European Odds and Ends

✦ EUROPE abounds in variations, not only in language but also in cultural artifacts and socioeconomic practices. On the lighter side is the variation in the practice of "drawing the blinds." German windows have ingenious slat-like shutters that are lowered outside the window by a canvas pulley on the inside. When night falls in Germany, so do the shutters. Rarely is the outsider permitted to view a family gathered around the dinner table or watching television in the living room. In Italy if one returns to his hotel room in late afternoon he finds he must turn on the lights, for the maid has already pulled tight the blinds. Holland, however, has a charm all its own. The houses have very large windows – but no blinds at all! Often the passer-by can see right through the house into the back garden. Only filmy curtains decorate the windows – even at night. To my question about modesty a knowledgeable American who had lived in the Netherlands replied: "But you aren't supposed to look. Nobody does." May the Lord have mercy upon my soul.

We found widely varied responses to the occurrence of illness. What does one do in a strange land if one becomes ill? In most instances the answer is: call a doctor through your hotel. In Norway I found myself needing a doctor in the middle of the night, and the hotel soon had a young physician ministering to my needs. The charge for this professional call was $7.50, which included a good portion of the antibiotic he prescribed. A week later, in Sweden, another member of the tour took to bed and again the hotel secured a doctor. This one charged $15.00 for his morning visit and the medicine was an additional $8.00 – prices which made one feel at home, in a sick sort of way. Still later my wife caught my Norwegian-born bug, but by then we were in Helsinki and it was a national holiday. Neither the hotel nor our efficient guide could locate a doctor willing to attend a tourist.

My wife therefore carried her fever on to Moscow, where the hotel promptly called in a woman doctor who arrived in short order accompanied by a nurse and an interpreter. After examination and diagnosis the doctor applied mustard plasters and prescribed antibiotics and rest. Russia's blending of the 19th and 20th centuries applies even to medicine! Next morning the medical team returned for a second half-hour visit. A little anxious about the charges, my wife asked what they would be. She was told that medical care is free in Russia even for tourists. Somehow Sweden's welfare state hasn't heard the word – and the U.S. medical profession isn't even listening.

The importance of work is a theme sounded throughout Europe, but it too is a theme with variations. Germans are compulsive, even driven workers. Perhaps this situation stems from the hunger and poverty of the post-World War II years, or from the pre-Hitler years of unemployment (followed by the deceptive full employment of the nazi police state). Whatever the cause, work is for Germans a symbol of identity and self-fulfillment. In iron curtain countries, however, a certain pallidness is to be seen in the faces of the workers. The visitor misses the enthusiasm and exuberance of the western Europeans. A youth in Czechoslovakia told me that inequities in the wage system there have destroyed incentive. "I know an alcoholic who reports for work only once or twice a week, yet he still gets paid," he said. "It's all very nice for the poor drunk, but where is the incentive for us college students?"

There seems to be no easily explainable pattern for national attitudes toward work. Norwegians have a short work day – 9:30 to 4:30 – and several local observers told us, "Norwegians are not noted for their desire to work." Their neighbors the Swedes work like mad, however, and often act mad while they work. At one of the best hotels in Stockholm we watched a desk clerk deal rudely with every guest who asked him a question. Desk clerks evidently are in short supply in Sweden. This one would not have lasted a day in the States (New York excepted). For their part the Italians have adopted the hard sell, especially in the tourist industry, one of Italy's most lucrative. Vendors approach the tourist as he disembarks from his bus and often follow him back onto it. There is something about a refusal that whets the appetite of an Italian salesman, as if his ego or reputation were at stake. Perhaps a deeper reason is that even in this day poverty is no mere apparition to many an Italian.

Europeans appear far more relaxed than Americans in taking for granted the day-to-day safety of their rulers. On a flight from Copenhagen to Bergen, for example, our plane made a stop at Oslo, where everyone disembarked for a customs check. On re-embarkation the six or eight of us seated in the tail found "occupied" signs newly placed on the seats. The hostesses settled us in this reserved section, then informed us in low voices that Norway's king and his party were coming aboard for the flight to Bergen. Sure enough, there he came – King Olav himself; he sat down two seats in front of me. Some 15 minutes out of Oslo I looked across the aisle and froze in horror. A young man was slowly unsheathing a long hunting knife. I waited for the secret service to throttle the man – but nothing happened. It turned out that he was a tourist showing off his latest purchase to a companion. Perhaps he had not heard the stewardess' whispered message. And so far as I could tell King Olav was not aware of anything being amiss.

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