

States of the Union

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Rome—We are sitting on some very old steps, gazing up at the Coliseum, that gorgeous monument to bread and circuses. Built by Jews, it devoured Christians. The Jews were slaves, unhappy pioneers of the Diaspora.

A few hundred feet to our right stands the Arch of Titus, a shameless tribute to the man who did the enslaving. It is swarming with scenes in bas-relief of the triumphal procession following Titus' capture of Jerusalem; spoils from the Temple of Solomon, including a Torah, are still discernible.

This is our fourth day in Rome and we are weary. It may be the heat; it may also be an oppressive sense of history engendered by the sight of this too, too solid stone, each boulder a reminder of man's inhumanity to man. All week we have been wandering down the opulent corridors of popes and princes. They were very rich; they collected saints for their walls.

We have been overwhelmed by art—the pristine Raphaels, the darkly glowing Titians—even as we have been saddened by the tyrannies that accumulated them. Behind the es-

thetics lurks a history of social ugliness.

This afternoon, before ambling over here, we visited the Church of St. Peter in Chains, where sits (on a rock) Michelangelo's magnificent Moses. He is a bearded giant holding the tablets; he is also a weary emancipator looking into the valley where, presumably, his feckless constituents are making merry 'round a golden calf. "If you persist in this foolishness," he seems to be saying, "you will again be enslaved." Between the Egyptian pyramids and the Roman Coliseum stretched two millennia, about the same amount of time that intervened between the Coliseum and the Holocaust.

Now, sitting on the steps, I discourse to my family on the subject of slavery and emancipation. It is not one of my jazziest lectures. My wife Diane sighs and wonders whether the thousands of cars roaring by—the sleek Ferraris and the mercurial Fiats—do not also represent a form of enslavement: modern man chained to his chariot. Harry and Philip, teenagers amid stone ruins, inquire politely where they might buy some playing cards.

We go to the dog races and pick up several thousand lire (about \$7). One of our longshots, a dappled greyhound named Venetia, wins going away. Glory be to God for dappled things—and for bread and circuses.

Assisi—In *Report to Greco* Nikos Kazantzakis calls this the most beautiful place in the world, save his native Crete. It is easy to admire the town, clinging to a high cliff overlooking Umbrian olive groves. St. Francis was born here in 1182, and we are now in the basilica where the good man is buried. The walls are covered with Giotto's 28 frescoes depicting his life. Most of the paintings have him in unnatural postures: conversing with angels or rising toward heaven. The emphasis is on worshiping the saint rather than on emulating the man.

Still, there is Giotto's painting of St. Francis talking to the birds. An English-speaking monk, leading a group of American tourists, is explaining that picture. "St. Francis was very spiritual," he says. "He recognized that animals had souls and could communicate. Since that time only one other man has possessed the profound spiritual ability

to communicate with animals. That man is Walt Disney."

Florence—We are in the Pitti Palace, a vast and gaudy museum where princes once dwelled. According to Van Wyck Brooks, Dostoevsky wrote most of *The Idiot* in rooms across the street. He worked in the mornings; then he would stroll over to the palace and meet his new, young wife in front of an agreed upon painting, where he would lecture at length on how the picture made him feel. The reactions of his wife are not recorded.

Verona—We are standing beneath Juliet's balcony in an amiable little courtyard once inhabited by the Capulets. Parting is such sweet sorrow; Verona tonight, Munich tomorrow.

Dachau—This is a pilgrimage we pledged to each other. To reach Dachau, a suburb of Munich, one takes a commuter train, a bus, then a longish walk. Many are walking with us, Americans mostly, and perhaps a dozen Greeks, each wearing a yellow badge bearing the name of his hometown.

We are a little lost and bewildered in this sunny suburb of white stucco houses and pink gardens. An old lady is weeding her flowerbed; she looks sweet and kind. Was she here back "then"? Did she see the smoke and smell the stench—and go right on tending her roses? We must chew pistachios and cultivate our gardens, counseled Pangloss.

It is at least a mile from bus to concentration camp. Why doesn't the town of Dachau provide more convenient transportation for the thousands of pilgrims who come here each week? We get a clue at the camp gate, where a tasteless four-color poster urges us to visit the "beautiful Dachau Castle." Later, in a brochure, we read a peculiar apologia: "Indignation and dismay fill every visitor of the Concentration Camp Memorial. Unfortunately some visitors transfer without further thought their justified aversion to the City of Dachau. To

equate the Concentration Camp Dachau with the City of Dachau would be unjust. . . . Dachau shares an equal measure of responsibility with every other German city. Not less, but also not more. . . ."

We see and assimilate what we can: the barracks with their narrow, three-decker pine bunks; the parade grounds where prisoners were made to stand at attention for days on end, often in the dead of winter; the trees from which "difficult" prisoners were hanged by their wrists; the other trees—poplars—that concealed the barbed wire and allowed the local citizenry to see absolutely nothing; the ovens.

We are silent as we walk back to the bus stop, past a factory, past a truck advertising Dachau bread, past all the neat little houses with their spotless square windows. I think of a remark a Manhattan burgher made in 1776: "I don't want a revolution. My house has too many windows." I am astonished by my anger.

Bern—A pleasant errand in a pleasant city. We have come to meet Vincent O. Carter, a remarkable expatriate from Kansas City who has written a remarkable work, *The Bern Book* (John Day). He wrote it 16 years ago; it was published, after many rejections, last May.

Carter calls the book "a record of a voyage of the mind"—an odyssey in which he painfully works his way out of an assortment of spiritual chains: first the manacles of race (he is black), then the manacles of ego. The upshot is essentially religious: "I was finally revealed to myself to be . . . merely a state of mind, a mere thought of myself; which condition I shared with all entities in the universe!"

The book is not as abstract as its conclusion; Carter is a superb storyteller. We see him, full of a fierce melancholy, wandering the streets of Bern, picking up barmaids, hassling with Swiss landladies

frightened by his blackness, examining spider webs on the railing of the *Kirchenfeldbrücke* ("What could he have been thinking, way out there in the middle of nothing, building a web!").

When I read *The Bern Book* I had a Holden Caulfield reaction: I wanted to meet the author. Now, accompanied by his beautiful friend Liselotte, he is smiling at us and guiding us through this friendly city. Carter sings as he walks—sometimes a blues melody, sometimes a cornier tune like "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy." At 50, with a touch of gray in his beard, Carter stays loose and wiry. He has given up meat, tobacco and alcohol; he needs no car ("Wherever I go, I walk"); he is, if not liberated, at least free of the more common enslavements.

"I don't *think* any more," he tells us. "I just follow my intuition." His intuition of late has led him to draw thousands of pictures, many of them, he has been assured by artists, worthy of display. "Sometimes I draw pictures through the night, one after another. For awhile I was working so fast and steadily I injured the nerves in my hand."

We are sitting in a public rose garden watching two elderly men play chess, not on an ordinary chessboard but on an expanse of checkerboard pavement. The chessmen are nearly life-size; it takes two hands to lift even a pawn. I ask Carter about his other books. According to Herbert Lotman's preface to *The Bern Book*, Carter has written several brilliant novels, all of them yet unpublished.

"I'm not worrying about them," he says. "I'm taking each day as it comes." Then he repeats some doggerel he learned in the Kansas City ghetto: "Your eyes may shine and your teeth may grit, but none of this ice cream will you git."

After the stones of Rome and the poplars of Dachau it is good to be with Vincent and Liselotte in Bern. They are our ice cream.