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Our Cruise in the Baltic

May 16 – June 3, 2017

Arend D. Lubbers

My wife suggested that we take a cruise, a good friend and her daughter had signed on for a Baltic Sea cruise the last ten days of May and the first three days of June. My wife further suggested that we join them. I like to accommodate her so our payment was soon made. We have taken three previous cruises. The first was sponsored by our Public Television station with PBS economics guru Louis Rukeyser as the chief attraction. He gave us about three days of the seven we spent in the Caribbean. The last two were on luxurious Silver Seas ships celebrating with about 30 people our hosts wedding anniversaries. The first was 45 years ago and our attendance was necessary. I have few memories. The other two were among a group of friends and acquaintances who provided pleasant social conversation. Now we were required to share accommodations with 930 people, knowing only two of them. At 85, I am content with the number of friends I have. The prospect of living for two weeks in close proximity to so many people bothered me. But I promised my wife to keep an open mind and a positive attitude.

Our port of embarkation was Stockholm. I had never been there so we decided to arrive two days early to tour the city. We made the interesting boutique hotel
Victory (named for Lord Nelson’s flag ship) our base and proceeded to see the sights and listen to two musical performances, one Beethoven’s, “Missa Solemnis” and a Swedish spoof of the “Merry Widow.” It took a while to catch on since Swedish is not our second language before we began to enjoy it. On the third day, we boarded the Viking Star. I was then, and have been since, favorably impressed by the organizing skills of the Viking Cruise Corporation and those who are employed. All is efficient with a friendly smile.

Soon it became obvious that most of our fellow adventurers were between the ages of 60 and 80 with more over 80 than in their fifties. The youngest passenger by far was our friends daughter who has not yet cracked 40. I promise that if you want younger people, you have to take a Disney cruise. There you get a better cross section of the white population, the children who enjoy it and the grandparents who pay for it while enjoying their grandchildren. I say white population because ours on shipboard was 98% white with a few Asian faces in the group. The world of the Viking Star felt like the British Raj, a white population served by a 100% Asian staff in dining rooms and cabins. The tour staff and other administrative officers were majority white. I saw only two black faces on board. I have not ascertained why. Certainly affluent blacks don’t find the Viking Star inviting, at least not on this trip.
The passengers came primarily from three countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. I met none from another country amongst paying guests. Often on our trip to Europe, we have met Australians who apparently like to leave for months at a time to avoid their relatively mild winters. The Brits and Aussies make good shipmates for Americans. It is an Anglo-Saxon comfort zone.

There are other observations that should not have surprised me but impressed me on the first day, and were never altered. The revolution in dress is complete. On cruises two generations ago, passengers dressed for dinner. This seldom happens. I saw three neckties worn by the approximately 400 men on board. Nothing is too casual for any occasion. Blue jeans are worn by many, but they are not derigueur as they are for younger people. That was a relief for me since I have an aversion to them dating back so long ago I don’t remember its origin. So as not to be in a state of constant consternation, I have come to accept them on others, even for my wife who wears them on occasion.

The casual dress revolution has not been kind to these people. To see them in too tight jeans is not an elevating experience. A high percentage of our fellow travelers were obese. Since I carry a pot belly around with me, I worry some about obesity,
but on this cruise I was on the lower end of the obesity curve giving me a false sense of security in weighty matters.

Jeans are not the only expression of casual dress. The shirts, the sweaters, the shoes, the ball caps, the vests, and slacks all seem to represent dress downism that characterizes our society. Being old and the son of my mother, casual can go just so far before I will rebel. I began wearing the blue blazer, the only sport coat I packed, more often than I anticipated. I did bring one tie but that remained unworn. It all leads to reflections on the meanings that can be found in the way people dress. Uniforms used to be necessary for the task at hand whether on the laborers job, the professionals job, or in societal representation. Not so much anymore. The people on board didn’t appear as people of their affluence used to appear.

We did not decide upon this cruise to meet and converse with people. Virginia and Leah Gearhart offered the friendship and sociability we enjoy, and made the adventure a pleasant and personal one as we wandered the corridors, lounges, and dining rooms of our floating palace. We had embarked because we wanted to see the ports of call.
Stockholm, our point of embarkation, was enhanced by a tour of the Vasa Museum and sights of the Metro Islands by boat. Our guide was a colorful Swede married to a Greek immigrant wife. He was a former actor who entertained as he led us. His banter was filled with historical and personal facts that I require to be happily guided. The two days on our own and the one provided by Viking Tours left on me a favorable impression of Stockholm. I was prepared to like Stockholm, but I liked it better.

We awakened the next morning in Helsinki. The capital city of Finland had a white clear light about it. I liked the streets that we followed to the Sibelius Monument and Park. Finland must be the only nation that has a composer as its most noted hero, which says something I suppose about its politics and national mentality. There was a negative however, our guide was a disappointment. There was much to be told about the national character and history of Finns that so many guides weave into their narrative. She failed. All countries have colors for me. Finland is white so I was pleased that Helsinki appeared white to me.

The next morning we were in St. Petersburg. This was our only two-day layover and we wished a third had been added. Peter the Great’s monumental project fulfilled for us all that we had anticipated. For years, I have dreamed of visiting the
Hermitage. The dream materialized. Our guide, who knew art and history and the use of English to explain it all, was one of our best. I will remember the Rembrandt gallery, and how she compared and explained the paintings. I want to go back and spend a day in that gallery.

Among St. Petersburg highlights, the Yusupov Palace where Rasputin was shot but managed to crawl a flight of stairs and into the street before being shot again and expiring, gave presence to an historical event that has long intrigued me.

One should not be in Russia even for a short period without attending a ballet performance. This we enjoyed in the palace theatre built by Catherine II the Great in the 18th century. It was a semi circle that I estimated seated about 350 people. It had high ceilings, no one was far from the stage I thought was too small for performing Swan Lake. I was wrong. The troupe performed flawlessly and Nancy and I experienced a magic moment in Russia where Swan Lake was composed and choreographed.

Peter the Great sought to build a capital on the sea opening his empire to the west. Over two hundred years later, I concluded he succeeded. St Petersburg, after two days of touring, seemed to me a beautiful city in the West European mode. Darting
in and out of a place like St. Petersburg only makes me want to experience more of Russia. I thought this would be my only stop on Russian soil. It may be, but I want more experiences in this vast empire.

A short night trip took us to the capital of Estonia, Tallinn. During the early years, Estonia was independent as it is now. Most of my life it was absorbed in the Soviet Union. It strives to keep itself separated from the Russian bear. Its currency is the Euro and it is a member of NATO. My first tour was conducted by a guide who impersonated a soviet officer. We learned what life was like after Estonia was absorbed by Russia, an event I remember from my boyhood. Old Tallinn was built on a high hill as a protective measure. On our afternoon tour, we were transported there walking amongst its churches, embassies, government occupied buildings, high-end apartments in old buildings, restaurants and shops. Then we were led down the hill, the narrow way populated with shops and homes, to an old town square that had on its perimeter the oldest European pharmacy. The square with all its restaurants, bars, public buildings, and shops was obviously the center of civic life and entertainment. Tallinn seemed like such a civilized place. The few Estonians in the world deserve this small plot to remain theirs.
Our next day at sea with lectures and music allowed us to recharge for the next series of tours. Gdansk was the next one, a city that has alternated between German and Polish control, and was a leading city in the Hanseatic League in the middle ages. Most recently, it was the place where Leck Walesa and the Solidarity Movement gave birth to the present Polish democracy. Not so much time as I would have preferred was spent on that event. More was dedicated to the development and architecture of the old town, which surprised us by its beauty and strength. It was a city built by trade and shows the influence of Dutch architecture. A knowledgeable yet English-hesitant guide led us through the city. As a boy, I remember it as Danzig, a free city between Poland and Germany in between the two world wars.

We awoke the next morning in Warnemunde, the port, for the city of Rostock. Our tour for the day was to Lubeck and Wismar. The German guide was one of our best. On the tour, including the drive to Lubeck, she gave an erudite lecture on the history and culture of west Pomerania and Mecklenburg. Both towns, particularly Lubeck, were significant Hanseatic numbers and for a long period Wismar was controlled by the Swedish before being peacefully turned over to the Germans.
I was interested in Lubeck because it was Thomas Mann’s hometown and the primary setting for his novel Buddenbrooks. I read it many decades ago and it has had a lasting effect on me. We saw the Mann family home now a museum. It is also the home of Hans Otte who, I think, was the first managing partner of BDO, an international accounting firm, “Seidman and Seidman” and Bill Seidman were the American accountants who were original participants in the international BDO group.

Lubeck was in West Germany near the border with East Germany. The ancient and the rebuilt mix throughout the city. The old Hanseatic gate stands with elegance as one is taken into the town and speaks with an architectural eloquence. It is a fitting prelude for what is to come. The restaurant where lunch was served was in a bakery and chocolate shop. We have never seen chocolates so numerous in their variety and so magnificently displayed as in this century old shop. A stop in Wismar to see the partially restored and special cathedral ended our walking day. We bused back to the Viking Star listening to more facts and opinions for our enlightenment.

Our next two ports were in Denmark, reported to be the happiest country on our planet. Of all our city visits, Copenhagen was the only one Nancy and I had
previously visited. We took the grand tour seeing palaces, churches, and of course the little mermaid. We remembered past hours in Tivoli. For me, our return was the highlight of our day in Copenhagen. If we ever returned, I would while away hours there. Its a magical place and conveys its own reality.

The second Danish town was Allborg. It rained. The bad weather came at the right time. There was not much that was captivating about the place to warrant inclusion on a Viking Cruise itinerary of the Baltic. We were served by Viking clad impersonators an ancient meade and other Viking treats on a pleasant lawn accompanied by Viking grunts and screeches. Oslo, the capital of Norway, would have been a better place and it was the only Scandinavian capital that was not included. We proceeded to Norway however and toured Stavanger. Except for its role in the north sea oil discovery and production, it also could be skipped. The oil museum and its history as a fishing port provided some interest. Our guide spoke excellent English because I think he was English.

The Fjords of Norway have had a place in my imagination, strong enough to hold my interest, not strong enough for me to plan a trip to experience them. This Viking Cruise had one on the itinerary and that pleased me. At last I would see firsthand a Fjord in Norway. We cruised up one of the longest Fjords at night after
leaving Stavanger, docking at a small village Editfjord at the head of the Fjord. There were some long and strenuous tours planned, but we opted for a short easy one to a nearby nature center. We encountered every kind of stuffed animal that inhabited the area. Some were so small I thought we would see a stuffed insect next, but we never did. There were some live animals, sheep grazing on the grass roof of the visitor center. We wish we had gone to the Viking village and enactment, a four and half hour tour.

The treat of the day for me was sitting forward as we cruised back to the entrance of the Fjord seeing the majestic mountains and the lights of an occasional town that dotted the landscape. It was a once in a lifetime experience, and I expect that is what it will be for me.

The next day, the last of our sea going holiday, was in Bergen, the hometown of the Viking Cruise founder. The beautiful city surrounds a bay. Our morning tour gave us an overview of the city, Norway’s second largest. In the afternoon we visited a stave church, one of the churches that date back as far as the 10th century. They are made entirely of wood and they frequently burned down. The carving and architecture were pleasing and noteworthy. Our last visit was to Mr. and Mrs. Edvard Grieg’s summer house, where they resided each summer for twenty two
years. After seeing interesting artifacts, our last event was a piano recital of Grieg’s piano compositions as we looked out over the forest and bay from a vast window in the recital hall. Our trip ended as it had begun with inspiring music, Beethoven’s “Missa Solemnis” in Stockholm and Grieg’s piano selections, a musical nature event in Bergen.

For me, the tours acquainting me with cities and towns I had never seen gave me the greatest satisfaction and enjoyment. The food, which is said to draw people back to sea cruises, showed visible results among a large percentage of our fellow passengers. Obesity reigns in that segment of cruise going society. I give the food better than just a passing grade. By the standards of my grading experiences, it earns a B. We had five choices aboard for dinning. The World Café, a cafeteria buffet with more varieties of food than one is used to seeing in such displays, the Restaurant, a sit down and be served venue with a fine gourmet menu (my first night there I had Poulet de Bresse, a first outside France), an Italian Restaurant Mancinis, the Chefs Table that offered all of the international cuisine and a breakfast, luncheon lounge in a living room like setting. Throughout the ship there were bars and cocktail lounges with guitar, trio and piano entertainment.
The service in these restaurants was always friendly and mostly efficient. I had little complaint. The food in the World Café was the least well prepared, but I always thought of the task it was to feed nearly fifteen hundred people in a floating venue three times a day, every day.

One night in the restaurant, I ordered mussels. Next to having a plump mussel in every shell, the broth and bread determine the quality of the serving. Mine had no broth at all. The server seemed nonplussed when I inquired about the broth, which never appeared. This was my greatest complaint on the trip I entered into with a hint of skepticism.

The lectures were a mixed bag, some excellent, some not too well delivered. While having cocktails on our first night, we noticed a nearly six foot woman tending a man not taller than five feet. She was in her sixties, he in his nineties. Later we learned she was our lecturer on arts and culture of the region and he was her husband. Her name was Margret Playford; his we never discovered. Her name seemed somewhat incongruous given the situation, though he followed her like a puppy.
Musical shows were organized and in some cases scripted by a professional organization out of Miami, I think. They contracted with six singer-dancers with high skills. When given a good show to perform, the event was beyond expectations. When presented with a weak script, no one could save it. I did not frequent the nightclub, but it featured a band that I was told met all the requirements of a good performance.

When my daughter asked me to rate the trip between 1 to 10, ten being the best, I had a difficult time. Compared to the other three commercial cruises we have taken, I would say it was about the same. Does that make it a 5? There were some ten aspects to this cruise. First, Nancy loved it and could have continued on the Viking Star for the next two weeks. When she is happy and content, I am happy and content. I like holidays to be well planned and organized. Viking Cruises are well managed. The business plan works. Passengers are served and cared for in a friendly efficient way. The land tours offer a variety of opportunities. The guides are mostly excellent or good. We had only one who failed out of eleven. The ship is a limited environment, yet a good one. Each day one returns to that environment without the experience of living and dining in the local culture just visited on tour. Some like the convenience and serenity the return provides. I miss the greater immersion, yet at my age the convenience may come closer to being a necessity.
Canes help as we pursue our shore adventures, but they are not the sole panacea for coping with less energy. If my wife asks me if I will go on another cruise, my response will be “of course I will. I enjoyed your pleasure and just being with you.” Badly served muscles can’t detract from that.