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TALE OF TWO SHIPS

KAI HORSTHEMKE

Lessons in Humility - Part 1 - The ‘Achille Lauro‘

Tuesday, 29 November 1994

"Hey Nineteen" finished the gig, as usual, just before midnight, and we briefly discussed rehearsal plans for the next day. The rehearsal was scheduled, as usual, for 10h00. We packed up our instruments, and I went downstairs to drop off my bass in the cabin, then decided to go back upstairs to catch "Crosstalk's" last set in the Sorrento bar - next to the Scarabeo lounge, where we always played.

Wednesday, 30 November

It was just after midnight. Tracy Hills wasn't playing bass with the band - it was just Moss, her husband, and Dave on guitars, plus the "Japanese rhythm section" - so we had a glass of wine or two and were joined by Robin and Julie Boltman, Luciano Zuppa (one of the singers) and Leon Henrico, our other keyboard player (Garth Victor, of course, was "numero uno").

Moss and Dave stopped playing at about 0h30 and came over to the bar. Leon and Robin started talking about the near collision we'd had the previous night. Apparently some north-bound vessel had crossed in front of the "Achille Lauro" without noticeably reacting to any flashing or hornsounding. One minute later - and a massive collision couldn't have been avoided. All this had taken place just after 03h00. When Robin - who had worked on the "Achille Lauro" many times before as a comedian/magician and, consequently, knew the officers well - asked one of them about the incident later that day, he was quietly taken aside and told that the "whole bridge" had probably been asleep on the other ship. This near-catastrophe resulted in a string of reminiscences about mishaps and almost-mishaps on ships over the years (after all, Robin, Moss and Tracy had been on the "Oceanos" when it sank off the Transkei coast over three years ago). We all had a chuckle about the "Aegean Dolphin" cruise season which followed the "Oceanos" - with the travel company going into liquidation halfway into the season, as a result of the disaster. We had ended up in Greece, without salaries, hotel accommodation, or air tickets, and temporarily even without passports: "Oh, we can laugh about everything now!"

All of a sudden there was a commotion in the vicinity of the staircase. The ship's Israeli security guards came running into the room, wild-eyed, in shirt-sleeves, walkie-talkie in hand: "There's a fire in the engine room!" They told us to stay together, not to do anything yet, not to alarm any passengers yet. (By this time, I think, there were only us entertainers and the bar personnel in the room.) It felt like a dream, especially in the light of our conversation - with Robin having delighted us with tales of previous fires on the "Achille Lauro". It felt like a dream from which I'd wake up any second now, now that I was aware of dreaming this. The Israelis rushed out, and - indeed - a vague haze, almost imperceptible, came snaking up the staircase into the lounge and bar area.

Then suddenly the fire doors slammed shut, effectively isolating us in the room. Tracy's eyes started welling up with tears: "I can't go through this again, I just can't ..." She and Moss had lost all their musical gear and other belongings three years ago.

After another 10 minutes (by this time it was just after 01h00), the Israelis were back, having forced open the fire doors. It was serious. We'd have to get our life-jackets and alert everyone, i.e., get all the passengers to assemble outside on the deck, in order to prevent exposure to the smoke, while the fire was being brought under control.

I rushed downstairs, got my life-jacket from the cabin and then started banging on doors. Almost at the same time, the signal for general emergency was sounded, followed by an announcement that there was no reason for alarm or panic - that it was mainly a precautionary measure to get everyone out into the fresh night air. It was really the most spectacular night out here, above one of the deepest stretches in the Indian Ocean - more stars than I'd ever seen before in my life. By this time, the engines had been cut, so there was no sound except hushed voices and waves gently lapping against the body of the ship.

Then a call went out for a doctor or a nurse. Apparently, an elderly German had suffered a heart attack at the front of the ship, starboard side. I made my way through the calmly waiting people, in order to see whether I could be of any help, translating or whatever. When I got there, the man had already died. The widow was sitting in a deck chair, her frail body shaking, the husband lying in front of her, already covered with a blanket, under which she'd placed her hand, stroking his head, sobbing inconsolably.

I rushed off to get blankets for her from our cabin, got back, muttered some platitudes about "Ruhe und Frieden", helped to place blankets over her legs and shoulders, but she was - obviously - not in receiving mode. There were other German people around, trying to comfort her, but at the same time wondering aloud about what was actually happening around us, whether it was big fire, whether it was being brought under control, etc. etc.

I went back inside to get more blankets, together with a couple of staff members and other entertainers. It looked like it was going to be a long night, and soon the night air would start to get chillier. As Heath, one of the dancers, and I made our way through one of the passages extending to the front of the ship from the Scarabeo lounge, I noticed a box on the wall, ostensibly housing a fire-hose. Curious, I peeked inside. It was a horrible sight, accompanied by intense heat: the paint had flaked off inside the box, and the hose hung in tatters, blackened and dysfunctional. That was the first time I felt that things might be more serious than I had previously thought, but it was only a fleeting feeling of unease.

We got all the blankets we could carry out of the cabins that we had found unlocked, carried them upstairs to distribute them among passengers (who were still relatively quiet, resigned to spending the next few hours outside). After getting another load of blankets from further down the same passage and having noticed that the smoke had begun to make similar endeavours increasingly difficult, I decided to go down to the cabin once more, to fill my little denim bag with essentials, "just in case ...". I still did not seriously believe, however, that we'd have to abandon ship at some stage. I had strong faith in both the quality of the fire-fighting equipment and the competence of the

crew dealing with the problem. I grabbed the bag and, in the dark (the cabin lights had been switched off by means of some central controlling mechanism), found my passport, my ID book, address book, pocket diary, camera, and finally the little Buddha Leonel Bastos had given me as a present during the last cruise season. The water supply to the cabins, too, had been cut.

This time, I went up to the pool deck, where most of the musicians, singers, and dancers had found deck chairs and the like. Some were already sleeping, more or less restlessly. I found a chair next to Moss and Tracy. Tracy was very calm now, almost apologising for her tears some three or four hours earlier. There was another announcement, to the effect that the fire had been brought under control, but that everyone should remain out on the decks, since there was a lot of smoke inside that would have to be "pumped" or filtered out. I managed to close my eyes a little and must have dropped off for a moment.

The next thing I remember is seeing Tracy, this time with dark worry in her eyes (it had begun to get light), staring in the direction of the chimney, under which the engine room was located. The smoke which had become thinner and quite transparent earlier was now billowing thick and dark. "I think it's getting worse again," Tracy said. Robin and Julie had found a place in the kiddies' pool. (Of course, the water is pumped back into the sea at the end of every day.) Robin was still wearing his tuxedo, but had placed the jacket over Julie. Gradually, as day was dawning, people around us started stirring, coming to their senses again, realising (as I had, minutes earlier) that it was not a dream, that we were drifting in the Indian Ocean, presumably equidistant from the Horn of Africa, Mombasa and Seychelles, with no land in sight and the smoke emanating from the cavity underneath the chimney becoming thicker, darker and more and more ominous.

Some time after that, the "rumour" (it turned out to be a fact, actually) reached us that the fire-fighting equipment had failed, that there was not enough pressure for the use of water anymore. - Had they really attempted to fight an electrical fire with water? - And then the "bucket brigade" was formed. It started with some Italian and Honduran crew members coming up one of the outside staircases, with water-filled buckets, climbing up the metal staircase leading to the area above the engine room and hurling the water into the smoke-belching cavity. We formed a chain, passed the full buckets on, hurled the empty ones to the lower deck to be refilled ...

This was the precise moment I realised that we were fighting a battle we weren't going to win, that we would have to abandon ship sooner or later. And still I carried on, participating in this silly and absurd pantomime of bucket-passing, all the while thinking how ridiculous it all was: people risking their health by briefly disappearing into the smoke, T-shirts or towels wrapped around their heads, to emerge split seconds later, coughing, eyes streaming, buckets empty, with the smoke singularly undiminished, indicating that somewhere below the fire, which had allegedly been brought under control, was raging on, devouring more and more, gradually eating into areas that had been accessible to all those of us who weren't crew members. I remember still thinking what a god-awful mess it would be to clean up and how unpleasant it would be to wade through muck and water for days on end. At the same time, however, I felt that this bucket-chain was the most pointless manoeuvre I had ever participated in. It's strange how the mind can entertain two contradictory sets of beliefs at the same time, or at least in close and continuous succession, two notions that are actually mutually exclusive.

Pretty soon, as was to be expected, we were told (unofficially by Dale Carolin, the assistant cruise director), that we would in all likelihood have to abandon ship and that we - staff and entertainers - should split up strategically to guide passengers in groups of 20 to the lifeboats. Some 30 minutes later, an announcement made this official, again advising passengers to remain calm - there was no need to worry, we had more than enough time, there was enough space in the lifeboats for everyone, etc. etc.

At this point I had to think of the disastrous lifeboat drill and test in Genoa, the day before the passengers boarded and the ship left Italy. After having been briefed about all kinds of emergency procedures and signals, we had assembled outside, adjacent to the particular lifeboats we had been assigned to. The Italian maritime security inspectors wanted one lifeboat lowered, with people inside, as a kind of "spot check". They chose the boat next to the one to which I had been assigned. Crew and staff members climbed inside, and after much bellowing, cursing, tugging, etc., the boat was dangling, out of reach, from the ship's port side - but impossible to manoeuvre into the water below. Moss, who was inside, was told to grab a rope (which almost jerked him overboard): for no immediately discernible purpose. There was more bellowing, cursing (a couple of extra "stronzos" thrown in for good measure), and copious amounts of tugging - to no avail. The lifeboat was dangling in a no-person's-land, and the inspettores shook their heads, made ominous marks on their papers and just left the ship. The test was to be repeated the next morning at 10, before the first passengers were to board. This never happened. Who knows how the safety certificates were obtained ...

All this went through my head as I contemplated the imminent attempt to get 900-plus people into the ship's lifeboats and life-rafts and away from the ship before things really got bad.
It wasn't a comfortable thought, but throughout I was in a Zen-like state of mind, not quite indifferent but certainly approximating a kind of quiet, relaxed fatalism. This was the way it was and I couldn't help it, no one could ... We did our bit guiding passengers to lifeboats, etc. There was a remarkable level of discipline and cooperation, as people waited patiently in groups, in order to be guided down towards the lifeboat deck. At some point, I saw a life-raft being thrown overboard and landing in one of the boats that had already been lowered. It self-inflated immediately and rapidly, and people were battling to get it off the boat. "At least those things are working," one of us was joking.

Time passed, and finally it was our turn. All the lifeboats on the port side were full, some had been lowered already - which had been easy: since the ship was leaning quite heavily towards the port side, probably as a result of all the water that had been used to "fight the fire" causing and then aggravating the initial imbalance. It would be more difficult to lower the lifeboats on the starboard side, against the body of the ship.

When we (staff and entertainers) got to the starboard side, after having completed our "duties" for the time being, we discovered that all the lifeboats that were still available to nonpassengers were occupied by crew members already, mostly Italian, who were trying to discourage us - only verbally but at the top of their voices - from climbing into their particular boats. We adopted a stoic "up yours"-attitude and just forced our way in. Among those in the boat was Arcadi, the officer in charge of hotel management, his watery-blue eyes completely vacant. The familiar spectacle began, that of trying to lower the boat. The windows of the discotheque, already blackened by fire, with

smoke oozing out of openings like ventilation grids, had started to develop cracks and would soon explode in showers of fine glass above our heads. Amid much shouting, insults and a general franticness among the crew (except for a zombie-like Arcadi), which did anything but evoke a great sense of confidence and trust among the rest of us, Nadia appeared on the deck. Nadia, as cruise director, had made all the announcements regarding the state of fire-combat as well as the disembarkation and was going to become the one person to take decisive action throughout this whole procedure, something which Orsi, the captain of the ship and other commanding officers had conspicuously failed, and continued to fail, to do. "There are still passengers on board who haven't found lifeboats yet."

Well, that of course meant that we had to get out of the boats and back onto the deck, making way for the now increasingly desperate passengers. We pushed and shoved our way up to the front end of the starboard side, in order to get to lifeboats - which we finally reached and which, again, were already occupied by crew members, shouting and claiming that the boats were already too full. Again, "up yours" worked wonders, and I finally managed to squeeze onto a greasy wooden bench, readying myself for the next spectacle, at which belligerence was to be exceeded by incompetence: the lowering of the boat.

At first nothing happened, even with the ropes and wire cables already loosened. The electrical gadget that is supposed to do the trick was virtually screeching - to no obvious effect. Then, all of a sudden, the boat jerkily crashed down towards the right, almost causing some of us to fall out, certainly to fall over and on top of one another. Because I was on the side closer to the ship, I joined in the effort to force the boat away from the body of the ship - simply by means of pushing our legs against the ship with all available force. The result was that now the boat jerked downwards on the left, again creating a terrible imbalance, accompanied by cries of fear, frustration and anger. This was the only time I experienced some sense of serious discomfort, mainly at the prospect of ending up in the ocean with what little we had managed to salvage from the ship.

After what seemed like an eternity of dangling and being thrown violently either to the left or to the right, we were finally on the water - without having gotten wet and without having been showered by the glass from the windows above. Ours was the third last boat or raft to leave the ship. Fortunately, we had a competent driver, and for the next few hours the shouting was kept to a minimum, as we were floating about, keeping within reasonable distance from the other boats and rafts. The German who had died had been left on the ship. I learnt later that a South African man had been hit on the head by the life-raft I had seen fall and self-inflate. He died in the lifeboat.

Chin resting on my lifejacket, I managed to sleep a bit, confident that it would only be a matter of hours till we were going to be picked up. The only thing that bothered me was the thought that, while I knew that I was okay, Fiona and my family and friends didn't know, and that the news of the fire would cause some anxiety - at least, for a short while. After two-plus hours, we saw the first ships. We made towards what looked like and indeed turned out to be a gas tanker. After three hours in the lifeboat, ours was the first to be "towed up", with a ladder being let down and us half-leaping to get off the bobbing boat and gain a foothold on the ladder. (For the passengers boarding later, a small gangway was used, together with the ladder.)

At this point, some of the crew started sobbing with tension and relief - a somewhat incongruous sight, after witnessing all that macho posturing and belligerence earlier. Fortunately, the sea had been calm (we were told later that, had the disaster occurred two days previously, we would have been in serious trouble) and the sun wasn't out - it had been relatively cloudy. By 14h00 we were aboard the "Hawaiian King", being welcomed on deck by a predominantly Greek crew. We were given a couple of boxes with bottled mineral water and glasses. After quenching our thirst, Reuben Samuels (our drummer), Gavin Minter (our saxophonist-singer) and I got hold of two canisters (holding approximately five gallons each), which we filled with water and with which we awaited the next couple of loads of passengers and crew who boarded, increasingly sunburnt, dehydrated, and shaken. The whole afternoon was spent with the three of us pouring water, refilling the canisters, pouring, shouting at people not to run away with the glasses we handed to them and/or to give water to people who hadn't had any yet, refilling, pouring, until the last group arrived - just after 19h00. The captain was among the last people. At least he hadn't abandoned ship first, like the captain and officers of the "Oceanos". However, Orsi was to keep a distant and certainly less than authoritative presence throughout the next couple of days.

During the afternoon already, and throughout the next couple of hours, a pattern emerged which - generally speaking - showed two groups of people, or two kinds of individuals, whose behaviour was virtually diametrically opposite. On the one hand, there were those who cooperated, who acted selflessly (perhaps not always in a friendly manner, but who nonetheless recognised the need for mutual assistance). On the other hand, there were those who behaved as if everyone "owed" them, selfishly, rudely, who were obnoxious and unfriendly without being willing to cooperate.

Meanwhile, Nadia had taken control on the bridge, making necessary announcements and embarking on the initial, crucial negotiations and arrangements. Within a very short time, the deck of the tanker (equipped to accommodate less than 40 people - and now suddenly being swamped by 900-odd people) started to look like a mini-Woodstock of muck and garbage. I hadn't eaten since the previous evening, and I decided not to eat anything either under these conditions, in order not to have to queue in front of a filthy bathroom. Reuben and I found a spot on the deck that looked reasonably grease-free and - head resting on our lifejackets placed against metal pipes - fell asleep at about 20h00.

Two hours later, we were woken up by the sound of helicopters hovering over the tanker. We learnt that they were U.S. choppers from the nearby frigates "USS Gettysburg" and "USS Halyburton". The "Achille Lauro" was, by now, a distant spot of fire on the horizon. It had started to drizzle a bit and I felt cold. I grabbed my lifejacket and found my way into the machine room of the tanker, which was noisy and smelly but also warm and dry - and my priorities resided with the latter, braving the former. I must have slept in there a good eight hours, absolutely exhausted and - I guess - overcome by the warmth and gaseous ambience.

Thursday, 1 December

Predictably, I woke up with a headache, sweating. Outside, the sun was already rather high and there was a fair amount of activity on the deck. JJ, the dance-captain, asked if I could help with the breakfast, so I went up to the kitchen with her. The choppers had dropped cornflakes, milk, bread,

oranges and grapefruit, and that's what breakfast would consist of. I took a large alu tray stacked with orange and grapefruit quarters, went downstairs and started with the distribution. One quarter per person - and most people appreciated that ruling. Some passengers were whingeing and complaining; most of the crew were sullen, either refusing to take anything or insisting on taking two or more pieces.

By now, the frigates were alongside the tanker, the choppers were circling, and soon the Americans were coordinating the transfer operations together with Nadia and other staff members. The German, French and Italian passengers were to be the first to get off, transferred to the frigates ("Trust the Germans to get off first," I thought). Next were the Dutch passengers, transferred to the "Spirit". Third were the British, American and some South African passengers, to go on the "Chios"; next the remaining South Africans, on the "Chevron". Fifth the remaining staff and entertainers, on a cargo vessel called "Lucy", together with some Philippine and Honduran crew members. The Italian crew and officers were to stay on the "Hawaiian King", and the remaining South Americans would be transferred to the "Lima".

It looked like it was going to be a long day, with the sun baking down and us seeking shelter under the overhead pipes, as the transfer operations got underway. The American navy, visibly welcoming this kind of diversion from their usual patrolling of the Gulf region, were handling all the transfers by small boat, 45 people at a time. (Apparently, they had been in close proximity of the "Achille Lauro" at the time that we first learnt of the fire. Had an SOS gone out immediately, they would have been more than equipped to deal with the problem. By the time they received the SOS, at 09h30, they were hundreds of miles away.) They looked like textbook "life-savers", baseball caps ("USS ..."), ray-ban sunglasses, walkie-talkies, and public-relations-promoting phrases like "Stand back, ma'm - we're here to save your life".

At about 15h00, after a seemingly endless ritual of announcements and people queuing in the heat, many now moaning and cursing, and us mentally bidding them "good riddance", Nadia announced that the "Chios" could still take another 23 people. Most of the entertainers decided to go, myself included, and one hour later we were aboard a Greek oil tanker that was barely 22 months old, spotlessly clean, and as inviting as it was gigantic. We were given a cordial welcome and a hearty meal (a huge Greek salad for me, my first meal in almost 48 hours), plus towels, soap, washing powder, and a sheet. I showered, hand-washed all my clothes, even my tennis shoes, and that day the ship looked like it was hosting an annual convention of Zen monks/nuns or other ascetics, or the set for "One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest - Part 2", with everyone walking around barefoot and draped in sheets. Of course, with bed- and bathroom facilities for 40 people, this posed a problem for the extra 100 people who had now materialised on board. The elderly passengers got cabins and beds, and some of us were given a room and en-suite bathroom at the very top of the living area of the tanker. It was still far from comfortable. We gave the bed to a couple where the man had a heart problem, and one of the staff (Sharon, a cruise hostess) slept on the couch, while the rest of us (five in all) slept on the floor. But at least it was clean, we had a roof over our heads, the Greek crew were incredibly charming and accommodating, and we were - finally! - on our way to Mombasa.

The next four days went by rather slowly, with little to do apart from talking - which was great in some ways. But I really regretted not having my bass with me anymore and being able to practise. Although I'd sworn to myself that I'd tick off the chapter immediately and not ponder with regret

what I'd lost, it became an exercise (not unlike that of counting sheep) before going to sleep to go through every part of my cabin on the "Achille Lauro" and take mental stock of what went down with the ship. (We learnt that she sank at 15h10 on Friday, after a piston exploded.) Somehow we managed to pass these long, hot days and hard-floor nights. Brief interruptions came with collect-calls home from the radio room, after lines had been established to England, the U.S. and South Africa, the obvious relief on both sides of the crackling line (I spoke to my parents on Friday night); with the equator crossing on Saturday, 3 December (for which ceremony the kitchen crew had baked us an enormous cake); and with an unscheduled stop on Sunday to enable a transfer of medical supplies to the "Spirit", where a Dutch woman was in a rather bad way with a rare kind of blood cancer. The transfer didn't help - we learnt the next morning that she hadn't made it through the night.

We docked off Mombasa on Sunday night, and that night my physical resistance started crumbling. My body was already sore from sleeping on the floor; now my head was starting to throb with pain, and I got a pretty bad cold which was to last almost two weeks. (Strangely enough, however, I didn't ever have a single nightmare or brief anxiety attacks, like a few of the others had had or were going to have.) The tanker was too big to get into the actual harbour, so we had to wait until the next morning to get onto a smaller Russian ship, which took us right into port.

Monday, 5 December

The farewell exchanges with the Greek crew were warm and somewhat tearful (obviously heightened by the extraordinary and stressful circumstances of our acquaintance), and after a two-hour journey on the Russian ship we were finally on "terra firma" again, surrounded by photographers, journalists, TV reporters and, indeed, diplomats. two people from the German embassy/consulate in Nairobi wanted to help the Germans on board with travel documents and onward flights, but apart from myself, there was only one German couple who were also residents in South Africa. So we thanked the consulate people for their trouble and said that everything had been taken care of for us.

I gave a short interview for SABC-TV (snippets of which were apparently shown the next day on CNN and Sky-News), in which I mentioned the uniqueness and possible value of the whole experience (for hopefully teaching us a sense of humility again), the negligence and/or incompetence of the officers and crew, as well as the virtual irreplaceability of some of our instruments. Then we were herded into buses and driven through a vibrant and colourful Mombasa to the "White Sands" hotel, where we had lunch, a shower and a short rest, before we were driven to the airport. (Trust the German to get out first, at least with the South Africans!)

Finally, we were in the air, on a specially chartered SAA flight which left Mombasa in the late afternoon and arrived in Johannesburg at about 20h30. Apart from countless well-wishers, curious onlookers, fellow-musicians/singers Peter and Barbara Taylor (who informed us that they'd organised a benefit concert for us musicians to help us recover at least some of our lost equipment), plus TV and press, my and Fiona's parents were there, as was Leonel - his head shaved as bald as that of the little Buddha. I was extremely touched by the news that family and friends had called from all over the globe, some even more than once. I phoned Fiona in London later that night, a call

made even more appropriate by the consideration that it was our 3rd wedding anniversary. It was difficult to articulate my somewhat hesitant comprehension that almost six days had passed since the beginning of the whole ordeal.

Everything had started very promisingly. We arrived in Genoa five days before the ship's departure date - Saturday, 19 November. From the outset, it looked like it was going to be a harmonious cruise season. The vibes among entertainers, staff (i.e., cruise director, assistant cruise director, hosts and hostesses) and skeleton crew were good, friendly, and the rehearsals with the singers and dancers went well.

Genoa was surprisingly warm for that time of the year, and there was abundant time to go out and explore the city. That was something I did with more direction, aim and purpose than on my two previous visits there. Thus, I spent a lot of time in the Old City, taking in as much as possible, from the Duomo San Lorenzo to the Casa di Colombo, Columbus' birth house. Evenings were usually spent going out again, resulting in more or (usually) less purposive pub-crawling.

After the botched lifeboat test on Friday and the boarding of the passengers on Saturday, we left Genoa at 16h30, passed through the Straits of Messina the next evening and arrived in Haifa/Israel in the early morning of

Wednesday, 23 November

I had volunteered to accompany a group of German passengers on an excursion to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. As we got off the ship to find our bus, I was struck by the rather untypical weather, untypical for Israel, that is: rain, thick clouds and a certain chill in the air. Another thing that struck me was the amount of junk and garbage by the roadside - I guess I had a mental image of central European cleanliness and non-pollution when I thought of Israel.

We drove through Haifa, along the coast to Tel Aviv (a rather unremarkable city with high-rise buildings, etc.) towards Jerusalem, with a brief stop at the "Elvis Cafe", another incongruity - with the statue of a huge, kitsch Elvis towering over (part of) the holy land. The "corridor" to Jerusalem is a long, narrow, winding road, graced by bombed and semi-burnt-out wrecks of vehicles, reminders of the countless skirmishes that have taken place here over the years, wrecks that now have the status of "national monuments". We by-passed Jerusalem: Bethlehem, 6 km south, was our first official stop. Rachel's grave is situated in the middle of all kinds of tourist shops - "Bethlehem Gifts", etc. (even the streets have names like "Manger Street") - as is the Church of Nativity, manger et al. Some dubious individual tried to initiate a conversation in front of the church, accentuating each of his trite questions by poking me in the chest with his umbrella. After the third poke, I advised him with quiet determination that I'd break his fucking umbrella and shove it down his throat if he poked me once more. That made sense to him. He figured he didn't need to know anything else.

At our next stop, a bazaar full of kitsch little Jesuses in mangers and the like, the people behind the counters were similarly forward - without the umbrellas, though. Relatively pretty Arab girls declared that they were very pleased to meet me, and could they show me something special.

Which turned out to be more little Jesuses, various crosses and fountain pens - all similarly taste-free.

By now the rain had picked up again, and as we drove into Jerusalem, the bus was being lashed quite severely. Still - one saw enough to get a profound impression of Jerusalem as a really ancient city. Because all buildings have to be built with Jerusalem stone, a beige-deserty kind of substance, one is struck by a "classicness" even greater perhaps than that of Athens or Rome. Of course, the traffic-lights, billboards and cars do their bit to quickly dispel any hopelessly romantic notions of a fling with antiquity ... until one gets to the Old City, that is: which really is quite magnificent - the view onto Gethsemane, the Via Dolorosa, Golgotha (replete with hole where the cross was allegedly situated) and the Wailing Wall. Soaked with rain and information (the guide, a passionate Swiss Jew, called the Bible "the best travel guide, historically and geographically - if one ignores the absence of exact dates"), we embarked on the longish drive back to Haifa, all the while accompanied by whipping rain. We left Haifa late that evening on an overnight journey to Port Said/Egypt, where we arrived in the early morning of

Thursday, 24 November

Again, I got to accompany one of the German groups - which was great: two free excursions in a row, though it also meant being exposed once more to a less than welcome amount of whingeing and complaining by the gastronomically obsessed (and, consequently, circumferentially enriched) Germans. In other words: many seemed to be more interested in their (admittedly very late) lunch than in seeing the pyramids.

The journey to Cairo and Giza took us alongside the Suez Canal for a while; then the highway angled off in a south-westerly direction towards Cairo, past military barracks, the occasional fruit- and vegetable stall, communal fields and farm shacks (the farmers are apparently exceedingly poor). Finally, we were at the outskirts of Cairo: a gigantic, sprawling city of 16 million inhabitants, exemplifying a kind of chaos - especially in terms of traffic - that is difficult to make sense of. It appears to be a turmoil of urban anarchy - but somehow, someway one gets to the relevant places relatively quickly and efficiently.

First stop was the Citadel and Mosque of Mohammad, a shoes-off-but-flashlights-permitted kind of gig, from the lofty vantage-point of which we caught a first glimpse of the pyramids in the far distance. Our next stop was the Egyptian Museum. (By now, the Germans were totally ravenous.) Most of the time was spent in the room(s) where Tutankhamen's treasures are on display: absolutely spellbinding craftsmanship and beauty. One could easily have spent the whole day in the museum.

The drive to Giza, across the two arms of the Nile, proved to be an exercise in patience for all involved - that is, at least those on a feeding mission. I, for one, found the journey fascinating: the shops, the commuters, and the veritable fleet of old '60s Fiat 1500s serving as taxis - everywhere else, they would be collectors' items.

The entirely sensible decision was made to by-pass the restaurant in order to catch the pyramids et al while it was relatively light. (Sunset would be before 17h00.) And there they were, in all their

glory and breathtaking architectural beauty! I went down into the centre of the second biggest of the three, Chephren, after trying to convince an Egyptian camel-jockey that I didn't want him in my picture at all, obscuring Cheops for 10 dollars a shot. ("Why you come here then?" he inquired rather implausibly.) It was a long, narrow and low-ceilinged climb down, a brief upright walk, and then another steep, long, narrow climb up - equally stamina-threatening as the climb down. This was the Pharaoh's gaff, then. Shaky-legged, I emerged into the gradually fading daylight.

The Sphinx is situated below the pyramids, a short drive away. As we got there, the sun broke through the clouds and bathed the Sphinx, the pyramids and the camels in the background in a warm, generous early-winter last-light-of-the-day that was powerful enough to make even the Germans stop thinking about food. Again, I was overwhelmed by that sense of a presence of ancient wisdom (which I first experienced when I saw Stonehenge): a time- (and perhaps space-) transcending suss, which - however - sadly seems to bear in no way at all on the manner in which the country is currently being run. A multi-lane highway is planned to run from beyond Cairo right past this fragile site.

(The very late lunch, incidentally, was stunning: we ate at the Mena House Oberoi, a palace now functioning as a hotel with myriad restaurants. The musical entree was provided by Egyptian musicians and later also dancers, and the hors-d'-oeuvres were a purely vegan delight, a typically Mediterranean/Middle Eastern meze platter.) The next stop was a papyrus factory/shop, and the last - just before 20h00 - an Egyptian bazaar where I bought an 18K gold cartouche, with my name in hieroglyphics: basket - eagle - folded cloth, which I was negligent enough to leave in my drawer on the ship. The drive back to, and through, Cairo was only marginally less chaotic than the previous journey. The shops just don't seem to close - by now it must have been well after 21h00. It was a long, tedious drive back to Port Said. (One tends to drive in convoys, and there are countless check-points on the road. And, of course, everything being dark, there was nothing to see anymore.) By the time we got back to the ship, just before midnight, it was decidedly cold.

Well, after this dual injection of culture and the always fascinating journey through the Suez Canal, the next couple of days on board were virtually totally uneventful, almost approaching tedium, with the daily ritual of rehearsing, eating, performing, sleeping, and so on ... until the fire happened.

Even before we were flown back to Johannesburg, there had been rumours of a replacement ship that would be coming out to salvage the cruise season for everyone involved, most of all the travel company. We had therefore talked about the possibility of continuing the season on the new ship, as "Hey Nineteen". We figured that it would be the quickest and surest, perhaps indeed the only, way of obtaining the money to replace our instruments and at least some of our clothes and other belongings. Our calculations turned out to be correct. By Monday, 19 December, we had received some money, which covered at least the acquisition of new instruments (the proceeds of the benefit concert came through a bit later), as well as the guarantee of higher weekly salaries. And, after all, it was work for two months. So I bought another cream-coloured fretless Fender Jazz Bass, plus a fretless Samick 5-string, but decided not to replace the little Gallien-Krueger amplifier just yet and to take my HH Bass Baby, which is as faith- as it is weightful, onto the ship instead.

Lessons in Humility - Part 2 - The ‘Symphony‘

The case for working on ships as a musician is relatively easy to state: first and foremost, you get to see places you normally wouldn't be able to visit - and though you hardly ever have more than a day ashore to explore these places, the impressions are invariably profound; the steady salary - while the money isn't great, you have no significant additional expenses: no accommodation or grocery purchases, no petrol expenses or other car maintenance costs, no phone bills; and the social nature of seafaring - you're in touch with people all the time.

The case against is more difficult to articulate, but (especially when you've done at least one season in a particular geographical region) nonetheless persuasive: the social nature of seafaring -in fact, there's hardly any getting away from people, both friends/acquaintances as well as non-acquaintances, because ship life is characterised by a distinct lack of privacy (down to shared cabins and bathroom facilities) and close encounters of a never-ending kind; the nature of the music you tend to (have to) play: cocktail jazz, background and dance muzak, cabaret music and show tunes, or - at best - the occasional tropical or rock-&-roll night; and finally, you're dealing very often with officers who exploit being in a position of authority, who are frequently hidebound and recalcitrant individuals with an intelligence that is at best specific. Generally, I have no problem with authority. But I do have a problem with authority that is governed by irrationality, by a refusal to listen to (good) reason, with people pulling rank because they're in a position to do so.

Passive resistance is, I find, the best counter-weapon. People who are used to encountering either obedience (whether hesitant or unquestioning) or outright active or vocal resistance (followed by the inevitable radical crackdown by those in authority) seem to have a problem dealing with passive resistance. It throws them. It unbalances them. It disturbs them in their authoritarian posturing, but it is sufficiently non-aggressive to prevent, or invalidate from the outset, any response they'd normally resort to. And while they ponder an appropriate response, you've gained time. Most importantly, your dignity remains intact. - No, there was a lesson of another kind in store for me.

The "Symphony" left Durban on Thursday, 22 December. Virtually all the entertainers and staff who had been on the "Achille Lauro" had signed on to do the replacement ship. We also discovered that the entire South American bar personnel had been hired as well, generally very open and friendly people. The ship as such, while roughly the same age as the "Achille Lauro", was considerably smaller and certainly seemed safer, better maintained, not unlike the "Aegean Dolphin" three years ago. Pretty soon, the usual pattern had established itself: morning rehearsals, afternoon tea music, supper, then two shows (for 1st and 2nd sitting passengers, respectively), followed by a slightly raunchier dance music set, sleep, etc. The inevitable tedium sets in after a while and is relieved every so often by the shore excursions: Cape Town, Bazaruto, Inhaca (both off Mozambique), Mauritius, Nosy Be (Madagascar's biggest satellite island, with the aptly named capital "Hellville"), and the Aldabra atoll (part of Seychelles, a protected, breathtakingly beautiful group of four islands, which we only circled).

Unscheduled relief of tedium also happened in the form of another fire on board, probably caused by a cigarette butt that had been thrown overboard and blown back onto the ship, landing among the garbage bags. It was dealt with relatively speedily and wasn't widely publicised, at least not among the passengers.

Monday, 23 January 1995

We arrived in the port of Victoria/Mahé (Seychelles' biggest island) in the early morning. The weather was exactly like it had been the first time I was here, three years ago: pouring tropical rain. Nonetheless, the prospect of remaining on board, or waiting for the rain to subside, was certainly less than attractive. So, together with Tim, the puppeteer from England, Thinus Maree, the solo/cocktail pianist, and Garth, I hopped into a taxi, which took us into Victoria. Since I was the only one to have my driver's licence on me, I hired a car, a little Suzuki jeep, and we spent the whole day driving around the island. Occasionally, the rain would let up a bit, but the only occasionally interrupted downpour did little to dampen our spirits.

Our last planned stop was Beau Vallon, the north-westernmost beach resort of the island, where we had lunch. It was just after 15h00. The ship was scheduled to leave at 16h30, and we had to be back on board half an hour before the departure time, which gave us enough time to take a short walk down to the sea and explore the rock pools. Thinus pointed out some fish that were resting (yes, resting) on some rock, and I took another step forward from where I was standing, in order to get a better look. That was when I slipped: both my legs went at the same time, and I crashed flat onto my face without so much as being able to protect myself. The initial pain was excruciating, exacerbated by my tentative probing what damage I'd done. Nothing felt right. I could feel no cheekbone on the left side of my face - or rather: I could feel it, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be. It had been pushed right against the lower part of my eye as well as against my nose. I remember just groaning at the thought of walking around the rest of my life as a Picasso portrait. The guys guided me to the car, and Thinus sped back in the direction of the ship. On the way there, we saw the ship doctor's car outside a restaurant. We stopped, the doctor came to examine me and concluded that the X-ray equipment he had on board wasn't sophisticated enough to give us a proper picture of the extent of the damage. He drove me to the hospital. I was X-rayed immediately, then waited in casualty for the results. The swelling had started and there was only a vague pain. In the meantime, Garth had packed a bag, because it certainly looked like I would have to remain in the hospital. The ship's next destinations were Mombasa and Zanzibar, both characterised by less than sterile conditions.

The X-rays indicated what was confirmed the next day by a specialist: double fracture and dislocation of the zygomatic bone. My bag was brought, the ship left with a slight delay, and I spent the next five days in the hospital on one of the most attractive islands I've ever seen, before the first flight to South Africa left on Saturday, 28 January. My face did look dreadful, mainly because of the discolouring and swelling and because my left eye was thick-red with blood. But fortunately none of my sense organs had been affected. Eyes, ears, nose, and also my teeth were okay. I lived on dhal, soft vegetables and sweetened tea, took the occasional walk through the botanical garden, which is right next to the hospital, and conversed a lot with other patients and their visitors, who were almost invariably courteous and warm, without being nosy or pushy.

Somehow, five days passed.

The operation took place in Johannesburg four days after my return. An incision was made on the left side of my head, underneath the hairline, and everything was pulled back into place. By this time, the swelling had gone down, the redness in my eye took only a little longer to subside, and

after two weeks I looked like nothing had ever happened to me. As I'm writing this, at the end of March, the left side of my face is still numb - I've been told that it would take another couple of months for all feeling to return. But I can live with this, after my initial fear of ending up looking like the Elephant Man.

The day I got out of hospital, some 24 hours after the operation, Garth had phoned from Durban. The ship had arrived that morning. After hearing about the accident, people had started a collection for me on the ship. Garth paid 560 dollars into my account that day.

10 days later, on 11 February, I saw them all again. Fiona, who had come out from England for five weeks, and I had driven down to Durban to pick up my belongings from the ship. We said hello and goodbye in the space of two intense hours before scheduled departure time. The cruise season would last another two months. No, even after all the hugs and the cordial ciaos, with even the captain and officers inquiring about my health, I couldn't say that I had any regrets about not continuing the season.

An hour later, we were sitting on the veranda of our holiday flat in Umhlanga, enjoying sundowners, as we watched the "Symphony" slowly edge northwards along the horizon, en route to Bazaruto.

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Apart from working as a musician for just over a decade, Kai Horsthemke has been lecturing on lifeboat ethics and slippery-slope-arguments in the Philosophy Departments of the University of the Western Cape and the University of the Witwatersrand.

(Written in March 1995, as an antidote to forgetting.)