

Wild Shaarkah

NO. 8 : MY AUSTRALIAN DIARY SYNCON '92 - AND SOMETHING MORE

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1. An Italian Interlude

There is no straight connection from Prague to Sydney: I found out that the cheapest air company is Alitalia and it was necessary to go one day from Prague to Rome and the other day from Rome to Sydney. Staying overnight in the transit hotel was really expensive (70 dollars per person and night) and so I was very grateful that Roelof Goudriaan (an administrator of the GUFF fund) had asked Hazu Hiroaki, a Japanese SF fan living in Rome, to help me.

My conclusion was that the Japanese hospitality is incredibly generous, but I am afraid I would not be able to do exactly the same for a Japanese guest coming to Prague: on the airport, I was awaited by a secretary, a driver and a huge limousine. Later, Hazu's wife prepared a lot of wonderful meals and set the table in such a beautiful way - but only for Hazu and me, not for herself and their three children, which made me to feel really uneasy - and somehow it happened that it was a lot of Czechoslovak books, souvenirs and music all around me - I think it's sort of courtesy to a guest to expose various

artifacts of his own nation around him - but in my house in Prague, there isn't absolutely anything Japanese, I am afraid - perhaps our Sanyo TV set, but it doesn't seem to be the proper stuff. - Hazu works as a correspondent of a Japanese newspaper called Yomiuri Shibun and in his office he has an exciting computer which writes in Japanese alphabet and is also able to convert the Japanese signs into the Chinese ones - and still it isn't so

simple: it offers all the time several possibilities of translation. It is really fascinating and I could never understand how it can work.

Next day, my plane was due at 2 pm, so I had some time for sightseeing of Rome. Hazu offered to accompany me, but at the end I decided to go by myself. I walked slowly around the Trinity church, Piazza del Poppolo and Di Trevi fountain, which is now so beautifully washed into shining white colour. Hazu stressed that it is really very important to see the Colosseum, and so I decided to see still the Colosseum, though it was already rather late. At the end I found out that I am not able to reach

Hazu's office (and another limousine prepared to transport me to the airport) in time. I started quite panicking, but finally (with a help of a taxi) I was only twenty minutes late, and I managed to come at the airport in time.

2. Fascinating Australia

For the first time in my life I travelled by the big Boeing (I think that it is 474). The flight to Sydney took nineteen hours, including a two hours break in Bangkok. So I had time enough (finally!) to read through an anthology of Australian SF and a guide which I get from Roelof and Lynne Ann (it is an exceptionally good, precise and witty guide from the Lonely Planet). Both ways with Alitalia were very vivid, with noisy Italian people singing, staying in aisles in groups and conversating with friends, and also collectively praying. My neighbour on the seat was Mrs Muirden, a retired teacher from Adelaide who breeds small cute dogs called Patrian Pugs (if you are interested in them, write to

her address - she has a dozen of them at present).

Suddenly we noticed a red desert below the plane - Australia! Mrs Muirden allowed me to the window for a while and it was really a gorgeous impression - rocks, mountains, plains - all of them so deserted and vast, all the same reddish colour... a wonderful view.

After the short day (eight hours shorter than normally) it was dark and we were landing in Sydney. I was surprised by the very thorough and strict checking of all the luggages. It is absolutely forbidden to bring any sort of food to Australia, because they intend to protect themselves against various sorts of pests and diseases which hadn't still reached their continent. I expected that the checking would be more casual - like in America - and I didn't declare one box of muskli which I brought for my breakfasts. The clerks looked really concerned with my muskli and posed me a lot of questions - do I know English? Have I declared that I don't bring any food? What else do I hide in my luggage? Which drugs? - But at the end they let me go and keep my muskli.

The main organizer of Syncon, Gerald Smith, awaited me at the airport. He drove with me to the suburb house where he lives with his wife Womble and two cats. It was raining, the air was very humid and warm. At the first glance the suburbs of Sydney reminded me suburbs of Los Angeles or another Californian city. Gerald and Womble seemed to me rather tired by the preparations of the convention. In their house I drought for the first time the Australian wine which is wonderful: aromatic, naturally sweet - perhaps the best wine I had ever tasted. During my visit I used every opportunity

to drink this wonderful wine.

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3. Friday - the First Day of the Convention

I waked at 2 a.m. and I was absolutely fresh. No wonder: my biological clock was telling me that it is afternoon now. So I read the programme book and prepared my contributions to the panels... but at seven a.m., when Gerald and Womble got up, I was extremely sleepy and dull... so I drought several cups of coffee and went with my hosts to the Shore Motor Inn hotel to prepare the convention.

I tried to help a little with preparing the budeses and then I went around to see how the place does look like. It was so beautiful: the restaurant with the glass walls, palms, shinningly blue swimming pool outside, a wonderful view to the sea cost, lots of flowers and exotic trees... and this humid, warm air bringing the smell of the ocean. It seemed to me like something almost unreal.

Before the noon, more people came and I met Roger Weddall from Melbourne, an only Australian fan who wrote me several letters before my visit and also commented my personal fanzine with my travel report from America. Roger is an extremely friendly, helpful and entertaining person, and if I would have been in a distress from the unknown environments and new people, he would certainly have helped me. But in fact, in Australia I never felt lonely or sad or in a bad mood, because everybody was so very friendly, warm, socializing and nice there. People kept talking to me and asking various more or less competent questions - for example: "Are people hungry in Czechoslovakia?" - "No." "Do you have enough paper for



SOME DRAWINGS FROM
THE MASQUERADE

publishing books and magazines?" - "Yes, but publishing is expensive." "Will the Slovaks separate their country from the Czech country, and will you fight in a Yugoslavian way?" - "Maybe they will separate, but we definitely will not fight. We Czechs are very peaceful and indifferent, even apathetic people." "How do you feel about the falling down of the communist regimes?" - "I am extremely happy. What a wonderful freedom! But some people can't cope with it. They are so used to be manipulated, to be told all the time what to do and what to think." And so on.

Then we went out for a lunch and I decided to try sandwiches with vegemite. The Australians looked doubtful about my capability to withstand this experience. I actually ate two sandwiches, but I decided that it was enough to try them just once. It's too salty and strong for my taste.

In the afternoon there was a very nice science-popularizing lecture, dealing mainly with the problem of cats falling from the high houses: when they fall from the seventh floor, they can kill themselves, but when they fall from higher floors, they survive it quite well! People were thrilled by this phenomenon and tried to find out what the cat thinks during the fall and how does it react.

The whole program of the convention was focused on art, so there was a lot of slide shows and a big art show of the pictures by Michael Whelan and Nick Stathopoulos (the GoHs) and by other local artists. I brought with me some works by Czechoslovak artists and some of them were quite successful (especially Martin Zhouf who is the main coworker of Ikarie

magazine). I expect that every reader of this fanzine knows Michael Whelan, an American author of the covers of Anne McCaffrey's Dragon series, and many other books. Nick Stathopoulos is an Australian artist who made hundreds of book envelopes, some animated films, masquerade creations and many other fancy things. In the dealer's room there were available many reproductions of Whelan's pictures and also some ceramics by local artists. Both Michael and Nick were extremely busy during the convention: panels, talks, shows, and also guided tours around the art show, which I considered a very good idea.

My problem was that I was absolutely fresh at 2 or 3 a.m., so that I stayed at all the parties to their ends, which I can never manage when I am in Europe. On the contrary, the mornings were awful! I couldn't get up though the Australian birds tried to wake me very energetically (they have very strange voices - like car horns or very loud cats). Before the lunch I usually went jogging and it helped me a little, so from 1 p.m. I was able to listen to the programmes.

4. Saturday and the other days of Syncon

There were also two Australian writers present: Terry Dowling and Sean McMullen. A Book Launching Party was scheduled for one of the evenings, and I wondered what it would be like. There were some speeches, champagne, signing of books and photographing, and of course it was an opportunity for people to meet each other. I decided to imitate it later in Prague, because my first collection of stories was due to appear in May. And I really did it, with



NICK STATHOPOULOS AT ONE
OF THE PARTIES



THE FAMOUS HARBOUR BRIDGE

champagne and speeches and signing of my book, though it was not so serious, rather sort of parody, because my editor Richard Podany gave a gorgeously funny speech there! The other evening there was a cocktail party, which was very informal, with lots of funny quizz questions and good answers rewarded by candies.

There was also a masquerade and I had to act like one of the judges, which was not so easy because the theme was "my favourite book cover" and I didn't know the original covers. I admired how Nick Stathopoulos moderated the masquerade: he made ninety percents of the fun himself in a really professional way.

I also took part in a few panels - dealing with fanzines, with fandom in various countries and with vampires. Both fanzines and SF clubs used to be more serious and informative in our country than in the Western countries because of the lack of information. What we had needed most of all was the information and the access to the western SF. But now this is going to be changed and I suppose that we shall produce fanzines and do the conventions mainly for socializing reasons and for fun. Sean McMullen sounded very competent about the vampires and their scientific background. I thought a little about them because I am translating *The Vampire Tapestry* by Suzy McKee Charnas, but I haven't read more books of the "vampire wave".

I saw also Justin Acroyd's auction of fanzines, books and other stuff for the fan funds. He does it in a lively, humorous way, and it was very instructive to see it. Now I shall be an administrator of GUFF and so I should also organize some auctions.

During various conversations I

found out that the Australians are not very pleased if you tell them that they remind you the Americans. On the contrary, they seem to be very much pleased if you assure them that they are in some way very British. That sounds very flattering to them.

The last evening there was awarding of prizes - Ditmar is a fannish prize for the best book, story, artist and fannish writer, and Hujo is a funny prize reminding the American Hugo: it is a silver rocket made from white chocolate and tinfoil and its shape is curved. It is awarded for the best fannish gossip and other similar reasons.

On the Monday afternoon, there was a closing ceremony with more fun and throwing of candies - and then the con was over.

5. SYDNEY

I was very lucky as Sarah Murray, a Sydney fan who lives in the center of the city, offered me to stay at her place. So I went with her and her friend Diana to the city. Finally I saw the famous Harbour Bridge! It was already dark and the bridge was beautifully enlightened by white and yellow lights. It is very huge and fascinating by a peculiar, constructivistic sort of beauty. And I saw for a few seconds also the Opera House - its beautiful white shells shining in the darkness.

Sarah is a very nice woman and she is interested in a lot of topics - philosophy, belly dance, feminism... Her flat is a lovely place, in one of the oldest houses of Sydney, facing the backyard with lots of exotic trees. I have never saw a bigger cat than Sarah's tomcat - it weights eight kilograms and behaves like a very distinguished and self-respecting person.

Diana came to the Syncon from

Canberra and she offered me to take me along with her for one day, so that I shall see also the capital of Australia. We planned that from Canberra I should go to Melbourne, because most of Australian SF editors and fans live in Melbourne and some of them didn't come to the Syncon.

Sarah and Diana assured me that after a couple of days I shall be just overfed by the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House, but on the contrary, I liked Sydney's harbour more and more. The next day we went sightseeing with a group of fans (with another lady from Perth, which is a city with very active SF fandom, with Rex Thompson from New Zealand, who also won a fannish fund - FANZZ, and with another guy from Sydney). Usually I prefer to go sightseeing alone, because I am more free and it is so thrilling to discover things by myself, but I saw that it is much more fun in a group, and the local people can show you the places which you would otherwise pass and not to notice at all.

Sydney is extremely beautiful. I am fond on sea, and in Sydney the sea runs out into the land in lots of narrow bays, and the harbour is so spectacular. We went by ferry to the beaches of Manly, and it was just incredibly beautiful. Clean water, yellow sandy beaches, surfers on the waves. Sarah told me that the beaches are overcrowded, but they were almost empty. I was absolutely fascinated by the view from the ferry, but Sarah sat inside the boat and read a book. This beautiful view was already boring for her!

We ate in several oriental restaurants and I tried to use the chopsticks. I got almost a spasm into my fingers but I quite improved my skill in a few days. I also started to

understand why the travel reports of western people deal so much with eating places and experiences. It can be really thrilling! Each restaurant is so different, with new and new cuisines and meals, which are so delicious! After my return from Australia I had to diet for a few days, as I ate too much there.

Gerald and Womble gave a party on the Monday evening. People spoke about Syncon and its positive and negative aspects (there was quite a lot of fun, but less participants than the organizers had expected).

I found out that people from Sydney are also very proud on their Victorian shopping malls. They are beautiful but quite familiar to me. If you want to see some architecture in the Art Nouveau style, come to Prague and inquire its building from the end of the last century!

On the Tuesday evening, an Adelaide fan (Ian) joined our group and we went around the harbour pubs. We started in a barbecue restaurant where you were allowed to make your steak yourselves. It was so delicious! Then we went around the pubs and each of them was different: there was a rock singer in one of them, people singing themselves in another, and we played eight balls in the last one. Diana wrote me down the names of the pubs: Philips Foot, The Orient Hotel, The Fortune of War Hotel, The Harbour View Hotel, The Mercantile Hotel. At midnight we decided to visit King's Cross, an area of night entertainment places. Especially Rex Thompson couldn't decide whether to visit King's Cross or not, so all of us went there, but only for a very short time. The street was really very lively and some places looked

wonderfully suspicious. At the end we went to a respectable caffè for a cake and tea.

6. Canberra

On Wednesday we drove with Diana to Canberra, which took four hours. We made a short stop in a motorest called Big Merino - a concrete sheep covering a two floor building. The Sheep had yellow shining eyes and looked very American. It was quite cold in Canberra and also the dry air and the vegetation reminded me Europe: the kinds of broadleaved trees which lose their leaves during the winter turned now in April (equivalent of October in Europe) yellow and red, which was quite beautiful but very European. On the yellowish meadows there were horses, cows and sheep grazing - a peaceful and nice country.

My guide explained that the white colonizers think that "canberra" means "meeting place" in an Aboriginal language. Diana likes a lot the Australian Parliament and so we spent about two hours by visiting it. It is full of symbols of Australian nature, artwork, and the architecture is really inventive. I was impressed by it as it looks rather modest from outside (it is even partially covered by grass) but inside there is lot of light and it is so spacy. There is a beautiful view from the top all around to the mountains and the city itself. There are no skyscrapers in Canberra and the whole city was planned in a model way. The buildings and streets are all hidden in the trees, so that you can see mainly the trees from upstairs.

We went to the halls of both Houses, and I especially liked that they have not only a gallery for journalists but also a gallery for children,

insulated by glass, so that children can observe the Parliament in work and don't disturb it.

I told Diana how much I like the Parliament and she seemed quite pleased. Then she asked me what is our Parliament like - well, it is just horrible, you should see it! I never really wanted to go inside; it is a plain concrete building cramped besides the highway, so that our MoPs are suffocating from the smog.

In the evening we went to a bookstore to meet local SF fans and Terry Pratchett who was doing a tournee around Australia in these days. I spoke with him a little about the possibilities of publishing his books in Czechoslovakia. Then we went with a group of fans to the center of the city to have a dinner in a Lebanese restaurant. Canberra is such a model city that people don't even go to the pubs in the evening - at least it seemed so to me, as the main street and the restaurants were almost empty.

We spoke a little about publishing SF in Australia: they don't have any big publishing house focused on SF. The only one is Aphelion which used to publish SF magazine Aurealis (editor Dirk Strasser) and now it publishes the books. The Australian writers use to publish their books in various American and British publishing houses, which is both a d v a n t a g e o u s and disadvantageous - they have a bigger market but it is more difficult to succeed there, and the American and English books completely overflow the Australian market. It is very different from countries with their own languages.

7. Melbourne

After one day in Canberra I

flew to Melbourne. At the airport I met Roger and Donna and we went to the lunch with some famous SF editors and writers which Roger had invited: I met George Turner who is probably the best Australian SF writer of the older generation and is a very nice, clever man with British dry humor. As far as I read his stories (only two of them) I liked them very much, they are intelligent and I should say prognostic. Then there was Damien Broderick, whose texts are very artistic and that makes them a bit difficult for me to understand - but I have already found some more understandable stories by him. He told us that at present he earns his living by writing books about archeology. And last came Bruce Gillespie, an extremely nice and friendly person who gave me several kilograms of books and magazines. He produces two fanzines which look great but appear only once or twice a year: Metaphysical Review and SF Commentary.

Then we went through Melbourne and it reminded me a little London (the pseudo-gothic churches, architecture of some buildings). Roger thought that it is not very flattering, because he remembered from my travel report that I didn't like London that much, but in fact I quite liked London and I just thought that it is too busy and noisy and overcrowded in the center, while Melbourne is not at all like that. It is a very calm city, with a lot of green parks, palm trees and beautiful old-fashioned trams. The Melbournians told me that I must go by tram, but in fact I go by tram almost every day in Prague. Generally I found that Melbourne is much more European (or normally looking for me) than Sydney; it is not situated

in such a fancy way around the harbour, and so I am rather a Sydney fan, though I think that Melbourne is quite a pleasant place to live.

Roger is unemployed at present which perhaps also accounts for his ability to write long letters and to be in touch with such a lot of people. He lives with Geoff, a painter earning his money by selling copies of Australian historical art before the gallery. Geoff is a very nice, rather quiet person, who says that to live with Roger is something like to be a wife of a president - such a lot of new people, parties, socializing activities...

Later in the afternoon we went to a printhouse where I got for free a pile of the Aurealis magazines, and then we went to a secondhand book store where one of the Melbourne SF fans, Danny, works as an assistant. In the evening we went to a meeting with Terry Pratchett and his lecture in a congregation hall. So I met Terry for the second time there. His lecture was almost completely uncomprehensive for me; a few days before I was pleased that I started to understand the spoken English quite well, but Terry again discouraged me. But after the lecture, people told me that half of them haven't understand it either, although they laughed from time to time - something like when the interpreter says into the headphone: "Untranslatable joke, laugh, please!"

We stayed in the hall after the lecture for a coffee, and I met Lucy Sussex, which is one of the best authors of the younger generation. She comes from New Zealand and seemed to me very British.

Next morning, Geoff went to sell his art and Roger still

slept. I was quite hungry so I decided to find in their kitchen something to eat. I found a box of cereals, but there were not flakes inside: it was a sort of biscuits. So I decided to spread something on them. I searched for some marmelade and I was very pleased when I found out a jar of chutney - it was made from peaches and mango and it wasn't too sweet or spicy - just very tasteful. So I spread the chutney on the cereal biscuit. I couldn't find any plate so I ate it above a bowl - the biscuit desintegrated while I ate it. And in this moment Roger came to the kitchen and he couldn't stop laughing: this funny person eats cereals with chutney, and moreover in such a funny way, bending over the bowl like a prisoner!

Then Geoff returned from his work and we started to do plans for the day. They asked me what I would like to see in Melbourne, and I kept to repeat childishly: "I MUST see a live koala and platypus and echidna and kangaroos..."

So we decided to go to Healesville Sanctuary, which was an absolutely optimal choice. It is about one hour drive from Melbourne, situated in a typical Australian landscape, so that you can see the animals in their natural environments. You can go inside to the kangaroo pens and into the aviaries with parrots or flying foxes. I could stroke a small wallaby which was so very cute!

Koalas are usually very passive animals but I was lucky - one koala was performing quite a lot. She ran on the ground, then crawled on a tree and fed herself. Very cute!

Most of all I was fascinated by platypus - when I saw it in some films or books I had never realized how very strange this animal actually is.

Everywhere there was a lot of black and white ibises who awaited for people starting eat and then asking them for food rather aggressively. So we found a remote, ibis-free place for picknicking. As soon as we started to eat our chicken, we saw that a wasp approached us. It seemed very normal to me but my Australian friends seemed to be appalled: "A EUROPEAN WASP!" said Roger and looked at me blamingly. They explained to me that the wasp is a newcomer to Australia and is not still very common there. We placed a tiny piece of meat on the distant end of the table and the wasp feeded itself and stopped endangering us.

Back in Melbourne we went straight into a caffè where there are regular Thursday meetings of SF fans. It is located in a big shopping mall, the waitresses seem to know everybody, people come and leave, sip some juice or coffee and are talking. It is similar to the SF meetings in pubs in England, but the Melbourne meeting is scheduled for an earlier hour (6 or 7 p.m.) and going there doesn't probably mean to spend the whole evening in the pub.

In this caffè I finally met Roman Orszanski, who wasn't present on the Syncon as he took part in some important environmentalist meeting. He is a nice person, speaking about things rather in jokes that in a "seriously constructive" way, which is good, and he looks like a typical nature protectionist (you know these people in torn jeans and green anoraks).

Then we went to a Thai restaurant for a banquet. There were many interesting people, Lucy Sussex, Bruce Gillespie and also Rosaleen Love. I hadn't know her stories before, but she gave me a collection of them. (All the writers were so

very kind and gave me their books, which I absolutely haven't expected.) At midnight we went to Bruce's and his wife Ellen's house. They have got seven cats, ten or fifteen thousand books (not only SF but also philosophy, theory of literature and others), computers which they use in their publishing... a real paradise of every publisher or writer!

8. Anzac day

Next day at noon I had to fly back from Melbourne to Sydney. I planned to visit the Melbourne gallery in the morning and Geoff drove with me there. But we found out that the gallery is closed on the Anzac day morning! Everywhere in the streets there were people dressed up into their uniforms or costumes, wearing medals, in a solemn mood. Soldiers, guards and scouts exercised themselves. I observed the airplanes, historical cars, the premier of state Victoria walking with the generals along the main street... everybody looked to enjoy it so sincerely: it was quite uncommon to me as nobody had enjoyed such parades under the communists in our country, and at present we don't have anything like that.

I went for one or two hours around the city center: the shops were closed, the air was cold and fresh, everybody seemed to watch the parade. The city was clean and quiet, without any traffic but the nice old trams going along the streets.

And then it was time to go to the airport and to fly back to Sydney.

It was much warmer in Sydney; the streets were crowded by exhilarated people who drought beer in front of the pubs. I told to Sarah (who awaited me

on the airport and went with me to the city) that it is amazing how people do identify themselves with this feast, and she told me that they just use every opportunity for drinking beer.

We went to the Paddington Market and enjoyed all these beautiful things, hats, small pieces of artwork etc. Then we went for a supper and were discussing feminist issues, like whether women can salvate this planet and how they could create an alternative society...

The last day in Sydney we spent with Sarah and Ian by going around the galleries (I was especially interested in seeing of some Aboriginal artifacts). In the evening we went for the last time through the harbor and I nostalgically enjoyed the fabulous view for the last time. How much I wished to return here sometimes once more!

In the evening we went to the airport - and I was told by Alitalia clerks that I can't fly because I haven't confirmed the reservation of my ticket! It was quite a bad shock for me, but after I made a hysterical scene I managed to be accepted and fly. I really don't know if this duty to confirm the reservation is worldwide - I have never heard of it before!! Of course at the Rome airport I immediately rushed to the Alitalia office and made the reservation for the next morning to Prague!

This Australian travel was so very pleasant for me - and it is difficult to say the main reason. There are actually many reasons why it was so agreeable: lot of fun, nice, incredibly friendly people, understandable English (at least sometimes...), enough money from the fannish fund, wonderful weather, fabulous

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sights, delicious food... but I think that I shall remember all these helpful, entertaining, charming SF fans most of all. And I hope that they will come to Europe soon!



THESE TWO PICTURES ARE FROM A FANZINE "MORE FUNNY ILLOES" BY IAN GUNN, MELBOURNE

