

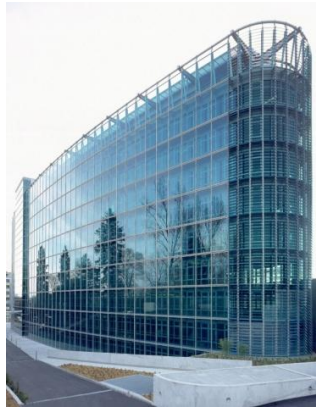
TOO BUSY TO BE RETIRED

My happiest years

Naginder S. Sehmi

1. LONGING TO BE SOMEBODY

René Mathieu, my colleague at the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in Geneva, retired in 2005. He had expected life to continue much as before. Surely, he would remain in contact with the men and women with whom he had worked throughout his professional life, especially those living in and around Geneva. Everyone knew everyone else.



World Meteorological organization

Living just across the border in France, René assumed that he would continue to share their joys and sorrows. He had little reason to contact his childhood friends at the other end of France; they had all scattered. His work colleagues, he thought, would remain his social circle.

But retirement brought unexpected social emptiness. There was no longer a common meeting place such as the workplace. I experienced a similar sinking feeling when I retired.

René, being a man of action, responded by launching the idea of **AMICALE — the Association of Former WMO Staff**.

At first, I did not fully understand this French word, *Amicale*. I was born in Kenya, then under British rule, and grew up among social and religious societies, sports clubs, groups and associations, although most were racially segregated in those days. But what exactly was an *Amicale*? I could not quite visualize it.

I retired at the end of January 1997. I punched my work card for the last time and walked out with no desire to look back.

Being a jack-of-all-trades, I immediately launched myself into projects ranging from house renovation, carpentry and masonry to mechanical repairs, watch repairing, jogging, cycling, playing music, gardening and, eventually, writing.

For a whole year I did not return to see my former colleagues, even when WMO moved into its new, glitzy building, fashioned rather like a cruise ship.

Soon, however, I began to feel the impact of the social gap.

I participated in various activities, but something was missing: **intimacy**. Was I asking too much? Or was it simply my own character that prevented me from recreating the easy friendships of my youth?

Perhaps the problem was that I had settled in Geneva as an adult. There was no way to recreate the carefree bonds of my younger years in Kenya. Becoming involved in local society was not easy. Like René, most of the people I knew best were my former work colleagues. And, like him, I watched those contacts fade rather quickly.

So, I wholeheartedly supported René when he launched Amicale in 2005. At first, I regarded it simply as one more item on my already long list of activities.

But I stayed with Amicale, through thick and thin.

Imperceptibly, the idea of Amicale began to penetrate my somewhat uncultured brain. Slowly but surely, I came to understand what it really meant.

Now, approaching ninety, I look back and realize how much I owe to Amicale, both emotionally and intellectually. I finally understand what an *Amicale* can be: **a hub of social activities and friendships that I had always wanted.**

Thanks to Amicale, I have walked along the narrow mountain irrigation channels known as *bisses*; ridden a little steam train to the Furka Pass and trekked down to the Rhone Glacier while it was still in its full glory; visited EUMETSAT in Darmstadt; stood face-to-face with the original figurine of Nefertiti in the Basel museum; walked from the Mauvoisin hydropower dam down to Fionnay in Valais, where I enjoyed in a rustic Swiss chalet, a piece of chocolate cake and a cup of tea I had brought all the way from Kenya.

I have crossed a newly built suspended “Burma” footbridge in a remote Alpine valley, travelled by boat along the Rhone to the Verbois Dam and visited its power-generating turbines, guided by a charming young woman.

Amicale even took me to Geneva's rubbish incinerator — one of the cleanest in Europe. I was highly impressed. I walked out afterwards, and, remarkably, I did not smell at all!

There were also countless visits to delightful Swiss country restaurants.

Would I ever have experienced all this without Amicale? I have two secrets to reveal.

First secret is learning to write.

Through Amicale I gradually acquired the art of simple writing. My articles about adventures and activities with Amicale, and many other experiences, were published in the biannual *Amicale Bulletin* from 2005 onwards. This experience eventually encouraged me to write my 400-page autobiographic book, *Twisted Turban*, published in the United Kingdom in December 2013.

The second secret is running.

In 1976, Jean-Pierre Golay was my neighbour. He had created a unique multifunctional wristwatch; one series bearing his name is now valued at more than a million Swiss francs apiece. One day, seeing me jogging towards the Rhone, he stopped me.

“May I accompany you? My knees cannot carry me normally. I can only walk or cycle. But I would like to run.” I welcomed him, and after three months he was running as well as I was.

Our families became close friends. Jean-Pierre was already an excellent swimmer and a good cyclist. A year later he began competing in triathlons — and winning some of them.

That reawakened me. It reminded me of the running I had done in Kenya forty-four years earlier. Hesitantly, I entered the annual Geneva **Course de l'Escalade** in December 1995. I was overjoyed simply to complete the 7.3-kilometre race, three rounds through the undulating streets of Old Town, in 42 minutes 24 seconds.

My fastest time came in 2003: 36 minutes 45 seconds.

I did not miss the Escalade for 28 years and was the oldest runner in several of the races. I completed Geneva's first fourteen half-marathons and five in Lausanne starting in 2005. I also took part in about 180 other races of which were 50, about 10 kilometres each mainly in different parts of Canton of Geneva, covering roughly 1,900 kilometres at an average pace of 6.28 minutes per kilometre.

Only COVID brought my racing to a halt.

To stay healthy, however, I continue to run regularly, mostly through the Bois des Frères to the Rhone and back. Since July 2012, my recorded running distance has reached 2,640 kilometres.

For more than two decades, my bicycle has also been my principal means of transport in and around Geneva. Besides cycling the Eleven Cities route in Friesland in the Netherlands and along the Danube from Passau in Germany to Vienna, I have made cycling trips in Croatia, Greece, Finland and many parts of Switzerland.

Joyfully approaching ninety, I find those years surprisingly short.

What a wonderful way to stay healthy — and to avoid bothering the doctors too much!

Many of the stories in this collection were first published in our *WMO Amicale Bulletin* from 2005 onwards. Looking back, I realize how deeply Amicale has influenced my life.

Without even noticing it, I think I have learned to become more affectionate and tender, loving and warm, affable, gentle, welcoming, cordial, sympathetic and well-intentioned.

Most people acquire such qualities naturally while growing up in a family.

Sadly, I did not have that opportunity. My mother died when I was five and my younger brother was three. My father, illiterate but wise, brought us up.

Perhaps circumstances later gave me another way of compensating for what I had missed. I learned many skills — partly to impress people, perhaps, but also to attract their attention and, deep down, to prove that **I was somebody**.

One event had a particularly strong influence on my attitude towards life after retirement: climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in 1956, when I was nineteen.

At the time, I wrote an amateurish account of the adventure. It was my first article and was published in *Batian*, the Scouting magazine in Kenya in 1957.

That extraordinary adventure, guided by wise and practical leaders, left an indelible mark on the way I would look at life — both when I began my working career and, many years later, when I stopped formal working.

That is why I have chosen to begin my collection with that story.

NOTE: At the end of each story is given the date of the Issue of the **WMO Amicale Bulletin**

2. CLIMBING KILIMANJARO: WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO YOU?

Two months before my twentieth birthday, I completed two years at the Nairobi Teachers' Training College and earned my certificate, graduating among the top three students.

I was looking forward to returning to my hometown, Eldoret, in Kenya's western highlands overlooking the world-famous Great Rift Valley. I had two more accomplishments to celebrate.

On 25 August 1956, I completed the Scout Master's Wood Badge course at Rowallan Camp, Dagoretti Corner, Nairobi. It was extremely strenuous.

Only two days later, wearing a hastily washed Scout uniform and carrying a heavy Bergen rucksack, I set off for Mount Kilimanjaro — a trek that would prove even more demanding than the longest Wood Badge hike.

I owe a lifelong debt of gratitude to my professor, **Joseph Loadman** (*7th from the left in the picture below*), who never allowed my modest background to stand in the way of academic success. He encouraged me to take part in extracurricular activities and eventually helped me obtain a Kenya Government scholarship to study at Trinity College Dublin.

He also encouraged me to write the article below, which was published in the Kenyan Scouting magazine *Batian*.



The 1956 expedition

With twenty other adult Scouts and Girl Guides, accompanied by four warranted scouting officers, and four highly qualified naturalists, we began our adventure at Loitokitok, a village located in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro on the Kenya side, on the evening of Monday, 27 August.

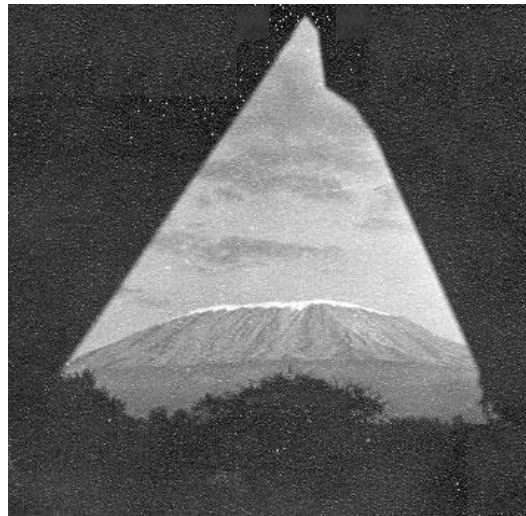
Two years earlier, on 1 September, Mr Loadman and Mr McNeil, my professors at Central Teachers' Training College in Nairobi, had experienced almost perfect weather on the upper slopes of the mountain. For that reason, we had chosen the same period of the year.

Unfortunately, this time the weather was much less kind. Snow was plentiful and visibility was frequently poor.

Nevertheless, we occasionally enjoyed magnificent views.

My tent door faced Kibo. Early on Tuesday morning, when I opened my eyes, I saw the complete outline of the mountain. What a splendid view! Kibo covered in golden snow glowing in the first light of dawn.

It was the first time I had ever seen an ice cap.



Kibo

We were in a world completely different from Nairobi — no hooting cars and no Suez Crisis to disturb us.

Most of that day was spent around the camp and exploring the surrounding forest with our naturalists, who had much to tell us about plants, insects and birds.

On Wednesday, the stronger climbers were divided into two patrols of eleven. The accommodation higher up was limited, making larger parties impractical.

I was assigned to the first party, appropriately named “**Express Train.**”

We were followed by the “**Stopping Train,**” usually one cave behind us — a distance of two to three hours' walking.

Through the forest we trudged, crossing clear, cold rivulets and steadily climbing higher. We sang and called our companions, and our songs echoed throughout the valleys.

I was so full of enthusiasm that I did not mind making the journey between the Second and Third Caves four times to ferry provisions.

On the third day of our ascent, we climbed through mist and snow to **Kibo Hut**, an unpretentious but very welcome corrugated-iron shelter at an altitude of 15,324 feet (4720 metres). That is approximately the highest summit in Europe, although I admit it seems rather modest compared with Everest!

At about four the following morning, we set off in bitter cold.

In the faint starlight, we could just make out the fresh snow covering the steep slopes of Kibo. The climb was much steeper than anything we had experienced earlier. Eventually we reached loose scree (volcanic ash) where, for every five steps forward, we seemed to gain only three.

Then the sun broke through the fleecy clouds behind Mawenzi, the other much older twin sister peak in the east. For a few moments we almost felt that weariness had never existed in the universe.

Within ten minutes, the sky was filled with an ever-changing variety of colours such as no human artist could reproduce on paper or canvas.

Then the weary climb resumed.

Snow was falling and the cold was intense. I could scarcely feel my feet. I struggled onwards, encouraging the others and helping wherever I could.

At about 18,000 feet (54860 metres) , we stopped allowing one of our companions, suffering from mountain sickness to rest.

Only a few steps farther, I suddenly came upon gigantic masses of ice on my left shining faintly blue through the mist.

It was Nature's beauty in a form I had never seen before.

Ten minutes later, I discovered that I had reached **Gilman's Point** (5,685 metres), on the rim of the vast crater.

Three others soon joined me, and between half past ten and eleven we rested there, admiring the extraordinary landscape.

The descent was almost a recreational exercise. I simply slid down the soft new snow. When I tried to walk with long strides, I suddenly found myself moving at full speed.

A large rock appeared a few yards ahead. I could not stop.

At the last moment I swung sideways and dropped into a place where I would not be hurt, thereby avoiding what could have been a dangerous collision.

When we reached Kibo Hut, with its four long bunks and wooden floor, the **Stopping Train** was already there.

We packed our things and made a rapid descent to the Second Cave, where we spent Sunday night.

On Monday, during the long trek down to the First Cave and then through the forest belt, we encountered a solitary elephant in our track facing us. We stood there scarcely daring to blink. The enormous animal looked at us, turned indifferently away from the track and lumbered into the bush.

Two days later, we were back in Nairobi, reflecting on an unforgettable experience shared by men and women of all three principal races of the Colony. Scouting and Guiding had brought us together.

We hoped it would not be for the last time.

Adapted from "Batian", the Scouting Magazine of Kenya, February 1957.

"So what?"

When I returned to Eldoret, I was eager to prove to my community that **I was somebody**.

I proudly announced that I had climbed Kilimanjaro.

The only response I received was:

"So what? Imagine if something happened to you! You could have died!"

That was very much the attitude of my society in those days.

But it did not stop me from seeking further adventures.

In 1957, I was accepted as an assistant instructor at the Outward-Bound Mountain School in Loitokitok, on the Kenyan side of the foothills of Kilimanjaro.

I helped train forty-five boys aged between eighteen and twenty. I found it more demanding than military training.

During the first two weeks, the boys acclimatized at different altitudes, beginning at about 1,500 metres and progressing to around 3,000 metres before the final assault in the third week.

You can imagine how demanding that was for the assistant instructors as well. We had to play the role model.

But what an experience!

For the first time since the mountain school had been established, **all our fifty participants reached the summit**, Uhuru Point — then still known as KWS, or Kieser Willem Summit 5,895 metres (19,341 feet), the well-known top of Africa.

The experience motivated me to join the follow-up to our 1956 Kilimanjaro expedition. In 1958, I climbed **Point Lenana on Mount Kenya**, the third-highest peak in Africa, with members of the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movement guided by two of the previous leaders.

Looking back, I can see that I, the young man, who wanted to prove he was somebody never really disappeared.

He simply grew older — and continued looking for the next adventure.

3. I'LL STAY YOUNG — EVEN IF MY KNEES DISAGREE

I ran my fourth annual cross-country race on an exceptionally hot day at the end of July 1998. Chatting with fellow runners helped me forget the fatigue.

The following day, 1 August, was Swiss National Day. My son-in-law and I drove to his little Alpine village of Fionnay, in the Val de Bagnes, about 1,500 metres above sea level. As we crossed the small bridge over the Drance River, we noticed a large tent on the left bank. Curious, we stopped to find out what was happening.

People were registering for one of the series of seven high-altitude mountain races. This race was to the Panossière Cabin starting at 6 a.m. the following morning.

After considerable hesitation, we decided to register, paying CHF 20 each. Rather unwise, we chose the 9 a.m. start, not realizing that running uphill in the Alpine sun could be rather warm!

What a memorable adventure it turned out to be.

The race involved climbing 1,180 metres to the cabin at 2,645 metres. At the age of 61, my time of 2 hours 30 minutes was nothing to boast about. But I was delighted simply to have done it.

The fastest runner completed the course in 51 minutes 25 seconds. The fastest runner in my age category—born in or before 1937—took 1 hour 14 minutes 45 seconds. The winner of my category had been born in 1934. There was even a 77-year-old, born in 1921, who completed the climb in 1 hour 50 minutes 23 seconds.

What an extraordinary day!

Running uphill was hard, particularly on my worn-out knees. Coming down was even worse. Many times, I had to crawl over the rocky descents while my knees screamed in protest. In fact, it took me longer to get down than to get up.

But that day I settled an important question in my mind: **I would keep running. I would stay young.**

The following year, I was tempted to repeat the race, hoping that better training would improve my time. Instead, I accepted a much more comfortable invitation from my neighbours to spend three days trekking around Grindelwald, sleeping in mountain cabins and walking the route from Kleine Scheidegg to Männlichen, Faulhorn and Schynige Platte.

I enjoyed the walks enormously. Yet somewhere inside me, a little voice kept saying that I had been a coward for escaping the Fionnay race.

That was enough to make me train harder for the Geneva Escalade Race in December. People say that with age comes experience. I therefore decided that improving on my times in the previous four Escalade races was a perfectly logical objective!

Friends and colleagues often greeted my running results with a slightly satirical twisted smile. When I told them that I had finished **580th out of 714 runners**, they were not particularly impressed.

So, I changed my way of presenting the result:

“I was first among 134!”

That usually produced a better reaction.

Race meetings were also wonderful opportunities to meet friends and former WMO colleagues. Pierre Jaccoud, a genuine marathon runner, was invariably there. Running had become much more than exercise; it had become my social world of its own.

And there was another lesson in all this. You do not have to be fast to enjoy running. You do not even have to win. Sometimes the greatest victory is simply reaching the finish line—and discovering that you are still eager to start the next race.

At 61, I had decided: I’ll stay young.

And, as I was slowly discovering, my knees did not necessarily have the final say.

4. THE PATH OF CELESTIAL VISIONS



The steep rocky promontory on the left, where the Rhône River makes a sharp elbow bend, has impressed everyone entering the Valais from the Lake Geneva side. It marks the entrance to central Valais and is also the site of a remarkable nature reserve: **Les Follatères**.

Thirty signposted trails crisscross this protected area. Thanks to its modified Mediterranean climate, it is home to more than 200 species of southern and oriental plants, as well as rare insects, birds and reptiles. Flowers begin appearing as early as February and reach their peak towards the end of spring, accompanied, among other things, by the songs of nightingales.

That was the season when our **Amicale** group set off early on Friday, 3 June 2005. By 9 a.m. we had parked our cars just downstream from the Rhône bridge at Branson. We approached the waiting yellow Post Bus and anxiously tried to delay its departure until our guides, Liliane and Robin, arrived. They eventually appeared—quite leisurely—from another bus. Our bus rolled away. It had apparently been waiting only for them! Such is **Anglo-Swiss timing**.

The narrow bus route then slalomed along the riverbank through green vineyards, sunlit villages and lush forests. Half an hour later, we arrived at the charming little village of Dorénaz, situated at the foot of a rocky cliff.

We had just enough time for coffee and croissants before the 10 a.m. cable car carried the seven of us 520 metres above the Rhône to the hamlets of Alesse and Champex. A brilliant blue sky and a light morning breeze lifted our spirits as we set off along the nature trail of Les Follatères.

Robin, with his typically English patience, lined us up for a photograph against the red cable car. Describing a walk in detail can easily turn into a boring travel diary. But some objects and incidents remain imprinted in the memory and become a joy forever.

The trail signs displayed the picture of a gentle, wise-looking donkey beside the words:

“Voie de la vision céleste” — Path of Celestial Vision.

What an appropriate name!

We walked downhill, mostly in the shade of deep-green coniferous woodland. It was a welcome relief for our cranky knees and ankles.

Liliane, our flower expert, was constantly drawing our attention to plants. She showed us **Jupiter's robin** (*Silene flos-jovis*)—not the celestial body, but a beautiful flower—along with viper's bugloss, white helleborine, wild lettuce and many others whose names have unfortunately escaped my memory. The flowers seemed to belong to another world: innumerable shades of colour, from deep Van Gogh-like tones to soothing pastels, and shapes resembling stars, bells, loops and strings.



Whenever the woodland opened, another magnificent view appeared. Far below, the Rhône flowed through green fields, orchards and vineyards. Across the valley, high snow-covered peaks rose dramatically, their slopes deeply cut by hanging valleys from which glittering waterfalls emerged.

Soon after midday we reached the rocky promontory itself. Perched there, we happily shared our picnic lunch while admiring the famous **“elbow” of the Rhône**, stretching for kilometres in both directions.

The industrial area around Martigny was, unfortunately, something of a blemish on this otherwise idyllic landscape. Some of the forest trees also looked rather unhealthy.

Was climate change already making its presence felt?

This was the heart of Les Follatères. The trail branched towards other viewpoints, including Jeur Brûlée and Tassonnières.

The last donkey sign led us out of the forest and into open vineyards. The sun, which had seemed so pleasant only an hour earlier, was now beginning to scorch us.



***Shady stop. L-R: Liliane Perry; David Hume; Margaret Glavin;
Naginder Sehmi; Emil Gomez; Nati Hugonnet***

The trail changed from grass to a steep, dusty road near Creux du Loup. Everyone was delighted when we finally descended into the village of Fully and enjoyed some well-earned refreshments.

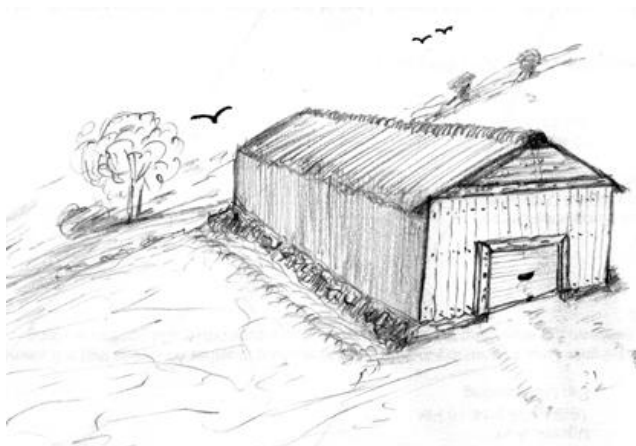
Another country bus took us back to our cars, while our group leaders returned by train.

Les Follatères is a magnificent nature reserve, suitable for everyone—from families with children to experienced walkers.

But for me, the walk was much more than a pleasant outing. It was a reminder that sometimes the most extraordinary journeys are not to distant countries or high mountains.

Sometimes, **the path to celestial visions begins just around the corner.**

*Editor of the **Amicale Bulletin**, Robin Perry, added two comments about my talents: one concerning an article I had published in Le Temps about development aid and job creation in Africa and another about one of my committee-meeting doodles.*



5/ November 2005

5. IF YOU DON'T USE IT, YOU MAY LOSE IT

In April 2004, at the age of 67, I was fitter than I had ever been. I had already run my first half-marathons and was looking forward to many more.

My total UN health-insurance reimbursements for 2003 had been **zero**.

Then disaster struck.

If you are over 65, **do not play football with children**.

Children love being goalkeepers and making you take penalty shots. For fifteen minutes, it is wonderful: you feel young again. Unfortunately, I continued for more than two hours. The next morning my knees were swollen like melons. Twice that week my left knee gave way, and each time I collapsed in excruciating pain.

Was I angry with myself!

Was this the end of my running?

Would I lose contact with all those running friends whom I met almost every week at training and competitions? No more silent nods or handshakes at the starting line?

As consolation, I took my bicycle and went to watch and encourage my friends at the next few races.

After examining my X-rays, the sports doctor—a knee specialist—explained that there was nothing he could do about the worn cartilage in my kneecaps and the damaged and inflamed ligaments. There was also a little arthritis here and there.

Nevertheless, he told me that some people continued running despite such problems, provided they avoided descents and stayed on level ground.

In other words: Cross-country running was out.

So was running on packed snow, as I had discovered painfully after a run in March.

Then came the doctor's most important advice:

“But don't stop moving!”

Extraordinary!

It confirmed what I had already begun to believe: I could stay young if I continue moving

The expression “*If you don't use it, you may lose it*” is usually applied to sexual prowess.

But it is equally true of the whole body—and the mind.

After retirement, a person suddenly has time to develop what I like to think of as a single physical-mental, perhaps even spiritual, entity.

I remembered an instructive health-and-retirement seminar organized by AFICS. We were encouraged not to accept the common belief that memory deteriorates simply because the brain can no longer replace dying neurons.

The brain can replace them—but apparently only when they are needed.

After retirement, the use of the brain is often abruptly, and unwittingly, reduced. The existing neurons are then quite sufficient for the reduced demand.

Hence, less memory.

The same principle applies to the body. Reduced physical activity means reduced need for food, which in turn contracts the stomach, digestive system and metabolism. So, the message seemed simple: **Keep your body moving. Keep the brain working.**

Blowing my own trumpet

Like many people, I enjoy blowing my own trumpet occasionally. The 2005 Geneva Road Marathon seemed to offer the perfect opportunity. I thought I would be able to show off in front of lots of people I knew, rather than remain an anonymous participant in Lausanne or some distant town.

That prospect overcame my hesitation. But I enrolled.

Sunday, 8 May, was a beautiful, cool morning. At 8:15, thousands of runners lurched across the electronically “bugged” starting line in front of the United Nations.

Cheering spectators lined the route. We ran towards Cornavin, crossed the Rhône and the Arve to Carouge, returned along the Route des Jeunes, followed the lake towards the World Trade Organization and finally reached the lakeside park and the finishing line on Quai Wilson.

When I used to tell people about my running exploits, they expected to hear about gold, silver and bronze medals.

If I told them I had finished **580th**, as usual, I would get a rather cynical smile. So, this time I presented the result differently.

In the Geneva Half-Marathon, I was first among 96!

Admittedly, 970 runners were ahead of me—but that was a minor detail.

My time was 2 hours, 6 minutes and 49 seconds, about six minutes slower than on previous occasions. My average speed was approximately six minutes per kilometre.

I suffered no cramps, but my knees certainly had something to say as I slalomed through the Jardin Anglais and the Perle du Lac.

You can imagine my happiness when I discovered that I had finished **14th among the 21 runners in the over-65 category.**

Once across the finishing line, my immediate reaction was:

“Never again!”



At the age of 78, Naginder completed running his 10th half-Marathon of Geneva - June 2015)

But optimism is remarkably quick to return.

Looking at the results on the Internet, I discovered that the “gold medalist” in our age group had been born six years before me, in 1931. He had finished 25 minutes—and about five kilometres—ahead of me and was probably already taking a shower at home when I crossed the finishing line.



Another runner, born in 1929, had finished ninth. Four others who finished ahead of me were four or five years older than I was.

That discovery gave my adrenaline another little push.

I still had several years in which to improve.

Why not?

My knees seemed to be recovering. I went on to complete half-marathons in Lausanne in 2005 and Geneva in 2006, my eleventh Escalade, and four *Tours du Canton* cross-country races in May and June.

Hopefully, my knees will no longer provide an excuse for disappointing performances.

And so, despite the doctor's warning, the football incident and my increasing vocal knees, I continued.

After all: **If you don't use it, you may lose it.**

And I had absolutely no intention of losing it yet.

5/ November 2006

6. ESCAPE FROM THE GOLDEN CAGE

RETURN TO KENYA

Eleven happy days with the family — I could have stayed indefinitely. But my desire was to see the *real* Kenya, not the Kenya presented to tourists. I wanted to visit rural families and see how they lived. Central Province, around Nyeri and Mount Kenya, seemed a good choice. I could continue my running training at high altitude and perhaps find an old colleague whom I had not seen for many years.

You know — the *mise en scène* for “Dr Livingstone, I presume?”

Twiga Travels could offer me only tourist lodges and safaris at exorbitant prices. Nobody recommended using public transport, although millions of Kenyans use it every day. When I asked about the coast, my nephew Rajinder became enthusiastic and, before I knew it, I had been booked into the ultra-expensive Serena Beach Hotel on Shanzu Beach.

I had no real desire to go there, but I take things as they come.

The Golden Cage

At 11.30 a.m. on Saturday, 16 December, in the arrivals hall of Mombasa Airport, I saw a man holding a **SEHMI** placard. A slight sign from me and he grabbed my bag and loaded me into a van driven by Faud, accompanied by Twiga's Simon.

Alone in the back, I felt like a convict being driven to jail — or worse. Hoping that the feeling would quickly pass, I chatted with my escorts about life in Mombasa.

But when we reached our destination, my feeling of dread was reinforced, even though the hotel itself seemed excellent. I thought it might be the heat, but in fact it was quite cool all the time. The atmosphere was suffocating.

As soon as I checked in, I asked the Twiga representative and the hotel to find me a place on the bus to Lamu the following morning. I also asked Twiga to advance my return flight to Nairobi from Thursday to Tuesday. I would have left even earlier, but they did not work at weekends.

I wanted to escape from that **golden cage**.

Unfortunately, the two daily buses to Lamu were fully booked.

A Lucky Escape

On Tuesday I landed back in Nairobi at 11.30 a.m., with a new-found lightness and relief. Then, as so often happens with me, **chance took over**.

At one of the information offices, staffed by young women, I booked the Garden Hotel, the only good hotel in Machakos. They were very surprised because hardly any tourists go there. They probably thought there was something wrong with me!

The previous evening, the waitress who served me a beer at the hotel bar in Mombasa happened to be a Mkamba from Machakos. She kindly briefed me about the place.

I was ready to take a taxi to Mombasa Road and take a *matatu*, the local name for a fourteen-seater van to Machakos. The girls at the information desk first asked for 5,000 Ksh to take me to Machakos. When they heard that I had an offer of 3,000 Ksh, they had a car ready in less than two minutes.

It had to happen that way. I was finally on the right track.

The driver, William, was a 22-year-old fourth-year Nairobi University student studying physical education. Before we had even left the airport, he said:

“You look very fit.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“I can tell from your skin and the veins in your hands. They are not those of an old person.”

There wasn't enough time to continue the conversation before we reached the Garden Hotel, more than 60 kilometres away.

William's mother was a Mkamba and his father a Luo from the Lake Victoria region. He organized meetings of the younger wing of the Nairobi Rotary Club and wanted me to give a talk, particularly to its Asian members, encouraging them to get out, breathe fresh air and exercise, using myself as a role model.

He also took groups climbing Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro. He might even have taken me to Mount Kenya the following week.

Alas, I did not have enough time.

Discovering Machakos

I was sure that my new safari I would be wonderful, thought-provoking and full of unusual encounters and unbelievable adventures in this rather neglected region of Kenya.

I did not see tourists in Machakos. If there were any, I should have met them at Garden Hotel. It dated from colonial times. Even the hotel staff seemed surprised to see me. They all went out of their way to make suggestions.

“I should like to go to the top of that hill,” I told them. “Please show me the way.”

“Well, take the road to Kathiani. But it is a long way, and the road is very steep. Nobody knows the exact distance.”

Two people gave me directions — and pointed in completely opposite directions. It was hilarious.

The previous day I had been unable to find a map of the area in any bookshop. In fact, I discovered that I didn't need one. **Chance had arranged a perfect companion for me, waiting just half an hour's walk away at the beginning of the climb.**

After my shower, I went down to the bar, where I met a hotel guest, Jan Bloemhof, a consultant working on technical-school projects of the Dutch Reformed Church.

He had lived in Eldoret, my hometown in western Kenya, and remembered everybody there — particularly the Sultan Juma Haji family, whom I had met in Calgary, Canada earlier that year.

Two drinks later, he was greeted by the local Member of Parliament, Mwanzia, to whom I was introduced. This was followed, naturally, by the usual conversation about local politics.

I set off early the next morning with a small backpack containing my jacket and a bottle of water. People on their way to work looked at me curiously, and almost everyone greeted me with a smiling “**Jambo!**” or “Good morning!”

Obviously, the sight of a non-black person walking on foot in this region was a rare event.

Bicycle taxis passed in both directions. After about fifteen minutes I reached the beginning of the climb, where several bicycle taxis were waiting for people coming down from the hills.

There was no question of my being transported uphill!

A short, friendly conversation confirmed that I was on the right track. The gentleness of these people made me feel completely at ease. It confirmed what William had told me: **there was no problem in the countryside.**

Most people spoke English, but my Kiswahili began to return to me. The cool mountain breeze, made me feel amazingly light in body and mind after the oppressive heat and humidity of Mombasa.

Silence — Brains Are at Work

On both sides of the road, I noticed at least a dozen signboards announcing church-related institutions or schools.

Just before the right turn to Kathiani, my destination, was the first secular school, Mumbani Girls' Secondary School. A little farther on was Mumbani Boys' Secondary School. They were run by different people.

The boys' school had about 1,000 students, and the fee was 20,000 Ksh per term. The guard allowed me to enter the school, which was hidden behind some trees.

One sign in the compound particularly pleased me:

SILENCE – BRAINS ARE AT WORK

The good tarmac road became considerably steeper, and fewer *matatus* passed.

I greeted a young man pushing his bicycle uphill. It had only one gear, making it very difficult to ride uphill. I had seen no bicycles with five- or seven-speed gears.

I invited him to walk on the right side of the road because it was safer.

Coming over to my side, he said:

“Yes, you face the danger.”

His name was Tom. He was 18 and lived with his parents a short distance away in Mungala. Seeing my interest in the area, he warmly invited me to visit his home and meet his family.

Hardly ten minutes later, we crossed the road and followed a narrow path through young maize interspersed with coffee plants.

His father came out and shook my hand.

Gideon M. Muthaka, 48, was a Forest Officer in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. When I left Kenya in 1970, before the Ministry of Water was created, I had worked in the same ministry. So, we immediately had something in common to talk.

On the family's one-acre farm, they also run a plant nursery. Tom showed me around. I saw grevilleas, pepper trees, jacarandas, pines and many other plants.

The Wakamba, the people of this region, live on numerous hills which have been terraced for growing coffee, maize, beans and vegetables. Farmers sell their coffee beans to the factory for 23 Ksh per kilogram.

The hills are subject to serious erosion. How long would they continue to have good soil? Population pressure is enormous.

Gideon was on year-end leave, supervising the replacement of his house roof. He apologized for the disorder.

He then took me to the small, enclosed compound beside the house, where there were three smaller habitations. A coffee table and chair had been arranged for me, and I met the family. Everyone was attentive and affectionate.

Of the four daughters, two worked in Machakos.

Life in the Hills

The next day when back in Machakos, Tom took me to meet his sitser Irene, who ran a neat one-square-metre kiosk within another shop. It was equipped with a computer and printer, and she charged 30 Ksh per print.

Of the family's three sons, the eldest is married, has two children and lives with his parents. The grandchildren were not shy of me, and I signed their visitors' book. The previous visitor signed it in September.

Machakos town has not grown much compared with others in Kenyan. Fifty years earlier, in 1956, I had walked 70 kilometres from Nairobi with three companions to see Machakos.

It has attracted little industry. Families are growing, but employment is difficult to find.

After the short rains, the hills looked beautifully green, as if this were a land of plenty — almost like the Swiss valleys. But in another two months most of them will be tawny brown and dry, signalling the onset of dusty, difficult and lean conditions.

In front of Gideon's house, on the hillside, is a 15-foot (5-metre) well, the source of fresh water. It was a lucky strike because the steep catchment above it is very small.

At the far end of the house is a small lawn with a few benches where relatives and friends are entertained. Gideon saw me off and asked his son to accompany me to the top.

I accepted, although somewhat reluctantly.

“There isn't enough room for the family, but we are happy,” Tom said.

He could hardly believe that, at his age, I had lived in Eldoret with my father and younger brother in a much smaller room with far fewer facilities.

As I stood beside the well, a thought struck me:

Why do we always point to the sky and say that God is up there, when in fact He is under our feet? Our entire livelihood comes from down below, but we never picture God there.

Tom showed me shortcuts, usually quite steep and deeply gullied by recent rains.

In a small niche in the embankment, a pretty little girl of seven or eight was selling small green apricots arranged in little piles. Tom said they were ripe, so I bought a pile for 10 Ksh.

They were not ripe at all!

After walking for about an hour, I noticed that the breeze was cooler and the vegetation had changed from tropical to temperate and wetter.

We reached the Ngulini — or “Baboon” — Forest, although there were no baboons anymore.

We came across six or seven children carrying bundles of firewood. When they saw us, the younger two put down their loads and ran towards the older ones.

I greeted them with a “Jambo”, and they immediately lost their shyness. Tom gave them the bag of apricots, which they promptly squabbled over.

A Changing Kenya

One thing struck me particularly: there was a total absence of Asians and Europeans in Machakos and the surrounding villages.

The former interracial society had been replaced by a more open, predominantly black society. Soon, people might even forget terms such as *Kalasinga* for Sikhs, *Banyani* for Indian merchants and *Mzungu* for Europeans.

We crossed another series of bends in the road.

“These are *Ngai dethina* bends,” Tom explained — “God help me!”

Since the road was almost always empty, I asked why such a good road had been built.

“General Mulinge lives not far from here, and he had it built to reach his house in the centre of his huge farm.”

Every person we passed, or found sitting outside their home, greeted us. Occasionally, when talking to Tom or lost in thought, I failed to greet somebody. Tom would immediately alert me:

“They are asking if you do not know how to greet!”

I would turn around and promptly correct my negligence. The gesture always ended in laughter and smiles.

The journey to Kathiani took three and a half hours. It was a small town whose population struggled to make ends meet.

I did not want to miss the chance of meeting General Mulinge, a gentleman of some distinction who had been the first head of Kenya's armed forces.

It was already after midday and few *matatus* operated at that hour, so we walked the remaining few kilometres to his residence.

Everyone was surprised to learn that we had walked all the way from Machakos.

Two guards directed me to a young woman who appeared to be a member of the family. I assured her that I was not a journalist.

However, one of the guards told me that the General was sleeping and could not be disturbed.

So, we turned back, disappointed. At least we had tried. I learned later that he was actually very old and ill.

We returned to Machakos in a *matatu* supposedly designed to carry fourteen passengers.

There were twenty-two of us.

The Road to Wote

The next morning Tom arrived at the hotel half an hour earlier than expected. On his father's advice, he decided that we should take a *matatu* to Wote, shown on the map as Makueni, about 75 kilometres to the southeast.

Passing through Mumadu — which means “abusing people” — we got off at Kivani and walked along a newly constructed road to see the “White Stone”, quartz used for pottery and construction.

Perched above the road cutting was a forest of Mukonge wood, used for the carvings for which the Wakamba are famous.

We walked about four kilometres, mostly downhill, admiring the greenery of the terraced hills.

We then boarded a full bus.

After several stops, I found a seat which I shared with a cheerful and very talkative woman. She was carrying part of her load bundled in a cloth, while the rest was in the luggage compartment.

It took only a moment to break the ice, after which we conversed in a mixture of Swahili and English.

She was 39 and was taking her farm produce to the nearby market town. Her daily earnings varied from a meagre 100 Ksh — less than \$1.50 — to 6,000 Ksh, depending on the time of year.

She complained that this was not enough to feed and educate her seven children, the eldest of whom was 19.

“I am very intelligent. I wanted to study beyond primary school,” she mused.

I suggested that perhaps seven children were too many.

“Yes, I realize that now. But it was *shauri ya Mungu* — God's wish.”

“How do you manage to pay their school fees?”

“My husband earns a little from a small business in Nairobi.”

Suddenly the bus slowed down.

A policeman peeped inside to see whether anyone was standing, then let us continue.

About ten passengers who had cleverly crouched down in the aisle immediately stood up again!

Wote and the Donkey Road

Wote was a large town, with signboards announcing a World Bank project to improve its roads. It was difficult to tell when the boards had been put up, but the roads were still bad.

The midday sun discouraged us from attempting the climb to the top of the hill. Instead, we followed the *punda* — donkey — track leading to a shallow river, a tributary of the Athi River.

We decided against wading across and turned back.

Along the 300-metre track, which reeked of donkey droppings, I counted thirty donkeys loaded with plastic containers filled with water from the river for household use.

The town's water supply was inadequate.

On the way back, Tom announced:

“This village is Mukunyuni. It is the name of a fruit that Jesus ate when he came here.”

“Do you really believe that story?” I asked as we sat in the front seat of the *matatu*.

The driver laughed.

“Don't laugh,” I said. “He is still here, even with us.”

Just then the driver happened to tell me his name.

Issa.

“There, you see! He is driving us home. We are safe.” We all had a good laugh.

A little farther on, Issa pointed out his village at the roadside. Then, quite suddenly, he stopped the van and ran across the road to a building that looked unfinished.

He returned within a minute.

“This is my church,” he said. “I stop here at least once every day.”

Back to Nairobi

Early the next morning, Friday, 22 December, I boarded a Peugeot station wagon carrying a maximum of seven passengers. Each paid 130 Ksh for the 70-kilometre journey to Nairobi.

I was given the front seat because I was the first to check in.

My fellow passengers looked quite refined; some were reading newspapers.

Nobody talked.

After reading the headlines, I started a conversation with the driver. The car belonged to him, and he made three trips a day.

I quickly calculated his earnings.

His total fares amounted to 910 Ksh. Allowing for the one-hour traffic delay entering Nairobi and petrol costing 80 Ksh per litre, his fuel bill was about 560 Ksh.

That left him a margin of only 350 Ksh.

Not much!

Near the airport we became stuck in traffic. To reach the Harambee Avenue terminal — no more than four kilometres away — took us more than an hour, even using side roads through a residential area.

During that hour I managed to stimulate a conversation among the other passengers.

We discussed Kenya: its politics, poverty, water resources as a limiting factor for development, unemployment, foreign aid and, of course, corruption.

When we finally got out of the car, we shook hands and wished one another a Merry Christmas.

“You never said a word. How come?” I asked the young woman.

“I was listening. I found it all most interesting.”

I was glad to be back in Nairobi.

The rest of the week was going to be very busy indeed: numerous marriages and other social functions, which invariably ended with delicious multi-dish meals and plenty to drink.

My escape from the golden cage was complete.

6/May 2007

7. EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK IN THE MASAI MARA

Many members of the Amicale will remember Rudolf (Rudi) Czelnai of Hungary, who was Assistant Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization. He retired from WMO in May 1992.

I first met Rudi many years earlier, in 1967, when we worked together for several years on a multinational project to carry out a hydrometeorological survey of the Lake Victoria basin. Lake Victoria, the world's second-largest freshwater lake, is also the source of the Nile.

Barely three weeks after arriving in Entebbe, Uganda, on 6 November 1967, Rudi was introduced to the project headquarters and met his future colleagues. Our dynamic Project Manager, Krishnamurthi, then decided that Rudi should accompany him to Kenya.

In mid-2007, Rudi telephoned me and asked whether he could send me an article for our Amicale Bulletin. He told me that he was enjoying his retirement managing his vineyard on the shores of Lake Balaton in Hungary.

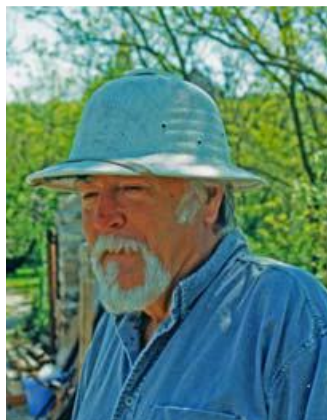
Then he asked me, “Do you remember when and where we first met?”

“Of course I do. How could I forget? You came to the project's regional office in Kisumu in 1967 to undertake your first exploratory trip to the Masai Mara catchment of Lake Victoria. When you came back from your safari, I still remember seeing your hand in a bandage.”

Rudi told me that he had kept a diary in Hungarian describing his experiences in Africa. Here is his fascinating account of an adventure on the Kenyan side of the Serengeti Game Reserve, known as the Masai Mara.

“Eine kleine Nachtmusik” — A Little Night Music in the Masai Mara

By Rudolf (Rudi) Czelnai



I had a contract to work for the UNDP Lake Victoria Project, officially known as the “Hydromet Survey of Lakes Victoria, Kioga and Albert (Mobutu Sese Seko).” This was the first time Kati and I had been to Africa, and we were full of adventurous expectations.

Our Boeing 707 landed at Entebbe Airport — a place that was to become world-famous only two years later — at 7:40 in the morning on 6 November 1967.

As the plane prepared to land, we stared silently down from the windows in awe. Our first impression was that everything was overwhelmingly, almost frighteningly, green. Below us stretched a sea of drifting papyrus on Lake Victoria.

Mr Thompson, the project's administrative officer, was waiting for us and gave us a lift to the Lake Victoria Hotel. It stood beside the lake, close to the Equator, with a magnificent view of the golf course and the water. A little farther away, a couple of elephants were sheltering under an acacia tree. Later we learned that they were tame elephants from the Entebbe Zoo.

At 9:00 a.m., Mr Thompson returned to take me to the project headquarters, only a few minutes' drive from the hotel. Our Project Manager, Mr Krishnamurthy, received me with an air of immense authority and immediately gave me an outline of the scientific work he expected me to accomplish. He also handed me a five-page printed briefing note.

I was then introduced to three hydrologist colleagues who had joined the project before me: Carlos Muñoz from Colombia, Dr Franz Schuster from Germany, and Alex Gavrilovic from Yugoslavia. The four of us immediately became friends and had a good laugh together.

Three weeks later, I was still quite inexperienced in the art of working in Africa, and Mr Krishnamurthy apparently felt it was time to throw me in at the deep end.

He told me I should accompany him on a safari to Kenya. We were to visit the Kenya office of the project, where he intended to hold a staff meeting.

We left Entebbe on 28 November in a Ford Zenith, heading east towards the rising sun and Kisumu. It was a long drive. On the way we passed through Jinja, where the Owen Falls Dam had been built.

I learned later that this famous dam had been the source of the problem that had led to the creation of our project. There had been mistakes in its design. Large areas around the lake became inundated, while the amount of water flowing down the Nile was reduced. This created disputes between the countries along the Nile.

Late in the afternoon we arrived in Kisumu and rested at the Kisumu Hotel.

The following morning, I first met Naginder, who was Head of the Kenya Office of the project. The staff meeting was rather unpleasant — at least for me. The atmosphere was

unusual because our Project Manager quickly and rather rudely dressed down the whole group. He said that he wanted to see action!

Looking back now, I realize that it may have been a little theatre specially arranged for me, so that I would understand that Big Brother was watching us.

Mr Krishnamurthy was a born leader, a man of instant decisions. He decided on the spot that I should receive an immediate initiation into the spirit of his “Africa Corps”.

He ordered Mr Wadidi, an elderly assistant meteorologist from Sudan, to get ready immediately, together with a driver and a Land Rover, and to get moving southwards with me as soon as possible.

Perhaps some instructions were given, but I heard none of them. Nobody told me where we were supposed to go. I assumed that Wadidi had secret instructions. He probably thought the same about me.

Unfortunately, we could not discuss the matter. Wadidi could not speak English, I spoke neither Arabic nor Swahili, and there was no other language we could use to communicate.

The adventure begins

When we started, I assumed that Wadidi had prepared everything for the mission. Naginder later also told me that Wadidi was responsible for the safari.

At least, everything looked normal at first. I leaned back comfortably and enjoyed the wonderful landscape.

After leaving Kisumu, we followed a tarmac road that soon became a very poor dirt road. It brought us to a small settlement on the lakeshore called Mbita, facing Rusinga Island, about 80 metres away.

We had to cross by ferry. It was the most curious ferry I had ever seen.

A heavy chain stretched across the water, passing through pulleys at both ends of the raft. The principle was simple. The women sat in the centre of the raft, while the men formed a queue, grabbed the chain and walked towards the stern. When one man reached the stern, he released the chain, walked back to the bow and grabbed it again.

And so it went on and on, while singing continued merrily.

Or perhaps not quite so merrily, because the chain was badly corroded and we were soon covered with rusty slime.

I was completely unprepared for such an exercise. I was wearing a pair of new white trousers and a beautiful shirt. I did not yet know that within 24 hours these fine garments would look like rags.

We quickly completed the survey on Rusinga Island and drove to Kisii, a small settlement nestled among steep slopes, where we spent the night.

After a good breakfast of papaya, fish, eggs and ham — Wadidi, being Muslim, had beans instead of pork — we filled the vehicle's fuel tank and our spare petrol cans. At 9:00 a.m. we were on our way again towards our next survey site, Keekorok Lodge in the Serengeti National Park.

On the way, Kironga, our Kenyan driver, whom I liked very much from the beginning, bought samosas and boiled eggs from a roadside shop. Wadidi bought shaving cream, and I picked up some cans of orange juice.

I too thought of buying samosas, but the unhygienic conditions in the shop repelled me.

I soon regretted being so fussy.

To reach Keekorok Lodge we still had about 140 miles to cover. By noon we reached Kapkimalwa, the outer border of the Masai Mara Game Reserve.

At a fork in the road, Wadidi advised the driver to take the dirt road on the right. It was probably the shorter route to Keekorok Lodge, but it was also the riskier one.

Consulting our map, I thought we were heading towards the Loongarya Escarpment.

The hills around us were the greenest green I had ever seen. We began to glimpse the first antelopes: zebras, wildebeests, Topi antelopes, waterbucks, warthogs, baboons, gazelles, giraffes and buffaloes.

But there were no lions — at least, not yet.

Road to Keekorok Lodge

At the Tsetse Control Point, a sign warned us that from that point onward nobody was supposed to leave the vehicle.

Two young policemen who spoke some English doubted that we could reach Keekorok Lodge from that direction. There had been a lot of rain, they said, and the roads were in very poor condition.

Shortly after leaving the control point, a herd of buffaloes blocked our way. We stopped and waited until they kindly decided to move aside. It took about twenty minutes.

The road was awful.



Wadidi used the opportunity to tell us, in his very limited English, a story about a buffalo that had attacked a Masai boy. The boy ran fast and climbed a tree. When the buffalo realized that it could not reach him, it started to weep, with tears pouring from its eyes.

Wadidi warned us that solitary bulls were the most dangerous.

Just then we saw a solitary bull standing in the middle of the dirt road, facing us. Half of one horn had been torn away, and it looked distinctly unfriendly.

Kironga stopped the car about 50 metres away and waited.

Long minutes passed, but the bull refused to move.

After a long battle of nerves, the bull finally cantered away along our track. But then it stopped again, quite close to us, and stared viciously.

After another ten minutes, we were able to continue.

About four miles from the Tsetse Control Point we came to a narrow creek. It looked shallow, and the watercourse was no more than three metres wide, but there was a broad strip of mud on both sides.

Kironga, our very competent and helpful driver, stopped, got out and examined the situation. He said nothing.

Wadidi looked at me questioningly.

I got out to test the ground. The mud held my weight and appeared firm enough.

So I gave the signal: "Go ahead."

Kironga obeyed — but, thank goodness, only half-heartedly!

The front wheels of the heavy Land Rover slowly sank down, and down, and down...

The body of the vehicle came to rest on the mud. The wheels spun uselessly, spitting mud at us.

Within seconds we looked like pigs.

And just then we heard the first lions, quite close by.

Apparently, we had invaded their watering place.



The lions' serenade

The story is really more about psychology than lions. After all, we had not yet seen a lion. We had only heard them roaring.



Before going to sleep, we talked about lions and wondered whether the flimsy canvas roof of the vehicle would protect us if the lions decided to investigate.

Wadidi humbly admitted that he felt safer lying between the seats.

Before saying goodnight, he told us many stories about lions. I took some comfort from his statement that lions “in general would not attack without careful observation and planning”.

Surely, we must be safe. After all, our lions could not possibly figure out what the hell we were doing in that creek.

I was quite scared. We had no lamp, and we had to conserve the car battery. Soon it would be 24 hours since we had eaten.

I wondered how we would survive the next twelve hours in pitch darkness.

Would we have enough physical strength to continue working? Would we be able to preserve our sanity?

The lions provided background music.

Suddenly I imagined seeing dog-sized animals moving swiftly between the car and the bushes. There were loud splashing sounds, and once I heard noises as if a large animal were lapping in water.

Was I hallucinating?

Why had I left the safety of Budapest to perish miserably in the African bush? I had come to do scientific work, not to seek adventure. I had no business with lions.

It was unfair!

Looking for some reason to be optimistic, I stared at the stars. The clouds had rolled away.

Later it began to rain again. The torrent on the left flowed noisily. I tried to memorize the angle between the horizon and the car window so that I could determine whether the vehicle was moving.

After a long period of anxious observation, I concluded that it had not moved at all.

I kept my feet away from the door handle lest I accidentally open the door and allow a hyena to bite off my toes.

I figured there were at least five lions, because I could distinguish five different roars and “keynotes”. When Wadidi and Kironga joined the concert, I counted seven.

After a while I became accustomed to the concert and, surprisingly, began to enjoy it.

I was tired of being afraid.

Since I was ready for action, I could not sleep. I held my Canon camera, safely packed in its waterproof casing.

Then I became terribly hungry.

It was difficult to think about anything except food and drink.

I thought the sky was getting lighter. I watched the stars and tried to estimate the time, but I could not read my watch.

It rained three more times — first violently, then more gently but persistently. Each shower seemed to coincide with changes in my confidence and desperation.

In my mind I examined possible solutions: the spare wheel, the jack, and everything else we might use.

The problems seemed endless: hunger, thirst, rain, mud, thorns, my sore hands, lack of tools, fatigue, inexperience, lions, language difficulties and our earlier mistakes.

Yet, despite everything, I was sure we would get out.

Surely no vehicle would come along during the rainy season. In principle, we could leave the Land Rover and walk the four kilometres back to the Tsetse Control Point.

But nobody wanted an encounter with the unpredictable buffaloes. We had already seen at least 150 of them.

I dozed off for short periods, resting my injured right palm on the chest of my deerskin jacket, to which it had stuck. Moving it was painful.

I discovered that a large part of the left side of my jacket was caked with blood.

In the pre-dawn darkness, I thought I saw one or two shapes moving. Something seemed to be approaching.

For a moment I thought I saw two lions walking slowly towards the water.

Then the lions started roaring again, this time very close by. Their voices sounded distinctly irritated.

Perhaps our Land Rover was stuck in the middle of their favourite watering place. Perhaps this half-submerged object was drinking their precious water.

By then I had become so accustomed to the lions that I could hear them roaring with a surprisingly cool head.

The sky became slightly lighter.

With difficulty, I saw that it was five past six.

Sunrise and a new day

Kironga got up and opened the door.

An awful sludge surrounded the vehicle, and the thought of wading through it was repulsive.

I put on my swimming trunks and went barefoot. The soil was cool and smooth.

I washed my only pair of elegant black shoes in the river and then took a refreshing dip.

The overnight rain had actually helped. The sludge was easier to remove than the thickening mud would have been.

I continued clearing the mud until I felt the sun burning my back.

The lions had finished their final sonatas.

Then I looked up — and an apparition nearly made me fall backwards.

About ten metres from the vehicle stood Wadidi in his long white nightgown, a black-and-white stick in his hair, staring at the sun and praying.

The scene was extraordinary, but also deeply comforting. I had been worried that Wadidi might lose his nerve.

Kironga and I managed to position the jack between the front wheels and lift the vehicle high enough to put stones underneath. With considerable difficulty, we did the same at the rear.

After removing the mud from underneath the vehicle, we laid two strips of stones along which we hoped the wheels would roll.

We were ready to try.

Wadidi tucked up his nightgown and dashed with me into the creek at the front of the vehicle.

Kironga warmed up the engine, gave a signal and released the clutch.

We pushed the vehicle as hard as we could, but it moved only about a metre.

Two things went wrong. First, the vehicle slipped off the strip and became stuck again. Second, the spare wheel broke loose and was carried away by the current.

I ran after it and, with difficulty, intercepted it downstream.

Where were the lions?

I wondered.

We were now in a much better position. The front of the vehicle was at least ten centimetres above the water level, although the rear was still touching the ground.

One more attempt should get us out of the mire.

My bare feet were covered with lacerations, but I paid no attention to such minor nuisances.

From time to time I dived into the creek, drank some muddy water and resumed the struggle.

Finally, we managed to lift all four corners of the vehicle and put stones underneath.

Kironga put the vehicle into gear, but it did not move. The front wheels were in the air, while the rear wheels, which were supposed to pull us out, simply spun round and round.

We were exhausted.

There was hardly enough energy to start again.

Using the spare wheel and the jack, we constructed a sort of tipping device under the front of the vehicle.

The idea was to swing the vehicle backwards and forwards and, when Kironga released the clutch, push it off the jack. That should give it enough momentum to start rolling.

We tried.

Nothing.

Then, suddenly, after one superhuman heave, the vehicle roared forward.

I lost my balance and plunged headfirst into the muddy water.

My eyes and mouth were full of mud, but I laughed like an idiot, unable to get up.

Unbelievable!

The car was free!

Kironga did not stop until he had put a respectable distance between the vehicle and the creek.

I looked at Wadidi.

He was still standing in the water up to his crotch, his muddy nightgown flapping in the current. He too was shouting, crying and laughing.

Naturally, the spare wheel had once again been carried away by the current, so I went after it.

This time it was quite some distance downstream before I managed to stop it.

Now I was no longer afraid of anything.

If a lion had tried to block my way, I felt ready to tear it to pieces!

Victory

Overjoyed and floating on clouds of bliss, I submerged myself once more in the cold water to wash.

Then we climbed into the vehicle and drove away.

The return journey was like a dream.

All the inhabitants of the Mara seemed to come out to say goodbye.

Buffaloes lined the road.

When I saw the first Masai boma, I asked Kironga to stop.

We had been without food for more than 30 hours, yet neither Kironga nor Wadidi showed much enthusiasm for stopping.

I asked a Masai man who came out of the boma to give us some milk.

He brought plenty.

I drank two cups without hesitation, setting an example for the others. They had little choice but to follow.

The smell and taste of the milk were unusual.

Wadidi said he had heard that the Masai “filtered” their milk through a cowpat.

Perhaps that explained why my very sore throat was suddenly cured!

We saw a herd of giraffes galloping slowly and gracefully. A large family of baboons was



playing beneath a big tree.

Ahead of us towered a superb cumulus congestus cloud. It had the shape of a beautiful woman, with breasts, arms, shoulders and waist all in remarkably correct proportions, her long hair streaming in the upper winds.

It seemed as though Mother Nature herself had come out to greet us and bid us farewell.

7 and 8 November 2007

Rudi recovered at the Kisumu Hotel. The next afternoon he came to my house.

When I saw his bandaged right hand, I asked, “What happened?”

He laughed and told me about that memorable night.

“This shows how little I knew about Africa. I took the only tool available — what you call a *panga* — to dig the mud out from under the front wheel of the car, which was bogged down.”

A *panga* is a broad, steel, knife-like machete used mainly for cutting thick bush and as a farm tool. It can be very useful, but it requires some practice.

“Now I know that the broad, pointed front part of the blade is sharp on both sides,” Rudi continued. “When I held the lower end to pull away the mud, I badly cut my hand. It is all right now. You see, I have learned so much about everything.”

“That is a painful way of learning,” I replied. “I should have accompanied you. I am sorry. But our Project Manager required me to stay behind and plan the projects in the Kenya catchment.”

A few years later, while running a half-marathon in Geneva, I thought I was being chased.

I remembered Rudi's night in the Masai Mara, when he thought he was being chased by lions.

But my “lioness” in the next story was quite different.

8. THE CHASER AND THE CHASED

Rudi's adventures in the Masai Mara, described in the previous story, generated many exchanges among the Amicale “chatternauts”.

My old colleague Sushel Unninayar, from the USA, was quick to reassure Rudi that he had never really been in danger of being eaten by a lion because, according to Sushel, animals do not enjoy human flesh — too many toxins!

In other words, he was suggesting that animals, unlike humans, do not pursue the uneatable.

His comments encouraged me to relate an adventure of my own during the Geneva Half-Marathon in May 2007.

I ran the race ten minutes slower than the previous year.

I felt I had been chased — perhaps by a lioness!

At the 14-kilometre mark, I was struggling through the Jardin Anglais when a girl — or perhaps a young woman — started running alongside me.

For about a kilometre, we played a sort of running yo-yo: she would move ahead, then fall back, and I would do the same.

Eventually she fell behind.

I passed several other runners, but many more overtook me.

It was hot, and I searched for the shadier parts of the route. The roads slope to the right in places, and to spare my knees I looked for flatter surfaces, frequently moving from the road onto the pavement.

Wherever I ran, I had the strange feeling that someone was chasing me — softly, silently, on padded feet.

I dared not look back lest I become distracted, just as an escaping animal would avoid looking behind it.

Our race bibs, or *dossards*, carried our names so that spectators could cheer us personally.

The name shouted after mine was always the same:

“Muriel!”



Chased by a “lioness”

As we approached the bends of the Perle du Lac, I realized that my “lioness” had been following me for nearly an hour, patiently waiting for the kill.

To save myself, I “accelerated” towards the finish.

She finished only a few steps behind me. I turned around to face her.

“You are my guardian angel!” I exclaimed. “Thank you for chasing me.”

She replied, “I hope you weren't upset that I was sticking so closely to you. I was worried that you might stop at the climb under the bridge — and that would have killed me!”

The chaser and the chased. I will let you imagine the scene.

We gave each other the warmest hug imaginable.

Two complete strangers.

My one Amicale colleague reacted to my story, “This can happen in sport. But Geneva is not tMasai Mara!

“My friend, Naginder,” wrote Arthur, “I like the story and the ending — and I mean that in all seriousness. But, on a less serious note, as a non-runner, I would like some clarification about the meaning of ‘We did some yo-yo for a kilometre and she fell back.’”

Good regular runners can maintain a steady pace uphill or downhill. I usually slow down when going uphill and find it difficult to hold back when running downhill.

So, I tried to explain to Arthur.

“You are like a yo-yo.”

That was the remark another runner had made to me in a previous race, when I overtook him downhill and he overtook me again on the uphill sections.

This happened in the Bernex area, where there are plenty of ups and downs.

I am sure you know that a yo-yo is a toy with a string and two discs. It goes up and down.

Experts can even throw one in any direction!

Sushel then put himself in the shoes of the person being chased in Geneva and wrote:

“Quite an amazing narrative. I enjoyed reading the trials and tribulations of THE ‘Run’. I am also highly impressed with your running skills. I need some advice on this matter.

“But let me come to the point.

“Chased by a lioness at the 14-kilometre mark? I might have reached that mark too if I were chased or followed by the soft padded feet you describe.

“But we — us global we — allow you some poetic license here.

“This was not a lioness in the Masai Mara. That would have been a multi-pronged strategic hunt, with not one but many lionesses, all plotting your demise.

“The final, actual chase would have been very short, and you might not be writing this email.

“For that I am glad. Otherwise, who would be describing a marathon run in these terms for the rest of us who have forgotten how to run at all?

“The chaser and the chased? Fascinating.

“Warmest hug? Two unknowns?

“I dare not ask a question about this.

“PS: A word of sage advice: Do not try this in Africa. If you hear soft padded feet behind you, climb a tree as fast as you can. Running will not save you.

“But what if there are no trees?

“Moreover, you are trained for running, not climbing trees.

“So, lacking trees, what would your next strategy have been?

“WE — us global we — are most curious.”

And that was the end of Sushel's advice.

7/November 2007

9. CAROUGE AND ITS SECRET GARDENS

A sunny and warm Saturday morning on 29 August 2009 attracted about 150 people to visit the secret gardens of Carouge, a city within the city of Geneva.

Of the eighteen garden visits organized by the City of Carouge, this was by far the most popular.

Welcoming us in the back garden of the Town Hall, the chief guide remarked:

“We are the victims of our own success. Evidently, people love discovering Carouge and its hidden gardens. I regret that we have only three guides. Fortunately, you will hear the fascinating story of each house and its hidden garden directly from the owners themselves.”

The six members of our Amicale group were together in one of the three groups.



Behind the neatly restored façades, an unexpected world opened before us: a small, intimate world, typically *carougeois*, which seemed to invite us into its mysteries with a kind-hearted and slightly mischievous welcome.

We pushed open a door and suddenly found ourselves in another world.

We stopped breathing in the perfume of roses and old lilacs. We noticed an old bicycle leaning against a wall, evoking a touch of nostalgia.

Conviviality is one of the outstanding characteristics of the people of Carouge. Some families warmly opened their homes to us and invited us to share, if only briefly, their private and privileged world.

As we strolled around, we could glimpse — or sometimes merely guess — the shape of a tree, a bench behind an artisan's workshop, or some other little detail.

These were precisely the things that made us dream of hidden courtyards and secret gardens.

It was fascinating to discover that behind the familiar streets and beautifully restored facades there existed such private and peaceful spaces.

At the end of the visit, the six of us sauntered along the narrow streets, slightly drowsy after inhaling so many garden perfumes.

Then came the final attraction.

A hearty lunch of *entrecôte* and *filets de perches* outside “La Bourse” sent us home in search of a well-deserved siesta.

A perfect ending to a perfect morning.

11/November 2009

10. LA NIÑA, THE BABY GIRL, WETS THE EARTH

Whenever a severe flood or drought occurs somewhere in the world, the person in the street usually knows whom to blame: the “baby boy”, El Niño.

Few people know his “baby sister”, La Niña.

She can be equally, if not more, dangerous.

The choice of gender is not entirely accidental. The gentle sex, like the goddess Kali, has an unfathomable potential for destruction — especially when it takes the form of devastating floods!

This has little to do with Robin Perry's regular “Talking about the Weather” feature in this Bulletin. But I opened my mouth, and words poured out about the unusual floods that had recently occurred in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia, China, Mexico, Brazil and Europe.

I was therefore assigned the task of saying something about weather and floods.

The list of La Niña's victim countries, from East to West, is not in chronological order. But there seems to be something significant about it.

A lesson from 1979

I remember when the WMO Secretariat was preparing for the first World Climate Conference in 1979.

At that time, meteorologists were not quite sure how to handle climate issues. They were experts at describing day-to-day weather, whereas climate is concerned with long-term records, trends and averages.

It is sometimes said that **weather is a watch, whereas climate is a calendar.**

Hydrologists, who were not quite sure how they fitted into the climate business, did not want to be left out of the conference glory.

The Secretary-General therefore agreed that my Director, Professor Němec, together with an expert from the US Weather Service, should undertake a study of the impact of climate change on hydrology.

Their conclusion was that a rise in global temperature would accelerate the water cycle, resulting in more intense rainfall and consequently more devastating floods.

Their findings were not particularly appreciated at the time and were soon forgotten.

Their significance, however, is becoming increasingly evident in what the world is experiencing today.

So, are these exceptional floods related to climate change?

I turned to the Internet for answers and found many headlines pointing an accusing finger at the little baby girl, La Niña:

- *La Niña continues to dominate in the Pacific.*
- *Climate chaos across the world as La Niña makes her mark.*
- *Australia floods — La Niña to blame.*

The baby boy, El Niño, also appeared in a couple of headlines:

- *New breed of El Niño on the rise.*
- *El Niño seen triggering next world warmth record.*

Either there is some gender confusion here, or perhaps both babies are involved!

Who is to blame?

Do we have any ethical or scientific basis for blaming these two little babies for all the world's calamities and climate-related woes?

Yes — if they were independent creatures capable of making decisions uninfluenced by anything else.

Human beings have always needed scapegoats for their physical and spiritual afflictions, preferably ones that cannot answer back.

God is perhaps the mightiest scapegoat of all. Floods, droughts, earthquakes and tsunamis are sometimes attributed to divine punishment for our sins.

We swallow the explanation without complaint, knowing that God cannot be questioned.

When heavy rain causes damage or drought kills cattle in Kenya, my country, people blame El Niño.

They do not want to admit their own sins: deforestation, overgrazing, population pressure and water pollution.

The poor little babies become convenient scapegoats.

Water, water, everywhere — 2011

The year began with massive floods in Australia, Brazil and Sri Lanka.

Much of the Australian state of Queensland was under water following weeks of unusually heavy rain. Brisbane, Australia's third-largest city, suffered major flooding, with damage expected to run into billions of dollars.

In Brazil, hundreds were killed when mudslides struck areas north of Rio de Janeiro.

Sri Lanka also suffered severe flooding, with dozens killed and thousands displaced.

Like the rest of the world, Amicale members watched the television images of the devastation: houses, cars and trees being swept away like plastic toys.

My words are inadequate to describe even a single scene.

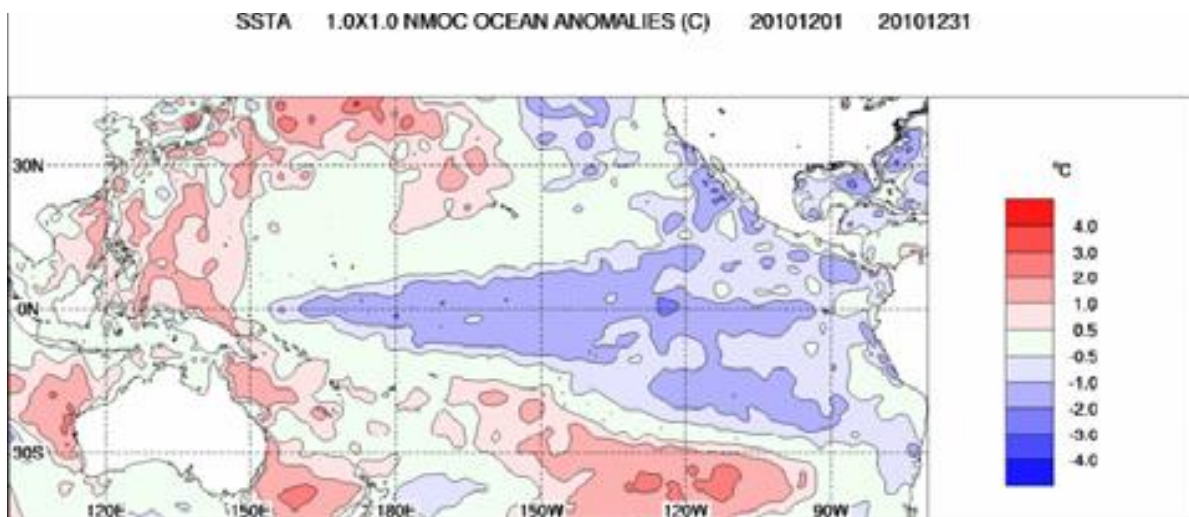
So I shall give up trying — and will not even offer a photograph of the flooding!

Where do the two babies live?

You have probably guessed how the babies got their names.

In Spanish, **El Niño means “the boy”**. The name refers to the Christ Child because the phenomenon often appears around Christmas.

Both babies live off the coasts of Ecuador and Peru — but they take turns appearing.



Australian Bureau of Meteorology
 (<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/>)

La Niña is characterized by unusually cool conditions in the tropical Pacific, blue in the map. El Niño is essentially her opposite: the map changes from blue to red.

La Niña had become particularly strong from the middle of 2010, influencing several climate indicators, including tropical cloud cover, the Southern Oscillation Index, trade winds and Pacific sea-surface and subsurface temperatures.

The number of tropical cyclones was also higher than normal.

During El Niño, the opposite conditions occur.

A new breed of babies?

The floods came after what had been described as the Earth's wettest year on record.

Scientists said that a combination of an unusually powerful La Niña and the influence of global climate change had contributed to the flooding.

Dr David Jones, a climate analyst with the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, agreed that both factors might have raised sea-surface temperatures near Australia, producing more thunderstorm activity and unusually heavy rainfall.

He pointed out that the previous comparable La Niña events — in 1973–75, 1955 and 1917 — had also brought major floods and calamities.

After reading all this, however, the scientists had me completely confused.

Why condemn La Niña?

Their accusing fingers seem to be getting longer and longer.

I cannot understand how they can equate La Niña and her little brother with climate change.

And why would two babies suddenly mutate and produce a “new breed”?

Scientists are human beings too. They cannot entirely escape the temptation to look for a scapegoat.

Frightened of facing the real devil — **climate change** — it is much easier to point at the two little babies.

Then I realized something.

If you have two babies, they cannot mutate on their own.

Their “cancer” must be caused by changes in the Earth's atmosphere, water and land.

One of those cancerous cells is climate change.

Assuming that the Earth is sick, **El Niño and La Niña are symptoms, not the disease.**

By feeling their pulse, we can diagnose the Earth's fever.

Another symptom is the temperature and strength of the Gulf Stream in the Atlantic Ocean.

So perhaps we should put the blame where it belongs: on climate change.

Leave the little girl, La Niña, alone!

Forecasting La Niña

I dare not talk too much about climate change. The whole world is doing that already — and has been doing so for many decades.

What I am pleased to see, however, is that scientists have made important advances in understanding our two babies.

Countries affected by both floods and droughts now provide medium-term, three-month rainfall outlooks based largely on the appearance and strength of El Niño and La Niña.

One thing should be made clear:

Whatever their gender, each baby has the power to indicate floods in one part of the world and drought in another during the same period.

According to almost all forecasting models, the La Niña of that time was expected to remain in the Pacific at least through the first quarter of 2011 and possibly into the second quarter.

Unless things have changed since I retired, the WMO Secretariat itself does not run forecast models. Based on information received from countries, WMO confirms and communicates the forecasts — including the expected weakening of the baby girl.

Understanding the behaviour of these two babies enables us to predict seasonal rainfall and helps people safeguard lives and property, particularly in rural areas.

In urban areas, however, it has become increasingly difficult to prevent people from building in areas vulnerable to floods and landslides.

And landslides frequently occur where forests and vegetation have been removed.

We do not like to admit it, but unfortunately, **we humans are often the major cause of the damage.**

So, please:

Don't blame the babies! Remember: *symptoms are not disease.*

14/May 2011

11. BIKING ALONG THE DANUBE

From Passau to Vienna

One school friend thought I had been dead for ages until he came across my website. Another e-mailed me: "Are you still alive? If your memory is intact, I can tell you who I am."

There are people living in this world with whom you can talk, write, meet, disagree and even quarrel. "Road running" is good, but apparently it is not enough. Anyway, some of us are still alive—or so I think. You could communicate with us; you don't need a licence or government permission to do so. If you are still capable of reading and writing, let us know how you are!"

I read this e-mail in a *Gasthof* in a small Austrian town on the Danube, just across the border from Germany. Being away from my computer is one of the drawbacks of travelling.

Two days earlier, Karin, my Swedish friend, and I had been cycling in southern Bavaria and had visited the famous fairytale castle of Neuschwanstein. It may not be the most beautiful castle in the world, but it attracts thousands of tourists every day, especially from the Far East. Along with the other sightseers, we walked to the nearby *Marienbrücke*, a steel bridge spanning the Pollat Gorge and offering the best view of the castle.

July was hot, but cycling was less taxing than running half-marathons. We loaded our two bicycles into my little Honda Jazz, and Karin drove us to Neuschwanstein. She loves doing things the difficult way. She had chosen an excellent B&B a few kilometres outside the village of *Schwangau*.

In the evening we cycled into the village and reserved places in an early-morning group visiting the castle. The sun was still shining, and my companion, an enthusiastic amateur photographer, decided that we should cycle around the nearby Alpensee.

Halfway round, we were rewarded with a spectacular view of the two castles. Hohenschwangau was glowing in the setting sun and reflected beautifully in the lake.

I shall not say much about the castles or their eccentric builder, Ludwig II; they have been exquisitely described elsewhere. My adventure was rather different. The cycling track ended at the viewpoint, and Karin then made me push or carry my bicycle for nearly three kilometres over tree roots and rocks.

It was excellent preparation for the days to come!

The next morning, our gracious landlady, Paula, knew that we were going to cycle many kilometres around the larger Forggensee. She read our minds and gave us two plastic bags for our lunchtime sandwiches.



In Paula's honour, we squeezed packed lunches into our banana bags for the next ten days—even though, in some places, notices clearly stated that all food had to be consumed inside. Presumably, this meant that nothing was to be “stolen” from the breakfast buffet!

Karin's philosophy was simple: why take a bus or a horse-drawn carriage when we had bicycles?

The climb of about 200 metres to the castle tested both my legs and my lungs.



The Danube: Passau to Vienna

We left the car in Passau, Germany, situated at the confluence of three rivers: the Danube, the Inn and the Ilze. Using public transport, we explored the old town and had dinner at a popular restaurant overlooking the Inn.

Before nine the next morning, we put our two bags near the hotel entrance for the tour company to take them to our next stop. Unfortunately, we never met the agent responsible for collecting them.

Never mind. We set off on our bicycles along the left bank of the Danube, with Vienna as our destinations 350 kilometres away.

After passing many joggers in parks and woods, we reached the towpath formerly used by teams of horses that hauled barges upstream.

I quickly discovered a fundamental disadvantage of cycling on a flat track: there is nowhere to rest! I had to keep pedaling continuously.

The riverbank trees shaded us for much of the time, which was particularly welcome in temperatures above 34°C. The beautiful scenery and the frequent appearance of long barges helped distract me from the growing fatigue, although my thighs were beginning to feel like lead.

At the next overnight stop, cold beer served by pretty waitresses dressed in traditional Austrian costumes was extraordinarily refreshing.

The famous Schlögen Bend, viewed from high on the hillside, was another attraction not to be missed. The climb normally takes about thirty minutes.

We, however, managed to get lost and wasted nearly an hour and a half before reaching the viewpoint. By then we were completely exhausted.



Schlogen Bend

I could not even e-mail my travel log because the *Gasthof* had no Wi-Fi. A violent squall followed by a thunderstorm had also knocked out the television reception. Nature was clearly determined to keep me offline.

The next morning, Monday, there were fewer cyclists on the route. The bravest were attempting the entire Danube journey from source to mouth.

Our track was still passable, although fallen trees and other storm debris obstructed it. Worse, a strong headwind generated by the storm was impossible to escape.

We decided on a diversion to seek divine assistance at *Maria Taferl*, an Austrian equivalent of Lourdes.

The three-and-a-half-kilometre climb to the cathedral was so steep that our bicycles refused to cooperate. They behaved like obstinate mules, forcing us to push them for two-thirds of the way. Clearly, the blessing had to be earned through suffering!

The eight-minute ride back down, however, was delightful.

We decided to cycle along the shadier right, or southern, bank towards *Melk*, where we visited its famous and dazzling monastery, once enormously wealthy.

Afterwards came an enjoyable ride through Austria's celebrated vineyards as far as *Krems*. But we were not particularly enthusiastic about facing the following day's final and longest stage, about 90 kilometres.

The route first followed the left, northern bank and then crossed to the right. Most of the way we passed through picturesque villages until we finally reached the outskirts of Vienna.



Entering Vienna

Only about 15 kilometres remained.

To our delight, the cycle track took us through the parklands of Danube Island, where we stopped to recover before the final sprint.

At last, we reached the hotel at 17:10, far too tired to send another e-mail.

Vienna

We spent three days sightseeing in Vienna. But the most emotional moment for me had nothing to do with palaces, museums or magnificent buildings.

I met the family of Alex Kiesel, now a retired doctor. Alex had been a camper in Switzerland back in 1962, when I was his monitor.

After hundreds of kilometres of cycling along the Danube, through heat, wind, storms, hills, vineyards and villages, meeting someone from my distant past was perhaps the perfect ending to the journey.

The Danube had taken us from Passau to Vienna.

But, in a way, the journey had taken me much further—back through more than half a century of friendships, adventures and memories.

17/November 2012

12. NATURE'S SUPREMACY OR RELIGION



The Golden Rock at sunset is a sight to behold in Myanmar (Burma). On 28 March 2015, I saw many similar granite rocks nearby, but this one was different. It was precariously balanced on top of another granite rock and, uniquely, had been covered with gold leaf. Thousands of worshippers continue to stick gold leaves onto it and seek blessings from Buddha.



They firmly believe that the rock is held in this delicate position by a relic of Buddha's hair brought from Sri Lanka. Gold leaf was available at an officially fixed price from the nearby post office, and I was tempted to buy some myself.

The sight is so extraordinary that it leaves little room for disbelief. Looking up at the rock, I felt as if the solid gold were about to fall on me. Instinctively, I raised my hand to hold it!

My guide was absolutely convinced that the Golden Rock really floats above the rock beneath it, and that the gap between the two is gradually widening, as shown in a painting in the adjacent museum.

“Only true believers can see the gap,” he explained.

I lay down beneath the rock to look for myself—but, unfortunately, I could see nothing. Naturally, the gap did not appear in the forbidden photograph I took!



You probably know that only men are allowed to approach the Golden Rock. I wondered whether the real reason might be that, if a woman touched it, the rock would tumble down.

Such is the power of feminine spirituality!

This extraordinary phenomenon left me wondering:

“What came first—the rock or Buddha?”

Surely, the rock existed in its natural, primitive form long before Buddha.

There are thousands of similar, and even more spectacular, geological formations throughout the world: rocks perched on sharp pinnacles, arches carved by wind and water, deep canyons and breathtaking caves.

There is, however, one vital difference: Buddha’s followers have not yet reached them with one of his relics!

Looking at all this, I felt that religion in Myanmar had, quite literally, claimed every extraordinary natural phenomenon in the country and made it its own.

Not far from the Golden Rock, I climbed with numerous devotees and tourists up a steep volcanic extrusion—a natural lava plug rising from the middle of a vast plain.

The small, flat summit is covered with a monastery and numerous stupas.

What a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside!

But religion had once again claimed the summit and covered part of it with rather unattractive concrete.

The following day I visited the ruins of a complex of stupas on the shores of the famous and beautiful Lake Inle.

There I was delighted to see trees growing through massive ancient stupas.



Nature was demonstrating its spontaneous power over religion.

Perhaps here lies the real lesson arising from Golden Rock. Nature was there first. Religion came later—and, wherever religion could, it put its own label on nature's wonders.

But trees, roots, wind, water and time continue their quiet work.

They do not ask permission. They simply carry on.

Editorial comment: I think this story works **particularly well in this shorter, sharper form**. Your final thought—“*Nature was demonstrating its spontaneous power over religion*”—is strong enough to carry the whole piece.

23/December 2015

13. ELEVEN CITIES BIKING TOUR IN HOLLAND

Adventure and excitement packed 2015

During two weeks in March and April in Myanmar (Burma), I was glad to see that the country had not changed much since I first saw it twenty-five years earlier. The striking change was the throngs of tourists—that was only the beginning, for the country had just opened its doors to the travel-hungry world.

Biking around Lake Constance in May highlighted the differences in the quality of facilities for cyclists in the three countries bordering the lake: Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Germany was clearly at the top. For my companion Karin and me, this tour was valuable training for our next adventure, which began on 3 July 2015.

With our two bicycles loaded into my little Honda Jazz, we headed for Harlingen, an ancient port at the entrance to the former Zuiderzee on the northern coast of Holland. It is difficult to remember all the countless places we visited, the scenic views and the events along the way. Nevertheless, I can still show you some of them!



With Beethoven and facing Charlemagne the Great

Beethoven provided us with a musical prelude in Bonn, his birthplace.

In Aachen, “Naginder the Great” challenged Charles the Great—Charlemagne, or Karl der Grosse. I have not sinned by borrowing a little of his “greatness”.

In Harlingen, I rediscovered Joke, my loving and generous friend, after many decades. We had been counsellors at an international children's camp in Fideris, near Klosters, Switzerland, in the summer of 1962.

In her warm and welcoming home, the temptation to celebrate our reunion was strong—but we had to resist it. Otherwise, we might never have started the planned eleven-city cycling tour, signposted *Elfstedenroute – lengte 240 km*, through the flat, beautiful green province of Friesland, a country within Holland with its own language and traditions.



The bridges over thousands of canals and roads were not our only consolation: they also provided welcome changes in our pedaling rhythm. On the first day, a strong westerly wind often pushed us along at more than 30 km/h, and we reached Dokkum, our first city, early enough to meet Saint Boniface.

In 754 AD, Boniface had led an Anglo-Saxon mission to convert the Friesians to Christianity.



He convened a gathering of converts near Dokkum. Instead, a gang of armed robbers appeared and killed the elderly archbishop and his companions. The robbers then ransacked his large chests, expecting to find riches, gold plates and silverware. To their disappointment, they found only manuscripts of little use to them.

One can still encounter the wide-winged Dutch windmills, now so peaceful-looking that one would hardly think of dueling with them. Instead, thousands of tall, slender, narrow-winged modern wind turbines churn the air over the otherwise pleasant countryside, not attractive opponents for a duel at all!

Every time we entered a B&B, the owners' homely welcome quickly made us forget our fatigue. Besides making us comfortable, they made sure we had a full, wholesome breakfast to prepare us for what lay ahead.



On the second day, we faced the same strong westerly wind. Cycling on the flat track became like climbing Kilimanjaro for the rest of the tour, with the wind gathering increasing strength as we progressed westwards.



However, surprises awaited us at every corner, providing a good excuse to stop. We saw the boat *Blauwe Tulip* sailing over a bridge; another passing underneath; another waiting while a bridge was raised; and yet another seemingly sailing through green fields between the windmills.



We reached Leeuwarden, the birthplace of the world-famous Mata Hari. This Friesian beauty charmed both the French and German high commands during the First World War. Accused of being a spy, she was condemned by France and executed. In the museum, I even met one of her traditional ancestors—or at least someone who looked remarkably like one!

The renowned Friesland cows and horses grazing peacefully in the lush pastureland, apparently undisturbed by the wind flattening the grass, were a sight to enjoy.



Riding through a forest towards the Zuiderzee shore gave us some short-lived relief from the wind.

Even sheltering behind the high dyke could not save me from automatically keeping my bicycle tilted to the left to maintain my balance.

Sneek and Bolsward are charming towns. Bolsward was once one of the

focal points of the Hanseatic League, the commercial and defensive confederation of merchant guilds and market towns that dominated Baltic maritime trade and northern Europe from around 1400 to 1800. Incidentally, you can still find “Hansa” in many names, including Lufthansa.



We ended our four-day tour where the *Elfstedenroute* – *lengte 240 km* had started. Joke was waiting to photograph our happy faces and to tell us that, early the next morning, we were booked on the ferry to Terschelling Island, where three bicycles were waiting for us.

No rest on the fifth day—despite all the effort we had made to spare ourselves! Our “rest” on the ferry lasted less than two hours.

Soon after arriving, I planted my flag on the beach. Joke convinced us that it would be easy to cycle along the southern shore with the wind behind us and return on the track through the middle of the island.

We enjoyed frequent stops and took in the varied marine scenery stretching towards the mainland. The eastern third of the island is a protected nature reserve and is mostly uninhabited. We therefore crossed the dyke to the middle track—only to face the forgotten headwind.

I pleaded with Joke to release the wind she had apparently stored up in the opposite direction!



A delicious apple strudel topped with a thick lump of full cream gave me the strength to cycle back to the main town, West Terschelling.



There, Joke introduced us to the statue of the island's famous sixteenth-century son, Willem Barentsz (Barents in English). Navigator, cartographer and Arctic explorer, he made three expeditions to the far north, including one in search of a sea passage north

of Siberia. Today, warming of the Earth has made this northern passage usable. The sea north of Scandinavia bears his name. He also published one of the earliest maps of the Mediterranean region.



Starving after all that effort, Joke stopped at a restaurant on the way back to Harlingen. Look at me struggling to restrain myself from launching on the food before the others arrived!



Holland—the kingdom of bicycles

In Holland, bicycles in all forms and shapes leave a lasting mental impression. People respect them and provide parking for them everywhere—in busy streets, in front of narrow houses and even on boats along the canals. We were pleasantly astonished to use a huge, free, computer-controlled cycle garage. It was wonderfully well managed.



From Harlingen, the three of us drove over the famous 34-kilometre-long dyke that encloses the inland Zuiderzee. On the way, we visited the open-air museum in Enkhuizen and then comfortably settled into the home of one of Joke's friends in Amsterdam.

There is so much to see in this friendly city: Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Henri Matisse, among many others.



Amsterdam is supposed to be a safe city. Luckily, the gun that took a shot at me was not loaded!



I survived to meet Navjeet for lunch, which brought back memories of Punjab, Kenya and Coventry. Her husband, Pim, joined us for coffee. Our families have a special century-old

relationship. More about this appears in my book *Twisted Turban*. Whether it will survive in this changing world is anybody's guess.



On the way back to Geneva, we decided to visit Maastricht, where we listened to a classical concert. A Japanese soprano sang beautifully in the resonant cathedral square.

Then I met D'Artagnan, one of the Three Musketeers. Louis XIV sent him to fight the Dutch. He was killed in battle on 25 June 1673 when a musket ball struck him in the throat during the Siege of Maastricht.



As we drove southwards, we hit the heat. Cooling my feet in Freiburg or drinking German refreshments beside the Rhine offered only temporary relief.

We reached Geneva even hotter.

24/June 2016

15. BACK TO THE STONE AGE

Stonehenge Magic

Stonehenge has fascinated me ever since I first learnt about it more than half a century ago. I had been near it innumerable times but had never actually seen it. I know that, in geological terms, my own stretch of life is insignificant.

In September 2016, a sudden drop in my activities created a depressing time vacuum that I found difficult to handle. My mind decided to fill the emptiness with a visit to England — with no other mission than to meet people and see places. No weddings, birthdays, anniversaries or funerals!

You may not believe me, but my first target was to **return to the Stone Age** and pay my respects to Stonehenge.

On Wednesday, 28 September, a coach from Victoria Station in London took me to the famous site. There it was: the magical stone circle on a gentle hill, with the haunting late-afternoon sunlight pouring between the stones.



The cool breeze did nothing to dampen my excitement. I do not need to describe Stonehenge, which attracts millions of visitors. I walked reverently around it several times, turning back repeatedly for one last look.

It was amazing that, shortly after my visit, I heard on the BBC, on 7 October 2016, that the tooth of a pet Alsatian-type dog had been unearthed near Stonehenge. The dog had apparently travelled about 250 miles (400 km) from York with its owner some 7,000 years ago — long before the famous Stonehenge circle was built, about 2,000 years ago.

Looking back, I thought that, like the dog's owner, I would have liked to walk from Switzerland to Stonehenge, across our concrete jungles and tangled network of roads.

Once back on the coach, I regretted not having thought of something clever: I should have hidden one of my teeth somewhere at Stonehenge. Then, in the year 4016, an archaeologist — most likely from another planet — could proudly prove that I, a human being, had travelled from Geneva to Stonehenge!

The Power of Stonehenge Magic — and Two Jagjits

Foreseeing my arrival, the Stonehenge spirit had apparently taken control of my plans even before I stepped onto Stonehenge Island.

First, its magic isolated me. Two days before our flight, the person who had been eager to visit Stonehenge with me was called away to Oslo to see her terminally ill aunt.

Then the Stonehenge spirit entered the head of my dear sister-in-law and diverted her to Gatwick's South Terminal, even though she knew that she was supposed to meet me at the North Terminal. I took a bus and then walked about two kilometres to her welcoming home.

The following morning, I took an off-peak train from Crawley to Hounslow to visit my elderly aunt and sick uncle.

As I walked out of the station, I asked a young man for directions to the High Street. He tried to answer me in English and then asked me to speak Punjabi. He was returning from a construction site and, like me, was heading towards West Hounslow.

"The road in front is a shortcut. We can walk together."

His name was Manpreet. He had been in England for twelve years and was happily settled there.

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm from Ludhiana."

"So am I. Which village?"

"Shpar, where the annual spring festival is held."

"That's near my village, Tajpur. I went to that festival when I was very young."

We talked about many things, including changes in Punjabi rural society and life in Hounslow.

"On this road there is a Sikh temple. I would like to stop there briefly to bow before the *Guru Granth Sahib*."

"I'll join you. It might do me good too."

“It’s midday. I would like to eat in the sacred communal kitchen. It’s open all day. You can have a cup of tea.”

I agreed.

He was finishing his lunch when I told him that I would wait near the shoe rack. On the way, I suddenly remembered that my very close friend **Jagjit Sihra**, an untapped intellectual, was on the management committee of the temple.

Jagjit and I had graduated together as teachers in Kenya. Just before I moved to Switzerland, we were neighbours in Kisumu, on Lake Victoria. I never failed to see him whenever I visited Hounslow. Yet this time, strangely, he had completely slipped my mind.

I asked one of the priests:

“Is Jagjit here today?”

“He’s having his lunch over there. I’ll take you to him. Look — there is Jagjit.”

He pointed towards the dining area.

“That is not him. He is very tall.”

“Oh, that Jagjit Sihra is in the office upstairs.”

I knocked and opened the office door. There he was.

I greeted him enthusiastically, hoping to surprise him. But he did not react. He simply looked at my face.

“I’m Naginder. If you don’t know me, I’m going,” I said, turning towards the door.

Suddenly his eyes lit up.

As required in the Sikh temple, I had covered my head with a scarf. Trying to place me in his memory, he initially thought I was someone from Leeds who had come to reserve a date for a wedding.

Then he recognized me.

We embraced joyfully.

I knew that Jagjit was suffering from dementia, which seemed to have increased with age. Unfortunately, his telephone rang. As soon as he finished one call, another came, and then another. He could not free himself to spend much time with me.

Then another Jagjit walked into the office.

Sihra asked me to talk to him. We shook hands and I looked at the second Jagjit.

“I know you!” I exclaimed. “Did you do your teacher training in Nairobi in 1956–57?”

“Yes.”

“You had just come from India?”

“Yes.”

“You’re Grewal! I was in the second year. We were together for one year.”

“Oh! You’re Naginder. I recognize you from your voice.”

This reunion could not possibly have been a coincidence.

Surely, it was the **Stonehenge effect!**

At one o’clock, Sihra switched off the telephone. We talked and embraced. I phoned my aunt and told her not to wait for me for lunch.



Jagjit Sihra, Naginder, Jagjit Grewal

I was deeply impressed by the voluntary work and devotion of the two Jagjits. Both dealt with the official administrative procedures requiring well-educated people such as themselves, particularly in connection with the numerous marriages solemnized at the temple.

“To tell you the truth, this is my daily pastime,” Sihra told me. “I enjoy doing it.”

After lunch, Jagjit Sihra walked with me as far as West Hounslow.

What a wonderful **Stonehenge surprise gift!**

A Perfect Cure

The Stonehenge spirit continued to follow me everywhere. Not pleased with my planned visit to Cardiff, it changed the plans of the people I had hoped to see there and made them unavailable on that particular day.

Then my companion, Karin, managed to free herself from Oslo and joined me.

Our Stonehenge coach took us to the centre of the charming city of Bath. Its Roman baths are fascinating. I heard someone enthusiastically describing the powerful curative properties of the main pool.

When I saw the green colour of its water, I was convinced that it must be magical — and that it would certainly cure my aching knees.

But nobody is allowed to enter the pool. Otherwise, everyone in Britain might be cured and the National Health Service would have to close.

Can you imagine how many people would become unemployed?



You can see me waiting for the moment to secretly slide into the pool unnoticed.

Did I wait too long? I don't recall. I wasn't there.

All I noticed was that Karin was frantically looking for me. There was no trace of me. Finally, she gave up and went outside to look around the square.

Suddenly, she stopped with a broad, astonished smile. She had found me — **completely cured and happily riding a tricycle!**



She loves cycling, and she was thrilled to see me following her example.

Perhaps the magic of Stonehenge really does work after all.

25/ October 2016

STORY 16 – FÊTE OF WHEAT AND BREAD

After hiking around the idyllic Lac Noir (Schwarzsee) in central Switzerland, about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Geneva, we drove another two hours to the small country town of Echallens, situated in rich farmland midway between Lausanne and Yverdon-les-Bains. This region is Switzerland's granary, producing almost every variety of wheat.



Every ten years, the people of Echallens organize a week-long celebration called the *Fête du Blé et du Pain*—the Festival of Wheat and Bread. This was the fourth edition. People came from all over Switzerland to taste the region's famous bread and cheese, admire traditional rural crafts and, above all, await the spectacular show staged on a huge, football-field-sized arena nearby.

The theme of this year's pageant was **Solstice**. For copyright reasons, no recording of any kind was permitted.

The pageant brought to life a local medieval legend about a time when the region was struck by a severe famine. Three heroes—Baral, a fearless fighter; Lancelin, an ingenious engineer; and Aurore, a mysterious alchemist, overcome the four elements and bring back to their village everything needed to make the first bread: water the source of all life, energy from the air, heat from the fire to bake.

Mighty Baral ploughs the earth and becomes the cultivator. Lancelin, ingenious and farsighted, harnesses water and air to operate his machines and becomes the miller. Aurore, secretive and creative, combines all the elements and transforms them with fire, becoming the baker.

Together, they create a sphere of nature and energy that is transformed into bread—more precious than gold, because, unlike gold, bread can actually be eaten!

For more than two hours, over 350 children, young people and adults from the region performed a spectacular show. There were folkloric dances, laughter, a tyrannical king, friendship, traditional and less traditional songs, painted frescoes depicting monuments, gigantic imaginary creatures with pyrotechnic effects, horse riders, an epic battle, crazy characters, a revolution, folklore, a flying, fire-breathing dragon, traditional choreographed movements, numerous combats, suspense, reunions, joy—and, finally, the rediscovery of the ancient art of bread-making.

The special effects were extraordinary. Giant marionettes, operated by two enormous cranes, kept some 5,000 spectators completely absorbed. At the end, happy children ran about joyfully, while the audience applauded the magnificent performance.



Two hundred choir singers, including some members of our choral group in Geneva, were accompanied by a large orchestra that provided continuous music and sound effects throughout the performance.

It was much more than a spectacle. It was a celebration of the earth, water, air and fire—and of something far more fundamental: **bread, the food that has sustained humanity for thousands of years.**

27/December 2017

STORY 17 – RETURN TO DUBLIN, THE FAIR CITY**TCD Bell Tower and Long Room**

I entered through the “Front Door”—that is what it has been called for centuries—and it was still the same tall wooden door. I felt as though I had never left, although I was returning to my old university after fifty-five years.

Dublin University, known throughout the world as **Trinity College Dublin**, or simply TCD, stands right in the centre of the city. It has retained its old character; remarkably, so little seems to have changed. The cobbled Front Square is still dominated by the Campanile, the famous bell tower.

On the left are the same chapel and old dining hall, as well as the GMB building where I lived during my final two years as a student. My room overlooked the Campanile.

I particularly longed to see the inside of the old hexagonal Reading Room, which is now closed. I spent many hours there, including an entire summer studying for additional courses I took.

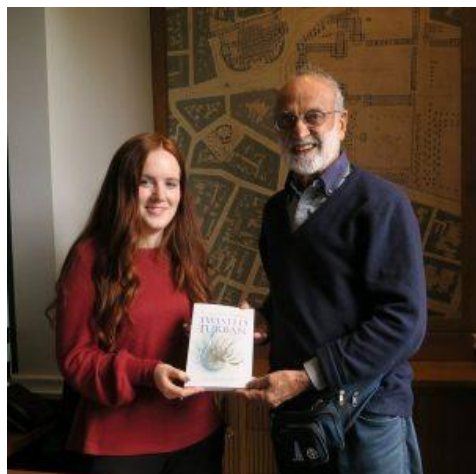
As I stood there, memories came flooding back: selling UNICEF Christmas cards from a stand near the entrance, selling tickets for the Carnival of Nations, distributing *Trinity News*, and meeting people, some of whom became lifelong friends.

For a moment, I could almost see Hilary, my classmate and dearest friend, walking towards me with her charming smile.

Sadly, I would never meet her again.

Only a few days earlier, the TCD Alumni Bureau had informed me that she had died two years before. It was a painful reminder that, while the buildings may survive for centuries, the people who gave them life eventually disappear.

The Secretary of the Alumni Bureau was exceptionally welcoming. She made me feel completely at home and was delighted to receive a copy of my book.



Dublin attracts tourists from all over the world not only because it is “*a fair city where the girls are pretty*”, but also because of the famous **Book of Kells**, a must-see for every visitor.

The Book of Kells is displayed in the Long Room, now reached through a new entrance on the side facing the modern library, reading and dining facilities. These new additions have been designed without taking away from the historic charm of the campus.

Trinity College was founded by Queen

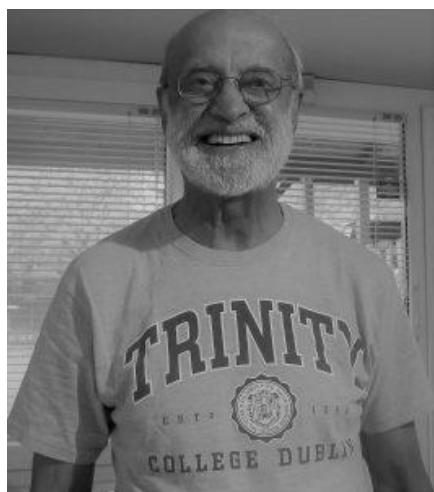
Elizabeth I in 1591. The Long Room, one of the college’s great historic treasures, houses one of Europe’s largest collections of old books.

When I reached the front of the long queue, I proudly produced my **1964 TCD Association card**, which I had fortunately found and carried with me. The pretty receptionist opened her eyes wide. She had apparently never seen such a vintage card before!

She admitted two of us and explained that I was also entitled to bring three to five accompanying people free of charge.



I was fascinated to see again the beautifully decorated open page of the Book of Kells. The following day, another equally beautiful page would be displayed.



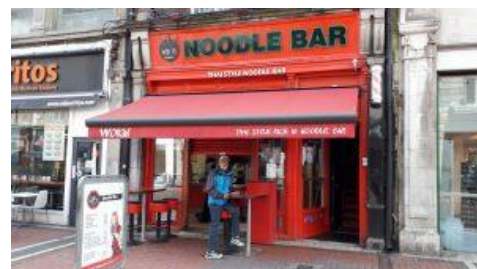
I would have loved to browse through some of the thousands of old books in the Long Room, but sadly they are not there for casual browsing.

There was also a large souvenir shop. Without my even asking, they generously gave me a ten-per-cent discount on TCD T-shirts and other purchases. Perhaps my ancient association card had finally proved its worth!

I will resist the temptation to describe all my adventures in this fair city, except to mention that I resumed something I had enjoyed as a student from 1959 to 1963:

bar crawling!

We started at Dublin's oldest pub, **The Brazen Head**, naturally passed through Guinness, and ended up in a Noodle Bar—something quite new compared with my student days.



What great fun!

After fifty-five years, I had returned buildings had changed surprisingly changed. Yet for a few precious hours, standing in Front Square and walking through the old college, I felt that the young student of 1959 had somehow returned. **Dublin had welcomed me back.**

to Trinity College. The little, but I had certainly

31/March 2020

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18. ALPAGE, COWSHIT AND BULLSHIT!

Summer was drawing to a warm close. For the cows, it was the end of grazing on the lush, succulent alpine pastures. The farmers decorated them with colourful bouquets, preparing for the traditional descent from the mountains.

It was Saturday, 28 September, the day fixed for bringing the cows down to the planes in a grand ceremony accompanied by plenty of folkloric fanfare. I joined a huge crowd in St-Cergue, a picturesque town not far from Geneva in the Swiss Jura Mountains.

The spirit of the festival was much the same as I had seen almost three decades earlier, except that there were now far more spectators lining up the streets to watch the parade of beautifully decorated, healthy-looking cows. The animals, apparently quite content with the whole affair, were led by farmers and their families dressed in traditional costumes.



Local people and visitors alike applauded the procession of these hooved performers, accompanied by yodels and rustic tunes played by various bands.



The first herd passed in front of the town hall, leaving the arena splattered with **“cowshit”**—fortunately, not particularly smelly. Many unsuspecting spectators stepped into it before turning their attention to stalls selling local bread, cheese, dried meat and souvenirs. Then the bells began clanging rhythmically, announcing the arrival of the next herd.

Ten farmers paraded their cows and displayed their skills in decorating them. Each herd, however, left behind a generous quantity of cowshit.



At half-time, a large cleaning truck arrived and cleared the whole fairway in one impressive operation. Watching it, my nit-picking brain began to ponder.

It is so easy to clean up cowshit.

But how can we clean up all the nasty **bullshit** incessantly produced by political, commercial, industrial and agricultural leaders—bullshit that is mucking up our planet, damaging the environment, devouring ecosystems and threatening the very nature on which we depend?

I looked at the efficient cleaning truck and wished, for a moment, that someone would invent a much bigger one—**one capable of cleaning up all the human bullshit as well!**

32/November 2020

19. FLORA-VIRUS AGAINST CORONAVIRUS IN MY GARDEN

Last winter (2019–20) was so mild that all my geraniums outside survived beautifully and bloomed much earlier than usual. Panicky human beings fear climate warming, but not all other living things do. Other creatures adjust to the vagaries of nature; humans fight it.



The tulip bulbs, which had been losing their potency over the years, stirred awake in the earth's depths. Even the tiniest ones pushed up as fast and tall as their newly planted neighbours. Alongside other colourful plants, they played a glorious symphony to welcome a sunny, unusually rain-free spring.



Nine varieties of zealous roses, interspersed among the tulips, seemed to sense the tulips' coming demise this year. They raised their heads quickly, as if jealous of the beauty beside them. But before they could overpower the tulips, the first of three azaleas took over the show. Passers-by seemed to soak up the calm it radiated. The other two waited their turn, revealing their charm one after another over the following two weeks. Now the rhododendrons have taken over.



What a miraculous antidote, this flora-virus, to the coronavirus pandemic that has choked individuals, families, communities, countries — the whole world. I wonder if human beings could relearn and retain the old lesson of respecting nature by becoming part of it. But I fear that in a few months, this lesson will be forgotten. Every nation and its leaders are pushing hard to strengthen humanity's dominance over nature, arrogantly resuming their accelerating pace, continuing to steal from nature to satisfy their own greed and gratification.





Humans refuse to heed the wise, past and present, who continue to say — or sing — that ego, or I-ness, is a graver disease than any coronavirus.

34/ October 2021

20. WHO HAS MADE MY EARTH SICK?

I am 84 years old. I have been a happy man and look forward to dying happily, as nature intends. But over the last few years I have been deeply troubled. Now I'm frightened. I fear that my Earth is going to die soon. A doomsday spiral has engulfed me. I cannot bear to see my dear Earth in such a miserable state.

To overcome my fear, I read authors like Andrea Wulf, Yuval Noah Harari, Steven Pinker, Raj Patel, and Jason Moore, along with *Le Temps*, my local newspaper. But my trouble only worsened. Then the COVID-19 lockdown struck me down harder still.

I am now convinced — not merely imagining — that a virus called *Bacterium homo graedigus* (BHG) has infected our Earth. This bacterium differs from *Yersinia pestis*, which caused the plague, and the *variola* virus, which caused smallpox. You'll recall that both nearly exterminated human beings. Now BHG terrifies me.

Unable to stand, Earth sits huddled against a massive square pillar in the entrance to colossal conference hall of the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

"I'm freezing," moaned shivering Earth, waiting for the ambulance. "Look, I'm sweating as well. The scorching heat is killing me. Hey, don't laugh — I'm not feigning. Where is the ambulance?"

My Earth hospitalized

Chiefs of the entire world surround Mother Earth. They have come to treat her. But what shame! They unashamedly ignore the sick Mother. Instead, each one pompously shows off his or her people's regalia, strutting like a peacock. Shrewdly, they avoid hearing sick Earth's moaning. Suddenly Earth coughs violently. She raises a scrawny finger and speaks feebly: "Would you please step back and give me some air to breathe! Don't you see my coughing pushing my guts up to my mouth?"

Just then, a little blond girl named Grete stealthily broke through the circle of supercilious folk. She wipes the vomit dripping from Earth's mouth with her scarf. Earth reacts at once, whispering, "Thank you so much, my lovely girl. You are the finest of this lot."

"Why do you groan so loudly?" Grete asks, curious.

"I have a splitting headache. Why isn't the ambulance coming? Please tell the driver to hurry and take me quickly."

When she reached the hospital, Earth opened her eyes. Why "her" and not "his"? Well, hasn't Earth given birth to everything that exists or lives on her? Evidently, Earth must be female. It makes sense.

She blinked to adjust to the flood of light projecting on her from above, assuming some driver had brought her there. But it was Grete herself. As we know, only a few are as kind as Grete.

Earth felt the Earth Doctor take her pulse. A nurse pricked her vein with a large syringe and drew blood. Electronic devices instantly displayed signs and numbers on a big screen. The doctor pointed at some volatile dots and addressed Earth: "An unusual parasitic bacterium



has infected your blood. It's a voracious phagocytic pathogen gorging on your good blood cells, the good BHG, I mean."

Another needle stabbed her in the buttock. Earth squealed. "I've injected a newly discovered, powerful antibiotic. I cross my fingers that this kills the nasty bug," the doctor consoled her. "Sadly, it will wipe out the good bacteria as well. But it should work fast."

Nothing happened. The doctor examined the label on the empty vial and diagnosed: "What the hell! The drug is fake. The world is full of cheats."

The bacterial infection spread. Earth grew sicker. Three days later, Grete broke free from the crowd of young people demonstrating in various cities in support of her cause and rushed to see Earth. In the room, she heard the head Earth-Doctor saying: "What can we do? BHG has become all-powerful. No one — not even from outer space — can save her. I'm convinced we're on the wrong track, treating only her agonizing symptoms."

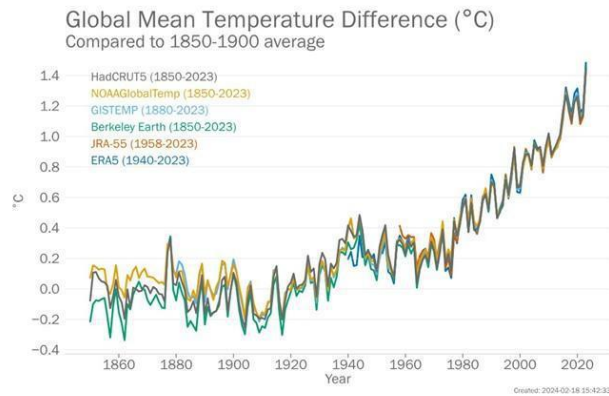
"Excuse me, doctor," Grete interrupted, "what is BHG?"

"I'm sorry, young lady — I assumed you knew. It's short for *Bacterium homo graedigus*." Grete, looking thoroughly confused, asked, "What have you diagnosed?"

The head Earth-Doctor continued, "The diagnosis is long. I'll give you the main points." Everyone turned to look at Earth as she let out a woeful sigh.

Earth's sickness symptoms

"Her disease is an old one. The BHG bacteria keep mutating, growing more virulent." The Earth-Doctor then showed Earth's temperature graph and then a long list of symptoms. "Look here, the sharp rise started around 1940."



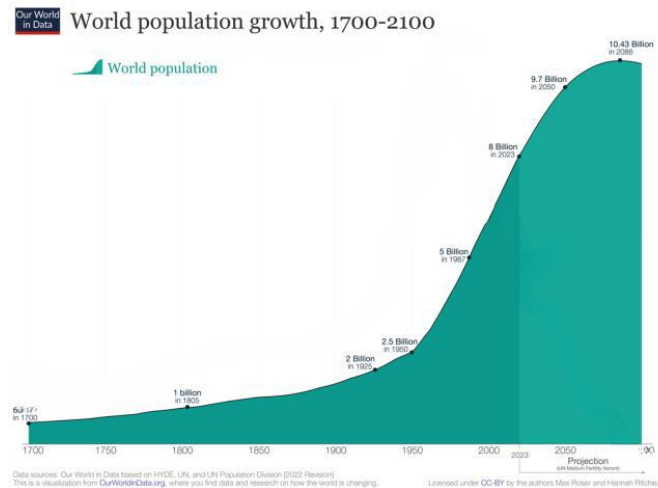
I intervened hesitantly, “Excuse me doctor. I notice that Mother Earth’s temperature suddenly accelerated to rise in 1937, the year I was born. Don’t you think I have made her sick? Am I BHG? I feel awfully ashamed and guilty. I have been trying to understand a graph I keep in my pocket.” I pulled out an A-4 sheet and flattened it on the table. Everyone looked over my shoulder.

“Doctor, you have confirmed my fear. When I was born there were 2 billion beings like me. Now, we are approaching 9 billion. Isn’t it amazing? It has never happened before during the entire evolution”.

“What a coincidence!” Earth Doctor reacted.

Curious as ever, I asked him, “Don’t you think Doctor, God raised her temperature so that humans would reproduce more and proliferate. I have read some sacred texts that express such an idea. Doctor, I dare not say, but are we the BHG, the real culprits?”

“I do not want to say it too loudly,” Earth Doctor whispered. “Your observation is correct. All our human brothers and sisters are the real virulent culprits”.



The fact is, Mother Earth cannot be treated unless the greedy human bacteria are controlled first. Of the long list of symptoms Grete remembers the main ones:

- Sudden heating and severe cold spells.
- Increasingly devastating flooding everywhere.
- Extreme flushing and dryness.
- Poisoned arteries, cell water, and major fluid reserves.
- Alarming disappearance of nearly all bacterial species except BHG.

- Overfed, voracious BHG gorging on food from the remotest parts of the body just to satisfy their taste buds — often stealing from the good BHG and throwing away half of it.
- Devastation of the body's entire health-giving biota.
- BHG killing each other, traveling faster and farther into the remotest regions to become fiercer, more dominant, and cleverer — often just for pleasure and curiosity.
- BHG polluting the lungs, debilitating breathing and the whole metabolism.

Earth's end approaching

Closing her eyes, Earth confided to Grete, "I feel my end approaching fast. How can I trust Earth Doctors when their BHG colleagues are gnawing away my inside?"

Earth dozed off, exhausted. A frightening nightmare made her shudder. She opened her eyes again and pointed a finger at the few still watching her anxiously. "I'm frightened. I'm beginning to doubt you can vanquish and eliminate the powerful, voracious fellows inside me. I'll never be well again."

Holding her hand, Grete consoled her: "Yes, you'll be well again, my dear. I'll work hard to change the BHG."

"It will be difficult to change their entrenched habits. They're already sidetracking your efforts by targeting my symptoms rather than the real cause of my sickness. Reducing my temperature won't reduce the number of culprits. They'll support your efforts to cut air and water pollution only if it increases their own comfort, so their vile clan can keep proliferating. BHG are Homo Deus. They have been the true Almighty all along. My dear Grete, offer prayers to BHG — they might hear you and save me."

My Talks

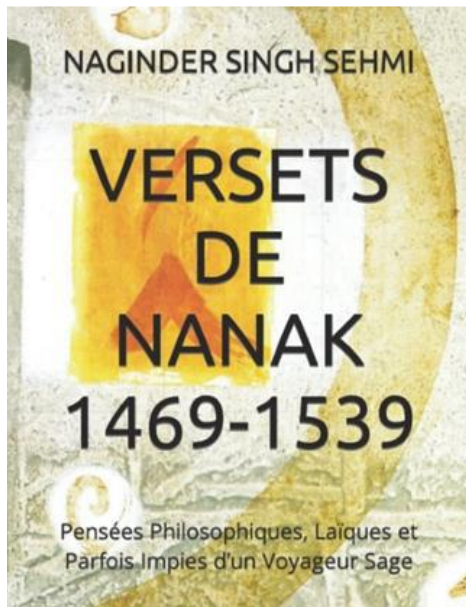
To ease my anxiety, I have written down my fears and convictions in twenty-one short Talks. See <https://bigbangyoga.org/2021/11/16/the-culprit-who-has-made-my-earth-sick/>

35 and 40/ January 2022

21. VERSETS DE NANAK

**The latest book in French by Naginder Sehmi
(428 pages, grands caractères, novembre 2022)**

This book contains all the poems composed by Nanak Dev (1469–1539). For the first time, French-speaking readers have this collection in French, which should make it easier to read, study, and research Nanak Dev. Few in the francophone world know that Nanak Dev was a reformer, a legendary traveler, and above all an incomparable poet. For twenty-four years he traveled across India, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet, and Sri Lanka — no other prophet traveled as widely. Gifted from a young age with remarkable intellectual, emotional, and spiritual sensitivity, he produced extraordinary work in the literary, social, philosophical, and religious fields.



Observing nature around him was the source of his knowledge that echoes beautifully in his poems. Nanak's songs appear in the holy Sikh scripture, the Adi Granth, an anthology dated 1604. They sit alongside the compositions of many other authors across 1,430 pages, arranged according to musical accords — Raags — rather than by subject or theme. Since ritual reading of the Adi Granth is the norm of Sikh worship, few grasp Nanak Dev's thought, ideology, literary and linguistic gifts, social and religious concerns, and approach to a simple life. He rejected the duplicity, hypocrisy, and trickery that marked the lifestyle of Hindu, Muslim, Jain, and Buddhist religious leaders of his time.

Paperback: <https://www.amazon.fr/VERSETS-NANAK-1469-1539>

E-book: <https://www.amazon.fr/VERSETS-NANAK-Naginder-Singh-Sehmi-ebook/>

38/November 2023

22. SICK EARTH: ARGUE OR TREAT?

Not a breath of clean air

On 21 June 2020, I finished writing about my anxieties. The following morning, I heard a meteorologist on the BBC commenting on climate warming and what we should do next. He proposed that we sit down and talk. That infuriated me. Isn't that what the world has done for over half a century? Since the first climate conference in Geneva, which I partly attended, I have followed the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Thousands of climate experts and political strategists worldwide have talked on countless occasions. Alas — not a breath of clean air! Earth is sicker than ever. No country wants to give up even a tiny bit of its greed. Clearly, the growth of industry and commerce remains the priority — the basis of the power struggle, both political and commercial.

Stop beating around the bush!

That same morning, I received a curt message from a young man in a small village in Punjab, India:

"Stop beating around the bush. Bravely prescribe the known cure for the sick Earth."

To encourage me, he sent this:

"Greedy and arrogant humans have ignored their mother Earth, who has fed them lovingly. They continue to insult her. Benevolent Mother Earth never imagined that humans would so cruelly abandon her on the sick bed.

One day, a human son learned that Mother Earth was sick. He rushed to see her. Her shriveled state brought tears to his eyes. Wiping them away, he asked, 'Who has brought this calamity on you? Dear mother, you were so beautiful. Your pure waters cured so many illnesses; your air rejuvenated us humans. We have adorned ourselves with the diamonds, gold, rubies, and other precious gifts you have given us. You have fed us through the ages. But who has brought you to this pitiable state?'

Tenderly, and with great patience, Earth replied:

*O my son, I do not feel the burden of the sky-high mountains.
Nor is my heart saddened by the weight of forts, houses, and palaces.
Nor by the mass of oceans filled by rivers and streams.
Nor does the weight of trees laden with fruit upset me.
I shelter innumerable living beings in total freedom.
I feel no weight of their dwellings.
But ungrateful people are a burden on me.*

They are the evil of evils.

— Gurdas, poet-philosopher (1551–1637)

The sensitive son, dazed by what she said, asked her, 'Please, Mother Earth, tell me who is responsible for driving you to this state. I'll wipe them from the Earth.'



Earth confirmed lovingly, 'O my son, I am burdened by ungrateful human beings. Having forgotten their mother, they exploit me and make a mess of everything, leaving massive problems for the future. All I needed was a little care and respect. By making their own needs boundless, they are killing themselves and making me sicker.'

Mollify inner demons

The solution became clear to me. But how can I radically change the complex economic, social, and human systems the experts demand? The entire burden, therefore, falls on human beings — the real culprit. The Earth cannot be cured unless humankind minimizes its own sickness through simple living, moving with the flow of nature, and behaving like *Homo sapiens* — wise man.

Evidently, human beings are the virus that has infected the Earth. This virulent virus I call *Bacterium Homo Gradigus* (greedy), or BHG, must be weakened, if not entirely eradicated. For once, instead of promoting development, could economists declare that the continued proliferation of BHG will demand ever more natural resources, making Earth weaker and sicker? This might encourage humans to mollify their "inner demons," and those of their enterprises. To achieve this:

- Reduce egoistic anthropocentrism.
- Harmonize with nature and its living beings.
- Correct the error that humans are superior to nature, and its master.
- Be "pro-life," not only "pro-human life."

39/April 2024

25. WHO COINED THE TERM “OPERATIONAL HYDROLOGY”?

Back in the 1970s, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) looked around and realized that it had missed a few important boats—boats carrying some very significant water-related opportunities.

In 1975, it decided to do something about it. WMO convened its first Hydrology Conference and, in effect, asked the big question:

“Can we still make a splash in the world of water?”

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

1. HYDROLOGY

Let us go back to 1958. Elvis was shaking his hips, while the United Nations, together with its specialized agencies and NGOs involved in water-related activities, was urging WMO to take the lead in water resources and hydrology.

Most countries appeared to be in favour. But then came the unexpected twist.

The Permanent Representatives (PRs) of WMO Member countries attending the Congress said, in effect:

“No, thank you.”

Why? That remains something of a mystery. Perhaps they thought hydrology was simply too wet a subject to get involved in!

Whatever the reason, the opportunity was lost. Other UN agencies subsequently moved into the field, while WMO remained largely confined to its traditional meteorological mandate.

2. ENVIRONMENT

Fast-forward to the early 1970s.

The Secretary-General of WMO, clearly ahead of his time, had his eye on a much bigger slice of the pie called “environment.”

In 1972, he attended the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, ready to argue that WMO should play a major role in this emerging field.

Unfortunately, the Permanent Representatives were not in the mood for another expansion of WMO's responsibilities.

No green light for green leadership.

3. CLIMATE

Then came climate.

WMO organized two major World Climate Conferences, in 1979 and 1990. One might have expected these initiatives to establish WMO as the undisputed international authority on climate.

But once again, the PRs were, shall we say, lukewarm.

Other organizations gradually took on much of the political side of the climate issue, while WMO continued to provide scientific and technical support, including hosting the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

WMO was rather like a generous host who provided the house, the facilities and the refreshments, but watched others receive most of the credit!

MANDATE: SMALL BUT MIGHTY—AND VERY METEOROLOGICAL

Until 1975, WMO's official mandate was essentially meteorological: weather, observations and forecasting.

It did not explicitly cover the water flows resulting from meteorological events. This narrow mandate had its advantages. WMO remained relatively small, efficient and, by UN standards, remarkably unbureaucratic, lean and mean weather machine.

But there was a problem.

WMO gradually realized that other UN organizations had much broader mandates and considerably greater political freedom. They could enter the fields of meteorology, hydrology or the environment whenever these fitted their own responsibilities.

They were bigger, more politically influential and closer to national decision-makers.

WMO's Permanent Representatives, on the other hand, were often several levels below their ministers in their national hierarchies.

THE PARADOX OF THE PR

And here lies an interesting paradox.

A Permanent Representative might have relatively modest influence within his or her own national administration, but within WMO that same person could wield considerable power.

Naturally, there was little enthusiasm for proposals that might dilute that power.

Any suggestion that WMO should broaden its responsibilities—and thereby share or redistribute authority—could therefore produce some very cautious reactions.

It was a classic case of small pond, big fish.

ENTER: “OPERATIONAL HYDROLOGY”

After WMO's “thanks, but no thanks” to a broader hydrological role in 1958, other UN agencies happily moved into the water sector.

WMO nevertheless continued to have hydrological activities. What it lacked was a clear and formally recognized responsibility for the operational side of hydrology.

That changed in 1975.

WMO convened its first Hydrology Conference. With the Secretary-General encouraging the initiative, the organization finally took the plunge and formalised its responsibility for hydrology.

But there was a potential problem: how could WMO extend its role into hydrology without provoking unnecessary disputes over institutional territories?

The solution was clever.

A panel of five experts at the conference coined a new expression:

“Operational Hydrology.”

The term neatly linked hydrology with WMO's traditional operational activities in meteorology. It essentially described the practical application of hydrological knowledge to activities such as monitoring river flows, forecasting floods and assessing the state of water resources.

The new terminology helped provide a bridge between WMO's meteorological responsibilities and its expanding involvement in water.

The concept was subsequently incorporated into the WMO Convention, giving formal recognition to this enlarged area of responsibility.

In other words, WMO was no longer concerned only with watching the weather. It was also beginning to watch what the weather did to the water.

Today, this role has developed far beyond the original concept. WMO's hydrological work forms part of its comprehensive Hydrology and Water Resources Programme (HWRP).

“Operational Hydrology” is therefore only the visible tip of a much larger iceberg—or, perhaps more appropriately, a much larger body of water.

The program encompasses, among other things:

1. Using hydrological knowledge to support sustainable water management.
2. Reducing the risks and impacts of water-related disasters.
3. Supporting the management of water-related environmental activities at local, regional and global levels.

Not bad for an organization that began life primarily concerned with the weather!

LOOKING AHEAD?

So, what about the future?

Perhaps the safest strategy is to keep WMO afloat, ride out the successive waves of UN restructuring and wait for the next storm to pass.

And then, perhaps, make one bolder move: **World Weather and Water Organization—WWWO.**

After all, WMO already deals with both weather and water.

Why not finally admit it—and give the organization a name that says so?

42/October 2025

26. HAILSTONES ATTACK GENEVA!

The bright evening sun lit up the row of roses in my modest front garden. On Wednesday, 19 June 2013, the sky over Geneva was a deep blue, without a trace of haze. That year, the roses had blossomed exceptionally beautifully.

Karin immortalized the view with a photograph, hoping to preserve the memory and enjoy it for the rest of the summer.

Little did we know what nature had in store for us the following day!

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the sky suddenly became hauntingly dark, accompanied



The day before

by a gale-force wind. A minute later, we heard a thunderous rattling, like a burst of machine-gun fire.

We all rushed to the floor-to-ceiling glass windows of the basement living room. Outside, hailstones the size of ping-pong balls were bouncing in every direction, hammering against our sheltered bicycles.

My granddaughter, Anisha, ran into the lounge because the noise against the west wall was even louder.

“Look! There’s water on the carpet!”

I looked towards the windows. Hailstones had piled up nearly a foot high against the windowpanes. The narrow drainage trench was filling rapidly with water, which was flowing from behind the wooden frames like two miniature Niagaras—one from each window.

The deafening barrage of hailstones almost drowned out the accompanying torrential rain. Then I noticed that the outlet of the drainage trench was clogged.

There was no time to think.

I rushed outside barefoot, painfully running over the icy hailstones, and grabbed a small blue plastic tricycle bucket. It turned out to be the ideal tool for the emergency: I began bailing out the water and hailstones as fast as I could.

And then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, it was over.

The entire drama had lasted barely five minutes.



Bailing out water and hailstones



After the storm

The hail and rain stopped abruptly.

The water level quickly fell below the windowsill. I cleared the blocked outlet and assumed that the crisis was over.

We were all left dumbfounded—and heartbroken—by the devastation that nature had dealt our garden. The beautiful roses in front and the vegetable garden at the back had been battered mercilessly.

Fortunately, we managed to save the carpets. But water had seeped underneath the thick wooden floor. Two large dehumidifiers worked continuously for two weeks, without making much difference to the dampness.

By September, the wooden floor had to be completely removed. Fortunately, the concrete underneath dried within a day. I was still negotiating with the insurance company and the carpenter, hoping to obtain a reasonable replacement.

Our little garden, however, was only a tiny part of the story.

I will let you imagine—or, better still, look up on the Internet—the havoc this extraordinary storm caused to gardens, trees, vineyards, crops, cars and houses along its narrow path. The storm began near Bellegarde in France and eventually petered out near Bienne in the Jura.

Nature, however, had the last word. About a month later, a single rose suddenly appeared among the battered plants. Then a sunflower raised its golden head and dazzled us.

Those two survivors were a small but wonderful consolation for our broken spirits.

Nature had attacked us—but nature was also showing us that it could recover.



The nature resists

43/October 2013

27. GOD AGNI'S REVENGE

Agni, the Hindu god of fire, is clearly not very pleased with me. He has been turning up the heat on Earth—and, apparently, taking personal revenge on me in particular. I am visiting Tajpur, my ancestral village in Punjab, and Agni knows that I am a retired hydrologist who spent much of my professional life dealing with water resources. I had even taken part in campaigns to draw the world's attention to drought in different parts of the globe, naturally with the occasional assistance of his rival, Indra, the Hindu god of rain.

Perhaps Agni has a long memory.

Yesterday, when I arrived in Tajpur, the temperature was already **44°C**. Today, at 5 p.m., it reached an astonishing **50°C**.

And then, to make matters worse, the electricity supply to my house was cut off indefinitely. My newly installed air conditioner, which I had regarded as my last line of defense against Agni, became a useless piece of furniture.

That was when I began to suspect that Agni had a larger message in mind. Perhaps he was trying to teach a lesson not only to me, but also to world leaders—including the then President of the United States—who continued to question the evidence that human activities were driving climate change.

Indra comes to the rescue

My adventures with the gods had begun earlier.

In January, my daughter telephoned me from the United States.

“You're a hydrologist,” she said. “Do something! It hasn't rained here in California for six years. People are suffering.”

A few weeks later, I set foot in San Jose.

No sooner had I arrived than Indra appeared in full splendour. For three glorious weeks, the rain poured down. California's thirst was finally quenched.

But Indra, like many enthusiastic helpers, apparently does not know when to stop.

The rain soon became excessive. Floods and inundations followed, and landslides blocked the picturesque Pacific Coast route. I had hoped to drive north along one of the most beautiful roads in America, stopping at scenic viewpoints along the way. Instead, Indra had other plans.

I was forced inland and spent the night in the famous university town of San Luis Obispo. The inland highway eventually brought me to Monterey, where I turned south again. Along the way I visited some magnificent places, including the original house of the celebrated writer **Henry Miller**, author of *Tropic of Cancer*.

Californians, at least, had plenty of reason to thank Indra.

The rain god follows me

My next encounter with the weather gods came in Sri Lanka.

I flew to Colombo on 13 May to attend the wedding of a long-forgotten Kenyan friend's nephew. Jassi, a Canadian Kenyan Sikh, was marrying Caroline, a Canadian Sri Lankan Tamil. Both were about to become medical doctors.



Canadian marriage in Sri Lanka

I noticed, however, that the monsoon rains seemed strangely reluctant to arrive.

Was Indra waiting for me?

The sea was already furiously beating against the shore. After the wedding celebrations, I joined a group of about twenty-five people, mostly former Kenyans, on a guided tour northwards to Anuradhapura.

The rain god followed me.

The day after I left Colombo, Indra finally lost his patience and struck the Colombo area with tremendous force. Torrential rain caused severe flooding and loss of life.

By now I was becoming suspicious.

Could I, a humble hydrologist, somehow be responsible for all this?

A hydrologist under suspicion

To avoid further trouble, I decided to fly to Bengaluru, formerly known as Bangalore.

Even the flight seemed determined to warn me.

As the aircraft approached the airport, a powerful gust of wind suddenly made it swing and jump before, thankfully, straightening itself out. It was really frightening.

A foreboding?

Perhaps.

When my cousin Harmandir picked me up and pressed the accelerator, the heavens opened. It began to rain cats and dogs, accompanied by thunder and lightning, as I had rarely experienced.

The traffic came to a complete standstill.

What should have been a straightforward journey home took more than two hours. Trees were uprooted, electricity lines were brought down, roads were blocked and many buildings were damaged.

Clearly, the gods had discovered my itinerary.

Fortunately, Bengaluru itself offered a pleasant respite from the drama. I enjoyed its salubrious climate and later travelled to the beautiful hill station of Medikeri, in the Coorg region.

But somewhere, I suspected, Agni was watching.

Agni prepares his revenge

Meanwhile, Agni was secretly preparing something special.

His objective was obvious: to undo everything that years of hydrology had taught me about water and climate.

I knew that temperatures of around 37°C were waiting for me in northern India. As my plane approached Chandigarh, however, I looked out of the window and saw beautiful white clouds travelling alongside me.

I felt reassured.

“Indra is with me,” I thought.

Perhaps the rain god was accompanying me after all.

On arrival, my host listened to my story and promptly destroyed my optimism.

“We don't expect any rain yet,” he said. “The monsoon is still far away.”

Then came a miracle.

The following morning, refreshing rain fell from the sky and brought the temperature down to a much more tolerable level.

I was delighted.

With Indra apparently supporting me, I began to think that perhaps a retired hydrologist still possessed some special meteorological luck.

But was that rain merely a trick?

Had Indra simply been trying to lull me into a false sense of security?

The final assault

I soon discovered the answer.

What luck!

In Tajpur, Agni was waiting for me.

50°C!

The air conditioner struggled heroically to make my room merely less hot. The electricity supply, meanwhile, had decided to disappear altogether.

I did not dare venture outside.

I imagined Agni himself lurking somewhere in the village, ready to grab me and reduce a retired hydrologist to a small heap of ashes.

Yet, strangely, the people of Tajpur seemed completely unperturbed.

And then I saw them.

The village children were sitting together, smiling and doing their extra-school afternoon tuition as though **50°C were perfectly normal weather.**

There they were—young, cheerful and apparently immune to Agni's revenge.

I looked at them and wondered:

Was I really the one being punished?

Perhaps Agni was not taking revenge on the retired hydrologist after all.

Perhaps he was simply giving me one final lesson in hydrology:

Water may be life, but without electricity, an air conditioner is only an expensive reminder that Agni is still in charge!

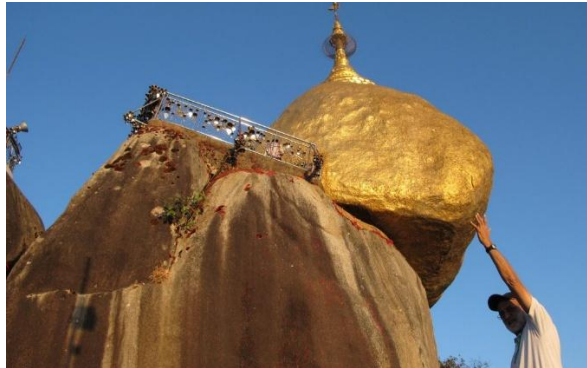


Village children doing their schoolwork in 50°C

44/August 2015

28. BUDDHA'S ROCK IN KENYA

In March 2015, I first set eyes on the world-renowned, stunningly shining Golden Rock in Myanmar (Burma). Thousands of tourists visit it, while masses of local believers worship it. I had seen photographs of this extraordinary rock before but seeing it in person was something else. (See *Story 12-Nature's Supremacy or Religions*). Here is another view of the same Golden Rock—with me apparently trying to hold it in place!



Since that visit, something has kept pricking my brain: **I have seen it before! But where?** Was it a dream? No, it could not have been. I am a bad dreamer.

I vaguely remember having taken a photograph of something remarkably similar. I searched through hundreds of packets of photographs stored in cardboard boxes. And then, perhaps with a little help from Lord Buddha, I found it: a photograph I had taken in **1967** of the other twin rock, perched almost as precariously as the famous Golden Rock of Myanmar.

It is in Kenya, in Bondo District near Kisumu, not far from the shores of Lake Victoria.



Kenya's Bondo Rock

According to the geology of the area, this rock must be much older than the Golden Rock of Myanmar. Surely, therefore, it must be even more sacred!

But what was I doing there in 1967?

A multinational survey project of the Upper Nile Basin had just begun. As a hydrologist, I was in the area looking for a suitable site to install an automatic water-level measuring station on the Yala River before it entered the swamp.

You cannot imagine how pleased I felt to rediscover Bondo Rock in its unadulterated natural beauty. I sometimes wonder why Buddha did not cover it with gold leaf when he knew that gold could be mined in nearby Kakamega. Perhaps Buddha simply preferred nature to gold.

This reminds me of another remarkable rock on the road from Kisumu to Eldoret, near Kaimosi. I have seen it myself, and it is said that water has always spouted from its top. It is difficult to see any connection between this water and groundwater below.

To me, this is more miraculous than the mythological Ganges emerging from the head of the Hindu god Shiva!

Kenya has enormous potential for attracting **holy tourists**. Perhaps it should seek expert assistance from a lama, a reincarnated Buddha, or a Hindu swami to sanctify these rocks. Devotees from Asia might then flock to Kenya to worship them.

In Myanmar, devotees believe that the Golden Rock is held in place by a hair relic of Buddha, brought from Sri Lanka.

They do not know that a far more potent **indigenous hair—from a lion's tail—keeps the Bondo Rock firmly in place!**

44/August 2017

29. FINAL TAKE-OFF — SINGING

Keep Your Ears Open

Music is a natural gift: you either have it or you don't. I am somewhere in between—more intellectual than naturally gifted.

Music seems to run in my family. Each of my past four generations produced a gifted musician. During my lifetime, my uncle and his son were leading temple singers in my village of origin in Punjab. Now the grandson has succeeded them.

Watching professional musicians perform has always inspired me to become like them, but I never quite managed it.

In 1958, Mr Ingle, a kindly fellow teacher in Eldoret, Kenya, agreed to teach two others and me to play the Indian drums—the *tabla*—and the harmonium. I quickly acquired books on music and mastered much of the theory. My fellow learners, however, did not bother with books. They simply began singing melodies in different ragas and playing various drumbeats—naturally, and much better than I could.

I was something of a one-eyed king among the blind when I sang and played the harmonium at religious and social gatherings.

My First Musical Adventures in Geneva

I started my job in Geneva at the age of thirty-three and joined the Indian Association of Geneva (AIG), whose members were mainly people working in international organizations.

A few of us formed a small music group and performed at several annual Indian national festivals. I contributed by amateurishly beating the *tabla* or playing the harmonium.

In the mid-1980s, two outstanding voices—a male and a female singer—joined the group. With their help, we staged successful concerts for several years.

But international organizations have one unavoidable characteristic: people come and go. Members left Geneva, and eventually our little group disappeared. For many years, I missed singing.

Then, one day, I watched the famous film *Sister Act*. I have never forgotten Whoopi Goldberg teaching the nuns to sing properly and eventually turning them into an amazing choir, singing both in church and on the streets.

Since then, I have carried a secret dream of singing like Whoopi Goldberg—even though I knew perfectly well that this was unlikely to happen!

SINGING AGAIN

In my life, good things sometimes just happen. Perhaps God, if He exists, occasionally opens a door.

For many years, I had been training as a runner at Geneva's Bout-du-Monde stadium. One day, while jogging alongside a Swedish lady, we started talking about our activities.

She told me that she was a member of a cycling club and had cycled in Sri Lanka. She also sang in a choral group.

That immediately caught my attention.

I told her that I would love to start singing again.

She replied: "I sing with the Cercle Choral de Genève every Thursday evening from eight to ten. You will be most welcome. We badly need bass voices."

I was not convinced.

"I have never sung French songs. I don't know any songs, and I cannot read music. The only song I know is *Alouette!*"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "There are many others in the group who don't know much either. You will learn. Come one evening and see."

Then she added the decisive piece of information: they rehearsed in a school hall only about a hundred metres from my home.

I could not resist.

"OK. See you there tomorrow."

And that was it.

I joined the Cercle Choral de Genève (CCG) simply to satisfy my urge to sing. I had no knowledge of Western music theory and no experience of choral singing, apart from the Boy Scout songs I had sung in Kenya.

That was in 2009.

Seventeen years later, I am still singing.



Cercle Choral de Genève — 2025

Founded in 1909, the CCG soon became the official choir of Geneva's Escalade festivities.

Singing with a full choir of nearly sixty people gives me a wonderful feeling. I know that our singing can bring joy, emotion, pleasure and energy to audiences in nursing homes and residences for older people.

I feel lifted to another level of enthusiasm when we take part in one of the annual choir festivals. Among the memorable recent occasions were Gossau, St. Gallen, in 2022; Moudon, Vaud, in 2023; and Kraków, Poland, in 2024.

But perhaps our most outstanding event took place on 10 December 2023.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) invited the CCG to participate in an artistic celebration marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Similar celebrations were held in several cities around the world.

The Geneva concert brought together internationally renowned artists, including Angélique Kidjo, Barbara Hendricks, MC Solaar and Billy Porter, together with local performers—including our Geneva choral circle.

With our music director, Luis Sémeniuk, at the piano, we sang *One Day* and then accompanied Angélique Kidjo in her famous song *Ago*.

For an amateur singer who once could barely manage *Alouette!* it was quite an adventure.

There is, however, one small problem.

We are expected to sing from memory, without music sheets in front of us.

And here I sense a warning from Mother Nature: my memory is gradually approaching retirement before I do. My capacity to memorize new songs has fallen almost to zero.

So perhaps I know how my story will end.

I may take off from this Earth one day—

singing happily.

So, if you happen to hear some strange singing from above, don't panic.

Keep your ears open!
