

An Ocean of Opportunities, A Sea of Regrets

Charles J. Krumbein
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Those of us fortunate enough to be a part of the UMUC experience in the “glory days” of the 1960’s and 1970’s were afforded a golden opportunity to travel the world, footloose and fancy-free. Our duty stations took us across three continents and most often our teaching duties involved working from Monday evenings to Thursday evenings, thus providing both long weekends and then even longer breaks between terms in which to explore that part of the world where we happened to be stationed. My personal UMUC European Division career put me in all three continents of Africa, Europe and then Asia. In Africa, I was posted to Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, which city today is the capital of Eritrea. In Europe, my teaching duties took me all over Germany and gave me ready access to the fantastic Eurail train system there. In Asia, I was sent to both Incirlik AFB in Adana, Turkey, in the southeastern corner of the country and later to Karamursel, Turkey, on the Sea of Marmara in the northwestern part of the country and near Istanbul. The University of Maryland experience was my start in my professional teaching career which lasted over forty years. I tried to take full advantage of that “ocean of opportunities” to travel on my breaks; but alas, today I can still recall the ones that I did not take full advantage of, and therein lie my “sea of regrets”.

When I began teaching at Kagnew Station in November of 1968, I was already also a full-time U. S. Army SP5, and to my knowledge the only person who held that job as well as being a part-time English teacher there. As such, my free time to travel was somewhat limited, but I did somehow manage to catch some R&R, mainly during the long breaks between University of Maryland terms. Regular travel to steamy Massawa on the Red Sea and some fishing expeditions and other adventures while there have been covered in a couple of my earlier memoirs. One other R&R destination was driving northwest to Keren, also discussed at length in my controversial memoir entitled “Harsh Realities.” Once my military hitch finished in September of 1970. I had much more free time to explore the Horn of Africa and its environs. My trip to Djibouti to pick up a baby cheetah has been detailed in my memoir “To Djibouti and Beyond.” My travel over to Yemen has already been covered in my earlier memoir “The Red Sea as a Time Warp.” Beyond those exotic ports of call I can also add a long weekend spent in Khartoum and other close-by cities in the Sudan, which gave me the golden opportunity to stand at the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile Rivers. I also managed a ten-day rather guarded trip up to Israel and Palestine. On one other memorable occasion, Dr. Julian Jones and I did a wonderful hop-skip-and-a-jump series of flights on DC3 Ethiopian Airlines craft, taking in memorable stops together at ancient Axum with its many stele, the long-ago Portuguese city of Gondar with its many strange castles, the city of Lalibela with its numerous carved-into-the-living-rock Orthodox Christian churches, the spectacular source of the Blue Nile River at Tississat Falls in Bahar

Dar, and finally ending up in the capital of Ethiopia at Addis Ababa. Perhaps some future memoirs may cover these last three travel ventures in more detail.

Yet in spite of having taken reasonably full advantage of my many postings to Asmara and Kagnev Station as a UMUC English teacher which ended there in May of 1973, there was at least one major regret involving an opportunity which I did not manage to accomplish. During one of my long breaks between teaching terms, a couple of former military buddies happened to be going on an excursion down to Kenya and invited me to accompany them. Sad to say, I passed on this one now-regretted opportunity to explore Nairobi, to go out to see herds of African wildlife and the colorful flocks of flamingos at Lake Nakuru National Park (which they later teased me with photographs of), and they even did the trek up Mount Kilimanjaro, which, as a long-time Hemingway aficionado, I cannot ever find it in my heart to forgive myself for passing up. So yes, there is that one deep-seated regret that I now must live with and try to survive.

When Dr. Robert Speckhard moved me up to Europe in 1971 after I finished my stint in the Army at Kagnev Station, my very first teaching assignment was to Pirmasens, Germany, with splits duty to Sembach AFB. Situated as it was near the border with France, the opportunities for getaway weekends and lunches were right at my doorstep. A Maryland colleague named Robin Schorr, who was teaching English at Kaiserslautern, would drive up with his wife in his VW minibus and soon we were happily absorbed in both another culture and its cuisine on regular Saturday afternoons in “la belle France.” That was my first of many teaching posts in Germany, which later included Bad Kreuznach and its splits over to Baumholder. Hohenfels and its splits to Vilseck, Friedberg with its splits up to Butzbach, a hellacious three-week stint in Wiesbaden (detailed in my previous memoir “In Memory of the Marquis de Sade”), and a term in Stuttgart just for fun. It just so happened that I was fortunate enough to be posted to Germany for Maryland’s Term I session quite often. Therefore, travel within Germany itself made it possible for me to attend the famous Oktoberfest in Munich for three consecutive years from 1971 to 1973. The first time happened because the aforementioned Maryland colleague Robin Schorr drove me, his wife and another Maryland colleague from K-town into the Bavarian capital. The other two years’ trips were made possible because officers’ clubs in Friedberg and then the following year in Stuttgart offered Saturday bus excursions to the event. On that raucous and memorable 1973 trip, I was treated to a night that featured a German oompah band in the huge Löwenbräu tent playing a special request, by a busload of well-lubricated Australians, of their favorite traditional Aussie song. There is nothing that can create a rollicking party atmosphere quite like a bunch of lederhosen-clad musicians pounding out their rendition of “Waltzing Matilda” on tubas, accordions, clarinets and trombones, especially after the fourth request of “one more time!” But Germany is so central to the rest of Europe that leaving the country on weekends or long breaks provided an opportunity not to be missed. Here was where the Eurail train system came in handy to allow for easy travel weekends to Paris out of K-town on the Thursday evening overnight run, of which so many of us travel-hungry Marylanders took regular advantage. What could be better than finishing night classes for the week and then waking up in the City of Lights on Friday

morning? Those of us who lived that lifestyle back then have memories to treasure now in our senior-citizen dreams. Another easy and tantalizing weekend destination was Amsterdam (which I covered briefly in my memoir entitled “Incident at Arnhem Station.”). I loved that city for its many art museums, as well as for its wonderful food and beers, not to mention certain other one-of-a-kind attractions. In the long breaks between terms, I made several trips up to Copenhagen where Danish breakfasts were to die for. From there, one could take the ferry boat over to Malmo and begin exploring what Sweden had to offer. In addition to making the long trek to find and photograph the statue of The Little Mermaid, and also partaking of the many pleasures to be found while strolling through Tivoli Gardens, I obviously took the train up to Helsingor to walk the ramparts of Kronborg Castle, better known to Shakespeare buffs as “Elsinore” where Hamlet went mad because his father’s ghost egged him on to avenge his death at the hands of evil usurping King Claudius. So these examples are but a few of the “oceans of opportunity” of which I took advantage during my many stays in Germany, home of my ancestors.

However, there was also one glaring “sea of regret” which now hangs over me because I passed on an opportunity to take the “troop train” run up to Berlin in the midst of East Germany. I was invited to join making this trip with a couple of fellow Marylanders but declined to do so. At the time, I was still using my red top-secret passport and was told that all passports were confiscated by the border guards once one crossed over to the eastern sector. I was concerned that my passport might not be returned and that I might even be taken off the train and left stranded in a Communist prison as some kind of spy. (Remember, I had been taken off the train at Arnhem Station on my way into a more American-friendly Netherlands.) Those fears were not shared by my teaching colleagues who were using regular green U. S. passports. To add even more to my regret, in one of the military-base theaters I saw the delightful Billy Wilder comedy starring Jimmy Cagney entitled *One, Two, Three* about an American Coca-Cola executive posted to West Berlin and his frantic encounters with East German politics, which only whetted my appetite to go there and experience it for myself, if only my passport circumstances were more favorable. Ultimately, I never made it to Berlin in all of my many later European travels, more is the pity.

As for my time in the Asian part of the European Division, I had two key posts that I know I have shared with dozens of other Marylanders. The first was Incirlik AFB at Adana in the southeastern corner of Turkey. I spent a total of nine months teaching English there thanks to Dr. Robert Speckhard. This base was a key staging area for traffic all over Europe and Asia, and as such afforded those teachers fortunate enough to be stationed there with many opportunities to use the MAC (Military Airlift Command) system to fly for free to just about anywhere he or she desired. I myself made flights to Athens, to Naples, to Madrid and also on a weekend down to Asmara out of Incirlik. In addition, one could easily make visits by auto or bus to such nearby destinations as Tarsus on the Mediterranean Sea (and historically the birthplace of St. Paul); to Antakya (or ancient Antioch) to visit one of the first Christian churches dedicated to St. Peter; and I even rode a bus along the southern coast of Turkey to visit such sites as Alanya to see its ancient fortifications and castles; Antalya to

see Hadrian's Gate, the famous Duden Waterfalls and the ancient ruins of Aspendos; and then finally to ancient Side built by the Greeks and therefore home to a magnificent and fairly well-preserved theater (a natural choice for a theater buff like myself) as well as the famed Temple of Apollo, where legend has it that Cleopatra once met her lover Marc Antony. All three of these stops included wonderful museums and lovely beaches as well and it was certainly worth taking one of my ten-day term breaks to make that bus excursion. Further, while I was there, one of the base clubs offered a trip to Goreme to see the famous fairy chimneys created by wind erosion and used long ago to create hollowed-out Christian churches and monasteries. Southern Turkey is like stepping back in time if one lets himself or herself imagine the ancient past that so many cultures crisscrossed and conquered. Add to which a cuisine to kill for and there was no shortage of Turkish delights to be had for a vagabond Marylander in the 1970's.

So yes, there was certainly "an ocean of opportunities" to be had while I taught English at Incirlik AFB, but of course that wonderful assignment also carried with it "a sea of regrets." My esteemed Maryland colleague Dr. Julian Jones managed to travel from Incirlik to Damascus, Syria, and now I fondly wish that I had managed to take that trip as well. Even though that was the occasion when he told me that he was disturbed by his having to pose for a "genital profile" in order to secure his entry visa, knowing Julian's sense of humor, I have to believe that he was just kidding. I would love to have visited its Great Mosque of the Umayyads in what is perhaps one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Its fabled mosaics would have been especially worth witnessing. I would certainly have also roamed its ancient market and brought back a souvenir Damascus steel dagger to add to my collection. That was over fifty long years ago and now the city is plagued by war and suffers under the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad. An American like me would not last very long there once I stepped off a plane. I should also have used the handy MAC flights to take me back to Israel for a quick weekend or two, as I know that my Maryland teaching colleagues Mike and Holly Reiter did. My other serious regret is that I wish that I would have taken the time to visit the relatively nearby country of Jordan in order to see Petra, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, especially now after seeing the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Finally, my one other Asian port of call while teaching for Maryland's European Division was at Karamursel in the northwestern corner of Turkey. A short bus ride from the base there to nearby Yalova put one right on the Sea of Marmara where a short two-hour ferry ride deposited him or her at the Galata Bridge in exotic Istanbul. During my six-month time at Karamursel, I made that ferry ride into "the Bull" just about every weekend. There was no end to the fascinating sights and sounds of this magnificent ancient city, as so many of my fellow Marylanders could attest to. I became quite familiar with the wonders of shopping in the exotic Kapalıçarşı or Grand Bazaar, where I bought myself a nice collection of meerschaum pipes, among other Turkish specialties. Istanbul was a feast for both the eyes and the other senses, what with the beautiful Blue Mosque and also the Hagia Sofia Mosque, both of which I visited regularly in order to try to absorb some of the wonders of the Arab culture. I also spent a lot of time in the Topkapi Museum with its ancient harem on

display for one to gaze at in wonder. I had to go there because I had seen the classic comedy caper film *Topkapi* (1962) starring Peter Ustinov and Melina Mercouri in which a group of thieves steal a magnificent emerald-encrusted scabbard and dagger. I wanted to make sure that it was still there at the museum. It was. Of course, my favorite overnight home in Istanbul, as was true for many fellow Marylanders, was the Perapalas Hoteli where one could even visit rooms that had been the office quarters for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the prime minister of Turkey in the early 20th Century. Other famous lodgers there included Ernest Hemingway and Dame Agatha Christie, two of my all-time favorite authors. But I do not have to say much more about what fantastic weekends were to be had in this ancient city. I even managed to see the famous Bolshoi Ballet perform there on one occasion. Further, because I made a solid acquaintance with one of the meerschaum pipe dealers in the Grand Bazaar, he invited me to visit him in Eskisehir where I bought more pipes from his shop and he even took me on a tour of the meerschaum mines to see where that material is dug out from the earth. On that same trip, I also managed to take in other worthwhile Turkish cities such as Bodrum, which was ancient Halicarnassus, and so had the ruins of the great Mausoleum on display, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, as well as a fabulous Greek theater which I also visited. Another bus trip out of Karamursel got me down to Izmir where I had a chance to stay with fellow Marylander, the late Dr. Bill Berglof and his lovely wife Atsuko., both of whom I knew from their time that they shared with me at Kagnev Station earlier. While there with them, I managed to make it over to nearby Ephesus to see the wondrous ruins of that ancient city and to bask in the Turkish sun while traipsing about among the fallen marble columns, truly one of my best days as a traveler while on an opportunistic break between terms with the European Division schedule.

Too bad that there were also the pesky regrets that I must now report. There were two main ones that will never come again for me now that I am in my early eighties. There was also one minor one in the form of Gallipoli, which was practically right on my doorstep from Karamursel. I have visited several other dramatic battlefields in my day, such as the D-Day Beaches at Normandy with their heart-breaking cemetery, and also Bull Run in Virginia, the site of two bloody Civil War battles. So not making the effort when it was so close by was clearly a serious lapse on my part. However, a more serious regret had to be passing up the chance to visit Russia when it was also relatively close. One of the service clubs offered a trip to Moscow and to St. Petersburg. As a student with the European Division, I took a one-year course in Russian that was offered at Kagnev Station. Going up to Russia should have been a no-brainer, especially as the trip was run during one of the Maryland term breaks. I could have borrowed the money and repaid it soon enough, but to my ever-lasting regret I neglected to take advantage of the golden opportunity to practice the language, to walk around Red Square, to visit the beautiful onion-domed St. Basil's Cathedral, to shop in the Beehive Department Store and, most of all, to spend a day or two in the fabulous Hermitage Museum. Politics being what they are added to my current age makes it near impossible that I will ever be in such a wonderful position again like the one I had while at Karamursel. Even more painful to me was passing up taking the bus to Çanakkale in order to visit the site of the Trojan War. I taught World Literature I with the European Division and that course included presenting both Homeric epics to my students

at Kagnev Station. I still own copies of both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the marvelous translations done by Richard Lattimore that I keep next to my bedside and use to help me fall asleep to the poetic rhythms of those epics. That I did not make the effort to go to the site of the first epic still galls me to this very day. Obviously, my time for getting there and navigating the rugged landscape has now become next to impossible. These regrets will haunt me to my grave.

So, yes, there were a magical ocean of opportunities to be had while teaching for the University of Maryland European Division, and I did try to take advantage of many of them. Those memories can still be cherished now in my own golden years. However, doing so without also recognizing the sad corresponding sea of regrets for those opportunities that eluded me would involve a serious lapse of reality on my part as well. The past is the past and it cannot be changed. For my part I can only wish that I had not passed up so many wonderful opportunities that can never be more than just ephemeral or secondhand visits in online videos now. Life goes by more quickly than we ever realize. My regrets are ones that I live with as each year goes by. However, I bet that I am not alone in that regard.