December column
Claudio Schuftan

Ho Chi Minh City. My editor keeps on telling me that columnists should not seem to be abstract founts of knowledge and wisdom, and so should also write about themselves and their experiences, including what it's like living and working where they do. So this month I tell of my recent escape from death. No, I do not feel that somebody was out to get me...

Now it can be told...
How your columnist had a brush with death on the road





Vintage Beetles line up for a celebration journey to open a school funded by their owners. Our 1959 vintage cabriolet is being admired in the picture, left

This month I have to thank fortune for having escaped a serious accident. The story goes like this.

Exhibit #1: My wife Aviva is vice-president of the Consular Club of Ho Chi Minh City. They fund-raise to do development work.

Exhibit #2: We own a vintage 1959 Volkswagen Beetle cabriolet, pictured above at left. We belong to the Volkswagen Club of Ho Chi Minh City, a rowdy and happy group of devoted Beetle lovers. The club often organises caravans, be it for charity, for tourism or for fun. They also raise funds.

Exhibit #3: The consular and the Volkswagen clubs co-financed the construction of a school in a rural area some 200 kilometres from the city. On the first weekend of last month, 3 November, a trip was organised to attend the dedication of the school.

Narrative: We set our alarm clock at 3:45 in the morning on Saturday for a 4:30 am rendezvous at the entrance of the highway going south. A fellow Beetle owner lives near our house. We arranged to meet in the corner next to our house and drive to the rendezvous together. He is a jovial man in his 70s in the plant nursery business, who likes to practice his French with me.

Our day started with us, by mistake, passing a red light (actually, we got going with the left turn green light, instead of waiting for the 'going straight' green light). Mind you, it was 4:25 in the morning and no traffic at all; yet – what do you know – a cop was there. We were promptly stopped. A bit of palaver, sweet talk by my wife and my consular identity card (remember, I am the Chilean honorary consul in Saigon) gained us his leniency.

So we drove on towards the brand new tunnel that passes under the Saigon River near downtown. I had gained some speed by then – perhaps 45 kph. Not more than 60 metres before the tunnel, and in a speeded-up fraction of a second, I saw sparks in front of me and the car had a strong pull towards the left towards the cement road divider in front of the tunnel; something felt unbalanced and a grinding sound could be heard. I think, but am not sure, I yelled 'the wheel!' After maybe 8 metres of literally 'ploughing' the tarmac the car stopped. It stopped just 30 cm short of the cement road divider, as you can see below. Aviva and I were both fine, just shocked. Sure enough, the left front wheel had fallen off. There was a small dent on the left front fender bender and no other visible damage.





Our brush with death on the road. Lucky for us that it was around dawn by the Saigon River tunnel, with almost no other traffic except vintage Beetles

Here is where mobile phones (which I hate) prove their worth. Club members some few miles ahead at the point of assembly were notified. Within 15 minutes two cars were there to help. By then, I had retrieved the wheel on the opposite side of the road some 10 metres behind. It was intact. The wheel cap, also nearby, was also intact. And then, slowly looking around, since at 4:40 am it was still not light, believe it or not, I found the five bolts. I jacked up the car and inspected the axle and the drum where the wheel goes on, and could not see any major damage. Then I bolted

in the five bolts (not yet the wheel) being sure the threads would be all stripped, but no, they were not.

I did not trust my meagre mechanical skills and waited to put the wheel on until our expert club members would give their verdict. They corroborated my findings and the wheel went back on. Then they said: 'Drive on and see if the steering pulls to one side': it did not. We arrived at the gathering point and everybody was talking about this and telling us how lucky we had been. Had we been in the highway, at higher speed, the outcome would have been different.

We did not abandon our trip. We joined the caravan of ten Beetles and did over 800 kilometres that weekend inaugurating, in the heat of the day, the school and also a bridge over one of the thousands of Mekong River irrigation canals. On Sunday, we visited the site of a future small project the two clubs may undertake in the near future. We were home that evening at 9 pm exhausted, both because of the long hours driving, and because driving in the dark is, by itself, semi-suicidal on Vietnamese highways.

Our detective work continues. It is clear that in one of the two garages the car had recently gone for repairs, a human error had occurred with somebody putting on the wheel without tightening the bolts. But in neither garage had we asked for any work to be done with the wheels…and I had done some driving in town before this journey without feeling anything wobbly. Is it possible that... No, no, I don't believe that... I will let you know who was the culprit was if and when we find out.

On the human right to nutrition and people-driven justice and equity



Jean Ziegler (left) here with his successor as UN special rapporteur for the right to food Oliver De Schutter (right) my hero in my September column

The week before my adventure on the road I received notice of what's here now. You have seen pictures of these two brave UN officials and advisors above already,

in my September column. Here they are again, and I will explain why. A quite astonishing email came from Spain – quoting a Reuters dispatch in *El Confidencial*). Its title: was 'Jean Ziegler says Spain should not pay its debt, because it is illegitimate'. To remind you, for eight years Jean Ziegler was the UN special rapporteur for the right to food; he is pictured here above with his successor and current post-holder Olivier de Schutter.

He now is a member of the consultative committee of the United Nations Human Rights Council. My piece of investigation here does not rival Geoffrey Cannon's fascinating piece on Derek Yach last month, but is another insight into the United Nations system and its tolerance of outspoken officials and advisors and is also quite revealing.

Box 1
UN special rapporteurs

United Nations Special Rapporteurs represent the UN secretary-general. They are independent experts who are asked to work on behalf of the UN. They can either have a country or a thematic mandate. They examine, monitor, advise and publicly report on human rights problems through activities undertaken by special procedures, including responding to individual complaints, conducting studies, providing advice on technical cooperation at the country level, and engaging in general promotional activities.

Appointed by the secretary-general, they act independently of governments. The first special rapporteur begun work in 1982. Rapporteurs do not receive any financial compensation for their work.

The occasion was Jean Ziegler visiting Madrid to launch the Spanish edition of his new book ***Massive Destruction: The Geopolitics of Hunger*** (1) 'We live in a criminal and cannibalistic world order', he said, 'where the small elites of financial capital decide, within the law, who will die from hunger and who will not. This is why these financial speculators ought to be judged and sentenced in a Nuremberg-type trial'. (He was referring to the trials of Nazi war criminals after the end of the 1939-1945 world war).

Jean Ziegler's engaged analysis of the historical moment we live in comes from a man with a distinguished diplomatic and academic career. His voice does not tremble when pointing his finger at those guilty of our planet's systemic crisis. 'It is simply not acceptable that almost one fifth of the population suffer from undernutrition'. In his open style, Ziegler addressed bothersome issues that other officials do not raise in the offices, meeting rooms or even the corridors of the United Nations.

We need swiftly to emphasise that current economics do not work, and to build an equitable social order

His proposals are startling. 'Massively occupy banks, nationalise them, and confiscate the wealth amassed by financial speculators', he said. But from his rather bitter experience, he went on to criticise the lack of capacity of civil society initiatives, including those in Spain, and the *Occupy* movement. 'I recognise that they represent important symbols and that they have gained sympathy from society at large, but they have, so far, been unable to break the current power stronghold and have not achieved launching a massive general strike'. He added: 'In the current prevailing world order, there is structural violence that must be countered with a matching counter-violence based on peaceful resistance'.

Massive financial speculation in the markets for food now positioned as a commodity like any other, is causing what amounts to a type of genocide, with the price of basic staple foods having shot through the sky, he went on to argue. But his optimism as a fighter and also as a diplomat shone through. He went on to say that this dire situation will create the needed social consciousness that will eventually confront the forces of the current crude and ruthless form of capitalism, to replace it with a new more equitable world order.

The first step, he also said, is to realise that speculators in the financial markets, which include banks, are the common enemy of North and Latin Americans, Europeans, Africans, and Asians alike. Hunger and unemployment are found everywhere.

A necessary rise in social consciousness will bring about new forms of needed international solidarity among different groups in different parts of the world. This will eventually become an intercontinental resistance front.

Class struggle is for him inevitable, because suffering will not persist forever without uprising. He was candid though, when asked about the risks of popular uprising: 'I cannot answer. These hardly preventable processes are always unpredictable; they have their own dynamic'. What is clear to him though is that insurrections, seen all along history, are triggered by hunger: 'Famine is now almost a reality all around the margins of Paris. The Spanish people are also living in poverty, as are so many people in many countries in Europe. An uprising is inevitable, you cannot push a people on and on, past certain points'.

As regards the Spanish situation, he said that the policies of austerity are 'absurd and destructive'. They are only applied to the working classes and other impoverished groups including those who cannot find employment. They never affect the bankers.

They will resolve nothing. He advocated massive public investment, higher minimum wages, social security, employment generation. He recognised that such policies can work only when accompanied by an awakening of civil society.

Also, he insisted first and foremost that external debt must be repudiated. The leaders of the governments of countries whose people are suffering must refuse to repay such debt 'because it is odious and illegitimate, born primarily from financial delinquency and political corruption,' Typically, he said, the vast loans made to 'develop' countries have not produced real investments.

You see why I have chosen to share this piece of news with you. A leader working within the UN system, who deserves great respect for his relentless work for the right to food, has now spoken out on the real deep causes of our current linked finance, food and fuel crises. I share this news with you as a salute to Jean Ziegler.

cschuftan@phmovement.org
www.phmovement.org
www.humaninfo.org/aviva

Reference

1 Ziegler J. *Massive Destruction. The Geopolitics of Hunger.* Peninsula, 2012 http://www.edicionespeninsula.com/es/llibre/destruccion-masiva_18759.html Translated from the original ***Destruction Massive: Géopolitique de la Faim***, Seuil, 2011. ISBN 978-2-02-106056-0.
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