Notes from the Norway Trip -- 2

Thursday Aug. 23 2018

The highlight of the day was our visit to Vigeland Park. We have never seen anything remotely resembling this extraordinary and free open air sculpture exhibition. Our friend, retired Prof. Mike Seltzer, acted as our guide, taking us there via bus. A word, first, about public transport in Oslo. You don't have to buy a ticket to get on a bus, a streetcar, a subway train or many public ferries. There are no fare gates at the trains and no ticket machines on the buses. You do have to buy a pass, which could be good for a day, a week, a month, or a year. You carry that pass with you and show it when a fare inspector comes around (we met none). Since there are no ticket machines on the buses, you can get on at the rear of the bus. The bus stops have electronic readouts that tell you how many minutes it will be before your bus will show up.

Mike, who taught sociology and anthropology, made us laugh by telling us at a certain point on the trip that we had crossed a boundary between East Oslo and West Oslo, where the east side was working class and the west side, bourgeois. They even pronounced common Norwegian words differently. But it is no laughing matter that until recently, life expectancy on the west side was eleven years longer than on the east side. We did notice that many of the apartment buildings on the west side looked more elaborate architecturally than the ones on the east side. We did not see the mansions of the ship owners and other economic barons that cluster on hillsides deeper in.

OK, so we took the bus to Vigeland Park. Technically, it is known as the Vigeland Installation in Frogner park, but the bus stop says Vigeland park. The whole park and everything in it is the design and work of Gustav Wigeland (1869-1943), Norway's greatest sculptor. An array of tourist buses outside the gate signaled that this was a major attraction. The brochure says more than one million come to see it each year. And no wonder.



After entering tall and artful iron gates, and paying no entry fee, you find yourself on a broad esplanade lined with trees, giving a perspective toward a fountain and an obelisk in the distance. There is a busy



playground with fanciful play structures, also by Vigeland, on the left.

As you walk past the first rectangular lawn, you enter a causeway over a pond, and become aware that each broad stone railing of the causeway serves as pedestal for a series of bronze statues of human figures, perhaps twice life size. I did not count but there must be fifty or sixty of these figures, no two alike. The sculptures show about every imaginable figure and combination of woman, man, and child in

a moment of family life.



All the figures are in a consistent realistic style, anatomically credible and complete. However, all the individuals appear to be in good health, well fed, strong if not athletic, and beautiful, which is of course not the case in reality. There is an obvious influence of the classical Greek or Roman sculptors, who





usually show people who are exemplary specimens. But these are not metaphysical or allegorical figures captured in classical formula poses. Some of the figures stand in static poses, others are caught in athletic positions, almost flying, or as if in battle. A highly popular figure shows a little boy having a temper tantrum; so many people have posed next to him, holding his hand, that the blue-green patina of the bronze is quite worn off, exposing the shiny

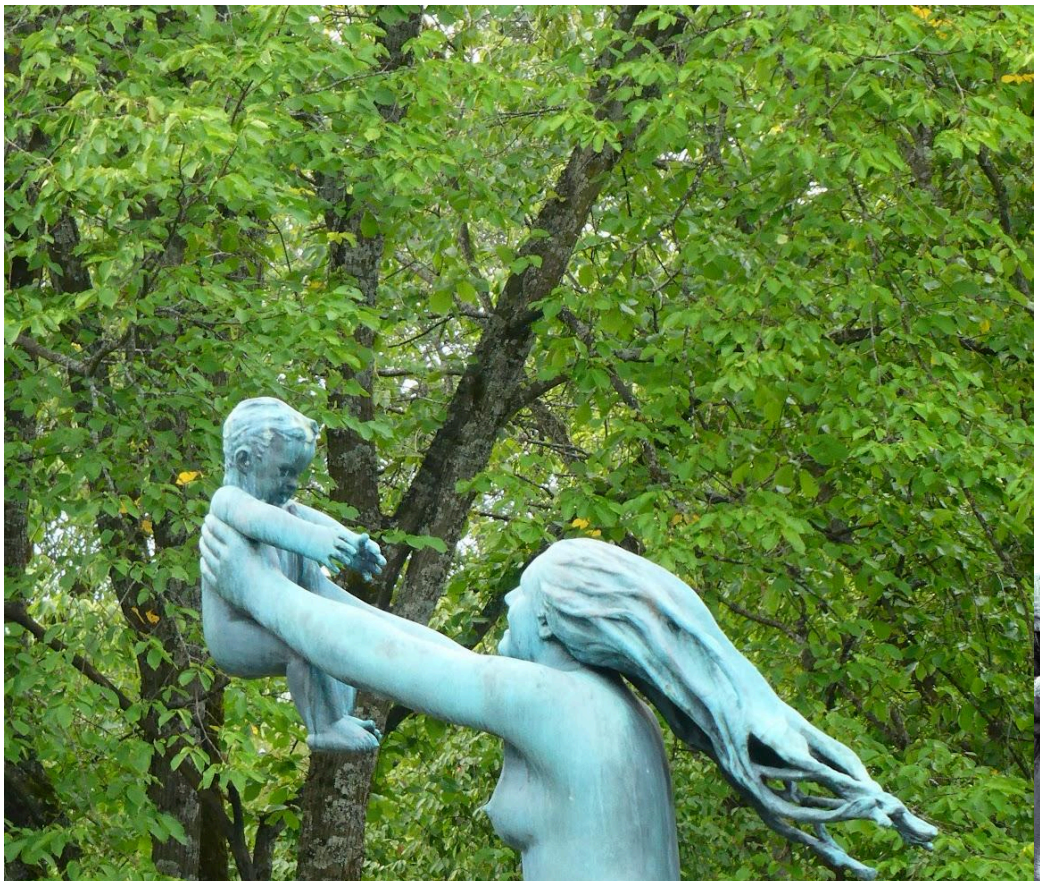
metal. There is one statue of an adult male balancing four babies, three on his arms and one on his foot like a soccer ball. I imagine many a mother has reflected that rare is the man in reality who





single-handedly manages that many young children.

The causeway, which rides over an attractive pond where a variety of waterbirds played, leads to a slightly elevated platform dominated by a fountain perhaps twenty feet high. A series of tall bronze human bearers supports a stone saucer from which the water pours into a square pool below. Smaller statues that seem to support little groves of trees surround the pool. A series of images in raised relief decorates the containment wall.



Beyond the big fountain, set off by beautifully manicured flower gardens with simpler water jets, lies a raised stone platform perhaps the size of half a football field, on which, up a further set of stairs,



rises a stone obelisk that may be forty feet high. The column is deeply engraved with human figures of all ages appearing to climb upward. Other stone figures with a great variety of poses and groupings surround the obelisk.







Each of these stone or bronze figures would merit contemplation if displayed by itself. Each figure or group expresses an emotion, a situation, a moment in time, a confrontation, a dream -- almost the whole gamut of family life. The cumulative effect of so many of them all in one place is overwhelming.



We posed for a selfie in front of one of the stone figures, but then asked Mike to take the photo instead. Mike jokingly prompted me to look like an Ibsen character. At Mike's urging, I had read *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* before flying over. Well, here is my Brand/Peer Gynt face:



Some of the figures in granite below the obelisk are so well filled out that they might almost come from a canvas by Fernando Botero, the Columbian painter. There are no statues here that might have come from the charcoal drawings of Kaethe Kollwitz, the German artist famous for her images of starving children and suffering families. There is a politics of selection here, and Wigeland drew sharp criticism for his conduct during the Nazi occupation of Norway, when he was an old man. None of the figures appear to show people at work, or at war, or on voyages, or in any occupation other than being part of a family and the immediate relationships that make it up and surround it. Given the boundaries of Vigeland's subject matter, the work is astonishing both for its quality and for its volume and variety. They say that there's nothing comparable to this open air museum in the world. If you are in Norway, don't miss it.

After exhausting ourselves with the statues, we had a light lunch at a restaurant in the park. There I got a clue how the park could sustain itself without charging admission. The restroom formed a separate building behind the restaurant. A man sat at the entrance collecting a restroom fee of 15 NOK. That's US $1.80! Just to take a pee. Fortunately they accepted Visa.

After lunch, Mike took us by return bus to the Edward Munch museum. Munch, whose name is pronounced Munk here, is most famous for his painting "The Scream." He was a prolific painter also of other subjects. However, we arrived at the museum just an hour and a half before closing, and were so worn out and, in our case, still jet lagged, that we stopped for a long cup of coffee in an outdoor cafe next to the museum. That done, we were done in, postponing Munch for another day, and eager to go home for a nap.



Mike walked us to a nearby small shopping mall, where we briefly checked out a bakery, a Turkish restaurant advertising inexpensive

lunches, and some other stores.





From there we hopped on a subway train -- as smooth and quiet as the Flytoget airport express of yesterday -- and in one stop we were a short walk from our temporary home, the apartment that Prof. Mike so generously lent us. Minutes later we were down for a nap. We will end the day with another quiet evening “at home.”