

HOW THE WROCLAW' DROBOTS CAME TO AMERICA

It was April 1956 when I was told officially by the Polish Minister of Foreign Trade that I have been ~~appointed~~ assigned a new job of the commercial counsellor of the Polish Embassy in New Delhi, India, effective July 1, 1956. This message was for me the culmination of not only my dreams ~~xi~~ but also the success of a very long and persistent strategy.

As early as the beginning of 1951 I became fully aware that there is no sense for me and my family to build socialism in Poland and to live in conditions of human degradation and worsening material situation. At that time the borders were already shut closely and it was not possible to leave the country just on the basis of your own decision. In cold blood I realized that the only practical way for me to get out, with my wife and children, is to get a job in foreign trade, with the hope and expectation that sooner or later I might get an assignment in a foreign (not "socialist") country, where from I could just - as the saying at that time rightly it described - "run away" - like from a prison.

The political atmosphere in Poland in the early fifties was such one that you could not dare talking about such "horrible" ideas with anybody. In fact the only person I talked about it was my wife and only during a walk in the park (the walls had ears). I did not talk about my plans with Julek and he never asked any question on this issue. Only Stefan, upon hearing in 1956 of my foreign assignment immediately, without being asked jumped with an "advice" for me to defect. Knowing his lack of restraint and the dangers resulting thereof I categorically and repeatedly told him that my defection is absolutely out of question and pretended even to be angry, that he had such a "crazy" ideas.

Nevertheless he told me ~~told me~~ before my departure that he is seriously thinking about emigrating but realized that under the circumstances it is practically impossible to do so. Elaborating his ideas he seriously asked me to "look around" while in India and try to find a possibility for him and his family to get out.

Before leaving Poland I was summoned to the Polish Ministry of Public Security (Polish KGB), where a deputy minister told me in a friendly way that his ministry is not interested in India and that they will not require my "services". It was quite a relieve for me since I knew that practically all of the commercial counsellor's offices of Poland in the "capitalistic" countries were required to "help" the local residents of Polish KGB in that country.

We left Poland in the second half of June 1956 with a few days stop-over in Amsterdam (Netherlands) to get vaccinations against tropical diseases. A few days after our arrival to Amsterdam radio and the newspapers brought big news about disturbances and shootings, in Poznan - and I realized once again that there is no way for us to live in Poland.

After arrival to New Delhi, finding residence and starting my job I received an alarming letter from Stefan advising me that Kathy was struck by diabetes. He was desperate and in letter after letter described the precarious condition not only of the poor child but also of his whole family. First of all, the Polish insulin was not reliable, sometimes contaminated and dangerous to use. Having now easy access to foreign exchange, I have opened thru my business associates in Switzerland a revolving account with a Zurich pharmacy, from where Stefan was authorized to import any medicine he wanted. Such an arrangement was impossible to make from Poland and I presume was quite helpful not only for Kathy but also for other members of ~~the~~ Stefan's family. So far I remember it worked nicely up to the time when Stefan and his family left in the second half of 1959 to USA.

Stefan's letters, much more frequent than ever before, sounded always alarming and emphasized strongly and repeatedly his exasperation by not being capable of emigrating. Besides material ~~problems~~ difficulties there were two fundamental problems for him:

1. - to get the Polish passports to emigrate; he could relatively easily get a passport but only for himself for a short trip abroad (and he got it - I believe twice -)

- but not for his family.

2. To get ^a job assignment, invitation etc. to a foreign country, so he could not only get an entry visa but also try to apply for a Polish passport for himself and his family. These two tasks were interconnected although the second one was not conditioned on the first one.

Stefan desperately urged me to help him out of India to resolve both problems. I could be in the position to try to handle the second one, but could not figure out how to handle, out of India, the first problem.

His letters became more and more frantic; even his wife Nathalie wrote me a separate letter urging me that if I could not "buy the books" (code words for getting Stefan and his family out of Poland) I should try to do it only for her. As strange assessment of my loyalty priorities as it was, I realized that the whole Wroclaw gang was in a frenzy and requires from me not treatment but action. Their desperation, regardless of its intensity was of course understandable and they could not be blamed for exaggerated expression of their reactions to the situation in Poland.

However it was dangerous for me, since most (if not all) of my correspondence was read by the Polish secret services (and I had a lot of evidence for it) and Stefan did not mince words in describing the political and economic problems of Poland.

I was also at loss what really and concretely Stefan wants me to do and whether really I could deliver the goods. To clarify these issues I decided to go to Poland and talk the matters over with Stefan. The opportunity was the new Indo-Polish trade agreement negotiations to be started soon, for which I asked the Polish Minister of Foreign Trade to give me specific information and instructions. I was not afraid this time of making the trip because my stock was then very high at the Ministry; in only one year I managed to quadruple the volume of Indo-Polish trade and in particular to considerably increase export from Poland to India.

So in summer 1957 I met Stefan and after a long and frequently difficult (for me) discussions I was told by him that:

A. There was for him at that time only one way to leave Poland: emigrate to Israel. By some quirk attitude of the Polish authorities (background of which would require a long explanation, ^{and} for which there is no sense to do it here), Polish citizens who had Jewish birth certificate could get a Polish passport very easily, valid however only for Israel. Stefan did not want and could not take "advantage" of this opportunity and his reasoning was correct. - Although he could immediately get an Israeli visa ("the law of return") his wife and children would have to undergo conversion to Judaism, a painful affair for the boys, who, according to Israeli laws were not Jewish, since their mother was not Jewish. Stefan and his family rightly refused to comply with such requirements, the more than, the prospects for Stefan's work in Israel were very low; and so were also the prospects for an intelligent and reasonable life in a theocratic state of Israel no more "attractive" than living in Poland.

B. The prospects to get an invitation, assignment etc. for a job for Stefan in ⁿwest-European countries were, according to Stefan's estimate, practically non-existent.

C. Similarly there were no prospects in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Stefan did not explore South America but he was not very excited about going there. And most likely the chances there would be also slim.

D. For the above reasons Stefan believed that the only hope for him would be if I could somehow, being abroad find a country and a university, where he could be invited to go.

A tall order for me - and he could not give me any advice how I should do it.

E. Because of his position as a university professor he would certainly have a problem with obtaining a Polish passport. Such passports were given mainly to people going to ~~Israel~~ Israel - and only after they quit their jobs, usually many months later. Stefan did not want to give up his professorship, not only because it was his only source of income.

We have discussed, with some degree of irritation on his part, the issue which he raised, that allegedly my present job makes his chances of getting a Polish passport more difficult. I tried to explain and to assure him that his opinion is wrong; in any case such a "blame" would go in both directions, since ^{his} efforts to emigrate and in particular his outspoken way of publicly expressing his political opinions could harm me in keeping my present position abroad, and in case of me losing it, there would be nothing I could do for him.

After long debates on these subjects I suggested to him and he accepted the following arrangements:

I. In order to eliminate any, real or otherwise, possibility of "influence" of my position on his efforts to get the Polish passports - we will start, immediately after my return to India, exchanging vitriolic letters, & calling each other names etc., to give the third readers of our correspondence in Poland (I had more and more evidence that they really existed) evidence that we are fighting and are estranged. After a few such letters in both directions we shall declare to each other that we do not want anything to do with "such a scoundrel like you".

II. However - to maintain a channel of communication we have established a code, that the fifth word in every sentence of the "insulting" letter has a meaning and is to be built into a short, but important sentence-message.

Naturally the insulting correspondence had to stop after a while. Further communication should be conducted through our ~~xxxxxxx~~ brother Julek, to whom Stefan or respectively I would write whole passages about the other "scoundrel"- brother - and these paragraphs would also contain the same code-words, to be transmitted to Stefan or me.

Now about action by me. After conducting exploratory talks with British, German and French diplomats in New Delhi I came to the conclusion that they are not interested in doing anything for Stefan and even did not promise to investigate the matter in their respective countries.

Soon an opportunity came - by itself - ~~literarily~~ in the literary sense of the words - delivered to my door. To the second floor apartment of the bungalow where we were occupying the first floor, moved an American, one Mr. Bill Lyhne who worked at the US Embassy in Delhi. The neighborhood contacts started with a fight, when his teenaged son put his bicycle right in front of our door. I took the bicycle and put it right in front of the door on the second floor. This simple operation so impressed my neighbor that he invited me for a drink and we became soon very good friends, with wives doing the same. After a few weeks, during a good dinner at his place, and after a few drinks Bill asked me in a whisper if I would like to "choose freedom" (popular western expression at that time) and live in the States. Of course I was very careful not to jump into acceptance of his idea, but did not definitely say "no!" - He repeated his idea a couple of times later and not after having drinks. Sensing that I might be receptive to further talks, Bill advised me that his colleague from the US embassy would like to meet me. We set a date for a cocktail at Bill's apartment and I met there a guy (Ed) who point-blank told me the US embassy would like to "help me" if I desired to go to USA and live there - of course for a price: they wanted from me selective information about activities of my office and of the Polish embassy. (Later I was constantly flabbergasted to realize that most of the US embassy questions for me were so shallow and naive, that the answers to them could be easily found in published Polish material or otherwise easily available; but this did not bother me ^{and} I duly was giving answers to all questions). Bearing in mind my firm determination not to live in Poland it was clear to me ~~there~~ that there could not be any conflict of my loyalties and my loyalty, of course, did not belong to Poland.

At this first, very businesslike discussion, I immediately told Ed, that the first order of importance for me is to ~~get~~ Stefan and his family out of Poland; I have described in details Stefan's situation and his qualifications.

It took several weeks when Ed came back with an answer: US embassy could arrange that Stefan would receive a bona fide invitation from an US university to come as a visiting professor.

They cannot do anything to help him to get a Polish passport, but after confirming by Stefan, that he accepts the visiting-professorship invitation, an US visa in Warsaw would be assured. The US embassy in Warsaw would not know anything about this arrangements. For security reasons I decided to convey to Stefan only a message (thru letter to Julek with "insulting" paragraph about Stefan) that he will receive a letter from USA, which he should promptly and dilligently answer. Ed told me that a Polish-American professor from the University of Chicago, one Mr. Zygmund, will start correspondence with Stefan and after a few exchanges of letters will send to Stefan an invitation for visiting-professorship in Chicago.

I was near a heart attack, when I received a message from Stefan (thru Julek) that professor Zygmund wrote him a nice letter but Stefan does not have time to correspond with him and besides, he (Stefan) does not know Zygmund personally.

After eight months of my efforts I felt that I am at the end of my wit. Another urgent message from me to Stefan to write to prof. Zygmund did not move Stefan and he ~~repeated~~ repeated that he is not going to waste his time on a stupid correspondence with a guy whom he (Stefan) even does not know.

In desperation and exasperating soul searching I decided to go to Poland in order to explain to Stefan the whole situation. There was also another reason for me; suddenly I got an idea how to help Stefan to obtain a Polish passport.

My American friends tried to dissuade me from this trip explaining that I am watched here (in India) not only by the Poles but also by the Russians and my trip involves certain risk. On their advice I decided to investigate the scope of the risk: should I have been under ~~suspicion~~ suspicion in Poland, the Poles would not ask me to come, because this might trigger my immediate defection. The Poles would rather wait for my proposal to go to Poland. With this in mind I asked for a permission to come to Warsaw, however giving deliberately a flimsy reason. The plan of this game was, that when the Poles refuse my trip I would have good reason to conclude that I am "clean" in the eyes of Warsaw; than I would ask again, giving this time another, very good, reason and only after that I could go. I was shocked and scared to death when my first request for a trip was accepted. A few sleepless nights did not help me to evaluate the real situation - but, after all, I decided to go. I understood from many recent messages from the Polish Foreign Trade Ministry that my stock there was very high due to some spectacular achievements in the Indo-Polish trade. It would be stupid for the Poles at this time to retain me in Poland.

The consultations in Warsaw went smoothly and after a few days I went to Wroclaw. In a strong but result-oriented way I demanded from Stefan that he follows strictly and absolutely without any hesitations and immediately all instruction which I was conveying to him. He promised to do it.

During that visit he, once, opened his desk drawer, where I have seen all my "insulting" letters with underlined (by him) fifth words of every sentence and a note nearby, reading in plain language the so assembled messages. I nearly fainted and he immediately destroyed all these letters.

There was another message which I brought to him and in particular pertaining to the issue of his Polish passport. Following background information is here required:

Back in the years 1931 to 33 I befriended in Brno (Czechoslovakia), where I was studying at the local German Technological Institute, a guy of the name Milek Schiff. He was a Polish Jew from Bochnia (about 30 miles east of Cracow) and his father was a wealthy merchant and landlord of a few large apartment houses. Milek, for whom I was a role-model, decided also to continue his studies in Lvov (Poland) after learning that I am going there. We continued friendship in Lvov and at his request I took him even as my roommate.

However Milek was a deeply devoted and active communist (I was not) and it did not take too long time for the Polish police in Lvov to catch him at a clandestine meeting, with a lot of very discriminating material, and put him ^{to} jail.

He was facing a 10 to 15 years jail sentence. Shortly after his arrest his father arrived to Lvov and knowing that I am his ~~good~~ sons good friend and not knowing in town anybody else - contacted me and heart-broken asked me to help him, somehow to get Milek out of jail. "Money is no problem" - explained the father. It took me several days of intensive searching and eventually I found a sheister dealing in shady affairs. I arranged for a contact between the sheister and the elder Schiff. The end result was that Milek was released from jail at a cost of a few thousand dollars to his capitalistic father. In a sentimental farewell meeting both Schiffs told me that if at any time I might need them they would be ready to do everything to pay me for helping to save life of the young communist. As part of the deal with Polish authorities, the young Schiff had to leave Poland and never to return. He went to France, where he completed his education in mechanical engineering.

I forgot about the whole incident, when suddenly, somewhere in 1953 I got a visit in my office in Warsaw - and it was my old friend Milek Schiff. We embraced and exchanged stories of our lives. In due course Milek told me that he is now a very high official at the Polish Ministry for Public Security (Polish KGB), but that he does not want anything from me. He decided to see me, after learning where I am, only out of devotion to the old times of our friendship. He remembered very well that it was me in Lvov in 1935 who helped to save his skin - and assured me once again, that his promise given to me at that time is still valid. I remember ^{ca} that.

Before going from Warsaw to Wroclaw to see Stefan in 1958 I arranged a meeting with Milek Schiff and told him that now I need his help.

In an exaggerated and doctored way I described to Milek Stefan's precarious condition and asked him to help Stefan to get Polish passport. To my great satisfaction Schiff promised me to contact Stefan and do "whatever he could". I understood that he could and would deliver the goods.

In Wroclaw I told Stefan about the forthcoming meeting with Schiff and coached Stefan in details how to deal with him.

This time Stefan - apparently - understood everything and I returned to Warsaw, to go back in a couple of days to India. However a day before my departure to New Delhi I was urgently summoned to report to the Ministry of Public Safety - and this time not to Schiff, but to a gay whom I did not know. My knees started trembling and I was sure that the security people knew about my dealings with the Americans and that they are setting a trap for me. In a desperate mood I mobilized all my spiritual powers and tried to prepare a plan for my defence. There was no way to disobey this summons and decided to go straight into the dragons mouth. The ensuing conversation between the security official (S.O.) and me was (more or less) as follows:

S.O. Do you have any contacts with the Americans in New Delhi?

Me: Of course. There are diplomatic receptions and I meet there all kind of people including Americans.

S.O. But I ask you if you have any close and personal contacts with some Americans?

Me: (Still not giving up) - contacts yes but not close and not personal.

S.O. I will ask you directly: do you know Mr. Lyhme who lives above you in the same bungallow?

Me: (almost ready to break down) - yes, I know him, because he is my neighbor.

S.O. Is he easily accessible?

Me: I believe so.

S.O. Very good. So we have an assignment for you: try to offer him money to work for us.

Me: (Now completely relieved but also exhausted) - So you want me to established good relations with him?

S.O. Exactly - and report to us thru the second secretary of the Polish Embassy.

This was the first time when in the process of making efforts for Stefan's benefit I had a justified feeling of being exposed to a danger of ~~life~~ death ~~or~~ judging by the practise of dealing in such matters by the Polish authorities at that time.

There was also a second time, during the same visit to Poland, this time a real one danger to my life - but I am not going to describe it here.

I happily arrived back to New Delhi and we had a good laugh with my American friends about my newest assignment.

Since this break-through meeting with Stefan everything went relatively smoothly. Stefan conducted a fruitful correspondence with Zygmund and received shortly an invitation from University of Chicago for a visiting-professorship. With this invitation on hand he contacted the US Embassy in Warsaw, where he was duly assured that he and his family will promptly get a visa upon presentation of a Polish passport. Stefan also contacted Milek Schiff, with whom he had a very long but friendly conversation resulting in "opinion" by Schiff that there should be no reason why Stefan and his family should not get the Polish passports. In fact, Schiff said, the Polish government should be proud that an American university invited a Polish professor.

Stefan and his family really got the passports and then promptly the US visas. To cover their local and transportation expenses I have transferred to Stefan my Polish-currency savings which I accumulated as salaries paid to me in Warsaw during my service abroad.

All the Wroclaw' Drobotos arrived to the USA late in 1959, going straight from the airport (or was it railroad station?) to an apartment, rented for them ahead of time. Stefan went there next day to his work-office at the Chicago university. And they live in the USA happily ever after.

After Stefan and his family safely left Poland it was time for me to arrange my own trip to the USA. I stayed almost four years in India, about a year longer than I was originally planning. This year-long extension resulted mainly from my efforts to make sure that Stefan is out of Poland before my defecting.

I arrived in June 1960 to the USA and contacted immediately my American friend Ed from the US embassy in New Delhi - to collect from him the \$30,000 (my savings) which I have given him to transfer to the USA. It was a big surprise for me when Ed handed me over only \$ 18,000 explaining ^{that} the balance of \$ 12,000 was retained by the US Government as reimbursement for the cost of all arrangements for Stefan and his family, to whom, as I was told, the US Government had never had any obligations.

At the price level of that time (1960) a family of 4 could live in a modest comfort for one year for about \$ 10,000; so my nest egg for three years living expenses in case I could not find a job was reduced by 40 %. Unlike Stefan, ~~who went straight from the airport (or was it railroad station?) in Chicago to an in advance rented apartment and next day to a waiting job at the university~~ - I had to start from scratch with my family waiting, and at my age of 47, not very attractive one for finding a new job in a new country.

From the very first meeting in the United States Stefan has shown to me genuine appreciation for my efforts, confirming many times that without my help he could not have done it.

Being now exposed to my own problems and based on extensive previous experience in dealing with Stefan, I suggested to him to leave me alone, until somehow I would manage to organize my own life. He left me alone for about a year but kept writing to me frequently very nice and effusive letters, always full of expressions of gratitude, assurances etc.. I have to admit that it was mainly a one ~~side~~ way traffic, because I did not have guts and patience to rehash again and again the same story.

It took about 8 months of extensive efforts to ~~land~~ ^{look for} a job for me in the USA (it was anyway a pre-Kennedy recession in 1960/61) - however without any result. So I decided to try my luck in Great Britain where I had some contacts from my previous activities.

In April 1961 we moved to London, England, where we rented an apartment and lived on our remaining reserves. Prospects for a job or business opportunity there turned out to be even worse than in the United States and we decided to go back there.

After about two years of successfully living in the United States Stefan regained his normal self-confidence. He ~~is~~ even developed a theory that actually he was invited to the USA not as result of ~~mine, or~~ anybody's efforts but thanks only to his own talents and personal qualifications. I met him at this state of his mind in 1962, shortly after our return to the States. Since my nest egg reserves were considerably reduced I came to South Bend to inform Stefan of my situation and told him, that while his life ~~is~~ and income is practically stabilized, I am still without a job and income. Reminding him that I spent for him and his family moving to the United States in cold cash \$ 12,000 (not counting other expenses) I would like his assurance that should I be in need he would help me financially until I would find a job.

I believe that in order to get a complete balance of the financial debate, which followed my request to Stefan, it would be appropriate to describe our financial relationship from the very early days.

At the ripe age of 13 we started with Stefan a home based workshop of book-binding. At that time most of the books were published in paper-back form; after binding a few of our own books we sold them at a good profit and so discovered that there was a business opportunity in book-binding; we could offer prices at ~~of~~ half of the market's at even better quality. For the money earned all was spent equally between us on special clothes, books and other essentials of teenagers at that time, which our parents would not buy for us.

At the age of 16 we found a more profitable business activity: tutoring. For two years we accumulated net income of about 400 dollars (at that time value) which we collected at a joint savings account; about 250 dollars was earned by Stefan. - The purpose of that fund was to finance the first year of college for either one of us, who would have to go to a college out of town. Our family's financial situation would not allow for such a support.

After graduation from high school Stefan decided to study mathematics ~~at~~ at the Cracow university; because the tuition was free and he had place to live (at home) he did not need to use these savings. I wanted to study electrical engineering for which there was no college in Cracow, so I had to go to another city.

I decided to go at that time to Brno in Czechoslovakia.

With Stefan full support and agreement it was decided by us that, at least for the beginning I would use the savings until I could somehow find my own income in this strange for me city. At the price-level of that times a reasonably modest cost of living was about 30 dollars/month. Thus, excluding home vacations, our savings account would last me for about two academic years. It lasted about three years, since Stefan kept his tutoring jobs and kept helping me; I managed also to make some money but not enough to survive.

The bottom line is that excluding my own part of the savings account plus my later income, Stefan spent on me about 350 dollars of that time value of the money. Allowing a very high degree of credit to Stefan it would be an equivalent of no more than \$ 3500 ~~at~~ of the dollar value in 1962.

Since I returned to Poland from Russia there were numerous cases of material assistance which I gladly extended to Stefan, whenever he needed or asked - but I am now not in the position to tabulate it or evaluate it in dollar value.

During the ensuing discussion at that time in 1962 in South Bend Stefan became angry and categorically refused to talk with me on the subject of his alleged obligations. He repeatedly denied that he came to the United States as result of my efforts and also denying that I spent any money on his trip.

He could not answer my question, why - if this was the case - he bombarded me in India with requests to help him and - ^{with} the hell - I had to go thru so many efforts and even dangers.

He also demanded from me to give him documentary proofs of my alleged expenses. I told him that I have such proofs and even witnesses to certify my claim. I have also reminded him of his contribution to my education and that I am willing now to deduct it from his indebtedness. I suggested that the ballance of \$ 8500 be made available to me, should I need it, in installments convenient to Stefan.

Stefan became more and more agitated and angry; he cut short the discussion by advising me to sue him in court - and left the room.

Since that memorable meeting he did not contact me any more until 1968 shortly before when I was about to go to India, on an assignment for Westinghouse Electric Corporation.

This is a transcript from tape-recording made in July 1993.