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Hikchhiking: Europe '68

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July 24, 1968: Hitchhiking, Europe '68



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SOMEWHERE around this day in July of 1968—maybe a day or two later, I don't know, for I kept no record—I set out hitchhiking for the first time in Europe. The guy I'd worked with in Switzerland and I decided to head from Munich down to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, which we had heard was a comfortable place in a beautiful setting. Not only that, but we were told the little town had a particularly comfortable youth hostel with a very understanding staff. It's also less than 90 kilometers from Munich, so it seemed like an easy jaunt, perfect for our first day. Neither

one of us was liking Munich much, so we set out early, hoping to get to Garmish before noon.

At the autobahn, there were already too many people waiting and it was quickly getting hot. After spending a bit of time in the queue, we decided to walk along the shoulder, hoping one of the speeding cars would decide to stop—obviously, we didn't know what we were doing for that was something no one with any experience hitchhiking would try. My past hitching had all been on local American roads, and had generally covered distances that could be walked, if need be. This hitching between cities was all new to me.

After an hour or so of walking with cars zipping by at over 100 kph, we gave up, cutting across to a small road that led us to a village. There, we were able to catch a train to Garmish, spending money above budget but not knowing what else to do. In a shop near the station, we splurged and bought bread and cheese and little containers of yogurt, a treat I had never experienced in America. As we waited for the train to arrive, I wondered if we weren't making a mistake, if it wasn't crazy to think we could survive on \$3 a day, each. The way we were going, the money would never last.

But there was nothing we could do about that, right then.

Over the next few days, I would pick up a great deal of hitcher's lore and information on travelling on the cheap, something I should have started doing earlier that day and the day before while we were still in Munich. I had started to recognize a few things, including that, in European youth hostels that summer, you could tell who was intent on really traveling simply by looking around as you woke to the morning bell. They would be the ones who had kept almost everything packed as they lay down the night before, who rolled out of bed and into their clothes and then quickly out of the hostel, hardly stopping for the simple breakfast usually provided. Foremost among these were the hitchhikers for, were they to get anywhere, they had to race to the highways, the autobahns (sometimes an hour or more away, by foot or tram) before others displaced them in the positions they hoped for at the heads of the queues.

There were thousands of young hitchhikers across Europe that year, many more than I'd seen anywhere in the United States, and they moved everywhere, mingling comfortably with others from myriad countries and cultures. It's not my memory inflating their numbers or the importance of the experience: "As travel had become a fundamental aspect of the new European youth culture, so it was fundamental to the youth political movements of 1968 and their transnational, even Europeanist, sensibility." [i] So wrote Richard Ivan Jobs four decades later. The other travelers weren't only Europeans. There were Japanese, South Americans, Australians. And, of course, Americans. The 'sensibility' wasn't limited to one continent.

Life on the road, however, wasn't as easy or romantic as it might seem, given the numbers of pampered students who flocked to give it a try. It takes a great deal of planning to successfully hitch, as well as endurance. You have to figure out where to be and when to be there—and have to have as many alternative routes in mind as possible, and contingency plans. One almost never arrives quite when and where one expects. So, one gets at it as early as possible, hoping for the best and expecting the worst. This was especially true in 1968, in those days when thousands traveled

by thumb, each highway on-ramp near a city, even in America, generally hosting one or two seated on guitar cases or backpacks or standing more hopefully, one leg cocked, arm straight out, thumb up.

Given the multitude, it was easy for someone like me, new to European hitching, to drop into the moving culture, gaining tips from the more experienced on everything from strategies to food to destinations and then quickly sharing what I had discovered with the next newcomer. No one was truly an old-timer on the road; all of us were young and, generally, inexperienced. Our pooled knowledge, though, gave us abilities often beyond individual years. Though it could be lonely as we waited during the day, the culture of the evenings that centered on the youth hostels gave us a sense of belonging even in places we had never been. Participation in it quickly became as important to us as the places we were visiting, particularly for someone, like me, traveling alone. Jobs writes:

Just as the early modern grand tour of the aristocratic young had been as much about visiting and identifying with other people as it was about seeing other places, travel by middle-class youth in 1968 functioned as part of a collective identity across Europe based on age and politics. Young people were traveling specifically to meet one another rather than to visit a particular location; destinations were determined by activism more than tourism. And just as the traditional Grand Tour preceded the rise of the modern nation-state, the Grand Tours of 1968 challenged the nation-state by anticipating its decline.[ii]

Of course, I had no idea, at the time, what I was involved in. Differences in origin were simply that; we were one by choice, by hair styles and clothes, by politics and by age.

Some people didn't like it. The manager of the youth hostel in Munich, I would soon discover (I would be making my way back there), would shoo crowds of guests out of the courtyard, yelling that we should be seeing the sights, not talking with each other. He didn't understand or care that we were living something unusual and new even while sitting there. Not that we did, either, not for all the discussions we felt were so deep and serious and meaningful. We Americans especially, no matter the depth of our pontificating on the road, had no real idea of what we were in the midst of.

At home, as Norman Mailer would soon write, "the Republic hovered on the edge of revolution, nihilism, and lines of police on file to the horizon, visions of future Vietnams in our own cities upon us." [iii] We didn't yet understand what was going on there, either, not on an emotional level, not even as we talked of revolution; we didn't really understand what any of that meant. In a sense, we were all still deeply conservative, taking advantage of the basic stability surrounding us to live unstable lives. Yes, we were antiwar. Yes, we had consciously decided to "live for today," as the song by the Rokes (and then covered by the Grass Roots) advises, and not "worry about tomorrow." But I don't think many of us really understood what we were about or how tied we were to the establishment we railed against.

Being a generation younger than Mailer and most of the others who tried to illuminate the waters we swam in, we did not have the experience that would give us the ability to see the limits of our little pool. We didn't want to listen to the Mailers anyhow; they were, we thought, merely grabbing onto our coattails. "There is," Mailer would write, "no history without nuance."^[iv] We were trying to abandon both.

We talked and, in our arrogance, talked ourselves into believing what we said. We were creating a new world, imagining self-reliance though all the while coasting in the wake of others, particularly our parents.

Even so, we *were* learning—starting to learn, to be more accurate. Especially those of us who were now, and for the first time, experiencing the difficulty of living on our own and surviving by our own wits. Though we knew that, for most of us, the safety net of home remained intact (if we would but use it), that couldn't help us through the immediacy of the problems we faced in getting from place to place, of feeding ourselves frugally, and of finding cheap places to sleep (youth hostels weren't always an option—they closed early and often filled up even earlier).

The great virtue of the hitchhiker, as should be obvious, was patience. Though we rushed to get to our starting points, we quickly discovered that we may find hours awaiting ahead of us before a ride comes along. Or, sometimes, even days. There are no guarantees and no schedules, only the waiting, doing nothing but watching the road. That can be hard to take.

Some people, in those crowded days, tried to read, sticking up their thumbs at the noise of an approaching vehicle, but this never seemed to work so well. One needs to seem to care about the ride, willing the car or truck to brake, desire becoming nearly strong enough to pull a vehicle to a stop at the side of the road just a few feet further along. Until, that is, it disappears instead, never slowing, raising a little more of the road dust that covered everything one carried and every part of one's person by the end of the day, down into the deepest recesses of pack and pores.

Almost all of us, by the time we got to day's end, were desperate for conversation, for people like us with similar concerns, similar looks and similar language. We had set out to find the difference but were discovering the draw of the like. And we were very much alike—even when we spoke in differing tongues.

So alike were we that we were easy to stereotype. Though you occasionally saw a hitchhiker with a suitcase, most of us carried frameless backpacks or, especially if military or a former serviceman (servicewomen were rare in those days, and never seen on the road), a duffel bag. The hitchhikers packed light, rarely carrying more than the absolute minimum they needed. They had a change of clothes or two but only the shoes on their feet—or maybe a pair of flip-flops stuck in the pack.

Learning through experiences of our own or through the advice of people who may have been on the road for all of a week longer, each of us carried a towel and a book or two, trading these last when done. In our packs somewhere was a toilet kit, including a bar of soap. Most bags also contained food for the day, purchased along the way to the highway in the small stores one passed: a short loaf of bread,

perhaps some cheese or salami, a bit of fruit, a container of yogurt. Like most, I had a pocket knife, a spoon and a fork. And, of course, the maps I started collecting the first day out. Some of us had hats (no baseball caps) and most had sunglasses. Everyone had some sort of kerchief, small protection against the dust but, at least, a way of wiping some of it away.

Knowing you could end up walking or standing for hours, you were loath to carry more.

Never having tasted yogurt back home (it was not yet popular in the States), I had to be instructed in the ins-and-outs of its eating that day on the way to Garmish. Only get the ones with fruit on the bottom, that you have to stir up, my companion told me. The others have too much junk mixed in, and the yogurt culture has probably died (or so he believed); you eat it as much for your stomach, he said, as for your mouth. Eat it slowly; you are not carrying much food and may not find more until evening, if then.

Eat the yogurt first, but space your snacking out so that you will not be reaching back into your pack for the bread and cheese too early—and finding it finished.

The next morning, at Garmish, as I packed, my friend left his bag on his bed. He told me that hitchhiking just was not for him. This was a beautiful hostel and a beautiful place—and it was not expensive. He was going to stay on for a time and then take a train to whatever next spot he chose. It was better, he told me, to see fewer places than to see more if it meant the rigor of hitchhiking. I shrugged: I wanted to get on the road early (I had learned at least that much), so we said a quick goodbye after breakfast, knowing we would meet again in Brussels for the charter back to New York and I was off. The last thing I wanted was to stay put.

The road to Innsbruck was no autobahn, but a two lane highway that twisted and turned down the mountain to the Austrian city. It took me four rides, I think, to get there and I arrived in the early afternoon. Quickly, I found the local youth hostel, deposited my pack, and wandered out to see the town and meet other young travelers. It was an exciting day, had been, since the morning; I was completely on my own for perhaps the first time in my sixteen years and I luxuriated in the freedom.

Paradoxically, there was but one absolute similarity of the hitchhikers that summer—and that, as I have hinted, was youth. Some of us clearly could have been driving our own cars but wanted to mix with the exploding culture of their peers. Some of the drivers, in fact, stopped for the same reason. Others were students traveling on the cheap, temporarily 'distressed' but with great possibilities. A few were genuine drop-outs, men and women who had decided to seek an alternative to the money-driven path, often seeking a spiritual 'solution' in the tradition of Somerset Maugham's Larry Darrell in *The Razor's Edge*. Strangely enough, there were even those among us using the burgeoning life on the road to move up a notch or two on the social scale, getting to know those from better circumstances than their own and integrating into their culture.

Most of us, both male and female, wore hair below our shoulders, though there wasn't any standard and no one used hair to separate sheep from goats. Most of our backpacks, as I have said, lacked frames, for that make them malleable enough for stuffing into small places in already overcrowded cars.

Because of the international unpopularity of the Vietnam War, Americans did not like to sew flags onto their packs, but people from other countries often did, sometimes simply to differentiate themselves from the Americans, whose numbers were growing daily. Our clothes, of every variety imaginable, weren't particularly clean, but our bodies tended to be—at the start of the day, at least. Too filthy, and we'd never get rides.

I don't ever recall a woman hitching alone. In twos and threes or with a man, but never by themselves. Drug use, which I'm sure was there, was circumspect; I, for one, never saw it.

Politics, as I have said, dominated our talk. The May unrest in France made the power of youth into something we all believed in and took seriously. We believed we really *were* in a position to change the world. Both the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would crumble, Vietnam being America's last hurrah and the Prague Spring still in progress showing that the wall around the USSR and its client states had been breached. In fact, in *The New York Times* for August, 1 (which I would see, if at all, through the *Paris Herald-Tribune*), a sense of optimism would be reported concerning talks between Czechoslovakia and its Russian overlords.

We spoke of hope and expressed our fears.

Eventually, in Innsbruck, I met a couple of like-minded people and, in a pattern I would repeat almost daily for the next month and more (twenty years more, if truth be told), found a cafe, talked, ordered beer, and got drunk.

[[i](#)] Jobs, Richard Ivan, "Youth Movements: Travel, Protest, and Europe in 1968" (*American Historical Review*, April, 2009), 384.

[[ii](#)] Jobs, Richard Ivan, "Youth Movements: Travel, Protest, and Europe in 1968" (*American Historical Review*, April, 2009), 384-385

[[iii](#)] Mailer, Norman, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Random House, 1996), 4.

[[iv](#)] Mailer, Norman, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Random House, 1996), 50.