

Money for nothing – Euro style

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We have to go back about 58 years for this tale. I have always managed to lose or drop things, and I learnt a very hard and expensive lesson. It was 1963. I was studying Electronics at the University of Southampton. Six engineers and scientists had buddied up successfully, including one Mick Jackson, who later became my best man when Judith and I were wed. Mick was a very interesting person: brilliant memory and artistically talented – but studying for completely the wrong degree (mechanical engineering), having been railroaded into it by an over-enthusiastic careers master. Eventually Mick managed to get an upper 2nd honours degree, but his real strength lay in the Arts. He eventually took a Masters degree in Film, Television, Stage production management (and more) at Bristol. Subsequent to that he joined the BBC, working his way up through the ranks to become a producer (for Brunowski's "The Ascent of man" and other series), before emigrating to Hollywood and becoming a Director of numerous films. However for those three years we were quite close.

At the end of our second year, Mick suggested doing the grand tour of Europe. He thought we could hire a car and take a minimum of camping gear with us. Two of the group weren't interested, but four of us thought it would be a good idea. However it all came to nothing until long after the end of the Summer term, when we had left for our parental homes. I was working at a summer job. When I came home one day I met a distraught mother who was holding an inexplicably odd telegram which had been sent "VERY URGENT" to me by Mick. I think he must have been paying by the word because it simply said "TROUSERS PROCRASTINATE NOT. PLEASE PHONE SOONEST."

Mick had managed to procure a hire car – an ancient Ford Popular – from one Major Money, believe it or not, and if we had our passports ready we could be off on our tour.

The next few days were a complete mish-mash of things to be done. I had to procure money in various currencies; travellers cheques; a tent, an inflatable air bed (Halfords, cheap PVC, failed after three days) and a primus stove, plus meths and paraffin. Eventually we set off for Dover, picking up the other members en route from various locations in London and Essex, in high spirits, arriving in Dover desperate to visit the toilets – which of course we couldn't find. "Don't worry!" cried Malcolm, "There are loads of hotels here and they all have toilets – look – we'll choose this one". So Malcolm and I hurtled into the "hotel" and soon found a room with the toilet. It was a bit small, so not being too prudish and a bit concerned about barging into a hotel where we were not guests, we both entered and locked the door. Unfortunately, on emerging we were less than relieved to be confronted with an irate householder. Sadly Malcolm had got it wrong – it was a private house.... We made hasty excuses that we had mistaken the address but that we were in a hurry and had to meet Mick somewhere. We scuttled off only mildly embarrassed.

The journey across the channel was uneventful – except that it was a first in Europe for me, driving a strange car on the wrong side of the road – in Belgium. I had three very enthusiastic navigators who were busily explaining how I was allowed to overtake trams on either side when they were stopped. So I chose to pass a stopped tram on the RIGHT. The descending passengers all waved excitedly and pointed at the car as we passed. The problem? Not a right of way issue: we had a roof rack with all our holdalls and camping gear lashed on

the top, and the extra weight coupled with the bumpy granite setts had caused the roof-rack to become loose – and it was now hanging lazily over the back window...

Then I lost my way – Mick who had wanted to exercise each and every European language – carefully cobbled useful phrases together from an AA phrase book. We needed to turn the car around, so he opened the window and enquired of a nonplussed Belgian “La route pour tourner?” The Belgian smiled and indicated which way to go. When we had repeated the exercise three times and met with the same Belgian who couldn’t contain his laughter, he told us that we had asked for the directions for Tournai !!

Enough of first steps in Belgium – and there were a number of other steps as well. Recall that back in the sixties every country had its own currency. That meant that we were carrying wads of different notes plus traveller’s cheques. Every day, one of the four had responsibility to look after the money, and on one particular day in Wiesbaden it was mine. We had managed to work up a sensible tourist regime and on this day we had just had a break for lunch in a Wiesbaden park, where I was delighted to find a flock of Ring Ouzels singing in a bush. Afterwards we went for a walk past some neighbourhood shops – and I dropped my wallet somewhere, with all my travellers cheques and a significant proportion of our currency in it.

Disaster! We only discovered the loss after setting up our daily overnight camp. What on earth could we do? We consulted the AA guide and our insurance documents and decided that the first thing to do was to report the loss at a police station.

We were directed to the Wiesbaden Fundbüro, or Lost property office. We drove to the Fundbüro to enquire haplessly of a red-faced sargeant had anything had been handed in? (with Mick using his AA phrase book once more), No!

We left, crestfallen. Now we had seen US service personnel driving in Jeeps, so we stopped one to ask for help. He told us that if we had lost our travellers cheques we could easily get them reinstated by visiting Cooks. He enthusiastically offered to drive us there. Cooks coolly informed us that as they were Barclays cheques they couldn’t help, but they gave us the phone number of Barclays DCO in Hamburg.

Off to find a phone booth – another new experience. We had to both queue, and pay in advance with some remaining Deutsche Marks. Barclays DCO proved less than helpful. We retired to our camp-site to decide what next to do. We decided to send a telegram back home to Mum, explaining the situation and asking for some more funds. The telegram was constructed and duly sent. But we still needed to report the loss to the police. We would report it next day.

The next day we set off for the city of Würms. On arrival we once more stopped a friendly jeep-borne GI and asked if he knew where the central police station was. He happily showed us the way and we duly reported that we had to register the loss of the wallet within 24 hours for insurance purposes. We were passed through two levels of seniority before the chief of police informed us in perfect English that Würms was in a different state and that we had to report the loss in Wiesbaden....

Back to Wiesbaden. Once more we went to the Fundbüro to get our loss documented. The same officer was on duty. He was obliged to type out our report in triplicate. Sadly his keyboarding skills were not the greatest, and I think he had been having a hard day as well. Two sets had been torn from his typewriter in disgust and he was busily engaged in typing the third, when his phone rang. He muttered something unintelligible to his caller, replaced the

phone, and carefully withdrew a Walther PPK revolver from his holster, which he started lovingly to caress. H gave me a hard look and very slowly said “Zey haf found your wallet!”.

We were overjoyed. We were next taken in a very large police vehicle (a sort of Black Maria from memory) to an address where we would meet the finder of the wallet. The policeman driving us advised that it was customary to pay a finder’s reward fee of 10% or so. On arrival at a tall tenement block were taken up several floors, arriving at the apartment of a grand dame, assembled with members of her family – and no-one speaking English. The wallet was duly produced, and appeared to have exactly what it had contained when dropped. Through the translation agency of the policeman it appears that it had fallen from my pocket and had been picked up by a shopper almost immediately – and being a good citizen she had called the Fundbüro to report the find. What a pity that they hadn’t recorded the find 24 hours earlier! All that now remained was to work out a reward in Deutsche Marks, pay up, and send a second telegram back home explaining to Mum that all was well after all.

So ended my education in losing and finding European currency. It also goes a long way to explain why I reckon that the Euro was a jolly good idea!

There were still a number of other interesting ventures in store for us, including expensive car repairs in Interlaken, a corrupt border official in Italy and a failure to understand the subtle difference in Italian between Signori and Signore where toilets are concerned. (Malcolm again I am afraid).