

# Interlude 1

## My House in the Woods

*Denis Sinor*

*Q1. What comes to mind when you think about your country?*<sup>1</sup>

What comes to my mind is my house in the woods with no neighbor in sight, a home I have to defend not against real burglars or imaginary terrorists but against deer that eat my flowers and raccoons that break into my porch and all that at a 15-minute drive from a superb library. I see the peaceful emptiness of the land. I see myself driving or riding my motorcycle on, say, Interstate 70, somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico perhaps along the legendary Santa Fe Railroad with barely a car on the magnificent highway. With some justification the USA is reproached for being the world's worst polluter yet it invented and maintains the most glorious National and State Parks. I recall the Natchez Trace running from Mississippi to Nashville Tennessee, a fine two-lane road with no buildings (not even a gas station) along its 443 miles (710 km), or the Appalachian Trail, a mountain footpath for hikers which extends over 2100 miles (3400 km). To those who equate America with New York it may sound surprising, but the overwhelming majority of the population of the United States leads a quiet, undisturbed life. One pays one's taxes – and is left alone in everything else. Years can pass without the need for any contact with the so-called 'authorities' to arise, and when it does – on city, state, or federal level – the contacts are usually pleasant. People elect their sheriffs, their judges, the employees of the court house, all of whom, to keep their jobs, try to be helpful. In the soup-kitchen where I have occasionally served, a good, appetizing meal is offered free of charge to anyone who comes in, with no questions asked about need or identity. Many who come could afford to buy themselves a meal.

When I taught in Cambridge – arguably the best university in the world – my efforts were mainly directed to overcome internal resistance. When I moved to Indiana University, I was cheerfully let loose to achieve whatever I was capable of. In the US, generally speaking, people like to see success and do not rejoice in the failures of others.

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Without textual support, such as evoked by the Israelites, Americans somehow view themselves as God's chosen people. Between New York and California (worlds apart) there stretches a land inhabited by people of mixed origins most of them firmly anchored in the unquestioned belief that the United States of America is the best thing that ever happened to humanity. Now it just could be that, by holding such conviction, Americans have come closer to Utopia than any other contemporary people. But there is more to life than the plethora of material goods. Some Americans are terribly, shamefully poor, others are amazingly rich yet – when compared to other nations – envy, bitterness, jealousy between the social classes are astoundingly muted. The use of first-names is general, even at first sight, in offices, among workers and their bosses. Most of the poor vaguely sense that it would have depended or is depending on them to improve their lot. Those who have, give generously to those who have less or to a large variety of good causes. They – 'my fellow Americans' as they are wont to be addressed by their presidents – build hospitals, museums, big or small, establish universities, finance symphony orchestras, parks, research in all its branches. Nowhere in the world is so much given to charities per capita as in the USA. They are optimists, and do not indulge in self-pity. When a hurricane, or a flood destroys all their belongings, they thank God for being alive and start reconstruction. Americans, leaders included, are often simple-minded, naive, ready to believe, for example, that Iraq may represent a danger to the United States or other nonsense and are genuinely amazed when not everyone shares their view of the world. Seen from Wyoming, the Dakotas or Montana the world, indeed, is a very distant concept. But, while it sorts out its problems – incomprehensible to most Americans – the people keep on working with a productivity unmatched elsewhere and sing, out of tune but with unshakable conviction: 'America! America! God shed His grace on thee . . . '.

*Q2. What for you is the most exciting and inspiring philosophical insight, scientific discovery or artistic creation?*

Quantum mechanics.

*Q3. Is there a specific part of the world to which you feel particularly drawn or close?*

Some 60 years ago I conceived the historical identity of a huge territory I called Central Eurasia, a land surrounded by the great sedentary civilizations of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. Some people, myself on occasion, call it Inner Asia, and Central Asia forms part of it. I devoted my life to the study of its history, civilization, languages. Now it so happened that owing to the vagaries of politics – from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the madness of al-Qaida – the world at large has focused some attention on this area of the world. For the first time since the 14th century Central Asia plays a political role transcending its own borders.

*Q4. What are your dreams, hopes (and fears) for your country and for the rest of the world today?*

I have a quasi-Buddhist belief in the universality of human suffering rooted in ignorance, in the not-knowing the real nature of our existence and of the world. The

20th century brought to the world increased, unprecedented misery. More people go hungry, are killed, tortured, mutilated now than at any previous time in history. The term 'human rights' became fashionable because they are being violated almost universally and, I am afraid, the signs are there that the abuses will go on unabated.

On a less elevated level I fear the results of unfettered movements of people, deregulated mass migration resulting in a multiplicity of anomies, breakdowns of social standards and values specific to any country. I do not like the idea of a United Europe to which are admitted people with differing standards, non-European in spirit, of a United States or a Canada losing their distinct identities. While all human beings are equal before God, they differ widely in language, custom, and in the terms of the social contract that make them a distinct unit. Mixing people with various cultural background creates inequality, prejudice and, in the worst case, hatred. I like the sheep and I like the wolf but the time predicted by the Prophet Isaiah, when the two can live together, has not yet come.

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### **Note**

1. In June 2003, at the point of compiling this issue of *Diogenes*, the same four questions were posed to Denis Sinor, Gay McDougall, Earl Shorris and John Barth. Their responses are published here as Interludes 1-4.