

Chapter Six

The Road East

Steppenwolf: *Born To Be Wild* > *Lyrics*

The VW two-door sedan we had previously discovered in the used-car lot in Frankfurt seemed cavernous compared to the Schultz rental VW Bug. One owner, excellent tires, clean condition inside and out with an exterior color of sky-blue, representing the open road that we were about to embark on. As you might imagine, it didn't stay clean, inside or out, for very long!

We had a collective intuition that the VW sedan was the right car the moment we saw it. We still felt that way when we returned to buy it. It could've been that we were desperate to get on the road, but the fact that all three of us sensed it made an impact. And our due diligence inspection supported our initial conclusion. That kind of intuitive reaction is something everyone can relate to, but there was something else. That "one owner" detail involved karma and would surface later with a vengeance. No spoiler here, but was our intuitive decision to buy the car related to the karma that manifested itself and came back to us in due course? Intuition, instinctive behavior, and karma are all human

reactions to events that fall outside of mental reasoning. They appear to be connected, but in what way? What would that look like?

We'd seen karma, as I define it, illustrated in the many kind gestures that benefited Scott and I during our journey between Europe and Africa. Karma was also apparent in the interventions of Guardian Angels. Similar to my assertions that your behavior, good or bad, toward others as a traveler will stitch the fabric of your travel experiences, so too with karma.

We liked the VW. It was solid, and we were eager to get on with it—didn't even haggle over the price much. We paid in cash and eagerly waited for the paperwork to be processed so we could hit the road. We brought little in the way of personal effects—we figured we'd be dressing like Afghanis soon, anyway. What was most important was the Sony portable cassette deck to blast tunes as we left a trail of hash smoke across Europe and Asia. We calculated and brought as much hash as we figured we'd smoke before we could replenish the stash in Afghanistan.

Our music selection reflected our state of mind (besides being stoned): young, restless, and eager to move. We didn't even want our shadow to keep up with us, and it was rock 'n' roll all the way. We hung each speaker from the clothing hook on either side of the back seat—crude, but effective. We blasted everything from Van Morrison to Edgar Winter. Loud and fast. Like us, usually.

Tot Ziens¹⁰ Europe

We bolted out of the used car lot in our tricked-out VW sedan. That's a generous description. The exterior looked like an automobile your grandmother would love. We liked that about it too. A nondescript vehicle that would not draw attention to itself. I thought of a dorm room

when I looked at the interior. The mechanical aspects of the sedan were good, and the heater and windshield wipers were about to be tested. The weather was typical in that part of Germany—cold and rainy. We dragged mud into the ride while getting it ready for departure, and the dirty interior soon reeked of illicit smoke. Before we roared out of that secondhand car lot, we rigged up our Sony cassette player: speakers hung from the coat hooks over each rear door, wires tucked in along the window frames, and the player resting in the front seat. Scott pressed the Play button and Van Morrison launched into “Glad Tidings.” We were on our way to Afghanistan! The Autobahn was nearby, and we were soon passing the Frankfurt Airport. Dave, Scott, and I were alert for any potential scrutiny, especially when we passed the US Rhein-Main Air Force base on the south side of the airport. The area was swarming with police and security personnel.

The facility was bustling, as the headquarters of Military Airlift Command was coordinating transport for military personnel to and from Europe. The C-5A Galaxy airplane was one of the largest military aircraft in the world, and they were prominent—the damn things were HUGE.

Commercial flights and military planes sometimes shared the taxiways near the air base. If you had a window seat in a Boeing 707 that was taxiing next to a C-5A, a giant tire—one of the 28 required to handle the weight of the plane—filled your vision. Crane your neck up and up, looking through your window to see the fuselage underbelly. The monster C-5A was fascinating to watch. I couldn’t believe that it could get off the ground.

This was Scott’s point of entry to Vietnam; he had lived in this area, and around Heidelberg. Like many Vietnam vets, he talked little about his experiences there and not much about his time “decompressing”

around here—except for all the partying. He was happy to drive right past the airport on the Autobahn, barely glancing at it as we drove on to southern Germany, the gateway to cross the Alps as we sped toward the East.

Music festivals in Germany were prestigious events. Woodstock may have been bigger, but the festivals still had big-name headliners. We skirted Heidelberg, with our sights set on the Black Forest and then Stuttgart. We passed near Gernersheim, where the British Rock Meeting Festival took place in May of '72. The bill at that time included Pink Floyd, The Faces, The Kinks, Humble Pie, Buddy Miles, and The Doors (sans Jim Morrison, who died the year before). Scott recalled the organizers acknowledged his contribution to the party atmosphere over the festival public address system as “good stuff.”

The German Autobahn did not have a speed limit. Drivers of fast cars loved it; the fainthearted feared it. We, of course, occupied the former group and drove the wheels off that VW. It was a novel concept to drive as fast as you wanted and not worry about a speeding ticket. There was an unofficial limit—drive within the operational safety margins of the automobile and your personal driving skill. It only took a time or two to be going 120 kph (75 mph) and have a Porsche flash past at 220 kph (137 mph) to realize that you needed to stay alert... Don't drive in the far-left lane, it's for passing only. Look for flashing headlights in your rearview mirror; you're about to be passed by a vehicle at high speed. Get out of that lane quickly.

The Black Forest intrigued us, so we jumped off the Autobahn south of Karlsruhe, avoiding France, to the west, and Switzerland, farther south. We spent some time marveling at the dense forest of nearly identical trees. When we pulled over and turned off our stereo and the car, we found it to be quiet, intriguing, and worth exploring farther. But

we hadn't been on the road very long and wanted to get some distance between us and Germany.

It's important to note that France had a thing against smoking Mother Nature, enforcing severe penalties for possession of hash or marijuana. Switzerland was much the same. There was a reasonable distinction between small and large amounts of drugs in both countries, and throughout Western Europe. However, we were hailing from Amsterdam, which had skewed our perception of the difference between large and small amounts. We grasped the difference between kilos and grams, but our daily usage of hash was considerably greater than most typical tourists—or even the locals. We smoked a lot of hash over quite a long time and our tolerance grew as we smoked ever larger amounts daily. When we talked about quantities among ourselves, we referred to a “chunk” or a “slab.” We left Amsterdam for the flight to Frankfurt with a sizable chunk of superb Afghani hash. Enough, we thought, for us to get close to the hashish motherland.

I digress. Hence, we didn't want to cross into France and absolutely not Switzerland, as they were at the apex of technical ability to detect contraband at their borders. They were quick to enhance their border points with the latest and greatest tech X-ray, dogs, scales, and even mirrors that rolled under the car while the agents watched on a screen. This was prior to computer capabilities, but they had ledgers with vehicle weights, dimensions, and chassis specs for the most popular cars, trucks, and buses. If it rolled, they could compare the specs with what they were looking at and determine if there was a discrepancy worth pursuing. They were very successful at discovering double doors, altered vehicles, and even spaces in boats that were being towed. However, for unusual vehicles—vintage military trucks, World War Two vehicles, military ambulances, expedition vehicles, and large construction machinery—they

were less successful. That gap in the vehicle ledgers was a convenient area to use when selecting the transport of many varieties of contraband.

The Black Forest, designated as a “mountainous” area, was beautiful, but from where we were, it seemed more like high hills. There was the odd pointy hill, so we ignored the details. The genuine mountains, the Alps, were on the horizon to the south, and there were snowcapped peaks that gave full definition to their designation as mountains. However, they were clearly in Switzerland, so we stayed to the north, veered east in southern Germany through Austria, and then swung to the south.

The secondary roads we drove took us through picturesque villages, where we had time for a beer or two and a smoke. We concluded that the Black Forest earned its name from the thick pine trees that cast the lower elevations into perpetual darkness. While the cool scent was refreshing at first, it soon became stifling. No wonder the cuckoo clocks make that crazy sound time after time! When night was approaching, driving on the Autobahn was easy, as it was well lit. These tiny rural roads were not. We found a little inn and called it a night.

We were more than a week out and less than a 1,000 km (621 mi) from Amsterdam, but it was never very far away from our actions or thoughts.

After a good night’s sleep, we rose early and hit the road, keeping to the north of Switzerland, driving east on the national highway toward Austria. We had traded the superfast German Autobahns for the narrower, slower, but more scenic roads of the other European countries.

We had relentlessly played hard driving rock ‘n’ roll music as we left Frankfurt and sped down the Autobahn. The hours of driving in that atmosphere left little space for quiet contemplation. Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, and The Who were right on and matched our mood. Slower-paced national roads would favor Crosby, Stills & Nash, Van Morrison, and Grateful Dead. They fostered, at least in me, time to

think and mull over thoughts and questions fermenting in my brain. Or maybe it was being stoned and absorbing all the unfamiliar sights, smells, and sounds of travel to new places. Probably both.

We motored eastward, more or less parallel to the majestic and beautiful Alpen mountains. The real Matterhorn was several hundred kilometers south, but as I drove, I considered the importance of the miniature theme park Matterhorn ride in my life and how it connected to my current situation, immersed in the majesty and beauty. Lots of questions were bouncing around in my head. All of us seemed to be lost in our thoughts as we drove ever closer to the end of Western Europe and the beginning of Eastern Europe—Communist countries that suppressed and controlled their populations. No doubt there was little fun to be had there by guys like us.



Frankfurt to Istanbul. Map data ©2024 Google

That passage hugging the Alps was the first time I took advantage of the lull in action and allowed questions to surface that had been lingering in the recesses of my brain. For the last couple of years, I had been running fast, enthralled by travel, peddling fast to absorb and respond to new cultures, languages, and perceptions. It was a heady time for a young man from the Midwestern United States. I was a student of the road and loving it all.

Travel profoundly changed everything for me. My perspective of the world and my place in it took on new meaning. I saw and accepted reality with a much broader input of information and experiences, which evolved effortlessly with time and distance. Travel provoked a deeper curiosity in myself and the concept of time and space. But it wasn't only travel that launched deeper thought.

When Jimi Hendrix released *Are You Experienced*, in 1967, many thought the songs were a reference to LSD trips. Allegedly he hadn't dropped acid yet. Nor had I. But popular culture made him and his music an anthem for LSD and psychedelic art. My experimentation with LSD didn't happen until years later, but it was definitely a catalyst for expanding my thoughts.

We had to drive around 800 km (497 mi) through scenic but slow routes from our location near Freiburg, Germany, to reach the stunning lakes and woodlands of Klagenfurt, Austria. The surroundings were bucolic and retained the charm and architecture of an old city from nearly a millennium in the past. A few dozen kilometers south from there was the border with Yugoslavia¹¹—a Communist country.¹² We didn't know what to expect. And even worse, we were low on hash!

We crossed into northern Yugoslavia without incident and hustled 200 km (124 mi) south toward what we hoped was a sunny and warm coastline.

It was pristine and majestic! We were on the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia (now a region of the Republic of Croatia) and winding our way south. The road rose and fell along the narrow two-lane highway, where vehicle traffic was scarce. The crystal-clear waters of the Adriatic Sea were stunning. There were pockets of beach here and there, but mostly the water sparkled as it met the vertical cliffs, producing a marvelous symphony of sound. Pure harmony with the azure-blue of the afternoon

sky, the drifting cotton-ball clouds hiding the sun momentarily as they scurried off to gather force so they could water life farther inland.

The air was fresh and invigorating. The Black Forest's somewhat stifling nature made the unexpected contrast all the more welcome. We embraced the feeling of adventure and the absence of humans, imagining ourselves to be balanced on the brink of danger as we skirted disaster careening around every corner. In fact, we drove slowly to enjoy the scenery, stopping often.

Countless islands lay offshore. Some had spectacular structures, built like medieval castles that seemed to rise from the stony surfaces into edifices that mimicked the rocky geology.

We were amazed to find that the Communist country had managed to maintain its ancient buildings and renowned history, contrary to our expectations. However, as we entered the city, it presented us with the unimaginative architecture we labeled "early penitentiary"—dull, ugly utilitarian designs that matched the hardships in life endured by the "comrades" living the drab life that they were born into.

Was it the simple misfortune of being born there? Surely, they did nothing to deserve this life. Are there alternate realities in which those unfortunate people could have been born, but by chance or design, they were not? Thoughts and questions like those circulated through my mind. Were they triggered by my hallucinogenic experiences, blurring my reality with an expanded sense of the self? Was I experiencing a flashback that was touted as one danger of LSD? Nah, I didn't think so. I was just letting my thoughts run free—a harmless and interesting pastime.

Yugoslavia was uncharted territory to us—there was little tourism then and very little information trickled into the scuttlebutt knowledge

base in Amsterdam or elsewhere. The country was under the hardcore fist of Josip Tito as president of the all-powerful Communist Party.

Yugoslavia was an outlier in the bloc of Eastern European countries. Tito threaded his way between the Soviet Union, Western Europe, and the US. He did not include his pragmatism in politics in his social policies. He crushed political opposition and fostered a stark life for most citizens. Our experiences with the people we met—only a few of whom spoke English—were fine. They warmly welcomed us with understandable curiosity, but kept at a distance. As Western visitors, we were obliged to stay in hotels designated specifically for us. We were hoping to pull into one of those castles and stay a while. Not to be, though. We enjoyed our drive down the shoreline, staying one night in Split, the other in Dubrovnik, but we didn't enjoy the architecturally bankrupt cement edifices or the unimaginative cuisine.

It had been a spectacular drive down the Adriatic seaside of Yugoslavia. The rugged coastline was dramatic and reflected the character of the people, while the clear and inviting water of the sea calmed our souls and spirits. The shift to a different reality from Western Europe was effortless. The sense of adventure propelled us forward like a friendly hand in the middle of your back. We weren't reluctant, just a bit cautious.

We faced a decision just past Dubrovnik. Should we take the most direct route to Greece and clip the northern part of Albania, or the longer way around by jogging up and around Albania but staying in Yugoslavia? We lacked any knowledge of Albania, yet assumed it was more Communist than Yugoslavia. Maybe the coastline was equally beautiful or not. We were eager to pick up the pace, so we went up and around Albania, dropping into northern Greece in a day or so of driving.

That part of Greece was a region known as Macedonia. It had been a part of Yugoslavia, so we could hardly tell the difference between where we were then and where we were now. Does that make sense? We did the logical thing and took the most direct route through Greece to the border of Turkey.

Boom! We left Europe—where we knew the people, roads, and signs well—and were about to enter Asia, where everything would be completely different. We didn't see it as any big deal at all. *Let's go, pedal to the metal!*

Another question was drifting around in my thoughts: How could religion—Christianity of Europe and Islam of Asia—cause such a difference in social traits? Was that the right question, or was there more to it, as there usually is with anything to do with humans? Traveling seeded questions that created new patterns of thought, forcing me to think more deeply. Some kind of shift was brewing within.

Dag¹³ Asia

We crossed some risky borders in Europe, into and out of both Western and Communist countries. And we had knowledge from reliable sources that there were two to be very careful with—the one we were approaching, Turkey, and the following country, Iran.

Some think the bridge over the Bosphorus is the border between Greece and Turkey. Not so. It's the point of division between the two continents, Europe and Asia. We crossed from Greece into Turkey about 250 km (155 mi) before that defining bridge.

Both Greece and Turkey were notorious for meting out harsh punishment for drug use. The infamous movie *Midnight Express*, which didn't come out until 1978, was about the jail in Istanbul, Turkey's largest

city. We drove past Sağmalcılar Prison (later called Bayrampaşa Prison). Unbeknownst to us, it would become famous and shine a harsh light on Turkey. However, the location we saw was not the prison depicted in the film. They used a more imposing location on the island of Malta.

Once in Turkey, it was a long haul across the mountainous backbone of the country. From Istanbul to the eastern Turkish border with Iran was close to 2,500 km (1,553 mi), with the capital, Ankara, about a quarter of the way. The road was narrow, two-lane, and often treacherous, with small villages along the way. Snowcapped mountains lurked to the north, and the rural population was tolerant of our appearance. Although Turkish is the predominant language, Islam is the predominant religion. Turkey, like Arab countries, has a history and responsibility to provide hospitality to travelers. Only on rare occasion were we escorted out of a village among a rain of rocks, encouraging us to move on.

East of Ankara, the weather turned cold and windy. After slowly motoring through a small village, we came upon an old man bundled up and carrying his few possessions in a sack. We had been blasting Edgar Winter on the stereo, and we all noticed the man at once. Someone turned down the tunes and asked if we should give him a ride. The nods gave a consensus so we pulled over and opened the door, motioning him to get in. He scrutinized us, seemingly comparing the warmth of our car to the chilliness outside, and grinned. He got in. We turned the tunes back up and cruised. We were quite curious to see how he would react. Within a few minutes, he was nodding his head and making a few movements to the beat of the pounding rock 'n' roll. It was brief and not overt, but he responded, and not negatively. I doubt he had heard Edgar before—and maybe not R&R—but we all smiled as he departed, and he got a ride to the next village.

As we approached the border with Iran, the imposing Mount Ararat loomed over us on our left shoulder. Scott and I would view it from the air when we winged west on a Pan Am flight from Kabul to meet up with our Afghan carpets in the US.

Our route would cross from Turkey into Iran in the far northeastern corner of the country, skirting Mount Ararat and what is now Armenia.

The Shah of Iran was still in charge and holding court, although we doubted he would invite us to visit. It's a big country with an ancient history and beautiful scenery. Tehran was called the "Paris of the East" then and was home to an educated population—Persian, not Arabic. The contrasts were astounding. The architecture was beautiful and extravagant, hosting a variety of vehicles and pedestrians. Compared to what we had seen so far, the city was up-to-date, with a strong Western feel. Foreigners were welcome, and hordes of young people thronged the streets. All fascinating, but we had a destination in mind, so we hit the road. Tehran was 1,000 km (621 mi) from the border with Afghanistan.

We were rocking and rolling unabashedly in our mobile sound studio...or, more accurately, the VW sedan that had safely and dependably propelled us across Europe and into Asia. We had traversed Turkey, and then the breadth of Iran to the border of Afghanistan. Herat was just across the Afghan border—a welcome sight, or so we thought. Ahead of us lay the final 1,000 km (632 mi) stretch of road to Kabul.

What we didn't know when we left Herat was that about halfway there, our rolling would nearly cost us our lives.