

Paris Report: May 20-June 30th 2013**First Installment: Arrival May 21st**

On Monday, May 20th, 2013 I climbed aboard a British Airways at Philadelphia's International Airport which took me to Heathrow in London, then, by transfer to a shuttle, to Charles de Gaulle in Paris, arrival around 9 A. M. on the morning of the 21st. The trajectory was notable for a series of crises that began shortly after my arrival at Heathrow and continued until I was safely installed in my apartment at 6 rue Amyot in Paris.

As the beginnings were unremarkable I will not contribute too many remarks about them. Over the weekend I'd been the guest of my sister Carol and her husband, Don Kennedy, in the suburban college enclave of Swarthmore. The next before my departure I'd repacked all my luggage in such a way that, in the eventuality that British Airways might lose my large suitcase I would still have enough clothing in my carry-on luggage to survive in the French capital for about 4 days.

That had happened in 2007. On that occasion I ended up having to buy enough clothing, from Tati and other stores, to shield me from the charges of either shabbiness or exhibitionism. British Airways got around to delivering my luggage at my hotel 10 days later.

The flight over the Atlantic was dramatic –for what can be more dramatic than flying over a vast 3,000 mile ocean in a little over 5 hours? – but uneventful; racking my brains I can find no incident worth recording. We settled onto the soil of Albion in a gloomy rain-swept airport at 6:35 AM, Greenwich time.

Problems assailed me from the beginning, coming like cockroaches out of the woodwork. The departure time for the Paris shuttle was listed as 7:25; the gate would close, officially, at 7:10. Despite this, I was obliged to suffer another security check, every bit as comprehensive as the one I'd experienced in Philadelphia. To complicate matters, the boarding pass I'd been handed in Philadelphia held no gate address or seat number; I was told these would be added on at Heathrow. Obtaining this information took another 10 minutes, with the upshot that I missed my connection to Paris by about 3 minutes.

All of the British Airways employees with whom I spoke concurred that the fault was the company's, not mine. What happened to me occurs every day, frequently on every flight. There simply is not enough time between the arrival of the planes from North America to Heathrow, and the departures of the shuttles to other European cities, to allow for all the formalities of security, immigration, the assignment of boarding passes, the walks through a

series of long corridors, to guarantee that everyone will be able to make the connections.

To put the situation in context I need to supply the background essentials.

To be able to move into my apartment in Paris at 6 rue Amyot, I would need the keys I could pick up at the math-physics Institut Henri Poincaré (IHP) ; I'd enrolled there in a two month course on "Spectral methods in Quantum Mechanics", whatever the hell that means (a joke).

The institute closes between 5 and 6 PM. If I showed up after that I might be faced with the necessity of checking into a hotel. In addition to being absurdly expensive, the activity of finding one through wandering about Paris in the rain dragging a metaphorical ton of luggage, was not the kind of adventure I wanted to embark on.

The travel time from Heathrow airport to CDG was 2 hours and 15 minutes: one hour and 15 minutes by plane, the second hour courtesy of the Greenwich Meridian, which France has refused to acknowledge ever since the English decided that John Adams was the first to discover Neptune in 1846 before Urbain LeVerrier.

The most reasonable estimate of the time it would take to go from

Charles de Gaulle (CDG) airport to the IHP was 2 hours. Were I to arrive at the airport after 3 it might already be too late.

The next step, after I'd watched the plane I was supposed to be on climbing in the wafting winds, was to proceed to a British Airways reservation desk. There where an elderly, unruffled sales representative, her face sallow as an over-ripe apple, reassured me, in one breath, that the situation was the fault of the company, and in the next that British Airways only promised to get me to Paris, not the time of my arrival. The end of May was the beginning of the peak season for British tourism among the unwashed natives, and every flight was overbooked.

In fact the next flight, at 10:50, was already filled; I could register as a stand-by. The earliest available booking was for 1:50, with arrival in Paris at 4:05. I was booked for this flight and advised to hurry over to the Customer Service counters, about 1 long city block down through the terminal, away past stores all a-glitter peddling hard liquors and fashionable clothing.

On the way down I put 2 pounds into one of those public Internet computers (1 pound for 10 minutes!), to send an E-mail to the IHP

explaining why I might need to go into a hotel for that night. The time was about 8 o'clock. I would be checking my E-mail account regularly every half hour.

The Customer Service counter put me on the list as a standby for the flight at 10:50 . Would it be possible, I asked, to make a phone call to the Hotel Picard in Paris to reserve a room? The clerk agreed that the situation was the fault of the airline. He asked me to return at 10 AM, when he would arrange for me to make a free phone call.

This turned out not to be necessary. A message was in my E-mail from Magali Martin, one of the secretaries at the Centre Borel, which is the division of the IHP that arranges the 12-week courses in advanced topics of mathematical physics named "trimestres". There is a postal box located inside the entrance to the IHP after 5 PM into which she would place the keys. I could retrieve them by typing in a certain code, which can't be communicated as it may be a state secret.

Relief from the fear of future anguish more than compensated for my fatigue and nausea (probably diabetic symptoms), and I returned to the

banks of seats the seating before the Customer Service counters and waited.

At precisely ten I went up the desk and spoke with a young woman from India, with a charming British accent obtained in training classes. There was no doubt: the chances of getting onto the 10:50 flight were bleak; however, I should stick around as anything could happen at the last minute.

And indeed, at 10:40 or so she instructed me to hurry quickly over to Gate A11, where a boarding attendant was waiting for me. I did as told; there I met up with a tall, handsome woman, blond hair, a thin voice and tranquil manner, dressed in a typical airlines' stewardess uniform. Her news, also, was not encouraging. Still, it couldn't hurt to sit down by the gate, and wait, since: "Anything could happen at the last minute."

Within the next two minutes 3 people raced up to the entrance, waved their boarding passes and were hurried through. The attendants were still waiting for one more passenger remained. This was someone who'd been held up by the extensive security check, *that is to say, exactly what*

had happened to me that morning at 7 AM !

In a way repeat of what must be a standard scenario for British Airways at Heathrow this person, like myself failed to make it . With 30 seconds to spare I was cleared for travel and hurtled down to the impatiently idling craft to buck the English Channel.

I then had reason to thank my prevoyance by putting in 4 days clothing and all of my documents into my hand luggage: My large suitcase would have to be shipped on a later flight!

A few more minutes delay:. then off to Paris in the Springtime!

....All my trials, Lord, soon be over

And indeed, all my trials were not yet over. Apart from the unusual shapes in the clouds, there were no further adventures during the flight to Paris. At the CDG airport I met with a representative from British Airways; she gave me papers to fill out so that they would know where to deliver my suitcases once they'd arrived.

Before leaving the US I'd already typed up an information sheet to give

to BA in case my luggage was destrained. It listed the names, addresses and phone numbers at the Institut Poincare. I was assured that my luggage would arrive the next day: in fact it took 4 days. The RER B subway line zipped me express to the Gare du Nord. The Luxembourg station is only 3 stops after that and I arrived at the IHP around 3:30.

Encountering all the friends I've made at the IHP and Centre Borel over the past 6 years was a delight: Sylvie l'Hermitte, Magali Martin, Nida (abbreviation of a long South Asian name), Florence Ajami, Sylviane Bellorini , Brigitte the concierge, the librarians and janitors...

After I'd had a cup of tea, Magali went with me to her office and handed me the key chain to the apartment at 6 rue Amyot. The chain held 3 keys and a funny piece of black plastic of unknown function. In a few minutes I was out the door, walking myself and my two bags over there. On the way I ran into a clochard (a deranged and homeless person) sleeping in an abandoned telephone box. She'd been there 2 years ago, and managed to both hold onto her territory and survive! Of course I rushed to give her all the change in my pocket (3 euros) which she

received with astonishment and a sadly twisted smile.

This district, only a stone's throw from the Pantheon, is very quiet, free from crowds and sparsely inhabited. Closeby vibrate the wild vitalities of the Place Contrescarpe and the rue Mouffetard, yet this austere neighborhood, a kind of scientist's enclave within Paris, has no restaurants, shops, grocery stores, bars. There are a few specialized bookstores.

One might think of it as a neighborhood passed over by the modern world, yet that would be a mistake. Much of modern scientific history first saw the light of day in this square kilometer. The workshops and laboratories of Madame Curie and Louis Pasteur, the battlements of the Ecole Normale Superieure, (the most elite high school in France in which, for more than a century, virtually everyone who was anyone in science, letters and politics, was brainwashed for fame), the succession of research laboratories, science faculties, medical centers remain the enduring tribute to the major role of French science for the last 200 years. The Ecole Polytechnique, France's equivalent to MIT, is close by.

Nestled within its confines one also finds the Irish Cultural Centre, the vessel of a living relationship between France and Ireland since Oliver Cromwell sent the monks and novices fleeing from Ireland in the 17th century.

The rue Amyot runs behind the Irish Cultural Centre to the southeast, between the rue l'Homond and the rue Tournefort

The building at 6 rue Amyot itself is a solid block of concrete, at the far end of which is a small archway indented by a massive door painted a spinach black-green. The door opened with a strong push.

The lobby holds a pair of marble platforms, one raised above the other. On the left lies the entrance to a computer research lab of SONY. Turning a corner to the right one comes to a glass door.

This door was shut solid. I found no keyslots. On the wall I found no tablet to peck in a code.

Nothing! "My God!" I swore (or "*Mille Tonnerres de Brest!*" or something like that) , "I'm very, very tired, and now I have to deal with this!"

But there was no hope for it. I dragged myself and my bags back to the IHP and again confronted Magali Martin with the new dilemma "I can't get through the inner door! There's no place to insert any of the keys you've given me!"

Magali got out of her chair, closed the office, and walked with me the three blocks to the apartment building. The moment we got there she saw what the trouble was. She pointed to a crude black button on the side of the entrance, something like the knob on an old radio: "Did you touch this with the piece of black plastic on your key chain?"

I'd never trafficked with this invention. "In French we call this a 'b.i.p.'" I didn't bother to ask her to translate. The b.i.p. worked without a blip on the front door; it also worked on its cousin on the wall next to the inner door. Magali accompanied me up to the 3rd floor to make sure there would be no more problems associated with getting into the apartment, then left me alone to take a shower and a nap. When I awoke, 3 hours later, I felt like Lazarus raised from the dead, "Come back to tell you All! I shall tell you All!"

Imagine that I'd failed to get onto the 10:50 flight as a standby, that I'd been forced to wait until 1:50, and that I could have arrived at the IHP after 5 PM. I would have taken the keys from the special box inside the entrance, walked over to 6 rue Amyot and found that I couldn't get into the building because I didn't know how to use the b.i.p! I would have been obliged , following 17 hours of travel, to wander about the Latin Quarter lugging a shoulder bag, a backpack and a large suitcase on rollers, looking for a hotel charging less than \$200 a night !

And in the rain

The gods look after people like me.
