

My Road to Damascus

There was nothing wrong with our life. We had bought a large Victorian house five years earlier in 1956. I had been appointed Lecturer in Mathematics two years before that and was already Senior Lecturer. We had made many friends, not just in the University at Cardiff, but also in the excellent tennis and badminton clubs in Penarth, both close to our home. We also played friendly bridge, sometimes twice a week. It was indeed a most pleasant place to bring up our children, Carol aged two and David only eight months.

For several years, I had been invited as Vacation Consultant at the Rutherford Laboratory, for four or five weeks each summer, and this had become a semi-holiday for us. It was useful for me to mix with a substantial group of theoretical physicists. Since none of my Cardiff colleagues had regular invitations to a national institute, I regarded myself as being quite enterprising in making these annual visits.

The working atmosphere at the Rutherford was pretty relaxed. Part of the routine was to wander down for coffee some time before eleven o'clock to a large laboratory on the ground floor. One morning, I was standing near the door chatting to one of the local inhabitants, when a young man in a dark suit walked in carrying a medium-sized suitcase. 'Oh!' exclaimed my companion along with two or three others close to us; then someone challenged the newcomer, 'We thought you were in Rome?'

That was a couple of months ago. I've been in Brookhaven.' Brookhaven was on an island near to New York.

'Just arrived?'

'Yes, got in this morning.'

'Let's get you some coffee.'

The newcomer was absorbed into the melee, and I asked my colleague who he was; he told me and went off to greet him. Life went on for another five minutes, and I was standing alone, drinking my coffee, when another brisk young man, wearing a light-grey summer suit, strode in, carrying a very small suitcase. The performance was repeated: general surprise at his arrival, and the challenge, this time, 'Oh, we thought you were in California?'

'No, I left Stanford about a month ago. I'm spending time at CERN.'

Again the visitor was supplied with a cup of coffee, and settled into the crowd.

This second arrival had a remarkable but instant effect on me.

My thoughts came rapidly: *These chaps are just about my age. They go all over the world to physics establishments. Here am I, just getting up to the Rutherford each year. Why don't I go abroad too, idiot? Where would be best with a family? Switzerland is a pretty safe country, not too far, and CERN has a good reputation...*

I finished up my coffee, washed the mug, and went upstairs to the secretariat. I asked a secretary, 'Do you know how people apply to go to CERN?'

She reached behind her desk for a form, which she handed to me, asking, 'This is for a year, is it?'

I was surprised, 'Well, it could be.'

'If you fill that in and bring it back, we'll send it off.'

About an hour later, I handed in the form, applying to visit CERN for the academic year 1962-3, and returned to my desk.

That evening, when I got back to the apartment where we were staying, I told my wife Monty that I had put in the application, saying that there must be a lot of competition for the posts at CERN. She did not mention that I had not asked her opinion, which I would normally do, but thought it would be a very pleasant change. We did not take the idea too seriously.

About three weeks later, a letter from CERN arrived at home in Penarth, offering me a post as Senior Research Associate for one year from September, 1962. The salary was distinctly larger than my Cardiff one, it would be tax-free, and I would be given an extra month of salary as a settling-in allowance; that sounded pretty good. I then had to get leave from Cardiff, which caused me no problem, and we were all set to go next summer.

However, a problem arose in the spring of 1962. I had applied for Chairs at one or two Universities, and was offered a Professorship at Trinity College, Dublin. After much discussion about leaving Cardiff and living in Ireland, I decided to accept. The only problem was that we were booked to go to CERN. I decided to ask for outside advice, and so telephoned the head of the Science Research

Council. He was very pleasant and I explained that I was committed to go to CERN, but had been offered the chair at Trinity College. The advice was swift and decisive: 'Make them wait. Go to CERN: it will change your life and that of your family.' They did wait, and I still do not know whether taking the Irish post was a good idea; the place was pretty decrepit and inbred, but it was a post of high status; there were two Chairs of Natural Philosophy in the College, and the holder of the other was Professor Walton, one of Rutherford's Nobel Prize-winning acolytes.

Did going to CERN change our lives? Yes, completely and utterly. I became a regular visitor at CERN over many years, often with the family, and we all became European. Carol was at a French-speaking primary school when she was four, and is now a multilingual Swiss citizen living in Neuchatel for over 25 years. We all took up skiing, and David has been captain of the British Junior Bobsleigh Team. Alison, born in Ireland soon after we returned there, spent two years teaching English in Switzerland, which allowed her to work for a Masters degree, which ultimately led to a University appointment. And Monty and I are still able and willing to visit Carol, often twice a year.

We cannot tell what would have happened if I had gone straight to Dublin in 1962. Nor can we tell what would have happened if I had ditched Trinity College and accepted the offer to stay on temporarily at CERN in 1963.

But what *did* happen was the result of those two smart young chaps walking into the coffee room one after another.

Roy Chisholm