



Around the World in 80 Missions






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Acknowledgement

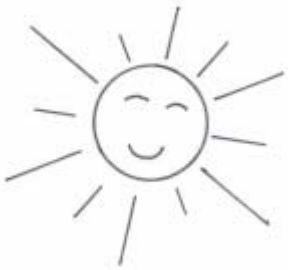
I learned to look at the world with humor with my parents, with my brother, Armand, with my sons, Paul and Marc, with my family at large, with colleagues at work, with René, Robert, George, André, Samir and other good friends. My first thanks go to all those with whom I cultivated humor and shared laughter.

I acknowledge with appreciation the mosaic of cultures represented in Unesco and its spirit of tolerance and solidarity.

Humor, tolerance, traveling, culture... a little bit of each is in the book.

I am much indebted to Marlaine, George and Patricia who helped me with the editing of the book and without whom it would have never been completed.

Introduction



This Book is not an autobiography. It is rather the product of an interaction between imagination, experience, fiction, reminiscence and fantasy. A cocktail mixed in the environment of Unesco - the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - and tempered by a sprinkling of light humor.

If you are familiar with the Unesco Secretariat, do not try to recognize the characters in this Book; the identity of each source of inspiration has been carefully disguised. These characters, born of a marriage between ‘mother truth’ and ‘father fiction’ have maternal and paternal chromosomes, but not necessarily in equally divided proportions.

What is the book about ?

You could say it is about traveling, people and countries. It is about national characteristics and cultural differences and similarities. It is about funny situations and amusing anecdotes.

In writing about national characteristics, one is faced with a classic obstacle: generalization. A perilous ground undermined by exceptions.

And yet, there are predominant features and behaviors that can be attributed to a given nation or cultural group. There are many exceptions, of course, but the dominant cliché often retains its merits.

I confess that my ambition in writing this book was to make a modest contribution to international understanding. The frictions and wounds caused by cultural differences and interethnic misinterpretations will only be healed by tolerance. Tolerance based on a better understanding of others.

To pass on the message in the following pages, a humorous treatment was favored - perhaps a little shallow at times.

Let us remember that many noble and dignified subjects can be treated with humor. Unesco itself will not lose its mystique if a couple of comic situations seem to

disturb the divine order of things. Humor remains a major humanizing factor.

In reading this book you may not burst into laughter but, I hope, you will smile. Smile and travel. You will meet people of various nationalities, discover some of their idiosyncrasies and colorful manners and observe other cultures with curiosity and, I fancy, tender feelings.

The perception of our differences in the way we behave, eat, work, talk and live may be amusing. It is not amusing because some do it better than others. It is amusing just because it is different, colorful or intriguing.

A brief appendix provides some succinct, basic facts about Unesco which may help you understand Jacques Dupont - the main character of the book - and follow him on his missions around the world.

Bon voyage!

Does Life really start at sixty?

"You look dismayed," said Brigitte, my better half, with a malicious expression on her face, "Don't be disheartened. Remember, life starts at sixty."

There I was, on that Monday of July 10th, 1995 - the very first day of my retirement - sitting at my desk with eyes glazed with boredom. It was weird to be home on a Monday. I felt lost, out of place and on a downward slope. I did not really know what to do with myself.

At my recent farewell party at the Unesco Headquarters, in Paris, the Assistant Director-General had said in his speech, "After thirty years of service, our friend Jacques Dupont is retiring. Lucky man ! He will be free at last. He will rest. He will rediscover the joys of life. He will do exactly what he always dreamt to do. Jacques Dupont will finally be his own master."

Encouraging words. I had yet to see how to organize my new freedom and become my own master. My nostrils twitched at the scent of a good espresso, as Brigitte handed me a cup saying, "Have some coffee, Darling, and stop thinking of Unesco!"

"I am sorry, Brigitte, to be such a bore," I said, "Only a couple of days ago I was still sitting at my Unesco desk writing, calling, planning, discussing, deciding, ordering... and now, all of a sudden, here I am, powerless and useless with nothing to do."

"With nothing to do?" asked Brigitte in disbelief. "My dear Jacques, here is a whole list of things which I have been patiently waiting for you to do in your retirement!"

I was quite happy for the time-being with the idea of wasting a few hours daydreaming. But Madame my wife had different thoughts. With Teutonic flair, she had developed a detailed program which could occupy an army of slaves until doom's day.

"First of all," she said, "you should have a critical look at our apartment. With fresh eyes." I had always thought that our Parisian apartment, Avenue Mozart, was comfortable, spacious and elegant. But I must have looked at it with not-so-fresh eyes. Suddenly, I was told that it needed to be renovated, redecorated and refurbished.

The most urgent task concerned our daughter's room. My wife reminded me

that Françoise was almost twenty-four and that her room was still pink. Françoise, who had a steady boyfriend, would soon finish University and probably get married in a year or two. How on earth could we still keep her in a pink room !

As to our own bedroom, it was thirty-two years old. The same age as our marriage. Couldn't we change it for a less depressing style? Something more modern, like that chosen by our friends the Lombards?

By the time Brigitte informed me of how the living room had to be freshened, how the dining room could be rejuvenated... by the time she shared her vision of our new kitchen and regenerated bathroom I was worn out. I tried a couple of maneuvers to postpone this discussion until later. To no avail.

Pretending to be angry she said, “I am unable to detect in you a modicum of enthusiasm for my proposals!”

“Brigitte,” I said, “Be reasonable. You are putting severe demands on my stamina, my time and my wallet! Let me first recover from the trauma of being retired.”

She giggled. “Come on, Jacques. I have been reasonable for years!” and with typical Gallic exaggeration she added, “ I have patiently waited, like Penelope, for you to come back from your meetings, missions and cocktails. Now you have time for your household. You have to be active, otherwise you will soon be fossilized !”

From that moment I knew that I would no longer report to the Assistant Director-General of Unesco. A new boss was born.

As Brigitte kept outlining the chores that would prevent me from becoming fossilized, my power of concentration weakened. My mind wandered and, all of a sudden, I felt a new, sweet nostalgia for my days at Unesco.

“Jacques, you look haggard,” she said, “You are not listening. Come on, Darling. Do you want to turn into a contented vegetable like our friend Julien ?”

“I am listening. I am.” I answered. “But you know, my dear Brigitte, the transition from being an International Civil Servant, Diplomat and Director to a house slave involves the sort of alchemy which demands time. Give me time. You will also agree that life during retirement is supposed to be a considerable improvement over the old days of sweat and toil.”

But reasoning and Aristotelian logic did not work. Cartesian logic did not work either. Nothing worked. Brigitte had given a lot of thought to the question of my retirement and she had to outline the whole program right there and then.

In spite of the authoritative aspects of her character and her magisterial

facade, Brigitte had managed, at fifty-five, to remain feminine and deeply sensuous. She knew how to use her charm with great maestria. She cared about the most pleasant pursuits in life: good eating, classy entertainment and vacation, being elegant, good books, witty conversation and, of course being French.

In spite of a fair amount of international exposure through friends, Unesco colleagues and traveling, Brigitte had remained essentially French in her outlook on life. She was attracted by all things alive, vibrant, stylish and chic. To be boring was inexcusable. She could be outspoken and sometimes abrupt. But even when she behaved improperly, she did it with class.

In comparison, my thirty years of international life had altered a great deal of the Frenchman in me. I had come to find the French outlook on life sometimes conceited, a little self-centered and, let us say, much too French. The international prism through which I now looked at the world tinted every issue with a little more modesty. I had lost a little bit of that vision of grandeur which my history teacher had attempted to instill in me.

Having finished her coffee, Brigitte sat closer to me and moved to another section of my retirement plan. From now on, I had to exercise everyday. I should join the same club as our handsome friend Michel. Apparently he was sixty-five and looked younger than me. I pointed out that Michel had gray hair whereas mine was still naturally black. It did not matter a bit. I had drooping shoulders, a stooping chest and a bulging belly. I was not tall and, if I were not careful, in a few years I would look as old as Methuselah.

“As of today, we’ll start the very effective Scarsdale diet our friend Denise recommended.” she said. It is true that I had always paid more attention to the delights of the table than to my waist measurement. I could advantageously lose several kilos. I was never meant to be a d’Artagnan or a Cyrano de Bergerac. But to go on a diet on that very first day was not exactly how I had visualized my new freedom.

In my thirty years of service with Unesco I had had to resort to all sorts of gambits to convince others. I used in turn authority, psychology, charm, logic, know-how, or humor. But with Brigitte, nothing seemed to work that day.

The guiding principles for my retirement had been outlined and drummed into me. If I did not want to become a moth-eaten, fossilized Patriarch on the decline, I had better fast and get to work.

That was not all. She went on to the third part of the program. From now on, we would invite friends more frequently, we would travel with my sister-in-law, Lily, and her husband, Albert. We would learn to play bridge. We would finally live!

To tell the truth, I had not realized that we had been dead for so long. I was

startled. Brigitte left the room to get some more coffee. I remained silent. One could hear the young girl next door playing the clarinet. I did not know that she played clarinet on Mondays. Apparently she played every day of the week for twenty to thirty minutes to keep her fingers nimble. When she stopped playing her mother, supposedly an accomplished soprano, started gargling like mad. The glass window of my room vibrated and everything else vibrated with it. At one point our Maria Callas emitted a piercing shrill that made me jump.

I yelled, as Brigitte entered the room with more coffee, “My God ! She must be undergoing open-heart surgery without anesthetics ! ”

Brigitte laughed and said, “It is so good to have you around. This afternoon we’ll go to the cinema. You love movies.”

It is true that I always loved motion pictures. As a kid I wanted to become an actor but I was quickly made to understand that I was not built for that. I would have liked to be a producer, a movie director, even a cameraman. Instead, I was encouraged to learn languages, I was pushed towards political science, shoved into Library Sciences, and finally, when I was thirty, propelled into Unesco by Brigitte’s influential Uncle, Gérard.

So I had started life by being weak and soft. Others had made what should have been my decisions. But, gradually, life hardened me. I learned to be resistant, when necessary, and to eventually obtain what I wanted. If not by head-on confrontation, at least by diplomacy, patience and applied psychology. That day, I knew that I would eventually come to a reasonable compromise with Brigitte regarding my retirement. However, I had to wait. There was no need to muddy the waters of negotiation by being impatient.

She had already accepted as a broad principle that I would dedicate a couple of hours every day to doing some work around the house but would also spend time at my desk. Since the day I had joined Unesco in 1965 I had spent endless hours at a desk and I could not bear the thought of having the ‘umbilical cord’ cut off so abruptly.

One good thing was that Brigitte had to shop for fresh food every single morning. She would not dream of serving vegetables or meat purchased the previous day and kept in the refrigerator. Like many French housewives, she had to get to grips with the produce in the open market, smelling, squeezing, feeling, sniffing, snapping and fingering everything. That operation kept my wife out of the house every morning from ten to noon.

My greatest pleasure, the fizz in the veins, came from the fact that I could retire to my desk every day for those two hours, read, sort out my papers, write and plunge into the past.

During those daily couple of hours I often remembered my missions to the four corners of the world. In spite of the anxiety attached to each, the jet lags, the fatigue, disappointments and frustrations, each mission had been a rewarding new discovery. A fascinating adventure. An inspiring new page in the book of my life.

I often thought of the numerous men and women I had met - perhaps only once or twice - along the many paths I had traveled. Friendships may have been superficial at times but fascination always deep. I never stopped marveling at the richness of each culture, at the beauty of each horizon, at the enlivening message of each encounter.

I remembered with delight some of the amusing situations I got into. Sometimes I laughed all by myself at the funny circumstances recalled. I remembered them all with a cheerful heart. Oh, yes I remembered...

My mission with Maurice Chevalier

I was in New York on one of my missions to the United Nations to represent Unesco at a meeting. I had been to the UN on several occasions before. In fact, I had established, over the years, a fairly good reputation as a dependable, serious and resourceful international civil servant. But, after what had happened during this last visit, I no longer knew how I stood in the eyes of my colleagues. I was not quite sure whether to laugh or cry.

It all started in Paris, in the middle of that week, where I left Unesco headquarters in a great rush to catch my flight to New York at Orly Airport. After a sleepless night at my Manhattan hotel, I was not in top shape on the next morning when I walked down Lexington avenue towards the UN Building.

I was happy to be in New York again. It is in New York that I made my first baby steps at international meetings soon after I had joined Unesco in 1965. I always loved Manhattan, notwithstanding the horror stories I kept hearing about it that made you wish to live in a bank safe. As a Parisian, used to intense city-life, I always found New York City congenial and alluring. I love its many attractions and points of interest. Its international flavor. I love its spirit and ferment, its pace and rhythm, its liveliness and energy. True, the city has some aggressive and scary aspects, but it always makes me feel alive. Walking down the streets and seeing the variety of ethnic groups and the assortment of clothes and colorful attires reminds me of the entrance hall of the Unesco building in Paris on an international conference day when delegates come from the four corners of the earth.

A story that I find fascinating about New York city is that concerning the purchase of Manhattan. It is said that the first Director-General of the New Netherlands province, Peter Minuit, purchased the island in 1626 from the Brooklyn Indians with pieces of bright cloth, beads and other trinkets valued at 60 guilders - about $ 24. At the same period, back in France, an architect by the name of Le Roy was supervising the construction of the Château de Versailles, ordered at great expense by the king.

When I reached East 42nd street I turned left towards the UN building and stopped to look at the display of suits at a shop-window. The glass acting as a mirror, I could not help but observe my silhouette. The light brown Yves Saint-Laurent suit I was wearing was indeed very stylish. I noticed, however, that my shirt had not survived the eggs-and-bacon breakfast and was no longer immaculate. I automatically said the single most appropriate French word for the occasion: merde !

If I pulled the tie a little bit to the left I could hide the damage. The overall appearance was not ugly. I was about forty then but the problem was already around the waistline. As Brigitte used to say: too many cocktails, business lunches and exotic dinners! I took a deep breadth and pulled my stomach in. I still looked inflated. Had I been taller, it would not have mattered so much.

Well, well... for a man of my age, I was not too bad. My hair was curly and dark and my valentino-style mustache not unattractive. I needed to go on a diet. As Scarlet O'Hare used to say, “I’ll think about it tomorrow !” I looked at my watch and walked towards the UN building. I had been standing at the shop-window for several minutes and had looked only at myself. All is vanity !

When I arrived at the UN building, Mr. Brown’s new English secretary welcomed me and walked me to the meeting room. She was not exactly beautiful but very stylish. With her long legs and striking outfit, she attracted attention. On the way, she made a comment which was to have a determining effect on the rest of the day. She simply said, “Your English is very good, Mr. Dupont. And your charming accent reminds me of Charles Boyer or rather of Maurice Chevalier.” She giggled. So did I.

The subject of the meeting was the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage. In an attempt to ensure the protection and conservation of the world’s cultural heritage, Unesco had adopted in 1972 a convention and was now in the process of establishing a Fund and an International Committee to supervise the program. The meeting in New York was meant to assist in coordinating this effort with a number of programs in the UN family and in some Member States.

There were some twenty participants around an oval table. The meeting started on time. The Chairman made his introductory remarks and I delivered a brief statement on behalf of Unesco.

The representative from Sri Lanka immediately asked for the floor and began, what seemed to me, an endless speech. He spoke very demurely in a monotonous cadence and in a very soft voice - as though he was about to share with us an ancestral secret. The rhythmical effect was instantaneous. In no time my mind wandered away from the meeting room and back to Mr. Brown’s new secretary.

Why did she refer to Maurice Chevalier ? Did she intend to flatter or tease me ? Was she not too young to have known either Boyer or Chevalier ? Perhaps she had recently watched on TV Cole Porter’s hit “Can-Can”, with Shirley MacLaine, Frank Sinatra and Maurice Chevalier. Or, maybe, Vincente Minnelli’s old musical “Gigi”. Oh yes, bubbly “Gigi”! What a wonderful musical ! A few seconds later I was miles away from the meeting room ...and years back into glittering, gay Paris. There was enchanting Leslie Caron, all arms and legs, gracefully dancing about. There was charming Louis Jourdan. He, too, has an accent. Doesn’t he ? There was Maurice Chevalier - the very personification of Gallic gallantry. And Shirley MacLaine

performing a naughty can-can dance. Didn’t the cast of Gigi also include Eva Gabor ? Or was it Zaza Gabor? In any case, all the Gabors look alike . Don't they ? How come they never age? They claim to have caviar and champagne for their daily breakfast. Do you believe it ?

I was still with Shirley, Zaza and Eva when I suddenly realized that the Chairman was looking at me with an intriguing smile. He could not have possibly guessed what had been going on in my mind. Could he? The intervention from Sri Lanka was over. The room was dead silent.

Staring at me, the Chairman said, “I am sure our distinguished representative from Unesco would like to react to Mr. Arianayagham’s intervention, since his proposals, if implemented, would imply a strong involvement on the part of Unesco.” With a dignified and masterly gesture in my direction, he added, “ Mr. Dupont, the floor is yours.“

Needless to say I did not want to speak! I did not have the slightest clue as to what proposal had been tabled. I could not even begin to pronounce Mr Arianayagham’s name. I had not asked for the floor. Instead, I would have wished for the floor to open under my feet and swallow me. As I procrastinated in silence, everyone turned attentively in my direction.

Finally, I said “ Well, well, well...”

I do not know if I sounded like Maurice Chevalier or Louis Jourdan, but the effect was not exactly brilliant. I must not have come across as terribly intelligent, for the surprise was now general. I remember a similar experience had occurred many, many years earlier in my school days. A teacher had caught me daydreaming and had scolded me embarrassingly while the rest of the class laughed. But it did not matter so much then. It mattered now!

“What makes you hesitate, Mr. Dupont ?” asked the Chairman.

I was then suddenly inspired by the witty politicians on French TV who can address any question and speak on any subject for any length of time without really knowing what they are talking about. It was, indeed, a bewitching challenge.

So, I said something along the following lines : “We have now a lot of food for thought” (Did we really ?) “The proposal is very interesting, but it presents some complex aspects which require thorough reflection.” (Who could disagree with that?) “In any case,” I added, “before I give you my opinion, I would very much appreciate listening to the reactions of the other participants and benefit from their comments on the subject which I intend to fully take into account in shaping my position. I shall not fail, of course, to share my thoughts with you after that.”

I looked around. The participants seemed satisfied and somewhat flattered. I

was proud of myself but, unfortunately, not for too long. As each one of them spoke, I began the agonizing operation of trying to guess what on earth Mr. Arianayagham's proposal was all about. The puzzle was intellectually fascinating. From their comments I had to swim upstream to discover the source. I soon felt I was drowning instead. Oh! If only Mr. Arianayagham had missed his plane in Colombo! If only Mr. Brown's secretary had not offered to take me to the meeting room!

The comments around the table added perplexity to confusion. Fortunately, after a painfully trying stretch, God had mercy on me and the Chairman decided to break for lunch. Whew! The torture was momentarily suspended.

I rushed to Mr. Arianayagham, and without trying to pronounce his name, I asked for a copy of his intervention. He did not have a typewritten one, but courteously lent me his handwritten notes.

Lunch consisted for me of an excruciating deciphering exercise. I do not think that Jean-François Champollion suffered as much as I did when he decoded the Egyptian hieroglyphics on the Rosette stone. The worse part was yet to come. Once deciphered, the proposal did not really make sense to me. I was experiencing sudden apprehension and fear - what is commonly known as panic.

But I took several deep breaths, bravely gathered all the bureaucratic skills in me and eventually synthesized an elegant general statement out of the various comments I had heard in the morning and what I could make out of the intervention. In other words, I put some of the pieces of the puzzle together. When I read the result to myself I was surprised. I wondered if Pablo Picasso was ever surprised in looking at some of his paintings, after adding various eyes, legs and noses.

In any case, at the beginning of the afternoon session I delivered my statement on an empty stomach. The Chairman nodded. The other members gave signs of assent. Only Mr. Arianayagham seemed puzzled by my puzzle. The meeting moved to other items on the agenda and at around 6 p.m., to my great relief, it ended.

No one had asked me to clarify my statement. Had they done so, I would have committed harakiri right then and there. I am sure the Japanese delegate to my left would have graciously accepted to advise me on the general procedure. But nobody asked.

On my way out of the room, the Rapporteur timidly inquired whether he could use my very statement, which he thought was so good, to summarize the discussion in the final report. I agreed and then wondered if the Rapporteur, or anyone else for that matter, had really understood what it was all about. As long as I live, I shall never explain this mystery. And as long as I live I shall never again daydream at a meeting.

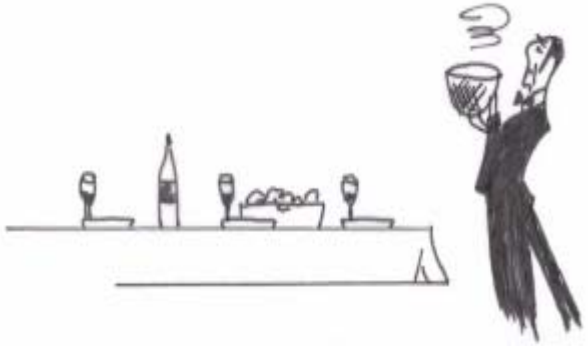
I ran out of the building and within minutes I had a huge steak with fries and onion rings, washed down with some Cabernet Sauvignon.

Back at the hotel I watched a little bit of TV and promptly fell asleep. My night was haunted with wild, confusing dreams. Maurice Chevalier was all over the place. He thanked Mr. Brown's secretary for managing to invite him to the meeting. He complimented Mr. Arianayagham for his constructive proposal, while Gigi was trying to seduce the Chairman. In his best Gallic accent, Maurice Chevalier told me that my statement was fine, but did not make much sense. Shirley, who apparently has all sorts of connections up there, was trying to obtain some heavenly clarification for what was going on. The participants danced around the oval table, drinking Cabernet Sauvignon. A disgraced Samurai wanted to pierce his belly. Eva Gabor said that generations to come would cite this meeting as a model of clarity and coherence, while her sister, Zaza, wrapped up in the UN flag, with her right arm stretched out like the Statue of Liberty, talked at great length about caviar and onion rings.

When I woke up next morning I was exhausted.

London with Spaghettini

I remember when I got off the plane I found Heathrow airport crowded. The sky was blue, but everyone had an umbrella. I guess, in England you just do not trust the weather forecast.



As I was finding my way to the exit, I heard a beautiful baritone voice calling across the airport loudly enough to wake the dead: ”Signor Dupont. Signor Dupont.” I immediately recognized the chubby silhouette of Dottore Giovanni Spaghettini.

Always joyful and lively, when Spaghettini represented Italy in an international meeting, you could rest assured that it would never lack luster or sink into dullness. Giovanni Spaghettini was colorful, imaginative and unconventional. He always seemed to be performing on stage in front of a wide audience, even in a confidential, tête-à-tête conversation. His repertoire leaned more towards the Allegro, vivace, fortissimo... con agitazione . When the subject was serious or sad he would dramatically change his facial expression to convey the proper concern or emotion. You almost expected to hear a Puccini aria in the background.

After the usual warm greetings, he asked to be accompanied to the airport bank in order to exchange money. Spaghettini was a well-traveled man and this was not his first visit to London. Nevertheless, he said that he had never fully understood the local monetary system.

At the bank counter he soon became entangled with pounds, shillings, and pennies. He was wondering whether half a crown was still in use. He said with a smile, “Two shillings and sixpence used to make half a crown, but a crown no longer exists. Strange isn’t it?”

I kept saying, “Giovanni, the line behind us is getting longer and longer.“

“Don't’ you worry,” he replied “In England queuing up is a national pastime.”

With Heathrow being far from the center of London, taxis being expensive, and Spaghettini in the mood for experiencing the English way of life again, we decided to go the cheap way - that is, by bus and subway. Spaghettini decided he wanted to understand the rationale behind British town planning. He had read somewhere that an attempt to introduce parallel streets in England was made after all towns had been completely built.

So, there we were, trying to solve the elaborate quiz of London. In the process I lost him on the Bakerloo underground line at Piccadilly Station, but found him again, squeezed between two orange-haired punks, at Oxford Circus. The next time the subway door opened, we were ejected with our luggage together with a few superfluous passengers.

In the streets of London we twisted and turned around until we found Bond Street. We were surprised that motorists in London, unlike the Roman and Parisian kinds, yielded at pedestrian crossings. “Sono dei gentlemen !” Giovanni kept saying.

I observed, “Giovanni, you seem to like it over here.”

That was a mistake. He stopped in the middle of Bond Street, put down his luggage and began his analysis of the British. “I like them because they have a deep sense of fairness and spare other people’s feelings. They are basically very decent people. Very polite. They do not like to cause any trouble in public. I also admire their eccentricity. You know, Jacques, they prefer quality of life to wealth. A form of snobbery, I presume. To Latins, it may seem strange that they camouflage their feelings. We may think it is hypocrisy, but it is not. It is the way they are taught to behave by their nannies.”

As soon as I could say a word I suggested that we proceed towards the hotel because we were blocking the traffic with our luggage. We moved fifteen yards and he stopped again and put down his luggage. Spaghettini needed his hands to fully express himself. “ You know, Jacques, what I like here is the sense of democracy and the media. Fantastic ! The power of the media on British life is outstanding. Newspaper circulation is so much larger here than in any other country. And the BBC is the most objective of all televisions. Don’t you think?”

I nodded, picked up my luggage and started walking again. Spaghettini followed and continued to talk, but obviously with both hands busily carrying the luggage he could not gesticulate. Nevertheless, he kept explaining that he did not care for the rigid class system, the well-known British ethnocentricity and a certain arrogance. The fact that they felt superior bothered him.

“True,” I said “the British are not generally credited with humility. Neither are the French for that matter.”

In addition, what bothered Spaghettini is that he could no longer tell whether puritanism or permissiveness dominated life in the United Kingdom. He found it disconcerting that both aspects were concurrent. He put down his luggage again and said that the British deserved an international trophy for their sense of humor.

“Can we award them the trophy,” I asked , “once we have found the hotel, please ?”

No. He had to rest. With both hands free to punctuate his speech he went on saying, “An Englishman is prepared to laugh at himself and at any of his defects. To the bewilderment of foreigners, he can make jokes that no one but an Englishman can understand. A Frenchman, such as yourself, my dear Jacques, may pride himself on the clarity of his intelligence, his Cartesian logic or his wit. But only an Englishman can greet adversity and make fun of himself with such unique humor ! Do you remember who said:‘ English is understood practically everywhere, and the English practically nowhere’ ?”

We asked our way to the hotel where all the participants of the Meeting had been booked, but to no avail. A lady who had lived on that street for thirty-two years had never heard of it. We walked some more while Spaghettini continued his in-depth analysis of the United Kingdom. Eventually the Lord had mercy on our souls (and legs) and with a great sense of triumph we found the hotel.

It was quaint, charming and totally antiquated. No comparison with some of the luxurious hotels we had come across on our way. “I am afraid,” we were told upon our arrival “there is a slight problem with the heating system. A pipe has burst.” We were also made to understand that pipes in that hotel sooner or later always burst in winter and, in any case, it was not healthy to keep bedrooms over-heated, as they do on the Continent.

A nice fire was lit in the open fireplace in every room. Spaghettini said jovially that England was “molto romantica !” However, for no understandable reason, once in a while the wind came down the chimney and blew smoke into the room and romanticism out of the window.

After a little rest, all the participants gathered in the hotel lobby and walked together to the meeting place. I immediately went to see Sir John to tell him that Unesco was in full agreement with his plan, that I would support it during the meeting but, because of budgetary restrictions, we could only offer moral support. Very elegantly, Sir John said that moral support was all that mattered. I felt good. Looking straight into my eyes, he added convincingly, “Jacques, you look remarkably well.” I felt very, very good, indeed.

The meeting’s main objective was to advise on the preparation of an international conference our hosts wanted to convene on ‘information technology in the library school curriculum.’ They were looking for support and contributions and, because of the international dimension of the planned conference, they had invited Unesco.

When I entered the meeting room I overheard Sir John telling the Greek delegate, Kharalambos, that he looked remarkably well. He looked rather greenish to me. I glanced around the table. They were all smiling. Undoubtedly, they had all been told by Sir John how well each of them looked.

I sat at my place, next to Mr. Brown from the United Nations. I do not know why on earth I did not find anything smarter to say than, " I was in New York last year and met your new English secretary. Very efficient, indeed."

"Oh, yes," he said "By the way, she is not English but makes a commendable effort to sound so."

"Where is she from ?" I asked.

"From Oshkosh, Nebraska," said Mr. Brown.

The meeting started and I was not going to let Mr. Brown's secretary from Oshkosh, Nebraska, Maurice Chevalier or anyone else distract me this time. I listened carefully.

Under the elegant and skillful chairmanship of Sir John, the meeting proceeded very smoothly. We have to admit that in international circles where English is often the common language, English participants are at a great advantage over the rest of us. Not only do they handle the language superbly but they also possess the traditional British diplomatic dexterity and, consequently, make very good moderators, excellent rapporteurs and astonishing chairpersons. What they say is often difficult to fathom but it is said with such elegance! Things which may meet resistance or hurt someone's feelings are left unsaid. You do not always know where you stand, but they make it clear for you. Some call it 'diplomacy' others 'hypocrisy'. Whatever it is, they are masters at it.

That day, nothing could possibly disturb Sir John in his function. Every difficulty was surmounted, every enigma clarified, every problem solved elegantly, placidly, eloquently. And if things seemed to take the wrong turn, a little English humor would do wonders. Sir John had no inhibitions about making a fool of himself, if need be, to relax the atmosphere with a few bursts of laughter in order to obtain what he wanted. At the end of the meeting we were totally hypnotized and agreed to almost everything.

Now, we had less than two hours to rest, freshen up and go to dinner at Sir John's house. On the way to the hotel, Giovanni Spaghettini stopped at the laundry to collect his shirt. Instead of a shirt, he was given back a pair of Victorian panties with lots of lace. I can still hear his fine baritone voice exclaiming, "Mamma mia! Mamma mia! Ma come si fà!"

An hour later, we were all clean and shiny, ready to go. We decided to buy some flowers before getting a cab to Sir John's. Some of us stood in line at the flower shop and waited for a long while. The shopkeeper had to discuss the weather with every single customer, while a complying queue stood by, each one serenely awaiting his turn to comment on the weather. It is astonishing to discover the incredible variety of statements that can be made about a single dreadful, rainy day.

In England, an educated man must know how to talk about the weather : the weather we had the past days, the weather we are having, the weather we should have had, the weather we will have. Pierre Daninos said that when the good Lord created the world, he thought of a changing weather so that the English could discuss it.

After paying for the flowers, we suggested that Mr. Spaghettini offer the bunch, on our behalf, to the lady of the house, since he was known to be able to deliver lyrical speeches with the most flowery vocabulary. But from another point of view the choice was incongruous. Poor Mr. Spaghettini was short and chubby and tended to disappear behind the huge bouquet.

We entered one by one, in a sort of procession, and were greeted at the door by our hosts . Mr. Spaghettini - his view obscured by large red dahlias - tripped over the last step and landed at the feet of Sir John's wife.

When the commotion was over and we had resumed our best composure in harmony with the style of the house, Mr. Brown, his eyes twinkling with delight, whispered in my ear, "We had asked him to deliver a lyrical speech not to kiss her feet."

Having finished our sherry, we entered the dining room. At the table, I was placed between Mrs. Van der Loan from the Netherlands and Ms. Pringgoadisurjo from Indonesia. I had known both ladies for a long time but had never dared call Ms. Pringgoadisurjo by her name. The spelling scared me to death and paralyzed my tongue. An American friend of mine had once said, "When in doubt about a name, you can always say 'hi, there!'" Ms. Pringgoadisurjo must have wondered why I always called her "there" whenever I greeted her.

At the beginning, the atmosphere was solemn, in spite of the urbane and courteous efforts of our hosts. It was partly due to the stately surroundings, to the shyness of some of us and, no doubt, to the widely accepted cliché defining the English as class-conscious, snobbish, exclusive and arrogant. I noticed Mr. Brown was gazing all around. Was he looking for some informality? That was too soon. Wine had not had its relaxing and buoyant effect yet.

The table was set with exquisite taste. I noticed that the British hosts and guests had their hands under the table. All the rest had theirs on the table. As Spaghettini would say, this is what their nannies had taught them. As it is always the case in England, all the cutlery to be used during the meal was placed to the right and left of each plate. The impressive number of forks and knives indicated that we were about to have a feast. An English feast, no doubt, but a feast all the same. As I was observing the cutlery, I suddenly remembered the day I had been taken to the Saint Louis Hospital to have my appendix out and had noticed at the corner of the operating room all the torture instruments arrayed on a table, ready for use.

Table manners are, of course, arbitrary. They differ from country to country and, in some societies, acquire an exaggerated importance. The regulations involved seem to have been created by the ruling class and imposed on the rest. In England, great attention is given to the strict application of such rules. You are expected to keep your fork in your left hand and your knife in your right hand at all times. The passage of the fork from one hand to the other, as Mr. Brown did after cutting his meat, is disdainfully considered in England as a juggling exercise fit for the circus. After cutting the meat, the knife is supposed to push the morsel and a sample of vegetables on top of the fork. English peas, which are notoriously big and hard, may constitute an insurmountable obstacle. But, ours being an international gathering, it did not matter too much. You could tell by looking around that table etiquette was far from standardized.

The rules of conversation also differ from country to country. In England, numerous are the subjects which are considered taboo, at least in the upper class. Anything polemical, critical, controversial, political, sexual, religious, personal, contentious, or anything which may embarrass or hurt anyone, is to be avoided. You are allowed to make fun of yourself, talk about sports, say something nice and, of course, discuss the weather. Silence is very much appreciated. These English rules had originally tinted those prevailing in America. However, the latter have become looser and more flexible with time. One very 'British' rule concerns the topic of food. As opposed to countries, such as Italy, France, China or Thailand, where table conversations may very well include reference to food and cooking, in England it is considered ill-mannered, if not vulgar. Such topic is never, never broached at Buckingham Palace. Remember!

We had had several courses and several glasses of Chablis and Margaux, when suddenly Spaghettini, either innocently or provocatively, broke the ice by saying, "At the beginning of a meal in Italy we say 'Buon'appetito,' in France 'Bon appetit,' in Germany 'Guten appetit' or 'Mahlzeit,' in the US we now say 'enjoy.' What do you say in England?"

After a little silence, Sir John's wife demurely answered, "In England, we are not expected to enjoy food". Pandora's box was now wide open! Every one felt obliged to refer to how tasty the Dover Sole was...how palatable the pudding... how green the peas.

Spaghettini was in heaven. He had managed to drag everyone closer to the kitchen oven. He spoke at great length of Italian cuisine, explaining in minute detail how one prepares 'risotto con le vongole' and 'scaloppine di fegato di maiale.' "Oh, you should taste, at least once in your lifetime, 'l'imbrogliata di carciofini.'"

At this point, everyone had gradually stopped eating our English dinner and had been carried away in spirit miles away into a Trattoria. You could almost hear the mandolins.

Then, our Italian delegate, self-appointed leader of conversation, decided that it was the French cuisine's turn. "Signor Dupont," he said "tell us all about the 'Cassolettes d'escargots.' Do you know how to prepare the 'Coquilles Saint-Jacques au foie gras'?"

Fortunately, before I could attempt an answer, he was already describing 'Les Anguilles au vert.' Since we were in the middle of a culinary discussion, Mr. Brown asked Spaghettini the origins of his name. I had been intrigued by this unusual name - to say the least - but had never dared ask. Unfortunately, I could not hear the explanation as Mrs. Schläger from Austria gently drew me deep in the preparation of a 'Linzertorte'' while Kharalambos was showing how to roll grape leaves.

By now, everyone was baking, roasting, frying, boiling, stewing, poaching, broiling. It had turned into an international cooking orgy right under the nose of astonished Sir John! A loud thunder suddenly silenced all the cooks and established law and order. You could hear the rain. Mrs. Van der Loan quickly referred to the storm and in no time the conversation shifted back into the safe topic of the weather. Sir John's wife looked relieved.

Nevertheless, we continued to drink, talk and laugh. By then, thunder or no thunder, all the international diplomacy and the English reserve had dissolved in the Chablis. I do not know who gave the signal, but I found myself standing in a queue on the way out. Thanks and greetings were exchanged. As I remember, we did not look remarkably well any longer.

There was a lot of rain. The lugubrious black cabs that had been ordered stood in line as in a funeral procession. I was glad that Spaghettini had not suggested to go by bus and subway this time. Miraculously, after a while I was in bed and quickly fell asleep. As usual, after a full busy day crowned by a heavy dinner my night was tormented by a confusing dream.

We were at Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty had a purple hat on and was staring at Spaghettini with surprise as he spread rose petals all over, graciously dancing a Boccherini Minuet. Her Majesty explained that the fireplaces were lit because the pipes had burst. Spaghettini was trying to have Mrs. Van der Loan accept the pair of Victorian panties with lace he had been given at the laundry.

Then Mr. Arianayagham from Sri Lanka (what was he doing here?) asked her gracious Majesty to explain how the social classes were organized in England because he did not know where he belonged. It was explained to him that people can be cast as 'upper middle', 'middle middle' or 'lower middle. And proceeding down the ladder as 'upper working class,' 'working class proper,' 'lower working class,' etc.

"And how do you assign a class?" he asked.

“Simply by the dress, the origin, the address, the accent - especially the way you pronounce an ‘h’ and, of course, the way you hold a fork”.

At that point I was astonished to hear Brigitte saying what she thought of the English and other participants at the meeting. To my great embarrassment she said that the English were badly dressed, were obsessed with horses, gardening and cricket, and their mannerisms were faintly ridiculous. The Swiss and the Belgians were dull, the Spanish and the Italians were noisy and the Germans were too German.

I began to run away when Sir John asked me if I agreed to what my wife was saying. The first door I found led me into the kitchen, where I stumbled over some escargots, walked over scaloppine, tripped over a smoked trout, slid on grape leaves and finally slipped and fell on Mrs. Scläger’s Linzertorte.

Fortunately, at that moment a loud clap of thunder put an end to my dream and established law and order into the rest of my night. Bonne nuit !

A dress for Zeinab

The meeting in Morocco had been scheduled to last three days. It was a restricted, semi-formal consultation, at the invitation of the Government of Morocco, to help finalize an important project for international assistance on the theme of: 'A national strategy for the protection of the rural environment.'

The World Bank was represented by Mr. Larry Thompson, a very powerful man, with a huge cigar and a thick Texan accent. Mr. J. Subramaniam, originally from New Delhi, spoke for the UNDP - the United Nations Development Program. With my French accent, I answered for Unesco, while the European Community was in the Germanic hands of Helmut Streitz. Mr. Makoto Takahashi, from Tokyo, represented The United Nations University. For three days this impressive Tower of Babel was to communicate in English with francophone Mohammed Fassi-Bekkari - the distinguished representative of His Majesty King Hassan II.

Unesco's collaboration with Morocco had been steady and intense over the years. It included inter alia a campaign for the preservation of the city of Fez, the establishment of a regional school for library and information sciences, support to the Institute of Studies and Research for Arabization, and many projects in the fields of education, culture and science.

In Morocco, a Unesco Secretariat Member was treated as a benefactor and made to feel welcome. No wonder I felt good.

As expected, the meeting started with a fireworks of greetings, thanks, blessings and benedictions. We were told that our presence had honored the country and that we had brought sunshine with us ! The truth of the matter was that we had left rain and clouds behind us in Brussels, Paris, Tokyo and Washington and found a radiant sun in Rabat.

In the Arab world, you are often sprinkled with artful compliments, warm congratulations, poetic wishes, soft greetings and fastidious regards. The higher your position, the more excessive the civilities.

I find it most interesting to observe two Arabs meeting in the street. They shake hands several times, gently bending forward, and while holding each other's hand and continuing to shake them, they start a ritual litany of polite invocations, praise and laudations. "How are you ? God bless you. How is your health ? Praise God. How are the children ? God bless you all. How are your parents ? Is their

health good? God bless you. God bless you" (Did anybody sneeze ?) All of this talk is usually abundantly showered with "Hamdullelah" - to thank heaven for being so good.

In the Arab culture, when you meet a friend you are expected to inquire about everyone, but never about the wife. That is considered unbecoming ! Arab modesty and decency have no room for such improper questions. After ten minutes have elapsed, after many questions are asked but few answers provided, the two friends recover their moistened hands and reluctantly part, each proceeding on his own way.

If they meet five or six more acquaintances along the way, they will reach their final destination an hour later. It does not matter at all. In any case good manners do not allow a respectable adult to run. Being in a hurry is generally considered vulgar. Etiquette demands that you take your time in walking, talking, eating, greeting a friend. The local social code says nothing about being late.

The notion of time is indeed fascinating; it constitutes an intriguing difference among people of different countries and often becomes a source of misunderstanding. Being late, being kept waiting, changing or missing appointments is not perceived the same way in different cultures.

In our international organizations, such as Unesco, which have adopted the Western way of doing business, it is essential to know how much lead time is required for each activity and how far ahead to request an appointment or schedule a meeting. Planning is crucial; schedules are sacred. This is the case for example, in Northern Europe. But as we move south, these plans and schedules take a much more flexible character. Once we cross the Mediterranean Sea, they become amorphous and rare. An appointment made several weeks in advance slips the mind. A Moroccan friend once told me that they believe Europeans and North Americans have a kind of devil inside who drives them crazy; they always hurry to get someplace, when the place would still be there, whenever they arrived.

The same friend told me that when the buses were introduced to connect major cities in Morocco, the authorities had to explain their usefulness. "You see, instead of taking three days with your donkey to travel to Marakesh, you can get there in three hours with the bus."

"Oh, yes," answered the Arab on the donkey " and when I get there so early, what will I do?"

But let us go back to the meeting which was only 30 minutes late to start. Once the opening greetings and civilities were over, another hour was spent puzzling over each other's accents and in trying to decode what was really being said. When Mr. Subramaniam suddenly decided to speak French so that His Excellency Fassi-Bakkari would better grasp the point he was making, we were

desperately lost. Somehow, the Indian accent does not mix well with French. (Does it mix well with Indian ?) Helmut Streitz uttered each word emphatically and managed to make everything he said sound important. However, he sometimes tended to place the verb at the end of the sentence, as it is done in German. By the time the verb made its appearance at the end of the sentence, you had forgotten what the beginning was about. German minds must function in a very special way. When Mr. Makato Takahashi spoke, on the other hand, mixing the “l’s” and the “r’s”, his Excellency Fassi-Bakkari softly asked his neighbor in what language was the statement being made.

While listening, an old French saying about the way languages are spoken in their native context came to mind. It goes something like this : English is chewed and swallowed, German is spit, Italian is sung and French is spoken. It does not say what you do with Japanese.

After a while our internationally-attuned ears gradually became accustomed to the cacophony and we proceeded fairly smoothly. In international circles that happens all the time.

Mr. Mohammed Fassi-Bekkari told us that the constant increase in population in Morocco aggravated the problem of unemployment, especially in the rural areas, where it took a chronic form. Problems related to housing, health, education, communications, trade and finance were dramatically deployed before us. The overall picture was gloomy. Very gloomy, indeed. The problems discussed, however, bluntly contrasted with the opulence of the meeting room, its rich ornamentation and fantastic arabesques. The ‘one-thousand-and-one-night’ Palace in which we were meeting made me wonder if we were actually talking of the same country.

At the end of the first day’s meeting we were taken back to the hotel. No social event had been scheduled for that first evening because we were asked to read and digest tons of documents for the next day. Larry Thompson wanted to stretch his legs and do some shopping at the big Bazaar.

I asked for directions at the Hotel reception, when the Director, Mr. Mustapha Bakri, said, “Monsieur Dupont, if you could wait five minutes, I have to go myself to the ‘Souk’ to buy a dress for my daughter, Zeinab, and both of you could come along.“ So Mr. Thompson and I waited for five Moroccan minutes - that is about 30 regular ones - and at around 6 p.m. the expedition started.

The whole Bakri family had gathered for the occasion: nine year old Zeinab, who needed a new dress, her mother, her father, the elder brother, a few sisters, a lady neighbor, Larry Thompson and me. The neighbor, Mrs. Mounira Mahjoub , was the key person of the expedition, since she was the technical expert on the matter. No one in the whole neighborhood ever bought a dress without the benefit of her advice. In the Bazaar she was known, respected and feared.

Many stores in the Souk have what you may call ‘pullers-in’ who stand outside the store and entice potential customers to enter the establishment. They inform you persuasively that the prices are low, the quality high, and the bargains exceptional. They tell you “You do not have to buy. Just come in, look around and have a Coca-Cola.” In fact, you should keep running. If you show the shadow of some vague interest, they will never let you go. As Mustapha Bakri stopped to look at one window display with some curiosity, he was a dead duck. We were all dead ducks. In no time the puller-in pulled us all in.

We were offered tea, coffee, and lemonade. Mr. Bakri explained to Larry Thompson that it was considered rude to refuse and that drinking did not mean that we had to buy from that store.

I stood in one corner to watch the scene and drank (or rather chewed) my Turkish coffee. The mother sat herself at a strategic point, next to expert Mounira, from where they could dominate the whole battlefield and direct operations. Little Zeinab stood on a raised platform having tried on a green and pink dress. Mr. Thompson asked if it was for Halloween.

While cooling herself with a palm leaf, Mounira commented on the dresses with disdain and asked questions with overtones of belligerency. It was explained to us that the bargaining tactics had been fixed ahead of time. While Mr. Mustapha Bakri and his eldest son were to remain calm and courteous, the two ladies criticized without respite. The idea was always to minimize every thing and never show the slightest enthusiasm. Everyone spoke. Little Zeinab, the only one really concerned, was told to be quiet.

The salesman helped to change dresses, to straighten them, smooth them, under a constant fire of negative remarks . The amazing thing was that the whole ceremony took place in a jovial atmosphere. Everyone smiled. All of Mounira’s critical comments were received by the salesman with a grin or laughter. He, no doubt, knew the rules of the game. I could very well imagine what would have happened to our two Moroccan ladies if - Heaven forbid - they had taken the same attitude in a Parisian boutique! But in the Bazaar the event was considered a kind of amusing ceremony with its special protocol and code of conduct.

For one thing, time did not exist. Most Moroccans carry around their wrists big gold watches. The richer the Moroccan, the bigger the watch. I suspect the watches are there for two main reasons: as a status symbol and for decorative purposes. In any case, the buying ceremony went on and on and on.

Needless to say, Thompson had no idea about what was going on. I ventured to ask him, teasingly “Is shopping the same in a U.S. mall ?”. We laughed. Everybody was smiling or laughing. Nobody was buying.

Now, Mounira had taken one dress in her knowledgeable hands and was

standing at the door, holding it to the sun. She was feeling it, looking through it, pulling it, smelling it. Was she going to bite it ? You could guess that things were coming to a climax.

Trying to be as detached and nonchalant as possible, she asked for the price. Having heard the answer, they all stood up, instantaneously . Mr. Bakri and his son laughed - as if the price given by the salesman was a joke; the mother looked bewildered; Mounira acted flabbergasted, pulling the young girls out of the store; while the salesman attempted to argue and the puller-in tried to stop everyone from going out. The scene continued on the sidewalk until we turned the corner onto another street.

Similar commotions took place in two other stores. Mr. Bakri explained to Mr. Thompson that one should never buy from the first store, no matter what. By going around you establish the real market value of the merchandise you want to acquire and then you can make the right choice. Mr. Thompson asked why there were no price tags on the goods. That seemed like a very strange idea to Mr. Bakri, who looked very puzzled. “How could one do business if you have price tags on the merchandise ?” he asked.

Mr. Thompson and I were tired, but did not dare go back to the hotel on our own. We would never be able to get out of the labyrinth. One good thing was that we were not thirsty, having benefited from the hospitality of three stores. By now I was getting addicted to Turkish Coffee and I would be able to read those technical reports all night. Meanwhile we followed the party like docile sheep and gave up any thought of shopping for ourselves. After a full day’s work on Sheik Mohammed Fassi-Bakkari’s development project we could not take any more negotiation.

To our great amazement, we suddenly found ourselves back at the first store to bargain for the first green and pink dress - the Halloween one. The arguing went on and on. On three occasions the party moved towards the door and was pulled back. The salesman looked several times at the ceiling, invoking Heaven. Mr. Thompson and I instinctively looked at the ceiling as well. There was a big fan in motion , trying to cool the atmosphere. At one point Heaven must have listened since both sides eventually reached agreement. The dress was purchased. More lemonades were served and probably many jokes made, for everyone smiled and laughed. Going back to the hotel Mr. Thompson said, “You are right, Mr Bakri, you could not have all of this business with price tags !”

The next day, the meeting was uneventful. We worked hard and made great progress. Perhaps, some of us now knew how to bargain. By the end of the day the project document was in fairly good shape as far as the substantive content was concerned. Our host looked delighted. None of the Agencies present had any major problem with it, which augured well for the international financing the Morrocans were aiming at. The next day was going to be spent tightening it up and trying to rewrite it in one language. A national strategy for the protection of rural environment

was born !

That evening we were to be treated and rewarded for the good work we had done. Sheik Mohammed Fassi-Bekkari invited us to a typical Moroccan restaurant to which tourists are seldom taken. Apparently it was the real thing ! As we entered the place, we were struck by the decor and the fantastic interlacing patterns of flowers, foliage and fruits, the fountains, the mirrors, the gold, the incense, the soft music. Many Hollywood movies came to mind. I could see Yvonne de Carlo dancing wrapped up in seven veils.

More than any other Middle Eastern people, the Moroccans have adopted and, so to speak, become addicted to every spice that has come their way en route to Europe from the Far East. They use them at discretion to make up some very rich combinations. The smell in the dining room was most inviting.

As soon as we were seated, a sumptuous succession of colorful dishes was paraded in front of us. The meal took place only a few inches above the ground. We crouched and squatted on lavish cushions and divans. Only the Moroccans looked relaxed and comfortable. Helmut Streitz, Larry Thompson and I seemed caught in three different, but equally uncomfortable, positions which would surely interfere with a normal digestion. Our Japanese and Indian colleagues seemed to do better than we. They must have practiced Yoga before coming to the meeting. Come to think of it, the Lotus position is particularly suitable for a Moroccan banquet.

The first dish was of Tunisian origin : ‘Brik à l’Oeuf’. Meat, onion and egg wrapped up in a thin sheet of dough and deep fried. It is delicious but it is imperative to bite the ‘Brik’ at one end, keep it tilted so that the egg will not escape, and gently bend it as you eat it. A delicate technique that develops with practice and experience. For Helmut and Larry, their first ‘brick’ was a disaster. Fortunately for Makoto Takahashi, he was too polite to quickly bite on the ‘Brik’. He observed how the Moroccans ate it and watched what went wrong on the other side of the table and managed quite well. He even seemed to have introduced some improvements of his own in handling the it. That is Japan for you !

Then we were served various tagines; A ‘Lamb, prune and honey Tagine’, which our host explained was a specialty of Fez. The sweetness of the honey was gently counterbalanced by the ginger, pepper and saffron. An amazing combination. The ‘T’faia Tagine’ which followed was a dish brought back by the Moriscos, five hundred years ago, when they had to leave Spain after the Reconquista. At that point I could only think of my stiff legs which I had decided to stretch under the low table. For some reason I could no longer move them back.

When the ‘Couscous Royal’ was served I could tell that Larry Thompson was in great pain. His husky body was ill adapted to Moroccan comfort. In answer to a question, Mohammed Fassi-Bekkari explained that this national dish of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia was made of fine ground wheat grain steamed over a stew,

with lamb or chicken, a variety of vegetables, chick peas and raisins.

"Until recently", he added "every family would send its wheat to the local mill to be ground to the degree of finesse they preferred. Then the grain was submitted to a delicate and time-consuming treatment with flour, to keep each grain separate when steamed. Nowadays it is, unfortunately, bought ready-made for the sake of expediency."

Who would guess that industrial food processing was altering the tradition even in this part of the world. If industrialization could have only raised the level of the tables by a few inches!

At that point, I had pins and needles all over my body. When I was presented with 'Moroccan brochettes,' 'Kofta and eggs', and 'Stuffed vegetables' I began to panic. Some of the Moroccan guests around the table ate in the traditional fashion with their fingers, showing a dexterity which is impossible to imitate. They would hand to us between three fingers a piece of 'mechwi' dripping with grease. We were told that it was extremely rude to refuse.

I could no longer feel my legs. They were simply dead. Finally a Moroccan belch of satisfaction announced that we were approaching the end of the ordeal. After the sweets, the dates, the dried almonds and nuts, the mint tea ceremony, the hand-washing ritual, and a few speeches, blessings and invocations, the lavish reception came to an end.

I tried to stand up. It must have been obvious to the smart and strong servants that some of us had a serious problem. They helped everyone and, in my case, literally rescued me, as from under an avalanche. In the process, my pants split open.

Instinctively I put my hands on my buttocks to assess the damage. It was not a small crack. More like a crater. By holding my hands in that position I began to draw attention to myself. I then tried a nonchalant composure, debonairly walking out, but carefully avoiding to have anyone behind me. Impossible. Our Moroccan hosts insisted to let me go first, gently bending and gracefully calling for heavenly protection. I bent back, thanking them. The crack seemed to widen, with every salutation.

Lying in bed, that night, I thought about those two past days and recapitulated their events. We had worked hard, achieved our main objectives and had a good time. I was satisfied to realize that in the 12 or 13 years I had been with the Organization I had made headway and gained ground. I was then forty-three or forty-four years old and felt more confident and poised. I had gained enough experience to feel self-assured and relaxed. I enjoyed the international dimension of my work, disencumbered of the apprehensions of my earlier years. I relished those positive thoughts and felt happy and serene.

I wished I could share a mission with my wife and daughter. Difficult as it may be, I wanted to find some future occasion to do so. We were in the habit of taking yearly vacations with Brigitte and Françoise in France and abroad, but that was different. I wanted them to feel and share an official mission with me.

It was getting late and all that thinking on top of the ‘Couscous Royal’ was preventing me from sleeping. I suddenly remembered that outspoken lady on the plane to Senegal who had said to me, “You International Civil Servants attend too many banquets to discuss the causes of starvation in the Third World !”

Smiling, I whispered to myself, ‘Hamdullelah’ and gently drifted down the tides of sleep.

The Borobudur File

I distinctly remember it was June 1980. I had just turned forty-five and had been promoted Director of a large division. That Monday morning I was peacefully planning my week at my desk, hoping to catch up with the backlog, when my Secretary came into the office, white as a sheet, to tell me that the Assistant Director General wanted to see me immediately about an urgent problem. Five minutes later he told me that I was to leave on a mission to Djakarta that very evening to represent Unesco at the Borobudur Festival.

What Borobudur Festival ? Why me ? I knew practically nothing about the subject. I vaguely remembered that Unesco had launched an international campaign and had collaborated with the Indonesian Authorities for several years in restoring and rescuing the Borobudur Temple. What was the Festival about? I knew that the project was looked after by another division and handled by a project officer by the name of Massaringhe - a notoriously difficult, recalcitrant and confrontational man who could not stand me.

Massaringhe disliked France and the French. He considered the French snobbish, cynical, elitist and arrogant. He often said that they have a natural inclination to show off and that they see themselves as the only civilized people on earth, believe that there is honor in seduction and world supremacy in a bottle of Grand Cru. Even though these characteristics were not necessarily mine, he had included me in his negative vision of the French. After my recent appointment to the Director post - for which he had also applied - his resentment had intensified.

The Assistant Director General told me that the decision had come from the very top and was not to be discussed. It was no use wasting time in trying to argue. A complete file had been prepared by the division in charge, with a concise description of the project, the agenda of the Festival, the speech to be delivered, and proposals in the draft ‘Program and Budget’ for continued collaboration with the Indonesians. Mr. Massaringhe had been asked to brief me and I had plenty of time to study the Borobudur file on the plane since I would arrive in Djakarta twenty-one hours after leaving Paris. I was already feeling tired, suffering from an anticipated jet-lag. I was then informed that the Unesco Protocol Division would be in touch with the Indonesian Embassy in order to facilitate the delivery of an entry visa upon my arrival at the Djakarta Airport. I was going to be met at the airport and all arrangements would be made in time by the Unesco Djakarta Office. I did not have to worry.

When the Assistant Director-General saw me aghast and totally collapsed in my chair he said, “Come on, Jacques, consider yourself lucky. You are going to see

the vastest, the oldest and the most beautiful monument in the southern hemisphere."

He waxed lyrical in its description. With its stone terraces rising skywards, stratum upon stratum and the profusion of unique stone reliefs and statues of the Buddha, this magnificent Buddhist sanctuary had been built over a thousand years ago and abandoned when people were converted to Islam. When it was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, it was rotting in ruins and seemed doomed to collapse. Thanks to Unesco and to international cooperation this great work of human genius has been saved for posterity. I was told that I was lucky to see it on this occasion and that I should be happy and act accordingly.

In spite of the energetic 'pep-talk' I did not feel happy. I did not know then that this would turn to be an unforgettable mission. I left his office without saying a word.

I spent the rest of the day running around frantically, overwhelming my secretary with an avalanche of orders. I canceled appointments, I delegated authority, I distributed assignments and secured my Travel Order, my tickets and my travelers' checks.

I called Brigitte and asked her to cancel the dinner party and pack my suitcase instead. At first she said that she did not know that she had married a Paratrooper or Fireman and then wanted to know what was all the excitement about and what was Borobudur, anyway. When I answered that I did not know, she thought I was being nasty and was most upset.

Then my daughter called, crying on the phone, because I had promised to attend the school play on Friday where she was to come down from the ceiling as an angel, suspended by a rope. I had promised to attend the play in order to applaud her and, at the same time, hold my wife's hand who was scared stiff at the thought that the rope might break. In fact, we all thought Françoise, who was nine at the time, was too big to play angels.

Among other things my daughter was upset because she had studied volcanoes in school and knew that Indonesia was in a geologically active area of the Pacific known as 'the Ring of Fire'. She informed me between two sobs that the Indonesian chain was home to some 130 active volcanoes. Why did I have to go to such places ! I was impressed by the knowledge of my nine year old angel.

In the meantime, Mr. Massaringhe never showed up. A few minutes before I frantically left my office, his Secretary came in and handed me the Borobudur file with an icy look, saying, "This is the file that was prepared for Mr. Massaringhe's mission,"

I do not know how on earth I managed to be on that Air France flight to Bangkok, that Monday evening. I was scheduled to arrive in Bangkok at around

noon on Tuesday; leave Bangkok that same evening to arrive in Djakarta before midnight. Mr. Mangala, Director of the Unesco Office in Djakarta, would have made all the arrangements for transportation to Borobudur on Wednesday, where the Festival would start on Thursday. Mr. Mangala certainly knew a lot about the project and could very well have represented Unesco all by himself.

We were now above the clouds and I could not get my mind off Mr. Massaringhe. What had happened? Why not him ? Why not Mangala ? Why me? Would I ever find out? After a while I dozed off.

I woke up just in time for cocktails. The lady next to me was very attractive and elegantly dressed. Dinner was delicious. A little champagne, a little Bordeaux, and Borobudur did not look so bad after all. I loved to travel by Air France; for one thing meals were generally first-rate and champagne was served generously.

After coffee I pulled the famous file from my briefcase and opened it for the first time, with great expectations. I was suddenly horrified and terror-stricken. I turned page after page, totally appalled. The file was about the restoration of the colonial center of Quito, Ecuador ! I was petrified.

I must have been as pale as death because the lady to my right asked me if I was feeling well. My blood was running cold. How could such an incredibly stupid thing have happened ? The lady handed me a glass of champagne. I asked for the bottle.

I had to talk to someone. I told her the whole story, over and over again, in total disarray. She listened with interest but I could detect in her mocking eyes a shadow of amusement. I must have been very excited, gesticulating abundantly. Her elegant composure and crystalline voice eventually pacified me a little.

She was a very graceful Eurasian lady, could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty-five; she had lived in Indonesia for many years. Was probably born there. She had visited Borobudur and knew the country inside out. She taught Asian History at the State University of Utrecht, Holland, and went back to Indonesia every year for the summer holidays. “You know,” she said sipping her champagne, “You did not get the wrong file by mistake. Your colleague who was supposed to undertake this mission gave you the wrong file on purpose. It is his revenge. Believe me, I know a lot about such underhanded maneuvers. Feminine intuition is a powerful tool.”

I did not answer. My Eurasian neighbor, who seemed to know a lot about intrigues, suddenly appeared to me as a sort of modern Mata-Hari. She continued to talk while I was searching in my memory for the ‘Mata-Hari file’. I had read her biography by Alain Decaux, in Les dossiers secrets de l’histoire (The secret files of History). Mata-Hari, famous oriental dancer and spy, was in fact Dutch, just like my neighbor. Mata-Hari was not born in Java as she pretended, but in plain

Leewareden, Holland. Her real name was Margaretha-Geertruida Zelle - or Grietje for close friends. She had spent a few years in Indonesia with her husband. In Java, she had become totally bewitched by the sacred dances, the religious rites and ancestral mysteries of the local culture. Later on, Grietje from Leewareden became, for the world at large, Mata-Hari from Java.

When I heard the word ‘Borobudur’, I suddenly realized that my neighbor had been talking to me for sometime, while my mind had again wandered. “How interesting!” I said “This is my first visit, please tell me about Indonesia.”

“I just did!” she answered.

“I want more. I want more. You are my Borobudur file !”

She giggled with satisfaction and, as an experienced lecturer from Utrecht she described Indonesia ad nauseam. I learned that Indonesia is made up of over 10,000 islands. It is the fourth most populated country in the world. From West to East, Indonesia is 1000 kilometers longer than the USA. It has 600 varieties of orchids and possesses the largest flower on earth, the ‘Raflesia’ which is over a yard in diameter. I wondered how a young bride would look with a dozen raflesias in her arms and chuckled at the thought.

I also learned that there are seventeen language groups but the national language is Bahasa Indonesia. It is basically Malay, enriched by Dutch, Indian, Arabic and English words. She said that it was a very simple language to learn. All the champagne I had drunk had put me in an exhilarating mood and a number of silly thoughts came through my mind. I thought that since I did not have the Borobudur file to read on the flight, I could perhaps learn Bahasa Indonesia, instead.

Unperturbed by my smiles and chuckles Mata-Hari continued her lecture. Until 1949 Indonesia had been a Dutch colony under the name of ‘Netherlands East Indies’. The mass expulsion in 1957 virtually eliminated all the Dutch settlers from the country. In addition to the indigenous population, there were numerous Chinese and a few Eurasians, native-born residents of mixed parentage.

“Eurasians are beautiful”, I said. She smiled.

She went on to explain that in an integrated effort of its diverse populations, the Republic of Indonesia had retained as a national slogan ‘Bhinneka tuggal Ika’, which means ‘Diverse and one, at the same time’. I repeated the motto and had my pronunciation corrected several times until I could say it well.

“Almost like a native,” she said.

“But how is Borobudur ?” I asked.

She informed me that the great Buddhist Temple in Java, 8th century A.D., consisted of a series of terraces around a hill 150 feet high, at the top of which is a large Stupa, surrounded by several smaller ones. The stone lining of the terrace walls is completely covered with exquisite relief sculptures illustrating the life of Buddha.

My lecturer went on to explain - while her only student began to feel sleepy - that the average yearly income in Indonesia was about $600. Most Indonesians had to have three or four jobs in order to survive.

“You know, the population grows by over 2 million people each year,” she said with a strange expression on her face, as though I had something to do with it.

I figured that perhaps, deep inside, she felt that the Borobudur Festival - which she probably imagined as a sort of mundane supercocktail - was not what the country needed most to cope with its economic problems.

“But cultural heritage, history and national patrimony are certainly important aspects of a nation’s life, don’t you think ?” And before she could answer I added, “If the national slogan is ‘Diverse but one’ (Bhinneka Tuggal Ika), Borobudur certainly contributes in making the ‘diverse’ feel like ‘one’.” She nodded and said that it sounded good enough for a Unesco speech.

With the ironic thought that, after several hours, I had found one good sentence for my speech, I smiled and closed my eyes to rest. I felt strange. Why was I in such good mood ? After all, the situation I was in could turn out to be very embarrassing. Back in the Office when anything crossed me ever so little I lost heart and temper. Whereas here everything was amusing. Strange. After breakfast - or was it lunch? - we arrived in Bangkok.

At the VIP lounge I called Paris. It was one o’clock in the afternoon in Bangkok and seven in the morning in Paris. The Assistant Director General was under the shower. In very few words I told him that I had been given a file about Quito, Ecuador and that I expected to receive by cable (The fax was not yet in use then) the full text of the speech and whatever information would not be available at the Djakarta office.

“If I do not receive such cable in time, ” I added you will understand that I shall not be in a position to attend the event. In that case, perhaps Mr. Mangala could take the floor for Unesco.”

The answer was “ Mr. Mangala is in New Delhi and shall not be back in time”.

After a long silence I said emphatically “Then, please keep an eye on Mr. Massaringhe, on what he will send and on when he will send it”.

I had never talked to the Assistant Director General in that tone, but I was certain that I had managed to put a quick end to a leisurely shower !

I then looked for Mata-Hari who had promised to tell me more about Indonesia, until the departure of the Thai flight, and probably beyond. I was being followed all the time by a skinny Thai who offered to take me downtown to a good massage parlor. I was unable to discourage him with any of the arguments I could think of. He followed me all over the airport, until I found Mata-Hari. He then left with a big smile saying, “I now understand.”

We sat for coffee. I asked her “How does one behave in Indonesia? Tell me about good manners, etiquette and local aspects of courtesy.”

She obviously liked the question. She put on her special Utrecht professor look and advised me that I should never touch the head, hair, hat, or turban of an Indonesian man or woman, for the head is the sacred part of the human body; it is the seat of strength and power. Touching someone’s head is considered an insult. I assured her that it was not at all my intention.

She smiled and explained that it is not necessary to take off your hat in front of a lady. Indonesia is a Muslim country, men keep their little hats on. “Like in the old Hollywood movies ” she added “ where men are indoors, without jackets, sometimes without ties, but always with their hats on.”

Then she went on giving some hints regarding table manners. “As a guest you have to eat faster than your host who is not allowed to finish his dish before you. In the country if you eat with your fingers, be sure that your host dips his fingers in the water bowl before you do. Never hand over something with your left hand. It is insulting.”

She continued to explain table etiquette in great details, until I decided that it would be much too complicated to eat in Indonesia. So I gradually stopped concentrating, as the jet lag was beginning to show its effects on me. Obviously the Mata-Haris of the world suffer no jet lag.

“If you go to Bali, it is another story”, she said “Bali is a Hindu society. Civilities are subtle and complicated. For example, the higher the rank the higher the chair you sit in. As a Unesco Director you will probably be given a very tall bar stool.”

“Since I am afraid of heights, I should avoid Bali!”

Another strange thing I learned was that, in Bali, when you give a present you should leave the price tag on so that the person who receives the gift will be able to reciprocate with a more expensive one. If you hide the price, you create confusion.

Then she went on saying that funerals are a joyous ceremony in Bali and one

is not expected to look sad. She ended the Bali chapter on funerals by informing me that in a mountain district called Tenagan, water is sprayed on the corpse, collected under the coffin and offered around in small glasses. When you drink that water the virtues of the departed are infused into you. I bet that Mr. Massaringhe did not know that.

When the Thai flight to Djakarta was announced, we proceeded to the gate. Dinner was delicious. The Thai hostess as feminine and pleasant as can be. The flight smooth. The landing perfect.

At the airport's customs I expected endless problems. Instead, the entry visa was granted without difficulty. Smiles shined on all the faces. The luggage was there. Mr. Russell, the Acting Director of the Unesco Office, was also there to greet me. Mr. Russell was a tall and skinny man, wearing glasses, almost bald with a high-pitched raspy voice. He was shy, unsure of himself and knew the Unesco Rules and Regulations by heart. I was driven to a comfortable hotel. The night was reasonably calm.

On Wednesday morning after breakfast, Mr. Russell, fairly excited, appeared on the scene to announce that a few journalists had come to the hotel for a mini-press conference. " You must be joking ! Impossible !" I said and as I began to explain why such an encounter could not take place, the journalists were introduced to me one by one.

We bowed to each other and exchanged smiles and greetings. There was something so incredibly unreal about the situation that I had to laugh. This new development put me in an exceptionally cheerful mood. It was too much. I felt as if I was about to participate in an amusing game or competition. The whole event struck me as a sort of hallucination - or was it another of my dreams?

Dream or reality, there I was on a small platform, without notes, without files, without knowledge, surrounded by half a dozen short, tanned and smiling men, with sleek black hair and wide noses.

"Mr. Dupont," asked the first journalist "We are very happy to greet you in our country. Could you tell us why you are here?"

"Because the Assistant Director General of Unesco told me to be here," I said.

The journalists burst into laughter. Mr. Russell looked bewildered. The journalists told me later that they thought I had a good sense of humor, compared to the more conventional diplomats of the United Nations family. In fact, only humor could save the day for me.

I answered all questions with a cocktail combining my general knowledge of

Unesco's policy and programs, the briefings of Mata-Hari, a touch of good sense, a pinch of humor and a tiny sprinkle of diplomacy and praise. So, help me God.

“Why is Unesco represented at this Festival ?”

“Unesco, as a friendly organization which has cooperated with Indonesia for many years in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, tries to be present at every major event to bring its moral support.”

“Mr. Dupont do you think the Borobudur Festival is a major event ?”

“Well, yes. If it were not a major event, would you all be here this morning ?” They giggled.

“Mr. Dupont, we are sure the national authorities are thankful for the moral support, but don’t you think our people need more than moral support ?”

“Yes, indeed. This is why our collaboration in education, science, culture and communication involves concrete financial assistance in a multitude of projects in Indonesia. In addition to these financially-supported activities, we also encourage and give moral support to what we think are worthwhile national activities, such as this one.”

“Could you tell us, Mr. Dupont, what concrete financial support Unesco is bringing to Indonesia in general and to Borobudur in particular? “

“Well, well. What Unesco has done in the past for Indonesia and Borobudur is well known to you and has been widely covered by the local press over the years. What Unesco assistance and collaboration will include in the future will be discussed with the national authorities during my short stay in Indonesia. You will understand that it would be embarrassing if your ministers were to learn of these proposals through the press. I shall be glad to discuss this question with you at the end of my mission, should I have the pleasure of seeing you again.”

They again chuckled and smiled. When the questions moved from Borobudur to the problems of Indonesia in general, I drew abundantly from the Mata-Hari brief and cited without restrain an avalanche of figures and statistics the number of islands, the different types of orchids, the famous Raflesia flower, the yearly national income, table manners, peculiarities of Bali funerals and what have you. Mr. Russell had first turned purple and was now becoming white as a ghost. The journalists continued to smile. What is the real meaning of a smile in Asia, I’ll never know !

“Our country is democratic. Our University and high-school students are free to organize public demonstrations to protest against corruption and dilapidation of public funds. Their slogan is ‘Kami Ingin Tahu’, which means ‘we want to know.’ How does Unesco feel about that ?” asked a journalist.

“Unesco does not and cannot interfere in internal matters. But as you well know, Unesco is for a free press and the freedom of expression. ‘We want to know’ is a good motto. We all need to know. Knowledge is basic to education, to research, to advancement of science, to progress and democracy. Unesco's own slogan could very well be “ Kami Ingin Tahu.”

“Mr. Dupont what is really Borobudur for Unesco ?”

“It is a beautiful Buddhist Temple which deserves to be saved for future generations - from an aesthetic, architectural, historical and religious point of view. But more than that, it is a symbol of Indonesian diversity and unity. The beauty of that temple proclaims for everyone to hear ‘we are diverse, but one at the same time’... ‘Bhinneka Tuggal Ika.”

At that point the journalists stood up and applauded. I came down towards them, shaking hands - but not touching their heads - and apologizing for my bad Indonesian accent. They said it was almost like a local accent from southern Sumatra. Where did I learn it? I told them I had had a good teacher by the name of Mata-Hari. Again they laughed. Mr. Russell looked thunderstruck. He did not know how to take all that “Blah-blah-blah”. Neither did I. I never imagined for a moment that Mr. Massaringhe’s file would turn out to be so useless !

The next day, to Mr. Russell’s astonishment, the local papers had nothing but praise for Unesco and its representative from Paris. Deep inside I was thankful to the French Education system at large and, in particular, to the Political Sciences Faculty who had taught me how to enlarge on a subject I ignored, with zest, animation and a certain logic.

That mini-press conference gave me great confidence. I felt jubilant and in good spirits. With Mr. Russell’s agreement, I convened a meeting at the Unesco Djakarta Office, I asked a thousand questions on the Festival, took notes, invited opinions and advice and discussed everything. Then a cable arrived from Paris. It contained the speech, essential briefing elements and many apologies. We left for Borobudur.

Borobudur was just like Mata-Hari had described it. Situated on a hill commanding an extensive view of rice fields and more distant towering volcanoes, the Temple looked like a low pyramid composed of successively receding platforms. Impressively majestic and beautiful. The Assistant Director General was right. I was lucky to be here.

The place was crowded. The Festival was attended by many foreign dignitaries, Ambassadors from Djakarta, members of the government and the army as well as politicians, and to quote Shakespeare “the choice and master spirits of the age.” Beyond the fenced Festival area, a huge colorful crowd added a further

dimension to the event.

There were puppet shows, dances and songs. When the crowd recognized an important public figure they would shout something which sounded very rude to my French ears. I asked Mr. Russell in disbelief, “Are they really shouting ‘Merde’ or am I not hearing well ?”

Mr. Russell smiled and explained, “Since the Liberation from Dutch colonialism, the patriotic greeting is ‘Merdeka’, which the crowd scans as ‘Merde- Merde- Merdeka’”.

“Oh, well,” I said, “Before he comes on an official visit, the President of the French Republic should be thoroughly briefed! “

The event lasted a long time. The sun was scorching. I wondered how the Borobudur Temple had not melted after all these centuries. Speech after speech, everything that could possibly be said on Borobudur was said. Speakers before me uttered the very thoughts and phrases which Mr. Massaringhe had put in the Unesco communication. I did not think I had the time or wit to come up with anything original. Then, the Master of Ceremony warned me that it would soon be my turn, and politely asked if it would at all be possible to make a short speech. “Oh, yes!” I said relieved.

I glanced at the twelve-page draft, which I had carefully edited, page after page, with Mr. Russell and practically memorized overnight, and in no time I reduced it to three paragraphs : a) the greeting, b) a concise recollection of Unesco's past involvement and c) what we will try to do in the future. It was the shortest and, for that reason, one of the most applauded talks of the day.

As I was stepping down from the podium, someone in the crowd fainted - probably due to a sunstroke. I later learned that it was Mr. Russell who, at the end of my brief, unconventional speech, had blacked out. We never discussed the reasons for his malaise.

The meeting with the national authorities concerning future cooperation between Indonesia and Unesco went very well. We spoke of the Consultative Committee on the International Campaign to Safeguard Borobudur and other related matters. I took ample notes and structured my mission report before leaving the country, fearing that if I did not do it right away I would forget important points. I could have entitled my mission report “Much Ado About Nothing,” but I did not want to cause any further fainting.

It was now Friday or Saturday - I wasn’t sure. Mr. Russell was bidding me goodbye at the airport. He looked very happy to see me go. I could not remember when I had last slept and felt completely washed out. The plane had not yet taken off that I was asleep, with seat belt on. I do not know how many intermediate landings we made, how many meals were served, or how many movies were shown. The real

and the unreal intermingled in a sort of hypnotic somnolence. Once in a while, an announcement would pull me out of my lethargy for a few seconds and then I would quickly sink into unconsciousness.

It must have been the funeral of some notorious man. Borobudur was crowded. Dignitaries were invited to speak one after another. Water had been poured over the corpse and each speaker was given a glass of that water to drink. I did not want any, since I had been told that Mangala was dying from it in a New Delhi hospital. Russell and Massaringhe were performing a Bali dance, 'the fight of good against evil.' When the journalists recognized me they joyfully cheered and had me sit on a very high stool from where I could dominate the scene. Far away to my right I could see Mata-Hari selling Batik textiles. To my left the Assistant Director General was taking a shower by the fountain. Way out in front, my daughter, dressed as an angel, was swinging at the end of a rope. Then a tempestuous wind hit the podium and a thousand sheets of paper flew over the crowd. "Not to worry," said the Master of Ceremony, "it is only the Borobudur file !"

Spiders, Véronique and other nuisance

I opened my eyes. The room was dark. It was not my room. The street lights projected a ghostly silhouette onto the window. As I moved in my bed, the silhouette turned and spoke. I recognized Brigitte's voice: "Are you alright, Jacques?"

"Is that you, Brigitte ? Where are we ? What time is it?"

" We are in Nairobi, darling ! It's three o'clock in the morning."

" In Nairobi ? " I asked, wondering for a moment if I was in the middle of a dream.

Brigitte sat on the edge of the bed and reminded me that we had just flown in from Paris the previous evening. We were in the New Stanley Hotel in downtown Nairobi.

"We are in Africa, Jacques. In the cradle of Humanity !"

It all came back to me: it was our twentieth wedding anniversary. I had asked Brigitte to accompany me for my three-day mission in Nairobi to be followed by a week's vacation, including a safari to Lake Nakuru, Masai Mara and Amboseli.

I remember, we were in 1983; Brigitte was 43 and I was 48. It was the first time she had accompanied me on a mission since I had joined Unesco and I had promised myself to give her a memorable vacation. In many ways it did turn out to be memorable...

"Why are you not sleeping, Brigitte ?" I asked.

"Because I am worried. Like a fool, I forgot all my medicine in Paris. What a stupid thing to do!"

Brigitte, like most French people, took lots of medicines. Her sister Liliane once said that both she and Brigitte had lost their pharmaceutical virginity very early in life. Brigitte had felt depressed lately and the doctor had given her an antidepressant of the pre-Prozac age. As a result, she had gained weight and her mouth was as dry as sand. But her mood had become brighter and her spiky temper had tapered off. Her doctor had strongly recommended not to stop taking that medicine abruptly lest she would endure serious side effects.

So our stay in Kenya started by taking a tour of the Nairobi pharmacies and seeing a doctor. The latter recommended a different medication, since he was not familiar with the particular French brand Brigitte was referring to. A different medication which, of course, Brigitte refused to take.

On the way back to the hotel we were caught in total traffic anarchy. Nothing moved. The taxi driver was in a talkative mood and gave us a lecture on Nairobi traffic problems. He said that since a shrewd Lebanese entrepreneur had imported those light scooters you could see everywhere, most Kenyans abandoned the bicycle for the scooter. Now, those noisy machines, which can be driven without any particular training, were thronging all over Nairobi

Brigitte and I looked around and watched all these scooters milling around. Whole families traveled on these scooters. Father, mother, two or three children, not to mention everything they could carry on their heads. You could also see some ladies in their colorful dresses, driving these scooters with an unequaled sense of balance, their dresses floating like sails on a boat. There were also large numbers of ostentatiously decorated cars that made the Detroit design of the fifties look like models of elegance and tasteful moderation.

At one point, we caught a scene that made us laugh heartedly. In front of us was a family on two scooters. On the first one, the father driving with a four or five year old son behind him, followed by the mother, on the second scooter, with a baby bundled on her back and, on the back seat, the eldest daughter with a basket of fruit on her head. When they decided to turn, the driver extended his right hand to signal a right turn. Automatically his son extended his hand, followed by the mother and the daughter. It seemed to us that even the baby on his mother’s back stretched his right hand. It was a wondrous sight.

Hearing us laugh, the driver told us that the previous week he had heard that a man on a scooter had been hit by a car when, without giving a signal, he decided to turn into the front yard of his house. When scolded by the police, the scooter driver was shocked and said, “Officer, this is my own house! Do I have to ask anyone’s permission to turn into my own front yard?”

We laughed but, looking at my watch, I was getting nervous. I asked the taxi driver if he could try a different way since It was terribly embarrassing to be late for the very first gathering organized for us. I should never have asked.

The taxi driver took an abrupt left turn and, hooting his horn, tried to break the sound barrier. It seemed to us that he was heading in the wrong direction. He said that he would circle the city and take us to the hotel from its other end. For some reason there was only one safety belt for the two backseats. Brigitte and I sat tightly next to each other with that one belt strapped over our bodies, joined like Siamese twins. I kept telling the driver that the appointment was not all that important. He would not listen.

We were in a car designed for war with a four-wheel drive and tremendous torque and booster-rocket horsepower. The sensation of personal supremacy was obviously intoxicating for the driver. Stop signs became suggestions rather than law.

Brigitte closed her eyes, prayed and thought of her precious tranquilizers that had been left behind in Paris.

Somehow, we reached the hotel in one piece and rushed into the meeting room. It was an informal gathering of all the Kenyans who had benefited from some form of Unesco support, such as fellowships, study grants, invitation to international congresses, the services of visiting consultants or experts. The gathering was meant as a tribute to Unesco.

They took turns to explain, with dignity and humility, what Unesco's support had meant to them and, in some cases, how it had changed their lives. They spoke in simple, succinct but very moving terms. I felt proud and particularly happy that my wife could listen to such accounts. After the meeting she told me that she understood more fully what Unesco was actually doing in the field and why I was so dedicated to its mission. I was suddenly invaded by a warm feeling of satisfaction.

Shortly thereafter, I left for my technical meetings and Brigitte joined a group for an afternoon visit of the Nairobi National Park. In this park, only a few kilometers from the city center, one can see specimens of virtually all of Kenya’s big game.

When we went to bed that night, Brigitte sounded exhilarated. She had seen and learned a lot of interesting things and wanted to talk about them. She spoke with great enthusiasm. Africans, she thought, were easy-going and friendly towards foreigners and very tolerant of any social errors they might make. With a few exceptions, however, such as public nudity, open display of anger, vocal criticism of their country and public demonstration of affection. Great emphasis is placed on pleasantries and hand-shakes. Apparently, Africans are proud and touchy. It is very important to preserve a person’s dignity. In no case should an African be blamed in front of others. It is very difficult for them to accept open criticism.

“Have you learned all of this at the Nairobi National Park ?” I asked in disbelief.

She giggled and said that she had learned those things from a charming

Italian who was on the tour.

“While chatting with your Italian, did you see any game ?” I asked

“Oh, yes plenty,” she replied “but speaking with ‘my’ Italian I mentioned that I had left my medicines in Paris and he suggested that I should go to a Healer instead. He knows of a good one in Nairobi with great supernatural powers who would make all my psychological distress and anxiety disappear. He said that he would do his best to ensure my well-being. He offered to take me to the Healer tomorrow and I have accepted.”

I do not know if Brigitte had intentionally meant to tickle my jealousy, but I was annoyed. For the next half hour I tried to change her mind. I marshaled all sorts of arguments, with no result. My attitude gradually changed from mild suspicion to utter jealousy. She wanted the Healer and, come hell or high water she was determined to go. In any case, she said that my fears were unfounded. I was much too conservative and obviously ignorant of the matter since I seemed to confuse healing with witchcraft. She was seeing a Healer not a Sorcerer! And she was not going to let the Healer bewitch her.

“What about your Marcello Mastroiani ?” I asked.

“Have no fear. He is no Mastroiani! Besides you should know that unaccompanied women in Africa face sexual harassment. I’ll be much safer this way.”

Unable to change her mind, I gave her a last reproachful look and turned off the light. I worried in silence for a long while. In the middle of the night, Brigitte screamed at the top of her voice. I jumped, but for a few seconds, again I did not know where I was, nor what was going on. When I managed to turn on the light, Brigitte was standing on the bed in hysterics, pale as a sheet.

“ There is a huge spider under the bed ! There is a huge spider !” she kept repeating.

“It must have been a nightmare, Brigitte.”

“No.No,” she kept insisting “It is a huge, black spider and it is under the bed.”

I went on my knees, with a slipper in my hand, on a spider-safari but could not see any. Then Brigitte thought that the spider was under the sheets. I had to undo the bed, while she was perched on top of the desk. I looked under every piece of furniture, in the bathroom, in the closets, under the rugs, everywhere. No spider.

Then Brigitte said that under no circumstances would she sleep in this room. She thought that the least I could do was ask for another one. It was two thirty in the

morning and I was not going to make a fool of myself. We argued some more. I finally said that in Nairobi there were no rooms guaranteed to be spiderless and that it was a real pity she had forgotten to bring her tranquilizers.

At that point she burst into tears and sobbed for a long while saying that I was callous and cruel and that this was no way to celebrate a wedding anniversary. I tried my best to calm her down. When we turned off the light it was almost four. My spider-hunting safari had exhausted me.

For many years, whenever we recalled this scene we burst out laughing. But that night there was no laughing matter. It was simply tragic.

I spent the next day working while Brigitte went to the Healer and visited the National Museum and the Snake Park. When we met at the hotel early in the evening she was still tense - not totally healed. I did not inquire about the Healer nor the Italian. She asked to be excused for the evening; she did not really care to come to the dinner party we had been invited to at the home of Dr. Mabungu, a University Professor. I did not insist since in Africa, wives are often invited but not always accompany their husbands to such small, unofficial dinner parties.

In effect, when I reached Dr. Mabungu's house I noticed there were six or seven gentlemen and one French lady by the name of Véronique, the wife of Dr. Maina. I had met Véronique on my previous visits to Kenya, for she seemed to attend every cocktail and dinner party in Nairobi. Her conversation was lively and her personality striking. She had lived in Kenya for the last fifteen years or so, but always gave the impression of not being adjusted to the African way of life. She was excessive. As I remember, she wanted to fly, she wanted to sing, to act, to travel, to hunt, to do nothing, to do everything. She struck me as a huge volcano of emotions, vulnerable and lacking focus. Yet everyone agreed that Véronique was smart and intriguingly charming.

At Véronique's invitation I sat next to her, but did not manage to strike a conversation with her for quite a while because the group was dominated by Mr. Wanga who demanded undivided attention.

Mr. Wanga was talking about the problems of Africa. He spoke calmly but looked angry. He said, "Burdened with climatic changes, deprivation and disease and, now, conflict, coups, genocides and corruption - the pernicious legacy of 400 years of foreign domination - Africa finds it difficult to emerge."

Véronique remarked that Europe could not continue to be blamed for every African problem after all these years. To which Mr. Wanga said, "Mrs Maina ! European slave traders shipped possibly as many as 13 million Africans into bondage overseas. Consider what effect just the six years of World War II had on the consciousness of the developed world and, then, imagine the effect that four centuries of slavery had on the entire social and cultural ethos of an undeveloped

continent."

After a brief silence, Véronique asked, "Does this explain and justify the corruption of many of our African leaders ?"

"The legacy of 400 years of slavery and exploitation does not justify, but certainly explains, the situation." replied Mr. Wanga. He went on to say that Western civilization had failed to provide mankind with a viable framework for social harmony and moral and spiritual fulfillment. Western civilization had created more problems of great complexity for Africa than those it had solved. "Westernization" he concluded "has damaged the local economic, social and political fabric of African society."

The servants brought some food and drinks and the conversation, fortunately, moved on to more neutral and safer ground. I thought to myself that it was a good thing that Brigitte had not come. Her views and that of Mr. Wanga differed widely and it would have been difficult to prevent some sparks.

At this point Véronique shifted to French, a language which was probably not shared by others, and whispered, "How long are you staying in Kenya ?"

I explained that at the end of my work in Nairobi I would undertake a safari with my wife. She became very interested and asked many questions concerning the safari, the itinerary, the departure dates, the cost and then added that she desperately needed to talk to me on a private matter of the utmost importance."

I was startled for I had only occasionally met Véronique at parties and did not feel we had reached the stage of confidential secret-sharing. She added, "I cannot discuss the matter here while my husband is observing me but will get in touch with you soon. Please do not mention this conversation to anyone. Not even to your wife. I count on you. I trust you."

She moved around to get some food and I remained on the sofa flabbergasted. Silence descended on the gathering as the food received due attention. Dr. Mabungu looked at me with surprise and asked, "Is everything alright, Mr. Dupont ?"

Was everything alright ? Obviously not. That night I could not fall asleep. It was almost three and I was still wondering in my bed what Véronique wanted. Many scenarios went through my mind, one more extravagant than the other. Later when I fell asleep one of these scenarios became a dream and I must have mumbled aloud in my sleep, for Brigitte woke me up asking, "Is everything alright, Jacques ?"

"Oh! Yes," I said "I was having a nightmare."

Brigitte wanted to know the subject of my dream. I first said I did not remember. As she insisted, I said I thought I struggled with a huge black spider. To

which she replied ironically, “Was the spider’s name Véronique ?”

From that point on I knew that my mission would be hell.

In the morning I showered and shaved. For one reason or another since I had arrived in Nairobi I had not had a single good night’s sleep and that showed on my face. My eyes were puffed, my skin gray and I felt tense. I kissed Brigitte goodbye and went down for breakfast.

I had not started my coffee when a lady came and sat at my table. Véronique !

“Listen to me, Jacques, you have to help me. I am desperate. I have to get out of this country. I must go back to France. My husband won’t let me. The French Embassy won’t help me. I have no one to turn to. You are my only hope. I am drifting away without anchor, at the mercy of winds and waves...”

She started crying. It seemed to me that the whole New Stanley Hotel was looking at us. I said, “Please Veronique, I beg you to control yourself.” And in order to shift the conversation into a different subject, I added, “Do you have children ?” She replied that she did not have any.

I asked her if she wanted coffee. She composed herself and continued, while everyone within listening range seemed attentive, “My husband is very nice but I cannot take this kind of life any longer. In Africa, loyalty to one’s family takes precedence over personal needs. In our house we have had, for the past fifteen years, visiting cousins, aunts and uncles staying with us. When one goes another arrives. It is like Grand Central Station in New York or la Gare St Lazare in Paris! Here, there is no concept of privacy. African friends are generous; they give you time and effort. But they expect you to give them your whole life in return. A couple has no private life. There is no personal life for the individual. I live for and owe everything to my extended family. I seem to be fog-bound and adrift. I have ceased to exist. I have lost all my inner resources”

“What do you mean by ‘extended’ family?” I asked.

She smiled for the first time and said, “That reminds me of a story. When we first came to live in Nairobi, after we were married in France, we hired a young man, named Micah, to help around the house. Micah was perfect but every two or three weeks he would request a day off because of the passing away of a grandmother, aunt, uncle or cousin. After a while I realized that he must have had at least six grandmothers, countless aunts and uncles and a whole tribe of cousins. When I accused him of taking days off under false pretenses, he explained that, in his society, any middle aged or elderly person was called by sheer respect grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle according to their age bracket. Younger ones were called brothers, sisters or cousins depending on the degree of friendship or

nearness of kinship. In Africa that constitutes the ‘extended family.’ Micah explained that they shared with members of the ‘extended family’ food, money, time, happiness and sorrow. The one who has more gives to whoever has less. At the time, I thought that such a bond of solidarity was wonderful. I envied Micah for belonging to such an altruistic society. Now, after fifteen years, I think it is a nightmare.”

I had listened with patience and finished my breakfast. I said, “ I am sorry, Véronique, but I have to go. What I do not fully grasp is why you waited fifteen years to realize that you cannot adjust to this kind of life ?”

She said, “I have asked my husband lately what we would do after retirement since we have not been able to save any money so far, with all the extended family on our shoulders. He said, not to worry, that someone will certainly look after us. I cannot stand the idea. I just cannot.”

“Véronique,” I said, standing up and slowly walking towards the hotel exit, “I sympathize, but what do you expect me to do ?”

“You can help me to get out of here. I’ll tell you how.” Having spoken these words, she walked out of the hotel. As I was following her through the revolving door I saw Brigitte at the reception counter staring in our direction. I was certain she had seen us. I rushed to the closing session of the meeting. My heart was pounding all the way.

That evening I found a note from Brigitte saying that she was visiting the Railway Museum, the Kenyatta Conference Center and shop for souvenirs at the City Market and the Maasai Market on Moi avenue. Not to worry if she was late in the evening since she was planning to have a drink at the Inter-Continental Hotel with her Italian friend. “In any case,” she concluded “I am sure you will not feel lonely, having many interesting things to do, yourself.”

It was obvious from the tone of the note that Brigitte had seen me going out of the hotel with Véronique and had imagined all sorts of things. It was also obvious that, deprived of antidepressants, she was not herself. I sat in the lobby, procrastinating and wondering what to do next. I read the note over and over again and decided that Brigitte was probably hoping to see me at the Inter-Continental Hotel, which was a few blocks away from our own on Uhuru Highway. So I decided to join her.

When I entered the Inter-Continental Hotel my heart was pounding again and my mouth was dry. I walked through a grand atrium with tropical plants and exotic flowers interspersed among the furniture. I walked, looking right and left. The place was full of businessmen who discussed, bargained, signed papers, or telephoned.

At the bar the light was so dim that I needed a flashlight to look for Brigitte.

The only person in evidence was the barman, a real artist in action, surrounded by a forest of colorful bottles. He had the cure for my dry mouth, but I did not yield to temptation and continued my search.

Everywhere you could see a diligent army of well-trained, smiling staff, moving around, serving, helping, and making customers feel comfortable.

The lounges were lush. As an international civil servant on a Unesco salary and per diem, I did not exactly have the profile of the successful and generously funded executive who filled the place. But no one seemed to notice my presence

All at a sudden I heard a beautiful baritone voice calling across the lounge loudly enough to wake the dead, “Signor Dupont. Signor Dupont.” I turned around and recognized the chubby silhouette of Dottore Giovanni Spaghettini.

We fell into each other’s arms and hugged like two old friends. We had not met since our London meeting, seven years earlier. Giovanni had not changed much, he had put on a couple of kilos around the waist. He was now more ‘canelloni’ than ‘spaghettini.’ He was as lively and enthusiastic as ever... Allegro, vivace, fortissimo ... con agitazione.

He said, “Come and have a drink with us. Let me first introduce you to a charming French lady.”

As I turned around, there was Brigitte, utterly surprised, with a crimson face and eyes wide open in total amazement. She could not believe that her Italian escort and I were friends.

“Bonjour !” I said to her joyfully, “I got your message and came to look for you.”

Now it was Giovanni’s turn to look bewildered. He asked, “Do you know each other ?”

“Well, slightly” I said “we have been married for twenty years !”

A few seconds later the three of us roared with laughter, Giovanni was shaking like a jelly, while Brigitte was going into fits. It was an incongruous situation.

It was strange that so far they had known each other only by first names. Brigitte looked surprised to discover that Giovanni’s last name was Spaghettini. Every subject became a source of laughter. When we talked about the Healer, the spider or Marcello Mastroiani, we chuckled and choked. The situation was ludicrous and put us in an exhilarating mood for hours. A serious argument not being possible during this mild euphoria, Brigitte and I gradually resumed a normal attitude towards each other.

We had several cocktails. Since drinking on an empty stomach does funny things to the brain, I took advantage of the prevailing sense of buoyancy and mentioned, en passant, having met during breakfast a French lady I knew from previous missions. Brigitte did not react and I felt relieved.

Giovanni insisted on inviting us to dinner so I waived the waiter to pay for the drinks. The bill was timidly slipped inside a leather folder. It was not meant for a modest budget and my credit card trembled with anxiety. Giovanni said, " Do not tip. I have already done so. Tipping in advance improves the level of service. With early and judicious tipping I always manage to be loved and remembered. Ha.Ha."

We moved to the dining room. Giovanni looked at the menu and beamed. From our table you could take a glance at the kitchen through the swinging doors, every time a waiter came in or out. There was an agitated army of cooks, helpers and waiters and you could enjoy the sound of smashing dishes.

Brigitte and I made our choice from a selection of international dishes which looked safe, but studied the local specialties on the menu, out of shear academic interest. Giovanni ventured into deep Africa. The Sommelier steered us towards the precious jewels of the wine list.

When Giovanni asked the waiter what meat did they usually eat in Africa. He said, with a smile, "We kill and eat everything that moves." To which Giovanni replied, " Then I had better stand still !"

The food was very nicely presented, but Brigitte and I did not find a hint of flavor in our unimaginative choices, whereas Giovanni seemed in ecstasy. The wine was exquisite, stories funny, observations meaningful, pauses relaxing, and the cognac smooth. Dinner stretched into two hours - a vacation from life's nonsense.

Before parting I suggested to Giovanni that he should join the safari. He liked the idea, but had to stay in Nairobi another full day to finish his work at UNEP - the United Nations Environmental Program. He promised to call Rome to see if he could extend his stay and perhaps join us later for part of the visits, perhaps Maasai Mara and Amboseli. He would thus miss only the first stop at Lake Nakuru.

At the hotel we packed since we were scheduled to leave early next morning. We slept through a rather short night and the following morning we took the Tour minibus in front of the hotel. The guide said that we would make several stops at the main hotels in Nairobi to pick up other passengers.

It was good to feel that for the next few days there were to be no meetings, no serious discussions, no appointments, no report writing, no telephone messages, no television, no news. It was just enjoyable to be alive and discover the animal kingdom. Nothing else mattered. I thought Brigitte was again herself and I felt happy.

At each Nairobi main hotel one or two tourists boarded the minibus. Brigitte and I carefully observed each one. We were curious to see with whom we would share the following exciting days. Most of them looked plentifully provided for, if one could judge from their outfits. We had not bought any particular clothes designed to make us look like African hunters and, unsure of ourselves, we wondered if we were properly dressed for the occasion. The lady from the Meridien Court Hotel took one good look at us and shattered our self-confidence in no time.

At the Hilton, a business man and his wife, with hand-stitched crocodile luggage, came on the bus. They had made an obvious effort to outsmart everyone else. The opulent, middle aged matron from the Oriental Palace Hotel was, in our view, more appropriately dressed for Mardi-gras than for a safari. At the last stop in front of the Grand Regency Hotel a party of four came up, beaming with anticipation and bursts of laughter that were audible miles away, visibly pleased with the attention they were attracting. At their sight Brigitte and I talked about Mogambo, King Solomon's Mines and similar old movies. The bus had now left the city and was spreading towards Nakuru.

The road was bumpy and hard on one's back, but when we reached the lake and saw thousands of flamingos and an incredible variety of birds, we forgot the hardship of the trip. Like most of the other Rift Valley lakes, Lake Nakuru is a shallow soda lake. As the sun dipped and the shadows grew longer, the scenery became overpoweringly beautiful.

The bus stopped at a distance from the lake because of road conditions and, in order to enjoy a better view, we were invited to walk to the lake. The ground was muddy and the closer we approached the lake shore the muddier it got. The sophisticated ladies of the group sank in the mud up to their knees and their elegance gradually vanished. By the time they returned to the bus, the sophisticated ladies, suffering from several mosquito bites, had lost all trace of sophistication. They were scraping, scratching, itching, cursing. I looked at the lady from the Meridien Court Hotel and knew that she would go into hysterics at any moment.

We drove about a kilometer into the park and stopped at the Njoro Camp Site. It was a lovely grassy site under acacia trees, but the accommodation was far from matching that of the Hilton and the Meridien and, as a matter of fact, did not correspond to the description given by the Travel Agency in Nairobi. Our fellow tourists started a litany of complaints, grumblings and grievances. At the sight of the pit toilets, the lady from the Meridien Hotel almost fainted.

A sign warned us to beware of vervet monkeys and chimpanzees who come into the tents at night and steal everything. Seeing Brigitte's amazement at the monkeys' intelligence and skillfulness, the guide told us a funny story.

He said that a few years ago a lady had decided to leave the camp and take a

walk by herself into the park - which, by the way, is absolutely forbidden. She walked for a while and enjoyed nature when, all at a sudden, she saw a bunch of chimpanzees walking in line, one behind the other, coming in her direction. She got very scared, but decided to act unperturbed and continue her way, as if nothing had happened. As the platoon of chimpanzees was getting closer and closer, she felt more and more apprehensive, but continued to act naturally. When the chimpanzees arrived at her level, the first one - probably the chief - extended his right arm for a hand-shake. They shook hands and having done so continued on their respective ways. The lady rushed back to the lodge and passed out.

It struck us as being terribly funny and we giggled all through dinner and right up to sleeping time, while many of the other members of the party looked terribly disappointed and continued to complain.

The accommodation at the Masai Mara National Reserve was of a much better quality. The lodge we stayed in was comfortable and provided with all the basic facilities. The tentacles of civilization had reached Masai Mara where one could find, among other things, croissants, Coca-Cola, Air-conditioning, Gin and Tonic, effective plumbing and Perrier. We never heard a complaint. Besides, the sun is known to be a great tranquilizer and the day slowly passed in a haze of well-being. It was a perfect day for the pool, the hammock and a good book.

The following day we drove through the park which is the Kenyan section of the wild and beautiful Serenguety Plain. We saw and photographed an astonishing amount of wildlife. We drove for hours in the open rolling grassland dotted with flat-topped acacia trees. The scene was breathtaking. Our bourgeois passengers forgot about their exclusive safari-outfits and paid attention only to nature. It was an inspiring experience.

The early evening was spent in contemplation of an awe-inspiring sunset kindling the skies into a myriad of fiery colors. We drove back in silence. When we alighted from the car, we were moving slowly, somewhat subdued by a long, fulfilling ride under the scorching sun.

In the lodge we looked for Giovanni Spaghettini, but did not see any sign of him. I was told that there was no public transportation to the park and, therefore, we no longer expected to see him in Masai Mara.

The next day, we drove to the Amboseli National Park. On the way, the guide told us that in Amboseli we would see a lot of wildlife, huge herds of elephants and, with a little bit of luck, even a black rhino. From that park, looking south, one can admire the Mount Kilimanjaro - an experience which leaves a lasting impression. “This is Masai land,” he said “ arid, interspersed with swamps and springs and belts of acacia forest. You will love it.”

At the lodge we found, waiting for us, Giovanni and Véronique. I was thunder-

struck and speechless. At first Brigitte paid attention only to Giovanni , but later noticed my strange attitude and asked, “Have you lost your tongue ?”

At that point Giovanni said, “Let me introduce you to Mrs. Véronique Maina. We came separately by taxi from Nairobi and met here in the lounge and became acquainted”

After Brigitte said, with a trembling voice, that she remembered having already seen Véronique at the New Stanley Hotel, I could only acknowledge knowing her and indignantly asked her, “What are you doing here ?”

She replied, “I came to see you to settle some urgent matters.”

Brigitte flew into a rage and left. I ran after her into the room and tried to explain things. She was fuming and would not let me talk. She was in a great state of excitement and was looking for some object to throw at me. Fortunately, the rooms at the lodge were as bare as a monk’s cell, reduced to the essential chattels.

I screamed at the top of my voice, “Brigitte, for heaven’s sake shut up and listen to me.”

In twenty years of marriage we had never had such a scene and I had never screamed at her this way. I caught her by surprise; she stopped and listened. I told her why Véronique had come to the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi and why she was here.

With an infuriated look she asked, “How do you explain, Jacques, that the night before she came to see you at the hotel, you mentioned her name in your sleep? Remember ?”

“I had already seen her at Dr. Mabungu’s dinner” I replied, “but the best thing to do now - as a matter of fact, the only thing to do - is for you to go and talk to Véronique and find out for yourself what exactly she wants. Ask her anything you want and clarify things for you and for me. And come back only when you are totally satisfied, because I refuse to drag back to Paris this misunderstanding between us. And, in the meantime, please send Giovanni up with a bottle of whisky ”

Giovanni and I drank Vat 69 and talked for hours. It was two in the morning and the lodge was dead quiet. I was worried. Then, Brigitte and Véronique appeared on the scene, holding hands like two old friends. Their eyes were red and puffed; they must have been crying profusely.

Véronique said, “I came to say goodbye. I’ll be going back to my family in Nairobi tomorrow with a group which is leaving early in the morning. I am sorry to have caused you so much trouble. I am glad to have met Brigitte. You are indeed lucky to have such an exceptional wife. Please, say hello to Paris for me.”

She turned around and left. Shortly thereafter Giovanni left. Brigitte then said with a smile, “ I apologize for having been mistrustful. It is all over now, Jacques. Don’t ask me how it happened. Don’t ask me what happened. Please, never ask me. It has been a memorable trip. Happy anniversary.”

In the morning I could not get out of bed. I figured that Giovanni had done all the talking and I had done all the drinking. The Vat 69 had solidified in my head into a block of steel and lead. Brigitte and Giovanni went to visit Amboseli with the group and Véronique went back to Nairobi. I stayed in bed wondering what Brigitte said to Véronique. I wondered but, to this day, I have never found out. I have never found out and have never seen the snows of Kilimanjaro.

Kabuki, Sumo and Sake

The twelve-hour flight had resulted in a first-rate jet lag. Unfortunately, Melatonine had not yet been marketed and I was desperately struggling to sleep in my tiny room at the Tokyo Hotel. One would assume that at fifty, after twenty years of extensive traveling, my body would have adjusted more easily to these time changes. But not at all! As a matter of fact, it was getting worse as the years went by.

I had read that the WHO, the World Health Organization, recommended that when you travel long distance you should set your watch according to the time of the country you are flying into. Research has shown that, in so doing, you helped your inner biological clock to get adjusted to the time difference. In leaving Paris I had set my watch forward by eight hours, but my inner biological watch, with a mind all of its own, refused to act according to the WHO findings.

I had come to Tokyo to discuss with the Japanese authorities all the details regarding a Regional Training Seminar for information specialists of the Asian and Oceanic region on the subject of resource sharing. The Seminar was to be held in Kobe early in 1986. I felt very comfortable with the subject since I had successfully organized many similar training programs in Africa and Latin America.

But since I could not sleep, all I could do was worry. Worry that this time negotiations may be complicated by the presence of Professor Earl Ray Clark. The Japanese had insisted that Unesco contract an internationally known consultant - a star. They had suggested famous Professor Earl Ray Clark, basing their recommendation on his research work and publications. I had never met him but through a short correspondence and few telephone calls I had found him jittery and not disposed to too much talk. He had accepted the modest financial remuneration offered by Unesco only because he was interested in the experience. He was coming to Tokyo but he had refused to fly through Paris for a briefing and, from what I could judge, he did not think briefing was important. The worst part was that he had accepted to be in Tokyo for only two nights since he had to fly to Hawaii on Wednesday evening. Stars are often freakish.

This was my first visit to Japan and I was not confident that we would be able to agree on all matters in such a short time. We had to decide on the seminar program, who was going to teach what, the time frame, the venue, the number of Japanese and regional students, the number of fellowships, the budget and a multitude of other details. The agreement was to be recorded in an aide-memoire

which I would sign before leaving Tokyo at the end of the week. On the basis of that aide-memoire, a contractual arrangement would later be concluded between Unesco and Japan.

As I went over all these considerations in my mind, it became clear that the best way out was to let Professor Earl Ray Clark first discuss the aspects he was mostly concerned with, that is the subject content of his lectures. I would deal with the other matters after his departure.

If I could leave on Friday I would be home for the weekend. That reminded me that my daughter, Françoise, who was then about fourteen, was worried that I was going to Japan because of the active volcanoes that smolder on the surface of the earth and violently erupt in that region. I had told her teasingly to lend me her class book so that I could better plan my missions in the future! I did not know then that the mini-earthquake I was going to witness was of a different kind.

Pondering over my mission I realized that there was an additional reason for my anxiety. I knew that it would be difficult to understand this country. I had gathered from those who had visited Japan, as well as from Japanese colleagues, such as Dr. Makato Takahashi, whom I had met in Morocco, that his was a different world. Everything was different. You could feel it. You could see it, hear it, and smell it from the moment you landed.

The previous evening, as the taxi drove from the airport to the hotel, I was struck by the size of things, the distances, the speed, the crowds. Automobile freeways connect the heart of the city with the suburbs and the airport. Some sections of the freeways are built two or three stories over dried canals. The spaces below the elevated highways are filled by stores and offices. Traditional buildings are mingled with modern ones. New and old are intermixed everywhere. The city is served by an efficient net of subways, buses, automobiles, and electric trains. Gone are the nostalgic days when transportation was done by colorful “jinrikishas” - the man-drawn carriages. The Japan I was looking at was different from the one I had seen in the Puccini Opera Madame Butterfly.

At the hotel I had been graciously greeted by several Japanese representatives of the Ministry of Education, the Tokyo University and the Kobe University. They had bowed profusely before handing their business cards, which in Japan are called ‘meishi’.’ I had bowed right and left in return, searching through my pockets for my ‘meishi.’

The Japanese cannot relate properly to someone before they know the exact rank of that person in his organization. Japanese protocol foresees different behaviors towards people according to their rank. This is why business cards are so important in Japan. As I was emptying my wallet, my hosts gently smiled saying that I did not have to bother since they knew who I was.

They had informed me that for the last evening of my visit I was to stay in a typical Japanese hotel in the outskirts of Tokyo, generally reserved for Japanese, in order for me to enjoy the experience. The present hotel we were in for the first few days was more conveniently located for the meeting. In the course of conversation I had also discovered, with great annoyance, that Professor Earl Ray Clark was already resting in his room and did not want to be disturbed.

I finally met him the next morning, just a few minutes before the car came to pick us up. He was tall and handsome, and impeccably dressed. He scrutinized the world around him with icy blue eyes and moved about the lobby, taking very little notice of my presence. He looked intractable, far from the stereotyped cliché of a smiling, easy-going and informal Californian.

In the car, I tried to discuss a few items but without much success. He knew who he was, what he wanted, what he could do and what he did not want to do. He spoke in a deep tone with the right amount of reassuring authority. It was obvious from the start that neither of us could reach the other. I probably did not know how and he did not care to.

I began to sweat. Gone was all the self-assurance I thought I had acquired over the years. Had I been able to say something, I would have explained that from an official viewpoint, I was the one who represented Unesco in the negotiations with the Japanese and that he - regardless of his fame, expertise and University rank - was accompanying me, in a consultant capacity . I was the one who would be expected to agree with the Japanese, sign an aide-memoire and later on conclude the contracts. His understanding of the situation was obviously different, if one could judge by his authoritative tone and grandiloquent language.

While I was striving in silent frustration to find a way to approach the subject without antagonizing him, he abruptly asked me, “Have you heard, Mr. Dupont, of Matthew Calbraith Perry ?”

I did not know whom he was referring to. Could that person be an American working at Unesco ? Or perhaps another international expert in education whom we could invite to the Seminar?

Before I could answer, he said, “Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry headed two naval expeditions to Japan in 1853 and 1854 to induce the Japanese government to establish diplomatic relations with the U.S. He knew that Japan’s traditional isolation policy could be changed only if superior naval forces were displayed and the Japanese approached with a ‘resolute attitude’. He managed to conclude the first treaty between the United States and Japan and thus opened up Japan for the West. Mr. Dupont, do remember that only a ‘resolute attitude’ could have made this possible!”

I felt baffled. The car arrived at the Ministry of Education where we were

greeted at the door and shown to the meeting room. We entered the room: Professor Earl Ray Clark, tall and proud, with a definitely ‘resolute attitude’ and I, shorter and hesitant, mopping my sweating brow.

I was asked to sit in the chair farthest from the door, which, in Japan, is considered the place of honor. After introductions had been made and business cards handed over, the Chairman, Dr. Mitsuo Harada, bowed and opened the meeting with a fairly long speech. Japanese bow at the beginning of each interaction and at the end. The higher the rank of the person addressed, the deeper the bow.

Dr. Mitsuo Harada’s speech covered a fairly wide ground. He spoke of Japan’s desire to cooperate with Unesco and to serve the region; the philosophy of Japanese actions based on Confucian ideals of serving society and showing respect for others. He explained a very important Japanese word, “Wa”, which means harmony. As I understood “Wa” refers to a certain positive quality of human relationship and involves cooperation, sharing, understanding and a warm and caring attitude toward others.

Dr. Harada then spoke of the Japanese students and the high level of Japanese education. He said “Our illiteracy rate is less than 1%; 99% of the students in Japan complete high-school; there are 240 days of school per year in Japan - probably the highest in the world; 75% of TV programs concern news, cultural events and education and only 25% are about entertainment. Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of unrest among the young and there is a noticeable decay in traditional values - a source of great concern for the older generation.”

He concluded by inviting us to lunch and dinner, outlined the social events that had been planned for us and insisted on the importance he placed on getting to know each other better.

During the speech, Professor Clark, who was sitting next to me, emitted several puffs; he was obviously nervous. All the placid references to the “Wa” had no effect on him. I stood up and thanked our host for his hospitality and for Japan’s invitation to organize the regional Seminar. I had intended to outline Unesco's program objectives in the area of Education in some detail but with every puff of my neighbor, my talk shrunk and the Unesco objectives got shorter and shorter. I quickly concluded by suggesting that, because Professor Clark had to leave the next day, we discuss first the course content. Amen.

Professor Clark, whose signs of impatience and irritation were by now obvious to everyone took the floor with a bull-in-the-china-shop attitude. He described himself as a ‘hard-hitter’ concerned with concrete results, adding that he had no time to beat about the bush. While some Japanese around the table were wondering what the reference to the ‘bush’ was about, Clark outlined an agenda with four items and bluntly asked five specific questions.

It was obvious that Professor Clark had been much too aggressive and I could feel that our Japanese hosts, in spite of their polite smiles, were finding him uncongenial. In reply, Dr. Harada repeated some of the generalities he had already exposed in his introductory remarks and invited the Japanese participants to speak. They did but mostly among themselves in Japanese. Seldom was the meeting addressed in English.

No one referred to Professor Clark's questions. That was too much for him! He was beginning to fume. I even expected smoke to come out of his ears any moment. I attempted to whisper some conciliatory words inviting him to be lenient. He answered that he had not traveled all these miles to beat about the bush all day and wanted to get down to business.

To everybody's surprise he took the floor and said, "I am sorry Mr. Chairman, but I don't seem to have made myself clear" and proceeded to repeat emphatically his proposed agenda and questions, forcefully articulating each word. My nervous stomach was torturing me. At that point I could have willingly strangled Professor Earl Ray Clark.

The Japanese are known not to show feelings. They try to hide them at all times, remaining tranquil and serene in all circumstances in order not to lose face. Losing one's temper is considered vulgar. Experience is needed in order to learn how to decipher subtle signs of reluctance or distress on their faces. I did not know how to read those signs at the time, but I could see that many of the Japanese gentlemen had acquired a more rigid posture, others were more contained and a few were tight-lipped. The smiles that still remained on a few faces were of a different kind. The Chairman spoke very softly and slowly about the importance of harmony and consensus. Any trace of 'Wa' was gone.

I was embarrassed and did not know how to save the day but I felt I had to intervene. With a lump in my throat and one in my chest I said, "We are witnessing different cultural patterns and different ways of conducting a meeting. I have been to many countries and yet I am not sure there is a universally accepted way of conducting business. We have to adjust and compromise. Different cultures have different perceptions of time, different ways of carrying a dialogue, different ways of negotiating, different ways of communicating. No doubt, any misunderstanding can be overcome and, with some patience and tolerance, we will successfully conclude our meeting to the satisfaction of everyone."

The Japanese spoke to each other in Japanese, while Professor Clark turned to me and in plain English said, "Bullshit !"

Tea was served. Professor Clark, who obviously was bullheaded and used to having things done only his way, left the room with a 'resolute attitude'. I never saw him again. Never.

During lunch I tried to explain that Professor Clark was a very busy person and was nervous because he had very little time at his disposal. In any case, he had been contracted by Unesco because the Japanese wanted him.

Mr. Harada smiled and said, “In Japan it is not important to establish who is to blame, when something goes wrong. What is wrong and needs to be corrected is the fact that someone is upset. We have to reestablish harmony.”

I thought that was a beautiful attitude compared to our Western confrontational and argumentative style.

Dr. Harada explained that he had to do a lot of consultation to establish consensus. I wondered on what, since to my knowledge we had not discussed anything so far. He inquired if I was willing to use the afternoon, and perhaps part of the next day, to visit Tokyo while he tried to establish consensus among his colleagues. He would contact me at the hotel in due time. Fortunately, Dr. Makato Takahashi was available to show me around.

In my long career as an international civil servant I had sailed many a time in the sea of inter-ethnic encounters and had always managed to avoid major storms. Never before had I had the feeling of being caught in such an imbroglio.

With Mr. Takahashi we walked and talked all afternoon on a variety of subjects. But I could not get my mind off the ‘Earl-Ray-Clark crisis’ on hand. No matter how one looked at it, I had failed to master the situation. I should have never accepted to attend the meeting without settling first a number of questions with him. I failed to play first fiddle and the resulting sour notes rang in my head.

Mr. Takahashi and I also referred to our recent meeting in Rabat and laughed about what had happened to my pants at the end of the Moroccan reception. I liked Mr. Takahashi. He radiated honesty, warmth and friendliness. In Japan, friendships tend to take a long time to solidify, but they may become deep, compared with other parts of the globe where personal relationships develop fast, but remain superficial. I knew that a certain degree of formality should always govern one’s relationship with Japanese friends, regardless of the degree of friendship. Informality is perceived as rudeness. No use of first names. No back-slapping. For a Frenchman of my generation that was not too difficult.

Mr. Takahashi showed much concern for what had happened during the embarrassing morning session. He was willing to discuss matters fairly openly with me. We talked for hours. I do not remember really seeing much of Tokyo, but I learned a great deal about Japan.

First of all, I realized that the major problem for the Japanese was not so much what Professor Clark said, but how he said it. They were upset because he looked upset and acted accordingly, thus harmony was shattered.

In addition, the Japanese have a problem with a rigid agenda. The purpose of a meeting is to let everyone concerned express his opinion and discuss alternative solutions to each problem presented so that consensus could eventually be reached. A fixed agenda may well be an encumbrance and prevent achieving consensus, since the Chairman usually tries to restrict discussion to items on the agenda.

When the Japanese deal with a foreigner, one of the most important goals of the meeting is to get to know him. That is why a first visit to Japan has to be relatively long. That is also why lunch, dinner and social events are crucial.

Mr. Takahashi also explained that respecting organizational hierarchy was essential in Japan. With reference to the morning meeting the fact that the Unesco consultant did not respect the head of the Unesco delegation alienated everyone. They had all seen that because in Japanese meetings, everyone is expected to read other people's thoughts and interpret unspoken signs, behaviors, attitudes and even silence itself.

An interesting point I retained from our talk is that Japanese society was organized according to an historical military doctrine, which explained their attachment to hierarchical structures, rank, the chain of command, team-work and to loyalty. This was true in industry and business where strong feelings of identity and loyalty to the parent company exist. He admitted though that many modern writers and the young generation promoted Western-type individualism.

"With such a military heritage, how do you explain the emphasis on consensus? " I asked.

He said that collective decision-making allowed everyone concerned to discuss, evaluate, and provide input to a proposal and fully identify himself with the final decision. It was a sine qua non condition for ensuring loyalty, team-work, feeling of identity, pride in the results and for keeping everyone informed.

As we finally reached the hotel I thanked my friend who had given me a crash course on many aspects of Japanese life.

At the hotel reception I found a message from Dr. Mitsuo Harada saying that the meeting would in principle resume on Thursday. That meant consensus had not yet been reached; we would never complete our business this week; and I had Wednesday off.

Mr. Takahashi saw the disappointment on my face and said, "Let us make the best use of the evening and of tomorrow."

For that evening, we were scheduled to go out for drinks, dinner and at the theater with Dr. Harada, and Mr. Takahashi. We would not talk business. I learnt that

Professor Clark had left the country, and that a Swedish visitor by the name of Ulf Nilsson would join us.

So we first went for a tour of three to four bars to warm up before dinner. In Tokyo there are thousands of bars. Most of them are very small and can accommodate ten to twelve persons at most. Strangely enough, many bars are scattered over several floors of buildings. They look like small apartments that had been converted into bars.

I was given to understand that most men usually go after work to one or more bars, while women go home to look after the children and prepare dinner. What happened to the Women Liberation Movement? The prices at the bars being so high, one wondered how they could afford so much drinking. When dinner time approached, men quietly zigzagged their way home.

The atmosphere in bars was, as a rule, festive and convivial. In one of them someone, having found out I was French, began to sing ‘La Marseillaise.’ I was astounded, as I was astounded to discover that Japanese whisky tasted so much like real Scotch. When we reached the third bar I had forgotten about the very existence of Professor Clark. By the fourth bar Ulf Nilsson began speaking Swedish to me. It was time to zigzag our way to the restaurant.

Dr. Harada ordered for us ‘Sachemi,’ ‘tempura’ and ‘sushi,’ well irrigated with ‘sake.’ The Japanese have developed a unique art of presenting food as an exquisite work of art. I found it really wonderful to look at.

Our host entertained us with a variety of subjects. At one point, noting that Ulf and I were looking at Japanese women with curiosity, he shifted the conversation to physical characteristics of the Japanese. He said that the male population had increased by an average of over four inches since the beginning of the century. The change was attributed to improved diet, exercise and decrease in the habit of sitting on the floor with the legs buckled under - a fact which impeded normal blood circulation. Mr. Takahashi looked at me and smiled; he was certainly thinking of our mission in Morocco.

We were finishing dinner when Dr. Harada announced that we were going for a short while at the theater to have an inkling of the popular Japanese drama, the ‘Kabuki.’ He said that it was a spectacle in which the arts of dance, music, mime, decor and costuming are elaborately blended in blazing and flamboyant style. He explained that ‘Ka’ means song, ‘Bu’ means dance and ‘Ki’ means skill. The other form of Japanese theater, the ‘Noh,’ was written in a variety of complex literary devices, too difficult for non-Japanese to appreciate.

So we went to the ‘Kabuki Za,’ a huge theater that seats 3000 persons. In the Kabuki art form, men also play the parts of women. A long passageway runs from the stage to the back of the theater through the audience and offers an extension of

the stage where a lot of action takes place. The style of dancing consists of restrained, flowing movements for the female roles and exaggerated postures for the men. For uninformed foreigners what goes on in Kabuki is an insoluble enigma sandwiched between two mysteries.

As I was asking myself ‘if the Kabuki theater is supposed to be accessible, what is the ‘Noh’ theatre like?’ I heard next to me a vibrating, discordant sound which did not blend with the music. It was Ulf snoring. Whisky and sake did not blend with Kabuki either!

On Wednesday, Mr. Takahashi took me to the University where we attended a lecture by Dr. June MacGregor, an American anthropologist and lecturer in intercultural communication who had published extensively on international relations and cultural differences. - a subject that Mr. Takahashi knew interested me.

Dr. June MacGregor’s lecture made an enduring impression on me. She opened up unsuspected horizons and threw light on a multitude of questions that had preoccupied me. She was a straight-forward and articulate good-looking woman in her fifties, with curly gray hair, regular features, a classic bone structure and a pair of penetrating brown eyes. Her mind was quick and incisive, her voice clear and relaxed.

She said she was a disciple of Edward T. Hall’s school of thought who had shown that one of the most basic of all cultural differences among people concerns the way we communicate. Hall had departed from the view that culture was a system of beliefs, customs, values and the like. Culture was communication and members of the same cultural group unconsciously share methods of coding and communicating that information, often by nonverbal messages, the unique meaning of which was naturally understood by members of the same culture. And often misunderstood by others.

Dr. June MacGregor illustrated her talk by showing differences between Americans and Japanese. For instance, Americans feel very strongly about the responsibilities of a neighbor. In the U.S. one is expected to keep his house up and the lawn cut for the sake of neighborhood, if nothing else. In Japan sharing adjacent houses does not entail any obligations to your neighbors. In Japan the street may be filthy and the house immaculate.

In the U.S., top executives have secluded offices, protected from the intrusion of others. Information is shared with a selected few. In Japan several top executives share an open-space to freely share information.

The Japanese can endure noisy and crowded conditions in public; they can travel literally like sardines in subways and trains, but in social situations they guard against any sign of space intimacy. Having sat shoulder to shoulder in the subway, they profusely apologize if they accidentally touch your elbow at a cocktail party. In

the U.S. it is rather the opposite.

She explained that a geographically large and relatively young country such as the U.S. - the melting pot of a variety of ethnic groups - is far from homogeneous. The difference in behavior between people could sometimes be great. Japan, on the other hand, which is geographically small, old, for a long time withdrawn into itself and is no melting pot, is much more homogeneous.

The lecturer went on to explain that her compatriots, because they were a prosperous nation, who had become increasingly affluent and had known many successes in scientific research, medicine, sport, and business, had come to believe that they had an answer to every problem. Mr. Takahashi looked at me with a smile; Professor Clark was on both our mind. She added, " As the world shrinks and more Americans are engaged in international situations, that will gradually change."

Before leaving, I went to thank and congratulate her and said, " Dr. MacGregor, I was told that Commodore Perry opened up Japan to the West. You have opened up both Japan and the U.S. to me !" She smiled.

I asked whether she would come to Unesco to give a talk. She agreed in principle. As I was going down the stairs she said, "Call me June". I first thought she wanted me to call her in June, but when I realized what she had actually said, I quickly replied, "Call me Jacques."

That evening was dedicated to wrestling. That is, to watching others wrestle. Mr. Takahashi and I first dined in a simple, popular restaurant. A sort of Cafeteria where plastic dummies of the dishes one could order were on display. A useful device since I could see what I ordered and in what quantity. Of course, what the food tasted like was a different matter.

The dish I chose looked attractive but did not taste like anything I knew. For a moment I thought I had been given the plastic dummy by mistake. I found it difficult to swallow what felt like an indefinable, repulsive, jelly like material. Was it reconstituted fish, meat or vegetable ? Could it be the cellophane film that covered the dish ?

While I was wresting with my food, Mr. Takahashi introduced me to another branch of athletics: Japanese wrestling. "The first match recorded in Japanese history took place in 23 B.C.," he said, explaining how wrestling gradually developed into two branches : 'Sumo' and 'Jujitsu'. The latter, from which Judo is derived, is a system of fighting without weapons.

He said, "The period from the 12th to the 17th century was an age of continuous warfare. The Samurai, whose sole purpose in life was to fight for his Lord, mastered many forms of fighting with sword, knife, spear and, when he had no weapons, with bare hands."

That night we went to a Sumo wrestling match. Takahashi had booked seats in the very first row. The fight took place right under our noses. The two wrestlers were naked but for a tiny loincloth. At the command of the referee, they crouched with their hands on the ground and watched for an opening. All I could see was the monumental buttocks of one of them.

On French television I had inattentively watched one or two such fights, but never had I realized what 300 pounds of naked flesh really looked like. I was watching a mammoth bulk moving about with a colossal mass. My stomach was already reluctant to cope with my 'plastic' dinner. It was getting more and more upset as the two dinosaurs - who seemed to be made of solidified molasses - wrestled on. As soon as one touched the ground with any part of his body, except his feet, the other wrestler was declared the winner. And two fresh dinosaurs came onto the ring for the next fight. It went on and on.

To this day I cannot talk or think of a Sumo fight without being nauseated. Was it the wrestlers ? Was it the food ?

The next day the meeting took place as scheduled. Dr. Mitsuo Harada apologized for the delay in resuming discussions. The participants seemed sympathetic to me. Now that I had become a mini-expert on Japanese matters, I looked for non-verbal messages or hidden signals. I could not detect any resentment. Harmony had descended upon the meeting. We had achieved "Wa". Wow !

Dr. Harada spoke of the broad consultation that had taken place. In fact, he spoke of many things. He said that the Regional Training Seminar would be organized early the following year, as originally planned. (I was relieved). He gave partial answers to the questions raised by Professor Clark. (I was surprised). He then hinted at some of the questions I intended to ask but never had time to. (I was amazed) He finally suggested three names of potential teachers for Unesco to choose from, in replacement of Professor Clark, and gave me the floor.

I stood up to speak and, without even thinking, I automatically bowed Japanese-style. Then, I said I had become a great believer in the Japanese decision-making process because I had witnessed the very efficient results. I apologized for the earlier problem due to a lack of good preparation on my part. I then outlined some of the pending questions that had to be decided upon before we could conclude the contract.

Some of these issues needed extensive consultation to reach consensus and the presence of 'the foreign instructor' to participate in the discussion. Dr. Harada said that I should come back for a short meeting as soon as a consultant was selected so that we could settle all pending questions and everyone could get acquainted with the consultant. The rest of the afternoon was spent drafting an aide-

memoire in very general terms. Once it was duly signed, Mr. Odashibuki and Mr. Katimimura from the Ministry of Education drove me to the new hotel.

It was relatively small, surrounded by a tiny garden with shrubs and trees, in a quiet residential area. They left me at the door, wishing enjoyment of the experience and reminded me that they would pick me up the next morning at 7 o'clock to drive me to the airport.

At the hotel no one spoke English. Communication was done with gestures and smiles. I was first asked to leave my shoes at the door and a young girl took me to my room.

My room looked almost empty: a table, a lamp and some flowers. As I understood from the girl's gesticulations, I undressed and handed her my clothes which she put in a cupboard. She handed me a cotton kimono which she called 'Yucata' and asked me to follow her to the 'Ofuro'.

In the 'Ofuro' I found a wooden-heated rectangular stone tub, full of water. It was very hot ! I soaked in it thinking of my Finish friends and their sauna. When the 'Ofuro' operation was over I was shown to my room where I changed my 'Yukata' for a black silk kimono. In my absence some cushions had been scattered in a corner and I was asked to rest on them.

Some ten to fifteen minutes later the girl directed me to the dining room. There I found three Japanese guests and, to my great surprise, good old Ulf Nilsson. Since men never dine alone in Japan, two Geishas were there to serve and entertain us. One played an instrument called 'samichen' while the other sang. We drank quite a bit of 'sake' and ate some exquisite 'suki-yaki'. I felt relaxed; the three Japanese guests looked demure and serene; Ulf was obviously thrilled.

Later we were asked to play a game before retiring to our respective rooms. One glass was passed around and each one of us poured some 'sake' in it. When the glass was pretty full, one of the guests would cause it to overflow. As a punishment he had to drink the whole glass. It so happened that Ulf spilled the glass several times, either intentionally or by accident. In any case he managed to have many glasses of 'sake.' and looked accordingly.

When the Geishas bowed and left, the young girls led us to our respective rooms. Ulf did not seem in full control of himself; he was again talking to me in Swedish, intermingled with a few Japanese words. He vanished down the corridor singing 'sayonara.'

The silk cushions had disappeared from my room which had been transformed into a bedroom. The young girl helped me get into bed and walked away with grace.

A few minutes later I heard a strident howl, followed by two long screams and a few Japanese yells. I thought I recognized Ulf's voice and that of his young girl, roaring with rage. By now a lot of people seemed to be in the corridor and the commotion was going crescendo.

Judging from the turbulence created, I suspected that Ulf had been misled by the going-to-bed ceremony and had misinterpreted the graceful gestures of the young girl. A simple error of interpretation of the unspoken signals. The same signals meant one thing in Sweden and another in Japan. The 'sake' no doubt had helped in blurring the meaning. The agitation was still going on when I cowardly pulled the sheet over my head and waited until the squawks and the squeaks subsided into the night.

At seven in the morning I was in an official car rushing to the airport with Mr. Odashibuki and Mr. Katimimura. I kept thinking about what had happened at the hotel the previous night. I guess I shall never know what really happened. I shall never know but I have not stopped guessing.

Suddenly, the traffic came to a halt. Two cars had collided and you could see the two drivers standing in the middle of the freeway, bowing at each other in an exquisitely polite manner. I expressed my admiration. "C'est magnifique !" Mr. Odashibuki explained that, no doubt, they were profusely apologizing and each one was blaming himself for the accident, as required by good breeding. "Which, by the way," he added, "has nothing to do with the written report they will each make to the police and insurance company, giving a quite different story." I thought it was not so magnifique after all !

While we waited for the normal circulation to resume, we spoke about the Japanese language. I inquired whether foreigners could learn it in a reasonable time. Mr. Katimimura said, with a giggle "If you decide to study Japanese be sure to take a male teacher."

I asked why and he explained that in the Japanese language articles, adjectives, verbs and substantives take the same sex as the person who speaks. He added that he had once met a husky, rugged old GI who had learned Japanese from a female teacher and now spoke like a young lady.

As the traffic started to move again I asked, "How do you say 'good morning' ?".

They said, "It depends - 'good morning' to whom ?"

"To anyone. Just a simple 'bonjour' !"

To my great surprise I learned that in Japanese you have a special 'good morning' for your parents, a different one for your children, yet another one for the

boss, one for a subordinate, and so forth. I gave up. I was not going to learn Japanese after all.

So, I finally boarded the plane after spending five days in Japan. I could not even say ‘Good morning!’

The Vikings and I

Brigitte had offered to drive me to the airport since she wanted to do some shopping with Françoise at the IKEA department store in Roissy, only a few minutes from the airport.

Françoise, who for a long time believed that my missions were, in effect, disguised vacations, was now almost fifteen and taking a more mature interest in what I was doing in those distant places. Being very studious, she recently related my missions to some class assignment and bombarded me with questions. I was all the more pleased that my friends and the rest of my family seldom took a real interest in my work. As they used to say, “It sounds terribly technical.” Meaning, terribly boring.

Having learned that I was going to Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, Françoise decided to write her monthly paper on the Nordic countries and wanted to know the difference between Nordic and Scandinavian countries, the outstanding feature of each, and the reasons why, once upon a time, the Vikings came to Normandy. Good questions! Such matters did not preoccupy my mind when I was her age.

With an eye on the traffic and between two driving tips to Brigitte, I briefly explained that Scandinavia was comprised of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. These countries claimed a historical link to the Vikings and originally shared a common language. “When we speak of the Nordic countries, on the other hand, we mean these four Scandinavian countries in addition to Finland, whose ancestors and language are altogether different.”

I added that I had just read in my briefing that the total population of these five Nordic countries does not exceed 25 million people. To which Françoise added, “ The whole population of the Nordic countries could, therefore, fit in Calcutta and Bombay.”

Françoise who suddenly seemed to suffer from an unquenchable thirst for information about Northern Europe wanted to know also why I was skipping Norway

and why such short missions. “Are you participating in a marathon race ?” she asked. In fact, I was scheduled to spend an average of two working days per country, including air transportation - except for Finland where I had to spend a weekend.

As we were approaching the airport I briefly explained that I was going to raise funds for a number of projects in which the Nordic countries had shown some interest. I explained that The Nordic countries were generous donors to the developing countries and to international programs. I was, therefore, planning to visit the respective Development Agencies which provide assistance funds for these countries.

Before parting, Françoise asked me to be sure to watch the people I was going to meet in each country very carefully so that I could describe to her the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of each. “How can you tell a Dane from a Swede ? Or a Finn from a Norwegian ?“ she asked.

My assignment was getting more elaborate by the minute! Feeling that she had to show some interest too, my wife added, “And let us know how the Greta Garbos and the Ingrid Bergmans look, up there ?”

So I flew...

In Stockholm, I attended a four-hour meeting organized on the occasion of my visit with representatives of the Swedish International Development Agency, members of the Nordic Council and of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I reviewed the projects I had come to ‘sell’, answered questions, clarified points, discussed suggestions, listened to comments, and noted down objections and criticisms. I was given a priority list of eighteen countries which Sweden helps. I was also reminded that the current Swedish budget for international development cooperation corresponded to approximately 1% of Sweden’s GNP - which made Sweden one of the most important world contributors. The message was that one could not reasonably keep asking for more.

Having noted the projects in which Sweden showed some interest, I paid more attention to Françoise’s assignment. I carefully observed Mrs. Annika Thomasson, Dr. Björn Holmström, Mrs. Elisabeth Karlsson, Mr. Gustav Knutsson and Dr. Gunnar Wilkens.

What were their common characteristics ? And their peculiarities ? How could they be differentiated from their colleagues in Denmark, Norway or Finland? Difficult to say! To foreigners, all Nordic Europeans look very polite, straightforward, cool, realistic, blond, clean, relaxed, honest, athletic, fair-playing and pragmatic. Any difference in temperament? Any distinguishing features? I continued to observe, analyze and register everything significant or insignificant all through the rest of the

day and later on during dinner at Mrs. Annika Thomasson's.

My first impression was that Sweden's traditional lifestyle was gracious, standardized and sanitized. I noticed a nostalgic old-fashioned element, in spite of its very modern side. We were here in a rich, capitalistic system with strong socialistic aspects. In everyday life, the Swedes show an intriguing mixture of formalism, sophistication, and simplicity. They look conservative but tolerate originality and admire individualism. They never let excessive feelings transpire and keep their weaknesses under control. In summary, they struck me as being well-balanced. The key-word is 'Lagom' - which means 'not too much, not too little, but just right.'

The Swedes have a well-established reputation for being taciturn and relish silence with special gusto. For a Frenchman, silence in the middle of a dinner signals that we are running out of topics or that we are beginning to be sleepy. Or both. Here, silence in the middle of a dinner simply means that we are in Sweden. It does not exclude, however, that we may also be bored. But you would never be able to tell.

I thought of Brigitte. She would not like it over here. Brigitte, like most French people, become very lively around the table. The better the food, the more scintillating the discussion. The French love to analyze, criticize, discuss - with humoristic repartees, flashes of wit, wordplay and double-entendres. You have to be a wit! And silence is to be avoided at all costs !

In Sweden, controversial subjects are not encouraged. Foreigners who may be used to inject in social conversation some audacity or mischief will have to remember that long, dark winters have a lasting, soporific effect.

I noticed that the Swedes respect other peoples' points of view and are quite tolerant. They struggle to reach agreement and are strong believers of consensus. A common point with the Japanese.

Here, external appearance is always correct, elegant but never gaudy. Not too much, not too little, but just right. Remember: 'Lagom.' Naturally, the younger generation comes from a different planet. Dressed in eccentric black leather, with glaring jewelry all over and peculiar hairdos; their motto must be something like : too much or too little, but never right.

At Mrs. Annika Thomasson's dinner the calm and controlled atmosphere warmed up a little as drinking proceeded. Her table was most elegant and lit by soft candlelight; the meal was copious and washed down profusely. At one point Dr. Björn Holmström said he was going to do a 'Skâl' in my honor. He stood up in front of me, straight as a soldier, put his glass on his chest, then raised it to his lips, mumbled a few words in Swedish looking straight into my eyes and emptied the glass in one gulp. With obvious clumsiness, I did the same and emptied my glass as

well. It was liquid fire! They all laughed.

They explained that the real, formal ‘Skâl’ is now disappearing. They showed me how it used to be done in the old days, how it is done in the country, how it is done in more formal occasions, and so forth. To me all the ‘Skâls’ looked the same. I was only amazed at the quantity of ‘liquid fire’ that was swallowed. However, if the atmosphere became a little warmer, the talk a little more vivacious, and the laughter a little louder, it all remained very proper. ‘Lagom’ !

In this connection, Ulf Nilsson suddenly came to mind. When he went to Japan he must have left his ‘Lagom’ home. I asked if anyone knew him and was told that he had never returned from Japan; there were rumors that he had married a Japanese girl.

At the end of the dinner, Mrs. Annika Thomasson stood at the door of the dining room and all the guests thanked her, one by one, on the way to the drawing room where coffee and after-dinner drinks were served. Guests would say ‘tack’ (which means ‘thank you’); some would say ‘tack, tack’; a few who seemed particularly happy would say ‘tack sa mycket tack, tack’ (Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you.) One said ‘Tack för maten’ (Thank you for dinner). In any case, there were a lot of ‘tack, tack, tack’ going on.

Next morning I was in Mrs. Annika Thomasson’s office when Dr. Gunnar Wilkens came in and, in greeting her, said something like ‘tack för sinast’ (Thank you for last time). I must have sounded discourteous since the number of ‘tacks’ I had distributed around was rather limited. I decided I would make up for it and from then on, at every good opportunity, I ‘tack, tack tacked’ everyone like a machine gun.

The three of us then met with Dr. Olof Erikson who was one of the three consultant candidates the Japanese had recommended. Dr. Olof Erickson was smallish, energetic, with dark sparse hair and a goatee. He looked young, confirming the fact that Sweden had the youngest managers in Europe. I thought to myself that youth was not an advantage in Japan where age is greatly respected, being considered a sign of experience and wisdom. But Dr. Olof Erikson had an impressive C.V. and a convincing business card. In addition, as a good Swede, he believed in consensus, he was polite, did not economize on ‘tacks’, listened carefully and did not talk much. I wondered, though, if that last point was good for an instructor. In any case, his candidature was retained and his name immediately cabled to the Japanese with the dates of his forthcoming visit.

As I flew to Finland I was happy and relieved to have settled among other things the question of the consultant for Japan.

In Helsinki, I attended a meeting very similar to the one just attended in Stockholm. We had representatives of the Finnish International Development Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Nordic Council, a couple of non-

governmental organizations and the University. The meeting was chaired by Mrs. Marja Haarala. The ladies outnumbered the gentlemen and the blondes outnumbered the dark-browns.

The outcome of the meeting was positive . No funds were committed on the spot but strong interest was expressed on two specific projects for Nicaragua. In addition, Finland promised to provide a couple of Associate Experts for two Unesco-sponsored projects in Peru. Associate Experts being young University graduates paid by the government to serve in a Unesco project. The meeting also helped in redrafting a proposal to the Nordic Council which they would endorse. That was a good harvest.

How could I describe the Finns to Françoise ? I had known many at international meetings and used a few as consultants in my work. They struck me as being rigorously honest, incapable of deceiving, pragmatic, unpretentious, generous and direct. I thought that they also shared with the Swedes many of the Nordic characteristics. They appeared laconic but had a more sensitive and easily excitable character. They enjoyed an elegant, clean and simple environment, disliking fuss, arrogance and ostentation. They showed a sense of national identity and pride, but at the same time seemed to be shy or lacking confidence. They impressed me as being very conscious of their geographical location, which they thought was too close to Russia. They were obviously eager to be considered as part of Western Europe.

I observed that the Finns liked fun but were restrained by a strong Lutheran influence. They showed a particular gusto for alcohol, in spite of its very high price. I learned that travel agents organized special excursions to St. Petersburg to enjoy cheap vodka. Mr. Keijo Rastas confessed to have been some sixteen or seventeen times to St. Petersburg but managed to visit the Hermitage only once ! Apparently, as the ship leaves the Finnish territorial waters, the alcoholic drinks are sold tax-free. By the time the ship arrives in St. Petersburg very few find their way to the Museum. Mr. Keijo Rastas then added - and I do think he was serious - that Finland was the only country to have a Minister with a portfolio for Alcoholic Affairs. I never checked on that one and did not mention it in my mission report.

When Dr. Wilhelm Perala found that I was not leaving until Monday he invited me to spend the weekend with his family at their country house. I had never met him before but willingly accepted the generous invitation.

On Saturday morning off we went in a minibus: Dr. Wilhelm Perala, his wife Merja, their two daughters, Helena and Ulla, a girl friend of the daughters, Eva Lundmark, the dog, Adolph, and myself. I wondered why they had not brought along the canaries.

Wilhelm’s wife, Merja, looked incredibly young to be the mother of two big girls in their early twenties. Assuming a French debonair attitude, I told them “To me,

you look like four sisters". The whole family was fair, tall and athletic, perhaps, with the exception of Wilhelm who had probably been athletic but was now rather plump. They all spoke English fluently. You could tell they loved nature and did sports. Even Adolph was big and muscular. Next to the Perala family I felt so very small!

As we drove through the countryside, Wilhelm explained that their country house was an old farm which they inherited from Merja's grandparents. Having a country house is the Finnish number one dream. About 40% of Finnish families are second-home owners.

Then somehow the conversation shifted to Finland's neighbors - the Russians and the Swedes. My diplomatic status and instinct told me to remain silent. I did not utter a word, as Wilhelm lost his Nordic composure in telling me about the 400 years of Swedish occupation and the many wars with the Russians. As he spoke about the battles, the occupation, the dead and the patriotic resistance of the Finns he got increasingly excited. At one point Adolph barked and Merja told her husband something in Finnish which put an end to the history lecture. After a long silence, which to me seemed like an eternity, we arrived at the country house.

The wooden cottage blended perfectly well with the surrounding trees and bushes. It was rustic and reasonably comfortable, with a particular old-fashioned charm of its own. It was definitely different from our French 'maison de campagne'.

After an hour of hurrying to and from, and a fair amount of agitation, I asked what all the fuss was about. "We are preparing the Sauna," Wilhelm answered. He added that every Finn, from the poorest peasant to the President of the Republic possesses a sauna. Originally it was the bathroom but now it is used for relaxation only.

An instant later I could not believe my eyes as four totally naked 'Nymphs' called Merja, Ulla, Helena and Eva joyfully crossed the room, rushed outdoors and disappeared into a wooden cabin. Wilhelm began to undress and invited me to do the same. I was not prepared for that. I did not have the heart to run naked in that weather and end up with those four Nordic beauties. I could not think of a good excuse, when potbellied Wilhelm, naked as a worm, told me to hurry up!

I mumbled, "I am not used to this. "

He looked at me in disbelief and laughed, saying, "I saw French lovers kiss in the streets of Paris, in the Metro, in the parks! And you come to play shy in Finland ! Ha. Ha! Come on !"

In no time there we were both completely nude like two Satyres running in the wilderness and joined the four Nymphs.

In the sauna we sat on benches, sweating in silence. I had two problems : the

first, I was under the firm impression that they all looked in my direction to see how a Frenchman was really made. The second, I did not know myself where to look. The sauna was small and I could not very well stare at the ceiling. I do not remember ever sweating so much. Some sweat no doubt due to the heat and some to the inward commotion. If only somebody had said something! Anything ! No. Nothing disturbed that endless silence. Had there been flies, you would have heard them flying. But we were not in Cairo, although it felt like it!

When Wilhelm poured some water onto the hot stone the steam created a screen which gave me the illusion of some privacy for a few seconds. As time went on the Perala family turned pink. They looked like sweating shrimps. Then, Big Chief said something and we all moved out. Each one grabbed one of the young birch-tree branches that had been prepared on a wooden table and began to lash the others. Before I could understand what was happening I was being fustigated by all these women. After a while I noticed that I was the only one giggling and screaming hysterically. The Perala family was rather silent and looked concentrated, heroic and, by now, purple. Then, Big Chief said another word and we all jumped into the freezing lake. I thought I would never see France again!

Back into the house to dry and warm up with beer and sausages. Then back to the sauna for a second round. Then more lashing. Back to the lake. More beer and more sausages. At that point I thought I should write my last will or, at least, a letter to say ‘Adieu’ to my Brigitte and share my impressions of Finland with Françoise.

I have to admit that a little later, as we sat (dressed) around a wooden table , I felt great. We ate cabbage, potatoes, delicious salmon with dill, country bread and drank some white schnapps. I was glad the sauna part was over, but thought that if I had to do it again, I would not find it so difficult. In fact, I had become accustomed to seeing Ulla, Eva and tutti quanti totally nude. They had very nice figures, indeed. I was glad, though, to see the old Satyre, Wilhelm, back with his clothes on. I had noticed that his figure was more affected by beer than by the sauna.

Taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere that prevailed I told them about Françoise’s request and asked, “What are the national characteristics of each Nordic country, inasmuch as one can generalize?”

From the discussion that followed I concluded that they agreed that the Danes were frivolous, the Finns taciturn, the Norwegians stubborn and the Swedes morose, opportunistic, condescending and dull. I remarked that the Swedes, who had colonized the other countries, were assigned four negative adjectives, whereas the others could get by with only one.

“And how do the French see the Nordics ?” asked Wilhelm.

“Well. Seen from outside, we tend to confuse the Nordics; they look very

alike. One does not expect differences, tensions or disagreement among them. They are an example of pragmatism, fair-play, generosity and intelligent co-operation. But when you come on the spot you see that differences do exist. A subtle love-hate relationship prevails among them. It is a very soft and gentle one and kept as such, in accordance with good Nordic behavior and style."

After the cognac we listened to Sibelius' third Symphony. Then the girls sang some melancholic Finnish songs. Somber, morose, doleful. I dozed in gentle drowsiness. It had been an interesting, relaxing experience.

That night I definitely had a dream. But I shall not tell you about it.

My third and last stop was Copenhagen, Denmark.

There I was in the oldest Kingdom of Europe. The most densely populated Nordic country. The Italy of the north. The country where Hans Christian Andersen wrote his tales and Babette cooked her feast.

The Danes are known to be light-hearted, extrovert, ironic, fun-loving, informal and, as my Finnish friends said, frivolous. Apparently they have an aversion for rules and regulations, and a distaste for authority and formalism. They show a deep sense of independence, tolerance and equality. I love Denmark!

In Copenhagen my host was Mr. Niels Andreansen of the Danish International Development Agency. He was intelligent, knowledgeable and unconventional. From a physical point of view, Mr. Niels Andreansen was small and robust, fair with deep blue eyes. He was a free spirit, unbound by the need for status and recognition. He loved to make a joke of everything. Even in dealing with serious matters, he always looked for the funny side of things. It was a pleasure to be with him.

We first visited the Nordic Council of Ministers where I explained a Unesco project, exploring the possibility of a Nordic co-operative contribution. Mrs. Britta Johansen's reaction did not sound too promising.

Mr. Niels Andreansen then drove me to the Danish Development Agency Headquarters to meet with Mrs. Birgit Petersen. There too, I felt that immediate financial participation from the Danes was unlikely. They were, however, prepared to finance an 'Associate Expert' in Venezuela. That was great news. Mr. Niels Andreansen suggested that we continue the discussion over lunch. So he took me to the Tivoli Pleasure Gardens.

In this rather cold season, the Tivoli was deserted but one could well imagine what it was like in summer. Magnificent. He selected a typical Danish restaurant where we sat behind a window panel. We ate, laughed and talked all afternoon. In so doing we wrote the job description for the Associate Expert and settled every

useful detail. I was very pleased with the outcome.

Any remains of formality vanished with the fourth schnapps we had. Niels delivered a series of hilarious jokes. "Come on, Jacques, tell me some French jokes" he kept insisting.

By ‘French’ he probably meant lewd. I think I did tell some but I do not remember which ones. I hope Niels does not remember them either. If the Assistant Director-General could have seen me laughing so wholeheartedly at the Tivoli in the middle of the day, he would have cancelled all future missions.

I should have taken some notes since the Danish jokes caricatured various aspects of Nordic life and would have answered many of Françoise’s questions, but all the jokes dissolved in the fifth and sixth schnapps. They all dissolved except for a classical one, probably because I had already heard it before. A joke about the laconic and taciturn Finns.

It went something like this : Two Finnish friends, Karl and Mauno had not seen each other for a long time. They decided to go out for a drink. They met at a bar, sat at the counter and drank in silence. After some fifteen minutes Mauno asked, “How are you, Karl ?” Karl did not answer. After another fifteen minutes Mauno repeated, “How are you, Karl ?” to which Karl answered with some obvious irritation, “Look, Mauno, did we come here to chat or to drink?”

As we laughed some more, I became intrigued by the window panel across from our table. It was covered with mist. Behind the misty glass was the shadow of a man who appeared to be watching us. It seemed to me that as soon as the man noticed that I was looking in his direction, he disappeared.

I was still talking with Niels when my eyes caught the same silhouette behind the opposite glass panel, looking in our direction. I stood up. The shadow quickly disappeared into the dusk.

A few minutes later, the waiter came to me and said, “Mr. Dupont, you are wanted on the phone.”

“Me?” I asked. “Who knows I am here ?”

Then turning to the waiter I asked him how he knew who I was and where I was sitting.

“The man on the phone explained...” he replied.

I rushed to the bar and grabbed the phone. My heart was beating fast as I said “hello ?” After a fairly long silence a low voice whispered, “Are you having fun, Mr. Dupont?” I asked who it was but the unknown man hang up on me.

Niels laughed about the whole matter. I did not. I was intrigued and disconcerted. The call had annoyed me. I kept looking at the glass panels for the shadow to reappear, while Niels kept saying, ”Forget it.”

Then the waiter came again to say that there was the same man on the phone who wanted to talk to me. It was urgent. So I walked to the bar slowly. Very slowly. I could feel my heart beats. The same low voice whispered, “Are you having fun, Mr. Dupont ?”

Niels wanted to know if the man had any special accent. Did he sound Dane ? No. Did he sound Nordic or English ? No. Did he sound French? No. Did he sound German ? No.

I thought for a while and, all at a sudden, I said, “He sounds like Mr. Massaringhe! Oh. Yes, just like Massaringhe !”

On the way to the airport I did not explain who Massaringhe was and changed subject, pretending I did not care about the incident.

I was laughing by myself on the plane back to Paris, trying to remember some of the jokes Niels had told me. Then, as I recalled the shadow behind a misty panel, I lapsed into a gloomy mood.

All in all my Nordic marathon had been fruitful. I had found a Swedish consultant for Japan and two or three Associate Experts for my projects in Latin America. I had received strong encouragements on some proposals. I also had a terrible hangover. No coffee or aspirin helped. When the plane landed at Charles de Gaulle Airport I thought my brain was going to explode.

I did not expect anyone at the airport. Usually, nobody comes to meet me when I return from mission. This time Brigitte and Françoise were there. They had to exchange what they had purchased at IKEA the day of my departure, so they decided to come and pick me up. That was thoughtful, but I must have looked surprised. I am sure my hangover did not help my facial expression.

They said “Aren't you happy we came? You look tired ! What have you done ? You can’t have had much sleep. Well, you’ll tell us all on the way home. By the way, the Blanchards and the Rousseaus are coming to dinner tonight. We had better hurry. They are dying to see Scandinavia through your eyes...”

In the car my two women would not stop talking. I somehow understood the value of being taciturn. Had I become a little bit Nordic ?

Then Brigitte said, “I think I saw one of your colleagues at the airport. The one you do not like”

“Who ? Massaringhe ?”

“I think so. But I am not sure, he was behind a glass door.”

Kama Sutra and Bollywood

All the directors had been convened for a meeting with the Director-General in Conference Room N° 2. We were told about the financial situation, the necessary cuts in the on-going budget and the inevitable restrictions that had to be imposed on every program. You could sense nervousness pervading the room. When the Director-General spoke of the necessity to cut down on missions, the temperature of room N°2 rose by several degrees.

He began by saying that he fully understood the need to visit our projects in Member States in order to understand the reality of the field, to grasp the needs and requirements of those we try to serve, and to meet the people we co-operate with. “Our work is not an academic exercise,” he said “that we can perform sitting at our desks in Paris. We need to grasp the actual situation on the spot.”

That ‘pep-talk’ had a soothing effect on the audience. He had lulled us into a state of serenity so that we would swallow the pill that was to follow with resignation.

He said that from a budgetary viewpoint, we had to save 40% on missions. But in order not to jeopardize the implementation of the program we would combine missions. “If one of us is going to Antofagasta to deal with project ‘A’ it does not make sense for another one from some other division to go to Antofagasta to handle project ‘B’!”

He thought that, with a good briefing and some intelligent preparation, we could very well combine missions, even if our fields of interest, program responsibilities and professional profiles were different. He had set up an intersectoral committee, called the Mission Coordinating Committee, and empowered it to conduct such an over-all co-ordination.

No director in Room N° 2 believed in such interchangeability. Unesco, as a specialized Agency of the UN Family covered Education, Science, Culture and Communication. Within each of these four large Sectors, a great number of specialized programs was managed by several specialists in the respective disciplines. Even a contemporary Leonardo da Vinci could not possess the encyclopedic knowledge needed to fully grasp the intricacies of all and each of them. Even with a good briefing, one was still bound to remain at the level of generalities, when dealing with a field of competence different from one’s own. Remember

Borobudur!

The decision had been taken and no argument would change it. The meeting was brought to an end, as the Director-General had to rush to the airport. He was going on mission to Zimbabwe...

On the way back to my office I stopped at the Library to consult a geography reference book to learn that Antofagasta was in Chile.

Two weeks later I found out that the Mission Coordinating Committee, in its great wisdom, had canceled my mission to the Ivory Coast and Ghana. My colleagues of the division would no longer go to Hungary, Qatar, Uruguay and Zambia. My mission to Sri Lanka was reduced to two days and combined with a much longer mission to India on behalf of two other divisions. As a result, we all wore a funeral-day expression.

We then spent endless frustrating hours preparing briefings, attending meeting after meeting, putting together special files and arguing on the phone. The Mission Coordinating Committee became, in no time, enemy number one !

My two-day mission in Sri Lanka was uneventful. I only remember seeing the airport, the hotel room and the conference room. I could have been in Antofagasta for that matter!

As the plane began its descent on New Delhi, I had a lump in my throat. India always raised apprehensions in me. As far as I knew, this country was relatively safe; I had nothing to fear, except for a notorious diarrhea. Mr. Boris Tikhonov, Director of the Unesco Office in New Delhi, was to be at the airport to stay with me until the departure of my connecting flight to Bombay, a couple of hours later. But for some reason, there was something in India that always stirred up anxiety deep in my soul.

I remembered my last visit to New Delhi a few years earlier. After the meeting, Mr. Boris Tikhonov had suggested that the office chauffeur drive me around for a quick city tour while the report on the meeting was being typed. After about an hour, I had asked the chauffeur to stop so that I could walk a little on my own. I had found the odor in the luxurious Mercedes nauseating. The driver smelled as if he had been marinated in curry and sprayed with a mixture of coriander, garlic, cardamom, saffron and cloves.

I had been walking for a while down Chandni Chowk Street, where all types of Indian handicrafts are sold, when I decided to take a turn into one of the narrow side streets. After two or three more turns I had found myself in a pandemonium. The cacophony was unbearable: loud-speakers at every corner howling music, street vendors shouting at the top of their voices, cars and trucks hooting and releasing clouds of carbon dioxide gas on motorcyclists behind them. Everywhere, blind

beggars, children, cows, crippled old men, lottery vendors, rickshaws and hundreds of bicycles. The Busses slanting dangerously as they rode with clusters of human beings hanging from the windows. Just as in Cairo. In large Indian cities this harassing turmoil goes on from sunrise to sunset, and beyond...

But that was on my last visit, a few years earlier. Perhaps things had changed since then.

The landing was smooth and, as usual, New Delhi Airport was overcrowded and chaotic. Something like Chandni Chowk and neighboring streets, but without cows or buses. Everything else was there. In New Delhi Airport you usually have to find your way through an ocean of luggage, boxes, trunks and a promiscuous collection of people, including a number of young European tourists, sleeping on the ground.

When I saw Boris Tikhonov I sighed with relief as if I had taken a new lease on life ! “What a pleasure to see you again, Boris,” I said - and I meant it!

He helped me with the formalities for transferring my luggage to the connecting flight to Bombay, steered me through the crowds as an experienced navigator and led to the VIP lounge. Clean, quiet and cool. “ Oh! It feels like Paradise!” I said.

“You mean Nirvana, my friend,” he replied. “But to enter Nirvana, my dear Jacques, you have to cast out the three sources of evil: desire, hatred and error. Perhaps you have already driven out hatred and error. But for a young Frenchman like you desire must still be there ! Ha. Ha.”

“Well,” I said “ at fifty-two, I feel it is fading a little every day.”

Sipping a cold drink, we chatted and gossiped like two old Parisian concierges. Boris Tikhonov was a husky man in his fifties, with a wild beard and formidable eyebrows. He had a charming and warm personality and hypnotizing, dark eyes - reminiscent of Rasputin. With his basso-profundo voice he could probably sing Boris Godounov very well.

He pulled a list from his pocket and said he had three groups of questions regarding: a) my forthcoming meetings in Bombay and Bangalore, b) a number of Unesco projects in India, and c) the latest gossips from Headquarters.

We started with the latter , which he considered by far the most appetizing. He wanted confirmation of various rumors he had heard, wanted to know how the latest Executive Board session had gone off; asked about vacant posts, the Director General latest initiatives, budgetary cuts and other matters. When the ‘gossip list’ was exhausted, Rasputin looked satisfied.

Regarding my visits to Bombay and Bangalore, he had made the hotel reservations and had arranged to have someone meet me at the respective airports. We discussed both meetings and agreed that my role was easy, since I only had to deliver a speech at each of the two meetings, prepared by the respective divisions at Headquarters, and bring back to Paris the reports on the meetings and their recommendations. There was little more I could do since the subjects of these meetings were outside my direct responsibility and competence.

Boris said that he could not have attended those meetings in Bombay and Bangalore himself since he was involved at the time in a long series of discussions with Government representatives in New Delhi regarding future collaboration between India and Unesco.

The meetings In Bombay and Bangalore had been organized by Unesco in cooperation with the Indian authorities and were to be attended by a number of experts from different countries, mostly from the Asian region. The event in Bombay was an international seminar on the relationship between development and culture entitled, “Man : the Focal Point of All Development” and that in Bangalore was entitled “Expert Meeting on the Role of Women in the Education of Young People, Mutual Understanding and Respect of Human Rights.”

The third set of questions was difficult for me to cope with since it concerned all sorts of projects Unesco was carrying out in India. I took notes and promised Boris that I would convey messages to the respective divisions back at headquarters.

Fortunately, the boarding of the Bombay flight was announced, which put a welcome end to Boris’ questioning. I warmly thanked him and literally ran to the plane. He looked haggard, standing there in the middle of the hall with the unfinished questionnaire in his hand. His Rasputin look worn off.

At Bombay Airport I saw a sign on which was printed in large red characters, ‘J. Dupont.’ I introduced myself to the man holding it. He smiled and said he would drive me to the hotel. His decayed teeth made me think that he had never met a dentist in his life. He grabbed my bag and ran towards the car. He was in a great hurry because he had to go back and forth, all day, between the hotel and the airport to pick up participants.

His erratic driving was totally insane. I closed my eyes. If I ever survived the experience, I could brag that I had been driven by Michael Schumacher ! In an attempt to make him slow down, I tried to engage him in conversation. I inquired about the meeting, the participants and most particularly about Mr. Kulendran Gosh and Mr. Shyam Narayan, the Indian organizers. My driver did not seem to know anything. He kept saying that I was staying at one of the most beautiful palaces in the world : the Taj Mahal Hotel.

“But, Mr. Boris Tikhonov, Director of the Unesco Office in New Delhi, had mentioned a different hotel,” I kept repeating, to no avail. In zigzagging his way through the crowd he said, “No Sir, all participants are in the Taj Mahal. It is one of the three most beautiful hotels in the world, Sir, together with the famous Rambagh Palace of Jaipur, and the Lake Palace of Udaipur.”

I realized that I would never be able to afford the Taj Mahal out of my Unesco daily allowance. Unesco does not reimburse actual expenses but provides a fixed per diem for each country - which is certainly not meant for the Taj Mahals of this world.

Eventually we arrived. ‘Michael Schumacher’ dumped me in front of the Palace and drove back to the Airport. On entering the Hotel lobby I felt carried away in the magic of the tale of one thousand and one nights. I made my way through it in total amazement, like Alice in Wonderland. I had never seen anything so overwhelmingly ornate and luxurious. It was imposing and ostentatious. Why on earth did we need such grand setting to discuss problems related to development in the Third World!

At the reception I gave my name and received the key to my room. I was told that the hotel architect was French, but no one could tell me anything about Kulendran Gosh or Shym Narayan. “I presume, Sir, that they haven't arrived,” I was told. I only found out that a reception was scheduled for the same evening and the meeting would only start the following day.

No working documents were available. I felt uneasy. I left my luggage in the room and joined a conducted tour of the city in order to keep my mind off the meeting.

Bombay is the economic and financial capital of India. A kind of Indian New York City. It encapsulates all the religions, ethnic groups and communities of India and concentrates all the wealth and activities of the various sections of its population, as well as their wildest hopes and impossible dreams.

Every single day, an average of 400 families arrive in Bombay looking for work! Out of the 15 million inhabitants, about 9 million live in slums - including some lawyers and doctors - and one million is quite literally on the streets. Bombay is prohibitively expensive. In a residential area an apartment costs 7000 US dollars per square meter. More expensive than the residential areas of Paris !

We visited the older city on Bombay Island, the harbor, the hills, a number of typical islands, the Victoria Railway terminus, the Museum, the Institute of Science, the famous Bombay film-making studios - known as ‘Bollywood’ - the Town Hall, and a large arch, known as the Gateway to India, built in 1911 to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary. At the cricket club, tea was served by stylish waiters speaking the Queen’s English.

On the way back, the guide talked about the diversity of India. He quoted extensively from the book ‘The Discovery of India’ first published in 1946 by Jawaharlal Nehru. “The diversity of India is tremendous; it is obvious; it lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits. There is little in common, to outward seeming, between the Pathan of the North-West and the Tamil in the far South. Their racial stocks are not the same; they differ in face and figure, food and clothing, and, of course, language... Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India on the Pathan, as this is obvious on the Tamil... All regions have their distinctive features, all of them have still more the distinguishing mark of India...”

The guide went on by saying that India, the largest democracy of the world, with its 950 million people was to become by the year 2030 the most populated country of the planet, with an estimated 1.5 billion. I conjured up for a moment New Delhi Airport and the large cities, like Bombay and Calcutta, as they would be then, and shivered at the prospect!

India is a mosaic of different cultures. More than 740 languages are spoken in the country. And to think that I have been struggling all my life with only French and English! Every year 300,000 scientists, engineers and technicians graduate from its universities and pour onto the job market. There are over 25 million divinities. At that point I wondered how a ‘Who is who’ of the 25 million divinities, compiled in the 740 languages of India would look like.

In spite of its computer specialists, nuclear energy researchers, space program and satellite engineers, India - the third scientific power of the world - has an estimated 300 million poverty-stricken people ! This was beyond me. I could not grasp the meaning nor the reasons behind the contrasts and contradictions. I was happy to be back at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Speaking of contrasts, next door to this magnificent Palace stood a man, behind a tree, answering a call of nature!

As I entered the lobby, I was invited to join the cocktail reception. I had not had time to change and, since I seemed to be late, I entered the reception lounge, dressed as I was. The hostess asked for my name and gave me a tag to pin on my jacket. Everyone could see now that I was ‘J. Dupont.’

A man was delivering a speech. He was saying that India with its 800 films per year was the largest world producer of films. A billion spectators go to movie houses every year. Bombay with its famous ‘Bollywood’, was proud to greet this international gathering. The speaker mentioned the great director Satyajit Ray and the ever popular movie star Naseerudin Shah. By now I knew I was in the wrong reception, the wrong meeting and the wrong hotel. I broke into a cold sweat.

I made my way back to the hotel reception desk and asked for the manager.

He looked at my name tag and said, “Oh, Mr. Dupont, we have been looking for you all over the hotel. Another Mr. Dupont has tried to check in, but you had taken his room. We could not understand why. May we ask who you are ?”

I gathered whatever strength was left in me and said, “ I am Jacques Dupont from Unesco.” “Oh. well,” he said, “we were expecting Jerôme Dupont, not Jacques Dupont. You have his room.” I asked for a chair and sat down in total disbelief.

Fortunately Jerôme Dupont had a good sense of humor. This case of mistaken identities amused him. He belonged to the French movie-making industry and said he could use the incident to produce a good comedy. We had traveled on the same flight from New Delhi to Bombay but, having had some problem with his luggage, he had been delayed at the airport. In the meanwhile I had read the sign ‘J. Dupont’ and had taken his driver. He said that later on he had spotted at the airport door someone looking for a ‘Jacques Dupont’ but knew he was not concerned. “That is the problem” he concluded, “with such common names, as Dupont !”

He insisted in offering me a drink because he thought I looked very pale. We compared pedigrees and, having climbed our respective family trees to the top, we decided that we were not related. There are hundreds of thousands of ‘Dupont’ in France, just like the ‘Smiths’ in England or the ‘Ferraris’ in Italy.

Jerôme Dupont was happy to tell me about Bollywood - a word derived from Bombay and Hollywood. He had spent a couple of months in India and he seemed happy to be able to speak French with someone, for a change.

He said that there were two types of popular Indian film themes : crime or love. “The scenarios of the latter are unalterable and immutable,” he said. “ A beautiful young girl from a higher caste loves a handsome, but poor, young man. The parents of the girl have promised her to a rich, ugly old man. The young lovers run away. They are hounded all over the place. There are tears and songs. Many songs. An Indian movie is in general an excuse for showing lots of singing and dancing. After three and half hours of love dialogues, tears, songs and dances we approach the end. There are two classic options for ending the story. The tragic one: the girl is caught and commits suicide. The happy one: the parents forgive the girl and give their blessing to the wedding. After two or three more songs, believe it or not, the movie comes to an end.”

We had a good laugh and ordered another drink. He lowered his voice and whispered, “You know, the Indian film business is 50% controlled by organized crime. There are deep connections between the film industry and the underworld.” Pointing to the reception room he added, “There are many top mafia ‘dons’ in that reception, you know.” He explained that the film industry in India was estimated at several millions a year, but banks would not lend money and the government would not subsidize it. Consequently, the producers turn to black market money. Mafia-sponsored films are very often about gangsters and crimes. They like action and

vulgarity.

"Let me tell you a funny incident," he said. "It happened in Bangalore, which is also another important film-making center. The Hoodlums are no longer satisfied with sponsoring a film, now they want to shape it, change the script, and sometimes play in it. So, some real-life gangsters played their own part in a film. One day some off-duty policemen in Bangalore were astonished to see on the screen a dozen of the city's most notorious criminals playing gangsters!"

I thanked Jerôme Dupont. After a few telephone calls, I handed in the key to my room and left my lavish Taj Mahal and its 'Bollywood Festival' for a more modest destination.

My own meeting had been going on since 9 o'clock in that morning. At noon, Mr. Kulendran Gosh had called Mr. Boris Tikhonov in New Delhi to tell him that I had not arrived. At that time I was probably peacefully visiting the Gateway of India. I felt so embarrassed that I could not tell the true story. If I had told the truth, no one would have believed it. Or had they believed it they would be convinced that I was utterly stupid. I kept saying, "I'll tell you later," hoping to be able to invent some credible and honorable story later on.

I turned down the invitation to the cocktail and went to my room. I had had enough drinks with the other Dupont. I took a couple of aspirins and modified my 'opening' speech that should have been read at the beginning of the session and tried to make it fit the theme of the discussion scheduled for the second day.

At eleven o'clock that night, Rasputin called from New Delhi. I told him that I had eaten something on the plane which did not agree with me and had taken refuge in the restrooms of the Taj Mahal Hotel, on the way from the airport to the meeting. "But the Taj Mahal is not on the way," he said.

With every question he asked, my story became more and more entangled in contradictions and less and less plausible. I was slowly mired in the quick sands of falsehood. I eventually said, "I'll explain everything when I see you next time," and put an end to the conversation. At midnight I went to bed on an empty stomach, like millions of starving Indians.

Having gone to bed in one season I woke up in another. I watched from the window a frightening burst of driving rain. Fortunately the meeting room was in the same hotel, so we did not have to face the deluge.

The Chairman, Mr. Vikram Shah, opened the meeting on the subject "Man : The Focal Point of All Development " by summarizing the salient points of the discussions of the previous day. He then greeted me, saying that he was sorry that I had met with some difficulties along the way. I thought I detected an ironic gleam in his eyes. Did he think I spent the day with a dancing girl ? He concluded by saying

that he was very happy that I had been able to make it and invited me to address the meeting.

I first apologized for being late and immediately broached the subject. I first recalled that the concept of culture, which used to be restricted to works of art and literature, now included the spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a given society, including modes of life, value systems, traditions and beliefs. Culture is the very fabric of society and its basic strength.

I glanced to see if anyone was asleep and continued, “History shows that periods of cultural development have almost invariably accompanied or immediately preceded a spectacular development of the society.” I proceeded to show that the symbiosis between culture and development was illustrated in China under the Sung Dynasty, in the Near East between the 7th and 13th centuries A.D., in Mali in the 14th century A.D., in Europe at the Renaissance , as well as in the pre-Colombian America by the Maya and the Aztec civilizations.

I concluded by drawing attention to the fact that, when cultural aspects were ignored in development strategies, local creative capacities were stunted as well as the ability to block the unwanted intrusion of foreign cultural influences.

Mr. Vikram Shah invited comments and questions. The discussion that followed further expanded on some of the points made and the meeting proceeded quite well. The third day was spent discussing the meeting’s recommendations. By the time it ended, I was fully integrated into the group and completely at ease. I had almost forgotten the Taj Mahal and the Bollywood incident.

The farewell dinner took place in a local restaurant where we were invited to sample some of the regional Indian dishes. Typical dishes from northern India, the Penjab, are the most appreciated by foreigners. Dishes from the South are perhaps too spicy; those from Madras are made of dynamite.

That night we had ‘samosa’ - turnovers stuffed with meat and vegetables; ‘tikka’ - grilled brochettes of fish with basmati rice; ‘ghost biryani’ - basmati rice with marinated lamb chops, ‘raita’ - cucumber salad with yogurt; curries of meat with okra, peas and beans; ‘tandoori chicken’ with special ‘korma’ and ‘chutney’ sauces, ‘chapati ’ and ‘nans’ - Indian bread. Kulendran Gosh, Shyam Narayan and Vikram Shah entertained us with colorful stories about food in various regions of India. That was culture. We ate a great deal and our waistline expanded. That was development.

The rain had stopped. We walked to our hotel, our bulging stomachs protruding before us. Shortly after 10 p.m. I collapsed in bed and slept like the dead. An hour later I woke up with abdominal pain and an acid stomach. All the regions of India were feuding inside me. I took an Alka-Seltzer or two. The ‘samosa’ obviously made me bilious, the ‘tikka’ gave me the hiccups, the ‘raita’ acidified my stomach,

the curries made me sea-sick and the ‘ghost biryani’ sent my bowels into an uproar. There was nothing to be done except to let nature take its course.

I was in the middle of my contortions, moaning like an elephant in labor, and swearing to become a vegetarian when the telephone rang. At first I thought that some neighbor was about to complain about the noise I was making, but it was good old Rasputin wanting to know how I was feeling. I told him. And when the storm was over I collapsed for the second time and slept like the dead.

In Bangalore, I arrived on time at the right hotel and at the right meeting. I liked Bangalore. At a slight altitude, it never suffers from torrid heat. Also known as the ‘Garden-City’ it displays large, shady boulevards and pleasant gardens and parks. Bangalore has cultivated a special way of life. In its numerous pubs, one can meet young, Indian engineers wearing Levis jeans, Nike T-shirts and Reebok sneakers. The music you hear is Bruce Springsteen’s.

This ‘Indian Silicone Valley’ is known for its Space research; large multinationals, such as IBM, Texas Instruments and Hewlett-Packard; ‘hi-tech’ industries, many research laboratories, and a first-rate army of software specialists. It has won a good portion of the customized software world market and creates software for Swissair, Nestlé, Morgan Bank, Samsung, and many others. Its world-renowned University - the Indian Institute of Technology, IIT, publishes every year over 1500 papers on fundamental research. The founder of this University, Jamsetji Tata, is the owner of some 8O companies employing 300,000 people.

The hotel was on Brigade Road, the very ‘in’ street of Bangalore, with lively bars carrying names such as Black Cadillac and NASA. As I checked in I was told that I could not use the elevator for the time being since there was no electricity. “Power is cut three or four hours each day, Sir.” I asked how the industries could manage under such conditions and was told that they had their own power stations. When I tried to take a shower I realized that the use of water could also be problematic. These are some of the contradictions of an emerging great power in the Third World !

The leading Indian organizer of the Meeting was Mrs. Indira Bahtia. She was tall and lean as a stick and exhibited few features of the traditional Indian femininity. She was straightforward and abrupt like an army drill instructor and did not waste any time on useless civilities and compliments. She greeted me by remarking it was regrettable that Unesco was again represented by a man at a meeting concerning the role of women. I never forget this chilly welcome and the disturbing effect it had on me for the rest of the day!

As I entered the meeting room, I felt I was unwanted. For a moment I thought I had broken into the harem of a Maharajah. All the ladies present looked as if they would have a collective heart attack. While I searched for my seat, I was met by frosty, hostile looks, one or two timid smiles and many expressions of surprise. Was

I the only man in the audience? Way in the back of the room, in the very left corner was a fat man who looked more like the Maharajah's Eunuch. He soon disappeared.

I timidly sat down behind the 'Unesco' nameplate and looked at the main working document to see if anything indicated that this was a women-only meeting. I read the title over and over again. I guess that the role of women in 'anything' should be discussed by women only. At least this was how this group seemed to feel. I was an intruder !

Indira Bahtia chaired the meeting with vigor and determination. Each participant was first invited to dwell on the role of women in education, mutual understanding and human rights, in their respective countries or regions. From the national reports it became obvious that women did not play as important a role as they should. We all knew that before coming to Bangalore. Indira Bahtia asked why. The answer was unanimous: men everywhere prevented them from doing so.

Then came an avalanche of recommended solutions. From my point of view, some participants were reasonable, others were excessive. Only a couple were outright aggressive. One of them kept looking at me with open hostility, while referring to the injustice of men.

The chairwoman, with a stony glare, asked me, "What could Unesco do to assist women around the globe in playing their role in these areas ?"

In answer to the question, I spoke for some 15 uninterrupted minutes, staring at my paper and without ever raising my head to glance at any participant, least of all at the Chair. One of their resentful looks would have paralyzed me for good.

I started by an opening sentence that had not been written in the speech prepared for me. It was not the sort of elegant statement a Unesco representative usually makes. "Unesco is happy to have sponsored and paid for this meeting and for your respective participation. Our thanks to the Indian authorities for the organization of the meeting and to each of you for having accepted our invitation." There was a dead silence. I did not raise my head but I could feel one or two hostile stares at me.

I then proceeded to explain Unesco's work relating to the status of women which aimed at enhancing the participation of women in economic, social and cultural life. This enhanced participation touches every aspect of life. An indication of this concern could be found under almost every Unesco program. After a brief pause I improvised an additional remark, "And these numerous programs are, of course, handled by both men and women. We do not believe in discriminating between sexes..."

After a short pause, I proceeded to provide numerous examples of actions undertaken under each program. At the end of this endless - and certainly boring -

litany, Indira Bahtia announced a tea break.

I was sipping my tea in a corner when one of the aggressive participants came to me with Indira Bahtia and with half a smile said, “Mr. Dupont, as a Frenchman you well know that it is Simone de Beauvoir who, in 1974, had underlined the need for women to assume full responsibility for an anti-sexist campaign. Even if some men, such as yourself, may be sympathetic to the feminist cause, there is a unique female sensitivity that has to remain at the very center of our struggle. Do you see what we mean ?”

“Well, I see your point,” I answered, “but it is my personal opinion that men are and, most probably, will remain in many decision-making positions for some time. They will continue to influence budgets, spending, hiring and policies. It would be smart to get them involved in your discussions and win them over to your cause, as partners and it would be counterproductive to keep them out. In any case, open antagonism, in my opinion, does not pay!”

I finished my cup of tea with a sense of satisfaction. Some of the inner tension had been released. But that was not the end of it. Indira Bahtia smiled and said, “Open antagonism may not pay, but at one point, Mr. Dupont, a gentle, civilized struggle for equality of rights may just not be enough. In some instances women will have to take up leadership . I see that you are smiling, Mr. Dupont. Listen to this...”

She went on to explain that among the apes, the gorilla males murder baby gorillas fathered by other males to free nursing mothers for breeding. Orangutans and chimpanzees wage bloody wars, kill and rape, making the higher male primates one of the worst criminal class of the animal kingdom. Latest research has found that, in the Bonobo species, peace is generally kept and transgressors are punished. “The reason for peace and order, Mr Dupont,” she said, “ is indeed very simple. Among the bonobos it is the females that rule and enforce the laws.”

I did not say any more. This was obviously a type of Bonobo meeting and I had better keep quiet. As the meeting proceeded, the tone softened, interventions seemed more moderate and proposals reasonable. Was it my own sensitivity that had changed? After a while, my mind wandered away from the meeting into the heart of the Bonobo jungle, with apes jumping all over the place. Indira must have wondered why I kept smiling. Eventually, the meeting ended. Much better than it had started - at least for me.

At the hotel I packed and settled the bill. I had a couple of hours to kill before the car was to come to take me to the airport. So I decided to go for a walk down Brigade Road and buy a gift for Brigitte. I always brought back a little gift from my various missions. Our apartment in Paris was filled with African masks, exotic knickknacks, paintings, curios and trivia from various parts of the world. Before leaving for a mission Brigitte used to say, “Have a nice trip, darling, and no more bric-a-brac, please.” But I could never resist buying a little something. Not of great

value, but something to remind me of a special place, of a given culture, of a special moment. Walking around my apartment in Paris I can travel around the world, thanks to these chattels.

While I was strolling down Brigade Road, an elderly man approached me, started to talk in a friendly and dignified manner and walked along with me. Once we had established a rapport free of mistrust and suspicion, he asked if I had ever seen an old manuscript of the Kama Sutra and was I interested to see one.

“Well,” I said, “ I have very little time and I do not understand the language.” To that he replied, “The drawings you would understand. They are most explicit. You need not read the text. And if you have no time you can buy a copy to take with you and consult at your leisure. Would you like to browse at one, without any obligation to buy, of course?” After some hesitation I said “Why not !”

After spending three full days in a room with twenty-two aggressive women wanting to bring to ruin the overall domination of men, I was ready for some feminine, soft and erotic interlude. Within ten minutes we entered a sort of dilapidated, dark cabin. In a shabby back room, the old man displayed before me several dusty books in parchment paper. They were impressively beautiful.

As I turned page after page, he explained, “The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana is the oldest Indian erotic book available to us. Other erotic books existed before that, but never reached us. We cannot date the origin of the Kama Sutra, but we know for sure that it was written between the 4th and 8th centuries. It is prior to 74O A.D. when it is mentioned for the first time in another text and it is later than a 4th century erotic book, known as the ‘Arthasatra’ which inspired the Kama Sutra.”

I was listening with interest but my attention was mainly taken by some very intricate postures illustrated in the book. I could not imagine how on earth one could take up such elaborately convoluted positions. You would have to be an all-round athlete! I began laughing at the thought of some of the couples Brigitte and I knew attempting some of them.

With an incriminating look, the old man said, “ The Kama Sutra is not pornography but a book about the art of love. It is an open book for us. In the West you have transformed it into a book ‘for private circulation only.’ The erotic sculptures in our Hindu temples are visual translations of the descriptions and illustrations of the Kama Sutra.”

He proceeded to explain that it was written in seven books and that Europeans were mostly interested in book one and two, richly illustrated. The others have more texts and deal with selecting a spouse, marriage, the art of seduction, how to deal with several wives, advice for courtesans, etc. He explained that some of the text was subtle, some was naive, other parts were pedantic.

It was getting late. I looked at my watch and closed the volumes I was browsing. The old man told me the price of the parchment paper edition in front of me. I exclaimed: “Oh, là là... là là !” and told him that I did not have this kind of money and would not know where to put (or hide) the seven volumes in my house. He offered a simplified English version of the first two volumes. We bargained for a while and I eventually agreed. He said he would make a special gift wrap for my wife. He went into the other room and reappeared with a package, wrapped in a very fancy parchment paper. He said not to unwrap it before I got home, otherwise it would be bad luck. As a suspicious Frenchman I wondered if the old man had not substituted the Kama Sutra I had purchased for some worthless book. But I did not say anything, I thanked him and ran to the hotel. The car was already there to drive me to the airport.

On the Air India flight back to Europe I found myself amongst a jovial group of Italian tourists who had spent twenty-one days touring India. They were festive, witty and loud. Since sleeping was obviously out of the question, I decided to write my mission reports. The Italian lady next to me said that they had visited hundreds of temples and had eaten chicken for twenty-one consecutive days. She added that if she saw another temple or was served chicken for dinner she would scream. A temple was out of the question, but who could tell what was on the menu? A few minutes later dinner was served. She screamed.

I eventually arrived home. Happy to be back. I sat with my wife and daughter and talked for hours. I had some nice Bourgueil and a whole baguette with Pont-l’Evêque, Pithiviers au foin and Saint-Marcellin. I talked, with my mouth full, while Brigitte and Françoise brought me up to date on all major and minor events regarding school, the neighbors, the weather, political scandals, the President of the Republic, the concerts I had missed, the cleaning woman and the rising cost of living.

Françoise was very excited at the thought that Nancy would soon be coming to stay with us. “Who is Nancy ?” I asked. “Oh, Papa, you have forgotten !” said Françoise, in disappointment. Nancy was a girl from Boston who would be spending the summer with us on an exchange program. Françoise would go to Boston the following summer. Brigitte showed me how they had rearranged the furniture and prepared a special room for our American guest. Everyone was happy.

The following day I went to work, gave my mission reports for typing and tried to clear my desk and tend to the most urgent matters. Around four o’clock I was discussing with a colleague a project proposal we had received from the World Bank when the telephone rang. It was Brigitte in a great state of excitement. She had glanced at the Kama Sutra at home and had found it very intriguing, so she had taken it with her when she went out. “Brigitte, this is not exactly a sort of book to read on the bus!” I said. “Don’t be silly,” she answered “It was in my purse. The problem is that it is no longer there.” I asked my colleague to postpone the discussion on the World Bank project because I had an even more pressing matter

to settle.

When my colleague had left I rang my wife back saying, “Where have you been ? For heaven’s sake, Brigitte, do you remember when and where you took the book out of your purse?”

She replied, “I went first to the dentist and I remember glancing at it in the waiting room. You know, dentists are always late. I then went to the butcher’s to pick up the veal cutlets for tonight. But I am sure that I did not read it there.” “Thank God!” I interrupted, “Finally,” she said, “I went to the hairdresser to have a hair cut and a blow-dry, but I cannot remember if I took it out there or not.”

I asked her if she had called the dentist or the hairdresser to find out. She choked at the question. “Are you out of your mind?” She did not want to be identified as the person reading such dissolute, libidinous books! She wanted to know why I had brought back such a licentious gift to start with ? Was there a hidden message for her in such a gift ? She now wondered what type of libertine I turned into when on missions.

I let the storm blow over and after a long silence I asked, “What do you intend to do ? Is there something I, myself, could do to help ?” She answered that she would simply have to find another dentist and another hairdresser. She was sorry because the hairdresser was very good and the dentist had not yet completed her bridge. “Don’t you have anything to say ?” she asked.

“ Well,” I replied, “ the good news is that we are going to keep the same butcher !”

Gay Paris with Nancy and Aunt Lily

On D-Day, Nancy arrived. I took the day off from work and went to the airport with Brigitte and Françoise to fetch her. There was a lot of excitement in the air before the plane arrived. The three of us spoke at the same time. Nobody listened.

Once the plane landed and we met Nancy - after she had gone through the passport control and luggage claim - all ideas of conversation vanished. Dead silence. Then, all of a sudden and at the very same instance Brigitte, Françoise and I asked in a chorus, “Did you have a nice trip?” After that long silence you would think that we could have come up with something more original !

Nancy, like Françoise, was about seventeen - eighteen years old at the time of her visit, but acted and looked more mature than our daughter. She was loquacious, open-minded, intelligent and seemed to feel totally at ease. She was well behaved and composed. A young lady from Boston. A pretty young lady, I should say, for Nancy was endowed with eye-filling beauty. Tall and athletic, she had the type of lavish hair you see only on TV commercials and a pair of beaming green eyes. If one had to find some fault with her beautiful face, it would wish her mouth and teeth were smaller.

While I was talking with Nancy, I overheard Brigitte asking our daughter in French when she had last washed her hair. “You told me not to wash my hair more than once a week,” replied Françoise. When we later found out that Nancy washed hers several times a week, our shampooing regime was radically altered. Any time of the day you could see someone around the house with a towel wrapped around her head. We had just entered a season of intensive shampooing.

At the airport, Brigitte and Françoise felt uncomfortable with their English and, at the beginning, did not talk much. But Nancy, with her engaging personality and inquisitive mind, had many questions for everyone. Little by little my wife and daughter gained confidence and, by the time we reached home, you could not stop them.

As we entered our apartment building, Mrs. Alvarez, our Portuguese Concierge, helped with the luggage. She was wide-eyed and looked startled to hear my wife speaking in English. “Oh. là, là, Madame parle bien l’anglais,” she said. How could she know it was ‘bien’ since Mrs. Alvarez did not know a word of English herself ?

By dinner time everyone was bubbling over with high spirits. Nancy had studied French in school and wanted to practice it with us. Françoise wanted to

practice her English. After a lively discussion in ‘Franglais’, we agreed to speak English at home and French when we went out. But the rules were never respected and the system never worked out. I sometimes even found myself addressing Brigitte in English in the privacy of our bedroom!

Nancy had done a fair amount of research on France and was writing a summer paper comparing the French and American ways of life. In addition, she wanted to know more about the Eiffel Tower, Jeanne d’Arc, ‘le tour de France’, wine and vineyards, what had changed since we were under a Socialist government, and how come the French ate so much and remained slim.

Françoise was delighted. She did not know all the answers but was willing to look for them. Brigitte was delighted to discover that a young girl from Boston could have such a stimulating effect on the family. She later admitted to me that Nancy was living proof that prevailing clichés about Americans were wrong. I, myself, was delighted to realize that summer would be a creative season this year. Delight was all over the place.

Before going to bed, our young guest wanted to know what I did at Unesco in general and what I would be doing, as an example, the coming week. I briefly talked about the Organization and promised to invite her for a visit of the Palais de l’Unesco and explain things on the spot.

“As far as next week is concerned,” I added, “it will be an unusual week since I will be on mission in Paris itself.” Brigitte seemed the most surprised. I continued, ”I will represent Unesco at a meeting organized at the ‘Bibliothèque Nationale’ - the National Library. Heads of national libraries from the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and many other countries will attend. We have been invited to discuss the new design for a new national library to be known as the Bibliothèque de France. ”

But Brigitte asked why I called it a mission since the meeting was in Paris. “Yes, it may sound strange,” I said, “but since I will not go to the office that week, I need the Assistant Director-General’s signature on an official ‘travel order’. I must designate who will be Acting Director of my division during my absence, and at the end of the meeting I am expected to write a regular mission report. France is one of Unesco's Member States. When I attend an official meeting in France, I am on mission.”

“Do you get a daily subsistence allowance?” asked Françoise. “Only half of a ‘per diem,’ since I have no hotel expenses,” I replied.

We kissed on the cheek good night and tried to explain to Nancy that in France you kiss, hug, embrace or give an accolade on different occasions. Always when you meet and part. And sometimes in between. Usually barely touching the cheeks. You do it two, three or four times, depending on the part of France you

come from. No rules exist and you never know how many times to offer you cheek. Most often, it is triple kissing: left-right-left.

Unlike Anglo-Saxons, Latin men also kiss one another, especially members of the same family or very close friends. If they do not kiss they slap backs or shake hands. There has to be physical contact. If the hands are full they usually offer the little finger.

Coming back to the unwritten rules of what the French call ‘faire la bise,’ Brigitte said, “It is just like eating cheese and salad . Always before dessert, but in some regions of France, you eat cheese before salad, in others, the other way around and yet in other parts you eat them at the same time.” To conclude the evening, Brigitte quoted Charles de Gaulle who once said that a country like France that produced more than 340 different kinds of cheese was impossible to govern !

The next morning everyone was up, shampooed and ready quite early. No one wanted to waste time in bed. We were chatting at the table, sampling croissants, pains au chocolat, pains aux raisins, baguettes, ficelles and what have you. Brigitte must have burgled the corner bakery for the occasion. For once, I did not have to rush since the meeting at the Bibliothèque Nationale would not start before 10:30. Nancy declared that she had already become a French bakery addict.

All of a sudden, the doorbell rang and there entered my sister-in-law, Liliane, in glowing flamboyance, looking as fit as a fiddle. She had an appointment at 9:30 with the dentist across the street and could not resist the temptation to come by for a minute or two to meet Nancy. “I decided on the spur of the moment,” she said, striding in the dinning room with a well-rehearsed, airy elegance. Knowing her, she must have planned that particular stage-effect in all its minute details. As far as I can remember everyone always called Brigitte’s lively sister: “Aunt Lily.”

I liked Aunt Lily. I liked her and I think I understood what was of value in her under, the glittering window dressing. As a result, I kept explaining Aunt Lily to everyone - her husband, Albert, included. Liliane may have seemed superficial to an undiscerning eye. But in fact she was not. She was quite sensitive, receptive, devoted, conscientious and full of drive. She loved planning, sharing, organizing, traveling. She was enthusiastic and loved life.

Her problem was that, sometime back in her youth she had expressed the desire to spend her life on stage. When her father threatened to strangle her if she did, she pretended to give up the idea but continued her theatrical career on an informal daily basis, throughout her life. It became second nature. Every place became a stage, every event a play, every reply a theatrical repartee.

Aunt Lily was not superficial but she liked to glamorize. Elegance, appearance, effect, brilliance, harmony of colors and charm were devastatingly important to her. In reply to any criticism in this respect she often said that she

preferred fireworks to funerals.

In many respects Aunt Lily was typically French. More so that anyone of us. She carried in her a lingering notion of grandeur. Like Brigitte, she placed great emphasis on good taste, elegance, sophistication. Some thought of her as snobbish. Her husband, Albert, who enjoyed teasing her, often said after listening to her, “I see why the rooster was chosen as the French symbol. It is a beautiful bird which makes a lot of noise !”

No, Aunt Lily was not superficial. Unfortunately, people could not always take time to scratch the surface to discover the richness of its substratum and invariably considered her light-headed and frivolous. Someone had once said of her, “Aunt Lily is elegance gazing at itself in a mirror.”

That morning she talked for some twenty minutes, asked many questions but did not bother to listen to the answers, and finally decided she had to go to submit to the dentist’s torture. She said that Nancy was absolutely charming and offered to show her Paris anytime. “Dear Nancy,” she said “ do not let these people make you spend your summer at the Musée d’Orsay or Château de Fontainebleau. Paris has many sparkling places to discover. Paris is alive. Paris is not so much a city as a stage setting for a Broadway musical. The sidewalk cafes are exactly as depicted in movies. Every street is alive with the charm and freedom of life lived as a magic holiday.”

Aunt Lily decided that, as in the film ‘Sabrina,’ Nancy would return to the States after her Parisian visit transformed, super-sophisticated and totally Frenchified! Aunt Lily would take her to Antoine’s for a stunning haircut. She knew a good place to buy a special eye-shadow and very exceptional bracelets and necklaces.

She also promised to take Nancy to Giverny - Claude Monet’s home - to the boutiques of Faubourg Saint Honoré, and to Bagatelle Rose Garden. She invited everyone for dinner the following week. “Since my dentist will certainly torture me, I will have to eat mashed potatoes for a couple of days ! See you next week! Do come with a huge appetite !”

She walked out like a triumphant Diva who had just killed her unfaithful lover at the end of the third act, leaving behind a touch of Chanel N°5.

Brigitte who had not been able to say a word during the conversation, said to her sister, “Au revoir, Liliane. I won’t show you the way, you know the ‘stage-door,’ or as we call it in France: la sortie des Artistes .”

So Hurricane Lily was gone. Nancy was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Brigitte looked defeated. Françoise, in the meanwhile, had eaten all the croissants. I began to recollect my thoughts regarding the future of national libraries and left as Brigitte

was mumbling, ‘I love my sister, but I was not ready for her. I had not yet done my yoga !’

The following week, as agreed, we went to dinner at Aunt Lily’s. My meeting at the Bibliothèque Nationale had been difficult. My brother-in-law, Albert, wanted to know more because he had read in the papers that the plan for François Mitterrand’s new Bibliothèque de France was very controversial. As I explained, there were numerous political, conceptual and architectural problems. Even though the family dirty linen should not be washed in public, the internal disagreements among the various French parties involved were brought to an embarrassing light during the meeting.

Nancy wanted to know what was Unesco's competence in this area. I explained that Unesco had had a wealth of experience in building, restoring and modernizing libraries. Over the years we had contributed to the automation of library services in many developing countries. We had recently started jointly with the Egyptian authorities, a fascinating project for ‘The Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria,’ the so-called Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

The magic word stirred up general interest. Everyone wanted to know about the Ancient Library of Alexandria. Who had destroyed it ? Did we know where it was situated exactly ? Would Unesco organize a campaign to raise the necessary funds ? Would I go to Egypt ? In no time, the François Mitterrand’s new library project was forgotten and buried under the ashes of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina which had burnt down at the time of Julius Caesar!

Albert had put on the table an impressive number of bottles. It was cocktail time or, as we say in France, l’heure de l’apéritif . By the looks of it, the evening would be dedicated to mass intoxication. Aunt Lily brought three assortments of olives: the tasty Calamata , the huge Volos and, since France had to be represented in order to maintain its grandeur, olives from Nyons.

Then we spoke of another library-related activity that I was probably going to get personally involved in. Albert was always interested in these culturally-related activities of mine. My brother-in-law was a wealthy man who had come into a fortune by selling champagne. He thought that in his job he missed all the cultural glamour that is associated with Unesco. In a way, we were complementary. Albert had the money and the champagne. I was supposed to have the glamour. Many a day I would have willingly exchanged positions !

Albert and Lily were rich, but as many moneyed French, they liked to keep a low profile. Aunt Lily made certain that Albert did not display fat cigars and luxurious limousines. She always preached for a modest approach to affluence, which did not prevent her from spending a fortune on clothes.

In any case, coming back to the library world, I explained that on 14-15

February 1988 the Library of the Leningrad Academy of Science was partly destroyed by a serious fire. An estimated 188,000 titles in foreign languages were destroyed by fire and 220,000 titles were water-damaged. Unesco had offered its assistance to the Soviet Union and I was probably going to head a fact-finding mission.

Meanwhile, Aunt Lily had taken care of a thousand and one little details. Dinner was now ready. Ready, exotic, luscious and delectable. My brother-in-law was particularly happy. Of all the parts his wife staged in life he preferred her in the role of the cook. She protested saying, 'Albert, you very well know that in the kitchen, I am miscast !'

Speaking of plays, Nancy asked if Aunt Lily had ever seen Rosalind Russell in 'Auntie Mame'. The question was obviously not innocent. You could tell that Nancy was visualizing Liliane in a French version of the colorful comedy. The grande dame, Rosalind Russell, had won an Oscar for this part. Nancy added that in the comedy Auntie Mame used to say, 'Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!' Aunt Lily fully agreed to that and declared that Nancy, as opposed to her Albert, had quickly understood her style. After a short pause, she added, 'After thirty-two years of marriage, Albert is still trying to figure out whom he has married!' That night we certainly did not starve to death at life's banquet.

Lily and Albert loved to tease each other and had a sense of humor of their own. That night, the show was on for Nancy. Someone had once said that in every French individual lurked a peasant and a revolutionary. According to Aunt Lily, as far as their family was concerned, the peasant lurked in Albert, since he was the one that loved to look for champignons, spent hours discussing with the butcher and knew how to fatten geese for foie gras.

According to Albert, the family revolutionary lurked in Lily. She loved to watch the TV news when there were strikes, riots and stone-throwing at the police. As to her way of driving, you could tell that she considered traffic rules as interesting options. Once Albert found a sticker on the car bumper saying: Vive l'anarchie. To this day he thinks that she put it there, even though she denies it vigorously.

Looking at Nancy and Françoise with tenderness, Aunt Lily became nostalgic and deplored the absence of her two sons. They were in England for the summer with a French group to learn English. This was the third consecutive year they had gone there but no progress could be noticed. Every year, they came back with the same 'Franglais' and a new French girlfriend. Liliane suspected that they spent all the time speaking French among themselves and having a good time.

But Albert was in no mood for serious talk. He liked to tease his wife. 'You all know who Lilith was in the Semitic Myth?' he asked. 'Lilith was a female evil spirit roaming in desolate places, attacking children. In Jewish popular belief, she was the first wife of Adam. In the demonology of the Middle Ages, she was a famous witch.

But that was Lilith, of course, and not our sweet Lily.'

Aunt Lily, who must have heard the Semitic Myth time and time again, obviously did not like it. She lit a cigarette. She did not care for smoking either, but she loved to hold her twelve-inch long cigarette-holder from Thailand. It put the last touch to her style. She said, 'Albert, when the Lilith story bubbles its way to the surface it signals that you have had your fair share of Champagne! I do not want to roam in desolate places. Instead, I want to go with Jacques and Brigitte to Alexandria and Leningrad.'

Pandora's box was now open. I caught my breath and began explaining that missions were not as alluring as they sounded. There was a lot of hard, tedious work to be done. Endless discussions. Boring dinners. Aunt Lily was not listening. I could tell that she was already wrapped up in seven veils, hopping around the Keops Pyramid on a camel. 'Can you come along Nancy? We'll invite you,' she said. 'We'll all go. It will be marvelous!'

I raised the tone and said emphatically that Unesco's administration does not encourage mixing work and family vacation, for obvious reasons. Ce n'est pas serieux! But Aunt Lily was no longer with us. She was in Leningrad on the Neva with Peter the Great. She had traded her veils for an Ermine coat. She was admiring the works of Matisse, Césanne, Rembrandt and Picasso at the Ermitage Museum. She was strolling along the Peter-and-Paul Fortress on the Vassilievsky Island. Now she was on Nevski Avenue. 'Oh. We shall go to the Kirov! Oh. I want to see the Puchkine theater!' She was again on stage.

To change the subject, Brigitte skillfully set a new date for dinner at our place to talk it over. She also announced that at our place Nancy and Françoise would be going over some of their research findings. They were studying outstanding differences between the French and American ways of life. But the project was a long range one and would not really be completed until Françoise had spent the next summer in Boston. But they had discovered interesting facts about Paris and wanted to share them with us. It would be a sort of informal debate and everyone would be encouraged to actively participate. I mumbled, jokingly, that if this trend continued I would not be able to tell my office from my home any longer. And Aunt Lily added, 'Or your missions from your vacations!'

We hugged and kissed everyone twice on both cheeks, which took a good four to five minutes, and we happily descended the staircase. Of course, when we reached the second floor, Brigitte suddenly remembered to discuss a number of urgent matters with her sister who was waving at us from the fourth floor. I said that it was a most convenient thing to do since the neighbors could also participate in the debate.

In France, this is called l'ésprit d'éscalier. It is a special frame of mind that has to come up with last-minute items for discussion when everything has supposedly

been settled. Since Aunt Lily did not have her sharp ears any longer - but, of course, would never admit it- it seemed that Brigitte's suggestions went in one ear and out the other. All she kept replying from the fourth floor was, Oui. Oui. I thought that it was a shrewd way to have Aunt Lilly agree to anything. The problem was that the conversation concerned next week's dessert that Brigitte wanted Liliane to prepare. A fabulous Charlotte. We all hoped that Albert would make sure that the Oui. Oui. would have an adequate follow-up.

The week that followed our dinner at Aunt Lily's was a busy one, both at the office and at home. At the office I spent long hours drafting a proposal for the biennial program and budget of my division as well as a chapter for the draft six-year medium-term plan. When I came home very late every evening I was tired and usually took a shower and went directly to bed.

However, on Friday evening of that week, when I returned home I found Brigitte, Nancy and Françoise highly animated and euphoric. They were in the middle of discussions to which I was invited to participate right away. My mind could not be detached from the meeting where the Assistant Director-General had said that my proposals looked pretty much the same as those of the previous exercises. He had used an expression which was still hurting: Dejà vu!

Fortunately, after a while, the three enthusiastic ladies managed to drag me to their level of preoccupation. Little by little, I participated in their discussions and enjoyed myself. First of all, they had to tell me a funny story.

Nancy and Françoise had stopped at a cafe in the Latin Quarter, where Nancy needed to go to the powder room - if one could use such an elegant euphemism for the occasion. A few minutes later she came back to the table laughing hysterically and blushing to the roots of her hair.

She had never seen a so-called, Toilette à la Turque - a shallow porcelain tray on the floor with a hole in the middle and foot-rests at each side, commonly called a Turkish toilet. She was trying to figure out how to use the toilet and where to put her feet when the light went out. The light switch in most Parisian cafes are fitted with an automatic timer for energy-saving. All of a sudden, she was plunged into total darkness. As she was trying to reach the light switch, avoiding at the same time the hole in the middle, she inadvertently touched the flushing device which thoroughly washed her feet under intense water pressure, while she screamed in total hysteria.

We all laughed. It was good to be away from Le Palais de l'Unesco! In the meantime, Brigitte had served some Lebanese mezzeh , made up of dozens of small dishes filled with delicious oriental appetizers. I had some ice-cold Pastis to go with it and listened to the girls. They also wanted to share with me a sample of their notes so that I could get an overview of their observations concerning Parisian life.

On the positive side of things, Nancy had been surprised to discover the many services offered by the Minitel - an on-line information service provided by the French Post Office prior to the advent of the Internet - fast TGV trains, a most efficient Parisian transportation system, and very developed social services for children, senior citizens, the poor and the sick.

She was amazed to witness a public transport bus driver about to depart from a bus-stop readily reopening the bus door for you, when he sees you running to catch the bus. She was impressed by the politeness of cashiers, butchers and bakers. Everybody says, Bonjour madame, Merci monsieur, Au revoir madame . Children also seem to acquire basic social courtesy very early in life.

Above all, Nancy felt the French seemed to know how to live and to create delights for the senses and the spirit. They had developed the art of leisure. ‘In the U.S., we are taught how to work hard and make money. In France you are taught how to spend money and enjoy life,’ she said. ‘Paris is so elegant, clean and lively,’ she added, ‘ All you have to do is go for a walk in any street and you feel rejuvenated, in spite of the highly polluted air.’

Nancy had learned that the French pay 20% more taxes than Americans; she found Paris extremely expensive. On the negative side of things, she had a few criticisms to formulate but felt somewhat shy to sound critical in a French home. We encouraged her until she spoke.

She said, ‘In the U.S. people admit errors. It is considered an honest and mature attitude. In France, it seems that no one would ever admit to having made a mistake.’ She also noticed that small lies are perfectly acceptable in France. In addition, she could not understand why, in general, people ignore one another, never talk or even smile to each other in elevators, public transportation or shops. They look distrustful.

As for French driving, she thought it was totally insane. Cars turn left from a right-hand lane. No one seems to care. Is it tolerance or carelessness? The Place de l’Etoile is incredible! You have to see it to believe it, with cars merging from all of its twelve major avenues, bypassing each other and roaring around the various exits, with no traffic lights, no stop signs, no policemen to direct circulation. And yet no accidents! ‘That is miraculous,’ she said. ‘ The French must be quite alert and, all in all, very good drivers.’

Two other things shocked her. French television was never on time. Programs and shows are on occasion several minutes late. Not in the U.S. But she admitted preferring French TV which had few interruptions for commercials.

The second surprising thing was the attitude of the sales people in stores. ‘If they do not have what you are looking for, they will tell you that it does not exist, you will never find it elsewhere, it is out of fashion, or it is not manufactured any longer.

And, in any case, it was never any good, to start with. At the end you feel stupid just to have asked for it.'

We all agreed, laughed, added a few other French characteristics, and discussed at great length French and American ways of life. To conclude the evening, Françoise and Nancy sang Josephine Baker's old song, 'J'ai deux amours, mon pays et Paris.' (I have two loves, my country and Paris.) It was delightful.

On Saturday evening Albert and Aunt Lily bearing the 'Charlotte' arrived on time. But before discussing anything else, Aunt Lily wanted to know if any decision had been reached concerning the missions to Egypt and the Soviet Union. I explained that the mission to Egypt was under preparation but would take place much later. I was going to be traveling with high Officials from Unesco and, unfortunately, there was no possibility for any family member to join. That settled that.

What about Leningrad ? 'As for Leningrad,' I continued in a quivering voice 'I'll have to go for a first exploratory mission in three weeks' time. I'll probably return to Leningrad at a later date with a more formal fact-finding delegation.'

C'est magnifique ! said Aunt Lily. She decided that three weeks was all that was needed for visas and preparation. She knew very well Boris Mickhailov at the Soviet Embassy who would facilitate matters in exchange for a couple of champagne bottles. Charming man! Albert was, unfortunately, unable to come at this time of the year, but Brigitte, Nancy, Françoise and she would have a wonderful time while poor Jacques would deal with the aftermath of the fire of the Academy of Science Library! And that settled that.

'You do not have to worry about anything, Jacques. We shall not bother you in your work. We'll be totally independent. We shall not be any burden to you. C'est magnifique ! Oh, I want to see the Pushkine Theater ! Nancy, don't you worry. I'll call your parents for permission. Now that Mikhail Gorbatchov is pushing perestroika and preaching glasnost , I am sure your parents will agree to the trip. I'll take care of everything. You will all be my guests !'

I had two or three stiff drinks and eventually relaxed and inwardly gave in. After all everyone was enthusiastic about the idea. Why not ? It could turn out to be an interesting experience. Dinner was served and we left the prospect of Leningrad for Gay Paris !

Brigitte had done wonders with the dinner. 'You have outdevilled the devil,' said Aunt Lily. Nancy was the first one to tell a story about Paris. The story of the metro. Because of my Unesco background I was asked to act as a sort of moderator to keep things reasonably under control. Albert, as usual, was in charge of the champagne.

Nancy took us back to 1893. At that time, she informed us, London, New York and Berlin had their subways. Romantic Paris had its horse-cabs and calèches. The politicians had argued against any underground transportation for years to come. Surface transportation projects under consideration included all sorts of crazy suspended trains, ugly viaducts crossing the city over the buildings, and hanging boats. Fortunately, none of these extravagant projects, which would have defaced Paris, were ever implemented.

At that time France, had just offered part of Congo to Leopold II, King of Belgium - some gift ! - and the latter was trying to make a worthwhile gift to France in return. The king asked one of his girlfriends, the Parisian dancer Cleo de Mérode, for an idea. She had heard of a certain Fulgence Bienvenüe who had desperately tried to build a subway in Paris. Cleo suggested that a metro would be a nice gift. Leopold II invited Bienvenüe to Belgium and had him explain his project in front of Baron Empain, the King's Financier.

The Belgians had then to convince the French to accept such a gift. In spite of a strong resistance in many quarters and numerous political and technical problems, digging started on October 4th, 1898 at the location of the present 'Franklin Roosevelt Metro Station'. On July 19, 1900 Metro Line N¡1 'Vincennes-Neuilly', thirteen and half kilometers long, was inaugurated. Bienvenüe then worked on other lines and ultimately died poor. The station 'Montparnasse- Bienvenüe' is named in his memory.

The huitres chaudes au foie gras had long been tasted and the filets de soles au basilic were getting cold, as everyone was thanking Nancy for her interesting and concise account. No one around the table seemed to have known or remembered the facts relating to the Paris metro. Aunt Lily said in admiration, 'Nancy, you had to come all the way from Boston to tell some ignorant Parisians about their own metro. Amazing ! Brigitte your soles are outstanding. What is the next story?'

Next was Françoise's story of the Eiffel Tower. 'You will probably be amazed to learn,' she started by saying, 'that Gustave Eiffel's real name was Gustave Bonikausen. If he had not used the pseudonym 'Eiffel', we would have had in Paris the Bonikausen Tower !' Everyone stopped eating in total amazement. Françoise continued her story.

Gustave Eiffel had an extraordinary career. He graduated in chemistry in 1855, but worked as an assistant to a Railroad Engineer. In no time he became known for his famous bridges in Bordeaux, Bayonne, Florac and all over the country. He was the master mind of airy two-hinged arches, such as that over the Douro river in Portugal, which was constructed from the piles without scaffolding. He built bridges in Europe, Indochina and Africa. In general, he used small and light iron beams instead of cast-iron. At fifty-five years old he was known around the world for his dramatic 564 meters long Garabit viaduct in Southern France. In 1885 he designed the inner structure for the Statue of Liberty.

Then, in 1889 France decided to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution with a World Exhibition which would be a sort of glorification, or apotheosis, of metal and machine - two symbols of the victory of the intellect over obscurantism. Gustave Eiffel presented a project of a metal tower, three hundred meters tall. It had never been done. It could not be done. The Organizing Committee laughed at Gustave Eiffel and tried to ridicule him. He insisted. He came back with a design. He explained. Eventually, the Minister of Commerce was fascinated by the idea.

A heated controversy spread over France. Many petitions were signed in order to stop the project by illustrious men of the time such as Gounod, Sully-Prudhomme and Maupassant. The project was thought to be frightfully ugly. Some argued that it was wrong to build something taller than Notre-Dame, which is only 66 meter high. Paris would be in the dark since the huge tower would overshadow the city. If it collapsed it would destroy Paris. In any case it would bring bad luck. Regardless of these objections, on March 31, 1889 the Tower was inaugurated.

'During the Exhibition, the Eiffel Tower was a real success,' continued Françoise 'but many famous personalities of the time, such as the poet Verlaine actively tried to have it dismantled once the Exhibition was over. But the Parisians had adopted it. As a radio set, it could intercept messages from all over the world. In 1914 it intercepted a secret message of the German Army of von Kluck, which allowed Joffre to stop the German invasion. The Eiffel Tower had saved Paris.'

We were all very pleased with Françoise and Nancy's accounts, but felt slightly embarrassed in realizing that we knew so little about certain basic aspects of our beloved city. 'The truth of the matter,' said Aunty Lily, 'is that we pay too much attention to the Louvre, Napoleon and Louis XIV. But every inch of this city has a fabulous past which deserves to be studied with love. Thank you girls ! Thank you for telling us those simple, but fascinating stories !'

My wife had a problem in reconciling the debate with the meal. Now the fricassée de veau au citron and the gratin de champignons aux épinards demanded undivided attention. In my capacity as a moderator, I diverted all the attention to the food. After the cheese and the salad we finally attacked Liliane's Charlotte.

We eventually collapsed around some coffee and talked for hours. The girls told us about the Paris sewers, the story of the Moulin Rouge, and that of the Closerie des Lilas , where Hemingway loved to dine. Nancy had compiled a list of some well known Americans who had visited Paris or lived there. The list was endless: Audrey Hepburn, Lena Horn, Orson Welles, Ingrid Bergman, Somerset Maugham, Danny Kay, Art Buchwald... writers, singers, painters, financiers, musicians, politicians, designers and millionaires. The link between America and Paris has always been very close.

‘And to think,’ said Nancy, ‘that some American tourists say that the French are unfriendly to Americans !’ And Françoise added,’ The French are the U.S.’s oldest and only consistently loyal ally throughout history. It is thanks to French funds and military assistance that the American Revolution against the British was crowned with success ! ‘

The moment seemed solemn enough for Aunt Lily to stand up and play a theatrical part. She raised her glass at the Franco-American friendship and drank to all the U.S. Presidents she could remember. She spoke with lyricism and great emotion about America saving France in World War II. She then suggested we sing the French and American national anthems. Brigitte was worried about the neighbors. It was getting out of hand, but the Moderator had lost all power of control. Albert kept pouring champagne when I realized that Françoise and Nancy had also been drinking. I did not say anything. When I was a child my grandmother used to say, ‘ A little champagne is good for you, Jacques. In the countryside they give it to the dying.’

Albert thought it was time to go, but Aunt Lily wanted a last story. The evening had been stimulating and she wanted a little prolongation for the pleasure of it. So Nancy and Françoise told us a last story. The story of the Arch of Triumph.

Towards the beginning of the 17th century, Queen Marie of Médicis ordered the creation of an avenue starting from the Royal Palace of the Tuileries and stretching all the way to what was then open countryside - and is today the ‘rond-point des Champs-Elysées.’ A century later, the avenue was prolonged to the top of the Chaillot hill - which the Parisians used to pompously call la montagne de Chaillot - and beyond to Neuilly. At the time the avenue ran through vineyards and vegetable fields.

The Parisians felt an esthetic need to put some sort of monument at the highest spot of the avenue, on top of the Chaillot hill (present location of the Etoile). Many ideas were put forward. An Obelisk. A fountain. Even a pyramid. But the hill of Chaillot, too uneven and rough, had first to be smoothed and leveled down by more than fifteen meters.

By then Napoleon was looking for an adequate site to elevate a monument to the glory of his soldiers. Many sites were proposed and discarded. When the present location of the ‘Arc de Triomphe’ was first suggested, Napoleon thought that it was much too far out of the city. He did not want his monument ‘out in the desert,’ as he said. Eventually he was given enough convincing arguments to accept it.

The location was retained but the type of monument had not yet been decided. One of the projects was a museum in the shape of a huge elephant to remind the world of Napoleon’s famous expedition to Egypt. Inside the elephant would be a number of rooms. The crazy project seemed to receive a lot of support. Fortunately, Napoleon preferred a triumphal arch along the line of those of the

Roman Emperors. We very nearly had a huge elephant at the end of the Champs-Elysées !

In 1806 the first stone of the Arc de Triomphe was laid down. For Napoleon's wedding with Marie-Louise in 1810 the Arch had not been completed. A sham was put up, at great cost, in twenty days, with dummy bas-reliefs. The sham was destroyed the very next day after the passage of Marie-Louise. Napoleon never saw the Arch completed. By 1814 he was exiled to the island of Ste-Helène and work on the Arch was interrupted.

Eventually Louis-Philippe decided to complete the project. It was inaugurated in 1836 but the top had not yet been completed. In 1840, when Napoleon's ashes were brought back to Paris, another sham had to be put up to complete the top of the monument for the occasion. Later Haussman opened up the 12 avenues forming the 'Etoile' and in 1921 the unknown soldier was buried under the Triumphal Arch.

Napoleon's ashes had been brought back to Paris and the Triumphal Arch completed, while Albert was sleeping like an angel, gently snoring in his armchair. Good night everyone ! Many thanks and kisses. The girls had been wonderful. Dinner was divine. The Charlotte was exquisite. Bonne nuit!

Between a family dinner and a visit to a museum; between a little research and an excursion to a château time had gone by. We were already in early September. The quality of light had changed. Parisians had come back from vacation, nicely tanned and exhausted. Traffic jams blocked circulation. Summer was over.

By then Brigitte and Françoise were totally at ease with their English to the continued amazement of Madame Alvarez. Nancy had undergone Aunt Lily's sophistication metamorphosis. Everyone's hair looked almost as beautiful as on the TV commercials. Normally, Nancy should have gone back home by then. But a special extension had been arranged so that she could participate in the expedition to Leningrad.

Aunt Lily did not show up as often as she used to. She was busily making all sorts of arrangements for the forthcoming trip. She had bought and studied travel guides, made reservations, obtained visas and prepared luggage. She had Mademoiselle Simone, the seamstress, move into her apartment for several days to undertake all sorts of alterations to her clothes. She had told Mademoiselle Simone that the new fashion this year had been strongly influenced by Gorbatchov's Perestroika . Everything had to have a Russian touch !

In the office, I prepared my files and briefs for Leningrad with a sense of great serenity. Something good had happened. Nancy had brought a breeze of youth and enthusiasm into the family circle. I had sensed and shared a certain amount of happiness. I had not been on mission miles away but right there in the middle of my

own family and environment. In fact, I was now happily looking forward to sharing Leningrad with the four ladies. I did not know then how the battle of Leningrad would turn out to be !

The Battle of Leningrad

Three thousand miles after leaving Paris we landed in dark, cold Leningrad.

The flight being relatively short, Brigitte could not see why we had waited so long to come to Leningrad. ‘To think that before the age of the railroad,’ said studious Françoise, ‘the journey by coach from Paris took as much as six weeks!’ Aunt Lily informed us that nowadays the trip from Moscow to Vladivostok with the Trans-Siberian railway takes more than seven days. She had inquired at a Paris travel Office, but fortunately had not pursued the idea, remembering the train scenes from the film ‘Dr. Jivago.’

The waiting line at Immigration was wearisome. The Immigration officers looked austere and grim-faced. In fact, everyone and everything around us looked cold and stern. Everyone but my four, lively girls who did not seem to notice anything. I glanced at them with some pride. Françoise and Nancy were two exquisitely attractive, young ladies. Brigitte, who had not quite turned fifty, was endowed with beauty and elegance. Aunt Lily, ageless, was glowing and resplendent. The airport belonged to them.

They chatted loudly and at random. ‘Why would the trip by train to the other end take seven days ?’ asked Nancy. Aunt Lily explained that this was a very large country. While the USA has four time zones between the east and west coasts - not counting Hawaii - the USSR has eleven. After a short silence, Françoise said with an expression of disappointment on her face, ‘The whole of France is confined to a single time zone !’ Nancy gracefully remarked that the greatness of a nation had nothing to do with the number of time zones. She had just delicately tickled our Gallic pride. We all smiled with satisfaction.

When we arrived at the Immigration counter we ran into the problem of nationality. We were given forms to fill in. Most questions were clear. But there were two different questions on the form that were confusing to us. One related to ‘citizenship’ and another to ‘nationality’ and we did not see the difference. We asked in English and French and the Immigration officer replied in Russian. It was obvious that we were getting nowhere. We were then asked to step aside and wait for a higher official.

When the latter arrived he explained everything, sternly but politely. In the USSR all citizens have Soviet citizenship, but they differ in nationality. The USSR,

being a multinational state, was comprised of people of many different nations or ethnic groups. There were well over a hundred of them : Armenians, Bashkirs, Chechens, Georgians, Ingush, Komis, Mordvinians, Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, etc. Each nation has its own identity, culture and language - that is its own nationality.

The explanation was clear but what was not clear was how it would apply to us. Nancy asked if she could put ‘USA’ under ‘citizenship’ and ‘Massachusetts’ under ‘nationality’. The higher official smiled. Aunt Lily said her husband, Albert, was of Lebanese origin and asked, ‘Could I put Phoenician for nationality ?’ The higher official shouted something in Russian and the Immigration officer collected our forms and let us go through without ‘nationality’ !

The luggage clearance was expeditious since Mr. Igor Panushkin, the Representative of the Leningrad Academy of Science Library, greeted us and took over, facilitating the remaining formalities.

Igor Panushkin was probably in his late forties. He was blond, robust and charming. His English was fairly good. I knew from the very first moment we met that we would get along well. In no time we were in a large black car headed for the hotel.

At the time of our visit, the city had not yet been renamed Saint-Petersburg. Mikhail Gorbatchov had been in power since 1985 and was trying to reshape and modernize the USSR. The Strategic Arms Reduction Talks with the USA and a gradual re-establishment of warmer relations with the West had created an international slackening of tension and a spirit of hope.

The Berlin Wall had not yet collapsed and the USSR was still in existence, but the Tchernobyl catastrophe of 1986 had already uncovered for the world a definite technological obsolescence of the Soviet Union. Western assistance had been sought. Gorbatchov’s new transparent style, glassnost, and admitted need for modernization, perestroika, had made it plain for everyone that the so-called Big Power was neither so big nor so powerful.

This was the prevailing mood as, the following day, I opened the meeting with the officials of the Library of the Leningrad Academy of Science, designed to ascertain the international assistance needed by the Russians to repair the damage caused by the fire.

The dozen officials I met during my visit could be roughly divided into two groups. Those who, under the banner of Glassnost, seemed to speak the truth, outlining the weaknesses and deficiencies of the Library. And those, belonging to the old nomenklatura, who insisted in projecting a positive picture no matter what, embellishing facts and altering figures. The first group wanted international help, through Unesco. The second, did not favor any foreign intrusion.

Needless to say, my task was going to be arduous. In meetings, while each participant gave his version of the situation, I had to guess to which group each one belonged. Who was telling the truth and who was distorting the facts? Who had the real authority? Who was a technical specialist and who was a politician?

My mission was first and foremost of an exploratory nature and my task was to propose, by the end of the meeting, a workable action plan which responded to local needs. Every day I tried to understand a little more and gradually undo the puzzle.

Back at the hotel, that first evening, I felt tense. Sitting at the hotel restaurant with Brigitte, Aunt Lily, Nancy and Françoise, my mind wandered as they shared their impressions of the day with enthusiasm. I could not help but silently recapitulate in my mind the meeting discussions, try to understand their significance and think of a strategy for the following day. I had been intrigued by the statuesque woman everybody seemed to listen to with particular attention. I believe her name was Tatyana. She reminded me of Sophia Loren in her early movies.

In that frame of mind I listened with half an ear to the scintillating wit of my four, happy girls. They must have had their batteries fully recharged and were now in high social gear. They had seen fabulous things. They had to tell me everything. They spoke two or three at a time. Sometimes all four.

Did I know that Olga Ananiev, the guide that the Academy of Science had assigned to them, was just fabulous? Did I know about the famous Leningrad battle during World War II and the heroic resistance of the Russians ? Did I know that forced industrialization moved thousands of peasants, the so-called muzhiks, from the country into the city? Between 1926 and 1939 the Leningrad population had grown by 3,500,000!

‘That is why,’ said Aunt Lily, ‘most Russians you see in the street seem to react in a peasant-like manner. In the large crowds of people we have met today, the frequent body contact was unbearable to us. Not to them. In crowds they touch, push, shove . They seem to have great difficulties keeping their hands to themselves. You can tell that they still maintain the peasant traditions of their ancestral villages. The aristocratic manners of the Tsar and his court have gone with seventy years of communist wind !’

I looked around to see if anyone could hear us and asked them to be discreet. ‘By the way,’ said Brigitte ‘ speaking of discretion, do you know that someone has searched our luggage while we were gone ?’ ‘Well, I am not surprised,’ I replied, ‘But we have nothing to hide, anyway.’

Referring to the floor woman who keeps room keys, provides hot water for tea, checks every movement and controls the situation on our floor, Françoise

concluding loudly, ‘She certainly works for the KGB !’

‘By the way,’ said Brigitte, ‘ look at that man with the dark glasses who pretends to read the newspaper while listening to our conversation; he has been staring at the same page for the last half hour !’

‘He is a slow reader,’ said Aunt Lily with a giggle.

‘Well, well, this is not a John Le Carré novel, nor a James Bond movie,’ I added, hoping to put an end to this type of conversation.

My remark seemed to have produced the opposite effect. It startled Brigitte who said, ‘Come on, Jacques, you remember all the spy stories you used to tell about your Soviet colleagues at Unesco? Nancy would be most interested to hear about Vladimir, the KGB spy, remember? And Mikhail’s forged birth certificate! ‘

Pandora’s box was wide open again and I would not be able to shut it for hours to come! Despite my procrastinations, I had to narrate in full detail every Unesco spy story I had once told Brigitte in great confidence. Françoise and Aunt Lily had never heard such stories and would not let me go until I told the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I was not happy. We had to choose Leningrad, of all places, to have such a conversation !

I spoke in a low voice, looking right and left to make sure that no one was overhearing us. The man with the dark glasses had turned the page of his newspaper, which was a reassuring sign.

I began by recalling that most Russian officials serving abroad in USSR Embassies, the United Nations and the various specialized agencies of the UN system, such as Unesco, are either KGB officers or have been co-opted by the KGB to report on their foreign contacts. This also applies to the officials serving at home in state agencies that come in contact with foreigners. ‘It certainly applies to your guide, Olga Ananiev,’ I added, ‘ who is probably writing her report on you, right at this very moment.’

That last remark had a sudden and unexpected effect on the four of them. They became silently apprehensive and inert - totally mummified. The man with the dark glasses, intrigued by the sudden silence at our table, followed by low voice conversation, glanced in our direction and seemed to be all ears.

‘Why would they be interested in us ?’ asked Nancy. ‘Well, you have to admit that the fact that a Unesco Official comes on mission with four ladies on private business may seem unusual!’

Aunt Lily immediately replied, ‘Well, Jacques, if you thought we would create difficulties for you, you should have told us !’ ‘I think he has tried to. ‘ said Françoise.

I smiled.

Brigitte put an end to this exchange by saying, ‘All of this is beside the point. We want to hear the Unesco spy stories.’

I told Vladimir’s story which had been documented back in the 70’s in le Figaro, le Monde, le Canard Enchainé and every other French newspaper under the sun.

Vladimir was a Russian spy who, like many other Russian spies, worked at Unesco, under diplomatic cover. He was smart and well-read, spoke fluent English and French, smoked one cigarette after another, was always in a hurry and regularly disappeared from his desk for no official reason. His secretary, Jacqueline, kept looking for him, running down the corridors calling ‘Vladimir, Vladimir.’ Vladimir would eventually be back at work with some vague excuse for having vanished . One day he did not return.

We learned from the local papers that he had been caught in front of the Saint Sulpice Church exchanging some documents with someone - probably concerning the supersonic Concorde. He had fallen into a trap. He was immediately expelled from France as persona non grata. A few days later some employees from the USSR Embassy were expelled as well . A couple of weeks later, a number of employees from the French Embassy in Moscow were sent back to France, in retaliation.

While finishing my dessert, I answered a thousand and one questions. Nancy remarked that, no doubt, some American colleagues at Unesco were working for the CIA. All spies need a good cover up.

I then tried to conclude by saying that, with the advent of Gorbatchov, the Cold War was probably soon coming to an end and all these spy stories would no longer be of great interest. Again Brigitte contradicted me by reminding me that Mikhail’s scandal had just taken place. The heavy bureaucratic machinery, she thought, would not react so promptly.

We had finished our dinner. The bottle of wine was empty. But I was not allowed to move unless I related the Mikhail scandal.

Mikhail was informally known in Unesco as ‘le Colonel,’ because someone had spread the rumor that he was a high-ranking colonel in the KGB. We did not know how true this was. In any case Mikhail was to retire very soon, having reached the compulsory retirement age of sixty.

One day, an official government letter from Moscow announced to the Director-General that Mikhail was no longer 60, but 55 years old. The letter explained that his birth certificate was thought to have been lost during the war, but

had now been found when an old aunt died. Mikhail's age which had been roughly estimated was now officially known for sure. The good news was that Mikhail did not have to retire and could stay with Unesco another five years! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Unesco could not question the Government's official letter. So Mikhail stayed. His 'curriculum vitae' circulated under cover in the Secretariat, and was the source of several jokes. With his new birth date, Mikhail had now apparently finished high school when he was 13. He married when he was 15 and finished university at 18 ! Le Colonel became known in the Secretariat as the genius Colonel - Le Colonel genial.

So ended the first day of my mission to Leningrad. That night I had difficulties digesting the herring. My sleep was haunted by men with dark glasses, just like the Blues Brothers. I was visited by Mikhail, Vladimir, Molotov, Stalin and others. Big crowds of muzhiks were everywhere. Everyone touched, pushed and shoved. Aunt Lily shouted, 'Keep your hands to yourselves!' I was then accused of having no nationality. Fortunately stunning Tatyana, looking more than ever like Sophia Loren, came to my rescue. After she spoke, all the men with dark glasses disappeared and the crowds of muzhiks vanished. She whispered 'Please do not say that the Library suffered a fire. There was no fire. Remember, no fire... no fire... no fire.'

The next working day was as frustrating as the first one. What remained unclear for me was who, in fact, was negotiating with whom. At first sight, the dozen Russians present around the table were supposed to be negotiating with me. In reality, they were agreeing, disagreeing, arguing and negotiating among themselves, through me. Again I tried all day to figure out who was whom and who wanted what.

On top of that difficulty was the difference in negotiating techniques between Russians and Westerners. Russians are expert negotiators. They negotiate in the way they play chess, planning several moves ahead. Also, while Americans and Europeans regard compromise as desirable and often inevitable, Russians regard compromise as a sign of weakness, a retreat. They are patient and have time. They wait.

An additional challenge in this particular case was that I did not have a precise position to defend or negotiate. This was a fact-finding mission. I needed to assess the damage done by the fire, listen to the needs and requirements and propose a scheme of co-operation.

During the afternoon tea break I told Igor Panushkin, whom I thought was the most open and sincere participant, 'Look, Igor, I feel very pessimistic as to the outcome of the meeting. I am afraid I will soon have to go back to Paris empty-handed. You still have to settle many things among yourselves before we can open the doors to international cooperation in this matter!'

Soon after, he asked me if we could have an informal dinner in order to talk

things over - just the two of us. I invited him to the hotel. He accepted the invitation but suggested a more discreet restaurant near the Saint Peter and Paul Fortress.

I sent a message to Brigitte to tell her about my plans for the evening and at the end of the meeting took a cab to the restaurant. The cab driver refused payment in rubles. After a little argument, I settled the bill in dollars. I had no choice. Russia was indeed changing !

The restaurant was relatively small and congenial. Most diners were seated in large groups. There were only a few diners seated at tables either alone or in small groups. Igor Panushkin had reserved a table for two in a quiet corner. When I arrived, all the zakuski , constituting the first course, were on the table with an ice-cold bottle of vodka. I admired the assortment of cold meats, a variety of fish, fresh and pickled vegetables and a lovely dish of black caviar.

In the Russian culture, as in many others, one does not attack the main issue of discussion right away. That night, the conversation first dwelled on the fabulous caviar. Igor explained that in Russia you may be served, under the name of caviar, eggs from lump, cod or salmon. That night we had the real roe of sturgeon. The best kind, for that matter : the Beluga. ‘Would you believe, it takes twenty years for the Beluga female to mature enough to produce the eggs!’ said Igor. He explained that a less expensive type existed, the Sevruga, whose female takes seven years to mature before producing the eggs. They are good but much smaller than the Beluga. ‘The caviar eggs must reach your mouth without being crushed,’ said Igor. ‘That is why we use wooden or horn spoons. No knives!’

Then, Igor tried to brief me to help me understand the complex local situation. At the beginning of the meal, when both of us were completely sober, he was very careful in choosing his words, often resorting to allegories, metaphors and other veiled, symbolic statements. As the vodka consumption increased, the talk became more direct and explicit.

In Russia, Vodka is drunk straight, ice-cold in small glasses in one ‘bottoms-up’ gulp. Russians seem to enjoy the flavor of vodka, of course, but their greatest pleasure appears to be drunkenness. They want to forget. To take measure of a foreigner, Russians usually want to drink with him. But that was not Igor’s intention. He really wished to help me understand so that, in turn, I could help him and the Library.

I remember he tried to explain a number of things. ‘First of all, one has to distinguish between old and young,’ he said. He explained that the older generations who have gone through Stalinist purges and have witnessed ideologically inspired violence are passive and less inclined to support change. The younger generations, on the other hand, have greater hopes for the future and are receptive to change. Apparently, that issue was one of Gorbathov’s dilemmas.

From what Igor later said I understood that Russia had a love-hate relationship with the West. There were two schools of thought in that respect. The 'Westernizers' who wanted to borrow from the West technology, management and know-how in order to modernize. And the 'Slavophiles' who wanted to protect Russia's cultural values, agricultural life, and mysticism. 'At our meeting,' Igor said, 'the controversy between supporters of change and opponents of Western-type reform, is apparent.'

He added, 'Another fact to keep in mind is that neither initiative nor hard work was encouraged under Communism. The system has produced what Russians call 'dead souls.' There are some motivated and creative people, but they are the exceptions.'

I raised my glass to Igor and said, ' In Vodka veritas! You belong to the category of young, creative and motivated Westernizers!'

Russians can be uncouth, abrupt and distrustful at work. But within the intimate circle of friends they become relaxed, warm and hospitable. The real Russian soul - the famous Russkaya dusha - pops up. 'Dusha' is made up of sentimentality, exuberance, spirituality, romanticism, and an array of other emotions. With the help of a little vodka I thought I felt Igor's Russkaya dusha. As a matter of fact I discovered a little bit of it in me.

'And who exactly is Tatyana?' I suddenly asked. Igor Panushkin smiled and replied, ' Tatyana Nikitine is no librarian. She knows nothing about books, libraries or fires. She is the highest representative of the Party. Tatyana is at the meeting to tow the Party line and to make sure that we minimize, in front of you, the negative effects of the fire and put up a very positive show.'

I told Igor that she had visited me in my dream and had told me in a sexy voice 'No fire. No fire.' He thought that it was very funny and could not stop laughing.

Igor explained that this attitude was called 'pokazukha' and had prevailed in Russia well before Communism. He recalled the classic 'Potemkin' villages which were nothing but false village facades staged along the travel route of Empress Catherine the Great to make her believe that her people lived well.

As we proceeded with our dinner, I asked Igor how could some participants twist events, invent new statistics, misstate facts in front of everyone without being embarrassed or openly challenged. 'And to think that we are meeting under the roof of the Academy of Science !'

He said that for the Russians the fudged facts were not exactly lies, but were regarded as false village facades of the Potemkin villages that were staged for me. He then proceeded to explain that I should try to understand a Russian characteristic which is called vranyo . He quoted someone who had once said that the Russians

were incapable of telling downright lies, but were equally incapable of telling the truth. Igor stared at me, expecting a reaction. I must have looked puzzled.

He proceeded to say that vranyo was untranslatable. A sort of a fib or white lie. Somewhere between the truth and a lie. It is a sort of varnished truth. Vranyo is the sign of the Russian inability to face facts, especially when they are not favorable to Russia. 'Olga Ananiev who is helping your family and friend discover Leningrad is a master of vranyo , so is our beautiful Tatyana Nikitine! By the way,' added Igor, 'it is another national characteristic that preceded Communism. Dostoyevsky refers to it in his novels.'

Igor went on to explain that Russians do not consider vranyo to be dishonest. It is bad manners to openly challenge the fibber, unless it is done with subtlety and tact. It is a subtle game which is difficult to grasp by foreigners. When using vranyo , Russians know that they are fibbing and expect their audience to understand that. 'That is why at the meeting,' he concluded, 'no one openly and abruptly challenged the speakers who fudged the facts , as it would be done in the West. But we did challenge them our own way, by presenting a different picture.'

The bottle of vodka was by now empty. I was physically and morally satisfied. Igor had helped me understand a little better the Russian soul as Takahashi had once helped me penetrate an inch into the Japanese soul. As to my own French soul, it felt like a Russkaya dusha. I swear I could hear mandolins and balalaikas in the air.

For the third session, the next day, I was in good shape. As usual, the meeting did not start on time. The respected virtue in Russia is not punctuality but patience. I used those extra minutes to collect my thoughts.

When the meeting actually started I said that I had very much enjoyed the discussions of the two previous days (speaking of vranyo !). I had learned a lot from the Russian way of approaching important issues, paying due attention to all the historical, philosophical and ideological considerations of the problem at hand. The contemplation of all these considerations may have given the impression of existing contradictions. But this was only an impression, resulting from the thoroughness with which the situation was analyzed.

Now the time had come to put down on paper a few requirements for an international cooperation designed to reconstitute the foreign language collections destroyed and to assist in the restoration of the library material damaged by fire and water. I said that I wished to spend the day visiting the Library and that I would be happy to come back to the meeting the following day to consider the requirements proposed by the meeting.

The element of surprise was instantaneous as the meeting turned into Russian language with twelve participants speaking at the same time. Tea was not

yet ready but a tea break was announced.

I was later taken to visit the Library and noticed that the fire had been a major one and the damage was quite serious.

In the evening, after a long and thorough shower to remove every trace of formaldehyde, I met with Olga Ananiev and my four ladies to go to the Kirov. The internationally renown Kirov Ballet, named after a Bolshevik politician assassinated in 1934, fully deserves its reputation. We were all overwhelmed by this illustrious ballet company who introduced stars such as Rudolph Nureyev, Altynai Asylmuratova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov to the world. The Sleeping Beauty performance was outstanding.

On the way out Brigitte remarked that the technical supremacy of the Kirov was breathtaking. ‘If one is to find a flaw with this company,’ she added, ‘it is that production details, such as costumes and stage effects, are considered of minor importance. But the exceptional quality of the dancing makes us blind to these shortcomings!’

Olga had reserved a dinner table in a nearby restaurant. In Leningrad, as in Moscow, it is unlikely to find a table in a good restaurant unless reservations are made ahead of time. Very often one has to order the food and drinks and pay for them at the time the reservation is made. When you arrive at the restaurant at the appointed time, the drinks and the first course, usually the zaziki, are already on the table. A little orchestra usually plays some music which contributes to the romantic, and somewhat old-fashioned, flavor imparted to the place.

Françoise wanted to know why both at the theater and at the restaurant they insisted that we first check our coats in the cloakroom. From Olga’s explanation we understood that in Russia there is a right way and a wrong way of doing everything. The wrong way is nyekulturno, which means uncultured or vulgar. Wearing coats in theaters and restaurants is nyekulturno. We pressed Olga to give us other examples. She mentioned standing with hands in pants pockets, placing feet on tables, sitting with legs spread wide and similar postures were all nyekulturno.

With a mischievous look in her eyes Aunt Lily whispered in French to her sister that it was too bad that touching, pushing and shoving in crowds was not considered nyekulturno . She then mentioned to Olga that she had seen in the hotel corridor a couple of Russian men in their pajamas and wanted to know if this was nyekulturno, as well. Olga smiled but did not answer.

The evening was pleasant as we chatted and learned a lot about Leningrad. We were amazed to hear that the Neva River is usually totally covered by ice six months in the year. We all agreed that Leningrad was among the most beautiful cities of the world. It combined severe and stately architecture with planned squares, wide avenues and many parks and gardens.

Françoise wanted to know what the word tsar meant. Olga said, ‘It was a word derived from ‘Caesar’ - a title that the autocratic dynasty of rulers that kept Russia as a vast, backward agricultural empire chose for itself.’

We thanked Olga for her company and patience and walked back to the hotel. All along I noticed that people turned around to look at us, more particularly at Aunt Lily. I had to admit that the extravagant outfits that Mademoiselle Simone had altered for her were somewhat conspicuous. The four ladies giggled all the way to the hotel. Françoise and Nancy, inspired by the Kirov ballet, walked and danced like two sleeping beauties, while I kept saying to them that it was Nyekulturno !

The next day the meeting was productive. My Russian ‘friends’ looked exhausted from the start. Even glamorous Tatyana did not look so glamorous. I figured that they must have argued all night to reach consensus. I was satisfied as I had, somehow, managed to get them moving.

In essence, they had agreed that a restoration laboratory was needed in Leningrad to treat damaged books but admitted that their staff lacked the training and exposure to advanced technologies, most of which were not available in the country. I offered Unesco’s assistance to arrange for visits where the advanced technologies could be studied.

Igor Panushkin drove me back to the hotel. We mutually agreed the outcome was positive. He seemed very satisfied. After a little pause, very calmly, he told me that there was a little problem, not related to the meeting; it was personal. Olga Ananiev had informed him that Brigitte, Aunt Lily, Nancy and Françoise had left the hotel before the 10 o’clock appointment with Olga and had not been seen since. He added, ‘You have no reason to worry, I am sure everything will be alright’. In any Western country this would not have constituted a problem, but in a Communist state, that was a different story.

We sat in the hotel lobby for ages, waiting for something to happen. Igor tried to talk to me about a variety of topics. I could not listen . I could not understand. It was already dinner time and they were not back. I was worried. I was furious. Once in a while he would go to the telephone and pretend his calls were not related to my problem. I kept asking questions about Olga, the availability of telephones in the city, about crime, rape and theft. Igor kept saying very calmly, ‘ Jacques, do not worry.’

While we were waiting, my attention was drawn to a small group of tourists who were loudly sharing, in English, their negative impressions and muttering their discontent. The short man with a yellow cigarette screwed into the corner of his mouth and the couture-conscious lady with a splendid outfit were obviously French. Nothing was quite right for them.

The other man who sounded American wore a yellow jacket, a yellow shirt, a

black tie with yellow dots and black evening trousers. His imagination must have run out of ‘black and yellow’ at this point because his feet were comfortably resting in a pair of white sneakers. The tall, blond lady next to him had made an obvious effort to show every possible manifestation of wealth.

They were determined to go back home with no positive memories of their visit. The city was gloomy, the distances enormous, the people discourteous and the food suspicious. Nothing was quite right. And above all everyone spoke nothing but Russian !

There was something indecent about the way the group displayed their arrogant disdain. It must have been depressing for Igor to hear the city he loved so thoroughly condemned. I began to talk to him about the good caviar we had eaten the other evening so that he would not continue to hear any more insulting comments.

Then, all of a sudden, in glowing flamboyance, wearing one of Mademoiselle Simone’s extravagant outfits, our great diva came through the door. I jumped up, asking loudly, ‘Lily, what happened? Where are the others ?’

She calmly sat down, placidly took off her cape, smiled at Igor Panushkin and said, ‘Oh, my God, it is ever so cold! The winds are howling over the Neva. It is a brisk autumn day. We would call it winter in Paris! You should see how some women are already bundled up. Fortunately, I had my glorious cashmere sweater on.’

I flared up saying, ‘We did not expect a weather report from you! Where are the others?’

‘I do not know,’ she said unconcerned, smiling with great nonchalance. ‘We lost each other at the station. There was such a crowd ! So what?’

I was about to hit the ceiling, but tried to control myself. I asked, trembling with anger, ‘Could you explain, please. ‘

‘I will explain, of course,’ she replied serenely, ‘But you have to let me talk without interrupting me. There is no reason to be so excited, Jacques !’ I could have strangled her but decided to try and act unperturbed. Igor seemed amused by this French vaudeville.

‘Well,’ she said, looking at Igor, ‘I have always thought that to understand and appreciate a country, one should not be confined to museums, palaces and other mandatory tourist sights. There is more to Paris than the Tomb of Napoleon and the Mona Lisa ! There is more to Leningrad than the Hermitage, the Smolny Monastery and the Petrodvorets ! We wanted to see real Russia. We wanted to see how the Russians live !’

At this very moment Igor was called to the reception phone. I said to Aunt Lily, ‘Why didn’t you ask Olga to show you real Russia?’ She looked straight into my eyes saying, ‘You very well know, Jacques, that they keep you occupied 24 hours a day, overwhelming you with hospitality and attention, they overfeed you with history, statistics and propaganda, because they do not want you to see the real thing !’

Igor was back. Resuming her demure tone, Aunt Lily continued, smiling at him. ‘So we decided to be a little adventurous and just walk in the streets by ourselves. Unfortunately, we did not know how to reach Olga to let her know, so we left.’ I looked at Igor who obviously did not swallow the latter part and said to him, ‘It sounds like Vranyo , doesn’t it ?’ Igor smiled saying, ‘Da ! Da!’.

‘So where did you go?’ he asked. ‘We went to a department store and looked at prices. We bought a few gifts. We also went to a food market. We walked in the streets. We visited a small church and lit candles. We went to a railroad station to see people. What a crowd ! That is where we lost one another.’

Igor asked how she had enjoyed her day and Aunt Lily immediately assumed a melodramatic composure and said that everything had been absolutely thrilling, heart-warming and touching. I could not help but bite my lips.

Sensing my nervousness, she kept talking to Igor, as though I did not exist. ‘I was hoping to find some cashmere,’ she said, ‘Cashmere goats live in Mongolia. Don’t they?’ Igor explained that cashmere goats cannot be made to multiply like chicken. They need space and privacy for romance. No one has managed to increase the quantity of cashmere produced, and it obviously remains a luxury product.

After a long while, during which I gave Aunt Lily several icy glares, Nancy and Françoise suddenly came through the hotel door with two young men and introduced us to Ivan Marakov and Andrei Vinogradov. My eyes could not resist looking at their outfits: jeans, three-tone artificial snake skin jackets, and Western boots.

They explained that these young men, who spoke a little English, helped them find their way. On the way they had visited Andrei Vinogradov’s apartment and met his family. They had sat in the kitchen and shared some food. Real simple hospitality and warm conviviality. They spoke to each other warmly, exchanged addresses and promised to keep in touch. As Ivan and Andrei were leaving, I sensed that the two girls were somewhat enamored and already nostalgic.

They kept talking about their experience and sharing impressions with Aunt Lily when I asked, ‘ Has anyone seen my wife, lately?’ Igor said not to worry because she was safely being taken back to the hotel. The telephone call he had received earlier was obviously about that. I was embarrassed.

I could not believe my eyes, looking at Aunt Lily, Nancy and Françoise

chatting and giggling as if nothing had happened. I had to make an effort to keep calm. Obviously, at fifty-four, I had turned into a rigid, conventional bureaucrat without fantasy or imagination.

Finally, Brigitte came through the hotel door, festive and in high spirits, walking erratically. Next to her was a tall man. Guess who ? The man with the sunglasses who was reading the newspaper in the hotel restaurant the other night. The KGB man !

She cheerfully introduced him as Victor Vassiliev. By now I was sure she must have had a few glasses of vodka. Merry and slightly tipsy, she looked and talked more like Aunt Lily. I had never noticed such a resemblance before. ‘Have you had any Vodka, Brigitte?’ I asked. ‘Well, yes.’ she replied, ‘As a substitute for central heating! Ha! Ha!’

She giddily told us that when she lost everyone at the station she panicked because she realized that she had no money and - believe it or not - could not remember the complicated name of the hotel. She had noticed all along that the man with the sunglasses had been following them all the way from the hotel to the department store, to the food market and even to church. ‘But in Church, he had not lit a candle to the holy Virgin.’ she added, laughing.

‘So, how did you meet ?’ asked Françoise. ‘I went to him at the railroad station, after I lost all of you and said straightforwardly that I knew we were staying at the same hotel. I told him that my name was Brigitte Dupont. I had no money. Could he, please, take me back to the hotel to my family.’

Victor Vassiliev who was listening to Brigitte’s account of the day did not seem terribly amused. He abruptly said goodbye and in no time disappeared, soon followed by Igor Panushkin.

Brigitte wanted to go up to the room. The four of us followed her, bombarding her with questions. She sat on the bed and laughed a great deal. I seemed to be the only one who did not think the situation was that funny. I kept asking, ‘How much did you drink ?’ She said, ‘As the Russians say, vodka is the best antifreeze for the human engine. Nash sdrovie! ‘

She then told us that Victor Vassiliev had insisted that they have some tea to warm up on the way to the hotel. Instead of tea he had ordered vodka. She could not remember how much she drank. He was very dignified, polite and charming. They chatted for a long time. He had asked her many questions but she could not remember exactly what they were. She had answered all the questions but could not remember exactly what she said. She then giggled and said.

‘At the end of this long inquisition I asked him if he had to write a report on me...ha.ha He turned pale.’ My four girls could not stop laughing. The people next

door must have thought we were having a party, as Brigitte kept saying ‘Nash sdorovie!’

I turned to Aunt Lily and the young girls and invited them to quietly go to their rooms. Under the circumstances, I thought that it would be preferable to skip dinner. I told them at what time they were to be ready for departure the next day. When I turned around Brigitte was sound asleep.

We say in French: Tout est bien qui finit bien, - all is well that ends well. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, in that cold and dark Nordic night, I said to myself, ‘ The battle of Leningrad is over,’ and, raising my right hand, I solemnly swore, ‘Never again ! Never !’

Who burnt the Library of Alexandria?

Inchaalah, Maalesh and Maktub.

Dust, confusion, noise, anarchy. I was in Cairo.

This must have been my sixth or seventh mission in Egypt. In spite of some minor inconveniences I loved being in Egypt. I found Egyptians hospitable, colorful, humane, amiable and delightfully amusing.

Knowing my fascination for Egypt, my colleagues at the Unesco Office in Cairo used to call me Champollion. For everyone else outside the office I was 'Mister Jacques'. One is generally not called by one's last name in Egypt. When the relationship was more formal I became 'Doctor Jacques.'

Zaki, the Office driver, drove me to the hotel, zigzagging his way through chaotic traffic and tumultuous crowds. Zaki had a deep sense of humor - a widespread blessing in Egypt. While hooting his horn he shared with me his views on Unesco, the problems of the Middle East, President Mubarak and the future of Humanity. At every visit he had to bring me up to date with the latest local jokes, the so-called nokat. Zaki had a warm personality and enjoyed a reputation for being loyal, resourceful and obliging. He was a man of impeccable rectitude.

The road from the airport leads through the modern suburb of Heliopolis into a large square facing the railroad, dominated by the ancient statue of Ramses II. Automobile elevated freeways connect nowadays various suburbs to the heart of the city.

Further down, in the large square 'Midan El-Tahrir' we were trapped in an incredible jam and doomed to go in circles three to four times. The population density in Egypt is among the highest in the world - over a thousand people per square kilometer of cultivable land. Forty years ago the population of Cairo barely reached two millions. It was now over fifteen millions! If anyone was uncertain about these statistics a tour of Midan El-Tahrir would convey an order of magnitude. I felt lucky to be observing Cairo from a comfortable, aseptic, four-wheeled cocoon. It took us thirty minutes to cover fifty yards.

A man on a bicycle was carrying on his head a huge basket of bread, finding his way among cars, motor-cycles, hand-carts and overcrowded busses with people

literally hanging from the windows. On the sidewalk - which represents an assortment of waste, paper and debris - a street vendor was dispensing a popular sugary refreshment which, as Zaki explained, was made of licorice and called Argi'suss. Further down a dog was taking a dust bath. Couples walked at a distance, usually men ahead of women. The display of intimacy being strictly forbidden, men an women never hold hand. Men often do. Vive la difference!

Looking around at the traffic jam it occurred to me that Egyptians had a deep-rooted aversion to anything that resembles order. Anyone who remembers watching on TV the funerals of Gamal Abdel Nasser will agree to that ! That is part of the charm .

The air in the streets was filled with a smell of deep-fried Falafel, spices and overcooked Kebab - an odor I loathed. But the crepuscular light and the overlapping voices of the muezzins, calling the hour of prayer from the top of hundreds of minarets, gave a mysterious and enchanting touch to the scene.

Once at the fine Hotel Meridien overlooking the Nile, I felt at home. In the hotel, everything was shining: the brass, the glass, the floor and the golden teeth of the doorman. I tipped my way, right and left, to the Reception Desk under a shower of greetings, blessings and salam-alek. Tipping in some countries is an occasional bonus for special service. In Egypt it is a nagging obligation lying in wait at every corner: an excruciating must.

In the lobby of the hotel I was greeted by Sharifa, a staff member of the Unesco Office who was waiting for me. She first apologized for not being able to come to the airport and then briefed me on latest events relevant to my project.

Sharifa seconded me during my various missions on the project of the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria - the so-called Bibliotheca Alexandrina. She was reliable, knowledgeable and most pleasant. I always admired her patience and endurance. Married to a famous Cairo lawyer and mother of three children, she belonged to the upper class - 'la grande bourgeoisie'. She had been educated at the convent school Notre Dame de Sion and at the American University of Cairo. Perfectly at ease in Arabic, English and French, Sharifa moved about the Egyptian scene with statuesque demeanor and great ease. She was priceless.

After a thorough, but concise, brief she handed me a detailed program for my two-week mission in Cairo and Alexandria, asked about my health and family and left with a bright smile.

Several meetings were scheduled in Cairo for the first couple of days: at the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the National Library and the Cairo University. On the third day I was to spend time with Mr. Marius Van der Meer, one of the Assistants Director-General of Unesco, who would stop by in Cairo for 24 hours on his way to Nairobi. I had to accompany him for his meeting with the

Minister of Education.

Then I was to go to Alexandria to work with the International Jury on the selection of the winner design of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. I expected the mission to be interesting and effortless. The weather in October was delightful; I had flown out of a dark, rainy Parisian Fall into beautiful Spring-like weather.

In addition, Sharifa had arranged for me to be invited in Alexandria by the cream of the Alexandrian Society where I would meet representatives of well-known, old families, as well as some Europeans whose families had been established in the city for several generations. She thought that their knowledge of the city and their ideas on the Library of Alexandria project might be helpful to me.

As I was searching my pockets for some change to tip the elevator groom and retire to my room on the eleventh flour, I noticed a commotion at the door of the hotel. Maddened hordes of tourists were running towards the door with all sorts of cameras. A strident, rhythmical music invaded the hallway, as tambourine players and colorful musicians blowing in some sort of clarinets made their appearance, machine-gunned by a thousand flashes.

Then came the bride under a thunder of applause, fleshy and shiny, decorated like a Christmas tree. She was followed by the bridal party, all dressed to kill. The men in designer suits and wearing fashionable sunglasses looked as though they had come to buy the Meridien Hotel. They were followed by a number of women in bright, colorful dresses displaying flashy jewels.

The overdressed bridal party contrasted with the effusive and careless crowd of tourists who had gathered to watch the event. Bermudas, T-shirts, ski jackets, jeans, Texan hats, sneakers, baseball caps - which may have been appropriate around the swimming pool - looked sloppy and in bad taste. I was certain that these very same tourists would never dream to be seen in such outfits in a four-star hotel back in their respective home towns. The strangest of all was a tall blond man dressed like Laurence of Arabia. While he was taking a picture of the bride, another tourist was taking a picture of him. Quelle salade !

In no time, the wedding procession got nicely out of hand, as some elderly ladies uttered wild howls of joy and jubilation. The ear-deafening ululations and cries of praise to God burst out from every side. It sounded like a dozen warmongering Indians were attacking a stage-coach. I strolled to the elevator and up to the eleventh floor where I found my freshly mutilated suitcase, a hot bath, a cold Stella beer and a few minutes of quiet rumination to knit myself together before going to bed.

Just before turning the lights off, I switched on the television, out of curiosity. My attention was caught by a local film. I could not understand a single word of Arabic, but I was tickled by the outmoded acting. Egyptians are demonstrative and

place high value on the display of emotions. I found the convulsive harangues and heroic declamations amusing. They certainly were not meant to be so, but the more tragic the situation seemed to get, the more I became hilarious. I was still laughing well after the film was over and thought that Indian films, made in Bollywood, would be appreciated over here.

The next two days were uneventful. Meetings were held more or less on time and yielded reasonable results. Sharifa was always there to second me. Evenings were spent reading briefing material, taking notes and preparing forthcoming meetings.

In contrast, the third day turned out to be eventful enough to make up for the first two quiet ones. The day practically started at the airport where I went with Sharifa and Zaki to fetch Mr. Marius Van der Meer.

Mr. Van der Meer was not my boss and I did not know him very well at the time. I had never worked with him and on the few occasions I had happened to meet him at meetings or receptions we had never managed to engage in any meaningful conversation. He always seemed pensive and tense.

Mr. Van der Meer was of Belgian origin but of Swiss nationality. I did not know from which side he had inherited his sense of humor for I had never seen him smile. That unusual background combination certainly did not predestine him to quickly understand the Egyptian soul or appreciate the local nokat. That was the way I felt. A Frenchman, as everyone knows, has all sorts of petty prejudices against his European neighbors. In any case, Mr. Van der Meer had not come to Cairo to exchange jokes and my personal bias was of no importance.

Come to think of it, why was he coming? Why had the Director-General asked Marius Van der Meer to stop over to meet with the Minister in Cairo ? Officially, he was supposed to prepare the forthcoming visit of the Director-General to Egypt, which I could have done myself. He no doubt had a hidden agenda.

Waiting for Mr. Van der Meer I looked around the airport and watched the very heterogeneous crowd. Among the more sophisticated types of Egyptian businessmen and government officials in western-type suits was a countryman, or fellah, wearing a long dark-blue cotton robe, known as gallabiyeh, and a close-fitting skull cap surrounded by a white turban. He was of dark complexion and of sturdy physique; he looked cheerful and, at the same time, resigned to hardship. I felt sympathetic towards him.

"What do the Fellahs usually eat ?" I asked Sharifa. She said, "Basically, coarse maize bread, Egyptian beans known as fool, white cheese, lettuce, onions and fruit. They seldom can afford meat."

I then asked her if the old red hat of Turkish origin, known as tarboosh, was

still worn. She explained that it had fallen out of use. A young man then offered to shine my shoes. Since shoe shining is a dead art in Paris and in most of Europe, I accepted.

We kept looking at the crowd of tourists coming through customs. Suddenly, the tall, slim and nervous silhouette of Van der Meer appeared. He looked stiff. When he realized that I was having my shoes polished, he looked stiffer. Or as my brother-in-law, Albert, would say : he looked constipated. The greeting ceremony was short, the Salam-alek part being kept at a strict minimum. Marius Van der Meer already seemed in a state of trepidation.

We had a laconic ride directly to the Ministry of Education. Zaki did not share his opinion about global matters this time. As to Sharifa, she gave the Assistant Director-General only indispensable items of background information. Conversation was not encouraged. It gave me a chance to admire my shoes - as bright as the Egyptian sun - and to look at the scenery. Dust was everywhere. Thick on the sidewalks; thin on the foliage of the sycamores, the eucalyptus and the date palms. If Cairo could have had the benefit of some rain it would have been a cleaner city. But, surrounded by desert, the rainless city is permanently covered by a mantle of sand.

When the car stopped at the Ministry, Mr. Van der Meer said to me, "Mr. Dupont, I am told that you are familiar with the Egyptian scene. This being my first business visit to Egypt I would like you to sit next to me at the meeting and whisper to me whatever you think may be helpful in my negotiations. Use your own judgment. Don't overdo it"

That statement caught me by surprise. Now, I had been given a clearly vague and perfectly ambiguous assignment. As the car was leaving, Sharifa waved goodbye to us with a Mona Lisa type of smile. I felt she anticipated problems and sympathized with me.

At the Ministry Mr. Van der Meer and I were shown to the Minister's waiting room by a young lady in long-sleeved gray dress of near floor-length, wearing a white hejab to cover her hair. We were served tea and left on our own for a while.

Since Mr. Van der Meer did not give any sign of wanting to engage in a conversation, I silently meditated on the duality of the Egyptian society. The young lady with the hejab and westernized Sharifa represented the two tendencies prevailing in Egypt. Sharifa was, in my eyes, the symbol of a secularly-minded, modern and forward-looking Egypt. The young lady with the hejab, represented the religious, conservative traditionalist movement. The first group believes in a Western type education: scientific inquiry and rationality. The second believes that the spirit of Islam, which prescribes proper behavior patterns for everyday life, should be the dominant feature in all teachings. This duality created a permanent conflict between the two tendencies and resulted in a sort of social fracture which was noticeable in

every aspect of Egyptian life.

My meditation was brought to an abrupt end as the door opened and we were invited to enter the office where the meeting was to take place. Nothing palatial, only a very large room with a large desk, several couches and chairs and three or four open doors leading to neighboring offices. Several telephones were scattered on the main desk. They seemed to take turns in ringing one after the other at all times. About a dozen people stood in various corners of the room in small groups or by themselves. It was difficult to guess who was who and who was doing what.

Any Western guest unwarned about the particular style of an Egyptian meeting and expecting some sort of privacy usually finds the arrangement amazing. Mr. Van der Meer found it shocking.

Mr. Abdel-Rahman, a high official of the Ministry, greeted us warmly "Ahlan wa Sahlan, Doctor Marius! Ahlan wa Sahlan, Doctor Jacques! Marhaba! Welcome, welcome !"

He apologized that the Minister had been unexpectedly called by the President of the Republic and would not be back in time for the meeting. Mr. Abdel-Rahman said that he had been charged by the Minister to meet with us and report back to him. I looked at Mr. Van der Meer. He was deadly pale.

Next to Mr. Abdel-Rahman were a couple of men who were never introduced. The telephones kept ringing and were answered by whoever seemed to be closest to the desk at the time. Once in a while, the phone would be brought to Mr. Abdel-Rahman to take the call.

Mr. Van der Meer was by now livid. He asked in a curt manner if we could have some privacy and meet in a quieter room. Mr. Abdel-Rahman smiled and, after a little pause, asked, "tea or coffee?" Mr. Van der Meer said stiffly, " We just had tea."

While our host was again on the phone I whispered, "You have to take some beverage. No matter how many drinks you have had, you cannot refuse. This is strict Egyptian etiquette." There was no reply except for a sniff of irritation.

Mr. Van der Meer pulled a sheet of paper and said in a firm voice that he had come all the way to Cairo specifically to settle some details concerning the forthcoming visit of the Director-General. He had prepared an agenda and had about a dozen items to discuss. I suddenly remembered my meeting in Tokyo and I shivered with fear recalling Professor Earl Ray Clark's rigid behavior.

Mr. Van der Meer proceeded to read the items on the agenda while some clerk brought a pile of documents to Mr. Abdel-Rahman, which he proceeded to read and sign, one by one. Once in a while he would stop, raise his head and say to the

Assistant Director-General with an engaging smile, "No problem with this item. We can look into it," or "We can do that, inchaalah." To another request he would say, "Why not? We have provided such service in the past. We may do it again, inchaalah. "

At that point a fat man came in from a neighboring office through one of the open doors and said "Salam alekum !" He was warmly greeted by two or three of the people standing around who exclaimed at him with enthusiasm, "Ahlan ! Ahlan Wassahlan!" Mr. Abdel Rahman jumped to his feet, furtively said to us, "Excuse me for a minute," and immediately went to embrace the fat man and, hand in hand, they went in a corner to talk.

Fuming with rage, Mr. Van der Meer turned to me and said, "This is intolerable. I will simply recommend to the Director-General to cancel his visit. We should not even try to do any business in this country ! They are simply not serious! "

Sensing that we were on the edge of a disaster I replied firmly, "You cannot say that. Unesco has successfully done business here for decades. During the Nubian Campaign, for example, organized by Unesco with the collaboration of the international community: over eighty temples were saved and restored, including Abu-Simbel and Philea. The campaign lasted some thirty years. Work was done painstakingly with the full participation of Egyptians at all levels. "

He blushed and asked, "You mean to tell me that you agree with this way of conducting business ?"

I replied, "No, but I agree to respect the way they are used to doing things. I am not here to change their way, their etiquette, their tradition or their culture. They do not have to necessarily adopt our ways. Even if, in our eyes, our ways are more rational. We have to understand and accept theirs."

By now he had turned purple. In the last hour Mr. Van der Meer had waxed all the colors of the rainbow in turn. It was obvious that he was making an effort to control himself. He finally whispered, "They are rude and insulting! "

"They do not mean to," I said. "They behave with us as they behave with each other, at their own pace and according to their codes of behavior and to their conception of work, hospitality, dignity and loyalty."

He looked at me with steely eyes and said, "You seem to have become totally 'Egyptianized.' Perhaps we should call you 'Abdel-Dupont' ! Does Mr. Abdel Rahman really agree with my requests ? Is he serious when he says 'yes, inchaalah'?"

Since Mr. Abdel Rahman was still discussing with the fat man I proceeded to say, "You know, Mr. Van der Meer, Egyptian etiquette demands that a request has a positive response, regardless of the intended follow-up to be given to the request.

Mr. Abdel Rahman's agreement to your requests is nothing but a declaration of intention, not a promise. The addition of the expression inchaalah - meaning God willing - adds a degree of uncertainty. You should understand that 'yes' means only 'yes, I shall try'."

"Under those conditions, how can we work? Tell me what I am supposed to do since you are a specialist in Egyptian matters !" he said sarcastically.

I took a deep breadth and replied, "Be patient. Be charming. Be tolerant. Be warm and smiling. Show emotions. Be demonstrative. Egyptians think that emotion connotes sincere concern for the substance under discussion. If you speak softly and concisely, making your statement only once, they think that you do not consider the matter too important. Egyptians love rhetoric, long-winded speeches and flowery prose. Do not try to plan the future in detail. Too much self-confidence in planning and a desire to control forthcoming events is considered arrogant. Do not forget that, in this part of the world, whatever you plan God must first be willing for it to happen. Hence, the many 'inchaalahs' you hear. Logic without emotion and faith is much too cold for them."

"You ask me to show emotions. If I had to show the emotions I feel right now," he added, " I would scream!" After a short pause he added, "As to faith, I am now convinced that if God does not personally intervene, nothing will ever be achieved over here !"

I was calm on the surface, but sweating abundantly. I could feel that Mr. Van der Meer resented me for what I had told him. We sat there in silence watching a couple of flies crawling around the empty coffee cups.

When I saw the fat man ready to leave I gathered enough courage to conclude, "Whatever you do or say, Mr. Van der Meer, let me tell you that constructive criticism is unknown here. Criticism is always destructive. Egyptians cannot lose face. They cannot admit ignorance, errors or weaknesses. Above all they have to preserve their dignity. That is why flattery and praise is so very important."

He looked at me in disbelief and said, "You must be joking !"

Mr. Abdel Rahman apologized and the meeting resumed with the usual interruptions. Somehow, Mr. Van de Meer had reconciled himself a little more with the Egyptian style of conducting a meeting and managed to make all his points. Mr. Abdel Rahman agreed to everything, sprinkling every request with a number of 'inchaalahs.' No agreement was officially recorded. No notes were taken. No Aide-memoire was signed.

More coffee was served. More telephone calls were taken. More guests were greeted. More flies came roving around the coffee cups. The meeting at the Ministry

of Education at long last came to an end.

As we walked out of the building I tried to break the ice and said, "Things will work out at the end, you will see. They always do, eventually. Not exactly the way we had planned them. But, miraculously, things do work out."

Mr. Van der Meer was now green. He gave me a last icy look and said he needed to walk to the hotel by himself. I knew that he had disliked my lectures to him and that he would always resent me. Nevertheless, deep inside, I knew that I had saved the day for him, even if he would never recognize the fact.

I slowly walked to the hotel, meditating on the significance of the day. How did I feel ? Once again I had witnessed a problem arising from cultural differences. Each one looked at the world through his particular cultural prism and with reference to his own set of rules. Mr. Van der Meer seemed to reject all people whose behavior, attitudes, methods or codes were different from what his culture dictated. He was rigid. Above all, he had misread and misinterpreted certain innocent actions as being rude and provocative.

On the other hand, Mr. Abdel Rahman had not bothered to compromise and modify 'his way' in order to meet his guests half way. I thought that all these years of exposure to the international community and its intercultural tensions had taught me many lessons; it had made me more tolerant and open-minded. I silently felt proud of it.

The next day, after 'Doctor Marius' had left for Nairobi, Zaki and Sharifa picked me up at the Meridien and we started our journey to Alexandria. We first crossed the Kasr-el-Nil bridge to Guezira island, along the fashionable Guezira Sporting Club, then onto the Pyramids, the Mena House Hotel and the desert road to Alexandria.

We discussed several topics, but mostly 'Doctor Marius' and the forthcoming visit of the Director-General. We did not see the time fly. A little more than two hours later we were in the outskirts of Alexandria. A light breeze from the sea tasted of algae and salt.

At every visit I kept finding Alexandria intriguing, fascinating and disappointing, at the same time. Hard to explain. It is a declining city which displays a number of features reminiscent of Mediterranean cities of Southern Europe, rather than those of a typically Arab city. A place where the fragrance of several ancient civilizations still hangs in the air. A sort of old lady in shabby clothes who, you could tell, used to be endowed with beauty and elegance.

One of the features I like about Alexandria is its fine seacoast road running eastward for about 16 miles with bathing beaches along most of its length. It used to be known as la Corniche , or 'avenue Faruk.' Since the advent of Gamal Abdel

Nasser it is, of course, called the 'avenue of the Army.'

In Alexandria, buildings are, for the most part, falling apart, uncared for, abandoned, ravaged by time, corroded by the saline Mediterranean winds and devastated by neglect. A distressing sight.

Yet, its history and its cosmopolitan aspects remain alluring. The names given to its quarters and tramway stations hint at its fascinating international past : Camp de César, Cleopatra, Stanley, Victoria, Zizinia, Bulkeley, Schutz, Glymenopoulo, Gianaclis, Fleming, San Stephano. Once in a while a name, such as Mustapha or Sidi-Gaber, will remind us that we are on Egyptian land!

Many pastry shops, tea-rooms, restaurants and department stores still maintain foreign-sounding names of the past : Athinéos, Pastroudis, Baudrot, Trianon, Hannaux and Cicurel. Very intriguing, indeed.

Sharifa explained that, for the most part the owners were now Egyptians but had kept the old names. She believed there were a few exceptions : The tea-room 'Délice' was still run by a descendent of the Greek founder, Cléopolos Moustakas. Also the tavern 'Zéphyrion', founded in 1929, was in the hands of the Tsaparis family. It still served the best fish in town. "Another famous place," she added "is 'l'Elite' ran by Mrs. Cristina. Until a few years ago you could dance the 'Bouzouki' every evening. But things have changed. The cosmopolitan feature of Alexandria is no longer what it used to be."

Feeling my fascination for the city, Sharifa added, "You perhaps know, Mister Jacques, that Plutarch has recorded that the builders of Alexandria at some point ran out of chalk for tracing its outline on the ground. They marked the streets instead with barley meal which the birds promptly ate. Alarmed, Alexandre the Great consulted his soothsayers and clairvoyants, who assured him that this was a good omen. 'Alexandria,' they said, 'will be a nursing mother for men of every nation.' As you know, Mister Jacques, Alexandria has indeed been, over the years, nursing mother to French, English, Greeks, Italians, Syrians, Armenians, Jews, Maltese, Turks, and many more who were born here and had no other home than Alexandria. "

"What happened to these communities?" I asked.

"After the Suez Canal war of 1956," she said, " the great majority left. An exodus. But a few are still here, I shall see to it that you meet some of them."

Then I told Sharifa that a number of these Egyptian-born 'foreigners' had come to France and had become famous singers. I cited Dalida, Claude François, Moustaki, Georges Guétary and others. She said with a smile, "They are an additional link between our countries."

We had now reached the Cecil Hotel where I was booked for my stay in Alexandria - the hotel Lawrence Durrell had made famous through his book 'The Alexandrian Quartet.' It had now fallen from its former glory and looked untidy. Before retiring to my room I glanced at the Guest book, or "livre d'or," and was pleased to find the names of famous visitors, such as Somerset Maugham, Josephine Baker, Tito Gobbi, and many others.

The following days I was totally absorbed by the results of the International Architectural Competition. The 524 architectural project rolls were opened, displayed on panels and examined by the Technical Committee to see if they adhered to the competition rules, local regulations and main functional requirements. Those who did not were rejected.

Then the International Jury examined the remaining 357 projects for several days, analyzing them according to a number of specific criteria. After a long discussion, the Jury selected 45 and examined them in greater detail. Then reduced them to 20 and eventually selected the three prize winners.

A couple of days later the Ceremony for the announcement of the results was attended by the Jury, the winners of the contest who had been invited by telephone, the Press and a large number of high-ranking personalities. The event was transmitted by the Egyptian Television. It was a moving and solemn ceremony.

This elegant crowd was then invited to a late lunch at the Yacht Club of Alexandria, overlooking the Eastern Port, a few yards from Fort Quaitbey. I was seated at a table between Mr. Abdel Basset, Egyptian Archeologist, and Mr. Mahmud Fawzi, historian. Seated at the same table were the representative of the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities, the French Ambassador and a number of foreign journalists.

Noticing that the journalists were admiring the Quaitbey Fort, Mr. Fawzy explained that it had been built in the 15th century by the Mameluke sultan Quaitbey on the very site of the famous lighthouse - one of the seven wonders of the world. "Certain parts of the lighthouse," he said, "were recuperated and integrated into the fort."

"What exactly happened to the lighthouse ?" asked a journalist.

His eyes bright behind gold-rimmed glasses, Mr. Fawzy said, " The lighthouse was built in the third century B.C. and served for over six centuries. It was destroyed by a series of earthquakes in the fourth century A.D. We know, for instance, that the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta visited Pharos in 1349 and reported that it was in such a state of ruin that it was impossible to enter. We believe that most of the remains of the lighthouse are under water."

Mr. Fawzy proved to be right. I remember reading in the papers, several

years after my visit, that Jean-Yves Empereur, head of the Alexandrian Study Center, had found under water by the Quaitbey site a profusion of objects superposed from different periods - Pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Roman - as well as massive blocks of granite that had belonged to a large structure, probably the lighthouse.

We were served fruit juices and mineral water. Some of the foreign journalists asked for beer or wine. The waiter answered in Arabic and the French Ambassador explained to the journalists that on official government-sponsored receptions, no alcohol was served. A French journalist commented that she considered that as a sign of intolerance.

At that point I tackled another subject with Mr. Abdel Basset and Mahmud Fawzy, trying to draw their attention away from the embarrassing topic at the other end of the table. "What other important archeological sites exist around here ?" I asked.

Mr. Abdel Basset said, "Somewhere in this very port existed an island, the island of Antirrhodos, on which Cleopatra had her famous palace. That was also destroyed in the fourth century AD by an earthquake and submerged by a tidal wave. Underwater exploration is made difficult because the city sewage runs into the eastern Port. We would need sophisticated means and special equipment, such as the Global Positioning System, which we do not possess. But I am sure that in a not-too-distant future we shall be able to do something in that direction as well., inchaalah."

Mr. Abdel Basset was right in his prediction. I remember reading in a magazine, several years after that lunch at the Yacht Club, that another French by the name of Frank Goddio had began exploring that other part of the site and started to unravel another mystery page of the history of Alexandria.

Our attention was then caught by a heated discussion going on between the representative of La Repubblica and the journalist of Le Monde on the fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria. Who destroyed the Library ? A recent Italian author, Luciano Canfora, had tried to deny the responsibility of Julius Caesar, blaming the Arabs for its destruction in the 7th century A.D.

Unesco had commissioned the Egyptian historian, Mostafa El-Abbadi, to research the subject and write a book to be published by Unesco on "The life and fate of the ancient Library of Alexandria." El-Abbadi had the advantage to research the subject from original texts since he had the necessary knowledge of Greek, Latin and Arabic. Authors without such skills, such as Canfora, relied on translations.

Having benefited from discussions with El-Abbadi I felt confident to speak on the subject. "Most probably the destruction took place in several episodes." I said, "First, Caesar accidentally destroyed part of the Royal Library in 48 BC. But we

know that, later on, Mark Anthony made a gift to Cleopatra of 200,000 books from Pergamum. The Library must have continued to function, if not at the original site of the Palace, certainly at the daughter Library at the Sarapeum. We also know that the Temple of Sarapeum was destroyed in 391 AD - and probably the daughter Library with it - as a result of a widespread Christian campaign against paganism."

The journalist from The Repubblica wanted to know what evidence existed that Caesar was responsible for the fire. Mr. Fawzi said that Plutarch in his biography of Caesar had written, "When the enemy tried to cut off his fleet, Caesar was forced to repel the danger by using fire, which spread from the dockyards and destroyed the 'Great Library'. The Historian Strabo, who later described Alexandria in details, does not mention the Library. Probably because it was no longer there."

We had finished dessert by now and were drinking our Turkish Coffee. We had had a very interesting 'archeological' lunch, washed down with fruit juices and mineral water. Yet, the journalist from Le Monde wanted to hear about the Arab involvement in the destruction of the Library.

I was disappointed to think that all these international journalists Unesco had invited, instead of writing about the Unesco project of the revival of the Ancient Library, would discuss its earlier destruction. "Well," I said, "for more that five centuries after the Arab conquest of Egypt by General Amr, not a single reference to the fate of the Library is to be found. Then in the 13th century we suddenly hear of an unfounded account by Ibn Al-Qifti describing how General Amr had burnt the books. There is a plausible explanation for this fictitious story. According to our Unesco Expert, Mostafa El-Abbadi, Ibn Al-Qifti, like his master Saladin, belonged to the Sunni regime who was accused by the competing Shiite branch of selling libraries and precious books. So Ibn Al-Quifty made up a story to show that selling books was not such a crime since General Amr and his Caliph Omar, if they had not sold books, had burnt them."

After taking leave from my hosts, I walked by myself along the Corniche all the way to the Cecil hotel. It was almost twilight. The sky was a never-ending blue and pink mantle. I enjoyed the fresh air and meditated in silence. I was overwhelmed by the history of this city. Nothing monumental had survived the fires, the earthquakes, the tidal waves and the wars. The richness of that past was all buried under either ground or water.

As Sharifa had promised, I was invited on the last evening before my departure to an outstanding reception which took place at the house of Mrs. Ferghaly who lived in a large villa by the seashore in a district known as Bulkley.

Zaki drove us along the Corniche eastward to Bulkley. He first stopped at the Stanley Bay beach so that I could admire the rows of cabins on a semi-circle on three levels. Looking at my watch I asked,"Aren't we late ?" With eyes lively with amusement, Sharifa said, "Maalesh! Do not worry, Mister Jacques. As you must

know by now, we are very relaxed about time, in Egypt. Hurry is not our type of intellectual concept."

I had often heard the expression Maalesh, which means 'never mind.' Quite a useful and extensively used expression which accompanies anything which has gone wrong, or is about to go wrong, or will certainly go wrong. In any case things happen in Egypt because they were meant to happen by God's will. One should not try to change events. As they say, Maktub, which means 'it is so written'. With a Maktub here, an Inchaalah and a little Maalesh there... life goes on unperturbed.

I was asked to admire on the eastern headland of Stanley Bay, a restaurant called 'the Ship.' Further down I was shown the most famous hotel of Bulkley the 'Mediterranée' with its night-club 'le Romance.' Soon after we stopped in front of Mrs. Ferghaly's imposing villa.

As we passed the Entrance Hall, I found myself drawn into a fascinating world. Around the Hall were two large lounges and a separate dining room. As Sharifa had told me, the cosmopolitan Elite of Alexandria was here. "After a long 'siesta"' in the afternoon," she said, "they usually come to life in the evening."

The house was very spacious, elegant and beautifully furnished. Perhaps, a little over-decorated. The rugs were Persian and the furniture mostly French. A few touches of local color would creep in here and there. The overall effect was magic.

Mrs. Ferghaly was an elderly lady in her eighties, elegant, very charming but a shade disdainful. She moved about with grace and dignity and kept everyone at arm's length, like a deity. Her bearing was that of a queen.

At all times she kept an eye on the personnel which she treated with distant politeness. Waiters in black jackets and servants in formal, white gallabiyeh, very responsive to the slightest signal, circulated carrying large trays with appetizers and drinks.

Sharifa took me to the first lounge which was filled with a number of richly dressed women and a few men. I was introduced to a number of ladies of the grande bourgeoisie of Alexandria. The younger ones had typical Egyptian names, such as Abdel Meguib, El Taieb, or Awad. The foreign-sounding ladies, on the other hand, were in a higher age bracket. Conversation was whisper-quiet at the beginning, but gradually grew crescendo, speckled with bursts of laughter.

An elderly lady, with a turban and an undefined accent, Mrs. Naoum, seemed to be intrigued by my presence. She ran a polite but disparaging eye over my suit from top to bottom. I could tell that she was trying to put a price on it, or on me. With a voice of doom she asked on what business I was there. "I am with Unesco," I answered. She seemed interested but not impressed. In the brief conversation that followed I learnt that Mrs. Naoum, an Egyptian lady of Syrian origin, had survived a

divorce, two World Wars, three nationalizations and countless devaluations.

We were soon joined by Mrs. Costantinides, wearing a sort of Pharaonic dress. Having been educated in the States - as I was later informed - Mrs. Costantinides had retained a semi-Yankee accent and certain American mannerisms. When introduced, for instance, she offered a nod, instead of a handshake, and said 'Hi.' After the usual exchange of platitudes, Mrs. Costantinides wanted to know if I had heard of the writer, Stratis Tsirkas, or the poet, Constantin Cavafy. Both Greek Alexandrians. I timidly said, "Vaguely." Her smile almost disrupted my self-confidence for the rest of the evening.

Maalesh ! she said with a giggle, "but you will have to read some poems of Cavafy. You must. You can find five collections of Cavafy's poetry available in English. Cavafy's tone of voice is eminently translatable. His magic moves into English without difficulty. His poems must also exist in French, I presume. Don't they ?"

Mrs. Costantinides looked at me and after a short pause, her voice low and confidential, she said, " He lived and died here without speaking two words of correct Arabic. Nevertheless he is by definition a true Alexandrian. You will agree, Mr. Dupont, that many foreign residents of Paris are Parisians by their behavior, style and contribution to the life of the city, without being French. Similarly, Cavafy was a Greek Alexandrian who loved our city and has immortalized it in its poems. By the way, he is also considered in Greece the first poet of modern Greek literature."

I did not dare ask if Mrs. Costantinides considered herself Greek, Alexandrian, American or Pharaonic. She probably was a mixture of all four. I ventured to add, "Come to think of it, I now remember having read several references to Cavafy in Lawrence Durrell's 'Alexandrian Quartet.'"

At that point we were joined by an elderly gentleman who must have spent hours in trying to look young and sexy. He had an air of unreliable charm about him. My French nose recognized Christian Dior's Eau Sauvage - a no nonsense aftershave. He wore an Armani suit with a dashy tie, which drew compliments from Mrs. Naoum. He was introduced to me as Mahmoud Ramzy Bey.

"I heard you referring to Lawrence Durrell, Mr. Dupont," said Mahmoud Ramzy Bey. "Do you recognize Alexandria as the city he described in his novel?" His question drew laughter from our two ladies. Egyptians tend to laugh a lot, and it is not always obvious why they do so.

"Durrell must have loved Alexandria," I ventured to say, adding, "Because of his love and fascination for the city he tended to embellish everything. A poet in love with a city."

"Not at all, my friend," said Ramzy Bey. "Durrell hated Alexandria. He found it

boring. In his correspondence with Henry Miller, after he had been posted as Press Attaché in Alexandria in 1944, he called it 'a smashed up, broken down, shabby Neapolitan town. A melting-pot of dullness.' He complained that there was no music, no art, no real gaiety, and no subject of conversation except money. He said to Henry Miller, 'if one could write a single line of anything that had a human smell to it here, one would be a genius.'"

Mrs. Costantinides asked, "How do you explain then, the masterpiece which his book represents? It was not possible to write in such poetic terms, if he really hated the place!"

"True," said Ramzy Bey, " either because he was a genius or because he altered his vision of the city with time. The city changed him."

Mrs. Ferghaly who had joined the group and listened to the latter part of the conversation said, "But, Durrell completed his book fifteen years after leaving Alexandria. He spent much of the intervening period in Greece, Argentina, Yugoslavia, Cyprus and France. It is not exactly Alexandria that changed him. He grew older and matured in so many different places under so many different influences. His Alexandria is an artificial, poetic and brilliant monument. An exotic illusion. Certainly a work of genius. Nonetheless his Alexandria remains an artificial construction."

Mrs. Naoum, who had been silent up to now and who did not seem to have any literary inclination, surprised us by adding, "The Egyptian writer, Edouard Al-Kharrat, who wrote so much on Alexandria is also of the opinion that Durrell knew very little of the city and its people. Al-Kharrat, in his many lectures and publications, shows that Durrell's Quartet is not really about Alexandria."

"In any case," I said, " many foreigners around the world know Alexandria only through the eyes of Durrell." After a pause I asked, " What other contemporary writers wrote about the city ?"

Mrs. Ferghaly, Mrs. Naoum, Mrs. Costantinides and Ramzy Bey delivered, in a chorus, a litany of names, "Ungaretti, E.M. Forster, Fausta Cialente, Cavafy, Leslie Croxford, Gaston Zananiri, Robert Solé, Mohamed Hafez Ragab, Jacques Hassoun, Naguib Mahfuz, Stratis Tsirkas, and others."

At this point Sharifa came and asked me to accompany her in the second lounge where she wanted to introduce me to some nostalgic gentlemen who were discussing 'the good old days of Alexandria.'

"Which were the good old days?" I asked.

"They refer to the period when the city was truly cosmopolitan," she said. "Throughout British colonial rule and beyond Independence until the 1956 Canal

war. Some refer to this period as the "golden age." Some glorify it and some condemn it."

"And how do you feel about it, Sharifa ?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "To praise that period uncritically like most foreigners who used to live here do can seem like an apology for colonialism. Like everything else this period had its good points and its negative ones. "

The second lounge was resolutely ostentatious. Sharifa pointed at a glass cabinet which contained a collection of glasses that had belonged to King Farouk. On the wall, a beautiful clock, which seemed to have been taken right out of Versailles, had given up marking the passage of time. Mrs. Ferghaly had thus stopped aging. Conversations in this lounge were louder, the room echoing with voices that would have graced the Cairo Opera House.

A first group of men, looking self-satisfied, were talking money: a little real estate here, a little merger there, interlarded with laughter . One of them, whom everybody called Nagi Bey, struck me as suffering from being abnormally rich. A man whose life must have been dedicated to the table and based on a dolce far'niente philosophy. He dropped names and dollars all over the place. While some were drinking a locally manufactured soda, known as Azouza Spathis , he indulged with enthusiasm in Royal Salute whisky.

The men of the second group were all in their sixties. They were referred to as khawagat - an Egyptian title, slightly derogatory, given to non-Arabic foreigners. These khawagat talked mostly in French or English, sprinkled with words of Arabic, Greek or Italian. At times, it became for me an exercise in tightrope walking, just listening to them.

Having introduced me, Sharifa asked the group to tell me about old cosmopolitan Alexandria. The first to speak was Mr. Ricardo Manzoni. Puffing at an impressively sized double Corona, he explained that Alexandria had been inhabited until the early sixties by different ethnic and religious communities that co-existed and intermingled, mostly in the upper echelons of society. These communities had imparted on the city a cosmopolitan stamp which was gradually fading away. He explained that each community - Greek, Italian, Jewish, Armenian, Syrian, French - had its own newspapers, schools, hospitals, orphanages, churches, homes for the elderly, cemeteries, basket-ball teams, clubs, and theatrical groups. They all kept their cultural identity and, at the same time, acquired a certain overall Alexandrian characteristic. Upper-class Egyptians sent their children to these foreign schools to acquire a good education and a European veneer.

I asked what this overall Alexandrian characteristic was. Mr. Khoury said,"Entrepreneurship, hospitality, sense of humor, joie de vivre, energy and ambition, a little bit of snobbery, a strong interest in Europe, an acute ignorance of

real Egypt, and a common language : French, with a strong Alexandrian accent."

They all giggled, approving the description. I asked, "Was Alexandria a real melting pot? "

"Not really," said Mr. Kazarian, "communities did not melt completely. They did not forget their language or lose their culture, but they acquired a certain local flavor. You could always tell that Mr. Benakis and Mr. Theodorakis were Greek, that Mr. Dentamarro was Italian, and that Mr Papazian was Armenian. But you could also tell that they were all Alexandrians."

I asked with some surprise, "Didn't everyone speak Arabic?"

"The khawagat were notorious for speaking poor Arabic," said Mr. Khouri. "In France or in the States, immigrants with poor knowledge of the local language cannot occupy influential positions in the country. In Alexandria the economy was at the time in the hands of this cosmopolitan crowd which may have been there for two, three or more generations without absorbing much of the local culture."

After a short pause I commented, " The Alexandrian melting pot was, therefore, different from the American one. In the States, after one generation you can only tell the original nationality of a person by his name. Otherwise they all look and act as Americans"

"Perhaps that is no longer true," added Sharifa. " I understand that integration is now gradually changing in the States where the communities tend to keep their original culture as well.It is becoming more like in old Alexandria."

Mr. Manzoni added, "Because the new immigrants in the United States originating from Asia or Latin America have roots in cultures, which are far removed from the local one,they find it more difficult to 'melt' than the earlier Europeans. The more foreign the culture the more difficult the melting.

"And what about the Jewish community of Alexandria?" I asked.

After a long silence, Mrs. Rassim, with a Greek accent which did not match her Egyptian name, said, "It is a historically known fact that a large Jewish community lived in Alexandria without interruption since the founding of the city in ancient times. After the creation of the state of Israel, they began to leave. Nowadays there are no more than a dozen families left. They had their journal, la Tribune juive, their hospital, their schools. It was a very wealthy and influential community. Their names were Baron de Menasce, Riso-Levy, Toriel, Rolo, Aghion, Chamla, Cicurel, Hannaux..."

Mr. Kazarian, who had been eyeing the buffet through the open door of the dining room, concluded this exchange by saying, "For radical nationalists, this

cosmopolitanism was the unwelcome symbol of a foreign influence which, together with King Farouk, was responsible for all the evils of Egypt. Every problem that could not be blamed on the corrupt King was the fault of the foreigners. Nasser put an abrupt end to it all. Cosmopolitan Alexandria was soon gone with the wind."

Mrs. Ferghaly passed by, inviting us to the dining room saying "Et-fadal, Et-fadal." The dining room was elegantly decorated in those quiet colors that age gracefully. At the sight of the Buffet, Mr. Kazarian, who admitted to be incurably gluttonous, made small humming noises of contentment. The servants made several appearances carrying loaded trays with a juggler's dexterity. There was more food on the table that could possibly be eaten by the whole Egyptian Army! I silently prayed my patron Saint to ward off indigestion.

Sharifa came to my rescue and explained what those exotic dishes were. Mrs. Ferghaly noticing that, according to local etiquette, her guests were pretending to hesitate to approach the buffet, encouraged them to eat. On the insistence of their hostess, they gladly did so. I understood that it was definitely not advisable to make hogs of ourselves, at least not from the very start. No matter what, I knew that I was close to gastronomical ecstasy.

I sat with Mrs. Rassim, Mr. Manzoni and Ramzy Bey at one of the small tables and talked some more while tasting at a variety of dishes, some of which I liked and some I found rather surprising. Mrs. Rassim said, "Mr. Dupont, it is so difficult to picture what Alexandria was in the old days. My mother used to tell me that a Greek Catholic family of Syrian origin, the Zoghebs, who had settled in Alexandria sometime towards the turn of the 19th century, lived in a style that has probably disappeared from the surface of the earth. Count Patrice de Zogheb held operas and ballet performances at his roof-top apartment in Safia Zaghlool street. Bernard de Zogheb composed plays and operas which were performed in French in a country which, you must remember, was a British colony!"

Gradually the conversation moved to politics and eventually landed on the undermined ground of fundamentalism. I did not think the subject agreed too well with the food and drinks but I listened carefully, avoiding entering into any discussion. I did not have the necessary ammunition. At one point, Ramzy Bey asked me, "What do you think about all this, Mr. Dupont?"

My friend Isaac Benzakein had once told me, "If some day you are stuck with a question to which you cannot, or do not, wish to reply, remember you can always turn your answer into another question." I had often found this piece of advice very useful.

So I said, "This problem has always intrigued me. Why do you think fundamentalism is spreading?"

Ramsy Bey said, " Because fundamentalism, which is a rejection of western

values and codes of behavior, offers reasons to cope with the hardships of life and provides a spiritual refuge from uncertainty concerning the future and infuses a sense of dignity in each of the faithful."

Mrs. Rassim said that it also promises a better lot for everyone in the life after death and Mr. Manzoni added, "It also offers an alternative to the failures of other ideologies, such as Capitalism and Marxism."

Mrs. Ferghaly came back with more goodies. Everyone said "Sofra daiman," which means 'may your table always be thus.' Our hostess gave the standard reply, "Bil' hena wal shifa," which I was told means 'to your happiness and health.'

It was getting very late. We found faithful Zaki at the door and took a last ride along the seashore to the hotel. At that time of night, buildings looked cleaner and in a more reasonable state of repair. One should always visit Alexandria by night! I told Sharifa that I had found this mission particularly enriching. I thanked her for her support. I had learnt so much and knew there was so much more to learn.

Somehow I was leaving with a heavy heart; I already felt a little nostalgic. In my heart of hearts I also felt guilty to have prevented Brigitte, Françoise and Aunt Lilly to come along. They would have been thrilled. But after the 'battle of Leningrad' I would have had to fight the 'battle of the Pyramids.' Well, perhaps I will have to take them along on mission one last time before my forthcoming retirement. Inchaalah!

Viva Zapata!

Our bus was caught in total traffic anarchy. Unperturbed, the Guide continued to talk with ardor, holding the microphone with one hand and gesticulating with the other.

"The ground of the city is gelatinous," he said, "it is a mixture of ashes and water. A sort of sponge. At the slightest earthquake, the buildings collapse. They say that one must be crazy to live in Mexico City!" He added with a mischievous smile, "One must be crazy to come to visit it!" Some tourists on the bus smiled; others ignored the comment.

Françoise, who had been fascinated by earthquakes since her early childhood listened with interest and some apprehension. Brigitte looked uneasy. Aunt Lily was watching the surrounding traffic jam and making all sorts of flippant comments.

"Look on your left at the Latino-American Tower," said the Guide. "It is the first skyscraper built in Mexico City, in 1948. We have a hell of a time keeping it straight. When the ground becomes too dry, we turn on a special underground system that injects large quantities of water under the foundations. The building is a technological miracle!"

He then proceeded to explain that on one summer morning, way back in 1325, the Aztec discovered, on a small island on lake Texcoco, a Royal Eagle eating a snake. They interpreted that as a heavenly omen and decided to settle right there. They built their capital, Tenochtitlan, on that island, interlaced, like Venice, with hundreds of canals. Mexico City was later built over it.

"Now," he said "Mexico City floats on muddy ground, with its twenty million inhabitants, its four million cars, its crowded avenues, its statues and museums, its baroque churches and palaces, its slums, its thieves, its 30,000 factories, its large department stores and numerous cemeteries."

"Did you say 'thieves'?" asked Aunt Lily.

"Yes, madam!" said the Guide. "And you better be careful, because they are

very skillful. Mexico City is dangerous, insecure and polluted, but it is a wonderful and fascinating place!"

Our unconventional Guide, who seemed to enjoy shocking his audience, went on saying, "The permanent gray cloud over your head is made of small particles of ozone, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide - a fiendish cocktail that will give you bronchitis if you dare breathe it in. In Mexico City, even our walls have emphysema! Ha.Ha."

Brigitte began to cough, while Aunt Lily wrapped a silk scarf around her face.

"The city is impregnated by history and memories of our heroes," said the Guide. "In our songs we always remember Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Mexico City is a modern city that does not forget its past and traditions. You should visit the bar La Opera on cinque de Mayo street. There, you will see in the ceiling the bullet fired by Zapata when he entered the bar on his horse. Speaking of traditions, you should also try to go to the restaurant Don Chon, on Regina street, where you can taste several Iguana dishes, as well as insects cooked in the traditional Indian way."

I looked at my three ladies. Françoise was smiling, as though the whole thing was a joke. Brigitte and Aunt Lily had decided not to listen any more to the Guide and watched the city streets as the bus progressed.

"Are you happy to be visiting Mexico?" I asked Françoise.

"Oh, yes Papa! Very much so!" she said.

On the occasion of Françoise's twenty-first birthday, I had offered her to accompany me on mission and visit a little of Mexico with Brigitte and Aunt Lily, while I attended a Latin American regional meeting. Since I was approaching retirement age, this was probably the last occasion for the three ladies to accompany me on mission. Aunt Lily's husband, Albert, was too busy to join us. He hated traveling by plane and always found a good excuse to stay behind. Aunt Lily had told him, "Since you cannot come you'll take care of the canaries. Otherwise, we would have had to take them along with us to Mexico." That was all I needed: to go on mission with my sister-in-law's canaries!

We had just finished visiting the exclusive quarters of Las Lomas, where the millionaires built their Beverly Hill-style houses. The Guide was telling us about Mexico's history, but we were only half- listening, when a funny story caught our attention. It concerned General Santa Anna who had organized national funerals for one of his legs, lost during a battle. "He is also remembered," said the Guide with sarcasm, "for having sold in 1848 to the United States: Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas!"

He then spoke about the two Mexican passions: The Holy Virgin of Guadalupe and Football. The sun was setting and we were now approaching our hotel in the Zona Rosa. The ozone in the air tinted the sky in gold.

The following days, my three Parisian ladies went on their own to discover different aspects of the Aztec and Maya cultures. They left in the morning looking as fit as a fiddle and returned in the evening completely washed out. They would tell me of their various pursuits of the day but refused to go out again at night. They were tired because of the long distances they had to travel and of the air and sound pollutions. Brigitte thought that walking through the crowds was very interesting, but wearisome. Aunt Lily said that the pandemonium that went on from sunrise to sunset proved that the megalopolis, such as Mexico City, Calcutta or Cairo, were fast becoming inhuman and inhospitable.

On the fourth evening, when I returned to the hotel I went to the bar - our usual meeting place - but did not find my three ladies there. While waiting, Alfonso, the barman, prepared a Tequila for me. He explained that it was the distilled liquor made from the juices of the roasted stems of the tequila plant. He showed me how to swing it off after licking lemon and salt. I had tried it before and had not liked it. I tried it again and still did not care for it.

Seeing me pull a wry face, Alfonso insisted to serve me a different drink. Did I want a Santa Cruz Rum Fix? An Angel kiss? A Hot Locomotive? He knew how to fix an Applejack Punch. He even knew how to prepare an English old-timer called Huckle-My-Butt that is famed in both the fact and fiction of the Crusades. Since I was French, he thought I would appreciate a 'Pousse … l'Amour.'

I had to laugh, because, when it came to the art of mixing drinks - and make no mistake, it is an art -, Alfonso spoke with maestria and passion. He explained his drinks with minute details, underlining his speech with elegant gestures. A little Maraschino here; a little Curacao there; a pint of Brandy here; a twist of lemon peel there; a whole egg; a dash of orange bitters; a tablespoon of sugar: stir, fill, add, shake. Alfonso was not a barman. He was a juggler.

I had to yield and try some of his mouth-watering mixtures. So grand in their blending of delicious tastes and so powerful in their hidden might!

More than an hour had gone by and Brigitte, Françoise and Aunt Lily were not back. But Alfonso would not let me worry. He would serve and talk. He explained that the art of mixing drinks was specific to the twentieth century. History tells us that our ancestors did throw together some concoctions of various spirits in days long gone by. But such drinks of the past were few, compared with the large selection of palate-teasing mixtures of to day.

Alfonso served me another cocktail in a frosty goblet saying that an English Diplomat, after tasting it had called it 'an ecstatic liquid delight.' I touched my lips to

its tantalizing rim with a feeling of reverence. At that point, I could no longer ask my palate to make subtle distinctions between drinks. There was no end to their names and no limit to the variety of the ingredients. Alfonso said, "They are as numerous as the sands of the desert." I said, "Alfonso, I cannot cross the whole desert in one night, I have drunk my fill!"

I looked at my watch. I had been drinking and talking drinks for well over two hours. Where were my three ladies? I suddenly remembered our last evening in Leningrad and shivered. My God! Not again!

I waited and waited. I took the Receptionist into my confidence and exposed my fears. I talked to the Hotel manager and to Alfonso. I called my friend, Dr. Pablo Gomez-Portilla, chairman of the Regional Meeting. No one had anything to offer, except for Alfonso who suggested another drink.

At around midnight, Brigitte, Françoise and Aunt Lilly entered the hotel, lurid and haggard. I ran towards them with a thousand questions. They looked at me with glassy eyes and barely reacted. The lump in my chest had grown very big and I showered them with a torrent of emotional reprimands and scoldings. They walked to the elevator like three robots. Their gait was ghostlike. Mine was staggering, thanks to Alfonso's generosity. I tried hard to keep calm and invited Françoise and Aunt Lily, who shared the same room, to come to ours so that we could talk.

I did all the talking; they did not utter a word. As I began to show my irritation at their silence, Brigitte and Françoise burst into tears and Aunt Lily said, "Listen, Jacques. We fully understand that you were concerned. We are sorry for that. But, please, do not ask what happened. We do not want to talk about it now. We'll tell you later."

"Why later? I need to know, now!" I said.

Lily replied, "If we have to relate in detail what we went through to day, we would go into total hysterics. We need to forget. It was just awful."

"Please, Lily, I do not need details now, but for heaven's sake tell me in a few words what happened."

"In summary," she said "someone stole Françoise's purse on the street, as we came out of the Museum, and when we went to the Police to report our loss we were treated like criminals. We were shouted at in Spanish and kept all afternoon and evening with thieves, gangsters, prostitutes and racketeers. It was hideous. It was horrifying. We had to pay our way out. When we eventually left the Police station, Brigitte and I realized that we no longer had our purses. Of course, we did not go back. We do not want to talk about it now. Please. We do not want to alert anyone. Who could you alert... we already went to the Police!"

Aunt Lily and Françoise went to their room in tears and Brigitte cried herself to sleep in my arms.

The next day they begged me not to tell anyone about what had happened. "How can I tell anyone," I said, "I know practically nothing about what happened."

After a pause I said, "Tell me everything in detail, slowly, chronologically, calmly."

It was obvious that they had decided not to share the full story with me. Every time I asked a question I had the feeling that they were hiding certain facts from me. Once in a while, a new detail would emerge and contradict part of the story they had told me. Versions kept changing all the time. An obvious effort was made to keep me in the dark. At what time was Françoise's purse stolen? They did not remember. What Police Station did they go to? They did not know. What time did they get to the Police? It was one o'clock or, perhaps, two. It might even have been three. What was in the purses? Everything. How did they get back to the hotel without money? They somehow managed.

The inquisition lasted a couple of hours, during which I showed nervousness and irritation, I flared up several times and, eventually, gave up and left the hotel to go to the meeting.

During the following days they made several telephone calls concerning their credit cards, passports and travelers' checks. Every time I tried to talk about the issue, Aunt Lily would say, "Don't be melodramatic, Jacques, it was just a small incident."

"If it was so small an incident, why were you all in tears?" I asked.

"Don't exaggerate! We were a little tired, that's all!" answered Aunt Lily, dismissing the topic with a gesture of disdain and walking away appearing as detached and nonchalant as possible.

I did not push the issue any longer, figuring that they must have had good reasons to keep me out of it. To this day I do not know what exactly happened and why they would not tell me. Even when we later got back to Paris, I asked each one of them separately, but failed to get a satisfactory answer.

Towards the end of our trip, the four of us went to dinner one evening at Dr. Pablo Gomez-Portilla's. On the way, Brigitte and Aunt Lily reiterated their wish that the subject of the theft and the visit to the Police station would not be brought up. They insisted. I promised.

The dinner party was delightful and lively. It never sank into a single moment of dullness. Everyone was joyful, imaginative and in a good mood. We had a

memorable time! The atmosphere was friendly and warm, thanks to the urbane attitude of Dr. Pablo Gomez-Portilla. He greeted us at the door by saying, "Aqui està su casa." (This is your house), adding in a whisper, "La che yo pago." (The one I pay for.)

Dr. Pablo Gomez-Portilla was a slender, tanned man with bright teeth flashing through a dense black mustache. He was witty, articulate and elegant. He could make the everyday look exceptional.

One of the liveliest guests at the party was Carlos Leon-Robledo, a jolly Mexican diplomat I had known for years. Carlos was not quite short, not quite fat, broad across the chest and stomach, thick-necked and dashingly mustachioed. He had been for many years with the Mexican Embassy in Paris and seemed to know the French inside-out. Whenever we met, he found great delight in teasing me. He needed to take his revenge over the French who probably made him suffer during his stay in France. That night he was in heaven, with such a wide French audience to tease. There did not seem to be any strict rules of conversation; all subjects were welcome: polemical, critical, political, sexual or controversial. Caramba!

"I love the French. They are smart people, but do not smile very easily," he said, looking at my three ladies. "I understand that François Mitterrand won two presidential elections without ever smiling!"

"He had a good reason not to," said Brigitte, giggling. "He could not afford to show his bad teeth. Had he smiled, he would have lost the elections."

"Besides," added Aunt Lily, looking festive and resplendent, "smiling at strangers is not part of French culture. We usually do not smile without a reason." And assuming a Prima Donna pose added, "Please give us some good reason to smile."

Becoming more provocative, Carlos said, "France is a very old country with many treasures, such as the Louvre and EuroDisney. It is a country that made valuable contributions to western civilization: Champagne, Camembert, Chanel number 5 and the Guillotine."

Aunt Lily, with a big smile - to prove that the French can smile - cited in one breath all the great French scientists, writers, artists and musicians she could remember. At the end of the litany, Carlos added, "And many more: Louis XIV, Joan of Arc, Gérard Depardieu and Charles de Gaulle, who was a President for many years and is now an airport."

Brigitte burst out laughing and said, "Many of your revolutionary Generals are now Avenues!"

With a bright smile, Françoise spoke of the French cuisine, citing many cooks,

famous restaurants and dishes known the world over. "Let's face it," said Carlos, "no matter how much garlic you put on it, a snail is just a slug with a shell on its back!"

At that point our Argentinean guest, Ricardo Villambrosa, came to the defense of France, attracting the admiration of our French ladies. Ricardo radiated neatness from his neck to his shiny shoes. Like most Argentineans, he was a person of refined taste and exquisite manners. A tiny bit snobbish with something of a superiority complex.

"Of course an Argentinean would come to the rescue of a European!" said Carlos. "The Argentineans, as opposed to the other Latino-Americans, think that they have no Indian blood in them. They do not spring from the Incas, the Aztec, or the Maya. They like to think that they spring from no one, descending directly from the Lord God Almighty. Ha.Ha."

To which Ricardo replied, "Well, the problem with a Mexican - if our good host, Pablo, would allow me to say - is that he carries deep in his soul two irreconcilable ancestors: an Indian and a Spaniard. They both live in him with a repressed mixture of love and hate. The great Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, said that a Mexican wants to be neither Indian nor Spanish. He asserts himself, not as a Metis, but as an Abstraction. He starts within himself. In your city tour, Jacques, you must have seen that strange fountain called 'Monumento a la raza' - a tribute to the new race: the new man of the new world."

Our Mexican friend, Carlos, did not let Ricardo drag the conversation onto philosophy. He wanted to keep the exchange light and funny. He said, "In Argentina, everything goes through a sort of 'hypernationalistic grinder' and comes out 100% Argentinean. A simple 'Dry Martini' has been rebaptized 'San Martin.'"

"In Mexico," retorted Ricardo, "You are still looking for your 'grinder.' Every other week you have a coup, a so-called 'pronunciamento.' Every other year you have a revolution!"

Françoise, Brigitte and Aunt Lily obviously enjoyed the general friendly atmosphere and, in particular, the Argentino-Mexican duel. The guests were exchanging comments in good humor, when our host introduced a couple of Mariachi he had hired to entertain us for a while. They sang and instantaneously electrified the atmosphere. I could tell that Françoise was in heaven. The general conversation stopped while the Mariachi were singing. Smaller groups spoke in Spanish and food was served. A sumptuous succession of colorful and spicy dishes were displayed on the buffet. It seemed that we were on the brink of gastronomic ecstasy. Even the women ignored their diet.

A guest with an elongated silhouette and nervous gait arrived and was introduced as Miguel Moustique. Brigitte and her sister, who had had a number of

drinks, looked at each other with an ironic smile and tittered - 'moustique' meaning mosquito in French. Miguel Moustique looked at Aunt Lily with the appraising eye of a prospective conqueror and sat next to her. He was tall and slim with an angular face and a long nose. He was dressed in gray and black, as though he had done his best to look sinister. He proudly explained to Lily and Brigitte that he was originally French. His ancestor, Achille Moustique, had come to Mexico with the French troops that Napoleon III had sent in 1864 to put Maximilian of Habsburg on the throne. The French troops left in 1867, but Achille Moustique, who had fallen in love in the meantime, stayed behind and married a local girl. L'amour. Toujours l'amour!

While listening to this story, Aunt Lily began to chuckle to herself. She probably visualized Miguel Moustique as a mosquito going 'bzz-bzz-bzz.' Then suddenly Brigitte was overcome by an uncontrollable laughter. At that point, losing all control, Aunt Lily burst out laughing in Moustique's face. They obviously had had too much to drink.

Miguel Moustique looked puzzled and asked what was the laughing matter. Aunt Lily, purple in the face, apologized, explaining that the song the Mariachi were singing reminded them of something very funny that had happed years ago in Paris. It is amazing how fast she could come up with a good lie! Brigitte stood up and walked towards the bathroom, with a handkerchief over her mouth, while Miguel Moustique continued his story.

When the Mariachi were gone, Françoise who knew some Spanish said that she was intrigued by the differences in accent among the guests. Alberto Almeida from Chili explained that obvious differences existed not only in accents but also in vocabularies. Words often had different meanings in different parts of the continent. In Central America a hat is a 'cachucha.' In Peru the same word refers to a part of the masculine body which is not publicly discussed in refined circles. If a Peruvian lady sits on the hat of a gentleman from San Salvador, he should not tell her, "Madam you are sitting on my 'cachucha'!"

Our gracious host, Pablo Gomez-Portilla, in trying to bring the conversation back onto safer ground, told us that the Chilians are known for their colorful language, their black humor and especially for their metaphors. For example, to announce that a neighbor, say by the name of Rafael, died, a Chilean would say "Rafael forgot to breathe!" or "Poor Rafael will no longer take the train!" or "Rafael will no longer shop at Gath y Chaves Department Store."

"True," said Alberto, "We love metaphors in Chile, but we are not the only ones. In Brazil, they call 'Camisa de Venus' (Venus' shirt), those objects men ask for in a low voice at the pharmacy.

I looked towards my three women to see how they reacted to this lewd talk. Brigitte had moved to the other side of the room away from Moustique. The latter had moved closer to Lily and was talking to her with fervor. She seemed tickled and

was obviously glamorizing. She asked many questions but did not seem to pay much attention to the answers.

"What I find amusing in Brazil" said our host, "is the fact that every profession has its precious stone. By looking at a man's ring you can tell that he is a physician if he wears an emerald; a lawyer if he wears a ruby; or an engineer if he displays a sapphire."

"What do wives of Unesco directors wear?" asked Brigitte, making a funny face. I gave her a reproachful look and discretely signaled that she should put down her glass.

And so the conversation, like a butterfly, flitted lightly from subject to subject, sprinkled with giggles and laughter. All that was asked of anyone was to be amusing and amused.

Françoise said that she liked very much the sense of humor that seemed to prevail in Latin America and the relaxed and warm relationships that existed among people. A few exchanges on the topic of humor followed. Our Mexican friend, Carlos Leon-Robledo, said, "If, while in Mexico City something is stolen from you - which is not unlikely - you should have enough humor to appreciate the astuteness of your thief. Mexican thieves are very foxy and sometimes one has to admire their ingenuity, with humor."

That remark cast a chill among my three ladies who looked at one another in silence. I did not utter a word, but Aunt Lily abandoned Moustique and sat close to Carlos, with an obvious wish to enlarge on the subject. Unfortunately, I had a brief exchange with Alberto Almeida on the other side and could not follow the conversation between Aunt Lily and Carlos. When I was able to lend an ear, I overheard Carlos saying, with his usual satirical expression, "The consular services of the French Embassy are intended in reality for the promotion of the interests of French business, such as wine, perfume, guided missiles, cheese, grenade launchers, champagne and high-caliber weaponry. If you, as an individual citizen in trouble, need their services, you are told to report between one and two on Tuesdays and Fridays. If you choose to call, an answering machine will give you all sorts of useless information, such as a list of qualified dentists."

Aunt Lily did not seem amused. Carlos' sarcasm did not meet her expectations this time. She strode back to Moustique with an airy elegance. Carlos turned to me and said, "You know, amigo Jacques, I finally found what Mexicans and French people have in common: they love revolutions. You have had your major one in 1789 and we have our smaller ones every now and then. We love to pull everything down and start from scratch. Every time I see France on the TV news, people are rioting or marching down the street, protesting against the latest government decision."

"Yes," I said "we have our Zapatas too!"

"Who is Zapata?" asked Françoise

Carlos explained that Emiliano Zapata, considered by some as a terrorist and trouble-maker, was in fact an idealist who fought for the poor, for justice and for land reform. "He was a rebel leader and fought during his life time against three presidents: Diaz, Madero, and Huerta."

"When did he die?" asked Françoise.

"He was killed in 1919," said Carlos.

At that instant, the elderly lady who had sat silently in a corner all evening spoke up for the first time. Our host had introduced her as his mother. Since she had not joined in the general conversation so far, we had assumed that she spoke only Spanish. We were mistaken, for Mrs. Gomez-Portilla spoke beautiful English.

She said, "Yes I remember Emiliano Zapata was ambushed and killed, on April 10th, 1919 by Jesus Guajardo!"

The astonishment was general. Everyone thought and said that Mrs. Gomez-Portilla looked much too young to have been around in 1919.

"Oh. No. I am older than any of you." she kept saying. And as some of us insisted that she could not have been around at the time of Zapata, she stood up, as we clustered like flies around her and, with an incredible verve, declaimed, "I was born before television, before penicillin, before air-conditioners. I existed before credit cards and Nylon stockings. I grew up without Barbie dolls and without electric typewriters. At the time of my birth, MacDonald's was unknown. I was born before Time magazine and before washing-machines. In my days 'time-sharing' only meant togetherness, a 'chip' was a piece of wood, and 'hardware' meant nuts and bolts. Cigarette smoking was fashionable, 'grass' was mown, 'coke' was kept in the coal room, a 'joint' was a piece of meat, and 'pot' was something you cooked in. A gay person was then the life and soul of the party - and nothing more. Believe me I was around when Emiliano Zapata was killed!"

We all gave her a true standing ovation.

After a little silence, I looked at my watch and realized that it was past one o'clock and hinted that it was time to go. I was a little concerned that the two French sisters might be getting out of hand. My remark raised a general protest. It was late for neither Mexicans nor Argentineans. Neither was it late for Chileans, for Peruvians, or for Colombians! Visitors seemed set to stay for ever.

A discussion on the notion of time followed. Aunt Lily did not miss the

opportunity to remark that time was a very flexible notion in Mexico and in southern countries in general.

Dr. Pablo Gomez-Portilla, regaining for a moment his professorial composure, explained that, according to Edward T. Hall, there are mainly two time systems: monochronic and polychronic. Monochronic people pay attention at one thing at a time; polychronic ones are involved with many things at once. In monochronic cultures, time is used in a linear way, planned, segmented, compartmentalized and scheduled. That is why a schedule, an agenda, a program, a plan or an appointment is so sacred among monochronic people, such as Europeans and North Americans. Polychronic cultures, on the other hand, such as those prevailing in Africa, Latin America and the Arab World, are characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things at once and by a great involvement with people. They consider a time commitment only as an objective. It is more important to finish a transaction with a person than to keep an appointment.

I remembered my mission in Morocco. I recalled the problem in Cairo between monochronic Van der Meer, who wanted to stick to an agenda and concentrate exclusively on it, and polychronic Abdel-Rahman who answered phone calls, greeted friends and signed papers during the meeting. I had met during my international work many such examples, when the notion of time became a major source of misunderstanding. I was thinking of the problem I had encountered in Japan between monochronic Earl Ray Clarck and polychronic Mitsuo Harada, when Carlos Leon-Robledo said "Amigo Jacques, even though the French, according to this theory, are monochronic, they are often late. Even the French TV programs are late," He added, laughing heartedly, "The French are always on time for lunch and dinner though!"

After a few more drinks and more laughter it was past two. I persuaded Brigitte and Aunt Lily that it was time to leave. We had eaten well, laughed a lot and drunk just enough to reach that stage where life becomes just great! We began our round of hugs, thanks and shake-hands. The house looked like a battlefield; we had contributed to the housework by leaving empty glasses and dishes all over the place. As we were passing the main door, Miguel Moustique kissed Aunt Lily's hand saying, "Tomorrow, ten o'clock." Brigitte giggled and asked, "Monochronic or Polychronic ten?"

There we were, at last, in the limousine our kind host had put at our disposal, with a bright chauffeur who knew his way around. The limousine was filled with all the indispensable status symbols you can dream of : a television, a bar, an ice box, a telephone and a fax-machine. "No washing-machine, though!" remarked Brigitte, as the two sisters became the prey to another fit of laughter.

"Françoise," I said, "You are the most reasonable and the best behaved of my three women!"

The following morning I was free, while the meeting report was being typed. The meeting was to resume at four in the afternoon to approve the report. So, I decided to join the shopping expedition which was to be led by Miguel Moustique.

At ten o'clock sharp we saw Moustique's silhouette coming through the hotel door. He looked impeccable but sinister, dressed all in black, which prompted Brigitte to tell her sister, "Brigitte, your enamored suitor looks like an undertaker's assistant." The two sisters started giggling again while Françoise remarked that she had never seen her mother and aunt having so much fun before. Just like two teenagers.

Moustique grinned from ear to ear. Lily was glowing and in high spirits. Her admirer looked at her amorously and offered her a pink rose. "Oh!" I said "I had better cable your husband, Lily, to come immediately with his sword!"

The morning was dedicated to shopping. Aunt Lily had already explained, the previous evening, all her problems and wishes to Miguel and he had prepared a plan. First we went to all the stores where she had already purchased a number of things that she now wished to return. Aunt Lily always changed her mind and invariably wanted to exchange or return her purchases. In Paris, she often ran into problems because many stores do not allow for that. In contrast, she loved shopping in London and New York because the rules of the game there made room for her chronic indecision.

It was fortunate that Miguel was now with us to help with the transactions. She had bought many things at a bargain price and no longer had the receipts which were in her stolen purse. A refund was impossible and the resulting haggling was endless. In many cases, all she was allowed to do was to exchange the returned good for something different. She had to make up her mind fast and ended up with more useless things she probably would want to return the following day.

After a quick lunch, Miguel Moustique took us to the Flea Market where Aunt Lily wanted to buy a nice gift for her Albert, whom she had 'abandoned' in Paris together with the canaries. Brigitte explained to Miguel that this sort of present was called a 'remorse gift' in France and that our own apartment, in Paris, was full of them. "After every one of Jacques' missions," she said, " I deserve a 'remorse gift.'"

When we entered the first Antique dealer , Aunt Lily went wild. In her eyes was a glint of the lust to acquire, she admired all the remains of domestic histories, culled from the attics of Mexico City. She was born with an incurable inclination towards expensive shopping. She asked for Miguel's opinion, she commented with enthusiasm on every object and caressed it. The Antique dealer, recognizing a good prey, gave her his particular attention and showed her a variety of exceptional antiques. She was drawn to a sort of a flat vase, which the Antique Dealer called 'an early sixteenth century chamber pot.' He said, with a straight face, that it dated from the days Herman Cortés defeated Montezuma, around 1519.

The situation had suddenly become killingly funny. Françoise said in disbelief, "Aunt Lily, you are not taking a chamber pot to Uncle Albert!" Moustique expressed doubts that Cortés' soldiers were so refined as to use such a sophisticated container to answer a call of nature. I asked Brigitte how on earth would Lily, who had her purse stolen, pay for the pot. Brigitte said, giggling, that perhaps Moustique would offer the pot to Lily so that she could put the pink rose in it. The situation became so ludicrous that we all laughed.

Aunt Lily was caressing the pot with admiration when her sister said, "Don't do that, Lily, you never know how many have used it since 1519!"

At that point Françoise left the store laughing till she cried. I said to Lily, "With the price you are asked to pay you can have a whole bathroom installed!" To which the Dealer said "If you care for a less expensive chamber pot, we have a more recent one of the Zapata period."

Aunt Lily was dead serious about making an exceptional bargain. She asked if a certificate could be delivered. The Antique dealer said that the only way to get out of the country such antique objects, which belonged to the national cultural heritage was to lie about their age. Brigitte immediately added, "My sister never lies about age. Ha. Ha."

It was past three thirty, I ran out - leaving them around Cortés' and Zapata's chamber pots - jumped into a taxi and went to my meeting.

The next day, when we arrived at the airport, we found a delegation of smiling, friendly gentlemen who had come to bid us farewell: Pablo Gomez-Portilla, Carlos Leon-Robledo and, of course, Miguel Moustique. We had so much luggage that one could easily assume that we had spent at least six months in Mexico.

Carlos reminded us that it was July 13th and we would be landing in Paris on Bastille Day. "Since you are traveling on Air France," he said, "you will be drinking a lot of champagne to celebrate the mass decapitation of the French aristocracy."

Aunt Lily took Moustique aside and, with a friendly smile and sexy voice, asked him if he would be so kind as to return a couple of gifts she got at the store where they had exchanged things. "We were in such a rush," she said, "that I could not make the right choice. When I packed this morning I found all these useless things!"

On the plane I asked Aunt Lily, Brigitte and Françoise which chamber pot had been bought, if any. They looked at each other and giggled, but would not tell me. I said, " Well, I do not want to know any more what happed at the police station, but tell me at least about the chamber pot!" They did not and I said, "You are no different than three Mafia women, whose law of silence, l'omertà, is never broken."

The next day, after a short nap, we went to dinner at Lily and Albert's place. The latter had prepared a special Bastille Day meal with champagne and all the trimmings. In the middle of the table was Emiliano Zapata's chamber pot, with a faded pink rose in it. Viva Zapata!

The Farewell Party

My farewell party is the last and, therefore, the most recent event which took place during my life at Unesco. And yet, it is a most foggy and confused recollection. The latter part of the evening is especially blurred, even though the party keeps haunting my thoughts. It all happened as in a dream.

I had joined Unesco in 1965, at the age of thirty, which meant that I have spent half my life, and certainly the most significant years of my adulthood, with the Organization. I met many people, visited many countries and learnt many things in those years.

As a tribute to my contribution to the organization, my colleagues decided to have my farewell party at the time of the Unesco General Conference. This biennial conference usually brought to Paris a large delegation from every Member State of Unesco, representatives from the United Nations Agencies, directors of all the Unesco regional offices, observers from a number of non-governmental organizations, journalists and many personalities. Quite a crowd.

My colleagues organized the party in our Division offices and sent out invitations to everyone I knew who attended the Conference. I distinctly remember the beginning of the party, but the latter part is in a mist.

The Assistant Director-General came up at the beginning for a quick drink and made a warm speech. He described me in very flattering terms and highlighted some of my achievements. He said that after thirty years of duty I would be free at last, I would discover the joys of independent life and of being my own master.

I also remember that some colleagues had asked what were the most outstanding lessons I had learned during my missions around the world.

"I have learned many lessons," I replied, "but the one that stands out is the fact that cultural differences can be a major cause of misunderstanding," and added, "Many problems among people could be avoided if we had a deeper understanding of other cultures."

The discussion - the only serious one we had for the evening - drifted to the very notion of culture and the issue of cultural misunderstandings.

Culture is the logic by which we interpret the world around us. The prism through which we see, and often judge, others. We learned this logic, as children, from the way we were raised, taught, and loved. From the games we played, the stories we were told and the songs we sang. From the way adults around us spoke, worked, bargained, expressed affection, joy or pain, and the manner in which they behaved towards their parents, their own children and their neighbors.

Thus we absorbed the tacit rules of our culture and then forgot that we had learned them. They became a deep-seated part of us. For the rest of our lives we shall tend to look at the world, and judge people, by reference to these rules.

The more we learn about other cultures, the more understanding we become. If, on the other hand, we believe that our own cultural rules are absolute and universal, we tend to be intolerant.

My international audience agreed with the message. They dwelt on the subject and exchanged specific examples. One of them referred to the unspoken signals and non-verbal signs and codes of each culture, which are naturally understood by people from the same group, but are often misunderstood in intercultural contacts, thereby making communication more difficult.

Some General Conference delegates began to drop in. I was very pleased to see each one of them, chat and have drinks with them.

After a while my mind began to show signs of confusion. My memory, that storehouse of the mind and guardian of all things, faltered. A sort of veil descended on reality and every person and object around me became somewhat unreal. Had I taken a drop too much ?

I asked my Secretary what ardent spirit she had served me and she replied, "From the cocktail that Mr. Massaringhe had sent for you."

I had not been told that Mr. Massaringhe had sent any cocktail and I never found out what the wicked mixture was made of: the last enigma of my days at Unesco. What was clear though, was my state of intoxication. I was not myself any longer. I was not upset. I was not hilarious. I was simply serene and completely unconcerned with the world around me.

Now, visitors followed each other, as I searched every corner of my brain and the inmost recesses of my memory to figure out who was who. Among the many smiling faces I recognized Mrs. Annika Thomasson from Sweden, elegant and dignified; followed by Mr. Arianayagham from Sri Lanka, who spoke in a monotonous cadence and very soft voice; and Mr. Fassi-Bakkari from Morocco, majestically imposing. Each one called to mind a specific event. A flash from the past.

"Oh, yes Mr. Kharalambos, I remember you taught us how to roll grape leaves at Sir John's dinner !"

"Hello Mr. Russell, how is Borobudur ? I shocked you during my visit, didn't I?"

"Good evening, my friend Takahashi. I am happy to see you. I trust you did not bring along Professor Earl Ray Clark ! Ha. Ha."

"Good evening, Mr. Andreansen, I'll never forget beautiful Tivoli and your good jokes !"

" How nice to drop by Mr. Mabungu. Is Veronique Maina with you ?"

I was then called on the phone. I walked there very slowly and carefully, so that my gait would not betray my intemperance.

The voice on the phone said, "This is Bacchus bidding you farewell!"

"Who is this?" I asked several times.

"Bacchus ! The Romans call me Bacchus and the Greeks call me Dionysus !"

After a long silence I hang up, having recognized Massaringhe's voice. I was not upset. Neither was I amused. Just serenely detached. On a cloud of my own.

There was Mrs. Indira Bahtia, chairlady of the Bangalore meeting, tall and lean as a stick, straightforward and abrupt. I was surprised to see her and, was tempted to tell her the story of the Kama-Sutra I had purchased for Brigitte after the meeting. I had it on the tip of the tongue but, fortunately, refrained from doing so.

I was ever so happy to see smiling, efficient Sharifa from Egypt! We exchanged a few gossips and chuckled about Mr. Van der Meer, the Assistant Director-General, who had made such a fuss in Cairo.

"Hello Mr. Perala. Nice of you to come. Please, have a drink. I have such good memories of my visit in Finland." And as he talked to me my mind wandered. I had a mental vision of Merja, Helena, Ulla and Eva running naked towards the outdoor Sauna. Good old days !

At the door appeared husky Boris Tikhonov, Director of the New Delhi Office, with his wild beard and formidable eyebrows. After all these years he still wanted to know what had happed at the Taj Mahal Hotel of Bombay.

Then followed in a procession M. Brown from the UN in New York, whose

'English' Secretary was from Oshkosh, Nebraska; Mrs. Schläger from Austria who had given us the Linzertorte recipe at Sir John's dinner; Mr. Larry Thompson from the World Bank, with whom I had gone shopping for Zeinab's dress in Morocco; Mr. Ricardo Villambrosa from Argentina, who had spoken of France in such exquisite terms; Ms. Pringgoadisurjo from Indonesia, whose name I had never succeeded in pronouncing, and always greeted with an anonymous "Hi there!"; Dr. Mitsuo Harada from Japan who had taught me how the art of reaching consensus; my good old friend Giovanni Spaghettini, Mr. Carlos Leon-Robledo, our jolly Mexican Diplomat, and many others whose faces time had erased from my thoughts and whose names Massaringhe's diabolic drink had dismissed from my memory.

Then came Brigitte who, at fifty-five, was still slim and attractive; Françoise, who was now a young lady of twenty-four, my brother-in-law, Albert, with a couple of champagne bottles under his arms, and Aunt Lily, in a stunning outfit, saying that the place smelled like a winery.

As we chatted, Igor Panushkin from Leningrad - which had now resumed its former name of St. Petersburg - came in with a bottle of vodka. Françoise and Brigitte inquired about their guide, Olga Ananiev, while I asked if stunning Tatyana still looked like Sofia Loren.

Then, Miguel Moustique from Mexico made his appearance... tall, slim, all in black, like Mephisto. Since this was his first visit to Paris since our Mexican trip, he brought for Aunt Lily a huge box of exchanged gifts. "More chamber pots ?" asked Brigitte.

All this procession of people I had met along the many traveled roads raked up the past and stirred up memories. Missions and countries were passed in review; discussions, negotiations and speeches came back to mind; meetings, anecdotes, laughters, dinners and cocktails flashed in my mind in some sort of dreamy sequence. Present and past intermingled. Reality and fantasy melted in a comfortable mirage. The Farewell Party must certainly have ended at some point. But I do not remember exactly how and when. In many ways, the party still lingers in my heart, the parade of friends and acquaintances continues and the show seems to go on for ever.

Appendix:
Unesco - sunny side up

Unesco, like the United Nations, was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. Its constitution was ratified on the 4th of November 1946 by the twenty Founding Member States who signed the solemn declaration: " Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed..." The purpose of the Organization was defined as " To contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture..." The number of Member States increased from 20 in 1946 to 184 in 1995.

The General Conference is the main decision-making body of Unesco. It meets every two years, determines the policies of the Organization and approves its program and budget. Every six years, it appoints the Director General. The Executive Board is composed of 51 Members. It meets twice a year and is responsible for the implementation of the program. The Secretariat consists of the Director-General, a number of Assistant Directors-General, Directors, Program Specialists and secretaries located at the headquarters in Paris and in some 60 field offices around the world. In 1995, the Secretariat was composed of 2483 women and men from 147 countries.

In 1994-1995 the regular budget, comprising the mandatory contributions from Members States, amounted to $455 million. Extrabudgetary funds (Voluntary contributions, Funds-in-Trust, Special UN funds and programs for Development, Environment, Population, Children etc) for the same period amounted to $275 million.

The Secretariat is divided into Sectors covering its main program areas : 1) Education; 2) Natural Sciences; 3) Culture; 4) Communication, Information and Informatics; and 5) Social & Human Sciences. Each Sector comprises several Divisions, which in turn are organized into Sections.

The activities carried out by the Organization, include: Establishment of international norms; conventions, agreements, recommendations and declarations; conferences and meetings; studies and research; publications : books, periodicals, reports and documents; technical and advisory services to Member States : staff missions, consultants, supplies and equipment; pilot projects; training courses, seminars and workshops; subventions and financial contributions; fellowships and study grants.

Jacques Tocatlian was born in Alexandria, Egypt, of an Armenian-Italian ancestry. He studied Chemistry in Alexandria; Textile Technology in Milan, Italy; Organic Chemistry in Utah, USA; and Library and Information Science in Philadelphia, USA.

After doing chemical research and developing information services in the US chemical and pharmaceutical industries, he joined Unesco - the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation - in Paris, France. He worked for twenty years in programs for international co-operation and assistance to the developing world in the fields of library, scientific and technical information, documentation and archives services. He directed the Office of Information Programs and Services. He has visited and implemented projects in numerous countries in the African, Asian, Arab, European and Latin American regions. In his last years at Unesco before retiring he was responsible for the project of the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria.

Jacques Tocatlian has published numerous technical articles in Chemistry, Information Science and International co-operation. He speaks English, French, Italian and Arabic and has working knowledge in Spanish. He has two passions: writing and oil painting (He has had several exhibitions and won the Julien Miallon medal in 1998). His first novel (Around the World in Eighty Missions) is not an autobiography, but rather the product of an interaction between imagination, experience, fiction, reminiscence and fantasy, tempered by a sprinkling of light humor.

What is the book about? It is about traveling, countries and people. it is about national characteristics and cultural differences and similarities. It is about funny situations and amusing anecdotes.

Jacques Dupont lives in Paris with his wife, Brigitte, and daughter Françoise. He works at Unesco - the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organisation - and undertakes missions to countries around the world, to attend meetings, raise funds for his projects, negotiate assistance programs and provide technical assistance.

By following Jacques Dupont around the world you will meet people, discover some of their idiosyncrasies and colorful manners and observe other cultures with curiosity and tender feelings. You will accompany him through various delicate situations and share with him his satisfactions and fears, his enthusiasm and procrastinations, his banquets and indigestions, his discoveries and fits of laughter. You will often smile and sometimes laugh.

With Jacques Dupont, and sometimes with Brigitte and Françoise, you will discover new horizons, visit Egypt, Russia, India, Kenya, Japan, Indonesia, Morocco, Finland, Mexico. You will bargain in the souks, taste exotic food, join a Safari, take a sauna, or worry about the KGB.

Our fictitious character, Jacques Dupont, joins Unesco in 1965, at the age of thirty and retires in 1995 when he reaches the age of sixty. No particular plot unfolds from the first to the last page. Each of the fourteen chapters of the book deals with a new country, a new mission and new adventures.

Jacques Dupont helps us comprehend our differences in the way we behave, eat, work and live. The wounds caused by interethnic misunderstandings and cultural differences can often be prevented, or healed, by tolerance and better understanding of others. He helps us achieve this - with humor.

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