

Last Word

My first impression was that the pilot had defected to the East and we were about to land in Siberia.

Every city girl's vision of ultimate wilderness lay spread out below me: nothing but row upon row of the darkest, most perfectly triangular pines marching relentlessly off to the horizon. Not a road, not a farm, not even a Howard Johnson's to indicate that man had ever been there or ever planned to be. It was beautiful but disturbing, for as we headed down for a landing I couldn't help wondering where the six thousand people I was supposed to play for that night were going to come from.

The airport was a shock. As modern and civilized as any I'd ever seen: poured concrete and recessed lighting, the latest in contemporary graphics, an architectural non sequitur delightful in its total inappropriateness to its surroundings. Actually, the airport did have one thing in common with its environment: there was not a human being in sight. Maybe the promoter had said I was going to play for six thousand raccoons; maybe this was all a gigantic mistake, due, no doubt, to some faulty transatlantic cable of the lilting peculiarities of the Swedish accent.

But eventually, as we drove toward the town that had to be there somewhere, the pines began to give way to farms, then to small clumps of houses, until from the knoll of a hill I could see something totally unexpected: the North Sea. And there, stretched out along its edge, like a rampart between the forest and the ocean, was a city.

Well, not exactly a city. But it was too late to be choosy.

Jutebory, or Gothenburg, or Göteborg - everyone pronounced it differently - was the Swedish equivalent, it turned out, of Des Moines. My manager had decided to kick off the Continental portions of my tour here so that if we bombed miserably at least we could hide our heads in a compost heap and maybe fix up the act before we got to the big burgs.

When we arrived on Friday evening, bikeloads of Sha-na-na look-alikes were cruising up and down, shouting what I took to be obscenities and/or traffic reports at the girls, who were also in motorcycles jackets and evidently loving every minute of the abuse. Well, maybe my Jutebory engagement wouldn't be a disaster after all.



"I'm going to go out there and turn that ice rink into a wading pool!"

As soon as the bus pulled up to the hotel I hopped right out, and before anyone could stop me, I went for a walk on my own.

Right across the street was a brightly colored food stall, with the legend M. Svenson emblazoned on a big yellow-and-blue umbrella. "Hello," I said cheerily to the neat little man behind the counter.

"Goddag. Det ska bli ett nöje," he replied, tipping his hat and making a little bow, "att hjälpa er."

"Oh," I replied charmed by the vendor's Continental politeness. "Do you speak English?"

"Nej, nej. Vad önskar ni?"

I smiled and pointed to a tray of chopped herring that looked irresistible.

"Nej! Nej!" Mr. Svenson cried. "Ni måste välja!" And then he began to point. Above the stall was a large sign picturing all the various herring combinations available. Faced with those forty-odd pictures, all I could do was quiver dumbly, dazed with the possibilities of herring.

Throwing caution to the wind, I decided on No. 36 - chopped herring with onions and cucumbers on some kind of bread.

Unfortunately, as his rolling eyes told me, Mr. Svenson couldn't see the sign. It was too high and too far back. Oh, well, I thought, I'll simply point at each tray, and with my stomach grumbling wildly, I began to do so. Mr. Svenson became more hopped up than ever. "Ni måste bli precis!" he exclaimed practically in tears.

"But why? Why can't I point at the trays?" I whined.

"Amerikanare är förryckta!" was all the vendor muttered, as he threw down his

on Juteborg

spoon in a frigid display of Nordic disgust.

"You know," I said "here I am, newly arrived in your country, anxious only to think the best of your fair land, eager to praise the Swedish mind, the Swedish heart. But I am not only open-minded. I am also starving. So I ask you, as one human being to another, WHY CAN'T I POINT AT THE TRAYS, YOU MISERABLE LITTLE..."

At this strategic point, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to look into the eyes of Max von Sydow. At least, I thought it was Max. He sure looked stern enough.

"Young lady," the stranger said. "you wish to know why you cannot just point at the trays?"

"Well," I mumbled incoherently, eyeballing his sensational fur coat. "yes."

"Then I tell you. You see, you don't come to just any fish stall. You have come to the most famous fish stall in all of Jutebory. In all of Sweden perhaps. Mr. Svenson here is a man of pride, of genius. He would never serve you anything that was not perfect. And of course in food, as in life, order is everything."

"Now, what combination did you want?" the stranger asked me.

"Number 36."

"All right, then, you were pointing at the cucumbers, were you not?"

"Well, if Mr. Svenson had put the cucumbers on the bread before the onions, the result would have been a soggy mess. Unthinkable. You see, to prepare a dish properly, the chef must know what all the ingredients are going to be. And now, if you will allow me..." My well-dressed friend spoke to Mr. Svenson, who rapidly began putting together a platter.

"Here," the stranger said when Mr. Svenson was done. "Number 36. Chopped herring with cucumbers and onions."

"Why, thank you," I said quite touched. "May I pay you for-"

"Of course not," the man said. "I hope you enjoy Scandinavia. I know you'll enjoy the fish." And with that he was off.

Savoring the concoction, I resolved thenceforth to bear in mind that it is best to always assume, until proved otherwise, that the fish stall you are in is the most famous of them all, and the man you are speaking to, a hero.

Bette Midler

The above is an excerpt from Bette Midler's hilarious A View from a Broad (1980) about her first world tour.