

MR TILLEARD CHANGES TRAINS

A diary of a ten day continental journey.

January 31st 2024

On the morning train to London, on my way to Paris and then Budapest, I fall into conversation with a young man. We talk of the Israel/Hamas war in Gaza. After I have voiced my opinion about the early violent history of Mohammed and Islam, he tells me he's a Muslim studying for a degree in International Relations at Warwick University. I should choose my interlocutors more carefully. We part amicably at Waterloo.

At the Betjeman bar in St Pancras Station, I accidentally spill most of my pint of beer, causing a small flood. I offer to clear it up but the barman won't hear of it and gets out a mop. I order a replacement pint. The barman refuses any payment - this, in a pub in London.

On my way to the Eurostar train the PA system is playing Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor aka the Funeral March: for some travellers, this cannot be the most reassuring of tunes.

Somewhere in Kent, the train drifts to a halt. It's a power breakdown. We arrive in Paris 40 minutes late. From the Gare de Nord, I walk the 40 minutes to my rented apartment in the Marais in the old centre of Paris. It's 8 o'clock in the evening and dark. The long Boulevard Magenta is busy, mostly with council lorries picking up rubbish bins.

The connection on my phone for Google Maps doesn't work. I ask a black guy for directions, he kindly connects me by synching his wifi to mine. After half a mile it disconnects. I ask a group of white youths for directions. One of them walks me a few yards to show me the way and then asks for money. Further down the road, a gang of girls, a mix of black and white, generously guide me in the right direction.

Only in Paris: getting some provisions for that night in a minimart I get a ready-meal of chicken risotto. I try to buy a bottle of wine but am told I can't. It seems some Paris arrondissements - in order to curb night-time

drunkenness - have banned the purchase of alcohol in supermarkets after 5pm. The manager tells me to hide it in my suitcase and then pay for it secretly at the checkout.

In a narrow street in the Marais I find the address for my apartment. After punching in the entry code, I push open the heavy front door of the old building and, in the cramped entrance corridor, almost trip over an unconscious figure in a sleeping bag. I step over him and climb the ninety steps up a tiled and wooden spiral staircase to my apartment on the fifth floor. It's a room about five metres by three with a single bed, a stove, a shower and a small steel table with a matching chair. It was advertised as 'a cute apartment'. If one wants to experience the life of an impoverished poet in a 19th-century Parisian garret, then this is it. The lavatory is back down the stairs in a cupboard. I eat my ready-meal risotto and drink my illicit wine and go to bed.

February 1st

The next morning, at the nearby Picasso Museum the visitors don't look at the paintings and sculptures, they glance at the work, take a photo on their smartphones and pass on. In the main atrium, there's a powerful 8ft high bronze of a man holding a sheep. One cannot see it all - it's against a wall. The same applies to a group of three bronzes of women's heads enclosed in an alcove. The brilliance of the art is secondary to the amount of money spent on the opulence of the building and its decor.

It's a Tuesday and the Louvre and the Pompidou are shut. I have a 10 euro beer in a bar, then walk by the Seine for hours. Walking past the Bibliotheque Nationale Historique I pop in to see if they have anything on Olympe de Gouges. I've recently printed and bound her seminal 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman in my Hatch Editions. The woman at the desk has never heard of her. I tell her of my limited edition and show it to her on my website on my phone. She says, maybe the library should buy a copy and gives me her card, telling me to contact her when I'm back in England.*

February 2nd

In the morning, at a bike-hire shop in the back streets is a helpful and charming middle-aged Parisien who speaks

perfect English. I ask him where he learned his English. He says, at school. I say, 'Have you ever been to England', he says, 'No, never'. He says he loved languages at school and also speaks fluent German. He has never been to Germany. He is in his late 50s and helping out at the shop for a mate who owns it. He lives and was educated in one of the working-class banlieues.

Cycling along the Rue de Rivoli to the Louvre the queues drift back forever - ditto at the Musée d'Orsay, so I cycle to the left bank and the Musée Rodin, which is empty of tourists. The 18th-century mansion housing the vast collection is exquisite, as are the sculptures, but I find with exhibitions of a single artist - as in galleries devoted to one artist - I get sensationally inured because of the monotony of one artist's work, especially if they hardly change - that is why I never tire of Picasso as he had so many personas. Hidden in the garden is the great and subtle figure of Balzac encased in a bronze cloak.

The Champs Elysées cycle lane is 2 kilometres of cobbles, I think I'm getting too old for this cycling. Going around the Arc de Triomphe the trick is the timing between the traffic flows. And afterwards down the surprisingly pot-holed Avenue Foch and, finally, to the Bois de Boulogne where, at an outside bar by the lakes, I watch the many dog-walkers arguing and laughing.

On a warm January evening in the Marais, the young of Paris are sitting outside the bars and bistros. At a restaurant, there is no table for half an hour so I go to a nearby bar. It's cramped and noisy and packed with students as if it's a 1950s Parisian cliché of students crammed around tables in heated argument about Jean-Paul Sartre - or perhaps now it's Jacques Derrida. I fall into conversation with a lone student from Germany who tells me the German train strikes - which I've been dreading - have been resolved.

At the restaurant, the young waitress is called Sam. When I weakly say 'Play it again Sam', she doesn't understand. I explain it's from the film Casablanca, but she's never heard of it, which is odd because she says she comes from Casablanca and she's called Sam. Paying my bill, I say to her, 'But we will always have Paris'. But of course she didn't get it..

February 3rd

The train to Stuttgart is a double-decker. Perched in first-class on the upper deck gazing down on the French countryside gives a fresh perspective on train travel.

I'm only in Stuttgart for one night as I have to catch the train to Munich at 8 am. The hotel, near the station, is small and modest. The concierge, a friendly guy called Ahmed, originally from Kenya, says there is no bar but he finds me a beer in a fridge and invites me to join him in the breakfast room where he's entertaining two young German women. I refuse, saying I don't speak German, but he says they speak English. One of the girls is a teacher of English staying at the hotel for a conference. The other is an engineer. The teacher reminds me of an old German girlfriend from Cologne with whom I was in love 30 years ago.

February 4th

8am. at Stuttgart station, the trains are in chaos because of the legacy of the train strike. The train to Munich is half an hour late, which means I'll miss the connection to Vienna. I use the half-hour to find an information desk but find I've queued at the desk for local trains and in the wrong building. Eventually, at the correct desk and building, a clerk says I'll have to re-book the entire journey to Budapest. She stamps the Munich ticket with a simple logo - it's this that manages to get me through all the subsequent ticket inspections.. By now the new train is about to leave. I'm now going via Salzburg to Vienna.

At last, I'm on my way to Austria in a First Class restaurant car, at a table with a white cloth and a lamp. I crack open a can of beer I bought at Stuttgart. The waiter angrily objects, telling me I should have bought it from the bar. It looks like he's going to confiscate it, but relents. Later he tells me the train will arrive late at Salzburg for my connection to Vienna and suggests I get off at Munich after all and catch a later train.

At Gunzburg, gazing out of the window I see a small river, maybe 50 yards wide. Google tells me it's the Danube, When I re-connect with it in Budapest it has grown in width to nearly half a mile.

At Munich, I find I can get a train direct to Budapest but I'll be two hours late, arriving at eight, instead of six in the evening, which is worrying as I'll have to somehow re-arrange my meeting with a representative of the people from whom I'm renting my Budapest apartment. He has the keys. It now turns out that, after all, I have to change at Vienna for Budapest. The Budapest train is only three carriages and my down-at-heel first-class carriage is empty - it's dark and I feel as if I've been abducted. I use the time to order, online, a taxi to take me from the station to my apartment.

At Budapest station, not knowing where my taxi could be waiting, I ask a passing girl. She walks me several hundred yards out other way to the taxi ranks. I thank her and, as she leaves, she says, in perfect English, 'I love your coat' - it's a very shabby vintage calf-length suede overcoat. She was pretty, kind and gracious. The taxi driver, a pleasant young man called Pal, takes me through the night to my apartment where the agent is waiting with the keys. Later, I realise I'd left a glove in the taxi but think it too trivial to bother about. However, on the off-chance I ring the taxi firm and leave a message for Pal. The next evening, I get a call from Pal to say he is outside with my glove. He's been working all day and has gone out of his way to deliver my single glove. He refuses a tip. I like these young Hungarians.

The apartment is in a narrow street of tall crumbling 19th-century baroque townhouses in the heart of the city, not far from the vast Parliament buildings on the Danube. I open great wrought iron gates into a dark passageway for carriages which would have taken you to the entrance. In the dark hall, a wide crumbling marble staircase goes up to the first floor where I find my modern little flat and, pleasingly, two bottles of beer are in the fridge.

February 5th

The Café Kor is five minutes from the apartment and near the Basilica. It is small, elegant and full of locals. The coffee menu is complicated so I ask the waitress, Sylvie, to give me what she normally drinks. Sylvie says it's going to be 15C. over the weekend. I admit to her that I've booked an evening river cruise on the Danube, and apologise for being so touristy. Sylvie says she was born and bred in the city and

still goes on river cruises as the Danube is so magnificent. Making an extravagant gesture, she knocks over a tray of crystal tumblers which hit the stone floor and shatter. I bend down to help but am ushered out. After five minutes I realise I haven't paid for my coffee. I return, but Sylvie and the manager insist it's on the house. I book a table for that evening.

I walk the nearly 600 metres over the Chain Bridge. In 1849, the first permanent bridge to connect Buda and Pest. Designed and built by two unrelated Scotsmen called Clark who are heroes in Buda and in Pest. Looking down on the vast Danube, I think of its skinny version seen from the train at faraway Gunzberg

I'm reading a history of Budapest by Victor Sebestyen. It tells me that after losing the 1848 wars of independence against the occupying Austrians, there were appalling reprisals. In Liberty Square, around the corner from my apartment, the deposed prime minister was so severely tortured he couldn't stand to be hanged, so they sat him on a chair and shot him. That evening, in the dark, on my way to the banks of the Danube, I pass the shadowy spot in Liberty Square where it happened.. I descend to the embankment where there is a memorial called, simply, The Shoes on the Danube Bank.

In the autumn and winter of 1944/5 the Hungarian Arrow Cross, a Nazi-inspired militia, lined up thousands of Jews - and others - along the banks of the Danube. They were made to take off their shoes - as they were valuable - and shot so that they fell into the freezing Danube. About 105,000 Jews were murdered in Budapest that autumn and winter. Sixty shoes cast iron shoes are facing the Danube, they are set into the embankment. There are children's shoes, and women's shoes and men's shoes, all in different styles of the period. To the left, in the distance is the Chain Bridge, lit up with a thousand lights; two hundred yards to the right is the Margaret Bridge with its noisy traffic. Here, in the dark on a cold February night, there are half-a-dozen people. Two teenage girls are silently tying a ribbon to the back of a child's shoe. I have seen Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust memorial in Vienna, an inverted 'negative space' library in her celebrated style. It does not compare with the emotional impact of these simple shoes on the edge of the cold and forbidding Danube.

I didn't take any photos of the shoes - it seemed disrespectful. Instead nearby, is a young couple overlooking the Danube, and their bronze Buda-pal on the right.



At dinner at Café Kor a complimentary glass of white wine is already on my table. The dinner of venison goulash, a Hungarian claret and a cseresznye pálinka, a digestif made from sour cherries. It is Hungary on a plate and in a glass. The pálinka is on the house.

The couple at the next table - only inches away - are speaking an unidentifiable language. It's not Hungarian, it sounds Italian or Spanish, but isn't. I ask them and they say they are from Catalonia. The woman is learning English so is keen to chat. She's a fashion designer in Barcelona but is off sick with osteoporosis. Her husband is a lawyer.

February 6th

The Centrál Café and Bar 1887 was the favourite coffee house of Hungarian writers and artists before the First World War. A woman pianist and a male cellist are playing selections from the great American songbook and the waiters think they are more important than the customers.

I leave and go to the Café Gerloczy which is small, elegant and friendly. A violinist is playing Beethoven's Für Elise. He comes to my table and asks if I'd like to make a request. I think of a Hungarian composer and ask him to play a bit of Dohnanyi. 'But he's so sad', he says. He plays a piece and it is sad - and appropriately Hungarian. I read in my Sebestyen history, in 2012, Hungarian women had the second-highest suicide rate in the world, and the sixth for men.



Afterwards, I walk over the Chain Bridge to Buda to see the old Central Market Hall. It is, disappointingly, a fine old

building spoiled by being a department store of modern shops with a central escalator. Buda, despite having the history, the geography and the castle, is, however, the bourgeois brother to its wayward sibling Pest. I walk up the steep streets and steps to the mausoleum of Gül Baba and its rose garden and a panoramic view of the Danube below and the sprawl of Pest beyond. Gül Barba was a sixteenth-century Dervish Muslim holy man and a favourite of Suleiman the Magnificent who was declared the Wali, or patron saint, of Buda. The mausoleum or türbe is a modest, stone hexagonal building containing Gül Baba's coffin. The entrance is roped off but one can see a perfect white-domed ceiling which one knows would produce a celestial echo if one called. Being February, there are no roses in the famous rose garden.

Going back to Pest over the wrought-iron Margaret Bridge, and my every step echoing through the wrought-iron over the noise of the passing traffic, I consider that, though Buda and Pest were separated for centuries - except for a dodgy pontoon bridge and the occasional freezing-over of the Danube - the people are still not connected.

Near my apartment is the baroque Basilica dedicated to St Stephen, the first king of Hungary. As I'm leaving, a grand old lady in a full-length mink coat is struggling with her walking stick to descend the cascade of steps from the church to the square below. I offer her my hand, which she gratefully accepts, repeatedly saying, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you' the whole way to the bottom. I'm sure she lives in Buda.

February 7th

On my way to the railway station to go to Prague, the heels on my shoes are becoming detached (since leaving England, I must have walked about 30 miles of city streets). I pass a shop selling shoe glue. At the station, having three hours before my train departs, I sit in a waiting room in my socks while my glued heels heal.

In my compartment are two large Chinese women and, filling the first-class compartment, a set of luggage, each the size of a building. One, who speaks a little English, tells me

she comes from near Shanghai. She offers me delicious sweets made from Chinese hawthorn - apparently, they aid digestion. We talk of Chinese influence on Western culture. They get off at Vienna and are replaced by a young Austrian man on his way to Prague. He speaks excellent English and works in IT. We talk of European politics and history when he isn't talking on WhatsApp video to his Czech wife and children back in Vienna.

At Prague Central Station, next to a Burger King, I'm met by a woman taxi driver who takes me over the Vltava river to my apartment. In contrast to my Paris garret the apartment is spacious. The bathroom alone is three times the size of the 'cute apartment' in Paris. It's in a 19th-century townhouse on the far side of the Charles Bridge below the Palace.

February 8th

Walking over the Charles Bridge on a cold grey morning the crowds are taking 'selfies' on their mobile phones. If it's like this in early February what's it like in the height of the tourist season? I go to a bar in the main square. It's an Irish-themed bar with cricket on the telly.

Whilst considering going to a concert, but finding there is little on in February, I see a poster for a concert for that evening. But the poster has too many popular classical pieces that couldn't possibly be fitted into one evening. I ask a young man standing by the poster for an explanation. He says it's an hour-long concert at 5o'clock with snatches from all the popular pieces. Everything in Prague caters for the tourist. Like Amsterdam, the city is pervaded by the smell of cannabis.

I walk a quarter mile to the Jewish quarter, hoping it would be quieter. All the streets are cobbled and, fearing for the heels of my repaired shoes, I watch my every step. I see two small brass plaques set in the cobbles. It's outside what was the front door of a Jewish couple. It gives the details of their deportation in 1942. It states the Kohns ended up in Sobibor. Murdered aged 59. There was only 22 days difference in their ages. I come across several of these tiny brass plaques called stolpersteines.



At the top of a steep hill is Prague Castle and its expansive square, which, because of the effort to get there is empty of people. Descending to the hidden backstreets, I come across a strange long, high wall covered from top to bottom

in colourful graffiti. Standing in front of it are three young Oriental girls, one of whom is standing with her back against the wall striking fashion-model poses. Her two friends are taking flash photos of her on smart phones. I find this naively charming and take a snap of the scene - I'm about 20 or 30 feet away. An angry and officious older woman confronts me demanding I stop taking photos. Taken aback, I say anyone can take photos in public. She gets angrier, demanding I stop. I point out, again, that any activity in public is allowed to be photographed - citing the work of street photographers and paparazzi. A crowd of youths gathers threateningly, shouting support for the angry woman. I begin to retreat for my own safety but realise I have dropped my glove back at the scene so return to retrieve it. The scary youths fall silent and I leave. In need of a drink, I stop at a nearby bar. It's another Irish-themed pub with a crowd of drunken English lads. *

In the Old Town Square is the huge Jan Hus Memorial. It commemorates the great Czech martyr of the pre-Reformation, a precursor of Luther and Calvin. He was burned at the stake in this square. It depicts Hussite warriors and Protestants who were forced into exile in the wake of the great Battle of the White Mountain during the Thirty Years' War, 200 years after Hus. It's ignored by the crowds.

That evening in a restaurant, I'm reading my history of Budapest. A group of six at the next table notice my reading matter and tell me they are Hungarians from Budapest. They ask me to join them and we talk at length of Budapest.

February 9th

The train to Frankfurt via Dresden and Leipzig has a smart restaurant car. For miles the great Hungarian plain is flat and featureless except for far-distant pine forests. We stop at the Czech/German border. While waiting, I go to the restaurant car. Between getting up to go to the bar and getting a beer, the train has moved. The beer has now doubled in price - welcome to with my last Czech crowns. Within a few hundred yards the shabby houses of Czechland have morphed into to the freshly painted houses of Deutschland.

The train will be 10 minutes late arriving at Dresden, which means 8 minutes to find the platform and connecting train to Leipzig. I imagine the usual dash up and down stairs to find the connecting platform, but on arrival it's 10 yards away. The train, however, is 15 minutes late, leaving me time to look up at the grey skies and think of the night of February



13th 1945 when the city was destroyed and about 25,000 people were killed. As I do so I see a train destined for Magdeburg where, in 1631 during the 30 Years' War, the entire population of 20,000 was slaughtered. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...*

On my way to my Frankfurt hotel it is grey, wet and dark.

February 10th

The following morning it is still dark, cold and raining as I walk to my 5.30 train. On the way to Brussels, there is a frost on Flanders' fields.

Early on during my outward journey, I notice there are no animals in the fields - not even a horse or a human being. It remains so for the entire return journey through four countries. I know it's February and the animals are presumably inside, but within 10 minutes of emerging from the tunnel into the Kent countryside, there is a field of sheep.

With seconds to spare, I get the train from Waterloo to Wiltshire. Arriving home in the evening, it's dark and raining. I've been up since 5 in the morning. My car has automatically locked itself. The car keys and my house keys are inside.

But that's another story.

* I get a pompous letter from the Biblioteque refusing.

* I still have no understanding of what was happening. I can only assume, because of the older angry woman, it was a professional photo-shoot and they were objecting because of copyright. But they didn't look like professionals, and they were using mobile phones as cameras. The crowd were watching as if they were extras in a shoot or just curious onlookers.



The wall is a Prague landmark called The Lennon Wall. It has morphed over the years: first created in the 1960s it was covered in graffiti after Lennon's murder. The Communist regime whitewashed, but it was revived after 1989. Wikipedia says it is now a symbol of love and peace - but not in my experience....

