

Breheim Stories

I

Don Breheim made a mark on me. Perhaps the mark of Cain, who can be sure, but nevertheless a mark that shaped some of my professional and personal attitude. He knew what the deal was. I didn't. In a small hotel room in the Hotel Drachen in Basel Switzerland, we made up a strategy on the floor and presented it to the Schwietzereimer Bankverein. The Swiss Bank Corporation. After the fact I found out that they made almost 50% of their entire profit from foreign exchange. We had both learned from our experiences with Bank of America, Barclays Bank and National Westminster Bank. You really could collect data, digest it so to speak and present it in a readable form to non computer business people to help them make good business decisions. I am not at all sure that this evening we had all this in mind, but.....

...here we were. The Swiss Bank Corporation needed more information to get a leg up on their competition. A former colleague had invented an operating system for the Apollo program that we were going to adapt to every bank in the world. "Real Time Operating System." RTOS. So Breheim and I plotted our meeting the next morning with some of the most powerful bankers in the world.

II

Barclays Bank. Well, Nick Perry, a man admittedly wishing he had been born in the previous century, was tall, portly in a tall way, and drove a Bentley. After around a year of work in London, Breheim came into my office and said that the Barclays contract had been cancelled. No RTOS. The head man, a Malcolm Duncan or some other pretentious English name, never liked me much, but he wasn't at the head of that class. If it appears to the reader that I am a crass, classically insensitive American total jerk, I am assuredly not. I really wanted to help these guys. I just didn't know some of the protocols of business. I made mistakes, but by in large, I did the job and did the job with excellence. I led a team to completely design a system that would automate their "Chief Foreign" Branch

Here's a story. I knew much more about the ways that you could send money from, say, Los Angeles, to London than anyone because of this study we did. I

had transferred all my assets (meager though they might have been at the time) to Barclays Bank in LA. I figured that would make international banking transactions easier. I purposefully sent a couple of grand by the most inefficient way possible, a department that was woefully understaffed. I felt empowered. This was the only time in my life that I one-upped a bank. One of the Bank managers explained banking to me. He said: "Land at Heathrow, go to the exchange booth, give the man \$1000 American for the equivalent amount of Pounds Sterling. Then take that and give it to the next clerk to exchange for dollars again. In approximately one hour, if you continue to do this, you will have no money." So I was very motivated to find ways to beat the banking system.

One day the Branch Manager at Aldernamberry Branch in the Banking district, just a block away from our IBM office called me and asked me to his office. He announced sentoriously: "Mr. Edwards. You are overdrawn."

Sure enough, I had written a check on a balance of zero. I had previously sent a transfer from my bank in Los Angeles and I showed him the voucher. He appeared a little frazzled and said that he would look into it. Several days later he called me at the office. We had a little chat. He said that the particular way I had transferred money was not efficient. I rolled my eyes and told him this long story how I put all my assets into Barclays Bank in LA so that the whole transferring of money would go like clockwork. I gave him a detailed account of the wonderful things I was personally doing on his behalf and on behalf of the entire Barclays worldwide community. He stammered a lot, but suggested I send money by some other method.

So I did. I knew intimately the next least efficient way to send money and transferred some immediately.

Weeks went by. One fine morning, the Aldernamberry Branch manager called me, coughing a lot, and asked me to come to his office. I did. He told me that I was yet again overdrawn on my account. I produced my voucher showing that I had transferred some serious money to my account. He looked at it. He looked at me. He said, "Mr. Edwards. Feel free to write checks on your account. There will be no overcharges applied to your account. Please accept my apologies." For the next year, I spent funds I never had. Of course I had to make up the difference at the end of my assignment, but get this: I wrote checks on no funds for over a year. You have to think that I am one smart son of a bitch.

So anyway, Breheim came into my office and announced that the contract was cancelled. My jaw dropped. I uproot my entire family, transport them to a northern suburb of London, put them in a proper British girl school...."Channing School for Gels," was the high pitched, accented voice of Ms. Saunders, the head mistress.

So I said to Breheim,"Well, shit, what do we do now."

He lighted up a cigarette, placed it in the holder between thumb and forefinger, and said, "Well, I think we should go have an amazing lunch."

And we did. We walked over Blackfriar's Bridge to the Anchor Inn...a fourteenth century pub that had, get this, a reproduction of Dr. Johnson's original dictionary. I had in a previous life been an English Literature major in college and knew a lot about Boswell's "Life of Johnson." I was in my own personal holy grail. The first real dictionary ever produced in the English Language by one of the cleverest of literary dictators.

So we went to the second floor. We looked at the menu. I asked Breheim what he was going to have. He said, "a bottle of Clos la Gilette and the Duck L'Orange."

This was a lunch, I must tell you. We used to tell Bob Campenni about our "five pound lunches." He went on one and decided it was too rich for his blood. But Breheim and I had many "five pound lunches." This was the best. I managed to get Bob later. Read on.

I was envisioning going back to Los Angeles, uprooting my kids from Ms. Saunder's clutches in Highgate, and Breheim said, "How would you like to go to Switzerland?"

I said, "Say what?"

He said that we had a potential project in Basel, Switzerland. Would I like to lead the team there?

Well, what the hell. Sure. We finished the Wine, the Duck L'Orange, I spent a half hour over the entries of Johnson's dictionary. We wandered back to our office and talked to Nick. And the next thing you know, I was flying to Basel, Switzerland to work with the seventh largest Bank in the world.

III

On the floor, in the Drachen Hotel, sitting cross legged on the floor, we were “what iffing.” We had just come from Haziland, a club in Basel that specializes in jazz. We talked about our meeting the next day with Freddy and the staff in Basel. Lots on the line. Honeywell was “in like Flynn,” so to speak. They simply had better banking terminals than IBM. I have sometimes wondered who Flynn was, but....anyway, we had to sell the director of technology on our plan.

Hans Fient...what kind of name is that? What plan? Well, we were making it up on the spot. Foreign Exchange real time information systems. Data Base technology. E Pleribus Unum. Tempus fugit. Caveat Emptor. Who cared? We knew what would work We would make it work.

And I asked Breheim a question so immature, so naive, so unbelievably childish that I blush when I recall it. I said something like, “How about career?”

Breheim looked at me as if I were an imbecile. His mouth dropped open. I was worried that his uncomprehending look meant that he might have passed out. Not so. He said to me, “Career?” What the hell do you mean? “

I fumbled around, “Well, you know, ‘Career.’ What should I be doing about my career?”

I thought Breheim would choke he laughed so loudly. He started slapping his thighs, poured another drink and said more or less the following and it set me straight forever. “‘Career’ is bullshit, Edwards. People like Paul Lindfors think about “‘Career.’” You are a smart person; you can do whatever you want to do, so do what you want. We are having a great time with the Swiss Bank. We had a great time with Barclays. Do a good job and choose what you can. Fuck ‘Career.’”

So from that moment forward I took that as my motto: “Fuck Career.” And pretty good advice too. I went to Japan. I went to Rome and Paris. I worked with some of the smartest people I could ever hope to work with. I was involved with the very first attempts at automation of the hard file technology in San Jose. I worked with kids to develop curriculum software for the PC in schools. I always did what was interesting and fun, not what would make me a

vice president. Breheim is responsible for that. “Fuck Career” is a really good motto.

Breheim is much smarter than he looks. Of course he would have to be.

IV

We here we were on the floor in Basel probably because of a few drinks several years earlier. We worked in what was known as “the punched card in the sky.” Seven or eight stories block house looking building on Sepulveda Boulevard in Los Angeles.

I’ve never told anyone this story...but it is true. I had just joined IBM from Northrop and my new boss insisted that I come to work in the week of Christmas. I was pissed, of course, because Northrop gave everyone the two weeks of Christmas with pay. So, reluctantly, I accepted and went to work. I was the only one in the whole fucking building for two weeks. Everyone else was taking vacation like civilized human beings do at Christmas. I was bored. So one afternoon, after lunch, I decided on a plan that I laughed myself silly. The “Punched Card in the Sky” really looked like a punched card. I worked out the details. Holerith code is simple with ones and zeros. I cut out black rectangles to tape to the windows. The eventual side of the building, in punch card message was “Univac” (highest three stories of the building), “Stinks” (the next three stories).

Every day I would go to work and laugh at the punched cards on the side of the building. I imagined a programmer biking down Sepulveda, decoding the building and seeing the message and falling off his/her bicycle laughing. Never happened, I am sure. But that says a lot about me and about why Breheim thought I was worth the price.

The windows were vertically rectangular, like holes in punch cards. This was the Aerospace center of IBM at the time. Hoo, Boy. IBM didn’t have a clue either. Breheim came from North American Rockwell with a few others. I came from Westinghouse, IIT and Northrop by way of various computer projects. We needed to package a proposal to NASA that would give us a chance to be players in this huge pot of money the government always seems to want to spend...especially if Republicans are in power. Large Payload Test Vehicle.

LPTV. Talk about amusing. Our management proposal said that if we and Glenn L. Martin (eventually to become Martin Marietta) would go out of business if we didn't win. Here was the deal. They were tired of the loss of missile canisters off the coast of California at Vandenberg. So they were going to launch from Montana, simulate the proper reentry angle and have the booster canisters land in White Sands. Talk about a boondoggle of the highest order.

So Breheim did the "Management" part of the proposal. I did the "Technical" part of the effort. Technical. IBM didn't have anything that could really address the problem. Martin didn't either. So the "Management" proposal said that if we didn't win this contract we would have to lay off 10,000 people. We were last in capability, first in need and guess who won the contract. Bingo. I really liked him during this escapade and apparently he put up with my BS too.

V

So back to Basel.

Here is Breheim: stocky, probably from German DNA originally. Big bones. Dark blue suit. Professorial glasses. Smoked cigarettes with a filter between thumb and forefinger. The perfect IBM image. White shirt, proper conservative tie, thinning hair perfectly combed over the bald spot. Shined shoes. Perfect IBM uniform. I, on the other hand, had slacks (brown), tee shirt (light brown) and contrasting sport coat (yellow plaid). To Breheim's credit he never made fun of my clothes, though fun was to be made in spades. .

Sorry... a little diversion from a previous time. I promise we will get back to Basel eventually.

I remembered a luncheon that he hosted for a dearly departed colleague going to Douglas from our little group. 20 or so at the table. At the end of the meal...several had managed many drinks, several none. He looked the waitress in the eye, inhaled a filtered cigarette and said to her..."Well, who had the peas?" She nearly croaked....programmers are notorious cheapskates. 20 individual checks. He let her off the hook, divided the bill by 20 and we all paid whatever.

Then in London. Standing in the elevator facing the rest of the occupants. “You might not know why I called this meeting,” as he dragged on the cigarette. Everyone broke up.

And coming back from White Sands Proving Grounds I wrote this:

“One of the projects I liked involved ways of using the very limited bandwidth available to communication satellites in the 1960s. Of course, the military was more interested in near space death rays, but until they got invented, communication was important. Don Breheim, Ed Hettinger, Paul Lindfors and I went to White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico. An AWACS capability and death ray thrown in for good measure.

White Sands is a really famous place, not very well known by the general public. It was where all the initial missile testing was done before Vandenberg and Cape Canaveral testing facilities were built. This picture was taken in 1946. The missile never worked. The modified V-2 that was nowhere near as good as the German engineers were able to manufacture in 1943 was being tested. In fact, the Redstone missile was the first missile we developed that surpassed the V2 in thrust and reliability. Incidentally, the reason for this was because the USSR took all the German scientists and engineers. We got the German sales engineers.

Anyway, the four of us came back from a semi successful meeting with NASA management. Lindfors promised a breakthrough in January, so I was trying to figure out what I was going to break through since what he promised hadn't been invented yet. The day was young. We had managed to get an early afternoon flight back to LAX. With all this time on our hands, Paul suggested we go bar hopping on Sepulveda Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley. This met with universal approval, so we pulled in the first bar in Tarzana called “Cisco's.” Cisco's specialized in margaritas. And dancing girls.

Breheim was fed up with the business end of things. He ordered a beer and began watching the girlies while the rest of us rehashed the meeting. When he finished his beer, he leaned over the table and said, “Let's go to the Mardi Gras,” but he pronounced it, “Mardi Grass.” Everyone ignored him and continued talking.

When we were all finished with our margaritas, we left, got in the car and went to the next bar. It was called “The Oasis.” This bar specialized in whatever you wanted to drink and dancing girls. We got a table, placed our order and

continued our meeting analysis. Breheim got a beer and began watching the lady with the huge rack bounce up and down. After a little time, he turned to us and said loudly, "Let's go to the Mardi Grass." We ignored him.

For the next two hours, we went from bar to bar. Some had unusual drinks, but all specialized in dancing girls. Each time the same scenario was repeated. We ordered drinks, got back into heated interpretations of the earlier meeting while Breheim watched the girl dancing after ordering a beer and eventually shouted to us, "Let's go to the Mardi Grass."

Finally, Paul Lindfors, who had been driving, pulled into a bar in Woodland Hills, looked up laughing and said, "Hey, you guys. We're at the Mardi Grass!"

Breheim lit up a cigarette, took a drag, and looking at Lindfors with a straight face and superior air, said "It's 'Grah,' you dumb shit," pronouncing it correctly".

He had been setting this up all day. Breheim is a very funny man

Ok, I promised we would go back in Basel.

VI

We were taken to lunch at the Schloss Binnigen. A 14th century castle. I don't know how many lunches you have been taken to by prospective clients, but I can assure you that the Schloss Binnigen wasn't can't be imagined. High backed chairs lining the hall leading to the dining room. Pictures of arcane noblemen with funny clothes. And what we had for lunch....my God. Bunderfleish. Air dried beef with fresh ground pepper. Small squab stuffed with walnuts and freshly gathered local mushrooms. Red wine to make your eyes water with a lustful palate. I would have gladly sold my soul for the privilege to work for the Swiss Bank Corporation. Breheim, however, wanted to drive a bargain. "Oh, shit, Breheim," I thought. "Put a plug in it. I don't care what we have to do. I would die this very moment if I could have lunch here every day." But Breheim drove the bargain. We were to design a system to end all systems. The astronauts would only dream of the stuff that Breheim promised the Schweitzeriser Bankverein. I can't tell you how I admired his bullshit that luncheon between savoring the chocolate thing we had for dessert. I have no idea what it was called. All I know that I would have gladly sacrificed my first born for another chance at the frappe we had that afternoon. "Please,

Breheim....let me stay here forever. Tell them whatever they want to hear. I have just died and gone to heaven.”

And the next day I was introduced to the head of the most prestigious of the Swiss Bank branches in Zurich. The “Haupt Director.” Middle aged, balding, well built, dressed in a three piece suit that defies description, a kind of pumpkin color. Later after introducing the team, he was joined by a Mr. Baschnagle, the head of the Foreign Exchange department. 47% of their entire revenue came from arbitrage. This was a big deal. We exchanged (in a kind of foreign way) pleasantries. The Big Guy offered cognac and cigars at 10 in the morning. I refused, of course. The meeting room was huge. Chandelier. Louis XIV furniture. I don’t mean Louis XIV style...this stuff probably belonged to the king. We finished our interview, Baschnagle let us out the door and the Haupt Director asked me to stay.

He said, “Mr. Edwards, have you ever considered working for a bank?”

I really didn’t know how to respond. If I looked interested, I was disloyal to IBM. If I didn’t look at all interested, it would be insulting. So I took the smart ass way out. I said, “Well, sir, I’ve seen the salaries of the data processing people working for the Swiss Bank Corporation and, ahem, I don’t think you could afford me.”

He arched his eyebrows, looked at me with a very careful gaze and said, “Oh yes I can.” I broke up, accepted his offer of a cognac at 10:05 AM, smoked a cigar with him and felt pretty good about the whole thing. The project was successfully completed on time. And I had a chance to go to Japan to help set up the Mitsubishi project with Breheim.

VII

Time out.

I have to describe Breheim. He grew up in Sheboygan, Michigan. I didn’t know him until he was well into adulthood, but I guess he was a smart ass too. Probably you can’t be a very big smart ass in Sheboygan....the citizens would not allow it....but his demeanor was so amusing I loved him at first sight.

For example.

He told a story at the big wig party at the end of the Mitsubishi project. Get this. The highest echelon of management of IBM Asia Pacific. And the biggest cheeses of Mitsubishi. At a Geisha House...now understand this: the Japanese Geisha House is not involved with any hanky panky. Oh, I suppose you can make your own deal afterward, but these women just serve you, play harmless games and are dressed to kill in fourteenth century garb with kimono, wig, obi, the whole deal....So at the end of the evening, the Man at Mitsubishi asked him to tell a story. This is the story. I wasn't there, but Jimmy Watabe who was a kind of shadow that IBM Japan attached to us because he spoke American English and Japanese because he was an exchange student in Indiana during high school....well he was there and he told me this version. I can see Breheim lighting up a cigarette in the holder, suck in a big sucker inhale and blow it out slowly, smiling that Breheim smile and said.....

“Well, there was this big air craft carrier near the end of the war. One morning the Claxton blew and all the pilots came up on the flight deck. The commandant started to shout at them at dawn. He said something like, “Risten up, you guys. Here's the deal. Notice, no parachutes. Notice that all your planes are full of bombs and dynamite. Notice just enough gas to get to the American freet. You will be shot at. Ignore. You will see ack-ack...ignore. American praners will try to shoot you down. Ignore. Aim your prane at the water level of the nearest battle ship and accelerate into ship. Any Questions?”

Way in the back, this lone hand comes up, very slowly and a thin voice says:

“Excuse me, Sir. Are you out of your fucking mind?”

This is partly an audio/visual joke, so my writing doesn't do justice to Breheim's tale. The Big Guy for Mitsubishi said that he had actually been a Kamikaze pilot, chosen from the highest echelon of society to make the ultimate sacrifice...and the war ended the day he was to take his flight. “The Empire of the Sun” beautifully tells this story the way it really was. I like Breheim's version. Watabe laughed his butt off as he told his remembrance of this evening.

I went to Breheim's 25th IBM anniversary at the BellAire Hotel in Los Angeles. I asked Basil Liaskos not to tell him I was going.

First I bought a false eyebrow and nose/glasses of the type that Groucho Marx wore. After they were all seated, I came through the lobby of this very fancy hotel, duck walking in the Marx manner, waving my cigar at the occupants and

came upon Don and his family. I said, "Say the magic word." I think this was pretty funny. The normal person would think this was pretty weird. I managed to get Bob Campenni at the end.

We retired to the bar for a after dinner drink. Bob offered to pay for it. Breheim and I exchanged glances. I don't remember what the others ordered, but Breheim and I ordered our favorite drink: Courvoisier "Napoleon" cognac. \$25 a pop. And we had seconds. It was priceless to see Campenni's face when he got the bill.

VIII

I started this little essay in Basel, Switzerland. Let's end it there. Breheim and I went to war the next day, convinced the IBM team that we were so impossibly American and smart that they couldn't possibly not hire us. Then we convinced the Swiss Bank Corporation muckety mucks that we were even smarter than that. Snow job, sure, but an excellent snow job. If the truth be out, we actually did them a service, had a lot of fun doing it and went on to other things. And had fun doing that too.

I will always be grateful for the opportunity to have shared experiences with this piece of work. And, make no bones about it; Breheim is a piece of work.

And, of course, I'm proud to know him. We had a blast, Breheim!