

# The Julian Calendar

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In a previous memoir entitled “Greece Is the Word,” I described one of my many short vacations from my time as an English instructor for the UMUC European Division. It took place between November of 1970 and January of 1971. The occasion was the opportunity to take a break for the first time from three straight years of being in the harness and getting experience as a university-level instructor. I had also just finished my four years of duty in the U.S. Army in early September, so the chance to house sit in an eight-bedroom villa on the Greek island of Hydra courtesy of my Maryland colleagues Ted and Frances Sullinger was most certainly welcome. That earlier memoir also described the complex and circuitous adventure of getting to that island by way of free MAC flights. I bring up this background as a preface to an incident that occurred while I was in residence on Hydra. I had contact with the outside world mainly by way of a Poste Restante box in the little post office down in the port area of the island. I checked it every day, most times without finding anything in it. However, one Wednesday afternoon in mid-December, to my delight and surprise, I found a telegram. It contained just four terse words: “HOTEL. PERAPALAS. WEEKEND. JULIAN.” The only Julian that I knew was fellow Marylander Dr. Julian Jones whom I had just met back in September when he came down to Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, to teach and we had roomed together there in the BOQ. We had hit it off very well, as I was able to shepherd Julian around Asmara and Massawa in my little red two-seater Austin-Healey Sprite convertible in September and October. So this telegram was an irresistible summons to my blood. I had never been to Istanbul. Here was my ready-made guide. My other Maryland colleague, Jerry Cranford, would be back from his speech-teaching duties in Athens on Friday morning and could watch the villa. For the next few days, at least, I was happily going to be operating on the Julian calendar. All that I needed to do was frantically to book air tickets and to take the plunge.

To say the least, “plunge” is the correct operative word here. Just as with my crazy MAC flights to get to Hydra, making this trip was, to put it mildly, half the fun. In fact, just getting from Hydra to Athens was on this occasion no mean feat. Over my time on Hydra from early November, I had made the hop-step-and-a-jump ferry-boat ride to the port of Piraeus and then the bus ride from there to the Athens AFB (with its adjacent civilian Greek airport) several times without incident. But on this day the gods were not co-operating, especially Poseidon. As I stood shivering at the rain-drenched port in Hydra, awaiting the already forty-minute late arrival of the good ship Kamelia on its early morning run in from the island of Spetses, I saw the darkening clouds forming out across over the Peloponnese Peninsula. The water in the horseshoe-shaped harbor was churning gray and ugly, but the boat did land and drop down its plank for the soaked passengers to scamper quickly aboard. However, once clear of that enclosed safe harbor, the ferry boat began to rock back and forth as it chugged along on its way toward the island of Poros. For one minute, I had a grim view of the water, and in the next minute I found myself looking up at that soupy sky. This constant rolling back and forth soon got the better of my stomach as I grasped onto the railing and paid my dues to the angry Poseidon by regurgitating last night’s supper. The ship’s crew were little help as they stood laughing at the scene of most of their new passengers lined up and also paying similar homage. The ones that did not make it to the railing had to have their vomit swabbed from the deck by that unhappy crew. When we arrived at Poros, I was sorely tempted to call it a day and cancel the trip entirely. But by that time there was nothing left in my groaning stomach to bring back up, so I waited until the new passengers boarded and then resumed my treasured spot at the railing.

However, when we pulled into Methana, the hopeful passengers there were completely out of luck. There was no enclosed harbor, just what amounted to a bare cliff face that threatened to smash the ship to bits if it even tried to pull in. Those passengers would have to hope for the afternoon boat to have better luck. The little Kamelia simply chugged away toward the final island of Aegina and I could do nothing but pray to have my feet on solid ground some time very soon. We did pick up the ticket-bearing passengers on that final large island before making our way toward Pireaus and blessed landfall. But even though the weather cleared up a bit, we still did not get to the mainland until close to noon, almost ninety minutes late of the scheduled arrival. I almost wanted to kneel down and kiss the tarmac, but resisted and headed for the lineup of buses. I had to wait another fifteen minutes before a Number 125 bus pulled in. I hopped in the back door, told the ticket seller, “Aerodromo, parakalo,” and paid my four and a half drachmas as the bus pulled away.

By the time I disembarked at the Athens airport, it was already pushing one o’clock. I was at the domestic terminal where I was told that I needed to take a taxi over to the international terminal; there I soon secured a \$38.00 one-way ticket for a 3pm flight on Air France to the magic city of Istanbul. While waiting in the terminal, I heard the announcement of the arrival of the Ethiopian Airlines flight out of Asmara, so I decided to wander over to where the passengers were coming in to see if there was anyone who I knew on that flight. It happened that I did spot an Army buddy from my Company B named Rocco Deteso dressed in a blue civilian blazer. I yelled, “Hey, Rocco,” and he acknowledged me with, “Chollie, Chollie, what you doin’ here? Ya gotta take careame, Chollie!” He was still putting on his funny Marlon Brando accent that was an in-joke around our barracks. I yelled back, “Just going up to Istanbul for the weekend. And you?” To which he shouted back, “Just goin’ home!” And then I thought that it might be years before I could, or even would, say those same three little words—and really mean them.

The Air France flight up to Yeşilköy Airport was relatively uneventful, a relief after all of the stress of making it from Hydra to Athens and then out to the Greek airport and onto the tiny jet. My passport and shot record all checked out, so I grabbed my small bag and went out to look for the bus to downtown Istanbul. There I was harangued by a couple of taxi drivers trying to divert me into one of their cabs. After some back-and-forth banter, leading to a refusal on my part to be hustled, I boarded the Air France bus, paid the 12-lira fee (about 80 cents in US money), and was deposited right in front of Hotel Perapalas. Time to find Julian and Taru. The hotel itself was indeed a veritable “palace,” as its last two syllables imply, an exotic “fin de siècle” holdover with lavish carpets, high ceilings, and elaborate chandeliers, further enhanced by massive stuffed armchairs, a sweeping staircase and a quaint little elevator that would hold perhaps two people and its operator at one time. This fine hotel had once been host to writers like Agatha Christie and Ernest Hemingway and also the great “Master of Suspense” Alfred Hitchcock. Now I was to spend a couple of days luxuriating in its opulence. I found Julian, who took me to see Arthur at the main desk, and paid for my room, a mere 40 lira per night (less than 3 dollars!). What a bargain! No wonder that UMUC personnel loved staying there. After dropping my bag and freshening up, I finally met Taru, Julian’s Finnish lady friend, buxom and in radiant good blonde health. Together, they made quite a stunning couple. Even though I was in a large and unfamiliar metropolis, I found it easy to surrender myself for the next two days to the Julian calendar, aided and abetted by the delightful Taru.

The next two days were a Turkish delightful round of exotic sights, sounds, tastes and smells. I placed myself in the capable hands of my two experienced travel guides as I was ushered around Istanbul in a whirlwind of dizzying dervish dances. One of our first stops was made by means of a taxi to Sultanahmet Square to visit the famed Blue Mosque and then the Hagia Sofia. We used the south

entrance that allowed non-worshippers entry to make our visit, removing our shoes and then placing them in the plastic bags available for the purpose of carrying them around this shrine. The blue tiles on the walls and ceiling were spectacular, as anyone visiting this six-minaret mosque can attest. I even located a large green rug on the tag of which was indicated that it had been donated by Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie I, giving me a little touch of my long-time home on the Horn of Africa. The even more massive Hagia Sophia dominated the other side of the square which had once been the site of the Hippodrome of Constantinople used to host chariot races hundreds of years earlier. The four minarets on this Grand Mosque helped to convert the ancient Christian church built by Justinian I into a place of Muslim worship. Myself, I much preferred the Blue Mosque to its formerly Christian companion. After this round of sightseeing, it was time to find a late dinner. In the capable hands of Julian and Taru, I was treated to a repast consisting of delicious döner kebab, followed by dolma (grape leaves stuffed with rice), a strong Turkish coffee and a wedge of divine baklava. When we went back to the hotel, Julian added to my wonderful first day by persuading Arthur to give us off-hours access to the famous Room 101, the museum-like room that had once been a home office of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Turkey, who stayed and entertained there until the late 1930's. The view of the Golden Horn from its balcony was spectacular on this special and memorable Friday evening. I bid Julian and Taru a pleasant "good night" and retired and collapsed into my spacious Room 209 bed.

On Saturday morning, refreshed and ready for whatever Julian and Taru had in store for me, I answered the phone that rang in my room. Julian invited me to join him and Taru for breakfast in his room on the fourth floor. "You can come up in about forty minutes or so, but do take your time ... otherwise it may be embarrassing for all parties concerned." Breakfast consisted of goat's cheese, ripe black olives, cakes and tea. There I discovered that Taru hailed from Turku, the regional capital of southwest Finland. She told me about a couple of the sights that would be worth a visit, such as Turku Castle and lovely strolls along the River Aura. (Much to my own sadness, I never did make it up to that Scandinavian country to discover them for myself.) With breakfast to fuel us, we headed back out to see more of what Istanbul had to offer. My memory of that day is highlighted by our visit to the covered Grand Bazaar, the famed Kapalıçarşı, the biggest bargain basement known to mankind, a confusing and bounteous assault on the senses which I did manage to revisit many more times when UMUC's English Supervisor Dr. Robert Speckhard sent me to teach at Karamursel Air Base a few years later. A couple of hours passed by in a flash as we wandered its spacious and bargain-filled voluminous halls with everything from massive carpets to meerschaum pipes on display in stall after stall. Our next stop took us to the Topkapi Museum where we saw the fabulous Spoonmaker's Diamond, and I was also relieved to see that the precious Topkapi Dagger, the emerald-encrusted golden jambiya that had been the subject of a theft in the 1964 Jules Dassin film Topkapi starring Melina Mercouri and Peter Ustinov, was safely back in its secure case. After a stop back at the hotel, we went to Taksim Square by way of a dolmus taxi for our afternoon meal. This lively modern part of the city on the European side was a delightful blend of both shopping and food fantasy. On this occasion, saksuka with its eggplant base and kofte for our meat dish made the very late lunch a treat. (I know that many people are partial to Italian or Spanish cuisine, but for my money give me Greek or Turkish food, or Eritrean/Ethiopian dishes when I can get them.) Our dessert was dondurma, the delicious Turkish ice cream, followed by a strong coffee. Again, with Julian and Taru as my guides, I could hardly have gone wrong. My night had a magical climax when we came across a seasonal open-air presentation of "Swan Lake" being performed by the famed Russian Bolshoi Ballet troupe. No better ending could have made Istanbul so glorious. But then such were the unexpected treats to be had when one had the rare good fortune to be operating under the Julian Calendar.

On Sunday morning, after checking out of the Perapalas Hoteli, there were just a couple of hours left for us to do a few quick touristy things, as suggested by Julian, like a five-minute stop in the famed Underground Cistern (just to say that I've been there) in which I did little more than manage to fog up my glasses. The highlight of that morning, however, was two hours spent in the Archaeological Museum on the Topkapi grounds, a magnificent collection of Greco-Turkish artifacts that encompasses the grandeur of whole civilizations from the surrounding Mediterranean area. We also managed to find a Turkish pharmacy where I purchased some precious Dramamine so that I could be more ready for those pesky waiters on the return trip to Hydra. With a slight tinge of regret, I then watched Julian bargain for a taxi to take himself and Taru to the Galata Bridge to catch the ferry boat back to Yalova so that he could return to his teaching duties at Karamursel.

Then it was my turn to haggle for a taxi to take me to Taksim Square to catch the Air France bus back out to Yeşilköy. We passed the Coke and Pepsi bottling plants along the way, thus proving that a little bit of home could be found almost anywhere. After purchasing my one-way ticket back to Athens, that short flight brought me to more familiar territory. I made my way over to the adjacent American air base, and realizing that I did not have to go right back to Hydra, especially as the weather in Greece was a bit raw that afternoon, I made my way to the base theater. The movie that was playing was "The Ballad of Cable Hogue" starring Jason Robards Jr., a delightful Sam Peckinpah comedy. Afterwards, luckily, the base commissary was still open, so I was able to secure a few edible supplies for back on the island. Having already missed the last ferry boat back to Hydra, I took the Green Line bus over to the Congo Palace Hotel, the "club" used by American officers when off-duty in Athens. My beard and long hair drew more than their share of stares, but I still had my UMUC identification with me, so I used the privileges from that to catch a good night's sleep at a very cheap rate. I strategically avoided the hotel bar, however, to prevent any more unnecessary hassles.

Waiting early until the next morning proved at first to be a wise choice as the weather seemed much better. I walked over to the Bahamas Night Club stop and caught the familiar Number 125 bus back to Piraeus harbor and walked over to the Hydra ferry boat dock. Here the weather began to look grim once again, but at least I had my fresh supply of Dramamine to see me safely back to my island retreat. That purchase proved to be fortuitous as the choppy seas on the trip through the Saronic Islands on this December morning brought another scary couple of hours. The rain was unrelenting the whole trip, but I did my best to locate an open center spot on the ferry where the rolling motion was the least severe. Then I held on past Aegina, Methana, and Poros before having to run down the plank while balancing my purchases to make it once more on solid ground. I trudged past the little post office, then the Hydra-Hoos Gift Shop, and the Gardenia Cinema ("Today—'Bandits of Milan'--in English—7.50 DRS"), then around past the little Greek Orthodox Church and back to the huge blue gate of my island villa, a little wiser and a whole lot wetter. Yet all of it was well worth it just to experience a few days operating under the Julian calendar.

### **Postscript**

The last time that I ever saw Taru was when she and Julian returned to Asmara for the Term V teaching post that he secured for June and July of 1971. During that period, I got married in the Catholic church on July 20 with Julian as my best man and Taru as one of our bridesmaids. At the feast after the ceremony, I managed to prank the master prankster Julian by telling him that, as best man, he had the distinct honor of drinking a cup of blood from the cow whose throat had just been slit by the Coptic priest. The shudder of horror that crossed his then chalk-white face was worth every moment to commemorate all the good times that we had spent together as UMUC colleagues.

**This memoir is dedicated to the memory of the late Taru Spiegel (1950-2021).**