

MEMOIRS OF
A TRAVELING
ECONOMIST

Stories from the Remote Corners of the World

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PREFACE

This is not a thematic book in the genre of “managing your retirement,” “the ultimate exercise manual for couch potatoes,” “the do’s and don’ts of investing” or anything remotely similar to that. Rather, it is a diverse collection of experiences or stories, vignettes ranging from growing up in Norway to humorous anecdotes and some suspenseful stories of economic development experiences in the Third World. These stories have remained in my mind for years, begging to be written down before they are too embellished or completely forgotten. I have been encouraged to do this for many years by my wife, kids, and others who seem to enjoy hearing them – so here it is. My own take on this is that my career has been, at least ... well ... unusual.

I spent a lot of my working career in and out of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East in some of the most remote corners of the world. For more than twenty-five years I was an international consultant traveling to and working in nearly seventy countries “solving” all sorts of problems for various clients. My assignments were many – from economic analysis and modeling of large-scale forestry and agriculture projects in Ivory Coast, Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Niger, to training needs assessments, to wildlife economic assessments in the national wildlife parks of Kenya, Botswana, and Tanzania, and

to biomass energy assessments in Rwanda and Vietnam and Thailand and many other countries.

Working as an economic development expert in the Third World is a job that can be very exciting if you are a high octane adrenalin producer. If you can meet the report deadlines, cope with constant jet lag, and you don't mind working in a totally unstructured environment characterized by Murphy's law – "if things can go wrong, they will" – you will be OK. Most can't, though, so I wouldn't wholeheartedly recommend this line of work to sane people whose focus should be on having a regular job, earning a regular salary, and living a life with at least some semblance of normalcy.

Typically, the sequence of events for me would be to travel to country A, spend two to three weeks there, write a report with hastily thought-up recommendations, come home for a week or so, and then head on out again to country B to repeat the process. On the way back from country B, I would often stop in countries C and D to set the stage for upcoming work there. And so it went for about twenty-five years. While on the road I somehow survived on heavy doses of adrenalin and lots of coffee, only partially recovering from jet lag, and often just barely escaping from countries where civil unrest had broken out.

On rare occasions when I had home time, we were invited to events (the kind where you juggle drinks and paper plates and spill the hors d'oeuvres) where I found myself talking with "regular" people. The conversation would usually go something like this:

Q: "So ... what do you do"?

Me: "Uh ... Umm ... I am an international consultant – I work overseas most of the time."

Q: "Really? So ... where do you work"?

Me: "Well, it varies; it depends on the assignment. Mostly in Africa, though ..."

Q: "Africa, wow, is it safe there? What kind of work? That sounds sort of secret. Is it government stuff? You a spook or something? Any connection with the CIA? – haha ..."

The inevitable CIA connection usually popped up, often accompanied by slightly nervous laughter depending upon the questioner's

level of paranoia. He might think, "Here's a guy who routinely goes overseas to strange Third World countries (whose revolutions and coups d'état I occasionally read about in the newspapers) on assignments I cannot in any way relate to; he must be privy to some secret goings-on."

Me: "Nah ... I do a lot of work for USAID ... and the World Bank, and such ..."

Q: "What was that ...?"

Me: "The US Agency for International Development ..."

Q: "... Oh, I've heard about that – that's the foreign aid stuff, right?"

Me: "... Right, thanks for keeping me employed ... haha ..."

And so it goes. Usually it degenerated from there. By then his eyes had already begun to glaze over. Our interests had begun to diverge and he drifted off, particularly if the hostess had just brought in a fresh supply of snack food. There was little common ground, little to relate to, little opportunity to discuss any of this further, and he might say: "... Uh ... I went to Sweden a couple of years ago ... had a wonderful time. Ever been there?"

Sooner or later you realize you're a loner lacking somewhat in the kinds of social skills needed to be on the cutting edge of local issues, or even on the same wavelength as the regular folks whose life experiences are as far apart from yours as the east is from the west. You can't articulate the stuff you "do" in those countries in any meaningful way, or at least in ways that would keep them fascinated and eager to hear more. It was exactly the same way for the family when we came home on furlough every summer. We all just pretty much didn't talk about it. It was doubly challenging when it became clear that I was an economist grappling with a subject matter that defies a prolonged fascination by most people.

After moving to the US from Norway in 1963 to become a student at the University of Idaho, I actually embarked on what turned out to be a fairly ambitious academic career that spanned eleven years and resulted in BS and MS degrees from the University of Idaho and a Ph.D. from Washington State University. This time was interspersed with work that put food on the table, paid school loans, and kept me

CHAPTER 1: GROWING UP IN NORWAY

WAR YEARS

I was born on January 6, 1942, in Oslo, Norway. It was cold and snowy on that day, I am told, so I have to give my dad credit for getting my mom to the hospital after curfew while evading German soldiers at roadblocks all over town. It was in the middle of World War II, and the invading Germans were everywhere, menacing everything and everyone. Food and consumable items were rationed, and young families had to be innovative in how to make ends meet.

The earliest of my fragmented memories were from the last days of the war. Most vividly I remember family meetings when Dad taught us how to use the gas mask—a very scary looking thing that made Darth Vader-like sounds when you breathed in it.

Another early memory is the loud explosions of the bombs the Royal Air Force (RAF) planes dropped on German targets in the harbor area where their warships were anchored near our apartment complex. The harbor was within easy walking distance from our top floor apartment in a five-story apartment building close to downtown. The bombing usually occurred at night, so everyone in our building had to hunker down in the basement serving as a bomb shelter, listening to

the planes roar just a few feet above our building as we sat on wooden benches in the dark. The very loud booms and the bright illumination as the bombs exploded were spectacular. I clearly remember the noise and the frightened faces of my parents and our neighbors as they endured the experience while quietly praying for deliverance.

I can also conjure up from my earliest memory that I too did my part in the Resistance movement. Although my parents had told me to stay far away from German soldiers, I was a rebellious three-year-old bent on breaking the rules. So, on one occasion when I saw a German soldier patrolling outside our apartment building I, in a moment of temporary insanity, picked up a small pebble and threw it at him while his back was turned. My throwing prowess had already begun to manifest itself at my very young age, and the pebble hit him smack on the helmet with a clang. My intent was to disobey the rule of not making any contact with any German soldiers whatsoever, and not for the pebble to actually hit its mark.

Upon impact, however, the damage was already done, and as I tried to make my getaway the soldier caught me in full stride. I probably expected to be thrown into prison or worse, and I awaited my judgment while bawling at maximum decibel levels. But instead of beating the daylight out of me he reached into his pocket, pulled out some candy, gave it to me, smiled, and walked off. Wow! Now that was confusing for a three-year-old. Candy, along with all other foodstuffs, was severely rationed, so it was an immense treasure when we had any. I naturally inhaled it and in my excitement told my parents everything. Big mistake, because it was then I received the beating from my mom which I had fully expected from the soldier. So, my own personal war effort had begun and ended in mere seconds. But at least I did my part.

LIFE AT HOME

My family was middle class, a bit on the upper middle side, sort of enough to be comfortable, but short of having enough to be part of the much-celebrated upper crust of Norwegian society. We used to have money before I was born, I'm told, but the family didn't manage to hold onto it and probably made some bad investments along the way.

And it didn't help that the government decided to nationalize the wine and spirits industry in which my grandparents were so successful.

But we survived. My dad owned and operated a hardware store in downtown Oslo, and my mom was stay-at-home. That was the norm of the day – one income families. My brother, Jon Erik, was two-and-a-half years older than me and circulated in an entirely different world. He and his friends were older and looked down on me as a little useless runt (they probably weren't far off). I duplicated this attitude toward my younger sister, Ann-Elina, and her friends. We, the three siblings, lived in three entirely separate universes, and my parents lived in their fourth universe. It wasn't until full adulthood that we actually developed close and lasting relationships with each other. I can't say that our family was particularly close or exhibited any warm and fuzzy family characteristics of the *Father Knows Best* kind.

My home was a small three-bedroom apartment near downtown. It had a spectacular view of the harbor area and innermost area of the Oslo Fjord. It was my neighborhood; all my friends lived there plus lots of kids who formed into cliques and gangs, terrorizing the neighborhood with boisterous playing, bloody noses, fights, and accidents. It was also characterized by moms who carried ointments and Band-Aids in their purses to render emergency aid and comfort to their kids as they earned their merit badges in the tough streets of Oslo. Well, at least we thought they were tough, and indeed we had our versions of street rumbles leading to bloody noses. Home was only a place where we ate, slept, and recharged our batteries; real life was lived on the streets, hanging out with friends where we generally raised a lot of hell.

My cousin Peder was my closest playmate during the early years, because he and his family lived in the same downtown apartment complex at the time. We did everything together. Our maternal grandparents lived a couple of miles away in a house we really liked to visit. They had a garden, fruit trees, berry bushes and plenty of space to play hide-and-seek. When there we gorged ourselves on unripe apples and berries, paying the price by getting sick.

Playing in our neighborhood was fun since we had a lot of friends, but it wasn't nearly as carefree as being at Grandma's house and

CHAPTER 2: EARLY STUDY AND WORK YEARS

STUDYING IN THE US

“I have been accepted at the University of Idaho, and ... I will get a partial scholarship to be on the UI ski team!” I shouted as I opened the letter.

This was a big deal. I had friends already there, and they had told me tales of their exciting experiences which made me want to go there like nothing else I had ever wanted before. My English, I thought, was fairly fluent (which it wasn't), my skiing skills were right up there (which they weren't), and I had always been good as a student just getting by and making it to the next level. Little did I know. Surely I would do well, get my degree, do some serious partying as a university student, and then come home to a spectacular job paying an astronomical salary—or better yet, work overseas while being based in the US. That letter conjured up an infinite number of possibilities—all very good.

Being on the university ski team is how many Norwegians made it to the US as students in those days. Our high school diplomas were roughly equivalent to slightly less than two years at a university in the US, so technically we should all have started as juniors. But, language difficulties and a lack of similarity in subject matters studied in Norway

and the US resulted in fewer approved advanced credits, so I started as a sophomore with three years to go before earning my BS degree.

The summer was spent counting the money I had set aside or needed to raise for this eventuality, procuring the best skiing equipment and clothes that would make me blend in well in America, and looking into the cheapest possible mode of transportation. Late July 1963 finally arrived, and I took the suitcase I had packed months before, my skis and boots, and headed for the airport. There I said goodbye to my worried parents and boarded an old Icelandic Airlines DC 6 to begin a 24-hour flight to New York, with refueling stopovers in Reykjavik and Newfoundland. I'm sure we barely arrived at each stop coughing in on the remaining fumes in the tank. And hey, guess what, we didn't have any airport security, no TSA gropers, and no electronic tickets. We just showed up and boarded the plane after producing a valid paper ticket.

Hello, New York! Getting off the plane and retrieving my luggage is just a blur in my memory. The sight of me standing in the taxi line carrying alpine skis and cool Munari ski boots in stifling New York late July heat must have been a something to behold. Needless to say, the New Yorkers stared at me. I was lucky to eventually find a taxi driver willing to accommodate long skis and a big suitcase for the trip to downtown Manhattan. I had the address of a friend who worked in the shipping industry there, so that's where I was headed. I remember the taxi driver letting me off about a block from where the office was, and I had to walk the rest of the way in the heat of midday, skis on my shoulder, boots hung around my neck, and carrying a heavy suitcase without wheels. This was my entry into the US.

Two days in New York City was followed by a week or so with my family in Darien, mother's younger brother and his wife and kids. Basse (his nickname) was already well on the US east coast, having graduated from Dartmouth and Harvard, and was on a fast climb in the corporate world. He was the one we all wanted emulate. All of his friends and neighbors in Darien were presidents and/or CEOs and so he managed to hitch a ride for me on a corporate airplane that was traveling to Los Angeles. That's the only time I took a ride on a private plane with bigwig corporate executives. It was a memorable trip.