

Phileas Phil, Around The World

Day 3 Berlin to Belarus

Where Phileas Phil proves himself equal to the situation

“The wisest thing to do if you’re living in hell is to make yourself comfortable.” - Charles Bukowski

I could hear the unmistakable sound of heavy boots running in my direction. I knew they were coming for me, and all I could do was sit and wait those few seconds before they burst into my compartment. I was on a train and had reached the Poland-Belarus border. They didn’t disappoint me, those boots. In the fateful seconds before their arrival I was thankful for the dodgy *currywurst* I had eaten the evening before in a Berlin Christmas market, as it had reaped its revenge on me this morning. Thankful, because it meant my now quivering bowels were empty and I would not embarrass myself in the face of an unpleasant, as Donald Rumsfeld would say, *“Unknown unknown”*.

The Belarusian border guard that reached me first, those few seconds later, I had seen before. But this time, unlike the last and, as if by magic, he produced a *blue* ink pad and rubber stamp from his tunic pocket. Casually, and I would swear he was either smirking, or was scared that he had made a cock-up, he said ‘Passport’. I knew this was not going to end well. By now three of his soldier buddies had crowded in on the scene. Me and four of them, the odds were stacking up against me.

Rewind five minutes and my friendly border guard had produced a *red* ink pad and stamp, and happily accepted that my Trans-Siberian train ticket for the following day was sufficient for me to transit his wonderful country to reach Moscow. Clearly there had been a rethink. My lovely red transit

stamp had now been covered with a blue stamp; ANULVANA. Cancelled. This leg of my journey around the world was proving to be tricky, and, in my meticulous planning, I had considered this the easy part.

I must have gone into meltdown because I cannot remember what immediately followed but, as if *beamed up* by Scotty on Star Trek, my next conscious recollection of events is that I was in a minibus with eight Belarusian soldiers. Armed to the teeth. Scowling at me. I cleared the window next to me with my coat sleeve to find it was dark, snowing and very cold. I noticed a digital clock which switched display with the temperature. It read -7c outside, it felt the same inside. I was surprisingly calm, perhaps taking inspiration from Michael Caine, straight out of a Len Deighton spy novel. It was very clear to me that the train I had been on, the one taking me to Moscow, was now rattling past me as it moved off. Getting to Moscow was not going to be as easy as I originally thought. That train was going to reach its destination without me, and I was heading – well actually I had no idea where I was heading.

There were lessons to be learned from this predicament, but whilst freezing to death in this 1960's cold war movie scene in which I found myself, I was not sure what they were. Something to do with more thorough research before you try to emulate a fictional adventurer. He managed the journey I was embarking on in 80 days. I planned to do it in less than 70, but was this situation going to force me to abandon my attempt? For Christs sake it was only day three! My only rational, or perhaps irrational, thought was getting myself out of this mess and flying home. Dear old Phileas would be laughing his head off, but then he didn't even need a passport when he set off, although he did take one and get it stamped to prove where he had been. I now had proof in my passport of what an idiot I was! Any would-be

adventurers reading this please note, doing your homework pays dividends.

We didn't travel very far, so I figured I was just across the border, somewhere in Belarus. As I later discovered, it turned out to be about a very short, but possibly my longest, ten kilometres. The minibus journey was a blur, no one spoke. I was stared at occasionally. I guess it gave the boys something to do. They could go home and tell the wife about their exciting day with the dumb Englishman over that evening's *borsch*. No one made a move to shoot me or pull my finger nails out. My calmness worried me, I should have been having kittens, or at least protesting my outrage and innocence, 'Don't you know I'm British, call the embassy immediately'. But I said nothing, I sat there, dumbstruck – like a lemon. Days later I reflected that I had called upon some unbeknown hidden calmness reserves from some previous difficult predicaments - Beirut airport came to mind, another *visa* situation. I guess the more you face in life the more prepared you are when you are thrown a curve ball. Right now the curve ball felt like a bowling ball.

Perhaps I should clarify at this point, I am not a member of any government agency, a secret enforcement group nor anything wildly exotic or even mildly interesting. I'm just a regular man in my mid-fifties. Yes, I like travel, and yes, I like a *good old journey* rather than a beach resort and all-inclusive cocktails by the pool with sunburned tourists, but I am really not used to this kind of *cloak and dagger* stuff. I've had a few *misunderstandings* in the past, but I follow the rules and don't break any laws - well at least no more than the next man. So this mess that I now found myself in was something *out of the ordinary*, and I was definitely not getting a buzz from it. In fact, when I have ever spoken about it, I feel like I'm recounting the details in the third person, 'and then he did this, and then he did that'. Like it is not really me, because me, well I never

considered a life in the movie *Spy Game*, that's for people like Brad Pitt and Robert Redford.

Finally, I was deposited in a large, sparse hall. At first I could not make out the purpose of the hall. Was it a government building? I was pretty confident that, at least, it was not a police station or prison. I was left alone. Me and my two bags in a very large hall. I consciously tried to recover my composure. 'Think' I told myself. I realised I still had my telephone. No one had searched me or taken anything away from me. I still had my passport. Michael Caine would have made a run for it. Jason Bourne would have escaped from the minibus without seeing the hall – he probably wouldn't have let them put him in the minibus to begin with. I sat with my phone in my hand wondering what I should do. After considering my options I decided to make a call. I looked up and a soldier, I guess he was my guard, on the far side of the hall, was staring at me. I smiled. Stupid thing to do really. I held up the phone in one hand and an index finger on the other. He glared for a few seconds and then nodded. That nod told me a lot. It told me I was going to get out of this mess. Well at least that's what I told myself, and that made me feel a whole lot better. So, I decided, I'd *phone a friend*. I remember laughing at that thought - clearly my nervousness was beginning to manifest. My mate Magnus answered but my relief was short-lived when he said, 'I can't speak now I'm at a yacht club meeting in London'. 'Wait', I shouted in near panic before he cut me off. The guard moved a fraction in the corner of my eye. I looked up and smiled again, and he settled back in his chair. Magnus waited. I explained my current situation in as few words as possible, fearful he would hang up. I heard him laugh, and then utter disbelief followed by a series of expletives. Magnus is a practical sort, Danish, but living in England for 30 years - those years hadn't made him any less Danish, cool as a cucumber those Scandinavians.

That's why I called him. He knew how to stay cool. Why isn't he here instead of me I thought. 'Tell me what to do?' he said, I did, I was thinking fast, which was probably not a good thing to do given the circumstances. I told him I would call back in two hours, if I could.

Time stood still. I realised I was thirsty and hungry, I must have left my water bottle and snacks on the train. My, what would I given for a cup of tea, or even better a shot of vodka. Suddenly there was a mechanical noise outside. I jumped. It's fair to say my nerves were frazzled. Externally I must have, or at least hoped that, I appeared calm, but internally I was in a tailspin. What was on my agenda next, a cell for the night, or maybe a simple deportation? Every conceivable scenario went through my mind.

It was a train, the mechanical noise. The hall was a train station. The situation was getting more promising. Would another red ink pad be produced and send me on my way to Moscow? If only I had known what false hope I was creating, and what nightmare lay ahead of me. Day four was going to prove very challenging.

A couple of soldiers appeared and joined my guard, they exchanged a few words, looked over at me and then headed my way. It was indicated, through a lot of pointing and grunting, that I should gather my luggage. We were off somewhere. No one spoke any English to me, actually no one spoke at all. It was as though we all knew our roles in this drama, and as if, in a perfectly choreographed performance, we all went through the motions. Being lead actor, I should have known what was going on, alas I had not read the script and just improvised.

I was ushered onto a platform where there was what I can only describe as a wooden train. It was something straight out of the wild west and that made me a cowboy, albeit I was the only person without a gun. The last time I had seen anything

like it was in Soller on Mallorca. That journey I had enjoyed, this one was not giving me the same vibes! A door was opened and I was invited to climb aboard. The inside was even more wood and ridiculously I remember wondering why a train would be made of wood in these temperatures, whilst also marvelling at how warm the carriage was. The carriage could hold about fifty people, but I had it all to myself. Lucky me. Only half an hour later did I discover the train was almost full. I was possibly travelling Belarusian first class, although it appeared more like fourth, if such a train class exists.

There were no handshakes or salutes goodbye. In fact, nothing passed between me and the soldiers. The train started to move and I watched them turn away as this little charade was over for the night. They were headed home for some hot *borsch* and a couple of vodkas. I was not the first and would not be the last acting out this play. No words had been necessary as this was a well-rehearsed scene. Only I was this night's stand in and had never played the role before. I think I did okay. I had not added too many theatricals, no screaming and shouting, my only form of communication had been a single index finger request. Belarusians were not such a bad lot, no thumb screws, they just didn't like foreigners showing up without a transit visa, even if no one in their right mind would have wanted to get off that train on a snowy freezing night in the middle of nowhere.

The *Wild Wild West* express slowly chugged away into the night and I was breathing a huge sigh of relief which, as it turned out, was to be very short-lived.

About 15 minutes later the train stopped, doors were being opened. I looked out of the window. The whole train was disgorging onto a frozen platform. When you don't know what to do, be a lemming, follow the crowd. I got off with everyone else. This was a good thing as the train was going nowhere other

than back the way it came, and I certainly had no desire to do that, although it could have been funny showing up back at the station where I boarded. 'Hello guys, I really missed this place, nice to see you again'.

They were a miserable looking lot, the passengers, but I was surely the most miserable of all. They knew where they were and what they were doing, I had no idea. I assumed the Polish border, but which one?

Warsaw, I had to reach Warsaw, at least from there I could work something out. It was eight in the evening – the clock was ticking. My train across Siberia departed at midnight the following day. I had to be on it. Traveling around the world has a schedule that needs to be maintained, and I was three days in and blowing it. I had been determined not to fly. Flying would be easy, 48 hours would do it. I realised I would have to fly to Moscow if I was to make that train. And I was definitely going to make it. Didn't Phileas fly in a balloon at some point, perhaps over Paris? Perhaps that was the film, not the book - I had forgotten to take it with me! I was hugely disappointed at the thought of flying, it wasn't what I had planned, but I figured if I could make it to Moscow around the same time as my original train was due to arrive, I could justify the *needs must* approach. I was not happy about it at all, but I was out of options. There and then I vowed to myself that for the rest of the journey I would not fly again. If the need arose I would bail out and fly home. And the truth is I didn't fly again, and there were times I really did want to bail out, but I didn't do that either - but I'm getting ahead of myself. I was in *no-man's land*. I had to find out where I was, and how I was going to reach Moscow in time - in fact, just getting to Warsaw would be nice.

I was at the back of the queue at an outside immigration cabin. Terespol, Eastern Poland, that's where I was. I'd never heard of it, and if there was a god in heaven, I never would

again – so hopefully my first and last visit. I was being snowed on. I was cold, thirsty and hungry, and was utterly miserable. I was looking for adventure and if this wasn't it, what was? But right now the all-inclusive with cocktails thrown in seemed like a wonderful idea.

I finally cleared immigration and tried to buy a ticket to Warsaw. It was zloty or zloty, they wouldn't take credit cards, euros or dollars. I asked around if anyone would like some dollars, I was offering the best exchange rate in history. Warren Buffet would have snatched my hand off. After five minutes a grumpy old man finally made me an offer I couldn't refuse; survival. I virtually gave him the dollars. Fortunately the zloty were enough to get me to Warsaw and buy a bottle of water. Moving away from that border made me feel good, but I was full of apprehension for what lay ahead.

As if the day had not been surreal enough, two hours later I found myself watching the Bond film *Skyfall* on my phone together with a beautiful blond Polish girl, Maja. Would I ever forget this day? It was certainly proving to be one of highs and lows. We were on my second train since leaving Terespol, arriving at Warsaw around eleven thirty that night.

I had been considering my options, following another chat with Magnus in London, when I bumped, literally, into Maja on the platform where I changed trains. Maja was the only good thing to happen in Biala Podlaska; in fact, she was the only good thing to happen that day, week and month. A couple of hours later, just as M was popping her clogs in the Scottish Highlands, I reached a decision about how I would get from Warsaw to Moscow. There were several factors influencing this decision, and none of them filled me with enthusiasm. It was some 30 minutes later as the train pulled into Warsaw, Maja threw a spanner in the works by suggesting I stay the night with her, and fly to Moscow the next day from there. That had not

been an option I considered when I made my earlier decision but, on the face of it, reconsideration would not have been unreasonable. My problem was that accepting such a proposal would almost certainly mean I would miss my connection in Moscow, because I would struggle to leave Warsaw, and that would throw the whole adventure out of the window. Was I really going to decline the beautiful Maja's offer? I mean, did I not deserve some light entertainment after such an evening? But decline I did. She gave me her number in case I changed my mind. It was 35 minutes later as I sat in a cramped, smoky, over-heated train compartment with seven drunken Poles heading into a snowy wilderness that I realised what a complete and utter fool I was.

Maja was one of those people you meet from time to time who are just *nice*. She had probably seen what affect the stress of my predicament was having on me, and she wanted to help. Perhaps no more than that. Travelling threw up many surprises to me over the years, but the over-riding one, and the one that always affected me so much, was that there were so many good people out there just waiting to be met and wanting to help. The media would have us believe there is a serial killer on every corner, the truth is there is a good samaritan on every corner, we just have to open our eyes to see them. I would think about Maja in the following days, and probably long after she had forgotten me. Hopefully when she next watched a Bond movie she might remember the idiot Englishman who tried to transit Belarus without a visa. James Bond I was certainly not!

It was just before midnight. I stood on the platform of Warsaw's main station waiting for the train that would take me on a seriously bizarre route, involving further three trains, back to Berlin, back to where I had started the day. I had faced tough, complex choices and plumbed for the one that gave me the best possible guarantee. I knew there was a flight at midday the

following day from Berlin to Moscow. I knew this because my travelling companion for the Trans Siberian railway, Sofia, would be on that airplane, and she would not have appreciated arriving in Moscow only to discover I wasn't there. But as I stood on that platform watching the train pull in, I can honestly say I was the most nervous I had been all day. And as it turned out I had very good reason.

Travel Tip: if taking a train from Europe to Moscow and crossing Belarus, be sure to obtain a transit visa before entering the country!