

Ouch!

BY CAROLYN WASHBURN

My late mother had a philosophy about coping with difficult situations. She reminded herself, "If it will be funny later, it's funny now." Easy for her to say. She wasn't the one with a dental emergency in rural Turkey.

In the summer of 1971, I took a three-month overland trip from England to India with my then-boyfriend. We and five others had signed on with David, a Brit who took paying passengers in his van between London and Delhi.

Our route wound through France, Germany, Austria Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Miraculously, all of the borders were open.

A few days before our departure, I felt a twinge in my right front tooth. I ignored it.

Three days into the trip, the twinge returned. It was difficult for me to focus on the picture-perfect scenery of the Alps. Was this a serious problem? Should I try to find a dentist while we were still in "civilization"? How could I pay for it?

The next morning I awoke to an intense, stabbing pain. The nearest big city was Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, four hours away. All morning the van bumped along rutted, dusty roads. I was miserable.

The receptionist at the American embassy handed me a slip of paper with "Dr. Pavlov" scribbled on it and directions to his office. "He speaks English and German," she called out as I left. "Don't be surprised by his equipment. Things aren't as up to date here as they are back home!"

We located the building, and I climbed the dimly lit stairway thinking, "If this is Bulgaria, Dr. Pavlov must be ... a Communist!" (Remember, the Cold War was still on.) The waiting room had several worn chairs. The floor tiles were cracked, and plaster flaked off the ceiling. Dr. Pavlov emerged from a back room.

He was tall, slightly stooped. A thin lock of sandy hair fell over his forehead. He greeted us in Bulgarian.

In English, I introduced myself and explained my problem. He nodded sympathetically. "Hello," he said, then, "Thank you," then "Yes," then "Hello" again. Panic returned. How could I make this guy understand me?

Then Birgitte, a German woman in our group, took over. After the two talked in German for 30 seconds, Dr. Pavlov led me to his one battered dental chair. A bulky drill hung overhead, and three pitted metal instruments lay on the tray.

After tapping around my tooth and gums (ouch!), he told Bigitte to tell me that he would need to perform a root canal. And it was a bad case. The root had totally rotted away, so the anesthesia would not eliminate all the sensation.

Root canal? Up to that point my worst dental experience had been the extraction of a wisdom tooth. With lots of anesthesia. By my beloved family dentist in Illinois. Sensing my fear,

Dr. Pavlov leaned over the chair and said to Birgitte in German, while looking steadily at me, “Tell her when it hurts, she should say ‘schmerz,’ and I’ll stop for a while.”

“Schmerz” is German for ache or pain. I must have howled it 50 times during the hour it took Dr. Pavlov to drill into the tooth, clean out the rotted root and fill up the canal. Each time I yelled, he stopped, looking increasingly distressed. “Tell her I’m so sorry ... ”

So I made myself sit there, staring at the ceiling. The other two chatted. He had been trained in Germany, he said, and didn’t get many opportunities to speak German.

Finally, he stepped back and smiled. I returned a lopsided grin. My mouth was sore, but I knew he had fixed my toothache.

“No charge,” he said, as he had a state salary. Then he admitted that his usual fee was the equivalent of five dollars American. I gratefully paid him the fee in leva, the Bulgarian currency.

As I turned to go, I thought, *Would it be okay to hug a Communist?* I stretched out my arms. Dr. Pavlov hesitated, then opened his, and we embraced, warmly.

Six days later, along the Black Sea in Eastern Turkey, I felt a different pain. Touching the tooth with anything – food, my tongue, my lower teeth – was excruciating. I traveled all day with my mouth open.

Now I was truly distraught. The next city, Tehran in Iran, was three days away by narrow, winding road through the Turkish Alps. During that sleepless night, I resolved I would have someone yank the tooth with pliers.

The next morning cooler heads prevailed. The tooth was probably infected, and we should find an antibiotic. Finally, in Erzurum, we spotted an apothecary, where we bought a bottle of Terramycin, no prescription needed. By the next day, the tooth was fine. Miracle!

In Tehran, I got Dr. Pavlov’s work checked. The office of Dr. Samadzadeh, our referral from the American embassy (yes, that American embassy, the one taken over by Islamist militants in 1979), was a sharp contrast to Dr. Pavlov’s. Samadzadeh practiced in a modern building with elevators and sleek furniture. Receptionists, hygienists, and x-ray technicians bustled around.

Samadzadeh was a short, handsome man, with curly, salt-and-pepper hair. In fluent English, he told me had trained at New York University. “You, young lady, were foolish to put yourself in the hands of a primitive Communist dentist,” he scolded.

“But I didn’t have much choice ... ” feeling defensive of Dr. Pavlov.

“Come back tomorrow when the x-ray is developed,” he said. “I will undoubtedly have to redo the work.”

The next day he frowned. “The Bulgarian did excellent work,” he said, “You’re fine. No charge.”

When I got back to the States, I sent Dr. Pavlov a letter, thanking him once again. No response.

His work has held up — the tooth is still in my mouth. When I smile in the mirror, I often think of him, reminded that there are kind people throughout the world.

And yes, Mom, the story is funny now.