yellow brick road" in subtitles, but there it was. And I laughed. It seemed like my theme song. Then I realized, it might be everyone's theme song, and the veiled women and unshaven men suddenly looked like neighbors.

275



X. LIKE A CALL TO PRAYER

Some poetics from Istanbul.

The call to prayer drifts imploring and beautiful through the window. I'm composing some poems - sort of transliterations of the melody, timing and tone of the five different calls. It's quite exciting and is helping me to develop the structure for the next long poem I am beginning to write. The idea of the Poem is this, if I can express it yet: it is a Song written in the consciousness of two primordial/mythic/perfect Lovers, but the overtones, refrains, counter-melodies and counterpoints of the song are the conflicting love states of human existence. Thus, the Mythic Conscience fragments into the multiple ego awarenesses, which swirl around it like electrons around a nucleus, or like cells in a tissue, comprising it, yet individually divided from its wholeness. And each of these fragment egos are cast as sailors whose ship has wrecked in Ertha. Here, they have lost contact with each other and with their Source, and can only reach each other by communicating through the mythic Love-States/Lovers (which leads them out of Ertha).

So, I have begun with these transliterations of the call to prayer, but it seems I listen as if I am one of the shipwrecked sailors. I had thought to begin with a female court, where the sailors are being tried. But it is transforming into a judgement that is more personal and one to one. The idea is this: the central imago, center of the mandala, is the two mythic Lovers, mingled in perfect Love, like Shelley's Prometheus and Asia, or Blake's Jerusalem and Los, or Adam and Eve before the fall, or a Hindu Shiva-Parvati. I will explore the Greek, Egyptian, and Chinese corollaries as well. However, those perfect lovers, my Protos/Solya (?) are the fusion product of all the states of incomplete and



300

imperfect human lovers. The Perfect Lovers are the Primordial Possibility; the human lovers are the incomplete actuality. The Poem is the interweaving of numerous human love scenarios overlaid on the Perfect Lover background. Thus, the sailors can not transcend their limits and return to the Body/Bodies of the Perfect Lovers. Rather, their individual journeys become threads in the fabric of that higher weave.



XI. COME TO BEIRUT!

A letter from Istanbul

Dear S---

Many hellos, some overdue, others just in time, others timeless. The sun is rising over the Asian hills, and mist is lifting from the Bosphorus waters. The cypresses and fig trees emerge from the moist and heavy air. Like a dream remembered, Asia unveils herself. The towers of Rumeli Hisar (Rumeli Castle) jut above the nearby trees, and behind, Russian tankers and trawlers sullenly make their way. Nothing remains of the Old World but what is remembered and clung to. And nothing will remain of this moment either, except a fistful of desires. Just now, every bird is gliding on the wind.

N--- has left to take L--- to the airport, and another strange saga is completing itself. We left on our tour of the Eastern Mediterranean in late May, rushed by the bad news that our friends from the consulate had been suddenly reassigned to a post they considered a hardship -- stationed in Washington D.C. So instead of spending July and August with them, we sped to Izmir in late May to have a last four days with them. We toured southwest Turkey in their car, alternating between untouched landscapes and newly created tourist scenes; between shepherds greeting us from their thatch hovels, and deluxe hotels and the Med cruise set. We'd enter an 18th century valley, cut through a treacherous mountain pass, and look down on a harbor filled with European sloops. We left our friends in the mosquito and tourist infested town of Marmaris, where we caught a boat, not much different than a fishing trawler, that competed with the official cruisers that sailed to Rhodes. It cost half as much, took twice as long, and the harbor-master denied that it existed.

325

We had no idea what our chances were of getting to Israel from Rhodes, since there is little exchange of international timetables between nations in this part of the world (except for some airline info). With a bit of effort we found a boat going to Cypress in two days. The next boat going all the way to Israel wasn't for at least two weeks, and it was not a sure thing. So we bought our tickets to Cypress and took our chances on another connection there. We also learned of a very cheap flight from Cairo to Rhodes, starting on July 1. This, we hoped, would conveniently get us back, if, indeed, it would actually be scheduled.



All we saw of the island was the capitol, Rhodos. It is an outrageously quaint place, but with more tourists than fleas on a buffalo's backside. Especially prevalent are the English, who have forgotten what the sun looks like, and have roasted themselves into varying shades of crispy critters. The old city is walled and is a maze of exceedingly narrow cobblestone streets, enclosed with two-to-three story walls on either side, or even entirely arched over, like some medieval fantasy. Occasionally the walls are pierced by an open door or window, revealing an old Greek lady in a black dress and black head scarf, in a room dense with nicknacks on every surface and photos covering the walls. We wandered for hours through these carefree alleys, or out into the touristed boulevards, from museum to coffee shop to our room for midday siesta.

The boat to Cypress continued to Beirut, as we learned upon embarkation, and we met some Lebanese who tried to convince us to continue with them, and go to Israel through Lebanon. It sounded exciting. They said it was possible, but we had strong doubts. Misinformation in this part of the world abounds, usually not out of malice or selfish interests, but due to an over-willingness to be friendly or helpful without being informed. One must constantly be compensating for bad advice and bad directions. We shook our heads yes, but decided no.

350

The boat was a beautiful cruise ship, immaculate, uncrowded, friendly, with a disco at night, good food, and a long row of clean showers with hot(!) water. We had bought the cheapest tickets, deck class, which entitled us to giant airplane-style seats in a room alongside a row of cabins. We watched Lebanese men and European women play musical cabins all night.

Going through customs in Cypress (8:00 AM), we were told that a boat was leaving for Israel the next evening. We gave a little cheer, and discovered a group of others that were going the same route, blind step at a time. We easily found a ticket agency, and again bought deck class tickets. At the same time we got information about a town to visit on Cypress while waiting. As it turned out, a number of others had the same idea, and we hired a group limo for a dollar each, and comfortably cruised the 50 miles of coast road to Paphos.

In Paphos we stayed in an old palatial hotel, newly renovated, for about \$6.00 a night for two, including breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee. First time we'd seen any food like that in months. We had trouble finding the quaint or interesting parts of this village that claimed to have many Roman ruins, so N--- took her siesta, and I decided to walk about four miles back to a village where I had seen a rather remarkable-looking little church.

I walked with my shirt off, catching rays like any beach bum, but I must have surely appeared to be a woman with bare breasts, the way I was stared at. Trying to compose myself as best as I could, given my clothes, I approached the church. It was, indeed, striking from the outside, very organic, with few sharp edges or corners. It seemed to have



375

risen by itself out of the earth over many centuries. It was stuccoed in a mud color, and tiny windows penetrated the thick walls. Looking through the windows I could make out four or five rooms, each with a small, very low dome, not rounded but lightly pitched and pointed. A shoemaker had the key to enter, but he was busy, didn't like my shorts, and told me to come back the next day. He also said there was a nice museum nearby. All in no-English, no-Greek; mostly bump and grind.

Walking back, and at the outskirts of Paphos, I stopped at a house that had a sign "Rooms to Let." A very lovely older woman (named Themoula Theodosiou) owned it and showed me around. She had a wonderful room with a 14' ceiling, a grand piano, big soft antique couch and matching arm-chairs, a double bed, private bath, oriental carpets. She would rent it to me for \$7.00 - \$10.00 a day, she wasn't sure, but it included breakfast. I said I'd bring my wife later to look. Arriving at our hotel, I convinced N---, who is always the skeptic, to return there with me. Of course N--- is so innocent and sweet-looking, that Themoula loved her and said the lower price was acceptable. We said we were planning on returning in early July for a week, and everyone was excited. Unfortunately, we already had a room for the current night, so we returned to our 'drab' palatial hotel.

400

Next day we walked back to the village and toured the church, which, to our great surprise, had 600 and 800 year old frescoes, and was very fine, indeed. However, the idea of going to a museum in this crumbling village of 500 people, which we had to walk four, hot, dusty, ridiculous miles to see, aroused N---'s unrestrained annoyance. Nonetheless, I persisted, and what we found was a stunner! It was the finest folk-museum we'd ever been to. It compared quite favorably with the Mercer Museum and Fonthill, though on a much, much smaller scale. The director was a brilliant social anthropologist and had devoted the latter years of his career to cutting and polishing this gem. He invited us to join him on an expedition into the interior of Cypress to see the remnants of a once-flourishing folk-weaving industry, and the life-style that evolved it. We declined with much regret, promising to return in July. This, we learned, was none too soon, because he (the director) was being forced to retire by the end of August. Then our chances would be nil of witnessing these indigenous traditions. In fact, the old ways were in extremely rapid decline, accelerated by the conflict with Turkey, and in a few years were expected to be entirely lost.

We left the museum and stopped at a funky tea house that had four chairs and no tables. I sat next to an old, ancient, prehistoric man, five days unshaven, bent and fragile and beautiful, one hand on a cane, a leather shepherd's bag hanging from his shoulder, leather pants that tied below his knees, an embroidered shirt and vest: clothes like those of his great grandfather, like those we had just seen in the museum. We stared curiously at each other. Then he got up and very slowly hobbled away, leaving this world to me, without regret.

The boat to Israel was like a refugee ship; a thousand bedraggled hippies camped on every square inch of deck space; hostile deck hands; filth everywhere; two showers for the

whole ship and as many toilets, neither of which were fit for swine. And N--- had her period! But it was over soon enough, about 14 hours all told. We were in Haifa by 9:00 AM, and quickly whisked by a group taxi (sherroot) 30 miles to where my parents had an apartment overlooking the sea, like any resort town. But this was Israel! Five thousand years of tragic and sublime history cried out to me from the soil! Nomads rode camels; the highways were crowded; Palestinians stared with hatred and self-doubt. Helicopters by the dozens, some with missiles, whined up the coast, flying low. Young soldiers by the hundreds wandered the streets, all of them slinging machine guns; they hitch-hiked; they rode buses; they chatted with pretty girls. They are the only guarantee against rampant terrorism and 40 million Arabs who curse the very idea of Israel. The Israeli Palestinians were in a quandary. Their tribal instincts (not said derogatorily) forced them to side with the Arabs. But their life was better now, their opportunities and hopes for personal improvement greater than they had ever been in two thousand years.

425 My memories of Israel are: much too much eating of wonderful, expensive, unnecessary food; of being gluttoned; of being much too exposed to the tourist view, ala my parents; of Jerusalem in 100 superposing snapshots (I'm sorry -- those images must remain in my poetry; they don't fit into prose); of the ruined, abandoned, sprawling, mud brick villages, once Palestinian, built in the oppressively hot valley near the Dead Sea (115° when we were there) -- villages melting, literally melting back into the earth, as mud brick will, when unattended; of writing poetry squatting under a fig tree, midday, 100°, in the Palestinian hills east of Jerusalem, where I walked for hours, obsessed with the conflicts of Israel's existence, and of its future; of Israel's existence and future that are vouchsafed by Divine Intervention, or by nothing.

Israel was easy (if I don't count my over-heated thoughts). Americans by the droves; English spoken everywhere. We naively boarded the bus for Egypt, spoiled by the easy life.

Being in Egypt was being in another state of consciousness. Cairo completely swallowed and devoured us: in heat and squalor and centuries of hopelessness; in unbelievable noise, 24 hours a day; in unbearable crowds; in unbearable ugliness. Egypt destroyed us and made us grovel. It stunned us and led us into mosques of despair. Cairo is a city shaking in a constant earthquake, buildings collapsing around us, a state of panic prevailing. But only in the Soul of it, not in the Body. In the Body the collapse is much slower. The mud brick melts slowly, for there is no rain; the concrete crumbles slowly in the oven and pollution; there is no ice. In the scorch, we drank gallons, but did not urinate. Neither could we sleep. Mosquitos devoured us in the darkness. Malaria and hepatitis hovered at our bedside. We did not know what to do. People by the hundreds rushed at us. They descended like vultures; they were dying of thirst; we were their only hope, for a brief sip, a small bite, anything. It stunned us and made us try to flee, but they clung, more desperate than we. They wanted our money, our blood, our Souls. Five days they held us

450



hostage, but we escaped with L---. Months earlier, we had convinced her to meet us there. So she had flown in, straight from her exhausting job, on her only vacation for the year. We carried her back, a ghost of horror in her face, and revived her in Istanbul. And now we are resting, ourselves having barely survived.

And that is a glimpse of the travels we have been doing on the outside. On the inside our travels are slower. I'll tell you about them in another letter. Or better yet: read my next book of poetry.

All and everything.... Your brother-in-law.

P.S. I have attempted to convey the mood of our travels more than the events, which themselves are more or less mundane. In that vein, Cairo was not so different from anywhere else, except in degree. As you know, I traveled in India for seven months, so I'm no stranger to poverty and difficult conditions. But for some reason, Cairo threw us off center, so its impact was much more profound and disorienting. People who go there in winter, stay in the Hilton, eat in the Hilton, only sight-see in tours, and take the pre-arranged, guided cruise up the Nile, at \$150.00 a day, tell us Egypt is lovely.



END OF PART 2