

SABBATICAL LEAVE, ISRAEL, 1968

Our visit to Israel during February to April of 1968 was initiated by David Ginsberg, whom I had met first at Columbia University when he was a student in a chemistry course in which I was the laboratory assistant. He had become a professor of Chemistry at the Technion, Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, and was distinguishing himself in research and writing. I was to be a Visiting Professor at the Hatechnion, the portion of the Institute that was on the hilltop overlooking the city. We flew by different airlines from Chicago to Tel Aviv in accord with our habit, while the children were still in school or college, of not flying together. After breakfast together in Chicago, we flew in separate planes to New York, where we had lunch together. Then, Nell flew by KLM to Amsterdam, where, in the morning, she had time to visit with family members at the airport, and then flew on to Tel Aviv. My TWA plane stopped in London and in Athens, Greece, en route from New York to Tel Aviv. Greece was under a military dictatorship, and passengers were confined to the airport during the stopover. Nell and I landed at the Tel Aviv airport within fifteen minutes of each other. That was according to plan, but it was still surprising that it worked.

We were met at the airport by Dov Ben-Ishai and were driven to Haifa by the main road along the coast, passing orange groves, wind-sheltered by cedars, and kibbutzim that consisted mainly of chicken farms. We stopped for pancakes and then came into Haifa under the lighthouse, saw the panorama of the harbor, and proceeded to guest house #3 of the Technion. In the next few days, we were treated to tours of the Department of Chemistry of the Hatechnion, the city and harbor of Haifa, and Roman and Turkish aqueduct ruins. Nell and I took brief walks around Mount Carmel and rode on regular buses to acquaint ourselves with their routes. We were guests of the Dov Ben-Ishais, the Eli Loewenthals, and the Frank Herbsteins at dinners and lunches. In the absence of David Ginsberg, who was on a lecture tour in Europe, a close friend of his, a Mr. Stiefel, kept us busy touring when our own initiatives seemed to be faltering. There was much to see, and life seemed to move at an accelerated pace due to (1) current events, (2) recognition of recent and past history, and (3) relating biblical stories to specific sites. Thus, we saw

Acre, Naharija port, the border with Lebanon, the Beit She'arim catacombs, the Jazreel Valley, Nazareth, Kafr Cana (site of the water-to-wine miracle), Tiberias (built by Herod, 686 feet below sea level), Degania (first kibbutz established in the Palestinian territory, 1909), Ein Gev (kibbutz on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee and directly under the Golan Heights), and Mount Tabor (the meeting place of three out of the twelve tribes of Israel).

After this orientation, it was time for me to spend time in the laboratory and to give seminars, which I did at the rate of about one per week, and to talk chemistry with members of the Technion department. Nell did the housekeeping chores of laundry (she noted, "What else?" in her diary) and shopping at the nearby food store (frequently, because there was no transport), but she was able to take in the sights that intrigued her, such as the International Training Center for Community services; the Druse village Daliyat on Mount Carmel; Ein Hod, an artists' village; in Acre (Acco), the museum, the Crusaders' fortress, the crypt of St. John, the prison where "Exodus" was filmed, a nursery school for poor children, and a mental hospital.

In our second week in Israel, we went by taxi and train to Tel Aviv, where we were met and driven southeast to the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. Our tour of Rehovot and the Institute included a visit to the grave of Chaim Weizmann, the founder of Zionism, and historic sites. I met and talked with the chemists, some of whom were famous or were on their way to fame, including Ephraim Katchalski, who later served a term as President of Israel. After my lecture in the afternoon, we were treated to a tour of the main buildings of Tel Aviv and the reconstructed site of Jaffa, where we had an excellent dinner in the Tarshish Restaurant (bourri, the Mediterranean fish). The guest house of the Weizmann Institute was most comfortable. After breakfast the next day, we left by a "United Tours" bus to Eilat, with fascinating stops along the way:

Yavneh—one of the holy cities of the early Jews

Ashdod—ancient Philistine coastal city

Ashkelon—ancient Philistine coastal city

Beersheba—site of the ancient well of Abraham, administrative center for the Negev, center for sheep and goat trading by the Bedouins

Yeroham—beginning of the Wilderness of Zin

Sde Boker—oasis

Avdat—ruins of the ancient city of the Nabateans

Eibat—in present time, a resort on the Gulf of Eilat, adjacent to the Jordanian resort city to the east. There we could swim and, in glass bottom boats, survey the protected coral reefs with their varicolored fish.

MORE THAN A MEMOIR

After spending the weekend at Eilat, we were to return via Tel Aviv to Haifa. We went to the airport to find out how this could be done. When Nell learned that there were not many planes on the schedule, she decided that it would be OK to fly together in the old DC-3 that was sitting on the tarmac. Why? Her reasoning was that for a plane to be that old, it had to be loved and well-maintained, and it would be safe for us to fly together on such an aircraft. It was our first time to fly together without the children, and we did arrive safely at our destination.

I indulged myself in another week of talking chemistry, after which it was time to take another weekend excursion, including:

Jericho—where Joshua caused the walls “to come tumblin’ down.” It was the site of a Rockefeller-sponsored archeological dig.

The Allenby Bridge—important in the 1948 war.

Qumran—where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found (1947) in earthenware jars in the caves and where the Essenes sect had lived.

Masada—the plateau-top fortress where a large band of Jews held out against the Romans for more than a year, finally committing mass suicide when the fortifications were breeched by the Roman army, who had built a huge earthen ramp to the top of the cliff in order to carry out the final assault.

Back in the Hitechnion, we led a quiet life of chemistry, housekeeping, and further assimilation. We became part of the local scene to the extent that we entertained visitors, went to banquets for seminar speakers, and took short bus trips to places such as Caesarea, Copernaum, and the Mount of the Beatitudes. When we neared the end of our stay, there were farewell dinners. The best had been saved until last: a visit to Jerusalem where all history and religions come together. In the bright sunlight (you reached for your dark glasses but then realized that you had them on), the city was indeed “golden.” We hired a private guide so that we would not miss anything. We had an introduction to Teddy Kollak, the Mayor of Jerusalem, who showed us around the Shrine of the Book, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are kept, and we again experienced the feeling of living at a fast pace because of the many centuries and cultures that engulfed us.

Finally, Nell flew to Holland, I remained for a day of visiting and lecturing at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and then I too flew to Holland to join her and to be with family members. I have the feeling that I received much more than I gave, and I maintain visions vivid enough to last several lifetimes.