

Writings

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Preface

I have had some scribblings, mostly essays taken from my life, and a composition, online. As with my life story, I decided to make it into one book-like pdf file, so that it won't get lost when my home page disappears some day.

It is in two parts. The second part consists of scans of some stuff I wrote for and with Thomas when he was 5-6 years old, and we lived at Bodøvej in Aarhus, where we had a tiny garden in front of our row house flat. Many of these stories are about this garden, but not all. I will use the scans, which are in pdf form, attached directly, as I think the originals, containing drawings by Thomas, are nicer than if I were to type them in. This means they are one long string of pdf pages with no headings produced by Latex.

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Chapter 1

Essays and a composition

Waiting

I watch him carefully. He stands alone, not far from me. He is waving both arms, with great, flapping sweeps, his hair springing up and down with the motion.

Around me: the others; impassive, pretending to read, yet constantly watching him. Now he turns slightly to one side and crouches - legs bent, body leaning forward, hands like a beggar's claws, fingers upward, as if presenting an object for sale; appealing, jerking spasmodically, violently. I can see the back of his suit collar, ridiculously high above his head, which he is stretching towards us. He makes no sound - just the jerking movements, and his legs like springs, coiling and uncoiling slightly, as if ready to jump.

I look down at my lap. There it lies - beautiful, shiny, black, freshly cleaned. Ready. My hands are moist. Soon it is time. I wipe them on a white handkerchief. Soon. Soon. I catch a quick glance, from my neighbour. He knows.

I look again at the man in front. He is springing gently up and down on his calves, body straight now. He lifts his right arm, fixes me with his eyes briefly; now I am ready; I lift my black beauty; he makes a long sweeping motion, it ends pointing at me, just as I start blowing, sweet and pure as ever, right on cue, as always.

Passports and customs

We have had a few interesting experiences with customs and passports over the years. We left Australia in 1967, visited my mother in Kiel for one month and then spent three months in Milano, Italy. We took trains. The last one crossed Switzerland, and when we got to the Italian border early one morning, the door to our compartment opened, a bloke shouted "Dogane!" and slid the door shut again. After a bit I realised that that was the Italian word for customs, so we had just had the customs check. I had expected the classic ceremony, showing passports, questions etc. Easy!

In 1980, my Ph.D. student John and I travelled to Prague to attend the ten-yearly Heyrovsky Symposium, a mecca for electrochemists. We took the train from Copenhagen, which went over to the then DDR on a ferry. Already on the railway platform in Copenhagen we had to show our passports. It was a night train. Early morning, about 5 am, we landed on DDR soil, and the door was opened on our compartment. Two men came in, and one of them said, in German, "Customs Control, passports please!". The other bloke had a small chest desk suspended from his neck and he seemed to be taking notes. We showed our passports and answered a few questions, where we were

going and why. All was in order and the first bloke thanked us and said good bye. We were about to put away the passports again, when the other man sort of straightened up and said loudly "Passport control! Please show your passports!". We had to show them again. All was still in order, and they both left us.

As an aside, later on travelling through the DDR, we were joined by a young German couple and an old lady. The couple told us about the wonderful holidays they had had in Russia. A lady conductor came and checked our tickets. It turned out the old lady had no seat reservation, and the conductor got quite agitated, "you must have reservations!". She said she could buy one now. The old lady seemed not to know any German, and I said to the young couple, can you help with the language? Because the lady was probably Czech, and the young people probably knew Russian, which is a bit like Czech. They turned away, not wanting to get involved. I guessed that they thought this might be trouble. The old lady showed the conductor her purse, which had only a few coins in it. The conductor went out and stood at the window in the passage outside the compartment. I went out, wondering what dire things might happen to the old lady, and asked the conductor, "What will you do?". She lifted both hands and said "What can I do?" - and that was that. Interesting.

Customs control on the Czech border was quite casual. I had noticed on arriving at both the DDR and Czech border, that there were soldiers passing mirrors on long handles under the train, no doubt checking for desperate people clinging on underneath, sneaking into these countries. A week later, leaving Czechoslovakia after the symposium, this time going west into West Germany, the Czechs did a cursory check (but still passing mirrors under the train), but the West Germans studied our passports minutely and asked a lot of questions, all very formal and strict.

It must have been about 1990 or so, our family was on a train heading for Germany. The train was packed with people, both in the compartments and standing in the passage outside them. We had not been able to get seats in the same carriage, so I was with the kids and Sandy one or two carriages away. As we approached Germany, I decided to get my passport out. But it was not in its usual place. Shit! I decided Sandy must have it. So I sent Lars to her, to ask for it. He pressed through the people, and came back after some time, she didn't have it. Shit! again. Where can it be? We were getting close now. I thought and thought, when was the last time I used it? Ah, it was in Germany, visiting my old work place at Jülich, where I had to show it. Ah, then I put it in a different place, my little shoulder bag, and there it was. Phew!

Still in the time when we sometimes had to show passports (in fact, recently we have to again, on the Danish/German border, especially going into Denmark, despite the Schengen agreement), I was returning from Germany, and we had to transfer to a bus, because of work on the railway lines. Before the trip I had ordered a new passport because it was now out of date. But because of a foul-up, I didn't get it before the trip. I thought, they will probably not even check passports. I don't remember why I didn't have to show it on the way to Germany - I guess it was the Danes who were more concerned at the time. So I had an out of date passport on me, hoping that they wouldn't notice that. OK, we were sitting in the bus, and the Danish policeman came through. We all had the passports out holding them up, and the friendly cop looked at us and said, "ah, you all have your passports", and left again without looking at any. Phew again!

Some interesting moments with languages

Here are a few interesting moments I have had involving language.

Trip to Zadar

About 1972, while living in Jülich, Germany, we took a holiday trip down to Zadar in Croatia, by car. Sandy was navigating. As we passed Trieste, we knew that the first town in Yugoslavia we would come to was Rijeka, so we looked for signs with that name. We came to a fork in the road, the left one signed with something I don't remember, the right one saying "Fiume". I asked my navigator "which one?". She got flustered, "I don't know! I don't know!". We were getting close to where we had to decide. Then I remembered, the Russian word for River is река (rieka), and in Italian it's fiume; so I took the right road. I always marvelled that my brain dug up those facts just when I needed them.

In Croatia, I used what Russian I knew, knowing that it is fairly close to Hrvatski (Croatian). People smiled and told me how I should have said it in Hrvatski and a good time was had by all. In fact, I learned a fair amount in those two weeks, and I soon ordered all our meals and drinks at restaurants. One day we took a trip down to Split, where there was said to be a beautiful park. We got there, close to where I thought it should be, but I couldn't see where we were to go to see this park. There was a small hut, and out of it came a young woman. I asked in Russian "Где парке?" (where is the park?) and she answered, "Извините, я говорю только по-русски", i.e. "Excuse me, I only speak Russian!". Hmm. I didn't pursue the matter.

Finnugrists

About 1996 I attended an electrochemical symposium in Cluj Napoca, Romania. To get there, I took a plane to Budapest and a train from there to a city called Alba Iulia, which is fairly close to Cluj. Landing in Budapest, a shuttle bus took me into town from the airport, and I wanted to get off near the railway station, but the bus driver only spoke Hungarian, of which I know only a single useless word. A nice lady helped me, who spoke the language and I got off at the right place. After the symposium, I came back to Budapest and to the airport, and there was the nice lady again. We got talking. She had (if I remember this) a Portuguese mother and a French father. She was going to Copenhagen, as I was, but from there on to Tallin, Estonia. She seemed to speak a fair few languages. We sat in different parts of the plane on the way to Copenhagen, and I mused a bit. She isn't Hungarian but speaks the language, works in Estonia, is clearly an academic... Hmm. As we got off the plane, just as we headed off in different directions, I asked her "Are you a Finnugrist?" She smiled brightly and said "Yes!" and we parted.

Interesting people, Finnugrists, strange family of languages, Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, different from all others. I once had some conversations with a Finnugrist, a German. I often wonder how people pick their professions, and I asked him about his. He told me that when he was 11, he picked up the book "Teach Yourself Finnish", and he found it so fascinating that that was it from there on.

Skandinavisk

Shortly after moving to Denmark in 1978, I attended the Scandinavian Trace Element Analysis conference, held at Vejle. There were delegates from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and an Icelander (who spoke very British English). Talks were given in Danish and Swedish and a few in English, and a lot of people were unhappy. Although Danish, Swedish and Norwegian are closely related, not everyone can understand the others easily. So there was a suggestion that for the next conference, the language should be English. This ruffled a few feathers. One man got up and said

passionately "Surely we can all speak Scandinavisk!". This is a mythical construct supposed to be intelligible by Danes, Swedes and Norwegians but in practice Danes just change their words for numbers (Danish number names take getting used to), and Swedes and Norwegians keep talking their own language. Icelandic is so remote from these three that it's totally foreign, and Finnish is of course even more so, being a Finnic language, not related at all to the others. Arguments went back and forth, until a Finn politely asked for attention. "I remind you", he said, "that the next conference will be held in Helsinki!". This clinched the matter and English it was to be from then on.

A train trip

A nasty streak came out in me on a train trip from Aarhus to Copenhagen. Sitting opposite me was an elderly couple. The lady was unhappy about something and intermittently beleaguered the bloke with a barrage of excited words. I couldn't understand her but I could hear that she was speaking Hrvatski. Now and then hubby tried to calm her down, saying "Mama, draga Mama..." (Mama, dear Mama). and this went on for the whole trip. As we got out of the train I turned around to them and said "Do videniye!" (good bye) and walked off. I admit to feeling a little bit evil.

Learning Danish

When we got to Denmark in 1978, we both started, of course, learning the language. It is to a large extent similar to English and especially German, with some quite different words as well. It was fairly easy for me to learn to speak it (with an accent of course, which I haven't eradicated completely yet after 40+ years) and I was giving lectures in Danish after a few months. What was hard, however, was to learn to understand Danes speaking to each other (they kindly spoke more slowly and clearly to me). Now this process had taken me three months in Italy, after which I could understand them; Italian is pronounced very clearly. Later, while in Brazil for a total of six weeks, I was just about to make the breakthrough (Portuguese being similar to Italian), before leaving again. After almost eight months in Denmark, I was still struggling to understand the language, and was getting a bit down about it. I gloomily thought that maybe I was too old to do it again as in Italy (I was 39 at the time). But at about eight months, from one day to the other, something gelled in my brain, and I understood everything. I used to go to the cafeteria for afternoon coffee, and I sat there with a happy smile just listening. The fact is that properly pronounced Danish is very unclear and at first the words seem to all run together, and a lot is left out.

The similarity to German was sometimes a trap. I did a fair amount of guessing, and it sometimes went quite wrong. At a Christmas party (the [in]famous "julefrokost") I asked for "butter" (the u pronounced as the oo in "foot"), which caused gleeful laughter "He said butter, har har har!". It is "smør", and how was I to guess that?

It was interesting to see how the kids learned Danish. When we first got here, Thomas was four. I delivered him to a lady home caretaker every day. He said next to nothing for about six months, and then started speaking fluent perfect Danish. When we again came back from a three year stay in Australia in 1985, Ruthie was also four. We took her to a Salvation Army play school. She talked freely, all in English to start with, to all the kids, and in the course of six months mixed more and more Danish into it, ending up, just like Thomas, speaking it perfectly at about six months.

One of the difficulties of Danish is the glottal stop, which is inserted inside some words but not others. In Zealand it's very obvious; the name København is pronounced Københav'n with a very

audible hard stop. In Aarhus it's softened a bit, but it's still there, and if you leave it out, you are unmasked as a foreigner. After about a year here, Thomas once said to me, "Daddy, it's not mus, it's mu's" - and I couldn't hear the difference. I can now, and can say it. But I'm still not sure about many words, whether they have the stop or not.

There is a test supposedly to test foreigners, pronouncing "rød grød med fløde", never mind what it means. But I found another one, two words, "røget ørred" (smoked trout), which sounds like someone gagging. I can do that.

Bad people

I have several times been warned of people who are dangerous, thieves or just unpleasant. In at least three cases, they turned out quite normal, friendly and even helpful.

Before we went to Italy in 1967 my father warned me about the thieves there; they have schools for thieves and pickpockets there, he told me, so watch out! We were in Milano three months and I hadn't noticed any suspicious people yet. By this time I was good friends with three young blokes in the workshop of the Institute I was working in, so I asked them about this. They told me, not here, they are like that in Southern Italy. We left Milano by train to Germany and in the same compartment as ours there was a family of Southern Italians. Somewhere at a station a conductor came in and told us we had to get out of this train and into another, quickly. We did this, but in the confusion I left my camera in the old train. Oh no, those Southern Italians... It turned out that both trains went the same way and both stopped at another station, in Switzerland, ours getting there after the other. As we stopped and looked out, we saw the Italian family all leaning out of their window, waving at us excitedly "Your camera, your camera!" So much for Italian thieves.

Our first stay in the USA was in Buffalo, New York. We went to a few restaurants and after a while I was missing Chinese food, which is always easy to find in Australia. I checked the phone book and did find one Chinese restaurant in the city. Late one night we drove there. It turned out to be in the black part of the city. There might have been a Chinese cook but the staff that we saw in the small place was all black. They were surprised to see us, and clearly a bit embarrassed. We sat down, and another (black) couple came in, apparently known to the place. They were also surprised to see us there, and the waiter joked with them, telling them they should sit in the back. The meal wasn't great but not bad, and we went home. The next day I told a few people about finding this restaurant, and they were aghast. "What? You went there, at night? You are lucky to be alive!" With all respect, bullshit.

After a year in Buffalo we moved Lexington, Kentucky, for a year and a half. There we heard and read stories about the bad hillbillies in the mountains, who hate "foreigners", that is, people not of their own kind, and are liable to shoot them on sight. Very bad and dangerous people. One day we drove there in our "Shuddering Heap", an old Rambler Ambassador, which had a foible of the gear stick getting stuck (it was a manual shift car, very unusual). This happened just as we were driving up a deserted narrow road, miles from civilisation. What to do? We were stopped. A hillbilly appeared next to us. "Havin' trouble, buddy?" I explained about the stuck gear, and he asked "Got a screw driver?", and I got one out of the back. "Put the hood up", OK, I did this. He applied the screw driver at a strategic point, and the gear stick was free. I thanked him and he walked off. He wasn't even carrying a gun.

One time while in Lexington, we drove to Cincinnati (Ohio) where there was to be a concert given by Jehudi Menuhin. Very nice performance. We stayed at a motel and found out that there was a jazz bar somewhere in the city, which we wanted to go to that night. We asked the motel manager

how to get there, and he got quite agitated and burst out "That's where the niggers live!". We found it anyway, and it was a great night, fantastic jazz, friendly people, some white. That manager was a bad person.

I was told that the French are very unfriendly if you don't speak French. In about 1990 or so I went to a meeting in Lyon, to do with the beginnings of unification of chemistry courses in European universities. I was booked into a hotel and had to take the metro from where the airport bus dropped me off. I had no French coins, only notes, and I was at a loss how to get a metro ticket, there not being any ticket office, only a big automat that only took coins. A young man near me asked me whether he could help me, and I explained my problem. "No problem" he said, dug into his pocket for some coins and got me a ticket.

Don't try to tell me about Italian thieves, dangerous hillbillies and blacks or unfriendly Frenchmen.

Weird people

Some years ago, when punks were big, there was a punk festival here in Aarhus. These punks had taken over the forecourt of Huset, a multi-activity building, that is now defunct. They played loud music Saturday afternoon and night, and in the morning there were a number of them around town, looking fearsome in their preferred raggedy black clothes and weird coloured and styled hair, all pretty monstrous. You could be scared of them. I had a couple of encounters with these monsters Saturday morning, a bright sunny day. The first was at the railway station, where I found myself on a collision course with a girl monster - will she shoulder into me? As we got closer, we both deviated from our paths and she gave me a beautiful friendly smile. Hmm. Later, two girl monsters were walking along in town, bright green and orange hair. As they passed me, one of them turned to the other and with great joy said "Isn't it lovely sunshine!" (Danes are very happy to see the sun occasionally).

Sunday morning I happened to go past that forecourt, where a punk bloke was cleaning up, all by himself, a big job, as there were great heaps of beer bottles and other garbage. He had his work cut out. I said to him "Have they left you alone with it?" He must have misunderstood me, and he said, almost primly "Well, that was the deal, that we'd clean up afterwards!". Of course.

Nice weird people.

Rascal boys

Second generation immigrant boys are notorious for being difficult, some of them half criminal. I have had a few encounters with them, which were interesting.

When we moved the climbing club to the "ghetto", we wanted good relations with the young kids there, and a few times we hired a portable climbing tower and invited the kids to try climbing. Some of them turned to be real talents, including one about 14-year old Eyman, who was amazing. After we finished for the day, I noticed that my laser pointer, which I carry on my harness, was gone, and I remembered that Eyman had been very interested in it. I knew that he frequented a youth centre nearby and I knew the adults there, so next day I talked to them, and they talked to Eyman and a day or so later I got the laser pointer back. The lady also told me that Eyman had enthused in the centre about me, an "old man who climbs like a monkey". So all was forgiven. He never followed up on the climbing, unfortunately.

I saw a group of boys coming away from a nature centre down at the lake, carrying a thick rope that clearly was not theirs, so I had a talk with them. At one point I said to them, "We foreigners have to behave ourselves". They looked up sharply and one of them asked "Are you a muslim?" I was not, and we started talking about religions.

A couple of Somalian boys, about 12, had a bike that was probably not theirs, and one of them was about to go down a steep road. I could see that the bike did not have good brakes, so I said to him, watch out because down there there is a cross road, and there might be cars. He looked up and politely said "Thank you for telling me that". Nice rascal boy.

Power

Many years ago, in my early years in Aarhus, I was at a discotheque one night. It was a split-level place and I was on the top level. There I saw an impressive example of power, without violence.

An argument developed at one table; a bloke who was quite drunk, who seemed to think that the couple he was arguing with had something of his. He got more and more heated and at one point picked up a heavy small foot stool and started swinging it around. No one dared come near him - he was dangerous with that foot stool.

Someone called the bouncer, and I saw him coming, a pleasant looking short but solid fellow, bounding up the few stairs with a slight smile on his face. He simply went up to the drunk and put his hand on his arm, saying a few words I couldn't hear, and the drunk calmed down immediately and allowed himself to be led downstairs and out. No violence was used or needed, but clearly the drunk could see that he had no chance against the bouncer, who seemed to radiate power, very impressive.

Labouring

As a student in the 50's and early 60's, I often supplemented my meager income by working as a labourer in the holidays. I was fit and strong, which was useful. Back then, there was practically full employment, so the approx. 1% unemployed reflected (in my opinion) the constant level of the unemployable, which still holds today. When it goes up, politicians like to pretend that they are all lazy and need prodding into getting jobs, which at such times don't exist. At that time, if I wanted a job, all I had to do was to get up very early, like 5 am, buy a newspaper to look for vacancies, and go to the nearest site. Usually I was the first there or one of the first, and got a job.

Demo job

At this one, I was one of about four, not the first to arrive, on a cold winter morning. We sat around a fire, and one of the blokes looked at the partially demolished house, and remarked "Demo job". We agreed. Another one commented, that the boss didn't fucking know what he's doin, they were demolishing from the bottom, instead of from the top. When the boss arrived later we were all taken on. I got given a crow bar and told to remove pipes and other fittings inside the house, which was fun work. I did this on and off for a couple of weeks. It got to me; one night, at Sandy's parents' place, I was idly looking at wall fittings in their lounge room, and thinking how I would attack them with my crow bar. I didn't have it with me, so the fittings were safe.

At about 11 am, one of the blokes burst out “I’ve fuckn had this!” and went to the boss and resigned. He got his pay for the hours he had worked and left. One of the others smirked and told us that that’s all he wanted, enough money to go and buy drinks for the day, bloody derelict.

Another job we got put to was cleaning bricks. They had mortar still on them and we got given tomahawks to clean them with, a pleasant and rewarding job. One the blokes had his own, that he had prepared really well. He had sawn or ground a slit in the cutting edge of a tomahawk and inserted a reactangle cut out of a saw blade in that, so he had a very nifty tool for scraping off the mortar. I envied him this lovely tool.

We stacked the cleaned bricks, and later put them up on a truck, throwing them up to the bloke on top of it. We got given leather gloves for this. One of the old blokes told us that in the old days they never got gloves for this, and the bricks wore away the skin on the fingers, making what he called birds’ eyes on the finger tips. This same bloke got a rip in his shirt, and said, “Aw shit, me missus will go crook at me!”. Nice old bugger.

A memorable couple of weeks’ work.

Foundation jobs

One job I got was on top of the bottom level of a building under construction. We had to receive wheel barrows filled with concrete coming up to us on a lift, and we had to wheel it along planks and pour it out. This was fairly hard for lightweight me, even though I was pretty strong, and it was touch and go not to tip the barrow on the way. One of the other blokes was a short stocky Maori, who revelled in his strength. At one time he called to the people filling his wheelbarrow down below, “Fill mine right up!”. This was what I didn’t want for mine. I learned a Maori word from him. He saw a woman some distance away, and called out to us ”Tekeh!” which I understood to mean a woman’s very private body part.

Another job I got was at Rose Bay, where they were starting on a large multistory building. I was in on the foundation part, again wheelbarrowing concrete late the first day. The building was built up from a level quite a lot lower than the road next to it, and I got the job of carrying some railway sleepers that were stacked up on the foot path at the top. I was paired with a strong young bloke, short and wide, and we took one end each down the stairs. This took a couple of hours and the time went quickly. Meanwhile, down at the foundation, other blokes were cleaning rocks and other stuff from between reo (reinforcement) mesh, which was an irritating and boring job, standing inside a calf-high mesh, bending over to pick up the bits. We felt lucky. Later, I got paired with another bloke, moving the sleepers from one place to another. This bloke had worked in an office before and couldn’t even lift up his end of the sleepers, and I had to pick them up, put them on my shoulder, so that he could get his shoulder under one end. Pathetic, I thought.

One lunch time, we were sitting eating with the bosses, and I heard one of them tell the other, that there had been some blokes looking for a job. They were uni students, he said, and he sent them off quick smart. I didn’t say anything. Some days later, he suggested that they get me trained as a crane chaser (the bloke who hooks up and unhooks stuff to be hoisted by the crane) commenting “We’ll make a good labourer out of you, Pete” (they couldn’t handle Dieter and called me that instead). I had to admit that was a uni student, but by then this didn’t matter any more.

This same boss, at another lunch break, commented on a team of Finns who were building extensive form work for more concreting, “There they go, jabbering away in their own lingo, but they seem to get on alright”. Funny. He was not a bad bloke, despite his various prejudices.

I went back to the same site a year later, and it was now a raw building, with different jobs to do. The blokes didn’t work very hard, especially if the bosses weren’t in sight. I noticed that, like

the Maori, a lot of them were quite obsessed with the mere sight of women nearby, staring at them. Anyway, one day the boss gave me some job, and I finished it quickly. I went to him in his office and told him I was finished. He got a bit flustered, not expecting this so soon. He looked around him, and after some seconds he said "This office is a mess. Tidy it up a bit", which I did. After that it was knock-off time.

At this job, which was in a hot summer, I learned to appreciate a cold beer afterwards, drinking a whole schooner. But only on hot days. Normally I don't like it so cold.

Chapter 2

The Bodøvej stories

As mentioned, here follow the stories I wrote for and with Thomas. I will attach the scanned written stories. I got Lars to film me reciting “Boring Story”, and it can be seen [here](#).