

2 Genteel decay

Vornehmer Verfall
Délabrement raffiné

A WARM EVENING IN June it was, after a day of sweltering heat. I was standing on a cobblestone square gaping at the scenery around me. The square was quite large and completely enclosed by buildings, none of them younger than 300 years. One large cathedral like gothic edifice with an immense spire dominated the southern side. Opposite to it I could see a smaller palace from about the same period, richly adorned with small arcades on several planes and with smaller spires on top.

However, grand as they were, these two palaces did not account for the impressiveness of this place. Instead, a host of smaller buildings – clearly from a later period – that harmonized together in an immensely pleasing way, incited my admiration for this square. They were guildhalls, indicating with proud self-confidence and splendour the valour of industry and commerce; for was it not those two that provided the basis of wealth for the city and its sovereign?

This was a glorious ending to a laborious day. At that time, I was working as senior economist at the EFTA Secretariat in Geneva. Negotiations about the European Economic Area (EEA) had just begun and country delegations, supported by us Secretariat experts, had assembled in Brussels for the introductory meeting of one of the negotiating groups. We were led to a somewhat worn-down and shabby building on *Rondpoint Schumann*, called *JECL* (It has since been replaced by the *Triangle Building*). The deliberations began with an elegant opening statement by Mr. Antti Satuli, the Chairman of the EFTA group.

Opposite Mr. Satuli, the great Finnish diplomat – who later would be honoured by having an EU Council room named after him – sat his Commission counterpart, a serious but more plain gentleman by the name of Ewig. He put the conditions for the negotiations on the table with a dry voice not unlike that of a government official. Thereafter, “Federführer” after “Federführer”, as they appeared to me, from the Commission took the floor to present each and every line of legal text underpinning the *acquis communautaire*, starting with the EC Treaty Articles and ending with Regulations, Directives, Decisions and Resolutions.

Quite exhausted after this lengthy legal lecturing, Per Wijkman, EFTA’s Chief Economist, took me aside and exclaimed: “We have to let this day end in a more benign mood!” We ordered a cab and before we knew it we arrived at the wide square described above, which of course was the *Grand-Place* of Brussels. I will always remember this day, when high-flexed expectations met dry legalism, and shabby administrative buildings were followed by the most glorious collection of buildings known to man. This would be a foreboding of my future experiences when moving to Brussels some years later. As an aside, this day also led me to revisit an old Swedish proverb: *Land skall med lag byggas!* (A country shall be built with law!).

But let us not rush ahead. After my definitive move to Sweden, in the winter of 1963, I had lived in Stockholm for 25 years already. Towards the end of that period I had increasingly felt as if life had come to a standstill. I had divorced, work on my Ph.D. Thesis had gone astray and my stay at the University of Stockholm had come to an end. This stagnation in my private life was mirrored by an increasing staleness in Swedish society, at least as it had appeared to me in those days. The days of optimistic progress were long gone.

Suddenly, things started to improve. I got my act together and managed to finish the thesis at long last. Soon thereafter, there was an opening at the EFTA Secretariat that I was eager to apply for; to my surprise and great joy I was engaged there as senior economist in the autumn of 1988.

Although the first months at the Secretariat proved to be rather sedate, there was a sudden change in working pace in early 1989, when the EC invited the EFTA countries to participate in its Internal Market and the EEA negotiations started. Thereupon, events followed events. The iron curtain disappeared; the EEA was created; the EC intensified its internal cohesion and became the EU, with the euro as its common currency; three EFTA countries joined the EU; and the great Eastern enlargement process was initiated. I was lucky to be right in the middle of all those

developments as well as their repercussions. During those eventful years I was mostly engaged in Geneva as an international civil servant, with only two short working spells in Stockholm.

My stay in Brussels started in 1998, when I was engaged as principal administrator at the EU Commission, and I remained there for ten years. I arrived in the city full of expectations, about the importance of the tasks I would have to carry out, as well as the splendours of the city that I would savour in my spare time.

As to the latter, disappointment awaited me. At the outset my mind was firmly set on Brussels as a splendid city, with monumental buildings from medieval times through the beginning of last century, as well as a grand cuisine. These beliefs were underpinned by flashes of memory from numerous short committee meetings, followed by official dinners in palace-like restaurants. Reality proved to be somewhat different.

It is true that Brussels has a right to be proud of its heritage, with places like the *Grand-Place* and other monuments. But, notably, these are rare treasures in the midst of either worn down city quarters of age-old buildings (especially in the centre), as well as a sea of post-war buildings that defy architectural aesthetics. At least this was my impression after my first few months there.

Let me give you two examples that underpinned my early disappointment. In the old days, the river *Senne* flowed right through the city, just to the west of the *Grand-Place*. In the late 1880s, Mayor Anspach had the river covered and a grand boulevard built on top of it.

This boulevard, named after him, started at *Place de Brouckère*. As originally conceived, the place was a beautiful square, surrounded by elegant apartment buildings and a hotel from *fin de siècle*. Its northern end was dominated by a neoclassic triangular building of impressive stature, crowned by a sculpture of substantial, albeit proportional size, which had its counterpart on the roof of *Hôtel Métropole* to its left. I believe there was a large apartment building to its right that may also have contained a statue on the roof.

Nowadays, a Coca Cola sign has replaced the impressive sculpture on top of the triangular building. That signboard is completely disproportional and disgraces the elegant neoclassic columns underneath. The only statue left is the one on top of *Métropole*. The latter building, with an impressive atrium, remains essentially preserved from the original site. Other buildings are at best reminiscent of the original façade, or have been replaced altogether by disharmonious post-war buildings. The most irritating element is a façade hiding a gigantic movie theatre in a way that counteracts anything that would render it pleasing to the eye.

The second example is more mundane. It concerns the general wobbliness of the city's sidewalks. Many a newcomer, used to well-built pavements in his hometown, receives a nasty welcome. If the first promenade is taken in rainy weather, the surprise will consist of a sudden surge of muddy water that soils your trousers to the knee. In dry season, the stones, by getting unbalanced when treading on them, may cause a nasty fall, scraped clothes or, even worse, a broken knee or two. This quickly induces you to keep your eyes firmly fixed on the pavement ahead of you during your city walks, rather than allowing you to glance at fellow walkers or the architecture around you.

Still, after having lived in Brussels for more than a year, I gradually got used to this idiosyncratic mix of new, old and wobbly, and started to realize that many architectural jewels were embedded in the general hodgepodge. This was emphasized when Richard Murray, an old friend from Stockholm, came to visit. He had been a municipal politician in his youth, with an emphasis on city planning, and he brought with him a keen interest in architecture. He incited me to go on a city tour with him, organized by ARAU (*Atelier de Recherche et d'Actions Urbaines*). This excursion, where many a splendid Art Nouveau building was shown, opened my eyes to the extraordinary beauty in decay that characterizes the capital of Europe.

I later learned that Belgium was among the first countries on the continent to be industrialized in the 1800s. This created great wealth among the leading industrialists

and led to a host of new city quarters and individual town houses in various styles, from *fin de siècle* neo-classical to Art Nouveau. Even if partly erased by subsequent building frenzies, enough of these artefacts remain to lead you to love the city. It just takes some selective viewing, closing your eyes to the worst examples of new city planning and opening them again to savour the splendours of yore.

Many spacious parks, boulevards and squares that were built during that period were initially planned by the Sovereign himself, King Leopold II, who also contributed partially or fully, with the financing. It is an irony of history that his capital stemmed from exploiting the *Free State of Congo*, which was managed by the King more or less as a private enterprise. As a relic from that period one can still visit a “temple” of that exploitation, the town house of Baron van Eetvelde (the King’s chief administrator of the colony). The inside of that house is like a jewel case, built with precious materials from the Congo.

Besides opening my eyes to architecture from the turn of the last century, I also gained some important insights about myself during the decade I spent in Brussels. This was brought about through interaction with other newcomers and ultimately, the native inhabitants of Brussels. As to the latter, contacts were established only gradually, but deepened towards the end of my stay, when I had already retired and decided to stay on for another year in the city.

I started to realize that the Belgians, at least those living in Brussels, were a very sociable and jocular bunch. I am a loner by nature, but was often drawn into friendly discussions with strangers, whilst walking along the street or sitting in a pub. Furthermore, when having Sunday lunch at my favourite Italian restaurant, as was my habit, I couldn’t help observing that the majority of guests were extended families, from grandparents to grandchildren, who took great pleasure in going out together and having a good time.

It may sound strange, but I felt very much at home among all this *bonhomie*. It was as if the Austrian in me, suppressed for many years, was resurfacing when experiencing those social contacts. In fact, if you think about it,

there are many similarities between Belgians and Austrians. They both share a recent history of trauma, they are both traditionally Catholic, with all that implies of “*joie de vivre*” unburdened by bad conscience, and they both have a sincere feeling of belonging within the family.

Gradually it dawned on me that it might be time to make peace with my birth country. If I could enjoy myself in the company of people who were so like my countrymen, why should I continue to feel resentments towards Austria, resentments that had been rooted in early youth experiences of more than fifty years ago?

Since that awakening, I was for the first time in many years ready to revisit my birth country without rehashing memories of yore. I had become a free man at long last!