

Trip report E.W.Dijkstra, Antwerp, 24 - 29 June 1979.

"There is no place like Hilton!" but a "Quality Inn Hotel" is a close approximation: breakfast and lunch with the same Muzak as in the toilets, dinner with the Muzak from the bar in addition. In a couple of days such a cacophony becomes sheer torture. The food, however, was on the whole much better --at least when we compare a Belgian Quality Inn with an American Hilton-- .

The purpose of the visit was a five-day seminar on programming that I conducted for Burroughs employees. The audience that I met was not quite what I had expected, as a few of the European plants had been unable to send participants; there were four participants from the USA and six from Europe. Instead of those six I had expected something like sixteen, and those missing ten was a bit of a disappointment for me. Twenty people would have made it more worthwhile, it would also have been easier for me: when trying to conduct a dialogue and to let the audience cooperate in the development of a solution, you tend to get more suggestions from the larger audience. (I have explained to them that as a result of the small size of the group they all had to carry a double burden.) It was a quite pleasant group to work with, they found it difficult, but were intrigued and worked very hard. It was my impression that on the average the European participants found it a little bit easier than the American ones to catch the spirit of the whole thing --when correct, not a surprising observation-- . As in Vallye Forge, we met from 9 till 12 and from 14 to 17 and disbanded at Friday noon. And "hotelwork" in the evenings. On Friday morning --the farewell session-- I have shown the termination detection for diffusing computations; the preceding four days we had dealt with the development of sequential programs, it seemed illuminating to show the same techniques can be applied in the case of distributed computing.

When I left Eindhoven on Sunday afternoon, the young couple ahead of me in the queue in front of the international ticket counter clearly had a very difficult request; after waiting for my turn for almost fifteen minutes

I gave up because I wanted to catch my train. When I tried to buy my ticket from the conductor, he told me that he could only sell me a ticket until the border. In Roosendaal I announced to the Belgian conductor that I wanted to buy a ticket from Roosendaal to Antwerp; he said "OK", but never showed up, so the last stretch I travelled free. (I travelled in the company of four Belgians who had been in the Netherlands for a few days and amused each other by telling "Belgian jokes". Most of them I couldn't understand, but I learned the announcement over the P.A. system at the Roosendaal railway station: "The train to Belgium departs when the hands of the clock coincide.") On Friday afternoon, when I returned, I again failed to buy my ticket at the station, but this time because the taxi that had been ordered to pick me up from the hotel was ten minutes late.

The brochure of the Antwerp Quality Inn proudly announced its audio-visual facilities for meetings, but the facilities were absolutely miserable. They had promised a blackboard, but the one they provided was ridiculous --the size of an opened atlas, at best!-- . The sad result was that I had to struggle the whole week with an overhead projector. The usual inconveniences of that "visual aid" are bad enough --the speaker is blinded and cooked-- ; this time I had the added inconvenience of a cord that was not long enough and a roll of foil that did not fit. Bah! The experience confirmed all my prejudices : the world would be served immensely by the defenestration of all overhead projectors.

Just before I left home I had heard over the radio that in large sections of Flanders a bacterial contamination of the drinking water had been discovered. (It had been discovered on Friday evening, but only on Sunday the population was warned to boil the water from the tap before drinking!) Had this something to do with the glass of rotten milk the Quality Inn served me on the second or third evening? Later in the week I began to taste chlorine while brushing my teeth.

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