

A trip to France: 13th - 20th December 1973.

The train for Paris left my country at half past seven in the evening: being a nervous traveller, I found the major part of that day ruined. It was about noon, when my suitcase was packed and I had checked for the umptieth time that I had my ticket, my passport, my money and all the papers, when Ria kindly offered to bring me to the University: there at least I was close to the railway station and that would give me the feeling of having started. Her offer was gratefully accepted.

That restless afternoon in my room at the University I could not work, so I thought, until I came to the discomfoting conclusion that I had to rewrite EWD401 "The characterization of semantics" because the way in which I intended to deal with non-deterministic machines --and I do intend to deal with them-- would lead to difficulties. Via two local trains I had to go to Roosendaal, where I would catch the Trans Europa Express "Ile de France" to Paris. I did not follow the suggestions of the travel agency --which would give me seven minutes in Roosendaal-- but made the trip to Roosendaal half an hour earlier. This meant, of course, more waiting at the Roosendaal railway station and if you don't know it, I can tell you: "It is not an exciting railway station!". But when the TEE left for Paris --with me on board!-- I had the immense satisfaction of having observed that I would have missed the connection, if I had taken the next train from Eindhoven! Such experiences confirm one's pessimism, one's little faith in travel arrangements.

The "Ile de France" is in principle an excellent train. I had a reserved seat in one of the dining cars. It so happened that in that car they only served the first meal and I came in so late that I was just unlucky.... So I had to change to another car and finally was served the second meal. The personel on the train was very impolite and unhelpful; I think the Wagon Lits puts its worst employees on that North bound train by way of bannishment. Later I checked my experiences with Carel Scholten who has taken that train quite regularly: he confirmed them.

I arrived in Paris "Gare du Nord" a little after eleven and dr.Robinet was there to pick me up and to take me to my hotel. I was very glad that he did so --the Metro terrifies me to such an extent that I would have been forced to take a taxi and in a large, strange town even that is not always pleasant--. In the hotel I was fortunate that I could leave the arguing at the reception desk to him, because for the first fifteen minutes the other side argued "that they did not know me". Finally they found my name written in a book --the wrong book, apparently-- and I got my room on the fourth floor which I reached via squaeking stairs. Before entering my room I looked around to imprint in my mind where to go for the emergency exit, but there was none... Sleep well. In the room I groped for the lights and in doing so I created a great disturbance in the bath room where suddenly all sorts of bugs were rudely woken up and started to run around. Being on sandals I could kill the ones that had chosen the wall as escape route as well. I knew I was in France, in the heart of France, in the heart of Paris even!

On Friday and Saturday morning we had meetings of the Program Committee for "1<sup>st</sup> Colloque sur la Programmation" where two out of every three offered papers had to be rejected. On the whole it was not difficult. A number of definitely wrong decisions have been taken, but somehow I did not suffer from it emotionally: to a large extent it is their symposium and their political game. For that was clear to me very quickly: French science is poisoned by politics. Many played it subtle, Nivat ~~that~~ it crudely but with

a persistence and a cruelty that I expect him to become a very powerful and very dangerous man when he gets older. Computing science suffers, besides from politics, from their limited mastery of English and, also, from the mathematical establishment: Bourbaki is in power and he never understood a single word of computer science and he never will. The situation is very familiar to me from Turski's description of Poland. (I am aware of the fact that it is a historical tour de force to try to understand the French scientific scene in terms of Polish situations!) The meeting ended with a considerable complication: Arzac had funds from the government for the publication of the proceedings of the symposium on the condition that ... you guessed it right: they would be published in French! The idiots! I did not buy that. Filled more with contempt than with indignation I left Paris from the "Gare de Lyon" at 13.20 with the TEE "Le Mistral", a train that I really can recommend if you have to travel through France. I had smoked trout and pheasant. (Although for us, who have been trained to eat noiselessly, sharing a dinner table with Frenchmen smacking their lips is somewhat distracting. But perhaps I am distracted too easily....)

At a quarter to eight I was picked up by a really multilingual driver who took me to Alpe d'Huez. The last thirteen kilometers were again a frightening experience: 21 hair pins and a slippery road. When it became too nerve racking I closed my eyes in the hope that the driver did not. At a quarter to nine I arrived and Bolliet --has seems to have it made a rule that he shares both the first and the last dinner of each of his speakers-- was there to welcome me. I think I first had a glass of sherry.

That Winter School in Alpe d'Huez is a funny business. I don't exactly know under what constraints it has to be organized. It is given under the auspices of some European Community Treaty: each country has to organize such a thing once a year and the government of the host country has to provide the funds, which, as a rule, they don't do. It is a glorious mess. This was the second time that Bolliet organized such a Winter School, but he has too many local speakers --each of them scheduled for one hour, say--. He should not do so, because they are really no good, but perhaps he has to do so in order not to make enemies. (Some of his American import I could not admire either. I found a remarkable man, Enslow who was observer on behalf of the American Army --apparently some of the funds came from that organization--, and he observed! His comments on some of his countrymen were less forgiving than mine and that is saying a good deal.)

In all the three days I heard two exciting lectures from Carel Scholten. It was a very nice survey of what he had done about axiomatization of synchronization via binary signals. Regrettably he lost a large portion of his audience. Peter Naur, who spoke, like me, three hours, was very disappointing. (Enslow was so furious that he refused to attend Peter's third lecture and he had taken the wisest decision.) The last half of his time he devoted to the article he had published a few years ago in BIT on the eight queens problem, what is generally regarded as a poor article, written with the best of intentions --warning for unwarranted optimism based on simplified views of "structured programming"--, but technically totally beside the point. More disappointing, I guess, was the audience: you are invited to stay a little longer so as to be able to have informal contacts with the participants, but the majority of them talks about skiing, a card game or what they have just read in the paper. Under Carel Scholten's expert guidance I travelled back home quite successfully.

25th December 1973

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