

Variations on a Theme #46

from Rich Lynch # for SFPA 248 # written in October-November 2005

Berlin

One week in Berlin isn't enough to see all of the city. Especially when much of the week is spent inside a conference hall. After all the false starts on travel this year, I was never entirely sure, right up almost to the departure day, that this trip was going to happen. There has been lots of unpleasantness between the boss and politically-appointed head of the organization, and one of the consequences of that earlier this year was that my expected trip to Spain got canceled. In retrospect, if one of the trips had to go, I'm glad the Berlin trip wasn't it.

I've actually been to Berlin once before, back in 1990 during Nicki's and my first-ever trip to Europe. (Some of the events in that trip were the subject of our article "Across Europe on Rail and Plastic" in *Mimosa* 9.) But our stay in Berlin was brief, only a single evening, and there was a bad rainstorm that night, so I got to see essentially zero of the city.

This time it was different. The hotel I was booked into was the rather posh Ritz-Carlton (our logistics guy is a miracle worker at getting good hotel rates), which was located perhaps 100 feet from where the Berlin Wall once stood. In the plaza right outside the hotel entrance there was an historical display about the Wall. But for more about the trip, here's a reprint from what I wrote in my online LiveJournal:



Paving Stones at Site of Berlin Wall

Berlin, day 1

Berlin seems to be a city in change.

I arrived here this morning after a scramble getting an airline seat yesterday afternoon, after the KLM flight I thought I'd be on was canceled. Just more proof that Dulles Airport is not a good place to be on a Friday afternoon.

But the trip itself was uneventful, and today has turned out to be a very pleasant autumn day here. I took advantage of it, too, because with the carbon sequestration conference all week, this may have been the only chance I had to see much of the city.

The hotel I'm in is just within the old border of what used to be West Berlin. The city has put down paving stones to show where the Berlin Wall used to be, and there are still some panels of the Wall that remain standing, some just around the corner from the hotel. About two blocks from here is the Brandenburg Gate and a few blocks in another direction is Checkpoint Charlie, where American and Soviet tanks faced each other down during the Cold War era. One of the newest monuments in Berlin is the Holocaust Memorial, which is about the size of a small city block and is covered with a matrix of

rectangular stone slabs of different heights. From the outside, the monument has the appearance of the waviness of the surface of a sea. But in some places, the stones are small enough where you tower over them, while in others they are so tall that they tower over you, overwhelmingly so. I am not sure what the intended effect is supposed to be, but it does provoke thought.



Berlin's Holocaust Memorial

This is also the weekend of a big street festival, and I have already certainly drunk my share of fine German beer. The Berlin Marathon is tomorrow, and today there was a prelim race for inline skaters. Two of them emerged from the elevator of this rather swank hotel and rolled through the lobby, but the hotel staff didn't even blink. I don't think anything like that would have happened during the Cold War era.

Like I said, Berlin is a city in change. And the change is still happening.

Berlin, day 2

It's only my second day in Berlin and already this is my last "free" day of the trip. From here on, it's mostly the inside of conference halls. The Berlin Marathon was today, and news reports said there were more than 50,000 runners. It must be one of the premier races, because runners were here from all over the world, including one from the wilds of Nevada (who was staying in the same hotel as me). The race went right past the hotel before it eventually swung around to a finish on a street a few blocks on the other side of the hotel. This was much to the annoyance of one of the late-arriving conference delegates, who (because of the street closings) had to trundle his luggage about a kilometer to the hotel from where the taxi had to drop him off.



2005 Berlin Marathon

It was a bit mesmerizing to watch the runners, but a little of that went a long way. I had a much better time seeing more of the city. There's a lot here to discover, much of it involving the second World War. Most buildings damaged from World War II have long since been repaired, but some of them still have evidence of bullet impacts. Evidently these pockmarks were deliberately left there for all to see. But there are also some structures damaged during the war that were so notorious that they were not rebuilt. One of these was the SS headquarters, now the site of an open-air history museum with photos and description of Berlin's war years. Even more notorious was Hitler's bunker. Parts of

it may still exist, but it is not open. The only way anyone would know its location is an historical marker on a street corner next to where it was. That corner is now occupied, no kidding, by a Chinese restaurant. I don't know if there's a weird form of Karma in that, but I do know, as my co-worker commented, you just can't make stuff like that up.

Berlin, days 3 & 4

It's been two long, long days and it's only the end of the first day of the conference. I'm glad that yesterday was only a preparation day because many things went spectacularly wrong. It turned out that the CDs of the meeting presentations we'd brought had been prepared using some proprietary software that made them totally unreadable on the computers we were using. We had backups on a FTP site, but the network at the meeting site had such a ferocious firewall that we couldn't access secure sites of any kind. By the time we had figured it all out, a 20 minute job had taken several hours.

Things went smoother today, thank goodness. This is an international meeting (22 countries represented). One of my duties here is to handle all the PowerPoint presentations, and the only bad moment came when the presentation for one of the speakers wasn't ready to go. (I had to scurry and get the newly-prepared disk with the backup file.) Afterwards, the meeting hosts had set up a truly interesting cultural event -- a docent tour of an exhibition of works by the great Spanish painter Francisco de Goya, at the National Gallery of Germany. It was an eclectic collection of Goya's works, from a Rembrandt-like self-portrait to some wonderful tapestries. There were also some rather grotesque nightmarish cartoon-like drawings, and from those I gather that Goya was one seriously disturbed individual. But, as one of the delegates commented to me, there are a few high-strung people at this conference who might also fall into that category.

Berlin, days 5-6

Today was the last day of the conference, and it was by far the easiest day. There was only a Technical Workshop to support and my main responsibility was to obtain a CD with all the presentations, which was easy enough to do. Last night was the conference dinner, and the place the German hosts selected was quite nice -- the 4-story high Great Room of the Berlin Museum of Communications. I was seated at a table with delegates from South Africa, China, and the U.K., and conversation ranged all the way from Beethoven to the physics of hurricanes. The food was pretty good but the beer was excellent, and by the time the meeting ended it was closing in on midnight. I decided to walk the five blocks back to the hotel, but that was almost a mistake. After all that beer, I'm very glad the hotel wasn't two blocks farther away than it was!



Brandenburg Gate at dusk

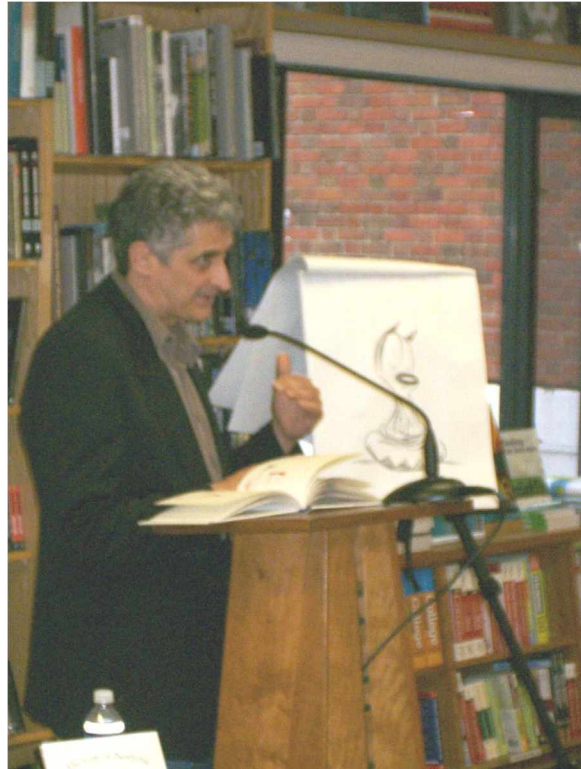
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Afterword: I had an mostly open day at the end of the trip, but Berlin is full of some very splendid sights, and a single day wasn't nearly long enough to see many of them. I'll have to come back.

An Afternoon with Mooch and Earl

Patrick McDonnell, creator of the comic strip *Mutts*, came to Washington on October 22nd for a signing at the bookstore Politics and Prose. (I'd never been there before, so I'm glad I didn't follow my first guess and go to Dupont Circle and then ask directions.) McDonnell was in town for the annual meeting of the Humane Society of the United States, of which he is a board member, but his publisher, Little Brown, was able to arrange a reading and signing event at the bookstore.

The two main characters of the strip, a feisty and amusing black-and-white cat named Mooch and a sincere white-and-black dog named Earl, are also the main characters in McDonnell's newest book, *The Gift of Nothing*. It's a children's book adaptation of one of his annual Christmas stories featured in the comic strip, so it only took about 10 minutes for him to read the entire book (and that included sketching some of the characters). He impressed me as a kind and gentle man, who lets his comic strip speak for him for causes he supports (twice a year, for example, he runs two weeks of "shelter stories" in *Mutts*). It was well worth the effort to go down into DC to meet him, and I hope he comes back soon.



Patrick McDonnell and Mooch

Mailing Comments – SFPA 247

Ned Brooks

On street art displays: "One of the Atlanta suburbs has huge fiberglass turtles that go astray. I live in the unincorporated part of the county, so I don't suppose my taxes go for such silliness." I guess I should ask how a fiberglass turtle can go astray. You must live in the 'no fun' part of the county. These displays don't cost much, if anything – artists donate their time for the visibility, and auction of the animals afterwards more than pays for the cost, with the local Arts Commission benefiting. Many cities seem to be doing this. I was in Baltimore for a meeting on October 20th, and there were many large painted Chesapeake blue crabs all around the inner harbor. In Berlin, while I was there, there were painted bears all about the city. It might have been fun to hunt them all down, if I had a few more days available.



"Welcome to Berlin" bear

Jeff Copeland

On apazine titles: In further follow-up to Guy's comment that he has "always been interested in zine titles and where they come from," my apazine title comes from "Variations on a Theme by Haydn" by Johannes Brahms, a composition whose melody is familiar enough you have no doubt heard it before. (I think it was even used in the movie *Animal House*.)

On 20th century composers: In further follow-up to Gary's comment that "George Gershwin and Aaron Copeland [sic] are just about the only two 20th-century American composers I can stand to listen to," I agree with you that John Cage's 4'33" is something *anybody* can 'listen' to. But for music with actual notes in it, I can also recommend these 20th-century American classical composers: Scott Joplin, John Philip Sousa, Samuel Barber, Ferde Grofé, and Leonard Bernstein. Any classical music radio station, from time to time, will play compositions by all of these composers.

Richard Dengrove

On obsolete devices: "If I remember correctly, the idea was that the difference between one part of the slide rule and the other is a mathematical function. Depending on what that function was, you could do square roots and multiply exponentially." The slide rule is still a nifty device, even though it's been obsolete for probably 30 years. The numerical scales on the stationary part and the slide are logarithmic, so by "adding" the two numbers on the scale, you perform a multiplication, and by "subtracting" two numbers, you perform a division. Some of the other scales on the slide rule allow you to do squares and square roots. You could actually make the argument that a slide rule is a fairly basic analog computer.

On D.C. attractions: "The places in D.C. I would tell people to go would be the Smithsonian's Natural History and American History Museums." Only those? I have a walking tour of downtown, and I usually customize it for whatever the visitor's interests are. For instance, back in 1998, the TAFF delegates were interested in the Civil War, so one of the places we went was Ford's Theater. The first place I recommend a visitor to go is up in the bell tower of the Old Post Office Pavilion. It's the best view of the city (and a splendid one), and gives you an idea where things are in the city relative to each other.

Guy Lillian

Condolences on the death of your friend Cindy.

On Hugo winners: "Memo to self: buy DVDs of *The Incredibles* and *Battlestar Galactica*'s '33' episode if it becomes available." Nicki and I bought a copy of *The Incredibles* for \$12 at a flea market some time ago, so copies of that should be available fairly inexpensively. As for *BSG*'s "33", I'm guessing it won't be available as a separate episode – you'd have to get the DVD for the entire first season of the show. But that's not a bad thing to do – the series is very good, with none of the "aw come on" moments that fill up the typical *Star Trek* episode.

On prospects for winning a Hugo: "I'm beginning to face the fact that *Challenger* might never break through and win fandom's fabled phallic doodad." Apart from the fact that being nominated is in itself a huge honor, I think you could very well win a rocket, if you ever decide to take the publication to the next level. I've talked to you about this

before, so this isn't new information, but if I were the editor, I would first of all tighten the publication. (You have been using way too many different fonts and layouts within the fanzine, almost to the point where it looks like the fanzine is cobbled together without any editing. Pick *one* layout style and one text font face/size and stick with them.) I'd also make the issues more thematic, and I would try to make the fanzine as seamless as possible, where the issue flows from beginning to end. The whole should be better than the sum of the parts. To make that happen, I'd write short intros to every article, and try to assemble the issue in a way that ties everything together under some common theme. You're a good enough writer where you can easily do this. And I'd be more selective on some of the stuff I included (this especially applies to the letters column.). Say 'no' a bit more often, and it's also allowed that you can ask for rewrites once in a while. (Mike Resnick once did seven rewrites for an article for *Mimosa*. If the request is reasonable and would result in a better essay, it's worth asking.) Taking *Challenger* to the next level might require a bit more work on your part, but it doesn't have to cost any more money. In fact, a leaner, more monolithic issue would probably cost less to produce than what you're doing now. (Specifically, you *do not* have to make the issues bigger, or slicker in appearance.) But before I end this comment, I do want to compliment you on the most recent issue, which I thought was kinda sorta headed in this direction. (And I did vote you as #1.) Keep doing what you're doing, only much more so. (My 2¢.)

Toni & Hank Reinhardt

On Heinlein: [Toni] "*Starman Jones* was never one of my favorite of Heinlein's juveniles (those being *Citizen of the Galaxy* and *Tunnel in the Sky*).\" I think *Starman Jones* probably is one of my favorite Heinleins – it was a great story and even had closure where the story ends back where it began. I don't think I have a top two or three Heinleins, but I do like *Tunnel in the Sky* as well, and also *Farmer in the Sky* and *Time for the Stars*. Great stories, with nice sense of wonder even after multiple re-reads.

On George W. Bush: [Hank] \"He has not vetoed a single spending bill, not one. Spending has been increased beyond all measure. In short, he spends like a Democrat!\" Makes you wonder who is really in charge at the White House, doesn't it? Anyway, to correct your misstatement, the Republican-controlled Congress has shown it is perfectly capable of spending money as fast, or even faster than when the Democrats were in charge. As I commented to Toni a few mailings ago, the success of a Congressman's term is now judged by how much money is brought to his or her Congressional district out of the Federal budget, so there is really no incentive for Congress to cut any spending. And it will always be this way, no matter who is in control up on Capitol Hill.

On the definition of good times vs. bad: [Hank] \"Bush won the election in both the electoral college and the popular vote. It appeared to me that he would understand that the people who voted for him were tired of the tax and spend policies of the Democrats.\" Well, let's see... those policies brought us about eight years of both economic and job growth, and resulted in budget surpluses for the final years of the Clinton presidency. Those years were good times, no doubt about it, compared to what we're struggling through now. I know that Nicki and I are most definitely *not* better off now than we were in the Clinton years, so I, for one, am not \"tired\" of whatever policies were controlling the economy then. Bring back the good old days of the 1990s!

Jeff Copeland

On CascadiaCon: “Best one-liner: Greg Bear in his banquet speech: ‘If we can put a man on the moon, why can’t we put a man on the moon?’” Clever, but unoriginal. That was the title of a program item at one of the 1990s worldcons. I think Jerry Pournelle came up with it first, in one of his speeches or maybe in one of his science or computer columns.

On possible presidential contenders: “We, as Democrats, can and must do better than Hillary [Clinton] for a presidential candidate.” There do not seem to be all that many Democrats who appear to be shining lights at the moment. The best chance for winning, based on past election cycles, seems to be for a sitting or former state Governor. That might point toward Bill Richardson, but New Mexico is not a high-profile state and Richardson had his record blemished during his tenure at Department of Energy. There’s Mark Warner of Virginia, but he isn’t very well known outside the mid-Atlantic. And then there’s Howard Dean, but it should be clear by now he’s not the guy they need.

mike weber

On events in Chastain Park: “And so here was a chance – finally – to attend a *Prairie Home Companion* show.” Nicki and I listen to it on the radio every weekend, and it’s an entertaining two hours. I saw Garrison Keillor’s comments at the *APHC* website about the second of the Chastain Park shows before a repeat of the show aired that Sunday, but it turned out that he used the Friday evening show for the broadcast. *APHC* comes to northern Virginia every year (to Wolftrap Farm Park), but Nicki and I have never tried to get tickets (way too expensive!).

Gary Brown

On subtle differences: [to Dengrove] “Well, you are right that Will Rogers was a comedian, but not in the stand-up sense of what we’re used to these days.” I think the word you’re looking for is ‘humorist’. ‘Comedian’ seems a bit too narrow a definition, and as you infer, not all that accurate.

On baseball: Nice photo of you and Alan at Tropicana Field. It doesn’t seem like it was, what, about fifteen years ago when the three of us met up at a Pizza Hut for lunch in St. Petersburg? I have yet to see an interleague game in person. Maybe next year.

Janice Gelb

On employment transfer: [Description of convolutions needed to be able to work in Australia] “And if you think this is confusing to read, imagine living it!” I haven’t gone through anything quite that complicated, but my transfer from TVA to DOE in 1988 was a lot more difficult than I thought it could be. Part of the problem was that I had to maintain continuity in employment in the federal government, so when my end date with TVA started to loom on the horizon, there were way too many hoops still needing to be jumped through to finalize the transfer. And all this happened with NolaCon just days in the future. I remember that we weren’t sure until the day we were leaving for New Orleans that we’d be able to go.

On London: I see that you also went to the Tower of London. There was a lot more there than I thought there would be, and I’m glad we chose that as the ‘big event’ for one of the days we were in the city. Next time, I think I’d like to go to St. Paul’s Cathedral

and climb to the top of the dome. (I've done that for St. Peter's in Vatican City, and it was worth the effort.)

Gary Robe

On worldcon trips: You left on your British worldcon vacation trip the same day Nicki and I did. (The Tri-Cities airport is an international airport??) I see that your express train to London from Gatwick came into Victoria Station. I know where that is now, so this is useful information if we ever get routed through Gatwick. (The express train from Heathrow goes to Paddington Station.) I also see that you decided to forego the Tower of London due to cost. I agree it's not cheap, but there was a lot to see there, and the Yeoman Warder tour was very entertaining. I feel we got our money's worth. On the other hand, we didn't go into Westminster Abbey, but that's on our list for the next trip. (Did you see the tomb of George Frederick Handel?)

Sheila Strickland

On grad school: "I'm not sure the degree is worth it." I made it through to a M.S., back in 1973, but it was not a pleasant experience and took more than two years. I am not really sure the degree helped, in the end, though there really wasn't much of a choice at the time – engineering entry level jobs were scarce in 1971, the year I got my B.S. I am very, very glad I didn't try for the PhD – it would have killed me. Anyway, I know you'll think things through, and I hope whatever the decision, it will be one where you can move on with no regrets.

A bit of space left over, so here are a couple more images from Berlin.



Checkpoint Charlie



Longest Remaining Section of Berlin Wall