

That strange and alien land that became Europe



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

ONE Friday lunchtime I was talking to my friend, who was Head of Music and a wonderful violinist. We both realised that we had no plans for the summer holidays. We decided to have an adventure. The Oxford School Atlases we had in the school were so out of date that the two-page centre spread of the map of Europe still described Germany as Prussia. I am not kidding. Schools in those days had very little money to upgrade their resources.

We then contacted our friends Matty and John who decided to join us. We decided to drive to Istanbul in a Vauxhall Viva. The one thing that we all shared was our love of music. So off we set with one violin and three guitars. The car was covered in stick-on flowers. In the 1960s the Geordie nation didn't quite get the 'flower power movement'. We were never fully involved in the counter culture of the 1960s. Like many other young teachers, we had long hair down to our shoulders. Unfortunately we spoiled the image by having stick-on bullet holes on the windscreen.

After driving through Austria we entered President Tito's Yugoslavia. The landscape changed dramatically. Quite frankly there was no sense of the different countries that were to emerge after the Balkans war. We drove along main roads overtaking oxen pulling carts. We drove through Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. All the capital cities, presented a striking image of dullness. Large blocks of flats built on the outskirts of cities without colour. I even missed the poster advertisements of the West - at least they brought some variety to the scene.

There was one really great thing to be British in the 1960s. Because we had guitars and would play and sing by various swimming pools in all the countries we travelled through we were greeted with open arms, literally, by numerous young ladies. I must admit there may have been the odd time when I didn't quite counter their view that we were The Beatles.

Then we entered Turkey, eventually entering Istanbul. What a difference. A vibrant, colourful city rarely visited by young people like our-



► The Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey

ourselves, except those who were driving to Afghanistan. The Turks we met were incredibly friendly and hospitable. However, they were very concerned about the amount of drugs being brought into their country. We visited the 'Pudding Shop Restaurant', still there today, where a poster prominently stuck on a wall had a picture of a man with a gun and the logo, 'Anyone with drugs will be shot.'

Ten years later, the film *Midnight Express* appeared in our cinemas. *Midnight Express* was prison slang for a prisoner's escape attempt. The film was about a young American student sent to a Turkish prison for trying to smuggle hashish out of Turkey. *Midnight Express* had everything going for it. It was produced by David Puttnam who is one of our finest filmmakers, Oliver Stone wrote the screenplay and the brilliant Giorgio Moroder wrote the music.

Yet, at the time, the film made me quite angry. The Turkish people were portrayed, as they were in another popular film, *Laurence of Arabia*, like cartoon caricatures. The prison guard was depicted as raping the escapee, which simply was not true in the real story. Whilst travel expands our horizons, *Midnight Express* narrowed the mind.

The other outcome of the film was the telling off I got from my mother for travelling to 'such a dangerous place'.

As we returned home and entered Bulgaria the border control guards accidentally gave our passports to another group who set off in advance of us. We then had to drive across Bulgaria, without passports and without the modern facilities to phone or email home. When we got

our passports back the other group then had to turn round and drive back to the Turkish border.

A couple of years later I drove from Cologne to Spain with a German girlfriend in her Opel with German number plates. As we motored through France we were tooted by French making various naughty signs as we passed by. When we entered campsites we were refused entrance, because we were seen to be German.

In the end I would walk ahead, book in first, and then reveal the D registered car.

We often forget what it was like to drive through numerous countries with armed guards on borders and going through so many hurdles in order to complete what would be a simple drive across Europe. Forty years later one of my sons would drive from Newcastle to Mongolia on the Mongol rally. This was no mean feat. The complexities of driving between Turkey and Mongolia reminded me of driving through Europe in the 60s.

On June 23, we decided to exit the European Union. I listened carefully to all the debates, with the emphasis on the economy and immigration.

I don't want to go back to the days when we thought Europe was a strange and alien land, hard to cross, full of barriers and divided against itself.

I don't want to go back to the days where a person from one country was attacked, because of another person's stereotyped view and the memories of things which happened many years ago. I don't want to go back to the day of my birth when German U Boats were sunk in the Atlantic.

I write these articles to help us to remember what things were like and what they could be again. As we develop our 'new relationship with Europe' let us create a better Europe than the one I entered as a young man.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.

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