

# AUTOMOTIVE INTERLUDES IN DIPLOMACY

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THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT AUTOMOBILE, LIKE THE PERFECT POSTING, IS OFTEN ELUSIVE. BUT DRIVING ANY CAR ABROAD CAN BRING PLEASURES AND ADVENTURES.

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BY PETER BRIDGES

**D**uring our decades abroad, my family and I have had many adventures — some sought-after, some unplanned; some work-related, some strictly touristic — involving various cars. Most of these are pleasant to recall, and even the vehicular experiences I am less nostalgic about still evoke a particular time and place for us.

My wife Mary Jane and I owed our first such experiences to an Austin A-40 — a modest black sedan acquired in France in 1956, when I was a U.S. Army private in an engineer battalion at Verdun. We spent every weekend in the Austin seeing Europe, and the birth of our first child did not stop our touring.

When David was just two months old, we drove over the Grand St. Bernard pass for two weeks at a little hotel in Cannes. The radiator boiled over as we climbed the pass — British engineering had perhaps not imagined Austins in the Alps — but we made it to the top. Disposable diapers had not yet been invented, so my wife rinsed out cloth diapers in service station restrooms, and hung them out the car's windows to dry. We reached the Riviera and came flapping along the Grande Corniche, not quite in the style of Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in their recent hit, "To Catch a Thief."

We took the Austin home with us to America in 1957.

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*Peter Bridges entered the Foreign Service in 1957 and served in Washington, Panama, Oberammergau, Moscow, Prague, Rome and Mogadishu. His last tour was as U.S. ambassador to Somalia from 1984 to 1986, the subject of his book *Safirka: An American Envoy* (2000, Kent State University Press). His *Pen of Fire, the first biography of American diplomat and Confederate editor John Moncure Daniel*, will be published in October.*

There I joined the Foreign Service, and for two years we lived in a small apartment in Arlington while I worked on the Soviet desk in the State Department. Our trusty sedan continued to serve us well on jaunts to Harpers Ferry and the Delaware coast. Then we (now four after the birth of Elizabeth) and the Austin went to the embassy in Panama, in 1959. The Austin liked the tropics better than it had the Alps. We drove it without problems across the Isthmus to Colon and out to the fertile province of Ocu and the cool heights of Cerro Azul.

From Panama we went, now five after the birth of Mary, to Bavaria. The Austin was full of miles, but we had no money for a new car so the A-40 went on its third sea voyage. It still boiled over on steep grades, but we kept it going until, eventually, I sold it for \$200 before we headed to Russia.

## Bidding Wars

My wife and I had hoped we would not need a car in Moscow; we were saving all we could to buy a house someday. However, we soon found that an automobile was a necessity in the USSR, so we began to assess our options.

We noted that the embassy's budget and fiscal officer had a Volkswagen and it worked well in the harsh Moscow winters. Equally important, VWs cost less than any American car. But the deputy chief of mission, Jack McSweeney, had improved on the State Department's edict against shipping foreign-made cars at government expense. He decreed there would be no foreign cars at Embassy Moscow at all, even if employees were willing to ship them at their own expense.

In vain, I pointed out to him that the B&F officer had a Volkswagen. She talked me into it, he said, and besides she's a woman. (While the accuracy of this observation was unassailable, its relevance has always eluded me.)

Order a Ford or Chevy, he advised me. I bit my tongue and went away fuming.

Not long thereafter, the ambassadorial Cadillac drove into a Moscow mud puddle which turned out to be five feet deep. The frame cracked, and the car was shipped to Frankfurt for repair. When it returned, an older Cadillac that had been shipped in as an interim vehicle for the ambassador fell to none other than Jack McSweeney, who found it nicer than his official Ford. However, the department, which forgot about some things but not about Cadillacs, cabled the embassy that it must sell the older one. I was the assistant general services officer, and dutifully sent out notices offering the Cadillac for sale to embassies in Moscow, including our own.

Seizing the opportunity, I bid on the car myself — 500 rubles, around \$500. The only other bidder, an Egyptian diplomat, offered 300. I had won! My wife and I chuckled; we would drive through Moscow, me up-front in a chauffeur's cap and her lounging behind, the grand lady.

But McSweeney called me in to say my bid was no good. Don't you realize, he said, what the General Accounting Office would say about our contracting officer buying a Cadillac for several hundred dollars? I saw no problem; I had been scrupulous in following procedures. Nevertheless, he directed me to put out a new request for bids. I did, and upped my own bid to 700 rubles — and won again, only to be overruled by the DCM. Why, sir? Then came the real reason: You don't understand, he said, what people would think of a subordinate officer driving a Cadillac while his superior officer drove a Ford.

I did understand. I was tempted to tell him off, but it would have been the end of me in Moscow. The

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third time around there were two bids. The Egyptian bid 600 rubles but the foppish aide to the British ambassador won by offering 1,500. I hoped our DCM would often find his Ford parked next to the Cadillac of Albion's junior representative.

### **A Falcon Flies**

Soviet restrictions on travel were severe, but we did all we could to try to learn what was going on in that secretive country. One April the assistant agricultural attaché and I took the embassy's new Ford station wagon to Ukraine. From Rostov we headed south toward Novorossisk, but never got there. Our Ford stopped dead on the empty steppe, miles from any village. We pulled up the hood and tried to locate the problem.

We knew the cops would come looking for us; they would not lose sight of two American diplomats for long. Sure enough, soon a militia car pulled up. The two officers asked politely what was wrong. The ignition, we said. They pulled up the hood but also failed to solve the problem, so they flagged down the next passing truck and ordered the driver to tow us to their Rostov headquarters. The colonel in charge had the Ford towed to a

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truck motor pool. Next morning the Ford was fixed. Defective points, said the burly mechanic; he had to remake them. We wanted to pay him, or at least give him a bottle of whisky (we took a modest supply on trips), but he would accept nothing; nor could the motor pool, a socialist enterprise, take in cash.

It seemed prudent to cut short our trip and head back to Moscow, 600 miles north. We progressed slowly; now our radiator was leaking. We stopped at the service station outside Novocherkassk and bought a useful Soviet invention, a truck inner tube with two pieces cut out of one end, leaving a strip for a handle to dip the tube in a well or a stream. We must have stopped 10 times en route to Moscow to refill the radiator. Fortunately, the leak stayed small.

(The next spring in Washington, I received a postcard postmarked Rostov on the Don, from my traveling companion. "Guess what?" he wrote. "Came here with a Mercury. Same problem, same mechanic. He says bring a Lincoln next time, he's never seen one. Cheers.")

Meanwhile, I borrowed \$2,000 and bought a red Ford Falcon. One afternoon my wife and our friend Evi Musser took our red Falcon up the Moscow River, to visit a village

with an ancient church tower that we had seen from the road across the river leading to the river beach where diplomats spent summer Sundays. Mary Jane and Evi found a little road to the village, and drove down through cornfields to photograph the church, closed for decades but still the most beautiful thing in the village.

Beyond, a track went down to a stream. On the other side was a paved road. The imperialists forded the stream and drove up into a very special place. There were large villas. In front of one stood a large ZIL convertible. Now, the only ZIL convertible ever seen in Moscow was used by the Minister of Defense to review troops at Red Square parades. That one was brown, this one pale green. (Later, we heard it belonged to Khrushchev's son-in-law.) The two Americans suddenly realized they were inside a resort for top Soviet officials — not a place where Westerners were welcome. What to do? Keep going; a gate was visible at the far end. The gatekeeper flagged down the Falcon. The game was up. There would be a nasty confrontation....Could the comrades kindly take a friend to Moscow? Da, da. The lady in question got into the back seat. She began to chat in Russian, while the two American women looked at each other, repressing giggles. The adventurers left the Russian at the nearest bus stop, drove away, and exploded in mirth.

The Soviet foreign ministry sent our embassy quarterly notes, listing our numerous alleged violations of Soviet regulations. Incredibly, they missed the Falcon's intrusion.

### **A Swarm of “Bugs”**

A couple of months before our departure from Moscow in 1964, I sold the Falcon to a colleague, took a succession of trains to Germany,

and picked up a new Volkswagen at the factory in Wolfsburg. My family joined me, and we drove to a Quaker conference near Montreux that brought together diplomats from all over the world, including two Soviet officers, for a week's discussion. One afternoon the two Russians and five Bridges squeezed into the VW and drove to Gstaad for tea. The next evening, one of the Russians told me he had heard that there was fighting in the Gulf of Tonkin. We went down to the VW, which had a good radio, and listened to a broadcast in English. The Russian thought Beijing would enter the fray and there would be a greater U.S.-Chinese conflict than in Korea. I do not recall attempting a prediction.

While I returned to Moscow for my final weeks there, our friend Evi flew out to join Mary Jane, and they and our children went off in the Bug to visit beaches and old towns on the Dalmatian coast. When Evi returned, she informed me that I owed her \$500 — nearly a month's net pay for me. When I had last seen my wife she had more than enough cash to last until we met. (I speak of days when credit cards were little used and there were no ATMs.) What had happened?

The trouble began in Dubrovnik, where a gang of boys stole two wheels from the Volkswagen. My wife reported the theft to the police and went to the VW dealer, who had no wheels for sale but lent her two to drive the car onto the northbound ferry. At Rijeka, Mary Jane went to the Volkswagen dealer, borrowed two wheels again, and drove the car off the boat. Everyone, said Evi, had been very helpful. The party then took the train for Trieste.

As they neared the Italian border, Mary Jane realized she had left little Mary's passport in Dubrovnik. Nothing daunted, she showed the Yugoslav border guard just her own

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passport, which contained photos of all three children, included after their births and then crossed through after they had been issued their own passports. The Yugoslav guard pointed at the lines across the pictures. Mary Jane shrugged and, using her best Slavic, said "Ya nichevo ne ponimayu" — I don't know anything about that. And so the entourage crossed into Italy, bought two wheels in Trieste, and took them to the car in Rijeka. The ladies then decided to drive to Florence, where they stayed in a lovely if expensive hotel and went shopping to make up for their troubles.

And all that was why I owed Evi Musser \$500, which I paid gladly before joining my family in Paris to sail home on the *S.S. United States*.

From Washington we went to Embassy Rome, accompanied by our trusty VW Bug. We drove it all over Italy with the three children and our new dog Seumas in the back seat. Seumas was not small, the children were growing, but they almost fit. They also fought. One day we stopped in a village and Mary Jane bought a large wooden spoon. Henceforth VW discipline was maintained with the spoon. On a long trip the mother would not even look back to identify the troublemaker, but laid on indiscriminately. My three oldest

children still claim that this bent their young souls, but we have never assented to that proposition.

In April 1969 my wife took the children to Greece for spring vacation. Seumas stayed with me in Rome, but the VW was even more crowded because our friend Roberta Schneidman and two of her children went along. They returned full of stories. They had almost slid off a cliff on a muddy road; they had collided ("barely," said Mary Jane) with a bus in Patras. But the big news was that my wife thought she was pregnant.

The birth of Andrew necessitated a change of cars and housing. We moved from a crowded apartment near Piazza Navona to a house on two acres north of Rome. I bought a roomier Volkswagen, a station wagon. One evening Mary Jane and I drove into town to an after-dinner get-together at the house of Luigi Vittorio Ferraris, a senior Foreign Ministry officer, a brilliant man with interesting friends. We stayed until almost midnight. Home was 30 kilometers out the Via Flaminia. About 22 kilometers out, the car stopped dead and I could not revive it. We began to walk, my wife in high heels. There was almost no traffic, and no one would stop for us. But it was a fine spring night, and my wife remembers hearing the first nightingales of the year.

From Rome we went to Prague, three years after the Soviet army crushed Dubcek's "socialism with a human face." It had not crushed the Czech nation. We made good friends; we had never known a people with such a liking for Americans. But the security police trailed me on foot and in cars, sometimes quite visibly. I mentioned this to my wife, who had noticed nothing of the sort.

She had, however, discovered a number of used-goods shops in Prague, state-owned like all Prague businesses, with interesting things at modest prices. One weekend we went

browsing together; she drove, since she knew all the places. After visiting two stores, I told her I saw four cars following us: an old black Mercedes and a blue Simca which I knew from earlier occasions, plus two Skodas. Nonsense, she said. Still, perhaps this distracted her; she took a wrong turn and, driving up a narrow street in Mala Strana, we found ourselves in a blind alley. Backing out, we found backing out behind us a black Mercedes, a blue Simca, and two Skodas.

After Prague we spent seven years in Washington and then went back to Rome. This time I was the deputy chief of mission. It was the most responsible job I had had abroad, and I enjoyed it although we were concerned about terrorism. I had a good Italian driver and an armored Ford, but there were no guarantees. My friend Ray Hunt, who directed the Sinai peacekeeping force, was followed one day on his way home from

his Rome headquarters in his chauffeured Lancia. One of the followers leaped on the back bumper and shot at Ray through the armored back window. The second or third shot penetrated the armor and killed him.

One Saturday afternoon I drove myself down to the embassy in the armored Ford, which was an apricot color. I planned to get the car repainted, to make it less obvious. A Ford of any color was a rare sight in Italy, but no Italian cars were apricot — although taxis were then orange. Saturday afternoon was shopping time and the Via Veneto was jammed, so I was moving very slowly. A woman came running up the middle of the street, pointing at me as she came. Was she fingering me for accomplices? She came up to my window, and asked “Libero?” She thought I was a taxi.

My last post in the Foreign Service was Mogadishu. Somalia's

ghastly civil war lay in the future and I traveled widely, usually without escort — although on my first trip to the northwest, where the Isaq clans had begun to contest Siad Barre's dictatorship, I was accompanied by an army truck with a machine gun on the roof. The best driving in Somalia came when my friend Bill Fullerton, the British ambassador, and I took a Land Rover and a Toyota a hundred miles along the Gulf of Aden, not on a road but just on hard beach sand and gravel. Days later, after we had reached the Horn of Africa by plane, boat, and finally on foot, we did another long stretch inland. For miles we drove side by side across the great Daror plain, racing through the night across a treeless, roadless land. One big boulder could have been the end of us. There were many stars, and fortunately no boulders. Which, I may say, has been true for much of my life. ■