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THE UNLIKELY DIPLOMAT TRAVELER TALES

by Robert John Baker

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The Unlikely Diplomat

TRAVELER TALES

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SYDNEY

LONDON

LAGOS

Robert John Baker

THE UNLIKELY DIPLOMAT
TRAVELER TALES

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the books and furniture for the USIS public library as well as exhibits and speakers for the cultural center.

Albania is now a member of NATO and moving toward membership in the EU. Though racked by corruption and clan rivalries, life in Albania is slowly improving. No more tiny teepees for fire and bathtubs of olives in brine.

Boiler for Bucharest, Ballots for Albania

State Department safety inspectors asked us late in fall, for help when they discovered that the boiler in our Embassy in Rumania was about to blow up. Nothing could be done locally to fix it.

I hired a private Vienna firm to send a new heating plant and technicians to install it. The job was done quickly before winter set in.

When Albania held its first democratic election, there was no paper or printing facility able to produce the millions of ballots needed. Our shop printed and shipped them in time for the election.

As the purchasing officer, I signed off on roughly a million dollars of library books annually. Our shop made tens of thousands of books "shelf ready" with library cards and proper labeling for the dozens of new and old Embassy public libraries in formerly communist countries. Those libraries were a major source of information about the U.S. I also asked for and obtained entire U.S. Army post libraries to be sent to ex-communist countries when our Army was closing posts in Germany. They were very welcome as local budgets for books were almost nil in the economic collapse that followed the end of communism.

Meeting Elke in Vienna

Beside work I met a great girl in Viena, an actress, Elke. I had met her and asked her for a date, got one, but was late driving to it. Thank God, she was still waiting there on the corner of the Nashmarkt in Vienna. Crowds of weekend shoppers carrying bunches of flowers or string bags of fruit, potatoes, sausages, cabbages, all streamed around her. Damn! She did not hear me beep to show I was there, as I sharply rounded the corner a just few yards from her, late from damned tons of traffic on Ringstrasse early Saturday morning. I panicked she would give up. I was fifteen minutes late.

I lucked into a parking space a block on, dashed back to her corner and, yelled, "Elke." I hugged her when she turned to me, startled, but then instantly her beautiful smile forgave me. High

cheekbones, brilliant blue, slightly titled oval eyes, silvery blonde pageboy hair, pale complexion, rosy from the Spring winds blowing off the Danube. She wore a beautiful dark blue Loden cloak almost down to her black boots. A long cherry red scarf around her throat made one long flash of red behind and front. Elke was just about perfect.

“Really sorry to be late.” She replied, “I thought people might think I was a prostitute,” crinkling her eyes. It was true that the Nashmarkt sold everything, but Elke was the image of the exquisite, mediaeval stone angels in the Cologne cathedral. Nobody could mistake her face for anything other. “Let’s have some coffee and lunch where it’s warm,” I said, and held her little hand as we dodged cars crossing the cobblestone street.

Elke had a favorite cafe two blocks down, the bottom story of a Jugendstil apartment house facing the canal and the Nashmarkt. Stone vines and leaves ran up the front of the building. The cafe doors were dark wood with beautiful curving glass panels and shining brass fittings. Crowded inside, smoky, a good, low, talk noise, high ceiling, great coffee smell, mixed with the scents of whiskey and beer. Bouquets of long brown/gold ostrich feathers topped the brown metal pillars that arched up to the ceiling.

We found an empty wooden banquette against the wall in a corner and ordered coffee. I took her hand to warm it as we drank our coffee which steamed in white china cups. Her hands grew warm and the cold flush on her cheeks faded as we talked. There was something beside her physical beauty which attracted me deeply. She said she had been to America after drama school in Vienna, had roles in a couple student films at UCLA, but no luck with the majors. She had starred brilliantly in an excellent Viennese indie but had a side job as a barmaid. It paid better than waitressing. She had a tiny flat to which you climbed four high stories on a curved marble staircase with a polished oaken rail.

We had more excellent grosse Braune coffees and a couple piping hot knockwurst mit brot which came with a dab of brown mustard on the little white plates. Wurst in Vienna follows the medieval Austrian laws and is pure meat and spices, delicious. (American hotdogs are almost half wheat) .The excellent bread, also pure by law, was served fresh baked. I ran my finger around her fingers as her hand lay on the wooden table top. As she spoke, I lost myself in her beautiful eyes. Her voice was slightly husky but musical and kept low as it was crowded even near our little table. She told me about her father who drank too much and mother who controlled everything except her husband.

Exceptionally, Elke had gone to the local religious affairs office and officially declared herself a non-believer. In her almost entirely Roman Catholic country back then, that was brave and outrageous. The Church ran schools, hospitals, hospices, orphanages, shelters, etc. out of tax money. You paid

the Church one percent of your national tax to do its work. If you did not pay, the government would enforce the tax. Non-believers are excused from the tax, e.g., Muslims and Jews, or Catholics who officially declare themselves non-believers. Protestants paid protestant churches the same way. Church and government were allied like that in many European countries.

I asked Elke why she had abandoned her childhood faith. Her face became hard as she said you could not trust anything organized. In that practical, flat, Northern European tone she added, "Why pay for what you do not believe? And she cried.

I put my arms around her and held her until she stopped crying, little darling. Thank God our corner was dim. The crowded room held nearly all men, very self-obsessed. The ostrich feathers, and the appraising looks guys gave me, instead of Elke, as we threaded through to our table, told their story. It was one of the most beautiful cafes in Vienna, figures.

That was out first-time date. After our coffee, Elke shopped for me in the blocks long open market across the street. She bargained at the little stalls in her Viennese, lilting German, very different from my German Hochdeutsch. Loaded with eleven red and white long-stemmed tulips, a couple chickens, some sausage, Kaiser rolls, strawberry jam, a chunk of deep yellow butter cut from a block and wrapped in brown paper, string beans, red potatoes, oranges and apples, we walked to my car and drove home. Elke helped carry the bags through my front gate, up the thirty steps to the front door, up the dozen steps to the hall door and back into the big kitchen past the three long, bright rooms and the front morning room.

I asked Ali, the Bangladeshi who lived in the servants' rooms downstairs and kept the house for me, to serve some coffee with bread and jam. He was the cousin of a worker in my printing factory downtown. He made excellent chicken curry dinners. But that was all he made, so after a couple months, I began to take Alka Seltzer every night. Slight, anxious to please, a meticulous cleaner, who spoke basic English, Ali had a fairly easy job taking care of a bachelor. Beside room and board and pay, I gave him the diplomatic papers that said he worked for me so he could stay in Vienna legally. Vienna had lots of foreign workers, many there illegally, and afraid of expulsion.

The afternoon sun filled the garden terrace out back, so I asked Ali to serve there. The six-foot high stucco walls around the garden were golden in the sun. The almond, peach, and willow trees were all in spring leaf. The green lawn gave off warmth from the afternoon sun. The wind had died and the gray sky was now blue. My hectic, late drive to Nashmarkt worry had disappeared too. We had a wonderful time until the sun began to go down behind the garden wall and it became chilly.

I drove Elke home and went to bed that night wishing she were beside me. Next weekend, after a heavy work week, I went to lunch at her place with a very light heart. I buzzed her number on the

bright brass plate next to the 15- foot high front doors of her apartment building in the old district. Lots of apartment buildings from the 1880's and 90's copied Vienna's hundreds of palaces from the days of the Empire. Their marble entrances, high ceilings, beautiful curved staircases and two-foot thick walls all aped the princely life. As there were no elevators, the 310 marble steps up to her flat were beautiful, but a challenge.

And the apartments themselves were tiny if charming and well designed. Each apartment lay off a marble corridor and had a large, handsome wooden door with a big, shiny, round brass handle.

Elke's bright flat had little windows with chimney views all around and an almost constant breeze off the Danube. A kitchen corner had a tiny enclosed shower where you bumped your elbows if you were not careful. The kitchen's glory was a dark green Kachelofen next to the kitchen table. On the kitchen side of the wall the oven was a large rectangle of dark green tiles covering a third of the kitchen wall. That wall was common to her bedroom/living room.

The Kachelofen glowed with deep warmth and kept the kitchen cozy even on the chilliest, grayest, windiest day. In the bedroom the oven was at the head of the bed and made a shelf about a foot wide over that. You opened the oven's round black iron door in the kitchen and put a little bundle of faggots into the foot of the oven each morning. They kept the apartment perfectly warm all day. Scrape out the ashes just before supper, add a little bundle of faggots and you were good until next morning-- efficient, beautiful, clean, convenient. Lots of Vienna was just like that.

The downside was trotting up the 310 steps with a canvas sling bag on your back holding 50 pounds of faggots. Each apartment had a low, oval iron door about five feet high and three feet wide off to the side of the grand entrance, reached by granite steps down seven feet from street level. The low cellar with its neat oval doors was for the coal or faggots used in each apartment.

The pleasure of entering her building's grand hall, and holding onto the perfect curve of the round wooden banister, palled about step 100. The banister became mostly a handhold at step 200 and was just a lifeline about step 250. Elke nipped up the steps as if the bundle were not there, like a sherpa guiding Sir Hillary up Everest. All in how you were raised, I guess, or your bloodline. Could that tilt to her blue eyes owe something to the Tibetan/Mongol invasion several centuries back? Tamurlane (Timur the Lame, by the way) got almost to Vienna before his father died and he had to go back for the obsequies, never to return to finish off the rest of Europe. Maybe Elke was part Sherpa.

With or without Tibet, she reached culinary highpoints for me. Her Christmas duck with apricots, apples, cinnamon and pears was outstanding. She found amazing cheeses and dark breads to go with strong afternoon coffee. I never asked her to read the coffee dregs in my cup as the Turks and

Egyptians in a psychic mood do, but she could have done so at the bottom of her cups of strong coffee, well, almost.

I wanted to take Elke to my favorite cafe/restaurant, Der Landman, on Ringstrasse, near the Volksgarten, so we walked along that grand street. I put my arm around her shoulder, then ruffled her soft hair and stroked the back of her neck. She came closer to me.

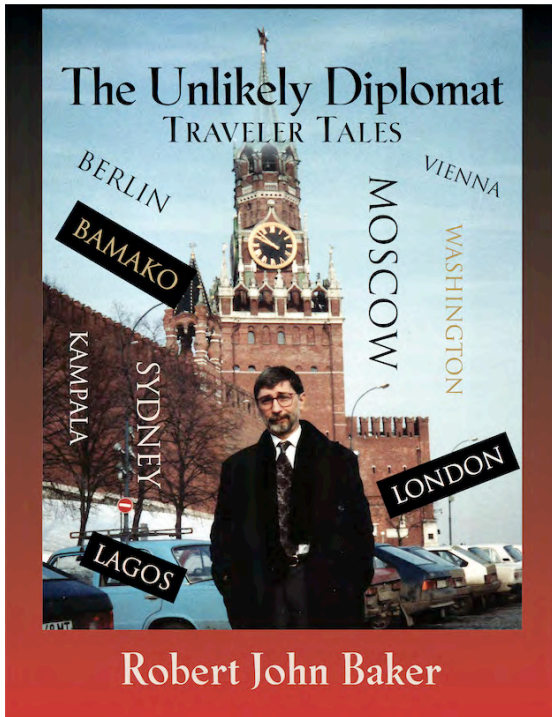
I stopped and kissed her for the first time, deeply and long. The breeze tousled her hair and she kissed me back. I was deliriously happy. Vienna was definitely the town for me.



Author, Elke , RPO staff at my annual garden party

The Royal Hippos

I met the Omukama's royal hippos in Uganda. When I was in Washington as an intelligence analyst, I had done favors for John, a young Ugandan diplomat. He gave me an introduction to his cousin in Uganda, the young Patrick Bagaya, King (Omukama)of the Toro tribe, and to Patrick's sister, Princess Elizabeth. One weekend we had an outing to Patrick's hilltop palace in Fort Portal, a day's drive from our home in Kampala. That's when I met the royal hippos.



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