

## Mistaken Identity

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Well, It happened again. On a lovely day in Hampshire, last September, while walking into the town of Newnham, I spied an apple-cheeked English youth approaching directly toward me on his bicycle. He had that look that announced an inquiry about directions. While framing my response on some version of "I'm not from around here," he politely asked the way to Tylney Park Golf Course. And indeed I did know the route because I had just walked from Tylney Hall adjacent to the golf facility. So I gave him instructions, somewhat to his surprise when he heard my American voice.

Thus continued a series of mistaken identities in myriad places. A caution, this paper contains a little name dropping and a whole lot of place dropping. For instance, Tylney Hall, a three night lodging, after a wonderful Queen Elizabeth 2 Atlantic crossing was quintessential English Baronial living - think Gosford Park.

The fine old manor house, near to one once owned by the Duke of Wellington, is one of several transformed into country hotels by the Elite group of properties. For starters, how's that for some name and place dropping.

Several years earlier, when walking through London one bright autumn day, I was stopped by an equally bright looking young American who asked directions to Victoria Station. His shock was apparent when I began describing the way in my trans-Atlantic English. Obviously having mistaken me for a Londoner, he actually looked mildly embarrassed. There was some irony on both our parts. His second surprise was that indeed I gave accurate guidance. I had just come from that huge barn that epitomized both a powerful woman and a distinctive era- Victoria/Victorian. The mistaken identity was both amusing and reassuring. A basic rule while traveling abroad is to be as inconspicuous as possible, which seems fundamentally difficult for most Americans. As a friendly Scot put it, he can always spot Americans. We are overweight and smiling. And, a camera around the neck may be a dead give-away. I usually avoid the latter identifier. This little London incident assured me that, if not really inconspicuous, I had at least seemed to fit the passing throng. No doubt some of you have had similar experiences, some flattering, some mildly frustrating. An interesting Club conversation last fall with Aaron Kahn, John Diehl's grandson, who is studying Spanish Medieval literature at Oxford, described his encounter in Spain, when English tourists asked directions in fractured Spanish, and he surprised them by answering in precise Americanized English.

In beautiful Auckland, on a busy downtown street, a determined looking young woman approached and asked me to sign a petition to keep the United States Navy out of Auckland harbor. It was part of the nuclear-free thrust in New Zealand. Not sure of my sentiments on the issue and having served briefly in the U.S.N.R., I nonetheless figured that it was her country and she should have a say on who came there with what type of equipment. Also, I have always admired those who are civically active, especially those who "take on the establishment." So I accepted the clipboard and signed my name. No address was required. When I returned the petition with the words "good luck," she looked at me quizzically.

In Paris, at dusk with my son, Peter, who was about fourteen at the time, we departed a patisserie near Notre Dame with warm baguettes which we munched while walking along a street on the Isle de Saint Louis, enjoying the orderly Second Empire architecture and the quiet Seine in the gloaming. A Mercedes stopped suddenly and the driver, speaking Germanized French, posed a question which was obviously about directions for somewhere. I said "Sorry, we're Americans." His utter dismay was apparent even in the dim light. He threw up his hands and roared off, grasping the steering wheel to avoid colliding with a parked car. How could he have made such a mistake? Germans, second only to French, once could identify an American with great accuracy at 1000 feet, sometimes unfortunately through a gunsight. Happy to say most such personal encounters in Germany have been beneficial, friendly exchanges, frequently with offers of assistance. The French are more circumspect, and their reactions to Americans are unpredictable. In any case, this German's chagrin at misidentifying a couple of Yanks caused a chuckle even in Peter's youthful view of the proceedings.

In a recent encounter in Munich, the ease of identifying Americans was put into question when Anne and I were having lunch in the courtyard restaurant of the New Rathaus off Marienplatz, after watching the noonday glockenspiel performance, complete with mechanical jousting knights. Occupying a four person table and awaiting our potato pancakes, we were approached by a couple seeking to sit at the other two chairs. The man spoke first in German, then after a pause, in English. He wasn't quite sure. We, of course, shared the table and had a brief conversation in English. They then continued talking to each other in German. There are so many Americans aboard now, and we are sufficiently diverse, that clarity of identification may be changing.

In Haifa, a conference on construction management provided some memorable episodes. One intriguing event was speaking to an audience containing many men-- and a couple of women-- carrying side arms. I hoped that they were not there to evaluate the speakers. They were, in fact, officials with a governmental building commission, and, as with many public personnel in Israel, had secondary duties as emergency police officers. Fortunately they had no need of their weapons during my presentation.

The following day, on a nearby street, a gentleman asked directions to a particular site. He spoke good English, in which many residents of Haifa are fluent. I later learned that he was Hungarian and was attending the same conference, but in a different session than mine. Haifa is quite cosmopolitan, with a diverse population. Unfortunately, although I had extensively walked the city, I could not provide the requested information.

Diverting a bit from the theme of mistaken identities, walking the cities of the world is enjoyable endeavor. I had literally spent much of the prior day individually touring Haifa. It has a beautiful setting, remindful of San Francisco. The city is photogenic, has a busy port, and enjoys predominantly sunny weather. Many buildings have solar collectors. The city has had close ties with Europe over the centuries and once was the location of compounds of Germans, English and Italians, of which remnants remain. There is a prominent Bahai Temple and a Carmelite convent. The Carmelites were organized there, on Mount Carmel, in 1209 by the crusader, Berthold. The Bahai, an imposing white domed building, is home base of that intriguing sect. It is placed prominently on a hillside on an axis with David Ben Gufrion Boulevard. My late lunch

break on the day of the walking tour was taken at a sidewalk cafe at the Anchor Bar in the dock area. Max, the bartender, joined me for a chat after serving a sandwich with the local beer, also Anchor, I believe. He had worked in Baltimore as a construction painter after World War II. We enjoyed swapping yarns about places in the U.S. we both knew. During the war, as a youth, he was interred at Auschwitz. He showed his tattooed I.D. number. No mistaken identification there. He had a remarkably sunny view of life. In fact, all of Hiafa was remarkably calm during my two visits there.

In China, our people-to-people tour group encountered the actor, Alan Alda, at a railway station on the route between Beijing and Xian, the home of the buried legion. We had an hour or so between smoky, coal burning trains and suddenly our group was abuzz with the presence of the American star. Alda, also trying his best to be inconspicuous, nonetheless, greeted the tourists and patiently explained that he was simply having his own jaunt through the ancient land. He himself looked slightly more ancient than on either the big screen or the small tube. His guide was a stunning Chinese beauty, tall and slim, dressed in an opulent but tailored colorful silk garb. I was chagrined at some of my travel-mates' giddy reaction to his presence, seeking autographs and witty commentary. Alda seemed equally chagrined, and a bit uncomfortable, and not very witty--but he tolerated the onslaught in a detached gentlemanly way.

Our train for Xian arrived and we boarded and continued westerly. Not knowing Alda's itinerary, I largely forgot the encounter, until, when walking down the aisle of a passenger car, I heard a voice from behind, "Oh, Mr. Alda." Was she speaking to me? Being the only likely candidate, I assumed so, and thus turned around to see a disappointed look on the face of an American woman--not on our tour. I told Anne of the incident and we both laughed and then determined to watch an episode of MASH to try to catch a rear view of Hawkeye.

The challenge of being inconspicuous is daunting in some third world places. I recall being in locales where I was a foot taller than anyone else. On the aforementioned China tour -- in 1982 -- we were among the early Americans in many cities and were obvious curiosities. But the people there were polite and hospitable -- as, I have found most people to be, around the world.

Oh yes, I've been tricked here and there - a vendor in Paris, a youth in Kuala Lumpur and a cab driven in Rome -- mildly threatened once or twice, but usually treated well. On several occasions, friendly local people have helped me find my way. When totally lost while driving in Porto, Portugal, and stopping to read a local map by lamplight, a middle aged gentleman voluntarily approached and assisted me with good detail, in rather good English.

A combination of behaviors is recalled in Jakarta. After a night of flowing, well lubricated conversation in the hotel bar with an Irish engineer on a British company's expense account, punctuated by periodic outbursts by the nearby raucous Australians, who were in Jakarta for a road rally, I decided to take a morning tour on a pedicycle device, one of those updated rickshaws. The young driver seemed eager and competent, but his route was mysterious. After half an hour, I was in a place teeming with people, not unusual in Java, but I was the only westerner in sight. He decided that it was time to claim his fare. I requested to be returned to the hotel - and a disagreement was at hand.

He spoke little English and I spoke no Javanese. A curious crowd was gathering. As I examined my options, a well dressed local man emerged from the crowd and spoke to the driver, then to me in very good English. In a brief exchange, he took a piece of currency from my hand, much less than the driver had been demanding, and gave it to the young man with some reproachful words. He then gave clear directions to my hotel, which was within walking distance. My thanks concluded the matter and I left the scene, quite aware of my overt conspicuousness.

The flip side of mistaken identities is meeting people with whom I've had dealings in the past, and upon reintroducing myself, see only a blank response. They don't remember me at all. I've gotten over the deflation of such experiences, particularly since I am equally guilty of having occasional difficulty remembering others. This is especially case with the many students of my experience. It is a true delight to be cheerfully greeted by former students, and I am pleased to remember many of them, now numbering several hundred. And, I have developed the knack of asking key questions to help my memory and to relate to mutual past experiences. They are usually happy to discuss their families and achievements.

The exponential possibilities of chromosome combinations makes most of us, to varying degrees, unique (an overused word in today's vernacular), identical twins being exceptions. Still there are similarities of physical builds, facial countenances, and behavioral characteristics. The concept of the universality of man has some appeal. This is another of our balancing acts, balancing our specialness against a need to be part of a larger order, The whole notion of identity is an ongoing concern from childhood to maturity, as nature and nurture shape us and as we tinker with the basic elements and accessories of who we are, who we want to be and with whom we wish to associate. Isn't it fun to look at old photographs and ask, is that really us? Our identities are both natural and acquired combinations of appearances, idiosyncrasies, speaking voices and performances, all over time. We wish to be distinctive -- but not too odd -- and if occasionally mistaken for another--that's usually okay. It can add to the richness of our experiences.

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