

# **Anton's World**

**Recollections by Richard Cowan in August, 1997.**

**Minor revisions: March, 2006, and June, 2013.  
Some names have been purposely changed.**

## **Foreword:**

I returned to Sydney from Hong Kong in 1997, after living there for eight years. In the months after returning, I felt rather isolated socially. The friends I knew from earlier times were either gone or pre-occupied. So I started to absorb my periods of solitude by writing.

I floundered with the choice of topic. Some of my writings were of Hong Kong, especially those last years that had taken such a toll. But this was too painful and I settled on the story of Anton – and my experience with him in Poland during the mid-1970s.

To place the opening paragraph in context, the reader must be aware that I was writing about Hong Kong and this Polish thread was a diversion from a larger plot. The diversion, which became a refuge for me, grew and grew and took over from the bigger story – which I never completed.

## Chapter 1: Polish passions

I have decided to tell you about Anton and my experience in Poland. Anton's escapade which I partly shared in 1976 did not have great relevance to my preparation for Hong Kong. His story does, however, reveal fatal flaws in my character, a penchant for lost causes, for risk and adventure, for eccentricity and intellectual challenge and for the seamy side of life. Perhaps more endearingly, it also shows some capacity to help someone in trouble – at least, that is how it was then.

Poland, or more particularly Polish people, had an uplifting effect on me. The passion of a people, driven themselves by a long series of historical lost-causes and disasters, inspired me. They were politically oppressed in 1976, but with a defiance and spirit which was contagious in their community. Deprived of material wealth and indeed of many basic food items, their life was hard but with ideals. What other nation on earth would, during a brief period between the wars when it could be called an independent sovereign state, elect a concert pianist and composer as its prime minister?

I had first gone to Warsaw in April 1975 with my wife and daughter. We had entered Poland by car from Czechoslovakia, having experienced the rigours and imagined terror of the Austrian-Czech border crossing, with its two high fences and regularly-spaced guard towers which surveyed the 150-metre strip of land between the fences. Czechoslovakia, where we had some house-calls to make on parents of ex-Czech Adelaide friends, was politically rigid and slightly scary. Our hosts in Prague took us outdoors to explain the need for limited conversation indoors. Only in the safety of an isolated outdoor environment would it be possible to discuss anything politically sensitive. Since the Dubček summer of 1968, with the subsequent Russian invasion to prevent Czech liberalism taking hold, the government had held tight control by any means it wished, including use of a feared secret police. Nobody felt immune from unwanted surveillance. Our hosts, friendly and innocuous people already retired, thought that our visit to them would have been noted, especially since, with us driving a modern Citroen and one of us being Chinese, we were obviously foreigners.

We learnt something very quickly in the Czechoslovakia of 1975. Whenever we needed help with language, our initial policy of approaching a young adult failed. Without exception in a sample of six or so, we found no young person able to speak a Western European language. Yet, most people over 55 years with an intelligent look, especially women, were competent in either English, French or German. We learnt from them that young people had only been exposed to Russian as their second language in school.

We also learnt that political attitude was of paramount importance for progress and promotion, even within Prague's apolitical institutes of science and mathematics.

Though Prague's streets and footpaths were a mess of trenches caused by construction of a new underground rail system, its beauty compared with any city in Europe. We stayed on a floating hotel, a boat parked in the river below the castle. We visited our hosts from there and saw the town as best we could in cold, sleeting weather. For us, it was the first experience of a communist state and we were intrigued by many things. A request for a cup of coffee in a café led to accounting paperwork. The serving girl scooped one spoonful of instant coffee into a cup and then proceeded to fill in a small form as documentary evidence that coffee had been used. The form was not for us, but for the state bureaucracy. Similar protocol attended the cubes of sugar and plastic satchels of jam at our hotel breakfast table.



The parents of our Adelaide friends were planning a stay over the Easter weekend at a small village in the north, near the confluence of the three countries, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. They invited us and so, on Good Friday, we travelled there together in our car saving them the journey by train. We absorbed the lovely atmosphere of their country *dacha*, a small wooden cottage set on a tiny elevated plot of land. The inside of the

cottage was simply yet exquisitely furnished, with colourful curtains amidst the natural timber walls. A cuckoo clock entertained our daughter, Nita, each hour.

We chatted the afternoon away, before taking an evening meal in the hotel of the village. It was no ordinary meal as, on this night, we witnessed a knife fight at an adjacent table involving some gypsies and local boys. Our hosts felt embarrassed, but they sympathised with the plight of the gypsies and told us so.

The next day, Easter Saturday, we set forth toward Poland. Because of the fight and the general mood of an oppressed society, we felt tense and insecure. We were losing control of our destiny, reacting to events around us and becoming cautious. With the holiday, there were no shops open to provide help if needed and no signs that we understood. Everything had closed for Easter, it seemed. Uncertainty prevailed for us, even on matters such as food supply and petrol. We were cheered up somewhat by seeing weddings in progress in many towns we passed; that day must have been especially propitious.

Nita didn't travel well and the slow windy roads as we approached the Polish border would surely make her car-sick. So we travelled at a snail's pace to avoid her sickness, hoping she would sleep in her baby-seat. A small convoy of about three cars built up behind us and I slowed further to give them a better chance to overtake. As a result, a few more cars joined the convoy. Suddenly, we passed a clearing in the trees and we were confronted with two policemen on the roadside. We were waved into the clearing next to the police car, as was one other vehicle trailing us.

Intimidating demands were made for my passport and, when the burly policeman grasped it, he then demanded money. We had been speeding, it seemed, as had every foreign car which passed that spot during our enforced sojourn. Ours was the only western-European car, but there were many East Germans on holiday over the Easter weekend and each one was asked to contribute to the welfare of the Czech state, or simply to the pocket-money of these 'law enforcers'.

We paid, retrieved my passport and passed on, relieved when we crossed the Czechoslovakia-Poland border at the checkpoint near Jelenia Góra. As we drove on eastward through the Polish landscape, we soon noticed the absence of the large posters, common in the Czech countryside, exhorting the merits of the socialist agricultural policies. No shops were open, though, and we could buy nothing except petrol, and only that with some difficulty. Near dusk we stopped in a small village and found the only hotel, an 'undesignated' inn.

Western foreign tourists to Poland at that time, were compelled to either exchange \$US10 per day per person at the legal rate of 33 zlotys per dollar or pay inflated prices at designated hotels. Without a receipt for sufficient officially-exchanged money to cover that day, one could not stay in an undesignated hotel.

Due to my invitation to work at the Polish Academy of Sciences, we were exempt from this rule but nevertheless encountered amusing resistance to our request for accommodation. The man was friendly and clearly was not planning to turn us away, but he did not understand the exemption. Nevertheless, provided we filled in some forms, he bent the rules as he saw them. He was rather cavalier about the form, unlike the Czech girl serving coffee. The form asked if our country of origin was *Demokratica* or *Kapitalistica*.. I ticked the former, but the man soon set me straight when he saw my Australian passport. We didn't have much dialogue, just a few halting words in German, but I learnt the lesson that *Demokratica* meant brethren from the communist Eastern block nations.

I was to learn later some curious classifications by Polish people; Sweden was seen as socialistic (and democratic too, I guess), whilst Yugoslavia, the errant schoolboy of the communist fold, was treated as capitalist.

The hotel did not provide breakfast, so we started our journey on Easter Sunday without food. We headed for Wrocław (the former German city of Breslau before 1945), expecting greater availability of food in the city. It was not easy, though, to find an open shop or café. I approached a woman of the likely age for help. By chance, I had selected a German woman who was herself a visitor to Wrocław, returning there for the very first time since fleeing the city as a young woman -- as the Russian army advanced across Poland in 1944-45. She spoke good English.

It was her first day back in Wrocław. With her help, we found a hotel coffee shop which was open for breakfast. She joined us and shared some of her feelings at being in her former home city.

We eventually made it to Warsaw that day, eating picnic food for lunch. We felt tired but relaxed as we checked into the Hotel Bristol, near the main cathedral of Warsaw. A telephone call to my host, Jerzy, followed; he was actually expecting us the next day but all was well and he invited us to a party. I attended, but my wife and daughter had an early night in the hotel.

I shall never forget that party of about twenty academics, nearly all of whom spoke English. After being served tea, I sat at a table a trifle apprehensive

about conversation, given my Czech experiences. Others sat around, or near, this large table and I found myself in discussion with the whole group. The first question to me was ... *“Is it true that Australia still has a restrictive immigration policy called the White Australia Policy, designed to keep Chinese people out ?”*

I was stunned but replied briefly that such a policy had been introduced long ago. It had, however, been dormant for quite some time. I informed them that my wife was indeed Chinese. Then followed perceptive questions from a number of people about the Whitlam Government and its social reforms in Australia. One person also explained to the others, quite correctly, that the Whitlam Government had formally removed that dormant statute. He even explained the origins of the White Australia law. It was legislation introduced through pressure applied by trade unions and religious groups to prevent Kanakas from the Pacific Islands to be used as under-paid labour in the sugarcane fields of northern Queensland.

I was impressed and wondered how many Australians could talk intelligently about Polish politics and history. The conversation flowed, all in English, about contemporary Poland, politics, their desire to travel and learn about the West and, importantly, the contempt by all Poles for the Russian domination of their country. Jokes about Poland and Russia were told to me; many of these centred on the meat queues and other hardships. I found that Russians were the butt of Polish humour, much as the Irish are in England or the Poles themselves in the US. One thing was absolutely clear. These people spoke with complete freedom of speech, at least in that company. There seemed no fear of anything. I learnt that, to a very large extent, promotion in their academic circles was through merit, not, as in most other communist states, through political correctness.

This night set the tone socially of my whole visit. There was a hunger for contact with outsiders. I was an insignificant academic in world terms, yet in Warsaw I was sought after. The motives were honest ones, warm hospitality, enthusiasm for English conversation, pride in Polish culture (and a desire to share that with us) and philosophical discussion of the world. And jokes, and more jokes. Speech was free and uninhibited.

I mentioned to my Polish friends my experience in Czechoslovakia, where speech with me was cautious and constrained. I also asked if Poles were apprehensive. After all, both Hungary and Czechoslovakia had been invaded by the Soviet Union when liberal attitudes surfaced. Surely, the defiance of Russia that seemed to pervade Polish minds would precipitate something similar. The power and influence of the Catholic Church, too, must be something that the communist state despises. One person's reply sticks in my

mind. *“The Russians will never invade Poland. They know we will fight. Czechoslovakia is a merchant society. It always has been and, throughout history, their approach to invaders was one of appeasement and subservience. Merchant societies are like that. Poland is not. We always fight, so Russia knows that an invasion would not be a simple matter lasting just a few days, with a few tanks.”*

I was to think of these words many times when later I watched Hong Kong society deal with its transition to communist rule. That island enclave is, without doubt, a merchant society. But it, like Czechoslovakia, didn't always have much choice in matters.

I had a car and nobody I met in Warsaw did. I was very happy to drive people to their homes or use the car to transport small items of furniture for people on occasions. It was not exploitative on their part, the use of my wheels, just a small gesture I could make to repay the warm hospitality. As a result, I drove over quite a large part of suburban Warsaw, often at night (and by myself on the return journey). At my friends' insistence, I would remove the windscreen wiper blades at night when I parked the car; the rubbers were in tight supply and likely to be stolen, so they said.

We also drove, with Jerzy, out to Chopin's birthplace. Frederik Chopin had been conceived in this small house as Napoleon's troops retreated from Russia. It was a shrine for all Poles, as was Marie Curie's home in Warsaw before she too moved to Paris. The Poles have this love affair with France, helped by Chopin and Curie and, not insignificantly, by the fact that France does not share a border with Poland! There was certainly no love affair with any country who now, or in history, ever shared a border! (Of course, those Polish borders were Europe's most fluid as conquering power after power moved them at will.)

One night when I was returning home late and alone after transporting a baby's cot for someone, I drove near the construction area where the Central Railway Station was being rebuilt. Navigation was difficult there and I was getting lost. A police car stopped me. I didn't have my passport, or any identification. Consequently, I was bundled out of my car, body searched and escorted to a police lock-up van.

*“Nye rezumiem Polski”* was all I could say along with *“Rezumiem Angelski”*. Even *“Rezumiem Frankelski”* I tried. I was tired and shaken by this experience and somewhat scared. I was kept in the van, locked up alone or with the police, for about half an hour. The police had no language in common with me and the only words I understood were in Latin since they used the phrase *“persona non grata”*. Eventually, they gave up and took me

back to my car where they strangely scribbled in the accumulated grime on my car to show me that it needed a wash. Shaken, I drove it away, found my bearings and reached the flat in Zoliborz where my wife, daughter and I stayed.

During April I did some mathematical research, writing a paper with Jerzy and giving a couple of seminars. We spent time with other couples, noting that the typical family composition (a circumstance driven by the compactness of an average apartment) was for just one child. Two children was a rarity.

Food supply was difficult for us. Red meat was scarce, fruit and vegetables were in under-supply and fish seemed non-existent. We managed though -- without joining too many long queues, as bread, eggs and chicken were more readily available. Eating out, in drab state-owned restaurants with unrecognisable food, and service that wasn't especially effective, was not generally enjoyable.

Service in shops and government agencies was poor. We saw long queues grow in the afternoons and it was explained to us that many people who should be serving these queues, were indeed taking time off to join some queue or other to acquire food for the evening meal.

My friends often visited the theatre. One night they took us to an avant-garde play, so abstruse it scarcely mattered that the dialogue was in Polish. My friends didn't understand it either. Another night, I saw the opera *Falstaff* at the Warsaw Opera House. I tried to read the newspaper once but since I could only understand one snippet -- a score line of a soccer match involving the British team *Derby County* -- the effort was not repeated.

The month passed quickly and we left, with much sadness at the loss of newfound friends who lived in this grey, sombre city with such passion and spirit. The grey sombre city, too, had revealed its own passions too -- seen mainly via its history and adversities.

The journey away from Warsaw, west across Poland was uneventful. As I drove, I pondered about the inability of socialism, communist style, to deliver the material standard of living which Polish people wanted. Yet a city, little more than a massive pile of brick rubble after the Uprising of 1944, had been rebuilt by that political system -- and without the massive capital injections which had rebuilt West German cities. I was left with the feeling that socialism, perhaps even communism, might be good for societies in ruin, but clearly Poland had now reached the point where that system must be

discarded, or at least adjusted. Society had ground to an economic halt for lack of personal incentives<sup>1</sup>.

We had been told that the farms were unproductive, but despite the forewarning it still came as a surprise as we drove westward to see men tilling fields with a horse and plough, scenes which conjured up visions from Thomas Hardy novels in nineteenth century Britain.

We crossed a moderately intimidating border to East Germany at Frankfurt-am-Oder and, since our visa for that country did not allow a night's stay, we travelled directly across to the border with West Germany. This was the border of all borders in Europe. We realised just how strict and frightening this crossing would be if one were attempting an illegal passage. Guns everywhere, mirrors under the car, a detailed search of the boot and close scrutiny of our passports followed before our emergence from the East checkpoint and our entry to the relaxed West passport control.

And so my first visit to Poland ended. We stopped at a fruit and vegetable shop in a West German town close by. There we marvelled at the range of merchandise and thought back to the fruit shops in Warsaw where, on a good day, there was typically a choice between two items, each filling half of the store. Perhaps it was pears and potatoes this week and carrots and beans next week.

We purchased some German strawberries which were almost the size of Polish apples. Nightfall prevented immediate comparison of the meat shops, which was just as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Writing these remarks more than two decades after the event, I was conscious of a clash between my suggestion that 'greater incentives were needed in 1976 Poland' and my resistance to the neo-conservative ideas and policies that swept the English-speaking countries in those intervening decades. One part of that ideology was the notion that people with capital needed more incentive.

## Chapter 2: A second time

On the strength of this first visit to Warsaw, I was invited back to give a lecture course eighteen months later. I travelled alone and this time, for variety, entered Poland by ferry from the small town of Ystad (located on the southern coast of Sweden). It was late October, 1976, and I had underestimated the cold. I had left my wife and children in Malaysia with my wife's family. Our son Tim was only six months old and, for a couple of years at this stage, my wife did not work. The plane journey took me from the equatorial heat of Malaysia to an early cold snap in Copenhagen. I had intended five days of sightseeing in Scandinavia, but my body reacted to the cold by swelling into a mass of red hives. After a couple of excursions, I was forced to abandon travel, instead renting a room in Ystad and lying in bed, rather unwell, for two to three days.

On two successive nights I braced the cold and went to the small local cinema just across the road. I saw an American gangster movie one night and an American mid-west story the next. To my amazement, neither film had Swedish sub-titles. Just the English dialogue (and with such dialectic oddities that even I struggled with some of it).

I felt very low and lonely boarding the ferry in Ystad for the northern Polish port of Swinoujscie on the allotted afternoon. My body felt weak, but my journey should commence as I was expected the day after next in Warsaw. I perused the passengers for likely company and noted a well-dressed man with an intelligent face. He was reading an English medical text. If help were needed, I would approach him. I recall little of the overnight trip; there were bunk beds and I slept fitfully as the ship pitched in heavy Baltic seas. Land in the morning was a welcome sight.

Unsure what to do upon arrival in Swinoujscie, I looked for the man I had identified the previous day. I didn't see him and wasted ten minutes waiting for him before giving up. Instead I spoke to a young man who had been detained for quite a while at immigration. He and another older Polish man were the last to come through the border control. As it turned out, a mere ten minutes delay was critical; we had missed the train. The two of them, strangers to each other, adopted me and together we became like three friends brought together by our common problem and their joint desire to look after this lost foreigner. One spoke to me in slow and limited English, the other in a French as primitive as my own. We quickly hired a taxi and the driver sped after the train, actually catching it at a small station about twenty kilometres away. The train, just serving the branch line along the peninsula to Swinoujscie, was exceedingly slow. We jumped on board at the station. My

two companions then shepherded me to Warsaw and the younger one, George, spent some time with me there during my stay.

He had spent a period in Sweden over the summer and with his earnings from fruit-picking on Swedish farms, he would be able to live for four years in Warsaw without working. The system was simple, but initially precarious. Young Poles could get an exit visa to Sweden. Years of saving in Poland, combined with black-market purchases of hard currency, would accrue enough money to survive in Sweden for about a week. If no work could be found, the money ran out and the venture failed. An immediate return to Poland, to the shelter offered by the socialist state, was then needed. On the other hand, if some employment was quickly located, the eventual savings of Swedish currency could finance all sorts of endeavours back in Poland. With hard currency, cars could be purchased immediately (the ubiquitous Polski Fiat of course) and one's position on the queue for housing improved. Hard currency opened all doors, shortened all queues, or in George's case, allowed a Bohemian idle existence in Warsaw for a very long time. A little could be set aside to finance the next Swedish trip in a few years.

I had been conscious of not being late into Warsaw and had allowed myself plenty of time to meet my expected arrival date. I had intended breaking my train journey from Swinoujscie to Warsaw for an overnight stay, but Zoltan, the older man, thought it best for me to continue with them, albeit arriving rather late on that same day. It was an alien world for me and their guidance gave me a sense of security too comforting to decline. Zoltan rang the Banach Mathematical Centre on my behalf from Poznan during a break for change of trains. So when I finally reached Warsaw train station, a day earlier than originally expected, Zielinski from the Centre met me. George and Zoltan farewelled me like departing brothers. Zielinski, one of the course organisers and someone I had met on my first trip, escorted me for a small meal and then, about 9pm, to a room that had been organised at short notice for me.

Accommodation in Warsaw was a chronic problem and the early arrival had really caused some difficulty for my hosts. As a makeshift arrangement for one night, I was placed in a small room within the Banach Centre, on a single-storey wing which helps enclose the small front courtyard. The room was not intended for sleeping; it was like an office or tea-room, but a small divan provided me with a place to lie down. As I was to learn as the night progressed, it must have regularly provided a place for lying down!

Not long after Zielinski had left me, there was a knock at the door to the wing. Walking a short distance down the corridor -- there were a few offices off it -- I opened the door. An extraordinarily beautiful woman in a fur coat was there, but, I hasten to add, accompanied by a man. Speaking good English he

introduced himself and I gathered that he worked or studied at the centre. They came inside, excused themselves and went to the office adjacent to mine where, as I tried to sleep, they made love. The audibility of it left me in no doubt as to the woman's satisfaction over the next hour or two. They left eventually and I succumbed to sleep. I wondered whom the man was, since he didn't have a key to that building -- perhaps a student.

The next day, after a wash in rather limited facilities, I was escorted by Zielinski to the main building. I met a number of people associated with the course, including some academics that I knew from the 1975 trip. For the 'students', all young researchers from either Poland itself or one of the other communist-block countries, the course had been in progress for a few weeks already. A new batch of lecturers, myself one, were to start fresh topics in that week.

Zielinski then took me and my bag to my more permanent lodgings, with a middle-aged woman who took in boarders. Pane Kosłowska lived in a small part of the city which pre-dated the war. Little of Warsaw survived the German occupation and the 1944 "Uprising" and people in the Academy suggested I was privileged to be staying in a pre-war apartment, with its spaciousness. Pane Kosłowska was in her fifties and would herself have been a young woman during that horrific period. She and I had no effective conversation, but I liked her and she was kind to me. We exchanged a few sentences in French. The rooms in her apartment were big and my bedroom was indeed extremely spacious, coming off a long dark corridor.

On that first evening of my official stay, my hosts did not arrange anything special but introduced me to two other lecturers for the course. We three had coffee together in a small café. One lecturer was a Czech professor, Hajek, who had an established reputation internationally due to an authoritative book; the other man, Govindarajulu, was Indian by race but had worked in the US for a long time. Hajek and I were both fairly quiet on this night. For me, it was from embarrassment at the behaviour of our Indian/US colleague. With no sensitivity to life in Eastern Europe, he was critical, condescending, demanding and patronising throughout the evening. Polish service in shops and restaurants did indeed leave something to be desired, but Govindarajulu seemed to have no idea about the culture of Poland and the constraints which made Warsaw different from his favourite US city. His few hours experience of Poland had not told him that basic ingredients were not readily available at all times, that luxuries were almost never available and citizens lived a materially-impooverished life compared with the US. He assumed that all societies would emulate the US, though I could not imagine Poland, if and when it became a wealthy society, modelling itself on his adopted land.

The next day all three of us commenced our lectures, mine being immediately before lunch. I never really mastered Polish eating hours, but lunch on this day was at a normal hour, around 1pm. As a welcome for the new team of lecturers, a lunch was organised in a cafeteria across the road from the institute. I had felt pleased with my lecture; one always has a feeling about the success or otherwise of one's effort in the class. On that day two students stayed behind to ask some questions. One of these was an attractive young woman, who, in the course of quite an extended conversation with me after her fellow student had gone, introduced herself as Ludmiła. She was Polish, in Warsaw from her university in Wrocław. She was perhaps eight years younger than me, not exactly pretty, but with a warm personality and nice figure. We seemed to have an immediate rapport.

I have often thought of Ludmiła since that day, largely because of the events which followed in the first few minutes after our meeting. Most academics from the Centre, together with the students from the course, had made their way to the lunch venue. Ludmiła and I walked down the steps of the Banach Centre, through the small courtyard to the street. The Centre was located in the city but the street, which was one-way from our right, carried little traffic and allowed no parking on the roadside. There were few cars in Warsaw in any case and on this day one could not see a car on the road, either to the junction about 100 metres on our right or for a similar distance to the junction on our left. The street was deserted, both of cars and people. Our colleagues had obviously disappeared into the building opposite where I knew we were headed.

Small posts lined both sides of the street on the footpaths and strung between these were chains giving the obvious message that one should walk down to the junction to cross the road. Nevertheless, and I cannot say whether I led or Ludmiła led or the decision was mutual, we jumped over the chain and crossed the road. A second or so after this commitment, a police car turned the corner and we were caught. We reached the other side well before the car reached us, but naturally we were stopped by demands from the police, who jumped out of the car as if we had been robbing a bank. One policeman came up to us and, with considerable officiousness, asked for our ID cards. Naturally, I had no comprehension of his words, but Ludmiła relayed to me this request. I produced my passport, which thankfully I carried; memories of my experience in the Polish lock-up van, when I was without passport and hence *persona non grata*, flooded back.

Ludmiła argued strongly with the man. She told him that I was a guest of their country and that he should show some graciousness and courtesy. She asked him to be lenient. Ludmiła relayed the gist of this to me later but I could guess in any case. My thoughts were running, anticipating her anguish and

embarrassment, admiring her courage and spirit, but there was nothing I could say. The policeman was becoming more officious and demanded the payment of a fine which would now, in view of my foreign status, be considerably larger. Ludmiła gave in and opened her purse. She told me not to reveal that I had Polish money, for then the fine might rise even further. In any case, she said that because I was a guest I was not allowed to pay. I had some zlotys myself at this stage and knew that the fines were quite substantial for her, though insignificant for me with my income in the West.

As she settled with the policeman, obtaining a receipt (unlike in my dealings with the Czech police), the dilemma and subtlety of my situation weighed on me. My relationship with her had already taken three distinct forms: we were lecturer/student with possibilities that my speciality would be of direct benefit to her research; we were man and woman with some small spark between us and, at the very least, some expectation that the man doesn't stand by meekly when the woman is being bullied; I was a foreign guest and she my proud host. Importantly, I was from the wealthy West with considerable economic power in her land, but hopefully with a bit more sensitivity than my arrogant colleague of the previous evening. My decision, which may have been wrong, was not to reimburse her for the fines. We walked to the cafeteria, where we found that Govindarajulu was demanding fillet steak for lunch, in a land with no more cows!

Instead of paying the fines for Ludmiła, I invited her to have dinner with me a few days later, in what was undoubtedly the nicest restaurant in the Old Town – and famous as perhaps the only truly good restaurant in the whole city. Duck with orange sauce was its famous speciality. I thanked Ludmiła for her spirited defence of me and we had a lovely evening. She was married, as was I, and any thought that we might have become closer did not arise, yet there was a good friendship between us.

The days passed. I lectured, worked in the library and travelled back and forth, usually by tram, between the Centre and Pane Kosłowska's apartment. Occasionally I walked and I still recall one day when I passed a large butcher shop on this walk. It had a long L-shaped counter with a huge area available for customers. Three or four men sat behind the counter, inactive. One seemed to be asleep. In the customer area the crowd, which I estimated to be about 250, waited patiently about ten deep. Most of those waiting were elderly; I was to learn that this was their role in life, to wait for the meat to arrive at the shop. Often it didn't arrive at any time during the day and so they would return the next day. A special word in Polish had been coined to describe the old folk whose role was to queue and wait, not just for the almost non-existent meat, but for all produce.

It was said to me, not entirely in jest, that a job in the meat shop was one of the most sought after in Poland, second only to that of “waiter in an international hotel”. Here I mean ‘*waiter*’ in the familiar sense, not in the sense of those desperate to be in the shops when the meat arrived. The hotel-waiters had first access to foreigners for the illegal exchange of currency at black-market rates. The official rate at that time was 33 zlotys to the US dollar, but waiters could offer about 100 and sell the dollar on the streets for perhaps 130.

The butchers were not, I was informed, averse to the odd financial reward for setting aside a portion of meat for a valued customer. One couldn't be fussy though on the cut or even the type of animal. Meat was meat, not labelled as fillet, sirloin, blade or leg. To me it seemed that one didn't even ask for beef, lamb or pork, just meat. Even the restaurants had no distinctions of this type, except for poultry which was clearly more available.

By dictate of First Secretary Gierek, Polish cattle herds had apparently been sold on mass to Danish buyers in order to raise hard currency for the expansion of heavy industry. At least, that was the story. Poland, one of the largest countries in Europe, had been left with very few cows. I never learnt about their sheep or pigs, but these were probably rare too. In any case, Polish farms had reached the stage where many men no longer worked in agriculture. Most of these travelled to the cities for industrial work, leaving their farms unproductive, wives often producing food just for their own families. Many farms were actually privately owned, I learnt, but farm output had no free market – only the state distribution system with prices too low to stimulate production. I had seen some evidence of a food black-market in the cities, mainly with eggs, but it certainly did not solve the chronic problems.

I had difficulty myself in getting enough food. At times I would not see anything that I wanted in the local shops and I lacked the language to ask. So I would instead opt for my warm room, albeit with no evening meal, rather than further food explorations outside in the November cold. Lack of food in the evening made me sleep well, I found. For breakfasts, I relied on a nearby "milk bar" which served fried eggs and hot cocoa.

Nearly all items produced in Poland were in short supply to people who shopped with zlotys (which, it was said, were in over-supply). Large-ticket items like refrigerators were not readily available in a showroom. If one wanted such an item, a catalogue was available but an order could not be placed. It was incumbent on any buyer to wait at the shop for the fridges to arrive (at some unspecified time during the ensuing weeks). An interesting system evolved. People would go to the shop and find other people who wanted a fridge. One of the potential buyers, whom we might call the queue

manager, would form a list of customers. A roster would be drawn up so that two people on the list would always be present at the shop during opening hours. When the fridges finally arrived, usually without warning, one person would dash to a phone and ring the queue manager. Then all of the customers on the list would head quickly to the shop. Such was the consumer society, Polish style.

Those first few days were rather lonely, save for my classes and the one outing with Ludmiła. Some of the people I had known in 1975 were away from Warsaw, others I had called on for a brief visit, but people were busy at those times. Unlike my stay in 1975, I didn't have my family with me. My train companion, George, met me in the Old Town for coffee one day. He was accompanied by his girlfriend, Barbara. We chatted and later visited Barbara's apartment where I was to experience yet another dictate of Edward Gierek. The First Secretary had declared that the temperature of heating in all apartments, hot water piped into buildings from an extensive underground state-controlled network, must come down by two degrees in order to save state money. Whilst I was in Barbara's apartment having *herbata*, a technician visited and adjusted her heaters.

I didn't seem to notice any marked temperature change in my own home, which was still a warm retreat for me from the rigours of Warsaw's winter, albeit a lonely one. Pane Koslowska lived in her part of the flat and we met only occasionally and briefly. Moreover, we could not talk to each other effectively. Occasionally her brother would visit. He was a genuine Francophile with good command of French; as is always the case when real fluency confronts me, I struggled to keep up.

One day I really intrigued Pane Koslowska as I worked in her kitchen. I had learnt from days spent in Malaysia that bread could be beautifully revitalised by steaming it over boiling water. I was doing this; it was new to her and she was very impressed.

In the streets, I could read nothing except for a few words which seemed to come directly from Latin. I felt homesick and somewhat apprehensive about the unexpected problems which always seem to arise when one has no words of the local language. Needless to say, I didn't cross roads in unauthorised places.

One afternoon, I returned to my apartment and found that Pane Koslowska was talking to a visitor in the kitchen, a woman in her late thirties. They sat at the kitchen table. I nodded hullo and started making a hot drink and snack for myself. Then, with my back turned to the two women, I suddenly heard English being spoken, words which conveyed perfect fluency. They were

intended for me. I cannot recall precisely what the young woman had said to me, but my response was an enormous smile, as if the world had been lifted from my shoulders, and the simple words to her “*It is like music to my ears*”. The young woman relayed my words to Pane Koslowska, who smiled. My prowess in the kitchen (solely based on bread-steaming skills) was then told to the new woman by my landlady.

Sarah was an American and the new boarder to occupy the vacant room next to mine. She was of Polish origins and researched Polish sociology and politics in her regular position at a US university. She was married, but had spent quite a bit of time alone in Poland over the previous few years. I was elated to have her company. In many ways, she looked after me during the rest of my stay, telling me the gossip about town, advising me where to shop and passing on what the newspapers were saying. That was a boon. In my previous trip in April 1975, despite much social discourse, I had actually missed the dramatic days marking the end of the Vietnam War and remained unaware for a long time that the war had ended, such was the consequence of my Polish illiteracy. I’d learnt about Derby County winning some soccer match but missed the end of the war we all despaired of.

I guess Sarah and I had the opportunity and proximity for our relationship to have a sexual dimension, but it didn't develop that way. We would sit in the evenings in each other's bedroom, talking about the day and the gossip. She had links with the US Embassy in Warsaw and had been involved in the parties there when Jimmy Carter was elected president early that November; she conveyed the very positive mood in Warsaw on Carter's election, a mood which I sensed myself too. I also learnt from Sarah about the Russian Film Festival held every year in November; despite free admission nobody would attend, yet I saw long lines at the local cinema paying to see Jack Nicholson in *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*. Hollywood films were not so common, though any that displayed the US as a society with warts received official approval of the censors.

Sarah relayed the story, not published in the newspaper but circulating in town, about a concert celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. The last item of the evening concert was a medley of Polish music which was well received by the audience, except for its final component. The Polish themes were replaced by *The Internationale*, formerly the national anthem of the Soviet Union and still the musical symbol of world communism. The audience rose *en bloc* and walked out. A well-known journalist turned and shouted “*This is an insult to the Polish people*”.

Antagonism towards Russia was running high. Candles were kept burning in a cemetery for Polish soldiers killed in an ancient Russian-Polish war. In the

previous summer, saboteurs had uprooted the track in front of the Russian train from Moscow to Paris. There were strikes in the Gdansk dockyards, dissent which would later be the kernel of Polish resistance to Russian communist hegemony. The Cardinal of the Polish Catholic Church had been making anti-government statements in his sermons.

In my own activities, I had noticed the delicate nature of our course's language policy. The official medium of instruction for all of the classes was either English or Russian. It was noteworthy that over the month or so of my stay in Poland, only one lecturer used Russian. He was a professor from North Vietnam. Even a visiting Russian academic, a delightful and clearly politically-sensitive man, chose English.

I had a brief chat with the Vietnamese man in French. As with most French spoken slowly by non-native speakers, I was able to detect the end of one word and the beginning of the next and so was able to learn a little of his life in Hanoi. He told me about the air-raids during the war and the one-man bomb shelters. These, simply a small cylindrical hole in the pavement with a man-hole cover, were scattered abundantly throughout Hanoi. Whenever US planes attacked, people lifted a cover and dropped down into a hole.

One night near the end of my stay, Sarah read from the newspaper that the government had introduced a ban on the export of leather goods. I do not recall the reason, but I can only surmise now that the wholesale slaughter of the Polish cattle herd must have caused a glut in hides. The government, never one to let market forces operate, had perhaps wanted to control the hide stockpile and prevent it being sold off to tourists at bargain prices. As it turned out, I had purchased a full-length leather coat a week or so earlier. It now seemed that I may have difficulty taking it across the border.

I remarked in jest "*It should be OK*", showing Sarah and Pane Koslowska, who was in Sarah's room at the time, the fact that the buttons on the coat were nearly falling off despite it being only a week old. "*The customs officials will think that it is an old coat, with such loose buttons*", I said.

Both women laughed "*No, that will simply be proof that it is indeed a new coat. All new Polish coats lose their buttons within a few weeks!*"

Sarah was a mine of information and a good friend. We had few outings -- she was rather too busy -- but we walked in the Old Town a couple of times. It was a shame that I could not tell her the intrigue that was evolving in my own life.

In preparation for my departure from Poland, I had visited the Czech embassy in Warsaw to arrange a visa for a trip through Czechoslovakia by train. My passport had been left with the embassy for a few days. I had been undecided which route to use for my outward journey. A proper look at East Germany would have its interest for me, but the deciding factor in choosing the southern route was my wish to see Krakow, and possibly, the mountain resort town of Zakopane.

Pane Pliesinska, a mathematician at the Academy, had volunteered the services of her son as a guide for any trip to Krakow. Krys was about 19 and an amazing young man in his language skills. His mother assured me of his keenness to accompany me, partly because of his hunger for practice in English. We could leave on the Friday afternoon, it was planned, and spend the weekend in Krakow. He would return to Warsaw late on Sunday, leaving me to visit Zakopane before eventually catching the train for Prague. I was told that I would have no problem buying a seat on the train as the route was not busy at that time.

I gladly accepted the invitation but later, in my apartment, I noticed that my visa for Poland expired on Tuesday the 23rd, just two days after Krys would leave me in Krakow. A side trip to Zakopane on the Monday might be a risk, timewise, as I must return to Krakow to catch the Prague train. No matter! I would leave Zakopane for another occasion, focussing only on Krakow. I mentioned this to Pane Pliesinska the next day, assuring her that I didn't mind missing Zakopane this time. There was insufficient time to enjoy it and I would not feel too happy going there without skiing in the Tatra mountains.

*“The queues for the ski-lift are so long anyway, you may not enjoy it. Moreover, it will be too difficult for you there hiring ski equipment without Krys's help. It is better for you not to go to Zakopane for a rushed visit; perhaps you can visit Oswiecim instead... oh, no, maybe you would not want that ... It is too horrible, though some people think it is good for one's soul to see it, so that history is not allowed to repeat itself.”*

I needed some explanation and was told that I may be more familiar with the German name, Auschwitz. It was close to Krakow, actually en route to Prague. I shuddered. *“No, once before I was offered such a trip, to Dachau near Munich. I declined then, too.”*

On the Monday before the planned trip to Krakow, that is, on Monday the 15th of November, I was invited to dinner with the Wilczynski family. Grzegorz Wilczynski was a mathematician and his wife, Monika, a chemist. In 1975 when my family and I had visited, a complicated arrangement had led to us staying in the Wilczynski flat; they had been elsewhere. So I knew

precisely where to go to visit their home. I caught the tram to the northern suburb of Zoliborz in the afternoon, early enough for a walk with Wilczynski. We wandered about, paused to look at a soccer match for a while and then sat on the banks of the River Wisła. I still remember the rather profound conversation of that day. We were both interested in political systems and philosophy. Wilczynski had the view that economic performance was more dependent on the resources of a country, both material and human, than on the eco-political system be it capitalist or socialist. He had many cogent examples of his thesis, but was still exploring the truth of this view, using me on this day for discussion and reaction. He felt that he would like to enter Polish politics so that he could contribute more to society, but that could not be done without joining the communist party. He was unsure if he could ever do that.

One of the examples that I raised in support of Wilczynski's arguments related to the East German economy. I had recently read quite favourable reports on recent successes there. It was clearly the most successful economy of any under Communist control and something of a model for other Eastern states. This was, of course, an opinion taken in 1976 and seems a little far-fetched now, in view of the experience with the German re-unification that was to take place a decade and a half later. In any case, Wilczynski was unsure if my East German example supported his thesis or not. He remarked *“It is said that nobody has yet invented an economic system which will stop Germans from working hard.”*

We also discussed the absence of genuinely applied mathematicians in Polish academia. I had noticed that some undergraduate mathematics students in Warsaw studied an 'applied course on Statistics' but after four years did not know what a t-test was. Instead, they were well versed in the more abstract probability theorems and in their interplay with mathematical analysis. Wilczynski reiterated the view, expressed earlier by others, that academics in Warsaw were reluctant to work with practical issues because that implied involvement with the government bureaucracy. This gave them little but frustration and moreover compromised their position in the eyes of their colleagues.

As we chatted, we sat on the western banks of the river. Wilczynski pointed across the river to the eastern side and identified where the Soviet Army had stopped in July, 1944. The Polish '*home army*' had timed the Uprising in Warsaw against the occupying Germans, expecting the advancing Soviets to cross the river immediately and give support to the insurrection. After sixty-three days of the home army fighting the German soldiers, in the alleys and basements on the western side, the Uprising finally failed. The Soviet Army had stayed across the river watching the battles on the other side for all of

these sixty-three days. With the Uprising suppressed, leaving 150,000 casualties in the home army and a city devoid of people (due to the forced evacuation of 700,000 Poles), Warsaw was then flattened by German detonation. The German Army then departed and the Soviet Army crossed the river on barges. Wilczynski showed me the site of their crossing but spoke without apparent bitterness.

We returned to his apartment for dinner which was pleasant and initially uneventful. Monika did not have the confidence to speak English, but I was assured by her husband that she could understand most of the chatting, which by now had moved away from the topic of that afternoon. At the end of the meal, the phone rang. It was for Monika. When she returned to the table, it was clear that it was a somewhat disturbing call for her. They apologised for the distraction, but discussed something in Polish, with some consternation.

Wilczynski seemed willing to tell me about the episode. *“My wife has just had a call from a man who wants to obtain some chemicals. She knows that these are substances which are used in forgery work. We have a feeling that the man is involved in making false documents.”*

There was a pause and further discussion in Polish. *“Actually, the man has been to Australia some years ago. He is a mathematician. I wonder if you ever met him”*, Wilczynski said in English.

*“What is his name?”*

*“Anton Tolecki.”*

*“I am absolutely amazed by this coincidence. Yes, I know him. He is a very tall man, isn't he?”*

Wilczynski agreed. I told him that Anton had come to Adelaide a few years earlier. He had taken a job as tutor in our Mathematics Department. I knew little of his background at that time, except that he was Polish. Anton had merely said that he obtained permission to travel from Poland to Italy for a conference. At that stage, he had decided not to go back to Poland, instead travelling to Australia. In Adelaide he didn't wish to speak about his past and I respected that. Anton could play bridge, though, and he joined in our lunchtime bridge game. He could play well, with some flamboyance and occasional rushes of blood. He was a dangerous player to his opponents, but equally an awkward person to partner. He played bridge rather more like a poker player than a bridge player.

Once when I went away from Adelaide for a brief trip to Sydney, Anton departed from Adelaide. He had only stayed about a year. Eventually on return I discovered his absence, but nobody seemed to know precisely where he had gone. Now, here he was in Warsaw, possibly engaged in forgery!

Wilczynski asked if I wanted to see Anton, which naturally I did. He promised to ring Anton for me to inform him of my presence in Warsaw, though he was tentative and unsure if Anton would be able to see me. Wilczynski said that if Anton were to ring me, it would perhaps be best if I refrained from controversial conversation on the phone with him. I assured him of my caution.

I left about 9pm and took two trams to my apartment. About 10:30, the phone rang and Pane Koslowska came to tell me I had a call, obviously Anton whom I had thought of constantly during the tram rides. Anton spoke to me quickly on the phone, expressing pleasure at this great surprise and arranging a meeting place for the next day. He asked that we meet in the foyer of Warsaw's most expensive international hotel around midday. I said nothing to compromise his or my position should the call be tapped.

The next day I entered the hotel on schedule and found the foyer surprisingly crowded, with many people standing around engaged in some reception. Yet I had no difficulty at all in finding Anton. I had forgotten just how tall he was, at least two metres. When we met, he said to me loudly *"What a surprise!"*, then more quietly *"Pretend that this meeting is unplanned, that we have just bumped into each other. We'll talk properly outside."* I was very pleased to see him and the small charade of a surprise encounter was no effort at all. He told me he had a car and we could have a drive around sightseeing. So we quickly left the foyer and walked a few hundred metres to the car, an old VW beetle.

There was no awkwardness in our conversation, as he immediately told me of his plight. He drove while he was speaking. *"Time is of the essence"* he said, *"so I'll not start at the beginning."*

*"The fact is that at this very moment I am trying to escape from Poland by decidedly illegal means. I have a friend who is my partner in this activity and we have acquired some old identity documents which we are altering. We have learnt some of the techniques of forgery. We have an apartment across the river used as a forgery workshop. It is an amazing coincidence hearing about you from Wilczynski. Our planned escape is next week after we put a few finishing touches to our documents. My friend is at the workshop now."*

I asked if there was anything that I could do to help and also for further explanation. Why was he in this predicament? He explained to me that, while in Adelaide, he had applied for and been given a three-year contract as a mathematics lecturer in Lae, Papua New Guinea, at the Technical University there. He had also become an Australian citizen. After the end of his contract he decided to return to Poland. I didn't press him for reasons; homesickness was something I understood.

He told me part of the story, though. At the time he departed from Poland, he had been married with two small children. He hadn't mentioned this to me in Adelaide but that was understandable as we hadn't been close friends. Anton continued. *"My wife and I were a bit naïve thinking that the Polish authorities would, if we were persistent, allow my family to join me once I had a good job elsewhere. When I was in New Guinea, I applied several times for their release. She also made applications, but it was all a waste of effort. So I decided then that I would return to Poland when my contract was up."*

His quest to return to Poland received a set-back when he applied for a Polish visa using his Australian passport. A visa wasn't granted.

*"It was after this visa application that I received a letter from the Polish government saying that they would only allow entry on my old Polish passport."*

I could almost guess the sequel as Anton went into more detail. *"I left Lae and flew to Europe. I had saved quite a lot of money and was able to carry a lot with me. In Denmark I purchased a new car, a Volvo, and drove it into Poland, using my Polish passport as instructed. I also had a sizeable sum of money, hard currency money, in addition to the money tied up in the car I was driving. Well, then the trouble started."*

He told me how he was called in to the government department in charge of passports and identity cards and told of his fate. His Polish passport was confiscated and replaced by an ID card which prohibited him from leaving Poland, even to other Eastern block countries. His ID was also placed on a black list of some sort and this made it difficult for him to obtain work in government-sponsored employment. In Poland, that rules out most jobs and certainly those which might make use of his degrees in mathematics. He was stymied.

*"Some incidents were quite humorous. I was summoned to attend a military tribunal where I was informed that my earlier abscondence had violated the terms of my national service, something all young Polish men were required to do. I was asked to don a jacket suitable to my rank at the time of my crime."*

*Ceremonially, the stripes were removed, whilst I tried hard to keep a straight face.*

*But it hasn't been a joyful time. I returned to Poland in December 1975, nearly a year ago. As was understandable, the five years of separation proved too much for our marriage. After several bad conflicts I moved out and the marriage was over. I then became determined to return to Australia, but I couldn't use my Australian passport to make my exit from Poland, of course."*

As Anton continued this sorry tale of his entrapment, I found it difficult to believe his naivety in returning like a lamb to the paddock, if not to the slaughter. If he had missed his family so much, then how could he have left them in the first place – relying on an equally naïve notion that they would be allowed to follow? He was, however, a friend to me now, despite these misgivings. In those few minutes of telling me his story, a bond was formed.

I asked about the Australian authorities. Had they tried to help? They were powerless, he informed me. Once one enters one's former home country on the old passport, one's adopted country can do nothing. He said that he had been in contact with people in the Australian embassy in Warsaw. They were very sympathetic and had made pleas on his behalf, but to no avail.

Anton was *persona non grata* in his own land, yet not sufficiently *non grata* to be allowed to leave. After the shock of his situation waned, Anton had done some freelance work translating books on mathematics, engineering and science from Polish to English with a small publishing house. *"The publisher only knew I had worked at universities in Australia and PNG."* Anton said. *"Actually I didn't really need the money at first, as I had sold my Volvo for a large sum and had further savings besides"*.

These savings were to dwindle soon after. Anton in his determination to get out of Poland tried a number of applications for visits to the West. These were accompanied by hefty bribes which were nonetheless fruitless. The money was wasted; some middle bureaucrats had fattened pockets but did not assist. Anton gradually used up significant cash reserves in futile attempts to buy his way out.

It was then that he met another man with comparable, but differing, restrictions to his mobility. Witek was his name, though I was not told that until much, much later. Witek and Anton became partners in forgery. Guided by another man expert with paints, they read widely on the chemicals used in inks and materials for stamps. They researched the properties of paper and the science of matching colours. They studied current documentation for the

normal Polish citizen. They obtained chemicals, paper and printing tools by whatever means and set up their workshop.

Sitting in the car, as we drove around Warsaw, he asked me of my intended departure date. I explained my plans to visit Krakow on the coming weekend, prior to crossing into Czechoslovakia on Monday or Tuesday, the 22nd or 23rd. He told me that he and Witek were planning to make their first crossing on the 23rd.

*“Our strategy is to cross into DDR, East Germany that is, first. Our research has suggested that this is the most relaxed border for Poles because most Polish citizens have a right to travel to East Germany with nothing more than their ID card. Many Poles make excursions to Berlin for shopping. There is a lot more to buy in Berlin. Travel to other Eastern European countries, for example Czechoslovakia, requires a 'Comecon' passport, normally easy to obtain for law-abiding Poles, but not for black-listed men like us. For Yugoslavia, which is strangely viewed in Eastern Europe with a kind of mistrust, one needs special stamps in the Comecon passport. Naturally, travel to the West needed an international Polish passport with the right stamps; these days, average Poles have a reasonable chance of obtaining this passport, but one needs to be trusted to come back, say by family ties, in order to get one of those. Even my money couldn't buy one!*

*Of course, my legal ID card is stamped so that I can't even go to DDR but I have taken the identity of a dead person and have forged some changes on his ID card. We think that the ID cards at the Polish-DDR border get less scrutiny than the Comecon passports at the Czech border.*

*Richard, would you be willing to change your plans and go to Berlin? It could help us significantly. I would ask you to carry something for us. They very rarely search foreigners.”*

Without giving the matter the consideration it deserved, I agreed, merely pointing out that I would need to collect my passport from the Czech consulate and possibly obtain a visa for DDR. I also mentioned that I must leave Poland by Tuesday next, a week away, as my visa expired then. Time might be short to arrange things. Obviously, I could still spend the weekend in Krakow with Krys, returning to Warsaw on the Sunday night.

*“Firstly, before we discuss plans in detail, I'll drive you to the Czech consulate and you can collect your passport. Maybe then, we can book a sleeper for you on the Monday night train to Berlin. I am booked on the Tuesday night, but obviously you cannot catch that with your visa expiring on that day. The train, even if it is on time, doesn't reach the border until after*

*midnight. In any case, I think it better for you not to be on my train. My partner is not catching the train at all. He is not quite as bad in the government's eyes as I am and can legally cross to DDR, but he can't get a passport for Comecon countries. Anyway, he is driving this car, our old VW, to Berlin. I shall be sitting up on the train all night. We are planning to meet in East Berlin."*

*"Surely you are not planning to cross directly to the West from DDR ?", I asked as we drove toward the consulate. "That border is just too formidable."*

*"No, we plan to change our identities again in DDR, establish forged Comecon passports, complete with the right stamps that indicate our valid departure from Poland and legal entry into DDR. Then we are motoring south, crossing into Czechoslovakia. Poles, at least normal ones, are legally entitled to do that. We expect that the German and Czech officials at that border will be less familiar with Polish documents than our own Polish guards -- and much less fussy than the guards on the DDR/BRD border. Even though my partner is fluent in German, we can pretend to have no language except Polish and possibly exploit any confusion. Their vigilance might not be too persistent if they have to deal with two people who comprehend nothing they say. My partner's fluency, and my English skill, can be held in reserve in case we need it.*



*After we cross into Czechoslovakia, we shall go to Prague where we shall investigate purchase of airline tickets to Bucharest, or possibly Sofia. We know that these flights stop in Belgrade, in Yugoslavia. We are unsure if on-*

*going passengers are allowed out of the plane but, if they are and security in Belgrade is relaxed, as we have been told – we shall get further information on this in Prague — it may be possible to walk beyond the transit lounge. In the confusion, I would speak English only and claim to be Australian. My friends in the Australian Embassy have briefed their counterparts in Yugoslavia and my Australian passport, which is lodged with a friend who is with the Foreign Affairs Department in Canberra, will be there quickly by diplomatic courier. My partner would speak only German and claim, at least initially, to be German. If we were held in Yugoslavia long enough for the Australian Embassy to be involved, then we would have a good chance.”*

I felt unsettled by these revelations of Anton's. My thoughts turned back to his style as a bridge player in Adelaide. He was something of a gambler then and now I could see he was gambling with his life and I didn't like the sound of his odds. I had earlier thought of his naivety in returning to Poland without Australian consular protection but now I wondered at my own naivety. But thankfully the plan improved.

*“But this risky plan is only one possibility. We may not be able to buy these air tickets. There may be no seats or the officials may consider our papers unvalidated. We are not too sure at this stage if the Comecon passport needs any special stamps for such flights. Of course, we assume that nobody will pick the forgery.”*

*“More likely, we will travel further in the car, through Hungary to Romania. In Romania, we shall get advice on the border sensitivities at that moment and try to cross directly into Yugoslavia. This will be a big test for our documents, because the border with Yugoslavia is a de facto crossing to the West. If we succeed there, it is very easy to cross the border from Yugoslavia to Italy.”*

I told Anton of my stay for three months in Trieste, just on the Italian side of that border. My own crossings of that border, on four occasions, had encountered somewhat officious border controllers. Once I had a long argument over a parcel which they wished to confiscate. I had been involved in a United Nations course in Trieste and on one Saturday had driven a classmate, a man from Thailand, to the local airport in Monfalcone. He was flying home, but by an indirect route, and asked if I would mail the parcel to his home. I agreed, but didn't do it immediately, instead taking a short touristic trip into neighbouring Yugoslavia that afternoon. The border guard seized on this parcel and was totally confused by the Thai script, the likes of which he had never seen before. He asked me what was inside. When I didn't know, he opened it and saw numerous tourist brochures of Trieste and the Adriatic coast. There were girls in bikinis in some of these pictures and this

belligerent Yugoslav guard accused me of importing pornographic material into the country. Non-plussed, I simply said nothing until he finally relented and let me through, without taking the parcel. I expect that he wanted a bribe but eventually saw little prospect.

I didn't tell Anton this lengthy tale, but I did mention that care was needed at the frontier with Trieste. I said that I would give him the address and phone number of a Dutchman who lived in Trieste, a man who crossed the border on business two or three times week. I recalled his tale of how, one night in order to speed up the slow process at the border, he had spotted a familiar face amongst the Yugoslav frontier guards. The Dutchman had just purchased some hot *cevapcici* for dinner. He waived his parcel of these highly-seasoned small 'sausages' beneath the nose of the guard and winked. Handing him one sausage, he was able to pass immediately through the checkpoint with minimal fuss. The Dutchman had told me in another conversation that the frontier was not impenetrable away from the checkpoints, but that a guide was needed. I had been curious at the extent to which Yugoslavs were entering Italy illegally.

Anton laughed at the *cevapcici* story and continued his explanation. *“We have one more possibility up our sleeve if all else seems impossible. We have forged Polish seamen's passes under our assumed identity and could try to get an assignment on ships which dock at the Black Sea coast of Romania. If we could do this, then we can jump ship at the first appropriate port.*

*But most likely for us would be the crossing of the border to Yugoslavia.”*

Shortly we reached the Czech consulate somewhat south of the Warsaw city centre. I entered and waited for my number to come up. My passport was ready, complete with the visa, one which I would no longer need. I paid the fees and rejoined Anton in the car. The next stop was the railway booking office. Anton was somewhat concerned that we may be too late to book for the Monday train; it was an important and busy route. Today was Tuesday the 16th and we wanted the booking for Monday the 22nd.

The woman we encountered at the ticketing desk was typical of most people I encountered in a service role in Poland. She was rude and unhelpful and clearly wished she was somewhere else, not providing service. After slowly wearing down her rudeness with smiles from both Anton and I, we found that the obstructions-to-purchase that she had placed in my path were indeed real. Firstly, we must pay in dollars, not zlotys, and secondly, she could not sell me a ticket unless I had a visa for DDR. Anton had dollars, but she could not, or would not, even *reserve* a seat without the visa. Upon enquiry if many seats were left, she was able to tell us that haste was necessary.

Another dash across town to the DDR consulate ensued. Nein! The visa we wanted, allowing me an overnight stay in East Berlin on the night of Tuesday the 23rd, could not be obtained without evidence of a paid booking at a hotel in East Berlin.

Fortunately the Deutsche Reiseburo was nearby, so bookings were possible quickly. The German girl serving was a shade more cooperative than the madame at the railway. She showed us the names of hotels available to a 'capitalist' like me and the ludicrously expensive prices I must pay, due to their insistence that I pay the Ostmarks cost in Westmarks at the artificial rate of one-to-one. (These rates were based on stubborn national pride by the DDR government; I had seen the same earlier when someone had explained that, in Russia, one rouble officially equalled one US dollar!) Anyway, I agreed to the arrangement and she offered to telex Berlin for immediate confirmation.

As I waited with Anton I expressed my pleasure at the modern facilities; a telex in Warsaw in 1976, available to the likes of me without a security clearance, was a surprise. I thought of my earlier attempts to use a photocopier in the Academy of Science library. I had found it impossible; all photocopiers, and there weren't many, were manned by a member of the Communist Party. Only they could do the copying and since all work must be closely vetted for its subversive nature, there were considerable delays. Now, here in front of my eyes, was a living example of German efficiency -- a telex machine with a willing operator trying to be helpful. Wilczynski's remark on the East German economy came to mind and I smiled.

The girl returned, but alas my dream was shattered. "*The telex machine is not working properly*", she said. "*I am sorry but I cannot help you today.*"

Anton and I hid our frustration and left, pausing for a rethink of our situation on the footpath. Of course, by this stage I knew what it was that I would be carrying for Anton. My parcel would be a stack of forged documents intended for use once the successful crossing into DDR was achieved. There was also a large stack of US dollar notes, totalling \$1000.

It was essential that we find a way for me to give these items to Anton once we had made our separate crossings into East Berlin. We discussed the possibilities. It seemed clear, given our need to book the train ticket soon and our inability to obtain a confirmed hotel room, that I would have to obtain a DDR 'transit' visa, the same type that my family and I had used on our last exit from Poland eighteen months earlier. This visa did not permit an overnight stay in East Germany.

So the central problem was that, all going well, I would arrive in East Berlin at 6am on Tuesday morning, precisely one day before Anton. If I had the transit visa, I would have to cross into West Berlin before mid-night on Tuesday. In principle, I could return on a one-day pass from West to East the next day. The snag with this plan was my hidden cache of money and forged documents. It was inconceivable to carry these across the East Berlin-West Berlin border once, let alone twice!

Still hesitant about a solution to the problem we nevertheless dashed back to the East German consulate which thankfully was not busy. Amazingly, after explaining our need for haste, I was immediately given the transit visa in my passport. We also asked if, once I reached East Berlin, a change enabling me to stay a night could be made. They said it was possible, but not guaranteed. I must go to the East Berlin Central Police Station and request a change.

Anton negotiated the fairly light traffic in yet another dash across town, back to the railway booking office where the ticketing clerk sold me the precious seat on the Monday night train. If I didn't mind sharing a cabin, I could also have a sleeper.

That was enough for one day; Anton and I parted with plans to meet again the next day in order to think through the scheme more carefully. That evening he needed to attend to other matters with his partner, in particular to consult him about the problems of my involvement, whilst I needed to finalise my weekend travel plans with Krys.

As it turned out, Krys and his mother were not at all perturbed by the 'minor' change to my plans. I simply told them I had decided instead to have a good look at East Berlin and would return to Warsaw from Krakow with Krys. I gave the same story to Sarah and Pane Koslovska, asking firstly if my room was still available to me for the Sunday night. It was; my change of plans had caused no ripples. We all agreed that the sightseeing weekend in Krakow would be easier now, without my full complement of luggage.

### Chapter 3: More scheming

When we met the next day, it was obvious that we had both given thought to possible solutions to our problem. It was easier though to confront the issues together.

Anton started the dialogue. *“If we could be sure that you are allowed to stay overnight, that is, that you can change your visa once you reach Berlin, then we can meet. I think that is fairly likely. Another seemingly obvious answer if you don't stay the night is that my partner cross into DDR on the Tuesday, early enough to rendezvous with you before you cross to West Berlin. But this creates a lot of difficulties for us at this stage and we would prefer to leave that as a last resort.”*

I asked *“Is there an Australian Embassy in DDR? I imagine so, and it should be in East Berlin. I am thinking that they might offer a sort of 'safe-keeping' service for me, as an Australian citizen. I may be allowed to leave a parcel there on Tuesday, cross to the West and collect it again on the Wednesday. Another possibility is that I hide the documents somewhere, in a park or other public place and collect them again the next day.”*

*“No, hiding is too risky. You won't know if you have been observed and could find yourself being set up, whereby we all end up in a DDR prison. The embassy idea is worth exploring. We can do that now. I'll drive to the Australian Embassy here in Warsaw and we can ask some relevant questions.”*

Anton had brought a map of East Berlin and a fairly quick perusal had revealed an Australian Embassy in the northern part of East Berlin.

As we drove across the river to the eastern bank of the Wisła, where the Australian Embassy in Poland is located, Anton pointed out the street where his forging workshop was located. He was confident that its existence had not been discovered by the authorities who, nevertheless, would probably be giving him and Witek some occasional surveillance.

We reached the Australian Embassy and I asked if embassies would allow Australian citizens to leave something for safe keeping. The girl consulted her more senior colleague and I was told that there were no general rules it seemed, but in Warsaw they did not offer such a service. I also asked if she could tell me if Australia had an embassy in East Berlin as I was going there next. She confirmed the existence of such, thus providing a useful positive check on Anton's map.

So we figured there could be no reliability on any plan involving the Embassy in DDR. It seemed very likely, however, that I would indeed be allowed to stay overnight. The problem was essentially unresolved but there was no turning back now.

We sat in the car and Anton showed me the map of East Berlin in detail. I noted the railway station where I would arrive and some of the hotels that had been mentioned in the Reiseburo as possible resting places.

*“Where shall we meet on the Wednesday?” I asked.*

*“The arrangement is quite elaborate and involves walking rather than waiting. At 10am I want you to start here at Alexander Platz. There is a circular tower there and many Berlin people use that as a meeting place. Don't wait around. Just walk from there down Unter den Linden on the right hand footpath.”* He was pointing on the map. *“Here, four blocks down, cross the road and walk back on the other side of the street. You shall be doing a circuit, traversed in an anti-clockwise direction. I shall be traversing the same circuit in a clockwise direction. We should see each other.”*

*“It would be more appropriate, given your name of Anton, that you walk anti clockwise.”* I remarked.

*“No, I have already agreed with my partner. He will be walking anti-clockwise using the same protocol as you. I shall meet him too on the route. You and he will not know each other as we do not think it necessary that you meet here in Warsaw.*

*If, after you have completed the circuit bringing you back to Alexander Platz, we have not met, then you should start another walk on the same route but now commencing at 11am. If that fails, you should return again to the tower in Alexander Platz at noon whereupon my partner will make contact with you. There is an interior waiting hall at the base of the tower; meet there. For this purpose it will be good if you can wear that blue ski hat of yours. It is quite distinctive; you must have purchased it in the West because you can't buy that sort of colourful design here.”*

*“Yes, I bought it in Copenhagen, hardly a centre of world skiing, but I was cold. I'll be sure to wear that. What next, if he and I meet at noon without you?”*

*“If you meet, leave it up to him. I'll go through some contingency plans with him. If you don't meet, then have a break for lunch and repeat the walk at 3pm. Is that clear?”*

I agreed.

*“The papers I shall give you will be taped inside an old map of East Berlin. The map will be folded and so nothing will be visible. We have taken some trouble to find a very old map, one that is no longer on sale in Warsaw. When I see you on Monday, before you depart from Warsaw, I'll place the map on the top of your clothes. Have you an open-top carry bag? The map can be placed on the top of that. Thus if you are caught, you can simply deny knowledge of the map, claiming that somebody else put it there without your knowledge. Because of its age, it will be clear that you could not have purchased the map yourself. Under no account should you touch it with your fingers, though. Of course, they will recognise us from the photos, and they may know that you know me, but they will have no evidence that you knew anything about the map or the documents.”*

We departed soon after that, with plans to meet again on the Monday after my trip to Krakow. My immediate thoughts turned to the preparation for that short trip and the completion of my duties at the Banach Centre. Saying farewell to my work colleagues also occupied me.

Krys, my guide-to-be, came to meet me and we had a fine rapport immediately. He was mature and worldly for his age but still eager and enthusiastic. He had booked the train tickets to Krakow and so we arranged to meet on the Friday afternoon, which we duly did.

Nightfall soon fell as the train moved southward across the Polish countryside. Some barely lit stations passed as Krys and I sat, occasionally chatting or in a comfortable silence if neither felt compelled to speak. We reached Krakow at a reasonable hour, but it was dark and cold. Krys knew a small hotel which would be suitable and so we made our way there on foot. Alas, a problem arose. I was rejected as a possible guest because I was a foreigner and I could not produce evidence of having changed the appropriate sum of money at the official exchange rate. The hotel was not "designated". I explained, through Krys's translation, that as an invited visitor I was exempt from such currency obligations, but this did not wash.

We tried a few more inns, with the same outcome. Things were looking quite grim; Krakow's streets or parks in November were not a pleasant prospect. I wondered if Krys was feeling embarrassed and was conscious not to show my concerns too much, just appreciation at his efforts. I even suggested that, if all else fails, we could try a 'designated' international hotel (if one existed). Krys, a young man of considerable resourcefulness, was not unduly worried, it seemed; he was confident that a hostel across town would take us.

He was right. At about 9pm, we were accepted without a long inquisition or bout of form-filling into the hostel. We would, however, be located in a room with 12 bunk beds. After a quick snack out in the cold streets again, we settled into our room for the night. This was a memorable occasion. About eight of the bunks were occupied when we arrived. Krys was amazing. He soon introduced himself and me to the other men. Two were young students from East Germany, three were Hungarian, one was Slovak and there were a couple of young Poles. Krys could speak to all of them, Deutsch to the Germans, basic Hungarian or Slovak when needed and, of course, Polish and English. He was in his element as social coordinator of this disparate bunch. We eventually slept.

One of German men was studying English literature in Dresden and he was naturally keen to speak English with me. As a result, when we had breakfast the next day the German duo joined us. The second German student lived in East Berlin. Krys mentioned that I would, in a couple of days, pass through Berlin. At this news and with Krys's prompting, I was invited to meet the Berlin student, Dieter, on the coming Tuesday. He would be back there by that time.

*"I have classes in the morning early but I could meet you about midday. There is a good meeting spot in Alexander Platz under the tower there"* he said in German. I more or less understood, especially the reference to Alexander Platz, before the precise translation from the other two.

I made quite diligent efforts to decline the invitation on the grounds firstly that I would be imposing on Dieter and secondly that I was unsure of my timetable. I felt, though did not say so, that my time in East Berlin was not free for socialising. Heaven knows what I might be required to do on that Tuesday! No amount of effort, however, in clouding the issue let me escape from the invitation. It was settled! I would meet Dieter at noon under the Alexander Platz tower, a venue which was fast becoming the centre of my life.

As we walked around Krakow, initially as a foursome before splitting into two pairs for separate sightseeing, I thought about the invitation. It was just possible that a contact in East Berlin would be useful, though I would not want to put Dieter in jeopardy in any way.

The day passed with Krys and I seeing all the main sights of Krakow, the castle with its treasured *da Vinci* painting and secret dungeons used during the war, and the main St Mary's "square" which I still always recognise immediately in any photo or travel book. The church and the colonnade

arches opposite, gave the square distinction from all others I have seen. The odd juxtaposition of the buildings, not in a rectangle at all but scattered around, helps this unique image.

Walking in the square, I was often approached by men with offers of money exchange. "Magyar?" was a word used by all of them, reflecting the fact that my clothing was not exactly Polish, yet scarcely of the elegance that they attributed to Westerners. To them, I was Hungarian and it became evident that there was a flourishing trade between Poles and Hungarians in St Mary's Square. (I felt that my facial features were not Hungarian, but then again, I had not found myself conspicuous in features in any part of Europe. I was a blender.)

Though not normally a shopper, I could not resist a shop near St. Mary's which sold Polish kilims. I'd seen many kilims in Warsaw in the special "dollar" shops for tourists, but had not purchased. In this Krakow shop, one large kilim of a medieval European town was so attractive that I bought it.

The next day dawned cloudy and cold like every other Polish November day. Our German friends had gone and we embarked on a second day of sightseeing. A short train ride took us to Wielitzka. Krys said there was something special there, but the environment I saw when we disembarked was decidedly God-forsaken. Nevertheless, Krys as usual was right. He had taken me to a touristic feature that was simply marvellous, but it was *underground!* Deep underground was a salt mine which had dated from the 13th century. Lifts, not actually working on our day there, take one into the depths where one finds a myriad of passages, all lit and delightfully warm by comparison with the air up top. Year round the temperature is about 15 degrees Celsius.

We walked down the stairs for what seemed an eon. Hundreds of feet below, we emerged into the myriad. As we walked, sculpture adorned the passages. At times there would be rooms where normal activities of commerce were conducted, shops and so on. There were, in large man-made caverns, disused munition factories from the German occupation in the second world-war. There was a modern day sanatorium exploiting the dry, constant-temperature atmosphere. History of many centuries lay before us as we walked the passages.

At the end of one tunnel, we came to a landing overlooking one of the most unbelievable sights I have seen. A huge underground cathedral lay before us. No windows, of course, but the walls and ceiling were ornately carved and the size – well it was akin to other more conventional cathedrals above ground, in all dimensions. Seeing is believing.

The train back to Warsaw that night was crowded, but we found seats and, in our tiredness, we slept much of the way. I was to leave Krys at Warsaw station, so full of admiration for him and grateful for his efforts on my behalf. He never knew the adventure that I was about to embark on with Anton. Nor did Sarah and Pane Kosłowska as I sadly said goodbye to them the next day! I departed from them, complete with freshly-sewn buttons on my leather coat. This would surely confuse all Polish border officials, we joked.

Anton met me and we drove in the old VW to Warsaw station. My train left in the late afternoon. I recall brief glimpses of sunshine as we walked along the platform to my sleeper carriage, the first sunshine I had seen in my month in Warsaw. I thought to myself, *“If I am caught, I can joke that it must have been the glare of the Warsaw sun, after weeks of gloom, that prevented me noticing the map being placed on the top of my open carry-bag.”*

So we parted, me on the Moscow to Paris train for part of its long journey, and Anton on the platform as I pulled away. I was confident that I would see him again.

## Chapter 4: The trip toward Berlin

Australians look at Europe and think that intra-country distances there are trivial, but one is soon conditioned into judging by local standards. By those standards, it is a considerable journey from Warsaw westward toward East Germany. The distance wasn't as great in pre-war days, before Poland was literally shifted west by those that decide lines on maps, the victors.

That night the trip seemed to last forever. Night fell quickly and, after a short chat with the man who shared my sleeping cabin, I climbed into the bed. By agreement I had the lower bunk. The man was a pleasant fellow, a sports journalist who was keen to practice his English. He had been overseas recently to cover the Montreal Olympics and we found some common ground talking about athletics and other sports. He remarked about the high quality of Australian tennis players. I replied, lamenting that they no longer had pre-eminence as a decade earlier. He was able to tell me his opinion about the up-and-coming Australian stars and thought that John Alexander (of no relationship to the recently-discussed "Platz" which weighed on my mind) was heading for the top. I guess that it was still the era when the world expected every Australian player of quality to rise to number one.

In bed, I wondered about the journalist. Should I be cautious of him? He was probably a person trusted by the party, to be chosen to represent the Polish press in Montreal. I was somewhat confused though, about who could travel abroad. Anton and George had both been allowed out for private purposes, albeit without close family members, and they were surely not party hacks. Nevertheless I felt reluctant to leave the compartment for fear that my bags might be inspected. It seemed most unlikely, but the one way to be sure was to forsake any excursion to the buffet car. Evenings without food in Poland had not been rare for me and the small snack in my bag would suffice.

The journalist did however take a break for whatever could be found in the train buffet. He returned in due course, turned off the lights and retired to the upper bunk. The beds were made up so that our heads were at the end near the door to the corridor.

I tried to anticipate the events at the border. Most likely the border officials would come through the train, firstly a Polish crew and then the DDR contingent. Where should I place my open-top bag? It seemed that near the door would be best, so that in the event of a search I might more plausibly claim that the map on the top came from a stranger, perhaps passing down the corridor. I would widen the window of opportunity for someone to deposit their contraband in my bag, to better sustain my lie. In any case, near the door it would be, so that at least I could see it clearly.

For a while I lay awake thinking about the adventure ahead. Presumably the forgeries contained photos, so the absence of anybody on the train resembling Anton or Witek would, of course, act against such an explanation for forged passports in my luggage. If it reached that stage, however, the officials might not be organised enough to search thoroughly for these suspect faces prior to removing me from the train.

Each time that the train stopped, I woke. It was not nervousness that disturbed me. I had settled down and taken a fatalistic view of the hours ahead. I dozed, rather than slept. The cabin was quite dark, except at stations and lit sidings where we occasionally stopped.

When the time came, it was sudden and I had fallen asleep. The door opened and some uniformed men in the passage called out words which included "pass". The light from the corridor shone on my face. My own passport was under the pillow and hence quickly produced. On perusal, the man said some Polish words to me which I didn't understand. He repeated them in German, "*Wie viele Geld haben sie?*"

I anticipated trouble. Would he be seeking to match the sums of foreign currency which I had declared on entry to Poland with the amount I had now? Would he be interested in tallying up the receipts for officially-exchanged money? Could this lead to him finding the wad of US dollars I carried for Anton?

He repeated his question and asked if I understood. I confirmed that I did understand his question and asked "*Nun? Geld ich jetze habe?*"

"*Ja! Natürlich.*"

"*Ah, nur ein oder zwei hundert zlotys.*" I paused wondering if that were enough. Did he want to know about my western money, too?

Thankfully, that was it! He dismissed my token sum of zlotys with a wave of the hand, put some stamp in my passport and returned it to me with a "*Danke*". The other men with him had shown no interest in me or my passport, let alone my swag of false papers or my leather coat and its newly-sewn buttons.

The guard then dealt with the Polish journalist who had a brief conversation making some reference to me being Australian and visiting the "Akademie" in Warszawa.

The door closed and it was dark again. This time I did not doze off; instead I lay wide awake waiting for the turn of the DDR frontier guards. They duly came, but their intrusion was even less of an occasion than the earlier one. They were simply, and thankfully, uninterested in me.

A few hours later at 6am, the train reached East Berlin. I found some food in the station and sat for a while until it was light. Communist states are so grey; the greyness of the sky that morning was a mere blend with the apartment buildings and the pavements as I walked north toward the city centre. There was no need for a map, unattainable in the station at that hour in any case. I have always remembered city layouts from a quick look at maps and the general layout of East Berlin was clearly laid out in my mind from my perusal of Anton's "new" map seen in Warsaw (not the "old" one, of course, which still lay untouched where it had been placed). As I write now, twenty odd years later, I can still visualize the layout of that city, at least as it was then before its eventual amalgamation with West Berlin.

I walked away from the railway station along a long straight boulevard. The city was waking up. Early starters were leaving the apartment blocks on my left. Nobody paid any attention to me despite my suitcase and small bag; my clothing did not set me apart. The leather coat might have been too distinctive, so I wore instead a cheap but warm Polish anorak. The distinctive blue ski-hat was also *not* worn; under no circumstances did I wish to be noticed.

I was alert to possible hiding places for my cache of documents. Despite Anton's advice against hiding the papers, I actually entered one of the apartment blocks through the door left open by a man departing. I looked at the area under the stairs, but saw no hiding place that would give me confidence. So, with papers undisturbed I walked slowly toward the Central Police Station.

It was still very early when I reached this office, but even by then I had realised that the density of men in uniform, police or army, was even higher on the streets of East Berlin than in Warsaw. These uniforms were everywhere.

It was warm inside the Central Police Station, a pleasant relief from outside. The atmosphere was less forbidding than I expected and the service at that hour was more than adequate. I had no difficulty explaining my wish to change my visa to allow an overnight stay, so that I could be a tourist in the East city before leaving. My request caused no ripples and, moreover, could (with the appropriate fee) be organised quickly while I waited.

Whilst my passport was receiving attention, I became embroiled in a small "circus" at the counter. A pleasant woman was having great difficulty explaining what she wanted to the DDR police behind the counter. She turned to me and asked "*Parlez-vous Français?*", to which I made my almost mandatory reply "*Un peu*".

Her French vocabulary and mine combined would not have impressed a four-year old in France, but she did manage to explain to me that she was from Bulgaria and she needed permission to stay a few extra days in DDR. I forget the reason now, but it was uncontroversial and acceptable to the police when I translated in my equally primitive German. It was all a bit humorous, the fact that I, an Australian carrying forged Polish documents, was translating for a Bulgarian in two languages which I hardly understood myself. My general incompetence, yet willingness to help, even brought a smile from the policeman. Eventually the messages were successfully conveyed.

After both our visas were put in order, the Bulgarian woman and I left the Police Station together and walked for five minutes together, just about exhausting our conversation abilities by the time our routes diverged. It was a shame; I would have liked company and she was cheerful, even ebullient, brightening the grey backdrop.

My focus was, however, in finding accommodation. That was easy; I had little choice. As a capitalist, I needed to book into an "international" hotel, paying the high price. My choice, determined somewhat earlier in the Warsaw discussions and confirmed as appropriate with the Berlin Police, was nearby.

So, despite our worries in Warsaw, I found myself checked into accommodation by about 9am on the Tuesday. My dilemma then, as I showered in my hotel room and rested for an hour or so, was the appropriate action with Anton's documents. Should I leave them in my hotel room when going out for a walk or should I carry them on my person? I opted for the latter. It had been impressed upon me, through conversation with Anton and from my 1975 brief period in the DDR, that this was the ultimate "police state". The contacts in the Central Police Station had been cordial, lightened a little by the Bulgarian woman, but I should be under no illusion of a benign system.

All hotels had a person assigned to each floor. Their job was surveillance of the guests on that floor and of their visitors. I had seen similar people in the Bristol Hotel in Warsaw and on the houseboat hotel in Prague. Here in East Berlin, with its greater reputation for rigidity, I feared that my belongings may not have been private when I was out of the hotel. So the old map, with

whatever it contained, was placed in my coat pocket, using gloves which I planned to wear in any case as I walked around.

I had come rapidly to the conclusion that I would *not* keep my appointment that day with the German student, Dieter. For his sake, it would be better not to meet with me. He had said that the noon rendezvous was not out of his way and that, if I didn't turn up, he would understand. So that was how it would be. I think that this is the only appointment so far in my life that I deliberately did not keep.

Unencumbered by luggage, I left the hotel and made my way to Alexander Platz about an hour before the scheduled meeting time with Dieter. The city in that central region was much more modern than Warsaw, with seemingly better facilities, like cafés and snack bars. Food supply seemed good by comparison with Poland.

I saw the tower and planned therefore not to be near it at noon. So I began the anti-clockwise loop that was organised for the next day. I was keen to be prepared and to learn about the timing. It was an easy walk along the right-hand footpath of Unter den Linden. Without effort, and consuming only 15-20 minutes at a leisurely pace, I reached the turning point for tomorrow's loop. The journey back on the other side of the road would take the same time; clearly the loop would easily be completed within the hour allowed for in Anton's plan.

Not wishing to be back in Alexander Platz at noon, I walked on, now simply sightseeing. The boulevard came to the famous Brandenburg Gate and I could see the West Berlin continuation through the gaps between pillars. Russian soldiers patrolled the gate on the East side. It was a symbolic gate only, not one used for transit, it seemed. The "wall", with its manned watch-towers loomed high on either side.

I walked to the left, off the main boulevard into a more derelict region. Winding back eastward, its dereliction turned into the sight that all tourists remember -- the bombed out buildings still blackened and in ruin from the war. The streets, with these one-time grand buildings, were deserted as I walked. There was nobody, not even a policeman or soldier.

The rest of the day passed with only one incident that I recall. I stopped for lunch at a café and got into conversation with another non-local person, a Peruvian man who spoke English. He had asked me for help in ordering food. Initially happy at the company, and moreover interested to meet someone from South America in Berlin, I soon found his conversation to be somewhat perverted and unpleasant. Eventually, I gave him the slip, but not without

some deception and fleetness of foot. He had not taken civilised hints to leave me alone.

Night fell and so did I – into the hotel bed, rather tired. Whilst I slept, Anton and Witek would be travelling, hopefully to join me the next day.

## Chapter 5: The Wednesday

I slept well and awoke rested and hungry for breakfast. Anton would be here now, I thought as I ate in the hotel.

I settled my departure from the room and arranged to leave my bags in the hotel's office. Nothing controversial was left inside. The documents were once again in my jacket as I left for the 10am start of my circuit. The weather was gloomy and very cold, with light rain. I needed the blue woollen ski hat for warmth as well as recognition.

Without haste I reached Alexander Platz just before 10am and started walking slowly. By now the rain had turned to snowflakes which, with no wind, made it more pleasant. Visibility was low but there was no difficulty in seeing clearly the people coming toward me on the footpath as I walked westward down Unter den Linden.

I reached the turning point halfway down the boulevard and crossed to the opposite footpath, taking great care not to miss Anton should he too be crossing at that moment. He is not a person who is easily missed but I was simply cautious in the heavy snow. Slowly I proceeded back in an easterly direction but with no luck. I completed the circuit without contact.

After a small meander to fill in ten minutes, I commenced the circuit again at 11am. A short distance into the walk, I noticed a man whom I had seen on the first circuit. He was coming toward me. The possibility that this was Witek occurred to me, but I dismissed this since he should have been moving anti-clockwise like I was and this man's path was consistent with a clockwise tour. Could there be a mix-up?

The snow began to accumulate on the ground, making the city bright where previously there had only been grey. There were many people out and about, but their footsteps could no longer be heard. All was quiet.

I became anxious as the second circuit neared the halfway mark. Still Anton had not appeared. The road was crossed and I slowly lost hope as I walked back toward Alexander Platz. He had not kept the rendezvous.

This time, on my return to the tower base, I entered the interior waiting room removing my ski hat to shake off the snow. Back on my head it was the beacon for Witek, if he were there. I would probably also be noticed by the dozen or so policemen in the circular room, some ten metres in radius.

Sure enough, within a minute I was approached by a man of medium height wearing a padded brown jacket, not the man I had passed twice on Unter den Linden. This new man had dark hair and features. His approach was not furtive and I guessed that he wanted to create the impression that we were friends.

He spoke in German as he had limited English. Yet words were not important initially. There was an unspoken bond brought about by our common adventure, and now, by our common concerns. He suggested that we go outside and walk to the car which he had parked some distance away.

As we walked he relayed his worry that Anton had been caught, that the forgeries to get him out of Poland had failed. Firstly though, we must check at the station to see if his train had arrived. It had been due at 6am, like mine the day before.

We stopped for coffee and a light lunch en route to the car. I reasoned that Witek's own situation was still fairly secure even if Anton had been caught. He had crossed into DDR legally in the VW and, even though the Polish authorities must have known of an association between them, it was possible that all evidence linking him to a forging conspiracy had been removed. I didn't know really, but he was very worried for Anton, and perhaps for himself. Certainly the prospect of a failed venture after so much planning was on his mind.

The snow had ceased when we came out from the café. Back at the car, we travelled along the slushy roads to the railway station. He parked and asked me to stay in the car whilst he enquired. A few minutes later he emerged from the station and, by the spring in his step, I knew that he conveyed good news.

*“The train was delayed for five hours! It has arrived, but around 11 o'clock. I am relieved.”*

The relief showed on both our faces as we smiled. Witek started the car and we drove away from the station. The next stop was my hotel, to retrieve my bags. This duly done we drove back toward the location where he had parked earlier. A parking place found, we sat quietly in the car for some time. I gave Witek all the documents and Anton's US dollar bundle. He opened the old map and showed them to me. This was the first time I had actually seen the forgeries.

The next stage of the plan would then take place. Witek would do the 3pm circuit alone, whilst I would wait. About 2:30pm we left the car and walked to a building on Unter den Linden. Witek and I found a coffee shop, part of a

hotel foyer if I recall, where we ordered a warm drink. As 3pm neared, he left me.

I sat for a long time, a little tense in some ways wondering if Anton would be found, yet relaxed in others now that my package of elicited documents had been passed on.

At around 4pm, the tall figure of Anton entered the coffee lounge with Witek at his side. We embraced. No words were spoken for a long time. A quiet triumph encircled us as we sat in a small area of the lounge. Eventually more coffee was ordered. Anton told how the train had broken down for five hours in Poland. He had just sat there -- they had reasoned that a seat in a crowded compartment was the best strategy for Anton's journey -- and was exhausted when he finally reached Berlin. The forged documents to get him out of Poland had been a resounding success.

The sad moment of my leaving was now upon us. In many ways I wanted to stay with them and share the adventure that lay ahead. Yet I must go. On this occasion, Anton remained in the café -- he needed food -- whilst Witek drove me to a station where I could catch a "suburban" train to the East-West checkpoint. The irony and injustice, of me simply walking onto a train and emerging a short time later in the West a privilege denied to them, struck me.

Before leaving Anton, I told him that I would be meeting my wife and daughter in early December whereupon we planned to stay in the Austrian alps for about a month. I promised to write to the Australian Embassy in Vienna to leave my address should he need to contact me or want somewhere to stay. We spoke as if his eventual success was guaranteed. Prior to the meeting with my family, I had planned some touring in the northern parts of Germany alone. He felt it likely that he would escape within a few days, or not at all.

I left Anton in the café and Witek a few minutes later at the "metro" station. I carried Anton's Hewlett Packard calculator; at the last minute he had asked me to be its custodian for him.

The train that I caught only went a couple of stops before all passengers -- only about ten of us -- alighted. We moved to one end of the platform and into the border check-point. The arrangement of counters and corridors confused me a little and so I came to the actual checking area with tentativeness. I don't know if this behaviour aroused suspicions, but I was subjected to a scrutiny like no other at the DDR exit barrier. I was asked to remove my hat and empty my pockets. One man then requested that I hold a card over one half of my face whilst he studied in detail the uncovered half, comparing it to my

passport. The procedure was repeated with halves reversed. My bags were opened and contents searched. I was frisked. My passport was given close examination.

The process at the DDR barrier came to an end and I entered the next phase at the BRD gate, a more casual affair. Passengers then boarded a train on the West side. I was free! My colleagues were not.

A few stops down the line, at Charlottenburg, I alighted. Carrying my bags, I checked into a cheap but adequate hotel. Sleeping was not a problem that night.

## Chapter 6: Interlude

My working trip to Warsaw was at the end of my period of employment in Adelaide. I had resigned from my job there and was due to start in a new Sydney-based post in March. It had always been intended, as I left my family in Kuala Lumpur for the stay in Poland, that my wife and daughter would rejoin me at some stage for a short European holiday in the Austrian mountains. A small apartment in a slightly less fashionable village could be let for an extended stay at good rates. Meal costs could be contained with one's own kitchen and some walking and skiing could be combined with normal life, choosing the best weather or least crowded days to be on the mountain. For me, life in a mountain town, with lots of exercise and crisp air, created a marvellous environment for mathematical writing and research. I had once before written a paper whilst on a mountain holiday. This time, some of my time was to be invested in another research paper.

So, when I awoke in Charlottenburg, my thoughts turned to some necessary arrangements for my family to join me for a stay in Austria. I rang my wife at her KL home from the hotel and she informed me of the exact time of her arrival at Frankfurt in West Germany. I didn't speak at length on my recent journey out of Poland, though I indicated it had been eventful.

My first practical matter was money for my own expenses, now that I had emerged from the shelter of my Polish stipend into the expensive West. I had a few Deutschmarks in cash and two bank drafts carried with me from Adelaide. Credit cards had been something I resisted back in those days. They were not especially common in Australia, certainly not as in the US; we simply used cash and cheques in our day-to-day life back home. In travelling, I had had considerable experience using banker's drafts, with no difficulty and with less exchange-rate commissions.

On this occasion, I had carried two quite sizable drafts issued by my Australian bank, one drawn on a German bank in marks and the other on an Austrian bank in schillings. They were to finance our holiday.

So after a long sleep-in, from emotional exhaustion I expect, I headed on that Thursday for a branch of the particular German bank. I presented my draft to the teller but was informed that it could not be honoured. This was a shock. I insisted that I had, on two earlier occasions in West Germany, cashed this type of draft at branches of their bank. Still there was refusal. I asked to speak with a more senior person. Politely I was told that, for encashment of the bank draft, it must be sent to Munich. Either I could travel myself to Munich, or indeed anywhere else in the genuinely western part of West Germany, or they

could send the draft for me. That would take quite a few days, especially with the weekend looming.

I could not accept this advice, but did not argue. Instead I walked down the street to a branch of the appropriate Austrian bank to cash my draft in schillings. That was a nuisance, of course, incurring unwanted exchange commissions from schillings to marks and then, later, back to schillings. But it was the only solution to the problem. I didn't have enough cash to pay my hotel bill and buy the rail ticket to West Germany proper. Actually, I had been presented by the hotel management with an outrageous bill for the international phone call I had made earlier that day. That added expense had made me technically insolvent. I felt sure I had been cheated on the phone bill.

It was thus a matter of some seriousness when the Austrian bank also refused to honour my draft. As before, they were prepared to send the draft to their head office, this time in Vienna, if I could wait on the reply.

I was in trouble! Where does one turn in such situations? My thoughts, influenced by my enquiries on Australian embassies in Warsaw, turned to assistance from my own government. I had already learnt that the Australian Embassy for DDR was in East Berlin, but that there existed a representative of Australia in West Berlin. (Naturally, the Australian Embassy for West Germany was in distant Bonn.)

The telephone book gave me the address of this representative office. It was a kind of military attaché. Not optimistic, I walked to the building on the far side of town where the attaché was located. I spoke to an Australian man there. As one might expect, he could not assist. I had hoped that they might have the authority to "bail out" citizens in difficulties. I offered to lodge all manner of security for any cash advance that might get me out of Berlin to the West. He was unable to help.

He did explain to me why I had reached this impasse. *"You must understand that Berlin is a unique city. West Berlin is just a small island set in a communist state. We are surrounded by a wall, as I am sure you have seen. The big problem here is forgery. This is the forging capital of the world. Some people in West Berlin make big profits forging documents for Easterners to cross. There are also syndicates in the East too. So nobody here in West Berlin trusts any documents. The banks also know that cheques and money are forged too. The standard pattern is that passports are forged for somebody and some cheques as well, to give the illicit holder some pocket money for a trip out of Berlin. That is the source of your problem."*

Oh, dear! Irony upon irony! Hoist on one's own petard! I almost smiled as I left him, thinking that perhaps Anton, upon his escape to Italy, would have to come back to Berlin and use his forging skills to rescue me.

I sat in a small park and took stock of my resources. I had cash, sufficient for basic food for a while so long as I avoided restaurants and cafés. I could buy bread, fruit and cheese for a few days. My hotel tariff included breakfast.

Since I was already at the mercy of the hotel should they ask for payment, it seemed irrelevant if the bill grew still more. I would simply stay on at the hotel and hope that I would not be asked for settlement. I would not, however, make any more telephone calls to exacerbate my predicament.

So some plan emerged. I would stay in Charlottenburg and hope to be lucky. The next day -- it was already too late on that Thursday for a return across town on foot to the bank -- I would again plead with the German bank. If unsuccessful, which seemed likely, I would give them the draft so that it could be physically sent to Munich, as they had insisted was necessary.

Friday came, breakfast on credit was eaten and, with calories on board, I embarked on my journey to the bank, on foot of course. I gave my sorry story at the bank, somewhat sanitized. I did not tell them that my part-time role in life was as courier of forged documents for Polish émigrés! Pleasantly, but firmly, my request for special consideration was denied, as I expected. So I left the bank draft with them and departed.

One can only walk up and down Kurfurstendamm, glamorous street though it be, a limited number of times before boredom sets in. Absence of money to spend, except according to a strict budget, doesn't help either. The cold of late November pushed me inside wherever the space to walk was free of charge.

I made two budgetary decisions. One was to buy a novel in a second-hand book shop which stocked a handful of English titles. I purchased "Paradise Lost" by Sumner Locke Elliot, to my surprise set in Sydney and the nearby Blue Mountains. The second decision, and a most successful one, was an investment in "table money" at the Berlin Bridge Club. For an affordable sum, I could play in a duplicate bridge tournament, lasting for 3-4 hours. I had located the club and, as is usually the case in bridge clubs worldwide, was accepted as a casual visitor. A partner was lined up and I played. It was warm inside and enjoyable as I learnt to bid and play the cards in a new language.

The days passed. My novel kept me going for a while. I ate heartily at breakfasts -- at least as much as one can with the "continental" version offered at my hotel -- and relied on picnic snacks purchased in supermarkets at other

times. I also had some company at breakfast time; a troop of dancers had arrived from Britain to perform at a nightclub on the main strip. The girls were pretty and I sat with them on some occasions. Their habit was to sleep in the day and perform all night. We overlapped only at breakfast.

Overall I spent eight days in Berlin. On some days I played bridge in the club and on others merely walked around looking at sights, especially those which gave the city its character: the wall; the crosses and wreaths at various places where young men and women had been shot attempting to get into West Berlin; the bombed church, unrestored not through poverty but for symbolic purposes; the parliament building, the Reichstadt, where Hitler had abolished German democracy in the thirties; the Brandenburg gate seen from the other side; "checkpoint Charlie" of spy-thriller fame; the zoo and the many lakes. On each day I would call at the bank to receive their increasingly-heartfelt apology at the long delay. So much for German efficiency!

The bridge playing was a life-saver. I became adept at calling for the *koenigs* and *bubels* and with the quaint French-influenced bidding, "*ein sans atour*". On my third tournament I was paired for the afternoon with an excellent player who had represented Germany. Unlike my previous partners, he spoke English. The confusion of constantly switching from one language to another, combined with the fact that I was in fact undernourished – indeed half starving as the budget for food was running low – led to a mediocre result and disappointment at not playing well with such a good partner.

I was due to meet my wife and daughter on December the 3rd in Frankfurt. It had originally been intended that I might do some organisation for our Austrian holiday, but that had been foregone. Thankfully, the clearance from the bank arrived just in time for me to travel by train and meet them, with one day to spare. Equally thankfully, indeed desperately so, the hotel never asked for payment during my stay. When the money arrived, I settled, moved out and caught the train to Frankfurt-am-Main, firstly along the fenced and guarded train corridor in the DDR countryside and then finally through rural BRD.

The family was reunited and I was relieved. We had our holiday, in the small village of Kirchberg. My daughter attended an Austrian kindergarten and sang German-language songs. We walked her to school in 'minus 32' degree early-morning temperatures. We had a "white Christmas", saddened only by the absence of Tim, still a little baby and with his Chinese grandma in Kuala Lumpur. I waited for word from Anton but none came. It was to be a couple of years before I heard of his fate.

## Chapter 7: Finale

The family packed up in Kirchberg after the holiday and travelled south. A bus trip took us through grand peaks to southern Austria, trains carried us via Italy's Tyrol district to Rome, whence buses deposited us in Brindisi on Italy's east coast. From there, a ship plies the Adriatic Sea to Patris on the Greek coast. After a few days in Greece, and the dreaded long flight that Australians must endure, we lodged in Sydney. I returned to Adelaide to arrange transport of our furniture and my wife remained in Sydney to lease a house and receive the said furniture.

Time passed. We stayed a year in one house, bought another and moved. We both took up new jobs.

Then one day a letter reached me, re-addressed from my old Adelaide employer. The letterhead said:

### **AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION - LONDON**

I read the body of the letter with anticipation.

13th March 1978

Richard Cowan, Esq.  
c/- Flinders University,  
Bedford Park,  
South Australia 5042,  
Australia.

Dear Mr. Cowan,

I hope that at some stage Anthony Tolecki would have mentioned my name to you because for the purposes of this letter it is rather important that you should know of me.

As an Australian Migration Officer on posting in Rome from 1969 until 1972 I was responsible for Anthony's migration to Australia in the first instance. Later, before his ill-fated return to Poland, I was also responsible for making him an Australian citizen before his departure from our country.

Before leaving Australia Anthony left certain personal papers with me and before actually entering Poland returned his Australian passport to me for safe keeping. During his period of freedom within Poland we were in constant contact through the good offices of a colleague of mine in the Australian Embassy. I consequently knew of his attempts to once again quit Poland and, in fact, on the eve of his attempted departure on the 23rd November 1976 he deposited with my colleague at the Australian Embassy a sealed parcel of personal papers. That colleague, at the end of his posting and on the eve of his return to Australia, sent that parcel of papers to me for safe keeping.

I had arranged with Tony that whenever he made his first landfall in the West he should send me a cablegramme. It did not matter what it said, the place of origin was to be the clue to the message I was hoping to receive. When no such cablegramme had been received within a few days of the attempted departure I feared the worst. In due course I obtained information from the Australian Embassy that Anthony was in prison in Warsaw and that nobody had been allowed to see him.

Following my posting to London for three years in May 1977 I approached Amnesty International to ask whether there was anything they might be able to do to assist. Unfortunately, I had too little information to give them in the first instance. For example; because I had been corresponding with Anthony through the Embassy I did not have even his former residential address in Warsaw. Thinking the matter over I decided that desperate situations requiring desperate measures I would open the personal papers which I had in my safe keeping in the hope that more information of the type which Amnesty International needed might be found in them. The exercise indeed proved most helpful, if somewhat disturbing, for amongst other things I found Tony's diary which gave a clear picture of the sort of turmoil he went through leading up to his attempted escape.

In his entry for Tuesday 16th November 1976 he mentions his extraordinary chance encounter with you, and your agreement to change your travelling arrangements to go to Berlin and carry the documents with you.

Amnesty International intend, as a starting point, merely to try to ascertain if Tony has been brought to trial (which they think most likely because Polish law provides that prisoners may not be held

for more that 13 months without trial) and if so, with what he has been charged and what sentence may have been passed. The expert with whom I have been dealing suggests that three possibilities exist. Firstly (and most unlikely), he may have been charged with attempted illegal departure. Secondly (and most hopefully), he may have been charged with attempted illegal departure in association with false documentation. Thirdly (and apparently a distinct possibility in all cases), he may have been charged with espionage.

I know about the forgery of the documents from the contents of the diary. What nobody seems to know at the moment, and what Amnesty International think might be useful to know, is where he was actually arrested. As, from the information I now have from his diary, it appears that the attempted border crossing was to be made in Berlin, Amnesty International think that he was probably arrested by the East Germans and that he may well still be held by them.

It could possibly be of assistance if you could throw any more light on this aspect; i.e. can you confirm or otherwise that the attempted border crossing was to be made in Berlin\*\*?

I have used the official letterhead of this High Commission to help authenticate my identity. (A telephone call to the Department of Immigration & Ethnic Affairs, Adelaide should also bring ready verification that I am a South Australian, and an Immigration Officer of 29 years standing). However, this letter is in no way official; because of my position my interest and efforts on Anthony's behalf must necessarily remain strictly personal.

Yours sincerely,

(G.K. HAMPTON)

P.S. Since dictating this letter I realise that the suggestion at \*\* above conflicts with the earlier information I obtained that Tony is, or was, held in Warsaw. However, I would be grateful to hear anything you may know which might be useful.

One can imagine that I was upset by this news, though, since I had heard nothing from Anton in the intervening years, I had feared the worst.

On one occasion, I had written to Jerzy, my friend and scientific collaborator in Poland. He had been my host during the 1975 visit, but had been away

from Warsaw on my more eventful 1976 sojourn. Fishing for information, yet unable to say anything which may compromise Jerzy, I concluded the letter with “*Give my regards to ...*” followed by a long list of mutual acquaintances. I included “Anton” on the list, hoping for a discreet reply which gave me an equally oblique hint as to his whereabouts. Nothing came of that exercise.

Mr Hampton was to write another letter very soon after, before I could reply to the first.

17th March 1978

Dear Mr. Cowan,

Further to my long letter of the 13th March this short one is simply to relate the wonderful news that I today received a letter from Tony Tolecki. He was released one week ago as a result of an amnesty, but he remains on probation until the 28th February 1979.

I am sure you will be pleased, as I am, by the news.

Yours sincerely,

(G.K. HAMPTON)

I wrote my reply.

18th April 1978

Dear Mr. Hampton,

I was both pleased and disappointed to receive your letters dated 13th and 17th March; pleased to hear some news about Anton<sup>2</sup> but disappointed at the fact that he is still in Poland. The Australian mail strike delayed your letters considerably, the delay being compounded slightly by my change of address.

Now that Anton is no longer in jail, some of the information that I enclose in this letter may be necessary no longer. However I think that I can provide you with some additional facts. In the days leading up to the crossing from Poland to East Germany,

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<sup>2</sup> I have written ‘Anton’, here, because that is his real name and the name I used to address him. But actually, my reply to Mr Hampton used ‘Tony’ and ‘Anthony’ as he had done.

Anton told me many things about his plans, but time was of the essence, and a number of facts which were not essential for me to know were not conveyed to me.

As you probably know, there was another Polish man involved in the attempted escape. I did not meet him in Poland, nor did I learn his name; but I spent about five hours with him in East Berlin on the 24th November. It would be valuable to find out his fate. It is almost certain that he crossed to East Germany on genuine papers. He drove an old grey VW sedan to East Berlin on the morning of 24th November. Anton crossed into East Germany by train on the same day (not 23rd, as was originally intended). I travelled with some papers by train, arriving in East Berlin on the morning of 23rd and spent one night in East Berlin before going to West Berlin about 5pm on 24th November. I was due to meet Anton at about 11am on the 24th but he did not arrive. Instead I made contact with his friend. After some very anxious moments we went back to the railway station to discover with relief that Anton's train was 5 hours late. Anton arrived at our meeting place about 4pm. We did not say much but all seemed well. The three of us had a cup of coffee in a very modern coffee bar in a very modern six or seven storey building on Unter den Linden about half way between Alexander Platz and the Brandenburg gate. I left Anton at this place and was driven by the friend to a railway station. I caught the train to West Berlin.

As far as I know, their plan was as follows. That evening they would travel out of Berlin in the VW and stay at a hotel in the countryside. The friend was then to drive back to Poland (for reasons which are unknown to me) and then return to collect Anton. Although the friend still had a legal right to cross between Poland and DDR (which Anton did not!) neither could legally travel to the other Eastern European countries. It was their intention to travel on forged papers to Czechoslovakia from East Germany, a common occurrence for Poles (the travelling not the forging). Anton, who already had a false name, was to change names again in DDR prior to crossing to Czechoslovakia and his friend would also start to use a false name. I do not know exactly how they planned to match their exit documents from DDR with their DDR entry documents. My guess is that the friend left his forging equipment in Poland, returned to prepare some stamps and proposed to rejoin Anton with valid "forged" DDR entry documents under new names.

They planned to travel to Prague and (as a first exploration) learn about air tickets to Bucharest. The Prague-Bucharest flight stops at Belgrade where Anton hoped to claim Australian citizenship with the help of his Australian passport (that the embassy would soon have). I don't know if his friend would attempt something similar. He could speak German quite well but not English. I guess that both would carry no Polish identity and speak English and German respectively to confuse the situation long enough to involve the Australian embassy. It seems most optimistic but feasible. In any case, I think they only had this idea as a fallback.

They had the appropriate forgeries for travel to Hungary and Rumania where other options for escape could be attempted first. (For Poles, one "passport" suffices for travel to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania & Bulgaria; additional documents are needed for Yugoslavia and no documents apart from the citizen's identity card are needed for DDR.) So after the Prague sojourn, they would quickly travel on to Budapest and repeat the air-ticket exercise, mainly for information at this stage. Certain Budapest-Sofia flights stop at Belgrade.

Their primary plan was to travel by car into Rumania and, with forged Polish seamen's papers, try to board a ship. I think that they also had some contacts in Hungary where they were to investigate the chances of a direct Hungary-Yugoslavia or Rumania-Yugoslavia crossing. From Yugoslavia it is easy to get out to Trieste without passing through checkpoints.

The whole plan seemed very optimistic and, in its final stages, rather vague. However the vagueness is due in part to my lack of information. I must say that the forgeries were very good to my untrained eye, and good enough to get to DDR.

Certain mystery still remains; I wonder if you have any further information concerning

- the fate of the friend,
- the date of arrest,
- the information that the Poles might have about my role, and
- your suggestion that they tried to cross directly from DDR to BRD.

I also wonder if the Australian government can take some initiative in securing Anton's release from Poland. I know that Australia has been unable to help so far because Anton entered Poland on Polish papers. Surely some efforts can be made to help him. The Polish government must see him as a liability by now and, with the appropriate persuasion, might release him.

I would appreciate any further information that comes to hand. Also, if you are in Sydney at any stage, I would be glad of the opportunity to meet you. I hope that this letter is of some help.

Yours sincerely,  
Richard Cowan

Nearly four years passed before more news arrived. In that time, Poland lurched from crisis to crisis. The Gdansk strikes had grown and the Solidarity movement extended its influence beyond the Gdansk shipyards. With the support of the Church, more than half of the Polish people supported Lech Wałęsa and his "Solidarnosc" movement.

Toward the end of 1981, Marshall Law was declared by the beleaguered Polish Government. Then, out of the blue, a letter arrived.

Perth, 25th February 1982

Dear Richard,

Do you remember I owe you a dinner & champagne? Well, I've never forgotten that, and it's going to be a great pleasure to stand by my word now that I am at last back in Australia. I also owe you a detailed account of what happened in those dramatic days in November 1976, when you helped me so much, and in the months that followed. To write everything in a letter, however, would be a task which I am afraid I would not be equal to; will you forgive me, therefore, if I restrict myself to the main events and reserve the rest until we meet?

After you left East Berlin (24th Nov), Witek (my friend "accomplice") went back to Poland to collect some luggage and returned to Berlin next morning. The documents he used were genuine and valid for all Eastern Block countries (but not for Yugoslavia). I entered DDR under a false name and after that I used yet another set of documents. We crossed the

DDR/Czechoslovak border on the 26th November, the first test for my documents. They worked perfectly. After a night in a hotel in Prague, we drove on to Bratislava and made an unnecessary and rather foolish attempt to cross to Austria, using our sailor's cards (mine was false again). We were lucky the border guards did not take us seriously. The same night we crossed to Hungary and spent a day and the following night in Budapest, searching for contacts which would enable us to beat the iron curtain there. All we learned was that Hungarian borders with the west were particularly sensitive at the time. We decided to move on to Rumania, and again my documents worked perfectly. Now it was time to furnish our papers with additional stamps required for the crossing of the Rumanian/Yugoslav border. By then, alas, the ease with which we were moving about dulled our prudence. Instead of taking our time and preparing ourselves with utmost care for the crucial step, we decided to do it on the march. We stopped at a hotel in a small border town of Timisoara for 5 hours, did the job (we had all the requisites with us), and - according to our original plan - left the car and took a train to Belgrade. We passed the passport check successfully, but then, least expected, a Rumanian custom officer raised alarm and called back the border guards. They rechecked our documents and, as a result, we were helped out of the train and escorted to a Border Guard station. We were quite shocked when we were told that one little stamp was missing from our documents. In a hurry we had forgotten about it! How angry I was with myself, you can imagine. That mistake was to cost me 5 years. What happened next is easy to guess: on closer examination, the Rumanians discovered that the documents were forged. After two nights at the station, we were taken by train to Bucharest. There, at the railway station, we made a crazy escape bid which even long after would give me creeps whenever I thought about it. As the train pulled at the Bucharest terminal, handcuffs were taken off our hands so that we could carry our luggage. Once out of the car, having marched a 100 yards towards Railway Police Station, we suddenly dropped our suitcases on the platform and sprinted to the exits, in different directions. I made it to a street and managed to be free for another 20 minutes. It ended up at a gun point half a mile away. I was beaten to a mummy, taken back to the Railway Police (Witek was already there) and then to the airport. Two days later Polish security men arrived from Warsaw and we were flown back to Poland.

They put us in the famous Pavilion 3 of the Rakowiecka (street) Prison (Warsaw), in separate cells of course. There followed 5 months of interrogation, several hours almost every day. Initially I was charged with espionage, which rather terrified me. Eventually, however, they gave it up and I was only sentenced to 2 year gaol term for illegal border crossing with false documents. Your role was never disclosed, although they know you had met me in Warsaw.

Due to an amnesty, I served only 15 months and was released on probation in February 1978. The first thing I did after I left prison was to apply for permission to return to Australia, which opened a new large chapter in my "relationship" with the regime, a long, cyclic process of perpetual defeat, a nerve-wrecking experience, with a culmination in late 1979 when I was told I would never go even as close as DDR - after I refused to become their informer.

How I was eventually let out of Poland is a separate and in fact a very tragic story. A few months after I left prison I got engaged with an Australian girl, whom I had known in 1973-75 in Lae, PNG. We decided to marry as soon as possible and started the necessary formalities. Michelle visited me in Poland in the spring 1979. However, it took another two years before we actually could get married - Michelle's divorce had to be legalized in Polish Law (took 1.5 years) and then again a court had to issue permission for marriage by proxy. The marriage ceremony finally took place in July 81. Four months later, on December 3rd, I was refused a passport to join my wife in Australia. And on the 13th of December, as you know, martial law was imposed in Poland and the borders were shut for all, except some very special cases like e.g. death or grave illness of the next of kin. You may now be guessing what happened. On the 31st of December the International Red Cross (the only communication link with Poland at the time) delivered this shock message to me that my wife was killed in Port Moresby. Later I was to find that Michelle was shot by a man who had fallen madly in love with her; the man then committed suicide.

On the grounds of the Red Cross message I applied for a passport. On the 13th of January I was handed a written refusal. Quite incredibly, the decision was changed on the 14th and I left for Rome on the 18th. A few days later, with the help of the

Australian Embassy in Rome and some men of goodwill, I reached Perth and travelled on to Port Moresby.

Now I am back in Perth, trying to organize myself and start a new life. I am fortunate to have been offered a virtually unlimited hospitality in the home of Michelle's aunt, Mrs. Johnson, and I'll be staying here until I can manage on my own, which I hope won't take very long. For a start I have been lucky to get some part-time teaching at the University of WA. I simply walked into Prof. Reed's (Maths Head) office and asked for a job. There were no vacancies but a few hours of tutorials were still available. It's not much but always a start.

In this connection, Richard, do you still have the HP calculator you were so kind to take out of Poland for me? I need one urgently for my classes, so if you still have it, could you please send it to me? And tell me what the postage would be so that I can send you a cheque?

Of course I realize that it may be too late for me to pursue an academic career, particularly after the break of several years I spent in Poland, and so I am thinking of a few other things as well. In fact, after all those years of struggle and now after Michelle's death it would be my dearest wish to do something towards helping others who find themselves in difficulties such as I have experienced. With this in mind I have approached the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and will also try to find out if I could be of any use in the UN High Commission for Refugees.

Well, the future will show what my lot will be. Meanwhile I will have some rather complicated legal matters to attend to, concerning Michelle's bequests, especially as her relatives here are very much divided, to put it gently, in their attitude towards me.

So, this is the story, Richard, I'll tell you a great deal more when we meet, the only thing that worries me is that I can't go now to Sydney to see you, but I will do my best to make it in as near future as possible.

Until then, with best regards to you and your family, wishing you good health and all prosperity.

I remain yours ever,

Anton

As things turned out, we didn't meet again. At the time I wrote back to him, of course, sending the HP calculator (minus its charger which I had lost) and expressing my joy at hearing from him --- and sadness at what had happened. He replied soon afterwards, but we did not come together as we might have.

Perth, 6th April 1982

Dear Richard,

I have little hope for this letter and my very best wishes to you and your family to reach you before Easter, but please accept them even if they're late. Time has been running like mad for me in the last month and before I knew where I was, already a few weeks elapsed since your reply to my letter. Your letter came on the 17th March and I had a good laugh reading it. As time goes by, one tends to think of the past events more and more humorously, even if those events did not seem funny at all at the time they occurred. Your enforced stay of 9 days in West Berlin falls in this category, and I liked the best your going to play bridge while you were not able to pay your hotel. By the way, I hope we have a good game of bridge one day. Did I tell you I had won the 1974 national championship of PNG? (playing precision). Returning to your letter, I have recently been in touch with Geoff Hampton, he is in Canberra now, retired just a month ago, will be moving to Adelaide soon. He told me about his communication with you back in 1978 and said he felt guilty for not having replied to your letter. Jerzy Raczyk, yes, I bumped into him once - it was only last September - but he never mentioned you and neither did I, I don't think he would associate the name "Anton" with me.

Richard, it's been uncommonly kind of you to ask me if I needed any money. Thank you very much for your offer, but I'm managing all right, I had a few odd thousand in the bank here waiting for me, and I'm also earning a little now. Much too little I suppose for all those hours at marking students' papers, nearly a hundred every week, drives me mad. I have 9 hours tutorials per week, hope to reduce this number next term and eventually stop this slave labour altogether. There's a chance, Terry Reed says (I've given him your regards), I could join a small informal group likely to emerge in the Maths Department in a few months which

will engage in processing, analysis and interpretation of seismic data, sort of consulting for big exploration business. A very applied mathematics, a lot of geophysics in it, but also harmonic analysis, which I used to specialise in. There's a great deal I've got to learn - in a very short time - before I can start working on some projects, so I'm doing my homework like mad, and also taking a computer course. Have nothing to lose, and if I make it, it'll be a very interesting job and good money. Will see what comes out of it.

Richard, thank you for sending me the HP, it came intact. I hope you'll understand that I cannot take your cheque, you've kept the calculator for me for so many years, how could I then. So please take it back.

There's a good chance I'll be in Sydney in a couple of months and I will be happy to see you then.

Again my best wishes to you and your family.

Anton

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So that was Anton's world until ... .

**Epilogue:** The story rested in my computer for many years until, in 2006, I had the opportunity to give a printed version to Anton, handing it to him in person during a visit I made to Perth.

The act of returning his story to him, might have been the wrong thing to do, I felt, but he was appreciative – and I was relieved.

Anton has made a new life and has married again, to Barbara, a woman who also comes from Poland. I stayed in the home of Anton and Barbara on that trip to Perth. It was a joyous occasion. The bond that Anton and I formed back in 1976, hadn't diminished with the passing of time.

Nor had my rapport with Polish kitchens. I displayed my cooking skills to Barbara, not by the steaming of stale bread as is my usual way with Polish women, but by baking a wheat-free orange and almond cake in her oven.

I have urged Anton to write the real story of 1976, but I think he just wants the peace and love of his new world.

Richard Cowan  
June 2013.