

Diary of a Nobel Guest - II
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Having read David Mermin's entertaining account of his own adventures in Stockholm during the 1996 Nobel festivities, I could not help but offer my own observations during this year's (2003) events. This was made possible by Alex's gracious invitation to come and help him celebrate.

Friday, December 5

Get to airport almost two hours in advance. Turns out to be a near mistake. O'Hare is a disaster that day, with one hour lines at both the counter and security checkpoint. But we (George Crabtree and I) make it (barely). My neighbor is a talkative doctor shuttling between Norway and Spain (European version of our Florida snowbirds). As a result, never check whether Alex (Alexei Abrikosov) and family are on the plane or not.

Saturday, December 6

Plane lands. It is snowing lightly. They announce that Alex is indeed on board. But we never see him. Must have been hustled off before everyone else. Collect luggage. No one there to meet us. Sounds like Mermin's experience. Take taxi to the Grand Hotel. Room not ready for us. Realize we have forgotten to bring a tie. Off shopping. Prices outrageous, but eventually find some which are not too bad. Off to National Museum. Collection o-kay, but have been spoiled after being in Paris in September. Back to hotel. This time, they let us in. Room is at end of corridor and somewhat small, with little bureau space. I laughingly dub it the servant's quarters. But bathroom is modern with heated floor. A nice touch. Room even has internet, which we use throughout the week (work can never be escaped it seems). Find out we have missed going to Nobel museum with the bunch. Oh well. Brief nap, then off to dinner. So-so place, but prices are reasonable by Swedish standards. Nice walk back to hotel. Snow on ground is lovely. People are ice skating. Wake up at 3 am, only to find out that George snores. Hard to go back to sleep. Will be a long week I fear.

Sunday, December 7

Breakfast at the Grand is fun. Tony Leggett has invited the Lees, the Richardsons, the Pines, and Clare Yu, and Vitali Ginsburg the Bozovics. See Alex's wife and daughter. They are relieved we made it. Off on the bus to the press conference. Physics, chemistry, and economics combined. But most of the questions are for Alex and Vitali. Why did one of you leave Russia and why did one of you stay? Long replies by both. As usual, Alex succeeds in getting in the last word on the subject. Tony is refreshing. Admitted one of his best days in physics was coming up with a theory for high T_c which he later realized was wrong. I wish all the rest of us in physics could be so honest. Last question of the press conference is a doozy. Russian reporter asks Ginsburg what he thinks of Alex as a human being. Alex's wife gasps in horror. Moderator turns white. Obviously, press conference is over at this point. Russian reporters descend on Alex and Vitali like a pack of wolves. Guess that the MRI prize won't be the only controversy here.

More museums this afternoon. They have given us a card which is "open sesame" for all the museums. A great deal for us. Coin museum not much. Old palace far more interesting. Apartments remind me of a (very) mini version of Versailles, but these are at least in use. Guard change at the end is nice, but almost too cold to watch. Make it finally to the Nobel museum. Listen to Bob Laughlin's 1998 toast to the King concerning babies. Entertaining as usual from Bob. But museum as a whole is a bit of a bore.

Reception in the evening at Swedish Academy of Sciences. Physics and chemists in one room, which is way too small for the bunch of us. Sasha Buzdin has arrived, so Abrikosov party is now complete. Finally get to talk to Alex, but then a woman interrupts. The charming Countess Bernadotte, a distant relative of the King's, who is lining up the current year's crop of Laureates for the summer school they run each year in Lindau (the family owns an island in Lake Constance, must be nice). Move on to talk to Tony, only for the Countess to intervene again. Beat a strategic retreat into the next room, full of paintings of many people. Am informed by the Bozovics that this is where the "decision" is made. Science's version of a temple I guess.

Monday, December 8

Lecture day. We get front row seats. Have never heard Ginsburg before. He is very charming, with an interesting story about his and Landau's arguments about the meaning of the effective e in the Ginsburg-Landau equations. Was 2-3 when fitting to experiment, but they had no idea about pairs. Alex gives a more technical talk, but better than many of his technical talks I have heard before. Interesting how he came up with the vortex solution. There are only a few times in physics where someone has guessed a non-trivial wavefunction. Basically the two Bobs and Alex. So, quite a feat. Tony's lecture on coming up with a theory for NMR in helium 3 is also fascinating. Had never heard the story before.

Decide to skip the other lectures, as I am to meet Alex and family for a tour, but don't see them, so get on the bus. I am found on bus by attendant and informed that I have been "upgraded" to the limo, as Alex and company are in a hurry to get back before the last tour of the day for Stockholm leaves. A standard bus tour. Silly music puts George to sleep. I myself find it tough to keep the eyes open. George and I decide to skip the boat part of the tour and find some lunch to recover.

Dinner that night with George, Clare, Tony's daughter, and the Bozovics. Nice restaurant in the old town (Gamla Stan). Pricey but not outrageous. As with the previous nights, am not sleeping well.

Tuesday, December 9

Lunch at the American Ambassador's house. Actually have choice of that or the Russian one, but Alex wants to go to the American one, so off we go. Must have been close to 150 people there, including Bob Laughlin and Steven Weinberg. Alternating seating by gender, which must have been a tough one for the Ambassador's staff to pull off (a sad statement about the physical sciences). On one side of me is one of the daughters of Agre (chemistry winner), the other side the wife of a military attache. Kurt Wuthrich (chemistry, 2002) is two places down. Has a good joke at my expense. I had been guessing on the bus he was Binning or Rorer, as he was Swiss, but says one of them is younger and the other older than him, so no way I could have been right. Everyone is dressed quite lovely. Another joke about ARCH, which when spelled out is some incomprehensible jargon, by its originator (Engle, economics prize). Joke had been made yesterday as well, so is beginning to run thin, especially when he tries to get all of us to repeat the jargon back to him. But it is a great lunch. Another wining and dining experience.

Back at hotel, Laughlin and I have a two hour discussion on RVB versus gossamer superconductivity in the lobby. Best not to repeat it here as it is not meant for tender ears. Interrupted once again by the charming Countess. She wants to make sure Bob will come to the summer school.

Another fancy reception in the evening, this time at the Nordic Museum. Alex fails to make the photo shoot, as he and the family have discovered the exhibits upstairs. I never got around to the exhibits. Wine is too

interesting to pass up. Meet Ginsburg for the first time. Explain to him I am Alex's "boss". He and his wife have a laugh over that one. Tell him it was more interesting before, when Alex was my "boss". This gets a bigger laugh.

Dinner that night with Natalia (Alex's daughter), Buzdin, and a former colleague of Buzdin's, now an economics professor in Sweden. Tells us to enjoy the dinner, as it will be better than the one at the banquet. Meal is very good. Herring for appetizers and lemon sole for main meal. Couldn't do dessert. Afterwards, drinks at a wonderful bar associated with the opera house. Woodwork in there is incredible. Natalia and I give it up after that. Buzdin and friend are disappointed, and head off to the bar at the Grand Hotel for more serious (Russian style) drinking.

Wednesday, December 10

The big day, but it's not till later. George and I do the boat tour. Much more interesting than the bus, but same narrator and music as the bus one. Later, takes us over half an hour to figure out how to put on the tux. Buses off to the concert hall with everyone looking magnificent. Some locals have gathered, but not a huge crowd. They are probably in the know, and likely more will come when the King and company show later. We are in the nose bleed section (second balcony), but at least have front row seats, physics being the "first" prize. Even the order of our seating is by alphabetical Laureate: first Alex's crowd, including Yuri Galperin and his wife, then Ginzburg's crowd, then Leggett's crowd. On the front row of the main section, next to stage, is Alex's wife and daughter. Two seats are open next to them. I joke to George that they must have screwed up, and those seats are for him and I. Am sadly mistaken. At last minute, the King's sister and her husband occupy them. As for the stage, truly majestic. On one side are the new laureates. Behind them, a number of their predecessors. On the other side, six chairs for the royal family (Queen's mother, King, Queen, crown princess, her two younger siblings sitting behind). Behind them are the committee heads and presumably other academy members. Above them is the orchestra, complete with lovely blond soloist in red dress. Experience is an amazing one to witness. For once, scientists are actually important people. Lots of music, and a few long winded speeches by the committee heads for His Highness's benefit. Alex, after receiving prize, bows to king, bows to stage, then bows to audience. Last is signal for ovation from audience. This is repeated for the other nine new Laureates.

Then, off on the bus to the banquet. The social event of the year in Sweden. Tickets are hotter than for a major sporting event in Chicago. Students have to play a lottery to get a shot at coming. It is in the lovely Blue Room of the City Hall. There is even a 71 page book explaining where we are all to sit. Long main table with all of us commoners sitting on 65 tables perpendicular to the main one. We are, though, in a great location, a few seats from the main table, with David Pines having the honor of sitting at the end, just behind Al Gore. Unfortunately, big Al's back is turned to us, so no great photos as we hoped for. Again, gender alternating seating. On one side is Clare, the other side an old Japanese friend of Tony's from Kyoto. Across is the lovely Dr. Almgren, wife of David Haviland, a former student of Alan Goldman's now working in Sweden. Wonderful band complete with jazz saxophonist and light show. Army of waiters descend grand stairs to deliver each course. Glasses for champagne (to toast the King), for dinner wine, for dessert wine, etc., etc. Dinnerware is only used on this occasion, no other time. Wonderful toast to the King by Coetzee, the literature prize winner. Incredibly articulate. For physics, Tony does a good job as well. Alex is sitting next to the lovely Princess Madeleine, a real beauty. With band around her neck, she looks like Cinderella in the Disney movies. She is surrounded by photographers all clicking away (probably next day, the Swedes were looking at the paper wondering who that old guy was she was sitting next to). Alex has his charm, though, and keeps her entertained. Alex's wife has the daunting task of sitting next to the King and entertaining him. From what I could see, she was doing a good job of it.

Then, the dinner is over, and up to the Gold Room (yes, room is literally inlaid with gold) for dancing. Am starting to come down with something, so no longer my aggressive self. As a result, little dancing for me, as I never ask, and only Galperin's wife and an older Swedish woman bother to ask me. Wander around a bit. Lovely ushers with linked hands block the way at the back end. Must be where the King and entourage are hanging out. Find plenty of people to talk to, though perhaps too many. My voice is starting to go.

Midnight rings, and it is time to find the bus. Off to the Nobel nightcap, the real party (now know what an after party is). Bus has mostly students, who start singing songs. We are honor bound to respond. I get off a rendition of Dixie, but am unable to help out the Brits (Tony's gang) when it comes to Tipperary. Brits feel us Yanks have left them in the lurch. George comes to the rescue with The Saints Go Marching In. Still, Swedes win this contest, hands down.

After party is crowded downstairs. We proceed upstairs, and I made an end run for the bar so as to beat the line. Find table where I am joined by charming Countess and friends. Tells me about the travel business, which is where they make their money. Eventually, they get bored and move on. Am starting to drag now. Bozovics come to the rescue by getting a hold of Ginsburg's limo (Vitaly having left a long time before). As it is 2:30, decide to bail out with them. On way out, find the real party, complete with a wonderful bar and disco. Tempted to stay but blossoming cold tells me it is time to move on. Get back to hotel at 3. George doesn't arrive until after 4. Says he left early, though, as after party wasn't to end until 5. Says there were more girls to dance with than one could shake a stick at. I feel I have been crucified by the God of Colds.

Thursday, December 11

Wake up and cannot speak. Full blown case of laryngitis. Panic, as I have to give talk in Uppsala the following day. Manage to drag myself out of room to make the daily tour (George does not join, as he is still out). First, a bus tour, but this time with a live narrator. Then to the Vasa museum. Most interesting museum I saw in Sweden. They found an intact boat from 1600s, raised it from the bottom, and completely restored it. You could get quite close to the boat (multi levels corresponding to various decks). Completely amazing. The boat is bigger than I thought it would be.

Find George. Do lunch at an Italian place. By far the most reasonably priced meal we got all week. Dinner at the King's is not for us commoners, so George and I make dinner plans with the Bozovics. I decide to bow out at the last minute, as my voice is still shot. Wise move in the end. Meal was outrageously expensive and the portions were tiny.

Friday, December 12

Alarm goes off early, as I must go to Uppsala. Simply cannot get up. Eventually, make it up a half hour before my talk, which of course being in Uppsala, I will never make. Call hosts to apologize. They are accomodating, so reschedule talk for 2 pm. Try metro for the first time to train station. Quite nice. Train to Uppsala is only 40 minutes. Taxi to new Angstrom laboratory just out of town. Quite a bit different from the old place in town when I was there 10 years ago. Borje Johansson has a big group now. Is on the Nobel committee for physics, but only smiles when I ask him how the "decision" was made. Make it through the talk without croaking like a frog. Mike Brooks and I head for dinner. A good meal and quite reasonable. We tell stories about Gerry Lander, always a favorite topic. Back on the train to Stockholm, and collapse in the hotel room.

Saturday, December 13

St. Lucia day. George and I intelligent enough not to order in room breakfast service from Miss Lucia and her companions. At breakfast, though, she and her attendants make their appearance in their flowing white robes. Lovely singing, then again in the lobby. Bus heads to Uppsala for the real visit. Another set of lectures. Ginsburg's is different (top 30 problems in physics), but Alex's and Tony's is the same as on Monday. Should have went on the tour. Afterwards, lunch at the castle. No alternating gender seating this time, as there are too many males. Not very talkative as voice is still almost played out. Siegbahns are there among others. Another very nice meal. They are starting to blur together now. Back on bus to hotel.

Another half hour experience of putting on the tux. It is time for the Lucia ball. We get to ride in the limo this time with Alex. Everyone again in their nicest finery. This time, I am lucky, as this is a student party, and there are apparently more females than males. Have Alex's attendant's lovely wife sitting on one side, and three lovely Swedish ladies (students) surrounding me on the other. Purpose of "dinner" is really to sing song, drink, sing another song, drink again, and on it goes (there are 26 songs in the book, so you get the idea). Ginsburg makes a smart move, delivers impromptu charming talk, then departs (he is 87, so all of this is a bit much for him). After that, more songs, drinks, etc. Lucia and her attendants show up. Lucia as usual a beautiful blond with five candles on her head. Lovely singing. Traditional songs. Male attendant shows up with dunce cap. Parades in front of Lucia and companions. This is a signal. Lucia and company break into a Mo-town hit. They are quite good, as it is a tough one to do without musical accompaniment. People link arms and sway side to side, then back and forth. Collide heads with person behind me. Later, up on chairs and more of the same. At last, the ceremony comes. The infamous Order of the Ever Smiling and Jumping Little Green Frog. Emcee is really good, complete with corny jokes. What do you get when you cross pasta with antipasta. Tony's answer: super pasta. Good enough for him to get inducted. All the rest of the Laureates (physics, chemistry, economics) go through same. Then it is time for Laureates to jump like frogs. Afterwards, MacKinnon (chemistry winner) gives gracious speech. He was clearly the happiest laureate during the week. Think he was the youngest, so maybe has something to do with it. Others are very happy as well, but not so obvious as with him.

Students then head off to after party, which is the real deal, of course. Another big disco. But we have had it. By this stage, I am croaking, and can barely get anything out of my mouth. Time to head home.

Sunday, December 14

Drag out of bed at 6:15 to pack, have breakfast, and head for the plane. There are five of us, so we have to split into two cabs. Clare and I pick the wrong guy. It is cold and raining. Guy cannot see out of taxi, as windows are fogged and his defroster is on its last legs. Guy starts weaving on the road, scaring hell out of me. Clare is hiding in the back. Fortunately, my handkerchief prevents a disaster. Get early Christmas. Free upgrade to Business Class. Buy toasting glasses at airport before departing. Same as used in Nobel banquet. Expensive crystal, but it is lovely and will come in handy to toast Alex in future years. Business class seats allow for a great nap. Come home happy. Find out from limo driver on way home that Bush has gotten an early Christmas present as well, as they have finally found Saddam. So, it is back to reality for us. The fairy tale is over for now.