THE BURDEN OF GENIUS

Marek Stanislawski was born in 1953, in an area nicknamed Poletown in Hamtramck, Michigan. Its streets were populated by lower middle-class families and newly arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe. Hamtramck had once been a suburb of Detroit, but gradually it was surrounded and absorbed by that booming industrial city. Marek had an older brother, Eryk. His mother, Karolina, was a housewife, and his father, Milosz, worked in the steel mills at the Rouge River complex run by the Ford Motor Company. The family attended St. Albertus Roman Catholic Church, and the boys had gone to the adjacent school there.

Marek was actually a genius, but nobody understood that amazing reality. Not his family, not his teachers, not his friends, not his relatives, not his neighbors. He was totally alone with his brilliance. This made him observe the world in a rather unique (if frustrating to him) way. If anyone had ever bothered to test him – but no one ever did -- they would discover that Marek’s I.Q. was around 154.

At school, Marek had to pretend to appear average in all respects, chiefly to avoid getting teased or beaten up by the other boys. He kept his grades in the low “B” range by deliberately missing test and quiz answers that he easily knew the answers to. He never volunteered answers when the nuns or priests asked open questions in class, but instead he answered them correctly in his head. Marek kept his mind active at school mostly by daydreaming about adventures, explorations, and travels to exotic lands. He also drew pictures and doodled, being careful not to get caught. He slowly paced himself when doing assignments in school, but at home he could easily complete his nightly homework in about ten minutes – work which would take another typical student at least an hour to finish. Marek could do complex math problems without paper and pencil. He had the gift of a photographic memory with a powerful recall. He was also a naturally-taught “speed reader” who could devour books in a tenth of the time that others needed to take. When Marek went on his bicycle to the nearby public library every Saturday, he would feast on piles of books on every imaginable subject – something that was quietly noticed by the librarians there, who secretly dubbed him “The Boy Wonder.” He wanted to learn all about the natural world, so he taught himself basic biology, chemistry, zoology, astronomy, physics, and geology. He especially relished biographies of famous scientists (Pasteur, Curie, Galileo, Copernicus) and explorers (Marco Polo, Captain Cook, Roald Amundsen, Lewis & Clark) in history. He loved the fantastic adventure stories of Jules Verne. Additionally, listening to popular music on the radio and going to the movies (when he earned money doing neighborhood errands) were always welcome diversions for the bright young man. On television, he especially admired the character of Mr. Spock on the program “Star Trek.”

At home, however, things were boring for Marek. There were no books in the house other than an old leather-bound Polish Bible and a few worn back copies of Life magazine that his mother enjoyed leafing through. His father did read the Detroit Free Press newspaper every morning, and his brother Eryk glanced at the comics and the sports pages. But other than that, his family were not readers. Even worse was the lack of intelligent conversation or discussion at the nightly dinner table. Practical matters only were mentioned, or chores for the next day assigned. It was assumed that both Eryk and Marek would join their father in working in the steel mills once they finished high school. College was never even imagined for the boys, because of its prohibitive costs. Besides, no one in Marek’s family tree had ever gone on to any higher education. Marek shared a small bedroom with his brother in their modest, grey & white wood-frame house on Euclid Street, but as siblings they were not very close. Eryk, three years older, was much like their father – honest, physical, hard-working, simple. His mother, Karolina, was pious, thrifty, tidy, and soft-spoken. Fortunately, there was no drinking or smoking in the house, and the boys were never beaten with a strap by their parents for any wrong-doing, as others in the neighborhood had been. There was always food on the table and clothes on their backs and a roof over their heads. Yet something huge was missing. There had to be more than this, Marek knew. Consequently, he yearned to burst out of his humdrum existence and experience the wider world’s challenges, rewards, and marvels, but he kept his dreams inside himself. One day, he mused…

When Marek went to Hamtramck High School, he began to change. He had grown tired of hiding his remarkable abilities and pretending that he was little more than an average student. He openly completed assignments, tests, and quizzes in record time. He carefully challenged and even occasionally corrected his teachers when warranted. Frankly, he was stunned at the academic mediocrity both of the student body and the faculty compared with his Catholic schooling, but never said so. Some of his teachers were actually jealous of his brain power, he was certain, by the way they looked at and reacted to him. The first time he was confronted by a group of three bullies afterschool, he ignored their taunts of “chicken” and “dumb Pollack” until moving just out of view of the campus. He then suddenly wheeled around and surprised the largest of the three boys with several rapid, withering blows to the face. As that fellow crashed to the ground, his accomplices fled in shock. Marek then angrily kicked the bully several times in the face, assuming that one cracking sound was the breaking of the hapless boy’s nose, which gushed blood. “If you or anyone EVER bothers me again, I’ll KILL ‘em,” he shouted. Marek’s eyes seethed with hate. His prior reading of books on boxing and self-defense had come in handy, as he knew someday they would. He was not a violent person, but he refused to be meek.

No one ever teased Marek again at school. He learned to make a few close friends, whom he trusted and confided in and joked around with. He joined the track team and the debate team. He took Latin for his language requirement. He learned to play the violin in the school orchestra. He worked on the school newspaper and the class yearbook. He was neither a jock nor a nerd. He was not a braggart or aggressive or obnoxious. He was an independent thinker, nobody’s fool. His teachers soon treated Marek with unusual respect, and began to pave the way behind the scenes for the future chance of his choosing between several important college scholarships. When he asked girls out on dates, they were impressed not only with his sparkling blue eyes and warm smile, but also with his self-confidence, honesty, and good manners. (Unfortunately, they in turn were not as mentally stimulating as they had been physically stimulating, he soon discovered and then lamented.) Marek was maturing into a tall, handsome, strong, and uniquely focused young man. He had no interest in the current teen cultural trends of growing his brown hair long, or in drug experimentation, or in outlandish clothing fashions; but he did find the musical evolution of The Beatles fascinating. He continually increased his extracurricular readings, to feed interests that were beyond those of his contemporaries. He read now about human physiology, botany, oceanography, archaeology, advanced mathematics, philosophy, and all about different world cultures and their religions. As for fiction, he now preferred science fiction, especially by Ray Bradbury. Marek got a part-time job afterschool and on Saturdays at the neighborhood supermarket as a stock clerk, starting in his junior year. The extra spending money always came in handy, and helped him buy model rockets, a chemistry set, a microscope, and a telescope. It also allowed him to go to the movies in Downtown Detroit and see the David Lean historical epics that he thrived on. He began a life-long appreciation of classical music, and thrilled to Mozart and Aaron Copland. Yet when his parents and brother learned about his staggering academic capabilities from his school principal, they felt somewhat threatened and suspicious over these new developments that they couldn’t really understand. Consequently, Marek grew somewhat estranged from his family over time. He vowed, however, to be obedient and respectful to his elders as long as he lived under the family roof.

In June of 1971, graduation had arrived, but Marek turned down the honor of being class valedictorian, not wanting that extra attention. (He had earlier similarly refused to run for class president or student council.) He was surprised and pleased, however, when he received letters from Stanford, M.I.T., Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the University of Chicago, each offering him a full four-year scholarship in any major of his choice. When he informed his parents of this incredible opportunity and asked their opinion on which school to choose, they had no idea, and seemed more comfortable with the recent news that Eryk would soon be joining his father, Milosz, working at the Rouge River steel mills. At least college would be free, they all agreed.

After careful research and consideration, Marek finally selected the University of Chicago for his higher education. Being drawn to the natural sciences, he formally declared Biochemistry for his major. Because Detroit was not too far from Chicago, Marek promised his family that he would be able to visit them during school breaks and holidays. His mother helped him carefully pack two large suitcases (her sneaking in a St. Christopher medal for safety and good luck), and the whole family saw him off at the Michigan Central Station, which had the distinction of being the tallest rail station in the world.

When he arrived on that crisp, sunny September afternoon at Union Station in Downtown Chicago, Marek easily connected to the Illinois Central commuter train and took it to the 59th Street stop. He then walked the short distance through the leafy, classical Hyde Park neighborhood to his residence at Broadview Hall on the University of Chicago campus. About 100 first-year students lived in this six-story residence, which was mostly single bedrooms, but also offered a few doubles and triples for those interested. The Hall was further subdivided into three “houses”: Wick, Talbot, and Palmer. Marek was granted a single in Palmer, with full board, as part of his tuition scholarship.

He settled in easily and felt comfortable. He met other freshmen at the Dining Commons, and was relieved to discover that both the men and women were eager, friendly, and bright. He thoroughly explored the campus with its many fine Gothic buildings, and quickly discovered some gems: the Oriental Institute and its famous museum, the W.R.Harper Library, the huge green swaths of The Midway, Cobb Gate, and the beautiful Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. Outside of Hyde Park, however, there was increasing black and white racial friction as neighborhoods were shifting, with many white families fleeing the urban core of Chicago and its crime for the suburbs – a pattern evident too in Detroit and in other large cities across the nation. Thus, Marek learned to stay within the general campus boundaries, unless he was going to Downtown Chicago on the train for theater, movies, concerts, or its world-class museums like The Art Institute, Shedd Aquarium, Adler Planetarium, and The Field Museum of Natural History. Marek was quickly accepted for a part-time job in the Harper Library, so he could earn some always needed extra spending money.

His classes were outstanding, seeing as many of his professors were Nobel prize-winning scientists. Marek happily plunged into his work. It was a relief to have both teachers and peers whom he could relate too and who could challenge his abilities. He joined the swim team, and took both Russian and German for his required foreign languages. For enjoyment, he studied architecture and art history. He was very attracted to American and European Romantic Landscape painters, such as Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, and Caspar David Friedrich. He read many of the novels of Hermann Hesse, and he identified with the main character in “Siddhartha,” who was also continually searching for the meaning of life and of human existence. He bought a used one-speed bicycle and rode along the nearby beaches of Lake Michigan to relax, always aware of his surroundings and his safety. In fact, he bought a 6” folding Buck knife and kept it in his book backpack when he rode – just in case he met a bad gang of Blackstone Rangers.

Over Christmas break, Marek took Amtrak home to Hamtramck. It was an odd feeling, for he had progressed so much in just a few months, whereas his family seemed stubbornly and dully frozen in time. They complained about the changing neighborhood and its declining safety and property values. Some of their good neighbors had already moved out. More blacks were moving in. Job security was now a concern at Rouge River, and both Milosz and Eryk were worried about layoffs and the elimination of overtime and the new threats of imported steel on the auto industry. Karolina, however, did her loyal best for her family, and made a fine Polish Christmas feast for her three men, and the whole family went to Midnight Mass at St. Albertus as tradition dictated. Marek took Communion, but avoided mentioning the fact that he couldn’t believe the many contradictions of the Catholic faith anymore and had actually given up going to church. He still believed in God and in the benefits of prayer and contemplation and in the existence of Divine Grace (a triumph of faith over scientific reason), but he was doubtful about the divinity of Jesus and the infallibility of any Pope and the myriad bureaucratic rules of The Church. Yet he loved the peacefulness and historical-ness of churches, and he longed to see the magnificent cathedrals of Europe someday.

When he returned to Chicago in January, he met a new Russian exchange student from Leningrad in his Russian language class named Marina Vorrinovich. She was a tall, perky brunette with cool blue eyes and a charming smile. She was 20, two years older than Marek. He was smitten!

Over the next few weeks they dated, enjoying modest restaurant meals and trips over to the Museum of Science & Industry and the now frozen lakefront. They even splurged for three concerts: The Moody Blues, Santana, and Van Cliburn. Afterwards, the couple always went for their favorite deep-dish pizza at Uno’s. Although the weather was brutal yet typical for this time of year in Illinois– with near Arctic temperatures, piercing wind chills and snow galore -- their mutual hearty upbringings in cold winter climates made them both uncomplaining.

When the right time came and Marek lost his virginity with Marina, it was an exciting revelation of new pleasures of the flesh. (She had had but one former lover back home.) The couple playfully snuck into each other’s residence bedrooms until the school term ended in June, with Marek staying on campus over Spring break with Marina rather than visiting his family again. (He had phoned them with his regrets, saying he was “swamped with work.”) But something was still missing. Marek was frankly unfulfilled mentally and spiritually with their relationship, although the sex had been wonderful. After several more increasingly awkward times together, when there didn’t seem to be anything more to talk about, the couple decided to break up.

Marek got a research fellowship that summer doing marine biochemistry experiments at Lake Superior on a laboratory boat out of Duluth, Minnesota. His sponsoring professor was impressed by Marek’s serious approach to their project, whereas the other three students – all from schools in Wisconsin -- couldn’t wait to drink in the bars after work and to party on the weekends. At least he earned a modest cash stipend for his labors, Marek mused.

Back in Chicago in the fall as a sophomore, Marek poured all of his energies into his studies. He attended extra weekend seminars and lectures, and he even began attending various scientific conferences in the Midwest at his own expense, making initial contacts with some of the top people in his field, both nationally and internationally. In his limited free time, he tried a course in Transcendental Meditation, went skydiving once, took classes for becoming a certified P.A.D.I. scuba diver, and poured into books on the American Civil War and on Medieval European History. He read fascinating biographies on Da Vinci, Newton, Edison, and Tesla. He read Dumas, Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy. Although, like many of his fellow students, he was against his country’s involvement in the divisive war in Vietnam, he didn’t march or publicly protest. Marek was basically apolitical. He saw corruption rampant nation-wide in both the Democratic and Republican Parties. Locally, Chicago Mayor Daley’s infamous “Democratic Machine” -- where fraud, cronyism, bribery, and vote tampering were an accepted way of life – spoke volumes to Marek about putting any trust in politicians and their empty rhetoric.

Marek was rapidly making a reputation among both the student body and the faculty as a brilliant student with unique potential. A rising star, many noted…

That’s when the problem started. Some people got jealous. Viciously jealous. Even in the supposedly placid and neutral world of academia, the demon of human competition was darkly lurking.

Once, Marek’s pen was stolen when he briefly left his desk at the library to use the bathroom. A week later, his mailbox was crudely broken into, the locking mechanism having been pried open. Next, he noticed that several of his classroom notebooks -- which were housed in his locked residence hall room -- had certain crucial pages carefully removed. (Someone had somehow climbed in his open window.) He reported these offenses to the Administration, but it was virtually impossible to catch anyone in the actual act of such vandalism, they confessed, so nothing could be done.

Then, he was accused of cheating on an exam by another chemistry student, Bruno Kettering, who reported to the professor that he had witnessed Marek covertly glancing at a scrap of paper, a “cheat sheet.” Marek laughed when confronted by his accuser in the professor’s office after the exam, but the professor had to take the event seriously and investigate. When no evidence of such a paper was found on Marek’s person, the professor dismissed the accusation. Bruno gave Marek a cold, hateful stare as he quickly left the office.

In his late 19th Century American History class a few months later, Marek was shocked when his professor, Frances MacGill, asked to see him in her office after class to discuss his latest research paper (“An Analysis of Andrew Carnegie’s Gospel of Wealth”) which defended the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie’s decision to donate almost 90% of his $350 million fortune to charities and foundations, particularly to fund the building of 3000 public libraries across America and other countries. MacGill was an ardent leftist, and she flew into Marek in a low-simmering rage, counter-arguing that Carnegie was merely trying to assuage his guilt -- in the despicable ways he exploited the working class to unfairly gain his fortune -- by giving his money away. Don’t you care about the workers? she demanded.

Marek was totally bewildered. Would Dr. MacGill be surprised to learn that both his father and brother were steel mill workers? That they were an immigrant family from Poland, trying (like millions of other newcomers) to make a better life in America? Didn’t she see how important Carnegie’s public libraries were for generations of “the masses?”

MacGill “suggested” that Marek re-work his thesis and re-submit it the following week, or suffer the fate of a lower grade at the end of the semester.

So much for “academic freedom,” thought Marek, ruefully. He told the professor that he understood, but respectfully declined to abandon his work. Professor MacGill turned livid, unaccustomed to being countermanded by a student – however rumored his reputation to being exceptional was.

When the semester grades were released, MacGill had given Marek the lowest passing grade, as he suspected she would. He immediately formally protested the grade to the Administration. A hearing was called, then postponed twice due to “Dr. MacGill’s busy schedule,” further wasting Marek’s precious time. Finally, in a closed door session, Marek’s paper was reviewed by a panel of other history professors, and its meticulous scholarship was deemed sound. The grade was revised upward, but not to an “A.” Marek was less than satisfied, but gritted his teeth and swallowed the result.

Over the next two years at the university, Marek had to deal with a slew of hurtful diversions and distractions. His character was attacked by rumor and innuendo. Those jealous of his intellectual gifts spread lies about him and about his family. He even had disturbing “hate mail” anonymously slipped under his room door on a few occasions. (From Bruno or others, it was hard to tell. “You think you are so smart. Why don’t you just die, or go back to Poland!” one said.) His few close friends and the handful of women that he had casually dated since Marina tried to bolster his confidence, but Marek was increasingly frustrated. He was fighting an insidious enemy which was basically invisible. His science major course grades were still sterling, but his emotions were aching. The unfair pressure was affecting his sleep, often generating anguished and vivid nightmares. He worried that the stress would eventually wear down his robust health. He tried to counterbalance the negativity by playing his violin to relax and by taking up both fencing and archery in the Gym to divert his restlessness. Why do some people hate those who have accomplished so much or have selfless potential for goodness? What did it gain to be so destructive to another human being? Marek had honestly never been jealous of another person his entire life! What was the point of it? Marek turned to God in prayer in his darkest moments of silent despair. In His loving grace, Marek always felt secure and protected, and was grateful. He felt he still had a special purpose to accomplish with his life. Meanwhile, he hid his problems from his family whenever he visited them, wrote them, or telephoned them.

The worst part came two months before he graduated in June, 1975. Marek had worked on a research paper – based on their laboratory work together all semester -- on amino acids with Dr. Werner Kaufman, and was assured that both of their names would be on the project when it was published in The Journal of Modern Biochemistry. It would be Marek’s first published scientific treatise, and it was an important component in his resume for applying to graduate school at UC Berkeley and others.

When the Journal came out, Marek’s name was nowhere on the paper. Kaufman had taken all of the credit! Shocked and fuming, Marek immediately stormed over to Dr. Kaufman’s office. The professor blandly explained that, in such instances, undergrads were routinely excluded from the credit – a complete lie, Marek knew, for he had seen the names of previous senior students before published in journal articles beside the names of their sponsoring professors. Kaufman then showed his hidden jealous hand when he muttered: “Well, Mr. Stanislawski, I’m sure a person of your presumed brilliance will get published someday soon, so I shouldn’t get so upset. I had to struggle for many hard years to get where I am today, while some are simply born to it.” He gave Marek a smirk and curtly dismissed him.

Marek decided then to travel abroad before even considering graduate school, even though several schools had already offered him 5-year Ph.D. scholarships. His whole family came up on Amtrak from Michigan to see him graduate summa cum laude from the University of Chicago that June. They later went Downtown on the I.C. train to Berghoff’s Restaurant to celebrate. They toasted Marek’s success with glasses of sparkling cider. Over ample plates of hearty German sausages (“Not Polish, but not too bad,” his mother noted), sauerkraut, boiled small potatoes, dumplings, and fresh rye bread, Marek told them of his plan to work his way across Europe for the summer, or perhaps even longer. I’ll get a Eurail Pass, he explained, and get short-term jobs as a waiter, or grocery stock clerk, or as a construction helper. I’ll see all the important museums and castles and most of all the cathedrals. I’ll even get to visit Poland. “I just need some time away from this country to think about what is the best thing to do with my life,” he confessed. Karolina and Eryk seemed to understand, but Milosz cautioned: “Just don’t think you can come back to Rouge River and get a job at the steel mills. Experienced men are getting laid off there every week. Eryk and I are barely hanging on. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?” Their elderly male waiter in his starched white apron brought them apple strudel and coffee. Afterwards, Eryk graciously paid the bill, then proudly announced to his younger brother that he had found a nice Polish woman in their neighborhood and that they would get married soon.

With his four-year savings from his Harper Library job, Marek purchased a three-month Eurail Pass, bought $300 in American Express traveler’s checks, and booked his first airplane ticket --- a one-way economy fare to London on TWA from O’Hare. (He had earlier found a sturdy green canvas rucksack at an Army/Navy surplus store, and bought it with the money he got by selling his used bicycle to an incoming U of C freshman.) He found a European phrasebook in a used bookstore, but knowing German and Russian – and remembering his Latin from high school – Marek felt that he could quickly pick up the other Romance/Latin-based languages of Spanish, French, and Italian once in country. He had a three-month mental outline of sites to see in Europe, with time factored in to work briefly here and there if he needed more money. Plus, if he wanted to extend his time abroad, he felt free to do so. Marek was only accountable to himself. He had carefully read Frommer’s Europe guidebook, so as not to miss any highlights on The Continent. He applied for and received his very first passport. He also had read Irving Stone’s biographical novels on Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Freud, and Schliemann, so he was psychologically primed for experiencing Florence, Rome, Paris, Arles, Vienna, and Athens. Lastly, he tossed his mother’s St. Christopher medal into his rucksack with his other gear.

After Marek landed at Heathrow, he changed money and took The Underground to central London. He found a cheap place to stay -- the Leinster Hotel -- immediately showered and changed clothes, and quickly plunged outside to wander the busy streets. He was both excited and jet-lagged from the time differential, but was thrilled at his first sight of Big Ben. I’m actually here, he thought in amazement! Over the next few days, he experienced the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London (via a boat on the Thames), the National Gallery, Hyde Park, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the British Museum, and Westminster Abbey. Marek had his first pint of beer and some tasty fish & chips at a pub too. This was a magnificent world city that put both Detroit and Chicago in a lesser category, he soon realized.

Needing to move on, Marek took a train to Oxford, and wandered the streets and poked into the famous buildings of that classic university town, so much older and more historic than the U of C. He especially liked the Bodleian Library, with its familiar Gothic architecture. He was also rather surprised to see many students with their scholarly black gowns and mortarboards over their suits and ties, heading for their classes!

Regretfully, he needed to leave England, if he was to see as much of Europe as possible over the summer. So Marek took a train from Oxford to Dover and caught the ferry across the Channel to Calais. Now his Eurail Pass would be used for the first time, for it had not been valid for travel in Britain. He took the first train to Paris. He studied his phrasebook and munched on an apple while traveling in the comfortable second-class compartment.

Exiting at the Gare du Nord and changing some money for francs, Marek was astounded at the physical beauty of Paris, with its broad tree-lined avenues, quaint winding secondary streets, vast parks, sidewalk cafes and restaurants, and famous museums. Even the bridges and street lights were works of art! He easily mastered the excellent and affordable Metro subway system. Marek embraced The Louvre (being surprised how small the “Mona Lisa” really was), visited Notre Dame Cathedral on its island in the Seine River, took the elevator up the Eiffel Tower, saw the tomb of Napoleon, climbed inside the Arc de Triomphe to its top platform, enjoyed the Sacre Coeur Basilica in the hills of Montmartre (where artists like Van Gogh had once lived), and strolled around the Place de la Concorde with its ancient Luxor Obelisk. He even tried escargot and onion soup – both delicious – with red wine and a crusty baguette at a bistro at 1 a.m. after viewing the legendary show at the Moulin Rouge. Marek was surprised to see bare-breasted female performers in the cabaret, and he was also caught off-guard when an aged prostitute with thick make-up propositioned him in a dim alleyway on his way back to his spartan, cold water-only lodgings! Before retiring exhausted to bed, he always washed his clothes in an available sink and hung them carefully to dry.

Marek took the night train south to Arles, so he could sleep in his compartment and hence save money on lodging. He noticed other young male and female backpackers on the train, and remembered to clutch his green canvas rucksack closely while he slept and to be on guard against any attempts at theft. The following morning, he got off the train and washed up in the men’s restroom at the station before heading out to trace some of Van Gogh’s famous Impressionist painting locales for the day – remembering such details from having read Irving Stone’s biographical novel “Lust for Life.”

He was quite close at this point to the sprawling port city of Marseilles on the French Riviera, but Marek was more curious to briefly enter Spain and to surely visit Barcelona, so back to the train station he went. By now, it was almost the end of June, and he had been in Europe for almost three weeks. He decided on a whim to stop shaving for the rest of the summer, just to see what his full beard would look like. Now was a good time to try and get some paid work to replenish his finances, he decided. After changing some traveler’s checks at the American Express office in Barcelona for Spanish pesetas and mailing some postcards to his family, Marek explored the city. First, he saw the Cathedral in the old Gothic Quarter, then he continued on to see the Placa del Rei where Columbus knelt before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella upon returning from his first voyage to the New World. Next, he wandered down Las Ramblas, an exciting pedestrian promenade which stretched for several city blocks down to the waterfront docks. After passing the Columbus Monument tower, Marek soon entered an area which featured the city’s largest fish market. Here, he thought, is where I can ask for work, for a week if possible. He had practiced a few useful phrases in Spanish, and approached a large man with a stained red and white-striped T-shirt over a big belly who was barking orders to a group of workers. Slowly making his request known, the large man responded by laughing, then shook Marek’s hand with a vise-like grip. “All the way from America? Well, I’m Gomez, King of the Fishes!” he bellowed. “Come tomorrow at sunrise, and you can help unload the boats and put the fresh catch on ice for the shoppers,” he added in perfect English, with a wink. “You see, I can speak American too, and I can always use a strong young American worker, for as long as you care to stay.”

Marek worked for Gomez from sunrise until noon siesta for seven days, at a rate equal to about ten dollars a day. It was hard, tiring, and smelly work, but he was glad of it. He broke bread with his easy-going co-workers, assorted uneducated men of indeterminate ages and nationalities. When they found out that he had just graduated from college, they gently ribbed him by dubbing Marek as “Professor.” During his free time, Marek continued his walks around the city. He saw the radical architectural experiments by Gaudi, tried his first small pitcher of sangria while nibbling some tapas at a local taverna, and was puzzled to learn when he went out for some paella that most Spaniards didn’t eat dinner until 10 p.m.! He found the Spanish people he interacted with generally more relaxed and earthy than their eastern neighbors, the French. Gomez bid Marek a fond farewell at week’s end with good cheer, and Marek thanked him heartily in return for his kindness.

By now it was July, and time for Marek to head by rail to Italy, specifically Florence. He experienced for the first time the powerful and wonderful “traveler’s change of consciousness,” whereby one day you wake up in a foreign land yet you feel completely alive and uniquely at home. Your memories of your actual home and your life there rapidly begin to fade, and you just want to keep traveling and embrace new realities! You feel at one with the world, totally free, open to everything. Marek was unknowingly being reborn as a new man, with new insights and new possibilities for his life…

He took an overnight express to Florence, seeing his first batch of rain out the train window near Genoa. It was sunny again when he arrived at Firenze S. Maria Novella, where he washed up (while appraising his beard growth) and changed some dollars into lira.

Florence was a remarkable Renaissance jewel: The Uffizi Gallery, the Duomo and its bronze Baptistry doors, the Palazzo Vecchio fortress of the Medicis, The Academy with its magnificent huge David statue, the Ponte Vecchio bridge with its shops over the Arno, and the Santa Croce Basilica with its tombs of Michelangelo, Galileo, and Dante. Marek eagerly recalled Stone’s novel “The Agony and the Ecstasy,” which detailed the life of Michelangelo, and he also recalled having read several biographies of Leonardo da Vinci. To think that these gifted geniuses walked these same streets and entered some of these same buildings which still stand today! Marek marveled. He blissfully walked the town until sunset, feeling its still living history. Then he had his first Italian pizza, which was thin with meager toppings – shockingly inferior to those many Uno’s deep-dish pies that he and Marina had once enjoyed back in Chicago. Still, the Italians made great gelato, delicious pastas of every variety, fine wines, and bracing cappuccinos. Plus, the people were friendly, highly animated, open and emotional. But their driving skills – whether in Fiats or on Vespas – was truly nerve-wracking, and made the simple act of crossing the street a death sport!

After a few more days, it was off by train to Rome. Marek found inexpensive lodgings for four nights near the Vatican, which were run by a religious order of nuns. He rushed off to St. Peter’s Basilica, the largest church in the world, and was awestruck by its immensity and feeling of sanctity. This was where Pope Paul VI celebrated Easter and Midnight Mass on Christmas, Marek realized. He went underground under the main Bernini-columned altar to view the catacombs and crypts of previous Popes. He stared amazed at Michelangelo’s masterpiece, the “Pieta,” undoubtedly the most perfect and beautiful sculpture on earth. He then climbed up the church’s inner stairwell to the top of the Dome, for a superb view of St. Peter’s Square with its twin colonnades and center obelisk, and a continued view of Castel Sant’Angelo with the Tiber River in the distance. Of course, his later visit to the Vatican Museums was breathtaking, but none more so than seeing the spectacular Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo over a four-year period under the prodding of Pope Julius II. When Marek was satisfied he had seen everything at the Vatican, he turned his sights on the ruins of ancient Rome.

He walked among the massive grey stones of the Colosseum, imagining gladiator battles, and then strolled past the Arch of Constantine over to the nearby Roman Forum, where Julius Caesar had met his bloody fate on the Ides of March. Marek next found the large dirt oval site of the Circus Maximus, where chariot races had once been held for cheering throngs, remembering one of his favorite movies, “Ben-Hur.” He wandered over to the Pantheon and marveled at its Oculus admitting the sunlight. He stopped at the Spanish Steps and walked into the nearby American Express office, where he received a letter from home detailing Eryk’s recent wedding and his parents wishing Marek good health in his travels. (He, in return, mailed his family a nice postcard.) And, of course, Marek tossed three coins over his shoulder into the Trevi Fountain with all the other sightseeing visitors, ensuring a return in the future to The Eternal City. He ate his weight in delicious spaghetti, fresh bread, and crisp salad with tomatoes and cucumbers. He liked the way the Italian language rolled off one’s tongue, and the Roman women were quite attractive too!

But soon it was time to travel north out of Italy and proceed by rail to Vienna. It was just past mid-July.

It was raining when he arrived at Wien Westbahnhof. Now, his German language courses would be put to use for the first time. He changed money into Austrian schillings and grabbed a frankfurter snack at the train station. Donning his rain poncho, Marek walked to and then boarded one of the trams circling The Ring, past the Rathaus City Hall, Parliament, Hofburg Palace Museums, and State Opera House. Over the following days, he visited St. Stephen’s Cathedral, the Spanish Riding School, the imposing Karlskirche, and the Treasury, which had impressive crown jewels and the unique Spear of Longinus – the actual spear said to have pierced Christ’s side while He hung on the cross.

Marek liked the sense of order and the faded grandeur of this former Imperial capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Plus, he felt he could spend a week here and earn some money if he found some employment. So first he tried the fancy Hotel Sacher, but they were not interested in hiring an inexperienced, unshaven American backpacker. Nor were the Café Central or the Café Mozart hiring. Finally, after several more rejections, Marek stumbled upon a simple coffeehouse on a non-descript side street near the Plague Monument called Café Schwan, with the white bird prominent on its sign. It was crowded with young student-types, smoking and laughing, with pop music playing. Marek asked to speak to the manager, 45-year-old Franz, who listened to his story and his request. Franz agreed to hire Marek for the week as a dishwasher and busboy, for about $12 a day (3 p.m. until midnight) and a free daily meal, plus tips. “But no drugs while on duty,” he demanded. “Off duty, it is your own business. Also, keep your hands off the waitresses’ asses when they are working,” he winked. Franz also complimented Marek on his German, saying, “Pretty good for an American!”

Marek started work the following day. The job was basically non-stop, and the waitresses were very sexy as Franz had hinted. He worked alongside two other young men who hailed from Czechoslovakia. They had sneaked out of their country to escape its Communist rule. They talked to Marek about the ultimately failed “Prague Spring” protests for democracy in 1968, led by the reformist Alexander Dubcek. Marek told them that he was going to visit Prague as his next city on his summer adventure. They gave him practical tips on cheap lodgings and cheap places to eat. They were hard workers and happy to be in Austria. But they, naturally, were illegal immigrants, so they kept a low profile to avoid any possible trouble with the authorities, which Franz appeared to have under control. They were paid in cash, “off the books”, as was Marek.

In his free time, Marek visited the vast, glittering Schonbrunn Palace on the outskirts of the city, saw a free rehersal of the world-famous Vienna Boys Choir, and enjoyed the historic Prater amusement park, with its giant ferris wheel of railroad cars called the Wiener Riesenrad. Often, too, there were free Strauss waltz concerts in the parks around the city, for the Viennese absolutely loved their music (and their rich pastries and chocolate desserts and their coffee “mit schlagsahne” – with whipping cream -- while reading their daily newspapers, Marek noted). Perhaps most memorable for Marek, however, was his visit to the house of Sigmund Freud at Berggasse 19. Entering the hallway, Marek knew from memory from reading Irving Stone’s “Passions of the Mind” exactly where each article of Freud’s surviving belongings and where each artifact he collected were located, and even what each room of his house contained beforehand. For the first time, a book had “come alive” for him!

Prague was next on his itinerary, so Marek bid farewell to Franz and his two Czech co-workers and headed back to the train station. Soon he would be going into his first Communist-dominated country. What would it be like, he wondered?

His initial impressions when he exited Praha hlavni nadrazi the next day, after changing money into Czech crowns, was of a beautifully well-preserved medieval city (It had been spared the heavy WW II bombings that had scourged much of central Europe). But there were many police and military men stationed around town, and the general populace seemed rather shabbily dressed, pale-skinned, and somber, compared to the British, French, Spaniards, and Italians he had thus far interacted with. Marek asked a passerby in German for the street near Wenceslas Square with the cheap lodgings that his Vienna co-workers had recommended.

After settling in and eating lunch at a restaurant around the corner, Marek headed for the Charles Bridge, with its thirty statues and ornate street lamps. It led over the Vltava River and on to Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral, in the oldest part of the city. Afterwards, he doubled back and went to Old Town Square, with its twin-spired Church of Our Lady before Tyn and its huge statue of reformer Jan Hus. Marek positioned himself near the great Prague orloj, the medieval astronomical clock from 1410, which paraded the Twelve Apostles in a clever model display every hour when it chimed.

While waiting for six o’clock to strike, Marek noticed an attractive young female backpacker, about 5’7’’ tall, with long reddish-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. He casually moved toward her in the now gathering crowd to get a closer look. She had light freckles around her nose, a fine mouth with straight white teeth and full sensual lips, and a clear complexion. Her eyes were hazel. She looked to be about his own age. She was wearing khaki hiking shorts, which displayed her shapely, tanned legs, and well-worn hiking boots with grey socks. She wore a purple long-sleeved wool sweater which complemented her breasts and alluring, trim figure. She suddenly looked towards him and their eyes met.

“Hi,”Marek said in English, having been caught off-guard for a moment. “Um…do you speak English?” he asked.

“Hi,”she replied with a big smile. “I sure do! I’m from New Zealand. But our accent is a bit different, “ she laughed. “I’m Veronica Kent, but my friends call me Roni. Pleased to meet you.” She offered a friendly handshake. Marek eagerly took it and introduced himself. “Look at all these people waiting for the clock performance!” she exclaimed.

At exactly six o’clock, the Apostle statues made their way out one door beneath the clock face and around in a semi-circle back in another door as the chimes rang out. As always, everyone applauded the show. Roni turned to Marek and asked if he had been up in the Old Town Hall tower yet. “The view is great. You can see all over Prague. I still have my ticket receipt, so they should let me in again. Want to go up?” she asked. Marek agreed.

After the amazing view, they descended and went to sit near the Jan Hus statue. They discovered that they were both traveling alone. Roni had begun her year-long travels with her boyfriend, Devon, after graduating from a New Zealand nursing college. They had seen and worked their way across parts of North America, South America, and Africa for about nine months when their relationship hit hard times. While in Morocco, Devon decided to break up with Roni and return early to Dunedin to start work at his father’s bank. Roni decided to keep traveling on her own and see Europe as planned before going home and beginning her job at Christchurch Hospital in November. She also spoke French.

Marek filled Roni in on his background and on his European travels thus far and his future itinerary plans. He casually offered to share dinner together, as he had earlier been told about an inexpensive café near his lodgings. Roni had been staying at a city-run campground on the outskirts of Prague at the end of a tram line.

Over a dinner of mushroom soup, roast pork with gravy, creamed spinach, brown bread, and Pilsner draft beer – with plum dumplings and coffee for dessert – Marek learned that Roni had already toured Scandinavia and the Soviet-controlled Baltics, but nowhere else in Europe. The pair seemed to hit it off nicely. Marek admired her courage, stamina, openness, and intelligence. He also wondered what she looked like with her clothes off. He noticed how carefully she trimmed her fingernails short, and her lack of need for nail polish or any make-up. He felt a pleasing growing attraction to this striking woman.

Fortunately, Roni felt the same way towards Marek. She quickly learned that he was extremely smart in a wide variety of areas, but that he kept his conversations more simple and direct. He was not an egotist, or aggressive, or competitive. She liked how his blue eyes flashed when he got enthusiastic about a particular topic. He was likewise neat and clean, though his beard needed some grooming. He had a good sense of humor, was tall, fit and trim, and he had a nice head of brown hair, whereas Devon had been going prematurely bald, like his father. Marek, she felt most importantly, seemed both honest and trustworthy. She wondered if they should get involved.

Marek showed her his lodgings after they walked off their meal. Roni asked the desk clerk if there were any single rooms available, and how many crowns they cost. She realized that she could get a room with a real bed for the same price she was paying for her camping site. She asked if Marek would help her move, so they took the tram together to the end of the line and found her tent and packed up and checked out. Roni had a room now down the hall from Marek after they returned to the Wenceslas Square area later that evening.

Over the next two days, the pair were slowly and delightfully blossoming into a couple. They held hands as they continued exploring Prague. They kissed for the first time on a park bench in the moonlight, but did not sleep together yet. The happy couple was assuredly falling in love…

When Marek asked Roni directly if she would be willing to accompany him by train to Berlin, she readily agreed. Although she did not have a Eurail Pass, the second-class fare was not too expensive. They checked out of their lodgings and left Prague the following morning.

Germany was divided into Communist East and Western Free parts, with Berlin entirely within East Germany. Two sour-faced border police checked their passports and inspected their belongings when the train halted for an hour as they entered East Germany from Czechoslovakia. Berlin itself was likewise divided by a hideous wall since 1961. The couple exited the Berlin Hauptbahnhof and headed for the Brandenburg Gate, which was behind and obscured by the Wall. They then walked a few blocks and relaxed at the Tiergarten, the spacious tree-filled park in the center of the city. Next, they found a bank and pooled some of their money and exchanged the cash into deutsche marks. They were later both surprised in their explorations to still see enormous mounds of bulldozed rubble from buildings that had been destroyed during the War thirty years ago. The newly cleared building lots were being prepared for new construction, but it nonetheless gave the city a rather sober look. Near Checkpoint Charlie, they got a peek from an observation tower at the Berlin Wall into grey and drab East Berlin -- a stark contrast to the more modern and progressive look of West Berlin. Marek and Roni saw the scowling East German soldiers with their machine guns staring at them from their guard posts, and the couple saw the awful “no man’s land” between the Wall partition, with its deadly electric barb-wired fencing, buried mine fields, German Shepard patrol guard dogs, and steel girder-clustered anti-vehicle barricades. Along the western side of the Wall were crosses and wreaths in some places, commemorating the spots where people had died trying to escape to freedom. Everyone should have to see this unreal yet unforgettable scene, Ronin and Marek agreed, to understand the dramatic difference between Communism and Democracy.

After securing lodgings together in one room with one bed for the first time, the couple continued their explorations. Roni had a simple camera with her -- an item Marek had excluded from his original trip packing list at home – so she became their sole photographer of both the sights and of their now growing relationship. They saw the Kaiser Wilhelm Church, with its ruined spire left from 1943, on the central street of West Berlin, the Kurfurstendamm, a bustling area of shopping, clubs, cinemas, and restaurants. Sadly, they were not allowed to see the Berliner Dom (the main city cathedral, just now being restored from the War), the Reichstag building, or the excellent Pergamon Museum -- with its entire Pergamon Altar and its remarkable Ishtar Gate from ancient Babylon -- because they were all located in East Berlin, which stubbornly blocked any tourism. But that evening, after strolling around West Berlin, they ate sausages and sauerkraut and rye bread with butter at a large beer hall, and they happily joined in the rousing group singing with other total strangers after draining their liter steins of lager! Marek did a good job translating some of the rowdier German song lyrics for his new girlfriend. They kissed long and passionately, as on-lookers casually noted the couple’s ardor and smiled.

Their first night together was exciting, tender and sincere, as nature and their growing love and devotion for each other took its course. Afterwards, they both fell into a deep, peaceful, contented sleep. They eagerly made love again at first light.

By now it was a few sunny days into August, a month when many Europeans took their summer vacations. The budget hotels, private home with rooms-to-let, and restaurants were more crowded. Because Marek strongly desired to visit Poland, they decided to board a train for Krakow, the former Polish capitol, rather than visit Poznan, which was closer but less historic. Upon their arrival in yet another Communist-dominated country, they were unable to find any inexpensive lodgings after searching for over an hour. But because Roni still had her 2-person yellow tent, they inquired and discovered that there was a campground just outside the city by bus called Camping Krak. It also conveniently had a small market next to its entrance selling fresh bread, milk, cheese, fruit, yogurt and sliced meats for making sandwiches. There were hot showers and laundry areas for washing clothes, and it had a swimming pool, but that was regretfully empty and badly in need of repair. The main camp office gladly changed money for the pair into zlotys, the Poles always eager for any hard dollar currency.

Taking the bus back into Krakow, the couple went first to Wawel Castle on the Vistula River and then to the adjacent Wawel Cathedral, burial place of Polish kings. Next, they walked to the Main Square, with its medieval Cloth Hall and St. Mary’s Basilica, where a lone trumpeter signaled each hour from the taller of its two towers with a tune that broke off in mid-stream, to commemorate a brave trumpeter in the 13th century who was struck in the throat with an arrow as he played to warn the townspeople of an impending Mongol attack. All the Poles they interacted with (Marek alternating between German and Russian) were friendly and upbeat, their spirits defiant and their Catholic faith unbroken despite their many burdens under the Communist yoke. After a full day and dinner (“just like my Mom’s cooking,” Marek quipped) in town, they returned to the campground and Roni’s yellow tent for the night. Roni already had a bedroll, but Marek had to borrow a blanket from the camp manager. The night was far from cold, however…

They found a bus which took them to Oswiecim (in German, Auschwitz) concentration camp the following morning, about 25 miles west of Krakow. This was the largest of the WW II Nazi death camps, where one million prisoners were killed. The victims died in gas chambers, or through torture or starvation or through hideous “medical experiments,” under the psychotic direction of Josef Mengele, who was decried as “Dr. Death.”

Roni and Marek entered the camp through the iron gate which falsely and cruelly proclaimed ARBEIT MACHT FREI (“Work Makes Freedom”). They were deeply moved by the displays inside several of the preserved buildings. One showed representative photographs of the victims – Jews, Poles, Catholics, Gypsies, and others – male, female, young, old. Another room was filled behind glass from floor to ceiling with empty luggage suitcases and trunks, another with human hair, another with eyeglasses and false teeth. It was eerie and ghostly. In another camp area, they saw the truly horrific ovens --which cremated thousands of human corpses every day after people were systematically killed in fake shower rooms which were actually poison gas chambers. Marek and Roni both concluded after their visit that this deliberate mass extermination of other human beings was one of the most heinous, sorrowful events in all of human history. It was emotionally and spiritually painful to even imagine. Yet it had happened, and not that long ago. A visit here left a staggering, life-long impression…

After returning by bus to Camping Krak, the couple discussed their onward plans. Both were interested in seeing Athens and Istanbul before August ended. The following month, they eagerly wanted to experience Israel and Egypt. After that, who knew? Roni had to be back home in Christchurch in November to begin her nursing job. Marek was seriously in love with Veronica. He wanted to meet her family in New Zealand. He thought about asking Roni if she would marry him. One thing he was sure about: he would not be going to any graduate school in the fall. His travels and his relationship with Roni had altered his entire outlook on life. He had profoundly been changed. He wrote a long letter at the main Krakow post office, and air-mailed it to his parents, asking them to contact all of the schools who offered him graduate admissions and declining on his behalf. He assured his parents that he was doing the right thing. Then he told them about all about his new relationship with Roni, and promised he would be in touch again in a few months with further developments.

They boarded the train for Athens, traveling again through Communist-controlled countries – and being expressly forbidden to leave the train -- until finally reaching the free soil of democratic Greece. Marek had read Irving Stone’s “The Greek Treasure,” so he told Roni about the archeological discoveries at Troy and Mycenae by Heinrich Schliemann and his devoted wife, Sophia. When they arrived at the Greek capitol, after changing some money into drachmas, Marek soon found the address of Schliemann’s house. It was now a museum (as Freud’s had been in Vienna), so they toured it as well as the nearby National Archaeological Museum, which also had many of Schliemann’s famous golden artifact finds that he had donated before his death in 1890. Meanwhile, Marek easily memorized the Greek alphabet, so they could translate signage around the city. For lodgings, Marek and Roni found a cheap pension favored by backpackers in the Plaka area of town called Pension Byron, run by a cheerful white-haired older man named Stavros. The following day, the couple climbed the Acropolis to marvel at the spectacular ancient Parthenon. The summer heat, however, was oppressive, but the pair were advised by Stavros beforehand to stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of water and to always wear their wide-brimmed hats.

After careful discussion (and needing extra money), the couple decided to stay and try to find work in Athens for a little more than two weeks, and then spend the final week of August in Istanbul. Marek got a badly needed haircut and beard trimming. On a whim, they asked Stavros back at the Pension Bryon if he knew of any work possibilities. Luckily, he and his plump wife Eirene needed both a desk clerk and a laundress to help out with running the pension. They would get free room and board and about eight dollars each per day in drachmas for a 12-hour shift “if that was agreeable”, Stavros offered. Eirene smiled when they accepted, showing a gold front tooth. “You are a nice young couple…you need to get married and have a big family!” she exclaimed. “Remember, children are God’s blessings. We had six you know,” nodding towards her husband.

Stavros quickly taught Marek the desk clerk duties (“If you need me to translate any spoken Greek, let me know,” he advised, “but most of those staying here usually speak English, Spanish, Italian, German, or French.”). Meanwhile, Eirene showed Roni how best to do the washing, drying, ironing, and folding of the various sheets, pillowcases, napkins and towels.

Eirene was a great cook, so she treated the pair to classic Greek dishes such as moussaka, dolmades, gyros on pita bread with sliced onion and tzatziki sauce, souvlaki, breaded and fried eggplant, avgolemono soup, fresh salad with feta cheese, olives, tomato and cucumber, and baklava for dessert. The retsina wine, however, was an acquired taste. Breakfast always included thick Greek yogurt.

The days went by pleasantly. There was only one incident that required to police to be contacted, that being when a young male lodger from Bulgaria was caught stealing a Swiss Army knife out of another lodger’s backpack when the latter forgot to lock his room door. Roni saw the attempt when she unexpectedly came into the room to change the linens and saw the Bulgarian wrongly there. She told Stavros what she had witnessed, but when the man was confronted by the angry manager, he baldly denied the theft. Stavros immediately phoned the Athens police. Under sharp questioning after two officers arrived, the frightened young man broke down and confessed his rash actions. He was ejected from the Pension Bryon and told by the authorities to never come back. They photographed him and filled out a report for their files. “We catch you doing anything wrong again, and its deportation!” they snarled. After the Bulgarian hurriedly left, Stavros offered coffee to the policemen, and they sat and chuckled about “…putting the fear of God in that gypsy punk.” On their only free day from work, Roni and Marek took the bus to the port of Piraeus and caught a ferry for the popular island of Mykonos. There, they swam a long time in the blue Aegean, and tried fresh octopus chunks fried in oil at a white-washed seashore tavern. Afterwards, they strolled the narrow side streets with other tourists checking out the souvenir shops. They also got their pictures taken in front of the six windmills which were the typical postcard scene of Mykonos. Unfortunately, both got too much sun and paid the price with bad sunburns. When they returned to the Byron, Eirene wagged her finger in scolding (“Eee…you look like lobsters!”), but then rubbed some cooling olive oil on their skins to sooth the pain. Any lovemaking for the couple was obviously out of the question that night!

When the final week of August arrived (with Marek’s 22nd birthday coming up soon on the 26th), the pair hugged Stavros and Eirene an emotional goodbye and set out for the train station once again (“Be careful with the Turks. They are a violent, greedy race!” Stavros warned, reflecting the centuries-old bitter conflict between the two countries). Marek’s Eurail pass was rapidly approaching its 3-month expiration, but after being valid in Turkey, it would then be useless anyway, so they would need to take the bus from Istanbul to Jerusalem and then another bus later on to Cairo. The train took them north via Thessaloniki, then continued to the frontier with Turkey. In the middle of the night, their Greek train car was disconnected from the engine and the other train cars and abandoned in a “no man’s land” between the two hostile countries. After two hours, a Turkish train arrived, but before it could be connected, the wheels of the Greek train car had to be exchanged for Turkish bogies, because the rail widths of the two nations were of different gauges. Afterwards, Turkish border police carefully checked everyone’s passports and belongings. Sleep was fitful for all passengers that night. The moon was full, the air chilly.

They arrived at Istanbul’s Sirkeci Terminal -- the train station where the fabled Orient Express ended its route across Europe -- just before noon, under cloudy skies. After changing money into liras, the couple found suitable lodgings on the Golden Horn for the week. This was an ideal area, for it was close to many of the famous sights of the city: the immense Hagia Sophia Church/Mosque, the Topkapi Palace, and the Sultan Ahmed (“Blue”) Mosque. A short walk away was the Galata Bridge and Tower. Further on was the Grand Bazaar and the impressive Suleymaniye Mosque. Fresh breezes coursed across the Black Sea south towards the Bosphorus. In the distance, Marek and Roni saw in the distance the lengthy modern bridge which linked Europe on the west with Asia on the east. The air was tangy with the smells of grilling fish and tobacco smoke and the sea, but it was also choked by car and truck fumes, for the traffic (which included motorbikes, bicycles and even some horse-drawn wagons) was crushing and chaotic. The locals were taking it all in their stride, though, for it was just another day in one of the world’s most exotic and exciting cities. The crowds were vibrant and purposeful, yet invariably kind to foreign tourists (other than possibly to Greeks?). Istanbul was one of Marek’s favorite cities thus far, with its heady historic blend of East and West. Roni agreed. Thus they finished the month of August, exploring with delight and trying such local foods as doner kebap, pilav, and borek, as well as delicious desserts and soups. They liked hearing the melodic Islam call to prayer five times daily from mosque minarets. As for understanding Turkish, the pair’s English and other languages sufficed quite well. On Marek’s birthday, they celebrated with a small sweet cake at a café.

When September arrived, Roni and Marek made plans to proceed south to Israel and Egypt. They discussed hitch-hiking as a way to save money, so it was suggested -- when they asked about that possibility at their lodgings -- that they try the huge BP MoCamp on the outskirts of sprawling Istanbul. ( BP stood for British Petroleum, the oil giant, and a MoCamp was short for “motor camp,” a place for both family cars with their tents and for long haul truckers to shower, eat and sleep.) The MoCamp was even on a bus line linking it with the city. So, after packing up their belongings and Roni’s yellow tent, the pair headed out.

They quickly set up camp upon arriving, then casually asked several nearby car and truck drivers if they could catch a ride with them the following morning to the Syrian border, or beyond. They figured that they could then take a scheduled transportation bus onward to Jerusalem from whatever major city they were nearest. After several refusals, they at last found a willing trucker named Sandu, who was hauling irrigation pipes to Aleppo, in Syria, via the main highway through Ankara and Adana. The trip would take about 14 hours, and they would leave at dawn.

Sandu was in his mid-30’s, and he was from Bucharest, Romania. His given name was actually Alexandru, but he preferred his nickname. He had a wife and young daughter, and he confessed it was a difficult life to be away on the road so much, but it paid well. He spoke Russian, so Marek was able to converse and translate for Roni.

When they arrived in Aleppo it was getting dark, so after Sandu dropped them off, the couple stopped at a nearby café to eat. Afterwards, they asked the owner, Nizar, in French if he had a place for them to spend the night. He did, and he happily accepted six dollars for a small room upstairs with a double bed. Marek and Roni thanked him for his kindness, and they also got to use their first non-Western “squat” toilet down the hall! Nizar gave them breakfast the next morning and then generously drove them to the bus station where they could buy tickets for Jerusalem. Not knowing any Arabic, the couple asked Nizar for the final favor of translating inside the bus station so they could get the correct tickets. Dollars were accepted to purchase their fares.

The border into Israel was extremely secure and heavily patrolled. The armed guards had everyone exit the bus for a thorough inspection of luggage and persons. They even squeezed toothpaste tubes out a little, smelling and searching for any hidden explosive material. Even the undercarriage of the bus was checked using tilted mirrors on poled wheels. The entire security check took over an hour.

After arriving in Jerusalem, the couple exchanged enough money into shekels to hopefully last them for two weeks. Marek told Roni about James A. Michener’s 1000 page book “The Source,” which was set in Israel in the 1960’s. It detailed a fictional archeological dig, with chapters explaining the back story of each artifact discovered as the experts dug down deeper into the past. As he had done with the Greek alphabet, Marek quickly absorbed the Hebrew script so they could read signs. Then the pair settled into simple lodgings near the Damascus Gate, one of the twelve ancient gates surrounding the walled city of Old Jerusalem.

Over the next fourteen days, Roni and Marek explored the traditional sites of the Old and New Testaments, especially those relating to the life of Jesus. Though Roni was a non-practicing Protestant and Marek was a lapsed Catholic, they were both genuinely fascinated by the life of Christ from a historical perspective as one of the most influential people who ever lived. In addition to Jerusalem (with its Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and its highlight – The Church of the Holy Sepulchre), they toured Nazareth, Bethlehem, Hebron, the Sea of Galilee, and Capernaum. And they bobbed like corks trying to swim in the ultra-briny Dead Sea! After showering the sticky water off their bodies, they visited the nearby caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. They also took a bus up to the ancient fortress plateau of Masada and later visited a kibbutz. Being September, the weather was still very hot in this largely desert land, so the couple took the same water and hat precautions that Stavros had advised back in Athens. Israel was an inspiring country that had achieved dramatic modernizations since becoming an independent Jewish state -- yet it remained a historic and sacred holy land for Christians, Jews, and Moslems.

For the last two weeks of the month, Marek and Roni traded Israel for Egypt. They took a bus from Jerusalem to Cairo, and quickly found a modest hotel -- The Cosmopolitan -- near the Egyptian Museum and the central bus terminal square. They changed money into Egyptian pounds at a moneychanger, who gave them a better exchange rate than they would have received at an official bank. Roni’s French came in handy, for most educated Egyptians spoke both Arabic and that language (a remnant from the days of Napoleonic conquest). The couple was initially overwhelmed by the crush of crowds, the furnace-like heat, and the endless dust – not to mention the constant harassment by the locals to buy this or that (“Meester, Meester…where you from? I have special price for you, my friend…come, you look, you need not buy anything…Madame, you want guide? I be your friend!”). The pair also learned the dreaded word “baksheesh,” which was bleated incessantly by those wanting a money tip for any service rendered, however small. But they quickly adapted – learning when to ignore and when to give in -- to this entrenched, corrupt system. They had gone from Europe to Asia and were now in Africa – a different world indeed!

Marek’s beard, meanwhile, was starting to itch and sweat in the dry heat, so back at their hotel, with its empty swimming pool and barely functioning ceiling fans, he shaved it off. Roni was surprised but then quickly voiced her pleasure with the result. “You are a handsome man, Marek Stanislawski, and you are all mine…”she purred. They took a shower together in less-than-refreshing tepid water, then happily made love in their aged, creaking wooden bed.

Naturally, the lovers eagerly wanted to experience the Pyramids of Giza and gaze upon the Sphinx, view King Tut’s gold in the Egyptian Museum, take a felucca boat ride on the Nile at sunset, and visit the splendors of Karnak and Luxor, with its nearby Valley of the Kings and Queens. The unique history here represented some of mankind’s oldest attempts at large-scale, integrated civilization.

Marek had read a recommendation about climbing the Great Pyramid of Cheops before dawn, because no vendors were there yet to offer photographs, postcards, cheap souvenirs, personally-guided tours and camel rides. Plus the area guards did not come on duty until sun-up. The northeast corner offered the traditional way up, a climb some 450 feet to the top, which had a flat area about 30 feet square where the pointed tip of the 4500 year old, last remaining of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World had been removed many years earlier by the authorities for safety. The climb was supposed to take about 35 minutes. Plus the weather was coolest just before sunrise.

They took a bus -- for a few piaster coins -- the short distance to the suburbs of Giza the following morning while it was still dark. They saw Venus, the “morning star”, glowing in the indigo sky. The wind was calm, but the air still smelled of dust and sand. They brought their water bottles, and some fresh dates, hard-boiled eggs, and chewy flat bread for a hasty breakfast. When the bus dropped them off, they could see the outline of the three famous pyramids on their rubble-strewn plateau, with the forbidding desolate sands of the Saharan Desert extending west and south to a seemingly infinite horizon.

Approaching Cheops, they were in total, silent awe. It was absolutely enormous and so very, very old…like something from another world! Here was the tallest man-made structure on earth for 3800 years -- 2.5 million limestone blocks, each weighing 2 tons, a construction project taking twenty years using 20,000 workmen. It was the most incredible building either had ever seen…

Beginning their climb, they had to be careful, for each block was about chest-high, and some hand and foot hold areas were littered with the eroded stone debris of the centuries. It was not like climbing a staircase, they soon discovered. But others had done this ritual before them, and they were undeterred. Up, up, up they went, occasionally pausing to catch their breath and admire the dramatic view.

When they reached the top, Marek and Roni saw much graffiti carved into the stones, and they smelled dried urine and feces from other adventurous tourists who had nowhere else to relieve themselves here at the summit. The sun god Ra, who the ancients worshiped, was now rising dull orange in the east over waking Cairo. The view downward off the Pyramid edges was both exhilarating and frightening. To the southwest, they barely made out the Great Sphinx, crouched and rather tiny from this high vantage point .

The couple took some dramatic photos with Roni’s camera, then sat to eat and drink. They were quiet while they breakfasted. But Marek had been doing some deep thinking the past few days, and he felt that now was the ideal time to share his ideas with Veronica, his true love. He put his arm around Roni’s shoulder and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Roni, I’ve become convinced that we should get married. I want to spend my life with you, and raise a family together. I want to come with you to New Zealand. I want to become a citizen there. I don’t want to return to America, and I don’t want to enter graduate school. I want to be a high school science teacher. I’m sure I could get a job in Christchurch doing that after taking a few teacher certification classes. I would even like to legally change my name to Mark Stevens, for better simplicity and to better fit in with other Kiwi names, if you don’t mind. I want a completely fresh start, a new kind of life. I’ll explain all of this tactfully and gently with my family when the time is right. I know this probably all comes as quite a surprise to you, but what do you think? Could we try our best and have a fine and happy life together?”

Roni blinked twice in amazement at Marek’s words. She paused and shyly bit her lower lip. Then she looked Marek calmly in the eye and said, “Is this a serious proposal? Well, I hope it truly is, because the answer is: of course!” She grinned, beaming with her beautiful white teeth, her eyes moist with relief and tenderness. They embraced and kissed several times joyously. Roni then offered her willingness to move to the U.S. if necessary, for she was sure she could get a suitable nursing job there too. But Marek was convinced that their future lay in New Zealand. She asked him if he was sure about changing his name, and he said he was. Next, they discussed their current finances and what to do for the month of October, because Roni wanted to write her family right away and bring Marek with her to meet them in November.

The couple decided that they could afford to purchase “open leg” one-way air tickets to New Zealand, which would give them the option to stop off for a week at a time in Delhi (try for some work while there), Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Sydney on their way to Wellington, then Christchurch.

So after finishing their Egyptian adventures, Marek and Roni bought their tickets for New Zealand and followed their plan for the month of October. India was very unusual – a real culture shock! The overpopulation and filth was oppressive. The ancient Hindu religion – with its many gods and goddesses, predating Christianity – was rather jarring too, as was the heat and humidity, which was only briefly relieved by the monsoon rains. But they got a job for a week in Delhi at an English-language newspaper doing copy proofreading and correcting, as the formerly British editor took nostalgic interest in their lives. The only down side that week was that both young people got traveler’s tummy (a.k.a. “Delhi Belly”) for 24 hours, causing dreadful diarrhea and general weakness and malaise. But they stayed on the advised tried and true diet cure of dry toast, tea, and rice, and they were soon back to full health.

Bangkok was bustling, but the Thai people were gentle and accommodating. Thailand was their first Buddhist country, and they enjoyed the many wats and stupa temples – some covered in gold. The countryside was lush, and the beaches were lovely. Food and lodging were very cheap here too. Hong Kong was another interesting experience, with its unique hybrid mixture of British and Chinese. The couple laughed when they first attempted eating a meal using chopsticks! And Sydney was exciting and beautiful, with its fine natural harbors and beaches and healthful climate. Australia felt like a fresh, young country brimming with openness and possibilities. At the Taronga Zoo, they marveled at the kangaroos, platypuses, dingos, wombats, and echidnas. They celebrated Roni's 23rd birthday on October 26 with pavlova cake at the restaurant atop Sydney Tower -- the second highest structure in the Southern Hemisphere "after Auckland's Sky Tower," Roni boasted proudly.

By the end of October, they flew to Wellington and caught their final flight to Christchurch, New Zealand. Roni’s family was there at the airport to greet them. Roni shed some tears of joy amid the hugging and kissing, for she had not seen her parents, brother, and two younger sisters for an entire year.

Roger Kent, age 50, ran a sheep station on the rural outskirts of the city with his wife, Adele, age 47. Roni’s brother, Robert (Rob), age 25, was proudly following in his father’s footsteps. Roni’s younger sisters Margaret (Maggie), age 20, and Victoria (Tori), age 18, were both college students.

While driving back to their ranch, the family got to know Marek better. They were very impressed by his high level of education, and with his life’s accomplishments so far at just age 22. “It will be nice to have another guy in the family,” Roger and Rob quipped, “because the women had us outnumbered around here. Now at least we have an even chance!” Roger counseled Marek on the technicalities of New Zealand citizenship and how to go about legally changing his name, “if you’re sure you want to do it.” He also felt that Marek could easily get his NZ teaching certificate and a job at the high school teaching science. “I’ll put in a good word for you too, if you like,” he winked. “I know everyone around here!”

At dinner, they ate some of the famous Kent mutton, and Roger talked about his English roots and how his family first came to New Zealand after World War One in 1919 (“My parents just escaped the Great Influenza epidemic,” he noted). Adele was Scotch-Irish, which helped give Roni her reddish-brown hair and slight freckles. Marek was later given his own guest room upstairs.

Roni took Marek to Christchurch Hospital the following morning, driving the family Jeep. She immediately checked in with the director, who wanted to hear all about her year-long “walkabout,” as he called it, and she proudly introduced her fiancé, Marek. “You can start work on Monday, Veronica. That will give you a few days to readjust to Kiwi life, and give a chance for Marek to settle in. By the way, when is the wedding?” he smiled.

Roni looked at Marek, who answered, “As soon as possible, next month in December, if we can.” The pair had previously agreed to have a simple civil ceremony rather than a huge, expensive traditional church wedding. “My mum may take some convincing, but she’ll come around,” Roni pledged. “Besides, she can shoot the works on Maggie and Tori when they take the plunge someday,” she added.

After meeting some of her soon-to-be coworkers, the couple left the hospital, and Roni showed Marek around the rest of Christchurch. They started by climbing up the spire of the Cathedral, which offered a stunning view of the snow-capped Southern Alps on the horizon. They saw the River Avon, which coursed through this quaint, well-ordered British-flavored city. Tidy green parks with lots of trees, and well-kept bungalow homes composed the neighborhoods fanning out from the city centre. The people were relaxed and friendly, like life was meant to be. The political and social upheavals of America – the pressures, the stresses -- happily seemed light years away to Marek, and he sighed with relief at having made the correct decision for his future with Roni.

The next few days before Roni’s job started, they took a quick motor trip around the South Island. They hiked the famed Milford Track, and took a boat ride through majestic Milford Sound. They saw the special glow-worm caves at Te Anau. They visited Arrowtown, but declined the bungee-jumping that was just becoming a new fad with the adventuresome of all ages. Marek was impressed with the pristine natural beauty of the South Island. And Roni said that the North Island was filled with geysers and hot springs and more of the native Maori people as well.

On Monday when Roni started her nursing job, Marek went to City Hall and had the official documents for obtaining NZ citizenship mailed from Auckland to the Kent family address. They needed to check with the American Embassy to see if a certain “Marek Stanislawski” was a fugitive from justice or if he had been deported from the U.S. The Embassy also warned Marek about the seriousness of surrendering his U.S. citizenship. But Marek was certain of his decision. Christchurch City Hall then processed his formal “name change” legal documents. He would officially become “Mark Stevens” in about ten days, and become a New Zealand citizen by the end of the month. He wrote then a long letter to his family, explaining his decision to marry in December and then live permanently in New Zealand as a citizen. But he put just the initials “M.S.” on the return address portion of the air-mail envelope, preferring to wait for a full year to inform his parents of his legal name change. He didn’t want to surprise his family with too many changes at once! He did promise to visit them (and Eryk and his new wife) back in Michigan with Roni, however, in the not-too-distant future, knowing they would find it difficult to travel all the way to New Zealand to see him. December was of course summertime in New Zealand, and the weather was ideal. Mark and Veronica had a pleasant civil marriage ceremony on December 10th, followed by a fancy mutton barbeque with friends, neighbors and relatives at the Kent Ranch. Because they had saved the family a small fortune by not having an expensive wedding, Roni’s family bought them a new beige Toyota pick-up truck as a surprise practical wedding present. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens also received many other generous wedding gifts, which handily fit into the truck bed! As for a honeymoon, they would delay that until after Mark finished his three NZ teacher credentialing courses and got a job. They talked about spending a week then in Cairns, diving at Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. They had already spied a flat to rent a few miles away from Roni’s hospital and Mark’s Christchurch University, and had made a deposit, and were ready to move the following day.

As the new year 1976 arrived, the Stevens’ were happy and healthy. Roni’s job brought in the money while Mark finished his credentialing classes and his three-month student teaching stint, which he absolutely loved. He was quickly offered a job at the main city high school teaching biology, chemistry and physics, beginning in September. On August 26th, Mark turned 23 -- his first birthday as an official "Kiwi!" The whole Kent family joined in the celebration.

September came soon enough, and with Mark’s new teaching salary, the happy couple could discuss buying their first home.

The month also brought special joy – the birth of their first child on September 23, a precious baby girl whom they named “Grace.”

Mark now reflected back on his life. His thoughts were clear and profound. As he held his wife and child and felt their heartbeats, he realized at last that voracious intelligence and the acquisition of knowledge were just part of the wonders of life to be experienced by man in this world. He also needed love. He needed a family. He needed to have faith in others and a sustained hope for a better tomorrow. He needed to contribute something lasting to his community. He needed to prepare the next generation for the challenges to come, to share with them what he knew, and inspire them.

His realizations were so overwhelming that he wept. Mark, having been reborn, had finally laid down the burden of genius…

The End by Jack Karolewski -- 4/14/15