

When Your Sons Want Their Night Out in Amsterdam....

(Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1992)

Traveling with three teenagers is a different type of experience. Our trip to Amsterdam opened up the wonders and excitement of the Red-Light District to Joshua and Shmuel. They were thrilled to learn that European norms of drinking were much different than that in the U.S., and that they were suddenly “of age.” Although Shanna was only 12 years old, she was beginning to transform before my eyes. During an early morning breakfast of coffee, hot chocolate, and donuts, she corrected me when I referred to her as a “girl.”

“I’m a young woman, thank you very much.”

Shanna’s personality had become brass, “You can’t sing, Dad! I bet you \$15 million dollars that you can’t sing!”

“Ha! I performed in *The King and I*, and was lead tenor in *South Pacific*! You owe me \$15 million dollars!”

Amsterdam. The old European city with canals, magnificent cathedrals, wide plazas, the clock tower, the attic of Anne Frank, the outdoor neighborhood shops and cafes, the marijuana bars, and the sex shops. The city seemed to breathe openness, freshness amid old tradition, tolerance, and universality.

I tried my best to celebrate this liberal culture that thrived through the streets of Amsterdam, balancing out the conflicted quasi-conservative Puritanical ethos that I had been raised on in the U.S. My children tested me, though. In every gift shop we would enter, they would spread out, trying to find the crudest item possible to show one another. “That’s really gross! Can you imagine doing that!”

My teenage sons, I could tolerate. But my daughter! My little girl! Where were those prohibitive “Adult Only” signs separating the sections of the stores, like we had in the U.S.?!?

We passed a sex shop with dancing, multi-colored dildos in the window, my discomfort obvious to my children.

“Jeeze, Dad! Don’t be so uptight. It’s natural – it’s just sex,” my daughter advised me.

Shmuel and Joshua were itching to explore the wonders of Amsterdam on their own. Back home in the U.S., this wouldn’t even be a consideration. However, here in Europe, they were technically old enough to drink, and to go to a nightclub to listen to music. We wanted them to learn about the culture of Europe, and they manipulated this fact to perfection.

“Dad, Amsterdam is supposed to have some really good music! Famous jazz clubs. We want to have fun and do things by ourselves – not just all the time with the *‘family!’*”

What to do? Forbid them? Force them to stay with us all night in the small airless rooms of the Bed and Breakfast apartment we had rented? With the elderly Russian landlady below, banging on the ceiling with her cane as she demanded we make no more noise after nine p.m.? I considered the fact that we had walked a good deal around the neighborhood, and the people seemed to be nice. It was clean, safe, with no drunks or drug addicts – the typical warning signs that would have convinced me otherwise. They needed to learn about life at some point, to take care of themselves, and this city seemed to be a lot safer than New York or San Francisco.

My wife and I discussed the situation for a few minutes, looking for one final sign of a mischievous plan concocted by the two of them that would provide me with reason to reject their persistent appeal.

“Okay. You can go out tonight. We think you’re responsible enough and will use good judgement.”

Excited at this rare opportunity for independence, the boys quickly showered, put on after-shave lotion, dressed in the one nice pair of slacks and shirt that they had each packed with them for the trip, and slicked their hair back. They did all of this to listen to some jazz? What great musical expectations!

As I began to give them instructions on how to be safe, Shanna glanced in my direction, longingly, jealous. I knew she wanted to go with them – but not at twelve she would not!

I began reviewing my list of “do’s” and “don’ts” with them.

“First of all, we want you to be back here in these rooms between 12am and 12:30am. Keep the money for the tram to take back here in a separate pocket from your other money,” I told them. “Take a map of Amsterdam, ask the prices if they are not listed, investigate to see if there is a cover or service charge BEFORE doing anything. Don’t lie about your ages if asked. You can get into big trouble that way!”

As I continued on with my long list of precautions, hoping that at least a few of my messages were being received by my two sons, I started to doubt my confidence in their ability to succeed safely in a night out by themselves.

“Watch out for girls coming on to you – no matter how nice they look or seem. You are two young, innocent – well, pretty innocent – American boys. Think before you do something! Think hard! How many pockets do you have? Where have you put the hotel key and address? Be very alert in narrow, dark alleys or streets. Don’t separate for any reason! If one of you goes to the restroom, the other one goes to the restroom too!”

“And don’t even think about being in the Red-Light district.”

“Here’s \$35 in Guilders. Any questions?”

My two sons looked at me – dazed. They nodded mechanically. Smiles on their faces in anticipation.

It was at this moment when my daughter, who was still bitterly sitting in the corner of the hotel room, upset at her exclusion from this adventure, used her perceptive, wise young mind to summarize everything I had told her two brothers. “It’s simple. Just remember this: stay away from anyone named ‘Big Al’ or ‘Killer.’”

The boys arrived back to the hotel at one a.m., exhausted and worn out.

I was not pleased that they were so late – that I had spent the whole night worrying, imagining all sorts of mishaps and tragedies that could have befallen them during their adventure, doubting my judgment at giving them this premature independence.

“What happened tonight? What did you do?”

“We took the tram downtown. Went to get something to eat – just a sandwich, but it was expensive! We found a jazz club and went in, but we didn’t have much money after paying for the sandwich, so we left. The thirty-five dollars’ worth of Guilders you gave us wasn’t anything!”

“So,” I asked, “what did you do then?”

“We walked around.”

“Where?!?”

“Through the Red-Light District. We saw all those women in the windows. They kept calling us, but we didn’t know what to answer,” said Joshua.

“We walked for miles and miles through all these narrow streets and plazas! My feet hurt!” Shmuel added.

“Yeah! We walked for miles and miles because you wouldn’t look at that damn map! You kept saying you knew the way – even when we didn’t know where the hell we were! Every time I tried to get the map, he ran away from me. I had to run after him so as not to lose him.”

Shmuel shrugged, giving a mischievous grin, as if to declare victory in his adolescent struggle for power with his older brother.

“We walked from one end of the city to the other to get back here. We had to ask people where to go. We – uh – had spent the tram money, so we had to walk,” Joshua continued.

“Yeah, and when we got back here – there in the street – just a few blocks away from here – cop cars and sirens – and a DEAD BODY in the street!”

“A DEAD BODY?!?” I asked, shocked by the harrowing recounting of their escapade.

“Yeah!” they both answered excitedly.

“Well...well – I’m glad you got back safely.”

“And that they didn’t meet ‘Big Al!’” my daughter added.