

A BUSINESS TRIP TO PARIS

In the days of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) we occasionally had some dealings with the Commissariat de Energie Atomique (CEA). I participated with them in a meeting in Washington D.C. and was invited with several others from Los Alamos and Livermore to meet with them in Paris.

Our meeting was held in Les Invalides, on the second floor as I recall. Only a wall separated us from Napoleon's tomb.

Les Invalides is a complex of buildings containing museums and monuments all relating to the military history of France. It is the burial site for many of France's war heroes of a number of centuries.

Our hosts were exceedingly gracious.

At one point we were invited to the home of Robert Dutray, one of their senior scientists. Upon our arrival, we were faced with a very tall wall, and before we could enter the wall gate several guard dogs had to be collared. It did not take us long to understand the need for the dogs, for the house was filled with dozens of exceedingly valuable paintings. We were told that they were paintings of several famous French artists, but the ones that were truly dazzling were the many original paintings by Pablo Picasso. Monsieur Dutray said that he has started collecting them when he was in graduate school, and obtained many of them at a very low price, relatively speaking. I suspect he took us to his home just to show off his paintings, and if so, it worked!

One day at the meeting he asked me if I had been to Paris before, and when he heard that I had been there a number of times, he asked what I would like to do that I had not yet done. I responded by telling him of the several times I had attempted to buy a ticket to the opera, but I had given up because there were never tickets available. I had wanted to do this as the Opera House is quite famous and reputed to be the most beautiful building in the world. Opera seats were generally unavailable, for the right to buy them could be inherited, or sold, and made available to the general public only on rare occasions.

The following day M. Dutray gave me two tickets for the opera that evening, and they were third row, center. When we arrived in our seats, the people seated around us were obviously amazed to see two non-French-speaking Americans seated where they certainly did not belong. The opera “Electra” was by one of my favorite composers, Richard Strauss. The building was just as beautiful as advertised. How the tickets were obtained, we do not know. However, M. Dutray was an academician—he wore small “wire” in his lapel, and we were told that wherever he went that lapel communicated that he was one of the very elite. Restaurants did not charge him for his meals, and his every wish was granted as a matter of policy. So he may have pulled that rank on a couple of friends, but however he did it, we were appreciative, and impressed.

At the end of a working day we were driven back to our hotel in a small fleet of chauffeured cars. On about the third day as I was being driven along the south bank of the river Seine toward one of the bridges, there was a sudden urgent-sounding message on the CEA’s radio, and my driver made a very exiting U-turn in heavy traffic, and sped at top speed to a bridge we had already passed. We then raced at top speed to the American Embassy. As we neared the Embassy the very tall gates swung open, and we arrived midst a lot of attention. The other cars arrived one by one until all of us were safely deposited.

We learned that the problem was this; on the bridge we were about to cross, there was a big explosion, and one car had been blown up. There was concern that the attack might be aimed at us, so we were all quickly diverted. It was eventually learned that Armenians had assassinated the Turkish Ambassador and we were not in any danger at all. But we did have an exceedingly official visit to the American Embassy.

Participating in these kinds of meetings on occasions was always something special for me, and I never regarded any of them as “just another meeting”. When I sat on the barn dreaming, I could never have imagined what the world might one day become.