

Ben (and I) in Postwar Europe and on the High Seas

By Victor Grossman

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Both Ben Shek and I, twenty and nineteen years old respectively, were lucky enough to attend the very first World Youth Festival in Prague in the summer of 1947. It lasted four weeks in a beautiful city full of political tension. Which side of the “Iron Curtain” would Czechoslovakia wind up on? It was a time of terrible memories—fresh flowers were still placed on the corners and doorsteps where resistance fighters were shot down by the Nazis, and German-language signs pointing to the river Moldau were visibly painted over with the Czech name Vltava. One Austrian youth delegate was recognized by the Czechs as a former Wehrmacht occupation soldier, and was forced to leave. There was no German delegation at the first festival.

It was also a time of hope and rebuilding what we hoped would be wonderful socialist countries in Eastern Europe, led by proven anti-fascist fighters. Delegates were there who were fighting for freedom in Indonesia, Burma and Vietnam, or for political freedom in Franco Spain, South Africa and Greece. During the festival India and Pakistan won their independence, the first in a long line.

I also recall the two delegations from Palestine, one dressed in blue and white, representing one of the Zionist parties; and another, not in costume, a Communist-led, mixed Jewish-Arab chorus. Both tensions and hopes were clear here too.

I first met the Canadian delegates on the Yugoslav freighter which took most of our two groups back across the Atlantic (along with a cargo of chrome ore). But our passports (of U.S. delegates) were stamped “Invalid for Yugoslavia,” and since we decided not to break the rules,

that meant not stepping ashore to the still-Yugoslav port of Rijeka (now Croatia), but climbing on to the freighter by rope ladder from the little launch which brought us from Venice, and waiting four or five days in brutally hot weather on the ship, while the Canadians slept on the ship but otherwise hit town. Even better, they

had done voluntary work on the legendary Yugoslav youth railway project connecting Samas and Sarajevo in a wonderful effort to bring Serbs, Croats and Bosnians closer together. We had worked on a far less glamorous youth project in northern Bohemia near the border of what would later become the German Democratic Republic (and my home). As we listened to the

Canadians’ stories and watched their daily outings, how jealous we Americans were of them.

Ben, to whom I was immediately drawn, had also visited Warsaw. I could never forget his description: the entire city destroyed, almost every building was an empty ruin—but in the ghetto, where the final, desperate, heroic revolt of the last Jewish survivors took place, there were no ruins—there was hardly one brick on top of another! This was probably his most moving experience. How could it be anything else?

Ben and I also discussed political developments in East and West at a time when so many key decisions were made, determining the future for many years. I cannot recall the details. The voyage, though under rather Spartan (hence inexpensive) conditions, was delightful for us young people. Accompanied through the Mediterranean by dolphins and flying fish, we sailed past Aetna and Messina, Palermo, Gibraltar and Madeira, with a brief yet very



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educational stop in Algiers, still ruled by France. We launched militant messages in bottles, with candles lighting them up, toward the coast of Franco Spain, and I think Ben was one of two or three who spoke on that earnest occasion before we sang the still fresh Spanish Civil War songs.

I recall only one direct exchange with Ben. To show how ignorant Yankees were about Canada, he told me he would list all the states in the U.S.A. before I could name the ten provinces of Canada. He certainly won, naming 47 of the then 48; I reached at best 6 or 7. We all learned at least one Canadian song, I recall, which lampooned Mackenzie King, and the Canadians taught us the wonderful song of the Yugoslav youth railway. I can still sing the refrain.

In New York harbour we parted. We left for a situation already bending under the weight of the proto-McCarthyite witch hunters, while Ben and the other Canadians sailed towards their different but related struggles further north.

I am sad that I never met Ben again, and have only just now “re-discovered” him, now that it is too late.



Charlie Chaplin in Berlin

July 16, 2011

Charlie Chaplin in Berlin, like everywhere else, past or present, equals hilarious laughter but means also, for all whose eyes are wide enough, no lack of true drama full of nuances. This was proved again on Friday, July 15th.

Chaplin had visited Berlin in 1931, touring with his new film *City Lights*, and on his way to the Adlon Hotel, where he stayed for five days, was greeted by enthusiastic crowds. But it was a Berlin under the double shadow of the Great Depression and the menacing growth of the forces led by Hitler.

Hitler and Chaplin, known for their similar little mustaches and born only four days apart, represented in every other respect, exact,

extreme opposites.

Eighty years after Chaplin's triumphant Berlin visit, Berlin's famous Brandenburg Gate made an unusual but fitting backdrop for the giant screen showing of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, his own moving declaration of war, in 1940, against hatred and fascism, racism and all oppression. It was this same big arch through which, two years after Chaplin's 1931 visit, Hitler's storm troopers marched to power, and is very close to the spot where, in 1945, Hitler swallowed a fatal dose of poison just before Red Army soldiers raised their red victory flag nearby over the hulking ruins of the Reichstag. This pillared arch has always been of historic importance, also in our own recent lifetime. At the free showing Friday evening, hundreds of people, most of them sitting patiently on the ground, undoubtedly followed the advice uttered by Chaplin's daughter Geraldine before the film started: “...to enjoy it, to think and to grow.”

This slender little actress, no longer young but contagiously full of much the same joyous energy and attraction as her father, came to Berlin, where she is staying in that same famous Adlon Hotel, to help host a Chaplin retrospective of all her father's films.

Except for the one remarkable outdoor showing at Brandenburg Gate of the mockingly anti-Hitler film, so fraught with symbolism, his

films, all eighty of them, early and late, 8-minute shorts and feature-length, will be shown in the next three weeks, as many as five or six a day, in a cinema orgy of laughter mixed with occasional tears in the Babylon cinema theater. It is a building with its own anti-fascist symbolism; it was designed in 1929 by a great anti-Nazi architect and later, a small resistance group here was able to provide a brief hiding place behind the scenes for people pursued by the Nazis.

The opening night in the Babylon theater, a few hours before darkness permitted the open air showing, was devoted to Chaplin's *Gold Rush*, with the little tramp hunting for gold in the Klondike. Before it started, Geraldine said a few words to the eager audience, with a line or two in German, words filled with her lively



Charlie Chaplin as “The Phooey,” Adenoid Hinkel, in *The Great Dictator*

humour and informality while also showing how moved she was by this ambitious tribute to a father she still admires so greatly.

Her words in English were translated by the noted film director Volker Schlöndorff, while curator Friedemann Beyer and theatre director Timothy Grossman welcomed prominent guests and thanked all who had been of help, up to and including U.S. Ambassador Murphy and Berlin Mayor Wowereit.

But then Chaplin took over with his major early film success, accompanied by the Neues Kammerorchester Potsdam, an ensemble of young musicians who are playing the music to all the silent feature films with exactly the music Chaplin composed for them. Even old buffs who know the films well were amazed at what a difference an orchestra made.

Those lucky enough to see many of the eighty films can follow the route of this little slapstick comedian from London, landing in those early days in heady Hollywood and developing into a stirring spokesman, not only for those oppressed by Hitler, but for all tramps, outcasts and underdogs against the greedy and the narrow-minded, the violent and hateful everywhere in the world. Although Chaplin never publicly committed himself to any particular political direction, his message was clear enough and strong enough, as in his film *Monsieur Verdoux*, exposing all eager warriors. He was forced to give up his adopted American home in 1952 thanks to just such views, and finally settled in more neutral Switzerland with his young wife Oona and his many children. In 1957 he voiced his angry reaction to the likes of Senator Joe McCarthy in *A King in New York*. Neither of these two films was shown widely in the U.S.

Both are today as relevant as ever.

The Circus, *Modern Times*, *City Lights*, and *The Kid*, with countless wonderful laughs and all with something to say, will have fine orchestral backing—as well as *Limelight*, Chaplin's coming to terms with old age, the recollections of his lonely childhood years in London and a haunting, hugely successful signature song. The shorts, some hardly known, will mostly be shown in a smaller room with accompaniment by fine pianists.

After the first two showings, nearly everyone spoke about how wonderful it was to watch the films with a large audience, to laugh out loud with all the others—but also, secretly, to wipe away a tear or two. Somehow even sentimental passages, easily derided in other films, never seemed kitschy when

Chaplin filmed them. His taste was superb; he was one of those rare masters who are able to reach people of all ages, levels, interests, and almost all views.

So many of his sentiments, though interpreted in many different ways, remain as relevant as ever in the contradictory, challenging, ever-changing life of the German capital, and far beyond it. There are still too many homeless tramps and hungry children around, and still too many of the men who love weapons and long to use them.

(Personal note: If my review seems especially enthusiastic, it is not solely because of the great films, though I love nearly all of them. As I must disclose, a main organizer of the retrospective and director of the theatre, Timothy Grossman, is my son. And just incidentally, it was he who discovered that Chaplin found it necessary to abandon McCarthy-ridden America exactly one month to a day after I was compelled to make the same unhappy decision.) ♦

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the choice of Aug. 23 as a date to commemorate the victims of the two totalitarianisms:

“72 years ago today, on Aug. 23, 1939, the Communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, establishing a non-aggression agreement. The two regimes pledged to remain

neutral in the event that either nation was attacked by a third party. The pact remained in effect until June 22, 1941.”

The paragraph ends there, full stop. Someone unfamiliar with the history of the last century would have no way of knowing exactly what happened on June 22, 1941—the Nazi invasion of the USSR, “Operation Barbarossa,” which

resulted in the deaths of 20 million Soviet citizens, surely among the worst of Nazi crimes against humanity, along with the Holocaust itself. From the description above, one would think that the pact came to an end only through a break in diplomatic relations. This kind of airbrushing of history seems a strange way to remember the victims of Nazism. ♦