

stranger in John Foyster
stranger lands GUFF 1979

Travellin' Fan

Europe, and What we did there

It isn't always the case that things work out the way you plan them. Several times in the next couple of weeks the truth of this off-the-cuff thought was brought home to us.

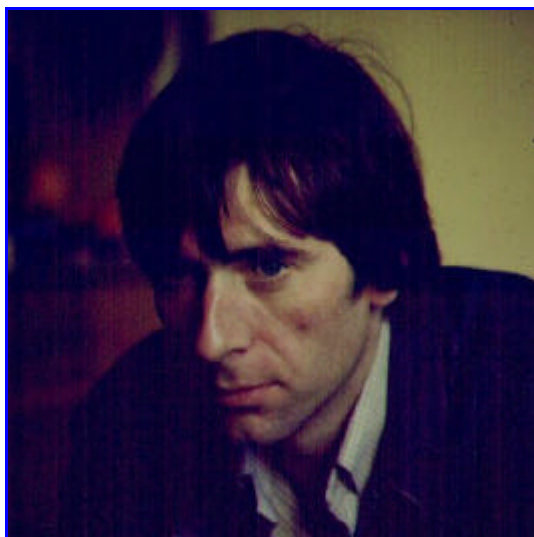
My plan to attend the German science fiction convention in Unterwössen in Bavaria was abandoned because Jennifer's friend in Basel was having more than the usual amount of trouble with her boyfriend — a telephone call during the week established that he was now into hitting, and we all thought that some visitors from outside might calm things down. As well as that, the details I had about how to get to the convention seemed, in the cold light of day, to be shy of a few crucial facts.

So we planned to visit Liz in Basel, then travel on to visit Franz Rottensteiner in Vienna, then wind our ways back to England via Venice, Florence and Paris. That didn't work out either.

What did work out was my back-up plan; to visit Cherry Wilder and Horst Grimm in Langen, in the event that things in Basel weren't too bad. On the Friday afternoon — the last Friday in August 1979, though I did not think about the significance of this at the time, and you are possibly wondering what it is too — we were to arrive in Basel.

That meant catching the boat-train on the Thursday night. Here was another cultural shock; as Australians we had read about boat-trains, but I at least didn't appreciate just what that meant. Jennifer, in fact, very much had the advantage of me over the next couple of weeks, for she had travelled in Europe in 1976.

Our immediate problem was solved, however, by the much-travelled Chris Priest, who drove us to Victoria in time to catch a train not long before midnight — and a last-minute job it proved to be, too, for it took rather longer than anyone had expected.



As always, Chris delivered the goods (two tired Australians, in this case). I remember nothing of the train trip, except for the crowding, and rather more of the boat trip, which was on a ferry which seemed wider than it was long.

It was certainly not one of the apprentice submarines in which more recent capitalists seem to specialize. There wasn't much chance to sleep — the change to the boat at Dover occurs at around 1 a.m., and the boat trip is only about five hours — but not much chance to do

anything else either. All the same, I slept better than Jennifer did.

We were surprisingly bright, I thought, just before six in the morning when we had to change to the train to Brussels, which also involved getting our Eurail passes stamped. The train was uncrowded (indeed, it wasn't until we arrived in Italy that we discovered what a crowded European train was like) and the one-hour trip to Brussels was uneventful.

All we had to do there was change trains, and there was a wait of almost an hour. I can remember working out which platform we had to catch our train from and then the two of us wandered out the front end of the station for *my* first glimpse of a European city. Jennifer is more practical — she remembers getting her first decent cup of coffee for a long time at that station, and when pressed I have to remember buying a Coke. What is most remarkable is that the coffee was available at the railway station; drinking coffee at an Australian railway station is a high-risk activity.

It was a quiet square in front of a railway station, and at that time of the day almost nothing was happening. Back to the train.



The trip to Basel was a long one, passing through Luxembourg, Metz, and Strasbourg.



Both Jennifer and I slept for part of the trip,



but despite being cooped up in a train we saw enough countryside to appreciate that we were in for a scenic tour for the rest of the trip. Mind you, the camera eye reveals that quite a deal of sleeping was done whilst passing through attractive countryside.

Basel

We arrived in Basel in mid-afternoon. We installed ourselves in a small hotel (the Hotel Greub — a hotel which has since been demolished) opposite the railway station. I came to like that railway station very much, partly because it became so familiar, but partly because it had a very wide range of services for its size.

We hadn't planned anything expensive, but even so the showering arrangements looked unusual, seeming to be nothing more than a shower stall placed next to a wall in an ordinary bedroom; and so it was. You had to be careful not to get confused between the wardrobe and the shower, rather like Garrison Keillor's greatest invention, the combination floppy-disk drive & toaster.

Liz met us for afternoon tea and we went to a health restaurant. Liz had muesli, making it clear that people in Switzerland were different.

Later, when I ordered a cheese salad for dinner and got *exactly* that, I was absolutely certain they were. (Jennifer ordered a meat

salad. It was a meat salad and no more — nothing more.)

We wandered around Basel by night a little bit, finding out from Liz what the lay of the emotional/physical land was. Apparently things had cooled off somewhat, so I telephoned Cherry in Langen and made arrangements to travel up to visit her and Horst the following day.

I had almost adjusted to the idea that I was in a country — indeed, a group of countries — in which English might be spoken by some, but by and large other forms of communication were needed.

I knew, because my grasp of languages other than English was so weak, that I could be in for an interesting time. (I actually enjoy other languages, and sometimes have a modest notion of sentence structure, but I never have any vocabulary worth speaking of, as you might say. I'm therefore a tolerable listener at times, but a hopeless speaker.)

It would certainly be interesting if I failed to make the connection with Cherry and Horst. One of the marvels of the European train

system at this time was the regularity of the timetable; the trip from Basel to Frankfurt was just over three



hours, with trains arriving in Frankfurt at 17 minutes past the hour, every hour! I took a fairly early train, and looked forward to a pleasant morning of travel; I was due back in Basel on Sunday afternoon. And so, on 1 September 1979, my train rolled across the frontier into Germany.

Cherry Wilder in Langen

Oh, the wonder of it all! Whereas the trip down from Oostende to Basel had been one covered in half-sleep, this time I was fully awake, having even had a shower in the strange contrivance

already described, so I could take in so many things I had never seen before.

It wasn't just the European landscape which appealed to me (the Basel–Frankfurt train ride is not superbly notable for its scenery, but you do have to endure the Rhine and the Mosel and several fascinating cities, even if viewed only from the train); even the rolling stock in the stations had interest — all of it was indicative of a well-developed transport system, something one simply doesn't see in Australia.

The trip was far too short for me, but then I was soon going to have plenty more of them. And I need not have worried about Cherry and Horst; they were waiting for me at the Frankfurt railway station — much bigger than the station at Basel — and I had no longer to worry about my lack of German.



We took a short subway trip and then walked down through the older part of the town to the Main, on the other side of which we were to catch a 'bus to Langen.

I've always regretted that we didn't spend a little more time looking at all those buildings near the cathedral which the travel books depict; at the time I was concentrating on the

people, especially a troupe of actors who were



performing on a stage in front of the cathedral.

As we crossed the Main over one of its several bridges I was shown yet another phenomenon which I didn't see enough of — a market on the southern bank which spilled over onto boats (or barges) moored nearby. I



have relatively little interest in market produce of this kind (the usual crafty stuff), but I felt there was probably something new here.

In Langen Horst took me out for a walk around the area for the afternoon. Langen is not large, and can be regarded as only just failing to be a part of Frankfurt; the green belts around Frankfurt, which impressed me very much from

the 'bus, make it difficult to



decide on the basis of simple observation just where the city boundary is.

The Grimms lived near the southern border of Langen, so there were plenty of fields nearby. But although there are parts of Langen where the buildings are quite dense, there are also rustic areas, and those are the ones Horst favoured.

I later visited Langen a couple more times, so my impression of the town is now much more developed.

In 1979 Horst made sure that I saw some of the old (such as a tower where eagles were

meant to roost during the appropriate



season) and some of the less old but equally memorable (such as the remains of the synagogue which had been vandalized that night in 1938).



Horst was an ideal guide, both knowledgeable and caring of the visitor's interests. It was a wonderful afternoon.

But there was more to this day than idle wandering; on 1 September 1939, forty years before, the tanks had rolled into Poland. (The next time I visited Europe the tanks were rolling through Poland again.)

One outcome of that day in 1939 and those which followed was that Horst spent time as a youthful teenager in the German Army. Another outcome was that German television in September 1979 had some special documentary programs that night.



After many years working in Australia Horst now worked for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, a paper somewhat to the left of the perhaps better-known *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Horst's life seemed to me all of a piece, in which his work and his politics combined to reflect his concern (if not despair) about the past and to some extent the present. He very plainly had mixed feelings on this day, being concerned to assure me both of his conviction that nothing approaching the Third Reich could occur again

and of his deep alarm at the occasional visible signs that it might.

From German television that night I learned several things. One was that television is a pretty good way to pick up a feel for a language; the messages, especially in commercials, are so simple that one can acquire quite a veneer, rather like Peter Sellers in *Being There*.

A second was that the quality of German documentaries is far above that of Australian ones (at that time hardly surprising).

A third was that German interviewers were very good indeed; admittedly they had the opportunity to work up a major issue, and to explore it (or exploit it) with some of the figures who had direct involvement with the activities being discussed.

Fourth, and finally, I shared with Horst and with the young interviewers a sense of incredulity as I listened to the older men — those of the generation before Horst — still defending the Third Reich and all it stood for. Here I could feel directly the alarm which Horst had talked about.

But I could also see the skill of the young interviewers as they hammered away at these old Nazis. Yet I do not think that unbelievers of even younger generations would take much notice; publicity, as leaders of the Ku Klux Klan have noted, is what maniacs feed on.

We did talk about science fiction as well, both that night and the next day. Cherry and Horst had both enjoyed SEACON, and Cherry also talked a lot about what it means to be an English-speaking writer of science fiction in Germany. She very plainly was delighted with the kind of company she could find in Europe.

On Sunday morning Horst and I wandered further afield, to a much older town called Dreieich. Walking there, and back, gave more much more opportunity to appreciate the German countryside. The buildings in Dreieich

are much older than those in Langen.



And beside a freeway (oh disillusioning freeway!) Horst and I explored the ruins of a castle which is still used for theatrical performances.

Under the cracked and crumbling arches we studied the tombs, seeing how far back we could reach to our ancestors. It wasn't too far, thanks to the efluxion of time on the one hand, and the effects of acid rain, and other pollutants of human experience, on the other.

We caught a 'bus back to Langen, but not before Horst had time for a beer at a kiosk (as we would call it in Australia) in the town

square; this is not the kind of thing you can do in an Australian town on a Sunday morning.

With some regret I now had to prepare to leave for Basel; the train left at around 3.30 p.m. and there was a 'bus to catch to Frankfurt. But there was still time for conversations and promises to see one another again.

The train arrived in Basel at about a quarter to seven, an hour or so before the next train left for Vienna. Jennifer was in the right place at the right time and so, after a quick gathering of refreshments at the station and a wander around, we took our place on the train for Vienna, the *Wiener-Walzer*.

(I do like the habit of naming trains; it makes information so much clearer.)

I slept well that night, so well that I have no idea of how well Jennifer slept! I can remember staring bleary-eyed at the railway station at St Pölten as we went through in the morning. We arrived at the Westbahnhof in Vienna just before 9 a.m.

Franz Rottensteiner in Vienna

I had read that you could easily find a place to stay when you arrived, but we had booked in advance to stay at a pension on the Graben, in the centre of the city. There certainly were a lot of friendly hawkers for hotel custom at the station, however.

I had been looking forward very much to visiting Vienna; not just to meet Franz, with whom I had been corresponding for over a decade, but because of what I had read about the city. I therefore had a map, and with this map in hand I felt that I knew how to get around. All I did wrong was underestimate a few things.

On the map the walk down Mariahilferstraße to the Graben did not seem very far, and certainly the sort of distance one might want to walk on a cool summer's morning.

I underestimated the distance slightly. I also underestimated the weight of our luggage, especially when carried over a substantial distance on a warm summer's morning.

This was all a very interesting introduction to Vienna, however, even though our attention was very much focused on what we were carrying, as opposed to our surroundings. It was mostly shop-windows anyway, down Mariahilferstraße, except for places like the church where we stopped to rest on this hot summer's morning.

Although we didn't know it at the time, we passed quite close to Franz Rottensteiner's apartment.

Eventually we reached Kärtnerstraße at the end of this sweltering morning, and from there it was a short walk to the Graben and our pension, a friendly and wonderful place we came to treasure.

We had only a few days in Vienna. Jennifer and I did a lot of visiting in that time, and what we saw and felt had given to us a feeling about that city which is matched by no other city. Some, but only some, of that feeling can be conveyed here.



We were there in the week which was being celebrated because Vienna was becoming a third United Nations city (after New York and Geneva); a complex called United Nations City, over the northern banks of the Danube, had been completed and was being opened. We took a trip on a suburban train out past the Prater and the famous Ferris wheel and wandered around these buildings.



buildings that which are so typical of modern bureaucracies.

At the other extreme, that first night we went to the Opera House. We had checked the program on the way down from the station, and although we didn't think we had the resources for the opera being performed on the Tuesday night, we did think we could manage the Monday night performance.

Standing room tickets are cheap, but you have to stand in long queues just to buy them. We waited for just under two hours in order to pay 65¢ each to hear Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

In the queue we talked to a young man from Birmingham who was visiting his uncle and was going to use the night's performance as training for the next night (at the opera, which we had decided not to try for). The performance was stunning — by far the greatest musical experience of my life.

In a sense, I suppose, the experience was heightened for me by the political context, the notion that the beliefs of Schiller and Beethoven were, in a sense, being realized here in a much more important way than the UNO bureaucracy, but the musical experience certainly stirred the audience (two people fainted in our immediate vicinity) — and the musicians; the soloists insisting on singing along with the chorus and, because they were pretty mighty singers, overshadowed the chorus completely.

Afterwards we had supper with the young man from Birmingham to try to relax, but I think we slept well that night only because physical exhaustion overwhelmed emotional exultation.

On this first trip to Vienna we managed to visit some of the significant buildings, especially art galleries, which that city has in abundance.

The Upper Belvedere, and especially its modern paintings (later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), was especially precious to me and I remain enamoured of it now. But we did also visit Franz Rottensteiner.

I telephoned Franz on the Tuesday morning, and he suggested coming around that afternoon. By then I had discovered that Franz really lived within walking distance of where we were staying — and indeed, my main impression of Vienna remains that everywhere was in walking distance of everywhere else, though I know it isn't true because we took the subway and the train and the tram from time to time.

Franz's apartment is several floors up in an old building with fixed rent; Franz had



decorated it superbly and in the main room the major impression is of a wall of books.

Many of these were — and this may fit ill with the impression readers of Franz's critical writings have formed — American hardcover volumes, some of them rather rare. A central part of the collection is, however, a multi-lingual collection of the works of Stanislaw Lem. I was impressed.

But I was more impressed by Franz and his sense of humour, something often



cunningly disguised in his writings. We talked at length about science fiction and Bruce Gillespie, about work and politics, and then Franz suggested going out to dinner with him and his friend Hanna and her brother.

And that's where Jennifer and I first met Dr. Rottensteiner's future wife. We had one of our best meals ever that night; Franz had as a favourite one of those hidden places which

never seems to be written up anywhere. I remember having a marvellous fish, while we all had elaborate pancakes of one kind or another. Hanna had relatively little English, but some German as well as Polish, while her brother, who was an engineer in the Polish Army, had no English at all; so, because Jennifer had no German, she talked to Hanna and I talked to Hanna's brother.

We had a great time, even though we didn't understand each other very well. At the end of the night Franz suggested that the next night we should come back to his apartment; he was giving a party. We decided that as Australians we had to find a koala bear as a present for Hanna; we were successful, but it was a little more difficult to manage in Vienna than it would have been in Melbourne. But Kärtnerstraße is one of those streets where you can find almost everything.

And what a party it was! There were probably only twenty or thirty people there, but Jennifer spent most of the night finding out about the East–West nuclear energy trade, while I talked to Roman Werfel, an old Polish

Stalinist now 'retired' from the party hierarchy (he talked to me about his time as a revolutionary in Poland in the 1920s).

Later we managed to fit in visiting a couple of other places — a museum based on the Roman origins of Vienna, one of Mozart's houses — a few things like that. But we also prepared to travel to Italy, which meant booking tickets at one of the other stations.

We had done this successfully, but just before the party I discovered that I had mislaid my Eurail pass. We made some enquiries late that afternoon but were unsuccessful.

Next day — the day we were travelling — we started trying again, but with little luck. But by midday all turned out well — a Viennese citizen had handed in the Eurail pass (which, I ought to say, is a very negotiable sort of item) and I was able to reclaim it from one of the railway stations.

We finished our time in Vienna with a warm glow towards both the city and its citizens, especially Franz and Hanna.



The train we took south to Florence was named *Remus*, and very early in the trip we experienced directly what those signs at the railway stations in Vienna had hinted at; a separate fare for 'hund' did indeed mean that dogs travelled on trains. And on our train, in our carriage, was a lady with a large dog looking for a comfortable compartment to spend the night. We joined the few others in our compartment in making the place look very full indeed.

It was six thirty in the morning when we passed through Venice, giving me a chance to regret briefly that we weren't visiting.

At 10 a.m. the train pulled in to the first railway station I had come across in Europe which did not appear to have a name. It was Florence, though the station is named Santa Maria Novella.

Florence

Jennifer had visited Florence before, in 1976, but then it was a matter of staying with a friend who was doing postgraduate studies in art history, now returned to Australia.

We stayed for a few nights at the Soggiorno Iris (which recommended itself to us because the owners had lived in Australia for a while) on Piazza Santa Maria Novella. From our window we could see an ornate church. Its name was

Santa Maria Novella.



Sometimes Italy's like that.

We were in Florence because Jennifer had been there before and because of the art. The latter soon became more important than the former. And science fiction very much took a back seat for these few days; I did notice an English–language second–hand bookshop with a few sf paperbacks in the window and, as we wandered around behind the carabinieri barracks which was on the far side of Piazza Santa Maria Novella from our pension I saw a (closed) comic–book shop (or so it seemed from the window) which I expect sold science fiction on the side.

When I did buy a book in Florence it was a collection of essays by Joyce Carol Oates, from a news-stand near the Post Office. There were some definite gains to be reported, however.

For example, a year before I had been arguing in *Chunder!* with Damien Broderick about whether Ghiberti's Doors of Paradise were on the Baptistery (or on the Baptistery — obscure reference...) and now I could walk down a side street and study them for myself. Or walk inside the building itself.

I made a discovery in a nearby construction which I would prefer not to have made; climbing Giotto's Belltower proved to be difficult not so much for the *amount* of climbing as for its *nature*, and although I had always been aware that I wasn't very happy about heights, it wasn't until I had to walk across the open grilles to get to the next set of stairs that I found out how strong my, ah, concerns, about height were.



But there were many enjoyable experiences to make up for that discomfort.

I had the feeling that very few of the other tourists in Florence at the time would have spent so much time wandering about the southern outskirts of the city just because Henry James had enjoyed living there so much — and had indeed in that place shared a residence with a woman (Constance Fenimore Woolson). It isn't hard to understand why James (or anyone) would have liked that area so much.

The other time we travelled out of Florence also involved an American woman.

On our last day we decided to visit Fiesole, an older town on hills to the north overlooking Florence, and were planning to take a 'bus. We had almost reached the 'bus stop when we were asked by the driver of a Volkswagen whether we knew the way to Fiesole.

Well, I kind of did, and so she offered us a lift. She was preparing an exhibition at the Medici–Riccardi Palace and was just up from Rome, which is apparently where she took her driving instruction.

We miraculously reached Fiesole after our driver insisted on confirming my navigational instructions, just after I had given them, with whomever happened to be nearest — no matter which side of the road they happened to be on. It was easy to pull up next to them and interrogate while flabbergasted drivers struggled to avoid us.



A couple of hours wandering around the Tuscan hills does much for one, and I have very much regretted not returning there. We were driven back to Florence by our American benefactor, though in less exciting style. It's understandable, though, that most of our time in Florence was spent inside — there's so much to be seen in galleries and museums that is actually worthwhile or even important that being outside in the sun seemed unusual.

Anyone who has visited us in St Kilda knows that at least one of us is an enthusiast for Botticelli, and although it was possible to add a few more prints to our collection, seeing the

originals (damaged though they might be) was something we regarded as more important.

And then there were tombs, statues, architecture generally — all those things striking for the contrast between the permanence they embody and our own relative transience. Just *being* in Florence was itself wonderful (as was being in Milan a couple of years later) and one reason for this was the strengthening of my reaction to the light in the Northern Hemisphere, which I've already referred to in writing about the Serpentine in London.

The kind of life I could take a lot of in Florence is typified by a very ordinary experience. One day we decided to have lunch in the Boboli Gardens (something which many people had thought of doing that day), and walked there down some back streets, picking up something to eat and drink on the way in a tiny grocery where no one spoke English but where the proprietors were friendly and charged almost nothing.

We wandered around the gardens for half an hour or so, then settled upon the amphitheatre

as a place to eat our lunch. So did about sixty other people.



But the amphitheatre was large enough to allow all of us to sit in a high private space where we nevertheless felt we had company. There were no blaring radios or any of the other unpleasant necessities of civilized Western life.

Then suddenly, but not simultaneously, though certainly in a short span of time, all around the amphitheatre the eaters stopped eating and looked up to see a newly-married bride and groom walking down the long axis of the amphitheatre; they looked so much like the model of a bride and groom on a wedding-cake that no one could resist breaking into applause.

They were surprised and then pleased, and waved to everyone.



What was important to me was that everyone regarded this as a very *ordinary* incident — no matter how magnificent it looked.

Up to this point our travels around Europe had been untroubled. When it came to moving on to Paris things got difficult.

We had gone down to the station to book our onward journey only to discover that because the school year was now starting there was no space available on trains direct to Paris for the day we wanted, or even for the couple of days after that. This was the first time we made extensive and practical use of the Thomas Cook Railway Timetable.

Our first problem was that we had a hotel booking in Paris, so there would at least have to be a telephone call to straighten that out. Our second problem was that we did want to get to Paris fairly soon.

The railway timetable revealed that the only practical alternative was to travel around the coast, rather than following the direct route through Switzerland. The train we actually booked on was not one of the big expresses; it was instead a very local train for a journey of about an hour across to Pisa, then being linked with a larger train which went through Ventimiglia and on to Nice, arriving there at about 9.30 p.m.

We figured we could stay overnight in Nice and then take a train on to Paris the next day. Jennifer made a couple of telephone calls (to Paris and Nice) and I booked the train tickets.

Florence–Nice–Paris

The train across to Pisa was interesting but very slow. And from there on the train fell further and further behind schedule.

The trip up the western coast of Italy was made interesting at one point when some Australians wandering up and down the train stopped to talk; it turned out that one of them was a keen science fiction fan from Melbourne and remembered me from Space Age Books — indeed, it had been that which first prompted him to stop. He hadn't known about SEACON, though.

By the time we got to Ventimiglia it was plain that we were going to be very late in Nice, and in fact we arrived after midnight.

The train disgorged many passengers who were rather anxious about where they were going to sleep. At least Jennifer had made a booking for us (out of Frommer's *Europe on \$10 a Day*) at a place very near the station — the Hotel des Nations.

The lights at the Hotel des Nations were out and the sign indicated that they had no spare rooms. We decided we would try to rouse them, and said farewell to some of our fellow passengers who were going to have to try their luck further into the town.

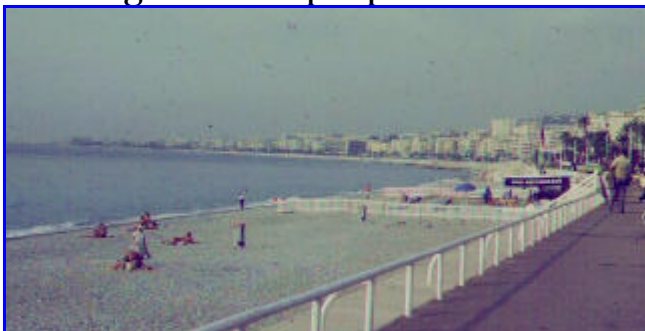
It was very hard to waken anyone, and when we did we found out that our room had been let (not surprising). We made a very small fuss and were grudgingly given a small room not normally let out (we were told).

It certainly looked as though it was some months since it had been occupied, but at 22 Fr a double it was well below the lowest price quoted by Frommer (we had already decided that we could usually get good rooms at prices below Frommer's lowest, so this was no great surprise). After that amount of travel we were happy to sleep anywhere.

We had to pay more for our breakfast than we did for the room. But when we came across one of our friends from the previous day's journey and discovered how much *he* had had to pay for a room we had no complaints. So far as going to Paris was concerned, there was only one train we were interested in travelling on — *Le Mistral* — and that was easily booked for that afternoon.



We therefore had a morning in Nice, and a wonderful morning for strolling it was. We did nothing of cultural or intellectual significance: we just looked at the Mediterranean and at the buildings and the people.



Just before we took the train to Paris I had for lunch the most marvellous salad rolls I had ever eaten, and Jennifer had a Salad Niçoise; we ate them looking out over the sea. The accident of

having to travel in this way rather than directly to Paris was proving most fortunate. This good fortune continued after we left Nice. *Le Mistral* was the best train we travelled on in Europe that summer, and I was so taken by Lyon as we passed through it that I resolved to return there. (This is described in a later chapter.) We reached Paris just after 10 p.m.

Paris

We were not particularly worried about arriving late in Paris, and because the hotel we had booked in to was handy to a metro station it was quite easy to get there.

The management of the Hotel du Lys had changed since Jennifer stayed there in 1976, but everyone was still very friendly, even though I didn't appreciate this much in 1979. The Hotel du Lys is near the Odéon station, which makes it handy to almost everything.

Over the next few days Jennifer introduced me to many parts of Paris, but it wasn't until a much longer stay in 1981–2 that I felt at ease. One reason I felt uncomfortable was the language. My French should have been able to

stand the small pressures which are placed upon the tourist, but I failed completely — or almost completely.

The truth was that in practice I managed better in German, in which I had had a total of about fifteen hours of instruction, and in Italian, in which I had had none.

I had, as Franz had pointed out to me in Vienna when we were discussing my limping German, no active vocabulary (in German I was more at home talking about test-tubes and formulas and equations). In Paris I was immensely frustrated because I could not communicate with anyone effectively.

But I *understood* quite a lot. I didn't understand idle chat, but I could make sense of a newspaper, or understand questions. I just couldn't answer — a disappointing situation for someone with French ancestors, albeit French ancestors some centuries in the past.

When I worked out what the problem was, I felt somewhat more comfortable, and late in the stay was able to put my meagre skills to some use. The arrangement we had made was that I would travel back to England ahead of Jennifer

in order to do some of the fan visiting while she would be joined in Paris by an Australian friend coincidentally visiting at about this time.

These plans — and indeed the general scheduling of holidays — were somewhat disrupted by a train strike. What made the problem worse was that the strike affected the major rail lines (and some minor ones) but not completely. Some trains were running, but no one seemed to know exactly which ones were running and which were not, and when the functioning trains were running.

This is the kind of situation in which it helps to know what people around you are saying. All this happened, naturally, just as I was making my booking to go to London and we were expecting Jennifer's friend in Paris, *and* at a time when accommodation was tight; although a room had been booked for Joan the manager didn't want to keep it unless he had a guarantee that she would turn up and pay.

My limited linguistic competence was put to some use: Jennifer, who had a good active vocabulary but had trouble following rapid conversations and gestures, did the talking

while I did the listening. I was a sort of monoglot uni-directional translator, adding what I thought Jennifer should say in response. This was particularly difficult when communicating by telephone.

We nevertheless spent a lot of time at the Nord railway station wondering whether Joan's train would arrive (having now learned that mine was definitely departing next morning); indeed when it did arrive its behaviour was contrary to all that we had seen and heard at the station.

There were probably other things about Paris that made me feel uncomfortable, but at the time this seemed the most obvious one. In retrospect I suppose the fact that it was more crowded and rushed than anywhere else we had been for a week or so must have been another contributing factor, especially since just these things had made me feel uncomfortable about London. But there was much to like, if only I could have seen it.



The area itself was filled with bookshops, some of them selling science fiction (even in English), and I was certainly attracted to the French cinemas nearby.

We saw *Alien* with French sub-titles at a first-release house which showed wonderful commercials and had girls selling candies and ice-creams during the short interval; perhaps it was the fact that the selling of ice-cream was integrated with the commercials which most appealed to me.

We explored back streets and tiny stores, gardens and museums and art galleries,

markets and department stores and the Seine. But it wasn't until much later that I appreciated these things.

For now it was to be an early train north and then back across the Channel by hovercraft to England, and back to science fiction fandom.