

## Vienna...and Other Destinations, 1966

After I left my faculty position at the University of Florida medical school in 1964, I was hired as a staff scientist in the Biological and Medical Research Division at the Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago. I was one of four young scientists the division director added that year, hoping to elevate the quality of the research being produced by a highly entrenched and mostly second-rate staff. One of those four was L. Dennis Smith, an accomplished embryologist fresh from a post-doctoral tenure at Indiana University. It didn't take long for Denny and me to discover that there were some exciting new things we could do together that neither of us could do by ourselves. The resulting collaboration endured for a number of years and produced some very significant research.

During our collaboration, I maintained my membership in the Biophysical Society, which represented many of the disciplines that I, as a molecular biologist, had embraced in my earlier research. So, when we had produced, along with a colleague from the University of Iowa, some results that merited presentation to our peers around the world, we prepared a paper to be presented at the Second International Biophysics Congress in Vienna, Austria in September 1966. I was the senior author on the work and I prepared to present the paper at that meeting.

At the time, I had two close friends that were living in London and my brother Tom was living that year in Stockholm, Sweden. So I arranged my travels so that I could spend few days in London on my way to Vienna and a few more in Sweden with Tom on the way home. I had never been to Europe. The Army had given me a glimpse of the Far East during the Korean War, but that had been the extent of my international travels. I prepared for this trip with considerable enthusiasm. Argonne was a major interdisciplinary government facility with over five thousand employees, so all of my travel arrangements were made for me by an office at the laboratory. I was planning to stay with my friends in London and with Tom in Stockholm, so they booked my flights and made reservations for me at a nice hotel in Vienna.



In London, I was invited to stay with John and Ethel Cebra. John was on a temporary assignment in a laboratory there. He and I had been colleagues

on the faculty of the medical school in Gainesville, Florida. I was on my own most of the time I was in London, although they did take me on a fascinating boat trip up the Thames to visit the Kew Gardens. In fact, the only pictures I can find of my visit to London



were of that trip up the Thames. Adjoining this narrative are some photos of that excursion. The gardens were a wonder to visit. One could spend days in the place and not see everything. I was particularly attracted to the gargoyles that adjoined the walkways in abundance.

The Cebra's home was easy walking distance from an underground station, so I planned a trip to visit the Tower of London while I was there. Considering its size, London was a remarkably easy place in which to get around. The underground trains were frequent and had stations within walking distance of virtually anything you might want to see in the city. Certainly, the Tower of London was a highlight of my brief stay in London. I don't have any photos, but the Beefeater that showed us through the facility was an encyclopedia of information about its structure, its history and its transient inhabitants, many of whom left carrying their heads in a bag.

I had the opportunity to visit two other friends while I was in London. Henri Jaquet had been a post-doctoral student with John Cebra when we were all at the medical school in Gainesville. At the time of my visit, Henri was working in a facility that, in England, was their equivalent to the National Institutes of Health in the U.S. The facility was a ways outside of London, so I had a chance to ride for some distance on a tube train after it had emerged from the underground. My most enduring memory of that visit was my theft of a few sheets of toilet paper from the WC there. Every sheet was imprinted with "GOVERNMENT PROPERTY." I had to have a few sheets to show the folks back home. Otherwise no one would ever have believed me.

The other friends I visited were Dwayne Chapman and his wife Marylyn, to whose home I was invited for dinner one evening. At the time, Dwayne (known as Peanut Brain when we were in high school and as Jess now) was an executive with Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company on assignment in Europe. What I recall most from that evening with the Chapmans was being served lamb with mint jelly, which was apparently considered the most typically "English" meal you could serve a Yankee visitor. The Cebra's had served me the same meal a day or so earlier.

The night before I left for Vienna, I had the opportunity to take John and Ethel out for dinner and a play. The play was "Wait Until Dark" starring Honor Blackman. It was a story about a blind woman in London who was being pursued in her apartment by thieves who believed she was hiding contraband. It was fascinating how the play was staged so that the audience could sense that the room was totally dark while the action was taking place in the play.

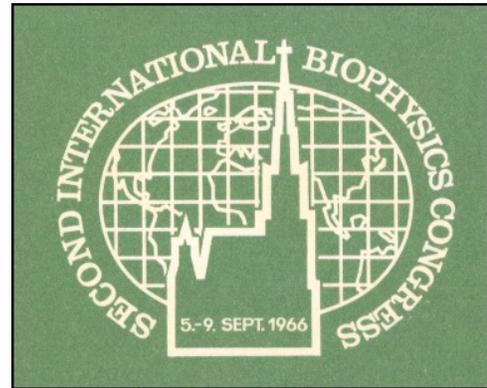
When I arrived in Vienna the next day, I called the hotel where I had been told I had reservations. They did not have me in their records...and I never learned why. I did learn that the first week in September is a particularly busy time in European capitals and, because of that, there were no reservations available in any of the significant hotels in the city. I don't recall now



how I heard about it, but I finally discovered a small hotel that still had accommodations available and I made a reservation there from a phone in the airport. When the taxi dropped me off, it wasn't hard for me to see why this hotel still had vacancies. It was on the second floor of a building on a back street, well away from the main part of the city. It had no private baths, but it was clean and the two elderly ladies that ran the place were friendly—and they spoke English. More about my lodgings later.

The Biophysics Congress was being held at the University of Vienna, the main campus of which

was housed in one huge building, near the center of the city. Above is a photo of the university and below is the logo for the congress, with the dates it was in session and an outline of St. Stephens Church, which was apparently a common symbol for the city of Vienna. Although they were my purpose in being there, I don't recall much about the meetings. All of those kinds of meetings are pretty much alike—a couple of symposia and a multitude of 10-minute research reports from individuals like me. How many? The published proceedings shows 700 pages of abstracts with two per page. That's some 14 hundred presentations in five days. I don't know how many venues at the university were used for the congress, but there were a lot of them. Obviously, one had to be pretty selective in picking the sessions to attend. The only notes I could find in my copy of the proceedings were next to abstracts from the session in which I presented my paper. I'm sure I attended others, but 10-minute papers can become very sleep-inducing after a while.



My most enduring memories from Vienna are from experiences outside the meetings. I will relate these stories without reference to the timeline of my stay in the city. I think lunch each day may have been served at the university as part of the meeting agenda, but I simply don't remember. What I do remember is breakfast at my hotel and dinner regularly at a small café across the street from the university. I think I found that place after the meetings the first day and I had dinner there every evening—except the evening of the congress banquet. In many ways my dining experiences there were a benefit from having missed my reservation at the major hotel that was intended for me, and where I would have probably taken my meals. As it was, those dinners became highlights of my stay in Vienna.

Walking into that little café was like being propelled back in history. The décor was simple and frozen in the past. The waiter was dressed in a tuxedo and always had a napkin over his arm. I always seemed to get the same waiter. Perhaps he considered it a challenge to wait on the crazy American who spoke almost no German (I could read it, but never learned to speak it). I could read the menu, but my vocabulary was mostly scientific terms. All the meals on the evening menu were several courses, always starting with soup. Even translating the soup selections was a challenge for me. However, one evening, I saw on the soup menu "bouillon mit ei," and I knew I found a selection I could understand...broth with egg, which I assumed would be like egg-drop soup. When the waiter brought it, I encountered instead a raw egg looking at me from the bottom of a bowl of bouillon.

The verbal battles between that waiter and I were often the stuff of slapstick comedy. I can recall once when I was having difficulty understanding one particular ingredient, he finally turned and headed for the kitchen, emerging shortly carrying a sprig of parsley. The one time I didn't have to do battle with the waiter, I went to dinner there with Gene Hoffman, who had been a fellow graduate student at Iowa State in the late '50s. Gene spoke German fluently, so dinner was ordered that evening without confusion.

The Congress banquet was a spectacular affair. As I recall, it was held at the Vienna city hall (Rathaus, below), which was about a block from the university. It was held in the commodious Festival Hall (71 meters x 20 meters, below) and the hosts outdid themselves with hospitality. The food was outstanding, the service was prompt and courteous and the beer was



memorable. Somewhere on an overlooking balcony, an orchestra played Viennese waltzes as we ate, drank and conversed.

I was sitting at dinner with several scientists from the University of Chicago, whom I had met at the meetings. One of them had a rental car and asked if I would like to join them on an after-dark excursion around the city. I happily accepted and, after the banquet, we embarked on an unguided tour of Vienna. The



driver exuded confidence that he knew his way around, but we soon found ourselves hopelessly lost and had to stop and ask directions. I can still recall the query by the driver (who spoke German a lot better than I...which isn't saying much) after he finally acknowledged he didn't know where he was, "Wo ist der staatmittel (city center)?" With adequate directions, we soon arrived back in familiar territory and went our separate ways.

On one of the days of the meeting, there was either some time in which nothing was scheduled...or I just played hooky for half a day...and I made a walking tour of Vienna. With camera in hand—and little to guide me except my curiosity—I sought out places that looked interesting. Among those places was an art gallery. There I found a couple of small watercolor paintings of scenes from "Alt Wien" (old Vienna). A photo of the first of these paintings is shown below. It shows a street in "old Vienna" with of view of St. Stephen's Church. Although



Alt Wein Graben met Blick zum Stephansplatz

this is obviously of a scene from olden days, I don't know whether or not it was actually painted a long time ago, because I can find no information on the A. Klein who signed the works. My assumption has been that, because the paintings were fairly inexpensive—and A. Klein has been lost to history—he was probably some local guy that made his living painting these things for tourists...and whose real name was Schultz...or Schmidt...or ??

On the next page is a photo of the second painting by the same artist, along with a current photo of the same general area taken from the lower level. You will note that this photo includes a sign at the end of the street pointing to a MacDonalds restaurant. As near as I can tell, Molker Bastei was (is) some kind of lodging facility where Beethoven is reported to have once

lodged. The university façade in both the painting and the current photo can be compared to the photo on page 3.



Wein Universität mit Mölker Bastei



The majority of my walking tour can be seen in the collection of photos below. I took no notes—and can’t recall the names of any of the buildings or neighborhoods—but I was mostly interested in recording some of the local color in this most historic city.



Except for the Congress banquet and the nighttime auto tour of the city with my friends from Chicago, I don’t recall participating in any other after-dark activities while I was in Vienna. I must have just returned to my hotel after my dinner at the little café across from the university. However, life for me at that hotel was not as simple as it would probably have been if I had been housed in a more modern facility. As it was, even personal hygiene became a bit of a challenge.

My room did not have a private bath. The “WC” was down the hall and next to it was a room with a large bathtub. I don’t recall that there was any running water in my room. I think there was just a pitcher of cold water and a basin. Having spent some months living in bunkers in Korea during the war, I was not greatly disturbed by the setup, but getting a bath was a bit of a challenge.

I could read scientific German reasonably well, but I was never required to be able to speak the language. To get a bath, however, I needed to communicate with the maid, who spoke no English. Fortunately, I had acquired a little pocket dictionary with common German phrases, and in it I found the phrase I needed to get my bath. I tracked down the maid and told her, “Ich mochte ein bad, bitte.” A few minutes later, she rapped on my door and advised that my “bad” was ready. So, equipped with soap, a towel and a clean change of clothes, I took over the bathroom and eased myself gingerly into that big bathtub that she had filled generously with hot water.

That exchange became routine during my five days at that hotel.

My stay at the hotel included breakfast every morning. By American standards, that morning meal was sparse, consisting of only rolls (not sweet rolls) and coffee (or in my case, cocoa). So, one morning, I decided to venture out for a more substantial breakfast before leaving for the university. Just down the street from the hotel was a small family restaurant to which I was directed by one of the ladies at the desk. Seated at a table there, I was approached by a waitress and asked for my order (I assumed, as she asked in German, of course). I responded by telling her, “Zwei eien (two eggs). Her next question should have been anticipated, but I wasn’t prepared for it. It was a short question and I’m sure she just wanted to know how I wanted them. As she stood there patiently waiting and I, having no idea what to tell her, thought about that raw egg staring at me from that bowl of bouillon and blurted out “kocht!” She nodded, wrote down my order (I had said “cooked”) and disappeared into the kitchen. Ten to fifteen minutes later, she reappeared with my breakfast—two hard-boiled eggs.

One other thing I recall from my venture for breakfast that morning was being stopped on the street by a family asking for directions. I shrugged and confessed to them, “Ich bin ein dumbkopf Amerikaner.” They smiled in recognition of my plight, thanked me and moved on.

On most days, I must have walked from my hotel to the university because I can only recall taking a taxi the morning I went out for breakfast, possibly because I was running late. I was able to flag down a cab on the street in front of the hotel and spoke one word to the driver, “Universitat,” pronouncing it the way you would if you were speaking to an American. He looked at me blankly, obviously not understanding my pronunciation. I repeated myself and he continued to stare at me blankly. Finally, I unfolded the city map I carried with me and pointed to the destination. “Ah.” He said with disgust. “Ooniversitâte,” and he sped off.

While I was in Europe, I had arranged to visit my brother, Tom, who was living at the time in Sweden as one of their national track and field coaches. Originally, I had purchased plane tickets home through Stockholm, by way of Frankfort, Germany, but just before I left from home, I received a letter from Tom containing two plane tickets—from Stockholm to Helsinki, Finland and return. In the letter he explained that he was going to be in Helsinki that weekend with the Swedish track and field team for a dual meet with the Finns. He also explained that the flight he had booked from Stockholm that Saturday would arrive in Helsinki too late for me to attend the meet for that day and directed me to his hotel, where I was instructed to wait for him till the team returned from the meet.

So I left Vienna that Saturday morning equipped with tickets to Helsinki through Frankfort and Stockholm. However, during my layover in Frankfort, I inquired at the Finnair ticket counter if I might trade them my Frankfort-Stockholm-Helsinki tickets for a direct flight to Helsinki. In that way I could arrive in time for the meet, which was scheduled to start at 4:00 pm. In fact, they had such a flight and were willing to take my tickets in trade.

I have written elsewhere about that flight and my arrival at the track meet; [www.ocomm.net/memories/helsinki.pdf](http://www.ocomm.net/memories/helsinki.pdf). Now I will pick up the story as the meet progressed that Saturday and Sunday. As I related in that web story, after meeting my brother Tom outside the stadium that day, I followed him through a tunnel and suddenly found myself standing in the middle of the track, surrounded by 50,000 spectators. From that moment on, I became a part of the Swedish national team. Tom assigned an English-speaking assistant coach to be my guide and I watched to entire meet from an area adjacent to the track. On the following page is a photo of the stadium taken from my location along the track.

The stadium had been the site of the 1952 Olympics and, as I had discovered before I arrived, this meet was the biggest athletic event of the year for either country. They alternated the location every year between Helsinki and Stockholm...and the Finns made sure everyone remembered that they had never lost at home in the history of the meet.



After the first day's events, Tom found me a place for the night with the team at its hotel and that night I joined them at a sumptuous banquet to celebrate the competition. It was even more of an elaborate affair than the one I had attended in Vienna a couple of days earlier. It gave new meaning to the term "smorgasbord." The next day's events were particularly exciting because it was a very close competition with the Swedes finally winning the meet—for the first time on Finnish soil.

Although I had a plane ticket back to Stockholm, I was invited to join the team on their charter flight, which I gratefully accepted. I had made a number of friends among the coaches and team members. One of those coaches, Gusty Laurel (spelling?), graciously gave me his participant's medal as a memento of my participation as part of the team. It had been a most memorable experience.

My return ticket from Stockholm gave me a couple of days to spend with Tom in his home away from home. One of my more memorable experiences after we arrived in Sweden was the trip from the airport into Stockholm. Tom had purchased a new Volvo after he established himself in Sweden and had parked it at the airport while he was in Finland. From my perspective, the commute from the airport was a most harrowing experience. Not only did he consistently drive at least ninety miles an hour, he drove on the "wrong" side of the road. I had not been aware until then that the Swedes drive on the left. It took some getting used to.

Probably my most memorable experience while visiting Stockholm was my introduction to the sauna. I had probably heard of them but I had no idea what was involved in using one. So, Tom announced one day that we were going to use a sauna. As one of the Swedish national coaches, he had access to the stadium in which the 1912 Olympics were held. The stadium had a sauna and that's where we went. In the stadium, Tom led me to a dressing room, where he instructed me to strip—totally. Then we went to a nearby shower room and doused ourselves generously with water, immediately crossing the hall into the sauna. It was very hot in there, so I was advised not to sit down directly on the wooden bench, but to brush my wet backside several times across the boards before sitting. It worked.

Before we left the sauna to douse ourselves again in the shower, Tom asked me to check the temperature on the thermometer in the corner of the sauna. I had to do a double-take when I saw the temperature. It registered 218 degrees F—six degrees above boiling. It wasn't in error. We were tolerating it only because of the evaporation of the water from the shower...and by sweating profusely. After a couple of cycles through that routine, I was totally rung out. I couldn't wait to hit the hay that night and I slept like a log.

I also recall Tom showing me a bit of downtown Stockholm. I was particularly impressed with the many downtown streets that prohibited automobile traffic. It was a delight being able to

shop without having to dodge cars. While I was there, I visited a music store and bought a recorder—a flute-like musical instrument. I already owned one, to which I had graduated some years earlier after years of playing the ocarina (sweet potato) as a kid. The one I bought in Stockholm was in a lower key. I think I also found a store where I could buy some presents for the kids, but I don't remember now what they were.

The plane on which I flew home from Stockholm was not a direct flight. I had to change planes in London. The highlight of that flight was the low-altitude trip up the Thames River on the approach to Heathrow Airport, where I could observe centuries of history in a few passing moments. My brief stopover Heathrow would probably not have triggered any memories at all except for a paperback book I purchased in a shop there. That book, titled “Now I Remember” (subtitled “A Holiday History of Britain”), traced the British monarchy from William the Conqueror to the present (1966) and connecting them with cultural and historical events in Britain. That book retains a prominent place on our bookshelf although its binding is disintegrating.

The rest of the trip home was uneventful for me—but not for Myrna. Because of the weather, my flight was diverted to Detroit and she had to juggle the care of five kids—including a 6-month-old infant—while making two trips to O'Hare to pick me up. She deserved a medal for pulling it off.

As it turns out, the adventure of my trip to Vienna did not end when I returned to The States. Soon after I arrived back at my lab, I was visited by an agent from the CIA. He wanted to “de-brief” me concerning what I had observed while in Vienna. The conference I had attended there was an international affair and the participants included an abundance of scientists from Iron Curtain countries. I'm sure the CIA guy was disappointed with the interview because I had no clue about anything he was interested in discovering. I was attending a scientific conference and I couldn't have cared less what the “Commies” were up to there.

Richard E. Ecker  
June 2015