

Part One

PRELUDE IN ENGLAND

The letters begin with one written from London, where I stayed with Ernst and Ilse Gombrich en route to India. Their son Richard was then and remains one of my closest friends. Our discussion about translation foreshadowed, in my letters from India, my several ruminations on Indian metaphors and clichés. I then visited Max Fry (Edwin Maxwell Fry, a modernist architect) and his wife, the architect Jane Drew, friends of a friend of my mother. They had worked for three years with Le Corbusier to create the new capital city of Punjab at Chandigarh. This was my first, but not my last, encounter with British colonial attitudes to India.

Not surprisingly, the pervasive theme of homesickness begins even in the records of my very first days in India, in fact on my flight from London to Calcutta. One of the ways I dealt with the strangeness of it all was to fantasize meeting old friends from home; hence the reference to Stephen Albert, a Great Neck High School friend who went on to win the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his *Symphony No. 1 RiverRun*, and died in 1992 in an ice storm in Truro, on Cape Cod (not far from my own summer house there); and to Daisy Schott, one of my mother's many Viennese cousins. This fantasy of encountering familiar faces in the strange land was realized early in my stay in Calcutta (August 15, 1963), when I met a boy I had known through another Great Neck High School friend, Mickey Solomon.

I am at a loss to explain the fact that the first letter contains one of only two short references to Nabaneeta Dev Sen in this entire correspondence. I saw Nabaneeta often when I was in Calcutta, but for some reason she never again—after August 15, 1963 (in Part II)—made her way into the extant letters to my parents. Nabaneeta and her husband Amartya Sen had been among my closest friends at Harvard during the previous year, when both Amartya and Richard Gombrich had been Harkness Fellows, and Nabaneeta and I had read Sanskrit texts with Professor Ingalls. Nabaneeta and I remained friends all of her life; after her death, I spoke at her memorial in 2021. Amartya and I have stayed in touch throughout the years.



*1. August 10, 1963,
England*

[Stopping at Stratford:] At night we went down to the river, and during the intermission of the play, too, and watched the flocks of swans floating down, asleep, head under wing, gliding in and out of the darkness like so many moons weaving through clouds. Silent and ancient.

[From a conversation with Ernst Gombrich:] We have lovely talks over breakfast about the theory of perception and the translation of clichés: Is it being false to the tone of the original to translate literally, and therefore often strikingly, a figure of speech which has become so trite as to be a nonentity in the original? Answer: Since you have lost so much of the author's original beauty in translating, you

owe him a little something, and can repay this debt in part by allowing the cliché to become striking in translation.

A false note was struck in the midst of all this euphoria. I went to see Max Fry and Jane Drew. I asked her, ‘Well, what do you do when you get sick in India?’ and she said, ‘You go to England,’ and I said, ‘Well, what do the Indians do?’ and she said, ‘The wealthy Indians go to England.’

[I had a] letter from Nabaneeta [Dev Sen] saying that she will be in Calcutta on the 13th and will come to meet me if I call her from the airport.

*2. August 13, 1963,
2nd Star to the Left**

I’m writing this from the plane [from London to Calcutta] but will post it the minute I reach the Land of the Gods so that you will know I arrived safely. As for my post-arrival adventures, they must be written on my forehead, as the Hindus believe all fate to be, but I’m afraid my linguistic talents don’t extend to that sphere.

Small world department. I am seated in this plane next to an Indian man with eyes like an ibis or perhaps a unicorn; I found out, in the course of a delightful conversation, (a) that he works as an ad man on Madison Avenue, and (b) that he is the first cousin of Khurshed Sahiar, the Parsi doctor who visited us on New Year’s 1962. I just know that when I get to Calcutta someone will approach me playing the sitar and begging and it will be Stevie Albert or Daisy Schott. I will have to disguise myself.

* These are the directions that Peter Pan gives for the way to reach Never Never Land. This letter was handwritten.

The Air India flight stops at Paris, Frankfurt, Beirut, Bombay, and Calcutta, *not*, as one might expect upon a moment's consideration, in Karachi. The India–Pakistan spite is so bitter that Indian time is ten minutes ahead of West Pakistan time, ten minutes behind East Pakistan time, just to make everything difficult. Travelling on Air India is pleasant and easy; there is never any doubt as to where to go [in airports] for the plane or customs or the restaurant—you just follow the line of saris.

As I landed and all the excitement of being in India came over me, I was strongly conscious of the feeling that I was landing in a country that really belonged to the Indians, and was not just a playground for Europeans. The Indian pilot and stewardesses left, and the Indian officials checked me through. (No import duties on anything, because they were so happy that I am going to Shantiniketan: there should have been a tremendous duty on the camera, but the official winked at me and said he would write that it was over five years old.) There were very few white people in the streets, even though the architecture and signs were very English.